

# Chapter 1: The Monster

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## I

A quiet night, a lonely wooden house, a dim yellow glow escaping its windows. Inside there be a newlywed couple, sitting on the chair she was sewing a little woolen glove, fit for a tiny hand. He was sitting on the bed, removing his shirt, lighting his pipe as he looked over his shoulder to the fireplace, yet in front was a wooden crib. He stood up and took three light steps towards the wooden crib, peered in, a bright smile dawned his face.

He called quietly: "Elizabeth, come look."

A warm smile was brought to her face as well, she gracefully took four steps towards the wooden crib and replied calmly:

"She's beautiful isn't she? You know Hector, we've still to pick a name for her..." He turned and wrapped his arm around his lass, as they were both peering into the crib, gazing upon a baby girl.

He answered: "What if we call her M? " he was interrupted by the shattering of wood behind his back, the wooden door shattered upon the floor as the cold wind pushed itself inside, blowing out the candle.

No longer the small wooden house emits a warm yellow glow. A figure stands before the newlywed couple, the child cries, and the mysterious figure steps into the wooden house, the man and woman lose their breath, they cannot scream as they gaze upon the fur covered monster before them. The sharp claws, the blue hate filled eyes, the bloody teeth.

He pushed her away from the crib as the child cried, the monster lunged, pushing the man and shattering the crib, yet the cries persist, the monster with one swift bite to the neck rips out his throat. The blood gushes out as the monster's claws tear into the man's chest, pulling it apart uncovering the organs inside, the beast does not stop there. It bashes against the dead man spattering him upon the wooden floor, spraying his wife with his own blood until the monster stops, the cry persists.

There she stands, shaking, looking at the defiled corpse as the monster raises slowly, howling as its eyes meet with the woman. Another howl heard across the land, the monster lunges at the woman beating her down, breaking the table she stood in front of. She desperately battles with the monster, managing to get a good punch to its throat, yet no use. The monster digs into her shoulder with the sharp claws and tears her open, the sharp teeth dig into her warm flesh. The beast relishes in the screams tearing and ripping mercilessly, the cry still there. The monster after finishing with the woman searches for the source of that cry.

It struggles, moving the wooden crib the monster stops, a little baby, crying, then it does something even the wisest were not expecting. The monster picks up the child and holds, not ripping it apart just yet. The baby stops crying as the beast holds her, the tiny hands move up to the beast's snout, stroking it lightly, the beast holds for a moment and then raises the claw, hastily moving it

downwards to strike the child in his hand, however the child falls to the ground and starts crying again.

A bright white light fills the room and slams the beast to the ground, spreading the arms and legs, binding them with bright white chains, a hum coming from them, a grey-robed figure enters the room, his right hand extended towards the beast on the floor, bound by holy chains. The grey-robed man kneels down and picks up the still crying child and places it on the bed. He sits down as well and calmly retrieves a small book from his pouch with a small pencil. He begins to write quickly and leaves the journal on the bed, he raises again, not minding the child and kneels, placing his right hand upon the forehead of the beast and chants, nothing seems to happen, however.

The grey-robed figure rises and takes a good look at the child, before taking his leave, the child still cries as the bonds around the beast shatter. The beast looks around and rises. It seems calm, at peace almost, it raises and stumbles to the bed, gazing upon the floor and trembling at the sight. It carefully picks up the journal and reads. Then looks at the child, standing and looking, thinking.

The beast gently picks up the little baby girl and peers into her eyes and sighs, the beast turns now, walking on two legs out into the world with the child in its arms, the child does not cry anymore. A snarl echos through the lands in a deep voice "You are... my Hope..."

In the warm and gentle night.  
He came as a gruesome sight.  
He ripped and tore.  
Yet love, he could not restore.

From all the blood and gore.  
He found something more.  
In his arms, giggling at the fur.  
She thought of him no cur.

This burden he could hardly cope.  
The child did not bring him down.  
The child raised his frown.  
His very own last, little Hope.

## II

A peaceful greenland, the grass is growing green, the sun shining through the delicate white clouds, while they so carelessly drift through the vast blue sky. A quiet greenland, secluded in its own time, in its own pace every single second feels like two, yet everything be well. Warm and soft is the grass, the leaves gentle, stroking your shoulder if you pass under a branch like a soft hand would in a time of need.

There be a little hole in this vast greenland of peace, a little black hole in the mountainside. An eerie darkness seeping out of it, giving a most uncomfortable feeling. At night the little black hole glows red and orange, the light flickers and fends off anyone who dare to approach the little hole in the mountainside, yet not all is at it seems, as is with many things upon this world.

In this little black hole in the mountainside there is a fireplace right in the center, surrounded by rocks, yet almost never lit during the day, an old pot over that fireplace. Some books in the corners of the hole, as are some clothes and wooden mugs, a somewhat broken pitcher near the wooden mugs. Two piles of hay on each side of the fireplace, one bigger than the other. Even though it is a little black hole, it be a cozy one, everything tidy and neat even if there isn't much in the little black hole.

Though the most precious thing in this little black hole is a girl, couldn't be much more than three or four years old, this little girl is wearing a ragged old blue dress. She stumbles to the entrance of the hole, placing her little hands on the cold stone and gazes over the lands, a cold breeze washes over her face, she shivers a bit. The little girl looks down, sadly, peering right through a single brown, dead leaf on the ground, letting out a sigh as she stands so.

The girl spots something approaching fast, something black, on all four. It would scare every child of her age, yet this particular girl is not frightened at all, a bright happy loving smile comes forth, awaiting patiently the black spot on the horizon. The girl looks over her shoulder, in the hole and then back to see where the black spot on the horizon is, no longer a black spot, however. The monster, the beast approaches, the little girl stands ever so patiently while the beast charges, running wildly to the girl, its blue eyes focused only on the child, coming closer and closer until it is a few meters away from the hole and the child, the beast comes to a halt, raising on both legs as it holds the bucket by its handle in its mouth.

The girl keeps standing, the warm smile shining brightly, blinding any who see it, comforting even the saddest and bringing hope even to the hopeless. She runs hastily towards the furred monster. The beast takes a few steps as it walks on two legs, straightening its back, carrying a bucket of grapes in its right claw. Hope approaches and wraps her little arms around the beasts legs, embracing the beast with love and care. The horrible monster bends down and swipes the girl off her feet, embracing her as she does the beast. The beast carries on walking, a bucket filled with grapes in one hand and little Hope in his other, it walks slowly towards the black hole, as the bucket, little Hope and the gruesome beast escape into its sanctuary.

Inside the beast places its little Hope on the smaller pile of hay, grabbing a handful of grapes and giving them to the girl. She smiles, longing for the grapes that she so rarely tastes, now she has a bucket full, yet the beast and its little Hope keep quiet. The beast walks towards some clothes in the black and shuffles through them, retrieving a journal and a small pencil, barely managing to hold

them by its claws. The girl keeps eating one grape at a time, holding them proudly in her little hands, putting them in her mouth, chewing and swallowing each one with her bright smile. Her red cheeks filled with grapes as a quite happy hamster.

The beast throws the journal upon the other hay pile as the pencil follows through the air. It walks towards those two mugs, filling one with the broken pitcher of water. Clumsy it drinks, placing the wooden mug back down on beside the pitcher. It stumbles and sits on the pile of hay, grabbing the journal, starting to write, its little Hope looks at it as the beast looks back with a smile, if a beast can smile. It looks back down to the journal and keeps writing.

Its little Hope grabs another handful of grapes and raises from her pile of hay, stumbling just as clumsy towards the beast across the hole. The girl approaches and falls into its arms, the beast places the journal and pencil to its side and peers at the girl in its arms, still keeping the creepy, wanting to smile expression on its horrible snout. Yet the girl doesn't mind it one bit, she tears a single grape away and raises her arm, putting the grape in the beast's mouth. She softly brushes against the beast, running her hands through its fur, leaning the head on its chest and humming quietly. The beast holds her back, stroking little Hope's hair with the long claw, ever so carefully, not to harm its little Hope. The beast softly takes the grapes from the girl's hands, she gives it another tight hug, looking up in its blue eyes, she speaks with a quiet little voice, matching her perfectly "I love you, father."

Everything is indeed not as it seems in this little black hole, for there are things in this world that deceive, there are things that we wish not to be true, there are things that bring us joy and there are things that bring us sorrow. What be this? Joy or sorrow? One thing is certain, it has been a long time since the beast had seen such care and acceptance as it does from its little, grape filled, red cheeked, caring, loving Hope.

### III

We live in a world that grows, everything grows, if only it is nurtured, cared and loved. The green grass, tall trees, the strongest and highest mountains grow, the little ants crawling through the dirt, the birds in their nest, twittering while waiting patiently to grow up so they can spread their wings and fly, fly far away. Everything grows, joy, sorrow, love, despair, anger, hate, everything grows, if only nurtured and well fed, cared and loved“.

The monster and its little Hope did not wander away from their little black hole in the mountainside. Content, happy with each other in their cozy little black hole. The beast, sitting down on its pile of hay, extends the horribly sharp claw towards the lit fireplace, warming it over the flame as it turns its head, the terrible blue eyes peering towards the exit of the hole, the monster tries to smile again. A warm giggle from across the hole, it be its little Hope laughing, though little Hope not so little anymore, the girl wearing a red ragged dress now, soft blond long hair fall from her head, flowing down the back, sometimes hanging over her shoulder, its little Hope must be thirteen or fourteen, a bright young lass, however still playful, so happy, too happy.

After the giggle its little Hope runs outside, her poor, somewhat bruised and tough feet running across the hole towards the exit happily, the beast merely shakes its head as she does so. Hope reaches the exit and runs out, the harsh, big raindrops falling upon her. She extends her hands towards the sky and laughs loudly, spinning around jumping in the puddles, having a grand time as the rain pours down, a bright smile upon her lips as she giggles every now and then.

The beast rises, pushing itself of the pile of hay and steps lightly over to the exit, though not stepping in the rain, merely observing the girl, listening to the rain drops as it raises one arm, opening the palm and pointing its index finger towards the sky. The beast takes a deep breath through its long snout. The finger moves gracefully through the air, waving around as if someone was conducting an entire orchestra.

The rain keeps pouring heavily, yet the beast and its little Hope seem to be enjoying it. She turns towards the monster and yells out:

“Father! I can hear it too! I can hear it!”.

She jumps in the next puddle on the floor, still laughing, then skipping towards the entrance of the black hole towards the monster as it keeps waving the finger, closing its eyes and just listening. She gets to the terrible furred creature and positions herself all wet right next to it, leaning on one of its legs gently, wrapping her arm around them, looking up to the wagging finger as she raises her own as well, doing what the beast be doing in the same manner, little Hope begins to hum a soft gentle melody as does the beast with its deep voice, humming beside its little Hope.

All care is gone from the world, both enjoying the sweet soft melody of the raindrops upon the green grass right in front of the black hole they both dwell in. The beast stops humming, stopping the sweet soft melody. It looks down at little Hope and speaks deeply, snarling:

“We practice today, get the book.”

Its little hope lights up like a spark, stopping the humming as well and nodding slowly, she ventures proudly in the hole.

The beast looks around, scanning the surroundings, watching over the wet, puddle filled lands with the utmost care and attention to detail, inspecting every corner its eyes can fall upon, suddenly it straightens its back moving the head, pointing its snout in a certain direction, it begins grinding its sharp teeth against themselves, opening the mouth and closing it again, it snaps shut, making a most terrible fear inducing noise as it does so, its little Hope emerges from the black hole and tilts her head, peering in the direction the beast be looking, squinting her eyes as she tries to spot something.

"I can't see anything.", she states disappointedly, frowning a bit. The beast merely relaxes again and nods, it replies with a snarl:

"Nothing to see, my little Hope."

Its little Hope nods and sits down beside the beast, looking up to it, she opens the book at a certain place and grabs the pencil out of it, she is prepared to write, still waiting. The beast indulges her after a few seconds:

"Two plus four times five.", it speaks. Hope writes the simple problem down and solves it quickly, showing it to the beast, it nods and snarls out yet again:

"Six minus eight divided by two."

She writes it down again, taking a few moments, yet solves it still rather quickly she states proudly:

"Father, you already taught me this, I already know this."

It replies simply with a deep snarling voice yet again:

"And yet you made a mistake, we must always practice, even if we feel like we already know, in your haste you made a mistake. You are too fast Hope." She frowns and nods.

The beast laughs out lightly, filling the air with a most sinister laugh. Meanwhile it speaks to its little Hope:

"You worry, do not beat yourself over it. We all make mistakes. Have you been praying and studying?", the monster asks. Its little Hope smiles and nods again:

"Yes, father, always. Will we practice a bit later, I want to show you what I can do.", she states brightly and loudly. The beast merely nods firmly. Hope giggles and looks into the rain, still sitting down, keeping the book opened in her lap.

"I heard the melody in the rain today. You said when I do, I'll be ready!"

She looks up to the beast, her eyes piercing its very soul. The beast hesitates for a moment thinking as its little Hope speaks out again, begging:

"Please! Please!"

The beast nods again, stating only:

"Very well, in the next few days we begin on it."

She smiles and wraps her arms around its legs again, humming happily, tightly hugging it.

So there stand, in front of the little black hole in the mountain side, the horrible beast and its little growing Hope, yet its little Hope be not the only thing that grows, for the beast itself grows. While teaching, guiding and caring for little Hope, it regains its humanity, slowly and patiently, beside little Hope. Everything in this world grows, not one thing is spared from the horrible, yet necessary and sometimes graceful, joy-bringing growth. Such is the life of the beast and its little Hope. Everything grows, sooner or a bit later, so it be from the beginning and the end of time itself.

## IV

Death, pain, agony, eternal suffering, shame, hate and anger. Love, joy, pleasure, compassion, care, happiness, life. We must ask ourselves, what is true death, true agony and what is true life, true love. It is a question that has never been answered, we can only give our thoughts, our experience upon the matter, is death when we stop drawing breath? Do we die when our heart stops its graceful dance? Do we live when it keeps dancing? Do we live when we feel the very air around us filled with the scent of joy and love? What is death? What is life? I know not for sure, yet life and death each of us must go through, as did the horrible beast and its little Hope.

A quiet night, the stars glimmering upon the cloudless sky, the bright round lady throwing her beams of quiet gentle light upon two figures in the vast greenland, far away from the little cozy black hole they call home. They stand there, the monster and its Hope, cowering behind some bushes peering over them, waiting. Hope, now stands fifteen years old, her lessons upon life and the graceful powers of the Light now be almost done. She stands in a blue ragged dress once more, yet no longer a little girl, but quite soon enough a woman true and brave, yet through her mask of strength the monster spots fear, they stand there, behind the bushes gazing towards a destroyed village.

The village be dark and gloomy, terrifying at the sight, yet Hope knows what she must do. The monster speaks calmly, yet snarling its words out:

“I have taught you everything, tonight we shall see your faith, your devotion, tonight we truly test your mastery of the very Light itself, strength through faith Hope, strength through faith and love.”

A little scared Hope nods, yet she doesn't move her eyes from the broken and destroyed village, she takes her time, observing the inn, the chapel knowing full well what dwells within the village, but she gathers herself and closes both eyes. The beast raises and starts walking away from the village, yet its little Hope stays behind the bush, all alone.

She mutters a prayer, calmly gathering herself, getting ready for the task before her. She gracefully straightens her back, raising her head proudly. She walks around the green bush, the beams of moonlight over her bright golden hair, glimmering in the night. A step towards the village, then another followed by another and another, soon enough she makes her way in the center of the village, peering down at the still water of the well. She smiles as she spots her own reflection, taking her mind off the troubling task, drifting away into her thoughts there, gazing at her reflection in the middle of the broken down village.

After a moment she hears a moan. Of pain and agony, of despair, a terrible and frightening deep moan. She closes her eyes, standing there faced towards the well, from behind the moans persist, growing ever closer. She clenches her fist and takes a deep breath, quickly and suddenly she turns around and extends her left soft arm towards a most gruesome creature, opening her palm towards it as she stares at it.

Before her stands a walking, living corpse. The rotting flesh upon its bones, what was once human, now only lives in death and pain. One leg broken, the bone peering out of the rotten flesh, no meat upon the skull, its jaw hanging loose, the arms out of their sockets, slowly it approaches Hope. Moaning loudly, closer with each small step it takes.

Hope mutters a few words quietly, nothing happens for a brief moment, utter silence fills the broken village, nothing heard not even the loud moans. Hope opens her eyes as a bright spark materializes from thin air in her very open palm. The bright white spark grows, keeping within her palm, it keeps growing and growing, until the spark no longer be a spark, but a globe of pure light, moving in her palm, flowing around it. Hope slowly exhales and closes her palm, the globe of light within her palm explodes violently, blinding the foul walking corpse as it lets loose a screech of pain, the globe of light shoots from Hope's palm towards the corpse, when making contact, it explodes once more, the globe of light shatters upon the rotting corpse, engulfing it in flames, holy flames. Burning it away, the screeches of pain persist as the corpse burns, Hope looking at it, after a few seconds the only thing left behind the corpse be ashes.

Hope takes a deep breath once more, she extends both arms in the air, standing there in the middle of the broken village. A loud moan this time from her back, another from the left and another from the right, the village be nothing short of a graveyard. The rotting walking corpses move towards gentle little Hope in the middle.

Hope exhales, slowly pointing her hands, palms open, towards the rotters. She mutters furiously, bright white globes of pure light forming from thin air in the palms, each shooting to its target, hitting, exploding left and right as the corpses keep coming. Hope stands strong and firm, sending the globes of Light towards the rotters, burning away each one with holy flames, with the very light at her fingertips, at her command. They keep burning, the smell of charred human flesh fills the air as the corpses burn away, leaving only ashes in their place.

The rotters be no match for strong Hope, she deals with each and everyone in the same manner she did with the first, everything grows quiet as the gentle night's breeze sweeps away the ashes left behind. A smile dawns Hope's face, gazing at the broken village she nods, content with her actions. She begins to hum a most gentle tune, taking small steps out of the village of ash.

She walks there, across the greenlands, alone, strong and confident, no fear in her eyes, on her way to the little cozy black hole she calls home, on her way back to the embrace of the beast she calls father, back with faith and devotion, she passed the test. A bright and warm smile on her face, knowing that it not be long now before her training in the arts of the Holy Light be done, returning to her father and home.

What is death? What is life? The simple truth be, it is what we wish it to be. We can live and be dead, we can be dead and live. We can be alone in the world, loathing in self-pity and agony, thinking about the past, thinking what we could have done, shattered dreams upon our mind, dreams we no longer dare to dream, that is death. Rather be happy, with a fellow soul, bringing joy and happiness to others as well as yourselves. Be there and grasp each day as a new, deal with the tasks in front and relish in the sweet and honorable victory, that and only that is life, everything else is only death. I tell you now in truth, there be little chance of escape from the dark and cold embrace of death.



## V

Freedom, what is freedom? We are all born free, each of us draw their first breaths free, not bound by chains, without vows or collars to keep us at bay, that keep us from living our lives the way we want to. What does it mean to truly be free? Does it mean to be unburdened by chains? Does it mean to be unburdened by parents or elders? To live a life in the wilds, away from the people that want to keep you in check? To live, like so many have never lived before. To see, what has never been seen? To be, where we have never been? To be free, to have freedom? It be a most delicate thing, that much is certain, a delicate most fragile thing that is easily taken and shattered. Taken it was, shattered under the mask of protection and care, hidden under love and fear, little Hope, no longer free.

A gentle breeze washes a young lass walking on a cobbled road, her long blond glimmering hair caressing her back and shoulders, her feet soft, yet bruised. Thin, yet seems strong as she walks ever so slowly and calmly, gazing around the lush green lands around her, a frown upon her face as she looks over her shoulder back to a most familiar little black hole in the mountainside, she be little Hope, now sixteen years, she looks back. down to the cobbled road and keeps taking heavy steps, moving on. Looking to her left she smiles briefly.

There stands the beast, the monster walking along side humming a saddened melody, yet the beast be different. It lost its fur, the sharp claws no longer upon its hands, the long snout and sharp teeth all but vanished the monster, now a man. A firm, strong man, blue eyes oily black hair upon his head, a growing beard, old and exhausted he appears, taking slow steps alongside his little Hope. Both the man and his little Hope clothed in ragged, old clothes, torn and ruined, yet they keep walking and walking, looking back to the black hole they called home for sixteen years, they be leaving, times are changing and little Hope requires more, more than an old man in a little dark hole.

Hope looks up to the old man beside her and speaks in a sad, calm yet graceful delicate voice: "Father, I am delighted to see you like this, I always saw you as a man, not the best you appeared to be."

She keeps quiet for a moment just before forming a bright, reassuring smile upon her pale lips. The man turns and replies with a calm, deep and almost intimidating voice:

"I know you did, I know...but I am a monster still, I am what I am...a beast, don't you worry. We shall be in the city soon, you will get to live your life."

He turns his head towards her as they both keep walking upon the cobbled road yet offers no bright reassuring smile. Hope shakes her head, but utters not a word more, both tired and exhausted they keep walking.

So they walk, day and day, week and another week, through wind and snow, through rain and storm, through fire and ice, through the very earth and stone if need be. Until one day it is a quiet gentle night, not a single sound to be heard in front the mighty walls of their goal, the mighty city of stone. Holding hands the old man and his little Hope walk in, gazing upon the quiet dark streets, not a single soul to be seen around.

They make it to a square and both scared look around, a man clad in iron, armored, a glittering sword strapped to his belt, his hands clasped behind his back, taking loud steps towards the old man and his little Hope. He speaks, loudly, firmly asking:

"Who be you two?"

The old man replies calmly, his voice trembles with fear almost as he lowers his head and tries to speak:

“Fa-fath...” He doesn’t manage, shamefully he stands there until a most warm squeeze of the hand can be felt, the guard before the old man and his little Hope merely lifts an eyebrow as he crosses his hands over his chest, letting out a loud sigh.

The old man clears his throat and takes a deep breath, he straightens his back looking in the iron clad man’s eyes with his own, he speaks equally firmly, stating proudly with his will, his confidence and power somehow restored:

“Father Bouchard, member of the priesthood. This be my daughter Hope, we are looking for the cathedral, point us to it.”

Exhaling slowly and loudly after he speaks, his eyes never leaving the guards. The iron clad man nods and gestures down a dirty street, inclining his head with utmost respect to the old priest and slowly walking away, minding his own business upon the streets, nodding contently.

The old priest looks down to his little Hope and shows a most pleased smile and gently squeezes her hand back, as she gave him the strength, the old priest starts taking slow confident steps towards the dirty street, his little Hope right beside him. They gaze upon a small rat, nibbling upon a piece of bread, yet they don’t seem to be that bothered by it at all, they keep walking through the streets which seem like a maze to them, but they find their way soon enough, standing speechless in front of a mighty, strong, built from finest stone cathedral, a symbol of faith, a symbol of true human will and devotion.

They look at each other and then back to the mighty cathedral, slowly then step upon the first stair leading to the entrance, then the second and the third, making their way ever closer, until at last they take a step inside, their feet soon meet a most gentle carpet made from the finest material. Both let out a sigh of relief as a bright smile appears on their faces. They take a brief look around the cathedral, empty, no clergy to be found within, it be a most lonely night, even for the cathedral itself.

The old priest starts looking around, leaving his little Hope behind at the entrance. She stands there, looking at the altar. Thinking, she takes a few small steps, walking ever so carefully towards the sacred altar, she comes to a stop just before it and gently kneels down. She clasps her hands together and closes her eyes, she mutters quietly as she can a little prayer:

“Dear light, guide my father. Protect him, make him finally feel some joy in such a long time, care for him, I know you will not abandon him, please help him...please. Your grace, forever.”

She opens her eyes and looks up to the altar once more, slowly raising to her feet as she hears something behind her, calmly she turns around to face the old priest, standing there.

The old priest speaks in his deep voice:

“Hope, come. I’ve found you a room in the cathedral.”

Then gestures towards some stairs. Both the old priest and his little Hope climb some spinning stairs up and up and up until they can go up no more.

A long and dark corridor filled with rooms in front of them, the old priest pushes open the first door and it opens, he gestures Hope to go inside walking slowly after her. He smiles and nods as his little Hope sits down upon a soft bed looking at her father as he states calmly with a smile:

"I will be back tomorrow."

Without a word more he leaves the room, closing the door after him, nothing can be heard for a moment until suddenly, the old priest locks the door.

What is freedom? Like a bird hatching and staying in its nest for a bit, before spreading wings and leaving, we all need care, yet when the time is right, we need to spread our wings and fly into the world. True freedom is when we can keep flying, unbound, free to experience what we wish, even if it means we've to experience death itself. We are not free when we are kept in a room to ourselves, blind, thinking that that be the best, that we be happy, our own pity and misery driving us to greatest madness. Freedom, true freedom is to be unbound and let loose, with no remorse nor care for what might happen, what has happened and what is happening. We simply fly, fly to lands we've never seen, where we've never been. To feel what has never been felt, that is true freedom.

## VI

The old priest opened the door calmly and took a single step upon the dirty wooden floorboards; he gazed over his study, displeased, closing the door behind himself. He sighed and took a few more steps across the messy study room, filled with books and papers of the sort, documents of the church, others of his research, the chairs and tables, shelves and cabinets filled with papers, books. He scans over his desk and walks behind it; he sits down, exhaling slowly and grips one of his many new writing quills. He closes his eye, pondering and looks down to his journal, on the top of many different papers across the desk, gently and gracefully he dips the quill in an inkwell and presses the sharp quill against the paper and writes:

“I, Augustus Bouchard, born upon the 30th of the 4th month hereby announce...” then stops, Augustus closes his eyes, he leans back on his chair and rests the quill on top of his journal, taking a few deep breaths he loses himself in thought, his eyes open slowly as does the door of his study.

A heavy plated glove grips the edge of the door and pushes it open, in steps a tall man, clad in brown plated armor, long silver hair caressing back, clearly groomed and assuming a posture of a hardened war veteran. A rusty old sword crafted finely dawns his back, strapped firmly. Stepping on the dirty wooden floorboards with his metal boot and almost breaking the fragile floorboards, he bows his head towards Augustus and speaks with a respectful tone of voice:

“Father Bouchard, I’ve heard tales you were dead, rumors in the wind. How fare thee?” he smiles warmly after. Augustus smiles back and raises his hand in a stopping gesture, he replies with the same respectful voice:

“I assure you, no need for such respect towards me, the rumors of my glory and of death are exaggerated, heavily, might I add. I fare well, weary, but well. Yet, I am at a disadvantage, you know my name, however, I know not yours.”, humming quietly after, resting his palms in his lap. The armored man answers heartily:

“Pardon my manners Father, the name be Victor Greydragon, at your service.” The armored man raises his head and keeps the joyful smile upon his face.

“Ah!” gasps Augustus and adds:

“So, you are Sir Greydragon? I should have known, I’ve heard some rumors about you as well, tell me, are those true?” he inquires. Victor grins and raises his left eyebrow, a somewhat proud expression creeps on his face as he asks proudly:

“Oh? What have you heard Father?” Augustus stands up slowly and clasps his cold hands together in front, entwining his fingers, giving a single nod. He speaks while walking around the table towards Victor:

“Well, Sir Greydragon, I’ve heard that you’re a ruthless butcher with no consciousness and no regard for hum-” Augustus corrects himself quickly “For any life in fact, I was told you maim, you cripple and destroy everything, everyone who stands in your path. Now, Sir Greydragon, is that true?” Victor keeps his almost wicked grin and nods once:

“Every single word Father, I can’t believe you heard the one about separating a mans tongue by stepping on his head, perhaps I shall tell you that one myself.” he states almost jokingly and proudly. Augustus tilts his head to the left for a few brief moments, the smile fades as the old priest widens his eyes, though quickly regaining himself he takes a deep breath, unclasping his hands and folding his arms over his chest. Augustus opens his mouth and tries to speak, no sound comes from it, an utter loss of words as he looks quite baffled at Victor’s response, merely able to murmur out: “Oh...” Victor clears his throat loudly and lowers his gaze upon the wooden floorboards, his proud expression and grin fades as he spots Augustus’ reaction to his words, correcting his posture into a disciplined one and adjusting his gauntlets quickly, he keeps his head bowed muttering out quietly:

“I’m sorry, that was inappropriate.” The old priest takes a few steps closer towards the Knight, a worried expression on his face, concerned but not afraid. He shakes his head in disbelief:

“Sir Greydragon...I want a sophisticated Knight of honor, not a drunken brute cutting tongues and turning others into cripples.”, sighing out quite loudly and disappointedly, Victor only nods, not saying anything further. Augustus speaks again:

“Sir Greydragon, I want you to do as I say if you intend on serving me, no murders... maimings or whatever it is you do. Well... unless I tell you to do so. I’ll admit Sir, you weren’t my choice... but you are the best choice for this line of work, even though you won’t be doing what you have been, you are the best for it.” Victor nods again, briefly saying:

“Thank you Father.”

The Father replies hastily:

“Yes yes, quite... let me tell you what you shall be doing.” Augustus looks around and turns about, unfolding his arms as he travels to a small cabinet, papers falling off it, the priest rummages through them and quickly finds what he seeks, stumbling, almost falling over his robe he waves the paper and clears his throat and speaks:

“I’ve had some worrying news from Redridge, truly. As a Knight in service to the king, I want you to investigate.” He offers the piece of paper to Victor who reads it slowly, often raising his eyes to meet with the priests, he asks somewhat surprised after reading it fully through:

“Are you certain this information is accurate Father?” he asks very doubtfully. Augustus replies merely:

“That is what I want you to find out Sir Greydragon, write me a letter from Redridge if the information is accurate. I’ve arranged a steed and squire to accompany you, both experienced, ride with haste, let nothing stand in between you and Redridge.” Victor folds the paper and nods again, turning around quickly he grips the wooden door firmly again and opens it taking heavy step, going out of the priest’s messy study, Augustus walks to the door and states as Victor leaves:

“Sir Greydragon, we cannot miss this chance... Sir Greydragon, we cannot miss the chance of immortality!” The old priest laughs lightly and smirks, closing the door to his study slowly.

## VII

Hope was sitting there in her old room, gazing out the window on the street below. Her eyes catch the bright smiles of the people, walking so carelessly upon the cobbled roads, the carts pulled along by anxious horses. Her eyes linger on the guards, clad in grey and blue armor, and a mighty one handed sword strapped to their belts. A steel shield with a particular lion's head as a crest, either on their backs or firmly in their hands, always ready. She smiles brightly, thinking about the outside, how wondrous it would be to thread upon the grass, how joyful to feel the wind in her hair. Denied this freedom as she remains locked in her room, high up in the cathedral, kept by the man who took care of her. His daughter, his prisoner.

She quickly turns her head to the old door as it makes the sound that old doors usually make when they are opened, opened quite slowly. She straightens up her back and smiles even more brightly; expecting Augustus to step in, the door suddenly closes quickly. Hope narrows her eyes quite confused, she takes a step away from her window and walks carefully to the wooden old door. She leans on it and places her ear upon the wood, listening to whatever maybe outside. She hears nothing at first, however suddenly a calm voice asks, an unknown voice, muffled by the door:

"Brother Bouchard? What are you doing up here?" she hears her father reply back somewhat nervously:

"Oh...Brother Whitmore...I'm merely meeting someone, a private matter...I'm sure you understand."

Hope pulls back and shakes her head, moving her long golden hair to listen once more as the priest named Whitmore replies:

"Oh... I did not take you for a man who dips his cookie in the milk...and with the fel- " Augustus interrupts the priest:

"Certainly not!" he almost yells out.

Hope covers her face with her palm, blushing red fully aware of what the two priests are talking about. She moves away from the door, perhaps too embarrassed to listen further, some more sounds come from the other side of the door, however too quiet and too muffled to understand.

The door opens again, Augustus steps in quickly and shakes his head, clearly annoyed. He adjusts his belt and dusts off his priests robe. He smiles warmly after, trying to cover up his annoyance, his frustration, but doesn't manage so well. He doesn't utter a single word, merely removes his black gloves and places them in his pockets. Hope smiles back, the fake warm smile of her father doesn't fool her, she walks up to him and takes a hold of his hands, she loses the smile and looks up at him, a worried look as she asks:

"Father, by the Light, your hands are cold. Are you sick again?" he looks down to her and shakes his head and reassures her:

"My Hope, worry not. Lately my hands have been quite cold."

He nods and goes to sit down on the soft bed in Hope's room. She stands there looking at him with a slight smirk before she goes to sit down next to him, resting her hands in her lap and looking at her father.

He looks at her and pats the soft bed:

"I'm still not used to these...two decades on hay and not then expect me to sleep on this..."

Hope giggles and covers a snort with her hands, blushing red again. Augustus looks quickly at Hope and raises an eyebrow, he smiles and replies:

"I'm being blasted serious."

Afterwards he shakes his head and looks around the room, asking Hope meanwhile:

"Have you studied today?" she quickly stands up and walks to some books on a table across the room. She picks up a certain blue book and replies:

"Yes...I have to get through this one still."

Augustus nods and looks out of the window:

"Very good, have you eaten today?" she puts the book down and quietly says:

"No...I do not feel hunger."

Augustus sighs out deeply and takes a deep breath after doing so:

"Hope...you've to eat. You're nothing but skin and bone. I shall tell someone to bring up some food."

Hope frowns and shakes her head, murmuring out:

"No no...I'm fine."

Augustus shakes his head again and stands up, dusting off his robe, even if it is not dusty at all, he says:

"You will eat...as I said, I shall send someone up here, but first I've arranged some company for you."

Hope's eyes simply glimmer as the brightest diamonds, she gasps and asks nervously:

"Who? Who is coming?"

Augustus then takes a few steps towards the door and grabs the handle of the door, pulling it open. Hope stares at the door, her eyes widen as she gasps out of utter surprise, and she almost yells:

"Father!"

Hope looks back to Augustus and repeats slowly once more: "Father..."

She takes her eyes back to the door and spots a small white and scared kitten. Augustus bends down slowly and picks the delicate kitten up with his cold hands, peering at it for a few brief moments. The kitten cries out, very afraid for some reason, filling the small room with its cries, Augustus does his

best to hurry towards Hope and he gently places the white kitten into her arms. Hope smiles very brightly and reaches out for the white kitten, as soon as the kitten travels from Augustus' to Hopes embrace it calms down greatly, brushing itself against her chest, relaxing. Augustus hums quietly and nods, he turns around and heads for the door, giving Hope a final warm smile before he closes the door behind himself and locks it.

Hope looks down at the kitten again, her warm smile remains as she moves towards her soft bed and sits down, placing the kitten on the pillow she speaks: "Afraid of father, are you?"

The kitten purrs in response sitting down on the pillow, Hope answers:

"He's not bad you know, no reason to be afraid..."

Hope smiles and strokes the kitten's fur gently, she carries on:

"Let me tell you about him."

She looks away for a moment and thinks quickly, looking back to the slightly confused kitten. "He is a priest, you know, he has been a priest for over fifty years, more if you count his training. He's the kindest and gentlest man, though your fur is softer. You didn't see his fur...that's right. Well, over twenty years ago he got bit by some strange creature and now...if he wishes, he too can turn into one. He doesn't tell anyone about it, so keep it a secret, alright?"

She smiles and pats the kitten again. It purrs and lies down on the pillow, grabbing Hope's index finger with its paws and softly trying to nibble on it, Hope doesn't resist and gives into the terrible man-eating kitten, she keeps talking:

"I was abandoned by my parents and he was going to kill himself because of the monster he was, he couldn't help it at that time, you know, he didn't have the control. So, he found me and cared for me, he told me I was his Hope, his purpose in life. We lived in a cave near the farm he was born on, it was quite nice. He taught me everything he knew as a priest. I can do a bit, but I'm not as strong as he is just yet. We lived there for all my life, how long has it been? Sixteen years spent in that cave? Indeed...only recently am I here...he locked me up for my own safety, he said, I'm sure I'd be just as safe outside...ah well."

She sighs out loudly and shakes her head, shrugging her shoulders lightly. She lies down and puts her head on the pillow near the kitten and continues:

"We moved out of the cave because he thought I need to see more of the world...he trained himself how to control the monster inside. I don't know how exactly, but he did, it took nearly twenty years, but he did it. We ventured away as soon as he could, it was a long travel, I don't exactly remember how long it took us to come here to the city, but we did it. He locked me up here...so I don't get hurt; he said that the city is foul and evil. I think he's overreacting; at least I have you as company now."

Hope closes her eyes and sighs out quietly, the kitten remains by her side, lying down as well. Hope speaks out softly and quietly:



“I wonder when he’ll let me out...he hardly comes to me, his work is taking all his time. I want to go out there...meet different people, I have never properly talked with anyone before, it’s been lonely...but now I have you and we are going to be the best of friends.”

She smiles and nods, remaining in her position on bed and patting the kitten.

Meanwhile down by the giant gates of the city one of the heavily armored guards yells:

“Open the gate!” and waves his right hand. The gates slowly start to open, the enormous door behind it being pulled open by the guards as a lonely rider enters the city of white stone. It be none other than Sir Victor Greydragon, a sword dripping flesh blood upon the cobbled road below strapped to his back, Victor narrows his eyes and inclines his head briefly towards the guards, he rides off into the busy streets. Hastily traveling to the cathedral, he dismounts in front and rushes towards the doors, leaning on them to push them open, however he almost falls inside as a priest pulls the door open at the same moment. Victor briefly smiles and rushes towards Augustus’ study room, pushing the door open quickly, he throws his backpack on Augustus’ table, though Augustus seems absent from the room. Victor looks around in a panic of sorts and ventures to the door again, opening it slightly and peeking out, he closes it quietly again and leans on them, letting out a sigh of relief. He ventures to the backpack that was thrown on the table and carefully opens it, retrieving a small blue box, placing it ever so delicately on the table. The Knight pulls an old wooden chair to the table and sits down. Taking off his gauntlets, he slightly relaxes, slowly peering around the still messy study and smirks.

The door slowly push open as Victor rises and grips the claymore strapped to his back. Relieved to see that it is Augustus, he lets loose another sigh of relief and a smile right after, he exhales and speaks out quietly:

“I’ve returned...”

Augustus looks at Victor and nods, saying calmly in reply:

“So you have...you bring good news, I pray.”

Victor nods rapidly and gestures to the small blue box on the table. Augustus’ eyes widen, his heart starts beating faster as he asks:

“Is t-that?”

Victor merely nods. Augustus steps towards the box and closes his eyes, slowly opening it a bright light fills the room, it emits from the small blue box. Victor takes a few steps back and shields his eyes from the brightness, however, Augustus simply stands there and slowly opens his eyes to peer down into the box, he grins and mutters out quietly:

“Immortality...”