

## Act of Bravery

### Part 1

The light drifted in through the window and bathed Sue in its warmth. Rising from her slumber, she yawned and looked around. Her brother was nowhere to be found, but outside she could hear the chirping of birds and soft voices. She got out of bed and dressed in her overalls and boots. She swept her hair out of her eyes. It was getting long again, that won't do. She'd have to cut it after the day's chores were done. Dressed for the day, she marched out of the house and scanned the horizon. The various farm animals were lounging and grazing in the cool autumn air. The large yard that housed them, cut off by a rickety wooden fence, shown a brilliant emerald green in the sun. The dense trees beyond it formed a thick curtain of foliage. Soon, the winter would come, turning that curtain into endless rows of skinny, skeletal trees. As Sue looked around she could see Poppa, who was talking to Peter near the edge of the gate. Sue started off towards them, calling out a good morning, but went unheard. When she finally was within earshot, she heard Peter speak.

"But it's boring here! I want to go hunting too!"

Poppa grumbled shook his head. His grumble was a weary grunt that said this was the fourth time today that he had done this. "I told you, Peter, it's too dangerous and we don't need the help. Maybe when you're older you can join us, but for now you're going to stay here and keep an eye on your sister." He pointed a finger back in the direction of the house.

Peter knew full well that this gesture usually meant "and that's final!", but still he grumbled and moaned. He was about to try and counter this when he noticed Sue. "Sue! Tell Poppa I'm a good enough shot to help the hunting party!"

Sue shook her head. "Poppa knows best, Peter. Besides, I like having you around." She threw her arms around her brother, who made disgusted noises at her.

Poppa patted Sue on the head. "Good girl. Keep an eye on your brother while I'm gone, OK?" He picked up his wooden rifle and marched off the property, towards the main village.

While Poppa's back was turned, Peter pushed his sister off of him. His own rifle was laying on the ground, most likely thrown in a fit after being told he wasn't allowed to join. He picked it up and slung it over his shoulder, throwing Sue a dirty look. "Thanks a lot." He muttered.

Sue was unbothered. "Oh c'mon. It's not bad on the farm. It's quiet and there's animals to play with and plenty to eat. Besides..."

She trailed off, staring off into the forest that surrounded them. Peter avoided following her gaze but knew what she was getting at. It was true, hunting was dangerous in these parts, and the hunting party had to be in peak condition. Here in the small village of Bafria, the wild animals in the forest were quite delectable... if you managed to survive them. The animals ranged from small and deadly fast, to giant behemoths, with claws and talons as big as axe heads. The hunting party was responsible for helping to feed the entire village, but it required skill, patience, courage, and of course, a deadly weapon to take down such great beasts.

But it wasn't just the hunting party that faced these beasts. The reason why Poppa needed someone like Peter to stay behind on the farm, was because these beasts often wandered into the ranches and farms of the townsfolk. Most of the time it was the smaller ones, young beasts that haven't yet been taught the most important lesson from their elders: the humans that live in Bafria aren't willing to give up their food without a fight. In the case of these smaller creatures, it was Peter's job to take them out with his rifle before they could get past the fence and kill one of

the animals, or eat take some of their crops. In the case of the occasional larger creature, his job was to warn everyone and get them to safety as quickly as possible, for that was all that could be done.

Peter knew all of this, which is why when his sister trailed off, he knew what she really wanted to say. "If you stay here... we'll at least be safe."

Sue may have known how to swing an axe, if the situation arose, but she was still only 13 years old. Farm life might have done a bit to enhance her muscles compared to the average barely-a-teen, but she was still shorter and smaller than the other woman her age, and this led her to often feel frightened and inadequate in the presence of danger, especially when the beasts are involved. She didn't always like to, but she relied on Peter for his protection just as much as his company.

Peter stormed off in a huff, grumbling "I'm gonna go shoot something."

Sue watched him head towards the barn, the place that housed his makeshift figures of beasts made out of hay that he used for target practice. She shortly followed suit, picking up from the barn her large metal bucket of feed, and headed out to the yard where the animals bunched together, awaiting their breakfast.

Sue scattered the feed around her and the animals greedily ate it up. She lost herself in this simple task, daydreaming about what Poppa would bring home for dinner that night. She was interrupted by the sound of a large *crack*. She turned and saw Peter had already set up his targets on the other side of the property, and was practicing his shots. Sue watched for a moment as Peter shot the targets. She listened to the *crack* and watched as the blue bolt of magic, just barely visible, with its speed, jump from Peter's rifle to the hay figures, enraptured by the magic of enchanted weaponry.

Magic in Bafria was complicated. It had very few practical uses, and few people knew how to actually make use of it. What even was 'magic', no one seemed to know for sure. It wasn't something like water or food, something you could observe and quantify, it was something more abstract, like whatever returned them to the ground after a big jump. Why did you always come back down? Who knew, it just happened. But magical force did have one use to the common resident of Bafria: weaponry. Passed down from generations is the process by which one imbues an object with magical power. A simple ritual involving some chanting, and an ordinary object. Once this process is complete an object can hold onto magical energy for a long period of time, and with careful practice, it can be discharged in bolts of piercing magical force. Useful for only one real purpose, defending themselves against the strange beasts that stalk the forests.

Poppa had taught Peter this ritual, as his father had with him, but Peter's magical senses were only able to imbue a stick with a mildly potent concoction of energy, resulting in magical bolts that could barely pierce the hide of a cow.

Sue continued to watch in awe as her brother let out another *crack* of energy, hitting his target (a hay representation of a wolf beast) right between its faux ears. Despite her brother not being able to cause all that much damage, she knew he was a crack shot. Someday, she knew Poppa would be proud to have him join the hunting party. But for now, he was in charge of lookout, and she was in charge of feeding the animals and tending to the crops.

Sue turned back to her work but froze in shock. She dropped her bucket, scattering the feed and sending the animals into a feeding frenzy, when she suddenly became aware of a large shape, just beyond the fence. It was as big as a bear standing on its hind legs, and if Sue hadn't taken a second look at the shape, that's probably what she would have concluded it was. But

instead upon further inspection, she realized it was a man. A large man, but unmistakably a man. Two arms, two legs. It couldn't be anything else; the beasts in the forests consider things such as number of limbs to be mere suggestions. Sue could tell from this distance that the man was absolutely massive. He must have been a whole seven feet tall, and about as wide as a house. Adding to his resemblance to a bear was the pelt he wore. He wore it like a cloak, covering his entire body in brown fur. It wasn't clear from this distance what animal it had been, but it was clearly large enough to cover this massive person's entire body. The last thing separating this large man from being properly recognized as human, was his face, obscured by a shiny, reflective surface. Sue was confounded. It was shiny and slick, it didn't resemble any mask she had seen before. Jutting from his back was a large stick, the handle of what Sue assumed to be a club of some kind, a handle large enough for the man's massive paws.

For a moment she and the figure stood still, staring at each other. How did it even get there? She wondered. Someone that large approaching them, from the forest no less, and not making a single noise was downright stupefying. The moment of stillness dragged on, and as the figure didn't move, Sue suddenly found herself relaxing. If this person was a raider or some other form of bandit, they probably would have done something more menacing than stand there by now. She moved slowly, waving aside the animals and picking up her bucket, never taking her eyes off the figure. When the figure didn't move again, she hazarded a wave. After another moment, the figure's cloak pelt parted, revealing a large, muscular arm, covered in thick hair. It raised, waved side to side, and returned to its home, the pelt coming together and swallowing it whole.

Sue smiled. This visitor wasn't a bad guy after all. She opened her mouth to call out a greeting, but was drowned out by the sudden *crack* and the force of a magic bolt whizzing past her head, landing just an inch in front of the figure beyond the fence. Sue whirled around and saw Peter, already halfway between her and his targets, eyes down the sights of his magic rifle. The figure did not so much as stir.

"Peter what are you doing?!" She called out.

"Get the hell out of here, stranger! And leave my sister alone!" Peter called back, with as much authority as his young voice would allow.

"Peter, he wasn't doing anything! He was just passing by!" Sue shouted.

"I ain't gonna say it again!" said Peter.

Sue turned back to the figure on the edge of the woods. Again, he stood still. His only movement was in the shiny surface of his head. It angled down, observing the smoking hole a mere inch in front of him. It angled back upwards, and after a brief pause, his shoulders rotated and he began walking to the east.

Sue returned her attention to Peter, eyes flared with anger. "You didn't have to do that!" She shouted, "It was just a drifter! He wasn't dangerous!"

Peter had dropped his sights to scold his sister, but as his mouth opened, it hung there. His eyes grew wide and in an instant his rifle was once again at the ready. "Sue! Get down!"

Sue whirled around and saw the beast crawling toward her. It skittered along the ground on the swift feet of a lizard but was as bulbous and thick as a boar, its face a mangled mess of teeth and fangs. There wasn't even eyes or a nose for the creature, it was just a vortex of teeth by the hundreds, all snarling and snapping for its next meal. In a panic Sue stumbled and fell, scrambling away on her elbows. How did it even get here? It was so small and fast it must have darted out of the forest as soon as that drifter left. It had closed the distance so quickly and it was already baring down on her, snarling and barking, brandishing that menagerie of teeth.

Sue braced herself for the violent gnashing that was approaching. Peter could knock it away with his shot, maybe scare it away, but it looked far too feral to be shaken by one shot. Sue felt the world go dark as she waited for what came... actually, she didn't just feel it, the world was getting darker. Sue's eyes darted from the creature to the sky. In reality, a massive shadow had suddenly blocked out the sun. A large round object, the size of a boulder was hurtling down towards her and the beast. No, not towards her... just the beast. The moment of bewilderment passed and she continued her fierce scrambling as the large object got closer and closer, and all at once it happened.

The large object collided with the beast, stalling its rampage with a sudden, violent impact. The ground tore up as the large object, packed with inertia, ground the beast into the dirt and finally, to a halt. As the dust settled Sue finally saw what the object was. It was the drifter. He had sprang all the way from his position near the forest, clear over the fence, high enough to cast a shadow, and dropped on the beast like a heavy boulder.

He was sitting over the beast, both knees planted firmly in the beast's hide. The beast's legs thrashed violently while its head of teeth bit and snarled in a desperate attempt to attack his new luggage. The thrashing didn't last long, as the drifter reached behind himself, yanking his large club from its holster, and planted the end of it firmly into the thing's cheek, or rather, the thing that closely resembled its cheek. There was a sudden and loud *BOOM* and the beast's messy head of teeth exploded, sending chunks of viscera and gore in all directions, including Sue's and the drifter's own bodies.

The silence after this explosion was deafening. The beast was still, not even a twitch. What once had been its head was now a stringy mess of flesh and bone, the parts that might have held it together strewn about around them. Sue remained where she was in the grass, panting and shaking in horror. She looked down at her overalls, they were stained with the goopy remains of the thing that had nearly ripped her apart. The morning sun stung her eyes briefly, before it was once again blocked by the drifter. Standing right in front of her, at full height, he absolutely towered over her. The shock still hadn't wore off. This massive *thing* resembling a man now seemed more terrifying than the beast. Though he had saved her, he remained looking somewhat threatening. Peter's voice was calling out to her, but she couldn't hear him, the words wouldn't sink in to her ears. She could only hear the sound of her own heavy breathing.

The large drifter produced a hand from inside of his cloak. It raised towards his shiny face mask. He gently eased the mask upwards, sliding it behind some kind of hidden compartment. It revealed his face, equally as large and bulky as the rest of him, but softened by his gentle blue eyes. His face was expressionless, and his features were stained by the scars of battle, zig zagging what would otherwise be a perfectly normal, if large, man's face. When his hand was done revealing himself, he lowered it to her, offering it.

Finally he spoke. With a voice as deep and as heavy as the sound of approaching thunder he said, "Sorry."

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The three of them gathered around the table inside of Peter and Sue's home. Their new arrival's stature brought with it some immediate problems. He had to lower his head just to fit under the door frame, and sitting at the end of the table his shoulders practically touched the walls. Sitting turned out to be a problem as well. He was much too large to sit in one of the wooden chairs they had. Despite them being quite sturdy, his frame simply wouldn't fit it. Their

new guest resolved to sitting cross legged on the floor. This turned out to be a better solution than thought, as sitting on the ground caused his head and chest to be at the perfect height with which to sit at a table. Sue provided a bowl of soup for each of them, and placed them around table, yet no one ate.

For a moment the three merely stared at each other. Despite inviting him in to show appreciation for his deed, Peter and Sue still felt weary about the man. Everything about him just seemed odd. Perhaps not dangerous, but still so unusual as to regard him with caution. His face mask, revealed to be a helmet of some kind, had been taken off and now sat on the table in front of him. His helmet removed, Peter and Sue saw a gentler side of the man. Perhaps it wasn't so much gentle-ness as it was simply humanity, as without his helmet and looming presence in the distance, he looked rather normal. He had a head of short, messy brown hair, a square, hard jaw, and soft blue eyes. Though his face was still expressionless, Sue could tell he was grateful for the hospitality.

His club, weapon, whatever it was, leaned against the wall next to him. Sue had tried to take it off for him as a gesture of kindness, but the thing was immensely heavy, and she couldn't bare the strain. In the end, the stranger had taken it off himself and leaned it against the wall, as if it weighed as much as a toothpick. Sue's eyes drifted over to it as she tried to make sense of what it was. The massive stick that had saved her life resembled, to her at least, a makeshift cudgel. It was about five feet long and looked like it had been formed by hand, a mess of hard clay and stone formed together until it made a massive blunt weapon, heavy enough to crush bone with a single swing. But that description didn't help resolve the noise. That heavy *boom* that caused the beast to explode wasn't caused by a simple swinging of a club. Clearly there was something more magical about it.

After the silence between them had gone on long enough, Sue finally spoke. "You should eat..." she trailed off, not knowing what else to say.

The stranger nodded. He gingerly wrapped the bowl in his massive hands and began graciously sipping the broth. This escalated into satisfied slurping, and he downed more and more of the soup. When he was done he let out a satisfied gasp and set the bowl back down. To little surprise, Sue saw the bowl was empty.

"Thank you." said the stranger. Once again his voice was soft but deep, nearly shaking the whole house with its baritone rumble, and once again the table was silent.

"You... don't talk much." said Sue.

The man shook his head. "No need."

"Are you... alone?"

"Alone. Alone a long time."

"How long?"

"... a long time."

"That's not very common these days. Most drifters are nomads who travel in groups. Traveling by yourself in these parts isn't usually a good idea. Those beasts in the forest ain't something you want to mess around with, especially by yourself."

The man nodded. "Beasts do not bother me. I hunt them."

"Do you have a name?" It was Peter. He was leaning against the wall. His eyes scanned the room constantly, sweeping from the stick to the man, to the soup and the helmet, and to Sue and back, trying to make sense of it all.

The man nodded. "Max."

"OK, Max... where are you heading?"

Max shook his head. "Don't know... no place. Just walk."

"You just happened to be walking near our farm?"

Sue shot a dirty look at Peter. She knew what he was getting at. He was being cautious, sure, but he was also being rude to a guest.

Max nodded. "Just walk." He said again.

"That helmet of yours is strange," said Peter, gesturing to the helmet. "It's a helmet for sure, but it doesn't look very sturdy, even though it's pretty big. It doesn't look like it would help much in a fight."

Max nodded and stared deeply at his helmet. "Not for fight..."

"Not for fights... OK... what is it for then?"

Max's brow knit. "For... the stars."

"For... the stars?"

Max nodded. "For the stars... and home."

"Home?" said Sue. "Where is your home?"

"My home... is in the stars."

The two looked at Max, confused, but he did not speak further.

"What about that stick?" Peter said, changing the subject. "You probably could have killed that beast with one swing of that thing... but you didn't swing it. You pointed it, and it... exploded. You must have imbued that thing with some pretty strong magic."

Max shook his head. "Not magic."

Peter raised an eyebrow. "I don't think there is anything else in this world that can make a noise like that and cause that much damage... except maybe a large beast."

Max leaned to the side and picked up his club. He laid it across the table, both ends practically hitting the walls. He took a firm grip on the two ends and bent, and suddenly the end closest to him made a loud *snap*, and broke off. No, not broke off, it merely cracked open, and revealed a compartment within the club. There were two hollow iron bars within this compartment, one being blocked by a flat golden object. Max retracted this object and held it up. It was a small cylinder, mostly red, only the bottom had a stripe of gold bracing it.

"Shells." He said. "Not magic."

"Shells?" Peter said, more confused than ever. "Doesn't look like any turtle I've ever seen."

Max shook his head again. "Not a turtle. Tools... metal and iron. Not magic."

He replaced the 'shell' and snapped his club back together. He clasped his hands around one end of it, and held it upright. "I do not need magic. My club is enough." He released his club and let it lean against the wall.

Sue and Peter looked at each other, unsure. While it had made sense to invite this person in and show gratitude, his answers to their questions concerned them. They had been talking for a while now but hadn't really gotten anywhere. Max clearly wasn't one for conversation but he didn't seem like he was lying, either.

Before Peter or Sue could decide what should be done with Max, he stood. Raising from his sitting position, gingerly avoiding hitting his head on the ceiling, he spoke. "I will go now. I thank you for the food."

Peter stared at him. "Yes... I think that's for the best."

Sue said nothing. Though her polite upbringing told her to be kind to a guest, Max's unusual self tugged at her self preservation instincts. She let the matter go.

Max picked up his helmet and returned it to his head, sliding the slick mask down over his head. He tugged up the makeshift hood of his pelt-cloak, covering the sides and top of his head in the animal fur. At this, Sue chuckled. Max aimed his head towards her. Though he didn't say it, Sue could tell behind his mask he was making a face that went "why are you laughing?"

She pointed to the top of his head. "The pelt... it still has the ears of that animal on it." She quickly fetched the hand mirror from her bedroom and held it up to him. It was true. With his hood on, the short ears of the bear Max now wore stood perched upon his helmet, making him look even more like a bear/man hybrid.

At seeing this, Max let out a rumbling, jolly laugh. "I like that." from behind his mask, he smiled.

It was then that a man burst in through the front door. He was panting heavily, gasping large raspy breaths. He was middle aged, bald, and carrying his own magic rifle in the form of a large wooden rod. His eyes were ragged and wrecked with fear.

At this intruder, Max had wrapped a hand around the handle of his club, but relaxed when Peter and Sue spoke.

"Jeremiah?" Sue gasped, "What happened? You look absolutely ragged."

The man continued gasping for air, but spoke raspy syllables when he could. "They... they... I... hunting..."

"Sit, Jeremiah!" commanded Peter. "Tell us what happened."

Jeremiah did as he was told, taking in large, heaving gasps of air. He shook uncontrollably, staring with terror at the blank wall to his side. It was as if whatever had scared him was still right in front of him, ready to strike at a moments notice.

"The hunting party," he finally said. "The hunting party was attacked. By... something. Not a beast but something more terrifying."

Peter and Sue looked at each other, darkly. Something more terrifying than a beast? Surely Jeremiah wasn't serious, though his face said otherwise.

"And something else... a woman. She was with the... the *thing* and they attacked us head on. We stood no chance. I managed to get away but--"

"Where is Poppa?" blurted Sue. "Tell us, is he alright? Where is he?"

"That's why I ran all this way. To warn you all. They were taken. They were heading towards the village. Perhaps we can still catch up with them if we hurry."

## **Part 2**

The town center of Bafria housed only a small number of buildings relating to the needs of the townspeople. There was the saloon, a necessity for small towns, the inn, for travelers to rest their weary feet, and the town hall, located at the end of the town square. Most residents of Bafria lived farther out in the country side, where they had the space they needed for their crops and animals. The only time the residents of Bafria needed to come to town was to meet up with the hunting party to distribute that days provisions, or for a get together like the semi-regular town meeting. And while they didn't quite know it yet, the town of Bafria was about to get together for one spectacular meeting.

Across the horizon, a groaning wail was heard. The wail was deep and pained, stressed by whatever task it was muddled in. The few residents in town paid this wailing no mind. The oxen and other animals they had has laborers tended to wail and groan in a similar manner, so such a groan was not unusual for the town. The attitude towards the groan changed as it slowly grew louder and louder. Whatever was making this groaning was getting closer to town. Curiously the few townsfolk looked up from their sweeping, or from their feeding, or from their napping, and eyed the horizon, as a shape making the groan slowly came into view. Eyes grew wide and horrified as they took in the figure, becoming more and more uncanny and unsettling as realization kicked in.

As they crested the hill, the figure become clear from top to bottom. First came the hat. A dirty, black wide brim hat. After the hat came her wide grin, sinisterly snickering at the forthcoming show. Lastly, so came the rest of her, the lanky figure wearing a sleek black coat, black shirt, black belt, and black boots. Had she not had a face or such an ample, bone white bosom, the townsfolk could have mistaken her for a shadow.

Though she was of moderate height, this figure was bolstered by the groaning shape beneath her. The shape resembled a man, but not any man that the town of Bafria had seen. He was absolutely massive, more elephant than man, with bulging muscular arms and legs, and a pudgy, thick body, overflowing with fat, wearing nothing but a loincloth. Though his arms were muscular, it was clearly not the product of a typical workout. In fact, to the average physician, they would probably say they looked less like muscles and more like tumors or boils, ready to burst with puss at one wrong movement. But the worst part was his face. The thing didn't have a typical face, with eyes and ears and a nose, but instead, his face was contorted and twisted, as if mangled in an accident with a mixing machine. The blending of his face was accompanied by extra parts that seemed to serve no purpose. Extra eyes in places there shouldn't be, milky and white and probably blinded, extra teeth without a mouth, and tongues hanging loosely from ears.

The monstrous thing was the one doing the groaning, though out of which mouth, the townspeople were unsure. His groaning had less to do with the woman standing upon his shoulders, but the large carted cage he was carrying behind him. In which the townsfolk could see, with horrified awe, the remains of that morning's hunting party, sitting sullenly within. They sat silently with blank, mournful expressions, as the cart rocked and its wheels squeaked mockingly towards the center of town. Marching in unison with the cart was a platoon of what could only be soldiers, though of what army, the townsfolk were unsure. They looked less like soldiers, however, and more like shambling corpses. Their bodies were thin and malnourished, the armor they had was light and ill-fitting, exposing their skin which was covered in blotchy wounds and scabs. Each one was disfigured in some way, be they missing limbs or eyeballs or worse.



Once the woman standing upon the giant was satisfied with her position, she bent down and muttered a command in its ear. The giant finally heaved the large wooden cart handle to the ground and rested, slumping to the ground and kicking up a swirling pile of dust, panting and wheezing in exhaustion. The soldiers, meanwhile, flanked her on either side, forming a human tunnel for her.

The woman in black descended with a dramatic flourish, planting both feet in the dirt and striking a theatrical pose. After a pause, for effect, the townsfolk assumed, she called out, in a voice with the squalling sharpness of a vulture: "Citizens of Bafria..." another pause as she scanned the town square. "As you can see, I have taken capture of your hunting party. By decree of me, myself, and I, I use this show of power to declare myself ruler of this town! Bow down to your new subjugator, Queen Victoria Von Cadavere, and I *may* show you a modicum of mercy!"

Silence. From the windows and barely closed doors the townspeople hid themselves behind, there were looks of concern and confusion. This woman kidnapped their hunting party, the most well trained and elite members of Bafria, and now declares herself queen?

"Rubbish!" called a voice.

"Queen" Victoria rotated herself in the direction of the voice. She saw a man, about middle aged and balding, standing just outside of the local saloon, drink in one hand, and face red from drunkenness.

"Pardon?" said Victoria, never leaving her pose.

"Rubbish I say!" said the man, pausing only to down another sip from his bottle. "Who the hell are you to go around declaring yourself queen? We barely got a system of government as is. The only rule we really got is be nice to your neighbor. So why should we do what you say?"

At this, Victoria snapped into a thoughtful pose, stroking an imaginary beard. "I say... that is a good question now, isn't it? Guess I didn't think that far ahead. Well have you considered-"

Victoria snapped from her sarcastic pose into one armed with a magic weapon, a hearty log suddenly brimming with energy. Where it came from, no one could tell, it was as if her black coat was the size of a closet and she had merely pulled it out. The end of his log whirled to life and after a short *vrurr* as it warmed up, dozens of magical bolts shot out of it, spewing forth and buzzing the air like stinging wasps. The drinking man didn't even have time to blink as the bolts punctured him, turning his body into a magic bolt pin cushion. He staggered and jolted as the bolts hit him over and over again, but Victoria did not let up, gritting her teeth as the recoil slammed against her.

Eventually, Victoria ceased. It wasn't clear why, perhaps she was just tired of the recoil, as the man she was aiming at had long sense been dead. His body, no longer supported by anything but gravity, collapsed to the ground with an ugly *thump*, leaving only silence and the lingering heat of the magic bolts.

"Pretty convincing argument, I must say." Victoria finally said, grinning to no one in particular. "Anyone else have any objections? I'm opening the floor to the public, as all fair rulers do." She gestured to the mostly empty town square. She eyed a bystander looking out a window, who immediately retreated and snapped it shut. "Good. So, as I was saying before I was interrupted. I declare myself queen, and my first decree is..." she paused. The silence dragged on, uncomfortably. "Ahh to hell with it! Just kill the whole hunting party, I'm getting bored."

The prisoners in the cart were unloaded, sluggishly dragging their feet in a vein effort to delay their demise. The soldiers under Victoria's command, though not as disfigured as the giant pulling the cart, struggled as well to get their prisoners in line. Their own hands barely had

enough digits to hold a spear, much less wrangle fully grown men. Victoria barked orders to the crew, ordering the prisoners to be lined up, on their knees in a row. Once this was done, she eyed the row from the far end and smiled with wicked glee.

“Excellent.” she said, forming a pyramid with her fingers. She reached into her coat and began pulling out something large. It was so large she struggled with the weight of it, only managing to pull out into view, a large metal rod. She gestured to the giant, pointing at the rod. She didn’t say it out loud but what the gesture meant was “I could use some help here”. The giant, though slow, understood this order, and reached a meaty hand around the rod, heaving the rest of the object out with little effort. What was drawn was a mighty cleaver, as long as 3 feet and as wide as a foot. The metal rod that preceded it might have had a handle at some point, but it was so large and heavy, it’s easier to imagine it had come out of a blacksmith’s shop as is. Hell, forget the blacksmith, perhaps this mighty thing came straight from the depths of the Earth itself. Its blade was worn and still stained with blood and viscera from its last use. The giant swung this mighty blade, burying it in the dirt in front of the prisoners, kicking up dust as it sunk into the earth. The blade, though still buried in the dirt, was long enough to just barely clear the head of the final prisoner at its end.

Victoria’s grin was wild and joyous as she saw this, “Excellent! Excellent! Excellent!” she squealed, clapping her hands. “I knew it was long enough! I told you it was long enough! Alright places everyone!” she straightened her coat as the soldiers stood at attention to her sides, finally, she looked up, dropping her manic grin in favor of a stoic, fearless glare. Her eyes scanned the horizon. The towns square was still empty, but the number of faces hushed away behind doors and windows had grown, as the towns people came to witness the final moments of their precious hunting party.

“Citizens of Bafria... for the crime of... of wasting my time, I declare that these men be executed at once!” She dramatically threw a hand at the hunting party, who were silent in fear. “Butcher!” she called, and the giant heaved the heavy blade from the ground, angling it just above the heads of the prisoners. Victoria raised a hand. Once dropped, so would the blade.

Before she could drop her hand, Butcher let out a yelp of agony, dropping the heavy blade to the ground and wailing in pain. Victoria whirled around to see Butcher rubbing his tender clump of digits and meat he called a hand, and examined a small black patch on it, still smoking with the remnants of a magical bolt. Furious she turned to the still empty square and screamed “Who did that?! Reveal yourself to your queen so I may beat the shit out of you!”

There was a twinkle in the distance, and instantly she dropped to the ground, covering her head as a blue bolt of magic whizzed past, splattering the head of the soldier who was unlucky enough to be in its path. The evening sun was beginning to set, and as such, Victoria had to squint her eyes and shield them from the sun to get a good look at the far horizon. Once she did though, she saw the person responsible for the magical bolts. A boy, no older than 15, was staring down the sights of a magic rifle, accompanied on either side by a young girl, face in shock, a giant with a shiny face mask, and a slender man Victoria recognized as the one person to escape her assault on the hunting party.

“Let them go!” called the boy with the rifle. “I ain’t gonna say it again.”

Victoria returned to her feet, dusting herself off. “I’m getting very tired of this,” she grumbled, “When did killing five people in a lavish public execution become so damn hard?”

“I’m not sure, ma’am.” sighed the closest guard.

“Do watch Butcher for a moment, will you dear?”

“Aye, ma’am.”



From the end of his sights, Peter watched as the slender woman commanding the attackers disappeared. She didn't evaporate or hide, she was there one moment, and then she wasn't. Peter dropped his sights, confused.

"What is it?" asked Sue. Her nerves had been shot since they had arrived in town and came upon the terrible scene. "Can you see her? Can you see Poppa? Is he OK?"

"I- I don't- She's gone. She just disappeared."

"Oh? So one of those men is your Poppa?" came a sneering voice from between them.

The group jumped in collective shock as Victoria had suddenly filled the space between them. Before a single yelp could be uttered, Victoria clutched Peter in a bear hug and vanished, leaving behind Sue, Max, and Jeremiah, too stunned to react.

Victoria and Peter reappeared in front of the guard, Victoria having thrown Peter to the ground just as the their feet had landed. Without a word, the guards surrounding them restrained Peter, putting him in the same kneeling pose as the prisoners.

"Wha- huh-oog..." Peter groaned. "What-what was that? Where am I? What did you do to me you witch!"

"Short range teleportation, darling, do try and not look like a bumpkin for once, will you?" said Victoria, taking interest in her nails. "Now that I know one of these little toy soldiers is your Poppa, I have even more reason to kill them all. Now as I was saying," she raised her hand. "Butcher! At the sig- wow does nightfall always come this quick in this village?"

She glanced up at the sky just in time to see a large boulder, big enough to block out the sun, was heading towards her. Panicking, she dashed back, throwing the nearest guard into the spot where she had once been. Had she done this a second later, it would have been Victoria's innards splattered all over the remaining guards and a few of the prisoners. Victoria, reeling from the shock took a moment to inspect the boulder, revealing itself to instead be the giant with the shiny mask. He had jumped as far as she was able to teleport, and was clearly more than willing to use his size to his advantage.

Victoria steadied herself and let out a snarl. "Fuck this! I'm so tired of you bumpkins and your damn jumping giants. Butcher! Do it! Do it now!"

Butcher let out a wailing roar, "Greee!" and swung his blade, and all at once the hunting party breathed their last, as the heavy blade carved through their necks with ease. Blood spurt from the stumps as gravity took hold, their corpses slumping to the ground along side their severed heads. Between the screams of Peter, the murmuring of the still hiding townsfolk, and the distant wails of Sue and Jeremiah desperately trying to reach the scene, Victoria cackled with wicked laughter.

"There! Done!" She barked. "What are you going to do now that everyone's dead you-oof!"

Max's meaty fist slammed into Victoria's solar plexus, lifting her from the ground and throwing her several feet backwards. She landed in the dust and rolled several feet before coming to a painful stop.

Wordlessly, Max began his work. The guards who had attempted to seize him were batted away, first by the sheer weight of his balled fist, then by the club. The club, which he had drawn so quickly the guards could feel the wind from his movements, began bashing skulls left and right, treating each head it met like a brick meeting a pumpkin. Those trying to flee couldn't get

very far, Max's reach was far to great, and anyone unfortunate enough to still be conscious after the first bash would quickly meet the second. And third. And fourth.

"Greee!" roared Butcher, turning its massive blade and swinging it towards Max. Max caught the blade in his hands, grimacing under his mask at the sharp jolt of pain, yet he held it back. He felt the massive blade pushing further and further against him. Butcher's strength seemed equal to Max's and he was not going to be stopped by mere human hands.

"Down!" he barked.

Peter did as he was told, dropping to the dirt. Max followed suit, letting the blade careen over his and Peter's heads. As it passed Max was already on his feet, aiming to strike before Butcher could ready another attack. He planted one end of his club in the monster's belly and the thing's entire stomach exploded as the *BOOM* thundered throughout the square. What had once been Butcher's meaty stomach was now a mess of hanging gore and entrails. While Peter was looking up, in awe of the damage, Max remained at the ready. He knew Butcher wasn't done yet by simple fact that he couldn't see straight through the beast.

"Greee!" Butcher roared, in pain. Max decided it best to not let the beast have another chance to fight, and leapt up to Butcher's face, his legs crossing around Butcher's neck. With Butcher's head locked in position, Max began pummeling his face with his bare hands, throwing heavy mighty blows at the creature while it gagged and roared and spat. Max's blows formed a thunderous drumming that slowly drowned out the creature's yelps. Finally the creature's fat legs could no longer support its own weight and it collapsed to the ground, Max still thumping away until its head was nothing more than a messy pile of goo.

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The one guard who had been smart enough to hang back when a 10 ton boulder-human had landed from the sky, hurried over to Victoria, who was laying still in the dirt. He cautiously approached her, jumping a bit when she stirred and letting out a pained whine. Gingerly, the guard touched her shoulder.

"Are you alright, ma'am?"

Victoria coughed up blood. "That... bastard... broke every rib I have... and probably a few of the spares."

"Hold still ma'am." The guard produced a small, knotted pouch, and unfurled it. He dropped a few of its contents, small blue pellets the size of marbles, into his hand. Victoria's army was highly advanced in the realm of magic, and had produced these small pellets called Pearls. They were a highly condensed form of healing magic, useful when one needed medical assistance on short notice... and weren't too picky about things like "anesthetic." He carefully placed a Pearl in Victoria's mouth, and gently closed it for her. Victoria swallowed and suddenly started thrashing violently, gasping for air and flailing her limbs. A sickly crackling noise sprung from her as the bones in her ribs began reattaching themselves, worming their way through her body from their dislodged position back into normalcy. Victoria whined and wailed throughout this process, but suddenly she was still, laying on her back, and breathing steadily.

"That..." she gasped. "Always... fucking hurts." She rose to her feet, the sudden movement causing her to stumble like a newborn deer. She groggily looked towards the square, and widened her eyes at what she saw. The giant who had punched her had turned her small army into a puddle of mulch, and was now pummeling Butcher into a pulp.

“Well... that’s not good.” She pointed at the guard at her side. “You, retreat and return to the castle, I’ll meet you there.”

“Aye, ma’am!”

And with that, Victoria blinked out of existence.



Max finally stopped laying into Butcher when his fists began punching more dirt than flesh. He stood over the creature, taking a moment to breathe out an exhausted gasp. He looked up and immediately returned to his battle pose. That woman, Victoria, the others had called her, was not crumpled in the dirt, where he had last seen her. Where she was, there was only a single guard, who upon making eye contact with him, hurried off in the opposite direction. Where could she have gone?

A whistle came from below him. He tilted his head down to see Victoria, grinning wickedly, arms wrapped around Peter, gagging his mouth. “Toodles!” she tutted, and vanished, taking Peter with her. A mere second before they disappeared completely, Max’s fist landed in the dirt where Victoria’s head had been. Fists balled with rage, Max looked toward the dirt road. The one that was laced with the tracks from the ugly wooden cart that had brought them there, now held only dirt. Dirt, and a single guard running for his life.

Catching up to the guard was the simplest task Max had accomplished that day. For as someone with as long a stride as he had, crossing a few dozen feet of dirt was about as simple as baby steps. The guard, still scrambling for his life, heaved heavy gasps as he forced his scrawny legs to carry him faster than they had ever been asked. He jerked to a sudden halt as his head stopped moving, causing his still running legs to carry him forward a bit and giving him mild whiplash. He rose his hands to his head and found them gripping not his own face, but the meaty paw of a giant, gripping his head firmly in the palm.

“P-please don-“ he begged.

“Where?” came the gravelly demand.

“Th-there’s a castle a ways north of here, that’s where they are! Now please-“

Max crushed the head that was between his fingers as if it were nothing more than a grape. He let the body fall to the ground, shaking off some of the blood still sticking to his fingers. He looked towards the north. It would be so easy to leave now, to give in to his animal urge to fight. To storm the castle, rescue Peter, and kill Victoria and every last one of those cruel, cruel people. But Max could not move forward, for Sue and Jeremiah had finally caught up to the scene. Without even turning around he knew what had happened, and he knew that those screams of pain and loss wouldn’t be subsided if she were once again left alone.

### **Part 3**

Jeremiah and Max sat at the table in Sue's home in silence. The days events had left them all withered, shocked, horrified, and exhausted. Upon returning to the town square, Max did the best he could to comfort Sue, who was inconsolably miserable. She had fallen to her knees in despair and wept long, hard tears. She wept for the death of her father, cut down by the brutes for seemingly no reason other than a display of terrible force. She wept for the loss of her brother, while her thoughts ran wild with visions of his fate. Was he being tortured? Was he already dead? She didn't know and not knowing only made her more upset.

When she had relented, at least somewhat, Max and Jeremiah helped her to her feet. Jeremiah began walking her back home, while Max gently lifted the remains of her father. Max walked a few feet behind them, not wishing for Sue to lay eyes on her father's disfigured corpse. When they had arrived, Sue had calmed down enough to direct her father's burial. She instructed that he be buried at a spot just behind the house, only a few feet into the woods. Max and Jeremiah did as they were instructed, Jeremiah picking up a shovel, and Max using his bare hands to move the dirt. When Poppa was buried, Sue stood staring at his grave. For a moment, she had clasped her hands and bowed her head in prayer, but it went on long enough for the others to surmise that she was merely delaying her exit. When enough was enough, Jeremiah guided her back to the house, Max following behind. Jeremiah ushered her into bed, closing the door behind him and now sat at the table across from Max.

Jeremiah stared at the table, eyes sullen and dark. "That poor girl..."

Max said nothing.

"She's been through so much," he continued. "First her mother passes away while she was nothing but a wee babe and now this..."

Max said nothing.

"That's where her mother was buried... that little spot in the forest. I guess it seemed only right to let her father rest there as well..."

Max said nothing.

"This world is so damn cruel. Why? That's the question I always ask myself. Why do these things happen? Why did that woman, Victoria, do this to us?"

Max's helmet rested on the table, allowing Jeremiah to look into his eyes. They were soft and sincere, despite his massive appearance, and despite his viciousness in battle. It was this softness that caused Jeremiah to grind his teeth in rage. "Will you say something you damned mute? Don't you have anything to say about what happened here?"

Max bolted out of his seat, nearly hitting his head on the ceiling. Jeremiah flinched and held his hands up defensively, suddenly reminded more of Max's combat abilities more than his need for words.

"I'm going." said Max, already reapplying his helmet.

"What? Wait, wait, wait!" Jeremiah rose and stood in front of Max, an ant trying to stop a moving boulder. "What do you mean you're going?"

"I am going to find Peter. I will bring him back." He stepped forward, forcing Jeremiah aside, lest Max push him aside with his sheer weight.

Max marched out the door and crossed the ranch to the main gate. He paused momentarily to observe the sun. It was falling westward, to his right, casting long shadows as the autumn dusk approached. He angled himself northward, and took a single step forward, the bursting of the front door halting him in his tracks.

“Why do you fight?!” shouted Jeremiah, his voice hoarse and ragged. “Don’t you see what they’ve done? What they will do? You fought a few of them, and you think you can take them all? There must be hundreds of soldiers there, thousands of terrible beasts and monsters that the devil himself wouldn’t have created! Do you really think strength is enough?”

Max stared deep into the forest ahead of him. The shadows created by the setting sun had already swallowed up any remaining light in the dense trees, creating a gaping maw of darkness. While staring deep into this maw, he finally spoke, “If my strength is not enough... I will not come back.”, and let the darkness swallow him whole.

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“Let me out of here you witch!” Peter screamed, pulling at the iron bars of his cell. They barely budged an inch. Across the room from his prison cell, the lavish throne room to which Victoria called home, sat Victoria herself, on a throne as lavish as the rest of the room, adorned with skulls of those she once called enemies. The skulls themselves had brilliant jewels adorning the eye sockets and teeth of solid gold. They dotted the throne, far bigger than Victoria needed, but when you work tirelessly to run an evil army it was worth it to splurge every once in a while.

Between the massive arm rests Victoria sat with her head between her hands, busily rubbing her temples. “Kid...” she groaned. “For the last time, shut up. I have a massive headache and far too much to do.”

“You killed my Father you- you... witch!” Peter rattled the bars harder and harder, but they refused to budge.

Victoria arose from her chair and swaggered over to the cell, resting against the stone wall beside it nonchalantly. “Yeah. I did. It was fun too.”

Peter halted his rattling, caught off guard by the simplicity of her remark. He slumped to the ground. Trying to keep his voice from shaking he wheezed out, “How... how could you? You’re a monster...”

Victoria snickered. “Sure am.”

“You’re not sorry, you’re not ashamed, you’re no better than a beast.”

Victoria howled with laughter. “Damn right! You catch on quick! I am not a saint, I am not a princess, I am a lunatic with nothing better to do. You, your father, and all the little peons in this world should be bowing to me, and because you’re not, I’ll start cutting you down until it’s all your feet can manage. So, as I was saying, shut up and let me think!”

“What do you have to think about you... witchess!”

“Creative.” snarked Victoria. “Well, you’re a part of this now so I don’t suppose it would hurt to tell you. But, I’m thinking of a plan.”

“...what kind of plan?”

“A plan.”

“... what?”

“Yeah, a plan. Any plan. Strategizing, ever heard of it?”

Peter narrowed his eyes at her from behind the bars. “What do you mean?”

Victoria threw her hands in the air. “Fucking bumpkins, I swear to the gods. Kid, let me put this as simply as possible. I. Have. No. Plan. I am trying to come up with one, end of story.”

“No plan? You have no plan? The hell am I here for then?”

“Oh I’ll think of something to do with you. I just didn’t want to leave the square empty handed. Speaking of.” With the speed of a hawk, she darted a hand into the cell, wrapping it

around Peter's face, her thick, sharp nails digging into his skin like talons. "Who was that giant that turned my army into a puddle?"

"How should I know- hurk!" Peter was cut off by Victoria digging her nails in another inch.

"You're a bumpkin but I know you're not *that* stupid. Tell me who he is or I'll castrate you and use them as decorative jewels."

"I really-hurk-don't know. He's just some drifter. He happened to be with us when we showed up to the square."

Victoria tightened her grip once more, but looking into Peter's eyes told her she was going to get nothing more. She loosened her hands, throwing them up again and returning to her throne. "Great. Just great. Now on top of everything else I have a hulking angry giant to deal with, and he's probably on his way here right now."

"How you figure? He doesn't know me. He's probably packed up and moved on already."

Victoria tutted. "No... No I don't think so. He jumped high enough to block out the sun to massacre a small army because I killed your Poppa, I doubt he would let a kidnapping go. Fortunately though, I have more than enough soldiers and experiments here to protect me."

"Experiments?"

At this, Victoria smiled from ear to ear. The malice in that grin cause Peter to back against the stone wall of his cell. "Oh, you'll find out soon enough, my dear."

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In a small clearing in the dense forest, the air blew gently between the leaves. The wind carried a chill with it, causing Max to shiver only slightly. His shivering was greatly reduced by the fire he had started, its heat and warm glow hypnotized him, letting his mind wander as he stared into its brilliance. On a spit above the flames was the charred remains of a beast. As night had drawn closer, the ravenous animals that haunted the dense woods had come to Max's camp looking for their next meal, only for the irony of the situation to be made quickly apparent. Max stared into the fire, absentmindedly chewing on a leg of boar(?) meat. A twig snapped to his left and with speed matched only by light itself, he was on his feet. His club had been drawn and was now laid over his arm, laying the club's "sights" directly on his target.

Jeremiah approached the campsite, arms raised in defense. Over his shoulder, Max presumed it was a magic rifle, was a stick attached with a sling. When their eyes met, Max lowered his club, but only slightly, and said nothing. Jeremiah's eyes darted from Max to the roasting boar, and he licked his lips. Max finally replaced his club and nodded to the fire. Jeremiah approached cautiously, reaching the fire and pulling a leg of meat for himself. He sat in the dirt across from Max, greedily gnawing at his meal. The two ate in silence until they were finished, the only thing interrupting the lack of conversation was the gentle wailing of the wind. It was Jeremiah who finally broke it.

"How much further?"

Max shook his head. "I don't know. Could be very far. Could be very near. Rest now. Walk later."

Jeremiah nodded. "And... what do you plan to do once you get there?"

"I will bring Peter back."

Jeremiah chuckled lightly and shook his head. "I knew you were going to say that. You didn't say how, or that you'll try and do your best. Just that you will."



Max said nothing.

"I envy that. I don't know what we'll find at that fortress but..." he stared deep into the flames. "I'm scared, Max. Are you not?"

Max did not answer.

"Max..." Jeremiah looked into Max's soft eyes. "There is something I must say before we get there." His eyes drifted from Max to the flames again, losing himself in the dancing light. "I... I was with the hunting party when they were captured.

We were deep in the forest when an elk appeared. The hunting party took aim and fired, but they missed, only barely. It ran off into the brush, and I offered to track it. It seemed like it was wounded and wouldn't get very far. The rest of the party was going in the direction of another set of tracks, hoping to find more. I found the elk, as I hoped, and began dragging it back to them. When I arrived I saw them fighting with those soldiers, and that *thing* called Butcher. They were no match. The soldiers fought so viciously, breaking their bones and hacking at limbs until they surrendered. All the while that witch cackled and taunted them. When I came upon that scene I was terrified. I couldn't bring myself to join the fight. I hid in fear. I cowered in a bush until the fighting was over and the hunting party had been taken captive."

Max's eyes remained on Jeremiah as he spoke. Though, Jeremiah did not meet his gaze.

"When they were being rounded up, I overheard that witch ask Sue's father if there were any others in the forest. He said that it was only them, and the rest of the party agreed. They were carted away and I ran. I ran as fast as I could in the other direction. I did all I could to run to Sue's home and warn her and Peter about the fate of her father. It was sheer luck that someone like you happened to be there. So you see now, why I am here. It was only by the good graces of Sue's father that I was able to survive and find you. I owe him a debt I can never repay. Perhaps by helping you save Peter I can repay that debt. A little bit, at least."

Jeremiah finally lifted his head to meet Max's eyes. He had expected them to be fierce with rage or disgust, but instead, Jeremiah saw only compassion and concern. It was this compassion that raised the heat of his guilt, causing him to hang his head in shame. "You must think I'm a coward."

For a while there was silence, save for the crackling of the fire.

"...Fear..." began Max, "Is a beast. As terrible as any beast of the forest. But Fear cannot be beaten with strength. This makes Fear a powerful foe. But Fear is not immortal. It can be killed, just like any beast. But you do not kill Fear with weapons. You kill Fear with this." He tapped a large digit to his temple. "You are stronger, here, than you were back then. That is all that is needed."

Eventually, the fire faded and exhaustion reached them both. They slept under the stars, as the gentle sounds of the forest, still teeming with nocturnal life, played their lullaby.

#### **Part 4**

The moment that the dawn's light reached them, Max and Jeremiah had awoken and left their camp. Once they had determined north, they began their walk. They moved in silence, save for the crunching of dead leaves and twigs beneath their feet. They walked for several hours, the faint morning sun quickly replaced by the bright glare of daylight. Their pace was slow. Deliberately slow, methodical. Should they rush to reach Victoria's fortress, they would only find themselves tired and weakened for the battle that awaited them.

Their pacing quickened, however, when they finally caught sight of the fortress, its spires just barely peaking over the hill they had been climbing. They reached the top, and stopped briefly, taking in the sight of it all. Victoria's fortress was just that, a mighty stone fortress, taller than any building that was known to be in Bafria. It was tall and boxy, its square central building most likely home to dozens of floors, and dozens of residents, not looking for visitors. The high walls surrounding it held a series of gaps, between which wooden ballista could just barely be seen. The castle itself was in the center of a landmass, gapped on all sides by a trench, most likely dug by the castle's servants. From this distance the two could see several soldiers bringing a cart through the front gate, a large wooden drawbridge. From the cart they saw the various disjointed limbs of what was once human beings. Most likely, this was another hunting party from different village. Victoria had clearly not slowed down whatever plans she had while the two had been traveling.

The pause ended, and Max resumed his stride, Jeremiah following closely behind.

"Those ballista will spot us the instant we're out of the forest..." said Jeremiah.

"Yes they will." said Max.

"We should attempt to get in from behind... I have some rope in my satchel, perhaps it's enough to help me to the other side. You, my friend, will probably be able to jump across." He chuckled, which Max did not return.

"You will enter from the rear. I will enter from the front." He said this simply and bluntly, as Max often did, but this time it caused Jeremiah to baulk.

"You- you'll enter from the front?" he said, confused.

Max spoke again, not looking behind him for confirmation, "I will draw the men to their posts. You will find Peter."

Again Jeremiah was left confused, but this time he let his confusion pass. He jogged to meet Max and keep pace with him, as best as his much shorter legs would carry him. He looked up at Max's helmet and nodded to him. "I will find Peter."



"Victoria! Madame Victoria!" screamed the head guard. His words bounced off of the castle walls as he rushed to her throne room. He burst through the heavy doors and heaved heavy gasps of air.

Victoria was already on her feet, practically giddy with delight. She dashed to the guard and got far too close to his personal space. "Is he here!? Is he here? Please tell me he's here!"

The head guard took a brief look at Victoria while he mulled over his answer. She was still wearing the same clothes she was in since yesterday, and had bags under her eyes, while her hair was frayed and oily. Clearly the excitement of waiting for this new foe to arrive had kept her up all night. Deciding that honesty was better than whatever punishment Victoria could cook up for having her time wasted, the guard spoke again. "Yes ma'am, he's at the front gate. The bridge

was drawn the moment we had sight on him and the ballista have been drawn, awaiting your orders.”

Victoria clapped her hands together, “Oh goodie, goodie, goodie! I’ll take my post.”

Several minutes later, Victoria and the head guard had taken up their post, at a central tower within the castle. It was high enough to survey the entire surrounding front of the fortress, and, while amplifying her voice with magic, Victoria could command any one of her soldiers with ease. Sure enough, the giant that had ruined her town square presentation was far below them, standing just at the edge of the trench, the shining helmet looking back up at them.

Victoria took a minute to calm herself before throwing on her best sneer and returning the gaze. As she did, she amplified her voice and called out, “Hear me, giant! Hear me and hear me well! You are trespassing upon castle Victoria. I show you mercy only this once, take one more step towards my fortress and be struck down by my men.” Without needing further order, the line of ballista cocked at the ready. “What say you?”

The giant squatted only for an instant, suddenly rising as he sprung into the air, his feet leaving heavy divots in the soil, fist drawn back at the ready. His trajectory put him directly in front of the drawbridge and when he was finally close, his fist rushed forward, colliding with the drawbridge like a boulder colliding with a dollhouse. The draw bridge shattered and tore, falling to pieces in a heap of splintery remains. His descent was rapid and fierce, dropping his full weight on the nearest soldier, turning him into nothing but a puddle.

From her perch, Victoria gazed down at the sight below, only occasionally hearing the yelp of her soldiers or the occasional cracking of breaking bone. She leaned back and turned to the guard by her side, hands at her hips. “Huh... I didn’t think he could do that.”



Max landed on the soldier unlucky enough to be closest to his descent with a sickly squish, turning the once bipedal thing into nothing more than a crepe. Landing in a crouch, hands already covered in the remains of his foe, he rose, unperturbed. His enemies surrounded him, forming a tight, but distant circle. There was a tension in the air as the soldiers remained at the ready but refused to surge forward. Max’s helmet tilted left, then right. He brought his blood stained hands together and pushed, the ugly snaps and pops of his joints echoing throughout the courtyard like dice in a cup. His arm reach behind him, and out slid his club.

The soldiers, still deciding if moving in was the right call, had their minds made up for them. Max’s club swung out from where he stood, its reach being far longer than they had expected. In an instant the soldier nearest to Max had his head pulverized into a mist of gore and blood. The soldiers next to him were instantly drenched in a ruby shower. It was now or never. Attempt to flee, and you’ll find out how long this giant’s club really is. Or even worse, find out how Lady Victoria treats deserters. Attempt to fight, and you may lose your life. The only joy that could be found in those final moments is knowing you gave your life in service to Lady Victoria and her wishes. The choice was easy, for most. For what else was there in this life, for a corpse held together by magic, but the glory of battle?

The first brave soldier rushed in, his bravery quickly yielding no results as Max’s club swung around and caught him in the ribs. The pain was quick and sharp, causing him to yelp in pain and clutch his side. Unfortunately for him, this momentary pause was long enough for Max to raise his massive foot and bring it forward to the soldier’s chest, the result being something like a cinder block colliding through a fresh strawberry pie, with just as messy a finale. Max

shook the remains of his foe off his boot and whirled around in time to see the next group of brave (or stupid) men rushing towards him. He drew the club forward, angling it dead center between the three of them. The next instant, there was a loud *BOOM*, and the following instant, the three men were nowhere, their number of dimensions having been quickly reduced by one.

The soldiers either kept finding their nerves or losing their patience, rushing in whenever they felt like they could take on the great beast before them. Each time, they were struck down with a swift movement, a single screech, and a violent sound like that of paint being thrown against a wall. The cacophony of violence continued until finally, Max was through. The first wave of foes were now reduced to nothing more than limbs tilting at awkward angles, and insides that were never supposed to be outside. Max drew a hand over his helmet, wiping away the gore that obstructed his view. He did this just in time to see the second wave of soldiers, much smarter than the first wave, hurrying into the castle, attempting to barricade the door behind them. Silently, Max thanked them for leading the way.



Deep in the castle, tucked away in the maze of stone walls, traps, and passageways, Victoria had retreated to her chambers. Not out of fear or worry, mind you, but out of preparation. She procured everything she assumed she would need for the final battle. Magic satchel, magic minigun, a collection of knives, a stash of Pearls, and of course, hair care products. One must look their best for their moment of triumph, after all.

Her concentration was jostled as the sounds of crashing, bashing, and screams suddenly cut short began to increase in volume. She quickly hurried to her mirror and fixed her hair, struggling to contain the sick glee she felt with the knowledge that her victory drew closer. Pleased with her appearance, she grinned wildly and hurled her fist at the mirror, shattering the glass to dozens of misshapen pieces. She picked up a particularly large piece with a sharp end. A quill pen would have done just fine, she supposed, but why not throw in a little theatrics for their guest?

Moments later, the space between Victoria's mirror and chamber door exploded, the space being filled with dust, rubble, and Max brushing the debris off of his fist. He examined the room. The guard he had recently "asked" for information had certainly not lied. This was certainly Victoria's chambers. It was obvious from its atmosphere of both a dungeon, and a hair parlor, with the only thing out of place for both of these locations being the large, elaborate bed prepared for Victoria herself. The sheets were a shade of black and red, matching her usual attire, but just above the sheets was a large misshapen knife, that Max recognized as a piece of mirror. Max glanced from the red stains on the bed to the space just above it. It was there he saw the source of the unusual red: a message, sprawled in blood, hastily written on the wall. THRONE ROOM, it proclaimed, complete with an arrow pointing westward, and a smiling face.

## **Part 5**

Max stepped into the room. He looked around and surmised it was, indeed the throne room. The room was fairly opulent, with elaborate, decorative braziers lining the left and right sides. In the middle, was a long carpet stretching from where he stood to the large stone throne, as equally as opulent and decadent were the jewels affixed to it, gleaming in the firelight. Max took another step forward, then immediately dashed to the side. What followed was a series of *THUNKs* as a set of knives dug themselves in where he had last been standing. Max scanned the room, only momentarily noting that the knives were sizzling in their place. They were either searing hot, or coated in a particularly nasty poison. It made no difference to Max, who thought it best to avoid them either way.

“Ah ha ha ha ha!” came the cackling sneer of Victoria. Though unseen, Max could feel her presence regardless. It was overwhelming, filled with spite and vitriol. “I knew you would avoid that. You’re pretty fast. Hopefully you can keep up that speed. My knives are quite poi-“

BOOM!

Max’s club was drawn and already singing its monstrous tune. If he couldn’t see Victoria, his best option was to attack everywhere. Max began systematically attacking the entire throne room, following a rhythm of BOOMS followed by a momentary pause of confirmation, before starting up again.

BOOM! Pause.

“Hey! Stop that! I-“

BOOM! Pause.

“Cut it out, I’m trying to-“

BOOM! Pause.

“Argh!”

The last shot had been angled at the ceiling, at a small perch that dangled above the throne. Max watched as a translucent shape fell from the perch, its form becoming clearer and less opaque as gravity took hold. The shape landed with a thud behind the throne, followed by the sounds of shuffling as the shape took cover behind the large stone seat.

“Ow! You bastard!” called Victoria from behind her cover. “Have you no manners as a warrior? The pen is mightier than the... whatever it is you have!”

BOOM!

Another shot rang out from Max. Above her head, the back of Victoria’s throne shattered to rubble, causing dust and pebbles to land on her head.

“You’re an insane brute!” she yelled. “It took a long time to get my throne looking that good! Do you even know how long it took me to get those wendigo skulls? They’re not exactly common!”

BOOM!

Another chunk of rock broke off the throne and whizzed by Victoria’s cheek. Her teeth were gritting as she shouted, “I’m getting tired of this! And here I was, thinking we could talk this out. I was going to surrender, you know.”

Max clacked open his club, loading new shells into the chamber. He took a few steps forward. As he did so he declared, “No, you weren’t.”

From behind what remained of her throne, Victoria grinned. “Yeah, not a chance.” She brought two fingers to her lips and let out a sharp whistle. What followed was a nasty rumbling that made the entire throne room shake. The loose rubble and pebbles trembled and shook, faster and harder as the rumbling formed distinct, thunderous footsteps. Max found himself taking a

step back. Giant footsteps were one thing, but the rhythm was far too dense. Whatever was coming, if it was another one of Victoria's experiments, it wasn't the same as Butcher.

The wall in front of Victoria exploded, sending debris and dust into their arena. From behind the dust cloud, Max could vaguely make out the shape that had burst its way through. It was just hard to process it, given all the appendages. What had burst through the wall was the culmination of Victoria's experiments, with an extra dash of insanity, stewed in a simmering pot of creative boredom. The thing was a tall, lanky creature, both sides of itself flanked with dozens of limbs. Their abdomen was disturbingly elongated, it was most likely that Victoria had merely combined a dozen torsos together in a row, limbs and all. The limbs on either side were a mismatched combination of legs and arms, noticeably unpaired to their opposite partners. The thing's face was equally unpredictable, a mess of eyes and teeth and ears, all stitched together into a vague orb shape that resembled a head, if one were to squint their eyes. The thing let out a horrible "Graah!", while its limbs flailed this way and that, only occasionally showing enough coordination push its malformed body in one direction over the rubble. Though, the action looked so arduous, it seemed less like pushing and more like dragging.

"Heheheee!" Victoria cackled in glee. "Say hello to Hun! He's the latest experiment I've been working on. Dozens of corpses combined to form the ultimate undead servant. The strength of a dozen men, the sensory organs of a dozen insects, and only enough brains to listen to me, myself and I. Hun, kill this giant!"

"Graah!" roared the beast.

As the thing approached, Max felt a degree of regret for the creature, and Butcher as well. It was not their choice to be mangled and maimed, then reconstructed into horrible creatures to do the bidding of someone like Victoria. The mangled bodies of Butcher and Hun were the result of grave misfortune in their lives. Before Victoria, they were most likely no different than Peter, his father, Jeremiah, or Sue. They were merely humans living out their lives in peace. It was this regret that made Max stand his ground against the beast. For while there was no way to undo this misfortune, perhaps Max could at least send them on their way. With a calm, righteous focus, he brought the end of his club to the beast's face, and waited only for the thing to take up his whole vision, before letting the shot ring out and ending the beast's miserable turn of fate.

From behind her cover, Victoria heard the loud BOOM, followed by the sickly splatter, and finally the heavy slumping of what could only be Hun. With her teeth grit, she let out a growl and popped up from behind what remained of her throne, shaking an accusing fist at Max. "That thing took me months to make! Months! I had to let the eyeballs gestate for a whole week! You brute! You lout! You-" Her rant was cut short as the end of Max's barrel was swung in her direction, dropping to cover once again just in time to hear the BOOM fill the space she was once in.

"Oh for-" Victoria rolled her eyes. "I have to do *everything* around here, don't I?" She sprang up from behind the throne, but was gone in an instant before Max could let out his next BOOM.

"Over here!" she teased, clinging to the wall on the right side of the throne room.

BOOM! But she was already gone.

"Yoo hoo!" sang the voice now attached to the opposite wall.

BOOM!

"Oops, I'm sorry, I meant over *here!*" the voice was close, far too close. Max swung his fist to his right, just barely feeling the heat from the residual magic as Victoria disappeared again. A sharp pain sank into his left side, penetrating his skin and lodging itself in his ribs. Max grit his

teeth but refused to shout in pain, instead opting to hurl his fist in the direction where the pain came from. Once again he missed, and the heat of the residual magic gently warmed his fist.

"Heee he he he..." Victoria's evil chortle filled the space, echoing off the walls of the stone throne room. Max began to perspire, but remained stout. "You lout... you brute... how dare you think you could take me on!"

His vision began to blur. Max refused to let his opponent know it, but the poison was effecting him. His mind was slowing down, his muscles were loosening, and his body was hot. It was like he was suffering from both a bad head cold, and had taken a serious muscle relaxer. He did his best to keep scanning the room, searching for any sign of Victoria. Suddenly a faint blue light appeared from the far corner of the room. Max heaved his body into action and began sprinting as Victoria cackled and let off the rounds from her magic minigun. The rounds whizzed by Max, leaving small smoking craters in the rock behind him. He ducked and rolled when Victoria changed trajectory, following him, but also appearing to spray bullets in random directions. She was either toying with him, or spraying wildly, both options seemed equally possible.

Another duck and roll, and Max found himself crouched behind Victoria's throne, using what little was left as cover. For a moment, and only a moment, he cursed himself for not leaving more of it in tact. The bullets sprayed wildly, whittling the throne down more and more, while Victoria cackled like a maniac, loud enough to be heard over the minigun's pummeling rhythm. As his cover shrank away, Max found himself thinking on his feet, using the only tool he had to his advantage. In desperation, he threw his club into the air, and to his relief, Victoria took aim. The bullets traveled upwards from the chair to her new target, blasting the club from its position in the air, arcing away from Max and skidding across the room.

Victoria, dumbstruck with glee, realized too late that the thing she had gunned down was not Max, but only his weapon. For a moment, she relented her assault, darting her eyes around to reclaim her target. Her eyes dashed right, nothing. Left- but Max was already bearing down on her. Though he was noticeably slower, lumbering as if the poison weighed him down, while his fist was already cocked back, and it wasn't likely to be as slow as the rest of him. Victoria dashed back, narrowly avoiding Max's fist as it passed just between her coat and corset.

Distance being the thing on her mind, Victoria teleported again, landing only a few feet behind Max. Her hand shot to the inside of her coat. Pearls. What she needed now was a Pearl. This giant was bearing down on her and even with her poison filling his veins he's getting closer and closer. It was only a matter of time until- Victoria's hand patted the inside of her coat. It grabbed nothing.

It happened in only a second. Her face swung to her pocket, as if staring daggers at her own compartment would reveal the pouch that carried her Pearls. When the staring proved ineffective, her head tilted upwards. Max's fist was rocketing at her, but that was not what grabbed her attention. What caught Victoria first, before the inevitable fury of Max's fist, was the tiny pouch clutched in it, the string tying it together lodged tightly between his digits. His fist was inches from her face before she ducked, pulling out another poison knife and- It happened in only a millisecond. Max's other hand was already on the move. And this one wasn't balled into a fist. It was holding a knife, its deadly poison still dripping at the pointed end.

The poison knife sank into Victoria's side, sizzling as it touched her flesh, causing her to cry out. She jumped back and held the wound, knowing all too well that the poison was already making its way through her system. She rose her head, ready to shout obscenities at Max through her gritted teeth, but couldn't get the words out. Partly due to the poison, mostly due to Max's

fist slamming squarely into her face. She saw stars and before she could react, another fist came crashing into her stomach, knocking the wind from her lungs. Victoria gasped for air before another blow caught her, this time Max's knee landing squarely under her jaw. It was enough to finally put her off balance. She fell backwards, landing hard on stone floor. The stars were beginning to clear, but they were quickly shadowed by Max's frame. He planted his knees on either side of her chest and began slamming his fists into her face. One after the other, left then right, left then right, as the sounds of the heaving blows and splattering of blood echoed throughout the hall.

Max pulled his fist back, for what he hoped would be the last time. The poison in his blood was making his own fists weigh as much as cinder blocks. He brought it down but it did not connect. A hand, Victoria's hand, had shot up from its place at her sides and caught around his forearm. Max's fist trembled at the resistance. Something was wrong. The poison was indeed slowing him down, weakening him, but Victoria was far too scrawny to put up this much of a fight, especially after several blows to the head.

Her eyes opened, and Max drew back. Victoria's eyes, normally a sharp, piercing red, were now as white as moonlight, and glowing just the same. Defying gravity itself, Victoria began to rise without making any effort to push off the ground. She rose and angled herself, all the while forcing Max's arm away. Finally, she was upright, her feet hovering just a few centimeters off the ground. Max clung to her, legs wrapped around her waist. Should he let go, he worried he might not have the strength to get this close again. He did all he could to force his fist through her, but it wouldn't give. Finally, Victoria had had enough. With the force of a tornado, a blast of unseen power arose from her, and Max was sent tumbling across the arena, skidding to a halt at the far end of the throne room.

It took every ounce of strength he had, but Max finally managed to prop himself up on his elbows. He inched back a bit, letting his back rest against the cold stone wall. Poison or no, mysterious force blast or no, the battle was not yet over... except Victoria did not approach. She remained where she was, hovering in the air. Her face was monotone, yet her head rotated this way and that, examining the area. It tilted down to her hands. Though bloodied and mangled from the battle, she flexed them, the broken bones and joints making sickly popping and scraping sounds. A few flexes later, and they were silent; completely healed as if she'd eaten another one of her Pearls. Her pale eyes continued scanning the room until they fell on Max.

For a moment nothing happened. And as the moment dragged on Max's unease would not cease. Something was wrong. Max's head was swimming in pain, but it wasn't receding. It wasn't going away but it wasn't getting worse either. The poison in his blood seemed to stop in place, settling in his veins. Max realized he was no longer breathing, yet he felt no pain because of it. No air came in, yet his body didn't seem to need air anymore, his lungs apparently satisfied for the first time in his life. This feeling, a feeling of pause, was unsettling to Max. The more he mentally examined his body, the more discomfort he felt. His lungs no longer needed air, his belly was no longer asking for food, he hadn't drank anything in hours yet his tongue was not crying out for water. His ears could no longer hear sound, the air particles that were supposed to be hitting his ear drums seemed to merely hang there in space. This was not a body that was healed, and this was not a body that was slowly decaying due to poison, this was a body that had stopped. Frozen, in some bizarre limbo. Existence, yes, but one where he could only exist as he was, in that moment, forever. It was as if in that moment, Max would not age, not decay, not metabolize... not anything.



Just outside their arena, nature itself was experiencing something similar. The nearby brook from which large salmon were making their yearly trek, flowed on, yet at a steady, monotonous pace. The salmon, meanwhile, swam as they did, in a repetitive, cyclical motion, making no progress yet not falling behind. The flowers blooming nearby stood stalk still, their pedals and leaves no longer taking in their vital nutrients, yet remaining upright, basking in the now frozen sunlight. Should a passing starship had seen the planet in a momentary glance out of the window, they may have noticed the planet was stationary. For a moment that stretched on for eternity, the world itself had paused.

The moment was not broken, only continued, as Victoria finally spoke, in a voice that was not her own. "Max..." her new voice was as hollow and empty as her eyes. "You are called... Max."

Max dared not move. He dearly wished he knew where his club was.

"Max... I have seen you... from afar."

Max said nothing.

"You... have been harming... my puppet..."

The thing speaking through Victoria trailed off, and Max remained still. She, it, raised its head to Max. "You... are afraid. You are afraid for the first time... in so very long." The voice was taking on a warmer, more soothing tone that Max found he could not trust, no matter how calm and enveloping it was. The thing's words wrapped gently around his brain like a silk blanket. "You are afraid... of me. You are afraid of me... because you know I can end your life?"

Max said nothing. Silently, he cursed this thing, for being correct.

"You are thinking to yourself, 'this thing is correct'. And yet..." There was a long pause, to which Max held his breath. "Yet... I have found no point in ending the lives of your kind. In my search for an answer... I thought your kind would reveal new information..."

Another pause. Perhaps this being was waiting for an answer. Max was far too weak to reply. The being lifted its head toward the ceiling and sighed wearily. "I am tired... I am tired of trying to understand them. I no longer wish... to concern myself... with your kind and your reality." The being looked down at Max. The light behind its eyes was beginning to fade. "Max... tell me... this feeling... is this... finality?" Victoria hung in the air as the light behind her eyes dimmed fainter and fainter until-

"Gasp!" From behind his mask, Max caught his breath. He took sharp, quick breaths, savoring each one. For better or worse, he felt the pain of the poison surging through him again. His ears heard the sounds of clattering weapons and shouts of panic from the soldiers just outside the throne room, he felt sensation itself coming back to him, the stimuli hitting him all at once in a meaty uppercut of feeling. It was simultaneously alarming, yet relieving. His momentary relief was punctuated by the loud smacking sound of Victoria's body crumpling to the floor. She lay on her back, where Max had been on top of her only a moment ago. She moaned and groaned, but remained where she was. Max scanned the arena for his club, until he spotted it. It lay where he left it, across the room, now dented with magical bullet wounds. He dragged himself over to it, and picked it up, trying not to think about how heavy it now weighed. From where she lay, he heard Victoria cough and spit. She gagged and spat up blood and god knows what else. There was a soft *tink*. Most likely, she spat out some of her own teeth.

"You... bumpkin." She sneered. "You think this hurts? You think this will kill me? You only clipped me. As soon as I get up you're dead! I'm killing you, I'm killing that little brat, his little brat of a sister, that whole town, all of them! You didn't beat me! You cannot beat me!" Yet, she stayed still on her back.

Max took a step forward and nearly crumbled in a heap. He fell to his knees, using his club as a support. He was exhausted, yes, but exhaustion wouldn't bring him to his knees. Victoria's poison was working its way through him, sapping his strength every minute. He spoke in between heaving breaths, "Stay... down..."

Victoria spat again. This time in spiteful rage. "Don't you... tell me... what to do, you little... you little... fuck you!"

Max struggled to his feet, once again using his club as a makeshift cane. He prodded his way to Victoria, who hadn't moved anything but her mouth. "-those fat ugly fists at me again, see what happens! If I had slept last night you wouldn't have stabbed me! I didn't even eat breakfast! I was hungry! If you didn't steal my Pearls I wouldn't have been distracted!"

The club swung over her face, her vision swallowed by the barrel at the end of its rock casing. "Alright, alright!" she yelled. "I get it... I get it... you want the antidote to the poison? You want to know where that brat is? Get that thing out of my face and I'll tell you."

A click. "No."

"No? No!? The hell do you mean, 'no'!? I'm bargaining for my life here!"

"Don't care."

"Don't care'." Victoria mocked. "You're a real meathead. Don't you get it? You're going to die. My poison wasn't exactly something I made to be gotten over in a day. And that little brat is being held by my guards. The guards who were told to kill him at the first sign of trouble. I can fix all that. I can make all that go away. Just... c'mon, let me go."

"No."

Victoria rolled what was left of her eyes. "It's like I'm talking to a wall. Whatever. Go for it, kill me. Not like I care anyway. I'll be back on the streets before you know it!"

Victoria saw it and grinned. A twitch. A momentary hesitation from her attacker. "Oooh!" She crooned. "That got you to stop, huh? You want to know what I mean when I say I'll be back? Well you know what? No more. Don't care. I'm not telling you." She stuck out her tongue defiantly. "You're all bumpkins! You don't have a fucking clue about how this world works. But I do." She grinned wide, her blood turning her white teeth into a red mess. "And when I come back... ooh I'll show you what real power is." She sneered and inched her head closer to the barrel, and after the shot rang out, her smile was all that remained.

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Max slumped against the stone wall to his right. He felt a momentary bit of relief as the cold stone seemed to ease his skin. His fight with Victoria had left him sluggish and tired. Through it all, he pushed. After all, there was still work to do. Jeremiah and Peter were still somewhere in the castle. He pressed on, ignoring the pain the best he could. Victoria hadn't lied, her castle truly was a labyrinth. Max had already been through countless hallways and passageways just to find Victoria. Finding where Peter, Victoria's highly guarded prize, was going to be no easy task. But it wasn't the layout that Max was worried about, it was time. Already he was unsure of how long it would take for Victoria's poison to wear him down, but what about Jeremiah and Peter? Max tried not to think about it during the battle, but he had not seen Jeremiah during his assault. He had not been seen since they agreed on the battle plan...

Max looked up and saw one of Victoria's soldiers rounding the corner. The guard stopped in his tracks. When Max had been searching for Victoria, a straggler had come upon him once or twice, but were usually smart enough to run in the opposite direction. But, once this guard

noticed that Max was visibly weakened, he took his chance. When the axe that was supposed to come down on the intruder's head was stopped by a hand clasping his own, the guard knew that he had misjudged the situation. With the information obtained from a single axe-wielding guard, Max stumbled toward the room Peter had been placed in. He took heavy, heaving, painful steps until he reached a door. On the left, before the entrance, was a bronze plaque reading "Laundry Room". In front of the door lay another one of Victoria's soldiers, stone dead. There was a trail of blood leading through the door to where he now lay. This one, surmised Max, must have bled out after being attacked. Max pushed open the door.

What he saw was Peter, crumpled in a heap in the corner. His body was impaled with multiple spears, and his skin was pale. His eyes were glazed, and still. Max finally let himself fall to his knees. He grit his teeth and raised his fists, bringing them down again and cratering the floor in front of him. He let out a breath of anguish, as well as exhaustion. He looked up again, flinching away from Peter's corpse. His eyes fell on the body of another man in the room. This one had also bled out, it seemed, and its hands were still clasped tightly around his sword. Around him lay several of Victoria's men. Each covered with thin but fatal blows from a sword. The trail of blood from the one who tried to escape originated from this group. Max crawled to the still body of Jeremiah and gently closed his eyes. Max surmised that whatever occurred in this room, it was truly in act of bravery. This thought gave him some peace as his body finally gave up on him. He collapsed to the floor, and darkness enveloped him.

## Epilogue

A bright light stabbed at his vision, and Max stirred. His head ached as he tilted it upwards, eyes stinging in the light. He moved his arm to rub his head, only to have it catch. He shook his wrist, jangling a large metal cuff attached to an equally large metal chain, attached to the only moderately large stone wall. His eyes adjusted to the light, and he confirmed he was in a cell, the source of the light being a beam of sunlight from a nearby window, barred of course. Daylight. Who knows how long it had been since he had found Peter and Jeremiah. How long as Victoria's poison been in his body, for that matter? Whatever length of time it was, it was long enough for what remained of Victoria's army to drag him to a cell and chain him up. For a moment, he briefly wondered why they hadn't simply killed him. Why didn't seem to matter, at this point.

The heavy wooden door creaked open and a soldier marched in. The skinny thing clearly felt more confident now that Max was incapacitated. He smugly sneered through the bars of his cell and began berating him. "You big lout!" he shouted, in a gruff, yet still weak voice. "You killed Queen Victoria and now it's all gone to hell!" The soldier began pacing back and forth, stopping only occasionally to reach through the bars and point an accusing digit at Max. "Everyone's in a ruckus because of you! Management is up in arms cause no one is bossing anyone around anymore. No one knows who's taking orders from who anymore! The damn bridge needs to be repaired, there's corpses stinkin' up the place, oh, and let's not even talk about the turnover! And who does this all fall to? Me! Of course! No one gives a spiff when I'm here working my arse off at the breaking wheel all damn day but the instant there's a fire, they expect me to put it out! And a fire? Really? Was that necessary? You were already tearing up the place!"

His hands clasped around the bars and he stuck his face into the gap, giving his best, meanest face. "Why if these bars weren't here I'd come right in there and--"

In an instant Max sprang from the wall, kicking off of it and hurling his full weight towards the bars. The chain holding him to the wall broke apart as if made of tissue paper. His hand clasped around the soldier's head as if it was nothing more than a softball. The guard yelped and whimpered and beat his fists against Max's hand, but he may as well have been punching a brick wall. Max brought his face close to the soldier. "Antidote."

"R-right away, sir." The soldier whined.



The wagon creaked and squealed as Max hauled it along the path. The rickety wooden thing wasn't much, but it was all the soldiers of Castle Victoria could provide him. Victoria was not much for expenses that benefited the average castle laborer. And so it was, after Max had muscled his way into obtaining an antidote for Victoria's poison, he had taken to giving orders to the remaining soldiers of Castle Victoria. One would think that taking orders from the man who killed your boss wouldn't be top priority, but when it became clear that disagreeing with Max meant a more violent means of debate, they were happy to oblige. Max had ordered them to gather him the bodies of Jeremiah and Peter (gently and carefully, of course), a cart to transport them, and whatever else around the castle could have been of use, as long as it wasn't part of Victoria's awful experiments. Whether they complied with him out of fear, or to simply get him to leave faster, Max neither knew or cared.

When his cargo was ready, he set off alone, on the long dirt path, heading south towards Bafria. His pace was slow and steady. He did not want to upset the cart, and its precious cargo.

The soldiers had not been able to scrape together much that was not tainted by Victoria's experiments, but they were able to provide at least something. One found the last of her Pearls, a small bag with maybe a dozen of them in a secret stash. Another brought what remained of Victoria's wardrobe, hoping the fine cloths and silks would satisfy him. Neither mattered all that much to Max.

Hours passed as he walked, until he finally came to a stop at Sue's tiny house. The animals that once roamed the small ranch were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they were eaten by beasts in Peter's and Sue's absence. Perhaps they had starved. Either way, the small space offered a silence that Max had not heard for his entire journey back. The rattling of the cart, plus the rumbling of the occasional beast in the forest, provided a melancholy dirge to his journey.

Sue was nowhere to be seen. Presumably she was still inside, recuperating from Victoria's "show" a few days prior. His rest was brief, as there was still work to be done. He brought the cart around back and found the spot where they had buried Sue's father. Needing only his hands, he carefully moved the dirt and made two spaces. He gently lay the corpses of Peter and Jeremiah to their final resting places. The dirt was replaced and Max finally allowed himself a true rest. His back lay against the wall of Sue's home, staring deep at the fresh piles of earth.

Something stirred inside the house. There was the rustling of covers, and the pattering of feet that drifted away, morphing into the sounds of feet against dry grass as it approached him. The figure rounded the corner of the house and stood there, watching the piles of dirt as intently as Max was. Finally, it slumped beside him.

"... Thank you." Sue said, to which Max nodded.

The two watched the dirt piles in silence, save for the whispers of the wind and the growing rumble of beasts, lurking just beyond the thick nest of trees.