

CHAPTER 1

Nature Gone Crazy

There was no need to set an alarm. Basim had only slept six hours, but he awoke exhilarated. The morning sun had not yet risen so he navigated through the cabin with the help of a pocket flashlight. He swept his hand against a wooden support beam as he passed it. Even the feel of the rough wood made him eager to start the day. Along the wall was a line of duffel bags. He unzipped one slowly, making as little noise as possible. Collecting footage for a nature documentary was his most elaborate job to date and he wanted it to go as smoothly as possible. Before leaving he'd made a checklist of every item needed and reviewed it several times a day. He was certain he had everything, but it was possible he'd forgotten something in his excitement to arrive at the filming location. There was a town nearby, but it was mostly grocery and craft stores. There was little hope of finding the necessary electronics on those streets.

He began with the soft materials. There were sheets of folded fabric designed to reflect and control light, various lenses stored in secondary cases, and weighted bags of sand for stability. Lastly he removed the tripod stands one at a time. It was impossible to keep the metal rods from clanking. As he removed the fifth one, the ceiling lamp sprang to life. Basim pulled the stand the rest of the way out quickly. "Morning, Jenkins. Sorry, was I being too loud? I didn't mean to wake you."

Jenkins' palms scraped against his morning whiskers. "It's alright. I trained myself to get up early." He went to a window and pulled back a cotton drape. The world was still dark, but hints of light crept through the green and brown carpet of trees.

Basim took a visual inventory and stuffed the equipment back into the bag. "I lost track of time. We'd better get going."

"Breakfast first," said Jenkins as he slouched to a cupboard.

Basim stayed busy with the equipment. They had scouted the area and he had selected three spots he wanted to start: one in the morning, another in the afternoon, and the third in the evening. He collected three cameras for each location and slipped each into a different satchel equipped with a shoulder strap. There was enough room in each bag for accessories that could come in handy given any number of conditions. Trekking through the forest with all three would be difficult but capturing footage of animals was a game of patience and the perfect shot could easily be lost if the appropriate attachment was not readily on hand.

As he filled each bag with detachable gear the smell of cinnamon filled the room and a coffee maker gurgled. Jenkins went to an oak table near the corner where Basim worked. "Get it while it's hot," Jenkins said as he sipped loudly from his mug.

Basim found a gyroscopically stable handheld mount. "I'll wait for the oats to gel. I don't like it when they're runny."

"I made it dry, the way you like it. Come on, eat up. I don't want you to pass out, especially if we get separated."

Basim went to the kitchen and filled a mug half-full of coffee. A glance in the pot on the stove showed Jenkins had told the truth. When Basim ordered oatmeal in restaurants it always had so much water that it was soupy. Jenkins had used much less than the suggested amount of water printed on the package, so the artificially flavored oats had the texture of a soft cookie. They planned on spending a lot of time in the cabin, and Basim was grateful to be spending it with someone who remembered such small details.

They ate quickly and collected their equipment. The area was full of winding trails, but not all of them reached the spots where the two intended to film and take pictures. As expected, the bulky gear made the hike especially exhausting. The various bags swung as Basim walked and preventing them from striking tree trunks was a chore. They finally reached the spot they'd passed the previous day. It was a hill that provided a view of a pasture which was frequently visited by birds and deer. It was also common for smaller crawling animals, but they would be too difficult to document on account of the long grass. The two mounted a stationary camera to a tree branch; the battery was expected to last a day. Jenkins began walking to the next spot, but Basim placed one of his satchels on the ground. "I'm going to stay here a while," he called.

Jenkins nearly dropped several bags as he spun. "You're joking."

"Can't you hear the birds? They're active. I don't want to miss a moment."

"I double checked the cameras. They're all recording. We won't miss anything."

Basim whipped his head toward the pasture. "I think a starling just flew by. Did you see it? If it comes back I have to get a close-up."

"It'll be back. You can get it later. We're going to be here a lo-o-ong time."

"But what if we get su-u-uper lucky on our first day?" He knew Jenkins was glowering at him, but he selected a camera and a lens suitable for the light. Soon he heard rustling as Jenkins lumbered off to the next spot, lugging the remaining equipment by himself. Basim lay prone as the world passed by before his eyes. Birds fluttered among the branches, but he didn't capture an image worth his time. When his shoulders and elbows were sore from holding himself up he put the camera back into the bag and tried to catch up with Jenkins. By the time they reunited most of the sites had been set up.

Months passed, enough time to notice a shift in the weather. From the beginning of spring rain to the longest day of the year, the only footage worthy of being in a nature documentary was captured on their stationary cameras, most of it collected at night. Basim still felt refreshed every morning and rushed to one of the spots on a mission to collect close-up images and recordings. He tried to keep Jenkins' spirits high by overhyping the few moments of interesting activity that he was able to capture, but it was no use. Jenkins reviewed footage less carefully each day. One night Basim saw him with his head on a desk in front of the monitor that played back a stationary camera's recording.

Basim jostled his friend's shoulder. "Hey, wake up, what are you doing?"

"The same thing I do every night," Jenkins yawned.

"You know what's going to happen, as soon as you look away something good is going to pop up on the screen."

“In that case this is the most exciting tape we have.”

Basim patted Jenkins’ back. “Go get some sleep. I’ll take over.”

Jenkins yawned again. “Works for me. Dreams are the most interesting things to see around here.” He went to the bedroom and Basim took his place in front of the monitor.

Jenkins’ lethargy was understandable. The camera was set up next to a creek. A furball scampered by on the other side of the water, too far away to be in focus. Occasionally something flapped its wings overhead, out of the camera’s view. Sleeping truly was more exciting than watching the video.

Hours into the movie, a racoon passed by. Basim clapped his hands; finally, something was close enough to see clearly. There didn’t seem to be anything notable about it at first, other than it walked on three legs. Basim leaned closer to the screen to try and see what was clutched under its front paw.

The racoon looked directly at the camera, directly at Basim, and pulled its arm tighter against its belly. It snarled, as if it knew it was being watched and was disgusted with the viewer. It faced the lens head-on, squatted on its hind legs, and wrapped both its front paws around the object. A piece of whatever it held shimmered between the racoon’s arms. The object was rigid, and glimmered in the moonlight, but the racoon’s fur was thick and covered up too much of the object for Basim to identify it.

An opossum entered the screen. It lunged from the side and sank its teeth into the racoon’s neck. The racoon struggled as blood stained its fur. The opossum didn’t ease until the racoon lay still. When the fight was over, the opossum swatted the object out of the racoon’s clenched paws. It was a stone, deep red, cut like a diamond, but too large to be placed on a ring. The opossum patted the stone with its paw and then lifted it, just as the racoon had.

The attacks continued. A skunk killed the opossum, and then a wolf killed the skunk. Strangely, the wolf seemed to be hunting alone, there was no sign of a pack caught on the camera. After the kill, the wolf pressed the stone with its nose. While it was distracted, a bird swooped in and clawed at the wolf’s eyes. The fight made the image blurry, but Basim thought it looked like a hawk. The wolf slashed and snapped and was able to do some damage to its attacker. The bird made a desperate move for the stone, snatched it in its talons, and flew away. The wolf barked and howled for several minutes before it limped into the woods.

Basim rewound the tape. He couldn’t wait until Jenkins woke up so he could gloat about being right; the most interesting things happened the moment one of them stopped looking.

CHAPTER 2

Stabby Scotty

Minh sulked to a section of the hallway where blue tiles were embedded in a concrete square. Inside were a trio of plastic ferns. She eased down slowly onto the ledge of the square, afraid that her pants would rip if she sat down too quickly. Her shirt didn’t reach her waist when standing and she didn’t know how much it rode up her back as lowered her position. She wasn’t accustomed to wearing tight clothes; she’d only purchased them in hopes of getting attention from a boy she liked.

A girl Minh’s age in a skirt and a strategically cut T-shirt sat next to her. “You look hot today.”

Minh pulled on the hem of her shirt. "Hey, Eve. Just thought it was time for a new look." The fabric sprang back up the moment she let go.

"I know the feeling. I get it every time I want a guy to notice me." Eve smirked. "It's Kyle, right?"

Minh sighed. Everyone thought her and Kyle would make a cute couple. They seemed compatible: both were interested in culinary arts, shared classes, and even watched the same shows. He didn't exercise intensely but was active enough to stay slim which made them both average on the hotness scale. Although if forced to assign values Minh considered herself a 7 and him a 5. But despite their comparable attractiveness and common interests, Minh never had feelings for him. "No, someone else."

Eve's grin ebbed. "I was afraid of that. It's Scott, isn't it?"

"No. Maybe. None of your business."

Eve placed a hand on Minh's elbow. "I've seen the way you look at him. Stop it. Even his ex-girlfriends say he's bad news."

"So what?" Minh said as she pulled her arm free. Everyone talked about Scott like he was disaster incarnate. He was a proud misfit, a regular rule breaker, a rebel who lived his life on his own terms. Normally Minh found it attractive, but today it was irritating. She'd spent a lot of money on her new clothes, and Scott wasn't around to appreciate them. "He isn't even here today."

"He hasn't been here for a while. Have you noticed? Have you heard why?"

"No." It was half true. Minh had noticed that Scott had been absent for a few days, but it was difficult to ask around for details. Every time she brought up Scott the conversations were short as most people were quick to advise a young, innocent girl like her not to be concerned with a rough man like him. "Is he suspended for fighting again? Has it ever occurred to you stuff like that's not his fault? Maybe Scott's so tough that people don't realize how sensitive he is. Maybe if people were more careful about what they said around him..."

"He murdered his parents!" Eve's shout caused several other students in the hall to look their way. She leaned closer to Minh and said in a softer voice, "you seriously haven't heard about this?"

"How could you possibly know that? How did that rumor even start?"

Eve pulled her phone out of her backpack. "I don't know who spread word around here, but it's not just a rumor." She opened an application that collected stories on local criminal activities.

"Those stories are so negative," said Minh. "Why don't you delete that?"

"Because it hits close to home, especially when stuff like this pops up." She handed over the phone.

Minh skimmed the story as she stroked the screen with her thumb. The description of the murder was vague, and the victim's names weren't mentioned. There was blood found on the floor and walls, a woman taken to the hospital where she was in critical condition. Her husband was not found but her son was taken into custody. "Scott's name isn't anywhere in this," Minh said as she handed back the phone.

"I heard from somebody who heard from somebody else that it happened in Scott's house," Eve said as she returned the phone to her backpack. "I'm telling you, forget about Scott."

The bell rang and Minh couldn't get to class fast enough. Throughout the day she thought about the story on the app. She knew better to believe everything she read and refused to blindly follow school gossip. She hoped Scott would return soon and stop the rumors from spreading any further.

Days passed and word about the murder only worsened. The first assumptions were simply that Scott had shot his parents with a pistol, and then the story changed to a rifle. Later the guns were no longer spoken of and instead Scott was said to have sliced their throats with a shattered plate. The latest gossip was that he'd drowned his father in the toilet and strung his mother up like a pig before he cut her open. Minh tried to ignore them all. She'd also stopped wearing her new clothes and had returned to her animal-patterned shirts with ripped jeans.

On an overcast day she wore a forest green raincoat over a black-and-orange tiger striped long-sleeved shirt that left everything to the imagination. The strong winds blew down the hood which left her hair wet and wiry, as well as ruined the makeup she'd applied that morning. She wanted to go to the school's bathroom to tidy up, but the bell was about to ring. She rushed down a hall, turned a corner, and skidded to a halt.

Scott was right in front of her. He clutched a few books tightly to his chest as he made his way closer to her. Minh gazed at his forlorn face and broad but slumped shoulders as he passed her. She tried to say hi but was distracted by strands of hair that curled past her upper lip. She settled for raising her hand and offering a gentle wave.

He didn't acknowledge her, or anyone else he passed. People stared at him, and some tried to ask him where he'd been and what had happened. Scott kept his gaze to the floor and walked by with his back bent forward. Minh watched him go as she absent-mindedly wrung out a section of her clothes. The morning bell brought her back to attention and her shoes squeaked on the floor as she raced to her locker. She would be late for class, but she didn't care. The only thing on her mind was what everyone would say about Scott now that he was back, and how he would respond to all that had been said in his absence.

Throughout first period Minh moved her pen across a blank page but ignored the teacher. Instead of notes, she jotted questions to ask Scott. Whatever had truly happened, it seemed to be a traumatic experience for him based on the way he acted, and she needed to come up with a way to ask him about it without pushing too hard. As the teacher droned on, she'd filled a lot of lines, but the only good phrase she'd written was *sorry for your loss*. Instead of going directly to him, she decided to seek out some of the people Scott hung out with often. There were three students he sat with every day during lunch. At least one of them would have heard Scott's side of the story.

The class ended and Minh tried to make up for what she'd missed by looking hard at the remaining information on the chalkboard. There were lots of trigonometry equations and it was hopeless to understand them all with a glance. Minh slipped her page of conversation starters into her binder. As she started to leave Eve approached her.

"So," Eve said, "you-know-who's back."

“Have you heard anything?”

“All of it.” Eve folded her arms. “Have you?”

“I haven’t heard anything.” Minh flipped her binder closed. “I haven’t asked anyone about it. I told you; I don’t care.”

“I can tell that you do,” Eve said as the two of them left the classroom, “and I’m begging you to stop it. The stuff he’s saying is even worse than the rumors. Apparently he thinks the devil made him do it.”

“Oh, come on, he doesn’t even believe in that stuff.”

Eve cocked an eyebrow. “How do you know that?”

Minh blushed and shrugged. “I just do.” She squinted and willed her cheeks to stop heating up. “Besides, he’s back, which means he wasn’t arrested. Doesn’t that mean he’s innocent?”

“No,” Eve drawled, “it means he found a way to play the justice system. It happens.”

“Now you’re the one spreading rumors. Not that it matters. Like I said, I don’t care.” She was sure that every time she said she didn’t care was less convincing than the last. She left Eve in the hallway as she hastened to her next class. The following hours passed in a long drone that went in one ear and out the other.

At lunch she stood by a wall and waited for Scott to sit at his usual table. The crowd grew, the food line shrank. Scott’s closest friends appeared, but he was absent. Minh’s stomach growled but she ignored it and approached the table. She didn’t talk to any of the people often and wasn’t sure of what to say. She stood at the head of the table and rubbed her elbow.

“Need help?” said a man with a mullet and a shirt advertising what Minh assumed was a band she’d never heard of.

“Where’s Scott?” she blurted.

“What do you care?” said a purple haired girl.

“I saw him earlier today,” Minh pressed.

“Everyone has,” said the mullet kid. “And nobody’s been able to shut up about him.”

“And then when someone tried to talk to him directly,” said purple hair, “they started a fight.”

“Oh no,” said Minh, “did Scott get hurt?”

The purple haired girl scowled at her. “Got a crush on him or something? No, he wasn’t hurt, but he’s suspended for the rest of the day.”

Minh turned on her heel and went to the food counter. She mechanically picked up a plastic tray and allowed bowls of slop to be placed on it. She didn’t care what was being served. She found an empty table and didn’t even taste it as she gulped it down. She wondered if Scott was too much of a bad boy for her, and if she should start taking everyone’s advice about staying away from him. If he really had murdered his parents, weaseled his way out of punishment, and then started a fight, it was too much for

her. Then again, she didn't have any solid facts. The purple haired girl hadn't said who had started the fight, so it was possible Scott was the defender rather than the aggressor. Minh remained resolute in her decision to hear Scott's side of the story when she had the chance.

Knowing her chance wouldn't come until the end of the day made classes insufferable. During her last two periods she stared at the clock and didn't bother trying to look like she was taking notes. The last bell finally rang, and she rushed to the principal's office. Unfortunately, she wasn't the only one rushing. Jocks hurried to practice, and geeks scampered to their clubs. Minh pushed past people but was short for her age and didn't have much leverage to force her way through the crowd. When she made it to the office the door was closed. She waited outside and continuously checked the clock on her phone. The commotion in the hall died down but nobody exited the room. Finally, Minh knocked on the door. A gruff voice told her to enter and when she did the only person inside was the principle. She apologized, closed the door, and shuffled out of the school with an urge to throw the books in her arms skyward. She felt like the universe was conspiring against her, like an invisible force didn't want her to meet Scott.

Instead of throwing her books she power-walked around the building. She stomped past the bus stop where many kids were boarding. The next one would arrive in twenty minutes, which was plenty of time to huff out her frustrations. She rounded a corner and faced the baseball diamond. The field was devoid of players but sitting alone on one of the bleachers was Scott. His backpack rested on the footrest below him, and his arms were draped over his knees. He seemed lost in thought as he looked out onto the grass.

Minh rejoiced at her method of relieving stress. She jogged over to the seats and climbed up next to him.

Scott's eyes widened as he looked at her. "You alright?"

Minh's face felt warm, and she was sure she was sweating. "I've been looking for you all day."

"Fuck off."

His scowl conveyed danger, but Minh refused to let the opportunity she'd been waiting for slip by. "I'm not here to pick on you or anything."

"Go ahead, everyone else has."

"I mean it, I'm not. I just want to hear your side of the story."

He kept his eyes locked on hers a moment. "It's Minh, right? Don't we have Economics together?"

Minh felt lightheaded at his recollection. She gripped the seat to keep her balance.

Scott turned away from her. He looked at his hands and sighed. "I didn't try to kill my parents."

"I know." Minh scratched behind her ear, worried that she'd let her emotions show too much. "I mean, I didn't think anyone in this school could do something like that."

"I'm the one that called 911. At least, I did eventually. I tried to tell them what happened, as much as I could. I couldn't tell them much." He moved his hands to his face and ran them from his forehead to his chin. "When it happened, I was under my bed."

Minh tried to piece the situation together as Scott lamented. The article Eve had shown her only mentioned Scott and his parents. "I'm sorry, were your mom and dad having a fight?"

Scott pulled his hands away from his face. "It wasn't them," he snapped. "There was someone else there!"

"An intruder?" Minh reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You poor thing."

Scott swatted her hand away. "The cops say there's no evidence. No prints, no scraps of clothing, the only blood found was mom's." He repped his knuckles against the bleachers. "Right now, my dad's the main suspect because he's missing, and because of what's been happening lately. He was acting secretive. Every night when he got home from work he locked himself in a room, didn't let me or mom inside, didn't come out until dinner. When my mom asked him about it, he got confrontational, sometimes violent, but never told us what he was up to. One night I got tricky. I slipped some tape on the door so he couldn't lock it. While he was in the room I walked in on him. There were papers everywhere, and he was holding something. I didn't get a good look at it because he freaked out. It was so bad that a neighbor called the cops. But nobody was hurt that time, so nothing came of it. That was two nights before it happened." His eyebrows scrunched together.

"We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Minh said consolingly.

"I want to talk about it. I've been trying to tell people for days. I don't know what happened, all I know is I was in my room, playing video games. Suddenly there was this, I don't know, chill in the air. It wasn't exactly cold, but I couldn't move. It was like I was frozen. Then there were voices. They were muffled through the walls; I couldn't make out what they said. There was something inhuman about them. Demonic. Using that word is why everyone thinks I'm crazy, but there's no other way to describe it. The voice was demonic. It scared the Hell out of me. I couldn't even scream, didn't want to make any noise, didn't want to be in that room anymore. I just dove under my bed. I stayed there for I don't know how long, and then my mom screamed." He paused and looked at Minh. "It was definitely her voice. I couldn't help. I just slapped my hand over my mouth like a wuss."

Minh racked her brain for something comforting to say. "You were scared. It's alright."

Her words didn't change Scott's face or his demeanor. "Then there was a rattling, something metallic, like a chain. I don't know why, but that was the worst part of the night. I heard them, and I felt like I was dead, if that makes sense. I might as well have been. Everything went quiet, no more screams, nothing, but that rattling was stuck in my head. The longer I thought about it, the more it paralyzed me. But, eventually, I got up, went to the room that was usually locked. The door was broken. Papers were all over the place. I went inside, and my mom was on the floor, against a wall. I should've called for help then, but there was something by mom's body."

He reached into his backpack and removed a copper-colored box. Minh leaned in for a closer look and saw that the metal was filigreed. There was a black material that outlined the perimeter of the cube and parts of the walls. The metal formed various shapes on each face. There was a circle on one side, a diamond surrounded by semicircles on another.

"Is this a puzzle box?" Minh asked as she reached out to run her finger along the edge.

Scott pulled it away from her. "I guess. The night I walked in on my dad, I didn't get a good look at what he was holding, but I'm pretty sure this was it. I recognize the pattern on this side." He rubbed the copper circle with his thumb, and then turned one of the corners ninety degrees. "It took me three days to figure out that step." He prodded the sides, tried to find a loosened portion.

"What's inside?"

Scott didn't take his eyes off the box and continued to jab it with his fingers. "No idea. But it's got to have something to do with what happened that night. I tried to give it to the cops, but they're not interested. They're too busy examining the knives in the apartment, trying to determine which was the murder weapon. Whatever hurt my mom wasn't a knife. I hope that if I can open this, it'll give me some idea what *did* hurt my mom, and what happened to my dad." He continued rubbing his fingers along the strips of metal.

"Do you want me to try it? I'm good at these things."

"Seriously? After everything I just told you?" His fingers turned white as he clenched the box. "Wait, do you believe me?"

Minh paused before answering. "I can tell this means a lot to you. I want to help you get closure. I also really am good at puzzles. If whatever's inside is a clue, I'm willing to try."

He handed it over to her. It was lighter than she expected, and she wondered if the metal really was copper. She rubbed her fingertips over the corners and scraped her nails across the indentations, carefully feeling for any movement.

CHAPTER 3

The Fledglings and The Stone

Gray clouds extended across the tree line and cut off the view of the distant mountain's peak. The foliage blocked the downpour only to a secondary torrent as the rain dribbled off the leaves. Basim, unimpeded, donned his rain clothes and pulled his boot laces as hard as he could.

Jenkins blew on a cup of tea. "What're you doing? Are you really going to try getting shots in this weather?"

"Of course not." Basim held up his empty hands. "See? No equipment. I just want to check out the site of that stationary camera."

"The spot where all the animals attacked each other?"

"Yeah, that one." Basim flipped the hood over his head.

"Oh, alright, no further questions." Jenkins turned, took three steps, and then spun back around. "No, wait, I have two." He held up a finger. "Why?" He extended a second finger. "And for fuck sake, why?"

Basim paused with his hand on the doorknob. "What do you mean? It's interesting."

"No, it's not. It's weird, and spooky, and probably dangerous."

"How is it spooky or dangerous?"

“Um, I don’t know, because it involves death!” He moved his hands as he spoke and some of the tea spilled onto his fingers. He jolted, which spilled more. He hissed and calmed himself.

“It’s not like this was premeditated murder. They were just animals. They weren’t thinking.”

Jenkins placed his mug on a counter. “That’s even worse. If that’s how non-thinking creatures behave around there, I don’t want to know what intelligent ones will do.”

“What exactly do you think’s going on that’s so weird and spooky?”

Jenkins shrugged. “Maybe there’s something in the water, or the soil, something making animals hyperaggressive.”

Basim dragged his finger over his heart. “I solemnly swear not to drink any of the water in that stream or eat any of the soil near it. We good?”

“Don’t talk like that. And please don’t go out there. I have a really bad feeling about this. In fact, I was thinking we should just forget about that camera when we leave.”

“I’m not doing that.” Basim opened the door and raised his voice over the rain. “And don’t worry, I’ll be careful, I always am. What’s the worst that can happen anyway, I come across an aggressive racoon? If it comes to that, I’m pretty sure I can outrun it.”

He went to the camera’s resting spot. Scavengers had done their part to pick the area clean, but Basim spotted stray clumps of hair and stringy remains of entrails in the dirt. The hawk had been the last to hold whatever object had caused the creatures to act so strangely. The footage had only captured a glimpse of the bird’s flight, but it was enough for Basim to gauge the direction it had flown after claiming its prize. Internet service was poor, but he used his phone to look up information about hawks as he traveled. Several trees popped up as common nesting choices, and pines were first in the list. He craned his neck and scanned for long, thin needles.

Even if he knew exactly what to look for the path to it would be long and difficult. He didn’t see any pine trees nearby, but he knew there were many throughout the campgrounds. Moreover, oak trees also appeared on his phone’s screen when the page finally loaded, and there were plenty of those in the area as well. The abundance of nesting options in addition to the fact that he had a laughably vague idea of the direction the bird had flown emphasized how pointless his actions were. Even if the hawk successfully returned to its nest with the object and Basim miraculously located it, the discovery would not likely improve their nature documentary in any way. The studio wanted them to capture animals performing typical actions, not erratic behavior. The only value to this venture was a personal one. He simply wished to know what had caused the events of that night, which started with finding whatever the animals had fought over.

A rapid succession of high-pitched chirps assaulted him, so loud and sudden that he slapped a hand over his right ear. When the surprise faded he turned toward the sound. He couldn’t put his finger on the reason the commotion intrigued him so much, but he had an urge to follow it. He bounded towards the chirps, leapt over logs and rocks. He soon came to the river that snaked through the forest. It was narrow in this part, more of a babbling brook than a rushing stream. He searched for rocks close to the surface and tried to use them as steppingstones. Not all the ones he chose sufficed, and he slipped. He

gave up halfway across and trudged through the murky water. He was soaked past his ankles when he made it to the other end.

Drenched socks did nothing to hinder the allure of the animal calls. He vaulted over a bush and paid no mind to the sucking sound emitted from the bottom of his feet. Throughout his run the chirps became silent. He paused, strained his ears as he waited hopefully to hear them again. When he did, he continued the chase at double speed.

Finally, the calls were loud and high-pitched enough to give him a headache. He found himself by the trunk of a pine tree, looked up, and spotted a nest. He ran around the tree to try for a better look, but the nest was too high. He placed a hand on the trunk, and realized he'd come to a part of the journey that he failed to plan for. He had no climbing equipment, not even a pair of gloves. He noticed a low hanging branch that looked like it could support his weight. With a small leap he was able to loop his fingers around it and painstakingly hoist his body onto the outgrowth. One pull at a time, he scaled other thick branches until his head was above the nest.

The hawk from the video was there. It lay prone on the ring of twigs. Its unmoving body was withered, and it was missing many of its feathers. The fledglings flapped their sickly pink wings and made a fuss over the body of their parent. The baby's chirps were the ones he'd followed. Underneath the adult bird's body was the object of concern in the video, in plain sight for the first time.

It was an oblong jewel, red like a ruby, but much darker than any gemstone Basim had ever seen. It was also much larger than anything commonly found at a shop, roughly the size of a baseball. The cutting was exquisite; there was a flat portion in the center surrounded by eight triangular indentations. Basim reached over the nest to push the animal carcass aside.

As his hand entered the nest the babies nipped at his fingers. One of their young beaks clamped around a knuckle. Basim pulled his hand away and sucked on his finger. He stared at the jewel again, steadied himself, and snatched the stone as quickly as he could. The baby birds once again snapped at him, but he was able to remove the stone from the nest without further injury. It was heavy, and Basim lifted his hand up and down to get accustomed to the weight. The stone was also warm, as if the sun had heated it despite the hawk's body blocking full solar exposure.

The babies continued to squawk. Basim looked to the nest and saw the pair of younglings hanging onto the side. Their eyes were trained onto the stone. They appeared angry, ready to attack him again. Basim held the stone above his head, away from the nest. The babies crawled to the ledge and leapt at the jewel. They were nowhere close to flying age and tumbled to the branch Basim stood on. Their heads clunked against the bark and with their remaining consciousness they tried to grasp at the branch with their underdeveloped wings. Basim watched as they fell down the tree, struck more branches along the way. Their cries drowned out with distance.

He brought the jewel to eye level so he could admire it again. He then looked over his shoulder and down into the forest below. In the distance, he saw a gap in the trees, the split caused by the stream. He followed the opening and located the brook where he'd soaked his shoes. It must have been over a hundred meters away. He looked back at the nest. How could he have heard the birds from so far away? What had made him so drawn to them?

He looked at the stone. Instinct told him that the gem had a story behind it. A part of Basim felt unnerved by what the tale could be, but the stone's beauty and the warmth calmed him. He pocketed the jewel and climbed down the tree.

CHAPTER 4

Doodle Of a God

Scott had taken another leave of absence from school. Minh guessed it had less to do with the murder and more with the way other kids talked about it. Nicknames like Stabby-Scotty had become widespread, and so had the rhyme: Scotty's parents were good folks; they aren't anymore, because when Scotty got pissed off he used their blood to mop the floor.

Minh ignored the childish name calling and nursery rhymes. Scott had seemed sincere when he'd told her about being too scared to move. She wanted to be there for him, to console him. While everyone around her despised Scott for what he'd allegedly done, she despised them for driving him away. As the school days passed without his presence she realized that if she wanted them to be closer, she couldn't wait for him to come to her; she needed to find him.

A benefit of all the talk was that it was easy to find out details about Scott's personal life. Minh stayed in the sidelines of most conversations but interjected to ask people if they knew of any places Scotty liked to hang out. Some of the answers were obviously nonsense, like how he had a cabin in the woods where he tortured animals. Others were more plausible, like the bars he frequently visited. After the last class on Friday, Minh went downtown to explore a few of the places she'd heard about.

Her age was an obstacle. Most places required her to show an ID before they let her enter. Luckily, most places had large windows in the front. She looked inside, saw Scott was not there, and moved on without making a fuss. Her third-to-last stop was a small bar named Alibis. This place had no windows outside, and when she entered her eyes needed a moment to adjust to the darkness. The already weak lights were further dimmed by layers of dust on their coverings. An oscillating fan in the corner gently pushed smoke around while a single vent rattled as it weakly attempted to provide fresh air. An old bartender with unbrushed hair, no makeup, wearing a tank top that may have suited her if she was thirty years younger, leaned over the counter as she talked with a customer who was just as elderly and worn as her. The bartender tore her attention from the man and looked at Minh. "Hey, sweetheart," she said in a gravelly voice, "you 21?"

"Yeah," Minh responded as she continued to scan the room. That seemed to satisfy the bartender, who returned to giving the droning man her undivided attention. Minh was happy to have finally found a place she was able to enter, and as if the universe was conspiring in her favor, she spotted Scott in a corner.

He hunched over the table and fidgeted with something in his hands. A tall glass of beer rested near him, mostly full but untouched so long that the foam on top had dissipated. Minh approached, placed a hand on the table, and greeted with a simple "hey."

Scott leapt in his seat as if a spider had just bitten him. He brought his hands close to his chest and looked up at her. His eyes were bloodshot, his teeth yellow, and his skin pale. A faint whiff of body odor suggested he hadn't washed his clothes in at least several days. They stared at each other, then Scott

slowly slid back into position and brought his hands in front of him again. He held the box he'd shown her that day in school. Some of the corners were lopsided, but it didn't look anywhere close to being solved. Scott pressed his fingers hard against the sides and twisted it like he was trying to open a jar. Minh quietly sat beside him.

"Hey," she repeated, "it's good to see you. I just wanted to see if you're doing OK."

Scott ignored her. He continued to twist the box, acted as if there was a seam even though there clearly wasn't.

"Scott?" Minh pressed, "can you talk to me please?"

He slammed the box onto the table, snatched his flat beer, and guzzled half the glass, which he also slammed onto the table. "This damn thing won't cooperate."

"Sorry," Minh said, lost for anything else to contribute. "By the way, those nicknames and phrases going around school, I hope they're not getting to you."

Scott took a slightly smaller gulp of his drink. "Huh?"

"What everyone's saying about you. They're all stupid, don't let them get to you."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." He pressed his thumb against the metal circle on the box as if it were a button. "Come on!"

Considering how riled up he was, Minh decided the best way to get him to open up was to appeal to his interests. "Why do you want to open that thing so badly? It's just a toy, it might not help."

He hammered a corner against the table. "No, it means something. I went back to my old place. It's still being treated as a crime scene, so I had to sneak into my own apartment, which is stupid. The point is, I saw some of the papers, the ones in the room that dad usually locked, where I found my mom."

"Nobody took them as evidence?"

He pressed his hand against a side and moved his palm in a circle. "I don't know. The papers looked like they were moved around, so maybe someone looked at some of them. It looks like most of the investigation is focused outside of that room. They're probably still trying to determine the murder weapon. I grabbed some of the papers, the few that weren't ruined by the blood stains or torn to shreds. It's worse than I thought." He downed the rest of his drink.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Minh recalled that Scott had described his father as becoming distant and violent and tried to deduce a motivator. "Was it about money?"

Scott put the glass down and scratched the back of his neck. "I wish. I think my dad was in a cult. Idiot."

It wouldn't have been her second guess, or even her third, but it fit. She'd heard about people in cults and how the group changed their beliefs, actions, and personalities. Minh reached for him to place a hand on his shoulder. She remembered how he reacted when she greeted him, though better of it, and brought her arm back to her side. "Don't say that. I'm sure he wasn't persuaded easily. I've heard of cult leaders. They're good at finding people's weak points, hooking them when they're most vulnerable."

“Have you ever heard of this one?” He breathed on the side of his glass to coat it in fog. He dragged his finger from the brim to the bottom and back up, creating diamond. He then ran his finger through the middle, splitting the diamond into two triangles. “The pages I found had this image on it. The paper was in bad condition, but apparently this is the God of Flesh. God, Minh. This octahedron, it’s a God. I was scared shitless, questioned by police, my mom is in the hospital. All because my dad worshiped a drawing of a damn Lego block!” He put his glass aside and again busied himself with the puzzle box.

“Maybe you should let that go,” Minh said pleadingly. “I haven’t heard of this group before, but if they worship such ridiculous things then maybe none of it means anything.”

“It meant something to him. I saw this box on some of the papers, too. It’s called the Lament Configuration. Dumb name. Dad’s handwriting was bad, but I saw the word ‘call’ next to a drawing of this box. I guess he thought this box *called* to him.”

“Like I said, it’s ridiculous. That’s all the more reason to let it go. It’s just a toy.”

“Yeah, but it’s the toy that started all this. I’m going to solve this. I’m going to get whatever’s inside; whatever dad thought was so important that he was willing to put his family through all this. Then I’m going to find him, and I’m going to smash whatever’s inside right in front of him. Then I’m going to slug him out.”

“Do you know how the search is going, does anyone have any leads on where he is?”

“None as far as I can tell. It’s like dad’s vanished off the face of the Earth.” The box emitted a soft click. Scott gasped, brought it close to his face and wiggled a piece back and forth.

“I’m sorry, but you need to hear this: you look terrible. How much sleep have you been getting lately?”

Scott put the box down and rubbed his eyes. “Not a lot,” he admitted.

“That’s not healthy. Maybe you should give it to me for a while.”

He brought the box close and used his body to shield it. “I’ve beat the crap out of people for trying to take it away from me.”

“I’m not trying to take it away. I want to try to open it. You don’t seem to be making progress. Remember, I did offer to help.”

“This isn’t your problem. There’s no reason for you to help.”

Minh bit her lip and tapped her fingers on the table. “I just want what’s best for you.”

Scott’s eyes went from her to the box, and back to her. “I had a feeling that was the case.” He flicked the box, and it slid across the table toward her. She reached for it, and he placed his hand over hers. “I like you.”

Minh’s hand went slack, and her stomach fluttered. She didn’t know what to say.

“Is that what you wanted to hear?” Scott asked with a grin.

“Yes.” A filthy bar was not the setting she preferred to have her first kiss with Scott, but she let the moment guide her and leaned her face closer to his. Their lips met and they held the pressure for a

moment before they moved away. Short, sweet, and innocent, Minh had no regrets, despite the smell of the smoky room. Scott left to order another beer and Minh stuck to her promise by experimenting with the box.

CHAPTER 5

Djinn On the Loose

The sinking sun sent rays over the treetops. Basim had tried exposing the jewel to sunlight at different times of the day, but this particular time felt right since the sky's color matched that of the stone. He'd also tried holding it up to the moon, under lamps in the cabin, and even flashlights. He didn't know what he expected. There was no reason to believe the gem would undergo a change in response to a specific wavelength. But he was sure there was something unusual about it. Instinct told him that light was a good a place as any to explore as the key to awakening its properties.

The rays ebbed and the sky's red hue faded. The stone remained an ordinary lattice of minerals. Basim pursed his lips and gripped his treasure tightly but forced himself to be gentle as he placed it on the desk.

If he kept his eyes on the jewel he'd pick it up again and attempt to uncover its secrets with more haphazard methods. He shut his eyes and tried to focus on something else. The smell of beef and onions assaulted him. It was so strong that it had probably been building up in the cabin for a while but had gone unnoticed. He went to the kitchen where the stove was off, but a simmering pot of soup rested on a burner. Basim collected a bowl from the cupboard, and it clinked against another dish as he lifted it off the shelf.

"I heard that," Jenkins called from another room. "That dinner isn't for you."

Basim ignored him and ladled a healthy serving for himself. "What do you mean?" he said as he entered the dining room. "What happened to our meal sharing deal?"

"That deal is only good if we do equal work." Jenkins glowered at Basim but didn't attempt to take the bowl. Instead, he just pointed to Basim with his spoon. "You haven't done a thing all day."

"Sure, I have." Basim sat and blew on a spoonful before slurping it. "I spliced some scenes. I can show you after dinner."

Jenkins pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. "I've been watching you. I checked in on you and recorded the times I saw you working. You spent a grand total of three hours on the movie today. The rest of the time you were looking at that dumb rock."

"It's not dumb. And I couldn't have been looking at it that long."

"Check it out." Jenkins slid the paper towards Basim.

Basim had the feeling that if he opened the paper he'd be proven wrong. "There's something strange about that ruby."

"Yeah, it has you distracted, like a kid going through his first crush."

Basim lowered his spoon and splashed his soup on the table. "I'm not just looking at it. I'm feeling it. Sometimes it's warm, even when I'm outside before the sun is up. It's almost like body heat, like it's alive, or there's something inside it."

"Is it something valuable? Because at this point you either need to get that thing appraised or put it back where you found it."

"I can't get rid of it. There's something about it. Can't you feel it?"

"No."

Basim pointed to their work room, where they'd seen the footage of the carnage. "But you know there is. It made those animals act weird."

Jenkins lifted his hands toward the ceiling. "There was nothing strange about that. Animals kill each other all the time."

"What about the opossum?" They were both aware that opossum was usually docile. The level of aggression it showed may have been the most shocking part of their footage.

Jenkins lowered his hands and tapped his spoon on the table. "I don't know, but it wasn't about the ruby."

"There was nothing else it could have been."

"Listen to yourself. That doesn't make any sense. Animals don't care about money, or gemstones. It could only be something else. Like I said before, there could be something in the water." He looked at his soup.

Basim looked into his bowl as well, at the food that had been prepared with water from the faucet. He gauged his emotions. Their argument had him feeling aggravated, but no angrier than usual.

"Or the soil," Jenkins said as he lifted his bowl and guzzled it in defiance of his own statement.

Basim continued to eat his soup leisurely. "The ruby, the soil, the water, there's no proof of any of it, so let me investigate my own way."

Jenkins scooted his chair back and brought his bowl to the sink. "There's an easy way to get proof. And, if it will get you back on track, I'll do it."

"What're you talking about?"

"I'll get samples," Jenkins called over the running water as he cleaned his dish. "Soil and water, and I'll send them to a lab."

"What lab?"

"I don't know, but there's got to be somewhere I can send them." He returned to the room scratching his head. "You know, forget the ruby and the footage. If there's contamination, we should do it anyway, should have done it earlier." He collected a Ziplock bag and empty plastic water bottle.

Basim smirked at his makeshift environmental analysis kit. "Is that what you're going to send them in?"

Jenkins looked at the items with a hint of embarrassment. "I guess. I've never sent anything to a lab before. These are all we've got, so I guess they're what I'm using." He went to the front door and put on his shoes. "You coming?"

"I shouldn't." Basim thought about the time-keeping sheet Jenkins had made, and genuinely felt bad for slacking off so much. "I really should get some more work done."

"Fine. Whatever. See you in a little bit."

* * *

Jenkins arrived at the spot where their camera was set up. He looked closely at the ground where some spots in dirt looked darker than others and wondered if it was due to the bloodshed. He took care of the easy task first and dipped the water bottle into the rushing stream. He capped it, and then tapped the dirt with his foot as he wondered where to collect his soil sample. The ground was firmer than he expected and as his toe struck the ground it didn't leave an indentation. He didn't know how deep to dig but figured his sample should be more than a few inches of topsoil. Lacking a shovel, he took his keys out of his pocket. They were sturdy with sharp teeth, so he imagined they would be suitable for the task. He went behind the camera so Basim wouldn't be able to laugh later as he struggled to stab a hole into the Earth.

He grouped all the keys on his ring in a single fist, but it was a slow job. He plunged them directly down and scraped them in an X-pattern. He estimated that he'd made it an inch down, but the ground was still tough. He scraped with broader strokes to widen the hole but stopped when he heard rustling behind him. He stood and pocketed his keys. Although he wasn't on film, if Basim saw him digging in such a manner, he would never stop making fun of him for it. He shoved his hand in his pocket and glided his thumb over the teeth of one of the keys, hoping his digging hadn't eroded them.

A man ducked under a branch. It wasn't Basim. This man was taller, with fair skin and darker hair. He also wasn't dressed for hiking through the woods. He wore a blue button-down shirt with a red tie and dress pants. Perhaps his clothes would be sensible if he were on a trail, but the nearest one was half a mile away. Despite the path the man must have taken to get to the spot, his clothes were spotless. There weren't even any burrs on his pant legs.

Jenkins placed the water bottle on the ground and kept his legs apart as he stood. The stranger didn't look menacing, but something about his smile put Jenkins on edge, as if the man looked too happy to be trustworthy. "Are you lost?" Jenkins asked.

The man stood still. Tall and rigid, he looked at Jenkins with the glee of someone about to take revenge. "I know these woods by heart, every tree, and every stone. It's a pleasure meeting someone who appreciates it as much as me. Do you wander by that stream often?"

"Not really. I haven't been here long. Don't plan on staying. Just here working."

"I see, you must be a hunter." A hint of appreciation crossed the man's face as he considered the possibility of Jenkins being a killer.

"No, not even close. I'm a cameraman. Me and my friend are out here capturing some stock footage of animals for a studio."

“Oh.” The man turned his attention toward the stream. “I just saw the signs of carnage and figured you were responsible.”

Jenkins flexed his knees. The way the man looked at his surroundings was even more disturbing than when he spoke to Jenkins directly.

“I see a patch of fur stuck to a shrub.” The man pointed. “If I’m not mistaken, I see a piece of a tail there. Also,” he inhaled through his nose, “the smell of blood lingers in the air. If I look closely, I think I can see the spatters.”

While the man spoke softly, his voice gave Jenkins the urge to run. At the same time, the man’s presence compelled him to stay. Somehow, Jenkins knew in his gut that running would be pointless. “You’re welcome to go in for a closer look. I should really get back to the workshop.”

The man turned his attention back to Jenkins. “What happened here, if it wasn’t your doing?”

“I don’t know what happened. A bunch of animals just started attacking each other.” Jenkins looked at the man pleadingly. He hoped that if he came across as friendly, the stranger would allow him to leave in peace. He added some humor for good measure. “Nature’s crazy, right?”

“Mankind is insane for looking down on smaller creatures.” The man linked his fingers and rested his hands on his center. The look in his eyes said he had no intention of letting Jenkins leave. Instead, he looked smug, like he had Jenkins right where he wanted him. “You say they simply attacked each other? No warning, no reason?”

“Just scratching and clawing. It was nuts, I tell you.”

“Surely a man who makes a living filming animals can predict their movements, have some insight into why they behave the way they do.”

“I’ve seen dogs eat dirty socks.” Jenkins didn’t know why he was still making small talk. A small part of him felt it was his best chance to end the conversation. “I wish I knew how their minds worked.”

The man’s smile stretched across his face, the look of a victor. “Granted.”

Jenkins felt like an elastic band had been wrapped around his head. The pressure was constant until he put his hands to his skull, and then the pain increased tenfold. His legs could no longer support his weight and he fell onto his stomach. He cried out, but the sound he made was alien to him. Instead of a bellow, it was a squeak. He reached for his neck to feel his voice box. His throat stung as his hands touched his skin, like he’d just pricked himself with a knife.

Jenkins tried to look at his hands but moving his head was as strange as his new voice. Although his body still ached, he rolled onto his back. The new angle allowed him a view of his hands, which were tipped with sharp nails. They were claws, and the hair around them was white, except it wasn’t hair, it was fur.

“Here is your first glimpse into an animal’s mind.” The man approached. To Jenkins it seemed like the ground rumbled with each step he took. “How do I look from a mouse’s perspective?” He lifted his foot high and brought it down hard onto Jenkin’s new body.

As Jenkins watched the rubber sole fall toward his head he hoped the pain would be brief. He assumed that once his neck was broken the brain would have no way to process anything. He was mistaken. The

agony continued after the man lifted his foot and trudged into the forest. However, that could have been because the blow did not kill Jenkins. Instead of expiring, his body once again took on a new form. His bones reformed and expanded in a way that dwarfed the growing pains he experienced as a child. His blood oozed around his innards and his skin molded around it, but the sealing of the wounds was even more painful than the infliction. It felt like his entire body was receiving stitches with no aid of anesthetic. When it was over he tried to examine himself again. He still had paws and was once again small, but this time he had a bushy tail. The sight was enough to confirm that he was a squirrel. He tilted his new head skyward as best he could. He was still getting used to his new eyes, but he thought he saw birds circling overhead.

CHAPTER 6

The Opening

Minh bounced on the balls of her feet near the rear door of the bus that had been late that morning. Her phone indicated she had thirteen minutes before school started, which was eight minutes less than she usually spent with Scott every morning. She forced the door open the moment the overhead light turned green and was happy to discover she didn't have to run far. Scott was outside in the school's courtyard. He leaned against a bike rack with the puzzle box in his hands.

"Hey, boy," she said cheerfully as she sauntered to him, "want to get some coffee before school? I think we have just enough time if we hurry." Solving the puzzle was how they spent most of their time together and it was getting stale. She constantly thought of other things the two of them could do together, and just getting coffee would be an acceptable change.

Scott didn't take his eyes off the box. "I think I've almost got it. It's coming together faster now."

She noticed how quickly his fingers moved about the edges of the box. One of the copper portions was raised and Scott shoved a fingernail inside it, probing for a hidden switch. He must have felt something give in to the pressure, because his face lit up and the pinky of his other hand spun one of the corners a few degrees. All the time he'd spent obsessing over the configuration seemed to have resulted in an intuition of how the parts worked together.

"That's great." Minh tried to make her voice as alluring as possible, hoping to force his attention toward her. "Now about getting coffee together?"

"Yeah, in a minute."

Minh checked the time. "Or maybe we should just go get ready for class."

"In a minute!" He breathed rapidly through his nose and his face reddened. Minh worried he'd have a fit if anyone tried to break his concentration as he continued to press and turn panels.

"Hey, you two." Scott's attention remained unbroken, but Minh turned toward Mr. Volley, her history teacher. "The bell's about to ring. You'd better get inside." He eyed Scott's hands. "What've you got there?"

Minh stepped between Scott and Mr. Volley. "Something very important to him. We won't stay out much longer; I'll make sure of it."

“It’s not a pack of smokes, is it?”

Minh sighed and shook her head. “No, Mr. Volley, it’s nothing illegal or unhealthy. It’s more like a hobby, his way of coping with his recent tragedy. Like I said, we won’t be late for class. I’ll get him inside in time.”

Mr. Volley looked from her to Scott, then checked his watch and hurried to the front doors. Minh stepped closer to Scott. “If we stay out here we’ll draw attention to ourselves.”

“Just a minute!”

“Do you want me to take over for a while?”

“No!” He pivoted to show her his back. She crossed her arms and watched his elbows twitch. He remained turned away from her as a high-pitched bell sounded from within the walls, indicating that she’d broken her promise to her teacher. She stayed by his side, figuring that the most supportive thing she could do was make sure that he would not be in trouble alone. “Almost,” he said as he slowly turned back towards her, “I think, almost there.” A metal circle rose. “This is it,” Scott said hopefully, “this has got to be it.” He turned the risen portion and forced it back down. There was a faint whirring, then a side became undone and slid out, openly offering its secrets to its holder. “Yes,” Scott shouted as he plunged his fingers inside. He smiled broadly, wiggled his fingers, and then his cheeks drooped.

The box wasn’t finished. The mechanical whirring continued. The other sides loosened and dropped. Scott opened his fingers, and the box became a flat structure with all the squares laying on the same plane, balanced on his palm. Seeing it open so completely was almost taunting, since there was nothing inside.

“No.” Scott placed his hand on the middle square, as if looking for some invisible cargo. “No, that’s impossible.” He looked at Minh. “It can’t be empty. There’s something in here. There has to be something in here!”

“Scott,” Minh didn’t know what to say. Neither of them knew what to expect to find when they solved the puzzle. She didn’t even fully grasp why he’d been so intent on it in the first place. “It’s time to go to class.”

“But,” Scott lifted the box, supporting it with both hands, “come on!”

Another noise emanated from the configuration, different from the mechanical noise it had made when it opened. It was lower and guttural. As it echoed around them Minh noticed it was a mix of frequencies; reverberating as if generated by a throat but harmonizing in a way that was outside the capabilities of any human voice. The temperature dropped and Minh rubbed her arms which were coated in bumps. They both stared at the box as it continued to hum, and then the sides rose. The tone was replaced by the familiar mechanical buzz, and all the progress they’d made was nullified as the box closed automatically. They looked around to see if anyone else might have noticed. The two of them were alone, which wasn’t surprising since everyone else was likely in class. Without voicing their feelings, the two agreed it was time to go inside. Scott pocketed the configuration, and they made their way to class.

Since they were already late they made their way directly to the main office to collect the slip of paper used to track their tardiness rate. Minh felt missing the first few minutes of class should be allowed,

since they were usually reserved for reviewing the previous day's material. As they passed through the hall they were followed by a rapid series of clicks, like chattering teeth. It echoed, as if it were coming from inside a locker. Minh paused and looked along the line of compartments to her right. "Did you hear something?" Scott didn't respond. She turned to him.

He was several steps behind her. His feet were rooted, and his lip quivered. The chattering sounded again, and his head darted to the side. With shaky knees he backed away from one line of lockers. The chattering came from the other side of the hall and Scott staggered in the opposite direction. Minh tried calling his name, but he seemed to have forgotten she was there. He continued looking from one side of the hall to the other, trying to pinpoint the source of the noise.

Minh gingerly stepped toward him and reached for him. When her fingertips grazed his shoulder he threw his arms up and leapt away. He bumped into a wooden door, tightly clamped the handle, and fell into the classroom. Minh followed him inside. Students snickered as she tried to help him up and the teacher informed them that they were in the wrong room.

"We've got to get out of here," Scott said to Minh. He turned to face the class. "Get out, now!"

"They're where they need to be," said a deep voice that came from behind Minh. Scott looked around her, toward the door, and fell again. He screamed as loud as his throat would allow as he scooted toward the wall. Minh covered her ears and turned around.

The tallest man she'd ever seen stood before her. He stood at least seven feet and was dressed in black from his shoulders to his feet. His skin was pale, not a strand of hair sprouted from his head, but his face and skull were covered in a lattice of pins.

Pinheaded looked at Scott. "Did you think the box would help you learn what happened to your father?" His face was stone but his voice eager, as if he'd been granted permission to fulfill a lifelong passion. "I'd hate to disappoint you." He strode to the front of the class and turned to the children. "Let's begin our lesson."

"Da fuck is you?" one of the students near the back of the room spat.

Pinhead directed his gaze at the one who'd made the outburst. "Is that how you usually speak? It doesn't seem like you've been paying attention in class. At your age, performing well in school is expected to be your life's mission." He grinned wickedly and several students scooted back. "You're wasting your life. Perhaps you'd be happier in death."

The window blinds fluttered. A drawstring on one side tore from the slats and flew toward the student. The narrow fibers lashed around his neck with such force he was lifted out of his seat. He clawed at his throat as a red line expanded under his chin and dribbled down his shirt.

Most of the other students started screaming as they watched their comrade being strangled. Minh was silent and placed a hand over her mouth. She was stuck in place just as everyone else in the room was glued to their chairs. Something warm and rough constricted around her wrist. She didn't turn to it, but instinctively recognized it as Scott's hand as it sparked the memory of the first time he'd held hers. He pulled Minh to the door as she watched the student continue to attempt to pry the string away from his neck.

Scott screamed, which provided Minh with the courage to turn away from the strangling. Their exit was blocked; chains formed a crisscross pattern over the door. Scott had let go of her hand and was rubbing his own. Blood oozed between his fingers. One of the chains dissociated from the door and lashed out at him like a snake. He jumped back to avoid it.

Pinhead turned to them. "No, Scott," he said, still using his menacing but keen tone. "You wanted to know what your father was so obsessed about. This is the perfect place to teach you. I hope you're a visual learner." He lifted his arms and the desks rose off the floor. With a flick of his wrists the desks flew across the room. The metal legs struck some students in the skulls, others dove to avoid them. The desks split apart and flew about again. Wooden splinters sliced those fortunate enough to avoid the first onslaught. The metal legs broke into jagged pieces and rained down. All the students, and the teacher, were on the ground, dying from a thousand cuts. The first victim had stopped trying to remove his cord, and now hung limp against the wall, supported by the drawstring.

"Son of a bitch," Scott cried.

Minh was curled on the ground with her hands around her head, surprised that she hadn't been hurt. She chanced a look at the door which was still barricaded with chains. Scott cranked on the handle. Some of the chains had wrapped around his arms; they had cut through his sleeves and torn at the flesh beneath, but he continued to struggle with the handle.

Pinhead turned to Minh. As his eyes bore into her bumps formed on her arm, just like when the box had opened. "The trouble with the last survivor," Pinhead mocked, "is they tend to believe they have an advantage over the others. After watching so many people be torn to pieces, you might think you've seen what I'm capable of. You might think your end cannot be any worse. This causes people to be resigned to their fate, or sometimes it results in a final burst of strength. In rare cases, the final survivor finds hope."

Minh began to follow his advice as he spoke. She was still too afraid to move with Pinhead staring at her, but she regained some control of her muscles. Her legs twitched, and she prepared to make a move toward the door to help Scott.

"The counter to this problem," Pinhead continued, "is beautifully simple: save the most agonizing death for the final survivor. Inflict twice as many cuts, tear them into even smaller pieces."

More chains, these with hooks on the ends, broke through the walls, ceiling, and chalkboard. They made slicing noises as they sailed toward Minh.

"No," Scott wailed as he moved away from the door. The chains, tight as they were around his arm, were smooth and did not hold him back. However, they continued cutting as he pulled away and the cuts reached from Scott's elbow to his wrist. He threw himself on top of Minh. She screamed in shock as they slid across the floor, and he screamed in pain. He pushed through the torment and was soon no longer on top of her. His bloodied hand gripped her trembling one. As he pulled her up she saw another wound on his back below his ribs. He dragged her to the windows and jerked on one of the frames. It barely moved, and the hinges emitted a squeak. Minh placed a hand against the glass and tried to help slide it upward.

A pudgy face appeared on the other side of the window. It was a man's, hairless, drenched with sweat or possibly ooze. His forehead was long, and a series of flabby folds jostled under his chin. Scott and Minh both jumped back. The obese monster placed its slimy nose against the glass and stuck out its tongue. The black-and-blue appendage flattened against the pane for a moment, and then the glass began to crack. Scott rushed to another window and struggled just as much to open that one.

A metallic rattling made Minh fall prone on the floor with her hands over her head. Glass shattered, and Scott screamed again. Minh chanced a look up and saw all the windows broken, chains extended into where the panes once were held. Shards clung to Scott's clothes, and he stared at his hands, which were both bloodied. The Butterball placed his hands onto a pile of shattered glass and hauled his body into the room. Minh followed the chains. They led to the door. They had shattered the windows, but the door was now a viable escape route. Minh ran towards the door, travelling around Pinhead to keep as much space between them as possible, and opened it. She stood in the frame, called to Scott, beckoned for him to join her.

Scott took his gaze off his hands and ran to her. He also moved in an arc around Pinhead.

"There is no escape for you in those halls," said Pinhead, "only more despair."

Scott and Minh ran from the room, towards the despair they were promised. The hallway was no different than the classroom. Students and teachers screamed. Objects flew into walls and crashed to the floor. Minh and Scott tried to push their way to the door but were overpowered in the panic. Minh fell into a row of lockers and pressed her back flat against it to make herself as small of a target as possible. Scott stumbled beside her, stood against the metal as she did, and placed his arm over her ribs. They started to move together, one sidestep at a time, down the hall.

Before they rounded the corner, the energy shifted. Everyone who had been rushing in one direction gradually stopped and turned around. Minh and Scott followed suit but didn't move as quickly as the fastest of the herd. As the crowd thinned, they saw the cause of the change.

Another pale skinned, leather clad being stepped before them. Almost as tall as Pinhead, skull devoid of hair, but baldness aside she had feminine features. Instead of pins in her head, narrow metal poles jutted from her cheeks and connected to a hole in her throat.

The Female grabbed a student by the back of the neck. The teen thrashed but despite her petite physique, she was able to lift him off the ground. She closed her hand, her fingertips dug into the flesh behind the student's jaw before his neck snapped. The Female tossed her victim aside and reached for another.

A nerdy student with braces and thick glasses tapped into a well of courage. He pulled a pen from his pocket protector and charged at the Female, wielding the writing utensil like a knife. The Female moved her jaw, and a locker door was torn from its hinges. The flat piece of metal turned sideways and clamped around the nerd's ribs. The nerd was lifted into the air. The locker door continued to bend and fold. It wrapped around the nerd's ribs and tightened, constricted him like a snake. He screamed and spasmed as the metal continued to tighten.

The Female looked at Scott and Minh. "Why do you protect her? Do you want to prolong her suffering, make her continue to witness things like this?" She clenched her fist. The locker door rolled tight. The nerd emitted a final scream as blood spurted from his mouth.

Scott gripped Minh's hand and pulled her through a branch of the hallway. It wasn't the shortest route to the exit, but it was less crowded. They were able to move more freely and hopefully avoid seeing any more death along the way.

The rapid clicks returned. Scott froze in place, but Minh pressed onward. Their roles changed, and now she was the one dragging him through the hall. She felt Scott tense as the chattering became louder, but she refused to look back, refused to waste any time comforting him. Her goal was set to escape, and she wouldn't let anything get in her way.

As tight as she was holding Scott's hand, a third one clamped onto theirs and put her grip to shame. Minh winced at the pressure and tried to continue running but was stopped and pulled back. Her arm was forced above her head and her body forced to turn around. Another tall, mutated creature stood before her. The flesh of this one's face was stretched tight over its bones, and there were no lips to cover its gnashing teeth. Its jaw gyrated quickly, and Minh realized the source of the chatter was the result of its teeth clicking together.

The Chatterer held Minh's wrist in one hand and Scott's in another. With graceful, silent steps it moved to a wall and held them both against it. There were no eyes in the Chatterer's sockets, but it looked from Scott to Minh as if sizing them up. Its gaze rested on Minh, its teeth moved faster than ever, and it brought its mouth close to her face.

Scott shouted in protest. Minh shrieked and tried to break free. The Chatterer moved closer to her, held her in place by sandwiching her between its body and the wall. As its mouth approached her she didn't feel any breath escaping, but its flesh smelled rotten. The Chatterer's teeth found her, nibbled at her right eyebrow. She felt a deep pinch and screamed louder. The Chatterer continued to bite her for a moment, and its body seemed to become warmer as she bled. It pulled away from her and turned to Scott. It swiveled its head as its teeth continued moving. Droplets of Minh's blood splashed from its mouth and showered Scott's face.

Minh looked to Scott and sobbed. She continued to struggle but breaking free of the Chatterer's grip was futile. She didn't know what Scott could do, but she was out of ideas and all she could think of was begging him to come up with some kind of plan.

With his free arm, Scott pulled the puzzle box from his pocket. The Chatterer's teeth stopped, and its grip tightened slightly. Scott held the box up, as if he was thinking of using it as a weapon, and as he moved it the Chatterer's face followed. Scott held the box still, and then tossed it aside. The Chatterer dropped them both and recovered the box. Minh and Scott took advantage of the distraction and ran.

They made it to the exit. The Chatterer's irritable noise echoed in Minh's mind, but the creature did not follow them. The Female also didn't intercept them. Although she was no longer facing the horror, Minh still felt unsafe. She heard screaming from the other side of the walls and knew the carnage was ongoing. It was possible that the monsters had murdered at least one of her friends, but she couldn't turn around. As much as she wanted to help those inside, her desire to be safe was stronger. However, she wasn't sure there was any place that was safe. The creatures had appeared before her suddenly,

and they could probably do it again. How could she run from something with such mysterious movements?

Scott took point and pulled her wrist as he ran toward the baseball field. He guided her under the bleachers and pressed his palms against his knees.

Minh leaned against a support beam. "Are you sure we'll be safe here?"

"No. Need to catch my breath. Some cover's better than none, right?"

Minh touched her index finger to her eyebrow. It stung, and the color of the blood that stained her fingertip indicated it had not closed yet. "What were those things?" She applied more pressure to her eyebrow to aid the clotting.

"That sound." Scott snapped his teeth together to imitate the creature that had grabbed them. "I heard it before. When I got home. When my dad disappeared." He placed his hands on his lower back and straightened his spine. "I thought it was a chain, but it was that thing. Those things. They took him."

"What are they? Why are they here now?" Minh tried to block out the distant screams. "What do they want?"

Scott placed a hand in his pocket. "That's why I solved the box. I thought it had something inside. Something that would explain what happened."

"Did it not?" Pinhead's voice reverberated from deeper in the maze of aluminum posts.

Minh and Scott jumped and looked toward the voice. It had sounded like he was next to them, but his figure was at the other end of the bleachers. Minh and Scott slowly moved in the opposite direction, never taking their eyes off him.

Small blue tendrils flashed from Pinhead's body, like miniature lightning bolts, and his outline vanished. In a moment, there was another lightning flash, and he reappeared. He'd covered half the distance to them.

Minh and Scott turned around to scramble out from under the bleachers. They paused when they saw Butterball at the other end. He placed a hand on his stomach and licked his lips as he lethargically moved toward them, leaning on his leg with each step.

Minh looked to the seats, planned to squeeze through the gap between the bleachers. Looking down on her from the space between the seats was the Female. Minh looked left and right, wondering if she might be able to make an escape if she moved quickly enough. Perhaps it would be possible if the Female were alone, but the Chatterer's mangled face appeared beside the Female's.

With another flash, Pinhead traversed the final array of beams and stood before them. "The box is a means to summon us. That is what happened to your father. He solved the puzzle, and we took him, as we will you."

"Fuck you," Scott bellowed. He ran at Pinhead and threw a right hook. The height difference was so great that Scott had to angle his arm up as he punched, but the blow landed and drove the pins deep into the monster's cheeks.

Pinhead didn't flinch. He stood tall and grabbed Scott's elbow. "You dare try to use pain against me?" Scott bellowed and twisted his body, as if his shoulder had been shattered. "You don't know the meaning of the word," Pinhead continued. "I worship pain. I exist because of pain." He pulled his hand from Scott. A chain fell from the bleacher above them and wrapped around Scott's neck. The chain became taught, not enough to choke Scott, but enough to make him stand on his toes. Pinhead pinched Scott's chin, looked down at him, and said "I am pain."

"Please stop," Minh pleaded. Two more chains erupted from the ground and latched onto her wrists. They retracted and she was forced to her knees.

"This will never stop," said the Female, her voice a whisper but one that carried far. "Not when you're with us."

"What you're feeling now is just a taste," said Pinhead. The sunken pins extended and returned to their initial position. He kept his focus on Scott. "And it is a taste that I would like to continue. Normally we take those who open the box immediately, but there is an advantage if you stay here a bit longer. Pay your mother a visit. Go directly to her. If you deviate from the shortest possible route, we will know." The ground rumbled, and a fissure opened behind Scott's feet. Air seemed to rush into the crevice and Scott was pulled towards it. The chain choked him for a moment as he kicked, and his toes found purchase again. From Minh's position she couldn't look directly down into the crack, but she caught a glimpse of large stone-like structures assembled into a maze. She saw them through a gray haze, as if looking through clouds. It appeared that she was getting a bird's eye view, looking down at the maze from the sky, even though the crack was in the ground.

"Go to your mother," Pinhead demanded again. He gestured to Minh. "Take your friend with you. We will be waiting for you." The chains on Minh's arms, and the one on Scott's neck, loosened and were sucked to their points of origin, where they disappeared. The crack sealed as Scott fell and closed over part of his foot. Lightning burst from all the monsters, and they all vanished.

From a seated position, Scott pulled on his foot. It came free, covered with dirt. He placed a hand on the ground and dug a little with his fingers, but whatever they'd seen in the opening was no longer below them.

"Do we obey them," Minh asked as she rubbed her wrists, "or do we make a run for it? If we even can run from them?"

Scott got to his feet and made his way out of the bleachers. "They said they'd be waiting. I have to go."

"What are you going to do?" Minh called as she followed him.

"I don't know, but I can't leave my mom alone with them."

CHAPTER 7

Meeting The Master

The sun set and Jenkins had still not returned. Basim felt guilty for not noticing sooner. He'd been enamored with the ruby again. Its appearance remained the same, but it generated less heat than before, and Basim could swear that it felt lighter. He'd examined it at different angles and held it under every light in the cabin, including some lamps equipped with filters, but the gem didn't show any

activity. He didn't realize he was alone in the cabin until it was nearly 10pm. His first bright was to run outside and call out Jenkins' name. When that didn't work, he rushed inside and called the park ranger station. He hadn't wanted to go into the details of the situation, and thankfully the ranger on duty didn't ask too many questions. Once Basim explained that Jenkins had gone into the woods and not returned the employee promised to organize a search. Unfortunately, there were only a few rangers on duty which limited the ground they were able to cover. After Basim hung up, he called the police station at the nearby town. The officer he reached spoke more gruffly than the park ranger and was not nearly as quick to make promises.

"I realize it hasn't been that long," Basim assured the officer. "I'm still worried."

"There's nothing to worry about. Folks camp in that park all the time. Nothing dangerous in there."

"That's a damn lie! We have footage of a coyote."

"Why'd you say you're there again?"

Basim groaned. "We're capturing footage for a studio. Why does that matter?"

"Just trying to guess what kind of survival skills your friend might have. Anyway, it's too soon for us to treat this as a missing person case or even a rescue mission if there's no proof this Jenkins guy has been hurt. You made the right move calling the park rangers. We'll be in touch with them, too. If there's anything we can do, we'll jump in as soon as possible. Until then, just sit tight."

Jenkins hung up on the officer. There was a chair in front of him, but he paced around it in defiance of the officer's advice. He couldn't just sit around and wait for news to come. He should never have let Jenkins venture into the woods alone. If he was right, if there was something in the water or soil making the animals aggressive, they should have realized that it was safest to be together at all times. Instead, they let their fight cloud their judgement. After their words were shared, all Basim wanted was some time to himself to focus on editing the footage and assuage the guilt he felt for not putting in his share of time into their work. Which he didn't do. Despite his guilt, the stupid gemstone captivated him again. Jenkins was right, he was obsessed. He wasn't even obsessed for a good reason. He didn't want to sell the stone and hadn't tried to get it appraised or explore its history. He just had a feeling that there was something unique about it. If Jenkins wound up being injured, or dying, on account of his feeling for a lousy rock, even a glance at any precious mineral would fill him with remorse in the future.

Five short knocks broke his spell of self-pity. He called Jenkins' name as he rushed to answer it, but realized it was a foolish thought since Jenkins had a key. He hoped it was the ranger who had come to deliver an update on the search plan.

The man at the door wore a blue dress shirt with red tie and dark slacks. "Good evening, sir," he said with a broad smile. "I'm sorry to bother you, but are you one of the professionals who set up cameras throughout the forest?"

"Is there a problem with that?" Basim studied the man's clothes. He hadn't spoken to the park rangers much but had seen them enough to know that they wore forest-green uniforms. "You don't look like you work for the park."

“Quite observant of you. I don’t work here. I’m just interested in what you’re doing. I’m a bit of a film enthusiast myself.”

Basim started to close the door. “I’m really sorry, but I’m going through something right now.”

The man pressed a hand against the door. “Oh, please, just allow me a moment of your time. It would mean so much.”

“I’m sorry, but there’s something going on with my friend and I’m really worried about him.”

“Ah, you must mean the man I passed by the river.”

Basim stopped trying to close the door. “You saw him?”

“I believe he said his name was,” the man paused, but it didn’t seem like he was trying to remember, more like he was adopting a mannerism that others expected him to present, “Jenkins.”

“That’s him! When did you see him? Is he still by the river? Is he alright?”

“When I left him, he was alive.”

The man’s response unnerved Basim. The sound of the latch clicking unbalanced him further. He hadn’t realized he’d backed away from the door, or that the man had entered the house.

The man’s eyes roamed around the room, at the small workstations and partially full duffel bags. “How much are you being paid for this filming job?”

“Enough to cover this place. How long ago did you see Jenkins?”

“Would you like a higher paying job? I can easily get you more money if you desire it. Many times more than enough to cover the cost of this small shack. All you have to do is ask.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

The man laced his fingers together. “Or perhaps the quality of your work is the true payment. Are you after the perfect image? I can guarantee that you will collect a masterful piece of footage before you leave.”

“Are you listening to me? My friend is missing.”

“Is that the only thing on your mind? I’m trying to help you.” The man’s stoic face faltered for a moment, then he regained his cold, calculating gaze. “But perhaps I can work with it. Do you wish to know what happened to your colleague?”

“Of course,” Jenkins blurted.

The man’s eyes rolled up. He lifted his hands and moved his fingers in a flourish. “Granted.”

A piercing scream tore through the cabin. Basim placed one hand over his heart and another against the wall. “Jenkins,” he shouted back. The voice was unmistakable, and it didn’t stop. Basim’s head darted around as he tried to pinpoint it. With every few turns of his neck, his eyes returned to the stranger. He couldn’t decide if he should find the source of the wails or force the man out of the house.

“Perhaps I should ease his misery.” The man waved his hand.

The screams were replaced by frantic splashing. Basim held his ground, did not take his eyes off the stranger.

“Help!” It was still Jenkins’ voice. He sounded less agonized, but still pained.

“You should go to him,” said the stranger.

“Where is he?” Basim had trouble finding his voice and it cracked as he spoke.

“He’s in the kitchen. You can easily see what happened to him, and for the moment he’s able to tell you about it. Just as you,” the man rubbed his hand together, “wished.”

Basim inched his way to the kitchen. He didn’t want to put the man out of his sight, but Jenkins’ pleas for help compelled him. His feet squeaked on the tiled floor as he shuffled to the refrigerator. He didn’t see anyone else in the room, but the cries sounded closer. Basim called his friend’s name.

“Basim, is that you?”

Jenkins sounded like he was right next to him. Basim turned his whole body about.

“Basim, I’m over here!”

He crouched and opened cabinets. They were small, but possibly large enough for a person. He slammed the first one closed when he found only pots inside and opened another.

“In the sink!”

Basim looked at the counter as he slowly straightened his legs. He hadn’t noticed the basin was nearly overflowing with water when he walked in. He also realized that in addition to Jenkins’ voice being closer, the splashing was as well. He strafed toward the backed-up basin. Inside a trout darted back and forth in its limited space. When Basim’s head was over the water, the fish darted to the surface.

“Basim!” The fish’s mouth did not move. The voice resonated from its whole body.

“What the fuck?” Basim considered the fish, and then opened the cabinet under the sink.

It sounded like the fish tried to say something else, but the voice became a fit of coughs.

Basim stood in time to see the fish’s head dip under the water’s surface. It made sense to him that the fish wouldn’t be able to breathe once its head was above the water, but he couldn’t believe it coughed any more than he could believe it spoke.

“A man did this to me,” the fish explained. “Except it wasn’t a man.”

“Jenkins,” Basim said, more to convince himself than to acknowledge Jenkins’ presence. He shook his head. He couldn’t deny what he saw but couldn’t understand how it was possible. “What’s happening?”

The fish bobbed under the water. “I don’t know, but it won’t stop. Somehow he turned me into a mouse. Then he killed me. But I came back, but I wasn’t me. I was a squirrel. A fox got me, but I came back again. It’s been going on all day. Every time I die, I come back as another animal. Things keep eating

me.” Jenkins rose above the surface again, coughed, and fell back under. “Please, do something. Make it stop.”

The now familiar cold voice whispered in Basim’s ear. “It won’t stop.”

Basim leapt back. Jenkins frantically swam about the sink. “That’s him,” Jenkins shouted, “Basim, run!”

The man blocked the only egress route. Basim moved to the table and placed his hands on the edge. He curved his back and bent his knees, ready to sprint in the opposite direction the stranger moved.

The stranger waved his hand again. The table’s legs scraped against the floor as the top struck Basim’s belly. It forced him back and pinned him against the wall.

“No games, they enrage me.” The man pointed to the sink. “You’ve gotten your wish. There’s no more need for your friend.”

The sink groaned. Basim couldn’t see inside from his position, but he noticed the water level recede. The garbage disposal pulled it down the drain, along with Jenkins. The fish screamed again and splashed about as if it was trying to escape the sink. Basim reached toward him, but the table was pressed tightly against his midsection, and he couldn’t move.

“Basim,” Jenkins said as the water level continued to lessen, “whatever you do, don’t answer his questions. That’s how he gets,” he was cut off as the grinding of the garbage disposal changed pitch. A narrow red fountain spurted from the middle of the sink.

Basim continued to cry out as he bucked against the table that was unwilling to move.

“Don’t worry, he’ll be back,” the man said in a voice that was in no way consoling.

A moth fluttered over the rim of the sink and made its way to the ceiling light.

“See?” said the man. “Now, make another wish.”

Basim shook the table lightly. He watched the moth fly in circles around the lightbulb.

“Do you want him to be human again? If that’s your second wish, I’m happy to grant it.”

Basim’s hands rested flat on the table. Jenkins’ last words echoed in his mind as he thought about how the man acted earlier. The stranger was a talker. Basim tried to take control of the conversation. “I won’t make a second wish. Not until you grant my first one.”

The man’s eyebrows furrowed. “I just did. Your friend is a moth now. That’s what happened to him,”

“That doesn’t explain anything. I still have no idea what’s going on.”

For the first time, the man stopped grinning. The corners of his mouth sank, his lips opened, and he ground his teeth.

If the stranger was becoming angry, then perhaps he was on the right track. Basim pressed forward. “I wanted to know what happened to Jenkins. To fully grant that wish, you need to tell me everything. Tell me what you did, tell me why, how you did it.”

The man's hands curled into fists and his body vibrated. "Why do you humans have to be so technical?" He gripped the table with one hand and hurled it across the room. Basim placed one hand over his throbbing abdomen and the other covered his head as the piece of furniture shattered against the wall. When he pulled his hand away from his face, the stranger had transformed.

The man no longer wore his fine clothes. He didn't have a shirt at all. He was at least twice the size he'd been a moment ago, with bulging muscles. His skin was pale green. Spikes jutted from his shoulders and concentric rings like tattoos covered both sides of his chest. His mischievous grin remained, but his cheeks had deep lines that surrounded his lips. Two horns began at his forehead, curled backward around the crown, and tucked behind his ears. His legs were covered by armor, but Basim wasn't sure there was truly anything covering them. The beast's legs may have been made of an armor-like material.

"What did I do? How? I changed the way Jenkins' body passes through time and uses its energy to form cells. He's traversing the fourth dimension cyclically rather than linearly, and his DNA is constantly changing. But you can't comprehend any of that, can you?"

Basim was still struggling to comprehend the monstrosity that stood before him. The way it spoke of dimensions made him wonder if he was looking at a god, or more likely a demon.

"As for why, it's because I'm a Djinn. I'm the only one of my kind able to visit this planet, this realm. It is prophesied that I'll grant three wishes to the one who frees me. Once I do, the rest of my species will join me here. Whether you understood that or not is irrelevant. You asked, I answered, your first wish has been granted."

Basim understood enough. He thought about the ruby, the way it called to him, and how it suddenly felt lighter overnight. "I freed you."

"Not in the most extravagant way. High frequency light has made me burst from the stone before. Filtered sunlight only gave me so much strength. But there are other forms of energy I can feed on. Even animals have wishes. I can only make human's dreams come true, but other animals intentions can sustain me. This forest offered enough to slake my hunger, but your desire to know more about the ruby was eased me into my physical form."

Basim leaned back and forth on his heels. He considered the best way to move to get around the Djinn and out of the cabin.

The Djinn folded its arms. "You're thinking of running. That's pointless. The prophecy has been negated before. People freed me but finessed their third wish to avoid opening the gate between our worlds. It confused me because my kind don't make mistakes. When we foretell the future, it comes to pass." With one long stride the Djinn stood before Basim and jabbed a clawed finger into his chest. "This time is different. I can feel it. You WILL fulfill the prophecy; you WILL open the portal to free my species. Now stop stalling and make two more wishes!"

The Djinn's touch made Basim stall, but he had no intention of staying in the room. While the Djinn spoke, he used the time to build his courage. He backed up half a step to break contact with the claw, turned his body sideways, and tried to run for the door.

The Djinn grabbed Basim's shoulder. He felt his body twist and pivot as he was pinned against the wall. He struggled to get loose, but the Djinn was too strong. Out of options, he inhaled until he strained his

chest, and shouted “HELP!” The pressure instantly eased, and Basim was no longer against the wall. The Djinn spun him around and lifted him slightly, so they were face-to-face.”

“You want help?” the Djinn asked with pure glee plastered on its face.

Basim realized his mistake and tried to say *no* but was cut off. He saw stars and his stomach lurched as if he’d just fallen off a bridge. The Djinn released him, and he sprawled onto the floor. It wasn’t the floor of the cabin. He was lying on carpet, instead of tiles. He grabbed a tweed couch to help regain his footing; a couch that had never been in the cabin. As he stood he smelled roasted beef and boiled potatoes.

“We’re in the town closest to your cabin,” the Djinn explained. “So go ahead. Ask the people who live here for help.”

All Basim cared about was finding an escape. There weren’t any doors in the new room, but a set of stairs, also carpeted, were mere steps away. He rushed up them, leaving the Djinn chuckling.

The stairs took him to a hallway that extended equally to his left and right. He tried going left, which led to a kitchen. A bowl of mashed potatoes rested beside a tray of steamed green beans. In the center a roast sat in a white dish, surrounded by dark juice. Three places were set, but all the chairs were empty. A knife and double-pronged fork were in the roast, as if someone had begun cutting it.

A high-pitched tone made Basim instinctively swat at his ear. He lifted the cloth to look under the table, but nobody was there. The tone persisted and he continued brushing his fingers near his earlobe.

“Hello,” he called. There was no response, other than the irritating noise.

Basim clicked his teeth and looked for the mosquito, gnat, flea, or whatever was causing the sound. There was no buzzing insect near his head. He listened more carefully and followed it to the refrigerator. It wasn’t low enough to be coming from the motor. The refrigerator door was decorated with pictures held in place with magnets. Some were done with crayons or colored pencil on white pieces of printer paper. Others were photographs of two adults and a young girl. In most of the photos the family of three was inside, either in a restaurant or a museum.

There was one outdoor image. It depicted a small island in a vast ocean and looked more like the kind of thing that he’d see on a postcard. As Basim’s eyes drifted over it he caught movement in the sand. He took it off the refrigerator and held it close to his face. In the image, there were marks in the sand, leaves and tree branches that had been arranged to form the letters SOS. A trio of silhouettes bounced and rolled as he tilted the picture. He held the frame still and the tiny shadows stood up. They were small, as if he were looking at them in the distance, but he could make out the rough shape of torsos, heads, and legs. There were three people on the beach, shouting, jumping, and waving their arms to get his attention. Based on the height difference, there seemed to be two adults and a child, just like the family in the other pictures.

Basim dropped the picture and looked away from it. The Djinn stood in the kitchen.

“I guess these people aren’t available. Perhaps you should ask someone else for help.”

The blurred vision and falling sensation returned. When it stopped Basim bumped into a cold wall that rattled when he struck it. He shook his head to relieve the dizziness and realized it wasn't a wall but a garage door.

This time no exploration was necessary. Racks of iron weights and kettle bells lined the walls and high-quality exercise machines were positioned underneath ceiling lamps. A man knelt in the middle of the garage with an iron ring above his head that was as wide and thick as a monster truck's tire. The man caught in the middle of the weight panted and shook as he tried to lift it. The man wasn't aware Basim, or the Djinn, were with him. His eyes were closed, his face red, and his tank top drenched with sweat. The veins in his swollen arms pulsed as he miraculously managed to lift the weight a centimeter. When he did, the metal expanded, and the increased size pushed him back down.

"We're just in time," said the Djinn.

The man panted faster and shook more violently. Tears, as well as sweat, dripped from his face. The iron ring continued to expand. The man's joints popped, his bones splintered, and then the weight overcame him. It crushed him as it plopped flat on the ground. Basim placed a hand over his mouth as a river of blood trickled out from the rim.

"As you can see," said the Djinn, "I've already visited this town. They've made their wishes, just as Jenkins did. With each granting, I become stronger. But all this will pale in comparison once you make your third wish."

Basim moved away from the river of blood that snaked towards him. "This is disgusting. You're disgusting."

"Call me what you will, but you wanted help. I gave you the chance to ask that family, and this man."

Basim took his eyes off the bloody floor and focused on the Djinn. "No, you didn't grant my wish. I won't make a third until you grant my second."

The Djinn growled and shook its head. "Don't. Not again."

"Yes," said Basim, "again. I wished for help. That means you take me to someone who's able to help me."

The Djinn spread his arms. "The people I've taken you to will be just as much help as anyone else."

Basim thought back to what the Djinn had said about the ruby, about being released. "Someone on Earth has dealt with you before. They can help me best."

"The last time I was here was many years ago. The people I crossed paths with are all dead." The Djinn clicked its tongue. "Mortality is such a nuisance."

Basim ran a hand over his head as he considered his phrasing. "There must someone who can help me. Someone who's familiar with you, your kind."

"Nobody truly knows me."

"Someone who knows your weaknesses."

“I have none.”

“Someone who’s been in a similar situation, someone who’s faced the unknown.”

“Enough! I’ve granted your wish to the best of my ability. There is nobody who can help you in the way you’ve described. Nobody has ever faced something so far beyond their understanding as me. You’ve wasted your second wish. Accept that and,” the Djinn’s eyes suddenly widened. “No, no it couldn’t be possible.”

“There’s someone isn’t there?”

The Djinn held his hand up, palms out, as if he were pleading. “Basim, trust me, you don’t want this.”

A small part of Basim’s mind feared what was happening, what could worry a creature of such power. The majority of his mind was glad the Djinn was concerned; Basim felt like he had the upper hand. “Do your job,” he shouted, “grant my second wish, and grant it properly.”

“Damn you,” the Djinn hollered back.

Stars blotted Basim’s vision again as the Djinn transported them once more.

CHAPTER 8

Family Matters

Scott decided to walk. Minh didn’t ask why. Perhaps, like her, he could still feel the monsters around them, watching them. Calling for a car or taking a bus might put other passengers in danger. The walk must have been a few miles, but it didn’t feel long. She put one leg in front of the other and tried to avoid remembering her classmates being murdered.

At the hospital Scott paused by the entrance. Minh stood beside him. They glanced at one another, both afraid of what awaited them. They’d already witnessed a massacre at their school, were they about to see two mass slaughters in a single day?

Scott slid into the hospital like he was walking on ice. People moved around him in the lobby, oblivious to the true horrors that were loose in the world. Minh held Scott’s hand and moved with him. Her eyes darted about as she searched for a sign of the pale, leather-clad sadists.

“Can I help you?” It was the receptionist. Her voice had made Scott squeeze Minh’s hand, which made her shriek.

People in the lobby looked at them. Scott went to the front desk, dragged Minh with him. “I’m here to see my mom, that’s all,” he calmly informed the receptionist.

He told her his name and showed her his ID. She confirmed the information, looked up what room his mother was in, and provided directions. As he went to the elevator he seemed just as anxious as Minh, his attention all over the halls. In an angsty haze, they made it to the room where Scott’s mother was unconscious and sustained by the grace of modern science. Scott and Minh stood quietly in the room. As far as they could tell, they were alone. Nobody wailed in the hallway. No evacuation alarms went off. It was just them, Scott’s mother, and the various noises of the machines that kept her alive.

The blue flash was identical to what they'd seen under the bleachers. Scott jumped and Minh shrieked. Pinhead was the first to materialize close to the bed. The Female, the Chatterer, and lastly Butterball appeared around Scott and Minh. Butterball stood by the door like a goalie, his girth blocked their escape. The Chatterer and Female closed in on Scott and urged him closer to the bed.

Pinhead looked down at Scott's mother. "She was beautiful, more so now that she's injured." He traced a finger across her face. His fingernail effortlessly carved a gash in her cheek.

"Don't touch her," Scott shouted.

Pinhead twisted his finger to form a hole near her ear. "I don't want to harm her. I want you to do it."

Scott backed away from the bed. The Female grabbed his arms; her face was not menacing but Scott hissed in pain at her touch. Minh tried to go to him. The Chatterer turned on her and gnashed his teeth furiously. Minh looked into his eyeless face and froze.

Pinhead's focus never wavered from Scott. "You think us monsters. We are explorers in the further regions of experience. Difficult as it may be for you to understand now, what we offer is pleasure. Your father is learning that as we speak."

Scott struggled against the Female's hold. "Where is he? What did you do to him?"

"He is receiving what he desired: bliss through a means most avoid at all costs. You opened the box, we came, and we will teach you the same lesson. Your first step starts here." He reached up and pulled a pin from the crown of his head. "Drive this into your mother's neck."

"What?" Scott thrashed against the Female's grip.

Pinhead placed his finger on the side of Scott's mother's neck. "Her jugular vein is right here."

"I won't do it!"

Chains burst from the wall behind Pinhead. They wrapped around Scott's wrist and pulled his arm straight. The Female finally released her hold. The chains pulled Scott closer to Pinhead, closer to the bed.

"This is crucial," said Pinhead as Scott was dragged closer. "Humans are born crying. If not, they are struck to make it so. Throughout their lives they accumulate uncountable injuries, a multitude of reasons to shed infinite tears. Some fools grow to believe pain is common, it becomes mundane."

Scott was now next to the bed. Pinhead forced the pin into his hand.

"But there is something special about the last wound a person receives. Being the one to inflict it is," Pinhead's eyes rolled up, "euphoric."

Scott twisted his arm back and forth, but the chains held tight. Minh swallowed her fear and dashed around the Chatterer. She felt her collar tighten which jolted her neck. Her feet left the floor, until she splashed into something that didn't quite feel solid. Her ribs were constricted by something hot and moist, and the smell of rotten eggs made her gag. In a daze she realized the Chatterer had thrown her into Butterball, who was wrapped around her and breathing down her neck.

“Inflict your mother’s final wound,” Pinhead demanded.

Scott shook his head. He continued trying to twist out of the chains, bent and straightened his arm as if trying to drop the pin but his fingers refused to open.

Pinhead assessed Scott as he struggled. “You seem afraid. If you don’t want to make her suffer then do this to end her suffering.” Pinhead positioned his palm above Scott’s mother’s heart.

The woman’s eyes opened. She tried to sit up, bit down hard on her breathing tube, and started to choke. She thrashed about on her bed. More chains descended from the ceiling and drove through her legs.

“Stop!” Scott plunged the pin into Pinhead’s stomach. The monster shook his head, pulled it out, and thrust back into Scott’s possession.

“Do it,” Pinhead goaded. “Experience the power of pain. It can end suffering, if it’s used properly, applied at the right spot.”

Scott looked at his mother. Her eyes glistened and she shook like she was having a seizure.

“If you need further motivation,” said Pinhead, “we can hurt your friend.”

At Pinhead’s ultimatum, the pressure on Minh’s ribs tightened. She wanted to scream but was only able to cough.

“No,” said Scott, “don’t.”

“You have the power to make it stop,” said Pinhead. “Do as I command.”

Scott looked at the pin in his hand, stained with Pinhead’s blood. He looked at Minh, who was still struggling to breathe. He looked at his mother as she writhed in pain. He looked at Pinhead, whose face showed no remorse even as he tormented the defenseless woman.

He did what he was asked. The end of the pin pierced the soft flesh of his mother’s neck. Blood flowed slowly; he must have missed her artery. She thrashed on the bed. Scott pulled his hand away from the needle. He fell to his knees and cried as he and Minh watched his mother cough. The breathing tube gurgled as it filled with blood.

Pinhead looked down at Scott as if he were judging him. “You still don’t understand the joy of what you’ve done. It will come with time, as it did for all of us.” One of the walls moved. The bricks pried apart to open a vertical section. Instead of leading into the adjacent room, the hole revealed a hallway lined with pale gray bricks, so long that Minh couldn’t see the end of it. “We will teach you, in a place where time has no consequence.”

Butterball released Minh. He, the Female, and the Chatterer approached Scott. Butterball and the Chatterer grabbed his arms. The Female took his legs. The three of them lifted him.

“Don’t,” Scott begged, but he was exhausted. His cry was more of a whimper, and he struggled only halfheartedly. As he jostled his legs the Female adjusted her position. She moved so his knees were on her shoulders, placed her hands on his thighs. She gritted her teeth and dug her nails into his skin. Wet patches expanded on his pants.

Minh didn't know what she could do, but she charged at the trio. "Let go of him!" At least her voice sounded more demanding than Scott's. The three didn't look at her. In two strides, Pinhead stood in her way.

"You must come with us anyway. You helped solve the box." He reached for her.

Minh whipped her arms about and backed away. She looked at Scott but strafed towards the door.

Pinhead looked at his companions. "Introduce him to his eternity. I will be with you soon."

The three carried Scott through the portal. The wall closed behind them.

Minh ran from the room. She bumped into a resident who asked her what was wrong. She turned and pointed to the room. Pinhead wasn't by the door. "Don't go in there. There's a monster. It killed someone."

The resident went to the room. Minh pleaded with him not to approach as she backed further away. The resident peeked inside. A moment later he turned on his heel and rushed past Minh. Desperate to escape, she ran to the next elevator that opened. She slammed her finger into the ground floor button repeatedly, didn't realize she was alone until the elevator descended.

Pinhead's voice resonated inside the tight space. "You needn't worry about them."

Minh tried to run even though there was nowhere to go. She darted to a corner, placed her hands against the walls, then turned and pressed her back flat against the edge.

"I've had my fun," Pinhead continued. A chain shot from an upper corner of the elevator and into a lower one. "I only want you now." Another chain crashed horizontally from one wall to another.

Minh put her hands in her hair and screamed. More chains appeared around her. The doors slid open. She bobbed and weaved around the chains and beelined to the exit.

She wished they'd driven. The exit led to a parking lot and as she rushed through the lanes she hoped someone would realize she was in trouble and offer to help. Nobody did. There were many cars in the lot, but she didn't see any people. She dashed past the cars toward the main road. Midway through the parking lot there was a flash and Pinhead stood before her. She skidded on her heels and fell.

"Your lungs are burning," Pinhead said as he strode toward her. "It's the agony that comes with fighting for survival. Are you beginning to understand? This pain results from hope, the belief that you can run to freedom."

Minh got to her feet and ran away from him.

"I'll show you an experience far more exhilarating than hope," he called after her.

She continued to run. She weaved around cars and looked over her shoulder. Pinhead leisurely walked after her. She turned back and intended to run faster but skidded to a halt again to avoid bumping headfirst into another monster. This one had horns, and its skin was green instead of pale. It stood next to a middle aged, middle eastern man.

CHAPTER 9

Round I ... FIGHT

Basim rushed to the girl. There was nobody else around, she must have been the one he'd wished to see. He helped her stand and didn't need to coax her to run. They sprinted between two rows of cars. As they fled the Djinn appeared in front of them, grabbed both of them, held one in each hand, but its gaze was focused on the girl.

"Why was I drawn to you?" The Djinn asked her. "What do you know of the unknown? We've never met."

"Unhand my parishioner."

The Djinn turned its head toward the voice. His eyes widened and he released his hold.

Basim followed the Djinn's gaze to a tall, pale monster with a grid of pins in his head. He tried to comprehend the thing that stood before him but was caught off guard by a high-pitched scream. He looked at the girl who now had a chain wrapped around her waist. It started near the pale monster's feet retracted into the ground and pulled the girl with it. Basim grabbed her arm and tried to pull her free. She screamed louder and a ring of blood stained her shirt as the chain sank into her skin. Basim darted past her and clasped the receding chain. As he pulled, and as the chain continued to move, it sliced his palms and wrists.

"What are you doing?" The Djinn bellowed.

Basim refused to say another word to the Djinn. He'd wished for help, and the Djinn brought him to the girl. He needed her alive. He acted on instinct and refused to stop pulling back on the chain.

"Do you enjoy bloodshed?" said Pinhead. "A man after my own heart."

Pinhead waved his hand. The windows of a nearby car shattered. The shards showered Basim. His neck stung, his breathing became labored, and his shirt collar, now wet, clung to his skin.

"No!" The Djinn hollered.

Basim's strength ebbed. He let go of the chain and faceplanted. The girl continued to scream, but her voice sounded distant. Basim was rolled over, and the Djinn looked down on him.

"Basim," the Djinn whispered, "I can fix this. Wish for it."

Basim grinned, and despite the cuts in his neck he was able to cackle. If he died before making his third wish, perhaps that was one way to defeat the Djinn, to ensure the rest of his kind would never come to Earth. He closed his eyes and let his laughter grow weaker.

"Basim, wish it!"

He could no longer hear the girl scream. Everything sounded quieter. His fingers were numb, and he became cold.

"Damn you."

Basim's body temperature returned. His neck no longer stung. His energy was replenished, and he opened his eyes. The Djinn held him like a parent cradling their child. The girl still screamed, but she was no longer dragged toward Pinhead. The chain had stopped retracting and the pale monster glared at the Djinn.

Pinhead spoke through clenched teeth. "Did you just," his hands curled to fists, "revive him?" He thrust his fists forward. A tire burst, the air pressure forced off the hubcap. It flew toward the Djinn.

The Djinn hissed as the hubcap sank into his side. He pulled it out, stood, and pointed at Pinhead. "You stay away from him. He's mine."

Pinhead took heaving breaths, and his arms shook. "I hate healers!" A chain materialized in the air. It plunged below the Djinn's fingernail and up his arm, protruded from his shoulder. Two rings of hooks emerged from the ground and dug into the Djinn's feet. The chain crept up and wrapped around the Djinn's neck, then shot upward so it was vertical. The Djinn was pulled off the ground, his arm forced straight, and his neck constricted like it was in a noose. The hooks in the ground clung to him. There was a snap as his ankles broke, and a tear as his feet were separated from his body. The chain tightened further and snapped his neck.

Pinhead sighed deeply. The chain and hooks vanished, and the Djinn's body fell to the ground.

Basim didn't know whether to rejoice or be terrified. He looked at Pinhead and placed his hands protectively over his neck.

Pinhead approached Basim. "What shall I do with you? I could take you with..."

A sucking drew Basim's attention to the Djinn. His feet reattached to his body and his neck realigned. "That which is eternal can never truly die," the Djinn said as he stood up.

"Eternal life." The disdain in Pinhead's voice was gone. He looked at the Djinn appraisingly and scowled. "But where are your scars?"

"I inflict scars," said the Djinn, "I don't receive them."

"Then you miss half the fun."

As the beasts sized each other up, Basim went to the girl. The chain had stopped retracting again. He shimmied it around her hips and down her legs. "What's your name," he asked as he dropped it around her ankles.

"I'm Minh." She lifted one foot over the chain and kicked it away with the other. "What's going on?"

"Stay away from her," Pinhead bellowed.

Basim flinched as he turned. A car behind Pinhead rose several yards in the air and tumbled toward him and Minh. He felt Minh's hand on him, pulling him away, but all he could do was hold his hands in front of his face.

The exhaust pipe expanded until it was as wide as the tires. Flames erupted from it and the vehicle shot away from them like a rocket. "I told you," said the Djinn, "the boy is mine!"

“What are you?” Pinhead thrust his arms over his head.

Dozens of chains pierced the Djinn’s chest, arms, and back. They lifted him, whipped him around, slammed him on the ground and into cars.

“Basim,” the Djinn cried as his head went through a windshield, “help me!”

Pinhead laughed as he continued to brutalize the Djinn. Chains seemed to fall from the sky, some tipped with hooks, others with pronged forks, and a few with metal arrow heads. “Whatever you are,” Pinhead mocked as the Djinn was forced to the ground and dragged across the pavement, “you are weak.”

“Basim,” the Djinn said as his skin was lopped off, “say the words.”

Basim didn’t dare make a sound. He turned to run. Minh followed him. They were blocked by a wall of interlinked metal rings.

“You will never escape us, Minh.” Pinhead approached her. The Djinn lay still, the chains still inside him. “This creature, whatever it is, has provided a glimpse of all that awaits you: suffering unrivaled.”

Minh whimpered. Basim held her hand. She pulled it away and rubbed her eyes.

Pinhead reached toward her. “You won’t always look upon such spectacles with dread. Someday torture of this caliber will be your fondest wish, as it is mine.”

The Djinn’s body became a white flare. Even Pinhead cowered and shielded his eyes from it.

“Your fondest...WISH?” The Djinn leapt to his feet. The chains left his body and glowed red hot. The Djinn snapped his fingers, and they wrapped around Pinhead.

Pinhead writhed under the glowing chains. The metal loosened, then tightened again, as if he and the Djinn were battling for control over them. Pinhead clenched his teeth and the chains slowly rose above his head. “This is my power.”

“Suit yourself,” said the Djinn.

The ground beneath Pinhead’s feet boiled. He sank into it like quicksand, his black clothes sizzled, and welts appeared on his legs before they dipped out of sight. Instead of screaming, Pinhead closed his eyes and moaned as if he found the experience relaxing. When he was submerged to his knees the ground hardened again.

“Behold true power,” the Djinn shouted as a gust of wind howled around them. Dark clouds rolled over their heads. A bolt of lightning struck Pinhead, attracted to one of the metal prongs that jutted from his nose. He cried out, his blissful demeanor overpowered by the current and voltage. More bolts struck him, each drawn to the pins. Thunder drowned out his voice, but his face contorted in agony. When the Djinn felt he’d done enough the clouds condensed. The moisture cooled into a block of ice and fell onto Pinhead’s skull, burying him under shavings and chunks.

Basim looked at Minh. He imagined her face matched his when he saw the Djinn torn apart.

The Djinn approached Basim. “Now that the fuss is over...”

An explosion made Basim cover his ears. Hot rocks showered him. The spot where Pinhead had been trapped was now a hole. Pinhead stood before it with not so much as a scratch on his face. "You are not the only one who is eternal," he said.

Pinhead thrust his arms to his sides. The chains, still glowing hot, impaled the underside of nearby cars. The gasoline ignited. The chains rose high off the ground and flung the flaming cars toward the Djinn. As the smoldering cars plummeted to earth their trajectory changed. The machines became alive; each transformed into a lion with a flaming mane. The animals ran around the Djinn and charged Pinhead. When the first lion leapt Pinhead plunged his hand into the animal's throat. Another lion attacked to one side; Pinhead caught it by the scruff and snapped its neck. The third lion succeeded in latching its jaws around Pinhead's ribs. As the lion shook its neck back and forth, Pinhead vanished in a flash of lightning. He reappeared next to the lion and impaled its midsection with his fingers. He spread his hands to open the lion's skin and let it bleed out.

Pinhead and the Djinn stared at one another; each contemplated their next move. Basim tried to run around the wall of chains. As he moved the wall shifted to block him. Minh tried to do the same in the opposite direction, but the chains defied the laws of physics and spontaneously grew new links. Whether Pinhead was controlling them while contending with the Djinn, or he'd given the chains minds of their own, Basim couldn't say and didn't care. The only thing that mattered was that they were trapped.

"It seems our strength is equal," said Pinhead.

"Here, perhaps," said the Djinn. His eyes locked on Basim, and he opened his hand. The ruby, which Basim forgot he still had, flew from his pocket and toward the Djinn who caught it. "Let's see how you fare in another realm."

CHAPTER 10

Into the Stone

Minh had seen many rules of reality broken in a matter of hours, so she wasn't surprised to see gravity manipulated. A red gemstone the size of a softball ejected from the middle-easter man's pocket and flew across the parking lot as if pitched. Once it was in the Djinn's hand it glowed bright red. The stone was beautiful, alluring as it shone, but she averted her gaze. A circular shadow partially obstructed her vision.

The man shouted. Minh looked to where she'd last seen him. His body was no longer present, but his voice lingered, a fading cry of pain and madness.

Minh looked at Pinhead. His body flickered, partially transparent one moment but solid the next. The length of transparency increased. He turned to Minh. For a moment, she saw despair in his face; whatever battle he was fighting, he knew he was going to lose. The expression was overshadowed by determination and rage.

"Whatever happens," he said as a chain burst from his chest, "you won't escape."

The chain wrapped around Minh's arm, tethered her to Pinhead. She tried to pull it off. As she struggled her hands also underwent waves of invisibility, in sync with Pinhead's body. She looked away from the chain, as her world vanished.

She was in a red room, the same shade as the gemstone. The walls and ceiling were made from dozens of different sized pieces, each one positioned at a different angle. Every surface, including the floor, was blood red and glowed like a neon sign. The chain was still around her arm, and she struggled again to break free. To her surprise, it came loose easily. She stumbled back as the tension eased and nearly fell over.

Pinhead pointed at her. The chain twitched but did not lash toward her or constrict her.

"You're in my prison now," said the Djinn. "Things work differently here."

More chains appeared at Pinhead's beckoning. They rusted and crumbled to dust.

The Djinn lunged and struck Pinhead with an uppercut below the ribs. Pinhead was thrown back and crashed through a wall. "And now," the Djinn said as he turned to Minh, "just because he's so drawn to you," shards from the wall that Pinhead was forced through shot toward her.

The man leapt in front of her. The fragments stopped in midair and fell to the ground. "Go, go, go," he said as he backed up, always keeping his body between her and the Djinn.

Minh turned in the direction she was being pushed. It was difficult to see since everything was the same color, but upon close inspection she spotted a door. She turned her back on Basim and ran through it. Rapid footsteps indicated that the man was right behind her.

A blue-white flash stung her eyes in the poorly lit hall. She didn't need to see Pinhead to know that he'd teleported in front of them. She spun around, nearly knocked the man over as she did so. They both started to run in the opposite direction, but the Djinn materialized in front of them. The man grabbed her wrist and pulled her to the side of the hall. They passed through another door; he seemed to have a knack for finding them.

"They can teleport," Minh said as she lost the will to keep up with the man. "Why are we running?"

"Do you have a better idea?" he said as he pulled on her arm harder.

"No," Minh admitted. "Who are you? What is that thing?"

"My name's Basim. That thing is a Djinn. Apparently I'm its master."

"Then why are we running from it? Tell it to leave us alone."

"It doesn't work that way."

A wall shattered. Minh and Basim nearly fell as Pinhead flopped in front of them. He shook his head as he groggily stood up. When he saw Minh he reached out to her. A chain appeared between them, fell to the ground, and snaked toward her.

The Djinn's heavy foot cracked the shards that had once been the wall. "It's no use. Your powers won't work here. I'm in control now."

Pinhead's hand shook, and so did the chain. "I will have her."

The red shards rose and gravitated around the Djinn's hand. The pieces liquified and clumped together. The droplets lengthened into a long handle and bulged at one end. The refractive properties changed as the liquid hardened again into a spiked hammer. The Djinn stepped on Pinhead's back to hold him in place and lifted the hammer over his head.

"I will take her and leave this wretched place," said Pinhead.

"You don't even know what this place is!" The Djinn swung the hammer, shattering Pinhead's skull in a single blow.

Minh couldn't see the blood on the red walls, but heard it spatter. She turned and ran. Basim was beside her. When they came to a fork in the maze, she went left while Basim chose right. For a moment she wanted to turn around, but only felt a smidge of safety if she focused on what was in front of her.

The further she ran, the more she longed for company. Each turn risked finding a dead end, and she couldn't retrace her steps. Even if she kept track of her progress, she wasn't sure there was an exit. Hope drove her to pump her legs harder, but with each step her optimism dwindled. She paid attention to the walls, as it seemed like they were closing in on her.

A sharp turn opened to a chamber which momentarily assuaged her claustrophobia. The room was as large as a house, with no adornments other than a chair on the opposite end as the entrance. A figure sat on the throne. The distance reduced it to a blot, but it was not as pale as Pinhead and too large to be Basim.

Minh's arms were forced to her sides as if by invisible ropes. Her feet left the ground, and she floated toward the throne. The Djinn's features came into focus as she approached. She wanted to avert her gaze but couldn't turn her head or close her eyes.

When she was close the Djinn reached out and tapped a clawed finger against her shoulder. "He'll be here soon," he said.

Rapid footsteps echoed through the throne room. Basim rushed inside. Minh saw him on the edge of her peripheral vision.

"Oh my God," said Basim, "put," he slapped his hands over his mouth.

The Djinn glared at him. "Finish that thought, Basim."

Basim kept his hands clamped over his lips and shook his head.

The Djinn raked his finger under Minh's collarbone. She felt her skin tear under the claw that felt like a knife. When she screamed her voice sounded amplified. She wasn't sure if it was the echo, adrenaline, or supernatural intervention.

"Wish for me to release her," the Djinn demanded. "Wish for me to heal her, before I go too far."

He moved his claw up and cut her lower neck. She felt wetness dribble down her ribs, but she could still breathe. The cut hadn't been too deep, and the Djinn had avoided her artery. Basim continued to shake his head.

"I applaud you," said the Djinn. "You're sterner than most people. More cautious. The finesse you used to get the most out of your wishes was quite clever." He positioned his claw higher on her neck, directly over her jugular. "I don't like to admit this, but my power is not absolute. I can animate a corpse, I have some control over souls, but restoring a severed soul to a body is, let's just say, complicated." He applied slight pressure to Minh's neck. "I cannot fully raise the dead, even with the power of a wish. If I kill her, no trickery, no wordplay, no amount of cunning on your part will be able to restore her."

Basim lowered his hands. His jaw moved but no words came out. He wasn't sure if he could believe the Djinn, who'd shown unbound power since they'd met. Then again, if there were one irreversible consequence in the universe, Basim supposed it would be death. The Djinn sank his claw a fraction of a centimeter deeper into Minh's flesh.

Suddenly the Djinn howled. His hand moved and Minh fell in a heap at his feet. She scooted away. The Djinn clutched his hand, looked toward her but not at her; his gaze was on something further away.

Minh knew what she would see but turned her head anyway. As she predicted, Pinhead was behind her, with not so much as a scar from the hammer attack.

"You never learn," the Djinn shouted as he pulled something out of his hand.

"I adapt," said Pinhead. Chains emerged from the throne. Instead of metal, they were red and polished, just like the material that comprised the walls.

The Djinn's eyes widened as he looked at the chains. He froze either in confusion or fear, and then the chains impaled his torso.

"I've found myself in a new world before," said Pinhead. He moved his hand, and the chains jostled in response. "I allowed it to change me. That's how I became what I am today."

The chains sank to the floor, pulled the Djinn to its knees, and held him still.

Pinhead turned to a wall. He spread his hands wide and breathed deeply. Indentations appeared in the wall, rectangular depressions that resembled bricks. The bricks pivoted, began to move apart just like when Scott was taken from the hospital.

"Open," said Pinhead, more of a beg than a command.

Pinhead's attention was on the wall while the Djinn struggled to escape from the chains. Basim rushed out of the room, and Minh followed. Once again, they tried to traverse the new world side-by-side.

"You said that thing is a Djinn?" Minh panted.

"Yeah, but it's not like the stories I'm used to," Basim said as they came to a T-intersection. This time they went the same way. "It uses wishes to kill people or come up with something worse than death."

Basim slowed down. Minh wanted to motivate him to keep running, but her lungs were burning. They both took a moment to stand still with their hands on their knees.

"Why don't you turn the tables on it?" Minh challenged between breaths. "Wish for it to shoot itself, or fly into the sun, or for an anvil to fall on its head."

"I probably should've," Basim said lamentedly. "But it's too late now. I've already used two wishes. I didn't mean to. The Djinn twisted my words. Also, I'm not sure wishing for its death would do anything. It said it's eternal. Considering the punishment that other monster doled out, I believe it."

"What does it matter if you made two wishes?"

"The Djinn told me there's a prophecy. Once its master makes three wishes, a gate, or portal, something, will open. Right now, that Djinn is the only one here. Once I make a third wish, the rest of his kind will come to Earth."

"Even if you make your wish here?" Minh gestured to the walls. "We're not on Earth right now."

Basim shook his head. "I'm pretty sure we are, technically. The Djinn didn't come from a bottle. It was inside a stone, like a big ruby."

"That thing that came out of your pocket?"

"Yeah, that." Basim tapped his foot. "I'm not sure how it worked, but it looks like the Djinn brought us all inside the stone. The stone is on Earth. If I make a wish, it counts." He gestured in the direction they'd come. "What's the story behind your demon?"

"They're also from another world."

"They?"

"There were four." She pantomimed solving the Lament Configuration. "They came after a friend and I solved a puzzle box."

"So, what are they? Another kind of Djinn?"

"I don't know. My boyfriend, Scott, he knew more about them. Scott's dad studied them. Some cult worships them."

Basim scratched his chin. "If we get out of here, could you find one of the cultists, would they know how to stop or control these things?"

"I don't know," Minh sighed. "Can we even get out of here?"

"Let's try." Basim took off running again. Minh followed close behind. They found the throne room again.

"It's like all paths lead to that same room," Minh whined. "We'll never get out." They turned around to try another route.

The Djinn flew over their heads and rolled in front of them. He stumbled up. Minh and Basim realized they were between him and Pinhead. They slid sideways. The Djinn grunted and waved his arm. The two were pulled across the room as if a wall was magnetic and their bodies metal. Once they were stuck, the Djinn and Pinhead focused on each other again. To them, Minh and Scott were mosquitoes buzzing near their ears.

More chains erupted from the walls. The Djinn leapt to avoid them. The red links moved like snakes to pursue him. The Djinn grabbed one while airborne and swung on it. He landed firmly and sank his

clawed hand into Pinhead's neck. With a thrust he threw Pinhead across the floor with half his throat missing. Pinhead's wound stitched together as he stood up.

Minh looked at Basim. He looked back at her. Both were at a loss. They were stuck, could only watch as the titans unleashed their powers on one another, and whoever won, both she and Basim would lose.

A section of the wall between them jostled. Indentations appeared in it like bricks. The blocks separated and the wall opened. Minh's lips quivered. She expected to hear the Chatterer's teeth any moment.

"Yes," Pinhead shouted. "You found me, come Engineer!"

Minh shrieked as a creature she hadn't seen before swung into the room. Its head was broad and its teeth sharp. It was suspended above the ground, but it didn't have legs and didn't appear to be levitating. Its arms clung to the sides of the entryway and its back arched upward where its lower body clung to the ceiling and held it aloft like a spider dangling from a strand of silk.

The Djinn bellowed again. A wall shattered. The shards burst into flames and soared at the newcomer. The Engineer stared blankly at the blazing projectiles. They struck its skin, and then fell. The beast was neither burned nor cut.

"You are a match for me," said Pinhead. His arms were folded. He didn't seem interested in the fight anymore. "But I am not the eldest dweller in Labyrinth. There are some who came long before me, have been molded more completely than myself. I cannot open a door between our worlds, but he can."

The Engineer dropped to the floor. Its back still curved upward and it crawled toward the Djinn like a scorpion.

Undaunted, the Djinn flexed his clawed hand and leapt at the Engineer. His hand arced down as his body descended, intent on stabbing the creature in the eyes.

The Engineer curved its back and pivoted its head. Its spikey teeth sank into the Djinn's arm. The Djinn wailed as the Engineer thrashed its head back and forth, then adjusted its position and bit into the Djinn's torso. It scurried back to the doorway, extended its tail to reconnect its body to the ceiling. The Djinn's cries grew softer as he was carried away.

Pinhead casually approached the door. "I have been to your home. You brought me to his." Minh and Scott disconnected from the wall. Pinhead caught them by the neck as they fell. "Now, we shall all go to mine."

CHAPTER 11

Into the Labrinth

Instead of neon red, the new world was dark and cloudy. Basim's ankles grated against the floor that was rough instead of smooth like in the Djinn's stone. He tried to use his feet to push himself up and ease some of the pressure Pinhead applied to his neck, but the demon's strides were too long, and Basim was too tired. He took short gasps and coughed as lightning streaked across the sky. The bolt was close, but the thunder was delayed, and when it came, it reverberated longer than what Basim was accustomed to. Even the way the lightning moved was unnatural, more of a slither through the clouds than a flash.

He was about to pass out from lack of air when Pinhead released his grip. Basim tumbled onto the cold ground and Minh sprawled nearby. He picked his head off the ground and saw Pinhead glowering down at him. He scrambled in the opposite direction, but the Engineer was behind him with the Djinn still secured between its teeth. He looked left and right, but there was nowhere to go. They were on a narrow walkway. The grim lighting and a layer of fog made it impossible to see how high up they were. As far as Basim could see were gaps and more stone planks. The whole world seemed to be a gargantuan maze.

The Djinn cried out as the Engineer tightened its hold and blood oozed through its teeth. Its arched back bent forward further and it impaled the Djinn with its sharp tail. The stinger shifted and the Djinn's skin was lopped off as its body raked across the monster's mouth. The Engineer tossed the Djinn aside and picked the shreds out of its teeth. The Djinn hissed and pounded his fists on the ground, but his wounds stitched back together quickly. The Engineer's eyes widened as it watched the healing process.

The Djinn rose, a look of pure defiance on his face. A pillar erupted up from the floor behind him. Before the Djinn could turn around chains whipped from behind the pillar and bound him to it. The Engineer scurried around the pillar and looked at the Djinn eagerly.

"An endless supply of flesh," said Pinhead. "You will be a truly bountiful gift." He looked at Basim. "Thank you for bringing this entity. As a reward, I will forego the pleasantries and provide you with an introduction posthaste."

A box emerged to Basim's left. It hovered above their walkway, and the front dropped like a plank. The Female was inside. With her was a man, naked except for a sheet that covered his entire face. The Female dragged a three-pronged, broad bladed cultivator over the man's chest. The middle point tore a gash down his sternum while the other two sliced off both his nipples. The Female hung the torture device on a wall and stepped out of the box. The door rose back into position and the chamber descended out of sight.

Two more boxes ascended. Butterball was inside one, crushing a man in a bear hug. The Chatterer was in another, nibbling on a woman's toe. They both left their quarters and joined the others on the walkway.

"No more running," Pinhead said to Minh. "No more struggles. You are here now, with us. You will be given the same treatment as Scott."

Pinhead's lackeys held Minh above their heads. The Chatterer and the Female clasped her hands, and Butterball held her legs. Pinhead led them down the walkway.

An appendage lurched over the ledge and wrapped around Basim's ankle. He clunked his head on the stone surface as he fell. Minh's muffled screams gave him the willpower to stay conscious. He rolled onto his back and kicked at the sinewy restraint. Another tentacle slumped over the other side of the narrow pathway and flopped across his chest. He bucked his upper and lower body but the only free motion he had was moving his head. He wanted to look away as Pinhead approached, but such cowardice would be disrespectful to Minh. He swallowed his fear and looked up into the monster's black eyes.

Pinhead grinned as he looked down at Basim. "This is but a taste of our God's power."

“Let go of Minh right now.” Basim tried to shout but with the tentacles smothering him he was only able to wheeze. “Or I’ll make you.”

The demon toyed with a pin in his upper lip as if he were twirling a moustache. “Leviathan enjoys struggle. You may be deemed worthy yet. Worthy of transformation, transcendence.”

Basim redoubled his thrashing. “I said let her go!” He looked at the pillar. The Djinn was having just as much trouble breaking away. In addition to the chains that constricted his limbs, ten spear tips jutted from his torso in an upside-down pentagram pattern. Blood flowed across the Djinn’s flesh in narrow streams. The red trails connected the spear tips until they reached the blade near the Djinn’s waste, where it spurting onto the ground. The Djinn’s head lolled to the side, jerked upright, then went lax again. Basim wondered if the pattern had some effect on the Djinn’s magic.

“Your mystic friend cannot help you here,” said Pinhead. “His magics are mere trickery in this world.”

Basim stopped fighting. He looked at Pinhead quizzically. “This world?”

Pinhead lifted his chin and looked past Basim toward something in the distance. “Everything here was created by our God, Leviathan; grace incarnate, sourced by a fallen angel.” Pinhead returned his gaze to Basim. “This Labrinth is what you humans have referred to all this time, as Hell.”

“Hell?” Connections were made in Basim’s mind, an idea formed that made him lightheaded.

Pinhead was still on his high horse. “All will be clear soon, when you experience suffering beyond your understanding.”

“Hell,” Basim repeated. “Not Earth, Hell.”

Pinhead turned to Minh. “Enjoy your eternity here. That is, if Leviathan deems you worthy of our level of experiences, instead of rendering you to nothingness.” He strode back to Minh and the other demons.

The corners of Basim’s mouth curled towards his ears. The fleshy mass still pressed on his chest, but he managed a chuckle. He became accustomed to the weight and his laughter built.

Pinhead spun around and towered over Basim again. “What’s so amusing?”

Basim laughed a while longer. The weight on his chest increased until he coughed. The pressure eased, but he still smiled. “Oh, I’m the one to fulfill the prophecy, all right.” He looked at the Djinn. “I’m ready to make my third wish.”

The Djinn tensed. Despite the impalement, it looked at Basim hopefully.

“I wish to see Scott.”

“WHAT?” The Djinn shouted. He beat against his chains.

“Me and Minh,” Basim clarified. “Take us to see Scott.”

“Damn it, Basim,” the Djinn wailed, “think! I can get you out of here, erase your memories of this place.”

Basim puffed his chest as much as he could with the mass on top of him. “That’s my wish. Grant it. I’m your master.”

“I won’t.”

The Djinn had been coaxing him since they’d met, begging Basim to make his wish, but only when they were on Earth or in the stone. The Djinn had not begged since they’d entered the Labrinth. His refusal fueled hope within Basim, and he pushed what he prayed was his advantage. “Do it!”

The Djinn’s face contorted. A long grunt escaped through clenched teeth. His muscles tensed and then he roared in defeat.

The floor beneath Basim disappeared. He lost his sense of direction but felt blood rush to his head. His back collided with something hard, and he rolled. He tried to look around, but his eyes needed to adjust as if the lighting had abruptly changed.

“Minh?”

The voice was unfamiliar to Basim. He rubbed his eyes and blinked. His vision slowly returned but there wasn’t anything new to see. He was still on the cold floor, surrounded by high stone walls.

“Minh!”

A filthy teen ran to Minh. At least, he tried to run to her. He barely advanced one step. His back was linked to a wall by dozens of fishhooks. His skin stretched more than normal, and he sweated from the effort. Minh’s eyes had apparently adjusted because she covered the distance to him. She put her arms around his shoulders, then carefully around his neck to embrace him.

Basim wasn’t concerned with the man in the room, or the assortment of torture devices that hung from the wall. His eyes found the Djinn, who, miraculously, looked anxious. The Djinn’s eyes were trained skyward, his mouth hung open, and he sweated as much as the captive man.

Basim hoped the Djinn was sweating out of fear. Making his third wish had been a desperate measure, but he’d been desperate since he saw his boyfriend turn into a fish. He was proud of how long he’d been able to restrain himself and was confident that he’d waited for the opportune moment. Pinhead had said they were in Hell. The Djinn said that a portal would open when three wishes were granted by the one who freed him. If Basim understood the situation correctly...

A red ring appeared in the sky. It was approximately the size of a quarter but shone brightly as the sun and could have been positioned at a similar distance. Its circumference expanded and Basim felt heat radiating from it in the otherwise cold world. Specks appeared inside it. They accumulated until the ring turned black. The specks became larger as they plummeted. They were creatures, each with a pair of horns. The markings on their skin varied but they all had the same green/grey tone. Basim rested on his knees, leaned back on his palms as he gazed at the sky. Behind him the Djinn cursed. Basim dropped his jaw and laughed.

Over his laughter he heard distant thuds as thousands of the creatures cracked the stone as they landed. One of them crashed into the room. The new Djinn grabbed the Djinn that had tormented Basim. “What have you done? This isn’t Earth!”

Another tentacle stretched over the wall of the enclosure. It wrapped around the new Djinn and pulled it away. A red tendril surged from the captured Djinn’s mouth and the tentacle retreated at its touch. The new Djinn floated in the air, and then flew out of sight.

Thunder roared all around, or perhaps they were explosions. Basim assumed it was thunder because the sky was roiling. Clouds sounded like crashing waves as they tumbled and distant flashes of red and white light cast shadows across the expanse. Outside the room the world was a mix of monstrous screams and chilling rumbling. Next to Basim, Minh and Scott cried in terror. Basim continued to laugh. Whatever the consequences, the pandemonium all around proved he'd made the correct decision. He'd outsmarted his demon, opened the portal in a place far worse than Earth, and whatever they were going through was clearly painful.

Pinhead appeared before Basim and grabbed him by the throat. "What calamity have you brought upon us?"

A shockwave rattled the room, and the walls were torn off. Pinhead glanced skyward, and then released Basim. In the distance, an octagonal block hovered above the maze. Light emitted from the block's sides, illuminating a swarm of black dots that surrounded it. Narrow beams of all colors sprang from the specks and caused sparks to dance across the obelisk.

Pinhead fell to his knees. "They're fighting. Leviathan is the God of Flesh, bringer of order, the most powerful entity in this realm." He turned toward Basim. "Why do they fight?"

"It's just the way they are," Basim said before he began laughing again. He tilted his head back and looked at Minh. "We won!"

White light filled his vision, and he threw his arms over his eyes. His bones vibrated and he felt his blood slosh in delayed time. Despite the discomfort and pain of the sensation, he still couldn't help laughing. He continued his chuckling as the thunder faded, the air became warmer, and the light dimmed. He didn't know how long he'd sat still, shaking with laughter, with his eyes closed and his hands over his lids. When he realized how quiet his surroundings had become, he lowered his hands and opened his eyes.

He was in an empty room. The walls were brick, not the cold stone from the Labyrinth. Light shown through a window, natural and radiant instead of the white, overbearing light that came from the floating block. He stood on shaky legs and approached the window, desperate to feel the warm light on his face. He paused when he noticed a pattern of light along a wall. At first, he thought a flaw in the glass had formed a rainbow, but the pattern changed, took on a distinguishable form, the form of a woman.

Minh's outline was superimposed on the wall. She was in front of him but not really there, and he couldn't decide if he should call out to her. She was sitting cross-legged, suspended in the air from his perspective. In front of her was a puzzle box which she stared at, then she tentatively reached for it. When she picked it up, she looked around. Their eyes met. Her lips moved, but he couldn't hear what she said. Then her figure vanished.

Epilogue

The War

Damn his master. Damn all humans. They had no power, not an ounce of magic was contained in their bodies. It was oxymoronic for them to be so tricky. Every time he's been summoned to Earth his master had negated the prophecy. This was worse than any of those times. He'd failed his kind. The portal had finally opened, but it didn't matter. The Djinn didn't know where they were, but it wasn't Earth. They also weren't in the stone. If they were in his bejeweled prison, there would have been a way to escape and launch the assault on all humans as they'd intended to do for eons. The Djinn had no idea how to escape the realm his species now populated.

He couldn't solve the location problem, but he could help his comrades. There was a form of magic in this world. It was different than the kind he could use but he could sense it in his bones. It was omnipresent, suffocating, and the source was clear. All the magic emanated from an octagon that floated above the maze. Though he was unfamiliar with the type of magic before him, every fiber of his being screamed competition. The hovering structure was not human, but it was their adversary.

Many of his brethren felt the same way and were already attacking the block. He leaped to their aid. Basim had not fulfilled the prophecy the way the Djinn intended, but he'd made three wishes. That meant the Djinn had no master and could use his powers freely. If he did not want to be bound by the laws of gravity, then he could move in any direction he pleased, including directly upward. Perhaps he could still make up for his failure. If he could discover where this realm was in relation to Earth, it might be possible to traverse the boundaries and go there.

But first he needed to defeat the enemy before him.

He flew to the octagon and gathered charged particles in the air near his fingertips. He infused the electrons with magic components in his body and blasted a red lightning bolt at the obelisk. Sparks burst from its exterior, but the outer shell didn't break. The Djinn didn't see any cracks in the block, but light shone from several spots. As the beams touched the other Djinn, they plummeted to the ground.

The Djinn tried to avoid the beams as he prepared another attack, but some of the light touched his arm. He felt constricted, as if a massive invisible hand clutched his whole body and pulled him downward. He crashed onto a stone walkway on his stomach. His fellow warriors surrounded him, all struggling to rise, all incapable of overcoming the pressure placed upon them by the mysterious object.

The Djinn's body was useless, but he hoped some of his powers still worked. In his mind he called out for the stone. He couldn't turn his head, but felt it appear in his hand.

"I call on that which is owed," he shouted as he gripped the ruby. The gem glowed as those he'd granted wishes for before visiting Basim were summoned to it. Their bodies were still on Earth but no distance, physical or metaphysical, was a hinderance to a human soul.

The power of the souls supercharged the Djinn's physical, mental, and spiritual strength. With shaking limbs, he overpowered the crushing force that held him still. The obelisk seemed to be aware of his efforts, and the pressure increased tenfold. For a moment the Djinn was almost overcome, but the power of souls rivaled the entity before him, and he pressed onward. He lifted the ruby towards the obelisk and directed its energy outward rather than into his own body.

Red light, straight as a laser, shone from the center of the ruby. It was not enough to degrade the octagon but pushed it back. The pressure on the Djinn lessened, and those around him rose to their feet.

“Everyone,” the Djinn shouted, “inside the stone, hurry!”

Those within earshot looked confused, but one by one they each vanished. They were no longer around him, but he felt the stone become heavier. Space was fluid in the stone. It was as large as it needed to be to accommodate those within it. Everyone who had come through the portal could fit inside.

But there wasn't enough time to collect everyone. He felt the stone's energy ebb. The power of souls was great, but not everlasting. He would not be able to keep their adversary at bay much longer. He clenched the stone tightly and warped space, essentially teleporting away from the obelisk, covering hundreds of miles in less than a second.

He restored space under the cover of a high stone wall. He hoped that the thing in the sky would not be able to detect his presence. No light enveloped him, and no pressure held him still. However, he was unable to relax. He had escaped the clutches of his enemy, but those in his hand shouted from within the stone. Questions assaulted him like a swarm of gnats. He could use his powers to release them all from the stone but decided to wait until he had them under control.

“Silence,” he commanded as he brought the stone close to his mouth. The rambling ceased. He took a moment to collect his thoughts. “I realize this is not what you expected. It seems there are realms other than ours and Earth.

The chatter rose again. His kind were not quick to accept apologies.

“Quiet, let me finish!” He waited for the din to die down. “For millennia you have trusted me to be your harbinger. I still aim to fulfill that responsibility. For now, in addition to being your guide, I will also be your protector. I don't know what that thing in the sky is, but does anyone feel its presence right now?”

There was no response from within the stone.

“I thought not. A human alchemist created this stone as a prison, but here it functions as a shelter. There are shields that prevent our magic from being used outside the stone. It seems those same walls block magic from getting inside as well. You're safe in there, protected from all influences of this realm.”

Courage built up within him. He kicked off the ground and slowly rose to the lip of the wall. “I will find a way for us to get to Earth. The planet will be ours; I swear it. Until that day comes, we will contend with the new forces that surround us. I don't know where we are, I don't know what enemies we face, but we can overcome them. This stone will give us the advantage we need.” He reached the top of the wall and stood on its edge, faced the obelisk that now hovered in the distance. “It will give us the strength,” he lifted the ruby above his head, “to declare war!”

Bonus Chapter

The New Job

Basim opened his eyes to silence. He hadn't set his alarm clock. Most nights were spent forcing his eyes to stay open out of fear that the spider-like monster would crawl through the wall and take him, or the red stone would drop at the foot of his bed. Sleep was only possible when exhaustion shut his body down. Since he didn't want the fleeting moments of rest to be interrupted, he opted to sleep late into the morning. Alcohol also helped, but he'd been trying to reduce his consumption. A half-full tumbler of whiskey rested on his bedstand. He stared at it and let a spark of pride at not drinking the entire glass warm him; it was particularly comforting since the sheets were too bundled to be effective.

By the time he rolled out of bed and showered it was nearly 9am. There was no reason to be stressed. The only work to do was wait for responses to some emails. Basim's appetite still hadn't returned, so instead of a solid breakfast he poured a glass of orange juice and sat in front of his computer. When the spam emails were deleted only a few job offers remained. The page was set up to reveal the sender and a preview of the message. Basim didn't instantly delete any emails from prospective employers, but the beginnings of their messages weren't promising. As he scrolled down an email caught his eye. The sender's username contained the letter M. There was no subject, but the preview said *why us and not Scott?*

The cursor hovered over the message. Any new revelations about where he'd been and what he'd seen had a chance to restart his drinking problem. He performed breathing exercises that he'd learned about online as he tried to build up the courage to click.

He jumped and nearly fell out of his seat when his phone chimed. He didn't recognize the number but answered anyway. Even a telemarketer would be welcome. He had to clear his throat before he was able to croak "hello?"

"I was afraid this would be you." The connection was poor, and her voice broke up, but it was Minh.

"How did you get my number?"

There was a woosh of a sigh on the other end of the line. "Now that we have a moment to breathe I can tell you the whole story."

"I don't want to hear the whole story. I want to forget."

"I don't think we can. Listen, I went into the Labyrinth to save Scott, but Scott did it to save Lucius, his father."

After a brief silence Basim took the bait. "Why did Lucius do it?"

"I don't know, but he didn't go in blind. I went to Scott's apartment. It's still vacant. I guess the investigation is on hold."

"Investigation?"

"Sorry. This started when Scott was arrested for murder. He said he didn't do it, that it was the Cenobytes, but the cops didn't take him seriously. That's what the monsters are called, by the way, Cenobytes."

“How do you know?” As soon as he said it he realized how afraid he was to ask.

“Because I found Lucius’ room, his research. He was trying to summon the Cenobytes, and he’s not the only one. Most people do it because they believe the Cenobytes can offer them something, usually pleasure beyond anything in this world.”

“What does that mean?”

“Not sure. I’m still looking through Lucius’ notes. It’s also possible the police took a few pages, maybe to build a psychological profile while they were working on the case. But there’s information on some of the things we saw in the Labyrinth. That floating octahedron, with all the lights coming out of it, that’s Leviathan.”

“That Pinheaded guy used the word Leviathan.

“Pinhead really is his name. Lucius’ notes refer to him that way a bunch of times. But Pinhead isn’t a leader, at least he’s not the head honcho. Think of Pinhead as a priest. Leviathan is his God.”

The thought of anything in the Labyrinth being considered a God made Basim’s stomach churn. He moved the phone down, but it was still near his ear, and gripped his gut as Minh continued.

“The story of Leviathan is extensive, and Lucius probably doesn’t have everything. But in his notes it mentions Leviathan craves order. I think that’s why we were released.”

Basim repositioned the phone. “Sorry. I don’t follow.”

“Or-der,” Minh stressed, “control. The Cenobytes worship it, obey it. But you brought a new species into its world, one that lashes out and tries to take control. When you made your third wish, you didn’t just outsmart an ancient superior race. You made a God panic.”

Basim felt like his stomach had exited his body, phased through his chair, and settled on the floor. “If that’s supposed to make me proud, it’s not working.”

“I don’t care how you feel. I think we have an advantage. Leviathan didn’t know what to do when the Djinn attacked. Like a child, it cut out its pain at the source. It expelled you because you were the one that brought the menace to the Labyrinth. It purged me because I was with you. That’s its weakness. If we go back and cause more chaos...”

Basim’s mouth became dry. “Go back?”

“Scott is still in there,” Minh said.

He couldn’t tell if she was sorry for bringing up the idea or angry at him for questioning it. “I’m not going back.”

“Just listen. If we return, find Scott, and do something unexpected, it’ll send a message. Leviathan will know that we’ll keep coming back and scaring it until Scott is released.”

“But we won’t keep going back. How are we even supposed to get there?”

Minh sighed deeply and when she spoke again her tone was clearly apologetic. “We’re drawn to the Labyrinth, the same way we’re drawn to each other. That’s how I knew your email and phone number.”

“I don’t know anything about you. How did it happen? Did you just wake up with all my info in your mind?”

“No. It started after I touched the box.”

“The box?”

“The summoning method. The Cenobyte equivalent of the Djinn’s stone. The thing that me and Scott accidentally used to bring the Cenobytes to Earth. I found it again.”

“Minh,” he didn’t know what else to say.

“The Engineer was in Lucius’ notes, too. It’s the name for that spider thing. Part of its purpose is bringing the box into this world, passing it onto a new owner. It placed the box in my possession.”

“Get rid of it! Or at least don’t drag me into this again!”

“We have to go back.”

“No, we don’t. I’m never going back ever again.”

“This isn’t Scott’s fault. He doesn’t deserve to be there.”

Basim covered his mouth, making sure he couldn’t speak until he thought through what to say. He didn’t know Scott, but Minh was convinced he was innocent. Then again, he’d seen what one Djinn was capable of and in some ways the Cenobytes seemed worse. “I see how much Scott means to you, and I’m sorry for what he’s going through. But I can’t help him.”

Minh said something else, but he’d moved the phone away from his head. He hung up while she was in mid-chatter.

Guilt weighed on Basim’s mind after the phone call, and throughout the following months. Occasionally he tried to call her back, but she never picked up. He was able to piece together her full name from her email address and look her up. To his horror, she was missing.

He found a new job and tried to go through the motions. It helped being behind a camera. He observed the world through a lens rather than acting, being involved in events, or taking responsibility for the outcomes. It was a false sense of security. He interacted with people daily, tried to act like everything was fine, but Scott and Minh’s fate always lingered in the back of his mind.

The lingering thoughts permeated his conscience and gradually led him to retreat into solidarity. The job was done, he got all the footage he needed, but he didn’t keep in touch with anyone he worked with or look for more work afterward. He sat alone in his apartment replaying the phone call, wondering if he could have made sure Minh didn’t try to go after Scott. Could anyone truly be so determined to save someone that they’d return to Hell?

It was late and he needed to try to push the thoughts out of his head to get some rest. He went to the bathroom to brush his teeth. He spread the toothpaste on the bristles, looked up, and dropped his toothbrush.

The mirror above the sink didn't reflect the walls of his bathroom. In the glass was Hell as he remembered, filled with fog and a maze of walkways and corridors. The face that looked back at him was not his own, but Minh's, and she was nothing like he remembered. She was paler, bald, and several black teeth showed as she grinned wickedly. Two daggers impaled her skull, and the handles jutted out from behind her ears. "I returned," she hissed through the mirror. To Basim it sounded like she was whispering in his ear.

He stumbled out of the bathroom, shook his head as he rubbed his temples. He told himself that the stress was getting to him, making him see things, that if he went back into the bathroom everything, including the mirror, would be normal. He said it to himself many times but couldn't summon the courage to prove himself right.

"We started a war."

He felt Minh's lips move against his jaw as he registered the words and swung his hand. Nobody was next to him. He felt alone, watched, violated.

He needed to get outside, into the public. Even being surrounded by strangers sounded like a welcoming proposition. He didn't put on his shoes or lock the door when he left. He called the elevator but to his dismay found it vacant. He took the stairs in hopes of passing someone as he descended. The stairwell was as empty as the elevator and the whispers continued.

"The Djinn have been revolting against Leviathan since we were expunged. The Labyrinth is a completely different place now."

Basim slipped and clutched the railing to save himself from tumbling down half a flight of steps.

"I didn't find Scott in time. Perhaps I could have if I had help."

Basim tried to continue but couldn't regain his balance. He scooted down the steps rather than ran down them.

"Scott and I changed in different ways. Now we fight for opposite sides."

He made it to the door. He pressed the bar, but the latch didn't budge. He leaned against the door with all his weight, but it stubbornly remained closed.

"My side has a disadvantage in numbers. Too many of us are damaged, including the Engineer. But there is hope. You and I are connected. We can contact one another, quite easily in fact."

Basim's hands were pulled away from the door. He faced a wall with his arms extended. Light from a streetlamp bled through a grimy window, and he noticed his shadow. It was too short to be his, the head too smooth. What really set it apart were the outlines of blade handles near the crown.

Upstairs it had been his body but Minh's reflection.

Here it was his body, but Minh's shadow.

The hands of Minh's silhouette closed. Though the shadow was on the ground, and his hands were in front of him, he still felt cold fingers clamp around his wrist. He was pulled toward the wall. With each step, the shadow broadened.

“You are now our recruiter.”

His fingers grazed the wall. The bricks contained in the shadow jostled and spread apart. A Minh-shaped hole appeared, and she leaned out, almost passing through the opening. Basim was no longer touching the wall but clasping her hands. She dropped a heavy weight into his palms.

“Bring us more,” Minh demanded.

Basim was forced forward. His hands passed into the hole and a cold snap chilled them to the bone.

“If you don’t I will come for you.”

She clicked her jaw. Basim was thrown back. He sat on the floor as the wall closed and Minh disappeared. In front of his feet was a box adorned with intricate designs, the same one he’d seen Minh looking at when he’d been forcibly removed from Hell.