

# THE COMPASS OF IMAGINATION

A Novel written by

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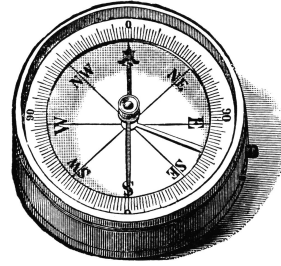
Second Edition

# PROLOGUE

“Imagine a world parallel to own. Generations of children, parents, and great grandparents sharing the same age, same place, at the same time. Trapped in that realm without direction, escape, or purpose they would fight among themselves for the shape of the future. Sound crazy? In the midst of all that chaos, would you still believe in fate and destiny to guide you or would you go your own way? Well, reality might be crazier than imagination and sometimes we’re left with choices we never expected. Often, things don't turn out the way we like. Dad says the universe has a way of breaking an egg on your face and no matter how hard you run, another one hits. Other times it's worse and you’re hit with tomatoes, onions, meat, peppers...everything! It's all random, you don't know where you're going...just running hard not to get hit...and it lands anyway. But then, the universe taps you on the shoulder, makes you look back, and says 'here you go', and you're presented with this beautiful, delicious omelette. It all comes together in the end, like magic. Dad says no one's going to believe my story, whether or not it's real...whether or not it's magic.”

- Max Park

# CHAPTER ONE



Blood-colored lighting flashes off in the distance, as the sun peeks over the horizon, from a dark purple puffed haze of clouds. Yard animals all over the suburbs erupt into frenzied noise that echo throughout the neighborhood. Thunder shakes the town. Car alarms goes off, dogs bark, cats meow, and for a moment, the power goes out, then flickers back on. A few moments pass, animals and cars quiet down. The rooster crows, the sun rises, and off in the middle of the neighborhood is a nice, grassy, two story townhome with a cop car parked in front. In the second floor bedroom, the alarm rings ‘6am’. Max, a young, skinny teen with semi short spiky hair covering his eyes, wakes up and walks over to his window. He rubs his eyes and yawns.

“Hurry up kiddo, let’s go!” yells his father, Marcus, behind his bedroom door, rushing past as it slightly opens. Max gets back in bed. The news is playing loud from a TV in the adjacent bedroom.

“...this morning a strange sighting was reported when witnesses described seeing a weather phenomena over Stolz Park...” The alarm sounds again, he stops it, by punching the snooze button but it malfunctions and he buries it under his pillow but the muffled sound keeps his eyes wide open. He reaches for the cord’s middle point and unplugs it. The alarm continues. Max gasps, his eyes widen, it keeps ringing as he’s holding the plug in his hand. His heart pounds, staring at empty socket he pulled it from. He looks outside the bedroom window, and back at his ringing clock. His mouth opens, about to gasp before the scream but he stops, the alarm dies. Max sighs and throws the alarm to the corner of this room, shaking his head, then rushing to the restroom. Marcus knocks on his door as he’s brushing his teeth.

“C’mon, we gotta go, we’re gonna be late. Move it!”. He yells. Max stays perfectly still and narrows his eyes. The TV noise from the adjacent bedroom goes silent, he can hear steps echo downstairs. He finishes and rushes to the closet where he stares at all his shirts in the semi-dark cool hue edge of his room. He takes jeans from the floor and smells it. He smells it again and nods. He puts them on and tries on a few shirts. He looks at a monkey t-shirt, throws it on the bed, another with an anime mech, and a third with a circular, geometric pattern in the middle and an eye. Marcus knocks on the door

“I’m out, I’m gonna leave you here, lets go, lets go!”. Max stares at all three shirts. He hears a door slamming in the distance. He grabs the geometric one.

Max hustles downstairs. Stops and rushes back up to get his headphones. Then slides down and rushes out the door as his dad begins exiting the driveway. Marcus stops, then Max locks the front door. As Max walks towards the car, Marcus slowly drives away from him. Max runs after his dad. Marcus stops then moves, stops and keeps moving again. Max raises his arms in the air, frowning. He runs faster for half a block, as the police car makes its turn at the end corner. Max slaps the window and Marcus stop. Max keeps knocking. Marcus stares at him. Max raises his hands in protest. The door unlocks, and he gets in.

Marcus smiles. Max closes the door, settling in his seat and clicking his belt. Marcus accelerates.

“Look who just decided to show up on time.” says Marcus, staring ahead. Max takes out his headphones, then puts them in his ears.

“What?” he says loudly.

“Haaa, very funny, Max” says Marcus. “You need to get up on time, you can’t keep being late or you’ll make me late.” Max just stares out the window, “You’ll make us BOTH late.” continues Marcus. Max raises the volume on his phone’s music app. “Ohhh, I see.” says Marcus. He drives around the neighborhood and stops at a traffic light. He drives around again, periodically staring at Max. While turning his head away, Max lowers his gaze for a moment, away from the window. Marcus notices a young girl walking beside them. He sees Max combing his hair over his face, tilting his head down

further. Marcus slowly drives parallel to the young, blonde girl in purple, torn, jeans. She stops at a bus stop. Max looks at his dad. Marcus is smiling.

“No dad.” says Max. Marcus rolls down the window. “Dad, stop, you’re embarrassing me!”

“Oh now you’ll talk to me, huh? Is she a classmate?” Marcus teases.

“Dad, the light’s green, just go!” whispers Max.

“Hey, ‘scuse me young lady, but do you happen to know my son Max?” Yells Marcus, pointing at him. Max stares ahead, flushed red like a tomato.

“Hey Max!” yells the young lady. Max eyes narrow as they roll at Marcus.

“You’re such an ass.” says Max in a deep growl. Then, like a robot, his head mechanically turns toward the young girl. Cars honk behind them. “H-h-hey Amy!?” he says, with a slightly cracked voice. Amy looks Max up and down and cracks a smile.

“Is this your dad?” she asks. Max snaps a quick angry glance at Marcus and turns back at Amy.

“No, no, he’s more like my legal guardian. I’m adopted --” Max says before his dad interrupts.

“Amy, would you like a ride to school?” yells Marcus.

“What?” asks Amy. Cars keep honking, some driving past them cursing at Marcus.

“Nothing, my Dad says hi, see you in school!” yells Max, waving and rolling the window. Marcus stares at Max, smiling with an evil grind, Max, narrows his eyes again at Marcus. More cars honk. Max gestures to his Dad to go. Marcus slowly drives forward. As he does, he can see Amy, staring at them with a look of disapproval. Max frowns.

“Why the hell’d you have to do that?” yells Max.

“Oh calm down, you gotta learn to relax, it’s just a girl.” replies Marcus.

“Yeah like you’d know.” snaps Max.

“Hey now, you wouldn’t be here if I didn’t” replies Marcus.

“Right.” says Max, putting on his headphones.

“Hey, I’m still talking to you, Max put down the headphone.” Marcus insists.

“Sorry Dad, I’m busy.” replies Max.

“You’re not doing anything, I’m the one with job.” replies Marcus.

“Yeah, then do your job and drop me off school already.” replies Max.

“You are testing my patience, what’s wrong with you?” asks Marcus.

“Nothing, Whatever.” replies Max.

“What, you can’t talk to your old man? I’m here to listen you know.” replies Marcus.

Max remains silent. Marcus pulls the headphones from Max. “Hey! Talk to me, junior, what’s going on?”

“You embarrassed me.” says Max.

“Aw c’mon Max, it’s called being a man, you gotta learn to lighten up, so what if some girl likes or doesn’t like you?”

“Maybe if you had a life, you’d get it.” says Max.

“What the hell is this about? You know that girl obviously, she knows you, who is she?” asks Marcus. “C’mon you can tell me.”

“No, I’m not telling you anything. You don’t listen and you’re never home anyway, why should I tell you anything.”

“Don’t be such a brat. Alright, I get it. You like this girl, sorry I embarrassed you, and sorry I’m not always at home to hear you ranting about girls, it’s called a job Max, if I don’t work, we don’t eat. You should be grateful I’m not some deadbeat Dad who does nothing for a living.” Marcus honks at a car in front of him. They’re stuck in traffic.

“Shoot! There’s no way we’re getting to school on time like this.”

“You’re gonna do it aren’t you?” says Max, eyes narrowed again.

“What?” asks Marcus.

“It’s abuse of power!” scolds Max.

“It’s the perks of job, little buddy!” says Marcus. He sounds the siren, cars begin to turn onto the sidewalk, and Marcus is allowed by all the cars to pass through. He speeds away into the highway. Max shakes his head and shrugs his shoulders at all the vehicles being inconvenienced as they’re pulling over the sidewalk and grassy edges of the street. He looks down at his phone, playing music.

“Karma’s going to get you one day, you know that?” says Max.

“C’mon kiddo, we’re almost there, we’re gonna be late.” says Marcus.

“That’s all you care about.” says Max. He puts on his headphones.

“That’s not true, I make time--” says Marcus as the police radio comes on.

“17 Ware Street ... both SP’s are still in the house, unknown race...wearing a dark coat, hat, and glasses...C-52 requesting assistance...situation red!” says the dispatch. Marcus picks up the walkie talkie, “C-12 to patrol, I’m off on Broadway near 52.” Max looks down, shaking his head.

“Sorry kiddo, gotta take this, I’ll drop you off at Sadie’s, we’re not far anyhoo.” says Marcus. Max blasts the music on his cell. Marcus makes an abrupt stop. He leans over to the passenger seat for a hug, but Max opens the door and closes it behind him. Max puts on his headphones. Marcus waves as he drives off, activating the siren. Max shakes, startled as the car screeches away.

The morning sun brightens above a 60’s style diner with giant, neon sign that reads ‘Sadie’s Cafe’ as Max walks towards the take out window. A woman with the tag ‘Tawni’ emerges from it’s deep recess.

“Hey, Lars, these are not what I would call croquettes, these look like sausage fingers and tastes like vinegar! Make it right this time, we need a fresh one for table 6. Hey, you, need caffeine for table 2.” says Teri. Behind her, another woman with ‘Teri’ on her tag.

“Yeah, I got it.” says Tawni. She waves outside the window.

“Hey Max!” yells Tawni, “how you been?”

“I’ve had better.” says Max, smiling.

“Poor baby. Don’t worry, I’ve got your fave coming.” says Tawni as she’s making coffee. “Did you hear about the crazy weather thing that happened this morn--”

“Oh hey Max!” says Teri. “How’s your dad?” she asks.

“He’s fine.” he grumbles.

“Tell him to stop by once in a while, there’s no excuse no matter how busy he is to say hi to his old classmate.” she says.

“Ha, I will!” replies Max.



“Here you go!” says Tawni. She reaches out to hug Max. He turns red for a moment, staring at Tawni’s chest as she moves away. She closes her shirt. “Hey now”.

“Sorry, says Max.” he waves and walks away.

“Oy!” yells Tawni. Max turns around, there’s a line of customer waiting in front of the window. “Be careful, ok, the neighborhood’s been getting weird.”

“Um, ok thanks, bye!” yells Max, waving.

Walking past a mall, he notices from afar a valdalized antique store as if hit by a bomb. Police car sirens echo from afar. He crosses the street, toward a short, old, stone, wall lined with bushes bordering a park. He walks past its entrance. A faint whisper grazes his ear. He stops, takes off his headphones and checks them. He looks around. The breeze passes the trees and their leaves. The park is empty. Max puts on his headphones ,again.

He walks for several blocks and crosses the street, arriving at Jonathan Edwards High, home of the Hellbenders.

Max arrives at the front lawn, littered with high school students of all shapes, colors, and sizes. The typical scene of any high school. Heavy bass erupts from cars rolling in the lot as they blast hip hop. Jocks chasing a mid-air football across the lawn, ROTC marching, holding plastic rifles in unison, other students playing basketball in the fenced-in side court, some holding portable game consoles in each other’s line of sight as they’re huddled, other circles talking, many walking past everyone down the sidewalk into the building. There’s students everywhere. One of them stops Max and hands him a flyer. It’s a black and white mini poster with images of six students, sloppily arranged and a message.

*‘MISSING, if you’ve seen any of these students, please call this number...’*

Max crumbles the paper and shoves it in his pocket. He sees Amy but lifts his backpack to hide his face. He keeps walking, acting casual, blasting the music on his

headphones. Then, as he gets in, walking towards his locker, he feels a finger poking his back. It's a goth looking teen with leather jacket and red front hair, spikes for wrist cuffs.

"Hey Hawthorne!" says Max, they high five.

"Did you see this?" asks Hawthorne.

"Yeah, I didn't recognize anyone." says Max

"My Mom's getting paranoid and she's not letting me hang out as late. I need to finish my community service credits to pass and I was hoping to put in a few hours at the gym so I can paint after school for the new mascot design, check it out". Hawthorne shows max a picture of a detailed, comic style salamander with the Hellbenders logo.

"Woah, that's pretty awesome. You drew that?" asks Max.

"Shuttup. Yeah, it took me all night, I barely got sleep." says Hawthorne.

--Oof!" Max yells, he gets shoved from the shoulder behind. He looks back.

"Oh, woops." says a blonde kid, a bit taller than Max with a slight stocky build and an entourage behind him.

"What the hell's your --" Max stops himself and gathers his composure.

"What you say?" asks Ethan, walking up to Max.

"Nothing." says Max. Ethan stands right up to Max, slightly stepping back. The other students following Ethan smack Max in the shoulder, one by one as they pass by. Ethan walks away as the others around him chuckle and high five. "Didn't think so!" yells Ethan, laughing.

"Ass." grunts Max under his breath.

"C'mon man, don't let him get to ya, they're losers." says Hawthorne.

"Yeah, whatever, anyway--"

"Oh yeah, so the school admin hasn't approved my design yet, but last time they said they wanted the Hellbender to be less muscle-ly and more unisex."

"Is that really an animal?" asks Max.

"Yeah, dude, look it up." says Hawthorne. Max looks up Hellbender on his cell, it shows images of a slimy, chubby, lizard-like creature.

“I think you nailed it in terms of the look, but unisex? I say keep the muscles” says Max.

“I guess it’s because of the girls volleyball team this year, their coach is in charge. She’s the one I had to get approval from.” says Hawthorne. “Besides, I think hellbender is way better than the alternative. It was the only thing her and coach Watabe could agree on, either this or the Pink Fairy Armadillos. Can you imagine? Edwards High, Home of the Pink Fairy Armadillos.” Hawthorne smiles. Max chuckles.

“Is that real?” asks Max.

“Dude, look it up, I swear, that’s a real animal, I’m not kidding.” says Hawthorne, snickering. Max scrolls through his phone, typing ‘pink armadillo’. He bursts out laughing at the images on his screen.

“That’s so lame, I would--” as Max is about to finish his sentence, the bell rings. Everyone in the lawn hurries towards their lockers. Max approaches his locker slowly. Two doors down from his, a young girl puts her stuff in, he notices her figure and purple ripped jeans. From the looks of it, Max notices she’s either a new student or someone transferring lockers. He opens his locker and takes out his books, waiting to see who it is. As the door closes, it reveals Amy! She turns and notices him staring. She smiles.

“Hey Max.” she says. Then, a jolt from behind.

“Hey dumbass, stop staring at my sister.” a voice yells. Max turns around. It’s Ethan again. The bell rings once more, everyone scrambles to get in class.

In science class, Max sits in the back, doodling on his notebook, a giant spider, a canoe, cardinal directions, a straw hat, a sea serpent, and a goblin. The room is dark, he stares out at the front of the class, with a large sign above the board reads ‘*Miss Seiden Science*’. Underneath it, a projector blasts it’s light at the front, next to Ethan in standing in front of everyone, next to a giant, white image projected on the white board with the word ‘*SUDS*’ on it. He points to a sloppily drawn image of bubbles on the left side and a diagram of images of foam. Ethan speaks, reading from his paper, in a monotone voice.

Some of the class are chuckling as Ethan shakes a bit, sweating, and speaking aloud. The teacher hushes the class, to calm their snickering.

“Suds are formed by trapping pockets-” says Ethan as the class whispers among each other. Ethan pauses, then continues “...of gas in a liquid or solid. A bath sponge and the head on a glass of beer are examples. An important division of solid suds is into closed-cell suds and open-cell suds--”

*Smack!*

Ethan shakes, freaking out. The whole class erupts into laughter.

“Who threw that?” yells the teacher. Looking beside him, Ethan sees an eraser hit the floor. His eyes narrow and his nose flares. He looks around, red faced at the laughing class. He notices Hawthorne staring at him, sitting up straight, in the corner of the room. Hawthorne points to the other side of the room. Ethan notices Max, looking down, doodling. As Max looks up, Ethan stares at him. Max shakes his head. Ethan points two fingers at him and then at his eyes.

“You’re dead” his lips suggest. As the teacher yells at the class. Max throws his hands out in the air, gesturing his innocence. Ethan looks back at Hawthorne, staring down. The rest of the class, recovering from their chuckle. “Thank you, Ethan, you’re doing great so far.” says the teacher. “As for the rest of you, whomever threw that eraser better confess now, or everyone will get double the homework.” The room remains silent. One male student with clean-cut hair, olive skin, blue eyes, and perfect posture raises his hand. Miss Seiden sighs.

“Yes, Hankie, what is it?” she asks. The students snicker.

“Hey Miss Seiden, it’s whoever, not whomever.” he says.

“Well, thank you, Hankie, but I’m a science teacher, not an english professor. I’ll give you extra credit for paying attention. Unless you’re willing to confess on behalf of the class. Did you do it?” Hankie shakes head and looks down. “Anyways, hurry up, let’s hear who did it or I’ll double the homework. There’s no need to make everyone pay the price for one antic.” the room remains silent. Max looks around and sees Hawthorne shrugging his shoulders. He narrows his eye at him and shakes his head. “Alright, then,

with the exception of Ethan and Hankie, everyone owes me two essays tomorrow, one on the effects of sodium acetate it's creation as well as it's discovery, and the other on Casein and its importance to the history of plastics." The classroom erupts into groaning as the bell rings. Everyone rushes out of class. Miss Seiden raises her voice over the bell "Let that be a lesson to all of you to be kind to your fellow classmates, we should all listen to one another!" then she whispers "Except for Hankie. Don't listen to Hankie."

Max catches up to Hawthorne as they head to their lockers.

"Hey, that was pretty messed up, Hoth, seriously." Hawthorne smiles, holding back a chuckle.

"Sorry, I know it's a jerk move, but I honestly thought it was hilarious to see that idiot shake like a total Wob." says Hawthorne

"A Wob?" Max laughing.

"A wob, like, weak, as in like just like, afraid of anything... putting up a front like he's cool." he says. Max gives him a strange look.

"You're trying to start another urban dictionary term. You're a total Wob." Max laughs as he says it. "Shuttup." Hawthorne says, laughing.

"Actually, you wanna hear a better one?" asks Hawthorne. "I'll be right back, I'm gonna go upset the French!". Max chuckles.

"What's that?" he says.

"I made it up, but it sounds like something you say before you decide to take a dump." says Hawthorne. "I'm gonna go upset the French, excuse me." he says. Max Laughs.

"You upset the whole class instead, you Wob." says Max.

"Sorry, won't do it again, just ... hate that guy. I HATE that guy!" says Hawthorne.

"You gotta stand up to him, you can't let him get to you."

"I don't want to get in trouble, my Dad already gives me crap as it is." replies Max.

"Well, if you want him off your back, you gotta do something. Upset the French on his face." replies Hawthorne. "And worse, if you're into Amy, you can't look like a wuss."

"No dude, I'm not into Amy." says Max.

“Hey Max!” yells Amy, projecting her voice behind him. Max shivers. Hawthorne shakes his fist in triumph, chuckling. Max turns around, fighting.

“Hey...Amy!”. She walks past them, giving Max a strange look. The other girls that follow her, giving him a proud look and a few of them laugh. Max stares at them.

“Did she just -- ?” He whispers to Hawthorne as the last of her group walk by.

“You blew it.” says Hawthorne.

“Shutup, you baited me, jerk! You’re a terrible human being. “ Max says as he turns back to his locker and closes the door. “ I should dump you and find new friends.” Max punches Hawthorne in the shoulder.

“Naw man, that was all you.” chuckles Hawthorne. Max straps on his backpack and walks over to the cafeteria, Hawthorne follows him in. They order their food from the lunch lady, who scoops a slimey ball of meat with an ice-cream scoop over cardboard, compartmentalized trays, filled with mighty slop of different colors, red, yellow, black, blue, and green. Max makes it to the end of the line and skips the juice and water for chocolate milk. “Hey, can you hold my tray? I’ll meet you at the tables, I’m gonna grab soda. You want anything? Least I could do?” asks Hawthorne.

“Naw, I’m good, I’ll find a table.” says Max.

“Thanks.” says Hawthorne. As he walks away, Max turns around, carefully holding both trays. He stops. Right in his way, standing in front of him, Ethan, angry faced and fists curled. His entourage of girls and boys standing behind him. Max looks up at Ethan, staring back. Max walks to the left and Ethan moves to block him. Ethan’s friends begin to circle Max. Many students in the midst of the lunchtime ruckus turn to witness the staredown. Hawthorne walks up toward Max.

“Hey man, your beef is with me, I’m the one who threw the eraser, it was me, ok?” Hawthorne confesses. Ethan doesn’t flinch.

“I say it’s him.” Ethan growls, staring at Max, nose flaring. “You gonna pay for that.” says Ethan.

“Dude, I didn’t do any--.” says Max.

“Shut up!” yells Ethan.

*Whoom!*

Ethan shoves both trays from Max's hand over him, covering him in multi-covered slime. The entire cafeteria freezes.

"Oooooouuuuuuuuhhhhhhhh!" the students exclaim in unison. Max, frozen in shock, looks at his shirt and jeans, completely covered. Some of the classmates begin laughing. Max raises his fist and lunges at Ethan with his whole body, throwing his hardest punch to the face. Ethan dodges back. Max goes for a second punch and Ethan slips from the food spill as he's about to tackle Max.

"Food Fight!" yells one of students. A lot them begin to pick up their trays and throw it at one another, while the rest of the student body tries to escape. One of the lunch ladies blows a whistle, while the food throwing onslaught ensues. Ethan has Max pinned to the floor, holding him in a headlock and throwing any slime he finds on to his head, while Max struggles to break free. The Cafeteria door slams open. Security arrive, blowing whistles and grabbing students they catch throwing food, cuffing them with zip ties. "Hey!" yells a stocky, tattooed woman with grey hair and a square jaw. She's wearing an army uniform and stomping past the war zone, making a beeline straight toward Max and Ethan. She breaks them apart and slams them against the wall.

"Oof!" yell Max and Ethan. As the woman grips them against the wall, they look down, realizing they're covered head to toe in food slop, catching their breath from the scare of the body slam. Max and Ethan calm a bit. The lady lets go of her grip and points to the cafeteria exit.

"Immediate detention! BOTH of you!! Go to the principal's office NOW before I have you expelled on the spot, do you hear me?! Go! Go! Go!"

Outside a shopping mall, police cars swamp the parking lot,. Marcus arrives in his squad car and gets out. His cell rings, he ignores it and puts it in his pocket, walking towards an abandoned, wrecked, antique store, with glass and various small artifacts all over the handicap parking spot near the entrance. He walks towards a middle aged, curly haired, shapely woman wearing a tag on her police uniform that reads 'Marianna'.

Other police officers are taking photos, collecting evidence, and talking amongst themselves. Dozens of police officers and officials roam in and out of the Antique store through the leftover debris.

“Hey” says Marcus. “What’s goin’ on, as Marvin Gaye would say?” Marcus cell buzzes again.

“Hey there, Mark, glad you made it.” says Marianna. “We need all the help we can get.”

*Buzz! Buzz!*

Marcus cell buzzes. He looks at Marianna, holding still. Marianna continues.

“We thought it was a bomb, obviously or perhaps an antique gone live like a world war two grenade or something, perhaps a landmine. But investigators so far have come up short. We thought it might’ve been a burglary or something but there’s a lot that doesn’t add up. So we’re speculating either an accident, foul play, or perhaps an odd situation like maybe the owner of the store was held hostage? We just don’t know right now, but you’re really good with details so I figured it would help to have you along to help out the crew and see if you spot anything ... interesting.”

*Buzz! Buzz!*

*Buzz! Buzz!*

Marcus smiles at Marianna, nodding as his phone keeps buzzing. Marianna stares Marcus in the eye.

“You gonna get that?” she asks.

“Yeah, sure, hold on.” answers Marcus, semi irritable. He turns around and takes out a flip phone from his left pocket. “Hello?” he answers in a low voice.

“Hi, is this Marcus Park?” asks the voice on the other line.

“Yes.” answers Marcus.

“This is principal Joey, from Edwards High. Your son is sitting in my office, covered in filth”.

“I’m sorry?” replies Marcus



“Your son seems to have gotten into a bit of trouble and we’re going to need you to come in and have a talk to avoid having Max expelled for inappropriate conduct.” replies Principal Joey.

“Woah, ok, No, please don’t expel Max. I know he can be a little strange at times but he’s a good kid.” replies Marcus.

“How soon today, can you arrive by for a meeting?” asks the Principal. Marcus sighs.

“Let me see what I can do, I need to work out some things before I can swing by.”

“I understand. Please give me a call as soon as you’re available.” says the principal. Marianna stares at Marcus, she raises her brow.

“Sure, thanks, I’ll keep you posted.” replies Marcus. He hangs up the phone, and walks back toward Marianna.

“Everything alright?” asks Marianna.

“Yeah, everything’s fine.” answers Marcus.

“You sure?” asks Marianna.

“Yeah, yeah. So it’s not a terrorist bombing per se, it could be something like Foul Play or some unknown scenario.” recants Marcus.

“Basically.” answers Marianna. A police officer interrupts and whispers in Marianna’s ear. Marcus turns his head and notices a woman standing a few meters on the edge of the yellow ‘do not cross’ plastic tape. Marianna continues talking to the officer. Marcus walks over stepping on broken glass, debris, and rubble to get closer. He notices the woman holding a dark, leather book, raising herself on tiptoe, attempting to look over the scene. Marcus walks up to her.

“Excuse me, Ma’am, is there something I can help you with? This is a police investigation and the mall is currently off limits for your safety.” he says.

“I came to drop off this book but it looks like something happened to the store? I need to give this to the owner.” replies the woman.

“Have you had contact with the owner of that antique store?” asks Marcus

“Yes, I brought this to return it to him.” she gives him the book. Marcus looks at the cover, it reads ‘Mysterious Objects and Items of the Order of Hathor’. “Is everything alright?” she asks.

“I can bring it to him on your behalf if you like. Also, would you mind also sharing your contact info so we can reach you for a statement?” asks Marcus.

“Sure, but you already have my info.” answers the woman.

“Oh? Did someone already take your info?” asks Marcus.

“Yeah.” says the woman, staring at Marcus.

“With one of these officers?” asks Marcus.

“No.” replies the woman, eyes narrowed.

“Ma’am?” Marcus tilts his head sidewise, confused.

“It’s Judy, not ma’am and you people haven’t told me anything about my son.” she says.

“I’m not sure I follow.” replies Marcus.

“It’s been three weeks. The antique store owner gave my son that book and he was really willing to help him out, unlike you people.” answers Judy.

“I’m sorry, Judy. I can look into your son’s case. I’m a dad, I understand what it’s like.”

“No you don’t. Heaven forbid you lose your son, then you’ll know. You’re sitting there using all your resources to catch a burglar while a kidnapper is doing who knows what to my son. For all I know he could be gone and you’d move on like it’s nothing.” says Judy. Marcus sighs. He stares at Judy, lowering his pen, book, and notepad.

*Buzz! Buzz!*

Marcus fidgets, taking the phone out of his pocket, he flips it.

*Marianna: Are you going to help us out or u gonna keep flirting with a witness?*

Marcus turns around. He sees Marianna waving, holding her phone in the air. Marcus holds out his arm, waving back. He turns back around towards Judy, staring at him.

“I’m sorry about that. I’d love to help out and I promise to follow up. If you can at least give me your last name and number, I promise to follow up.” Judy keeps staring at him, nodding.

“Well, look, here’s my card just in case.” Marcus takes out his contact info and hands it to Judy. She turns around and walks away as he holds his hand out. A hand grabs him on the shoulder and turns him around. A large, stocky, tall, male with pepper, dark blonde hair, blue eyes, a thick brow, and a square jaw looks down at him. His tag reads ‘Gil’.

“Hey bud. Looks like you struck out.” he says.

“Naw man, she’s a Mom returning this to the store owner.” Marcus answer, showing him the book.

“Did you get her info?” winks Gil.

“No. I have a feeling there’s more going on here than we thought. I need your help later tracking down who she is and the name of her missing son. It’s possible whoever did this might be linked to the kid and the owner.” replies Marcus. He turns to look for Judy but she’s gone.

“Yeah, well we can look into that later, Marianna’s been harassing the team to double up and it’s not a good look to look like a loiter.” says Gil.

“Oh relax” says Marcus.

“I’ll take this for ya, Marianna, insisted she needed you.” Gil takes the book and walks it over to Marcus car.

“Thanks.” says Marcus. He turns and sees Marianna walk inside the antique store. He follows her in.

*Buzz! Buzz!*

Marcus reaches into his pocket and clicks his phone off. He enters the Antique store. It’s covered in debris, cracked glass, wood chips, foam, tattered carpet, broken vases, wooden cats, jade elephants, amber monkeys, statues of bronze and copper, leather lamps, maps, globes, masks, paintings, broken mirrors, giant minerals and books scattered all over the floor, others still perched on their podium, burn marks across the

walls, ceiling, and a heavy vault at the end of the room. A vast space of coffee coloured carpet, vast enough to accommodate dozens of scattered police officers patrolling a maze of books, crates, and wooden box pillars all over. Yellow tape, signs, and post-its everywhere. Photos being taken left and right. Marianna leads Marcus around the store.

“So to the right, you’ve got the cash register, which hasn’t been touched. To the left over here ... a mess. And then there’s this...” Marianna walks towards the vault in the back. Marcus can’t take his eyes off the strips of burn marks from the ceiling, straight down to the walls. Marcus almost trips. He looks down and the coffee colored carpet has a gaping hole with burn marks, exposing the cement underneath.

“I take it they got pretty rough to break into the vault.” says Marcus, looking around. He notices a powdery residue. Marianna snaps her fingers.

“That’s what’s strange about all this. The vault’s barely touched.” Marcus walks up to the vault, a 6 foot, heavy, iron block with a giant spoked, copper wheel in the front. Marcus looks back at Marianna, walking around it. “Yeah, I got nothing.” He notices more of the powdery residue along the top, middle, and bottom rim of the vault. “This stuff looks weird to me.” he notes.

“What?” asks Marianna.

“This powder, I notice it on the floor, but ... I dunno, it’s not usual to what I’d see with debris.” says Marcus.

“You know, it’s probably from the merch. Who knows? This place is a zoo, if zoos were made of wood and leather.” says Marianna.

“Yeah.” says Marcus. “Any cameras? I saw one outside on the way in.”

“It’s a fake but there’s one from the parking lot we’re getting retrieved from Mall security later. Anything else you notice, out of place?” asks Mariana.

“Everything. The burn marks are weird to me. This whole place. My guess from looking at the way the glass shatters out and how the room is laid out, it’s inconceivable this would be a break in. I think whoever did this, was trying to break OUT.” says Marcus. Marianna’s eyes widen. She smacks Marcus on the chest. He lets out a heavy breath.

“Good call! One of the detectives that arrived earlier said the same thing.” she says, smiling.

“The burn marks stand out to me the most, looks like it was done by a laser, not a blow torch. That’s not normal.” Marcus remarks.

“Yeah no one’s got a clue yet on what the burn trails were about. They look like intentional vandalism. The registers’ clean, there’s still cash in it.”

“Oh.” says Marcus.

“Anyways, thanks for helping out. Here.” says Marianna.

“What’s this?” asks Marcus, Marianna hands him a plastic bag.

“I need people to help clean up.” she answers.

“You have plenty of people doing this.” Marcus argues.

“And we need all the help we can get.” argues Marianna.

“Oh, fine.” Marcus narrows his eyes and grabs the bag. As Marianna walks away, he stares at the powder. As a piece of shattered glass reflects sunlight from the outside, on to the residue, it begins to glow with a unnatural, glowing, red, luminescence for a moment, and then disappears. Marcus runs his finger across the floor.

“Mark! Get over here, we need you to help bag and tag, there’s plenty to cover!” shouts Marianna.

“Yeah, coming.” says Marcus, brushing off the dust from his fingers and staring as he walks away.

Max stares at the clock at the front of Edward’s High’s infamous windowless classroom, above the ‘DETENTION’ sign, fluorescent lights beaming over his desk. A stocky, light brown male with a buzz cut in military uniform, flips through pages of a scuba diving magazine, next to a tray of cell phones piled up. He stops copying from the dictionary and looks around, seeing his classmates engrossed in their copying. He notices Ethan stop and tilt his head back, letting out a heavy, loud, obnoxious sigh. The teacher looks up at Ethan, staring back for a moment and then lowering his head. The

bell rings. Everyone rushes to the front to get their cell phones. Ethan pushes through the chaos and the teacher grabs the tray and pulls it away from the class.

“Everyone may go, Ethan, you stay, we need to chat, son.” Says the teacher. He pushes the tray forward as the students rush to sort their phones, thumb their buttons, and rush out as if the room caught fire. Ethan looks up and rolls his eyes. Max slips past the crowd out to the alleyway between buildings, outside detention. Max stops as the herd rushes past him. He notices Amy at the end of the ally, giggling, smiling, softly punching one of four guys and two gals. They’re perched on two roofless luxury convertibles, parked back to back, wearing sheik clothes, fancy doos, tattoos, and shades. It’s a moment out of a magazine. Max can’t stop his gaze as the other guys hug Amy one by one. Then one of the girls, an attractive asian with black, silky hair, down to her back, wearing a long, blue-pleated, skirt and a sleeveless puffer jacket with heavy, black, leather, boots; holds her cheeks and shrugs her shoulders in such a way that woos the group. They’re laughing, playfully smacking, and heckling each other. Everyone among them, tall, beautiful, perfectly shaped. Max looks at his skinny arms, narrow chest, and long feet, frowning. He looks up at Amy again, giggling. She turns her head and notices Max. She frowns. The guys around her stop and turn to look at Max. One of them removes their shades, losing his smile. Max looks away and walks ahead.

*Oooof!*

Max plunges to the ground from the force of two hits shoved from behind. His shoulder-strapped, lopsided, bookbag pulls him sideways, tripping him further. He turns his head to the right and sees Ethan, red faced and livid. He looks around, noticing all their classmates, gone.

“C’mon punk, fight me!” yells Ethan, slowly walking toward Max. Amy from afar, gasps, witnessing the scene. She starts to walk toward them. The cool kids around her turn to pay attention and start to gasp and laugh. Max regains his balance. Ethan shoves him again. His bookbag flies off his shoulders as he stumbles further back.

“What the heck is your problem?!” yells Max.

“Your face!” retorts Ethan. Max looks at Ethan in confusion.

“You guys, stop!” yells Amy. She walks closer towards them, while the cool kids behind them follow her.

“Fight! Fight! Fight!...” yells one of guys with smooth, swept, comb over hair, buzzed sides, sleek shades, a massive Adam’s apple, and a ripped-sleeve, jean jacket. The other guys join while the girls laugh. Amy turns to hush them but the group continues to heckle and yell. Max goes to pick up his book bag from the floor.

“I don’t wanna fight you.” says Max, gasping for air. Ethan shoves him again.

“Stop!” yells Amy.

“Stay outta this, he’s a piss and a fart when they have a child out of wedlock!” yells Ethan. The cool kids erupt into more laughter.

“Duuude, you’re gonna let a girl fight?” yells another one of the guys following Amy, light brown skinned, wearing a midnight blue hat, short hair, a red hawaiian style silk shirt with black, large, palm leaf patterns, neck tattoo, and an assortment of seashells on a bunch of thread necklaces down to his half exposed abs.

“Brody, stop it.” yells Amy. Brody opens his mouth, pointing to himself, the group laugh.

“I don’t wanna fight, ok, leave me alone!” yells Max.

“You’re gonna wuss on me, punk?” yells Ethan, slapping Max in the face.

“Ohhhhhh.” yell the cool kids, snickering even louder. One of them snapping his fingers and two of them high fiving each other. Amy approaches them, standing between them, arms stretched out. Ethan narrows his eyes. Max holds back his punch, holding his cheek, with tears.

“Stop it, Ethan, he hasn’t done anything to you.” yells Amy.

“Get outta the way, this is a showdown between man and loser” yells Ethan, pointing.

“Hey, A-amy, it’s ok, it’s ok, don’t worry.” says Max, softly, rubbing his cheek.

“Awwww he’s a wuss!!” yells one of the other guys laughing.

“Slap him, slap him like a hussy!” yells another.

“Get outta the way, sis.” Ethan growls. Max walks around Amy, Ethan moves to counter him, Amy shuffles to block Ethan. Max puts his hand on Amy’s shoulders, she smacks it away.

“Hey Amy, it’s ok, please just, don’t worry.” Max insists. Amy doesn’t respond. Ethan walks up to his sister in a stare down. Amy looks up at him, holding her ground.

“Fight, fight, fight!” chant the cool kids. Ethan walks away, turning his back on Amy and Max, at a slow pace, clenching his fist. Amy holds her posture for a moment until she sees Ethan ease the tension in his shoulders.

“Awwww!!!” yell the cool kids, some of them exaggerating their disappointment with arms wide open. The girls giggle. Amy lowers her arms and walks back toward the cool group.

“Eeeyyyy you tried, you tried, good job, good job, peace.” yells Brody. Amy glances at Brody and looks back at Ethan, walking away from him. Max stares at her, looks at Ethan, and calmly puts on his book bag, walking away. Ethan holds still for a dozen seconds, then turns around, and lunges toward Max at full force, throwing a punch aimed at the face, but he misses. Max dodges, using his book bag as a shield, then winds it from its straps, and immediately slings it with full force at Ethan’s head.

*Whack!*

“Wooahh!” yell the cool kids. Amy whirls back, fists clenched.

“What the hell?! I said stop!!” she yells. Ethan’s head rammed to the side by the force of the hit. He shuffles to regain his stance, feeling the side of his lip, dripping with something wet, and runs his finger through it. He sees blood. Ethan stares at Max, eyes wide open. Max gasps holding still then leaps into a sprint, gripping his bag. Ethan rushes after him, both racing at their utmost; a large, burly, figure going after a skinny twig the way a lion chases a gazelle.

Max rushes with all his might, through the school’s outer, fenced gate, then across the basketball court. Galloping around the court’s fence exit gap. He sees Hawthorne raising his hand, waving, with a concerned look on his face.



“Help!” pants Max as he brushes past his friend. A second later, Ethan nudges Hawthorne.

“Outta the way, swizzle stick!” yells Ethan. Hawthorne runs after them and sees a pair of luxury convertibles follow them down the street. He keeps following them, running as hard as he can but his legs slow down. He slows to catch his breath as Max and Ethan speed away from him. He stops and gets on his knees.

“Ok...you guys are...clearly...hauling...ah...” Hawthorne gasps. The cool kids drive past Hawthorne as Max turns the corner at the end of the school campus’ grassy field, toward a cracked, one-way street, lined with an old, cracked, mossy, stone wall, blocking tall, overgrown, trees, furred over it’s border, and bushes. Ethan extends his reach to Max’s bookbag as they’re running. Max runs even faster, tiring Ethan as he slows a bit. Max hears a faint whisper ahead of him, heavy panting, as he narrows his eyes in confusion, sprinting along the wall. Max stares at the wall beside him, then jumps into an opening the moment he notices, onto a grassy field and disappears in front of Ethan. Max pushes through heavy, spiny bushes, scratching against his arms as he covers his face, then emerges into a clearing. He looks around and notices a large, grassy field, a small dirt path, large boulders, and a small fence on the other side with a large sign that reads ‘Stolz Park’. He sees a clear path on the other side and aims for it. He runs parallel to the large boulders that border the edge of the park. Half way through to the other side, he hears the whisper intensify as he’s running. The indistinguishable whisper crescendos. Max covers his ears, then he trips. As he lifts himself from the ground, a shimmer grabs his attention, buried among leaves. He scatters them, revealing a bright, copper, antique, compass. Ethan emerges from the bushes behind him. Max grabs the compass. A jolt runs through his hand. A seizure courses through his arms and it subsides. He looks behind. As Ethan catches up, Max leaps into a sprint, compass in hand. Ethan reaches out again, grabs him by the bag, and slings him to the ground. Max is pulled into dirt, rocks, and leaves, as Ethan attempts to jump on top of him. Max rolls to the side, over his shoulder, evading Ethan’s attack. Max pops like bread from a toaster from the ground, to a sprint, reaching top speed toward the fence.

Two luxury convertibles, open top, break in front of him on the other side. Max looks back, evading Ethan. He looks ahead and two guys jump out of one car, the driver of the other car hands the steering wheel to the asian female and jumps out of the car toward Max. He stops. Panting, he's surrounded. Ethan slows and starts walking toward Max, catching his breath.

"You're not going anywhere, poser." says one of the cool kids.

"You guys a don't know when to stop!" yells Amy in the distance from one of the cars. Everyone inches closer to Max, spreading out among themselves to keep him from advancing. He pants, sweats, and shakes from the rush. As they close in on Max, he feels a heavy vibration in his hand, electrical buzzing in his palm. He looks at the compass as it spins like a blender, then it stops. It points to a gap between two of the cool kids closing in and the space between the parked convertibles. They reach out to grab him. Max ducks past them and leaps toward the fence. They trip over each other and miss. Max leaps over fence, as the next guy tries to get him. He hops on the convertible's front bumper beside him, slides his other leg over the shiny hood and shuffles his body over the other side of the vehicle. Max then rolls on the ground and hops up again as another car approaches them, blocking the group chasing him. Max continues down the road, on to the sidewalk into a suburban neighborhood surrounded in white picket fences. He looks at the compass, it's arrow changes direction and as he follows, he averts a car turning the corner about to hit him, which then blocks Ethan and the cools kids from chasing him. One convertible speeds alongside him as he runs, the compass points to the right, he veers, as the other convertible loses sight of him and blocks the first car. The compass gnomon points left and Max avoids a rolling skateboard across the sidewalk. Ethan almost catches up but trips on the board, as Max then veer right again, as the compass arrow changes direction, pointing toward a space behind a wall, into an back alley of homes. A dump truck turns in front of him as the compass points into another direction, aimed at a narrow passage between short fences, parallel to the road. He slows down, hidden behind by signs, hanging laundry, and vehicles passing. As Ethan and the cool kids try to look for him, he seems to disappear over and over again.

They look around but aren't able to find him anywhere. Objects, vehicles, signs, poles, pedestrians and residents cover Max at moments he's spotted, constantly evading their gaze. He's gone. As Ethan and the cool kids look around.

"He could be anywhere!" yells one of the cool kids. They slow down for a moment and gather together, catching their breath. They shake their heads, looking around. Behind Ethan, ducked into the corner of a short-fenced yard, next to a garbage bin, Max holds his breath, eyes wide. The compass spins. Max stares, as it keeps turning like a propeller. He covers it to quiet the buzz and peeks to see Ethan throw his hands in the air. Ethan shrugs his shoulders. The other guys look around as the convertibles converge in front of him.

"I don't see him." says Brody.

"He's such a loser, I know he's here." insists Ethan. The cool kids laugh.

"Dude, honestly, that kid should try out for track." says Brody.

"--no, take me home, I don't wanna be a part of this, you guys are jerks." yells Amy. "I'm already late for volleyball practice, he's not worth it, just ... take me home." she insists.

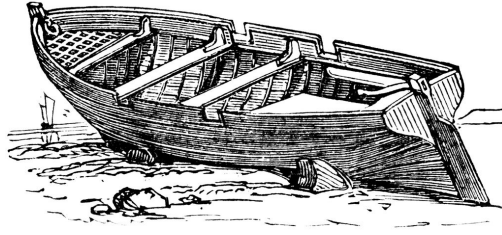
"Calm down girl." says the asian female. The guys laugh.

"Ah, whatever, this is lame, let's go. Tough luck, baller, you almost got him." says the cool kid with the over-sized Adam's apple. They all jump into the convertibles and screech away. Laughing, giggling.

"Woooo!" one of them yells as they drive away. As the sound of the engine echoes off, Max emerges from behind the large, blue, plastic, recycle bin. He catches his breath. He looks around the neighborhood in it's mundane activity. He raises his fist in the air, smiling. Then he looks back at the compass, bobbing as it points north, like any other. He stares at it, bewildered.

"I don't know who or what you are, but thank you." says Max, staggering down the sidewalk toward the sunset. "Thank you for saving me."

# CHAPTER TWO



Hawthorne's phone buzzes. He slides it out of his side pocket. It's a message from Max. He swipes the home screen to read it.

*Are you home? Or hellbending @gym?*

*I'm @Library*

*???? ... o\_o ... who goes to the library?!*

*Remember, miss sieden? plastic?*

*But internet...*

*:(*

*Nevermind...dude I'll meet you there, I HAVE TO SHOW YOU THIS.*

Hawthorne receives a photo of the compass.

*Dude, this thing saved my life and it's haunted! Heading over...*

Hawthorne looks around. He's surrounded by aisles of books, towering over him, twice his height. A few meters away, at the center, stands the front desk; a large, round, wooden table with books and folders neatly arranged. A librarian sits in it's inner edge, towards the entrance. She's a young, photogenic, light brown skinned, asian woman wearing a raggy red shirt, bob cut blue hair, white streaks and oversized, lensless, thick-rimmed glasses, reading a historical magazine.

“Scuse me” says Hawthorne, projecting his voice. The librarian doesn't respond. “Hey!” Hawthorne continues with a fierce whisper. The librarian turns a page from her magazine. Hawthorne sighs and turns around, looking at books, row by row, title by title, lost. The front door of the library bursts. Max walks over to the counter. Everyone in the room stares, as he's drenched in sweat and panting. He slams his hands on the counter to get the librarian's attention but looks around and notices Hawthorne. Max

detours, walking over to him, waving toward the aisles. The librarian turns another page of her magazine. Everyone in the room resumes their activity.

“Holy hell, Max, you look like you lost an argument with a toilet.” Hawthorne whispers. “And from the look of it, the toilet won.” Max, still catching his breath looks up at Hawthorne.

“Very funny.” says Max. “Where the hell did you go? You should’ve backed me up and you just stood there, punk.” he continues, poking Hawthorne in the shoulder.

“Are you kidding? You guys were going a hundred million miles an hour, I could barely breathe by the time you dipped.” replies Hawthorne.

“I thought you were going to the gym.” says Max.

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t in the mood and I just felt like being here.” says Hawthorne, looking over at the front desk. “What’s that your holding? Is that it?” Hawthorne leans in to Max as he’s bent down. He takes the compass from Max.

“This looks epic. Who’d you take it from?” asks Hawthorne.

“Shuttup. I found it in the park and dude, I’m telling you that thing is haunted.” says Max. As Hawthorne inspects it, he notices it’s shiny, bronze outer rim with notches etched along it’s border. It’s arrow split between silver and red oxidized metal. He inspects the letters of cardinal directions.

“This font is rad. I haven’t seen anything like this. Like, this is old.” says Hawthorne.

“Yeah.” says Max. “I tried to find it through image search on the net, but it just gave me a bunch of generic results. You should’ve seen it. That thing came alive, told me where to go and dude, it was so badass, it went, left, right, it just starting going on it’s own and as I did what it said, things just started to happen--”

*Smack!*

A book drops from one of the shelves. Hawthorne snaps out of his stare and looks around. He looks back at Max.

“Did that book just --”

“I didn’t touch anything.” replies Max, looking around. Another book falls.

“What the heck?” says Hawthorne. Max picks them up and puts them back on the shelf.

“Was about to say, looking at this, it looks pretty expensive. Just from the lettering, the embossing...” Hawthorne flips over looking at it’s back. It’s brushed metal copper with ‘13061917 zero’ etched across the center with deep lacerations.

“What about this?” asks Hawthorne, pointing at the marking.

“I didn’t have a lot of time but yeah...” Max catches his breath. “I looked that up, but it’s probably the model number or something.” he replies.

“It’s put in there by hand, I doubt something this precise would just have it’s serial scratched like this.” says Hawthorne. “Seriously, where did you find this?” another book drops from the shelf. Max looks up.

“Seriously?” yells Max.

“Shhhhhh!!” hushes the librarian at the front desk.

“Sorry.” says Max. Hawthorne looks around.

“Where’d you get this, tell me?” whispers Hawthorne.

“The park. I was running, found it, and then it just did it’s thing.” Max takes the compass and starts shaking it. Hawthorne stares at it.

“I bet you can get some serious cash. It’s old and fancy.” says Hawthorne.

Max’s eyes widen.

“What?” asks Hawthorne. Max points behind him. Hawthorne turns around. A few books begin to lift off the shelf and hover. Hawthorne gasps. Max grabs his bag and bursts out of the library. Hawthorne chases Max and turns to glance at the librarian on his way out, as she flips another page of her magazine. Outside, Hawthorne runs into Max, standing straight, staring at the compass. They catch themselves before tripping over. Max holds up the compass, keeping his eye on it.

“Dude, get rid of that thing.” demands Hawthorne. Max sees it’s arrow pointing to the left, toward a cement wall beside the library stairs. Hawthorne looks at it in disbelief. Max sprints where the arrow points. The sound of loud engines roar close by. Max hides behind the wall. Hawthorne follows.

“What are you doing?” asks Hawthorne.

“Watch!” says Max. Both of them stare out, peeking over the wall. A luxury convertible screeches in front of the library as Amy gets out of the car. Max turns to Hawthorne, right eye widening as if to say ‘see what I mean?’. Hawthorne’s jaw drops. They witness Brody get out of the car, Amy waves with a scorned look on her face. She enters the library and Brody leaps back into the convertible’s passenger side as it screeches away with the sound of boisterous laughter and loud, obnoxious, heavy-bass music playing. Hawthorne witnesses the compass behave normal again.

“What the hell is this?” says Hawthorne.

“It’s crazy right?” answers Max. Hawthorne gets out from behind the wall and heads toward the sidewalk, ignoring Max. Hawthorne senses him catching up, pretending not to see him.

“Helloooo..” says Max, waving at Hawthorne.

“Dude, I don’t know you, get away from me.” says Hawthorne.

“What?” replies Max. Hawthorne keeps walking along the sidewalk, beside a large, residential lake. “C’mon, dude, relax.” says Max. Hawthorne keeps walking. “C’mon Hoth, talk to me, dude this thing is like magic.” he says. Hawthorne remains quiet as he walks on. Max tries to grab his attention to no avail. “Dude, why are you like this?! C’mon, talk to me!” yells Max. Hawthorne stops and turns to Max.

“Get rid of that thing...NOW!” he demands.

“Awww c’mon, there’s no way, who knows if it grants wishes or something?” says Max.

“It’s evil dude. I don’t want any part of it. Throw it away. Like, who knows if the previous owner died or something?” argues Hawthorne.

“It’s not evil, it just saved our lives, dumbass.” replies Max.

“And what if that thing is like , made of demons or something? What if it’s the devil? Nothing’s free, Max, that thing might be cursed, like the purple claw or something. Just being around you might kill me. Get away!” yells Hawthorne, walking away from Max and looking straight ahead. Max follows Hawthorne as the sun sets.



“What the hell is the purple claw?” asks Max. Hawthorne stops, turns to Max and narrows his eyes.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t heard of the purple claw.” says Hawthorne.

“Stop messing with me, I’m already pissed you ditched me twice already.” replies Max.

“Whatever you wob, look. The purple claw was supposedly this artifact that grants wishes, but every time it does, someone dies or some horrible thing goes wrong and it has like three fingers and each time, the fingers close when you make a wish and it basically resets when you give it to someone and then that person makes wishes and people die.” explains Hawthorne.

“Well I didn’t make any wish and if we hadn’t ducked behind the wall, WE would’ve died.” argues Max.

“Yeah but, I mean, just by touching it, what if you somehow reset the curse?!” replies Hawthorne.

“What!?” exclaims Max.

“Whatever dude, here, I’ll do you a favor.” Hawthorne grabs the compass from Max’s hand, throws it with all his might, high into the air, several meters out toward the creek. He turns around and smiles as it plops into the water.

“What the hell did you do that for?” yells Max. Hawthorne lowers his gaze. He gasps, wide-eyed. Max stares at his hand, the compass resting on his palm. He looks up at Hawthorne, jaws dropped. Hawthorne leaps back, into a group of trash bins, and falls over, backwards. Max walks up to him.

“Dude, get away from me!” yells Hawthorne, running away as if attacked by bees. Max stares at the compass, chest pounding. He keeps staring and looks around. Hawthorne’s out of sight. The sun is almost set and his phone buzzes. It’s a text from Hawthorne.

*You’re cursed!!!*

The screen switches color with buttons under the word ‘Dad’ across the middle. Max swipes the screen to ignore the call, puts the compass in his pocket, and jogs home.

Marcus, sitting in the dining room table, next to the kitchen, looking at his watch. It's late and the table is set, with bowls of white rice, steak chunks, stir fried vegetable mix, and a small container of kimchi with chop sticks. He stares at his empty plate. The clock ticks. He stares at his phone, then puts it down beside his fork. He grabs a spoon and serves himself some rice, then puts some on a plate at the other side of the table. He stares at the front door. Then he puts the rice from the plate, back to the bowl it came from. He smacks the table. He gazes at the front door. Then, he stares at the clock. He gets up to stretch. Marcus yawns.

The front door bursts open. Max rushes towards the stairs to his room.

"Woah, woah woah!" yells Marcus. Max stops in his tracks. Marcus sits, puts his foot on the dining chair next to him, in shadow.

"Sorry, Dad, I lost track of time hanging out with Hoth." replies Max.

"You look like hell, Max, mind telling me what's going on?" Marcus asks. Max drops his book bag and walks over to the kitchen table. He gulps a glass of water, then sits down opposite Marcus, and starts digging with this spoon into the rice and meat, gobbling it without putting any on his plate. He takes another gulp of water from his glass, tilting his head all the way back, to savor the last drop. He drops his glass on the table, chewing on a piece of ice, and stares at his Dad. He looks at meat bowl and heaps another portion from his spoon then drops his jaw to fit it all in one bite. His mouth stays full as he's heavy breathing. Marcus slides his full glass of water toward the other side of the table. Max catches it and looks at him, washing down his food with gulps from the second glass. Marcus stares at Max who stares back. "Mind telling me why you were suspended?" inquires Marcus.

"Nothing." insists Max, scooping rice from it's serving bowl. Marcus pulls the bowl away from Max.

"Answer my question, son. What's going on?" asks Marcus in a low but firm tone of voice. Max sighs.

"It's not a big de--"

“Don’t tell me it’s not a big deal.” Marcus interrupts. “I had a long chat with the principle and he told me you got into a fight?” he says, narrowing his eyes. Max looks down. He stays quiet.

“Ethan, right?” asks Marcus. Max nods, looking up at him again. “Did you fight him?” Max continues to nod, keeping the spoon in his mouth. Marcus turns away and shakes his head. He sighs, then buries his head in his hands. Max continues eating. Marcus looks up at Max again. “Did you win?” he asks in a soft tone. Max shakes his head. Marcus sighs. “I don’t know what I’m gonna do with you, kiddo.” says Marcus. Max goes to the kitchen and fills both glasses with water. He returns and places one in front of his dad, while drinking from the other. Marcus looks at him. The phone buzzes. Marcus looks at it.

*Marianna calling....*

Marcus answers. He gets up from his chair. Max walks back to his side of the table and sits.

“Hell-oh!” says Marcus, looking away. “Yeah, I was just home having dinner.” Marcus continues. Max grabs a few paper towels from the kitchen bar counter as Marcus paces the living room back and forth. Max wipes his face, arms, and pits. He throws away the paper towels and gets a dozen more sheets from the free-standing roll dispenser. He wipes his face over the kitchen sink with some faucet water, dries his eyes, nose, and forehead, and notices notices a book next to him in the midst of files and papers. He throws away the remaining sheets and walks back to take a look. It’s a thick, brown, heavy journal , made of leather, and glistening from the dining room’s warm light. He picks it up with one hand but it’s too large and dense to hold. With both hands, he inspects. The cover, embossed with the symbol of a falcon, a constellation, and its title “Mysterious Objects and Items of the Order of Hathor”, feels dry, smooth, and cracked to the touch. He opens it, whiffing that old, musty, book smell, as if it lived in a closet for several decades. Max coughs and flips through it’s pages. In it are line drawings of creatures, artifacts, masks, and various objects. He glances at a page with five mineral types, then another with a sketch of a giant, wooden, robot growing out of the earth. He

continues flipping, seeing line art of pyramids, underground temple ruins, a giant spider, a cyclops, various symbols, and a geographical map Max doesn't recognize. Marcus turns, snaps his fingers while holding the phone and points down, a motion for Max to drop the book. Max looks up, then back at the book, flipping its pages. "Yeah...I figured Gil might also want check it out also." says Marcus as he walks over, grabs the book with one hand and closes it, placing it back on the kitchen table. Max crosses his arms staring at his Dad. Marcus turns away. "Yeah. Yup, very true. It seemed weird to me that they haven't been able to get a hold of him, is there a next of kin?" Marcus continues his phone conversation. Max grabs the book again and goes back to flipping its pages. He stares at one page, eyes widened. In it, is an exact replica of the Compass.

*Shuffle! Shuffle!*

*Buzzzz! Buzz!*

Max turns to his his bag, shaking with an erratic movement. Marcus tries to cover his ears and turn away from the noise. Max stares at his bag. It stops. He turns his attention back at the book to read its content. Another buzz is heard from his bag. This time, it starts to hover just a bit off the ground. Max snaps the book closed, clutching it over his belly, sprints toward his bag, grabs it, and rushes upstairs to his room.

"Can you give me a second?" says Marcus over the phone. "Hey MAX!" yells Marcus. Max stops, holding his bag tight against this chest, as it continues buzzing.

"Sorry Dad, I gotta do homework." says Max, looking down at his Dad from upstairs. Marcus covers his phone.

"We're not done talking, son." says Marcus.

"Yeah we are." replies Max.

"No. We're not. You're taking Karate." says Marcus with a stern voice. Max drops his bag, while it continues buzzing.

"No, I'm not taking Karate, I hate Karate." replies Max.

"Son, you can't let the bullying go on!" Marcus yells. "You almost got expelled and we have to talk about it, get back down here."

“No! Besides shouldn’t I be taking Tae Kwon Do? Anyways I prefer Kung Fu or Jiu Jitsu but you complain it’s too far from here. You’re always too busy anyway, I don’t see how I’d get to any class on time.” retorts Max.

“Hey, watch your attitude, don’t talk to me like that.” yells Marcus. “You do what I tell you, when I tell you, son.”

“Oh, you’re just gonna order me around like I’m a slave? Don’t I have say in what I want to do with my life?” yells Max.

“You don’t have a life unless I say so.” retorts Marcus.

“Right. Of coarse I don’t. If I did, I wouldn’t be sitting here arguing with you while you’re on the phone with whatever.” argues Max.

“Get back down here and sit down, we’re not done talking. You have a lot of explaining to do.” says Marcus with a loud, stern voice.

“Why? It’s not like we’re going to have an actual conversation. Everything has to be your way, whatever you say, but when it’s time to have a REAL talk, you’re just going bail like you always do, because of your stupid work. And then you’ll change your mind or forget what we talked about and then you’ll just act like we’re buddies or something and forget the whole thing, instead of actually listening and having an actual man to man!” yells Max.

“Hold on!” says Marcus. He turns and puts the phone back to his ear. “Sorry about that, can I call you back in a sec?”

“Exactly, my point. No wonder Mom left your ass!” yells Max. He lifts his bag with the book off the floor and walks away.

“HEY! Watch your mouth!” yells Marcus, covering the phone. Max stomps and shuffles a few feet down the hall, toward his room, with his bag hanging over his shoulder.

“Come back here, Max!” yells Marcus. “You know, I bet you’d make your mother real proud!” he continues. Max slams the door shut, loud enough to shake the house. “Hey!” Marcus yells even louder. He sprints toward Max’s room until a knock at the front door

stops him in mid distance. He's half-way up the stairs and hears the doorbell, followed by another knock.

"Who is it?" Marcus yells. There's no answer. Marcus lifts his voice louder, almost cracking at the top of his lungs with rage. "Who is it? Hello?" Still no answer. As Marcus turns toward Max's room, he hears a faint sound behind the door. He walks back toward the front door, leaning his ear against it's surface.

"Mark, it's me." says a voice.

"Me who?" asks Marcus.

"Meee...Gil." he replies. Marcus lets out a heavy breath and looks upstairs for a moment. The door keeps knocking. "Some of the guys are waiting for us, we've got to officers here." Staring at Max's door, he holds his breath.

"Yeah, uh, give me a sec!" yells Marcus. He walks towards the stairs, then turns and look at the door knob. He buries his face in his hands for a moment. A gentle tap keeps knocking on the door. Marcus shakes his head, staring at Max's bedroom door. He turns around, toward the front door, opens it, letting in Gil and two more officers.

Max leans his back against the door, holding his breath and letting out a heavy sigh. The room is dark, except for the cool hue of night, and the moon's beam through his window shining at the middle, bouncing an iridescent glow that illuminates it's wood flooring, colorful yet shaggy rug, and poster-littered walls. It's bright enough for Max to resent the mess he left before he rushed to school. He drops his bag and shuffles over to his bed, catching his breath. He takes off his shirt and throws it into the darkness of his closet without aim. His thin ribs and sunken chest appear bruised. Max winces, as he takes one of his shirts and puts it on. He tosses aside his other shirts onto the red wagon in the rooms corner, and passes out, lying back on his bed. Max stares at the ceiling. He hears the murmur from downstairs between his Dad and co-workers, along with the bleeps and static from their walkie talkies. He turns and notices his soccer ball next to his dragon pillow and tosses it in the air a few times, staring at the ceiling. The voices outside his room, dim. He holds the ball in his hand. The sound of the front door closing

echoes. He lifts his head, gazing at his door. We waits. The silence roars. Only the hush of the outside breeze emerges. Max sighs, placing the ball beside his bed on the floor. He turns his head toward the bedroom door.

*Ruffle! Ruffle!*

Max's bag shakes as if it a bottled a trapped pet. He sighs again and drags out of bed. The bag stops. Max shakes his head and walks over to it. He kicks the bag and waits. Nothing happens. He bends down, moving the bag aside for a moment, lifting the leather book from underneath, with both hands. He tosses it on his bed, grabs a flashlight from his desk drawer and shines it on the book. He lies on his mattress and sifts the book's pages, past ink drawings of a full-pages sea serpent, a giant octopus, constellations, the egyptian god Horus, and a few more pages. He stops, landing on one with the compass. It's titled "The Compass of Imagination". He begins to read it's description, but another shuffle steals his attention. This time, the bag floats off the floor. Max rushes over to it and takes out the compass.

"You better not mess with me." whispers Max. The compass's arrow stirs then stops. He stares at it. Looks away, then looks back. It points north. Max nods. "That's what I thought." he says. Max lays down in bed, placing the compass next to the book, taking his flashlight, and reading the passage he left off from. He whispers to himself while reading it's description, then flips through the pages, looking at the art. The compass rolls off the bed, Max shifts his gaze at it as it drops to the floor, rolls into a circle, and lands in the middle of the multi-colored, noodle rug. He stares at it. The compass's face flashes, brightening the room with ten times the luminance of his light. Max's eyes widen. He waits. Then he looks around the room. The compass shines with the brightness of noon-day sun. Max covers his eyes for a moment. He stares at it as his eyes adjust. He grabs his pillow with caution and lifts it over his head. He flings it at the compass. The pillow hovers over, then bounces to the other side of the room, bumping into the opposite wall. He looks around. He sees his soccer ball and grabs it from the corner of his bed. He raises it over his head and pitches it to the compass. It hovers over

the floor with momentum and bounces against the wall, then bumps into his pillow, lingering in mid-air. He stares at the drift of his personal belongings.

“Woah.” says Max.

Staring at the compass, he gets off his bed and walks over to the wagon. He yanks out his clothes, shoes, comics, and action figures from it and rotates the front end, facing the light. He nudges the wagon toward the compass as it rolls with a slow glide over it. It creeps to a stop over the beam.

It hovers, rises, twists, turns, and drifts in the air, bumping into the ceiling. Max looks up, breathless. He walks over to the compass and places his hand over it. The light warms as he cups it with his other hand to darken the room. Looking around, his belongings continue to hover in the dark. The heat stings and he withdraws his palm, rubbing them against his jeans to cool off and takes a step back. He looks around the room, then down at himself. He climbs his bed and stands on its edge, as it creaks. He stares at the light from the compass. He lets out a sigh.

“Here goes.” Max whispers. He holds out his hand to feel its warmth. Then leans over, raising his arms on both sides, palms outward. He lets his body drop. His arms and legs jolt in front of him at the last second, to catch himself as he’s about to slam against the floor, but the compass absorbs him. He floats for a moment, as it catches his fall, then it pulls him in, swallowing his body whole.

Surrounded by pure illumination, the momentum of his fall, lunges him into a weightless, white, void. The warmth turns ice cold. A wet, jet, breeze of air rushes through his skin, like a storm wind that thickens into dense, liquid matter. Then, the light fades and flashes as the gravity that pulled him down is felt pushing him up. The white fades into millions of bubbles with mild hues of blues, beiges, and greens, among pitch blacks. The white remains in front of him, textured in a caustic pattern. As the bubbles fade, they reveal Moss, Kelp, and sand. His wagon, pillow, controller, and other belongings surround him. The momentum plunges him upward. He looks around, vision blurred, barely witnessing an abyss all around to infinity. His skin, nose, and ears



envelope in liquid. He catches his breath, holding his nose. There's fish around him. He panics! Kicking and screaming, bubbles all around him. His heart races, he kicks upward, and swings his arms, toward the light. He paddles with all his might.

*Whoossh!*

His head rises out of the water, letting go of his face, and taking in one, giant breath of open air. He keeps breathing, catching himself to calm his lungs. He paddles to keep himself afloat and stabilizes with his arms. He wipes his eyes and looks around. His vision clears. The sun's rays beam above him. Deep, blue, ocean as far as his eyes can see. Confusion in his gaze. His wagon and other items surface around him. He hugs his soccer ball for balance as it bobs to the surface, and slows down. He looks up at the vibrant, blue sky and, puffy, white cloudscapes all around him. He turns his head to his left, and sees green mountains. To his right, more green mountains. He looks up again and turns his head. He sees the moon, and then another one just behind it. Two moons! Max hyperventilates.

"What the?" he shouts. His eyes wander to reason his surroundings. He turns his head to the right and off in the distance, the silhouette of a man in a straw hat appears. With arms crossed, standing on a twin paddle-wheeled rowboat, he approaches. The sun's glare hides his face. Mist emanates from under it's hull. Max rubs his eyes, the boat inches closer. Max loses his grip on the soccer ball and starts to lose energy. His eyes rest, his body stiffens, he gives himself over to the sea, he's going to sleep. As Max forces his tired eyes open, vision blurred, the boat paddles closer and closer, the sun's glare continues hiding it's appearance. The figure raises a fishing net, tossing it in the air. It covers Max as he lets himself go, underwater. His eyes close as he lets out a final breath. He thinks about his dad and the conversation they never had and the shortness of life as it is with his breath. Everything dims to nothing. He fades.

Marcus looks up at the condescending stars outside the passenger window of his patrol car, en route to a luxury condo facility. Gil makes a turn on the steering wheel.

"You alright bud? You're zoning out ever since we left the house." says Gil.

“Yeah, sorry about that.” Marcus replies.

“Did you and your kid have a fight or something?” asks Gil.

“You know, somehow you guess the most random thing and get it. I’m surprised you’re not a detective by now.” says Marcus.

“Yeah, but you’re the details guy. I’m not cut out for that. Plus, you know how it is, making detective. It’s all politics. I’d rather help people, not myself. It’s all butkis. Maybe at the downtown station, I’d think about it. What about you? You should go for it.” Gil replies.

“Naw. I’m with you. I don’t like the politics and I’d rather fight crime like one of Max’s superheroes. But speaking of, yes, yeah, I had a fight with him today...well, it wasn’t a fight per se, more like...having a talk with him about life. Stuff.” replies Marcus.

“He’s at that age. Becoming a man.” says Gil.

“He’ll always be a kid.” replies Marcus.

“Time flies. At some point, he’ll be one of us.” says Gil.

“What about you?” asks Marcus.

“Me? I’m fine. I’ve been an adult most of my life.” answers Gil. Marcus punches Gil on the shoulder. He smirks.

“No, man. I mean, you know, settling down. Laying the cowboy hat. Having a family.” replies Marcus.

“My time will come.” replies Gil.

“That’s what you always say.” replies Marcus. They slow down to hail a security guard for the Condo’s entrance. Gil flashes his badge and the guard nods, pushing a button behind the counter. The modern steel, rod gate opens as the loud sound of buzzing and whirrs linger. They accelerate through the bumps, and slow down as they notice police cars parked near the courtyard. Gil stations his vehicle behind one of them and cuts the engine, looking up at the condo.

“Don’t you wish we had the money to live in one of these?” asks Gil.

“We do alright. Yeah this place is nice, but wouldn’t you want to be somewhere where the neighbors say hi and know your name?” asks Marcus.

“Nope. Those days are gone and I like to keep to myself.” answers Gil. Marcus smirks.

“What did you just say a minute ago? Your time will come? You’re not gonna have any time if you keep thinking like that.” says Marcus.

“Whatever.” replies Gil.

“You’re such a big kid.” says Marcus, smiling. They get out of the car and head toward the elevator.

“So what was the fight you had with Max?” asks Gil.

“Nothing. He’s getting beat up in school and I just don’t know what to do.” replies Marcus.

Ding!

The elevator doors open, revealing cream colored walls with floral patterns and glossy tile floors. A brown, tattered carpet lines the hallway. They can hear the sound of snaps and flashes from cameras. They walk a few meters ahead. The hallway curves.

“You taught him to fight?” asks Gil.

“With what time? I barely got the chance to yell at him when I was called here. You showed up at my door with an army, I can’t say no.” replies Marcus.

“You didn’t have to come, I would’ve covered you.” replies Gil.

“Hey guys!” shouts a voice from behind. They turn around.

“Marianna.” replies Marcus.

“You’re late.” she says.

“Where is it?” asks Gil.

“Keep walkin’” she replies. They head down the corridor. “We haven’t been able to get a hold of the antique store owner, nor his son who’s listed as next of kin. We also can’t figure a way to contact any former employees either. We’re suspecting he may have been kidnapped or skipped town. It’s strange we can’t figure out anyone associated with the store. Good job, Mark, on flirting with that woman, she may actually be our only lead.” Marianna punches Marcus on the shoulder. “Oh, and no dating witnesses until we’ve clear it, ok?” she says.

“Yeah.” replies Marcus with a dry wince.

“We’re hoping an APB and a warrant for questioning should be enough to get HQ to give us some bandwidth to find the owner.” Marianna concludes. After a few minutes down a long corridor, the end of the hallway segues into a large, double-door entrance, shattered and charred, with its frames ripped. Glass, wood, and ceramic shards litter the entrance into a large, pristine, white living room with palm fronds stationed next to a fluffy, white, l-shaped sofa. “Somebody partied” jokes Marianna.

“Yup.” affirms Marcus. As they look around, officers are walking in and out of the room.

“Hey, can I grab you for a sec?” Marianna whispers to one of the officers passing by them. She turns to Gil and Marcus. “This is officer Bolivar, he’s the first responder and can answer any questions you guys have. I need to step out for a bit, so he’s in charge here. But for now, just see what y’all find. Marcus, I’m counting on your eye.” she says. Marcus extends his hand to shake Officer Bolivar’s, then Gil follows suit.

“Like Marianna said, if you guys have any questions, just let me know.” says Officer Bolivar.

“Anything unusual?” asks Gil.

“Not really, no. Other than this mess we’re standing on and the fact that it probably took a train to wreck this place, we have no clue what happened here, but it’s the usual.” he replies.

“I guess then, we look around?” Marcus says as he turns to Gil.

“Yeah.” he replies.

“Well if you guys have any questions let me know.” he reminds them.

“Thanks.” Marcus replies, with a dry smile. Gil whistles.

“This place is fancy.” he says. Marcus notices the other officers walking around, some eyeing them.

“Ok.” replies Marcus. The power goes out. The lights then flicker and pop back on. Marcus stares at the broken frame that held the remaining bits of broken glass scattered across the floor. Everyone in the rooms holds still, anticipating another moment of

unpredictability, but nothing happens. Marcus walks towards the frame, staring at it. He looks up at the ceiling. One of the officers placing tape on the floor stares at Marcus.

“Hey Mark, why don’t you stop staring at glass and get me some tape?” asks one of the officers. Gil narrows his eyes at the officer. Marcus waves at Gil and walks over to him, squats, and reaches out behind him.

“It’s right behind you, Miller.” Marcus answers. His partner walks up to them, arms on hips. Gil walks closer. Marcus gets up and takes a step back. He turns to Gil. “Hey, can I borrow your flashlight?” Gil breaks his gaze and looks down at his belt.

“Yeah, here.” says Gil. He takes the baton-heavy flashlight and walks over to the window sill. Miller and his partner walk away, back to their previous busywork. Marcus aims the flashlight on the window frame several times, shining it on what looks like white, powdery residue. He stares at it, running the light across it a few times. He looks around the living room and at the officers.

“Does anyone here wear glasses?” asks Marcus, projecting his voice over the room. Everyone’s silent, going about their business, ignoring him. “Does anyone here wear glasses?” Marcus asks a second time. No one responds.

“What’s this about?” asks Gil, next to him.

“You’ll see.” says Marcus. He looks around the room and notices an abstract, crystal, blob next to the sofa. He walks over to it, detours to the sofa where an unopened box of latex gloves rests and he rips it open, taking out a pair of gloves to put on. One of the officers stares at Marcus. He walks over to the bowling ball-sized sculpture and grabs it, holding it with both hands and maneuvering across the room, cowboy style, one step at a time with glass blob in hand toward the frame and sets the sculpture on it.

“Gil, do me a favor, can you flash your light again?” asks Marcus. “Right at this spot where I’m holding this. I think I see something.”

“You sure you wanna do that? I’m not giving up my salary to replace that thing.” says Gil. Marcus stars at Gil, smiling.

“Trust me.” he says. Gil cooperates, and shines his light where Marcus instructs.

“On second thought, can you hold this, over this spot, and let me shine the light?” Marcus insists. Gil holds the sculpture and Marcus glides his flashlight over the powdery residue.

“Check out this milksop, what’s he doing?” officer Miller elbows his his partner, who then chuckles. Marcus eyes widen.

“Do you see that?” asks Marcus.

“No.” replies Gil. Marcus moves his flashlight back and forth across the powdery residue.

“Can someone turn off the light for a moment?” asks Marcus. Everyone resumes their work, ignoring Marcus. He sighs. Officer Bolivar enters the room. “Hey!” prompts Marcus across the room. Officer Bolivar turns his head. “Can you do me a favor and turn off the lights in here for a minute, I think I found something.” he says. Officer Bolivar starts to turn off the light switch in the kitchen, and flickers different ones, until he finds the ones that turn off lighting for the living room. The other officers look visibly annoyed, standing up or stopping their work and turning their eyes toward Marcus.

“Sorry, guys, just one sec.” Marcus says, addressing them. “Gil, can you hold up the glass one more time?” Gil obeys. Marcus glides the flashlight across the powder. Gil’s eyes light up, as he notices a rose-colored iridescent glow emanating from it as Marcus glides his flashlight across the powder. It’s mist in the heat of the light vaporizes, glowing like a scarlet fire, dissipating into the air wherever the lights beam lands, to and fro.

“You thought this was just debris?” asks Marcus looking at Gil. Officer Bolivar approaches and leans in to take a closer look.

“Perhaps a synthetic narcotic?” he asks.

“I’ve never seen a drug do that.” says Gil. The other officers approach Marcus. The lights flip on. Everyone shivers and jolts as they snap their gaze toward the front of the living to see who turned the light on.

“What are you guys doing?” shouts Marianna.

“You gotta see this.” says Officer Bolivar.

“I need everyone to finish up here quickly so we can all head to the security room. We’ve got visual confirmation on the break in and it’s a doozy. I’m going to need every pair of eyes we can get on this. Whatever it is, just take a snapshot and tag it for evidence, we need to be out of here by midnight.” replies Marianna. Everyone returns to their previous duty. Gil places the blobby sculpture back in its original place. Marcus looks around and sees a notepad, rips a section of the cardboard backing, grabs a piece of scotch tape and uses his index finger to slide some of the powder on to the cardboard, folds it, and holds it in place with tape. Gil hands Marcus a plastic bag.

“This’ll be easier.” He says to Marcus, giving him a narrowed eyes glare as if he should’ve known.

“Let’s move it!” Yells officer Bolivar as he claps. Everyone joins him at the front in single file line on their way out. Marcus closes his plastic bag and shoves it in his pocket.

They walk to the elevators, across the hall, down to the lobby, into a room hidden in the corner behind the emergency stairs. Marianna awaits them, holding open an unmarked door. The officers walk in. The room is large, covered in grey paint. The white ceiling and chrome air cooling ducts are the only colors in the space. They walk past an empty table with an unplugged, abandoned coffee maker. The next room is filled with monitors, racks, and hard drives. The security guard sits in a plastic chair with miniature wheels, hunched over a large desk with multiple monitors.

“Ok everyone. We found the footage of the perp before the place was vandalized. Take a good look and see if you find anything familiar.” Says Marianna. She motions for the guard to fast forward through the surveillance footage in front of the condo’s outside patio. All the officers gather around the monochrome displays. The timestamp in the corner jumbles, lines of static cross the screens. As the numbers count back, the view of the condo’s terrace remains uninhabited.

“How long ago does the camera record?” asks Officer Bolivar.

“Well, generally it doesn’t really keep a recording for longer than ... say a week. But sometimes the system bugs out and we’ll end up losing footage. But generally, a week.” the security guard answers. As the guard continues, a black blur soars across the screen.

Debris and glass shatter as it happens. The guard pauses the recording, then rewinds. He plays the footage again in slow motion. The balcony of the patio appears deserted. A bald-headed male figure is seen from within the apartment, wearing jacket, and reading a book. He turns and walks away from the glass, with casual timing. Then, a large, brooding figure in a black trench coat and matching fedora, glides into the balcony. A white flash is seen off screen before he intrudes on the patio floor and crashes through the window. More white flashes occur inside the apartment. Glass and other various objects are seen being blown out the window as though it were an explosion. In another camera, the owner is seen running away from his apartment entrance, then as the black hooded figure draws near the lens, officers can see his eyes covered in shades, and then all the footage turns to static across on half the screens. Some of the officers shiver. The guard stops the tape.

“Where’s the rest of it?” asks Officer Bolivar.

“That’s it.” replies the guard. “After that creepy dude looks at the camera, all the ones near apt 756 all go out for a good hour.” The room remains silent.

“Can you rewind, just before the crash, and play it frame by frame?” asks Marcus. The guard, rewinds, and plays the footage frame by frame. “Stop!” he says. “You notice the white flash?”

“What’s your point?” asks Melba, Officer Miller’s partner.

“Don’t you notice how the flash looks like it’s throwing him into the balcony? It looks like he got shoved off a helicopter. Look at the force of that. How’s he getting up to the seventh floor of a building? Did you guys hear any sound or was there a scaffold nearby?” asks Marcus, toward the guard.

“No, not really.” he says in a raspy voice.

“I don’t see your point.” replies Melba.

“What I’m saying is that whatever this guy is into, however this happened, and from the shiver you’re all getting looking at this, I think it’s safe to say it’s above our pay grade. Look at those white flashes again later on, the way the apartment gets decimated



with it. It could've come out of a gun but there aren't any bullet holes in the apartment." Marcus points out.

"You're losing us here, so what?" boasts Miller.

"Military grade weapons, black market stuff. We're talking, a possible compromise at the federal level." says Marcus.

"Woah. Let's not jump to conclusions. I agree this isn't normal but that's a bit heavy. We still need to comb through the evidence we've found." replies Officer Bolivar.

"Yeah, I agree." replies Gil. "This is weird, but who knows? We'll just assume the best for now."

"At this point, what are we investigating? Is this a kidnapping? Can we say for sure the owner was taken by this man in black? Or are we talking homicide?" asks Officer Melba.

"Again, let's not jump to any conclusions. It's just too soon. Let's just comb through what we find and go from there." Officer Bolivar insists. Marianna asks the security guard to rewind the footage. He pauses it on her instructions on the frame revealing the black hat figure in cape and shades.

"Take a good look everyone. This is our suspect. And we've got nothin'. What we can say, is that he's likely working with an accomplice, maybe several, they are armed with deadly force, remain at large with no description, and no id. We don't know their motives, resources, or affiliation. It is dangerous to proceed if anyone makes contact. It's not safe to patrol the streets without more information on who these people are, and we should proceed with caution going forward. If you or any officer comes in contact with the suspect, you are to put out an APB and not to engage without backup, is that understood?" replies Marianna.

"Doesn't the shop owner have a son? Has anyone contacted him?" asks Officer Melba.

"No. No one's been able to get a hold of him." replies Officer Bolivar.

"You think maybe we should put out a curfew?" asks Officer Miller.

"It's too soon for that." replies Officer Melba.

"You sure about that?" asks Officer Miller.

“Yeah, I agree, it’s too soon for a curfew.” replies Gil.

“Generally, we don’t put out a curfew until we have a homicide. Don’t freak out on me yet, people.” says Marianna.

“You suppose his son was also kidnapped?” asks Marcus, gazing at Officer Bolivar.

“Like Bolivar said, we just don’t have enough info, we have to keep combing. But take a good look at the footage, I’ve asked them to give us a copy so we can review the video anytime from our shared folder” replies Officer Marianna. Marcus walks away from the group and takes out his flip phone. The screen lights up.

‘Calling Max...’

No answer. He texts. No reply. He calls back again. He paces around the back of the room. Gil walks over to him.

“You ok?” asks Gil.

“Yeah. Just trying to reach out to Max and can’t get a hold of him.” replies Marcus.

“I’m sure he’s fine. He’s a tough kid.” replies Gil.

“I’m a dad, I always worry.” says Marcus.

“We can head out if you want.” says Gil. Marcus stares at his flip phone. He looks at the other officers bickering over the footage. He looks at Gil.

“Yeah, I just wanna make sure he’s ok.” replies Marcus. Marianna walks over.

“You guys cool?” asks Marianna.

“Yeah, I’m gonna check up on Max.” replies Marcus.

“How’s little Maxie doin?” asks Marianna. “He reminds me of my middle one, him and Andre should be about the same age, oh, that kid is a handful.” she says smiling.

“Ha, yeah, it’s that age. But Max is fine, we just had a bit of a tiff when you guys came over.” replies Marcus. Marianna shrugs her shoulders. Marcus continues to dial but no answer. He keeps dialing again and sending text messages with no response. Gil nudges Marcus on the shoulder.

“Let’s go, I’ll take you home. You should check up on him.” Gil says.

“You sure?” asks Marcus.

“You guys go ahead, we can reconvene in the morning.” Marianna confirms. Marcus nods. They walk out and head towards Marcus’ house. Gil stops in front of the driveway, Marcus gets out of the car and closes the door. Gil waves and drives off. Marcus takes out his keys and unlocks the door, dialing for Max, with no response.

“Max!?” yells Marcus as the front door swings open. He looks upstairs at Max’s bedroom door. “Max!” yells Marcus again. No response. He closes the door, walks over to the kitchen table, where the half-eaten beef bowl, rice, and half glass of water rest, abandoned. He tosses the keys across the dining table and loosens his shirt. The house is quiet except the faint sound of theme music from the TV show ‘Zombie Cop’ trialing from his open bedroom. “Max?! I’m home! Can we talk?” yells Marcus. No response. Marcus shakes his head and walks upstairs. He steps in front of the bedroom door. He lifts his hand but hesitates. The noise from his bedroom, irritates. The raspy voice of character echoes from the TV. Marcus holds still, keeping his ear to the bedroom door.

“You have the right to remain lifeless, any brains you have can and will be eaten from you in the name of the law.” says the groggy voice from the other bedroom. Then the sound of a man screaming. Marcus strides in a hurry toward his bedroom and turns off the TV, in the middle of a campy, yet, gruesome scene of a man being eaten by a figure wearing cheap rubber prosthetics and what looks like a sprinkler shooting red water out of actor’s neck. He stares at Max’s bedroom door.

“Max!” yells Marcus. He sums up the courage to walk up the door. He taps it with a soft knock from his forefinger knuckle. “Hey Max, talk to me, buddy. What’s goin’ on...as Marvin Gaye would say?” No response. He hears a faint whisper while dogs bark outside, and the sound leaves rustling outside as the wind starts to howl.

“C’mon buddy, talk to me.” says Marcus. No reply. He twists the door knob to open, but it’s locked. Marcus sighs.

“I see. Ok, you don’t wanna talk. That’s fine. I deserve that.” he says, arms on his waist. Marcus stares at the floor, unsure what to say. A moment of silence passes as he tries to figure out the words to say that won’t come out. “Hey look, I get that you’re mad. It’s true, I’m busy. The bills won’t pay themselves, alright. Someday, when you grow up,

you'll learn. You'll see what I mean. You'll become a dad and see how it is." he continues. More silence. The sound of crickets outside grow noticeable. "I uh ... I'm sorry about your Mom. But that's got nothing to do with you. We both love you and while you should have both of us, there's only me and I'm not perfect. But I do care. And this whole bully thing needs to get resolved. I know you don't want to take karate or that maybe I don't always have time, I dunno ... I should take you when I have time to one of our self-defense classes. Wish I had time to teach you myself, but I don't. Either way, it's not good to get a call and find out you almost got expelled. I know you're a good kid, but you know, you're becoming a man, soon, and you need to learn how to hold your own, someday. You know?" he says. Marcus walks away from the door and stares at it. He looks underneath and notices no sound coming from it, and the light peering underneath remains unperturbed. Marcus takes a step back and leans against the wall behind him. "Max! Cmon' buddy, open the door, let's talk." he insists. He bends down to take a closer look under the door. He hears a scraping sound behind him and checks his back pocket. He takes it out and looks at the powdery residue trapped between glass and tape. He notices a faint iridescence that intensifies as he approaches the door, and fades as he holds it away. This time, it's illuminating in shadow, and starting to glow as he moves it close to the door handle. "Ok Max, open, up now, son!" he yells. No response. The residue's glow intensifies like a cigarette. Marcus' heart beats louder. He pounds on the door. "Open the door now, Max!" he yells. "I'm going to count to three, if you don't open, I'm going to kick it down, you hear me?" he continues. Marcus sweats. "Ok, one...two...three..." Marcus waits, no response. He takes a step back. The residue glows brighter. Marcus steps forward and lifts his leg for a high front kick with his full weight powered into it

*CRACK!*

The door breaks open, it's frame ripped apart from the force of the blow. Marcus stares into the empty, messy, bedroom. Max is gone! Marcus notices the residue in his hand glow brighter, as he walks over the bare-wood spot where the rainbow carpet once stood. It brightens like a bulb. Marcus eyes widen. Looking around, he notices papers,

action figures, furniture, flipped and tossed all around. He rushes to the switch near the door and lights up the room. He notices a few items missing; the wagon, a pillow, and a ball. He looks down and by his foot, he sees the book he warned Max not to take. The residue dims its light. He drops the sample to the floor and covers his mouth. Marcus can't control his heavy breathing, darting his eyes around the room, looking into the closet, under the bed, around the room, and no sign of Max. He rushes toward the corner, flipping the desk, then the bed, then the closet, ripping out items and clothes from it and finds no one. His eyes widen. He goes to the bedroom window and rips it open, no sign of escape. He rushes out of the room, turning on every light switch in the hallway, in his room, then scrambles downstairs, to the kitchen, the living room, turning on every light switch in the house. The sound of dogs barking crescendos. He rushes to the kitchen to slide open the glass patio door and rushes out to the back yard. He looks around and sees the emptiness of a space with overgrown grass and a 9 foot tall, aluminum toolshed. He rushes to the shed and opens the door, turning on the light, but finds it empty. He rushes over to the side of the yard, opens the wooden door that leads to the front yard and walks up to the street. He looks around in the face of the moon's light over his face. The wind howls, leaves rustle, and the crickets chirp. He struggles to catch his breath. He inhales one more gasp of air.

“MAX!” he yells.

# CHAPTER THREE



Max opens his eyes. His wrists itch as they cling stuck together, bound by fibrous, hairy, rope. A large fishing net wraps around his body. The deep blue sky, warm sun, and fresh, cold wind across his face, calms his anxiety. The twin moons above, peer down, causing him to gasp. He shakes his wrists unable to loosen the hand-woven cuffs. He looks around, feeling his back against the net and hardwood floor inside a large rowboat, with a tall, slender, male, silhouette, wearing a straw hat, beaming at him. They rock back and forth with the ocean's waves as the paddle wheels on either side, shake, splashing water as they spin. Max rubs his eyes. The sailor's arms cross as the wheels turn on their own! Max flinches, and sits up with a jolt. He struggles to break free from the fishing net surrounding him.

"Where the hell am I?!" yells Max. "What is this?"

"Very funny. I'm not falling for it this time, bucko." says the Sailor with an accent Max doesn't recognize except somewhere between british and bostonian. Max takes a better look at him. He's young, scruffy, tanned, appearing in his late teens or early twenties with a sharp chin, short, fluffy brown hair, dark leather jacket, and black, baggy pants. To Max, he appeared as something in between a TV pirate and a hobo, with a dark, red strip of cloth, woven around his pants, serving as a belt. "I'm the one who gets to ask the questions here." insists the Sailor. Max, confused, raises an eyebrow and lowers the other. The Sailor perceives his gesture and retorts with a narrow stare.

"Why don't you let me go?" asks Max.

"Very funny. I wasn't born yesterday kiddo." The sailor looks around. Where's the rest of your crew?" he asks. Then turns his head, shielding his eyes from the splash of

the paddle wheels. “I know you’re out here somewhere, vermin, come out!!” he yells. Max looks where the Sailor is staring, but sees nothing but endless ocean and distant mountains around them. He adjusts his body, sitting up against the inner hull. The net shifts over his head.

“Can you at least tell me where we are? How’d I get here?” asks Max. The Sailor claps.

“Bravo, kid. Bravo. Those acting lessons worked out for ya, didn’t it?” the Sailor replies. Max narrows his eyes.

“Jerk.” says Max.

“Alright, fess up!” yells the Sailor, standing, hands on his hip.

“What?” asks Max.

“C’mon, you can drop the act, kiddo. Who are you?” asks the Sailor.

“I’m Max.” he replies, holding his hand over his face to cover from the sun.

“Don’t play dumb with me. Who ... are ... you?” insists the Sailor. “I didn’t ask for your name. Anyone, anything can have a name. My boat has a name. You know what it is? It’s Jaynce!” yells the Sailor, smiling as he approaches Max.

“I told you already--” replies Max.

“Who are you? Who do you work for? What’s your gang? Do you work for the King? Who are you?” the Sailor urges.

“I don’t know. I’m just a kid from Harvest Town, I guess?” he replies.

“You don’t even know who you are?!” yells the Sailor, raising his hands in the air in a gesture of sarcasm.

“Look, I need to get home. Is there a phone or something? And what’s with the moons, is this for real?!” asks Max.

“Phone?! Oh that’s rich. Sure, I’ll give you a phone, who are you gonna call, your dad-dy?” the Sailor mocks. Max narrows his eyes.

“Yeah. My dad.” replies Max.

“If you’re not gonna tell me what I wanna know,” says the Sailor, spying his surroundings, “then I’ll just frisk it outta ya!” he says, leaning over Max. He removes the



net as Max struggles to get away but he's cornered in the boat. The Sailor struggles to hold Max still while kicking him away.

"Get away, creep!" yells Max. They wrestle until finally the Sailor is pushed back to the middle of the boat.

"You know what? Fine. I got what I came for." says the Sailor. He holds out his hands and with a slight turn of his wrist over the other, with a magician's gesture, the compass emerges out of nowhere when his hands cross, in the palm of his hand.

"Give it back, that's mine!" yells Max, struggling in the net.

"Finders, keepers bucko!" replies the Sailor, with a smile. He pauses, noticing Max is no longer flinching. He's hunched over and swerving a bit, on his hands and knees.

"Woah, what are you doing?" the Sailor widens his eyes.

"I get sea sick." replies Max.

"Woahhh, woahh, noo noo, hold it in, hold it." warns the Sailor.

"Well then gimme back my Compass and get me a phone or I'll throw up all over your boat!" Max threatens.

"Get away from me, you vermin!" yells the Sailor, stumbling back toward the other side of the boat.

"I need to get outta here!" says Max, on his knees, hunched over and trying to free himself from the net. His head sways back and forth, he covers his mouth. The Sailor takes a step back.

"Hey! I'm warning you, don't--"

Max throws up, all over the floor. The Sailor yells and cringes. Max tries to gather his composure but he loses his bearing and throws up a second time, over the edge, into the ocean. The Sailor screams. He takes a blue vile from his leather bag but then drops it and grabs the bucket from the back of the boat. Max hangs on to the edge of the boat, coughing. A huge splash of water washes over Max from behind, drenching him from head to toe. He wipes his face and coughs, turning around to see where it came from. The Sailor drops his bucket.

"Wha'd you do that for?" yells Max.

“Home?! There is no home!” yells the Sailor. “And if there was, I wouldn’t take you there. NOBODY vomits on Janyce!” the Sailor yells back. “Wait, don’t--” he continues, but Max keeps hurling over the side of the boat. His body shivers from the cold. He lets go of the edge as the hull sways up and down. His energy weakens as his body shivers from the cold. Max loses his grip and drops to the floor. The Sailor splashes another bucket load over Max, washing the floor. Max barely raises his arm to stop the Sailor. His eyes close as all the energy in his body drains. Max passes out.

Marcus hangs up the phone, punching the kitchen table. He paces around the living room and walks back. He stares at a blank, yellow notepad with its pen laying on the edge of the kitchen table, surrounded by dinner’s leftovers. The cell rings, he flips it in an instant, placing it to his ear. “Hey Jane!” he replies.

“Hi Mark, is everything ok?” Jane asks.

“Is Max with ... have you seen Max?” Marcus replies.

“No. Let me ask if Honny’s seen him.” she responds. Marcus overhears Jane screaming, then she repeats herself, yelling ‘Hawthorne’. A faint voice over the phone is heard but too soft to make out. “...he says ‘not since earlier’. Why? Is he gone somewhere?” she asks.

“Yeah.” Marcus sighs, sitting down in front of the notepad. His hand fidgets with the pen as he starts to draw spirals. “Well, if you guys see him can you have him call me right away?” he asks.

“Sure. Hey look, you know, I’m sure he’s fine. You know how kids are, this age, they think they’re invincible and they get all crazy. But Max is a good kid, I’m sure he’ll turn up.” Jane replies.

“Thanks Jane. But you know, as a cop, I see things. They don’t always turn out ok. You know, every time I get a call, it’s never good. People don’t call us for snacks and flowers, you know what I mean? I don’t have the luxury of positive thinking. All I ever see is when it gets bad. So, it’s not just if he’s ok, the world is not ok. There’s a million things that could be happening to him right now. I’ve got to consider all of them.” he replies.

“Mark, I understand. I get it. But Max is a smart kid. You know he wouldn’t put himself in harm’s way. I’m sure he’ll come around.” says Jane.

“Thanks, Jane. Please let me know if you guys hear anything.” he replies.

“Sure. Hang in there.” says Jane. Marcus hangs up the phone. He writes down a list of names and crosses off ‘Jane’. He searches his phone’s index for names and dials each one. With every dial, he gets a voicemail.

“Hi, this is Mark, Max’s dad. I wanted to reach out and see if by chance you might have seen him? I know it’s late and sorry to bother ya, but I can’t seem to find him. If you hear anything please call me back. Thanks, bye.” he says. He makes a few more attempts leaving slight variations of the same message, crossing every name on the list. He stares at the page. The last name on the list left uncrossed gives Marcus pause. He circles ‘Linda’ with his pen and takes a deep breath, as he presses one of his speed dial buttons. The ring tone echoes.

“Hello?” answers a voice.

“Hey Linda, it’s me.” says Marcus.

“Mark! Hey I’m sorry I can’t talk for too long, I’m getting ready for a date, ok?” she replies.

“Right. Listen, have you heard from Max?” he asks.

“My little Mickey? No. Why?” she says.

“He hates that.” Marcus replies.

“Oh shush. I don’t care how old he is, that’s what he’ll always be.” she replies. Marcus remains silent. “Is everything ok?” she asks.

“Yeah, I just, wanted to see if he called you.” he replies.

“Mmmarrkk. What’s the deal?” she replies.

“Hey, we need to get ready, we’re about to be late, we’ve got 15 minutes” says a male voice in the background.

“Ok, Josh, honey, hold on!” she replies. “Mark! What’s up? Talk!” she demands.

“I can’t find Max. We had an argument this morning. And I had to step out for work...and now, I don’t know. I’m wondering if he tried to call you.” he replies.

“Well, you’re a cop, you’re the guy I call to handle a missing person, I’m sure you can handle your own son, right?” she replies.

“OUR son.” Marcus insists. The phone goes quiet. Marcus hears mumbling in the background and some noise. “Hello?” says Marcus. “Hello!” he repeats louder.

“...yeah I’m here. Hold on...” she replies. “...yeah, yeah, I’m getting ready. No, it’s nothing, just Mickey...it’s fine.” Marcus hears over the phone in the background.

“Hello?” she says directly.

“I’m here.” he replies.

“Well, look, if anything happens, I’ll call you, ok? Next time try not to lose OUR son. I’m sure he’s fine, you know how kids are.” she replies.

“Everyone keeps telling me that, and you know what? I DO know how kids are, Linda, that’s WHY I worry.” he replies.

“You worry too much.” she replies. Marcus covers the phone.

“Idiot.” he whispers.

“Hello?” she says.

“Yeah.” replies Marcus.

“I’m not an idiot. I can hear you over the phone. If anything happens to my little Mickey, you’re dead, you hear me!?” yells Linda. She bangs the phone on the table. Josh grabs her by the shoulder. “No!” she yells. Josh grabs the phone from her, she grabs it back. “Ok, well, make sure he’s alive or else! Bye! Gotta go, bye!” she yells and hangs up. Marcus slaps his forehead. He tosses the phone across the kitchen table and lays his head down, sideways, staring at the notepad. He rips the top page while keeping down and tears it in half. The cell rings, he reaches out across the bowl of rice and picks it up.

“Yo!” yells the voice on the other end. Marcus groans.

“Hey Gil.” he replies with a sigh.

“How goes it?” he asks.

“Not good.” he replies. “He’s AWOL, I’m about to file a missing persons.”

“Woah, that’s not good. But you know, it’s a small town, I’m sure someone’s seen him.” Gil reassures.

“You should’ve witnessed it Gil. His room’s a mess. And the powder ... ah I can’t think.” replies Marcus.

“I’ll swing by, we’ll find him, I promise.” says Gil. Marcus hangs up the phone and stands up, buttoning his shirt. He stares at the mess on the kitchen table. He turns his head and looks up at Max’s room. He waits, but nothing happens. Walking over to the kitchen, he stops, washes his face, dries it with paper towel, and staring out into the darkness of the patio. The wind howls as it sways leafless trees overgrown grass in his yard. He breaks away from it, walking over to the kitchen table, grabs his keys, wallet, and walks out the front door.

Max wakes up in the corner of an old, soft, red, sofa, seated in a white, wooden, windowless cabin, surrounded by junk. He sees his wagon, ball, and pillow nestled around him, along with various junk items from the boat; rope, cloth sacks, an old chair, and fishing supplies. His wrists remain bound and clothes, soaked. He’s surrounded by dense trees with dry leaves. Looking up, the sky grows colorless, and overcast.

*CRACK!*

A whipping sound from ahead and the cabin begins to shake. The sound of snorting in the air and trotting on the ground remind Max of the circus. He scoots toward the outside window and peeks his head out. He’s in a stagecoach! The Sailor pulls the rope on one horse. The paint over the outside is in patches of greens, browns, and beiges, perhaps as camouflage, he supposes. The boat he arrived in can be seen tied behind a thick group of bushes. The cabin shakes as the rickety wheels hit a rock on the dirt road. Leaves hit Max in the cheek in the cool breeze. He shivers, still drenched from his arrival. He looks around but doesn’t recognize any sign of civilization. They’re surrounded by groves, trees, and rock. The cabin steers away from the coast, along a subtle, dirt path. Max inspects the items around him, lifting them to see underneath, opening sacks and baskets for anything useful. A fish flops around in one of them, with a hook still latched into its mouth. Digging further with his bound hands, he notices a

small, rectangle shaped piece of metal. He grips it with his fingers and begins to poke the corner with rope. It's just enough to loosen the fibers of his rope.

*THADDUMP!*

The coach shakes with a heavy wobble from the carriage rolling over a rock. Max loses his grip and drops the metal piece to the floor. He rolls his eyes.

“Can you please let me go!” Max yells.

“Oh! Look, it's the compass boy, waking up.” the Sailor replies.

“My Dad's a cop, wait till he finds me, and when he does, you're dead!” yells Max.

“Ohhhh...I'm so so scared. Your daddy's a cop huh? Go on, then. Call him on your phone, hahah.” mocks the Sailor.

“Jerk!” yells Max. The coach continues to shake. Max looks out the window, to his right. The trees begin to clear, revealing a large, grassy plain, surrounding a grey, rocky mound. Peering into the distance, he spots a cave. Max reaches down to the floor and picks up the metal piece with his forefinger. The Sailor tugs on the horse's bridle, adjusting his posture on the bench affixed to the front of the coach. The Sailor stares ahead, adjusting the knapsack strapped around his chest and his straw hat. He hears a cracking sound behind him. The door from the coach flies off as he witnesses Max rolling on the floor, jumping up, and taking off like an olympic sprinter. The Sailor pulls on the bridle to stop the horse.

“Hey!” yells the Sailor. He jumps off the coach and runs after Max, but loses his breath after a moment of running. He sees Max run away further and faster. “Fine! You wanna leave?! Good riddance!” yells the Sailor, catching his breath. He turns around to walk back toward the coach. Turning his head once more to spy, he sees Max run toward the open field, and then curve toward the cave entrance. The Sailor's jaw drops. “Wha?” he whispers to himself. He raises his hand over his brow and sees Max enter the cave. “Hey, kid, what are you--?” he catches himself. Nods and throws his hands forward. “Nevermind.” he mumbles. The horse pulling the carriage walks back, stops, and snorts. The Sailor shakes his head and opens his knapsack to look at the compass. He lifts it up to take a closer look. It's bronze, dull, reflection still shimmers under monotonous sky.

He flips it, noticing the hand-written etchings on its backside and gasps. His eyes widen. He looks up at the cave. “Hey...wait!” he yells, waving his hand. He hears a gallop from behind. He turns around and sees the horse walking away. The Sailor gasps again, running after it. The horse walks a bit faster as he approaches. “Oh come on.” yells the Sailor.

Max enters the cave, gasping for air and bending down, holding his knees, waiting for his breath to slow. He looks behind, seeing no trace of the Sailor. He sighs and looks the other way, into the dark void. Stepping forward, he dodges roots, thrusting his neck and shoulders from above. The air is warm, damp, and thick. He rubs his arms, face, and waist, clearing the bits of wood, mud, insects, and slime that line the surrounding walls. He stops and looks back, then sits down on the ground, hoping to pass the time. He lowers his head, resting it against his legs. It’s damp, but quiet. A moment of peace, Max cradles himself, waiting, and basking in the silence. He imagines the pebbles on the ground as a make-believe city built for a spec-sized human civilization. He wonders about its dusty surroundings, how far its inhabitants would have to travel for water. How long would they survive?

“Hey!” he hears from a distance. Max gasps, gets up and starts pacing his steps with haste, deeper into the cave. He walks further and further into the dark, pushing past roots and crawly things, casting them away as he strides. He looks back, the mouth to the outside shrinks. He slows down, facing deeper into the void, noticing a bright speck. He continues, pushing harder through the thick, to draw closer. A few moments later, the entrance becomes a white dot. He turns to stare at the other spec and with caution, approaches closer, deeper into the cave, casting off slime and muck from his arms and neck, approaching as it brightens. His arms burn from scratching, the air’s dampness thickens. Max struggles to breathe and stops. He blows his nose, clearing his sinuses. The malodorous stench of stews from barnyard animals with a tinge of sulfur invades his breath as he inhales. Max covers his nose, breathing out of his mouth. He notices the spec is a bright blotch, a hole at the top of the cave. Light and smoke beam down from it. Curiosity urges him to push closer, holding his arms together, pacing slow, walking up

to the light. After a few more steps, he lowers his head and looks up, through the hole, at the overcast sky, darkening. He hears a faint wind. And then another, and another, almost like a whisper. He sees, just a few inches in front of him, two wet sparkles from a pair of black fruit. He stares at it as the wind sounds more like a whisper. He holds still, hoping the light will reveal it's true form. The whisper approaches, sounding more like a breath. The fruit pair draws closer, staring, toward the hole's glow, brightening their sparkle. And as Max looks across the shining light to learn it's true form, he discerns it's shape; a large, pointed nose, heavy brow, bright, green leather skin, black eyes, and sharp teeth. An face emerges!

“Yaaughh!” yells Max as he falls back, landing on his rump, against the rocky floor. He crawls back on his hands and feet as the pale, green lanky figure his size, surfaces into the light. It's build, like a broader shouldered, muscular teen. Short, white hair, large, pointed ears, a few warts and spots all over, like a frog, along with thin, white eyebrows, and a protruding forehead. It's posture, hunched like a monkey. Almost human, yet dull as an animal. It's zombie-like, lifeless, glare felt to Max as if it had peered into his soul without regard. Its brief grunts bellow with every breath in baritone. The light shimmers across its sharp-tooth necklace, bright striped, tattered soccer uniform, waistline wooden ornaments, and rusty, right-handed blade. One step forward, wraps it in silhouette while its pitch black eyes, glisten in the dark. Max's heart beats faster. He crawls back further. A shuffle echoes behind the creature, then several more. A red glow kindles from a distance. The shuffles reveal their true form. Dozens of hunched, armed, silhouettes, loom. Max gasps. They shuffle in unison. One in front, towers over him, lifts both its arms, holding it's blade tight, and straightens its body. Max jumps to his feet, just as it jabs into the ground, sparking embers with it's rusted blade at full force. Max realizes a tear on his shirt where he would've been. It screams like a chimpanzee and pounds its chest. Max turns, jumps, and scurries with all his might, toward the cave's exit, as the shriek of a hundred monkeys tremor the cave's walls and shake through Max's bones. His heart blazes as he sprints, never beating fast enough to contend with his knees, uncertain which part of his body will fatigue first, lungs or legs? His forearms



wrap around his head, lacerating from the roots that slice by a thousand, , small, cuts as he pushes through, ignoring the pain, to live. The cave's mouth widens, drawing closer. He turns back to peek, as the creatures draw closer, shaking the cave with their howls and footsteps. Max turns to look ahead as the tunnel's mouth widens, bright. He gapes at the exit to the outside world, then trips against a craggy bump. He stumbles, scurries, and rolls against the rigid, cave floor. The stampede approaches. Max jolts to his knees, embracing them with his arms, ready for doom.

Gil turns left at a traffic light under the midnight blue, starry, sky, slapping Marcus on the shoulder.

"Mark, did you hear what I just said?" asks Gil. Marcus looks out at the night sky and turns his head toward Gil.

"Yeah, I'm sure Max is fine. I get it. But you can't tell me not to worry. You're not a Dad, you don't get it. And yes, I've already heard it from Marianna, we can't file a missing persons until the 24 hour period. But we're cops Gil. You know we've seen just about everything humanly possible, happen." says Marcus.

"Unless we find a dead body in a cave somewhere, right?" says Gil.

"You're not reassuring me, Gil, just drive." replies Marcus, irked.

"Sorry." says Gil, driving around the block of a common, suburban neighborhood. For a moment, only the sound of the patrol car's engine and it's rubber tires grinding against tiny rocks, murmur. Gil notices the sign for Edward's High School as they pass by. "Hey Mark, do you remember any specific details before Max went missing?"

"We had a fight and he was being a punk." replies Marcus.

"No, no. Before that. Can you remember anything? Any details he may have mentioned when he got home, or anything you saw on him?" Gil presses. "Like, anything about school?" Marcus sighs, rubbing his hair back..

"Yeah. He came home drenched. I was going to ream him for getting in trouble because of this kid...Ethan." he replies.

"Do you know what it was about?" Gil asks.

“No...I don’t know. My impression is that this kid is a prick. That’s the thing about Max, I worry about. He’s too nice. Heaven forbid he’s up against a monster, he won’t make it. He’s gotta learn to fend for himself, I can’t always protect him. There’s not always going to be someone there to save him.” he replies. Gil snaps his fingers.

“Focus,” he says. “Was there anything else? Any other details? What does this kid have against Max?” Gil asks.

“I don’t know. Maybe jealousy? I’m not sure. It’s the Stolz kid.” Marcus replies.

“Like the park?” asks Gil.

“Yeah. Max had bruises and rashes, who knows what they did to him. He tried to avoid me, it looked like there was a whole group harassing ‘im.” Marcus replies.

“You know how bullies operate. You think maybe they followed him home?” asks Gil.

“They better not. I’d teach those punks a lesson.” Marcus replies. He notices the abandoned bleachers in the shadows of the high school's abandoned football field, it’s edges contoured by street lights near the sidewalk. A sign mounts next to it for the cheerleading squad. “There’s this girl he likes.” says Marcus.

“Yeah?” asks Gil. “Who is she?”

“I don’t know, I saw her this morning. He’s always staring when he sees her as we drive by here.” replies Marcus. “I make fun of him for it.”

“You embarrassed him!” says Gil. Marcus laughs.

“He’s funny when he gets like that, but he’s gotta man up.” says Marcus.

“I hate that word you know.” replies Gil.

“Wha? Man up?” says Marcus.

“Yeah. Maturity is like ... um ... it’s like an avocado. The ripeness of a man or woman comes from allowing it to happen in it’s due season.” replies Gil. Marcus looks at Gil.

“Shut up and drive, Gil.” Marcus replies, smiling. Gil laughs.

“I’m serious.” Gil insist.

“You should quit being a cop and become a philosopher.” says Marcus.

“Yeah, well. You think maybe this has to do with the girl?” asks Gil.

“Maybe. You know, that Stolz kid has a been a pain for a while now.” replies Marcus, staring at the dashboard.

“Is there a connection between him and the girl? Maybe a jealous lover?” asks Gil. “You know, if Max made a move and she’s with some jealous guy, that would totally do it. We’ve seen it before. Gang members, people, kill each other over love.”

“I don’t know. But my gut feeling is that kid knows something, and we should ask him, right now.” says Marcus.

“It’s late, Mark, we can’t interrogate kids at this hour.” Gil argues. “But at least give me a name.”

“Ethan Stolz.” Marcus replies.

“Type on there.” Gil replies, nudging his head toward the keyboard and mini monitor attached to his dashboard. Marcus rolls his eyes and starts typing Ethan’s name.

“Well, kid’s got no priors, he’s clean.” Marcus replies. He keeps typing and clicking. “How do you get an address?” Gil pulls over to the side. He starts typing and navigating the menu. He clicks twice, hits ‘Enter’ on the keypad.

“There you go.” replies Gil. Ethan’s address comes up.

“You sure?” asks Marcus.

“There’s no one else by that name, and according to records, he’s got a sibling named Amy.” Gil replies. Marcus types in his flip phone.

“Bingo. Holy crap. Yeah. Let’s move in.” says Marcus.

“Woah, there. I told you, no way!” says Gil as he turns the car around. “Let’s leave it for morning.” Marcus looks at Gil and then lowers his head down.

“Yeah, you’re right.” replies Marcus. Gil makes another turn.

“If you want, we can wait it out at Sadie’s, have a few beers? They have that amazing pie, Teri makes. I’m sure by then, Max’ll ring you up” Gil offers.

“It’s fine.” replies Marcus. “I’d rather be home and wait, in case, if he gets back.”

“You mean ‘when’ he gets back.” replies Gil.

“Right.” says Marcus. Gil drops him off at home. Marcus runs upstairs, but finds every room in the house same as before. He yells for Max, but no answer. He stares at his patrol car.

A bright flash bursts. Echoes of grunts cry out. Max feels a hand claw into his shoulder, pulling him out of his crouch.

“Run, you idiot!” yells the Sailor. Max looks up, the Sailor pulls his arm to lift him off the ground, holding a luminescent object too bright to determine. He pulls Max behind him. “Cover your eyes!” the Sailor demands as he raises his arm to cover his face. Max complies but peeks between his fingers. The Sailor’s flash strobes like lighting, blinding the horde, compelling them to step back. He then charges out of the cave, pulling Max’s arm behind him. They exit the cave, running into the open, grassy field. The Sailor dashes toward a giant boulder nearby and hides. Max follows, ducking behind the rock, and kneeling next to the Sailor. Ignoring Max, he catches his breath, eyeing the cave.

“Thanks.” says Max, with heavy breathing. The Sailor keeps watch at the cave entrance.

“You’re really stupid, kid, you know that? What the hell were doing?” the Sailor scolds.

“Getting away from you, jerk.” replies Max. The Sailor shakes his head, covering his eyes. The cave entrance remains void. The Sailor looks back and spots a beach off in the distance. He looks down at Max, lying back on the ground, against the rock, covered in cuts, bruises, rashes, ooze, and dirt. The Sailor smacks him on the stomach.

“Alright, let’s go!” urges the Sailor.

“I’m out. You go. Just leave me here.” replies Max.

“Hey kid, I just saved your life, you owe me one. If you go out on me here, there won’t be a chance to pay me back.” replies the Sailor.

“You took my stuff and my compass. That makes us even.” says Max. He starts to nod off.

“Nooo, noo, noo, not here, you dunce, stay with me!” the Sailor whispers.

“I’m beat, just let me rest.” says Max. The Sailor gazes at the cave’s entrance. He looks at Max and tries to grab his wrist, but Max pulls it away, yelling. “Ah that hurts!”

“Ugh, you’re in bad shape.” says the Sailor.

“Lee..me...rest...” says Max before he lies still. The Sailor grabs his wrist again, but no response. He taps Max’s cheek with a backhand, but still, no response.

“I can’t leave you here, moron.” says the Sailor. He opens his leather strapped satchel and takes out a green vile and holds it next to Max’s head. “Nope.” he says. Then he takes another vile, filled with yellow liquid. “Not that one either.” he replies. He finds a purple vile and checks the cave again. He looks down, pops the cork from it’s top and tilts with caution, so that only a drop lands on Max’s chest. Vapor rises from his body as the liquid marinates. The Sailor pours another drop on his hand and rubs Max’s arms and legs as quickly as he can. “C’mon, c’mon” he says. A mist envelopes Max. The Sailor fans it away with his hat, shifting his attention behind the rock. Max coughs. His eyes open and he sits up. The Sailor places his hat back on his head and continues peering around the rock. Max fans away the smoke emanating from his chest. He rubs his arms and pauses. The rashes, bruises, and scratches are gone. His skin is as smooth as a baby. He rubs his legs free of dirt and grime, but feels no pain, all the lacerations and injuries are gone. Max looks at his hands, they’re free of any scars and marks. He gasps.

“What did you do to me?” asks Max, with a breath of fresh air and renewed vigor.

“Nothin’.” replies the Sailor. “Just stay put till I tell ya.” Max stands up, but the Sailor pulls him down. “Eh, shhhhhhh! Get down! Get down!” he urges with a loud whisper.

“Whoopp, whoooooopppp, whhoopppppp!” screams bellow from the cave.

“Don’t move.” the Sailor whispers.

“Can you at least tell me what’s goin on?” asks Max.

“You idiot, why would you run into an Ogre cave?” the Sailor whispers.

“Ogre!?” Max asks.

“Yes! Ogres. You almost got your head bit off. What the hell is wrong with you?” scolds the Sailor.

“Well, I don’t see anything, we should go.” says Max. The Sailor remains quiet. “Why can’t we go? Let’s just go!” Max insist.

“Ok, here’s the deal. I’ll explain this once, so even a grade A gook like yourself will get it. There are Ogres, ok? And they’re evil. They can hear you a thousand meters away and smell you a million miles away and they don’t stop until they get what they’re after.” says the Sailor.

“Uh huh.” replies Max, eyes narrow.

“Youuuuuu, just pissed them off, dummy!” whispers the Sailor. “You went into their territory and got them all mamable, jumble mess. You poked a hornets nest, kiddo. If we don’t find an escape route, we’re dead.” he says.

“Why’d you save me?” Max asks. “You got what you wanted, you can just leave me here, I don’t care anymore.”

“You’re an idiot. I didn’t know you were fresh leap.” the Sailor replies.

“Fresh what?” asks Max.

“Look, nevermind. You were passed out and there was not way you’d make it to the beach. They hate water, so the sooner we get to the boat, the safer. I’ll explain everything later, but we need to go now!” whispers the Sailor. He gets up and tip toes away from the rock. “Psssstt!” urges the Sailor. He tilts his head but Max shakes his head. “Hey punk, you can’t stay there. I just saved your life twice! You owe me. Let’s go.” Max shakes his head. “Ok, I’ll make you a deal, you wuss. Follow me, and I’ll tell you everything you want to know. I’ll even find you a stupid phone if you want!” he says. Max looks up at the Sailor and stands on his feet. The Sailor points toward the sandy shore, several yards away. The Sailor puts his finger to his mouth and tip toes. Max follows. They continue walking in careful strides for several minutes.

“Whhhoooooppp, whooooooppp, whoooooop!” yell the Ogres from the cave. A dozen burst out of it’s mouth, running with ferocity toward them. The Sailor skips, holding his hat, and runs. Max follows after him. As he look back, swarms of Ogres scurry out, running. They’re holding pitchforks, knives, torches, and spears. All of various shapes, body types, and sizes, no bigger or different than variety of green-skinned humans with ape

behavior, amassing in droves toward their direction with growls, howls, and screams. Max and the Sailor keep running with all their might. Max reaches the edge of small cliffside, and slows down. He looks down, several feet to reach the sand. He looks around and spots a tiny path that winds across the cliff's face. Max tip toes along, holding on to rocks, as the narrow path ramps down toward the base. He makes it with just a half height distance drop and jumps down to the sand, sprinting towards the shore. He reaches the coastline, taking a breath to relax for a moment. He looks back and sees the Sailor, climbing down the same path he took. He jogs towards Max, as he loses energy. He walk past Max, holding his hat, looking toward bushes on their right. The Sailor points to his boat bobbing with the current, tied to a mangrove, hidden behind bushes. Max nods. He hears the sounds of rumbling feet. Looking back, the Ogres line up across the cliffs edge. Dozens and dozen of them, surrounding them. More and more catch up, lining along the entire cliff's structure.

“Whooooo! Whooooo, whooooo, whooooo, whoop!” chant the Ogres, pounding their bellies and chests. He notices females among them, with albino hair, torn dresses, and shirts, and wart covered skin. All of them holding weapons and torches, gnashing their teeth. The Sailor heads towards the bushes. Max follows the Sailor.

“I need you to distract them while I untie the boat.” says the Sailor.

“What!?” exclaims Max.

“Relax, we're almost home free. Just buy us some time.” Says the Sailor.

“What am I supposed to do?” yells Max.

“I dunno...dance or something.” yells the Sailor. “Go!” The Sailor points as he walks away toward the the boat. The Ogres begin to crawl along the ramp.

“Dude! They're coming, gimme something!” yells Max. The Sailor sighs. He looks around and sees a broken branch nearby and grabs it.

“Hold this.” he says. Max complies. The Sailor then takes grabs a rock from the ground, takes out another vile, this time, red colored, and pours it onto the rock. He closes his eyes.

“What are you doing?!” Max yells, as the Ogres reach the base of the cliff, about ready to jump down.

“Shuttup and watch!” yells the Sailor. He closes his eyes. The rock illuminates and flashes. He presses it against the edge of the stick and drops the rock. The stick lights on fire!

“Woah.” says Max.

“Here. Go!” the Sailor demands. Max grabs the torch and holds it, standing still while the Sailor dashes toward the boat. Several Ogres run toward Max as he swings his burning stick. They howl, scream and jump back, afraid of the fire. More Ogres join and Max aims his torch at each of them, walking back toward the ocean. He screams at them. Flaming arrows pierce the sand around Max as they step forward closer. Max shakes. He closes his eyes. More whooping noises are heard among the Ogres, growing louder. Max opens his eyes, noticing them walk backwards in apprehension. The first few near him begin to turn and run toward the cliffs. The Ogres start to climb back up toward the cliff top. Max arches his back and steadies his grip, walking forward and swinging his torch at them. Some of the Ogres from the cliff tops start to run away.

“It’s working! The torch is scaring them off, I think!!” yells Max. The Ogres look up, whooping louder, some of them drop their weapons and run away. Max sighs. The Sailor looks behind Max. His eyes widen.

“You idiot, look behind you!” yells the Sailor. Max turns around. Out of the water, a large, dark, reptilian head rises. It’s eyes like a dragon, fins on the sides of it’s head. It keeps rising higher and higher, without limbs. It’s mouth opens wide. The Ogre’s whoops grow louder. Max’s jaw drops. It towers over him, higher than the cliffside. It looks down at Max, revealing itself as a tower-sized serpent. It hisses with hurricane force wind, pushing Max backward. It’s jaws open wide as it rises higher, aiming for him. It steadies it’s torso, ready for the kill. Max walks back, shaking, holding back tears. He drops the torch. It strikes!



Marcus drives by a suburban neighborhood in his patrol car. The police radio comes on, but he lowers its volume. He glances at the empty seat next to him. On his laptop, a map displayed on screen.

“Turn left at 500 feet.” it says in a monotonous voice. Marcus approaches a large, two story home with a big, empty, driveway and grassy yard. He peeks at the house number. It matches the address. He slows down, approaching it’s sidewalk and puts his car in park. He turns of the engine and waits. Looking at his watch, it’s past midnight.

“Where does a family go at this hour? Maybe they’re on vacation.” he mumbles to himself. He rolls down the window and stares at the windows. Some of the lights are on. He gets out of the car, taking a flashlight with him. He walks up to the entrance and looks for a doorbell. He can’t find any. He knocks on the door. “Hello?” yells Marcus. He knocks a second time, louder. “Hello!” he continues. Marcus waits. Nothing happens. He peeks through the side windows and notices the television playing a game show. He peers inside to see if he can find anyone. He knocks on the window. “Hello?!” he yells, no response. He walks around the home, inspecting it’s interior, wooden floors, an expensive dish cabinet, a large, imposing, vase about waist high with gold trim, and a large leather sofa. He knocks again but no answer. He turns on the flashlight to see if any more details stand out, but nothing stands out unusual. The sound of a car engine approaches. A luxury SUV parks in the driveway. An older gentleman gets out of the car.

“Can I help you officer?” asks the gentleman. Marcus turns around, turns off his flashlight and tucks it into his belt. He walks up to the resident. An older woman gets out of the passenger seat, holding plastic bags from an ice-cream store. In the back of the car, Marcus recognizes Amy getting out, staring at her phone.

“Hi, I’m Officer Marcus Park.” he says, holding out his hand for a shake. The gentleman looks Marcus in the eye.

“I’m Reagan, this is my wife, and kids. We just got back from a night out. Is everything ok?” he asks.

“Yeah. We’ve had a series of disappearances and I came by to follow up on a lead. You have a son, right?” asks Marcus.

“Yeah.” Reagan replies. “Hey Ethan, can you come out here?” Ethan gets out of the car, staring at his phone. He walks up to Reagan and holds still. Marcus looks at him. Ethan remains engaged with himself. Reagan holds Ethan back for a moment. “Wait a minute, officer, what’s this about?” he asks.

“Max, my son, is missing. I believe Ethan might know where he is.” Marcus replies. Ethan looks up at Marcus. “Hey, Ethan, have you seen Max?” he continues.

“Yo, you’re Max’s da--” says Ethan until Reagan shushes him.

“Son, you don’t need to answer his question.” says Reagan, narrowing his eyes at Marcus.

“He can either tell me now, or at the station.” Marcus replies, holding on to handcuffs tied to his belt.

“I haven’t seen--” Ethan wines.

“Shuttup!” says Reagan, interrupting.

“Is everything alright?” asks Reagan’s wife. Amy behind her, paces back and forth, smiling, talking on her cell.

“Don’t get involved, Beth, leave it to me. This cop doesn’t realize who he’s talking to. And he was just about to leave.” Reagan replies.

“If your son won’t answer my question, you will.” Marcus insists.

“I’m not answering anything. Get the hell outta here, slant!” yells Reagan.

“Honey, I think you should just answer his--” Beth says before Reagan holds up his hand at her.

“Did you hear what I said?!” says Reagan in an ominous tone. Ethan, Amy, and Beth stare at Marcus. Reagan taps Marcus on the chest. Marcus explodes. He grabs Reagan by the wrist, twists his arm behind him.

*SLAM!*

Marcus pushes him against the hood of the car.

“You’re under arrest for assaulting a police officer and resisting arrest!” yells Marcus. Beth yells in hysteria. Amy starts crying. Ethan stares, speechless.

“Beth! Make the call, get me outta here. Make the call!” he yells. “I’m gonna sue you, you punk. You can’t arrest me. Do you know who I am!?”

“You’re a piece a work about to go to prison, if you don’t tell me where Max is, now!” Yells Marcus.

“He went home after we were messin’ around, nothing happened, I promise!” yells Ethan.

“Shuttup, son, you don’t say anything!” Reagan yells. Marcus pulls Reagan from the hood of his car and ducks him into the back seat.

“Please let him go, he doesn’t mean it.” Beth pleas.

“I’m sorry ma’am.” Marcus tells her. He looks at Amy, narrowing her eyes, holding back tears. Ethan looks at his Mom. Marcus sounds the siren and drives off. Ethan walks up to the middle of the road, looking at the empty, moonlit pavement, as siren’s noise and lights, fade.

The serpent’s head tilts and rises out of the sand as the sun sets over the beach. The Sailor winces. The last group of Ogres, flee. Max rolls around in the sand, feeling his torso to see if he’s still alive and relieved to be. He gets up and runs back as the serpent releases a loud snort. Max can’t help but shake and stare at the serpent, slithering out of the water, like a living tower made of reptilian skin. The Sailor’s eyes widen. He grabs an item from his knapsack and hurls it with all his might at Max, hitting him on the head and snapping him out of his trance.

“Ow! What the hell you do that for?!” yells Max.

“Use the stone!” the Sailor yells back. Max looks down and notices a vibrant, yellow rock, resembling raw citrine. He picks it up, grips the stone, and throws it at the serpent, but misses. Max dashes, around, keeping his distance from the serpent as it beams at him. He reaches the Sailor and gasps for air, holding out his hand.

“Gimme another one!” says Max.

“You dolt! You’re supposed to USE the stone, not throw it. Get it back!” the Sailor demands.

“Just gimme another.” Max says, holding out his hand further. The Sailor slaps it away.

“WE are going to DIE if you don’t grab that one you just threw, now!” yells the Sailor. Max shakes his head. He sees the stone in the sand, just a few inches from the serpent.

“No way. There’s gotta be something else.” says Max. The serpent hisses. The Sailor pushes Max ahead and knocks him down.

“Hurry, you dimwit!” yells the Sailor. The serpent begins to slide away from them, keeping his gaze at Max, as he’s running away. The serpent follows Max. The Sailor coats another rock with liquid from one of his viles, then lifts it over his head as it begins to glow. The serpent’s glare shifts toward the Sailor, he changes direction. Max sees the Sailor jogging back as the serpent follows. The serpent’s body slithers closer, hissing at the Sailor. Max’s heart beats, too afraid to grab the stone lying in the sand, in plain sight. The Sailor keeps running back, cornered by the bushes. The serpent draws closer. Max looks at the palms of his hands. The serpent maneuvers around the Sailor, circling it’s body around him. It’s dark green, scaly body conceals the Sailors form, only a straw hat peers over it.

“Hurry!” yells the Sailor. Max takes a deep breath and sprints toward the stone. He grabs it from the sand, lifts it toward the serpents back and aims with it. Nothing happens.

“It’s not working!” yells Max. The light from the Sailor’s hand, dims. The serpent turns around and shifts it’s body toward Max, uncoiling itself from the Sailor.

“Use the stone!” yells the Sailor. Max jogs backwards, keeping the stone aimed at the serpent.

“Hocus pocus!” yells Max. Nothing. The serpent advances. “Abaracadabra! Open sesame!!” Max continues to yell as he walks back and the serpent draws closer.

“Oh, c’mon, hurry up!” yells the Sailor. The serpent circles Max, coiling it’s body like rope, surrendering him. Walls of wet, dark, scales grow higher and begin to contract

around him, unable to see the outside world. Max lifts his head and jumps, but the serpent's torso obscures his view. Max grabs the yellow stone with a tight grip using both hands.

"What am I supposed to do? It's not working!" yells Max as he closes his eyes. The serpent's mouth begins to open, salivating, and hissing.

"Focus! Think! Imagine something!! Concentrate!!" yells the Sailor. Max tightens his eyes and clenches his fists together around the stone. The Serpent coils its body, wrapping itself around Max, like living rope. The Sailor douses his stone with more red liquid from his vile, lifting it again for it to glow. It shines and flashes brighter than ever, but the serpent pays no attention, keeping an ogle on his prey. Tightening its grip around Max, he keeps his eyes closed, holding back tears, praying to himself, clinching the stone tighter as the serpent's torso wraps around Max's shoulders, squeezing him. Max coughs, mumbling, shutting his eyes firm. The Sailor throws a torch at the serpent as it wraps itself around Max's head, but the fire goes out the moment it lands. The serpent loosens its tongue, salivating, and tightening its torso. The Sailor runs, jabbing it with a sharp stick, as it cracks. The serpent wraps its tail around itself as the Sailor is pushed back from it. The Sailor gasps, as the serpent's body coil contracts.

*CRACK!*

Officer Bolivar exits the fluorescent-lit local, town police station, as a walkie talkie beeps over around his belt. He heads to his patrol car but stops, noticing Marcus walk into the office with an arrested citizen having a thin frame, short, grey hair and looking down, with a smile. He closes the door of his vehicle and follows Marcus in. A few officers keep an eye on Marcus as he shoves Reagan forward, cuffed.

"Hey Mark, everything ok?" asks Officer Bolivar.

"Hey, yeah. Are any of the rooms available?" asks Marcus. Officer Bolivar hesitates for a moment.

"Sure, there's the one behind you, at the end to the right, but I heard about your kid--" Marcus interrupts Bolivar.

“Thanks.” he says, as he turns and opens the door, shoving Reagan inside. Some of the officers look at each other. Deputy Reece, a black woman in her late 40’s looks at Officer Bolivar, shrugging his shoulders. She walks across the room, emerging from her office and peeks into the windowed door Marcus closed. She knocks, Marcus opens. “Yeah?” Marcus replies.

“You ok?” asks Deputy Reece.

“Yeah.” replies Marcus. “I’m with someone right now, can I talk to you after?”

“Mind if I join?” she asks as she crosses her arms. Marcus looks down. Then up at the Deputy.

“Sure, come in.” Marcus replies. As Deputy Reece enters the room, she sees Reagan cuffed to the table. “Where’s my son?” asks Marcus.

“I ain’t saying anything till I get a lawyer, pig.” replies Marcus.

“What’s this about?” asks Deputy Reese towards Marcus.

“This scumbag here won’t let me ask his son a simple question about where my kid’s at, and I bet he’s got something to do with it.” says Marcus. Deputy Reese looks at Reagan.

“Why don’t you tell this slant over here that I ain’t got a reason to be here, and that I should go before I have this whole place on fire with one call.” Reagan threatens. Deputy Reese looks at Marcus, then back at Reagan. She puts her hands on her hip.

“Excuse me? You’re going to do what?” asks Deputy Reese.

“You heard me. Let me go, or you guys are gonna seriously get it” says Reagan.

“Some piece of work you arrested, Mark, where’d you find this one, in the sewer?” she replies. Marcus slams on the table.

“Talk! Tells us what we need to know before we put you in jail for assaulting an officer.” yells Marcus. A knock on the door interrupts the interrogation.

“Scuse me.” answers Deputy Reese. She opens the door. Marcus gets into Reagan's face. Reagan responds with a smile. Deputy Reese receives a sheet of paper and closes the door with a gentle tug.

“Mark, step away.” she demands.

“What!?” yells Marcus.

“Mark, I said, get away from this man.” she orders. Marcus gives her a bewildered look.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Can we talk outside a moment?” she replies. Marcus lowers his guard, looks back at Reagan, down at the floor, and then back at Deputy Reese.

“Yeah, ok, sure.” replies Marcus, winding his hair back. He exits as the deputy closes the door. He notices the Chief walking away from them.

“Chief Pimentel just gave me the orders to let this guy go.” says the Deputy.

“Wait what!?” exclaims Marcus. The deputy shushes him.

“Keep your voice down.” she says in a low tone. “I don’t know who this guy is, but I’ve never seen the chief that livid.” she continues. The deputy peers around the office, then back at Marcus. “Whomever is in that room has enough friends in high places to piss off folks we do not want to disturb.” she whispers. Marcus’ head shakes. “Now I’m going back in there, he’s gonna sign some papers, and then I’m going to release him.” she says. Marcus bites his lip.

“He knows where my kid--” he insists but the Deputy holds out her hand.

“Mark!” she exclaim. Marcus remains quiet. “Go home. We’ll talk about your missing persons in the morning.” Marcus narrows his eyes at Deputy Reese. He looks away, folding his arms. She enters the room. A few moments later, Reagan walks out, heading towards the exit, smiling at Marcus, running his fingers through his hair. He smacks an officer in the shoulder on his way to the exit. The officer apologizes. Reagan doesn’t flinch. Marcus walks into the empty interrogation room, staring at the chair Reagan sat in, and closes the door. The officers nearby the door hear muffled sounds of thud and Marcus’ scream.

*SHINKT!*

The Serpent head strikes into the center its body’s coil, silhouetted by the sunset behind it. The Sailor grasps his straw hat, eyes widened. The serpent stiffens. The Sailor

steps back, taking cover in the bushes. He watches, waiting to see what the serpent does next. It remains as still as a rock. The Sailor tilts his head, looking at it, while nestled among the grove's thick branches. The wind howls. He watches as the serpent remains still. He looks back at his boat, then at the serpent again. The sand around it, tosses as the waves from the shore crash against its dark green, scales. The Sailor takes off his hat, never keeping his eyes off whatever comes next. The serpent remains still. The Sailor looks at it in confusion. Then, its neck begins to shake. The Sailor looks around, unsure what to make of its movements. The serpent's upper torso also starts to wobble in an unusual manner.

*SHINKT!*

A sharp, reflective, metal rod emerges from the top of the serpent's head. It tears in half, along with the rest of its torso. As purple ooze gushes from its neck and stomach, a glowing figure emerges from its carcass with luminescent eyes, hair like fire, and a glowing hilt grown out of its hand, fused into its forearm. It drops its arm, slicing the serpent into another half, then steps forward. The Sailor puts on his hat and walks out of the bushes, toward the figure. As it walks out toward the beach, its eyes return to normal, hair turns to black, and the sword shrinks into the palm of its hand. Max looks at his arm, holding the yellow stone, eyes widened. The Sailor holds out his hand.

"Hey kid, can I have that back now? You almost had me there." he says. Max holds out his hand and gives him the stone. The Sailor takes it and puts the Compass back into his hand. Max looks at him.

"What? What's this??" Max asks. "You said finders keepers, right?" The Sailor holds the back of the Compass toward Max.

"You know what this means?" asks the Sailor.

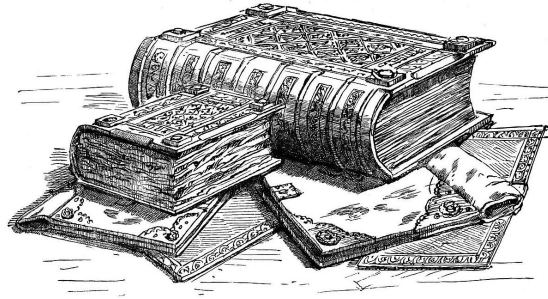
"No, what?" Max replies. The Sailor stares at Max for a moment, then hands him the Compass. Max looks at the Sailor in confusion. "I thought you said 'finders keepers'?" The Sailor nods.



“It’s yours now, kid. You earned it.” replies the Sailor as he places it in Max’s palm. He looks at it, waiting to see where the arrow points. But it bobs with no direction. He tries to shake it a few times with no result. “What the hell just happened?” asks Max.

“Kid, hold it.” the Sailor urges. “Come with me, I’ve got a lot of explaining to do”

# CHAPTER FOUR



Marcus awakens, lying on the kitchen table, bothered by a loud buzzing sound. The house is a mess. He picks up his cell, eyes winced, and it says *Chief* on the caller ID. He browses his text messages.

*Marcus, we need you at the station asap.*

*Where are you?*

*It's late. Give me a call as soon as you c..*

Marcus checks another message.

*Marcus, you better hurry, we have a serious situation, swing by my office.*

It's from Chief Pimentel. The rest of them are from Gil. He rushes to get ready for work and a few minutes later enters the station. Deputy Reece waits for him behind the glass door of her office, motioning with her forefinger to come her way. Marcus walks towards her, passing by co-workers giving him stares. The Deputy opens the door, staring at Marcus and urges him to sit. She closes the door.

“Mark, the Chief asked me to talk with you, he wanted to have this conversation himself but you came very late and he's very pissed. ”

“Look, I'm sorry, it's been— “

“Marcus! I need you to listen. Don't talk. Just... hear me out for a minute.”

Marcus offers a moment of silence. He looks down at the cheap, battered, office carpet.

“You need to keep a cool head because as of right now you are on thin ice.” says the Deputy. Marcus looks up at her.

“You need to be careful. I get what’s going on with your son. Any parent in your place would be hysterical. I get it. But you are in a whirlwind of trouble with the Chief. You pulled the wrong string. Somebody important got really upset, big time. Your custody stunt last night, led to the Chief having to do a backflip on a hoop of fire for the higher ups. And no suspect walks away from the station like that without some serious associations. The Chief is looking to put you on permanent parking duty or possibly have you dismissed for misconduct.”

Marcus looks away, towards the cream colored, blank wall of the office. He then lowers his head.

“I had to defend you to the Chief for almost two hours. I stuck out my neck for you because I know you’re a good guy and you mean well, and it’s a stressful time. But you owe me bigtime. “ says the Deputy.

Marcus raises his head and looks up at the Deputy.

“What about my son?” asks Marcus.

“No word yet, but I’ve got an APB out on him, but you know we still need to wait before we can declare this a missing persons. “

Marcus nods.

“In the meantime, the Chief wanted to put you on suspension for a month, but we agreed to reduce it down to a week, given the circumstances.” says the Deputy.

Marcus stares at the Deputy with a momentary false grin and a deep breath.

“I know this is a rough time right now, for you. Look, just...take a week off. And if there is anything else you need or any way we can help you, please, please let us know. Alright?” asks Deputy Reece.

“I’m fine.” insists Marcus. A moment of silence between them. Deputy Reece stares back at Marcus.

“You know, you can’t just go around and do whatever you like with a badge. That thing right there on your uniform symbolizes to serve and protect. “

“I know. I went to the academy just like everyone else. I get it. But I gotta find my son at any cost.” replies Marcus.

“Watch your tone. You better chill out or you won’t have anyone left to watch your back.” warns Deputy Reece. Marcus lets out a heavy breath and stares at the floor.

“...you’re right. I’m sorry. It’s been rough. You’re right. I’ll take the time off and wait for my son.” affirms Marcus. He calms down a bit.

“I understand if you need time. Kids do the craziest things these days. My 15 year old is handful and my 9 year old won’t give me a moment of shut eye with that drum set I got her for Christmas.” says the Deputy. Marcus looks at her with a look of bewilderment.

“Come back next week. You’re needed on the antique store case.” assures Deputy Reece.

“And what if I can’t find my son?” Marcus asks.

“It’ll be fine. The department is doing everything it can. But stay away from Reagan, as it is, you’re already in hot water.” warns the Deputy.

“C’mon, who is he, really?” asks Marcus.

“Don’t know, but he’s got friends.” says the Deputy.

“I just can’t sit around and do nothing, Maddie, I need to find my son.” argues Marcus. “And i’ll do whatever it takes, I don’t care who I piss off.”

“I understand. But YOU need to be VERY careful and tread lightly. This is your first and only warning, Mark.” says Deputy Reece.

Later that night, Gil takes Marcus to the bar. Marcus looks up at the television broadcasting the news next to another monitor showing a baseball game.

“Let’s try this again, Mark, let’s retrace your steps.” says Gil before he takes a sip of his pale beer.

“There’s something about that guy, I don’t get it.” murmurs Marcus.

“C’mon, you gotta remember if there’s any detail you may have missed” insists Gil.

“I’ve gone over it a hundred times already, but that kid, the one bullying Max, that’s the missing link right now. If only I can talk to him. I need to interrogate the son.” insists Marcus.

“Woah, there. Settle down. You’re trying to get yourself fired? Lose your job and your kid?” asks Gil.

“It’s the only way I can figure out what happened to Max. Why would he block his kid from talking to me? That kid knows something.” says Marcus.

Gil stares at Marcus and finishes his beer. Marcus gets up.

“I got this.” says Marcus. He slaps money on the table and walks out of the bar.

The next day, Marcus patrols around the school in the afternoon, just as the bell rings. He notices one of the students passing out flyers. The student walks toward Marcus car and waves. He’s young, wearing a black shirt with a white T-Rex and blue jeans with a piercing across his nose. Marcus lowers his window.

“Please help us find Nancy. She’s been missing for several days.” says the student. As Marcus takes the flyer, he spots Ethan pacing quickly across the school yard. Gil thanks the student while Marcus moves the car and rolls up the window. He’s circling the school, following Ethan.

“Hey Mark, you gotta be careful man, you almost took that kid’s arm, what’s wrong with you?” scolds Gil.

“Here, take this, I got the kid.” says Marcus.

“Calm down, man. I don’t think you can handle this, you’re not in the right frame of mind, he’s a teen, not a terrorist suspect.” Gil warns.

Marcus circles around Ethan, tailing him as he crosses the street. As Ethan keeps walking forward, he’s joined by several classmates passing by who give him high-fives, hand slaps, hugs, and fist bumps, then walk away. Marcus wait for Ethan to be alone. As soon as he is, he’s ready to speed his patrol car but then he stops. His hands shake a bit. He looks at Gil, then turns to Ethan again. Marcus lets out a heavy sigh. Then, he spots the school principal walking towards his car.

“You know what? I have an idea.” says Marcus.

The next day, Amy gets called into the principal's office. She notices Marcus sitting in one of the chairs across his desk.

“Please, have a seat, Amy.” ushers the principal.

“Am I in trouble?” asks Amy.

“No, no, nothing like that” interject Marcus. “I just need to ask you about Max. I just need to ask you some basic questions.”

“Ok.” says Amy, looking at the principal. “Well, then I don’t think I have anything to say, can I just get back to class?”.

“Please, Amy, I need your help. I’m sorry about the other night. I know I overreacted and I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to cause you or your family trouble and it’ll never happen again. But I’m worried. Max has been missing for several days and he’s not the type of kid to do something like this. I know he had a fight with your brother the day he went missing. Is there anything, ANYTHING you remember that day that would give us an idea of where he might be? Something they may have argued about or maybe someone made a comment about some place... I dunno, anything at all that could help us find where Max is?”

Amy stays silent, staring at Marcus.

“Anything at all that can help figure out what happened?” pleas Marcus.

“The last time I saw Max was at the Park, near Sunset.” Amy softens her voice. “Him and my brother were arguing but I didn’t see much because I kept asking the friend I was with to take me home. You know how guys are, they fight all the time. That day didn't seem any different. I just assumed Max went home.” said Amy, with a calm shoulder shrug. “That’s all I know.”

“Thank you, Amy.” affirms the Principal.

“Thanks, Amy.” says Marcus.

The Principal nods, Amy walks out of the room.

“I’ll be making announcements in the school loudspeaker, during morning updates. I’ll let you know if anyone comes forward with information regarding Max.” assures the Principal.

Marcus stands up and firmly handshakes the principal. He leaves the office, slowly walking down the hall. He notices a glimpse of Ethan through the window of the closed science class door, just before approaching the school exit. Ethan shudders.

Back in the Lost Realm, Max restores his human form through stone and willpower. The Ogres look away with teeth clenched and anxious tension. A hundred indignant, monkey-like, beasts await their next move. The sailor waves a torch at them while Max emerges from the serpent's ooze. A moment passes, but no one moves. Then the Ogres crowd in slowly, raising their heads, lowering their stance, and tightening their grip. Inching closer and closer, they pressure Max and the Sailor, being grossly outnumbered by these wild, green, animals.

"I was gonna tell you everything but we're gonna die. This is it, kid, thanks for nothin'." complains the Sailor. Max strengthens a hold on his stone and waves it at the Ogres. Eyes shut, he leans back against the serpent's slimy corpse. No matter how hard he tries, nothing happens. The Ogres advance closer, hissing, growling, ready to lunge forward, and stab. Suddenly in unison, they stop. Max and the Sailor look at each other for a moment and gaze at the horde. In perfect synchrony, they turn around, looking behind them, in almost robotic fashion, and starting with the furthest from the cliffside all the way down to ones almost a few inches away, they take off running, one by one, almost in single-file line. They hop, skip, and run like frantic, green, apes in torn clothes and sparse trinkets. Max and the Sailor stare at them in confusion, following their movements beyond the peak of the beach cliffside.

"Yeah, that's right! Get outta here!!" yells the Sailor, throwing a rock in their direction. It pegs one of them, but they just keep running.

"Where are you going?" asks Max.

The Sailor runs up a few meters after them but then jogs back out of breath.

"We need to get outta here, kid, they're retreating to the caves." says the Sailor, catching his breath.

"What does that mean? I don't get...what just happened?" asks Max.



“Ogres don’t act that way unless...” the Sailor grabs Max by the shoulders and looks back. “We need to get back on the boat, fast.” urges the Sailor.

Max gives the Sailor a ‘what the hell’ stare.

The Sailor walks away, towards the boat, mumbling to himself.

“You disgusting human being, you couldn’t hold it in. How could you vomit all over this?” The Sailors voice trails off as he clutches the edge of the boat with both hands. Max can barely hear him.

“Poor Alice, look what he did to you!” The Sailor coughs. “Look what you made me do.” The Sailor digs around in his burlap knapsack and holds up a dark, sapphire stone. He commands the water to wash the boat, then he tells the water to go away. The water obeys, leaving the boat clean and dry. Max eyes widen.

“Whaa?!” Max whispers loudly.

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In the real world, Officer Marcus goes to the park. He follows his hunch and goes to where the compass was found behind the rock but sees nothing. He looks around the park, there’s an item dropped from what he knows was Max’s backpack.

“Do you know any of his friends?” asks Gil standing next to him.

“Honestly, I don’t really, although, there’s this one kid...Hawthorne.”

“I’ll ask around the neighborhood and see if anyone’s seen or heard anything, while you go through the phone and call Hawthorne’s parents.” orders Gil.

Marcus goes to visit Hawthorne.

“Hey, Hawthorne, did anything strange happen yesterday?” asks Marcus.

Hawthorne looks at Marcus, “Yeah, but you’re not going to believe me.”

Marcus gives him an inquisitive look. “What?” asks Marcus.

“He showed me what he found in the park...a compass ...

In the forgotten realm, As the Sailor is rowing in the ocean, Max sits on the other end of the boat, looking down, hair covering his face.

Max turns around and sees the coastline approaching, slowly arriving to the shore.

“The realm is a place like no other. “ The Sailor begins to explain. But then he stops and looks at Max. “I cant talk and row at the same time, here!”.

Max tries but he’s terrible. The boat is barely moving, he’s flopping and wailing the oars. The Sailor continues, “The world you know it is not what you think. There are two kinds of people in this world, Leapers and Creatures. You’re either one or the other. It’s a cruel place. You go to the market if you need goods, if you’re hungry, kills anything with four legs, if two legs, get it’s eggs. Don’t trust anyone, and above all, avoid using stones unless you have to. There are several islands. There are people who are going to fight each other. Try to stay away from everyone’s way.” The Sailor leans back as if going to sleep. “On land, you gotta watch out for mega spiders, giant rhino, mountain sized boar, flesh-eating unicorns, fire-stinging butterflies, glowing insects, and even a cyclops.” the Sailor leans in “They’re real.” Max rolls his eyes.

“Then there’s the sea monsters, leviathan, giant water worms, serpents, man-eating jellyfish. They only eat man, women are safe. You need to throw away the world you know, you, are a leaper.” The Sailor points to Max in obviousness.

Max gets tired and slows a bit, but keeps going.

“Now, I can’t promise to be around forever, I can only help you out just enough to not let you rot here. I work alone.” says the Sailor.

Max is getting more tired, softening his grip on the oars.

“C’mon, you’ve only starting rowing a minute ago and you’re already tired? Wimp! Keep on movin’, c’mon, let’s go, let’s go. You better not be a slacker, kid...wait, what’s your name? You need a name.

“I’m Max.” he says panting. Max lets go an oar to shake the Sailors hand. The Sailor looks at his hand and doesn’t move.

“I’ll call you Wuss if you don’t keep rowing.” says the Sailor.

Max gives him an angry look.

“Row!” insists the Sailor. Max shakes his head and goes at it again.

“What’s your name?” asks Max, panting, but slowly starting to get the hang of it.

“I’m Sailor.” he responds.

“But is that your real name? Like your actual name is Sailor?” Max urges as he’s panting.

“That’s my name. I don’t have a name. Unless you wanna give me one?” asks the Sailor.

“Yeah, maybe you should be Wuss instead.” jokes Max.

“A real wiseguy, eh? Maybe I just don’t tell ya anything and leave you high and dry out there.” threatens the Sailor.

“I’ll flip this boat or better yet, I’ll just barf again.” jokes Max. Then he notices something “Hey I’m not sea sick anymore. That’s interesting.”

“Keep talkin’ I’ll just lie down here and sleep. You don’t need me to tell you anything” says the Sailor, pretending to yawn.

“Sorry. Go ahead.” Max says. Continuing to row and irritable.

“There are no such things as friends. Don’t bother thinking you have any, because anyone who wants to be your friend is only out to get something from you, and as soon as they take what they need, they’re gone.” The Sailor yawns, using his knapsack as a pillow, he turns to his side, hat covering his face. “ Also, stay away from caves, and don’t how anyone what you’ve got in your pocket.” The Sailor adjusts his legs to get more comfortable in his resting position. He continues, “You’ve got gangs, wars, deadly monsters, and there’s a royal monarchy also out to get you. Everybody’s got something to take from someone. Keep a low profile, blend in, don’t stick out, and don’t show anybody you’re weak.”

Max gets tired. He pushes as hard as he can. The evening sun slowly sets. The Sailor looks like he’s fallen asleep.

They arrive on shore, the Sailor wakes up.

“Hey kid, park the boat just underneath some bushes.” says the Sailor. He takes a retractable telescope from his knapsack to see if there’s anyone. But they’re safe. They reach the shore and park the boat near where the Sailor pointed. He takes a stone out from his bag, and with it he’s changing the boats color, then he waves it across the

bushes, and the boat changes color like a chameleon, becoming camouflage. The Sailor gets out of the boat and starts walking.

“Hey, where are we going?” asks Max.

“We need to go to the Marketplace” replies the Sailor. He takes out a tarp and some rope from his bag.

“Here, wear this.” orders the Sailor.

“No way!” Max refutes.

“Shhhh! listen kid, you’re wearing fresh clothes. If any of the other leapers see you’re fresh meat, they’ll take you for everything you’ve got, plus, you got nothin’” says the Sailor. “With your shirt, jeans, and sneakers, you can trade for some raggy but clean clothes.”

“No way! I’m not taking anything off, and I’m not giving anyone my sneakers.” Max argues.

“Shhhh! Keep your voice down you crazy idiot. Fine. Keep your stupid sneakers, just hurry it up!” says the Sailor.

Max goes behind some bushes and changes into what the Sailor gave him.

“I look stupid.” complains Max.

“Yeah? Better to look stupid than be dead, kid.” the Sailor argues. “Did I ever tell you the story of the cow and the other three farm animals.?”

Max rolls his eyes. “No. And I’m not sure I care, I’m gonna change back.”

“Let’s just hurry to the Market, you look fine.” insists the Sailor.

“No way, dude.” says Max. As Max is changing back, he’s barely paying attention to the Sailor trying to recall the story of the farm animals. Max doesn’t get it or care.

“Lets go! You’ll get it soon enough before we get there, just get going already.” says the Sailor.

Back in the real world, Marcus hold Hawthorne by the shoulders and looks him in the eye.

“Are you sure that’s all that happened? Any strangers?” asks Marcus.

“Everything is exactly like what Max told me.” replies Hawthorne. “The cool kids and Amy were there too, heckling and everything. Nobody tried to stop the fight between them. Actually they all tried to gang up on him. I’m glad he made it without getting beat up. But nothing else happened, I swear.” insists Hawthorne.

“Thank you.” says Marcus. He hands Hawthorne a business card. “If you think of anything else, please don’t hesitate to ask.” says Marcus.

Marcus meets up with Gil.

“Some of the residents heard some screeches and a kid of max’s description going through the hood. Some of the people knew someone who recently lost their kid and haven’t heard from them.” says Gil.

“My next lead, brings me to the idea that whatever happened to Max, may have also happened to the other kids, there’s a possible connection.” says Marcus. Then he spot at hanging poster of missing children.

“The same things that happened to Max, happened to three of the kids on there.” Marcus says pointing to the worn poster stapled to the wooden electrical pole. “I believe we’re on to something. “ know who I need to speak with”.

“Hey man, calm down, Mark.” says Gil. “You’re jumping to conclusions. Maybe Max ran away from home? “. Gil puts his arm on Marcus’ shoulders.

“Is everything ok between you and Max?.” Gil asks.

“I’ve been having a hard time connecting with Max. Ever since his Mom left, we haven’t felt like a family, and I admit I’ve been on top work more than home.” says Marcus.

“Max will come back, he’s a tough kid.” says Gil, looking Marcus in the eye.

“You know, I still see Max as a kid, if he grows up, I’m afraid once I stop being a Dad and Max moves away, I won’t have anyone. Being a cop and a dad is my life, and now I’m close to losing both at the same time.” confesses Marcus.

“I don’t think you ever stop being a Dad. But I get it, you’re afraid of empty nest. You know, a couple of guys in the force have had their kids move on to college and they’re

havin' the time of their lives. Once we get Max back, you'll see it'll work out." Gil reassures.

"Thanks, Gil, I appreciate that." replies Marcus. He nervously stares at the missing children's poster.

In the estranged realm, Max whimpers "help", walking slowly behind the sailor. They arrive at the Marketplace. It's the size and scope of a giant flea market. There's things from the 20's to the modern times. Trinkets from every era in between. Max gazes at collection upon collection of items from all different time periods.

"If you don't know what it does, don't touch it. Fashion aint' exactly a thing and be careful not to get too fancy, anyone can steal your clothes from you." warns the Sailor. Max keeps leaning over to closely inspect the various items sold.

"Like I said before, it's a brutal world, there's factions and gangs." warns the Sailor.

"Where did all these items come from? Who are these people? How did a flea market happen here? Are there batteries? Phones??" Max is asking the sailor a bunch of questions and is sort of getting irritated with him.

"Calm down. Stop asking so many questions. Look, you gotta act like a cool kid, act like you don't care, don't let anyone know you're new, people here take advantage." reminds the Sailor.

"There's gotta be a way back home." says Max.

"Kid, how many times and in what way do I need to explain it to ya, there's no getting back." argues the Sailor.

"Ok. But, there has to be." Max insists.

The sailor keeps quiet. Some of the merchants look at them with an awkward stare. Max looks around and sees all kinds of teens and kids, wearing scruffy clothes, most of them are mismatched, some of them hard to say what time period they're from. Some of them wear baggy pants from the 90's with the bright colors and a dark, short leather vest. Others wear an ivy cap with shorts. There's glasses, batteries, shoes from all

periods, earrings, playing cards, a rubix cube, a slinky, a bear, rulers, matches, and stones.

“Don't touch that” warns the sailor as he smacks Max's hand.

Max feels his compass buzzing, he looks at it and it's whirring like crazy. He takes it out and watches it spin then it stops, pointing to a spot at the market. He goes up to one of the tables and sees a strange item, the compass is drawn to it. The merchant is a kid, giving him a strange look. Max asks how much is it. The merchant looks at him, knowing he's kind of new.

“Whatcha willing to trade for it?” asks the Merchant.

Max shows him his shirt and jeans.

“Sorry, not enough.” The merchant says.

The sailor turns around.

“Oh c'mon, you've got plenty of these, give the kid a break, I bet you'd be willing to give us that and these two over here, which is worth far less than what the kid is offerin' and you know it. You can do better than that.” Says the Sailor to the Merchant.

“Give up and trade me the shirt for what this dufus wanted.” haggles the Sailor.

The Merchant remains silent and stares at both of them.

“It's a stupid idea.” The Sailor tells Max. “Look, you need to trade for clothes to blend in.”

“I don't like any of this stuff, some pants too small or large—” complains Max.

“There's a changing room in the back of the tent.” says the Sailor.

Max tries a few things but it's not fitting him. Eventually he gives up and decides he's going to stick with his clothes.

“I just don't fit in with any of this, besides I'm going home soon.” says Max. The Sailor rolls his eyes and sighs. The compass begins to spin again, pointing to some random direction.

“What's wrong?” The Sailor asks.

“The compass, it's pointing to a new direction.” says Max.

“It's probably broken.” replies the Sailor.

“Hey! There he is, we’ve been looking for him. Hey you!” someone yells from the other side of the Marketplace. “Yeah, look! It’s the Sailor!! I know it’s you, Sailor, git over here!” yells the teen.

“I gotta go.” says the Sailor.

Max sees the compass arrow pointing the opposite direction towards the woods. A few teens cluster together like a gang and start to run toward them.

The Sailor begins to walk fast out of the Marketplace. The teens walk after then even faster. As they’re being chased, the compass continues pointing to the woods. Max urges the Sailor to follow him. The pursuers start to yell and run.

“Somebody stop those guys!” yells one of them. Max and the Sailor begin to run as fast as they can, across a grassy field. Max is moving in sync with the compass change of direction. They reach the trees, look back, and their pursuers looked like they were out of breath. One of them tripped over a large, fallen branch. Max and the Sailor keep heading deeper into the woods as they get away.

“Kid, these woods, we’re in, it’s not what you think...” warns the Sailor.



# CHAPTER FIVE



Marcus drives around the neighborhood at night. He's holding his cell while driving.

"Yeah, Linda I'm on it. Since early this afternoon, the team have sent dogs, patrols, and whatnot to do a wide search from my house to look for Max. I know how you feel, I'm frustrated too, I'm sure we'll find him but right now I need to let you go, I'm actually heading to work now to talk to the chief about this. I know we can do more." Says Marcus while taking a left turn into the station.

"Just, please let me know the first thing you find anything. I swear I'm gonna kill that kid." Says Linda, sobbing.

"I know. We'll find him and then we can both take turns yelling at him. But please, don't worry, I know he's out there somewhere, I'm not gonna sleep until then. If anything comes up you'll be the first to know, ok?" Assures Marcus.

"Ok." Says Linda. "Just, please let me know right away."

"I will. Talk to you later." Says Marcus. He closes his flip phone and parks the car. He walks into the station towards the Chiefs office. He notices the station fully staffed and bustling around. His heart pounds. He walks up to one of the officers sitting at his desk, but hesitates and walks over to the Chiefs door. It's wooden with a golden plaque reading *Randy Pimentel Chief of Police*. The Chief is an older gentleman, with a large, well groomed, finely trimmed, grey beard and silver hair. He has thick, dark, eyebrows

and an imposing demeanor. The lines on his face show he's seen his fair share of hard living.

"Hey Chief, thanks for making time to see me. I notice the search team is back? Any leads on my son?" asks Marcus.

"Yeah, sorry Marcus, no leads yet." replies the Chief.

"I can't help but think we can still send out more teams. The office is full today. I'm wearing out and just mad at how meanial the effort has been or hot it feels." says Marcus as the Chief takes a seat at the same time.

"You know how it is, we're stretched thin right now with the recent burglaries and break ins" replies the Chief.

"Ok, but there's gotta be something you can do." insist Marcus.

"Sorry." says the Chief, matter of fact.

Marcus storms out of the Chiefs office and gets to his car. Gil goes after him.

"Mark, you ok?" asks Gil.

"NO. I'm NOT ok." yells Marcus, irritable.

"The Chief blew you off, right?" asks Gil.

Marcus looks at Gil in silence and then opens the door to get in the patrol car. Gil joins him.

"Calm down. You know Max isn't the type of kid to run away. And you shouldn't keep passing by the guys house. I wish you had called me earlier, I could've helped you out." says Gil.

Marcus starts the car.

"We'll find him. I know it sucks the search team is doing piss to find Max. I don't like what's going on either, but we'll figure something out. Just don't do what I think you're going to do." says Gil.

At Ethan's house, Reagan looks out the window and notices a patrol slowly driving by. Beth walks up behind Reagan, hugging him.

"Is everything alright?" asks Beth.

“Yeah.” Reagan peers carefully at the patrol car. “I’m thinking of putting a restraining order on Officer Marcus.” he says.

Ethan casually walks by them towards the kitchen.

“You know, Max’s dad visited Amy during school?” says Ethan.

“In that case, I’ll make a few phone calls and see if I can get him to stay away from our family... at least 200 feet.” replies Reagan with a stern voice.

Amy overhears and stomps downstairs from her room.

“Dad, please dont. Max is still missing! How would you feel if either me or Ethan were missing?” asks Amy.

Reagan gives her a condescending look.

“Sweetie, why don’t you relax and sit down with us, let’s watch TV together.” Beth urges.

“I’m gonna play some games, no thanks.” replies Ethan.

“Sorry Mom, I need to study.” says Amy.

“I’ll go to bed and deal with it in the morning.” Says Reagan.

Reagan sees Marcus drive away. In the patrol car, Gil leans back, looking out the window. Marcus makes several turns. They drive by a few restaurants with large signs and twinkling lights.

“We’ve been at this for hours, we should take a break.” says Gil.

“I can’t. What if there is a correlation with the other missing kids, call it a hunch?” says Marcus. “If you want, I can drop you off somewhere.”

“Where are you going?” asks Gil.

“I want to visit the lady from the investigation at the antique store.” replies Marcus.

“Alright. Drop me off over by Sadie’s. BUT if you run into anything, call me right away, I’ll have my cell.” assures Gil. He drops Gil off.

“Thanks, I will.” says Marcus.

Marcus stands in front of the woman from the investigation’s door and knocks. He looks at a piece of paper with the address in his hand making sure it’s the right house

number. The writing is very loose and scribbly, he keeps comparing the house number to the note in his hand. She doesn't answer. He keeps knocking.

"Who's there?" says a voice on the other side.

"It's me, the cop from earlier who was a jerk to you." answers Marcus.

"What do you want?!" she asks.

"My son is missing also." replies Marcus. "And I want to know if there's anything in common with you son's disappearance and mine."

She opens the door. "Do you still have the book I gave you?" she asks.

"Why?" Asks Marcus.

"There's something I need to tell you..." she replies.

In the Estranged Realm, it's nightfall. The sailor looks around and hears the sound of creatures cooing and random fluttering. Foliage snap in the distance.

"Hey kid, set up a fire" orders the Sailor.

"Wha? I've never done that before" argues Max. "Why not use a stone or something?"

"You can't just uusseeee stones whenever you want. You gotta learn to get by without 'em whenever possible." says the Sailor, annoyed. He digs around in his knapsack.

"Haven't you joined the boy scouts?"

"What about that moment with the serpent?" asks Max.

"That, was different, it was an emergency. And you're fresh, so I knew it was a better take." says the Sailor.

"I doesn't understand." argues Max.

"Look, kiddo, whenever stones are given to a member of a tribe or gang, there's a famous rhyme, a warning to everyone. Something like, 'Don't use, you lose. Power hoarder, turn to—'". The Sailor is interrupted by a loud crackling noise in the distance. They both stop and look toward the noise. They wait, but nothing happens.

"Nevermind." says the Sailor. He takes two rocks and starts to smack them together, rubbing them together.

“Hold this.” orders the Sailor. He hands Max a wooden stick. The Sailor keeps trying until a spark happens. A few more times and the sparks begin to light up the stick. He blows into it and eventually becomes a small fire.

“Whenever you see paper trees, take a few sheets from their bark.” says the Sailor. He takes the sheets of bark and lays them on the ground. He drops the stick on the pile and a large fire emerges. The Sailor rubs his hands over the fire and gathers rocks around the fire. “The more the stones are used, the faster you age. You’ll notice yourself getting older and sometimes even get an olive tan or white streaks. If we get too old, the estranged realm will never let us out.” explains the Sailor.

“So there’s a way out” says Max, excited.

“Not really, kid”. Argues the Sailor. “By the way, did you see what made the kids running after us stop when we ran away at the Market? And what made you run towards the woods? It was a good call.”

“The compass told me.” said Max.

The sailor laughs. “You’re crazy.”

“I’m serious!” Max insists. “Even the item from the marchants place was something the compass pointed to and it also pointed to the forest, it kept me from getting beaten up by bullies. Maybe, the compass can point the way home.”

“I think you should drop the subject about going home. Kid.” contests the Sailor.

“But I wonder if there’s ever been anything like this?” says Max, holding up the compass to inspect it.

“It’s weird you got to come back with it. You see, most leapers end up here through ...an enchanted artifact. Some through a vase, others from a watch, a slipper even, a mirror, there’s thousands of objects in the real world that bridge the two realms, but it’s always been a one way ticket, and WE never age unless we use up too much stone power.” explains the Sailor.

“Isn't there a way to use them without worry ?” Ask Max.

“No way.” says the sailor.

Max hushes him. “You hear that?” he asks.

“NO!” says the Sailor, irritable. “Don't mess with me.”

“C'mon, you don't hear that?” Max insists. The Sailor remains quiet for a moment. There's a sound of crying. The compass buzzes again, it's pointing to the weeping sound from afar. Max gets up.

“Where are you going?” asks the Sailor.

“We should follow that sound.” says Max.

“No way! We got a campfire, food, it's too cold, you'll get killed, it's not worth the risk.” says the Sailor.

“But what if that's someone who needs our help?” asks Max.

“The only people we should help is ourselves. No way.” insists the Sailor.

“But what if that someone we help knows the way home.?” argues Max.

The sailor closes his eyes, irritable, trying to retrain his annoyance at Max.

“Drop it! no way, leave it alone, if you go, I'm not coming to save you.” warns the Sailor.

Max takes a piece of cloth, a stick, wraps it, and makes a little torch.

“I'll be back” says Max.

“Forget it kid, you're dead to me if you go out there.” insists the Sailor.

Max stares at the Sailor while holding his torch. The crying gets louder.

“I have to” Max insists. He looks towards the noise and starts walking away. About a few steps later, Max hears the Sailor whistle at him.

“Catch!” says the Sailor. Max grabs hold of a stone.

“What's this?” asks Max.

“Your torch wont' last, this'll help.” answers the Sailor. Max looks at it with the torch, it's color and the way it glimmers. It's small.

“Just imagine it glowing.” says the Sailor. As max looks at it, the stone does nothing.

“Um sure, thanks.” says Max. He walks out and disappears into the dark....

Back in the real world, Marcus sits on the couch, sipping coffee and listening to the story while looking around the house.

“Strange things have been happening around my son before he disappeared.” says the woman. “Oh, by the way, I forgot to introduce myself, I’m Michelle.” she says, walking up to Marcus and shaking his hand.

“Oh, right, sorry, yes, I’m Marcus, nice meeting you, and sorry for the circumstances it’s under.” he says. Michelle walks over to the living room piano, walks back, and shows him a photo. Marcus closely inspects it. It’s a young male, wearing thick, rimmed glasses and a school uniform.

“That’s my son, Alex.” says Michelle. “I think the book may have something to do with it and now that your son is gone, which I’m really sorry about, but I think it confirms my hunch.” she clears her throat.

“I wonder, have you talked to anyone about this?” asks Marcus.

“Who is going to believe me, honestly?” says Michelle. “It’s been weeks.”

“Can I check Alex’s room?” asks Marcus. With permission, he goes upstairs and the boys room is also messy, papers everywhere. Michelle follows him in.

“I haven’t touched this room since Alex’s disappearance.” says Michelle as she’s keeping herself close to the doorway, reluctant to step further. “The police took photos already and combed through everything but no results.

“It’s interesting that the windows were kept shut and the closet doors must’ve ripped open. Something happened. Something with a force occurred but it would’ve been hard to be taken from the second floor. Do you remember anything? If there was any noise or screaming or if your son had been arguing with you about something?” asks Marcus.

“You know, honestly, we fight all the time. His dad is a deadbeat who is never around and he’s had to learn some things I can’t teach him on his own, but he thinks he’s a man already and can leave the house whenever and I don’t tolerate that kind of attitude. Not if you’re not paying rent.” says Michelle.

“Ohhhhh, I can relate.” Marcus says with a dry smile. “You know, lately I’ve had a tough time with Max. There’s no way he’d run away. It really is as if he disappeared and it was just like Alex.” continues Marcus, as he’s combing the room. He look down in the closet and picks up a shoe. “Huh, they even wear the same shoe size.” notes Marcus.



He gets a call from the station.

“Gotta go, I’ll keep you posted if I find out anything. And hang in there. We’ll find our kids, I know it”. Assures Marcus. Michelle holds back her tears a bit and nods.

At the station, Marcus walks over to the Chief’s office. Chief Pimentel closes the door.

“Let me cut to the chase.” says the Chief with a stern voice. He hands over a few papers to Marcus.

“What’s this?” asks Marcus.

“It’s a restraining order. You’ll need to stay away from Reagan Stolz and their family for a while. I just got this handed to me a few moments ago. The judge granted it on him before the courthouse closed. It says to keep away at least 200 feet.

Marcus flips the pages in the air, upset. “How is this even possible?” asks Marcus, irritable.

“I understand, but you can’t go around doing whatever you want. I’ve got a tight ship to run and can’t have any of our officers making us look bad. I’m warning you about going any further in getting too involved in searching for your son. You need to follow protocol.” warns the Chief. Marcus sits down, staring out into space, shocked. The Chief continues. “I don’t believe you’re taking your role as an officer serious and think you should be given time to relax. Therefore, I’m putting you on suspension.” says the Chief.

“For how long?” asks Marcus, looking down and twitching his thumbs.

“Three weeks. You’ll get paid leave and be expected to come back with a new assignment.” says the Chief.

“Ok. thanks, Chief.” says Marcus. Distraught, he walks out of the office. He sees Gil walking past him into the Chief’s office. Neither of them say a word. The door closes. Marianna walks up to Marcus.

“Sorry, Mark. Gil is called in and being reassigned another partner for the moment.” she whispers. Marcus nods, shaking a bit. Everyone at the station is looking at him.

Inside the Chief’s office. Gil is listening to the Chief explain the situation.

“But why? Isn’t that a bit harsh?” complains Gil.

“I’m being grilled by the commissioner. Gil, this Reagan guy is something else. No wonder he’s got an attitude. Marcus was given a warning and he didn’t follow. Look, I’m doing what I have to do. But do me a favor, will ya? Keep an eye on him. Make sure he’s ok.” says the Chief Pimentel.

“It goes without saying, but thanks Chief.” replies Gil.

Marcus goes home in a fit of rage. On his way home, he stops at a traffic light and notice something's off. But he ignores his hunch and drives on. A Sentinel is watching him from a distance. Marcus lies down on the couch and stares out into nowhere. He looks around the house and notices a bunch of books on his shelf. His phone buzzes, ‘it’s a text message from Marianna.

*Sorry about what happened. Hope you find max soon :(*

Staring at the books, he gets up, turns to the stairs and slowly walks to Max's bedroom. He notices a book on the floor of enchanted objects and monsters from his investigation. He looks around and sees a mess everywhere. Takes a camera from his bedroom and photographs everything, wears gloves and begins inspecting the room, going through drawers, open and emptying the closet searching for any clues, but nothing was found. He puts the closet back as it was and takes the book with him. At the corner of his eye he notices a sparkle. He takes his flashlight and notices the fibers of the carpet in the middle of the room has this rosey, glitter-like dust, he picks it up with his fingers, when he glides his flashlight across his finger, the powder reacts with an uncanny glow. He takes a photo with his phone and sends a text message to Gil.

*The same as the substance from our condo investigation, I just found in Max’s room. Coincidence?*

# CHAPTER SIX



Max comes back with the kid from earlier, a young girl.

“Look who just leaped!” exclaims Max.

“Hi!” says the Sailor as he waves. “Pssst! Can I talk to you for a moment?” The Sailor motions for Max to huddle with him away from their campfire area. They huddle, while the girl warms herself by the fire, shivering from the cold.

“Leave her here!” whispers the Sailor.

“I can’t. She should join us.” argues Max, whispering back.

“Ok, how can I put this? I don’t have enough to feed two people.” the Sailor loudly whispers.

“Well, you can go and we’ll figure something out.” says Max.

“You’re really pissing me off, you know that?” the Sailor shouts-whisper to Max.

“Hey! I’m sorry. Look, you guys can leave me alone. I just want to know why I’m here.” says the girl.

“No worries, everything's cool, just give us a moment!” shouts Max, waving and smiling.

“How can you trust her? I told you, don’t trust anyone.” argues the Sailor, still whispering.

“She looks scared, how can she be possibly be lying? She probably, really is a fresh Leaper like me” asks Max.

“Or maybe she got lost and has been a Leaper for a while and had a falling out or was part of an initiation gone awry. Did you think about that?” asks the Sailor.

“No. But why don’t we take a chance?” says Max.

“I’ve survived this long NOT taking chances kid. You know what? You’re on your own. I’m done.” says the Sailor. Walking away.

“Fine.” says Max.

The Sailor stops and throws a tantrum at himself, clutching his hat. He walks back towards Max.

“You’re a chisel, you know that?” whispers the Sailor.

“What?!” says Max.

“You’re conning me into this, punk. I’ll bite. But if this flame o’ yours brings trouble cause you bought into it, you’re both dead to me. Got it?!” says the Sailor.

“Yeah, sure.” says Max. The Sailor walks over to the girl and introduces himself. Max joins.

“I’m Nancy, thanks for finding me, I don’t know how, but I owe you one.” she says.

“No worries—” says Max.

“We’re heading out to sea in the morning.” interrupts the Sailor. He looks over at Max. “Hey Nancy, you don’t get sea sick, do ya?”

Max rolls his eyes.

The next morning, they find the boat and head out to sea. Max struggles to paddle, carrying the weight of an extra passenger he didn’t expect. The Sailor guides Max to where he needs to row. Then, with a wave of a stone, a large sailing vessel uncloaks in the middle of the ocean. They board through a rope ladder. The Sailor moves a bunch of levers and gears to lift the row

boat on to the vessel's rear. From the layout, size, and details of the vessel, Max can tell it's a floating house for the Sailor and he's one with the ship, a life in the ocean, and his main dwelling.

"I hate bothering you, but we need to move on to the next location." says Max.

"I'm not going anywhere, this is it. You want home, this is home." says the Sailor. Nancy looks around, admiring the details of the ship and it's rooms.

"But look, the compass keeps proving itself, there has to be a way out" insist Max.

"There isn't. End of story." argues the Sailor.

Max shakes his head. He keeps following the compass to where it points and at first it takes him to random locations, some the sailor doesn't like, but others the sailor is totally onboard. But in many cases, the sailor learns to talk Max around what the compass is saying, he argues all the time and makes a suggestion for a better place to go. Each time, they compromise on where the compass is pointing, and when they get there, it's changing direction again and again. Max begins to realize maybe the compass is all about timing, when they obey its promptings immediately, things work out to their favor, but when they go as the sailor thinks, it starts to change its direction again. The Sailor is starting to wear out and doubt the compass ability. Nancy follows along, learning the ways of the Lost Realm.

They've traveled by caves, abandoned castles, marketplaces, forests, coastlines, but they've found nothing.

"This is one of many islands. We'd have to search all of the islands and take forever, at this rate, we'll just be chasing our tails." says the Sailor.

"How many islands there are?" asks Max.

"There's twelve more." answers the Sailor. Along the way, they meet other Leapers.

"Let them go!" says the Sailor.

"We've got to let them join us! We could be heading home soon." exclaims Max. The Sailor refuses. Against his better nature, Max lets them go.

Max finds Nancy fishing off the side of the vessel.

"Listening to the sailor helps, but I think it also makes you ignore what your inner voice is telling you." says Nancy.

Max looks out into the sunset, amidst the twin moons in the sky.

“Maybe.” says Max.

In the real world, Marcus continues his investigation, connecting the dots between events and consulting Gil. They’re at a bar, Gil is looking at the TV screen.

“Maybe there’s a kidnapper or terrorist taking the children.” says Marcus.

“Strange things have been happening around the case, Mark, who knows what’s behind all this? But I believe your boy is alive, I know it. Call it a hunch.” replies Gil.

“I’m not sure I believe in hunches. Given the choice between believing something supernatural and what I know as a cop, the facts, I’m better off going with what I know.” says Marcus.

“But maybe you’ll have to face having to abandon your disbelief.” says Gil.

“I don’t want to take that risk.” argues Marcus.

“And what if you fail for not going with your gut, what you know deep in you is true?” asks Gil.

“So what? Even if I fail, I can still bring justice. I know someone is doing this and I will do everything I can to find this someone. No matter what!” says Marcus, with a fierce look in his eye. Gil turns to look at Marcus.

“Then let’s get to work.” says Gil.

In the Lost Realm, Max, Nancy, and the Sailor take a boat along with one more person and they sail to the end of the ocean. Somehow, they sail around, past all 13 islands. A few crazy sea creatures attack but they ward it off.

“There’s no way out.” says Max with a look of disappointment. “I’m sorry I made you go through all this for nothing.”

“Eh, I don’t mind, I love the sea, it’s where I belong. It’s peaceful. If we stay in the ocean and get a bigger boat, life would be perfect. Hey, you can be my skipper.” says the Sailor with the condescending laugh.

“No thanks.” says Max with an irritable look. Max turns to Nancy and the other crew member who joined them.

“What do you guys think? Do we live a peaceful life in the deep ocean where it’s safe or risk a dangerous one, gambling on the chance the compass can take us home?” asks Max.

“You should accept your new reality, this is where you all belong now, this is your world.” argues the Sailor.

“But, I miss my old life: my music, phone, internet, classmates, my dad, a shower, fast food, TV, games...here it’s brutal.” says Max.

“Me too. I miss my Mom and friends, playing games, watching TV, prom, debate club.” says Nancy.

“Sorry, Sailor. I think we should take the risk of going back to land” says Max.

“I can’t hang with you forever anyway, if you go to land, you’re on your own.” warns the Sailor.

“Hey, I don’t like the idea either, but we have to try and put faith to where the compass points.” says Max. Nancy agrees.

“I’d rather stay, it’s too whacked out there.” says the third crew member.

“See? Somebody around here with some sense!” says the Sailor.

In the real world, Marcus gets back his badge and gun from Deputy Reece. Mariana tries to get him back in the fold on the investigation from the antique store. Marcus with a newfound resolve shows her a list of potential suspects.

“Oh, someone is handling that, don’t worry about it, Mark.” says Mariana.

“Sorry, but I need to do this. The perp I’m looking for may be related to the case.” replies Marcus.

“Well, talk to Angelo, he’s the guy in charge of all that, he’s the guy putting together the investigation including for your son and good luck.” says Marianna with a heavy sigh.

Marcus approaches Angelo, he’s upset to find how lazy and shotty the attempts have been and makes the effort to investigate on his own. He talks to the chief.

“Let the man do his job, Marcus.” insists the Chief.

“How can you let him do such a shotty job?” demands Marcus.

“It’s protocol. We all gotta follow the rules.” argues the Chief.

“You’d rather follow rules than uphold justice?” challenges Marcus.

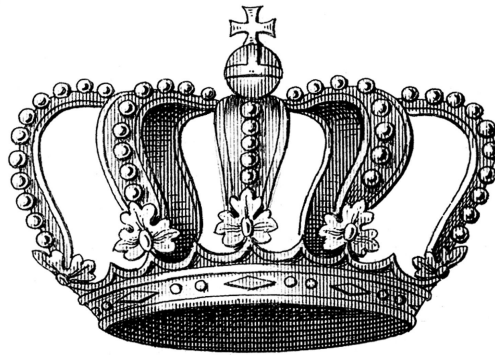


“Need I remind you, you just got your badge back? YOU need to follow rules if you’re to keep it.” yells the Chief with a gorilla-like posture, standing up, fists rested on the surface of his desk. Marcus calms down.

“Alright, I’ll let the guy do his thing. BUT I’ve got a list of suspects and rap sheets. I’ll start MY investigation.” insists marcus. Later that night, Marcus tries to turn his house into an intelligence headquarters, with whiteboard, posters, and boxes of evidence and copies of paperwork all over the place. On the main whiteboard, there’s a collection of photos and a list of all the missing kids so far, their parents and contact info and a map of locations.

“Count me in” says Gil, walking in on Marcus as he’s posting another map on the wall.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



In the Lost Ream, Max heads back to the island where the Sailor first found him. The Sailor doesn't say much to him but goes off and steers the ship, setting course to their destination.

“I guess this is goodbye.” Max says to the Sailor.

The Sailor doesn't say anything.

“Michelle, are you coming?” asks Max.

“I think I'll stay. Sorry Max.” says Michelle.

“I get it. Well, take care everyone.” says Max. Michelle and the other leaper wave as the Sailor accompanies Max in the row boat towards the shore. Max waves at the Sailor who ignores him. As soon as Max gets out of the boat, the Sailor rows back out to sea.

Max, alone, goes to where the compass points, this time, he's obedient to it's direction and it takes him all the way to another marketplace. It points at someone, he walks up to them, but then he's apprehended by a female guard in a uniform he's never seen before. She arrests Max and he

learns to hide the compass. He's brought to a small castle that looked like it grew out of the ground. He's brought before a female Magistrate. Max is put on his knees, surrounded by guards, each with a jewel on their chest.

"Where's the Sailor?" asks the Magistrate.

"Now I get why the sailor kept trying to manipulate me away from certain areas." Max whispers to himself.

"I don't know" answers Max, loudly.

They search him and find the compass.

"What is this?" asks one of the guards.

"It's a keepsake, please give it back." pleases Max.

"I doesn't care for it" says the Magistrate and she tosses it to one of the guards, "here, you can keep it." Max is then put in prison.

"Why I'm being arrested? I didn't do anything!" yells max.

"For lying ... and treason." answers the Magistrate.

"What a load of crap! Who am I —" Max yells but the guards gag him and put him in prison.

Meanwhile, in the real world, Mariana notices something very strange Another break-in happens. She gets a closer look at the appearance of suspects from surveillance footage and notices they're sentinels, same face, same costume, and pale skin. The sentinels get back into a unmarked car.

"I don't want to get into conspiracy theories, but they're like the famous men in black. This case has the same sort of clues from the last one except the heist was a high-end pawn shop. Marcus, I need your help again. We couldn't find much but you're always picking up things others don't, you have a sharp eye for details." says Marianna. Marcus attends and does a full inspection of the property, going over details.

"Sorry. but I didn't find anything out of the ordinary except this one thing, a piece from a missing thing." says Marcus. It's a false lead.

"What bothers me about this is the lack of clues. No fingerprints, or burn marks. Same MO but this time if it IS related, its much cleaner. Either this is a legit heist or a copycat." says Marcus.

Max meets another prisoner.

“I’m Alex. I leapt here a few weeks ago but it feels like years. I’m from Springwood.” says Alex.

“Hey, me too.” says Max. It turns out to be the kid that was missing earlier,

“There’s this mysterious book and antique store and that’s how I got here. I also found a way for us to get stones if they can break out.” says Alex.

“No way, my Dad gave me a book from a store with creatures in it and details.” says Max.

“That’s the one! Woah, what a small world.” says Alex.

“Well, I may be able to find the way home if I can get my compass, it led me here.” says Max.

“Shuddup!” yells a guard, walking towards them. Then the guard slips Max the compass. “There’s no way to leave.” whispers the guard.

“This has never misled me” argues Max.

“But you’re in prison.” says the guard.

“Maybe the prisoner next door and you are the reason for me being here? Do you believe in destiny? Maybe this compass is the way home, I gotta find out, why don’t you guys join me?” asks Max. The guard looks both ways, between Max and the entrance.

Marcus starts to contact and organise parents of missing kids in his home.

“Let’s meet weekly in order to share anything you know and to spread the word.” says Marcus.

Some of the parents get up to talk about their missing kids. What happened and why. Marianna shows up and sits down to listen. After the meeting Marianna walks up to Marcus.

“It’s apparent that some of the missing cases are not related, there might be various reasons and we’re going to have to do a lot of work to sift through it. The chief isn’t going to like you taking the reins on your own like this” warns Marianna.

“I’m off duty and doing this as a citizen.” argues Marcus.

“But I know your role as a civilian and cop grey where they start and end.” says Marianna.

Max's mom shows up, she just got off the plane, it gets tense and Marianna excuses herself. Marcus and Linda argue about Max.

"I got a call from the school regarding a restraining order against You for stalking."

"Wait, how is the school calling you? Who called you?" asks Marcus.

"It was the principal warning me." says Linda.

"I don't like what I'm hearing or where that's coming from." says Marcus.

The next day, Marcus goes to Max's school to pay the principal a visit.

"I'm sorry, I must confess to you, it was a unanimous decision by the PTA and it's new leader."

"Who? Who's the new leader?" asks Marcus.

"Reagan Stoltz." says the principle. Lighting strikes. The cell phone rings.

"Please head to the station, the Chief wants to see you." says the caller.

"Let me be frank, I agreed to be notified if you return to the school." says Chief Pimentel.

"I wonder, did Reagan put you up to this too?" asks Marcus, eyes narrowed.

"I admit, not directly. But if you don't stay clear of Reagan, I may be forced to fire you." warns the Chief. "The commissioner is somehow related to Reagan and I'm uncertain how. But whoever this guy is, no one in the station wants to even go near him. He's got some kind of political muscle and he's all too happy to flex it."

Marcus remains silent and stares into the void with shock.

"Marcus, I hate to say this, but you've poked a hornets nest and are way in over your head. Steer clear of this guy at all costs. You're an excellent cop, we need more guys like you who are passionate, determined, and have a great sense of justice. But you may have put me in a place where I'll be forced to make a decision I don't want. You've been warned" says the Chief.

Marcus eyes widen in disbelief. He walks out of the office as if the world around him is spinning.

"I just want to find my son". Whispers Marcus to himself.

The group agrees to help Max and he gets the compass but nothing happens.

"I'm starting to think you're lying." says Max.

Max's cellmate nods in agreement.

“I’m disappointed.” says the guard.

“C’mon, the compass has always lead me.” insist Max. He holds out the compass but nothing happens. The other guards show up and the one guard had to cover for herself and pretend like nothing happened. There wasn’t enough time to take back the compass.

The guard returns to talk to Max and Alex.

“The news is breaking out you’re sentenced to be fed to Dimples.” says the guard.

“What?!” says Max almost laughing.

“ Who happens to be a giant blob of living jello that swallows people, especially children.” says Alex, nervous.

“Are you kidding?!” yells Max. The guard hushes him.

“It was either that or Wardell.” whispers the guard, dismayed.

Max looks at both of them, confused.

“She’s a flesh-eating unicorn” says Alex, shivering.

“The Magistrate must be in a good mood.” says the soldier.

“We’re doomed. The compass won’t save us.” says Alex.

On the day of their execution, they’re about to get swallowed, just to make sure dimples is up for it, they take a goat and shove it towards Dimples, and it swallows the goat, dissolving as it enters the jello. The thumbs up is given by the army, it’s time to feed Max first. He’s being shoved towards the blob when he feels a buzzing sound in his pocket.

“What’s that?” asks a soldier.

He takes the compass out of his pocket. It points to a direction SE. He moves, and slips away from the soldier. Then the other soldiers try to go after him, the compass zig zags again and Max follows. His movement and timing throw off everyone and some of them run into each other in the confusion. The compass takes him to an area just behind the blob and it’s a whistle made of stone. The compass stops moving and Max takes the whistle and blows on it. The blob, going after Max, stops. Then he whistles again, this time, he points for the blob to go away and it does. He’s amazed by the whistle, the guards go after him, he runs away.

“RUN!” yells Max at the other prisoners. The Magistrate is losing it.

“After them!” yells the Magistrate, while she picks up her weapon to join in. As Max joins the other kids, the compass leads them to a direction. As the chase gets closer, Max blows the whistle again and the blob starts going after the soldiers.

“Gimme the whistle.” says the soldier running with them. Max does it, and she throws it like a football, far, and it lands into the blob, disappearing. The blob goes outta control and starts chasing after the soldiers who are now scattered and trying to control the problem. Each one of them exert power from their chest, one starts to create a powerful air pressure towards the blob, another shoots dirt formed into clumps like bullets at it, another summons mud from the ground around it to slow it down, but the blob just keeps going after them. The Magistrate shows up with another stone and lets out a scream. The blob freezes almost like rock and the guards shatter it with their stone powers and weapons. They try to go after the runaways but they left.

“Get back, soldiers, that’s an order!” yells the Magistrate. She turns to her second-in-command. “We need to report this to the King. He won’t be too happy... Dimples was his favorite pet.”

# CHAPTER EIGHT





In the real world, Ethan bullies other kids at school, makes fun of the fact that Max is gone, and the other kids start talking. There have been several disappearances, but Ethan isn't scared.

“You need to stop and focus on your studying and maybe if you weren't such a jerk, maybe Max wouldn't have disappeared.” says Amy, scolding Ethan.

“He's a loser, he has that stupid, whiny face, he was gonna get lost anyway. And I didn't do anything anyway, we were just kidding.” argues Ethan.

“But what really happened?” grills Amy.

“I didn't do anything.” swears Ethan.

Amy stares at him in silence.

“Ok, look, I chased him to the park, he picked up something, and then he ran off and it took me and the all the guys to catch him and then they went away.” recounts Ethan.

“I was there, yeah, I know.” says Amy.

“Afterwards, I got together with some of the misfits and then went home, nothing more, I swear.” says Ethan, hand raised in the air.

Amy and Ethan arrive home.

“Hey! You two, help me out, will ya?” harasses Reagan. A large, squarish, item covered in khaki tarp.

“Your mom just bought at item at a garage sale.” says Reagan.

“Miss Garcia wanted to get rid of everything at her house before she moved. Her grandkid was missing two years ago.” says Beth, with excitement in her voice. Reagan, Ethan, and Amy carefully settle the heavy item in the living room.

“Woah, Mom, this is... something!” says Amy.

“It’s ugly...” says Reagan. Holding Amy’s arm about to remove the tarp. “...like your Mom. Keep it covered.” he continues with a smirk. Beth ignores him.

“That’s so rude, dad.” scolds Amy.

“Hey, better to get rid of it, except she’ll get rid of me if I don’t let her keep it. I’d rather have peace with your mother.” says Reagan.

They position it carefully in the living room.

“Let’s leave it and keep it covered until we figure out where to keep it.” says Beth, somber.

Ethan lifts the tarp, ignoring his mom, and removes it from the item. The big reveal and it’s a mirror. It has this crazy, ominous frame.

“It’s nuts!”. Says Ethan.

“Beth loves it though.” says Reagan. It’s got unicorns and other mythical creatures, sculpted into its frame.

“How strange they have sharp teeth.” notices Amy. The family goes to bed. Ethan tries to get one of Mom’s butterscotch toffees but she slaps his hand

“It’s for the PTA.” warns Beth. Ethan tries again.

“No!” yells Beth.

“Oh, let him have it” yells Reagan.

“It’s not for him, I can make another batch later.” Beth argues.

“My son can have whatever he wants. Make more, who cares?” says Reagan. Ethan takes a few and runs to his room. She gets upset, holding herself together for a moment.

“Mom? I can help make more.” offers Amy.

“It’s ok sweetie, it’s fine. Let it go.” says Beth. That night, Ethan gets up, he’s not supposed to go to the kitchen but he does anyway, he’s eating more and more of his mom’s toffees. A glimmer gets his attention, he opens the sheets from the mirror to take a look at it again. And he looks at his reflection. Something is off. As he’s eating the reflection is delayed.

“That’s trippy.” says Ethan. He puts his finger on the surface and it sticks to his finger like it was made of gel. He lets go and it ripples like mercury. He gets creeped out by it and covers it up. As he does so, it glows. When he pulls the curtain, it reveals a gorgeous beach coastline during the day with palm trees. He can’t believe what he’s seeing. He touches the surface again but it’s reacting to his finger like it was water. He takes a step back and throws a toffee he was eating at it and the toffee lands in the sand. He throws more toffees. Then he takes the whole tray and throws it out to the mirror. All of it falls into the sand. He sticks his hand in and sees it affected by daylight and feels it’s warmth. He takes it out and his hand has some sand grains in it. He pokes his head in, and sees the amazing reality around him except he’s upside-down. A force like gravity pulls him in, head first, as if he fell from the sky and he lands in the sand. The portal to his home closes with the tarp that covers the mirrors as the last of the wind dies down. He jumps up to try to get in but it’s too late. He’s in another world!

A few moments later, Amy walks downstairs, and Beth comes after her.

“Stay in your room.” says Beth. But Amy doesn’t listen. She’s mad to find that the toffees her mom made are gone. Beth is pissed also. Amy goes to her brother’s room but he’s not there. Beth and Amy go around the house, but Ethan is nowhere to be found. Amy looks at the mirror, sees a crumb trail of the toffees leading up to it. She uncovers it.

“Sweetie, this isn’t the time to mess with the mirror.” says Beth.

“What the heck is going on?” asks Reagan in a groggy voice.

“We can’t find Ethan.” says Amy.

“I’m not worried, maybe he sneaked out to go to a friends house or something. He’ll be back.” assures Reagan.

“I’m worried. Says Beth.

“Amy, tell your mother not to” says Reagan.

“I wonder if this is like how it was with Max.” says Amy to her Mom. Reagan gets pissed off.

“Shut up and don’t mention that name.” orders Reagan, irritable.

“Sweetie, don’t worry about, I’ll call the parents of Ethans friends, I’m sure your father is right, he might have just gone to someone's house without telling us. You know how your brother is.” she says. Reagan goes back to bed, Amy stays up with her mom.

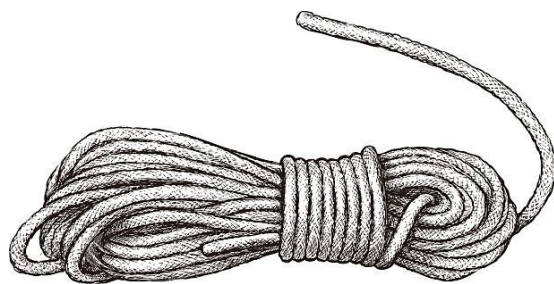
In the morning, Reagan walks downstairs, police are talking to Beth, Amy is passed out.

“What’s going on?” Reagan loudly interrupts, half asleep.

“I called everyone I knew, Ethan’s nowhere to be found. Our boy is missing.” says Beth.

Reagan’s eyes narrow.

# CHAPTER NINE



In the Lost Realm, Max and his two friends take shelter among rocky hills. They've evaded capture.

"They're in trouble once the Magistrate brings reinforcements, the King is going to be pissed. They also had beef with the Sailor." the female soldier warns.

Max notices a stone on the soldier's chest.

“Do you have stone powers?” asks Max.

“Yes.” says the female soldier.

“What is it?” asks Max. He gets a tap on his shoulder and the soldier appears behind him. He turns back and realizes they’re twins! They merge into one again.

“I try not to use my powers unless I have to. That’s how I was able to slip the compass to you in prison.” she says.

“If all the soldiers have powers, why weren't they used to capture them again?” asks Alex.

“It was an order from the Magistrate to save our energy for an oncoming turf war with Hannibal's gang. A leader of one of the largest groups on the island bent on taking over and possible dethroning the king.” says the female soldier.

“Oh, by the way, I’m Claire.” the female soldier says.

Max understood the sailors warning. The compass starts to buzz again, pointing to a new direction.

“We gotta go.” Max urges.

“Can’t we cut a break? I’m exhausted.” says Alex.

“Yeah, I’m too tired to run, we need a moment.” says Claire.

“ I’m afraid if we don’t go now, we’ll miss out on a chance to escape the realm.” argues Max.

“There’s no way out of there.” says Claire. The compass shakes with the arrow insisting on a direction. The soldier knocks it out of Max’s hand.

“That’s annoying! We’re safe, there’s no need to worry.” insists Claire. Max picks up the compass.

“Look, if they don’t hurry, who knows what going to happen?” says Max. He runs ahead, following it’s direction towards a group of tall bushes.

“Hey, Max, can you wait up!?” yells the prisoner, panting.

“Whatever!” yells Claire. As she turns around, poof! A soldier appears in front of her, then teleports just a few feet away from her,

“Found them!” the soldier yells. The soldier goes up to her and starts fighting her with their staff/spear weapons. The other soldiers and the Magistrate appear, holding the Claire hostage.

“I demand you tell me where the prisoners went!” yells the Magistrate, soldiers holding Claire. She says nothing.

“You traitor. After everything we’ve given you.” accuses the Magistrate.

“You’re looking for prisoners, we’re all prisoners, and we’re doomed!” Claire yells back, spitting on the ground.

“Where are they? If you don’t tell us, I will make your life hell.” threatens the Magistrate. Claire refuses to give in. Finally, the Magistrate draws her sword.

“Tell me or I end your life right now.” says the Magistrate.

Silence. As the Magistrate swings her sword, and pierces her chest, she falls to her knees and to the ground. Max and the prisoner watch in horror. They get a tap on the shoulder, and it’s the female soldier.

“Shhh. I wanted to make sure you were safe and I needed to distract them.” assures Claire, coughing a bit.

“Awesome! Ok, let’s go.” says Max.

“Sorry, but I can’t.” says Claire.

“Why not?” asks Max.

“Because I don’t have a lot of time left, I only came to make sure you guys are ok, but I don’t think I can hold much longer.” says Claire. She starts to dissipate.

“What’s happening?” Alex asks.

“I’m sorry, but they would’ve spotted my clone, being that I spent a lot of time with them. There’s no way she’d be able to trick them.” says Claire. And with that, she starts to dissipate, coughing.

“Thank you, Max for giving me hope, but that’s something I left a long time ago.” She waves at Max and Alex, then dissipates. The Magistrate and soldiers start to scatter,

“Permission?” One of them asks the Magistrate.

“Go ahead.” says the Magistrate. The soldiers turns into a hound. The compass doesn't move and they're inching closer, they're almost caught when out of nowhere, the prisoner hears a voice.



“Pssst! Down here.” Looking down, a head is popping out of the ground. The prisoner screams, but Max hushes him right away. Looking down, it’s the Sailor’s head popping out of the ground.

“Hurry up!” says the Sailor. He pops back into the hole. Max and the prisoner try to squeeze in, they find themselves near the coastline. They’re safe.

“Have you been keeping an eye on me?” asks Max.

“What?! No. Nooo.” says the Sailor.

“You were worried about me? You didn’t have to.” Max said, smiling.

“Watch it, punk, I can leave you out there again.” says the Sailor. The compass points to the hole again.

“I wonder if the soldier is still alive? Sailor, can you try?” Max asks.

“Kid, it may be too late.” The sailor argues.

“I’ll do it. I’m willing to try. I’ve got to.” says Max.

“Don’t do it, kid, it’s suicide.” The Sailor warns. But Max does it anyway.

“Hey, if you don’t do something, I’ll hurt you real bad” threatens the Prisoner towards the Sailor. The other kid goes up to the prisoner with fists raised.

“If you get near him, you’ll get tossed out to sea right now!” yells the other kid.

“Everyone to calm down! Look, I gotta save her.” insists Max.

“Fine. But it may be too late.” warns the Sailor. He pops his head in the hole, takes it out, then pops it back in and does it a few times.

“Look behind the rock” says Max. He finally sees her but is almost stepped on by someone. He waits for the right timing.

“Found her!”. Says the Sailor. With help, Max and the Sailor grab her feet and pull her through, she’s barely alive.

“I don’t think she’s got much time left.” says the kid.

“She’s a goner.” says the Sailor.

“I know first aid, do you have any bandages?” asks the kid. The sailor closes the hole, but he’s been noticed.

“There he is, it’s the Sailor! After him!!” yells the Magistrate.

“Oh great.” says the Sailor.

“What is it?” asks Max.

“They spotted me, and now they’re probably going to hurry to the coastline” says the Sailor. As the Sailor summons the boat, the kid does first aid on the girl and stops the bleeding but she’s barely hanging on.

“You want the bad news or the bad news.” asks.

“What?” asks the Prisoner.

“There’s not enough room in the boat for all of us, one of us has to stay behind.” says the Sailor. Max takes a step away from everyone.

“Oh, c'mon, I just saved your keister!” yells the Sailor.

“I’ve got the compass, everyone else needs to go.” insists Max.

“Not this again, c'mon, let’s go.” says the Sailor.

“No” argues Max. The other kids argue about who is going to stay, but then they hear a foghorn.

“What the heck is that? Is is the Magistrate?” asks the kid doing first aid.

“No” says the prisoner.

“It’s Hannibal.” says the Sailor.

“We better go, it’s going to get REALLY nasty.” says the prisoner. The sailor goes, Max pushes the other kids and they fight back but as forces approach and the horn sounds louder, it scares the others into taking the boat.

“I swear I’ll come back for you.” says the Sailor as he throws the stone he used for making the hole at him.

“How am I going to know where to find you? Asks Max.

“You’ll have to trust your stupid compass to find out, let’s see if your belief in it really works. See ya!” says The Sailor. A bunch of rebel looking kids from a mile away start running towards their direction, the Sailor’s boat disappears in a mist. Max makes a run for it, there’s still some distance between him and the horde, most of them running towards the sailor.

In the real world, Marcus has another meeting with the parents. They talk about some leads and this time, they’re agreeing to start a neighborhood watch.

“I’m scared and starting to wonder if anyone is safe, is it a kidnapper, who would want to take their children and why?” asks one of the parents.

“Calm down everyone.” says Marcus. “This is the way we need to gather as much info as possible and for the community to help each other out. Now I... have a list of suspects with a list of crimes committed on the loose. We may be able to apprehend them for questioning, it’s our best lead.” says Marcus. Everyone remains quiet, listening to Marcus presentation.

“Do we all agree to form a coalition and help to find the missing kids as much as they can?” asks Marcus. Everyone raises their hand in agreement. Reagan shows up as parents are leaving. He whistles really loud.

“Attention everyone!” yells Reagan. The parents stop and turn towards Regan. “I have a warning for everyone, be careful not to trust this guy. He’s been harassing my \ family over the disappearance of his son and is now he’s terrorizing people and harassing other kids, and now he’s harassing you folks. Enough is enough. You wanna know the real threat to our neighborhood? It’s the police who abuse their power. That’s why I’m going to offer up a reward to anyone who will find Ethan, my son who just disappeared yesterday and Max, Marcus son in exchange that he stop this charade and leave everyone alone.” says Reagan.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” yells Marcus in retaliation. The two get into a shouting match and people walk out of the meeting. Gil and Marianna break up the argument. Both are holding each other back as if a brawl is about to happen.

“Calm down, Marh down.” says Gil.

Marianna tries to calm Reagan down.

“What happened to your son, Ethan? Tell me! I want to know what happened to Ethan! How did he disappear?”

“I’m not telling you squat.” yells Reagan with an attitude.

“We can’t help you if you don’t tell us what’s going on. You’re provoking the law, either you tell us here or you can tell us at the station” says Marianna pressuring him a bit more. Reagan calms.

“I don’t know. I woke up and now my boy is missing. And if the police aren’t going to find my son, I’ll take matters into my own hands.” says Reagan. He walks away with an attitude.

“Don’t any of you dare get near me.” threatens Reagan. He bursts out of the house.

“Man, I’d love to punch that guy.” says Gil.

“It’s understandable.” says Marianna. Marcus agrees and is now more frustrated. He runs after Reagan.

“HEY! Reagan. Look, I’m sorry, for your son’s disappearance and just the way I had been acting with you during this whole thing. I wanted to apologize to you formally”. Says Marcus.

“Go to hell.” answers Reagan and slams the car door shut. He starts the car and screeches out of the driveway.

## CHAPTER TEN



In the Lost Realm, Ethan marvels at the beautiful beach and sunset. He sees his mom's toffees and tries to throw them back up in the air, to see if it's possible to get back to his home, but nothing happens.

“Mom! Can you hear me?! Anybody?” yells Ethan.

Silence. He keeps throwing toffees in the air but they land in the sand.

“Dad, Amy! Can you guys hear me!? I’m trapped in the mirror, somebody get me out!” yells Ethan. No response. “I’m stuck in the middle of nowhere, dammit.” says Ethan to himself. He looks around and sees the island looks as if it’s uninhabited. He finds his flip flops and walks the beach.

“Helllooooo! Anybody here?!?!” yells Ethan.

He keeps yelling and yelling but nothing happens. The sun slowly begins to set. It’s getting cold. As the hours go by, the sky grows dark, he wanders around, yelling for help, but he doesn’t see anything or anyone, not even a trace of civilization. He starts crying a bit. He stops near a large, round, grimey, white rock. But as he walks around it, he realizes it’s giant animal skull! He falls back on his rear, gasping for air. He keeps yelling for help, but no answer. He gets up and notices he’s not able to see much around him, the sun is about to set, so he heads back to the palm tree from where he came from. It grows dark around him as he walks back, except the beautiful stars and two moons. Looking down, he gasps, noticing the glow of luminescent seashells, scattered across the sand like a mirror for stars, as if he was walking on a mosaic of the universe, he forgets his fear for a moment. He realizes, he may not be in the real world anymore. He wakes up the next morning and nothing. He keeps trying to explore the area around him and he’s starving. His clothes end up getting torn by accident and one of the plants, like a venus fly trap, just bit a snake near him, pulling it into its mouth like a noodle. It freaks him out and he runs back to the palms. He starts to pick up the pieces of his moms toffees and collects them in his shirt. He eats them little by little. He’s not sure how long it will last so he saves them and puts them in his pocket. He keeps exploring the island little by little but not straying far from his original site. Yet nothing. Eventually he runs out of toffees and his stomach growls. Looking around the nearby forest, bushes, and sea, there’s not much to eat from the plants if they don’t eat him first and the wildlife is barely anything to consider edible. He goes back to the bones and tries to see if he can take a rib and use it as a spear and tries to go into the water, but he doesn’t see any fish. There’s hardly any bugs around him except a few ants here are and there. He tries to make fire but he’s not able to. He goes back to his original site, defeated. He’s pretty

much ready to accept he might starve to death. The sun rises and sets, a few times. He sleeps it off, hoping each time, he can wake up and yell for his mom or dad or sis to hear him, but nothing. His stomach growls loudly. He's lying asleep trying to forget his hunger pain. More times, the sun rises and sets. He can't remember the day or week. He's about ready to say goodbye.

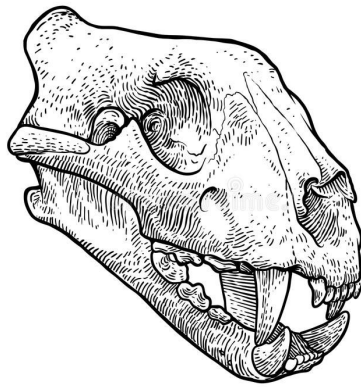
*KICK!*

He wakes up with a sharp pain on his side, he looks up and sees a bunch of scruffy teens surrounding him.

“Hey! Who are you guys?! Oh wow, finally! Where are you guys from? Can you guys tell me where we are? I need to reach my parents as soon as possible! Man, it's great to see another human!!” says Ethan. The teens stare at him dead-eyed. Then their leader shows up, it's Macchio.

“Hey, Leaper, I'm Macchio. And from here, on, you're my gimp!” he says.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



In the Real World, Marcus continues following leads. He's at home, going over evidence and gets a visit.

"I want to hash out the conversation we couldn't finish earlier." says Linda.

"What is it?" asks Marcus.

"I'm realizing, I think, Max may have a run away and not been kidnapped." says Linda.

"He'd never do that." argues Marcus.

"You're such a fool, Mark." yells Linda.



“You start attacking me like that and I get a picture of why we divorced.” says Marcus.

“Max may have blamed himself for our separation but it’s too late.” argues Linda.

“Stop it! Look, I’ve done everything I can.” says Marcus.

“You’re too occupied with work” argues Linda.

“Oh yeah, look who’s talking?” Marcus argues back. They’re interrupted by Gil.

“Time out. Sorry, there’s a huge problem and you needs to see this. Hey Linda, sorry.” says Gil. Marcus follows Gil out the door.

“Hey, I’ll contact you when I’m available.” says Marcus.

“Don’t bother. I’ll be in town until I knows Max is safe and alive, that’s the only news I want to hear.” says Linda.

Marcus goes with Gil to another site, this time it’s an art museum with curious artifacts. They found more of that powder.

“I’m not interested in the case anymore. C’mon Gil, help me go after some of the guys on this list.” says Marcus.

“I’ll make you a deal. I’ll agree to help you, at least with a stakeout if you keep a low profile and play along with the mysterious break ins.” answers Gil. Marcus agrees and starts going after all the guys on his sheet. During his stakeouts with Gil he catches them in illegal activity. They bust the suspects and bring them in. One of the guys in particular is the Wench, a notorious street thug that’s evaded capture. Marcus and Gil bring him in to the shock and applause of the police force. Marcus keeps getting called into another break in, but this time at a convenience store with footage of the sentinels shortly before the power goes out. He goes to check it out and finds the owner lives in the back, with what looks like an urn.

“I wonder about it. The art patterns look suspicious” says Marcus. He looks up the inventory list of the antique store owner and realizes they’re all connected.

“These guys are going after all the objects sold by the antique dealer. Find him, and we’ll have their biggest piece of the puzzle.” says Marcus. He turns his attention to another missing children's case that also involves the convenience store. A boy that was missing.

“I wonder whether one is related to the other” says Marcus.

“I don’t think it does, it’s a bit of a stretch to connect the two.” says Gil. Marcus goes back to the store, and notices a hidden door, he breaks it open and notices there’s a basement. In there, he sees a shocking discovery and calls for backup. The next day, Reagan is at the bar and sees on the news, the missing boy was found in the basement hidden in the convenience store and taken to the hospital. He sees Marcus being interviewed and he starts to throw his glass at the TV. He takes out a wad of cash and gives it to the bartender and walks off.

“Is anyone looking for MY boy?” Reagan asks.

In the Lost Realm, Macchio picks up Ethan and has his hands bound. They take his clothes and give him rags.

“Hey, it itches!” Ethan complains. Everyone starts laughing at him.

“This isn’t funny, where are you going?” asks Ethan.

“We’re goin’ on a raid.” Macchio answers. Ethan gets mad and starts to fight off the guys. He starts to get crazy and while bound takes out a few of the kids. Eventually Macchio stops everyone and sees that Ethan can fight.

“How’d you like to join our gang?” Macchio says.

“I’m not joining your stupid gang. I don’t want to join anyone’s gang, I want to go home.” yells Ethan. The kids make fun of him again and he fights back except this time they’re a bit hesitant.

“Buddy, I’m telling you, you’re already there. We’re all leapers” Macchio says.

“I’m brazilian.” says one teen.

“Mongolian” says another.

“Jordanian” says another, raising their hand.

“Djibouti” says another teen, in an accent.

“British” says another teen.

“Me too” says another.

More and more of them share loudly the country they're from.

“Yet we all landed here. Bad news, worse, we’ve been in here a loong loong time. See that lady over there? That’s Nicole. She’s the oldest, practically my grandma. Whens your birthday grandma?” asks Macchio yelling behind him.

“May 20” replies Nicole.

“What year?” Macchio asks, holding his ear, ready to hear the answer.

“1919” says Nicole.

Ethan’s eyes widen. He is shocked by they news. He hyperventilates a little.

“Hey everyone, don’t tell him anything more.” says Macchio. He crouches leaning towards Ethans ear.

“We’re on our way to a raid, if you survive, we’ll tell you everything, and not to worry, if you pass the test, and the raid, it’ll be worth your while, you’ll get to join the biggest gang in the land.” says Macchio.

“Piss off!” says Ethan. Everyone can hear his stomach growling and he’s barely got energy to fight. As the kids harass him and chase him around back and forth, he has has a bit of trouble catching up, one of them throws a piece of fruit to his head. It stings him but he catches it. Macchio was the one who threw it. Everyone laughs.

“Alright, alright, everyone calm down, simmah, simmah down.” says Macchio. Ethan tries the fruit he was given.

“I see you like it.” Macchio says with a mischievous grin. Ethan is eating away at the fruit like crazy.

“Now do you believe me?” Asks Macchio.

“Fine, deal.” says Ethan.

“Let’s go get our raid everyone!” yells Macchio with fists in the air. The gang cheers and head off to the raid. They cheer and race one another towards the direction they’re headed. Ethan has a hard time keeping up, as he’s keeping pieces of the fruit from escaping his mouth.

From a distance, a kid is watching all this take place. A hawk lands on his shoulder.

“I believe this one has serious potential. I think it’s time to approach him for a much bigger position coming soon.” says Kid Zero as he feeds the hawk. “But it all depends on how his raid

and the way this new recruit goes.” he continues. The hawk keeps eating from his hand. “Keep this a secret. It may be the best chance for the grand plan to work.” he says. The hawk disappears and a young woman appears.

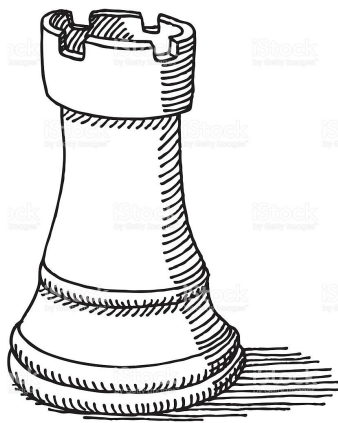
“Are you sure about this?” the young woman asks.

“I’m not. That’s why I’m waiting to see what happens. The key to success is timing, it’s everything.” Kid Zero says

“I’ll keep an eye on the King then and report if anything comes up.” replies the young woman.

“Thank you.” Kid Zero replies. She disappears and a hawk flies away in her stead.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



In the Real World, Reagan makes a call and sits at an office with a man in a suit.

“Hey Reggie, you know we’re close. Well, my boy is missing, and I’m disappointed with the way police is handling it.” says Reagan.

“You know, I remember your father, he was a man of the community, a great man. I’d do anything to help out any way I can.” Reggie says.

“I wonder if you can get the commissioner to do something about getting all police involved in searching for my son.” Reagan asks.

“Reagan, I want to reassure you they’re doing everything they can.” Reggie answers.

“But what about this cop in their department, Marcus?” Reagan inquires.

“We’re doing everything we can.” says Reggie.

“To me, that’s not good enough.” argues Reagan.

“Getting the mayor involved would be overkill.” says Reggie.

Reagan swings his chair and stares at Reggie for a few seconds, smiling.

“You know, I’m lucky I don’t have to do anything for a living. My father left me a trust fund I live off of and I spend most of my time, golfing, fishing, driving, buying new things, just living a spoiled, retired life.” says Reagan.

“Speaking of golf, I also happen to be good golfing buddies with the ‘main in the suit’, who may have some leverage with city officials from multiple counties to join in the investigation and put real heat on their local station, and maybe get the news involved if need be.” Reggie offers.

Reagan agrees, and a few days later, the chief is irritated to find the news all over the place, making their police department look bad. Then, an ordinance is given and they’re forced to let other precincts muck with their investigation.

Reagan takes the mic on the news. “I’m callin’ for a major reward to anyone who can find this boy.” he says, flashing a picture of Ethan. Reagan makes the news and becomes almost a celeb from this whole tirade.

At home, Beth is beginning to get mad at him, losing himself in the spotlight and not really getting involved in the leads for Ethan’s missing case.

Later, Reagan walks toward the kitchen to grab a beer. He’s playing his own news interview on TV.

“I’m calling you out on it, Dad, you seem more interested in the spotlight than in actually finding my brother!” yells Amy at Reagan.

“I’m mad you think I can’t handle it. I’m not one to be told I can’t have the spotlight. I can have whatever I want.” yells Reagan. He starts to get mean towards the girls.

“I wonder if you’re even the same man I knew as my Dad.” yells Amy.

“Honey, your father is going through a lot, go easy on him. He’s in pain, just has a different way to dealing with it.” argues Beth.

“Mom! Stop makes excuses for him! I hate him.” yells Amy. Reagan ignores her comment and goes to his garage.

Marcus makes another bust, they’re not talking but the evidence in the apartment shows they were kidnapers ready to target kids near Max’s school. They get close, in hopes that they would find a lead to Max but no luck. Marcus gets upset and in the face of the kidnapers, he almost goes too far and the chief intervenes. They’re glad Marcus was able to bring them to justice. Several kids were found alive and imprisoned in the home’s secret room, living like slaves. He saved their lives, but none of them were Max.

In the Lost Realm, Max is running along the coastline, as a few of the horde from Hannibal’s group chase after him. He eventually loses them in the forest, following the compass’ direction. It guides him to zig zag and times perfectly to cover his line of sight from the others chasing him. Eventually one of them is about to use their stone.

“Stop!” someone yells. Max follows the compass behind a group of bushes. A dark skinned kid appears.

“Don’t use your stones.” says the one who looks like their leader. Everyone lowers their arms and relaxes their posture a bit. “Hussh!” he tells the gang with a motion of his forefinger over his lips. He waits. Everyone listens to this kid.

“What is it, Hannibal?” asks one of the gang. He listens around the jungle. He looks around, eyes darting back and forth.

“Ok everyone. Not to worry, the kid we’re after will come to us. For now, we need to head out! It’s time to focus on the raid to the Magistrates camp.” Hannibal says loudly with assurance. They go in the opposite direction and for the moment, Max is safe. The compass then points to the fleeing kids. He’s confused, reluctant to obey. The compass insists pointing in their direction.

“C’mon, that makes no sense. I’m not gonna do it, tell me to go somewhere else.” Max argues. But the compass keeps pointing same as before. He slowly walks towards their direction, not hearing a trace of their existence. He slowly but carefully follows the compass.

By midnight, the compass leads him to the Magistrate's fortress but it's desolated. A lot of bodies on the floor, mostly orges, defeated and knocked out. Small fires everywhere. He visits the prisons but it's empty. The place he escaped from is just a shell of its former glory. The compass points to the Magistrates throne room. Hidden behind it, a secret compartment within the wall. When he opens it, there's a strange, brick wall and an iron door. He has a hard time opening it but it wedges open. It looks like an old tomb except without any foliage or anything, almost like a prop in a movie set. To Max, it felt staged. He explores it's chambers and short hallway and at the end, a mantle, with a blue sphere floating above it. Max approaches and notices it looks like a miniature version of the earth, the size of a bowling ball, floating in the air.

It's beautiful, the cloud and mountain details look amazing. Then, as he touches it, the earth slices open like a watermelon, in half, with the top part vaporizing, and the bottom part revealing the core, glowing like a sun, like a seed in a fruit. Then it's light bleeds into the iron-hot, red, outer layer, the mantle, and finally the cool, rocky crust, and just on the outside skin, the thin layer of sky and ocean. Max looks at his compass pointing at the core. He waves his hand over it the way anyone would a candle, but the core begins to cool and the earth begins to melt, then vaporize as it hits the floor. The core remains floating in the air, forming a long, diamond shape. Then it cools, in a red, then cyan crystal. And then it falls right onto the mantle. A stone! Max looks around, no one in sight. He looks around but the chamber is empty. He walks out, holding the stone and bewildered it had been left there, forgotten. He opens the iron gate, walks out of the Magistrate's throne and out to the courtyard. To his horror, Hannibal's legion stand waiting for him, he's completely surrounded.



# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



In the Real World, Marcus at the Police Station starts to pin several suspect photos of criminals they've looking for on the office investigation whiteboard, based on feedback from the neighborhood watch meetings at home.

"Another kidnapper was caught and brought to the police station" says Deputy Reece, officers clapping. Marcus makes the news.

"Congratulations on doing an amazing job!", says the Chief.

"Thanks, Chief." Says Marcus. He walks away and Gil approaches him as he exits the station.

"Good to see you excited again, Mark". Says Gil.

“But I’m not happy, I’m angry. I hoped this last bust would lead to Max, but nothing.” Replies Marcus. More and more criminals are put behind bars as Marcus aggressively pursues Max’s alleged kidnappers.

“I’m publicly making a stink for the news about police incompetence as the list of missing children keeps rising.” Says Reagan on the the news for an interview.

“I wonder about an old lead. The magic powder.” Says Gil.

“Yeah, I wonder about that too” says Marianna.

“Sorry but I refuse to acknowledge it.” Says Marcus. Another bust leads to a direct contact with one of the antique dealers. Marcus is given a letter:

*Dear Marcus, I’m telling you to stay away, warning you, you’re way in over your head.*

There’s no signature or author name to the letter. He follows the lead and him, Gil, and Marianna end up facing the dealer.

“You have no idea what you’re up against. The missing kids have nothing to do with me or anyone. It’s the artifacts! I’ve been trying to get them back, one by one, so that we never lose another kid.” Says the dealer, with his hands up. The police are confused. “I’m sorry, I can’t say anymore, they’re after me.” Warns the dealer.

“Who? Asks Marianna.

“The Sentinels, the men in black, they watch, see, and hear everything that goes on.” Answers the Dealer.

“I think this dealer is crazy.” Says Gil. Marcus is ready to arrest the guy for being crazy.

“Run! Save yourselves!!” Screams the dealer.

“Calm down, you’ll be safe at the station” assures Marcus as he slowly approaches the dealer. They hear noises. Gil calls for backup. Then it stops. “We promise you protective custody” says Marcus.

“Protective custody?” Asks Gil.

“I believe the Sentinels have something to do with my son’s kidnapping. Knowing they might be after the dealer, we should book him” says Marcus. Marianna and Gil agree.

Marcus takes him into the station in the interrogation room and treats him to coffee. The station is almost deserted except for a handful of officers, but it’s 3am, it’s expected.

“The dealer is safe and when he’s ready, they’ll take his statement.” Says Marcus. When they hit record, and the dealer starts talking,

“As I was explaining earlier, it’s hard for anyone to believe that the artifacts I sold are a gateway into another dimension that only children and teens can enter but not adults. The missing children have been teleported into this realm with no way to get out unless I can gather all the artifacts and figure out a way to reverse the effect —“ Before the dealer can finish what he’s saying, the lights go out.

“They’re here. I can’t be here.” Says the dealer. The lights flicker like crazy and Marcus, Gil, and Mariana hear a crash at the front, then with another flash, they see a sentinel appear! He’s got a black hat and coat and shades. The police take out their guns and fire at him. Nothing happens. The lights go dark. They hear yelling from the interrogation room, and then the lights come on. The room is empty, the dealer is gone. Gil, Mariana, and Marcus don’t believe their eyes. Everything in the interrogation room, even the recorder, is gone.

In the Lost Realm, Kid zero, in his chamber room, hears an ominous squeal. He’s looking at himself in the mirror, a black shadow emerges from the corner of this reflection, but he’s not phased by it. The shadow becomes a sentinel, reporting the way things are going in the real world. It’s voice sounds like it’s filtered through a static electrical current, almost robotic.

“We found the antique dealer and dealt with him accordingly.” Says the Sentinel. Kid Zero smiles.

“Good job.” he says.

“Is there anything else?” Asks the Sentinel.

“I’ll let you know.” Replies Kid Zero. 5 more sentinels emerge.

“The King wants to see you.” They say in unison.

Zero greets the king. The king is upset.

“Why is there a sentinel missing?” he asks.

“I assure you, greatness, it’s nothing to worry about.” Replies Zero.

“ Well, if you say so, then it’s fine.” Assures the King. One of the people next to him whispers in his ear. “On second thought, you are to stay away from the sentinels, they are to only obey me.” Says the King.

“My Apologies.” Zero says, bowing. “I’d like to ask the King if it would be alright to at least have one sentinel under my command for keeping order and helping to serve your leadership.

“I refuse.” Says the King. “From now on, you’re to no longer have contact with Sentinels.”

“How did this come about?” asks Zero, irked.

“It was my decision and that of the council.” The king replies.

“I thought I was your council, your majesty, since it was I who put you in that chair”.

Reminds Zero.

Then one of the council members stands up. “Look at how insolent he is. He speaks to the king as if they’re brothers, when it was the king who showed Zero mercy.” She yells, staring at Zero. Zero gets mad.

“Again, I ask for permission to command ONE Sentinel.” Zero insists.

“No.” Another council member says. “The King already spoke.”

“Oh...and what if I refuse?” Zero asks.

“Zero should be put in prison and have his command taken away.” Another council member yells.

“Very well, I’ll be on my way”. Zero answers.

“Stop!” The king tells to Zero, but he waves as he’s walking away. Guards go after Zero.

“Guards, hold your post!” The king yells. “I summons all 6 sentinels to go after Zero.” He orders. They advance towards Zero, turning around.

“Stop.” Zero orders. They obey. “From now on, you’re on my full command, you will no longer obey the king.” The sentinels nod.

“Hey! Who do you think you are? I order you to stop!! Answer me!!” The king yells as zero walks away with the sentinels

“You had your chance... later!” Zero exclaims waving his hand goodbye, raising his voice louder as he exits the court.

Meanwhile, Max is surrounded by more soldiers than he can see. It’s dark, and many of them lie in wait, in the void. Hannibal emerges, stepping forward.

“How would you like to join our group ... or be taken as a prisoner?” Hannibal offers. Max is frozen in place, trying not to tremble. He remains silent. “You know, that stone you’re holding

was taken from my good friend, Kida who is no longer with us.” Continues Hannibal. Max looks at his compass which points in the opposite direction.

“Oh yeah, I didn’t know, sorry. What’s this friend Kida like?” Max asks, stalling,

“I’d share, but on second, I think I’ll take you prisoner.” Hannibal answers. He motions for one of the legion to approach Max until a crazy shriek interrupts them. Everyone looks in the direction of the scream.

“What the heck is that?” Asks one of the legion, taking out a stone, glowing it in their hand.

“Sounds like a horde of Ogres headed our way and possibly a king Ogre” answers another. The kids step back.

“Stand down everyone, it’s just a rouse.” Hannibal warns. Max makes a run for it in the confusion and slips away. Hannibal finally gets everyone to calm down and gets them to follow after Max to chase him. Max runs deeper into the jungle. He’s about to out chase them when suddenly, he ends up at the edge of a cliff! He can’t see the compass buzzing in his hand and doesn’t know what to do. The kids approach with torches about to find max.

“There he is!” One of them spots him. They’re just a few feet away from him when max hears ‘psssst’. He looks around and noticed a straw hat on the ground.

“Get in” it says.

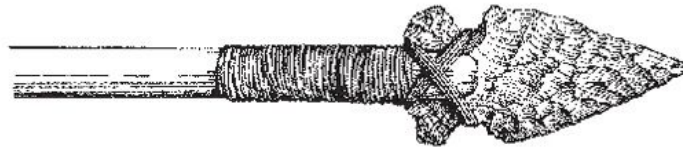
“Get in what?” Max whispers loudly.

“Get in the hat, hurry.” It says. Max jumps on the hat but nothing happens. Just as a kid is about to approach Max, he holds out his stone and in a second, a large, wooden pillar rises in front of him, knocking out the kid and a few behind him.

“Seriously kid, do I have to do everything for you?”. The Sailor’s voice echoes. An arm comes out of the hat and pulls Max in. The army surrounds the hat and watches as Max and the hat disappear behind the pillar into a black hole that closes. Hannibal stares at the ground Max disappeared from.

“Damn you, Sailor.” He grunts.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN



In the Real World, Amy walks by Ethan's room. She sees her mom sitting in his bed.

"Mom, are you ok?". Amy asks.

Beth doesn't reply.

"You're clearly not." Amy insists.

"I miss Ethan, and still a little upset at him taking the toffees but ... I'm just wondering if I'm a bad mother? I wonder what I did to scare him away." Beth says, holding back tears.

"Mom, you're perfect and Dad is doing everything he can." Amy assures her Mom.

"But you know, between you and me, your father is suffering too." Beth says.

"I dunno, Dad seems to be enjoying it, hogging the spotlight." Amy says, crossing her arms.

"Your Father struggles to get out of bed, this isn't easy for him either" Beth argues.

"Why are you always defending Dad?". Amy answers with anger in her voice.

"He cares about the family." says Beth.



“Haven’t you noticed? He’s been out a lot lately, going from one interview to another, face it, he’s milking this for himself instead of actually looking for Ethan or Max.” Amy says with conviction.

“I’m hurt by what you said” says Beth.

“Well it’s the truth.” Amy says.

“It’s not.” Beth argues.

“You know what? You clearly don’t wanna hear it. I’m done here.” Amy says.

“Amy! You’re not understanding, your Father and I—” Beth says but Amy interrupts.

“You know, I’m sick of this. You let Dad walk all over you like a carpet. He doesn’t even show you any respect, I’m sick and tired of you getting on about him when you should be looking out for yourself, I hate him.” Amy yells.

“Sweetie, you can’t talk like that about your fa—” Beth tries again but Amy interrupts again.

“I can talk about my Dad however I want, he’s a bastard. You need to stop taking orders from him like you’re some mindless cult follower, ‘Oh Reggie, oh Reggie’, you need to stop this I’m sick of you defending him when all he does is just run around like we don’t exist. You need to stand up for yourself for once” Amy rudely yells.

“Don’t talk to me like that, if your Father were here, you wouldn’t be so disrepec—” Beth keeps talking, but Amy starts walking away. Beth follows after her. “Amy! Don’t walk away when I’m talking to you!” yells Beth. Amy walks to her room and shuts the door on her mom’s face.

“Your Father and I love you, but you can’t keep acting this way, it’s very rude and disrespectful. We need to have a proper conversation about this.” Beth says as she gently knocks on Amy’s door. She keeps knocking. “Please understand, this is not an easy time for any of us. Who knows what your brother has been through? Your Father wants the best for you but right now this isn’t about you or me, this is about getting your brother back and your Father is not trying to do this for himself, he’s doing this for all of us and putting himself out there. You need to respect that.” Says Beth. Amy opens the door wearing a somewhat revealing outfit. “What are you doing wearing that?” Beth asks startled.

“I’m going out and I’ll be back late.” Amy answers irritable.

“No! You can’t go. I’m warning you, I’m telling your father if you do this. You can’t go anywhere wearing that. If you value your bo—” Beth says until a honk heard outside. “Is someone coming to pic—” Beth is about to ask.

“I have to go.” says Amy, interrupting.

“You can’t just go whenever you want, I’m your Mother, listen to me!” Beth yells. But again, Amy leaves like it doesn’t matter. Beth cries. She turns on the TV and the entertainment menu offers suggestions for the current video lineup. One is news on missing children, the other a crime show, another, a cartoon show Miko the Cat, the next lineup is a space detective show called StarPunk. And then an interview with Reagan.

“Tell us about yourself” the show host says.

“Well, I like talking about my family. I’m always with them.” Reagan says, slightly sobbing in front of the camera. “I misses Ethan ... hello son, wherever you are, I hope you can hear this. We love you, come home.” he says, with a long pause.

“Take your time” the host assures.

“You know, I’m proud to be a Dad and Husband, I’m always there for my wife and daughter” says Reagan.

“How are they holding up?” asks the host.

“...They’re holding up.” Reagan replies. Beth takes the remote and throws it at the TV. It cracks a bit and she starts to tear up.

Amy goes to the party and has an awesome time there’s beer pong and great music, wild antics, and other crazy games.

“C’mon Amy, let’s go upstairs.” One of the cool kids says to Amy.

“Why?” Amy asks, smiling.

“Well, there’s this cool thing I wanna show ya.” the cool kid says with a grin.

“Why can’t you show me here?” Amy teases. The cool kid leans in to whisper, while taking her hand and slipping it under his shirt so she can feel his stomach.

“Shut Up and let’s go make out, dammit, I wanna make out.” whispers the cool kid. She picks up her drink from the table, and follows the cool kid upstairs to one of the rooms and he shuts the door. He grabs Amy by the hand, pulls her in for a kiss, and they hold each other, while

doing so. But then, Amy pushes him away a bit. He leans in again for a kiss but she tries to turn her head away for a moment, yet he doesn't stop. She tries to keep his hand off her a bit while kissing but he keeps persisting.

"Hey, slow down, dude." Amy says.

"Relax, babe, c'mon, we never get time alone together." the cool kid says.

"Yeah, I know, but just, chill a minute, ok?" Amy insist.

"Ohhhh the ice queen. I get it. You don't have to do anything. But, c'mon, babe, let's just relax, ok." the cool kid says.

"You relax, I'm not the one that needs the relaxing." Amy answers.

"What's with the attitude?" the cool kid asks.

"Nothing. You're kinda being a jerk." Amy says.

"Naw, c'mon, you're making a big deal, let's just relax." says the cool kid.

"You keep saying that, but I'm getting even less relaxed now." says Amy. The cool kid leans in for another kiss and grabs Amy with more assertiveness. She tries to pull away but can't. She gives in, knowing he's not going to stop. But then she jerks away.

"C'mon don't be so difficult, dammit" the cool kid says.

"Stop, I don't wanna make out anymore, I'm tired." Amy says, half drunk with little effort.

"Ok. What's wrong? What is it?" asks the cool kid.

"Nothing. I ... I just had a fight with my Mom and now I'm kinda worried about her. Sorry" Amy answers.

"Come over here, babe. It's ok." the cool kid says, hugging Amy.

"Look, I'm obviously too drunk to stop. I don't want to." Amy insists with a groggy, tired, voice. The cool kid starts to grab her face. She backs off and guy then throws her to the bed and pins her. She's resisting but it doesn't stop. He takes off his shirt, tries to take off hers.

"Stop, dammit, stop, stop. Dammit that tickles" Amy yells somewhat giggling, he keeps moving faster and getting more aggressive. There's a knock on the door. "Help!" yells Amy, giggling a bit. The door is locked. The guy continues with Amy. "Ok, ok, stop, I mean it this time, it's not funny, for real!" Amy keeps yelling and fussing. The cool kid slaps her and she shrieks loud. Someone busts the door open but it's a drunken pair of dudes. Startled, the guy falls

off and Amy gets up immediately, putting her shirt back on, relieved. The other guys at the party and gals are making jokes, and Amy walks out, calling for a ride.

“Hey! Hey, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, ok?” the cool kid yells, running after Amy. He keeps apologizing to her, but Amy says nothing. She gets in her ride. The car door closes and drives away.

“Fine, whatever, screw you!” the cool kid yells at her, then goes back into the party.

When Amy gets home, she closes the door and hears her parents arguing upstairs. She cries, but tries hard to gain her composure. Dad’s home finally, she thinks. Reagan walks downstairs, going to the kitchen. She changes into her night clothes and follows downstairs.

“Hey Dad.” says Amy. He gives her a brief look.

“Hey” Reagan says, walking by. Then he stops and looks at her.

“Where they hell have YOU been?” Reagan growls.

“I want to explain it, but—” Amy says but Reagan interrupts.

“What the hell are you doing out at this hour? Your mother told me what you did, I’m so pissed at you right now, how could you?!” Reagan yells at her. She starts crying a bit.

“Don’t. Don’t you start crying on me. Don’t be a sissy like your Mom. Woman up!” yells Reagan.

“You bastard, I hate you, you coward, you son of a bitch, you good for nothing loser!” Amy yells. Beth walks downstairs.

“Don’t talk to your own daughter like that, you’re wrong! We already lost one child, you’re going to make us lose another. ” yells Beth at Reagan.

“You can’t tell me what to do. Look at you, talking to me like that, no wonder she’s got no respect. No one respects me in this house.” Reagan berates.

“You should be more home often, instead of walking around acting like a celebrity, pay attention to what’s going on a home.” yells Beth. Amy goes upstairs to call her friends but no one answers. She writes in her diary.

*Today a guy just tried to force himself on me. I don’t want to say rape, but I feel guilty...I’ve never seen mom like this. I hate life right now and I feel like I got slut shamed. I miss my*

*pain-in-the-ass bro, I need a hug right now. We're not a family anymore. Wherever he is, I hope he's ok. If he's in some far off place, I'm sure it's nice, I'd love to join him. Anything is better than here.*

Reagan stops for a moment and notices a slight glow from the mirror.

“Did you see that?” Reagan says.

“Stop ignoring me!”. Beth yells back. Reagan removes the covers from the mirror.

“What the hell was that?!” Reagan says loudly, pointing at it.

“That's right, take a good look in the mirror, you jerk”. Beth yells. Reagan stares, then steps back. “Listen to me!” says Beth.

In the Lost Realm, Max joins the Sailor's group again.

“I can't believe we'd seen you again. You're lucky to be alive.” says one of them.

“What made you come after me?” Max asks the Sailor.

“Well, there's this black hole potion, see, and it can track anyone so long as they've entered once through it. But there's a distance limit and we had to get close.” the Sailor says.

“What about the King ogre, how'd you get past it?” Max wonders. The sailor shows him a couple of potions, one for mist, another he swallows, and then spits out, but his voice bellows into a deep growl. Everyone bursts out laughing.

“I wanna try!” bursts Max.

“Don't swallow, whatever you do.” the Sailor warns. Max lets out a deep, groggy, scary, monster's voice, and makes laugh sounds.

“I'm the great and powerful King of Ogres, hahahah, and I'm going to rip your head off.” says Max in his monster voice. “I am ruler of the universe! I am your new Lord, and all must obey me, bow before me, muahahaha!” Max says, coming up with any cheesy phrase he can think of.

“And check this out.” says the Sailor, showing him a potion he rubs on his hands and when he claps, they don't make a sound. He yells but nothing comes out. He clangs glass around him but no sound. Then he rubs the liquid from his hands and sound returns.

“How the heck do you do all this?” Max asks in his demonic voice.

“I invented a process and found ways to grind stones into powder, mix it with boiling water, and it works. It’s only a fraction of the power with the limits of danger so they have to be used wisely. But it’s better than using full stone power.” says the Sailor.

“Man, you should sell your potions.” says one of them.

“How do you think I make my living? But you gotta choose your customers wisely, you never know who might be trying to take advantage and steal your secrets.” warns the Sailor.

The guard is healed, thanks to a healing potion the sailor reserves for special cases.

“The camp got raided pretty bad.” Max says.

“I’m not surprised. Hannibal's group is unstoppable.” Claire replies. Then she notices Max has a stone and stares at it, then at him.

“Oh, this? I found it in the chamber behind the Magistrate.” Max responds. Claire stands up immediately.

“Are you out of your mind?!” Claire yells.

“Keep your voice down.” says the Sailor.

“The compass pointed me to it.” Max says.

“But knowing you have that stone which was meant to be brought to the King will basically have the entire island, no, maybe all the kingdoms of the islands after you. Do you realize how dangerous it is for you to have what you’re holding in your hand right now?” warns the Soldier.

“Gimme the stone” the Sailor demands.

Max hesitates.

“Gimme.” the Sailor insists. Max hands it to him, and then the Sailor throws it with all his might like a football, out into the dark sea.

“What the hell you do that for?!” Max yells at the Sailor, the other kid shushes them.

“Max, how did you do that?” asks one of the teens.

“What?” asks Max.

“Dude, look at your hand.” another one says. Max sees the stone back in his hand and the sailor starts to lean back with eyes wide open like a mad man at Max.

“Oh crap. Stones never do that, unless....” the Sailor says.

“It’s a Guardia class”. Another says, finishing the Sailor’s sentence.

“What?!” Max exclaims.

On one of the other islands, Ethan is given a chance to prove himself. Macchio’s raid becomes a success, but their rebel group’s leader is a huge kid named Beezle. All the enemy gang have been tied up or knocked out and the victory over the enemy camp is almost theirs, but Beezle remains last, ready to take anyone on, one on one.

“Hey Ethan, bad boy, if you take out Beezle for us, you’ll be made an official member of our troop.” Says Macchio. Ethan is looking around, everyone’s worried, even Macchio. Beezle is holding a huge Tusk like it was a curved sword. Everyone who tries to knock him out, loses.

“Stand back everyone, let the new kid try. Ethan, you do this, and you’ll earn your letter.” Macchio says.

“What the hell do you mean by letter? Why?” Ethan yells, staring at the imposing foe before him.

“A letter means you’re a high rank officer.” answers one of the gang.

“Hey Maach, you’re going to let a newb get a letter? Are you serious?” argues another one of the gang.

“Hey, you gonna take out the Beez?” Macchio challenges. The teens gets quiet and steps back.

“Good luck.” the teen says.

“C’mon, let’s cheer him on, guys. Eeeettthaaan! Eeettttthhhaaaan! Eeeaaattthann!” yells Macchio. As he chants, half shaking, all of the group joins.

“Ethan, Ethan, Ethan!” they chant loudly in unison.

“Come at me already, wuss!” Beezle urges. Ethan advances but he gets pummeled.

“Come on, everyone, louder!” Macchio keeps getting everyone to cheer for Ethan, and Ethan keeps getting back up, over, and over, and over, mildly attacking. Beezle starts to get tired, and eventually the kids start throwing stuff at him. Ethan takes one more lunge and Beezle drops his sword. Then a few more, and the kids start cheering as Ethan is finally standing over the big kid and barely able to lift the huge tusk. Macchio runs up to Ethan and gives him a headlock, rubbing his head.

“The Champion and new member of the Macchio gang, Ethan!!!” yells Macchio, raised fist in the air. And with that, he gets his nickname and a ceremony where he gets his letter, while some of the other members get jealous, others excited, put prisoners away and prepare food over a bonfire for the victory feast.

The next morning, Ethan wakes up and notices a boat docking near the shore. All the kids are passed out from being full. He walks closer and closer and notices a sailor with a straw hat, two figures, and one shadowy figure.

“Hey champs, what’s going on?” Macchio says as he sneaks up behind him.

“Who are those guys?” asks Ethan.

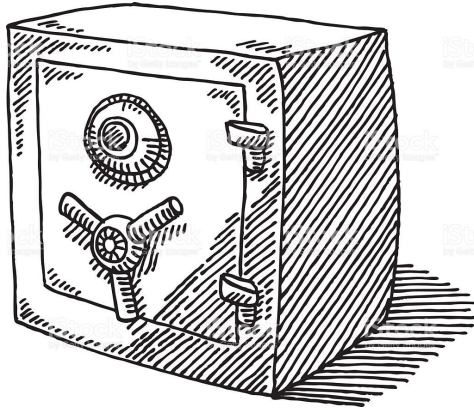
“Beats me, let’s go haggle em.” Macchio says. Ethan hesitates to walk forward, staying in place, not sure what to do, macchio walks ahead. Two other kids follow him. Macchio stops and turns around.

“Hey are you comin?” Macchio urges. Ethan walks ahead. As they get closer and closer, Ethan notices the person furthest away from them.

“I don’t believe this.” Ethan says as he grabs a spear.



# CHAPTER FIFTEEN



In the Real World, Gil is driving around the neighborhood, on patrol. Marcus stares out the window, running his fingers through his hair in frustration with a worried stare.

“I’m trying to get you to think about the strangeness of the case.” says Gil.

“There’s nothing strange.” argues Marcus.

“But I can’t wrap my head around what happened to the antique dealer, how there was no surveillance? How they just came in and took a guy like nothing!?” Gil exclaims.

“I believe there’s an explanation.” asserts Marcus.

“There may be a supernatural element to consider, things aren’t adding up and we can’t deny what we saw with our own eyes.” Gil argues.

“Look, there’s a kidnapper, it’s human, and we’ll bring him to justice.” Marcus insists.

“Why can’t you admit, letting go of some of your disbelief, in the something out there beyond nature, in the hope it may just bring your son back and maybe might be worth it?” Gil cautions.

“I refuse. There’s got to be a scientific explanation.” says Marcus. Gil pounds the steering wheel with the palm of his hands as he grows frustrated. He parks the car at the station and heads into deputy Reece’s office. Marianna joins them, the door closes.

“I want you all to keep the incident secret and not have any evidence of a filed report.” Deputy Reece tells Mariana, Gil, and Marcus. “Drop the case altogether.” she orders.

“But, we had a strong lead, it’s worth pursuing.” Marcus argues.

“I’m sorry Mark, but the chief says it’s too risky.” Deputy Reece answers.

“Am I the only one in this room who doesn’t believe in the boogeyman?” Marcus exclaims.

“Oh, and what would you do if you saw a ghost, Marcus?” Deputy Reece asks sarcastically.

“If I saw a ghost, I’d punch him in the face ... and get my son back” Marcus replies.

In the Lost Realm, Slade, one of Macchio’s right hand guys goes up to Ethan.

“What’s going on, whacha doin’ with that thing?” Slade asks.

“I know that kid anywhere, what the heck is he doing here!?” Ethan replies. Macchio walks up to them and puts his arms around them.

“You know these chumps?” he asks Ethan.

“Yeah.” Ethan confirms. Macchio takes out a stone.

“Let’s give ‘em a welcome party”. Macchio says. His eyes flash for a moment, he grins. Slade takes out his stone and holds it, tight-fisted to his side.

On the boat, near shore, the Sailor looks off in the distance, slowly positioning himself out of the boat.

“Oh no.” he says.

“What?” asks Max.

“Looks like we have a gang and they don’t look happy to see us.” says the Sailor. He gets back in the boat. They try to get in but one kid stops the Sailor.

“C’mon, we have all these stones and potions, plus Max has his now, let’s take ‘em!” the kid urges.

“We don’t know how many they are and stone wars don’t go well.” the Sailor argues.

“Alright, fine. Max, let’s go!” the kid argues.

“I dunno about this.” says Max. The kid wrestles with the Sailor.

“Stop!” yells the Sailor. But the kid doesn't listen and starts to get really aggressive, snatching the bag and seeing a whole collection of small stones.

“Hey, give it back!” The Sailor yells. The soldier and Max wrestle the kid away from the bag and push him to the other side. The sailor gets the boat ready.

“Max, Claire, help me with the boat, will ya?” asks the Sailor. The kid jumps out of the boat.

“What the heck are you doing?” yells Max. The kid's eyes change into red snake eyes.

“I can take them on!” the kid yells back. Max darts toward the kid to stop him but the Sailor holds out his arm to block Max.

“Let him go.” says the Sailor. As the boat starts to head out, Max can't believe his eyes, at the one charging for his boat.

“No way ... Ethan?” Max takes a good look. “Stop!” Max yells. “I know that kid!”

“You mean the one trying to kill us all?” the Sailor yells.

“I have to go!” Max says. “I need to talk to him... he could know the way home.”

“Stay back, stay in the boat, you're gonna get killed.” the Sailor argues but Max gets off.

“Please don't go you moron!” yells the Sailor. “I'm telling you not to go.” But Max follows after the kid. As Macchio, Ethan, and Slade get close to the kid, he changes form into a giant demon monster and growls. Everyone except the Sailor stands back in terror and amazement. He has skin like an elephant, as tall as a two story house, one giant horn like a rhino, and sharp teeth. The sailor slaps his forehead.

“That kid's an idiot. I'll give him that he's got talent and hutzpah, but he's an idiot”. Says the Sailor. Claire puts on her soldier's armor and powers up her stone in one hand and grabbing her weapon in the other. She helps the Sailor while her clone goes to back up the monster. Ethan yells, pointing his spear at the monster, now stomping its feet. Macchio waves his hand, and the swell of the ocean shore rocks the sailor's boat, pushing it towards the coast and shoving it on to the sandy coast. The monster looks back and starts to kick the ground over the gang, but it's not as forceful as expected from a creature his size.

Slade's arm turns pitch black and glossy, as if made of pure ink. Then his fingers merge into a sharp point. He starts to run up to the monster, jabbing it's shins. Max's compass tells him to back away. Ethan goes after Max, who is now running away from him.. Slade attacks Claire, Macchio aims for the monster. It has a hard time moving. Macchio lifts the monster in mid air as his eyes glow and his arms tremble. All manner of liquid is oozing upwards out of the monster, rising up into the air. The ooze dissolves as it's pressured out of his pores, being lifted higher, than Macchio drops him. Boom! His body slams into the sand. The monster grabs his stone, it glows brighter.

“Kid, stop! Stop this now!” the Sailor yells. Macchio keeps lifting and dropping the monster, the kid holds his stone tighter and grows bigger. Meanwhile, Max is having a hard time defending against Ethan, he’s being pummeled to the ground, Max fights back, they’re in a wrestling match, Max uses his stone to hit Ethan. Ethan overpowers him and Max tries to get away. He snaps the spear in half from a kick by accident, and uses it to beat Ethan. Ethan jumps back, finds the other half of the spear, and they start jabbing at each other.

The monster grows larger and larger, changing color and deepening its voice. It’s now the size of a 4 story building and it’s woken the whole gang, starting to surround them and holding weapons, ready to join in. The monster punches the ground but it’s not strong enough to make an impact. Macchio jumps back, astounded. The monster grows 6 stories and tries to stomp again on everyone, but Macchio keeps restraining him. They go at it.

“Dammit, I’m tired of yelling stop! Listen already!!” yells the Sailor. The kid grows, and grows, becoming this incredibly huge dragon the size of a 10 story building and taking up most of land along the coastline. Macchio, falling back on the floor keeps restraining him, as liquid water keeps raining upwards to the sky, oozing from the monster’s pores, while it’s gnashing it’s teeth and growling with an earth quaking scream. Max and Ethan along with everyone is startled. But then, the dragon shrinks.

“OH no.” says the sailor. The dragon becomes a monster, it turns green, it shrinks to a large humanoid figure, and then finally, a large mist dissipates all around him and the kid falls to the ground, dropping his stone. The Sailor mourns. Ethan and Max are staring at the whole thing, while holding spears at one another, Slade makes a bold stab at the soldier who then disappears, Slade falls forward. And Macchio takes the stone from the kids hand and raises his fist in the air.

“Whoooo-hooooo!!!!” Macchio yells in victory. The Sailor gets depressed, then he gets angry and jumps out to push the boat into the water again. Ethan overpowers Max, whose eyes glow as he holds his stone tightly in defense. A large, wooden, pillar with a metal cap rises from the ground under Ethan and flips him back. Max takes advantage of the momentum, clutching his spear and finally pinning Ethan down, pointing it to his throat.

“Hold on, stop!” yells Macchio as approaches Max. Ethan tries to wrestle away.

“Let go of me, wuss!” yells Ethan.

“Hey, c’mon, now let him go. Look, he doesn’t wanna fight anymore” Macchio pleads.

“Stay out of this.” Ethan yells, waving at Macchio.

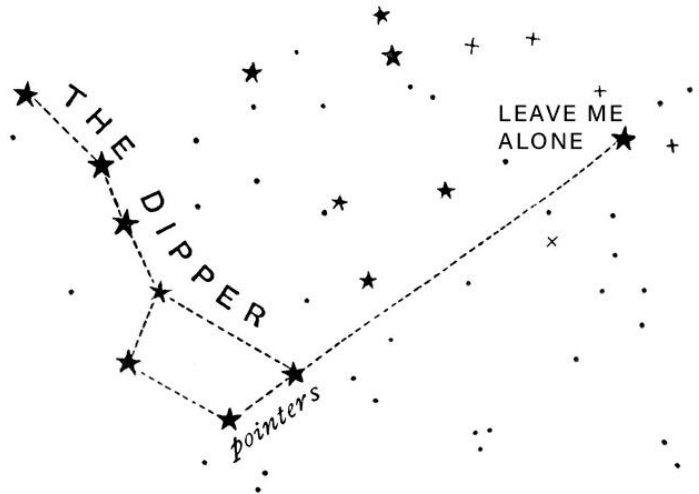
“You know this kid?” asks Macchio walking up to them, as Max keeps Ethan pinned while squirming.

“Yeah.” Ethan says. Macchio looks at Ethan and at Max.

“I agree, he’s a jerk. Let’s celebrate the reunion and have another party.” Macchio says smiling. “But first, you gotta let him go.” Max nods in agreement and loosens his grip on the spear. He offers a hand to help Ethan get up, but he slaps it away. Ethan stumbles away from Max as he gets up. Macchio lets out a loud whistle using both hands.

“Hey, you in the boat! Come join us... come out, come out!!!” Macchio yells inviting the Sailor and Claire. Max walks up to the kid lying on the ground and realizes the truth about their powers: where his passed-out body should be, in his place, wearing his clothes and whitened hair, is an Ogre!

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN



In the Real World, Marcus is approached by his ex-wife, Linda.

“Mark, we may have to start making preparations.” She says.

“For what? Asks Marcus.

“For the possibility that Max may not be coming back.” Linda responds.

“No, I’m not about to give up.” Marcus says, getting really upset.

“You’ve done everything, and there haven’t been results. Maybe we need to consider the worst and begin prepping his ... his funeral.” Says Linda.

“There’s no need for a funeral, I’m going to find my son.” Marcus argues.

“But the reality is...that things need to be resolved and soon or else it’s going to cost us as time goes by.” Says Linda. Marcus is distraught.

“Faced with the tough choice of admitting my son might not even be alive anymore, I refuse to give up. I won’t rest until at least a body is found.” Replies Marcus. The grandparents move in. Marcus is wrestling tough decisions.

“Some kids are never found, Marcus” Linda argues.

“That’s because of shoddy police work” Marcus argues, “I’ll turn every stone in this neighborhood if I have to for Max”. He promises.

“And what if he’s not here anymore?” She asks. “He could be ANYWHERE!” She raises her voice.

“Then maybe...I’ll consider widening my search to other counties.... but I feel like I’ve got a lead or two left. Let me do this.” Says Marcus.



In the Lost Realm, The Sailor, Max, and company are sharing a meal with Macchio's group. Ethan and Max are at odds still.

"Sooo, how do you guys know each other?" asks Macchio.

"Yeah I was wondering also." Says the Sailor. Ethan leans forward.

"He's the jerk from my school, I used to put this dill- wad in his place." Says Ethan, smirking. Max eyes narrow.

"We had detention in school." Says Max.

"How'd you guys leap?" Macchio wonders. " I imagine you must've got in through the same artifact, that's how we all got here." Macchio says. "I got in through an old piano I thought was broken, Slade got teleported through his Mom's antique purse while he was trying to steal money from her wallet." Macchio continues as he points around, one by one, to kids in his gang around him, "trunk, vase, bottle, old phone, painting, desk, rug, clock, hat, cat statue, door—."

"We get it, we get it. For me, it was this" Max interrupts. He shows Macchio the compass, to everyone's surprise. Ethan looks at Macchio.

"What?" Asks Ethan.

"It's rare that, the thing that brings you here, stays with you. Let me see that." Macchio continues. Max holds back. "C'mon, let me see it!" Macchio insists.

"Back off." the Sailor tells him. Macchio calms down.

"I got in through an old Mirror my mom bought from Mrs. Fragelus. She lost her grandkid a few weeks back and held a garage sale." Ethan says.

"I remember my dad working on a case with an antique store. It's possible more kids from our neighborhood might show up." Says Max. The Sailor's eyes widen. Macchio looks at the Sailor.

"We're gonna get a flood of leapers, something's going on in the outside world." Says the Macchio. Ethan looks at Max's stone.

"I want one of my own. I'm ready to attack Max for it." Threatens Ethan.

"Relax." Says Macchio. "Given how you fought today, twice, you've earned your right to a stone." He assures. That afternoon, they perform a ritual. A kid comes out with a box, he's the stone treasurer with all kinds of powers. The treasurer holds out the box in front of everyone.

“The best way isn’t to choose the stone but let it choose you.” Says the treasurer. Macchio stands in front of the treasurer.

“The King is going to be going after us and also Hannibal. We’ve got enemies on all sides, we need all the help we can get.” Says Macchio. He turns to Max, Claire, and the Sailor. “Will you guys join us?”

“Sorry. No can do.” the Sailor refuses. The other kids agree to join Macchio's group. One of the gang whispers to Max ‘pssst’.

“That’s his real power, not what comes from a stone, but what he got from birth, his mojo” says the gang member. The gang form a circle, Ethan is brought in the middle. Macchio begins performing the ritual.

“I’ve got a special stone that’s perfect for Ethan, our newest member and total badass. But there’s a catch. It’s not here. It’s with Hannibal, and we’re going to help fight to get it for him, that’s how he’s going to have it. You earn your stone. But in the meantime, this is considered a loaner, for the upcoming fight.” Macchio announces. And so the stones are laid out in a circle, one of them takes a bronze dish, with 8 black notches carved on its outer rim. Another kid takes a large, bowl-shaped spoon with a tiny handle. The Sailor recognizes it. He leans over to Max.

“The spoon is made of lodestone, watch.” whispers the Sailor. The bronze dish is filled with water, then the spoons is dipped inside, with it’s rounded tip balanced in the center. It starts to move on it’s own. “It reacts to stones that are hyperactive to their user.” continues the Sailor. The spoon begins to float a bit, spinning, then slows and stops, pointing to a leafy green colored stone. Max looks at his compass, but it doesn’t respond. Macchio picks it up and gives it to Ethan.

“Alright, buddy, try it out.” Macchio asks Ethan. “Hold it tight and think about the thing you feel like doing the most.” he continues.

“I feel like...naw this is stupid.” Ethan hesitates.

“C’mon man, don’t be shy. Tell us, what is it?” prompts Macchio.

“I feel like jumping as high as I can.” says Ethan.

“Go for it.” Macchio says. Ethan jumps, high. Then higher, higher, and higher. Everyone’s impressed, Ethan is able to see as he jumps higher over the cliffs and forests. With every leap in

place, he's rising close to hundreds of feet in the air, and then lands. On the next jump, he can see all the way to the ends of the island.

"Oh man, it feels like I'm flying!" says Ethan. Everyone whistles at Ethan, cheering him on.

"In battle it's going to be important, not only for getting from place to place, but it packs a mean kick to your enemies. But don't grow too attached. Your real power is coming soon." Macchio tells him.

"Yeah man, that's cool." says Slade, as his eyes narrow, with a hint of jealousy. Macchio can sense it in his voice.

"Don't worry, buddy, you're especially needed for recon, to spy on Hannibal's camp and track their location. Take any two from the gang you feels like taking. You're in command" assures Macchio.

"I dunno, man, It's fine if you don't need me, anyone can go." says Slade still not pleased.

"You're the one for the job, c'mon." Macchio insists.

"Don't bother." says Ethan. "He's coming our way. I saw an army heading toward us while I was in the air." Max looks at his compass, it's pointing to a direction.

"Hey Ethan, is what you saw, that way?" asks Max, pointing where the compass showed him.

"Yeah." says Ethan.

"Never mind, Slade." Macchio tells him. "Alright, everyone, time to get ready, Hannibal's army is on the way!" yells Macchio. Everyone grabs their stones and weapons, facing the direction Max and Ethan said they'd arrive. A noise is heard among the forest trees from that direction and a few of Hannibal's front lines spring out. The Sailor looks for cover.

"Hey, I can offer you cover, with my new power." Max offers.

"No way, I refuse" responds the Sailor. He finds a place to take cover, then takes his potions and starts hurling it in direction of Hannibal's oncoming army. The fighting ensues but it looks like Macchio's army is getting subdued. Macchio sees Hannibal and they start fighting head on. Water versus Earth. The land around them is getting deformed and filled with water. Small lakes and puddles are forming around them as they're bobbing and weaving.

"Yo Ethan! Follow her, she knows how to find your stone with her powers." yells Macchio, while dodging Hannibal's attack. Ethan sees the girl he was pointing to. She motions for him to

follow her and as they run and dodge attacks around them, she slows down and points to a kid with a backpack. Ethan tackles the kid like he was a football quarterback. He's then surrounded by soldiers but he kicks them back bit by bit. More come, and he grabs the kid by the waist and jumps out of the area, rising high in the air, to a clearing several meters away from the battle. He haggles the kid and while the kid is about to take out a red stone, Ethan snatches it from him.

"See ya" Ethan says, and he jumps away. While in mid-air his eyes glow like fire. A few kids look up, including Macchio.

"We got what we came for". Says Macchio. Hannibal's army is beginning to overwhelm them. "Retreaaaaatttt!!!" Macchio yells, dodging more of Hannibal's attacks and shooting water back in defense. The treasurer takes out a stone. It glows bright as a star. As Hannibal's army starts to chase them, they stop and scatter. As Macchio's army runs away, right in front of them.

"Where are they?" one of Hannibal's soldiers yell.

"They're gone!" yells another.

"I don't hear anything or sense any of them." a third soldier yells.

"Where they heck did they go?" Asks Hannibal, eyes widened.

"They got our treasure stone." says the kid Ethan had wrestled. He's out of breath and passes out.

"Don't worry, there's payback." swears Hannibal. Their forces retreat.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



In the Real World, Chief Pimentel enters Deputy Reese’s office.

“I’m here to notify that all officers are to attend a meeting.” says the Chief. All the officers gather in the center of the station for briefing. The Chief stands behind Deputy Reece.

“I just wanted to let everyone know, we’ve been notified by the state department, attorney general, and governor's office that our precinct is now part of an ongoing lawsuit and because of complications behind the case, our funding is getting cut, which means certain officers might have to be let go and shifts spread thin, unless we can ramp up our efforts to find the missing children, specifically the case of missing child Ethan Stoltz.” the Deputy announces. She clears her throat. “Marcus, I want to personally call you out, I know you’ve been doing a phenomenal job, but from here on, the whole task force will have to be involved on the double. The state department has issued orders for us to make an arrest quota to at least make it look like we’re doing something. Reagan Stoltz, the missing boy’s father has us under immense pressure, it is on, and the commissioner is tempted to take over if they don’t see results in the next six weeks. I’ll talk to each of you one by one to let you know the status of your service, and promptly transfer you to another precinct if you have made the list. I’m sorry about this. I’m sure y’all aren't liking it. But for what it’s worth, I feel we’re a great team and we’ll do everything we can to accommodate everyone. Thank you for your service and patience. Dismissed” says Deputy Reece. Marianna and Gil gather by the coffee pot alongside Marcus.

“This could put the community on edge and raise our wrongful arrests.” warns Gil in a low, hushed, voice.

“The chief says at this point, it’s better to catch the wrong person and it be nothing, than to not arrest anyone that might potentially be responsible for the problem.” replies Marianna. One officer overhears their conversation.

“Some officers are concerned about profiling.” The policeman whispers.

Marcus rushes home after the meeting. He’s combing through his case files and photos. A knock on the door, it’s Gil and Marianna.

“Hey, we’re heading out on patrol, in the SUV, wanna join us?” Asks Gil.

“Oh nice! Thanks guys but I’m following a lead that I think could potentially blow the whole lid wide open.” Marcus replies. Gil and Marianna look at each other.

“Well, I’m mean if you’re going to follow the leads, are you also looking into the disappearance of the shop owner and the Sentinel?” Asks Mariana.

“No.” Says Marcus. “I found a clue related to one of the suspects we apprehended near a school. He may have a partner stalking near where we arrested him and I think this could lead us to a whole trafficking network.” He continues.

“Look, Mark, we are struggling to convince you to follow the supernatural clues.” Argues Gil.

“Thanks guys, but we have a quota to fill and I’m not going to stop looking for Max...and I’m ok with science and logic on this one, Gil.” He replies.

“At least follow your gut.” Marianna insists.

“Sure.” says Marcus. Gil and Marina wave goodbye and walk away. Marcus closes the door. Days pass, while he’s growing closer to catching perps in town, he feels the dread of a dead end. Gil calls, Marcus answers.

“Hey bud, we received a tip that may have been related to one of your cases, but we’ve turned up empty. It’s frustrating not making any progress, I can’t just go arresting people at random, you know? How are things on your end?” asks Gil.

“It’s disheartening. There’s only so many kidnapers or terrorists we’re going to catch while Max might never be found.” Marcus answers.

“Well, you’re not gonna catch any bad guys couped up in your house all day, why don’t you come join us?” prompts Gil.

“Sorry, Gil. Look, I just need to do this alone. I need to get through this in some way shape or form. You guys have been great to me and I’m grateful, but it’s time I take this solo for a while. No one’s going to make progress unless we focus and right now, all I see is everyone just going all over the place. You and Marianna can do fine without me” Marcus argues.

“You’re pushing me and Marianna away. Why can’t you just, let go and join us?” Gil insist. “This isn’t good for you, Mark. You’re going down a dark path.”

“Yeah, well, I hear ya, just give me time ok?” says Marcus.

“Ok bud. Well, hang in there and I’ll just be patrolling around.” says Gil.

“Sure, ok.” says Marcus.

“Ok, well, talk to you later.” says Gil, voice hinting with disappointment.

During one of the parent meetings at his house, less people show up. Less than a handful arrive. Marcus looks at his watch.

“Where is everyone?” asks Marcus towards one of the remaining parents.

“Well, a lot of them are going to the ‘Save Our Children’ rally, led by Reagan.” says the parent.

“We’re probably going to start heading over there soon, we came just to give you the courtesy and also to thank you for giving it your all. We know you did your best, but a lot of us have seen the news and we’re becoming less encouraged the police can really do anything about it without taking a stand.” says the parent.

“But I AM police!” insist Marcus.

“We’re sorry about this, Mark.” replies the parent. The others approach Marcus and hug him. One by one, they leave the house until the last one closes the door. Marcus finds himself alone. A knock on the door is heard and Marcus answers. One of the parents, Sandy, returns holding a laptop.

“Sorry, I...” Sandy says.

“What is it?” asks Marcus. “You want to show me something?”

“Yes. But, I couldn't show anyone this. I was afraid ... I dunno. It’s something I haven’t been able to share with anyone. Please promise not to think I’m crazy.” Sandy replies.

“It’s on your laptop?” asks Marcus. Sandy shakes her head.



“It’s my daughters.” Sandy replies. She opens the notebook and goes to open a video file on the desktop labeled *haunt.mov*.

“I found this, rummaging through her stuff the night she was gone. She would record herself almost everyday for her friends on her social feed. I ... edited it...I don’t know how you’re going to feel when you see this. I haven’t shown anyone.” Sandy says.

Marcus nods. She hits the play button, it shows her daughter acting silly in front of the camera. It’s night time, the room is dark except for light from her screen and the front-facing warm luminance of her desk lamp, off frame. She talks to the camera but audio is mute. She stops as if she heard something. She looks behind her, pausing for a moment. She takes off her headphones, walks away from the camera to the corner of her room. A glow emanates from the vase placed there and as she places her hands on it, she suddenly dissipates. The vase vacuums the vapor, and with another glowing flash, she’s gone. The video loops over and over. It plays each time for 20 seconds. Marcus eyes widen.

In the Lost Realm, the King sees a Sentinel walk up to him and stop. The council erupts in disdain. Two more show up and reveal Kid Zero, emerging from their buoyant dark void.

“What are you doing here?” says the King irritable with him.

“I came to tell you about Hannibal’s rising, potentially taking over an island pretty soon. Wars are breaking out all over the islands and that you need to do something about it.” insists Zero.

“I’ve already sent my top officials out to enforce order” the King says.

“But...” Kid Zero says “you’re not building trust and loyalty with people. You need to curry favor before the other kids begin to take over.”

“You don’t tell me what to do. I tell YOU!” The King argues. Zero rolls his eyes.

“Start delivering on your promises. People want safety, security, food, shelter, and some distraction from their woes of life. And if you’re not giving them any of that but charging high tariffs and squeezing people, then make sure they’re at least well fed and entertained. Otherwise, it’s like the old saying, if you won’t love your significant other, someone else will.” urges Kid Zero. The king gets mad.

“And what do you suggest?” answers one of the council. “That we cut back on every decision we’ve made in the last few months?” she’s a young woman wearing full golden, glittering, makeup and an outfit to match. “It’s too late. We’ve already made provisions for all their cities and loyalties have grown over the last few weeks. We’re fine.” she assures.

“You’ll need to give up a few cities, make some sacrifices. You’re spread too thin. Too much damage has been done. If you can divert your resources to just your top cities and focus on defense, rally support, feed the people, rebuild trust, it’ll be the root of your growth.” argues Zero. The council member in gold was going to reply but the King stops her.

“We’ve still got our trump card” assures the King.

“It’s not enough” says Zero. “I’m warning you to scale back on smaller cities, fortify the larger ones.”

“And we say keep expanding.” argues the lady in gold.

“Eroding trust is an impossible taskmaster. Hardly won, easily lost. Don’t lose the support of the people or they will turn against you.” warns Kid Zero.

“Trust? We’re more popular than ever.” argues another council member. A young, stocky teen dressed in elaborate gold plating and matching tunic worn like a scarf. Zero looks the King in the eye.

“This is the last chance to save the throne I put you in.” Zero warns.

“Oh please, you’re no longer relevant, the council is with him at all times, we grew this kingdom into the first true empire of the Lost Realm, what have YOU done?” argues the golden armored male.

“I’m out there...” Zero points to the entrance. “scavenging the lands.”

“Thanks to our spies, there isn't anything we don't know.” retorts the lady in gold. “Your busy work is no surprise.”

“What does the king decide?” asks Zero. The King is silent.

“I’ll go with the council.” says the King. “Please understand Zero, I know you mean well, but I have to make the right decision. Sorry.” the King says. Staring at everyone, Kid Zero gives a scornful look. “Let’s make amends! I forgive you. Put all this behind us and move forward.” Says the King.

“You’re making a huge mistake” says Zero.

“Trust me” the King says. “Every decision I make is the right one.” Zero pauses for a moment, taking a good look at the council. “Hang out with us for a while.” urges the King.

“Thanks, but no thanks.” says Zero.

“Your loss.” says the King.

“You know, there’s an old Russian proverb.” Zero says, staring at the King for a moment. “If the chair gets too comfortable, you won’t feel a thing.” He smirks. Then Zero turns around and heads out of the courtyard stepping into a heavy, cloudy, mist along with the sentinels, fading into darkness. The smoke clears.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



In the real world, Hawthorne doodles on his notepad during class. He's drawing all kinds of crazy things. It's dark, thanks to the projector running a class presentation. In particular, he's drawing crows and palm trees and minerals. He's also drawing a picture of Amy in the front of the class. She gets a sense and looks back. Hawthorne just pretends like nothing. Later he walks out and sees Amy. He tries to walk up to her but gets timid.

The next day, he's at gym class. The coach, a tall, extra thin, woman in her 40s with short hair, sweatpants and dark hoodie is holding a limping, male student to her left.

"Alright everyone, we'll pause while I take Gus to the the office. And just a reminder to all of you that the reason we ask you to bring the proper shoes is to prevent you or anyone else from getting hurt by tripping over yourselves during laps in the gym. These floors are specially made for gym shoe performance." The kids break and some of them start talking amongst themselves.

"We should make a list of who is and isn't in class lately." One student says.

"The police should've caught the kidnapper by now." Says another.

"Did you see the guy on TV getting frantic? Says another student.

"Oh yeah he's talking about getting cops to bust everyone that even looks like a kidnapper, suspect, whatever." Replies another student.

"You know that's Amy's dad, right?" Another says

"How embarrassing." Says another.

"Heck, if I were missing, my parents would throw a party." Says a third teen.

“What about Meera, she’s been gone for several days.” Says a fourth student.

“She’s legit sick” Says a fifth student “just spoke to her yesterday”

“It sucks we haven’t been able to go out or do anything since the curfew.” Says the first student.

“Well they better catch the predator soon, ‘cause I’m goin’ crazy, know what um sayin’?” Says the second student.

“Hey, what about Max?” Asks the first student.

“Hawthorne should know.” Fifth kid says.

“Maybe Hawthorne keeps him in his art studio basement and uses his dead body for art.”

Sixth kid jokes

“Shut up.” Hawthorne tells him.

“What about Ethan?” second kid asks.

“I think Ethan was already planning to run away and use the missing kids thing as a cover.” says the sixth kid.

“I agree. There’s no way he’s kidnapped, nobody wants him.” says the seventh kid. The other students chuckle and the bell rings. The group head out. Hawthorne sees Amy walking outside and catches up to her.

“Hey Amy, how are you? Any word on Ethan?” Asks Hawthorne. Amy doesn’t say anything. She keeps walking. “Sorry about what happened.” he tells her. “I lost contact with Max the day of his disappearance.”

“Sorry.” Amy replies, softly.

“Be careful.” Hawthorne says.

“Thanks you too.” She says. Hawthorne watches Amy walk away from him, beating himself up for not being able to connect with her. Moments later, passed his home, he walks by Max’s house and sees the police car parked out front and decides to knock.

“Hey Mr. Park, any news about Max?” Asks Hawthorne.

“Sorry kiddo, no.” replies Marcus. “But is there anything else you may have remembered that you might have forgotten to tell me? Any detail?”

“Y’know, I mostly remember the book and compass Max showed me.” reminds Hawthorne.

“Ok, thanks” says Marcus.

“Hey, also, I wonder if you still have the book?” asks Hawthorne.

“No, it was part of a crime scene and everything is at the lab.” Marcus says. “I also want to tell you, Hawthorne, to stay safe and go home. It’s a dangerous time and it’s getting late. I don’t want to lose you too, kid.” Marcus warns. Hawthorne nods. “Say hi to your Mom for me. Thanks for coming by. If I hear anything, you’re the first to know. Max is lucky to have you as his friend.”

Hawthorne walks back home and on the way he passes by the antique store, closed and covered with ‘DO NOT CROSS’ yellow tape. He looks around, no one’s present. He takes his cell phone and cranks up the LED light from it. He looks and sees the place in shambles. Most of the artifacts are gone, but some remain. He notices a giant vault at the end, cracked open, but it’s empty. Nearby he sees a bronze picture frame left on the floor. It glitters a bit when his LED shines on it. The phone buzzes, he freaks out for a moment. The caller ID displays *Mom*. He swipes the screen with his thumb to ignore the call and texts.

*I’m coming now.*

He takes the picture frame, looks both ways and heads out of the parking lot and straight home.

“I’m pissed you’re late. You’re lucky the police haven’t picked you up thanks to the curfew.” yells Jane, Hawthorne’s Mom.

“No worries.” says Hawthorne. Jane gives him a harsh look. “Sorry, sorry, I won’t do it anymore. I’ll be careful next time.” he says.

“Terri needs a walk.” she orders. He puts his bag in his room, takes the dog, a latte-colored border terrier who starts growling at him, specifically at his room. Hawthorne takes him outside but Terri keeps staring at his room and barking.

“There's nothing there, you mutt”. Hawthorne reassures him. The dog refuses to take a leak, so Hawthorne walks half a block before Terri runs to a neighbors mailbox post and wizzes on it with gleeful panting. A patrol car drives by slowly, then speeds away. Hawthorne brings Terri back inside the house.

“What was that ruckus about?” Jane wonders.

“Dunno.” says Hawthorne, shrugging his shoulders. He goes upstairs.

“Dinner will be ready in an hour.” Jane yells.

“Alright.” yells Hawthorne. A brief pause. “Hey mom, what’s for dinner?” he asks.

“Ginger pork fajitas” she replies. Hawthorne shakes his head. He goes up to his room, takes out his sketch book and finds an art piece he loves for the bronze frame. He takes a marker, pens, and starts drawing all over it to make it look really cool. But then he pauses, yawns and rests his head on his desk. He closes his eyes.

*Ooooff!*

He wakes up. The painful feeling of someone who just kicked his side lingers. Looking out, the sky is blue above him, he’s surrounded by sand. A teen trips over him.

“Watch it, moron!” scolds the teen. Hawthorne freaks out, jolted out of his lying position like bread from a toaster. He can’t believe his eyes. All around him, dozens and dozens of scruffy teens, with stones and weapons in hand, powering up against one another, some with swords, guns, and daggers. Others yell orders to command ogres. Hawthorne’s eyes widen. Near the horizon, he notices the twin moons of the Lost Realm.

“What the hell is this?!” he whispers to himself.

In the real world, parents gather around the school at night. The rally from the PTA has grown much bigger. And Reagan is introducing everyone to Hawthorne’s Mom, Jane. She takes the mic.

“I just lost my son, it’s been a week and while I’m actually thankful for their effort, I wish more could be done by police, but they keep telling me how more and more cases keep piling up. They insist they don’t have the resources to find my son.” She says “It’s time for the community to take action against the people stealing our children and our families. We need more.” Everyone is riled up. Marcus and Gil are called to help do crowd control at the rally.

“Thanks Marcus, there aren’t too many officers that can help, we’re spread thin and at this point, you and Gil were chosen out of a hat with names.” says the dispatch over the patrol car’s radio. The news crew covers the rally as parents are marching in downtown, with signs like



‘SAVE OUR KIDS’ and ‘POLICE EVERYWHERE, JUSTICE NOWHERE’. Reagan at the front sees Marcus. They have a standoff. Reagan holds the microphone, pointing at Marcus.

“Incompetent police are the blame for this mess.” yells Reagan.

“ Oh yeah?” Marcus yells. “I’ve done more and busted more people than anyone in the force.” Gil tries to hold Marcus back but he pulls away. “On the contrary, you’ve done nothing”. Gil takes Marcus and makes him stand back.

“Alright parents, keep marching forward! Let’s send a message to our government that we won’t tolerate losing any more kids.” Reagan asserts. Students join them in the march also. They take up a huge part of downtown. As the crowd dissipates late into the night, Marcus and Gil head to the bar after and it’s all over the news.

“... talk about accusations of mishandling missing children's cases, despite several busts and wrongful arrests. People interviewed are saying they feel like they’re losing their town, no one feels safe anymore, whether it’s the kidnapers or police. Something needs to be done...” says the news reporter on TV. Gil and Marcus keep quiet, drinking, eating, and listening. “There’s a statement from the Mayor saying they’re doing everything they can, but the District Attorney's’ office is considering opening up an investigation into the cases and potential police misconduct.” the reporter continues.

“I admit, this whole thing is a mess” comments Marcus.

“Yeah.” Gil agrees. Marcus looks at a series of photos. “Are those from Nancy’s case?” asks Gil.

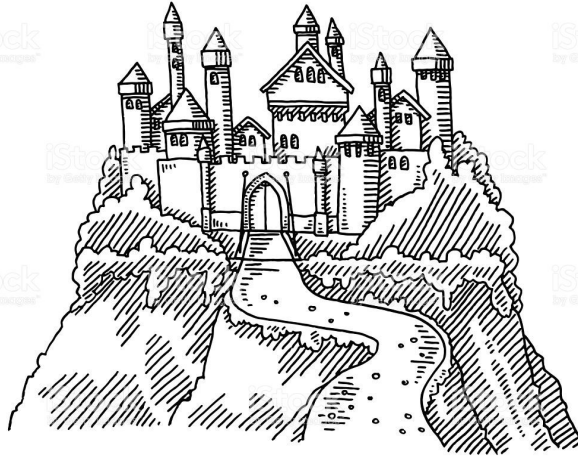
“Yup, someone printed them out for me and wanted to take a look.” replies Marcus. He notices a picture from Hawthorns desk.

“Hey, check this out.” Marcus shows Gil the photo. “It's from the antique store and I wonder if he passed by or snuck in?”

“Wanna check it out?” asks Gil. Marcus nods. Gil throws money on the table, waves at the waitress and Marcus follows him out. They arrive at the antique store, with flashlights drawn, walking the premises. Gil and Marcus stop and point their lights at the back room. This time, the vault is missing!



# CHAPTER NINETEEN



In the lost realm, an army of rebel stone users begin attacking one of the fortified cities of the kingdom. Knights wearing armor emerge, with swords backed by an army of automatic crossbow shooters and a mix of those with rifles. A handful of them start shooting at the rebels with stone-powered laser weapons. The rebels attack the imposing stone walls that fortify the kingdom. Citizens and merchants are escorted away into hiding by kingdom soldiers. A military commander raises her hand and an army of ogres begin attacking the rebels from both sides, east and west of the main gate. One of the stone users ushers in their comrades and with a glow of their stone, they pass through the wall like spirits, emerging on the other side, and throwing off the knight's attacks. Ogres, knights, and rifle shooters focus on the ghost stone user who then becomes the last into the city. The rest of the rebels remain outside, defending. One rebel stone user hops from one flying arrow to another with perfect timing, as if light as a feather, hopping over awnings, objects, and protruding brick, leaping over the kingdom wall. The rebel group, one by one, start taking out some of the crossbow shooters, while dodging laser attacks. Another rebel stone user glows with this tremendously bright light, temporarily blinding an horde of ogres, while the other rebels take advantage of the moment to counter the knights outside the walls. Another rebel stone user quickly runs around, taking cover, and begins touching those who are defeated, hurt, or falling to the floor. Their injuries disappear and they get back up. The healer jumps over a fallen ogre and while running past his comrades, he taps their shoulders, arms, or legs, while getting hit, but manages to instantly renew and heal those who've been touched. He's attacked by a knight and is injured. After taking cover again, he uses his stone to

recover. Another rebel uses her power to draw energy from hordes of ogres, punching, kicking, and body slamming them. The horde keep crowding around her as she keeps pushing her powers to the limit. She's superhuman, knocking out hundreds of ogres, fighting with the expertise of a master martial artist. But as the fighting continues, she starts to turn green, hair whitens, and she passes out, knocking the few remaining ogres around her. A mist covers her body. Hundreds of her fallen ogre opponents are lying on the ground. The remaining ones crowd around her. One of them grabs her, picks her up, and lifts her up to their commander.

"Awaken!" shouts the commander. She wakes up and struggles to be let go. She jumps to her feet and joins the horde, attacking rebels. A giant spider emerges and attacks the front gate. The kingdom forces focus their attacks on the spider as the front gate is getting damaged by its fangs.

A couple of kingdom forces teleport just outside the gate to confront the spider, while the rebels defend. One rebel user touches their opponent as their stone glows and they fall asleep, drained of energy. Another and then another, one by one, many around him are instantly lulled into slumber. A kingdom knight with a stone on her chest deflects every weapon, stab, and physical assault from the rebels. No matter how many times she's attacked, there's not a scratch. She counter-attacks the rebels around the gate. Then, the rebel leader summons her stone, melting armor and swords from knights that come near her. The metal re-forms into chrome spheres that drop to the ground, while others attack their former wearer. As the rebels defend their leader approaching the gate, she melts the hinges and rivets, re-molding them into metal spheres that are then thrown against ogres and knights. The gate becomes a bunch of wooden planks and fall. Rebels from the other side knock the wooden gate towards the spider, who eats it and starts entering the front. A kingdom stone user summons a giant sized, reflective, flying skateboard that takes him closer to the battle, then jumps off and uses it like a shield to deflect attacks. With a wave of his hand, the skateboard floats in mid-air. He aims it to attack rebels and succeeds to knock out the rebels. Then gestures it to attack the spider at bullet speed, instantly knocking it unconscious and summoning it back. He gets on the skateboard and rides it, mid-air, back behind city walls, and returns it to his stone while taking cover. Another kingdom stone user summons a ghost who attack the rebel leader, whose attention is diverted. But it's too late. As they're fighting against knights, soldiers, and ogres one on one, the rebel army pours into the

kingdom's open entrance. Kid Zero arrives with sentinels and four other stone users. One of them uses a stone power that erects a giant brick wall out of the ground, separating the rebels from the kingdom army. Another harnesses electricity, zapping and numbing the rebels en masse. Another one uses their stone power, and the rebels begin to fall back, as if gravity were sucking them back. Then, a second major reinforcement army of ogres arrive. As the commander shouts for newly-arrived ogre army to attack, many of the stone users who turned, regardless of affiliation, rise from the ground to join them, all directing their efforts against the rebels. The leader calls for a retreat and the rebels start to fall back. Some of them form into liquid and seep into the ground, another projects an illusion of flying skulls, scaring back the kingdom army forces. Another turns into vapor. A few more rebels get on a giant bird and fly away. Eventually the coast is clear but the kingdom is heavily damaged and covered in heavy, amber mist. One of the kingdom stone users repairs the walls. Another makes the mess and clutter disappear. Kid Zero whispers orders to the captain who nods in agreement. The other stone users he brought into the battle rejoin him, awaiting his direction.

"Finish off and secure the perimeter." Zero tells them. His sentinels surround him and he disappears with them into the dark void created in front of them.

"Walk with me to the town center." asks one of Kids Zeros stone users to another. She projects her voice and image like a giant castle-sized hologram into the air, visible to the whole kingdom.

"We would like to inform everyone on behalf of the King, that the battle is over. You are safe and have nothing to fear. Please remain calm while our forces gather the injured. If you are unharmed, please enlist with your nearest captain for further instructions, help those who may be struggling. Thank you for your cooperation." says the giant headed hologram. Everyone in the kingdom stares.

In the real world. Hawthorne's Mom is crying. Marcus is consoling her.

"I'm sorry Mark, I'm losing my mind. I'm worried, scared." Jane says.

"I'm sorry. I know this is a tough moment. Max is out there and I'm angry not being about to find him." answers Marcus. "I'm doing everything I can but it's not enough. Is there anything you can remember? Anything going on that you forgot to mention?" Jane shakes her head,

sobbing. “You have every right to be upset, I feel partly responsible not escorting him home.” says Marcus. “But somehow, I gotta believe we’ll see our boys again.” His cell buzzes. He answers the phone and shakes his head. “Sorry, I have to take this” he says. Jane nods, Marcus puts his hand on her shoulder “It’s gonna be alright. Please keep me posted if anything else comes up.” he says and heads out. Jane nods again and closes the door.

Later, a knock on her door. A woman in red with beautiful hair and makeup waves hello.

“Hi, sorry to bother you. I’m a rep from the PTA and wanted to come visit you. Is this a good time?” the woman asks. Jane remains quiet. “Hey listen, sorry about your son, but um, I came by to follow-up since you were part of the rally. Also, wanted to warn you about talking to police. We live in a difficult time. They don’t have our backs anymore, they don’t have our best interest at heart, they’re only out to take care of their own. All the parents and teachers need to stick together.” says the rep.

“Thanks.” says Jane.

“I also wanted to give you this before I go.” The woman says, handing her a nicely decorated, double sized shoe box. “It’s a care package that’s been put together by other parents who’ve had their children missing and a meeting card invite.” Jane holds it, appreciating its size, weight, and color. She sniffles a bit.

“Thank you, that’s really sweet.” she says. Her cell rings. The caller ID reads *Marcus*.

“Are you gonna answer that?”. The woman asks. Jane hesitates but chooses *Ignore* on the phone.

“Please thank the PTA lead.” replies Jane, with a slight smile “I’d love to come to the meeting.”

In the Lost Realm, the King receives a messenger in the court.

“...afterwards, we secured the perimeter, the gates are now under repair, but we suffered heavy casualties.” concludes the messenger, recounting everything that happened.

“Congratulations, your majesty on this notable victory” says one council member. The rest of the council clap.

“It’s a warning!” yells Kid Zero, interrupting, and appearing instantly before them. The council and King are taken by surprise. “You need to fortify ALL your kingdoms against stone user attacks which are only going to get worse.”

“Everything works out in the end.” The King says.

“Not this again.” says another council member, rolling her eyes.

“You’ll lose your throne if you ignore my warning.” replies Zero.

“Is that a threat?!” yells another council member, standing up. The King motions for the council member to sit down. The council member calms a bit. “anyway...that last coup worked out.” the council member argues.

“If I hadn’t cleaned after the King, it would’ve been an even greater disaster.” Zero says.

“You’re gonna let him speak ill of you like that?” yells another council member. “We should have him arrested and executed.” The king stares and Zero but doesn’t say a word. The King again urges with a gesture of his hand for the council member to calm down and sit.

“If you stupid fools don’t listen and fortify your defenses, the King will lose his throne.” Zero tells the council.

“Who are you, to make threats to the King?” asks another council member.

“It’s not a threat, it’s a promise.” answers Zero. The council gets really upset. The King squirms in his chair.

“We’ve got it all under control and if you keep harassing us, you’ll no longer be welcome in court.” says the first council member. Zero looks at the King.

“Do you understand my warning?” he urges. The King looks at Zero and his council. He stares at the ground, then back at Zero. “It’s not that hard, say the word and it’s done, you’re a damn King, you have all the power in the world, I don’t get you.”

“We’re doing fine. Don’t bother me about this anymore or like they said, you won’t be welcome anymore. We’ve got more stone users than they do and we control most of the islands. You’re just paranoid. We can’t lose.” affirms the King. Kid Zero smiles.

“Sure, bro.” says Zero. Along with the sentinels he walks out of the courtyard. But while the sentinels disappear into the void, Zero vaporizes into the wind.

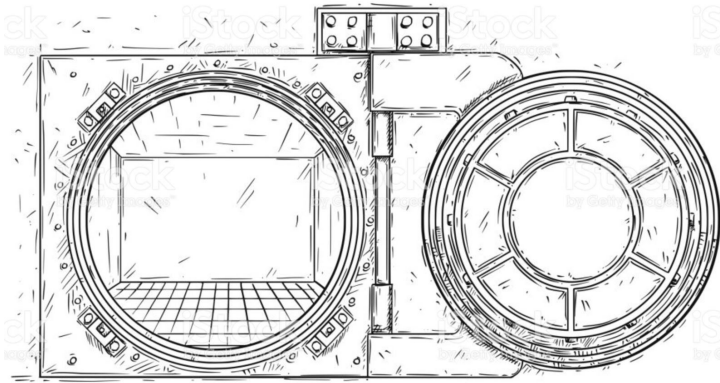


The rebels gather at their hiding place after their loss, recouping their wounded, dejected, and feeling helpless. Some of them are almost ogres but not quite. One of the healers along with a team are tending wounds. One of them realizes among the injured, there's someone new and fresh, based on their modern clothes but battered and bruised, almost knocked unconscious.

“We got a frosh!” yells the healer. The leader walks over to him. She bends down.

“Kid, you got one hell of a timing”. She says. It's Hawthorne!

# CHAPTER TWENTY



In the real world, Marcus is on the trail of the missing vault. Looking through evidence from previous cases at home, he's trying to find any link between all of the disappearances, gangs, thugs, and people he's arrested with priors. Gil is with him, sorting through files and photos.

"This strange, powdery residue is the only lead that ties a lot of cases together but very little of it seems to have anything to do with the kidnappings." Marcus explains. "There is, however, a gang of smugglers who work for an underground group known as the Albatross. They have a specific tattoo marking with wings." Marcus continues, updating Gil.

"I'm not sure what's the correlation either, but most of the suspects have disappeared." Gil confirms.

"I'd like to head over to the county office to follow up on that lead when we started the case, regarding the powder." Marcus says.

"The magic powder?" Teases Gil. "Are you now realizing all your logic has gone out the window?"

"No. But, I'm willing to consider maybe there's ... something." Replies Marcus.

"I'm telling you, this is some Area 51 stuff, I'm not sure you're ready for this." Gil jokes.

"Right, well, lock the door on the way out ok?" Marcus retorts. "Try not to get kidnapped by aliens." He continues. Gil smirks.

Marcus heads to the county station. He talks to the lab coordinator.

"It was sent off but the test results never came back." Says the lab coordinator, operating a magnetic stirrer used to quickly blend chemicals.

"How long?" Asks Marcus.

“Gosh I don’t know, it’s been months.” The lab tech replies.

“What?!” Marcus reacts.

“I tried to follow up but the sample never made it.” Says the lab tech. “I can’t find a copy of the custody form. It strikes me as odd but this kind of stuff happens more than I’d like to admit, yet this one feels different for some reason, I can’t put my finger on it” he says. “Sorry I couldn’t be more helpful.” he concludes. Marcus thanks the lab tech and leaves the station. He picks up Gil from his home to go on patrol. They roam around the neighborhood.

“Everything ok?” Asks Gil.

“I’m realizing, someone in our dept has been tampering with our case evidence.” Marcus confides. “We need someone who can help us figure out what’s happening without tipping anyone off. We need to go under the radar a little.”

Marcus goes to visit Hawthorne's' mom. She’s reluctant to answer.

“Please Jane, I really need your help, please.” Marcus begs.

“Look, Mark, you’ve got all the help you need.” Jane replies, defensive. “I’m feeling worse by the day.” The phone buzzes. Marcus looks at her. “Sorry Mark, I need to take this.” she says, closing the door. Marcus leaves, disappointed. With Gil, he goes back to the antique store, this time, around the missing vault area.

“We’ve been here a many times already, what are you hoping to find? It’s a dead end.” complains Gil. Marcus carefully combs through the area of the missing vault using his flash light and cell brightness, aiming at the tattered carpet.

“This!” Replies Marcus. He takes out a glove, runs his finger through an area of the floor where the missing vault was, and shows it to Gil.

“Never thought we’d find some of that again.” Gil replies. It’s the powder, glittering in light, glowing. “And don’t worry about the lab. I think I know someone who might help.” He says.

The next day they knock on the door of this woman who comes out dressed in pseudo army clothes, glasses, and with a pixelated, angry ghost on her shirt. Marcus recognizes her as Judy, Max’s science teacher.

“Hey Gil! Marcus! Welcome to my humble abode, come in, come in.” She says. Marcus gives them both a strange look as they proceed to sit down on the couch.

“I don’t believe this, how do you guys know each other?” Asks Marcus, smirking.

“Gil and I dated but it didn’t work out and we’re friends now.” Judy says. Gil explains to her about the case and strange things surrounding their investigation.

“What I’m about to show you cannot be discussed with anyone, ok? Just want to make it really clear. I don’t want you to get in trouble or hurt if anything happens.” reminds Marcus.

“Yeah.” Says Judy. Marcus shows her the powdery residue and it’s unnatural, sparkling reaction to light.

“Woah. That’s really neat! I’ve never seen anything like that.” Judy says with wonder. “But if you guys can wait until everyone leaves the school, I might be able to use some of the gear they have to figure out what it is.”

By nightfall, they arrive at school, but there’s a PTA meeting happening in the auditorium. They sneak past the meeting’s door, down the hallway, into the science room. Marcus and Gil are dressed casual. They take a look around.

“Can you guys help me with this?” Judy asks. She hands them containers to hold and pour while she’s tuning the equipment. She starts mixing, spinning, and boiling chemicals with the powder. She prepares the beakers and test tubes, then looks at the results through a microscope. The guys wait quietly for what seems like an eternity. Marcus wakes from Judy’s sudden shriek. “You’re not going to believe this, it’s not like anything we’ve ever seen.” She says. “It’s not just reacting to light, but similar to photons at the subatomic level, the actual properties of this thing is physically altering by observer effect!” She concludes, heavily breathing with excitement.

“I’m sorry, you lost me.” Says Gil. “What does that mean?”

“The observer effect? Hello? Everyone knows about it? Right?” Judy asks. Gil and Marcus look at her, expressionless. “Um, ok, well, it’s a theory that simply observing a situation or phenomenon, changes it. An instrument, for instance, can change what they measure in some manner because it has to. Like, for example when you’re checking the air pressure on your tires, it’s hard to do without letting out some air, thus changing the pressure. Or it’s impossible to see something without light hitting it, causing it to reflect what hit it. While it’s often negligible, the thing you’re measuring still experiences a change.”

“Ok.” Says Marcus.

“What’s special in this case?” Asks Gil.

“I was getting to that.” She smirks. “So, a strange version of this happened within quantum mechanics through a famous experiment done by Dr. Weizmann in the 90’s. It was dubbed ‘the double-slit experiment using photons to measure the trajectory of light. But... the observer in this case was a machine, not a human, yet the results changed even when it wasn’t supposed to. Because the word ‘observer’ makes people think it has to be a human being, it’s led to the belief that a conscious mind can affect reality. But the fact that someone has to be conscious was rejected by science as an misunderstanding rooted in poor grasp of the quantum wave function  $\psi$  and the way it gets measured. But in this case, it’s really true!” She concludes with a dramatic, giddy smile. Marcus and Gil continue to stare at her, overwhelmed by the continuous rant. Her eyes roll. While she figures out another way to explain, Gil interjects.

“I think I get it, but you’re saying the powder is somehow reacting to our thoughts?” Asks Gil.

“Exactly!” She says.

“Woah. Woah. Hold on. How?” Asks Marcus, confused more than ever. “And what does that mean about the powder? What is it?”

“That’s the thing I’m kind of losing my mind over. This thing isn’t on the periodic table. You guys, this is a whole new element!” She says.

“Ok, what were you about to say earlier?” Marcus asks.

“I’m trying to think of a way to explain it better...” Judy says. “Oh, right. You guys are cops, perfect example. Ok, think of light itself, or rather photons as bullets from your gun.” says Judy.

“Ok.” says Marcus.

“Imagine you shoot them one at a time. What if every time you shot a bullet, wherever you aim it, even if you do it a million times, the bullets only make five, perfect, evenly spaced holes, regardless how you do it.” Judy explains.

“Go on.” Gil says.

“But what if there was a weird exception? Shooting one bullet at a time, normally lands on any one of the five holes no matter what. Except what if just staring, actually paying attention to

a bullet, as it hits it's target, makes it behave like a normal firearm? And if you stop paying attention, it goes back into the five?"

Gil and Marcus are bewildered.

"Is it supernatural? Is it a haunted bullet?" asks Gil.

"Well no, but it's one of the issues with light and photons that has perplexed physicists for decades and they can explain it away as misunderstood math. Yet, this powder, this strange powder... is doing exactly the thing they said can't be possible. It's not just reacting to light, but magnifying it's behavior. It doesn't do anything when I'm not paying attention, but when I'm focused intently on it, radiation emits! In other words, this stuff behaves and changes all of its properties just on how aware you are with it. Instead of doing the thing with one bullet at a time, it's doing it with all the bullets all the time." Judy says. Marcus and Gil look at each other. Gil lets out a heavy sigh and buries his head in his hands. Marcus shakes his head. She takes a little bit of it, mixes it with warm water and places it in her hand. She starts to focus, and the liquid begins to glow. Gil and Marcus freak out. Marcus stares at her hand in horror. "I don't know what's going on." she says. "But this stuff is not known to modern science. It's not a drug, nor synthetic, you can't make this in a lab as far as I know, it's something else entirely. Otherworldly, even." Judy confesses.

In the Lost Realm, Max, Claire, Ethan, Macchio, Sailor, and the rest of their gang are walking through the thickness of a heavy jungle, recouping. They follow Macchio into a remote village, hidden in the heart of the island's coast. Many are still recovering, some are working on weapons, others are healing and applying first aid. Macchio offers Ethan, Max, Claire, and Sailor a tour of the place. He shows them where to get food, where they clean their clothes, and if they want to try out stone powers, there's a depot. The food court is running like a full fledged yet makeshift kitchen with tables and there's a series of contraptions that help automate laundry. For the depot, they have a large, square, space half the size of a small tennis court with targets and practice dummies, along with stone collections and a clipboarded record of who's been in and out of there. A young lady watches the area and grants permission for Macchio to show them around. He takes out a jewelry box the size of a toaster oven with stones placed in each compartment by volume, color, shape, and type.

“They’re all quasi useless. This one glows really bright, this one melts ice, oh, and this one in particular tastes like any flavor you want when you lick it.” says Macchio. He takes it out and holds it close to the Sailor’s face “wanna try?” he asks. The Sailor shakes his head with disgust. Max gives a grossed out reaction. He puts the stone back into the box, thanks the depot’s guard, and moves on to their training center for weapons, entertainment, and where they gather for meetings. He shows them the entrance to the camp. “But don’t leave just yet.” he warns. They walk out in the jungle once again and when they turn around, the camp is gone! Macchio throws a pebble and it disappears. “An Illusion!” he yells sarcastically.

“Is it stone power?” asks Max.

“Partly.” replies Macchio. “We still have to think like magicians. Earlier when we came, you saw it because they took down the barrier for maintenance. But once it’s up, you can see what it does. Once you make the surrounding areas match and blend together, the illusion holds well. We use a lot of wood and foliage to mask the edges where it’s not easy to tell what’s going on. One of our earlier members made a huge sacrifice to make this possible.”

“You mean Carrie?” Slade interjects.

“Yeah.” Macchio concurs with a sigh. “The Illusion only works over a specific part of the camp. The rest of it is still careful planning and rock placement. I know it goes without saying and I trust you guys, but this is why we need you to stay hush about this place no matter what. It’s our best, most closely guarded, secret.” says Macchio. He takes them back into the camp, through different sections, into a large tent with dirt floor. In the center is a hole in the ground with a wooden ramp. Macchio urges Ethan to offer some lighting. Ethan uses his new stone powers, setting a few wooden planks on fire and handing everyone a torch. They walk down to a network of tunnels. “Each of these run through the island. They all lead to different coastlines, but very few people ever survive, since it’s a maze. Nonetheless, we’re safe. Traps are everywhere and we’ve got gang members taking turns on guard duty. Anyhoo, that’s our tour.” Everyone remains quiet. Macchio claps his hands. “It’s time to eat, relax, and recover!”

“It’s time for me to head out.” says the Sailor.

“Why not stay?” Max wonders.

“Look, kiddo, I don’t belong here. The sea calls.” the Sailor replies.



“You should stay for the meeting, we could use your input.” Macchio insists.

“What meeting?” the Sailor asks.

“Well, we’ve retreated from Hannibal’s attack and just stolen one of their greatest treasures. There’s no way you’re not going to come back alive. They’ll go after everyone and we need to figure out a way to counter their next attack” says Macchio.

“Not my problem” says the Sailor.

“C’mon, you should stay.” Max pleads. “At least for the meeting.”

“Aren’t you comin’ with me?” the Sailor asks. Max checks his pockets, but before he can take his hand out, the Sailor refutes, waving his hand at him. “Forget the compass...do you want to come with me or not?” asks the Sailor.

“Well, I need to che—” Max says until the Sailor speaks up.

“Forget whatever the compass says, what do YOU want?” he exclaims.

“I don’t know.” Max replies.

“Fine”. The Sailor replies. Then he asks again, to the whole group around them “Is anyone coming with me or y’all stayin’?”. Everyone either looks down or away, there’s no answer.

“Yeah, well, I’m not thrilled but not surprised either.” says the Sailor.

“Let’s have the meeting right away.” Macchio calls, clapping his hands. Everyone follows him.

“You should come.” Max insists with the Sailor.

“Whatever.” the Sailor replies. Shaking his head in agreement, pretending not to care.

“Let’s unite!” Macchio proposes to the whole gang in the center of camp. “With the addition of the Sailor’s crew, Max, and Ethan, and a few more recruits on Leaper patrol, we’ll be able to give Hannibal a run for his money and take over the island!” The crowd whistles and cheers as Macchio delivers his line with the dramatic flair of a showman.

“Can’t be a part of this, but I wish you all the best of luck.” The Sailor yells.

“I’m sorry too, but I also can’t follow you guys or the Sailor, I’m going home.” says Max. Some of the people among the crows give Max a strange look.

“How?!” asks one of Macchio’s gang members. “As if you have some kind of power to teleport outta here?”

“No.” says Max. He takes out his compass. The Sailor buries his head in his hands. “See this?” Max announces to everyone. “It’s pointed me in the right direction, every time. And even though it hasn’t led me home, it’s taken me closer and closer to the possibility, and I’ve been always in the right place at the right time. I believe the compass’ power is in piecing all the right events together in order for the possibility of home to happen, for it to be a reality.” he says with a loud voice. Some of the kids jump and get really upset, other kids start to get excited. There’s arguing among everyone in the meeting.

“Settle down.” Macchio tells them. The crowd settles a bit, but the mood has shifted to confusion. “Look, if the compass hasn’t taken you home yet, maybe it’s not really taking you there? What if you’re just assuming? And you know what happens when you assume?” jokes Macchio.

“Ha, yeah you make an ASS out of U and ME.” Max says. “But this, brought me here and as I understand it, artifacts never travel back with their Leaper.”

“Why would something that brings you here, then lead you back? That doesn’t make sense, man.” Another gang member argues.

“I believe, the compass has some kind of higher purpose. I don’t believe the compass is simply here to save me but to take me to all the people that are willing to follow to be saved.” says Max. The crowd erupts. Many in the group are offended. Others wonder.

“You think you’re a hero or some kind of god? Like, seriously?” a gang member yells. The crowd starts to get a bit hostile towards Max. Jeering at him.

“You should’ve been home already if you were telling the truth, you poser.” Slade yells.

“Yo! Everyone calm down, simma down! Listen, hold up, hold up!” yells Macchio. The crowd calms a bit. “I get why we’re all upset. Max is getting a bit weird on us here, and yeah Slade, I agree he’s a total poser. Look, what he’s saying has huge implications. But let me play devil’s advocate here... what if it’s true? That compass pointed at Hannibal’s surprise attack before our fight started and it helped lead our escape. It’s got something, but I personally don’t think it leads anyone home.”

Macchio argues.

“You’re right, I can’t prove it.” Max says. “But I’m willing to believe, and anyone else who wants to believe also can follow me. At least, we’ll be led somewhere interesting. If the compass led us here, it means you may have something, some ingredient to us going home, or maybe it meant to locate Ethan, I’m not sure. But I feel the more I do what the compass says, the closer I get.”

“WE, had to save your life! And there is no one, in the history of the island that’s EVER escaped in the real world.” Slade yells.

“News flash, there are beings that can travel between worlds at will, of course there’s a gateway!” The Sailor argues. The crowd freaks out.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Slade retorts.

“Wha bu yu takkin abou?” the Sailor repeats, making fun of Slade. “I’m talking about the Sentinels! Ever heard of em?! They’re under the King’s control? Hello? And they might be the ones responsible for all the artifacts that got us here in the first place!” yells the Sailor. The crowd is quiet, almost in shock.

“Woah, hold on, Sailor, where did you get this info from?” Macchio questions.

“Kid...” the Sailor says “I’ve been in the Lost realm a loooooong time. Probably way before any of you have ever Leaped here” The crowd’s murmur breaks into silence.

“I’ll join you, Max.” One teen says. “I miss my family.” the teen continues. The crowd look at each other, murmuring in confusion.

“Same.” says another female. The crowd’s silence erupts into mayhem, the gang argue among each other, ‘can we really go home?’ they wonder.

“What about those who leapt years ago? Will they still be kids? Or age quickly?” asks one gang member out loud.

“Will our families even recognize us? or be alive?” asks another.

“What about those from different countries, how would they get back?” asks a third. Too many questions linger among the crowd.

“That’s enough! Simmer down!!” Macchio tells everyone. He walks up to a big wooden crate filled with sand. He turns to one of his female generals, “Bring up the island map.” he requests. She takes out her stone and throws it in the middle of the sandbox. She waves her hand over it as

the stone starts to glow. The sand begins to morph into the shape of the island and hardens into a perfect scale model with all of its details. Another teen takes water and pours it into the outer edges. It leaks a bit out of the shoddy, wooden, frame, Macchio uses his stone and holds the water in place, landing almost exactly where ocean meets coastline. Macchio waves his hands and the water starts to foam and form waves, behaving like ocean on a smaller scale.

“Show off.” says the female general. Macchio smiles.

“Max, put your compass on the island to see where it’s pointing.” Macchio requests.

“Seriously!?” Slade argues. “That compass may not mean anything. It could be pointing to other stones or locate Leapers... or perhaps it’s random, or worse, maybe it’s being manipulated by Max to make it look like he’s going somewhere?”

“I don’t follow anyone or anything except whatever the compass tells me.” Max insists.

“Let’s not waste our time any further with nonsense, we need to worry about Hannibal’s next attack.” Slade argues.

“Ok but what if the compass is really the real deal?! Then does it matter?” another teen argues.

“You know, I like a good gamble and I’m curious. Alright, let’s hold off on Hannibal, let’s see where the compass points.” Macchio declares.

“I don’t know if this is going to work—” says Max but Macchio interrupts.

“Aw c’mon. After all that fiery speech you gave us you’re gonna hold back? Show a little confidence, man.” Macchio demands.

“Fine.” says Max. He places the compass on the island model. As he follows its direction, it keeps pointing and turning to a location just outside the sandbox. The crowd murmurs.

“It’s pointing outside the island.” says Max. Macchio waves his hand over the crowd, directing them to hush.

“Try ALL the islands.” the Sailor shouts. The general shifts the sandbox with a gesture of her hand and a heavy stare, to form 12 islands. Max moves his compass around the scale model, but it points to an area in the middle of the ocean, away from all the islands.

“See, I told you, it goes nowhere” Slade interjects.

“You’re wrong, punk! The compass is on to something. That spot in the middle of the ocean, most people aren’t going to know about it.” the Sailor argues.

“What are you talking about?” asks the general.

“There are 13 islands, not 12” Says the Sailor. The crowd erupts into murmuring. The Sailor raises his voice “And like the stone power used to hide your base, there’s a mist that hides the whole whole island. The only way to get there is to know exactly where it is.” he insists. The crowd continues to murmur. Macchio tries to hush them. It takes a bit before they calm.

“Have you been there?” asks Macchio.

“No. It’s considered taboo for anyone to go there. I’ve never step foot.” the Sailor answers.

“Then how do you know it exists?” Slade argues.

“Because I’ve seen it!” Yells the Sailor. “I know it’s there.” he continues. The gang freaks out. The crowd murmurs again. Macchio looks around.

“Alright everyone, from here, on, we follow Max and the compass. Maybe this time we can all go home.” announces Macchio. Everyone cheers.

“OH, just like that, huh?!” Slade yells, angry. “Yeah, we’re just going to change plans and follow Max and the magic compass just because he says it’s true?” Slade turns to the crowd.

“How can everyone be so simple minded and naive? We have a war to win! Hannibal is coming for us and if we don’t take care of our own, then we’re gonna get slaughtered and lose everything we’ve worked hard for. Don’t be fools and believe what someone you’ve just met for a day tells you. What if he’s a spy? What if he’s working for Hannibal? How do we know he’s not going to sell us out?” yells Slade. The crowd grows quiet.

“Yo Slade! Relax.” yells Macchio. “We got it under control, man. We can’t send everyone out into the ocean anyway. Only a select few of us can go on this mission. Let’s call it ‘recon’. The rest of us will proceed as planned to play defense and hold the fort. Don’t worry about it, we’ve got this.

“I agree. We can’t let go of an opportunity if it’s legit, man.” concurs the general.

“Ok, I’ll bite. Let’s say it’s true and we CAN go home. What about those of us who don’t want to? My family is right here! Who’s with me?” yells Slade. Half the crowd cheers, the other half in dismay. The group is deeply divided.

“This could be our only chance!” yells Claire.

“And what if we fail?” Slade interjects. “With Hannibal, we need all the help we can get, all hands on deck to guarantee a win.” he argues.

“I’ll be in charge then, no way I trust you to lead if everyone disappears on island 13.” says the general.

“We can’t fit too many people in our boats, let’s keep the core group small, go recon, and if the rumors are true, then a few will go back to the camp, report, and lead the way for the rest.” warns one of the generals.

“Those who want to go home can join and we’ll draw straws for it. Those who want to stay, can stay.” Macchio suggests.

“Are you leaving us?” asks one of the gang, looking at Macchio.

“Ha.” Macchio reacts sarcastically. “I like the idea of adventure, who knows what’s on that island? I’d rather live to find out than die never knowing. Don’t worry, I’ll be back”. He says. The crowd cheers.

“And as far as who is going to be in charge of the camp while you’re gone?” asks Slade.

“Well, either you or the general can choose to flip a coin or fight for it.” responds Macchio.

“Combat.” says the general.

“Coin.” Slade insists.

“Ok everyone, we have a draw. Let’s get a vote. Whatever gets the loudest cheer is how we decide your new captain while I’m gone. Ready?” Macchio asks the crowd. They wait, quiet. “Coin!” yells Macchio. The crowd reacts mildly. “Ok then, Combat!” says Macchio. The crowd erupts into frenzy. Many of them laughing at the childish outburst of a sarcastic crowd.

“You had to ask?” says one of the soldiers.

“Everyone wants combat.” Macchio acknowledges. “Alright, let’s clear the space and tonight, right before sundown, we’ll have a fight.” he says. The crowd cheers. He waits until they calm and he continues. “No rules except don’t kill and no stones. Let see these two go at it. Whoever wins will be your new captain while I’m gone and promise not to lose to Hannibal.” he says.

Ethan looks visibly upset.

“What’s up?” asks Max.

“Nothing, jerk. There’s not much I can say or do.” Ethan answers.

That night, Slade loses to the general who becomes the new leader. During celebrations, Slade heads down, while injured, to the underground tunnels. A few from the squad ask where he’s going.

“Away.” he says.

“We’ll join you”. They answer.

“Don't you want to go home?” He asks.

“We don’t care, it’s getting lame anyway, being here” another says. Slade smiles.

“Alright then, come with me and make sure to keep up!” he says with a grin, limping. Around the main campgrounds, Max, Macchio, and the rest of the gang celebrate their new plan and work out the details.

Ethan sneaks away towards the tunnels, noticing Slade and a handful of the crew were headed there. He wonders where they went. A female guard catches up to him.

“Everything ok?” asks the guard. Ethan stares at the entrance to the tunnels.

“Yeah, it’s nothing.” he replies. The guard glares at Ethan while he ignores her and walks away.

# CHAPTER TWENTY ONE





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In the real world, Marcus barely has any attendees left in his home meetings. After dismissing the group one of the parents approach him.

“Hey Mark, thanks for hosting tonight.” Says the parent.

“Sure, sure. Um actually I wanted to ask you something. I notice less people are coming, most of the parents have gone to the PTA, Im feeling like maybe I’m losing my touch?” Says Marcus, concerned.

“Don’t give up..” Says the parent.

“Thanks. By the way, have you heard from Jane at all?” Asks Marcus.

“I haven’t lately, sorry.” She says “ but I have seen her at the PTA meetups from time to time.”

“Thanks.” Marcus Says. She leaves behind the casserole she made. “Thanks again.” he says and closes the door behind her but then it stops. Gil shows up along with Judy the science teacher.

“What...brings you guys here?”

“Hope you don’t mind, Judy might give us a better lead on some of the other crime scenes.” Gil insists.

“What we’re doing is against the law and can put Judy in danger.” says Marcus.

“I don’t mind.” says Judy. “I loved Max, as well as the other students who were missing and I’d like to help any way I can.” Marcus nods and welcomes them in, closing the door. Gil goes through the evidence on the kitchen table. Judy continues, “I located a professor who was a

friend of my teacher in college who may be able to give us more details about that crazy substance. Maybe somehow it'll lead us to the kids?" she smiles.

"A little over-optimistic but you got us results!" adds Gil.

"I don't know. Listen, I don't want to think too much about it. We didn't really use the same gear as the lab and I don't know what to make of it, but none of what we found is admissible in a court case anyway. There has to be a more grounded clues, you know, like fingerprints, DNA, something?" says Marcus. Judy frowns a bit and looks at Gil. Gil walks over to Marcus.

"Look. I get it, I understand how you feel. But Mark, we've followed every clue in the last couple of weeks and it's gotten us nowhere. Whatever this stuff is, it's big. Someone with serious pull had to make it happen, let's think of it from that angle!" says Gil. Marcus looks away in disapproval, Gil holds him by the shoulders to keep his attention. "Look, Mark, you've got a choice to make. Either you let go of your disbelief, at least SOME disbelief in the supernatural or follow what your logic as a cop tells you." Gil walks back towards the pile of documents surrounding the kitchen. "This place is a mess of evidence from every day since we started looking for Max. We can run through all of this over and over again like we have the last few weeks, but we're just going to be running into the same dead ends." says Gil. Marcus crosses his arms and lowers his head in disagreement. "I'll humor you, Marcus, that it's not all hocus pocus, from a basic cop level of 'working the angle', at least we can say there's a group of serial kidnapers that target their locations based on this synthetic residue. That much we can agree on, right?" asks Gil. Marcus stays quiet. Judy takes bottled water from the table near the couch and takes a seat, drinking a bit. "Maybe the antiques from our investigation hold traces of this? Maybe those antiques are really trophies?" Gil proposes. Marcus stares at the floor for a moment..

"Could there really be a link between this group and the artifacts? And how would this stuff get made?" asks Marcus.

"I have no idea what lab in the world would be capable of making something like this. There's so little of it, that's why the only person who may help is my contact." Judy insist.

"Ok. I'll head out right now then to see if I can find more traces of the stuff from artifacts while you contact your science people to get more info. But, be very careful! If we can figure out

what kind of lab would develop such a substance, we may be able to isolate places capable of producing it.” says Marcus. He motions with a head gesture for Gil to join him.

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about.” Gil reassures, clapping his hands. He gets up and starts walking toward the living room. Marcus opens the front door, Gil and Judy follow him out as he closes it.

“Judy, thanks a lot for your help, let me know when you hear anything from your contact and again, be careful.”

“Thanks” says Judy, “I will.”

In the lost realm, as everyone is getting ready to leave, the sailor packs and starts heading the opposite direction. Max stops him.

“Where are you going?” asks Max.

“What are ya, deaf? I’ve been telling you a bunch of times. I’m out! Let me repeat, ‘sorry max, I can’t stay’ and if you guys are going to island 13, you’re DEFINITELY on your own.” says the Sailor.

“Ok. Sure, I get it. No worries, the compass always leads in the right direction.” Max replies.

“Careful, Kid, that compass may tell ya to jump in a shark’s mouth, are you gonna do it?” the Sailor teases.

“I don’t know.” says Max.

“You gotta be kidding me? You’re a slave to that thing.” says the Sailor. ”Everywhere it wants you to go is nuts. It’s dangerous to follow that thing.” he argues.

“But I’m alive.” insists Max.

“Buh waim alieeee.” the Sailor exclaims, making fun of Max. “Wake up! You’ve been getting lucky all this time. What if next time, you’re not?” the Sailor argues.

“Look where it got us! We’ve got an army now, a ton of followers, we’re not alone anymore.” retorts Max.

“And how do you know you can trust them or anyone? Remember what I told you when we first met? There are no such things as friends?!” yells the Sailor.

“I think you’re overreacting.” says Max.

“No way. I’m right.” The Sailor refutes. “And sorry to tell ya this kiddo, but on top of that, there are some things a compass won’t have answers to. You’re gonna have to think for yourself.” warns the Sailor. Max gives him a blank stare. “Anyway, whatever, you got ‘friends’ now, that compass, and you’re heading home, there’s no role for me here.” the Sailor continues as he spits on the ground.

“We’re still friends, it wouldn’t be the same without you..” says Max. “I mean, don’t YOU want to go?” he asks.

“Well, no pun intended but that ship sailed for me long ago.” says the Sailor. “I almost turned Ogre a few times and now I’m too old to pass through.” The Sailor says as he looks up at the sky. “Most of my family and friends by now have either passed away or moved on.” he says.

“Well, what about living a normal life, maybe get a girlfriend someday, marry, have kids?” asks Max.

“Pfft!.” the Sailor scoffs. “I don’t need any of that. I’m happy on my own. But I’ll tell you what. I wish you luck.” says the Sailor. He turns around and starts heading out. Max tries to stop him but can’t. The Sailor stomps with resolve towards the shore. He takes out a small stone from his pouch and whistles. A mist flies by, revealing his rowboat. He gets in.

*Smack!*

Ethan hits Max on the back from behind.

“What the hell you do that for?” yells Max.

“Nothing, you’re a punk.” says Ethan.

“Don’t call me a punk, punk!” yells Max.

“Well, just shut up and listen! I think there’s something going on.” says Ethan.

“What?” asks Max.

“I saw Slade escape.” says Ethan.

“Wait, what?!” Max exclaims, caught by surprise.

“SSShhHHHH!” Ethan motions for Max to keep his voice down. He lowers his voice.

“I think maybe he might use the tunnels to escape and betray the clan.” Ethan warns. “If we don’t figure something out it’s going to get nasty.” he says.

“Then tell Macchio, what are you looking at me for?” Max loudly whispers.

“I dunno man, this whole thing’s a mess. If we’re going home anyway, it may not matter. But if we deliver the wrong news, it may get us killed.” says Ethan. “Should we keep it a secret?” he asks.

Max stares at Ethan, then turns to watch the Sailor drifting away at sea, disappearing in the mist.

Days later, in the real world, Marcus is at home, organizing piles of photos and documents near the kitchen when his phone buzzes. He answers.

“Hey Mark, it’s Judy, hi, listen, remember the professor I was talking about? She has something to show you. It’s an hour drive to a hilly area. Can you come right away?” she asks.

“Sure, I’m on my way.” says Marcus. He picks up Gil who was in the middle of making an arrest, but left it to another officer in order to join. They drive for more than half an hour, arrive at a small hill which opens to a vast university lot. Judy meets them outside near the front doors. They head to the science department and greet the professor, an older, dark skinned female with thick-rimmed glasses and a tiny frame, in her mid sixties introduced as Professor Davis.

“Have you been followed?” She asks. Gil, Marcus, and Judy look at each other.

“No.”. Marcus replies. She looks around and keeps a low tone of voice. She stares Marcus in the eye.

“You’re not going to believe what I’ve discovered.” says Professor Davis. She shows them a device, an elaborate contraption, with lenses, gears, knobs, wires, and connected to a large computer. It’s as much an instrument as a design sculpture of brushed steel, metal, chrome, and dark plastic. “This contraption is my design. It takes a laser, shoots it through an object, and records as well as displays how it behaves when it interacts with different wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum from gamma waves and x-ray, to radio.” She shows them a projection on screen as the lights in the room fade. “The substance you sent me has very little mass. It’s not like any element on the periodic table ever seen.” she adjusts the knobs on her device. A laser shoots across the device into the powder sample. The laser changes color. She then waves her hand over it “So to confirm what Judy mentioned about this strange substance, it’s true, the particles react to me. If I’m not doing anything with it, it behaves like sand. But if I apply just enough focus, strange things happen. As you can see here, magnified, it starts losing and gaining

particles at random without falling apart.” Gil and Marcus are staring at molecules on the projector waving around, behaving as described. “But it gets weirder. In x-ray, it makes light appear somewhere else entirely. If you keep playing with it...” she focuses on it with more effort adjusting knobs, the laser shooting into the powder begins to form a reaction. “I’m able to piece together the way colors change. If you bounce light from the powder to any surface, it changes color based on the angle you hit it with. At first I thought this was strange, so I tweaked the machine and had a student help me run a program to map what all the colors look like at every angle within one hundred and eighty degrees. When we flatten the result into a map, it looks like this”. The projector shows a colored image. It’s animated, like video, a beach during sunrise, palm trees, and sand. Gil, Marcus, and Judy aren’t sure of what to make of what they’re seeing. “What was supposed to be a random map of color, now looks like a portal of our surroundings but in another time of day. It gets crazier, if I switch the bandwidth to radio waves, it may seem random, but I had someone from computer science help create a filter to keep up with the way the substance keeps changing. If I focus enough, this happens.”

“Voices?!” exclaims Marcus. “What are those voices?”

“They sound like kids, or a group of young people...cheering?!” says Judy. “Is this radio? What is this?” she asks.

“Or is this a joke?!” Marcus wonders, confused.

“You can’t believe what you’re seeing, huh bud?” says Gil, smirking.

“No, officer, I can assure you that what you are listening to is quite real.” says the professor. “it reacts to the thoughts and feelings of the person near it.” she concludes.

“So it’s reading your mind?” asks Gil.

“No. It’s acting like a speaker and microphone into another world. But thoughts somehow tune what it picks up and plays back, in other words it’s like your brain is the knob that changes the radio station.” the professor says. Marcus gets closer to it, and the voices grow louder and louder, but barely discernible. There’s many of them and then a few minutes later, they fade. But then, they hear it again. Marcus freaks out.

“Hey can you hear us?! Is anyone there?” Marcus yells, but no response. The beach image remains unchanged. “Hello? Anyone there??” Marcus keeps yelling, but no response. Then,

emanating from the projection, there's a smell, and then smoke, and the professor shuts off the machine and turns on the lights. She inspects the machine, black spots form around it. Marcus stares at it, the powder disappears!

"What just happened?" yells Marcus.

"I want to know where the substance came from." demands the professor.

"We're dying to know what it is!" Gil interjects.

"It...doesn't exist." The professor says. Marcus and Gil stare at the professor.

"Look, I know you guys are confused but I want to iterate the professors point earlier, whatever this is, she doesn't believe any lab on Earth, can make this." says Judy.

"Exactly my point. Not even the LHC can be used to make this. It's way beyond any documented science. Whomever is able to make this is either an incredible genius or a dangerous power." says the professor, waiting for her words to sink in for a moment. "We're all way in over our pay grades. As it is, I don't feel comfortable getting the Feds involved and I'm surprised there's not any military involved in this. Whatever is going on, I'm grateful to know there's something new to consider but no thanks, I know my limits and want nothing to do with it." says the professor. Marcus shakes his head.

"Alright, Professor thank you very much for your time." says Gil. Marcus thanks her also and they leave. Before they exit the front doors, the power goes out. It comes back on, and behind them, staring from the end of the hallway, a sentinel appears!

In the lost realm, Macchio gets a few of the gang to combine their physical labor and stone powers to build three ships to set sail. One of the gang is knowledgeable about ship building and tells everyone what to do. She's a former pirate, Angela.

"Everything we're going to need to make it is right here. Weapons, kitchen, and stock room. The islands are a six day journey. We need to stock up and make sure the boats are coated with tar." Yells Angela, leading the group to build their ships. One of the stone users focuses their ability and channels the tar onto wooden beams on the boats surface, sealing the cracks and giving a polished look, resembling cherry wood covered in plastic when he finishes. Others are hammering away. Macchio is helping to lift some heavy planks but he hurts his back. The crew make fun of him.

“Hey dumbass.” Yells Angela “you're supposed to lift with your knees, not your back.” Macchio replies with his middle finger. Angela does same. A stone user offers to heal Macchio .

“Naw man, I’m ok. I’ll take a break and cool off a bit.” Macchio replies. He sits in the shade over a fallen trunk at edge of the construction site. The ships are almost ready. He takes a drink from a coconut nearby.

“Nice job” says a voice behind him. He looks back and sees Kid Zero, with his glasses on

“Thanks.” replies Macchio. He turns around and squints his eyes. “Where’d you come from?” he asks. “I don’t remember your face from anywhere.” Zero pauses for a moment. Macchio stares at him.

“A land far, far, away” Zero replies.

“I assume then, you're not part of my crew. So question is, what are you doing here?” Asks Macchio.

“Relax” Zero tells him. “You’ve got nothing to worry about. I’ve been watching you for a while and love your leadership style. I think you’ve got potential.

“Thanks, I guess?” Says Macchio. “You’ve been stalking me, huh?” He jokes.

“I hear you’re planning to leave the Lost Realms.” Says Kid Zero.

“I don’t think it’s possible.” Says Macchio.

“Then why humor this?” Kid Zero asks.

“I never want to get bored.” Macchio answers. Zero laughs.

“Is that why you lead them?” Zero inquires.

“My life as a Leaper sucked. My life before I leaped, sucked. I’ve always had it all and never had to earn anything on my own. But then I always had to do what I was told. I hate that.”

Macchio recounts as he adjusts his posture, straightening his back. “Be free!” he says. “Be smart, but be free.” Zero smiles a bit. “Here I can reinvent myself, be whatever I want, whomever I want. I can make up a name, and that’s what everyone would call me, even if it was Goonie Googoo, that’s what everyone would call me and no one would question it.” Zero laughs.

“And what are you planning to do with the crew if your mission fails?” Zero asks.

“Then, we fight Hannibal and take over the island. Make it ‘Nostra Paradiso’, our paradise.” Macchio answers.



“Why not let Hannibal take over?” asks Zero.

“No way!” Exclaims Macchio. “He just wants to turn the whole island into a nazi camp, all rules, no fun. No way.” he insists.

“Again, if you take over, you’re just going to make the island fun?” Zero urges “Not try to take over the other islands?”. Macchio slouches his back a bit.

“I hadn’t thought that far.” Says Macchio.

“Dump the gang. Join me, and you’ll not only have power, you’ll rule over all the islands.” Zero tells him. Macchio turns and stares at him. “I’m offering you the throne to make you the new king.” Zero insists. Macchio chuckles a bit.

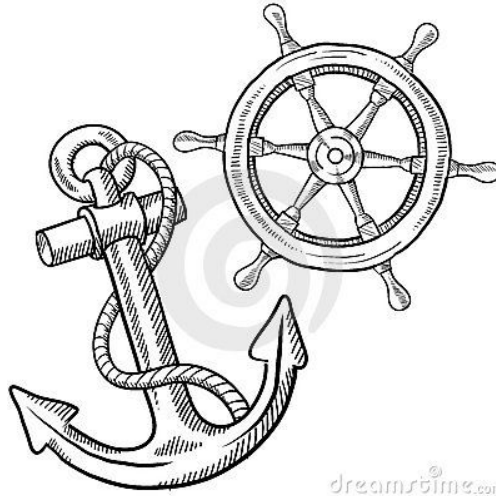
“Yeah dude, I’m flattered but I wonder under what power will you be able to do that?” Macchio challenges.

“Nope. Agree first and then I’ll show you.” Zero argues. Macchio sighs.

“I’ll think about it.” Replies Macchio. Zero smiles.

“Don’t wait too long, when opportunity knocks” Zero urges. “There’s no telling when the door might close and never again avail.” he says. His eyes glow, becoming almost pitch black from head to toe. He then morphs into an albatross and flies away. Macchio smirks.

# CHAPTER TWENTY TWO



In the real world, Marcus ducks behind the left side of the university's main hallway, aiming his gun down the hall.

"Run and take cover!" Yells Marcus. Gil joins Marcus across from him, on the other side. He takes out his pistol. Judy and Professor Davis exit the glass doors of the university's entrance.

"Stop, or we'll be forced to shoot!" yells Gil. At the other end of the hallway, the sentinel advances forward.

"I repeat, stop or we will shoot!" Marcus warns. "Do not proceed any further." He keeps warning but the sentinel refuses to heed. Marcus opens fire on the sentinel but no effect. The bullets fired get sucked into it's jacket. Gil's eyes widen and starts firing. As the sentinel continues to walk forward, both officers keep firing but it doesn't stop. Eventually Marcus' gun goes blank and he follows after the teachers. Gil continues to fire but he also runs out of ammo. They run toward the exit while Marcus reloads. He picks up his cell but it dies. Gil sprints towards the patrol car and opens the trunk.

"Get in the car!" yells Marcus, motioning at Judy and the professor towards their police vehicle. Gil takes out his rifle, loads it, and hollars into the car's radio mic.

"This is C-52, I'm here with Officer Marcus, we have a 10-71, I repeat we have a 10-71, requesting full backup." Gil hears static but no response. Marcus helps Judy and the professor into the back seat.

"Stay here, you guys will be safe." says Marcus.

“This is C-52 is anyone listening? We have a 10-71 at Spring Hill University, I repeat, 10-71, requesting backup!” Gill yells. No response. Gil hears the sound of static. “Hey, Judy or Professor, call 911.” Gil urges.

“My phone is out.” Says Judy.

“Mine too.” Says the professor. “The battery died, but I know I had a full charge.” she continues, panicked. The sentinel emerges behind the glass door entrance, just a few feet away. A dark figure, ghostly pale skin, and a long jacket. It stops moving and stares. Marcus trembles, looking for ammo by the trunk. Gil takes a big gulp, clearing his throat, and slowly steps back, aiming his rifle at the glass door, but his gun shakes. He wipes the sweat of his brow. As the sentinel stands there, staring at them, a moment passes with no movement.

“Why did he stop?” Asks Marcus loading his gun and position himself on the other side of the patrol car. He urges Judy and the professor to stay down. They stare off at one another.

“Get me out of here!” Judy loudly whispers.

“Hold on.” Says Marcus. Gil fires his rifle. The glass doors shatter but the sentinel remains. He reloads the rifle and fires again. He gets up and walks closer to the entrance. He fires again but the sentinel doesn’t move. It’s body absorbing the shots fired. Everyone’s eyes widen.

“Gil, get the hell back here, let’s go!” Yells Marcus. Gil fires another shot and the sentinel remains unharmed, despite damage to his surroundings. Marcus sneaks into the passenger side of the vehicle, to the steering wheel, turns the ignition and starts the car, waiting a bit longer.

“You guys can go!” Gil urges.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Marcus retorts. He nudges his head towards the seat next to him, persuading Gil to join. The sentinel continues to stare. Gil lowers his rifle and jumps into the passenger seat.

“Let’s go!” Yells Gil. Marcus closes the door and shifts the transmission into drive, but the car starts to shut down. Marcus tries again but the car won’t start. The sentinel smiles.

“Dammit, start!” Yells Marcus. He stares at the sentinel, shaking.

“Aw shoot! I forgot to tell you I had trouble with the car earlier, I had to start it in neutral!” Gil responds. Marcus glances at Gil, irritable, steps on the break and shifts to neutral. He turns

the key and the engine roars. They head out of the university parking lot and about 5 minutes later, they get reception.

“My phone works, calling 911 right now!” yells Judy.

“What was that?!” Shouts the professor. “Don’t ever involve me in anything like this, I want nothing to do with any of you anymore, leave me out of this!!” She bawls. Marcus sounds the siren as they speed towards the station, zipping in and out of traffic. They arrive at the station and call for backup. Moments later, Marcus leads a large squad back to the University. When they arrive, it’s abandoned. Marcus directs the team, guns drawn, towards the professor’s lab. When they open the door, it’s empty and trashed. Marcus gets a call from his walkie-talkie.

“All clear. I repeat, all clear”, Says the voice on the radio.

“Alright, commence investigation and evidence collection.” says another voice on the radio. Marcus lets out a heavy sigh. He dials the professor on his cell.

“Bad news, we found your lab in terrible shape. I hate asking you this, but we’ll need you to come in and help us out with the investigation.” Says Marcus.

“Let me see it.” Says the professor. Marcus takes a few photos with his cell and sends them via text. The professor remains quiet on the other line. “No.” She responds. Marcus hears sniffing. The professor pauses, sniffing a few more times. “My work...”, the professor's voice chokes. “My work, equipment, everything. My goodness it could take years to get it all back.” She says.

“I’m so sorry about this.” Says Marcus.

“No. You leave me alone. You should've told me this was going to be a risk.” She says with trembling in her voice.

“I’m sorr-“ Marcus says but the professor interrupts.

“Leave me alone.” She says and hangs up the call. Marcus calls Judy.

“Hey, Judy, are you ok?” Asks Marcus.

“Yah.” Replies Judy. “what the hell was that? What just happened to us?! That was like, some poltergeist crap. I’m not sure how we’re even alive!” She says

“I honestly don’t know.” Says Marcus. “Your professors pretty pissed though.” He says.

“Yeah, I don’t blame her. She’s probably not going to want to talk me either, for a while.”  
Says Judy. Marcus sighs.

“This guy hasn’t left much evidence but it’s just like the other locations. He’s our best lead now, yet our investigation keeps leaving us in cold trails.” Says Marcus in a soft voice.

“Hello! That’s not normal, whoever these people are, this isn’t normal, it’s beyond you! It’s beyond police!! Man, you need to call FBI, military, CIA.. The Pentagon!!!” Shouts Judy.

“It’s nothing we can’t handle.” Marcus argues

“Woah, man, time out. Did you just not see some crazy sheeite happening to us?! Did we not just see some alien, sci-fi crap just happen!? Tell me we weren’t just hallucinating!” Insists Judy.

“There’s no hocus pocus here, that guy probably had some high caliber, illegal market armor under his vest or whatever the hell he was wearing.” Argues Marcus.

“You know Mark, that’s your problem right there.” Says Judy. “That’s your flaw. You can’t admit when something can’t be explained.” she argues.

“Everything has a scientific explanation.” Argues Marcus.

“You dummy.” Judy says with a soft voice. “Even as a scientist, I know when I need to let go of what I think I know about nature and submit to some greater reality.” She says.

“Yeah, I can’t do that.” says Marcus.

“Why not?!” Asks Judy.

“Because...” Marcus says but then he stops, noticing some of the officers on the scene overhearing him. He covers his phone and exits the lab. “Hold on.” He tells Judy. He walks towards an empty room, away from the team investigation, down the hall from the lab.”What if it means my son is dead?” Says Marcus, whispering loudly into his cell. “If there’s an explanation for it, then I KNOW I can get my son back. If there isn’t, then I’d have to give up the only family I have. I can’t.” He says. The phone buzzes, he checks the screen. “I’m sorry Judy, hold on, Gil is on the other line.”

“Call me later, ok?” Says Judy.

“Sure, bye.” Says Marcus. He presses another button. “Hey Gil, sup!” Marcus answers.

“You’re not going to believe what we found!” Yells Gil, excited.

“What?” Asks Marcus.

“When we hauled out of the university, the surveillance system recorded everything that happened in the lab. The power must’ve come back on, because that machine she was running came back online and kept going. Listen to this...” says Gil. He plays the audio, Marcus hears a scramble of voices from the machine running the experiment.

“Ok.” Says Marcus.

“Now, one of the engineers we consult with at the county office came by and sorted out all the voices for us, one of them may sound familiar to you.” Gil continues. Marcus hears a click and static.

“... wi...wan..do you want me to get on, this one? Or the other one? I don’t get seasick any...cool...” says the voice. Gil plays the audio a few more times. Marcus eyes widen. It’s Max!

In the Lost Realm, the sky darkens, thunder and light rain drizzle over three wooden ships sailing across the deep ocean. Mountainous waves rise and fall with each boat slowly like fluid hilltops. Some of the gang in one of the boats are gathered around Max. The compass is showing them the way. The other two boats follow. Macchio, the general, and Max are huddled around a map in one of the boat’s main rooms.

“We’re bound to run into the 13th island.” says the female general. The boat shakes, hit from underneath.

“We’re under attack!” yells one of the gang. Macchio, Max, and the general scramble to look outside. A giant sea serpent rises out of the surface to attack but a stone user takes out their crystal and lets out a powerful sound. The creature lowers its head back into the ocean. Macchio pats the user on the back and ushers for everyone to get back inside.

“That’s awesome. How’d you do that?” asks Max towards the stone user.

“I can create vibrations in mid-air that imitate sound and sonar, confusing and giving a huge headache to the sea creature.” the stone user says. She puts the stone back in her pocket and holds on to the edge of the room as it tilts side to side.

“I wonder really, whether we CAN go home or not. It might actually be physically impossible.” says one of the gang.

“Yeah, well, we’ll have to wait and see.” argues another.

“Hey Max! If this whole thing turns out to be a scam, poof! You’re outta here!” threatens another, wearing a red bandanna.

“Poof?! What does THAT mean? Like what the heck is a ‘poof’?” teases another gang member.

“Poof! You know, Poof!” retorts the bandanna wearing gang member.

“You’re gonna turn him into cake? You’re gonna making him into powder?” teases another.

“Just shutup, he’s dead if we don’t get home, all I’m sayin’” says the gang member.

“Well, no one knows anything about the 13th island. It’s all speculation and mystery. We just have to take chance.” the general reminds them. The room’s tensions ease and everyone resumes their tasks. Outside, the rain worsens and the storm clouds darken further, almost like nightfall. More sea creatures begin to rear their ugly head, and another stone user summons underwater plants to keep the monster back. Another one appears, and a third stone user creates a rift in mid-air that makes the creature disappear. More and more creatures appear.

“Leave it to me” says another gang member. She grasps her stone with a tight fist and closes her eyes. One of the sea creatures roar and begins to attack the others. They attack each other and submerge into the water. The stone user crosses her arms, smiling.

“Hey!” yells one of the gang. “Save your juice for the island. We should switch to spears but don’t use stones unless it’s necessary.” he warns.

“We’re getting closer.” says Max. The storm intensifies and the boats begin to take major hits from the roughness of the sea.

“Hey Macchio” urges the general. “The captains are worried this was a bad idea, they’re not sure how much longer the ships can hold.” she says. The compass shakes.

“Max, are you sure the compass is pointing us right?” asks Macchio. Max’s breath gets heavy. His hands shake a bit. He holds his other hand to keep it steady and takes a deep breath.

“Yeah, it’s fine.” replies Max. Macchio and the general look at each other.

“Hey man, is there something you’re not telling us?” says another gang member. Everyone in the room stares at Max.

“Well...” replies Max.



“Spit it out!” yells the gang member. Max lets out another heavy breath.

“I don’t want to say anything about it yet, but I’m having a hard time figuring this out...for whatever reason, the compass is not as steady as it used to be.” admits Max.

“What are you saying?” probes the gang member.

“Well, I mean, I’m starting to wonder if maybe this whole thing was a mistake.” Max confesses. Everyone in the room gets really quiet. Thunder strikes.

“What did you just say?!” asks Macchio. “Tell me you didn’t just mean what you said.” he urges.

“Oh I think he just did, we’re screwed.” says the gang member.

“Let’s just rough out the storm, at this point, that’s our best option, no matter what.” says the general.

“Everyone seems pretty eager to get out of this and go home. Maybe it’s true. I’m thinking we should turn around before it gets worse. We came, we tried, and while it sucks, maybe there’s nothing here.” says Macchio.

“Yeah, it’s getting pretty bad. We should just, turn around immediately.” says another gang member.

“We came all this way, why don’t we at least stick to our guns and wait out the storm?” the general persists. The room erupts into murmurs. Macchio taps a wooden bowl with a spoon. The room calms.

“Tell you what, let’s flip a coin.” says Macchio. “Heads, we head out further to sea, tails, we high-tail it outta here.” he continues. The boat rocks further as thunder strikes again. Everyone’s holding on to something to hold still. They wait for the boat to steady as Macchio takes out a coin. Macchio lets out a huge flip, it lands on his hand and he catches it. He lifts his hand. It’s tails! The room remains quiet. “Sorry Max.” says Macchio. “but we tried. Alright everyone! Time to head back and forget the mission. Abort and head back immediately!” yells Macchio.

The other ships get word and start to turn around. The storm worsens. Max stares at the compass, spinning crazy like a helicopter. Everyone's in jeopardy.

“At this point, we should try to anchor but the ocean is too deep. “ says Macchio. Everyone is doing everything they can to keep the boats together from falling apart and the water from

drowning the ships. Many of the crew are working together, using buckets, crates, and rowboats to remove excess water from flooding the ship. The wind hits hard, it sounds like a freight train. The clouds darken worse.

“Hey everyone. I know it’s a grim moment. No one’s sure right now if we’re going to make it out alive. But let’s hang in there.” says Macchio. At this point, everyone is hating Max. Macchio is having a hard time raising morale.

“Hey Macchio, you need to stop these guys, they’re throwing stuff out.” says a gang member. He rushes to find many of the crew throwing overboard their food supply, and other crates. He runs up to one of the generals, waving his arms at the crew.

“Hey, stop! What the hell are you guys doing?!” yells Macchio.

“Sorry cap, we need to dump our supplies and anything else that will help lighten the ship, we’re getting flooded.” yells the general.

“No man! We’re fine! We don’t need to throw away our only source of food, we need this stuff!!” yells Macchio. And then lightning smacks one of the ships, cracking it in half! Stone users respond with their powers immediately, half of them teleported to the first ship, the others to the second ship. Other stone user begin using their powers to create force fields around the ships. The third ship sinks but luckily everyone survived. While overcrowded, they’re safe.

“How is everyone?” asks one of the gang, approaching Macchio.

“Eh, everyone’s ok, though all our stone users are having to keep pushing. They’re getting worried if the storm doesn’t finish soon, they’ll turn ogre.” he replies. The crew helplessly wait, hoping something works out. Max is now hated by everyone. He’s crowded in a boat, surrounded by people, yet more alone than ever.

In the real world, Marcus can’t believe what he’s hearing.

“Max! It can’t be, but how?” yells Marcus. Gil remains quiet on the other end. “Sorry Gil, I need to go.” He hangs up the phone and re-dials Judy, recounting to her what he just heard from Gil. Judy starts crying.

“How is it possible?” asks Judy.

“I don’t...I don’t know how to explain it” answers Marcus. “But I’m willing to consider, maybe there’s something more out there. Maybe the kidnappers are from somewhere we’ve

never considered. Anyway, I need to let you go, I'll keep you posted and um, thanks a lot for your help, Judy.” says Marcus. The investigation concludes, all the evidence collected, and Marcus heads over to Gil’s. Marianna is with them. They listen to the audio recordings Gil collected of the other voices. They recognize it may be of some of the missing kids.

“It’s difficult to say when or where the audio took place. But everything was destroyed by the sentinel.” says Gil.

“I think if I can get more of that substance, and find another lab that can do the same as the university, we may be able to use that to attract the sentinel and catch them this time.” Marcus proposes.

“It’s too dangerous and we don’t know who or what those men are.” replies Marciann. But

“Hey, I notice something in the video. Look at the static in the footage, happening right behind the guy. It’s like the sentinels give off energy similar to that of the dust itself. If there’s a way to sweep the neighborhood for that, with a camera, we may be able to figure out where they’ve been.” Marcus proposes.

“Yeah, it’s not like you can use a metal detector for evil people.” jokes Mariana. “But we do need a way to track radiation or at least an expert on that subject and I know someone who may be able to help. Um, though, he may be the last person on earth we should talk to.” she says.

“No way.” says Marcus.

“What?” asks Gil.

“Well, as it turns out, one of the few people we know, who was an expert on radiation detection...is Reagan.” Marianna replies.

In the Lost Realm, the rain persist but begins to clear up. Stone users from Macchio’s gang are starting to get pale green and falling asleep. The shields holding the ships together weaken.

“Hey Macchio, the other gang members have assured the ships are strong enough to hold, repairs are good enough.” says one of the gang.

“Ok, tell the gang to lower shields and take a break.” orders Macchio. The sky begins to clear a bit. Some of the teens are throwing up on the side of the boat, including Max. The seas calm a bit and the sun shines brightly on everyone, they finally made it alive but they have no idea

where they are. Some of the crew begin to fight about which direction to go. The traditional compasses aren't working.

“Let’s head west.” says one of the navigators, “It should take us back to our land.”

“Um, yo, we don’t have enough food for everyone.” says one of the gang. A huge debate breaks out about going back home versus settling on one of the other islands before heading back. As everyone is arguing about the next step, Max notices his compass working again. It points northeast. He gets up and looks outside.

“Hey guys” Max yells. No one listens but he keeps yelling and yelling and then finally he makes a huge scream. Everyone stops and turns to Max. He points out. Everyone freaks. Off in the distance where the clouds part, the 13th island!

They arrive on shore and it’s nothing like they’ve seen from the other islands. It’s prehistoric foliage and creatures are enough to scare anyone away, but it’s waterfalls and beaches are also the most beautiful. One of the gang points to an area that’s safe for them to land. And once they get off, they’re finally kissing the ground. That night, they throw a huge feast, a bonfire roasting meat, and sea creature sushi for dinner. People are starting to come around to Max, but others are kind of resenting him.

“Man, I’m glad we made it alive. I can see why it’s been kept hidden so long. It’s a paradise among paradise that can cost you your life. Heck, I’m not even sure any leaper has ever made it here before.” says Macchio.

“The Sailor knew.” says Ethan.

“Yeah but he split.” argues Max. The compass points to a giant mountain in the distance. “I believe we need to go that way.”

“It almost looks like an active volcano.” says one of the gang.

“You guys sense that?” asks Macchio.

“What?” asks a general.

“Feels like we’re being watched or followed.” says Macchio. One of the gang members snicker.

“You’re just messing with us, stop it.” says Ethan.

“No man, I’m serious.” Macchio insists. Max agrees.

“We’ll just have to keep on our guard.” says Max.

“I’m not sure if we should go anymore or not. “ says one of the gang members.

“We almost died and we’re lucky to be alive.” says another gang member.

“Then again, the compass did lead us here.” says Ethan.

“I’m willing to go.” says Max. “Who wants to join me?” the group gets quiet. Unfortunately, only a handful raise their hand, Macchio included.

“It’s too dangerous, what’s it worth going home if you’ll just end up dead instead?” Ethan argues.

“You gotta believe.” says Max.

“Yeah, well, that sounds cheesy. No one can really do that. Most of us would rather be safe than home.” says Macchio. The group venture off and right away they see dinosaurs and giant creatures and oversized monkeys. They’re having to keep on guard and use stone powers to get by. Macchio keeps getting the feeling they’re being followed but don’t see anyone. Max uses his stone powers to create a pillar that allows them to cross tricky areas or block certain creatures from attacking them. Then, about halfway to the mountain, they’re crossing a rocky path, when a part of it collapses. Most of the gang make it across but Max has to turn back to help one of them, almost slipping by accident. Max lets go of the compass while saving the kid.

“Without the compass, how are we going to find our way?” asks one of the gang.

“I’m willing to at least go to the edge of the mountain to find out what the compass had been trying to point at.” replies Max. The group is at odds again.

“Maybe it was a good idea to stay at camp.” says Ethan.

“We’re not going to get a chance like this.” argues another.

“With the compass gone, do we really stand a chance? Max is a newb.” says another gang member.

“Look, we’ve gotten this far, it’s stupid to turn back now.” says Macchio.

“It’s a sunk cost fallacy.” says another gang member. Everyone looks at her, confused. “It’s the idea that the more time and effort you put into something, the more you’re going to want to avoid losses when really, you should just take your losses and go.”

“I don’t care if I’m the last one. There’s gotta be a reason to go up there.” says Max.

“Woah, careful not to alienate yourself. You’ve already got half the gang pissed at you. Honestly, we’re so close, maybe we can go to the foot of the mountain and head back, at least check it out and call it an adventure.” says Macchio. The gang agrees. They reach the summit. A stunning view. Pure land, ocean, wildlife, and mountain. A gorgeous vista surrounds them, but they’ve reached a dead end.

“This sucks.” says one of the gang members. Everyone is disappointed.

“Sorry guys, without the compass, I can’t do or say anything about this. I guess there really is no home”. Replies Max. The gang look at each other in disappointment. Macchio grins.

“Hey man, it’s not a total loss, at least we got to claim a territory! From now on, the 13th is ours.” says Macchio. The gang laugh it off a bit but then, the earth shakes. An avalanche almost buries them alive, but their stone powers protect them. When they look down, they realize, they don’t have a way back.

“Looks like we’re really in for it.” says one of the gang. They start fighting among themselves when they hear a voice.

“Wwwooooo!!!” says the voice. Max looks to his right and sees a hat.

“I know that hat anywhere.” says Max, smiling. An arm pops out of the hat, waving.

“Follow along.” says the voice. Max gets into the hat. The others do same. They find themselves inside a cave.

“You’re pretty close to being goners. You should’ve heeded my warning but noooo, no one listens, do they?” says the voice echoing.

“Who is this?!” yells Ethan.

“BOO!” screams the sailor from behind them. The gang freak out and jump. Macchio laughs. The other members laugh too.

“Shut up!” yells Ethan.

“You shut up, you screamed louder than all of us!” yell another gang member.

“How the heck did you find us?” says Max.

“This.” answers the Sailor. He motions with his empty hands and like a magician, he claps them together, and as he pulls his hands apart, he’s holding a shiny metal object, and spins it with both hands and in dramatic flair, the compass appears! Everyone gasps.

“How the heck is that even possible?!” yells Max.

“Magicians never reveal their secrets.” the Sailor responds. The gang are bewildered by him.

“We’re not the first to claim this island are we? You played us the whole time.” Macchio says.

The Sailor smiles.

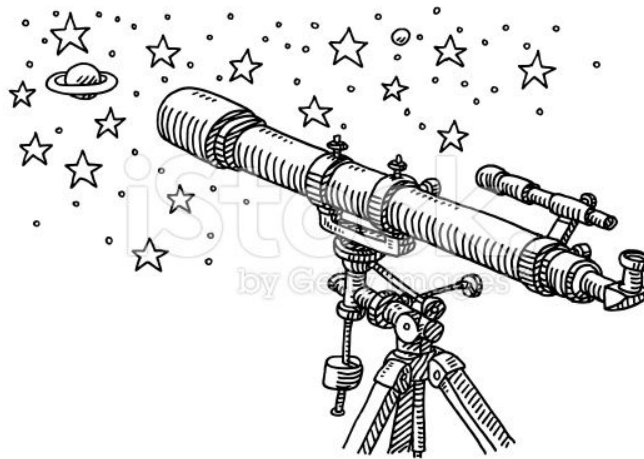
“Pretty much.” He answers.

“How did you survive the storm?” Ethan asks. The sailor gives him a strange look.

“What storm?” the Sailor responds. Everyone smacks the Sailor.

# CHAPTER TWENTY THREE





In the real world, A morning briefing is held at the police station. Marcus, Gil, Marianna and the rest of the team watch as the deputy showcases video, photos, and statistical details on the lab incident. The sentinel's photo is plastered all over the board. All police become aware of the Sentinels. There's now a county-wide manhunt issued along with recordings, news, and illustrations.

Some conspiracy theorists within the precinct believe it's the men in black, others say it could be mafia or terrorists. The police have little evidence on the identity and location of the sentinel besides his photo.

"He was last seen at the university with two people injured." Says the deputy. "When police arrived at the scene of the crime, he escaped with little to no evidence of his whereabouts." The deputy dismissed the meeting. Marcus answers his cell..

"I refuse to talk to Reagan." Says Marcus to Judy as they're on the phone. Marcus and Gil head out on patrol. Marcus takes the passenger seat. He enables speakerphone.

"Given the obvious animosity and the restraining order, yeah." Judy replies.

"I don't want to go near him either." Says Gil.

"I'd like to still be able to help." says Judy.

"We've got to find another way." says Marcus. "Reagan is not an option." he insists. Gil thinks about it.

"Who else would know about radiation?" asks Gil.

“The university science department is out of the question now.” says Judy. Marcus gets a call on the other line.

“Hold on Judy, I’ve got another call” Says Marcus. He turns off speaker phone. “Hello?” He Says. He nods for a moment. “Ok, yeah...got it, thanks.” says Marcus. He switches the line again “Sorry Judy, something's come up, we’ll be in touch. He hangs up the phone. He turns to Gil “Marianna’s calling for everyone to meet the chief.”

“What did she say?” asks Gil.

“Sources say they’ve found info on the men in black and according to an anonymous tip, they have a hideout out west.” answers Marcus.

They leave Judy behind and head back to the station for their emergency briefing. Mariana, the Chief, detectives, and all the officers of the precinct are gathered around the whiteboard with suspect photos.

“There’s an abandoned warehouse on Pierce Avenue and low activity.” says Deputy Reece. “All our busts have led us to this point.” she aims her laser pointer at the neighborhood region on the map. An officer raises his hand. “Officer Jose.” she says pointing.

“How reliable is the source?” Officer Jose asks.

“That is confidential.” answers Chief Pimentel, straightening his jacket. “It’s from a higher authority, that’s all I can divulge at this time.” He nods at Deputy Reece.

“So far, of the 12 suspects who were charged with assault and burglary, investigators from other precincts, including special help from detectives Harris and Navarro, pinpoint all their activities to the warehouse where a lot of shipments found in previous heists and antique stores have been smuggled. It’s believed to be a transit facility for trafficking black market items. We had visual confirmation days ago. Get ready to roll out in 15 minutes.” says Deputy Reece.

Moments later, just outside of an industrial parking lot emerges dozens of police trucks, cars, and a helicopter.

“Are you ready for the biggest sting operation we’ve had in years?” says Gil with excitement as he’s driving with Marcus in the passenger seat. Marcus looks ahead, silent. “There’s bomb squad and everything!” says Gil, smirking. Marcus shakes his head.

“This better be good.” says Marcus.

Arriving at the warehouse, they bust through a giant gate. Police quickly get out of their vehicles. Weapons drawn, they approach the warehouse doors. One of them motions with a hand chop for one squad to head right toward the side of the building, another gesture to head left. They surround the warehouse. The squad leader motions to open the door. One of the squad members approaches the door, opens it up, and it's full of racks and partition walls, large crates, and armor. They head in deeper, going around the walls into the main warehouse floor. It's empty! Investigators find there's no one there. No evidence any activity took place there. Gil exits the car to get a closer look but notices the squad exiting the warehouse in calm strides. He gets back to the car, Marcus hangs up the communications radio. Marcus motions for Gil to get in.

"Looks like the unmarked cars from previous investigations were found outside, but not a trace of anything else. Wherever they were, if they were, they simply vanished!" says Marcus. Gil shakes his head and rolls his eyes back. Takes off his hat with a heavy sigh.

"The trail ends cold." says Gil.

In the Lost Realm, the King panics, getting word of another attack. This time, from the same group as before. Their forces are fighting with everything they have. Knights with stone powers, laser rifle shooters, warriors, ogres, and even a 20 foot, gorilla-like king ogre all wreak havoc on each other in a massive battle for the kingdom. As the rebel group attacks, it grows fierce. The kingdom walls crumble, as the gang invade and swarm in. The king and council panic.

"If something isn't done soon, the throne room will be ransacked!" yells a council member.

"Thank you for the obvious." yells another council member.

"Where's Zero?" The King yells. A black void emerges in mid air as the King finishes his sentence, along with his sentinels.

"Where the hell have you been?! Your help is needed now!" The King pleads.

"I did" replies Zero. "I helped the enemy." he says with a grin. The King and council cringe. Kid Zero pulls a stone out of his pocket. It glows, as the King turns pale green, his hair whitens, his knuckles slump, his back arches, and his ears point. He becomes an ogre!

"GO!" Zero yells at the King turned ogre. He runs out of the throne room, exiting the castle.

The council freeze, eyes wide open, jaws dropped. A few of them shaking. “As for the rest of you, sorry, but destiny calls.” With another flash, the council become ogres as well. Zero’s eyes glow. “Go! Fight!!” he yells. They run out of the palace like a pack of green chimps, but one council member remains. Zero approaches the council member, trembling. “What was it that you accused me of? Being a useless traitor?” Zero teases. “I don’t appreciate such baseless accusations. Traitor, yes. Useless?! Ha.”

“Someone help!” yells the council member. Zero makes fun of him.

“Help. help. Heelp.” says Zero. He turns to one of the sentinels. “Take him.” he says. The council member tries to run, but Zero waves his hand and a dark void opens right in front of him. He stops before he could get sucked in but the sentinel approaches, pulling him into it, screaming. The void closes and Kid Zero sits on the throne. “The race is not won by the swift, nor bread to the wise, nor battles to the strong, or riches to the knowledgeable, or favor to the skilled, but time and chance, happen to them all!” He says to himself with a grimace. A commotion is heard outside. “Alright..” Says Zero, yawning. “Enough is enough.” One of the sentinels hands him an elaborate jewel box, in it are a collection of neatly arranged stones. He takes a few with him and walks outside. The battle between kingdom forces and the rebellion intensifies. The city in ruins, covered in smoke, fires, floods, and ashes all over. Bodies among the contentious as they rage on with their fists, swords, guns, lasers, and stones. Kid Zero overlooks the battle. One of the rebels propelling his body in mid air like a cannonball, hurls toward Zero. A sentinel stands in between them and crashes like a wall against his chest. The sentinel doesn’t move, the rebel falls. Zero lifts his hands, holding stones. With one, he raises it in the air and projects his voice. The rebels are taking over more than half the kingdom, the city is in peril. With a thunderous voice, he projects his presence over the onslaught.

“The war is over! Everyone stop, now!” Yells Zero. The heaviness of bass in his voice grips every heart in the area. The sporadic battles begin to break away. Everyone’s attention is towards Zero. “To the rebels, it’s time to leave, the king is defeated. We will make arrangements for a new leader soon. Go back from where you came and leave or face dire consequences.” As Zero finishes, another dozen rebels attack but the sentinels emerge, blocking all their advances. The rebels refuse to listen and the fighting intensifies. Zero then takes another stone, and when it

lights up, all the citizens find themselves floating in midair, each guarded by a force field bubble around their bodies. The rebels erupt in anger, unable to move. Kingdom officials, bruised and worn, marvel. Then, Zero uses another stone, this time, it collapses the ground underneath the rebels, taking a huge chunk of the city floor with it. The rebels are then sucked into the ground. More than half the kingdom, dropping into a dark sinkhole, taking everyone with them down to a few stories underground. He waits to make sure the last of the rebels fall into the pit. As soon as they do, he picks up another stone, and it glows. This time, the pit closes completely. Burying all the rebels alive! Everyone among the kingdom feels their heart race. Their eyes stare at Zero. Some bow, others run away or remain in hiding. Hawthorne, at the edge of the kingdom's border, drops his jaw, mouth and eyes wide open. He buries his head in his hands and rubs his eyes, glancing harder at what he saw. His heavy breathing is interrupted by the approaching ogres. He makes a run for it, ducking out of sight. He barely escapes. A handful of stone rebels that can hover, jump back in fear, and fly away.

Zero then takes his first stone, and safely drops all the citizens to the ground. He speaks, with a loud bassy voice, projecting using another stone.

“Everyone! It’s time to rebuild our city and our world. a new leader will be announced soon. In the meantime, let’s rebuild again, better than ever”. A flying rebel stone user headed past the kingdom outskirts undetected, spots Hawthorne and flies in to scoop him up.

“Hey, sorry about this but I don’t have a lot of time left, I’m sending you to our headquarters, to tell them everything that’s happened.” says the flier. “Oh, I’m Cloe by the way” says the rebel.

“What about you?” Hawthorne asks. With her hair turning white and her skin turning green, her voice cracks a bit.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to make it. I used up all my abilities during the battle. You’re the only one who can send our message, the king is gone, there’s a new leader, and they’re going to be announcing someone, and everyone from our group is gone.” says Chloe. She speeds like a jet across the sky using her large, dark wings. Hawthorne sees the ocean and islands surrounding them, gasping for air at the high altitude and shivering from the cold. Chloe suddenly drops then raises herself higher. They approach a mountainous region, coated with forest.

“Save your energy!” yells Hawthorne, but she starts to lose her balance, as she speeds to a sandy opening. It’s a large camp hidden behind one of the mountains. She drops altitude with a sudden jolt and flings him near the entrance, while losing control of herself and crashing into the forest. Hawthorne gets up, injured and limping. He only has enough energy to get to the entrance. A few from the camp get out and grab Hawthorne while others run toward Chloe. They come back, but only with her stone. They look down, saddened. Hawthorne is then taken prisoner to the leader of the camp.

“Tell us everything you know! What happened to everyone, what happened to the war? Start talkin!” shouts a young woman as one of the commanding officers.

In the real world, Marcus and Gil meet at Judy’s house. Her living room and garage is full of all kinds of boxes, plastics, foam, metal bits and wires.

“I found someone who was able to help me with some of this tech stuff. After the lab incident, I got freaked out, but later I had an idea from what the professor said.” she says as she walks over to a case next to her computer. “I was experimenting with night vision and AR. Just the kind of thing a kooky, quirky, nerdy, gamer gal like me who has some idea about radiation would do on a typical weekend.” Marcus and Gil look at each other, confused.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea, Judy”. Says Marcus.

“Hold on. Give me a moment” says Judy adjusting a strange goggled contraption on her desk. “Look, I’m good at what I do. Trust me on this, I’m so close to getting something together that may help, hugely! But I have a mega crazy favor to ask.” she says.

“What?” asks Gil.

“I need more of the sample of that stuff.” says Judy. Marcus sighs.

“Not yet” says Gil. “But we’ll be back.” he assures. Marcus looks at Gil, shrugging his shoulders. Marcus nods his head and they both leave.

“We’ll keep you posted, alright?” says Marcus. Judy waves as they head into the patrol car. “This is crazy. I don’t even know where we’re going to get any of that stuff anymore.”

“Why didn’t you just tell her that?” says Gil.

“I mean, I dunno, I didn’t want to disappoint her and ... wait ...the evidence locker.” Marcus realizes. “We need to figure out a way to get it from there. Remember the bust we just made?”

During that haul, they bring in a bunch of artifacts with the likelihood of there being more traces of that stuff.”

“You know that’s a felony.” Gil reminds Marcus.

“What choice do we have?” asks Marcus. Gil looks away, burying his face in his hands. “I’ll do it, you don’t have to help me, I can be in and out in no time. No one’s going to know this stuff is there. It’s not like I’m stealing anything, it’s not going to be on the list.” says Marcus.

“You know the stakes if you get caught, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” says Gil.

“What if we’re there to submit something? Or we simply ask them to let us look at what they have?” Marcus proposes.

“They’re not going to just let you in and tamper with evidence just because you said please.” Gil argues.

“You have not because you ask not. Besides, a bunch of people owe me favors and I never collect. What’s the harm in asking?” says Marcus. Gil shakes his head.

“Let’s go before I change my mind.” says Gil. They get in the car and head to the station.

Gil and Marcus arrive at the county station. They try to sneak into the evidence locker, but it turns out, all of the evidence is gone!

“I knew it. Someone’s has been sabotaging our investigation.” says Marcus. They sneak out.

“I’ll go and find out what’s going on, see if you can find anywhere else you think the substance would be.” says Gil. Marcus nods and gets in his patrol car, slamming the door shut. He speeds home, sprints past the living room to Max’s room. Nothing’s been touched. He remembers Hawthorne’s house. He goes to visit Jane but she’s weary to let him in.

“Please Jane, if you can just spare a moment.” says Marcus, appealing to her. “C’mon, it’s me, Marcus, remember how our sons were friends? Look, I’m doing everything I can and need your help.” says Marcus. She softens a bit.

“Ok, come in.” Jane says with her head down. Marcus hurries to Hawthornes room, but finds nothing. “Did you find what you were looking for?” asks Jane. Marcus shakes his head.

Later than night, Marcus joins Marianna and Gil at the bar for drinks.

“I’ve been to every site where there's been a disappearance or sighting, but no luck. The university science lab yielded no results either. I’ve been all around town. The only place that might still have remnants of what we’re looking for may be impossible to get to.

“Which place?” asks Marianna.

“Reagan’s place.” answers Marcus.

“No way in hell. No.” Gil answers.

“You’re crazy.” Says Marianna.

“If someone can back me up and distract him, I’ll be able to get in there and gather a sample.” Says Marcus. Marianna and Gil remain quiet. “I know it’s high stakes. But it’s the best shot we have.” He continues.

“You’re like a crack fiend with this stuff.” Says Gil, raising his voice a bit. “You do realize this guy's got a hold on our entire precinct. Think about your career, think about your livelihood. Max wouldn’t want to see you like this. Please, Mark, reconsider man. This is too risky.” Gil pleads. Marcus shakes his head. Gil looks at Marianna.

“I mean, I hate to say this but what if Marks right? With everything that’s going on, we’re out of leads. What if it’s the only place left at this point?” Marianna asks.

“Mark, I thought you had let go your belief in boogeyman.” Gil says.

“For Max, I’ll believe in Santa and aliens at this point if it’ll get him back.” Marcus replies.

“So you’re willing to believe.” Says Gil.

“I don’t get why you have to keep pressing the issue, there’s no need to get preachy, this is just about getting evidence.” Replies Marcus.

“It matters because we can’t half-ass this. If we fail, this could end our careers. You better damn well believe in what you’re doing and I’m not about to stake two decades of my life on a whim unless it was something worth fighting for. Something to believe. Your resolve is what I needed to know.” Says Gil. Marcus nods.

“Leave me out of this. It’s too dangerous, too rich for my blood. As far as I go, I wasn’t here, I didn’t hear this conversation.” Says Marianna. Gil and Marcus nod.

“Check please” Says Gil to the waitress, hands raised.



Later that night, Marcus lies in Gil's car, a few blocks away from the Stolz family home. Gil surveils the property with binoculars on the driver's side, knowing the family goes out during PTA rallies and weekends. They're dressed in casual attire. Most of the lights at the home remain bright.

"If we're lucky, we have a one hour window." says Gil as Reagan and Beth leave. A little later, and Amy sneaks out from her bedroom window. She gets picked up by her friends and watches them drive away.

"Perfect!" says Gil, keeping his gaze on the property. "Little do teenagers know the consequences of their —"

"Time to go?" Marcus gets out of the car, interrupting Gil.

"Hey, wait!" says Gil. Marcus stops and looks at Gil. "You're in and you're out. No poking around, got it? I'll call you if anyone shows" he says. Marcus nods. "OH, and to watch out for LOPS." Gil warns.

"What!?" asks Marcus, confused.

"Little old persons. Spies can get ratted out by them." says Gil. Marcus blinks a few times, and rubs his eyes. "One of the greatest failures in the history of espionage happened because an elderly woman was watching the property these spies were breaking into at one in the morning. It became the biggest scandal and a major international incident" he said.

"Yeah, thanks, no pressure." says Marcus.

"Don't worry, it's LOP free." says Gil smiling. Marcus sprints ahead, looking both ways. He sneaks in through Amy's bedroom window. He enters the room but stands still. He looks around and waits for a few minutes. Then he walks with a slow pace, out of the room, then down the hall. He notices the room next door is Ethan's, but nothing unusual. It's orderly and pristine. With a confused expression, he looks around and heads downstairs. In the living room, the covered mirror gets his attention takes a flashlight around it. Bingo! A glow around the edges of the frame emerges. He uncovers it and collects a trace of the substance. The cell buzzes. He ignores it and keeps collecting as much sample as he can. The cell continues to buzz. He checks the cell. It's Gil.

*Get out of the house, now!*

Marcus hears a scream from behind. It's Amy!

"Get out of my house!!!" yells Amy at the top of her lungs. She dials 911 but Marcus covers her cell with this hand.

"Calm down!" says Marcus in a soft voice. He's motions for her to hush. She lowers her hand a bit. "Calm down, hold on, listen!" Marcus continues. Amy pulls her phone away from Marcus and raises her finger over it, threatening to dial. "Hold on. Before you do that, hear me out." Amy stares at Marcus, ready to call. "I've been trying to get evidence to look for Max and your brother. This is the only place left we haven't been able to investigate. You know your dad has made it impossible to get what we need. We're so close!" Amy lowers her hand and hangs up the phone.

"Get out." says Amy with an assertive tone.

"Don't tell anyone, please!" Marcus pleas.

"No way, I'm gonna tell my dad as soon as he comes home." says Amy, insisting. Marcus buries his head in his hands. "That is, unless you let me help." she continues. Marcus looks up at her.

"It's too dangerous." warns Marcus.

"I swear I'll tell my dad." threatens Amy.

"You snuck out to be with your boyfriend!" Marcus argues, pointing at her bedroom door.

"No matter. They know anyways." replies Amy. Marcus looks at her with a sarcastic glare. His eyes narrow.

"Then why do you have to sneak?" says Marcus.

"It's fun." says Amy, smiling.

"B.S. You're just as in trouble as I am if you get caught." he says.

"Fine, I don't care if I'm caught. I'm telling my dad anyway." Amy insists. Marcus lets out a heavy sigh, trying to calm down.

*Knock, knock, knock!*

Amy turns around and approaches the door with a quick, careful, quiet pace. She peeps out the side window.

“Oh shoot, it’s my dad!” says Amy. The door keeps knocking. “Coming!” yells Amy. She turns around but Marcus is gone. Her bedroom door swings. The door keeps knocking. Amy opens it, letting her dad in.

“Who the hell was in here just now?” says Reagan as he enters. “Who were you talking to?”

“No one dad, nobody.” Amy says. Reagan puts his hands on his hips and notices the mirror half covered.

“Don’t lie to me, who the hell was in here?” asks Reagan, insisting. Marcus jumps down from Amy’s bedroom, landing behind Reagan. Amy sees him through the open door, her eyes widen. Marcus gives her a thumbs up and sprints away. Reagan turns around but sees no one. He hears heavy rustling outside, looks out the door, then closes, and locks it in place. He turns back to Amy, covering the mirror.

“You better not be sneaking anyone in the house. Who the hell was it?” Reagan interrogates.

“Nothing Dad, I was on the phone. Look, there’s no one here. It’s fine.” insists Amy. Reagan narrows his eyes, scowling at her.

“You lying witch. You’re lying to me!” Reagan shouts as he reaches out his hand, motioning for her to give what he wants.

“No dad, why?” asks Amy holding back tears.

“Gimme.” Reagan insists, tapping his foot.

“You don’t believ—”

“No, I don’t” says Reagan. “Let me see your phone.” He gestures for Amy to give it up. She slams her cell onto his palm. Reagan looks at the call history.

“See?” Amy insists. “It’s nothing.” Reagan keeps flipping through her call history. He notices a name.

*Chad 10 minutes ago*

“You’re no longer using your phone for two weeks.” says Reagan. Amy’s tears emerge from an expressionless glare.

“What!? Why?? I didn’t lie to you!” yells Amy. “Wait, who are you calling?” Reagan holds the phone, looking at Amy.

“Hello? Is this Chad?” Reagan starts talking on the cell. Amy hears a faint voice out of the phones speaker. She tries to grab the phone from him but he wiggles around, bobs, and weaves, twists his torso a bit to keep it out of her reach. “Hey Chad, this is Amy’s dad, letting you know that you are no longer allowed in this house and stay the hell away from Amy, understand?! YOU are not longer--welcome.” then he hangs up the phone, staring at Amy, holding it with arms raised, keeping it out of reach.

“You ... I hate you with every fiber of my being.” Amy says with a growl in her voice. She run upstairs.

*Slam!*

Amy shuts her bedroom door with might. All the glass and ceramic in the house, shakes. Reagan flings the phone at her bedroom door with force from across the living room like a football. It slams against the door and drops on the carpet.

Meanwhile, Marcus was able to get just enough residue from the mirror’s frame to then hand over to Judy. They’re in her living room. Marcus hands Judy the sample.

“I will get started on it.” says Judy. She takes the sample and begins working it into a contraption with strange-looking tools. “Night vision works based on moon lighting, generation 3 and 4, using a combo of lighting and lasers. But I found a way to hack the laser so that night vision can be based on any substance you put in. With certain phosphors, we can take a part of the radioactive substance and makes it like a dye that allows you to see it glow more than any material or anything.” Gil and Marcus cross their arms, standing, and waiting. “Think of heat vision but based on light instead. If this thing reacts a certain way to light, then just putting a bit of it in the laser, or between the phosphor screen and microchannel plate, means we can shoot out a beam and be able to see any radiation of just that substance, glow.” Marcus and Gil stare.

“Hold on.” she says. She finishes up and tries it on. “It’s still night vision goggles, so we’ll need to turn off the lights and give it a try.” Gil looks for the living room light switch ad turns it off. The room is dark except for outside lights through the windows. “Ok.” says Judy. She takes off the heavy, high-tech goggles and gives it to Marcus. He puts it on. Judy helps him adjust the

straps around his head. At first it doesn't seem like it does anything but then Marcus notices his fingertips glow. Then he looks around and sees faint trails of radiation along the walls.

“Holy crap. Where was this when we needed it?” says Marcus smiling.

“How is it?” asks Gil.

“It’s perfect. You can see the trails of the substance in mid-air and around the house.” says Marcus.

“Probably. I was moving some stuff around and had to move boxes.” replies Judy, smiling.

“Ok, cool.” says Marcus. He takes off the goggles. “Thanks! With these, I want to see if we can check out my place.” he continues. He motions his head for them to go. Judy and Gil join him.

They all head out to Marcus house. He grabs the tech-goggles and tries it on. Everywhere he sees is greenish blue. He notices a trail of light around him.

“I see it!” Shouts Marcus. “This orange-rose mist in mid-air, leading up to Max’s room.” He follows the trail, up to its tail end in the middle of the floor, right where Max disappeared. Gil and Judy follow.

“There’s a faint glow of radiation leading here” Says Marcus. Judy shrieks with excitement.

“Oh my lord, it’s working!” Says Judy as she jumps and slaps Gil on the shoulder.

“We can finally investigate with this!” Says Gil.

“But not yet.” Just interjects. “Give me a few days.” She pleads.

“We don’t have a few days” Says Marcus.

“Ok fine.” Replies Judy. “Give me a few hours. With some adjustments, it hopefully works better.”

Later that night, Marcus wakes up in his car, outside Judy’s house. His phone buzzing and buzzing until Marcus picks it up. Gil is next to him in the driver’s seat, head tilted back and snoring loud.

“Hey.” says Marcus with a groggy voice.

“I’m finished!” says Judy.

“Ok, I’ll...I’ll be right there.” He exits the car and knocks on her door. She opens after the first knock. Judy hands him the tech goggles. He puts it on, pulling it’s straps on the sides and

holding it in place on his head. He looks around. The goggles fumble over his head a bit, Judy walks over to help him keep it in place. She grabs his hand and helps guide it toward one of the knobs on the side.

“Ok, so you see this right here? Adjust this to change the frequency range of the signal. That should help you detect different wavelengths of the trails you’re seeing. Also…” Judy lodges a fist-sized heavy object to his belt and an attachment into his pocket.

“What are you doing?” asks Marcus, fumbling, looking around, adjusting the knob.

“Oh, this is a tiny computer and battery to help. This thing needs a lot of power and you literally have a mini pc strapped to your belt.” says Judy, chuckling. “I’m adjusting the battery output so it runs smoother but it’s only going to last thirty minutes, I just want you to see how it works at full range capacity, ok?”

“Holy crap, Judy! Not only can I see faint trails but like you said, I can also adjust it… and what I sees is a line, like a cloud, it’s like a jet trail, floating around, a trail that goes where I’ve gone, since having a trace of the substance. I can’t believe what I see.” he says. He tries to walk outside but Judy stops him for a minute, he’s still holding the goggles with both hands, keeping it steady and adjusting the knob.

“Hold on, I need to disconnect this cord so you can go outside.” she says. Marcus feels a sharp tug from his belt. “Ok. go.” she says.

Walking outside, there’s trails everywhere, still floating, like a thin, long, glowy, stretched piece of cotton in the air. Gil gets out of the car.

“Woah, you got it to work?” asks Gil.

“Yeah, you gotta see this. This is amazing!” says Marcus. “Seriously Judy, you’re a genius. Thank you!”. Marcus stops and removes it. He twists his body, looking at how it’s strapped around him. He holds the gear up towards Gil who nods with a dismissive gesture of his hand.

“Let me help you with that.” says Judy, helping to remove the objects. “Yeah, here, take it with you and let me know how it goes. Good luck! Hope we find Max and Ethan soon!!”

“I can’t thank you enough, Judy, seriously. This is impressive.” says Marcus, shaking her hand. She smiles “Glad I could help”.

“I owe you big time.” says Marcus. “With this, I can follow the trails and hopefully be able to find out where the men in black have been going.” he conforms. Judy smiles.

“But...” Gil says with an ominous conjecture, “what if they can see the trails also?”

# CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR





In the Lost Realms, citizens from the kingdom rejoice after Kid Zero's announcement. Common life starts to resume; trade, amusement, and dining. They've begun to settle but their kingdom is in ruins. Damage, debris, and tattered pieces from previous merchants remain scattered all over. A giant albatross hovers over the kingdom, bringing someone holding a stone to Kid Zero. The Albatross drops who it was holding and flies away. Kid Zero walks towards the landing site, near the edge of a cliff, on the outskirts of the palace, hundreds of feet over the city.

"My apologies, Pike, but I need to ask you a favor!" shouts Kid Zero, limping as he approaches. Pike, an olive-skinned, short, skinny, youthful, teen with long hair and rainbow suspenders, stands up, dusts himself off, and walks to meet halfway. Zero stops and stares at Pike for a moment. "We are going to need your special talents." says Zero. "Help us rebuild." he says. Pike nods in agreement.

"What happened?" Pike asks.

"I was injured gravely in battle and it's uncertain if I'll make it." says Zero. Pike frowns. "For now, I'm helping tend to affairs." He continues as Pike nods.

"Sure man, anything." says Pike. He looks out at the kingdom and surveys the land, crumbling walls, and damaged buildings. He takes a moment to look at the townsfolk. "I'm going to need a demolitionist." he says.

"Yes." says Zero. "And, I have access to anyone in the kingdom's military. Here's my ring." Zero takes off one of the rings on his left hand and hands it over. "You can talk to any one of the commanders." assures Zero. Pike salutes and follows Zero into the palace.

Later that night, Pike enlists the help of a stone user who can demolish using vibration.

“Can you destroy this wall?” asks Pike.

“Yeah but it’s messy.” replies the stone user. Pike shows him a diagram, explaining how it might work with minimal casualty.

“If you can focus your energy on these target regions, we should be fine.” says Pike.

“Are you sure?” asks the stone user.

“Please.” Pike replies. He motions to one of the guards who nods and walks in a hurry toward a post. Military officials ask people to evacuate the wall. Once given the ok, the large, damaged, gate protecting the kingdom is then shattered to nothing. The kingdom walls crumbled, left completely unprotected. Everyone murmurs in shock at the sudden collapse, many grateful no one was injured. Pike then uses his power and out of the ground, emerges a completely brand-new, rebuilt, perfect wall, like a tree from a seed in an instant, surrounding the kingdom with twice the height and girth as the previous one. Everyone’s astounded. Some of the other stone users chip in and use their powers to clean up debris around the kingdom and help the town rebuild.

Some using super strength to carry out large debris or help lift new structures in place. Others use super sense to hear anyone who may have been trapped or hurt from the war. Another turns twigs and rocks into cooking ingredients. He’s a baker, holding out his hands, counting to five at one of the other stone users.

“Salt, flour, sugar, baking powder, and powdered milk. If it’s white and it’s powder, always take it with you in emergencies, and you’ll be able to cook anything. That’s what my mother in France always taught me. If you have those five things, you can survive anywhere.” he says alongside one using heat breath to start a fire under a large cauldron.

“What happens if you don’t find any fresh water?” asks the other stone user. The baker shrugs his shoulders and smiles. The rest of the remaining stone users in town available are going up to squad leaders and either cleaning up debris or helping to organize and rebuild. Some have a bread shop, others an armory. The city is working together to rebuild. At night, Zero can see torch and candle lights glimmer across the town, shimmering along the clean, bright, brick stone all over the kingdom. He can see the tarps and rooftops of different colors, blowing in the wind.

The people rejoice and mourn. Zero shivers, crossing his arms. He holds another stone, making a pen appear in midair. He grabs it and writes a message on a floating sheet of papyrus that emerges as he concentrates to write. He then feeds it to the Albatross, whispers into its ears, and watches it fly away into the twin moonlight.

Meanwhile, the Sailor, Max, Macchio, and crew are inside a cave that leads into a network of tunnels. It's hot, humid, and a warm glow from nearby provides ambient visibility. The Sailor raises a glowing stone from his satchel. Ethan takes a few wooden stakes from one of the gang and waves his stone over it. Everyone stares at Ethan. His eyes glow red and the stone ignites the stakes, while engulfing his arm. The Sailor raises his palm at Ethan.

"We got this, he-man, put your stone away" says the Sailor. Ethan stares at him for a second.

"Why you not freaking out? Your arm is on fire!" says one of the gang. Macchio laughs but Max gives him a stern look.

"My arm IS the fire, baby! But no, it doesn't hurt, I don't feel anything." says Ethan, smiling. He raises it as if to slap the gang member but then calms down. The fire rescinds into his arm, his stone stops glowing, and he puts it away. Ethan passes a torch to everyone except the Sailor who has his own. The Sailor raises an eyebrow, staring at the group. Everyone's laughing and pushing each other in jest.

"Alright, I'm out, you guys don't need MY help, obviously." says the Sailor, searching through his satchel. The laughing and fooling calms as everyone catches their breath.

"What's wrong Sailor? You chicken?" Max yells. The Sailor narrows his eyes and takes off his hat, throwing it on the ground, then throws a stone from his satchel into it. "Oh c'mon, I'm just kidding." says Max. Everyone looks at the sailor, about to get into the hat.

"What? You're leaving just like that? You're not going to help us?" says Ethan in a scathing tone.

"You guys seem to have it covered, I already did my part." says the Sailor, looking at Max.

"So you're saying you don't want to help us?" replies Macchio. He nods. "Alright. Yeah, we got this. Go." says Macchio.

“Wait, why don’t you join us? I mean, you came all the way here, it’s not like there’s a bunch of people waiting to get in a volcano, why would you leave? C’mon man, hang with us.” says one of the gang.

“Naw. Let him go. He wouldn’t want us finding out his little secret, right?” says Ethan, shouting at the Sailor.

“Ohhhhh, so he’s been keepin’ a secret eh? Why you hoarding from us?” asks Macchio. The Sailor stares at them, angry.

“C’mon guys, calm down. Look, we got to the cave he’s helped us out, it’ll be fine, let’s just move ahead.” says Max. “Sorry about this, Sailor, I’m grateful you came.” he continues in a soft voice. Ethan and Macchio stare at Max. He turns back to the Sailor getting ready to place his foot into the straw hat. “Hey wait! Just hold on a sec. Why did you come?” asks Max. The Sailor ignores his question as he adjusts his satchel. “Hey Sailor, answer me.” Max pleads.

“You got your stupid wish to go home, and your buddies. I’m out.” the Sailor replies.

“Wait! Is there something you’re not telling me? Us??” asks Max. The Sailor ignores him, as his foot passes through his hat on the floor, his leg passing through up to his knees.

“What is it you’re not telling us? Did you know where the stone was this whole time!?” asks Max. The Sailor continues to get into this hat.

“He knew where the stone was and didn’t say anything, Max he played you!” yells Macchio. The Sailor stops. “He played us all. This kid knows EXACTLY the way home, don’t you?” says Macchio.

“C’mon Macchio, it’s not like that, the Sailor led us here, we’re here because of him.” says Max.

“Exactly. We’re here--because of HIM!” yells Macchio pointing at the Sailor. “He knows about the treasure here and he’s about to bail on us, to get to it first, aren’t you, traitor?” yells Macchio.

“C’mon, that’s not true.” Max says to Macchio.

“No Max. He’s right.” says the Sailor. Everyone’s gaze locks on to the Sailor, half way into his hat, raising one leg out on bended knee. “This place, IS where your stupid treasure is, but it’s also the home of a CYCLOPS!” yells the Sailor. The gang starts erupting in laughter, except for

Max. The Sailor continues talking as they're heckling. "So if you want to die, please go. I like living, so I'm out!"

"Wait! Wait!" yells Max. The Sailor stops. His head being the only part left out of the hat.

"You fools! Turn back. You're way in over your heads." warns the Sailor.

"What's the worst that could happen?" says one of the gang, calming down.

"I want to see for myself if that thing is real. Will it eat me?" teases Ethan.

"Oooooohhhh yeah it's gonna eat your face!" teases another gang member.

"Well, in all seriousness, what if we get burned alive?!" says Max.

"I'd like to see if any of this is for real." Says Ethan smirking.

"We'll be fine. Let's head out." says Macchio, cocky. Macchio, Ethan, and the gang start to move ahead.

"Hey Max, aren't you coming?" Asks one of the gang.

"I dunno." Says Max. He looks at his stone, then at the Sailor and the gang.

"Max! Either you with us or we leave you!" Yells Macchio.

"Just go, I'll follow after you in a few minutes." Says Max. They start to head out.

"Eh, you better hurry, we're not coming back for ya." Says one of the gang.

The Sailor looks at Max, his head still emerging out of a hat.

"It's not too late to turn back." Says the sailor,

"I don't believe I belong here, I have to believe in the possibility I can go back home." says Max.

"Even if it's in dwelling of a cyclops?" he says as if Max is being ridiculous.

"I gotta try." Says Max. "I may not have my compass, but I don't need it anymore. It got me this far but it's time to follow my gut instead, and this time, it feels like it's right to follow the guys even though it's dangerous."

"Come closer." Says the Sailor, pulling his arm out of the hat and motioning for him to approach. Max walks towards the Sailor and squats close, looking down at him. The sailor pulls on Max's ear, and brings his hand back to his chest, pulls out his other arm, squeezes his hands

together and when he opens them up, a shiny, metal, object appears grasped by his fingers, around its edges.

“You mean this?” Says the Sailor. Max’s eyes widen.

“How’d you find it?” Asks Max. The Sailor grins.

“Same way I found you, moron” says the Sailor, adjusting his shoulders. “I tailed ya all the way here so you wouldn’t kill yourself.”he says. Max tries to grab the compass but the Sailor pulls it away from him.

“Ah, ah, you said he don’t need it anymore right?” Says the Sailor. Max lets it go.

“If you want it that badly, you can have it.” Says Max. The Sailor gives it to Max.

“I don’t care.” says the Sailor, throwing it at Max catching it. “But you can still change your mind.” He urges.

“Or you can join us.” Says Max, nudging his head for him to follow. The Sailor shakes his head. Max frowns. “I get it. It’s like you said, you don’t have any family and friends to go home to. The only friend you’ve got is here.” The Sailor nods. Max smirks. “But wait, didn’t you say there were no such things as friends?” Asks Max.

“Of course not.” Says the Sailor. “They all abandoned me to find ‘home’ in some cyclops cave.” The sailor replies, smiling. Max walks over to the Sailor and reaches out. The Sailor shakes his hand.

“Thanks.” Says Max. The sailor then pulls his hand away.

“I hate germs.” Says the Sailor. Max chuckles. “And don’t thank me yet, kiddo, until you’re really home.” He continues. “But I do wish you luck.” Says the Sailor. He salutes and withdraws into his hat, which then collapses on itself, disappearing. Max stares at an empty corner wall holding compass in hand, pointing to where the gang went.

Ethan, Macchio, and the gang cross a waterfall in the cave, it’s a maze of tunnels that seem to go in all kind of directions. One path seems to lead to a ramp. At the end of the ramp is a broken bridge. Each of them need to jump the gap, and they do. Past the waterfall, there’s a spiral opening at the roof, they can see out at night. The moon shines on the water, they can see the stars and aurora borealis, but red. They hear footsteps and groaning.

“You guys believe there might be someone down there?” Says one of the gang. They hear flapping sounds. Everyone steps back.

“Go ahead, I’ll check this out and catch up!” Macchio tells everyone.

“We’ve already lost Max.” Says one of them.

“Yeah but I’m not Max, I’ll catch up in no time.” Says Macchio. The gang move ahead, leaving Macchio behind. He stares out into the night sky and sees the bird hovering. He raises his hand and the bird swoops down like a jet, then spreads its wings, breaking in mid-air, then flaps hovering next to Macchio, over the waterfall. Dust and dirt fly in all directions with every heavy flap of the human sized Albatross. Macchio holds out his hand, and the Albatross spits out a note. He reads it smiling and whispers to the Albatross who flies away. He puts the message in his back pocket.

“What was that?” Says a voice. Macchio looks around. From behind one of the caves, Max emerges!

“What the heck are you doing here, I thought you split?” Says Macchio squinting his eyes.

“I wanted to say bye to the Sailor.” Says Max.

“You found us pretty quick” Replies Macchio. Max holds out his compass. “Ah, nice. Well, the rest of the gang isn’t far, hurry and go if you wanna catch up.” Says Macchio. He joins Max as they move ahead. “Congrats on getting his compass back.” He says. They catch up to the gang as they’re regrouping. They find themselves in the middle of a strange fork.

“We should take the one on the left.” Says one of the gang.

“Naw, let’s go straight down the middle, it’s the safest bet.” Says another.

“We could try splitting but we need to stick together.” Says Macchio. Ethan tries shooting fire at each one, but it doesn’t reveal much except more depth or turns. Max looks at his compass and it points left.

“Oh shoot! Max you got it back!!!” Yells one of the gang.

“It’s pointing left, no matter what.” Says Max. The gang begin to follow him. On their way, they’re astounded to see rock formations that feel like organic architecture, slabs, stairs, pillars, except they blur the line on what is natural and what may have been crafted. One of them stops and freaks out. On the ground, is a heavy footprint, and it’s half the size of a human. There’s

several of them that trail off and soften as they look onward. They keep moving forward and the cave becomes more and more architectural, with symbols none of them understand. There's an archway with cyclops statues on either side, standing straight, with sharp teeth, a giant horn, and claws. As they venture further, following Max, there's a heavy gate. None of them can move it. Macchio's water powers don't work without being near water. Ethans powers don't work, the stone is impervious to fire. Max can make his pillar rise from anywhere but it's hopeless.

"You guys notice that?" Asks one of the gang. He points to a contraption to the far right of the door between two rocky columns but it's out of reach. Max looks at the compass, pointing to a narrow gap among the rocks, just a few feet away from them. He squeezes but can't make it through. The compass insists. He uses his power to make a pillar rise between the rocks and they crack, widening. Max is about to squeeze through and sees there's a mechanism as well as a rocky staircase to get to it. He activates it but it's stuck. Some of the gang run to go help him, and the door opens, revealing an incredibly gorgeous chamber with a mosaic of colored tile on the ceiling, walls, and floors, depicting all the giant creatures of the island and the cyclops eating them. Macchio notices a pillar, with an inscription on it. He runs over to the gang.

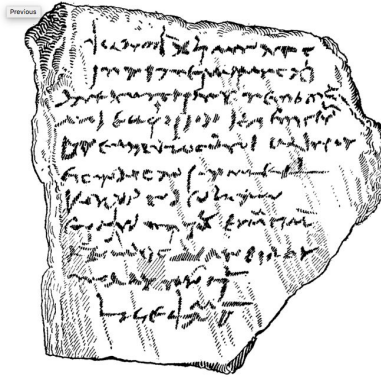
"Guys, I found something." everyone looks at Macchio. "I'll hold the lever. You guys check out the hidden chamber!" orders Macchio. The gang rush in and study the mosaic. One of them turns around.

"We hit the jackpot!" yells one of the gang. A faint glow from the end of the long chamber, is seen. As they walk closer, they recognize it's a glowing stone, in red, floating atop a pillar with a similar design to the first one they ran into. Macchio joins them.

"I can't believe it." says Max. The compass points directly to the stone. "Everyone, it's time to go home." Then a loud shriek fills the cave. Behind them, a 12-foot tall Cyclops with large feet and burling muscle yells at them and starts charging. Ethan, Macchio, Max, and the gang power up their stones.



# CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE



In the Real World, Marcus and Gil drive around the neighborhood, Gil writes down on a map notations, while Marcus steers based on Judy's feedback. She's in the back seat, wearing the tech goggles she developed and looking all around her, peering through the window from their patrol vehicle from both sides.

"I can see a concentration of static energy, red trails, floating around, around the park." says Judy. They keep following and a lot of trails lead to the antique store. Another to Marcus house, Ethan's house, Hawthorne's, and every kid from their disappearance also has a faint trail. "Turn here, to the park" she continues. "Let me get out of the car". Marcus stops. She gets out and walks over to where the compass first appeared. There's a ravine just behind it. "I can't believe what I'm seeing" she says. "It's a huge leak along the ravine of this red, static, substance." she describes. Marcus looks at the edge of the ravine.

"Can you point where you see the direction of the glow?" asks Marcus.

"It's not faint, but alive and kicking." says Judy. Marcus takes a look, she gives him her helmet. Gil draws the indications of it on his map. Marcus takes off the helmet.

"It's the fault line!" yells Marcus. Gil and Judy stare at Marcus. "C'mon guys! That's it. Gil, do you remember the earthquake we had a few years back? It's epicenter was the park. It was the first time we heard there was a fault line so close to my house, and it was rare to experience quakes in our neighborhood." Gil glances with confusion. Marcus holds Gil by the shoulder "Don't you remember all the fault lines from calls we've gotten in the past?"

"I remember a few" says Gil as he marks them down.

"If Marcus is right, that means the events have been happening all near fault lines." says Judy.

"Woah, that's wild." says Gil.

“You know, I remember a similar concept on a video I saw on the internet. There’s these things called Ley Lines, a flow of energy throughout the earth.” says Gil.

“Oh! That’s fascinating” says Gil.

“Guys, c’mon, let’s push to follow this lead.” insists Marcus. Surely enough, as they’re driving around, there’s heavy concentration of this radiation from all the areas Gil remembers being fault lines.

“Do me a favor, can you drop me off at my parents house and after, I’ll meet you back at your place?” asks Gil. Marcus agrees and drops Gil off, and with Judy, they head to Marcus home. She follows the trail as she gets out of the car, from the front of the house. Marcus unlocks the front door, keeping all the lights shut off and starts to walk around the kitchen. Judy stares at the kitchen table, then sees the streak heading up to Max’s room.

“I remember the night of our argument.” says Marcus. “The trails form every step Max took that day.” he recounts. They walk upstairs and enter Max’s room. Judy gasps.

“I see a strong, static, electrical current, almost like a lighting bolt frozen in time, hovering in the middle of the room.” says Judy. There’s a knock on the door. Judy and Marcus jolt instantaneous, taking heavy breaths. Gil walks in with a ton of maps.

“Sorry to scare you guys. I rushed here as quick as I could. I got these from my Dad who was a cartographer.” says Gil. They head back to the kitchen, turn on the lights, and lay out Gil’s map along with his dad’s earthquake danger emergency map. “Ok, so note, these are all the disappearances, then all the areas we’ve been seeing the static.” he says.

“And these points are where we had sightings of the sentinels.” Gil, Marcus, and Judy gasp. Gil’s eyes open wide.

“Bingo. All the disappearances and sightings have happened whenever artifacts related to the antique store were near any of the fault lines, where the static was at its greatest.” says Marcus.

“The university was a special case, we may had been activating it near another fault line.” notes Judy.

“If this is true, then maybe the men in black see this, and sure enough there may be a way to use this to our favor. “ says Marcus.

“What do you mean?” asks Gil. Marcus smiles.

“We catch ‘em in a trap!” he says.

In the Lost Realm, The stone users are fighting the Cyclops but in such a tight, narrow, space, that they’re also hurting each other. Macchio uses his power to hold the Cyclops back, while his tears and other fluids from his head, nose, and mouth are floating out towards the air behind him. The Cyclops is gets dizzy and more upset.

“Everyone to chill!” Macchio tells the gang. “I’m almost getting burnt by Ethan. Max, raise a pillar in front of us for defense.” Macchio orders. Max nods and obeys. “And then Onelia, use your power to summon insects to drive him back further.” he continues.

“Hold on a bit.” replies Onelia.

“Ethan, start a fire in front of the Cyclops.” demands Macchio. He tries to aim, and while it fails, it lands near the creature, a large flame from the floor. But it goes out quickly. It’s enough to pull the Cyclops back. Macchio lets go of his powers. The Cyclops falls to his knees, his head in his hands. He gets up.

“I have an idea” says Max. He lowers the pillar protecting them and raises it in front of the Cyclops. “Ethan, can you can set my pillar on fire?” he asks.

“My aim sucks!” yells Ethan

“I agree, that’s because YOU suck. But you should do it anyway, cause if you don’t, I’ll call you a wuss for the rest of your life and a loser if you don’t.” yells Max.

“Yeah, fat chance, wimp!” Ethan replies smiling. He shoots a few times and one of them lands on the pillar. It’s flaming! The Cyclops walks back. The fires that don’t land, go out quickly, but the pillar remains burning. The Cyclops gets up, bashes the walls, and run towards them, leaping over the fire, and thrusting his fist towards the group, destroying the pillar, and knocking out the stone floating on top of it. A few of the gang are knocked on the floor. The Cyclops tries to stomp on them while they run and dodge to the other side. He follows after them, but Ethan shoots another great ball of fire which scares him away briefly, but he slowly starts walking toward them, grunting. Macchio looks at the exit doors of the chamber.

“Is a pillar all you can do? ONE pillar?” Ethan yells at Max.

“I don’t know. It’s not like these things come with instructions, moron!” yells Max. But in the panic of the moment, he tries to catch his breath. “I’ll see how far I can push it!” he says. Max aims his stone at the Cyclops and tries to raise a pillar. He keeps trying to make it bigger but nothing happens, he keeps focusing, and as the Cyclops gets closer, Ethan throws another fireball. But the heat is starting to affect everyone.

“Max, do something!” Ethan yells. Max keeps trying, just then, another pillar rises, then another, then another, and they gather around the Cyclops, forming a wall of five wooden pillars. Ethan sets them ablaze. Finally, they have a wall of fire that keeps them protected. The Cyclops takes a few steps back, gets into a sprinters pose, and with a few steps, leaps over the fire, feet first, like a pole vaulter and lands near them on the other side, but they scramble away near the entrance when they see him land. He gets up and is about to charge after them when a swarm of insects arrive and starts to drive him crazy, trying to swat them. Macchio runs towards Ethan.

“Hey Ethan, put out your fires! Max, take down your pillars, let’s get the stone and go.” yells Macchio. Everyone follows Macchio past the Cyclops, to the other side, deep into the chamber where the pillar was destroyed. Ethan lights up his power stone with just enough light to see through the rubble. One of the gang sees the stone.

“Alright, let’s see if this thing really does bring us home.” says one of the gang. Another grabs it, and closing their eyes, concentrating, they start to activate the stone. It glows, and a portal opens. Everyone’s shocked at what they see. Macchio gasps.

“Oh my gosh, that’s my house!” yells Onelia.

“No! That’s MY house!” yells another.

“I’m seeing my house too.” says another. Ethan sees his sister and dad arguing in their living room.

“You guys don’t see what I’m seeing?” says Ethan. Max sees his bedroom.

“Guys, I think we’re all seeing the same thing, but for each of us. This is it!” says Max. He looks at his compass, with a strange stare. “Hey, everyone, something’s weird with the compass.” he warns.

“Who wants to leap first, let’s hurry!” yells one of them.

“Wait, something's not right.” Max argues. The compass points at Macchio.

“I’m going in” says Ethan. As he starts to make a run for it, the Cyclops bashes the walls and causes the room to shake, along with the portal.

“We should all just jump in at the same time, let’s go”. Says one of the gang.

“I’ll go first!” yells Macchio. As other stone users are following him to the portal, he raises his stone in the air and holds them all back, knocking out the gal holding the stone.

“What the hell are you doing, Macchio?” yells one of the gang. He grabs the stone from Onelia and runs towards the Cyclops who is once again charging after them. Everyone goes after Macchio.

“There’s nothing for me to go to!” yells Macchio.

“Give it back!” yells one of the gang. As they approach the Cyclops, with Ethan shooting fire to stop Macchio and Max using his pillars to corner him, he’s trapped. The insects starts to swarm him also. In desperation, as the Cyclops is shrieking at them,

“Shut up!” yells Macchio at the Cyclops as he throws the stone like a football into the creature’s mouth. The Cyclops swallows the stone. Gagging and coughing, he tries to hold himself together, putting his hand around his throat, and getting to his knees. Macchio then uses his stone powers to lift himself out of his position, with all the fluids from his body rising with him. He then flies out of the chamber. The gang are mixed in reactions. Ethan tries to go after Macchio but the Cyclops is in his way, he shoots fire at Macchio who dodges them. A few flames trap them in the entrance. Onelia tries to get her swarm of insects to follow Macchio as runs away. The others are standing back, trying to figure out what to do.

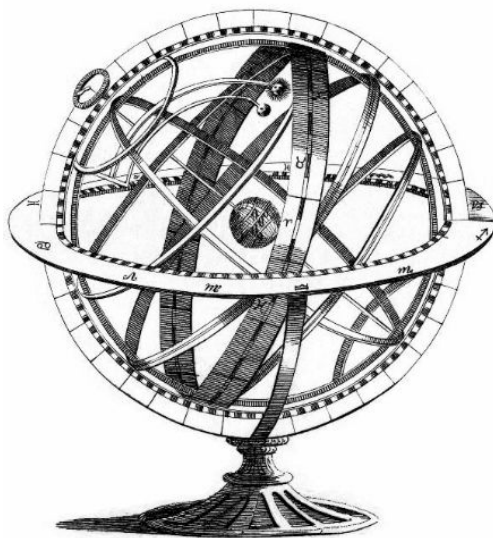
“Ethan, put down your fire!” yells Onelia. He compiles, but before they can get out, a clicking sound is heard in an echo.

*Whooom!*

The doors close. They’re trapped in the chamber along with the Cyclops!

# CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

## Armillary Sphere



In the real world, Marcus is in his kitchen with Gil explaining to Marianna what they found. They show her the device Judy had hooked together and she freaks when she sees the trails.

“We believe this could help blow the case wide open and possibly lure the sentinels, especially if they somehow follow this also, as it’s related to that substance we found.” Says Marcus.

“No way.” says Marianna “this is no longer police work and it’s way in over your heads. You should report this to the Chief and give this over to the experts.”

“But,” Says Marcus “we’re the only ones who can make it happen. Who is going to believe us? I barely believe it myself.” Marcus argues.

“Even if you figure out a way to lure the sentinels, how would you stop them?” Marianna questions. Gil and Marcus glance down.

“We aren’t sure.” Answers Gil. “But we believe there has to be a base of operations, and if we can find it, it’ll be worth calling in to have possibly Federal authorities involved and use every weapon in our arsenal to stop them.”

“I don’t like the idea.” Says Marianna. “After the shootout at the University and the police station, I’m not sure you’re dealing with anything human.”

“I’m getting back my son along with everyone’s missing child, even if it costs me my life.” Marcus argues



“Careful, Mark. It just might.” warns Marianna.

“I get where both of you are coming from. I’m unsure of what to say, I’m divided.” Says Gil.

“You guys should report this to the chief and let the higher ups handle it.” Marianna pleases

“I’m sorry, but I refuse.” Says Marcus.

“If you won’t, then I will.” Marianna threatens.

“Ok, wait, wait. Hold on.” Says Marcus, holding out his hand. Calming down. He takes a deep breath. “Give me a chance here. If I don’t have results in 48 hours, you can go to the chief, deal?”

“I’ll give you 24, and warning you to watch out.” Says Marianna. Marcus and Gil nod in agreement. Marianna leaves.

Marcus draws out a plan with Gil.

“We know the sentinels appear mostly from sunset to sunrise, which is also when the trails are at their brightest. There has to be an area with a heavy concentration of it.” Says Gil as he circles an area of the city. He takes out another map. “We need to find an artifact related to the case that hasn’t been confiscated.”

“Is it possible?” Asks Judy.

“Maybe? Here’s all the records of every missing kid from our investigation and every artifact from the antique store.” Says Marcus as he places two, full, heavy, binders on the table and sorts files on to one of the chairs. “Ok, then here’s a cross-checked list of customers from the shop. Are every one of them parents? No. But many of them gave away their items to someone who had a child. There’s hundreds of items, not all of them ended up in town, some of them were shipped all over the world.” says Marcus. Gil looks at the paperwork.

“Hey, I think this was the mirror that was sold from a Mrs. Garcia to a Mrs. Stoltz.” says Gil.

“Let me see that.” says Marcus. “Is there a photo?”. Gil looks through the files, and takes out a photo of the mirror, showing it to Marcus and Judy.

“I recognize that mirror anywhere. It was in Reagan’s house when I broken in. But we can’t do anything about it.” says Marcus, frowning.

“When do they appear?” asks Judy. “So far, you’ve mentioned near an item, at night, by a fault line...is there anyone else?”

“I remember the picture frame from Hawthorne’s desk.” says Marcus. “Gil, can you put on the helmet, we’re going for a ride.”

They pass by Hawthorne’s house, surely enough, there’s a pillar of glowing dust trails from his bedroom. He drives by Reagan’s house, and the dust trail emanates from the mirror in the living room all the way to the chimney. They drive to the mall, and there’s a large intersection of lines emanating from the antique store. He goes to where the vault was taken, and he can see for the first time, a strong trail coming from its origin heading to an area in the middle of mall parking lot.

“Gil, is there a fault line here?”. Asks Marcus. Gil confirms.

“The parking lot was repaired a decade ago from a minor quake.” says Judy.

“I don’t believe the vault would just disappear in the middle of the parking lot.” says Marcus.

“ I wonder if they had a van.” says Gil.

“I don’t remember seeing one in the video footage. But I wonders about the condo.” he says. They go back to the antique store owners condo, it’s been ransacked! The same markings from the store are in the condo. Gil can see the trails coming outside in. They lead to the office room. There’s missing items in the office.

“What’s peculiar, is that a lot of objects in the condo were taken.” says Marcus.

“It looks like a lot of trails lead to where artifacts may have been were taken.” says Gil, staring around the condo using the helmet.

“I suspect they’re going after all the items that were left behind. Which means either Reagan or Hawthorne’s Mom may be in danger.” says Marcus.

“I have an idea.” says Gil. “No matter what happens, all their trails, where they came from and went, all lead to dead ends, near fault lines. But, if we remember the university incident, we were activating the substance using a laser. If that’s true, our goggles aren't just viewing the trails, it’s also broadcasting!” he conjectures. Marcus eyes widen. They rush towards the patrol car and circle around areas of high beam intensity. Not much happens, they’re following the trails to their respective origins but nothing happens.

“Just being around the hotspots should’ve been enough to signal their presence.” says Marcus.

“What if we boost the goggles laser?”

“Yeah I turned the knob all the way up like she said, the battery’s pretty close to dead at this point. We’re definitely going to need a boost anyways.” says Gil. They head over to Judy’s house.

“You’re crazy.” she says.

“It may be the only way to find out, if it doesn’t work, we’re out of leads.” says Gil.

“Alright. But you guys are playing with fire. I want to be as far away when you guys turn this thing on as possible, I don’t want those things near my house.” says Judy. Gil hugs her.

“You’re a saint!” says Gil.

“Don’t thank me yet. I might be able to do it but I’m gonna need a car battery and alternator.” says Judy. “Is anyone willing to donate their car for science?” Gil nods. A half hour later, he drives up with a white van.

“My dad doesn’t care, it’s the only thing I could find that would help.” says Gil.

“It’s perfect.” says Marcus. Judy winces, but gets to work. An hour later, they hear Judy yelling from outside, as they’re getting up from her living room couch, Marcus shuts off the TV. She demos the contraption now sticking out of the hood, through the window, into the cargo area.

“It should work as long as the car is on, you control the power here, and don’t activate this bad girl near my house.” says Judy smiling. Marcus shakes her hand and thanks her. She removes the cables from the hood, closes it, and hands the wires to Gil. Marcus takes the driver's seat. Gil puts on his seatbelt. Marcus checks out the goggles but it starts to malfunction a bit.

“Hey Judy! I hate to ask you this, but we need your help.” says Marcus.

“I’m NOT going.” she insists.

“I promise we’ll protect you, nothing bad is going to happen.” says Gil.

“Last time they almost killed us!” yells Judy.

“Five minutes, I promise it’ll just be five minutes and after we’ll treat you out as a huge thank you.” Gil offers. Judy looks at them, sighing.

“I promise you after this, we’ll go to Crazy Lobster.” says Gil. Judy’s eyes widen and she smiles.

“I’m not that gullible to fall for something like that. Food? Honestly?! What am I a college student?” says Judy.

“He’s talking about the one downtown, the one that floats.” says Marcus.

“Shut up, that’s expensive.” whispers Gil.

“That’s why you guys just ended up friends, whatever, we need her help.” says Marcus. He looks at Judy. “Well?”

“Five minutes.” she answers. “Then we go straight to the restaurant.”

“Agreed!” yells Gil. “Let’s go!” Judy gets in the van and takes another look at the goggles. Marcus sits in the passenger side as the van starts to head out.

They drive to the mall parking lot, and put the van in neutral, with the emergency break enabled. Gil hooks up the goggles to the car battery, gets in the van, and run the engine. He keep trying and trying, revving the engine as many times as he can. Judy checks the goggles, noticing the fidelity getting brighter and sharper as they’re running more power through it. She gives it to Marcus, who tries it on. He gasps at sharpness of quality in the air of the trails and the subtlety of rose-colored electrical currents running in the air.

*ZZZooosshhh!*

The power goes out. All the lights in the parking lot, the van, the mall, everywhere, pitch black.

“You got your wish.” says Judy. Marcus withdraws his flashlight and checks the van and wires coming out of the goggles. The power comes back on and the sentinels appear! A gang of them, stand a few feet away from the van. Judy screams. Gil detaches the goggles from the engine and rushes to start the car as the sentinels approach. Marcus takes the cable and attaches it to the old portable device Judy gave him. Gil puts the van in reverse, almost flooring it, and gains distance between them. The headlights reveal five sentinels, running toward them. As Gil accelerates faster, the sentinels run, catching up. Gil’s eyes widen. The accelerator reads thirty miles an hour, yet they’re catching up.

“You gotta be kidding me!” yells Marcus.

“We’re outta here.” yells Gil. “Let’s see if they can chase a van!” yells Gil. He motions for Judy to get in the passenger seat. She straps the seatbelt and secures it tight. Marcus in the back, holds on to a metal bar welded to the wall. Gil spins the vehicle in the opposite direction, then

accelerates out of the mall parking lot. Marcus puts on the goggles and doesn't believe what he sees. One more sentinel appears from a rift in mid-air.

"There is no headquarters, Marianna was right, they weren't human." says Marcus.

"Shoot! Can you shoot?" asks Gil.

"It's pointless!" yells Marcus. Gil speeds down an isolated highway through the forest. The sentinels run after then, getting closer and closer. Gil watches the road ahead of him, with only trees and asphalt visible with the headlights. The speedometer keeps rising to fifty and sixty miles per hour, but the sentinels approach closer in the rear view mirror. Gil wipes the sweat from his brow.

"We need to ditch the goggles and go!" yells Judy. Marcus nods. Gil circles around, back to the mall entrance. They speed across the vast, empty lot. Before Marcus takes off the goggles, he sees a portal opening in the center of the parking space. In it, he notices the last thing he'd expect. The van exits the mall and the sentinels begin to slow down.

"Gil! Turn the car around and go back to the mall." Marcus demands.

"Are you crazy?!" yells Judy

"I think we just lost 'em" says Gil.

"Gil, please, you have to go back." argues Marcus.

"You've got a death wish? No way I'm going back. We're lucky to outrun these monsters if that's even possible." yells Gil.

"I saw someone!" yells Marcus. Gil and Judy look at him with eyes wide. Gil keeps driving forward.

"Did you hear me?!" yells Marcus.

"Yeah, I'm trying to think!" shouts Gil. "Damn." he says. Gil looks in the rear view mirror and sees the sentinels slowly catching up again. He makes a defensive maneuver around the highway in the woods. "Alright, Marcus, you to take the steering wheel, I'm going to try to shoot."

"It's not going to help!" Marcus argues.

"Just shut up and take the wheel dammit!" yells Gil.

"I'll do it. I'm right here, I've got the rifle, I get your plan." Says Marcus.

“I’ll drive around to lure them.” Gil says. Judy hyperventilates, holding tight to her seatbelt and shutting her eyes. Gil pulls on her seatbelt, and puts his on on her shoulder. She flicks it away. He pulls again to make sure Judy is strapped tight. Marcus sees the sentinels just outside the mall parking lot, wraps rope around his left shoulder as he ties the other end to the metal bar, and opens both doors of the rear. He takes out his gun, aiming at the approaching sentinels and starts shooting. Gil sees a sentinel appear right in front of him and he tries to hit him with the truck but the sentinel becomes ash and the van just drives right through it.

“Holy ---” yells Gil as the van swerves for a moment and he straightens the van as he drives around the lot. That sentinel along with the others reappear behind the van. No matter how many times Marcus shoots, the bullets get absorbed into them. Gil tries a series of defensive maneuvers in and out of the mall area. But no matter where they turn, sentinels appear in front of their van.

“There’s no way to escape!” yells Judy. “Marcus, ditch the goggles!!”

“I can’t” yells Marcus.

“You have to, we’re not gonna make it.” yells Gil. On the next turn, the van almost flips over. Marcus throws out the goggles. The sentinels reappear in front of the Van, and then disappear as Gil speeds ahead, through the long winding highway in the forest.

“Are they gone?” asks Judy with her eyes closed, breathing heavy. Gil keeps driving for a few miles. Minutes pass by without a sighting. No one says a word for several minutes as Gil gets close to the police station.

“They’re gone.” says Gil. Marcus is quiet. Judy lets out a huge sigh of relief, wiping her eyes. She looks back in the van were Marcus sits on the floor, staring ahead.

“Is everyone’s ok?” asks Judy.

“We have to go back to the mall!” Marcus yells

“No way!” Gil and Judy shout simultaneously.

“We...need to keep this under wraps, it’s way over our heads.” says Gil

“I have to go back.” Marcus insists.

“It’s too dangerous Mark. I’m sorry.” Gil argues.

“Guys, you don’t understand.” says Marcus, staring at the wall, hands over his head “The last thing I saw with the goggles, was a portal opening behind the sentinels, and inside of it...was Max!”

Meanwhile, in the Lost Realm, the Cyclops coughs and gags, with sparks shooting out of his mouth. They’re trapped! The Cyclops gets up and starts to pound against the entrance but can’t get it open. It then starts to open its mouth wide, screaming at the stone users. Everyone runs back while Max, Ethan, and the Onelia use their powers of fire, pillars, and insects to keep the Cyclops away.

“We’re dead. I don’t see us getting out of here. We’ll probably turn ogre or the air in the place will probably suffocate us.” says one of the stone users.

“You should keep your fire down, I’ll keep my pillars up along with the insects to keep the Cyclops away.” Max tells Ethan. The cyclops on the other side of the immense corridor, punches and yells at Max’s pillars. It’s like an angry, giant, gorilla, ready to rip something apart. It starts pounding on the door, floors, and its surroundings. The insects are keeping him busy.

“I don’t know how long I can keep it up!” yells Onelia. Her skin starts turning a pale lime color. Max looks at the compass. It’s following the cyclops movements. As he’s coughing and gagging, more sparks are coming out. Max’s eyes widen. From where the sparks emerge, he can see an opening out of the creatures mouth. In it, a van, and the mall near his house.

“Guys, I think there’s only one way out.” Max says, pointing to the sparks coming out of the cyclops.

“No way. There’s no way that’s gonna happen.” yells Ethan. The other teens are looking at Max like he’s crazy.

“Guys, we’re already doomed. It’s either we try or die.” says Max. He turns around and starts heading toward the cyclops provoking it. Everyone yells at Max. The Cyclops locks it’s gaze at Max and screams. Everyone shouts at Max to come back. He ignores them and starts to run, then lowers one of the pillars using his stone powers as the cyclops lowers his head toward Max. Mouth wide open, he gets ready to chomp on Max, looking down at the compass. It’s pointing to the cyclops mouth.

“Stop Max! What the hell are you doing?” yells Onelia.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” shouts Ethan. Everyone's yelling at Max to stop. He runs faster, and just as the cyclops turns his head sidewise, Max dives into his mouth. The cyclops raises his head, and swallows Max. Everyone screams. One of the gang cries. The cyclops gags and coughs, but only sparks come out. Onelia turns to Ethan and punches him in the shoulder to get his attention.

“What!?” yells Ethan.

“Did you notice the sparks grew intense as Max was swallowed?” says Onelia. Ethan narrows his eyes in a confused expression.

“Wha-?” shouts Ethan. Onelia turns to the gang.

“Everyone! Sorry, but if we're gonna be goners, might as well go with a bang.” says Onelia, as she walks backwards facing the gang and turns around to head toward the Cyclops. Everyone yells at Onelia. She runs, using her stone powers to provoke the cyclops attention towards her. It's irritated by the swarm, circling around it's head. Max's pillars disappear into mist. As she runs towards the cyclops, she confronts it head on. It tries to squash her, but with the insects she's able to guide his behavior. Her stone glows brighter. She provokes the Cyclops to eat her. The cyclops, coughing and gagging, lowers its head toward her and in the moment it's struggling with the insects, she makes them disappear. The Cyclops gasps, and she jumps into its mouth. Ethan and the other two users scream at each other.. The Cyclops coughs and gags further.

“Alright guys, I guess this is it” says one of the gang, crying. “Might as well go for it, I'm so sorry.” he yells and runs towards the Cyclops.

“Stoooppp!” Ethan screams. But the other gang member follows, slowly heading towards the Cyclops. The other gang member turns around and salutes Ethan.

“Hey man, it was good knowin' ya. See ya on the other side.” he says, following the other gang member.

“Come back you idiots. Don't leave me here!” Ethan yells but no one listens, as the last two gang members run towards the Cyclops, one after the other, with little hesitation. Ethan screams silent.



# CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN



In the Real World, Gil and Mariana yell at Marcus just outside the station at night. He gets in his police car.

“If you want to stop me, call out an APB on me and say I’m going AWOL.” Marcus replies. He rings the siren and jump starts the car. Gil tries to stop him.

“Alright, Mark, let me get in then.” says Gil.

“It’s too dangerous, send word out!” Marcus yells. As Gil tries to get in the passenger side, Marcus backs up and speeds away, headed toward the mall. It’s pitch black except the fog lights from his car and the moon’s cool cast over the trees and road. A few cars pull to the side with no sign of sentinels. He arrives at the abandoned mall parking lot, takes out his gun and looks around. The mall parking lot lights are bright and heavy but not a car in sight. It’s quiet. Marcus rolls down the window. He can hear the wind howl. He’s shaking and warming himself up. There’s not a single sign of life, not even an ant. He slowly gets out of the car, holding his gun. He puts it in his holster. Then, a red flash of lighting sparks off in the distance, then, two more. A streak explodes to his right, suddenly, over the emptiness of the lot in front of his car. Two more flashes. Debris fly everywhere while Marcus leaps behind his car, withdrawing his gun. Out of another flash, sparks emerge, and then a luminescent apparition emerges with red embers. As the sparks and embers rise, the apparition dims into the figure of a young teen wearing antiquated

clothes and long hair. Marcus looks around, he can hear sirens from oncoming police in the distance. He stares at the teen, lying still, then slowly moving, and getting up. Marcus slowly walks towards the figure with his gun drawn.

“Put your hands up where I can see ‘em!” Yells Marcus. The teen stands straight holding a stone and turns around. “Who are you?!” Marcus inquires. Pointing his flashlight at the teen, he realizes with tears in his eyes. “Holy crap, you’re one of the missing from the investigation!” The teen looks at Marcus, dazed. The police begin to arrive at the scene. Officers begin to get out of their cars, with guns drawn.

“Put your head down on the ground and behind your back!” yells one of the officers.

“Stand back!” Marcus tells the officers, but they move ahead and handcuff the teen. “Leave the kid alone!” he yells at the other officers, but they ignore him. “Hey kid, sorry about this.” Marcus says to the teen, following them. One of the other officers approach Marcus.

“What just happened?” asks the Officer. Gil gets out of the car and run towards Marcus.

“What’s going on?” asks Gil. Marcus ignores them, following other officers are taking the teen.

“Have you seen Max?, have you seen my son?” asks Marcus, as the teen heads toward one of the cars, cuffed. Another office lowers the teens head into the back seat of the car.

“Max? Yeah, he was the fi-”. The door closes.

“Let me talk to the kid!” Marcus pleas with the officers but they ignore him. “What the heck is wrong with you?!” Marcus yells, approaching one of the officers up close, but Gil holds him back.

“It’s ok, Mark. I called it in.” says Gil.

“You?” asks Marcus.

“They’re not happy with us right now, the Chief is pretty irked also. We gotta report tomorrow morning. Marcus you look like hell, go home.” insist Gil. Marcus gets hysterical.

“I just saw that kid come out of that wormhole, he’s seen Max too, we gotta question him!!!” All the officers on the scene turn toward Marcus, one of them about to withdraw their gun. Gil holds out his hand as if to say stop.

“Calm down.” Gil tells Marcus. “We’ll get our chance but if you don’t chill, we’ll both be canned.”

“I can’t go home. That kid knows where Max is, he can tell us everything you’ve gotta believe me.” Marcus insists, holding back tears.

“You are one crazy son of a bitch, Mark!” yells Marianna walking toward them, emerging from a patrol car that just arrived. “The chief ordered us to escort you home.” she says. Marcus turns to Gil who nods in agreement. He looks down, lets out a heavy sigh, and resigns to follow Gil to his car, Marianna opens the door to the back seat, Marcus takes one last look at the abandoned parking lot, then gets in. Marianna closes the door. When they arrive at Marcus home, Gil parks in front.

“Hey Mark? Don’t worry man, we’ll figure out a way to find Max.” Gil assures. Marianna on the passenger side turns around.

“Don’t to give up hope, but right now, you need to worry about your career. That move you just pulled is about to put our entire force in jeopardy, and the Mayor is already threatening to replace the Chief over your actions. Let’s just say, you’ll be lucky if you have a job in the morning.” scorns Marianna. Marcus gets out of the car but leans in for a moment.

“I don’t need a job, I need my son.” says Marcus. He closes the door. Gil and Marianna drive away. In the darkness of night, he stares at his front yard and the stars. “Max, where the hell are ya, son?”

*Flash!*

Max’s bedroom window lights up. Marcus eyes widen, frantically, he unlocks the door. The keys drop, but he picks it back up again, fidgeting with the lock. The door unlocks, he barges into the living room, runs upstairs to Max’s room, and slams the door open. He freezes.

“Dad?” says Max.

“Wha--” Marcus chokes. He gets down on his knees and tears come streaming from his eyes.

“Dad!?” Max bolts over to his dad and hugs him with all his might. Marcus holds his son, then he gets up and holds him tighter. “Dad, you’re killing me.” Marcus cries. He can’t stop or say anything. He’s there with his son for a moment that seems like ages.

“Where have you been?” Marcus sobs, holding back tears.

“Dad, you’re not going to believe me.” replies Max. Marcus looks him in the eye and smiles.

“Don’t worry” he replies, “I don’t believe you’re here. And anything you say is just as impossible.”

In the Lost Realm, Hawthorne sits on the dirt floor of a makeshift, green, military tent, tied to a pole, and surrounded by rebel troops. He recounts the story to the leader of the gang that just tried to wage war against the King and how they lost. She considers his story.

“I think he’s telling the truth” says one of the gang. Someone slaps him.

“Of coarse, estupido”. Says another member. The leader looks at the two gang members. They lower their heads. The leader then turns to Hawthorne.

“For your loyalty, for returning to give us the news, I’d like to invite you to join our gang.” she says. Hawthorne looks around, all eyes on him. “There’s an initiation, but if you pass, I’ve got the perfect stone power for you. Hawthorne gives her a confused look.

“What stone power?” he asks. The leader walks over to the other side of the room, over to a locked, wooden box. She unlocks, then opens it to reveal a bento box crammed with stones of different shapes and colors. She sifts them with her forefinger, and takes one out. She closes her eyes and holds the stone. A raven flies across the room and lands on Hawthorne's partly injured shoulder. She walks over back to Hawthorne, holding the stone out in front of him with one hand. As she lifts her other hand, it’s missing! The end of her wrist where her hand should be, is a stubble of skin and dark feather. She whistles, lifting her stubbled arm up in the air. The raven flies, landing on the end of her stubble. She lowers her arm and as Hawthorne blinks, her hand is restored.

“I’ve got a special mission if you’re willing to accept. This war ain’t over. Not by a long shot.” says the leader. Hawthorne nods.

In the Real World, Beth wakes Reagan.

“There’s someone in the house, we may have a burglar.”whispers Beth, tugging at Reagan’s shirt.

“Deal with it.” he says. She slaps him with a pillow. He takes the hit. They hear the sound of glass breaking in the living room. Beth shakes Reagan, who then slides out of bed, giving Beth a scolding look. “If they kidnap you, I won’t stop them.” he loudly whispers. He stands still for a few seconds. Beth looks at him waiting. He slowly creeps back into bed.

“Nevermind, you handle it.” he says. Beth rolls her eyes and slowly creeps out of the bedroom into the hallway. There’s more broken glass sounds coming from the living room. Beth slowly walks into Ethan’s room and grabs a bat. Amy opens her door, but Beth motions for her to get back into her room. She slowly walks downstairs, holding the bat in front her, ready to strike. As she reaches the base of the stairs, the kitchen is lit up. She notices cover for her mirror was removed and one of their vases shattered on the floor. She hears the sound of the fridge opening. She takes the white sheet covers from the mirror and holds it in her other hand. As she creeps toward the kitchen, someone pops out of the corner of her eye. She immediately throws the white bed sheet over and with all her might and beats the intruder with the bat like a piñata. The intruder curses and swears at the top of his lungs.

“OW! Stop it! what the hell?” yells the intruder. Beth stops.

“Oh my G--” Beth yells, interrupted as the intruder quickly takes off the white sheet. It’s Ethan! Bruised from the shoulder, down and covered in slime. Beth drops the bat, crying, and hugs Ethan, now in more pain.

“Mom, geez!”. Says Ethan, shivering. Amy walks downstairs and sees Beth and Ethan, she’s frozen.

“NO way! Where the hell have you -” says Amy but Ethan cuts her off.

“Don’t even get me started. Just, need water, shower, food, clothes, decent sleep, and then I promise I’ll tell you everything. But first...”. Ethan takes the bat from his mom, walks over to the mirror and shatters it with his bat. Beth and Amy are screaming at him.

“What are you doing?” yells Beth.

“This thing is the reason I hate life right now.” Ethan tells them. Beth is holding back tears. Amy pries the bat away from Ethan.

“What happened to you? Where did you go?”. Asks Beth, holding back tears. Ethan looks at his Mom.

“Sorry about the toffees and I’ve been waiting a long time to say that.” says Ethan, holding back tears. He looks at Amy and Beth. “Mom, listen, what I’m about to tell you, can’t be explained. You gotta see it, to get what I’m about to tell you. You wanna know where I’ve been?” Ethan takes out his stone, it glows in his hand. His iris becomes luminescent “a place none of us ever expected to get out of, alive...”

In the Lost Realm, Kid Zero stands off the edge of a cliff from the outskirts of the royal castle. It’s an early, golden sunrise. The giant, red, silhouette of an albatross glides towards Zero with jet speed. As it approaches, with its towering wingspan near the edge and the wind from it’s wings, blowing back it’s surroundings. It takes a lot for Zero to resist falling back, like hurricane force winds. It’s webbed foot opens, throwing Macchio across the grass, rolling on the ground from the momentum. The giant albatross lands, settling it’s massive wings over it’s torso. A sentinel emerges from behind, brining a fish to Zero, who passes it to the Albatross, who gobbles it up. It lifts its throat and swallows it whole. A few more fish emerge from the Sentinel. As Zero continues feeding the bird, Macchio throws up.

“Had a nice trip?” asks Zero. Macchio holds up his palm.

“Sorry, I’m not good with heights and he’s got a killer grip” Macchio replies. Zero throws another fish into the Albatross’ mouth.

“Everything work out at the cave?” asks Zero. Macchio looks up at Zero while on his knees.

“Yeah I had to take care of my friends, first.” replies Macchio. Zero smiles.

“Don’t lie to me. There’s no such thing.” says Zero. Macchio grins. “Are you ready?” he continues. Macchio nods. Zero walks him towards the side entrance of the castle. Macchio looks around, gasping at the splendor of its size, grand walls, sprawling carpet, elaborate decor, and pristine opulence. He looks at his tattered clothes. As he’s walking beside zero, many are pausing from their duties to salute them. Macchio doesn’t respond. Zero ushers him into the courtyard and then walks with him to the throne room. Macchio’s eyes widen.

“Shouldn’t I, like, change or something?” Macchio inquires.

“Not if you don’t feel like it.” says Zero. Macchio yields a baffled glare at Zero. “Take a seat.” he says. Macchio sees Zero’s hand pointing at the Kings chair.

“Which chair?” Macchio confers. Zero smiles, staring Macchio in the eye.

“YOUR seat, your majesty.” Zero replies. Macchio looks back at Zero.

“I dunno about this, look how I’m dressed, like, this isn’t me.” answers Macchio. Zero turns to look behind him and motions four of the court subjects to come forward. One of them brings a crown, the other a robe, another a gold fleece, and another, a ring. They crowd around Macchio and over his ragged clothes, he’s given the crown, robe, ring, and fleece. A sentinel appears and hands him a staff with a green stone at the end.

“You seem pretty well dressed now, your highness. Go ahead, try it”. Says Zero. Macchio sits on the throne, adjusting his coat, and his waist. He tries to settle in it, and at last, finds a comfortable position. Zero looks at him. “Looks like you fit it well.” Macchio is speechless. Zero then walks away towards the front of the courtyard, “oh, your majesty, I wanted to show you one more thing”. Macchio gets up, followed by the four subjects and the Sentinels. As Macchio follows Zero to the outside entrance of the courtyard, there is a huge crowd of subjects gathered, waiting for them. Macchio looks down and sees more people than he can possibly count. The kingdom’s walls seem to go on to the horizon. From their high elevation, they can see the waterfalls, cliffs, rivers, and land just outside the kingdoms outer walls. Macchio looks out in the distance

“Is that--?” gasps Macchio as Zero nods. A swarm of Ogres surround the castle's outer walls.

“Lift your staff and focus on the Ogres.” instructs Zero. As he does, all the Ogres lift their arms. As he lowers it, they do also. Macchio gasps. He does it again a few more times and cackles, as the Ogres mirror his gestures. A sentinel brings a stone to Kid Zero. He lifts it over the crowd and begins to speak. A holographic projection of Zero hovers over the gasping crowd, pointing to the air and murmuring among each other. Zero waits for the crowd to settle. A brief silence, the crowd waiting in suspense. Macchio's image is projected in the air, the size of a mountain, with Zero next to him, from the waist, up. All eyes are on them. The wind howls.

“Behold, your new King!” echoes Zero over the crowd. A moment passes, then the crowd erupts with cheers. Zero holds Macchio's hand up in the air. The crowd goes even wilder. Macchio smiles, but it soon dies down, as he notices a pillar of light erupting from a mounting volcano, off in the distance. Kid Zero lowers his stone, distracting Macchio from his far-off glare. They’re seen but not heard in the projection.



“Lower your staff now.” Kid Zero instructs. The Ogre army, get down on bended knee, bowing their heads. “From now on, you’re the king. I’m your advisor. Just do what I tell you, and we’ll rule the lands into an empire of our making.” Macchio waves at the crowd.

“Yeah, totally.” says Macchio, gasping. A sentinel appears out of a portal just behind them. Zero turns around. The sentinel whispers in his ear. He nods. The sentinel disappears. Zero turns to Macchio.

“Looks like we have our first order of business.” urges Zero. Macchio continues to smile and wave.

“What’s that?” asks Macchio. Zero looks down at the crowd.

“Your friends made it in the real world.” says Zero. Macchio’s expression turn to horror as he turns to Zero. “NO ONE is meant to escape the Lost Realm. Our first order is to make sure of that.” insists Zero. They turn around and walk back into the castle. Macchio's crown tilts, as he settles in his new throne.

**THE END**

# A HUGE, BEYOND WHAT I CAN MUSTER, THANK YOU



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