The Waking World

Jordan A. Moore

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To my siblings:
Jasmine: I promise nothing and deliver less.
Jared: “Hmph. Weak!”
Jada: fellow black belt, fellow rebel child.

To my readers and fans: Thank you - all three of you.

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"…when these things had come to pass, and childish hopes had gone away forever, there was a man who travelled out of life on a quest into the spaces where the world's dreams had fled."

- Azathoth, H. P. Lovecraft

1

Mother

This is it - the death of the universe. The Festival is here, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it.

Well, except for me.

Here in the Temple of the Gods, I'll make one last stand to hold it off for a little while longer. Just stick with the plan; seal the Archway portals, then wait for help.

At the end of the Temple, only a few frozen feet away the portal opened. I shielded my eyes from the overwhelming rays of sunshine pouring out from between the giant, golden Archway pillars. Something *almost* human stepped out of the light and into my world.

"Hello mortal, I see you've read the stars to greet the coming of the Elder Gods," it spoke. Its voice was made of three combined tones that came out as a chilling reverse-echo. The voice of a man, woman, and child. An eerie series of ghostly flutes rose up from an invisible choir; signaling its arrival.

I looked up and over the approaching priest and focused on the Elder God behind it. The giant humanoid creature was draped in a dress made of shining strands of starlight that wove through space beyond the portal. Its eyes were pure white light, and its face strained with mute anger. It reminded me of an abstract interpretation of a yellow, pissed off Statue of Liberty. It was locked behind the shimmering wall of light, like a starved shark separated from a child by a pane of glass at the aquarium.

From the far end of the Temple, the priest continued walking forward,

leaving the trapped Elder God behind.

My father had once imprisoned them all with the Elder Seal, but now it and its kind were moments from being released, free to wreak havoc and drive the universe into mindless violence.

The priest moved farther from the golden rays, dressed in priestly yellow robes and a hood. On its face was a stone mask marked with the symbol of three squiggly lines coming out from the center, like three radiant question marks forming an imperfect triangle.

“Not today, Yellow King.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t recognize it was you from afar. You’re Carter’s girl, Faith, aren’t you?” The voice changed to the woman’s as it slowly approached me. It seemed to float across the cobblestone floor, less like a human’s walking and more of a phantom’s glide. “An ironic name for someone so… apostate.”

“Let’s be real; I’m downright heretical.”

“Just like your stepfather, may he rest in peace, wherever he is now of course.” The female voice altered, giving way to the male’s. “Well Faith, it looks like this is the end of the line. Your family has done well, preventing us from taking what is rightfully ours for a hundred years now,” said Yellow King.

“Try again. My daughter will continue the fight to keep you out of our Worlds.” A groan came from behind Yellow King’s mask as it shook its head like a frustrated parent.

“Wonderful. You’ve made another. When will you give up and accept that this is the will of the Elder Gods? They planted the seeds of life and gave birth to all Worlds. It is time for them to reap the fruits of their labor. Look, they gather, in just moments my brothers and sisters will seize this place and be free to roam the stars once again.” Yellow King raised its palms to the skies. All around the circular Temple, the four other Archways lit up. From gold to blue, green,

purple, red they glowed like stars, the source of their light being the Elder Gods waking on the other side of every Archway's portal.

"Yeah, well I'm pretty sure I speak for both this World and my own when I say no." I knelt onto the still lightly strobing runes I'd drawn in sketchy detail in the few moments I had in preparation. Clasping my hands together, I recited the Old Tome. Although sure I was butchering the pronunciation, my short and awkward syllables worked.

Dark energy split up and out from the Temple's floor, creating cracks and twisting the pillars that oversaw ten thousand years of prayer into a hellscape raging with cursed energy. Sparks of black lightning rose up, building into a cloud of fog, concealing *his* arrival. A form stepped out of the shadows and smoke between Yellow King and I. He was known as The Ancient Keeper, The Dweller in Darkness, The Skinless One. But for me? An old family 'friend.'

"Who dares summon the dark lord-oh God, it's *you*." The animated skeleton lazily raised his bone-hand by pulling the thin black wires laced between his joints, manipulated by synthetic shadows that gathered in the center of his ribcage, like a ball of black yarn. I grabbed the Silver Key from around my neck and held it out.

"Spooky, I don't have time to explain-"

"-Hello Spooky, how's your day?" He put his bare fists on his hips like an irritated teenager. "Well, thank you for asking. I was enjoying a bomb-ass nap before you had to drag me out of the cosmic prison that you and your husband put me in," he complained.

"Ex-husband." I quickly began to regret my choice of summoning, but it's not like I had any other option.

"You dare bring that vulgar, irreverent, traitor into my presence?!" Yellow King gasped in a seething whisper. "You will be the first to suffer!"

“Yeah, Umbasa to you too, Usurper.” Spooky leaned in closer, holding up one hand to hide his words and using the other to point his thumb at the Avatar-priest. “You didn’t tell me he was here.”

“You have no right to say that!” Yellow King hissed. Spooky played him no attention and looked around the Temple to see the glowing lights of the five Archways. “It’s Festival season already?! It’s hardly past thirteen and a half; we should still have at least a billion years before it comes around again.” He looked at his wrist, even though he didn’t wear a watch.

“I have an offer.” No matter how distracted, I knew the creature could never resist a good deal.

“I’m listening,” he sighed.

“The Elder Seal is breaking down, and I just learned Yellow King can slip through the cracks. I can’t take all the Avatars on alone, but if I don’t stall him now, he’s going to destroy the rest of the barrier, and it won’t be only the Avatars I have to worry about. I need you to take this key to the Lonely Island.”

“And why would I do that?” He put his fist under his jaw.

“Because I’ll break your curse.” I clenched my fists, knowing this was already a terrible trade.

“Justice… will find the both of you!” Yellow King began stumbling forward in a drunken rush, his neglected body still getting used to its legs.

“Fair enough. But why would I care about stopping the Elder Gods from coming through? They’re not that hard to hide from.” He looked at the nail-less backs of his fingers, trying to bait me to sweeten the deal.

“Because I can’t do this alone. My daughter is on that Island, and she has the Sign. Though she’s just a child, if you can train Joy and guide her back here when she’s ready, the multiplying effect of the Elder Sign with both of us

together should be able to fix the Elder Seal and seal Yellow King away before he can free the others. If they're sealed away, they won't be able to track you down and put you on trial for your crimes against the Gods." Spooky's head bobbed side-to-side.

"Fine. But how are you supposed to survive your encounter with Yellow King? This deal isn't much use to me if you're dead or he eats your soul. As much as I'd love to see that happen, I'd like my body back first."

"I'm going to time-curse myself inside the Temple along with the Archways. It'll put this entire place on lockdown, and neither of us will be able to leave, but you'll be able to break the curse with the Silver Key. Yellow King's Avatar will be cut off from the source, and he'll have to be a whole lot more careful than he would if the Elder God came through behind him."

"Sure. I'd love to play babysitter to your bastard child and hang around in a World so primitive they haven't even figured out gunpowder. But then again, how could I refuse?" he sighed, and held his hand out for the Silver Key anyway. I gave it to him. "I can't believe I've stooped so low that I'm negotiating with space-terrorists these days."

"Cosmic Slayers, not space-terrorists."

"A distinction without a difference. Your kind is next to extinct anyway."

"Joy is just the beginning of the next generation. She'll bring in a new golden age for humanity and all life."

"That's a lot of responsibility for a soon-to-be orphan." He reached for the air, grabbing invisible curtains, he tore open a portal with his bare hands as if the space between galaxies were just wall plaster.

"You do not have my permission to leave!" seethed Yellow King as he moved closer to me.

“I’ll be seeing you both shortly.” He responded as he stepped through the gap, vanishing into a World beyond this one. It snapped closed behind him as soon as it appeared.

“For us, yes,” I mumbled, watching the last line of my intricate runes ink seep into the floor. As it did, my trap sprang to life, sucking time itself out of the Temple holding the Elder God and me hostage until the Silver Key would release us. My breathing slowed, and the ticking of my watch came to a halt. Standing there in a fading room as all color drained from my vision, all I could do was hope Joy would grow up safely in the Dreamlands until the day came when she was ready to take on the task of becoming a Cosmic Slayer.

2

Lonely Island

In the middle of the day at the edge of the island's mountaintop, I set my brush down onto the half circle of my makeshift painter's pallet as I raise my arms overhead to stretch and look over my latest work.

The scene was a young woman and her daughter. They're wistfully looking up into the night sky. The stars are alive, and they move like a stage full of billions of little lights jiggling in place. Around them was a strange gathering of stone spires that stood ten feet high. Below them, the rest of their island. A simple site in the lower foreground with less than a hundred huts mostly gathered around in a circle, making a village. There was a small field for the pigs and chickens to roam that took up most of the grassland west side. The sand bar was a barrier that traced the edges of the little island all around. The woman's perch itself rose high in the sky, the remains of a long extinct volcano. All was calm, and all was at peace.

"Oh, I like that one!" I nearly jumped off the cliff as the voice came out from behind. Holding my hand over my heart, I snapped around to scold whoever scared me.

"Robert Isaac Craft! Don't scare me like that." He gave an innocent laugh as I moved my bamboo tripod a few feet toward me just in case someone else decided to come by and make me nearly throw my painting into the sea.

"Sorry, I saw the painting, and I thought it looked pretty great."

"You say that about all my paintings," I grumbled, still slightly upset over his entrance.

“And I think it’s true for all of them. At least, the ones after your watercolor phase.” I winced and tilted my head sideways.

“We don’t talk about the watercolor phase.” We shared a smile. I picked up my sketchbook off the ground and put it into the waterproof satchel bag resting on my waist.

“Is that you and your mom?” He pointed to the still wet canvass.

“I guess so.” I shrugged.

“I think she’d like your painting too.”

“Thanks.” Robert offered a hand to help me stand, and I took it. I don’t remember a lot about what happened that night all those years ago, but I do know something went wrong. I’d come to terms that no matter how curious I was, I’d never learn the truth. The only clue I had to who she was or why she left me here was the leaf-shaped birthmark on my right shoulder.

“By the way, the Trader’s in town. You might want to get down there before she leaves,” said Robert as we started down the hill.

“But, I didn’t order anything. I should be stocked up on paint for the next few months.”

“You have a gift.” I could see him trying to hold back a smile from behind. His curly brown bush of hair couldn’t hide his always red ears. Anytime he was trying to be coy or tell a joke, his adorable dimples that ate his freckles would give his incoming pun away.

“A gift? But why-”

“-Happy Birthday, by the way,” he mumbled.

“Wait, you’re joking, right?” He kept walking. “It’s my birthday?”

“Seven years since you got here. I mean since we don’t know your real

birthday, it's the closest thing. You're seventeen, an adult now! How's it feel?"

"It feels like I probably shouldn't have stayed up all night, but thanks for asking kiddo." I popped his arm with a pulled punch. His happy-go-lucky grin quickly turned to an embarrassed scowl.

"I'll be an adult too in less than a few months you know," he defended. "Besides, I'm probably older than you anyway."

"You know, you shouldn't talk back to your elders, sonny." I had to look away to keep from bursting with laughter at the transformation of his pale chameleon face turning deeper shades of red by the second.

"I think I'll go to the Trader first and tell her to give me a refund; I really shouldn't be bribing adults in positions of authority here on the island. Even though I'm pretty sure your job is crazy-dream-whisperer-girl."

"Ah-ah. It's crazy-dream-whisperer-woman." I held up a finger and stuck my chin out like any sophisticated adult would. "But I'll treat you as an equal if you tell me what you got me."

"We've known each other since we were kids. You should be able to guess."

"That could be anything! Wait, is it a book? Did you get the sequel to The Prince's Palace?" Robert shook his head.

"Eww. That series is smut. Don't you remember when Grandma Phillis caught you reading it?"

"How un-ladylike! That book is for heathens and ne'er-do-wells!" My spot-on impression of an elderly woman trying to raise the 'wild child' I was growing up into a 'respectable young lady.' I have to admit, for the most part, it worked. "But anyway, what's the gift?"

"You'll see. Just go pick it up and find out for yourself. At least the party tonight will be amazing. I hear the Bacons are serving fresh ham." I sighed.

“I don’t like parties - even birthday parties. I mean sure, on one hand, there’s sweet sugarcane candy. But on the other, there’s a lot of noise. Even worse, a lot of people.”

“What’s wrong with people? I’m a people.”

“Not that I have anything against people. I love people; I just don’t like to be around them all the time.”

“Message received.”

“No - you’re not a people. You’re a *person*, goof.” I rolled my eyes. Birthday parties here on the island are celebrated all at once on the first of each month. But really, I’d much rather be doing what I love, painting in peace and quiet. As the descent leveled out and we reached the grassy center of the island, we started passing the outer huts where the farmers lived.

Things were simple on Lonely Island; every day was the same. Quiet, safe, boring. It was almost perfect for me. At least, that’s what I told myself since I’ve been stuck here for as long as I can remember.

“Joy! Joy, help!” A little voice called out to me. We stopped to face Gavin, the youngest son of the towns pig farmer, Mr. Bacon.

“Thank goodness I found you. Our little pig, Wilbur, he’s hurt!”

“Sounds like a job for you, Robert.”

“He’s not, um, ‘hurt’ hurt! ‘Least I don’t think. He ran off the mountaintop, but when he fell into the water, he wasn’t banged up. He’s scared stiff!”

“When did this happen?” I asked we began following him to the farm.

“Just ten minutes ago.”

“Why’d he run off the plateau?”

“Well, I don’t know. We just had them roaming around like always, and

something spooked Wilbur bad, made him take off full speed ahead up the mountain and off - like he didn't even see the ledge." I nodded. We hopped over the three-foot rickety fence made of thin stalks of bamboo, and he led us to the last pen. Inside in the farthest corner, half-hiding in a pile of hay was a piglet, only big enough to have been just weened.

I knelt, and Robert joined me. The piglet was shaking as it laid there. It eyeballed us wildly, like a baby rabbit trying to cower from diving hawks. Robert checked the pig, wrestling with it as it squared the entire time. He still managed to do everything from probing its ribs to looking over its skin mites.

"Gavin's right, this one isn't hurt." He reached into his many pockets and small bags in his overcoat, taking out a pointy plant.

"I'll give him a dose of Sleeping Nettle to make him calm down, should be an easy fix for you," he told me. I nodded, looking at the complex set of pouches on him. He insisted it was the easiest way for him to carry his supplies, and that all decent doctors-in-training wore the same baggy outfit.

After he gently prodded the piglet's neck that squealed to his touch, its breathing slowed, and it lazily rolled over. I took in a deep breath. With my right hand, I reached over my right shoulder and felt the bump of my birthmark; it began to burn as I tapped into the power it held. With the other hand, I reached out palm first, placing it on the piglet's pink potbelly stomach.

Then, all colors vanished, torn out of sight in an instant. Robert, Gavin, the stable, and the island. All gone. Washed away by the blinding color of nothing but pure white. It was just the breathing piglet and me in the infinite expanse of nothingness. A land of dreams I called The White Room.

"What's wrong, little guy? Was falling off the cliff that scary?" I asked him, patting his head. Wilbur's identical piglet spirit looked up and shuttered. It was afraid, but of what I couldn't tell. Animals can't talk, and they're a lot simpler

than people. The emotions they have are primitive, and so much easier to deal with. With a person, they might be afraid of the future or envy someone's fortune. But with an animal, it was usually wondering what was next to eat, or how to avoid being eaten. I had a sneaking suspicion this piglet's fear was the latter.

I turned as I sat. A scene had appeared, drawn on the white canvas around us. A memory the pig was solely focused on. It started as the piglet looked up through a window in Mr. Bacon's shop room. Where everything from castration to butchering took place on the animals. And as the piglet peered into the shed, he saw one of the larger pigs there, eating.

The piglet wanted to join at first but was horrified as he saw Mr. Bacon slit the larger pig's throat. The pig tried squealing at the sudden sting, but only its blood poured out, and it quickly fell. I'm not a big fan of death or pain. I felt some sadness for the innocent thing. But for the piglet, it was a nightmare. It ran, squealing and running until it jumped off the mountaintop. Gavin jumped in after him and brought him back to shore. From there, he left the farm and found me. The vision was complete.

"Aww, poor thing. Don't worry. Maybe you'll grow up to be a breeding piggy." It couldn't understand me. They never can. But there's an aura that comes with dealing with animals and people in The White Room. Like a safe house of nothing but feelings where I can sort out what's bothering anyone and help them feel better. Sometimes troubled villagers come to me for help, but many stay away, my powers being too superstitious for their tastes. I was happy to help them when they'd come. I was also just as glad to be left alone and not burned at the stake.

I waved the memory of the workshop away, and the image dissolved like smoke. One of the many tricks I had here - one of the many I tried not to use unless I had to. The piglet sat up, the memory now erased. Or at least banished

to the back of its mind. I smiled as I pet it again, its breath and snorting returning to normal.

The White Room flashed as it dissipated like fog and the island, stable and the boys returned. The piglet stood and sniffed the air. It walked out of the stable at a brisk pace to play in the sun, as if nothing had ever happened.

“Geez, Miss Carter. You’re a life saver,” thanked Gavin.

“Please, don’t call me Miss. I’m only a few years older than you,” I told him, standing again.

“Well, thanks anyway. You too, Robert. I’ll make sure you two get the best ribs at the party tonight.” He bowed with gratitude. It was a nice gesture, but I think I’d stick with sugarcane today.

Robert and I continued on our way. We made our way past the town hub and bartering square toward the Trader’s small shop anchored on the pier.

Robert went off to the side, joining his grandparents who were out picking seaweed on the side of the docking line. I would have gone with him, but my curiosity wouldn’t allow me to take any detours. I continued, quickly reaching the side of the vessel. The shop itself was a simple floral-patterned box you had to crawl inside. It sat on top of a long and thin boat that bobbed as if at any second the weight of its contents could make it topple, but somehow it always stayed afloat. Crouching down I wormed my way through thick layers of carpet drapes hanging down to keep the heat out of the uncomfortably small boat’s interior.

“Hello? I’m here for a package,” I asked as I passed the last veil and sat cross-legged, somehow making it work in my tattered midnight blue sundress. From behind the next layer of rugs, the Trader appeared. She was an older woman hunched over with sagging wrinkles that formed into an always smiling face.

“Joy, isn’t it? I do have something for you. A package from Kingsport,” she hummed as she turned away and disappeared right back into the thicket of cloth. I shifted, slowly rocking back and forth from one knee to the other, waiting for the shopkeepers return. With a sudden burst of movement, her arm shot out first, holding a small rectangle of a box wrapped in brown parchment.

“Turns out you have two packages. One comes from Miskatonic University. Let me guess, a bookish girl like yourself has become pen pals with one of the professors?” she chuckled. But I’d never met anyone from the university before, not outside of Robert’s grandparents. I opened my mouth to say something, but as she handed me the two small packages, and I read the name on the front, all words and thoughts escaped me.

Faith Carter

I looked up at the Trader, who was hardly paying attention, lost in her world of making sure the local’s letters were correctly sorted.

“This can’t be. How’d you get this package?”

“From the mail clerks in the city. Is there something wrong, dearie?”

“It’s from my mom, but… she’s dead.”

“Oh, I’m sorry darling. Maybe it got lost in the mail, it’s possible she sent it before her passing, and a clerk found it buried in a mail storage room somewhere. Arkham’s a smart city, but they make mistakes too.” She handed me another box about the same size. I didn’t even read what it said. I kept a blank stare on the box that had my mother’s name as I thanked the Trader and left the shop, stepping back onto the pier I ran back to Robert and his family.

“Robert! Robert, I got something from my mom!” I announced as I knelt over to catch my breath. Robert looked at his grandparents, who both returned their surprised glances. “It has her name.”

“What? That’s crazy! What’s in it?” He shook his head.

“I don’t know. I haven’t checked. How’d you get this sent here?”

“I didn’t. That’s not what I got you.” Robert scratched the back of his head. “But, you should probably open that to find out what’s inside. Here, we can open this later.” He took the other small square box away from me. And put it in one of the many pouch pockets on the large belt his outfit had.

“Oh, Joy, this is wonderful. Maybe it’s a lead on your mother’s whereabouts?” Grandmother Phyllis said as she clasped her hands together.

“This looks like a pretty serious find. I can imagine you’ll need a moment. We’ll be over there if you two need us,” said Grandfather Howard as they both continued down the shoreline. Robert and I sat on the edge of the pier, as we both kept our eyes on the strange little box.

“So, aren’t you going to open it?”

“Yeah, yeah I just…” I shook my head. I was still, taking in a deep breath. I was hoping there would be something, anything to explain what happened after we made that strange leap across the stars, and why I was the only one that came back.

I took off the outer layer, making sure not to tear the small box. I opened the top and revealed the contents inside. Lying there was a small, silver ceremonial emblem. It looked like a stylized circle mixed with a specially engraved mark; a string looped through the center gap.

I pulled the string up and out. A bit was sticking out of the top of the emblem, but I couldn’t imagine what it was for. I reached with my other hand and touched the symbol. I was nearly knocked over as a band of light pulsed out of the ring along with a loud sound of cracking glass. It vanished as quickly as it came, and as I recovered, nobody else seemed to notice the flash of light or the sound, not even Robert.

“Woah! Are you okay Joy? Here, I’ll get some water-”

“-No, I’m okay. But… did you feel that?” I asked, shaking my head.

“Feel what?” I shook my head, realizing it was probably just the reflection of sunlight on the shimmering metal, mixed with my excited nerves. I scoured the rest of the box and found a letter inside. I unfolded the old bits of paper, and we read the short message.

Dear Joy,

Inside this box is a fragment of the Silver Key. It’s been in our family for generations, and now it’s your turn to wear it. It was too dangerous to keep it in one piece, as many terrible forces would love to get their hands on it. You’ll have to retrieve the other two parts. One I’ve given to the city of Kingsport, the second I gave to the Basc. I sent Spooky to help guide you through your training, and I bet he’s doing a bomb-ass job. Once you have all three pieces, it’ll be safe for you to come to the Leng Plateau and find the temple on the summit. That’s where I am, inside the World Archway. I can’t wait to see you again. But hurry, now that you’ve touched the key, the barrier I put over this island will crumble. Hurry, before Yellow King returns.

Umbasa, Faith Carter.

3

Attack

I sat still for a moment, holding my mother's necklace and note in hand. I had so many questions. What's the importance of this key? Why the Leng Plateau? My brain whirred in frustration at the cryptic letter.

I didn't even realize I was crying until a single tear fell from my cheek. Robert's arm came around from the side and hugged me. After a moment of silence, I stood up and marched over to the Crafts. I showed them the note, and they exchanged unsure glances.

"What is she talking about? What does any of this mean? Is this a joke?" I asked a mixture of anger and sadness overwhelmed me.

"I'm… not sure, Joy. We had met her during our younger days when we were searching for somewhere to settle down. We had gotten cornered by some bandits, and she saved us with her magic. We owed her our lives, and when she brought you here, she asked if we could care for you, we accepted. That's all we ever really knew about her," said grandfather Howard. I nodded in understanding.

"This has to be forged. This can't be a real letter. Who would be so cruel?" I asked them as I held the gift out, but they shook their heads.

"I think it's real. Your mother was very mysterious, after all."

"I just… I just want answers. But I don't know if I should go. I don't even know where to start."

"Well then, I'll send a pigeon to get you a boat right away young lady," he smiled with those kind sunken old eyes.

“Really? Oh, that’s too expensive for me to go all the way to Kingsport to find out this is a sick jokester’s letter.” I had no idea how much it would cost to pen for a ferry to sail here and back, but I imagined it costed more than the elderly couple had.

“Non-sense. Who would go to such lengths for a such a cruel joke? You’ve been waiting all this time to find your mother and here’s a huge clue from the woman herself. It’s not the time to be bashful Joy, be aggressive! Go out in that big world and demand those answers! You and Robert will have to tell us all about it when you get back here with her,” he said. Robert’s grandmother, Phillis gasped in defiance, clearly not a fan of the idea of letting either of her precious grandchildren take on a mission so far away from home.

“Thank you, Mr. Craft.” I smiled, and for the first time in a long while, a glimmer of genuine hope lit my soul. I turned back to Robert as the couple stayed on the shoreline.

Phyllis argued about how she’d never let her darling grandchildren get scurvy or drown on a ship in the middle of the ocean, and how improper it was that a young lady should go off sailing with a bunch of no-good men and that rescue missions and detective work should be kept to the professionals.

“Looks like we’re going on an adventure,” I nervously nudged him.

“I heard. Think we’ll be able to stop at the Miskatonic University on the way back?”

“I hope so.” I grinned. “Oh, I forgot to open your gift.”

“I think it’s probably better to just wait till later.” He probably didn’t want my unexpected letter to ruin the moment.

“No way. If I keep thinking about my mom all day, I’ll go crazy. Give me something to take my mind off it.” I tried to convince him. He sighed, knowing I wouldn’t give up. He reached back down into his pouch.

As he grabbed the box, we both froze as a cry from the skies pierced the air. It was shrill, short, and guttural like a wild animal screaming as it dove for its prey. The sound was so bone-chilling we both slightly ducked down as if an ancient instinctual urge told us the sound itself meant danger.

My eyes scanned left and right, then to the sky, but I saw nothing: Robert was doing the same. When our eyes met, I could tell he was anxious too, wary of what could have made such a thundering noise. It was too loud to be an animal from our island. All around us, the villagers cautiously continued their days, hoping whatever it was didn't come any closer.

But then, it came again — this time, much closer. The cry from the sky shook the sand under my feet, making individual grains bounce from its mighty roar. The wind picked up in an instant. A powerful breeze coming from across the sea blew over us.

In the first moment, it was just a draft, but as each second passed, it got harder even to stand upright. The villagers began heading back to their homes, some running. Never before had the island seen any foul weather beyond a light rain before.

"What do you think it is?" I whispered to Robert as I leaned closer.

"Something big. A bird, maybe." We were both quiet as we made our way back to the huts in silent agreement, it was better to stay inside for now. Robert's grandparents were doing the same, carrying their baskets of seaweed back. We followed them, and Robert's grandfather turned around, looking at us with an uneasy smile.

"Good thing the parties aren't for a few more hours," he said. I gave him a nervous chuckle; Robert joined me. But we all knew that this phenomenon was the first of its kind. What it was, none of us knew. It was better to hide away than to test the wrath of the Dreamlands. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Robert's

head drift upward and behind us. His expression changed from wary, to near panic. A single word escaped his mouth.

“Shantak!”

“Dragon!” Phyllis cried as she matched her grandson’s view. Dropping her basket and grabbing her husband’s arm, they ran faster than I ever thought would be possible for such an old couple. Immediately, panic broke out. Every man woman and child at the docks ran. Those who were still in the small rowboats jumped out into the water and swam with all their might to the shore.

“What’s a Shantak?” I asked as he grabbed my forearm, pulling me forward. Curious, I turned around to see just what everyone was screaming about. When I did, I realized why they were horrified. A contorted oval body with a head the size of a mutant horse connected by a thick goose-like neck flew towards our shore. A pair of yellow eyes with milky pupils on each side of its head gazed in all directions. Two hind legs followed behind it, clawed and thick with talons the size of paddles. Its wings dwarfed its own body as it bobbed in the air. They made a leathery flapping sound, but they were covered in ashy scales that made its maple brown corpse look even more rotten.

But just beyond the beast, something else sped toward our island in the water. A boat. No ordinary boat either. A single sail that had flags painted in red and crimson, the colors of Kingsport. It was a small warship. A whip-like noise cracked out from behind the beast, it came from the ship - another quickly followed. Two black dots flew through the expanse of blue between the two, both narrowly missing.

The beast’s head turned back as if disturbed the ship was managing to close the distance between them. Then, another crack. What I assumed was a cannonball flew right toward the face of the beast. Before the monster could dodge as it turned away, the black object slammed into the back of its elongated head.

The creature cried a horrible screech. Its body went limp, and it fell. It began to spiral downward, but its wings flattened, making it soar right over our heads as we ducked down. As it passed us, I saw something in the clutches of its oversized claws, a person.

Instead of landing in the middle of our peaceful paradise, it fell on top of the island plateau, right where I was painting only moments ago. Both Robert and I looked at each other, then back at the ship. The wooden beast that was the warship had already anchored and was coming to a halt. Oddly enough, the wind came to a complete stop as well. I could make out a single rowboat thrown over the nearside, and the shapes of a few people began crawling down the ropes.

I don't think our island had ever been invaded, and I hoped they weren't coming here to break that record of peace. I knew that whatever that creature in the sky was doing to get the attention of Kingsport's Crimson Elite was most definitely very, very dangerous. And for that reason, I began to lose my fear and became incredibly curious.

"Robert, did you see that?"

"I mean, it was hard to miss." He exhaled and nodded toward the crashed beast.

"No, I mean the person. That dragon was carrying someone. They might still be alive up there." I pointed to the plateau.

"That's a Shantak, not a dragon."

"What's the difference?"

"Shantaks breathe lightning. Please tell me you're not going to go up there, right?"

"Robert, we can't just leave someone up there with that thing. It might still be alive, and so might they."

“Shouldn’t we leave this to the soldiers? This is way too dangerous.”

“Maybe, but they might not get there in time. We should at least try.” I took off toward the incline. The dash there was shorter than I expected, and as we got to the top, there were marks along the ground where the Shantak had slid and fallen off the edge. A few feet away from the drop-off, was a young woman who stood, brushing herself off.

Her hair was a short bob reaching only to the end of her chin. She wore a long-sleeved undershirt that you’d see a typical pirate wear, with a simple beige jacket over it. Dark leather pants kept tightly around her legs and flowed into knee-high boots with a rapier on one hip, and a compass on the other. There was a stark contrast on her face from grassy green eyes above rosy red lips. For a soldier, she was very stylish.

“Don’t move, you might be hurt,” Robert said as he dug into his pockets. His skills and know-how in medicine would be more helpful now than ever. He approached the woman while holding a painkilling herb.

“Keep your dirty weeds away from me. Where am I? You know what, don’t answer, don’t care. How did I get here?” She trailed off, hands on her hips as they jutted out to the side. Robert and I shared a look of surprise at the sudden rudeness of our guest.

“This is Lonely Island. The Shantak dropped you on this summit. We came up here to help,” he patiently answered.

“Deva? Deva?” Someone called — a boy’s voice. I turned, two figures were quickly approaching us from down the incline. The much smaller one outran his companion and stopped in front of Deva. He was at least a head shorter than her and some years younger.

He began gasping for breath and bent over, holding his knees. His outfit was similar to his partner’s. He donned an even simpler outfit of mostly softer

browns and tan, a sort of standard light armor. He wore a cape colored red on the inside and an ashy grey on the out. He carried weapons as well, a sash went across his chest laced with a dozen small throwing knives. He had short, wild red hair with big, blue eyes peeking out from underneath. I assumed she was the senior ranking member to the boy.

“Whew, when the Shantak dropped I thought you might have been a goner.”

“I’m fine. You guys weren’t supposed to hit the damn thing!”

“Crap, it’ll probably still retreat to Tsang Tower. Should we follow it or try to let it capture you again?” I shook my head in confusion at hearing the word ‘let.’

“You aren’t here to pillage the island?” Robert asked as the second man reached our little group. He was, perhaps, the tallest person I’d had ever seen. Although most of the people on Lonely Island weren’t usually giants.

Unlike the others, he had no armor or weapons: only tan pants and a white shirt with sleeves that sagged slightly at the forearms. The shirt was tucked into his pants, and his pants into the same knee-high boots the other two wore. Despite his casual dress, his face was entirely different. His gaze was harsh, from his angerly arched eyebrows to his full jaw beard and narrow green eyes hidden behind multiple scars on his cheeks and forehead. His short, salt peppered hair stood up as if even his hair was angry too. The only thing this group had visually in common was those fascinating yet practical boots. I made a mental note to ask the Trader about them later.

“Neither of you move,” a cold order came from the man.

“Why would anyone come to this place? What do you have to pillage? A couple of dozen pigs?” a sharp snort came from the woman, amused with her rude humor. “Let’s wake this bird up so it can lead us there. I don’t care if we have to wrap a rope to its neck and tie it to the front of the ship to get it to listen.” She walked past us alongside the man. The boy by her side stared at me

for a second, as if confused, but quickly followed his friends.

Robert and I both started to follow them down the hill, but a small noise came from behind the plateau's edge. It was the splashing of water. Robert looked behind us and inspected over the ledge. A thundering thrashing came from down below. Robert tripped backward as an enormous form zipped up and over the edge of the cliff. After whirring into the air, it landed, erupting the dirt and rocks around it several feet into the air. My heart skipped a beat as I realized Robert and I were now separated between the beast. The soldiers turned, and in an instant, both woman and boy had their weapons drawn while the larger man marched forward.

"Stay back, miss! Leave this to us." The boy stepped in front of me, lightly pushing me back as he drew another knife from his sash. The Shantak reared back, and its beak for a mouth opened wide.

A glowing, sizzling light rose up from deep in its throat. I braced myself, remembering Robert's words. *Shantaks breathe lightning.*

4

One Way or Another

The Shantak snapped its head down toward me, and a blinding mass of crackling light poured out.

The large man wasted no time and stood in front of the three of us, and in a sudden whirlwind of darkness, something appeared in front of him. The white and yellow light of the Shantak's lightning boomed with the wrath of a thunderstorm, and the brightness nearly blinded me. But from my squinting eyes, I could see what that had formed in front of the man, a shield darker than obsidian.

The vibrations of the lightning pouring down on metal rang out. But the rays of light stopped, and the Shantak reared back in anger. The man lowered his arm to his side, and as he did the black shield that had come from nowhere, waivered like gas and made an uneasy steaming hiss as it evaporated into shadows and vapor, like a mirage.

But then it hit me; Robert was still behind the creature. Its wings thrashed as if struggling to take off. I stepped to the side, trying to see Robert from behind the beast.

He was trying to make his way around to our side, away from the cliff ledge he was pinned against. But he didn't dare run out in front of it under threat of being caught in its fierce blaze of electric fire and talons that lashed out as it stood on one leg, stretching itself upright at least a dozen feet tall.

"I'll keep it down!" Deva thrust her rapier toward the sky, and immediately a current of wind came down. The force of the air was so strong it became that

much harder for my already wobbly legs to stand.

I covered my face as the downdraft overwhelmed me. The Shantak cried, as its large and scaled wings were forced back down. Its head clapped and clasped, making the noise of loose metal smacking oak. The bird's beak came swinging down as its neck extended toward the charging man. Its razor edge shimmered as it attempted to slice the unarmed fighter in two.

But the man didn't flinch nor hesitate. The black vapors surrounded him again. It was like black ink that flowed through the air unseen until he called it to him. It wavered and wrapped around him, coating him as it began to solidify.

As the Shantak's maw reached his body, he caught both sides of it with his hands. In that same moment, the smoke became totally solid, a suit of black armor protecting him. But this was no suit of armor you'd see honorable knights wear while riding into battle. It was pitch black, scarred by heat, as if corrupt and twisted. Not a single piece of the man's body could be seen from under its form.

The man hardly budged as he held a firm grip on its mouth as it twisted and whipped in frustration. And the clang of metal on scales told me that this was no cheap trick or illusion. It was magic. Memories came flooding back that I hadn't recalled in years. Memories of the magic I'd seen my mother use back before her disappearance. Whatever it was, now was not the time to distract the soldiers fighting the Shantak by asking questions.

"Got it!" Cheered the boy, throwing one of his knives at the beast as it struggled in place. The dagger met its mark, stabbing the creature in the rightmost of its four eyes. At the same time, the man let go of the right half of the screeching creature's head. He made a fist as the beast tried to free itself from its captor's grasp. The shadow knight slammed his hand down, and the creature's head smashed into the ground, kicking up dirt in the explosion of force.

It cried a loud noise that cut my ears. It broke free from the man's grasp for just a moment. And with that split second, it reared back just out of his range and opened its mouth as the light built up in an instant.

In a sudden burst, lightning poured out of its mouth in a desperate last attempt to free itself from the fight it was losing. The wavering light overwhelmed the man, and he covered his face from the blast as the beast focused its wrath on him, covering him in a bath of fiery yellow sparks. It made a roar of anger so fierce I had no choice but to cover my ears this time as I cowered away.

The man gave a feral growl; he sounded like more of an animal than the Shantak. His war cry was terrifying. But if I were roasted alive, I would probably sound even worse.

The man charged forward now through the rays, his steps clanging on the ground under the mighty force of his mystical shadow armor. He leaned forward with his shoulder and curled his arm into a sideways flex, using it as a makeshift shield while powering through the beast's assault.

The downdrafts stopped as the bipolar wind shifted in an instant, as Deva pointed the tip of her rapier forward. I almost toppled over from the shift, but I was able to dig my legs in just in time before I tripped forward into a faceplant.

"Give him a tackle!" cheered the boy at my side, who wildly swung his knives around in glee. He acted like this was a regular battle, and that there was nothing special about mythical creatures fighting men that could forge sets of armor or weapons out of thin air.

With the wind, the man's charge picked up as he barreled down on the beast that tried flattening out its wings as they were kicked up like sails, pushing it back. As it happened, I saw Robert try to find a last resort to get around the beast. There was no way he would make it out of the way in time.

“Stop!” I ran past my small protector, trying to halt the warrior’s run, but it was no use. His body slammed into the creature’s scaly hide and threw it backward. I watched in horror as Robert tried to jump out of the way, but he wasn’t fast enough. The Shantak toppled over him, and off the cliff. As Robert dived, the tree branch sized talons smacked him backward, and he fell off the cliff with it.

I ran with all my might to follow him as the wind settled. I didn’t have time to think or get a sound footing. I screamed as I fell over the edge of the cliff, reaching for him while going headfirst for the jagged rocks below.

As my arms flailed, I felt a clamp grasp onto my wrist. A loud pop came from my shoulder, and I winced in pain. I was being pulled back upward. Time seemed to freeze as my eyes darted around, looking for him. He wasn’t still falling, but there was no blood on the jagged rocks below.

My eyes widened in horror as I realized that in the talons of the beast, was Robert. He was being flown away, a hostage. The Shantak outstretched its withered shingled wings as it fell and swooped low and parallel with the water below it. It flew forward with all its might, realizing this was its chance to escape the assault of the shadow knight.

I was dragged back up the edge of the cliff and thrown back on my butt. But I kept reaching out, trying to close the impossible distance between Robert and me somehow.

“You nearly killed yourself, idiot!” I heard Deva yell at me as she threw me back, but it was fuzzy. I felt like I was drowning. Little dots and spots of stars filled my vision, and I couldn’t breathe. Water filled my lungs and my sight, I choked as my vision faded. My ears buzzed, echoing a smaller version of the Shantak’s fleeing cry. I was frozen in anxiety, paralyzed by the fear of what nightmare just happened. Shadows crept up in the corner of my vision, and the air escaped my lungs. I couldn’t see, I couldn’t breathe.

“Hey! Just breathe okay.” I heard the boy say to me as he patted my back. My mouth was open, but I couldn’t make any sounds. The shaking had overtaken me like being left to drown in freezing water. “Stay calm. Breathe like I am. In - and out,” he instructed. I nodded, or at least I tried too. “Was that guy your friend?” he asked, his voice slowly becoming less garbled behind a wall of water. I nodded furiously — my brain sloshing back and forth in my skull like a pile of useless mush.

“He’s my… Robert.” I spoke broken words behind chattering teeth.

“Why’d you go and do something like that? Those jagged rocks could have killed you,” the boy asked.

“I wasn’t just going to let him die.” On the bright side, as I got angrier, I could breathe easier. There were words exchanged from behind me, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying. As my eyes began to focus and I escaped from my dizzy trance, the speaking cleared.

“Shouldn’t have charged? Would you rather it have fried us all?” said the large man as he spoke to his comrades.

“We could at least help. It’s the right thing to do,” spoke the boy at my side.

“We’re not a charity, and we’re not taking her,” said the woman. I forced myself to get up, I felt like puking immediately as I balanced on still shaking legs. I asked an honest question, but I wasn’t sure I wanted the answer.

“Where is it taking him?” The voices of the soldiers behind me stopped. After a few seconds too many without an answer, I grit my teeth as I put the pieces together. “You were following it because it had her.” I looked at Deva, who looked back with unjustified disdain. The three were quiet. Only the boy looked even remotely guilty. “Tell me where it was going,” half-demand, half-plea.

“The Leng Plateau.” The red-headed boy answered after looking at his

companions. “More specifically, the Tsang Fortress.” I was only vaguely familiar with what he was talking about from the maps I’d seen in the past, but it was a start.

“Okay,” I answered. I didn’t know what I was going to do with the information I was asking for, but I needed something to grab onto.

I looked down at the warship anchored in Lonely Island’s waters, then back to the soldiers. I realized what I had to do. If these soldiers were going to chase after the Shantak, I had to go with them to save Robert from the clutches of that monster. “Take me with you,” I demanded. Deva immediately swiped her hands back and forth.

“No. We have a critical mission, and we can’t have a mousey wildcard like you running around screwing things up.” I’ve always considered myself a pacifist, and I’d never felt the urge to punch someone in the face. But right now, I was really feeling it.

“My best and only friend has been taken by that thing because your crew came to my island and ruined everything. I don’t care about your mission or assignments. I’m going on that boat, and no one’s stopping me.” I tried sounding as brave as I could, praying my bluff wouldn’t get called immediately. Deva crossed her arms.

“Deva, we were going there anyway-”

“-And now we might as well not because it got away. How are we supposed to get through the maze?”

“But it’s our fault. The least we can do is drop her off on the way back home,” the boy pleaded.

“Fine,” she snapped and turned, facing the decline. “We’re not going to wait for you. You have thirty seconds before we get back to the boat, and if you’re not there, we’re leaving. And when you get killed, it’s not on us.” The large man

followed without saying anything. The boy stopped and faced me.

“If you have any family, you should probably tell them goodbye. Deva won’t wait up,” he said, turning back to follow his fellow soldiers, but he stopped again. “I’m really sorry about your friend. But don’t worry, we’ll save him!” He smiled with a grin full of determination. I made my way down the incline. I ran past the villagers who had already begun getting back to their daily duties, though a lot more cautiously now. I ran into the hut I’d come to know as home, entering the small box of a living room made of mud and stout palm trees. Both of the Crafts were huddling together by the fire in the center. When they looked up at me, they stood and questioned.

“What happened out there, Joy?” asked Howard.

“Shantak, the animal. It came down and attacked us,” I spat out, but I couldn’t find the words to explain what happened to Robert.

“Where’s Robert? Is he still out there?” Phyllis asked. My mouth hung open, and as our eyes met all I could do was begin to tear up again. Phyllis broke into uncontrollable sobbing.

“Joy... is Robert…” he couldn’t manage to complete his sentence. I had to find something to say.

“No! It took him, but he’s still alive.”

“What? That dragon took it back to its nest? Gods. Our poor boy is going to be eaten alive!” Phyllis said, her weeping became wailing.

“N-no! It took him, but it won’t eat him. The soldiers said that they don’t eat humans. It tries to kidnap people and keep them as prisoners. But it won’t hurt him. The soldiers said we’re going to rescue him,” I said. It was a complete lie, but I had to give them an ounce of hope.

“You’re going after it? Shouldn’t the soldiers go by themselves to save him?”

asked Howard.

“I am. He’d do the same for me. I need to help him, one way or another. But I don’t have any time. The soldiers are leaving right now to follow it-” Howard cut me off as he stepped forward, embracing me. I hugged him tightly back. “We’ll be back soon.”

“Go, Joy. But please, stay safe. We love you both.” I turned away and left, tearing myself apart from them. I ran across the last group of huts, making it onto the shore. The three soldiers waited by the rowboat they paddled to the island on.

“How nice of you to join us,” Deva complained as I approached. “You ready yet?” I nodded as I looked around. Several of the islanders were looking at us, watching the strange group of people that came from the seas.

“Yeah, I think so,” I nodded. Trying to hold back my knees bouncing from anxiety.

“What’s your name?” asked the boy.

“I’m Joy.” I tried to smile.

“I’m Leeroy,” he replied. The only one of the three that gave any signal he cared I was here.

“I’m Deva. This is our ship, the Second Alert. This is Tristan.” Deva motioned to her companion as he looked out over the island, his head panning sideways, watching the villagers as if they could attack at any moment. “Now, if you’d like to save your friend before the Shantak figures out he’s not me, get in.”

5

Come Sail Away

Deva stepped into the rowboat. There was hardly enough room for two people, much less four. As we settled in and Deva and Tristan sat on one bench facing us while Leeroy and I sat on the other.

Tristan took the oars and drove them into the water. With each rotation, our vessel lunged toward the still warship. Leeroy looked from his partners to me. A silent awkwardness fell over the rowboat as we left the shore.

“So,” he said, tapping his fingers. Neither Tristan or Deva reacted as he tried to break the silence. “Was that guy your boyfriend?”

“Boyfriend?” I asked aloud, not sure how to answer a question I didn’t know the answer to.

“Sorry, maybe that’s a little too personal since we just met,” he laughed.

“We’re very close,” I said, still thinking about his question.

“Leeroy, shut up.” Deva shook her head as she folded her arms. Every few moments, Leeroy would make a popping sound with his lips, and each time he did, Deva gave him a harsher and harsher look. And every time Leeroy would look out over the water, trying to hide a growing smile. Tristan didn’t seem to mind; he focused solely on getting us to the ship as soon as possible. He looked the most uncomfortable out of all of us in the cramped space. Deva pulled out an orange and began peeling it. I remembered one of the short medical lessons Robert gave me, and despite my shyness, I tried to make peace with my new travel mates.

“Scurvy?”

“What?” She froze as she eyeballed me.

“You eat oranges to prevent scurvy?”

“I eat oranges because I like them. And I like them because unlike people they don’t ask stupid questions.” The amount of hostility coming from her was oddly different from Leeroy’s common courtesy and Tristan’s apathy.

When we reached the hull of the boat, the rope-ladder was still down. Tristan was fast to grab it and begin tying it at the front of the ship, trying to get out of the situation as soon as he could.

“I’ll go last to make sure she doesn’t fall-”

“-Nice try. Go.” Deva pointed for him to go up first. He frowned, but when the two made eye contact, he snapped his fingers and pointed at her. He climbed the rope like an excited little monkey, scaling the entire side of the boat in seconds. Tristan went after. He was much slower and deliberate with each step.

“By all means, take your sweet time. It’s your friend that’s going to end up as bird food, not mine.” Deva was motioning for me to go next. I focused and began my climb. It took every ounce of will I had to not look down into the waters as I got halfway there, but the way up was shorter than I thought it’d be.

As I reached the railing, an arm stretched out, and I took it. It wasn’t much, but it at least gave me some help getting over. Leeroy was standing on the other side.

“Welcome to the Second Alert! He waved his arms out in a grand gesture. “This is our bounty hunting head-quarters.”

“Bounty hunting? Like mercenaries? I thought you all were Kingsport soldiers.” I pointed up at the flag.

“Well, technically Tristan was. But that was a long time ago. He’s retired now.”

“Crimson Elite,” the large man broke his silence, standing by the forward mast. “Not a soldier. Stop speaking to her Leeroy.” His voice was bland and deep. I couldn’t tell if he was thirty, or fifty, probably somewhere in between. Arms folded with a disgruntled frown, he continued. “This woman is not to be trusted. We know nothing about her. Learn to hold your tongue,” he ordered, walking away.

“Can I show her how to swab the deck?”

“She can join you in your chores until we kick her overboard.” I looked around the deck of the ship. It was already surprisingly polished.

Tristan made his way over to the ladder and helped Deva up, then pulled the rowboat up by himself, an impressive feat of strength on top of just having singlehandedly fought a Shantak and won. As Leeroy directed me away from them, he continued.

“We were trying to find where that bird lives. We got a lead that said it lives in a place called Tsang Tower. We were trying to follow it, so we could figure out how to get through the Northern Spire Maze.” I was glad Leeroy was here; the others would probably give me no information at all.

“Leeroy, you better start keeping your mouth shut. This bumpkin doesn’t need to know anything,” Deva ordered like Tristan had, hearing us from across the ship. Leeroy leaned in and covered his mouth.

“She seems bossy, but she’s just trying to look cool since you’re new here. She does that with all new people,” he said.

Looking up at the flag, I wondered why they would have kept the Kingsport flag up. Probably to ward off would-be attackers. Even from my distant home in the middle of nowhere, we heard about the ferocity of the Kingsport army and its conquests that made Kingsport the greatest City-State in the world.

“Tristan, please take her below deck before Leeroy gives her any stupid

ideas," Deva said as they finished putting the rowboat away. Before I had a chance to even speak, Tristan was standing right next to me.

"Come." He tilted his jaw for me to follow. He took wide strides toward the back of the boat. He opened a back hatch that stuck out from the raised base and going down a narrow set of stairs down into the belly of the ship. I had to quicken my pace to keep up. After a few turns, the steps stopped and led down a single corridor, and somewhere in the middle, Tristan stopped in an instant. I almost ran into his back.

"Stay in here until I come to get you. If you leave, I will find you." He opened the door and stepped back as if I were a poisonous animal he had to lure in carefully. I stepped into the new room and looked around, cringing at my new room.

The impossibly cramped space had just enough room for a cot-bed that looked like a pigsty. A bucket sat in the corner, and I didn't have the heart or stomach to examine it any closer than I already was. There was a poor excuse for a dresser that took up the other half of the room, making a foot-wide walkway for me to stride inside.

I sat on the bed. I sunk immediately, the pile of damp hay covered in sheets giving way to my weight. "We will arrive in a few hours, sleep here until then. You'll want to be on your toes when we get there. And you don't want me to catch you snooping around." With that, he slammed the door shut, leaving me alone to my thoughts.

I sat there for a few minutes. Eventually, my head sank into my hands. Why did it have to take Robert? I tried laying down as the millions of individual straws poked my back. I shifted and turned. But as my eyes slowly closed and my brain became exhausted from thinking about everything that happened, a small knock woke me right back up.

I sat up, wondering if I only hearing things. But then, there it was again. I got up, pushing my wild hair back and reaching the rickety door. I turned the handle; or tried to until I realized it was stuck, rusted from age. I pulled it forward a crack, and on the other side was the only person on the ship I didn't mind seeing.

"Hiya," Leeroy waved with a whisper. "I'm not supposed to be down here, but I wanted to talk to you about stuff." I opened the door and looked both ways down the dark hallway that angled with the ship's rocking, then stepped aside, allowing him in.

He jumped on top of the dresser, which wobbled uneasily under his lightweight, but he didn't seem to mind. I sat on the bed again. "If there's anything I can help you with, just let me know. I know it can be kind of stressful, going out on an adventure with folks like us and all. I felt the same way last year when I first joined them."

"Well, first of all, this isn't some adventure for me. I'm trying to save my best friend's life." Leeroy half frowned. I bowed my head with a sigh. There was no reason for me to be so rude to the one person that was helping me. "Sorry. I'm, frustrated is all."

"The first trip is always the hardest. You've never gone sailing before have you?"

"No. At least not out of sight of my home island."

"You're an artist, right?" he asked. My eyes perked up.

"How'd you know?" He pointed to my side. Only now realizing I was still wearing my satchel bag. "Oh, well, yeah sort of. Nothing major, I dabble here and there."

"After this mission and we rescue your friend, you should come to the Gallery. You'd love it." The Kingsport Gallery was the peak of civilization. The works of the greatest creators of all time stay there. Even for a well-known

professional, it could take a lifetime to have even one piece admitted. It was a dream of mine, the kind that would probably never come true.

“I guess we’ll see. I’ll probably need a vacation first.” I gave a weak smile. “Why is that thing flying around, and why are you chasing it?” Leeroy pursed his lips and looked to the side. As if guilty.

“Well… A lot of weird stuff has been happening recently. There’s a lot of animals and monsters that nobody’s seen in forever popping up more and more. People are spreading a lot of rumors. And they all start with the Leng Plateau. I think it’s the Elder Gods like in the stories, they’re up to something.”

“Elder Gods? I’m not very familiar-” I could hardly ask the question before Leeroy gave up the answer.

“The Old Ones!” He dramatically waved his hands, getting lost in his explanation. “Way back when, before the Dreamlands was home to people like you and me. There were these people, well, they were kind of like people. Except they had these great powers. There was only a handful of them, and they all had total control over all the Worlds. But then this guy named Randolph came out of nowhere and sealed them all away! With all the strange things going on, people are starting to think the Elder Gods think it’s safe to come out again. So, we’re exploring to figure out what’s going on. And if it’s true, we’re going to stop them from coming back, or else everyone in the Dreamlands will die.”

“If these, um, ‘Elder Gods’ were so strong and controlled everything, how could you guys stop them? Seems like a losing fight to me.” Doubt filled my voice.

“Simple. We do the same thing Randolph did.” Leeroy raised a fist.

“How’d he do it?”

“Well, I dunno. We think it has something to do with this thing called the Elder Sign.”

“What’s an Elder Sign?” Leeroy leaped off the dresser and pulled up his sleeve, showing me his left wrist.

Printed there was a symbol, the veins of a leaf — the exact same design as the birthmark on my shoulder. I faked a cough, pulling my dress shoulder strap closer inward to cover my birthmark.

“It’s a special mark that’s really rare. The only people that I know that have them are Deva and Tristan. They say people that have the sign have special powers, like how Deva can control the wind. That’s how we sail from place to place; we don’t need paddles or a real breeze. And Tristan? He can make armor from shadows and weapons of all kinds right out of thin air. I’ve never even seen someone touch him before, he’s so cool! He even taught Deva how to fight when she was my age.”

“What do you do?” I asked, trying to get as much information out of him as I could. My heartbeat sped with the question. Was it possible I wasn’t the only one with these strange powers? Leeroy smiled with a blush.

“I… don’t have it. I drew this one on because I want to get it one day. But I’m good at being fast - I’m agile, like a snake! And I love to fight bad guys. Tristan is training me the basics of fighting. I’m gonna join the Crimson Elite like he did one day so I can become tough like him.

“So, the three of you met and started traveling together?”

“It’s a long story. Deva and Tristan have always known each other, but I only found them last year when I tried stealing some of their treasure.” I nodded, starting to understand. I began to wonder if this was some kind of divine coincidence, or if I was talking to a boy with an overactive imagination. “I should probably go back topside, don’t want Tristan to start looking for me.” He made his way to the open door. “I hope we find your friend,” he smiled as he turned the corner.

I opened my mouth, about to tell him I had the same mark - but I stopped. I had no idea what they'd do if they found out I had it. For all I knew part of their bounty hunting was to find people with marks like myself. Maybe they were working for these 'Elder Gods.' Or perhaps I was just paranoid.

Part of me desperately wanted him to be right about the magic they had, that I wasn't alone with my magical powers. My head bobbed back, thinking about my situation. I laid back down, curling up into a ball. I rolled once or twice, before settling in and closing my eyes.

I got to enjoy a few seconds of rest before I was rudely awakened with a set of three pounding strikes on my door. I shot up, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes and pushing my already frizzling hair back again as I stood. Tristan wasted no time and shoved my door open.

"Come topside. We're here." He walked out of my doorway. I was sure to follow him quicker this time, not letting those strides outpace me so quickly. We made our way up the stairs and into the dark outside.

A chill came over me as the cold air of night flowed around me. I was distracted by the complete darkness of the seas around us. A blanket of thick fog made it impossible to see farther than a few yards off the boat's sides.

When I looked up from under the sails that began to lose their size under the fading push of Deva's wind, I realized the stars had shifted ever so slightly. To the untrained eye, it would have looked like a few different pinpricks in the veil of heaven, but to me, the landscape I'd painted and marveled at a thousand times was so much different.

"Enjoying the nature watch, princess?" Deva's coy voice nearly made me jump as she leaned casually against the railing just a few feet from the door.

"Sorry, it's just different." I pointed to the sky.

"The stars? Yeah, that's what happens when you're nearly at the top of the

world. We've been sailing full speed ahead due north for the last six hours. Globes are funny like that. Anyway, if you'll look around, you'll see that we're here." She lazily twisted her wrist as if she didn't have a care in the world.

As my eyes adjusted in the darkness, I could see jagged spires and columns rising out of the sea. A chill went down my spine as we passed each one so narrowly. Deva steered us through the minefield while having a casual conversation.

"Look, I'll be honest with you." Deva marched up to me, her face getting so close to mine I could smell the scent of Kingsport field's signature lavender on her neck. "I almost feel bad about your friend. Almost. He's most definitely a pile of bones by now. But there's a small chance Shantak wanted to save him for a midnight snack. He's probably tied up somewhere or in a pit or a tower or wherever a Shantak bird saves its meals. If you make it to Tsang Tower, you might be able to get him out before that. It's a long shot, and you'll have to get through this creepy village on the docks here but, if you want to, we'll take you up to where you can see the pier and let you row there." Deva's sudden hospitality, although backhanded, took me by surprise. I nodded.

"Yes, of course. Should I follow the roads there, or is there another way? Could I have a map?" Deva sighed and motioned for me to follow her. Together we made our way to the front of the ship as it came to a near halt.

Lights coming from a dock in the distance broke through the fog. It looked like a ghost town. There were only a few tiny boats docked there, all out of commission or nearly about to be. There was a lot of room for unwary travelers to anchor in the forsaken place.

I could make out a few forms skittering here and there. My chills only grew as I watched the black specks dart in and out of the lights, like roaches trying to stay hidden. There was a tower in the distance to the left, where Robert must be.

“Tristan, could you get her something that doesn’t scream, ‘I have no idea what I’m doing, please abduct me.’” Tristan left the center of the deck to head below. “The people here aren’t what you’d call human. They’re very skittish and probably will hide while you’re in town. But if you do see any wearing a brown cloak with a wobble when they walk, keep your distance. They won’t attack you if they don’t think you have anything valuable. But If you walk around in that cute little farm girl dress of yours, you’ll be robbed and sold to slave traders in minutes, and Gods know what else.” I was silent. Deva’s relaxed stance told me she didn’t care if anything bad happened to me. Not wanting to seem like a clueless child, I defended myself.

“I’ll be fine. I have a knife.” This caught her interest.

“Really? Where?” she nodded, inspecting me. I reached down and fumbled around on the inside of my satchel, where I had my letter opener. I clumsily dropped the small, dull blade as I pulled it out. It was barely sharp enough to cut grass, but at least it was something.

“First off, you aren’t going to get anywhere with that little thing. Second, that took way too long to get out. In life or death situations you’ll have maybe half a second to react.” Deva snapped her fingers. She reached into the backside of her belt and fumbled with something.

She held out her hand toward me. In a sheath was a knife, much bigger and much deadlier than my letter opener. “See, now this is a knife. Granted if you get in a fight with noodle arms like yours you’d still lose against most small children.”

Noodle arms? I looked down at my own body. I wasn’t the strongest girl in the world, my biggest muscle was probably my heart, but I couldn’t be that frail. I reached out and took the knife anyway, not wanting to disagree and lose the only form of protection I’d have against whatever was waiting for me in that village below.

I tied the leather strap around my waist and clamped the buckle. I jumped as something draped over me, a deep brown colored sheet. I gripped the fabric and held it out in front of me; my eyes scolded Tristan for a moment. It wasn't a sheet - it was a cloak, simple and plain.

Realizing this is the thing Deva told Tristan to get for my disguise, I put it around me. It smelled of algae, old musky seawater, and rotten wood. It would have been unbearable, but I think my nose had subconsciously gotten used to it while I was sleeping.

I put the hood up; the front portion nearly covered my entire face. I adjusted it as tightly as I could. Even still only the bottom half of my eyes peered out from underneath.

Deva stepped forward, her hands darting into my hood, her hands were surprisingly warm for such a cold person. I froze as she invaded my precious personal space. She had tucked my hair back, so it was no longer showing from the front or peeking out from inside my outfit. I nodded in understanding.

"Come on. The boat is ready for you." She guided me toward the end of the ship I'd climbed up earlier today. The ropes tied on each end would allow me to be lowered into the water safely. "If and when you make it out of here alive, you can find us at Kingsport. This rowboat cost a pretty penny, and if we find out you lived to tell this tale without paying us back, you'll wish the Shantak had killed you." Deva motioned for me to step over the railing and into my new boat after giving me her backhanded 'good luck.'

Awkwardly maneuvering around the bars like a clumsy sloth, I sat down in the vessel and gripped the oars, they weren't too heavy. When the water soaked them, that would change. Tristan and Deva stood up above, watching as they lowered my vessel into the murky depths.

Before I even reached the water, they vanished from sight, swallowed by the

haze of smoke. The boat slightly rocked as it made contact the water below. I quickly untied the ropes and tugged on each end. The rope-ladder was swiped up the side in seconds like a snake returning to a safer place.

In moments I could feel the wind pick up as the warship began moving forward. And after a few seconds, it vanished into the fog. Luckily from here, I could see the torchlit port. I shuddered. Realizing I had taken the first step into a side of the Dreamlands I never knew existed, and I was alone.

6

Scary Monsters

My short and silent rowing to the port passed quickly. By the time the tip of my rowboat touched the earth, my arms were burnt out from cycling the oars.

The clay squished under my ragged shoes; the soft earth was moist from the murky waters. I stepped onto the docks. It was barely bigger than the one at home, but this one was rickety and shambled, even the wood felt weak. It was too old, unused. I half expected the material to creek or give a demonic giggle as I stepped onto its trap, but nothing nearly that dramatic happened.

I made my way down the straightaway and stepped foot onto the hardened dirt, patted down with old prints that didn't resemble the five-toed pattern a human would make. These prints came from hooves, but they were too small to belong to any horse. I shuddered, wondering what kind of 'people' were hiding under the brown cloaks.

There were buildings; pueblos carved out of the hills that rose up, making the mounds look like small mountains. Little huts were scattered around, like sheds or one room houses. As I neared one of them, a skittering sound began. My eyes darted toward it, looking inside the hut. On this side, there was no wall, only bars. Something was inside the bars, something tall.

My head turned against my own will. One, two, four, eight. Eight legs rose up, each one at least six feet tall going upward. They bent inwards, leading into a central body. I realized what I was looking at as I stood only a few feet away from the thing.

There was nobody, only a mass white ooze that twitched in place. My voice

was caught in my throat as it lunged at me, I fell backward as its legs extended out through the bars, digging on the ground right in front of me. Its fangs stuck out of the sack, dripping with black ooze, it gnawed on the bars that separated me from it. I crab-walked backward in desperation, getting as much space between myself and the man-eating crawler as I could.

The fungus-infected spider stopped, realizing it had missed its chance at an easy meal, it turned, and stumbled away, forgetting that I existed. I stood, regaining my breath. There were at least a dozen more huts, each one identical to this one. I could only assume each one had an identical monster inside.

I looked around at the pueblos, wondering if an entire hive of them lurked inside. Then I realized these people must use the spiders the same way we use pigs. I knew that something from inside the coves had to have seen me. I had to hope my outfit would ward them off, make them think I was tougher than I appeared after nearly peeing myself after the scare. I wove my way through the huts, staying away from each one as much as I could.

I kept moving at a brisk pace. My cloak floated behind me like a spirit; I was a specter in a ghost town. I continued down a beaten down the trail toward the tower. I soon reached a fork in the road.

The main road kept going forward into a forest of black trees, starved by the lack of sun — the color of death down to their very cracked and shriveled roots. I turned to the next, smaller, and winding passageway. This one lead in the direction of the Tsang Tower, where Robert was.

Time was against me, so I kept my pace up. As I passed through that town and it shrank behind me, I sighed in relief, thankful I wouldn’t be attacked by the cloaked people today.

The earth rose, and the brittle grounds weaved like shifting sands in a desert of mud. The dew and fog floated freely between the miles of emptiness. The air

was light, and even keeping at this light pace was a challenge as the feeling of icicles building up in my lungs began to weigh me down. Up here in the far north, even the land itself seemed cursed. By who or why was something I don't think I wanted the answer to.

As I continued, my cruel mind kept bringing up the stories of the worst old wives' tales I'd read when I was younger. A witch that baked children and lost travelers into pies - a necromancer that slit the throat of every passerby and made them join his legion of undead warriors. There were too many to mention. With the Tsang Tower in sight, I kept trying to focus on the task at hand.

A noise popped out from behind me, the crack of a twig. I tried to ignore it, forcing myself to believe it was coincidence or a trick of the brittle ground under my own feet. But it happened again. This time, I turned my head back to make sure I wasn't being followed.

Twenty paces back, in the middle of the road, was a rock. The boulder stood about three feet tall, hardly menacing, but there was something off about it - something almost alive. I searched my memories of a story with rock monsters, but I drew a blank. I slowly turned my head back around and continued my pace.

It was another thirty seconds until the subtle skittering came to my attention again. I wasn't sure what I'd do if I caught the stalker in the act, but I'd rather confront certain death now than have it loom over my head until it decided to strike later.

The boulder had gotten closer by just a few paces. The light of the full moon revealed there was something strange about the rock — the grey altered, much darker than the rest of the land. I turned and began to sprint, and it followed.

The skittering noise taunted me with its speed. I could run, but I couldn't outrun it. I followed the trail for another thirty seconds before I began to run out of breath. My heart throbbed from the fear of what was following me. What was

hiding behind that disguise of the land? What unknown predator was stalking me as its next meal?

I realized I only had one option. I reached for the blade at my side and pulled out the knife Deva had given me. Taking it out of its sheath, I pointed the knife forward, then stopped. I turned on a dime and faced my follower.

The boulder slid to a stop, only five paces away. My wide eyes kept from blinking as I held my weapon in both hands, tilting my jaw down as if the rock might try to lunge at my throat. I don't know if I'd be able to kill something to protect myself, but I was about to find out.

"What are you? Who are you? Why are you following me?" I asked it in a panic. The rock was silent. But then, it vibrated with a voice.

"Wait, you can see me?" squawked a voice from inside. I narrowed my eyes in confusion and irritation that the thing would taunt me.

"W-well, of course I can. You're a rock!" I rationalized with the living thing.

"What? I'm not a rock." The earth at the base of the rock wavered like steam as the base of it lifted like a curtain. Up, until a particular little person stood proud as his cape rested behind him. "It's me, Leeroy." My expression went from confusion and fear to anger.

"How could you? You almost gave me a heart attack!" I scolded as I waved the knife around like a mad woman.

"Sorry! I wanted to make sure you made it okay. Guess my invisibility cloak needs some work," he shrugged, whipping his cape behind him. I sighed as my heartbeat began to drop to a semi-normal pace.

"Aren't your friends going to leave you behind?"

"Ahh, it's fine. They're going to be in Kingsport for a while. They're taking a break from all the Shantak chasing. I'll be able to find them no problem." The

young man had an impressive amount of confidence.

“This place seems dangerous. Are you sure it was a good idea of you to come?” But Leeroy waved me off.

“No. You haven’t seen dangerous until you’ve been on the streets of downtown Kingsport. Now that’s the wilderness.” He put his arms behind his head as if bragging. I had no idea what to make of the boy, but the company of a somewhat familiar face was certainly more than welcome.

“I guess we just keep going this way, right?”

“Yup, if we follow this trail, we should get to the Tsang Tower in no time,” he nodded as we continued on the ashen trail. He was right, in what seemed like no time, we had made it to the outskirts of the tower, and the twenty-foot-high wall that protected it. We stared up at the unscalable thing as it taunted us.

“Don’t worry, I’ve broken into way more secure places back in the day,” he assured me.

“Back in the day? You don’t look that old.”

“I’m thirteen!”

“Oh. Well if you’re old enough to have a ‘back in the day,’ I must be ancient.” Leeroy shrugged.

“You look nice for an old lady. Look, over there where the wall dips into the water. I bet if we go that way we’ll be able to find an old sewer drain. All these old castles and fortresses have them,” he said as I followed him down the wall. At first, I was careful of my footing, trying not to make any noise. After a moment, I realized there wasn’t a single guard on top of the walls or anywhere in sight on the ground.

“Leeroy, shouldn’t there be guards around here?” I whispered. Leeroy answered without even trying to keep his voice down.

“Nope. This place is abandoned for sure. That’s probably why Shantak lives here. That or it’s the reason why it’s abandoned in the first place.” His reasoning made sense.

What doubt I had for the wide-eyed boy just minutes ago was becoming respect for his adventuring knowledge. I guess I was too quick to judge a book by its cover.

We both went down to the water connected to the clay shore. Leeroy didn’t hesitate to wade in. I followed him, reluctantly. The water was freezing at first, but I adjusted to the cold soon enough as we waded around the base of the walls until the water was neck high.

“Here. See this? It’s not part of the wall. It’s a tarp covered with iron plating, so it looks like the wall.” He felt all around the section of granite, but I couldn’t quite make out what he was searching for. Then he pulled a tarp upward, revealing a crack in between it and the wall. We continued inside the narrow space.

The interior of the tunnel was small. But along the wall were ridges that poked out. Just wide enough so we could place our feet on the outermost portions and perform a sort of waddle instead of having to swim. The floor below us opened into a much, much larger tunnel below. Like a canal, you could fit an entire boat through.

There was an eerie yellow light coming from the trace lines of a material I couldn’t name along the sides of the tunnel and on the bottom of the submerged section below us.

“Leeroy, what is this coloring?” I asked, feeling the lines like yellow veins that pulsated with life.

“It’s moonrock. I know that it’s pretty famous up north. Back in the old days, a lot of different creatures traded it like we trade rubies. Pretty valuable, it’s a

light source that never goes out," he explained, his voice echoing in the chamber.

"Really? Why haven't robbers or adventurers taken it?"

"Moonrock can only come from one source. A race of these frog things that only live in the deep north, they come from the moon."

"Nothing can live on the moon," I shook my head.

"Tell that to the Moonbeasts. Moonrock is very, very illegal because the Moonbeasts would only trade it for human slaves that are never seen again. I mean, very few people have said to ever seen them. The Cosmic Slayers convinced the king that they were real, and so he outlawed it. I think since all the other Provinces are scared of Kingsport, they changed their laws to match. If they catch you with the stuff, they burn you at the stake, or worse."

"Wow. You sure do know a lot about all this stuff."

"You gotta if you want to be an explorer. You'll learn a lot if you hang around me or the others long enough."

I kept my eyes down, inspecting every little rock and crevasse in the submerged tunnel down below. And as Leeroy and I continued, for a moment - but he soon slowed and came to a halt.

"Don't. Move."

7

Hide and Seek

I listened. I only let my eyeballs roll around, trying to see what I was supposed to be paying attention to. Then, the water itself vibrated from all around as a smooth motion swept through the waters. I dared to look down, and nearly screamed as I saw it. From behind us, a massive form swam up through the channel. It was the color of skin and soot, something writhing and awful. Then I realized it was the Shantak, swimming like a snake under us, into its home.

My thoughts ran wild wondering if it had seen us and was on the hunt. But as it passed from under us and disappeared into the waters up ahead, I waited for Leeroy to say something else. But he said nothing. He only turned halfway toward me and nodded for me to keep walking, and we did so in silence.

Soon, our little tunnel ended as we walked into the basin of a large round room. Leeroy and I swam to a ladder. We climbed up the rusted rungs that had seen better days and into the area above.

I looked around. A large portion of the surrounding floor was wet. This entire room was without a doubt used as a secret exit or a central water source for the fortress just as Leeroy had said. The only exit was a broad arched tunnel way that tilted in an upward incline. Designed so the water could flow down. A trail of freshly dripped water led up into the tunnel down the center where the Shantak bird had been moments before.

“Come on; it knows we’re here. We don’t have much time. Once we get up here we should be able to climb the stairways and reach the central spire of the fort without even having to worry about running into the Shantak again,” he continued as we tip-toed up the slope.

It took some time, but we made it through the mold and grime to another massive enclosure that seemed ten times as big as the first, but we didn't enter it. As we came up to the mouth of the tunnel connecting our walkway to the next room, Leeroy stopped me.

He snuck over to the side, and we both tip-toed over to a metal gate, still ajar. There was a room on the side of the tunnel, probably the escape route that connected to the inside. We went into the pitch black and up a staircase ascending into the spiral structure.

There must have been at least one hundred steps. When we exited and found ourselves at the top of the large and empty box of a room, Leeroy got down to a near crawl. Continuing along the short cobblestone wall barrier meant to keep tunnel workers from falling down the several story drop into the basin below.

We went all the way to the other side of the room. There was another gate in the middle of the wall, still open. But instead of going through, Leeroy stopped and pressed his back against the wall.

"That big puddle when we first came out of the water, the Shantak bird shook the water off itself. Why'd you think it'd do that?" he whispered silently, so his voice didn't have a chance to echo in the chamber.

"I… I don't know. Is it like a dog? Maybe it just didn't like being wet." But Leeroy shook his head. His eyes rolled upward, and over the top of the waist-high barrier. We both peaked our heads over the wall.

My heart throbbed, and my chest contracted in fear as I saw why Leeroy had pulled me to the side. On the large entryway to the water room, pressed against the wall right past the pool of water, was the Shantak bird. It's snake-neck curled backward, and its elongated beak slightly ajar. Its coconut sized milky yellow eyes bulged in excitement, ready to strike.

The hairs on my skin stuck straight up, like the beast's scales. It reminded me

of a cat, puffed up and reared back. It was waiting for us to walk through. It knew we were here, and it had set a trap.

After a moment, its head dipped down, looking down the chamber. Realizing that either its new prey had lost its nerve, or that it was outsmarted, the thing expanded its metallic wings and flew upward, out of a circular opening in the ceiling above that let moonlight pour in from above.

“She’s good,” Leeroy let out a sigh of relief, “But I’m better.” We continued into the next room. The gate led to another stairway much to my already sore legs’ horror, and we went up.

Luckily this one was much shorter. When we reached the end, I realized we were already almost on top of the tower. We had reached the innermost section and could see the wall from down below and that shanty port town with the giant spiders in the distance.

We began walking around the crescent corridor, careful not to make a sound. Only the soft patter of our feet made any noise. The rest of the fortress was eerily quiet. There were small windows carved out of the stone walls, with pitch black inside. I could only imagine the things that might be hiding right at the edge of those shadows, looking at us.

My head kept steering side to side. Mostly looking for places to hide, there were none. I made my way across the area and stopped in front of the seemingly ordinary wooden doors. The doors themselves were ancient, but they still stood upright on their hinges.

Leeroy reluctantly pulled the handle, and it let out the slightest creak. We poked our heads inside. A faint light lay at the other side of the room. By the wavering of the shadows around the floor, I could tell it was bigger than a lantern. A kitchen fire, maybe.

I squeezed around dozens of tables and chairs as I crept toward the warmth. I

saw dozens of dirty plates littered around. To my surprise, not only did something live here, but somethings. Making my way to the coal fire surrounded by rocks at the back of the cylinder room, I was greeted with a familiar scent, perch stew.

A huge black pot of it was simmering over the fire. At this point, I became bewildered - but I didn't let my guard down. Even monsters could enjoy terrible food. Then again, what if this was just a retreat for social outcasts or bandits looking for a sanctuary? That question brought a new slew of problems on its own.

A single, weighty **thud** came from above my head. I looked up. **Thud**. It made its way to the right. Above us was a wooden ceiling, separating the first from the second floor. **Thud**. My eyes rolled to the right. Stairs. "Hide," Leeroy whispered as he began searching around the room.

My eyes focused, and I swiveled my head around for something to hide behind. Tables, chairs, I could hide under them. **Thud**. A light came from the top of the stairs. Whoever was coming down had a lantern. They would see me there. There had to be something. I looked at the soup. Instead of behind or under, I could hide in something.

The smell of perch still in the air, I angled my head to look right behind the fire - barrels. **Thud**. I dashed in front of them, taking the lid off the first, it was still crammed with glossy-eyed perch. The second barrel, however, was empty.

I motioned for Leeroy, and he opened the next and last barrel, then hopped inside. I twisted the lid off and crawled in the small container. For once, I thankful for having such a frail frame.

Thud, Thud, Thud. The steps came down the stairs, the light quickly reaching my hiding place. The lantern stopped right in front of the fire. Whoever, or whatever it was, I couldn't make out from my angle. It was humming.

A particular, grumbling tone was coming from its throat. It fidgeted with the pot, some water dripping on the floor. Then, the footsteps made their way toward the front of my barrel. I didn't move, I didn't blink. A slimy noise came from beside me. Followed by the lid to the barrel next to me, being twisted shut.

I was able to make out a sickly and chapped looking arm dropping a perch into the pot. It then began walking away with the lantern, up to the stairs and out of sight, and the footsteps out of hearing. We waited for a good minute. I soon cautiously fumbled my way out of the cramped barrel, and around the room.

"What was that?" I asked him.

"I didn't get a good look. Did you?"

"No, I only saw its arm. It looked chapped, flaky. Kind of like the Shantak's scales." Leeroy's eyes looked down in thought.

"Dagonian," he said, snapping his finger.

"What's that?"

"Fish people. It's a long story, but for the last few years, there have been these fish people that have been attacking coastal towns. They even make attacks on Kingsport every once and a while." The term 'fish people' did nothing to help my nerves. But I didn't have time to ask him any more questions as we continued. There were no doors. No windows. Only the stairs, which we made our way to the base of.

Darkness. We didn't have a choice but to walk up blindly. I prayed I'd see the thing's lantern before I ran headfirst into it, but I didn't have a choice. We went forward into the abyss. Slowly but surely, my eyes adjusted to the complete darkness. The staircase was embedded into the stone, going in a big spiral around the inside of the cylinder tower.

Once we reached what should have been the top of the second floor, there

was only a wooden door, safeguarding something on the inner layer of the cylinder building. I wanted to ask Leeroy if he thought this is where it slept, but it was better to make no noise for now.

We kept going. And on the third floor, another wooden door. I tried not to think about what would happen if one of these doors opened and our host found us sneaking around. By the time I reached the fourth floor, my legs were stinging from each step. I'd never had to move around this much, and hopefully, I'll never have to do it again.

At the top of the next floor, however, there was no door, only a roof that had an opening for people to walk up through. We walked through the open exit and back out in the cold night air. We were able to look over out at the vast expanse of the ashen desert all around that connected to the black and foggy sea.

We were less than fifty feet from the top of the tower on a balcony connected to the central strut. There was another sizeable double door made of wood. We approached it and pried it open.

It creaked so loudly a part of me wished to disappear into the darkness of the room inside, afraid the thing from earlier had heard us. As we carefully entered the dark room, the sound of whispers came from the back in the deepest part of the darkness.

It was a quiet, fast whisper. Like the person's mouth couldn't keep up with all the thoughts their brain was making. I stepped forward, passing the doorway into the final cylinder-shaped room. Besides the obvious stairway on the walls, the only thing inside this room was a wooden cage stretching along the entire back crescent half of the room.

The voice was coming from inside; it sounded so human - it was human. I looked down at Leeroy to see what his plan was.

A sudden movement came from the corner of my eye, and I snapped my head

back as two hands gripped the bars in front of us. Nearly falling backward, I gave a small scream of fright.

“Joy?” the voice eked. I stared into the darkness as a freckled face came into the light.

“Robert!” I stepped forward, grabbing the bars while frantically looking for an opening.

“Joy, how did you get here?” His voice was labored and dry.

“I’ll tell you later, where’s the opening?”

“Did it see you, Joy?” I stopped to meet his eyes; they were wide with panic. “The Shantak, it’s not just a bird. It’s intelligent, and it knows you’re coming. He knows you’re coming.”

“That’s not important.” I tried waving him off as I paced back and forth, finally finding a rusted lock keeping two of the boards together.

Leeroy saw it too, he took something out of his pockets and began picking at the lock. In seconds it was off. I ripped open the cage and Robert tripped out. I went to hold him, but he held onto my forearms with an iron grasp, trying to keep my attention.

“Joy, you have to run. He knows you’re coming. He wanted you to come!” he warned, but I didn’t listen to his ranting.

“Okay, we’ll go. I have a rowboat at the docks. Let’s get out of here.” I helped Robert as he seemed to be bending over in pain. Leeroy ran toward the entrance, and we hobbled over to follow him. As we did a noise cut the air, and we froze, the cry of the Shantak. Robert looked at me.

“Joy, he said he knows about the island. We have to stop him!” I tried to ignore his words and think how the three of us were going to make it out of here alive. He gave a wincing groan as he held his side. I tried holding him, but he

didn’t seem to be able to stand straight up. There was no blood, but for all I knew he could have been beaten and battered while being taken here in the Shantak’s claws.

“Just keep quiet, we’re going to make it out of here.” I moved us forward, nearly making it to the door.

I froze again as the building itself rumbled. The stones shook as a mighty earthquake rattled the three of us to our cores. From up above the wooden roof shattered, imploding inward. Following closely behind the hundreds of shards of rotten wood was the monster itself, the Shantak.

Its cry pierced the air and rattled my ears. I fell forward as it landed right behind us, crushing the wooden prison Robert had been in just moments before. I looked back as I tried to crawl away, my legs felt like paste from its impact. It shrieked again, and in a swipe is beak bore down on me.

I screamed as each side split into the floor beside me, narrowly missing. But when its beak pinched inwards on my sides, I realized it hadn’t planned to impale me. It hoisted my body effortlessly as it reeled back. I could almost make out Robert and Leeroy trying to scream for me down below as my ears rang from its shriek, but I was completely disoriented.

I was caught in the maw of the beast. It spread its wings and flapped its way up and out of the open tower top. Robert and Leeroy vanished from my sight, as we flew out over the nightmarish ashen planes of the Leng Plateau.

8

Master of Puppets

I tumbled through the air as the Shantak swung me around in its beak, I could feel my spine bend in ways no back was meant to as its whip of a neck snapped back and forth.

I would have been able to see everything for miles had I not almost been puking from the force of the flight. We cleared the Tsang Tower and sped past its empty walls.

We continued over the man-eating spider huts and the blackened forest of dead trees. Up above and winding through mountains of ash as they rose up. I had no idea how long we traveled, I must have lost consciousness from either the sheer speed, fear, or blood loss as the Shantak's beak had slowly cut into my side and arm.

Eventually, the bird took a near 90-degree turn upward, and we scaled a massive wall of faded purple rock. By the speed we were going and the angle, I could tell it was impossibly tall and couldn't have been man-made. I wondered what could have forced a mountain to form this high in the sky, that even the clouds began to sink under us.

Soon, the Shantak flattened out and landed, dropping me out of its beak then stepping back. I groaned and flipped over, my mind still trying to catch up to my body. I rose to my knees, trying to stand. I could hear footsteps approaching me slowly from above. I realized I was kneeling at the base of a massive series of stairs. My neck was too sore to look up, but I was able to glance left and right.

Each step went on for dozens of feet. It was a temple, a massive and ornate

building that must have taken generations if not centuries to build. But if this was a temple, what God could a monster like the Shantak serve? A final footstep landed. I saw a yellow fabric come down on the last step, right in front of my face.

I managed to slowly tilt my head up to see who I'd been brought to. A yellow fabric draped down like a flowing robe, tracing behind the figure. Up through the web of yellow and fool's gold, all the way up to a mask. A grey, stone mask with a squiggly emblem hid his face. Like three question marks going out to each corner of a triangle. I opened my mouth, hoping this wasn't going to end in a horrible cult ritual with me as the guest of honor.

"Well met. I'm the Yellow King. You must be the Little Carter I've heard so much about," he spoke. But his voice was not that of a normal man, it was three voices in one that came out like a reverse echo. The voice of a man, woman, and child speaking as one. The voice unnerved me, whatever was talking to me wasn't natural.

"How… How do you know me?" I tried to stand, but my legs were still too weak while I demanded answers. "Where's Robert and Leeroy?"

"Hmm. The one you brought with you to break into my home?" he said peacefully, although his words accused me as if I'd committed a small crime. "They will not be harmed. The first one was brought here only to get your attention. The second would be too slippery for even myself to catch."

"He tagged along. I meant to come alone," I mumbled under my breath. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Well, it's a bit of a long story, Miss." The child's voice overtook the man's. "I'll keep it short and easy. I have a few friends coming to a party, but they're locked out with no way in. There's one person who has the key and knows how to use it. Here, follow me, it'd be easier if I showed you, Miss." The child-man

tried kneeling and lending me a hand, but I was too cautious to take it.

I stood on my own, with my hands curling into balls at my sides. I'd read too many children's books to know better than to just let my guard down around some strange otherworldly being that used mutated dragons to do its bidding. I looked back at the Shantak, all three of its still working yellow pupils focused on me with that psychotic stare of death.

I followed the Yellow man up the stairs into the temple. The light dimmed, and the massive chamber echoed our steps.

"When I came here a few years ago, I was separated from my friends. I've been able to get a lot of things done, I even had time to search for my brother. But that's a different story," he said, explaining with an ethereal voice filled with gratitude.

"Why are you looking for your brother? Is he lost?" I asked. I kept trying to find a way to get to the question of where my mother was and what happened to her, but every time I would breathe in to ask, it caught in my throat.

"Well, half-brother. He's sort of a runaway. I guess that's the easiest way to explain it. As strange as it sounds, I'm from a very different place than yourself. But when I wanted to have a family reunion, we got separated." The child's voice was filled with sorrow, but the gnawing feeling of danger wouldn't leave the back of my head. No, it was my shoulder. My shoulder was on fire, the Elder Sign was burning on my skin.

We approached a massive Archway at the center of the temple. The color was gone, it had turned grey. But not a simple stone grey, this grey was filled with contrasting white and blacks that swayed ever so slightly; as if the thing was in monochrome hibernation.

"Beyond this Archway is a small portion of the place where I'm from. It's a link to the other Archways that hold up entire Worlds." It was at this point that I

decided without a doubt that this man was either crazy, a sage, or an Elder God. “As a descendant of Carter, bearer of the Elder Sign, and wielder of the Silver Key, you have more than enough rite of passage to open it. I’ve brought you here, so you can open the way for my family to complete their journey, so we can enjoy The Festival celebration.”

“I don’t have the key.” He tilted his head as I tried to explain. “My mother only gave me a part of it, see?” I held out the base of the silver key for him to see. He cocked his mask of a face side-to-side.

“Oh dear. You wouldn’t happen to know where the remains of it might be?” he asked, looking up as if he’d forgotten something so simple.

“My mother sent me a letter. It told me where she sent them.” I didn’t give him the details, in case he was prying for information and planned to kill me here anyway.

“Oh? Did she? That’s fortunate for us!” He nodded excitedly. I grit my teeth, forcing the words to come out this time.

“What happened to her? Where’d she go?” I asked behind chattering teeth.

“Your mother? She’s inside the Archway. She locked herself up there in a tizzy.” I looked at the Archway of black and white, wide-eyed.

“How do I get her out?” I asked without hesitation.

“Easy! The Archways are just big gates. But you don’t have the key…” the childlike voice trailed off.

“But, I know where the parts are. I can find them.”

“And open the Archway. Genius!” he completed my thought.

“But, I’m not sure how. I don’t even know where I am.”

“Well, I may not be able to travel between the stars, but, I might be able to

get you to where you need to go. You said your mother gave you a note of where to go, yes?" I nodded. "Well, where is it?"

"Kingsport. That's all it said for the first place."

"Hmm. I think I have just the right tool." He motioned for me to follow, weaving through the smaller archways and pillars until he stopped in front of one that seemed no different to the hundred others.

"This one should take you to Kingsport. I have just enough energy left in my body to open it for you, but after I do, I won't be able to help you anymore. Skipping through space isn't an easy task." His voice was sincere as if instant travel were like an expensive voyage rather than an impossibility to him.

My eyes scanned the darkness, only to be met by the stalking eyes of the Shantak that roamed around the edges of the temple, keeping an eye on me in case I decided to harm its master.

"How about this Little Carter, I'll help you get to where you need to go, and you come back with the Silver Key. You can open the Archway to free your mother, and I'll be able to meet my family," he offered. I thought about it, but I had no real choice. I nodded.

"Good! Now, just step on through. It's a sharp fall but, since you have the Elder Sign, it should protect you from anything that might try to harm you on the way down. I'll open it for you, but I'll need that key part," he said.

I thought about it again. Realizing if he wanted to kill me, he would have done so by now. If I refused, he might just get rid of me anyway and try to find the key on his own. I had no idea where to go and even if I did run the Shantak was waiting right there to snatch me up.

As much as it terrified me, I had to work with this being. I took out the necklace from around my neck and held it out. He took it gracefully with a proper nod and stowed it away in the layers of sheets that made up his cloak. He

reached out his hand, and the grey archway came to life with a swirling burst of colors. Blue as the sky, greener than a field of grass and more vibrant than the colors of the wind. He motioned for me to come toward the wavering mass of light, and I did.

I walked up to it and lifted my hand. The swirling light enveloped my hand and my arm slowly as I pushed through. The Archway's exterior wavered as my hand touched it, like ripples on water they spread across the surface.

"Have a nice trip," he said from behind. I turned my head back, but two hands pushed me forward.

I shot out my hands to catch my fall, but to my horror, there was no floor on the other side of the mysterious Archway portal. Only darkness - and a hole. I screamed as I tumbled downward, flipping and turning all the way. As I fell little lights like stars zoomed past me as if fleeing from the bottom of the pit. I tried orienting myself upward, and as I did, I looked down. I wish I hadn't.

Something was at the bottom of this pit. It looked like a ball of human skin, bunched up as if smushed together. As I fell, and it got larger and larger, it got even worse. There were eyes. Hundreds of eyes. Every one of them wide open and dilated in panic. Laced between them were mouths wide open and lined with monstrous teeth no human could grow.

The skin bubbled and boiled as if it was being cooked alive. I stopped moving as I realized there was nothing I could do to stop myself from falling into it. I couldn't even scream; I was too scared. But something came in from the side, another massive shape. An arm the length of a mountain range and as tall as the distance between the sea and the sky swooped in from the side.

Its fingers outstretched, reaching to close in on me. As the godly sized hand swallowed me whole into its grasp, the stars vanished as I entered complete darkness. In an instant, for a single and split second, I lost consciousness. But

my eyes opened immediately, I was no longer falling, but laying down on my back.

I sat up, screaming at the top of my lungs like a terrified child after having my voice stolen for what felt like hours. The darkness was complete here, an absolute abyss. Tears streamed down my face as I wept uncontrollably. I sobbed into my knees as I curled up into a ball. I was so stupid!

The friendly façade of Yellow King worked. He'd taken the key piece of my mother's away. And now I was trapped somewhere between reality and fiction. Alone in a place of complete and total and empty darkness. At least, I thought I was alone. Until I heard a noise echo from somewhere in the darkness.

A distinct cracking noise, like a spine being stretched after a long rest. I stood uneasily on a floor I couldn't see but had the texture of smoothed stone. I looked around, but there was still nothing to see.

"Hello?" I called out to no one, and I received no answer. Out of desperation, I began to walk. I didn't know where I was going or why. But I kept looking around. I felt the sensation of something on my left shoulder, like water. I touched it, my fingers traced the top of my spine. I held my hand out to my face. A black ooze covered my fingers and dripped like puss. I tried turned my head back to inspect my wound, but it was too dark to see anything. Something else caught my attention.

From the corner of my eye, something in the distance had appeared. I snapped my head toward it, maybe someone was home in this abyss. I shuddered and coughed. I approached the thing, and as my vision focused, I realized it wasn't a person at all, but a desk.

Despite there being no light from above, I could see it clearly. The desk acted like a source of light and was bright enough to illuminate itself. The desk was ornate, made of deep brown mahogany far richer than the trees that grew on my

island. As I reached it, I realized there was something behind the desk… Someone.

I stopped, frozen in fear yet again. The chair was facing the opposite direction, but my curiosity wouldn't let me stop. I had to investigate to find out if I could ask for a way out of here, back home on the island where I belonged. I slowly made my way around the desk to the other side, keeping my eyes firmly locked onto the bald head of the person.

As I did, my eyes took in the sight. It wasn't someone at all, it was a skeleton. The thought occurred to me that maybe I wasn't the first one thrown down here. Maybe I would soon share the same fate as the sitter. I looked around, my mind racing at the thought of there being even more corpses nearby. But I saw nothing else in this empty place. I turned back to the bones.

I moved in closer, realizing it was wearing a cloak that dropped down its sides. I had to see if the poor soul had left a note just in case. Maybe a clue on how I might figure a way out. I reached the skeleton and knelt less than a foot away, I looked into the empty sockets where someone's eyes used to be.

There was a drawing under its right eye. Like an ancient emblem underlying the sockets. There were two lines, on each side traced along the cheek. The first line on the inside was like a teardrop, the other curled near the bottom like the end of a monkey's tail.

"Sorry, I don't want to be rude but, I have to check if you've got anything that I might be able to use on you," I apologized to the bones, but they gave no reply. I crouched to the side and reached into the ashen and black cloak.

I plunged my hands deep to find something, anything. I moved to the other side, careful not to bump the bones as they might turn to dust at the slightest touch. "Hi. I'm Joy, by the way. I might be down here for a while and starve with you, so, we might as well be friends," I mumbled, checking the other pocket.

Nothing. I sighed and shook my head. Sitting back on the floor. I wrapped my arms around my legs and put my head down. “What am I supposed to do skeleton man? I’m so lost. I never should have left the island, but I couldn’t leave Robert behind. I knew I wasn’t cut out for this,” a single tear escaped my eyes. “I’m sorry Robert. It’s my fault,” I sobbed again. Here in this silent abyss, no one could see, no one could hear. It was only me. All alone.

Then, in the darkness, all around, a voice answered me. A deep, bold voice that oozed like syrup.

“Giving up already?” I shot my head up. The tears stopped. I snapped my head left and right as I stumbled to up to my feet and turned around. But there was no one around. Then, I saw it.

My head tilted down, my eyes locking into the once empty sockets of the skeleton corpse. Sockets that now, in the center of the pitch-black holes, had large octagon gemstones glowing with violet. My mouth hung open, my body shook as it moved its jaw, speaking again.

“What's up?”

9

Spooky, Scary, Skeleton

I screamed and fell backward, catching the floor with my palms, I frantically crab walked away from the now living thing. It's skull slightly swiveled to follow my movements.

"Oh please. You act like I'm the creepy one. You're the one that was frisking my pockets for goodies, you disgusting thing," it spoke. I kept staring and kept one hand up as if it might try to hit me from ten feet away.

"Y-you're a skeleton!" I announced. The thing lightly lifted its arm, like an elderly grandfather. It tilted its head down to inspect its clacking knuckles as it slowly extended its hand.

"Oh. My. God. You're right. Who knew?" The thing gave me a certain tone I couldn't exactly comprehend. It wasn't the anger of an evil creature you'd expect to find in an abyss, or some vile speech quoting dark citations, just a lot of sass. "Stop toying, Carter." The skeleton slowly leaned forward in its chair. Reaching out with its fingers extended.

But it didn't stand or leave a slightly forward position. It just stopped. "Curses! How long have I been sleeping for? My powers have nearly completely left me. Damn you, Carter!" It hissed through clenched teeth.

Only now did I realize there was a particularly animated nature to this creature. Was this the result of some forbidden necromancy? Its jaw moved slightly as it spoke, and I could have sworn what should have been bone was mailable like a grey clay, or skin turned to molten ash.

"How do you know my name?" I asked, slowly standing.

“Don’t play dumb with me, Faith.”

“Faith? I’m not…” I shook my head. “That’s my mom.” I tried explaining for some reason. The skeleton sat back, his eyes narrowing somehow as if trying to piece a mental puzzle together.

“Her daughter, then? What year is it?”

“115 AC.”

“Seven years, almost.” He put his hand up to his face. “Oh yes, we did have a deal, didn’t we?” He inspected his skeletal hand, as an eerie inhumane smirk managed to creep onto his skinless face. “If you’re here, that means her plan worked. We have work to do.” I stood and raised my fist. I didn’t know how, but I had to try something.

Another servant of the Elder Gods wouldn’t fool me. He didn’t look especially powerful; maybe I could stop him now before he regained his strength. As the skeleton man struggled in his seat, I took my knife out of its sheath and with two steps forward I threw my hand back, then swiped it forward, slicing it right across the jaw.

The entire skeleton, especially the skull, shambled into pieces and scattered with an echoing clatter across the floor and chair. The skeleton was silent. I gasped, taking in heavy breaths - a crisis avoided.

“Okay, rude.” To my horror, the skull that laid on the ground spoke to me, its unwavering glowing eyes meeting my own. A wavering black smoke surrounded the skeleton. Like tendrils of darkness, little lines connected to the skull. The spine, the legs, arms, and every little part in between.

They floated toward a center point in front of the chair and resembled. In a matter of seconds, the skeleton had been brought back together. This time, he moved a little faster. He cracked his knuckles and gyrated his bones with that awful clattering like death’s wind chime.

“What are you?!” I raised my shaking fists, trying to figure out how to use my supposed abilities to my advantage. I half hoped he would begin monologuing to reveal his weaknesses.

“Everyone always asks me *what* I am, but they never ask *who* I am.” He seemed to sigh as he pushed on his spinal cord and stood straighter. His head now stood slightly taller than mine. Confused, I pressed further.

“This place, it has something to do with that Archway and the Elder Gods, doesn’t it?” I asked. “You’re working with the Yellow King, aren’t you?” He tilted his head. I tried to remain confident but stuttered on nearly every other word.

“The Yellow King wished I worked with him. I don’t deal with petulant brats.” He looked up to the sky and let his hands out to his side. “This is the child I’m supposed to guide to the Archway? I don’t even want to know how you fell right into one of Yellow King’s traps so easily. Let me guess, your mother took you to that podunk garbage island in the middle of nowhere and didn’t explain anything about your family’s whole god-slaying-bent, right? Probably raised you away from all that and kept you in the dark to keep you ‘safe.’ God, you must be confused out of your mind right now.” The skeleton’s sluggish movements began to speed up.

Despite the lack of any muscle or skin, its excessive hand gestures began to resemble more and more of an average human’s. It began to slightly pace to the side. I opened my mouth to speak because so far, I couldn’t tell if the skeleton was lying or trying to fool me like Yellow King had. I decided to press on, without attacking him this time.

“How do you know my mother?”

“That’s a long story; all you need to know is that her, your father, and others were business partners. Before they went completely insane and ruined

everything, that is,” he sighed and lowered himself on the ground. Crossing his toothpick legs and putting his hands on his knees.

“You knew my father too?” He motioned, palm upward.

“Pop a squat. This is going to take a hot minute for me to explain.” I stared at him for a moment.

Unsure if this was a trap, I stood where I was. Deciding if the thing lunged for me, at least I wouldn’t have to jump to my feet. “Suit yourself.” His palm motioned to his chest. “I’m Spooky, by the way.” Spooky - where had I heard that name before? I turned to my side, rummaged through my bag, and pulled out my mother’s note.

“I sent Spooky to help guide you through your training, and I hope he’s been doing his job well.” I eyeballed the skeleton.

“My mother sent you to help me?” I asked, wondering if there could have been a different and more human being that identified as Spooky.

“Ta-da.” He shook his fingers like a stagehand.

“Where were you? The note says you were supposed to be helping me this whole time,” I complained, but he shrugged.

“I tried. But your ditz of a mother forgot to take the seal off your island. Nothing with any remote connection to the Elder Gods could get through, including me.”

“The barrier. Just like the one she wrote in the letter?” I looked down at my note, remembering the ring of light and the noise of shattering glass when I first touched the emblem.

“I improvised that letter by the way. Convincing, isn't it? You ask too many questions. But yes. Look, it’s not personal, but I try to stay away from you Carters as much as I can. Everywhere you go, you tend to destroy everything

with a radioactive touch. That being said, I'm unfortunately a bit of an investor in your family."

"An investor?"

"I've been dealing with you people since before the AC era. Despite my incredibly healthy and youthful bones, I'm very, very old."

"I'm Joy Carter," I lowered my fists, "But I guess you already knew that." If my mother entrusted this creature to help me, I had to trust in her judgment.

"Joy Carter? I suppose I'll call you Little Carter then since you're the newest one."

"If you're supposed to be an ally to my family, then help me find the Silver Key."

"First of all, don't try to call the shots. You don't even know where you are or what forces you're dealing with. You gave Yellow King your piece of the Silver Key for God's sake."

"That's not fair. He took it from me, and how do you know that?"

"You were right next to my Abyss when it happened. I heard you two from a Cosmos away. The old kick down a well trick gets them every time," a slight giggle came out of this mouth, more devious than diabolical. I nodded. I was tricked. "Where are the other two pieces? Where did she send those?"

"I have a letter. It says she gave one to Kingsport and the other to Basc, whoever that is." Spooky gave another chuckle at this.

"Of course she did. At least it shouldn't be too hard for you to get those back. The one Yellow King has not so much. Say, do you know what happened to your mother?" I gulped, not sure how to answer.

"Yellow King said he knew how to get her back. He said she's frozen in the Archway. I should have known better than to give him my piece," I grimaced at

my gullibility.

“Do you know what that key does, Little Carter?” Only now did I realize that I had no idea. “The Archways are less literal Archways and more like gates - barriers that keep the Worlds of reality in their proper place. The Silver Key is a master key if you will. It can unlock every one of them. Your grandfather used it back in the day to make sure none of those pesky Elder Gods got into our Worlds; that they stayed outside of our Cosmos and as far away as possible. Now, what do you think Yellow King, a priest who follows their wills will do if he has that key?”

“He’ll… release them?” I reached into my bag, taking out my sketchbook to write down notes.

“Clever girl. And then the Elder Gods will use their unfathomable powers to reset the whole of reality in their own image. No more Carters, no Elder Signs. They may be omnipotent, but they’re awfully stupid. Literally mindless, actually.”

“We have to stop them,” I said aloud.

“You don’t stop an Elder God; you delay the inevitable. Your family’s been doing it for a hundred years, but to an Elder God who’s timeless and infinite, that’s not much,” he paused, leaning forward. “You saw it, didn’t you?” His voice turned dark and solemn. “The thing as you fell in the Archway. That… mass of flesh.” Spooky shuddered as the last word escaped his mouth. “A literal bag of skin. My worst nightmare. It doesn’t help that it’s a being of ultimate power, but I don’t like that whole skin motif,” he explained.

“Is that thing an Elder God?”

“The oldest of Elder Gods. As in, the first one. The Ancient. It’s said that eons ago the Elder Gods were all spat from its mouths and that all worlds themselves are is its dream. But who knows. No one that’s investigated long

enough has survived to tell any detailed information. Well, except your grandfather. In reality, the title ‘Elder Gods’ doesn’t fit. They’re barely more than aliens that are radioactive to everything that comes within a galaxy’s distance to them. Otherwise, they’re not even aware of their actions — an enemy of life by nature, like waging war against angry fungus.

Nevertheless, every once in a while, a bit of their power seems to fly off like heat from a solar flare, and somebody somewhere finds it. That Yellow King fellow up there isn’t special. The power behind the Yellow King didn’t choose him. He managed to find some of that Elder God’s fragmented power and used it to his advantage. I’d advise you get rid of him as soon as possible.” I was quickly learning that every question I asked created two more, like a hydra of ignorance.

“But why? What’s their goal? Does Yellow King follow the Ancient One’s orders? Why is my family the one that’s been holding them back? And how?” I asked, baffled at this influx of information.

“You’re still asking too many questions, and I have too little time. As I said, I’ll make a deal with you.”

“What’s the deal?” I tried to stop myself from seeming as eager as I really was, but it was pointless.

“I’ll show you how to use your abilities, most of which you have no idea exist, I can see. I’ll assist you around the obstacles that are sure to come. And most importantly, I’ll tell you everything you want to know, sooner or later.”

“And what do you want in exchange?” I tried to anticipate the catch.

“There will be a time in the future when I will need a favor from you. Nothing major, just an extra hand.”

“Okay... Deal,” I reluctantly nodded. “But I don’t trust you. And I’m not just going to do what you tell me to blindly.” I tried to stand up and see how he

would react. But he gave a coy smile and used his knees as armrests to stand. He stepped forward, only a few feet away from me. He lifted his hand toward me.

“It’s a deal.” I looked at the offer. I had no other choice, so I shook the hand. It was clammy and felt like it would crumble to dust under the slight pressure I gave it. Despite the chill up my spine, I felt this deal would go better than the one I had with Yellow King, for now.

“What do we need to do next to stop them?”

“Ah-ah, you have to stop them. I don’t have to do anything.”

“But if you’re not going to do anything, why would you help my mother and grandfather? Your’ investments?’” He cast me a glance out of the corner of his eye.

“At this point, I’m only in it for the novelty and nostalgia. I may not be in danger, but I do have my reasons for helping.”

“How can you not be in danger? If Yellow King gets the Silver Key first, then you’ll die too.”

“No, I won’t. Elder Gods may have undeniable World destroying powers, but I have many tricks up my sleeves. No matter what World, there’s a skeleton somewhere waiting for me to possess it.”

“I’ve never hit anyone before, but you seemed pretty fragile to me,” I tried returning his rudeness.

“I also brought myself back together in like, two seconds. If you want a fair fight, I’ll give you one once I’ve warmed up from my hibernation and collected a few trinkets.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Of course not. You Empaths are all the same.”

“What’s that?”

“You. The White Room and your feelings-based abilities. I can smell it from here.”

“What’s an Empath? Do you know about The White Room? You’re the only person I’ve met that knows what that is.”

“I know about all the Elder Sign’s aspects and the effects they have on humans. Being an Empath means If I beat you like a piñata, your tears would taste like poetry. I bet you tip-toe around flowers so you don’t step on their petals.” I wasn’t that sensitive, but he wasn’t far off. “You’ll learn about it in due time. For now, I’ll show you the way out.”

“There’s a way out of here?” I asked, looking around the darkness.

“Of course there is. Once a bit of my strength has returned, I’ll meet you again on the other side. Until then, try to stay alive, Little Carter.” Spooky’s hand pointed toward me as if he were trying to push me away with his palm. Then, in a rush of midnight blue and purple haze, I was flashed out of the black space.

The sound of Spooky’s slow laughter followed me as I was hurled to the floor. I caught the ground, grass in my hands. I stood, my legs turned into cheese as I wobbled to my feet. I was no longer in an infinite land of darkness, but a bright and breezy field of grassy plains. I shielded my face from the light above as my eyes readjusted to the sudden light.

I was back in the Dreamlands. I could have kissed the ground. As I took in my surroundings, I found myself in an open field, on the edge of a beaten dirt road then split down the middle. To the left, the grass turned into sand and led off into the ocean. The waters stretched past the horizon. And to my right was a distant grove of pines, fat with leaves too thick to see past the first few rows.

They were so unlike those dead groves I saw on the way to the Tsang Tower; these trees were majestic and filled with life. I turned around, wondering what

the far side of my perimeter had in store. A gargantuan pair of city walls the size of mountains were laid out in front of me. The first walls rose higher than the Tsang Tower's Leeroy, and I had climbed what seemed like just moments ago.

The one further behind it was at least twice the size. And even still from behind that layer were towers that nearly touched the clouds above, like still giants looking down at the ants below. Pristine white as if freshly cleaned an untainted despite its surroundings of lush nature. The Kingsport flag of the red and gold skull had draped down between each major battlement for unseen archers and soldiers.

There was an arch with a gate made of iron bars the size of pines protecting the outer wall, and on the inside was an even thicker layer. And beyond those two was a wooden set of double doors, much smaller than both. Though in the bright daylight and with no signs of danger or assault around, all three were held slightly ajar.

Realizing I had nowhere else to go, I took my second chance at life and approached the gate. Deva had said I would be able to find them here. If that were true, I had no choice but to keep going forward. I made my way toward the gates, trying to think of what this city could hold.

After all the time I'd spent reading about it and painting it, nothing gave it the awe it deserved. As I got closer, I realized there was a bridge drawn over a dry moat dug all around the outside. Whoever had built this city had defense in mind.

"Halt right there, little miss." The city guard held up a hand. I'd been staring out over the coast and appreciating the glistening waters. It felt as if the gate had snuck up on me as I mindlessly walked into it.

The image of Kingsport lay on his chest underneath his chainmail and helmet-less hide. "Who are you, and what's your business here?" In the last ten

or so minutes of aimless walking, I hadn't thought of what I'd say. I'd been too busy taking in nature and the beauty of it all. I'd made a terrible mistake.

"I'm uh, Joy."

"Speak up you. Can't hear," he said, taking a cautious step toward me. I could see inside the gated city, and just in the first few blocks alone; I could see more people lived in this section alone than all of the Lonely Island combined.

"I'm Joy Carter, I'm from Lonely Island, and I'm here to see my friends," I nervously rushed out a soup of words. The guards peered at each other.

"I haven't heard of any Joy Carter or Lonely Island. What're your friends doing here? Who're they?" He pressed on. I opened my mouth, realizing how terribly I was explaining it.

"My friends told me they'd meet me here. Deva and Tristan, I think." The guard shook his head.

"Send a letter to Parliament, and they'll send you papers to let you in within a few months. Until then, unless you have some official documents, I can't let you pass." I sighed.

I didn't have two months. I had to use The White Room. I jumped forward clumsily, reaching for his arm. I missed as he stepped back, shouting at me to stay down, but I didn't. I got back up and lunged again as his friend ran over to assist. This time I narrowly touched his exposed fingers, but that was all I needed. The color faded around us, and his movements became sluggish.

"W-where am I?" he droned, his head bobbing up in down as if in a drunken stupor as the total emptiness of The White Room surrounded us.

"This is The White Room. I need help, you're going to let me through," I explained, catching my breath after the near miss.

"Help… you," he agreed. My Elder Sign was already burning, the darker

side of my abilities spiking the pain.

“You’re going to let me in the city so that I can see my friends. You know me.”

“I remember you.” He gave a dozed nod. My shoulder was on fire. I grimaced, hoping this would be enough. I released my grasp on his soul, and I fell back to the ground.

“Stay down!” I heard the second guard demand. I rolled over to see that he had a spear pointed inches away from my face.

“Grimes, wait! This is my niece.” He put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. His comrade gave him a baffled look.

“This woman just attacked you, what do you mean?”

“She’s a nervous girl. Don’t worry. Let’s let her through. The poor thing’s probably terrified.” He let down his hand that I just risked my life to grab. I took it and brushed myself off.

“Thanks, uncle…” I realized I didn’t know his name, so I dropped it there. The man’s friend kept a close eye on me, and his eyes squinted with doubt.

My shoulder was in agonizing pain at this point. My right arm was nearly limp as I tried to walk my way through the gates as normally as possible. But by the second, the pain got worse and spread. I was straining to keep the soldier under control. If I let go, so would my influence over his mind.

I made it through the first gate and almost to the second when I smelt steam rise from my skin. If I didn’t get through the gates and out of sight of the guards soon, I was going to break. The two followed me, and I passed another set of guards on the inner wall of the city. I was almost home free; all I had to do was make it a little further. Just a little way from here was a crowd of people gathered around, and I could get lost in them as I made my escape.

“Have a good time in the city, uh…” The influenced soldier spoke, but he trailed off. The burden on my shoulder lifted. I accidentally released him under the strain. “Wait a second…” I heard him say, as I started a full sprint into the town. “Wait!” I could hear him stumbling to follow me. “Witch! She’s a witch!” he shouted, as the other three guards joined him in shouting.

I kept running as fast as my wobbly legs could take me, bobbing through people and children that ran around on the streets of the city. My mind went wild, wondering where Deva and Tristan might have gone. Their boat, I had to find their ship. It would be somewhere on the pier. Since Kingsport was mainly attached to the water with an entire world-class port on its sea-facing side, I knew I could find them there.

I weaved my way around the backs of buildings and alleyways as the soldiers shouted from behind. They easily managed to keep up, and they were gaining on me fast. I found my way out of the alleys as the guards shouted their threats. I couldn’t lose them in their streets.

If their bosses found out they’d let an unidentified person into the city, it would probably be their heads. They weren’t just going to give up that easily. I found myself in one of the main streets again. I looked left and right. I saw a sign, ‘Ale and Beds, a place to drink and rest your head.’ I could try hiding in there. I ran to the sign seeing the entrance being a set of small double doors that hung in midair, a special kind of café door you’d only see in the city.

I ran to it, hoping I could pull another hide-inside-a-barrel trick or break into a room, but as I rounded the corner and nearly fell over someone that had just exited, I pushed open the doors in full force. I looked behind me, the guards had just rounded the corner, and their eyes scanned the area to see where I’d gone. It wouldn’t take them long to follow my clumsy trail.

But as I pushed the doors open with my head turning forward, I ran into what felt like a brick wall. I fell backward, my skull throbbing as I bounced off and hit

the floor.

My vision blurred, and my ears rang as my consciousness faded. The wall I ran into seemed to move closer to me. As it did, I saw the bodies of the guards stand above me. The wall spoke.

“Joy?”

10

Kiss

My eyes fluttered, cracking open as I regained consciousness. I rolled my eyes back and forth under nearly closed eyelids. There was movement nearby; someone was sitting beside me. Although every muscle in my body ached with soreness I'd never felt before. I lay tucked under a layer of white sheets, and I couldn't help but try to move. But that only aggravated the pain.

"Don't. Don't try to move your shoulder is still healing," said a young man. I knew this voice. "Didn't think I'd ever see the day where you broke into a city and ran from armed guards." The back of a hand floated in through my fog of sight and graced my forehead. "If Tristan hadn't been out drinking, you would have been burnt at the stake. It turns out the locals avoid magic like the plague." I sucked in my breath, as I used every ounce of my strength to focus my eyes. That messy bowl of brown hair was all I needed to see.

"Ro... bert," I choked with a smile, immediately starting to weep with happiness silently.

"Don't speak. You've been out for a few hours. The others said you went overboard on using your Elder Sign," he whispered.

I'd never been separated from him for so long. I didn't know what to say, even if I could speak. But I knew I never wanted to be separated from him like that again. I lay there with a bittersweet smile as the pain prevented me from hugging him. "Speaking of the Elder Sign, I've learned so much here. Joy, there's a lot of stuff the other's filled me in on, but it's best if you go back to sleep for now. You still haven't fully recovered. Deva says you should be on your feet fast. I'll be here when you wake up. Don't worry." He ran his fingers

through my hair and scratched my scalp.

I gave a slight nod, complying with his ‘doctor’s orders.’ As I dozed back off, in what felt like a single moment, I had woken back up. Although I was still groggy, I was wide awake this time. I was able to open my eyes all the way and look at Robert’s sleeping face. I reached out but stopped. I decided to sit up first.

It took me a moment, but I was able to sweep my legs out and sit upward. I was still a little dizzy, but at least I was alive. I got on my feet, using the bedpost as support. I reached out to tap Robert on the shoulder. As I did, I fell forward right on top of him in the clumsiest way imaginable.

I fell over him and wrapped my arms around his shoulders with a hug. He woke up with a startle but realizing he was being attacked with my affection, and he hugged me back. I clutched him so tightly that if it weren’t for my noodle arms, I could have crushed his ribcage. I nuzzled my forehead into his neck. I don’t know how long we stayed like that, but it didn’t feel like long enough. I sat up, and he helped me sit back onto the bed. He got up and sat beside me. He was smiling, but the coming redness in his eyes betrayed his attempt to be stoic and composed.

“I thought you were dead,” he whispered.

“Me? You were the one that got kidnapped by the Shantak,” I argued. Robert shook his head.

“You’re the one that got me out of there. You and Leeroy. He told me what you did. You were so brave.” Brave? Out of all the qualities someone could describe me with, brave was not one of them.

“You would have done the same for me. You’re my friend, and my only one at that. I want to keep you around as long as possible, so when I come down the plateau every month or so I have someone to talk to.” We both giggled.

“Same to you.” Our laughter quieted as we both stared into each other’s eyes.

I realized, maybe grandpa Howard was right. I should be more ‘aggressive.’ I leaned forward and closed my eyes. I kissed him. At first, he seemed to pull back in surprise. But he figured it out what was happening - and kissed me back.

"Well… took you long enough!" He blushed.

"Took *me* long enough?!"

"You fell for it. I only got kidnapped so you would realize what you were missing." He had the audacity to wink. I folded my arms and looked away as he laughed.

“Who knew this planet was so weird? One day we’re just hanging out and the next we’re dealing with ancient animals and Eldritch Aliens,” he joked. “At least now we can go home."

“Aliens? Oh, you mean the Elder Gods?” I said, remembering the Spooky’s words and how he described them just the same.

“Turns out they’re not really gods. People back then didn’t have another word for it, so that’s what they called them,” he explained.

“How did you find that out?”

“Like I said, I did a lot of history reading since we’ve been here. It’s going to take us months to get caught up on everything we’ve been missing.”

“Anything I need to know?”

“Well, your name. Carter. It’s pretty…” He struggled to find the words.

“Popular?”

“Controversial. At least when it comes to the old texts I’ve been reading. So, we may want to keep it to ourselves for now.” I nodded.

“Robert, I found my mother.” He looked at me, blinking in confusion. “At least, I know where she is. She’s locked away in an Archway on the Leng

Plateau. It’s a long story but, that note she sent? It’s real. I have to find the other two key parts to get her out.”

“Wow, what happened when Shantak flew you away? You know what, hold off on the explanation, you can fill us all in. By the way, the Cosmic Slayers decided that they’ll sail us back home if we help them with their next outing. It seems sketchy, but it’s a lot faster for us to do that than stay here and work to save enough money to get back.”

“The Cosmic Slayers?”

“It’s what the three bounty hunters that came to our island call themselves. At least that’s what Leeroy calls them.”

“What could they need our help with? They acted like they couldn’t get rid of me fast enough when I sailed to the tower with them.”

“It’d be better if they explained it. They have a lot more information on it than I do. I didn’t want to agree that we’d help until you were up. I’ll be in the living room, come find me when you’re ready.” He stood and exited the room.

I was quick to get out of bed and followed him moments after. I wound up in a rustic and homely wooden hallway. The sunlight came in through several windows and outside the chattering noises of the city carried on. I headed down left of the hall when a door opened, and Deva stepped out. She looked at me with a raised eyebrow, as if half disappointed she had to see me again.

“Oh, look who it is. Regular Sleeping Beauty. Did Robert go over the plan? Never mind, do me a favor and make sure Tristan wakes up. He’s probably still in a coma from last night.” She walked past me, gyrating her hips along the way.

“Good morning,” I mumbled under my breath. But then I realized the man who said my name before I passed out had to of been Tristan.

“Tristan wasn’t hurt, right?” I asked.

“The guards were going to haul you away and have you interrogated and probably fried, but Tristan told them you were a whore he’d ordered and that they had the wrong woman. When they realized he was past Crimson Elite and drunk, they knew better than to mess with him. Go figure you’d do something stupid like get a bounty on your head and get the whole guard in a frenzy looking for a rogue witch with long raven hair.”

It was good to know I’d already made a terrible first impression, but as Deva kept walking down the hall into an opening at the other end, I turned to see the last door at the end of the hall. I swiftly strode forward and opened the door to step inside, planning to thank Tristan for helping me.

I froze as he stood facing away from me, his arms were tangled in his white long-sleeved shirt. He was only wearing his bottom tan trousers. He had a single mark on the middle of his back. A single mark I’d seen two other times. The mark my mother and I shared. The black leaf-like Elder Sign.

I clasped my hand over my mouth and stepped back. He tilted his head back at my sudden interruption and turned around. I locked eyes with him. I used every ounce of will to focus on keeping eye contact with him, and not look down.

“Hmm?” he grunted, annoyed that I disturbed his peace. He continued putting on his shirt. As he did, our eyes broke, and I was allowed a single glimpse at his unsurprisingly chiseled stomach. I was not disappointed. I’d read about the knights that rescue princesses, daring and handsome. He was easily the spitting image of what one was, at least when he didn’t have his armor on - though he didn’t act nearly as proper as one should. I wondered what bothered this agitated knight. Most people like him are usually soft under their rock-hard shells, but I decided against bringing him into The White Room for now.

“Did you want something?” he asked again as he finished buckling his belt. I shook my head in a shallow movement, still frozen.

“Just… making sure you were up,” I mumbled, stepping backward, closing the door behind me. I stood on the other side, blindly staring forward. If there was ever a time for me to practice painting the male body, now was the time, and that was the specimen. I shook my head, snapping back to reality. I slapped myself in the face to help focus. He was probably twice my age, and I had more important things to do than practice my painting.

I traveled down the hall and approached the opening. The living room was a square den with a simple table in the center. The area was surprisingly homely, with all sorts of decorations and furniture you would only see in a higher-class place. But this little cove in the middle of the city was surprisingly cozy. It even had a fireplace with a little spark of a flame simmering. As my eyes roamed, I saw Deva, Robert, and Leeroy, all sitting at the rectangular table in the middle of the room.

“Something wrong Joy? You look like you’ve been sweating. Take a seat before you fall over.” Robert pointed to my face. I raised my forearm to my forehead and wiped away the little beads of sweat that gave away my nervousness.

“My bed was warm is all,” I spat out.

“Hey there, stranger,” Leeroy waved.

“Leeroy!” I made my way over to hug him, and he jumped out of his chair to hug me back. “Thank you so much. If it weren’t for you, both Robert and I would be dead.”

“All in a day’s work for a Cosmic Slayer. Ready for the next adventure?” he asked, jumping back in his chair. I sat next to him. There were six spots at the table, and we all sat near the middle seats. Tristan entered the room and sat next to Deva on the other side. He groaned as he sat, some of his bones cracking.

“So, I’m curious,” Deva said, placing her arm over the back of the chair,

leaning back on her seat. “How’d you make it out of there? You know, seeing as that the last time Leeroy saw you, you were getting carried away by the Shantak to Gods’ know where.” Her voice accused me as if I was on trial.

“It took me to its master,” I spoke, slow and unsure of what I was going to say. But at this both Deva and Tristan’s jaws adjusted with curiosity. “To a man who called himself Yellow King.”

“Told you!” Leeroy smacked his end of the table and shot back up. But my eyes were locked on Deva and Tristan, who shared a glance of cautious realization, the look of hearing bad news they already knew.

“What did he say?” Tristan focused back on me. I only now realized his eyes were even greener than Deva’s.

“He told me that he wanted to meet his family,” my voice trailed off, not sure what to reveal. I still didn’t trust these two, and I knew they didn’t trust me. “Then I think he tried to kill me by throwing me into an abyss.”

“Why? Did you resist his games?” For once Tristan seemed interested in what I had to say.

“I’m not sure. How do you guys know him?” I asked. Again, the two shared a glance that told me they were playing careful cards.

“I have deep ties in this city. There’s been a lot of rumors floating around in the last few years. And in the last few months, they’ve gotten worse. Cultists have been spouting about the stars being right before they’re beheaded. Artists and writers have had the same reoccurring image, a man in a yellow robe or a three-pronged sigil. Almost everybody can feel something, they know something is coming; a figure they can only describe as a yellow priest. Does this sound like the man who brought you to himself?” she asked. I gave a single sharp nod.

Deva looked down. Tristan leaned back in his chair, cupping his chin and hiding his mouth. They knew something, and I needed to pry the truth from

them.

11

Question

“How’d you get out? Did you run back to Kingsport from the north?” Leeroy asked. His question came from honest curiosity and less hidden interrogation like the others’.

“I met someone else.” All four sets of eyes came back to me. “A man…” I trailed off, thinking of how to explain meeting an animated skeleton in a way that wouldn’t make me seem insane. “…He didn’t seem to like me, but, instead of trying to kill me, he offered to help. He made it sound like he was an enemy of the Yellow King.”

“This other man, what else did he tell you?” Tristan followed.

“He was wearing a dark robe.” It wasn’t a lie. The skeleton-man was wearing a robe when I inspected his still corpse. “He said he’d find me again soon.” The table was silent. The crackle of the sparks in the fireplace popped from behind as we thought about the situation.

“This man, what did he look like?”

“Well, he’s…” I tried finding the words.

“You’re marked too, aren’t you?” smiled Leeroy. This was looking less like a coincidence by the second.

“Show us,” Deva said, bending over the table. “Prove you’re one of us.” I tilted my shoulder down to them, pulling my sundress strap down just enough so they could see the Elder Sign on my shoulder.

“Gods. Do you think-” Deva stopped her shallow whisper as she looked at

Tristan.

“It has to be. It might be time to put our training to use.” Tristan replied, a firmness in his voice as he clenched his fist on the table.

“It doesn’t make any sense. Why now, why this girl?” Deva followed, forgetting I was right in front of her.

“You two have it too, don’t you?” I asked. Leeroy nodded on their behalf, Tristan and Deva were at a loss for words. “Another thing, I had a key that was given to me by my mother, at least a part of it. Yellow King stole it from me. He said he needed it to open the Archway.” I tried re-piecing the story together in my head.

“The Archway? That can’t be the same thing, right?” Deva asked Tristan.

“The Archway. The Festival is coming, soon,” he answered.

“The Festival? He mentioned a festival. He said his family was coming.”

“Who was your mother? How’d she get that key, and how’d you get that mark?” Deva half-stood, the pitch of her voice rising.

“Faith. Her name was Faith,” I let out. “It was just a third of it. I have a letter that said she gave one to Kingsport and the other to Basc. It’s just a birthmark, I don’t know.” I spat out. Deva’s eyes narrowed.

“What’s your real name?”

“Joy,” I said, sucking my lips in, unsure of what she was getting at. “Joy Haita Carter.” Immediately Deva sat back with a groan. Tristan sighed, blowing out air while leaning back in his chair and scratching his head. He seemed even more taken back than Deva.

“The letter.” Tristan reached his hand out. I understood and went into my bag, then pulled out the note and handed it to him.

“A Carter? Gods. You mean to tell me this island bumpkin is a Carter?” Deva complained while she smacked her forehead as if finding out the answer to an obvious children’s riddle.

“Woah! I told you she was different!” Leeroy cheered and ran up to me. He grabbed my hand and shook it excitedly. “A real Carter! Please, teach me your ways!” He bowed. I didn’t know how my last named changed anything, but apparently, it was important.

“I understand now. We have no time to waste. I’ll go to the court and call for a meeting immediately.” Tristan began to rise, his eyes already looking for the door.

“No, I’ll go. They probably won’t be too welcoming for you.” Deva closed her eyes and exhaled as she rose. Both Tristan and Leeroy became silent as they looked at their companion.

“Are you certain, Deva?” Tristan gave a low toned question.

“It’s been long enough. It’ll be fine,” she said, turning away from the group as if she might stay if he tried to convince her anymore. “Come to the castle before the Quarter Ball starts, until then, don’t let Carter out of your sight.” ‘Carter.’ I guess ever since I left the island my new name was ‘Carter’ or ‘Little Carter.’ Never just ‘Joy.’

I didn’t understand why it was so important. Nobody seemed to care about last names unless it came to mine. I made a mental note to ask Robert if he knew anything about it when we were away from the others.

Deva continued and opened the door into the street outside, leaving the four of us behind. We sat there in silence for several moments too long to be comfortable. Tristan sat and crossed his arms, looking away from us. He wasn’t interested in continuing the conversation.

“This is boring. Let’s go to the Coliseum,” Leeroy said, standing in a hurry.

“No,” Tristan said as he leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes as if trying to sleep.

“You guys wanna see the Coliseum? They’ve got all sorts of cool things to watch there.” He gave us a sing-song voice, trying to sell us on the entertainment. At this point, anything would be better than just sitting here for hours with such a terrible host. I stood. Robert joined me.

“Come on! Don’t be a stick in the mud,” Leeroy complained as he ran around the table. He put his fists up and began play-punching Tristan’s shoulder, which easily bounced the boy’s fists off. Tristan stood with a sigh. Leeroy gave a cheer of victory, raising his arms above his head and leaning back, an excited victor.

“You’re gonna love the Coliseum, Joy. There’s so much fighting.”

“I don’t think I’d like that. I’m not a fan of violence.”

“Well there’s a lot more to see than just fighting, they have boring girly stuff like dancing!” My ears perked up.

“Dancing? I thought the Coliseum was for warriors to fight and show off their skills. I’ve never heard of dancing being a part of the shows.”

“Then come on! At noon the fighting starts, if we don’t get there soon, you might miss it.” He waved for me to follow as he ran out the door. I looked at Robert.

“Sounds better than spending all day in here,” he shrugged. I nodded, and we both followed Leeroy out the door.

The streets of Kingsport were wide and only became wider. There was enough room to fit five horse-drawn carriages at once between the buildings that faced inwards. Most were houses and apartment buildings for the tens of thousands of people living this close together.

At the end of every block was a series of shops all trying to get our attention.

Almost all of them worked, and I knew that even if I had all the money in the world, I would have spent it all on the sheer number of exciting arts, crafts, and supplies. And all that space became denser by the second with people going about their merry lives.

A few of them here or there stuck out with little accessories and details I'd never seen a person wear before. On Lonely Island, it was all the same rugged and practical garbs. The people here must be so much wealthier than anyone else in the world. But success and money were probably much easier to attain when you were living in such a powerful city.

For a girl in my commoner outfit, I felt uncomfortable, embarrassed even. Whatever court I was going to see later was probably going to assume I was a street rat. I could only hope Deva's ties to the Kingsport courts were as tight as she made it sound.

Leeroy led the way as Robert and I followed. Tristan stayed back, keeping a watchful eye on us.

"Robert," I said in a hushed voice, even though in these loud streets it would be impossible for anyone to eavesdrop. "Is there anything I need to know about these three? Are they going to try to hurt us?" Robert looked back at me with a smile.

"I don't think so. Over the last few days, they've warmed up to me. Deva is a rebel-adventurer type. She's got a chip on her shoulder, and so does Tristan, but I think that's just because of their jobs. They both hate the cultists that follow the Elder Gods, especially Tristan. From what I've learned, Tristan was a member of the Crimson Elite and a famous fighter in the Coliseum, which isn't a surprise. I think he trained Deva, they may not seem like it, but they're very close. They were hunting the Shantak for a while. With Leeroy, what you see is what you get. He's a bouncy kid that wants to grow up to be like Tristan. He considers himself a devout student of adventuring, though I don't think he knows how to

read. He’s spoken to me the most out of the three, and he’s had a troubled childhood. He grew up as an orphan here in the streets of Kingsport. He met Tristan and Deva while his gang was stealing from their ship. Ever since then, they’ve been traveling together. Since you’ve been gone, I’ve found a lot of things in the library here. I found one special medical book, and I think it’s less of an ordinary book and more of a Grimoire,” Robert explained.

“A Grimoire?”

“Yeah, like a magical medicine book. It deals specifically with herbs and plant medicines. I haven’t figured anything out in it, but I’m working on it. There are dozens of years of research in it that I would have never known otherwise. Most people are scared of it. It’s not illegal, but with all the strange things happening in town over the last few years, it has the locals in an anti-magic sentiment. We have to make sure we don’t do anything remotely magical in public. That and I found out about something called the River in The Sky. They say it’s where life came from, the deeper you go in the river, the simpler the life gets. Fascinating stuff.” Leeroy slowed down until we caught up.

“Oh, I’m sure it is.”

“It is! Really!” He tried to defend my teasing.

“Come on. This way is a shortcut!” Leeroy spoke in front of us as he swerved around the corner and into an alley. The pathway was much narrower than the street, but not so long as to where we couldn’t see the other side. The noise from the town settled down as we made our way down the cobblestone corridor. It got darker, as the looming buildings rose above our heads.

From behind a gathering of wicker bins came two arms followed by the body of a boy not much bigger than Leeroy. The arms drove into Leeroy’s shoulder, pushing him to the side. He toppled over and skidded across the ground. Robert began to run forward to make sure he was alright, but he was denied as two more

boys came out from the trash bins, each one brandishing a knife.

“Back off, Oldies,” said the one in the center who had pushed Leeroy over.

“This is our business, not yours,” said one to his left, with greasy hair that stuck to his forehead and covered his eyes. Robert stepped in front of me, half pushing me back.

“Stop this right now, kids!” he demanded.

“Why don’t you go screw right off, Oldie?” said the third to the right, a who’s hair was equally as messy. His stomach was so large his belly button peeked out the bottom of his ragged clothes. Robert took a step forward. But all three boys screamed and swinging wildly at him. Robert stepped back, surprised that the children would actually try to cut him. We looked on, as the first boy waited for Leeroy to stand. The had thin blonde hair that had been slicked backward.

I could tell he was the ringleader since he was the only one with the sense to keep his hair out of his eyes. Instead of a shirt, the boy wore an oversized brown jacket that opened in the middle. Leeroy’s palms were red, and I could see a bump on the side of his head growing like a goose egg.

“You have the nerve to use our alleyways you traitor?! No one comes into The Rat’s territory. We run the streets!” he announced, stepping away from Leeroy. “You want to live? You better fight for your life!” he warned, raising his arms.

“Boys stop fighting!” I cried. The two other boys in front of us spread out, ensuring we couldn’t try to run around their bladed barricade

Leeroy stood, a look of fierce determination on his face, one that reminded me of Tristan’s when he took on the Shantak.

“Prepare yourself,” said the blonde bully. Leeroy wiped his face and took a

step back. Taking a low fighting stance.

“Bring it,” Leeroy replied as his eyes focused on his opponent.

“James,” the blonde boy started as he threw his serrated knife up into the air. It twirled as it came down behind him, lodging itself into the ground. “Call it!”

“Rex first, begin!”

12

Leeroy Brown

“No!” I cried while panicking, praying Rex wouldn’t hurt Leeroy. But Rex didn’t move forward. Instead, he started dancing.

He fluttered his leg out to the side and slowly swayed out like his hips were stuck on a flat plane, then shifted backward. He hopped and made flowing snake-like motions with his arms. He took a step in Leeroy’s direction and flicked his chin toward him as if acknowledging his opponent.

Leeroy immediately moved backward. He swung the upper half of his body around, like a dramatic swaying tree. He then whipped himself forward, putting his hands on his knees as he kicked skyward. His shoulders pumped backward, he turned around doing a full circle on his toes, then leaned back, pointing at Rex with his index fingers, as he had to Deva on the boat.

“Woah, he got you there, Rex,” said the chubbier boy, who had lowered his knife entirely.

“S-shut up! It’s just a warm-up round. You like spinning? I’ll show you spinning,” Rex replied, his confidence slightly shaken as he stepped forward, placing his hands on the ground. But the performance was cut short when a whizzing dart zoomed right past my eyes.

Rex screamed as a pitch-black needle had pierced through the palm of his hand. Robert ran forward, but the other two boys met him to keep him away, brandishing their knives. I looked back, as Tristan formed another one of the small bolts in his fingers from the gathering shadows.

He reached his arm back and threw another, the projectile zoomed inches

away from my body and landed into the leg of the heavyset boy. He went down to the floor, sobbing as it had gone clean through the side of his shin.

“Tristan, stop!” I screamed as I ran to him while he prepared another needle. He began to raise his arm, but I pushed his elbow down with all the might I could muster. It worked, but only because he put his arms down so he could push me to the side, swatting me away like an obnoxious fly. “They’re kids, you can’t do that to them!” I rebelled; my fists formed into tight balls. “They were just dancing! What’s wrong with you?!” I yelled as he raised his arm again.

“If you’re a Carter, why don’t you stop me?” he said, not even taking a glance my way. I grit my teeth in rage at his sudden cruelty. The last boy looked at the needle that would soon be coming right for him. He stood still, and his lip quivered like he was about to cry. I screamed in defiance.

“No!” Tristan reared back all the way while I stepped forward, slapping him across the face. We both fell over, toppling over each other on the ground. I rolled over and jumped to my feet. We were in The White Room. Tristan looked all around, realizing he wasn’t in the street anymore.

“What is this?” he asked, glaring at me.

“It’s The White Room. You might be able to make any weapon you want, but you can’t hurt anyone here,” I said, my sense of righteous indignation being satisfied. If I couldn’t be friends with this cat, I’d have to declaw him. Tristan growled, a spear growing in his hand.

“Stop your lies. You’re no Carter.” He reared his arm back, pointing at me with his free finger. He hurled the pointed shadow stick at me. When it reached halfway between us, it turned into bubbles. The sides of The White Room wavered and altered, psychedelic blacks and red colors whirred around us as the magic absorbed his attack and turned it into nothing.

I popped a few of the bubbles, showing my fowl tempered acquaintance he

had no power here. He didn't like that. He looked around at his surroundings and growled. He ran toward me, raising his fist to punch hit me as hard as he could.

I flinched, even though I knew nothing could hurt me here. When I opened my eyes, he was back to where he started. He'd nearly fallen over, as The White Room created ten feet of space between the two of us to protect me. He looked at his fist, then to me. He crossed his arms.

"The hell is this?"

"This is my house, I make the rules," I demanded, standing up to the bully of a man. "And the rules are no one gets hurt here. Not me, not you." He spat at my words, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Let me out, child."

"You told me to prove it. Only if you promise not to hurt them again." He growled again.

"Fine," he agreed through grit teeth. I sighed, knowing he didn't mean it. Though I knew someone from the Crimson Elite would keep their word. I snapped my fingers, and we reappeared in the real world. We were standing right next to each other. It only took Tristan a second to reorient himself.

He looked at me with eyes full of disdain. But something else hid behind those eyes that looked down at me. I couldn't tell what emotion it was, but it was different than his usual anger. He pushed past me, bumping me out of the way with his shoulder. I shook my head. I ran past him, getting to the boys first. Robert was already there, fumbling in his pouches to find his medicine.

"Are you okay?!" I asked frantically to the boy with the slicked back hair. He looked at me with soft brown eyes full of shock.

The groans and weeping of the other boy with the black needle through his leg continued, and Robert left my side and began tending to him. The dart

vanished and left the boy's leg as I heard someone snap behind me. I felt fingers touch my shoulder, making a light wiping motion. As I looked behind my left shoulder, I saw Tristan inspecting his fingers. They were tainted with black ink.

"Hard to believe someone so soft could be one of us," he said, half mumbling.

"What? My Sign?" I asked. I wanted to fire back at him and say something along the lines of how he just got beaten by a softie like myself, but it was better to let it go.

"The Elder Sign. With it comes dangerous powers and protection from the Elder Gods themselves. It's a curse. And those who bare it can become Cosmic Slayers," he said, his voice low and to the point.

"Why did you throw needles at these kids?" I looked up as Robert moved to the next boy, the first one inspecting his bandage.

"Needed proof. Could have been a con-artist. A bleeding heart like yours couldn't help but try to save some street rats," he spat. I opened my mouth as my temper rose, but I turned away in a huff.

The fact that someone would dare hurt children just to test me was despicable. I stood and joined Robert as he watched the boys he'd just helped limp out of the alley, trying to get as far away from their attacker as possible.

"They should be okay. I gave him some herbs that'll take care of pain and make sure it doesn't get infected," he said, shaking his head that he even had to help someone with such a wound. We both looked at Tristan, who insufferably folded his arms and waved us onward. We turned as Leeroy joined us, rubbing his temple.

"Who was that? Did you know them?" I asked.

"The Rats." Leeroy took something from Robert to help with his swollen

temple.

“The Rats?” I asked as we rounded the corner. Entering an area filled with buildings that rose up several stories.

These buildings looked even more extravagant than the ones on the outer layer. As we looked onward, a massive wall rose up. I realized when I was standing outside of Kingsport, this was the second ‘wall’ I saw. The wall arced inward, it was an oval structure we could only see a portion of since we were so close.

It was much, much larger than I had ever imagined it being. I’d read that the construction never stopped, they always added more and more to it. It became the center of their city, the core of Kingsport ideals and identity. A symbol of strength, entertainment, and culture wrapped up in one. It’s said that half of Kingsport’s funds are put into caring, operating and running the place. The other half went to the military.

Robert and I continued following Leeroy into the streets that gleamed as the midday sun showered us once again with its golden-white rays of light. We began to merge with a handful of others bleeding into an entrance at the base of the massive structure. We passed more of the shops with all kinds of exotic foods freshly caught from the bays and brought in from massive caravans from all over the Province.

A pair of guards in similar armor to the ones I had run away from the day prior guarded the entrance and I immediately began sweating. Even though their eyes were forward, I had a paranoid feeling they might recognize me from a wanted poster or word of mouth. But we soon enough passed them with no interruption under a low archway leading to a stairway that led us upward.

There was cheering coming from deeper inside, echoing down our entryway. Of course, we had to go all the way up through several stories of the stairs until

we broke into the light. Standing there, I saw stone benches that spread left and right, seemingly for hundreds of feet in a large circle.

We hobbled over dozens of people as they cheered onwards. Even during the working hours of the day, there had to be at least a few thousand people here. I found a nice end spot on the marble bench and sat with Leeroy and Robert next to me. Tristan sat on the other end like a dog bitterly kept on a leash, he would rather be anywhere else.

From here I could make out a group of a dozen people, mostly women, in nearly skin-tight dresses. They were less dress and more like another layer of skin with feather fringe added. As I watched their dance and took in their movements, I saw elusive and fluid patterns. They would spread their arms around and wiggle their legs like jellyfish as they stood.

Despite the thousands of people already in the arena, more and more gathered by the minute. Leeroy left our spot, but came back momentarily, handing Robert and I a pair of monocular tubes. I put mine up to my left eye, peering through it. It was amazing, I could see them in so much more detail now.

The women were so beautiful. They had marks on their faces of all kinds, like makeup signaling emblems and patterns you'd see in exotic animals. Some had birds, fish, and all sorts of cats. And their moves showed their respective animals' elements and traits. When the women or the few men would perform one of the more provocative movements, the crowd would offer a series of whistles and swoons, and every time I rolled my eyes.

"Is dancing popular in this city?" I asked Leeroy, looking at him while he seemed fascinated by the spectacle. I tapped his monocular, and he came back to reality.

"Oh, yeah. It's common here. Everyone knows how to dance in at least a few different ways. It's like the second language here."

“So, when those boys attacked you, they were trying to talk?”

“Well, in a way.” Leeroy’s shoulders slumped. “They were my friends once.”

“You knew them? Why would they attack you like that?”

“Well, they think I’m a traitor. Ever since I joined Deva and Tristan on their adventures, they’ve disowned me.”

“What’s wrong with you joining them?”

“The Rats are what the kids that live in the sewers under the city call themselves. We don’t like adults. Most kids that don’t have parents get kicked down there. We survive on our own and take care of each other. But because I left they think of me as a traitor. I haven’t seen Rex in months. I thought it would be safe to use one of our old shortcuts, but he must have seen me coming and wanted to fight. Our dance was less talking, and more of him just wanted to show off but, I kind of won that one.”

“How’d you win?”

“I think I did because Tristan almost killed them. Plus, I’m a really, really good dancer.”

“As good as they are?” I pointed my chin to the fabulous dancers below us.

“Not that good. You have to be the best to make it in the arena. What about you?”

“Dancing? Me? I’ve never danced before. I think I’m too clumsy to dance. I don’t think I’d ever dance sober.”

“Everyone can dance. You just gotta find the rhythm. I bet Deva could teach you.”

“I would have never guessed she could dance. And I don’t think Deva wants me around, much less teach me anything.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. Deva’s just standoffish. So is Tristan. I told you they were the same way with me when I first joined. They have to warm up to you is all.”

“I hope you’re right.” Our focus was drawn back as the dancers froze. Music came from an unseen orchestra that made a loud blaring of horns and trumpets fill the Coliseum air. The dancers ran away, scattering in all directions as if escaping the coming bloodshed.

13

Entertainment

The crowd roared and cheered, hailing praise for the dancers. The volume was so overwhelming.

“It’s so loud here. It makes me miss Lonely Island,” I told Robert over the noise. He was looking down at the row of rock seating in front of us as the space filled with people. His eyes were drooping slightly.

“Nostalgia. It’s like being homesick for the past,” he said. I nodded.

“Nostalgia. Hopefully, we’ll get back sooner than later.” He gave me a weak nod as he popped his crinkly hood up, hiding those gentle hazel eyes.

“I wonder how my parents are doing,” he mumbled. He was still. I missed home. But not the people. Probably because I didn’t have any people there, Robert had his grandparents and friends. His poor heart must have ached terribly, and I felt awful for dragging him into this.

“I’m sorry, Robert. This is all my fault. We’ll find a way to get you back as soon as we can-”

“No. I want to help you find your mother. Sure, I’d rather have just sailed here instead of getting caught by the Shantak but, at the end of the day here we are.” I reached over and pulled his hood back. His eyes met mine, and I could tell he was holding back tears. I reached out and embraced him. Being separated for a day was the longest we’ve been away from each other, and it was terrible. We separated after a moment, and I held onto his shoulders.

“Fine. But I won’t let you get hurt again. If anyone should get kidnapped by horrible ancient creatures, it should be me. It’s my mom and my responsibility,

but I can’t thank you enough for being here with me.” I smiled. And then the chanting began.

“Fight! Fight! Fight!” They clamored as one voice. The noise was so loud; I’d never heard anything like this before. People began to flood into the stands. The half-empty mega structure began to fill as the sun climbed into midday. Then, in the middle of the stadium, a hole opened and brought up from hidden stage mechanics, a man came up from below.

A man wearing a full body priestly black cloak and veil that hid his face. With white gloves to disguise his hands. I’d seen that outfit before, at least part of it. I raised my monocular. Even the stance was familiar.

“Good people of Kingsport. I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. I had pressing matters to attend to. But now, it’s time!” The crowd roared as he used exaggerated movements to emphasize his words from so far away.

“But… there’s no way…” I said, lowering my monocular.

“What? Something wrong?” Robert leaned in to hear me.

“I know him.”

“What?’

“I know that guy.” I pointed at the cloaked man.

“Who?”

“That’s Spooky. The guy I met after Yellow King tried to kill me.”

“What? Are you sure? He might only sound like him. I think that outfit is meant to be a disguise.”

“That’s the new announcer, he’s the villain of the new season!” said Leeroy. “He came in yesterday. He killed Maximillian, the last announcer and took his place!” Leeroy explained.

“Season? Like a play?”

“Yeah. The arena is a fighting stage. Only the best fighters get in from all over, and they show off their skills here.”

“So, it’s fake fighting? Like a swordplay-”

“No! It’s super-real! Anyone that says it isn’t is lying!” Leeroy immediately became defensive at my simple question.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls,” Spooky interrupted us. “The arena is set, and the sands are primed to be filled with blood.” The crowd roared as he put a big emphasis on the last word. “From the north side, a man who lived a simple life of working as a shipper on the docks from sunrise to sunset. Happily married, with three children. At least he was happily married, until one night after coming home from work early to pick up some parchment he’d left behind, he found his ‘faithful’ wife in his bed, with another man!” The crowd gasped, followed by a hiss.

I couldn’t help but cock my head at the sudden childishness of the scene. I silently wished the dancers would come back out and stop this silly display. A man walked out from the north. He looked no different than any of the people in the crowd around me. He held an ordinary straight sword and looked irrationally upset, his skin redder than blood. Probably middle-aged, a sliver of gut stuck out from under his shirt.

“It’s Mr. McSweeney! And in the south corner. We have none other than the very man he found with his wife!” The crowd gasped. “A challenger all of you know and love, Zubaz!” As the man on the other side walked out, the crowd had a mixture of cheers and hisses, evenly spread out.

The new man was a tall, incredibly muscular person with short blond hair, a full beard and sharp black markings all over his face. He wore a black shirt with no sleeves with ‘Baz’ written on the chest, blue trousers, knee-high black leather

boots, and black fingerless gloves with wristbands. He held a rope whip in his right hand. I could have sworn as he banged on his chest a crackle of blue sparks came out of his unconventional weapon.

As they both made their way to the center, Spooky stood between them. “Gentleman make sure we have a good, bloody fight. The fight stops when one of you either give up or die. Do either of you have anything to say?”

“You destroyed my family. I’ll get my revenge right here, right now!” McSweeney spat as the crowd cheered him on in his huff of righteousness. But Zubaz leaned in, and Spooky kept his hands between them to make sure no cheap shots were taken.

“I’m going to pound you harder then I pounded your wife,” hissed Zubaz. The crowd let out a resounding “Oooo.” Spooky pushed both men backward. McSweeney recovered, raising his blade for the first strike while charging toward Zubaz.

Spooky vanished in a puff of smoke, and the two fought each other like rabid dogs. “Small World.” I heard Spooky say. But this voice was no echo, it was near. He was speaking normally. I nearly jumped back in surprise as I saw the hooded skeleton sitting right next to me, one leg casually crossed over the other.

“How did you…why are you-”

“-Before you ask a million questions of why just know this is a guilty pleasure of mine, and I don’t do it often.”

“Okay, why are you here?” Robert looked back, his eyes widening as he realized the coliseum announcer was now right next to us. But Tristan and Leeroy were too enveloped in the spectacle below to notice.

“I told you I’d be seeing you. I always keep close tabs on my friends.”

“On your investments,” I corrected him. I wasn’t falling for his coy words.

I’d been fooled too many times, and I still couldn’t be sure this creature, whatever it really was, could be trusted.

“I don’t understand why you’re so abrasive, Little Carter. We skeletons aren’t as terrible as we seem. We only want to socialize.”

“I don’t think you should.” I shook my head at the gratuitous violence going on down below. McSweeney already was losing terribly.

“What? Are you not entertained?”

“The dancing was much nicer.”

“The Coliseum is free for all, young and old. Gives something to take the people’s minds off all the terrible rumors going around.” I tilted my head.

“What rumors?” I asked, recalling Deva’s words.

“They say things are stirring. Old things have escaped their tombs. Shadows have settled over small towns by the sea — a man in yellow manipulating entire Providences. But you shouldn't go off on a wild goose hunt. Head to the castle up on the high hill. You’ll find the next key part there.” He pointed, my eyes followed.

He was motioning to the hill that rose up at the end of the city with bridges that went upward at steep angles to a palace at the top. I turned back to face him, looking into the pure darkness hiding his face. But from here I could see faded violet orbs, burning silently in his skull.

I opened my mouth to speak, but the crowd drowned out my question as the homewrecker Zubaz was standing over an unconscious McSweeney. Raising his clasped hands in victory as the mob cheered him on.

“Looks like the victor has been decided.” Spooky stood. “Good luck with the ball. I’ll be seeing you.” His voice deepened as his eyes of fire came alive. In an instant, his body lit aflame in a purple haze, and he evaporated. I looked back to

the arena as Spooky now held the forearm up of the winner and announced his victory.

For several hours, the fights kept coming. There must have been at least a dozen before the final match wherein two very tall, very large men fought each other. With titles like ‘Man-Eater’ and ‘Giant Dad,’ it was all so silly. But something told me the ‘injuries’ the fighters sustained were just as fake as the choreography. But Leeroy was enthralled the entire time.

He would lean over and explain each one’s backstory to me, what their goals were, what their style of fighting was, and so on. His commentary was amusing, and so in depth, he could have carried an encyclopedia’s worth of knowledge about it.

The fighting ended, and Spooky announced the end of the day’s show, then vanished yet again. The sun was setting over the coliseum’s high walls. The night would arrive soon enough. We made our way out of the stadium in a mass of people that moved at the speed of molasses. Outside, Tristan spoke.

“It’s time. We’re going to the castle now,” he explained and began moving through the streets as guards began lighting torches as it became harder to see. I could imagine crime being a big issue in a city this massive, and the light probably helped stop that. We passed the Coliseum and made our way to the next set of high walls that I could only guess was the entryway to the castle.

The walls weren’t as thick, tall or ornate as the Coliseum, but they were still towering and pristine. The white marble glistened as the rays of the almost set sun fell onto its surface, casting an orange glow on us and the area. We traveled up steep rampways that built up to the hill, leading to a single structure big enough to be a miniature city inside the city itself. It was built on the highest point of the mountain overlooking the Cerenarian Sea.

We passed several checkpoints with dozens of guards, each more alert than

the last. And every time they saw Tristan, they would let us through without hesitation. I began to wonder just who I was working with that the most secure city in the world would just let him and a few unknown friends in.

Eventually, we made it high enough to make it to the plateau. Now I could look out over the city, and the people down below that settled in for the night. Ever further past the walls and into the forest of pines that was still and serene. The farmlands that layout across the fields and the massive military fort attached to the landside of the city opposite to the seaport.

But the most magnificent sight of all was the sunset. Out over the sea, the sun just finished dipping below the watery horizon, making orange mixed with majestic waves of purple and hues of baby blue. It was a breathtaking sight, but I couldn't take it in as long as I wanted to.

We kept moving, making it to a series of large steps. Leading to a building held up by elaborate pillars that I prayed were unrelated to the ones I'd last been around. It was the grand courthouse, a palace — the Kingsport Castle.

A massive central building that connected the Council Courtroom, the Grand Hall, the King's quarters, and a spectacular ballroom. As we approached the front, a water fountain with a basin that stretched a dozen feet across and had several angel children fluttering around with silvery wings met us. And standing there with her arms crossed was none other than Deva.

"You're late." She tapped her foot like a disappointed mother. Tristan walked past her and continued into the large hallway inside.

"Not my fault. She wanted to watch the show," he mumbled. I opened my mouth to point the blame to the real culprit, Leeroy. But I was too slow.

"Oh man, I gotta change. I'm going to be late for the Quarter Ball!" Leeroy ran inside after Tristan with his usual youthful excitement. Robert and I stood with Deva. She shook her head as she looked out over the city.

“Robert, go with the boys. Joy, you’re coming with me.” She turned around.

“Where are you two going?” Robert asked for me.

“Where do you think? We’re going to get the island bumpkin here some decent clothes. She can’t show up to a ball for the highest level of society in the world wearing that.” She eyeballed my tattered dress.

“Ball? I thought we were going to the court?” I asked.

“All good politics starts with partying. If most of the people inside like you, the King himself might just give us the key without any hassle. It all depends on the advisors. And if we’re going to get the advisors on our side, we need to doll you up.” Deva half turned. “But I will admit you do the whole humble-beginnings-poverty-girl look pretty well.”

“Thanks?” I mumbled. Robert and I looked at each other and simultaneously shrugged as we followed Deva past the marvelous pillars and took our first steps into the capitol of the world.

14

Delilah

Deva split off to the side, taking me down the left corridor. Robert went right, following Tristan and Leeroy deeper into the other side of the vast maze of halls. Deva and I took one hallway after another. Along the way, we passed several people, mostly women that greeted us with everything from waves and curtsies. I tried to reciprocate the gestures, and Deva ignored them.

As we got deeper into the upper-class depths, we eventually came upon a series of smaller rooms. Deva led me inside one of them that had the symbol of a dress on the outside on a sign that stood on the ground. Like a little shop inside the castle. We continued inside, and I found myself surrounded by a gathering of hundreds of dresses, gowns, and flowing outfits of all kinds, colors, and styles.

“You have two minutes to find something you like.” Deva stopped and leaned on the inside of the doorframe. What’s up with this girl and two minutes? This wasn’t a shop. It was a warehouse of fancy clothes. I paced around, wondering how so much could be kept in so little space. There had to be hundreds if not thousands of them all kept on hangers and roundabout racks.

I marched my way through them. I realized I should probably wear something elegant and majestic. Something that said ‘Yes, I’m the descendant of some people that killed a lot of bad guys, but I come in peace, preferably.’ Since that was as far as my knowledge of my family went.

But instead of picking a pristine dress with a tail of fringe that would flow behind me as a queen's would, I picked a much more practical outfit. I took it from the rack and brought it to Deva. She bobbed her head to the side, and as my eyes followed, I saw a curtain outstretched for those that wanted to try on the

outfit.

I made my way over and made the change. Loose white sleeves draped from my arms from the wrists up to my shoulders. It flowed into a top half that felt more like a comfortable leather padding than an elegant dress. There were tan patterns, like streams of ink that flowed down in rivers from the source on top.

My belt kept my body snug, but from the waist down, my garment turned into more of an actual dress. The lower half had two layers. The outside layer kept tan with black trimmings. The inner layer peaked out from the high center point that bared my shins. I inspected my favorite part of the outfit, the shoes. My simple flat leather shoes had been replaced with knee-high leather boots, just like the others'. I walked out from behind the curtain; Deva looked me over.

"You picked something decent. I'm impressed. I thought you would pick out a wedding gown or some garbage. I'd say it's almost an aggressive look for you" She stood firmly and motioned for me to follow.

"You're not going to change?" I asked.

"No. This is what I always wear. I might scare people if I suddenly start acting soft and girly like you." I rolled my eyes, emulating her attitude.

We continued back down the halls. But as we did, this time, I looked around to better take in my surroundings. Everything from the gold fringe carpet to the elaborate oil paintings on the walls screamed wealth.

I looked up. The ceiling was covered in Frescos, filled with images of fully completed art from ages past. As I inspected the striking imagery, I realized all the artistic depictions flowed from one into the next, going from an unknown beginning to the unseen end. From here I could tell I wasn't looking at the start of the story. It was like I had flipped a book open and began reading from the middle.

"Where does this start? What's this story about?" She stopped and looked up

with a shrug.

“Of course, you’d ask. But why not, we still have some time. I guess all the money they spent on this place would be a waste if nobody looked at it.” We walked shoulder to shoulder down the halls, as she directed me back through the walkways. “Do you even know what Carter did all that time ago? Way back before all this was here?” she asked.

“Not really. My mom never spoke about any of the Elder Gods. She kept me on the island to make sure I wouldn’t get involved until I was older.”

“Well, look up. This is where they start.” I looked at the ceiling, and the depiction of a pale man with dark black hair stared back down at me. Those were mother’s green eyes and my nose for sure. It was the first time I’d seen any depiction of the grandfather everyone knew more about than I did. “It’s said he came from a distant world much different than our own. A place we call The Waking World.” The next image was one of dark towers and spires rising into the air, gathered together in one cluster. Like a castle, but it spread so far and wide that it had to be covering dozens of miles. Hundreds of little red specks were attached to the towers, like torches to illuminate the forms in the darkness of the night city.

“Carter came across an ancient race of beings that had figured out the secrets of the Cosmos, what makes the Elder Gods tick. Carter called them Elder Things. They were hunted by the Elder Gods for their knowledge. Some people say it’s because they broke the rules of nature, and the Cosmos itself. But others say it’s because the Elder Gods feared them for their newfound powers. The last of the Elder Things hid away in The Waking World until only one remained. As the lone surviving member of their race, the last Elder Thing gave Carter its knowledge. And Carter gained powers beyond imagination.”

The frescos moved from the city to a land of ice, with a series of spires that raised into the skies. Then the colors shifted to dots of all kinds on top of black

canvas, representing the night sky. Next was a grassy plain, inhabited with a host of strange animals straight out of myth and legend.

“With his newfound abilities, Carter was now the one being hunted by the Elder Gods. He escaped to the Dreamlands, and he began his journey through the new world. Overcoming every task that came his way.”

A new section depicted ghastly people with white skin and dog-like heads — another with little rodents with furry beards and more with cats sitting on grand thrones. I wasn’t sure what to make of it. Bizarre was the only thing that came to mind.

“Carter’s journey through the Dreamlands led him to the source of the evils spread throughout the land. A place where the Worlds themselves merged. A place called Leng. And in this place-”

“Is the Archway,” I said, stepping forward to see the largest, most significant portion of the frescos.

As if in the center of the hallway, in a background of the grey insides of a temple filled with pillars that stretched up into the black ceiling, was an Archway several times larger than the rest. It radiated with an intense yellow glow. It was that same Archway from seven years ago.

“You know what it is? I’m surprised. I mean, everyone knows about the tale of the World Archways, but I didn’t expect you to have heard of it.”

“Yeah I… think I went there when I was a kid with my mother.” My eyes were captivated by the image.

I was rammed backward, forced into the velvet-lined wall. As my eyes snapped forward, I saw Deva’s fiery eyes staring at me full of rage.

“You’re on his side, aren’t you!?” She accused me. I looked at her in disbelief.

“What? Who’s side?” I said, trying to push her off me, but her iron grip kept me in place.

“Only a Carter can open the Archway. So how come seven years ago he got out? The same time your mother disappeared. You’re both traitors, aren’t you?!”

“No! She went there to stop him, but it was too late. I’m sorry, I was just a little girl. I couldn’t do anything.”

“So that’s the truth. Your mother let him out. Do you know how many thousands of people died because of her mistake?”

“She didn’t do anything! Mom said it wasn’t too late to stop him. She’s not dead, and she’s still there. I can fix it!”

“Fix it? It’s her fault to begin with. The dumb bitch-” I cut her screams of rage off as I slapped her as hard as I could. I was done with being nice now. I had said I was sorry. Deva stepped back as her head slowly turned back to me.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to-” In a flash, Deva ducked and dove into me. Her arms flying outwards and wrapping around my lower torso as she tackled me to the floor. I hit the ground with a thud as Deva rained down blows from above.

“Get off!” I screamed at her as she kept her assault up. Her fists came straight down and having no real way to retaliate I covered my face while trying to hold her arms back.

“It’s your fault! It’s your fault the coast is filled with monsters! It’s your fault that my friends keep dying!” She shouted at the top of her lungs.

My boiling blood simmered as teardrops fell onto my face between her slowing attacks. Deva fell sideways off me. Barely catching herself as she put her back against the wall. Her eyes went to the floor. She was crying. The stone-cold killer herself had tears of frustration streaming down her face. I much sooner expected her to stab me to death than start weeping.

“I… I’m sorry. I was ten. I never even knew what the Elder Gods were. I never knew what the Archways were. I was a kid. I just didn’t know.”

“I know,” she sniffled, looking to the side. We were silent for a moment.

“Did the Yellow King… kill your friends?” I asked. Praying it wasn’t true. Deva’s eyes searched for some answer.

“Not with his own hands. But through the years after monsters like the Shantak started to return to the Dreamlands, we knew Carter’s seal on the Archway had been broken. When I was sixteen Tristan and I traveled across the seas trying to hunt down as many nests of creatures as we could. We wiped out dozens of species of all kinds of horrible beasts. But one day when we were sailing to the north, we were attacked by some horrible thing. It slaughtered us. Tristan threw me overboard because I refused to leave the ship. But almost everyone else died. Ever since then, I’ve been searching the seas for the source, the Archway. How to seal it or destroy it altogether.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, with full regret. But Deva shook her head.

“It’s not your fault. You were just a kid. If your mother had taught you how to use your family’s Elder Sign this probably never would have happened, I blame her. But it’s too late for that.”

“But… at least we can still try to stop him and put him back in the Archway, so it doesn’t happen to other people.” I offered a silver lining.

“But how? This has all just been a fever dream for me. Do you think we’ll stand a chance against the Avatar of an Elder God?”

“I don’t know if I can. In fact, I’m pretty sure the answer is no. But my mom can. If we get the Silver Key and take it to the Plateau, she can stop him,” I said. Deva exhaled, gathering herself. She nodded and stood. She offered a hand up, and I took it.

“Alright then, let’s go get that piece.”

15

Masquerade

We continued down the winding halls as they grew. Eventually reaching the main entrance hall. We took the path all the way down until the sight of the grand doorways came into view. The oaken barriers were spread outward, welcoming us.

I laid my eyes upon a massive room that must have held a hundred people inside. There were dozens of guards outside the hall. The moving bodies of happily chatting people probably gossiping about the local events as we neared the entrance.

Men and women danced as a band played to the side of the hallway near the windows that peaked from under high archways that rose above the checker-tiled floor. On the other side of the room was a table that nearly spanned the length of the room itself. Waiters and maids brought and took trays of food and drinks from it.

Deva and I entered, and the smell of expensive perfume tickled my nose. Even though I had just changed, I still looked completely outclassed by every man and woman inside. You could feel the wealth in the air, like swimming through molten gold and silver.

Deva and I waded around the small circles that had formed here and there. Some people had full faced masks on and spoke with others wearing the same ornate designs. The inner rectangle was for a handful of people that used the beautiful and lively music to their advantage and danced. It was funny to see grown and even more elderly people hop around with such abandon.

Deva led me around them like mice through a maze of politicians and businessmen. The sheer amount of trades and deals and comments about the city I heard, it was impossible to keep track of them all. We made our way to the table near the end of the hall.

We found Tristan, leaning against the wall holding a mug in his hand. He stood only a few paces away from the casket of beer that sat on the table, alongside a few dozen other bottles of ale and alcohol. If I didn't know any better, I could have sworn he was almost smiling. He was wearing his same outfit and hadn't changed his looks at all, I guess Deva didn't fall too far from her teacher's tree.

"We should probably try not to get drunk just yet, at least not till we get the key," she said as she poured herself one of the pitchers and joined him in leaning against the wall like the couple of social outcasts they were. Leeroy approached us from down the table.

He had changed out from his boyish pirate scheme to an all-black outfit of light leather armor, but he kept his cape on. He looked like a vigilante watching out over the civilians in the room. His head swiveled, his chin high. He must have found a comb to quickly press his wild brushfire of hair down to a manageable level. He joined us, hands on his hips.

"Evening ma'am." He puffed his chest out. I cracked a smile.

"You know there are guards here to protect us right Leeroy?"

"Ahh, phooey. Those guys couldn't guard a coop of hens. Something always happens at these rich events with the big hats."

"Nothing ever happens at these events. Just sycophants trying to get attention and win favor with the man in charge." Deva nodded to something behind me. I turned to see a table at the furthest point back in the room.

The table was short, as there were only four seats, each one facing the

banquet hall. A man with grey hair. He looked thin and had hollow cheeks He sat on the inner right next to a woman who could hardly be older than myself. Their outfits were elegant but were probably some of the calmest and least eye-catching out of the entire court of people. The other two seats at the ends were empty. I realized that that must be the king's table. And that girl was probably the princess.

"Deva is that-"

"-The king and his new wife, yeah."

"New wife? She looks barely fifteen."

"Don't worry, she turned sixteen this month." I felt myself dry heave a little.

"What? It's normal. His second queen died a few months ago, he needed to remarry. His son is usually too busy sailing across the sea and dealing with the desert slave traders to care about the court. His daughter has been disowned. He needs more kids and she fits that role. Rumor has it she's a few months pregnant and they're planning on announcing it tonight, so that should be the highlight of this party," Deva informed without an ounce of inflection or any legitimate interest, like a schoolchild reciting the answer to a math question. She then downed the ale she'd poured during her little informative burst.

I looked out at the rest of the crowd, I saw Robert nearby. He was speaking to a group of older looking men, they were easily the most scholarly looking out of the mass of bodies in the room. But I couldn't help but notice Robert had changed out of his old outfit and now wore a fitting cloak that looked less like a pile of autumn leaves and more like a wry student of the clerical elderly men. Though of course, he still had a dozen pockets around his belt full of supplies. His hair even looked fixed, less like a tangled mess of seaweed. He and Leeroy's must have used the same comb.

I decided to join him. I walked to the outside of his group, and as I stood

there the men seemed to point his attention to me. He turned to face me, his hazel eyes blinked a few times as he had to double take at my sudden outfit change.

“You look different too,” I said, understanding his expression. He smiled.

“Gentlemen, this is my good friend Joy. Joy, these men are professors at Miskatonic University.” I smiled and nodded to the men. I wasn’t sure if I should have curtsied, but I probably would have tripped over my own legs if I tried.

I felt a brush against my arm and turned my head to see who’d bumped into me. An apologetic hand came up, next to a face a head taller than my own. Pristine blue eyes that reminded me of the view of the ocean from home. His hair was dirty blonde and immaculate. His cheekbones were beyond defined, and his outfit was impeccable. He looked almost militant, but his smile was too kind for that.

“Please forgive me, Miss.”

“Oh, no, not at all. That was my fault.” It wasn’t my fault, I hadn’t budged in the last thirty seconds.

“Please, allow me to make it up to you.” He held out his forearm. “May I?” He offered as he tilted his shoulders as if to show me the dancing section of the room. I opened my mouth, frozen. I was going to accept his offer as to not be rude. But I realized I had no idea how to dance. Then out of nowhere a different arm swooped in and interlocked with mine as it rose.

“The lady hasn’t had her proper first dance yet. Come, Joy, it’s courtesy for young and eligible women to dance with their fellow ladies first before mingling with the boys.” Deva lead me forward, away from the new face, his expression went half blank, half confused.

Deva took me just to the edge of the floor. She spun around to face me. One arm wrapped around my waist and she stepped close, pressing nearly flush

against me. She grabbed my right hand and held it out, like the other couples on the dance floor. Going from being attacked to having her dance with me in the span of ten minutes wasn't a change of pace I wasn't mentally prepared for.

"Step and step and swivel and step. This dance sucks, but it's easy to learn." I looked down at my feet as she gave a short instruction on how to do it. For the most part, I just mimicked the other women on the floor and tried not to step on her boots, but I failed time and time again.

"Who was that? I asked, trying to look around for the stranger.

"Who? Oh, the blonde guy? That was the prince." I looked at Deva, who didn't seem to care.

"The prince?!" I hissed, slightly outraged she would scare away a literal prince.

"What? He's overrated, trust me." She scoffed. My mind immediately put a theory together.

"You know him?" Being careful not to upset her. I could tell she was blushing, not from embarrassment but from guzzling so much alcohol in so little time.

"I did. Haven't spoken to him since the last time I stepped in this place a few years back. I don't think he even recognized me." The ever so slight tinge of sadness coming from her voice caught me off guard.

"Oh, I'm sorry it didn't work out," I said.

"Work out? Oh no, it wasn't like that. It's a lot more of a brother-sister relationship, like you and Robert." I looked at Robert who was still deeply entrenched in his conversation with the elderly men.

Some were holding books now, probably ancient history, one of his favorites. He seemed so happy over there, being able to speak with people that could keep

up with his medical know-how. No matter what was happening or where I was. Just seeing him was enough to put me at ease. He was like an anchor for my lone ship out in the wild and rocking waters of my new life. Since this all started I couldn't tell how I truly felt for him, but I knew he would always be there to make sure I never capsized. The song ended, and Deva took a step back.

"You're not half bad. A natural even." She gave me a nod. The first time she gave me the slightest bit of a compliment. This change of pace between us was still hard to grasp, but nice. I didn't even realize I'd made my third friend. Or another positive acquaintance, at least.

"Stay here. It's time to get that key," she said, walking away. I furrowed my brow. She clapped her hands together. And a gust of wind shot out from around her knocking everyone over. Some people spilled drinks and dropped food. I braced for the impact. Leaving me the only one standing on the dance floor, only a few feet behind her in a room full of silent and shocked wealthy patrons of the king in the most powerful city in the world.

"Oh, Delilah. You've returned," the king said, still sitting in his chair. His tone was mildly annoyed, but unphased otherwise at the sight of Deva wiping out so many of his guests. I looked back and forth between them in shock. I thought I heard wrong, the king just called Deva by what I assumed was her real name.

"Hello, father."

16

Float On

I swapped glances between Deva and the king. I wanted to crawl away, but between being horrified that I was now exposed and shocked at what I was hearing, I was frozen in place.

“Please, guests. Excuse my daughter. As you all know, she is quite the feisty one,” he smiled with a dishonest chortle. The crowd hesitated but joined him in his haughty laughter. Deva walked forward, approaching the short stairs that elevated the table over the crowd.

“I have good news, good news for all of you. I’ve found the one and only descendant of Carter.” She motioned for me to join her. All eyes in the silent room fell on my shoulders. I felt faint. The king burst out in more hearty laughter.

“Oh, Deva! Your imagination has always been so wild. But if you wanted to tell me silly tales you could have done so in private.” The way the pitch of his words elevated at the end spoke volumes about how upset he was. But he held face well.

“Silly tales? Look, she’s a Carter. Black hair, green eyes, all that stuff.”

“You’ve found a woman that faintly resembles the description of the old hero. Well done.”

“She’s real. You know what, Joy, open a portal and dump water on his head or something.” I had no idea what she was talking about, but even if I could do that, I probably wouldn’t do it to a king.

“Deva, I can’t just…” I started to explain, but I don’t think she heard my

sheepish whispering.

“Delilah, please. Leave the courtroom. You’ve already made enough of an embarrassment of me tonight. Come back later, and I will speak to you about this in private.”

“Embarrassment? You know what? Fine. I hope the Dagonians burn this city to the ground!” She heel-turned and sped past me. Her face was red. Redder than red. She looked like she was going to explode. I wasn’t sure what she meant, but I remembered the word ‘Dagonian’ from back in the Tsang Tower.

I followed her, keeping my head down. A drunken Tristan, a shocked Robert, and Leeroy came after us. We stopped as we made it halfway through. Screams came from outside the grand hall. The guards shuffled in as the great doors shut in front of us.

“Dagonians! They snuck into the castle. Everyone stay down!” One of the guards warned. The whole hall let out a gasp of fright. And then it happened.

Every single patron in the ballroom wearing a mask, men and women alike, tore their disguises off. Revealing pale, milky-blue skins with scaly hide, glassy white globes for eyes, and jagged teeth. It was the same type of creature Leeroy, and I saw in the Tsang Tower. The Dagonians were here the whole time, just waiting to strike.

Everyone screamed and ran for the door. But the assault began in seconds. Their webbed hands broke out of their gloves, and they began tearing at their human counterparts. Deva and Tristan drew their weapons and jumped into action. There had to be at least a dozen of them, all attacking different targets. But when they saw the two jumping in to fight them, they forgot about the people around them entirely and focused on the two defenders.

I stood still, unsure of how I could help. I had no idea how to use my abilities in a way that could assist them. I looked side to side, but only Leeroy was near

me. Robert had run into the fight. He was kneeling beside one of the groaning people. He had taken bandages out of his packs and began stopping the excessive bleeding from the lacerations. He didn't even seem to notice the raging battle going on around him.

He worked while I stood there, gritting my teeth while being completely useless. Deva's rapier slashed and the winds it drew kicked the curtains on the sides of the arches. She leaped to the nearest threat and skewered it with serval needle strikes. Before it even had time to know what happened, it fell to the earth bleeding a black ooze from corkscrew sized pours. I held my mouth as I fell over, shuffling backward toward the beer table.

Just moments before they were acting just like people, talking and laughing with us. Knowing that I walked right past these creatures just moments before made me shiver with fear. My thinking stopped when the sound of clattering armor tracked across the ground. In both of his hands, Tristan held a massive block of a weapon.

He dragged it along the ground, like a ship's plank. As three of the Dagonians jumped for him, he swung the hunk of shadow and slashed all three in half with one blow. The ichor sloshed everywhere, drenching terrified and disgusted nobles that ducked as low as they could to the ground.

Robert was on his fifth patient now, the last one that had been ambushed before a dozen monsters focused on Deva and Tristan. And in seconds their numbers had been cut in half. The rest bum-rushed the two, but they were ready. Tristan let go of his weapon as it vanished, and he drew back a spear, which he drove into one of the fish-men, running forward until he hit the wall. He turned all the way around as Deva faced five more, she rolled, making one of their paw swipes narrowly miss.

A whizzing sound shot through the air and a black arrow stuck in the chest of one of the still standing creatures. Tristan reloaded his newly made bow from an

invisible quiver on his back. The one next to the most recently fallen snarled but was immediately dispatched by another shadow bolt. The last four kept going after Deva, she parried, lunged and cut with immaculate skill.

As she incapacitated them, Tristan would follow up with a shot. And as each one fell, they would scream bloody bubbling noises from their fleshy throats. Until only one remained. Deva slashed to its side, missing on purpose. The beast flew to the side, the wind taking it all the way to the wall next to the stained-glass window. Deva ran over and placed her weapon under its chin.

“Who sent you here?” she demanded. The thing looked up, its glossy white eyes emptily staring forward. But from here I could see something in those eyes, a tint — the ever so slight hue of yellow. Realizing now was my chance to help, I ran forward with my hand outstretched.

“Deva, wait I can-” But as I crossed through the bloodied hall, it lurched forward, gouging its esophagus on Deva’s blade. She tried pulling back, but it was too late. The Dagonian toppled over to the floor, making a puddle of black ooze leak out. She cursed and walked back toward us as the nobles readied themselves to leave. We all gathered together in the center as Robert and Leeroy helped the hurt people recover.

“So, this new Carter. Does she usually use her powers by doing nothing?” The king looked furious. As if an attack in his courtroom was like noisy children.

“You’re welcome. You know what? Don’t worry about it. We’ll solve your problems for you. We’ll go to their hive and wipe them all out one by one if we have to.”

“Ha! If a hundred Crimson Elite couldn’t get through those chambers, what hope do you five have?”

“Thanks for the support. It’s so heartwarming to know you still believe in

me.” Deva turned around, and her face was redder than when she was wrestling with me earlier. Tristan, Robert, Leeroy, and I exchanged awkward glances.

“Good to meet you, sir! We’ll be back tomorrow!” Leeroy waved as he ran after Deva. Tristan sighed and picked up a half-empty cup of ale and drank it as he casually stepped over his slain bodies. Robert and I followed them. I thought about saying sorry, but the ambush wasn’t our fault. And I didn’t feel like trying to make someone so awful as this king feel better.

We made our way out of the castle top, out of the city on the plateau and down into the city below. Along the way, we saw a few corpses of Dagonians, slain by guards right outside the castle. If they hadn’t been found, we wouldn’t have been tipped off before their surprise attack.

Deva kept such a brisk speed; it was hard for me to keep up. But at least now I didn’t have to hike up my dress to keep up; this new one was so much more agile. Robert and I slowed our pace, but we made sure to keep them in our sights at least.

I looked at my hands as we neared the soon closing city gates as the last tip of the sun dipped under the horizon. There had to be some way to access the powers mother used back then. I could look into the soul of any living thing, but I couldn’t do anything she did. I wasn’t sure if I was incapable, or if I didn’t know how.

* * *

We left the city and headed out to the nearest stable, a series of small buildings to keep horses and carriages safe. Up ahead I saw Deva speak and make angry motions to a man standing outside where the horses slept. She handed something to the man and headed around the back, making a motion for Tristan to follow him. Deva marched around the side of the building. Leeroy motioned for us to follow.

We met them behind the barn, where a closed roof carriage lay waiting. There were several other carriages beside it, and this one was the fanciest. Deva had already crawled inside. And as we neared it, Tristan and the man were leading two horses to us. We entered the cabin. I decided to sit next to Deva, hoping her rare good mood wouldn't forever vanish. As I settled in, and Robert sat next to me, I realized my arm was brushing against hers. If I went into The White Room, I'd be able to get at least a hint at what she was feeling.

I didn't want to intrude, but if I could connect, I could help her. I reached out with my mind to see what she felt. The carriage faded, and as I blinked, we now sat across each other in The White Room. Deva was looking down. She didn't seem to mind the sudden transition.

"Your father didn't seem very kind." My quiet statement echoed in the chamber.

"You're so observant. He's the king. He doesn't have to be anything." Unnecessary roughness. The aura around her body was spiked, agitated. But not as much as before. As we talked the jaggedness of her spirit slowed. I brushed the comment to the side. "My father wouldn't have a degenerate sea-sailing pirate daughter be next in line to the throne. So, he told me he'd disown me if I didn't stop. So, I formally renounced my position, and we went our separate ways."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. He's not my real dad." I kept quiet for a moment. Realizing she was referencing Tristan's guidance over her. Leeroy wasn't the only one that looked up to him.

"Well, he could at least try to be a decent father."

"Yeah, and Leeroy's parents didn't have to throw him down the sewers as a baby for the rats to eat. And your mother didn't have to abandon you. But

parents are like that, aren't they?" I was silent again. I snapped back, she was trying to divert my attention to escape The White Room, and it was working. But I could tell I was getting through.

"They're not perfect, no. But I think they try," I said. Deva scoffed. She paused; she was thinking. Her attitude still softening, spikes becoming bumps.

"Look at us — a couple of kids off to start a war against Elder Gods with our little gimmicks. Tristan's the only one that has any idea about what's really going on. We don't have anyone on our side. There's no one looking out for us. This is how it always is, one day we'll replace them, and the whole cycle will start again."

"We can be better."

"Why? Why try? Why do you care?"

"I care about a lot of things."

"Well you shouldn't, none of it matters. We don't matter."

"All life matters, even ours." Deva was silent. She sighed. The vapors around her body became still. Just as I had helped with the pig and the people on Lonely Island, I reached out into her past. My vision flashed as the image of a grassy courtyard with hedges, and an elaborate fountain drew itself around us. A playful and hyper child running around in pants chasing a butterfly with a makeshift net rose up.

"How un-ladylike." Scoffed a woman, her face was fuzzy and unclear. "Without her mother, she'll end up a savage. The girl needs a woman to raise her."

"I have the best tutor coming in to discipline her." The voice was familiar. I recognized it — the dry tone of the king's voice. But the scene melted and morphed into one of her being thrown into a dark room. She cried as she was

threatened by a tall, fearsome elderly woman shaking a stick down at her.

The next was a flash of her climbing down a rope and running off into the city to never look back. The next was her several years later, sailing the seas alongside pirates and a familiar face, a slightly younger Tristan. The last image was a picture of her standing before her father in court, throwing a tiara to the ground, and leaving. Though fuzzy, I realized this was her story.

She allowed me a glimpse into her past, and the gears began to click. When she ran away from home, she met Tristan, and he taught her how to sail. The last time she saw her father, it was to tell him what she thought, how she hated him. But now she'd finally worked up the courage to come back and make amends. And she was rejected, yet again, like a lion with a thorn in its paw asking for help, only to have another lodged in.

Again, I was the meek and modest mouse, trying to help. I thought about how to counsel her without tempting her to chomp my head off. I opened my eyes. Robert, Tristan, and Leeroy were all fast asleep. Leeroy was snoring. Our carriage was moving, and I wondered how long we'd been going for. Deva had pushed the window curtain back and kept her eyes on the outside sky, an expression I could relate to.

"How are the stars tonight?" I asked, giving her a small smile. Her eyes darted toward me but shifted back to looking outside, toward the ground now.

"Same as always," she mumbled. I opened my mouth. I hadn't thought about what I'd say next, so I just tried to be honest.

"I know the past was bad, but if we work together, we can make the future a lot better."

"You know what makes me want to throw up? Optimists." She shook her head slightly as if in disbelief while putting her fingers down, letting the curtain fall. She turned her head to the corner and slumped over. But as she hid her face,

I could see her frown had changed to a more thoughtful and understanding expression.

Taking thorns out, no matter if they're physical or emotional, is always painful for people, and they take time to heal. But afterward, they're always thankful they let it be pulled. Although the conversation was over, I could feel somewhere in that suit of armor I'd found a crack, and had soothed the hurt girl inside.

I may not be able to control the wind or make weapons out of shadows, but I could make people feel better, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

17

Bad Romance

“Hey.” I heard a voice call as two hands nudged my shoulder. I cracked my eyes open, it was still dark. I must not have slept for long. The carriage had stopped and was empty except for myself and Robert as he woke me. I slid off the seat, crouching on my feet as I left the carriage. As I exited, the first thing I noticed was the blanket of fog all around us.

It was so thick and layered I could hardly see more than a dozen feet in front of me, it reminded me of the fog between the spires off the coast of the Tsang Tower. The others were making their way toward the town hidden in mist. I began walking forward, but I stopped and looked up at the carriage driver. It was none other than the skeleton man.

“Spooky, how did you…” I trailed off, realizing my question would be pointless.

“We don’t have much time. If you stay here long your friends will leave you behind in this mist. Or worse, they might try asking me as many questions as you,” he said, still holding the horse’s reins. “There’s a good reason I tagged along. Turns out there’s Dagonians here.” His tone now was far more serious than his usual banter.

“Yeah, I know that.” He was telling me old news.

“Well, I didn’t, because they don’t belong here. Dagonians belong in a different World entirely, definitely not this one. Do you know what that means?” I shrugged. “Someone’s been bringing them here.”

“The Yellow King?” I asked, he nodded.

“The very nature of the Dreamlands has changed ever since he’s gotten out. As if everything ‘astral’ about this place has been sucked out. He must have brought them here from the Waking World, and I have reason to believe he’s been using them as a slave race to accomplish his goals.”

“There were some in the castle, they attacked us there.”

“Looking for the key parts no doubt. Be on your guard Little Carter. Yellow King has moved an entire town from across the Cosmos just to have an edge in this Easter egg hunt. You and your friends’ lives are at stake. I will continue to search for as much information I can, but don’t dawdle. Get the key parts as soon as possible, and beware,” he said, snapping the whips. The horses reared and took off. Within seconds, he vanished into the fog, taking the carriage with him. I ran after the others as their forms were absorbed into the thicket of mist.

The faint salty smell of the night air coming from the sea returned to me for the first time since I was on Lonely Island. We had to be on a coastal town. I was expecting a dungeon, not a port city. But then again, that tar and clay filled village full of the men that hid in the shadows and man-eating spiders could be considered a port town too, even though its piers themselves were neglected and rotten.

The night was quiet, and on top of the salt, the air had an aroma of old wood. Like the scent of a decaying forest being eaten alive by termites. We reached a sign on the road that led up to the town. ‘Innsmouth. A Fisherman’s Paradise.’ An innocent enough sign. The fog lifted as we passed into the place. On either side buildings rose up made of brick.

It was immediately obvious why this place was considered abandoned and had lost so many of its travelers. The buildings’ paints were peeled. Their structures dilapidated, but they still stood. It wasn’t just a single street in a ghost town either. There were alleyways and angled roads that interconnected. Like a colony of people that seemed to avoid being outside. To be fair, it was a

sentiment I could empathize with without using the Elder Sign.

“What do either of you know about Innsmouth?” Deva asked as she led the way.

“I heard they have really nice fishing.” Robert made a pun on the obvious sign.

“A few years back this place popped up out of nowhere, as if this whole town was built in a day. It was strange, and the king even had a massive investigation on it, but they found nothing. They chalked it up to bad mapping, but I kept my eye on it. People don’t come here, they avoid it like the plague. But those who do usually don’t come back. People from Kingsport have been outlawed from even visiting. Although, I have word that there are some locals in nearby villages that have people who work here doing what little maintenance they can. We’re here to try to find one of those people and get some information, so we can find where the Dagonians are hiding.”

“So, we’re not going to fight anything right? Just here to ask questions?” I asked.

“We’re going to find out what’s wrong with the locals. Even though they’re probably just Dagonians in disguise. More importantly, how they got here.”

“So… what do you think it is?” I leaned in slightly, hoping she knew the answer and I wouldn’t have to relay Spooky’s information.

“It has a lot to do with Yellow King, obviously. He might be hiding away in Leng, but make no mistake, his influence is spread across the world just enough so people who are looking can see it. I think Innsmouth was just the first place south of Tsang Tower to fall to his infection.”

“Infection? Like a disease?” Robert asked.

“In a way. A sickness of the mind. Yellow King doesn’t act like other freaks

that think they're Gods. He has a very indirect way of fighting, through subtle manipulation of the mind. Once he has an inch he takes a mile, and with that he enslaves entire populations and transforms them into mindless slaves that do his bidding." Deva's language got more heated as she spoke. "And for the people here, they're all under his control, that's why they've got what we call the Innsmouth Look."

"What look?"

"Big, white eyes, scaly skin, flappy necks, razor teeth. Like a walking fish," Leeroy explained, using his hands to make great and dramatic motions. "The monsters we nearly ran into at Tsang Tower." I remembered.

The time in Tsang Tower when I nearly fainted after seeing its arms in the candlelight was quite an introduction. I prayed we wouldn't be here long.

We made our way through the streets. Something worse than the muck and grime lay under this city. Even though it was the dead of night, there was a certain emptiness to it all. Not a single soul in the street. No maids chatting in the markets. No men by the sawmill down by the river. No children screaming and playing in their homes. No cats or dogs or any small animals for that matter. It was eerie and unnerving.

If a plague from that monster that served the Elder Gods had taken root, it couldn't be safe for us to casually explore for long. And after speaking to Spooky, I kept on my toes, waiting for the next ambush to come. I wanted to ask if we could come back in the morning, but the chills this place gave me kept me silent.

We rounded two or three bends until we arrived at one of the taller buildings, several stories high. A sign made from big wooden letters nailed above the doors, 'Innsmouth Cove.' We entered. The lobby was empty in the lodge. We stood there, in the open foyer, and waited. Leeroy's darting eyes and Tristan's

clinched fists agreed with my suspicions. In this ghost town, living human beings like us had no right to stay.

There was a staircase leading up to a level with who knows what hidden up there. Tristan made the next move. Leaving this room and heading around a wall leading into the conjoined room. We followed him and came upon an area full of long tables, a dining room that could fit at least fifty people. And in this room was a man sitting in the back corner, his eyes lost in a bottle. But he looked surprisingly normal. His clothes were standard and plain, those of a simple farmer.

Tristan strode up to the man and took a seat across from him on his small round table. We took our place at a nearby table for twelve. Taking our seats on the stools. There was a fire going in the chimney on the space of wall between us. The man had probably sat there for its warmth. My back was to it, and its flickering was the only thing that brought me any peace or feeling of sanctuary in this place. Tristan spoke with the man and I tilted my ear to eavesdrop.

“You’re one of them?” Tristan opened.

“How’d you guess?” Silence. The man’s voice was rustic, but not foreign and disturbing like a Dagonian’s should be.

“Bit of skin on your neck is peeling.” I was so tempted to look, but I contained myself.

“Good eye, friend.”

“You live here?”

“Ehh. Don’t really live anywhere. I come here for the cheap drink since everyone else is too scared to come.”

“Why are they scared to come?” Silence. “They can hear us, can’t they?” Tristan’s mumble was confirmed as we all looked up, the sound of wood shifting

on wood on the floor above us. It was slight, but obvious. My stomach twisted with the uneasy feeling that we'd set up a trap for ourselves. Even being tucked between Tristan and Deva, I felt so exposed here.

"Listen mate, you've still got a few good years ahead of you. Don't go snooping around and they won't bother you. I know it's the infection, but I've taken a liking to this town, feels like I belong here. I can't wait to see my new home. They've started to accept me, but these folks love privacy more than they love water. My family left yesterday for Kingsport thinking they'd be safe, but nowhere is safe."

"Why is nowhere safe? Are the Dagonians that strong? How many are there?" He pried.

"Enough to make the army of Kingsport look like child's play. They, or we I guess, could conquer the world if they wanted."

"Why don't you?"

"We don't like land, and this isn't our home planet." I saw him make a motion from the corner of my eye, pointing to his neck. "Breathing up here gets hard after you've turned enough."

"What places should we avoid if we're trying not to attract their attention?"

"Well, no matter how much you want to pray, avoid the church here. They're not fond of newcomers that try to spoil their town meetings. Definitely don't go north of the river. That neighborhood is a bad one. And under no circumstances go in the sewers." The man's head picked up. Something caught his attention.

Tristan had turned his head to the side, both were looking at something on the other side of the room. I followed their sightlines to see a man standing in the doorway. He was chubby and wore a common clerks' outfit and apron. His pot belly stuck out. He had the most disgusted and downturned snarl I'd ever seen. When he spoke, it was with that blubbery, sloppy voice. Even worse than the

attackers in the Ballroom.

“We’re all filled up. Can’t help you. Go elsewhere,” he spat on most of his words, especially the S’es, making the words slosh out.

“No, you’re not. We’ll pay well for two rooms.” Deva threw a bag that jingled as it hit the floor at the man’s feet. The man looked down at it. He awkwardly hobbled down. He grabbed the sack and untied it; his eyes narrowed just slightly as he nodded.

“I see. You’re one of those nosey ones huh? Brought some friends too.” The man gave a short chuckle followed by a moist coughing. “Hope you have a good night’s rest.” He reached into his pockets and tossed two keys. Deva caught both and handed one to Tristan. The man hobbled around the corner. Leaving as suddenly as he arrived.

I was never a socially adept person, but even I knew when a mysterious monster man let you stay in his house, he was probably going to try and bake you into a pie. Or was that witches?

Tristan stood and took something out of his pocket; a bottle of ale he had swiped from the ballroom. He placed it near the man, who took it without a word and began to down its contents. Tristan exited the room, and I was determined to stay as close to him as possible.

Entering the main room, we headed up the stairs. Tristan leading the way up to the second floor, and down the dark hall. I whispered a silent thanks to the moonlight coming through the window at the end of the hall, it at least gave us some light.

He turned to face a room labeled 115 and entered it. Deva faced the door on the opposite side and unlocked it. She held the door open for me. Leeroy and Robert both went with Tristan. For the first time in my life I would have been perfectly fine with sharing this box of a room with as many people as possible

for the night.

A thin layer of moss was building on the curtains. The bed, despite having barely enough surface for one person still managed to take up half the room. Deva peeked out the curtains, looking left then right.

“Best get some shut eye. It’s about to be a long night,” she said as she hopped into the bed. Not showing a care in the world about the conditions around her.

“Deva doesn’t this seem, unsafe?” I asked, cautiously approaching the blinds and peeking out like she had. I too looked left and right, and for a moment, I thought I saw a movement in the streets, something alive in the darkness, but it must have been my paranoia. I kept my eyes grazing the town courtyard for another thirty seconds and saw nothing.

“Nah. I’ve slept in worse.”

“Worse than a bed with decade old dust? We could get sick from this.” I channeled my inner Robert and forced myself to sit on the corner of the health hazard mattress.

“Growing up on the seas will either kill you or make you a badass,” hinting she was the latter. With her devil-may-care attitude compared to my own anxiety, I was in no place to disagree.

“So, are you three used to this sort of thing?” I asked as Deva sat up and started taking things out of her pockets. Some leaves, water from her flask, and a little rock. She scoured the cupboards and found a cup. She put water in the cup, followed by the leaves. She placed her finger in the water. It stirred without her moving her digit. A slight breeze picked up and tossed the loose dust in the room around. I smiled, it was funny to see such a power being used for the most menial task imaginable.

“Pretty much. We’ve dealt with a lot of different creatures from the old ages.

A lot of them live in the water, some underground. Others live inside villages like normal people, others invade towns through espionage like this place. But what about you? Why are you so interested in all this? Besides for your brother-boyfriend and mom." I was caught off guard.

"He's not my brother or my boyfriend, I think… I don't know." I shrugged.

"He seems sweet. Almost too sweet. In my opinion guys like that don't last very long out here."

"Not every guy should be like Tristan. 'Oh, look at me I hate talking to people and my muscles are my only friends.'" I waved my hands around. Deva nearly spat her tea out as she took the first sip.

"Would you look at that, the mouse has jokes. But you're not fooling me, I see you making those googly eyes at him."

"Tristan? Not at all. I figured you two were close."

"Tristan and me? Gods no. We're close yes but he's the father I never had. He taught me everything I know. But I guess you know that from the whole White Room thing." I thought about it.

"Makes sense. But I figured a tough girl like you wouldn't care."

"No way, no how. That'd be incestual and a bad romance. He's not even my type."

"What's your type? Oh, I bet you're more into the softer, thoughtful guys?" I teased.

"I like my men how I like my coffee," Deva said, picking up her tea and taking a deep sniff of the aroma.

"What kind of coffee do you like?"

"I'm allergic," she sipped, "besides, I'll probably marry some boring old rich

guy, so I have funds to keep sailing. A better question is, why are you so interested in my teacher's relationships?" Her tone was more sarcastic than upset.

"I never! He's too rude and probably twice my age. Even if he was a gentleman we're both too quiet to carry any conversation to get anywhere." Deva's smile grew again.

"Fair enough." She set her cup down and laid back down in the bed, facing away. I had a curious thought.

"You don't think the boys' gossip about us like we do to them, right?"

"Oh, it's even worse."

"No," I gasped in horror.

"Yes, Try spending a few years on a ship with them. It'll put some hair on your chest." I was already going to have nightmares; my mind needed no more disturbing images to stack onto the pile. I couldn't help but let a slight smile grow on my face as I laid on the other side of the bed. I'd made a friend today.

18

Children of the Sea

With the split-second time travel of a cat nap, my eyes opened as I was jolted awake. Deva was out of bed standing by the curtains, peeking out into the darkness. I sat up and moved over to the window. Outside there were shapes of people moving about, but I couldn't tell what they were doing. They skittered when out in the open, only slowing when they were close to the buildings they were entering, like roaches scurrying back and forth.

"What are they doing?" I asked.

"Looks like something's causing the locals to get excited."

"Maybe they're just more social at night? Like vampires." Deva looked back at me as if she was unsure whether to make fun of me or laugh.

"Don't be silly. Vampires aren't real." She walked past me as I stuck to the curtains, still peering out into the courtyard lit by moonlight that betrayed the shadows below. She opened the door, and I turned to follow, not wanting to be left behind in the darkness. The hallway was dark, but not pitch black thanks to the moonlight coming from the window at the end of the hall. Deva didn't even knock as she opened the boy's room door.

Tristan was sprawled out on the bed, still sleeping. Leeroy was looking out the curtains, and Robert was asleep like a crumpled sack in a chair with rotten upholstery. "Wake up," Deva spoke normally, not even trying to whisper. All the boys jolted up.

"Operation Fish Fry is a go." Leeroy excitedly jumped up in seconds and ran outside the door past Deva and I. He looked left and right down the hall, then ran

out. His fists were raised as if ready to challenge any beasts in an honorable bout of blows if any would dare to come near.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I helped Robert up.

“We’re going to find where the townsfolk go at night. We’re going to find their hive and take out whoever is sending them to Kingsport.”

“How are the five of us supposed to be sneaky? We can’t even go to a ball without a fight breaking out.” It was more of a complaint about having to go outside with the scary unknown than a legitimate issue with her strategy.

“We’re not. You and Tristan are going to be sneaky. We’re going to cause a distraction.” I blinked, glancing at Tristan while he lazily stretched his arms above his head.

“That’s too dangerous. There’s so many of them here, that’s like using you guys as bait.”

“Kind of the point. Tristan shouldn’t have a problem with them, they’re hardly any different than normal people. I can fend for more than myself, Leeroy and Robert aren’t defenseless either. Tristan can defeat anything in a one-on-one fight. You’re going with him because you’d get in the way.” It was rude, but she was right.

“How do I know you won’t betray Joy?” Robert said, sudden defiance out of nowhere. “For all we know this could be a trap, you could be on their side.”

“Good thing none of us asked for your trust.” Deva fired back.

“If she can’t survive something this basic, she doesn’t belong in our line of work.” Tristan agreed, breaking his silent streak.

“I really don’t belong in your line of work.” I shook my hands to wave away any suspicions they might have otherwise after my magical flukes.

“Either way, if you want to find your mom and go home to bumkin-island

this is a major step to it. Or, you two can stay here for the night and let them come up here and eat you." Again, she had a point.

"Maybe we should just try. We're already here, Robert. Like you said, after this, we can go home," I said. I could tell from here he was gritting his teeth.

"Fine," he said, looking back out the window. I could tell he wasn't happy with the idea of being separated once again, especially in a place like this.

"Oh no." His hazel eyes flashed wide. Deva joined him, I peeked from where I was. A line of bodies flowed forward like shambling corpses. Eyes that reflected just enough moonlight that it was impossible to mistake them for anything else, but the bulging orbs of white the Dagonians used to see. Some of them walked upright, but most hopped like giant frogs while others used all-fours. All of them, at least a few dozen, flooded toward the hotel.

"It's time, let's go," she said, pacing out of the room with the rest of us following. We ran down the dark halls, the silence was so eerie. The damp air so dead and filled with that scent of fish and flies it made me sick. I could hear the rush of shadows as Tristan pulled out a sword from nowhere and ran in front of Deva. He leaped down the stairs before she made it there, the sound of slicing and animalistic grunting filled the silence.

When Robert and I reached the top of the stairway, four bodies of pale skinned men lay there in a pool of black ooze, all laced with gashes from the deadly blade. We ran outside after Tristan roared and kicked the door forward. It exploded on a Dagonian that had its hand on the knob. He used his straight sword to make swift work of one, two then three. The beasts tried clawing and gnawing. Jumping one after the other, but their ferocious might was nothing in the sweeping darkness of Tristan's fighting prowess.

We walked behind him. Leeroy kept an eye on our backs while holding his trusty throwing knives in hand while looking for any unlucky eyes. Within thirty

seconds, a dozen creatures lay in a haphazard pile around us. Puddles of guts and gore that popped and sizzled told me these things weren't meant to be here, not on land. We made our way to the inner courtyard. Noises came from all around, like ribbits and croaks from hundreds of unseen demon-frogs. Eyes came from alleyways, and wide webbed feet that had split open shoes came for us.

"Here, there's an entrance right below us," Deva said, smacking her rapier on the metallic round manhole. "Come get us freaks!" She stepped forward, raising her arm above her head in a fencer's pose. Tristan's shadows gathered on his feet as he clanged toward Deva and me.

He stomped his metal boot down. The manhole crumbled into bits, tumbling into the dark hole below. In the same motion, Tristan let himself fall into the hole. I saw sparks ten feet down when he grabbed onto the walls and began skidding his way down to the bottom. I chose the safer route with my magic-metal lacking hands and stepped onto and down the rusted ladder. It bent under my weight, and I winced every time I heard its rusted creak.

Down those rusted rungs and into the next abyss. I could hear Tristan still descending below me when Robert warned of approaching figures from behind the buildings. I prayed to any good Gods that might be listening that they'd have the skill to fend off the enemies.

"Do you think they'll be okay?" I asked, but he said nothing as we both reached the bottom. He had a much thinner blade drawn, identical to Deva's rapier. In these tunnels there was no room to move, it could hardly fit the two of us side by side. The darkness moved around us as if he was manipulating the shadows as feelers to see what hid beyond our limited sight.

"I really don't like this." He was still silent, but he slowly started to stand straight. Letting me know we were probably alone and away from the monsters for now. "How are we supposed to find their commander?" I tried thinking of questions he'd want to answer instead of trying to make awkward conversation.

“We keep killing them until we find the biggest one.”

“The biggest one?”

“The Dagonians are primitive. And every primitive society has the same simple rule. The biggest one is in charge.”

“The biggest? I guess that makes sense. A lot of animals do that. But how will we know it’s the biggest?” Normally I wouldn’t be so talkative, but it helped keep my teeth from chattering and kept my mind off the smell of decay and rot of the plants and mold that squished under our feet.

“We find one and torture it until it tells us where the Basc is.” Basc. Where did I hear that before? In a stroke of realization, I grabbed my bag, reaching inside to feel the paper. My mother’s note. It had the same term, Basc.

“Tristan!” I grabbed the space between his forearm and elbow, he reflexively flinched and nearly pulled my wrist out of its socket.

“Don’t do that,” he scolded. Less in anger and more in irritation.

“Sorry. But the Basc, my mom’s letter has its name.”

“I know. I read it.”

“How do you know that the Basc is their leader?”

“It’s my job to hunt big things. Now stop asking questions. No matter how nosey you try to be, I don’t have to tell you anything about what I do.” Now I was the irritated one.

“You’re impossible.”

“Stop nagging me, I’m trying to sense where the man-eating fish are.” I sighed, but I was silent for a minute. The sounds of our once clear boots now smacking and slurping on the ground as the phlegm of goo under us was trampled over by our unsure steps. As we rounded the fourth corner, and I

became hopelessly lost in the sewers, an eerie light began to rise.

A green light appeared in the crack of the ground. It reminded me of something I'd seen before. The lights at Tsang Tower. Just by a different color, green instead of yellow. Why the color change, I wasn't sure, but that lightly fading and waning hue of moonrock was impossible to mistake. We made our way down descending slopes, simple designs meant to keep the underground flood water from getting out of hand.

We tip-toed around even more corners. There were times when we would stop to listen to an unseen splashing in some faraway section of the catacombs that became more like caves and less like man-made tunnels after some time. As if the two worlds merged together. It must have been half an hour before we came upon it. Arriving at an opening that lead to another place, the green light was everywhere. The walls were made from it as if the ground itself was filled with the green veins of fire.

We exited our final corridor, and into the new open area. There was a waist-high balcony, the type that might keep a worker from falling to their death below. We got right next to it in a crouch, facing each other. We peaked over the ledge and peered down below. A flashback of when Leeroy and I had narrowly outmaneuvered the Shantak came back. The area was massive. Like an inverted version of the Coliseum, the walls arced all the way down into the base. At the bottom was a wide, flattened area. The floor was wet, a thin layer of dirty water had flooded the place. This place couldn't have been designed by men with tools, but its angles were too sharp and calculated to be natural.

"Ever surf before?" He looked at me as we inspected the decline to the bottom.

"What's surfing?" I saw something grow on his face. Something so out of the ordinary I almost fainted from surprise. Tristan was smiling. He hopped onto the disgusting angled wall surface covered with mold. He kept his feet shoulder

width apart and slid all the way down. He turned to me once he got to the bottom and waved for me to follow.

I reluctantly tried to mimic his graceful hop, and I clumsily slid down the slope. Halfway down, I began to lose my footing, and my legs began to slide apart. I almost fell forward. But I refused to let any part of the horrible muck touch me, so I used all my might to keep my balance as I leaned forward. I kept my eyes open and landed firmly in front of him.

“Damn.” His grin disappeared. As if my success had taken away his fun. As he turned away, I looked back up the hill. I hoped one day I’d be able to do this ‘surfing’ activity somewhere more sanitary one day. We walked up to the mouth of the farthest tunnel. Our ankles deep in the water. We made our way down the enlarged corridor, keeping close to the sewer walls. But something subtle changed in our surroundings. The green hue faded and waned. It was molded and transformed into a different color, yellow. Why did it have to be yellow? Yellow used to be such a nice and happy color to me. The color you’d see in a sunrise or morning sand. Not of a horrible Avatar or an Elder God.

Again, we crouched down as we neared an upcoming exit. We sidled up to a barrier. This room was a large circle, like a church’s pulpit, lit by fresh torches. We peeked through the cracks to see a figure. A single Dagonian wearing dark tattered robes and a crystalline green tiara atop its bald, scaled head. The Dagonian was standing in front of a hole that led down into the earth, filled with darkness. It mumbled broken, weeping words, but after a moment, it fell to its knees. Head to the floor.

“Why’s this one wearing a hat?”

“Must be a priest.”

“What’s it doing?”

“Trying to make contact.”

“Contact with what?”

“The Basc.” As I caught movement from the corner of my eye, I looked from Tristan’s focused gaze back to the scene. The darkness was rising, but it wasn’t just darkness. It was liquid, like oil and tar. As the shape rose, the surface tension grew. Like a glob of ichor, it loomed upward. As two tree trunk-sized arms came out from the sides and gravity pulled the water down, it was revealed.

It stood like the Dagonians, but its hide was darker and thicker, the scales much larger. It was easily ten times bigger than any of the normal Dagonians. It groaned, its voice shaking the loose pebbles in the area. Its eyes glowed, not glossy white or green, but Yellow. Pure Yellow. The Yellow King’s yellow. It finally made sense. Deva said the Dagonians only started their attack around the time after my mother had disappeared. When Yellow King’s influence began to grow. He must have taken control of this creature and now is using it to wreak havoc, maybe he’s the one that brought them here.

“Tristan. Do you see that?” I asked he nodded.

“The Yellow Sign. Yellow King is controlling the army through him.”

“We have to help him.”

“Be my guest. You’re not getting close to that thing without getting crushed in a second.” He shook his head. “I don’t even think I could take that monster on, not without a surprise attack,” he admitted while clenching his jaw. He looked up above to see if there were rafters he could climb, probably to get a leaping attack to plunge his plank sword into its skull.

The massive Dagonian began to speak, but not in any human language. It was in incomprehensible mumbles and groans. The Dagonian below would eek a meek response to its leader after each utterance.

The only way to get rid of Yellow King’s influence was to get rid of Yellow King. It wasn’t possible right now, but maybe I could reach out. My battlefield

wasn’t from the body, but the soul. Like a bad memory, maybe I could try to wipe Yellow King out of his head.

“If I can cure him, he might give me the key piece, and the Dagonians will stop attacking Kingsport. And the King will give us the last key part,” I told him.

“Like I said, good luck. There’s no way we’re getting close to that thing. Even if you did, how would you kill it?”

“Not kill him, cure him. If I touch him, I might be able to fight the influence in his mind.” Tristan gave me a look that implied I was crazy.

“What are you talking about?”

“Just… trust me.”

“I don’t. I think the spores have gotten to you.” He shook his head, looking away and trying to think of something else.

“I just need time. If you can cause a distraction-”

“I’d love to kill myself for your nonsense idea, but I’m not going to.”

“Fine, I’ll do it myself.” I took a step out, but he grabbed my arm. I pushed his vice grip off and ran toward the priest. Basc was quick to notice me, his giant flattened oval head turning on his thick neck while the priest’s gaze followed. I heard Tristan swear as he ran past me from behind. He leaped high in the air, a mass of shadows gathering his hands. He landed with his greatsword, splitting the kneeling Dagonian in two with a loud crash as it crushed the earth.

The massive Basc bellowed with a mighty roar that rattled the entire cove. It raised its arm to the sky, making a fist as it slammed down. I screamed to warn Tristan. He looked up to see it coming down, but with such speed, he had almost no time to react.

He threw himself backward, but it wasn’t enough. The force of the thing’s fist slamming into the ground sent shards of stone in all directions. Tristan

cursed as he flew backward, landing on his back and sliding away until he hit the other side of the cave.

I kept running forward, realizing I had no time. I outstretched both my hands to try and touch the thing's hands before it was too late. As I was inches away, a crushing force wrapped around my waist. It had grabbed me with its other hand and swiftly brought me toward its opening maw that hinged like an eel's.

The maw was lined with hundreds of knife sized teeth and saliva that hissed with acid. My body shook in fear as I seized with horror. But then I realized, my hands were touching its own scaled fingers. At that moment before it dumped me in its mouth, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and reached out.

A flash of white light overtook my vision as everything vanished. Then, I fell a few feet. Landing not in the water, but on a yellow carpet overlying pure white marble. A throne room. It was the throne room. The temple on the Plateau. Last time I'd been there, it was run down and ruined. But usually, people's memories come up as the time they remembered it at its best.

Was this how Yellow King remembered his kingdom from many ages ago before he was banished by my grandfather? A question for later. I stood. I saw a Dagonian sitting down, slouching with eyes so glossed over it was unnatural even for a Dagonian. This was a mixture of memory and a persona. He was out of place, dragged out of his own body. The only way to fix this would be to get its attention and draw the Dagonian out of its dream.

"Yellow King! Get out of his head!" The now normal sized Basc's head lifted weakly.

"Oh, it's you again? Of course, you survived. You Carter's are destined to hunt us, aren't you? What do you want this time?" The Dagonian's head slid from side to side. It was Yellow King speaking, but his voice was coming through Basc's throat. Making it sound blubbery and forced.

“Your influence over the Basc stops here!” I said. Whispers came from all around me. The whispers of the mind that protected it from intruders. They hovered around me, yellow strands of light and thread. They sniffed me out like ants finding a rival nest’s spy. They began to whizz by and cut at my arms and legs. I winced, this was the first time I’d ever been attacked in The White Room before. I needed to finish this fast, or else these things would tear me apart.

“Can’t wake him without an army. An army to raise him.”

“Him? Who’s he?” I couldn’t believe I was appealing to a proxy Yellow King.

“Brother.” Basc sat up. He stood, pushing off his armrests. “Exiled because of his selfishness. He’s one of The Five, he must wake for the Festival to complete.” It took a few steps toward me. The yellow strands were getting more aggressive as if the taste of my blood was growing their hunger. Or maybe they knew their hive was in danger.

“Get out of his head! I don’t care what you want. You’re manipulating these innocent creatures. That’s evil, and I won’t let you!”

“Evil? Evil? You are the evil ones. Disobedient children. Brother must return. The cycle must continue.” Basc lifted his arm back, making a fist. The yellow ribbons grew in number, and I had to cover my face to protect my eyes. They felt less like stings and bug bites and more like barbed wires now, wrapping around my whole body.

“No!” I screamed over the screeching twine. Basc twitched. “I’m done talking to you. Get out of his head.” I raised my hands and ran forward. Basc didn’t move, he was frozen in place. I pushed him with all my might. And as I did, a seething hiss came from Yellow King.

Then, everything vanished. In a flash of white, I returned to my body. Just in time to feel my limbs going limp. Basc’s grip grew weak, and I fell. I splashed

into the water, unable to control my bleeding and flayed body. The force of will it took to enter Basc's mind and push back Yellow King was too much for a novice like myself to bear.

I sunk down, drowning. Sinking into the deepest depths of the black water below.

19

Answers

A cage enveloped my limp and drowning body as I hit the bottom of the pit. I was ripped up and above the water. Over the surface, my ragdoll body was thrown about. I puked the water in my lungs out and lifted my head, I couldn't tell if it was water in my eyes or blood. My legs and arms were pinned to my body as four scaled fingers pinched down. I was in the grip of the Basc.

Its white eyes glared down at me. I stared back with wide eyes, unblinking at the monster of a thing. I placed my hands on the thumb of Basc, trying to worm my way out, but my strength was gone. It was pointless. Its mouth hung ajar and slowly moved.

It began to bellow and groan from deep down in the bottom of its throat. I had no idea what words it said, I couldn't speak ancient fish-man. It sounded slow and uneasy, old and unrefined. Its hand swayed me to the side, as its pupil-less white eyes focused not on me, but something behind me.

"What's up, Dagon?" said a familiar voice from under me. Basc reached down and brought something up in the open palm of its hand. Standing there as if casually meeting with an old friend, was, of course, Spooky. "It's been a while. What are you doing in this neck of the woods?" he said, paying no attention to me.

I swapped my sight between the two as they kept talking without me. Every time Spooky said something, Basc would bellow like a whale in response. "So, that brat did bring you here after all. Typical, getting others to do his dirty work. At least the girl cured you. She's a feisty one, isn't she?"

It bellowed back. “No, I had nothing to do with it. I was just here to watch. If you have anyone to thank, it’s her.”

More bellowing. “Yes, the Festival did *almost* happen, but that Carter Girl, remember her? She postponed it. Dumped it off on her kid. Some things never change, am I right?”

Basc spoke again. “Yes, that would explain how she would be able to use The White Room to release you from his grasp. She’s an Empath.”

More unintelligible grumbles. “Trust me, I don’t like him either. He might get away with it too if it not for this meddling child. That’s why I’ve directed her here. She’s managed to survive the trials of the Dreamlands so far. I’d say it’s safe to entrust her with it. It is her family heirloom after all. Besides, if it goes haywire, Tristan can still go nuclear.” The way he spoke sounded like he was trying to sell water to a fish.

“I’m right here,” I coughed, my lungs not finished rejecting the putrid swamp water. But neither of them spoke as Basc reached his arm back to the ground, letting Spooky hop off. Then he used his now free hand to reach into his throat. A disturbing sloshing sound was made by his index finger and thumb, but after a moment he pulled something out, a little object caught between his long and cracked nails.

He set me on the ground next to Spooky. I wobbled a bit but was able to stand. My outfit was torn in several areas, especially around my left shoulder. Basc’s several foot-long talons hovered only inches away from my face. I lifted my hands, holding them together, ready to catch whatever this now friendly beast was willing to give me. His nails separated, and a glob of goo landed in my hands. Resisting the urge to hurl, I wiped the saliva away and revealed a small, silver emblem that looked like two blocks facing the same way, connected to a little rod. I knew this tint. It was a part of the Silver Key. The top third of it.

I reached into my bag and placed it in the center pouch. Luckily my bag was still waterproof, so my sketchbook survived. I looked to Spooky, who kept his skeletal arms crossed and leaned back. The look on his face betrayed his cynical demeanor. If I didn’t know better, I might have thought he looked proud.

“Thank you,” I said meekly to the beast. It seemed to acknowledge me with a slight nod. Basc once again shifted its attention to Spooky and said something.

“Break the cycle? The odds are slim but, we have another Carter now. Not only that, there are two others with the Elder Sign. If I can find a few more, it’ll be our last chance to win this war against them. But if the girl fails at the Plateau, there will be no time left. Their Festival feast is still prepared, and they’re starving.” I narrowed my eyes.

“War?” I whispered. But neither answered. Basc turned away and began to sink into the black waters, but he spoke one last time before he disappeared under the depths. However, this time, he didn’t talk in grumbled or grunts, but with sounds. Blubbery and with base. It almost sounded like he was attempting to use common words. Ancient words in a forbidden chant in a language so primitive that it sent a chill down my spine. And for the first time, I was thankful I didn’t understand this omen.

“Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn.”

“Not for long.” And with that, the now peaceful beast sunk below the water. Leaving us in a quiet and empty room. I sighed, another encounter survived by the skin of my teeth. Tristan! I looked at his limp body on the wall. I ran over to him, sliding onto my knees as my legs gave way. I shook his shoulders.

“Wake up Tristan, are you alright?” I felt the back of his head to see if he might have split his skull open on the impact. Besides for a handful of bruises, he must have used his armor on reaction to shield him from any serious harm.

“What was that about?” I asked, still inspecting Tristan.

“Personal business. Dagon was thankful for your help. Not often does the God of the fishermen say things like that to a flesh-bag. Yellow King managed to gain control over him after your mother’s failure to fully seal him away. You used your Empath gimmick to free him from the grasp of Yellow King for good.” I had so many questions.

“Spooky, what the heck is going on? I’m tired of all these secrets. Tell me everything!”

“Fine. I suppose you’ve earned it for making it this far,” he shrugged. I had to double take to make sure I heard him right. I tried not to seem too interested as I kept inspecting Tristan. He stirred a little, he was slowly coming to. “Enter The White Room, and I’ll tell you everything there,” he said, crouching down next to me. I made sure Tristan wouldn’t topple over. I held back a smug smile of my own, I reached my hand back. “Quickly, now. Don’t waste my time-” I whipped my palm forward. Slapping Spooky right on his jaw. Everything went white in a flash as I entered his soul. The scene around me vanished, replaced by an infinite expanse of darkness. Spooky and I gave off the slightest glow, like lightning bugs in a field. It was just like the Abyss. It made me shiver, wondering just what kind of creature could make The White Room turn pitch black.

“Was that necessary?” he said, adjusting his crooked jawbone back into place. I shrugged.

“No. That was for me.” He rolled his eyes. “Why’s it so dark in here?”

“The lightbulb broke. Maintenance is taking their sweet time fixing it.” *Lightbulb?* “Now, what do you want to know?” He slowly lowered himself to the ground. Sitting back on his tailbone with one leg parallel to the ground and the other going up. He placed an elbow over his knee to lock himself in place. I joined him, sitting cross-legged, I pulled out my sketchbook and stared at him like an eager student.

“How did I do this? How do Tristan and Deva have the Elder Sign too? What’s so dangerous about the Silver Key that she had to break it into thirds? What’s the war you’re talking about? I want answers now.” I demanded. I wasn’t going to take any more lies from this creature. He would answer me, or I’d figure out a way to make him leave me alone for good, though I didn’t know how. I felt so faint as if I could pass out at any second.

“Don’t strain yourself. Looks like you nearly got torn to pieces entering Dagon’s mind. Be glad that was a puppet and not the real Yellow King. And before you ask, Dagon is Basc’s real name, not what you Dreamlanders call it.”

“I’m still going to call him Basc.”

“Okay, whatever. One question at a time. Pay attention, I’m not going to say this twice. You know that sign your mother put on your shoulder when you were a kid? It’s an ancient magic rune that an ancient race of beings called the Elder Things used to protect themselves from the Elder Gods. However, when they went to the Waking World, your grandfather Carter found them, they gave him their forbidden knowledge, the same Elder Sign. Your mother literally took a little fraction of an Elder God and placed it in your body to build your resistance, like a vaccine, not that you’d know what that is. In doing so, she gave you access to an aspect of their powers. You grew up as a shy, sensitive creature. So, your abilities reflect that in your Empathic prowess.” I tried tracking along, writing his monologue word-for-word. “Don’t think about it too much, I’ll get into your abilities later. For now, what’s important is just getting this key together.” I nodded. Magic. I was really imbued with magic. I mean, it would have been nice if mother asked me if I wanted it before she gave me this power, but I’d have to give her that complaint later.

“As for the key, as your mother said, she must have hidden the key away to stop it from falling into the wrong hands or from you using it to open all sorts of doors to places you don’t need to go. It might be mostly inert now, but

somewhere in that relic is a powerful arcane energy that shouldn't be in any untrained hands. It even ended up being more than your grandfather could handle, but that's another story. As for the war…" My hand moved at lightning speed to keep up with him.

"There are certain battles that go on behind the scenes. You heard me mention the Festival? Well, it's a Cosmos-wide event. Happens every 15 billion years or so, give or take a few. During this event, the Cosmos implodes as the Elder Gods consume every galaxy and cluster. Which kills everything, obviously. Then after some time, it explodes again, starting the process all over again. And every time this happens, the Cosmos is re-created in their image. Though, some seek to make a change to this process. They're considered Great Traitors in cult circles." I thought for a moment and raised my hand.

"You're one of them, aren't you? The Great Traitors? You're helping me, so I can stop Yellow King from letting his family, the other Elder Gods from making to the Festival and destroying the Cosmos?" He turned his head slowly, looking at me from the corner of his eye. He didn't answer, and I couldn't help but grin. "A civil war! You're fighting against the Elder Gods in order to save the Dreamlands!" I spouted.

"What? No. I don't care about the Dreamlands. This place is garbage. And they're not going to destroy anything, just sort of make it start over. I have my reasons for wanting to change the way they do it though, and the easiest way to do it is through the Elder Sign," he admitted.

"Why didn't you tell me? You're a real Avatar! Just like Yellow King, but nice."

"*I am not nice*. I just have different goals than Yellow King."

"Wait, you're not from the Dreamlands, are you? You're from a different place, like mom." As I looked up, I saw Spooky's eyes unfocused, looking at the

non-existent ground between us.

“Correct,” he spoke, his vigor returned. Then another question came to mind.

“What did you know about my mother?”

“Naturally, since she had the Elder Sign and was one of the Cosmic Slayers, we became business partners. She was an adventurer, and I offered her the means of travel. However, in the end, she broke our deal and tried killing me. Just like her father before her. Both betrayals left me… deformed.” He motioned over his own body. I felt like he wasn’t telling the whole story, but I wasn’t going to argue and stop his explanation.

“Who were the Cosmic Slayers? I heard Leeroy mention that before.”

“After your grandfather’s disappearance, the Cosmos was in dire need of protection from the Elder Gods. Somebody had to repair the seals he placed over Archways to keep them outside of our Cosmos. So, Carter’s child traveled across all Worlds and found people who could handle the Elder Sign’s power. These people banned together and called themselves the Cosmic Slayers. After completing their task of reforming Carter’s barrier, and thanks to half of them being complete fools, they disbanded. Of course, it didn’t take long for the Elder Gods to find little Avatars across the Cosmos to carry out their wills. And in only a few years, people like the Yellow King came to be. And now, here we are.”

“What was she like?” I lowered my voice, wondering what aspects my mother and I shared.

“Obnoxious.” I frowned. “That being said, I can’t have either of you die until I’ve ended this fight.” He gave an almost playful smile. I started to realize Spooky was more human than I thought. “Your friend is waking up. We’re out of time. This information should be enough to satisfy your obnoxious curiosity for now.” He stood.

“What am I supposed to do next?” I put my things up.

“Go back to Kingsport. Retrieve the next piece from the king, then challenge Yellow King in his temple for the final piece. I will finish what I have left to do on this World, then I’ll meet you there, be ready,” he said as I snapped out of the darkness and back into my own body, nearly falling over backward as I left the twisted White Room.

20

Sacrifice

“Joy, what happened?” Tristan asked, now he was the one shaking me. I was still exhausted. Basc had taken his toll on me. The only reason I could think of why, is that if somebody or something didn’t want to be saved, it must be that much harder to help them.

“The Basc is gone, he caught me off guard. What happened after that?

“I pulled the thorn out of his paw,” I groaned, realizing Tristan wouldn’t understand the reference. “I cured him instead of trying to kill him.” Tristan shook his head.

“Impossible. You don’t have an aggressive bone in your body. You couldn’t defeat a fly.”

“Let’s go back to the surface and see. I’ll bet you a barrel of beer the Dagonians have stopped fighting.” Tristan bobbed his head back, not used to my growing confidence.

“Deal.” We began walking out of the basin at the bottom of the old place and made our way back up. I sighed, realizing the only way back up was a sloppy incline of blocks that rose one higher after the other. There would be thousands of stairs to step up on our way back. Why did it have to be stairs? I wobbled, and as I was internally distracted, Tristan caught me.

“You’re torn up. Here, you’ll only slow us down.” He grabbed my arm and ducked under me, lifting me off the ground and onto his back in one easy motion. I wasn’t going to complain. I hopped on and tried to lace my tired legs around his waist.

“Thank you,” I said. I felt so faint as if I’d been poisoned. My stomach was in knots from the pain, I winced as I kept jittering and squirming trying to feel better.

“When we get to Yellow King, I will kill him with my own hands. Do not get in my way.”

“What?”

“It’s personal. You’re not the only one who has lost family to him. But I will get my revenge first.”

“What are you talking about?” I shook my head in confusion. Tristan sighed. He lifted his hand, palm upward. I gasped, realizing what he was offering.

“You’re going to let me see your soul? I thought it was none of my business.”

“Before no. But you’ve proven yourself as a Cosmic Slayer today. Had it not been for your ability, I would have been crushed by the fish. I won’t let you see everything, of course, but it’ll help pass the time, so you stop squirming on my back.” I smiled.

“You can limit what I can see in The White Room?”

“There’s more forms of combat than swinging a sword. The mind and soul are places in equal need of defending.”

“Good point.” I reached out and held onto his wrist.

We skipped The White Room altogether, the first time it’d ever happened. Tristan was only interested in showing me a specific part of his past. The vision of his memory came instantly. From the dropping white to the vivid scene of a child with blonde hair. This memory was Tristan’s, but the boy I was watching wasn’t him.

The boy traveled with his family in a small caravan across desolate and barren desert lands, it was home. But their home had been destroyed by winds,

colorless, toxic winds. They took a boat across the sea. Not all of them made it. They settled down in a new land, in the distance a magnificent white city stood in the background. It was Kingsport. The boy's family was poor, and they could barely manage to feed themselves. So, when he was sixteen, the boy decided to join the Kingsport Crimson Elite to help his mother and father.

He went off and trained for months and months while sending his money back home. But when he finally returned home, he found that his family had been taken by hooded men and headed off to the north. Without hesitation, the young man went off and tried finding them.

He went through the Spires, around the Tsang tower. He slaughtered the hooded men with satyr legs and their spiders, they bleated like sheep as he did. He asked the survivors questions, but he couldn't understand their tongue. He went on, further north. He went through a sea of black glass and obsidian. He saw things in shadows and creatures that could only exist in nightmares. He climbed a mountain that pierced the skies. Until he made it atop a flat plane. A plateau.

And not far away was a building, a structure that rose above the faded purple rock and stood. Made of pillars. He entered the place, hearing voices he sprinted. As he did, he saw his mother and father bound together with rope. The Men of Leng stood over them, chanting and raving. The boy ran to save them, as the glowing and strobing Yellow Archway swirled with forbidden energy.

But he was too late. He fought bravely, but the Men of Leng took him captive and tied him up with his parents. They kicked the family as one into the mass of light between the Archway. They screamed, and then they were silent. As the light shone bright, and from the now silenced voices, a new form rose in the light of the Archway. A man stood tall, dressed in linen made of golden rays. The Yellow King. The memory ended there.

"That family… they were a sacrifice for Yellow King? That's how the Elder

God made its Avatar?”

“Something along that line,” Tristan responded firmly.

“That was awful.” I held my hand up to my mouth, pressing my fingers over my lips as I fluttered my eyes, trying to keep the tears away.

“He was my student, I was friends with his parents. You need to rescue your mother, and I must avenge him. Once I kill that abomination made from their bodies, my fight will be over.”

“I see. I don’t like fighting, but I’ll do everything to help you find justice for him,” I said.

“Good.” He gave a slight nod. We made our way up the stairway and out the empty tunnels to the surface and into the sweet fresh air and moonlight.

Deva was leaning against one of the market stalls, throwing some of Leeroy’s knives into a target she drew with what I assumed to be some of the fallen Dagonian’s blood. Leeroy was running around the courtyard, inspecting little cracks and cervices, probably looking for bugs or mice that he could take as prisoners.

“Deva, where’s Robert?” I asked as I dismounted from Tristan’s back. A part of me began to worry I’d have to go on another journey to rescue him again.

“Oh, you’re alive. I was starting to think you guys died,” she casually replied. But I could see from her extended look in our direction, she was happy to see us come back up. Tristan kept walking past us. He went straight to Leeroy, who stopped crawling around, shoving his hands into the broken cracks in the ground and stood. He put his hands behind his back and looked up at Tristan. I began to understand their relationship. Tristan and the way he protected and taught them, just like his student from in the vision.

They exchanged a few words, then Tristan continued into the hotel we had

slept in just a little while ago. A part of me knew he was going to go into the kitchen to find what he could drink. Deva walked beside me. “So, what happened down there? You guys don’t seem as horrified as you should be seeing as that you’ve just come from a den of horrible beasts.” I began walking with Deva as I explained what had just happened.

We walked around. Going behind a section of buildings to find the ocean meeting the shore not far away. The fog was beginning to lift, and the moon fell from the sky. The sun would soon be up.

“Huh. So, you just kicked Yellow King’s soul’s ass, and that was that?” She always had a way of making things sound more action packed then they really were.

“I guess. Robert is over here?”

“Yeah, he said he was coming over by the water,” she said, turning away. “I’m going to sleep. Our carriage should be here at daybreak, so we can head back and shove it in the king’s face. I won’t lie, you’ve proven yourself, Joy. I’m almost tempted to call you my teammate.”

“I’m almost tempted to call you my friend,” I replied, hoping she wouldn’t run away screaming from my offer. She gave a small huff and stuck her nose up, but she didn’t deny it. She made her way back to the houses and went to join Tristan and Leeroy. I turned back, looking out over the shore. I approached the docks. Just like near Tsang, they were crumbled and shambling. The stars were out, all of them danced and strobed far away in their blanket of space. I was brought back to reality as I heard something to my right. Fearing it might be a Dagonian still under Yellow King’s influence, I ducked down.

The thing I heard wasn’t the bubbling or groggy tones of something from the sea, but a person. I made my way forward. The fog was light, but the slight blanket around me made it difficult to see. I realized only a dozen paces from

myself sat Robert in his cloak. I stood straight with a sigh. My poor nerves were just as shot as the rest of my body. This ‘adventure’ was really taking its toll. When I was only a few feet away, I could hear him murmuring to himself as he moved the intestines of one of the fallen Dagonians. I spoke.

“Hey Robert, you okay?” He nearly screamed as he jumped forward. He quickly turned back, looked at me with wild eyes. His hazel eyes went wide with dark rings as if he’d been given two black eyes. “Oh, my-Robert is something wrong?” I reached down. He blinked rapidly, coming out of whatever trance he induced himself in.

“Oh, sorry. I came over here to just study these... things. Their biology is fascinating. Look, I took its whole heart out, it’s only been a few minutes, and it’s slowly regenerating.” He thrust a pulpy blob of red meat towards my face. I nearly puked.

“Please, Robert, you know I hate blood.”

“Sorry, but this is amazing, I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s human, yet so reptilian!”

“We dealt with Basc. I got the key part so now once we get the other one from the king we’ll be able to go take the last one from Yellow King, free my mom.” I don’t know why I was so disturbed. It wasn’t the first time I’d seen him working on an animal. Maybe it was because it was so humanoid. I was going to offer him my hand to help him up, but he was drenched from the forearm up to guts and sinew.

“I’ll keep this sample. I wonder if it’ll rot, or grow a new body!” I cringed, his mess not bothering him in the slightest.

“Come on, we should probably get some sleep. Once we get the next piece, we could be up for days trying to get to the Plateau.” I turned away.

“Joy, we need to talk.” I turned back as Robert finished packing his new

heart away. “Remember how I told you about the River in the Sky? Apparently, you can only get to it using the Archways. After we rescue your mom, I need to find it. If I could find the River, I might be able to find the cure for everything, even death.”

“Oh... well, maybe after we’re done with all this we can go home and go look for it on the next adventure.”

“Yeah, that’d be fun.” He paused for a moment. “Joy… there is no home to go back to.”

“What?”

“The Lonely Island, it’s gone.”

“Gone? What do you mean gone? We haven’t even sailed back yet, stop that crazy talk.”

“I’m serious. I heard the others talking about it. After they visited the Island, Yellow King sent hundreds of Dagonians to invade it. They said everything was burned to the ground, there were no survivors.”

“That can’t be true, they had to be messing with you.”

“I don’t know Joy. They were whispering about it so we wouldn’t hear, but they didn’t know I could hear.”

“Well, we have to go back and find out. I’ll ask the others, we can sail there and you’ll see, it’ll be fine. Now come on, don’t let rumors get you down.” I held my hand out, but he didn’t take it. He stood on his own and gave me a weak smile.

“I hope you’re right.” We followed the path back to the hotel in silence.

We rounded the corner and entered the empty hotel. Sure enough, Tristan was in the side room, drinking. We made our way up the stairs and separated as he went into the boy’s room. Deva was snoring, her limbs outstretched in every

direction of the bed like a selfish cat. I crawled next to her in a ball. Trying to fit in the little space I could. I took in a deep breath, and took in my well-deserved rest, though I couldn’t help but toss and turn at wondering what really happened to the Lonely Island.

21

On Top of the World

As the rising rays of the new sun came through the window, I stirred back to life. Remembering last night's misadventure and the progress of gaining another key fragment made me wake with an unfamiliar excitement. I was so much closer to the end now, and since we'd solved the king's problem, he would give me the next piece, hopefully. As I moved, Deva woke too. The both of us stretched out, and as if on queue, three knocks tapped on the door, Tristan entered immediately after.

"Carriage is here. So are a hundred of the king's men." I sat up.

"What? Why?"

"Apparently there was someone here in town that saw what happened. Whoever it was told the king, and now all of Kingsport is celebrating. They have a parade all set up now, and the king himself is making a speech. So, get up." He left.

"Well, how about that. We went to sleep as tired warriors and woke up as famous heroes."

"You went to sleep a warrior. I have no idea how I keep getting mixed up in wars I don't even know exist." I sighed, standing while stretching my back.

"Okay, a warrior and a cleric." She left the room and headed downstairs. Cleric? I liked it. I followed her suit and headed down the stairs and out of the hotel. As I got outside, I realized there was a small army of soldiers all around. Inspecting every building and setting up different militant contraptions and defenses around the town. The others were entering a carriage in the town's

courtyard. I ran to join them before one of the men inevitably started to ask me questions. Once we all gathered inside, the reins snapped, and we took off.

This time we went much, much faster than we had before. Our driver must have been told to bring us back as quickly as possible. I felt sorry for the pair of horses that had to carry our weight. Sooner than later, our cart slowed. Looking out the window, I saw the forest and further ahead, the massive walls that protected the city of porcelain stone. We approached the gates and passed through without even being inspected. Then, everything went crazy.

The cheers of a thousand voices shouted and screamed. Everyone inside our carriage began peeking outside. Even Tristan leaned ever-so-slightly forward to see over the ever-hyper Leeroy who waved to the crowds gathered along the side of the road. A handful of mounted men rode beside us, the only thing separating us from the people. They led us down the main streets, and as we continued, the people didn't fade away. More and more seemed to sprout from every corner of the city as we wheeled on by. Going up until we passed the tallest houses with the people right below the nobles. We stopped at the inner wall that guarded the castle.

We looked up at the alcove high above the first ramp leading upward to the castle. Every inch of the wall had an armed guard. And on the perch above the grand courtyard of the wealthiest families, stood the king and his consort, some faces I even recognized from the party.

The driver opened our door, and we stepped out, which made them cheer even harder. As fun as it was to know I helped these people, the noise and attention definitely wasn't my favorite. We were guided by the soldiers up a flight of, you guessed it, more stairs. All the way up to the perch where the king himself stood. As we made it to the top, overlooking the masses of thousands of people, the king faced us. For once, he seemed grateful. He walked up to me.

"My apologies, Carter. If I had known it was truly you, I wouldn't have been

so rude.” He outstretched a hand. I smiled. Not my usual, ‘happy to meet you. I hope you have a good day smile.’ This was a devious one. I grabbed his hand and squeezed it hard, forcing us to enter The White Room. His eyes widened as everything disappeared, and we entered the space in the middle of nowhere. He fell back.

“W-what is this? Is this magic-” I stomped over to him. I reached down and grabbed him by his kingly collar. The fabric was ridiculously rich.

“You better be sorry!” I tried sounding as intimidating as I could, and for some reason, it came out easier than I thought. I prayed my guise was working, and by the king’s shaking eyes, I could tell it was. “Now fetch me that key. And if I ever find out you’ve been treating Deva poorly ever again, you’ll wish you’d never been born.” I nearly stuttered over the overused and villainous quote, trying to think of a way to threaten the most powerful man in the world.

Before he could answer, I let go of him, and we returned to the real world. The king stumbled and stood still, we still held each other’s hands. I reached out and grabbed his other arm to help him stand. He looked at me with wide eyes. As he faced the crowd to speak, I realized my shoulder was on fire, as if my body still hadn’t recovered from my last use of The White Room against proxy Yellow King.

“Ah-ahem. T-thank you all for coming. Your efforts as warriors will never be forgotten. I have statues being made in your honors, no expense spared,” he announced to the crowd, regaining his composure.

“Don’t need it. I’d rather have more ships.” Deva crossed her arms.

“Beer. I’d rather have beer,” Tristan added.

“Woo! I’ve got a statue!” Leeroy raised his arms above his head and cheered. Robert just shook his head.

“People of Kingsport, I present to you our heroes. The Cosmic Slayers!” he

said as he stepped to the side. We reluctantly stepped forward. Leeroy being the first to go up, throwing his hands up with the biggest grin I'd ever seen.

"Speech, Speech, Speech!" demanded the crowd. We all looked at each other, but everyone seemed to agree with their eyes that I should talk. I shook my head violently. But as the crowd died down and thousands of eyes looked at me, I froze.

"Don't be shy. Just tell them you beat their commander or something," Deva whispered.

"Why don't you tell them that?" I kept my awkward smile up while seething through my teeth.

"You're the one that did it, hero." I looked back at the crowd and swallowed.

"Hi." My greeting echoed. I had no volume, but the acoustics of the miniature arena created by the high buildings carried all sound. "The Dagonians won't bother you anymore," I said. They cheered and whistled. "Sorry to take your time, have a good day." I waved. Half of them cheered again, the other half awkwardly looked on. I sunk back into the shadows of the arch.

"You're not going to tell them you're a Carter?" The king questioned me. I gave him a harsh look.

"Mind your own business." He gave a nervous smile. The heat was spreading down to my tricep, and I could feel a seething migraine rise in the back of my skull.

"Of course." He stepped forward into the light. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I will also be presenting a precious item known as the Silver Key to our champions. For security reasons, this will be done inside the castle walls. Thank you all for coming to see our new heroes," he thanked the crowd. He motioned for us to be turned away. But as we moved, a young boy in the crowd caught my attention. He had slicked back blonde hair and thin, angry eyebrows. I cocked

my head, trying to remember where I saw his face before, but I was distracted and drawn away, as we were safely guided inside the walls. Up to the drawbridge slope to the high castle with the ballroom we'd been in just a night before.

We were soon led into the main hallway. Past the changing rooms and side hallways, leading to different sections of the massive ornate building. All the way to the ballroom itself. The king shooed his guards away. Leaving only us and himself inside the massive checker-tiled floor chamber. He led us to his chair, then behind it. He pressed in on a specific tile on the wall, revealing a secret passageway. There was another room behind the throne.

An altar stood. On top was a glass box, protecting a small shimmering item that lay on top of the pillow. He raised the glass and set it on the floor, taking the pillow and reaching out to me with it. I looked down to see the neck of the key, the section that connected the tip of the key I was just given, and with the base that was stolen from me. I took the part, pulled out the head, and connected the two. It twist-latched into place, and I held it. Two of the three thirds, ready.

"There you are, Carter. If there's anything else we can do for you please, don't hesitate to ask."

"How soon can your fastest boat for five be ready to sail to the Leng Plateau?" I asked, clutching the thing in my hand, and carefully placing it in my bag.

"Before nightfall. What's at Leng? Is it another den of those Dagonian scum?"

"None of your business is what it is." I folded my arms. He coughed.

"Of course. I'll tell my men at once. Please, enjoy the castle as much as you'd like." We followed him out of the enclosed secret room.

"If you want someone to thank, thank Deva. She's the reason we were able to

get any of this done.” It was true. We all played a role in getting to Basc, but I figured I’d stick up for her. The others exchanged glances, they were probably having just as hard a time adjusting to my newfound confidence as I was. The king said nothing, but Deva did blush slightly.

“Come on, let’s go watch something at the Coliseum while we wait,” Deva spoke. We silently agreed, the memories of the Dagonians in this room was the last thing we wanted to think about. It was time for us to relax before our final trip. We took a relaxed pace back down, and by the time we made it back onto the streets, the crowds had calmed and dispersed. It was good because I don’t think any of us were in the mood for dealing with any more people than we had to. We continued past the high houses, taking Leeroy’s quick route to the Coliseum.

When I heard a commotion as we passed by an alley, I stopped. I was in the rear of the group, so nobody saw me as I stepped back. They were taking a straight-away to the Coliseum, and I could see it from here over the lower rooftops. I figured by now I was confident in my own abilities that if I were to find danger that I’d be able to defend myself. So, I continued down the alleyway. I was glad I did, as I saw two boys kicking another that was already down. He was covering himself in the fetal position. I ran over and yelled at them.

“Boys! Stop.” I grabbed the closest one by the wrist. He turned to face me on a dime. It was the boy I saw earlier with the slicked back hair. The same boy that attacked Leeroy in the alley before. That’s when I knew something was wrong. The boy lashed out like a snake, his fist bashing into my stomach. I knelt over, falling to a knee as I wheezed. He struck me so hard the air rushed out of my lungs, which flattened like pancakes. He pushed me over, I was in no state to stop him. He ripped my bag off my shoulder and shouted to the other boys, and they rose to their feet.

Their charade had worked. The three boys ran away, out of the alley and out

into the street. I tried getting to my feet as soon as I could, but I was too slow. I regained my breath and leaned on the smooth-walled houses toward the exit. Only as I passed the bins of trash did I realize this was the exact same path we'd taken when we encountered them the first time. I shouted to my friends down the path.

"Leeroy, the Rats!" I knew that would get my message to them. They turned, Leeroy came bolting down and slid to a stop.

"What happened? Where?" he asked, helping me stand straight.

"They went down that way. They have my bag, the key parts!" I said. His face traced my direction, but he didn't move. He just groaned.

"Woah, what happened Joy?" Deva asked. By now, I had recovered and started a light jog down the walkway.

"Those kids from before attacked me. They took my bag and the key parts," I told her, but she wouldn't understand, she wasn't there. Tristan dashed ahead, trying to see if he could find them, but the city crowd would be the perfect cover. The upper-class people here wouldn't bat an eye at a street rat running through, as long as they stayed out of the way.

"Sorry Joy, this is my fault. They're trying to get my attention," said Leeroy as we caught up with Tristan whose hawk-like gaze scanned the area.

"How is this your fault? I fell for the same trick twice."

"They're trying to draw me in. They want revenge."

22

Rats Rule

“Revenge? What did you kill someone?” I asked.

“No, just… follow me. I know every entrance to the sewers,” he said, running down the streets. We followed.

“You don’t think they stole it because they’re under Yellow King’s influence, do you?” Robert asked as we bolted.

“No, they’re too smart to fall for his tricks. But they know you’re one of my friends. They stole your bag to get us to follow them. We need to stop them before they get to the sewers, otherwise they’ll run circles around us in the maze.” We made our way around one corner after the next identical edge. Until we hit a pathway where there was a break in the city buildings. The stone was replaced with well-cut grass plains. I realized we had just walked into an artificial park. The land was uneven, and the ‘hills’ had a slight roll to them. It was like a miniature version of the farming lands outside the city. At the far-right corner were two boys. One about to enter a hole in the ground, the other held a grate up, leading into the sewers below our feet.

Deva picked up the wind in her favor and made leaps and bounds to get to them. As the last boy attempted to jump down the whole, Deva tackled him to the ground. They rolled several feet from the momentum. The boy thrashed and threw blow after blow, but just like the time I wrestled her in the castle, he was no match for her ferocity. She struggled her way to stand, keeping the boy in a headlock. After another moment of kicking and grunting, he slowed down, realizing he was caught.

“I’ll let you go once you give us back the bag you stole,” she offered as she loosened her grip, but she had to immediately tighten again as the boy began to thrash.

“Too late! I don’t have it - it’s with my friends. They’ve already escaped into the sewers. The treasure is ours!” he said dramatically, cackling at the end. Deva gave a frustrated sigh before throwing the boy down on the grass as she stepped in front of him and the grate. He struggled to stand back up, nearly losing his balance as he did.

“Do your worst, Oldie,” he spat from his bloody lip while raising his fists. Deva put her hands on her hips.

“I swear you kids are too much sometimes. Who even are you? Why do you keep coming after us?”

“I’m Rex, I’m the Big Rat. I came to get that treasure, and to get revenge with the traitor!” he shouted, pointing at Leeroy.

“Take me to your friends. You can settle your beef with Leeroy later.”

“I’ll never sell out my fellow Rats,” he stepped forward, “like I said, do your worst.” Deva raised her hand as the boy rushed forward, and a burst of wind sent him backward. Landing on his butt, he groaned as he rubbed his bruised behind. Deva moved like the wind and knelt beside Rex, grabbing him by the lapel and pulling him in close.

“I really don’t want to hurt you, kid, so don’t make me.”

“Who told you about the Silver Key?” I asked, stepping forward. The kid was obviously confused or misinformed. Both looked at me with confusion. “How did you find out about it? What do you kids want with it?” I restated the question. Deva looked back and shook the boy as he glared at me.

“Answer her, punk!”

“Alright. Geez. One of my fellow Rats is sick, and when I heard the king say something about giving you guys some treasure called the Silver Key, I knew it would fetch a high price,” he admitted. “We’re going to sell it, so we can pay a doctor to heal him.” Deva and I looked at each other.

“How does that make Leeroy a traitor?”

“He left us. He left to go find glory in the adult world before he had turned seventeen. He left us all behind when we needed him,” he spat. Leeroy stepped forward.

“That’s not true. I joined this group so one day I could help you guys. We’ll never solve our problems by staying down there. We need to come up to the surface. People keep getting sick because we live in the city sewers, but none of you would listen!”

“We’re the Rats! The surface hates us. The sewers are our home,” Rex shouted back.

“The surface can become our home. There’s a place for everyone up here, even freaks like my new friends.” We all narrowed our brows at him.

“I don’t care. Whatever you’re going to do to me, just get it over with. You’ll never figure out the tunnels.”

“Okay punk, we’re going to-”

“-heal your friend.”

“What?” Deva looked at me.

“If we heal your friend, will you give us the treasure back?” The boy blinked. He seemed to be thinking about my offer.

“What?” Deva repeated, completely taken back from my statement.

“My friend Robert is a doctor in training.” This piqued his interest.

“After you heal him, we’ll give it back,” he stated.

“Good Gods let’s get this over with,” Tristan complained, stepping forward and shooing the boy into the tunnel. This time he climbed down the ladder instead of performing the over the top slide down the sides he did last time. We joined once we hit the bottom. It wasn’t hard to follow the slight splashing of the empty catacombs.

“I’m Joy, Joy Carter. This is Deva,” I offered. Rex gave Deva a rude glare, which was returned with double the distain. But his eyes went from anger to surprise as his eyes returned to meet mine.

“So, you’re the daughter of that guy who fought the Elder Gods in the stories?”

“How do you know about that?”

“Everyone has been talking about it today. You’re famous.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess that’s me.” I shrugged.

“Good to know we have the Carters on our side. The guys will be amazed when I show them what I’ve brought in. Another victory for the Rats!”

“Brought in? Trying to change the story?” I mumbled, but Rex didn’t seem to notice.

“Keep close to me, and the Rats won’t attack,” he advised.

The tunnels were like a maze just as he warned. I could only imagine what it was like when it rained. By now, I was more than over the experience of entering and exploring claustrophobic and dark spaces. We made our decent slowly into yet another dark place, the tunnels seemed to grow taller, and widen. And soon we came upon an opening, a much larger square area. Voices came through as we neared the room with flittering torchlights. As Rex entered the elevated area, the noises raised.

Both Deva and I braced ourselves for what might be an ambush. But instead of attackers, there were just more children. At least a dozen of them. They all surrounded Rex and gathered around him, all clamoring with excitement. Most of them were even younger than he was, some couldn't have been older than five. I tried to make out what they were saying. Questions about the 'treasure' the others brought back. And how he defeated the two 'witches' that chased them down here. It didn't take them long to see Deva and I looking down at them. They quieted down and retreated. The lanky and chubby boys from before came in with serrated knives in hand.

"Rex, did you capture them?" One of them asked.

"I did. I've managed to convince them to be on our side. I offered them freedom in exchange for them using their magic to heal Atal. "They work for the Rats now!" Rex pumped his fist in the air, and all the children cheered.

"Woah, is that the traitor," said the chubby boy that Tristan had shot with a needle. His bandage was gone, and he seemed healed. Leeroy stepped forward.

"I didn't betray the Rats. I was trying to find a way for us to move out of here. I haven't forgotten you guys. Now that I've helped save Kingsport from the Dagonians, the king might just grant us all the housing we need." Dozens of children hiding in the shadows and behind the doorways out of the center room looked on at the strange newcomers and their old friend. Looking at Leeroy, it began to make sense. When he spoke about his friends from before he wasn't talking about Deva or Tristan. He was talking about the kids here in the sewer, and there were so many of them. There could be a hundred kids living down here. Most of them were dirty and most likely sick. I couldn't help but start asking questions.

"Leeroy, how many children live here?" I asked, stepping forward.

"A little over a hundred. Kids that don't have parents or ran away from home

come here. We all take care of each other. The older boys like Rex and I get food, supplies and protect our hive from mercenaries looking to pick up and sell easy slaves."

"Oh my, that's horrible." I looked at Deva. "Why hasn't the king done anything about this?" I asked her. But she shrugged, not even changing her expression.

"King doesn't care. No one does. For the most part, they're left alone, and they leave the people alone. Except for when they get caught stealing."

"We can help them," I said.

"You can help them after we've completed the mission. Right now, we need to retrieve the pieces," Tristan said, looking back at the boys as fleeting shadows gathered around him. Several boys rushed in from all around, some brandishing knives or slings with pebbles wound back. I reached my hand out in front of Tristan, he sneered, but stopped his armor from completing.

"I'd like to help you, if you'll accept," I offered. The children kept blank faces. "But first we should probably cure your sick friend. Can you show us where he is?" I asked. Rex nodded to his friends, and they motioned for me to follow.

"They stay here where we can watch them, only you two are allowed to come back," Rex demanded. Tristan and Deva simultaneously shook their heads in disbelief they had to put up with this situation. They both knew they could have overpowered every single child in the catacombs without breaking a sweat, but they respected me enough to at least follow my lead.

Robert and I were taken to a room not far away, hidden slightly further in, under a staircase was the body of a young man, probably only a few years younger than myself. Even in the poor lighting, I could tell he was sweating in a bad fever. A cat lay at the foot of his bed. It was black and watched us

quizzically with its green eyes and a doubtful squint. We approached the makeshift cot. Robert was quick to get down and began pulling out several different devices while poking and prodding at the boy.

“I’ve read about this,” he trailed off. After a moment, Robert put all his things up and was still for a moment. He said nothing, but from the expression on his face, I could tell he was deep in thought, considering something. He reached inside his cloak and pulled out a book. I noticed the title: ‘Grimoire of Health.’ It clicked immediately as I remembered this was the ‘magical’ book he spoke of. He flipped through pages that looked older than time. I wish I could have felt it, its texture looked loose yet durable. Almost translucent, if it weren’t for the red ink it had been drawn with. He stopped in the first third, thumbing on a section that had a man with his limbs outstretched. His skin had been pried backward to expose the tissue and organs within. I had to hold back the urge to hurl as my eyes studied the detailed depiction.

He put his hands together as if in prayer. He began mumbling something. A language that I’d heard before, a slow yet violent rhythmic chanting. The same kind Basc used when speaking to Spooky. But this time, the words were different. He raised two fingers together and touched the sick boy on his forehead. A soft orange glow strobed as he did, and the boy’s chest rose like someone had grabbed him and pulled him skyward. Even the cat seemed disturbed, its eyes focused on the light. The boys let out a gasp. Robert withdrew his fingers, placing his book back into his coat with his free hand as he stood.

“Do you guys know where I could find an actual rat? I need to put this sickness somewhere,” he asked.

“This way.” Rex guided him away. I was going to follow him to see just how Robert managed to heal the boy with that strange book. But right before me, the boy began to stir. His breathing steadied. He slowly moved his hands up to his face, wiping the sweat away. His eyes cracked open, and they slowly shifted to

meet mine.

“Did you heal me?”

“I, uh, not really,” I tried to explain.

“Are you… an angel?” I blinked at the out of place question.

“No, no. My friend Robert is a special doctor.”

“That was magic! Were you sent here to save us?” whispered one of the smaller boys from behind. I looked around, not sure of what to say as I realized dozens of the Rats had gathered around.

“They cured Atal! They’re like angels!” exclaimed the chubby boy.

“They’re not angels,” said the lanky one, “They’re Gods!”

23

Monster

I tried mumbling words to deny their positive accusations, but I couldn't figure out what to say. The children all ran forward toward me. Surrounding me like I was a holy woman here to pass out blessings, even though Robert had done the healing. The children cheered and gave me all sorts of praises I blushed at it. But at the same time, it made me sad. It was painful how much these children needed someone to look up to, or some hope to help them hang on under the cruelty of this city. Deva and Tristan came around the corner, being guided by some of the children.

"What'd you do to make these kids get all excited, Joy?" Deva asked.

"Robert healed this boy. He was lying in bed just a few minutes ago, and now he's feeling great."

"I wouldn't say great, but, I do feel better," he corrected as he stood.

"Atal, you're alive! Now the Rats can get back to business." Rex cheered, making the other boys join him in their victory howl.

"Congratulations. Now give us the key, boy," Tristan gave his demand, his patience running thin.

"Joy said she was going to take us out of the sewers. Hey, what about your hometown you told us about Atal?" Rex asked his friend.

"Oh, you mean Ulthar? We could, but the only problem is that it's across the sea. We need money for the boat-"

"-Don't worry about it. I'll take you guys there, and we'll use a Kingsport

military boat."

"A military vessel? I don't think the king or his guards will allow that," Atal laughed.

"The king answers to me," I corrected him. "Is everyone ready? We can go now." I told him. Atal seemed taken aback. I looked at Deva and Tristan, both gave me a curious look as if I was speaking a foreign language. The heated feeling hadn't left my back or my arm since we left the city. They were testing my patience. "What? Don't look at me like I'm crazy," I said. I marched out of the room and entered the wide-open area. The others followed me.

"Rex, guide us out of here toward the closest exit to the docks. Your friends have two minutes to get their things ready to leave," Deva ordered. He nodded and ran screaming down the halls to all the children, while I was waiting and stared off into the darkness of the tunnels. I remembered a time when I feared dark places, but now I had grown used to them. Honestly, I almost felt at home in them now. Even if some horrible monster attacked me, I could touch it. Reach out and graze its skin, and it will become putty. Not only did the strongest king in the Dreamlands bend the knee to my Elder Sign, but a God of sea monsters. It was only a matter of time before I could challenge the Elder Gods themselves.

I scoffed as Deva, Tristan, and Robert mumbled to each other. I could tell from their looks they were thinking something. Probably jealousy. They wanted to keep me down, keep me as the little mouse I always was to be trampled over. But now I realized the truth. I was the lion, it was my power. I'd use them how I pleased. But after the two minutes had passed, a gathering of children rose up in the room from the dozens of tunnels. There had to be a hundred just as he said. They all looked up at me as their guide, they didn't even pay attention to Robert. Some were scared, others amazed. I was their savior.

"Come on, let's get you guys to Ulthar," I said, waving them on. Rex led the way, and we gathered as a mass while the four others fell in behind me.

“Joy, are you okay?” Robert asked. I rolled my eyes. Of course, I was okay.

“Yeah. Do I look sick?” I asked him.

“You seem… on edge.”

“You’d be mad too if you were trying to save your mom and you had to deal with all of this nonsense.” He didn’t reply, but I felt his finger touch my left shoulder. A smudgy feeling came with it.

“Joy, your Elder Sign is bleeding,” he whispered, but I shrugged it off. I was fine. We made our way up an incline, making our way up and out of the darkness into a new light. We came up to a large grate pinned down by slabs on the other side. The waves of the sea came in and out from below. We looked back at Tristan, and he knew what to do. We gave him space, and his armored legs kicked and battered the grate until it bent and burst, allowing us to duck through the space onto a narrow ledge that led up to the bustling and lively port. Dozens if not hundreds of boats lined the docks of the bay. And as we entered it from the forsaken sewer, my band of orphans and me strolled through. People, sailors and fishermen alike stared on as we moved like a herd toward the large boats. I stopped in front of one of the biggest ones in the port, probably a supply ship. It flew a Kingsport flag. A guard stepped forward, spear in hand.

“What are you doing? I’m going to have to ask you to move these children off the docks. It’s holding up progress.”

“Move. These children and this boat are going to Ulthar in the East,” I told him. He frowned.

“I won’t be asking you again miss, it’s the law.”

“I’m Carter. What I say is law.” The guard turned back, looking at his friend who was leaning against the boat. He came forward to approach us, but as he neared, I wasted no time. I lunged forward, my fingers wrapping around his throat. We fell into The White Room as he struggled. He lost his strength

quickly, as he had none in my World. Then the Elder Sign dug into my skin, it was growing. Like a weed, its veins wrapped around my right arm down to my hand at sharp angles as each line shot out, making the pattern repeat over and over again. Both my arms were tattooed with its oozing color. Whispering voices came to my ears, whispers from something I couldn't see. But I wasn't scared. Not even slightly frightened when the white color was swept away by a sudden influx of purple hues and distorted sounds like the deepest keys of a piano being slammed on by a blind and mad player. Without releasing the man I was still choking, I looked up.

I was no longer in the bay, I was no longer in The White Room. I was in a hellscape somewhere in the stars. In the same place, I saw above the thing I fell toward in the Archway Yellow King pushed me through. I was in the middle of that place, the Temple of the Gods. And as I looked up around that fog of blighted lights and hues that raged like a slow dripping ink swirled around me in a massive funneling cone, I saw the forms of things that were bigger than the planets that surrounded me. Vaguely humanoid bodies with multiple legs and sets of arms, crawling across the Worlds. A bubbling, inconsistent mass that bumbled its way, bouncing off walls of stars that separated me from its Cosmos-spanning form. A woman draped in gold, shimmering brighter than the sun. The body of some insect that was majestic and loosely pieced together like a mosaic kept together by gravity. An eye, entirely mechanical with gears and chains that whirred and whizzed as the pupil lazily shifted. There were more unimaginable things, but by that point, my eyes had begun to shake in fear, understanding I had already spent too long in this place. I'd lost control of the Sign, it had spread over my entire body.

Five beings in total watched as five objects faded into sight from beyond the wall of stars and light. They loomed over my position as they passed the edges. They were Archways. Each one resounding a different hue on a palate of colors I wished I couldn't see. I recognized the yellow one immediately. The noise of

puttering flutes came from all around, the haunting sounds announcing the arrival of something, *somethings* I never cared to meet. I had to get out before it was too late.

"**It's time**," a voice spoke from somewhere above me. "**The Festival is upon us. The stars are right. We feast tonight, and you are the honored guest**." I fell to the ground. Covering my ears as I screamed as hard as I could, my skull rattled as I shouted. But it was too late. Far too late. I felt a hand grab me by the shoulder, its long fingernails digging into my skin, it threw me back.

"Joy, what the hell!?" Deva shouted as I was dragged back into reality. I fell onto my backside, my panicked eyes darted upward. But I only saw the baby blue sky with the slight tinge of orange on the far side of the coast. I tried opening my mouth. I looked at the guard who scooted away from me, a terrified look on his face as he grabbed his throat. I reached out.

"Sorry! I'm so sorry," I pleaded, realizing what I had done. The man stood as his friend looked between him and me.

"Ready the boat! Do as she says! By the Gods, obey!" The soldier I had just assaulted lashed out as both men lowered a ramp leading up to the boat. The men ran on to alert the crew about their early departure. I looked up to see Tristan standing over me. He had created a shadow weapon resembling a club, his wrist tensed as if ready to strike me down.

"I've seen that look before. Have you gone mad child!?" he accused me. I waved my hands in desperation.

"No, I'd never hurt anyone! I-I don't know what got into me."

"Better safe than sorry." His eyes flared with violence. His arm twitched toward me, the club still formed. But Tristan was tackled from the side, and I watched as Robert took him to the ground before he could strike. The two wrestled, and Robert tried pricking him with a pointed Sleeping Thistle. Leeroy

joined in. I couldn't tell if he was trying to help Robert or stop him. I think he just saw a fight and wanted in.

Like a trio of wild dogs, they fought. Tristan must have recognized the plant, as he had grabbed Robert's wrist and refused to let go. Leeroy had wrapped himself around Tristan's other arm entirely. Then Deva whizzed by, adding to the chaos. I stood and began to scream at them to stop. I could feel the eyes of hundreds of people watching us now, my overwhelming illusion of self-confidence had left. But the fighting died down, as the three of them seemed to work together to stab the fuming armor-less Tristan multiple times in the neck with the plant. He slowed, and they stood. We gathered around his sleeping body. Even drugged, he looked angry at something. Robert fell over, luckily into me. I caught him and laid him gently down on the dock's stone floor. I exchanged glances with the other two, both taking laboring breaths.

"Was he going to… kill me?" I asked, hoping the answer wasn't what I knew it was.

"He was thinking about it after you nearly choked that guy to death and started chanting with those crazy eyes. But then again, he might have just been trying to knock you out." Deva shook her head. She kept a distance from me with her hand still on the hilt of her weapon. It was subtle, but I noticed it.

"I don't know what happened, honest," I pleaded again.

"It's probably because you're not used to your powers. Tristan and I never had this problem. But using the Elder Sign too much at first did take a toll. I'll ask those guards to show us to our ship before these two wake up," Deva said, walking aboard. I looked back at all the children whose eyes were focused on me. Some were in awe, others in curiosity, but most were afraid.

"Sorry. We're not usually like this." It was honest for the most part. Usually, we were trying to kill strange monsters, not each other. I motioned for the kids to

get on board the vessel. Reluctantly, they walked past me onto their passage to safety. Rex stopped and looked back to Leeroy and I. He nodded to me, then reached into his pocket, and pulled out the combined pieces of the Silver Key. I thanked him, even though he was the one who stole it from me in the first place. Can't hurt to be too nice about it though. He looked to Leeroy, and they exchanged nods.

"Rats, we're Rats, we're the Rats," Rex started.

"We prey at night," Leeroy continued.

"We stalk at night."

"We're the rats."

Leeroy raised his arm for a shake. Rex eyeballed it. He took it, and then they shook, an unspoken agreement between the two. He turned around and joined his friends on the ship, the curious black cat sauntering alongside him. Deva came offboard with one of the terrified guards.

I opened my mouth to try to apologize again to the men that avoided me as they left the children's ship to lead us to our own. Deva joined me as we stood over the two sleeping men. We struggled to pick Tristan up and carry his heavy body onto our vessel, which, thank goodness, was neighboring the children's. There were no others on board with us. We went back to retrieve Robert. Deva commanded Leeroy to retrieve ropes so she could tie Tristan to the main mast. I shook my head as she made sure to double then triple knot him there as if he were a wild boar ready to foam at the mouth and slaughter me. Leeroy dragged Robert below deck, probably so he could sleep on that same bed I did just a week ago.

I sat near the railing on the side of the ship. Hoping feeling the breeze through my hair would be just the thing to make me feel better and calm my frayed mind. Deva came up top without Leeroy, who most likely decided to take

a nap after all the excitement of the day's efforts. I probably should have slept too, but if there's anything I learned after my series of misadventures, every time I close my eyes, I wake up more tired, and something else had gone wrong.

"We should be able to get there by nightfall," Deva told me from up atop the quarterdeck. And with her rapier, she swished the air under the sails and commanded them to unfurl. Then, she made a grand sweeping motion out toward the sea, and we were pushed out and away from the pier in a single gust. I had to hang onto the rails to keep from being flung off into the harbor. But the rattling didn't stop there. The winds kept pushing us in the middle of the storm of air and seconds we were out to sea, nearly skipping over the water toward the north. I got used to the supernatural speed and counterbalanced my mass of hair by tilting my head toward the front of the boat.

I took out my sketchbook, looking over the notes I wrote down from Spooky's instruction. I wondered what the skeleton man was doing now. He'd said he meet us at Leng, and I hoped his promise would be true. But it would have been useful if he could have warned me about going berserk from using the Elder Sign too much. I went back a few pages. Looking at one of my first drawings of the mouse and the cat. I smiled, hoping I'd have made the little guy proud. But thinking about what just happened, how I'd traveled to that horrible place as I became arrogant and awful. My head lowered as I curled up like a lost child. I stayed on the side of the boat for a while, maybe hours as the salty winds battered my body. The sinking sun was still setting, a crescent slowly fading under the horizon.

I had the two pieces, Yellow King holding the last part I'd given to him. If we were able to overthrow him and his Shantak if I was able to turn this key and open the Archway to find my mother, what would I say? Would I hug her in pure happiness to be reunited with her? Would I hate her for giving me this curse? I'm not sure. Most of all, I wanted answers. At the same time, maybe I already knew

too much. Deva and I were silent on the journey there. Maybe it was because we didn't have much to say. Maybe it was because this was a threat none of us were truly prepared for. I was able to look up at the night sky and sit and enjoy the new stars. There were millions of little white, yellow, orange, and purple dots scattered across the night sky. I smiled as the lights shone down from the deep heavens. Why were the stars so much friendlier down here compared to being up there with them? I nearly fell off the boat as Tristan broke the silence in front of me.

"You don't look so possessed any more." My eyes met his. His greyed hair had nearly overlapped his nearest eye. He wore an expression that I hadn't seen before. He didn't stand tall, he bent over as the ropes kept his mid and lower back attached to the main mast. His hands were to the side as if he'd accepted his state as his student's prisoner.

"Either do you," I nodded, putting my book back into my bag.

"I was helping you. You were being controlled by a force that was outside of your ability."

"The Yellow King can't possess me. Elder Sign." I pointed to my back, giving him the obvious reminder.

"No. That's why I was willing to stop you. Your actions were your own. Maybe not the silent daydreamer girl, but a much sinister lass that hides underneath. It wouldn't be the first time a Carter lost their mind."

"Like how you do with your armor? You have no room to judge. I mean, it got the job done, didn't it?" I was getting defensive because he was right. It was something in me. Nobody else to blame there. I looked down and scribbled to ask Spooky how to prevent it next time.

"My armor and weaponry are the results of years of training to control the Sign. There were times I'd lose my temper and go rampaging. There are times I

still do. The same way you did, but with more carnage and fewer words.” The image of a fully armed unstoppable Tristan made me shudder.

“I don’t know. I guess if I go into someone’s mind when they don’t want me too, I have to struggle a lot to stay in. I think the soldier was just the last straw.” I shrugged, playing with the Silver Key, tumbling it around in my hands like a bored cat with a ball of yarn.

“You need a teacher. Otherwise, you’ll end up mad and corrupt.”

“I have one kind of. He’s not much help, though. Well, when he shows up, he’s helpful.”

“For someone who’s barely been using her abilities for less than a week, you’re doing well.”

“Thanks? I mean, you almost killed me a couple of hours ago because I lost control, but if you say so.”

“I only would have knocked you out. It was your husband who overreacted.” I gave him an empty stare.

“I’m sorry, who?”

“Your husband, the little doctor man.”

“Robert?” I held in a nervous laugh. “It’s not completely like that. His parents practically adopted me.”

“I know a lot of men from the Crimson Elite that married their childhood sweethearts. And I can bet at least one or two married their blood sisters.” It sounded like he was trying to make a joke, so I gave a slight smile. It wasn’t very funny, but I wasn’t going to discourage him from trying. “You’re easily old enough to have a husband.”

“I’m only seventeen.”

“Seventeen?” he said it as if it was rhetorical. His eyes went up as if trying to remember something. “I suppose that sounds about right.”

“Yeah well, he’d have to propose first, and that’ll never happen. I think he’s too busy studying herbs and medical research to care about something like that.”

“Suit yourselves. I’d always taken you as a married woman. You’re so… reserved.”

“Oh, I’m the reserved one?” I snapped my head up to face his hypocrisy.

“The Pot and the Kettle is my favorite story,” he shrugged. I got it a second too late. He was on a roll tonight. “Could you unbind me? I’ve lost feeling in my limbs, and I’d like to kill Yellow King with something besides my teeth.” I stood, approaching him.

“Promise you’re not going to spear me to death?”

“Yes. But I make no promises on beheading.” I rolled my eyes. I undid the ropes, and they untethered. Tristan fell to the ground, barely catching himself on a knee as he fell. I knelt to help him stand up.

“How did a woman like your mother raise a saintly child like you?” He leaned back against the base of the mast. I sat again, facing out toward the darkening seas.

“She didn’t raise me, but, I guess.”

“That’s right, you must have been barely ten when she sealed away Yellow King.”

“Yeah. Robert’s grandma Phillis had that job, and she was a very traditional woman. She taught me how to wear dresses, pray, and keep clean. I guess that’s just how things were on the Island. When Robert taught me how to read, she hated it. Saying I had better things to do than fill my head with knowledge from men’s universities.”

“Give women books, and they learn how to become witches is what I say.” He leaned back, folding his arms. I snapped my head his way, but I realized he was teasing from the ever so slight smirk that stuck out from his usually still face. “That’s what happened to your mother.”

“You were one of them, weren’t you? A Cosmic Slayer.” He nodded. “What was she like?” I asked. He sighed.

“It’s been nearly twenty years since we disbanded — almost the same since I saw her last. You look just like her,” he paused. “She was aggressive and almost as hyper as Leeroy. You’re nothing like her in that respect.”

“What did she do? Was she an artist?”

“She had no talent whatsoever. I tried teaching her during our group’s travels, but, she didn’t have the patience.”

“Teach her? You’re not saying you’re an artist, right?” To my bewilderment, he nodded. “You should show me your work sometime. I love painting.”

“I know. I saw your sketches. It’s amateurish, but at least you’re better than her.” I frowned.

“Oh yeah? I bet you’re too rusty even to know how to hold a pen, old man.”

“I have a piece in the Kingsport Gallery.”

“What!? Don’t lie about something like that.”

“I speak the truth. Its title is Carnage. It’s a depiction of my first kill when I was eight.”

“Of course it is.” I shook my head. There was more to this middle-aged warrior than my prejudice gave him. After a moment, I spoke again.

“Do you think all the Elder Gods are bad?” His brow furrowed, he wasn’t expecting that question. “You know, Yellow King is one of them. He’s awful.

But I wonder if they're all like that."

"I wouldn't doubt it. I don't trust magic. Gods and faith are your business, not mine, little priestess."

"I don't know. Doesn't at least one of them have to be good? Can't there be something way out there in the Cosmos that's on our side?" I asked. My question made me sound so silly, like an optimistic child.

"Maybe you'll find someone who can answer that for you," he said. My thoughts went to Spooky again. But I felt if I asked he'd give me a half-riddle to let me try to decipher on my own. "If there's a God of ale, I will build him the greatest shrine," Tristan shrugged. I let out a giggle. And he, for the first time, an honest smile. But our peace was short-lived, as the echo of a monstrous bird's cry rang out from beyond the horizon. The sun was half set, but in the distance, we could see the maze of spires. And beyond those spires, we knew the home of the Men of Leng, Tsang Tower, and the Shantak. It cried again, it was getting closer.

24

Going Gets Tough

Tristan and I stood while Deva looked forward past us. Her eyes told me she heard it too. We made our way to the spires. Steering up through the large gaps between the first incoming wave of them, Deva carefully focused as she plucked the wind like strings on a violin. With the spires, the blanket of fog followed. If it weren't for Deva feeling the area with the winds, we never could have made it through the maze of death. Robert and Leeroy came above deck, but they said nothing. They knew what was happening. We all gathered near the center of the boat, looking at different directions at all times, ready for the impending attack.

"Keep it off the ship. We're almost on shore, can't be more than a minute left," Deva spoke, her voice was strained. The screech of the Shantak came from above. Our eyes went to the sky, but we couldn't see it as the fog flowed with the shadows of its movement. But as soon as it passed overhead, the predator circled around trying to find it's plan of attack. Silence. The tick-tock of my heart counted the beats of my anxiety. Then, a whoosh of air from overhead swooped down from the side. The sound of splintering and cracking came from overhead as the Shantak squealed and it zoomed past us, hitting the upper half of the center mast overhead. The sail was torn away as the Shantak had used its legs to shatter the post, the splinters flew into the water.

"Hang on, we're going for it!" Deva warned us as a massive gust rose up from behind us as our vessel was pushed forward. We grabbed onto the remains of the mast as we rammed forward blindly into the fog. The Shantak cried again as it made another swipe at the remaining mast, but it miscalculated as our burst of speed threw it off. But it was quick to scream even louder, it wouldn't give up

so easily. If it hadn’t been so loud to warn us, we wouldn’t have been able to throw ourselves to the sides as it swung down and dragged its massive talons on the deck of the ship. It shrieked as it’s gooseneck arced down to bite Tristan. But he was prepared, and he created the same massive round shield that protected him before. It clanged as the beast’s beak rammed into it, teeth of iron scraping on shadow metal.

Tristan ran forward now that he was able to see the beast, making a great two-handed greatsword. But as he leaped forward in the air the Shantak thought it would be clever to throw itself to the side, it jumped right off the ship and bashed into a spire as it rose up out of the fog. As the Shantak rammed into the side of the rock, it found itself caught between the spire and our ship. In Deva’s last push, she could hardly turn the vessel as the jagged rocks ripped into the right side of our ship. We were thrown around as the right fifth of our transport was sliced into ribbons, while battering the Shantak between a rock and a hard place. But we lost no speed as we cleared the sea fog.

“Hang on!” Deva warned. I looked up just in time to see that shanty port I had visited once before. We were headed right for it and had no time to slow down. In seconds, we were rag dolled around the boat as the remains of our vessel turned the old wood of the port into splinters as the hull of the boat was crushed by the sand and clay that rose up to meet it. The boat hit the land and dug in like a rusted knife into bone, wedging itself there as we came to an abrupt halt. I coughed and slowly picked myself up, silence all around. I looked around to make sure no one was hurt. Tristan covered himself in armor, but Deva had been thrown off the elevated back of the boat and had fallen on her arm. Robert tried helping, but the way he held his head told me he might have banged his skull. We needed to get on land fast.

“The king’s going to kill me.” Deva put her working hand on her face as she leaned back with a groan from her pain. Her face glistened with sweat. It was

obvious she was exhausted as she clung onto the railing and came down from the obliterated quarterdeck.

“Not if the Shantak does first,” Tristan corrected her, untying a rope on the left side of the ship for us to climb down. Leeroy went first, then Robert. I followed as Tristan picked Deva up on his back. We ran past the port as Tristan led us past the spider huts and pueblos that made up the shanty town. The Men of Leng were nowhere to be seen. But I could imagine they hid somewhere in those caves, waiting for their time to pick our corpses clean after the Shantak had killed us. After the Shantak’s impact between the ship and the spire, I would be impressed if it were still able to fight. We stopped, and Robert continued checking Deva’s forearm.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, besides the whole crushed hand thing. Pushing a ship with half the sails it should have at full speed ahead isn’t easy.” She waved him off. “I’ve been through worse. Nobody bests Deva on the water.” She proudly stood and puffed her chest out.

“We’ll finish the fight here, then try to sneak our way through to the Plateau,” Tristan informed. Just like in the memory, when his student avoided the same dens of man-eating spiders and the satyr-men. He must be planning to do the same thing now. All the way up to that impossible block of a mountain to the top of the Plateau. But as a cry came from over the water, we focused on the task at hand. The Shantak was still alive, and it was bitter.

“Clear out this hut, Leeroy. The four of you hide inside, I’ll deal with this,” he said, focusing on gathering shadows that seemed to attract to him like magnets without the brightness of the sun around.

“No way, this stupid bird wrecked my ship.” Deva defiantly waved her arm, but quickly bent over, holding her sides. Robert fumbled in his pockets, realizing

she probably broke more than her hand. He found his medicine to help her exhaustion and suppress her pain. Leeroy kicked the door open to the one-room hut and ran inside. It had no spider inside. He quickly came back out and waved us in. We followed him. It was dark, but we had just enough moonlight to see we were alone.

We watched out the window as Tristan made some distance between the Shantak and us, standing in the middle of the barren field between the water and the village. He stood there, arms folded. I didn't doubt he'd be able to defeat the Shantak on his own, but something told me he could use a little help. I decided to sneak my way around and help him if he needed it. As Robert helped the ornery Deva take a seat on a poorly made three-legged stool, and while Leeroy inspected the boxes in the corners, I gently opened the door and snuck out.

Crouching my way around the small buildings in the area, I moved a few huts away from the one I came from. I hoped the spiders this time wouldn't try to attack me. But as I looked through the grates, the spiders were all gone. I peeked around the corner, Tristan's armor had fully formed around him as he stood like a statue.

From out of the fog between the spires, it zoomed out into the clearing. It slowed, using its hurricane bringing wings to halt its momentum. It stopped, landing upright on the shore. It's head with its three still working beaded milky yellow eyes looking down at him from on top its coiled neck. Tristan's stance widened. The Shantak walked in a circle around him as if they silently agreed to a proper duel. The thing prowled and waddled its massive scaled ashen legs as it began to near the building I hid around the corner of. It was limping slightly from being crushed between the boat and spire. I laid low, wondering what my next move should be. It was solely focused on Tristan. Then, something I never saw coming happened. It spoke.

"It's been some time since your friend came to me and sacrificed himself for

my body’s sake. Have you brought more sheep here for my feast?” I held my hand over my heart. I could almost feel Tristan’s pain. But as I kept looking through the cracks in the shambled wall, I saw Tristan simply walk forward. He said nothing. His expression was unphased as his face was covered in the shadows. The armor around his body was constantly shifting. Adjusting as if ready to form into the perfect shape depending on the attack he was about to take.

The Shantak reared back and leaped up, using its leg to lash at him. Raising his big round shield, he stopped the talons and pushed its leg back. He ran forward as it circled around him again. Making a sword, he ran forward. It was a flurry of the Shantak’s talons, its clawed toes tried gripping the shield away from him. Tristan tried pulling out a bow and shooting it with a darting arrow between its strikes. Every time he advanced, it would hop back to avoid his close-range weapons. Despite its massive size, it was too fast for him to get close, and every time the Shantak attacked, he would have the ideal armor ready to protect himself.

It seemed like the man and beast were evenly matched. But the fantastic clash was short-lived when the Shantak managed to catch Tristan by surprise. The beast slashed with its front leg, then quickly did a movement identical to a front flip, slamming its tail down on top of him. He made armor for his shield and to brace his arms. Tristan winced as his legs absorbed the force of the downward strike. With Tristan recovering, the Shantak reared its head back, a deep bellow rising from the pit of its stomach. It lowered its head and opened wide as a massive stream of yellow sparks flew out like a torrent of water bursting from a dam. Tristan held his shield up as he tried to move closer, but the force of the rays of light began to overtake him. Now was my chance.

I ran out from around the corner and made a break for its tail. It was fully focused on blasting Tristan with its lightning, it didn’t even notice as I tackled

down, wrapping my arms around its tail. My hands came into contact with the scales, and the electricity stopped. I stood quickly as the Shantak lifted its head in confusion, finding itself in the empty White Room. I backed away as it reeled around to find its new attacker.

“Little Carter! Stay away from my dolls!” Yellow King’s voice threatened as I backpedaled to get away from its jaws.

“He isn’t your fight. Your battle is with me.” I told him, realizing he couldn’t hurt me in here if I didn’t let him. I stood tall and faced him, the Shantak charged, but as its legs cycled in its hobbled dash, it stayed in place. As if ice was making it sprint in place. Shantak realized this quickly and stopped trying to physically get to me. It reared its neck back. That yellow tone rose in its throat. I raised my arms to cover my face as it arced its head down, the rays of light pouring out.

I was covered in the blistering hot beam of sparks as they crackled around me. I fell to my knees as my legs seized up. I tried keeping one hand on the ground and the other up to the sky to stop the electricity. I felt that feeling in my shoulder, like boiling lava under my skin. It boiled over again, and as it did, my arm became covered in the sharp angles of the Elder Sign.

I screamed, not in pain, but rage. The electricity stopped as I strained my fingers toward the bird as if I was trying to choke the light from it. I looked up, the sparks had turned into bubbles that floated helplessly upward after being streamed out of the Shantak’s mouth. I stood back up, proving it couldn’t hurt me here. But I didn’t have much time. If I stayed here, I might start to go crazy again. And this time it might not be a guard I hurt, but my friends.

“Yellow King, get out of his head!” I demanded, hoping it would work now like it had for Basc. The Shantak screeched, as the thread-like bugs in his mind began snapping at me.

“I was trying to have fun with an old friend, Little Carter! You’re so mean. But fine, come to the Plateau. My party is starting anyway.” The childish Yellow King sneered from behind the face of the Shantak one last time before its head went limp and slammed into the ground. The White Room vanished. And I stood there still at the base of its tail. I nearly fell over as I was thrown back into reality. But I didn’t have time to sit there and recover, I had to move.

Tristan was still reeling back from the force of the electricity. And the others would know I was gone any second. I had to get on Shantak and get to the Plateau before they stopped me. They were in no shape to fight the Yellow King, and I wasn’t going to let them be killed so I could rescue my mom. I jumped onto Shantak’s back and took hold of the base of its wings. I reached into its mind once more. The White Room returned as it stirred, The White Room I saw when I spoke to animals.

“Take me to the Plateau,” I demanded as I shut my eyes, hoping it could still understand me without the Yellow King’s influence. The watercolor shifted as the beast’s mind sniffed me with doubt. I left its mind as the thing stirred and shrieked. Its wings battered and swayed, lifting off the ground. I heard Tristan yell something at me from below as we began to rise into the sky, but I was already too exhausted to say anything back. The Shantak took me over the thinned and dead forest. Over the camps of desolate villages full of hooded men and the lost spiders. The infinite fields of black onyx, a blanket of reflective nothingness over the desolate lands. It had been a while since I’d flown over this dead place. I never thought I’d willingly come back, especially on the same beast that brought me here in the first place.

We flew higher, our ascent became steep as we reached the block of a mountain and climbed up the side. I took in harsher breaths trying to keep up with the thinning air. The Shantak slowed and spaced its wings out, landing on the peak of the impossible mountain. I slid off, dismounting the bird as it stood

still. I kept my eyes on it. I hoped now that I freed it from Yellow King's control it wouldn't go back into its predator instincts and rip me apart anyway. As I stepped away, the thing looked down on me with eyes, still yellow, but they were somehow so much clearer.

"I've taken your thorn out." If I had to choose my last words, at least they'd be poetic. But the Shantak said nothing back as it eyeballed me. It gave a snort before it turned around, and leaped off the Plateau, gliding its way back to where it came from. I kept my eyes on the vast expanse between my friends and me. I stood there, praying they'd understand. I hoped I'd made the right choice. I had the key parts, and I'd brought it back. If I could manage to get the last third from Yellow King, I could find my mother inside the Archway and then she'd be able to figure out how to stop him.

I was exhausted, but I'd have to fight him in The White Room. Or maybe Yellow King was honest, and he would be good on his side of the deal, but I wasn't holding my breath for it. I turned and saw a whirlwind above the towering temple made of pillars. Like a funnel from the sky, a vortex of yellow, purple and black surged around, encasing the building in a raging torrent. The wind had kicked up, and I could feel it growing ever so slightly by the second. It was the Festival, and this was the arrival greeting for its guests. But to the side, only a few paces away from a dead tree stood up in front of me. The only tree on the Plateau. And in its branches, sitting with his legs gently swaying back and forth was none other than Spooky.

"Bravo. You're brave to go off without your friends to face your demon alone," he said giving me a slow clap. Like everything else in the Dreamlands, I was used to him popping up out of nowhere by now.

"They're hurt. I'm the only one that wasn't beat up from the crash," I said, looking down. "And I don't want to hurt them if I go crazy. I don't know if I can control the Elder Sign."

“You need to build resistance over time. You’re not going to go on a killing rampage, not with the power of feelings. You’ll get used to it.”

“If only there was someone who could have taught me how to use it, so I’d be good at it by now.”

“Don’t you put that on me. I tried going to your island three times, but your mother placed a barrier on it.” I remembered the flash of light and the noise after I first touched the key. “You still have the key parts, correct?”

“Yes. I don’t know how to get the last one from Yellow King, though. Any ideas?”

“Oh, don’t look at me. I’m a feeble bag of bones. But… I have a few tricks up my sleeve. Once you get the last piece and give it to me, it should take two minutes to fetch your mother from beyond the Archway.”

“You could do that? How do you know where she is?”

“I was there when she completed the ritual. Just like the note says, I made a deal with her back in the day, a trade that’s too sweet for me not to keep. When you get inside, get the last part from Yellow in any way you can. I don’t care if you have to act like a lunatic, just get it off him. When you do, I’ll be there, and you can give it to me. That or you can sit there like a lame duck, and I’ll use a little ‘magic’ from the Waking World to figure something out.”

“Why should I trust you over him? How do I know you’re not a part of this Festival?”

“You shouldn’t. But I’ve been the one helping you, not trying to kill you. Besides, I’m not the one your mother was trying to seal away. I’ll be fine regardless if Yellow King leaves this World and kills you all or not, but I’d rather not let that happen. When the Elder Gods start their feast, they eat everything in a Cosmos-wide radius.”

“I don’t get it. Why are you helping me? Why do you care? Is this just so I can give you a hand to help you win the war?” Spooky shrugged.

“I like planets. They grow people, people are fun,” he gave a dishonest sigh. “I’d hate to see it all go. I’d be so bored.”

“Well, thanks,” I offered, but he waved me off.

“Thank me when your mother stops this damn fool from trying to get out of his cage. When you go inside the temple, you’ll be entering the Festival. If you couldn’t tell from that overwhelming mass of evil fart gas.” He motioned to the mass of flowing pure energy above the temple. “It’s a big deal to our Elder God friends. Your mother is the last safety pin stopping them from invading every World in the Cosmos that an Archway is attached to. And where there’s life, there’s an Archway. If we don’t get that last piece and get her out of there in the next few moments, it’s over,” he warned. For once, there was no sarcasm in his voice.

“I’ll do it,” I told him, beginning my walk toward the temple of evil.

“Two more things. When you go inside that place, you’re going to see things that are going to eat away at your mind for the rest of your life. I’ve seen it happen to too many people to count, including your grandfather. It’s not too late to walk away and try finding a nice hole to stay in while you live the rest of your days hidden away from the cultists that will walk the Dreamlands by daybreak.” It was a nice offer, but not one I was going to take. I’d come too far, and I wasn’t going to let my friends down now. “Second, don’t you want to know what happened to your Island?” I stopped immediately. The sound of tearing fabric in the middle of a thunderstorm rose up from behind. “I have to warn you, it’s not pretty.” I slowly turned back. Between Spooky and me was an opening, a gateway leading from the Plateau to a field. I slowly made my way forward, stepping past the fissure in space. One foot on the Plateau of Leng, one on the docks of Lonely Island. It was raining, but my clothes didn’t get wet. It was like

looking through a window, a vista into another place without actually being there. I could smell the sulfur and still burning fires, it was so real. I stepped onto what should have been sand - but it wasn't, it was ash. There were no buildings, no pens, no pigs, no people, no children. Everything was burnt to the ground. The Island itself looked as if it was broken, shattered by some overwhelming force. I looked to where my house was, where it should have been. I paced, building into a panicked run. The porch leading to the door was gone, the door was gone. Everything was just gone. As I slowed, my eyes drooped down. Lying next to each other in the center of the remains, was a couple of skeletons, holding each other in their death. I fell to my knees, my hands shaking as I brought them to my face to cover my mouth as I began sobbing in pain. The Crafts had never done anything wrong. They'd never harmed a soul. But now, because I left them behind, they were dead. It was my fault. I broke the barrier keeping everyone here safe.

"Yellow King sent every Dagonian he could here once that barrier was broken. They obliterated the island and all living there. They died quickly," said Spooky.

"I'm going to stop him. He'll never hurt anyone again." I grabbed my pants legs and squeezed while I seethed.

"Don't lose your head of course. If you stick with the plan, and you'll get your revenge."

"Good." I stood, wiping my eyes. I balled my fists, and strode forward, keeping my eyes locked on the whirlwind of darkness as I neared the Festival's barrier. As I crossed the desolate soft purple clay mountaintop, a sound met my ears. It wasn't screams of terror or unholy growls, but flutes. The piping of wind instruments played by skilled musicians. When I made it to the very edge of the barrier, and the swelling winds kicked my hair in all directions, it sounded like a concert caught in a thunderstorm. I took a deep breath in and stepped forward.

As I did, the wind stopped, the music slowed, my eyes opened. The massive shimmering yellow Archway stood at the center, its colors beamed as if bursting with energy. At the base of the Archway was a table with six seats, lined with gold. A grand feast was on top of it with every food you could imagine. And on the other side calmly sitting in his end seat, was Yellow King.

“All rise for the guest of honor,” he commanded, standing. I heard the noise of shuffling sheets and clothing. I looked to my left and right and across the entirety of the temple’s sides were lined with rows of layered pew seats, like the Coliseum. They were all almost human looking, were it not for masks on their faces. Masks made of clay, hiding faces I hoped I would never see. Some were big, some small. Each had a primitive pipe for an instrument. Most had it where a human’s mouth would be. Others, especially the ones with grotesque flabby ball-like forms, had multiple masks on their meatball bodies. Some were long and tall and had several sets of limbs. Others had thin vestige wings clinging to their backs. They all had stopped playing and stood, staring at their guest. Yellow King spoke again.

“Please, take a seat, Little Carter.”

25

The Court of the Crimson King

Cautiously, I moved through the empty space between myself and the table as all eyes watched me. I tried to stand straight and show no fear. I'd already begun to sweat at seeing the strange beasts, the 'cultists' to my sides. This must be the bizarre ritual that my mother and grandfather went through so much effort to stop. Now it was my turn. I didn't feel ready, but I didn't have a choice. If I didn't do something now to get my mother back and out of the Archway, I'd ruin everything.

I made it to my destination in silence, a table with six seats. The hairs on my neck stood on edge in response to being only a handful of feet away from Yellow King. The unsettling music alone that came from the flutes would have made me tremble if I was in a dark room alone, how much more being right next to evil incarnate. I sat down at the opposite end. Looking at the blank mask with the squiggly Yellow Sign inscribed on it. This wasn't just some man, it was the remains of that boy's family. I set my white-knuckled fists sideways on the table.

"Try the grey stuff, it's delicious," the childlike voice said, waving his hands over the food covering the table. The feast did look surprisingly well made, but I'd sooner jump into a lake of sharks with hunks of meat around my neck then fall for that trap.

"I'm not hungry, I ate before this." In truth, I was starving, but I felt justified lying here. "I'm here to listen to your side of the story." It was a long shot, but maybe somewhere in that awful corpse was an ounce of humanity. Maybe I could out-manipulate the God of manipulation. This wasn't a battle of fists or swords, but feelings and words, which meant I wasn't helpless. Yellow King

raised his hands, I tensed up. He lightly clapped twice. Out from behind one of the pillars came a hobbling form. This one was unlike the others. It wore no cloak, no regular clothes at all. It wobbled forward as quickly as its two stubby legs could bring it. It was a rectangular form entirely covered in yellow tethered wraps like a mummy. It had two arms near the top corners of its body that waved like foot-long worms. In its right, it held a jug of liquid that dripped down the sides from spilling. I remained still and wide-eyed as its suction-cup laced arm gripped a golden goblet by my hand, lifting it and sloppily pouring some of the wine inside. It clumsily half-set half-slammed my drink back down as it turned quickly away, disappearing behind the pillars. If I was hungry before, my appetite was now ruined.

“I heard about the work you did in Innsmouth. I can’t believe you managed to break my influence on Dagon. And you just broke my influence on Birdie too. You’re a natural.”

“Birdie? The Shantak?” I entertained his small talk.

“Yes. That’s what I called her before you separated us.” A tinge of bitterness was attached to the end of his voice.

“Well, I had to get the key pieces. I don’t know why you’d try to stop me when we agreed that I’d bring them here.” I pointed out the holes in his lies.

“I heard you started working with other… dangerous individuals. I should never have doubted you, and I was absolutely in the wrong,” the man’s voice was eager while he tapped his fingers on the table.

“Your attacks through the Dagonians in the Kingsport castle didn’t work either. For the Avatar of an Elder God, you sure do suck at doing things.” I felt a bit of Deva’s attitude come through my own mouth.

“Ah, ah, but not all of them. I still have the one piece you gave me, remember?” he teased as he reached inside his overlapping cloak and pulled up

the string and first key piece my mother gave me. My eyes focused on it. I tried thinking as hard as I could. The Archway was only a few paces behind him. Maybe I could jump up and make my way across the table, take the part from him and jump into the Archway to find my mom. Or if Spooky somehow came out at just the right moment. As I thought, that same shambling creature from before came up from the shadows and approached Yellow King. It spoke something from its circular jaw, bubbles plopping up and dripping out its crab-maw. It waddled away.

“About that friend you made. That… monster. How come you’ll play nice with him, but not me?”

“Spooky never tried to kill me or my mom.”

“Spooky? Is that the name he’s going by now?” Yellow King seethed under his calm demeanor as if just thinking about our mutual acquaintance made him rage. “What did he offer you? Eternal life? Riches beyond your imagination?” Yellow King sat forward now.

“He taught me how to use the key and release my mother from inside the Archway. And how my Elder Sign keeps you and other monsters from hurting me.” I was exaggerating, but a shot in the dark couldn’t hurt. Yellow King sat back in his seat.

“You so easily trust the thing your grandfather so dearly despised. He’s probably rolling in his grave if he has one.” I wasn’t sure if I should act or keep up the conversation. I decided to wait a little longer.

“Spooky told me they didn’t get along. But what do you mean when you say if he has one?”

“My apologies, to be honest, I can’t answer that. I have no idea what happened to old Randolph. Probably out floating in the Cosmos causing somebody trouble. Either way Little Carter, I’m glad you came to your senses

and decided to come here. Now that you've finally stopped this silly game of cat and mouse, we can finally move on. Really, you've saved the Cosmos thanks to your selflessness." While he spoke, I heard something far behind me. It was slight, and over the piping and jittering flutes, it was almost impossible to make out. Spooky was on the move. Something moved up above on the ceiling, but I didn't look up to give its position away. It might have been another cultist, but it might have been Spooky getting ready to strike. I had to be ready.

"If you want me to help you save the Cosmos, then why don't you tell me how this works. Why are you so bent on releasing the Elder Gods?"

"Simple. You see, in the same way we breathe in and out, the Cosmos does the same. It starts from the smallest speck, then explodes out. But sooner than later, it always has to come back. There's an Ancient God, a God older than even the Elder Gods. This all-powerful being is what powers this cycle. The Elder Gods are the tiniest fragments of his power made manifest. And we Avatars, in turn, are a mere fragment of them. It is my holy and sacred duty to bring them back into the Dreamlands and all other Worlds in the Cosmos. Carter, excuse my language, was a damnable heretic. He hated the Elder Gods and their wills. He decided to abuse the powers was given by a race of traitors that traveled to his World a hundred years ago."

"The Elder Sign." I nodded. I knew this information, it matched with what Spooky had told me.

"Precisely! I won't tell a lie, I was worried you'd be just like your parents after our tussles before. You're so much lovelier and understanding then they."

"Well, I am an empath. So, my grandfather, Randolph. He used the Elder Sign to seal away the Elder Gods, and that stopped them from making the Cosmos breathe?"

"Yes. He prevented the cycle from repeating. One hundred years is like a

second for an Elder God. But the balance of nature is a fragile one. It's of dire importance that we restart the cycle as soon as possible before it's too late."

"What happens when it's too late?"

"The Cosmos will choke, and everything will die. Maybe even the Gods." His tone was serious. But at least it made sense why the cultists would go to such awful and great lengths to free their masters.

"But, won't the cycle make everything die anyway?"

"Yes. Everything other than the Elder Gods. They retreat to the Temple of the Gods where it's safe. Then, it happens, and the Elder Gods return. And with their power, life can begin anew. And after time dictates, the cycle will come and go a vigintillion times again, just as it has before." It was a lot to follow, but his great arm movements to the sky helped illustrate just how important this was too him. As he was distracted from his gestures, I took the risk and peeked up to the ceiling. It was almost impossible to see, but there, clinging to the rafters hundreds of feet above was a form I couldn't fully make out from here. But I knew exactly who it was from those glowing purple eyes. I stood, slowly from my chair, letting my extending legs slide it back. This was it.

"No wonder. That snake was lying to me. I always knew my mother was a witch. I'll open the Archway, but only if you promise to let me be the one to kill my heretical mother." Yellow King stood so quickly I thought he saw through my ruse. He made his way around the table to me, I met him halfway. I stood in front of the ethereal being now. In his left hand, he held the dangling last part of my Silver Key, his right was outstretched for a shake.

"Make this Cosmic Pact before these masses and the Elder Gods. I will give you the key and allow you to release your mother. In return, you will take her life." I didn't look twice. I grabbed his hand and shook. There was hardly any time for me to take in the glaring colors of sparkling hues of black, orange, and

blue around our hands as something grabbed my shoulder and threw me back like a ragdoll.

As I recovered, I saw Spooky standing over me, holding a silver object in his hand. 6 sharp, rapid thundering blasts rang out, several times louder than any Shantak screech. Spooky's arm rattled fiercely, as the silver and brown thing in his hand caused the noise. It must be the magic he mentioned from the Waking World, whatever that was. The smell of sulfur and smoke filled the air in front of me. In that instant, Yellow King flew back in a drunken motion, falling backward over his own feet. He slammed into one of the pillars and slid down. Spooky held the stolen key part and looked back at me.

"Give me your key parts, quickly," he demanded, holding out his hand. I shuffled through my bag as the noises of the flutes began to pick up. It was worse than hearing them stop because instead of helping their master, it was like they were playing louder for him in excitement. I ripped the two thirds out but stopped. I narrowed my eyes to the Archway, my eyes went to the Key part in his hand. I stood, grabbed the piece while pushing him aside. He howled in surprised as he reformed his fallen bones.

"The hell are you thinking?!" he hissed as I ran into the light, I said nothing back. I hadn't come all this way just to let someone else meet my mother first.

It strobed so brightly as I passed the barrier of light I had to shield my eyes from the overwhelming glow. I held the reformed Silver Key out, hoping it would be enough to open the doorway. The light faded, and my sprint slowed. I stopped and uncovered my eyes. I was in another temple, but there was no Yellow King or Yellow Archway in sight. Blue, Red, Green and Purple Archways of the same size spread out in a circle around me as if they all led to this cylinder.

I realized these Archways were beginning to spark to life, starting to glow. Those Archways were entire Worlds I had no idea existed. I watched as on the

outside of invisible walls every single color and hue imaginable vibrantly flowed, strobed and pulsated. They sloshed like a jelly filling the space between giant monstrosities that hurt to even look at. The same massive creatures I saw before in my out of control vision of rage.

In the center was a person standing still. From here, all I could see was a short bob of black hair hovering over an all-black coat that hung down to the shins, showing the raised heels of black shoes. The woman was a few inches taller than I. This was no Yellow King or Avatar of an Elder God.

“M-mom?” I mumbled as my eyes began to water. The woman’s head tilted up, and she turned in place. She wore rectangle frames and had crimson patterns woven into the front of her gloomy outfit. She had my nose, or maybe, I had hers.

“Wait, you’re not Spooky. Who are you and how the hell did you break my time-seal?” she growled.

“Are you… Faith?” I sniffled

“Yeah, what’s it to ya’?” I raised a trembling hand to my chest.

“I’m Joy… Joy Carter.” The woman raised her chin and looked me over.

“You’re… big.” The woman’s mouth hung open as if she wasn’t sure what to say. She blinked and pursed her lips. “Man. Look at you, you’re like, a grown woman now. What are you, eighteen?”

“Seventeen,” I paused.

“I was only out for a few seconds, and now you’re taller than me-” I ran forward as hard as I could as she spoke, I nearly tackled her as we embraced.

“I missed you.” I whimpered, no longer able to hold back my tears.

“I missed you too. I mean, even though it’s only been a few seconds for me.” We gave each other weak laughs as we hugged again.

“I’m so happy you’re back, mom.”

“I am too.” She held me back for a moment to look me in the eyes. “I’m so sorry, Joy. I didn’t have a choice. Your father was dead and I had nowhere else to turn to. There was no way I could have sealed off all the Elder Gods by myself. You had the Elder Sign, so I knew one day when you were older, you might be able to help, and we could do it. It wasn’t fair to you, I’m so sorry.” She began to cry.

“It’s okay, mom, really.” I gently shook her. “The Crafts were so kind to me. If I never went to the island, I would have never met Robert or Leeroy or anyone.” A terrible trembling rose up from behind me. I looked back to see the Yellow Archway shaking from the force of the quakes.

“Yellow King,” mother hissed. “We’ll have to catch up after this. If we don’t seal this Archway right now, this is only going to get a lot worse.” She stood by my side. “Did Spooky teach you how to use your Elder Sign?”

“Kind of.” I shrugged. “I can go into people’s souls, I think.”

“My daughter is an empath? Who knew?” More shaking, this time was even worse.

“Hand me that Key. With just you being near, it should multiply my ability by just enough to fix the seal. I’m going to tie up some of the runes here, you head back to through that Archway, and I’ll be right there. Just hang on.” As I handed her the Key, she stepped backward in a hurry.

“I’m not going to lose you again, right?” I hesitated.

“No. Not this time.” She smiled and continued toward the purple Archway. I turned back and headed for the yellow Archway. I jumped through the barrier and nearly fell on my face from the distorting colors of the warp. I wiped the last tears from my eyes on focused. I looked around, trying to remember what happened before my reunion.

My eyes swept back up to the beasts, who stayed in their pews while they rocked back and forth, playing the music an octave lower, yet speeding their tempo up. I looked back to Yellow King. He was trying to stand, but not in the way any human should. His torso was twisted. His legs were in shambles, the impact seemed like it should have shattered every bone in his body. But that didn't faze him. His bones cracked as they reassembled in place. Twisting and croaking as he slowly stood. Six-coin sized holes were on his chest, a honey-like syrupy substance oozed down.

"You shouldn't have done that, Little Carter," he said, his tone was disappointed.

"If you think I'm crazy enough to just let your cult free those horrible monsters you're wrong. There're not Gods, they're just angry plants!" I spat, stepping away from him as he stood taller and taller. He was growing. I looked back to the entrance of the temple. It wasn't far, I could make a run for it. I looked back to Yellow King. His body was still rising. He had to be at least eight, no, nine feet tall when from the bottom of his robe I saw limbs like blackened branches creep out, like vines wrapping around the nearby pillars while searching for life to snuff out. *Legs; don't fail me now.*

I turned down the center aisle, down the faded red carpet and made a mad sprint away from the Yellow King. The choir of awful creatures played their instruments louder and louder. I covered my ears as I ran. I looked back as I made it halfway down the court. The Yellow King now stood above the table. The branches had formed into the base of a tree to prop him up. Dozens of the corrupt and withered tendrils swept toward me ten times faster than I could run. I screamed as they rose up, a handful trying to grab me.

I was thrown back with overwhelming power. But not from the grip of the tendrils. A burst of wind came through the entrance of the temple, forcing me off my feet and backward, right on top of the hollow middles of the bark limbs. If

they hadn’t been there I would have burst the back of my skull on the stone floor. I heard a clattering, the noise of slashing and tearing of something at my feet. I looked up to see not my own body being ripped apart, but the tendrils of death as a black straight sword and a rapier-wielding duo stood before me.

“I told you, lass, vengeance is mine.” Tristan looked down at me. His arm extended downward. I would have hugged him if I wasn’t so confused about how they got here. I stood, Leeroy and Robert came to my side.

“But how?”

“Shantak brought us. I think it likes you,” Leeroy answered. As if on cue, a set of scaled wings flew overhead. The Shantak screeched as it dived into the mass of vines that rose to meet it. As it clawed and raged, I filled them in.

“I found my mom, she’s in the Archway, she said she’ll be out in a few minutes!”

“We’re not just going to wait for her. Let’s go!” Deva shouted as she ran forward, her rapier in her left hand now as her other was bandaged. We all joined in her charge toward the monstrosity Yellow King had become.

Tristan leaped through the air, slicing limb after limb. Deva pinpointed the slithering masses poke after poke. Leeroy went to work with his own throwing daggers, making sure to clean up what the others missed. I stood there behind them with Robert, dumbfounded at what I was seeing.

I didn’t know if we could win this, but I realized something. If I could touch the Yellow King’s face behind the mask, I could enter his mind and end this. I ran forward, making a beeline to the table his corpse floated above. If I timed it right and had enough coordination, I could jump off the table, rip off his mask and touch him. But as I made my final run down the center and got just a few feet away from the table, it all went wrong. One of the snake arms slid under me, wrapping around my ankle. I nearly smashed my face on the ground. I caught

myself, nearly twisting both my wrists.

While I faced down, everything turned for the worst. Yellow King gave a booming command in that cryptic language I couldn't understand. The sound of hundreds of pieces of metal clambered to the stone floor, the music became so much worse and jarring to my ears. When I looked up, I realized the cultists had stopped playing, and they now surrounded us, making a twenty-foot high wall of amorphous flesh, fusing together like clay. We were cornered, trapped in an arena with the Yellow King in the center. The Shantak still clawed at him, but as we were distracted, and the others gathered around me, he focused all his still spawning snake limbs on the Shantak. His tendrils wrapped around its neck and squeezed.

"Help it!" I screamed. Tristan was already on it. But as he used his armored legs to crack the floor with the force of magic under him, he was slapped out of the air by a grotesque arm made of flesh that formed from the mass of monsters. Tristan was flung against the only pillar trapped in the small space with us. He crashed and slid down the wall. Deva tried next, but she was too slow. She kept her eyes on the mass of flesh, but the limbs from above snapped like whips, slapping her away like a fly. She landed on her legs, but they gave under the force of her impact, and she crumpled to the floor. My wild eyes went from her to Tristan, to the Shantak.

"Begone, heretics!" An inhuman voice shook the temple around us. The Yellow King's now infinite array of limbs poised to strike us all. The cultists around us seemed to laugh at us; at our inevitable deaths. Robert stepped in front of me. It was a nice gesture, but even Leeroy put his knives down, realizing we were hopelessly outmatched. Maybe the Gods were on his side. I gave a pitiful laugh and shook my head, looking at my feet in embarrassment. Only now did I realize how hopelessly outclassed we were. How close I'd come only to die to this monster.

Crack.

We stopped, all of us. Shantak stopped screaming, the cultists stopped laughing. The very top of the glowing light of the Archway above us had cracked, leaving a shining glow brighter than the rest of it piercing through. **Crack**. This one was even louder.

“No,” Yellow King spoke in disbelief. Then, all hell broke loose. The mirror wall of light between the Archway pillars shattered, and music with the light came flooding through. If I thought the music at the Coliseum was grand, this was an opera of the Gods.

As if riding the waves of trumpets, a figure came riding down in the rays of overwhelming light as the Archway glass shattered. A figure in black slid down the Archway near Yellow King. She twisted her body and brought her leg around in an arcing motion. A burst of sparkling silver vapor and fire burst around the person’s foot like a shockwave of pure energy.

Yellow King cried with seething pain as his looming body was shot back so hard he burst through the mass of cultists. The arena of bodies began falling apart into the light of the Archway, the cultists forming back into their original bodies. They made a horrible war cry as one as they lunged for us. I stood there, frozen as they tried to finish their master’s job.

In a whizz of black and red, mother reappeared in the space between me and the monsters. She swiped her arm as if slapping the dozens of enemies. A fountain of the sparkling grey and silver vapor spread from her hands, slicing outwards. The split second it made contact with the demons, it shred them to bits. They exploded backward, transforming into goo and a nauseating crimson paste.

Some of them shuttered and screamed running from the temple, others growled and began repositioning as she turned to face us.

“Kept you waiting, huh?”

26

Turn to Stone

She let out a giddy war cry as she began facing off against the next hoard of cultists. Against her magic, they had the same results as the first group, exploding into chunks of meat as her grey smoke tore them apart.

I stood there, dumbfounded. I'd wondered what she'd be like. But this was like watching an older version of an even more dangerous Deva run around killing demon-cultists while laughing like a kid in a candy store. But I had no time to ogle. Shantak had fallen on the table; I could only hope it was still alive. From behind the Archway, Yellow King's form rose again. As it did, mother had already dispatched the entire mass of cultists.

I opened my mouth but said nothing. I didn't know what to say. From the side near the base of the Archway Tristan stirred. He growled as he stood, using his weapon to help himself stand.

"Come here… coward!" he mumbled, his voice drowsy yet still full of hate. I ran to him to help, but he pushed me away as he stepped forward with a limp. Mother came up from behind me on the other side.

"Tristan?" she said. I looked at her, then back to Tristan. He was momentarily taken out of his murderous trance as he looked at mother.

"Faith?"

"You two know each other?" I asked, remembering they were both Cosmic Dancers.

"Unfortunately," Tristan nodded, trying to focus to the task at hand.

“Unfortunately? This is the first time you’ve seen me in what, seventeen years? And that’s all you have to say? Nice to see you haven’t changed at all you ass,” mother hissed.

“Woman now’s not the time-”

“-Oh, now you don’t have time. You had plenty of time knocking up the queen then leaving, but now you’re just so crunched for time.”

“I thought you were dead,” he mumbled as he lowered his weapon, staring at her.

“Yeah, same.”

“Shouldn’t we focus on the Archway?” I asked, as the light from beyond the pillar bubbled like a boiling pot of water.

“I don’t know, why don’t you ask your father?” said mother. I looked around, unsure of what she meant.

“I’m serious you guys we need to focus.” I tried in vain to stop them from goofing around.

“What? Oh please, don’t tell me that you didn’t tell her.” Mother shook her head at Tristan. Tristan turned to me and nodded.

“Your mother and I were... together, once.”

“Oh… Oh Gods,” I gasped, lowering my head at the realization. We all had green eyes. We all had the Elder Sign. We were family.

“She’s your mom?” Deva put her hands on her hips while recovering. To be fair, I was having a hard time believing it too. “We’re half-sisters? Bummer.”

The Shantak picked itself off the floor and made a worried cry as it stampeded past us. Our conversation was cut short as the yellow light pulsated, the Archway grew. It expanded past the temple ceiling, the light becoming an

infinite wall, a window to something on the other side.

“Wait, where’s Yellow King?” asked Robert.

“We’re out of time, we need to end this, now,” warned Tristan.

“Just like the old days,” mom began to smile again, cracking her knuckles.

“Girl, do you feel confident in your abilities?” Tristan looked down at me. “This isn’t the first Avatar your mother and I have slain, but your assistance is critical. Yellow King is a master of manipulation, but you share his heinous gimmick. When I give the signal, you will touch him, enter his soul, and distract him while I land the killing blow and your mother seals his tomb.”

“You’re joking.”

“I never jest.”

“I barely survived getting him out of other people’s heads, I don’t think I could get him out of his own.”

“Believe in your ability, girl. You saved my life in the catacombs against a larger foe. You don’t need to do anything but distract him for a few moments, I will do the rest.”

“We - will do the rest. Don’t worry kiddo we’ll be right in front of you the whole time,” mom reassured me.

“What about us?” asked Leeroy.

“The lot of you are in no condition to take on this threat. Head back down the mountain and find a vessel for our escape.”

“Well, good luck! Try not to die.” Deva turned away, but the other two wouldn’t be so easily convinced.

“No way! We got all the way here with you, we’re not turning around now,” Leeroy denied.

“It wasn’t an option, boy.”

“Yeah? Well, I deny those orders! I’m not leaving Joy.” Robert stepped beside me. I wasn’t sure what to say.

“Robert, I can’t let you put yourself in danger. If the others get hurt, they’ll need you to help them.”

“No Joy. I’m not going to get separated from you again,” he denied.

“Alright then, let’s do this. Follow me into the light!” Mom ran forward, leaving clouds of vapor dust in her wake.

“Stay behind me.” Tristan ran forward. His armor formed around his body before he passed into the light. The four of us exchanged unsure glances.

“Going to get that ship, Deva?” I teased.

“Shut it, sister.” Deva ran forward, the rest of us followed into the overwhelming light.

The transition was instant, from one stone temple to another; this one far greater. We stood there, coming to an anticlimactic halt as we took in the magnificent horror of it all. Most of the Archways were no longer glowing but solid grey. Whatever mother did with the Silver Key must have sealed away the energy coming from them. Now, only the Yellow and Blue Archway shone.

“Look at them, trapped out there, alone and cold. The creators, masters, judges, jury, and executioners betrayed by their own grandchildren.” Yellow King pointed a lazy finger at the group of us. “Those who wish to see the Cosmos strangle under its own weight. This golden whirlwind of colors is the wrath of the Gods, nature’s will to survive will not be beaten by mere humans. I am just one tool of many that is their will made manifest.”

“The hell is this guy going on about?” Deva shot a quizzical eye back to me. I shrugged.

“I am the will of the Elder Gods. My brothers and I will-”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard it before. You know we’re just going to kill you now, right?” Mother stopped him. Yellow King’s shoulders began bouncing as if he were giggling.

“I will not be the only one to die here today. Sovereign Elder Gods remember me. Please, strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Cosmic Slayers for their treachery!” The Yellow King raised his hands to the sky. As if on request, the barrier of stars waivered, and for a moment, a stream of twirling bound yellow light came from high above, streaming from the massive godlike being stuck on the other side of the Yellow Archway.

“Well, this never happened before. Is that bad?” Mother asked as both Tristan and she began stepping backward.

“Very,” Tristan replied as they threw themselves back as the rays of light exploded and drowned Yellow King in its lights.

“Tristan, isn’t he doing your armor thing?” asked Leeroy.

“He’s doing his armor thing.” Mom nodded. The light stopped as soon as it came and remaining was a shining body. The cloak was gone, his arms and legs had drapes on the sides, like tassels to his ornate set. He was covered head to toe in armor. It looked nearly identical to Tristan’s, but instead of being dark and jagged, it was smooth, welcoming, even. The yellow-gold color shone vibrantly, yet he still wore the stone mask on his face. In his hands were two straight swords, each blazed with golden fire. He stood still, looking over his new outfit.

“Oh, a power-up. Nice,” mom sighed.

“Deva!” Tristan stepped forward.

“Go!” Deva whipped her rapier upward behind Tristan as his armor fully formed around him, his two-handed blade forged from shadows mid-charge.

Despite his ludicrous speed, Yellow King raised his right blade to parry the weapon away. Tristan slid past Yellow King, who stood still and inspected the blazing sword, almost oblivious to what just happened.

“Deva, I don’t know who you are or what your Elder Sign is about, but I’d say to keep it up. We’re going to need it.” Mother ran forward. A gathering of sparkling ash gathered in her hands and on her feet. Her long black coat flowed behind her, the flakes trailing in her path. As she approached, she punched the air and sent a cannonball sized orb of ash from her fingers at Yellow King, who effortlessly deflected the ball. It flew in away in an arc, exploding on the wall of stars.

Tristan wasted no time, during her assault he charged from the side, raising his sword went to cut the new Yellow King in half from top to bottom. Yellow King simultaneously blocked Tristan’s attacked while he threw his left blade, but not at Tristan. Deva had nearly no time to react as she ran towards the standing threat. She raised her own sword to bat away the oncoming one. The sheer force of the blade sent her reeling back, but she had enough strength in her arms to keep the sizzling edge away from her body. She rolled on the floor, keeping her eyes on the weapon as it lodged into the ground behind her.

“Hiah!” cheered Leeroy. While we were distracted, he jumped up to Yellow King’s face. A dagger in hand, he thrust his arm down to strike the Yellow King’s exposed neck. Yellow King didn’t miss a beat, he dropped his other blade and grabbed Leeroy by his wrist and neck, clamping down on both his armed hand and his windpipe.

Yellow King twisted back around, jumping forwards while raising his leg as mother approached from behind, her fingers outstretched while lathered in ash. His leg lurched out and kicked her ribs, hard. She went flying, tumbling across the opposite side of the bridge.

“Stay here, I’ll make sure everyone’s okay.” Robert ran forward, trying to

find a route around Yellow King in the center connection. Yellow King picked up his dropped blade after Leeroy's fingers let go of his knife. He kept his grasp on Leeroy while turning again to face Tristan, he blocked Tristan's one-handed straight sword swing head on, clashing the enchanted flames on shadow steel. But this time, Tristan had adapted his strategy. Tristan used a new straight sword to slice into the knee of Yellow King's armor, cutting into the side.

Yellow King dropped Leeroy, who gasped for air while crawling back, but the hit was short lived as Yellow King bent his knee armor, pinching the blade between the openings. With his now free hand, he punched Tristan square in his armored face. Tristan responded by howling and giving Yellow King a bash of his own. He hit Yellow King so hard his mask cracked in the center. Deva jumped in, holding not her blade, but Yellow King's. She dashed forward, corkscrew-lunging the blade toward his side. Yellow King stepped back, barely deflecting the tip of his own blade downward. Deva tripped forward, and he reached forward as Tristan was forced to step back or risk skewering his student.

He grabbed the roots of Deva's short hair, whipping around in a circle and threw her like a ragdoll. She landed at the far end of the Temple leading to the Blue Archway, and she didn't stand up. Tristan made a feral war cry that rattled my bones as he didn't even waste time making a new weapon. His open fingered hands lunged for Yellow King's throat. Yellow King had no time to reach for his dropped blades, he met Tristan's assault, and the two leaned forward, trying to break each other's grips. Mother came in from the side, her ashen fist upper-cutting into Yellow King's ribs.

"How do you like it, jackass?!" The question seemed rhetorical, as he made no response except for looking in the direction he had kicked her to, where Robert stood, now running for Deva. He lurched sideways as Tristan charged forward. Leeroy had recovered and slid out a new throwing knife. With it, he lunged it into Yellow King's good knee as Tristan still struggled to push him

backward. I began to walk forward in suspense as they neared the edge leading into the bottomless pit below.

Yellow King had a final feat of strength, managing to let go of Tristan's arms, he ducked, his right arm sweeping across Tristan's neck while his leg kicked Leeroy away, knocking him unconscious. He turned to mom and punched her square in the stomach. She formed clouds of ash in her hands, but the result was the same, being hurled back across the center bridge connector, past one of Yellow King's dropped flaming blades.

Yellow King limped for his weapons as Tristan recovered, his body had made a small crater in the temple floor. Robert dashed past me, sweat pouring down his face as he made his way around the edges to Tristan. As Yellow King picked up his first blade, he lumbered towards my mother, who lay on the floor, unable to move from the wind being knocked out of her lungs.

He reached for his second weapon, but Deva was already on him. Her rapier speared directly for his hand, and she skewered it dead center right before he grabbed the hilt. He gave a groan of pain but endured it. As he lifted his flaming blade and swung it full force toward her. She deflected again, this time her own weapon was bashed out of her grip. It twirled through the air, clattering to a halt at my feet.

He raised the point of his blade to spear her through. I reached down to pick her weapon back up and run it to her, but it would take me too long to reach her. In that millisecond, Robert tackled her out of the way. Yellow King fell to one knee, as the momentum of his empty strike carried him down. He struggled to stand and begin his march to my two recovering friends. There was no one else to stop him. Nothing in his way from killing my family, besides my hasty charge from his blind spot. As he raised his blade, the dull ashen mark my mother's fist made revealed a hole in his shining armor. As his blade arced downward, I focused my eyes, praying the rapier's tip would hit its mark.

I thrust my shaking hands upward, driving the blade I'd borrowed right for the hole in Yellow King's armor. I grit my teeth as time seemed to slow, and the tip of the rapier bounced right off his armor. I missed. I tripped forward into him, and we both toppled over with our weapons clattering to the ground. I rolled over to get as much space between us as I could. He was the first to sit up, and he managed to fall over in my direction. On the way down his fist slammed into my face, smashing my jaw so hard a tooth from the back flew out. Luckily, I couldn't feel it, as my entire face went numb from the sheer force behind the attack. I continued scrambling back, clinging to what little ringing consciousness I had left. I had no idea what I'd do now, I wasted my shot and failed everyone. Yellow King stood and raised his fists.

"What kind of Cosmic Slayer doesn't know how to use a blade?" he scoffed.

"I really don't belong in this line of work," I mumbled from bloody gums.

"You will pay the price for being an enemy of the Gods." He turned to his side, looking for his blade, but it wasn't on the ground. The dull side of the blade smashed into his mask, making a cascade avalanche of cracks. Half a dozen small rays of golden light shone out as Yellow King's mask shattered. He screamed in pure rage and lunged for his attacker, Robert. As he did with Leeroy, he grabbed Robert by the neck and held him in the air. He ripped the weapon out of Robert's hand.

"No!" I screamed. Yellow King tilted his head in my direction.

Without hesitation, he plunged the blade into Robert's stomach. I felt the searing steel cut into his flesh as it tore into his intestines. I had never felt pain like this. Not since Robert was abducted. I heaved and lurched forward, frozen in place. Yellow King ripped the blade out of poor Robert's belly. He threw Robert as hard as he could, and he tumbled through the air like a lifeless ragdoll. He flew over the Temple floor, all the way to the Blue Archway, sliding past the portal of light.

Before I could think, my legs pumped as I leaned forward. My left arm was entirely wrapped in the Elder Sign. The hate I felt for this monster was the heaviest emotion I'd ever felt, and I had no control over myself. My thoughts became wholly focused on killing Yellow King. My fingers outstretched, and they slipped through the jagged cracks in his mask, turning my fingers into bloodied strands as they touched whatever flesh was underneath. In that instant, we left the Temple of the Gods and entered not The White Room, but an abyss.

We tumbled through the air downward. I leaned headfirst, trying to speed up to the light below me. The whizzing sound of a thousand wisps and mind-threads came from above me, but I didn't care. No defense could stop me from deleting Yellow King's entire mind. I never tried removing all of someone's memories completely, but now was the time. I drew close to the light. It was a body, a form made from nothing but white rays. There were no features besides vague tubes that resembled arms and legs.

"Yellow King!" I screamed at it as I stretched my torn hand for the spirit body below me as the whispers grew stronger, they became defined. It wasn't the wisps, it was the voice of three people - but not the Yellow King. The voice was as one, but the feelings that came from it were nothing like his aura. This was the feeling of human beings. People in agony. A lost family of three, imprisoned inside this hellscape.

"Trapped! Help!" they begged. I was inches away from taking revenge on Yellow King for everything he'd done. For taking Mother and Robert away from me. From killing the Crafts and everyone on the Lonely Island. All I had to do was give the thought, and I'd rip their very essence apart, erased from reality itself. As I touched them - as I made contact with their fading souls. I had no choice, but to free them.

"Go." An overwhelming flash of light came over my vision. The burning fire in my arm faded and I felt an intense pinprick pain on the top of my forehead as

if the thing stabbed me.

“Thank… You.” The voices whispered. My falling slowed as if the air became thicker. Until my mind was oriented upright, and I realized I was back in the Temple of the Gods, my fingers on top of the broken stone mask.

“You… didn’t win.” Yellow King’s fading voice seethed. “Forgive me… Hastur.” I stepped back from his body, holding my bleeding forehead and watched as he trembled in place, and from head to toe, turned to stone. In moments he had transformed into a grey statue, lifeless and still. I jumped as Tristan’s labored grunt came from behind me as he brought the flat side of his two-handed greatsword down on the Yellow King’s crystallized body, smashing it into a million pebbles.

“We need to leave, now!” I’d never heard Tristan speak with such urgency. Whatever it meant, it could wait. I had to get to the blue Archway and get to Robert before he bled out. I knew enough from watching him work on others to know how to stop the bleeding, maybe I could make it in time.

My eyes panned for the Archway, but I was pulled by the elbow and dragged forward. I hadn’t noticed mother was screaming at me and was now dragging me away from the danger above. From up in the stars, the barrier bent and cracked as one of the forms burst through the wall of stars. It was the golden god, the master Yellow King served. My eyes watered at the sight, it pained me just to look at the horribly beautiful and enticing colors. The only thing that released me from its hypnotic grasp, was seeing the Green Archway light up underneath it.

“I’m going to get the Element; you go to the Waking World. I’ll meet you there soon.” Tristan pointed at mother and me to keep moving as he carried the unconscious Leeroy down the pathway. Deva followed close behind him.

“Where are they going? It’s dangerous over there, they have to come with us!” I pulled on mother as the gap between our separate paths grew.

“We don’t have time Joy, we need to go!” She pulled me away. From above, an instant and blinding flash of lightning fell on the center of the temple. The noise of a million thunderclouds boomed and the sheer vibrations made my bones rattle under my skin. Mother hurled me through the blue light, and I tripped, banging my head on steel ground that reverberated in an empty chamber.

In my haze of sight covered with blood and sweat, I looked back to see mother jump through the blue light wall and turn around. She pulled something out of her jacket and put her hand on the portal. She spoke in a strange language, but I couldn’t make out the words. I couldn’t hear anything. My breathing slowed, as everything faded to black.

27

Joy to the World

Coming back from the abyss was something I had become accustomed to in the last week. Usually, I didn’t feel like I had actually died, but right now, I was really feeling it. The slow fade in of light came in as usual, my eyelids having to adjust slowly by creaking open like massive doors on rusted hinges. There was no grogginess in my thoughts as I lay there, in a white room surrounded by curtains. A window was opened to my side, but I couldn’t see through it as overwhelming sunbeams came through.

There was a pattern, a strange noise like a lingering cry that kept popping up every second or so. The noise was diagonally behind me, but I didn’t have enough strength to tilt my head back. Probably a parrot or some house animal. I realized I didn’t have the strength to move at all, but if the past times I’d lost consciousness taught me anything I’d get my ability to at least stand sooner than later. My parents were so strong and fearsome, what could have made me so faint? Must have been a curse, or maybe I had a secret opossum relative. It wasn’t a funny thought, but it made me smile. It would have made Robert smile.

The tears started dripping down, I was powerless to stop them. After everything, it was all in vain. I failed him time after time. From the island to the Temple of the Gods, in the end, he died because he refused to let me go on by myself. What I did to deserve someone so wonderful was beyond me, but it was over. Tristan, Deva, and Leeroy might not be alive either. They might have got caught in the blast of lightning. Even if they made it through, who knows what was on the other side of that portal? No. I knew better than to hope now. I was completely and utterly crushed and demoralized. At least I was able to get my

mom back, but I would never have chosen to sacrifice my friends like that for my own selfish sake.

There was a movement in the corner of curtains by my bed. The sheets hanging from the wall rustled, and I saw light-skinned shins under them. The legs went into pretty teal shoes with tiny heels, a kind I'd never seen before. In a burst of movement, the curtain was shoved aside, and the woman was revealed. She wore a baggy blue outfit that only revealed her forearms and face. Her hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail, and she wasted no time coming to my side. I watched her, trying to pretend my eyes were shut, but peering out just enough to see as she fiddled with something on the wall next to me. She was messing with whatever was making the annoying noise. She turned away, but as she did, her eyes cut down to mine. She stopped, I'd been found out. I nearly held my breath, hoping she wasn't an agent of some new unknown enemy.

"Are you awake, miss?" she asked. I said nothing back. Partly because I was afraid, but mostly because I physically couldn't speak yet. "I'll call your mother, she'll be so happy to find out you're awake!" An honest cheeriness came from her voice, but I wasn't falling for it yet. She turned and began to wrap around the corner, closing the ceiling-curtains behind her. As she did, I saw another pair of shins behind hers. There was a movement, a struggling as the woman made a choking noise. Her legs were lifted off the ground as they kicked, she was being strangled. My heart began beating faster as the parrot noise to my side increased, signaling an intruder. I opened my mouth a crack, still unable to communicate and call for help. The new pair of legs stood still, then slowly turned. Their toes faced me and as they did, I realized those were no ordinary feet or legs. The bare toes moved forward, and as they did, the curtain was pushed away, revealing the attacker. From bone legs to bald skull, it was Spooky.

"What's up?" he greeted with a clay smile. I kept trying to speak, but I was unable. "Dehydrated I bet. You'll adjust in a moment. Don't worry, that woman

is still alive, I just couldn't have a nurse go running around telling everyone death was in the building. I wanted to congratulate you on your victory, even though it's partial. You actually made good on your deal, without trying to stab anyone in the back."

"You…helped," I eked, "Thank… you."

"Oh please, let's not make this personal. It's just good business. That being said, my colleagues were impressed by your performance, and we're looking forward to assisting with your efforts in the future. Some of them are more… distant and secret admirers. Others are downright naysayers and think the efforts I went through was far too high a cost for the return. But I think they're just scared of what you're capable of." The way he said 'colleagues' made me slowly raise an eyebrow.

"Don't say it… not more… skeleton people." He gave me a chuckle.

"No, no. I'm the only one."

"Spooky... I have a question," I coughed. He tilted his head.

"Your colleagues, do any of them know a good God? Or are all of them evil, like Yellow King?" He paused. Instead of coming back with something witty, he thought about his answer.

"If you mean the Elder Gods, no. But they're not evil either. They're just blind and uncaring masses of raw energy. No different than gravity or math. They exist and aren't even aware of it. If you mean the Avatars, most likely not. Power tends to corrupt the weak, and the Avatars have a lot of it. Of course, I have seen a few decent ones over time. Even a benevolent one or two. But those types usually don't make it far in this great Cosmic scheme."

"But, what about beyond the Elder Gods? Is there something bigger than them?"

“I don’t know.” I looked down, wondering if I could find the answer myself. “There were a few very, very ancient and primordial Gods before the Cosmic Cycle even started. But their history is lost and might as well have never happened. But what would I know, I was living under a rock in an abyss for seven years. Besides, of all the questions, why ask that?”

“I wanted to know if any of them might help me. I guess I’ll have to find the answers for myself. Thanks, Spooky.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m just the Messenger.” His sentence barely came out as an explosion of grey burst around his body, forcing him against the wall. As the dust settled, I saw none other than my mother standing in front of him, holding him in a choke with her forearm against his bone neck.

“Please don’t tell me you’re trying to choke a skeleton.” He rolled his eyes. Mother stepped back and filled in the space between he and I.

“You stay the hell away from her,” she hissed.

“Mom, calm down he’s my friend-”

“He is not your friend, Joy. I swear to god if you so much as-”

“-You’ll do nothing. Nothing but scheme, just like your father. Your daughter’s actions in a single week outclassed everything you’ve tried and miserably failed to do in your entire life. But I’m not here to berate you. I’m here to receive my part of the spoils. In fact, I think I deserve extra. If it wasn’t for me, you know who would have gotten out.” I looked at mother, as she grit her teeth. “You can’t stop it, Faith. Joy erased Yellow King’s Avatar and released the others. You didn’t win, you delayed the inevitable.”

“What can I say, my family is on a winning streak of kicking your ass.”

“Kicking their asses.” Spooky motioned around in a wide circular motion in the air. “The only being that’s given me any pleasure of competition in the last

four thousand years was Carter.” He leaned forward, his gemstone eyes flaring. “Now release this curse.” Mother tensed.

“I hate you so much,” she said, as she took out a book from inside her cloak. It was the same old and mangy tome I saw her take out before she sealed the blue Archway. She flipped to a page with a strange depiction on it. It was like a ‘T,’ but on top of the letter was an oval, like an elongated ‘O.’ She placed her hand on the page and raised it. The black image rose up out of the paper, popping out to life. As it left, the page turned blank. She grasped the now tangible thing in her hand and threw it at Spooky like a stick. He caught it.

“See? Was doing business like a big girl that hard?” He took the symbol and jammed it into the center of his chest. There was a burst of strange hues, like a negative form of moonlight as he did. “Ahh, feels good. I might have skin before New Year’s.” He sounded almost giddy.

“Stay away from us.” Mother turned away.

“Now that I’m free, I have better things to do.” He stepped to the side and turned to me. The shape at the center of his chest replaced the ball of yarn that used to connect his bones. The strings coming out had already grown several times over. It had mutated, growing like muscles of shadow. They were horribly deformed, and the skin swirled as if infected with a billion worms swimming in unison. Something besides the strands of fluid flowing across his bones stood out. He was taller. No, he just stood straighter now. The slight hunchback arch in his back was gone. The symbolic markings under his eyes stood out even more as if they now had an ethereal glow. The purple gemstones were gone from his eye sockets completely.

“Now I have a question for you,” his voice lost the remainder of its nasal-ness and grew deeper. “How did you do that? That trick with Yellow King. I’d only seen it once before, eons ago.”

“I… I don’t know. I just saved the people trapped inside his body instead of hurting them.” Spooky tilted his head at hearing my response.

“Fair enough. Either way, I love what you’ve done with your hair, Joy Carter.” He turned around, raising his arms and pulling them apart as if ripping open a ribcage. As he did, he opened a window like opening in the room, just big enough to pass through. On the other side was a field of corn in a thunderstorm. As he stepped through and the portal snapped together, closing as if ever there.

“Wait!” But it was too late. He was gone. I scrambled to get up, but my body still refused to obey. Only now did I realize my left hand was covered in bandages, a sign of my last battle. Mother was quick to lay me back down.

“Careful Joy. You’ve been asleep for three days.”

“Three days?!” We don’t have time to sit around and wait, we have to get to that Archway and find him and the others. They could be in trouble.” I tried pushing her away, but my spaghetti arms were no match.

“It’s more complicated than that, Joy. But don’t worry. Tristan is with them, they’ll survive. When we escaped from the Temple of the Gods Yellow King was able to release his master before he died. Luckily for us, it was just one, and not the other four. I had to seal the Archway on our side to keep him from getting into our world. Spooky said he dealt with the thing, but I don’t know if it’s safe to travel through the Archways yet. Either way, we can’t go back until you’ve recovered, and I’ve helped you learn how to control your Elder Sign.”

“But what about Robert? He was hurt, I can’t just stay here.”

“He’s okay. Yellow King missed his spine, and the heat from his blade seared the wound shut. He’s probably getting breakfast right now.”

“Let me see him!”

“Alright, jeez.” Mom helped me sit up in the metal bed.

“You’ve got your father’s invincibility, that’s for sure.”

“That, or I’m really lucky.”

“I don’t know. You’re capable of a lot more than you think.”

“What am I capable of?”

“Saving the Cosmos.”

“I’ll barely be able to save my art career with this hand.” I lifted my limp left hand in its bandages, it made her laugh.

“Lucky for you, there are more art and art schools here than anybody would ever need or want.”

“Too much art? That’s sacrilege.” She laughed even harder.

“Wait till you find Pinterest.”

“Pinterest? Who’s he?”

“We have a lot of work to do,” she sighed. “Here, try getting up.” Mother assisted me as I slowly stood. Only now did I realize I was wearing a long, bland dress with nothing underneath.

“Mother!” I quieted my voice. “Who stole my undergarments?”

“Calm down, Joy. Nobody stole your clothes. I have your dress back at the apartment. We’ll drive over there once we get you checked out.”

“I hope the carriage won’t be too rough, I’m so sore.”

“Oh boy,” mother sighed, “This is gonna be fun.” She led me out of my small room and down a hall painted with interesting colors. The hall was empty besides a nurse or two walking about in their strange yet elegant dresses. She took me to the end of the hall, where we turned around after touching the wall. It was a sleek metal box. But then the front wall began to close in from both sides, and I tried to step out of the obvious trap, but mother held me back.

“This is an elevator Joy, don’t panic.”

“What’s that?”

“It goes up and down. It’s like stairs, but faster.”

“Like, climbing a rope?”

“It’s exactly like that.”

“We’ve conquered stairs in this World?”

“We’ve conquered a lot more than that. I don’t even know where to start.” It seemed like she was having trouble keeping up with my questions already. After a moment, the trap doors opened, and we stepped out of the confined space. Quickly the halls became filled with people, nurses, male and female like. But there were others. Hundreds of people walking around us. By the time we left the hall and entered an impossibly massive area that reminded me of the temple on the plateau. Everything here looked so different, so alien to any natural material a building should be made out of. Mother guided me to a desk as she began speaking to an older woman behind it.

I kept my eyes on the people. So many shapes and sizes. It was like Kingsport all over again. But this version was so much more alien. The clothes I couldn’t understand. So many colors and patterns with seams in the wrong places. Children wore shirts with art plastered on them while adults wore entire types of clothes I’d never dreamed of. The smell of sizzling meat and forks hitting their plates came from my side. There was a dining hall with people of all kinds eating around circle white tables. I stepped toward the room, passing walls made of glass, invisible yet so real. I passed by a few of the tables in a trance as found who I was looking for. Robert was sitting at a table, eating soup. I strode up to his table and stood only a few feet away, he was lost in his meal. He had a bandage wrapped around his lower chest, and he sat in a chair with two large wheels on the side, like a miniature wagon.

“How’s your back?” He stopped and looked up at me in surprise.

“You’re awake!” He tried standing but fell back, wincing.

“Robert! Don’t hurt yourself.” I grabbed him, but he waved me off. I took a seat right next to his.

“The doctors say the damage isn’t permanent. I should be able to walk in a few months.”

“I’m just happy to see you’re alive.” I smiled. Robert put his spoon down and reached into his pockets. He fumbled for something, then raised a small box.

“Do you remember this?”

“That’s the same box that was in the mail for me on the Island, I forgot about it.”

“So did I.” He hesitated for a moment, thinking of what to say. He opened the box, revealing what was inside. It was a golden ring. Grandmother Phillis’ ring.

“She gave that to you so you could give it to me?” I sniffled. Robert nodded.

“Took you long enough,” I smiled as his face turned the same color as his tomato soup.

“Me? I risked my life how many times for you and you couldn’t get a hint?” He playfully folded his arms and looked away. “But, we both saved each other I guess. Maybe when I get better, we can find the River in The Sky together?”

“I think I’d like that,” I smiled.

“I’m not sure what happens next. Do I put it on your finger or...”

“I think so.”

“Oh, okay.” He took the ring and slid it onto my ring finger.

“Does this mean we’re married?” He almost whispered.

“I think it means we’re going to get married, but we have to have a party first.”

“Oh, jeez. I don’t understand any of this stuff,” he shrugged. “Oh yeah, your mom says we should be able to go find the others soon.”

“She told me. But Robert… What is this place? It’s so strange.”

“Come on, I’ll wheel over to the entrance. You need to see something,” he motioned for me to follow him as he spun the wheels at his side, letting him slide across the stone floor. We went past the desk with the people in fine outfits and to the doors.

“This world is way, way more complicated than Kingsport. They travel in carriages that move faster than arrows.” He told me fanatically as we approached the doors of glass. Something impossibly fast zoomed by outside a long plane of glass, at least three times faster than even the fastest horse could be. I carefully made my way to the glass, but I couldn’t find a knob.

There was a slight reflection of myself in the glass. Something on my head caught my vision, I narrowed my eyes, leaning forward. On the front right corner of my hairline was a small patch of hair, completely discolored from the rest. It was blonde, bright, golden blonde. At the root, the color seemed to surge into my skin, like cracked earth infested with rays of scattering sunlight. It was Yellow King’s color.

But despite everything, it was still me.

I jumped as the glass wall opened, and a man walked past me. He spoke aloud as he held a thin black brick up to his ear. He didn’t even touch the door, he simply walked, and it opened for him - some sort of rune magic I assumed. I carefully walked through, making sure to give the barrier enough time to slide out the way. There was another exit in my way, and this one acted the same. I

stepped out of the hospital, onto the stone floor and into the sunlight. I nearly jumped back as one of the impossibly fast yellow boxes zoomed past me with a loud rude noise. Like a cow's moo, but much shorter. I watched as the thing sped away. Then I looked up in horror as I realized I was surrounded by dozens, hundreds of buildings that went up as high as the purple mountain on the Leng Plateau. Something about the sight was so familiar as if I'd seen it all before in a fever dream from years ago.

"Joy! Don't walk off like that, these streets can be dangerous." Mom grabbed my arm and pulled me off the crunching ground.

"A-are those temples, mom?" I pointed with my shaky good hand.

"Temples to the almighty dollar, yeah." She put her hands on her hips.

"Dollar? Who's the Almighty Dollar? Is that another Elder God?" How mom could have survived growing up in such a terrible place that made the Leng Plateau look like child's play was beyond me. No wonder she sent me to the Lonely Island.

"Money. Like coins, but more flexible. You'll learn along the way."

"What is this place?" I turned to face the other side, and a mile away, I saw it. Across the sea was a green giant of a woman, standing on top of an alter spanning hundreds of feet across on this side alone. She stood hundreds of feet high and wore robes the same color of her skin. She held a weapon of fire in her hand, raising it to the sky, summoning something in the cloudy heavens I couldn't see. In her other hand was a tome, a spell book, I imagined. She wore a crown of spikes pointing out in all directions. What sort of Elder God this statue could represent, I couldn't tell. Mother and I must have come here to stop her, The Almighty Dollar. She had to be even worse than Yellow King.

"What is that?" I pointed at the structure. Mom laughed.

"Don't worry, it's not going to eat you. That's the Statue of Liberty, it's

supposed to welcome you here.”

“She doesn’t make me feel very welcome.” She laughed even harder, but quickly put her index finger up to her chin while looking at the distant thing.

“Maybe letting you grow up on a small island in the Dreamlands wasn’t the best idea. You’ve got a lot to catch up on.” We walked back up the steps.

“We both do,” Robert agreed, he was just as lost.

“Oh, I know!” Mom pointed skyward. “We should have a welcome back party!”

“A party?” I reached out and held Robert’s hand. “I think that’d be fun.”

The End.

Thank you for reading The Waking World!
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