

AMONGS

THE AMAZING



JORAHKAI

AMOS THE AMAZING



JORAH KAI



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A MESSAGE OF HOPE

FROM YOUR FRIENDS AT MORE PUBLISHING:

NEVER GIVE UP!

“From a small seed, a mighty trunk may grow.”

Aeschylus



AMOS

THE AMAZING

The world's spiciest ice cream, a trip to Chongqing's rural countryside, and a strange collection of curious belongings begin this unforgettable tale that mixes Solarpunk science fiction and high fantasy for a thrilling modern fairytale.

Amos, a puckish 12-year-old boy who hides his insecurities behind a mask of mischief, dons strange artifacts he uncovers from his father's childhood bedroom. A peculiar power pulses through his body as he slips into a world of magic and monsters, where the dangerous-amber-eyed huli jing—a nine-tailed fox-spirit—draws him out, steals his soul, and poisons his grandpa.

Against all odds, Amos chases the fox into the Dreamland, where he meets friends and foes along the way on a perilous and fantastic journey to recover his soul before all is lost. A spine-tingling adventure full of imaginative characters and dazzling creatures, Amos the Amazing will delight adults, teens, and anyone who dares peer beyond the shadows.



SPECIAL THANKS TO:

The City of Chongqing, China, a lovely place
to eat the world's spiciest food

R.A. Salvatore, for writing the books I loved growing up, &
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*If wishes were fishes,
there'd be oceans of dreams*

This is a book of second chances

DEDICATED TO:

The Muses,

Who are Told

They Won't Amount to Much

But Don't Believe It

—Belief is a Powerful Form of Magick—

And When Presented With a Glass Ceiling,

Grab Their Hammers, Protect Their Eyes,

And Smash It

My parents, for supporting my love of reading and magick

My family, for your eternal patience and endless love

My friends, who made me kinder

My foes, who made me stronger

Andra & Medusa,

Angels of the Dreamlands

&

Most importantly to my readers,

This book is for you.

Never
stop
dreaming.

INVOCATION OF THE MUSE

O Divine Poesy, O Dreamer, In Spirito,
Summer Queen of the Fae
Please grasp, with me,
At the straws we've cast, and together
Weave them into the most exquisite of yarns,
for the boy holds within him great potential
but he must labor with vast application,
and season his sorrow with sacrifice.

As he journeys; he will learn the value of friendship,
and the prick of arrows that stem from treachery,
it's a vain hope, but let us strive in vain,
entwined, weaving the tale for all to enjoy.

If our illusions have offended,
close your eyes, and all is mended,
you have only rested here,
while these visions did appear,
upon dead pages, word by word,
a tattooed legend, overheard,
about a boy, and his cat, from Chongqing,
a normal boy who might be King.

Make the tale sing for us, a-musing
in all the shimmering facets of Elsewhere.
For the Dreamlands lie in wait for all of us,
and if you search enough, you may find me there.

R'amen

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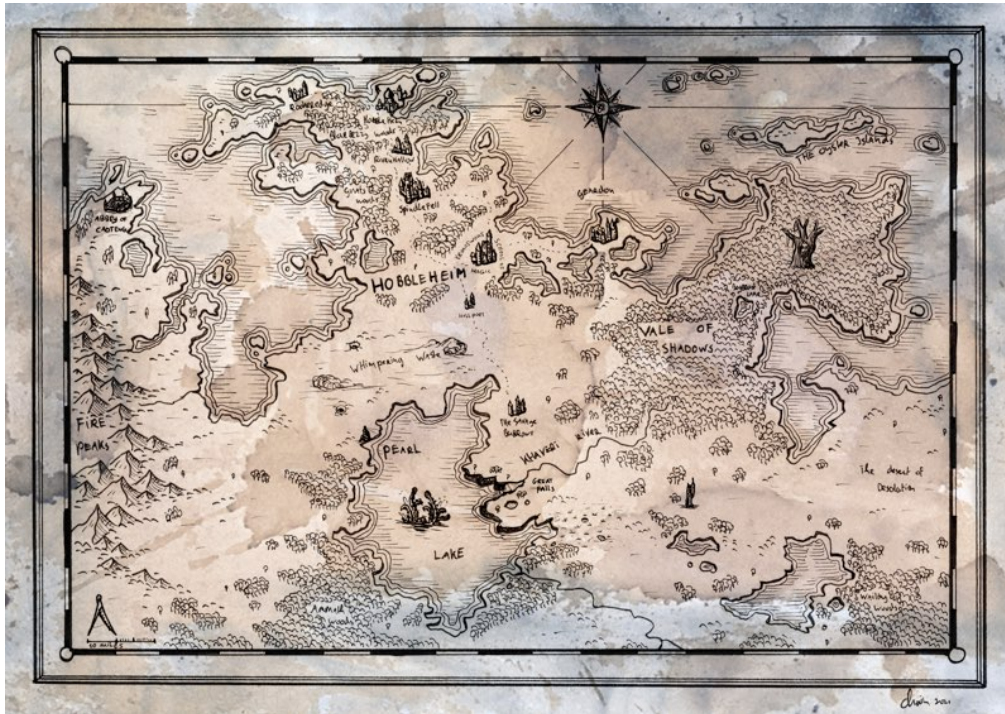
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MAP OF CHONGQING



MAP OF AN'YATRA



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“All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.”

- Edgar Allan Poe

CHAPTER 1

THE BOOKSTORE



Alice slipped inside the bookstore and tiptoed down the cubist staircase. She sighed, agog at the panoramic view of thousands of beloved books. Walls of tomes lined several floors above and below her, and staircases cut every which way; a surrealist Salvadore Dali painting redefining her sense of gravity. All divisions were crystal-clear glass to give the impression of being at the center of a shifting Rubik's Cube of books. Photos on the internet of Zhong Shuge, Solarpunk Chongqing's newest architectural darling amongst hipsters and the literati, had impressed her, but being here was breathtaking. She'd only been back in China a few weeks and could hardly remember what her years of study in the Sprawl had been like.

She took a moment, in a reverie, to snap a few photos. Turning the camera to herself, she struggled to capture the immensity of the bookstore from an arms-length selfie. *I should have brought my droid.* Never one to give up without a fight, she set her timer to three seconds, and she snapped a handful of promising shots. Suddenly feeling the weird sensation of being watched, she spun around. No, there was no one there, it seemed, it was all her imagination. Alice examined the photos; her hair, a bright red bob cut popular among her friends in cosplay culture, contrasted well with her

blue nautical costume, and her cherry red lips accentuated her lily-white skin. *Perfect. Who needs droids? Not I!* Alice posted the picture to her socials, tagging the bookstore with the caption, “#ZhongShuge is amazing!! Better than I’d imagined! #booklife” The W4-hashtags infused the post with her excitement and the positive attitude that in 2038, made her posts a viral sensation, and she was already anticipating the sweet dopamine hit that accompanied the stream of rabid excitement when her social algorithms went platinum. It wouldn’t take long.

She skipped down the stairs to look for her favorite sections, quickly locating science fiction and fantasy. Soon enough, she was entranced by the spines of famous and fantastical titles. A front-facing hardcover with a lovely frame jumped out, and she picked up a copy to examine: Guy Gavriel Kay, *The Fionavar Tapestry*. A sticker proclaimed it a special 50th-anniversary edition in gold leaf hardcover.

Her heart skipped a beat, and her stomach fluttered as she held this gorgeous tome. Leather-bound hardcover books held a special place in her heart. The cover illustration was a classic twist on off-Camelot fiction, based on the stories of King Arthur. It was a thick, hefty book. Thumbing through the beautiful gold-leaf pages, she paused to enjoy the occasional chapter illustrations. Reaching the back cover, she winced at the obnoxious sticker price. She couldn’t afford it today.

“Ah,” sang a man behind her. He leaned against the K section sign on the wooden shelf. “You have good taste.”

“Thanks,” she mumbled, not looking in his direction. A little sorrowful, she put *The Fionavar Tapestry* back.

“Books are like an addiction,” he continued with a musical lilt. “You always want more. Those who don’t read live only

one life, and those who devour the pages of fantasy books are blessed with thousands...”

Alice glanced at him. A foreigner, yet vaguely familiar, was standing next to a glass display of new releases. He wore a wool cap, round glasses, and a scarf tied over a grey and brown cardigan—hardly the clothes for a sweltering Chongqing day. But something was familiar about him. *Was he on TV? She'd seen him somewhere.* “Mhm, yeah,” she said a little more enthusiastically. “Hey, are you that guy from TV? Wood straws?” Alice asked with a chuckle.

“Bamboo,” the man said. “You know those old plastic ones were no good for anyone.”

“That’s cool,” she said. “You must have made a fortune off that.”

“Gave it all away,” the man said with a shrug. “To the fishes.”

Alice smirked. This guy was too much.

“If you like Kay, you might enjoy this story...” he paused, scanning the shelf. His fingers danced across the books.

“Hmm,” he mumbled. “Odd. They don’t seem to have it yet.” He shrugged and looked at his watch. “A shame.”

“What story?” Alice asked but didn’t wait for an answer. She moved on to the *L* section. Adventure called her name.

“It’s the story of a boy ... about your age, well, when you were younger. Odd boy. Book lover,” said the man.

“Never heard of it,” she said. She was fishing again, her fine fingers running down the lovely spines of big, beautiful books. *Ursula K Le Guin, Kathryn Le Veque, and David Leadbeater* caught her eye. *Was that a new one?*

“Amos.”

She froze, and her breath caught in her chest. *Amos?* “What?” Alice gasped.

“His name is Amos. You seem curious...let me tell you about it,” he said. “I had the book launch here, actually. It’s a lovely place.”

Book launch? He’s a writer? She continued on down through *M*. Alice didn’t have particular plans this Saturday afternoon and intended to keep it that way. This was her *day off*. *But a writer, sharing a story*, she thought. That was something special. She could blog about that. “Um, sure, go ahead,” she said.

“To the café, Miss...”

“Alice,” Alice said.

The Storyteller, not seeming the least bit surprised, gave her a perfunctory smile. A little wide, and Alice thought of the Cheshire Cat from her favorite childhood story.

“Alice,” he repeated, and marched off.

She glanced at her mobile and smiled at the stream of new likes. *I could walk away*, she thought, but instead, she plodded after him to the bookstore café. *It could be any Amos, right? But she had a friend once... long ago, and his name was Amos.*

The man sat down near a window, away from a group of friends talking loudly and Alice joined him at a small table. Outside was an overcast, rainy day, but at least it was fresh. Yesterday had been blisteringly hot until the rain came. Soon, a robot waiter scooted over, a glowing set of cute anime eyes winked garishly as it bubbled a kawaii greeting. The robot

raised the tray, and they took their drinks. It sang in appreciation to be of service, spun around, and rolled away.

The Storyteller continued, “I guess it begins years ago with a young married couple on their second anniversary...let’s see, *Once Upon a Time*....”

Alice smiled nonchalantly, but suddenly this random event seemed anything but. She started to ask him what this was about, but her words caught in her throat, so she simply swallowed the lump and listened as the day slipped away. The Storyteller painted a fantastic tale with a lyrical flourish. Soon she was lost, floating, somewhere between *magick* and memories, traveling dreamily through time and space.



Gift Basket



Once upon a time, two young lovers crossed under the arched stone gate of the new Anju Ancient Town on a warm, sunny summer afternoon.

Today was their second anniversary and the grand reopening of the newly renovated 1,000-year-old pedestrian village. Red lanterns festooned the trees around the scenic gate and hung from the beautiful, carved arched roofs. The vivid Sichuan opera characters, garbed in red and yellow silk,

guarded the opening, each with one hand holding a closed fan, the other a colorful sack.

Tian, a handsome, broad-shouldered company man, walked with his pretty young wife, the schoolteacher Mei, who was flabbergasted by the sights and smells. Their hands intermingled, despite the sweaty weather. Tourists from around the country flocked to experience the local culture. City workers had promised new attractions, cultural performances, and an endless sea of delicious, spicy snacks.

“What a beautiful day,” said Mei, inhaling the gorgeous aroma of fragrant orange flowers. A smile creased her serene, doll-like face. Tian nodded, smiling because she was smiling. As tourists buzzed around the sea of vendors, he pointed in the direction of her favorite snack. Tian had always had an excellent sense of smell and an almost supernatural sense of direction.

“Let’s try some,” he said.

“Oh, so stinky,” she said.

Tian pulled a single yuan from his pocket and handed it to the aproned chef. “Stinky tofu,” he said with a laugh.

They waited in the shade of a tree while a paper bowl was filled, and then they blew it cool before tasting the freshly fried treat.

“It smells like baby poo,” Tian said, laughing with his mouth full.

“But it’s sweet and crunchy,” Mei said. “A delicacy!”

Walking and laughing, they reminisced about their last time here, pointing out new shops and cosmetic changes until they came upon the courtyard. A large crowd was hushed as they arrived, and a Sichuan Opera performance had just begun.

The two settled under a shady tree with a good view of the stage.

Musicians in colorful, silk costumes banged drums with gusto. Sweat poured and sprayed from the stage as the music built and a pair of dancers weaved to and fro. Mei gasped as the actors strutted and teased the crowd until they unexpectedly changed faces, a movement so quick that when Mei blinked, she missed it. She laughed and punched Tian on the shoulder. The drums beat, and their faces transformed again. A red and white mask switched to blue and yellow. Mei clapped and cheered. To her, it was *magick*.

The music's tension rose and built, and the dancers circled, fans waving. The audience cheered and then hushed, anticipating a change would come soon, but the actors teased them, prolonging the anticipation, until in a flash, one transformed to a black and yellow mask, the other to a gold and red mask, and everyone applauded. The performers turned, and the masks repeatedly swapped in a crescendo, four times to coincide with the frenetic drumbeats. The audience was ecstatic, and the actors bowed their heads. When they rose, they revealed their true faces to the crowd.

“Oh, how do they do it?” Mei asked. Tian shrugged helplessly, a warm smile adorning his sun-kissed cheeks. Later, Tian and Mei walked down a narrow cobblestone road. The couple sampled local spicy noodles, savoring the delightful mix of hot peppers and vinegar. Tian got another bowl of stinky but delicious black tofu. Before they'd finished, he bought a bag of fresh sesame crackers, and they came upon a Dragon dance already underway. Tongliang people were no strangers to Dragons, and for thousands of years, Dragon culture has shaped them, far beyond mere dance and lanterns.

Historians say the Dragon spirit is deeply rooted in the land and its people.

“You know we’re going to Beijing this year?” Tian said, whispering into Mei’s ear.

“That’s unbelievable,” Mei said in mock surprise. She’d heard this story a dozen times before.

“It’s an international Dragon dance competition. Countries from all over the world will be there, but I think Tongliang will win.” He grinned, and she plucked a sesame seed from between his teeth and kissed him so he would be quiet and enjoy the show.

The fluffy, gold-adorned red-and-yellow-dragon bobbed and weaved, hiding a dozen young acrobats that controlled it with sticks. The line between Dragon and men blurred to become one spirit entity. It danced for minutes as the young performers spun and sweated, and when it was over, they cheered and moved on.

Tian and Mei had been hoping for a baby these two years but had not yet been blessed, and the pressure from family elders was heating up. They walked along the boulevard to a bench in front of a large iron door, and Tian squeezed her hand. “Let’s stop here,” he said. “It’s where...”

“I remember, Tian,” she said and smiled, looking around.

“It was two years ago, today...” Tian said.

Mei nodded, smiling. “I know, husband, where I said ‘yes.’”

“So, in honor of those two wonderful years, you know, I wanted to—”

The banging procession of a dramatic parade reenactment became louder. First came a line of men in gold and red silks, crashing on their gong, and then followed stewards in blue and black, carrying the standards of an ancient lord, followed by flag bearers in burgundy and gold, carrying the flags of ancient dragons.

The loud gonging drowned out his following words, so he stopped and watched as the county chief, a round-bellied man in red with a long black beard, walked by with another in blue and grey. Both wore traditional black Ming dynasty hats. The procession passed them by, and the palanquin came along, a litter carried by six servants in red, bobbing up and down.

The windows were covered with green silk, but for a moment, Mei froze, eyes locked with a face inside the cart. Mei caught a glimpse of the shape. First, for a moment, it manifested as a beautiful woman with sharp angular features, but then the curtain shifted, and Mei saw a wild, ear-to-ear grin of something wild, and not quite human. A cat? Or ... something *supernatural*. Her heart skipped a beat.

“My imagination,” she mumbled. *No one ever rode in these reenactment carriages, much less a Cheshire cat. But how wonderful this new Anju was, and how unique and magickal their anniversary was shaping up to be.*

When the procession had disappeared down the road, Tian opened his mouth to speak again, but he stared, stunned at the ground. His jaw hung open. Mei raised her eyebrows and followed his gaze down to the cobblestone steps. Her heart jumped again. Anju Ancient Town was full of surprises.

A basket had appeared at her feet, and inside was a baby boy swathed in a red fabric blanket. Mei picked up the boy, gazing into his curious eyes. He did not cry, and when she

touched him, he grabbed hold of her extended fingers with his tiny hands. He wore a silver necklace doubled over his tiny neck, and on it was a silver ring with the insignia of a triple spiral that looked like three trees, weaved together. There was no name or number inside the basket, only a tiny piece of paper with a script the pair had never seen before. Mei held the boy, entranced.

“A treasure,” she mouthed but was too stunned to say any more. And so, he was named.

Eventually, the moment passed, and Tian stood up, arms crossed across his chest. “We must contact the police. Someone has lost their child.”

Mei was stunned. *How could he?* “Tian.... no. We will listen for anyone who is looking for a child. We’ll wait right here.”

Tian shook his head. “We can’t—”

“We will wait all day,” Mei insisted. “And we will come back tomorrow and the day after and wait with him all day for someone to claim him.”

Tian put up a finger and opened his mouth to interject, but Mei beat him to it. “If no one does, by the end of the third day....” Mei said, trailing off.

“It’s not how things are supposed to-,” Tian said, but watching her hold the blanketed boy, a tear came to his eye, and he wiped it away. “Okay, okay, Mei. I’ll run and get some milk.”

Tian went out to find a pharmacy and returned, his bald head sweaty and looking a little euphoric to be Cosplay Dad, waving a milk bottle. Mei was still waiting in the shade in front of the iron door. She rocked the babe, who was now

sleeping. She offered him the nipple of the bottle, and he woke and began to drink. He did not cry or whine in the sticky heat or the bustling commotion.

In the shade of green trees, they sat almost statuesque on the stone bench for three days and nights.

Much to their surprise, there was no talk of missing boys or distraught parents. They took him back home at the end of the third night and decided to discuss it no further. He was their little miracle, their Treasure. Tian had locked up the mysterious jewelry and bundle of robes in case the family came looking for him one day. But days turned to months, and months to years.

Sometimes Mei dreamt of that face, the endless grin, behind the silken curtain of the litter, but she never told a soul.

Tian continued his job on the road, returning from business as often as possible, and Mei kept teaching her beloved students and raising their beautiful baby boy. A year later, they got their second miracle. The following spring, Mei gave birth to a daughter, and they called her Grace. She had the most remarkable eyes, one brown and one green, but the doctors said she was perfectly healthy, if prone to frequent and sudden cat naps. They were a perfect, totally normal family, with only a couple of very minor exceptions, and for many years lived mostly quiet, happy, everyday lives. Until one day, they didn't.



“So, it’s a story... about a young couple in old China?” Alice asked, yawning. She tilted her head blankly and gave a dramatic sigh.

“No, no, no, definitely not,” The Storyteller said and smiled. “It’s about Amos, and the fate of the world, and you’re about to meet him.”

CHAPTER 2

THE DEATH WAIVER



Powered by imagination and sugar, a 12-year-old boy in a cherry-red bathrobe wound through a crowded pedestrian street of the floating Hong Ya Dong shopping plaza on the back of a magickal feathered river serpent. Bringer of knowledge, inventor of books, and protector of Chongqing, the river spirit bearing Amos sprinkled through tiny pores in the tightly packed crowd, marinating in the pungent spicy haze of a myriad of remarkable delicacies.

Amos glanced back to see Alice and Ruby Red scowling at him as he jostled by grannies and their service droids, stacked-high with bags and parcels. He crept like a spider monkey through webs of playing children. The pair of girls followed out of curiosity, or perhaps accountability to their parents, for Amos was always getting into some kind of trouble and the hot wind of their disapproval blew his invisible sails to full mast, pushing him forward until his target was in sight. As he scampered past stilted, Bayu-style antique buildings, the mid-morning sun shone an eerie hue from the mysteriously crimson sky onto deep brown arched rooftops. The somewhere-post-apocalyptic Solarpunk glow illuminated traditional wood-paneled buildings carved with stories of heroes, myths, and

monsters. Amos was not a hero, but today he would become a legend.

He patted the folded *death waiver* in his housecoat pocket and smiled. He could see Mrs. Pi's Beijing-style Ice Cream ahead. "Respiro Del Diavolo," he whispered, "Devil's Breath: today you will be mine!"

Above their heads shone blinding, radiant megacity skyscrapers that reflected the red sky in the morning, *shepherd's warning*. Up there was a pulsing chrome futuristic super city. But here on the cliff, life was timeless. Amos outstretched his arms like wings as he whirled by flying red lanterns and glowing fluorescent signs depicting noodles, dumplings, and snacks of every variety.

In surprise, children and grandparents pointed to the sky at the butterfly effect that began with a peculiar sandstorm from the endless red tundra of the Mongolian desert to cover the capital and push far west. It gave him the slightest edge, and Amos pushed on.

With each step of his white bunny slippers, he silenced his classmates who had laughed at him. Each step brought him closer to sweet vindication—*liar, weirdo, bookworm*. The bullies' voices rattled around his head rent-free, like broken brackets, but would soon be silenced. They had called his plan *impossible*, but today, *Amos would do impossible things*.

The Hong Ya Dong tourist shopping plaza was a recent facelift to the ancient State of Ba fortress that once stood upon this cliff for millennia. Today the floating plaza, modeled after Miyazaki's iconic bathhouse from Amos' favorite movie, the classic anime *Spirited Away* (and inspired by a real place, *Dogo Onsen*), was universally popular for its unrivaled view of the two rivers and its unique selection of sweets.

“Hurry up!” Alice shouted to Ruby as they scampered through the crowd after Amos.

Amos pushed on, determined to collect the largest bag of sweet treats that any boy had ever seen before he conquered la crème de la crème of spicy ice cream in a viral video, no less. As he ran, a stick full of rainbow cotton candy sprang askew. His other hand clinched a bag full of candies of all flavors: sweet, salty, sour, and of course, spicy. In Chongqing, spicy was the ruling class of all tastes, and Amos, despite his obsession with pop music, was a Chongqing boy.

Alice and Ruby Red also held bags of local sweets. The three had grown up in the shadow of their parents’ friendship. As their families chatted along the boardwalk, they raced to meet destiny. Amos would be the first at his school to try the world’s spiciest ice cream. The challenging and strenuous school year had finished only yesterday, and their scores would arrive next week, and this gap would be stuffed with sweets while they hoped for acceptance to the prestigious Chongqing Foreign Language School, a nearly 100-year-old academy full of amazing opportunities.

“Is he really gonna eat it?” asked Ruby Red, nearly out of breath.

“Of course he is! Amos is crazy!” Alice said and rolled her eyes. They were on babysitting duty *again*.



Alice quirked a brow and peered long and hard into the Storyteller’s eyes for any sign of mockery or teasing, but he was telling the story with focused intensity. Again, she wanted to ask how he knew, but her voice caught in her throat.



“We’re here,” Amos called, hopping atop a wooden bench to scan the crowd. He was only a small sprint, through a sea of children and grandmothers, to the front of the line. Amos hopped down and weaved like grass in the wind.

Alice grinned as Amos crammed to fit inside unorthodox crevices between humans, like an alien or a bug. “What a weirdo,” she said, dissolving into side-splitting laughter. Ruby Red blushed from her arched fringe down to her chin, but they followed close enough to keep him in sight. Quite shortly, the trio stood at the front of the line. Amos wriggled a mountain of cotton candy obnoxiously under the nose of old Mrs. Pi.

“What’ll it be, girls?” Pi asked them, squinting at them as her round glasses slid down the long, winding road of her nose.

Amos gave her a deep, manly cough, blinking back the salty tears of a sensitive poet boy.

“Or boys, whatever, quick.”

“Vanilla,” said Alice, rubbing a hand through her pixie hair.

“Strawberry,” said Ruby Red, blushing harder and biting her lip.

Amos’ eyes were wild. “Spicy chili oil ice cream,” he said breathlessly. “Respiro Del Diavolo.” He waved his left hand and jiggly mass of rainbow cotton candy, tracing an intricate sigil of conjuration magick to summon the spicy treat. Breath of the Devil was a brand-new, imported version of spicy Chongqing ice cream stuffed with Carolina Reapers, the

world's hottest chili peppers. Developed by Aldwych Café and Ice Cream Parlor in Glasgow, Scotland, it was the world's spiciest ice cream. Mrs. Pi had refined it and introduced it at this year's Chongqing Spice Festival. At approximately 1,569,888 Scoville units (500 times hotter than Tabasco), she'd become an instant local legend. The ice cream was so hot that it could only be sold to legal adults by government decree after signing a *death waiver*.

Mrs. Pi glared down at the boy. He was four feet and change and wafer-thin, with long, shaggy straight hair that fell to the bottom of his neck in the back. It hung unevenly around his tanned face in the front with fairy wisps at the side that almost, but not completely covered, huge, slightly pointy ears. Behind thick large, coke-bottle-lens glasses, Amos' comically wide eyes bulged, and his mouth stretched into an obnoxious ear-to-ear grin. The bombastic boy stood on a crate in a bright cherry-red bathrobe over striped blue and white pajama pants.

She sneered as if offended by the sight of him. "Oh, no," Mrs. Pi groaned as the crowd grew quiet and leaned forward to listen carefully. "You've gotta be 18—"

"—and a healthy, wealthy, wise adult, or in the accompaniment of a flying Unicorn," Amos said with a smile.

Mrs. Pi shook her head, "No, you have to—"

"Yes, sign a waiver," Amos squawked dismissively but quickly pulled the corners of his mouth up into the painfully-imitated approximation of a charming smile. His left hand slipped into his bathrobe pocket and produced a folded piece of paper.

She accepted the form with obvious annoyance, shook it open, and pushed her glasses against the bridge of her nose to scrutinize it closely. "You are *not* 18, boy," she said.

“It’s for my dad,” Amos said. “He’s a doctor, and he’s on a work call, life and death stuff you see, but he can wave at you.” Amos waved, laughing as his father’s thick hair blew about madly in the wind. His mother’s intense gaze settled on him for a moment, and the adults waved back.

He caught his reflection in the shop window and froze - in a rare moment of self-awareness - at how absolutely ridiculous he looked. He was painfully childish, in pajamas and a bathrobe, with a face only Picasso could love. All his best-laid plans seemed foolish as he ran his hand through the bird’s nest of hair, wiping the sweat from the back of his neck. The kids in the class were right. *A funny-looking bookworm ...weirdo—it wasn’t going to work. They’re gonna call me a liar.*

Mrs. Pi considered the signed waiver and the nodding faces and waving hands of Amos’ guardians less than 100 feet away. The crowd of faces pressed closer, many holding paper money or mobile payment apps at the ready. This was *good* for business. “Don’t you try it, boy- it’s too spicy. Take it straight —”

“—to my dad, who will reward me for being a diligent and responsible young man,” Amos said with a very innocent grin. Mrs. Pi shuddered and averted her gaze. She knew his type.

The momentary dance with his demons passed as Amos realized that it was going to work. His eyes blazed with ambition, and he saw himself as he wanted to be seen- a teenager, college-bound with long fiery streaks in his mane and a gold earring. His childish awkwardness had become the hallmarks of an eccentric fashionista - he still wore the preposterous red robe, but he rocked it like a warlock. The bouncy mass of cotton candy was a ball of swirling purple tendrils, aglow with deadly eldritch power—*Yaas queen.*

Amos grinned with absolute confidence and winked at the bewildered Ice Cream Madam, who got to work, if only to get rid of him as soon as possible. Amos was used to having that effect on people.

Amos swiped his mom's mobile payment app in front of the terminal. Their cones were a reasonable 8 yuan each. There was an audible gasp from the crowd when Mrs. Pi rang him up, "Yours is 24 kuai," but he just smiled and scanned the terminal. The shop buzzed and chimed with confirmation, and young and old faces pressed forward, waiting for the dramatic reveal.

Suddenly, a chubby, fluffy grey cat that resembled his grandma's cat Thunder peeked out from under the crate, focused on a small, dangling fuzzy bunny tassel on Alice's purse that blew in the wind. Amos could see it hypnotized by the fuzzy bunny. Its butt wiggled as the cat crouched down very low, unblinking. Amos glanced around but did not see Grandma.

"You know, Alice, although we're best friends," Amos said, "I think you're too...serious."

Alice quirked a brow at him. "We're not best friends, Amos. So, what are you on about?"

"When it comes to not liking cats," Amos said, "splish, splash, your opinion is trash."

She shook her head, "oh, no, you—you are a fast-burning dumpster fire, *Great wizard, Amos the Amazing*," she said sarcastically, "and you're not going to—"

"Change your mind?" Amos finished, and Alice scowled. Amos knew that she hated how he always tried to outsmart her and finish her thoughts.

Mrs. Pi handed the vanilla and strawberry to the girls and then went to work on her masterpiece. Red licked the strawberry cone in an orderly swirl, keeping the ice cream from dripping as she slowly tasted it. Alice took big bites from the top, letting it dribble onto her hands before she licked them clean.

She counted off reasons on her sticky fingers. “First, cats are smelly, and they’re dirty; they’re often disease-ridden—”

The fluffy grey cat’s eyes became dangerous slits and it crouched very low.

Amos leaned forward and whispered to Alice, “I think *they are* amazing. You know, cats don’t ‘*sleep*’ like we do.” He delivered these facts in his best ‘old British documentarian’ voice. What was his name? Attenborough? *Yeah, that was it.* “The truth is cats are inter-dimensional beings and regularly visit places we cannot.”

Alice bit her lip, alarmed. Amos knew she hated when he got creepy.

“Their eyes can also detect wavelengths of light that we can’t pick up, enabling them to see energies, spirits, elementals, and more.”

Alice’s eyes bulged at the mention of spirits. She also *hated* ghosts.

The cat froze, fixated upon that floating, soft rabbit tassel. *Almost there,* Amos thought.

“The same way dogs are our guardians in the physical world; cats are our protectors in the spirit world,” Amos said. “This is why cats were regarded as sacred in ancient Egypt...” Amos reached out and wiggled Alice’s bunny tassel. In a flash,

the cat leaped from under the bench up and into Alice's lap, claws and teeth thrashing at her purse.

Alice yelped, and brought her hands up to protect her face, throwing her ice cream cone into the air.

A moment later came the scream. "Ahhhhh, who did that?"

Amos peered into the crowd. Shoving towards them came a red-faced, balding man with an ice cream planted onto the top of his shiny, sweaty head. Vanilla cream rivulets already streamed down his furious face.

The smoky ball of fur hopped onto his lap and purred, while Alice cursed and held Ruby Red by the hand. The two of them melted away and Amos grinned. *Perfect*. "Are you Thunder? How did you get here?" Amos glanced around but couldn't see Grandma anywhere.

"Hey, kids, stop!" The angry, dripping, bald man chased the girls down the boulevard.

Amos whipped out his ukulele with a smooth motion, dropping his bag of treats onto the crate at his feet, and with two zips, he swung the instrument over his shoulder. He glanced at Mrs. Pi, who was still drizzling the reddish spicy-hot sauce into his ice cream bowl.

He gave a quick strum, tuned the pegs, and played a few chords. Then he thumbed the three-chord progression, an upbeat melody that sounded like his Papa's favorite old-timey pop songs. He began to sing.

"Even in the sun, you know I keep it icy,

You could take a bite, but it's too damn spicy...."

Amos played the popular classic teen-pop parody as children cheered and grandparents applauded. Amos took a

bow, basking in the glory and adoration of strangers. Mrs. Pi placed the bowl of ice cream, red and creamy, dolloped with a drizzle of spicy chili oil, on the counter, and the crowd leaned in closer, waiting for him to take a bite; its stuffed Carolina Reapers twinkled dangerously.

Amos was fixated on Mrs. Pi's hypnotic chili sauce when he realized he'd need one free hand to navigate the crowd back, so he stuffed the cotton candy into his treats sack. It instantly melted around the various candy bags, like a sticky spider web. *Oh well.*

Without warning, Amos' mom, a beautiful young woman in a fresh fringe cut, looking too young to be Amos' mom in her favorite netted designer dress, appeared beside the cash, waving and smiling. "Hi darling," she said. She clapped her hands and grabbed the Respiro Del Diavolo spicy chili oil ice cream. "Mom tax! I'm trying this," she giggled and opened her mouth to taste it.

"No, mom!" Amos cried, trying to grab it, but she dipped away from his wiggling fingers. His mom always had a sixth sense for trouble, but it didn't always work out in her favor. Amos gasped as time dripped like sticky ice cream from a balding man's head.

"Amos! Look at you," Mom said with a laugh as she dipped away from Amos' clawing hands. "If we're not careful, you'll give up becoming a doctor to join the circus." She jabbed a delicate spoonful into her mouth, and there was a moment of confusion before her tears started welling up.

This was going to be worse than when she tried wasabi—way, way worse.

Amos' mom made a wild and surprising sound. Amos took the bowl from her limp grasp. The crowd rumbled as everyone

in the front explained what was happening to those behind them or pushed closer to get a better view. Amos' mom began to choke. Her face was as red as his cherry bathrobe. Her eyes, lips, and cheeks were already puffing up like Aunt Grace after a trip to the 'Beauty Doctor.'

"Oh god, Amos, what's h-hurppening? What's happening to my moufff? It feels rike a chemical burn..." She slurred and rubbed her hands against her eyes.

Amos cried out again, "no! Don't touch your eyes—" But it was too late. The hands that held the bowl were now rubbing the spice right into the back of her eyeballs. Time froze, and Amos didn't know what to do for one long, desperate moment. He had his legacy, the spicy ice cream in one hand, and a phone to record it for the internet in his pocket. His mom shrieked, and very slowly, painfully, he chucked the ice cream away, grabbed a bottle of water off Mrs. Pi's counter, popped it open, and poured it onto his mother's face.

"I'm melting," his mother screamed in a desperate, hilarious voice, and Amos' mouth curved into a grin, despite himself. "Help me, I'm melting," and then she began yelling in tongues. *It broke my mom*, Amos thought. Amos wanted to help her but then remembered his promise to the bullies and pulled out his phone to record a video of his mom's antics for his classmates.

"**AMOS!**" His father yelled in a voice that tolerated no further shenanigans, and the crowd hushed. Papa cut through the line with the quiet confidence of an ER room surgeon even in his T-shirt and shorts. He led Amos' mother away by one hand as she cried into his shoulder, and he grasped Amos by the arm. "What have you done now?"

"I, well, actually, it was Mom. She wasn't supposed to—"

“Quiet!” his father snapped, furious, taking the phone out of Amos’ hands with a simple but confident Wushu twist that left no room for argument or debate. “Let’s go.”

Amos was defeated. Like his friends, the record-setting spice and his bag of candy were abandoned. They were back on the street, and a self-driving hydrogen-powered auto cab dropped out of the sky a moment later, and his father ushered them inside. In deep contemplation in the front seat, Amos sat quietly while his father tended to his mother’s swollen face and spicy tears in the back. Amos snuck one good look, and all he could think of was: *PUFFER FISH*. He knew he would be in big trouble, and he might never get to taste the Devil’s Breath. So much planning...wasted.

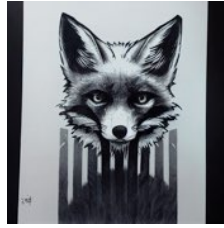
They arrived much too quickly at the hospital and hopped out of the taxi. Papa brought them back to an exam room and sat Amos down on a chair.

“You are going to sit here, and you’re going to be quiet. *Don’t. Touch. Anything.* After this, you’re going to Grandma’s.” Papa jabbed him ferociously with his index finger. “Don’t say a word. Just nod.” And that was the last thing his Papa told him. The cool as a cucumber surgeon was uncharacteristically hopping mad.

Amos nodded, holding back steaming hot tears from running down his cheeks as long as he could. Today had turned out pretty bad, but tomorrow would surely be worse.

CHAPTER 3

NO RELIEF IN WAKING



“— And still, the frightening natural phenomenon happened at 2 pm across the region. Just 50 minutes later, the bright red sky had returned to normal. Meteorologists predict that a low-pressure system may move in and prepare for heavy rains and flooding. No one is quite sure what caused the bizarre weather event, nor has any official—”

Papa switched off the car radio. Amos turned to him hopefully, but that hope soured like spoiled milk in the sun when Papa kept his eyes on the road, jaw clenched shut.

Despite being a spicy Chongqing girl, it turned out Mama was violently allergic to the world’s most dangerous peppers. They’d left the hospital finally to get some rest at home. Mama was still puffed up in the morning and was receiving supportive oxygen. Papa made him pack a bag of clothes and a book. *One book!* About ancient philosophy and morals, no less. There was no phone or games, and they were off to Grandma’s house.

The phone rang through the car’s bluetooth system. Amos listened long enough to figure out it was Aunt Grace who was concerned about his mom and pretty peeved at him. Aunt Grace, a schoolteacher infamous for fits of sleep while standing up in the middle of a lecture, was judging *him*. Amos

groaned and tried to magick his father happy, his mother well, and the GPS to take them to Happy Valley Water Park. Not a single good wish seemed to influence their destiny, though, and as the two-hour trip to Tongliang Village wore on, his thoughts grew darker, wilting into silent tantrums and pity parties.

Typically, Amos would look out the window and wonder about the creatures and people he could meet as the city dripped away in their rearview mirror. Today, he sat and stewed. Matching his mood, the city's clear skies began to darken with Kraken-cruel, foreboding nimbi they raced closer to Grandma's house. They arrived too soon, and Papa drove up the road towards the humble little home of Amos' grandparents.

Airy anvils gathered over the glimmering sphere above Grandma's house. Yesterday's cardinal red sky had faded, and the terrible winds of change had blown in. It began as a whispering in the air. Amos strained but couldn't quite make out the words. A bully breeze battered the trees and fluttered up inside his cherry red housecoat, billowing his balloon sleeves. Long, lean giant fingers raked the churlish clouds. A short, round old lady dressed in overalls and a wide-brimmed sunhat greeted them in the driveway when they arrived.

"Are you coming in, Treasure?"

They got out of the car, and Amos dragged his bag from the back seat, strapping into the bulbous snail-house.

"Sorry, Mom," Papa said as he gave her a quick squeeze. "Daisy needs me back at the hospital. Just dropping off *the boy*."

"Come in for a bowl of noodles." Grandma patted Papa's stomach. "You're too thin."

Lightning cracked the sky, and moisture droplets began to drip on Amos' head. He stood by the car, hoping perhaps for a last-minute change of plans and a trip to Pizza House. Defeated and dripping, he was as soggy as a bowl of left-behind cereal.

"Where's Dad?" Papa asked, looking around.

"Oh, he's off working down the way," said Grandma.

"He's gonna work himself sick in this weather," Papa said.

"Let's get inside," Grandma said, looking up at the darkening sky. "Hurry now!"

Amos crept like a snail, struggling against the wind as the rainfall became more intense, and heaved with all his might to shut the front door behind him. A wall of rain moved over the oak tree and heavy drops drummed against the windows; the sound of a military court-martial.

Amos followed the adults into the kitchen, hovering invisibly like a spirit. Thunder greeted Amos with a quick rub on his legs and scampered away and out of sight. Rufus followed Amos in from the yard and shook his wooly, white Pyrenean mountain coat dry. He crept under the kitchen table, near Amos, with his paws over his expressive chocolate eyes.

"I've got to go back to work," Papa said, turning around. "I'll be back in a few days."

"The roads will be rough. Take a rest," Grandma pleaded, but Papa shook his head.

"If I don't go now, I'll be stuck here all day."

"Be careful, Treasure."

"Be good, Amos," Papa said, finally giving Amos a glare with a wagged index finger. "Be good or else." And then he

was gone.

“Hey, Grandma,” Amos said. “Were you and Thunder in the city yesterday?”

“No, we weren’t. If we had been, maybe you’d have stayed out of trouble,” Grandma snapped and walked to the window as the red hydrogen-powered smart car backed out and drove away. Grandma spun around, and her face was as cruel and cranky as the weather. Amos fought back a stream of hot tears. “Drink some hot water and eat some noodles. When you’re done—”

“Go play around the house and eat some of your delicious candy?” Amos finished with a grin.

“No. Take your bags upstairs and unpack. Then come down and do some chores to earn your dinner.”

Amos, hungry despite the pit of sadness in his belly, scarfed down the cold spicy noodles on the table, chugged the warm glass of water and scurried for the stairs.

“Wash the dishes, Amos. I’m not your housekeeper.”

Amos froze and turned back with a dramatic sigh. When Grandma didn’t capitulate, he stomped to the sink and ran the water, making a perfunctory effort to wipe the chili oil from the bowl with his hand.

Grandma shook her head. “Use the cloth, silly boy,” gazing once again down the road. “It’s oily, and you need to use soap.”

How does she know? Amos thought. *She’s not even looking.* He used the blue rag and a squirt of lemon-scented dish soap to scrub the bowl clean.

Amos crept up the stairs to his dad's old childhood room, lay in the single bed, and cried. This was going to be the worst summer ever. So much rain fell that the beating on the tin roof over his head blurred into the long, whirring roar of a helicopter. He wanted to be anywhere else. He whispered a plea to the spirits to send him away. "Please help me," he said. "If anyone is listening, take me away, get me out of here." Nothing happened, and so Amos stared at the ceiling and waited.

After a while, Amos opened his backpack and fished out the dog-eared book his father had given him. He opened to a page about Confucian philosophy and the uncarved block, curious why the paper bookmark, a hand-drawn Chinese poem, had been nested here. He began to read, which was one of his favorite activities, but the writing was so dry that he blinked repeatedly and gave up. Instead, he stared out at the growing storm.

The stygian sky was bleak and sorrowful. Only a glimmer of light crept in from the hallway in the gloom. Amos stared into his shadowy reflection pressed against the glass.

A crash of lightning struck the tree in front of their house, and the booming of the thunder was like a bomb exploding. For a moment, it was as bright as a sunny day, and then everything became gloomier, darker, and more hopeless...



Alice listened to the tinkling pearls of rain drumming onto the café window like the glassy clinking of a champagne flute, lilted and clear. She realized she was chewing on her nails, and stopped, but her guts twisted in anxiety as she tried to piece together her connection to this Storyteller and his

story... *to Amos*. A sheet of rain passed over the bookstore, and the roar intensified, like the phut-phut-phut that ripened nuts make when they hit the ground.

“Oh, it’s really pouring outside now,” she said, gazing into the worsening storm. It snapped and crackled like bracken pods in a bush fire.

“Nature’s white noise,” the Storyteller said. “Is it good timing? Or story magick?” He winked at her, oblivious to her twisting tentacles of uncertainty.



Thunder crashed, rumbling through the house like a cannon’s mouth, and the furry grey ball Grandma was so fond of hopped up onto Amos’ lap, startling him from his reverie. The cat stared at him intently, one eye an ocean blue and the other a chocolate brown. They exchanged a long, intense glance.

“Don’t be scared, Thunder,” Amos said, rubbing her furry belly until she purred like a rumbling engine while his broiling waves of anger dulled into an abstract bitter gloom. When Thunder finally had enough and hopped off him, Amos picked up his book again and read a couple of pages until his eyes became very heavy.

He snapped his head up at the sound of scratching at the door, which had somehow gotten shut. Something with claws wanted in. Dreamily, he floated to the door and twisted the handle. He wondered where it would lead for a moment, but it was only the hallway in Grandma’s house. A light down the hall provided a soft glow. Thunder lay at his feet.

“Hi, Thunder, how did you get...oh, well,” Amos mumbled, climbing back under the covers. With one eye, he

peeked at the ceiling and the corners where it met the walls, but they danced in odd hexagonal patterns and froze, awkwardly splayed when observed. Thunder meowed, walked into the closet, and meowed again, this time longer and more guttural.

“You smell something? Is it a dead mouse?” Amos called out from his blanket fort.

The scratching continued until Amos built up the courage to see what the bother was. Outside was an endless black void. Amos crawled on the ground after Thunder into the shadowy recesses of the musty closet. Her paw was hooked on a coin-sized nook. The boy helped the cat free her trapped paw, and she leaped away with a grateful meow. He found the nook again and pulled on it.

A hidden compartment opened up with a whoosh of stale, hot air and dusty secrets. Inside, he clutched a grubby old wooden trunk a little larger than a shoebox.

He dragged it out of the closet and managed to spring the latch with a bit of effort. He wrapped his fingers around the cold metal. It was a silver ring and a pendant on a chain. They both bore the mark of a triple spiral, like three trees, connected together. Underneath and padding the chest was a folded and dusty old robe. Amos put the necklace over his head and shook the robe out.

Dust danced around like stars and constellations spreading across the endless abyss of deep space, catching the faintest hint of glimmer from the hallway. Unlike his towel-soft bathrobe, this robe was sleek and shiny. He slipped into it and spun as it billowed around him. He studied the full-size mirror and marveled: Most impressive, he thought. *He was a wizard!*

Amos grinned. Costumes always gave him a chance to be something special. As he continued to stare into the reflection, a pulsing in his temples made his eyes twitch, and then a dull ache quickly spread across his forehead. Amos gasped. His face had changed. He was older, wrinkled and his hungry eyes were ancient and sad, like a warrior who'd seen too much war. They were malicious and hungry as they studied his reflection, changing color from dark chocolate to a murky, glowing amber. A cold shiver of sweat dripped down Amos' spine. The hair on his neck and arms tingled. Amos tried to turn and run, his heart beating like a snare drum, but he couldn't move a muscle.

"Be careful what you wish for..." drawled the voice in the mirror. Amos' mouth contorted into a horrifying grimace, exposing razor-sharp fangs. Amos groaned as a viselike pressure squeezed his skull. The mirror shattered, leaving behind a choking emptiness, a clinging void, and an old skeletal visage that uluated in madness. Amos, nose to nose with the wraith, released a soul-wrenching scream of agony. It was the desperate, sanity-shredding howl of one who realized too late that they were not alone in the universe.

All around him, spectral shadows swirled, holding him down on the bed paralysed, but try as he might, Amos couldn't move a muscle.

Suddenly, Thunder hopped onto his chest, meowing, and the wraiths and spirits scattered into the umbra of dusk. Somehow free, Amos scrambled, and with a start, rolled right out of bed to fall face-first onto the ground.

Painful pricks exploded through his noodly limbs as he flopped to his feet, holding the edge of his bed unsteadily. Without his glasses, the ghostly shadows flickered ominously

around the gloomy room. His heart raced as he pawed frantically for the bedside table, and he swatted his glasses into the air. Amos dived after them, scrambling for their comforting steel frame, utterly terrified to grasp something in the dark that might grasp him back. He caught them, landing awkwardly back into bed. Gasping, Amos looked around, but all was still. *Could it have all just been a dream?*

“Amos...Amos?” Grandma called him to dinner. He blearily tiptoed on pins-and-needle legs into the hall and down the stairs. The kitchen was steeped in a familial glow, jarring compared to the nightmare he had emerged from. He inhaled a heady cloud of spicy carrots, greens, spicy meat and potatoes stewing. Grandma served him a bowl, and Rufus sat by him, large paws warming Amos’ feet.

“Where’s the pizza and french fry shop around here?” Amos asked.

Grandma frowned at him. “Eat your soup. You look terrible.”

Amos put his head down, slurped his soup, and a drop of blood fell into his bowl.

“What’s wrong with you?” Grandma pinched his nose so hard that his eyes watered. When she pulled the tissue away, it was painted a deep crimson and soaked with his blood.

What *was* wrong with him? “Excuse me, Grandma, I’m going back to bed,” Amos said. “I don’t feel well.” He pushed his half-eaten soup forward and stumbled up the stairs. A nearly full moon watched him from outside, bursting through the dense cloud cover illuminating the dusty old room. Very vulnerable and alone, he hid under his covers, tossing and turning, until he finally fell into a restless and terrible jaunt through dark and unforgiving dreams.

CHAPTER 4

THE SEED FAIRY



The following days passed without disaster if only because Amos gritted his teeth, ate his vegetables, and promised to be an ordinary boy if it made the nightmares stop. Sadly, it didn't. Amos slept fretfully. One morning, just as he was waking from a restless sleep, something hooked his consciousness and snatched it to the dark depths of his dreamlands, where Amos found himself wearing the same artifacts he had discovered in the first episode of this nightmare. In a strange land, he hid from packs of vicious, tusk-mouthed savage warriors hunting for his blood. The dissonant whispers of demonic voices crept from the shadows all around him. "You're in over your head, boy," croaked a harrowing voice behind him. Spun around, holding the pulsing artifacts, the necklace, and the silver ring so tightly they cut three swirling circles into each of his hands' smooth, unworked palms.

"I'm waiting for you, and soon it will be too late to run or hide," came the wretched whisper. Once again, those captivating eyes, a dull amber, ancient and hungry with malice, held him frozen in place.

Amos awoke, screaming. His bruised brain quivered, trying to grasp the slipping sand to focus on the nightmarish grains as they faded into fleeting stars. Grandma came and sat

beside him, placing a warm cloth on his head. “Both of my kids had restless leg syndrome as children. I’m not surprised to see you kicking up a storm. But they did grow out of it.”

Amos groaned and reached for his glasses on the bedside table.

“Don’t feel bad, Amos. You are a *mostly good boy*.” Grandma patted his head and left him to gather his thoughts before coming down for breakfast.

As he moved about the house, Amos saw tall shadows, black shapes with large wide-brimmed hats in every corner, and avoided looking in the mirror when he washed his face and brushed his teeth. As the powerful summer sun penetrated gaps in the curtain, crepuscular rays warmed his face, like arrows from the heavens. Today would be different.

He stumbled in a daze down the creaky stairs to find a bowl of rice porridge on the table. Despite his sour mood, it was warm and delicious. He blew into it, fogging up his glasses with warmth and humidity. He wiped the fog clear with the corner of his t-shirt and set them on the table. The world around him swam in large, undefined splotches of color.

“We’ve got lots to do today, Amos. You’ve got to help me feed the animals, and then we’ll take a walk.”

“Why can’t you have service droids like a normal family?” Amos whined.

“I don’t need a robot to feed my animals or clean my house,” Grandma scolded. “Too much reliance on technology will erode your ability to pick up after yourself... you don’t want to end up a giant alien head with little chicken arms and legs, do you, boy?”

“Okay, Grandma,” Amos said with his hands up in surrender, and he didn’t interrupt again as she droned on about whom to feed, where to find the food, and how to go about it. Lost in a daydream, Amos held onto flashes of a castle high on a cliff overlooking an angry sea. He fought hard to keep the fleeting images burned into his brain so he could ponder them later in greater detail. They mostly slipped away like sand through his fingers...except the image of him atop a mighty Dragon soaring through the sky. Amos yelled, arms out, mouth agape, and eyes pools of astonishment. He flew over a fantastic world, bubbling in magick and wonder, as capacious as the sea.

Grandma reached up and patted Amos on the shoulder, and his visions turned to ash in his mouth. He strained his mind, but the dream, as vivid and lifelike as it had been, was now long-gone, and he only held onto the impressions of an amazing adventure.

He finished his soup and walked outside, squinting painfully in the glare of the humid summer morning. A strange rustling in the trees caught his attention. Amos froze, his heart pounding like a jackhammer. His curiosity finally won over his fear and, emboldened by the light of day, he went to investigate the shrubbery by the edge of the yard.

“Who’s there?” Amos called and waited, tense and ready to run. Nothing moved. He lingered under the bough of a large tree. Minutes crept by. Still, there was no more sound. “Must be nothing, after all,” he whispered and turned around. He counted down from three and then spun around, hoping to catch a glance of whatever had originally made the noise. But there was nothing there. *Or so it seemed.* He trudged back to the house and saw Rufus next to Grandma, ready for a walk in her wide-brimmed sun hat.

“Ready?” She asked.

“Sure, I guess,” Amos said. Rufus wagged his tail happily and bounded along with her, and Amos followed, stomping white bunny slippers on hard-packed clay under the penetrating glare of the simmering Chongqing sun. Amos marveled that, unlike other cities of the world, Chongqing only had two seasons: winter and summer and was often called the furnace of China for its reliably regular broiling heat. Rufus, a leashless dog (and not at all a person), shied away from clothes; unlike the fashionable pups in the city. The countryside air was deliciously fresh except for Rufus’ musky fur that effused a not entirely unpleasant dankness that reminded him of rafting down white water currents with Grandpa.

“Hey,” he asked, turning to face Grandma, who looked more than a little like a magical mushroom peeking out from beneath her towering sunhat’s brim, “where’s Grandpa?”

“Oh,” Grandma said. “He was up at dawn and off to clear some brush. A family up the road needed some help, and he never says no,” she laughed a little quickly and continued down the way.

Colorful flowers bloomed; their sweet scent heady as trees swayed in the gentle breeze. Barely any cars passed them on the dirt road as they plodded along. Rufus got excited and chased a passing kitten and stomped in a large mud puddle. Grandma frowned as Rufus shook off the water, beaming Amos a ridiculously happy fuzzy doggy grin. They hopped back to avoid being soaked.

“Rufus!” Grandma chastised the old silly dog.

“Where are we going, Grandma?”

“Oh, to a special place...the ancient town,” Grandma said.

“Anju,” Amos said, remembering it from summer visits growing up.

Grandma smiled softly, lost in memory, and said nothing. They walked along curving roads for what seemed like hours. Amos knew the earliest record of Tongliang in history books was in the Spring and Autumn Period, and the Warring States Period. He had spent at least one afternoon - but likely a few- marching up and down this winding road in the roasting summer sun, pretending it was 329 BC, and he was King Wei of Chu. He had destroyed the state of Ba—now, Chongqing City—and named his concubine son as the marquis south of the Pujiang River. Today, however, he had no mood for imagination and games. He was quiet and sullen as they finally arrived, sweaty and thirsty, and passed through the great bowed stone gates. The curved roofs and carved wooden buildings characteristic of Bayu style showed characters from ancient history, but Amos was too glum to be impressed.

They marched along, as if walking just for the sake of walking; marching towards the inevitable, towards the pointless tragedy of war. Amos stared at clouds, trying to decide what shape they resembled. He saw a dragon, a fox, a robot, and a sword. They mosied on, finally stopping to rest at an old stone bench. Grandma sighed and patted Rufus’ head and offered Amos some water from a large metal thermos. Amos sat sullenly, lusting greedily after all the snacks on display up and down the street. Just when he was convinced Grandma meant to starve him, she opened her sack and produced a bag of sticky rice balls wrapped in bamboo leaves.

“Here, Amos,” Grandma said and opened the bag. He wiped his hands on his fashionable designer cherry red

bathrobe, the only thing he planned to wear all summer. He took one of the sticky bamboo wraps and began to untie the string that held it together. At first, it was complex and messy, but his annoyance melted away when faced with the complexity of the knot. He unwrapped the leaves and bit into the sticky rice, enjoying an explosion of sweet red bean paste in the center.

Amos gazed at Grandma and smiled. “Thanks,” he said, chewing with his mouth full. “Delicious.”

“Slow down, mind your manners,” she said. “You’re not a wild animal. We’ve got enough to eat.”

Amos looked away, as an awkward wave of heat rushed over him. He *hated, hated, hated* being told what to do.

“I mean, you’re a city boy. You’re supposed to be the cultured one, right, boy?” Grandma laughed and patted his back.

Amos blinked rapidly as a single tear formed at the corner of his right eye. He wiped it quickly with his sleeve and gazed at Grandma with such a pitiful expression that leaked the mirth from her face.

“There, there,” Grandma said and patted his back. “You are so sensitive, such a soft boy. You must learn to be tough. The world is hard.” She opened her bag of vegetables and said, “do you see all this?”

Amos nodded.

“What do you see?”

“Beans, sprouts, lettuce, spicy peppers.”

“And this bag,” Grandma pointed to the sack of rice.

“Rice,” Amos said, an eyebrow quirked. He sniffled.

“Now go bring over one of those pretty little flowers.”

“Grandma, what are you getting at?”

“Fetch it, and you’ll get a treat.”

Amos ran over and grabbed a fresh yellow daisy. He broke it off at the green stem. “A daisy,” he said.

Grandma shook her head. “Don’t just do things for the offers of candy, boy, do them because it’s good for your family.” When he looked confused, she shrugged. “Oh, well. See that weed growing over there? Go get me one.”

Amos huffed and puffed but ran over to pluck a stalk of wild grass and ran back.

“Is this what you wanted? Now what?”

“Look at them all, boy.”

He squinted and shrugged. “It’s green stuff. Okay, candy now?”

“Where did they all come from?”

“The vegetables from the old guy with the hair combed over his bald spot.”

“They all came from seeds. Someone planted them, and they grew up with enough sun and water.” Grandma regarded him. “What do they do?”

“Um, the vegetables are for eating?” Amos said with a shrug.

Grandma nodded. “What does the daisy do?”

“It’s pretty, like Mom.” Amos grinned.

“What does that one do?” She pointed to the weed.

“Um, it grows,” Amos said.

“Can you eat it?”

“No.”

“Is it pretty?”

“No?”

“It’s a weed, boy,” Grandma said.

“It’s grass. Why do you call it a weed?”

“A weed,” Grandma said, “is a plant that grows where it is not wanted. It just soaks up water and sun and doesn’t do anything for anybody.”

“Maybe it grows for itself, Grandma,” Amos said and smiled, tucking the weed into his pocket.

Grandma shook her head in disbelief, but Amos was used to evading her lessons. They lingered at the bench after snacking, and Grandma rubbed Rufus’ head while they peered around with old eyes. Amos watched them, wondering how Anju had changed. “Have you been coming here for a long time, Grandma?”

“Yes, Amos, all my life. This town is a thousand years old or more.”

“What was it like here before Anju was built, Grandma?”

“Oh, you’re funny!” Grandma furrowed her brow, but Amos’ ridiculous expression made her laugh.

Seizing on her moment of weakness, Amos groveled, begging, “Let’s get a treat!”

Grandma nodded, exhausted from Amos’ mental gymnastics. “I suppose we can.”

Amos bolted up like a bat out of hell, grabbed her hand, and dragged her towards a vendor that sold Tang Yuan of

various varieties with an assortment of traditional and modern toppings. A very short beggar, like a hunchedback dwarf in robes, was lying in the street clutching a bowl, and Amos glanced at him and maneuvered so he would not have to make eye contact. Grandma surprised him by marching up to the little man and saying hello.

“Bless you, it’s a hot day to be hanging about,” she said and dropped a couple of yuan notes into his bowl.

The little man bowed his head and thanked her. “Bless you, Grandmother, may every day be fortunate, and may luck arrive when you need it most.”

Amos had never wondered before what it would be like to be child-sized for one’s entire life. But for a moment, his mind wandered until he stopped in front of a counter full of fruits, nuts, and candies that could decorate the glutinous rice dessert bowl, and the idea flitted away, awkwardly, like a blackbird fighting out of a paper bag. Amos jerked around as the man called him.

“Hello, boy,” a large, hairless man said in a slow, lumbering voice. “What will it be?” Without eyebrows, a particularly round and shiny head, a slightly grayish complexion, and the slow and purposeful way he puffed and waited on Amos to reply made the boy think of a giant, thoughtful sea tortoise.

Amos shook off the dreams blending into his waking life. “I shell have—” Amos stammered, blushing, “I mean, I shall have...” The man’s eyes bulged, almost fishlike, and his forehead wrinkled as if straining to produce the barest hint of an eyebrow. Those strange eyes, wide, wild, and fixed upon him with an intensity that gave Amos the creeps. The man’s mouth opened wide and exploded in the loudest, open-mouth

sneeze Amos had ever witnessed. Eyes wide, he plugged his nose and turned and ran out of the shop.

“My Grandma will order,” Amos called from the doorway and waited outside, staring at clouds until she had ordered, paid, and handed him a traditionally topped dessert bowl of sweet glutinous rice balls in a sugary soup sprinkled with berries and nuts.

Amos wolfed it down in under a minute and licked the bowl happily. They walked back to the gate and down the road towards home.

“Are we going back home now?”

“First to the village butcher, and then home,” Grandma said. “Help me carry these vegetables.”

Amos, buzzing from the sugar overload, skipped most of the way to the little town before he sugar crashed. He dragged his feet and the vegetables every step after that, despite Grandma scolding him repeatedly not to let the bag touch the ground.

They walked down the road together along a shady path, past a rice paddy, and then left onto a bigger road. They passed some geese, who honked at Amos but didn't bother Grandma or Rufus. A few minutes later, the road led to some buildings at the edge of town.

“How do you feel, Amos?”

“I'm tired, Grandma,” Amos said.

“I guess Tongliang is different than you're used to.”

Amos nodded, keeping his eyes straight down the road. It had rained last night, and some of the ground was damp. Other

parts were downright muddy. Amos focused on avoiding deep muddy puddles and keeping his slippers dry.

Grandma took his hand in her own. It felt hard and callused—leathery skin, like a city worker’s that had once grabbed him for running near a worksite. Amos recoiled.

Grandma guffawed in surprise. “This is from hard work, boy.”

“We have a robot for that,” Amos said.

Grandma shrugged, “Sometimes it feels good to do a hard job yourself.”

Amos’ gaze fell on a dark shadowy spot among the trees. For a moment, his heart skipped. Amber eyes gazed back at him, and he could almost make out the glimmer of rows of snarling razor-sharp teeth.

Rufus growled in a low tone, and the vision faded. That’s when they noticed a large, raggedy dog at the end of the street. His massive underbite looked cartoonishly frightening, and as they got closer, Amos saw that his fur was balding in patches. The mangy dog didn’t notice them; instead, he smelled the wind. He was smaller than the huge, friendly Rufus but looked dangerous in a disheveled chaotic fashion and puffed up his chest when they approached. Rufus barked and bared his teeth, looking vicious and frightening for the first time in Amos’ life. Amos hopped behind Grandma, but the old dog shuffled off, looking lost but happy to get out of their way.

“Oh, Rufus,” Grandma said. “I wonder who he used to be?”

Amos’ eyes bulged at this. He glanced from Grandma to Rufus to see if there was a punchline to her riddle. Rufus

wagged his tail and put his big scary teeth back behind goofy dog gums, and they continued on their way.

Who he used to be? The words snagged in Amos' mind as too profound to be discarded. Many wild dogs got lost in the city and roamed around the streets.

If his parents never came to pick him up, if they were mad enough, could he become a lost dog, too?

The next block was bustling as locals had set up another market, tarps covered a wide assortment of animals and fresh-grown food. Amos saw large and small fish in buckets and tanks that flopped around in the water. Turtles shuffled over each other, frogs groaned, and feral chickens clucked in cold iron cages. Rows of tomatoes, corn, lettuce, broccoli, and green vegetables were stacked on tables. Farther away lay rows of other foods and creepy crawly things beyond the periphery of vision and imagination.

“Over here, Amos.” Grandma, with his soft, boyish hand in her rough, leathery one, led him into the butcher's stall and began negotiating. Amos did not feel thrilled by the bouquet of meat.

He gazed out to Rufus, alert, sitting at the edge of the shop, imagination running wild, back to the closet and what could be behind the fake wall and the hidden nook. *Did Grandma know? And when would Grandpa return?*

It was late afternoon when they got back to the house. Amos remembered that he was supposed to feed the animals. They must be starving. Maybe a little intermittent fasting would be good for them. He had read that it was healthy from time to

time. Suddenly, the phone rang. Grandma answered, then yelled, "It's your dad."

Full of boyish emotions, he couldn't decide whether to scamper or skulk to the phone and looked very funny doing both.

"Yes, well, I'm glad to hear that. Sure, yes, he's here now."

"Papa?" Amos asked, putting the old-fashioned receiver to his ear.

"Amos. Are you helping Grandma around the house?" Papa's voice was grave.

"Yes," he said, rubbing sore muscles. "It's backbreaking work."

"Well, don't be lazy. And keep your stories to yourself. You need to grow up a little. Maybe a lot. Grandma will teach you to be a good boy. Your mom and I have spoiled you too much."

Amos gasped. "When are you coming?" He asked, holding back hot tears at the harsh words.

"Mom is still resting. I'm quite busy with surgeries, so we'll see you in a week. Be a good boy!"

"I am a—" but the line was already dead.

Amos put the phone down, stunned into silence.

Grandma barged in from the back door, full of sound and fury. "The animals are going wild. Didn't you feed them this morning Amos?"

Amos stuttered, suddenly remembering again that he had forgotten. "I meant to—"

“You meant to feed them? Do it now, or you can go to your room without dinner!” Grandma rolled up the newspaper on the kitchen table and came after him, but he was already out the door and heading to the caged pen. He approached a coop of clucking chickens. He couldn’t find their food anywhere.

“Baaa,” bleated a funny grey goat behind him in a mocking voice.

“What’s your problem?”

“Baaa,” cried another wild goat. It put its head down and charged at Amos, who scampered back, flipping over a third billy that had come to stand right behind him. He tumbled over its back into the mud.

“Aw heck no,” Amos said in disbelief. Before he could stand again, the goats were on top of him, bleating and butting him. They knocked him back into the dirt. Finally, he screamed, desperate, wild-eyed, and sputtering. The goats wandered off, blabbering gibberish.

Amos noticed Rufus staring at him, panting. He seemed as amused as a dog could be.

Grandma was waiting with her hands interlaced over her apron.

Amos sighed. “Where’s the food?”

Grandma shook her head and motioned for him to follow her to the back of the walk-in pantry, where she kept a large bucket and a smaller metal bowl. “This one is for chickens. That one is for rabbits. You can grab that bundle of hay when you’re done and bring it to the goats.”

Amos made wiggling jazz hands and said, “hayyyy,” in a sing-songy voice. Grandma shook her head and walked away.

Amos pulled on his hair and gritted his teeth long past when Grandma was gone. Finally, he sighed, bent over to fill the small bowl with chicken feed, and then picked up the heavy rabbit food in his other hand. Struggling, Amos held the metal bowl in his teeth. He made it all the way to the kitchen before the sweaty bag slipped through his fingers. Time froze. “No!” he cried, and the chicken feed exploded all over the room. Veins on the side of Amos’ head bulged, and his pulse beat like a jackhammer behind his eyes. Strangely, time seemed to freeze for just a moment. Eyes wide, Amos could count the individual grains as they flew out of the bowl, and then, all at once, they hit the ground, covering the floor in chaos and nonsense.

“Shut the front door!” He called, shielding his eyes and pulling his hair in abject frustration. Finally, he bent over and began to pick the food up, grain by grain. There must have been thousands. It was a preposterous, absurd, terrible job.

Amos suddenly had an idea—a marvelous idea, a genius, marvelous, exceptional idea. Amos grabbed a handful of seed and carried it out back to the chicken coop. Amos peered around, but Grandma was nowhere to be seen. He opened the gate and sprinkled it, leading the chickens from the pen into the house and pantry, right to the pile of spilled feed. Sure enough, they followed him, starving as they were, to his mess of spilled feed in the kitchen pantry. He watched for a moment, hands on his hips, grinning as they started to clean up the mess all over the floor. *I’m a genius.*

Satisfied it was under control, he went up to wash the mud off his robe and change into a clean shirt and shorts. He picked up his book just to read a page and actually found a passage on Eastern philosophy that was quite interesting. He had read half

a chapter on 'intention and art' when he heard Grandma scream in alarm.

He hurried down to see what was wrong. The chicken feed on the floor was all gone, but bags of flour and rice had been torn and scattered everywhere. Chickens were chewing and pooping around what had been a clean and meticulous kitchen this morning. Grandma's eyes flashed like white-hot daggers, and she wagged a finger at him.

"Chickens in my kitchen?" She roared. "You fix this now, or you'll wish you weren't born!" She grabbed the chickens by their scrawny ankles, unleashing a flight of feathers, and left him alone in the chaos.

Amos wished he had the power to snap his fingers and set things right. Instead, he got down on his knees and scrubbed and shoveled the awful mess into a bag. Grandma would walk by whenever he stopped to rest and curse him for being a lazy boy. Her timing was terrible. He went through phases of anger, grief, denial, and acceptance but he did not leave the pantry until everything he'd fowled up had been fixed. Eventually, he had more or less finished. She came to inspect the work but did not seem impressed.

"It'll have to be good enough; now wash up."

Amos ran up to his room, slamming into a table as hot tears ran down his cheeks and steamed up his glasses. He yelped as a prickling sting ran up his leg, and cool drops of blood dripped down his ankle. He'd never worked so hard, but to Grandma, nothing was ever good enough. It just wasn't fair. That's enough. Without further ado Amos dashed straight for the back of the closet to the thing he had been avoiding these past three days. He'd had just about enough hard work and humble pie.

Amos crawled to the back of the closet, spreading the mess of white flour, rice crumbs, and sticky sugar around his Papa's old clothes. He felt for the nook on his hands and knees with sticky fingers. He scrambled around but came up empty. No nook.

Disappointed, he returned to his feet, backed out, and froze. *What if dreams were like photos but reversed?* He got back down, but he checked the opposite side this time. He found a little round nook. It was real. A little indentation, about the size of a coin, with a little metal ring around it, which he yanked on, but it did not give easily. He tugged on it as hard as he could, and a rush of stale air and musty secrets blew Amos' hair back, and his body tingled with a foreboding flash of curious fear.

CHAPTER 5

THE DEAD AND THE LIVING



Amos sat stunned as red, dim dancing lights swam in the darkness. His breath was trapped, increasingly claustrophobic in his dizzy chest until he felt tiny little paws scratching and prodding him. The scratch of blood broke the spell, and Amos snapped out of his reverie with a lurching gasp. “Ouch, Thunder!” he cried.

Amos heard Grandma creaking up the steps, with an overbearing chorus of sighs and suffering. Dazed but determined not to be caught, Amos slid out of the closet, brushed himself off, and rushed to stand beside the bed, looking casual.

Grandma popped her head in, “You didn’t shower?” she scolded. “It’s been half an hour already; what were you doing?” Her eyes scanned the room and returned to him, lingering on the fresh cat scratches on his legs. Amos glanced around guiltily, but Thunder was nowhere to be seen. “It’s dinner time! Hurry up!”

With eye rolls of impetuous fury, Amos stormed off to the bathroom. Amos showered, changed into his pajamas and bunny slippers, and stomped to the kitchen. His feet knew the way, but Amos drifted in a snow globe of his imagination. The nook was real. It had whooshed open, and something was back

there in the darkness. Could what he had dreamt been real?
What did it all mean?

Downstairs, the kitchen table was laid out in a delicious hotpot feast. Plates of vegetables and meats of all colors, shapes, and sizes layered the table around the central steaming spicy pot of bubbling, broiling red chili oil. Amos sat down, grabbed his chopsticks, and went fishing inside. After all the exercise and sun he had gotten today and after his nook-stupor daydream, he was lightheaded, exhausted, and humiliated. Still, the food was so delicious and spicy. It rejuvenated him with the magick of ghost peppers, the secret of Chongqing spice. Still, his thoughts wandered past the closet into the abyss. Amos wolfed down bowls of crunchy lotus root, slices of tripe that looked like old dish towels, and spicy hot beef strips.

“Thanks, Grandma,” Amos said. A tired smile jerked the corners of his mouth into a rictus-grin.

Grandma, for her part, let him eat as fast as he wanted and didn't complain when he ran upstairs after dinner.

His pounding heart jackhammered in his ears as he crept into the murky closet and felt for the hidden place. He reached in with both hands, jamming one finger into something wooden and hard. The trunk! He dragged it out into the dim evening gloom of his Papa's childhood room and shoved open the latch.

Amos gasped, his trepidation forgotten, as the trunk creaked open stiffly. Dusty air puffed into his face, and a shimmering glint of metal caught the moonlight. He unwrapped a necklace that held a ring and pendant, both marked with the triple swirls of what looked like interconnected trees and slipped it over his head. There was

something else, a piece of paper folded in half. He opened it, examining the flowing script, unlike anything he'd ever seen. A portent, a mystery? A conundrum. He slipped it into his pocket. He shook the silken fabric in circles, and dancing dirt devils fluttered around the room until the cloak was simply dusty, not dust-caked. With a flourish, he slipped the silken red robe over his head. Something changed with the sound in the room and how he perceived it. It took a moment to realize that his heart wasn't pounding anymore. It was like everything; his breathing, his heart, and time and space itself had slowed down.

Calmly, he tiptoed to the hallway stairs and listened. Grandma was cleaning up after dinner. If only I could creep down the stairs as silent as a caterpillar, Amos thought, squinting in concentration. When he opened them, he was already at the bottom of the stairs. He peered around in surprise. *How did I do that?*

Amos snuck towards the door, but there was no sign of Thunder or Rufus. Grandma hummed while she washed up after dinner, the contented sound of family life. For a moment, he froze at the doorway.

The hot pot had warmed his belly and washed away some of the indignity of the day. He could picture himself turning around, going to help her put away plates and dishes and the easy conversation of evening chatter. In another world, there was an Amos with no notions of skulking around in a dusty old cloak. Then he blushed, embarrassed at himself, for he was a boy of 12, a prime age for skulking. "Whatever!" he said and prepared to skulk hard. *If you want something you've never had, you have to do something you've never done.*

He turned the handle carefully, opening the door without making a creak. Thunder slipped by his feet and out the door, and Amos padded quickly behind. Outside, Thunder hopped down the way toward the forest. The rusty red moon above was fat and full. Amos whistled at the blood moon as the air pulled him away into the vacuum of night, and then came the crack as the heavens split asunder. It had been warm, and the ground was dry, but a single drop of cool rain dripped down the back of his neck.

Amos followed Thunder around the sweet-smelling lavender hill and around the bend. Amos loved his new cloak, light and sleek, and as the rain softly drizzled down, he pulled the hood up around his head. Thunder chased a butterfly into a bush and soon hopped out the other side, and they were together again. Lightning exploded in the sky, and the night cracked all around him like an exploding cannon. He barely managed to stay on his muddy feet.

Thunder flew through the air and caught the lovely many-colored butterfly under one paw. Moments later, raising the paw to examine it, the butterfly took off again, off the path and into the trees. Thunder bolted after it. Amos followed, racing down a slippery slope until he came to rest next to a large tree stump under the protective canopy of foliage.

His necklace twinkled silvery, faintly humming with power in the moonlight, and Amos could feel the hair on his neck stand on end. The barrier between his imagination and the unknown blurred as secretive and stealthy things crept. Amos heard a chittering all around him in the darkness, and glowing eyes appeared all around him, like in his dreams. Suddenly, Amos found himself entirely lost in the dark woods, far from home.

Under the canopy of trees, the fresh air was infused with the fragrance of pine and lavender flowers. Amos didn't know that he had stopped exactly over the eighth stone age cultural site discovered in China, dating back more than 20,000 years, along the Bachuan River. They had been full of ancient, beautiful, and almost mystical bronze Dragon lanterns and an entire host of ceremonial stone warriors, a little Terracotta Army. He only knew that as rays of moonlight reflected in a large puddle, revealing pools of glowing, milky orbs, he was not alone. Some said the old Tongliang Ming Tombs were haunted or a thinner barrier to neighboring magical worlds. Right now, all Amos knew was that the many eyes that watched him in the gloom were not of Tongliang, not of this earth, and somehow, as his necklace began to hum with hidden power, Amos knew it was all his fault.

Thunder began to growl, a low, guttural sound, as the singing cicadas caterwauled all around him. The milky orbs scattered with a low chittering, and it grew darker. A nebulous green fog rolled around his feet, and Thunder hissed and sprang away, leaving him all alone. Amos held his breath, hoping it would soon pass, rammed his eyes closed, and counted back from ten.

When he opened them, his heart skipped a beat as he gazed into the mercurial amber eyes from his nightmares.

A sly, slinky red fox padded toward him, and a shiver ran down Amos' spine. Its beaked nose touched his. Rows of razor-sharp fangs slavered. The fox-spirit spoke in a terrible voice that grated his nerves, rooted in a petrified stupor.

“Hello, boy. I've been looking everywhere for you.”

Amos froze, his breath caught in his chest.

“Who...who are you?” Amos stammered.

“I am the gloom, foolish boy. I am the crack in your light. I am the hungry wolf come home for dinner. You couldn’t resist playing with your toys, could you? And here I am, to eat your foolish soul.” The huli jing lifted its head back to laugh with a terrible callous coldness as tears leaked down Amos’ cheeks and dripped from his glasses. The boy who always got away finally knew what it was like to be completely without hope. The fox curled up around Amos, inhaling him like a fine perfume. Its nine shadowy tails fanned out around him like the bars of a prison cell. Amos was trapped in the clutches of a huli jing, a fox-spirit trickster. He now knew that demons were real, and the boy’s mind, stretched to its limit, suddenly snapped. The forest was silent, and time dripped like sweat from his brow. The fox licked its lips, savoring his fear, and it occurred to Amos that there could be something worse than death. It pressed its nose against the boy’s cheek until a salty tear fell from his eyes. A long scratchy sandpaper tongue licked the side of his face, leaving a sticky, cloudy residue across his glasses. It was at that moment when the fox-spirit brushed against the silver world tree pendant that Amos first felt their spirits intermingle. It was a strange coupling of the fox-spirit’s joy and his fear. The Trickster reeled back and sniffed at the boy’s neck.

“You’re not *the boy*, not exactly. From here, but not entirely. How peculiar. A strange one, with a strange smell, covered in trinkets you know nothing about,” the fox whispered. It sniffed again, curiously. “But you’ll do, won’t you?” The fox inhaled him like he was a delicious meal. “Yes, you’ll do.” The Trickster lifted its head back as if in laughter and a guttural, slow, syrupy sound crept out as its jaw cracked, dislocating. Suddenly, it lurched forward and engulfed the boy’s head.

Amos shivered as a numbing tingle spread through him. Slack-jawed, tears rimmed his spectacled eyes, and the vicious, ice cold burning pain spread quickly out from his chest cavity to his extremities. Amos felt some essence—the ‘He’ part of ‘Him’—leaking into the Trickster’s hungry mouth. He bit his tongue until the taste of tangy iron filled his mouth. His vision blurred and twisted into a möbius of colors and memories, drawn painfully from his core, a life of experiences draining rapidly out his eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. And something else happened too, a twinning of his sensation, a doubling of his eyes. He was both a very hurt, weak boy, and a very powerful, hungry Trickster. One dwindled, while the other expanded hungrily, greedily, bleeding the boy dry.

In the darkest abyss of hopelessness, a small sliver of light shone down upon the boy as the Earth and moon hurriedly parted ways. Feeding, sucking the soul from the boy, the Trickster barely registered a blur of white fur soaring through the air until it collided with an astonishing force that left the Trickster winded, even as the beast tore deep into the huli jing’s exposed neck. The beast’s savage maw tore through fur, and flesh and blood, to the bone. Amos—no—the fox-spirit yowled and struck out with its vicious tails. The furry white blur held on doggedly, ripping, biting, and tearing, and the two beasts snarled and whirled like primordial forces of nature.

The fox-spirit exhaled a noxious green gas into the beast’s face. Gagging, it finally released its death grip upon the fox’s throat. The Trickster shifted forms and drew a long, dark magick-runed blade that dripped with a purplish ichor, and it sailed through the air, and Amos heard a pitiful yelp. On the ground, Amos, spent and hovering between life and death, closed his eyes. He heard the cries of battle and felt a pungent

magick envelop him. And then there was silence. After a time, the cicadas and crickets resumed their dance of life, and the creatures finally exhaled. The last thing Amos remembered before the blackness swallowed him was the haunting song of the forest.

CHAPTER 6

A SMALL SLIVER



The hula jing's nine lashing tails strike out at the fluffy beast in a rapid-fire assault, caving deep red gashes into its body, but the feral creature only growled and thrashed and tore all the harder. The Trickster could smell the dog's fear, but it was fear for the boy, a protective concern. It would not relent or be scared away, the Trickster knew, reeling dizzily as a crimson tide, its own lifeblood, washed over them both and the world pulsed darkly. It was time to go.

The Trickster focused on a gem that pierced its right ear and conjured a stinking cloud of noxious yellow gas that spewed from its mouth and the hole in its throat. The guardian beast gagged, retched at the putrid haze, and released the fox, who became mist-like. Shadows swirled, and reformed into the shape of a tall, androgynous humanoid. The Trickster kicked the beast with a leather-booted foot, that sent it flying back end over end, and drew a black dagger that oozed a purplish ichor. As it snarled, the wound was torn open and began to bleed again. *No ordinary bite*, the Trickster cursed, pressing one hand to the wound to staunch the flow of blood, as the other tossed the dagger skillfully through the air. It pierced deep into the belly of the beast, who whimpered, standing protectively over the fallen lump that used to be

Amos' body. From its bloody maw came a vicious bark. It would clearly fight to the death to protect the child.

Amos, now adjusting to life behind strange amber eyes and the dispassionate, calculating coldness of the Trickster, dizzily looked upon the bloody and ragged Rufus. By some artifice he didn't understand, Amos' spirit was contained within, and bound to the shapeshifter. He found himself in a savage yet beautiful forest full of serene majesty. Areas of the woods were recently burnt and scarred by war, but the living forest seemed quick to adapt and regrow. It felt intelligent, cunning, and ferocious.

The Trickster fumbled in its cloak full of things for a murky reddish vial and managed to bite the cork off. It evaporated like translucent smoke, before being swallowed down in one gulp—the taste reminiscent of the sins of the donor: greedy, selfish, and cruel. A gentle coolness that numbed to the bone magickally staunched the blood flowing through the clenched fist and partially closed the wound. The bleeding lessened but did not stop. One long, delicate finger plucked a rolled-up bandage from another enchanted pocket and applied it to the injured throat. The bandage pulsed and glowed with Elven runes, becoming a second layer of skin. It would hold, for now. A wound like this would need powerful magick to heal. *Curse that damnable beast.*

Amos felt warmth course through him—through them—and wondered what was happening. How had he become a dark passenger in this cursed Trickster. The horrifying wounds began to close—he was grateful—but as he glanced at the motionless boy in a crimson cloak upon the ground, spectacles scattered underfoot, it dawned on him that he was looking upon his own still form. He had been spirited away from the life he knew. He suddenly felt a rush of fear, which like the

magick in that flask, somehow fed and rejuvenated the Trickster.

The Trickster reached again into the multitude of tiny pockets and produced a little lantern. Setting it down, it quickly grew to full size and began to glow and whistle, expelling a thick greenish mist. The groping fog wrenched the edges where worlds rubbed against each other and opened the Foggy Way—the way to An’Yatra. *Home.*

As the smoke cleared, the Trickster emerged in a heavily tangled grove of low, fine-fingered yew trees, a savage yet beautiful forest full of serene majesty. Areas of the woods were recently burnt and scarred by war, and the Trickster stopped to lean against one ancient, sprawling Senator yew that had survived both fire and axe. From its touch, the Trickster felt its tremendous age, thousands of years, and the incredible suffering it had endured as it had worked with its family to repel invaders of the Vale. Some had fared worse and connected via roots, and the Trickster felt the palpable suffering of each and every tree that had been taken from the Fae grove. The living forest seemed quick to adapt and regrow, however, and the Trickster marveled for a moment at its intelligence and cunning ferocity. The grasping boughs shined only a dim hue from the luminescence of alien creepers, but it was enough for the nimble Trickster to navigate what outsiders called The Green Hell - a place particularly unwelcoming to strangers - that the Trickster had once called home.

A secretive shuffling drew their attention to the nearby foliage. A little Vroog—a sneaky, scuttling, little beast—stuck one furry head above the leaf canopy as wide brown furry ears twitched in curiosity. When it saw the Trickster glance in its direction, its milky eyes melted into black pools of dread, and

the tentacles surrounding its mouth twitched nervously. All six of its short legs backtracked quickly into the canopy of tree cover. A commotion rustled, quickly disassembling whatever traps the Vroogs had mucked up to catch the unwary traveler, and the chittering things scrambled away; hungry might they be, they were cunning enough to run.

The Trickster donned a shadowy hood and faded into the forest. The second skin covering the wound would not hold for long, and they were far from home. Despite the unwelcome clawing fingers and thorny creepers, the hostile forest begrudged the Trickster passage. Creatures scurried out of sight and hid until the dark shadow passed.

Alert for intrusions or spies of the Summer Queen, yet oblivious to the curious eyes of the boy on the inside, the Trickster took rest under an ancient yew tree. Long fingers dipped back into the wondrous cape to produce a simple bone flute. The Trickster's cruel, tusked mouth, at odds with the delicate Elven features and eyes like galaxies, played a few haunting notes before slumping down to rest a moment, exhausted.

A cold, wet nose nudged the Trickster's crown of horns and licked its face, bristling against the Trickster's protruding lower jaw tusks. The Trickster's eyes shot open, a feral gaze focusing slowly upon the beast as one hand shot to a rune-carved dagger. It was only a Shantak, a huge bird-like beast with scales instead of feathers, larger than an elephant, with six legs and two pairs of long tentacles that sprouted from the tops of its limbs. The Shantak whinnied and stomped the ground, smelling the Trickster's bloodied face as it phased in and out of sight, moving to and fro with natural illusory magick. The Shantak had responded to the pheromonal call of

the bone flue, and the druid Trickster grabbed the beast's neck and painfully climbed onto its back.

Despite its immense size and jaw-dropping speed, the Shantak was graceful and avoided trees and creatures alike. A shadowy blur, it was too fast to be hunted and avoided all manner of predators. As the beast raced through a makeshift path, the Trickster's ears twitched. They kicked at the beast to race forward as a translucent, lumpy, toad-like creature lunged forward, a mass of pink tentacles at the end of its snout shooting out to ensnare them. The bulbous clay giant rose on its back haunches. An eyeless face sniffed the air and brought its feelers up to catch the approaching breeze. The beast roared, spun around, and the Shadow drew a black runed sword. As the mass of tentacles swooped down at them again, the Trickster's blade cut up in a lightning-fast arc, crackling with power and severing the entire trunk. The lumpy creature roared in pain and fell to the forest floor, but the pair were already long gone.

Their shadows raced across the land, chasing twilight, and soon they were past the forest and around the lake that bordered Hobbleheim and north, by Geardon, through the smallfolk hills of Pook country.

The Trickster, quickly fading from loss of blood, spurred the beast on. The Shantak picked up speed for a sprint along the road to Kronoswons, moving like the wind. They blew by the occasional traveler so fast that in the purplish dusk, the beast passed like a blur, gone sooner than it had come.

A young Pook family was heading home in a chugging steam-powered carriage with a fat basket of fresh-caught fish as the beast raced along the cobblestone road, but so quickly did the shadow beast sail, and so dark was its passenger that

only the two young children noticed and sat up straight. Astonished, they felt the sensation of whooshing, blowing their hair back. Their parents, discussing their dinner plans and the best combination of spices for Geardon river fish, never even noticed.

Soon the beast and rider arrived at the modest towers and spires of Kronoswons. Magically barred from entering the grounds, the Shantak could only dump the Trickster unceremoniously at the gift shop entrance. It nuzzled its master for a moment and then turned and disappeared as fast as it had arrived.

Amos gasped in amazement. The castle gift shop bore a logo that read ‘Kronoswons School of Magick.’ Everything seemed so fantastic, yet utterly normal, and Amos desperately wished he was here under any other circumstance. *Am I dead? What will happen to me now?*

The Trickster tried to rise but collapsed with a wet groan, their long flowing hair spilling out of a black-feathered cap.

“Get the Mistress,” the beleaguered Pook giftshop worker cried, and a crowd quickly gathered around them. The shell-shocked girl held the prone druid with care, shaking in her bloodied apron.

“Who’s that now?” called a woman from the crowd.

“Looks a bit like one of those Slowmorth types....” answered a gruff, bearded Dwarf.

“Is that an Elf? Could it be?” a timid student asked as she dropped a handful of books and sweaters.

“I’ve never seen an Elf before,” replied her curious friend.

“Naw, darling, look at the tusks. It’s an Ork for sure,” the gruff Dwarf answered.

“She’s an awfully pretty Ork then...” said a boisterous first-year.

“She?” came a scornful voice followed by a haughty laugh. “Watch your tongue, foolish freshman, that’s Shugo the Shadow, deadliest assassin on either side of the Savage Sea, a handsome devil he is—” drawled a thickly accented portly Pook in an elaborate gleaming gown.

“That can’t be Shugo! Shugo’s been dead for years!” growled the gruff Dwarf.

“Don’t much look dead to me—” the gilded Pook said.

“Make way,” commanded a stocky, robed Dwarf who carried herself with quiet authority as she pushed her way to the front of the crowd. Wearing the school robes of green and white, all recognized her as Luka Starlight, the school’s esteemed headmaster. She gazed at the druid with smoldering, doe-brown eyes and reached a starshadow-black hand over the druid’s porcelain-pale face to brush away the hair.

The druid’s distinctive amber eyes shot open in recognition, and bloodied lips whispered, “Luka...”

“Asht’arra,” Headmaster Luka Starlight said, shaking her head, leaning heavily on a wooden staff capped with a crystal orb. She wore a sad smile. “You should not have come here, Trickster. You are not welcome. Not anymore.”

The druid’s eyes pleaded for mercy but found no anger or malice in Luka’s eyes, only pity and sadness. Luka stood slowly and whispered, “*porta diastasis*,” as she gestured with the staff. A third eye opened above her nose and glowed with celestial power, and the crystal cap of her staff sparkled as magical energies gathered around the fallen form. The

headmistress of magick commanded a portal to crackle open and engulf the Trickster.

The crowd leaned forward, quiet but intensely curious. A portal to a dark, spired gothic castle ripped into mid-air. It was the Slowmorth Academy of Magick. “I believe this is where you meant to be, and I presume they will tend to you.”

“No, wait—” the shadowy druid tried to stall for time. Unceremoniously, the headmaster’s staff pushed the crumpled form through the portal. For just a moment, as the druid’s consciousness faded, Amos’ beamed to the surface and grasped Luka’s hand. Her eyes flickered with recognition as the word ‘help’ bubbled to the druid’s lips. But it was too late.

The spell pulled them apart.

With the dizzying energy of whirling particles dissolving and reconstructing the wounded druid, the Trickster landed like an old newspaper at the gates of a second magick school in one day. The Trickster’s eyes shut as the crumbled figure slammed into the school’s entrance.

Amos sunk deep into a dark place, a dreamlike place.

The portal closed, and that was that.

CHAPTER 7

THE GREAT ESCAPE



Arcane fire and terrified screams are your earliest memories. A starving orange glow dances in the shadows where you hide. The flickering flames lick the lavender curtains over your baby basket until they crackle and pop. Through the window, you're painted by refractions of eldritch bolts and dark, oozing tendrils of necrotic magick. As rainbows dance in a kaleidoscope of destruction, you cry for Mummy. A black arrow whooshes overhead, silencing an attendant with a gurgling cry. Hurried shadows flit to and fro. Isolation grips your tiny heart, which pumps and races like a jackrabbit.

You cry louder this time, an ear-piercing shriek, but Mummy is back. She kisses your head, and the wail of despair dies in your throat. She bundles the blanket around you and hoists the basket up. The world lurches. People crowd to you, pouring in from all sides, but she sails through the sea of rising panic, as the embers that have engulfed the carpet spread quickly, and now your home is burning.

A soothing voice greets mummy. An embrace is shared, and Mummy's face looms large, awestruck and full of wondrous colors. She tries to speak, but tears stream down her pale, regal face. She bends forward, soft lips upon your forehead. You feel a tremendous loss, even before she is gone.

Nanny smiles, comforting you. “Sssh babe, sssh. All will be well, one day, one day.” Her voice is musical, wistful, and lyrical amongst the chaos. “You must wait, and don’t cry. We must be quiet now.”

You are being carried again through dark tunnels. The shouting is closer now, and there is the crash of steel on steel. The tangy smell of metal and fear mix in the air. You begin to scream, but a warm hand strokes your cheek, and you relax. Warmth spreads like mother’s milk through your body. You coo instead as tiny muscles unclench, and you’re floating, dreamlike, on a current of love and compassion. Nanny places you down and grinds open a heavy portal. She ushers you inside a dark place full of sweet flowers and earth.

The ruckus is farther away, and the basket floats merrily down a stream. Time passes. Perhaps you are asleep, thanks to Nanny’s charm. The water bounces and jostles your basket, pushing you along on a lily pad. You are far, far away from home. The glow of sprites flashes around your basket, a tiny buzzing, and then, a face appears, the woman from your dreams. She wears a green crown of leaves, and her luminous emerald eyes shimmer in the glow. She nods to you, offering a finger. You give it a curious squeeze. In your mind’s eye, you get a flash of the lily pad and see under the surface there exists a system of stems that runs to the lily pad. These tubes connect to openings at the top of the leaves. They help the pad float and collect oxygen, all the way down to the plant’s roots. Everything is connected...part of the forest...part of Her.

“Let’s get you somewhere safe,” she coos, and her voice is musical and ethereal. She picks you out of the water, and you see the faces of her strange and furry friends around her. The curious expressions are lit by the glow of vines and bioluminescent shrooms.

“I know just the place.”



Amos jerked as a finger jabbed him hard in the ribs.

“Amos!” Alice hissed.

Amos opened his eyes. It hurt, somehow. Something felt wrong. He was in math class.

“What is the answer?” Mr. Hu’s voice was a fraying, jangling cord, ready to snap.

Amos closed his eyes again. He’d had the most terrifying dream. He opened his eyes. A nauseous feeling passed over him, a wrongness, like a glitch in reality. It manifested as a mind sliver behind his eyes, which he rubbed with his balled fists and groaned.

“Amos,” shouted Ruby into his ear, and she picked up a pen and stabbed him in the back of the head.

Amos screamed, and everyone in his junior school class stared at him. Some wore friendly smiles, and others carried meaner expressions. A pair of huge egg-shaped albino twins sneered.

Mr. Hu stared at Amos, face expressionless. His eyes were a frightening, empty Void.

Amos rubbed his eyes. “I’m sorry, Mr. Hu. What is the question again?”

“It’s on the board. Please read it aloud and solve it.”

Amos checked behind Mr. Hu. He cleared his throat. Several students chuckled until Mr. Hu glared at them. His space laser eyes hushed the hecklers.

“What is x if $x + 2y = 10$,” Amos read, “and $y = 3$?” Amos laughed. *They woke him up for this?*

“Is something funny, Amos?” Mr. Hu asked.

“Well, now that you mention it,” said Amos. “A couple of things.”

Chuckles and jeers fractured the calm and taunted him to continue his long walk on the ever-shortening dock. Smoking under Mr. Hu’s smoldering expression, he felt himself flicker and sway.

Amos continued unabashed. “First, the problem is elementary. X is 4. Second, I think math teachers are always too obsessed with finding their exes. We all know your ex is teaching science down the hall.” Amos was about to tell him the third thing he found funny about this when the class erupted into a wild chorus of hysterical laughter. Next to him, a curious, pale girl with a crown of blue horns giggled. One of her long, pointed ears flopped down. She hid her mouth behind a delicate hand.

Who is she? Amos wondered. I don’t remember a girl with horns and floppy ears in math class.

Mr. Hu padded toward him, and the sound of his black leather shoes swished on the tile floor like rain. Amos broke out into a sweat. Mr. Hu’s eyes grew into large, pools of rage, and then he grinned, a wicked grin that cracked his face in half. He flashed rows of razor-sharp teeth and licked his lips. He took off his glasses and rubbed them with a bloody cloth.

Amos’ insides began to feel cold and numb. He put his head down. As Mr. Hu walked up to him, he could feel his breath upon the back of his neck, hot and steamy.

Mr. Hu towered over the desk, and Amos felt a lot like a delicious sandwich. The teacher's skin stretched over his bony face like a mask. His eyes were no longer chocolate but a murky amber-yellow. He wrapped his long skinny fingers around Amos' throat and began to squeeze.

Amos gasped, eyes bulging out of his skull, and struggled to draw a breath. His heart hammered against his chest, and his insides began to feel cold and numb.

A knock came at the door, and the principal strode in. She was a short, dark-skinned woman, not his regular principal, but Amos recognized her all the same. She was small but carried herself with authority. "Mr. Hu, what are you doing? Unhand him this instant!"

Mr. Hu hissed, releasing Amos and stepping back to raise his hands and waggle his fingers. Nine dark tails burst out the back of his business suit, swirling like purplish eldritch tendrils. The headmaster balled her hands together, shouting arcane words of power, and a white ball of energy gathered in her hands. Students scrambled under their desks. Several near the door ran away, and papers flew in a tornado of chaos. Mr. Hu spat a slick goop of gibbous, necrotic dark matter toward the stout headmistress. The two teachers' evocation magick blasted into each other in the center of the room with tremendous force. All the windows shattered, and both wizards grunted and slid slightly backward.

Amos slid under his desk, grasping his aching throat. An ashen ball of fur scuttled by, softly rubbing against his leg. Amos drew back, startled, wait, was that Thunder? *Yes!* Thunder watched him coolly and then scratched the coatroom door. Amos crawled over, past heaps of screaming and crying students. Thunder disappeared inside the darkened coat room,

and Amos followed. A moment later, the classroom exploded in a deafening boom, and Amos felt as though he lay inside a canon's mouth.

“Thunder?” Amos asked, but he could see nothing...he crawled forward and began to free fall, tumbling down into the darkness, falling end over end.



Amos landed on a motorcycle. His long hair flowed in the wind as he gunned the ignition. In the side mirror, he grinned. A shining diamond earring glinted in the light. He was free, a rockin' rebel in black denim. He rocketed forward, and his bike took off high into the sky. Under his hands, dreamlike, he could feel the handles of the bike shift until he held leather reins. He blinked quickly, buffeted by heavy wind, and now he coasted atop a giant armored snail. Its long feelers and eye stalks wiggled happily in the wind and turned to wink at him as they flew over treetops.

“I'm flying,” Amos screamed in awe. Over the forest, he saw fires and the clash of war. Dark towers and spired castles sped by beneath him. And he flew toward a village on the horizon. A magickal and stupefyingly dynamic ecosystem breathed under him. Beyond the ancient old-growth trees and organic creatures, the smog of industry permeated the sky—a dark tinge of sulfur that made Amos gag. He dove toward the village and noticed armies of creatures and beasts that roamed the plains and glimmered like burnished chrome. They twisted and moved in synchronous patterns and gleamed more like clockwork beings than wild beasts.

And then he reached the village on the sea. As he landed, trees became saplings, and saplings merely seeds. The clocks

wound back to a darker time, long ago, when devastating armies left the land scarred and twisted.

A grizzled old wizard with a mighty beard, Amos stood in the center of an epic battleground and pounded the earth with his fantastic staff. He banished sleeping gods, and dragons too, and the land rumbled, shaking armies to their knees. Further still, as bombs peppered the land, leaving behind radioactive wastelands, a war beyond conception destroyed the very moon above. Amos screamed, and the magick splintered reality into a thousand fragments of glass, scattered throughout time. He was left alone, floating in a white void, and was again just a boy.

Thunder appeared beneath his feet, purring, and nipped at his leg before running off again. Amos followed and now he was in the hallway. Amos ran after Thunder, as paintings swirled, depicting epic scenes of history, just unlike any history Amos had known. He wandered up and down, watching coronations, celebrations, pestilence, and war. Thunder stopped at another painting and studied a dark room with torches beside a bed. Amos gazed upon it, watching a dark figure, wounded, and bandaged. Something in the picture called to him longingly, but Amos didn't know why.

Amos struggled to connect his shattered experiences before they moved on.

He strolled toward a scene he recognized, an old town that Grandma had loved. He stared and watched as a procession crashed by, and a baby was found. His mind spiraled, searching for meaning or a way back home. He approached the end of the hall to one final panorama.

In front of a cardboard desk that looked like a cheap movie prop, a man in a fedora was typing on a typewriter in the

desert. He wore goggles to protect his eyes from the blowing sand. Amos tried to see what he was typing but could only make out squiggles. The man picked up a red plastic phone, but Amos couldn't hear what was said through the pane of glass.

On impulse, Amos stepped through the glass to sneak up to the man at the typewriter. He became buffeted by blinding winds and roasted by the dry desert heat. Blinking quickly, Amos cupped his hands around his eyes and used his cloak to protect his face as he crept toward the strange man at the desk.

“Gates, what is it, Gates?” The man said. He stopped to listen. “That sounds like a your-universe problem. Yeah, no, no sign of that over here. You're saying that space worms have poisoned their minds? Deep slumbering gods attacking the very fabric of time? Have you tried baking them a cake?”

Amos gave a tug on the man's shirt. He turned around, annoyed, to regard Amos, gawking at the bird's nest of tangled hair, the red robe, and bunny slippers. “What's up, kid?”

Amos regarded the man, and an extraordinary thought bubbled forth, a memory that flashed through his mind. A gruff, bulldog of a man jabbed his fingers toward this existential cowboy, accusing him of having hit a glass ceiling and outliving his usefulness. Amos felt a wave of empathy for the bizarre foreigner. He was tired and strained but contained the seed of greatness. It just needed water. To the man's right was a corkboard with ‘Deus Ex Machina Detectives; Active Cases’ written on it and notes and files overlapping each other. Some fell to the ground and slipped into the sand. Wild hybrids of beasts and machines cruised the dunes around them.

Amos had never seen anything like it. He gasped when a giant bronze octopus with four faces and eight flame-throwing

tentacles careened toward them, followed by fire-breathing steel dragons that carried a screeching band of dancing pirates. Amos even took a step back to cover his face, until a glowing pirate ship adorned in LED lights barely avoided a head-on collision with the Kraken and both of them spiraled off onto the horizon as if nothing had happened at all.

The man followed his gaze and shrugged, unperturbed as he rubbed his hands over a pencil mustache. He grabbed his thermos and flipped the top open, taking a deep swig. “Dark and very, very stormy.”

“What’s happening here?” Amos asked, eyes wide in wonder.

“What can I say? It’s Tutu Tuesday,” the man said, and flashed him the cocky grin of a space captain that had just settled a blaster fight in his favor.

“Are you a detective?” Amos asked, stepping forward to peer onto the scattered papers of his desk.

The man exhaled in annoyance and pointed to the turquoise Smith Corona Corsair typewriter. “No,” he said. “I’m a unicorn maintenance officer, kid. Whassitlooklike?”

Amos thought about it and shook his head. “I don’t believe you. You *are* a detective. I need you to help me solve a mystery.”

He narrowed his eyes and focused on the boy. Then he said, “Hey, you’re...are you really...?”

“Amos,” Amos moved as if to shake the man’s hand, then rubbed it through his hair and kicked him in the shin instead. “Nice to meet you.”

The detective yelped in surprise, but it quickly morphed into a hearty chuckle. “What are you doing here?”

“I might be dead,” Amos said, looking around. “Does that mean anything to you?”

The man poked him in the shoulder and shrugged. “You don’t feel dead.”

“What are you writing?” Amos asked, peeking. “You’re writing a story! Wait a sec...” Amos peeked at the page and saw the alarming words:

The man poked him in the shoulder and shrugged.

“You don’t feel dead.”

“What are you writing?” Amos asked, peeking.

“You’re writing a story! Wait a sec...” Amos peeked at the page and saw the alarming words.

“You’re writing...this, right now?”

“Well, I am now, I wasn’t before...”

“But...” Amos stopped, mind blown. “Wait, what happens to me, to my story?”

The man shook his head and crumpled up the paper. “You’re gonna have to wait and see, just like everybody else.”

“Please hurry up and finish it. I’m quite invested in the outcome.”

“I’m sure you are, but it’s hot, hot as heck here in the desert.”

Amos ran up, snatched the pen out of the writer’s hand, and drew a large S onto the last page. “There you go, if you need it.”

“What am I going to do with an S?” But the writer grinned as soon as he had said it.

“If the desert gets to be too much for you, just add an “s,” and you’ll have a cool dessert.”

The man laughed and tossed the paper ball at Amos. When it hit him, the scene around them shattered, and Amos stood at the foot of the bed in his dad’s room at Grandma’s house in Tongliang Village, watching himself sleep. Grandma sat in a chair next to him, snoring. Her glasses askew on her lap.

Thunder meowed, jumped on the bed, and then turned to regard him. Amos nodded and hopped onto his sleeping form, knowing by now to trust the cat in the Dreamlands.

Groggily, he opened his eyes. He was alive. He was back home. And he was in bed.

CHAPTER 8

TIGERS IN TONGLIANG



Amos jerked himself upright and felt a hammer smash the back of his head. The room spun, and flashes of red and white dots, dizzying visual phosphenes, danced like a late-night KTV disco ball until he lay back down.

“Woah, easy, Amos,” said Grandma, guiding her queasy green grandson back into the bed. “Not so fast. Stay in bed, dear.” Her stern judgment was gone, Amos noticed. Now, only naked compassion, love, and fear remained. It’s in facing death that we come most alive, Amos thought. He’d read that somewhere, long ago, and the thought made him wince again. That memory was somewhere behind a red wall of pain.

“What? Where?” Amos clutched his throbbing head with one hand. Even the dim nightlight in Papa’s bedroom was like a luminous knife jabbing into his throbbing brain. Thunder lay on his legs, a purring ball of warmth. He peeked out with one eye, and she smiled at him. “Am I dreaming?”

“You were lost in the woods,” came a husky voice from the doorway.

Grandpa! Amos opened both eyes a crack, shielded by his folded hands. Grandpa was tall, with broad shoulders, a barrel chest, and arms like tree trunks. He was youthful and robust

despite a full head of snow-white hair, but today he showed his age. He leaned against the door frame, and his face was ashen-grey.

“You must have taken a wrong turn in the storm.”

“Grandpa?” Amos scratched his head. *In his hazy reflection, he didn't remember Grandpa coming; there'd been...a fox? Amos shivered. It had been a huli jing, a Trickster with nine tails...it had scared him stupid and...and almost killed him.*

“Rest, Amos,” Grandma said, standing beside Grandpa. “Are you hungry?”

They exchanged glances—a mixture of worry, fear, and sadness. Amos, already on thin ice, expected to be beaten, or locked away until he graduated college, but they just looked worry-stricken and heart-broken.

Amos gulped and closed his eyes. It felt better to keep them closed. He put two hands on his stomach, as he often did when he was sick, but there was no warmth or comfort in them today. It was like laying twin icicles upon an open freezer. Beyond the pain in his head, he became aware that his whole body felt numb. Pins and needles creeping up and down from his neck to his knees. Only his feet, where Thunder lay felt any warmth or comfort whatsoever.

Grandpa was breathing thickly. He settled the fluid inside his lungs, coughing a little into his hand. Amos opened his eyes again as Grandpa cupped his abdomen in pain.

“You go and lie down, Tian,” Grandma said, squeezing Grandpa's hand. “You've got pneumonia, you old fool,” she patted his shoulder despite her harsh tone. “Thank goodness you brought him home.”

Amos' head spun like a pinball between the paddles of his grandparent's cold comforts.

What did they mean?

A black leather boot flashed in front of his eyes.

A flash of the huli jing, licking his face, mouth impossibly vast, swallowing him whole.

A painful ice-knife shifted in his chest. Amos shivered and groaned.

Grandma walked over and put a hand on his head. "No fever, no chill. I'm calling Dr. Yang."

"I'll get another blanket," Grandpa said, but Grandma put her hands up to wave him away.

"You will go and lie down unless you want another knife in your belly," Grandma glared; the haunting stare of an Apex predator jungle cat and Grandpa backed off.

"Another what?" Amos asked, alarmed. "Another what??"

"Ahh, I had an accident, clearing brush," he said and gave Grandma a look that said the conversation was over.

"It's okay, dear," Grandma said as Grandpa limped out into the hall. "You rest. I'll be back with more blankets. You need something; you ring the bell," she said, pointing to a little bell on the nightstand.

Too bad I had to sell my soul for housekeeping services. I would have loved that bell a week ago. Today, I feel nothing. Uncomfortably numb. Amos held his breath and focused on their whispers. He heard only fragments of conversation from the hall.

"...you have to rest...fool...lie...doctor..."

“...boy...cold...don’t know how...found...”

Grandma’s voice was full of secrets when she mumbled, “what...think...means?”

Did every adult wear a mask they could take off and be anything they wanted?

“It...important...happening...but...” Grandpa broke into a coughing fit, and they wandered off.

Amos was left alone with his thoughts, trying to sort out the conflicting memories and parse the convenient story they’d offered. *Had he really wandered around and fallen over some branches and cried out?* Grandpa had happened to be walking nearby through the woods, heard him in a thunderstorm, and carried him back. Farfetched. Not impossible, but hard to swallow. *His visions were so clear...weren’t they?*

What was the alternative? He’d found hidden artifacts of magickal power in a fake closet in his father’s childhood bedroom. He’d worn them and summoned a fox-spirit that sucked his soul half to death because he didn’t do his chores. *Unlikely.* Amos clutched at his throbbing head. The truth must be somewhere in the middle.

A few minutes later, Grandma pattered back in the room, humming a lullaby. It was eerily familiar, something that his parents used to sing. She brought a cup of steaming hot soup and set it on the nightstand.

“Sit up, Amos. Drink some,” she said, pushing a pillow behind his back to elevate him into a seated position. He reached for his glasses and slid them over his eyes.

Amos took a tentative sip. The warmth steaming off the vegetables and broth fogged his glasses, but was little comfort. He made grunted noises as he slurped it, but it could not thaw

the frozen block of spiritual goop that had spread giant frosted tendrils throughout his torso. With a sigh, he set the bowl down and stretched out his arms, wiggling tingly fingers and prickly toes.

“Go back to sleep,” Grandma said, touching his head again.

“I must have a bad cold,” Amos said, “I’m...sor—”

Grandma waited, but Amos could not go on. He wanted to cry, but his tear ducts were empty, so the boy closed his eyes and breathed slow and steady until she left.

A light rain battered the windowsill, the faraway patter of battlefield drums. Unable to sleep, Amos cracked open his eyes and gazed out the window. Above the tree line, Tongliang was a vast void of smokey grey clouds, as if someone had forgotten to finish painting the sky.

Unsteadily, Amos crept to his feet, feeling the rush of blood to his head. His heart jumped, and his arms and legs tingled painfully. He grasped at the nightstand and sent the cup spinning off of it. His eyes grew huge, and time froze as he hooked it on an outstretched thumb and caught it mid-air.

Breathing heavily, he placed the mug back on the nightstand and crept to the hallway.

Grandma spoke to someone downstairs, and Amos hurried back under the covers as they marched to his room, smiling with their creepy adult masks.

The doctor had a round face creased by regular smiles, a receding hairline, and two small bumps on his forehead where horns might have once flourished. He sat next to Amos on the bed.

“Hello, Amos. I’m Dr. Yang. You got quite the scare in the woods. Was it tigers again?”

“Tigers?” Amos asked, eyes bursting open as he forgot he was pretending to sleep. “Tigers in Tongliang?”

Grandma sized up Dr. Yang and shook her head.

“Just a joke. Humor is healthy.” Dr. Yang winked at Amos. “What happened?”

Amos shrugged. “I can’t remember clearly.”

“Well, let’s have a look at you,” said Dr. Yang and opened his little black bag. “Open up,” he said, sticking a popsicle stick into Amos’s mouth.

“Ahhhh,” Amos moaned, mouth as huge as a train station.

Dr. Yang shone a flashlight inside. “Tonsils look very good. Have you ever thought about modeling?” He produced a thermometer, slipped it into a clean plastic cover, and popped it inside. “Behind your tongue.”

“Tonfil Mofeling?” Amos garbled, confused. The thermometer had the delicate aroma of mint. Amos scrunched up one eye.

Dr. Yang chuckled again, then he pulled his stethoscope out and felt Amos’ heartbeat. He paused for a moment, listening intently. “It’s wormwood. A local treasure. Banish those demons in a heartbeat.” He winked again.

Amos frowned. The jokester’s endless well of jokes had run dry. Try as he might, he could not crack back.

“Amos, I’m going to shine this in your eye, okay, just for a second.” Dr. Yang shone the flashlight into Amos’ left eye and watched him closely. “Okay, good, good, normal pupil dilation.” The doctor brought the flashlight to Amos’ right eye

and frowned. He was quiet for a moment. “Is the boy taking any medication?”

“No, he’s not. Why, is something wrong?”

“His right pupil is not dilating, non-responsive to the light. It could be significant, yes.” Dr. Yang turned off the flashlight. Amos heard the doctor say, “One eye on the past, one eye on the future. Isn’t that how the saying goes?”

“Where...” Amos struggled to speak with the thermometer in his mouth, “where does that saying come from?”

“What saying?” Dr. Yang asked, pulling back and trying to hide a bewildered glance at Grandma.

What’s going on? Amos reached into his shirt and felt for the silver necklace, but it was gone.

Where did my necklace go?

“Do you have any other symptoms, I mean, problems, Amos?” Dr. Yang said.

Amos’ voice caught in his throat. He was trying to remember what his dad had said about non-responsive pupil dilation. Everything before Tongliang lay obscured behind a red fog of pain.

“Amos?” Grandma asked him. “Tell the nice doctor what’s wrong.”

“Um...bad headache, feels like my guts are frozen....”

Amos waited uncomfortably, and all three shared a tense quiet moment until the thermometer beeped. Dr. Yang popped it out of Amos’ mouth. “Oh, this is cold. 35.2 C— almost hypothermic. That’s no good... no good at all.” He stood up and scratched his head, looking at Grandma. “Keep him warm, and we’ll monitor him. We’ll have to take him in if he gets any

colder.” Dr. Yang remembered to give Amos a reassuring smile that everything would be okay. But, it was too little, too late.

Grandma looked stricken but nodded and took another blanket out of the closet and put it on Amos. “Finish your soup and sleep. I’ll be back to check on you, darling.”

Amos closed his eyes. He listened to their footsteps creak over to the hallway and down to Grandpa’s room. Amos massaged his feet until they started to feel less prickly. Then his hands and, slowly, carefully snuck one foot in front of the other on the pins-and-needly balls of his feet, listened into the hallway.

“How did...this...wound?”

“—slipped with knife...Amos...tangled up...mudslide—”

“—looks infected, or worse...did you...clean—?”

A murmuring from Grandma, “—he was...worse...first... home, but you know Tian,...full moon—”

“— gut wound...different...serious.”

“—wrong...him?”

“He isn’t healing...Can...tell...any...—?”

“Shortness...breath, blood...urine...-tighed.”

Grandma and Dr. Yang walked out into the hall, and Amos slipped into the hallway closet, sneaking the door closed just in time.

Dr. Yang paused and then asked an extraordinary question. “Is it possible...he’s been poisoned?”

“Poisoned?” Grandma repeated, incredulous. “How could he have been poisoned?”

“It’s just...these symptoms, what looked like infection could be...poison. Big Brother Tian is the strongest old man in the village, Sister Mei. When we had the troubles with... monsters...”

Amos gasped and then covered his mouth, so he would not be found.

“...we would have been lost if not for him. But this wound is unlike anything I’ve ever seen... worse than what I’ve patched up before. It has its hold on him, and I’m not sure... I...if you can find what poisoned him, I might be able to help counteract it. Those gashes on his back too- they smell like, you know...”

Dr. Yang whispered something to Grandma, and then she answered, sounding a little scared.

“Thank you, Doctor Yang.” Grandma seemed small and human then, not the towering matron that held up the family. This made Amos feel tiny and scared, too.

“Let me walk you out.”

Amos held his breath until they had walked downstairs and then crept out of the hallway closet to see Grandpa.

Monsters? What did Dr. Yang mean?

Poisoned?

Would Grandpa die?

Was it all his fault?

What had poisoned Grandpa?

Could he help somehow?

He found Grandpa resting with eyes closed and hands at his sides. His skin was ashen.

“Grandpa, are you okay?”

Grandpa smiled weakly. “I am tired, Amos.”

“How did you find me, Grandpa?”

“I heard you cry, Amos, and I—”

“Shh, shh, shh, shh,” Amos interrupted, putting a finger against his Grandpa’s thin lips. “Be honest. I remember things. Scary things...Grandpa, what happened out there?”

Grandpa considered him for a long moment, and Amos could see the turmoil behind his warm eyes. Finally, he nodded and wrapped his big strong paws around Amos’ shoulders.

“Now, boy, you might be young, but it’s time you know something. It might be the only time to tell you.”

“What is it, Grandpa?”

“You brushed up against something that most people in their lives never have to put a name to. And...and it stole something from you.” Grandpa coughed, and clutched at his belly with a stoic grimace.

Amos gripped his Grandpa’s bear-sized paw with both of his hands. “You know about fox-spirits, Grandpa? You believe me?”

Grandpa nodded softly. “Of course, Amos.”

“Have you seen monsters before? For real?”

“Our family has lived in these mountains for many years, protecting this village—there haven’t been any in a long time.”

“I’m sorry, Grandpa,” Amos said, squeezing Grandpa’s hand. He felt a hot flush of...*guilt*? It felt alien, out of place in

his cool, mostly soulless body. “Please don’t die, okay? Please...”

Grandpa nodded, “Of course not, I...need...to rest—”

Hot tears ran down Amos’ cheeks. “Thank you for finding me. I’m so—I’m sor—”

“How did you find—Papa’s box?”

“I dreamed about it, Grandpa, and I wanted to play. I didn’t mean —.”

Grandpa watched him and nodded. “We should have given it to your father years ago, but we were happy, and he was so busy. There was never the right time. Now I fear his fate has come for you.”

Amos rocked back on spaghetti legs, and Grandpa’s hand shot out to steady him, although he groaned from the effort. “Amos, you feel cold because your spirit isn’t whole, and you are not fully here anymore. In time, your body will adapt. I’ve seen it before, long ago. You must be patient.” Grandpa squeezed his hand. “I know you’ll be a good boy, grow tall and strong, and make us proud.”

Amos sat down beside Grandpa. How would he feel if Grandpa died? This was all his fault, and everyone would blame him. He was a menace to everyone who loved him. The bullies in his class, maybe they weren’t so bad. They called a fool a fool. “Okay, Grandpa,” he said and closed his eyes. He felt frozen, and numb, and dizzy. Eventually, dreams came for him again of Anju Ancient Town’s old days and promises made and promises broken.

Later, Grandma was beside him again when he opened his eyes with a cup of hot tea to offer him. Amos got up groggily and stumbled to the bathroom. He fearfully avoided his

reflection, keeping his gaze to the floor. While he could taste the fragrant flavors of the flower tea, it did not warm him. The icy hole in his soul was an ever-present source of discomfort, from his tingling ears to his prickling toes. He hobbled back to his room and found Grandma waiting.

“Do you feel better?” Grandma touched his forehead. She seemed weary and frail.

“Where’s Rufus?” Amos asked.

Grandma met his gaze but quickly glanced out the window, shrugging. “Oh, Rufus is around. He’s independent, likes to roam all over this land, protecting us from wild tigers and other things.”

“We don’t have tigers here,” Amos said, forehead scrunched up in deep thought.

“Oh, we used to, we used to, before Rufus.” She smiled.

Would half a soul be enough? A cold office drone, a study robot, or an emotionless doctor...Amos could never laugh and joke and play again ...even if he could, would he lie in bed slurping soup until Grandpa died? Amos was very close to making a decision.

“Where did Grandpa propose to you?” Amos asked Grandma.

“What a funny question.”

“Did he propose to you on a little stone bench in the ancient town after the opera show?”

Grandma smiled kindly. “Did your Aunt Grace tell you that? She always loved romantic...”

“I dreamed about it,” Amos interrupted. The seed of an idea had sprouted just under his consciousness. “Is that where

you found dad? In the basket?”

Grandma froze, speechless, and then forced a laugh. “Go to sleep, Amos. You must be confusing Aunt Grace’s story with a dream.”

“Maybe,” he lied.

Grandma was lost in time, staring out the window.

“So, you’re not my grandparents?” Amos wanted to cry, but his tear ducts were still frozen shut.

“Shhh child, of course we’re your grandparents.” Grandma hugged him a little too strong, smothering him back to bed. “That’s enough out of you today. Go back to sleep.” Later, after some more bland, dreamless rest, he heard Doctor Yang talking to Grandma again in the hall.

“The infection...worse...I can’t say for sure...he will make...the night.”

“He...I...has to...,” Grandma said, sounding very small.

Amos waited until the voices stopped and tried to fall back to sleep, but he couldn’t rest.

I’ve made a mess of everything. Mama’s in the hospital, Papa is furious, Grandma is weak, and my Grandpa is dying. What is wrong with me? Why does everything always happen around me? I’m such a screw-up.

He spent hours fitfully in and out of sleep but could not rest peacefully. He was only a boy. He knew this. He was lucky to be alive. He knew this too. He was not a hero—all this trouble was because of him. That last thought stuck, lodged, a bone in his craw. No matter how hard he tried to swallow it, it became an untenable thought. He could not do

nothing. Somehow, he had to do something—to fix all that he'd broken.

Amos began to dream up a plan.

He waited until everything was hushed and then massaged his hands and feet until he could feel them without the intense prickling sensations. He got up, put on his slippers, and crept to his grandparents' room. They were sleeping. Grandpa's breath came in gasps, and he was chalky pale. Grandma tossed and turned, making scared sleeping noises. Their whole world was falling apart all because of him.

As hints of blood orange painted the playful suggestion of a lavender hue into the blackness of a hopeless night, he crept through their room in search of the wizard's robe. His bunny slippers slipped quiet, and he snuck around the room without a sound until he found the payload in a plastic bag under their bed. He crept back into the hall. In the hallway, he unwrapped it and was rewarded with the pleasant jingle of jewelry. Over his head, with a whoosh, his heart slowed down, and he felt much calmer about the situation.

He slunk down the stairs like a cat, without making a peep.

At the kitchen table, he sat down to write a note.

Dear Grandma, Grandpa,

I've gone to find medicine for Grandpa. Wish me luck. Don't worry. I'll be back soon. Don't tell mom and dad. They'll worry. And get mad. Trust me. I'll be back.

Amos the Amazing

P.S. I Mean it!

Thunder meowed as he finished his note, her tail high and looking towards the purpling sky.

“Yes, Thunder, I’m ready,” Amos whispered. “Are you coming?”

Thunder meowed and followed Amos underfoot.

Amos slipped out the door, ready to stalk the huli jing.

CHAPTER 9

THE JOURNEY ELSEWHERE



Amos trod on through the darkness, toward the golden autumn scent of osmanthus, and the first of many tangerine-dreams kissed Tongliang's indigo sky; promising the impossible. He retraced his steps along the old town road to Anju as the dawn chorus of melodic birdsong welcomed a new day. He would locate the gateway to Elsewhere, recover his soul, and save Grandpa.

Only sparse traffic this early disturbed Amos, who played his Papa's favorite ancient pop jams. The music emboldened him to do what must be done. An old pickup truck slowed as the boy belted the lyrics to *Mm-Bop*.

An old man rolled his window down. His lips moved.

Amos pulled off his headphones, "what?"

"Hey, Boy, are you Fan Mei's grandson?" It was the vegetable dealer, old Mr. Zhang.

"Maybe," Amos said cryptically.

"Nice to meet you, *Mei Bi*. I'm Zhang Liang," the old man smiled and waved. "Do you want a ride to Anju?"

Amos regarded him with suspicion. "No...I'm fine," he said and put his headphones back on. This was his walk into the sunrise. "Go, shoo, shoo."

The old man shrugged, “suit yourself,” and drove off.

Only a few more cars passed by Amos, slowing to ensure they did not startle the boy. Amos bopped his head and shoulders, bright red silken robe jiggling aggressively over his blue and white striped pajamas. Although a bit stained, his bunny slippers had been lovingly washed.

This time, Amos did not follow Thunder. He knew the way, and she often walked beside him. On the occasions she disappeared into a bush, he stayed the course. She soon returned, chewing on a large bug. The hours rolled by, and Amos began to falter, but he did not slow down. *Maybe I should have taken the ride*, he thought, but he vowed to get there all the same. Finally, as the sweltering noon sun desperately tried, yet failed, to thaw the icy soullessness from his belly, Amos arrived at Anju. Several men sat on steps by a pair of stone lions that guarded the large ancient gate. They played mahjong and hocked a cart of deliciously aromatic steamed buns.

“Buns!” One man called. “Steamed buns! Two kuai! Fruit, meat, breakfast treat, get a steamed bun.”

“Or for lunch!” his friend said. “Have steamed buns for lunch, Boy! They’re delicious and nutritious! Only two kuai!”

Amos had no money, no phone, and no breakfast. His stomach rumbled, but he crossed under the age-old stone gate. Amos walked through the cobblestone streets of Anju Ancient Town, looking for the resting spot on their previous visit. He would find the door from his dreams. But without his grandmother to guide him, all the narrow boulevards looked the same, and he found himself lost aimlessly on tired roads. As he walked by, a rat scurried out from under a stall, and Thunder took off down an alley after it.

“See you, Thunder,” he said and kept on.

He stopped under a gazebo for a momentary respite from the blazing sun. After some time, he kept going, up a hill, down a bend, around the way, and back again. He was walking in circles. Thirsty, he paused to get a drink from his bottle and noticed that his ring had begun to pulse. He followed the alley to another snack street, and the pulsing grew stronger until, at last, he found himself in front of the stone bench where they had rested and eaten snacks. This was where he and Grandma had broken the ice, and Amos hoped his soul-ice would do the same with a bit of luck. When he sat down, his ring rattled so Mad Hatter that it brushed against the decorative iron door behind him. With a tremendous creak, it moved a little.

Eyes agape, he stepped back to examine it closer. It was a decorative door, wrought iron, and huge. It did not stand out from other carvings on the wall of windows, characters, and houses along the road, and it did not seem like it should open. Yet, Amos peered through the crack into the darkness beyond. Lights flashed with quantum potential and prismatic rays of magick.

He steadied himself and pushed again.

It gave a little more, and now, he heaved. The red iron door creaked a few inches, then a foot or so, enough to slip through.

He steeled himself to accomplish impossible things. Only achieving the impossible would bring him back whole and save his Grandpa. Everything weighed heavy on his boyish shoulders. Yet Amos had no choice but to try. With a sigh, he slipped through the crack into the gaping abyss that lay behind, and soon the warmth of a hot Chongqing summer morning was lost and forgotten and far away.

As he rocketed through the quantum multiverse of bubble worlds and possible N-dimensional realities, he was deconstructed and rebuilt along at least ten axes, contorted, stretched, and skewed in $|\mathbb{R}| > \aleph_0$ ways. Amos swam breathlessly into the endless gloom, following the pulse of the triple spiral yew tree ring elsewhere, to the Dreamlands. Amos was as resolute as a 12-year-old could be to discover and harness the artifacts' magick. Alone, except for his fluffy cat Thunder, Amos knew that even if he returned, he would never be the same boy again.



“I’m sorry, we’re closing now.” the serving robot apologetically chirped in a synthesized, almost human cadence. Its cartoon eyes, bewildered, peered at them.

“Woah,” said Alice, clutching her empty glass with an iron grip. “What time is it?” She set it down with leaden fingers and massaged her hand. After a moment, she met the playful gaze of the Storyteller with impatience and intensity. “So, what happened then?”

“Ah,” he said, smiling, “What happened then, a fine question.” He pushed his empty cup forward and slowly stood up. “Well, I would love to tell you, but it seems we have to go. It’s getting late, and I must be somewhere. Perhaps, you can find yourself a copy and find out—”

“No,” Alice roared, then blushed and held her hands together in front of him. “Please, no. Can’t you tell me what happens next?” There was something a little unhinged, frantic in her request.

With this telling, almost dreamlike, the warm, fuzzy memories of her student life before college had begun to unravel. *What lay beneath?* What was the truth about Amos? With a quickening pulse from her temple to her chest, she held her breath and waited. *She had to know.*

The Storyteller studied her for a moment. “I leave tomorrow. I can send you a copy when I get back. I’ll even sign it.” He grinned.

“I need to know, please, wherever you’re going, I’m sure I can drop by,” she clasped his hand now with an iron grip.

The Storyteller had to protest one more time. “I’m sorry dear Alice. I’m taking the first shuttle off-planet in the morning. My publisher’s idea, they thought some clean moon air might do my head some good.”

Alice grinned ear to ear and nodded without skipping a beat. “Perfect. I’ll see you there!”

The Storyteller quirked a brow. “You’re going to meet me ... on the moon ... tomorrow?”

“There’s a Chongqing cosplayers convention at the Mare Tranquillitatis Resort Hotel” Alice said as she pulled out her phone and inertly lost herself in the softly glowing glass screen of her device for a minute. “I was thinking about going anyway, it’s not a problem.” She laughed nervously.

The robot beeped and buzzed, rotating slightly, impatiently.

The Storyteller shrugged at the robot, stood, and picked up his shoulder bag. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Alice said, nodding and jumping up. “I just booked my tickets for the convention and the shuttle. See you

tomorrow morning!” She started to leave and then hesitated and raised her phone again. “Can I?” She stood beside him.

The Storyteller froze, his shoulders bunching up, but he steadied himself after a long moment, sighed, and nodded. “Yeah, sure, okay,” he said and smiled into the camera screen.

Alice snapped a photo. “Excellent!”

As the Storyteller walked away, hiding a giddy grin, Alice texted her friends.



The train ride home was crowded but thankfully air-conditioned. The Storyteller stopped at his favorite noodle shop to get some *wanza mian*, a hearty dish with chickpeas and ground meat similar to a Chinese spaghetti bolognese. He ate in silence, surrounded by the noise and chatter of the city. He existed in sublime isolation, in the heart of the crowd. When he finished, he scanned a QR code, and the shop sang out in confirmation.

He walked up the hill, into the academy compound, and up the stairs to his flat. When he entered, only an old, fluffy golden-brown teddy bear poodle greeted him with a wagging tail. It howled in delight. The Storyteller patted its head and smiled. “We were both wolves once, weren’t we, Johnny?”

He sat in front of his computer, working on some ideas for another book. In the background, the TV played electronic music. Breakdance contestants from a dozen worlds competed on the latest dancing show. A buzzing sound alerted him to a drone at the window, and he slid it open. A compact, powerful, space-grey robot carrying a box of milk made a beeline for the kitchen.

The Storyteller returned to work, ignoring the pleasant stream of beeps and boops of the refrigerator, greeting the delivery drone like an old friend. He wrote until his eyes were too dry, and then he walked down to the gym and had a run and a swim. He dared hope, but only a little.

Later, the Storyteller packed a shoulder bag with his overnight kit, his computer, and a couple of ironic t-shirts that never seemed to go out of style. His thoughts drifted back to the young reader at the bookstore; she knew her fantasy books and was invested in the story, but it was more than that. The story affected her personally. He was sure, incredibly sure now, that she *was* the Alice he'd been looking for.

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“Come with me, take my hand. I promise I won’t bite,
A wonderland, this Elsewhere, but best be home by night.”

- Hiro Takai, ‘A Tempest in Spindelfell’

INTERLUDE

A BURNING STAR



Alice was *always* happy to subvert expectations. She stepped out of a self-driving hydrogen-powered minicab in front of the Chongqing City Spaceport wearing a fluffy, leather, white rabbit steampunk costume. The searing eye of a savage summer sun caused her to break a sweat in the dozen steps to the spaceport doors. “I want the old sun back,” she murmured. “This new sun takes its job too seriously.” This, of course, was abstract, for she’d only ever known *this* burning star.

Once the world’s biggest polluter, China was now the world’s biggest supplier of clean power, sponge cities to soak up the rising sea levels, and carbon sink super forests to rapidly decarbonize the atmosphere. Every country had made promises, but few worked as hard to make them a reality. Once on life support, Mother Earth had turned the corner. Like every Chinese person, she was proud, but it was still wicked hot outside.

The double doors of the spaceport whooshed open, and Alice adjusted her face mask as she stepped into the cool, crisp air-conditioned lounge. The vast chamber was a Santorini-style white-and-blue with tall white pillars stretching up to a vast ceiling covered in LED panels. Alice grinned at the images of flummoxed children mounted on a lunar shuttle

projected on the ceiling. The video cut to pictures of lunar boarding and expeditions mixed with animations of fabled uni-horned space whales. Somehow, this impressive building had normalized the fantastical prospect of leaving the planet, ushering in a new horizon; *lunar tourist consumption with Chinese characteristics*.

The morning crowd lined up to tap their devices to the security markers, holdovers of the containment protocols that had kept borders and travel safe for years. Each passenger was screened using near-field communications, wirelessly transmitting recent travel information via geolocation satellite tags. Alice clocked the line, smirking a little at the colorful mix of corpos in suits, blue-collar engineers in jumpsuits, space tourists, and elaborately festooned cosplayers. A family of four scanned their watches, and it chimed happily. Next, a group of candy-colored Sailor Moon manga girls giggled as they beeped through. Alice worked her way towards the front, one step at a time.

A couple of bald suits approached the marker. For a moment, nothing happened at all. The men, with eyes a little too far apart for her comfort, shared bewildered expressions when an alarm wailed. A dispassionate robot spun out of the wall. It sprayed the two corpos and those behind them with a sterilizing gas, filling the air with acrid smoke.

“Xerlock,” growled one man. “We don’t have time for this.”

“We don’t have time for anything, Foames. It’s your head if we miss that shuttle,” growled Xerlock, his ichthyic features creased in resentment.

Alice shuddered. There was something fishy about their bulbous eyes and hairless heads as they clucked in

dissatisfaction.

The Sailor Moon girls ahead of them were marched back into a containment office for secondary screening and sanitation. Alice clicked the bubble dome mask into place around her face, always apprehensive about breaches. She held her breath, counting one-1,000, two-1,000 as long as she could. A hazmat-suited security team shuffled the bewildered corpos off, and an unfortunate elderly couple was taken along for good measure. *All in the name of safety.*

Fifty-eight-1,000, Fifty-nine-1,000.... Sixty-1,000... the gas cleared, the robot shuffled back into the wall, and everything was as it had been.

A young surfer boy in board shorts swung his backpack into Alice and then turned around to apologize and almost swatted her with his lunar board.

“Sorry,” he said.

“You know, they have those *on the moon*,” Alice growled.

“This one is special,” the boy said, giving her a goofy smile. She thought of her old friend Amos. After so long, she had dreamt of him last night and wondered where he was today. Would she still recognize him? The scanner chimed, and the surfer stepped onto the boarding gate. Alice scanned and entered the shuttle bridge to Chang’e-88 without issue. She stowed a single bag overhead, strapped in, and reclined her seat. Closing her eyes, Alice went right back to sleep, dreaming, in fact, that she was a cat.

A little over four hours later, Alice woke up to the landing chimes and prepared herself for the turbulence of lunar entry. It always spooked her a little, the sudden gut-punch between effortless floating and the realization she had been traveling a

mind-numbing 100,000 km/hr and was making a guided implosion onto the landing pad of the Mare Tranquillitatis, Sea of Tranquility, Chinese luxury lunar resort. Five years ago, it became the first AAAAAAA tourist hotel on the moon and was still the most popular among Chinese space tourists. With Qunar discounts and government space exploration subsidies, it was hardly more expensive than a summer trip to Europe and much more affordable than the Americorp-run resorts around the Tycho crater.

Alice took a rapid train from the spaceport to the hotel. She entered the hotel, glancing at a cartoon sign of two hazmat workers cheering with one hand in the air for the safety protocols that kept the moon resort virus free. As she entered the domed garden lobby, she remembered her first visit. Her dad had won tickets through a company lottery, and they'd been some of the first civvies in Chongqing to experience the joys of gravity-controlled Chongqing-hotpot in space. When she returned to school, Ruby and Amos were so jealous that they made her recount the stories and shared her videos until they could recite every word and gesture. Amos had been adept at miming low-gravity dining blunders. His enormous eyes and elastic features always had made her howl with laughter. He'd been so annoying that she couldn't even remember when they'd finally become friends. She rubbed her eyes, wondering why so much of her childhood was a hazy fog of vague memories.

Alice walked past scores of moonies that lounged around the lobby entrance, navigating a sea of LuneX dropouts begging and busking to sustain their bohemian life.

Alice remembered an feelie-doc a few years back about how Sideræl Musk had begun scraping the O₂-infused crust around 2030, a good portion of which was paid in taxes to help

achieve China's Carbon-Zero by 2060 plan. As part of the largest umbrella corporation on Earth, LuneX helped ensure the fractured and corporate-dominated western nations kept up with their quotas. Once they began chasing large concentrations of lunar ice craters, a massive 'industrial accident' had resulted in hundreds of corpos on PTSD leave. Alice noticed that there wasn't a droid in sight. Since the incident, all of them were banned from public spaces on the moon - and some reformers pushed for them to be banned on other planets as well.

"Moonrock massage?" whispered a willowy waif. Alice shook her head. The woman was about thirty, but her pale, almost translucent skin and feather-light frame were typical of those who'd lived in low gravity for years. Alice maintained her sour expression until she passed through the crowd of moonies. They held up laminated signs offering lunar boarding excursions, crater tours, and one that made Alice stop in her tracks: Space Whale tourism. She gawked at the grizzled old captain smoking his e-pipe and said, "Has anyone actually ever seen a Space Whale?"

"Ever seen a Space Whale?" he guffawed, his voice like dragged gravel, and twisted his captain's cap in consternation. "I've seen, hell even hunted, more space whales than any captain that's touched this old rock."

"I don't believe in them," Alice said.

He leaned forward and whispered. "Don't believe in Space Whales," he laughed. "You know, the most merciful thing in the world, I think," the captain blew out a puff of fake pipe smoke, "is your inability to grok infinite space."

Alice shrugged, "that doesn't make space whales real."

“You live on a placid isle of idiocy amid jet black seas of eternity,” the captain puffed a series of smoke rings.

She frowned at what she was pretty sure was an insult, and kept on walking.

“You might go *mad* if you ever saw one...but don’t you want to *try*?” the captain called, but she did not take his challenge.

Alice scuttled along to the check-in desk. She scanned her face, and a droid at the counter beeped a crisp chirping greeting, offering her room cards and an info tablet about the resort. She accepted the room card but declined the tablet and went up to unpack and unwind.

A half-hour later, as Alice approached the coffee bar to grab a couple of light lunches for her and the Storyteller, she caught the gaze of a nondescript older woman. Alice smiled and then did a double take. The woman’s shoulder-length brown-black hair was tied behind her, and she wore a simple green blouse and white arm coverings to protect herself from the lunar reflection. Her face was kind, with natural laugh lines around her eyes. She was about sixty and so normal that it gave Alice shivers. Some gut feeling, a foggy memory of her old friend Amos whispered, “haven’t you seen her around you lately? After you left the bookstore yesterday, didn’t you see her next to you on the metro?” But Alice shrugged it off. Amos was long gone.

She marched to the café and ordered. “Two mocha chocolate café lattes and two lunar continentals,” she said, and the terminal scanned her face and charged her account. She texted her friends. A moment later, Dave told her they’d been out lunar boarding all morning and would be down in a minute. She took a seat at the retro-rock-n-roll diner booth and

waited until Dave, dressed as a clockwork-monocled Mad Hatter, and Cindy, an elegantly gowned Victorian Red Queen, strolled over. Alice slurped the last creamy droplets of her coffee, grinning as her sugar-fueled synapses vibrated with excitement.

Mad Hatter hung sweetly to the arm of his Red Queen, large eyes full of puppy love. Alice had to poke them. “So, when’s the wedding?”

Dave blushed until he matched Cindy’s crimson dress. Cindy, with her painted white face, gave Alice a regal smile.

“After college,” Cindy said, craning her neck to wink at Dave as she led him by his necktie.

“So, I found the guy’s book online; it should arrive tomorrow,” Alice said, changing the subject for Dave’s benefit. “I want you to meet him. He’s different.”

“Probably mad. Writers are always mad,” Dave said with a thankful grin.

Cindy glanced at Dave. “We have a live stream in the afternoon, but....”

“Sounds like fun,” Dave said. “So, where’s the old guy?”

Alice glanced around and shrugged. “He’ll be here soon.”

“Maybe he won’t,” Cindy said impatiently. “Hey, let’s go check out the Ultraman show by—” she stopped as an older gentleman - a foreigner - wearing a black collared shirt and carrying a spring jacket slung over one arm approached them.

“Hi, good morning,” the Storyteller said and smiled at Alice.

“Hello,” Alice said. “Oh, my friends. This is Dave and Cindy. Dave and Cindy, this is—”

“Fine,” he said, glancing at breakfast. He held the cup, savored the warmth, and sipped the coffee. He peered out the window as if his mind was far away. His hands broke off pieces of space-baked croissant, lost in his imagination.

Cindy cleared her throat.

“Well, Amos spun through the endless gaping abyss of quantum darkness,” the Storyteller began. He sipped his coffee and flashed them a shy, apologetic smile. “Whizzing past unlimited worlds, as many as he could imagine.” He set the coffee down, finding his place again.

“His triple-swirled world tree ring, powered by his desire to save his grandpa and his very soul, propelled him with purpose...Elsewhere...”

CHAPTER 10



Amos slipped through quantum streams while swirls of pastel fractals danced like cosmic sugar plums across the periphery of his imagination. As he came out the other side, swathes of blue, green, brown, purple, and red overlapped to stitch together a patchwork quilt of colors—a Frankenstein landscape of heaven and earth. Amos soared like a dizzy comet through a tangerine sky, barely slowing as he skidded through an ancient forest and crashed at the shore of a lake and into the ear of an innocent lake gazer.

Amos rubbed his eyes, shocked to discover his hands were coconut-brown and shimmered like moonstone. He gazed into his reflection in the lake and gasped. He wore a black and purple frilly blouse and intricate, rune-carved leather gauntlets from his elbows to his wrists. Over the blouse was a set of corseted black and brown leather armor. Over his hips flowed a puffy brown skirt over leather leggings, with supple leather boots to his calves. He spun around, skirt twirling, to reveal a sword and shield fastened to his back. Amos' heart pounded as he once again focused on the eyes reflected in the water, like lavender pools of liquid eldritch fury.

He wasn't him. He was a *girl*.

Who in the Green Hell do you think you are? A voice bubbled up from behind his mind. Amos stumbled back, bouncing a full head of velour-black, curly afro in surprise. Over the tight Afro, the curious character sported a crown of small deer-like antlers. Involuntarily, the face sneered at him, and he gazed, stunned, at those lips—burgundy red—the color of wild berries. Ears twitching, Amos marveled at the bizarre carnival reflection in the lake. His ears were long and pointed to a knife's edge. Amos wobbled on short, brown, stubby legs and was ... perhaps three feet tall! Reflected in the lake, his gaze was drawn back to an amethyst stone around a simple leather rope around their neck that softly twinkled, reflected in that powerful gaze, drawing his attention to a body that was very different than the one he had spent all his life in, prior to this moment.

“I’m a girl,” Amos cried in surprise. “I’m a girl!”

No, you’re not, the voice said.

Was it in his mind? Or next to him? He gaped all around him but was alone on the shore.

I am a girl. You’re a bug on my windshield.

“Who’s that?” Amos asked, looking around from side to side. “Speak now, demon.”

I’m no demon! I’m Fis, the voice said. Paladin of the Summer Queen, and I’m ‘bout to kick your ass.

“She’s definitely in my head.”

No, you’re in MY head, said the girl. *You’re a ghost, maybe an old fart that popped in my ear when I sneezed.*

“Um, I’m Amos. I’m here to save Grandpa,”

Excuse me?

“And myself. Do you know a fox-spirit...nine tails...very dangerous?”

“You’re after a fox-spirit?” Fis choked off a laugh. It felt weird for Fis to move his mouth...her mouth, pushing him aside. “Good luck! But please, keep on going; I got stuff to do.” *I’m on a critical mission to stop a war. The Queen of the Fae herself sent me to Hobbleheim.*

The girl named Fis stopped, quiet for a moment, and Amos felt as if she had told him something she had only meant to think. He wondered if that worked both ways.

“Hold on, I forgot something,” Amos closed his eyes to concentrate, then felt his red robe form around Fis, like spider-silk clouds congealing into jelly. As they peered into the lake, the cloak’s hood made her look a little like Red Riding Hood. His necklace, with the insignia of the triple spiral of yew trees, draped Fis’ neck, fused into her own special stone. Finally, the silver ring formed on her finger.

How’d you do that? Fis was now a little less angry and a little more curious. *Wait... that symbol. It’s Old Fae. Who in the name of Father Deerhands are you?*

“I’m Amos,” he repeated and waved into the reflection. “I’m from Chongqing.”

Do you even know what that symbol means?

“You know...” Amos said, deciding not to lie since she might be able to read his mind. “I stepped through a door and ended up here.”

Don’t let that door hit your ass on the way out, Amos. I have very important things to do and don’t enjoy riding backseat in MY OWN BODY.

Amos laughed, and it felt warm and good to be whole again.

What's so funny? You're not funny!

Arguing with her reminded him of lazy days at the cottage with Aunt Grace, arguing about linguistics, literature, and semantics. Amos happily stretched and sat by the lake's edge. She was still talking, but Amos wasn't paying attention. Instead, he removed the leather boots and dangled the curiously stubby, coconut toes into the cool, crisp water. It smelled a little like rotten eggs but was clear and refreshing. The icy pain in my chest is gone.

What are you doing? What are you, like 12?

"I am 12," he said with a grin.

Oh, brother.

"How old are you?" Amos asked.

"I'm almost 17," Fis said proudly.

"Cool," Amos said, looking around in awe. Two colorful suns danced in the candy-colored sky like watchful eyes. One was large and warm, a blood-orange red, and the other farther; a little old blueberry-purple star. The colors of the sky, the trees, and even the lake were more vibrant than he knew was possible. He felt whole again. More than whole. *Whole and a half.*

Bubbles rose to the surface, and a fist-sized spider wriggled up and swam towards him. Amos jerked back in surprise. The eight legs reminded him of the curved arms of sunglasses. Its body was an opaque tube with a filament inside, like a lightbulb, held on by what appeared to be a large chrome screw. The filament flickered, and the body illuminated. Amos felt the pulsing electric power as it burbled

up the riverbank towards him. A dozen others scrambled, crablike, out of the water.

Cool, Amos thought, awestricken.

What are you waiting for? Get going! These are scramble spiders. You don't want to touch them in the water!

Amos hopped away from the water, yanking her boot over their damp foot. The first glowing spider was creeping closer, so he swung the other boot, and it made a satisfying thwack, sending the spider sailing through the air to skip across the lake's surface. The other spiders had blinked on and wriggled toward him, so he ran to the line of trees holding her other boot like a club. When Amos reached the base of a huge tree, he turned back and found they were alone. He hopped about, wriggling their other foot back into the boot.

How graceful, said Fis, oozing sarcastic annoyance.

“Well, feel free to lend me a hand anytime.”

One of my hands? You've already stolen both! How about you take off and find someone else to bother?

“I would if I could,” said Amos. “Any idea how I do that?”

Just...get out—! Fis cried.

Amos felt pressure growing in his head and gritted his teeth with a yelp. The necklace around his neck pulsed and glowed, and then the pressure subsided, and he felt comfortable again. Fis went quiet, so Amos clocked the horizon for landmarks. On one side of him lay the great lake, and on the other side, trees dotted plains that soon became a forest.

Cries came from the woods, and a flock of birds crested the sky over his head. One particularly nosy one flew down,

circling over Amos close enough that he could make out its mechanical gears whirling. Its glowing red eyes spun like a camera lens as it flew over him and back to join the fleeing flock towards dark and ominous clouds.

The ground shook, and a dust cloud on the horizon signaled the approach of a rumbling herd. Amos clung to the tree trunk. “Fis, what is that? Am I in danger?” But no answer came.

The rumble became a roar, and a dozen gigantic armored elephants trampled past the lake. He was stupefied with the unbelievable earth-shaking immensity of them. They resembled ancient mammoths, wrapped in brass armor, and fortified to hold an entire village upon their backs. He could make out smoke from the chimneys of a foundry or factory over brassy hills. Along the top sides of the beast were walls, and Amos could see tall towers or castles. Cannons were mounted on swivels to their sides—manned by guards.

Each beast was large enough to hold a small village. When they reached the lakebed, their trunks began to suck up water for many long minutes. The majestic mixture of beast and clockwork chrome machines was amazing. He forgot his fear as he watched, wondering what kind of folk could make homes atop such fantastic beasts.

Oppressive clouds bullied him overhead with threats of a nasty storm, so he got moving again. No sooner had he taken a step forward did he hear a meow and feel a soft furry paw rub against his calf.

“Thunder! It’s me, Thunder,” Amos said and rubbed Thunder under her chin. “But you knew that already, didn’t you? You clever thing.”

Thunder rubbed against his leg and bent down as he scratched her face and chin. She sniffed Fis' smooth ebony hand and peered at him curiously before purring and rolling over so he could rub her belly.

"I sure am glad to see you here. Where should I go now?" Amos asked, and Thunder took off down a path, following a little river that carried water from the large lake behind them deep into the forest full of large, ancient yew trees.

"Okay, Thunder," Amos said. "Let's head this way." Soon, Amos's powerful new body propelled him along the river and through the woods. They stuck close to the riverbed because the forest was dense and overhanging, with long, giant fingers and heavy canopies that blocked out the light and warmth of the watchful suns. Thunder was content to hop and scurry along its bank, always stopping before Amos lost sight of her. As they navigated by the bioluminescence of glowing vines and large fungi that erupted from the trunks of trees, Amos felt ready to run a marathon.

Thunder chased bugs along the riverbed as they trekked through the woods, and now and then, the living woods erupted in a cacophony of sounds, bird calls, or the chattering of living things. However, as he scampered around in his Fis the Fierce Fae Paladin costume, none seemed a threat. She had not spoken to him in hours, but Amos was entranced by the journey with Thunder and did not feel lonely. Only rarely did he stop to consider the momentous task ahead of him, that somewhere in this fantastic land was a shape-shifting fox-spirit that held his soul and that his Grandpa was likely dying back home. He did not like to linger because it filled him with horrible thoughts and feelings, so he kept going instead. As they walked, the forest became denser, making for a challenging climb that finally caused Amos to break a sweat.

Although the forest looked impenetrable, a way always opened before him, just large enough for them to pass through or duck under. He was glad then to have Fis, as cranky as she'd been, for the woods might not have been so kind to strangers.

Hours went by this way until Amos stopped under a tree to catch his breath. From within the gloom of the overhanging branches, he noticed a network of glowing vines inextricably connected from tree to tree. Unseen birds and insects called strange music to each other, and he heard scuttling and saw those milky orbs in the shadows that reminded him of the watchful things in Tongliang before the Trickster had found him. Thunder decided to continue on her way, and Amos focused on not losing her again. She hopped along, and he pursued with frantic abandon.

Amos gasped, finally, throat burning, and gave Fis' afro a good shake. He mopped the sweat off his forehead and leaned against an old tree trunk, drinking from her water skin.

"Excuse me," came a muffled voice. Amos had placed his hand over the face in the trunk of the tree.

Surprised, he hopped back. "Oh, I'm sorry," Amos said. "I didn't realize you were there."

The tree rolled its eyes and puffed out a face full of spores that left him blinking and slightly disoriented. "Well, I never," it said. "You didn't realize I was here. Been here a thousand years, but don't mind me, stuff your fist in my mouth and take a rest. Go ahead, Chosen One. I'm only a lowly tree, not the hand of the Summer Queen."

"I'm so sorry," Amos blurted, "I'm not really feeling myself."

“Well, at least she didn’t poke you with that blade of hers,” another tree said.

The first one snapped crankily, “I wasn’t finished. You’re not going to let me finish?”

“I had something to say, but you know what, never mind, I don’t want to bother—”

The quarrelsome trees descended into sassy, petty bickering, and Amos hurried by before he offended them any further. Thunder had stopped by the river’s edge to drink and approached the burbling water to wash her face. It was clear and cool, and refreshing. Cupping Fis’ hands and drinking deeply, Amos found it as fresh as a mountain spring and as delicious as anything he’d ever tasted. He smiled and stretched out, gazing at the large hanging branches that brushed the lake’s surface.

“They look like the tree on my pendant, don’t they, Thunder?”

Thunder, being a cat, only meowed and waited for Amos to stretch and rest, content to play in the soft glimmer of mushrooms and vines around that connected to the others, part of a network, like a nervous system for the entire forest.

“The whole forest seems to pulse with a curious life, doesn’t it?” Amos asked, but again Thunder did not answer. They continued until a break in the tree line due to the curvature of the river afforded them a clear glance into the sky, which was now a deep purple hue; the smaller orange sun was directly in front of the huge cool blue one.

On the horizon stood a tall white tower. “Look at that,” Amos said with wonder, pointing to the ivory tower far away. Thunder hopped up in his lap and began to purr. Amos,

grinning, gave her a good rub. Thunder's warm furry body was a comfort. He closed his eyes, resting after the exertion and commotion of the day's adventure, and wondered how Mama was doing in her hospital bed or Grandpa, ashen and grave. He needed to get his soul and find something to fix up Grandpa and fast.

Thunder fell asleep on his lap, and he did not want to disturb her. He had been walking for what seemed like hours and hours, so Amos decided a good rest was in order. He listened to the rising crescendo of insects and the melodic call of evening birds until it was quite dark. The shadows began to stretch longer in the woods. Then, when the last licks of twilight had excused themselves and the sky was black, a curious, loud squeaking sound erupted all around him. It started as a chirp here and another there. Then the call was quickly answered and repeated, carried on and multiplied as a million distinct voices grew together into a symphony of activity, exploding from the ground, rising to a crescendo around him, and flying up into the sky until the air was thick.

One of the leathery moths fluttered onto his hand, with dark mottled wings and a speckled pattern of paler browns and orange for its abdomen. It had a single dark stripe and a skull-like mark on its thorax.

"A death's head moth," Amos whispered in awe, but Thunder pawed it away and meowed. It flew off without complaint, and Amos crept closer to the tree's base. He found a nook in the tendrils and fungi that were cushiony soft, and exactly his size. Despite the frightening arrival of the moths, his eyes grew heavy and soon were closed altogether. Amos fell asleep restfully for some time and then restlessly tossed and turned as he felt many eyes peering at him from the dark, furtive corners of the Dreamlands. He dreamt of the amber

eyes of the Trickster that watched him, but that wasn't the worst thing here. Something older and meaner gazed at him, and it gave Amos shivers.

As Amos jerked awake, he froze, feeling the creeping presence of a dark watcher leering down upon him. Paralyzed, Amos could only howl in abject terror. As he screamed, he felt bile rise in his throat, as the leathery old lips of the wraith peeled back into an awful rotten grimace before it slowly faded into the trees and lazy breeze. After a few moments, Amos managed to slow his breath but realized he could not move.

Frozen, Amos peered into the deep abyss of the shadowy forest. The hair on the back of his neck vibrated with electricity, and cold sweat dripped down the nape of his neck. In the gloom, something drew closer. His heart leaped out of his chest when he saw the dim flicker of bioluminescent fungi from the ground far below reflected in many glowing orbs that regarded him coolly. Then came that sound, the dreadful chattering of hungry mandibles.

CHAPTER 11

DARWIN'S WEB



Bundled tight in spider silk, his arms at his sides, Amos dangled upside down in the darkness. The eight glowing orbs chittered closer. The creature smelled earthy, organic, like wool and humid dirt. It scuttled close enough to feel its putrid, wormy breath upon his face. In the dim glow, Amos gazed in awe and horror at the most enormous spider anyone had ever seen. Its thorax chittered, and two leg-like pedipalp feelers on the sides of its face wriggled in glee. Amos called for help, but no help came, and Thunder was nowhere to be found.

Oh, no, you've got to be kidding me. Amos, you're just fantastic at this hero stuff, chimed Fis sarcastically, also awakening to the dire situation.

Really? Amos found he, too, could project his thoughts, and suddenly this seemed a prudent decision.

No, of course not. We're hanging upside down in a giant spider web and a paladin of the Summer Queen is about to get eaten by a forest guardian.

I covered a lot of ground today, Amos grumbled.

I'll try to get that chiseled on your tombstone, Fis mocked. *'Covered a lot of ground before being eaten.'*

You know, if this tree wasn't safe, you could have warned—

I have been trapped in a prism prison for what felt like weeks until a moment ago. I guess that magic of yours doesn't protect me the way it protects you.

Oh.

I would appreciate it if you would just leave. Take off. Shooo. I'm on a mission, it's kind of a big deal. You'd know that if you knew anything, but you don't because you're twelve.

Amos tuned her out, instead watching the reflections of the glowing bioluminescent mushrooms in eight unblinking eyes.

You're not a hero. But you know who is pretty capable, kid? Me. Let me handle this.

Go ahead, Amos said and backed off.

The giant Spider was right in front of them now, pedipalps grasping at their cocoon. It pushed and prodded their petite package, sending them swinging sickeningly back and forth. "Hello there, Fae creature," the Spider crooned, grinning oddly. "Nice to eat you."

Amos groaned in horror as the Spider made a joyful sucking sound. It wasn't the fact that it was a spider itself that bothered him so much. He was perfectly fine with hypothetical spiders around the house, sucking up flies. But he'd never been in the position of a fly before. Meanwhile, Fis tried wrestling out of the silken prison but only managed to tighten the web around their hands and arms. The more she wriggled, the more trapped they got.

Wait, no, don't! Amos recalled an obscure fact from science class: a single strand of Darwin's bark spider line in Australia was up to six times the tensile strength of steel. *You can't break free! It's too strong!*

Buzz off and let me handle this, Fis demanded, and Amos felt a tentative pulse in the back of his head, and a dizzying pressure in his nose like it might start bleeding again.

The pressure rose in his head, and he gritted his teeth. *No*, he thought forcefully. Amos focused on his breath, regaining control, and felt the sympathetic magick of the necklace supporting him. Fis grew quiet once again.

If only he were a butterfly! With a lightness in his belly, a delightful fluttering, twisting and squishing, Amos was suddenly free! He soared up into the air, flying at dizzying speeds but slammed into a sticky wall above and became embedded into another section of the web.

The Spider clicked and clattered its pedipalps across the web as it raced after him. Amos willed himself to change into something smaller still, but the magick of his cloak seemed tired, and when he willed himself to change, he only shifted back into Fis-form. The Spider silk strained and stretched to accommodate his growth, but he was still stuck.

The Spider chattered happily, close to Amos' borrowed face, as his heart jackhammered in fear. Amos closed his eyes, gutted that he had come so far, only to lose again. *What would his parents think? That he just ran away?* That would almost be worse than death—the tragic and anchorless hope of the disappeared. He waited a moment, and nothing had happened.

Amos peeked at the Spider with one eye, and it seemed to grin, showing off a mouthful of sharp, needle-like structures, *chelicerae*, Amos knew. These fangs would be jam-packed with venom. As the Spider's mouth spread wide, leering over Fis' frozen form, its fangs drooled a clear, sticky goop.

Venom, Amos thought glumly. *I wonder if it's necrotic, capable of melting my skin, or neurotoxic, to paralyze me or*

kill me. Amos wriggled pitifully, but his cloak afforded him no second chances. He was truly stuck.

“Goodbye, little Fae,” the Spider hummed as its mouth opened wide, and Amos felt the fangs pressing, testing the strength of Fis’ leather armor. “It’s a pity you are only one and so small.”

Amos closed his eyes, resigned, but suddenly, like a lightning bolt, he thought of a very far-fetched idea. His eyes shot back wide open, and he screamed at the top of his lungs.

“Wait,” Amos cried out in desperation. “You don’t want to eat *me.*”

“But I do.” The Spider retreated just enough to get Amos out of its mouth so it could explain itself clearly. “You’re in my web, and I eat things in my web. I’m very hungry.”

“Wait,” Amos continued quickly. “No, you want to eat many creatures, with me, I’ll just be a disappointment. See, this whole... racket is a good approach for insects with an exoskeleton. But it won’t work for me, and you’ll be left with human bones while the rest of me drips away.”

Crestfallen, the Spider, examined Amos in his bundle. “Is this true? Are you a human? You smell like a Fae, yet you flew like a butterfly.”

Amos had bought himself precious moments, but it would take a spurious leap of logic to get him free. He pressed on, his blather and hoodwink abilities cranking into overdrive like an atomic-hydrogen Bugatti. “Regardless, I have an endoskeleton, so if you use venom to dissolve my flesh, it will drip away. Just go to waste on the ground, feeding worms. Unlike the insects you might often devour, I am not an ideal juice box for you.”

“Please do not delay, Fae creature. I am sorry for trapping you here, but I am so hungry. I will apologize to your Queen if I see her, but I worry that I will not survive long without food. Cannot eat the hard ones with their fire and axes. No juice for me.”

Amos wondered, for a moment, what it must be like to be a Spider where all the bugs were turning into clockwork automatons.

“I’ll tell you what. Let me go now because I have some important errands to run, but very soon, I’ll be back. And I’ll bring you a meal... a feast for Kings! So much food, worthy of a giant Spider such as yourself. You’ll be stuffed and content for a year!”

“You want me to let a meal go now for a meal later? That’s preposterous,” still, Amos detected a greedy chittering as it considered his proposition. *It wants to believe me.* He was almost there. The venomous fangs tested and probed Fis’ still form one more time, however, barely avoiding puncturing their soft flesh. *Lucky again – but a third time might find flesh.*

“Woah now, easy, easy,” Amos cried, as if he was wrangling horses. “Who doesn’t love a good grub right? Right?” The Spider backed up a little and nodded. “Yeah. So delicious...especially after it rains, right?”

“Yes, yes, yes, so juicy!” the Spider cooed, rubbing its pedipalps together.

“But see, my blood type is O negative and you know what they say...”

“What, what, what do they say?”

“Oh...that after a big meal of O negative you get even more hungry, and you end more miserable than you started.

It's not a pretty sight.”

The spider looked absolutely dejected.

“Also, Chongqing people are really spicy. Like melt your face off spicy. I wouldn't recommend it.”

The Spider sighed. “So...you propose...?”

“Yes, I'll bring so many tasty friends,” Amos said, quickly now. “If only you let me go and fetch them for you.”

“Soon? You'll be right back? Do you promise?” The Spider drooled eagerly.

“Yes, of course, you can enjoy many tasty friends. Very soon.”

“Do you promise?” The Spider pressed urgently. “And not spicy ones. Maybe...ranch. Or salty.”

“I promise,” Amos said. He was sure that Fis would have had something to say if she could. *Perhaps a promise carried more weight in the Dreamlands, but it was his only way out.*

“Then I accept your promise.” The Spider retreated a little and soon lowered Amos with its spinnerets to the ground. Its salivating chelicera chomped the cocoon open, and he was free.

“Go, go Fae thing, and do your business. Return with friends. Soon, for I am hungry.

“Thank you,” Amos said, grateful. With a boost of confidence, he got to his feet, chuffed off the residual webs, and backed away. “I will call you Darwin, and I won't forget you.”

Amos was pleased to see the tower again on the horizon, much closer this time than it had appeared last night. The early

dawn was licking the sky, and the crowns of two suns poked up over the horizon, twined to create a lavender and blueberry sky. Leaving Darwin behind, Amos strode towards the ivory tower.

Soon, he found a break in the foliage and a sea of tall grass ahead. Just then, Thunder popped out of the grass, chasing a dragonfly, but paused when she saw him, and sat to await his arrival.

“Thunder,” Amos cried in joy. “Thunder, I missed you,” he said, and he rubbed behind her neck. She purred and nodded, and then they left the forest together, trekking through abundant grasslands scattered with pockmarked plains and savage burrows. He had survived a day and night in the dreamlands and was ready to continue to chase the hula jing, determined to return to Chongqing with his soul.



“Woah,” the Mad Hatter said, putting his sneakered feet up on the moon rock coffee table as he slurped the bottom of his iced cappuccino through a straw. “This—what did you call it—Dreamlands? It’s wild. Like a sci-fi safari. Do you wanna go?” He grinned at the Red Queen.

“It’s a story, you fool.” The Red Queen punched him on the shoulder and placed two fingers in front of her lips.

The Storyteller paused, her intensity catching him off guard. “What do a book deal and a bathtub have in common?”

The three of them exchanged glances. The Mad Hatter was profoundly intent, wiggling his lips and fingers, but he couldn’t answer.

Out of the spaceport window next to their table, an absurd small child floated by, askew and upside down. The bewildered child was dragged along by a lunar board's ankle tether.

The Storyteller nodded, taking it all in stride and their silence as consent to continue the story as if uninterrupted. It was a long time before any of them slowed him down again.

CHAPTER 12

TO BEE OR NOT TO BEE



A midsummer's afternoon in Elsewhere had a slow, languorous feel. As the crimson-kissed citrine sun beamed high above them, it eclipsed its twin blueberry star, now distant and aloof. Amos' stomach rumbled with hunger as he trudged towards the tower through grassy plains. They left the forest and the spiders behind them. He followed Thunder, who was content to hop here and there, sometimes finding an insect flying low or pouncing on the ground. "What's that," Amos asked and saw that Thunder had pinned a centipede in its paws. It gleamed with polished copper, with many wires for feet and eyes of glowing red diodes. Thunder held it on its back with one paw and meowed. Twin LED bulbs flickered on and off in confusion, and a hundred tiny wire filaments—some conception of millipedal legs—twirled.

"What a fantastic, wonderful, terrible place, Thunder," Amos said. "Wild, beautiful, and strange. Who makes all these things, and what are they for?"

Thunder meowed and let the copper centipede go, bounding away again toward the tower. The two sprang through the grass, and Amos could not help but grin. Together they pranced along, light in spirit and high on hope. After a time, they came upon a commotion by a lonely tree.

Something fuzzy flew above Thunder, who hopped after it, doing an awkward backflip and landing in the dry grass.

“Scaredy-cat,” Amos said with a laugh. “What did you find?” A bumblebee the size of Amos’ fist floated closer to his face. Above them, Amos could see a huge nest.

“Do bees make nests?” Amos asked, “Or are you a chubby wasp?”

“You shouldn’t be body-shaming us like that,” the bee replied. “We are big and beautiful, and even if we were fat, it’s none of your beeswax.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Amos said, scratching Fis’ chin. “I mean, I could ‘bee’ a little more sensitive.”

“Oh, that’s good, I’ve never heard that one before,” said the melancholy bee.

“What’s the problem?” Amos asked. “Where are your friends?”

“If you only knew the half of it, you’d believe my dour expression, for there is a reason for my sour behavior,” the forlorn bee frowned again back in the direction of the hive above.

“What is it? Are you having a crisis of bee-lief?” Amos asked. “You can tell me. I may be a bee-ginner adventurer, but I am a bee-con of hope when it comes to my friends.” Amos paused, feeling a flash of guilt. He really wasn’t, and his punny performance made him feel...insincere. Oddly. *What would it take to be a beacon of hope, for real?* Fis had no answer for him. “Maybe I’m not, exactly,” Amos confessed. “But I’d love to become one.” Amos moved closer to the fuzzy bee. “What’s your name?”

The bee was bereft of hope and sighed as if it carried the world's weight. "My name," the bee said, "is William."

"Well, Billy Bee, what's the matter? Is it trouble at the hive? Love gone awry?"

"It's worse, I...have had a crisis of *being*."

Amos' eyes followed the honeybee, who floated with one hand on its forehead and another, pawing longingly at the heavens.

"Tell me about it!" Amos said, praying for a dramatic monologue.

"To bee, or not to bee, that is the question," the honeybee declared with Shakespearian sincerity.

"YES!" Amos cried.

Fis woke up at that, *what's happening?*

"A monologue!" Amos pronounced.

Oh boy, Fis said.

Oh, bee! Amos corrected.

"Whether 'tis bumbler in the mind to suffer the barbs and stingers of outrageous fortune, or to take up wings against an eclipse of night moths; and by opposing end them. To die—to sleep, no more; to end the honey-ache and the thousand natural buzzings bumble's heir to. To die, to sleep; to sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the nectar: For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this honey'd thorax, must give us pause—there's the respect that makes rotten honey of such a long life."

Deflated, the bee floated like a leaf on the wind toward the ground, but Amos was voraciously clapping and brought up

cupped hands to catch the feather-falling bee. “That was fantastic,” Amos said. “Well, hey there, honeybee. It’s not as bad as all that. It’s how you feel today. Have you tried,” Amos paused to waggle his eyebrows, “napping?”

“Oh, it’s hopeless, not a hope in the world, my honey is gone, and I am alone,” the bee cried, covering its eyes with two feelers.

“Perhaps, the beauty of life is in the eye of the bee-holder,” Amos said kindly, cupping the bee and lowering it to a massive petalled flower growing near the tree. “You can be anything you put your bee mind to, and if someone has stolen your honey, get up and make some new honey, for the day is young, and the flowers are sweet.” Amos released the bee upon the pollen-rich flower and backed away.

It took a moment, but the dejected bee opened one eye, sniffed once, then twice, and then buried its face inside a new flower, letting biology take over. Amos took a deep breath, savoring the fresh air and the natural, picturesque landscape. It was a perfect lazy afternoon.

A chthonic-purple butterfly fluttered lazily toward Billy. “Now that’s a pretty butterfly,” Amos said, watching with glee as it landed on the flower and turned to face Billy the Bee.

Back off! Fis said.

Why? Amos asked.

Its mouth opened like a horror show, bottom proboscis jutting out wide enough to swallow Billy’s head in a single gulp. Something hazy and fuzzy halfway wriggled out of the bee’s form, a spirit bee.

“Soul-sucking butterflies?” Amos yelled.

Quiet! Fis said.

Thunder, who had watched the interaction, decided to pounce on the butterfly and caught it between both paws. With a satisfying crunch, the grey kitty chewed it in half.

“No wonder you’re always after those butterflies, Thunder,” Amos said, patting her head. “Can’t trust even the little pretty things around here, can you?”

Thunder meowed and shook her head, then hopped and skipped towards the white tower on the horizon again. It was much closer than it had been. Dizzily, Billy the Bee flew off, and Amos decided to follow the beaten-down path towards the white tower on the horizon.

“Perhaps it’s meeting me halfway,” Amos wondered, when his long, pointy ears perked up and twitched.

Hide, Fis cried, now! With surprising force, Fis flung them into the nearest shrub. The brambles scratched their skin and tugged upon his cloak, making Amos sputter in discontent and confusion.

“What? Wait—” Amos said, hopping up, but Fis smothered their mouth with one hand and yanked him back down into the shrubbery.

Quiet, you fool, Fis said. Do you hear that?

Amos stopped and listened. Sure enough, he heard the galloping of riding beasts. *Who’s that?*

Ork Raiders, Fis said, voice choked with distress.

“Thunder, hide,” Amos called before Fis could shut him up again.

Be quiet, you fool! They’re not likely to chase a cat, but they would definitely be interested in us.

The dust cloud and the roar of sprinting hooves built in intensity until the massive, heavily armed warriors decorated in the fangs and twisted claws of strange and vicious beasts were nearly on top of them. Only a dozen feet from the road. Amos wondered if the shrub was dense enough.

Don't move.

One of the first riders called out in a guttural voice. A pack of warriors on giant ebony, stone-like reptilian mounts stopped, not twenty steps past where Fis and Amos were now hiding. With two hands over their mouth, Amos breathed in shallow breaths, peering through the heavy bramble.

The Orks took a shufti, alert to the presence of something nearby. They turned up their noses to sniff at the air. They drew swords and circled around, about a dozen in number, with armor so black it soaked up the light from the road, and skin so pale and ghoulish that they resembled the undead. Black circles rimmed their eyes, reminding Amos of American Spaceball players with their large, hulking forms and imposing armor.

They can smell fear, don't be scared! Fis said.

Easy for you to say, I'm 12 years old, and they're scary! Amos shot back. He had dreamt of these raiders before, and it was as frightening now as it had been in his dream. Four riders dismounted, towering at least seven feet tall and decorated in the jagged prizes of many kills and conquests as bone belts and trophies of their hunts. They turned their noses to the sky, opened their vicious, tusked mouths, and roared in violent aggression. They drew cruel, jagged blades and turned to look right towards him in the bush, and he wondered if they had already discovered him. They spread out in a semi-circle, with

the middle two heading straight towards the shrub. They would be discovered in no time.

This isn't going to go well, Fis said, but they shall bear my scars for the rest of their lives, and the first of them will die today. Amos was unable to stop her from grabbing the hilt of her sword, but then Amos had an idea.

Wait, Amos said. I can fly. I'm pretty sure...I can fly! He jammed his eyes closed and felt the sympathetic magick of the necklace buzz with power. At first, he felt sluggish and tired. *Come on, cloak! Or necklace! Or ring? Whatever is giving me these powers, you can't let us get caught now!* Amos clenched his jaw and forced the transformation. He felt his head slam against an invisible wall, and groaned, as the frontal headache spread out across his forehead to his temples. Fis sniffed, as a trickle of blood dripped from her nose.

Come on, come on, come on, come on! Amos begged and pushed through the pain. Slowly, they shifted into a brown and grey death's head moth and fluttered out of the bush toward the tops of the closest tree. In a moment or two, from the top branch, Amos watched the riders pounce upon the shrubbery where they'd just been hiding.

Disappointed, they tramped around, sniffing the air and barking for blood. One gazed up at him at the top of the tree. The Ork's red eyes glared, and he sniffed, growling with a violent mouth of sharp teeth and violent protruding, savage bottom tusks. The disappointed riders returned to the pack when they spotted Thunder, who took off into the forest.

Two of them grunted in hungry excitement, and began to pursue the cat, but the leader barked a guttural order, and they dashed away. Amos waited until the dust cloud had settled and floated back down to the ground, changing back into Fis.

That was close, Fis said. Neat trick.

Who were those monsters? I've dreamt about them... those wicked tusks, bulging arms, vicious spiked armor...

Entrepreneurs, Fis said. They're the local law. Slave hunters, slavers, and sheriffs all in one. They rob, steal, and squeeze taxes back to their capitol and make sure no one over here ever forgets that Orks won the war. Some say a roving gang of bullies is better than a full-scale invasion, but it's best to avoid them.

Yikes, Amos thought, a cold drop of icy sweat dripping down his electrified spine. He let out a long breath in a gasp. Thunder hopped out of a bush ahead of them and meowed back to Amos. Despite the lingering horror of the vicious raiders, they continued, this time a fair distance from the road towards the White Tower, until dark clouds swirled and lightning crashed upon the tower.

Amos took cover underneath a large fruit tree, eyeing the darkened sky with suspicion. Tired of waiting and feeling the hunger clawing at his stomach, Amos climbed up the tree and took an apple.

“Are you an apple?” Amos asked.

The apple did not respond. He rolled it around, squinting and examining it. “Would it be okay if I ate you?”

The apple didn't have any opinion on the matter, which Amos decided was consistent enough with his experience. “I have an apple,” he said, waving it around. He drew Fis' sword, “I have a sword,” he said and tossed the apple into the air, catching it on the point of his sword. “Apple Sword.”

What are you talking about? You better wipe that clean, Fis said, and he could feel her rolling her eyes. He wiped the

blade off took a little nibble. It was juicy, sweet, and delicious. “Nice to eat you,” he said, with a grin, and then he greedily scarfed it down along with three more. He took another pair off the tree and stuffed them into his robes for later.

“It’s interesting,” he said to Fis. “In a world as strange as this, there are also apples. I guess they’re pretty fun-de-mental fruits.”

They’re pretty tasty, Fis admitted.

Amos sat and waited for the storm to dissipate, and the suns crawled across the sky. Amos lay under the apple tree’s shade and closed his eyes. He awoke, sometime later, with the lingering image of a door...a rune-carved green door, and beyond it, a darkness...and a light. Amos listened to the creeping sounds of a whistling wind. Fis was on her knees in the brush, watching a glimmering chrome tiger fleeing from the roaring storm.

What are we doing? Amos asked.

Oh, you again. Good grief. I thought I’d lost you.

Nope, still here!

Well, I was heading to Hobbleheim, but this tiger was ferocious...and strange. I’m studying it. The clockwork cat hustled back as the storm bit at its haunches, with its tail between its legs. One side of its face was natural, ferocious, and wild, and the other was forged of chromes gears, fused metal plates, and a lit up by a shining red eye. Its body was chrome and metal, gears and spindles, with legs that resembled curved steel beams. He marveled at the metallic, skeletal beast for its beauty and strangeness.

Amos watched the storm, knowing that most storms were said to have an eye, but this one had two and a dark howling

mouth too.

As the storm beat the tiger away from the tower, nipping upon its heels, Amos perceived its character to be quite joyful. It bounded like a golden retriever puppy, dogged, determined. *Could it be distractable?*

Amos saw an opening on the other side of the tower and rushed in to take it, not knowing how long he'd have to wait if he wanted to keep testing his theory.

Wait, what are you—? Fis asked, but he focused on the storm.

We're getting in that tower. No time to talk!

The storm swirled back as he reached the. Flustered, Amos felt about the solid wall, but there was no entrance.

The rain and heavy wind blinded him as the dark, oppressive body of the storm closed in, and its large glowing eyes and gaping maw washed over him. There was no time to retreat and nowhere to go. Thunder meowed, hopping out from under his feet, and walked straight through a section of wall.

“An illusory door!” Amos howled in glee. As the storm descended, lightning crackling and thunder booming, Amos forced himself to believe he could walk right into the tower wall. And so he did.

CHAPTER 13

THE UNCARVED MASK



The tower was quiet and peaceful inside, with crystalline walls offering a clear worldview. *Like one-way mirrors*, Amos thought. *Cool*. Outside, the storm thrashed and raged.

“Hello?” Amos called. The base of the tower was spartan, brilliantly clean, and most importantly dry. Thunder hopped up the spiraling staircase with purpose, and Amos hurried to keep up. *Have you been here before?* Amos wondered. “Hold on, Thunder! I’m coming!”

His voice echoed eerily through the tower. He climbed the stairs, passing diverse landscape paintings of fantastical lands. As Amos stopped to watch a scene of wild beast riders racing across desert dunes, they began to move, galloping on huge dinosaur-like lizard mounts across a stormy sea of vast sand dunes. *Amazing*, Amos gasped. He stopped at another painting to experience a subterranean mountain kingdom of stout bearded dwarves. Amos gazed into it, and they began to dig and forge precious metals with fires that burned from the molten crusts of the earth. Another painting depicted nomadic horseback riders riding the plains, herding a majestic, wooly-horned beast, and he saw those giant elephant-like beasts, like mobile cities, on the horizon. Up the stairs Amos was entranced by a painting of battling pirate ships upon the

spitting seas, waves frothing and giant sea monsters roaring, as the steadfast pirates fired canons and threw harpoons. Small vessels floated in the ocean, while others soared with giant balloons in the clouds above. Some of the seamen seemed more sea than man, with claws instead of arms, and maxillary barbels instead of beards. At the top of the stairs, Amos discovered a pair of wondrous schools of magick that he wanted to watch all day, but they passed from day to night in flashes, as if time moved at ridiculous speed on this top level. He would have loved to stay, but his cloak propelled him forward towards the end of the hall.

It was broader inside, Amos noticed. There were doors on this level, and he tried to open a few, but he slid toward the end of the hall, propelled by magick, or magnetism, Amos couldn't say. At the end of the hall was a man who sat with his back to Amos. Amos wandered next to him, staring at an empty canvas that had consumed the odd, pale man's attention.

The man swiveled to regard Amos with cold contemplation. He was delicate and thin and wore a cream suit with a stiff wide collar. He held a cane in one hand and ran his fingers along it, dancing intricately. *Was he playing an instrument? Practicing arcane arts?* His hair was platinum blonde, almost white, and combed to the side. Several moments passed before he noticed the man's focus shift from the blank canvas to him. *His eyes were different colors*—like Aunt Grace's. Amos felt drawn in by the mesmeric gaze.

Amos shifted from one foot to the other as he watched the man.

“Tick tock,” he said. “Late, late, late. To be honest, I think you're *too late*. I've got things to do... good day, you made it inside the tower. Now please, go away...” His voice had a

melodic lilt that reverberated across the room, which awakened LED screens all around them, as the walls came alive to display a dozen different viewpoints, constantly shifting with the power of the sea “Wait,” begged Amos. “I need help, and I was hoping you’d be someone who could....”

“Everyone needs something,” the man said, “but I’m not in the charity business, little Fae, not anymore.”

Amos’ heart sunk, and he turned away, fighting back the tears, but his red cloak tugged and pulled him closer to the thin, pale man. When they were almost side by side, his cloak floated half off him to pet the cold man softly. It took a moment, but the man’s eyes sparkled with joy, and the cold, bored mask disappeared, leaving a childlike grin upon his thin, smooth face. “It’s you, Cloaky. How long has it been? No, don’t tell me; it’s better not to.”

Amos ogled the cloak, amazed by its sudden exuberance, and then studied the man.

“What’re you staring at?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just—”

“My eyes.” Amos nodded like one caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Luminary lefty, radiant righty,” the Duke said, looking a little wistful. “Sadly, we haven’t had a moon here in 10,000 years.”

“What happened?”

“It went *boom*.”

“Somebody blew up your moon?”

The Duke furrowed his brow and began to chant. “When the world was still and young, and dragon’s magick heavy

hung...the gods would walk the earth in file, guardians of a floating isle...do you know them?"

He sounds very old, Amos thought, and peculiar. Does he remember the moon personally? Or second-hand, from books?

Fis didn't answer, and Amos closed his eyes, trying to find her. She was .. trapped in the mental prism of his necklace. He tried pulling her back, but the Duke watched him, with knowing eyes and shook his head.

"No, no, no, not another guest, one is enough." The Duke snapped his fingers. Amos stared at his bunny slippers and ran a hand through his familiar birds' nest of hair. Then it dawned on him: he was Amos again. "Wow, how...I'm me!"

The Duke considered him and spun his cane, the crystal on top scattering the light like a disco ball. "The question is, *who* are you?"

"I'm..." Amos started to speak but trailed off, feeling guarded. Being here as himself felt different from traveling as Fis. But he still didn't completely feel like himself—a little fluffy, or was it fuzzy? He felt substantial but not warm... Amos-lite. The tower buzzed with magick.

"I'm...here because of your tower and my cat Thunder," Amos said.

The Duke was unimpressed. "Is that all?"

"I was hoping you'd help me, I'm on an arduous journey, and I am only a boy."

"Only a boy," said the Duke, "so why would I trouble myself?"

The Duke puffed impatiently, and his gaze settled on something far away. When he looked back, the amusement had

drained from his face. Amos shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Amos stabbed a finger towards the emptiness on the canvas and asked, “What’s wrong? Don’t know what to paint?”

“You know, the sages of old were as careful as someone walking over a frozen lake,” the Duke said, “as alert as if enemies were on all sides, as courteous as a guest in their own kingdom, as fluid as melting ice, and as complete as a blank canvas.” The Duke picked up the paintbrush beside him and ran his hands over the brush, seeming to enjoy the tactile sensation. “You could say it’s perfect.”

Amos cackled wildly, clutching his belly until he saw the Duke’s icy glare sobered him up.

“How can it be perfect, Duke?” Amos asked. “There’s nothing there.”

“The essence of the empty canvas is simplicity, a natural power easily spoiled.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” said the boy. “It’s blank.”

The Duke stared out the windows, folding his hands together, and turned to look at Amos, disappointed.

“Oh, everyone thinks they’re an artist,” the Duke said and smiled coldly. “But the world is full of awful choices and spoiled lives.”

“But, but...an empty painting is ...meaningless,” Amos said again.

“Emptiness means everything,” countered the Duke. “It’s the uncarved block.”

“It’s nothing,” Amos shrugged. “Nothing is *nothing*. Nada, No-thing, not a thing.”

“*Anything*,” The Duke hissed, his face a wicked visage of anger that rocked Amos back on his heels. “It could be anything—the best painting anyone has ever seen. It could change the world and make men mad with its beauty. It could end wars or start them. I’ve seen it. I’ve done it.”

The Duke’s eyes grew misty, and Amos took note of the enigma, wrapped in a nutshell, hidden away from the world. Fis had said this was not a man to be trifled with. Perhaps he should nod, backpedal, and continue on his way.

Nope. Amos sprung forth, fingers splaying wildly as he counted off his ideas. “But it’s not,” Amos said, unrelenting. “The worst painting in the world is better by far than the greatest artist of all time’s most brilliant imagination that never gets made. Because it’s something real. And that matters. Real things mean something.” Amos pointed to the canvas. “How long have you stared at this?”

The Duke shrugged dustily. Amos guessed a long, long time. *What had struck him so?*

“Whatever you did, you can do it again, Mister Duke.” Amos recalled his father giving him similar advice when he had come home one day after an abysmal test score. “It may not be perfect, but it’ll be good.”

The Duke recoiled with a sneer, “What do you know?” he said with a frown, and a storm swirled in his eyes. Amos raised his hands to his face, bracing himself for a smack. But it didn’t come. Amos peeked back at the Duke, who had softened like ice cream on a summer’s day. “I don’t know the way,” he confessed.

Again, his father’s words bubbled out of his mouth, “Maybe you don’t need to...to start.”

The Duke watched him. “Go on,” the Duke said.

“My father told me what we do in each moment shapes us, but you don’t need to know everything all at once. The main thing is to just keep moving and let it flow.”

“Let it flow?” the Duke repeated.

Amos nodded nervously, not knowing if any of what he said was the way his dad would have said it. He dug deep and held onto the cadence and tone of his father’s memory. “You cannot seek the way because you are the way,” and then he added his own twist. “If you forget that, Mister Duke, you’ll only get stuck in your own way.” And then he finished with what he estimated as a charming grin and a mild helping of jazz hands.

“Ha! Genius!” the Duke blurted out with a jolly chuckle that made him seem quite downright boyish. He ruffled Amos’ hair, just like Papa did, a wild grin dancing upon his lips. Amos felt a pang in his heart and wanted desperately to make it home once again. “You are wise beyond your years, young one...”

Amos smiled bittersweetly. “You’re in front of a canvas. You have a brush. Paint.”

The Duke closed his eyes and let out a deep breath, scattering dust in the sunlight, swirling fractals on the invisible currents of air that blew around the workroom. The Duke stood up, looking as tall as the tower then as if the weight that had kept him in his chair had been removed. The Duke smiled kindly, and the light in the room crashed over itself like waves on a beach. The Duke returned to the canvas and touched it with the bristles of his dry brush, a tentative gesture. “Just paint,” he laughed, and for a moment, the mask was gone, and his eyes were very wild. “The passage of time is like a reset

button. Each moment allows for the possibility. The Possibility. Amos. You'll be a great teacher one day."

"How- do you know my name?"

The Duke smiled like a boy- a very old boy. Amos reached out with the sympathetic magick of his necklace and felt a familiar presence, warm as the sun, and then a cold wall of force pushed him back on his heels.

The Duke's eyes roamed to Amos' necklace. "That's enough of that, but you've given me a gift, so I'll offer you the same, but none of that. What do you need?" The Duke's intense growl evoked the sensation of a yawning, ancient thing, hidden, fathomless, and dark, under the pale, calm face, something wild ... with tentacles. Amos shuddered.

"I need information," Amos said, watching the waves of time crash on the walls, mirages of history spinning like complex strands. "Where do I go from here? If you know my name, do you know that which I seek? The fox-spirit who stole my soul, where can I find it?"

"One magickal moment, the stuff from where dreams are woven, we are such stuff. Tell me everything but keep it snappy. Tick tock." The Duke wiggled his hands, and a feather quill pen floated off the desk, dipped itself into ink, and began writing on a piece of paper. He was spilling over with creativity now, unburdened, and his eyes pulsed with power. Amos gulped and then jumped into the telling. He started from the ice cream, the trunk, the fox-spirit, his Grandpa, and how he had met Fis.

The Duke listened and, after Amos was done, finally spoke. "Elsewhere, the Dreamlands, An'Yatra...this place has

many names,” the Duke said. “And you’ve come at an interesting time, by design,” his fingers stroked the cane like he was playing an intricate pattern, and he smiled again. “The one you seek has many names, forms, lives, from black to white. Dead, gone, back again. Tick, tock, Amos. That’s the thing, isn’t it? You haven’t much time. A half a soul can grasp a kindred spirit for a while, but not for long.”

Amos grimaced as a red haze pulsed against his temples, and his head began to ache.

The Duke studied him for a long moment. “This is an invisible mask, you see?” he said, as he clutched the corners, and removed it from his face. He looked scared and uncomfortable, then passed Amos his invisible mask. “Put it on.”

Amos froze, eyes darting madly about for an escape. It felt like a trap.

The Duke leaned forward and whispered. “I always feel afraid, the same as you. But I wear this mask every single day. It doesn’t take the fear away but it does make me feel better.”

“Really?” Amos asked. He put on the invisible mask, which slipped easily over his face. He became cold and powerful, emotionless—one more artifact to stamp down his childish fears.

The Duke nodded. “Brave enough to face the whole world. I did...for many years. And now you will, too.”

Amos sat there in his magick mask, looking at the Duke, and it was true; he did feel better.

The Duke weaved another magick mask, spun it out of thin air, out of nothing at all. The Duke finished it and smiled, and then he put it on. And he was so relieved and pleased. “Now

we've both got invisible masks. We can see through them perfectly well, and no one would know we're even wearing them," he said.

"You're a wizard," Amos said, confounded.

The Duke smiled. "I've been called that before." The Duke smiled and waved his hands to encompass all the land around the tower. "I'm a collector. You can keep it, Amos. You can stay here—I'll help bind you to this place...You've come so far already." A chorus of angels cried over the Duke's shoulder on the tower wall and sang notes of grace for Amos.

"Respectfully, Duke," Amos said, moving his weight from one foot to another. "I already promised to get what I need, make it home, and save Grandpa."

"But things will never be as they would've been now that you've seen what you've seen. You can watch them from afar and change the world from this tower. Wouldn't you like to have that power?"

Amos saw his grandmother tending to his grandfather in bed on the wall. The poison was spreading, and he was very, very weak. For a moment, Amos was tempted. To train under a wizard, to live a life of magick and adventure. *What I've always dreamed of.*

The Duke ran his fingers over his brush, and in a moment of inspiration, he squeezed paint from a tube onto his pallet and began to mix colors. He began to paint a little round blob. "If the ocean was like an onion," he applied a confident, masterful stroke, and then another, "every drop, a world, a microcosm of meaning, but if you peeled back each layer until you had but one...what would be...."

The Duke finished painting a cream oval that glittered as if radiant from within. “Your pearl?”

“You have a real talent,” Amos said, chewing on his lips and squinting at the pearl as he got a strange fluttering feeling in his belly.

“Talent is fine, but we strive for genius,” the Duke said. “You know, talent will never make anything great. Sometimes you have to leap off the ledge...to believe you can soar. At the gods’ mercy, your genius wakes..” the Duke trailed off. “They are going to say you wrecked the world, Amos.” He was very grave and patted Amos on the shoulder, “but don’t believe them until you see it yourself. Even then, you know, belief is a very powerful thing. Your mind is like a garden. Protect it from weeds.”

Amos nodded, unsure of what he was really agreeing to. Noticing the fear on his face, the Duke patted his shoulder kindly. “Shine a light, Amos- nightmares aren’t so scary in the light. Tick tock.”

Feeling a whoosh of his cloak billowing around him, Amos jumped into action. “I need my soul. Can you tell me where to find it?”

“The last place you look, of course. Just keep one foot ahead of the other.” He gazed far off into the distance, his fingers dancing, and his eyes twitched.

“Where will the fox-spirit be? And how can I save Grandpa?”

“A witch could make a potion for his poison, but the winding way is dark and dangerous. Goddess could help ... if you keep your word. They’re picky about that sort of thing.”

Amos nodded. “I have to try.”

CHAPTER 14

THE LONG AND LONELY WAY



Amos plodded on through the sinking earth, reunited with Fis, who, all things considered, didn't seem all that terribly sad to have him back. As they trekked onward, after a herd of huge trampling beasts had softened the ground, his excellent mood soon soured. The earth, loosened by the herd of wild beasts, began to suck his feet and hold them in their muck and mire. Amos slipped and slid, and things went from bad to worse as it began to rain again.

Keep moving, Amos. Stay close to the tree line and be quiet. We need to get out of here quick time.

“Sure thing, Captain,” Amos said and made his way closer to the forest's edge. Once inside the tree line, the forest protected him from the hungry bog, and it was much easier to march onward. The long, bare, skeletal giant fingers of the tree branches shrunk and curled to resemble wilted old crones as they marched deeper into a depressed and sorrowful bog. Soon they were soaked. As Amos trudged through the bog, the reeds clawed him like wicked talons and the trees groaned as if disturbed by a blasphemous wickedness.

“So,” Amos said with a shiver, trying to fill up the space where fear grew. “What's, um, Hobbleheim?”

It's a vast land of smallfolk tinkers—they're called Pooks. I have important business there.

“Oh yeah?”

And it's none of yours.

“Ouch,” Amos said. He was going to say more, but a nearby howl made him leap in fear.

That's the wind whipping through rocky crags, goofball. Eolian sound, it's called.

“Oh, whew, that's good,” Amos sighed heavily in relief, listening to the animated thrumming. “It's just wind and rocks,” Fis said.

Amos cupped his hands to his face and howled back in excitement, and his wild baying echoed through the bog.

What are you doing? Have you lost your mind? I told you to be quiet!

Amos, with boyish excitement, bellowed again, this time as loud as he could. “Hear that echo?” He grinned. “Echo! Echo, Echo!”

This whole place is infested with...oh no, Father Deerhands, we're in deep silt now! Run!

Amos felt a tentative pressure in his head, but it backed off almost immediately. *Come on, move it, kid!* Fis said, deciding to plead with him instead of fight the power of his necklace. She sounded scared. *We need to run for the tall trees!* Amos, feeling her fear, had a sinking feeling in the pit of their shared stomach.

The first thing that changed was the smell. A methane-like heaviness—part diesel, part toilet pipe gas—hung in the air. Amos remembered the summer he crawled under the cottage

porch up at Fairy Mountain to get a ball but found a nest of dead rabbits. How they'd exploded into gas when he poked them with a stick.

Amos put a hand over his mouth, choking back bile and vomit. Then he heard a rustling and spun around to see two hulking figures crawling out of the shrubbery. They were giant, moss-covered things with wicked, sharp, dirty fingernails that groaned as they clutched at him. Amos hopped away, another rakish assault. Around him, rustling and groaning sounds bubbled up everywhere, terrible noises that made his heart pound through his chest.

You huge, massive, giant, frustrating, stupid boyish idiot, Fis yelled.

What is it?

You woke up a nest of Vampire Trolls.

VAMPIRE TROLLS? What do I do, Fis?

Run, Amos! Don't stop! Let's get out of here.

Everywhere, the hands reached for him, and after a few nimble jumps, a pair of dirty, sharp-taloned hands locked onto his feet and squeezed him to a stop. He wriggled, but there was no escape from their firm grasp. *I'm done for,* he thought. *This is the end.*

Amos froze. His blood ran cold, and that awful sickly feeling in the pit of his stomach, like being in the clutches of the fox-spirit, rose in him again. Amos gaped up in dumb fear.

“Break free! Fight them off! Don't let them scratch us,” Fis screamed. “Let me fight!”

All around him, moss-covered lean and lanky giant trolls shambled out of the bog, clawing at him from every shadow

and shrub. Amos recoiled, crawling backward, but there were too many, all around, and there was no escape.

“Viens...viens...come,” croaked a wicked, sour, fermented breath putrid and awful on Amos’ face.

“No!” shouted Fis. *Let me fight! My sword, Amos, for the sake of Father Deerhands; let me fight them!*

Amos’ mind went blank as the fear overtook him, but luckily, Fis’ fighting instincts kicked in. Fis drew her sword and severed the lean, leathery hand that had snagged her other wrist. It flew through the air, and she dove, blocking a claw swipe with the shield on her back.

“Oh hellfire, no, no, no,” she said and swiped left on the trolls. She ducked and swiped up, and then leapt and swiped downwards, chopping the fingers off hands that clawed for her, and hit the ground, nimbly rolling through their legs and away from the gathering crowd of lumbering trolls. In one fluid motion, she slipped the shield off her back and gripped it in her offhand, banging her sword against it. “Come on, you big ugly moss gurglers,” she spat. “Is that all you got?”

They lumbered forward, smashing their heads together as they tried to grapple or crush the tiny, flitting thing around their knees. Fis sliced and diced them like onions in a frying pan, and the trolls yelped and caterwauled as their limbs flew akimbo.

Her sword began to glow softly in the gathering dusk, as it tasted their blood, and knowing how it cut through them- and slowed their feared regeneration - they began to shrunk back from the wild little badger. There were so many, though, that even as some pulled back, others pushed forward, but the enraged Fis had enough sword for all of them. As more craven claws popped out of the ground to grasp at her, Fis hopped and

rolled away from them, and Amos marveled at Fis' superb athleticism, even as their sheer swarming numbers forced her to retreat towards the heavier grove of trees, where she spotted a fairy ring.

Without warning, a lumbering shadow stood between her and escape. She looked way up to face a towering, gnarled giant, quadruple her size, with lanky arms and legs and a gaunt torso. A moss and seaweed cape hung from its back, floating the flag of desecration and entropy as he crept out of the brush. In a rough, thick garbled voice, it begged, "stop moving, let me eat you," and flakes of algae flew from his mouth and splashed over Fis.

Fis grimaced and pounced inside his guard. Fis slashed deep and severed both hands.

"Oh non, ma main. Soccer bleu!" the Troll shrieked. The nasty giant dropped down to bite her in half, but Fis shield smashed its mouth, spraying a mist of dark green blood, and then she leaped onto its back as the lumbering Troll whirled around in anger and pain. Holding on as it thrashed and bucked, she did not see another Troll coming for her until it slashed deep into her back long, putrid claws slicing through her leathers and finding gaps in her armor.

Fis grunted in pain but stabbed at the grasping Troll again and again, until she was free to leap into a nearby tree. She ran along a branch, hopped to the next tree, and scurried on thin, wispy branches to a bit of fast-moving water. She slipped her shield back onto her back, but something yanked her from behind and she spun to face her attacker, but it had only gotten snagged on a branch. She wriggled free. A pack of hungry Trolls stumbled alongside them on the ground, trying to cross the small river by stepping on dark, slick stone-like logs. But

the logs sank into the water and as the Trolls slipped, they rolled to reveal toothy maws of razor-sharp teeth as the huge crocodiles bit deep into gangly Troll flesh.

Fis didn't let the distraction go to waste as she climbed and hopped to another tree and across to the more stable ground on the other side of the river. Fis limped away, only now realizing as the adrenaline burned from their body that her right leg felt horribly wrong.

Fis stumbled as the Troll toxin infection spread through her bloodstream. In the distance, they saw smoke and fire. *People!* Amos cried.

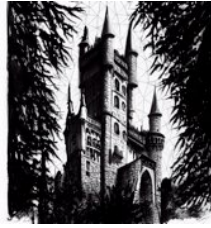
"Peo...ple," Fis repeated, slurring and stumbling toward it. Through shrubs and trees, they trudged toward the smoke on the horizon. Amos assisted the weakened and quickly fading Fis one shambling step at a time. *A cabin, Fis! Don't pass out. We can make it!*

They shambled another hundred steps, and then Fis leaned against the cabin's ornate purple door. Her eyes shuttered closed, rolling back inside her head, but Amos forced a hand up to the door and rapped against it three times.

When the door opened, Fis fell into the arms of two women, one young and one bent with age. Amos gazed dumbly at the two women who held poor Fis as the fresh, bright streaks of blood dripped down her back, intermingling with the dark green, goopy troll blood. They put Fis down upon a fuzzy rug, the last of her adrenaline spent as the noxious Troll toxin coursed through her veins.

CHAPTER 15

THE COLD COMFORT OF STEEL



““**T**hey’re coming for you,” whispered Ghorok. She leaned over the Shadow’s bed, her red-tinged Orkish eyes shining within the gloom exuded by her dark hooded necromancer robes. She peeked around and, satisfied they were alone, lowered her hood to reveal a worried frown upon her strong jaw with viciously sharp lower tusks. Her black hair was tied in a topknot, and the sides were shaved and tattooed in sigils that twisted with necromantic energies. She held up an orb, and the cloudy glass swirled, revealing footfalls that rang out across the campus. Through her scrying magic, the Trickster watched the soldiers coming for her.

The Trickster gazed intently from beneath a bundle of bandages and blankets. One hand searched for a sword that was not there, while the other tried to cover a vulnerable throat wound that would not heal despite a monstrous degree of magickal healing. The Trickster squirmed in a soft patient’s gown, eyes straying to the enchanted runed armor and weapons bundled beside the infirmary bed. Finally, the shapeshifter met Ghorok’s gloomy gaze.

“Will you run?” Ghorok asked.

The Trickster glared at Ghoruk in response. “No,” came a rasping, wheezing voice as one elegant, porcelain hand pressed against a bandaged, savage throat. *That damnable beast, my damnable luck.* “There’s no hiding from...”

“His wizard is absent, just the knuckleheads, it looks like,” Ghorok said, smiling without conviction or confidence. Her eyes shifted to the Trickster’s weapons and the savaged throat. “There’s no way you can... in this state.” Her gaze drifted to the pillows, and she began moving, just a muscle spasm, but the Trickster snarled, eyes blazing dangerously, and she froze. *I am still dangerous. If you dare to finish me, I will put up a fight.*

“I will not run,” the Trickster growled, and through the orb, they watched the six soldiers march through the gothic castle with eight spiked spires that sat upon spoiled land where only twisted trees grew. Slowmorth, the Orkadian magick school in Tyne Drozzi, was very unlike the Kronoswons Academy. Slowmorth...was something darker.

“Give me my dagger.”

Ghorok wilted under the smoldering gaze of the Trickster’s ancient Elven eyes and scurried to the pile of dangerous, pointy things. She grasped a black dagger carefully by its leather sheath. They both stared at the knife, the creeping magical sigils, barely visible, swirling along the exposed hilt. She gingerly passed it to the Trickster, who stuffed it underneath a pillow, and they returned their gaze to the Orb. Ghorok focused on the pack leader, the fearsome General Goga Lagra.

“If he discovers....” Ghorok hissed.

“Then we’re both dead.”



In the orb, the Shadow and the dark magick healer watched as the dark headmaster met the elite warriors. After a moment, she led them to the Spider’s Den, an undercarriage for the eight towers. Their ebony armor absorbed light, dimming the magickal Everburn torches as they passed. The Den was the central body of the school, with access to each crown jewel of the arcane arts: Abjuration (defensive magick), Metatropí (Alteration and Transmutation), Conjunction and Summoning, Mind Melding (Enchantment), Greater and Lesser Divination, Deceptomancy (Illusion), Evocation (War Magick), Necromantic Clockwork, Chronurgy (Temporal Manipulation), and Bladeslinging. The first eight were housed in the spires, the spider’s points. Bladeslinging was in spider’s body. Scrolls and scribes got the spider’s head, and Chronurgy wasn’t practiced anymore (which made their entire student body perpetually late for class).

The Trickster sighed. There was nothing to do but wait as the seven turned toward the infirmary. They wouldn’t be long now.

The marching Ork soldiers passed two professors speaking in the infirmary archway. The rotund, blood-red-robed Ork Dhorzuk Ironhide talked to a thin, gangly Troll named Professor Zengu Plouffe. His mottled yellow body seemed brittle and flimsy beneath his puffy brown robes, and he wore a large-brimmed hat trimmed with ostrich plumage. Headmaster Sloob nodded to the two other magick teachers as she slowed her pace slightly.

“Greetings, General,” Dhorzuk said with a smile. He started placing a hand on Goga’s shoulder, but thought better of it, and gave him an awkward little wave. Next to him, Professor Plouffe bowed with flair, removing his feathered hat to reveal thin, stringy, balding hair and a bulbous face with large, close-together eyes and a long hawkish nose. “Welcome to Slowmorth,” Plouffe drawled and winked at Sloob.

“This way, General,” Sloob hissed deferentially to General Goga Lagra, and they passed the two, entering the dark, sterile hall towards the infirmary beds.

“Lead the way,” the General barked, ignoring the professors and the gawking crowd.



“They’re here,” said nurse Ghorok, and the Trickster nodded, resolute.

“But what if he returns?”

“Shut up and do your part,” hissed the Trickster, “Or you will feel my blade.”

Impotent though the threat seemed, Ghorok did quiet down. The nurse palmed the orb into her robes and nodded. The Trickster grew very still as the nurse turned to check her fluids, one clear and one a glowing reddish amber that flowed into her patient. One hand slipped under the pillowcase and felt the cool, comforting steel of the knife. The Trickster slipped the blade halfway out of the sheath, allowing the poison to settle and coat the tip of the blade, and waited, hoping for the chance to end this.



“As my raven conveyed, General,” Slob said as the squad marched to the Trickster’s bed, “your assassin is recovering well but was...quite injured. He’s been in an induced dream sleep to facilitate the healing magick.”

“Wake him,” the General snarled.

“It’s quite dangerous in his condition, Your Grace.”

“It’s not a request, Bub.” The General grinned as the headmaster bristled.

Slob, in her incalculable wisdom, let the moment pass, nodded, and turned to the nurse. “Ghorok Lum’arn, make it so.” Ghorok produced a magickal sigil from her robes and, through a combination of whispered words and muted gestures, channeled dark and meta-tropic energy that electrified the air. The Shadow’s eyes fluttered open and widened as they focused on the General.

Headmaster Slob narrowed her eyes at this display.

“Hello, Shugo,” the General said, towering over all present. “I trust you got what you needed?”

The Trickster studied the Ork, a mountain on two legs, that proudly displayed a crisscrossed patchwork of scars throughout his body that showed the many battles fought, many wounds taken, and the Trickster wondered if any who had cut Gogo Lagra so still drew breath today. The Trickster imagined, most likely not, but, grasping the hidden blade, thought, *perhaps today will be the first. Perhaps today would be his last.*

“Your Excellency, General Lagra, yes,” the General’s assassin whispered, inviting the Goga closer. “I retrieved the key...mostly.”

“Mostly?” Goga spat, eyes narrowing. He stepped towards the still form, a wall of armored muscle. “I don’t like the sounds of *mostly*.”

“It,” the Trickster wheezed, “it should... it will be enough. Unfortunately...the boy was guarded—”

“And you let a little kid eat you for lunch,” the General chuckled. He leaned in over the Trickster now, red eyes blazing dangerously. “Perhaps, you’re not as good as they said. Maybe, I’ll change the terms of our little deal,” he said and laughed cruelly, lighting a cigar with a rune-rod. The General puffed on it while considering the bedridden assassin for a long moment. He exhaled a cloud of smoke into the Trickster’s face tauntingly.

Just a little closer.

“Oh, I’m sorry, General, smoking isn’t allowed in here,” said Headmaster Slob apologetically.

“Izzat so, bub? Well, now it is,” the General smirked. He rose up to his full height as his thick black eyebrows rose to the top of his massive, muscled grey forehead. His blood-red eyes, ringed in black tattoos to reflect the suns in battle, sparkled at the challenge. He snarled in open contempt of the magic teachers in their own domain, crossing his massive arms over a barrel-thick chest, which he flexed impressively. The General taunted them to escalate the matter, effortlessly implying extreme violence and ruthless intimidation.

Headmaster Slob gulped, recovered, and nodded, began to cast a breeze, thought better of it, and stepped back and

stayed her hands, palms open and very still.

The Trickster's eyes narrowed in soundless fury.

Patients and nurses walked by, coughing, but there were no further complaints.

He waited and then, satisfied, clapped. "So, this... gathering, at the castle, is when?"

Headmaster Slobb lowered her black hood to reveal intelligent, dangerous, crimson eyes that sparkled under a pointed fringe and longer wisps at the sides of her grey, pointed ears. "Yes, General. We know that... Hobbleheim has invited all sorts of magacademics from many lands and has promised to present something of great interest. We will, of course, be sending—"

The General, Goga Lagra, guffawed, "Oh, we'll be there all right. We're going to BE THERE." He butted his cigar on the bedside table and chucked it upon the Trickster's armor, where it settled upon the sheath of a long, slender sword. He winked at the Trickster. "If it weren't for his toys and the Emperor's *deal*," he sneered, "we'd have pummeled him back to the cataclysm." He grinned wickedly with teeth like razor blades and the protruding daggers of his uncommonly large Orkish bone tusks that jutted violently from his bottom jaw. "Well, he's not the only one with a big surprise."

"Yes, their tablets and gadgets are quite...convenient," the headmaster said, seeming uncomfortable, "but we will be able to reproduce much of that convenience should you terminate our arrangement—"

"Don't care, not interested. Orks been getting wicked soft for too long now for me to give two flying frogs what we're going to do without Mypads and Nymbals," he laughed, and

his men, who'd been still and soundless behind him, laughed with him. "So, now that you got the key, you're gonna open that faery door and get me the damn book, right?"

The Trickster glared for only a moment and then nodded and rasped in a hoarse voice, "Yes, I will retrieve what we agreed to..." *Come closer, come back to face me.* "And then, you will release—"

The General raised a single gauntleted fist. "I'll do what I want, when I want, if I want. Get me the book, and we'll discuss deals, *bub.*"

The Trickster blinked back a curtain of crimson rage, while the General smiled as if to say, 'try me.'

"You better hope I don't change it. For all your sakes." He stared down the headmaster and the nurse, and they turned towards the dials and IV and adjusted the settings innocuously.

"Anyway, you heal my Shadow here and let's finish the job, or you'll be next on the slab, Sloob," he laughed and turned around. The meeting was over.



As the Trickster cursed their foul luck, the Duke smiled. The walls of his tower shifted and changed from the magick school infirmary—to the marsh that Amos was just then escaping from, into a glade in the woods, and the promise of a little help. The Duke had not been the only ghost in that room, for the boy, connected to the dark Trickster from their previous encounter, had also been present. He watched as the boy and his little Fae friend entered the cabin in the woods and smiled, disappearing into the protective wards of the witches' cabin. The Duke ran his fingers up and down his cane, playing an

invisible solo on an imaginary instrument. *Yes, the boy would make it in time.*

CHAPTER 16

COVEN OF THE MOUNTAIN DEW



With a tinkle of wind chimes, Amos blew through the front door while Fis fell into the arms of a pair of ladies in comfortable-looking robes. An old woman in green and a younger woman in grey carried Fis over the threshold, taking care to lift her feet over lines of white and red dust sprinkled across the doorway.

“Vampire Trolls,” the younger one said, eyebrows dramatically arched and her smoky eyes as wide as saucers. Her cherry red lips accentuated the ‘O’ in Trolls as one long-taloned hand darted across the festering wound between the gaps in Fis’ armor. The three long, dark, bloody gashes were already swirling with green bubbles, and dark, toxic splotches had begun to wriggle like the roots of a plant across her body.

“Trolls can smell blood,” snorted the short, round older woman in green. “I’m going to hide the trail,” and she slipped right through Amos, shivering slightly as she left the cabin.

Amos gasped, staring down at his red robes as his translucent hand became solid in front of his eyes. With a shock, he slumped down on his knees to the rug. He took a few tentative breaths and then peered around, surprised by the peaceful atmosphere. The cabin was lit by candles in every part of the space, creating a warm glow. It was tidy, calm, and

orderly. The smell of incense, perhaps sage and rosemary, hung in the air. There was an abundance of plants in the living room, filling every empty space around an antique sofa, chairs, and small tables. A sweet black kitty cat sat in a rocking chair by the window. Bundles of herbs and stones hung over the doors and windows. Three large iron cauldrons stood near a fireplace in the center of the room, with a barbecue-style grill. Jars stuffed with eyes filled a wooden shelf. Other jars were stuffed with rabbit paws, obscured by hanging smoked meat, herbs, and other spectacles.

She came back a moment later and closed the door. “I think we’re alone,” she said. “For now, at least...” She stopped, now noticing Amos, slumped on the rug. “And, who, pray tell, are you?” the green witch rasped suspiciously. Her gap-toothed mouth was cut to a sorrowful frown. Her eyes gleamed with cunning, and her bushy eyebrows waggled up and down.

They can see me, thought Amos.

“Why are you here, spirit?” the younger one asked, stepping up towards Amos. Her voice had a slow, gravelly drawl, and she raised long-taloned fingers towards him. Even though her cherry-stained mouth smiled, her eyes smoldered.

“He’s a spy. They’re both spies, likely.”

“But for whom?”

“Could be anyone. The Mad king?”

“She is a Pook,” the younger one said, pointing to Fis.

“Not enough metal on her,” the old one said. “Maybe the Summer Queen? She’s got antlers. I ken smell the Fae on them both,” the older one said. They both leaned toward Amos and sniffed.

“Could be Goga. He’s always got someone about these days.”

“Who’s to say it’s not the census bureau? They’re always trying to prod around. There ain’t nothing strange about single women living alone in the woods,” the older one said indignantly.

“Perhaps, a missionary. She’s got the mark of Treesus,” said the younger one, pointing to a severed, long taloned green finger impaled in Fis’ calf. Frowning, she removed it with a grunt and a splash of blood. She walked to the kitchen and slipped it into a jar as it twitched in complaint.

“And you,” the older one said to Amos, “we don’t take kindly to invading spirits. You’re not supposed to be here.”

“Not supposed to be here,” the other echoed, and they crept toward him, eyes ablaze, wagging long, sharp talons.

Amos gasped and backed into the closed door. “I...I—”

“The Duke,” said the younger one, stopping and scratching her chin.

“The Duke doesn’t need any spies,” the older one said, turning around to face the other.

Amos nodded. “Yes, the Duke, I was just with the Duke. But, I don’t work for him. I’m just trying to save Grandpa.”

The two witches hissed and stalked toward Amos, intimidating harpies with eyes that burned like hell and mouths like gaping chasms where spiked teeth spelled a tortured demise. Amos gulped.

There came a scratching at the door, soft but insistent. The older woman pushed Amos aside and opened it a crack. Thunder slipped inside, crept beneath Amos’ feet, and rubbed

his legs affectionately, then scurried over to Fis, scratched her still form, and padded back to sit in front of Amos.

The pair gasped, exchanging another look. “He’s a witch?”

“He’s got a cat, hasn’t he?”

They dropped their infernal demeanor at once and came forward to introduce themselves.

Amos started to protest that he was not a witch, but they were much more agreeable now.

The elderly witch approached and took hold of his hand. When she touched Amos, he was astounded to see that he could interact with things here in the cabin, even as a spirit.

“Mildred Pickerin,” she said. “This is my cabin. It’s been in my family for generations, and you’re welcome to have a rest.” She pulled her hood down and gave him a motherly smile. Mildred had white, knotted hair, frizzy and wild around her face. Her eyes were elliptical, like cats, and she had a slightly hooked nose. Her round face was seasoned by time, world-weary but wise.

The young one approached next. “Levana Labyrinth,” she said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, darling.” Her long black hair was straight and down to her bottom. She had a button nose and a delicate, oval face. In many ways, she was the opposite of Mildred; her skin was as cold and white as a winter’s moon, and she smelled of lavender. Amos thought she was beautiful.

“We’re the Coven of Morning Dew— we had a third, but she left us.”

They frowned at each other and then at Amos.

“You’re witches!” Amos said.

“I’m a Green Witch,” Mildred said, waving a hand to the kitchen assortment of herbs and crystals.

“I’m a Gray Witch,” said Levana, with an air of mystery. “And you?”

“I’m Amos,” he said. “I’m...a...sandwich,” he said and grinned.

“A Sand Witch?” Mildred said with suspicion. “From what coven?”

“I’m from ... the Coven of the Mountain Dew. We’re practically neighbors.”

Mildred studied him and nodded. “I see. Well, is this yours?” They pointed to Thunder, who was sniffing their black cat that yawned by the rocking chair.

“Sort of. She’s my grandma’s. Her name is Thunder. She seems to know your cat.”

“Figment,” said Mildred, nodding. “And who’s this?” They all approached Fis and examined her prone body.

“She got it pretty good from the Trolls,” Levana said, whistling.

The two cats ran off down the hall and disappeared.

“Might end up a Troll herself by dawn, and then she’ll have to leave. No Trolls in the cabin,” Mildred said, pointing to an embroidered sign hanging over the door that said as much in floral, colorful writing. (‘No Trolls In the Cabin’)

“That’s Fis. She saved my life, and I can’t exist in this place without her. I mean, maybe this place, or the Duke’s tower, but outside...see, I only have half a soul. And—”

“Half a soul,” said Levana. “I mean, it’s tough, but I knew a djinn named Jimmy in school. He only had half a soul, and he did very well for himself. He’s an adjudicator now.”

“That’s impressive,” said Mildred.

Amos interrupted, “I’m quite keen to get it back. I need her help. Isn’t there anything you can do for her?”

“We can get her up, but you will need to gather some herbs for us.”

“I also need an antidote for...a poison...My Grandpa is poisoned. Can you do something for him?”

“Can you describe the poison?”

“It was...dark and purple, thick and smelly.”

“What did it smell like?”

“Like...some kind of flower. It had a strong, sweet scent but also like it had gone off, like it was a bit rotten.”

The two witches exchanged a look.

“And where did you come across that poison?” Levana asked.

“Sssh,” said the older one, “you know well enough, but it’s better you don’t *know*.” She turned to Amos. “We can help them, but you’ll need to go out and get some things for the potion. It’s not going to be easy.”

“Can you make anything, like, in the kitchen to help her?”

Levana nodded. “You’ll need... iris, cardamom, anise, frankincense, myrrh, ginger, and saffron, pounded together with honey...and a bezoar. Or the horn of a unicorn.”

“Woah, Woah, Woah. Horn of a unicorn? They have to die for that, right?”

“Generally, that’s how you obtain the horn.”

“No way,” said Amos. “What’s a bezoar?”

“It’s a... solid mass of undigested food, plant fibers, or hair found in the digestive tracts of animals, including deer, porcupines, fish, and, yes, humans. Anyone with a cat is familiar with the feline version...hairballs.”

“So, how do I get one? Of what kind of animal?”

“Well, there are two nearby, powerful enough to help.”

“Okay, what, and where are they?”

“One is a Chimera and lives in the mountains north of here.”

“A Chimera?”

“A Chimera is a fire-breathing monster with a lion’s head, a goat’s body, and a dragon’s tail.”

“Is there any...other way?”

“You could go into the cavern by the Abbey. If you’re pure of heart, obtain the flower of Caoteng. That would heal any poison or infection,” Mildred said, scratching her chin.

“Is it close?” Amos asked.

“No, it’s quite far away. And very difficult. Might die trying.”

“So...what can I do to save Fis?”

“We can make a salve to slow the infection and pep her up,” said Mildred.

“Fair enough, hang out for a few bits; we’ll whip up something.”

Amos sat down on the sofa and watched as the two witches went to work. They hummed an old-sounding tune as they gathered ingredients and herbs from the pantry, squeezed some blood from the wriggling troll finger, and pounded them with honey. They spread the mixture into a bandage, making a wet, sticky salve that they brushed onto Fis' injured back and leg. She stirred shortly after, wiped her eyes, and sat up. Fis scanned the room and then noticed Amos.

“You,” she said, pointing a finger at him.

“I’m sorry, Fis. I didn’t mean to possess you.”

“You,” Fis said louder and hopped up to her feet.

“Look, I’m not even sure how it happened. I arrived here from my...world...and suddenly—”

“YOU!” Fis howled and pounced on Amos, seeming somewhat surprised when she connected physically with him, and they both tumbled awkwardly over the couch. Amos scrambled up and ran around it, hands up in surrender, and Fis stalked him like an enraged jungle cat.

“Look, wait, don’t be mad,” Amos begged. “I didn’t know what would happen. I was looking through your eyes, at your hands, and my reflection, your reflection, in the lake.”

“Reflections,” said the older witch, scoffing, “that’s why we don’t have mirrors here, you see. Pools are dangerous; they’re a kind of door for many.”

Levana sniffed and rolled her eyes.

“I. Am. Going. To. Kill. You,” Fis snarled, leaping at Amos, who ducked and rolled away. To the witches, she said. “My heart is beating 100 times a second. What is in that stuff?”

“Oh, you like it? It’ll keep you going a little while,” Mildred said.

“A little while,” Levana repeated, eyes wide and long fingers wiggling creepily.

“But the toxin is spreading. You’re Fae, right? Head back to the Summer Queen while you can.”

“Anyway, Fis,” said Amos. “I’m really sorry you got hurt. These ladies said they know how to help fix you, but we need to get some materials...”

Fis shook her head. “I can’t go home now. I’ve got important stuff to do,” and then she spun around and leaped over the couch, wrapped her legs around Amos and dragged him to the ground in one smooth motion.

“Ow, ow, ow, I give up,” Amos cried, and she rolled him over to face him, her gaze lingering on his triple spiral yew tree necklace. She grasped it in her hands. “Where did you get it?”

“Oh, it was in...my grandmother’s home. It’s always been there, I think since my dad was a baby.”

Fis got up and stretched stiff muscles, wincing. “It might just be that the Summer Queen paired us together for a reason.”

Amos nodded, touched. “Thank you, Fis, I want to know about Hobbleheim, too. The Duke told me to keep on marching, that I would find my soul in the end.”

“Oh, you best not get involved in that,” said Mildred.

“It’s trouble, you’ll probably die, horribly,” said Levana, seeming to enjoy the idea.

“Look, let’s get your antidote and help Grandpa too,” Amos said. “Then we can get back what I need, and you can find out what you need to know. Okay? Friends?”

Fis glared, but the Witches brought out a tray of biscuits, sweets, and warm herbal fruit teas. “You’ll need some rest. But you’ll need a cure soon, or you’ll be....” Levana crossed her throat with a finger and made a dead-eyed face. “You know.”

“Oh, thank you,” Amos said, “but we better be going. Shouldn’t we, Fis?”

Fis nodded slowly. “I guess so.”

Mildred frowned, poking her head out the curtain of the kitchen window. “Oh, you definitely can’t go out now; oh no, it’s nightfall.”

Levana grinned wildly. “Nightfall,” she mouthed, eyes wild with excitement, and her pointy, sharp canine teeth looked extra long and extra pointy at that moment.

Amos gulped. “Why, why can’t we go out now? What’s out there? More Trolls?”

“I’m not scared,” Fis said, but she didn’t seem overly excited about the prospect of facing more Trolls.

Mildred shook her head sadly. “No, worse than Trolls, even Vampire Trolls.”

“There’s a sleuth of Werebears in the woods this week,” cackled Levana excitedly.

“And also Wad, Wen, Ew, and Owlbears,” Mildred interrupted.

“Whatbears?” Amos asked.

“No. Wad. Wad bears. Nasty little spitballs,” Mildred said.

“And the Ew-Bears...don’t get me started. I’ll just tell you, you smell them before you see them,” Levana added with disgust written on her face.

“But it’s the Owlbears you need to be most afraid of...”

“Owl bears,” Levana repeated, raking her long-taloned fingers like hunched claws over Mildred’s shoulders, dramatically miming maiming and eating smaller prey.

“—who’ll just be getting up now to hunt,” Mildred finished. “It’s much too dangerous.”

“Very dangerous,” Levana nodded, eyes darting to the window. “I might—”

“Owlbears? What is an owl bear?”

“Imagine,” Levana said, her long, thin, alabaster talons dancing together with glee. “A 1500-pound owl with the body of a bear and a beak as long as your arm that loves to eat, more than anything else, the still warm flesh of...children.”

Fis and Amos both shared a glance of shock and dismay before looking back to Levana.

“Now, now, Levana,” Mildred said. “No need to scare them. I mean, you spend two hundred years not eating children, and people always dwell on the negatives, don’t they?”

Fis and Amos shared a queasy, frightened look.

“We’re kidding!” Levana said. “Let’s just say it’s not safe out there. You’re welcome to stay, and we’ll brew you up some more bandages and snacks for the road after breakfast.”

Fis and Amos froze, not moving a muscle.

“We’re totally not going to eat you,” Mildred laughed.
“We’ve got cookies!”

Amos let out a huge sigh of frustration but also relief.
“Can we afford to wait?”

“I don’t see a lot of options, Amos. I don’t want to face a sloth...”

“Sleuth,” Levana corrected with a wink.

“A sleuth of owlbears...maybe some rest would be okay.”

Mildred smiled at Amos and Fis, “Just do your best. It’s the best you can do.” She pulled a cloth off the table to reveal a mahjong board. “Since you’re stuck here until the morning...care to join us for a game? It’s been ages since we had four people here. Do you know how to play?”

Fis shook her head.

Amos smiled and nodded. “Sure! Do you have more snacks?”

The witches nodded happily, and Mildred asked, “you play Mahjong?”

“Oh yeah! I play with my grandparents all the time.”

“I don’t know how, Amos,” Fis said.

“Oh, it’s easy. You have four suits of tiles. Each range from one to nine, and you need to make four sets of three, either three of a kind or a small straight such as seven, eight, and nine, and then one pair. If you can have a whole hand of the same suit, it’s a better victory. There are other ways to score high points, but that’s the basics.”

The witches nodded, and they sat down, snacked on biscuits, drank tea, and played around the table. Mildred won

the first hand, but Amos saw that though the tiles were a little different than he was used to, it was more or less the same. Their automagick table automagickally shuffled and reset the tiles when they finished play to get ready for the next hand. Fis was a little concerned about this.

“The table, it’s not—”

“Sprite powered?” Levana finished with a cackle. “Heavens no, a simple enchantment.”

“We’re witches, not monsters, Fis,” Mildred said kindly.

Fis nodded, relieved. Amos won the next two hands. And then Mildred took the fourth and sixth hand, Levana the fifth and seventh, and Fis watched all the time very closely. She’d been getting closer and closer to a solid hand. Finally, she finished first, with all of the same bubble tiles. By then, the witches were yawning and telling her that they better rest before anyone got embarrassed.

“I’ll find the cozy linens,” Mildred said as she rummaged around in a closet. She dimmed the lanterns and candles and wished them good night with a hug.

Lying side by side, Fis on the cozy sofa and Amos on another armchair, he tried to relax, but after a while, as she turned and let out a small groan, in obvious discomfort from her infected troll attack, Amos said. “Fis, I’m sorry I got you into this.”

“I know, and I also know there’s a reason you have that necklace and beamed down into my head. It may not make sense now, but I trust it will, Amos.”

Amos smiled in the darkness. It felt good to have a friend again. He wondered what his dad was doing, sleeping in their home, or working all night in the busy operating room. He

thought of Grandma, sitting alone at the kitchen table, wondering where he had gone and if Grandpa was going to be okay. He wondered if Grandpa was still alive, and the sobering thought wiped the smile off his face. Life was pretty hard when he tried to do it right.

“Good night, Fis.”

“Good night, Amos.”

Tuckered out as they were, Amos was soon asleep. He did dream this time, and in his dreams, the face of a giant, tusk-faced warrior haunted him. A violent, powerful man, a remorseless killer. This fanatic, ruthless warrior chased Amos across nine seas and through deserts and up mountains, all in search of power. And the power all began with Amos, sealed somewhere he had seen before, waiting for him. And something else was waiting too, a horrible, skeletal thing, bursting with putrid rot and holding the dispassionate contempt for life shared only by the dead. And it, too, was coming for Amos, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

CHAPTER 17

THE VOICE OF POWER



The witches made breakfast in the morning, and Levana came out with platters of boiled bird eggs and crumpet scones with jam. Amos noticed she was clean-faced in the morning and had no eyebrows at all. Although it smelled delicious, Fis grumbled at the sight of it. “I can’t eat, Amos,” Fis said with gritted teeth. “My stomach is in knots.”

The kitchen was cozy, with wood stools around an island and a stuffed pantry at the other end. By the light of morning, Amos noted magickal tools, a kitchen altar, heirloom leather-bound books, herbs in the windowsills, and a kitchen counter holding a small bubbling water fountain and vessels of water.

Amos took a step toward Fis and recoiled, for under the soft light of the twin suns, Fis’ eyes were blood-red, and little drops of blood leaked down her cheeks.

“Your eyes... they’re bleeding...” Amos handed her a napkin.

Fis nodded solemnly, wiping her cheeks. Her renewed strength and excitement of the previous night had dulled into a numb dissolution and rather hollow hopelessness. When Mildred and Levana returned with a skillet of fried potatoes, their cheery faces fell, too.

“Poopie doodles,” Levana muttered. “Not much of a party in here.”

“Levana,” Mildred said solemnly, setting down the skillet on a hot plate on the kitchen table. “Please get my axe.” Levana nodded and disappeared into their study.

Amos wondered what Mildred intended to do with an axe. Fis sat up straight, perplexed, and one hand reached for her sword, but it wasn’t there.

“No, wait,” Amos said, “we’ll just leave... thank you for ___”

“Sit down,” Mildred said sternly, “please,” she added, seeing their crestfallen faces. Then, a moment later, Levana returned with a six-stringed purple guitar and gave it to Mildred.

Amos breathed a sigh of relief, and Levana grinned at him.

“Okay,” Mildred said, “bear with me for a moment,” and she ran her short, stubby fingers across the strings, tweaking and tuning the pegs, bending the notes until they rang out to her satisfaction. Amos sat quietly, happy about the turn of events.

“There,” Mildred said, slipped the guitar strap over her head, and put one foot on a kitchen stool. “Hang on to your socks.” She hummed a few bars of a lullaby and began to strum. The guitar had a unique character to its cadence, open and anthemic, with a gritty tone that meant business. Amos recognized major and minor intervals in the creative progression that had an ethereal quality that pulled at his heartstrings and beguiled him with its beauty. He felt an electric pulse crackle through the air as the guitar notes

surrounded, embraced, and amplified her lullaby, creating the feeling of longing, of loss, but of epic reversals, too.

Within a few measures, the guitar sang a song of unlikely comeuppance, forging a white-hot blade under duress to become a sword forged by dragons. Amos wasn't sure exactly how these ideas were conveyed or if Fis felt the same, but he held her hand, and she did not shy away. The twangy notes of the guitar painted a picture of defeat and success and were ultimately uplifting and inspirational. Mildred doubled over the opening theme again. In the context of the journey, Amos felt hope hidden in the crevices between his failures, rising into an unlikely success. A peaceful optimism washed over him, relaxing and reinvigorating. It was a new dawn, a new day, and as the world seemed full of possibilities again, he was feeling good. As the last notes rang out, he peeked at Fis, and she smiled. Her eyes were lavender stars, vibrant and clear.

“Shall we have breakfast?” Fis asked.



Amos had two of everything, and it was delicious. Fis preferred the vegetables to the baked goods and ate until they rubbed their bellies in contentment.

“Auntie Mildred, was that a kind of magick?” Amos asked.
“With music?”

“Of course, Amos. There are many kinds of magick. Can't you feel the beacon of hope in your breast? And how your friend Fis has recovered—temporary, though it will be.”

“I wish I could do magick like that,” Amos said. He thought of his ukulele back home. Amos' heart ached when he closed his eyes and was suddenly playing for his mom, who

would ruffle his hair and do silly viral video dances until Amos would howl with laughter, and his father would climb out of his ponderous study with a baseball bat, claiming to be ready to defend them from a gibbering ape attack. If only he could do magick to make his parents forgive his mischief. Maybe there was a spell that could heal Grandpa.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay with us? Inside the cabin, you can be yourself with our wards and protections. I can teach you a thing or two,” Levana said with a wink. Even without eyebrows, she had a sultry, engaging personality that did not make Amos think of a turtle at all.

“I, well—” Amos began.

“We have a third cauldron already,” Mildred said. “I’m sure it would be fine if you used it for a while. Who knows when she’ll be back? With her, she may have been back already.

“Already back?” asked Levana.

“I don’t know. Was she?” replied Mildred.

“You mean when she was with us before or that she already came back later, but an earlier before?”

“Oh, Levana, I don’t remember. You know Chronurgy gives me a headache,” said Mildred with a sigh. “Anyway, Amos, you and your friend are welcome—”

“It’s a nice offer,” Amos said reluctantly, pondering what one could get up to with a mastery of time magick, “but I have promises to keep, a soul to find, Grandpa to save, and a friend in need.” Amos gazed out the window into the gloom under the canopy of fir trees. Suddenly, a memory trickled into Amos’ mind; a forgotten dream that had previously slipped away from him. The shadows clung to him, and part of his

mind clung to the dream, holding on fast to return it to his conscious mind.

“Is something wrong?” Fis asked.

“Ah, I’m not sure,” Amos said, rubbing his forehead. “Auntie, do you have a pen and paper?”

“Sure, Amos,” Mildred said and went and fetched him a feather quill and a hand-beaten parchment.

Amos pushed his plate aside and set it down. He rubbed his temples, and then after a long moment of staring at the empty page, peeked out at the gloom again and could not escape the feeling that it was peeking back at him.

“What is it?” Levana asked, a trill in her voice, giddy with joy at his dismay. “I can feel your heavy concern like rain clouds overhead. I love rain clouds.”

Amos did not return the smile; instead, he began to write. He stopped after a few words and scratched his head. “I can’t quite remember my dream, but I just had a flash...a couple of words. There was a voice...something dark, but it’s...lodged in me, like a mind sliver. I need to write it down. What’s another word for shadow?”

“Oh,” said Mildred cheerily. “Try one of my synonym buns. That’ll help.” She went and fetched a plate and set it down beside him. Amos picked one up and peered at it closely. It was a hearty roll, like a scone, peppered with raisins. He took a nibble, and it was tart and tangy, with a hint of zesty citrus.

“Ah!” Amos said, “perhaps I was thinking of umbra! Or... the Void. Yes, that’s it!” Like a key that had unlocked a door to his dreams, the words suddenly flowed back to him, full of gloomy foreboding.

The witches looked startled, raising their eyebrows to their foreheads and sharing oddly-glazed gazes. They crept behind him to watch him write. With the synonym bun working its magic, Amos quickly began to write, dipping his feather quill in ink every few words until he finished. Then he stood up and backed away to examine his poem from a distance.

I am the umbra

a crack in the light

stirring at the

edge of sight

I am the gloom

shadow of your history

I stain fresh-fallen snow

to ash-smoke gray

I am the shadow

the doom of time

friend of the Void

In fact

I'm where

doom

is from.

“I like it,” Levana said. “It’s quite pretty.”

“It’s kind of dark,” Fis said, scratching her forehead and stuffing another boiled egg in her mouth.

“At least you wrote it down,” Mildred said. “When you write something down, you get it out of your head and make space to think about something else.”

“Like trapping demons on paper?” Amos asked. “That’s cool. Writing is a kind of magic, too.” Amos had another synonym bun and looked to Fis. “We had better get going, haven’t we? So to be clear—there’s a boat we can use by the river, and we can take that to find the Chimera?”

“Yes, definitely. Make sure you do not go over the falls,” said Mildred.

“When you hear the rapids crashing, time to scramble to land before...you know,” Levana said, and once again drew a deadly finger stroke across her throat and crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue.

“Okay, got it. And a hairball ought to be good enough?”

The witches nodded.

Amos noticed, looking around, that their black cat Figment was back on the rocking chair, but there was no sign of Thunder anymore. “What happened to your friend?” Amos asked, mouth full of a delicious berry crumpet.

“She got her head full of dreams—” said Mildred, “And went—”

“Off to teach the magickal youth of tomorrow,” finished Levana, with a smile and a slight kick under the table.

“You mean she teaches at a—”

“Magick school,” Mildred finished, disappointed.

Amos was pie-eyed and stunned for a moment. *A magick school.*

“You can’t hold it against her,” Levana said with a laugh, “that she teaches children instead of eats them.” Levana winked at Amos, and he gulped.

Mildred grumbled. “That was a long time ago, and...I prefer the old way of apprentices.”

“Parents are busy, and kids need structure. I went to a magick school....”

“You miss her, don’t you?” Amos interrupted.

Mildred nodded, and Levana was quiet. “I hope you’ll see her again soon.” Amos finished his breakfast, and the witches hugged him goodbye, then waved to Fis. “Good luck, kids.”

Amos and Fis headed out with packed lunches, snacks, and a few magickal bandages wrapped in banana leaves.



As they tiptoed across the threshold outside, careful not to disturb the lines of red and white salt that seemed to protect the cozy cabin, Amos felt a terrifying endless abyss as he was ripped from a tangible, physical manifestation of a boy to the worlds between, almost another dimension that he was not able to properly perceive or comprehend. From the gut-wrenching dizziness of the endless Void, Amos perceived Fis, who shone like a burning star, and his spirit flew towards her,

desperate, clinging for friendship and warmth. They blended back together seamlessly, and then he was back in the woods, behind Fis' brilliant lavender eyes. And so they left, two adventurers, in one body. Songbirds called, and insects chirped. His head jerked up of its own volition, and he realized that Fis had sniffed the air. *Woah*, Amos said with a laugh. *This will take some getting used to*, Amos said.

Yup, said Fis.

A minute went by as Fis listened, pointed ears twitching, for the sound of the river, and then she nodded, and they headed in that direction. They walked through the woods as the second sun began to grow larger on the horizon. Around the bend, the sound of the river grew closer.

"Thank you, Fis," Amos said.

"For?" Fis asked.

"For coming along on this journey with me."

"I didn't have much choice when it began," Fis said.

"I'm sorry about that. I didn't know what—"

"I know, Amos," Fis said. "I told you, I trust that the Summer Queen paired us for a reason. The necklace you wear—means something to me, and I've been charged with a sacred duty of trying to understand what's going on west of the Vale. Together, we're going to do that."

"And find the antidotes," Amos added.

Fis nodded.

"And get my soul back," he continued.

Fis nodded again. "We're in this together, Amos."

Amos smiled.

“So...you’re from a big city?” Fis asked. “What are your friends like?”

“Oh, they’re great. Alice is hilarious and always mad at me for all my jokes and pranks. And Ruby is super smart and cool, always embarrassed and blushing all the time.”

“So, your friends are mad at you, and you embarrass them?” Fis asked. “Cool but maybe not really your friends?”

“Uh,” Amos said, taken aback. “Well, our parents are friends, so we’re always hanging out. I mean, we are basically siblings.”

“And you’re the annoying little brother, right?”

Amos scratched his head, feeling uncomfortable. “Well, what about you? Do you have lots of friends where you come from?”

“Sure,” Fis said. “I mean, I know lots of people in the Vale of Shadows...they, uh, well, they’re all doing fine, I guess.”

“You don’t sound very sure,” Amos said.

“Well, it’s just that they’re so clueless, you know? Like they always complain about their problems, but they never take action. I’m talking obvious actions required to make meaningful changes, you know?”

“So basically, you’re bossy and probably drive everyone crazy?” Amos asked rhetorically. “You don’t have to answer that.”

“Oh you, shut up,” Fis said, and they walked silently for a time. After a while, her pointy ears perked up. “There’s the river,” she said. Within a minute of trekking through the brush, they found a small wooden boat and two paddles tied to the

closest part of the shore. A galaxy of dragonflies soared over the river, and Amos smiled, “This is good luck,” he said.

Fis untied the knot like a trained sailor. Amos appreciated her skill, and then they pushed the boat out and hopped on, using the paddle to clear the shore. The crimson sun drew high above them, and the fluffy clouds were stained dark pink.

Here, the boat cut through opaline-still water, and Amos soaked in the pollution that hung heavy in the sky.

“It wasn’t always like this,” Fis said. “Hobbleheim is behind it, I’m sure of it.”

“These... dark changes you speak of. That’s turning the animals ...into machines? What do you think is causing it?”“The King has been experimenting with clockwork magick, they say. He’s been capturing sprites. We don’t know what he’s doing with them, but it’s concerning.”

Amos frowned. “Is this a kind of time magick? Chronurgy?”

“No,” Fis said. “That is very rare. There are many kinds of magic. But none so vile for the spirit as resurrecting the dead, by a necromancer—this kind of Clockwork...we’ve heard rumors of awful experiments.” She shuddered.

“That sounds terrible,” Amos said, truly curious to hear more.

“They’ve built things that can light up a whole village, but it is dirty and creates Moop.”

“What’s Moop?”

“MOOP stands for Matter Out of Place,” said Fis, with a grimace. “It’s things that shouldn’t be where they are, or anywhere.”

“Oh,” Amos said, nodding, “pollution.”

Fis thought for a moment, listening with her ears and mind, and nodded. “Yes, that’s Moop. But the skies and the water have produced a foul smell and a yellowish goo this year.”

Amos paused, inhaling with Fis’ very delicate hunter’s nose. “Like rotten eggs.”

They nodded. Fis rowed like an athlete, and Amos gazed around, relaxing, and enjoying the morning sail after breakfast.

“I need to know what’s happening in Hobbleheim...why they’ve been cutting down ancient trees. I hear them, Amos,” Fis said. “They cry for help, all the way to our forest.”

“And you think it’s the King—”

“It must be him. The clouds are darkest over their kingdom. He wasn’t always King. They say he just walked into the Kingdom one day, from another world. He became an advisor to the royals. Hobbleheim is a kingdom of smallfolk, of Pooks, like me,” Fis said, “but the King is big and tall, more like—”

“Me,” Amos finished, curious. “The King is a wizard?”

“Some kind of. I swore to discover what he’s been up to lately... you know. I won’t go home until I do.”

“I’m sorry you got hurt by those Trolls,” Amos said.

“Yeah, I can see why you would be, Amos. You must learn and listen. Danger lies ahead.”

“I promise, Fis,” Amos said, and he nodded, feeling this pain, owning it.

“Well then, let’s keep on,” Fis said, and they rowed onward, talking lazily until they discovered they’d been talking over the oncoming roar of the rushing falls, and they had not docked in time. Fis strained, but try as she might, she could not budge the little boat to the shoreline. The mouth of the falls roared closer, ready to swallow them up.

“Brace yourself!” Fis wound her hands and feet around the inside of the boat as it bumped and leaped like a children’s bath toy. The little boat rushed over the waterfall’s edge and down, down, down the roaring falls.

Amos clutched the boat’s sides like a cat on the edge of a bathtub, every muscle contracted, and a low whine escaped his mouth. The playful stream was one thing, but the rushing falls brought visions of violent concussions, jagged rocks, and a deep, swirling pool of icy death. Fis fought for control of their limbs as his nervous contractions unworked her steady bracing for the collision, and Amos tried not to vomit.

The boat crashed down the roaring whitewater falls, while Amos hung for as long as he could at the top, until like an elastic reaching the end of its flexibility, Amos snapped back, experiencing the very disorienting spirit crash and accompanying spinning, and whirling. He dizzily found their soul tether and crept back to Fis as she struggled near the bottom of the deep, dark lake. Amos, shaking like a leaf, was scared stiff, and on the verge of a massive, unequivocal, for-the-books freakout. As he wiggled through the thick morass of no-body-ness towards the dim, flickering light of Fis’ soul at the bottom of the lakebed, he tried to calm himself as best he could. This was life or death, and a freakout would mean game over. He found her wedged into an old shipwreck at the bottom of the lake.

“We’ve stopped,” Fis said and tentatively took a breath, for the boat still held a pocket of air.

“What now?” asked Amos.

“Can you turn us into a fish?” Fis said hopefully.

Amos tried to concentrate, but he couldn’t focus in his state of anxiety. He could still feel the crashing water outside the little haven. They hadn’t much time. The cloak was sluggish and would not respond. “No, I can’t...what can I do?”

“You left me, for a moment, as I was falling,” Fis said, speaking slowly and evenly. “Can you do that again? Take a peek around?”

Amos wasn’t sure, but he had to try.

He left Fis, but in the existential bleak pitch-black dark abyss, he found himself screaming in terror, imagining all sorts of horrors approaching. He popped back, shaking his head. “No, no, no, no, not that.”

“You need to try,” Fis said.

“I can’t!”

“Okay...together, we swim for the surface!” Fis said, but she did not look particularly hopeful.

They took a deep breath and kicked off the boat, swimming as fast as they could past the old shipwreck. Fishes swam curiously around them. The pressure made Fis dizzy, and she grasped her ears, and started to choke.

Oh, no! Amos said, then, all at once—the schools of fish scattered. Something massive was approaching. The glow of the fungi dimmed as something vast swept by Amos, full of brainy pods and a grappling spike, smashing the shipwrecked

boat. The thing was huge, rubbery, and full of eyes as it grasped at the spirit boy. A moment later, another bundled and held the drowning Fis. Amos could feel, through the magical sympathy of his necklace, something cosmic, ancient, and powerful beyond belief. It swung Fis towards its face, and Amos could feel its immense, ancient shape, full of malice and rage in the darkness. *It's trapped here, like us*, Amos thought. It was a gigantic squid with facial features resembling a dog, with a long proboscis that snapped around its angry mouth. Its eyes, glowing pits of simmering anger, locked onto Amos in the eerie murky darkness.

Who. Are. You.

I'm a boy, Amos thought.

Hurry, hurry, Fis cried, seeming weaker by the moment.

A boy spirit, tied to a Fae creature. You both smell like the Fae, mused the giant monster, from inside a swirling cloud of inky horror. Tentacles twitched, ancient yellow eyes glowed, and Amos shivered.

And who...are you? Amos asked.

An old soul, trapped.

Can you please let us go, maybe give us a push in our little boat back to the surface? She's an air breather, and I fear her air is running out.

I used to feel the freedom of the oceans but have been here, starving, for ages of man. Tell me, boy, what lies above the surface?

Amos thought quickly. *Oh, above the surface? Well, there are two suns...you know that, okay. Waterfall up above, a big one at that. There's a Mad King turning tigers into alarm clocks.*

Where are you from? You don't smell like this world. The tentacle pulled him close against a glowing ocular orb that studied him like a boy with a magnifying glass might examine a flea.

I am, um, well, that's a complicated question. A good one, though, see, I'm from another place altogether, but a fox-spirit stole my soul, and I used magick to travel worlds or something like that, and now I'm pretty attached to the girl here—we're working together so I can go home. My parents are probably worried.

The Kraken's merciless orbs blinked, once, in thought.

You can travel worlds?

No, I mean, yes, in theory, I did.

Take me.

Fis' voice was small and far away. *Amos, hurry.* She coughed some air bubbles out and breathed water into her lungs, and Amos knew they were in deep trouble.

Oh, we'd better hurry. My friend needs me. Is there any way you could give us a hand?

I could. The Kraken blinked again. *For a promise.*

A promise? Amos said.

You will help me leave this lake and sail the worlds again. I'm so hungry. And bored. And my father needs me. Do you promise?

Amos, too, desired to please his father. Amos decided to get Fis' opinion. *Hold on a moment. Let me confer with my friend. Fis?* He said to her, *what do you think?* But Fis fading fast into oblivion. Amos returned his focus to the glowing orbs of the Kraken.

Okay, mighty Kraken. We need back in that boat right now and back up to the surface before my friend suffocates. You do that; I promise to help you. Fis kicked her legs and jerked wildly, and Amos started to ... fade away into mist. *Oh, please hurry. You have my word, I really, really promise.*

The Kraken shook him and spoke again. *You have promised. You're pledged to me, now. With hope, I shall cast you away so that you may return and set me free another day. My champion. Go, blessed of Cythella, go, the boy with my heart, and do not fail me. Take this and bring it far and away...* A tingling warmth grasped Amos, as he was cradled by the seas's delicate squeeze.

A mighty spongy brain-filled tentacle struck the old deteriorating pirate ship, and the tiny boat lodged against it spun wildly upwards and plunked them into the boat and the tiny pocket of air. Amos and Fis snapped together again and whooshed towards the sky.

Moments later, they crashed upon the surface, entering a world that was both still, and dark, perforated by the brightness of a series of brilliant stars. In a world without a moon, the stars shone all the brighter. For a long while they lay dazed and silent. As Amos came to, he wondered if Fis was alright.

"Fis," Amos said. "Fis!" He took control of her lifeless limbs and shook her by the collar with one hand. "Fis, come on." He pounded two balled up fists into their shared sternum, once, twice, and then a third time.

Suddenly, Fis coughed out a mouthful of water, turning her face to the side, gasping, hacking, wheezing. She choked a little, but slowly, got her bearings after a dizzying and disorienting series of sensations that Amos also felt as

passenger in her body. Her heart raced. He could feel her pulse pounding in his head and in his hands and arms. He could even feel it in his armpits!

“Amos?” Fis wheezed. “You’re still here?”

Amos, overjoyed to hear her speak, did not fight for control of their body. “Fis!” he replied out loud.

“That was...” Fis broke off into another wet cough, and Amos gave her a moment to recover still. “What happened?”

“Let’s worry about that later. Okay, just take a moment to get your bearings, Fis,” Amos said, and Fis nodded. It seemed, after all, sensible enough. They rode for a while, in silence, and Fis’ heartbeat slowed and Amos felt them both relax.

They sat there in silence under the stars for quite some time. Amos daydreamed about being back in Chongqing at his favorite hamburger restaurant that flew drone trains around on monorail tracks that delivered the food right into his mouth when Fis suddenly pointed up to the stars. “See that one? That’s the North Star. You can always follow it North, and that’s where I’m headed. Towards Hubbleheim.”

“What’s that one?” Amos asked, pointing to a strange cluster that looked like a sword and a boot.

“That’s the Harlequin Cobra,” Fis said. “It’s...a storied star.”

“What kind of story?” Amos asked.

“An old one. About a mighty warrior, and a true love, that shattered an alliance, and led to the fall of the Great War. That led to the world we see today.”

“It doesn’t seem so bad,” Amos said.

“If those Ork raiders had got ahold of us, you would feel differently, I promise you that,” Fis said glumly. “See this one, see it? Made up of six stars, the constellation called Caoteng—he was our last great dragon. Do you see it?”

“You have dragons?” Amos asked, feeling nerdy and excited. He loved dragons. At least stories and films about them. And his games full of fantasy and magick. Amos squinted. Now he could make out the shape...with a bit of healthy imagining, he could see two wings and a face. “The ones to the left of it, is that supposed to be fire?”

“Yes, Caoteng’s rage. It can be seen most prominently high in the sky during summer. Caoteng was the mightiest of all dragons.” Fis seemed thoughtful for a moment. “We used to have dragons, they say, and they protected us from terrible things, but now they are gone, and the evil things lie sleeping, and we have only legends to remind us of the time before.”

Amos wanted to ask more but suddenly felt shy, so he watched the stars in the wondrous night sky.

“I remember hearing once that when we look into distant galaxies of space, we might be looking at our own reflection, through time and space, like being in a barber shop, but every mirror in the place had a different back of the head, but they were all you, but since they’d be at all different times of your life, you wouldn’t even know it was your own head you were looking at, isn’t that funny? Fis?”

Fis was quiet, and Amos wondered how she was doing. He dipped into her body consciousness and felt a wave of dizziness. “Are you okay, Fis?” Amos asked.

“What’s it to you?” Fis snapped grumpily. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I...” Amos stammered, “well, the Troll toxin...do you feel ok?”

Fis softened. “I think so, Amos, thanks. Let’s not talk about that. See this?” Fis asked. “This one is the Star Bridge.”

“Oh?” Amos asked.

“It’s said that a Fae archer used to watch over nearby worlds using a pool of radiance,” Fis said, her voice a whisper now. “She found a noble and kind farmer and used her magick to make little miracles for him. Never greedy, he always used her gifts to better his village. Eventually, she passed through the pool, becoming a weaver girl, and they fell in love. But she was promised to another, and the Summer Queen became angry, banishing the weaver girl from visiting his realm. They were...”

“Separated by a bridge of stars,” Amos finished.

“Yes,” Fis said. “How did you...”

“Once a year, the weaver girl was able to cross the bridge to meet—“

“—we call this day *Qixi*. My Grandma told me. It’s an old Chinese holiday.”

“Imagine that,” Fis said, and then pointed to another. “This one is made up of fifteen stars—the constellation Choeropsis. It’s a chameleon. It can be seen high in the Northeastern sky until after the autumn equinox. It’s a representation of the god of music. Those born under it are believed to be excellent dancers and are very confident.”

Amos smiled, “Were you...born under it?”

Fis blushed and nodded, “Guilty. Total Choeropean.” They laughed and floated in the darkness. The excitement of

surviving had worn off, and Fis became quiet.

Amos observed her for a moment before asking, “What’s wrong? We’re okay.”

“You did a bad thing, Amos. I warned you, but you didn’t listen.”

“Didn’t I save your life?”

Remembering she hadn’t asked him, yet, “but, how?” Only then did she seem to notice a perfect white pearl the size of her fist, glinting by the light of the brilliant stars overhead. It was tucked into a corner of the boat. She snatched it up and held it so the stars could shine down upon it fully. It was a sphere, lustrous as a diamond from the reflected starlight upon the pearl’s sheen. It was not completely round, Amos noticed as they held it close for inspection, but its slightly oval quality didn’t diminish the almost hypnotic beauty of its pearly glow. It had a heft to it and an indescribable air of mystery. Holding it gave Amos a feeling of holding a priceless treasure, and he would be loathe to give it away. “A gift from the Kraken? You accepted a gift from the Kraken? This is *bad juju, man*.”

“Would you have rather drowned?”

“Then make a deal with a monster? Yes, I would,” Fis said.

Amos scrutinized her, but she appeared not to be joking. “And you’d rather risk death from the Trolls than go home and get healed by your Summer Queen?”

Fis said nothing.

Amos scratched his head, unable to comprehend her.

“Where’d you come from anyway? Is everybody from that Fae forest like you?”

Fis was silent for a long time, and Amos wondered if maybe she'd fallen asleep when she answered. "I'm not from the Vale of Shadows, no, but I was raised there, kept safe by the Summer Queen, Lady of the Fae. Like many, she has her plans."

"Where are you from, Amos?"

"I'm just a boy...from a big city. Chongqing, it's great. We love everything spicy...even our ice cream." As he spoke, his heart ached once more for his home, parents, grandparents, and spicy local food. "My dad's a doctor, and my mom's a journalist...I miss them a lot. I was with my grandparents when I met that fox-spirit, and my grandpa got hurt trying to save me...really bad. Now, I have to save him...and get back home...somehow." Amos sighed.

"That's tough," Fis said. "It sucks when people you love get hurt. I had some people protect me growing up, but one day...they also got really hurt. I tried to help them, but...never mind. It just really sucks." Amos perceived an ocean of sorrow underneath her little boat of stoicism. She was barely holding it together.

He nodded, "It does suck. So, you don't remember your folks?"

"The Summer Queen is the only mother I've known," Fis whispered. "And that fox-spirit is a Trickster and a killer. You can't just hunt them down and demand your soul back any more than you can run into a burning building and demand a room for the night."

Amos was quiet for a moment but said, "I have to try."

"Me too, Amos."

CHAPTER 18

THE LADY OF SORROWS



A rowdy flock of seagulls wheeled and arced overhead, their raucous cries ringing off the sparkling diamonds that playfully slapped their battered boat. There was a strange glamour to their timeless call as they soared between the twinned orbs of God-goldened light. Fis sat up and cried out, “Seagulls! We’ve hit land! But, it’s not the edge of the lake, Amos. It’s the island at its center.”

“Do you know of it?” Amos asked.

“From legend, yes. It’s nearly impossible to map, though, and harder to sail to. It...moves.”

“A moving island?” Amos said with a laugh.

“Legend has it, it sits on the back of a giant turtle,” Fis said.

Amos stopped, stunned. “That’s fantastic. Utterly fantastic.”

Rudderless, they sailed along with the current to the island, eventually landing upon a red, sandy beach. Amos hopped onto the sand, kicked off the soft leather boots and basked in the warmth of the sand and sun squishing between his funny little cinnamon toes, yelping in joy to be on dry land.

Quiet, hissed Fis.

You okay? You're acting kinda grumpy.

Amos plugged into all her nerves and jolted as the Troll toxin worked its way through her body. She'd need to rest soon. They walked along the shoreline, coming shortly to a wall of tall shrubs higher than their heads. "See that," Amos said. "Someone's keeping these hedges trimmed."

"It's a maze," said Fis, looking down the beach suspiciously. "Be alert."

"Someone maintains a vast shrubbery in the middle of a lake...wow," Amos said, impressed.

"Magick," Fis said and nodded, finger to her mouth. They walked around the hedge perimeter for half an hour in silence until they came to a raised section where the tightly-knotted bramble tapered up and split and a gate about ten feet wide. "Well," said Amos. "It looks like we've found the mouth of the maze."

"Wait," said Fis. "Movement at the gate."

As Amos crouched down, a group of rowdy individuals hovered around the mouth of the maze. Four horsemen were arguing around a pair of small, hooded figures. One horseman reached down and grasped a small little creature, who cried out, hands up in protest. Crouching through the shrubbery, Fis brought them closer, stalking within earshot.

I wonder what they want? Amos thought to Fis.

I've heard of this maze before. Supposedly, at the center is a treasure...and a monster.

They're likely adventurers or thieves.

Be careful, Fis, Amos thought, but he grinned in excitement.

The little cloaked figure lowered its hood, exposing a reptilian face that sniffed the air and shook his head. The man, who was not a horseman rider, but a horse-man, responded by grabbing him by the throat and shaking him.

“Centaur,” Amos and Fis both whispered, eyes wide in wonder. The four had the lower body of horses and the upper body of men. *They’re heavily armed, cunning, and quick to anger*, thought Fis. *Let’s not get involved...unless we have to.* They crouched and listened.

“Wagwan iguana,” the lizard said, one hand clawing at the Centaur’s choking hand and the other adjusting its eye patch and the beanie cap over its scaled head. Its legs dangled and pumped furiously as the Centaur held it by the neck against the wall of the bristling hedge. “Whataguana?”

“Speak clearly, beast,” said the Centaur stiffly. He drew a long, shimmering blade from the sheath at his armored leather back and pointed the tip against the lizard’s neck. “Why did you stop?”

“What’ya call a lazy reptile, irie?” The tiny reptilian creature spouted back in a musical pat-wa. “A procrasti-gator.” He curled up his nose in distaste and turned invisible, becoming the same shade of green as the hedge behind him.

“He led us this far, Gnome. What’s the problem?” Another centaur trotted impatiently and waved a sword at the other tiny, cloaked figure.

“L-l-let me have a m-m-moment with him, p-p-perhaps I can r-r-reason it out,” the little, floppy munchkin stuttered and turned to face the hanging reptile, looking up at him. “S-s-s-slick S-s-Salvador, wh-wh-why w-w-won’t you l-l-lead us onw-w-ward?”

“Yaseen, two lizards, walk into a bar, and the bartender says, ‘Hayyyyy, wagwan, we don’t get many lizards in here.’ The first lizard says, ‘At these prices, I’m not surprised. Irie!’”

“What’s he on about?” Growled a third, grey-haired and grizzled Centaur who stroked his bushy-bearded chin.

“I b-believe,” said the Gnome, turning around and lowering his hood. He was a bulbous-nosed, spectacled little man with curly brown hair, a long floppy hat, and beady little eyes. “He wants more money.”

“More money? We paid the Abbey well for the pair of you,” growled the elder Centaur amidst the muttering of the others.

“In-in-d-d-deed, you did, S-s-sir Ra-Rasmere,” said the Gnome, wringing his hands together and looking up at the shuffling and muscular horse body, only a moment away from trampling him into the ground. “But he be-be-believes it to be v-v-very d-da-dangerous, and he would like some m-m-m-more m-m-money.”

“Argh, you two are insufferable,” roared Sir Rasmere. “You’ll be lucky if we don’t leave you in a ditch to rot when this is all done.”

“B-b-b-but, the Abbey.” the Gnome squealed.

“Yes, the Abbey.” The Centaurs chuckled and spat on the ground. “Fine, he can have another twenty Cheirons when we leave this bloody island with the prize. But, we must return to the ship by dawn, so make the lizard guide us. Now!”

“He’s n-n-not a li-li-lizard,” the Gnome quipped.

“Dat’s right horsemon,” Salvador nodded at the Gnome and looked back to the Centaur, “I’m a standup chameleon!” Salvador’s legs danged, and pumping back and forth, as the

Centaur held him by the collar of his cloak, menacingly shaking him. “Every-ting is irie, horsemon, don’t worry, be happy.” The Centaur grumbled, ground his teeth, and chucked him into the bramble bushes of the hedge.

“And you say the device will work?” Rasmere said to the gnome as he waved about a shimmering, mirrored shield. Light from the twin suns reflected off of it, blasting Amos squarely in the face from his hiding place. He ducked extra low as they crept a little closer.

“I-I mea-, yea, bu-, well, if—” the Gnome stammered, failing to communicate anything of substance.

“It better. If what they say about the monster is true, that treasure won’t come easy.”

The Centaurs grunted, hoofs stomping, gripping the handles of their swords and spears with violent aspirations.

“Well, n-n-now that that is s-s-settled, w-w-w—” the Gnome said, but Salvador had brushed himself off and entered the mouth of the maze. With their guide on the move, the party of Centaurs followed. The stuttering Gnome wriggled his hands together and then started to run after them, pumping his little legs into the maze.

Fis and Amos, who had indeed been listening, waited a moment in silence, considering what they had heard.

“That was absolutely—” Amos began.

“Dangerous,” Fis finished.

“Thrilling,” Amos sighed, attempting to set the record straight. “Horse-men, Centaurs, on the hunt of a bona fide treasure at the center of a maze on a secret misty island in the center of a magickal lake that holds an ancient monster. Whew!” Amos sighed. “Like, can it get any cooler?”

“You’re ridiculous,” Fis said. “You play dangerous games like you don’t care what happens. Actions have consequences.”

“Says the one turning into a Troll because she’s too busy to go home and get treated,” Amos scoffed but stopped when he heard no rebuttal. “I’m sorry...are you okay, Fis?”

“I’m dizzy, Amos. Can we sit?”

“I have a better idea,” Amos said, and they sat, and he fished around for the waterproof pouch and cut off a short bandage wrapped in Mildred’s magickal goop. He cleaned off Fis’ calf with his water skin and applied a fresh bandage. He tried his best not to gag or complain at the site of the pulsing, bubbling, and festering wound where the troll finger had lodged itself only yesterday. Soon, the new bandage covered it, and Fis perked up a little.

“That’s a bit better,” Fis said.

“Now, if I could only get your back changed,” said Amos trying to feel around behind their back to see how flexible Fis’ arms could be and whether it was possible to change the bandage himself. He couldn’t.

“It’s okay, Amos, this will do for now,” Fis said. “Thanks. Let’s be on our way. There must be a village nearby or a boat big enough to get us back to shore.”

“Are you kidding me?” Amos asked. “Life has brought us here, to this island, a mystical, moving island. I believe it must be by design. We have to go after them.”

Fis was silent for a moment, then nodded. “Fine,” she said. “Trust the fates.” They crept into the mouth of the maze, and once they had entered, they could no longer make out any distinguishing marks above the labyrinth, such as trees or even

the sun's position. "I can't see any trace of them. The grass shows no signs of tracks. It must be magick," Fis said.

"Cool," Amos replied. They approached a fork in the road. After some consideration, they took the right path until the next fork. "Let's try lucky lefty," Amos said, and they went left again down a winding corridor. Another right turn split again, and, trying left, they reached a dead-end shortly. They began to retrace their steps.

Wait, said Fis. Amos heard a shuffling a moment later, and they tiptoed away from the intersection. A huge, barrel-chested creature, with the head of a bull and the body of a giant man, roared into view. The beast carried a massive two-handed battleaxe. The Minotaur's sniffling snout foamed in a furious rage, but in a moment, it had passed right by them.

A Minotaur in a maze. That's awesome.

Awesome? Fis shot back. *That monster was frightening. Have you no sense at all? This isn't a game, Amos.*

They quietly retraced their steps until they worked their way towards the labyrinth's heart. Soon, they reached a dead end. "We could be lost in this maze for days," Amos groaned.

Even Fis, with her wonderful sense of direction, was lost. "It's like the maze itself is moving...it's playing tricks." In the distance came the roar again and the sound of stomping feet. "I don't get it," Fis said. "This should be the way forward."

Amos hopped up as a fluffy ball rubbed against his leg. He spun around. Thunder was looking up at him, grinning an all too human grin.

"Thunder? But how? How do you always pop up like that? Is this all a dream? Are you dreaming, too?" Amos asked, scratching Thunder's chin. Thunder purred louder but did not

answer. When Amos finished rubbing her, Thunder walked through the thorny green wall. Amos jammed his hand into it to follow her, but it was solid, and he cried out as his fingers stung in complaint.

“It’s a wall,” Fis said. “I don’t underst-”

“Don’t trust your eyes,” Amos said, inspiration compelling him forward. “Close them.” He jammed their eyes closed and walked toward the wall of prickly brambles. Well past the time they expected thorns and leaves to push against their body, they kept walking forward unimpeded. He opened their eyes to find they were in a vast, wide-open clearing, the heart-shaped center of the maze. Behind them, the hedge had completely vanished. Now, there were only the lapping waves of the sea slapping against the red sandy beach.

Thunder purred and rubbed against him, and Amos picked her up in his arms. Down the beach was a temple with white marble columns. Figures stood along the shore. The soft, warm sand tickled his feet as he tried to make out the shapes of the many figures ahead.

“Be careful,” said Fis. “Something wicked lies ahead.”

Dozens of figures lined the beach along the edge of a pond. They were lifelike, and after examining a half dozen or so, a chill of cold sweat dripped down Amos’ spine. They weren’t elaborate sculptures at all. “They’re not people at all!” Amos said. “They’re statues!” Some were short and stout, bearded warriors, others tall and thin, with pointed ears, and some broad-shouldered, muscled, tusked warriors. There were Centaurs and some creatures that resembled half-men and half-beasts, but the beast half varied from wild dogs to cats, to fish and crustaceans, horse and goat, and stranger things that Amos couldn’t recognize at all. Creeping closer, Amos noticed

that all the petrified figures were male, and they all waved dangerous claws or carried weapons: axes, swords, bows, maces, spears, and other—more esoteric—instruments of violence.

It's the Centaurs, thought Fis, pointed to the group for them, reared up and brandishing sword and spears. The leader held a mirrored shield that hadn't seemed to help. Poised to spend eternity upon the sandy beach, and hiding behind them was a small, cloaked reptilian on back feet covering his face, which hadn't seemed to help either. Walking along the beach, they heard a hushed and insistent whispering from the bushes. Fis turned to peer into the shrubbery, but Amos, hearing music, turned back to the beach. A woman was singing a beautiful song. Amos did not recognize the words, but the melody was lovely, tragic, and compelled him forward.

“Wait,” Fis said, flustered, but Amos pushed on. He approached the form of a woman. She sat with her legs in the water, singing and rubbing water over delicate alabaster skin with one hand. Her other hand held a coconut with a straw, which she sipped, while swinging long, golden locks of hair.

She's gorgeous, Amos thought.

Amos took another step toward her, but Thunder unexpectedly wanted down and scrambled in his arms, scratching him with sharp claws.

“Ow, ow, ow,” Amos said, and the woman jumped, startled, from her song. Her golden locks reared up, each becoming a hissing snake. As Thunder hopped from Amos' hands, she became very heavy and plunked, petrified into stone, into the beach with a solid thud.

Amos scrambled to avoid smashing his toes, and his ring tingled, vibrating with power. He felt a stiffening spread

through his body, but his ring grew warm, and tight, and he could move freely again.

He was okay.

“You startled me,” she said, winking. “We don’t get a lot of company around here lately. You doing ok? You look a little tired.” The snakes had become golden locks again, and she patted the sand beside her. “Come, have a seat. You startled me, girlfriend.” Amos blushed a little, remembering again, as it was so easy to forget, that the woman did not see him but instead a stunned, rather diminutive Pook Fae girl.

This is Medusa, Fis said. But...we’re not stoned, she said with surprise.

My ring was shaking. I don’t know, Amos said. *Maybe it ate the magick.*

After standing about, the beautiful woman shrugged and took another sip from her coconut. Her thin, arched eyebrows rose as she studied Amos’ glum expression. “Sorry about your cat. He looked like a cutie.”

“Thunder’s a girl,” Amos said glumly.

“Oh, well, she’ll be back in no time. Cats aren’t greedy enough to stay stoned, usually. It’s all about intention.” She threw her head back and laughed. Love, pain, loss, sadness and joy all crystallized in the polyphonic, full melody of her wild laughter. “And how did you manage to dodge my gaze?”

“I think my ring sucked up the spell,” Amos said, flashing her a glimpse of his hand. “I’m not sure how it works.”

“Neat ring, that,” she said, winking. “You’re full of surprises.”

Amos, unafraid and intrigued, sat down next to her. She passed him the coconut, and Amos took a sip. It was sweet, aromatic, and pungent, with the taste of fermented fruit. It reminded Amos of his father's New Years' celebrations. He coughed a little at the heat of it going down his throat.

The woman chuckled, "You're a young one, aren't you? Looks like you been through hell and back. Where are you from?"

Fis answered, "The Vale of Shadows."

"Oh, an enchanting place. It's nice to meet you. I'm Medusa."

"I'm Fi-Amos," they said together and then blushed.

"You're famous?" Medusa let out raucous laughter like crashing waves against the beach. "I've never met you before, so you can't be that famous."

At this, they all laughed together. "Give it time," Amos said, wheezing between gasps of laughter. Finally, he stopped. "Why are there so many statues here?"

"Some people want what they can't have," Medusa said with a wink. "You're not like them, are you?"

"Oh no," said Amos, "I'm just a boy passing through."

Medusa stared at him again for a long minute and smiled. "I don't really get it, but it's nice to have company and friends. True friends are like rare songbirds at dawn. They can break the darkness and summon the morning light."

"You don't seem a fearsome monster," Amos blurted out. "I think you're pretty."

"Aw, shucks," Medusa said, her cherry lips curving into a menacing sneer that quickly dissolved into a joyful grin. She

winked at him. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

Amos smiled, and they enjoyed an easy silence. As the suns began their slow descent towards the horizon, Amos watched the most magnificent sunset of his life. The twin stars refracted upon the playful waves and across the lake’s surface, rippling into infinite sparkling diamonds. The beach was warm, but the breeze was cozy and cool, and exotic songbirds overhead sang a beautiful melody that reminded Amos of lullabies from his childhood.

After a time, Medusa rose and sang with them. It was a song of loss and beauty, of places long forgotten. As she did, Amos danced in the shadows of her many guarded memories, held safe amongst the lapping surge. The pool in the labyrinth’s center shimmered, and the swell took on a golden hue. A curious, ethereal toddler formed of bubbling, scintillating diamonds, played and blew bubbles, laughing as they shimmered in the sunlight. He seemed, non-euclidean, and not quite held to their dimension, for he moved in ways that seemed unfathomable to Amos’ wild imagination. Each bubble that flew by Amos contained infinite expression within the soapy contours. When he focused on one, it was like looking through a microscope to discover a galaxy.

The young boy blew bubbles on top of bubbles until they formed a mountain of possibility, each unique, some large and some small but connected and expanding. If each bubble was a galaxy, this golden babe brewed a metaverse, the worlds of possibility within every choice, every decision spawning a parallel projection, and Amos was awed to stillness. Medusa sang the song that made the babe sway so beautifully that he understood how the music could have drawn those men here,

only to be turned to stone. After a time, she stopped, and the babe settled down amongst the waves again.

“You’re going to want to do something with that pearl,” Medusa said, nodding at the bulge in Fis’ pouch.

“How do you—”

“Oh, I can hear it calling, clear as a telephone. Be careful. Others will sense it too. But if you can hold it long enough, I expect you’ll know what to do with it.”

“You have a telephone?” Amos asked. “Can I call my Grandma?”

Medusa smiled but shook her head. “I don’t have one here, they don’t work the same here, as they used to where I came from.”

“Oh,” Amos said, disappointed. “Well, will you accompany us?”

“I’m sorry little Fae, but I’m happy here. After so long going fast, it’s time to dip my toes in the water and this little beaut of a bubble boy needs someone to guard him, until he’s all grown up.”

Amos was distraught, but Medusa smiled and wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. She rubbed the drop of moisture onto Fis’ forehead. Amos felt a subtle vibration and a peaceful stillness. “There,” she said with a sad smile. “My tear. A blessing to take with you. May it keep you safe.”

Fis wrapped an arm around her shoulder and gave her a warm hug. “Thanks, Medusa.” Amos blushed, pulling back.

“Okay, well, I guess we better get going,” Amos said, looking back at the maze. “I don’t suppose there’s an easy way out, is there?”

Medusa grinned and tossed her head toward the other side. “That path will take you to town. Don’t stray off it, though.”

“Okay. Well, it was nice meeting you,” Amos said and shook her hand.

“You too, Famous,” Medusa said with a laugh. “Sorry about your cat. She’ll come around sooner or later.”

“Please feed her, and don’t let her get too wet,” Amos said with a sigh.

“Oh, cats don’t need help in the Dreamlands,” Medusa said with a smile. “They’ll take care of you more often than not.”

“That’s good. She’s my grandma’s,” Amos said, getting up to his feet.

That was a close call, Fis said.

Not everything can be solved with weapons, Amos said.

As they walked towards the exit, a voice whispered out of the shrubbery again, a shrill hiss. They stopped to glance into the bushes and noticed the hysterical little Gnome. It was the Gnome from before that had entered with the Centaurs.

“Is– th-this the w-w-way out?” He croaked.

“It sure is, little man,” said Amos. “Have you been hiding out from the lady on the lake?”

“Very dangerous,” he said, nodding his head.

“Seemed nice enough to me,” Amos said. “Guess it depends on why you’re here.”

The little Gnome blinked quickly, in confusion. “Do you know-n-know the w-w-way out?”

“Yes,” Amos said and stopped for a moment. “You can’t see it?” He said, looking straight ahead to the path in front of

him. The ground shifted, pulsed, and groaned like a living thing to the right and left of their path. *Souls*, Fis screamed. *It's a fabric of souls!*

Don't look at it, Amos said. *Just keep walking.*

The little Gnome looked perplexed.

“Close your eyes, little buddy, take my hand, follow us,” Amos said.

“Us?” asked the Gnome, but he closed his eyes and followed along.

“You're a real 'Fraidy cat, aren't you, buddy?” Amos said. “What's your name?”

“I'm L-l-l-Lemengnoost,” said the Gnome as he followed behind Fis and Amos. “And you?”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Lemon Goose,” Amos said with a grin. “I'm, Famous.”

You're too much, Fis said with a laugh. The three walked down the path towards the village in the distance.

CHAPTER 19

VERITATEM EX FACTIS QUAERE



Famous walked with a spring in their step, and a Gnome trailed behind them until the blue sun hung heavy over their heads and its orange twin disappeared over the horizon. The shore on this side of the river's mouth became rocky and dark grey. As they continued, the path soon became wide enough for two passing carts. Besides the spirited little Gnome, they had been alone on the road, and Amos missed Thunder like a part of himself was gone. Finally, as the last licks of purple streaked through the fading twilight sky, they could see a gothic spired church or tower on the horizon.

“A village,” said Amos, elated.

“Let's be careful, but a village means people, and people means food,” Fis said.

Lemengnoost quirked his head at their discourse but stubbed his toe on a stone and hopped up and down, cursing. “Oh darn it, by the quills of Geardon, that hurts!” Trying to rub his toe, he lost his balance and fell on his bum.

They turned and laughed, “come on, little guy.”

What a fool, Amos thought, but Fis had gone quiet. He took a step forward but stumbled and fell, overwhelmed by rising waves of exhaustion.

“Mr. Goose, you must help, please,” he said, lying face down on the road. He reached into Fis’ pouch with one hand, found one of the witches’ bandages, and waved at the Gnome with Fis’ flask. “Please, change this bandage. I hope you can clean up the wound a little.”

Lemengnoost smiled, wiped his eyes, and approached. Amos held Fis in a relaxed planking position and let Lemengnoost get to work. When Fis stiffened, Amos tried to reassure her. *Relax, we’ll get this looked at.*

“Oh my,” the Gnome said. “This is a Troll wound? It looks quite fearsome, quite bad indeed. I’ve never seen one in real life. Fis, you’re quite a stoic to have kept this to yourself. Let me clean it,” and he poured water over it. Fis sighed as the cool water soothed her aching, feverish skin. The Gnome removed the old bandage and patted her dry, wincing as he applied the new dressing. “This is a witch’s brew? It’s quite distinctive. I’ve studied things like this before. Yes. Hold still a moment. Okay, all patched up,” he said. “Now, one last thing, here, let me...” Then, he closed his eyes solemnly and declared, “By the power of Lord Gygax, The Allfather, bless this good friend.” He placed both of his hands on Fis’ back, and a warm energy spread through them, rejuvenating Fis, healing blisters, and slowing the spread of the insidious Troll toxin.

Fis jolted back up to her feet, startled. “That feels fantastic, Gnome—er, Mister Lemengnoost. Thank you. Thank you very much!”

“He’s a healer!” Amos cried out and then noticed the Gnome had tears in his eyes again. “Wait a sec,” Amos said. “You weren’t stuttering.”

“It comes on stronger when I get n-n-nervous.” Tears began to well up in his eyes.

“Mr. Goose, are you crying?”

“Oh, it’s just all so much,” Lemengnoost said. “I was hired and fired, trapped and freed, and now I am finally going to get a warm lunch and go back to the library. I didn’t think it would happen; I thought I was done.”

“We didn’t do too much for you, though. I mean, you followed us out. We didn’t save you.”

Lemengnoost sputtered his disbelief, but Fis shrugged and got to her feet. She wiped her hands off, and began to march towards the village again, a little more nimble than before. “Thanks, for that,” she said with a smile.

“Where are we g-going, anyway?”

“I lost my cat back there,” Amos said, “Thunder’s sort of been our guide this whole time. We need to get to Hobbleheim. I guess I’m putting one foot in front of the other.”

“That’s the only way you get anywhere, though,” Lemengnoost said, with a smile, pushing his spectacles up high on the bridge of his bulbous nose. “That reminds me of an old friend, Master Zhi Xuan, a wise one if I ever knew one, both learned in books and a life of tra—”

Fis and Amos weren’t listening, instead peering at the ramshackle cabins along the path. The windows and shades, if they weren’t already shuttered, were jammed closed as they approached. Amos did not get to see who or what might have lived there. Some cabins had little docks to the lake, mostly of the run down and in poor repair variety. A few had small personal fishing boats or canoes carved of wood.

As they walked, Lemengnoost told them a rambling tale of a wise monk named Master Zhi Xuan from the Great Library near the caves of Caoteng.

At the mention of Caoteng, Amos perked up. “How far is it? Is it connected to this lake by boat?”

“No,” Lemengnoost shook his head sadly. If you sail to the northern tip of this great lake, you’ll need to cross the Whimpering Waste by foot before you reach Hobbleheim. But...” He started to say; “there is an a-a-airsh-airsh—airshi—”

“How far is that?” Amos interrupted.

“It would take me days on foot,” Lemengnoost gazed at Fis meaningfully, and then down to his short stubby legs, and back. “With your wounds,” he gulped, “a lifetime.”

Amos sighed, feeling sorry for himself. He wanted champions and he got ... munchkins.

Lemengnoost, blushed and grew very quiet, and they continued their walk in silence.

They came upon a curious sight along the road: large iron cages holding dusty bones of various humanlike creatures. Amos shuddered at the sight of them.

“What a horrible thing that is,” he said.

“The cages of Khaveri,” Lemengnoost said, nodding again. “A punishment for betraying the locals. They don’t have jails in these parts, just...reminders.”

A little further down the road came a flash of movement from inside one of the cages, and, catching it from the corner of their eye, Fis hopped back in surprise. Inside the cage was a human-shaped cat—a furry cat, the shape and size of a full-

grown person. It was fluffy, grey, and white by some form of luck or cosmic humor and reminded Amos of Thunder.

“Thunder?” Amos cried, and the cat person turned to observe Fis with intelligent, sparkling eyes.

Be careful. I don't like this one bit, Fis said.

“Don't go n-n-near it,” Lemengnoost pleaded, “if they s-see us m-meddling, we'll be caged up n-next to it before you can say m-m-mercy’.”

As they drew near, the cat person called out to them in a silky and attractive voice. By the sound of it, the cat was a she. “Hail, travelers, I seem to have caught myself in this cage. Might you please help me open the door so I may be on my way?”

Amos walked right up to the cage. “You speak my language,” he said in surprise. The cat wore a tattered white puffy shirt and black trousers and held a smashed-up, wide-brimmed hat. Amos wondered, *could it be Thunder? Did magick do this?*

No, Amos, Fis said. *Don't believe it.*

“And you mine, fellow traveler,” the cat person produced a small pipe from a raggedy vest and stuffed a little smoking herb inside. “May you be so kind as to light my pipe?”

“Oh, kind Mister Goose, do you have a fire starter?”

Grumbling, the Gnome fished around in his pouch, produced a runed rod, and passed it to the swashbuckling cat.

“Tinker rod, very nice,” the cat lady said, and pressed the tip to the pipe and inhaled until she blew out a cloud of thick blue smoke and sighed.

“The r-r-rod,” Lemengnoost said, holding out his hand.

The cat lady laughed, a little surprised and then shrugged. Her hands held only the pipe.

“You’ve g-got to be k-kitten me,” Lemengnoost whined.

“Are you a Werecat?” Amos asked.

“A Where cat? No, no, more like a Here cat.”

“A... no,” Amos said, confused, “I mean, do you change form? Like a Werewolf, but...cat?” He sniffed her, and despite her bedraggled appearance, he was pretty sure she wasn’t an Ew-Cat. Amos was starting to wonder if this sort of thing wasn’t a lot more common than he’d been led to believe.

“No, I’m not exactly a Where-Cat,” said the cat person. “I guess you could say,” she paused, puffing again on the pipe and filling the cage with an exotic thick blue smoke, “I’m more of a Why-Cat.”

“A Why-Cat?” Amos asked, perplexed.

“Indeed, I find the where to be quite self-evident, but the why captures my imagination. I mean, any of us could see that we are here, at this crossing, now, but the thing that needs to be addressed is Why. Don’t you see?” The Why-Cat paused, and a slow grin spread across her fluffy face.

Amos considered that but had to admit, the why of it was often what he concerned himself with as well. “So, you’re a philosopher then,” Amos said with a smile. “Your coat is grey. You remind me of a friend I lost, you know.”

The Why-Cat leaned forward, nodding. “We’ve all been through a terrible trial, but I believe you’re on the edge of a discovery, a What that intersects with a Who and a How, but can you find the *Why*?” The Why-Cat blew smoke rings onto Amos’ face. Amos coughed, feeling positively silly.

“Is your name Thunder?” Amos pleaded. Through the haze of acrid smoke he gazed upon the Why-Cat with dewy, hopeful eyes. The Why-Cat considered the boy and then treated Amos to an ear-to-ear grin.

CHAPTER 20

A SHIP WITH NO HARBOR



“Is it truly you?” Amos asked, slack-jawed.

Wait, oh heck no, Amos. Don't do it.

It's Thunder, said Amos. Can't you see? Somehow, the magick has changed her, but it's Thunder. She always comes back. Medusa said she would!

It's a trap. That ... cat person could be a murderer, caged for a good reason.

Not my Thunder! Amos shouted back, pouting and refusing to see Fis' point.

Amos considered Fis his loyal and trusted friend, but the sight of Thunder suffering in the iron cage melted his critical mind faster than a spicy ice cream cone in a Chongqing summer.

Thunder quirked an eyebrow, watching them wage a frozen internal war. “Do you recall when you last saw me?” She blew more smoke circles around Fis and Amos. Thunder's eyes became mesmerizing, drawing Amos closer. Fis pushed back, grinding her jaw, and they stood, frozen until the Fae necklace began to glow, and Fis was gone again.

Amos sputtered, “Of course, we passed through to the center of the maze and surprised Medusa.” Amos grew

serious. “She turned you to stone on the beach, a stone statue of a kitty. But that was only half a day ago.”

Thunder mirrored his posture. “It may *feel* like a few hours to you, but the magick of the dreamlands makes time quite fantastic... it’s stretchy. It’s elastic.”

“How long...” Amos began welling up as tears forced themselves into the corner of Fis’ eyes. “And how did you change?”

“N-n-now hold on a s-s-second, F-f-famous,” Lemengnoost said, but Amos did not.

Thunder snarled a little at the Gnome but batted her eyelashes at Amos. “Do you remember your home still?”

“Home?” Amos asked. “Of course, home...is Chongqing, Grandma’s house in Tongliang Village. We came here through the magick door at Anju Ancient Town...” he trailed off. “... but I don’t know how we’ll get back from this side.” Amos bit his lips.

Thunder shook his hand vigorously and grinned, purring. “Come on, Famous. Let’s find the doorway back to Grandma’s house. Open the cage, and we’ll head right home.”

“Wait,” Amos said, surprised. “We have to find my soul and save Grandpa first. You didn’t forget, did you?”

“Of course, we shall. I’m sure one will be where the other is, and we’ll get them all together. Please, I’m so ravenous.”

“Who trapped you in here?” Amos asked. He wanted so badly to believe, but part of his mind rejected this creature, so he attempted to navigate the space between them. “What happened?”

“Please,” Thunder pleaded, drawing a quick gaze to the floppy little gnome and back to Amos, “when I awoke on the beach, I was starving and tried to catch a fish. Then, these wide-eyed fishermen came for me, screaming and calling me a thief. I didn’t know all the fish in the sea belonged to a few men in a boat. I’ve never heard of such a thing. Have you?” Thunder purred.

Amos’ heart swelled with empathy, and he turned the latch and opened the door. Thunder flowed through the open space like smoke, furry arms wrapping around Amos. “Thank you,” Thunder said, relieved, a grin erupting across her round, fuzzy face. “I knew you would save me.”

Amos produced a shiny red apple and gave it to Thunder. “Here, Thunder.”

“B-b-b-but, all this is h-h-highly unl-l-lawful,” Lemengnoost protested. Lemengnoost, arms crossed over his chest, began to sputter, but Thunder placed a sharp-taloned paw over his mouth and quieted him down.

“We are headed to Hobbleheim,” Amos said, “we have urgent business there.”

“Yes, yes,” Thunder said. She gazed at Amos’ necklace with an intensity that Amos hadn’t noticed before. “Well, I have a better idea. My friend is up the road. Let’s keep going,” and she pulled Amos along, leaving Lemengnoost to waddle quicker to keep up, red face puffing and gasping in a trail of rising dust. Soon they came to a run-down wooden cabin with a dock and a small but capable sailboat.

“You have friends here?”

“Oh sure, I make friends...everywhere. We can borrow the friend’s boat and be off this cursed lake by morning.”

“Now w-w-wait,” said Lemengnoost, but it was no use. Amos and Thunder were not listening.

“Unfortunately, it’s a tiny boat. Just us.”

“But Mr. Goose is awfully small. We can’t just leave him,” Amos said.

“He disagrees with our mission. Maybe he should find his own way.”

Amos shook his head; *no*, he thought, *that’s our friend*, but Thunder gazed at him so beguilingly, with her hypnotic, swirling eyes, and suddenly, his will to resist was gone. Turning back to Lemengnoost, Amos nodded. “I wish you good luck, Mr. Goose. I hope to see you again!”

Lemengnoost hobbled off towards the villages, while the pair of bizzaro Thunder and Amos hurried past several run-down cottages until they found the short dock. Thunder raced ahead and rushed to untie a shoddy little sailboat. Amos hopped inside it, and Thunder was just pushing off when motley cries of anger cut through the evening glow. Several generations of a family raced out to the dock, gibbering like lunatics under a moonless sky in shabby clothes and waist-high rubber boots. They had large bulbous eyes and strange, fishlike affectations that gave Amos chills.

“You,” the elder fisherman croaked, “Stop that right now!”

“Let’s hurry,” said Thunder, “This must not be my friend’s cabin after all.”

Amos stopped in shock, but Thunder was already paddling them away. As the sailboat pushed off the dock, a younger fisherman gripped the paddle, holding them fast.

Thunder pushed and twisted, desperately trying to weasel the paddle out of the firm grasp of the young man. By now, the

others clawed at the boat. Amos started gasping as fear took hold of his heart.

“Fight them, fffamos, fight them off with your sword,” Thunder spat, wrestling with the strong young fisherman for control of the oar, but Amos was too shocked to move.

Sighing, Thunder let go of the paddle. The young fisherman flew back on his bottom and tumbled into the others as the sailboat lurched away. The wind caught the lonely, shabby sail, and they shot away from the shore in a moment.

In the distance, the family cursed and cried out. But they were moving at a steady clip and the voices were soon drowned out by the soothing sounds of sailing.

The sky had been a rich, vibrant purple mix of the brilliant twin suns but turned a foul grey as dark storm clouds appeared over the western mountain ridge. Lightning struck the lake, and thunder rumbled so violently it felt like they were inside the cannon’s mouth. Within moments, it began to pour.

Amos hid under Fis’ shield and cloak in the corner of the small sailboat, taking one last look at the orange and blue suns that twinkled on the lake’s horizon like glittering diamonds before falling asleep with a troubled heart. Thunder might be a phenomenal cat, but she wasn’t doing terribly well as a person. He would talk with her. *It would all be okay. It’s fine.* But Amos wasn’t really sure.



Amos woke, floundering in a sea of divine-blue quicklime. The boat had taken on water, and he was thoroughly soaked. Crawling out of his shelter, the early morning tangerine sky

warmed his chilly bones. Thunder was fishing off the side of the boat. Several fish bones were littered at her feet.

“How did you...” Amos began, but then noticed the deflated sail, hanging limp and listless even though the wind had picked up, and realized how Thunder had managed a fishing line.

“It’s marvelous how pieces for *that* can become pieces for *this*,” Thunder said. “A little rod here, a little rope and line there, a tiny fish begets a bigger fish, and before you know it, we’re going to get breakfast.” She tossed a fish the size of Amos’ forearm over to Amos and winked. Amos flustered, fumbling the floppy fish and knocking it right off the other side of the boat back into the lake.

“There goes breakfast,” said Thunder, and for a second time, Amos liked her better when she had been a cat. Thunder got back to work fishing, and the wind picked up, but the sailboat only limped along with no sails to catch the breeze.

Amos fumed, tugging on his earlobes in frustration. Somewhere, far away, he heard Fis whisper, ‘Ow!’ but then she was gone. “But how will we make it to the other side with one oar and a torn-up sail?” Amos roared. He began to pull at Fis’ afro and then thought better of it and kicked the gaff, sending it flying along the inside of the boat.

Thunder began to sputter excuses. “Well, I ... you see, we... anyway, after breakfast, I’ll put it back together as best I can.” She caught two more fish with her rod and gutted one open, offering the meat to Amos. Amos pouted, growled, and crossed his arms, but hunger got the best of him, and he accepted the raw fish, imagining it covered in soy sauce and wasabi, and managed to choke it down. Amos was warm and feverish, and he wondered why he had spent so much time

imagining adventuring. So far, the hero's life was wet, cold, hungry, dangerous, miserable, and full of moral quandaries he couldn't have imagined a week ago, with stakes much higher than ice cream and allergies.

Thunder laughed and lit her packed pipe with the Gnome's rune-rod, blowing rings of blue smoke, like smoke signals rising up above the lake's surface into the drizzling clouds above. Amos narrowed his eyes accusingly. Thunder stretched her arms and legs and lay down on the boat's deck. "It may be a heck of a life," she said to Amos, "but it can still be beautiful sometimes, can't it?"

As Amos stewed, Thunder finished her pipe and leisurely stood and stretched and assessed the damage she'd wrought. She tried to reassemble the sail as best she could, but it was an amateur fix, and the sails sagged like a dirty diaper as the boat floundered like a flounder in a tutu at the winter Olympics. Amos had had enough, and grasped the remaining oar, clumsily trying to row them to safety.

After a while, his arms burned, and he sat back and let the current push them along. Worried, wondering, and lonely, Amos dug around and found a jug of water in a locker that he drank sparingly and shared with Thunder. Thunder immediately poured half of it over her head, laughing as the sun's rays refracted around her into a joyful, rainbow cat-bath.

"No! We have to save—"

"Why? We have water everywhere," said Thunder.

"That's SALT water. You can't drink salt water. It's salty."

"Oh," said Thunder foolishly. "Well, aren't I lucky to have such a smart friend as you onboard." She winked, but Amos only scowled.

As the day crept on, thirst and heat exhaustion built as twilight fell upon the lake. Amos felt the acute pain and suffering as the Troll toxin spread through Fis' body, but was able to numb himself to it by using a spiritual cognitive dissonance. *We don't have much time before she will grow too weak to help me, though,* Amos thought, and that made him feel lonely and all the more lost at sea. He began to hunger for a reasonable friend, so he grabbed his necklace, begged Fis to return, and braced himself for the lecture of his life.

Where are we? Fis asked. *What in the blazes have you gotten me into now? I don't...feel good.*

Sailing for the shoreline, Amos said. *Hoping to get to Hobbleheim soon.*

Okay, Fis said, and then was quiet, and Amos was more alarmed by the lack of her anger and felt guilty for how much she must be suffering because of him. All this trouble, all of it was on him. Holding back tears that clouded his vision, Amos watched the clouds floating above and ground his teeth. He saw the shape of a Dragon in the clouds, and imagined it moving its majestic wings. *Beat, beat, beat. Don't give up.*

The sky was clear, and it made for a beautiful scene. As the twin suns burned once again on the horizon, they lit up the lake to an electric blue, scattering diamonds of color and scintillating gems across the water's surface. Flying fish soared all around the boat by the hundreds. Thunder, hopped up excitedly, and tried to swipe them with her claws, but tripped upon the broken mast and nearly tumbled out of the boat.

"Please...help change these bandages," Amos implored. Thunder frowned and pouted, a lot more selfish as a person than as a cat, but after a few minutes, Thunder was helping

change her back's bandage. This refreshed Fis and bought them a little more time.

“A ship!” Thunder exclaimed, and Amos saw a large, fast ship swooping in quickly toward them.

“Help! Help!” Amos cried, and Thunder joined in, standing precariously on both ends of the rowboat, waving their arms.

As the impressive black ship closed in on them, a flurry of action upon their deck came into focus. Amos looked at their silhouettes upon the deck, and they appeared quite strange and vicious. In a flash, the incredibly fast black ship was beside them. The deck teemed with the most bizarre cast of rascals Amos had ever seen. Men with large muscular crab claws for arms and lobster faces sneered at them. A reverse merman with the lower body of a man but the upper half of a fish pointed with a pectoral fin. The pirates, whose faces were punctuated by long, bristly maxillary barbels, like a catfish, shouted in a gurgling wet tongue that Amos could not understand. A dolphin-faced, wide-brimmed, black-hatted pirate tossed over a grappling hook.

“Boom about!” cried a voice from the topmast, and the pirates growled and prepared to leap as their ship sidled up next to Amos' little sailboat.

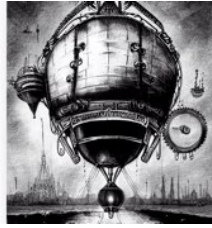
“Are these...friends?” Amos asked with an audible gulp.

They most definitely are not, Fis fretted.

“I guess we shall see,” Thunder said with a nervous chuckle.

CHAPTER 21

THE DARKEST PART OF NIGHT



“Come on now. We’ve got you. No need to panic,” said the dolphin-faced sailor who managed to balance a magnificently large, wide-brimmed black hat. He gave Fis a perky chortle that did nothing to reassure Amos as he yanked them onto the deck.

Amos called out to Fis. *Are these...*

Yes, she said. They’re pirates.

As soon as they were on board, a group of tentacled, clawed, and finned pirates gathered around them, laughing and jostling in a giddy manner and speaking in a thick language, wet, guttural, and alien.

Do you understand them? Amos asked Fis.

Not a word, Fis said.

They bound their hands and feet in heavy, biting, rusty shackles and chains. To make matters worse, they stole Fis’ sword and shield from her.

“Not my sword!” she cried out, leaped forward and head-butted a lobster-faced, red-skinned, claw-armed sailor, who groaned and grasped at his bloodied face. A dozen gangly hands, fins, and claws grabbed and held her down, while others beat her with clubs and stomped her with violent kicks. Fis, curled into a motionless ball on the ground, stopped fighting.

“Oh bloody hell,” Amos gasped when it was over, for that was the first real beating he’d ever taken. “Our everything hurts.”

They took my weapons, Fis said. They...mean a lot to me.

We’ll get them back. We’ll get out of this. Hey, we’ve been through worse together, haven’t we?

Have we? Fis asked.

Amos wasn’t sure.

They were dragged down to the brig and placed in a dark cell. Amos gagged at the foul stench of ammonia, mold, and something worse. The putrid, nastiness of methane, rot, and death.

“Rats?” Amos asked.

Worse, Fis said.

Thunder was in the cell next to Amos and Fis and remained quiet, even at the mention of rats.

As the door slammed closed and the lock clanked, leaving them in almost pitch blackness save for tiny rays of light that shot through cracks above, a guilty pit of regret caught in Amos’ throat, and it was hard to swallow.

Thunder was despondent at being back in a cage so soon, so they didn’t try to chat or pass the time. Amos, feeling foolish and betrayed, did not try to fill the awkward, lonely space either. His cell had no windows; the air was stifling and thick, full of sweat, the ammonia of stale urine, and bleak hopelessness. Amos, once again, had failed. The creeping Troll toxins made him queasy and lightheaded, so he put his face in his hands and quietly wept.

What if we die down here? Amos said.

At least it won't take long, Fis said, running a finger down her swollen, bubbly leg. The dark roots of infection could be felt all the way to the tips of her toes and up past her waist, mingling with the infection on her back. *Time is running out, Amos.*

Amos thought about trying to change into something so they could escape, but after the beating they took, he lacked the will, focus, or clarity of mind to get a tingle out of his ring, so he sat and stared at those tiny rays of light, searching for a plan. He wanted the next thing out of his mouth to be a positive and ingenious solution. He was reticent for quite a long time.

Finally, the door opened, and a shadowy figure with tentacled appendages slithered close and handed Amos a skin of water to drink. “Err you are, drink this, you scoundrel.”

Amos greedily took and drank the skin from the squid-faced sailor.

Drink it slowly, Fis warned him, but Amos couldn't control himself. He took a large gulp and reveled in the sweet taste of the cool, clean water. They'd been so thirsty for so long that Fis' stomach twisted and tied in knots, and they vomited the water back up.

They tried again, and this time Fis took a slow sip, letting it absorb into her mouth.

A pair of burly sailors entered the cell with torches that made their ominous features all the more strange amongst the dancing shadows. One had green scaly skin and the long mouth of a crocodile, and the other had tentacle arms and a slimy, bald, purplish face with an eye patch over one eye.

They inspected the cells and then nodded. “It’s clear,” one grumbled, and they parted. A well-dressed man in a puffy purple suit with wavy black hair approached them. He wore large golden necklaces full of jewels that spilled over his poofy white poet’s shirt. Amos had always wanted one and watched the man closely. The man waved his full bishop sleeves, decorated with large cuff frills. His fingers were covered in jeweled rings as well. The man took in Amos’ curious gaze with a charismatic and confident smile. He held a purple feathered hat in one hand and had a curved, silver saber with a golden handle strapped to his waist.

He turned his attention to Thunder. “Well, well, well, the infamous *Hiro Taiki*. I haven’t seen you in...how long? Oh yes, at that nasty bit of business in the Empty Earth,” the Captain grimaced, and shrugged. “Well, Hobbleheim’s King has offered a mighty bounty for you.”

Amos sprung up, spellbound by a horrifying realization.

Gears and rotors whirred and hissed in Amos’ stupified mind. “Thunder,...why did he call you Hiro?”

“Ah,” Thunder sighed softly. “I should have guessed you’d still be Captain when I saw The Cursed Doom. What a nice surprise.”

Amos studied the grey and white Why-Cat in the harsh light of the torches and proclaimed. “You’re not Thunder, are you?”

Thunder finally turned to face him and wiggled her whiskers in thought. “Why, if I’m not Thunder, who’s to say you’re you? I mean, with how things are going, are any of us who we were anymore?”

“What’s my name?” Amos said, balling his fists up.

“Your name,” Thunder said, laughing, “You’re Famous.”

“No,” said Amos, a pulsing behind his eyes building, like a curtain of crimson rage. He felt a strange crackling in his fingertips.

“fffAmos,” Thunder said, shrugging.

Amos wanted to run, and gagged instead, bile rising in his throat. He wiped his sweaty brow and ground his teeth. Finally, the rage boiled over, and he screamed. “That’s what Mr. Goose called us, but not my name. My name is Amos. You horrible, horrible thing. You aren’t Thunder at all.”

The Purple Prince’s fingers danced together in amusement, as he interjected. “Yes, the Gnome tells me you’ve got an interesting story too, curious little thing, you are. Well, good news, you’re headed to Hobbleheim, guests at a King’s Ball. How about that? What a fortuitous species of luck for us all.”

“Really?” Amos asked, in genuine surprise, off balance as his emotions shifted from rage to curiosity.

“Why yes. You’re the guests of honor and our most famous prisoners.”

The Why-Cat-that-wasn’t-Thunder, who the Prince had called Hiro, groaned.

The Purple Prince leaned towards Amos and said, “So what do they call you?”

Fis stared at the Purple Prince, unblinking. *Don’t speak, this one is dangerous.*

They’re all dangerous, Amos said.

Especially this one.

The Purple Prince shrugged. “Allow me to introduce myself, I am...myself. If you care to join me for a feast, I would like to pry your little brain for secrets. Join me on the upper deck. It’s time to feast on good fortune.” The Purple Prince flashed a wicked smile full of glimmering platinum teeth and Amos’ eyes widened, and he stared, slack jawed at the frivolous and absolutely preposterous pirate.

The pirates removed their shackles and Amos rubbed sore wrists as they were marched toward a mess hall that was full of lively music and excited chatter. As they entered the crew hall, the smell of roast meat and vegetables made Amos’ mouth water and eyes bug out. Stomach rumbling, Amos realized he couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten a hot supper. Grandma’s Chongqing hotpot felt like a lifetime ago. His heart hurt when he thought about how much he had wanted to run away for adventure when now he would give anything to return home again.

The crew was jovial. Besides pirates and sailors, many guests drank and dined around the tables of the mess hall. A few stout, short bearded men and women sat together near Amos, drinking and spilling ale on fine robes and silken fabrics, and Amos said to Fis, *Dwarves?*

That’s right, Mountain Dwarves. They look like they could be merchants.

Next to them, a handful of heavily armored Dwarves, wearing masks of animals like dogs and owls, and then a party of tall, darkly robed, sinister figures who spoke quietly, occasionally reaching out a pearly hand to take a piece of fruit or meat. They made an effort not to draw attention to themselves. *Wizards?* Amos asked in wonder.

Worse, Slowmorth instructors, Fis said.

Amos saw Lemengnoost the Gnome chatting at the table with a red-robed woman with the most exquisite, delicate features, dark blue skin that shimmered like newborn stars and long, white spiraled horns. She raised her head back to laugh, and Amos waved at Lemengnoost, who did not seem to notice him.

“It’s Mister Goose!” Amos said in surprise, as he was led to sit next to the Purple Prince, while Hiro sat with a table of long-bearded Dwarves, and seemed to be making friendly conversation.

Amos’ mouth watered at the aroma of sweet hams, vibrant trays of fruits, and aromatic herbed flagons of drink in front of him.

Eat slowly, Fis said, or you’ll be sick, and we’ll be back in the hole again.

“It smells so amazing,” Amos said. “I’ll start with some fruit.” He picked a delicious, juicy grape and popped it into his mouth. He bit down on it, and the skin slipped right off. The seedless fruit exploded with sugary sweet juice, and he got a rush of acute clarity as his happiness chemicals organized a parade for their good fortune.

A smallfolk Pook band played stringed instruments and horns and sang bawdy sailor tunes. The guests and crew smiled and sang as they enjoyed a hero’s feast.

Wow, Amos thought to Fis. Are we dreaming?

There’s magick afoot, Fis said. But it does smell very good. Fis sounded awfully disappointed in him, and Amos felt a bitter pang at the abandonment. He quickly forgot, however, intoxicated by the sights and smells.

Amos grabbed a mug from the table and drank deeply. It was purple and full of deep husky flavors, a thick drink that felt like a meal after seasick days.

“You like that?” The Purple Prince asked them. “It’s cranberry spiced sweet ‘n sour ale.” He grinned, flipping a hand around to point around the room. “It’s purple.”

“You seem to love purple,” Amos nodded and reached out for a giant glazed chicken leg. He bit into it, juices dripping down his face. He wasn’t dreaming up the food. “Oh, it’s delicious. It’s perfect.”

“You can thank my chef tonight, the grand wizard Aire Dara,” he smiled, pointing to the tall, thin elf with pointed ears and delicate features. As she smiled at Amos, her skin shimmered, constellations dancing silver and gold upon her dark blue skin.

She looks like the child of stars, Amos said.

She’s Elvish, Fis said in awe. Amos realized he had not met or seen one before.

She’s beautiful! Do they all look like they’re made of stars? Amos asked.

Some look like they’re made of fire, Fis said.

Have you seen many about your land? Amos asked again.

Never.

The Prince gave her a wave, and she paused her conversation with Lemengnoost.

Lemengnoost is here, Amos said to Fis. *He knows that wizard.*

Not as useless as you thought, is he? Fis spat back, and Amos blushed for judging him by his small appearance alone and being fooled again by the rascally Why-Cat.

“How are you enjoying the food?” The Purple Prince asked.

“Well, it is very delicious,” Amos said to the Purple Prince. He smiled as he gazed across the room towards Aire Dara and tried to get Lemengnoost’s attention. Still, the little Gnome was engrossed in his conversation or avoided Amos altogether.

“So, tell me, where do you hail from?” asked the Purple Prince.

Be careful, be calm, Fis said.

Amos stared at the Purple Prince but did not know where to begin, so he said nothing.

“You look like you can fight,” the Purple Prince said with a smile, “and you’ve been in a bad one recently.” His smile softened. “Who do you serve?” He stroked his neatly trimmed chin beard and twisted a ring on the finger of his right hand. “Let me guess; you serve the Summer Queen.”

Aire Dara came to stand behind the Purple Prince’s chair and smiled.

In the light of the feast hall, the tips of the Purple Prince’s ears glinted as the lights refracted off jewel encrusted silver jewelry, and Amos had a momentary gut feeling...could he be part Elf too? He seemed to love jewelry, for he wore five rings in each ear. The Prince clapped his hands together, precious rings on each of his fingers sparkling with different precious stones and metals. They hummed with barely concealed power.

“So you’re on a quest for the Summer Queen that paired you up with that rascal,” he pointed to the Why-Cat, who had grabbed an entire plate of meats and was ravenously dispatching a large beast chop. “Most unusual. The scribe, the little one, told me you’re not alone in there.”

The Purple Prince narrowed his eyes and moved very close to them, staring into Fis’ eyes. “Who’s behind those eyes?” He grinned and waved his arm out to the hall. “Come out and play.”

With a warm queasy fluttering in his belly, Amos was sure the Purple Prince and wizard could see right through him. Fis locked her jaw, resolute, and stared them down.

“Ah, well, when you’re ready,” the Purple Prince said, plucking a grape off the table and throwing it up and into his mouth playfully. “There’s a fine bounty on that one, Hiro Taiki, a known quantity,” the Purple Prince’s smile grew as Fis blushed in shame.

“Oh, the King will be overjoyed to have her back at court. You don’t seem the stealing type, let me guess....” The Prince rubbed the index ring of his left finger, which twinkled in the light.

Amos could feel the presence of the Purple Prince invading his thoughts then, and he tried to put up a wall. *Hot Pot, full of spicy chili oil, spicy beef, lotus root, tofu, eggs, mushrooms, tripe, organs, and sprouts. Yummy, just like my favorite Italian pizza covered in cheeses, Parmesan, Mozzarella, Feta, and Ricotta, with mushrooms, yes, button mushrooms, shiitake, portabella, and rare black forest truffles. Truffles were irresistible because their aroma was composed of chemicals that mimic mammalian pheromones...His*

necklace vibrated softly, supporting his inner sanctum, and he felt the Purple Prince's presence get pushed away.

The Purple Prince quirked a brow, then took a large swig of his purple ale and smiled. "You are an interesting little one. Full of secrets. Aren't you? If the King doesn't keep you, maybe I will."

The Purple Prince glanced at the Elvish wizard for confirmation. Her eyes were aglow with power. "Oh yes, Captain. The King will want to know. The Fae touched one smells of another world, and days before the banquet. I'm sure he'll pay a handsome treasure for them."

The Purple Prince grinned wickedly and raised a jeweled golden goblet in one hand. "For love and money," he roared, with a voice that cut through the air, and everyone raised glasses. Even Amos took his fruity ale to toast their capture.

Amos searched for the source of the music, trying to take in the room and watch the Pook band playing a tribal tune that had the room cheering and pounding the table. The drummers were shirtless and rugged, and all wore patterned green kilts. They swayed and grinned with joyful exuberance, playing off each other's energy as they drummed and played an infectious dancy rhythm that Amos would have been fascinated with if present circumstances had not seemed so dire.

The Purple Prince was frozen as if in thought for a moment as he stared into a shiny silver spoon. He thoughtfully and carefully twisted a ring on his left hand, hardly moving beyond that simple gesture. Then he reached forward and grabbed the salt shaker. He gave a sprinkle over his plate into his hands and threw the salt over his shoulder. Something right behind him cried out in pain.

Smoothly, the Purple Prince drew his silver blade and stabbed it over his left shoulder three times in a flash, smiling. With a whimper, a black-robed assassin suddenly appeared, magically becoming un-invisible as a bloody pool spread quickly across his robes. He watched them with stupified eyes, and his venomous dagger clattered harmlessly to the ground, and then the hooded man dropped to his knees, gasping for breath. The Purple Prince wiped his knife clean on a napkin and slipped it back into his sheath. He clapped, made a complicated hand gesture, a kind of sign language, and some of his crew rushed forward from their cups to recover the body and drag it away. The Prince shrugged, although Aire Dara seemed a little alarmed. She flashed something back in their mysterious hand code, and the Purple Prince replied with another series of gestures, still looking unperturbed. Then he poked his fork into the roast meat and took a bite. “Oh, Aira, this is good, this is good.”

Amos stared on in shock, saucer-eyed.

“Didn’t you ever wonder why it was good luck to throw salt over your shoulder?” The Purple Prince smiled and took a sip of his ale.

What the heck just happened? Amos asked Fis.

A failed assassination, it looks like.

The Prince didn’t bat an eye, Amos marveled.

I told you, he’s dangerous, Fis said.

Aire Dara leaned forward and said to the Purple Prince, “It won’t happen again, Captain...and we are ready to take off on your call.”

The Prince nodded, seeming unconcerned. “Let’s be off.”

Take off? That's what the Gnome had been trying to say, Fis said. *An airship!*

Air...ship? We're going to fly? Amos replied.

As prisoners, without my weapons, Fis said glumly.

Aire Dara nodded. "I'll make it so." She whistled a clear, soft melody as she walked away, and to Amos' surprise, a vine grew around his flask of ale, holding it to the table.

The Pooks started a new song, and Amos saw a chance to excuse himself and move around the table. The idea of a flying ship was fascinating, but he did not want to get interrogated by an angry king. Amos wandered to the empty chair the Elvish wizard Aire Dara had occupied next to the little gnome Lemengnoost and struck up a conversation with him.

"Hello again, Mr. Goose. It's a surprise to see you here," Amos said.

"They came for that...thing," the Gnome pointed at the Why-Cat. Amos noticed he seemed much less anxious now, safely aboard this boat and in fine company at a lavish feast. "The bounty was quite high, it s-s-seems," Lemengnoost struggled for a moment and then continued. "That he's headed for an audience with the Mad King. And you're along for the ride."

"You're barely stuttering, Mr. Goose," Amos said in amazement.

Lemengnoost smiled, "I'm on the way, first to the ball, and then back to the sacred towers of knowledge, the library. Thank you for your help. Even though you l-left me, I was just a hop and a jump to the tavern and this ship."

"Do you still want to find your friend, the monk? We could try to make an exit..."

Lemengnoost looked away. “No, no, I can’t. I’m headed where I need to go.”

“They’re all distracted and feasting. It sort of feels like now or never,” Amos said, glancing around suspiciously.

“They won’t let you go. They’re watching us n-n-now. But if you make it to the monastery, ask for a Master Zhi Xuan. Myself... I have duties here, now, but it could be worse,” the Gnome smiled, “I could be you.”

“Ah, fine then,” Amos said, scowling, feeling disappointed and unable to be graceful about being rejected. Amos stood up, “come on,” The music was rowdy now, and folks were bopping their heads and singing along.

“Oh, no,” Lemengnoost said, but Amos held him firmly and dragged him towards the dance floor. “Let’s dance,” Amos said and pulled the Gnome along with him. The Gnome danced with two left feet, trying to keep up as Amos spun around, laughing and hugging him, to the beat. He bumped into as many people as possible and hollered in joy, as the Pook band picked up the intensity of the music. Soon another pair began to dance, and by the song’s end, a dozen couples twirled around the open spaces. The next song was another rowdy tune. Amos sent Lemengnoost into the arms of a stout Dwarven lass with the shadow of a beard about her and excused himself. Amos crept through the crowd, smiling and spinning, to ensure the Purple Prince was occupied in conversation and no one seemed to be paying attention before slipping out of the dining hall. He crept, a shadow among shadows, his belly fluttering as Fis’ stealthy steps blended into the quiet and dark spaces along the deck.

My sword and shield, Fis said. I can’t leave without them.

The boat hummed with magickal power. Amos stopped for a long moment, but they both knew they would not make it off the ship this night if they did not leave now.

I'm sorry, Fis, we'll find them again.

She shuddered in barely contained rage and then threw herself into a closed door, pounding it until she had beaten her fists through the thin wood. Her knuckles bled, and her lips were bruised and torn from biting down. *Amos gasped as he had to carry her ocean of sadness underneath her small, stoic lifeboat. Those things had meant a lot to her.*

I just can't, Fis said, and then she was gone.

Amos snuck towards the safety boats along the starboard side. There was some activity up and down the corridors as the various crew prepared the craft for takeoff.

Amos managed to unhook a rowboat from the side with paddles, dropping it down with a splash to the lake level. Amos hopped off the side and landed in the boat but tumbled off with a freezing splash into the lake. For a moment, he was so shocked that he froze and began to sink.

Go. Boy, came the ancient voice rising from the deep. *You made a promise.*

Amos snapped back into action, reaching the side of the bobbing boat. He wrestled with the lip but pulled himself up and crawled inside. Amos realized that a world with no moons was a terribly dark place at night, shivering, soaking wet, and alone. He paddled away as the black ship began to glow with rainbow hues and magickal energy. A large balloon was unfurled and quickly rose, full of air, and deep purple waves of magick emanated from the ship's hull. A prismatic propeller roared to life and soon lifted straight up into the sky. Amos

watched as the little blip of light soared farther and farther away. And then it was gone.

Amos inexpertly pumped the oars himself, almost dropping them into the water. He wished for Fis' help or the company of Lemengnoost, or his beloved Thunder...even the lying rascal Hiro, but Amos had turned his back on his friends, and now, in the dark, with no way to go but onward, he rowed until he could row no more.

Amos was hopeless, lost, and utterly alone.



Alice let out a great big sigh and shuffled as the Mad Hatter and Red Queen exchanged grimaces and frowns. The Storyteller took a sip of his water. "Perhaps you're ready for a break?" But they did not move.

Alice shook her head.

"Oh... so...shall I go on?"

"It's so sad," Alice said, and her eyes were red and teary.

"I thought this was a happy story," said Dave, holding his top hat in his hands.

"So, the boy fails," said the Red Queen. "It's an unfortunate story, but we can still catch the costume contest if we hurry."

The Mad Hatter shrugged.

Alice looked to the Storyteller, perplexed. "But he was always so good at evading danger. Is this really how Amos' story ends?"

The Storyteller looked surprised. “Ends?” He let out a deep gut-chuckle worthy of Medusa. “Amos’ story is not over. How silly of you to say so.”

The three teens gazed back, astonished. “How could he succeed? After all, he’s been through...” Alice said. “He’s defeated, and Fis...is close to dead.”

The Storyteller nodded. “It was a bad couple of days for Amos, that’s true.” He clapped his hands. “But this is not the end. In life, we get knocked down and get up again.” He smiled and winked. “You know, it’s always darkest and coldest right before the dawn.”

“Will he be okay?” Alice asked.

“How’s he going to get off the lake?” The Mad Hatter whined.

“You’ll have to hear the rest to find out,” the Storyteller said, waving a tall, freckle-faced young man over. The clean-cut server eyed the Storyteller curiously as he ordered. “Water, with ice please,” he said, “and some hot water for my friends.” After waiting long enough to be sure that was the whole order, he lumbered off in the slightly crooked way tall people lumber through a world that’s just slightly too small for them to the kitchen to fulfill his request.

“Fine, fine, I want to know. You simply must tell me,” said the Red Queen, waving her hand.

The Storyteller nodded, soaking in the doubts and fears upon their faces. “Well, things are always darkest before dawn. In fact, the spiritless night sky...”

CHAPTER 22

A BEACON OF HOPE



The spiritless night sky and the endless bobbing purgatory were a grubby reflection of the vast void of Amos' hollow soul. The kaleidoscopic lights from the departing airship's engines were a mere blip amidst the endless darkness. Amos, sinking in a bottomless sea, was truly alone.

The oppressive clouds hid any guiding lights as if even the stars had turned their back upon him. He clung to the betrayal of Why-Cat Hiro, so much that even the night lake air seemed hostile. He let out a sobbing breath, rowing with what little conviction he had left. When the dawn came, the cold world would reveal his tenuous fate. With some time to reflect, he began to see Hiro as a frightful mirror, a guide rail for the doomed fate of liars, rascals, and thieves. Hurting Fis and disregarding the helpful company of Lemengnoost had revealed Amos' poor judgment. Amos felt destroyed, but as long as he rowed, he was yet undefeated.

What is the point of any of this? Amos thought to himself. *Why am I still going?* It had taken the Why-Cat's craven abuse of his trust to truly understand what it meant to feel cheated and robbed, and Amos wanted to sob for the loss of his innocence, and the stacked weight began to crush him into the boat. A litany of mischievous offenses against his parents had left Grandpa on his deathbed and Grandma scared and alone.

Thunder was gone, and Fis was dying, and anyone who came close ended up regretting it. *I am a vortex of chaos, swirling and bubbling and ruining everything I touch.* Amos tiptoed to the edge of defeat—a hair's breadth from capitulation—but some tiny spark inside him smoldered, and a desperate hero roared to keep on rowing.

Amos paddled the sad little dingy until his hands blistered and his arms felt like rubber, until the routine circular motions stopped being a punishment, simply a part of life, like breathing. Past the point where excuses met fear, a flame began to burn. A little smolder, barely perceptible, but as he kept on, it began to scorch and scald his insecurities, demons, and fears. *Fis is gone. I'm all alone.* He rowed through the bitterly cold witching hours, and the feverish boy discovered a newfound strength that surprised even him.



As wine-stained fingers of the twin suns sprawled a rosy hue across the morning sky, the dawn chorus of melodic birdsong drifted to Amos, and he felt a wild elation possess him. Those first licks of dawn illuminated a rocky shoreline revealing a lighthouse that shone like a beacon of hope. Amos drifted in and out of consciousness as he breached the sandy shore. With leaden arms and noodly legs, Amos rose, shivering in the crisp air, lurching toward the lighthouse and up the circular outer stairs ringing the tower until he reached a large iron door. He knocked softly, and when there was no answer, he banged and banged until he finally collapsed against it, utterly spent.

But then, the faintest sound of footsteps rumbled toward the door. After several click and clacks of sliding locks, latches, and bolts being unbolted, the door creaked open.

Falling forward, Amos gazed with one eye fluttering half-open to see the most remarkable thing. Filling the doorway was the imposing shape of a towering man with the face and snout of a bronze metallic lizard. Amos wanted to scream, but the dreamlands had already been so unbelievable, so wild, that perhaps nothing could surprise him anymore. Or maybe he was just too tired.

The giant was covered in metallic, glimmering scales and wore royal blue robes. He held the most enormous shimmering metal blade that Amos had ever seen. Folded steel to a razor's edge; towards the hilt, it became as jagged as Dragons' teeth. The hilt was a burnished bronze, with three protective abjuration sigils engraved upon the crosspiece.

"Who are you?" growled the swordsman in a deep, baritone voice that sounded like mountains grinding together.

"I...I'm Amos," Amos said, fading quickly and on the verge of collapsing. "And this is Fis." Amos jabbed at his belly with blistered, twisted fingers. "Please...help us."

The warrior's scaly face revealed no emotion, but his red and gold-speckled eyes blinked as he considered Amos' simple, honest plea. "What do you need?" he roared down to the faint, fading thing that hovered about his knees.

"The pouch...a bandage...witch magick..." Amos pointed to the bulging leather pouch around his waist with one crooked finger. His eyes flickered closed, and he heard the Dragon Man set the great sword down. Strong, cold, scaly hands picked Fis up and carried them into the lighthouse. The Dragon Man fetched and wrapped a coarse wool blanket around them, laying them down on a plush sofa. The comfort and warmth made Amos blearily joyful and somehow even more exhausted.

The Dragon Man returned with a warm cup of tea. “Drink this.”

Amos unsteadily brought the cup to his lips and sipped the warm, herbal brew.

“Let’s have a look at you,” grumbled the Dragon Man, who’s brow furrowed together towards the bony ridges of his crown. “A bad infection.” He left again as Amos closed his eyes and enjoyed the warmth from the blanket and the crackling of a roaring fire. Amos drifted, dreamlike, until a warm cloth began to clean the wounds, which was excruciatingly painful as they scrubbed away calcified layers of saltwater and grime. Fis jolted into Amos’ consciousness with a shriek of pain, biting down on a pillow until it was over.

Finally, the Dragon Man opened the leather pouch, gasping for a moment, and when Amos peeked at him, he was holding the Kraken’s pearl. He gingerly set it down and fished out the witch’s poultice, which he spread across the cleaned wounds. The nasty tendrils of infection were growing up and down Fis’ leg and across her back from waist to shoulders. The magick sent a warm tingling from the tips of Fis’ toes to the strands of her puffy afro, and she gasped as the ill effects and pain of the potent Troll toxin temporarily abated. Warm, dry, and safe, Amos slept, and there were no dreams.

Sometime later, his eyes popped open, and Amos gazed around for a disorienting moment at the spartan and tidy living space of a Dragon Man lighthouse keeper. He kept few decorations but had a penchant for hardcover books. Many were packed upon his table and a nearby shelf, along with nautical memorabilia, strange artifacts, and keepsakes. Amos strained to read the spines but the flowing script was

inscrutable to his hungry gaze. There seemed to be a thoughtful purpose to every paperweight, nicknack, and item, although to Amos, they were a treasure trove of wonder, a bazaar of the bizarre.

He sat near the fire holding the Kraken's pearl in his hands, and when he saw Amos awake, he held it toward him. "How did you get this?"

"It was given to me...by the sea monster," Amos replied dreamily. He tried sitting up but lacked the power, and his eyes closed again.

The Dragon Man sat in quiet contemplation and finally rose to pat Amos upon the head.

"Rest, then, Amos and Fis, Chosen of the Kraken, for tomorrow is the day we change the world."

CHAPTER 23

HERE BE DRAGONS



Amos woke to the sizzle of fried potatoes and the hint of maple wafting in the air, accompanied by buttery toast and greasy fried eggs. His stomach growled with ravenous passion, and he enjoyed a fleeting moment of normalcy, the nostalgic sensation that it was just another Sunday morning at home, with Papa cooking a brunch smorgasbord. It lasted a beautiful, peaceful moment until he caught sight of the towering Dragon Man lighthouse keeper in a kitchen apron, armed with a cast iron skillet. He flipped pancakes with three-fingered talons into the air, which lazily somersaulted back into the buttery pan. Amos was indeed far from home.

Are you okay, Fis? Amos asked.

It's getting pretty bad, Fis said. *Even with the Witches Brew, which I think we just ran out of.*

Seeing a mirror between a telescope and a bookshelf packed with hardcover tomes and ancient artifacts, Amos hopped up to get a peek at the Troll infection, wincing in nauseated pain as Fis' abdomen twisted like a pit of venomous snakes before coiling into a tight knot of gnarled tissue. He froze, shocked at how bad it had become. The miniature bundle of Fae fury, Fis the Fierce, had thick purple rootlike

bands around every exposed inch of her skin. Her teeth had turned a purplish black, and the whites of her eyes were a bright crimson that leaked droplets of thick purple sap-like blood as she gasped in horror from her blood-stained mouth.

“Oh, by Father Deerhands,” Fis said. “I look monstrous.”

The bandage and salve covered much of her back, but blistery boils protruded on her calf and from her shoulder.

“If I die from the infection, you can’t let me become one of them, Amos.” Fis’ voice cracked heavy with sorrow, and she wrapped her hands together pleadingly.

Amos was shaken to see the stoic Fis in this state. Fis had always been so sure of her cause, of herself and her abilities. Now, she was a shell of herself. *Where did that leave him?*

“I, um, I won’t let that happen, Fis,” Amos said, sounding more confident than he felt.

“It’s okay, Amos,” Fis said. “I know you’ll do your best.” *Um, Amos? Fis said softly. I have to tell you something. In case I don’t make it.*

What is it?

I think the Summer Queen sent me out to go blow off some steam or at least take it out on someone or something outside the Vale. I...I’ve got a bit of a temper. I don’t know if I’m really meant to be discovering some big secret or stopping some war. That might...have been a lie. Fis sounded ashamed and small.

“Look, Fis,” Amos said, meeting her gaze bravely. “I don’t know your Queen, but in the time I’ve met you, you’ve been courageous, brave, and...I think you’ve even taught me a thing or two about the importance of being earnest. The Summer Queen herself might not know what you’re capable of, but when you tell me you’re going to investigate Hobbleheim and

save your land...I don't for a second believe you're lying. We just don't know how yet. But we'll figure it out together. Okay?"

Fis was quiet for a moment, and then she blushed a little. "You're not always as dumb as you look, Amos."

The two of them burst into a wild bout of laughter until Fis' stomach clenched knots of cramping pain, and she gripped the wall for support.

The lighthouse keeper had been listening quietly and seemed about to ask them something and then thought better of it. "Brunch is served," he said, his voice a low gravelly roar. It was the friendliest battle cry Amos had ever heard.

The Dragon Man pulled up a small table in front of their sofa and sunk into a wooden chair that valiantly supported his hulking mass. They shared plates of curious blue eggs, a bright red sort of sliced vegetables, a dark rye toast, fluffy pancakes, and greasy, fried potatoes.

Amos closed his eyes and, for a moment, could hear the chitchat of family brunch around him. Mom laughing, Papa reading, and his Grandparents telling a story. It made him feel warm and fuzzy. "This is perfection." Tears welled up in his eyes.

"Amos, you okay?" Fis asked.

Amos nodded.

The Dragon Man watched them closely. "You're two-spirited," he said, crunching a piece of toast.

"It's complicated," Amos said with a snuffle. "Technically, one and a half. You see Fis when you look at us, but I'm Amos; I'm from another place, far away, and I just want to go home."

“Are you children? Or just allergic to the sky?” A moment later, the warrior’s dead serious face broke into a toothy grin, and he chuckled heartily at his joke.

“Both,” Amos said.

“He’s twelve. I’m almost 17,” Fis said, “and I like my height, thank you very much.”

“So, um, Dragon Man,” Amos said. “This is your lighthouse? And are there more of you?”

“I prefer Dragon Rider,” the Dragon Rider beamed proudly, his mouth a jagged cave of ice stalactites. “And my name is Grokwym. Rhogar Grokwym.” His tongue wiggled through his sharp teeth like an ancient, eyeless troglobite. “Yes, I am alone, the only rider guarding this lighthouse.” He spoke with stoicism and self-reverence. I come from a faraway place called...Var Awaii...yes, it’s literally called Var Awaii...” The noble warrior seemed desperate for their attention or approval, but Amos was too tired to even bat an eye. “Okay, tough crowd, never you mind that. How about you? Where are you *two* from?”

“Also, from far away,” Amos replied, “but not *your* Far Away—Chongqing.” Amos’ brain caught up, and with a sudden surge of adrenaline, his pulse pounded in his temples and gawked at Rhogar Grokwym. “Wait, you ride Dragons?” Amos asked, utterly gobsmacked.

Rhogar dropped his gaze and whispered, “truthfully, I have never seen a Dragon, or heard of Chongqing.”

Amos nodded sorrowfully, clearly dissatisfied. “Chongqing’s a huge land with great rivers and mountains. The city has millions of people,” Amos said, his rambling picking up speed, “and the countryside is sprawling with

tigers, panda bears, monkeys, jungle, villages, ancient towns, and sculptures. It's where my family is...you see, my soul was stolen by a nine-tailed-fox, and I came here by magick to get it back." Amos held up his necklace, "This was—I think—meant for my father, and when I wore it, I started having these dreams."

Rhogar pushed his empty plate forward and packed a pipe. He lit it and puffed thoughtfully. "Marked by the Fae. From another world. Returning to face the Trickster. Bearing the blessings of the Lady. Foretold by the prophecy," Rhogar said thoughtfully, puffing delicate smoke rings, large O's that circled his head and then drifted up to the rafters. "And, how did you come to hold that?" He indicated the pearl.

Amos bit his lip, pouting. Watching Rhogar smoke reminded him of the Why-Cat. He recounted the story, simultaneously proud of his negotiation while Fis was embarrassed that they'd been in that situation in the first place.

Rhogar puffed his pipe, entirely focused on Amos' every word.

"She asked me to take this, to the endless sea, so she could be free. We promised to help, and she sent us back to the surface with our little boat and that pearl."

"I told him not to get involved," Fis said, "and we don't want to mess with things we have no business with. We're very sorry if—"

Rhogar shook his head violently. "No, no, no, there's a reason for all this. But Fis needs help soon. It's past the point where most healers could intervene."

Amos looked glum, "and Grandpa, too...if he's still..."

Rhogar piled the finished plates aside, making room on the table, and unrolled a dusty old map. “This is where we are. And this,” he indicated a considerable distance, “this is the Abbey, and under it, the Cave of Caoteng where you must journey. It is rumored that only the pure of heart may pluck the petal of Caoteng. Its restorative powers might be the only thing, short of divine intervention, that will help.”

Amos took this all in stride, and Fis suffered stoically in silence.

“And you, Fis? From where do you hail?”

“It’s okay...um, I mean I grew up in the Vale, with the Summer Queen and the Fae.”

Amos ran a finger over the top of the map, studying a mostly legible script at the top of the map. He read out loud, “The known world, by Bara Juta, explorer, a life’s work, drawn in the year 14955, after the cataclysm.” He ran his finger along it. “14955?”

“So says the map,” Rhogar growled with a nod. “But to what civilization’s count that number means is anyone’s guess. Perhaps Bara discovered and could tell you.”

“Bara...” Amos said. “Who’s that?”

“Bara Juta,” Fis said, “was a prince of Hobbleheim who left to discover and trade with faraway lands...before his family fell. After the Mad King came to power, he was never seen again.”

Rhogar nodded, “That’s right.”

“Where’d you get this map?” Fis asked.

“It’s borrowed from the Abbey, I have a few friends there.” He looked them over. “Can you ride? The secrets they guard

might be your only chance...in your condition.”

Fis nodded. “Of course, but I lost my sword... if we are to see battle....”

Rhogar stood to gather his things. “My weapons... will be much too large for you.”

Amos wandered across the room, drawn to the shelf where a pair of long talons were displayed like historical museum pieces. “What are these?”

“Dragon’s claws,” Rhogar said with reverence in his voice. Each one was about as long as Fis’ arm. “Relics of an age forgotten by men. It is a reminder....”

“Dragon’s claws?” Amos echoed. He studied them... peered into their dark amber hue, like dried magma, but scintillated as if made of diamonds. He rapped against one with a candle stick, and it seemed as solid as any metal or stone he’d ever seen. He ran his finger along its edge – and found it was viciously sharp.

“There was a time, kids, when Dragons ruled the skies, and fought for the justice of mere mortals, when even ancient evils hid and plotted for their opportunities—they did not act with craven impunity as we see today. A Dragon Rider is dedicated to restoring an age of justice, of stability...upon this land, and all lands. This is why I keep the things that I do, because I can never forget.”

Amos watched Rhogar for a moment. He noticed something stirring in him. Fis, a sword fighter without a sword, and Rhogar, a Dragon rider without a dragon. Both heroes would give their lives to stand beside him. These were his friends.

“Fis, can you lift this?” Amos asked, squinting at the dragon’s talons with awe and reverence.

Fis stepped forward and tentatively grasped one talon. It was light, despite being incredibly dense, and Fis swung it easily back and forth. It made a satisfying ‘whoosh’ as it cut through the air. “What can I do with it?” Fis asked.

“It could be both sword and shield,” Amos said, “if you could carry one on each arm?”

Rhogar sniffed at the idea, but when he saw they were serious, he put his spectacles on and began searching for something. “That reminds me...” he said, and he recovered a package from the back of his shelf, dusted it off with a shake, and cut the twine to roll it open. “Yes,” he said, “I think I could help with that.” The package contained two gauntlets, a few smaller tools, and a large parchment with instructions and writing. “This arrived from Kronoswans the summer before last, with a note that said they’re for a visitor who will need them. It’s obvious now. They’re for you.”

“How...” Amos asked in wonder. “How is that possible?”

“Many things are possible with Chronurgy. Time itself is no obstacle. I don’t pretend to understand it. Now, come, sit down.”

Gauntlets made of scales and steel were fitted around Fis’ lithe arms. He donned a pair of goggles over his eyes and clicked on a mechanical jeweler’s loupe. Amos smiled at his impossibly large-looking eye as Rhogar peered into the gauntlet’s fastening system. He got to work at his workbench, and soon the two talons were snugly installed on winches that could retract up her forearms or extend powerfully past her hands. “They’re stronger than diamonds. They would protect you,” Rhogar said. “And when you do this,” Rhogar said,

slowly bending her arm so, with a click, their talons slid forward on a groove to extend past her hands.

“Groovy,” Fis said.

“Right, well then,” Rhogar said. “We will leave at once.” He went and gathered some supplies. When he returned with skins of water from the kitchen, he was wearing a heavy armor crafted of chromatic copper Dragon scales, so he glimmered as he moved, looking every inch a regal Dragon Knight. Sharp fangs jutted from raised shoulder plates and around his neck, and Amos noticed the armor was crafted of hundreds of plates of various sizes that fit together nearly seamlessly. He wore his mighty two-handed great sword strapped to his back.

They followed Rhogar up, up, and up hundreds of steps to the rooftop of the lighthouse. Rhogar grabbed a pair of goggles from the tower door and fished around a shelf for a dusty second pair, which he wiped on his royal blue cape, and gave to Fis. “Put these on.” He pocketed a bone flute from the shelf by the door and then, with a grunt, unbarred the heavy wooden door and heaved it open.

They followed him outside, amongst the clouds, in wonder. Rhogar put the flute to his lips and blew a few notes that formed into a strange and lyrical lullaby.

“What now?” Amos asked.

“Now we wait,” Rhogar said.

“Wait, for who?”

“Our ride,” Rhogar said with a toothy grin.

They waited for a minute, Amos shifting impatiently from one foot to the other. Then, a glimmering shape hurtled towards them across the sky.

“Look! What’s that?” Amos asked.

“That’s Nitro!” Rhogar growled affectionately.

A giant snail, with magnificent eye stalks swirling wildly, crashed down towards them. It landed with a whoosh, mouth feelers petting Rhogar. Its long, silvery wings shrunk back onto the top of its armored cowrie shell as it purred and grinned. Rhogar rubbed its neck, and its tongue lolled out in a goofy expression of contentment.

“What a ridiculous, lovely, bonkers creature,” Amos said.

“Hop on,” said Rhogar. “We haven’t a moment to waste.”

“We’re going to fly?” Amos asked. “We’re going to fly!”

Fis and Amos climbed behind Rhogar, holding on for dear life. It turned out the Dragon Knight had something to ride after all.

“Hold on,” Rhogar said and patted Nitro on the neck. The armored snail dove off the side of the tower, and they were in free fall. White-knuckled, Amos held on to the shell’s barnacles for dear life, screaming at the top of his lungs until the silvery wings shot out, opening wide around them, and caught the wind. They ascended at high velocity, and Amos was glad for their goggles.

With a few furious flaps, they sailed high upon currents of air, and the tower was far below them, and the horizon spread out before them, full of possibility.

CHAPTER 24

THE BATTLE OF THE BOOKS



Sipping across the sky, Amos and his friends coasted on powerful air jets on the back of Nitro the flying snail, as they raced above the clouds. They rode with their backs to the morning sun from ochre clouds that resembled clay to the west, chasing the huckleberry horizon. Amos watched in wonder as they quickly covered hundreds of leagues through the Dreamlands. Leaving the enormous Pearl Lake behind, they soared over massive dunes so high that great monsters appeared as only tiny specks.

What creature would call this desolate place home?

It's the Whimpering Waste, said Fis, a wasteland that is home to many strange and dangerous beasts. Those who wander there return sick, and their hair falls out. The ground is cursed.

Perhaps it has something to do with what's going on at Hobbleheim?

I must go and see for myself what desolation the Mad King has wrought upon our land.

As they flew over the Pook villages, the air grew heavy with billowing smog below them and thick plumes of smoke that rose from many fires. They left the Pooks behind, flying

high and far and fast until they reached vast mountain ranges to the west.

These are called the Fire Peaks, Fis said. The ancestral home of Dragons.

Are there Dragons here? Amos asked in amazement.

Legends only, mostly destroyed when the Orkadian's dark army swept the land.

Oh. So, the...the mountains are empty now?

Full of Dwarves, Fis said. A network of vast tunnels that lead to the sea. The Orkadians don't go in, and the Dwarves don't leave, and so it has been.

How about the Elves? Amos asked. *Like the wizard Aire Dara.*

Yeah, I remember the airship, Fis said snarkily.

I'm sorry...again, said Amos. I'll help you get your sword back. I feel..responsible for your loss.

Ok, Amos, Fis said. Well..the Elves keep to themselves. No one enters, and they don't leave their isles

Well I guess that's not always true, Amos said, but Fis didn't reply.

They rode on in awkward silence until they came upon a vast bubbling sea beyond.

Agileas, Fis said with a sigh. The Endless Sea.

“Here we are, approaching the monastery,” bellowed Rhogar. They passed over, and Amos caught the glint of steel. Rhogar veered west to get a closer look. “Be on your guard,” he yelled to them. Fis shifted, as a stab of pain tightened her

back and made Amos shoot up straight. Even sharing her pain, it was a dizzying burden.

The din of battle.

Battle? Amos wasn't sure he was ready for battle.

“Rhogar?” Amos yelled, “we’re flying past this battle to the safety of the Abbey...right? Right?”

Rhogar growled and narrowed his eyes as he gazed down at the glinting steel, reflecting their twin suns off twirling weapons of war below. He guided Nitro’s reins and they coasted down for a flyover.

He wants to fight the battle? Amos groaned, and Fis, despite her wounds seemed interested in the goings-on as well.

We should see what it’s about, she said.

A half dozen bald-headed monks in earth-toned robes protectively encircled a carriage as several dozen dark riders peppered them with ranged attacks and jabs from jagged-looking spears. The monks ducked and weaved with blinding speed to keep back at least twice their number, as the many smaller riders that sat atop strange beasts swatted at them, pushing their backs to the curious contraption: a mechanical, motorized carriage. The monks dodged and parried, caught and returned, or swatted away the vast majority of the attacks. Amos noted that the monks seemed injured; their limbs were peppered with arrows, and their robes wet with blood, but they were not letting the riders overwhelm them, so quick their movements and coordinated their defenses that even three or four to one, it was a stalemate.

“Look!” Amos called, pointing at the gleam of chrome armor poking out from the robes and cloaks on the riders’ bodies. As one rider’s spear strike was parried and they took a

Bo staff to the head, they fell off their armored mount and Amos got a clear view of the burnished chrome and shining steel the rider wore. Her face was masked and goggles covered her eyes, and she wore a spherical copper backpack that emitted a trail of smoke and whistled like a boiling kettle.

“They’re Pooks! But armored, as stout as dwarves, and bristling with chrome. No, look... see her red eyes glowing? That’s not armor...it’s Necromantic Clockwork—they’re fused with machines,” Fis said.

Amos watched them curiously, but could feel Fis’ pain. As a Pook girl from the Fae, she prized the natural world and natural magick above all, and this kind of ... clockwork cyborg army deeply offended her sense of propriety. To Amos, who knew no other Pook than Fis, these soldiers were just strangers in a strange land, curious artifacts of the Dreamlands. The strange beast turned around to search for its fallen rider, and Amos got a good look at it, a platypus-shaped creature, shelled in an armored casing, with large windows on the sides for eyes and long bills that also huffed trails of smoke. The suit looked like an old-timey diving suit that you would construct for a polar bear.

Nitro coasted back up and toward the back, toward a row of chariot archers. Even now, the peculiar cyborg-Pooks were working to unfold a ballista cart. One aimed a wide-panel dish toward the caravan. At the back were three sturdy legs and what looked to Amos like some kind of odd, whirling clockwork motor.

“See that?” Rhogar roared. “If they get that machine ready, the monks are done for.” One Titan Guardian turned a lever on the side of the ballista, and it started to vibrate violently, whirling with rising intensity and a bellowing roar.

“Fis is in rough shape,” Amos hollered. “I don’t know if a battle is what the doctor ordered.”

Rhogar regarded Fis’ dark, bloody eyes and purpling mouth grimly. “If I am correct, we will need the help of those very monks below to save Fis. If we fly past them to the Abbey and let them fall, Fis is as good as dead.

“They’re ready to fire that cannon!” Fis hollered.

Amos froze. Jumping into battle sounded insane, but if Rhogar was right...the price of inaction was death. Die fighting, or die running away. In that light, at least they had to try.

“Then let’s make sure they don’t!” Amos screamed.

“Agreed!” Rhogar yelled into the wind.

Nitro dove towards the machine at the back, and Rhogar gripped his great sword with both hands. “Fis,” Rhogar shouted into the wind, “are you ready?”

Fis felt her heart pounding with the anticipation of the fight ahead, and with the rush of adrenaline, a certain clarity, a warrior’s second wind, gave her the strength to grit her teeth and roar back. “Let’s kick some Hobble Heinie!”

“For the Abbey!” Rhogar shouted. The snail crashed into the ballista, knocking the attendants to the ground and scattering several crossbowmen on chariots askew. Despite their bulky armor, several Titan Guardians were bashed off their mounts to the ground. The impact left Fis breathless. Nitro climbed to circle around again, giving Fis a moment to recover. Then, as they dove toward the chariots again, Fis leaped. With a satisfying clink, her Dragon claws sprang out over her hands, gleaming dangerously. *Keep your eyes out, Amos.*

Head on a swivel, Amos said. Copy that!

She landed on an archer's chariot and severed the Titan Guardian's bow with a quick slash. As he turned around, she slammed the flat edges of her claws against the rider's helmet. Behind his goggles, the Titan Guardian's eyes rolled back, and he fell off. Several arrows flew towards Fis' midsection, but she brought her talons up in front of her in the nick of time, and the curious arrows, with wicked barbs and shorter and heftier than a traditional bow arrow, bounced harmlessly to the ground. Fis breathed a sigh of relief. *Good call on the claws, Amos*, she thought.

One of the rider's beasts dove to swipe at her, as acrid smoke poured from its armored beak. Fis dodged a gigantic paw swipe and dug the tip of her talons into a seam in its armor. She cut deep into its back. It yelped and rolled, and Fis was hit with a wild, frenzied paw swipe that sent her flying backward. Fis, ever a paragon of prowess, turned a stumble into an acrobatic tumble as another armored beast rushed in to swarm her with its wild frenzy of claws and bite attacks. This time she rolled under it and away, and a well-placed swipe at the beast's leg sent it rolling forward, yelping in pain and the Pook rider sailed away through the air.

In the distance, Amos saw Rhogar dive into the fray. He swiped his great sword into the line of archers, sending them diving for cover. With the ranged attackers occupied, the monks made a renewed assault upon the front row of spear-wielding attackers. Amos was agog, apoplectic, and awed by the sight of him fighting against the fearsome riders, but suddenly, out of the corner of his eyes, he caught a glimpse of archers taking aim at them.

Now, to your right! Shields up! Amos cried as a Titan Guardian rider took aim at Fis and released an arrow, which bounced off her claw.

As the pincer attack from Fis and Rhogar unsettled their flanks, the cavalry lines began to dissolve and soon were spinning around, paranoid.

“Form up, on me!” a young Pook woman commanded with an intimidating battle roar. She lowered her hood to reveal a pixie cut and a long scar down the side of her face. A few Titan Guardian riders moved to flank her while another handful of riders grouped to swarm the Dragon Knight. “Rhogar watch out,” Amos cried, but Rhogar opened his mouth and exhaled a cloud of noxious green gas. Those that entered the cloud began to slow down...and he easily batted away both spear and paw attacks with his mighty sword, bashing them unconscious with the flat of his blade or slicing them down with its wicked edge. Amos lost sight of him as the closest crossbow riders drew clubs and charged. Fis dispatched one rider with a combination parry and knockout smash. Another Titan Guardian rider swung at her, and she knocked the club wide, but it clipped her arm. Fis felt the crackle of electricity numb her right arm, and it fell uselessly to her side. A swipe from a rider’s beast sent them flying in a dizzying spiral. They landed next to a barrel-like monk with leathery green skin. The turtle monk wailed a guttural battle cry, splitting his face in two and he spun two pairs of nunchucks with dizzying speed to weave a wall of pain. As the riders fell back, he helped Fis to her feet. Fis noticed, too late, that a rider was charging with a spear poised to skewer him, so she pulled him close, and the spear slashed across his back. He spun around. Torn robes revealed a hard shell across his back that

had deflected the spear. He leaped up with a flying kick, knocked the rider off his mount, and disappeared into the fray.

“Don’t retreat,” the scarred leader of the Titan Guardian army called again. “We must take that carriage!”

To your left! Amos screamed, and Fis sprang away, batting away a spear thrust with her good arm and turning to backhand the rider right off his beast. *Behind you!* Fis hopped up but was surrounded by three spear-wielding Titan Guardians. As the first one rushed in, Fis deflected the spear tip and sliced the wooden shaft cleanly off. The following two struck where Fis had been, but she had rolled underneath, cleaved the beast in two, and rolled away as it slumped wetly to the ground, sending its rider flying. She wriggled her right arm, but it was still tingly, pins and needles painfully running from shoulder to fingertips.

The Pook leader arrived at the carriage, hopped off her mount, and crawled inside, only to be beaten back by a muscular, bare-chested monk warrior. His arms moved with dizzying speed to reverse the Titan attacks and quickly had her and a pair of her soldiers on the defensive. He leaped over the swing of a spear, an ax kick bringing down the sorry Titan Guardian as he descended, his momentum knocking the fellow deep into the dirt. The other stepped in to impale him, but he turned sideways and launched a side kick that sent the soldier flying back. Squared off with the leader, she drew a second sword, performed an impressive sword dance, and snarled at him. The monk’s eyes flashed. He raised his two powerful fists over his head, giving a catlike fighting scream. The scarred lady’s gaze followed his hands, alert for his blinding strike. A surprise leg kick sent her stumbling off balance and then a second kick to her head sent her sailing back. Amos had been distracted and did not see a Titan diving through the air. He

crashed down on them, and the incredible weight of the clockwork armor pinned Fis to the ground.

Fis gasped as she struggled to catch her breath, only to find two remaining riders rear up, intent on impaling her with their spears. They towered over her, waving their spears menacingly, and pinned down, she could do nothing to stop them. Amos gasped.

With a silver flash from the sky, the two riders were knocked back, stunned as Nitro bashed them away from Fis, giving her a moment to breathe. One went flying off his mount and stabbed at the giant snail, but the Titan Guardian's spear scraped harmlessly against Nitro's hard shell as she flew back toward the clouds. Fis wriggled out from under the weight of the fallen soldier and rose to square off against the last rider.

Careful of this one, Amos said.

Noted, Fis said, dodging his sword slash, deflecting it upwards with one Dragon talon and inside his guard, slashing his arm with the other. The claw shredded his robes and armor, revealing an arm of burnished chrome whirling on gears and servos. He snarled and pushed her back, bringing his sword around for another powerful strike. Fis dropped to the ground, slamming his mount and stunning it. The Titan rider flew off and slammed to the ground. A moment later, he rose and snarled a battle cry, face contorted in rage. He raised his sword to Fis and took a step forward, then froze with a stupid look of confusion. A moment later, the tip of Rhogar's sword answered Amos' unspoken question. Rhogar grinned. "I think that's the last of them." The leader and a few of the others had taken the opportunity to flee and were dots on the green plains by now.

Amos stared at the fallen Titan rider who had been impaled by Rhogar's great sword. He appeared to be in excruciating pain. Blood poured from his mechanical exoskeleton, which whirled and whined as gears and servos cracked and black smoke churned. Amos watched the red glow slowly fade from his android eye and began to sob great wracking tears. Overwhelmed by the intensity of his childlike emotions, Fis wrapped her arms around her chest, and they knelt on the ground and held the poor Titan's hand as his spirit sailed away.

This is war, Fis said. Even when you serve a righteous cause, it is not for the squeamish.

Let's get out of here. Amos gazed up at the lavender sky, the blue sun looming large in the sky while the coral star had already set in the dim twilight. It was time for them to get somewhere safe and warm before night fell.

"Good job, Fis and Amos," Rhogar said, his husky voice sounding cheerful. "I counted twenty-two of those tin can warriors. The odds weren't fair for them." He patted Fis' shoulder and laughed heartily as he wiped his sword clean and sheathed it over his shoulder.

The handsome, tricky monk that had guarded the caravan approached them. He was calm and collected, despite being shirtless and bleeding from a deep claw slash on his chest. His almond-shaped hazel eyes sparkled with curiosity. He bowed slightly and cupped one hand in the other in front of his chest. *The propitious salute, favored by respectful combatants,* Amos thought. *Does he come from my world?*

"Rhogar Grokwurm, well met. Have you come to return our map?"

Rhogar grinned, "not yet, but I will, one day, my friend."

“Well, it’s been too long since we played Wei Qi, but it seems your visit came when we needed you most.” He smiled. When Rhogar shook his head, the monk turned to face Fis. “And thank you, noble warrior. I am Master Zhi Xuan, caretaker of the Abbey.”

Rhogar nodded and patted Fis on the shoulder. “Have the Pooks attacked before?”

“These weren’t the first we’ve faced on the journey back.” The monk looked to the sky, “it seems the Mad King has eyes everywhere and has been scouring the land for esoteric lore.”

“Well, we shall escort you the rest of the way,” Rhogar sheathed his great sword and clapped the monk on the back. Nitro circled around Rhogar once in the sky and then flew into the clouds.

“You’re Master Zhi Xuan?” Amos asked. “Mr. Lemon Goose told me to find you, that you would help us.”

“Ah, Lemengnoost is a wise one,” Master Zhi Xuan said and smiled warmly. “Well, we are in your debt. You fight well...are you injured...you don’t look so...”

Fis smiled but then stumbled forward as the adrenaline of combat slowly faded, and she found her leaden limbs too tired to support her any longer. Master Zhi Xuan caught her in his arms.

The bald turtle-shelled monk approached and bowed. “Brother Zhi, the scrolls are safe.”

Master Zhi Xuan nodded, “let’s help this one to the carriage.” The two monks carried Amos to lay upon a silken pillow in a carriage full of books and old papers. He gazed up at the turtle-shelled man. “So, you’re like....”

“A Turtle,” the monk said, with a smile that split his face in two. “From the Oyster Islands. Thank you for your kind concern on the battlefield.”

Fis grinned weakly but said nothing. The monks closed the carriage door and rode the remaining distance to the monastery. Amos awoke as the monks helped Fis out of the carriage and into the walled courtyard. They marched by hundreds of monks trained in martial arts to a fortified keep.

“Come in, clean up, and prepare for a feast,” said Master Zhi Xuan and led them to guest quarters to relax and refresh. After a respite, Master Zhi Xuan escorted them to a great library that held thousands of tomes on shelves that reached high ceilings at least 30 feet overhead. Amos had never seen anything as vast and inspiring.

“So many books,” Amos remarked in awe.

“The salvaged knowledge of our world. The only known library to have withstood the Dark War,” Master Zhi Xuan said. “We have nurtured it and protected the knowledge, guarding against the rising darkness for ten thousand years. Scavenging lost tombs for tomes, and historical scrolls, and today we returned with a caravan stuffed with ancient texts. They almost didn’t make it back to the Great Library- but they salvaged the priceless relics, thanks to you. I owe you and your large friend a great debt. Feel free to look around, make yourself at home. I have matters to look into.” He bowed and left them.

“Amazing,” Amos said, astonished by the towering shelves of ancient tomes around him. Amos realized he could spend a lifetime here and never finish all of these ancient, leather-bound books. He wondered what secrets they held...and what languages they employed. For the moment, he forgot about all

their troubles when he found a good thick book called “The history of the Elves of the Azure Forest,” written in a language he couldn’t understand, yet the pictures were compelling engravings of timeless beauty and wonder and he flipped several pages through, until his fingers paused on a face that made his heart skip a beat.

A face from his dreams, a leathery, gaunt face of a hungry dead thing, a wraith that haunted him, on both sides of the Dreamlands. But in this picture, he wore a crown of Elven horns, and his pointed ears were unmistakable...in Amos’ dreams, this face seemed not to have ears at all. But the eyes, large, haunting pools, were unmistakable, and Amos gasped in gob-smacked surprise.

“I’ll be taking that, thank you,” the Turtle monk quickly but carefully pried the prized leather book from their fingers, “These are delic—oh gosh, what happened to your face?”

CHAPTER 25

A MATTER OF TIME



Amos and Fis were shocked by the reaction the Abbey's green-skinned Turtle monk. "Hello, and my endless pardons," drawled the monk as he carefully collected the ancient tome. "I meant no offense; I was merely surprised."

Fis nodded and sat up.

That was weird, Amos said.

"I am Jupe, brother of the Abbey," the monk smiled and bowed low in respect. "Thank you again for your aid on the battlefield. Excuse me, but you have a visitor."

"A visitor? Who would know that I'm here?" Amos asked, feeling his heart quicken.

Who indeed?

Jupe nodded, carefully found the book's home, and left. Fis' pointy ears prickled as a knock at the door came a few moments later.

"Come in?" Amos said, echoing all the high shelves to the cavernous roof.

"Good afternoon, child," came a sweet, motherly voice from the doorway. In walked a matronly caramel-skinned dwarf in splendid blue and yellow robes.

“I know her,” Fis said and then scrunched her eyes in confusion. “I’m sorry. I mean, I know you. I’ve seen you before, in the Vale. You were the headmaster at Kronoswons.”

I know her too, Amos thought, remembering his dream in the classroom.

Fis stood up to greet the headmaster, but tripped over her feet, a dizzying wave of red stars flashing across Amos’ field of vision. The dwarf stepped forward, with surprising speed and caught Fis, and carefully helped her back down.

“I’m sorry,” Fis said, but the dwarf waved away her apology and smiled kindly. “I was, and still am, Headmaster Luka Starlight, head of Chronurgy. How are you feeling... I must say, you don’t look well. Do you mind if I examine you?”

“Yes...I’m Fis...I’m not feeling so hot.”

Amos put a hand to Fis’ forehead and it came away slick with feverish sweat.

“You have my thanks, Fis, for protecting the knowledge uncovered and returned to the Abbey today,” Luka said, her voice calm, but Amos sensed unease beneath her adult mask. “I’ve been told you’ve got a visitor, is that right, child?” Luka held out a hand to Fis’ face, felt her forehead, and frowned.

“It’s true,” Amos said. “I’m Amos, uh, from Chongqing.”

“Oh, that’s a very spicy place to be from,” Luka said.

“How do you know?” Amos asked, feeling as if he’d been tickled in the stomach. *My spicy hometown.*

“We haven’t the time now, child, but I will happily share that story one day. Do you miss stinky tofu? And hot pot?”

Luka smiled warmly, and Amos' stomach rumbled at its mention.

“I miss it so much.”

“We must move quickly if you want to taste it again, child. Please let me have a look at your wounds.”

Fis nodded and rolled over to lift the back of her top with Luka's careful help. “Oh, this is awful.” Luka's face twisted in a sympathetic grimace. “How...how long have you been infected?”

“At least three to four days...” Fis said.

“Impossible...” She stopped and examined the wound on Fis' back closely. “You had some help, didn't you?”

“That's right,” Amos said, “Mildred and Levana brewed us up a bandage, and they said they miss you at the Mahjong table.”

Luka gasped. “I bet they do. I'm unsure if keeping Fis going all this time is a kindness or a curse. You have a paladin's spirit, but it would take a goddess to stop this infection now,” she said.

Amos let that pass over them like a wave of hot air, and Fis clawed the sofa's arm weakly.

They keep saying we're done, Amos, Fis said. I don't know how much more of this I can do, even with your help...

We're here, Amos said, now we just need to ask the Dragon for a favor. I'm sure it'll be a piece of cake, barely an inconvenience, just rest, my dear Fis.

“Or a miracle.” Luka's eyes sparkled, “Tell me, child, how you know Mildred and Levana?”

“Oh,” said Amos with a shrug, “we were off in the woods...and ran into them. And I figured out you were their missing friend. It only made sense.”

“Well, you have a quick mind, young Amos,” Luka said, “and good timing. You know, if you find yourself around here, you can come to visit me at Kronoswons.” She smiled at him, speaking confidentially, and her smile seemed radiant and youthful, although her eyes seemed wise, and timeless. “The truth is, I am in your debt. You saved some of the oldest books and scrolls we have ever seen.” She was delighted. “Powerful tomes, and more importantly, you stopped Hobbleheim from recovering them.”

Amos studied her with wonder. *There’s something really special about her. I can feel this radiant power. And she feels kind of timeless, like she doesn’t age, doesn’t she?*

She’s quite famous in my land for being a very special teacher, and a powerful wizard, Fis said.

Luka carefully prodded the painful boils on the back of her leg and studied the rootlike growths that wound around her leg and spiraled around to her belly. Fis winced, clenching her jaw and jamming her eyes shut until the waves of pain subsided. “What are they up to?” Fis asked her.

“I’m afraid I can’t say,” Luka said. “Yet.”

“Will the monks let us descend the cave?” Amos asked.

“I believe they will.”

“If I succeed and get the flower,” Amos said, scratching his ear. “Will we be able to split it into two? For both Fis and Grandpa?”

“Oh, no,” said Luka, her face creased with concern. “You’ll have to choose, child.”

How could he give it to Fis and return to Grandpa empty-handed? But how could Amos let Fis die for him, holding the magick for someone else, after all they'd experienced together? Perhaps he would receive two tears. *Yes, a good hope. In the pit of Amos' stomach, he felt butterflies warring against each other...or, perhaps, it was the Deaths Head Moths scuttling about. He would make a hard choice, and even if he won, someone he loved would die. And it would be his fault.*

Don't worry about me, Amos, Fis said. I can handle a little more.

"I'm sure the monks want to discuss with you, why you came, and how. Especially why now."

"It's quite complicated," Amos said.

"Try me. I think I can handle it," Luka replied with a kind smile, and Amos flushed in embarrassment.

Amos told her everything, and Master Zhi Xuan and Rhogar slipped in quietly to listen from the doorway as Amos explained his dreams, the nine-tailed fox, his journey through the Anju Ancient Town door into Elsewhere, and his adventures thus far.

Master Zhi Xuan exchanged a severe look with Luka. "We must talk."

Luka nodded, "Of course, but isn't it remarkable? *He's here. Now. Of all times, of all hims.*"

Master Zhi Xuan nodded, clearly agitated. "It's very auspicious."

Luka read his expression and nodded, "fine," and turned to Fis. "We have something to discuss, please, excuse us for a moment." With forced composure, the three of them excused

themselves to another room, debating in hushed whispers on their way. Amos and Fis relaxed back into the soft, plushy back of the sofa, and closed their eyes until they returned. *I wonder what they're talking about, eh Fis?* Amos asked, but Fis clenched her jaw in pain and exhaustion and Amos did not bother her again.

After what could have been hours, but was likely just minutes, Luka put a kindly hand upon Fis' shoulder, and Fis opened her eyes.

“Our purposes have convened tomorrow at Hobbleheim,” Luka said, smiling softly at the girl's twisted, tortured, and root-laced, Troll-poisoned face before peering out of the large beautiful stained-glass window as the early cardinal sun slipped past cloud cover and gave the room a reddish glow. Even Luka could only take so much pain, it seemed.

“Do you mean, will convene?” Amos asked.

“Perhaps to you, yes,” Luka said, nodding sympathetically.

“The King is up to something with his new blackguard,” said Master Zhi Xuan. “Machines and men, and beasts, melded together.”

“A form of clockwork magick and necromancy, an abomination of nature,” Luka shuddered. When she looked at Amos, her eyes were smoldering embers of anger. “I will express my concern at the feast tonight.”

Tonight? Wow, it's all happening...tonight?

Master Zhi Xuan nodded, “Good. And as to why they wanted the knowledge we recovered...we can only guess. Our scholars have ascertained they pertain to certain figures and artifacts before the Dark War and some artifacts of considerable power.”

Amos perked up, mentally somersaulting through fragmented memories from his dreams.

“Was there anything about... Onubus Void?” Luka asked, a grimace on her face as she said the name, “You’ve seen so far?”

Amos’ eyes bulged, something about that name resonated with his dreams, and a cold shiver went down his spine.

Who’s Onubus Void? Amos asked Fis.

The Jackal, Fis spat. *It’s bad luck to even say it aloud, a curse word to terrify children.*

Master Zhi Xuan nodded grimly. “I believe so, but we need more time. You may have a look for yourself.”

“Who’s Onubus Void?” Amos asked aloud as a dizzy feeling of déjà vu shook him.

“He was once a peculiar Elven boy named Cidolfus Crane. A naughty, mischievous student of m...of Kronoswons,” Luka seemed to be choosing her words very carefully, and Amos had the peculiar notion that she knew more than she was letting on. “This was, of course, a long, long time ago,” Luka said. “But as he grew, his pranks became more and more dangerous, and he grew hungry, and desired to be more and more powerful. This is a danger in the world of magic, and why we must be responsible in both our teaching and our learning. Elves can live for hundreds of years, but the Crane boy wanted more. He wanted to live forever. And his hunger propelled him to make some very irresponsible decisions.”

Amos gave her his best ‘oh go on, and such as...’ eyes, and surprisingly, she did.

“He summoned spirits and beings to aid him and created dark places amongst us that used him to... wreak considerable

havoc. In the end, the Crane boy destroyed himself. Only the Void remained.”

“It’s well documented, a cautionary tale, if you would,” Master Zhi Xuan said, nodding gravely.

“Have we done this before?” Amos asked, as he felt an odd twitching sensation in his right eye. He blinked rapidly and grasped at his nose, fighting the urge to sneeze.

Luka gave him a curious look.

Fis coughed and spat blood into her hand, “Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, gasping for breath.

Luka passed her a cloth to wipe her face. “Oh you poor thing, child, take this.” She gave the monks a hard stare. “They don’t have much time for pleasantries,” she said. “I suggest we skip dinner.”

“It is absolutely against our normal protocols to let someone inside the cavern without years of proper training,” Master Zhi Xuan said. “I don’t see how I can in good conscious allow it...”

“Master Zhi Xuan,” Luka said softly. “This is not a normal situation. Far from it.”

The monk nodded, sighing. “Very well. Amos, Fis, you must be honest, earnest, and careful. Our monastery is sadly home to many who failed and are now catatonic as their mind tries to find the way back.”

“Oh, Master Z...so it’s... not a real cave? It’s a mind cave?” Amos asked with a strange quiver. He couldn’t escape the feeling that they had done all this before.

“It is both. The cavern is ancient, nearly bottomless,” Master Zhi Xuan said, “When the dragons abandoned the land,

their last great King, Caoteng, buried his heart here to keep the embers burning for the day they would return. To be judged worthy is a journey through the darkest places of the mind. Our Abbey was built to study the cave and other knowledge preserved through the ages. I have journeyed to the heart of the cavern to face my own demons, to be purified. But one must be prepared. We study a lifetime here at the monastery, and some of us still fail. I cannot warn you enough of the dangers.”

“Do you have any advice for us?” Amos asked.

“You must be pure of heart and honest of intention, for you will be tested in every way. If you are firm, he will crush you like a nut. You must be like water. Flow to the bottom and back up again.”

“How does one flow like water?” Amos asked Master Zhi Xuan.

“Come sit with me,” Master Zhi Xuan said.

Easy Amos. You're no longer the kid I met at the lake. You can do this.

“Now, close your eyes,” Master Zhi Xuan said.

Amos stood stiffly and followed Master Zhi Xuan to sit cross-legged on the floor.

“Have you always been here, Master?”

Master Zhi Xuan stopped for a moment, surprised by the question, then he patted Fis on the shoulder. The master's voice was kind when he said, “perhaps one day, young master, I will tell you, but focus now.”

Under the fatherly hand of Master Zhi Xuan, Amos felt an electric pulse, and images flooded into his empty mind. *The*

master was a handsome young man, a visionary. He traveled across vast seas and lands, training, teaching, and fighting until he was the most famous fighter in the entire world. He entertained and inspired millions and began to travel to other worlds in his dreams. Amos saw the master fighting in a yellow suit against a tall, dark-skinned giant with an Afro like Fis'. They were only performing. In fact, they were really good friends. Finally, one night, he traveled to the Dreamlands and did not return to his body. The world mourned him, yet here he remained.

“Now...imagine yourself shapeless, formless, you are a drop in the ocean and the ocean in a drop.”

“A drop in the ocean,” Amos repeated. “The ocean in a drop...” His thoughts swirled around him in a haze of confusion, and he could not focus on Master Zhi Xuan’s voice, because the name Onubus Void kept returning to the fore front of his mind, invading from dark places wherever he tried to be at peace. Amos opened his eyes again.

“When you cannot clear your mind,” said Master Zhi Xuan, “acknowledge the obstacle and try again. You will find, in time, it gets easier.”

I see you, my fears, Amos thought, closing his eyes again. I know there’s something afoot, and that name, Onubus Void...

In the darkness of his mind, ancient eyes watched him, a cool chill numbed Amos as a presence brushed against him, patient, waiting. It wasn’t the nine-tailed fox in the mirror. This was something older, something worse.

“You are a part of everything. You are everything in a part. Clear your mind, focus on your truth, and let go of all the lies that have protected you. You must let your truth define you.”

Amos felt a brief moment of clarity, but it did not last, and his doubts returned.

“Open your eyes.”

Amos opened his eyes and saw Master Zhi Xuan holding up a finger, demonstrating the drip-drip of rain. “Water can flow, and it can crash.” Master Zhi Xuan balled his fist up and brought it down to punch his open palm with the suddenness of a lightning strike. “Be like water, my young friend. Do you understand?”

Amos nodded slowly as they opened their eyes. “I...think so. But what is my truth?”

“You will know when it is time.” Master Zhi Xuan rose, bowed, and left the library.

Luka gave Fis and Amos a motherly hug and whispered. “I believe in you. Believe in yourself, too. You’ve come too far to quit.”

Rhogar leaned close to Amos and grumbled softly, by his standards. “We will take you to the cavern’s edge and wait for you to return.” He patted Fis on the shoulder. “I have seen you fight. You have the heart of a dragon. I know you will succeed.”

If we don’t make it through this, Fis, it was a heck of a journey, Amos confided.

Perhaps the childish agility of your mind will guide us through where the devout acolytes have failed, Fis said hopefully.

Wu Wei, Amos said, yes, Wu Wei will guide us.

Amos and Fis were escorted by Jupe, Master Zhi Xuan, and Rhogar. Equipped for spelunking, they strapped him into a

harness, into a large bucket which they could lower with an enchanted rope, which would send him deep down into the monastery's underground catacombs. Amos could see the masked doubt on their faces as they waved goodbye. It might be nearly hopeless, but it was their only chance.

What stands in the way shall become the way, he thought, remembering something he had read. *The only way onward is through.*

Amos and Fis lowered themselves down the rope until it became so silent he could hear their ragged breath and pounding heartbeat. He could hear the blood pumping in Fis' veins. *It's our moment, Fis*, he said. In the eerie stillness and absolute darkness, he pushed on, one hand in front of the next. He hated the claustrophobic emptiness around him, but too soon, he heard the clattering sound of nails against the dank stone. *The Dragon was real.*

CHAPTER 26

A DRAGON'S TEARS



Amos froze, petrified by the rustling and scraping sounds echoing through the endless darkness. With a whoosh of hot air that blew his ears back, the Dragon Caoteng stunned him into silence.

“You don’t belong here,” croaked a voice as old as time. “You aren’t my children.”

Amos bit his lower lip until he felt the warm release of blood. He ground his teeth. His knees knocked together, but he continued to climb downward.

“You aren’t worthy of my treasures. Worthless sacks of skin. You’ll fail, like so many before you. And die. Utterly insignificant.” Those last words hooked Amos like a hangnail on a wool sweater, for Amos could see his Papa shouting at him with his hands on his hips, and Amos’ cheeks burned with hot, salty shame. Fis’ anger was rising, too. Pride and prejudice cut through their armor, wounding his manic and outgoing personality, and battering her self-righteous importance. Amos thought about his father, always working, how the cool kids laughed at him for living with his nose in a book, even what he wore, how he spoke. He wanted to refute it out of pride, and anger, or prove it wrong by virtue of his bodacious excellence. But he said nothing. Instead, he kept

one hand in front of the next, silently descending. Sweat poured from Fis' brow, and he felt her consciousness waver.

“You cannot save anyone, let alone everyone. Your sorry promises, unfulfilled,” rumbled the ancient King of Dragons. “A liar and a failure, trapped here until your pathetic specks of soul rust like old iron.”

In his mind's eye, his father wagged his finger at Amos. Amos hated the disapproving way his Papa washed his hands of the boy when he made a mess of things, how he shrugged to mama, saying, “it's your boy, I'm off to work.” Although mentally prepared, this stung more than Amos would have expected.

Breathe in. He tasted the blood in his mouth. *I am here,* Amos thought to himself, *I am alive.*

Breathe out. Focus on the breath.

“You will fail, and you will die, and no one will remember you ever lived, so insignificant you are.”

Amos stepped outside his feelings as Fis' eyes rolled back in her head, and she began to spasm and seize. For a moment, Amos panicked. What could he do to help her? *Nothing*, he realized. *Nothing except succeed.* After so long, crushed by the pressure of his mistakes and the weight of making it right again, his efforts focused into something diamond-like. He snarled in determination. “I'm doing this,” he spat. “You can't stop me.”

Dangling at the end of his rope, Amos was once again alone, but this time, he was not afraid.

I should be honored to have my personal insecurities voiced by an ancient King of Dragons. Usually, it's just some brat at school that disses me.

“Thank you, King of Dragons,” Amos said through clenched teeth. “You honor me.”

The Dragon roared so powerfully that his rumbling shook the very mountains. In Amos’ mind, it was his father that was screaming at him, in anger and disappointment. Amos felt shaken, inside and out. And Amos fell...down, down, down into the deepest part of his mind. The Dragon spat curse after curse.

“You are a burden to your family...like a leaky cup, they lose fortune, health, and prosperity because of you...”

Amos’ heart beat faster. Fear pulled at the corners of his mind. The Dragon spoke with the ring of truth.

“Your efforts to atone are laughable. All you do is draw fools to your side to suffer and die alongside you...”

Amos rubbed his eyes, holding back a dam of hot tears. Poor Fis. Poor everyone who wasted their energy on him.

“All this, for a lie...to chase an ice cream...” The Dragon laughed at his foolish pride. “So easily corrupted by opinions, you would be destroyed by fame, you would become a monster to chase power, wouldn’t you? I have seen it before.”

Amos thought of Master Zhi Xuan and his unshakable cool. Amos imagined a stream; he was just a stream, passing consciousness into a river that would one day return to the ocean. The Dragon may as well have been cursing the mighty Yangzte River. Rivers bend and flow, but they do not know fear.

“Empty your mind,” Master Zhi Xuan had said, and now, Amos could see him here with them as well, ghostly and ethereal, but nonetheless, here, to guide them.

“Be formless, ready to flow, or ready to crash,” Amos agreed.

As the Dragon taunted him again, and again, Amos, with a nimble whip of a mind, avoided the folly of each threat, each temptation, and each trap that had sunk those who had come before.

In this timeless place, where Amos was as much a prisoner of his mind as in a deep cavern of an Ancient Dragon, Amos dodged a hundred hooks of anger, pride, and vengeance. It went on for a tedious and exhausting time, and I will not bore you with the details, but know that it was a harrowing experience. Amos, somehow, kept on going, for as he had learned on his long, dark night rowing through desperation before he met Rhogar, sometimes hope, however meagre, is enough to fight for. Amos had come to realize that, like his father had told him and his grandfather had told his father before him, a man can be destroyed but never defeated unless he gives up, and Amos did not give up. Amos fought on, escaping the hooks and barbs until finally, the Dragon seemed to have grown bored of taunting him. Gone was the fear of the dark, and instead, Amos embraced the wonder of coasting through the unknown.

In his mind’s eye, he saw the flower, the glowing tear of Caoteng. Amos was elated, exhausted, but excited: for he seemed to have passed the test of Caoteng. He was forced to choose what to do with it: he could eat it for himself and cure the aging soullessness that ailed him, prop up his deflated spirit essence with ancient draconic magick and live a thousand years to become a great wizard of the Dreamlands...

His Grandfather at his deathbed, his grandmother and parents, all forgotten, their worries and cares and love, just

sand upon the boot of Amos the Explorer. Powerful for all time, all would tremble at his name.

Amos wondered...could he take the flower? And become powerful? And use that power to heal Fis, and to save his Grandpa? He could cross worlds, himself, and show Papa what a special boy he really was. He imagined it, and he felt the calling, the temptation, and he started to gravitate toward it... but it was the feeble call deep inside him of Fis and her honest integrity. “This power, it’s a lie, and it would turn to ash in your mouth, Amos, you came here to save someone, and you have to be true to that... or you won’t make it out of this place, at all.” And Amos knew, he felt, deep down, that she was right, and he was grateful for her counsel, even if it was only a memory, even if she was lost already, and even if he, too, would soon follow.

The certainty of death came for him next. No matter the virtue of the life he chose, nothing could stop Death. From the throne of his power, he welcomed a dark-robed rider who arrived upon a white unicorn, a rainbow mane flowing majestically. The rider dismounted, scythe waving with inevitable assuredness to Amos, and lowered his hood. Amos gasped as they shared the same grim face—Amos’ face, mature but never old. *Would you eat the flower to stay young forever? To have all the time in the world to learn from your mistakes and master every skill you desire?*

“No,” he shouted to the visions, which shattered like a mirror into thousands of reflections. “I’ve made promises, and promises shall be kept.” Amos’ worldview fragmented in the gaping maw of endless opportunities. Amos knew he was still

inside the test and bolstered his will. He had come too far to give up now.

His imagination created a myriad of powerful Amos-heroes, all possible paths forward that would break his glass ceiling and prove his worth. He sped along but grasping at power always ended in hollow horrors. He would end up a craven old wizard, a soul-sucking undead Lich King, a twisted form of godlike evil that forced stable boys and chambermaids to become champions. *No, neither will this be my path.*

The sensation of falling had passed. He merely existed in the infinite emptiness.

Had he succeeded? He imagined that he had and would soon be back at the Abbey facing an impossible choice: to give the flower to Fis, his loyal friend who was fast fading, or allow her noble sacrifice to ring through time, and save it for Grandpa, so he may return to his world unscathed. He had promised to save Grandpa, and go home to his family again, a simple boy who only schemed for spicy ice cream. But that boy justified his mother's hospitalization as an accident, felt no guilt for abusing his father's trust, and left Grandma to toil over supper while he ran around summoning spirits.

"No," he said. "No, I can't do that. I promised to help my friend. Together to get my soul back at Hobbleheim." Were there a path to save his Grandpa, too, he would find it *with Fis*. His Grandma's face swam into his mind, and he realized he was still dreaming in the Dragon's grasp. This time Grandma was not the bent tyrant, forcing his creative genius down to the level of dust and dirt, but a loving matron. He repeated her words, "Sometimes it feels good to do a hard job yourself." Amos saw his unlikely victory, threading the tiniest of needles. A narrow path where he returned home.

Still, he stood, the abyss peering him to look death in the eye, and he wavered, feeling the rising dark hopelessness like a drowning tide—until he imagined the faith of Fis. Her sure-footedness, self-confidence, and Summer Queen, whom she served and would die for. There was a wonder in faith and potential in creation. Their friendship bathed him in a radiant glow, and so he dived forward through the void, past the horror of absurd existentialism, landing at a place of quiet purpose. The dual nature of the universe meant things fell apart so that new things could emerge. Amos embraced the paradox. *You gotta serve somebody*, Amos thought. *You have to bow to something. Creation or destruction? I know what I have to do.*

“What is your *truth*?” The elder Dragon rumbled, and its whiskers tickled his face.

Amos’ mind flashed, through the ups and downs of his life, taking on the unstoppable force of a barreling steam-powered locomotive train, from his innocent jokes and smiles as a baby to his complex, somewhat dark, some might say—cruel hurtful pranks of late. He was deeply ashamed of the consequences of his actions and scared of the outcomes of his very prickly predicament, but there remained one constant: like a prismatic love pump, the most powerful thoughts circled back to his family, those kind, silly folks who always loved him unconditionally. He thought of his friends, especially through the dangers that Fis had experienced with him in the face of overwhelming loss...her bravery had touched his heart. Rhogar had given his all from the moment they met. No matter what happened, Amos knew he had truly lived.

Amos whispered into the abyss, into the bristling ears of the ancient Dragon King of the mountains. “Love is greater than fear.”

A moment passed. Amos held his breath, but only silence greeted him. So, he spoke again. “Caoteng, I am ready to leave. If I can do it, you can too. You know that, right?”

The rustling of Caoteng’s mighty wings shook Amos and the entire cavern, rumbling with the crash of thunder. At the edge of twilight, Amos reached out into the vast endlessness. A message to the nine-tailed-fox-spirit who’d taken so much from him—but had given him this path, this pursuit, and this channel for growth. Grandpa had hurt it, and it had bled. *What bleeds, can die, what hurts, can fail*, Amos said. *I will be triumphant.*

He felt the Trickster plotting, preparing, and in their brief contact, his sympathetic magick from the necklace; amplified by the cavern of Caoteng. Amos gleaned a moment of insight: the Trickster had needed him here, in some form or other. There was a door, and behind it, a prize of immeasurable value, and somehow, for some reason, he didn’t know, he was the key, but he would be a tool no longer.

With a start, Amos heard the sound of pouring water. He opened his eyes to see Caoteng lounged against a rock, long white hair flowing across his scaled body giving the intense-looking Ancient One a distinguished, sage appearance. One taloned hand cradled a wooden Er Hu, prepared to play a song, while the other held a cup of tea. A glowing flower swirled inside the teacup, which he passed to Amos. “Here, I believe this is yours.” Amos reached out to grasp it.

Amos opened his eyes again with a dizzying start to find himself lying next to the cavern's hungry maw. Rhogar smiled down upon him, and a single tear dripped down his cheek onto Amos' face. In his joined hands, Amos held the bright reddish golden flower of Caoteng, which glittered with mysterious power.

Against all odds, *Amos had done it.*

CHAPTER 27

SHADOWS AND DUST



Amos held the flower of Caoteng, and the power of ancient Dragons flowed from his hand, calling him to use it to bend the world to his will. The longer he held it, the greater the temptation to rationalize using it grew. Several harebrained ideas about absorbing the power for himself and using it to find his own way to save Fis and Grandpa passed quickly through his mind, but his resolve to give it away was strengthened when he peered into the pool and felt Fis' utter agony with every ragged breath she took. "Fis...are you okay?"

Okay is not the word I'd use, but hey, I'm here. But look what we got. I would kiss you, kid, if you weren't me and I didn't feel like Troll food. She seemed to be feeling his inner turmoil, and it made her nervous, but she projected encouragement and calm, and it was comforting to Amos all the same.

"Come with me, Amos, Fis," called Master Zhi Xuan. "Jupe, fetch Headmaster Starlight. Now we must prepare the materials." Jupe bowed and left, and Amos took a step forward but stumbled as Fis' legs gave out under her. They tumbled to the ground before Rhogar could offer support, so he grasped Fis like a baby, cradling her to his chest. "It's okay, Fis," he said, "I've got you." Fis twitched, and Amos felt a distancing

cloudiness, kind of a spicy chili haze, obfuscate the hall as his connection to Fis - and the body - faltered Fis. “This way,” said Master Zhi Xuan, “I worry it might be too late, but we—”

“Lead the way,” Rhogar interrupted, barreling down the hall. “My friend Fis will fight until her last breath, but we haven’t a moment to lose!” Amos, eyes lolling around, absently observed candles on elaborate candelabras, walls of tomes, and leather-bound books, and then they were in a smaller space. Rhogar set them down upon a cushion near a pond.

“Hang in there, Amos,” Rhogar said. “If you have a second wind, fight for Fis.”

Master Zhi Xuan hovered over Fis’ face and rubbing his hands together, and then, with lightning speed, struck several pressure points up and down Fis’ spine. It felt like a lightning bolt exploded inside their nervous system, and with a jolt, Fis bolted up to a sitting position, eyes wide open.

“Woah,” said Amos, “that feels like half a dozen energy drinks in the face.”

“Hang in for a little longer, my friends,” Master Zhi Xuan said. “Your adrenaline is pumping, but your body can’t take much more damage. In the end, it will be a test of your will to survive.”

“Can I... can I put this down?” Amos asked, indicating the flower that they held in their cupped hands.

“Carefully place the flower in the water until we are ready to use it,” Master Zhi Xuan said.

On wobbly legs, like a new-born deer, Amos approached the room's central pool. For one moment, he wanted to keep the flower and run, run home to Tongliang, to his Grandpa, and save him, but Amos had no legs of his own, and had made a promise to Fis. Sighing, he carefully lowered the precious flower onto the surface of the pond. Amazingly, tiny roots wiggled out of the bottom, causing ripples across the pool's surface. The water hummed softly, and Amos pressed an ear closer. "Do you hear that?"

"Yes," growled Rhogar, regarding Fis with worried, loving eyes. He stood close, prepared to leap into action should she stumble again..

"It is, for now, an enchanted pool. Until Jupe returns and prepares the ritual for consumption, is there anyone or anywhere you wish to see? The eyes of the Dragon can penetrate any wards and protections, hear or see anyone, as you can imagine."

I wonder what the Duke is doing, Amos thought.

Fis spoke out. "Hobbleheim. Can we see the King?" She grasped the edge of the pool's stone basin for support and gazed into it intently.

"Of course," Master Zhi Xuan said. "Simply touch the water with intention."

Fis dipped her right hand into the water. "Mad King of Hobblehem," she whispered, and the water's surface rippled and clouded. The clouds contained a silver lining that swirled and pulsed for a moment and then formed an image, sketchy at first, of a decadently dressed corpulent man in a flashy silken jumpsuit. He sat at the head of the feast table.

The Mad King! Fis exclaimed.

The Mad King wore a high-collared ebony pantsuit, and his greasy fingers roamed around a massive tray of juicy meats and ripe fruits. A Pook advisor stood next to him, wearing his guard's black, red-sashed colors, taking notes and whispering to the King, "Your Majesty, the Titans are ready. All will go as planned." The words reverberated clearly through the scrying pool, around the room, as Amos and his friends huddled intently, soaking up every sound and sight of the elusive regent.

"It better be ready, Colonel. They asked me to do it, and I've been anxious to do a live appearance."

"Yes, your Majesty," the advisor said, nodding sympathetically. "Of course."

"Head," he growled with a mouthful of meat. The advisor wiped beaded sweat off the King's forehead with a white handkerchief. The Mad King's hair was a puffy mess, and he took off his dark glasses to reveal haunted eyes ringed with dark circles. "It's been a long time since I've been out amongst the people, live, you see," said the King as he waved the greasy drumstick around in one hand and grabbed a handful of potato grits with his other fist. He shoved them into his open mouth like a man possessed. "But it's time."

He stood up, addressing the mainly empty feast hall, waving a half-eaten turkey drumstick. "It's a good opportunity to get in front of the people." He wiped his tired eyes and hid them behind large, silver framed shades. His eccentric dress was one of the many curiosities of the King of Hobbleheim. Another was his size. The Pooks averaged about three feet tall, and he was nearly double that.

"How...why..." Amos began.

"He hadn't always been their King," Luka said softly.

“My liege, if you finish all those grits...you’ll have a hard time slipping into your *fancy pants* tonight,” the advisor said, his mouth curled into a slight sneer as he tugged mournfully on greying curly hair.

“King eats what he wants.”

“I’m only trying to serve your interests, my liege, as an advisor should.”

“You see, Colonel, it’s tough to live up to an image.” The King threw down his food and wiped his hands on a white handkerchief. “Everything is so dreamy when you are young. After you grow up, it becomes too real.”

“Understood,” the Colonel nodded, lips tight, as he made notes in his book.

“Alright, so let’s take it from the top,” the King said. “Is the band ready?”

“I shall summon them.” the Colonel waved to a servant who went running off.

“Do they sound tight?” the King asked.

“They have been practicing all week.”

“How about the curtain?” the King asked.

“It shall be raised.”

“But you gotta do it smoothly. It’s a show. This is the dawning of a new age, Colonel, and in front of the best audience in the world. We gotta do everything with style. Machines gonna save our world.”

The solemn Pook advisor nodded. “Would you like me to raise the curtains for you now?”

“Yeah, let’s do that. And the wards? Did you check the magickal wards?”

“Everything seems to be in order for tonight.”

“Make sure the VIPs are brought in, scanned, no surprises, no weapons. This is a tough crowd, but they’re gonna get wowed.”

As the curtain rose, three burly, shirtless Pook men in tartan kilts with drums, a stringed instrument player, a piper, and two women in black dresses with flutes and horns hurried onto the stage.

“Ah, there you are,” the King said. Even in his chair, he towered over his people. His pale skin was another feature that differentiated him. Pooks were dark-skinned, yet the King was a chalky olive.

“Let’s hear those drums again. It’s gotta have *wow* factor, man. We are selling a vision of the future. Make sure their uniforms are stiff, boots are shiny, and chrome is gleaming. I want everything shiny.”

“They will blind you, your Majesty,” the Colonel said with a sinister sneer. “There is one more thing.”

“Just spit it out, man.”

“Some rumors persist that some rabble-rousers might protest the arrival of the VIPs. They are unhappy about the draft, citing...ethical concerns.”

“Invite them in, man.”

The Colonel stopped, quirking a brow. “Invite them...in?”

“All of them. Tell them to watch the show. If they still wanna protest after, they can do it right in front of me. We got nothing to hide at Hobbleheim castle.”

“Security is a concern.”

“Everybody comes from the same source. If you hate another being, you hate part of yourself. You got my tasters, and my guards and the whole Clockwork legion will be here. Every Witch and Wizard of note is gonna be on hand. And I can handle myself,” the King said, making a knife hand karate gesture and a hi-ya cry. “Don’t worry your curly little head about that.”

The Colonel stiffened. “Is that all, sir?”

The King looked back to the band, “I wanna hear you run through the set. Take it from the top.”

They began to play an energetic instrumental ballad. *A little Celtic*, thought Amos, *with some rock and roll*. Horns, string instruments, percussion, and melodic singing, all infectiously groovy. The King tapped his foot and nodded his head. “Yeah, man, that’s the stuff.”

“Everything will be ready,” the Colonel said as he waved for the servants. “There’s one more thing...”

“Of course,” the King said, nodding. “I need my cape. Have someone go and fetch my shiny cape, and you guys, play that one again, slower,” the King said as a delicate and graceful servant with distinctive amber-colored eyes crept up soundlessly and plucked the key out of his hands, and left without a second glance across the feast hall.

“Wait,” Amos gasped as a cold chill ran down his spine, and the hair on the back of his neck vibrated. “There’s something about that one’s eyes...I know them. Follow that one.” The divination pool obliged, and the scene in the pool shifted. Amos noticed out of the corner of his eyes that Luka

approached the pool, silently observing alongside them. She patted his shoulder comfortingly, and nodded.

They watched the graceful servant escort the trays through the castle halls. The key opened a set of doors that led to both well-used and little-used areas, and she took the path less taken. When she came upon a pair of guards manning a set of double doors, the servant held up a wand and spoke an esoteric chant. A clatter down the hall sent them off to investigate, and the remarkable servant crept through the double doors and dashed down the hallway. It was moth-eaten and had fallen to ruin but had the trappings of former glory. The sound of whimpering from barred rooms caused her to hesitate, but she forged ahead to the end of the hall. With a click and clack, the heavy door pushed open to a courtyard once majestic, adorned with marble sculptures and many birds that fluttered above, singing a curious song despite the apparent dust on the furniture around them. Trees that had lost not a leaf or held a speck of dust framed the walkway to a green door. Save the trees, this was a throne room that had fallen into ruin.

The Door. Amos rocked back. It was the magick Fae-sealed door from his dreams. He had been here before, but the details were scrambled and hazy, lost to time.

The face of the servant melted, revealing the horned, tusked Trickster from his nightmares. Amos gasped and took a step back.

Rhogar gripped him by the shoulder. “Is that the one?”

“That’s the one,” Amos said stoically.

“Asht’arra,” Luka said, nodding grimly. “She’s been on quite a tear this week, it seems. I wonder what’s got into her...”

The Trickster's hand reached for the handle and hesitated, weaving an intricate pattern that shimmered with transmutive, magickal forces.

Amos gasped. His essence, what little he still had, twisted longingly at his farfetched dream to be whole again.

“Do you feel that, Amos?” Luka said. “That’s your soul she’s channeling.”

The Trickster's form twisted, eyes, face, mouth, and nose all bubbling and shifting until Amos gazed upon a mirror image of himself. The mirror image tried to open the door, but it did not budge. Snarling, Shadow-Amos tried again, cursing. The sound of boots stomping down the halls drew closer. With barely contained rage, the trembling Shadow-Amos dipped into a pouch, pulled out a chunk of gum, tore an eyelash off, and rubbed it together. “Desapareesie Ahorae!” Shadow-Amos cried, drawing a sigil that pulsed, and disappeared.

With nothing to focus on, the pool became still and clear once again.

“We haven't much time,” Luka said, “but there are some things you must know.”

A knock at the door interrupted Luka, and a monk entered, breathing rapidly. His eyes were wild, and he was obviously frazzled. He bowed to them all and again to Master Zhi Xuan.

“What is it, brother Sammael?” Master Zhi Xuan said.

“There's a Sprite from the Vale of Shadows here to speak to that one,” the monk nodded to Fis. “And they aren't alone.”

“Can it wait? She's a little busy, I'm afraid,” Master Zhi Xuan said with a patient smile.

“She bears ill tidings,” the monk said grimly. “A legion of Ork raiders has chased her to the gates. The Dark Armies have returned...”

Amos choked. He had seen this before, in a dream, and had forgotten all about it until this moment. The monk glanced around the room nervously, and Amos’ anxiety paralyzed him once again, gripping his chest. No matter what he overcame, the hits just kept on coming. When he spoke, in a daze, he mirrored Sammael’s words, as heavy as the silence that came after them.

“We are at war.”



“I’m sorry, sir,” the tall, lanky human waiter said apologetically, looking downright exhausted, “but we’re about to close.” The Storyteller looked around. Once again, they’d lost track of time and found themselves alone with a weary-looking young man who clearly had places to be.

The Lunar café was quiet now. Hours had passed, and his backside had become an angry lump of pins and needles as he shifted in his chair, but there was no satisfying his neglected body.

“Well, I guess we’re out of time, sadly. Perhaps we can continue another day. I have a quick meeting...and then duty calls back on Earth. I’ll be headed back to Chongqing on the red eye shuttle.”

“No, please, finish!” Alice pleaded, hands clasped together.

“Yeah, come on,” Dave said. “What happens next?”

“You simply can’t expect us to wait,” Cindy, the Red Queen, said. “Tell us what happens. Please.”

“Look, I’m sure you’ve got places to be. You can buy the book.” He smiled and rose to leave.

Alice’s face was so crestfallen that the Storyteller finally conceded. “Fine, fine, when are you back on Big Blue?”

“Tomorrow night is the Chongqing Lunar Cosplay Festival official afterparty at Paradise Walk, and the theme is Chinese Hanfu,” Alice said with a smile. “It will be unforgettable.”

“Okay then. Tomorrow night. Hanfu Parade, Paradise. Got it.” The Storyteller winked and sauntered out the door ahead of them. It was a good thing that she was hooked. There wasn’t much time left.

POETRY ARTS UNIT

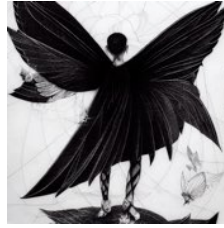


“And on that day, he’ll be the sky;
He’ll be the hills and mountains high.
The sea will kiss him, while castles sunder;
Travel home, by Dragon’s Thunder.”

- Headmaster Luka Starlight, Kronoswons,
‘On the *Power of Prophecy: An Ode to the Turntabler*’

CHAPTER 28

THE RISING TIDE



The unexpected cloudburst shattered the liminal sky back on Earth, drenching the Storyteller as he fled the packed Chongqing subway station. He looked up to the heavens gratefully, inhaling the humid, earthy air of the busy Chongqing streets, peppered with the pungent odor of many varieties of spicy food. After the spartan, manicured, artificial environment on the moon, the Storyteller was always grateful and easily smiled back upon this beautiful, blue rock. Space stations couldn't compare to the simple, clean beauty of Earth. When he first arrived in the early 21st century, fossil fuels burned in every building and in every car. The air in Chongqing had been dirty, hazy, and some of the worst in the entire world. Now, the city and most of China were already Solarpunk carbon sinks, sucking up more carbon than they produced.

With his hat down low and his glasses tinted blue, he was unremarkable as he dashed through the slowly dying rays of the day. Just a face in the crowd of the thousands leaving the underground in the evening throng. Unlike a decade ago, when people woke up at dusk to avoid the unbearable summer heat, these folks had the relaxed energy of people that had already won or lost their daily goals, and he smiled. *Things were going to be okay.*

The Storyteller surfed the ebb and flows of the crowd out of the subway station, under buildings that boasted vertical gardens, wind turbines, and energy-harnessing waterfalls until he arrived at Paradise Walk, Southwest China's first forest-covered carbon-neutral Solarpunk shopping mall since 2028. The sudden tempest couldn't dampen the spirits of a colorful army of cosplayers that swarmed the overstuffed entrance. With a crowd this size, droids were parked out front of the mall, while the colorful anime characters and monstrous demons slowly filtered past the security gates. Some, reluctant to get inside already, huddled under umbrellas, drank coffee, and chatted about the *stellar* Lunar Cosplay Festival while ancient Chinese legends and pop culture icons peered into windows. As he worked his way toward the heart of the crowd at the convention center, he saw more and more traditional Hanfu cosplay costumes. They'd become quite popular amongst young people and fans of fantasy *Wuxia* movies in recent decades. Out of the corner of his eye, a young woman's mouth opened violently wide, exposing rows of razor-sharp teeth and a mouth that burned like an infernal gateway; but as he jumped away, eyes wide and heart racing, she smiled at him. It had been just makeup and special effects. The suddenly claustrophobic Storyteller wiped his brow. Shuddering, he worked through a colorful crowd of Hua Mulan, Kylin Hanfu, Dunhuang Flying Goddess, and some enthusiastic youngsters in Red Hanfu Wedding garb. *It was just a dream, it was just a girl*, he thought, but in his heart, he knew what the price of this story could be. But not telling it would surely be worse.

Approaching the doors, a pair of scrawny bouncers barred his path and shook their heads. "We are full to capacity. You'll have to wait outside for now, or...you can check out our app and watch online, sir." The Storyteller peered closely at the

clerk, a pimply-faced young man with retro horn-rimmed spectacles and short hair. Behind every costume was a person, just having a human experience. “Sure, I’ll get some grub. See you later.”

He made his way back through the crowded hall to the food street. Only one food shop didn’t have a lineup around the corner, so it would be Oodles of Noodles. The neon sign’s N pulsed and flickered existentially. As he entered, the door chimed. A few orphaned cosplayers from the Studio Ghibli universe and a handful of traditional Hanfu Chinese characters glanced at him. Perhaps they, too, had arrived too late to get inside on the shenanigans. He approached the cash.

“Can I have some noodles and soy milk?”

“Please use the app, sir,” the bored cashier said while playing a mobile game. His device wirelessly transmits augmented and virtual reality artifacts into the boy’s mind.

“But you’re right there,” said the bewildered Storyteller.

“The app, please,” the cashier repeated.

The Storyteller sat down, realized he didn’t have the app, walked back to the cash, and scanned the QR code on the glass counter. His device opened a mini-program where he was treated to pictures of various beverages and a multitude of noodle dishes. He picked a combo, scanned the mobile payment, and the cash beeped with the notification.

The lazy cashier stood back up in annoyance and began to make the order.

The Storyteller laughed, rubbed his eyes, and spread his soaked jacket over the back of his chair. The order came up. “Chickpea,” the uncaring youth brayed without conviction.

The Storyteller rose. “I’m chickpea.”

Back at his table, The Storyteller sipped his warm soy milk and watched the crowd milling about outside. It was near the end.

“It can’t rain all the time,” called a familiar voice, and he turned to see Dave, face painted in white with the long black hair wig, grey silken robe, and red umbrella of the Swordsman from the Wuxia Couple.

“Dave, right?” He asked.

“Why aren’t you over there?” Dave asked, gesturing wildly to the crowd across the road.

“I could ask you the same thing,” the Storyteller said with a laugh. “You look like you’d fit right in.”

“I was late getting out the door,” Dave said, clearly bummed. “It’s packed now.”

“Appears so,” the Storyteller agreed, between bites of noodles.

“They’re there to see you, man,” Dave said.

“You’re kidding,” the Storyteller said with a laugh and then bristled. “You’re not kidding?”

“It’s true—at least, some of them are. Alice’s post went viral last night, inviting the festival afterparty to experience the epic end of Amos. And you’re not even there!” Dave laughed as if it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard.

The Storyteller sighed. “Life is what happens when you’re stuck in traffic...you never know, do you?”

“*You* do, of course,” Dave said. “You’re the *Storyteller*. Can you tell me? Here...,”

This was not, of course, what the Storyteller had planned. “Well, I don’t know. I was telling your friend, Alice, and—”

“No, no man, hold on. *Technology*, see—” Dave said and opened his phone. “Check this out,” He smashed a few buttons and then pointed it at the Storyteller. “Okay, yeah! Now it’s streaming to Alice and the crowd at the bookstore. Everywhere actually, across the world.”

“The whole world?” The Storyteller frowned. “Anyone can tune in and see that I’m here, now?”

“Yeah! I’m sure it won’t hurt your book sales,” Dave grinned and bowed, the elegant Swordsman. “I’m Cosplay Dave, here live at the Chongqing Hanfu Afterparty, and it’s my honor to introduce your esteemed Storyteller to finish the unforgettable tale of Amos.” Dave pointed at the Storyteller. “Are you ready? We’re live....”

The Storyteller sipped his warm soy milk and thought for a moment before glancing back to Dave’s live stream. He stood up, glanced toward the door, and then to the cosplayers in the corner who gazed from their phones to him in surprise. He sighed and nodded. “Well, well. Good morning, world,” he said, sitting back down and rubbing his hands together with a smile. “Hello, old friends, very old friends, and new ones, too. You may recognize me, you may not, but I’ll be your Storyteller tonight. Please don’t stop me until the end. We’re so close now. Where were we? Oh, yes. It was time for Fis to drink some tea...”



“War?” Amos asked. “Couldn’t they do it tomorrow?”

“It’s just a patrol of raiders, perhaps,” Master Zhi Xuan said, stroking his chin. “Unusual, that they would be so bold.”

“No,” Sammael said. “They are like a dark cloud on the horizon. They pour off boats, like locusts.”

The stunned companions were shocked to silence. In the end, it was Master Zhi Xuan who spoke first. “Brother Sammael, Jupe, please help our brothers at the gate. The Ritual must not be interrupted.”

Jupe nodded and gave Master Zhi Xuan the prepared teapot, a dark ceramic kettle that shimmered slightly with runes that traced augurical energies by the candlelight, then June and Sammael bowed and left.

“Amos, take the flower,” Headmaster Starlight said, and moved closer to Fis. Rhogar took up a guard position in front of the door.

Amos reached into the scrying pool and carefully plucked the Caoteng flower once again. The incredible powers of augury and enchantment coursed through his prickling fingers.

“Place the flower inside the teapot, Master Amos,” Master Zhi Xuan said.

“Master Amos?” Amos said with a laugh as he placed the special flower inside the pot.

“You have mastered the Caves of Caoteng and mastered yourself,” Master Zhi Xuan said, nodding.

Amos looked like he’d been slapped. He finally asked, “So what now?”

“Now we wait,” Master Zhi Xuan whispered. “It’s steeping.”

Luka smiled and opened her hands. “Amos, while Fis is healing, you must let her recover alone. If you are still with her, you may be bound to her forever.

“What can...”

“You can come and sit with me for a while,” Luka said. “I promise to be kind.”

Amos nodded, and before he had time to change his mind again, he focused on his spirit inside Fis and flew out of her ear. In the blackness of lonely space, ungrounded, he followed the complex prism of light that was Luka Starlight’s aura, a safe harbor. There was so much of her, Amos thought. Her light was so intense—how powerful, how wise she was. Amos entered and was amazed.

Hi Amos, Luka said. Welcome.

Thank you, Headmaster Starlight.

Fis stumbled, as the adrenaline that had kept her going these last moments leaked from her system, and Master Zhi Xuan held the small warrior by her shoulders, steadying her. “Easy, little brave one. It’s time now. Just hang in there one more moment.” Her noodly legs buckled and Master Zhi Xuan set her back down upon a meditation cushion.

Luka poured the tea into a cup and set the pot down. He passed the cup to Fis with two hands, and Master Zhi Xuan helped her jerking hands to hold the precious tea steady. Amos got to see her as the others had. Her eyes were wretched pools of darkness that leaked a dark brown sappy blood down cheeks that crawled with tendrils of rootlike structures crisscrossing her face and neck. The bubbles and boils that had infected her back crawled along the sides of her neck, wiggling and pulsating with wickedness.

Luka brought the teacup to her mouth, and Fis somehow steadied herself and smiled and blew into the cup to cool the tea, and then she took a sip.

“You must drink it all,” Luka said. Fis nodded and finished it off. Nothing happened for a moment, and then, the black tendrils that crisscrossed her skin writhed in anger.

Amos tensed. *What’s happening?*

Patience, child, came Luka’s voice to him. *Have faith.*

“Lie her down, on her side,” Master Zhi Xuan said. “And let the blessings of the Ancient work its magick.” Luka and the Master helped Fis down, on her side. Amos watched in horror as the tendrils wriggled and pulsed and seemed to squeeze Fis out of her skin, and her eyes rolled back into her head. The blood flowed down her eyes faster now, and her ears bled too as she convulsed.

“Is she...?” Amos said, struggling to speak through Luka’s powerful form.

“She needs to rest, her body has been through too much, but the blessing of Caoteng is strong. In the end, it will depend on her,” Master Zhi Xuan said, gently holding her to the cushion.

“I’m afraid we may not have much in the way of time,” Rhogar said grimly. “But in that regard, I must excuse myself, for my sword craves the blood of Orks. They will not penetrate the Abbey today.”

“I shall join you,” Master Zhi Xuan said. “Luka, can you keep an eye on—”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ve got her,” Luka said. “You go and defend your Abbey,” she smiled kindly, although her eyes blazed with fire. “The accumulated knowledge and history

preserved here must not fall to darkness today.” She let out a long and heavy sigh when she was alone with Amos and Fis in the small meditation chamber. For a long moment, they simply watched Fis in silence.

What time is this feast at Hobbleheim? Amos asked. They held Fis carefully, but the dark tendrils were already shrinking on Fis’ sweaty face.

“Sundown,” said Luka. “Ah,” she nodded to the door. A moment later, he heard a buzzing of wings. “The messenger has arrived.”

A flashing ball of light blazed into the room, swirling excitedly around for a moment before settling next to Headmaster Starlight and the resting form of Fis.

What is it? Amos asked.

A sprite, Luka said. *From the Vale of Shadows.*

“Greetings, Fae messenger,” Luka said, nodding her head.

The Sprite bounced excitedly around the room before settling in front of Fis. Small as a finger, Amos could make out distinctive features and glittering chromatic wings once she stopped streaking around. When she spoke, her voice was tinny and high-pitched. “Greetings, Luka Starlight. I have a message for Fis of the Summer Vale.”

“Fis,” Amos said and gently shook her. She didn’t react. On impulse, he left Luka and flew directly into her ear. *Fis we need you,* he said from inside her. Her eyes fluttered open, and they were an intense lavender, speckled with shimmering gold. *Marked by the Dragon’s gift.*

“Fis,” the Sprite began, “War is imminent! The Vale is Under Attack. Orkadian fleets have landed upon the shore. A massive fleet.”

Fis was startled for a moment, then asked, “how many?” She sat up, rubbing her jaw and blinking rapidly, but she seemed to be ok.

“A thousand boats landing upon many shores. They will soon swarm across the land into the Vale. We need all defenders. Even you.”

Amos asked, “Is the way still clear to Hobbleheim?”

“No. It most certainly is not. The gates are blocked, the road is teeming with Orks, but you must return to protect the Vale.”

Amos’ heart sunk. After everything they had been through, an army of ferocious Orks, many thousands strong, still stood between him and the castle where the huli jing waited.

Luka stood. “I must send a message to the school. Please excuse me,” and walked to the window.

What will we do? Amos asked, wracking his brain.

I must return. The Summer Queen has commanded me.

Amos gulped, suddenly dizzy. Without Fis’ help, he was just a ghost, floating in an endless abyss. He never considered that she would abandon him at the finish line.

Master Zhi Xuan and Rhogar returned, looking ruffled. “We are going to lock down the Abbey. We must go now,” Master Zhi Xuan said. “A tunnel under the Abbey will take you outside.”

“Fis,” the Sprite shrieked in irritation. “The Summer Queen calls you back to defend the Vale. You must return at once.”

Fis waffled, torn between duty and honor as she marinated in Amos’ utter despair and hopelessness, but it solidified upon

reflection, and she stiffened and stood shakily and bowed her head to the Sprite.

“No,” Fis said. “Fair Gelatyx, thank you for your message and for taking this dangerous journey, but you must return the message to the Summer Queen. You can tell her that I will complete my mission to help the Vale and have sworn to aid this Fae-touched boy. I will return as soon as I can.”

The Sprite blazed around them in a dizzying silver blur of high-pitched irritation.

“But but but but but but but but but,” the Sprite sputtered. “You swore an oath. **AN OATH!**”

“To help the Vale, and so I shall,” Fis said. Without waiting, she turned to Master Zhi Xuan, “Let’s go. I’m ready.”

The Sprite flew once around the room in a blinding streak of rage and out the door, defeated.

“How will we make it through the Orkadian hoard?” Amos asked. “Rhogar, can you summon your snail friends?”

Rhogar shook his head. “It will not be safe to fly now. We must find another way.”

Amos’ heart sunk. To come this far, only to be left without hope. Suddenly, a shimmer of light caught their eye, and Luka weaved her hands together in a complex pattern, causing starlight to twinkle all around her. Her third eye opened. It radiated all the celestial hues of deep space nebulae. Amos was awed once again by the incredible power Luka manipulated.

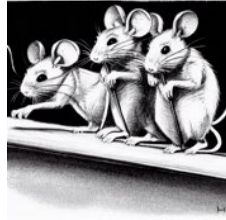
“Pórtas diástasis,” she cried, opening a portal of radiant light in front of her. She turned back to smile at them. “We have no time to lose, then, do we?”

Amos, wiping tears from Fis' cheeks, smiled. "You're taking us?"

Luka nodded. "To Hobbleheim."

CHAPTER 29

ALMS FOR THE POOR



Amos twisted this way and that through a kaleidoscopic starburst, turned inside and out, and back again. Finally, with a most peculiar reverse sucking sensation, they were born again at the other end.

Blinking rapidly, they stood in the shadow of an Inn, in a dark alley. The air burned acrid to Amos' mouth, and he smelled fire and what he could only describe as burning garbage. A chalky ash fluttered into the alley from the road, and as Amos' ears ceased ringing, he became aware of the chatter of a crowd, speaking in a lilting, foreign accent.

Headmaster Luka Starlight was scratching her chin and staring up at the grey sky in confusion. "That didn't quite work," she said. "They must have barred entrance by magical means. Perhaps I can try again—there must be a summoning gate by the base of the castle."

Amos and Fis, followed by Rhogar and Master Zhi Xuan, approached Headmaster Starlight and the glowing portal she had conjured. The pair held their weapons—a wooden staff and a great sword—and appeared resolute.

Headmaster Starlight held up a finger. "Now, now. They're expecting me, not this gang of rabble-rousers. This won't quite do." Scrunching one eye, she maintained the portal with one

hand while she drew an arcane sigil in front of them with the other hand. Above her nose, her third eye pulsed as bright as the twinkling starlight. Amos blinked and looked away.

“Polýmorfás pontíki,” she said, and a spellbinding flash filled brightened the alley with the light of new born stars, wrapping them in a blanket of chromatic chaos energy. Luka grew taller and taller, and the room larger and larger. Master Zhi Xuan’s ears grew cartoonishly floppy, and Rhogar sprouted grey whiskers and a long tail. Looking down at his hands, Amos wriggled little white paws. They had become mice.

“Climb into my pocket,” Luka said.

After a brief moment of acclimatization, the three mice climbed up Luka’s robes until they scaled the summit of her pocket and crawled inside. At that moment, in the warmth of a mouse nest and surrounded by friends, Amos grinned.

“Hold onto your tails,” Luka said, and for the second time, Amos was turned inside out and back again.

This time, he bit Fis’ tongue and it stung quite a bit and when it felt like they were rightside-out again, Amos poked a little mouse head out to see a massive stone castle upon a hill with twisting spiral towers that overlooked the hungry seas and a village choked with thick, acrid smog.

A crowd of working-class masked Pooks milled about the gates that led up the hill to the majestic garden walkway up to the castle proper. Amos gagged as the putrid smoke tickled his nose and burned his lungs. The smog was oppressive at the gates, but the sky was clear at the castle. In the sky, bursts of magical light shone as a beacon of the King’s festivities, and illusory energies, like fireworks, pulsed fire into the sky overhead.

An enormous brown thumb gently poked him deep into the pocket. “Okay, here we are,” whispered Luka, “as close as we could get, the whole castle is warded. Be quiet.”

“Hail, strange one. Please step forward and make yourself known,” called a stern voice.

“Luka Starlight of Kronoswons School of Magick.”

“Hold, please...Ah, yes. Welcome, Headmaster Starlight. Please, come this way. We’re just letting in a crowd from the villages of Hobbleheim and Rivenhallow. Would you care for a lemonade?”

“No, thank you,” Luka said.

“All right, well, this is Daemon. Daemon will escort you to the VIP area.”

“Hello, headmaster,” grated a niggling voice. “I’m Daemon. Please come with me.”

“A goblin at Hobbleheim?” Luka said. “What a surprise.”

“Oh, the King has employed many of us for quite some time. Decent pay, enviable benefits. Come, follow me to the VIP line.”

A goblin? Amos said.

They’re a nasty sort, said Fis. *Greedy, selfish, and usually evil.*

Just like in my games, Amos said.

Lucky you.

Luka shuffled a few steps forward towards another group of people chatting.

“Hello,” said a cracking, accented voice that made Amos want to poke his head back out, but Fis stopped him. “Nice to

zee you, Luka.”

“Professor Plouffe,” Luka said with icy politeness, “and Headmaster Sloob.”

“Good day to you, Mistress Starlight,” came a smooth, sugary voice that made Amos’ mouse hairs stand on end.

Something bumped into them as they waited, and Amos felt a violent yank on Luka’s robes. “Alms for the poor? Got a penny for the downtrodden?” A drunken Pook slurred from close to their pocket, reeking of sweet, fermented Pook grapes. “Before the mad King came, we had no jails, no criminals, no locks or keys, and no thieves. Now we’ve got hard work and poverty, and I’d like to feed my lil’ ones today if you don’t mind, mistress.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Luka said, “but I have no coin.”

“I can tell you’re no pauper—too clean, you—”

“Getaway, you filthy thing,” said the slick creepy one, and a moment later, there came a cry of pain. “Keep walking, please,” said Daemon, and they moved on through the crowd.

“That poor man,” Luka said.

“Poor indeed,” croaked Plouffe.

“Ah, he was a drunk. Every drunk’s got a story,” said Daemon.

“It doesn’t mean he isn’t hurting,” Luka said.

“This way,” Damon said, and a key scraped against a door, and it creaked open.

Luka’s boots rang out inside the castle, and the crowd died away.

“Please approach the security frame,” beckoned a Pook soldier in a lilting, musical cadence. “We must check all guests for weapons and surprises. Anything not allowed inside the castle will be placed in a secure locker until you leave. Headmaster Starlight, would you like to go first?”

“Oh, please, let the Slowmorth faculty go ahead.”

“Why, what a surprise,” replied the buttery voice of Headmaster Sloob.

“I thought you’d enjoy being first for once,” Luka said with a laugh, and the mirth leaked from their cruel mouths, and they left Luka and the mice alone.

“Now,” Luka whispered and opened her pocket for them. The three blind mice all scrambled into her hand and down her robe.

Luka followed the other two professors—one a tall, thin, dapper Troll in a long, brass-buckled leather jacket, the other a menacing Ork in a flowing skirt, black and white corset with puffy sleeves, and a neck ruff. Amos froze, and his gaze lingered upon the dangerous-looking wizards, but the Ork with puffed sleeves glanced at the mice with such gruesome blood-red eyes that Amos shivered, as a cold chill dripped down his spine. The one they had called Sloob growled with two protruding lower tusks and hissed like an angry anole lizard, but just then Luka’s robe swooshed between them cutting off line of sight, and Amos scrambled to get them under a table before they could be spotted again.

The mice crawled past the scanning gate and into the bustling halls of the keep without attracting further attention.

“Now what?” Rhogar asked.

“We get the castle’s layout down,” said Fis. “And formulate our plan.”

“We sneak. Be wary of cats,” Master Zhi Xuan said.

Cats. He wondered if Thunder was still on the beach with Medusa. “How long will this spell last?” Amos asked, and the other two shrugged helplessly. They had forgotten to ask.

CHAPTER 30

THE SQUEAKY WHEEL



The three mice charged blindly down the castle's tattered velvet-covered halls but stopped quickly when they reached a fork in the corridor. Amos gazed down each, dizzily holding his stomach. Which way would take them to the fox-spirit, and his soul?

“Forward, left, or right?” Rhogar growled.

Amos gasped, clutching his head.

“What is it, Master Amos?” Master Zhi Xuan said.

“I can feel...a fluttering...I've been here, not long ago.”

“Can you tell which way?” Master Zhi Xuan asked.

“I don't know.”

“So, let's get the lay of the land,” said Rhogar. “Your fox-spirit must be somewhere.”

“Divide and conquer,” said Master Zhi Xuan.

“If anyone notices us, we must act very mouselike,” Amos said. “Where should we meet up? When?”

“Let's scout about,” said Master Zhi Xuan, “We must take advantage of our enemy's ignorance. Yes, Rhogar, information is the key to victory.”

“The kitchen,” Rhogar said, with a nod to the wise monk in mouse form. “15 minutes or so. Or when you .. begin to change back.”

Amos clapped, “let’s go team!” and they split up. The duo of Fis and Amos raced by guest quarters along the halls festooned with rich velvet tapestries and curtains. After a while, the hall began to look more worn, with moth-eaten curtains. They continued until they were chasing the decadent aroma of food that led them to the kitchen. Around the corner stalked a wicked-looking giant tabby cat, coolly ambling about. It froze and flashed them a wicked grin of razor-sharp teeth. “Meow?”

“Run!” Amos cried, and they scrambled into an open doorway and under a table. The cat tumbled after them and knocked over a candle holder. Flames hissed upon the old rug, and Amos scrambled under a dresser and out the other side, but the cat closed the distance again.

A glimmer of light from the baseboard caught his attention, and Amos scurried into the tiny hole in the wall. “We can’t go out, but maybe we can go further in,” Amos said. Soon, the heady and decadent aroma of mouth-watering flavors made Amos’ stomach growl. As they came upon the kitchen, frenzied Pook cooks yelled and stomped about as they arrived and peeked inside. Amos scuttled about to avoid one foot after another. As the shadow of a boot loomed over them, Amos froze, but a little brown mouse pulled him to safety and into a quiet corner of the pantry, where a multitude of squeaky cries welcomed Amos into a gathering of mice.

“Why thank you,” Amos said. “You saved me from becoming rat soup, miss...”

“Dolores, my name is Dolores. Don’t get me started with rats,” said the little brown mouse with a dramatic sigh. “You’re new here.”

“We’re Famous, and...yes, just visiting. What’s going on?”

“A lot. We can’t get any food because the rats hoard all the cheese, so we’re fighting back!”

It was true. A mischievous swarm of fat rats on the top shelf was hoarding a veritable mountain of cheese and other fruits. Below them, dozens of mice gathered to listen to one old white mouse, who stood atop the stub of a white wax candle and addressed them.

“The problems we face did not come down from the heavens. It is not gods that have starved our mice,” cried the old mouse, “but the selfish decisions of a few rats.”

A polite smattering of applause encouraged him, and he stood a little taller upon the candle stump.

“Who is that?” Amos whispered to Dolores.

“Oh, he’s Uncle Bertrand,” Dolores said. “He’s the oldest mouse in the kitchen, and today he’s challenging the rats up top.” She made a frightened gesture to the rats, who were comfortably above the fray, lounging, munching, and laughing.

“We cannot allow these fat rats to grow fatter by stepping over starving mice. That does not make an ethical kitchen,” proclaimed Uncle Bertrand. “We are responsible for allowing the rich rats to get richer; 1% of the rodents hoarding 99% of the cheese. As the former King of Hobbleheim, Wilner Laric Bramblepot, reminded us: “The measure of our progress as a civil society is not whether we add more cheese to the

abundance of those who have very much, it is whether we provide enough cheese for those who have very little.”

The mice gathered around him. A few whistled, feeling emboldened. The clapping got louder.

Dolores poked Amos and pointed to two white mice standing around awkwardly on the outskirts: a lean one and a brick house. “Are those your friends too?”

Amos nodded. It was indeed Master Zhi Xuan and Rhogar. He waved them over.

“What did you find?” the mousey monk asked Amos.

“A quite scary cat,” Amos said with a frown. “And some sort of mouse revolution,” Amos said. “Arguing about the fair distribution of stolen cheese.”

“We should continue searching for your soul,” Rhogar growled. “The feast will be soon.”

Noticing Amos’s reluctance to leave Dolores’ side, Master Zhi Xuan raised a finger. “Hold, my brave friend. By three methods, may we learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is most noble. Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third, by experience, which is the bitterest. Amos, I believe, is learning the macro by the micro.”

Amos nodded. “Yes, I must see what comes of this tiny revolution.”

Old Bertrand continued. “...you see, fat rats have cultivated, into fine art, the ability to divide our mice population into cliques, that’s what they do. And while we fight for the scraps, they’re hoarding a literal mountain of cheese.”

A few mice waved paws up at the rats and screeched in protest. The rats pretended not to notice, but Amos could tell they were getting agitated.

“We live in a kitchen that worships the acquisition of cheese rather than caring for the poorest of mice. I don’t think that is the kind of kitchen we should be living in.”

The mice clapped louder and began to call out, “Uncle Bert! Uncle Bert!”

“It’s not about me. It’s about we...together!” The old mouse cried. “We don’t need plans to get more cheese for the rats. This system is grotesquely failing the average mouse. There is no justice when—”

THunk! With a floor-shaking rattle, one of the fat rats dropped down the shelf to land in front of the gathered crowd.

THunk-! A second giant grey rat hopped down next to the first. They crossed their arms over their chest, shook their heads, and walked toward old Uncle Bert. The mice nervously parted, clearing the way. Bert held his ground.

Amos cried out, “No! Don’t hurt him!”

The mice, and the rats, all turned in surprise, including Dolores, who shrunk away from his side, and suddenly one hundred beady eyes shone toward him.

Amos was emboldened. “You don’t scare me with your bully tactics and cheap tricks! Pick on someone your own size.”

The rats laughed, but when Amos did not flinch, they charged him, eyes blazing in anger.

Are you sure, Amos? Fis asked.

This is your fight, too, Amos said. He's an old man, and they're bullies. So what if they're only mice? We're only mice too, but wrong is wrong.

I can respect that, Fis said.

Uncle Bert continued, speaking faster and more frantically. “Change comes, even in the face of overwhelming odds, when we don’t give up. Even in the end, we must push forward because that is when every inch counts. When every bit of force is rallied against us, that is when we are closest to achieving our dream of a more equitable society for all mice.”

“Get out of the kitchen,” hollered a fat brown rat.

“I built the damn kitchen,” grumbled Uncle Bert, and then, suddenly, the first rat reached Fis and swiped with a massive, dirty paw. Fis ducked and kicked out at the rat’s foot, knocking the brown giant off balance, and it tumbled into a dusty corner. She squared up with the second rat, who hissed and nipped at where Fis was, but in a flash, Fis dropped into a perfect set of splits and punched that dark grey rat in its groin. It groaned in pain, reeling back, and Fis leaped up and jammed her mouse knee right into the rat’s face. It dropped to the ground.

You are a badass mouse, Amos said.

I am feeling amazing, again, thanks to you, Fis said.

THunk—THuunk— THuuuunk. Other rats had decided to hop down, throwing their imposing size and weight around. Amos was soon surrounded. The mice had nervously retreated to a towering pile of plates, safely watching in the distance. Old Uncle Bert was surrounded by rats, too, trapped upon his candle stub. The shadows stretched long, making the rats appear towering.

“Who’s your leader?” Amos called. “I challenge you for the kitchen. If I win, you have to do things differently. You’re not going to be in charge anymore.”

“I’m in charge,” said a slick-looking sewer rat with large front teeth and greasy hair, combed back over its large, bulbous head. “When you mess with The River, you end up in the sewer.” He laughed, and the lackey rats around him laughed, too.

“So, you’re ‘The River,’ I take it?”

The menacing opponent smiled daggers in acknowledgement.

They’re bullies, Amos said, and bullies are cowards. Let’s give River Rat a fight he won’t forget.

“Hey, is that a wishbone?”

“You wish,” snarled River.

“Bring it over. The winner gets to choose the contest.”

River waved the wishbone. “It’s your funeral, runt.”

“Use your wrist,” called Master Zhi Xuan.

Fis hopped up and grabbed hold of it. As River jerked away, Fis, prepared for his deception, swung with it, flipping acrobatically and twisting hard with a brittle crack. She landed in a three-point stance, the larger half in her hands. River held the smaller end.

“Well, if I call the wishbone our first trial, then we’re almost done, aren’t we?”

“Funny guy, no way, I know what I’m choosing: to pummel you with my fists.”

“Well, I choose a riddle battle and a public speaking contest.”

“A what? A squeaking contest?” He laughed. “That’s stupid.”

“What kind of cheese likes to shoot hoops?” Amos asked with a smile.

“Shoot hoops? Cheese, I don’t know?”

“Swish Cheese!” Amos said and laughed.

“I’m gonna mash you into jam!” River cried and lunged.

Fis rolled out of the way as the gigantic rat slammed down where Fis had just been, but she was already scrambling up to the top shelf. On the way, she barely avoided two nasty nips and swipes. Amos grabbed a walnut from a pile of hoarded food and waited for River to hop up next to him. “Eat this, you selfish bully!” Amos cried and shoved the walnut into River’s surprised mouth, where it lodged in his throat.

Choking, River twisted and fell backward off the shelf. Amos hopped down after him, standing with one foot on River, who had begun to turn blue in the face.

“Do you give up?” Amos growled in his best Rhogar roar.

River’s eyes bulged.

Amos waited as he started to turn a purplish blue and asked again. “Do you give up? I’ll help you if you give up.”

River trembled in anger but finally, in desperation, nodded. Fis slipped behind him, squeezed hard at his stomach, and River managed to cough up the cheesy walnut.

River gazed up in dismay. “That wasn’t even fair.”

Amos eyeballed the other rats. “Your rat lost. I won. Now get him out of here.”

Heck yeah, Amos, Fis said. We really kicked some rat butt.

Amos was astounded by how easy it had been to do the right thing when it mattered. *We did. We showed those bullies what’s up,* Amos said, and they grinned.

A pair of rats carried River away. Amos turned back to the crowd, “Listen, please, listen to me. Listen to Uncle Bertrand.” He stood next to the old mouse on the candle stub. “When we stand together, there is nothing we can’t accomplish.”

“That is correct. What my young mouse friend said is true,” Uncle Bert said, his gruff truthiness ringing out across the pantry. “This immoral, unsustainable economy is not what Hobbenheim is supposed to be about. Progress is great, but filling the air with smoke and grime isn’t healthy for anybody. The change begins when we say to the elite rats: “You can’t have it all. And it goes beyond the kitchen. We can’t let the King of Hobbenheim continue to send our fruit to Orkadia while millions of hard-working mice... and Pooks are just trying to make a living. We will not allow them to hide behind cheese havens while the poorest mice go hungry.”

The mice cheered, and Amos shook the old mouse’s hand vigorously. “You’re in charge now,” Amos said. “If I hear these rats are causing trouble again, I’m coming back, and they will regret it. Things are going to be different in Hobbenheim, starting today.”

Uncle Bert shed a single tear and hugged young Amos. “Look, rats. There’s a place for you in the kitchen, but it’s not at the top anymore. We control the means of production and acquisition!”

The mice cheered and held up uncle Bert on their shoulders. They had been so noisy that they didn't hear the arrival of gigantic brown leather shoes until the kitchen worker who wore them screamed and dropped a pot of soup. The action caused a deluge of tomato soup to flood the assembly.

Amos slipped and fell, but Rhogar grabbed him by the shoulders and yanked him back to his feet. They took off after Master Zhi Xuan, who led them toward the mouse hole they'd previously arrived through.

Servants ran back and forth inside the kitchen, filling plates with fruits, meats, and soups. Amos scampered up the counter and whistled for the pair to follow, where they hid inside a bunch of grapes on a silver fruit tray. Their tray was picked up and carried down a long hallway in a few moments. They traveled to a giant courtyard packed with thousands of Pooks who'd gathered to enjoy the King's big ball and sat down on a crowded table atop a circular glass disk, which began to spin slowly, giving them a revolving view of the room. After a few moments, a queasy seasickness bubbled up in his fluffy mouse belly.

"What's happening?" Amos asked, and they peered into the translucent glass disk. Directly under them, they caught a streak of starlight, a silvery shimmer, and the barely perceptible high-pitched grunt of entrapped Sprites.

"Oh no," said Fis. "They've bound Sprites to rotate the buffet trays around the table automagickally. It's unseemly. We have to stop it!" A huge, stubby-fingered hand crept towards the bunch of grapes that hid the trio of mice, and they ducked back to the bottom, but it disappeared in favor of a selection of ripe cheeses next door.

“We will,” Amos said, “as soon as we can. So, what did you figure out?” Amos asked.

“I found the royal quarters, where the King and his guard live,” said Rhogar. “It was heavily guarded, and they had cats,” he snarled. “Mean cats.”

“How about you, Master Zhi Xuan?” Amos asked.

“I believe I found the old quarters, where guards talked about a plan to tour a procession of VIP guests after dinner to open an extraordinary door.”

“Bingo! That’s where the Trickster will be,” Amos said. “I know it—we have to get there before the end of the ball.”

As the guests of honor took their seats at the front of the hall, the roar of the villagers was overwhelming. Some cheered, others booed, and some argued about what kind of sound they should be making altogether. It was a dizzying onslaught of stimulation for a moment, but when the King stood up, everyone hushed, craned their necks, and waited for him to speak.

CHAPTER 31

THE KING'S BIG BALL



All eyes were on the King as he rose at the head of the elevated banquet table. He was a sparkling, gaudy man in a high-collared, gem-encrusted white jumpsuit. As he stood, surrounded by his VIP guests at the central table, he faced the crowd, thousands of city folk, factory workers, fishermen, farmers and a various assortment of Pook. Some of the guests Amos knew, and some simply amazed him. Luka sat near a couple of colorful wizards but chatted with Mildred and Levana. Near them was a startling Elephant-man. The Duke was dapper in a pristine cream suit and his wide-brimmed vanilla hat, just sitting quietly and waiting for something to happen. Several dark-robed figures gave Amos the creeps, and next to them were the Slowmorth professors he had seen earlier. A lion-faced shaman, a tall feather-plumed troll, and the Purple Prince who glittered in a three-piece suit of swirling stardust sat next to Aire Dara who looked resplendent in a lovely ballroom gown. The Elf wizard's crown of blue horns was hidden behind her hair, but no, Amos blinked. They had vanished. Next to her was a little glimpse of a floppy hat that might just have been Lemengnoost.

“Now, I want to address the elephant in the room,” the King began, speaking into a scepter that amplified his voice so

it carried all the way to the back.

The hulking elephantine man spat out his wine and shot to his feet.

Who's that? What's that? Amos asked.

A Loxodon, Fis said. A very angry Loxodon.

The Loxodon was massive and had the face of an elephant, leathery grey skin, and enormous, floppy ears. He wore a navy blue robe with sigils of stars that danced with power.

The King laughed, “Not you, Moon-Eye,” he said. “I’m referring to the reason you’re all here today. I heard some of you in the realm have a nickname for me that isn’t so nice, but I assure you, I’ve got a good cause for celebration. And it’s not just the plates of delicious food and rare beasts we’ve hunted from around An’yatra, far beyond Hobbleheim’s borders. And it’s not just our famous and important guests who’ve come to bow to me. It’s that and more. There’s much more.”

“Sit down, Ghanonoth,” Dara Aire’s dissonant whisper cut through murmuring mages and a raucous crowd, yet Amos heard as if he’d been beside them. “Forget about it. It was a long time ago.”

“I can never forget,” Moon-Eye boomed, and his face betrayed sorrow and fury, but he sat and drained his mug in one gulp.

“I realize,” the King said, “that others have come here bearing tidings of war.”

A worried murmur rocked the crowd again.

The King beat his scepter on the stage, and a ripple of power blasted Amos’ ears back. Everything was eerily silent for a few moments. The King grinned and nodded. “Thank

you, thank you very much. There are Orks in the sea, it's true, but our cannons keep them from landing.”

A rustling swirled through the crowd, but the King pushed forward.

“Tonight, we'll show you surprises that will fill your heart with pride and faith in my governance in Hobbleheim. So, I want to say again thank you for coming to our ball. You know, a lot of people seem to think I started this kingdom, but Hobbleheim was here a long time before I came along.”

After a polite smattering of applause, Amos heard scattered calls of “hail the true king!”

Chrome-burnished guards from the front peered into the crowd, looking for the hecklers, but the King dismissed it with a hand. “Now that might hurt, but the truth hurts, see; the truth is like our suns. You can shut them out, but they ain't goin' away.” The King waved. “I want to thank my guests for accepting my invitation tonight. Tonight, we're gonna open a door that they said couldn't be opened.” The head table of Witches and Wizards reacted with varying degrees of disbelief—everyone but the Duke, who smiled patiently and then, as if feeling the weight of Amos' gaze, turned to look at him and winked. Amos scurried deeper into the grapes and waited to the count of five before his tiny little nose poked out again.

“We're going to have a contest to see who can open that door and earn my favor. Whoever does this will be owed a great service that will be both *undeniable* and *timeless*. For the rest of you, this will be a show for you all to remember, a story you'll be telling for the rest of your lives.”

Some of the crowd applauded, but others still shouted and jeered.

“I know I’ve been swamped lately,” the King confided to the crowd, “but I’ve been trying to protect this kingdom, and that’s a big job. Orkadia, you know, it’s a big army, the biggest, but I want y’all to see for yourselves what I’ve been up to. If you’re angry at me, I invite you to the front. If you feel slighted by my work, you deserve a front-row seat.”

The King’s elite guard worked through the crowd, jostling through the onlookers with their bulky armor and smoking, whirling chrome backpacks. They brought the hecklers, catcallers, nay-sayers, and nonbelievers to the front.

“Now, before we go any farther, I want to turn the stage over to an extraordinary guest, someone who has not accepted a social invitation—as far as I know, and please correct me if I’m wrong—in the many years I’ve been King, until I, your illustrious monarch, personally sent for him. In fact, he was more myth than man until tonight. Isn’t that true?” The King cajoled the crowd with an evangelical charisma. “When your King invited him here to Castle Hobbleheim, he agreed to bestow upon us a work of art that will be everlasting—a hallmark of the future of our great nation. Please put your hands together and give a big, warm, Hobbleheim welcome for the man, the legend, the Great White Wizard of the South, make some noise for *The Duke*.”

The Duke stood slowly and gracefully, taking his time to smile almost apologetically for being the center of attention. He walked with catlike grace toward the King, who reluctantly stepped back to give the Duke the space to work. The Duke turned to face the assembled crowd and smiled humbly. The crowd hushed and waited. The Duke closed his eyes and spread his arms as if to hug the entire crowd in his arms, and then he weaved his arms in bewitching gestures to spin a sort of invisible ball, back and forth, until it became crystalline, as

it danced across his arms with a subtle shimmer—a gleam. One ball became two, and then three, and then he juggled them with his eyes closed, from left to right, and Amos was struck with an odd idea.

It's like he's manifesting dreams into reality.

I'm sure he could do that and more, Fis said.

The Duke spun and weaved his dream crystals into something like cotton candy to become as large as a man and larger still until he set it down on the ground in front of the assembled crowd. He traced esoteric magickal sigils into the air that twisted and worked the stuff until it solidified into a giant block of marble. He rubbed his hands together and gave a shy smile to the crowd. Then, a few brave souls cheered out his name. The Duke gazed into Amos' eyes again, and Amos heard his voice. *You had better get a move on. Tick tock, tick-tock.*

Did you hear that? Amos said to Fis.

Oh yeah, Fis said. *Freaky Deaky.*

“We need to go,” Amos said.

“To the door?” Rhogar growled.

“Chop chop,” Amos said, chopping one mousey knife hand into his mousey palm.

The Duke turned and twisted his hands, and invisible chisels worked the stone. Already, they could make out several shapes—a massive white marble sculpture of a crowd of people, holding several aloft on their shoulders.

“How do you do it, Duke?” The King called like a circus barker. “How do you make such beautiful things from a rock?”

“Beauty is already hidden there,” said the Duke. “I just removed the extra stone.”

The Duke waved a hand, and the sculpture floated up and spun around to face them. Many gasped in surprise. The sculpture revealed in intricate and exquisite detail a crowd of Pooks waving flags of Hobbleheim, carrying a group of heroes on their shoulders: a young boy with glasses, a robe, and bunny slippers, a Pookish-Fae girl with antlers and a puffyafro, a muscular, tall, and lean Human monk, a toothy grinning Dragon knight, a ram-horned Elf swordsman, and, at the center, an old Pook man, with frizzy white hair, spectacles, and large mittens.

“Hey, that looks like us,” Amos said.

Master Zhi Xuan put a mousey paw on his shoulders. “It does, Master Amos.”

The Duke glanced at the King and smiled, “It was the will and dreams of the people manifested. I hope they like it,” he said softly and returned to sit at the table. The people cheered in thunderous applause—deafening to Amos’ little mouse ears.

“Well,” the King said, flustered, stammering. His face took on a shade of deep purple slow-brewing rage as his surprise turned to incredulous anger. “It’s not what I expected.” He tried to smile and failed, his mouth twisting into an angry sneer.

“We’ve gotta go,” Amos said to the others, twitching and peeking around.

“All right, next, my old friend here, the legendary thespian, swashbuckler, and rascal Hiro Taiki will put on a little drama.”

Amos froze, compelled to stop and watch. He felt a complex wave of emotions: anger, disappointment, sadness,

and loss crash over him. Amos was furious that Hiro had betrayed his trust and made a fool of him and was now a guest of honor here while Amos skulked around. Somehow though, Amos...forgave Hiro for being a survivor. She lied in a world of madness, but she had not hurt him maliciously, he felt. Most of all, it reminded him of the real Thunder, whom he missed terribly.

“You won’t believe how hard it was to get her here, but your King spares no expense for a show you’ll never forget. Hiro, the floor is yours,” the King clapped his meaty hands together and found his seat as Hiro took the stage. The curtains behind her rolled open with dramatic pomp as a military drum roll rang out across the courtyard.

“Why, thank you, my liege, your Majesty,” Hiro said, raising a glass. “Well, I have put together quite the program for tonight’s dramateurs, but first, let’s all toast the brave and portly, oh I said it,” she grinned, ready to continue the roasting, took note of the purplish hue of the King’s face and then continued quickly, “—we were all thinking it, anyway let’s raise a glass to the health of our King.” She drained her mug and tossed it off stage. “Now, in fact, we have a little tale for you. Why? you might ask.” Hiro grinned, savoring the crowd’s attention. “Why, indeed, I promise something to shock and amaze you...Oh, no! Orks!” Hiro broke into a dramatic scream as a hulking figure leaped out from the curtains and pushed her off the platform. She landed with a delicate thud and lay still. The villagers reeled back in terror. A dozen more Orks charged the stage. Their leader, the biggest of their lot, turned to face the crowd, studying them with a look of vicious hunger. So ferocious and so brutal was his rage that villagers cried out and several in the front fainted. His face was a brutal mass of tusks and fury, and he stood three times as tall as the

Pooks. “For myriad years, since the Dark War, Orks have ruled all the lands with an iron fist. But we have grown soft.” He smashed his fist into his open palm. “What happened to dreams of reaching the Azure Forest and mountains full of Dwarven gold? I will make Orkadia great again!”

The Orks eye-murdered the crowd and cried, “Crush Hobbleheim!”

A force of ten Pooks, traditional villagers with wobbly clubs and handmade spears, stood to oppose them. The Orks charged, bashing and smashing them to the ground in moments. Extras in green tights hopped onto the stage to slosh them in buckets of fake blood, signaling to the panicked crowd that this was only a drama, but some had already turned to flee. The crowd was tense, palpably close to panic.

“Now!” cried the Colonel. A score of the chrome-burnished riders, like those Amos had faced at the battle of the Abbey, leaped onto the stage to protect the fallen villagers. Their armored beasts pawed the ground, and their nostrils steamed in jets of smoke.

“For Hobbleheim!” cried the Colonel. The armored Pooks charged the Ork soldiers on stage. The forces met in a violent clash, but the Pooks proved quicker, more agile, and more capable than the larger enemies. The Orks were beaten to their knees and then down into the dirt.

The same scarred face Pook girl Amos saw at the Abbey battle confronted the Ork General last. The two traded powerful blows, but she slipped past him, tricked him with a feint, swept his legs, bashed his face, and knocked him to his knees. She turned to face the crowd, raised her sword high, and decapitated him. The crowd cheered when three Pook acrobats rolled out of the Ork’s armor to lie still.

“Make some noise for your Titans, Hobbleheim,” the King said. “Your heroes!”

The Titans of Hobbleheim, fierce black-robed soldiers and riders, turned to raise their spears to the crowd and chanted, “Hobbleheim! Hobbleheim!”

The small folk villagers roared from all corners of the courtyard, a deafening roar of “Hobbleheim! Hobbleheim! Hobbleheim!”

More Orks streamed from the stage to encircle the Titan guards, and the crowd cheered again.

What a rollercoaster, Amos said. What a show.

What an abomination, Fis replied grimly.

“Shall we surrender?” the King cried into his scepter, shrugging helplessly. “Of course not!” He shouted, slamming his scepter down. “Say hello to El Diablo!”

A whirling accelerating rotor cut through the chaos and clatter from behind the stage. Heavy stomping feet announced a new contender to the Battle Royale, and then El Diablo tore through the back of the stage. The massive construct towered over the Orks. Made of burnished bronze, a fire burned in its belly, visible through a porthole. Pooks with shovels scattered away as it turned to focus on the Ork soldiers. Its two glowing eyes narrowed, and smoke and fire bellowed from a huge mouth of swords. It stomped towards the Orks, and when their slashes and stabs only scratched its metal legs, and several had fallen from its menacing swats, it reared up and blew a gout of Dragon fire into the sky that went on for nearly a minute. The actors portraying Orks turned and fled, leaving the Pooks victorious on the stage. The crowd was stunned into silence as legions of Titans marched out in military formation to fill the

front of the courtyard. Hundreds of blackguard riders and infantry stood tall, gleaming chrome, enhanced with steampunk machine magick and whirling with electric power.

“That’s one for Hobbleheim!” the King roared, and the crowd cheered in thunderous applause and patriotic screams this time. The witches and wizards were engrossed in an engaging quarrel. Luka jabbed a finger at the King, but he ignored her, raising his hands to accept the well-earned praise and glory. The Slowmorth crowd turned and left the stage altogether, and the Purple Prince and Moon-Eye were gesticulating with passion. The villagers chanted, a deafening roar that was terribly troubling to Amos. He covered his ears for as long as it took for the crowd to settle down.

“Woah, woah, woah,” the King screamed, finally, trying to keep control of the show, and pounded his staff, and this time they settled down. “Now listen, I ain’t done yet. As long as a man has the strength to dream,” the King drawled, “he can redeem his soul and fly. So, every dream I have ever dreamed has come true a thousand times.”

This time, his wistful moment silenced the crowd into some thoughtful introspection. “In this pivotal moment of history, we must have action, and all the stars will shine for the story of our hearts and our glory.” The King smashed the scepter down upon the stage, and a thunderous rumble echoed across the courtyard. “A little less clash and a little more spark. Shut your mouths and open your hearts.” The scepter shifted in a flash of magickal power, slithering around the King, snakelike, into an elaborate, serpentine electric guitar. He began to strum a hypnotic melody.

Amos felt a wave of sympathy for this bouffant caricature of the monarchy. Something about his words and his music

stirred Amos' heart. And there was an undeniable charisma to the King, even if Amos was repulsed by his obvious manipulations and some of the company he chose to keep. His necklace began to hum with power, and the empathy diminished. It was magick, after all.

“We gotta go,” Amos said and hopped onto the table.

The King waved to the band. “Now, it's time to dance! The band and I have worked out a medley to get your appetite firing on all cylinders. Let's hit it!” The band roared to life, backing up his strumming with bass, strings, horns, and drums to belt out an infectious tune.

The King began to sing, swaying with a charismatic flair, shaking his bulging jumpsuit provocatively.

“The King threw a party in the castle hall;
The little people danced at the royal ball;
The band was hopped up, and they began to
groove;
Those dirty Ork dogs never stood a chance, so
let's move!”

The crowd began to sway, raising cups and spilling ale everywhere. They sang along.

“Get up. Everybody get up. Everybody raise
your cup, get down to the sound and get
up!”

There was more than music and the King's crooning, deep buttery voice at work. Amos' necklace thrummed with power to keep his mind clear as the crowd went wild.

"Wait," Rhogar cried, joining Amos on the buffet table. "What are they eating?" Rhogar poked at the large tray of sumptuous meats. "Look!"

To his mouse nose, the roasted garlic and buttery steaks of white meat smelled delicious. "Rhogar, we have no time for eating!"

"No," he cried, "That's an eye stalk!"

Flying snails, Fis said. They're eating his friends.

Amos gazed at the tray in horror, remembering the affectionate flying creature that had flown him across the sky this morning.

Rhogar waved the large trident with a roar and stabbed a hand that crept towards the buffet tray, ready to sample the garlic-slathered snail meat. He stood protectively with his back to the buffet tray. Rhogar's tail wiggled, and his eyes narrowed, a vengeful snarl upon his lips. The outraged Pook screamed, and although many were singing and dancing and did not notice, a few turned to watch the commotion at the table.

"Rats!" A Pook woman with a silken scarf around her head cried out and threw a glass of wine at the companions. Rhogar roared and held his fork like a javelin, ready to throw.

"Let's go," Amos cried.

"Why?" Rhogar cried, brandishing his fork dangerously. "They're eating flying snails!"

Amos ducked under the swinging fork and slapped him across the face with one mouse paw. “Wake up, Rhogar. We have a mission to finish.”

Amos, Fis said, that was abrupt.

But necessary, Amos said.

Rhogar’s eyes narrowed, and he wound up his fist to strike Amos, but then his shoulder’s slumped. “You’re right, Amos. I’m sorry.” He chucked the fork down, and they hopped under the table and scurried away from the dancing throng. A glance at the head table showed some commotion as the witches and wizards continued to quarrel. Some drew sigils and wards, and others danced and nodded along, hypnotized by the music. The Duke sat, smiling.

“If you wanna be loved, baby, you’ve got to love me, too,” crooned the King, and the band began a new song, a slow ballad, and his deep baritone voice oozed with beguiling power. It crept upon them, but the necklace hummed and chugged and kept his head clear.

“He’s mass charming them all,” Amos said. “They’re all under his spell. Come on!”

Moon-Eye cried out as the mice stumbled into his feet. Palpable fear leaked from his eyes when he spotted the three mice. He spun in panic and stormed off, shoving the crowd to and fro.

They reached the double doors and took off down the hall, but Amos tumbled head over heels as his body suddenly became top-heavy. His ears had grown huge and pointy. They rolled face-first into the carpet. “We’re changing back,” Amos cried, voice muffled with a wooly mouthful of rug. A snarl got

their attention. Down the hallway was the tabby cat Amos had escaped earlier. It charged toward them, drooling and snarling.

CHAPTER 32

THE MOONLIT PATH



Amos tried to scramble but could only tumble awkwardly down the hall with fae-sized ears on a mouse-sized mouse. His friends fared no better as Rhogar sprouted gigantic talons on his mousey feet, and Master Zhi Xuan's lightning-fast hands hung clownish on his mouse body. The ferocious black castle cat charged at the trio of tasty treats with dripping fangs as they bumbled toward an open chamber door.

“With me,” Amos cried, rolling forward as Fis' head ballooned like a bowling ball. The cat was almost upon them, and as it pounced, Amos froze and closed his eyes.

A familiar meow twisted his grimace into a joyful grin. He squeaked open one eye to see a fluffy grey ball of burning rage spring out of the chamber door to intercept the pouncing castle cat. They crashed mid-air, and the electric ball of grey and orange fur tumbled, hissing, down the hall and out of sight.

“Thunder!” cried Amos in surprise. “Are you okay?”

Amos started after the cats, but Master Zhi Xuan grabbed him. “We cannot wait.”

Amos hated to hear it, and losing her again felt like a gut punch.

“He’s right,” said Rhogar.

Tick-Tock, boy, Tick-Tock rang the voice of the Duke again, an echo in Amos’ mind.

“Fine, fine, let’s keep on,” Amos said, and when they weren’t sure which way to go, he closed his eyes and focused upon the Trickster, and his soul, and he felt the way before them shimmer, as if lit by the gentle moon. They ran down the hall as ears and tails shrunk and their legs grew; through the twists and turns of the castle, they were soon themselves again. Master Zhi Xuan poked his head out at each intersection before giving the all-clear. Finally, they were at the end of a long hall, and Master Zhi Xuan waved them to stop and wait.

“Up ahead are a pair of guards, but we need to get through to get to the old quarters. How should we handle them?”

Amos had an idea, “what if Fis approaches in the costume of kitchen staff and leads them off? And we slip through?”

“It would raise suspicion,” said Master Zhi Xuan, “but not as much as knocking them out and leaving their bodies outside the door.”

“It’s a good plan,” Rhogar barked, cracking his knuckles. “Let’s get it done.”

Amos willed the cloak to change shape, from the fitted leather armor Fis preferred to simple green garb resembling the other kitchen staff. “Fis, give Rhogar your talons. Cooks don’t carry Dragon claws.”

“Not happy about this,” Fis sighed and gave Rhogar the talons.

“The pair of guards are up ahead.”

“Okay, I’ll try to send them away,” Fis said as Master Zhi Xuan and Rhogar stuffed themselves inside a roomy supply closet to wait.

“Help, help,” Fis said as soon as the two guards spotted her with glares of suspicion. “Drunken guests are wandering the halls, and one of them grabbed at me,” Fis said to the guards. “Send them back to the party, please.”

Hey, nice improv, Amos said.

A stern Pook soldier with salt and pepper hair nodded and took off down the hallway, but the other squinted at Fis, eyeing her antlers. “What was your name? I don’t remember you...and I’d remember you.”

A loud thump and a crash stole his attention, and he turned to chase after the first guard, raising a horn from around his neck to his lips. Fis clocked him on the back of the head, knocking him out cold. Master Zhi Xuan and Rhogar came through the doors, handing back Fis’ talons.

“He saw us,” Master Zhi Xuan said with a shrug.

“Let’s get this one into that closet too,” Amos said, motioning for the nearest door, and they dragged the guard out of sight.

Amos cautiously approached the double doors, cracking them open to peek through. “It’s here.” The remnants of his soul pulled him forward with an extraordinary fluttering insistence, and his necklace hummed with power.

“Are you ready? Fis asked.

“I’ve got to be,” Amos whispered.

Over their shoulder, Master Zhi Xuan cracked the doors open without a sound.

Amos' heart skipped a beat. Amos peeked inside to see a large chamber that had once been a regal throne room but had been left to rot as vines snaked across the walls and floors. Nature had reclaimed the space, as wild gardens and shrubbery ruled it now and the sound of songbirds filled the air. A musty stink of stale, damp mold wafted from the regal furniture, now left to rot. The dankness diffused from the once great court, and Amos felt this disregard for the chamber was akin to an assault on the meaningful history of this place and its people.

“Ahhh,” Amos said, and a figure in a black cloak froze at the end of the hall. “Choo!” Amos sneezed as the dust and decay overwhelmed his senses.

The cloaked intruder spun to face him in front of a rune-inscribed green door. It was the unmistakable figure from his dreams—the true form of the fox-spirit that had taken so much from him.

“Well, well, well,” drawled the Shadow in a raspy voice, and Amos noticed a bandaged throat. “Who have we here?” The Trickster sniffed the air. “Yes, yes, I can smell you in there, boy. I can feel your soul begging for reunification. So pathetic,” the Trickster laughed cruelly.

Amos' friends advanced to stand beside Fis. Rhogar growled, “Give the boy his soul back, and you don't have to die here.”

The Trickster faltered. “I did not expect you to follow me, but perhaps it's our destiny to meet again. As you can see, half a soul isn't enough to open this door. Have you come to give me the rest?” The Shadow moved lightning-fast to the hilts of two dangerous-looking swords.

“Hold your tongue, fallen one,” Fis said, and her eyes glowed with radiant energy. “I know you. We don't fear you or

your empty threats. Give us what was taken.”

“Come and take it,” the Trickster growled, drawing two black-runed blades.

Rhogar stepped forward and drew his great sword. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

With a snarl the Trickster charged toward them. When they were within striking distance, one hand dipped inside the magickal cape and threw a small stone to the ground. In a moment, a cloud of smoke had blinded them.

“Back-to-back,” Rhogar growled and closed the door behind them. “No one leaves until we get the soul.”

Do you feel my soul creeping?

I...I think so, Fis said in grim wonder.

Focus on it, close your eyes, and feel it like a hunter’s mark.

Fis nodded with closed eyes and focused.

Breathe in. Fis pressed her elbows against Rhogar and Master Zhi Xuan to guide them forward on her mark.

Breathe out. Amos’s boyish shimmery essence crystallized, and Amos knew the Shadow was coming. *Now,* Amos cried. Fis brought up her claws before Rhogar’s midsection and deflected the runed blade. They held their breath and waited. Amos felt the blades coming for them again. This time, Fis reached out and blocked a slash away from Master Zhi Xuan’s throat. Fis deflected another strike and pounded the flat end of the talons into the bewildered assassin’s face as the Trickster fell backward. The smoke began to clear, and the Shadow, bloodied and furious, surged towards them in a battle frenzy. Fis countered one strike, and

Rhogar blocked another, pushing the assassin back, and the Trickster shot back with a double cross swipe at Master Zhi Xuan, who ducked and struck out with his staff to sweep the Trickster off balance.

Flipping away from Rhogar's sword slash, the Trickster kicked Master Zhi Xuan in the chin. Master Zhi Xuan stumbled back and got his staff up just in time to block a sneaky slash. Retreating, the Trickster sent two daggers flying at Fis. They oozed purple ichor, but Fis got her claws up to deflect both strikes. Inside the assassin's guard again, Fis battered the Trickster with punishing blows.

The Trickster grunted and somersaulted away, blocking a strike from Master Zhi Xuan and sending it towards Rhogar, who took the staff to the nose with a painful crack. Rhogar spat blood. The three warriors worked together to parry a wild flurry of the assassin's blows.

Slowly the Trickster gave ground. "Is this what you want? To spar until every witch and wizard of the realm waddles over to play parlor tricks on the Fae door? You think you can fight them too?"

"I want my soul," Amos said coolly. "Give it back."

"Give me one good reason," the Trickster hissed, "why I shouldn't just take the rest of your soul now, and open this door myself."

"Because I know your real name, Ash'Tarra," Amos said, and Fis held up her talons defensively, but the expected strike did not come.

A moment of consideration as the Shadow's eyes darted wildly. "You know nothing, but you can get what you want on

one condition: you open that door. Then we go our separate ways.”

“Why?” Amos asked.

“You couldn’t understand, you meddling peasant.”

“If I can open that door, you need me. So, hand it over, and we’ll talk.”

The four fighters held their blades high, ready to reengage.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” Rhogar barked. “At the Wailing Woods, you fought like a demon. You’ve lost your spark, I’d say. Without your tricks and your poison, you’re no match for us. Give back the boy’s soul before I lose my temper and roast you.” Smoke rumbled out of Rhogar’s nose, punctuating his threat.

A flicker of fear clouded the Trickster’s eyes, and Amos stepped forward between them. “We don’t have time to waste, but you can’t expect me to just trust you.”

“You can trust me,” the Trickster said with impatience, “to act in my best interest, and it turns out, I need you to open that door. Do it for me, and you can have your wittle soul back. It’s been a burden, too shiny for my taste.”

“You can’t,” Master Zhi Xuan said, “Not for that one. If that’s the door I think it is, it’s been sealed for a good reason.”

“Do I have a choice?” Amos growled. “I’m running out of time.” He felt cold in his fingertips, so exhausted from resisting the pull of his magnetic essence that sucked him toward the Shadow.

Master Zhi Xuan sighed and shrugged. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this, Amos.” He cocked his ear to the door they came from. “Wait—someone is coming.”

“We’ll hold the door,” Rhogar said, dragging a dresser in front of it. “Hurry, Amos.”

“Come on, hurry, you fool,” the Trickster hissed.

Fis and Amos followed the assassin to the large doors at the end of the court. Songbirds fluttered above, on rails, singing a curious lullaby. Amos’ hands and feet were numb, and a strange ache twisted his chest.

I can’t stay with you any longer, Amos said. One way or another, you’re on your own, Fis.

Are you ready, Amos? Can I do anything to help you?

You’ve done enough, Fis. I...I don’t know how to thank you.

You can start by getting your goofy spectacled ass out of my head, Fis said, but her voice was warm and full of jolly mirth.

Amos began to tear up, and Fis couldn’t fight the release of tears now streaming down her cheeks. *I couldn’t have done this without you, Fis.*

And you quite literally saved me too, Amos. You’re a good kid. You’re kind of amazing.

Okay...The Shadow looks ready to eat us for lunch, so let’s just say... it’s going to be okay, right? It’s time for me to make the leap on my own...

Are you scared?

A little, Amos said and laughed. The Trickster squinted dangerously.

Good luck, Amos, Fis said. You’ve got this.

I know, after all we've been through... Amos sighed. *It's time to be whole again. Thank you, my friend.* Amos squeezed their left hand as tight as he could into the comfortable crush of a balled fist and hopped out of Fis' ear towards the Shadow, who had already begun to shift.

The Shadow's nose swirled into a canine beak. Her form became animalistic as she dropped to the ground, transforming into the huli jing, the nine-tailed fox-spirit.

Amos closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, flying free of her anchor for his journey and flew towards the Trickster. This moment was an act of vulnerability, and in the end, foolish trust, but necessary. He felt his other soul, like a single point of light in a swirling endless black star. This time, his essence shimmered and coalesced into a firm gelatinous goop. It was a dizzying feeling as he tried to compress soul jello into diamond-like luminance. Amos opened his eyes and found himself in a puddle on the floor. He rose, on wobbly legs, his red bathrobe swirling around his bunny slippers. He reached up and rubbed his face, and to his surprise, he noticed he wasn't wearing glasses, but the world around him remained vibrant and clear and razor-sharp.

Fis smiled in joy and wonder, seeing him as if for the first time, while the Trickster snarled impatiently, turning back towards the door. "Now, open it," the Trickster said, and swirled back into the form of the dapper warrior.

Amos put his hands on the doorknob and tried to turn it. It was so cold that it burned the palm of his hand, and he leaped back. "Yikes!" He said, blowing warm air onto his hand. He tried again, with the sleeve of his robe covering his hand, but it did not open. "I am here; I am the key, open sesame," Amos said, but nothing happened.

“Do it, now.” The Trickster shoved a blade in Amos’ back, pushing him onward. Cloaky swirled angrily, buffeting against the Trickster’s blade. Amos licked his finger and felt for the wind. It craved something, and a stillness begged him to defy it. Amos mumbled, “when you don’t know what you’re doing...at the mercy of the gods...genius awakens. I just need to fall.”

The blade pressed harder against his back.

“Hurry, you foolish boy, you meddling peasant.” The Trickster spat again, “Fulfill your purpose and be gone!”

This time Amos whirled around. “Clocks,” he said cryptically, eyes locked on the Trickster’s swirling amber pools. He breathed slowly, and time seemed to slow again. He could feel the hairs prickle across his forearms and the back of his neck.

“What?” The Trickster spat, glaring menacingly.

“The Compass. Paper. The Printing Press. Literature.”

“What nonsense is this?”

“Gun powder, iron and steel, alcohol, silk, cookware, the oar, and the coffin,” Amos said, teeth gritted. “These are the gifts of my people. What have you ever done but bully children and hurt their grandfathers?” Amos stepped forward, jabbing his finger out accusingly, and the Trickster actually stepped back in surprise. The Trickster’s eyes flared with anger, and a snarl curled upon that wicked visage, but Amos was unrelenting.

“You don’t remember Rhogar, and my friends, because you weren’t at the Wailing Woods at all, were you? You aren’t even the assassin you claim to be. Who exactly are you? And what are you playing at?”

The Trickster's face turned crimson, and for a moment, the wave of bluster and fury almost blew Amos back, but he stood his ground, and, under it all, he felt the Trickster falter. The flurry of emotions passed in a moment, and the Trickster sighed and pointed that dagger towards Amos' throat. "Turn around, open the bloody door, or bleed out in front of it. I don't much care which. Take your pick."

"Fine," Amos said, his mouth a thin-lipped smile. *This round goes to me, doesn't it?*

He gazed up to the skylight, noticing for the first time how the windows reflected daylight upon the door, how the tapestries soaked up the sound of his breathing, and the song of the birds above. They shifted, like musical notes, on five rails, giving structure to their shifting form. Amos opened his mouth and sang.

The birds rustled around, creating new notes, and he sang those also, and his unsteady voice became clear and true as they fluttered.

"What are you doing, you fool? Just open it! They're coming!" The Trickster pushed the point of the blade deeper into Amos' back. Amos kept singing the timeless, eerie lullaby, the jab pitching his melody several half steps higher; and with the push, the air began to shimmer around him. *That was it*, Amos thought. *That's the key*. Amos continued to sing a song that he felt in his bones, that held some inexplicable power, and things grew still inside him, even as they swirled in power around him. An invisible sonic wave reverberated through the chamber, shook the dust off the old furniture, and restored color to the fabric chairs and tables, curtains, and tapestries. The pulsing power increased intensely until a final note sent the birds scattering.

“Fis, help us hold these doors,” Master Zhi Xuan called, and Fis hesitated only a moment before racing the dozen yards to the main chamber doors to support them. As she arrived, a thunderous crash knocked them all back. The shattered doors blew open and in a haze of smoke, a handful of figures entered the chamber.

Amos knew it was now, or never, so he held the door again, and this time, the door was warm to his touch. For one moment, he remembered the warning of Master Zhi Xuan and paused. He really had no idea what he was about to unleash, only that in this world, a promise seemed to weigh heavier than gold, and he had made one to the Trickster. This was a door that couldn't be opened, yet he was about to break 1,000 years of surety. What ripples, what waves, would this door unleash? Amos did not know. He only knew that he was the key, and he was here for a reason. Perhaps, it would be fine, after all.

He turned the handle easily and, as it opened, and a kaleidoscope of ultra-dimensional eldritch light flooded through the crack in the door. Amos screamed, blinded, and filled with a terrible sense of foreboding and gloom, as evil, bone-dry laughter flooded his ears from the Void and Amos collapsed to the floor, groaning and clutching at his burning eyes.

CHAPTER 33

BEYOND THE GREEN DOOR



Amos had done the impossible: he'd opened the Fae door. Not a ring, not a necklace; he, Amos, had done *magick*. Something *amazing* had happened. Yet he had no time to congratulate himself. Stunned, he grasped at his eye sockets, blinded by the piercing light that had blasted out at him as the door swung open.

The dry-bone laugh ricocheted around the court as the door-that-mustn't-be-opened poured out a chromatic spray of blinding light. It clattered through Amos' mind, multiplying until it was only a cacophonous, stunning din. Amos stood and wiped his eyes, but a dark shadow bowled him back over and Amos tumbled to the ground. He turned and cried out, "wait!" The blurry shape—the Trickster—held a hefty, dusty, leather-bound tome with gold leaf pages. The book's cover contained a multifaceted, beautifully cut stone that shone in all the colors of the visible spectrum, radiating colors, feelings, and twisted hideous impressions that gave Amos the creeps.

As Amos gazed, it twinkled.

Take me, a dry, creeping voice inside Amos cried. Possess me, and all the power we contain can be yours. More than your greatest dreams. What do you crave? Your grandfather? You could heal him with a wave of the hand, boy. It might be

that you're too late—but we can show you how to bring him back. You just have to take the book.

Amos gripped the Trickster's boots, compelled to hold that book.

With a savage snarl, the Trickster held the book high and extended one long, bony finger toward Amos. The air crackled with power and the smell of ozone filled the air. Amos cried out, closing his eyes and grasping to the Trickster's boot with all his might as a lightning bolt crackled through the air and exploded into him.

And then nothing happened. Nothing at all, except that his ring became warm to the touch, momentarily feeling too tight and hot, pulsing with power. He felt it absorb the lightning and then expel energy as if to make room for the new spell. Steel clanged as a group of Pook soldiers charged toward them. Rhogar's greatsword and Master Zhi Xuan's Bo staff held them at bay across the throne room. The Titan Guardians puffed steam as whirling gears ground eagerly for Amos and his friends' blood. Amos rose unsteadily to his feet and stared curiously at the frozen visage of the assassin, paralyzed in a soundless scream. The black figure slowly turned the color of sand, frozen in place.

Medusa's magic! That's what came out of the ring, Amos thought.

Take me, crooned the tome. Amos wiggled the book but could not pry it free.

A hand jerked Amos by the shoulder and spun him around. Master Zhi Xuan stood, with a far-away gaze. "Let me, young master," he said, and twisted and yanked at the book, but he could not free it from the Trickster's stony grasp. "The book..." Master Zhi Xuan said, face creepily blank, "We can't

just leave it here...must...take it... to the safety of the Great Library.”

Several soldiers rushed through the chamber door from the hall, but a retreating Rhogar roared and blasted out a noxious green gas that slowed any who entered the cloud to a snails-crawl, affording the companions critical moments to disengage and retreat, yet still they lingered by the book. Only Fis took advantage of that pause, and ran to the open Fae-sealed green door and disappeared inside.

“Let’s go,” Rhogar growled. A dozen paces away, the Mad King and his guards barged into the throne room, followed by a strange cabal of Slowmorth wizards, Hiro, Moon-Eye, the Purple Prince. The entire motley crew seemed united in one purpose: they were transfixed upon the hovering book—and Amos! Headmaster Slob was the first to react and traced burning sigils into the air. With a flash of eldritch power, she stepped through mist and shadow and appeared within a cloud of sulphur directly between a startled Master Zhi Xuan and Amos. The snarling Headmaster Slob reached for the spellbook, but Master Zhi Xuan knocked her arm away with the tip of his Bo staff. Snarling in fury, she spun to face him, and traced a glowing rune into the air as she cried out, “apokriphy exriki!”

Twin magickal hammers materialized in the air above them and bashed down upon both Amos and Master Zhi Xuan. One hammer knocked Master Zhi Xuan back with dizzying force and he shattered some velvety antique chairs into dust beneath him. Amos’ ring grew uncomfortably hot and tight, and the other hammer dissipated into mist- sucked into the ring. In exchange, Amos treated the Slowmorth Headmaster to a lightning bolt that coursed through her body. The ring, once again, had seemed to swap spells, and now was blasting her

with the Trickster's lightning bolt. The electricity arced back to the spellbook as it hungrily absorbed the magickal energies. The Trickster's claw-like hand exploded into dust, and the spellbook hovered in the lingering electric field. The gem sparkled. Behind it, a shadow-like pupil, a gruesome, horrendous all-seeing, ancient eye, turned to regard them all, and cold sweat dripped down Amos' spine.

Take me, the voice crooned to Amos. I can fulfill your desires and grant your fondest wishes. God-like power at your fingertips. Just take me.

Amos knew in his heart that this spell book could grant him the power he needed to return home, save Grandpa, and more. He could be everything he had dreamed, a warlock or wizard, some kind of powerful being, feared and respected. All he had to do, was reach out and grasp it. Master Zhi Xuan also seemed frozen beside him, and Amos could only imagine that he was fighting an internal battle of wills.

A second wave of blackguards rushed past the enchanted and slowed ones. "Get them!" the King screamed, "Stop those despicable hound dogs! That book will be mine! Return it to me! No, don't you dare touch it! I will claim it for myself!"

Rhogar swung at an approaching Titan, and the Dragon Man's incredible strength crushed both helmet and skull, tripping up two that ran on his heels. As Sloob slowly rose, Rhogar delivered a gauntleted punch that knocked her back to the mangy carpet. Standing beside Amos, now he stared off dazed into the electric field and reached forward to grasp the book.

"No," Amos yelled, pushing Rhogar's arm wide, moving to stand between him and the book. "We can't. No good will come from this," he said. He had seen, in the cavern, where

this road would lead. A sword struck Rhogar's back, skidding off his armor, but he snapped out of his daze and turned to fend off a pair of Pook attackers. The motley cabal of witches and wizards that had followed the King from the feast to the old throne room was nearing them now. "We must run!"

"Up the stairs," Fis hollered as she emerged from the Fae-sealed room, holding a curiously small potted tree in her hands and pointing to the only other exit: a stone staircase that led upwards behind the old throne. One more time, the book called to him, and this time the promise of power was so great Amos trembled. It was so intoxicating as to be irresistible, but Amos' eyes dropped to the Trickster's black daggers at his feet. They dripped with purplish venom, and he recalled the witches' advice, how a poison could hold the key to an antidote.

At that moment, faced with the promise of terrible power or the key to saving Grandpa, Amos ducked and carefully picked up the blade using his cloak to tuck it into his pocket.

"Come on, slowpokes!" Amos cried and fled up the dimly lit tower stairs, higher and higher. Amos ran until he reached the top and found an old, heavily reinforced door. Amos pushed it as hard as possible, but it would not open. Behind him, Rhogar called, "Move aside!" and bashed it at full speed. The door stood no chance, and it burst open with a satisfying crunch.

Outside, Amos saw no escape. Only a dozen paces lay between the smashed door and the edge of the parapet, but he ran to look over the edge in search of any inspiration for an avenue of retreat. The twin suns hung low, and Amos was again reminded of the Duke's watchful eyes. Amos gazed off the side of the tower, to the rocky shore and the sea's crashing

waves far below. “We could never survive that leap,” Amos cursed and scratched his head. *What if Cloaky and I could float?* he wondered, but he would not leave his friends behind.

Rhogar, Fis, and Master Zhi Xuan were trying to hold the door closed, but a steady stream of thuds rang through the air as forces on the other side bashed and banged at it, determined to face the companions down- perhaps literally, pushing them off the tower.

Fis set down the sapling, and jammed her shoulder against the bottom of the shattered door while Rhogar held the top closed.

Amos ran back to his friends. “We’re trapped,” he said. “What can we do?”

“Hope for a miracle, young master,” said Master Zhi Xuan gravely. “Until then, we must hold the door.”

“Take that tree, Amos. You must keep it safe,” Fis begged.

Amos nodded, picking up the baby yew tree. “What is it?” Amos asked curiously.

“Fae hopes and dreams, Amos.”

Before he had a chance to consider that, a blast of magical force knocked the companions back, and the door blasted wide open. Wizards and guards stood, breathing heavily, as Amos brushed wood shavings and splinters off his hair and face.

Amos took the sapling and ran to the edge of the tower, looking for any avenue of escape. As more guards pressed in, Rhogar’s great sword cut a dangerous swath through the Titan Guardians who parried high while Master Zhi Xuan’s staff shot out low and swept several elite Pook guardsmen off their feet. More surged in to fill the gap, while the wizarding cabal behind them wiggled their fingers and chanted.

From the other edge of the parapet, a dozen paces away, the hair on Amos' neck stood up, and time slowed, once again. Amos cringed, expecting something absolutely horrible to happen.

Something did, but not what he expected. Professor Plouffe wagged a finger at Fis but before more than a spark could leap off his finger, Hiro slashed out from the doorway, and her curved scimitar sent the dapper Troll's finger flying through the air.

"My hand!" cursed Plouffe as the spell dissipated with a wet splutter. He was pushed aside by several dark, faceless shadows that pinched the air targeting the flamboyant cat swashbuckler even as an acrobatic Purple Prince chased Hiro with a drawn silver blade. Mildred held her hands up to summon a protective ward around her and Levana, who turned to casting an unlucky hex upon the tall shadow figures. Amos quickly lost track of the chaos and magic and blows being traded as his companions were forced to retreat towards him. He looked down again, at the raging sea, and rocky shore and gulped.

Hiro wall-ran off the parapet, hopping down beside the Titan Guardians, knocking one of them off the tower with a trip and a shove. She spun back just in time to parry a lightning-quick rapier strike from the Purple Prince and now, two expert duelists in particularly fancy, feathered hats faced off, dipping low, arcing high, and testing each other for openings in a lazy, lackadaisical dance of death that looked easy and effortless. It turned out that Amos was grateful for Hiro after all.

"Move aside, I'll handle this," crooned the sugary voice of the Mad King. He sounded different now, calm, cool, and

drunk on the tome's dark power. He elbowed and pushed past the witches and wizards and held the ancient tome with that horrible, staring-eye gem in one hand. The book positively radiated a power that both repelled and attracted all around him, Amos could feel it still, calling to him, suffocating him with its own narrow notions of power and career methodologies. The King sneered at his own soldiers and the assembled wizarding world like they were mere ants in his path.

Simmering with rage, he snarled at Amos and the party crashers, and his aura positively hummed with electricity. His eyes spat chaotic bolts of eldritch fury as he swaggered toward Amos and his friends. In his free hand, he produced a small black stone, which he rubbed between his fingers, and he chanted the command, “megáles báles fotiás!” before tossing the stone into the fighting fray before him.

With a deafening roar, the tower exploded into flames. In response, Rhogar roared, projecting an icy-cold cone of frigid cold that stopped a portion of the fireball in its tracks and shielded him and Master Zhi Xuan from the incinerating effects. Many of the King's men, however, were not so lucky, and their confused cries and caterwauls of pain rang out across the castle dome. Fis held up her shield, but her leather pouch burned clean off her leggings as they caught fire and even her boots began to melt in the heat of the magical inferno. She cried out in agony, but held the shield fast, protecting her vital organs and her beautiful head of hair. The Pook soldiers around them did not fare so well and cried in pain and confusion as their callous King's sorcery heated their armor and clockwork parts white hot, and they suffered short but excruciating departures from the Dreamlands.

Amos recoiled as far as he could on the ledge, teetering dangerously off the castle wall as the heat swelled toward him. The force of the fire whooshed in Amos' face, but his cloak caught the wind and wrapped around him, protecting his face and the yew tree sapling. His ring pulsed and grew hot and tight as it tried to absorb all the energies of the spell, but it seemed weak and spent by this point, and he hung dangerously over the edge, one foot scrambling in empty space. He gazed down at the terribly steep descent onto the rocky shore and the crashing waves below, but his cloak caught the wind and gave him a firm push back onto solid stone.

“Thanks, Cloaky.” Then he heard a crack: a second crack, and then another and another. Amos pinpointed the sound: the steaming pearl where Fis' burnt pouch had fallen. The shell shattered, and a tiny head popped out.

“A Dragon!” Amos cried in surprise.

The baby Dragon hopped out of the shredded egg and unfurled its wings. The Wyrmling, the size of a kitten, let out a high-pitched screech that cut through the sky. The blackguard dropped their weapons and clutched their ears as Amos dropped to his knees.

With his hands in front of his face, Amos caught just a glimpse of a vision that would haunt him for many restless nights. A bizarre rending of the space between Amos and the King wavered, and a man in blood-red robes and fiery red hair materialized, leaping for the King and his magical tome. The fiery-haired warlock grasped at the book, but that evil, all-seeing eye in the gem of the book locked onto him, and the warlock froze and fell to the ground, hand clenched in a desperate, empty claw. The King stepped back, eyes aglow, hugging the ancient tome, and held it aloft, and began to

scream, a bizarre, frantic scream of the dead souls that echoed across the castle dome. The book's pages twisted, howling with the faces of stolen souls straining to escape its cursed pages. The Mad King waved, tracing eldritch symbols into the space between them and dark energy began to pulse and build around him, creating a dizzying inky heaviness that engulfed the man, and extended with spectral, grasping hands to claw for Amos. Restless souls cried out, straining. They cradled Amos in foul, necrotic energy, and Amos began sliding towards the book, his twisted mouth contorted in a paralyzed scream. His ring pulsed weakly but could not absorb this magnitude of magick. As the dark power of countless tormented souls squeezed him with a vicelike pressure, Amos gasped for air.

Just as the hideous souls had taken hold of Amos' arms and legs and began to tear and claw him towards the loathsome all-seeing gem and that accursed book, the King stumbled. He turned, momentarily distracted, and Amos gasped for breath. The King's advisor, the Colonel, tripped and tumbled at his feet, staggering him with a knotty ball of splayed limbs. Behind him, the tall, starry-robed Loxodon chuckled, holding a wooden staff with a crystal moon up in a half-wave.

"Oh you dirty, nasty, no good heffalump," the King raged, balling up his hands and the cursed book floated above him upon the expanding electric field that encompassed the Mad King. His eyes became white orbs that protruded like spider egg sacks from his ashen face, and his hair turned snow white, falling away in chunks as if dead and decrepit. The King, for all his newfound power wasted away in front of their eyes as the book cannibalized him. A dark, nebulous mist gathered around the Mad King as his body looked to be more and more

spectrally infused, and the dead Pooks and Titans on the ground began to twitch and groan as his necrotic magick bequeathed them an unholy second sham-blance of life.

Luka Starlight and Lemengnoost stepped out of the fog together but with divergent purposes. Luka dove toward the young man in red robes and pushed him back through the rift, and they both disappeared off the castle without a trace.

Lemengnoost waved his oaken necklace at the King and called out, “By the All-Father, antifeto xorxee!” A gold ribbon of energy swirled around the Gnome’s hands and sliced the dark, swirling necromantic energy into a fine mist as the King’s magick fizzled and dissolved, knocking the Mad King to one knee.

“You people are going to pay for this, you’re all going to pay!” the King sputtered in incredulous rage and struck the floppy-hatted gnome flying with the weighty tome.

The Wyrmling cried again, and a sky-rending high-pitched shriek brought everyone to their knees, clutching their ears.

Within moments, a dark shadow flew over Amos’ head, blotting out the very suns above them. The heavy wing-beats that announced the thunder of Dragons filled Amos with ecstasy, and he knew, before he could perceive the source of the commotion, who had arrived, at this opportune moment. At the head of a pack of multicolored drakes, a giant, copper Elder Dragon descended to perch behind Amos on the tower walls.

“Hello, Caoteng,” Amos yelled into the whooshing wind. “Your timing is impeccable!”

Caoteng carefully scooped up the baby in his talon. Rhogar called out to the Elder Dragon in an old, scratchy tongue, and

the Elder Dragon nodded, white eyebrows bristling as he lowered his regal head.

“Come on, Amos, now, let’s go!” Rhogar called over his shoulder, but as he stared at the Elder Dragon he froze.

“You can do it, Rhogar,” Amos called, patting him on the lower back. “You’ve waited all your life for this.”

Springing into action, Rhogar scaled the Dragon’s neck and held out a hand for his friends to follow. “Let’s go, while we can,” he yelled.

“Hurry, old friend,” Master Zhi Xuan said, helping Lemengnoost to his feet amidst the smouldering flames and destruction of the wrecked castle dome. Lemengnoost grinned, and wrapped his arms around the monk. “That was a c-close one!” The pair dashed to the Dragon, as the stunned King knelt, weakened physically and depleted magically.

Amos watched Rhogar, for a moment, atop the Elder Dragon looking every inch like a legendary Dragon Rider, took a leap of faith and climbed on behind him. Fis, Master Zhi Xuan, and Lemengnoost followed quickly, scrambling atop the Dragon’s back. Then it rose, beating its mighty wings, and left the castle far below them.

Amos gazed down at the soldiers and wizards, but he could only make out the burning embers of fire and huddled darkened shapes. And then...he was over the clouds.

CHAPTER 34

AROUND THE WORLD



Amos held on to the Elder Dragon for dear life with the Fae sapling tucked safely into his housecoat. His friends clung to the Dragon’s back, and Rhogar cradled Elsewhere’s first baby Dragon in an eon. The Wyrmling mewled like a curious kitten. Everywhere they went, animals, men, and even mountain Giants gazed in awe at the mighty Dragon, bringing with it hope and wonder.

Amos could see the coastline stuffed with dark-masted warships, trading canon fire with castles and forts along the coast. Warships catapulted black stones, which exploded into a burning, flaming sludge that consumed the bastions and towers. Where Pook defenses had been overpowered, masses of the dark army converged and flooded the land. They burned villages and forests, and drove out streams of scattered refugees, often barely ahead of the dark swarm of the Ork army that devoured the picturesque beauty like hungry locusts and left behind fire, smoke and chaos.

Amos shuddered at the sight, for he had come to love the Dreamlands and its people. “Look, Caoteng, they need your help!” Amos screamed into the wind and pointed to the refugees and the savage mob about to trample them. Caoteng obliged, diving and blasting a gout of flame into the Orkadian horde. It incinerated the charging legion and scattered any

survivors in the nick of time. Amos was apoplectic but managed to hang on.

Caoteng flew on, descending at the shore of Pearl Lake. “This will do,” Caoteng growled as they hopped off his powerful neck. “Be on your guard, mortals, danger awaits.”

“It always does, it seems!” Amos said with a grin. He hugged Caoteng, and they carefully dismounted. Caoteng’s wings kicked up swirls of dust that mixed with the plumes of smoke from his nostrils. “Goodbye, Caoteng. And thank you! I knew you would come.”

“Now go while you can,” Caoteng rumbled, scooping up the copper Wyrmling. “I have Dragon business to attend to.” Caoteng wagged his snow-white eyebrows meaningfully and he soared away into the sky. Amos watched him as long as he could but the dragon was soon lost amongst the clouds.

“We did it,” Amos said. He was real, he was here, he was Amos, the boy with the soul who had been touched by the Trickster. Amos liked his fingers and felt the chill lake breeze, and squished his bunny slippers into the muddy shoreline. They squished comfortingly, and their bunny eyes winked knowingly at him. He took a deep breath, then another, and then let out a spontaneous roar, pumping his hands into the air. “We did it!”

Rhogar grinned a toothy grin and Master Zhi Xuan nodded. Lemengnoost looked about nervously, and Fis gave him a big hug and planted a smacker of a kiss upon his cheek that caused him to blush as red as a ripe tomato. “You did it, Amos, and I knew you would,” she said.

Amos’ legs felt a little noodly. He slipped to the ground, laughing and planted both hands right into the mud.

Lemengnoost approached Fis, and touched her on the shoulder. “You look a little singed, my d-d-dear. May I heal what ails you?”

Fis grimaced stoically and nodded, and Lemengnoost held up his necklace and closed his eyes and whispered a prayer to the All-Father. Fis sighed as the superficial burns from the Mad King’s fiery explosion were soothed and healed by warm, magickal energy. When he was finished, Fis gave the Gnome a grateful smile. “That’s great, thank you again, mighty Lemengnoost.”

“Amos,” Lemengnoost said, eyes bulging quite uncomfortably with the unexpected compliment. Amos wasn’t listening pay attention. He was whole again. Fis was saved, and he was out of danger. *He had ridden a **Dragon**.* Amos began to laugh, a little unhinged. He thought of his family—now only one hop, skip, and a jump away, and wondered if they would complain about his muddy hands and dirty clothes. He thought about his Grandpa and decided it was time to go home.

Amos dipped his hands into the great lake and wriggled them until they were clean. He washed his charcoal-singed face, reveling in the cool, calm, and refreshing water, and he cupped his hands and drank deeply. He did not notice the stench of eggs anymore. Perhaps he had merely gotten used to it.

“A-amos? Master Zhi Xuan?” Lemengnoost said again. “You had b-better....”

Amos took off his slippers and dipped his feet into the water, but curiously, the water seemed to retreat from his toes. He crept farther into the lakebed, but no sooner did he approach the water did it retreat as if repelled by him.

“What sorcery is this?” Amos cried.

“Amos,” called Master Zhi Xuan, but Amos didn’t respond.

“Amos!” Rhogar cried, scooping him up in his arms. “Amos, look!”

A horde of Orkadian riders charged across the land. The dust cloud billowed, turning the sky a dirty crimson as the raiders uluated in rage.

“By heaven’s gate,” muttered Master Zhi Xuan.

“Hell on four legs,” growled Rhogar.

“They’re headed for us,” shouted Fis.

Amos scrambled his muddy feet back into his bunny slippers. “There’s more behind us!” On the horizon charged was a parade of the enormous, armored Elephantidae, that carried rumbling steel villages that Amos had glimpsed so long ago. They seemed to be converging to meet the Orkadian charge.

“Into the forest,” cried Fis, pointing to the tree line. It seemed so far away.

Their companions hustled to their feet, dashing towards the treeline, which by some magick or trick of the eyes was also racing toward them. Could it be? *It was!* Amos saw that the giant trees, at least 30 feet tall, had come alive! Each had face-like features on its bark, a division between its trunk that formed legs and roots, and massive, giant branches for arms.

“What are those?” Amos cried in wonder.

“Treants!” Fis said, “Forest Guardians of the Fae!”

Leaves and moss shook off them as they charged with simmering, stoic fury towards the Ork horde. As the closest of them crashed past him, Amos noticed deep, intelligent eyes surveying him with penetrating gazes.

“Are you staying to fight?” Amos asked.

“Amos, you have done much in the Dreamlands, but you are still a boy. We must get you to safety first before we can join the fray,” Fis said seriously.

Rhogar and Master Zhi Xuan nodded, and so it was decided: a calculated retreat for today so that Amos would certainly see tomorrow. After all they’d been through, Amos did understand. He had seen quite a lot of battle for a boy of 12, after all.

As Fis led them toward the Fae forest, others joined the fight against the Ork horde. A herd of large four-eyed deer with majestically curved antlers and broad, fluttering butterfly wings charged and leaped. Mingled with them were griffon-faced, ram-horned creatures with fish fins, and rows of horns across foxlike bodies and swirling tails. They were strange and beautiful creatures, ridden by Satyrs and Nymphs, and even the earth rose as Giants and Elementals of Earth, Wind, Water, and Fire roared toward the horde of Orks. Flashes of light dotted the swirling Fae army like fireflies. One that flew right by Amos’ face was the blurry, zipping silhouette of a warrior sprite. The Fae had left their Vale to defend the lands of men.

Rhogar scooped up Lemengnoost, who was gasping already, and they continued to escape the converging forces. That’s when Amos noticed the wave—and Amos understood why the water had retreated from the shore.

A giant tsunami rushed back across the lake, over a hundred feet high, a dizzying vertigo-inducing wave that

seemed ready to crash down upon them. “Oh, corn pops!” Amos cursed. “Quicker! Run quicker!” Amos screamed and dashed breathlessly for the tree line.

The Ork forces slowed, gazing up stupidly at the wave, giving the companions critical moments to reach the forest cover before the vicious convergence crashed upon them.

They made it into the treeline, an impenetrable wall. “We need to get in there, now!” Amos cried as he looked up at the wave that was now descending just above their heads. *There isn't enough time.*

“Here!” Fis found a small opening in the trees. At the very last second, they dove under the protection of the yew tree canopy and behind the massive, sturdy trunks. Like sailors in a wild tempest, they clung to these masts as the deafening roar of the wave crashed down upon the land resounded through the forest and burying them under a thick layer of froth and chaos. An instant river pushed Amos through the woods until he grabbed hold of a tree branch and held on for dear life as the gouts of water poured over him.

It worked! Your spell worked! Thank you, boy, bubbled the Kraken Cthylla. ***I am free!***

Stupefied, Amos clung to a shattered tree branch as the black waves brought bodies of man and beast, rubble, and the shattered debris of the toys of war crashing through the tight-knit trees of the Fae forest. Unbelievably, sailing amidst the flood, atop the waves, looking joyful, hideous, and free, was the Kraken. Staring at Amos with its many bulbous eyes, the whale-like yet otherworldly dog-squid-monster floated atop a magickal wave, surfing the tides of chaos, while its baby-sized leather wings frantically flapped, keeping it improbably stable.

My what now? This was you, Kraken?

You kept your promise, boy, good for you! Good for me too! I'll see you around, it said, and then was gone. Amos held tight until the water subsided and then, relaxed. His arms burned, but, he had endured another, and hopefully, a final trial. "Fis?" He called, looking around. "Rhogar? Mr. Goose? Master Z?" Amos cupped his hands and called out until he was able to locate them, one by one, and they had all come out more or less intact. They continued on foot, soggy, but cheery, deeper into the Fae woods, led by Fis, who was clearly giddy to be showing them her home.

"And see these trees?" Fis said when they passed a particularly odd-shaped split of one huge lower trunk that split into two diagonally-growing trunks. "We call these the mad brothers, they don't talk anymore because of an old family feud, but we hope that one day they'll get over themselves and grow closer."

"It's much more complicated than that," the closer branch called back to her while the other one maintained a stoic silence.

Fis grinned and they continued on. "And see —" Fis stopped when, soon enough, they heard the unmistakable sound of Orks and their beasts tramping through the forest behind them.

"The Orks have brought the battle to the trees," cried Fis. "Keep moving!"

They raced on through the bioluminescent glow and endless gloom. Furtive, fuzzy Zoogs crept from under the leaf cover to watch Amos, but his friends plodded onward through the Green Hell.

Amos, feeling a strange recognition, cried, “this way!” and tumbled down a hill, rolling wildly until he came to rest at the bottom. He landed after a steady stream of thuds, and the forest rumbled and broiled at the disturbance. Mesmerizing patterns of twinkling lights suddenly filled the space around him. The glow of fireflies reflected on the streaming runoff of Pearl Lake beckoned him into a moment of awed contemplation of their fairy-tale world, encapsulated in a sea of shining stars. The fireflies drifted lazily over tree branches and leaves, glowing a warm yellow against the gloom of the yew tree canopy.

“Wait!” Amos called, grinning like a maniac. “Oh wait, I recognize this, come on guys!” He was particularly chuffed to be the resident expert at this moment.

Master Zhi Xuan was exploring about a dozen yards to one side of the gully when he bumped into what he thought for a moment, was a particularly fuzzy shrub. Until it moved, and he hopped back, eyes wide and mouth agape. “Be careful it’s a-”

“Spider!” Amos called out, cupping his hands to his face. “Darwin, are you there?”

“What are you doing?” Fis hissed.

A scuttling sound crept towards them in the gloom, and the fireflies scattered into the tree canopy above them.

The chittering giant spider peered down at Master Zhi Xuan, and one feeler pushed him down on his back, testing his squishiness. He groaned, pinned, and unable to escape. Rhogar drew his sword and gazed up at the eight glowing orbs that reflected the bioluminescent glow of the flora and fungi around as it chattered closer.

“Giant spider,” Amos called again. He grinned ear to ear and rushed towards the giant thing. Another spider leg knocked him to the ground and held him in place, melting the grin off Amos’ face.

“No, no, Darwin, wait! It’s me, Amos! I’m your friend!”

The spider sniffed curiously. “I don’t remember you. Are you tasty? I’m ever so hungry.”

Rhogar raced towards it to slice into a large, furry leg, but Amos screamed, “No, Rhogar, stop! This is my friend. Darwin! Listen! I have kept my promise and have returned and brought many delicious lumps of meat. Are you still hungry?”

Rhogar paused, an eyebrow raised curiously, and Fis put her face in her palm and rolled her eyes so hard her ancestors felt it.

“Are you the Fae creatures that made me a promise?” The Spider cooed, creeping towards Fis. “Ah, I recognize the girl one. Which ones can I eat? I expected more from the way you went on and on...”

“Oh, no, not us, but just behind us are many armored soldiers, juicy Ork warriors and exoskeletal beasts full of gooey goodness. I’m sure they’re delicious.”

“I am famished,” Darwin said, clacking its pedipalps together.

“Bon Appetit,” Amos said. “We’re on our way to the Summer Queen!”

The spider nodded, chittering excitedly. “I can smell them already. Dank and musky, full of juice. Give my regards to the Summer Queen.” The spider released Master Zhi Xuan and Amos, who hopped up and patted the spider’s closest pedipalps. His friends watched in disbelief. “Come on,” he

urged, pulling Fis with one hand and Master Zhi Xuan with the other. They broke into a stride, and Rhogar and Lemengnoost followed deeper into the woods.

“You’ve got interesting friends, Master Amos,” Rhogar said with a toothy smile.

“Yes,” Amos chirped with an ear-to-ear grin. “I certainly do.”

CHAPTER 35

THE JOURNEY HOME



Amos patted Thunder’s warm fuzzy belly under the vast canopy of yew trees as the story of his adventure, told by his companions, regaled the Fae court and its people. Thunder had awaited Amos under a particularly healthy, old grandfather tree, and when he walked by, she rolled over and offered her belly for rubs. “What is the Summer Queen like?” Amos nervously asked Fis.

“The Summer Queen is intense, beautiful, ethereal, brilliant, and funny,” Fis said.

Amos nodded, thinking of his parents. “She sounds a lot like my mom.”

“Yeah, she’s really down-to-earth for a Goddess.”

Amos laughed, “Okay, so maybe a bit...extra. My mom is pretty cool for a mortal, though.”

Fis laughed until she realized he wasn’t kidding. “Well, she raised you,” Fis said with a grin. “She must be pretty extra, too.”

My mom is a mortal, right? Amos thought to himself but smiled back and rubbed his palms on his robes. “I’m sweaty. Is it hot in this forest?”

“I think it’s just you, Amos,” Fis said.

Amos had refused the invitation for a bath and a change, citing that there would be plenty of time for that when he returned to Chongqing, while Fis had traded in her battle leathers for a clean puffy skirt and blouse and looked fresh, smelled great was in fact, quite pretty, Amos thought. The burns on her legs and feet would not leave even a scar after the healing Lemengnoost had performed. The terrible marks on Fis' back had mainly healed, leaving only a bare trace of the root-like infection. The scar appeared as three swirls, like interconnected Yew trees. They looked, to Amos, like the symbols he wore upon his father's jewels, and they were seen by all in the Fae Grove as a mark of good luck.

Amos, wiping sweat from his brow, glanced around the grove at the variety of interesting locals that seemed to be casually checking him out as well: Satyrs, Nymphs, Fairies, Flutter Byes, Sprites, and Treants, who were gathered in a circle not far away to listen to Lemengnoost, of all people, recount a story of their adventures together from the moment they'd met on Medusa's beach, to the battle of the Vale, where a giant wave had washed away thousands of Orks and opened their defenses for the Fae Folk and other local creatures to send them scrambling back to the coast and their ships. Word had it the ocean was much choppier now, and that ships were sinking due to sea monster attacks. Amos listened for a little while, smiled, and wondered if the Kraken was back in her old stomping grounds and how much trouble she was causing. It was said that other armies had formed to overthrow local Ork Raider militias.

Now that it was full-on war, it was time to take a stand and fight back in a way their ancestors had only dreamt of for the past thousand years. Dwarves were crawling out of their mountains, and the nomadic, horseback tribes of the plains had

all been spotted, sending patrols of Ork Raiders scrambling, torching their outposts, and pushing back their armies. By way of Hobbleheim, the fighting was rumored to be quite fierce between the massive Orkadian army and the Mad King's steam-powered Titan guardians. Both General Goga Lagra and the Mad King were full of surprises, and the war waged on, leaving the lands blackened and burnt. Many Pook Villagers had headed East, on foot or by carriage, and those who agreed to abide by the sacred oaths of the Vale of Shadows were offered shelter, while others headed south and east or further west to the Dwarven strongholds until the war had passed. Amos could tell Fis was eager to join the fight, but all his friends had stuck around a little longer to say goodbye.

“The Summer Queen and her court are ready for you,” Gelatyx, the sprite from the Abbey, reported in a high-pitched warble. Amos nodded gravely and took Fis' hand.

“Let's go,” he said with a nervous smile, and they, accompanied by their friends Rhogar, Master Zhi Xuan, and Lemengnoost, walked down the trail of bioluminescent shrooms, and a regal and majestic garden of the most exotic and colorful fragrant flowers Amos had ever seen, surrounded by a circular grove of the tallest and mightiest looking ancient yew trees that Amos had ever imagined until they came face to face with the Summer Queen and her court. All beings, from the Satyrs and Nymphs to the smallest of Sprites and the tallest and broadest of trees, seemed to regard Amos with interest, and the grove became unnaturally silent as Amos arrived. The Summer Queen, beautiful beyond belief and resplendent in a gown and boat of living flowers, was talking to a group of nomadic horse riders from the Endless Plains who wore feathers and painted their faces and body in times of war, and two contingents of stout, bearded Dwarves from the Firepeak

and Shadowspire mountains, who looked fearsome, and awe-inspiring despite their short stature.

Amos marveled at their axes, mauls, hammers, shields, and armor—a gleaming silver that he'd overheard described as burnished mythrél, a cousin of the unbreakable adamantine ore found in the deepest mountain mines. Forged into both solid plates and interwoven rings, it was lightweight and indestructible, and their helmets bore the likeness of badgers, bulls, lions, crocodiles, and owls. They marched away sternly, and it seemed to Amos that another alliance might be in the cards after all. As the guests of the Vale bowed and left, the Summer Queen turned her attention to Amos and his friends. She gave them a curt nod and beckoned for them to approach. Fis bowed deeply Amos followed suit.

After all their adventures, it was time to go home. Amos couldn't believe it had all amounted to this. He had grown fond of the sweet scent of decay and rebirth inside the intimate canopy of the Fae grove. The grasping, ancient yew trees where it was always summer blocked out the starry sky, leaving the companions bathed in the soft glow of mushrooms and honeysuckle flowers that sprouted on vines. Hot tears streamed down his cheeks, for his adventure was over; Amos was finally heading home. The Summer Queen watched him, the barest tug of a smile tugging at the corners of her queenly mouth. She seemed to see deep into his heart and approve of his musings; after all, laid bare and vulnerable, Amos was comfortable in his own skin.

Beyond the teary waterfall of his puffy eyes, his blurry friends, a ragtag team of heroes, stood stoic, satisfied with their part in returning the boy.

The Summer Queen observed them with inscrutable emerald eyes. Her flowing green mane, living dress, and colorful flower boa were breathtaking in their natural beauty. Atop her yew tree throne and surrounded by her court of Sprites, Satyrs, Nymphs, Treants, and the griffon-like bird-faced foxes, butterfly deer, and other magickal Fae, the Summer Queen regarded Amos' companions.

“My my my, what a pleasant surprise to see the lot of you together under my roof.” The Summer Queen turned her attention to the floppy-hatted Gnome. “Thank you for your help, Lemengnoost. You will always be welcome here.”

“Anytime,” Lemengnoost said, bright and clear. “It was my pleasure to get out of the library and get some fresh air.”

The Queen regarded Master Zhi Xuan with a respectful nod. He bowed and spoke, “The Abbey, a protector of light and knowledge, will always be a friend to the Vale.”

“And we will always be a friend to the Fae.” She turned her gaze to Rhogar, who blushed shyly and looked down, unable to bear the power of her stare, “You must be delighted, having trained all your life to be a Dragon Rider.”

“Thank you, Summer Queen,” Rhogar said, his voice soft and heartfelt as he dipped to kneel in front of her. “I am quite chuffed.”

She regarded Fis with a motherly gaze. “You have been a surprise, Fisinian. When you didn't return, I was rather cross.”

Fis stammered an apology, but the Queen held up her hand. “However, Gelatyx conveyed your message that I was to trust your judgment. But I did not expect you to bring back Dragons.” She smiled then, her stern expression betraying

playful mirth. “Most impressive. Even for you. You’ve come a long way.”

Fis blushed. “I cannot take the credit, my Queen. It was all of us, especially my friend, Amos,” The entire Fae court turned heads and eyes toward Amos. He felt the force of their gaze weigh heavily upon him, but he stood fast and returned their curious stares with a stoic nod.

“What a lovely boy,” the Summer Queen said and rose to face him. Amos blushed furiously. She ruffled his hair, ran a delicate finger down his nose, and scratched behind his ears. Amos did not shrink away. “What a thing you’ve done,” she said. “Coming to this world, a broken spirit, besting Asht’arra, for your soul.”

“Asht’arra?” Amos said and nodded, “right, the fox-spirit.”

“You saved my daughter, recovered your soul, and returned the *Dragons*.”

“I think, also, um, I might’ve freed the Kraken.” Amos shrugged guiltily.

The Summer Queen laughed, as wild as a charging stag, as melodic as the tinkle of wind chimes. “Let the Orkadian fleets enjoy that. You know, we protected your father once.”

“My father?” Amos asked.

“Many years ago, as we were requested. We protected him for the coming of this day. I am a little surprised to meet you before him.”

Amos burned with questions but found his mouth suddenly dry.

The Summer Queen studied Fis. “And the Green door?”

“Amos opened it,” Fis said. The Summer Queen did not look surprised, and Amos wanted to ask her... how...but was afraid to sound foolish. There would come a time, he decided, when he was brave enough to ask. “And we brought back this...” Fis nodded to Amos, who presented the yew tree sapling to the Summer Queen. “The heart tree, reborn,” the Queen said, eyes revealing her absolute astonishment. “At this time, of all times. It’s truly an exceptional gift to bring back. But the book—”

Fis was crestfallen. “It’s in the hands of the Mad King.”

The Summer Queen’s eyes blazed, and sparks flew from her crown. “As he desired. As the prophecy foretold. Perhaps, it couldn’t have been avoided. Are you ready to join the fight?”

Fis nodded and kneeled again. “I lost my sword along the way, but—”

“These Dragon gifts suit you. I do not object. So, I dub thee,” she ceremonially brought her scepter down upon Fis’ shoulders, “Protector of the Realm.” She raised the scepter and turned, “Now, Amos?”

Amos nodded, “um, yes, Summer Queen?”

“Would you wish to stay with us in the Vale or return to your home?”

“Your land is magickal...and wondrous. But I’ve promised to go home.”

“Yes, you’ve kept your promises thus far, haven’t you?” The Summer Queen smiled, and the warm wind blew a gentle caress. “Then I shall help you.”

“Might I ask, Queen, if you know how I could save my Grandpa? He was poisoned by that...Asht’arra while saving

me. He struggles at home if it isn't too late..." Amos gulped now, wondering how long he'd been gone.

"Poison, you say?" The Queen considered him. "Poison varies greatly, and so would the antidote. You wouldn't be able to describe it in vivid detail, could you?"

"I can do better than that," Amos said and smiled. He reached into the pocket of his robe and produced the cloth bundle. He unwrapped it carefully and presented the dagger to the Summer Queen. Her court tensed, and several Satyrs waved spears, stomped hooves, and growled at Amos to keep him at bay. The Summer Queen raised a hand, and they drew back. Amos carefully placed it in the palm of her hand. The Summer Queen carefully examined the ichor-stained cloth and the black dagger. "Ah, this is a potent toxin. It is known in these woods. Asht'arra learned the perfume arts here many years ago, after all. Yes, we can treat this."

Amos sighed, the incredible tension in his shoulders ratcheting down by a factor or two. "That...that's most wonderful...I don't know how I can thank you."

"Oh, I'll think of a way, young one. For now, you may go before battle rings out in these woods. And you may take that sapling home."

"What?" Fis called, "Are you kidding?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't, your...uh, majesty, Lady Summer Queen," Amos protested politely. "It's obviously like really important to your people. I'm happy to leave it to grow here in your care."

The Summer Queen waited for the commotion of the court to die down around them and then shook her head. "Amos, you must simply learn to trust that I know what's best for the

Fae, and when I charge you to look after this tree until it's time to return it, this is what's best for the Fae. You will return one day, and this tree will be safe, for now, in your care. Now, pluck a leaf off, boil its sap, and add some of the moss that grows on the ground by these yew trees. Combine it in tea or a stew, and your Grandpa will recover ... in time."

A lovely forest-green Nymph, dressed in a living gown of rosebuds, stepped forward and gave Amos a handful of glowing blue-green moss, which he slipped back into his cloak.

"Well... thank you," Amos said, bowing deeply. "It is a great honor."

"Keep this little plant safe, child." The Summer Queen smiled kindly and wiped the tears from Amos' cheeks with one soft, loving stroke. "Moist and sunny, like your world kept you safe, to grow, and one day, to return."

Amos ran towards the Summer Queen and hugged her, and she wrapped her arms and living dress and flower boa around Amos in a warm, vibrant embrace. Something warm and furry rubbed up against his legs. "Thunder!" he cried, and the grey cat purred. "I'm so happy to see you. Where have you been?" He bent, picked Thunder up, and snuggled her close, rubbing her face and belly. But Thunder didn't tell.

"Goodbye, Master Zhi Xuan, goodbye Rhogar," Amos said, wiping his cheeks. "Goodbye, Lemengnoost, too." Then he walked up to Fis, who was eager to leave and join the battle. "Goodbye, sweet Fis, you've saved me more times than I can count, and you..."

Fis smiled and hugged him close. "That's what friends are for. You did...pretty amazing, kid. See ya," and she winked.

“Now it is time,” the Summer Queen said, and she raised her scepter and the flowers and vines in front of her wriggled and moved, revealing a shimmering pool of water. “This will take you home, young Amos. It’s of the utmost importance you visualize your family, exactly as you remember them, and places that make your heart sing until you pass through and arrive there. Until next time.”

Thunder dipped her paw in first and then hopped inside. Amos followed, falling down, down, down. The water crackled, and Amos’ triple-spiraled yew tree ring glowed and fizzled as ley-lines connected his path through the quantum darkness as Amos passed by many cosmic entities, both young and very, very old.

Amos concentrated on filling the endless emptiness with images of his grandmother, Tongliang Village, and his parents in Chongqing. He thought about Spring Festival feasts with his family, birthday dinners, and their patient, loving smiles through all his shenanigans. He thought of the iron door of Anju Ancient Town until a scattershot starfield of brilliant white light blinded him.



He first noticed the sweet smell of summer chrysanthemum that his grandmother loved to pick and fill the house with. Then he heard the hocking vendors and the bubbling aroma of grilled spicy snacks and stinky tofu wafting into his nose. Amos’ almond eyes were gobsmacked as he imbibed the overwhelming rush of familiar excitement, born again with a special meaning and a joyous welcome. He tasted the fresh sticky warmth of Chongqing summer with barely restrained glee. Thunder hopped down the cobblestone streets chasing

butterflies, as a typical cat is likely to do on a midsummer's day.

Artisans and vendors sold souvenirs and snacks sizzling in spicy aromatic oil. Children ran and screamed among the rich cultural relics. In the distance, a Dragon fire-dance performance twisted and turned, and a crowd of youngsters howled in delight.

Amos wondered how long he'd been gone. His heart ached in worry. As strong as he was, how could Grandpa hold on without medicine? Amos tried to tell himself it would work out well because he was a child. After all, that's how children's lives were supposed to go, but he worried deep down that he had been fortunate thus far, and his luck was just about out.

Red lanterns dotted the horizon, each dangling bright yellow streamers, hung from intricate wood panels carved with stories of myths, monsters, and legends. It was all much more vivid, magickal, and meaningful to Amos after his trip to Elsewhere.

"Can you believe we're back already, Thunder?" Amos asked, and Thunder turned her head to meow. She did not look the worse for wear for all they'd been through, perhaps a little sleepy. He wondered how often her lazy days resulted from a night of the kind of adventure they'd just had. Cats really were mysterious. He ran to the road and waved over a passing truck. It was the bald old Mr. Zhou.

"What have you got there?" Zhou asked.

"It's a baby tree," said Amos. "It's a gift."

"Are you lost, boy?" Zhou asked Amos.

"No, sir, I'm found. I'm headed to Grandma's."

“Well, I can drop you in Tongliang Village,” said Mr. Zhou. “Hop in.”



Hot sun stewed a dirt road at the edge of the small village. A gaggle of grey geese greeted him with honking cries that seemed more welcoming than he remembered. Bent women tended to leafy green stalks, and each golden seed held their heart. Amos rolled down the window and stuck his head out to inhale the deep fresh country air as the lazy breeze gusted sweet perfume from fragrant flowers. Children played on dirt roads to enjoy the simple countryside life, and girls in white dresses and red boots skipped in puddles laughing and blowing bubbles. Bright ribbons in their dark hair shimmered, and Amos' shoulders relaxed. He was *home*.

“Here!” Amos cried. “Let me off here!” Mr. Zhou pulled over, and Amos hopped out of the car and let Thunder hop down. He walked up the winding mountain road to Grandma's house and was greeted by the cacophonous, goofy bleating of goats, geese, and chickens along the way. Amos smiled and waved to them all. Grandma paused at her laundry line to wave and call his name. She ran to him and wrapped his arms around her until he thought she might burst.

Looking drawn, fraught, and worried, Grandma, pulled him back and observed him. “Amos, I've been looking for you all day—where have you been?”

“All day?” Amos balked. *All that he had experienced had happened in a day?*

“How's Grandpa?”

“Oh,” Grandma frowned, her mouth tight and thin. “Resting, feeling weak today.”

“I’ve got to get to him now. Sorry, Grandma, I haven’t a moment to lose.”

Amos ran back to the house, boiled some water, set down the Fae sapling, mashed up a leaf and the sap, crumbled the quickly drying moss that lost some of its glow by the light of day, and stirred the mixture into a cup. When the water was hot enough, he poured it inside and let it steep.

Grandma waddled into the kitchen and patted Amos’ shoulder. “Are you hungry?”

Amos nodded. “Starving!”

Grandma pattered to the stove to boil up some noodles.

Amos carried the tea carefully up the stairs to Grandpa. He hesitated only a moment before he approached Grandpa’s bed. Grandpa’s complexion was ash grey. A bear of a man when standing now seemed more like a baby with the delicate pallor of a stone giant. Amos squeezed Grandpa’s ice-cold hand.

Grandpa opened his eyes.

“Grandpa, Grandpa! Are you okay?”

“Oh...I’m just resting.”

“I made you some tea. You have to drink it right away,” Amos said.

Grandpa smiled, took the mug in his large paws, and sniffed it. “Herbal, is it?”

“It’s *magick*, Grandpa. Hurry.”

“Sure, Amos,” Grandpa said and laughed a little, grimacing as his chest cavity shook. He blew on the tea and

took a little sip. “Not bad,” he said. “A hint of...mint?” Something shifted behind the grandfatherly eyes. Grandpa *knew* it was **magick**. *Who was he, really?* “Thank you, Amos, for this,” Grandpa said, and he squeezed Amos’ hand again.

“Make sure you drink the whole thing! I’ll give you another one tonight!” And Amos carefully hugged Grandpa around his shoulders. “Now, sleep. You need your rest.”

“Thank you, boy. I’ll do my best.”

“You’ll be fine, Grandpa. The Summer Queen told me so.” Amos hurried to his father’s old room, where he decided to put the ring, the necklace, and the cloak, which was miraculously clean, into the closet in case his father ever needed it. Then he headed to the kitchen.

“How is he? Did he drink it?” Grandma asked.

“He did, and now he’s resting,” Amos said.

“That’s good, that’s good.” Grandma smiled at him. “Sit down and eat, child.” She put his spicy Chongqing noodles on the table before him. He took a moment to inhale the delicate blend of local spices and herbs, engulfing his senses and making his stomach rumble with a ravenous, fiery appetite. He studied her, noticing her weary expression and the tightness of her mouth. “Did you sleep well last night, Grandma?”

She shook her head, “I didn’t, no, I didn’t...”

“Well, I hope you sleep better tonight,” he said and smiled, and then he scarfed up those local Chongqing spicy noodles in under a minute. He licked the bowl clean, and then he went to wash them up with a sponge and hot water. He even used soap.

While he washed his dishes, Amos’s thoughts drifted to Luka. *Was she fighting the Mad King right now? Who had she*

snatched off the castle dome? Amos hadn't thought of it before, *but there had been something familiar about the fiery red hair and burning red robes.* Thunder wandered into the kitchen and rubbed against Amos' leg, purring warmly. She hopped on the counter and curled around the small tree sapling to nap. It was well deserved.

"You know, Grandma," Amos said, "Cats don't *sleep* the way we do," watching Thunder nuzzle the sapling in the window as it soaked up the late afternoon sun. "The truth is," he said, in a whisper, "they're inter-dimensional beings, like guardian spirits, and they visit places we usually cannot."

"Is that so?" Grandma said and ruffled his hair. "You need to go up and take a bath. You look like you rolled in the mud."

"I did, and much more," Amos said with a grin.

"What's that you brought in?" Grandma asked.

"It's a sapling, a gift from the Queen of Fairies," Amos said and then continued, "You know, cats walk the Dreamlands, and sometimes, if we follow close enough behind, we can too."

"Silly boy," Grandma said, but kindness filled the space between them.

Amos went up and ran a scalding hot bath. He washed all the mud off himself and remembered to scrub behind his ears. When he got out, he put on some fresh clothes, he eyed his old bathrobe, neatly folded, but decided a blue t-shirt and a pair of jeans would be okay.

"Care to join me for a walk to the market? Your parents are coming for dinner."

"Sure!" Amos said. He was filled with quiet contentment that used to come only on birthdays or Spring Festival

celebrations when he was about to get an exceptionally wonderful gift. Today his gift was simply the present.

At the bustling market, he saw everything anew with a keen eye, marveling at the familiarity of sights and sounds. Grandma shopped for fresh cuts at the butchers, and Amos watched the clouds play over the horizon. One large fluffy white one had the face of an Elder Dragon. He waved to it. The whole world was full of wonder.

Later that afternoon, Amos waited by the window until his father's car pulled up the driveway.

"Mom!" Amos yelled, running outside to wrap her in a big hug. "Are you okay?"

"Hi honey, yes, I'm fine. Your father and the other doctors took good care of me."

"I'm glad to hear," Amos said, and finally, he let go to hug Papa too. "Hi Papa," he said, and his father patted his back.

"I missed you, little buddy."

"Hi, Amos." Aunt Grace hopped out of the car and squeezed him. "Have you been busy?"

"I sure have," Amos said. Grace lowered her sunglasses and gave Amos a knowing wink. *What?*

"Let's get dinner on," Grace said. "I love a good hot pot after a trip!"

"Me, too," Amos said and grinned. *And what a trip it had been.*

They all worked together in the kitchen, washing, chopping, cutting, and boiling food to enjoy a fragrant and spicy Chongqing hot pot full of fresh vegetables, meats, and all sorts of wondrous odds and ends. It was the most

comfortable smorgasbord of aromatic flavors Amos had ever tasted.

Afterward, it was time to go, and Amos checked up on Grandpa, carrying a full mug of fresh Fae yew tree tea. Grandpa was already looking a little better. It would be a steep slope to wellness, but Amos knew he would be okay.

“Rest well, Grandpa, and come visit me soon.”

Grandpa nodded and smiled. “We’ll visit you in the city soon.”

Amos smiled and hugged him. He gathered up his things and looked around but couldn’t find Thunder or Rufus anywhere.

“Let’s go,” Papa said and hugged his mother tight. “Thanks for taking care of our boy.”

“He was a joy, Treasure. We’ll see you soon.”

Amos took one last good look on the horizon and marveled at the clear sky, a symphony of eye-popping orange, gold and purples that seemed all the more magnificent after the storm had passed, like the earth had been washed clean and allowed that the sun to shine just a little bit brighter. He hopped in the car with Aunt Grace and his parents and Papa drove them back to Chongqing City.

On the way, the woods were alive with magick, history, and mystery, and he told the Fae yew sapling all about his life along the way.

Amos watched the sky as they drove home, and his single sun fell slowly behind the horizon, and the sky faded from bright and vibrant hues to purple and then to darkness. Amos slept soundly in the car. His father woke him when they

arrived back home, and while everything seemed perfectly normal, at the same time, everything was absolutely different.

As the days passed, he did something remarkable. He didn't complain about a single thing.

CHAPTER 36

MOONAGE DAYDREAMS



One day, during the most dogged of dog days of summer, Mama knocked on Amos' door with the barely contained excitement that signaled her *big news*.

“Come in,” Amos said, taking note of her ear-to-ear grin. He put his book down and waited patiently for her to spill the beans. It wouldn't take long.

“It's your birthday, Amos! We're taking you for brunch!”

Amos grinned and cheered. She gazed closer at him and said, “you're not wearing your glasses?”

“Oh,” Amos smiled and rubbed his eyes. “I'm trying not to rely on them as much,” he said. The truth was that he hadn't really needed them since he got back home, and when he wore them for too long, he got quite a headache.

“We've got some excellent news Amos, and we're going out for a special bite to eat—your pick.”

“Space Lab!” Amos said, clapping his hands.

They first hit the court for an intense game of badminton. Amos found he was much less timid on the court than he used to be and was improving against his competitive father. Later, they walked through downtown, the old heart of Chongqing,

and stopped to ponder for a moment at the People's Liberation Monument, a clocktower that had, a century ago, been the tallest building around, but today sat nestled in the tourist square between chrome and glass superstructures that broke through the clouds above, a timeless reminder of the struggles of Chongqing's past.

Today, the sky was a vibrant blue, and the white fluffy clouds danced across the horizon like a faraway battle. The air was clear for the foggy mountain solarpunk supercity he called home. There were no dragons in the clouds today, but Amos knew that did not mean they were not there, somewhere, doing *Dragon Business*. Amos had spent less time on tablets and games and more time playing music and writing in his journal. After his adventure, it just didn't seem so important anymore.

They walked outside, and Papa summoned their car. It drove up a minute later, and they hopped in, and Papa turned on the radio.

“To commemorate a decade since China's launch of the breakthrough orbital solar power plant, the government has announced that engineers from the Western China (Chongqing) Science City have applied a significant upgrade to the wireless power transmission technology capable of beaming clean energy an astonishing 400km from space to ground without leakage. The enhanced solar power generation capacity will help China continue providing cheap, clean energy to ASEAN and Western Bloc countries. A government spokesman said this technology has been ‘an effective contributor to reaching carbon peak and neutrality goals’ and along with reforestation and carbon sink projects, is contributing to the rapid re-cooling of our planet...”

“Pretty cool, eh, son? Ultimately, the market got the world on board with clean power. We just had to make it cheaper than the old dirty kind.” Papa said and flashed Amos a smile in the rearview mirror.

“Yeah, it’s amazing,” Amos said, feeling pretty chuffed about life. He was practically grunted. Today, *he was 13*.

Mama changed the station to an old-timey rock and roll song, and Amos sang along. As they arrived at the newest horizontal skyscraper in downtown Chongqing, Raffles2, an automated parking device took their car and shuffled it off into the car pile. Based on the original Raffles Mall, it was a completely immersive AR experience tailored to deliver custom content, advertising, and entertainment designed upon personal preferences and customer history. It was Amos’ favorite new shopping mall, and they visited his favorite brunch place, where they could see the confluence of both rivers, the Jialing and the mighty Yangtze River. Skyscrapers dotted the horizon and the city streets pulsed with vibrant energy as electric and hydrogen cars drove over large spanning bridges, and boats sailed up and down the rivers.

The skies were full today, too, as taxis shot along invisible aerial highways. Drones soared through the skies, delivering noodles, pizzas, and groceries to busy customers.

“When are Grandpa and Grandma coming to visit?” Amos asked.

“As soon as Grandpa feels better. Do you miss them already?”

“Yes, I do!” Amos said with a smile.

Amos led them to Space Lab2, a fabulous restaurant covered in hyperloop monorail tracks. Flying drone trains

raced around, delivering hamburgers, fries, salads, snacks, and milkshakes. Rolling droids guided guests to their tables, singing joyfully, and children clapped and cheered as the magnetic trains raced by.

It all felt so normal and delightful, yet Amos' thoughts often wandered back to the Vale of Shadows, Castle Hobbleheim, and the Dreamlands of Elsewhere. *My friends.*

"It's amazing," Mama said to Papa. "A week in the countryside with grandparents, and he's a completely changed boy. He's totally grown up."

"He's still a little rascal," laughed his father, "but he's our rascal."

"He's an amazing little guy," Mama said, ruffling his hair as Amos chomped down a delicious cheeseburger as big as his head.

"Amos the Amazing," his father said with a laugh as he pulled a letter out of his pocket and waved it around. "Oh, good news, Amos. We got the call: you've been accepted into the Chongqing Foreign Language School this fall."

Amos grinned. "I knew I would. The test wasn't *that* hard."

"We're proud of you," Mama said.

Amos ate a fry, dipped in a spicy aioli. He loved being back in the city, but he had learned to love the countryside as well. His parents had a little bundle of gifts for him, a new book to read, some sneakers, "for extra sneaking," he said with a wink, and a couple of new journals for writing. He liked them best, for they would hold his dreams. The little things didn't seem to matter anymore. His shoulders relaxed, and he

closed his eyes to revel in this intimate everyday moment. “Can I see the letter? Is that from the school?” Amos asked.

“Sure, kiddo,” Papa said and passed it to Amos. A droid rolled over, whistling cheerfully, and delivered a large chocolate ice cream cake. Amos’ heart fluttered, and butterflies awoke in his warm belly as he held and unfolded it. The soft cream-colored paper had a natural, high-quality feel to it. Amos opened the letter, and the dark ink contrasted beautifully, and the school’s logo shone at the top corner of the letter. He scanned it quickly, “...Chongqing Foreign Language School... international program...congratulations and welcome...next fall...” Amos was owly-eyed and tongue-tied as the paper shimmered under his gaze. The text swirled and bubbled, letters shifting and changing until even the Chongqing school logo had become the emblem of a steampunk hourglass emblazoned with a swan. The new words said:

“Welcome, Amos. Congratulations! You have been accepted to study in our super-international outreach program, a full scholarship admission beginning this fall semester. Looking forward to watching your bright mind engage with our material...”

Amos’ heart hammered in his chest, and he skimmed to the bottom to the signature. In elegant handwriting, he could clearly make out the name Luka Starlight. This was a letter from *Kronoswons*. His hands trembled as he set the letter down.

“Excited or what, kiddo?” Papa said with a smile.

“Yeah...this school is going to be great,” Amos said.

Later, they saw an action movie, ate popcorn, and played games at the arcade. When they got home, Amos excused

himself and lay in his bed and read until he was exhausted. That night he slept deeply, but very early in the morning, when the streets were still quiet, and the sun was still busy Elsewhere, he sat up with a start, his heart racing. His thoughts had returned to Hobbleheim. He had been dreaming of the mice in the kitchen and hoped that old Uncle Bertrand was faring well against those fat rats. Amos walked to the window and peered out at the pearl in the black sea, shining bright, for all its shadows and secrets, and Amos was warmed by its presence in his sky again.

“One day, I’ll visit you,” he promised, and he thought of Ruby and Alice again. Perhaps, they’d be there with him. Studying the moon’s craters and dark spots intently, Amos reflected upon his adventure thus far, and the moon gave a knowing wink. He sat down at his desk, opened a new journal, and decided to write as much as he could while it was fresh in his mind to capture every crisp and vivid detail.

“One day,” he said, as the first rays of morning sun poked sleepily out of the twilight haze, “I’ll return to Elsewhere and see my friends again.”

He didn’t know when or how he would return, but deep down, he knew the adventures of Amos the Amazing had only just begun.



“Wow,” said Swordsman Dave to the live stream. “Fantastic. That was just epic.” Alice popped up behind Dave, wearing the flowing purple robes of The Legend of Sword and Fairy hero Lin Yueru, and hugged the Storyteller. “Thanks! That was...wow.”

Alice noticed the Storyteller slip a paper card into her robe's pocket as he leaned close to say goodbye. The Storyteller smiled. "Well, it's getting late. I best be off."

"It all worked out in the end," Alice said.

"Oh, it's not the end," said the Storyteller with a smile. "Not by a long shot."

The door opened, and well-built men in black suits and dark sunglasses marched menacingly through the crowd. The place had gotten pretty crowded over the last few hours. At least fifty colorful Hang kids were smiling and clapping. More filled the street. The MIBs marched to the Storyteller. "You need to come with us," said a bald, short but broad-shouldered one who seemed to be in charge.

The Storyteller sighed. "Do I have to?"

"You can do it the easy way," said a mean-looking one with a scar that protruded from behind his dark glasses. He cracked his knuckles. "Or the hard way."

"Turn around, hands behind your back," said the first one.

The Storyteller sighed and glanced back to Swordsman Dave and Lin Yueru-Alice and the crowd, many of whom were still live-streaming him. "All right, let's go," he said, putting his hands behind his back.

They slapped some zip strips onto him and dragged him through the crowd and out the door.

The cosplayers in traditional Chinese Hanfu and a few lonely aliens and androids clapped and cheered, commenting on how authentic these spooks in black looked.

Outside the Oodles of Noodles, a dark panel van slid open, and the Storyteller was chucked inside. The doors slammed

closed, and it peeled off into the night.

“They had a van and everything,” a young Qiyao Runqun in black and red said. “Top-notch showmanship. Other cosplayers around the shop exploded into cheers and applause again.

“Brilliant!” one of them screamed.

“What an ending! Incredible,” Dave said to Alice before looking back to his streaming device. “Okay, netizens! There you have it, Amos the Amazing live in Chongqing. See you next time, folks! Cosplay Dave, signing off!” and he put his phone away. The excited crowd started to head outside, looking for the next flash mob activity or interactive installation.

Alice poked a finger into her vest and felt a paper card. She peered at it curiously.

“What is it?” Dave asked.

“Just a bookstore...in Jiefangbei. It says *Junge books*.”

“Never heard of it before.”

Alice watched the dark van as it sped away through the pouring rain down the slippery boulevard. She frowned. “Do you smell something funny?”

“Like noodles,” Dave laughed.

“No. Something fishy. Did you think those guys were a bit off?”

“For Men in Black? Perfectly normal to me, I think,” Dave said.

“No, like too normal, so normal, they weren’t normal. Uncanny Valley weird,” Alice said. “Do you think he really

hired cosplayer spooks to whisk him off?” Alice asked Dave.
“It doesn’t feel like his style, does it?”

“It was a great ending, wasn’t it?”

“Maybe.”

Pregnant raindrops exploded against the noodle shop window with relentless enthusiasm. *It was a dark and stormy night*, Alice thought as she slid the card back into her vest pocket. *It seems...I have a mystery to solve.*

“Okay...gotta go, see you, Dave. There’s something I have to do.”

“Ciao, Alice. Thanks again,” Dave said, “for the invite, you know,” without looking up from his phone.

Alice walked to the door, parasol in hand, and activated the handle as she slipped outside. The neon-laced electric umbrella shot up around her, illuminating her way through the misty, foggy night city as she trudged off with no clear destination in mind.

“Storyteller... did you send me down the rabbit hole? Where is Amos?” She thought about an old friend who just might have a clue. “Ruby, Ruby, Ruby...my old, dearest friend Ruby. Maybe you will know where Amos has gone,” Alice muttered to herself, repeating the name three times as if hoping, like the slippers she was named after, she would magickally appear.

If only I knew where she’d be...after all this time. Mysteries were like a fine wine, and this one was an exotic vintage. Otherworldly. Something was going on, she knew, and Alice was going to figure out what.

OUTERLUDE: TIDES OF CHAOS

(A PREVIEW OF AMOS' NEXT ADVENTURE)



“Are you sure this is it? The real deal?” Amos scrunched up his elastic facial features in concentration. He wiped his sweaty palms on the forest green and gold student robes. He missed his fabled ‘Cloaky’ and its comforting, enchanted embrace. The egg-shaped albino twins, Heikki and Eetu, enthusiastically nodded in their identical robes. Their crew cuts stacked their egg-shaped heads onto their egg-shaped bodies. Amos felt their reputation as movers and shakers, and worse, bullies, was rather exaggerated. Their general vibe was more akin to potato salad. Perhaps, their parentage played a factor—both their parents were quite famous in the magick world. The boys *were* trouble but valuable because they often knew where the action was.

“Oh yeah,” Heikki said. Heikki was typically the instigator of their twinned violence—the ideas-man. “In Sibelius’ office is a tome with the most restricted magick. Like top-shelf creepy stuff. If you want to impress the older boys and us...” he winked a curious pink eye at the mirrored reflection of his identical brother. Both of their white eyebrows wagged furiously.

“That’s the book you’re looking for,” Eetu finished. Eetu often followed Heikki’s lead but was infamous around the

campus for his tremendous temper. They both grinned ear to ear, and Amos gleaned a devilish insight from their exchange.

Amos grabbed hold of their hands and shook them furiously. “Thank you, thanks a lot,” Amos gushed. “It’s a great opportunity and all that.” Even without his father’s powerful necklace, Amos could glean a fair bit of insight when he put his mind to it, and he was reading these boys like a book. It was true. The book was real. At least, they believed it was.

It’s in there, Cthylla cried in his mind’s eye.

I know, Amos said. *I’m pretty sure they’re trying to get me expelled, but the book is real.*

I can get you into that room, Cthylla said. Lately, the Kraken had been very chatty, and she wasn’t the only one. Amos was slightly concerned by the voices that no one else could hear, but not overly so.

“Okay, so how will I know which book when I get in?”

The egg-shaped twins shared a look, and Eetu shrugged.

Heikki said, “it’s a large tome, definitely evil,”

“What’s more,” Eetu said, his voice a whisper now. “They say it’s written in blood, bound in human flesh.”

“Maybe Elf,” Heikki said with a shrug. “And there’s a face on the front, a demon, which protects the book, and if you’re unworthy, it’ll bite your hand off when you touch it.”

“Yuck!” Amos cried.

Is that true? Amos asked the Kraken.

The Kraken did not reply. “How do you know?” He asked the twins.

I'll handle that book, the Kraken said quickly.

“Our dad was in the office of magical artifacts when it was recovered from those balding librarians at the ‘crabby,’” Heikki said.

Eetu nodded, “quite crabby,” and they grinned wickedly.

It is true. That's the book I seek. You must find it tonight.

Oh, golly. Amos shuddered. *But—when I cast this spell, our debt is paid?*

More or less, Cthylla said cryptically.

More? Or Less? Amos pressed.

Closer to more, the Kraken cooed.

“So, it's a big leather book and creepy. Okay, I got it. Can't be too many of those.”

“Only one,” the twins said together, laughing openly now.

“Well, time to get on with it. You boys should scam,” Amos said with a wink. “You're hardly discrete.”

The twins began to blubber but did not protest when Amos turned them around and shoved them off into the darkened hall, away from the glow of Everlight torches. He waited a moment, satisfied they were on their way, and considered the door to Professor Sibelius's office again. He approached tentatively, slippers slipping soundlessly upon the marble floor. It was time to get the Kraken off his back.

Professor Sibelius' door was half open, but Amos stopped short of crossing the threshold, pausing to examine it closely. He'd learned in his short time at Kronoswons that appearances could be deceiving, and what appeared hard could be easy, but what seemed too straightforward could be dangerous. Amos

peered around the doorframe, looking for sigils, lines of dust, or any indication of a magick trap. Close to his feet, he found a simple strand of spiderweb across the doorway: a tripwire. He traced it to the doorknob, where it disappeared.

“Ex-oratos,” Amos said softly, holding his spell focus, a bronze hourglass emblazoned with a swan over the end of the web, and he felt a warm wave pass through his hand, channeled by the focus, and with a sparkle, a small sigil became visible.

A numbing, paralysis trap, the Kraken said. I will dispel it.

No, Amos said. Let’s just carefully step over it. There we go.

Amos picked up his robes and made sure to give the strand of the web a comfortable berth. Sighing, he looked around the inner sanctum of Professor Sibelius, headmaster of bardic magick and musicology.

The room was immaculate, with a long, hardwood library holding many leather-bound books, a desk with a stack of student papers, a bone horn, and a photo of a young woman waving, spinning, and smiling in a yellow dress. Beside it was a marble bust of the Duke, who smiled playfully at Amos. Rumor had it they were chummy, and the Duke might be coming for a guest lecture next semester. There were lots of rumors, but Amos paid them little mind. On the walls were several stringed instruments, racks of temperature-controlled lutes, guitars, pipes, horns, and various outrageous and creative instruments that Amos had never even seen before.

Is it here? He asked the Kraken.

Not here, but close. I can feel it calling to me. The Kraken seemed manic, irritable and excited.

Amos scanned the bookshelf, but it did not seem to be on the shelves.

The Duke statue, the Kraken said to him. It's magic. Close his eyes.

Amos crept to it and tried to pull the Duke's eyes back closed. They wouldn't budge, so he sang them a lullaby, a first-year *sleep* spell, and tried again. This time, they closed easily, and with a creak, one panel of the wooden bookshelf cracked open. A cool, damp drafty sea breeze welcomed Amos to peer into a rocky-hewn cavern. It was pitch black inside.

I will be your eyes, boy, the Kraken said, and invisible eldritch tentacles wrapped around his face. Amos could see perfectly well into the darkness. Amos crawled through the cave, down a descending tunnel until, after a while, he could hear what sounded like the crash of waves, and the tunnel leveled out.

Quiet. We are not alone.

Amos tiptoed and soon heard a low-rumbling, ritual chanting. The chamber was large, circular, and drafty, but he kept to the shadows around the edges, approaching quietly. The figures had their backs to him and wore high hoods, except one, who faced the semi-circular crowd, eerie shadows flickering from his lonely torch.

The cultist at the head of the altar pulled down his hood, and Amos gasped. His shrunken ears, and glassy, bulging, unblinking eyes made him look decidedly fishlike on his narrow, hairless head and rubbery, blue-gray skin. He opened his mouth to bellow a wet, gurgling cry that the robed figures repeated. He raised clawed webbed, fingered hands into the air in a violent gesture, and Amos noticed folds on the neck that

shivered, gills that awakened with the violence of tearing flesh.

“Y’ha-nthlei!” The robed Fishman cried. The crowd repeated it. Amos shuddered, but the Kraken urged him on.

“Ythogtha and Zoth-Ommog!”

There’s the book. It’s right there. Get it and go!

How? They’re all going to see me.

Wait.

The ceremonial leader produced what looked like a giant coconut and split it open with impossibly strong hands. From the split halves crawled a dozen or more white, slimy flatworms with a circular mouth of jagged teeth. They crawled along his robes, dropping to the ground or hopping directly to the others gathered around. They did not turn and run but welcomed the worms. Horrified, Amos looked away for fear of the nightmares that would come had he witnessed what happened next.

A burning command in Amos’ mind fired like a starting pistol. *Run!*

Suddenly all the torches snuffed out, and robed figures cried out in confusion. They stumbled around, but Amos, who could see perfectly well with the Kraken’s spectral tentacles over his eyes, dashed to the alter and gingerly touched the book’s rough leather cover. On its cover was a circular seal with a series of cascading stars inside. It shone in the flickering torchlight like silver or platinum, but as Amos crept closer, it greedily sucked in the ambient light so that the book itself eschewed a perpetual aura of gloom.

He felt it come to life under his touch. A menacing face came to life on the front, and its wicked eyes feasted on Amos

with a gruesome hunger. Then a curious thing happened, and its eyes crossed slightly, staring over the boy's shoulder. The book seemed to pale, cower, and fearfully disappear off the cover altogether. Amos grasped it and ran, relying on the supernatural Kraken's magick to guide him through the magickal darkness.

Amos returned to the office and closed the bookshelf once again. He escaped the trapped door with his robes lifted around his waist like a victorian dress as he curtsyed into the shadows, where Heikki and Eetu gawked at him, faces growing slack with a such dumb shock that they forgot to breathe and fainted upon each other. He stepped over them, tiptoeing back to his room.

Inside, the Kraken helped him prepare for the spell, drawing a circle of protection upon the floor, employing candles, incense, and other protective charms. Then, when he was ready, he flipped through the book, looking for the spell Cthylla had in mind. Although indecipherable, the blood-red ink and accompanying symbols chilled him to the bone. *We're not doing anything wrong, are we?*

On the contrary, you are simply fulfilling the promise you made me. There! That's the one.

The spell was epic and profound, and the melodies appeared very complicated. It was way, way above his level.

How am I going to do this?

Trust yourself. Trust me.

Amos shrugged and sighed. *Okay. I mean, what's the worst thing that could happen?*

The Kraken said nothing. Amos knew spell failure could be dangerous but imagined that the Kraken could shield him.

Or his ring of spell storing would save him. It didn't give him carte blanche to be irresponsible, *more a grey card to be mischievous*. With a start, he remembered his ring was back, safe and sound, at his Grandparents' house. Amos sighed. *It's fine*.

Amos stretched his calloused fingers, delicately bringing each back and holding for 10 seconds. Then he bent them forward. Then he spaced each one apart as far as they would comfortably spread. *Hurry*, the Kraken pushed.

Amos didn't like to hurry. Sometimes, he acted like he had all the time in the world.

If my hands are cold, the magick won't hold, Amos chimed back.

The Kraken was not pleased. Amos could feel it pushing in his mind, almost frantic.

Amos picked up his absolutely gorgeous cherry-red Fender Spellcaster guitar and lovingly wiped down the beautiful blueberry paisley spell guard. He whistled three clear notes, and an apple-sized chrome ball on his desk fluttered to an approximation of life. Wings unfurled to reveal a clockwork dragon with ruby eyes that sputtered a little cloud of steam as it sailed into the air and hopped onto the headstock of the Spellcaster guitar.

Amos smiled at the curious gift from Lemengnoost. "Come on Orrery!" As Amos plucked a string, the clockwork dragon sung back the correct note, usually a little flatter than what Amos had played. When Amos played the exact vibration, Orrery purred with satisfaction and his ruby red eyes glowed green for just a moment. All the strings tuned easily enough, except for the 'G,' which for some reason was always a little too sharp or too flat, and if Amos tried to flatten the

sharp, it became too flat, and then sharpening the flat, it was once again a G sharp.

Hurry, I've been waiting too long!

Amos wiggled just enough to flatten it into a healthy-sounding 'G.' He flipped his amp on.

Amos warmed up his favorite scales, playing up and down the neck with deliberate slowness over and over. Then when he'd remembered exactly the required muscle memory, he did them lightning fast, forward, backward, and triplets until he felt pressure in his mind as the Kraken squeezed him like a walnut. The Kraken had stopped begging and started demanding.

"Okay, okay, I'm ready, I'm ready," Amos whined, and as the pressure started to wane, he began a practice strum, down, up, down, up, counting *one and two and three and four*. He changed chords through some basic guitar chord progressions and their magickal inversions. His strumming took on a rhythmic chug-a-lug groove, indomitable, unstoppable, with all the inevitability of a bullet train. Finally, his nerves were under control, and he focused on the tome. "Let's do this," he said.

Amos began to play the song, but it was way too hard. He twisted his left hand to form complex full chords with third, fifth, seventh, and ninth intervals. Energies began swirling around him, and with his right, he plucked the strings wildly, trying to master the dictated arpeggio. He was so focused on his strumming pattern and chicken picking that he missed a chord change, and the sour sound curled like burnt paper upon the air. The spell was failing already.

No, cried the Kraken. You must get this right.

It's too hard. It's too fast.

Make more time.

Amos grimaced as he plucked a dissonant chord, glanced down, and realized his fingers were on the wrong strings. In his exuberance, his hand had slipped, and now he was hopelessly lost.

No! The Kraken howled in desperation.

Amos tried to get back on track, but he played two more foul flat chords before he could get back into the progression. Sparks flew from the tome, and the corners of the room bent and twisted, awkwardly skewed, as the failing spell created dangerous pockets of wild magick.

The roof tore off and squished into the window, which blew out in a devastating crash. Thousands of pieces of flying glass whizzed, punctuating the sleepy campus grounds.

I'm going to be in so much trouble, Amos thought, finally deciding that, yes, a wizard can whizz, without much consolation.

Amos focused on all his blossoming abilities and, to his surprise, connected to a groundswell of magic available to him. The untapped source of incredible wild power called to him, and Amos dug deep, absorbing it, focusing it, channeling it. He dug deeper than ever before and felt the well of primal power willing to flow through him. Eyes aglow, and fingers shooting sparks, Amos vibrated with power as he doubled back around to the opening refrain, cloaking the failing spell in a cocoon of magick and sending them backward in time. He found himself back at the song's beginning as the room around him bent and twisted back into shape, and the windows repaired themselves. The ceiling unfolded and settled back

over his head. Startled, Amos couldn't believe what he had accomplished.

How did I..?

KEEP PLAYING!

Amos felt a small voice poke into his mind then, from far away. This had begun to happen more and more since he'd unlocked his bardic magic at Kronoswons. He found the easiest way to get them to leave him alone was just to give a quick and inspirational answer.

Hi Amos, I'm a young _____ named _____ who wants to be a writer, but my parents say it's not a real job. Do you have any advice?

Amos winced as the song became unsteady, as his concentration twinned. *Just Write!*

He hoped that once the Kraken left him, the well of bizarre questions that had opened him up to so many minds would quiet down and let him focus on his studies. He would be much better rested if he had some semblance of peace.

He focused on slowing the song down to sound out every note of the incredibly complex melody. The song held the emotional transitions of a tear-jerking ballad. As it rose into a crescendo of arcane fury, the theme scattered into disparate arpeggios filling the gloomy space with tension. The complex chords and notes came alive under his fingers in an ancient key that he struggled to play. Amos began to sweat, for the song required demanding progressions that had Amos painfully twisting his fingers to articulate complex chord shapes. His other hand strummed very quick and complicated patterns that became increasingly intricate. Amos' mind

drifted back to the island maze that he had once escaped, and he wondered what his offramp was for this song.

Amos calmed his breath and focused on slowing time down further. Electricity vibrated up and down his fingertips to his shoulders. It made his jaw chatter wildly, but somehow he felt he could grasp more time so that he could play as steadily as he wanted and pluck the complicated phrasings at his leisure. *It was working*. He rang out full, archaic chords and strummed them as decreed by the powerful old book.

He grinned. When this was finished, he would be a campus legend.

The song was fascinating and deep in its complexity. He found himself lost in the moment until he reached the bottom of a page. Amos played the final phrase, gulped, and quickly flipped the book's page.

His heart sank when he saw the next page was impossible to play, that and the suggestive images rattled around in his mind, warbling his reality with a kind of claustrophobic anxiety. Even with enough time, he realized he didn't know how to sound the rhythmic chords and play the lead notes to voice the melody. There was something...wrong about the book. Amos could feel it now through his excitement and recklessness and the frenetic encouragement of his silent giant friend. A maddening, panicky feeling crept over Amos then, as cold sweat dripped down his neck, and he fought back the urge to stand up and flee helter-skelter into the night, but the Kraken pushed Amos onward, whipping at his mind to not falter now, and even as the book rang his head like a bell, the Kraken soothed his nerves, slowed his heart, and pushed him onward. So his problem was practical: he didn't have enough

fingers and hands. This magick was lightyears beyond what they taught in his bardic college classes.

Amos began to sweat, his forehead glistening with a fine sheen that trickled down the sides of his face and the back of his neck. He focused on the rhythm, knowing that any moment now, the magick would falter and tear him apart, but the accented notes and solos seemed to ring out of their own volition. Peeking down the fretboard, Amos saw spectral tentacles rising from his wrists, playing other soundings up and down the neck as he played the first and the second position so that now it sounded like a symphony of beautiful chanting angels, all singing together and the magick in the room intensified. Despite the horrors of the imagery on this page, the song was beautiful, free, and intoxicating, and it consumed Amos altogether. The song built, and a final crash to the root tonic tore the room asunder with a thunderous and cacophonous crash. Eight gigantic tentacles poked through from another plane of existence, ripping the portal wider, and dozens of dark shapes penetrated the sanctity of Kronoswons school, swirling around Amos.

The demons were like bat-men with smooth, fish-like skin, long slender humanoid bodies, curving horns on their heads, leather bat-like wings, and a blank expanse of flesh where one would expect a face to be. Their unpleasant horns turned inward toward each other, their bat wings beat but made no sound, and ugly prehensile paws and barbed tails lashed out in violent anger.

A dozen and then a hundred of the wretched things swirled out of the portal, circled Amos once, and then bolted out his open door and through his windows with a shattering crash to roam the campus of Kronoswons bardic college.

Amos, so alarmed he froze for a moment, felt the Kraken's spectral fingers straining to play all the positions. *FINISH. Finish, and your promise is done. You are almost finished.*

But...what about...those things? Amos thought, even as his fingers played the melodic rhythm, the deep sound of worlds drawing together, and the waking of sleeping gods.

It's no matter. They welcome my arrival, the Kraken cried out in bliss as the song rang out, complete. The room quaked and shuddered as something much larger than his bedroom burst through the warbling rip in space and time.

A bulbous, many-eyed thing ripping through with a sea of tentacles emerged. It floated aloft with baby leather wings that should not have been able to support it, yet they did. It was a green so gray as whale-like and otherworldly, alien, and when its many eyes met Amos.

Thank you, boy, bubbled the Kraken Cythella. You kept your word. I am free!

Cthylla looked around, shuddering, as the magical wards that protected the school tried to hold it in place, and then it leaped into Amos. Amos bent, and skewed absurdly as his body tried to contain something of that magnitude in three dimensions, but he was overstuffed. Finally, the fourth dimension provided relief, and the Kraken disappeared somewhere, in time, with the crash of waves.

Amos released his grip on time, and everything swirled back into regular speed. He sat for a moment, adjusting to the dizziness of time lag until a commotion in the halls got his attention. Amos hopped off his bed, set his guitar down, and crept past the wrecked pile of stone from the hole in his ceiling and walls to peek outside his room. When he did, he stumbled, stupefied as his jaw hit the floor.

Headmaster Luka Starlight arrived in the hall, flanked by Professor Sibelius, Headmaster Alizon Jinx, and Sir Francis de Porte-Doubles. The four weaved devastating magic to blast the demons with chaos beams and summon spectral spiritual guardians. Screams echoed down the hall as first, and second-year students fled or cowered under the shattered remains of the bardic college wing of Kronoswons School of Magick.

One giant, leathery creature escaped the radiant hold of an enchanted suit of armor and flew directly toward a pair of girls, who screamed so loud and high-pitched that they shattered some of the few remaining windows in that portion of the hall.

The round-bellied, dashing Pook bardic headmaster Sibelius whipped a harmonica out of his embellished, forest green, and gold-leafed coat and played a dissonant melody so terrible and antagonizing that the Nightgaunt whipped its head around, hissing in disgust.

“You are a pathetic attempt at chaos, thou cream-faced loon, you scrambling, weasel-spleened fashion-mongrel. I pity your mother, *salao!*”

The Nightgaunt had abandoned the girls but faltered in its strike toward him, its long-taloned claws plugging its ears to stop the psychic barrage of pain. Sibelius was, after all, a magical master of vicious mockery.

The hot-tempered Professor Jinx wasted not a moment. Her fire-Jinn eyes flashed with the power of the storm, and electric energy coursed through her body to form a lightning lasso that twined around the demonic beast, wrapping it up in booming energy, wailing in an ancient tongue as she slammed it down to the ground. A senior named Tobias Morietti

summoned giant magickal meat cleavers to mince the monster into a fine paste.

Amos stood apoplectic as the expanding destruction of his school spiraled out of control. He watched Luka Starlight blast back a pair of Nightgaunts with her crystal scepter against the stone walls. They splattered into the stone arch with a crunch and fell to the ground. With a sweeping motion, a giant radiant hand and dustpan brushed the crumbled and injured demons into the open portal conjured by the long, lean, and elegant Professor de Porte-Doubles, who clapped his cloven heels and snapped the inter-dimensional gateway shut. As the last of those in the hall were banished, Luka met Amos' sheepish gaze, her three eyes blazing like radiant pools, and Amos gulped, tempted to leap into that portal to avoid what he knew would be a heap of trouble. Instead, he inched back slowly away from the chaos to calmly await his punishment on the remains of his bed.

As students shrieked further down the hall, Amos put his hands together and focused on his breath to quell a dizzying panic as the army of the damned swarmed the hallowed halls of Kronoswons. Around him lay the wreckage of his furniture, plaster, glass, stone, blood, and monster guts. The screams carried on for much longer than Amos imagined, giving him time to ponder his punishment. He worried it would be quite severe indeed.

"I couldn't have known," he tried, but no, that wouldn't quite work. "I was as surprised as anyone when..." no, no, that wouldn't do. He didn't want to seem over-rehearsed. When they stormed in, he would go with what felt right. So, he sat and waited.

The first to enter the shattered doorway was a red-faced Sibelius, who glanced at the tome on Amos' bed, and his face turned a shade redder.

“Tell me now, Amos, why, no, not why, but how, and also why, you stole from me and tried to destroy zee whole school?”

Amos, lost in thought for a moment, did not react, so the professor drew a rapier and pointed the tip up at him. Finally, Amos blinked, crosseyed, at the shining silver point of the blade tapping the end of his nose.

“I...I...well, you see, I was merely trying to impress the other students....” It felt weak. It was.

“No!” cried Sibelius. “Do not razz me, you foul-spoken coward; I scorn you, you scurvy-bottomed, mustard-dappled child of toad!”

Amos grimaced as a terrible mind-sliver jabbed his brain like a pick-axe. “Professor- erg— you see, it's really not that hard to imagine, you see, there was a *dare* from the twins, and I wanted to show the older students I was as capable—”

“Don't pepper me with your pithy platitudes,” Sibelius spat, his nasal, guttural accent purpling his words. “Tell me one reason why I shouldn't run you through with my blade now, as we have handled other traitors of the school in the past?”

To Be Continued...

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DEAR READER,

Thanks so much for reading my story—well, the story about me any way. I didn't write it. I more or less lived it, and it's more or less true, although I would have told a few things differently...like, I don't really think I cried as much as the author went on about in the beginning, for one! Anyhooo...I just want to ask you, if you are really going to write me letters and ask me for advice, perhaps you could write them down and send them to the Storyteller, and he could deliver them in batches when I'm not in the middle of a magick class? (I've been getting behind in my studies lately...I'm sure you have no idea what that feels like.) Here's how you contact the storyteller to send me letters and questions: jorahkai.com/askamos

Thanks! Whew. Life's been pretty wild lately, I have to say, but I'll tell you all about that soon. Hang in there! Things are going to be okay.

Your friend,

Amos

P.S. I drew a picture of a wyrmling for you.



ABOUT THIS BOOK

No one ever wonders where they're going to run to after they've run away to the circus. I did, and for me, at least, it was to China. I had spent the better part of my childhood - which, in Peter Pan fashion, lasted a good thirty years - playing festivals until the faces blurred together, and the sound of excited shouting became the expressionistic Jackson-Pollack patina that formed the bedrock of my daily life.

It may sound awfully exciting. In fact, it had its moments, to be sure, and even now, recalling those days, months, and years with the rose-colored lenses of nostalgia, they were the best of times. They were, however, also the worst of times. A Prince on the weekend, standing atop a million-dollar light and sound rig, blowing fire, playing my newest songs on shrieking speaker stacks while artists and Faeries mixed with Orks and the things that go bump in the night, often turned to dust in my mouth by Monday.

Still, those nights were defining ones for many, a right of passage, and often spent rubbing shoulders with unbelievable characters, both regionally and intergalactically. I mean, we were all a little like the Lost Boys and certainly no stranger to a bit of magick, but some stories are more unbelievable than others. One night I remember a run-in with that roguish space captain with a killer smile and a huge, shaggy best friend, who at least once stopped down for a drink at a watering hole on a scummy blue planet where I happened to be doing my thing. We tussled a little over a girl, if you can believe it. You probably wouldn't believe that *I won*.

I left school to play gigs - and then quit gigs to finish school and always wondered about the roads not taken, when, for example, I supported my best friends, The Root Sellers, to prepare tracks for gigs at the Beijing 2008 and Vancouver 2010 Olympics and Paralympics, but ultimately decided to stay behind and finish a degree in Poetry and Creative writing, while world leaders danced to the beat of our drums without me. If you're reading this, it's a fair guess that the writing thing worked out, so that's always a plus.

Eventually, even having a good time gets tiring, and one can only eat so many excellently prepared cheese plates before we crave a new horizon. Mine was a trip to China, Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing through a college I was hanging out at because it seemed like a good idea; it's what people do. Often, they hang about at colleges and dream of doing something once they've moved on. Chongqing was a very hot and spicy place, full of excellent food and some of the nicest people I've ever met, and when they told me I should stay, I listened, and the rest, they say, is history.

Years went by, I got married, and I had a big loving family here, which is pretty remarkable since I came from a small family and was an only child. Around 2016, we started taking our high school students to the countryside to teach rural primary school students in mountainous villages - like Tongliang - and I got to see the city boys and girls learn all about the rigors of countryside life, even as they taught the very curious young rural children about Canada, English and some other things that I supported them in. At the end of the week, the children all lined up and bawled their eyes out that we were leaving, and it was terribly sad, but we promised to return next year. For a while, we did, and then we didn't.

In 2020, mere months after an epic European trip with my wife where I promised to kickstart my faltering and fairly shelved writing career - I had several binders and drafts on a shelf, and that was about all I had to show for decades of writing classes and a lifetime of dreams, something big happened. A lockdown, a virus, and a global pandemic had begun. As the first Canadian journalist on the scene for an early lockdown in China before it was rightly recognized as a pandemic, I was a curiosity back in the west, and I had a column on a fairly prominent national news page where millions of people read about my daily escapades making banana bread, gorging on scientific podcasts, and trying to share what I learned with the west so they could be prepared for what was coming. Some listened, many laughed, and quite a few argued with me for having the gall to try to help them at all. That diary became a book, won a few awards, and was considered a humble bestseller for what it was. It showed me that when pressed to the fire, a writer could burn white-hot, and those papers and binders could become a real book. I promised to repeat the process.

After a couple of years of talking about viruses and parents feeling sad for children at home without friends and school, I thought of Amos again, the composite of myself and all those children learning about the countryside. I had tried to write his story in 2018 but realized he'd been too old and too mid-journey, and I went back and imagined how it all really began. We got a call one day, and I was asked to meet some university students in Tongliang, a place I knew, sign some books and read a poem, and generally just be there, being me. I drafted an outline for the first "origin" of Amos' book and then drafted a chapter that seemed like one they would enjoy, and then I read it to them. *They loved it.* They wanted to know more. They wanted to hold my story in their hands and savor every word. I met Dr. Gao then. She told me I had done a little bit of magick (yes, real *magick*, not the rabbit-out-of-hat-on stage fluff), and she and her daughter promised to help me bring this cross-cultural Western and Chinese fairytale to the world. It was June, and I was told if I had a book done by September, her students would read it as part of their literature class. So I worked all summer and had a messy, leaky draft by the first day of September.

With Abantika, Erin, and Garrett's help, we got my draft into good shape. The students read weekly sections of it for an entire semester - and all seemed to love it. So I kept working on it, and eventually, we got maps, illustrations, and a beautifully

painted cover, and it really became my love letter to all the children's books and magic and fantasy I read growing up. As it's come close to publication, and a Chinese version is slated to be released in early 2023 by a big-time Chinese publisher where it will, with a little luck, become a major blockbuster, a lot of people seem excited about it, including some people from Tongliang. I hope those children, now grown up, at least a few years older than the kids who blew bubbles and smiled and cried when we left, will enjoy it and remember a little bit of the magick of their childhood. Really, it's all about magick, and I hope that's ok with you.

I set it in the near future because, at this time, much of the world is experiencing record-high temperatures, weird weather, and a slew of other problems I'd rather not dwell on but instead dream that we have already solved. I thought, why not give them something optimistic, encouraging, and SOLAR PUNK to read? Maybe some of these children will become engineers and figure out how to use hydrogen cars, solar power plants, and huge carbon sink forests to save *our beautiful world*.

It's a good wish. If you're reading this in the future, you'll know whether it worked out or not. I hope it did. If you're reading it in the near future and we're still not sure, I would really love it if you could share this book with your friends and leave reviews and comments online and help every young dreamer fall in love with the idea that *we are going to save our planet*. Our planet would really like that too.

In the end, I would like to say I'm sorry I never had a chance to finish the book. A lot of writers never feel their work is done. We just have to let it go. And then there's Patrick Rothfuss, but for the rest of us who hope to release more than one book a decade, it is painful to know we could have done more. I hope his fans finally appreciate the loving dedication he puts into the years of revision when that elusive third book comes out. If you are from the future, which you likely must be, I hope it is finally done. Civilizations have risen and fallen in the time it took to get from book two to book three, but many of us know that it will be perfect when it comes out.

For my own story, it's been incredibly interesting to write and translate simultaneously for the Chinese market, and I am really pleased to see this version, as imperfect as it might be, come out in my own native English while I'm young enough to appreciate it. Writing for the deadlines of a publisher, a translator, and hopefully, a lot of readers of all ages around the world, I did what I could in the limited time I could squeak out of a busy life, but I did my best. As Mildred would have been happy to remind me, it's the best I could do.

I do want to give a special mention to the true villain of this novel: straight quotations; unlike the curly smart kind that is now in vogue in book publications, they are generally out of fashion for those that don't type on typewriters. You'd think, then, that it would be easy to set a modern computer to use the modern curly quotes, and that would be that. Not so. It seems straight quotes have got a grandfathered clause into the computer world and the best we can do is have a

crack team of fairies sprinkling fairy dust around liberally that at least temporarily tames the old quotes and transforms them into the smart, bouncy, curly kind. But every time I've turned around, those blasted quotes have turned back, grown up like weeds, or invaded like a pack of rampaging Vampire Trolls, and I'm sure, despite my best efforts, some of them remain in the book to this day. They really have a zest for life that I can only hope to approximate, but they are a continuing source of stoic inspiration, even as I curse them for all the trouble they make.

A hearty thank you very much goes out to the artists who colored my words, Adrián Ibarra Lugo and Randall Hampton, both of whom I discovered through the really supportive fantasy community around Critical Role, and to Fan Yuelin, a brilliant and hilarious 10-year-old girl who loves to doodle monsters, this book wouldn't be as visually compelling without you. Also, Midjourney, what a wonderful and all-seeing, all-powerful AI you are. Please be kind to us in the future.

That's it, and that's all. In perpetuity, in life, and in the dream, I thank you from the bottom of my heart to the tips of my oft-mad but generally well-meaning toes.

Your friend,

Jorah Kai

October 2022

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Someone once told Jorah Kai to *write what he knew*, but since he was 12 and knew very little, the avid reader set off on a lifelong journey to master a variety of esoteric subjects. He's been a lifelong student, martial artist, musician, English teacher, writer, newspaper columnist, editor, web designer, dance music producer and touring DJ, black rock city existential detective and philosopher, fire-breathing gypsy circus performer, standup comedian, and family man, all of which offered many profound insights into the human condition. He now lives in the solarpunk capitol of Asia, Chongqing.

Kai enjoys conversing in foreign languages because it's more mysterious, and he enjoys playing guitar and eating pizza. He has lived at the confluence of two mighty rivers, the Yangtze and the Jialing, with a large and loving family for many years as a human being and forever after as the most immortal of all supernatural beasts, *a writer*.

For more information, please visit:

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