

MISSION SANTOS



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For those who feel like they've done battle in their minds just to retrieve a lost piece of themselves, suffering greatly in knowing that something was missing...

I hope that you may return one day and realize that all of that seeming insanity had meaning – that you'll be able to look into the mirror and find the missing piece you were looking for, is the person you became.

"There is no room left for giving up."



Preface

PART OF THE PLAN

Her boss had already gone home for the day.

Britt Bronwyn remained at the cafe, closing up shop all by her lonesome. She had just welcomed a visit from a group of old high school friends; a reunion she'd anticipated, but left her feeling barren inside... She was glad she was by herself now, because, as she listlessly swept, and half-heartedly washed dishes, she was swallowing back tears.

The Rose Siblings had just lost both of their parents, leaving Alexis Rose a rather spacey new mother to her baby boy.

Britt's old friend Sundance, had not seen his older brother since graduation; he worried that the disabled young man didn't make it on his own.

Hank and his sister, Anya, had money problems, and they both could no longer handle the stress of city life.

Britt's own sister, Illiad, had complained about everything from her chipped nails, to politics; which underneath it all, was just vented steam from the current family feud that had broken out since the holidays.

Britt had also recently heard from Yohan Jones, the best friend of another high school buddy, Jade Jewel; Yohan had absconded to Japan to become a rock star, though his dream was quickly turning into a nightmare as the accomplishment transformed into a question of ethics. It hurt Britt to see him stepping back from everything he'd worked so hard for.

As for Jade himself? That beautiful ray of sunshine that used to keep it all together? No one had seen him in years either, but for Jade, that was expected – he was a gypsy at heart, a spirit that could not be restrained. It just boggled her that she had not seen him on the news, or heard of the abashing things he was creating.

Maybe he was dead? The thought shook her to the bones... He was the only person she'd ever known who lived a life by following his Soul. Heaven forbid if he died young somewhere, alone, and undeserving.

Britt had always been inspired by his independence: She worked everyday of the week trying to save up enough money to purchase her own shop, so that no one could tell her what to do anymore, and maybe, her parents would deem her a successful business woman at last...

Britt's cluttering thoughts were gone with the knock on the glass door of the cafe, it was alarming to hear such a thing after closing time – but as she peered into the lobby, she could see the most intriguing of a figure standing in the doorway, trying to shade out the reflections in the glass with a cupped hand. She might have believed he were a person of military status, but the uniform didn't add up to anything she'd ever seen before – and he was far too luxurious for such a dress code; He wore a cap with a glossy bill, dolled up with pins, and perched atop umber-black hair that dripped to shoulder-length. His double-buttoned coat of red satin finish and perfect fit, swept elegantly from him in extensive lapels with generous pockets. Multi-pocketed trousers accommodated tall, expensive, leather boots and matching black gloves, thickly buckled onto his sturdy wrists. Envious posture held the handsome creature up as he glimpsed Britt through the glass. Beautiful skin, peach lips, and sparkly eyes of a distant green-gray, caught her attention, as the smooth, confidant voice asked if she were "closed for the day". A little star-struck, Britt pointed at the sign, but the gorgeous figure didn't seem satisfied.

Britt cautiously approached with phone in hand. She didn't open the door, but simply spoke through the glass.

"Is there something you need?" Britt stopped midway as the gentleman swiped his hat off with a sweeping bow. He had the most charming of a smile, but Britt knew better than to just get swept off her feet – even in the richness of all his qualities.

“On the road ma’am, I’m in need of ditching some of my wares... I don’t suppose you’re a fancier of antiques? I’ve got a table, chairs, divan, *mirror*?”

He was naturally sincere in all of his comity, and she believed the circumstance to be truth. She could see furniture legs peering out the back of his muscular, almost futuristic-looking vehicle. Brave enough to enter the evening air, which was still lit by a watermelon sunset, Britt came to inspect. The young man followed with sheer conviction - he truly did, mean no harm to her.

“I’m going further than I thought, so I’m to lighten this load – but I’d hate to see these masterpieces go to waste. What do you want? You may have it all if that’s what you wish, just please take the mirror, I’d be crushed if something were to happen to it, it is such a marvelous work is it not?”

The grand mirror was tenderly folded into an Indian carpet to prevent scratches, but of what peeked out, Britt could see that the dark wood it was framed in, had deliciously intricate carvings, and a thick polish that made it shine with a magic. She wanted the mirror for sure.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll take your offer on all of it.”

“Excellent! As you wish!” The gentleman was happy to find the antiques a new home.

The tables and chairs were unmounted with care by the two of them, and placed in the little cafe, giving the coffee shop an elegant new face. Britt’s boss would be pleasantly surprised!

When they got to the mirror, however, Britt requested that it instead be loaded into her van, parked in the back of the cafe. She’d greedily take it home to one day display it in her own shop. The young man was fine with that, too. When all was said and done, Britt thanked him profusely. From the way he was dressed, Britt couldn’t possibly offer him money, all she could do, is give thanks.

“No, no, thank *you*,” The stranger said almost tearily, a hint of sentiment. “it is of good deed you take respect of my dear friend’s old things... Especially that mirror. It is near two centuries alive you know... Said it helped him survive the hardships of the war.”

“Oh, wow... That’s beautiful,” Britt breathed. “I will cherish it. Thank you, again-?” She gestured for a name from the man, but he gave none, he simply took her hand, ending the handshake with a sweet, warm, kiss atop it. He then left for his vehicle.

He was certainly a flattering young man, but there was something somber about watching him salute before stepping into his car and driving away forever...

But perhaps Britt would never know what transpired that one, mysterious evening.

CHAPTER 1

JADE'S COORDINATES

The day had come. It was the grand opening of Britt Bronwyn's very own flower boutique. She would sell blooms, bouquets, herbs, seeds, unique gifts, teas, and baked goods for every occasion.

The environment was made complete with a small, but full green house bursting with color. A white picket fence margined surrounding gardens to hug the flowers closer to home, and a picnic table area was near to enjoy your sweets and beverages. There were wind chimes ringing, birds twittering about the feeders and baths; not to mention the flocks of butterflies and bees that floated across the new property in search of the cosmos, daisies, and mums.

The shop itself was painted in warm, welcoming tones, while patio decorations spruced up the variety and textures. The gravel lot bubbled with both exploratory new comers, and congratulating old comrades.

Britt wore her best dress; a modest, plaid thing, overlapped with a pure white apron she'd sewn herself. She wore ethnic beads she received as a gift from a wise friend, and she pulled at a pair of good-luck earrings throughout the day. Her blond hair was fashionably bobbed by her sister's hand, and finally, she paraded around in a comfortable, brand-new pair of matching green slip-ons to get her through the event.

She was overwhelmed by who'd come to marvel her success – a feat she could not have pulled off without the support of many loved ones, though she couldn't help but glow with pride that this cute, little shop, was all hers!

Florian and Aleigh brought the grand opening cake, a scrumptiously creamy, fluffy lemon cake, with pastel-pink strawberry frosting. It was flourished with shaved white chocolate and edible flowers from Britt's own garden. Britt laughed in flattery.

“It’s a grand opening, not a wedding!” She told the extravagant, wealthy couple who adored spoiling their friends and family.

Florian and Aleigh were married now, but excited and fervent as ever. They did not yet have children, as they’d decided to wait until they were not so young and crazy, but with a hint of tailored jealousy, they gushed over Roary, Alexis and Dillans’ busy bundle, whom was already starting to toddle around and cause mischief. Uncle Addison and Auntie Illiad were pleased to boast about him.

Other old high school buddies that showed up (More so Illiad’s pals than Britt’s), included Chase Winstons, whom came with a girlfriend known by Illiad, the old girl-gang, Averell, Connie and Sherry, and Blaze Sigmonton was also there.

Those that Britt knew better, were Hank Swenson and his sister, Anya, who came with gifts of home-cooking and recipe cards – just like in their high school days.

They haven’t changed a bit. Britt thought.

Sundance Truesdale arrived in a big, stuffy, mascot costume to amuse the children (he was supposed to come as a bumblebee to match the flower shop’s theme, but the costume rental had a mix up, so he showed up dressed as a giant snowflake instead).

He hasn’t changed much either. Britt giggled.

Ms. Fonda, their old high school nurse, whom had since moved onto other jobs and careers, had come to help Britt throw the party. She too, was touched to see all of the familiar faces.

In truth, it had only been a few years since school, but Britt had witnessed friends change as drastically as the seasons that it was hard to not feel like an era had passed.

Britt was most surprised to watch as Yohan Jones (Or Peaches, as they called him), enthusiastically filed into the shop with his Asian rock band, a swarm of lovely ringing voices spewing a constant stream of foreign words.

Britt was taken aback at just how much Peaches had changed – in school, she’d only known him as a freshly, depression-sobered teen whom had basically only begun life.

What was in front of her now, walked proudly, casually, dressed smartly, cleanly, and was well-spoken – for an eccentric. He had a keen eye, heard music everywhere, and he was now a jubilant thing – if one of his band mates gave a hearty chuckle, Peaches was bound to laugh too.

As the others spelunked the shop, hunting for souvenirs throughout the cheerfully diverse array of live plants and gifts, Peaches noticed the walls, over-stocked with paintings, and shelves showcasing local crafts. The only piece that was not for sale was Britt's prized antique mirror, which hung on the shop's wall, dignified, glorious, and adding space to the interior of the well-decorated room. Its magical essence drew his eye before suddenly catching Britt's.

Peaches and Britt greeted each other with a big hug.

"It feels like a life time." Peaches breathed.

"I know! How are you? Nice to see you! I've seen all the videos, I can't translate them, but they look great!"

Peaches chortled, but there was a sprinkle of disappointment in his tone.

"Yes, thank you. Though, our new releases won't be out for awhile. The band life always seems to run you into walls... We may be done with the whole life style of fame. It's just not the juice one would have hoped it to be."

Britt took these words as an abstract way of implying that the band was quitting, but in actuality, Peaches just had no way of saying it just wasn't his dream anymore. She was a tad shocked, but she found her way around it.

"No matter when or where or how, life is just a rat race these days," Britt agreed, "but it's good that you got to get out there, make some fun memories, you know? Not everyone here faired the same..."

"Oh?"

“Well, I mean, the Rose siblings are around... Illiad calls me everyday if I don’t see her, Sundance comes every other week... They’ve all got something to complain about-” She paused her own protests there.

“Sundance,” She switched the subject. “he hasn’t seen Truesdale since graduation.”

Peaches’ eyes glistened, but it was not for Truesdale’s sake.

“As I’ve not seen Jade... He stopped answering the phone one day. Not a word since – from anyone.”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you any better.” Britt replied. The two were quiet as they watched the flower shop swirl with merriment.

“He was such a busy fellow... ” Britt recalled. “I can’t imagine he would’ve just settled down and gotten on somewhere... ”

“He was like a flash – bright and then gone, and I miss that, hopelessly” Peaches’ songwriter mind kicked in. The two were silent again, both contemplating the same exact thing. Britt was first to conclude.

“But surely he’s out there somewhere, being his same ol’ free, funny self, aiding his neighbors, enjoying life, we know how he was – is.” Britt corrected herself. Peaches nodded his clean, smooth face, no crease to tell Britt how he responded to her fantasy.

Of course Jade was out there...

They just didn’t know where...

CHAPTER 2

ARRIVING AT CAMP PINTO

The worn, helpless boy had been walking for what seemed like days. Nothing but cold, wet, concrete caught the bottoms of his shoes, and nothing but stained, concrete walls intruded his candle-lit vision. The only object of interest were the redundant number of mirrors on the walls, reflecting Jade's exhausted body as he trod past on dragging feet. Like a house of mirrors trying to put him into a craze, Jade shook off the moments of stupefaction with strength, but by no means did it make him feel any less lonely. He wished his cat, Tsuki, was still riding on his shoulder – but the rambunctious feline had run off long ago, playing tag with the mice that lived abundantly in this dark world.

Jade tried not to smell the intense must of the mold slime that tickled his nose since entering the tunnel. He tried not to hear the sound of his own sloppy footsteps against the ancient concrete. He tried not to think about the deepness and desolation of his location. He tried not to worry about how his lamp was running out of wick and oil...

Jade struck out of wick. He quickly stripped a piece of fabric off his own clothing and refed the wick holder – and then, when he ran out of oil, he tread the blackness, keeping straight by tracking the wall with his quivering hands. The darkness was even lonelier than it was before... But it sparked remembrance of why he was here in the first place.

Jade had come from above; through a hidden room of an early 1900s home, which had landed him in this underground bunker hall where he now roamed, perfectly lost. But by some stroke of truth, this road was to lead him to a place called Camp Pinto.

Jade had spent many school years questioning the history of his independent academy, a past that revolved around a young soldier by the name of Lave Santos.

Rumors of how Santos died were prevalent, but in Jade's experience, the century-old character had not even grown up; a paranormal contact occurred with Lave through remote viewing and telepathy, several times within Jade's years at Donogan Academy.

Jade believed Lave still awaited to be rescued on some remote battlefield in the last century – and if Jade could reach back into the past, he could inform Lave’s superiors at home base, that Lave was still alive, and his mission, not failed. Lives could still be saved!

Now of course this was completely illogical from the stand point of the average person, but Jade was no average human being – at least, he liked to think so.

However, this was not what Jade was thinking about. Jade was fantasizing about his life back on the surface; He’d just dropped out of high school, leaving familiar faces and dear friends to the mechanical business of getting jobs and going to college. They had no fight in them. They did not stick up for their dreams or gut feelings – unlike Jade, who’d followed his (And apparently bit off more than he could chew).

Jade had spent his school days fighting everything around him – all of the resultless structures and maniacal habits that his peers and teachers promoted even though their own lives slowly declined.

Jade was lucky to have two best friends; Florian Forbes, and Peaches, who were the only two on Jade’s planet that didn’t think he was crazy. Florian carried on with a life that he chose; and Peaches, after beating a social blueprint that supported boxes and boxes only, shed suicidal thoughts to chase his dreams. Though to some, it would have all sounded totally punk, the three couldn’t be done justice until you sat down with a cup of coffee to hear the whole story.

Jade missed his friends. He missed people. He missed birds and sunlight, and trees, too.

Jade kept walking.

The boy finally hit the wall – he bumped into a mirror, making it slightly tinkle upon impact. He was sure he’d splintered it, but it wasn’t the mirror he was concerned over - It was the dead end.

After all of the time, effort, and energy he'd spent, the search for his mysterious man had come to a halt. There was nothing left to explore, nothing left to entertain. There was nothing down in this bunker hall but rats and mirrors.

"Dammit." Jade muttered, socking the wall.

He slunk down into the muck, the sticky concrete momentarily more comfortable than his swollen legs. He tried not to think, he just tried to feel the ease of taking weight off his limbs. A thought still slipped by him; To go zig-zagging through the unlit maze for any potential paths that would lead him to what he came looking for, or to go back the way he came, with the risk that he may decide to turn heel on the adventure forever...

For Jade, neither suited him, but he didn't get much a chance to ponder which was more delectable, for he was overcome by the far tastier temptation to fall into a greatly needed sleep.

He'd been awake for two days.

Jade opened his eyes – or at least, he thought he did.

Between believing he was either awake and delusional, or asleep, and dreaming well, he found himself lying on his back, rising to the sight of a faint, gold-white glow, allowing him to see just a little...

He jumped to see the figure beside himself – but it was just his reflection in the dirty mirror.

He was relieved to see himself looking like himself – no horns, tusks, or demonic appendages from slaving away in the dark for so long. He looked like Jade; Chocolate hair, chocolate eyes, fair skin, and that same ol' red jacket, not exactly appearing so red anymore. His chin was a tad more whiskery than he'd ever preferred it, and his face was unavoidably smudged with oil. But at least it was all comfortingly familiar.

As Jade zeroed out from his God-given reflection, he squinted at the mirror's dusty surface, trying to cognise where the sliver of sacred light was coming from. Evidently

not from the winding bunker tunnel, whispering nothing but hues of blackness from which he once came.

It was the mirror itself – the spidery broken glass catching the intensities of the glowing illumination, so brilliant in that moment of having not seen the Sun for what felt like corrupted eons.

Jade brought his face closer to the beaming mirror, pressing a desperate cheek to the seductive light. The looking-glass was ice cold - cold as the top of a frozen lake, cursed to be eternally winterized, though somehow, he did not care.

He huddled next to the light like it was the only thing that would keep him alive. Leaning on it gratefully, it seemed as though it were leaning back... Pushing.

“Move!” It rudely said.

Jade couldn’t understand it. No divine light would ever say such a thing in such a tone! It must truly have been just a delusion, though he wished it would have stayed a good dream, and not a disruption to his appreciation. Could his reverie betray him any more? It answered that question deliberately.

“Moved I sayed!”

Just to tweak his irritation, the irony grew as the light became more prominent than ever.

“Moved you sorry human, or should I just leaved you here?!”

It now had Jade’s full attention. He moved more so out of surprise than obligation, but as he extracted himself from the excruciatingly cold sheet of glass, the mirror seemed to bend, bulging to the will of an immensely muddy figure. It held the sultry light in hand, a lantern encasing not a fire or bulb, but a flaming orb. Jade’s sensitive eyes were too blinded to acknowledge the being’s features, but he cared not whom was there – he was no longer alone in the unforgiving darkness.

The mysterious figure had a British curl in their tongue, though it was hard to find in their poor wordage.

It spoke promising things into Jade's weary ears.

"You'reses the one who'did called for Lave Santos, ares you not?"

Jade was abashed in total faith of the "fairy tale" now.

"Y-yes."

"Prooved it." The stranger snapped.

Jade was so overwhelmed he forgot what to say – he didn't know that this moment would ever come, so he'd never bothered to rehearse it. Jade came back down to earth with a cuff on the shoulder delivered by the fellow life form. Benevolent or not, Jade took it as genteel, and it gave him confidence to recall Lave's instructions.

"I am Stan A. Solve." Jade even lifted the rusty dogtag around his neck; a token of the historic legend he had discovered back in high school.

"Fantastic." The reply further cemented Jade's belief as the person smacked their lips to taste the amorously beloved name in their mouth.

"And I?"

It was an abrupt questionnaire. Jade's exhausted spirit didn't quite catch what the queer specifically was asking for.

"I'm afraid I don't know you."

"Of course, not yets anyway, you may call me Sloan, Sloan E. Vast. Come Stan, follows me, Lave's been trapped in Skullgully for a several blue moons too long."

Jade recoiled as Sloan magically pulled Jade toward the broken, but solid mirror. In a split second, without understanding what was done to him, Jade found himself crouched in a new tunnel with Sloan, though this one was of packed dirt; gritty, and smelling of earth worms – So much for a mystifying looking-glass!

There was nothing new to see in the continued lumpy soil of this tunnel, except for the shadow of his sudden companion lighting the way through the unsanitary blackness.

"I tells ya, I notted believeded yous was ever going to showed up. I recalled seeing you as a kid, but I was young then, too, thought maybe you were just an imaginary friend or

something, but after I gots to Camp Pinto and met Lave before he went missinged, he Rved me pictures of you, so I knewed you as soon as I sees it.”

Jade’s mind cringed just trying to keep up with the nonsense. Perhaps English was not Sloan’s first language, which made Jade nervous, since his life was now depending upon Sloan. It was already hard enough to believe he was crawling through an unknown, orphaned bunker after a stranger who shared faith in a seemingly nonexistent (Or deceased) historic figure.

Jade decided to test his reality.

“So you know me as Stan A. Solve from Lave, is that right? And by rved, you mean remote-view? Is this your Journal?” Jade pulled the leather bound from out of his pocket. “I found it at the Pinto house.”

“Yes and yes, and no, that’s Fang’s writing. Ooh he’ll be fluffed to knows you saw his bad handwriting.””

“So you knew my face, but tell me, what’s my real name?”

“Jade Jewel, of courses, even a fool’d know that, me thinks.”

Jade hoped not.

“So how’d you find me here?”

“When Lave told me of you, I suck to be sure you came, since I was stuck at Camp Pinto as it were, you’d be the only one enough to break my bond with Pinto, and together, we can go back to rescuing Lave! I saw you enter the old Santos residence from Captain Fang’s crystal ball, so I opened the window. Sorry it took so long, my eyes aren’t what they used to see. By the way, who did come with you? That oddish carnivore with them dark matter?”

Jade was not following.

“Tsuki? My cat?”

“No, the two legged.”

Was Sloan possibly talking about Truesdale? Jade's old high school nemesis whom had stalked Jade on this journey for his own personal gain? Jade would be floored if Truesdale had had enough backbone to follow him this far; into a soiling, cavernous abyss.

These thoughts however, were swallowed up the moment Sloan proclaimed that Truesdale was already on Camp Pinto's premises. How in the world Truesdale arrived first, Jade did not know, but it probably meant he was in for a sour surprise.

As the two scratched through the dark, Sloan gave a more lengthy lecture on what was throwing down at Camp Pinto:

Since the beginning of the 1800s, humanity from Jade's dimension had begun to traverse time and space. Dimensions of all kinds had been opened, and the fight to possess fabrics of reality began. Angry that their timelines had been invaded, rulers from many realms struck back, erupting the entire cosmos into war. The secret soldiers hidden within the shrouds of the equally destructive Camp Pinto worked in alliance with other dimensional beings to weave the worlds back together again, and aid in the undoing of damage inflicted upon the big black sheets of Universe all alive beings called home.

While some believed in regulation of this "space travel", others vouched for it's liberty, thus, allies became enemies. One trusted no one.

Jade could not tolerate such an explanation. He was by no means just a drop-out that stumbled into a mysterious tale of a legendary man, whom telepathically gave him a code name to gain access to a hidden encampment to deliver the message that their missing man was still alive and still holding space for Pinto's victory; but he was not prepared for Sloan's far-fetched rendition.

"Er... Let's go back to ground zero," Jade began to sweat. "I'm not about to get involved in some inter-galactic star wars."

Sloan giggled like no other Jade had ever heard.

"I wased just kidding – Camp Pinto is much worse than that!"

With that, Jade decided he did not enjoy Sloan's sense of humor. He did not speak for a long time, so neither did Sloan, which Jade was appreciative of, but left him wondering just what was in store for him in the future.

He imagined a camp full of soldiers fitted permanently with cyborg appendages, dome shaped buildings of glass, brilliant metals, gaping garages to conceal UFOs. Walls of bullet-proof fort that stretched it's arms across the land, protecting one's eyes from seeing the impending electromagnetic towers and prostrate rockets. It would be guarded by laser lights, drones, and hot wire gates. It would be the precise doomsday picture that would evoke one to believe there was indeed, a cosmic strife at hand – in short, Jade had bought Sloan's fantasy, but there was still a road ahead.

Jade's days of darkness suddenly ejected him into a dusty, rusty, dirt-dry channel that opened into a Sun-lit landscape of hot autumn colors. The butted, spired, country side of deep vermillion and sunset painted rock, was an everlasting sight to behold – but Jade could only enjoy so much of it, for he was blinded to tears by the Sun, and had a thirst that had not been quenched for several nights. He even forgot that the faceless Sloan was still with him – Or perhaps not – perhaps he'd dreamed Sloan up, just to keep himself company...

After stumbling into raspberry brambles, getting spooked by a rattling Diamondback, and hitting a splinter wood fence, Jade collapsed in the grueling, unended heat of sunset, sure that this was his last... but Sloan was real, and picked Jade up, helping him walk, despite the grogginess of Jade's delirium.

Jade limped beside Sloan's own limping feet, but when he opened his tired eyes, stopped leaning, and brushed off, he saw it.

Distrusting his conditions to aid his perception, Jade stared in a state of impairment – believe it or not, there it was:

Camp Pinto. Surrounded by wasted country, and weathered, bombed, fort.

A place lost in time.

A place no one knew about, except Jade and it's inhabitants. The thrill of his arrival took his own breath away.

The two walked in on a militantly-honored drill. Marching, stamping, shouting soldiers moving as one unit in the form of bodies, guns, and thick intent. In the dust they passed their weapons, aimed, turned, crossed, paused, repeated. They practically danced – though you could have asked one of these young men to swing, and likely, they probably could.

They were dressed like a typical mid-world war II soldier... But something was off... They carried wood-handled longguns and drilled in a hand-built camp made from mud-sealed timber, and peg structures. There were horse stables, braying guard dogs, and a crowing pigeon coop. The treasured well could be seen in the heat-distorted backdrop, and what was once a castle, was now a pile of rubble, replaced with a small, two story Victorian-style house – a rather pathetic home base for an organization that was supposed to strike fear into his heart.

This was not at all what Jade expected...

Jade was violently shoved forward by Sloan, to which Jade whirled around in resistance, at last, meeting Sloan's pale face in the light.

Sloan was hugely disfigured; cataracted eyes as big as tennis balls were crammed into his melon-shaped head, messily draped in dirty, dirty-blond curls. An irksome smile was framed by blushed lips, that in turn, framed crooked, rather sharp-looking teeth. Sloan wore a suit similar to the cadets, though there were holes tailored into the back, for some odd growths that could not be contained in the coat... Almost like some kind of wings that had lost their feathers? Sloan also had designer shoes for his animalish feet, booted specifically for his upright sway – a savage reel that made him look pomp no matter if

Sloan kept arrogance in his heart or not. Sloan was well aware of his pure ugliness, batting giant eyes in his bobbed head to be sure Jade knew that he knew.

It flirtatiously smirked its horrible teeth, then spoke low.

“Listen, y’ nots gonna pass the fitness bill, so just insist on a custodian position if they don’t gives it to you first, you can join the army later – Oh, and I never tolds you any of this.”

“R-right...” Jade weakly agreed, but missed the meaning of all that was said.

He was about to thank Sloan for ushering him this far, but Sloan interrupted as he aggressively nabbed Jade’s arm and pulled him forward.

“Sir!” Sloan shouted hotly to get the commander’s attention. “Mr. Carry! We’ve got another straggler from the Sandbox boarder!”

The sturdy figure answered back in the shape of swear words, slang, and the demand for an explanation. It was a hailstorm of words that hit Jade so hard and fast he couldn’t keep up with the damage.

The moment Jade’s parched lips blurted the blessed – or cursed, name: Stan A. Solve, the officer spewed his alcohol-stained coffee, and the healthy-eared soldiers stuttered their strut, making the whole patterned line come undone like an unraveling beige scarf.

“*Stan A. Solve?!*” Was the mess of noise that echoed through the encampment, unacceptable that a strange, lost, civilian would claim to be, or know such a person.

The man over-seeing the drill blew his whistle so harshly his face turned red. His blood pressure went through the roof as he called to attention numerous other superiors.

The swarm had Jade under the assumption that this was his arrest – he was so convinced, he put his hands in the air, which they did not oppose. They led the exhausted, vulnerable young man away, not a pity to his condition.

Jade conveyed fearful eyes toward Sloan whom remained with the congregation. Hoping Sloan would share a glance that’d say everything would be okay, Sloan’s scarred, disordered, browless face remained impossible to read – But Jade did not miss the

gesture of Sloan slitting his own throat as he slipped an evil grin - lastly batting his lashes for the fun of it.

CHAPTER 3

INTROS

Jade was put up to the head honchos as if in court. While Pinto's cabinet was few, Jade was in no position to challenge the advisers. His brute honesty tested him negative as an immediate infiltrator, but it did not sell the Lave Santos ordeal for him. According to the high men, there had been many other "Baloney sandwiches" claiming that Lave was still alive, but the chances of a clueless civilian getting involved in Mission Medallion's hidden agendas were slimmer than Popsicle sticks.

Jade persisted – He spoke of Lave like he was more real than his own living flesh. He delivered the message Lave requested him to relay so many years ago; Where Lave and his crew got stranded, when and where they lost contact with Pinto, who captured them, and the potential truth that Mission Medallion was still a breathing cause awaiting to be completed – as long as Lave Santos was still hanging on for dear life.

Jade's confidence wavered, but the story had been told.

Sympathy did not fill *this* audience.

The officers were talking amongst themselves when Jade noticed a eminent, shadowed figure in the gallery. He was a tall, handsome fellow, generously clothed in an expensive red uniform. Gloved, hatted, badged, and different than the rest, as he peered a shiny crystal ball and whispered to the other judges. He wore shades over an x-ray expression, cast from a young, proud face smoking a cigarette, and smiling the smile of a cobra.

It was no wonder why all called him by the nickname of Fang.

His face lit as he cascaded a sardonic delight down upon Jade.

"And how do you know about Stan A. Solve?"

"I already told you, Lave directed me to call myself that when I made it to Camp Pinto because it would let me in."

There was a grave silence before Fang gave a seeming gesture of sanction.

All burst into laughter.

Fang stood and sweetly breathed. He made his announcement with swagger.

“Let’s keep this amusing one, assign him to the kitchen, we could use a new cook.”

Jade was proclaimed a nonsensical prank, closing the case for good.

Helpless, hurt, and furious inside, Jade prayed that he would not have to see this Fang person again.

Led away by Sloan, Jade was then given a full quenching, but a meager meal in the mess hall.

He was shown his little place in the back of the cookery; a room that contained a bunk, a janitorial closet, and what Pinto called a bathroom: Two bowls margined from the sleeping quarters by a curtain.

By the bed was a tiny chest to put personal belongings – one was expected to be something of a minimalist at Pinto, which, luckily for Jade, he had covered.

The space wasn’t much to call his own, but he was used to it. He was actually pretty happy to snuggle into the ragged bed for the night.

It was only then Jade noticed the sky light in his dreadfully cramped room – an unobtrusive, everlasting, red, gold, and copper sunset pouring down on him...

There was no such thing as night in this world.

Jade was rudely awoken by the early morning bugles, but the music made him hop to his feet to shave and wash, lastly tying the hand-me-down apron around his waist. Jade didn’t mind it much – in fact, he played cooks well since he’d once gotten in trouble in the cafeteria in high school, having to help cook for a week after to compensate.

He would just have to find some other way to convince Pinto he wasn’t a quack.

Jade bumped into Sloan before he could even make it into the kitchen.

“Whater yous doing?” Sloan’s buggy gaze spied the blotched apron.

“Well... I thought I’d be making breakfast?”

“No, no, no! The boys don’t eat ‘til noon today, didn’ts they give you a schedule? Here, here it is,” Sloan peeled the clip board off the wall, slapping it to Jade’s front. “hurry, I can shows you around before you have to work, but come fastly now.” Sloan tipped his cap and dusted his gloved palms before walking militantly through the kitchen and out the back door that clearly read: Emergency Exit only.

Jade realized it only said so because the scrapped-together building was made from old plane parts.

They entered what looked like a training field belonging to the more advanced of the soldiery, who was already risen and pounding out sweat-breaking drills. The captain shouted from the forefront with a watchful eagle eye, so Jade and Sloan were not missed. Sloan did not seem bothered by the authority as he waved his cap and barged straight through the drill, to which, the well-practiced soldiers simply oceaned out of the way in perfect synchrony.

“G’job boys!” Sloan said of his own mess. Jade nervously followed.

It would have been early morning here at Camp Pinto, and the Sun should have been peeking over the horizon at a pastel, dewy environment, harboring a cool breeze – but of course, it was not.

As early as the time was, Camp Pinto was still frozen in the immortality of an unmoved sunset... It was hot and dry, and banished the existence of plant life. The only vegetations were the parasitic ferns and lichens that attached themselves to the tents, lean-tos, and little rectangular long houses being used for the soldier's housing. The tarred tears in the roofs made them look sticky to sleep in.

Sloan took a zig-zagging path through the soldier's village towards a more impressive group of buildings – the pieces of brick fort, staired by hills and more hand-made brick walls, guarded by ready cannons. If Jade didn’t know any better he might have said the

set up looked a little under-serviced... Maybe a little old and dusty... But he didn't try Sloan's pride.

The two's sandy shoes clinked and clanged as they stepped onto the metal platform that was thrown over a muddy dip that somehow blocked the entrance of the military school. Inside, was an ax and hammer-built row of benches that seated dozens attending the motion pictures displayed on an old canvas-projector theater screen. Huge, brush-painted maps, diagrams, and advertisements were plastered to the wall. Sloan was about to give a speech on what this place was all about, when a teacher, followed by a small group of students, emerged from a side room, dismissed from a morning class. The congregation was headed for the door to attend business elsewhere, but a particular student caught Jade's eye – It was the familiar face of an old high school foe, Twilight Truesdale.

The pale, drab, unchanged man, chuckled like a raven.

"Hello Jade Jewel, heard you made the underdog title again, guess that's you no matter where we go."

"Nice to see you too." Jade managed sarcastically. "How in the world did you get here before me?"

The swarthy man ran his palm over his soldier attire and smirked, hoping to make Jade jealous, but the only thing Jade was burning with, was curiosity.

"I've been here for months, slowpoke, apparently I chose a better, much faster mirror than you did – Or let me guess, you didn't even figure out the magic mirrors until today?" Truesdale gave a good, chunky chuckle to rub it in, all the while Sloan was rolling his eyes, and trying to stop himself from grinning. Jade was baffled.

"Anyway," Truesdale continued his braggish momentum. "I think these men actually know a genius when they see one. I was invited to Pinto's Energy Lab right away, it's not exactly robotics, but I got the knack. Heh, heh, this is exactly everything I've always wanted, and I can only go up the ranks! Just watch, I'll own this place in a couple of years."

Jade was aghast, but he was pretty sure Truesdale was talking to his absent Father, not him.

“What about home? What about your promise to Maxwell Donogan?”

It was only because of Jade’s search for Lave Santos that Truesdale had followed Jade in the first place, wanting to find Lave’s resting place for a man named Maxwell Donogan whom wanted to pay Santos some last respects – this is what Jade knew anyway, but this evidently meant nothing to Truesdale now, mostly because it had been a lie...

“Donogan is old news, have you seen anything yet, kitchen boy?”

“I’m giving him a tour as of now.” Sloan piped in, but was lavishly ignored.

“I could turn this place into a gold mine!” Truesdale rambled on. “If we truly are in the past, then we can sell them our futuristic toys and inventions for every dollar they own! Look Jewel, we could walk out of here with a fortune! All because we came from the future!”

Jade was both blatant and furored.

“You can’t just plagiarize the last past two centuries of inventors! Are you mad?! Besides, what would we do with a fortune? I came here to save Lave – *to save a life.*” Jade emphasized. “You know that, Truesdale.”

“Fine, fine,” He retorted. “I wasn’t asking you to help me. All I know is, I’m not missing this opportunity. I will finally be, rightfully, at the top.”

“You can’t fool people like this.”

“Maybe not, but unlike you, Jade, I’m actually of value here.”

Sloan had watched the two’s conspicuous bickering, reading not the aura of a friendship gone bad, but a friendship that never was... Truesdale noticed this awkward stare – a stare that could make a self-conscious person feel like they were being broad-casted on live t.v. He scorned Sloan’s probing with a ravage of hurtful words to Sloan’s disfigurement, but Sloan had his own flame within. The old adage, “Fight fire with fire”, would never work on someone like Sloan.

The three departed on a pungent note. Jade was terrified.

He was going to have to figure out how to stop Truesdale from cheating and lying to Pinto – or worse yet, getting himself trapped in this time and space, not their own. Truesdale's wild, greedy, imagination threatened what Jade came here for. He'd have to step lightly around his old peer in order to remain trustworthy, and gain Pinto's respect.

Sloan acted indifferent despite Truesdale's atrocities and insisted they carry on with the tour, though he proceeded with a smidge less enthusiasm than before.

Back on the trails outside, Sloan pointed out the indoor and outdoor gyms, equipment made of weights and wood. The shooting ranges were all of target-dyed hay stacks and reused packing crates. There were drill fields for hand-to-hand, working with the war dogs, horses, and vehicles, and a pigeon coop was planted not far.

Although the supply house and artillery was off limits, Sloan got away with parading the newcomer through the officer's village, possibly the most lavish place on camp Jade had seen so far.

The Victorian joints were shaded from the heat of sunset by the aged, uneven, brick fort, ostensibly bombed in the past.

Through a second-story balcony window, one could see an incredible observatory filled with bookshelves, and tables crowded with instruments; but the giant telescope was the trophy in the room. Before that, was a balcony set up to serve coffee breakers; a navy periodical and teacup sat abandoned in this space.

As simple as it was, this was the most wealth Jade had seen in months. On the front porch, persons in good clothes exchanged business about weaponry. It made Jade uneasy to watch the several men pass around the newest machine gun of the time, all the while laughing and making puns on the subject. Sloan could see Jade weaken in an instant. He cuffed him in the arm.

“Lookie there, there's y' ol' beau, Fang. He's Charles's son, Chuck Junior. And that'ses Mr. Cordell, the weapons engineer, oh, and him...”

He turned directly towards the tall, dark-haired, mustached man in a silver suit and tie with a politically incorrect smile plastered to his face. Sloan regarded him with a dictionary's worth of foul language before proceeding with the facts.

"That's Sir Charles Renkins, the man who used to own the Ice mirror company. Since the wipe out of the Gelicide, his only purpose in life now is to collect and buy back every mirror he ever made and preserve it for Pinto's private use. He also thinks he's going to win the current war for us." Sloan finished with a twitchy grin.

He probably didn't mean to, but Sloan was bleeding sarcasm all over the place.

Sir Charles was impressive, and definitely dark – at least Fang was sadistic enough to smile and wave.

Jade wondered about the youngest of the group, a small, thin girl whom bordered on the age of still being a child. She was blond-haired, ice-eyed, and pale-skinned, her body dressed in regal satins. She was beautifully patient as her elders tried the guns on for size. Her name was Elsie, and she was evidently Fang's lady, which made him seem all the more sleazy.

Jade suddenly recalled the photo that had been in Fang's journal... It certainly looked like this girl, but why was the name Kristelle written on the back of the photo, not Elsie? The two exited the well-to-do block in silence.

Jade was now having to digest the reality of this violent paradigm – a dimming cloud that only grew stickier as Sloan led the way through another building with long, bland halls, numerous doors, and zero windows. Some rooms made your bones clatter with a chill, while others felt like they had an incinerator burning twenty-four, seven. What the rooms did have in common, were tables upon tables of viles, beakers, jars, and glasses full of dangerous liquids.

The entire building was dedicated to chemical warfare experiments – at least, that's what Jade feared, but it was kind of odd he and Sloan could just walk freely about it.

"So, um... What is this place?" Jade hesitantly spoke to confirm his judgment.

Sloan's answer was too simple, but it's all he said.

"The Pinto Laboratory."

Sloan stopped to introduce Jade to one of the workers whom stood over a broiling cauldron, donning a goggled face mask, and a filthy assortment of coats. Mr. Agnes was shy to take off the disguise for the intro, and instead, stared eerily through his protective gear in the displaced quietude of bubbling potions. Saying nothing in response to Sloan's complimentary provocations, he made Jade swallow. Sloan moved on.

On the way out of the lab, Jade panicked as he was splashed by a plinking liquid from one of the room's kinetic, merry-go-round of potion motion trains. Jade quickly wiped the drops away with his opposite sleeve, but the contact had already burned and bleached his skin.

Sloan shrugged.

"Eh, it's just weed killer."

It didn't make Jade feel any better, especially as the spot began to swell, but the two were soon distracted by a map tacked to the wall near the front door of the laboratory. Before Jade could peruse it with scrutinizing eyes, Sloan was already smacking destinations with a stick taken from a leather pouch hung on his hip. The stick was actually a hand-carved fife, and it was pointing at Lave's exact coordinates.

"So when will they go get him?" Jade pondered his proposal to the army and if the credibility of his story had translated.

Sloan's weird eyes gauzed over before letting out a crowing, bird-like laughter that sent him spiraling with the tickles. He recovered, but with tears in his big, glass orbs.

"They won'ts! You works for the kitchen til the mans says you are fitted to invite to the battle field – not a word that's your intention though, just stay shady until they deem you soldier material, then you can rescue Lave yourself - "

"*What?!*" Jade blurted in such a fashion that Sloan had to slap a hand over his crudity.

“Oh shut up, you’re braver than you thinks, you’re going to become a soldier and pull Lave from the depths yourself, deal?”

Jade was way too small, weak, undisciplined, and hard-headed to ever become a true soldier. He was capable of being brave, but not *that* kind of brave.

Sloan was encroaching on the door before Jade could remove his gaze from where Sloan had smacked the map; a little crescent of canyonous desert on the battle grounds of Skullgully, once reeking with the enemy, and now abandoned to the wild monsters and free spirits.

Jade had succeeded in making it to Camp Pinto, but why did it feel like Lave was even further away than before? How could Lave wait much longer? He was starved, thirsty, and tired the last time Jade had checked in on him.

“Hey chocolate head!” Sloan called from the doorway. “Move y’ ass or you’ll be late t’ serve the boys!”

Jade sighed and dogged after Sloan’s fast, swaying feet, but as they ate up the path, Jade slowed his pace to gaze into the outskirts of camp, absorbing the other side of the fence and all it’s beauty... It’s nothingness... Not a rock or tree on the distant horizon, just miles and miles of plain, red, sand stone, free to take you in any direction you desire. It was tempting to think of aborting mission here, but he didn’t bother fantasizing for long. He spotted a hallow concrete bunker across the camp, embedded into the side of a half-bulldozed hill below the higher mounded trail he and Sloan stood atop. Jade opened his mouth, but Sloan had wandered away a bit to relieve himself near the wall of a tool shed, as he came back, he fumbled to light a cheap cigarette with a matchstick.

He was definitely a boy.

“What is that place for?”

The question made Sloan fall out of Jade’s step.

“The old bunker... “ Sloan graduated to concentrate on his cigarette.”Pinto uses it as a prison these days – not something for the faint-hearted, you know? Anyhey, we shouldn’t be running late nows, let’s get back to the mess hall, shall we?”

Sloan did not stay to instruct Jade. In fact, Jade had no idea what Sloan’s job in Camp Pinto was. He was left to the cookery by himself while Sloan disappeared to his own duties.

After a sweaty hour or so behind the fuming stove, chopping vegetables, and by-product sausages above the broiling cauldron, Jade finally entered the open air again to serve each hungry rookie his portion of the stew for the noon. He flopped a ladle full of chow into the aluminum bowls, and forwarded it to the next gratified boy in line.

“Thank y’ much,” A soldier replied. “yer the new guy, right? Caused quite the stir with the uppities. I reckon you pulled a straw they weren’t fancying, ay? Somethin’ of Stan A. Solve, ay?”

The kid was pushed along by another impatient rookie, but it wasn’t just their meal they were starved for – everybody wanted to know about the “Stan A. Solve scandal”.

“Why even bother telling such a whopper? It’s all known that the T.T project kicked the buckets.” Someone called down the line.

“What’s T.T?” Jade was immediately drowned out by another soldier laughing like only a boy could.

“Yeah, push that tall tale, and Fang is going to *bust-your-ass*.”

The whole mess hall went up in flames of guffaws, reminding Jade of high school. Sloan rose from the smoke to break up the fling with memorable, graphic, curses. The amateurs obeyed the silly creature, but mocked him as they went. Sloan just gave indignant eye rolls, awaiting Jade’s release from responsibilities so he could sit and eat with him.

Situated, Jade spoke up.

“So who exactly is Fang, anyway?” Jade asked of his personally-most-feared identity on camp.

Most would have voted Sir Charles as their top mongerer, but for Jade, there was something uncanny about Fang.

“A battle strategist,” Sloan answered. “both intellectual, and intuition. Sir Charles reveres him like the angels.”

“Why? What’s his special power?”

Sloan eyeballed Jade in such a way he wished he could have taken his question back.

“Why? Because Captain Fang’ll have you ripping out your heart and handing it over before you even realize it weren’t such a bright idea.”

Jade returned to his stuffy little room at ‘sundown’ after saying goodnight to Sloan and receiving his new schedule from the staff. As he looked the clip board up and down, he squinted suspiciously at his own opinion of Camp Pinto, which so far, was largely, sort of... Lame.

As much as the officers kept people under control, there was something wonky about how things worked around here. It was all bottom of the barrel... And what about that consistent sunset? As surfacely organized as Pinto was, even Jade, who’d never known a veteran in his life, felt like Pinto was... Going no where.

But this was of course an opinion he was keeping to himself!

Jade threw the clip board into the trunk in the corner, and pulled up the covers – he paused in awe of his own fist.

Sloan’s “weed killer” had given his right palm an extra finger.

For weeks Jade operated the muggy kitchen, getting to know the rules of Pinto’s roads, and getting hammered into place. He tried to make acquaintance of the soldiers, but

became uninteresting to them once he was disallowed to gossip of the Stan A. Solve scenario in front of them. He was harshly reprimanded for forgetting the fact.

When Jade wasn't chopping, grating, peeling, and boiling, he watched the army drills, miming points of focus just to feel like part of the bigger picture. No one seemed to care, but it definitely didn't go unnoticed; Truesdale scoffed in the shadows, while Sloan beamed.

Working rough to ragged, even on breaks, Jade slept hard at night, taking him awhile to note that Sloan was keeping tab on his progress. After bumping into him multiple times on his way to the bunker prison (which of course, always canceled the excursion), Sloan always appeared to be at Jade's heels, rubbing shoulders with Jade like a chick following a hen. While Jade yearned for a friend in this war-contentious jungle, there was something about Sloan that had not yet met his inner eye. Sloan purely seemed to gravitate towards Jade, but Jade also imagined Pinto had put him up to the plate of spying on him.

Friends, or not, Jade didn't get much privacy around the premises, except for in the dead of night, when vulnerable thoughts were welcome to creep back into him...

Jade missed home. His own "dimension". He missed the free roam, free time, good people, and living his adventurous, humble, life – not that Camp Pinto wasn't an adventure, but how he bemoaned it's regulations! He missed sunrise! He'd seen too many sunsets now, and how very strange Pinto be trapped in an eternal one? He missed the plant kingdom, which was absent from Pinto. He missed wild life, and starry nights, and the sound of the ocean... And again, he missed people. The woman's touch – yes, even Jade had to admit the male-dominated Pinto lacked women of any age to balance out the masculine pride that suffocated the perimeter. Elsie was only a visitor, and there was no hope in acquainting with the lass because of Fang.

Jade pondered about his friends back home, like Peaches, whom was probably inspiring many through his music, rocking out with his band every night. Jade hoped he was doing well.

The last time Jade had seen Florian, he was getting his educations and running online businesses. Confident and secure, he planned to marry his true love when school was finally said and done.

There were the caring Rose siblings, and Jade's old side-kick, Sundance Truesdale. There was even old Mr. Ambrose Godwin, whom Jade had rescued from the dark side. There were so many faces Jade dearly missed, and wondered if they missed him just as much. Or perhaps they simply carried on after graduation and never looked back.

His academy days felt so far away now that the soon-to-be seventeen year old placed his absurd school memories far in the back of his mind so he could focus on now – his disturbing, incredible, unbelievable, now.

It was just what was required of him if he was ever going to solve the mystery of Stan A. Solve and bring the innocent Lave Santos back from the dead.

And if it was all just a dream?

Jade bolted upright.

“G’ morning scout!” Sloan’s huge presence wrecked the halls. “I reckon you’re off to the kitchen? I’ll be at the skyrat house during y’ break, hope t’ sees you then!”

CHAPTER 4

CONSORTING WITH PRISONERS

It wasn't long before the trainers took note of Jade – his dedication, his persistence, the fact that his free time was spent on strength-building, sharpening up, and going on long jaunts around camp. He was anything but a normal teenage boy and it showed.

The acknowledgment, however, was anything but glorious. Jade was simply given more jobs and responsibilities. Sloan assured it was a good sign, but it was hard to fathom it's value as forward movement; Jade was now mopping and sweeping buildings other than the mess hall. He was shoveling stalls, scraping the coops, and cleaning horse tack. He still cooked in the torrent kitchen twice a day, and served the meals too, all the while "babysitting" Truesdale, whom was still dead-set on carrying out his avaricious deeds. On top of this, Truesdale's spread of calumnies through camp intended to fell Jade's reputation so he could grow his own legacy. The rookies were hooked on the slander, and no longer acted affable towards Jade. It drove Jade nuts – what would he do with Truesdale when it was time to go after Lave? He had no ideas, and frankly, no time to think about it.

Once the last meal of the day had been served, dishes washed, the mess hall scrubbed; there was nothing left to do but hit the drilling fields to inconspicuously participate. With all the lugging, chopping, serving, washing, cleaning, and chasing down of Truesdale Jade was doing, it felt like his feet never stopped moving. Even on breaks Sloan was always trying to take Jade somewhere, show him something; he talked while he walked, and Jade dragged his feet on every occasion.

One evening (still a sunset), when Sloan had been called on for an unexpected job shift, Jade ambled into the setting Sun all by his lonesome. He usually jogged the outskirt trail when he had nothing better to do, but today, his soles were sore, his muscles burned, and his brain was fried. He instead walked the path like a contemplative mystic, listening to

the dead of night... There were never any singing crickets, birds, or frogs on Camp Pinto, only the occasional woof of a guard dog, or grunt from a horse whom couldn't sleep through the contingent vesper of sunset. Jade had to agree - it was totally disorienting. He only knew the time by the camp's schedule; which was written by those opulent enough to own clocks. Otherwise, Jade was at the unmoved Sun's mercy.

Jade was wrapped in a rather somber shawl of emotions as he circled camp, just the way Sloan had toured him that first morning. He experienced *de ja vu* as he skittered up the sand stone hill over-looking the sumptuously empty, red rock horizon... His gaze averted to the sepulchral bunker below, sitting still and quiet, utterly seductive in it's curiousness... Jade's feet began to move downhill.

The concrete opening bred nothing but a dire ominousness. It was guarded by nobody but a mangy, slumbered, tortoiseshell cat that flexed and yawned at Jade without even opening it's yellow eyes. Jade peered into the bunker entrance, hesitating at the familiar sight of a long, dark, dripping, tunnel of concrete.

Fortunately, it did not go on forever like the tunnel to Camp Pinto did, and there were no doors or mirrors on the walls.

Instead, a multitude of brick cells with metal bars comprised the dungeon. It was lit with super orange, flickering, lamp lights of the last century, which could not have been the source of the unusual heat that Jade experienced as he entered.

A massive, black, white, and silver Akita was chained behind bars in one of the dim, damp, primitive, cages. Paying no mind to bark at Jade, or even lift his huge, bear-sized head as Jade clicked his tongue at him, the dog simply didn't care. The beast panted like stroke was in it's future. It was like an oven down here.

Moving along the sheets of barred windows, the final cell at the end of the hall produced a soft, blue-green glow... For a moment Jade could not even comprehend the

glowing mass, but as his eyes adjusted, the enlightened thing on the other side of the barricade tapered into a recognizable, naked, human-shape – at least, mostly.

It was slender, blanch, and had a large head like Sloan's, bulging atop it's curled, resting body. It had reverberating gills on it's neck, four growths protruding from it's back, evidently clipped wings that were once white, and looking like elegant swan wings – only, ten times bigger.

Thick, pearly, almost clear strands of long, ridiculously straight, heavy hair, showy like an equine's, toppled over it's small shoulders. It had extensive arms and legs on it's long spine, gracefully held in fetal position. Also like Sloan, it had no brows, no direct facial expression on it's peacefully sleeping face. It was an unearthly creature, gorgeous, but broken... It's whole body breathed with a rigid sadness.

Jade was so stupefied by the exotic beauty, that he'd been staring a good, long while before spotting the strange, sparkling shackles on it's high-heeled, paw-like feet. Unwisely, he reached out to lean in for a closer inspection – but all in the split second of placing his hands on the bars, the metal of the enclosure caved to his touch – the bars were so hot, they were half liquefied.

By this time, the entire prison was awake to Jade's unbearable pain. The dog, the unspoken human, and Jade's glorious alien.

Giant, incredible, electric-green eyes came open. The creature stood at attention to Jade's harm, towering a great deal higher than Jade – possibly taller if it had space to rise to it's hackles. It's candle-light luxuriousness all caved into a frightfully, godly demeanor, far more bravading than a mere mortal like Jade, whom automatically shrunk under it's might, wilted by his pain, and now ready to take a blow from the present monstrosity if that's what it wished – but all it did was open it's long fingered palms in innocent gesture of helplessness to Jade's foolishly begotten wound.

The compassionate pause of both empathy and fear, ended as Jade could no longer prevent the urge to stick the burn in his mouth. He felt like a toddler in comparison to the divine being. Jade looked it in the eyes, smiling sensitively.

“I-I’m okay...” He relayed through a warbled breath.

It blinked.

It’s elvin ear revolved.

Jade could feel it’s roaring vibration press closer – it became known that this being’s own body was responsible for the treacherous temperature in the prison. It bashfully covered itself with it’s frugal wings.

“... Who are you?” Jade gushed the curiosity despite his pain.

It blinked again.

It’s gaze averted, though you could only tell that by the movement of it’s cat-eye pupil, as it had no eye-white.

Suddenly, a watery, musical, resonance penetrated the air – it was like a harp, definitively female to Jade’s ears.

“*Shiinnnkha*.” Was the name.

It was a beautiful note, rather than a word. Jade practiced it a few times in front of her.

“Shinka? Is that right? I’m Jade – er – Stan, why are you down here? Does Pinto have something against you?”

Shinka was not shy to use what little English she knew. Her globular eyes grew with an intensity that Jade found both hot and grievent.

“Pinto called us sky medusa, anima, not human. Human not loved, so not loved any other – human forget itself and we.”

“Is... Is Sloan like you?” Jade considered the similarity between he and Shinka’s speech and appearances, though Sloan was assuredly a much grosser version of this divine presence.

“Yes.” Shinka said. “Sloan sky medusa child, only two hundred years alive.” Shinka swallowed with grief only an empath could muster, but Jade was too busy being surprised - Sloan was also two hundred years old? Old as the legendary Lave Santos?

“But... how is he just a child? And if you’re a, uh, *Sky Medusa*, why aren’t you free like Sloan?”

“*Sloan not free!*” Her delicate sorrow trembled fiercely into words, making her recede to a sitting position again. Her smooth vibration rose to a bumping throb, which Jade could feel humming in his lungs – the liquid metal danced to the beat.

The creature cried unlike human raving; it was a sobless, emotional suffering, a weep for the sake of seeing a child of it’s own kind, enslaved.

She was a sentient, compassionate being, and Jade didn’t know how to make things better. In this moment, Pinto became the enemy... a dark entity imprisoning peoples they saw as inferior to them – and Jade didn’t even know the extent of it yet...

“What could you do?” Said a deep, male voice impregnated with a rich vocal fry.

Jade jumped out of his skin to the words of the third prisoner who had remained silent until then. Jade turned around to face a face that was almost as scary as Sloan’s – only worse.

The human had messy, dark hair, so greasy, it was unknown if it were black or brown. The man’s expression was bedraggled with stitched scars, trenching his several-decades-old, face. He had an eye of gingerbread-brown, and a bleach-blue eye that had spun out of control, unable to look straight ahead even if he wanted it to. He was dressed in pants and a trench coat, stained beyond launderability. His feet and arms had shackles that had bruised him bloody – but a long time ago.

Jade’s own face went shocked at the sight – but so did the man’s at Jade’s appearance.

“God, you look like my son...” He breathed in such a melancholy way, Jade knew he had never seen this loved one again. “God... I haven’t seen ‘im since... Hell knows when... He was sent to the factory – ever been there?”

Jade poignantly nodded. He was uncomfortable and desired to leave now, but the jail bird wanted to talk.

“So where’d they get you, then?”

“Pinto? I came by myself. I came looking for Lave Santos.”

“Find ‘im?”

Jade hesitated, he could not lie nor white lie himself out of this one. The prisoner sighed before Jade responded. Jade was looking toward Shinka out of shyness of the hideous state of the prisoner, but the man now stared Shinka’s way too. He seemed to lighten up; he liked the alien angel just as much as Jade did.

“Them bosses of Camp Pinto can’t pick out a buck-marvelous being when they see one. Damn afraid the monsters’ll get claws around their necks if they don’t cut ‘em down to size-” He kind of laughed. “Got some right to be concerned I suppose. Nasty things if y’ get ‘em pissed. Sure you understand if you know Sloan an’ all – and that’s just a puppy.”

As rugged as he was, and as frank as he was, the comment was a compliment – he was on the side of the sky medusa.

“Why is Shinka in here and not with Sloan?” Jade pondered to the prisoner about Sloan’s debated freedom.

“Shinka don’t roll over, believe me. But Sloan was young, and when he got here, it was easy to extrapolate him from his culture and wisdom. They chipped ‘im, experimented on him, and now he’s the dog they use to put guts into their pseudo soldiers, but it don’t really matter, above or below, Pinto’ll keep any sky medusa for their immortal qualities in hopes of finding a way to transfer it.”

“By experimenting on them?! That’s a crime!” Jade snapped furiously.

“It’s what Pinto calls moving forward. Have you ever been to planet earth?” The ragged man got cocky. He flashed an uneven-eyed smile... Jade now recognized him – the masked man from the Pinto laboratory. Jade stepped back, eliciting a smirk from the stranger.

“You’re not cut for this place, are you, boy?”

Jade winced and pulled his stare away from the man’s lolling gaze.

“True, but I’m only here to rescue Lave. After that, I’m headed back home...” He faded off.

“So you thought...” The man rubbed the scar-line on his chin, thoughtfully. His eyes were sparkling in admiration of Shinka, making her blink, and playfully turn away. He chuckled and suddenly turned back to Jade, wild-eyed.

“Ah, so you’re the boy who claimed to be Stan A. Solve, is that right? Golly, what a flirt with death.”

Jade recoiled nervously.

“Yeah, so I don’t even have a clue what it means to be Stan A. Solve – Lave was the one who told me to claim it, but he didn’t tell me anything else of it, or him, or whatever it stands for-”

“He didn’t? You swear? Maybe you just weren’t listening.” Mr. Agnes laughed contentedly.

Jade wasn’t sure what the man meant – he just prayed he hadn’t given information to the wrong person. Unexpectedly, a pebble from Shinka’s cell popped the chortling man on the head.

“O-ow!” He twinkled, picking up a stone to throw back, but the small rock was instantly globularized by the electromagnetic force-field encapsulating her. He knew this would happen, but that’s what made the game unctemperuous.

Shinka batted her eyes like Sloan did during times of unseriousness. Mr. Agnes sighed in smiling irritation.

Before the game could get any more romantic, Jade struck the prisoner with a question that would put them on equal ground.

“So how’d you wind up down here?”

“Many reasons.” He answered casually. “I’d cracked the code of the sky medusine, *learned their secrets...*” He emphasized sultrily. “I began to speak their language, how to administer care, I learned of their traditions, beliefs. But at that time, I was hired as Camp Pinto’s head quantum theorist, giving predictions on the time-twisting mirrors to foresee how they may be used in combat – but we were still in opposition with the sky medusine, so I was trialed for treason, and titled a traitor – and now I work my due in the lab, preparing to destroy what I created.”

“But why?”

“But why?” He mimed. “Because I made a mistake. I was, after all, just a theorist. All that is quantum is bound to shift at some juncture or another, right? We’re still on God’s plot, not Satan’s, or at least, that’s what I believe.”

“Well, I kinda meant, why do what Pinto asks? Why stay? You don’t really want to hurt the Sky medusa, do you?”

“Look kid, you don’t know what it’s like to orchestrate truth in the face of sinful brothers – those that hate because you are you, and they are not.” The man’s crippled gaze watered with care.

The remark reminded Jade of how he and his friends were treated in high school – It was a crime to be a teenager. Just the fact made you guilty as charged for something or another, but this thought still did not help him see eye to eye with the prisoner. All four living things were quiet for a short moment.

“Don’t you want to be free?” Jade blurted out of his own pain.

The man did not hesitate to uproot Jade’s adamant nature. He locked their stares – the freakish unsymmetrical face of the inmate boring boldly – his one injured eye rolling, straining to come to its senses, while the warm brown iris remained functional, gazing sternly, groping for something honest inside of Jade.

“Freedom is not something I’ll die for. What is the use of it when you are the loneliest man in the world? Pinto expect me to break out and take off on a white horse into the

sunset? Never. I chance nothing unless I can take these two souls with me." He gestured to Shinka and the canine.

Jade bit down on his tongue. Something twisted in his stomach, but it was so deep he did not even feel like reflecting upon it now. In favor of this neglect, Shinka's eyes and ears suddenly shot up. The Akita stood, and the human lazily turned his head.

They could all hear boots tramping from above, sending a chill down Jade's spine – he begged it was not Captain Fang coming down the stairs, only to corner him in this dreary place where no one could hear him scream.

To Jade's utmost surprise and disgust, the quiet was interrupted as a ground keeper dumped the prisoner's daily rations down the chute from the upstairs. Jade scarcely moved out of the way of the dumpsite on time to avoid getting a chunky shower of what looked like raw compost tossed over his head.

Instantly, the monstrous Spitz ravenously wolfed it's meal into it's void of a mouth, choking back every last piece of gristle and glob of potato peel.

With the "food" out of the human's reach, Shinka levitated a portion across the room, depositing it over the man's head with a titter. She then went on to "eat" for herself, dispersing apple cores into usable energy through dematerialization.

Jade stared.

"So um, where are the sky medusa from, again?"

The nameless man smirked as he pulled the rotten cabbage leaf off his shoulder, grossly munching down, fruit flies and all. He now leaned back on his pile of rubble, tired, and relieved he had something to quell his growling stomach before bed.

"The sea above, the water that hangs, a place they call B.L.U.E: The back lands under the Earth."

The human was obviously drunk on sleep deprivation, but Jade wasn't sure if he was messing around like Sloan had, or actually meant something of his words.

"What is your name?" Jade realized was a question he'd not yet asked.

The slimy, black leaves were gone, and the man was lying down to sleep.

“They call this piece of work, Mr. Aldwyn Agnes.” Said Mr. Agnes, closing his eyes for the day. “Good night, boy.”

“Good night Mr. Agnes. I’ll bring you some better food tomorrow.”

He was already asleep.

Jade moved to leave, not needing to say anything to Shinka as he went – their last, yearning glance was enough to say, “*Good night, thank you, can’t wait to see you again.*”

It was already a promise on Jade’s end – he was used to being people’s only friend.

Jade popped through the door of the mess hall, leaping on the opportunity to speak with Sloan.

“Sloan-” Jade began seriously. “*You’re a sky medusa?!*”

At first Sloan could not even verbalize his repulse to the transgression. His pantomiming began with the spewing of his mouthful of baked beans – Jade instantly saw what Shinka meant by *child!*

“Where’d that come from you fool?! I knew you gone to see Shinka! What’s wrong, am I not medusa enough for you? I prefer the term Starbright, but-”

“But Sloan, if you’re a Sky medusa, then you’re special, right? Aren’t you magical? Can’t you-”

“Magical?! Ha! Say that to my face, dickens!” He pounded the table.

“... Well I kinda just did.”

“That’s it!” Sloan jumped from his seat, taking Jade into a grapple, trying to over turn him.

It was so sudden and theatrical, Jade knew he had to be kidding – but why?

The boys around them cried out advice for their next moves, but even in the violent haze of his school days, Jade had never swung back before. Truesdale was laughing blissfully.

It was then that Jade realized there were superiors in the room. They quickly arrived to seize Jade's bruising by grabbing Sloan by the hair and forcibly leading him out of the hall – his corn-silk went to ruddy-peach in a split second – had his hair just changed color right before Jade's eyes? Regardless, Sloan went away looking pleased with himself. And Jade's nightmare came true all too suddenly.

With pilot shades gleaming, Captain Fang paraded down the lane, his crystal ball being tossed up and down in one gloved fist while the other held a burning cigar. He *literally* had a snake wrapped around his shoulders.

Fang walked like a golden lion, stared like a hunting wolf, and felt like an untouchable eagle flying high above all he looked down upon, and of course, there was the poisonous strike deep in throat, that could kill with one wrong move of those subjugated by his power.

The boys slowly sat back down.

He left the cigar in his mouth to let his shades down.

"Am I to speculate," Fang worded tenderly. "That those who inhabit this room today are opposed to the disciplines of the insurmountable Camp Pinto?"

Nobody answered that. Especially Jade, whom thought Pinto looked like a junkyard.

"Good. *But wrong.* Discipline is everything, boys." He began to strut past Jade as the rest of the congregation echoed an ashamed chorus of "Yes Sir"s.

Fang gave Jade an apple-green ice beam, mellowed only by a freakishly calm, blink.

"And you..."

Jade tried to freeze in the cloud of smoke that puffed from Fang's lips, but he lost to a cough. What followed Fang's smoke screen were hypocritical words, meant only for Jade. He whispered so that no one else could have interpreted.

"I had better see you swing back one of these days."

"Why?" Jade mustered the courage to talk back.

Fang graced him in such a way, that Jade's bravery was only "cute" to him. He smiled an over-extravagant glance of parentalish pride.

"Because you are different, Stan A. Solve." Fang's eyes sparkled with malicious enjoyment.

CHAPTER 5

LEARNING OF THE T.T. PROJECT

It was worse than Jade could have dreamed.

Not only did Fang have him swing back, but he wanted Jade to shoot – which is exactly where the officer cut him to the chase.

Jade was so nervous he couldn't even remember being handed the gun, but the game pigeons were released, and Fang was telling him to shoot. His orders, as always, were alluring, regardless of the grit in his tone, and the uncanny will power in Jade.

Whispering under the shade of the ware house behind Jade and the Captain, were the only known bystanders, Sloan, and Elsie. They locked impatient eyes on Jade.

The conspicuous spies were Truesdale and a couple of rookies, eager, jealous, and snickering in hopes of failure for Jade. To them, Jade looked stupid wielding the long gun in his average, modern rags of jeans and an old red jacket, which had faded to orange, blending him into the perilous sunset.

Jade aimed.

With a held breath, he pulled the trigger.

In a few seconds, as he watched the lapse between bullet and bird, he thought, *Lave, this is for you.*

The bird fell to the ground several yards away from the small, private gathering. The camp's wandering hounds tore into the field to retrieve the dead avian. Jade turned back to the youth's wide gazes and hung mouths. Fang's face was pricelessly expressionless. He had come here to make a humble fool of Jade, not to see him excel without a flinch. He quickly gestured to the familiars under the aluminum building. He muttered as a weapon transaction occurred.

“Lucky shot... Lucky goddam shot... “

Jade's bullet gun was traded out with a bizarre machine featuring glowing bars and a computer screen that supplied measurements unknown to Jade. As far as Jade knew, such a piece of technology should not have existed in this time.

"Use that on anything else and I'll murder you." Fang made sure he was handing the unbelievably dangerous weapon to the right person.

"I won't doubt that." Jade guaranteed the captain. Fang did not deflect the back talk – the comment was approved.

Shaking as he pointed the gun at the second bird still flapping for its life in the Sun beatened sky, Jade pulled the trigger.

He could feel something within the gun charge before sending a super-hot blast of light into the horizon. It made a noise that caused Jade to cringe though it was not loud or shrill, but simply high-frequented. Jade gasped for air as he observed the second pigeon fall from the lights - not as a dead bird, but as a puddle of molecules.

He deliberately handed the weapon back, and Fang locked it before regifting it to Elsie, whose pretty mouth was agape, but the fire in her belly, excited.

"Your highness, what's the word?" Fang mustered without a smile.

"He's a sniper." Young Elsie dubbed with a crisp, sweet voice.

Jade let a breath go – he had no intention of killing any body else with that sacrilegious weapon. He didn't even want the responsibility of Fang's bullet gun, let alone what he just witnessed.

Sloan hid a backhanded grin behind a breath of smoke – Jade had been cornered into militant duties.

Jade collapsed into bed that night, his mind more exhausted than his body. This was turning out to be far more traumatic than Jade had signed up for.

He closed his eyes and tried to relax, which led him adrift, but his lids came open at the sound of a voice – a voice not present, but *remote* – Lave was contacting him for the first time since being at Pinto!

Jade did not see the boy this time around, the message was only a vocal supported by hardcore evidence that Lave was in fact, a man of existence. Gratified, but cautious in making sure he got every word of what Lave had to say, Lave no longer sounded like a delirious refugee starving on a deserted island – he still sounded sick and worn, but he had taken on a beaming, surer, tone.

Bless you for making it to Camp Pinto! One step closer! You give me strength! I moved to the Skullgully prison pit, you'll find me there. Out.

He was gone. Jade rushed to ask questions, but Lave was not heard again. That was it, but it gave Jade a peaceful high. Something to fight for, and something to sleep soundly to that night... And hopefully the rest of the nights that would go by until Jade succeeded in doing what he came for.

For the next few weeks, Captain Fang invited the now, militantly-groomed Jade to the hefty drills, stressful target practices, and intellectual classes meant only for the soldiers. Fang unfairly allowed Jade to continue carrying out the bulk of kitchen and custodian work to test his desire for a place in the Pinto army. It was difficult to induce morale for, since all Jade wanted was to save Lave then quit this soldier making factory and go home.

Everyday now began the same: Jade woke to the cantankerous bugle blasts, sometimes accompanied by the tootling of Sloan's fife (Sloan's wishful thoughts to be in charge of Pinto's time of rising). Jade cleaned up, jammed on a uniform, and broke a sweat drilling. He returned to the kitchen to hang over a hot stove, serve lunch, take a break – which was actually spent smuggling food into the abandoned bunker – then it was back to drilling, target practice, dinner, curfew, bed.

The days were rough, but one way or another, he was going to need to know how to survive in the caverns of Skullgully.

Some days, the physical drills were replaced with class room lectures and other intellectual content, which Jade preferred over the cardios. He was good at the psychological exams – he'd survived high school after all!

Camp Pinto reminded him a lot like school, only, a good deal worse. At best, Jade didn't have to worry about getting socked in the halls – since he got socked on the training field instead.

Having not a previously disciplined bone in his body, Jade found himself giving up many times. There were days he wanted to run from Pinto – but then he'd get distracted by the innocent, womanly Shinka, whose energy and eye contact was poetic. The unearthly vibration of the beautiful mystery that she was, kept Jade coming back for more – until his fears pivoted him back into fantasies of fleeing Pinto... Then he'd once more, flip-flop into the candor of Shinka's deep, dark, light – just what he needed in this time of confusion.

Telepathically, he told her his feelings about how he missed home. He spoke to her about childhood, his years at school, all that had happened up til now – a rather lengthy description for a man only seventeen years alive.

Shinka listened with attentiveness, tenderness, and like no other ever had. Just as Jade was about to go on, Mr. Agnes interrupted with physical words.

"Hey now, don't steal my medusa."

Shinka just lolled her huge cattish eyes. Jade laughed.

Just when Jade had thought he'd sold his heart to the prisoners, he met latter days he just wanted to skip camp and hide from Fang. Those days he felt like a five-year-old again, trying to dodge his Father in the hallways, but when Fang found him, it was not

punishment that awaited – Fang had a way of knocking the wind out of you with a test of the spirit.

Staring at his hundredth sunset, Jade lamented.

“What if I never make it to Skullgully?”

Fang clapped his lighter shut.

“Then it will at least have been a good fight to look back on. Just depends on how you want to walk away from it – spotless and spineless, or a boastful philanderer in all his shredded peacock feathers, with proof stamped to his body that he indeed lived a life collecting scars for the sake of listening to his own guts, and not someone else’s lie... Fulfill the favor God gave you.”

The sunset was politely quiet as Fang, in all his beautiful, maddening encouragement, put out a hand just as youthful as Jade’s own...

Jade breathed. He took it and was pulled to his feet.

“What does Captain Fang mean by God?” Jade asked underground, when he’d went to deliver his incarcerated comrades their daily portions of leftover stew from the kitchen.

The soiled, chained, starved, Mr. Agnes, leapt up with passion.

“I have one word for you – Jesus Christ.”

“That’s two words.” Jade accidentally corrected him. Mr. Agnes chortled with fire.

“Be quiet and let me talk.” He said through a hard, smile.

And he preached the new testament from memory...

Jade still did not know what to say.

Mr. Agnes reached through the bars.

“There is no room left for giving up.”

It all happened so fast. Jade's sharpshooting lesson was frozen in time by an unexpected occasion. Jade could not confirm if it was the innocence of the novices, or a haul-off by the temperate Captain.

Who had fired the high-tech hand weapon without warning? Maybe it was a malfunction? The apparatus was dropped? Unlocked? Whatever the case, the bullet-proof ware house resisted the aimless fire, and the small congregation ducked and covered as the scorching bead of laser light went ricocheting across the range. Jade was pretty sure the amateurs screamed.

Jade hit the ground for cover, and for a moment, thought he'd broken a rib doing so. The following pain and numbness made him forget how he got laid flat on his back, gazing up at the clouds. Fang was shouting orders and people were scrambling to obey. Then Fang and Sloan blocked the Sun as their expressions bore immeasurable distress.

Sloan spoke, but everything was all echoy – all Jade could do was stare back at the concerned faces and read the dog tags that dangled inches from his pulsing vision.

Sloan's tag was titled: *Sloan E. Vast*, while Fang appeared to have stolen Jade's war souvenir; the tag that read *Stan A. Solve*. However, he did remember Fang's journal being signed under that name, so was he Stan A. Solve before him?

This was the last thing Jade consciously thought before realizing that he'd been hit.

All went pitch black. He could not move. Jade was enclosed by the dread of death, a harrowing, dark, cramped place, where he sat nose-to knee, fetal in his dire world that smelled a little like... polished leather shoes... And mildew tainted clothing?

Jade slightly wriggled, noticing his body was freer than he believed. He found himself kicking against boxes, and bumping into dusty coats – was he in the Pinto house closet? The path that had led him down into the bunker tunnels with the ice mirrors, where he had met Sloan?

Jade tried to stand, but stumbled, noticing a sudden strange hum in his ear, caused by a mic piece wrapped around his jawline. It made no sense as to how it got there, but the headset clapped before a staticy, unwholesome voice came through.

“... Do you read? Sending... Northwest... coordinates..... Cover! I repeat! TAKE COVER!”

Just then the line went dead, and the eerie wave of silence filled with a pealing charge of energy, which nearly wiped out Jade’s patience.

It came.

The loudest gore of a noise that Jade had ever experienced, came bombing down as the most atrocious sound Jade had ever heard in his life. It rumbled the ground, it rattled his bones, and Jade knew for sure this time, it must have been the end...

For what seemed like a trillion years, Jade sat in this seismic noise while the door of the closet gradually cracked open. When all was over, Jade finally, *finally*, opened his eyes to a bright white light, glowing through the wedge of the ajar door. Wisps of little glittering pale flakes wafted through, unknown if they were snowflakes or ashes. The fragrance of dust-encrusted fabric hung in the immediate air, but the small breeze that curled in from the outside held not the stench of a bombarded landscape, but a sea breeze... Jade climbed to his shaking legs and crept like a creeping thing towards the light...

The wooden door creaked as he pulled it open, stepping onto a floor of white sand sprayed with blue-gray river rubble, smooth and round. The horizon could not even be interpreted – the world was just a blinding white glare that could not be penetrated by the naked eye.

Was this pure white glow still of the heavenly kind? Jade could not say, as he knew this was still the resulting aftermath of some awesome destruction... And there was something compelling about it.

He desperately wanted to know what had just occurred in this place, but he was falling back to the earth...

Jade was still flat out on the dirt under the setting Sun with faces hanging over his mentally paralyzed body.

He'd only lost consciousness for a minute or so. People's voices were still hollow, but he could at least recognize Sloan's uneasy chant: "*Stan? Stan?*"

Jade squirmed in protest as Fang treated him for shock – but how useless that was if the injury was melting him into an unrecognizable lob of carbon as the world watched on!? Jade still couldn't make words leave his lips, but he sat up, keeling weakly under the pain of a minor burn in his side – *not* a grotesquely furrowed hole like he fantastically dreaded it to be. It was in fact, more painful and humiliating to have been stripped to the waist by the most feared superior on camp. Jade was close enough to smell the coffee and tobacco in Fang's breath, his harsh hands still on Jade's neck, taking his pulse. Jade could see the youthful creases in Fang's face... He couldn't have been any older than he himself... Afraid to meet Fang's gaze, Jade instead looked to his buddy, Sloan, whom smiled with unrestrained relief.

The hit that quite possibly should have supplied Jade his last day on the planet, was instead an injury that was simply cleaned and dressed. He was released from duties for a rest, but now that the accident was done, Fang returned to his diabolical self.

"Not a word of this to anyone. I shall be with you soon... And you will come to know what business you have with the title of Stan A. Solve. Onward." And he poked Jade with the butt of his rifle. Now was probably not the time to ask for his dog tag back, so he kept marching forward with Sloan at his heels. When Jade turned to Sloan, there was horror in his big green eyes.

"It was my fault! I dropped it! It was unlocked! I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!" Like a little child, he had a good cry, but then instantly elated for whatever reason. "Do you realize what this means, Stan?!"

Jade forgave the infantile creature, but chose to listen to his feet. A few paces ahead, he collapsed into bed with a soft thud and slept hard.

He would hear about it later.

When Jade awoke a few hours after, he half expected to wind up back in his original reality.

The thought of being home and not trapped in the violent consciousness of Camp Pinto sounded like bliss today, but he did not get his wish. He was still in his dusty little bunk, bandaged, and mentally bulldozed. Groggy from his adrenaline crash, he slowly raised himself and sighed... It was time to assemble the willpower to go face Fang in the private of his remote office and admit that he, Jade Jewel, was not cut out for the army, and did not have the strength to rescue the long, lost Lave Santos.

As he entered the cookery, Jade was relieved to see that he would not be going alone. Sloan and Elsie were draped across the mess hall seats, awaiting Jade. Seeing that he finally showed, each jumped up in their own fashion.

“Can you walk?” Elsie offered a soft hand.

“Yeah.” Jade said, only wanting to avoid touching someone else’s girl.

“We’re going to talk to-”

“Yeah, I know.” Jade assured the two whom sidled him with raised brows at one another. They walked Jade like body guards through the mess hall out into the sunny midnight, casting bold shadows as they trudged towards Fang’s little Victorian home on the range... And passed it by.

“Wait, where are we going?”

“Shh! I didn’t think you knew-:” Elsie smiled nicely, continuing to amble towards the old bunker prison. Nobody spoke anymore until they were concealed inside. There were torches lit for the purpose of human sight, certainly nothing to do with warming the already frying prison.

It was late. The dog, which lie chained and feeble, only growled weakly at the newcomers. Shinka sat fatally in her favorite corner, a state of stasis having hold of her. Mr. Agnes looked dead in his cell, but luckily, Sloan, whom was far-sighted, bumped into the wall, moving Mr. Agnes to briefly glance up with an acute aliveness. He rolled his sleepy eyes and went back to bed.

Elsie then led the group up to a concrete wall, where she deliberately pushed a stone “button” unearthing an ice mirror, which the threesome filed into. Inside, was the interior of a house, a mudroom that opened into a living space where old, chartreuse divans surrounded a darkly stained coffee table, all positioned atop hand-woven Indian rugs. There were oak, glass-doored bookcases filled to their brims in the backdrop, and the creaking wood floors led one either down into a dark basement, or up a well-crafted stair way to where an uncomfortably dry, fire was burning in the second story fireplace. The kids took the stairs toward the flame-lit room above, treading tenderly, where at the top, Sloan and Elsie walked shamelessly across the exotic carpet. Jade paused to embrace the space with caution; a large leather, feather-stuffed armchair hung over a hard wood desk surrounded by walls decorated with important faces, bearing metaphysical witness to all who came into this place.

Another huge mirror hung over the fireplace mantle, giving the room the illusion it was more breathable than it actually was – but not for long.

Fang turned his throne around, piercing Jade with an inescapable gaze. He smiled. “Welcome Jade Jewel. Thank you, loves.” He acknowledged the princess and the pauper. Smoke was still leaving his lips as he said this. He placed a crystal ball back on it’s stand, tapped his cigar on the ashtray, and lastly disposed of his cap in respect of his guests. He offered Jade to sit, while the others were content to stand; Sloan was in need of pacing. The gathering was opportuned tobacco, alcohol, tea, coffee, and chocolate, but all was refused, except for Sloan, whom took a cigarette.

Jade grasped the whole situation with high suspicion, making Fang chuckle.

“Not one to trust an artist of war? I like that, I like that a lot... “ And he took a gulp of his liqueur.

“What do you want from me?” Jade rushed to get out of here.

“Unfortunately,” Fang began. “quite a bit I want from you. I’m about to ask, for more than I’ll ever be worth.” He pulled a leather bound book off the shelf, flopped it onto the desk, and opened it to the exact page he needed. All the sudden, Jade recognized the book, it was a book he’d read in the library back at school, when he was looking to identify Lave Santos. Jade was incredulous of the book, but Fang remained sheer.

The fat, live, snake draped around Fang’s neck was beginning to slither down his arm onto the table. It’s tongue flickered eerily in the contrast of shadows and firelight. Jade swallowed wearily. Fang smiled more.

“It’s admirable that you got this far, Jade Jewel, but did you ever come to the conclusion of what exactly you were participating in?”

Jade had not. Was it not too late to question? Jade had a feeling this was not what Fang was giving him the opportunity to do.

“This book, is filled of lies. Let one tell their own tale from their own lips, in their own words. Lave Santos never fought in any wars – none you know of, that is. His family didn’t die of yellow fever, he didn’t grow old, he didn’t even die... but you know that.”

Fang ardently tossed the book into the fire.

“You came chasing after a man your reality proclaimed dead, not of your time, not of your place. You remote viewed him, telepathized, and watched his ghost wander from the past into your present. How and why did you ever believe these hallucinations were true?”

At first, Jade had no answer, but he then recalled seeing Lave’s “ghost” for the first time.

“All I knew was that I could feel someone out there, and that someone was in a lot of pain. I didn’t know what to do about it, but I guess I kinda just followed the bread crumbs... “

“And then made it this far. *That*, is the gut I want you to trust.” Fang said solidly. He began his request, sparing no preparation.

There was this thing called the Triple Threat project, or T.T, which consisted of four men carrying out separate tasks belonging to the same mission. Code names are given to each unit in coordination with which of the four parts they play: The Mind, whom is in charge of intelligence, mapping, and the surmising of plot twists. The second piece, The Body, is the trooper, the one moving space to space, courageously carrying out physical tasks, eliminating obstacles, and grinds. The third piece, the Spirit piece, works out the psychic tasks. The fourth piece, is simply bait, an extraneous partaker whom holds a code name to drag enemies away from the true action and often towards their own doom. The meaning of code names were for the team’s own use over radio or psychic lines; it gave forewarning as to how each player would move when individually deployed.

The Triple Threat quartet had already been distributed with great success – until the day it’s communication lines went black, temporarily marking the T.T project as failed, and therefore, Mission Medallion, the same. The only member to return to Camp Pinto was the scruffy Sloan, who played the Spirit piece because of his modest psychic abilities.

“But now we know where our trooper is,” Fang assured. “Lave Santos is trapped in Skullgully, and whatever his detriment, it blocked his reception back to T.T.”

Fang then reached over to his inkwell for a dip. Pulling a parchment from his stash, he wrote boldly and slowly to give Jade a chance to understand what he was about to test him at – He slid the paper across the table with three names painted on it’s surface:

Lave Santos

Stan A. Solve

Sloan E. Vast

“What are these three names a code for?”

After a long silence, Jade was rosy with embarrassment – but then it clicked.

“They can be rearranged to spell one another’s name... It’s a sign they belong to the T.T project?”

That was obvious, but Fang didn’t bother deflating Jade there. Sloan stepped into the spotlight.

“The secret to the Triple Threat ensemble is thats the Body, Minds, and Spirit pieces are immortal.”

Jade kind of laughed.

“No, it’s true.”

“Convince me.”

“You just got hit by an energy weapons did you nots?”

“How am *I* Immortal?”

“You tell me! You smelleted immortal the day I found you! So you tell me how and whened you gots it!”

“I don’t know! That’s the truth, I don’t know... I don’t even know that that’s true.” Jade was glancing at faces for help. None offered any clues until Sloan shuffled.

“One can become... *preserved*, by the aid of a Sky Medusa – so I hear anyway... There are historical documents of medusine gifting other organisms with their healing blood. But mark me word, Prince Chuck, Mr. Solve *came* with the stench to Camp Pinto.”

Fang was more than pleased to hear that Jade’s “immortality” was pre-Pinto, and thus, Pre-destined.

No one was perturbed that they did not wrap up the story of how Stan became eternal – it was evidently satisfactory without conclusion, though Jade did not feel the same.

“So let me be clear...” Jade strained for breath. “If I can’t die – what exactly does this mean for me?”

The crowd was quiet. It was a “hear a pin drop” moment.

Fang picked up his retreating snake and dropped it back around his neck like a feather boa.

“Nothing.” Fang breathed. “It means absolutely nothing.”

He cleared his throat at the sound of his own ultimatum.

“On that note, Jade Jewel, are you still willing to accept the title of Stan A. Solve? Will you fill in for T.T.’s missing member and take on the responsibility of recovering our lost Lave Santos?”

Jade’s gears groaned and grappled in his head, but even with all of this machinery running, he felt like there was nothing to lose... Quite literally, he had nothing to lose.

“I accept.”

Fang’s smile was slow to curl.

“Let’s see to that, Stan A. Solve.”

CHAPTER 6

LAUNCH

The scheme had been established, the plot laid out: Lave would still play T.T's Body piece, the trooper, and though he wasn't doing much grinding kicking around Skullgully, Fang kept him as this piece for future instruction. Sloan remained the Spirit piece, and Jade was given the part of the mind.

"But... I'm not that smart." Jade complained. "I don't know if you can trust me with that-"

Fang shook his head softly.

"Well you're going to have to hell with it, as I, will be purusing around here as the bait. Don't suppose you care to trade places with me?"

"You don't really come off to me as the bait type."

"Flattering" Fang blinked above a sweet smile - he'd made his mind up that all would go according to plan.

But Sir Charles Renkins thought not.

In the safe, luxurious two-story of Captain Fang's living quarters, Sir Charles stared narrowly out the dusty window, surveying the poor contents of Camp Pinto. His inert eyes pierced, his mustache twitched, and his forehead wrinkled under the pressure of a bloody decision... With every breath that he breathed, he never thought he'd be planning to demote his most dependable man - Fang. Prince Charles Shasta Tamaki Renkins Jr., his own son.

The very man whom sat leg-over armrest, lopsided in all his cool confidence, swirling a glass of red wine before inviting his lady to sit in his lap.

No, Charles had never doubted this sure-footed, entrepreneurial moxi-drunk hooligan in all his life... but times were changing, and those times were now.

“That boy is an anomaly, I feel it in my bones.” Charles said hoarsely, putting an end to the lip wrestling taking place in his un-ideal background.

Fang showed no alarm, and simply waved at Elsie to accept a pause. Fang, still with glass in hand, gestured boredly to his Father.

“The kitchen boy?”

“He knows Santos like the back of his hand... It disturbs my peace.”

“Peace? I didn’t know you had such the thing, your majesty.” The prince toyed, knowing he could soften the tenseness with this age-old game. He kept smart though, and threw in a pint of concern.

“about Santos – did Conway find out something more?”

“No, I just can’t fathom the words spoken when he arrived... All that nonsense about *Solve*... I haven’t slept since.”

Now they were in deep water.

“Camp Pinto has always been the perfect ploy for lost boys. I’m sure our little Stan A. Solve will fit in eventually, we’ve cracked tough nuts before, and this one, I promise you, shall be no different.”

Charles just barely heard all of Fang’s sweet guarantees as he enshrouded the present with a burning past. A past where, he, Sir Charles Renkins, was king of all lands, and he ruled with the most powerful alliance by his side – the female sky medusa, Shinka, whom he swore loved him beyond all other believable things... And then betrayed him beyond all believable things; A story that was purely all in his head.

How he *loathed* her now. How he hated that she ripped the rug from underneath him, all for a concept of freedom – to go back to her people and break every promise made of a glorious future where humans and sky medusa walked the earth together.

But no, his beautiful son now sat imprisoned in a big, red, decorated, Captain Fang costume, all in the name of what his own Mother took away from him; times of peace.

When he looked Elsie in the eye, he felt no different. Her Mother too, had destroyed the Renkin's life, and her sky medusa Father was out there somewhere seeking nothing less. Both of these half-breeds could have sat at the top, if it were not for those two women. And so they instead sat here, subjected to a future of a dying dream's labor - rebuilding worlds.

Sir Charles was just about losing his mind over his twisted reverie, as the two supposed victims of his crumbling vision ironically giggled in ecstasy in his perfectly inexcusable background. His ultimate goal in life was to unite sky medusa and humanity - and the fact that the prince was mad in love with another half-breed meant that he had succeeded beyond anyone's wildest imagination in an existence that believed sky medusa to be extinct - but a man like him would never be able to perceive this, even if he washed his eyes in the pool of Siloam.

Charles excused himself, as he did not care to lose his temper here, where Fang was lost in tickling Elsie's eyelids with kisses.

They could hear Charles meet the messenger in the hall way, but could not make out what was said to the poorly treated servant. Charles's messenger was much like an abused parrot - for years Charles believed Sloan could only mimic what he heard and witnessed with no intellectual impartation.

Fang didn't bother straining to hear the secret telegram to home base, because he knew that the bobble head doll would gladly tell him later.

Meanwhile, in his last few moments alone with Elsie, he told her how he loved her as if it were the end of the world, then sent her away to safety, deeply praying he'd make a harmless return to her by next week. The prince always tried to make sure he did not needlessly worry his love, but she was too sharp for that...

It wasn't but fifteen minutes later that Sloan reappeared in Fang's office door and over-boiled with a shout.

“Your Father’s going back to head quarters. He intends on sending personal hitmen after any suspicious activity. He’s planning on pulling your position at Pinto - Jade is in grave danger!”

Captain Fang had taken his Father’s place by the window, still with wine glass in hand. He dug his grasp into the fragile wall, peeling back it’s “fabric”, and steepled his fingers before punching the glass case in his way. He delicately pressed the button that lit up a holographic touch-screen. A million pop-ups were disintegrated with a swipe, and he then forced the computer to display the forbidden keypad. He wrote a memorized code into the box, and it accepted. The screen disappeared, and another part of the wall collapsed in, revealing a huge lever. Fang laid his hand on it, making Sloan wince.

“Your insane, y’ knows that.” Said the individual on Camp, who everyone thought was a lunatic.

“Don’t tell me things I already know.” Answered the man who everyone thought was a genius.

He mashed the lever down and drained his glass.

Since the agreement to be part of T.T, Jade no longer worked the trivial duties he now longed to have back. His responsibilities were discreetly replaced with the training required for the Skullgully rescue mission – Mission Santos. There wasn’t time for much else, but when Fang did dismiss Jade, he spent every precious moment with Shinka and Mr. Agnes, fretting about where his life was going, and what would happen if he were to live forever – an idea, to Jade, that was spookier than death itself, especially in a dimension that so far, only boasted images of war into it’s destined future. He’d originally been stoked to be right about Lave all along, but now he began to grieve his fate as the soldier-contracted Stan A. Solve. It felt like a trap.

While other men got to ring the bell, Fang made it a forbidden walk for Jade.

“I just don’t see how I was meant to do this... I didn’t ask to be a hero, I only wanted to lend a helping hand... This is the first time I’ve ever shot a gun, pulled a punch... Who am I fooling?”

“And if you fell into someone else’s steps?” Shinka answered. “Did you not say to me how you fought everything around you in a slavery back home?”

She was talking about his academy: Being in school!. It was a strong word, but Jade didn’t bother correcting her.

“True, but war is a lot different, even I can tell that much.”

“But if you fight for your life there, you’ve been in war, past. You already in battle, you already a soldier, I thinks.”

“But-”

“Well y’ can’t tell me yer notta victory-hungry warrior on the prowl to awaken the sleepers. So shutcher amateur mouth and start breeding some integrity.” Mr. Agnes interrupted the private conversation.

Shinka’s eyes moved at him. His chained wrists shot up.

“Hey, I’m just tellin’ the kid how it is.”

Shinka gave her lovely worldly laugh, humanly shaking her head.

“Quantum scientists, think they know everything.”

Mr. Agnes coyly saluted from his dark cell.

Suddenly there was a great rumble from in the distance...

Shinka’s ear swiveled in ponderment, her eyes set wide as usual. Mr. Agnes sluggishly glanced up, and Jade paused. The Akita stood, braced to bark.

The grumbling roared once more, this time, shaking the solid old bunker, causing Jade to trip as he scrambled for the exit.

“I’ll go see what’s going on-”

Whap!

Jade smacked straight into Sloan whom barely recovered before spewing his out-burst of a warning.

“Captain Fang demands us immediately! ASAP!” Sloan tugged on the hesitant Jade. The shock of it all caused Jade to raise a hand, for he had not been sold on his eternity. He still felt like a soul in a singular body, whom could not be dragged around the universe, lost, forgotten, never to be seen again. According to his beliefs, he was still a mortal... And even if he did live to tell his tale, would he be telling any familiar faces? Would he see any of his friends ever again?

Reading his flying mind, Shinka raised her honey-scented aura, urging Jade to trust.

“You come once to this place on dream, you can leave it on dream, come back to it on dream, no one can miss what never was, but we can feel what always is. I shall always be, as you will always be.”

Her words weren’t clear, but her essence was easy to breathe. Jade sighed. In the wordless language he’d spent so much time practicing, he said goodbye - a heart-wrenching wash of sorrow and love. She understood the “sentence”, returning “words” just as fierce. He would always be a treasured friend of hers’.

He turned.

“Goodbye Mr. Agnes.” Jade said.

“See y’ round, kid.”

Jade turned to Sloan as the walls shook once more.

“Right, let’s go.”

They set to running, when Sloan recoiled a moment from his gazelleish stride. He put his cap off, and his guard down, his funny gaze dipped in humbleness.

“You’ll see to freedom, Shinka, marks my words, but the stars hasn’t says when. The gods have a plan though, please believe.” And with that, he disappeared after Jade.

The two could hardly run on the trembling surface of Camp Pinto. Buildings were being shaken down – the cheap structures squealed as their metals were twisted. Some men were running out of buildings, while others ran into those still standing.

Amidst the chaos, it suddenly hit Jade – where was Truesdale? He couldn't just leave the blind man blundering about.

“TRUUSSDALLLE!” Jade called across the dusty disaster in front of him. Sloan nabbed Jade by the collar.

“Yous don’t have time!”

Out of the flurrying dirt, dodging cracks in the sand stone pavement, Fang came barreling towards his targets in a loaded, armed, vehicle, expecting the soldiers to hitch themselves to the moving machine. They grabbed hold, pitched themselves in, but were instantly thrown back in their seats after Fang hit the gas to what seemed like 100 mph. Recovering his balance, Jade seized the back of Fang’s seat.

“I thought this was supposed to be a matter of stealth?!” Jade coughed over the roar of the sand spray.

“Every crisis is an opportunity!” Fang quoted, even though he was the one who set the detonation off.

By this time, the “earthquake” had done it’s worst, and Jade found himself questioning the destruction around him – it was unrecognizable – not just the devastation, but the “peeled canvas”... some kind of bizarre fabric that had tore away from the splits in the ground. Beneath it, lie glimmering titanium panels... It could have been the discovery of cellophane all over again.

From somewhere on camp, an emergency signal began to blare, and a robotic voice tolled out a list of precautionaries – Pinto’s secret was disclosed – but no, this technological castle was still not what Sir Charles called sitting on top of the world.

The impostor earthquake began to exhaust into small moans, making Fang hit the pedal even harder. Sloan ducked and Jade could see why – Fang was intent on ramming

through Camp Pinto's gates. The man whom stood guard was starkly confounded when Fang did not respond to the traffic protocol. He blasted through the barriers, busting lasers and electrical as he went, leaving the system to dramatically blow up behind them. Something caught fire.

Fang tipped his hat to the floored gentleman at the gate and laughed.

"Damian, he's been trying to catch me drunk for years."

The last of their grand escape from Pinto ended with the truck slapping into the mysterious magic canvas; ripping down the constant sunset that Jade had grown so unfond of.

Jade gaped at the sapphire sky... There was still a dry desert before them, but now, Jade could see everything for what it was; the golds, and red sand, the gray and green juniper, the porcelain clouds, and the quenching, almost blinding-blue sky.

Wind whistled in their ears beside the deafening top-speed spray of rubble. Fang's eyes were fixed on the invisible road, guiding them head-long into a mesmerizing noon Sun, which pulsated with the land – but this was no illusion of freedom. Fang was well-aware they were an obvious cheetah, whose hunt took form of a streak of dust, shooting into the open wastes of Camp Pinto's front yard. Without a glance, Fang handed a brass monocle over his shoulder. It's quality Pinto design included that of a grafted hummingbird.

"Any stragglers?"

"None." Sloan said, after taking the apparatus in such a way Jade didn't get the chance.

"Aren't you tracked?" Jade queered, recalling what Mr. Agnes had said of Sloan being chipped.

"No worries! I ate it! We waited for this moment for six years! Whadaya thinks me gonna do?!"

Jade wasn't certain what he meant, but asked no further.

They soon arrived at the foot of a small town, consisting of a school house, church, general store, stable, bar, and trading post. A few Victorian homes sat where the mesas peacefully back-dropped them. Cattle wandered the distant planes, while chickens walked underfoot in the town's dirt roads. The children were first to burst through the doors, throwing down their chores to go greet the heroic, high-officer from Camp Pinto. Boys in caps and breeches, and girls in cotton bonnets and dresses, chanted after Fang as he stepped out of the vehicle. He fondly pat a child on the head when they came too close. Parents peered outside from the porches.

“Not today, my little friends. Where's Ginger? I've a request, we've got a red alert-”

While the children went to find Ginger, the head rancher, Sloan and Jade were instructed to unpack the mobile while Fang worked the crowd.

Soon, a rather tall, blond, gray-eyed cowboy in blanched buckskins and a bleach cowboy hat, emerged from the fluttering heat. He did not stop his long, calm, stride, but tossed the Captain a ribbon from around his neck; Jade caught a glimpse of the toothy, golden key.

Fang hasped it around his own neck and stuffed it under his collar as he followed Ginger's lead.

“I'll take the palominos or chestnuts if they're fresh. Hide my clunker well, Pinto's bound to get giddy if they find it here.”

Ginger didn't stop, he just approached the stable and began tacking. Jade and Sloan fell into his rhythm.

“Don't worry about that tin bundle,” Ginger zipped the bridle buckles with finesse. “just put it out with the cattle and let them aliens suck it up, never to be seen again. You'll be gone without a trace, no?”

“That'd be great – if Pinto were not the “aliens”.” Fang barely cracked a smile. Ginger chuckled heartily.

The three departed on horseback, the townspeople waving off the gallant heroes as they dashed into the sparse juniper forest. Aside from the whirling, giant juniper trees, their trail was surrounded by cacti, sage, and pinion shrubs, causing one to taste a floral note in their mouth, but above that, Jade could smell danger.

He leaned into the silence of the horse's hooves crunching in the stone, waiting for Captain Fang to say something... But he never did. He supposed Fang would better inform them once they got to Skullgully.

The horses worked hard for the destination, the first highlight being the daring leap over the fallen saguaro in their path. While Sloan was almost thrown off his steed, Jade hardly held on. Fang of course, guided his mare like a champion show jumper, and did not drop speed once on the other side.

Then came the cliff.

Jade just trusted his golden mustang to take the plunge for him. The aerials soon ended as the three came upon the open range. Again, another long silence, with a hint of urgency that Fang did not speak on.

Jade now saw an antique house coming into view, but this one sat alone in the desert, a hermit of a building, standing like a sage in all it's mysterious freedom. It was this very house the men found themselves pounding up the steps of.

Fang led the way, dipping inside and leaving the door wide for his dogging boys, but as soon as they entered, he shut the door hastily, double-bolting it with a much-practiced speed.

“Up you go.” He insisted them towards the second story. Jade had no time to admire the gorgeous 1800s mansion, but he knew if there was anything to criticize it for, it was the squeaking floorboards that may have given under their weight at any second. At the top of the stairs was a room fit for a king – whatever king could handle the unreliable ground beneath his feet, that is.

Of all the enticing masterpieces and bits of treasure in the room, the mirror rested against the wall was the most grand. A clear, empty spot on the wall due to the mirror's dismantlement made it known that there was every intention to use it as a door to another world.

Fang went to the dresser in the corner, but instead of opening it, he pushed it aside, revealing seemingly nothing, but Fang took out his key from Ginger, using it as an insert to the obscured keyhole in the surface, to which, when turned, permanently crumbled the plaster of Paris around it.

Breathing deeply as he re-faced the boys, he held out the hidden object.

“When you find Lave, give him this. It is no longer safe here.”

There was a seizing of energy to acknowledge what exactly was resting in Fang's palm, but Jade, even before Sloan, reached out to take the box; A beautiful little golden box with intricate, curly-cue designs.

Jade took it slowly, as if it were a living thing.

There were a million questions in his mouth, but he knew he had no time to explain that he *knew this box*. He pocketed the precious thing as if reunited with an old acquaintance.

“When you get to the end of Devil's Bridge, there will be a passage where two large ice mirrors were used as a gate. Take the mirror *on the right* – Got it? Do not forget it.” He glanced gravely. Sloan gave a nod.

“I assume the rest of your supplies is in order then?” Fang tested.

“Yes Sir!” Sloan saluted, clearly loaded with a whopping pack and helmet.

“Good then. Go.”

“You mean you're not coming with us?” Jade stupidly realized.

“My dearest son,” Fang buttered, though he was too young to be the adolescent's Father. “remember that I, am just the bait... *Now go!*”

Jade nervously grasped the golden box in his pocket, hesitant to make his exit.

Sloan snatched him by the arm, and lifted off into the sleetish mirror that gave way to their physical bodies.

They were gone.

Fang stared at his own impressive reflection in the now still, mirror. He sighed.

“Good luck...” He bid them.

Suddenly his lids lowered to the unexpected, but familiar, clean smell of teak, wine, and exotic cologne.

Fang’s hand shifted to the pistol in his inner breast pocket, but Sir Charles Renkins had stepped into view of the reflecting mirror with not only the sound of a well-shoed footstep, but the charging of his prized high-tech hand weapon.

“What has gotten into you? I give you all my woes about the Jewel kid, and now you release him from captivity? And my messenger,” He roiled on. “Just where on earth do you think you are going to get me another? What’s in you’re head, Charlie?”

Fang continued to calmly stare into his own eyes in the mirror.

“I take every responsibility for these actions, my Lord, I have a consciousness of my own... But... Oh dear, an other-worlder and a young sky medusa now run amok the Gelicide clock. *How dangerous for we.*” He mocked sarcastically.

The gun clicked.

“What was in the wall, Charlie?” Charles pressed.

“A hand mirror of the Gelicide ice kind – for keeping in contact with me. I have the receiving hand mirror in my desk back at Pinto if you want to confiscate it.” He flourished the lie.

“That I shall. Turn around you fool.”

Fang turned heel, and as he did, the floor creaked with tension, making the silence all the more incredible. Sir Charles was literally centimeters away from blowing the young man’s brains out... But he was too valuable... Yes, that was it, he was simply too valuable...

Charles shot the mirror and lowered his gun. Turning it handle-up, he delivered a lightning-quick blow to the traitor's face, which split the skin and made him drool.

"That should negotiate this jubilee. Come, Captain Fang, let's see if we can still make use of you back at Camp." Sir Charles said so confidently, he began to turn his back.

Fang sighed with relief. He unveiled his pistol, and pointed it at his own head... The whites of his eyes glittered. He spat the excess blood in his mouth on the ground.

He now had his Father's undivided attention.

"Are you mad?" Charles spoke with wide, glistening eyes. "There are only so many who can wield the secrets of the Gelicide ice – don't close another door on me, Charlie."

Fang did not budge, but his shifted weight caused the shattered mirror's glass to crunch under his boots.

"Charlie—" Charles's dark eyes hardened. He leaned forward in such a way, Fang had to swap his target to his unpredictable Father.

Almost nonchalantly, the tracer from Sir Charles's weapon appeared on Fang's forehead. The two stood in stand off, eyes steeled, gears wrenching... It was an age-old game of Love-hate they could never seem to break. Both smiled.

A bloody bubble popped in the corner of Fang's mouth as the two broke into stoic laughter.

"You wish." Charles breathed, locking his gun and returning it to his coat. He finally gyrated to leave, and Fang raised his heavily booted foot as if to proceed with him – which did trick Sir Charles for a split second.

Fang brought his foot down on the meager floorboards with a smack.

He crashed through the floor.

Shocked, Charles ran to the cracked alteration and stared down. When the dust had filtered, he could see that the sly fox had reclined another ice mirror on the floor of the first story to "catch" him. And now, the treasonous boy roamed the universe without so much as a rightfully due sentence.

In a humiliated rage, Charles took the stairs, sauntered towards the offending mirror, hoisted it to his shoulder and began his stroll to the back door where his Pinto henchmen were waiting.

He would have assumed the look of a collected gentleman, clearing out his old apartment, but in his head, Charles boiled on about how he would take this ice mirror, and throw it into another, and then throw that mirror into another ice mirror, and then throw that one...

CHAPTER 7

ESCAPING PINTO

A mound of brick and concrete had fallen through the prison wall, bending bars on cells, and crushing chains. The once secured canine now yipped at the end of one cuff, a foot still snared, but escapable the moment he decided to take the painful plunge of ripping away.

After crawling from the rubble Shinka thought had buried him, Mr. Agnes walked free, instantly taking a stone to Shinka's electromagnetic binds, which fizzled dead after a savage smashing.

Shiny-eyed, Shinka flapped her naked wings happily at the dirty, huffing, puffing, man. "Come." Mr. Agnes said breathlessly, and they advanced into the prison hall unknowing the things that were transpiring above.

Truesdale growled as he removed himself from the debris. He had no idea where he was on camp after running in a blurred panic from the start of the disaster. He could hear peers out-crying in their own harms, some, evidently trapped under collapsed materials. Truesdale ignored them, figuring it was up to Pinto to rally up the scattered soldiers themselves.

Scrambling with a limp, Truesdale tried to collect his bearings through his other senses, which became irrelevant the moment he went crashing down into the darkness of the old bunker prison.

He had heard of the prison since arriving, and feared it from the beginning.

A Pinto educator had lectured Truesdale on the vileness of sky medusa – and the beastly man whom was taken hostage for protecting them.

But today, there was no one in earshot in the prison, no one but a large, intimidating dog, still gambling with it's chains.

It growled at Truesdale whom sat up in a rush to get out of this underground fortress. Being stuck in a pit with a mad scientist and a hellish creature was a terrifying thought to Truesdale, which made the possible idea that both had perished in the earthquake, a fantastic one – but this fabrication was untrue.

Truesdale noted the noise floating from the back of the bunker – although Truesdale could not interpret what was happening, a good pair of eyes would have rendered this; Fang's secret meeting room had been broken into, and the swinging stone door had not fully closed behind the alien and scientist, as a fallen rock was wedged in it's swivel. Lit only by fire, the room would have been snug if it weren't for Mr. Agnes's incessant, lunatic-worthy raiding. He was throwing everything into a bag – papers, maps, documents, instruments, Fang's luxuries. He forayed the drawers of the desk, which had locked away weaponry, ammunition, and embarrassing amounts of tobacco, liqueur, and coffee. There were boxes of emergency supplies and parchment in the wardrobe.

Then there was the chocolate.

So much, Mr. Agnes 's borrowed time could only haul away about one percent of it. Everything disappeared into his leather bag, which he slung to his shoulder when he deemed his plundering complete. All this while, Shinka had been doing her own searching, stopping only when she uncovered a peculiar crystal hanging on a sinew braid. Still half-binded, she had trouble putting it around her neck, so Mr. Agnes helped her by laying it around her shoulders with the quality of a crafty diamond jeweler. Satisfied with this secular treasure, she followed the pleased Mr. Agnes with a smile.

“Let's go.” He said in his soft gruffness.

On his rampage toward the exit, Mr. Agnes mercilessly ripped the last anklet off the struggling Akita, whom bolted ahead without a proper thank you.

Truesdale timidly withdrew as the bustle streamed past, but the demons inside him had gotten the best of him. He followed their footsteps to the surface, losing them in the daze

of Pinto's mid-reorganization. Tearing from the crime scene, he upsurged from the bunker waving his arms to attract the attention of the superiors.

“The prisoners are escaping! The prisoners are escaping!”

Upon hearing this, the dusty old Mr. Agnes only laughed.

CHAPTER 8

MISSION SANTOS

Strapped across the underside of a stone outcrop, the receiving mirror deposited the two soldiers onto the hard, cold, ground. Jade tripped into the icy puddle of rainwater on the depressed rock floor of the harrowing Skullgully.

Before even getting up, he could tell the environment had dramatically changed. There would be no more disparaging heat, no more light of a continually bearing down sunset, and no more company.

Skullgully was frigid, wet, and clammy. Here, where ever *here*, was, held a consistent, deep, but not dark, green sky. It sparkled with quartz stars, and three white moons, pale as plumeria blossoms. An intergalactic lime fog flavored the horizon.

These green heavens were richly moving.

It took a moment for Jade's eyes to adjust to the foreign lights, but when they did, Sloan was standing there, awaiting the same.

His globish eyes matched the verdant sky, and now, Jade could see that Sloan never was blind – his pupils had been so thin, like a cat's, they'd remained unseen in the blaring, permanent afternoons of Camp Pinto. Here, however, they adjusted to the dimness of the location, growing into huge, full circles, giving him an almost comical, but spooky, fish-like appearance.

Jade would have to get used to it.

He turned to the moonscape, blanched with a lunar-green glow and rocky purple shadows. Sloan stood, scanning the terrain with a dumb-founded glare.

“This is Skullgully then?” Jade grieved, putting on his hard hat.

“Mm...”

“You don't know?!”

“No, no, I know! Thised is Hades’ cliff, we still gots Adam’s Trench to cross beforde we gets to the true Skullgully ruins... Brace y’self, man, this’ll be unlike anything you’ve ever seen in your young, short, life.”

He began to lead the way down the craggy canyon wall, which compelled Jade to tentatively oblige.

It was only then Jade really began to reflect on everything he’d been trained for up til now. Fang had spoken of many potential dangers that entertained Jade’s imagination back at camp, but today, the likelihood of meeting these threats palpitated in Jade’s soul. Fang had educated Jade in the many kinds of animals, bandits, and barbaric cults who hid themselves in the stone crevices of Skullgully – just a few additions to the fact that he and Sloan would also be navigating unfamiliar flora, fauna, terrible weather, and the dreaded possibility of running into remaining enemies of Pinto – which Fang did not get the chance to detail.

Despite being a low-class member of Pinto, Jade was sure Sloan knew exactly who the enemies were, and now that Camp Pinto’s disguise had literally been ripped off it’s face, Jade felt he deserved to know, too.

“Sloan, what happened back there, at Pinto? You weren’t serious about that whole space-chase tale were you? ”

Just then, as they turned the corner, the two came about an old abandoned car.

Sloan was between being pleasantly surprised at the find, and deeply irked at Jade’s question. He neglected Jade’s concerns and gave the jalopyish vehicle a good, hard, kick in the rump. Briefly, the dashboard and headlights faintly glowed.

“Help me push this out, I thinks we can still works it.”

The derelict vehicle was from the battle of Skullgully, a long forgotten property of Camp Pinto’s, never retrieved. What perplexed Jade the most was it’s uncanny futuristicness – surely it could not still be juiced up by gasoline or electricity if it sat here all these years, but Sloan was “waking” it up with a good slogging.

Soundlessly, the headlights lit for good, “blinking” before activating the rest of its body. Cab-happy Sloan grabbed the wheel, punching in a few buttons as Jade climbed into the passenger’s seat. Sloan then spoke loud and clear.

“Vernon Shift, four, seventy two, doesd you read me?”

There was a beep, the click of a speaker, then a “female” robot voice that simply said: *Engaged.*

Sloan wasted no time and hit the gas. He almost drove like Captain Fang.

As they rocketed off, the GPS activated – Sloan smashed it with passion, which made the shabby mobile shudder.

By this time, Jade had almost forgotten his unheeded question. The speed of cutting through Skullgully’s damp air was chilling. The summits of the mountain range around them had grown eerie, like dark blue, purple, and black peaks of scratchy Christmas trees. Within them, Jade caught sight of his very first Skullgullian-wild life – a herd of ram-like creatures, none of which looked very feminine. Each individual had thick, spiraled horns, solid bodies, and a careful glare comprised of four, split-pupiled yellow eyes.

The rest of Hades cliff was a fairly smooth, but harrowing ride, cold, solitary, plantless, and hollow. Rats scattered as they drove on, leaving their feasts of unidentifiable carrion.

Seemingly bottomless pits cleaved the mountains, giving it it’s swirling, broken-glass appearance. It was convenient to be using the path pre-beaten by the past war, though Jade was positive they would not be so lucky the whole way towards the ruins. The peak of Hades cliff had a profound, dark cavity all around it, mist enshrouding it’s bottom – if it even had an end, that is.

The desolation and impurity of this rise had Jade sure that somebody was murdered here – which alarmed him more intensely when Sloan suggested they take advantage of the fresh water streaming against it’s stones. Before gulping the rare water, Jade said a

little prayer over it – he didn't expect it to do anything, but it somehow made it feel safer to drink. Sloan didn't seem to care either way.

Descending Hades cliff, Sloan reached into his coat to pull out his energy weapon, and handed it to Jade.

“We'll be entering Adam's Trench – Bandit country it was, not sure about these days, but we best beed prepared.”

Jade rejected Sloan's offer by picking up the gun Fang had appointed him.

“I'm better with the longguns.”

“Suit yourself.”

As nerve-wracking as the two hour drive down the trench was, the blue-black crevices of Adam's Trench never produced any thieves for them, however, they were in for a surprise as they reached the end of the pass. Sloan gradually came to a pebble-grinding stop in front of what looked like a hill of construction debris – someone had completely, and intentionally, blocked the passage.

“Well this aren't good...” Sloan stepped out of the machine, sniffing like a hound on the prowl.

“Is this an ambush?” Jade quickly deducted, bringing his longgun to a ready position.

“It was,” Sloan assured, nudging a stone with the toe of his boot. It created a puff of dust. “... six, maybe eight weeks ago.”

Jade sighed with relief, making Sloan smirk at the greenhorn.

“Chin up, I didn't says we was safe.”

Jade perked and looked around, but only the movement of Sloan's exploration took his eye...

Then he noticed the dribbling line of insects carrying tiny sheafs of leaf in their pincers...

“Sloan?”

“Yeh, what?” Sloan said, annoyed as he stepped back from studying the rubble.

“What is Camp Pinto really? Mr. Agnes told me there was a battle between humans and the sky medusa.”

Sloan cleared his throat, gave something of a snuff, and climbed back into the car, seating himself. He’d cringed the whole way before succumbing to the part he did not know.

“*Mr. Who?* Ah, never mind. Focus! Whatever Captain Fang taught us is all that matters now.”

He breathed noisily before his melon head tipped towards the borealic universe, still seeping through the trench’s open stone vein. He placed his hand on the large lever between them, and rammed the stick back. The vehicle shifted.

Beneath their bodies, the wheels were sucked below, replaced by several emerging mechanical insect legs, like a throne on stilts. The buggy robot went smashing over the collapsed rock.

Upstream, the midday moons scorched every inch of the canyon. What now lie before the two soldiers, was a flatland of cracked earth wedged between stone walls that could not be seen over, it was much like a crater with impact lines curled into a snarl.

The webbed bowl spooked Jade with an uncautioned explosion – scarcely missing him on the passenger side.

The old, baked plane popped with geysers.

While the wind did the freezing, the waterspouts boiled. Sloan did his best to avoid the wisps of nearby eruptions, but the spewing atmosphere misted down in stinging droplets.

The mechanical insect bulldozed through the crater and over; another piece of rocky mountain range, looking spectacularly deadly... The volcanic ground divided into purple chunks of terribly rich cake, crumbling from a molten chocolate that glowered with burning animosity. Beautiful but dangerous, Sloan fastidiously tramped over this violet mountain-scape rivering with the planet’s broiling blood.

When all finally seemed dried up, the two came about a plate of thin mountain top hammered down at the peak, creating a narrow, railless boardwalk that jutted hundreds of feet above the sea. Here, Jade saw no signs of life whatsoever – only signs of life that once had been – at the bottoms of the gorges, piles of bones lie at rest: the unfortunate animals and travelers that took missteps to their last days.

They'd made it to Devil's Bridge.

Sloan pulled over into the shade of an unparalleled stone formation, appearing a little more man-made than the rest of their current stone world.

"We go on footses from here." He told Jade, taking his luggage with him as he dismounted.

"Convert." He asked the machine. It went from robot-insect, back to being a four-wheel drive. It blinked its headlights sadly.

"Sit and stay." He commanded.

As soon as Jade unloaded his pack and weapon, the mobile creped after.

"No, bad car – park!" Sloan demanded. It slank back, and although it took a few seconds, it ultimately announced: *Shutting down.*

Sloan pranced in a couple circles as an internal compass overthrew him, magnetizing him to some destination to which his gun barrel acted as the needle. Jade didn't understand the need for this directional affirmation, until Sloan rounded the stone composition he'd parked the car beneath – the mountain fog had obscured two other bridges.

They took the middle one, beginning the long, treacherous walk.

A few minutes in, Jade let Sloan know what was still on his mind.

"I want the truth." Jade said seriously, hoping Sloan would take on the same attitude.

He was gazing into the steely reflection of his weapon as he slowed pace.

"Truth, eh?" Sloan thought for a moment. "Fine. The truth is, the Starbright were blamed for bringing the enemy to this world, that's why they were treated as the sushed

in later years, but, in-facted, any self-respecting sky medusa would says we did not cause the catastrophe done by the foes, but they did follows us back from our planet."

Jade remained quiet.

"Sky medusa were once welcome in most worlds, here, there, by humans, ferals, and mythics alike, until one day... *The giant, predatory, one-eyed woozle bugs came to get revenge on us all!*" Sloan's grin revealed his own carnivorous teeth as he reeled with laughter.

"*What the heck, Sloan?!*"

"Look!" Sloan insisted. "I'm as dumb as a rock, you know that. What if I just don't know about other mes? What if I'm just as alienated from my kind as you are of yours?"

Jade was shocked into automatic comparison. It was true. He could not say he knew his kind, much less understood them...

He strolled in the silence of the cool wind and ashy air. Unexpectedly, Sloan spoke again.

"Sir Charles discovered the sky medusa's rich world of resourceful land once upon a time, and ever since, war came upon the land and people. So dark as it were, you couldn't convince one to be part of it unless you brought demons into the picture. Camp Pinto becomes the institution to do the job, and no one has to know until you go up the ranks – or, of course, if Fang comes along and saves y' ass. As you may understand now, the Prince has different ideas thaned his psychopathic Father. Mission Medallion – the T.T. project, it was to change the royally-owned Pinto's course of actions, Fang wants to end the medusa wars. He wants to go home. Though when T.T failed, Fang's faith flagged, as did mine..."

"So what exactly is it that Pinto does?" Jade bribed.

"It's one big experimental factory out to produce people of whatever quality is needed next to win the ongoing wars. And if one doesn't get mind-controlled, Sir Charles feeds you to the giant woozle bugs, but that'ses a whole other rabbit hole."

"But what would Mission Medallion's success have brought?"

“Who knows, but let’s find out from a distance, shall we?”

“Do we have *any* idea what we’re doing?!” Jade began to feel the kindling of a wildfire.

“Depends on if you believed the shit that Fang feeds those he sees hope in. I do, but don’t take it from me, because I’m as dumb as a rock, you know.”

Jade stared. The moment was filled with unbought reality. Sloan finally sighed, rolling his huge eyes.

“Oh go make y’ bed.” He spat over his shoulder as he trekked on.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“One thing at a time. You only came to rescue Lave, right?”

Jade paused before wandering on... Sloan was right, Jade was already beginning to talk like he was a skeptic of the Mission they’d worked so hard to launch. They were denizens of Skullgully now, which was completely out of his hands.

With a clearer mind, Jade put one foot in front of the other...

The bridge went on forever, though every now and then the soldiers came upon a platform of path where guards used to take post with loaded cannons. These spaces at least had remnants of wall on them, making for a somewhat cozy nook to shelter beside as the breezes blew through the gelid night.

After a cold, canned meal, the boys laid out their sleeping bags before the moons were hidden behind the snow-bringing clouds. Each took a turn being on watch while the other slept with his gun.

It was a disconcerting, lonely sight.

Jade awoke Sloan in a craze, making the freshly woken Sloan jump up to duck Jade’s head down below the crusty brick wall. He straightaway recognized the very valid danger; The sound of a rasping, guttural cry of a bony, mealy, black lizard, that soared by

on thin-skinned, battish wings. It was covered nose-to-tail in thorny scales, and it's legs dangled like a wasp's as it searched for food.

Had Jade seen this before, he might have believed Sloan's woozle bug story – it was one of the most frightening things Jade had ever drawn his eyes upon.

When the monster was gone, Sloan volunteered to take Jade's watch early, but Jade swore he would not sleep. They decided to forfeit their rest to make progress instead.

Another frightful calamity stopped them within the same hour. Sounds like a cannon blast, thundered in the not so distant horizon.

Sloan assured Jade that it was a natural landslide, likely started by melting rivers in the twi-lit mountains. As the cloud drifts dissolved, they could see boulders and oceans of pebbles swallowing the cliffs, taking the massive four-eyed rams with it. Although the rock slide did not disturb their side of the trail, Jade could not help but fiercely ideate.

“What if Lave-”

“Then we dynamite it.”

“But Lave?!”

“He’s immortal is he not? What don’ts you understand about being immortal?”

“A LOT, Sloan!” Jade snapped. “What does it mean to you? What does it actually mean you can do?”

“Survive being crushed? Running through fire? Jumping from a plane without a parachute? Maybe, but that’s not important – *yet*. Right now, we’re in the middle of trying to rescue Lave, so let’s start acting like it.”

He ended on that note, and Jade was shattered.

What to believe? Was he safe in this world or not? Without knowing, he walked on, frightened by the whole galaxy that was smiling down on him in delight of his tender-footedness.

It was morning as they reached the end of Devil's Bridge, which was now surrounded with black hills veined by snow. They were close to consumed in the impenetrable, lofting wads of cottony clouds, but a crisp view of the world's third moon could be spied shining in white-gold through the inks and grays of the far-reaching quilts. They were about to enter the ruins.

Sloan now walked as if being stalked by a tiger. He sidled walls before entering pathways, which was utterly useless because Jade was as stark as a pearl behind him.

Both were expressionless to the grizzly, dark, isolated towers and demolished brick buildings smudged with burn marks. Irrecoverable cannons lie still. There was a sentimental wisp of snowflakes on the air, but the breeze still held the fragrance of smoke and fire.

Hauntingly godly, two humongous mirrors gaped out of the fog at their horrified faces.

This was it... The entrance to Skullgully.

Jade's partner mindlessly led Jade to the left – because Sloan didn't know his right from his left.

They stepped through the colossal ice door.

Sloan peered around, his ragged ear twitching. Jade's eyes remained open, but inconveniencing.

The Skullgully ruins were a wildly creepy place.

Stone stairs, wood ladders lashed with leather, and rope bridges rotted in it's framework, unbeknownst as to how much treading they'd handle in this age. There were incomplete skeletons wielding blades hung on the walls like limp party decorations, and barred dungeons could be found at every turn. Weird carvings were drawn into the architecture, as well as on the floors, but the most unforgettable of all, were the statues; life-size, black as coal, but with in-laid white marble eyes, blank and bleating into your weak spots with demonic features and violent poses. Some of the sculptures had lost

their heads or limbs in the bombing of the war, adding depth to their bleakness... But the soldiers were not here to sightsee – the show had to go on.

While Jade felt dodgy about the ladders and rope crossings, those that remained usable, or at best, lendable, carried Jade and Sloan just fine. It was a stone stairway that shot a tingle through Sloan's spine.

His hand shot up at Jade whom was leading the way.

“*Stan, WAIT-!*”

The cobble buckled beneath Jade. He was going down, and fast.

Unthoughtfully, Jade ditched his weapon to grab hold of a nearby rusted chain hanging from the fort wall – it snapped.

He caught another – it left him stranded in the stale air.

Jade did not look down – but if he did, there was nothing but bricks and bones at the bottom of the dreary gorge.

Sloan instantly dropped his pack, dug in, and produced a rope, which he knotted and lassoed towards Jade. It landed around his neck. Jade didn't really know how to go from there.

“Uh, Sloan?” Jade sweat. Sloan took it back up and tried again.

“Gimme y' foots!”

Jade strained to put his leg out and Sloan lassoed his booted ankle in one try. He pulled it tight and wound the rope on a boulder in addition to still holding the life line with two hands.

“Alright, lets go!”

“Are you sure?!”

“*What part of immortal don't you understand?!*”

Jade let go with an exasperated wail. His eyes shut by second nature. He was turned over and swung by one foot, briefly scraping his body against the wall, which ripped open his pack, allowing his supplies to fall to their doom.

Sloan, though smaller and disabled, pulled him up with haste. When Jade was sturdy on the ground again, both took a breather and wiped the sweat from their brows and mouths.

“Thank you, Sloan.”

He said nothing, but his genuine eyes told Jade all he needed to hear.

Shaking off the event, the boys set off in a different direction, leaving Jade to wonder if Sloan really did believe in immortality.

Or perhaps more importantly, if Fang had lied...

CHAPTER 9

LAVE'S RECOVERY

It came time that the two finally reached the prison pit, a large, trashed aquifer dried to the ivory, and filled with that very thing: Bones. The place was built of blue and ebony bricks, except for the occasional patchwork stuffed with plain, chalky, chips of remnant marble, which attracted cockroaches and snakes. The space was grimy and dotted with flocks of vulture-inspired creatures, still picking at victims of the deep pit – animals that fell over the wall and could not escape.

Skullgully had death written all over it – but a gleaming voice caught Jade's ear – Lave was calling them.

He Rved pictures of where he could be found; There was a large, smooth stone that jutted impressively toward the sky. At it's feet, was a spiny pile of rubble with small depressions surrounding it. The puddled, sooty waters mimed reflections of the cloudy, emerald weather. The vivid rock reminded Jade very much of the monumental stone back at Donogan Academy, where he'd first seen Lave's ghost.

Jade's momentum puckered, looking west of where he and Sloan stood. Sloan turned too.

"This way." Jade paced heavily into the infectious prison-scape.

Just as he'd seen in his mind, the duo stumbled into the spike of stone surrounded by a black-water lake front. As Jade and Sloan ran up to the land mark, rats and other vermin scattered across the floor. It could clearly be read that someone had made the dump pile into a campsite; A patched canvas, slicked with fat to water-proof it, had been thrown over the rocks and pinned down to create a very sorry shelter. Tins and remains of a camp fire were washed away into stagnant puddles that reeked like spoiled tannin water, tell-tale that there had been a very bad storm in the area maybe only days ago.

“Lave!?” Jade called as he stamped straight through the pooled rain. “Lave?” He glanced around. He circled the stone pile, stopping in front of the tent.

“Lave?” Sloan cried as if lovingly calling for a beloved pet.

No one answered.

Jade approached the shelter, dreading what he might see as he pulled the canvas flap aside... There was a bundle of bedding, which Jade further peeled back to discover a skinny, filthy, rag-wearing creature that could have been mistaken for a fossil.

The young Sky Medusa recoiled with a whimper, leaving Jade to inspect the body... Lave was not dead, but he was truly unnatural looking. Covered in soot to conceal himself from Skullgully’s dangers, Lave breathed at about one breath a minute, sleeping as deep as a caterpillar in a cocoon.

Jade slung off Sloan’s borrowed pack, yanking it open for a can of broth. He popped it open with his utility knife, and crept into Lave’s make-shift bed room to scoop up Lave’s limp skull. His untended hair was longish and thick with lice. Feeling liquid against his lips, Lave opened his mouth and Jade let him drink for as long as he would. Then that was it. There was no pumping life into him just like that.

Jade had to ask himself; *Was this really what immortality looked like?*

It was not the reunion Jade had expected – there were no hugs, happy tears, laughing or crying, angels singing, or fireworks. All was quiet, and Jade couldn’t help but fill the void.

“Please Lave, we need you. Don’t leave us, we came all this way just for you...” Jade said as he re-wrapped Lave with their last, clean, flealess sleeping bag. He slowly rose from his squat and met Sloan’s eyes, spooked, but disproving of Jade’s words.

“What part of immortal don’t you understand?”

Jade’s eyes watered as he went on to scrap together a camp fire with whatever was left in their pack.

“I hope I understand nothing.”

Sloan paused for a moment, but finally turned his back to go collect fire wood.

Jade had instantly gotten the message that this part of their journey wasn't going to be as vibrant an adventure as the rest of their mission.

Hunkered down in the lone, drab, Skullgully with a helpless boy to protect and take care of, Jade realized he only had two things to rely on; Sloan and himself.

It was here Jade had to reflect on everything in his mental tool shed and muscle memory, but it felt like his instincts knew just what to provide; Jade would guard camp and nurse Lave while Sloan would hunt fire wood and seek prey. This plan worked well, and both worked hard.

"Here." Sloan lended Jade an object he had smuggled into Skullgully. It was a red and gold Japanese fan.

"What do I do with *this*?"

"Use it to air the fire. Won't waste y' breath that way."

Jade cracked a little smile.

While Sloan was gone, Jade pulled Lave out of the decrepit hut, lying him by the roaring fire for warmth as he routinely stripped him from his bedding to shake out the biting insects. One of the first things Jade committed to, albeit, awkwardly, was give Lave a down-to-the-scalp shave to relieve his horrid case of lice. A soft "bath" removed the caked up soot on his body, and the continual sipping of broth added liveliness to his eyes.

Lave's breath kept changing rhythm.

For the first two days, Jade and Sloan fasted to be sure the remaining food that was packed would be plenty for Lave. This didn't affect Sloan at all, but by the second night, Jade had dragged through the day with a headache. That day, it had also begun to rain; A light sprinkle that turned into snow. Jade was unable to safely clean up Lave as usual, so

the pests returned, leaving Jade with the astonishing realization that he could be driven mad by something as insignificant as a flea.

On the third day, things were looking up. Sloan came back with a fortune; A large antelope for supper, and Jade's lost shotgun, which was still in exercisable condition. Sloan immediately skinned and cut the animal, shoving raw bits into his toothy grin as he worked.

Jade cooked the rest, broiling Lave's portion into a soft mash to get him started on something more than broth. Spoon feeding Lave was an agonizingly slow process, though it did not try Jade like the persistent vermin did – it was only sad to watch Lave fight to do something as simple as eating. On the bright side, once Sloan was bringing back real meat, Lave wanted more. He weaned quickly, and his flesh began plumping out again. His baby-blue eyes opened more, and his raw throat had enough energy to cough.

Sloan intensified the hunt.

Sloan caught small, horned ungulate, and beastly reptiles. He raided swallow's nests, and sparred with unusual peccary-like hogs. He hooked fish with a handmade spear; which the three of them got sick on, proving some of the water sources in these parts were poisonous.

Jade was at the fire all day long melting snow for drinking, cooking meat, and looking after Lave. He labored just as tirelessly as Sloan, whom walked miles around the prison pit just to bring in sustenance and collect every bit of twig, or dead vine he could find to keep the flames going.

They were all worn and hungry, but Lave was about to get even hungrier.

Lave was becoming barbarically hungry. He wolfed his mash, gulped his broth, and swallowed bits of meat whole. Jade caught him grabbing passing roaches, unashamedly shoving the bugs towards his mouth before Jade could stop him. This made Jade crazy

because the unkilled squirming creature would cause Lave to vomit, and all he could do was feel sorry and painstakingly replace the starvation in Lave's stomach.

Now it had been a long, uneasy, emotional, five days.

Lave was recovering, but he had not yet spoken a word or had the strength to sit up. When he wasn't sleeping, he was eating. It was like caring for an infant on a wintry, desolate mountain with nothing to aid you but your own resources – inside, and out. It made each day treacherously long, and each night, harshly bitter. Jade lie awake those nights, staring up at the oddly verdant sky, holding onto the sweet starlight in an unnerving way... It was a sight that told Jade just how far away from home he was.

Jade made up his own constellations to entertain himself, and pretended to talk to Mr. Agnes and Shinka about it. Sometimes he'd even "talk" to his old high school friends, day-dreaming of the moment he'd get to tell them all about his adventures... But then he wondered if they'd ever believe him. Would he ever get the opportunity? Would he ever get back home? It were these fears that cut deeply into his gradually, but surely, changing being.

Day six, early morning, perhaps as early as four-o-clock, stars were still twinkling in the ephemeral, dazzling green sky, but the brightest moon was rising in the east, just as Lave had seen it do for the many years he be trapped in Skullgully. The chirrup of black swamp crickets gave their rare calls from the pebbles, a twitter that tickled Jade awake. He lie flat out on the solid brick ground, using his shredded backpack as a pillow.

Sloan, whom was supposed to be on watch, had fallen asleep upright, legs crossed, his melon head propped up by a vertical elbow.

The fire was just a miniature hill of magically glowing embers releasing beautiful little wisps of twirling smoke. Jade roused before the sleep-deprived Sloan, to re-kindle the campfire and warm breakfast in the cool morning air.

Entering Lave's tent, Jade heard a tiny chuckle – directed at the sight of his new companions; Lave's eyes were open. He was smiling.

Raw, but enthusiastic, Lave finally spoke, acknowledging that he was truly safe now.

At last, he's been rescued after all these years...

"I knew you'd come, Stan A. Solve."

Jade knew he meant it all – to Camp Pinto, across Skullgully, and ultimately, back to him; Lave Santos, the refugee trapped not only in a strange land, but also, the wrong time.

Jade smiled too, a happy tear coming to his proud face.

"I had my doubts we'd ever make it, but I'm so glad we did. I don't regret a thing... It's good to meet you, Lave."

Despite his atrophied state, Lave reached out a wobbly hand to shake.

"I am grateful, brother."

Having heard another voice, Sloan was shyly in the doorway, queering about. Lave smirked at him.

"You too, y' little twit."

Sloan burst into tears and hugged Lave's bundled up feet, thinking the rest of him was too delicate to throw himself upon.

Reassurances were doled, and the three rejoiced in being "together again", happy and relieved that their mission was at most, spiritually complete.

Jade and Sloan moved Lave by the fire, where the three then ate in full company. Still shaky with weakness, Jade continued to feed poor Lave, whom had tears of relief streaming down his appreciative face.

It was all words of gratitude before Lave fell velvetishly back to sleep, a small smile curled in his lips as he napped.

Jade could breathe again.

Sloan danced out into the dark of the prison pit, knowing he'd come back with a celebratory feast.

When Sloan returned, he did so with a huge goat buck, which Jade got straight to roasting. Lave woke not long after, with the capability to sit up. His eyes had further brightened to a glimmering pale blue. A rosiness had come back to his wane cheeks and lips.

He finally had the strength to tell his story.

Between bouts of coughing, and slang Jade could not penetrate, the boys listened to Lave's tale, carefully.

He described the rise and fall of Mission Medallion, and how it all began with a brave rebel of the Renkin's family, Prince Charlie's Uncle Raggs, whom seeked to free the Prince and Princess from Sir Charles' clutches. Having began almost a decade ago, Raggs had taken a huge risk in trusting the two, who were only children at the time, to aid in their own release from Sir Charles' hell...

The first T.T project was organized as the following: Lave as the Body, Elsie as the Spirit, Prince Charlie as the Mind, and Prince Charlie's beloved Uncle Raggs, as the lure. During the mission, Raggs had been with a well-weaponized group, leading the enemy away from Fort SkullGully, while Lave's team made their way through it's walls. Elsie worked remote coordination and communication back at head quarters; the castle in which Lave's team would come to free her from. This complex, and obscenely bold mission had been plotted for years: T.T would pretend to be Pinto, Pinto would attack the Dong Kingdom as it always had, and T.T would move through the insanity as if partaking – but instead, escape, with the Renkin's prized possession, one of three cursed medallions, that gave the Renkin's it's drawing power.

Unfortunately, an unexpected capture by the Dong kingdom of Lave's army ended the chess game, transforming it into an all-out attack from Pinto. SkullGully's walls were ripped down to allow Pinto's soldiers into the Dong's kingdom, and as T.T intended, the breach caused disorganized mayhem, allowing the gameboard to be wiped clean and reset.

However, on the way back, the backbone of the entire mission, the courageous Uncle Raggs, was suddenly not heard or seen from again, leaving the various pieces of T.T stranded mid-air... No body knew, did he turn on them? Was he killed? Captured? What? In the haze of battle, bombs, blood, Lave and eleven of his men escaped to the mountains, made it halfway across the porous desert and almost out of the war zone, where transportation and the safety of an armed number suspensefully awaited for any sign of them. A surprise air-raid hit both groups and changed the war forever – the air-raid was not of the Dong's, nor Pinto's.

There was now, a third party.

The last Lave had seen of the precious medallion was in the desert cavern he and his men took cover in during the explosions. Before getting taken hostage, Lave buried the medallion in the cave sand, praying the others would somehow recover it from there.

Ultimately, the strangers won the battle, and Pinto did not find out the medallion was missing until the shock of the alien attack was over. What was left of T.T was unable to recover the medallion, nor it's escorting men, and SkullGully was utterly thrown to the destruction, leaving all scattered members of all three parties to starve, wither away, or kill off one another in the abyssal pits behind the high castle walls.

With no aid, Lave attempted to escape the dead battle field, walking across the desert, alone, alive, but growing deathly with all of the trials he had faced. He knew not if the young royalty escaped, he knew not who else had survived, the only hope he had now, was make it back with his own life.

One day, with overwhelming thirst, Lave leaned down to a reflective pool to quench his smoldered body, but he couldn't seem to scoop up the mysterious water he found – it was a marooned ice mirror, which he fell into, and emerged from; back into the throes of the dark, cold, SkullGully ruins. Broken, Lave cursed his eternity and buried himself like treasure as his soul went into solemn stasis for the next six years...

Sloan presented the little golden box, gladly shoving it towards Lave, whom, for a moment, moved back with a hard-pumping chest. Reaching out a thin arm, his starvation spindled fingers took the object of mission Medallion with disbelief.

Upon seeing this medallion, Jade realized it was not the same one he had found several years ago in his own realm, the box was replicate, but not the medallion, his had been gold, this one was silver. There were multiples?

“Captain Fang, er, I mean, Prince Charlie, told us to give this to you. He’d been keeping it in the wall at a private residence before passing it along to us. Is it your medallion? Mission Medallion’s?” Jade asked as Lave stared incredulously. Sloan encouraged some celebration, but all they could sense were the gears roaring in Lave’s brain, trying to piece together the enigma.

It was indeed his medallion, the silvery, double-pronged cross, set with sapphire, and implanted with a bottle full of medicine-red liquid; Sky medusine blood.

“Still full.” Sloan proclaimed with a flutter.

“And thank goodness.” Lave said with a look of sincerity. He was pleased one more random person had been spared a grueling “permanence”. Jade swallowed hard in realization.

The medallion’s golden sibling was once in his hands... The vile had been broken by he and his friend Peaches when they’d struggled to open the tiny gold box it resided in. The medusine blood had splashed into their own wounds and healed over. Jade *had* been blessed by a Sky Medusa – now things were beginning to make sense.

“Mission Medallion...” Lave proclaimed. “It’s almost complete... Maybe a little late, but we’re almost there...”

Lave plopped the medallion back into its box, snapped it shut, and clutched it to his naked chest. The boys let him have his moment, but were surprised when Lave hoisted himself to his bare feet.

He stood, and fumbled. Jade and Sloan dove for him.

“Easy,” Jade pleaded. “we’ll get you back to Pinto in time, don’t hurt yourself-”

“We’re not going back to Pinto.” Lave said, a little vexed.

“Then... where are we going?”

“We’ll find out what our options are when we get there.”

Jade and Sloan glanced from Lave to each other. Sloan, knowing Lave better, nodded his head. He knew Lave to be a man always determined beyond his capabilities, but he asked his companion one last time.

“If you believe the time to act is now.”

Lave only gave an expression that what he said, he meant – Jade could tell this was going to be a coarse trip ahead. It had only taken under a week to raise the skeleton of that boy, and now, he was feeling merciless...

The three mopped up camp like they had never been there.

Lave evacuated from his rags into an old, familiar, pair of beige pants, and a clean beige jacket that had been saved for Lave’s recovery. Guns and hard hats were distributed, and the medallion was tucked into Jade’s breast pocket for safe-keeping.

With as fast as Lave wanted to move, Jade was glad he had dried a fine portion of Sloan’s hunt, because the jerky, aside from a small hoard of ammo a few matchsticks, and two canteens, were the only things that filled their backpacks now.

They started off into the chilling ruins, a freckling of snowflakes swirling in their wakes.

CHAPTER 10

THE MARCH

For a man skinnier than a super model, and as undernourished as a stray cat, Lave stepped high and proudly. He still walked arm-in-arm with Jade, but it was Jade who lagged behind in underestimation of the persistent man.

Sloan haughtily led the way, bouncing about in the jolliness that Lave was part of his team again.

For now, T.T's goal was to make it to the mirror all the way back on Hades Cliff so that the team may return to Ginger's town, where Jade and Sloan left off with Fang. Lave knew of both the cliff and the town, making him vouch for a short-cut he knew of, which his team mates did not object - Lave had the aura of someone who knew what they were doing.

During their hike, Jade asked Lave's opinion of the whole situation.

"Depends on what Prince Charlie does for rent outside of Pinto's beeswax. He was infamous for executing folly, independent of his Father's wishes. Before Pinto launched their offenses on the moon medusa, Charlie was the only individual to defend them at the end - In a land where it was the inhabitant's nature to deflect, hide, deceive, and run, Prince Charlie inspired the medusine to fight back - and ferociously I may add. But he was a novice at war, and failed them miserably. Not to mention he is only a child."

Jade squinted doubtfully. The young man he knew as Captain Fang did not come off to him as a failure. On top of that, his lovely, placid Shinka did not seem like the violent type.

Sloan barged in with the facts.

"Prince Chuck is now regarded as an ice mirror expert. He administered Jade and I's training, and sented us to go collects you - privately and separate of Sir Charles Renkin's

desires. So it's true. Pinto's not the class room you used to know, Lave, they're all just a buncha shit heads now, hoping for more war and destruction." Sloan pulled at his cap. "Damn." Was all Lave said to that.

The conversation was diminished by the need to focus on the environment, which had quietly sneaked in around them.

Tangled branches of dead, willowy vine spilled over the sides of the blackened cliffs, and on them, in the ashy mist, millions of silent Monarch butterflies flexed their wings... It was such an alluring tranquility, all fell into the insect's quietude, and they passed through the cold hall of fluttery mounds with no words, except if you counted Jade and Lave chuckling at Sloan huffing and puffing at the winged creature that randomly alighted on his nose.

All too fleetingly, the moment passed, and the men remembered that they were soldiers.

"Lave, in the original T.T. project, who was Raggs Renkins, and what was he like? And why do you think he left his team during the mission?"

Lave paused thoughtfully.

"Some men run from battle, it is a tangible truth. He may have been killed. There is always the chance he was a spy, too. Many sinfully, and indulgently betrayed their fellows just to get a glimpse of what was left of B.L.U.E."

"B.L.U.E." Jade opened his mouth. "So it is a real place?" He digested the idea.

"Bet your boots it is. It's a garden of Eden all graceless men dream to get to so that they never have to lift a finger again. A place men think they can be kings. Very likely our extinction – not something that will be repented easily. God only gives paradise to humble men, at least that's what I'd like to think."

"Is there such a thing as paradise?"

"There are other worlds than this, believe." Lave looked Jade squarely in the eye. "Why, I'd give a limb just to live a day in a world that did not believe in war, would not you?"

"Sure, but I'm already giving them to ones that do."

“Good call.” Lave smirked thoughtfully.

From the angle of Lave’s short-cut, climbing out of the Skullgully prison pit hadn’t exactly been a piece of cake, but they made good timing of it, and were now on a new trail. The ancient mud flats were hardened like concrete, and no member of the team could resist tracing the outlines of the Jurassic footprints immobilized in the capturing stone. Each print was almost three feet in length, and there was no way for any of them to proceed as wide and as fast as this beast once had. Jade just hoped nothing of that immensity lived in Skullgully today.

They began to lose the tracks as snowflakes cluttered the air. In a short time, everything was covered in a thin layer of dry, white, crystals.

The long, but swift crossing of Devil’s bridge was fairly uneventful, though it was on the bridge that conversations were riled again, albeit, through chattering teeth.

“The medallion,” Jade began. “what’s it’s significance?”

Lave checked around to be sure no strangers hid within the darkness, but it didn’t much matter because every enemy knew the medallion’s power like they know their own dogma.

“It’s the key to open the map. The map that shows a mortal how to enter B.L.U.E. sky medusa don’t need it to get back to their own country, which is also why we should suspect the original Stan was one of those very creatures.”

“Perhaps also why he didn’t want Pinto to have the key?”

“Affirmative.”

“Why do you think so?”

“If you were a hound among a wolf pack, and you finally realized other hounds existed, you’d join them would you not? It’s simple, Prince Charlie was going back home. But it is also why we are not to return to Camp Pinto; If I see this in my mind’s eye correctly,

Pinto is still out for itself, Prince Charlie on the other hand, is still trying to unite the two species.”

“Are you saying Pinto is dangerous?”

“All People can be dangerous given the chance. But if your Captain Fang sent you, let us return to him as well.”

“He didn’t even tell us where he’d be...”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to wait for him to walk out of the shadows.” Lave said airily.

Even if that was for the best, the visual made Jade shudder. All went blank until Lave aspired to converse again with a sparkling leniency.

“How about you? What’s the state of our world these days?”

Jade hadn’t really mulled over it since being at Pinto. He could now describe the typical life of the average human to be similar to that of life in Camp Pinto; one was stripped of their birth-given identity to become a hard-working soldier expected by his peers, government, and community, to carry out specific duties, be in certain places at certain times, carry out tasks as perfectly as possible in particular ways, and be obsessed with where your next paycheck was going to come from. Mistakes were punishable by law, and one traded their obedience for survival, comfort, and status. And last, but not least, your superiors, by rule of thumb, hate your guts.

That was what lie in Jade’s dimension - *the future*.

“That’s the future?” Lave got a disgusted glimmer put to his gaze. “But... it sounds like humanity’s dumbest generation yet.”

“Thanks!” Jade laughed. Lave remained level.

“No, don’t you see? We’re fighting for freedom *now*. What is the point of a soldier returning home if home is *also* a battlefield?”

Jade had no answer, but it was not an obstruse concept. When Jade had dropped out of high school, he never felt grounded again. His workaholic parents had never felt like

parents, and therefore, people never felt like home, much less places feeling like home. School was not what he'd thought it'd be, and all the friends he'd met along the way left for college and careers when it was over and done with. With no community to suspend him, Jade took to the wind where nothing was static – even his name - He was now Stan A. Solve, which he had even used as a pen name before he knew the meaning. He had no inclination to a job, skill, or talent, because no one really needed them. He had no silver threads.

There was no where to go, and nothing to accomplish once Jade got back home, but Lave did not know this.

“You’ve written literature?” Lave’s eyes glistened as though it made Jade a celebrity.

“Yes, but only one book,” Jade informed modestly. “I also did videos, learned to dance, play violin, tennis. I used to do public speaking.”

“Never stopped moving those marching feet I’d say.” Lave dubbed with a wink.

Lave paused at the edge of the horizon.

“Dammit.”

Jade hardly made out the gurgling mass blocking the pass in the distance, but Lave could clearly predict the herd of brutish, bluish, wildebeest-like animals flooding across their trail by the millions, meant only one thing – They’d be going no where for awhile.

Lave dropped to his bum and pulled down his hard hat.

“No getting around them?” Jade asked, thinking he already knew the answer. Lave smiled from beneath his visor and said nothing. The three napped to the sound of thundering hooves for the next hour.

When Jade awoke, the migration was still afoot. Lave was staring to the horizon with a broodiness about him. He turned to Jade boredly.

“Care to dance, soldier?”

“Huh?”

“*Swing*.” Lave said authoritatively. “Do you swing, man?”

“Took dance lessons in school... Dunno about swing.”

Lave offered an atrophied hand. Jade rolled his gaze.

“What the heck.” He shrugged, and they proceeded weakly, not knowing the silliness would save their lives down the road.

The travelers were at the end of Devil’s Bridge by late night, on the forked path, where the two had left the sci-fi mobile.

The jalopy activated it’s headlights as soon as it saw Sloan, but he just smacked it on the nose because the over-reactive vehicle was not needed now.

They would set up camp and rest here for the night.

The snowflakes unseized to drop as the three bundled up around the fire to eat a boring, but gratifyingly warm, meal. Sloan and Jade had pretty much covered Lave on their happenings, so it was time to know more about Lave himself. Jade had had a question perched on the tip of his tongue since recovering the lost Lave Santos.

“How did you do it? How did you survive in Skullgully all by yourself?”

“What part of immortal-”

“Don’t give me that speech. I mean, how did you just sit there and wait for us to come get you without going insane?”

Lave mused a little with a playful smile dancing across his lips. There was still a depressed tone to his gaze, but he made dark humor of it.

“What’s to fear after being alive since 1841? I’ve fought civil wars, befriended ferals, been lost in the forests of NightGill, the jungles of the Wonderland Wilds, I saw the fall of the Akashic rocket, world war II, the reset of the pyramid’s return, Shangrila, Shambala, shilly-shally of every breed.” Lave chuckled, trying to be funny. Sloan swung around impatiently.

“I’m two-hundred years old too, you knows!”

“Yes,” Lave considered. “but you’re also still a baby alien.” He said for the record.

“I’m not a baby alien!” Sloan exploded. “I am in fact, a full-grown baby alien.” He put a dignified palm on his chest.

“Nice try.” Lave laughed. Sloan threw a tantrum on his own corner of the world while Lave and Jade continued to discuss not the concept of immortality, but rather, Lave’s mortal, but exciting childhood, which began on a surprising note; Just the same as Jade, Lave was born in Jade’s dimension, destined for a normal life, in a normal time.

It all began one pleasant Summer noon, when Mr. and Mrs. Donogan (Lave’s true last name) went to Mr. Donogans brother’s manor on Karnak Hill. What they thought would be a fine luncheon turned into a day spent listening to the rabbles of an insane man – Lave’s Uncle, Maxwell Donogan had created what he called a Dimension Converter; a strange machine he claimed could be used to traverse other realms. Although he could not wrap his head around his dear, but crazy brother’s contraption, William Donogan did not doubt Maxwell when his wife disappeared within his brother’s mansion.

There was only one explanation according to Mr. Donogan – The time machine had stolen her away.

There was then no arguing that the machine had no use: William went to go find his wife.

Long story short, the two were reunited, but they could not find their way back to Donogan’s manor. They stayed lost in history for the rest of their days, living the lives of those who witnessed the dawn of the last age.

Lave was then raised in a log cabin planted in the bosky Wonderland forests. With mountains at their back, and a front yard full of creeks and natives, the beginning of this life was like that of a charming fairy tale. The boy ate from the trees, hunted, and drank from the streams. He played in the woods and learned to respect the land by the guidance of his loving parents: His Mother, whom he revered as a Goddess.

“She could do anything.” Lave boasted.

And about his fondness for his Father, he said: “He was the bravest that ever lived.”

“What about your friends?” Jade pondered of the neighboring natives. Lave stole a glance of contempt before melting.

“My brothers? My best friends? I should think that I will miss them everyday of this life and the next, or until we meet again.”

The story began to get dire when the boy’s fun and games, endless days of fishing, hunting, craft and discovery, turned into a struggle for survival.

Strange people began to encroach the wild lands, and the family’s expansive existence became one infiltrated by the cutting down of trees, the paving of roads, and the building of schools and churches.

The settlements that invited themselves chased away the natives and preached corrupt religions, causing skirmish across the newly-built village for a little over two years.

Then one day, namely, a betrayed Sunday, at age thirteen, Lave participated in his first civil war; a small, short, but fierce battle that would never be found in a history book. The demonic forces won, causing the Donogans and several other families to flee.

Injured, Lave woke up in a busy town by the shore, where trading and fishing ports gleamed with the hubbub of over-domesticated high society. He’d winded up here to be nursed back to health by a well-known doctor, whom also informed him that his brothers had to escape during the incident. His Father had gone to war, and his Mother had been drafted into a parachute factory, far from home.

Practically orphaned, Lave wandered like a banshee before quickly getting picked up by a man looking to give unfortunate young men a second lease on life.

The army.

Lave enlisted under-aged, uninformed, and unprepared to do battle for the “good” of human kind.

“I was naive,” Lave admitted. “just because I fought a small, bloody civil war, I believed I’d seen it all... But the military was not what I dreamed it would be, I’d never seen so many men in my life...” He gestured a long, drawn out palm to accentuate the numbers. While Lave went on to shoot, train, fly planes, drop bombs, grow thin, recover, and repeat, his buddies lived and died, and those that survived, often lost limbs, eyes, teeth, or their minds.

Lave trumped on...

The war ended and Lave went home to a place called “Satin Pines”, where he, his ‘one and only’, and close friends, built a place to call home for the rest of their lives...

Donogan Academy. Jade thought.

But the bugles sounded once more, and Lave was called back to duty, so he entered his second major war – a *systematically different affair*, Lave termed it.

“And that’s when the adventures got interesting.”

“Every time I thought I’d been licked by shrapnel, snuffed a poison, or been buried alive, I came up for air against all odds. I recovered to a robustness same as before the action – I was on a battlefield, I was in the familiar old trenches, but... It didn’t feel like my battle. It wasn’t my country, not my fellow men, not even my enemy. I can’t explain it, but I somehow knew wherever I’d been brought, it was no longer my time. Something had happened to me...” Lave’s distant eyes wandered the present sky, flailing with snow. He gazed aground.

“But I got what I enlisted for...” He finished. “the only anomaly is, that I am still alive.”

The Sky Medusa blood... He had gotten ‘blessed’ by his brothers all those years ago.

All was hushed, gazes drilled into the stone. The campfire crackled.

“So where does Sloan come into all of this?” Jade asked. Sloan turned, bright-eyed, but unsmiled.

“I found him,” Lave informed. “one dark, stormy – *Ace*?”

“*Ace*?” Jade copied. “What is that?”

Lave's baby blue irises were deeply entrenched in the snow flurry before them. Sloan's ears pricked, his eyes became almond. Jade could hear it too, the nails clicking and chains dragging, a heavy pant in something's breath...

A huge, fury beast emerged from the mist.

The Akita from the bunker prison.

Ace barreled into camp, licking faces and jumping on the boys. The dog clearly knew Lave, and had to be restrained from knocking the wind out of the still-healing soldier, but Lave was glad to see his old war dog, whom he had worked alongside during past missions.

Jade was perplexed as to how Ace had not just escaped Pinto, but also came all this way to find them. Were Shinka and Mr. Agnes free, too?

Desperately wanting to know if it were true, Jade felt compelled to walk ahead and see if either prisoner was coming their way. However, Lave was tired and needed to sleep. With Lave contentedly tucked away with the bear-sized dog at the foot of his bed, Sloan took first watch.

Jade decided he could afford to venture into the icy lightlessness, alone.

"I'm not going far." He pledged.

"Don't you dare." Sloan reminded as he continued to feed the fire. Sloan watched Jade's form become one with the rushing snowflakes...

The clouds soared across the horizon. There was wettish snow beginning to slick the blue and purple stone, making Jade gingery about how he stepped. The mountains were catching snow on their northern sides while the rest blurred the wind as a minty, white breath. Jade could not see into the distance, but if Shinka were out there, she would have her pearly glow to break the blinding snow drifts.

All he could hear was the whistling wind.

The time climbed to twenty minutes, making Sloan pace. Every minute that went by Sloan thought Jade would reappear from the smoke, so he kept calm and let Lave sleep, but soon, every next moment had turned into an hour, and Sloan began muttering aloud. Lave opened his eyes.

“What are you smattering about?”

“Stan’s been goneses for an hour now!”

Lave was briefly alarmed, then irritated, smiling as he swore under-breath. He intuitively surmised that his short-cut wouldn’t be much of a short-cut this time around. Slowly he sat up, slowly he stood, slowly he loaded his pack, and slowly he began to hobble away with Ace’s help.

Sloan had all the time in the world to understand the command and follow.

Jade sat in the pitch black. He couldn’t believe what had just taken place now... Or was it an hour ago? He could not comprehend his time-space coordinates, but what he did recall, was that one moment he was looking for his friends, the next, he was being attacked by a monstrous beast. It had come upon him so suddenly, a shot from his longgun would have been useless. He and the creature became tangled in a grapple that made Jade go down – but he was going down with the beast, literally.

They were battered and bruised in a hard skidding, plunging deep into the earth through a stone chute. At the bottom, in the pebbles and grime, Jade was given a chance to unsheathe his knife, which he thrust at the attacker in the blackness, not knowing where, or what he was doing. In the end, the abysmal animal lie dead on his feet.

A dreadful claustrophobia transformed him.

Through violent trembling, his choppy breath could not be made to utter a thing.

The scuffle was not difficult to find or read in the snow, so it wasn’t long after the kill was made that Jade could hear extraneous stonage breaking and ricocheting down the

cavernous tube – Lave and Sloan came spitting through the tunnel into the rocky chamber with a thud. Someone hit Jade and knocked the air out of him.

All groaned and Jade heard numerous expletives. They could just faintly hear Ace's concerned barks at the top of the mountain before he purposefully came sliding after the boys, bumping into them with his big, furry, body. The smell of the wild animal's blood excited him instantly.

Lave gave an asthmatic-worthy coughing fit, but cleared on a good-natured note.

“Damn, I can’t walk and talk like I used to.”

Lave was first to move, a painful moaning in his efforts. He wiped his finger along the wall, tasting the powder to be sure they weren’t sitting in a pile of explosive minerals. Testing negative, he searched his pack for a matchstick and an emergency candle.

The light fell on their contorted figures crammed in the crop of the stone chute. The dust had mostly settled, but it still clung to their bodies in a silky, fine, layer.

As Sloan groveled to verticalize himself, he bopped his head, making his hair flood to jet black with tiny flecks of silver, perfectly matching the stone above. It was now obvious that he could camouflage.

“Stan,” He said incredulously. “you’ve grown another head...”

Lave delivered a French-style slap in the cheek, and Sloan came to. His buggy head swiveled, cat eyes rotating in blind curiosity.

“It seems we have fallen a hundred feet beneath Skullgully.”

Lave rolled his eyes and Jade took the torch from him to help him sit up. Ace was digging into the murdered beast with tail wagging.

Jade didn’t have to explain himself, for Lave had already seen the unstaunched, double-gash across Jade’s cheek where the creature left it’s mark. Jade hadn’t even realized he’d been struck after being tumbled down the chute like a wool sock in the laundry machine. Either way, Jade endured a hand-stitching by Lave’s doing, all the while being

congratulated for his swift killing of the monster, which Sloan identified as an abominable poisonous people-eater.

They then got to the task of figuring out how to escape.

Jade moved the candle to the left... It appeared there would be no crawling back up the way they came – there was simply nothing to grasp the way back up the tube. Jade shifted the light to the right... The cavern twisted out into a narrow passage, leading to who knows where.

Lave intently went on ahead, proceeding forward as if adventure was where he was most at home. As soon as the boys stepped into the belly of the cavern, guns were reflexively drawn – But the masked figures on the walls were inert. Jade felt a shriek come to his mouth, but it never left his lips. Instead, he stood in disturbed awe.

Realistic masks of sculpted clay, crystal, and bones, sat on wall mounts with fur and blood-dyed cloaks dangling on their pseudo shoulders. There were anthropomorphic carvings on the floor, bordered in pentagonal shapes and surrounded by an ancient alphabet. There were mathematics beyond all threes' comprehension. Skeletons of sacrificed animals lie dormant in the corners, and the corners held a metallic, pungent odor, smelling atrocious and unfamiliar.

Lave snatched the candle back, clumsily striding up to one of the creepy faces, studying the voodooed dummy closely...

“The Caspian cult.” Lave determined of his examination. “Let’s move through here quickly – this stuff is old, but not old enough...”

Pragmatic Lave was deliberate despite being the least robust of the group. The trooper led the team down the first hall, ignoring the alchemic greeting on the wall. Blind cave spiders inched along the grotesque masks, some of the masks created from human skulls, others, of unknown monstrosities. It was an uncanny valley of life and death as the demonic decorations kept coming.

Something twittered in the rafters and made Jade’s blood curdle.

The shuffling of three pairs of feet, plus Ace's clawed paws, echoing in the moist caves made it hard to keep track of other suspicious noises, but every time Jade thought he heard something of concern, it was only a rat or a bat. Paranoia began to kick in as Jade began to pick up another pair of footsteps...

Seasoned Lave acknowledged Jade's amateur grief and restrained Ace by the collar.

"What is it?" Lave whispered.

"There's something ahead..." Jade's dry lips hissed. Sloan froze too.

Before they could step into the next room, it lit with a brilliant luminescence that made Jade think he was going into euphoria. The walls bounced colors back in wild blues, purples and violets, the light then grew golder and golder, until it finally burned white. It was Lave who pulled Jade back from walking straight into the hypnotizing ultra-violet rainbow, slapping a palm over Jade's mouth for good measure – but a scream would not have been heard over the striking, one-note sound that rained through the cavern, reminding Jade of a smooth, drawn-out bowing of the open E string on a violin. The phenomena faded with a milky puff of sparkling dust that flew out the door as the event ended. Something was catching it's breath...

Sloan cocked his energy weapon as he sidled the wall to ease a look, but he could not get what he wanted. He nodded to Lave whom was in a better position for ambush.

Lave whirled around, his tracer landing upon the enormously tall, white, fully-flighted angelic monster. Electric eyes glared, unshaped by Lave's threatening gesture.

Jade's hand fell on Lave's weapon and he embraced the kindred sight.

"Shinka!?" He exclaimed.

CHAPTER 11

DO-OVER

Shinka had just gotten through melting the shackles off her wrists, and regenerating her four, gigantic wings. Not only was she free, but Jade noticed the blinding crystal around her neck, transporting health to her like a blessed talisman. It left the cavern aglow with a buzzing heat. She was even more glorious than before.

Shinka was both shocked and worried to see the boys, and explained that she'd escaped from Pinto to Skullgully by mistake through an ice mirror that did not intersect the path she thought it would. But Lave did not care.

"You *know* this creature?!" Lave shot his heated question at Jade. Jade just cleared way for Shinka to talk.

"Do not use mirror I came to here from - you should not see Pinto again, they programmed to kill if you do not meet Captain Fang first."

Sir Charles Renkins had sent Pinto soldiers after her.

Lave gave the congregation a steely-blue glare.

"Makes sense to find our Captain Fang man before getting all buddy-buddy with Pinto again. The medallion can only be put into the right hands now, especially after all we've gone through. *Medusine-*" He snapped.

"Her name is Shinka." Jade informed. Lave remained acrid.

"What is your objective?" Lave stared her down.

"I regain strength, loose Pinto's bind, and I free to return to my family."

Lave stared well and hard.

"Let's be moving."

The conversation briefly turned technical as Shinka gave coordinates, the speed at which Pinto was moving, and how long ago she'd last seen them. Based on that, the team decided which prong of the fork in the road to take. They moved intensely.

“Hey,” Jade suddenly mentioned as he caught up to Shinka’s swift strides down the stalagmited tunnel. “where’s Mr. Agnes?”

“Watching through his telescope.”

Jade didn’t necessarily understand, but it sounded like he was okay, where ever he was...

The team descended.

The paths grew more fibrous with stalagmites and stalactites, here and there, a patch of geode glittered, or a fossil showed it’s historic face. There was a drop in temperature and oxygen, which only grew worse with depth, and if it were not for Shinka’s vibrating warmth, the humans would have been a troubling blue. Even in the inhospitaleness of this underworld, the group was still coming across more and more ancient scrawlings and hellish ritual sites, which Lave pronounced bad luck to tread over – so they were avoided like the plague. Jade stopped looking up at the masks on the walls... He tried not to wonder about the bones...

A gasp from Sloan rewarranted Jade’s attention – and this time he did not look away. The walls had been replaced with ice. Not magic mirror ice, but the frozen blue ice of an extinguished ancient lake, to which one could intelligibly see the preserved bodies of hideous fish and their demonic, non-mammilian friends. The window to this netherworld could make one’s stomach lurch in squeamish assumption that hell was not a land of fire and brimstone, but a place under the freakish sea.

Grateful that Shinka was with them, Jade tried not to throw obvious glances at the warm, towering, alien angel. She appeared virtually unafraid of their environment, and even if she were, she didn’t show it.

As the steadfast group paraded through the slick envelope of cerulean walls, floors, and ceilings, Sloan happily pointed out a sign of live life – A large, knotted tree root driven in the cracks of rock to their right, web-like along the surfaces before it dove into

another stone fissure. The frozen waters gradually removed themselves from view as the roots stole the scene.

It was taken as a clue that they may be near the surface...

They hit a dead end.

Jade's blood went colder than it already was, but Lave did not wait for his human crutch to walk with him. He kept his cool, turned heel and put one foot in front of the other. No one said a thing. They just followed the leader, on and on, in a wordless, unpromising, march forward...

Through a different passage, they found their ascent; huge, chipped blue stairs leading up and up into an amphitheatric maze of hollows that released pressure and lack of air with every step. The stone around them now wore a more castle-like cloak, and carvings were less intricate as they were, practical, for the sake of pedestrian movement. The only problem was, the place had been evokably built for giants.

Because of her height, Shinka could easily hoist herself to the next ledge with grace, as did Ace, whom could bound a shelf in one leap. It took the others thrice as much effort, even with Shinka's aid – which burned the arm of the recipient.

Halfway up the stairway, a bizarre sound was heard.

All paused in unison.

There were scratchy, chirping noises rising up after them.

The group picked up pace.

At the top of the giant's stairs was a series of decrepit wood-beam structures, piled like grocery store shelves, stocked with old sacks, and barrels of past-prime comestibles. There was an exit on the other side of the room, but the team had run out of time.

Thinking quick, Jade instructed everybody into the rafters, hoping to lose the stalkers through stealth. Silenced, everybody tried not to shift their weight on the squealing

beams, and Shinka instinctually dimmed her obvious glow. Lave clamped Ace's muzzle shut.

Jade couldn't stop from gasping at what swarmed into the room – dozens of brutish, little, gargoyle-like apes with sharp claws, teeth, and hooves. Their inhuman eyes and bat noses took away from the kind of exotics Jade used to see at pet stores; they were more like two-foot tall devils than anything Jade's memory could stir.

The things carpeted themselves across the room as they boistered among each other for no clear reasons, devouring anything in sight, including rocks and unfortunate mice. Worse yet, they were there to stay.

At this moment Jade reached for his longgun, which was gently pulled back in the shadows. Lave hastily shook his head.

Too many. He mouthed.

Bereaved, Jade's eyes began to look for another solution, when he suddenly realized that Sloan was not with them – he was across from them, on another storage unit, balancing precariously among old burlap bags... A light bulb-moment broke – but how to communicate it to Sloan?

Jade retrieved a matchbox from his pocket and pointed to Sloan.

Powder? He translated through walking lips. Sloan checked the burlap. Yes, it was old sacks of flour. Sloan understood at once – of course he knew how to make cheap explosives.

He gave a thumbs up.

On the count of three, Sloan pitched the flour sack overboard, and Jade struck and dropped the lit match into the puffing cloud. They covered their faces.

BOOM.

The air snapped as the particles briefly caught fire and diffused. The critters were instantly stunned. Lave shot the last few living specimens.

Jade wasn't sure, but the combustion may have injured his eye. It burned and teared, but he was able to ignore it for now.

The group leapt down into the mess.

"What are they?" Jade grimaced as Sloan picked up a lone leg.

"Is it edible?"

"Gross, Sloan."

Lave just chuckled, wiping the dirt from his forehead as he pushed on. There would be no lingering. For him, this was nothing.

"Keep it moving." He told the lot.

Jade smiled, T.T, was in full swing...

There was no hunch to prepare T.T for what came next. The trial began without warning.

A roar rumbled the caverns with both a deepness and shrillness that shivered the walls and rocked it's loose teeth. This time, it was Sloan whom whirled around in immediate knowing. After a bleak, wide-eyed pause, he spat.

"Run."

The thing could already be heard plowing through the limestone tubes; it's horns and scales scratching against the rocks, and it's guttural cries sounding hungry for meat.

It was the bony, black, waspish dragon Jade and Sloan had met earlier on Devil's Bridge.

Gaining on them triumphantly, the lizard snapped it's jaws, spraying venomous saliva before taking a huge, reptilian breath.

"Get down!" Sloan cried.

Upon turning the corner, Sloan, Shinka, and Ace were protected by the cavern's bend, while the men lagging behind would not be making it out of the range of fire on time. They glanced to see the wave of regurgitated flames hurling towards them, and

reflexively, Lave took position, grappling Jade's hands to perform an inspiring swing dance "heel slide" which landed Jade flat on his back, and Lave flat on his front.

The flame-thrower raged above them for one whole, hot minute, and the dragon came crashing by shortly after, rampaging towards Shinka's luminescence.

Jade shot it in the belly as it passed over he and Laves' rigid bodies. It collapsed in a foul, cold-blooded heap.

"Moving on." Lave breathed.

The team stepped into the open air and cheered.

Ace and Sloan pranced around the snow, as Shinka beat her wafting wings in delight. Jade beamed at the crystal-clear, starry sky before glimpsing Lave whom grinned with his eyes.

They were on the surface at last.

The group had emerged in unknown terrain, and neither from Lave's memory, or Jade and Sloan's retracing, could anyone recognize how close to their exiting mirror they were.

On this side of Skullgully, the world was wetter, and leafier. There were even some twisty trees to glean fruit from, a small, golden-purple grape, but with a pit, and a bitter skin. Lave claimed it was a type of cherry, Jade thought it was like a tomato, and Sloan believed it was good for nothing. But they all ate anyways, and it turned out to be decent food for their footpath travels.

This end of Skullgully had become something of a jungle. The rock and snow fluttered into soil, a loamy, boggish sort of earth that eventually spread out into a thick blanket of ferns, palms, and glowing mushrooms.

A rubberleaf-like species of tree began to shadow the team's heads, though it left a verdant glow in the basil-green air; a mist holding an abundantly humid, caressing

warmth that you could not escape the embrace of. The micro-climate was so distinct, the horizon appeared as a mist as far as the eye could perceive – and Jade now only had one working eye to do this perceiving.

The team set up camp inconspicuously and deliberately, though it was unlikely the Pinto entourage would find them here. Sharp about their needs, Lave insisted everyone have a bite, and then hit the sack. They'd been through too much today.

Jade took first watch beside Shinka, under the umbrellas of giant banana leaves. Jade parented the camp fire as Shinka sat politely serene, like a woman at a Japanese tea ceremony. Her wide green eyes were expressionless in the gobs of reflections bouncing off her huge irises from the firelight. Her long ghostly hair fluttered in the subtle breeze while her pixie body drummed with energy.

“Does it hurt?” Jade questioned of where the metal contraptions had bleached the skin on her wrists with scars. She could have asked the same of his eye, but he was already reaching out to touch her damaged hands, and was burned by her extreme pulse. He recoiled in somber surprise.

“I wish I could help. Why can no one touch you?”

Shinka blinked solemnly at the confused boy, keeping her body hidden beneath her weighty wings as she stretched her arms out to lick her wounds like a cat.

“We are not from same worlds, have dimensions in between us, see?”

Jade conflicted this concept. Why should something so alluring be so far away? Why something so entrancing be out of reach? Back home, Jade could reach for the skies, he could hug trees if he so pleased, he could feed the birds, pick a flower. Beauty was never far. Yet, inside the treacherous Pinto house mirrors were different – Beauty, wonder, light, it all teased him.

“Can humans and Sky Medusa ever live together? Why did Pinto do what they did? What truly happened? Sloan hasn't exactly been upfront about that.”

Shinka's soft gaze remained until her eyes fully closed in musing... They opened with lashes low and serious.

"Time ago, twisted sky medusa bring lie to human, that he no longer love him. He leave humans, feeling so betrayed that they turn away from all things of the God's. Became different, and forget who they are, then looked upon other species with jealousy for they still knew... But the same fate befalls us all, and we were bittered by our own twisted ones, fell to grief; both human and sky medusa, mythic, beast, feral, and most thinking creature. You see, to control time was to control what happened in past – who forget, who not forget, it's why the mirrors exist - very mighty weapon, or very sacred gift of creation. But how we use it show what in the heart. It is the story of every Universe, one not over yet, you know."

Jade was quiet for a long time. He didn't understand her words completely, but there was a graveness in Shinka's story that Sloan had not eluded to.

"So there is both good and bad sky medusa?"

"Sure as there are good and bad human... And beyond just good and bad. We too, make mistakes."

"I always thought, that if humanity ever discovered people from the stars, that whoever they were, they'd be better than us, not so wicked, not so hateful... I guess it's true that nothing perfect exists."

Shinka blinked nostalgically.

"We've been called many; Sky Medusa, Starbrights, Sungods, Moon Chasers, Sea People. But we, whatever we called, find that we are just another alive – another people, maybe human too. Don't separate anything in the Universe, Jade. We miss our friends."

"Humans and sky medusa were friends?"

Shinka paused, her open eyes refulgent in the glimmering firelight.

"You are my friend, Jade, thank you..." She silently morphed into her upright fetal position to tell him it was time to rest.

Turned to the chirruping forest, Lave finally closed his tearing eyes...

The morning produced a thick fog screen of tinted green. It was balmy enough to make one sweat and the mosquitoes were a torturous concern. The fire had kept the bugs away in the night, but now they were nakedly noticeable.

The boys tramped on with sloshy footsteps, swatting at the insects that grew thicker with the jungle's foliage. Fungi of eclectic colors stuck to the sides of fallen trees like parasites. The air was full of faes and undetected birds.

Soon, Sloan whom was in the lead, could not see more than three feet before himself due to the vines and bobbing taro ears. Shinka, whom towered above them all, became their periscope, guiding the group forward; Jade was most frightened when she called the men to a halt.

“Building.” She said.

Jade’s salty skin crawled.

“Description.” Lave perpetuated.

“Smoke mist come from flutes at top, concrete like Pinto’s, diamond gates made like wire-”

Lave slapped his forehead.

“Of course! It’s the factory! Pinto placed it in Skullgully somewhere, just nobody ever knew precisely. Well I’ll be... Golly. I guess we’d better toggle a new route. No use junketing here.”

He finished his sentence with an integral grind of the heel.

Shinka said nothing, but Jade could tell she was holding an emotional longing behind her listless face. She was thinking about Mr. Agnes’s son... The hardcore Lave would never go for it though, their task was to return to Fang, and the factory had nothing to offer them concerning that.

Jade feared this was where Shinka would be parting ways with them – but she did not.

A little ways into the brush later, Jade caught her eye.

“Why didn’t you go?”

“I can’t be tempted, there are other ways.” She gave a sympathetic glance.

Jade half-nodded in conjunction to his half-understanding. He pressed on, but found himself raking through the herb ears unable to contain his mouth.

“Tempted by what?”

“Time. Time not the same. He will be free in other time. I must not stop. Like you, Jade.”

Like me? Jade thought. Everyone seemed to think it a quirk of his, and it was true; Jade never stopped. He was the boy who ran fast through high school, and now, he was racing towards manhood. Jade looked ahead to his comrades, both marauding diligently through the foliage with hands at their guns... Jade potently realized his own weapon was at his nervously bungling fingertips. This wasn’t quite what he imagined a man would, or should be, but there was no time to question this personal philosophy.

Shinka was no longer at his side, making Jade turn.

Fang stepped out of the sweating jungle, stark as a sharply out-lined toucan.

Leaves were stuck in his hair, spider webs caught on his coat. He said nothing before striking Sloan with the butt of his rifle – he couldn’t help it. It’s what his Father always did.

The bedraggled captain’s spittled lips barked like a chimp caught in a snare.

“YOU FOOL!”

The jungle scattered with flits and whistles and wing beats, hushing as Fang’s echoes filled the humid air.

He grabbed Sloan’s collar.

“Did I not tell you to take the mirror on the right at the prison gates?!”

Sloan’s bobble head was buoyed upright at Fang’s mercy, but his eyes widened as he instantly realized his mistake and took in the senseless outrage of his commanding officer.

This schizo frenzy revealed Fang's irregular side.

The rest of T.T had to watch on, left out of the punchline of what it all actually meant; what did it mean to have taken the mirror on the left by mistake?

Fang invented his theory there and then.

“Time! You took the wrong path of time!”

“What does that mean?” Jade desperately charged him, trying to ride his fiery waves of angst as gracefully as possible.

“*What does it mean?!*” Fang literally spat. “You course-correct and do your job right, and take it like a God-send. It's not every day you get second chances at life. Now move your ass!”

Jade swallowed as the boys fell into the young Master's footsteps... He couldn't believe Lave asked no questions. He did not expect Sloan to, and he was surprised that he, himself, could not speak upon Fang's sudden appearance – an appearance that was almost gone as quickly as it came.

He was like a hailstorm of unknowns, slapping from every direction as they again, wandered the grip of the ransacking jungle – but the ominous toucan knew exactly where he was going.

He halted under a bough of Chaya, where a rocky protrusion formed a cave entrance littered with rotting leaves and newt nests. Fang cleared away the broken roots and curly vines to reveal yet another hidden ice mirror, saved for some special emergency occasion, such as this.

“I have a question for you, Stan.” Fang addressed his experience-matured student.

“Yes Sir?” Jade straightened up.

“You've come far from Pinto, but are you ready... Are you *willing*... To do it all over again?”

This was an unexpected twist. Jade didn't even want to believe what he was hearing, but somehow, he surrendered.

“You mean... Saving Lave? Of course I’ll do it all again. It’s what I came for.”

“Good. Cause you’re going to have to.”

Sloan turned to both Jade and Lave with tears in his huge green eyes.

“*I’m sorry.*” He bubbled.

Fang booted the three forward.

Jade was shot out of the receiving mirror, causing him to stumble upon the cold, puddled floors of the hairy outskirts of Skullgully. The sky above was emerald green and glittering. There was a slight dusting of snow, and a sleet that clung to the purple ground from nights before.

They were indeed, back where they had started.

Lave was not with them. Nor Fang, nor Shinka.

Jade watched as Sloan humbly set forth, swallowing back everything his one mistake had cost them. Jade gave him a small smile.

“Don’t look back, Sloan. We’re not looking back.” Jade added sincerely. Sloan nodded and continued his independent march, which was shortly interrupted by the sight of an old abandoned vehicle.

CHAPTER 12

FINAL “BATTLE”

Sir Charles's stare cut deeply into the troubled Soul of Truesdale in the dim lights of the Pinto office. While neither said a thing, it was evident what one another thought of each other.

They both believed the other to be simple, and stupid. Yet only Truesdale wanted all the other had, to the very last drop. Truesdale wanted the king's accumulations of wealth and power. Sir Charles only wished he'd had Truesdale's resources to this infiltrater.

Sir Charles spoke first.

“What do you know of this Jade Jewel character whom has begotten the favor of my dear Charlie?”

Truesdale exploded into the past, rummaging the blizzard in his brain. With vulgar immaturity, he rearranged every fact in his cranial programs to make Jade into the optimal villain.

“He took everything from me! He was deemed a somebody in school just because he babysat for a low-life loser who couldn't survive on his own! He was always doing good deeds to bump up his popularity with the gullible teachers and peers. He doesn't care about anyone, it's all about his reputation, and he'll do anything to play the hero! He's a farce! He's a threat! He will steal from you, and sell you empty persuasions about his greatness!”

“Is that so...” Charles did not flinch at the unbelievably childish interrogation he'd just taken part of.

He turned around in silence, utterly grief-stricken at this worthless hater in front of him... But then he had an idea.

“Can you shoot?”

“Reasonably well, I've been training for months!”

“So has Mr. Jewel-”

“There’s a damn good difference between two months and six months.” Truesdale ejected poisonously out of utter offense.

There’s also a damn good difference between panic and control... Charles wanted to say, but held his well-disciplined tongue.

“Are you ready to be a real soldier? Are you ready to kill?”

Truesdale’s mouth ran like the wind as his head filled with paradoxical memories of a school shooting. Ever since that day, he lived and breathed on fear. His bones were made of the stuff – but he wanted so badly to prove he was not weak. He believed that having come to Pinto and learning to wield a gun would keep other men with guns at an arm’s length.

“Good. Then let’s start with Jewel.”

It took a moment for the statement and its meaning to soak in, but once Truesdale had his bearings, his lips grew to a grin he couldn’t quite execute. To his sold heart, the idea was delicious. He had wanted to for so long...

For five days, bombs dropped into the stony Skullgully battlefield while Lave sat in the grit and dirt of a trench, wearing his sweat. He hadn’t eaten or tasted water in several days, but even these survival needs were not on his mind – the bombs had seized, troops were moving in and the guns began to blaze.

If he and his men were caught, the last of the Mission Medallion men would face immanent imprisonment or death. All he could do now, was continue to breathe.

Jade found himself alone.

Sloan, Lave, Fang, Shinka, and even the dog, were no where to be seen. He lie on a mudflat high above the Skullgully canyons, but beneath yet another stone out-cropping that held an obscured mirror.

Skullgully's normally emerald-green sky was a muddy black-purple, matching it's volcano-like stone. Streaks of dirty clouds were tell-tale of the invading air-raiders who were dropping missiles like fish shedding eggs. Marching troops blanketed the floors of the dark, marbled, morbidity of Skullgully, informing Jade that this was not going to be a pleasant dream.

Between wild panic, and a form of paralysis, Jade sat up with both a start and a hesitance. He felt his pockets for the medallion, but it was no longer with him. There was no hope of solace here.

Jade reassessed his costly loneliness. If he were here to do things over, then what was in front of him, had to be the past... But where was Sloan? Could this "past" be before he ever even stepped foot in Camp Pinto?

His piteous confusion was broken by the scenery.

The bomb-dropping, space-craft speckled, and missile-streaked heavens... The cratered floors stampeded by armored troops and elephant-reminiscent tanks ... it all belonged to the very moment Lave's team failed to pull off Mission Medallion.

Lave was somewhere down in those Godforsaken trenches...

Jade looked at the mess of men, machines, explosives, and debris. It was like a swarming mass of insects, ready to consume the dying.

Now what did Fang expect Jade to do about it?

There was an unnatural calm within Jade as he contemplated, but before his mind could catch up, his feet began moving. He was a clear target for gunners both of air and earth, but his sure stride did not seize. His mind began to revolt.

No, no, no... But I have to... This is suicide... No, it's saving Lave... But I'm just one person... But he's all you got... I'll be killed... Fang said you can't be... Do you really believe that? What is death anyway? I don't know... I don't know... Does heaven exist? Don't even go there... This isn't real... Nothing is real... Will I ever go home? Is this world real? Or is it a dream? What am I doing?

They're going to kill me... They're going to kill me... They're going to kill me...

The law of Jade's karmic thoughts doled it's content.

As he tried to step over a crust of Skullgully's old brick wall, it burst into life, knocking him flat on his back.

Before he could react, a horrible, horrible, smoking-black infernal creature stood over him with a face of blank, soulless rage.

It raised it's gangly ashen wings as it came forward in a teeming, awkward lurch. In two bounds, it's ebony face full of sharp, cat-eye spite roared at Jade with flinging spit and carnivore teeth.

Immobilized, Jade accepted his fate with jaw clenched and muscles ready to burst...

The thing's wrinkled nose suddenly relaxed from it's leopard-worthy snarling to a perfectly smooth, inquisitive glare.

It recoiled, leaving coal-dust on Jade's sleeves.

Jade scrambled to upright himself and run.

“*Jade?*” Shinka’s voice rang out like church bells on a wedding day.

“*Shinka?!*”

“I know you, I saw you at camp in future-”

“Wait – do I know you yet?”

“I do.”

“Do I?”

The boy and soot covered sky medusa burst into humiliated laughter, but Shinka knew the battle field was no place for a reunion. She helped him up and ducked into the marooned trenches.

“Can’t explain – time is always uneasy in the mirrors. I know I seen you, but not here. This before... I was captured. I’m trying to change that, that is what Fang has me to do.”

“I’m here for Lave.”

“That’s right... He had medallion in those days... “

“Shinka, Fang had us re-do Mission Santos – what am I doing different this time, do you know?”

“You’d be put here eventually. You are exactly where you need to be, as I. Just do what you would’ve done.”

There was a pause as the both of them got distracted by an airship crashing to the ground on a ball of fire. Mortar shell flew not far.

“So what is your goal, and can I help?” Jade turned, wondering if a collaboration could aid them in gaining a win-win.

Shinka shook and sneezed on her camouflaging dust. Her lids went wistful as she looked into the eyes of the war outside their window. She turned back to Jade’s all-inclusive stare.

“I’m afraid you cannot help me in my act of cowardice...”

Jade was thrown for a loop. Not in his wildest dreams did he once ever conjure that his alien angel was weak.

“What are you saying?”

“I am abandoning Mission Medallion... *I am Stan A. Solve.*”

The proclamation echoed through Jade’s skeleton with a calamitous finalization: “You? How? Why?! I thought Stan was a man!?”

“In this time, commander thought me invincible as a sky medusa, so they made me fight in T.T, but I’m no more than just an alien and woman. I did not know I was expected to be brilliant or brave. I am a coward.” She soundlessly wept.

“Coward?!?” Jade’s poise could not be apprehended. “Shinka, you’re the freakin’ scariest thing out here, Pinto’s *afraid* of sky medusa, just like Mr. Agnes said-”

Shinka’s weeping hardened. Jade knew his words were inappropriate, but in all his frustration, he couldn’t imagine how someone with so much power and grace could feel so useless. He put his hands on her, and this time, her searing vibration did not harm him.

“Shinka, you’ve done nothing wrong, if Pinto forced you into T.T, then none of this is your fault. Come on, help me get to Lave, then we’ll get out of here, together, okay?”

Her musical voice sputtered until she coughed out a sentence that broke Jade’s heart.

“I’m too afraid of Pinto’s men.”

“But Shinka, there’s one right in front of you.”

She paused as if trying to formulate an excuse, but none came, and it made Jade sort of satisfied. She could think of nothing but an affirmation.

“... You are the real Stan A. Solve. Take my place.” She shuddered in desperate reminding.

“I will, but I need you to show me where the rest of T.T is. Please Shinka...”

Her shivering began to fade, but her body rocked further into his space, and he could see her canines glisten as her hypnotic eyes speared his aura. She welled with a synonymous terror and courage. She became an unpredictable fate.

The world was frozen for one long, short, moment...

With no words, plans, or maps to trace, Shinka tore out of the trenches and into the gory cacophony.

Shinka’s disguised body convulsed through the gawking swarms of troops, felling soldiers like bumbling bowling pins by her image alone.

She both led the way and cleared the path, and Jade followed like clockwork, dodging death on his way.

Jade eventually lost Shinka in the blur as she had to finally duck for cover. She’d been shot in the wings several times, but she left him where he needed be, and he found himself standing outside a cavern where several gun barrels peered out at him, bulls-eyes on his heavy heart.

It was the shelter where Mission Medallion had been laid to rest.

The guns cocked. Jade's boots turned...

"Lave Santos?! Don't shoot - It's Stan!" Jade shouted against the crossfire.

There was a moment of unfruitful dread, but then, Lave's face appeared in the stone crevice.

Jade ducked toward the pit, a bullet whispering past his ear as Lave's hand shot from the darkness. Jade reached for him, but instead of grasping his palm, Lave slapped the medallion into his awaiting hand.

Jade sat up in shock. He was awake now.

The pastel green moon-rise swam with flocks of babbling crows. The team was camped out on the rocky mountain range, enveloped with a layer of snow...

Surveying the slumbered camp, Jade could not remember where he last was, how much of his dream was real, what was happening, and what was still true. Had they met Fang in the forest or not? Did they repair the mistake Sloan had made? Was all that Shinka said, true? Was she the original Stan A. Solve?

Jade looked toward the contorted alien, she was still resting like a sleeping bird, her enormous wings drooped aside her fairy-thin figure as her peacefully closed eyes remained half-hidden within.

In contrast, Sloan was sprawled on the ground, snoozing with his head atop Ace's furry trunk. His cap covered his snoring face, but Jade could tell he was drooling.

Lave was still properly tucked into his sleeping bag; Jade swore the boy slept quieter than dead men.

As Jade stood, wiping the sweat from his hairline. Ace glanced up from his unconsciousness. It stirred Sloan with a jerk, causing Shinka to slowly rise. She stretched her billowing wings which she beat to finish, it raised the dry snow and made Lave sneeze.

"Bless you." Jade greeted as his mind began to come back to reality.

“Damn. We should have been moving hours ago.”

“I know.” Jade said collectively, still pondering his dream and when and where it began. He went to help Lave up, but the boy stood with vigor on his own. What Jade was looking at, was a man who had made a full recovery.

The two shared a content glance.

Excavating camp, the group swooped up with haste. The snow had cleared, and the moons shone down strong, revealing that they were well past the Devil’s Bridge area. They were so close to their checkpoint, it made Jade beam.

Now all that they needed was for Fang to appear on the horizon – but for real this time.

As Jade’s booted feet crunched down on the ice-blanketed stone, his chin turned at Shinka. His eyes asked for her opinion, but she’d strangely become impenetrable – not in a cold way, but in a curious way. Their connected gaze was flawed by the sounds Jade heard in his dream.

Those awful whispering noises...

Lave dove down on Jade, shaking him from his stupor. Lave knew the sound of bullets hissing through one’s aura like the back of his hand.

Lave was pulling the trigger over his own shoulder before Jade could even get up again. The peaceful dawn had just gotten ugly.

A group of men larger than anyone had anticipated, began to percolate on the mountainous horizon. They were Pinto soldiers – out to collect their missing convicts.

Ace growled before turning paw to run with T.T. The team paused only to shoot back from behind snow banks and boulders. Lave and Sloan became machines as they ducked and fired, ducked and fired.

Jade was still fumbling with his gun, unable to believe this moment had finally trapped him.

Pinto closed in, forcing T.T towards the hills where the irregular rock formations came fast and furious. The group had already cut corners just to avoid getting pitted on a cliff side, and just as they feared they would, the Pinto soldiers split up.

Entering a mild ditch, Lave kept his eyes on the skies, while Sloan and Jade kept aim on the hallways. They were still making progress towards their exiting mirror, they just had to make sure no one ended up between it, and them.

Lave's gun exploded at the mounting cliff above T.T, but froze at the sudden flutter of a white kerchief.

"Just hand over the prisoners and we'll let you be!" The old familiar voice of Truesdale floated into the stone bowl. Jade groveled.

"Who is that?" Lave put his body on pause.

"He followed me from my world."

"He's from your time?" Lave was stricken. Sloan kept his eyes on the escape routes.

"Yeah, he joined Pinto when he got here, but he doesn't belong. I still somehow gotta get him back home..."

"Helllooo?" Truesdale called. "We got a deal yet? What do you thorns need a sky medusa for, anyway? Oh, and hand over the Medallion while you're at it – maybe Sir Charles will spare–"

Lave's last straw had been pulled. He fired.

"Wait!" Jade smacked into the longgun, sending the bullet into the ether.

Truesdale would never accept it, but Jade had just saved his life.

Truesdale retreated like a flushed Bobwhite, flunking his task before it had even begun.

"What's the matter with you?!" Lave snapped. "we're not gonna waltz around sparing drones, Mr. Stan A. Solve!"

"Didn't I just say that guy has to come back with me?!" Jade fumed. He suddenly stopped. "Wait, what do you mean, drones?"

“Guys!” Sloan shouted like a swear word. He did not wait for Lave and Jade to begin shooting at their quickly clogging escape routes to start taking part in the now deafening popping and whistling of the guns.

“Shoot!” Lave reminded Jade whom hadn’t since the battle had begun.

Jade took aim at the human figures crawling forward in the distance. His tracer locked on, he tightened his grip... He couldn’t.

Sloan shrieked.

Jade dropped his aim to attend, but Shinka scooped up the child in her embrace faster than you could blink.

With only one man fighting now, Pinto soldiers fell from above, crashed through T.T’s entrance, exit, and clowdered in from every other gap. Bullets flew over the team’s heads. There as nothing to do but surrender, but Lave didn’t seem to think so. He fired one shot after the next.

“Just keep shooting! They’re not going to stop! Trust me, they’re not going to stop!”

Jade was going to have to help Lave.

While Lave took care of the attackers, Jade presumed to clear their way out of the trench – trench, yes, this was part of Lillia’s Trench. They were so close to getting out of here. Over the water’s edge was the geyser lands, and somewhere upstream from that, a magic mirror awaited them.

Jade was shooting now, and he was very quickly accomplishing his task. Fang had made him a great marksman, and it was paying off with every fallen figure. The only problem now was, Jade had retreated – inside.

He had heard of survivors talk of such things – how everything begins to happen in slow motion.

Jade was out of body, and he wasn’t sure how to get back.

The weapon in his hands had become an extension of himself; *aim, cock it, pull it. Aim cock it, pull it.* He heard Fang repeating in his hollow memories...

There was another glitch. Perhaps another one of Jade's filmy dreams, or perceived hallucinations – no less intense than the reality he was leaving behind.

T.T was obliterating Fort Skullgully. They dashed down a line of cannons, each partaking in loading, paddling, lighting, and firing. It was all aimed at what was left; all of the bridges leading to no where, the hidden, demonic scrawlings, they were burying the ghosts, and all of the monuments representing ill-intent.

It would all be gone, and the world would be one more step closer to being free.

“Clear!!!” Lave shouted. Sloan cracked the flint. The three covered their ears.

Hissss... BOOM.

The cannonball was thrust across the powdery sky, hitting their target with a messy crash. They repeated this like a machine in a factory until Lave sighted an irregularity worthy of a halt – something was emerging from the smoke... It steadily rose - A monolithic aeroplane built of junk.

It's nuts and bolts squealed as it breached from the pluming demolition site, rising like an aluminum monster with tin-patchwork for wings. It hummed an ugly hum as it's grotesque, creaking body began to take off, guzzling with black smog and gaslight eyes.

Gaped and belittled, the three froze at the inhuman creature; Lave burst from his shock into fury.

“Re-aim that cannon – we’re taking this scrap-iron scarecrow to the ground.”

Lave overdosed the cannon with gunpowder. Jade smacked the flint and steel... The fire glowed, taking it's sweet time. Lave snapped up Sloan's Japanese fan and aired the flame.

BOOOOM.

The towering, ghoulish vehicle began to fall, cascading the mountains in coal-hued fog and burning hardware. As the gigantic, living aeroplane died a tragic, catastrophic, theatrical, death, the soldiers ran for their lives.

Jade did not know if they made it out or not.

“What the hell is that?” Lave was taken off guard as something came barreling through the barricade of Pinto soldiers, grounding them like a wave of dominoes. The huge thing sprayed the snow as it swerved on the melty ground to land in a perfect mounting position in front of T.T.

It was the sci-fi mobile.

“Good girl.” Sloan joked weakly from Shinka’s arms. Lave took that as the cue.

Everyone jumped in, but not before Jade’s ankle was nabbed by a masked Pinto soldier. Jade spun around to find the man raising a blade to him.

Lave shot the goggled creature clean in the head.

It draped lifeless onto the side of the vehicle. Jade recoiled in disgust – but it was not what he expected.

His would-have-been- killer slipped to the floor with a clatter, helmet toppling away to unveil a bald, metallic skull.

They were robots.

He’d been shooting at robots the whole time.

A sense of both relief and overwhelm flooded into Jade’s conscious, and he felt a little more back in his body again.

Lave smashed on the gas.

“I had no idea!” Jade pleaded apologetically.

“I didn’t think so!”

The rover bulldozed forward.

Lave did not slow on the ice-capped slopes. He rammed through obstacles, took dangerously sharp turns, and even used high speed to idly jump a fault line.

For Lave, the geyser lands were like cutting butter with a hot knife. He was quite possibly even more daring of a driver than Captain Fang and Sloan combined.

“There! There!” Jade pointed to the rock formation where the ice mirror hung, concealed.

Lave went shredding under the out-cropping, ending the wild ride with a marvelous parking job, whether needed or not.

All unmounted.

Lave and Jade immediately lowered the delicate object from it's suspension under the stone ledge to make it accessible. They'd destruct the mirror on their way out to be sure no Pinto stragglers could follow.

Jade smiled as he and Lave set the mirror down on the icy floor... They'd done it. They were free to go.

But they were too late.

From behind the stone formation, a swarm of Pinto's ground men rushed onto the scene, seizing everyone harshly and deliberately.

The only one who bucked and brayed before being subdued, was Shinka, whom threw down several pairs of cruel, robotic, hands before getting bound by Pinto's weird technology.

At first Jade fidgeted with his captors, but eventually he took the hint from Lave to get quiet. Lave remained shut up, even as Sir Charles Renkins stepped into the ambush scene.

Jade swallowed shock as his peaceful Sky Medusa became the beast from his dreams:

Gills flapped bright crimson, while her elvin ears folded to her skull, she displayed an unhappy grin of pearly teeth, wicked canines, barred. She literally glowed with fear and rage, illuminated with over-exertion. A venomous growl warned all she was ready to murder for the sake of her pack. She was hysterical as Sir Charles reached over to touch Lave.

He pushed his chin up, getting a good look at the eyes of the Pinto soldier he never wanted to see again...

Charles began flipping open the breast pockets of Lave's coat. Lave did not budge. Sir Charles was searching for the medallion.

But all of T.T knew Jade was the one who had it...

Jade wished Sloan would stop fighting his handlers who kept kicking him to stop his flailing – every time he whimpered, Shinka got excited and nervous.

Ace jerked and grumbled through his muzzle.

Sir Charles was onto the lapel pockets...

What to do? What can I do?! Jade screamed in his head.

Sloan wrenched to the side, giving himself enough freedom to assault a restrainer by clamping down on his arm – Jade just hoped Sloan had not broken his teeth on the robot's steel appendage.

To Jade's surprise, the lackey wailed and ripped away, blood speckling Sloan's pleased face as he did so. Sloan had sniffed out Sir Charles's only fleshed-out man, Mr. Conway.

With a poised set of finely delivered martial arts moves, Sloan downed his captors, and reclaimed a gun.

All hell broke loose.

Jade and Lave had their restrainers pulverized from behind – An unfamiliar gun fired six times before they could even turn and glance.

Fang had arrived.

In all of what seemed like thirty seconds, Fang had taken every robot in sight to the ground with a booted foot, fist, or bullet.

“Go, go, go!” He told the lot, who dove for the mirror without question.

When T.T was secured, Fang slowly backed into the mirror himself, one foot in, one foot out, standing above Pinto's groaning men with a victorious smile.

He was almost lady-like in his bragging mirth – a wicked smirk Sir Charles would not soon forget.

A smile like Fang's Mother's.

“*Snake*.” Charles muttered of his ungrateful son.

Fang winked before theatrically dragging the ice mirror inward on himself, shattering it on the Skullgully side.

CHAPTER 13

RETURNING HOME

The boys, aliens, and dog, spilled to the hardwood floor with a crash. Ace yipped as someone pinched his tail beneath their weight, and others jumped away from the static shock of Shinka's skin.

Before Jade could even push his chest from the floor, he could smell the fragrance of aromatic teas, perfumes, beeswax candles, and holiday cookies. His chin was sliced by broken, hand-thrown pottery as they took the fall.

They were in... *A gift shop?*

Sloan rocked himself to a sitting position, the many fancy clocks in the room ticked with him, revealing that it was night here. He moaned.

“Oh, this isn’t the old ranch house... Wheres are we now?!”

Captain Fang carefully leapt down from the shelf where the recipient ice mirror, framed with wood, hung amidst other wall decor. He landed with the clap of his boots, and a tingle of some glass ornament breaking – but that was the least of his worries – they were puddling the previously spotless floor with blood and sweat.

“Does it matter?” Fang retorted as he briefly glanced into his pocketed crystal ball to be sure Sir Charles was returning to Camp Pinto’s head quarters. He grabbed the straw broom from behind the counter, piled the gross packs and longguns in the corner, and began to sweep.

The soldiers sat panting and peeling off their coats to cool down. Sloan turned to vehemently lick his wound like an animal. Jade staunched his chin with a strip of his linen shirt.

Shinka remained haunched over in the tiny shop, unable to stand, or extract her four, towering wings.

Jade graduated from the floor, he pulled the small, gold medallion box from his pocket and handed it to Lave, whom took it with sentiment; he held the treasure to his heart.

Jade walked on. The only sounds to be heard was the breathing, booted footsteps, and brushing of Fang's sweeping job. Bits of glass tinkled here and there, but all was voiceless until Jade laid a grip on Fang's arm.

Jade felt like he could scream, and rave, but his exhausted body diminished him to just a few angry words.

"You risked the medallion's life by sending it out with us. And did you realize that when you used the earthquake as a cover-up, you left us no knowledge of where to meet you, after the fact? Oh, and when did Pinto soldiers become robots, huh? Tell me that! You could have killed all of us! And now Truesdale thinks he's part of Pinto's plan, too! What the hell, Fang?!"

Fang paused, and for just a moment, he was not the battle-hardened Captain, but the unstable, young, Prince Charlie.

Letting an exhale sink from his nose, he shook off Jade's grasp, and continued to sweep. He was sorry he'd left his student with so much spunk and not enough fortitude.

"Pinto, is but a small company of few men - and even fewer promises. Yes, most of the men you saw in Skullgully were machines, but the young men from camp, the ones you fed and cared for, they were real."

"Yes..." Jade thought about it. They had to be. "But... if Sir Charles just sends robots to do his dirty work, then where do the humans go? What will happen to Truesdale?"

"You don't want to know."

"Yes I do."

"They're sent to what's left of the factory." Lave pitched in, knowing Fang would not relent. "When I was a trainee at Pinto some years ago, they taught real men to be hardcore soldiers... Pinto's since been bought, has it not?"

Fang sighed at the wrinkleless veteran, then turned back to Jade.

“Camp Pinto is a guise for the many lost, confused, young men who happen upon it. We teach you all about saving the world, and becoming a man of significance. It’s just what Charles has to do in order to get a breathing organism to comply with what awaits them at war. You have to make selling your Soul to the devil sound tantalizing, right?” Fang licked his scabbed lip. “How my Father keeps that shit going, is my rumpus, but it’s what he’s done all his life.”

“So what in the world are you doing being part of it?!” Jade pushed on Fang’s thinning threshold.

“Boy, just be glad I was part of it, or Mission Santos would have been suicide. You got what you wanted. Be happy.”

Fang was serious. Saving Lave’s life, was quite literally, a once in a life time opportunity.

Fang moved onto the bucket and mop, proceeding to daub out their blood and dirt stains in his distinguished coat of tomato-red, his ebon leathers, and military cap. He was visually, completely out of place.

He worked swiftly then put the cleaning instruments as they had been. He plopped a wad of dollars and silver coins onto the counter for what they had broken, then went to fix the lopsided merchandise on the shelf.

Lave’s eyes glinted at the drops of Fang’s blood that respotted his perfectly swabbed floor.

“Captain Fang, Sir, let us come back in the morning. You need to rest. We all do.”

Fang’s paling face accepted him disdainfully. The action-oriented Lave was the one to usher the group outside, locking the door behind them.

By foot the men came across a small, cheap, highway motel, which they immediately checked into. Jade worried that Sloan and Shinka would be shunned for their appearance, but it became apparent that people in this modern era were not capable of conceiving

Shinka's energetic form. Sloan was another story, but Fang had a cover-up for the lot of them.

"Music video." He brilliantly lied, though it could not explain the stench or the fake blood that magically drained.

They made it to their room number without any further disturbance, and crashed in relief. The men stripped down, showered, shaved, anointed, bandaged, and dropped into the wonderfully clean-smelling sheets.

Shinka tucked herself into a far corner of the room, out of sight of the men, and away from the inactive television set, which she found disturbing.

Fang eased into the armchair when all was complete, Ace curled up at his tired feet.

The ticking clock lulled everyone into a deep dreaming...

Jade woke to some murmuration.

It was only two-o-clock, and he wished he'd not awakened until morning, when he wouldn't be the only one.

All slumbered impenetrably, even with the small lamp still lit on the night table.

It was Captain Fang who had woke him – sleep babble ran through his teeth like cream...

He was in a helicopter, cutting through a crisp, periwinkle daybreak, roaring into a sky full of pillared, well-architected clouds. The broccoli-top jungles below soon turned to frothy, burning-blue waves of water, and some freak accident forced the passenger to become a paratrooper, diving for his life.

His body jerked as he deployed the equipment, shortly thereafter gasping for air as he reached the surface of the ocean.

Jade took an extra blanket from the wardrobe and draped it over his young captain... This boy... That he hardly knew anything about.

Fang did not wake.

The boys were arisen by Fang's impatient foot steps. He had went to get their clothing laundered at the crack of dawn, and now ordered all to retain their hygiene regimen before portioning out clothes fresh from the laundromat. His own suit was perked up, and his bandaged thigh had finally stopped bleeding.

"Get smart, gentlemen, we'll be meeting a girl for brunch a little after nine."

"A girl?" Sloan queered.

"Not you, you'll be staying here – and lying low, I may add." Fang reminded himself to put the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door. "we're already in enough of a jam the way it is."

Sloan pouted as the powdered up three said goodbye at the door.

Captain Fang had the men taxied back to the flower shop before the owner decided to call the police. How he was going to explain things for them would be interesting, but above his relentless pursuit to apologize, Jade also wanted to know how one of Pinto's rare ice mirrors got displayed in a gift shop at this point in time, and in this realm.

With miraculous timing, Britt's van pulled up just as the taxi dropped the men off.

As Britt came around her van, she suddenly lost her purse and packages at the sight of the gorgeous boy she'd briefly met several years ago, now sidled by a uniformed army of two. Fang swept his hat off and bowed.

"Holy Mary Mother of Christ, am I glad to see you." He smiled.

After a true tall tale that rocked Britt's world in a bad way, Britt had heard enough. These young men, whoever they were, appeared to have gone through the dryer – she couldn't however, get over the fact that they cleaned up, paid for the damage, and righted

all that was wrong. Whatever the truth, they'd come back to share their sorries – and, to thank her.

“If it were not for you accepting that mirror, we may not have been saved.” Captain Fang swore with a raised glass.

Britt had sat the boys down on a picnic table, serving them like proper guests with what she'd scrounged from the break room pantry. She set the quick-mix pancakes down on the table and looked each man in the eye.

Mr. Captain Fang looked just as fabulous as he had when they first met; only a single scar's difference.

The young blond, blue-eyed, Lave Santos came off to her as a hard-working, manly, old-fashioned gentlemen, exactly the type you'd want for a son-in-law. There was almost something familiar about him... And she almost wanted to say that his eyes should have been green.

The last of the three, whom in his own ways, appeared either the oldest, or simply, most rugged, made Britt stare. His scars, eye patch, and uneven hair-cut did not detract from his nervous, wandering gaze that did not want her to recognize him. But Britt had always been good with faces. She gasped and grabbed her own.

“*Jade?*”

He stood out of embarrassment, which only made her inclined to hug him. He pulled away before she was done.

“What happened to you? *Where have you been?!*”

“Didn't we just tell you?” Jade insisted with a sad, sheepish, ashamed, and desperate tone. She shook her head softly, smiling as a million thoughts ran through her mind.

“You've gone mad.”

“I know... but wasn't I always?”

“Different.” Britt corrected him, hurrying back to her hospitable ways. As she introduced the butter, berries, and maple syrup, Lave's incredulity bordered on that of one lying

hold of a unicorn pelt. Jade hadn't been kept quite so long away from such a breakfast, but it didn't stop him from eating slowly and gratefully. The meal was washed down with crisp orange juice and sweet, fresh, milk.

As the boys dined, Britt gossiped on, telling Jade just how much she and all his friends had missed him, and wondered where he'd gone.

This was the exact conviction Jade's hurt feelings needed back in the isolating Skullgully and Camp Pinto, but for some reason, he felt nothing now.

As Britt tirelessly went on, her few employees arrived in the background, interjecting with slamming car doors and hellos.

A tall, dirty-blond, young woman in leathers, feathers, tattoos and jeans walked by, throwing a careless, rude, flat, greeting at her senior boss between teeth busy with chewing gum; Britt held her place like a cool, collective Mom.

The employee's name was Azalea, and she didn't look or feel like the nicest of characters, but Jade watched Lave transform before him, having a fit like he'd never seen anything like her.

Lave leaned over to Jade like a best friend would.

"I'm going to go talk to her!" His infatuation burst from the seams.

This finally made Jade laugh.

There was apparently a side of Lave he had not yet seen, and it gave him hope that there was still life to live on the other side of Camp Pinto.

Back at the motel, Jade collapsed into bed, drained by Britt's promises of seeing old high school buddies, invitations to celebrations, and further gifts.

Almost forgetting that Shinka and Sloan were still part of their auxiliary, Jade was reminded as Sloan leapt up from his boredom to cause a fuss. He would have been ignored if Lave had not needed someone to flash his all-important piece of lavender stationary to; Lave's high-held paper trophy contained Azalea's phone number.

Fang claimed the arm chair and sighed. He watched the scene in front of him go on like a reasonably intriguing television show until Sloan began the advertisements and made Captain Fang cross a leg.

“Could I have your attentions, please?”

The soldiers snapped up at once.

“We are in need of discussion,” Fang explained. “... About, the future...”

All remained silent.

“Sloan and I shall be returning to our world by tomorrow, as we still have business in finishing this war. We are partners in crime if you haven’t already figured that out. On the contrary, Lave Santos, Stan, Shinka, Ace.” He included the dog with a small grin. “You are free to go if you so choose. You have completed your mission, doled your dues, your services have met their standards, and I am proud of all of you for that. Forever grateful. You have earned my respect.”

“Thank you, sir.” Lave saluted. “I’m home thanks to all of you, and I plan on building an even greater one with the freedom you have granted me.” He was smiling and did not stop, even as Fang moved on.

“Mother?”

Jade tried not to wince, but he was shocked to find he was speaking to Shinka.

“I desire to be left on my way.”

It seemed like a good enough answer to Fang. He glanced at Jade whom lost some dignity as he was put on the spot.

“You mean it’s over, just like that?”

“Sometimes heroism is not glamorous,” Fang paused. “... And best left that way. Mr. Solve, be proud. Be satisfied. You’ve accomplished more in these last past months than most will ever conquer in the entirety of their life. I wish I could face my demons the way that you’ve faced yours. I both admire and envy you, Stan A. Solve.”

“... What exactly do you mean, Captain?”

“You have delightfully, and recklessly made a fool of me. You are free to go.” He broke a smile and looked at his watch. He said nothing more and went about packing up he and Sloan’s possessions.

Knowing he would not be going back to war, Jade turned from his pillow.

“I’ll be staying in this world, Captain Fang.”

Fang acknowledged Jade with a tender nod, leaving Jade to drift off in uncertainty...

In the morning, Fang and Sloan were gone.

Jade paced the room barefoot before slinking back under the covers, disappointed that they had not properly bid he and Lave farewell.

Lave was in the shower, and Ace snored on Lave’s stolen bed. Shinka was curled up like a cat on the carpet, still hidden as best she could.

Unexpectedly, Jade glanced up to find a package at his bedside.

Leaning over for a closer examination, the front of the package had a letter taped to it, frivolously rendered with Sloan’s sloppy hand writing.

Happy Birthday. It read, even though it wasn’t.

Jade unfolded the letter, reading diligently.

We got the medallion where it need be. We have succeeded Stan A. Solve! Much appreciation to your services, and I hope to see you again some day. Thanks for being such a good pal.

P.S. Fang says he’s sorry he didn’t recognize you sooner.

P.S.S. Happy Birthday.

P.S.S.S. I will be back.

P.S.S.S.S. You were right. There’s no such thing as immortality. Only time. More time.

Jade swallowed so hard it hurt. He threw the package into his bag, not knowing how he felt about the last message – he knew that whatever it was, he didn’t want to feel it now.

Lave exited the bathroom in pants, he was briskly drying his hair with a towel as he searched for a shirt.

Jade could now see the damage – Lave had battle souvenirs streaked all across his torso, some from before he knew him, and some from the journey they shared. He was living proof of a man whom felt it was his right to put himself in danger to help others – and it appeared painful, but Lave's mood never would have admitted that.

“Good morning partner! New adventures await! I’m swingin’ by that Flower shop again to meet Azalea, you comin’ with?”

“Sure.” Jade said automatically to squelch his inability to catch Lave’s fire. Jade numbly turned.

“Lave... Can I ask you something?”

“You have the floor.” Lave answered, vanishing into a white blouse.

“Is this all a dream?”

Lave exploded into a huge grin. He was a soldier who had honestly come back home.

“You *bet* it is! It’s a dream come true is what it is! I’ve prayed for this day for years. Let’s get out there and start building a life! I will never forget what we’ve been through, but this is what we worked for. Come on, Stan, wake up and smell the coffee!” He chuckled, pointing out the filled tray he’d gotten from the continental breakfast.

Jade paused.

Lave was on a completely different cloud.

He had no clue as to what Jade was trying to say, and for a moment Jade wondered if Lave was just some guy he’d met in school or on the street, and was now going to a reunion party with.

Jade grabbed a fresh pair of clothing from the dresser and took his turn washing up, but he refused to look into the now, dismally, haunting, mirror.

Britt's place was a nightmare. None of his old friends recognized Jade until Britt told them it was him. All were flabbergasted by his ugly state of being, and believed he must have been living on the streets for all those years they had not heard from him. Disgusted by whom they used to look to as a hero, their disingenuine concern suffocated him – they pitied him in the worst ways possible, and he hated it.

Overbearing in their own need to be comfortable again, some offered to help him procure a job and an apartment, which he begrudgingly accepted, knowing that Shinka and Ace could not stay sane in the tiny motel room forever.

Alexis, who once stood taller than Jade in school, now looked up at him with fear.

“You’ve changed.” She accused without any kind of conclusion.

After all that Jade had been through, Jade did not get the kind of respect he believed he deserved. The most he got was awkward diversions in favor of avoiding proclamation of his unfortunateness. It was like acquiring backwards amnesia; no one admitting to the facts of the present, and only recalling those of the past.

Jade did not go back to the Flower shop again.

With great speed, Lave did exactly what he said he would do. He made it big, with leisure to spare. He was fascinated with the future, but never forgot the days of old. With 200 years of experience under his belt, he made fast friends and recuperated well. He found love and appeared happy. His sureness made him seem so smart. He was talented. He was seasoned.

Jade on the other hand, struggled to find meaning at all. He knew what he’d been through was real and true – but how to cope with it in a dimension that could hardly wrap their head around the first page?

Only a few weeks into his routine job at the supermarket, Jade grew overwhelmed with rage. He could not sit still at this nine to five endeavor everyday, knowing a robot could take his place - He had done real men’s work.

He had been in battle. He'd fought for his life and the life of others. He'd built shelters and fires and fended off monsters. He'd tended the sick, climbed mountains, and crossed deserts. He spelunked the coldest, darkest caves, met aliens, and almost died – four times.

Now he knew what it felt like to be an unappreciated veteran, and just like in his high school years, he cracked down on this case with great motivation – he grasped for old skills and talents he had in his previous life, hoping they could be an outlet for his madness.

Yes. He'd write a book about it. Justice for homeless veterans; health and healing for those coming home. He'd give speeches and do videos, and he'd volunteer at existing practices...

But then he remembered.

Nobody would ever believe what he'd gone through. It had all happened in seemingly fictitious worlds. He was still, only a teenager. And the only place this grand journey had been recorded, was in his mind. There was no evidence.

Without the credentials, his marvelous idea diminished to mental ashes, and he sank into a core despair.

The next morning he did not go to work. Groaning as he rose out of bed, he messily poured Ace a bowl of kibble, and left a glass of milk and a bunch of bananas in Shinka's reach.

Shinka... He wondered about her. She'd gained but the status of a largely independent house cat, spending most of her days sleeping in the Sun that came through the apartment window. She'd not spoken since being here – why did she stay when she was free to go?

Jade shrugged it off and went to find some clothes he could wear in the autumn air – but he had none. Checking the unused closet, by a stroke of coincidence, he found a nice, thick, trench coat left by the previous renter. He bundled up and set off for the stairs.

Entering the apartment lobby, he sighed grievently as his war-worn body tingled with pain, nearly making him return to his room. The canister by the door of the lobby caught his one eye, so he borrowed the walking cane among the umbrellas and hobbled into the chilly, sherbet sunrise.

CHAPTER 14

RECEIVING A BADGE

Jade sat senseless on a damp park bench, his booted feet on the wet sidewalk, and both hands clasped atop the walking cane. He felt like an old man contemplating life because it was nearing its end. Young, but passionless, he searched for meaning.

Even the miraculous, golden-bronze sunrise could not give him what he wanted.

The dew-dropped grass, so green, and bobbing with the singing wind, did not catch the attention of his conscious.

The city pigeons flying early morning rounds danced across their misty stage in blue and white feathers, rising and falling like beautiful music notes... But they only reminded Jade of the war birds.

Jade's gaze fell to the concrete.

He wanted to cry, but tears made his injured eye sting, so he held back.

Frustrated, Jade stood and gazed across the landscape in pondering...

What was best for him now? Which way to go? Who to be? What was the point?

As he fumbled back to the apartment in the hazy golden light, surrounded by downtown buildings and traffic, Jade caught sight of a truly unreal looking man...

Entrapped by his destination, Jade crossed the street, making taxis honk and screech. Pedestrians gawked and yanked at their pooches' leashes to avoid being part of the spectacle.

Jade hastily hobbled up to the man – the glass of an abandoned restaurant window.

He stared.

The unbelievable figure gazed back, tracing the scars on his face with a six-fingered hand...

Jade did not look like Jade anymore.

He was no longer a boy, nor did he resemble any proud representative – without his army suit, he did not look like Stan A. Solve.

This was a new man. A new life.

This was the solstice of a new chapter.

Mr. Agnes ripped the eye patch from his face, and laughed.

He ran home as fast as he could, to go open the long forgotten package from Sloan and Captain Fang.

Inside, was everything he had stolen from Fang, and at the very bottom of the box, was a mysterious, bejeweled medallion that he had made himself.

Epilogue

BACK IN PLACE

“I’m afraid I still don’t understand what the point of Mission Santos was.” Mr. Conway toyed with his elegant hors d’ oeuvre with thick fingers, plucking out the tiniest bit of cilantro, which he did not care for.

Prince Charlie, whom had long given up his Captain Fang incognito, turned from the full Moon back to the sparkling, golden, ballroom.

“Admittedly, in the beginning, I did not know Mr. Jewel to be the young Aldwyn Agnes, and luckily, nor did my Father. He had the connection with Santos, there’s that. All I knew was that he was the perfect man to execute the operation based on his inability to be brain-washed unlike the last past century of men I’ve seen and heard. Voila, at least that was spot on.” Charlie shrugged his well-dressed shoulders.

“And what did that accomplish?”

“He wanted so badly to rescue Lave Santos. Good. But he also freed my Mother from Pinto; Not to mention, His future self. A vital key. Look at it this way, I was protecting him from me, my Father, and all that Pinto stands for. In the end, all I know, is that the medallion had to get into the hands of the *free* Mr. Agnes. This will set things right. Jade and Lave were simply the means to get us there, you see?”

Conway finally tossed his appetizer down the hatch with a smirk.

“The suspicious demon strikes again.”

“I rather you call it anti-heroism.”

“Call it whatcha want, you’ll never be the good guy, *Captain Fang*. You’ve got your Father’s eyes.” Conway chuckled.

Prince Charlie bit his lip, He mustered some sarcasm.

“I can still try... Maybe one day Mr. Agnes will tell his children stories about our adventures, and he’ll pose me as one of the good guys.”

Conway's stern face didn't budge. He gazed the hopeless Prince up and down, seeing that his bare feet did not match his black suit and tie.

"Wishful thinking, eh?" Handsome Charlie raised a brow.

Conway sighed a monstrous sigh and patted the rebel's shoulder. He melded into the chandelier-lit ball room with no more words of advice for the fate-accursed dreamer.

Charlie turned back to the spangled night, leaning helplessly on the balcony with frustrated, crossed arms. This place... This castle.. It was his own prison, a destiny that led to nothing but being a forever-hated king. If only Mr. Agnes could make things right with Shinka, their exiled queen, then maybe he too, would be freed.

Like a ghost, Elsie floated from the light into the Moon-drenched darkness. Her bare arms came up from behind, embracing her sentient fool with an unconditional gesture. Her head fell to his shoulder with closed eyes.

"You are my only witness now." Charlie said to his love. "The only one who truly knows who's in here."

Elsie could think of nothing else to say on the matter that would console him. She just pressed her cheek to his silk shirt and admired his warmth; his humanness.

"I love you, Charlie."

With Captain Fang's smile, Charlie let himself be loved, and he continued to stare into the starry blue night, wondering if Mr. Agnes would ever forgive him for all that he and his Father had stolen from him.

*This book is dedicated to someone I will never know.
It's the least I can do for having turned my back on a
moment I should have listened to my intuition, but didn't.
And I am forever sorry for that.*

*But then again, perhaps you were just a vision
of mine, since no one else seemed to be able
to see you... Take care... And Thank
you for your service.*



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