

CHILD AND THE SUNGODS

BY KAI NAKASHIMA



PREFACE: Child's Wish

It was the night of a full blue Moon, cool and breezy in the towers of the abandoned temples where the wind whistled through its' belfries.

An alienish figure, clad in human clothing, scaled up the stone brick walls, to the ledge of the belfry where moonlight kissed the surface and the wild mice who waited there for him. The hooded boy hoisted himself to the platform by the use of clawed fingers and nimble moves. Throwing his hood back, he shook out his bleach-hair and furry white ears, opening crimson-red globes for eyes to the shine of the glorious, glowing Moon in the star-sprinkled ether.

"Isn't it marvelous?" He said to the mice, his own mouse tail wavering in appeasement. "I long to go there one day. I've dreamed of going to the moon since forever! It feels like eons that I've yearned..."

The mice squeaked and scurried.

"Yes, I know, gold like cheese. It couldn't be more perfect. There's nothing I want more than to set foot on that wondrous, mysterious, gem in the sky. It was a gift from the Gods, did you know? The Sungods that came on heavenly wings! Imagine! Flying to the Akashic kingdom, meeting the moon, eating its' cheese, basking in its' cosmic eternity... I would do anything to be like that..." He turned to the mice with tears in his glassy, red irises.

"I used to only dream of cheese, but now I dream of going to the moon, to be with the king, to thank the Sungods for all he has given us... But alas, I am just a mouse, wishing he were someone else, something else, some place else..."

The boy sat cross-legged as his palms went to his face. He shook his strangely-eared, head.

"What must one do to earn their place among the stars?"

"The stars, eh?"

The mouse-mythic jumped up, shocked that anyone could have sneaked up on his superior ears. The mice dispersed.

"Who's there?!" Child called down into the gullet of the belfry.

"Oh, no one much," Said the familiar voice of a man. "just a worn soul in hopes of getting back something precious that was stolen from him, long, long, ago."

"Oh, I'm afraid I can't help you then..." Child, the mouse-creature answered. "We mice don't usually have the honor of living amongst such precious things."

"What about this temple?"

“It is abandoned. We mice cannot possess things until nobody else wants it.”

The man entered the moonlight, taking a seat next to Child. He gazed out to the night life of the exotic city below, glistening with torches, and reflective pools and fountains. Metal gates and decorative fences margining the big, white houses.

“That is a rather sad philosophy. Perhaps you ought to change those ways.”

“I have tried, but I will always be a mere mouse dreaming about being something else. Mice, bugs, and insignificant things will never change the world. It is my unfortunate destiny.”

“I’d rather take that destiny... I’d rather dream that dream...” The stranger sighed hard. “I once had convinced someone to be something that they weren’t. Do you know what happened?”

Child shook his head no.

“He went bad. He killed someone. He took credit for deeds he never did. He turned evil. Dark as the nights when that big, beautiful moon did not exist.”

“What happened to him?” Child asked, wide-eyed.

“He gave it up, went back to chasing destiny. Went searching in hopes of getting back something precious that was stolen from him.”

Child backed off. The man laughed.

“Do me a favor, kid, help this man redeem himself. If you ever find a notebook full of sketches of that incredible, amazing moon, bring it to Donogan Academy. You know the one. That should set things straight. Maybe it will set your fate straight, too.”

Child took a step back, then finally bolted.

“Don’t waste your life fighting it, kid,” The stranger called after. “destiny can only win.”

Chapter 1

Wake Up Call

He was an early graduate, respected by both peers and teachers for his destined greatness. He embraced technology, reached for the future, and destroyed everything that got in his way. Some say he was so revolutionary, he would become the most genius inventor the earth has ever known.

Carter Miles Cordell would shape his dreams of numbers, matter, and science into the brand-new world we would live in – with dark intentions or not. No one would be able to stop this human force from what he had to do, even if it meant doing it over and over again.

The future had been written, so it was time to walk this path... Or so he thought.

Garbed in his suit and tie, Carter walked down the street with his little brother, Luka, and Luka's best friend, Chike Cain. They were headed to Donogan Academy; a school Luka should have been too young to be going to, but was bestowed an invitation by Mr. Donogan himself, for his exceptional brilliance. Luka would never notice as he was too young and too smart to feel like an exception in the academic world.

It was Carter who barely noticed the fun they were having; Chike and Luka, as they clambered past the fallen autumn leaves. The Sun shimmered through to the forested dirt road, and the deep-green weeds, that threw off their dew as they ambled by. Chike and Luka laughed with joy as they ran along, arms spread, trying to catch the gold, fire, ember, emerald, and neon-blue leaves...

Dropping the two off, leaving them with backpacks and lunch bags, Carter turned and carried on towards the robotics lab down the road.

"Did you ever notice how Carter can't see the spirits?"

"Neither can any of the other kids at school." Luka shrugged.

"Are we different, y' think?"

"We're *weird*!" Luka clapped happily. Chike looked to the clear sky, sparkling with zig-zagging entities.

"No Luka, we're just lucky."

Carter heaved the giant, silver, metal pot onto the stove burner and fired it up. He quickly chopped leeks and fresh celery stalks over it, and then dumped cubed carrots, whole shallots, and chopped

chicken over the side from a bamboo cutting board. Wiping the sweat from his brow, sapphire eyes glanced out from beneath short, thick, brown hair, laying themselves on Luka, whom was at the table doing homework.

Luka's long dark hair spilled all over his shoulders and chair, while childish clothes glittered as bright as his apple-hued eyes. Luka's feet waved under the table.

"We talked about dreams today. Is a dream really just thinking in your sleep?"

"Is that what Mr. Izinski said?"

"Yeah."

"Then probably."

"Last night, I dreamed I was a pelican!"

"How silly." Carter chuckled, unceasing to salt and pepper the broiling stew.

"Yeah, I looked silly I think, but I *did* have wings!" Luka flapped tiny, pinched fingers.

"Chike says he dreams about pyramids and mummies and stuff, and one time, he had this dream where geysers shot out of the desert and lifted him into the sky to meet a cloud spirit that told him he was a Sungod!"

"Isn't that interesting?"

"What do you dream about, big brother?"

Carter's blazing-blue eyes, lit.

"Numbers..." He immediately answered. "Lots of numbers... Sometimes you."

"Really?"

"Absolutely." He said with relief.

"Brother?"

"Yes, Luka?"

"Mr. Donogan didn't come to school today! He *promised* to bring one of your robots!"

"He's a busy man," Carter said of the school owner, whom also happened to be Carter's life-long scientific role model. The Cordell brothers had always been very fond of him.

"I'm sure he'll do the presentation tomorrow. Why don't you get back to your grammar?"

"I hate English!"

"So did I."

In the night, Carter jotted out the most dastardly of inventions he could think of. He locked the papers in the night-stand drawer and went to bed. There was nothing new about this dark routine, he had

done it for as long as he could remember... Though there was something different about tonight - something had seeped into the cracks of Carter's concrete world...
Somebody was trying to change the future...

"I win! I win!" Luka slammed down into an empty seat at school the next day, proud to be the winner of he and Chike's race to homeroom.

The good-sported Chike, simply laughed and acknowledged, but the empty white board, still halls, and slow dust particles lit by the window, had him questioning the silence.

"Where is everybody?" He wiped beigey curls from his deep-aqua eyes.

"Dunno." Luka abandoned his bags to peer down the hall.

A book lie on the polished wood floor.

"What is this? No way! It's big brother's notebook! This is top-secret! No one's supposed to know about it! How'd it get here?"

"Did he follow us in? Do you have the wrong bag?"

Luka deemed both possibilities negative.

"Maybe a sprite stole it."

There was a pause before the two burst out laughing – not because it was ridiculous, but because they believed it was more likely.

"Can we take a look?" Chike pondered a bit guiltily. Luka just smiled and opened the book.

Page after page, was a cylindrical object surrounded by scratchy math, and thousands of scribbled notes and reminders. Without a moment to discern, the little spies were interrupted by a thunderous sound.

"What was that?" Luka swerved at the ceiling. Chike said nothing as the classroom trembled to the pound of megalithicly large, footsteps.

The sunlit hall of the school building squealed with a disturbing dread, causing Luka to grab onto Chike for dear life.

The destructive thuds became too close for comfort, making the boys shut their eyes tightly to the possibility that this could be the end...

The boys opened their clenched lids.

The barren landscape of sweltering, walking sands, poured across the world for as long as they could see. The stark, blue sky stretched overhead, containing no such clouds, and but one, lone, golden eagle.

This unfamiliar desert smelled of ancient seas, with a fresh, but hot wind that had the power to take your voice away. Though before it could, Luka screamed in surprise.

“What is this?!”

“Another dimension!” Chike suddenly glowed with a happiness. *“Amazing!”*

Before Chike could run off into the open air, the colossal footsteps of a barky, mossy, hairy hill, came rising above the horizon.

The mammoth-like behemoth stood many stories above the terrified children, but spoke as though he awaited them for one-thousand, three-hundred, and sixty-five years.

“WEEELLLLCOOOOOMMMME.” Its’ plump lips roared with a breath that could be mistaken for storm winds.

*“IIII AAMMM THE GRRREAAAT EAARRRTTTHHH BOOUUUNNND AKKAAASSHHIIIC
LIIIBRRRAARRYY. SSSAAACRRREEED YOOUUNNNG ONNNESS, DOOO YOOUU WISSHH TOOO
EEENNTTEERR?”*

Unphased by the peculiar world, Chike jumped up.

“Yes!” His reply escaped before Luka could slap his hand over his mouth.

The behemoth’s thick, gnarled trunk reached down to the small humans in gesture.

“YOOUURR TIICKEET PLEEEAAASE.”

“We don’t have-”

“THE BOOOK!!!” He gargled the words so loud that the ground shook.

Stunned with terror, Luka handed over the book without a second thought, to which it was flung high in the air and deliberately swallowed by the behemoth’s ugly face. It began a ground-shattering dance, accompanied by a wind-ripping song; A nature-themed solo that ended with the beast crashing to the giant sandbox in a sphinx-like position. His trunk arched, his mouth opened, and his tongue lolled out across the grainy floor like a red carpet, awaiting Chike and Luka’s stride.

The behemoth was then still as stone.

Chike was the first to move.

“No!” Luka pleaded. *“It could eat us! It ate Carter’s notebook – so it could eat anything!”*

“You mean like a library?” Chike suddenly understood.

Chike disappeared into the dark between the enormous beast’s tusks, causing Luka to give in. He closed his eyes before plunging into the grotesque blackness, framed with molars that would easily be able to crush them...

They emerged into amber light.

The candle-lit chandelier of the library revealed its neatly packed spaces.

Books, maps, scrolls, blue prints, and tablets were crammed into the bones of the behemoth, carved to be bookshelves, tables, and chairs. The aisles were cold, and cavernous, opposite to the warm glow offered by the candles. To the boys' surprise, there were already two people there.

The woman awoke from a deep meditation, and the man looked up from the book he was studying.

The lady stood up from behind the perfectly polished ivory counter; A foreign tongue to match her dark hair, bronze skin, and rare emerald eyes, which were shaded by thick, distinguished brows. Beautiful in every way, she smelled like Indian temples, and her being was adorned in white and gold. Her clothes spilled with ruffles, bells, and beads. She wore layers of dyed scarves.

She translated herself.

"Welcome to the Earthbound Akashic library. My name is Azure WhiteIbisEye. How can I be of service to you two, today? I felt we would have guests today – is there anything I may help you seek?"

She did a double-take of the boys, but said nothing more.

"Wow... " Chike breathed, still taking in the grandeur. "What kind of books do you have?"

Luka was already digging in.

"No way!" Luka shouted, half-excited, half-horrified "All of these belong to Carter! I've seen these things in his sketch pads!"

"How is that possible?" Said Chike. "Even we've never been here."

"It is possible because all great things we create, belong to the morphic collective." The man placed the book he was reading in his lap, his golden drinking chalice was set on the table.

Chike froze at the sight of this divine being – dressed as an exotic king, jingling in gold, misty capes, and geometric jewelry. Above the silks, shells, bones, and stones, was an impressive crown of scarlet feathers. But the most heavenly beauty about him was his crystalline flesh; You could look at him one way, and his hair and skin appeared as the tones of sand, but you could look at him another way, and the iridescent tinge caught the candle fires like butterfly wings. Silvery-sand hair draped beside a thin grin, while desert lashes half-shaded an utterly-at-peace gaze of fierce indigo.

"What does that mean?!" Luka demanded childishly of him, but it was Chike whom answered, almost robotically.

"It means that all great things belong to everyone. These aren't Carter's books, they're from inventors and creators from all over the galaxy!"

"What?!"

“That is correct.” King Bomani blinked with mirth, opening his eyes wide to Chike, whom shyly basked in the divine man’s praise.

“All lovely things come from the deepest depths of the stars.”

“The *stars*?”

For hours on end, Luka read and read, studying diagram after diagram, rejoicing in the creative dreams of the world. Slowly, he began to understand the fundamentals of these futuristic machines, contraptions, and vehicles, and swore to try and build them when he returned home.

“I can’t wait to tell Carter about all of this! Even *he* wouldn’t understand these mechanics!” Luka exclaimed. “I’m so glad we found this place. Now *I KNOW* one day I can be a scientist, *just like big brother!*”

Azure was delighted by Luka’s abilities, she was sure this child had been blessed by Thoth himself.

Chike on the other hand, spent his precious time at the library, talking to king Bomani, to whom he was a little star-struck by. Chike found the man to be very kind and fatherly, moral in every word he spoke. And above even that, he gave him the hopes that one day, he too, could be like that.

This was someone that Chike had longed to meet, his entire, short, but crowded life.

By the time the boys were ready to go home, both had been drenched in unfathomable wisdom.

“Can we ever come back?” Luka questioned.

The king and his royal book keeper, laughed.

“If you so choose.” Bomani nodded. “But don’t you forget - You boys have been here before.”

The world Chike and Luka knew, came flooding back, their visions once again, filled by the sight of familiar faces, busy bodies, and the obnoxious school bell.

Speechless, they took a seat like nothing had ever happened.

Chapter 2

To Ascend Or Descend

At recess, Chike and Luka were joined by the “usual bunch”, an older group of kids that misfitted from their own age group and became friends with the tweens as a result.

In fact, one of them, Joey Smith, was an ex-bully; still a fighter, but at least now fighting for what he thought was right. He had dirty-blond hair and green eyes that reflected a jester’s grin.

Honora was nice and upbeat, always supporting her friends. Her dream of becoming a pop-star made her struggle between modesty and shining brightly, which showed in her good, but mismatched fashions. Despite their age difference, she thought Chike was sweet, and hoped that he liked her, too.

Dillan was chill, running his own race towards growing up, he was terribly strong-willed, but that’s what made him memorable. He wore thick glasses, sports jackets, and jeans stained with house paint on a regular basis.

And then there was Child, the new guy. The shyest, most faithful, and full of talents. He was a unique-looking boy, thus shady for the sake of keeping people off it. He was instant friends with Chike, to which he liked so much, he was slightly jealous of Luka. But today, he had something else on his mind.

“Hey guys – Guess what I just found out!” Child leaped to the top of the friend’s lunch table. “*We’re - ancient – aliens!!!*”

Nobody but Chike ever understood his sudden obsessions, but today, he and Luka had something to pitch in. They told the gang about their phenomenal adventure to the enchanted library - but nobody believed them, except Child. The others were so doubtful, that they didn’t even laugh at them.

But the group continued to hang out as usual, yakking about other events of the week, so Luka carried on about the science conference that Carter would be attending.

“He said he’ll be meeting with some of the top researchers in robotics. I can’t wait!” Luka jumped around impatiently.

“Sounds like it’s a pretty big deal.” Honora smiled.

“Yeeaah...Dandy n’ stuff...” Joey unexpectedly grew sullen, slouching against the school yard wall.

“What’s up with you?” Dillan sipped at his straw with a question in his brow.

“Hadn’t y’ heard? Donogan’s canceled his visit again! He’s been a no-show for a week! Think he’s retirin’? Think he ain’t even sayin’ so long, now? He’s shirked every big event since school’s been in this year!”

Child leaned down from the gym bars to offer his bag of gourmet white cheddar puffs.

“Well, we’re not exactly Donogan Academy’s A-plus students, so I doubt he’d make the time-”

“Ignorant cheapskate.” Joey grumbled.

“Why do you care so much all the sudden?” Honora put her hands on her hips.

As the teenagers argued like boisterous monkeys, Luka and Chike went back to chatting about their mysterious morning, unaware of Child’s inconspicuous eavesdropping...

Carter dropped the box he was carrying. It thudded down with a twinkly shatter of glass.

“Ridiculous. Non-sense, Luka.”

Luka stuck his tongue out.

“How would you know? Maybe one day, you will meet Azure and king Bomani!”

“I know, because I never met your fairy friends either. Or the dragon, or the-”

“Just stop it!” Luka started down the stairs. Carter began cleaning up the mess.

Neither said a word, but Carter went on into his workshop, and Luka decided to go tell he and Chike’s story to someone who would believe him; Maxwell Donogan, their beloved teacher...

Luka was not at home when Carter emerged from his workshop. Carter’s whirl-winded mind poured anxiety across the side walks as he checked every single one of Luka’s favorite places, including the Cain’s house, but Mr. Cain, Chike’s Grandfather, had not seen Luka that day.

Carter could barely talk right as he unneedingly yelled through the phone at Joey and Dillan, demanding to know what happened earlier that afternoon. The young men didn’t know.

The road to Maxwell Donogan’s estate was not a pleasant one, Fate tried everything in its’ power to stop Luka from telling Mr. Donogan the news.

Luka dodged speeding vehicles, a bad bus driver, wailing police sirens, and even roadkill, to get to his beloved teacher’s fortress at the tip-top of the posh, Karnak hill. He stepped over litter, and was ignored by cars, racing like horses in hot pursuit of their destinations. Ducking out of the path of an abandoned garbage truck set on the green, he could suddenly smell a coming thunderstorm, which left the air to

shake the leaves around him. Spooked by a fat ally cat tangled in plastic can rings, the clatter ended when the feline was attacked by a neighboring stray out for a fight.

Luka just couldn't get a break from this reality's sorrow.

By the time Luka was at the foot of Karnak hill, a steep climb awaited the exhausted boy. And trouble had found him – bullies out for a victim.

But before anyone could get hurt, Azure stepped into Luka's world, confounding all who witnessed her dimension leap.

"Your brother is coming." Is the first and last thing she swore.

Luka looked back towards the street, where another set of headlights appeared on the horizon, beaming like two, shiny pearls that quickly pulled up to the curb, and scared the bullies away.

Azure disappeared before Carter could see her. The sound of his scoldings, and relieved, loving words took the wind as he dashed up to the gates of Karnak hill, and swept Luka off his feet in a harsh embrace to take him home.

"Still catching up on some shut-eye?" Child asked in the school yard, shoving a package of string cheese into Luka's waking face.

"No thanks..." Luka replied to Child's offer, proceeding to blink back his melancholy. "Oh why does he never believe me? I'm even having dreams about us arguing..."

"You mean you and Carter?" Dillan clarified with concerned eyes.

"Don't worry," Honora assured. "It will be okay, Carter was just scared for you, he just wants to protect you is all."

"You guys will make up soon." Chike said lovingly. Everyone nodded understandingly until Luka gave in.

"Okay... You're right."

"Hey," Child mentioned. "I think I might know something that'll cheer you up. Just meet me by the gates after school."

Luka agreed, and the friends went back to business as usual; Joey blabbing about a new video game that had just come out, leaving images of medieval contends and grandeur castles in everybody's heads until the school bell.

Child led Luka across the street, to a red-brick hospital where they carried up many steps to the fifth floor where they were permitted into a bland, white, room.

This is not how destiny would have had it, but maybe it believed it was the right thing to do...

Unveiling a bouquet of yellow, red, and white posies, Child had Luka present the gift to Mr. Donogan, who lie in bed.

"Mr. Donogan!?" Luka spilled the flowers into the man's lap as he went to give him a big hug.

"I've missed you too."

"What happened to you?!"

"Ah, Luka my boy... That, I wonder... "

The man proceeded to tell the tale of last Monday, when he was in his lab, conducting a brand-new experiment. He had built a resplendent machine, that had finally been put to work, but caused the electricity to black-out. However, the darkness was soon replaced by a radiance that told him of marvelous places, and exotic peoples. He saw luscious ravines, spectacular structures, abundant oasis, and humongous waterfalls. But he didn't stop there – his curiosity ran him to roam that world's ruins, to seek its' history, and dig up its' secrets; little did he know, that this angered the spirits, but it was all part of someone's plan to destroy Carter's destiny.

Child giggled.

"Sounds like you hit your head!"

"No!" Luka brightened. "It sounds like *Bomani's dimension!*"

"So that is what it is called..." Donogan mused.

Short and sweet, the visit was soon over, and the two boys were on their way back to the bus stop, where Carter would be expecting them., but before their time was up, Child stopped Luka in the ally.

He pulled his hood back to reveal timid eyes of glassy-crimson. Bleach-white hair hung shoulder-length, interrupted on each side of his face by a pair of white-furred mouse ears. A long, thin, mouse tail suddenly tapered from his spine.

Luka's blank face grew into the biggest grin. All he could see was the 'magic' of the moment.

"I knew it! You *are* one of me and Chike's friends!"

The two hugged like old companions who had not seen each other in years.

"I already was, wasn't I?" Child smiled coyly at the past book keeper...

Luka was so excited to get home and tell Carter; Luka finally had proof of his fantastical world.

“Prepare for lift off, my splendiforous little friend!” Maxwell Donogan grinned. Child’s animalistic ears perked.

“So what happens now?”

“Ha, ha! You did just as I asked! Only through Luka will Carter even begin to believe in the path I hath chosen for us!!!” Mr. Donogan waved his arms like a lunatic. “You have fulfilled your purpose, Child, my child! Soon, Carter shall thirst to see my genius, and when he does, he will be dragged into the quantum world of Bomani’s dimension, forever!!! Muaah ha, ha, ha, ha! Ah, ha, ha, ha! Ha!” He threw his arms open. “Why, Carter even once said himself: We know we are greater than what we have already succeeded, the betterment of humanity shall drive us, but those who leap above their mediocre systems will have the pleasure of taking science by the horns; Immeasurable access to power and possibilities!-”

“But he was talking about robotics-”

“All classes are the same, and every single one of them needs evolution... ” Maxwell informed darkly.

“We have the right of liberty to control our destinies, my Child...”

Mr. Donogan did not.

Carter did not take to Luka’s claims well. He was cold. He didn’t know how to deal with it any other way.

It was days later that Luka confronted him again, eager to show Carter that there was more to life.

He went to Carter’s bedroom, which emanated with the sound of electric guitar; Carter always played when he was feeling bad.

“Do you still think Mr. Donogan has gone mad?”

“Very.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Carter looked up from his spotless, black, fender. He hated when Luka apologized to him, he always felt things were his own fault.

“I don’t think Mr. Donogan is wrong. I think we’re going to make great discoveries in Bomani’s world. We’ll show people that behemoths, and faes, and elves really do exist. And I don’t know what Child is, but he’s a magic being too-”

Carter’s guitar string snapped. Luka cuffed his sneaker on the rug.

“You don’t know *everything*, big brother.” Luka accused before Carter could even speak. Carter smirked as he replaced his broken string.

“Did you know, that in little time, flying cars, printable biology, cures for genetic disease, and near to instant home-building will be the social norm? That’s science. We *BUILD* the future with our hands; It’s called *hard work*, Luka. The world will be happy without your fantasy adventure books to distract them from what is on the horizon – and then we won’t have to commit sci-fi crimes to “mend” what we “think” is coming for us. We solve problems as they arise, not plot them.”

Carter didn’t get the point at all. But the brothers’ worldly problems had just turned personal.

“But *you’re* not happy.” Luka incriminated him. Carter gritted his long, exasperated sigh.

“We’re not there just yet, Luka.”

Maxwell Donogan conceitedly expected the phone to ring, hoping that his best student would call to congratulate him on his successful discovery of another dimension.

That of course, did not happen.

“I guess I will just have to celebrate *myself*.” Maxwell dialed Carter’s number to inform him of his successful discovery of another dimension.

Up the rusty dirt trail, Carter went; It was the back road to Karnak hill, and Carter’s forceful path to a destiny not meant for good people.

Chike and Luka marauded after, afraid that Carter was only going to Donogan’s to pick a fight.

Barricading pine trees blocked the view of the city as they made a staining, red-dust crunching hike to the top of Karnak hill. Iron gates and arresting thorny brambles, pointed them in the right direction.

The scenic sprint was hardly interesting to Carter, as he’d made this climb many times before, when he was a younger researcher, coming to ask his scientific guru the meaning of E equals $M c^2$ square.

But today was different.

Carter stopped. Luka arrived in second place, and Chike was last, smeared with dirt and sweat; panting between his legs before uttering: “*Made it*.”

“Pull yourself together, I’m here for business, and if you two insist on defending Donogan’s pride, do so with some integrity, will you?” Carter snapped seriously. He then tapped on the metal fence.

Knowing security cameras were eyeing them, Carter gave a sarcastic wave. With a metallic shift, the gate swung open, and Carter proceeded. More cautiously, Chike and Luka glanced around before making their entrance.

Mr. Donogan’s spectacular property was festooned with fruiting figs, papyrus, and perch-filled water gardens. Granite stairs and marble deities were mounted atop grand platforms, and the walls of the

enormous patio were inscribed with his very own secret code that he'd been working on since his own high school graduation.

However, nothing beat the man himself, whom shuffled out of the large french doors on an expensive walking cane carved to look like an ancient Egyptian staff.

"Greetings, boys!"

"Forget the formalities." Carter rudely interjected, He stepped back from the fuzzy robot creature that scurried out of the mansion with a silver platter in its' paws. It presented Mr. Donogan with a set of keys. Chike and Luka whispered between themselves.

"Follow me, then," Maxwell turned towards the doors. "and please excuse my paranoia, I am expecting a library to come crashing through the roof any moment now."

Through a maze of perfect architecture and mosaic floors, museum halls, and more clamoring critters Mr. Donogan referred to as, "loyal Its", the four finally stopped at a vault that Mr. Donogan tenderly unlocked by key. He then had the boys turn the heavy wheel for him, which popped the door open with an exaggerated swing.

"Come," Maxwell began the tour through the halls and halls of cabinets. "I could prattle on about the discoveries from my latest exotic sojourn, but I'd rather you speculate an old artifact I picked up from my trip."

In a dedicated room, he drew a glass-covered drawer that housed a good-sized contraption shaped like a pair of wings, though it was missing several shafts, and there was a deep crack in the right shoulder piece. Despite the display, the marvelous object was in many pieces.

"Wow..." Chike breathed. "What is it? It's beautiful!"

"Beautiful, yes," Maxwell agreed. "it is the Wings of Ra, an apparatus used to fly through the sacred skies of the legendary worlds, the higher dimensions of the Universe! It has been my inspirational affinity for my latest, greatest, state-of-the-art creation..."

A suspicious glance was handed to Maxwell as Carter approached the cased specimen, glazing it over with his mucky skepticism.

"And what does this have to do with our little problem?"

"You shall see momentarily-" Maxwell was already moving on. Carter followed. Chike and Luka couldn't take their eyes away from the wooden wings.

Passionately humbled by the "technology" from Bomani's dimension, Chike instantly spoke Bomani's wise words.

“The Wings of Ra were a gift from the Sungods, a key to pass the barrier of the water planet, and on into the space lights so a new Earth could be created, but the gift was left to ruins when the Earthbound tribes failed to raise the new world, as they had found a way to steal their path towards the fourth-dimension. These wings are a rare reminder that dimensions over-lap. We are the ones who will raise the two world’s alliance once again!-”

“Boys!” Carter called. “Hurry up!”

“Sorry!” They echoed, trotting off.

In the room over, a monstrosity of a machine was activated by the push of a button.

“So, Carter, my cynical, educated, little friend, you understand the concept of the ultra-violet spectrum, versus these cone-lacking, human orbitals, void of the fabulous world we could be fancying through ultra-violet adapted peepers, do you not?”

“Well, when you put it that way-”

“Never mind the analogy – feast your color-coney eyes on this-!!!” Mr. Donogan jabbed his hand under the light that poured out from the aperture of the machine.

Gemstones sparkled on his long, knarled, fingers of... Shining steel?

Assuming Maxwell was trying to make a point about U-V waves by showing off the glow of his mineral jewelry, Carter realized upon the retraction of his limb, that he’d never been wearing jewelry in the first place, but he certainly didn’t have a cyborg limb. It was beyond comprehension.

The man lavishly repeated the action with goofy sound effects.

“Ha! Believe me now?! This machine has the power to show us another reality! Just because we lack the faculties to conceive it, doesn't mean it does not exist! We have discovered undiscovered things for hundreds of thousands of years, why not just accept that we shall never conclude the laws of the Universe?”

“May I try?” Chike out-stretched his hand. Carter stepped forward before Chike had the chance. He studied his own hand under the machine.

It was no more aged, nor youthful, nor decorated with anything, but upon flipping his palm down, an obvious wound sat atop his knuckles, gushing blood. He took it back fearfully. In this time, Chike had moved in, his arms multiplying under the light.

“Hologram.” Carter determined, even though he had physically felt pain.

Luka nervously stood back, while Chike’s wonder, bloomed. Chike tried to step further into the illumination, but Carter snagged his shoulder.

“We don’t know what this can do to us. Stay back.”

Carter turned to Maxwell, who was no longer there, he was reentering the room with a cart, that held the magnificent Wings of Ra. He toted it beneath the machine, and the artifact reconstructed itself like new. As long as it was under the machine's beam, they could touch it, lift it, and maneuver it as if it were whole and complete.

"Amazing!" Luka rejoiced.

"Three-D printer." Carter deducted, but Maxwell was too busy agreeing with Luka.

"Ah, amazing indeed, but alas, despite this monumental wondrousness, I cannot find a soul who will partake in my studies. I want to find out if the wings can actually fly us, and I'd rather use my dimension-converter, than build a dead-of-spirit replica. Quite frankly, even my lab rats won't take a smackerel of a gander... But *YOU*..." He raved at Carter. "You are my most accomplished student! You see the momentousness in this, don't you?! Or do you still think I'm crazy? Crazy *genius*, that is." Maxwell chuckled pleasantly to himself.

Carter scoffed.

"I thought we were settling the dispute about filling these kid's heads with foolishness. Was this some kind of trick to get me into your workshop?"

"Maaaybe..." Maxwell's light, british voice droned. "But of course I needed a carrot to lure you away from the labs' mundane robotics projects!-" He whipped his arms and flailed so suddenly, that the kids jumped back.

"BUT BEHOLD!!! My DIMENSION-CONVERTER!!!"

Carter flipped a lock out of his ice-beaming glare.

"You make me laugh." He said, even though he didn't.

"Is this not the kind of revolution you've been searching for?! An honest-to-goodness flying machine from another world? No fuel, no jets, not even the hang-up of an electrically adapted hover device? Just wind, wind, wind, rushing through your hair?!!" Maxwell swooned around in excitement.

"Your silly little sculpture proves nothing." Carter snagged Chike's hand. "Come, your grandfather will be wondering what's taking us." He took Luka's hand as well. Chike struggled free.

"W-wait! Carter, please, please help Mr. Donogan, he's our teacher! We should believe in him!"

"Aid this lunatic? I won't."

"Then I will," Chike wrenched away. "I'll fly. Bomani knows what this is-"

"You're just a kid."

"And the only brave thing in sight..." Maxwell teased. Carter grimaced and strode up to the man.

"You have no idea what you're doing."

“Then why don’t you just get on board. Buy the darn wings from me; let them be in safer hands. Perhaps you’re interested in building a dead-of-spirit replica?”

Carter stepped back in surprise.

“*Sold.*” Mr. Donogan said to the look on Carter’s face.

Chapter 3

Three Chances to Change the Future

Immediately, the ancient treasure was transported to Carter's place with care, to ensure that nobody else at the lab would mess with it before he, but before he knew it, Carter's attention was stolen by Luka's changing behavior. The trip to Mr. Donogan's museum home had filled he, and Chike's head with what Carter regarded as fantasy. They began to sneak off, often retreating to Chike's house, and Carter could hear Luka babble at night and early morning, talking to Chike on the phone. The two were obsessed with their secrets, making other friends stray. It seemed like they were always off, doing something without Carter's knowledge.

Unacceptable, Carter's study would have to wait.

The only thing was, this was not really what was happening. Chike and Luka were actually going on enrapturing adventures to Bomani's dimension. They were perfectly happy, and they certainly weren't lonely.

Every day, it was something new, some place new, some new face. Bomani's dimension was of swirling deserts, and jade oasis. The days were long, and the sun was just different – The smell of the breezes, the taste of the foods, the cultures, the creatures, the technology. Everything was so wildly interesting, that the boys became lost to their senses, and never wanted to go home.

But Azure always took them back, back, to Carter's dimension.

In Carter's world, things were devastating. Carter was confused.

He began to home-school Luka, baby-sit. He worked later and later because of his compensated time. He was terrified of losing Luka, which ironically drew him to drink, catch colds, and watch T.V, all for the first time in his life.

Carter's spark had diminished... But at least it had kept him from the Wings of Ra.

The dark intentions struck back.

The phone rang.

"Hey," Honora said on the other end. "me and the guys are on Seventy-seventh, mind if we swing by?"

Carter did not even speak because he and Luka had just fought. He hung up.

Honora, Dillan, Joey, and Chike were at Carter's doorstep in a flash. With high spirits, the four tried to cheer Carter, whom looked sleep-deprived beyond belief.

"Where's Child?" Carter queried absent-mindedly.

"Didn't you hear? He had to switch schools, we haven't seen him in weeks."

"Mm, yes, I see."

After passing around coffee, tea, and snacks, the friends sat down to talk about Luka and Chike. Carter cunningly avoided the subject with other life happenings, which somehow morphed into passing around photos and cellphone screens; A lighter, good time to which Luka remained absent, hunkered down in his room, wanting to be by himself – in Bomani's world.

But of course, nobody but Chike knew that.

"Look at this one!" Honora giggled, sharing a picture of when she and Chike went to a concert together. Dillan held up the Cordell's old scrapbook.

"Hey, this is the science fair!"

"Carter with d' blue ribbon." Joey nodded.

"Aww! Look at Luka!" Honora pointed to the toddler in denim overalls sitting in Carter's lap. Carter finally broke a chuckle.

"Heh, yeah, before he started wearing Mom's necklaces and ballet slippers."

"Dunno," Joey hissed. "I think he was always kinda different."

"Both of these two," Honora shouldered the ten-year-old doused in chunky gold-colored adornments. "you guys have been partners in crime since the dawn. Do you remember when you came to school with that paper-crown on your head? And the beach towel toga? What was it? Second grade?"

Before Honora had even finished her sentence the guys burst out laughing. Joey choked on his refreshment.

"King Chike, your majesty!" Dillan jested an extravagant bow. Chike blushed fiercely.

"Yeah, so what's up with you two lately?" Joey messily recovered.

Carter tried to break things up before he could go on, for he himself, was simmering about it inside.

"Would anyone like another coffee? Tea?"

Chike stood.

"Please."

But he followed Carter.

“Carter, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” Carter played it cool. “You haven’t done anything.”

“But I know you’re mad at me. You don’t like what I say to Luka and I’m sorry.”

Carter wanted to slap him.

“Well stop being sorry! There’s nothing you can do now. Forget about it. It’s my fault Luka doesn’t want to be around me... Maybe I’m the one who took your stories too seriously.”

Chike sensed Carter’s violent impulse, but also his reluctance to follow through.

“Carter, you are a great person... But you must listen! Luka doesn’t hate you, he loves you, and we just want someone to believe us... We have something to tell you but you won’t understand until you listen! And let’s face it – we all know you’re a genius...” Chike stamped his foot.

“Don’t you know how much power you have?!” Destiny is expecting monumental actions from you! Something is trying to unfold here! A miracle is at our feet! And if you don’t embrace this now, we may not get another chance for the next one-thousand three-hundred and sixty-five years!!!”

Carter stared.

His palm fell to his side as the other remained on his hip. He was shaking his head slowly. Where on earth did they get all of this from?

“Chike, thank you for your kind forewarning, but... Well... I don’t really know what to say about that...”

“Tell me you’ll give Luka another chance?”

“...Of course, of course... Let’s not keep the others waiting now, shall we?” He turned to the coffee pot.

That night, Carter knocked on Luka’s bedroom door after a rather silent supper.

“I’m busy.” Luka called. Carter sighed.

“Luka, something’s been on my mind, can I talk to you for a minute?”

The door opened just a crack.

“What?”

“Can I come in?”

Luka mumbled his no.

“Why not? Luka-”

Luka tried to shut the door on him, but Carter caught it and stepped in. He was shocked at the disaster in Luka’s room – a disaster no different than the one in his own workshop.

“Luka... Where did you get all of this?!”

Luka sheepishly went to recover an object which he hid behind his back until he was at Carter's feet again.

"I-in Bomani's dimension there's a library, s-so king Bomani's been teaching us a lot, so I asked him if he could teach me about robots, because I like them, b-because you like them, and I'm sorry we've been fighting and I just w-wanted to-"

Carter hushed his rambling, which caused Luka to simply hand over what he was concealing; what he'd made, all by himself.

The mysterious, kinetic craft squirmed in Carter's aghast grasp, making him release the creeping carving shaped like a beetle, onto the floor. Incredulously, Carter watched it scale the vertical bedroom wall.

Carter would've been speechless, but his inventive brain got the best of him.

"Luka, how would you like to come to work with me tomorrow?"

It wasn't long before Luka was helping to construct some of the laboratory's most high-tech machines among Carter and his co-workers. Carter had no idea what had just happened here, but he was happy for Luka, and so very proud. Luka and he could finally relate again, which was quickly putting the past behind them... Just not the right past.

Luka came racing down the stairs with his arms full, scarcely able to see past the huge apparatus he carried.

"Big brother! Big brother!" He chanted enthusiastically. "What's this? What's this? Can I have it? What is it?!" He collided with Carter in the doorway, falling to his bottom with the Wings of Ra still in his lap.

"Luka – are you okay?" Carter exclaimed, but Luka energetically ranted on after seeing the grocery bags in Carter's hands..

"Is that meatballs? Yea! Meatballs for dinner! Carter, can I have this?" Luka hugged the wings.

"I'd forgotten all about that..."

Both of them had...

"You can take a look, but be careful, it's delicate; put it back when your done," He turned to the kitchen.

"Chike and his Grandfather will be here soon, so don't get carried away with anything."

Luka ran off with delight in his heart, a big smile on his face. Carter smiled too, and shook his head.

Knock. Knock.

The doorbell resounded.

"That should be the Cains, could you get the door, Luka?" Carter called.

Killing the burner, Carter moved the potful of spaghetti to be strained, and he placed the herb garnish into the home-made marinara sauce. Hurrying to the cabinets, he retrieved the porcelain table-ware, proceeding to set the mahogany dining table for the company. He lie the delectable hors d' oeuvres on the table first, then fixed the vase of wild flowers Luka had placed on the table haphazardly. He was in the middle of making the finishing touches when Luka came rushing into the fragrant room.

"Brother!" He said nervous, but with a half-smirk. Carter quickly turned, not to Chike and his Grandpa, but to a radiant woman in shining white and gold. Copper skin complimented her deep, dark, hair. Impossibly verdant eyes met Carter in the space between them.

"Oh... Who is this, Luka?"

Luka was struck speechless that the king's book keeper was finally here. Azure was not.

"I am Azure WhiteIbisEye. I have come for the wings of Ra that you keep."

"Ah," Carter breathed. "an associate of Maxwell Donogan's? Are you a teacher at Donogan Academy? I've heard-"

"The Wings of Ra." Azure reminded.

"Of course, this way," Carter headed for the stairs. "did Donogan send you? Is he needing the specimen back momentarily? I hear he couldn't find anyone to run the trials-"

"No, he is desiring that the wings stay with you, *I* am the one who has come for the wings."

Carter paused outside of his workshop door, twiddling keys.

"You are an associate of Maxwell Donogan are you not?"

"I am not." She said with honest truth. "I am, however, here to stop you; prevent you from a tumultuous fate. The road ahead, as we know it, sees that you are to hold the Wings of Ra as your own, and forget your place with the Moon."

Carter paused.

"I see... Well thank you very much, Ms. WhiteIbisEye, but I'm expecting guests any minute now... If you will excuse me, I'm going to have to ask you to leave-"

"But Azure just got here!" Luka threw his arms up. He was ignored.

"You desire to keep the king's Wings of Ra?" Azure gave Carter a rocky glance.

"Quite."

"Any chance you are to be changing your mind?"

“None whatsoever.”

“Very well... I understand... Goodbye Mr. Cordell,” Azure then gazed at Luka. “Luka, my dear.”

The woman went as quick as she came.

Knock. Knock.

The doorbell resounded.

“That should be the Cain’s, could you get the door, Luka?” Carter turned to lock every door and drawer in his workshop.

After dinner, Carter remained in the kitchen with Mr. Cain, talking over the dishes, and later, a cup of tea. Not a word was said of Carter’s and Luka’s odd experience with Ms. WhitelbisEye, but Carter was too busy discussing personal matters with Mr. Cain to care. Chike on the other hand, was already aware Azure was roaming Carter’s dimension.

The boys had sent themselves to the living room, where they played game after game of chess with the very nice marble set that Chike had brought, but their entertainment was more of a guise than it was the object of their attention. Chike cocked his headful of lovely, soft, blond curls.

“Did you and Carter ever make-up?” He whispered. Luka beamed.

“Everything’s great! We’re gonna change the world one day! Everything Bomani taught me is paying off!”

He took Chike’s black king with ease. Chike laughed at himself for making the wrong move.

“I’m glad you guys aren’t fighting any more, but... does he believe you?”

“Huh?” Luka paused, but then totally got it. “Oh no! I haven’t talked about Bomani’s dimension at all, he wouldn’t get it, but he gets the kinetic stuff. Bomani said it was important to teach the sciences, right? We’re gonna use it to make us better!”

He put a hand over his heart.

“We know we are greater than what we have already accomplished, the betterment of humanity shall drive us, and those who leap above their mediocre beliefs will have the pleasure of taking the future of science by the horns to immeasurable access to power and possibility!”

Chike admired the words with shining eyes.

As the boys laughed and played, Bomani and Azure contemplated from the realms above.

Azure’s feathery spirit gyrated towards her poised king.

“Carter does not believe.”

“So it seems,” Bomani accepted with grace. “so what will the stars have us do?”

“Not to worry my king,” Azure assured. “I shall set Carter’s path straight. You may watch over Chike for now.”

Bomani’s smokey-blue eyes encompassed the children as though they were in a swirling crystal ball.

“Of course. Thank you for trying, Azure. I trust destiny will amend itself for the good of all.”

Equal to a deal, dealt with a hand shake, the king and his servant pressed their left palms to one another’s before parting ways.

“He’s too busy thinking about what he’ll do for the rest of his life... And then, he didn’t have any left... But you’re not like him, Carter, you’re not like your Father at all...”

These were Maxwell Donogan’s words, from back when he and Carter were only mutual friends, not teacher and student, nor rivals.

“Considering that, how do you plan to show up in the world, Carter? What revolutions will you lead? What discoveries do you plan to make? Who will you be? For Luka? For your team? For humanity?”

Carter’s blue eyes opened in realization.

“A person... A real person. Hopefully more. That’s how I’ll show up. That is who I will be...”

Where are the numbers? Carter asked.

He awoke from the dream – and into the dream he was already in...

Gasping awake, Carter’s shake-up resulted in insomnia for the rest of the night.

Getting out of bed, Carter figured he’d get some kind of work done while he was awake, so he headed for his workshop in the room over. In the dark, Carter knocked into his guitar, which had been leaned against the wall... He could play... Or he could work...

Pulling the covers off the Wings of Ra, Carter held his breath in the speculation of its’ miraculous repairs – It appeared as it did under the influence of Donogan’s machine...

Shaking his head, Carter panned the specimen once more, but it’s sudden health remained. He figured Luka tinkered with it while he wasn’t looking... Or *had* Carter? He couldn’t even recall... But that was not of importance now.

I guess it’s ready for a test flight. Carter smiled with pride.

Luka’s eyes glittered with awe.

“You look like an eagle!” He flapped his arms to the sound of his words.

"I look like a fool." Carter spun around trying to get a grip on the contraption, which was heavier than any weight a trail blazing backpack could put on you.

Carter's hands were slipped under a handle that allowed his fingers to move freely, but at the same time, controlled the individuated "feather" slats that made up the primary wing feathers. Secondary feathers were left to fold neatly at the bend of Carter's elbow. It was a cyborg-like attachment, but made of wood, and of course, shaped like a wing, rather than a human appendage.

"This makes zero mathematical and aerodynamical sense."

"You haven't even tried it!" Luka jumped up and down. "Flap! Flap!"

Carter rolled his eyes, and glanced around the vacant park to be sure no one was seeing how ridiculous he looked. For the sake of amusing Luka, Carter made several heavy strokes, leaving the wings to clack and smack as the quills shuddered under the movement. There was an odd feel to it, but he did not leave the ground in the least.

"Try it again." Luka said hopefully. Carter raised a brow, then smirked.

Running off towards the edge of the hill, Luka followed with a belly full of laughter just on time to see Carter glide down hill and come to a running stop at the bottom. No matter the amateur use, the ungraceful flight was fruitful.

"Yea!" Luka hollered, clapping with joy.

Several hours later, grass-stained, and bruised, Carter walked home with Luka, quite pleased with their discovery, but before they could finish getting down their street, Azure stepped out of the shadows.

"You again." Carter simply stated.

"Please, may I ask you again, is there any way you would part with the Wings of Ra at this point in time?"

"Absolutely none at all."

"I am willing to pay a price, though I am aware there is nothing of equal value to the wings, but whatever it is that you may so desire in return--"

"I'm sorry Ms. WhiteIbisEye, I've made my decision."

She paused dramatically, but her distraught was true.

"Very well... Excuse me... Farewell, Carter Cordell."

Hand-in-hand, the brothers watched Azure disappear over the hill, leaving them to wonder who exactly she was, where she came from, and if she'd been watching them this whole time.

At least, that's what Carter wondered.

Carter lie in bed several nights later, numbers racing through his head, trying to make sense of the wings' quantitative details.

Running over the measurements, he fell to sleep trying to crack its code to make logic of it all. Knowing that the great Maxwell Donogan believed in the wings abilities, Carter knew there had to be precision tuning somewhere that made the contraption possible – possible, to fly. It was hard to fathom, and he didn't really want to believe it was true, so he fell asleep in doubt.

While Carter fell asleep rather unsoundly in the room over, Luka was gifted with a third visit from the king's royal book keeper, whom prompted the boy to relinquish the Wings of Ra to her. When he refused, she proposed a second idea.

"Would it be possible that you give the Wings up to their rightful companion, yourself?"

"You mean they belong to somebody else?"

"Your dear friend, Chike Cain."

"Really?"

"They belong to he, just as much as they belong to the king. Would you be willing to deliver them to him?"

"Of course, but Carter would never let that happen."

"Try."

"I... I guess."

Azure crumbled into thin air.

The Wings remained with Carter.

Obsessed with the numeric riddles that the Wings of Ra offered him, Carter finally stooped to the wealthy helping-hand of Donogan, who financially gave Carter whatever he wanted in order to understand the mysterious Wings of Ra.

Carter's lab bustled with excitement and jealousy. Gossip spread, and Carter was beginning to enjoy the attention of the higher-ranking scientist's praise and interest.

Having placed the precious wings in harm's way, Azure had had enough.

It was about time Carter be told who his real friends were.

Chapter 4

Conflicting With the Zombies

Carter came crashing down onto an old, wood, floor. The Wings of Ra were strapped to his back, making him heavy as he lifted himself from the dusty ground. The weight of the Wings of Ra was the weight of what it felt like to be the king of the Sungods, himself.

Carter blinked awake... This certainly wasn't the test room in the lab.

Did I black-out? Where am I? What was I measuring again? Carter tried to collect his bearings.

Before he could recollect the world that he knew, Carter was hearing the peculiar snapping of splintering wood – the walls of this place were beginning to cave, and the floor was coming out from beneath him.

Standing, Carter barely had any time to acknowledge where exactly he was. He ducked out of the empty door frame across the room, only to end up in another barren space. The only way out was through a webbed-glass window, to which he willfully smashed through with zero hesitation; thinning the wings as he spiraled head-first through the small space.

Rolling to the floor boards of a tattered balcony, pieces of glass tie-dyed Carter's shirt and jeans in blood.

Slowly decapitating to the ground, the tower began to crumble into clouds of dust below. Carter became stranded mid-air by the surface taken out from beneath his feet.

Soaring out into the gold horizon, Carter held his breath in panic trying to keep the wings steady. Fighting to stay focused, he couldn't help but take in the sumptuous desert sands and domineering obelisks. There were chivalrous pyramids, some standing lone, and others in great formations surrounding the distant villages.

Distracted by the environment, Carter was suddenly tossed by the random desert gale which forced him to stroke the mechanical wooden wings - to his surprise, not only did he stay afloat, but he was indeed now flying – maneuvering his way through the deliciously blue-sky, and moving towards the Sun, which blinded him from every angle.

All of the sudden, Luka came free-falling down into this world, calling out to his brother with fear.

"Luka!!!" Carter dove for him, reactively reaching out, only to have the wings buckle on him.

Luka came crashing into his arms, sending both of them to the sand with a grainy splash.

Carter dizzily shook it off.

“Luka!” He sat him up. “Are you hurt?!”

Luka recuperated quickly.

“Why are we here? Where’s Bomani? Where’s-”

“Don’t be afraid Luka, I’ll figure this out...” Carter stood, pulling Luka to his hip. He squinted across the desolate desert plains... Just sand and far-reaching monuments, distorted by the frying sun.

With nothing else to say or do, Carter just started walking...

The miraging sands had Carter hiking on and on... Tired and thirsty, Carter worried about Luka most of all, but that was exactly what kept him moving.

Somewhere along the road, Carter’s cerulean eyes came open, sinking back into his body with relief at the sight of human forms rising above the hills of golden sand.

“Hello?!”

Walking faster, Carter’s jostling awoke Luka from his sleep, and he too, looked up to the scene expectantly.

Even with the illusions of the teasing desert, the forms were honest-to-goodness there, and Carter’s efforts were getting them towards their goal – the only problem was, the closer they got, the more suspicion that began to creep in.

The figures began to seem choppy and thin, teetering in-and-out of the miraging heat with an awkward rigidity.

Blinking the drying breeze out of his eyes, Carter tried to focus, but this phenomena did not go away. With Luka’s fingers latched to his clothes, Carter could tell Luka was seeing the same exact thing.

“Are they people?” Luka whispered.

“Don’t be afraid-” Carter continued to walk, seeing that the waiving figures were in the corner of his vision. He spun around – the same scenario was playing out behind them.

“They’re everywhere...” Luka whispered.

“It’s okay...” Carter hushed Luka, but that was before Luka cried out.

Carter was yanked by the ankle, causing him to fall to the ground and Luka, out of his grasp. Paralyzed, Luka stood wide-eyed as Carter snapped the bone-hand off his ankle, then stood to face the spell-bound skeletons that surrounded them.

Stuttering on disbelief, it took Carter a moment to get over his own icy position in order to snag Luka and drag him through the grotesque creatures with a sudden gutsy fire.

Determined to get through the fleshless freaks, Carter whaled his way through the barricade, sending the bits of bone flying every which way, when unexpectedly, someone else, stood in his way - Someone, and his entire gypsy caravan, colorfully, loudly, and freely paving path through the zombie-infected sands.

"Freeze." The leader commanded of the zombies.

They froze.

Before Carter could even stumble out a thank you, the man looked down at Carter very seriously. Luka hid within Carter's grasp, for something was very powerful about this man – you almost could not look away.

"You do not recognize those zombies?" The stranger tested him.

Carter shook his head no.

"Speak up."

"No, Sir."

"Why don't you bleed for them, so? This may be the last time they ever get see you again - those supposed friends, and trusted colleges."

Carter was dumb-founded in the dusty bluster of the yipping and howling gypsies, ladies in dresses, bouncing about, laughing at Carter's stupidity, as if their leader was the wisest man in the world. A young man jovially cartwheeled past a row of frigid zombies, and the women giggled like he was skipping through a field of chrysanthemums. Nothing here made sense to Carter, but he couldn't really think about it either.

The wise leader's tribe safely made it through, all the while, Carter was too bewildered to act.

"I am not here to save you." Was the leader's goodbye.

"Wait-"

"If you want to survive my son, let those wings hand you the wisdom that means a world of life or death. Those wings are *life or death*."

The tribe dissipated into the rays of sun, unfreezing the ghoulish figures, and making the two, run.

Keeping the unexpected advice in mind, Carter had Luka hold on tight.

Spreading the mechanical apparatus into the wind, Carter made his first take-off from the ground, flying high above the bony beings, Carter and Luka were safe in the sky, headed towards the pyramids once again, and leaving the haunted desert behind.

After hassling with some uninterested tourists near the pyramids, Carter gave up on trying to convince anyone of what he and Luka had seen. Using the wings to hop walls and fences, Carter short-cutted his way into town, where the busy streets made Carter come to a screeching halt.

Vehicles, wagons, cattle, goats, and stray animals ran amok, but the drivers, shepherds, and pedestrians consisted of not just people, but beasts – monsters in Carter’s eyes.

He knew there had been something strange about those chirping gypsies.

Dipping back into the dark of an ally, Luka watched Carter’s panic attack with queer.

“What’s wrong, brother?!”

Through his hyperventilating, Carter grabbed Luka, tight.

“Don’t worry, Luka, everything will be alright-”

Luka wheedled his way out of Carter’s vice-grip.

“What are you talking about? They’re the good guys!”

“What are YOU talking about?!”

“They’re just like Child, they’re not like those zombies-”

“Child was an experiment-”

“No, he isn’t!”

“Yes he was-”

“You don’t know *anything* about Bomani’s dimension!”

Suddenly Carter froze – not because Luka concluded things, but because he finally rationalized that this was going no where.

“Fine.” He spat. “What do we do?”

Luka was taken aback.

“Well – I mean – I don’t know how we got here – I mean, usually, Azure or Bomani-”

Getting over his fluster, Carter stood, and pulled Luka to his feet.

“Walk with me.”

“Wh-where are we going?”

“We’re going to need resources if we’re going to start making our way home. *You-*” Carter emphasized. “are going to tell me everything about this ‘world’.”

Resources? Make their way? He didn’t even know why or how they got there, but Luka didn’t bother telling Carter that yet. He was in no mood to listen.

As Luka led the way through town, Carter carefully observed the cultures and foreign-tongued villagers. Although slightly squeamish at the sight of some of the mythical-bodied beings, the two did well for themselves despite only being guests in the marvel-filled village. Luka was able to maneuver he and Carter all over town, collecting food, water, ointment for their wounds, and a knapsack to hold it all.

Settled on an abandoned rooftop by the use of the wings, Carter let Luka help himself to the tomatoes and fresh cream they'd bought while he tended their cuts and scrapes.

Luka went to sleep as soon as the sun slipped away, knowing that, in the morning, Bomani would come and take them home...

Carter lie awake, engulfed in the darkness of the dimension's black night. The only light in sight, were the twinkling stars... Completely misaligned in Carter's eyes, for he was unfamiliar with this side of the cosmos.

He sighed in deep exasperation.

Bomani's dimension, was it some kind of simulation Donogan cooked up for a bunch of gone-wrong experiments? What was it? Who was Bomani? Why did he and Luka have to get dragged into it?

Carter laughed at himself and thought the better of it.

Should it all be a crazy experiment, very well, Luka and he could return home. He could at least make that happen.

Carter's muscles panged. He wheezed for air through gritted teeth. He stroked his arms as hard as he could – below him, were the zombies of the haunted desert, grappling and griping and begging for empathy: *Come back! Come back! What about us?! Don't you care?!*

When Carter thought about it, he realized that he genuinely did not. All of those jealous friends and co-workers he'd come to know... They weren't passionate about changing the world at all, in fact, they hardly ever changed their own lives.

Rasping out of determination, Carter heaved the mechanical wings with all of the strength he had, escaping the clutches of the victimized bones, he soared to his own freedom.

How revealing. Carter thought when he awoke.

A blazing hot Sun sizzled morning, into day, scaring Carter and Luka into the shadows. Napping through the unbearable heat, Carter woke every now and then, keeping an ear out for anyone who may

have spoken English, or could give him directions or the like, but for most of the day, the brothers remained stranded from the flow around them. By sunset, the two were hungry and thirsty enough to get moving. Carter took Luka's lead out to the ghastly bazaar.

Losing his temper over a stingy merchant, Carter was banished from the market for the day, sending he and Luka back to the streets, empty-handed.

"I'm sorry," He apologized to Luka. "I should have been listening to you..."

Luka's green eyes sparkled.

"It's okay, I'm scared too. I wish king Bomani and Azure were here to take care of us."

Journeying back to the rooftops, the brothers sheltered beside a chimney over-looking grand city lights of fire on the wealthy side of the neighborhood. Big houses lie entwined with lush paradises of park and garden spaces.

Carter's mind was wandering over-and-over the situation at hand, wondering who in this crazy, mythical world, was going to help them get out of here... If 'here' was even real.

Just as his head was about to go on a rant about how the whole ordeal was Donogan's fault, something, or someone - made Carter glance into a yard over.

In a golden robe, grasping a bejeweled wineglass with a bejeweled hand, seated in a posh chair by the tiled, lit, pool, was the perpetrator himself, the one and only, Maxwell Donogan.

Without thinking, Carter simply flew on over, landing directly in front of Donogan, causing him to jump and spill his red wine in fraught, but he ended up laughing in pure spirits, whipping out a lace hankie to wipe up the mess.

"Carter my dear boy! Positively good to see you! How coincidental we be vacationing here in Sir Child's hometown together! Is Luka here too? Have you come to see Child Jr.?"

Far too many questions came springing from Carter's mouth at once, causing Maxwell to dramatically wave his palm.

"Slow down! Slow down! Perhaps you should bring Luka over for the party," he spotted the boy. "I'll have Mr. Tsu fetch some tea and sandwiches, you look bushed!"

Carter stared for a moment, but twisted to the fence, hiking back up with heft in order to launch himself back to where Luka anticipated him. Returning on a clumsy glide, with Luka clutched to his waist, Maxwell sipped what was left of his wine with an evil grin.

“You have taken to the wings well...”

“Mr. Donogan, please, there is so much I don’t understand, ever since the wings-”

“*Begging?! How unlike you, boy! I thought you were greater than that? That the betterment of humanity would drive you? You swore to leap above mediocre systems to take the future of science-*”

“Is this some kind of joke? Mr. Donogan, please, it’s time for us to go back home.”

Before Mr. Donogan could respond, Child’s Father, Sir Child, Mr. Tsu, the butler, and a well-groomed pack of Salukis, came sauntering out of the house. Introductions took over, and a generous onslaught of refreshments were served.

“How have those wings been treating you, Carter? I’ve heard that only the blood of a Sungod may use them.” Sir Child chortled. Luka paused mid-bite into his tabbouleh-drenched flatbread.

“Jibberish!” Mr. Donogan cut in. “Rest up!” He gestured to the food and drink.

Carter and Luka ate to their better fortune, hydrated, and bathed in the pool. Wounds were dressed, and clothes were laundered.

All the while, the situation distorted Carter like wire, as the conversations taking place never explained why he and Luka were there. The men had nothing to say about zombies, or astral travels, or experimental simulations. Neither knew of any Azure WhiteIbisEye, and King Bomani was but a legend. The wealth of information Maxwell gave up about the Wings of Ra was far from esoteric; It was all of the math and numeric detail Carter had previously been trying to figure out himself, but none of that mattered now.

Am I the one going mad, here? Carter couldn’t understand. Before he knew it, he’d been duped into Maxwell and Sir Child’s hospitality, gifted with food, water, and even a bit of money for their ‘travels’, but they were still sent on their way.

“Off you go,” Mr. Donogan waved. “there are millions of things to do, and places to go with those wings of yours; do see the world my dear boys!” He shooed slyly.

Carter crashed to the clay-colored roof, the wings clicking and clacking as he rolled to the searing heat of the hot surface in sweat and pain. Dizzy from the heights, Carter would stop and close his eyes, but then he’d get straight back to work as soon as he felt just a little better.

For several uncounted days, practicing with the wings was all Carter wanted to do. He forgoed much of his food and water to Luka so that they wouldn’t have to be interrupted by an outing to town. Luka admired Carter’s persistence with both awe and exasperation. Carter was killing himself out there, and for what?

Carter's feeble plot was to impress Maxwell Donogan with what he was accomplishing with the wings, and have the man send them home out of sheer respect.

But unfortunately, that's not how things were going to be...

In the early morning, rose-ringed parakeets twittered in the cloudless sky. Luka's eyes flew open to the rising sun hitting his lids and he smiled at the flock of birds. Stretching his arms to pull his fingers through his long, black hair, he awoke with avidity.

Carter remained sleeping amongst their few possessions, so before he could wake himself, Luka's clambering to peer over the side of the roof ledge, stirred him.

"Brother, look!" Luka called with fright at the sight below, where even the still-shaded halls of the ally could not conceal the electric anomaly that rested mid-air in this lonely crevice of the city.

The light-rimmed rip in the world sparkled with white energy that encased a sight much different than the one it floated in.

Through this inter-dimensional window, Carter and Luka could see small Chike, looking lost and confused, rather abandoned and sad.

About to hop down from the roof edge, Carter stopped Luka and volunteered himself.

"No, Luka, we don't know what this is-"

Flying down, Carter landed on the concrete, a few feet away from the apparition. He proceeded with caution.

"Chike?" He breathed at the face.

Chike did not respond.

"Chike Cain?"

Still nothing.

Daring to touch the crippled fabric of reality, Carter reached out to the sweltering light with great intimidation... The moment he touched that blasting white light - Nothing happened.

Carter could suddenly smell the familiar scent of smoky frankincense.

Turning around, he encountered Azure's lovely face; her form still draped in white and gold. It was her hypnotic emerald eyes that caused him to speak.

"Azure." He stated, now a bit irritated.

"As you can see, you and Chike, are now two worlds apart."

"What is this thing? Why does it matter?"

“You have allowed yourself to peek back into your own dimension, where Chike still doubtfully awaits you to hand him the Wings of Ra, thus allowing the king to open this dimension for the good of fifth-dimension kind, but unfortunately, you have absconded with the key; the wings.”

“Well if I’m stuck here, how am I supposed to give them to him? And how do I get back?! Tell me that!”

“This is the last time I may ask you... Please, would you be so kind as to give the Wings of Ra to me, so I may return them to their rightful master?”

Carter was suspicious. He wasn’t sure what to do. Did the gypsy leader in the desert not tell him the wings meant life or death in this world for he and Luka? But of course, that was coming from a mysterious stranger – although, so was Azure.

“How can I trust you? Are you some sort of spirit coming back for revenge? These wings last belonged to Maxwell Donogan-”

“It is not revenge I seek. You forced the creation to which is now strapped to your back, to obey you. You now carry that weight by your own doing, and I respect that with every breath that I breathe.”

Carter raised a brow.

“However, there is a destiny awaiting the Wings of Ra, with your dear friend, Chike Cain.”

Carter’s logical mind stepped in, forgetting the mythical world that he stood atop.

“The wings can always be duplicated, right? Maxwell Donogan most likely has the ability and was quite interested in anyone willing to test-”

“Carter Cordell.”

“Yes?”

“Is there anything I could ever do to get you to part with the Wings of Ra?”

“That depends-” Carter answered defensively, wanting to make more of a bargain, but Azure had been worn too thin.

“You do not desire to part with them? Is that the truth?”

Carter’s stare was enough to answer her.

“Then I have no choice... Here, is where you shall stay.”

“Wait-”

Azure faded into the breeze, but the ‘illusionary’ world did not.

It was time to face the facts. This world, was going no where.

Chapter 5

Taking Temptations to Sleep

Chike had just returned from Bomani's dimension, still clung with golden sand and a belly-full of fresh, mouth-watering honey comb.

He and Bomani had spent the morning in the Earthbound Akashic library, reading about alchemy and skin-walking. So fascinating it was to Chike, that he had to go try it for himself.

Out to the sacred temples, he and Bomani rode atop Bomani's pampered, three-headed camels. The triple-personalities steeds, adorned in silvery tassels and colorful fabrics, dropped them off at the doors of the transformation shrine. The shrine's walls were carved with every plant, animal, insect, and alien figure you could think of.

In only hours Chike walked out of the temple, not on his human feet, but on four, perfect jackle paws, a sandy-colored coat, and eyes, just as deep as the ones he had as a human boy.

Naive, Chike wagged his tail at Bomani, and king Bomani sunk to his own, four paws, still tall, proud, and wise.

They ran the desert, free, no intentions, no limitations...

Until Chike thought of flying.

Now, I want to be a falcon!

And so they flew, for hours and hours. No one but their own souls in sight, that was, until king Bomani caught a glimpse of a lost hare, and dove on it.

His bird-eye view went sky-ward in prayer, before taking the lagomorph's life.

Chike could not bring himself to join this feast.

By the time the two had finished their alchemic lessons and returned to their humanity, Chike was starved and thirsty.

The king graciously took him to the palace, where he was served luscious cream, fruits, and honey.

A little sugar-buzzed, and embarrassed by the adoring servant ladies, Chike woozily followed king Bomani through the palace, trying to keep up.

"So what was it you wanted to show me?"

The king came to a halt, and so did the jingling of his jewelry. The sandstone alcove opened up into a balcony, soaring high above the ocean of shimmering, tawny desert waves.

“Take a look here,” The king nudged Chike closer to the stone window. “beyond that distant oasis, is another desert, more desolate than even the one we prowled in, today.”

Chike had not even seen a scorpion that day. Bomani’s hare had been a rare find.

“What happened?”

“Life happened, and then it moved on. Homes happened, and sands covered them. Something lived, and then it died... Do you understand that, Chike? Can you accept that?”

“I think so... Maybe... I don’t know.”

“Well come to know it. One day, you will face this very cycle of the universe. Something precious to you will face it’s end, as it did for the Sungods.”

The king said this fiercely, but with a strength that made Chike feel like he were Bomani’s prince.

“King Bomani, you remind me of my Grandpa.”

Bomani only blinked, his dignified face remaining untouched.

“I love my Grandpa very much... So... I love you very much, too!” Chike smiled.

Again, Bomani retained poise, and nothing more. Chike was a little disappointed he did not smile back.

As Bomani’s gaze centered on the horizon, Chike took a bare-footed step forward and grabbed the king’s hand. Chike was intrigued by how little his hand was in comparison. By the time he looked up, Bomani took his palm back, and placed it on Chike’s head.

“Little one, it is time for you to return... ”

Chike was back in his room, thinking about the day he’d just had; his skin still clung with golden sand, and his belly filled with delicious honey. He danced around the room in complete ecstaticness.

“I have a Dad! I finally have a Dad!”

This was what he truly thought of Bomani... But it was not destined to be... It was not the truth – there was another truth.

In all of a minute, Chike could hear his Grandfather return from work, closing the front door behind himself with a jostle. Chike ran down stairs to see what was the matter. He was shocked to see Mr. Cain’s face so flustered. Mr. Cain knew he could not hide anything from his sensitive dear one.

“Oh Chike, come here my boy, I have terrible news... ”

Chike’s eyes were already welled with tears, though he had not a clue what his Grandpa was about to say.

“The Cordells are missing. No one has seen them in days. Their home is abandoned. They’re gone without a trace, nobody has heard anything... I’m sorry Chike... ”

Chike's tears suddenly ran dry

"Don't worry, Grandpa! I know where they are!"

"Oh Chike, it's okay, you don't have to-"

"No Grandpa, it *really is* okay, I will find them, I know."

But Chike did not. He searched Bomani's dimension with the king's help, and came up with nothing.

In Carter's own dimension, he could not be found, and neither Luka. It left Chike and Mr. Cain to wonder what happened to their old friends; That despair led to the succumbing of Carter's beliefs: The world in which they lived was a difficult one.

This cut Chike off from the higher realm that Bomani thrived on, thus losing his ability to see and communicate with the man he thought could save his soul: The king.

And without Luka, Chike could not believe in 'magic'. He was doomed to the nonsensical, unsensual, perception of of pure, abstract, disbelief, and with that, Chike peeled away from everything he knew, and became unconscious.

Small Chike looked lost and confused; Abandoned and sad.

Chapter 6

Rumors of A Sungod

By the end of the light hours, Carter gave up his sweat-breaking, heart-pounding, flying routine for some tentative camping under the stars; again, dark as the fur on a raven's body.

In the night, a violent disturbance got Carter and Luka out of bed, and the two ended up many blocks down, away from the evening chaos. This part of the neighborhood held a pleasant surprise for the brothers, as Carter's detective work concluded them a marooned little cottage, which Carter's intellect took advantage of.

The mud-brick home was crusty and leaky, vines and lichens grew in the corners, adding life to the trickling streams dropping into the terracotta pots below. A fireplace, cubby shelf, and paneless window detailed the abode, but by the time Carter was through with it, he was harvesting the rain water, set up a place to sleep, he was cooking food over the fire, and could even lock the rusty, old door.

Having gotten little sleep that night, the brothers slept past dawn, waking to the late morning when the Sun finally reached the open window, making the plant life and pittering water, glow with a heavenliness.

parakeets were squawking in the warmth of the coming rays, their undisturbed routine made Carter feel fine and comfortable. He ignored the time and closed his eyes again, but had to glance up at a rustle that came from outside.

Watching as a mouse ran by the window, Carter thought nothing of it, and tried to rest, but the skittering noises did not stop.

Rising, Carter found Luka already observing the mouse parade, so the two peeked outside, finding whole globs of mice making headway down the ally corridors.

The river of mice got so thick, that they started to crawl on them, prompting Luka to shriek. Scooping him up, Carter messily flapped to the roof of the house, where even there, mice were still streaming across their path.

"Where are they going?" Luka asked.

Before Carter could speak, there were bells tolling in the distance.

"You wanna find out?"

Luka nodded.

"Hold on." Carter began making his way towards the Sun.

“Child?” Carter’s lips blurted as he came swinging into the window of the old, discarded, temple.

Luka slipped down from Carter’s front, grinning at Child’s surprisingly big, strong, chanting voice, ringing into the echoing hall.

“Child!” Luka waved at the boy standing smack in the middle of a mouse sea, with platters of kibble in his clawed hands. He dropped them in shock.

The mice rippled away, but quickly returned to gobble up the sustenance. Child’s clear, red eyes, grew with happy melancholy at the sight of the familiar faces.

“Hello Carter, Luka...”

“I knew something had gone wrong in the realms... I just never expected something like this to happen... I thought king Bomani had total control of these illusions – Ow!”

Carter pulled at Child’s velvety, white mouse ear.

“Seems real to me.”

“Are you arguing for your limitation or not?!” Child snapped, rubbing his victimized ear. “*What do you want me to say?*”

“To be brutally honest, I’d wish everyone would stop talking nonsense so we could get to the bottom of this. Mr. Donogan gave me the wings and wants me to use them. That Azure character does not, and needs me to hand them over to her, or Chike; to whom I cannot reach. A tall, dark stranger thinks my life depends on having them, and now you’re telling me I’ve stolen them from this whole n’ mighty king Bomani to whom I’ve never even met?”

Child was silent as the twittering of hundreds of thousands of mice echoed in the background.

Luka walked up to Child, picking up his long, drooping mouse tail, waving it through the air. Carter smirked in amusement at this, but his humor quickly faded.

“Who is this all-important king, anyway?”

“He is the last Sungod.” Luka spoke up.

“Yes, yes,” Child piped in. “and he will seize to exist if we do not fulfill the things that lead to his reign, such as the restoration of the Wings of Ra, for if Bomani fails to enter this realm, then so does this world itself, and everything in it.”

“Oh, that kind of thing.” Carter simply replied. Child grew frustrated.

“*This isn’t a movie you know!*”

Carter’s face remained straight.

“Well this is all very exciting and revolutionary, but I still have no answer as to how I’m supposed to get home so I can do anything about the darned wings, so unless you have some ‘in’ with this magical king-”

Child freaked.

“Oh no, no, no! I’m just a mouse! I would never be chosen to serve the Gods-”

“Oh great, so now he’s a God... Well Child, I’ve got somewhere to be. It was nice chatting with you, so... until we meet again.”

“Yeah...”

“Come on Luka.”

“Um... Bye, Child.”

“Bye.”

Luka cringed as he oversaw Carter crash over and over again, trying to master the Wings of Ra. Carter was fired up and rearing to get out of here, and the only way he could think of, was through Donogan.

Carter had already gotten a lot better at using the wings since coming to Bomani’s dimension, but Luka pondered over just how good he wanted to get. He stayed quiet, noticing Carter’s moments of grace – and ungrace. Luka could pick out patterns and shapes in the strokes and the bends and the folds of Carter’s intense effort.

The wings had an identity of their own.

All of the sudden, it clicked to Luka: Carter could not see these things because *he* was the one *in them*.

Carter’s eyes flew open, catching sight of the wild falcon sitting in the depths of the wrinkling palm fronds.

Off it went, in hot pursuit of a rock dove that was caught off guard by the speedy dive.

In the falcon’s pursuit, Carter went; rising from his crouched knees to run like heck. Carter beat his arms to move faster through the maze of alleys, which had him bouncing off the walls and missing turns, ultimately losing his observation subject.

Cutting the chase, he heaved himself roof-ward, to gaze down into the trenches of houses from a better vantage point. All the birds were long gone.

Disappointed that his study ended so soon, Carter prepared to head back to the shack, when suddenly the sound of prattle, both English, and foreign, made him duck beneath the bushy palms aside the roof.

“So what did you hear? I thought the high messenger was sent to the third plane and then she never returned.”

“At least not to the king.” A deeply accented voice replied. Someone murmured exotic words.

“Think she failed her mission?”

“A high messenger? Never. I think they got the story wrong.”

“Things happen.”

“WhitelbisEye is rebirthed. You can’t beat that kind of power.”

“Yep. But things happen.”

WhitelbisEye? Azure was the king’s messenger? Why hadn’t she said so? Why hadn’t she just taken the Wings of Ra by force? She could have ‘saved’ her world and this whole ‘destiny’ thing could have been over with long ago. Why so complicated? Now Carter *HAD* to find her.

Carter dropped down on the passerbys, raising his wings into a threatening silhouette. The bumbling fawns and ogres backed away.

“Where can I find Azure WhitelbisEye?! It’s an emergency!”

“Whoa, whoa!” The giraffe-fawn submitted his open palms. “Not everybody can just chit-chat with a high messenger of the king’s. What kinda problems do you got Mr. Stranger, sir?, maybe we can help-”

“Just tell me where the palace is!!!”

Carter should have seriously intimidated them, but they instead stared like he was nuts. The fawn finally talked.

“Er... You do know that the Sungod king and his elites are just legends, right? You know the story of king Bomani, right? The – Hey – Where ya goin’ stranger?”

Carter gave up.

In all his rage, Carter went straight to Mr. Donogan to show him what he’d accomplished over the weeks with the wings. Maxwell was impressed, but the show did not go as Carter had wanted; Carter felt oddly tired and messy. It was as if everything was against his plans to return home.

After the performance, Maxwell asked what Carter’s intentions for the wings were.

“Well, I was hoping you’d be able to help Luka and I get back to the lab, that way, I can get a team together and plot further studies-”

Donogan laughed his head off.

“I’d love to help you two grab the next caravan out, but don’t you realize you’re in the wing’s hometown? What better place to learn how to build, use, repair and reinvent them?”

“They have to be repaired?” Carter let his question slip. Maxwell’s lip curled at his lack of knowledge.
“Quite.”

The conversation with Maxwell Donogan did not get Carter any closer to home. Carter was beginning to grow deeply depressed about the situation.

Plan B was to search and find Azure, but instead of finding her, Carter stumbled upon an opportunity to secure he and Luka’s necessities by working for a local farmer on his peanut plantation. Not humbled or grateful, Carter stayed up late into the night, wondering if this would be he and Luka’s final fate.
Some one thought not.

Pearl morning light, coaxed Carter outside. Slipping past the creaky wood door, he was confounded to enter a dead-cold forest, where the glittering ground was quilted with snow. A lavender glow sparkled like diamonds across the white horizon; even the trees were frosted with glassy icicles and frozen fruit.

His breath puffed in front of him as he kneeled to the ice pond, looking like a magical window into an underwater dimension. Fish swam over a clear, river-rock bottomed space of the cleanest spring water Carter had ever seen. Yearning for a drink, Carter shattered the ice with a smack, jewel-bubbles frothing at his bare feet as he stepped in. With bare hands he cupped the water and drank. With a bare body he plunged into the water, using huge, serious-umber wings of golden eagle feathers, to splash the liquid over his back. Beating the earthy angel wings, he stretched, breathed, and felt so peaceful.

The sky was now a pale tangerine, and it dyed the shining snowbanks and crystalline trees in it’s fiery hue.

Undesirably, a crunching footstep came moving out of the branches. Carter turned to see Azure at the shore, gazing out to Carter in acknowledgment of his angelic temple. In her own hands, was the Wings of Ra. Her elegant hair and clothes flickered in the very light breeze.

Carter’s icy-dank, wings fell, finally feeling the chill of winter on his wet skin.

“So I see you have it in you to give up the Wings of Ra.”

“What should that mean to me?” Carter’s blue eyes were stabbing.

“*Everything*. This incarnation.”

“Your riddles are beyond me I’m afraid.”

“Do I sense some admiration?”

“*Resentment*.” Carter’s face rushed warm.

“How honest, but untrue.” She batted an eye, poetically. “When will you realize that you don’t hate as much as you think you do?”

“What?”

“Don’t die on me before you have the chance to remember who you truly are.”

Carter awoke in the farm house. He’d passed out in the fields from heat stroke, and the whole family was gathered around. It was rather embarrassing for a business man like himself; Carter couldn’t remember ever being such a weak person... He fell back to sleep after another long drink.

Carter found Luka staring down at him, his glossy-green eyes full of queer as Carter sat up in horror of another crazy dream. The Wings of Ra were still strapped to his back, causing him to sit awkwardly as Luka stared, munching on a large palm date in one hand, and a juicy fig in the other. Carter immediately returned to reality – At least, Bomani’s reality, anyway.

“Where did you get that?”

Luka looked at the fruit before answering with full cheeks.

“Child brought them.”

“He knows where we’re staying?”

“He said he could smell us.”

“Rat... But his Father’s mansion is so far...”

“He said he knows all the short-cuts.”

“Right.”

Luka brought the bag of fruit over and dumped it on the floor in front of Carter. Instead of complaining, Carter just started eating. Without a word, Luka climbed into his lap, and they ate to their heart’s content. When they were done, Carter broke the ice.

“Maybe I’m not meant to fly.”

Luka was shocked to tears.

“Don’t say that! You’ve worked so hard! It’d be shameful not to do anything with them now!”

“But they apparently don’t even belong to me. Listen, Luka, back before we knew any of this, or got stranded here, I accepted the wings from Donogan as my duty of being a science pioneer. Slowly, I grew disinterested in my integrity... Selfish endeavors overcame me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wanted to see if the wings actually worked – but for the purpose of bringing back fleeting childhood memories; When I dreamed of inventing ridiculous things.”

Luka suddenly smiled.

“You’re not *that* old! How could you forget!”

Carter gave a little laugh and stroked Luka’s cheek.

“I lost my Mother before I even got to know her. And then one day, Father came back from a business trip with you and a woman who he could not leave suffering in that faraway land... The two of you were the most wonderful things that ever happened to us... We then lost *your* Mother, together.”

Luka’s face was now blank.

“Father lost those very same people, but let that grief take him away, too. I grew up very fast, Luka. I had to be strong, responsible, and learn how to take care of you. It was painful. I’m sorry I never told you these things... I didn’t want to burden you. But I see how my bitterness hurt you more... I never properly got to apologize for the fights we had... I see now that everything you and Chike spoke of was real, and I wasn’t there for you two... I want you to know, that you are the most important thing in my life, and that’s the truth. You are the only reason I care about anything.”

Luka drank his words like the most nourishing of medicines.

“Did the wings ever help you remember?”

Carter’s answer was yes, but it was not about his childhood.

“I remembered... that I want to be more like you.”

Luka stared.

“But I want to be more like *you*, big brother.”

Carter smiled, and Luka laughed.

Feeling just a little destroyed, Carter finally settled his soul into this mysterious, mythical world, able to relax after work and enjoy the fifth-dimensional sunset. Below the roof of the storage house where Carter sat, Luka played with the children of the other peanut farmers, playing games together, despite the difference in languages; Each side of the coin could tell exuberant stories from their hands and gazes, laughing and learning all the while. Slowly, this life was becoming home, but Carter resisted somewhere deep, in the back of his mind, especially when Luka lamented: “I miss Chike...”

One evening as Carter stared out to another bloodshed sunset, he heard a delirious coo from behind him, atop the farmhouse roof. A white dove waddled up to his side, continuing to coo. He let it be, and stared at the sky.

Coo.

He stared.

Coo.

He stared.

"Are ya a bird ora beast?!"

Carter stared at the bird now.

"Well? Whatarya? Whatarya?" She gave his thigh a pathetic kick, then hopped circles around him. Getting over his surprise, Carter decided to answer the odd, little dove.

"I am a human, and these are my human wings."

"A U-man with wings?!" She puffed her body feathers out. *"You're a thing!"* She flustered, dancing around on her birdie-feet.

"If you could please leave me alone." Carter shooed.

"You are a sad thing..." She cooed, returning to perch on his knee. *"Why areya a sad thing?"*

Carter paused in exasperation.

"I have no idea why I'm telling you this, but... I'm lost. I have no idea where I am, or what I'm supposed to be doing... Maybe I went crazy like Donogan, hit my head, maybe this is some kind of punishment... Heck, I can't even use these darned wings to fly my way back home, I feel so-"

"COO HOO HOO HOO!!!" The pigeon laughed. *"Ya got wings but ya ain't flyin'?"*

She persisted to guffaw in pigeon.

Carter just ignored her now, turning back to the blood-orange sunset. The bird swung her avian body upright again.

"Ya need a true flyer ta teach ya how to swim the heavens! Sadly, Dodger don't live on this side-o-town."

"Who's Dodger?"

"Only da best flyer around!" The dove flapped. *"He lives in a quaint lil' town by the sea, that-a-ways-"*

She pointed a wing, but then jutted an eye at Carter. *"Though ya never know Dodger, he's a curious fella. One day he'll train ya free a charge, the next, he'll make ya pay dearly."*

"Nothing a little bird seed can't fix, right?"

"Ah, don't worry 'bout pay now, go! Ya be travelin' fer moiles! Ya behind schedule already!" She winked and took off, wings clapping as she made a raspy coo into the quiet evening air.

A bird, training ME? What the hell am I thinking... Carter thought, but he was already heading down to the fields to tell Luka the news.

Chapter 7

Letting Go of the Limitations

The brother's little shack was generously given to Child to look after while they made their sojourn towards the sea for Carter's 'schooling'.

Traveling through twilight to avoid the heat, Carter and Luka had to face the down-side to the blackness, where eventually their eyes adjusted, but could not take the thieves and monsters out of the alleys, short-cuts, and cross-roads.

Ducking into a belfry for the night, they were kept restless by the bats and owls in the rafters, which caused them to head out early, before even the dawn.

The seaside community was awoken like this:

"Hear ye, hear ye! The Sungods rise to raise your lids! A new day hath come! Ra be here! Ra be here!" The vampire hollered. The Sun was just licking the waking streets when the brothers began tasting salt on the young, morning breeze. They'd made it, and in good timing.

Searching for any peculiar bird who may have had the potential of 'speaking' with them, the multitude of birds they saw that morning were all beginning to look a little more intelligent than they should have been... But maybe that was just paranoia kicking in.

Dipping down an alley to find his way back up to the rooftops, Carter passed by a noisy dumpster outlined with crows.

"Are any of you named Dodger?" Luka innocently asked the normal-looking birds.

For a moment they continued to peck at the trash, caw, and squabble, but some epic beat-boxing broke the silence.

"*Who's there?!*" A dog leapt to the railing of the dumpster, making a few crows dart out of the way.

"I'm Luka, and this is my big brother, Carter-"

"*Ahh,*" The stray dog looked flattered, but smirked. "*nice of ya t' drop in, in the dark, of Thebe's alley...*"

"Sorry to bother you, but do you happen to know a bird named Dodger?" Luka took charge.

The canine scratched his chin with a back foot then shook his scruffy head.

"*Ooh la, la... Ya got da right dog, shorty, but he ain't no bird.*"

"Dodger is a dog?" Carter raised a disappointed brow.

"*That would be me-*" Dodger said through a fake grin.

“Aren’t you supposed to be the ‘best flyer’?”

“I am.” He said coolly. *“Don’t tell me, that just because I’m a dog, I can’t fly... ’Cause guess what, baby, you are a human, and humans don’t fly...”* He fluttered his eyelids. Carter shut his mouth and the dog gave a supercilious nod.

“Don’t worry kid, I’ll teach ya, just rustle me up some decent grub an’ I’ll getcha off the ground in no time. Shake a leg!”

Carter couldn’t believe it. He’d fallen for a fortune-teller’s scam. They’d come too far to not embark this journey now, so Carter and Luka went to procure a sausage link from town anyway. They showed up at the meeting place, where unabating waves and seagulls could have easily put them to sleep, but Dodger didn’t keep them waiting. His ‘pay’ was gobbled up instantly, but he didn’t run off – quickly he got to the point.

He lead them down to a far end of the harbor, where the docks were ragged and the fishing boat bells and rigs, squeaked and rattled. The sky was pink and pastel purple. The sun lie as a smudgy pearl in the aging morning sky.

“Now then, ready t’ experience flyin’ like never b’ fore?”

“How do you fly without wings?”

“Hah! You ask all the wrong questions my friend, and the answer is, I don’t fly-! I SOAR. You ain’t need no wings t’ soar,” He gestured a paw. *“So now then, Mr. Big and brainy, before we get to our soarin’ practice, let’s head up to the towers, it’s easier t’ get your groove on up dare. We’ll drop junior off at the seaside temple roofs. Let’s boogie.”*

Alone, Dodger stared Carter down.

“So, y’ ready t’ fly?”

“Of course.”

“Wellp, first yer gonna hafta lose some weight. Mental weight that is. All that baggage that ain’t so good for ya, y’ know? The disheartening limitations? That my friend, is the only stuff in life y’ got fear - the rest? You just dreamin’ it up.”

“One does not just stop fearing.” Carter’s lungs filled with contempt, pondering over how this dog knew of his inconveniences like the back of his paw.

“Oh really? Then I guess this lesson is over-”

“That’s not what I-”

"It's time to choose, flyboy! Flight or phobia, now or then! Your past, or your dreams?!"

Carter sighed.

"Okay, okay, I get it, let's do this."

Behind the veil of his false name and sacred fur, a human boy smiled mischievously...

From the tops of glittering glass buildings, a graceful stray dog soared from structure to structure to structure, leaping like an unearthly stag while maneuvering his being through the towering city rooftops. As if running an anti-gravity parkour course, he sailed through everything the sky world had to throw at him, and in another reality, Joey, did the same; only Joey was a human daredevil, ripping up the laws of human definition.

Following Dodger's lead, Carter used the Wings of Ra to accomplish the dangerous game of tag through the air, bursting with some of the best feelings, and some of the worst. When the lesson was over, Carter crashed to the last rooftop, his hair and brain in a mess, but beaming with a contagious grin, and a tremble of excitement.

"You were right!" His teeth glinted in the noon Sun as he took a huge breath to finish. He was no longer even remotely afraid of heights.

Joey's eyes rolled towards the atmosphere.

"Yep. Flyin' is livin', and just... Well, whoo hoo!"

"So Dodger, tell me, where'd you learn to 'soar'?" Carter asked smugly. The dog answered vaguely.

"Dis kid... Crazy magic he was.... Taught me everything I know 'bout flying. Crazy kid in da red jacket..."

It's not what Carter expected, but he asked no further, he was taking a breather. Joey watched carefully wondering if Carter's gears would switch from one existence to the next, leaving his human image to flash before Carter's eyes – but Carter gave no indication of that being so.

For the next couple of weeks, Carter spent much of his time with Dodger, leaving Luka at the seaside temple belfry to play with a model air-plane he bought him. While Luka treasured this, his free time still had him feeling lonely when Carter was away – it wasn't like when he and Chike used to run off to Bomani's dimension together; This time, Luka was in it, and it was just as real as any other place on earth. During these hours, Luka mused about many things. These contemplations wicked away the good and the bad - there was something momentous unfolding in he and Carter's hands, but it wasn't quite perfect... Something was going awry.

As time carried on, Dodger and Carter became an unstoppable duo. ‘The ones that got away’, infamous for their games, tricks, street shows, and dare-devil acts. Before Carter knew it, he was a shameless celebrity, taken by the money they were making off their stunts. Sharing the bounty, the two never had to struggle with their appetites ever again.

Carter threw down a bag of crimson apples in front of Luka.

“Eat up, we’re headed for a new crowd in the city over. Dodger wants to leave by tomorrow.”

Carter crossed his legs, put his hands behind his head, and leaned on the belfry wall, intent on already falling to sleep for the day, though it was only sun-down. Luka ignored the fruit, crawled to Carter’s lap, and fell asleep to Carter’s stroking palm.

In this one, small moment, Carter had a realization. He could truly fly now... But what was the point if he had to leave his beloved Luka on earth?

Pulling Luka into his arms, he cradled his little brother in deep thought...

I must find a way to take you with... I must build another pair of wings, just for you!

“What?!” Dodger spat. “Yer just walkin’ out on me? We were kickin’! What about everything I taught you? Don’t that mean anything t’ you?!”

“I’m sorry Dodger, but my path is now to build another pair of wings, and I know people who can help me... Maybe Donogan was right all along... Maybe he was trying to tell me something... Either way, I’ve made my decision... That is of course, if you can’t offer me a solution?” Carter implied.

“What? No way! I can’t teach dis kid to fly, it’s too dangerous!” Dodger snuffed, pacing the alley with dusty feet.

“But I thought you were a flying genius no matter what? Not gonna live up to that title?”

“How dare you!”

Carter shook his head.

“Then I guess we’re done here. I apologize for my inconveniences. Farewell.”

Dodger watched solemnly as they began to step out of the latent alley.

“W-wait, I mean... I’m sorry if this all didn’t live up to ya expectations, but... if ya eveh wanna mess with the wicked again, I’ll be here...”

Carter never stopped, but he at least acknowledged him.

“I can do that anywhere.”

The fast friends had just as quickly become good enemies, and Joey wanted a taste of revenge before Carter went off with his 'favored friendship'. The morning Carter planned to leave the seaside and go back up towards Sir Child's place, was the unfortunate day Luka awoke to the sound of a dog barking in the alley below. Leaving Carter to rest, Luka traipsed to the roof ledge where Dodger was seemingly bullying a stray kitten. Gasping, Luka carefully climbed down to the dirty street, realizing Dodger had only been feigning a fight with an old shoe.

"What are you doing, Joey?" Luka asked.

Ignoring what he was up to before, Joey turned with jest.

"Hey, y' wanna go somewhere cool b' fore Carter gets up? We'll come right back, he'll never notice."

"Huh? Why can't he come?"

"Shh! Come on Luka, like old times? I know a guy who can build those wing-things..."

"Really? Are you sure? But yesterday you said-"

Dodger was already trotting off down the alley hall. Luka glanced up with guilt, but timidly followed Joey down the road. Their little walk turned into a game of tag that dragged them all the way out to the abandoned docks. Teasing Luka on the end of an elderly fishing boat, Luka gingerly crept in, remaining loyal to he and Dodger's game, but as soon as he was aboard, Dodger jumped past, sliced the ropes and kicked the rickety old boat out into the harbor.

"J-Joey!" Luka pleaded. "I can't swim!"

The rag-tag stray just smirked into the sunrise.

"Guess you'll jest have t' stay on dat boat, den." He turned hock.

"Joey! Joey!"

Chapter 8

Cornered By the Subconscious

Carter ran, flew, leapt, and soared through the streets, atop roofs, down alleys, through shops and bazaars, but he couldn't find Luka anywhere. His heart pounded in heartache. Flying circles, ignoring those shouting, pointing and making a fuss about the wings. Carter flapped madly across the city-scape, gaining quite the audience along the way, but none of these owl-eyed onlookers could help him. Carter searched the clay-wall neighborhoods, to the glass towers and marble mansions. He was at a loss.

In his panic, Carter lost his balance on the wing – his last beat shattered by an unpredicted wind that overturned him. Fighting to stay on track, Carter scooped the air far too deeply, causing the wings to come too close together. The suction locked them in place.

Carter could not hold a match against the pull and push of the air foil – he was spiraling down to earth and it would be his certain death.

But he was still being watched...

Before he could hit the concrete, he plummeted headfirst into the sea.

With no time to be baffled, Carter warred with the huge red waves that endlessly caught him off guard. Combating the excessively salty water only made the situation worse – the wings were weighing him down and he knew he was panicking.

He couldn't decide if he was drowning or not.

Carter sat up, his mouth gagged with seawater. Unable to see past the sting in his eyes, he quickly washed it away with thoughts of Luka. His coughing transformed into what he could utter of his name – and like some miracle, Luka appeared before him. Luka's unmistakable green eyes blinked nervously.

"Big brother?"

"*Luka!*" Carter whipped his arms around him, the wood feathers clicked uniformly.

The figures around them witnessed the recovery with warmth.

"Fresh water, mate?" The Aussie in the panama hat offered Carter. He took a few satisfactory swigs, then truly took a look around the ship cabin, again embarrassed that he was not the most adept survivor there ever was.

The Aussie in the hat wore well-used beige clothing. A rather formidable blue-black shepherd dog was on a chain-lead beside him. The man introduced himself as James, and the dog, as Dodger...

But it was just a coincidence.

Malcolm was a fellow strong in appearance, dark-skinned, dark-eyed, but bright as fire in spirit.

The last figure was Malcolm's girlfriend, Evinrude, a biped creature with auburn fur shining across her whole body. She wore only pants, held up by a black-belt, and her tiger face held eerie golden-green eyes. Her handsome voice filled the room.

"The little one explained what he could, but I think we need to hear your side of the story, Mr. Cordell."

"What's those whatchacallits strapped to y' back that almost drowned ya, mate?" James cut in.

Carter told he and Luka's story sparingly, still needing to collect his bearings. After the immediate discussion, Carter and Luka were left to rest, which they graciously accepted, later awakening to yet another, whole new life.

Arriving to the fresh ocean breeze on the main deck, Carter, with Luka hand-in-hand, took a walk around the ferry that they suddenly found themselves stranded on. The two joined a small bundle of creaturesque onlookers watching Evinrude perform an inspiring series of martial arts moves. Luka happily danced around, vaguely miming as he let the actions capture his curiosity. Carter on the other hand, had more brooding of thoughts...

When he got the chance, Carter inquired to Evinrude about teaching him some of her skills.

"Do you know how long it takes to master these arts?" She questioned the ex-office worker with passionate aggression. Before he could answer, she answered herself.

"A *lifetime*. One does not go into these arts with a heartful of fear, impatience, or a headful of boundless, violent fantasies."

"I was just-"

"My answer is no. I cannot teach someone like you. You are better off continuing to master those wings of yours. Good luck, and see you around."

After a long, general conversation with the sure, chill, Malcolm, Carter popped his main question.

"So what's up with Evinrude?"

Malcolm chuckled at Carter's comment, for he knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Dats just da way she is. Holdin' her peace. Doin' whatchee tinks is right. Don' take it personally, man."

The combustion chamber exploded, filling the room with heat, and spitting random pieces of burnt trash out onto the already-garbage covered floor. Malcolm just shoveled more refuse into the incinerator's mouth.

"I think she's tinkering you're all wrapped up in what happened to your little brotha earlier. She's one t' tell ya you can't hold a grudge forever."

Carter paused and thought about Dodger's last deed.

"Mmm, yes, I suppose so. Speaking of which, I need to get back with Luka, he's probably waiting for me. It was nice talking to you, Malcolm."

"You too, man." Malcolm said sincerely, turning to shovel in the horrid heat and toxic smoke. The fire lapped the teeth of the mechanical doors as Carter watched on for just a moment... Malcolm was a hard worker.

Carter left.

"I aspire to become the main attraction at the most popular saloon in the heart of Alice City! I've dreamed of being a triple-threat my whole life!" The well-costumed ferret lady squeezed Luka close, but had cinnamon eyes sparkling in the distance. "So I'm ferrying out to my train ride to the big city, where I hear dem artists are paid like kings and queens!" She pinched Luka's cheeks as she rambled on with her solid New-York accent.

"Whaddaya say you come with me an' we'll knock da town dead with a show they ain't neveh gonna forget? Say, Luka, honey?"

"I think he can stay with me." Carter smiled over awkwardly crossed wings.

Nelly Swim, the ferret-woman, laughed.

"You'd better let dat kid shine, you'll hava star on your paws one day, no matter what he do in life, ya hear?!" She smoothed her furry ferret cheeks.

Carter and Luka then encountered Jame's quiet cabin mate, Mr. Jackson, whom was a magical, spell casting mechanic, whom expressed interest in the Wings of Ra.

Wondering if he'd be the man to help them build Luka's pair, this thought of Carter's soon dissipated with the eeriness of Mr. Jackson's displaced silences. He wasn't a shy man, he simply read body-language far too well. Verbalizations did not come easy from him, and so Carter moved on.

Luka delighted in the grotesqueness of the seafood slump in James's net on the side deck of the ship. Digging bare-handed, James would pick up a crustacean every now and then, bucket it, or throw it back to the sea.

"So just how long does a ferry ride last? The captain's cool with us hitch-hiking, right?" Carter's arms folded as much as he could fold them in the wings.

"He's more th'n cool with it. Actually, there's pirates up in the wheel house now. He's really quite a leisurely fella. Probably don' even hafta worry about a fee."

Carter cracked no smile for his joke, but raised a nonchalant brow at Luka's giggling as he picked up a giant, squiggling sea worm.

"Think he'd take us back home on the house?"

"Sure! But you best inquire in-person. Let 'im know there's a few changes t' make on th' course back – Where are ya goin', mate?"

"To do just that." Carter replied to James, he stopped in his tracks. "Gotta problem with that?"

"Yeah I do!" James's gesturing left a crab to dangle it's injurious claws through the air. "There are pirates up there, you can't just walk in on that!"

"What ever shall I do to protect myself?" Carter turned heel.

At the tip-top of the trash-guzzling ship, Carter knocked on the office door. Queering at the noise of several heavy boot steps rearranging themselves, Carter and Luka could hear people whisper before consenting to the requesting knock.

"Comes in!" Said an attractive British voice, too young sounding to tell whether male or female, and also too young to be the Captain that James spoke of.

"Why don't you stay here, Luka."

Carter opened the door to a scene so plotted, it was as if someone was filming a movie – A weird one.

The captain's chair faced the window out-looking the sea, and was winged unevenly by three teenagers in steampunk attire. Their different hairstyles were sidled by black, white, or gray cat ears, thus their legs were crafted to the floor alongside airy feline tails – except for the huskiest one, whom lacked a tail, but also held a string that lead up to the ferry captain's left ankle; The ferry captain, to whom was leaned against the wall, enjoying a cigar.

The swivel seat turned darkly to reveal another young steampunk, blond and topped with a sailor cap that shaded out their face. Glassy, rose-red lips spoke hauntingly...

“You dared enter the ground of this bloodshed turmoils of a ransacking pirate-governed massacre?! Can’t you sees the captain and Is are swappin’ a son-of-a-gun deal, here?!” The ringleader banged their fist, revealing smoky eyes of a fiery ice-blue that could eat your heart out.

Seeing that the Ferry captain was totally relaxed, Carter stayed cocky.

“Well you did tell me to come in.”

“BLAST IT!” The young man swooned back in his chair, slapping the arm with gloved fingers. “Whadaya wanted ya wooden buzzard?! Make it quicked before I decide t’ make y’ walk the non-existent plank.”

“Er... Well, my brother and I kinda ended up here by accident. When do you think you’ll be headed eastward again?”

“Who knows, I may never knows, we all may never knows, but what I do knows is – HOLY ROCKET-FUELED POPCORN BALLOONS is that the WINGS OF RA???!!!”

The real ferry captain sipped water and took a bite of his sandwich.

“I’ve got twenty-two passengers steppin’ off at Wonder harbor in about a day or so, we can swing this gal around as soon as they’re on their way.” The captain answered Carter.

“Thank you, captain.” Carter nodded, gyreing to leave.

“STOPPED RIGHT THERE, you feathered freak! No one ignoreses the likes of Captain Hullabaloo the *EVIL* pirate!!!”

“I’m afraid I can’t stay-”

The leader raised an arm, and the cat boy’s lightning-fast reflexes whipped fourth a bow and arrow, gusari, and club.

Carter braced himself while the captain proceeded to eat his sandwich.

“What’s withed you desert roamers? Always homesick for y’ sandied shores... You’ve been rollin’ in the sands of time have ya not? Just likes me... two-hundred years at leasted, trapped in this under-world of mes own doing, but see... ” Hullabaloo’s mildly blind, large eyes contorted to lie a kooky gaze on Carter.

“I’ve chosen to take a path nots my owned, as you did when you *STOLES* away with that sacred woodened flying machine!” The boy’s words blasted from his lips like blue flames.

“Wha-? How do you? Who are you? What do you know about-”

“SILENCE!” Hullabaloo took a bottle to the cabin wall. He threw what was left of the neck over his shoulder.

The ferry captain patted his beard with a napkin.

“Boys, if you will... ” Hullabaloo opened his palm to the right. The archer handed him a well-kept, silver-plated 52 wedge golf club.

He tapped it in his leather-bound fingers and closed in on Carter.

“Run Gerard, run, protect your marbles if you’d can... ” He hissed slyly before exploding into maniacal laughter.

Threatened with a golf club and a spinach pie, Carter was lead down into the shady spaces of the cargo room, where Carter was forced into a small cell amongst the storage. To Carter’s bewilderment, Hullabaloo entered the cell himself, slamming the iron door behind him. Taking a pill box from his sleeve, the boy emptied it into his hand to show the assortment of bone dice. From there, Carter suspiciously agreed to gamble for answers to questions Hullabaloo had about the Wings of Ra. This made Carter especially distrusting, because the kid already seemed to know so much.

They sat cross-legged on the floor with only the oil lamp light that the silly pirate had brought on their way down. From his sleeve, Hullabaloo pulled two drinking cups, a rum flask, a folded game board, two place keepers, a can of sardines, cigarettes, a lighter, a tall skinny vase, and a single rose to fill it with.

The psychotic boy lit a cigarette, causing Carter to clear his throat on the smoke.

“Don’t you have any body looking after you?” Carter boldly asked.

“Do you?”

“I look after myself, thanks.” Carter queried.

Hullabaloo flattened the board game and poured the pirate rum with a thoughtful face.

“... Oh... You mean God. Right?”

“I’ll pass on the drink.”

“Shall we begin?”

“As soon as possible.”

“Tortoise or hare?”

“Pardon?”

He held up the hand-sculpted Native-American-style totems they would be using as place-markers.

“Oh, uh... ” Carter took a fair moment to decide, wondering if this was some sort of test.

“Tortoise.”

Hullabaloo put the pieces down and sipped his cigarette.

“I’m not quite sure I like your style.” Carter admitted to the kid.

“Thank you. I’ll go first.” He tossed the dice.

The board game was short, so they played one round for each question. The first question was about Carter; Who he was, where he came from. Carter lost, so he explained to Hullabaloo that he’d been a scientist living a normal life on Earth, with a normal job, and a normal family, and a normal life-style. Hullabaloo started another game.

The second question was about who and where the Wings of Ra came from. Carter won, keeping that information to himself; although Carter thought it probably couldn’t have hurt to tell Hullabaloo about Maxwell Donogan, since the two would have had some stuff in common...

The third question was about what Carter intended to do with the Wings. Carter lost.

He told Hullabaloo that he was making use of them, studying them, and interested in finding out more about how to build them.

So far, the game was easy. Carter would have told these things to the kid had he asked in the first place. He didn’t understand, and the whole thing was beginning to feel foolish.

And then the fourth question came.

The fourth inquiry was of what Carter was going to do in this dimension if he couldn’t find his ticket back to “Earth”. Carter was slightly anxious about how Hullabaloo phrased it, and had no good answer should he lose. Luckily, Carter won that round, and didn’t have to think about it.

The fifth and last question concerned Luka. Why was Luka in this dimension, and why was he so “dang” smart? Why was he not serving the king, why did he forget about the Akashic records, how did he perish, how did he get back, does he still remember the land of Sebek, when did-

“*What on EARTH* are you talking about?!”

Hullabaloo paused, his cloudy eyes remaining in the shade of his hat bill.

He’d cornered Carter.

“The boy has so much potential, he takes after you, does he not?”

Carter just looked away.

“And but you are very different also, such knowledge, specially now.” His English accent was clear, but low, he reached for his sleeve once again. An empty glass jar was placed on the floor and opened.

Carter was taken off guard as the pirate unsheathed a knife from the bags on his belt. The small, but pretty knife glinted in the candle light.

Carter braced himself to stand and fight – or defend – or negotiate – but Hullabaloo just stared.

“You desire more than this... You’ve come so far, learned so much... Yet still, you want the very cherry on the top of this whole ordeal, don’t you?”

Carter didn't answer.

"You want more time to explore this dimension. You're not really headed home, are you?" He ungloved his hand, tossing the garment aside. Carter watched carefully, trying not to show any nerves.

"What happens if you die trying? Trying to find that last bit of fruit? Then what? What happens to Luka?"

Carter broke.

"What are you saying?"

"What if your little adventure here leads to your doom, and poor Luka is left to be? Awful thoughts, is it not?"

"What do you want from me?" Carter spat.

Hullabaloo tapped the knife into his palm, suddenly clutching it, and drawing dramatically. He squeezed his fist over the jar and Carter could hear the plinking of blood draining into the glass.

"What I want," The boy squeezed his fist until it was shaking. "Is to make sure you two do what you need to for your planet. Promise me something..." He finished filling the jar and corked it. He pulled a handkerchief from his sleeve, wiped his hands, then wrapped his wound. He faced Carter.

"I'll be around these worlds many times, living and breathing in dimensions most will never go. The dimension you spoke of whence from you originally came, is in dire need of help... Please take the gems you mine from *heres*, and return to turn them loose, *theres*. And please... *Take this*." He offered the jar.

Carter did nothing.

"*Please*, if you die now, it will be for naught. I give this to you and your brother as thanks for braving Earth and beyond. This blood is of immortal, and will heal you of whatever you'd decide to overcome with an instant. It's the least I can do to aid fellow astronauts. The two of you can return home as anomalies the world's not seen – make them question the insanity of the old paradigms."

"*Insanity*?" Carter said, staring at the doosey in front of him.

"Yes."

"Please..." Hullabaloo breathed sincerely. "Take it, please." He begged.

Past the fumes, smoke, clothes, make-up, and cataracts, Carter could suddenly see something he hadn't before... But it wasn't whom Hullabaloo was, it wasn't even an innocent child, not some little boy to which Carter could compare himself – It had nothing to do with any of that. What he saw, was not even human.

It was nothing.

The bodyless soul that could aspire to be everything. The stuff that made evolution move. A essenceless, wondrous, quality of existing that didn't feel like *anything*.

The metal door at the top of the stairs, clanged open. Carter's fleeting moment of peace, vanished.

The two could hear Nelly's worrisome calling for Luka as his footsteps clunked down the steel stairs.

Sighing, Carter snatched up the bottle of liquid and pocketed it, rushing to the bars to tell Luka to slow down on the stairs.

"*Thank you.*" Hullabaloo whispered as he and Carter gazed out of the cell, together. Carter gave a sideways glance.

"I found you!" Luka smiled, clumsily making his way down with a sheet of paper in his hand, and a key in the other. Hullabaloo transformed.

"Luka!" He exclaimed. "Clever lad! I knew you'ded crack the code on that map! Now, lettuce out! Those wily sea bandits will pay for what they've brandished against the legendarily evil pirate, Captain Hullabaloo! *No, no!* The other way-" Hullabaloo feigned impatience as Luka misguided the key. The door snapped open and Luka ran in, giving Carter a giggly hug.

"Hurry! Lettuce run before the pirates find out!" Hullabaloo childishly nabbed Luka's tiny palm. Luka grabbed Carter's hand, and the chain of people went galumphing up the steps in an airy-fairy game of make-believe. Carter was either awe, or dumb struck; *Just who the heck was this Hullabaloo guy?!*

The parade passed Nelly in the hall, and she stared after the maniacs until the fancy boy grasped her paw in frivolity.

"Don't worry fair lady, we've got everything under control, those pirates can't catch us now!"

"My Goodness young man! What is dis? Some kinda fire-drill?"

Carter shrugged at her and the four disappeared down the hall.

The cabin door flung open to the kick of Hullabaloo's heavy, black-leather boots. His band members came to attention.

"Sir, the hostage has remained secured. Did you complete your mission, Sir?"

"I haved indeed. Good jobbed keeping our position."

His lackey handed him a teacup and saucer. They all sipped to their 'fortune'.

"Now!" Hullabaloo threw himself into the captain's seat and crossed a leg.

"*Begone!*" He waved a bandaged hand at Carter, Luka and Nelly. "Quick, before I changeded my mind about what I wants to do with the place. This wall-paper is so tacky."

Carter was stupored, but charmed at the same time. He exchanged a glance with the ferry captain before leading Nelly and Luka away.

“Will you be alright, Sir?”

The old man slugged his tin-mug of coffee.

“Don’t worry, it’s the most fun I’ve had allllll my life.”

Carter half-grimaced, half-smiled. It seemed everybody in this dimension was a bit whacky no matter how they looked at things.

“Well, so long then, Hullaballoo I know I said I didn’t like your style, but, you’re alright – for that kinda guy. Take care of yourself, kid.”

The boy rose from his slouch, setting aside the tea. He took a note from his coat.

“There’s nothing a darling could do to lie a finger on the likes of Captain Hullaballoo, I’ll see you again soon, when you come back to Bomani’s dimension, once you’ve created its’ moon, and together we shall crawl out into the moonlight for the first time, sharing immortal skins and furs to which we surrender our souls, no more war in the skies below, and instead a life well-lived because He found out who He truly is; an eturnity.”

Hullaballoo looked up from his poem.

“We’re all in this together, goddammit, so let’s start acting like it.”

Chapter 9

The Madness of Change

Slowly everyone was meeting their destinations; Nelly waved goodbye at Wonder harbor, where she'd step onto the next train for Alice city, and her dream of becoming a performer. James and Mr. Jackson would go in search of a group they intended to join, a clan who lived in a desolate location across a sinking sand sea, called Godwin's Island. Evinrude kissed her love farewell at the docks of Calling pass, where she would train with master martial artists for the next eighteen months. With a solemn heart, Malcolm stayed behind to venture on as the ferry captain's fuel room tender, and Carter and Luka patiently awaited the turning of the ship for their turn to finally 'go home' to the little shack near Child's temple, to see at least one, familiar face again.

At each harbor, the pirates went off, but always came back, mysteriously timed by the sightings of owls. No one knew if they were off to go do bad or good, but they always returned quiet and well.

Sunrise after sunset after sunrise, the brothers got closer to where they started. All seemed right, until one, hairy night...

The pirates awoke the last four passengers to the most alien of a sound – A sound so angelic, all would have slept right through it. Like an aurora borealis, turquoise, green, and yellow lights danced across the starry sky above, glowing wildly, and forming patterns in the heavens. The open sea was shuddered, waves forcing the boat towards the unknown.

It was beautiful, it was mystical, it was other-worldly, but not everyone saw it as a wonderful thing.

This unearthly movement sent Hullabaloo into a craze. The mad boy became unstoppable.

"Go! GO! And get away with your lives!!!" Hullabaloo instructed everyone into a rowboat. The boat was dropped into the wild, wet, darkness of night. There was nothing the others could do but watch as the pirates loyally followed their captain, whom took the ship to chase down the neon lights like a scene from an action movie – an action movie that quickly turned sci-fi as the vessel dematerialized into the thin, green, air, never to be seen again.

The four, never saw them again.

There was morning light.

Carter stood, tied a rope to the boat, and the other end, to his ankle. He jumped into the air, slapping the water before gaining enough height to catch the breeze. The small row boat was pulled so heftily, Malcolm's and the captain's paddling was needless. The sight of land urged Carter to beat harder. As he did, he was joined into a flock of gulls that laughed him on, though a little red ibis flew silent amidst the avian audience until Carter dropped into the knee-high waters of shore.

While Malcolm and the captain were just happy to be on soil again, Carter and Luka stood phased by a harbor and seaside town they did not remember at all. Whether the alien tide sent them off course, or their rowboat ride rocked them the wrong way, they were unsure of this home coming.

Before parting ways, the ferry captain prayed for the 'pirates' that had saved them all, and Carter asked the sea dog if there was anything he needed, and if he'd be okay, now that his ferry was gone.

"There will always be more ships," He assured. "but one *can't* buy adventures... This is the most fun I've had alllllll my life."

The brothers roamed the coast to see if they'd simply off-shot their mark, but they never did find the old seaside town again.

Carter pulled the binoculars down from his face, turning to vault himself over the railing. He got behind the ship wheel only to fiddle with a combination lock, that was subdued in seconds and tossed aside. The wheel was thrust into action, setting the ship home-ward. Waves rocked the boat to a melody, he could feel the wind, the boundlessness, but then – The green crust on the horizon – It almost disgusted him to see land.

Why on Earth should I have to return home?

The ship hit the sandbar, sending Carter slamming into the metal wall, snapping pieces off the Wings of Ra in the impact.

"NO!"

Carter lost it. Dream after dream, more real and normal than the next, was about losing the precious Wings of Ra. He could not rest or sleep sound. It made him catch fire in his waking life – the wings became his top priority.

This dedication manifested Carter a way back to the Childs' neighborhood, only to find out that Maxwell Donogan was gone, and would not be back until next Summer for his fifth-dimensional vacation.

Carter became so upset and angry, he and Luka searched for other possible ways to return home, but they found none. Wasting away that Fall, Winter and Spring, Carter continued to fly, tinker, study and fly some more. During this time, the brothers would lose every friend they'd made along the way, for Carter could not look at a life without the Wings; Which was an unquenchable destiny for he.

His intentions once again, focused on building a second pair, but like any sacred creation ever discovered, the wings were not replaceable. Carter remained spiritually starved.

In the Summer, Carter knocked on Sir Child's door.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Tsu, the butler, answered. "but Sir Child and Maxwell Donogan have gone to study their own fields of science this Summer, I don't mean to relay the personal, but they aren't much of companions these days. It is untold of when either may return."

Carter went on with his own studies, bending destiny to his selfish will. He became a hero in Bomani's dimension, witnessing glorious, adventurous, battles to force the recreation of the wings to be. The brothers solved number-crunching, mind-over-matter mysteries, played death-defying danger games, and turned technology over to the public in the name of the Cordell brothers. The scientific geniuses changed lives in Bomani's dimension, but Carter was yet to change his own...

The buildings seemed to lean inward on the student as he walked slowly, past the merchandise-cluttered windows of the lichen-filled streets. With a bright-red suitcase in hand, he stopped at the terra cotta brick wall, where one, simple glass door was imbedded into it.

"Hello?" He said into the bleakness of the movie theater lobby, lit only by the colorful lights interlaced between the menus. Finally, a friendly voice came out of the darkness.

"Oh, hey Chase." The blond, brown-eyed high-schooler greeted her peer.

"Hello," Chase said again. "you really should put up a sign, I could hardly tell your little after-school job was open."

"Doesn't matter today, everyone's at the Cordell festivities. We'll be plenty busy during the debut of Carter's Castle, the one they made in honor of that crazy-awesome scientist. Did you want something to eat?"

"Oh, uh, sure... Carter, he's the guy you see in the paper all the time; the one they're holding the festival for downtown? They made a movie about him?"

"It was gonna happen sooner or later. You wanna see it?"

“The movie? Now?”

“Sure, I’m a V.I.P. thanks to Florian.”

The girl trayed a stack of mozzarella sticks and oatmeal cookies, then came around the counter to lead Chase to an empty theater room.

The screen lit. A few commercials played. The movie began.

The visual soared through thick, pink and gray clouds, while a booming voice came crackling into the space. The scene dove through a maze of mountains, where pillars stick out from the fog and a ninja practices moves atop them.

Every Master has a power, has a way, a path...

The ninja continued.

But when power and skill can only get them so far, what is left in the journey to the kingdom?

The ninja falls, as do others, and the screen moves across a misty valley up to ‘Carter’s’ face.

Facing the ultimate being, the man, the immortal...

Chase was intent, it was getting addicting.

Carter stood in a mountain cave, Luka was in the background with a pet monkey. Carter’s capes fly in the wind, almost revealing something – the Wings of Ra, but it remains unknown until later.

The movie went on with almost two hours of mystifying flying scenes, there was fighting and romance, adventure and comedy. The movie ends with Carter about to attack the enemy, but the foe is spared. The cliff hanger left Chase’s mouth ajar.

“That was great. I loved it. Thanks for getting me in early.” Chase obliged.

“You’re very welcome.”

“But can I ask, what does it have to do with Carter? I thought he was just a really far-out scientist, not a fantastical warrior with enemies and other-worldly allies.”

“It’s a movie, they can do what they want, Carter’s real bio is in what he does for the world, his advanced technologies have gotten us off the ground, under the sea, deep into deserts, you name it.”

“Where is he now?”

“They say he lives in some secret location in the mountains, just beyond this city.”

“Wow.”

“He’s a phenomena.”

“You don’t think he’s cool, now do ya?”

“He’s *inspiring*, okay?” The girl smiled sheepishly.

“Yeah... I wish I could be part of it too, y’know?”

"I should be closing up."

"Yup. Thanks for the movie again, it was good!"

The two parted at the door.

Chase walked out into the brightest sunset he'd ever seen, everything was stained in tangerine. With thoughts soaring high, he made his way back to campus absent-minded.

Little did these kids know, that the awe-inspiring scientist they idolized, was just a fellow human, trying to find his way home.

Carter staggered to his feet as the wind pushed him into the limestone mouth of the cave. Mechanical, wooden wings folded under his coat. Umber locks swept across his deep-blue eyes, as a quick, enamored smile escaped his face.

"Luka?"

"Yes Carter?" Luka erupted from a pile of red-silk pillows, having to pull his terribly long, dark hair with him. He tripped over a cushion, and he threw it back into the pile as if it made the place neater.

"Prepare for departure, we'll be seeing Maxwell Donogan again real soon. The folk's from Major's airship say he's very much alive... So much for rumors..."

"So where are we meetin' 'um?"

"The Sir Child Child's fiftieth anniversary ball. I received an invitation, and so will Donogan. Tonight, we go home. I've had my time with these wings."

"Sure have!" Luka agreed as a chirping pet monkey jumped to his shoulder from an open, brass cage.

Carter gazed out of the cave mouth to where the city was just a crunchy glitter amidst a yellowing, green, horizon, slowly going blue.

"I will be glad to be home, but I'm sure going to miss what we built here."

"The Earthbound library made it all possible – wonder whatever happened to it... Hey Carter, what are we going to build first when we get back?" Luka grinned; He was referring to all of their inventions, but Carter knew better.

"A *life*." Carter breathed deeply. "Luka, Donogan abandoned us here for a reason, When I came to Bomani's world, I was far behind in my ways of looking at the concept of science. Maxwell Donogan was – *is*, a genius," He corrected himself. "I should have seen that all along. He discovered Bomani's dimension fair and square, I'm sure he's made even more progress over these years than I could ever have even hoped to scratch the surface of. He must hold the wisdom of a mystic by now, our dear, old,

Maxwell Donogan. The people of our dimension have suffered long enough without the hidden worlds of knowledge available. I'll start a war if that's what it takes to unveil what should belong to all people."

He'd finally gotten Carter...

Staring out to the darkening atmosphere, the brothers watched the sky go shocking blood-red, ending their last day in Bomani's dimension with an extravagant sunset. There would be nothing like it when they got back home, but they were ready to change Carter's dimension forever.

Carter alofted into the alley beside the grand ballroom and theater to tuck the wings under-sleeve. Sharing a glance before masking themselves, Luka continued onward on his air-scooter. Carter stuck with good, old-fashioned strides.

The huge building flashed with signs advertising for the Sir Child's 50th anniversary ball, so the brothers did not have to doubt they were in the wrong place. The two passed giggling ladies in matching performance costumes, reminding them of the jolly anthropomorphic, Nelly Swim, they'd met so long ago. Taking a sharp turn, the brothers wafted down the main hall to flash their invitation before stepping into the most splendor-filled ballroom they'd ever laid eyes on.

There were huge roman pillars that held up a muraled ceiling, convexing towards a huge stain glass window that opened up the ballroom like an over-hanging umbrella. Several layers of decadent balconies overhung the mosaic dance floor paved in gemstone tiles grouted in gold. There were refreshment tables stocked with the finest of feasts, and a castle of goblets that awaited guests for punch and wine drinking.

Shimmering lights and lively music aided the ambiance while the artists themselves only glinted in the preferred shadows. The guests were diverse in beauty and style, though all held a posture or gesture of superiority, elegance and greatness.

Recognizing the native heroes, the Cordells were given curtsies, tipped hats, and blown kisses from every which way. There were dignitaries even lowering themselves to their knees in respect of the flamboyant geniuses.

As the two waded through their admirers, Carter's eyes grazed the ceiling, where a chandelier as big as a carousal, hung.

His gaze averted to a stage where the movie that was made in the Cordell's honor, was just ending. There were a majority of watchers applauded the screening, and as if on cue, a spot-light crashed down

on Carter, momentarily blinding him from the hill of velvet stairs, where Maxwell Donogan emerged from the darkness of the stage-wing. Carter ditched his ball mask now that it meant nothing.

Maxwell folded a mechanistic hand over an intricate walking cane. It was sad to speculate this loss, but Donogan looked no more weaker or dibilitated with a missing arm, in fact, he looked stronger.

“Maxwell... ” Carter began. “It is a blessing to see you again. I do believe you’ve heard of the things Luka and I have accomplished here. We’ve come not for the celebration, but for you; to acknowledge what you’ve done for us, but inform you of the worlds of lessons we have learned as well. Despite all we have honed on this plane, we are ready to return home.”

Maxwell patted his chest robustly.

“How touching! Hello my dear boys, how have you been?! This dimension has treated you well, yes? You’ve seen the movie, right? They’re always so terrible at portraying these things – anyhow, of course I’ve heard about your break-throughs! But what I don’t see... *Is another pair of wings...* ”

“You’re still ahead of me on that one, Sir.”

“Untrue!” Donogan proclaimed. This *was* true, Carter never did succeed in creating replicas, the Wings of Ra were still the original healed artifact that came to him fresh from reparation.

“Don’t lure me with white-lies, tell me you’ve decoded the wings, my boy!”

“In some ways I have. In others, not even close.” Carter admitted. “But ultimately I’m understanding that the Wings were meant for Chike Cain to possess. Is that something you knew, Maxwell?”

“Maaybe... ” He tapped his lip. Carter didn’t like where this was going.

“Then what have you waited for? Why are we here? I am ready to take my knowledge and inventions back home, why do you resist? Why did you fake your death? Just how desperate are you to keep us here? Don’t tell me you planned this, Donogan.”

“WHAAAT?!” Donogan feigned surprise with great sarcasm. “You’re going to accuse little old me for taking you to worlds where your genius would be appreciated? Don’t you see, Carter? You didn’t belong in that realm, you were far too superior to that 3-D planet, scuffling with those simple minds of matter back at the lab – It was a killer, for both you and I, and it really wasn’t your style to be fair... ”

“Enough prattle, why did you do this? What am I missing?”

Maxwell’s voice bloomed.

“ISN’T IT OBVIOUS?! I *saved* you! Look at what you’ve accomplished here! You should be grateful!!!”

“But Mr. Donogan, I don’t understand-”

“How could you NOT?!” The cyborg whipped a sword from it’s walking-cane costume. Carter’s wings fanned, prepared to fly as he dodged the man’s sudden blows.

The crowds shreed and flew to the flanks of the ballroom. Soaring safely away on his air-scooter, Luka shouted to Carter.

“Get him away from the innocent people! I’ll go find Sir Child!”

“Right!”

Carter faced Maxwell almost emotionlessly. He’d always known Maxwell was mad. And in this world, nothing surprised Carter anymore. Madness was no feat here.

Maxwell seethed through a wrinkled squint, wailing a hit at Carter and beheaded a chair-back. Tossing the legs aside, Carter shot straight into the air, flapping towards the spherical ceiling, hovering to collect his bearings. He flew circles as Maxwell rabidly clamored up the balconies to get to Carter.

In the dish-eyed audience below, two news women embraced each other in disappointment of the upsetted ceremony. Their co-worker ran off to the scene of the crime, camera-first.

“Iggy! What are you doing?!”

“Don’t worry girls, this is great! I’ll put it towards Carter’s Castle 2!”

“Do you know what you’re doing?!”

“Course! Unless you don’t know what you’re talkin’ ‘bout!”

The crowds pervaded to swim and shift.

“Come here, Carter my boy!!” Maxwell called as he leapt to the chandelier in sick pursuit.

The golden rings of dangling diamonds rocked up in front of Carter, causing him to dive away, but he crashed into the other side of the circle as it rocked back, snapping several strands of beads as he went. Everything glittered as Maxwell crawled through the crystals in a rage, it became difficult to pick the sword out from all of the other shimmering materials splashing through the air.

Carter got himself tangled in the glistening ropes, quickly cornered by the man he’d spent most of his life in reverence of... But he wouldn’t *really* harm him, would he? This was all just a joke, right? An extreme one, but a joke none-the-less?

“After all I did for you, dear boy-” Maxwell poised himself with a careful strike.

“Then tell me, Mr. Donogan, what *did* you do for me?” Carter took the chance to unravel out of the crystaled chains. He remained still.

“Why, my boy! I gave the slip to the biggest obstacle in the way of your reputation with the wings – I *killed* king Bomani!!!” He broke into gagging laughter that caused Carter to freeze with anger.

“Run, Carter, *RUN!*” Luka woke him.

Maxwell could have ranted on, but the freakishly crazed man was out of breath.

Enraged, Carter threw himself sideways, causing the beads to release him, but dangle Donogan. The man erroneously freed himself, which allowed him to fall from the deadly height of the chandelier – but before Donogan hit the ground, he vanished into thin air, leaving his lavish cape of red, behind. It eerily floated to the ballroom floor.

He was gone.

Carter swallowed. The now, twisted Carter wished he'd killed him while he still had the chance...

Flying to his freedom, Carter joined Luka and the two dodged streams of water from the sprinkler system after something exploded.

Stroking to the exit, Carter could feel a warm ooze on his thigh, which he hoped to hide from Luka until they were home, safe. Carter slimmed the wings to fit the jostled door, then fanned them again to rocket up above the city bustle, where he could see lavender twilight.

The wound made Carter whip up a storm, the wings beat the wind while his arms grew heavy. He staggered to the mountain wall, crashing with a wooden thud.

"Carter, Carter! Are you alright?!" Luka jumped from his air machine. Carter said nothing, was out of air and bleeding. The mechanical wings folded with a click, and he tried hoisting himself into the cave mouth, but he could not push his painful leg, or his weakened spirit.

"All along... He only cared to be and have the greatest... He kept us from the people we loved, just for... For what? "

Luka shook his head, yanking at Carter's arms.

"We're still going home! I know we'll find a way!"

Carter couldn't hold on. His foot skidded to a lower crag.

"Carter!" Luka pulled with all his might. "*Stop - doubting – us!!!*"

At the bottom of the mountain, under the shaded forest, any shape of moon-light was blocked by the chunky canopy. The two lie in shamble on the blankets of ferns in the crickets and in the damp soil. They could hear owls sing. Forest life twittered. The Wings of Ra was now missing several feathers, and there was a heavy crack in the right shoulder piece. Carter's handle was smashed inward, leaving a gash across his knuckles that gushed blood.

Carter believed that this was the end. They would never go back to their dimension, he would never make things up to Chike, they would never get to tell the tale of the wonderful adventure they'd found - he would never find the strength to become a good person.

A bittersweet end.

Carter whispered the last words of a great inventor – a revolutionary pioneer who sacrificed the understanding of his life and soul to bring amazing things into the world...

“It’s not too late,” A small, nasally, little voice carried far enough to reach Carter’s ears. “it doesn’t have to end here, I’ve seen miracles nothing short of what I see here today.”

“Who’s there? Luka coughed. The blind little hedgehog hobbled up on a twiggy cane.

“Just call me Sir Redwall. It looks like you two took quite the slide. I apologize for my inferior hedgehog suit, but if there’s anything I can do of my ability, please, give the word, and I’ll see what I can do.”

Knowing the critter wasn’t capable of much, Carter hugged Luka closer and spoke.

“Just keep us company, Sir Redwall...”

The tiny, old, hedgehog took a seat on nearby litter. There was silence before he cleared his throat.

“Well then, allow me to tell you a story; it’s the only story I know. It’s a story about a little hedgehog named Sir Hoghedge Wallred.”

“... And then he told them a grand story about a little hedgehog named Sir Hoghedge Wallred... but he could not find a way to end the story, as Sir Wallred’s destiny had not yet been fulfilled...” The blind, quillless hedgehog suddenly realized he had somewhere to be.

“Sir Redwall then made the decision to once again set out on another, soulful adventure.”

As he got off his little bum, his twig cane clinked against the glass bottle he’d taken a seat on, making Carter open his blurred eyes to the tiny glass bottle he’d kept as a keepsake on the end of a neck-chain for two years. Carter’s unfocused eyes watched Redwall mosey off into the horizon until he was able to zero in on the perfectly unscathed bottle lying in the dirt.

The bottle of captain Hullabaloo’s immortal blood.

Chapter 10

Stepping Back on Track

“Coming!” Chike called downstairs to where his Grandfather was yelling for him to hurry. Chike hardly meant what he said as he was still wrapped in a towel with a toothbrush in his mouth. Too busy styling his corn-rowed, spiked, *and* braided hair, he knocked over the bottle of home-made kohl, which landed in his jewelery box, dying the metals and beads in midnight hue. Swearing under his breath with a smile, he plopped the box under the running faucet as he ran to get clothes.

Finally dressed to his liking, the clumsy sixteen-year-old flew down the steps in shining white and gold; and of course, a little black. Grabbing the pastry from the toaster oven, and snagging a leather messenger bag from the foyer rack, Chike was about to run out the door, when he knocked a pair of loafers off the shoe rack.

“Are you ready, yet, Chike?” His Grandpa asked.

“Sorry Gramps, I just wanted to look cool for the party.” He explained, as he put the shoes back, put on his own, and knocked more off.

“Cool?” Mr. Cain questioned his ancient Egyptian funk. “It’s your birthday, coulda went in your Pjs.”

“Gramps!” Chike blushed.

“Heh.” Mr. Cain chuckled, ducking outside as Chike stopped to untangle his bag-strap from the table-end.

Chike finally made it out the door. His eyes flew open.

Dillan, Honora, and Joey, posed extravagantly around a beautiful, vintage, topless-car, refurbished by his Grandpa with gold paint and leather seating. Mr. Cain worked the camera.

“*Surprise!*” Everyone screamed. Chike blushed even harder, his heart fluttering in appreciation.

“Oh Grandpa, you didn’t!”

“Oh yes I did!”

“But I *didn’t* want you to buy me a car!” Chike was all over it.

“Yep, it’s the golden Chariot you always dreamed about!” Joey’s accented voice flavored the moment. He punted Chike in the shoulder. Chike didn’t even open the car door, he just stepped over into the driver’s seat.

“Oh gosh, Grandpa, I *love* it – I absolutely love it!”

“Do you even know what ‘*it*’ is?” Said Mr. Cain, the automobile connoisseur. The boys snickered.

“Aw, come on, Gramps, he knows nothin’ ‘bout the classics.” Joey gestured.

Chike cried and laughed on the wheel until he could regain himself. He then had the honors of driving his guests to the reserved beach pavilion, where they would meet up with the Childs, the Cain’s neighbors, and Honora’s Aunt.

Chike had felt this way before... But today was special, as if the feeling wasn’t going to abandon him this time.

He felt *SO LOVED*. It felt like everything was suddenly very familiar to him, like he was back on Earth after a really long night of constant dreaming. He felt like he was having de ja vu about realizing he was alive, and loving everything his gaze touched...

The gulls swimming in the salty air.

The wind taking smoke from his birthday cake candles.

The way that Joey humorously presented his gift.

Honora’s smile, and the way it felt when he smiled back.

The water that touched his toes on the shoreline.

Child’s hopeful eyes that yearned to please...

Chike saw love in the dancing and playing, the tossing of the volley balls, he saw love in the footprints in the sand, the music coming from the radio, the piece of melon he graciously ate, the joke that made everyone spew their drinks. It was everywhere! *EVERYWHERE!*

It was in the absence of friends who could not be there that day – even in the absence of that! There was sudden beauty in the mystery of whatever happened to the Cordell brothers, which had been traumatizing to Chike in the past... Today, all it felt like, was a mystery.

As Chike stared out to the sunset; A dying day that had set fire to everything in heavenly gold and copper colors, he thought to himself with tears streaming down his smiling face.

A delicate touch from the tip of his own finger calmed his quivering lip. His heart beat in ease as his body shook in cosmic relief.

All but forgotten, came memories of king Bomani, which flooded Chike’s soul with everything the man had once taught him.

Where have I been?! Chike thought.

But that was two years ago, Chike was eighteen now.

Packing his room, Chike was headed for life outside of his Grandfather's reach. He was sad to be leaving, but he was not afraid, he felt ready for this journey since he was sixteen, when king Bomani came back into his life after a six year absence. It was only because of Bomani that Chike yearned for new life – a life that no one could offer to him but the king.

“So why didn't you tell me sooner?” Chike yammered on, as he folded clothes on his bed. “What do you mean by ‘twisted’ destiny? And what does it have to do with my old friend Carter? He's gone, I told you that ages ago.”

The euphoric spirit glittered from the back of the room, his bronze flesh dressed in salmon and gold. His eyes were like crystal balls.

“You'd once been offered to fulfill this incarnation, eight years ago, a man you knew as Maxwell Donogan, denied you the gift of an ancient artifact known as the Wings of Ra; Carter seized Maxwell's folly dreams, and thus the opportunity. You had not yet decided to trust my word, and ultimately, lost contact with me-”

“*Me*, follow *you*?! You're the one who's haunted me these last past three years! People think I'm nuts, talking to myself all the time,” He sighed and chortled. “but yes, of course I remember when Donogan did that, Carter and I were having an argument then...”

“It was during that time Azure'd begun to haunt Carter as well.”

Having spoke of Azure before, Chike knew, that she, too, was an inter-dimensional being.

“Wow, did Carter really see creatures like you? He always seemed so...”

“Do not judge your cherished friend, times have changed, and so do people. It has become of utmost importance we meet Carter again, and reclaim the Wings of Ra. Carter had a different destiny awaiting him, I assure you.”

“I mean, I get what you're saying, Bomani, but... where do I start? I haven't seen Carter, or Luka – My *best* friend, in ages! Would I even recognize them? Would they recognize me? I have no idea where to begin-”

“We start, by leaving everything behind.” The alien angel smiled magnificently. Chike paused, somberly smiling back.

“I'm sure going to miss everyone... I loved growing up near the coast, but I need to go where there is snow! Do you think driving up North-”

“Snow? I'm afraid where you'll be going you'll still be getting sand in your shoes.”

Chike sighed and wandered the room that would no longer be his. He sat in the window seat and looked out to the familiar neighborhood to which he would have to detach from. He recalled the many days and hours he'd spent staring out, daydreaming and talking to the king in the secrecy of these very walls.

Soon these would all just be fond memories, a lick of honey for a memoir as a mortal on a mysterious sphere known as Earth.

But of course, Chike did not yet know this.

Chike bid a long, meaningful farewell to his Grandfather; both of them very sad, but also happy and hopeful for one another. With one last hug, and a few more words, Chike was out the door, and ready to step into his little gold convertible with packed bags.

But it wasn't there.

"Um... Bomani?" Chike accused. He looked around the cleared driveway, across the street, around the neighbor's houses... He took a few steps forward. Nothing happened.

"*Bomani?*" Chike called out again. Suddenly the house door opened and Chike's flustered Grandfather came out after him.

"Oh Chike, you know, I was thinking..."

"Grandpa..." Chike stood in bewilderment of Bomani's magic act going on behind the scenes.

The home that Chike had always known, instantly peeled away into the wind, revealing the dimension beneath, where a fierce stone sphinx lie at attention, wildly colored in a fresh coat of mineral paint.

Chike shook off the stupor.

"Grandpa!" He held his hands out, abandoning the grip on his bags, which turned to sand upon his letting go. Mr. Cain could see their world melting away behind Chike, his eyes grew wide in disbelief.

The both of them began to slip on the soft, fine, sand that piled up beneath their feet.

The world was swimming.

"Chike! Oh Chike!" Mr. Cain took his Grandson's hands. "What is happening?!"

"Don't worry Grandpa, everything will be okay-" Chike tried to help keep him afloat on the smothering sands. As the earth began to settle, the transition left the two stranded in the wind-whistling desert, kneeled before a sphinx and surrounded by a valley of pyramids and intricate labyrinths. There was silence as the two took everything in.

Chike wanted to say something comforting, but his mouth was dry. His senses were prisoner of the valleys yonder.

Unexpected, the yipping and yapping of a cheerful gypsy band tickled the two's ears from afar. The leader waved hello, then gracefully pointed not at them, but behind them. The two jumped from their skins to see a woman in shining white and gold, clothes rippling, hair wisping.

With a grounded presence, she stared down at Chike and his Grandfather through a horrific bird mask made of clay, bone, and gemstone.

There were two others; One figure, shorter than Azure, the other, taller than Azure, both bearing masks meant to be conceived as "human" faces.

"Stand." Azure told the Cains.

Chike tried, but his legs were shaky. To his surprise, his Grandpa stood first, quite robustly.

"Excuse me, Miss, I have been around the world many times, but I've never seen a place quite like this, could you be so kind as to tell us where we are? Are these not the great pyramids of Egypt?"

"Do not be so easily fooled. There are pyramids all over the Earth. But this is not Earth. It is a mere dream. Come, the peoples of this world have waited far too long for this moment."

Chike was still sitting in the sand, dizzy from the sudden scene change. His Grandpa, hardy from the travels he'd made as a pilot in his younger years, helped Chike stand. Chike managed to speak.

"Where's Bomani?"

Azure sighed hotly.

"You speak nonsense. Come, let's clean you up, have you informed."

This was not at all what Chike had in mind for the future. Bomani was no where to be seen, and although Azure and her two acquaintances took care of he and his Grandfather, Chike felt miserably inconfronted in Bomani's dimension without him. They stayed the day in a clay house, treated with luscious foods and conversation. Chike and his Grandfather tried to sleep that night, but the newness of everything was waking.

It was the next day Chike was riled from sleep to bathe and dress and be dragged back out to the desert for some reason or another.

Azure and the two masked figures stood still, allowing Chike and Mr. Cain to take in the rugged, bare, desert... Or at least, that's what Chike thought they were doing. In fact, they'd been awaiting the arrival of the awesome, mythical caravan that came riding up with splendor.

Chike beamed at the unicorns and three-headed camels. The avid servants nodded among the lavish gold, garnet, sapphire, and emerald decorations. Chike searched the rainbowed parade for his beloved

king, but he was not part of this hubbub. Chike turned to the touch on his shoulder; Azure was gifting him with the sacred ibis mask she'd been wearing.

"Carry wisdom like the ibis, combine intuition and intellect. Do not falter, and neither will your people."

Chike was confused, but he placed the mask onto his face. Gazing out the clear quartz eyes of the ibis, Chike could see that the entire welcoming parade was just an illusion – robots made of sand. If he did not bend the desert to his will, they would not make it to where they needed to be: Where Carter and Luka awaited him with the Wings of Ra.

"We must cross this desert and the obstacles it veils. Be strong." Azure asked of Chike.

But I can only be strong when Bomani is here... Chike thought, but didn't say.

He took a breath and tried to remember what it was like to make-believe – but the magic of Bomani's dimension just was – there had never been anything to deliberately create, there was nothing to control. Chike was open to the energy of these realms, but he had never actively created within them.

Arising feelings of authority, Chike reached for the reins of a silver unicorn, but all he got was a handful of sand. He felt another touch to his shoulder, but this time it was his Grandfather.

"You can do it, Chike, I know you can."

The two other masked figures were glued to Chike in suspense for his response... Chike took a deep breath.

"You're right, okay, I can do this..."

Feeling almost foolish, Chike closed his eyes and pretended he was king Bomani. He knew the king as someone who could do anything he wished, and so believed in his ability to raise life from the harsh, desert sand... All stood in stillness... Waiting... And waiting...

Up rose a large, golden chariot, bejeweled in carnelian, and led by a team of powerfully-bodied masses of tame lioness. As if that weren't enough, 'Bomani' urged the desert to birth another beast; A massive amber elephant, tapered with metallic yellow tusks, and wise, gentle eyes.

The elephant bowed to her king, and the man helped Azure to her new steed. He opened the chariot door for his Grandfather, and boarded the ancient vehicle to take the reins. The short, masked figure sat on his left, while the tall, masked figure took the seat on the right.

The royal caravan moved forward.

Then came the twisted path; A fork in the road. As Chike raised the reins to snap the lionesses to the right, the tall, masked man, spoke.

“That way will lead us to the nomad camps. It looks like paradise, yes, but know that the tradesmen call it *bandit cove*.”

“So I should go left?” Chike glanced into the heart of Death valley's twin. The short, masked boy spoke.

“That’s dragon country! The aligator-headed Sebek lives at the top of the mountain, *viciously* guarding the only source of water in the land!”

“Which way should I go?” Chike questioned, not feeling so much like the king anymore.

“Manifest your path.” Said the tall, masked man.

“No matter which way we go, it will be tough!” Said the short one. “I’m kinda scared...” He added.

Chike felt like he had an angel and a devil arguing on his shoulders. He looked up at Azure from beneath the bird mask. She only looked back with the expectancy of a decision.

Bandits or dragons? Perhaps we can take on a few thieves, maybe... but I've never angered a dragon before...

The riders, steeds and chariots, slowly began to blow away in the wind. Chike panicked. All this thinking was costing him, but what was he supposed to do?

The parading fortress fell to dust, and along with it, vanished Azure and Mr. Cain.

Chike and the two masked figures were the only ones left to fall into the broiling desert sand.

“Grandpa!” Chike coughed.

“Do not fret, he and Azure will be fine, it’s us, I’d worry for.” The tall, masked man dusted himself off.

“What’d I do wrong?”

“We gave you knowledge, but you didn’t think.”

“I *was* thinking!” Chike snapped. “What did Azure expect? I haven’t been to Bomani’s world in years!”

“Brush it off, Chike, we still have many trials to over come.”

“What do you mean?” He asked nervously.

“Chin up, Chike, you still have a path to choose.”

Chike was mentally subdued, he just started walking to shut up his mind chatter.

He and the masked silhouettes entered the blazing desert.

Chike was quickly uncomfortable by the suffocating heat. The silence was also unbearable. He felt alone without the sounds of the livestock’s hooves beating the dirt, the pleasant creeks of the wooden and metal chariots, and snapping leathers of the animal reins. The dry winds had mostly taken the traveler’s voices away, but Chike was desperate for company.

“Sooo... I didn’t catch your guys names, do you work for the king?”

The two glanced at Chike like he was crazy or worse. But then the small one jumped up, his hand raised like he was in a classroom, although what came out of his mouth was not a question.

“The king is my Father!”

“He is not in the least!!!” The tall man whirled around.

“So is! You promised to protect me!”

“And that is, what it is, nothing more!”

“Hey!” Chike got between the two. “Don’t pick on the little guy! What d’ you two have against each other?” Chike removed his mask to show that he was serious – but the others took it as game-over. The two revealed their identities with the removal of their own, disturbing masks.

For a moment Chike thought that the maddening desert was getting to him – For he saw Carter and Luka for the first time in eight years.

But it wasn’t them. The illusion faded.

“*King Bomani?!* ” Chike breathed at the towering figure. Chike almost didn’t want to look back at the child; his younger self.

“And...*Me...*”

Chapter 11

His Destiny

The three stood in the arid, warm, sands together, as if they were the only forms of life in that empty, merciless desert.

Chike could not keep his head straight. His consciousness began to move into his three bodies all at once, each seeing the golden hills and juicy-blue sky in a different way. Each felt their own feelings about being abandoned here with one another, but above all else, Chike could feel the disaster of emotions that conflicted within.

Ever since he'd 'met' Bomani, Chike revered the man, but if that man was him, how could he love him like him? He felt so unworthy – he'd failed to convince Carter of a better world, and Carter and Luka suffered for that. Young Chike yearned for guidance only a loving Father could give, and found that guidance in Bomani – but if he was *he*, how could *he* be there for *him*? The present-day Chike felt lowly when compared to the almighty Bomani, yet, he was in awe, and craved that might.

"Bomani," Chike exhaled. "**how** did *I* become king?"

The spirited man was almost taken aback, which made him laugh.

"I thought you'd never ask. Come. We must first seek refuge from our generous friend, Ra."

King Bomani now proudly led the way, leaving little Chike to take a bare-footed step forward to grab Chike's hand; Little Chike was intrigued by how small his hand was in comparison. By the time he looked up, Chike was smiling down upon his own, child-self.

"I will call you, Citrine. It's what Grandma called me a long time ago."

Recalling that he'd chosen to walk the dragonlands, Chike hesitantly followed the king into the shade of the mountain crags. They'd walked for miles under the scorching Sun and hadn't seen one serpent, but the possibility still trifled Chike.

Citrine was tired and weak and went to lie in the soft sand, looking ill.

"Let's break here," Chike suggested before Bomani could carry on. "Citrine doesn't feel well."

"Citrine?" The king queeried. "You can't just name yourself like a tamed parakeet."

"If it's me, I can do whatever I want, right?"

"Tell me more..." Bomani said nonchalantly, taking a bronze dipper from his skin-bag. He began to trudge up the mountain.

“Bomani, what are you doing?!”

“Helping you, we can’t let Citrine fall behind, now can we?”

“But the dragons-”

“Come Chike, you were as brave as I, only a short time ago.”

Brave? Bravery... Was that the key to becoming Bomani? Chike came quietly, but not for long.

“Bomani, if you are I, why do you exist? And how is Citrine here? He’s my past, isn’t he more unlikely to exist if he’s from the past, because I am grown in the future? Why are we all here together? What does it mean?”

“So many questions.”

“Sorry-” Chike said guiltily, but continued to let more slip. “Is it maybe because we all have different ways of remembering things, and we’re supposed to work together to conquer all these trials you were talking about?”

“Anything is possible...” King Bomani avoided any promises.

At the peak of the elderly volcano, a reservoir of rain sat, water so pure, cool, and crystalline. Bomani easily could have scooped Citrine’s drink and left, but instead, he crawled to the edge with humility, and tossed the dipper in.

Surprised, Chike peered over the side of the spring, watching the spoon sink to the bottom.

An enormous yellow eye opened.

Chike let a wail escape as the reptilian creature rapidly rose, a jawful of sword-like teeth coming straight for Bomani, whom was still perched on the ledge of the spring. Sebek very well could have nabbed the king and swallowed him whole.

The hydro-dragon lifted a paw from the waves – but Chike jumped in the way.

“BOMANI! NO!”

Sebek garbled with laughter, almost spilling the now-full dipper in his sharp claws. His words were for the bowing king.

“YOU WERE SUCH A YOUNG AND FOOLISH BOY... SO MUCH FEAR, I WOULD NEVER HAVE RECOGNIZED YOU...” He regifted the dipper to Bomani, whom finally regained height.

“MY GOOD KING, TAKE WHAT YOU NEED.”

“Much gratitude, Sebek.” Bomani accepted his chalice.

Sebek retreated to the depths, and Chike watched with a bead of sweat still on his brow. He held his tongue until he and Bomani were making their way back down the mountain.

“Sebek wasn’t vicious at all!”

“Did you doubt that we were not a threat to Sebek?”

“What are you saying?”

“Our other choice was a road to a place the tradesmen call bandit cove. What do *you*, call it?”

“Well, I’ve never been there...”

“Don’t you see Chike? *Reality* can mess with your mind. However, destiny, is written, and it will do everything in it’s power to make sure you give birth to it – even if it means throwing you a cosmic punch to knock the daylight out of you so you can wake up tomorrow, an amnesiac, and start all over again.” He chuckled at his own allegory. “The third dimension is a world, sterilized of its’ power to create. Once every thousand years or so, an exception is borne unto that world, giving it a chance to resurrect as something new. This time around, you and Carter were that exception.”

“But we failed.” Chike’s eyes watered.

“No, your paths had been swapped by a turn of fate; You decided not to accept the blueprint you’d written for yourself. You remained in Carter’s world, and Carter was blasted off to “Bomani’s dimension” as you call it. You had decided not to dream the dream. Lessons disguised as mistakes ensued.”

“What will make things better?”

“Chike... ” The king sighed. “Mistakes do not disfigure destiny. All involved went on their own journeys, but no matter how far and wide, we won’t escape what we do this today. Destiny was written for and by you, do you trust the stars, Chike?”

“All lovely things come from the deepest depths of the stars, right?” Chike offered merrily, but the king wasn’t fooled.

“Let us be moving.”

“But Bomani!” Chike grew agitated. “What am I supposed to do?! How am I supposed to become you, if you’re the destiny you’re talking about?!”

Bomani woke Citrine so he could have his drink, but instantly lifted him to his back when he was done. It was time to press on.

Bomani looked at Chike before permanently turning away.

“Watch as life begins to fold.”

Chike did not expect that it would take days to cross the dragon lands. Among those sunrises and sunsets, the three silent travelers never spoke a word. They only huffed and puffed after slaying a

dragon, cried when all was not well, smiled when things were good, and gazed when fortune was to be admired.

They roamed on jackle feet when the night was fair to travel. They flew on falcon wings when the air was faster than their feet. And finally, they tread the land as dragons when the dragons found anything else they could be, tastier than one of their own kind.

But on the seventh day of struggling through the grainy, hot, rocky, world of the desert, Chike lost his ability to shape-shift, and Citrine was even weaker than that.

Even Bomani didn't understand what was happening – that was until, he beheld a bright, white, Moon one night.

They were in Carter's dimension...

No more dragons, but no more magic, and no more playing by Bomani's rules.

Though Bomani had also grown thin, his spirit had not – his eyes still sparkled with a lust, as if the last past days without water was just the way it was supposed to be. As long as Bomani existed, Citrine and Chike had a future to surrender to: A life that they would one day rule. Carter's dimension could do nothing about that.

A sandstorm raged across the Earth.

Chike collapsed.

Bomani picked him up.

Citrine grew still.

Bomani shook him out of it.

Chike stopped to gaze out to the nothingness on the horizon.

"I give up." He whispered.

"Look at me, Chike," Said Bomani, sternly. "so long as I live, you can be assured that so shall you."

Chike could not even contemplate it. He couldn't remember what the point was. He forgot that they were supposed to meet Carter and Luka on the other side of the desert. He forgot about Azure and Mr. Cain. He was so sleepened by the desert, that all he was really trying to do, was survive... Which meant he still wanted to live... which meant there were still things he wanted to do, see, touch, taste, feel...

Slowly, Chike lifted his head. In the reverberating heat, he could see three figures wavering on the horizon. He was sure it was just his imagination. He'd seen nobody but himself in the last past many days... The shadows seemed to melt back into the sands, but just as soon, they reappeared.

Chike was sure he was going crazy.

He was.

Bomani woke to the smell of smoke. It was raining ashes, soft and white, drifting on the stagnant breeze like snowflakes. His stirring woke Chike.

“There’s your snow.”

Chike could not even remember why Bomani was jesting about this. The two got to their aching feet.

“Wake up Citrine, it’s time to go.” Chike informed the slumbered boy.

He did not rise. He was gone.

For once, king Bomani had been wrong.

It wasn’t long before Chike realized what was to happen.

This journey would be the end as he knew it. But it would be most painful for the most courageous of them all; King Bomani, the future.

Chike perished of thirst a sunset later, untimely to the discovery of a small, pitiful watering hole – but water, no less. Bomani could afford to weep.

It was still drizzling ashes.

He didn’t understand... He was the future – was he not supposed to transmute into one, whole being? *Himself*? Just how could his past selves *die*? They’d been on a path to a future where the king thrived – and was very much alive. Suddenly Bomani was scared, for he realized, that he did not know everything...

Bomani walked on... Thinking... Thinking...

How easy it had once been to see God in a leaf or flower... A bird, a stone, a cloud, the sky... In the eyes of a boy like Citrine, in the gaze of a young man like Chike...

But now there was no one, and nothing but sand.

With no past to blame or admire, to glean pride from, or recount his knowledge of experience, Bomani walked on... Alone.

Through the night, the king went on, narily noticing his feet treading over something new... Grass? Burned grass. Coarse, brown, burned grass – the source of the ever-falling ashes. The grass rolled out

into a large, round, hill, where Bomani could see flames still in the distance. The smell was intoxicatingly obnoxious, unlike burning grass, and more so, like burning hair. His queasy, starved stomach, lurched, and so did the ground – The shifting earth sent Bomani to his knees.

A second rumble shook him, and he slid all the way back down the hill; a tumble that bruised his weak body.

The disoriented king looked up just on time – to dodge the mammoth, fire-lit mountain, that was now emerging from the sands. A thunderous roar trumpeted across the lands, revealing the monster that was ablaze in scorching pain.

Like a flash of lightning, Bomani was on his toes, his mind awoke, and his heart, reacquainted.

It was the Earthbound Akashic library!

Bomani raced to the flames and washed what little water he had in his skin bags over them, but it was vain. He tried to smother the flames with his cloaks, but his hands were burned black before long.

RRRRRAAIIINNNN, BOOOMAAANNIII, RRRRAAIIINNN... The behemoth bellowed.

There was nothing Bomani could do. He lacked strength, and had lost his powers.

He embraced the beast's trunked face until daybreak. The library became so tired it did not even wrench in agony. It just took the pain as it continued to smolder. All was quiet. Bomani moved.

"Earthbound library, what happened to you?"

The behemoth told an awful tale. He was set afire and left to fade in the arms of the relentless desert. But it was not what one thought – no one meant to kill the giant, old, behemoth, but rather, burn the books that resided in the Akashic library.

"Who has done this?!" Bomani demanded, standing bold, like a titan.

*WWHHYYY, NOOO OONNE. MMMYYYY BBBOOOKSSS BBUUURRRNNN AASSSS
PPEEOOPPLLE FFOOORRRGGEEETT. IIII AAAMMM THEEE AAACAASSSHHHIIC
LLIIBRRRAAARRYYY AAFTEERRR AAALLLLL...*

"But that means-!" Bomani's head raced with all of the divine knowledge he'd ever learned from reading in the halls of the Earthbound Akashic library. Were people really forgetting that much about the many realms?

As if the library read his mind, the behemoth gave a sly, wrinkled eye.

SSSEEEEE FFOOORRR YOOUUURRR SSEELLF...

The ill monster turned to stone, his jaw dropped, and tongue lolled awaiting the king's entry.

Before the king could step forth, a figure came bursting from the toothy cave.

“Who’s there?!” Cried the old man, white in the hair and a curly mustache. He took a hankie from his pocket to wipe the sweat from his face, which was rosy with perturb.

“Sir Child?!” Bomani blinked.

“OH?” Sir child’s aghast eyes rolled over the handsome, exotic king. “You’ve heard of me? Preposterous. I’m not *that* infamous, am I? My colleges used to call me the abominable professor, not quite the title one pursues for-”

“What are you doing?! The Earthbound library was ablaze! You could have been in serious danger, Sir Child-”

“*Danger?! But of course! I am trying to save the library’s life, you fool! I’m trying to memorize as many books as I can before it’s too late! Pah! Danger...*” The man spat. The king was flourished, he’d never been called a fool before.

“Memorizing the books? You mean, so the library won’t burn?”

“Is that not what I just said?! My, you lack brain behind those good looks. Lad, you mustn't know a thing about this library. Come, I will teach you everything I know.”

The sacred library was not how Bomani had remembered it. The behemoth still had all of it’s fat, ugly teeth. The place was a mess, and to top it off, there were missing books – not that the library was any less packed, but Bomani could tell that some wisdom had already been burned.

As for Sir Child, Bomani already knew everything the man had to teach him about the Akashic library, but of course, he courteously did not say so. Instead, he simply basked in Sir Child’s precious company. Sir Child fed the weathered man well on tea and scones.

Sir Child also explained that he was once a professor at Donogan Academy, and that he’d spent a great deal of his life experimenting to try and find a cure for aging.

“But I named all of my subjects,” He said of the animals. “and my colleges got me voted out when they heard. I was laughed at, scorned. I cried to lose my dear little Pooky; He was an amazing little critter, hardly a rabbit, more so a friend.”

And then it was Bomani’s turn to talk, he told Sir Child about Citrine and Chike. Together they bawled.

Between sobs, Bomani heard footsteps enter the library.

“Well this is a sorry sight.” Said the lovely lady who smelled of frankincense and sounded of bells and beads. In shining white and gold, she floated around the library, cleaning up open books that Bomani and Sir Child had left amok.

“Excuse us, Azure,” Sir Child pulled out his well-used hankie. “we were talking deeply. This lad is Mr. Bomani – Ah, your studies are on the counter, we took another tumbling last night.”

“Azure?” Bomani glanced, brushing away his teary cheeks.

“Yes, yes, lovely psychic from the future who blessed me with her time-tripping presence. All in the name of saving the Akashic library.” Sir Child said as if it were all normal.

“Welcome, Mr. Bomani.” Was all Azure said.

Before Bomani could ask about Mr. Cain and the others, the library began to tremble like an earthquake. The walls tumbled upside-down.

Bomani smacked the ceiling, followed by Azure, and a dozen books. Sir Childs crashed into the chandelier and became stuck.

“What’s happening?!” Bomani shouted over the roar.

“He’s burning up again!” Azure pushed Bomani’s shoulder away.

“Isn’t there anything we can do to ease the pain?”

“Nothing but bring the Akashic wisdom to more people so that books will be spared – Agh!”

The library made another disastrous gyre, burying the three in piles upon piles of books.

Sir Child groaned.

The team of three spent the afternoon cleaning, restocking shelves, and carving out more bookshelves into the ivory of the behemoth’s teeth. The place was beginning to look a lot more like it used to.

Bomani walked into the main hall, still picking up books, astounded to find the rare and elusive sight of patronage. He returned to Sir Child’s desk.

“Who is that?”

“A *guest*! Fine boy made it to the library just in time. Strange lad, but a good boy, says he wants to study the long, arduous history of humanity, alchemy, quantum physics, aliens, and mutton recipes.”

“Is that so?” Bomani looked at the average-looking teenager cross-legged on the floor in a red jacket and sneakers. He had open books encircling him, all of subjects mentioned, including the cook books. Curious, Bomani tapped him on the shoulder.

“Pardon, young man-”

“Oh? Hey! *WOW*! Are you the *Sungod*?!” He jumped up to shake Bomani’s hand. “That book keeper lady told me all about you, and now I’m like, a really big fan of yours! Hey did you ever go to Donogan Academy? Cause there’s this kid there that looks just like you, actually, I mean he’s younger than you, obviously, but he’s shorter – Is it true you can create storm winds and break clouds? Cause that’s really

cool, I've kinda been thinking about trying it myself, but, uh, I think I need some practice, actually, I'm wondering what humans are capable of, and according to these books, I can do anything – I mean, maybe, I mean, maybe I'm just bein' modest, but I think I might be able to do something like that, I've had weird experiences before, like maybe psychicish, but some of this stuff is way out there... ” He was still shaking Bomani's hand.

Bomani finally took his hand back.

“Good for you. Welcome. Read up.”

“Oh! Sure thing, your majesty!” The boy gave an extravagant bow. “I won't let you down!”

Bomani Smiled, going off to search for Azure and her “Sungod” business.

As he stepped through the aisles, tidying as he went, Bomani happened to find a dying mouse, crushed by the flying books from the tumultuous earth-shake. Picking it up, he empathized with it's writhing.

His eyes grew wet with all of the death he'd seen in the recent days, wishing he'd had the power to get himself through the desert as a complete soul. An emotional battle raged, but Bomani's heart made the final move – he knew he was better than just a survivor. He reclaimed his power, and blew a healing breath over the agonized rodent... The mouse's squinted eyes widened, it's twitching calmed. Bomani looked up to find Azure gazing in awe.

“So you are a Sungod...”

“Sungod? I am just the king.” Said the humble king, a little embarrassed to be confronted as the such. He headed back towards Sir Child's desk.

“Poor thing,” Sir Child took the mouse. “seems everyone had a rough day... He reminds me of Chadwick and Cheesey. I'd be delighted to take this little fellow. I haven't had a companion since my academic days. Thank you Bomani, how kind.”

“You should name him after Child.” Bomani said, thinking Sir Child recalled the boy.

He did not. They had not yet met. Sir Child instead responded like this:

“Child? Splendid name for such an innocent creature.”

Chapter 12

Again

It was Carter's dimension.

All of Chike's old friends were gathered in the park for a picnic. Chike hardly said a thing as his friends monotonously told him what they'd planned to do for the rest of their lives.

Honora had given up her dreams as a singer.

"I've kind of always liked cooking too." She lied to make her new job at the sushi and grill sound okay.

"I'm taking over my Dad's workshop," Dillan said in false pride. "I knew I'd end up a mechanic just like him."

"Tsk! You guys should considah yaselves lucky!" Joey spat. "Dare's notta place in town that'll hire me! What about you, Child, where are you runnin' off to?"

Child was perched on the picnic table, rocking himself with hugged knees.

"Dunno."

"Oooh," Joey humorously stuck his nose in the air. "dat rich cat Sir Child got ya covered now ain't he?"

As the boys bickered, Chike went off towards the lake for a breather. Honora followed him.

"What about you, Chike?"

"What about *you*?"

"Huh?"

"You don't really want that, to become a cook? You've always wanted to be a *star*, why did you give up?"

"I didn't give up!" Honora insisted. "I just... Wasn't good enough."

The two stared out to the sparkling lake. Dragonflies balled through the air, while the wind rustled the willows. Across the lake, the friends noticed a dirt path surrounded by wild flowers

"Want to go check it out?" Chike asked timidly, hoping to turn it into a date. Honora nodded.

"Oh Chike, it's *beautiful*!" Honora whispered as they entered the path. The blooms seemed to go on for miles. The rich, flowered woods smelled fresh and sweet. The birds sang joyfully in the Sun. Chike smiled warmly; his gaze growing loving.

"Thought you'd like it."

Perfectly by themselves, except for the colorful birds and insects, Chike reached out to grab Honora's hand. She took it – but guiltily.

"I've always liked you, Chike." She admitted. "But Ma says you're too young for me."

"Really? Grandpa likes you a lot. He kinda always thought we might be together. He says the heart is what counts."

"Yeah... Together."

"What's wrong?"

"I told the guys I was becoming a cook."

"So?"

"My Father got me the job. It's a city over, I won't be seeing you guys much anymore."

Chike began to feel strange... Things were growing still... Things were faded...

"I'll call you. I'll call as often as you want, if you want to talk everyday, I'll call every-"

"Chike, stop. I don't know you. I've always liked you, but I don't *know* you." Honora released his hand and looked him in the eye. Chike shrank back, under her accusing view.

"Yeah, I mean, I guess so..." Chike agreed without understanding. She tapped his chest.

"I mean *that*." She blamed with love. "I will never be like that."

Chike gazed down at himself, finding his body to be being replaced by Bomani's. Everything from the gold and silks, to his long, sun-kissed hair, and iridescent skin. He felt Bomani's powers well up from inside, pure heart, superior intuition, wisdom – just maybe not enough...

Along with these feelings, he and Honora's secret garden disappeared, drying into a vacant world of crumbly moon rock... When Chike looked up, Honora was gone, and the great Akashic library roared with the joy of freedom in the distance. They were soaring through the cosmos at lightning speed, and Chike was gliding alongside... In the Wings of Ra.

There was a sudden weight on his arm – something had grabbed him.

A shrunken face bestowed with a puffy red king's crown and flowing red cape, grappled at Bomani's limb with skeletal hands.

"*Don't fail me, Chike my boy... I deserve a second chance too.*" Maxwell Donogan wheezed.

Bomani was not one to wake with a start, but all of the yelling in the library was stirring.

"Seize!" Cried Sir Child. "Child, you must stop this, my Child! You mustn't eat the book of heavenly wisdom!"

"Sir Child, get that dirty rat out of here!" Azure scolded.

“But Azure! He’s almost a *real boy!*”

Bomani watched in wonderment as Sir Child led a little boy towards the exit for some quiet time. He couldn’t believe his eyes, it *was* Child!

He would greet his old friend later, but now, he followed Azure, whom busied herself with cleaning up books.

“What do you want?” She didn’t even look up.

“You’ve been harsh.”

“This is your fault.”

“Mine?”

“You saved that mouse. You choose one mouse over a castle of knowledge that has the potential to change humanity. Are you stupid?”

“You really are the book keeper aren’t you?”

Azure couldn’t help her smirk. Her quirk had been rooted out.

“Would you be serious?” Azure raised a thick brow, taking their conversation in an opposing direction.

“How did you do it? You practically ripped that mouse from the after life, and now he’s gone mythical. Are you *sure* you’re not a Sungod?”

“What might exactly a Sungod be?”

“*You don’t know?*” Azure snapped, but rushed to the conclusion. “Ever since I was a little girl, I have awaited to see the face of a Sungod. My great, great, grandparents told stories of how the Sungods would one day return to the lower dimensions to bring peace to the third-dimensional tribes. They could quell greed and quench bottomless needs. They carried knowledge equal to that of the Akashic library, and their powers were beyond that of even the fifth-dimensioners. Ring any sort of cosmic bell, Mr. Bomani?” She batted an emerald eye.

“To me, I’m afraid, that all sounds of fantasy.”

Azure took great offense.

“You make fun of me, ignorant stranger?!”

“Stranger?”

She raged off, rather childishly for whom Bomani knew to be a respectable woman.

“Wait-” Bomani called. “I’m sorry for not being one of your anticipated Sungods, but I care about the library and everything in it. I want to help you save it, so can’t we be amiable and work together? I will speak with Sir Child about Child-”

Azure exhaled frustratedly, but again, she surprised him.

“Oh Mr. Bomani, it’s not you, I’ve just... Given up on the Earth-dwellers. These books are burning faster than Child could ever nibble. It’s hopeless, really...” She pulled her scarf low with shame. Bomani cocked his head, he had never seen her this way...

“Humans are not hopeless. Sir Child wants to save the library, does he not? We had a guest only yesterday, inspired to make himself great. Maxwell Donogan revered the magic he discovered. Luka and I, believed...”

Azure wasn’t listening anymore. He watched her vanish into the obscuring of the bookshelves.

Bomani climbed to the top of the stony, grassy, behemoth. It was night again, and darkness poured over the bland desert like a bucket of black paint. He sat beside a flame that refused to go out, and thought on, sorrowfully...

“Good evening, king.” Azure teased, seeing that Bomani had beat her to her quiet place.

“Good evening, Azure.”

Azure pursed her lips.

“Mr. Bomani, I-”

“Please, just call me Bomani.”

“Bomani, I apologize for earlier. I am just a silly, troubled book keeper. I never meant to drag you down into it-”

“There are more and more people letting go of the Akashic library everyday. So long as the library is bound to this Earth, it will be afflicted by the actions of it’s inhabitants forevermore... It does feel impending does it not?” Bomani’s gaze remained in the flames, sizzling atop the behemoth.

Azure could not help but blurt her secrets.

“Bomani, I am part dijin, I have the power to see into the past and future, and I have seen that you are indeed a great king who will one day rule a new Earth. The Akashic library would be your most prized possession, and you hold the ability to enshroud it from the tribes that rather sleep. Bomani, you must believe me. Please believe me so that I can believe myself.”

Azure had grabbed onto Bomani for dear life. Bomani’s heart ached.

“I too, have lost my way.”

Azure bit her lip, but it didn’t last long, she dove into his arms and the two burst into helpless tears. The agony could have been mistaken for a couple who’d lost their children, but in truth, that was how valuable Bomani and Azure’s vulnerable destinies were to them; like children.

Sir Child observed from the veiling night, his fire-lit face aged by the shame of what his kind had accomplished. He glanced to the side, where Child stood, hand-in-hand.

“Let us pray,” Sir Child said. “the library is counting on we who know faith in a future.”

Child blinked his bright, red eyes.

Bomani burst through the library doors.

“Sir Child!” He shouted at the first person he laid eyes on. “I had the most incredible dream last night! I know what we can do to save the Earthbound library!”

It was the same dream he’d had only nights ago, but he finally understood it.

“Ho, ho!” Sir Child pushed his chair back. “The bare-footed wonder strikes again! What is it, my boy?!”

“The library is bound to this Earth, right?”

“Yes, yes, tell me something I don’t know-”

“That is the reason it is powered by *human* consciousness, right? No longer the Sky beings?”

“Yes, I know that, lad.”

“Then what if – we bound it to some other world? Azure said she had a vision of a new Earth-”

Azure had been softly laughing at Bomani in the back of the room, but now, he had her respect.

“What? What? I’m not following, boy-” Sir Child unraveled his clasped fingers.

“Carter Cordell; Carter my old friend, had this plan. You see, it was a design for a giant rocket that he called the Moon. When Luka and I were little, we saw it in his notebook; A book that ended up somewhere here, in the library!”

“I’m sorry lad, did I hear that correctly? You want a book on how to build rockets for behemoths?”

“Yes, it’s here in the library, it was Carter’s notebook. We gave it to the library as a token many years ago. Surely it must be here somewhere-” Bomani went stroking down the aisles.

“Be gracious, boy, Azure just alphabetized those. You really think it’s still here even after all the burnings? Seriously, a book about flying behemoths... What is the world coming to?”

“Whatever we need to do to save it.” Bomani answered.

The four swam through books all day long, but the notebook evaded Azure’s intellect, Sir Child’s memorizations, and Bomani’s intuition, as well as Child’s messy ability to scout out deeply hidden books from the nooks and crannies of the huge library.

Bomani snatched an ancient scroll away from Child before Azure could see, but there was already a bite in it. He tossed it behind the tooth counter.

“So many books have been burned!” Azure flustered. “That notebook may no longer be with us.”

“Ah, yes, burned-” Sir Child swiped a document away from Child’s mouth.

“What was the author’s name again?” Azure asked, flipping through a stack of books.

Bomani’s eyes bled shockedness.

“Carter Cordell, you don’t recall?”

Azure kept scouring through titles, so he let it go, but wondered...

By night, all wanted to slumber, but Bomani would not give up.

“We find that notebook, and I will find a way to build that rocket. The Akashic library will be freed from this planet and all of the humans who bind it. The wisdom will be safe and sound amongst the stars. That is the plan, now let’s find that book!”

Everyone sighed.

One terrible night, the kingdom of four, spent the dark hours battling flames. A thunderstorm commenced outside of the library, beating down on the poor, old, behemoth. Everyone took turns setting buckets of water just outside the behemoth’s humongous tusks to catch rain water for washing over the feverish books. All night long, books were bursting into flames, catching other titles on fire and so on.

Fire, water, fire, water, back and forth, Bomani, Azure, and Sir child went. They didn’t even have time to look for Carter’s notebook.

But Child did.

The combustions had finally cooled, and the library was once again, a quiet place to read, however, the residents could not yet rest, for Sir Child was grieving a loss...

They looked everywhere for Child, but he could not be found. Sir Child would search the desert for his mouse if that’s where he’d be found.

“If I make it back to the villages, I will ask Mr. Donogan if Carter Cordell had a copy of his notes. I hate to walk out on you two like this, but perhaps it is my destiny. Who knew a magic mouse could change everything in this old man’s heart... And just maybe, the world.”

It was morning. Azure rose from her paisley cloaks and turned to her left where she palmed a splash of water to her face and patted it dry. Fixing her sleep-muddled skirts as she stood from where she’d fallen to rest on a pile of books, she glanced across the chamber to Bomani, whom dreamed on his own

bed of books. She chuckled softly at him, then went about her routine, lighting the ivory chandelier from the balcony, to illuminate the library in amber. She was able to fix tea and breakfast; a petite meal for two. There were oddly no flames to fight today... It was queer... But fortunate.

Some days she would rudely wake Bomani to help her with the fever-running library, but today, with no flames to fight, she felt strangely.

She tapped him on the shoulder anyway.

Bomani jumped up from a dream, which made Azure jump too. They both laughed, then wondered why. Usually, the mornings were spent pestering each other about the sad state of the library, but they were both quite pleasant that morning. After food and tea, the two began tidying like they never had before. Books, maps, scrolls, blueprints and tablets, were neatly packed into the bones of the behemoth.

As noon neared, not one book had erupted into fire light.

For the first time in a long while, Bomani could rest his mind and read one of the prized books within the Akashic library. And Azure could sit down and meditate...

The two young boys walked into the Earthbound Akashic library with Carter's missing notebook.

Not only did Bomani and Azure gain the book that day, but also, the ambitious child who swore to build whatever wild invention the library had to throw at him; Luka.

Chike approached Bomani just as shyly as he had then, but this time, Bomani would not let him fall unconscious to who he would one day be; *Him*.

This time around, the wise king and his faithful book keeper asked a desperate favor of the boys; To ask Carter to aid them in the launching of the Akashic library's rocket.

They were floored when their own, young faces, laughed.

"Sure I'll ask him," Luka continued to leaf through an eight-hundred page science record. "but he'll never believe me."

The two exchanged glances of lost dignity – What they'd grown suspicious of, was true; the arrival of their familiar guests meant starting all over, from the very beginning.

But this time, they knew what they would do *differently*, because somewhere, wherever he was, in whatever time, in whatever place, Carter was on the wrong path...

Epilogue

The Stars

It was the night of a deep, dark, sky, cold and still in the towers of the newly built temple. Child was talking to himself, yearning passionately and glorifying the race of the Sungods to which he held so much reverence for. He praised Bomani, the Sungod whom saved him, and was forever in debted to. He was wondering why he was fated to be just a mouse, a small, insignificant being in such an illustrious world full of potential for those who were not mice.

“What must one do to earn their place among the stars?”

“The stars, eh?”

The mouse-mythic jumped up, shocked that anyone could have sneaked up on his superior ears.

“Who’s there?!” Child called down into the gullet of the belfry.

“It’s just me,” Said the familiar voice of a man. “just a soul that’s begun to see everything as a reflection of myself; A world trying to overcome a world I made for me before I knew what I wanted in life.”

Carter entered the night air, followed by Luka, whom said no words. The world was silent. There was no Moon in the sky to speak of, only stars. *The stars.*

“How did you come to know that?” Child asked. Carter sighed.

“I went on a journey I could have easily avoided. A journey to cruelty when I could have done differently. I fell to a sleep that even mummies would be envious of... But, *I LIVED.*” He said, triumphantly.

The three gazed out to the crusty, white sands, pitted and dry, while the winds above were clear, mistless, and blooming over in bright blacks. The new breeze tasted fresh.

The raw echo of construction work was ringing in the distance. From Child’s understanding, they were erecting obelisks and pyramids from the foreign moon rock.

“You’re the one who made the Moon.” Child turned.

“I did in fact. The Moon of Bomani’s dimension.”

“No pressure!” Luka pitched in.

“What do you want of it?” Carter questioned Child. “I’ve got the math, if you want the papers.”

The twinkling of Azure’s bells and beads pronounced her presence.

“Always so logical.”

“Always so convenient.”

Citrine, Chike, and Bomani, were right beside her.

Everyone had arrived.

Citrine's face lit with a smile as Luka raced up and jumped on him.

"You're still here!"

"Of course!" The boy tripped under Luka's weight. The boys invited Child over, and they shared a group hug, wet with happy tears. Luka was then taken off guard by the taller, sand stranger, standing beside the towering Bomani, for he and Carter had not aged in years.

"Luka! Luka! It's me!" Chike opened his arms.

"Who?"

"It's good to see you again, Chike," Carter smirked in solemn relief. He gazed toward Bomani.

"and it is an honor to meet the king I owe so many apologies to." He began to unteather his feathered chains.

"Ah, but you owe none to I." Bomani gestured to Citrine. Carter approached young Chike as if he were the king, already.

"Chike Cain, *forgive me*, I was selfish, but I am ready to give up these wings now... *Forgive me...*" He begged the boy. "*Forgive me...*" He presented the sacred wings.

Unknowing how to accept an apology, the boy simply put his hands on the wings and told Carter honest words.

"Carter, you are a great person."

"I know that now."

The moment had finally come, but Carter knew better than to just take his majesty's hand; He reached his left palm forward, and the two dimensions collided at last. Everyone could finally stop sleeping and dreaming, and finally just be.

Destiny, could just be.



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