Summary

Sequel to Hell's Neighbours

When the past catches up with Mr H Shoe Crab it leads to some devastating consequences. Can our guys help?
The Man With the White Hair

Joe had seen him twice now. Definitely seen him twice. Two days ago he had thought he might have seen someone, then he had moved on to thinking he had imagined it. But now it was definite - he had seen someone and that someone was following him. Whoever it was was being careful, or had at the very least, begun by being careful, but over the last two days, this man had become increasingly visible and increasingly scary. He was in New York. He felt at home there, he felt comfortable there, or he did. Now as he saw the man for the third time, he knew he wanted to be just about anywhere else. He was across the street, watching, staring, not even moving. Joe hadn’t intended to meet his gaze, but the moment he locked eyes with him, he knew that it was the end of the cat and mouse game he had been playing. There was recognition in the man’s eyes, there was hatred but most of all, there was malice.

Turning, Joe ran. Pushing a couple of tourists aside as he headed for the relative safety of a hotel lobby, Joe gasped for breath as he ran inside, drawing attention as the revolving doors remained spinning for almost a minute after he stepped through into the cool black and grey marbled interior. Staff on the front desk stared with distaste and the man at the Concierge desk picked up the phone. Possibly calling the police, Joe thought to himself. Good. It seemed ridiculous… perhaps, but he was frightened. Still standing in the lobby, Joe pushed his hand into his pocket and curled his fingers around the cell phone. Perhaps he’d call the police himself, just to be sure?

“Sir?”

Joe’s heart leapt into his mouth at the voice suddenly beside him. Turning slowly, he saw the man from the Concierge desk standing next to him. Turning a little further, Joe saw the man who had been following him still unmoving on the opposite side of the street.

“That man,” Joe managed, still breathless.
“‘What man, sir?’ the Concierge asked politely.

A city bus drove past the entrance to the hotel, but Joe was ready, he knew exactly where the man was standing.

“Next to the hotdog vendor, on the opposite side. White hair, dark suit and…”

Joe trailed off; the bus cleared from view and man was nowhere to be seen.

“He… He was right there! He’s been following me! I…” Joe looked up at the Concierge. Something about Joe’s expression was drawing a sympathetic smile from the man who had initially believed the guitarist to be a drunk or a troublemaker.

“Can I get you anything?” the Concierge asked. “Water?”
Joe nodded grimly. “And the police.”

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Joe dropped his head into hands. What he had originally felt was the relative safety of the hotel had now become a battlefield.

“Look!” he sighed in exasperation, finally raising his head to look at the police officer. “If you don’t believe me, say so. You’ll save me so much time that way.”
“I didn’t say I didn’t believe you,” the officer began.
“Just that you think I’m lying?”
“There’s a big difference between lying and being wrong, Mister Trohman,” the officer skirted around the problem.

“Not to me there isn’t. To me, it’s either you believe me, or you don’t. The reason you don’t believe me doesn’t really matter.”

“It’s not even a case of that,” the officer tried to explain. “He hasn’t actually done anything illegal.”

“He’s stalking me!” Joe returned, exasperated. “Surely that’s illegal?”

“Seeing the same man twice is not evidence of stalking, Mister Trohman.”

“So? Then what is? When he kills me?”

“That would be murder,” the officer replied dryly.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re finding this amusing!” Joe scowled. “So, what you’re saying is you can’t do anything until he actually attacks me?”

“If he attacks you, yes. That’s a crime, we can’t do anything until a crime has actually been committed.”

“And this is why I pay taxes? So you can find my killer after I’m dead?”

“He could be a tourist, Mister Trohman, just a tourist.”

“He could be a psycho.”

“Then the best advice I can offer you is to make sure you’re never alone, that you don’t ride the subway and that you ask cab drivers to lock the doors. Do you drive?”

“Sometimes,” Joe shrugged.

“Then keep your doors locked and your windows up at all times. I’ve got a description of the man, so…”

“So if anything happens to me you’ll know who to blame.”

“I’m sorry, Sir, there’s nothing else I can do. Did you want to call someone?”

“Yeah, I guess I should,” Joe sighed; as much as he didn’t like what he was being told, he understood that the man had technically, at least in the eyes of the law, done nothing wrong.

“I understand, Mister Trohman, I really do, but there really is nothing we can do. With any luck, it’ll be nothing. Maybe a fan?”

Joe smiled. To outward appearances it was in response to the officer’s acknowledgement that he was a musician with a following, but Joe had heard something else, something that had raised his spirits somewhat. He had heard the word luck.

“Can I give you a ride back to your apartment?” the officer offered.

Joe nodded thoughtfully. “Thanks. Appreciate it. Actually, can you take me somewhere else, please? It’s a friend’s place.”

“Sure,” the officer rose and led the way from the conference room, back through the hotel lobby.

Thanking the Concierge on the way out with a twenty tucked in his palm, Joe found himself consciously not looking for the man who he was reasonably certain was following him. Once outside the hotel entrance, Joe’s eyes were inexorably drawn to the last place he had seen him. With a sigh of relief at seeing no one, Joe turned towards the patrol car, gasping in shock and stepping back a pace as he noticed the familiar looking man behind the wheel.

“What’s wrong? Have you seen him?”

The officer’s voice was his own, but his face had become that of the man he now feared.

“Wh… What…” Joe stammered, noticing that each and every person nearby, be they male or female all wore the same face.

“Get in the car, Sir.”

The voice sounded suddenly and strangely intimidating and almost from nowhere, a hand shoved him into the back of the patrol car. Sprawled across the seat Joe kept moving even as the car began to
move. Reaching for the car door on the opposite side, Joe’s eyes widened as the door opened unexpectedly and a hand reached in, before dragging him out the other side. Falling breathlessly to his knees, the first thing Joe noticed was that the street was carpeted. Looking up, Joe gasped, disorientated and confused but relieved to find himself in his own bedroom with a familiar face staring down at him.

“What The Hills was that?” the man exclaimed as he reached down to help Joe to his feet.
“A dream?” Joe asked, still shaken by what he had just experienced.
“Joe, I’ve been weaving dreams for a millennia and I’ve got to tell you, that was no dream.”
“Maybe it’s different here?” Joe suggested hopefully.
“No, Joe, it was all wrong. It was… Parts of it were real.”
“It sure felt real,” Joe’s shoulders sagged as he began to relax.
“No, Joe, you don’t understand. It was real… parts of it. I shouldn’t have been able to pull you out. I effectively woke you, don’t you understand? I reached in to your dream or whatever The Hills it was and pulled you out!”
“I heard you, Marcus, but I don’t understand the significance of it,” Joe yelled back.
“Me neither,” the Sandman frowned, chewing on his lower lip.
“Why are you here?” Joe asked finally acknowledging the presence of the Sandman. “Not that I’m not grateful, but…”
“Oh!” Marcus grinned. “I’m delivering discvitations.”
“Discvitations?”
“Yeah,” Marcus shrugged holding up a small gold disc. “It’s an invitation… on a disc. You’ve seen them before, Joe,” the Sandman reminded him. “The disc that you had when Patrick was being sold by Allandra.”
“That was a discvitation?” Joe asked sceptically.
“Okay, they’re really called Nyheter discs, but,” he grinned as he paused, “isn’t discvitiation more fun? Especially for this!”
“Well, what is this exactly?” Joe asked, puzzled by Marcus’ exuberance.
“Silas’ wedding of course!” if it were possible his grin broadened. “You can come, can’t you?”
“You guys don’t hang about, do you? They’ve only just met!”
“But why wait? They’re perfect for each other,” Marcus argued, surprised by Joe’s comment.
“Yes,” Joe smiled in return. “They are, aren’t they? When is it?”
“Next week,” Marcus handed over the gold plastic disc. “You… You will come? All of you?”
“Yours or mine?” Marcus smirked in return.
“Both,” Joe replied absently as he stared at the disc. “How do I play this? Oh!”

As he said the work play, a hologram emerged from the centre of the disc. Now standing atop the disc, miniature versions of Silas and Laura appeared, dressed in gold robes of state, with Laura seated and Silas standing behind her. Lord Joshua’s voice could be heard emanating from some unseen speaker.

‘Their Majesties, The Lord Joshua and The Lady Eleanor cordially invite you to the marriage of their son, The Lord Silas to The Lady Laura on the day of the Celebration of Light.’

“Celebration of Light?” Joe asked, tilting his head questioningly.
“Next Sunday,” Marcus replied with another broad grin.
“Are you the best man?” Joe asked, his traumatic experience momentarily put behind him.
“Of course I am!” Marcus shrugged playfully. “But Silas has still asked me to Stand For Him too.”
Joe rolled his eyes. “We’ll be there.”
“Joe,” Marcus’ voice dropped to a much more subdued tone. “What about your… I don’t know what to call it.”
“Dream?”
"It wasn’t a dream, Joe, trust me,” he added with concern.
“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Joe replied; he almost sounded convincing.
“Okay,” Marcus frowned, deciding not to press the matter and unnerve Joe more than he already was. “I better get on, lots to do, you know.”
“I’ll see you on Sunday,” Joe nodded, waving the disc.

Marcus gave a forced smile as he faded from view. Suddenly alone, Joe felt rather more vulnerable. It was time to make a phone call.

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“Father?” Marcus stood at the entrance to Lord Joshua’s office, shifting nervously from foot to foot.
“Do you have a moment?”
“Marcus, come in!” Joshua smiled. “Now your mother’s given my job away, I’m hoping you’re going to ask me something that’ll keep me busy for more than a moment,” he smiled broadly.
“Advice with your speech next week, is it?”
“Father, I…” Marcus lowered his eyes, uncertain what to say. One thing he knew for certain, he was worried.
“Come in, sit down,” Joshua saw the nervousness and concern in his son’s eyes. “What’s wrong?”
“That’s just it, I don’t know,” he shrugged unhappily as he approached his father. “I just came from Normal World. There’s… what seems to be some sort of Dimensional Reality Overlap going on, but it… it wasn’t that straightforward. It was as though a partial reality had invaded a dream.”
“Who are you talking about?” Joshua asked.
“Joe. I got him out, but…”
“You got him out? You woke him? You?”
“Yeah,” Marcus nodded with a vague shrug. “But I’ve done it before. It’s easy to wake people in Normal World apparently. According to Patrick, just shaking them is enough.”
“Shaking them!” Joshua exclaimed his surprise.
“They don’t have Sandmen or Benzedrines. It’s all a bit haphazard really. How anyone sleeps is beyond me.”

Joshua sighed as he tried to imagine a world without organised sleep. Finally giving up on the idea, he continued:
“But did it seem like one of their dreams?”
Marcus appeared deflated as he considered the question. “No. I’ve seen enough of their dreams, both Pete and Patrick’s to know what they feel like and this really wasn’t a dream. Now that I think about it, he wasn’t even lying down, he was standing up in the middle of his bedroom.”
“Then there really is only one possibility,” Joshua mused. Marcus looked up into his father’s eyes, willing him to continue. “He wasn’t asleep. Where could the dream element have come from?”

Marcus shook his head. “Normal Worlders create their own dreams.”

Joshua raised an eyebrow at the reply, prompting Marcus to continue.

“Oh, they’re sloppy and uncoordinated,” the Sandman frowned. “Nonsense really. Whenever they have one that even approaches being vivid or realistic, it scares them and they turn to nightmares. They have no control over them. Like I said, no Sandmen.”
“But this wasn’t a nightmare?” Joshua asked.
“There were elements, but it was really just his own mind handling what it believed was a dream. It… It was real, father.”
“And the reality was?”
“Someone is after him. Someone with a lot of power. Enough to disrupt reality.”
“From Carousel?”
“There was a slight familiarity to the signature, but no.”
“Can you spare a Sandman to watch him?”
“Yeah, I can find someone, that’s no problem, but what about a Benzedrine too?” Marcus asked hopefully. “In case he’s actually sleeping when it happens.”
“I really don’t want to worry Silas at the moment. Just let the Sandman know that shaking will be enough. I’ll make some enquiries. I’ll also get…” pausing he sighed heavily. “I’ll ask Robert to send a spy master to watch him.”
“You’re finding this hard aren’t you? Giving up the captaincy.”
“It’s for the greater good,” he smiled. “It makes your mother happy and that makes me happy.”
“But what about you? I mean your needs, not just…”
“I’ll never stop worrying, whether I do the job or not. That’s something I know we share and that you understand.”

Marcus nodded sympathetically.

“Now, go work on your speech and… Marcus?”
“Yes?”
“Thank you for bringing this to me,” he smiled with appreciation of Marcus’ trust and faith in him and for keeping his promise not to recklessly do his own thing.

Marcus smiled and nodded. He hadn’t simply offloaded the problem, he was still worried, still involved, but he didn’t feel alone with it. It was comforting.

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“Hey,” a voice called gently. “Has anyone told you that you look beautiful today?” Laura looked up and smiled at Silas. “I believe you’ve mentioned it once or eight times this morning.”
“I’m slipping;” he smiled back, settling himself on the couch beside her. “I should have told you ten times already.”
“Well, if you want to catch up, you can tell me twice now,” Laura pressed her lips gently against his, drawing a sigh from the Benzedrine as she pulled back.
“I love you,” he breathed, placing a tender kiss on her cheek. “I love you,” he repeated with a second kiss to the base of her neck before taking his place next to her.

Resting her head gently on his shoulder, Laura relaxed completely as Silas caressed her hair. It was a beautiful scene, the pair simply enjoying each other’s company, sitting on the patio leading from the breakfast room and overlooking the palace’s extensive gardens decorated with flowers, shrubs and trees of all types, sizes and colours. The powerful scent coming from the jasmine surrounding the patio was heady and rich and had been a driving factor in making this particular spot Laura’s favourite place in the palace. It was also where Silas had officially proposed; how could it not be special?

“I’m sorry to spoil this moment, but I do need to speak to you both.”

Laura jerked upright suddenly and awkwardly and Silas looked up, frowning at the sound of his mother’s voice and the instant cooling effect it had had on both of them.

“Yes, mother?” Silas almost whined.
“I don’t believe you’ve discussed the Extension Ceremony with Laura yet, have you?”
“I… ah… no,” Silas hedged.
“And yet you’ve already sent out the invitations?”
Silas sighed his frustration. “It wasn’t… I mean I didn’t do it on purpose. I was just…”
“Silas? What’s wrong?” Laura asked now concerned.
“My dear, let me explain.” Eleanor smiled as she took a seat on the adjoining couch. “My son is very much in love with you and wants to marry you more than anything. Apparently, he wants to so
much, he’s overlooked a few details.”
“Is everything all right?” Laura asked nervously.
“Well, my dear Laura, that’s your decision to make. You see, what Silas has neglected to tell you is
that the ruling family live, not for years, but millennia.”
“Oh, no, I did know that… I… Oh, I see. I’ll get old, but Silas won’t.”

Eleanor smiled kindly as she saw the expression of extreme sadness on Laura’s face. The need to be
with him tempered by the worry that as she aged, he wouldn’t want her.

“Or, you could submit to the Extension Ceremony. It’s completely painless and takes no more than
an hour or so, but it will mean that you will live the life of a member of the family. You may grow
old with Silas, alongside him over many millennia. It isn’t something we just assume you’ll want and
we understand if you want to give it some thought.”
Laura chewed her lower lip as Silas’ brow creased. “You mean I’ll spend thousands of years with
Silas?”
“I’m two thousand, six hundred now,” Silas clarified. “There’s roughly one hundred extended years
to one ageing year. So, a good few thousand left, I hope.”
“Of course! Of course I’ll do it. You don’t need to ask. Spending the rest of my life with Silas is a
dream come true. Increasing that life a hundred times is beyond wonderful!”

Silas’ shoulders dropped as all the tension and stress of the moment fell away. His arms suddenly
found themselves wrapping around Laura and pulling her close. Eleanor smiled at the sight.

“Ah! My baby boy, all grown up and getting married!”
“Mother!” Silas objected, somewhat embarrassed.
“Silas, your children are always your children, no matter how old they are. You’ll learn that well
enough when you have your own.”

Silas grinned and blushed lightly at the idea.

“I’ll make arrangements for the ceremony,” Eleanor smiled as she rose from her seat.
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“Yeah?” came the voice on the other end of the connection.
“Pete? It’s Joe.”
“What’s wrong?”

Joe sighed; Pete sounded concerned, was it really that obvious from just three words?

“Pete… Can I come stay with you for a few days?”

Joe sounded tired. At least that was part of it. There was a quality to his voice that, frankly, Pete
didn’t recognise. It actually left him feeling slightly unnerved and hoping that it was simple tiredness.

“Sure, Joe,” Pete replied in as upbeat a tone as he could muster. “Where are you?”
“At home,” he answered in a flat voice. “Don’t you want to know why?”
“Sure, Joe, but you can tell me when you get here,” Pete paused; something was very definitely not
right. “Do you want me to pick you up, Joe? You sound really… I don’t know… A little out of it?”
“Yeah, I am. I’m sorry, Pete, I’m really freaked out. Something weird’s going on… I can’t even
explain.”
“Stay where you are, I’m coming over.”

Comforted by his friend’s decisiveness, Joe found himself nodding, only realising what he was doing
when Pete spoke again.

“Joe? You still there? I’m coming over, is that okay?”
“Yeah… Y..yeah, sorry Pete, I was nodding, can you believe?”

Resisting the urge to say yes, Pete frowned; Joe was very distracted, he’d even go so far as to say scared but scared of what? It didn’t seem to him that he was likely to open up over the phone; the faster he got there the better.

“Okay, Joe, I’ll see you in twenty, okay?” Pete waited impatiently for a reply. “Joe?” he prompted. Still no reply. “Joe!”

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“Your Majesty!” Robert, recently invested as Captain of The Guard, rose and stood to attention as Lord Joshua knocked on the open door of his office.

The Guardhouse was linked to the palace but as a general rule, Joshua had almost always conducted business from his own office within the palace rather than visit the adjacent building. Now, not only did it seem strange to be walking in there, but he felt totally ill at ease with how he should proceed once there. This had once been his domain and his every command obeyed to the letter. But now, he felt at a loss.

“May I come in, Captain?” he asked, somewhat awkwardly.

Robert stared up, momentarily dumbstruck. He had once feared Lord Joshua. No, not feared exactly; he found himself correcting his own thoughts. It was less than fear and more than respect. The respect was still there, of course, but now he was viewing the man as just that - a man - and no longer the fearsome Captain. It seemed strange to him now that he had never before realised that, on stripping away the difficult job and elevated rank, Joshua was simply a family man and one that cared deeply for his family. The turning point, he remembered vividly, had been the discussion in which the worried father in him had revealed that both his sons were in mortal danger. It had been a moment shared that would forever change their interactions. Now, Joshua had come to him, uncertain of how to act in this new situation. Robert smiled; it was up to him to make things less awkward.

“Majesty,” Robert rose and bowed respectfully. “This is still your office. You’re always welcome.” Joshua smiled; it was obvious what the new Captain was trying to do and he appreciated it. “Thank you, Robert, but you are in charge here, never forget that.”
“I don’t expect us to ever clash, My Lord,” Robert smiled.
“I hope not,” Joshua replied, pulling out a chair at Robert’s desk. “Please, don’t stand to attention, I have something to discuss with you.”

Taking a seat in his chair once more, Robert sensed the urgency in Joshua’s tone and waved a hand briefly over the small avstandball on his desk, instantly darkening the glass.

“Thank you,” Joshua nodded gratefully as he noted that Robert had deactivated the communication device.
“What’s wrong, My Lord? Is it the security arrangements for Their Highness’ wedding?”
“No, Robert, I’ve seen your arrangements for the day and I’m most impressed. This is something different… really, very different.”
“Go on,” he encouraged, now frowning at the concern now showing on Joshua’s face.
“It’s Joe,” Joshua paused while he found the right words.
“Yes, I’m afraid he may have made an enemy here somehow.”
“An enemy? What makes you think that?”
“Marcus was delivering the Nyheter discs to the Normal Worlders when he found Joe standing in a sleep-like trance apparently having a nightmare but it was real. The reality was someone was following him, chasing him. Marcus said whoever it was had a great deal of power but the signature was similar to that of a Carouselian.”
“Similar? Not the same? I thought they were all…”
“Yes,” Joshua nodded. “I can’t explain it either. Perhaps it’s being disguised, though, I really can’t imagine why or even how. But whatever the explanation, this man is after Joe and I would like him protected.”

Robert lowered his eyes. The extension of protective service to Normal Worlders was an unusual request, certainly, but these particular men had helped to save the lives of the royal family on more than one occasion.

“That is…”
“Consider it done, My Lord,” Robert smiled, sensing Joshua’s returning awkwardness, having realised that he had basically given an order, more out of habit than any other reason. “What did you have in mind, in particular?”
Joshua smiled kindly. “Can you spare a Spymaster?”
“A Spymaster to go to Normal World?” Robert considered the possibilities carefully. “I recommend Spymaster C42. Can either of Their Highnesses instruct her in what to expect when she gets there? I imagine that none of the usual training could prepare anyone for what they’ll find in Normal World.”
“I’m sure it can’t be so different… perhaps? But, yes, that’s a very good idea; I’ll speak to Marcus. Please set up a meeting as soon as possible and I’ll let him know. But Robert…”
“Yes, My Lord?”

“Not a word of this to Silas, please. He’s had a lot to deal with in the last few weeks. A great deal of trauma and he, whether he admits it or not, is exhausted. Finally he has something happy to concentrate on and I want him left to enjoy it. This may be nothing and I sincerely hope it is, but I don’t want him bothered by it.”
“I understand, My Lord,” Robert smiled, reminded once again that Joshua was a caring father. “And The Lady Eleanor?”
Joshua raised an eyebrow in thought. “I’ll tell her, so it should be okay. Let me know when you want to see Marcus.”
“Of course, My Lord, perhaps in one hour?”
“Thank you, Robert.”
“Tell me, My Lord… Are you worried about this?”

Joshua thought for a few moments. Yes, it was true that Marcus was occasionally given to melodrama, but on this occasion, his concern didn’t appear misplaced. Something had happened, something strange, something neither of them had ever experienced.

“Yes, Robert,” Joshua nodded. “It may be that I’m still tense and suspicious following recent events, but… somehow I know it’s more than that. Yes, I believe it’s genuine. Someone is following Joe, for what reason I don’t know, but I believe he intends harm.”
Robert nodded. “We’ll find out what’s happening, My Lord.”
“Thank you,” Joshua nodded thoughtfully again. “I’ll ask Marcus to be here in one hour.”

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Patrick groped sleepily in the dark, his arm reaching in the general direction of the source of the noise. Finally grabbing the phone, he settled it against his ear, his eyes still closed.
“Yeah?” he answered, his voice sleepy and gravelly.
“Patrick! I can’t reach Joe!”
“Pete?” Patrick asked, frowning. “Do you know what time it is here?”
“I’m at Joe’s, he called me. Something’s wrong, but I can’t get in.”
“Something…” Patrick rubbed his eyes, confused but finally waking due to the urgency in his voice.
“What? What’s wrong?”
“I don’t know, I can’t get in. Does he have a spare key somewhere?”
“Look at the door number, push the four to the left.”

Pete did as he was asked and as he did a small key slid from a section cut into the door.

“Sneaky!” Pete smiled, as he retrieved the key and let himself in. “Joe? Joe! Who are you?”
“Pete? What’s going on?” Patrick shouted down the phone, frustrated by no response.
“I said who are you?” Pete yelled again at the man standing over an apparently unconscious Joe.

Shoving him backwards, Pete glared at the young man, now pinned against the wall.

“What have you done to him?” Pete yelled, his eyes furious.
“B…but you know!” the man stammered. “You sent me to watch him. I’m trying to wake him up!”
“I sent…?” Pete frowned, confused by the reply.
“I have to wake him!” the man cried again. “Please, Mister Sandman, let me wake him!”

Pete pulled back, releasing him. Still confused, he at least knew the man was no threat, but one thing had been confirmed. Lifting the phone to his ear again, Pete watched as the man drew Joe from what seemed a dead sleep.

“Trick, I don’t know what’s going on, but Marcus does.”
“Is Joe okay?”
“He’s awake, at least, that’s all I know.”
“Find out and call me back. I’m coming to you; I’ll get the next flight. I’ll let Andy know too.”
The white-haired man is turning up in different places and causing a lot of confusion

Marcus moved quickly, not exactly running but he was definitely in a hurry. He wasn’t late, well, not yet anyway. He was on his way to the Guardhouse to discuss what he knew of Normal World with a Spymaster. In truth, there wasn’t much he could say. He had seen Pete’s apartment, the studio and a few areas beside, but his experience was very limited and, unlike Silas, he’d never been there alone.

What could he say that would be of any use? What he knew seemed so superficial. They had no powers, but then, with the possible exception of mind reading, it was likely that the Spymaster would have none. They dressed strangely, certainly. Useful information, perhaps, but hardly essential. Ah, yes! Their modes of transport and communication were very different. Marcus smiled at the memory of seeing the quaint electronic devices they had used to communicate with sound only, no holograms. Losing the smile he sighed again. Was it what a Spymaster would want to know? He knew so little about Normal World, but he hoped that what he did know would be useful in some way.

With his mind so focussed on what he was able to discuss, the distracted Sandman hadn’t even registered that he had arrived at Robert’s office.

“Well now, look what the poes dragged in!”

Marcus’ head snapped up at the sound of the scathing tone. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped at the sight of Spymaster C42 standing near Robert’s desk, her arms folded, glaring at him coldly.

“S…Spicy!” Marcus stammered, stopping dead in his tracks.

Robert, about to reprimand the Spymaster for addressing the Sandman and prince so irreverently, paused as he noted Marcus’ reaction. The pair definitely had a history.

Marcus stared. She was exactly as he remembered her. Long, flowing chestnut hair with a shimmer of bright red underlying her soft curls. At five foot seven, she stood maybe an inch taller than the Sandman, but with her spiked heeled boots, she towered over him. Wearing a form-fitting outfit in black and red, accentuating her curves and slender waist, the sight of her had quite literally taken all coherent thought from the now gaping Sandman.

“Well, Marcus, finally nothing to say? How refreshing!”

“You’re the Spymaster that’s going to watch over Joe?” Marcus asked quietly.

“How do you know a Normal Worlder?” she asked harshly.

Nodding briefly, Marcus pushed the surprise of seeing her again to the back of his mind and prepared himself to answer her questions.

“He and his friends saved all our lives. Silas and I…”

“Silas and you?” she raised an eyebrow at what she believed to be an unlikely opening statement. “Silas and I brought them to Carousel, and they helped us. They’re our friends,” he continued firmly
but quietly.
“Well, I can’t wait to meet this Normal Worlder. The Captain said he was special, but he must be special if he can get you to care about anyone other than Marcus J Sandman.”
“Spicy… I…” Marcus lowered his head and sighed almost inaudibly.

There was no point arguing; everything she was saying was true. Well, it had been true, once.

“And still nothing to say? I’m liking the new you more and more.”
“Hey! That’s not fair! Okay, so maybe it didn’t work out and we’re not that good for each other but…”
“All I want from you are the details about Normal World so I can get over there and do my job.”
“Spice, I don’t need all this attitude from you! It wasn’t as though…”
“Oh, this isn’t going to work,” Robert interrupted. “I’ll find another Spymaster and…”
“Captain,” Spymaster C42, known to some as Spicy, turned sharply and stood to attention. “I’m more than capable of applying myself to this assignment once I have the information I need. I’m a good Spymaster, you don’t need to find anyone to replace me.”
“I’m keen to get this investigation underway and your bickering is unprofessional and unproductive to say the least! I get that you have a past, but I suggest that’s where you leave it.”
“I’m sorry Captain,” Spicy nodded solemnly. “Let me correct that. My Lord, Marcus, what information do you have for me?”
“Spice, it’s me! Come on!” Marcus almost whined at the coldness of her response.
“Highness, if you could just provide the information, please?” Robert prompted.
“Yeah,” Marcus heaved a deep regretful sigh. “I don’t know much,” he sighed again on noticing the twitch above Spicy’s right eye, indicating her efforts not to raise it in response to his opening remark. “But I’ll tell you everything. Please, let’s sit down.”

* 

“Joe?” Pete called, pushing the phone back into his pocket. “Joe are you okay?”
“He’s slipping back!” the sandman shouted, suddenly alarmed by the glazing of the guitarist’s eyes.

Leaning forward once more, the sandman placed a hand over Joe’s forehead. Connecting with whatever it was that was manifesting as a dream, the sandman grimaced.

“What’s wrong? What’s happening?” Pete demanded. “What’s happening?” he repeated, frustrated at the lack of reply.

Pete stared, concerned and frightened as Joe’s body stiffened. Wave after wave of helplessness and frustration washed over him as he waited impatiently for… he didn’t know what he was waiting for.

“Wake up!” he yelled finally. Moving forward, he began to shake Joe, slowly at first, then more vigorously, still with no response. “Why did he send a sandman to wake him? Joe!”

The name had just left his lips when his eyes widened at the sight of the sandman being propelled back against the wall. Torn between helping Joe and the crumpled, unconscious sandman, Pete’s head turned one way then the next. Finally gasping in relief, Pete dropped to his knees at Joe’s side as he emitted a yelp of surprise and threw out his arms as if to stop himself from falling. Breathing hard, his eyes wild and clearly alarmed, Joe almost scuttled back as his eyes fell on his friend leaning over him. Throwing up his arms defensively, Joe readied himself to fight, but only moments later lowered them as he finally became aware of his surroundings.

“Pete?” he whispered, exhausted and obviously scared.
“What’s happening to you?”
“I don’t know,” Joe replied shakily. “I think someone’s after me.”
“But you’re just dreaming, aren’t you?” Pete asked, his brow creased with concern. “Mister Sandman,” a voice groaned from somewhere near the wall. “I think I need to go to the hospital.”

Pete turned to see the young man who had managed to pull Joe out of the dreamlike state, still crumpled near the wall, his left arm twisted awkwardly. Frowning at the sight of the unnatural angle in which his arm was positioned, Pete moved over to do his best to help.

“I’m not Mister Sandman,” he explained. “I just look like him. My name’s Pete.”

“Pete?” the man looked up and then turned his eyes toward Joe then back again. “Sir! I’m sorry, I didn’t recognise you! Either of you. Mister Sandman didn’t say. I’m sorry!”

Pete’s eyes widened. “Hey, no! Everything’s fine. Look, we’re going to get you back to Carousel, okay? We’ll get you to a hospital and then I want to have a talk with Mister Sandman. I want to know exactly what’s going on.” Pete turned his head and smiled with relief to see Joe sitting up with his eyes still open. “You’re coming too, you’re not going anywhere on your own from now on. Okay?”

Joe nodded grimly. “That’s fine with me.”

“Just tell me one thing,” Pete turned back to the hurt sandman. “Why did Mister Sandman send you? Why not a Benzedrine?”

The young man turned a worried glance toward Joe before looking back to face Pete once more.

“He’s not asleep,” he frowned, shaking his head slightly. “It’s not even a dream.”

“You mean it’s real?” Joe cried in surprise as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Almost… Not quite,” he shrugged, then regretted it, gritting his teeth against the pain. “It’s really strange.”

“Come on, let’s get you to Carousel.”

Pete sighed heavily. He strongly suspected that the source of Joe’s problem was within Carousel, but what and who? But perhaps more worrying was why?

*

“Go away!” Slumped over the table in the corner of the room, Marcus muttered as another rap on his door, louder and more urgent than the last, sounded into his living room. “Marcus! Open the door!” Donnie’s voice begged. “Please?”

Marcus raised his hand, staring at it, his fingers poised in position.

“And don’t even think about sending me to sleep!” Donnie called. “It would not go well for you later!”

“I can keep you asleep indefinitely!” Marcus shouted back, not entirely serious.

“No you can’t!” Donnie laughed. “Just open the door!”

The Sandman sighed heavily and pushed himself to his feet and headed for the door. Opening it, Marcus stared with bleak resignation at his best friend, who merely stood outside with one side of his lips slightly curled up in sympathy with the distressed Sandman.

“Who told you?” Marcus finally asked, ushering his friend through the door.

“No one,” Donnie replied casually as he entered the living room and waved a hand near the controls for the lights, raising them from complete darkness to a level of soft ambient light.

Marcus followed him into the room, folding his arms across his chest, barely disguising his anger.
“You read my mind?” his voice was clipped as he stared at Donnie’s back.
“No,” Donnie turned, his expression open and sympathetic despite the glare aimed directly at him.
“Read mine if you don’t believe me.”

Marcus pouted grumpily. What was he supposed to do? Say that he didn’t trust his best friend? Read his mind? What if he then found he was telling the truth? It was more than likely that he was. If Donnie was anything, he was truthful. But it still left the question.

“Then how do you know?”
“I don’t,” Donnie finally admitted to the now puzzled Sandman. “I mean, I don’t know specifically what’s wrong, just that something is.”
“How?” Marcus asked, now unfolding his arms and frowning deeply.
“You’ve practically broadcast it! You’re really angry or upset about something and you’ve been so busy trying to block your parents and Silas from sensing it that you forgot about me.”
“But it’s just… family.” Marcus sighed and shook his head slowly. “I’m still not used to you being my cousin.”

Donnie nodded silently and took a seat at the table.

“Donnie, I didn’t mean it like that! You’re my best friend, always have been, always will be. You know I always thought of you as family anyway, but now I know you actually are family, so now I’ve got to be more careful with my thoughts, haven’t I?”
“No, Marcus, that’s the whole point: you don’t. You remember that talk we had about you letting people in?” Donnie raised an eyebrow. “Maybe this is one of those times?”

Marcus sighed and began to pace the room. Instantly Donnie knew just from this action alone that something had upset rather than angered him. He was hurt, and hurt badly at that.

“You’re going to think I’m stupid, Donnie.”
“I doubt that,” Donnie replied softly.
“Well I don’t see why not! I think I’m stupid!”
Donnie smiled; self depreciation was one of Marcus’ strong suits. “Well, try me and I’ll tell you what I think.”

Marcus stopped pacing but remained turned away with his back to his friend. He was gathering the courage to explain. Finding the words to try to express the myriad of emotions and the turmoil churning inside of him. The words were elusive. Nothing he could think of came close to describing the utter torment that was crushing him at that moment. There was only one thing he could do. Just speak the words he had. The very basic truth of what had happened; the thing that was tearing him apart.

“I saw Spicy,” he choked out.

Leaving the words hanging in the air, Marcus suddenly wished he could see Donnie’s reaction. Was he sympathetic, angry, laughing, bored, indifferent? He needn’t have worried as only moments later he felt himself being turned around and pulled into a comforting embrace. Momentarily he hated himself for needing the reassurance for something so apparently simple, but the meeting had shaken him. Seeking solace had not been his first thought, but now offered, he accepted it readily, clinging on as if Donnie’s arms would provide the energy he needed to move forward.

* 

“How?” Donnie asked, pulling slowly back from the hug only to see Marcus’ unnaturally pale features, even beneath his make up. There was almost a grey tinge to his appearance suggesting that
all of the colour had drained from his cheeks. “Marcus, come on, it can’t be that bad. Did she see you?”
“It is that bad! She’s the Spymaster that’s going to watch over Joe.”

Pulling back from Donnie, Marcus headed toward the table again, pausing before sitting and merely leaning over it, shoulders hunched, head lowered.

“She finished her training and made Spymaster?” Donnie asked, looking down with concern at his anguished friend.

“About six years ago,” Marcus nodded.

“You… You’ve kept track of her, then?”

“Not specifically… I mean… It was in the Court Despatches.”

“Since when did you read Court Despatches?” Donnie rounded the table and turned a disbelieving eye toward his friend who was currently avoiding his gaze.

“It was in the Despatches,” Marcus argued, deliberately diverting Donnie’s point.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t,” Donnie replied calmly. “Spymaster appointments always are. I’m just saying that you didn’t read it there. You didn’t read it at all did you?”

“No,” Marcus replied quietly.

“Marcus?” Donnie began tentatively. “What actually…”

“But…”

“I didn’t then and I don’t now.”

There was a finality to Marcus’ tone that brought an oppressive silence down over the whole room; the pair remaining, one seated, the other standing, unmoving for what seemed an age. Donnie frowned. He had seen Marcus upset before, but this? Donnie had seen this before and it was taking them both back only ten years. That was the problem with being a part of the royal family, you lived so long that ten years was nothing. It meant that there was time to dwell, time to over-examine, time to suffer. Ten years earlier, Marcus and Spicy’s tempestuous relationship had come to an abrupt end. It hadn’t been dramatic but, whatever had happened, it had taken its toll on the frequently volatile and temperamental Sandman.

Unable even to look him in the eye, Marcus withdrew more and more with each passing second.

“Do you want me to leave?” Donnie asked quietly. “If you need time alone, I can always come back later.”

“She hates me, Donnie!” Marcus suddenly announced as he slumped in the chair once more, shaking his head. “I don’t know why I’m so surprised, I really don’t. I could say we didn’t part on the best of terms, but you’d tell me I’ve started lying again!”

Donnie sighed his understanding. He didn’t know what had been the final straw with them, but he knew they argued regularly. Saying that they had not parted on the best terms could never have been called a lie, but it was, at the very least, a gross understatement.

“So what now?” Donnie asked quietly.

“What do you mean?” Marcus offered a puzzled glance in response.

“Do you want to fix things with her?”

Marcus turned to look at his friend; the question had never even occurred to him, but now the words had been spoken, it was as if they suddenly consumed him. Pushing himself to his feet, the Sandman’s expression became urgent and determined.

“Yes,” he announced. “Yes, I do.”
“Now?” Donnie cried in surprise. “You’re…”
“I have to do this, Donnie.”

Donnie could see it in his eyes; the thoughts and plans forming as he stared without actually seeing.

“You can’t,” Donnie pointed out. “She’s going to Normal World to take care of Joe. You’ll have to wait until she gets back.”
“No,” Marcus turned, shaking his head as he did. “I can’t wait. I’m going to Normal World too.”
“You can’t!” Donnie rolled his eyes and threw his hands up in despair at the idea, regretting even making the suggestion.
“Why not?” Marcus asked, beginning to pace swiftly once more, leaving Donnie uncertain if he was even listening to him.
“Be practical, Marcus! You have work to do, a wedding to prepare for! A speech to write!”
“How long do you think I’ll be gone?”
“Well I don’t know, do I? How much damage control do you need to do?”

Marcus stopped pacing and turned an expression with a curious mixture of shame and sadness towards the worried Catcher.

“I didn’t just break her heart, Donnie, I tore it out, ripped it up and stamped all over it.” Marcus lowered his gaze as he tried to compose himself once more. “I… I have to fix that. I can’t bear to see the hate in her eyes.”
“Marcus…” Donnie began slowly, unsure how to phrase his question. “Do you want to do this to ease your conscience or to make things better for her?”

It was a difficult enough question to ask, but impossible for the Sandman to answer. As he stared at his friend, very few words would come to him.

“I… I don’t know,” he replied honestly.
“Then, can I at least suggest that you don’t do anything until you’re sure that it’s in her best interests? If you only want to do this because it’ll make you feel better, then it’s for all the wrong reasons.”

Slowly moving forward, Marcus wrapped his arms around Donnie and returned the earlier hug with genuine affection.

“How did you get to be so wise?” he smiled, drawing back to hear the reply.
“I learned from your mistakes,” Donnie smirked in return, drawing a broader smile, almost a grin, from the Sandman.
“And the embarrassing thing is, that could be true,” he nodded.
“What makes you think I’m joking?”

Giving Donnie a playful thump to his arm, Marcus nodded gratefully. Donnie always seemed to know what to do or say to cheer him and this occasion was no exception. He still wanted to do the right thing, but now he had to figure out exactly what that was.

*  

From what he had said, Andy’s plane was due to arrive in just forty minutes and he would probably be inside the terminal in under an hour. It didn’t make any sense to do anything but wait for him, but while he did, Patrick was growing ever more frustrated. Pete hadn’t called back. Instead he had sent a simple text message merely saying:

*Going to Carousel. Marcus knows what’s going on. Will find out and call when back. Joe’s with me.*
It was as unhelpful as it was vague, but there was nothing more he would find out by staring at the message. Switching the phone back to stand by, Patrick pushed it deep into his pocket and looked around. Somewhere in JFK airport, there had to be a Starbucks or…

“Somebody call 911!”
“Get a doctor!”
“What happened?”
“Is he okay?”
“He’s coming round.”

Patrick groaned as the loud questions and statements assaulted his now overly sensitive hearing.

“I’m a doctor,” came a quiet authoritative voice that simply demanded attention. “Give me some room.”

He didn’t even need to make that final statement as the small gathering of people parted to let him through. Kneeling at Patrick’s side, he waited a few moments as he studied the singer, still lying prone on the floor.

“Go,” he demanded, not taking his eyes from Patrick.

One by one, the small group of onlookers and concerned travellers rose or turned and walked off to wherever they had originally been heading when Patrick had collapsed. Patrick’s eyes darted from one to the next as in turn they simply left him lying there, watched over by the stranger claiming to be a doctor. There was something very unnatural about what was happening. Firstly, he had no warning that he was about to pass out, no memory of it and no idea how long he had lain unconscious. It could have been seconds or hours. No one had moved him and an ambulance had not yet been called, so he was prepared to guess at seconds, maybe minutes at the most. The man leaning over him was unnerving him deeply. Since ordering everyone to leave, which they had done without question or even a moment’s hesitation, he had said nothing and yet he was still there, just staring. The strangest thing, that only now occurred to Patrick, was that he was simply lying there, making no attempt to stand.

“I… I’m okay now,” he muttered quietly, placing a hand at his side to push himself up.
“Stay where you are,” the man ordered as Patrick lifted his shoulders from the floor. “I’m not finished yet.”

Patrick’s eyes widened at the statement. What did he mean? Not finished? Not finished what? Continuing to push himself from the ground, Patrick felt his arm give from under him and he fell back down, grimacing with pain as his head hit the floor.

“Do not make me hurt you again,” the man ordered flatly, not taking his eyes from Patrick’s. The man’s eyes were an icy blue, deep set and cold. They bored into him and Patrick was transfixed. Staring up, helplessly, suddenly realising that he was unable to move or even speak. Where are they? The unspoken words seeped into Patrick’s mind. Where are they? The man repeated soundlessly. Where are what? What do you want? Let me go!

“Hey!” a voice yelled off to the left. “Get away from him!”

Breaking eye contact, the stranger looked up and glared icily at the approaching man. The instant he looked away, Patrick gasped in relief, finally able to both speak and move. Rolling swiftly to his left,
Patrick scrambled to his feet before falling back down again, dizzy and weakened, his leg muscles trembling as he tried to stand. Dropping the small bag he carried, the newcomer followed suit and knelt at Patrick’s side.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

It was as if suddenly, normality had been resumed and once again a small crowd gathered around them.

“What happened?”
“Are you okay?”
“Do you need a doctor?”

Patrick frowned in desperate confusion. He had no idea what had just happened, but he knew he wanted to get away from there. Looking up at Andy still kneeling beside him with an expression of growing concern on his face, Patrick didn’t even want to guess at how he looked. Pale described him at the best of times, but he was willing to bet that he looked as if he had seen a ghost. He had definitely seen something unnatural, but what?

“I’m… I’m okay,” he stammered. “Andy… Let’s get out of here,” he nodded, reaching out a hand to be helped up by the drummer.

Now on his feet and trying hard to convince the gathered crowd by that he was fit, and well enough not to need a doctor, Patrick snatched at his case and pulled at Andy’s arm.

“What happened?” Andy finally asked as the pair walked away. “Are you sure you’re okay?”
“I’m fine,” Patrick replied, clearly lying from the shake in his voice.
“You want a doctor? Some water?”
“No… Andy, I… Did you see where he went?”
“Who?” Andy asked, puzzled by the question.
“The man!” Patrick replied, surprised by the need to explain. “The man… He was right next to me. I couldn’t move… I…”

Patrick stopped walking and turned to face his confused looking friend. It was obvious from Andy’s expression that he had no clue as to what Patrick was talking about.

“He was talking to me telepathically. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even speak! He kept asking me ‘where are they?’. You shouted to him, you told him to get away from me.”

Patrick stood open mouthed, willing the drummer to acknowledge what he was saying. Finally staring in disbelief as Andy merely frowned in return, shaking his head lightly.

“There was no one there, Trick. I came through the arrivals gate, you waved at me then just collapsed. There was no one near you. But…”

Patrick frowned in response to the change in Andy’s facial expression.

“What?” he asked miserably; confused by events and starting to doubt his own sanity.
“Your head…” Andy held Patrick’s chin and turned his head to get a better view of the back of his head. “You’re bleeding, we need to get you to the hospital.”

Pushing Andy’s hand away, Patrick turned back to face him, a look of indigence on his face.

“I’m fine,” he stated, embarrassed by the thought he had taken a blow to the head and imagined the whole scenario.
“You’re not fine!” Andy insisted. “You may need stitches.”
“T’m fine!” Patrick insisted once more, before moving his fingers to the back of his head to check. Feeling the sticky dampness of the patch of blood starting to mat his hair, he frowned. “Maybe not,” he finally admitted, as the muscles in his legs appeared to give way once more and he reached out to Andy for balance. Looking down he felt dizzy and nauseous. “I don’t feel so good.”
Is the wedding postponed?

Chapter Summary

Silas is ill and where did Pete go?

“And you think that’s wise, do you?”

Joshua turned an exasperated expression towards his wife, who was sitting, one leg crossed elegantly over the other, comfortable, deep in an armchair in their private apartments. Her expression, in return, was not harsh or demanding but, perhaps even worse, it was questioning.

“Ellie, he’s planning his wedding. I haven’t seen him this happy in years. Since he got back, I’ve been watching him. He’s been sleeping.”

Eleanor frowned at the statement. That someone would sleep normally wouldn’t be anything remarkable, but neither Benzedrines nor Sandmen ever slept unless they were ill, bored or unhappy. Silas was never bored; his quick mind and energetic approach to life and work ensured that. He was clearly deliriously happy, planning his wedding to a woman he obviously adored.

“He’s ill?” Eleanor choked out.

Joshua nodded. “He thinks he can keep it to himself, that no one will notice, but he forgets, I’m a doctor too.”

“What’s wrong?” Eleanor’s voice was small and frightened. Her baby boy was unwell and hiding it from her. Beneath her concern a level of anger was bubbling, but first, she needed to know how bad things were.

“Oh, Ellie, I’m sorry,” Joshua bent to kneel in front of her and taking her hands. “It’s nothing serious. He’s run down, exhausted and he had a minor lung infection, but he’s okay now… at least he will be if he allows himself time to recover.”

“Josh, you’re his father, his doctor! Can’t you make him relax?”

“Do you want to be the one to halt the wedding plans?” Joshua shrugged.

Eleanor slapped her hands down on the arms of the chair and pushed her way out.

“If I have to, yes!”

*

It was the first time any of them had used a portal and Pete was hesitant. Despite receiving both Marcus and Silas’ assurance that it was perfectly safe and that they would be spared the long, terrifying fall through the air, Pete couldn’t help but feel concerned.

“Pete,” Joe sighed. “Just do it, or I will.”

Pete turned a worried glance toward his friend.

“What if I get it wrong?” he asked with his hand poised, ready to conjure the portal.

“We’ll probably die horribly. Crashing through the floor in a splat of blood and guts,” Joe smirked.

“Helpful, Joe,” Pete grumbled, as he lowered his hand with a sigh.

“Sir?” the sandman began politely but with obvious pain in his tone. “Can I help?”
Pete turned to look at the young sandman, a visitor from Carousel and badly hurt. Instantly he felt ashamed for allowing his uncertainties to delay their return to his world. The man was in a great deal of pain and probably in shock. Then there was Joe; clearly exhausted and very possibly in grave danger. Marcus knew what was happening, possibly not why, but he did know what, and it was a start. There wasn’t time to hesitate, he had to get them safely and immediately to Carousel. Drawing a line in the air with his finger, Pete was astonished to see a brown cigar shape suddenly appear hanging in mid-air. As he pulled back, the shaped began to widen and lengthen.

“Marcus said it would take us directly to the palace,” Pete commented, noting with a subdued smirk that the sandman’s eyes widened at the statement.

Unsure of exactly why he was surprised, Pete guessed that the sandman was quite unable to believe that he had referred to the Governor of the Dream World by his first name. It was an accurate guess and it only served to make the sandman, already nervous in their presence, even more so.

“You must… You must be very powerful,” he commented quietly, barely able to make eye contact. “I mean… To be able to transport to Carousel without having to descend.”

“Us?” Joe laughed. “Nah, we’re just such wusses, Marcus fixed it so we didn’t have to. We don’t have any powers.”

Pete pouted; he was enjoying the adulation. “Well, there’s…” he began.

“We don’t have powers, Pete.” Joe turned to the sandman still crumpled against the wall, clutching his arm. “We don’t.”

“What’s a wuss?” he asked, surprised at Joe’s words. “Is it some sort of animal?”

“Yeah,” Joe laughed again. “It’s a scaredy cat.”

“I don’t think we have them in Carousel,” he replied with a sincere nod.

“No, they stay hidden most of the time,” Joe nodded, still smiling.

“It’s… It’s ready,” Pete announced, pointing at the portal that had now formed the shape and style of an oak panelled door with a shiny brass handle.

“Nice!” Joe commented; Marcus and Silas had clearly pulled out all the stops to make the experience of returning to Carousel as easy and stress-free for them as possible.

*

“Can I come in?”

“No!”

Silas drew back from the door, the agitation and absolute certainty with which Laura’s reply had come had shocked him. Standing, quite at a loss to know what to do, Silas began by thinking about what he might have done or said to warrant the response. Even as he was considering his recent actions and words, the door opened a small amount and his mother slipped through the gap, pulling the door closed behind her.

“Mother?” Silas began, trying to peer around the door as she closed it. “What’s wrong, what’s going on? Why can’t I see Laura?”

“She’s trying on her wedding dress,” Eleanor raised her eyebrows meaningfully. “You can’t see her now, you might as well go back to whatever you were doing before.”

Silas nodded before frowning as he coughed, a deep hacking cough.

“Are you not well?” Eleanor asked with deep concern, in the full knowledge that he was just recovering from a lung infection.

“I’m fine,” he replied dismissively. “Just a tickle,” he smiled. It would have been a convincing smile
if Eleanor hadn’t known the truth already.
“Are you sure?” she asked.
“Of course!” he lied. “I’m a doctor. I’d know if something was wrong, wouldn’t I?”
“Walk with me, Silas.”

Silas swallowed hard at the words; the phrase usually preceded a dressing down. Walking in silence, the pair headed slowly down the length of the corridor toward the grand staircase, leading to an ornate, and grand foyer. It would have been easy for the the decor to be unpleasantly ostentatious and overbearing, but there was a muted elegance about the room’s furnishings that gave an overall feeling of tasteful opulence. Eleanor continued to walk in silence, heading down the long corridor that would eventually lead to Joshua’s office. As they walked, she could feel Silas’ reticence. Perhaps he was worried that his father would confront him over the extent of his illness. Perhaps he knew already? But above all, Eleanor knew that the silence was killing her son. He needed to cough, but was doing everything he could to hold it back. He wanted his mother to talk, to say something, anything to get it over with and not have to wait for whatever was going to happen.

Eventually, he had no choice. His medicine was overdue and the previous dose had reached the end of its effectiveness a long time ago. Another cough burst from his lips. It sounded painful, tearing across his throat and wrenching at his lungs. Silas stopped walking and Eleanor turned to face him. Lowering his eyes, he sighed.

“You know don’t you?”
“Tell me what I know,” she replied gently and in a surprisingly kindlier voice than he was expecting. “I have a lung infection,” he sighed. “It’s not a bad one, I think I picked it up from the myrland. I know I wasn’t in it, like Patrick was, but I was pretty run down by then. I just picked it up. I’m taking medication, I’ll be fine in a couple of days.”
“I highly doubt that, Silas,” she replied, her head cocked to one side.
“It’s just a…” Silas began to protest, but caught his mother’s stern gaze and sighed, allowing his shoulders to sag. “How do you know? Even father doesn’t know and he’s a doctor!”
“You think he doesn’t? Not commenting on something is not the same as not knowing, my dear son. Now, where is your medication?”
“In my room,” he replied quietly, resigned to the idea that he was going to have the conversation he had been trying to avoid at all costs.
“Then, let’s go there,” she replied kindly.

Silas’ room lay only a minute’s walk from his father’s office, and before long, the pair stood outside the door. With his hand on the doorknob, Silas sighed.

“It’s a bit of a mess,” he admitted. “Laura’s not the only one trying on outfits.”

Eleanor smiled her understanding and waved a hand indicating that he should open the door. As they entered the room, Eleanor’s smile faded. The normally immaculate and fastidious Benzedrine would claim a mess if one or two things were out of place in the room, but at this very moment, the room lay in complete disarray. Drawers lay open with clothes overhanging, jackets and hats lay strewn on the bed, some clothes even lay on the floor. Eleanor turned a concerned eye to her son; he appeared pale, almost grey, his eyes, she noticed suddenly, were sunken with dark circles underlying them and for the first time, she realised that his clothes hung a little loose on him.

“Silas?”
“I know, I’m sorry,” he sighed, tiredly, scooping two or three shirts off a cushioned seat and allowing them to fall to the floor. Flopping down into a chair and waving at another nearby seat, he seemed to sag with the effort of sitting upright. “I’ll sort it out, I promise.”
“Are you not going to take your medicine?” Eleanor prompted.
“Oh… Oh, yes,” he nodded but remained seated, merely looking about the mess with glazed eyes.
“It’s here somewhere.”
“I’m sorry, Silas,” Eleanor shook her head. “I can’t let this go on.”
“What?” he frowned, barely taking in the words.
“You’re much worse than you’re admitting to, aren’t you?”
“No,” he replied unconvincingly. “I’m fine,” he added creasing his brow as his line of vision fell on
the bed. “I just need to sleep a little, that’s all.”
“You sent out the invitations before explaining to Laura about the extension ceremony.”
“I explained that,” Silas protested, another cough interrupting him. “I forgot.”
“No you didn’t,” Eleanor replied firmly, rising as she noticed a medicine bottle lying on his desk.
“You knew the incubation period for your infection. You knew it would show itself before we could
organise the ceremony. You knew that your father and I would make you postpone the wedding
until you were recovered.”

Silas looked down and to his right, barely even looking up as Eleanor passed the bottle to him with a
glass of water.

“Thanks,” he said quietly, unsure how else to reply.
“Silas, why did you do that?”
“I didn’t, I…”
“Please don’t lie to me. I had enough of that with Marcus, I don’t need you to start.”
“I… I’ve never been so happy. I didn’t want to wait. I didn’t want to give her a chance to change her
mind.” Silas sighed heavily, his eyes almost closing with the effort of his admissions. “She’s so
beautiful and thoughtful and kind! I don’t know why she loves me! Maybe it’s that she thinks it was
because of me that she got away from the slavers… I don’t know. But seriously, what do I bring to
the relationship? I had to have the wedding before she realised it too.”

Eleanor dropped to her knees in front of Silas’ chair and pulled him into a tight and urgent embrace.

“Oh, my sweet darling! You are so special I don’t even know where to begin! You are intelligent,
quick witted, thoughtful, kind, handsome, loyal, big-hearted and above all, she adores you. I’ve
spoken to her and all she wants, more than anything is to make you happy in the same way you’ve
made her happy.”
“But…”
“No! There is no but, Silas,” Eleanor insisted. “if you weren’t my son, I would wish you were. Do
you understand me? I’ve watched you grow into a loving, wonderful man and you have made me so
proud to say you’re mine. But, my dear, you’re not well and even if you don’t say it, and even if
your father doesn’t say it, I will. You will rest and you will rest as long as it takes until you’re fully
recovered. Laura would be angry with you if she knew what I know now. She loves you, Silas and
you have to believe that and take care of yourself, as much for her sake as yours.”
“But…”
“You will check into the hospital for a few days rest. With absolute rest, you may still make the
wedding, but without it, you won’t and you know that, don’t you?”

Silas nodded vaguely. It was not something he had wanted to admit, even to himself but here was his
mother forcing the reality on him.

“I’ll have an orderly collect you,” Eleanor rose, waving her hand over the nearby avstandball. “I’ll
help you pack a few things.”
“I need to see Laura.”
“I told you, she’s trying on her dress,” Eleanor smiled and before kissing him on the cheek. “I’ll
explain and I’ll bring her to you in the hospital, but don’t be surprised to learn that she’s expecting
something like this.”
“You’ve spoken to her already?” Silas groaned.
“No,” Eleanor shook her head. “I don’t need to, she has eyes, and she sees more than you think.”

*

Stepping tentatively through the door, Pete screwed up his eyes as the brightness of the seemingly ever-present sunlight in The Hills momentarily blinded him. Turning back he could clearly see Joe and the young sandman waiting for his signal to come through the portal - it was a very strange sight. Waving at them briefly, he waited before frowning as they remained unmoving. Waving again, Pete’s brow creased as, again, nothing happened.

“Come on!” he called, frustrated by the continuing lack of response.

Stepping back through the door, he frowned deeply as he saw only Joe now seated at the table in the corner of the room.

“Why didn’t you come through?” Pete called.

Joe looked up; his surprised expression suddenly turning to one of pure relief as he rose to his feet.

“Thank God! Where have you been?” Joe replied, rushing over to the very confused bassist.

Pete’s confusion increased tenfold at the words. He had stepped through the portal only moments before, but now he noticed the window behind Joe. When he had stepped through, it had been morning, now it was starting to go dark outside.

“I… I went to Carousel,” he began, at a loss to understand what had happened. “I was in The Hills. I signalled to you to come through, but you just stood there, then I came back.”

“No you didn’t!” Joe replied, surprised by the response. “Pete you’ve been gone over nine hours! Alistair and I went through…”

“Alistair?” Pete shook his head with a shrug of his shoulders.

“The sandman,” Joe clarified. “I spent three hours with him, Pete, we talked a lot.”

“But why didn’t you come through?” Pete asked. “And nine hours? I…”

“We did go through!” Joe argued. “You weren’t there! We looked for you, but we couldn’t find you and no one had seen you either.”

“You came through?” Pete stared off into the distance as he tried to get his head around what had happened to them. Joe seemed to be telling him that they had all gone through the same portal but somehow had not encountered each other. More mysteriously, he had spent only moments in Carousel yet hours had passed. It didn’t make sense.

“What’s going on, Pete?” Joe frowned.

“I could have got it wrong,” Pete tried to reassure his worried friend. Very strange things were happening, certainly, but he couldn’t rule out the possibility that somehow the portal hadn’t worked or that he had made some sort of mistake when conjuring it. “Did you speak to Marcus?”

“No,” Joe shook his head. “The portal took us straight to the palace reception chamber…”

“No it didn’t,” Pete interrupted. “It brought me out on the side of one of the hills, near the river. It was so bright, I was squinting!”

“But, you said it yourself! Marcus arranged it so we’d arrive in the palace.”

Pete was at a loss to understand what had happened. Joe was right, the portal was intended to work that way and even though having only just mentioned it, he had forgotten that detail as he arrived in The Hills. There was no doubt in his mind that he was in The Hills, it was exactly as he had remembered it, but how he had arrived in a different place to Joe, he had no idea.

“So where is Alistair now?”
“We were met at the reception chamber by Lord Joshua’s aide.”

“Ambrose?” Pete queried, remembering him from previous encounters, the first of which had not been pleasant.

“Yeah,” Joe nodded slowly. “He took us to the hospital.”

“Oh!” Pete raised his eyebrows. “So you saw Silas?”

“No,” Joe frowned. “I asked to see him, but Ambrose just kept saying that it wouldn’t be possible.”

“And you were there three hours?” Pete’s brow creased in confusion and he was beginning to worry that this was another of the not-quite-dreams that Joe had experienced earlier. It seemed the only thing that would explain what had happened. Discreetly, he pinched his own arm, flinching in pain as he did so. Joe raised an eyebrow as he noticed the action.

“Sorry, Pete, this is real all right! When no one could find you, and believe me, they looked everywhere, I decided to come back and wait.”

“Alone!” Pete gasped. “And they let you?”

“I wasn’t sure if they knew about what’s been happening to me,” Joe shrugged.

“They didn’t ask why there was a sandman here?”

Joe sighed. “I just wanted to get Alistair some treatment, and I wanted to find you. I really wasn’t getting into explanations, but they weren’t asking all that much either. I just never noticed.”

“And I’ve been gone for nine hours?” Pete asked, still shaken by the revelation.

“Yeah,” Joe frowned somberly. “I was getting really worried. I tried calling Trick and Andy to see if they’d heard from you, but I couldn’t get through, I was really starting to think it was happening again.”

“Trick and Andy?” Pete cried looking at his watch - momentarily taken aback as he realised that it was almost eight in the evening. “They might be here by now. I said I’d call hours ago!”

“They… They’re coming here?” Joe stammered.

“I called Trick,” Pete explained. “They were both flying out… but… You’ve not heard from them?”

“No, nothing,” Joe replied, watching as Pete pulled the phone from his pocket and began to dial. He had no idea what was going on or what was happening to them, but he had the very definite impression that whatever it was, they were all dangerously out of their depth.

*

Patrick glanced at his watch and frowned. Sitting in the back of a cab on their way to the nearest hospital, he was confused. Could it have been the crack to the head? Could his watch be broken? No, he could see the second hand still moving.

“What’s up, man?” Andy turned a worried glance in his friend’s direction.

“Did you get an earlier flight?”

“No, I told you, the first flight I could get was…”

“What time is it, Andy?”

Andy looked at his watch, surprised by the interruption but even more surprised when he noticed the time.

“The plane is due to land in about twenty minutes,” he replied incredulously.

“But you landed about an hour ago,” Patrick pointed out.

Andy frowned as he tried to work out the logistics of what Patrick was saying. Somehow, not only had his plane arrived an hour and a half earlier than he had expected it to, but he had technically arrived before Patrick’s plane.

“So your plane was early too?” he asked, desperately trying to understand what had happened.

“I didn’t think much of it, but it must have. I guess I wasn’t really thinking about it because of the time difference.”

“Well I don’t know, but… We’re here,” Andy announced as the cab driver pulled into the driveway.
leading to the hospital’s Emergency Room.

Patrick turned his head towards the brightly lit hospital ER department and was suddenly reminded of the reason for their visit as a harsh throbbing pain sunk deep into his head taking his breath away.

“Trick?” Andy cried with concern as the singer’s eyes rolled back in their sockets. “Are you okay?”
“You need a hand there?” the driver asked.
“No!” Patrick groaned, grabbing Andy’s arm urgently. “It’s him,” he hissed pulling at Andy as he fumbled with the lock. “Andy!”

Andy was at a loss to know how to react. Was Patrick hallucinating? Was it the injury? Was the taxi driver…? No, the idea was ridiculous, wasn’t it? Deciding to take no chances, Andy reached for the latch only to see the door lock engaged moments before he reached it.

“What?”
“I know you’re keen to get your friend in there,” the driver snapped. “But that’s eighteen-fifty. Sixty-eight-fifty if he’s bled over anything.”

Relieved, Andy looked around. Certain that they had kept the wound covered for the majority of the journey, he knew that no blood would be in the cab, but it made sense to check.

“No,” he replied finally. “It’s fine. Here,” he added, rifling through his wallet before pressing twenty two dollars into the man’s hand.

Relieved as finally the door was unlocked, Andy pulled at the latch and helped Patrick out of the cab. Turning to look at the driver, Andy was transfixed as the man stared back at him with translucent pale grey eyes. The snow-white hair seemed out of place on the man who, while of indeterminate age, didn’t appear old. The man’s expression gave the impression of age, wisdom and more than a little condescending amusement; his skin appeared almost unnaturally smooth making him appear both very young and old at the same time. It was unnerving; made all the more so because the man appeared to be laughing at him.

As they stood there, Patrick’s phone started to vibrate in his pocket. Pulling the phone out, his eyes refused to focus on the caller name and the more he tried, the more disorientated he became. Swaying noticeably, Patrick clung to Andy’s arm. Pulling the phone from Patrick’s hand, he pressed the button to answer the call only to bark a brief message before switching it off.

“Pete, it’s Andy, I’ll call you back in a minute.”

“Andy.”

Patrick’s voice was little more than a whisper and the drummer was beginning to understand his friend’s apprehension, but frustratingly, not why. As the car pulled away, Andy shook his head briefly, released from his dazed state.

“Can I help you?”

The female voice dragged Andy back to reality once more. At his side stood a woman, a redhead, roughly his own height. Dressed in scrubs, the uniform didn’t disguise her figure or detract from her stunning looks. For a few seconds, Andy was lost for words and thankful when she offered him the words he needed.

“Your friend’s hurt?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.
“Uh… Yeah, he had a fall… Doctor,” he added, opting for one of the two possibilities.
“Nurse Spice,” she corrected. “Come with me.”
“Sure,” Andy replied, finally gathering his wits as he took Patrick’s arm and led him into the hospital, trying hard to keep up with the woman ahead of him.

Pausing once more as Patrick stumbled, Andy saw the nurse was now heading back towards him. “Do you need help?”

“Yeah, a chair, maybe? He’s really dizzy.”

“I’ll get an orderly, make sure you’re both settled okay. The driver,” she paused. “Did you know him?”

“No,” Andy frowned. “Why?”

“No reason, just that you were talking with him for a long time. Wait here.”

Andy frowned deeply as she walked away. Almost dreading it, he looked at his watch to find thirty minutes had passed with no conscious explanation of what had happened. Unnerved, Andy dialled Pete’s number and waited for a reply.

“Andy! What the hell? You said you’d call me back in a minute!” Pete voiced his frustration immediately.

“Pete, I’m sorry, man, I don’t know what’s going on. I seem to be gaining time, losing time, forgetting stuff and it’s Trick who’s banged his head!”

“What?” Pete replied, forgetting all his anger. “What’s happened to Trick?”

“He passed out at the airport, but there’s more to it than that…” Andy paused. “How’s Joe?”

“He’s with me, he’s okay. Nothing weird’s happened to him since this morning.”

“I wish I could say the same! I can’t even explain what’s happened.”

“Problems with time?” Pete prompted.

“Yeah!” Andy frowned; from Pete’s reply, it seemed that things were about to get a lot weirder. As they spoke, Nurse Spice returned with an orderly and a wheelchair.

“Us too,” Pete replied grimly. “I think we need to find Marcus.”

“Marcus?” Andy’s eyes widened, before noticing the nurse staring at him meaningfully. “I gotta go, Pete, I’ll let you know how Patrick is.”

“Okay, but… be careful, Andy. This is… too weird.”

The woman staring at Andy was as much staring at him for his attention as she was baffled by the communication device he held. It seemed that Marcus was, for once, telling the truth. He didn’t even seem to be exaggerating, as strange as it seemed to her. Their devices were indeed as primitive as he had said, but were the men as special and endearing as he had suggested too? Only time would tell, but she was not here to be charmed. She had work to do.
Spicy takes a trip into Andy's mind

Chapter Summary

Silas goes to hospital and Spicy gets the surprise of her life in Andy's mind

Silas Benzedrine walked into one of the hospital’s many patient rooms and sighed. The orderly who had arrived at the palace to take him the short distance to the hospital had brought with him a Heisseng clinical transport. As multi-positionable, hovering, clinical transport beds went they were very comfortable and extraordinarily reliable. To the best of his knowledge, Silas had never seen or even heard of one malfunctioning while in use, but he didn’t want to use one. Or, more accurately, he didn’t want to be seen to use one, even though, deep inside, he knew he would benefit from the assistance.

This was his hospital. His hospital and he felt slightly foolish. It wasn’t as though he would lose face should he be seen to be weak or vulnerable. In fact, if anything, his staff would be worried and concerned for him. No, this was more about control than anything else. Unlike his brother, Marcus, it wasn’t even as if the Benzedrine found being in control particularly important.

Marcus had always need things to be just right. To go his way. It was probably why he had started lying all those years ago. He would bend the truth just enough to serve his own purpose, to get what he wanted. It was hard to be angry when Marcus lied, because unlike people who would lie for personal gain, he would lie for other’s benefit, most notably in Silas’ memory was the pack of lies Marcus told Pete and his friends in order to obtain their help. Marcus had vowed to give up lying in all circumstances. It was a brave and bold decision to make, leaving him feeling very vulnerable and decidedly out of his comfort zone. But, Silas thought to himself, sooner or later, Marcus would realise that he could get the bulk of what he really needed simply by being honest with people and letting their own good natures shine through - particularly when considering their friends from Normal World.

For Silas, control had never ranked high in his priorities, neither was it something he actively sought. But, in unusual situations, such as this - times when he wanted, no needed to hold on to some semblance of normality, he craved control in whatever small way he could manage. Right now, that manifested itself in the need to walk into the hospital under his own steam.

He was exhausted, drained and utterly deflated. The only thing keeping him going right now was the thought of his fast approaching wedding and if he wasn’t very careful, that ray of light in his otherwise bleak situation would be extinguished. His mother, Lady Eleanor, wife and consort of Lord Joshua, Ruler of Carousel had made it very plain to him that she would postpone the wedding if he wasn’t fully fit. It wasn’t an idle threat. It was one thing he knew for a fact; if his mother said she would do something, then she would do it.

The only way to – he almost shook his head at the thought, he was about to think ‘ensure’ – but there was no certainty in the outcome, the best he could hope for was that sufficient rest would either resolve his illness or at the very least, placate his mother with his efforts. The wedding had to go ahead as planned. It just had to. Silas lowered his head as he thought about it. So much had gone wrong lately. Yes, it was true that so many good things had come out of everything that had happened to him, but it had still left him mentally and physically shattered.
The problems with his brother – the intense rivalry and what they had believed to be hatred had been resolved but it had been a painful and dangerous journey for them both. But, he smiled faintly, he was now closer to his brother than he had ever been in his life, closer even than they had been as small boys when they had been inseparable. And his beautiful Laura, his bride-to-be. The thought of her brought a smile to his lips; she was worth all the terrible things that had happened to him, a thousand fold. He would suffer anything for her. But right now, he was suffering and it wasn’t for her. If anything, it was keeping him from her. He needed to give in and simply get well and he was in the right place to do just that.

“I’ve unpacked for you,” the orderly announced, speaking in a louder than usual voice, having had no response following his first address.

“Oh!” Silas blinked and suddenly became aware again. “Thank you, Seth. That’s very kind of you.”

“Can I get you anything, sir?”

“No, I’m…” Silas began before allowing his gaze to scan the room. “No, I think I have everything I need.”

“Should you be resting, sir?” the orderly asked almost timidly.

Silas smiled; the question clearly wasn’t one that Seth felt comfortable with and immediately Silas recognised it as being spoken at the insistence of his mother.

“The Lady Eleanor can be quite intimidating, can’t she?” he flashed a knowing smile toward the orderly.

Smiling meekly in return, Seth nodded slightly.

“If you’re under orders to witness me resting then give me a few moments to get changed.”

Silas nodded as he reached toward the bed to pick up the hospital issue gown. Frowning as he held them in his hand, he placed them back down again.

“Seth, could you…” looking up once more, he laughed as the orderly stretched out his arm; in his hand, a pair of fine cotton pyjamas and robe. “I think, maybe I’ll rethink the gowns, they’re not the most attractive items, are they?”

Seth gave a lopsided smile and shrugged. “They’re not meant to be. They’re functional.”

“I know, but…” Silas shrugged; he had no idea where the sentence was going, snatched away from him by a wave of tiredness. “I’ll get changed.”

“I’ll wait outside.”

Leaving Silas to change, Seth stepped outside the room and waited patiently. Within moments, a blur of black and gold rounded the corner of the corridor.

“Governor Sandman, sir!” the orderly stood to attention. “Are you looking for…”

“Yes!” Marcus interrupted. “Where is he?”

“He’s in there, sir,” he replied pointing to the room behind him. “He’s just getting changed.”

“Can I see him?” Marcus asked with a worried expression on his face.

“He is supposed to be resting, but I’m sure he’d be happy to see you.”

Marcus smiled, pausing a few moments before nodding meaningfully. Seth, taking the hint, turned and knocked quietly on the door.

“Come in,” a muffled voice called.

Opening the door, and stepping in the few feet needed to approach the bed, Seth allowed a faint smile to cross his lips. Earlier, Doctor Benzedrine had looked pale and drawn and while he still
seemed exhausted, he at least appeared comfortable now. He could see he wasn’t far off sleeping; his recovery could begin at last.

“Governor Sandman to see you, sir.”

Not even waiting for a response, Marcus entered the room correcting Seth as he strode in.

“Mister Sandman, please. I don’t like Governor.”
“Sometimes, we’re too alike,” Silas commented as his brother approached the bed. “Did mother tell you?”
“Silas?” Marcus stood dumbstruck as he stared open mouthed. “What The Hills are you doing here? You’re a patient?”
“You didn’t know?”
“No! I came to see Alistair, my sandman.”
“What’s wrong with Alistair?” Silas asked, concerned for the new patient.
“He… ah… he had an accident.”

Silas leaned forward and narrowed his eyes. Marcus wasn’t telling him everything, that was plain.

“An accident?” he pressed, raising an eyebrow.
“He broke his arm in Normal World,” Seth explained in an attempt to be helpful, but the furious glare suddenly aimed at him by the obviously angry Governor of The Dream World sent the very clear message that he had done something very wrong.
“Thank you, Seth,” Marcus snapped through gritted teeth. “You can go now!”
“Hey!” Silas called. “Don’t talk to one of my staff like that! I’m sorry, Seth. That was uncalled for, Marcus!”
“I’m sorry,” Marcus sounded genuinely contrite; relieved that his tone appeared to be the only thing Silas had noticed, not the content.
“That’s quite all right, sir,” Seth replied aware still that he had done something wrong. “I do need to go though, I have quite a lot to do.”
“Okay, Seth and thank you,” Silas smiled, waiting until the door was closed before continuing. “And just what was a sandman doing in Normal World?”

Marcus’ shoulders sagged as he exhaled a deep sigh.

“Yes, you thought I’d missed that, didn’t you?” Silas added as, at first, he received no reply.
“I hoped,” he replied with an unhappy shrug.

Neither Andy nor Patrick raised any questions when Nurse Spice escorted them directly to a private treatment room, bypassing the usually very long wait in the Emergency Room. It wasn’t that they thought they should be treated differently because of their fame or wealth, but merely because they had too much on their minds to consider that what was happening was unusual. Patrick was disoriented and in pain, Andy was far too worried about both Patrick and what had happened with the time gains and losses. He had briefly thought that they were lucky to have been seen so fast, but he put it down to Patrick sustaining a head injury. Perhaps it was simply more important that anyone else’s injury that night? He didn’t know, he simply didn’t care, and the thought had only briefly flitted through his mind before being forgotten in a moment. Now waiting silently in the treatment room as Spicy examined Patrick’s head.

As a Spymaster, Spicy had been given a modicum of medical training. More than first aid, but less than what she would normally need to diagnose and handle Patrick’s condition. But Spicy was considerably more qualified than most in this area. Prior to training as a Spymaster, she had worked
as a doctor in The Hills General, Doctor Benzedrine’s hospital. Inspired by her father’s tales of intrigue and mystery; in particular his involvement in the identification of the cause and source of the terrible illness suffered by Ruler Joshua. She had been impressed that he had managed to discover that almost his entire counsel was infecting him with hate manufactured by a group of corrupt dream spinners. Joshua had come so close to death and the obscure method of poisoning had greatly delayed diagnosis. She remembered hearing how Doctor Benzedrine had stayed at his father’s bedside, constantly pouring over his books, desperate to find a solution. Ironically, it was one of the corrupt spinners that eventually and unintentionally provided the information. Struck down himself by the same illness after having incorrectly disposed of the batch of hate he had created, the spinner had been rushed to Doctor Benzedrine’s hospital by the worried Mister Sandman. Worried enough about the spinner to put his own issues with his brother put aside, Marcus took him straight to the man he knew he was the best doctor in The Hills.

Seeing the connection immediately, Silas had called the Spymaster and The Guard to the hospital. The truth was easily extracted with the man knowing that he would die without treatment. It had originally inspired her to become a doctor and then later to apply for a position as Spymaster.

But it was in her role as a doctor that she had met Marcus. On one of his very few visits to The Hills years later when one of his weavers had become very ill. They had been instantly attracted to each other, but it was a tempestuous relationship and they argued regularly. But for as much as they argued, their passion also reached similar heights. It was the main reason that when it had happened, it was such a blow and had ended their relationship immediately.

Seeing him before making the journey to Normal World had been a shock. She had covered her pain with sarcasm and snide remarks but underneath it all, she knew, to her irritation, that she still loved him. But there was no time to think about it now. One on the reasons that she was here was injured and she wasted no time in diagnosing a cut that looked worse than it was and a simple case of mild concussion.

Reaching into her bag, she withdrew a small handheld device before placing it on the back of Patrick’s head.

“What’s that?” Andy asked with a worried frown.

“It’ll seal the cut,” she replied casually as she removed it once more.

Andy’s eyes opened wide as he saw that it was as if the gash had never been there. No stitches, nothing, just perfectly healed.

“H… How…”

“He’s got a case of mild concussion, but that’s all,” she continued, ignoring Andy’s question. “He’ll need to rest for a few days. Now, the driver. What did you talk about?”

“I don’t know,” Andy replied honestly without understanding the relevance of the question.

“Patrick was scared of him. Do you mind if I place you under hypnosis to find out why?”

“I… Er… Do I have to?” Andy replied, unhappy with the idea.

“It would help,” Spicy replied. “If it was the man who attacked him…”

“How do you know about that?”

“He told me when I was examining him. You don’t remember?”

“No,” Andy frowned, deeply uncomfortable with what was happening.

“I need to know what you were talking about, in case I need to call The Guard.”

Spicy quickly read Andy’s mind as his eyes widened at the words.

“The police,” she corrected herself, smiling. “You want him protected don’t you?”

“Yeah, of course, but… How…”
“Then please,” Spicy placed a hand on Andy’s shoulder.

He let out a small gasp of a breath as he almost sagged under her touch. Guiding him to a chair, Spicy pushed him down and drew her fingers gently over his eyes, closing them.

“Now, I want you to think back. It’s important you remember.”

* 

Andy could hear his phone ringing. Vaguely he became aware of it as if it were in another room and the sound was filtering slowly through to him. Whatever Spicy had done to him, he now realised he was unable to move. He couldn’t even frown or open his eyes and was quickly becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the situation. Attempting to voice his concerns met with yet another empty response from his immobile body. Sensing Andy’s discomfort, Spicy needed to move quickly, but the noise was bothering her. Was it important? Was she supposed to know what it was? Resisting the urge to ask what the sound was for fear of giving herself away again, Spicy closed off her mind and entered Andy’s.

Now it was Spicy’s turn to frown. As both Marcus and Silas had discovered in other encounters with both Pete and Patrick, Andy’s mind was nothing like what she expected. She was used to seeing rows of clearly labelled filing cabinets, neatly ordered, indexed and highly accessible. Even Marcus’ mind had been exceptionally ordered, although, unlike any other Carouselian mind she had connected with, she had found locks on many of the cabinets in the Sandman’s mind. She wasn’t sure exactly how he had done it and couldn’t ask without him knowing she had been in there. She was fairly confident that he was unaware of her presence on the two occasions she had entered his mind; stealth being one of her many talents, even before her Spymaster training. It was the locks on some of the cabinets that had particularly worried her, especially after it had happened. Sighing internally, she noted to herself that it was the second time she had thought about the reason for their break up and on both occasions, she had been completely unable to allow the words to describe what had happened between them to pass through her mind. She didn’t want to admit that she was still upset about it, but there was no escaping the fact that she was. He had hurt her deeply; more than any man before or since. Since. There had been no one since. There had been offers, but her heart wasn’t in it. Her heart was somewhere else. Her Spymaster training had begun only months before their break up and, it was one of the many things they had argued about. It didn’t seem that either of them could do anything without arguing about it. But Spicy knew why. Even then, she suspected it, but now, she believed she was certain. Almost everything that happened between them came back to their respective relationships with their families. Spicy had been remarkably close with her father and he in turn had been a highly respected Spymaster at court. Favoured by Lord Joshua, he was the only one of agents of the elite Special Forces team that was reverently referred to as Master. At the time, Marcus had no idea why his father held him in such esteem, but Spicy’s closeness to her father only served to remind Marcus of the chasm between him and the rest of his family, in particular his brother. Confused and bitter, Marcus’ frustration led them from one argument to the next.

But, Spicy could see beyond the brittle facade that Marcus had erected. Perhaps it was her father’s influence? As Carousel’s premier Spymaster, he had almost certainly taught her a great deal without her even realising it. But whatever his influence, be that as a doctor or Spymaster, she was grateful to her father and admired him immensely. She wondered what in The Hills he would make of the image before her eyes - Andy’s mind was like nothing she had ever seen in her life.

It was chaos. Absolute chaos.

Creatures of all shapes, sizes and denominations flew through the brilliant blue sky in a blaze of glorious colour that was too vivid to truly exist. Some flew propelled simply by pointing a clenched
fist ahead of them, others had taken to the sky with a variety of machines, some standing, some seated. Almost all of them wore either capes or masks, sometimes both and all seemed to be engaged in some sort of aerial battle against each other. Swooping and swirling with explosions or burst of flame or light filling what little area remained in the overcrowded airspace. On the ground, caped superheroes, witches, robots, excessively muscular tyrants and vicious looking animals reflected the scene above in their own conflict. Spicy presumed that some represented good, others evil, but it seemed impossible to tell which was which. Who they were and especially why they were there was beyond her. They ignored her utterly and she resolved to do the same. To her right, some distance away, she saw what appeared to be a river, but something about it looked odd to her. Finally moving from the area she had entered, Spicy headed towards the river. There was an unusual silvery appearance to what should have been water. Even more surprisingly, despite the fact the river was certainly moving, somehow it didn’t actually seem to be flowing. It was… shimmering. At its widest point stood a bridge; a magnificent, gleaming white arch of steel elegantly spanning the width of the river with a path running across the base. Worked into the intricate design on the gate at the approach to the road were the letters FC. Beneath the letters sat a man, casually leaning back in a comfortable chair, idly watching the chaotic battles going on only a dozen or more yards away. Spicy frowned as she recognised Andy sitting quietly, now smiling at her with sparkling eyes. It was a polite, gentle smile, unassuming, unthreatening, almost welcoming.

As she approached, her eyes were drawn to the river once more. The shimmering silvery river seemed now to be a series of long spiral wires, closely packed and each one vibrating, rattling. It wasn’t an annoying sound, in fact it met her ears with an almost familiar and pleasant ring, but still she had no idea what it was.

“Snare wires,” Andy explained simply with a friendly smile.
“A trap?” she asked warily.
“No,” he laughed, rising to meet her. “Snare wires,” he repeated. “They attach to the underside of a snare drum, they make that rattling sound that drives the music.”
“What’s a snare drum?” Spicy asked with a confused frown.
“That’s the most used and most important drum.” Andy reflected on his description; his stare drifting off as he thought about it. “I’ll remind myself to show you. You’ll know it when you see it, or hear it,” he nodded as if to confirm the statement. “This isn’t regular hypnosis, is it?”
“I have different methods to most,” Spicy admitted with a smile, impressed at his reading of the situation.
“Come on,” he turned, opening the gate covering the entrance to the bridge, he jerked his head, indicating that she should follow him. “It’s quieter over the other side.”
“How can it be?” she asked following him onto the bridge. “It’s all open.”
“Yeah, but, it is,” he smiled. “Trust me, I’m a drummer.”

Spicy nodded silently, simply accepting the explanation. Looking down as she approached the gate, she now noticed that what had appeared from a distance to be riverside reeds, standing upright and unbending in the sunlight, were in fact bundles of drum sticks. What at a distance had appeared to be long grass, she now realised were the steel filaments of brush sticks, the slender rods swaying in the gentle breeze.

“Who’s Vic Firth?” she asked as she read the letters printed in bold red type down the side of the sticks.

Andy merely smiled in return. It wasn’t that he was being deliberately evasive, but he was finding her questions both interesting and slightly out of place. Together with her comment about The Guard, Andy was having his own suspicions about Nurse Spice.

“What does FC mean?” she asked closing the gate behind her, suddenly astonished by the absolute
silence that followed despite the open ornamental grille design.
“You don’t want to know,” he chuckled as he led her to the opposite bank. “You really don’t want to know.”

If Andy had hoped to quell her curiosity, he had failed; instead he only managed to increase it tenfold. But he didn’t appear to mind as he led her up the hill to a large tree with a double trunk and spreading branches, leafy and bursting with a multitude of greenery. Settling himself down on a rug lying on the grass in a shady spot under the lowest branch, Andy looked up and noticed Spicy opening her mouth to speak.

“It’s a cork tree,” he replied to her unspoken question. “Please, make yourself comfortable.”

*

“He’s not picking up.” Pete sighed his irritation.
“Maybe he can’t,” Joe suggested. “They are in a hospital after all. You know… the machines? Maybe he can’t answer?”
“Possible, I guess, but the phone is switched on.” Pete frowned. “I wish I knew which hospital.”
“Pete…” Joe began tentatively. “Something very strange is going on.”
“Yeah, and I’m pretty sure it’s got something to do with Marcus,” Pete complained, shaking his head as he wondered what kind of a predicament the errant Sandman was going to get them mixed up in this time.
“No,” Joe shook his head. “Marcus knows about it, but he doesn’t know what it is.”
“How do you know?” Pete asked, turning a puzzled stare towards his friend.
“I told you. I talked a lot with Alistair.”
“And?” Pete prompted after a short pause.

Joe shrugged and rose from the chair shaking his head lightly.
“I’m not dreaming,” he explained as best he could, given that he barely understood it himself. “That’s why he sent… no,” he paused to correct himself. “That’s why he could send a sandman.”
“What do you mean?” Pete turned a puzzled glance toward the guitarist.
“Alistair was under strict instructions not to tell anyone he was coming here…”
“Well, I can kind of…”
“No, there’s more,” Joe interrupted. “In particular, he was not to tell any benzodrine, or anyone who may know a benzodrine.”
“He was hiding it from Silas?” Pete asked, disappointed but hardly surprised. “It didn’t take him long to start lying again, did it?”
“We don’t know he’s lying, Pete,” Joe corrected in a tone that suggested he was almost scolding his friend for saying the words.
“Well, we know he’s not telling the truth,” Pete retorted, raising an eyebrow.
“We don’t know why,” Joe replied calmly.
“Yes we do,” Pete shook his head scornfully. “He’s Marcus Sandman. What more do you need to know?”

Joe frowned. Some very strange things had happened to them all. His dreams, Pete’s mysterious disappearance, Andy and Patrick’s issues with time. It all added up to someone with a great deal of power to create the problems they had been dealing with. That someone, it made sense to both of them, either came from or had some connection to Carousel, but who? And if Sandman was lying again, why was he and what was he trying to hide?

“One other thing I don’t understand,” Pete interlaced his fingers as he stared down at his hands. “What’s that?” Joe asked with a frown.
“We’ve all experienced strange things or even attacks, and I’m pretty sure that the same guy is responsible for everything that’s happening, but…” Pete paused.
“Yeah?” Joe pressed.
“Well… even after all this, we’re none the wiser over what this guy actually wants from us.”
“Then there really is only one way to find out,” Joe replied with a knowing nod.
“How?” Pete asked with a blank expression, displaying his lack of ideas.
“We need some luck to figure it out.”
Pete smiled; the answer seemed so obvious. “We ask Mister Crab to help us! He said he heard all calls for luck no matter where they were. So, Mister Crab,” he called, “we need luck to find out what is happening to Joe.”

A silence fell over the room as nothing happened.

“Do you think he heard?” Joe asked with a shrug.
Pete returned with his own expression of deep uncertainty. “I guess we wait.”
A Chapter of Revelations

Chapter Summary

Finally some answers, but do they raise more questions than before?

“What’s going on, Marcus?” Silas asked with what would have been a stern glare if it hadn’t have ended in a cough.

Marcus frowned with deep concern at the deep hacking sound and the obvious pain in his brother’s eyes as he squeezed them shut.

“Si! What can I do? Who’s looking after you?” Marcus rushed forward, placing his hands alternately on his brother’s arm, the bed and his own head.

“I am,” came a familiar voice behind him.

Turning quickly, the worried sandman turned pleading eyes to their father.

“Then make him better!” he cried, his voice filled with concern. “He’s getting married in a few days!”

“If mother lets me,” Silas grumbled quietly.

“What?” Marcus turned a confused glance back toward his brother then back to his father once more.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing, Marcus. Please stop fretting. Silas is here to rest and recuperate. He’ll be well enough in time for his wedding provided he has no more excitement.”

Marcus looked guilty and Joshua’s heart sank. Had he already disclosed the problems Joe was having?

“Why was a sandman in Normal World?” Silas repeated. “Perhaps I’ll get an answer now you’re both here?”

Joshua smiled, partly grateful that he now knew what Silas knew, or more specifically, what he didn’t know, and partly to reassure his son.

“That was on my order… to instruct your friends on wedding procedure and inform them of the security arrangements.”

“A sandman?” Silas raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“Marcus was going to go himself, but he was writing his speech, weren’t you, Marcus?”

“Er… yes! I was right in the middle of it. I had a flow going and wanted to keep at it. I asked Alistair to go in my place; he had all the details.”

Silas raised an eyebrow. “And how did he break his arm?”

“I don’t know,” Marcus shrugged. “I came here to find out. I didn’t know you were here, I thought this was his room.”

“Oh! Well…” Silas paused as his father placed a small device against his temple, raising a faint smile as its pain killing effects took hold. “Well… I guess you’ll want to see him… then. Don’t let… me…”

Marcus watched as his brother sank back against the pillows and drifted off into an artificial sleep.
“I wish I could give him a dream,” he remarked despondently. Looking up at his father, he raised an eyebrow. “So much for me stopping lying.”

“Just this once, Marcus,” Joshua smiled gratefully in return. “He needs to rest and you know he wouldn’t if he knew what was happening.”

“I wish I knew what was happening!” Marcus pouted. “Any word from Spicy yet?”

“Not yet, I doubt her first report will be long. Come on, let’s go and check on Alistair. His arm should be fixed by now.”

“You can re-knit bone, but you can’t cure a lung infection?” Marcus frowned only to receive a knowing smile from his father.

“Marcus, I’ve given him the correct dose with the Bredelse. Silas was rather foolishly trying to treat himself, but he was treating only the symptoms, not the cause. Now, when he wakes the infection will be gone.”

“So he’ll be fine?” Marcus gasped in relief.

“He will be without infection, yes, but there’s nothing I can do to renew his strength except force him to rest. You can help with that.”

“How?”

“Just stop him finding out about whatever is happening to Joe. We’ll deal with it, whatever it is. You, me, Robert and Spicy.”

“But you know he’s not buying that sandman story. When he wakes up…”

“When he wakes up, he won’t even remember it,” Joshua interrupted holding the Bredelse device out for his son to see.

Marcus frowned, now confused by his father’s words. “Then why lie at all? If he’s not…”

Joshua smiled pleasantly; this really was a new Marcus.

“If we had told the truth, he would have found the strength to fight the Bredelse and stay awake. He would be exhausted and the infection…”

“Okay, but this is no different to what I used to do!” Marcus complained. “But somehow this is acceptable?”

Joshua sighed and stopped walking, waiting until his son stopped and turned to face him.

“No, my dear Marcus, it’s not acceptable, I’m not happy about it, but it’s for his own good. However, it is very different to what you used to do.”

“How?” the sandman asked quietly. “Last time I lied to help Silas too.”

“Who benefits?”

“Silas.”

“Who is lied to?”

“Silas.”

“Who, if anyone, is manipulated.”

“Silas,” Marcus sighed and nodded heavily. “Whereas I would lie to and manipulate others.”

“I’m not condoning this either, Marcus, but he has to rest and this is the only way.”

“I understand,” he sighed.

Marcus nodded, as the pair headed for the door.

“How are you dealing with all this, by the way?” Joshua enquired gently.

“With what?” Marcus asked, playing for a few moments of time.

“I hear your meeting with Spicy didn’t go well.”

“It went better than I had any right for it to go,” the sandman sighed, as he remembered their encounter with sadness.

“Marcus… what…”

“I really don’t want to talk about it,” he lowered his head as they again walked briskly down the
“Marcus, don’t you think…”

“No!” Raising his eyes once more, Marcus allowed his shoulders to drop. “Did you know she was the Spymaster on the case when you sent me to speak to her?”

“No, I’m sorry, I should have checked. Robert gave me her code name only, I should have asked,” Joshua sighed. “I should have asked for a different Spymaster.”

“No, she’s one of the best Spymasters the Guard has. If anyone can find out what’s going on, she will.”

“And when she does?” Joshua prompted.

Marcus stopped dead in his tracks and turned a determined eye to his father. “We sort it out.”

“We?” Joshua raised an eyebrow at the reply.

“I… er… But you said…”

“Be sure it is all of us, Marcus, and not another one man crusade,” Joshua warned as they continued towards the junior sandman’s room.

“Yes, sir,” he replied with quiet respect.

Joshua subdued a smile, fervently hoping that he had truly turned a corner with his headstrong son.

* 

Gone was the nurse’s uniform and Spicy was unnerved to find herself wearing her own clothes. She almost hadn’t noticed, so distracted was she by the strange scenery that was so different from the minds of Carouselians.

“Well now, you’re not a nurse, are you?” Andy smiled knowingly before continuing as Spicy turned a non-committal gaze at him. “You appear here as you really are. Don’t worry, your secret’s safe. When you leave, Andy won’t remember you being here. Please, sit down.”

Spicy lowered herself to the ground and ran her hands through the soft grass beneath the cork tree. As her fingers trailed the lush green blades, she paused as her fingertips brushed against something hard and cold. Picking up the small object Spicy frowned as she found herself turning a small brass key in her hand.

“I think you dropped something,” she offered the key to Andy as he took his place beside her in the shade of the imposing but beautiful tree.

Andy tilted his head and looked thoughtfully at the key before shaking his head.

“No, it’s yours,” he smiled.

“No,” Spicy insisted still offering the key.

“You found it. Here,” he waved a hand to indicate their surroundings, “people often find what they’re looking for.”

“You get a lot of people here?” Spicy asked, intrigued by the comment.

“Drummers… mainly. Drummers share a lot, they’re a lot less guarded than other musicians and we get in each other’s heads looking for ideas and inspiration.”

“You can consciously do that?” Spicy was growing increasingly impressed by Normal Worlder’s abilities; this was something Marcus had failed to mention.

“Oh, no!” Andy laughed, a bright, happy laugh that suggested he wished it were true. “No one knows when they do it, they just do. I know; I live here, but I don’t tell Andy.”

“That’s the second time you’ve said something like that. You’re not Andy?” Spicy was growing confused now.

“Yeah, I am, but… It’s complicated. I look after things here. He’s not really aware of me.”

“But surely he created you?” Spicy asked, being drawn into the conversation.
“Ah, now there’s a paradox for you!” he laughed again. “But you’re not here to talk about me, you’re here to talk about Andy.”
“What about this?” she asked raising the key once more.
“You came to find what you need, obviously, you need that. I suggest you keep it. Now, ask away.”

Spicy nodded, slipping the key into her pocket.

“So, if Andy isn’t aware of you, are you aware of Andy?” she asked, hoping it wasn’t all one sided.
“Oh, totally! I know what you want to know, but first, I want to know why you want to know it.”

Spicy frowned; she had underestimated him.

“I believe it may have some bearing on what happened to Patrick.”
Andy nodded knowingly. “Okay, let’s clear up a few things so we can get the conversation moving. Firstly, you can tell me anything, Andy won’t remember. Now, you’re not a nurse…”
“I…”
“And you’re from Carousel, aren’t you?” he pressed.
Spicy sighed and nodded. “I am from Carousel, yes.”
“Did Marcus send you?”
“Not exactly, no. Look, I’m a Spymaster, I believe you met my father, Spyvie. It’s sort of a family tradition, or at least, I hope it will be, I want this for my children too.” Spicy stopped herself abruptly; there was something about the drummer that made it so very easy to talk about her hopes and family.
“You have children?”
“I have a son.”
“How old?”
Spicy’s brow furrowed, almost as if she didn’t know the answer to the question. “He’s still a baby.”
“Still? That’s a strange thing to say. What do you…”
“I’m not here to talk about me,” she interrupted, frustrated by how much information Andy had extracted from her, but most of all, how easy it had been. She was normally so much more guarded than this. “Look, something strange is happening to you, all of you and I need to find out exactly what has been happening.”
“All I know is that Joe has been experiencing some strange dreams,” Andy focussed on the problem, hoping that Spicy’s discomfort would dissipate.
“They’re not dreams, someone is actually after him. We believe that, at least initially, if not still, someone was trying to take him to another dimension.”
“What?” Andy’s eyes widened at the idea. “Why?”
“My father believes it’s because of his connection to Mister Crab.”
“Because he looks like him?” Andy enquired.
“Yes, but there’s more. Wasn’t he the one who freed him from the dream plain?”
“Yes, it was, but…”
“So there’s more than a physical connection, there’s a bond on another level entirely.”
“You think someone is unhappy that he freed Mister Crab?”
“Yes, but it’s more than that, I think because of the link, there is actually some confusion over whether or not he is Mister Crab.”
“Whoever this is thinks Joe is Mister Crab?” Andy’s eyes widened in surprise.
“If you came looking for him and found Joe, would you assume it was someone who just happened to look like him?”
“I guess not,” Andy frowned.
“And now he’s been given power to create portals…”
“It looks like he’s just trying to hide his powers but not being entirely successful,” Andy interrupted, sighing heavily as he finished, worried by the possibility he might be right.
“Exactly,” Spicy nodded. “And now I believe you and Patrick have been attacked by the same man. He has affected time and your memories. He’s clearly very powerful. Possibly as powerful as Mister
Crab himself, maybe more so. I need to know what he said to you.”

Andy frowned as he thought back to the half hour he was speaking to the cab driver.

“He asked me… No he kept asking - ‘Where are they?’ There were some threats too, and then he was silent for a long time while I couldn’t move, but he kept asking ‘Where are they?’”

“Did he say who or what he meant by that?”

“No,” Andy shook his head. “I don’t know what he wanted.”

“Did he come in here?” Spicy pressed.

“No,” Andy replied decisively. “Not in here.”

“Thank you,” Spicy smiled. She wasn’t sure what it all meant, but it was a start. “I think we need to get you all back together.”

“Can I ask,” Andy began tentatively. “What’s your son’s name?”

“William.”

Spicy didn’t know why she replied, but somehow, she felt as though she could tell him anything; it was an unusual feeling for her.

*

“Try again,” Joe urged as Pete turned the phone in his hands once more.

“Yeah,” Pete nodded. “I’m getting worried now,” he admitted, before almost dropping the phone in surprise as it vibrated in his hand. “Yeah?” he asked, answering the call.

“Pete, it’s me, where are you?”

“Trick? I’m at Joe’s, we both are, where are you? Are you still at the hospital?”

“No, we’re just leaving. I’m okay, I had concussion, but I’m okay now, the nurse… she gave me something for it,” Patrick didn’t even know how to explain what had happened. It seemed so unlikely that he could possibly have recovered so quickly, but somehow, thanks to the mysteriously well-equipped nurse, he was feeling fit again, if a little tired.

“She gave you something for concussion?” Pete replied, unconvinced. “I’ve had that… several times Trick and it’s just…”

“I know, Pete, I don’t understand it any more than you, but I’m just telling you what happened.”

“Oh, can you get here?”

“Yeah, we’ll…” Patrick paused almost shivering at the idea. “We’ll get a cab. Is Joe okay?”

“Yeah, we both are, but we’ll be a lot happier when you and Andy get here. We’ve called on Mister Crab, we think he might be able to shed some light on all this,” Pete replied.

“He’s there? With you?” Patrick asked happy at the idea that someone with so much power might be protecting his friends.

“No,” Pete replied despondently. “Not yet, but you know, early days.”

“Oh, we’re on our way,” Patrick switched off the phone and sighed. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” one corner of Andy’s mouth turned up in puzzlement. “Ever had the feeling you know something, but you just can’t remember it?”

*

“He will be all right, won’t he?” Laura’s hand hovered over Silas’; concerned that if she lowered it, she might wake him and slow his recovery. “Please?”

“He’s going to be just fine, Highness,” Seth confirmed confidently. “And, if you don’t mind me saying so, you can touch him, you won’t wake him.”

Laura frowned momentarily as something occurred to her. “Then who…”

“The Benzedrine from neighbouring Danloka is taking over temporarily. Danloka is very small and the doctor trained him himself, he’s highly skilled.”
Laura nodded, a faint smile breaking over her lips as she lowered her hand to cover the sleeping Silas's hand. She hadn’t noticed before, as, since she had known him, the creases had been a permanent feature on his brow, but now, his forehead was smooth and he appeared so peaceful. Raising her right hand, she gently smoothed his hair, her eyes lighting up as still within the confines of his sleep, a slight smile formed on the Benzedrine’s face.

“There, you see, he’s going to be just fine,” Seth added, his voice as certain as his words bringing untold comfort to the young woman. “Majesty.”

Laura turned at the word; it could only mean one of two people had entered the room and instantly she was torn between standing and not leaving her beloved Silas’ side.

“Please,” Eleanor smiled, motioning with her hand for Laura to remain seated. “Seth, when do you begin your training?”

“Next month, My Lady,” a broad smile broke out on his lips as he spoke.

“That is very good news, I’m certain you’ll make a fine nurse.”

“I hope so, My Lady.” Seth nodded politely before continuing. “I’ll leave you alone.”

“Thank you, Seth, I’ll let you know when we leave.”

Bowing with a brief bob of the head, Seth left the room, pulling the door closed behind him.

“Silas sponsors two training places every year. Seth has always wanted to train as a nurse but couldn’t afford the tuition. He’ll make a very good nurse; he’s intelligent, organised and very caring.”

“Silas is paying for his tuition?” Laura’s voice cracked and her eyes welled with tears as she learned more of his generosity.

“Ah, my dear,” Eleanor plucked a tissue from a box on the bedside cabinet and gently dabbed Laura’s cheeks. “Of course, I’m biased, he is my son after all, but the more you discover about him, the more you’ll love him. I swear there isn’t a malicious bone in his body.”

“I believe you, but then,” Laura smiled through her tears, “I’m biased too.”

“I hate to ask you now, but, are you ready for the Extension Ceremony?”

Laura took a deep breath and nodded as she dried her tears. “Yes, very much so. I want to spend as much time with him as possible.”

“I hoped you’d say that,” Eleanor held out her hand. “It’s time.”

*

“Donnie!” Marcus called as he followed his father into Alistair’s room at the hospital.

“Marcus, where’ve you been? You said you were on your way ages ago,” Donnie rose and stood back to allow Joshua to approach the patient to inspect his arm.

“I’m sorry,” Marcus frowned before turning to the young sandman. “I’m sorry, Alistair. When I got here, I went into what I thought was your room only to find my brother a patient in there!”

Both Alistair and Donnie’s eyes widened at the words and the pair spoke simultaneously.

“Governor Benzedrine is ill?”

“Silas is ill?”

Sandman frowned for a moment, slowly filtering out the individual words before replying.

“Yes,” he finally responded. “And, he doesn’t like being called Governor any more than I do.”

“Sorry, sir,” Alistair replied with an apologetic frown.

“It’s okay,” Marcus shrugged.

“Would that be my fault?” Joshua asked with a smirk aimed at his son.
“We don’t particularly like any of our titles,” Marcus replied flatly. “Neither of us.”
“So, then, I shouldn’t call him, His Highness, The Lord Silas, Governor of The Waking World any time soon?”
“Not if you want him to reply, no,” Marcus folded his arms across his chest.
“Too bad, he’s getting it at his wedding,” Joshua hid the smirk from his son, allowing only Alistair to see it; leaving the young sandman biting his lip in an attempt not to laugh.
“I think you’re hurting him,” Marcus commented on seeing his sandman’s expression.
“I’ll be gentle,” Joshua promised.
“He won’t like it, you know,” Marcus continued.
“I’m not hurting him, Marcus,” Joshua protested as he continued his examination.
“I meant Silas!”
“It’s a legal requirement.”
“No it isn’t!” Marcus’ tone reflected his belief that the statement was preposterous.
“It is now,” Joshua retorted with a grin, earning a burst of a sudden laugh from Alistair.

Marcus pouted; they had been baiting him. Gently and playfully, but he felt foolish.

“I see,” he grumbled.
“Marcus,” Joshua sighed, finally turning back to look at his son. The smile still fixed on his face as he looked the sandman in the eyes was infectious and it was too difficult for Marcus to maintain his hurt demeanour.

Sighing heavily in defeat, Marcus cracked a smile and shook his head.

“You know…” he sighed again, shaking his head. “Okay, you got me. I’ll check up on you later, Alistair, okay?”
“Thank you, sir,” the sandman smiled appreciatively in return.
“You coming, Donnie?”
“Sure,” Donnie nodded only to receive a worried frown from his friend.

Once outside the door, Marcus acted on his concerns.

“What’s wrong?” pausing for a few moments, Marcus repeated his question, only this time with more concern in his tone. “What’s wrong, Donnie?”
“You,” the catcher replied without elaboration as finally they left the building.
“Me? What’s wrong with me?”
“Spicy,” Donnie replied simply, keeping his head lowered as he walked briskly.
“What about her?” Marcus almost choked on the words.
“I want you to tell me what happened between you two.”
“I want you to tell me what happened between you two.”
“No, I don’t want to…”
“Look, Marcus,” Donnie turned and took the surprised sandman by both arms. “When my brother died, I… I couldn’t have got through it without you. You helped me more than I can even begin to say or thank you for. But damn it, Marcus, this is killing you! Let me help!”
“You can’t,” Marcus looked down, refusing to look Donnie in the eyes. “You can’t,” he repeated sadly.
“Try me,” Donnie said gently. “Let me in, let me help you. Please, Marcus. Let me please do something for you after everything you’ve done for me.”
“No… I…”
“We’re family, Marcus and best friends. What could possibly be so bad that…”
“I cheated on her!” Marcus yelled. “Okay?”
“You…”
“Yeah, I treated her like dirt. I cheated on her and she caught me. Are you so very sure you want to help me now?” Marcus was still shouting, but with tears streaming down his face. “I hurt her,
Donnie. I don’t deserve your sympathy or your help, or anything but her hatred.”
“Where?” came the weak, almost feeble reply.
“You’re coming back to mine. I’ll make you some koppte and you’ll tell me about it. And not your bleak, I don’t deserve anything tale. I want to know what actually happened, okay?”

Marcus merely nodded; exhausted and drained, overwhelmed by his best friend’s kindness.

“And if you’re lucky,” Donnie placed an arm around the sandman’s shoulders. “I may even have some krets.”

A small, desperate laugh burst from Marcus’ lips at the words. Donnie was worried; he had not seen his friend so unhappy in such a very long time and it broke his heart to see it. But, something was telling him that all was not exactly as it seemed. Marcus either knew a lot more than he was telling, or, somehow Donnie believed, a lot less than there was to know. It was possible that the sandman had behaved so appallingly, perhaps. But it just seemed so unlike him. One way or the other, he would discover the truth and help his friend, guilty or not.

* 

“He’s not coming, is he?” Pete sighed as he paced the room.
“Give him a chance, Pete, you only just got off the phone with him! We don’t even know where…”
“I don’t mean Patrick!” Pete turned a bewildered eye to Joe; how could he not know who he meant?
“I mean Mister Crab.”
“Oh,” Joe shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know. How long would it normally take, do you think?”
“He came pretty quickly when Marcus called him, but that’s really the only time that…”

Pete’s head turned so fast, he almost grew dizzy as a white-haired man seemed to walk from out of the wall beside him. Standing stiffly just inside the room, the man turned his icy blue eyes between the room’s two terrified occupants.

“You will tell me now, where are they?” he demanded coldly.

Grabbing Joe by the shoulder of his shirt, Pete pulled him toward the door only to be met with solid wall as they approached.

“Wh… what? How did that…” Pete gasped, lost for words, as he realised they were trapped inside a room now without a door. Turning desperately, he saw the window had vanished too, although so many floors up, he wasn’t seriously thinking of jumping.

“Marcus did something similar at the studio,” Joe offered, remembering their first encounter with Mister Sandman.

The man narrowed his eyes suspiciously as he stared at Pete.

“You’re not the sandman?”
“No,” Pete gasped as the pair backed up, pressed against the wall, desperately willing the door to reappear. “Who are you?”
“You look like him. You have powers. Do you take me for a fool?” the man growled.
“Powers?” Pete’s mind almost blanked under the impossible stress of what was happening to them.
“One… One power,” Joe stammered. “He made a portal, that’s all.”
“I will deal with you shortly, Crab, but first…”
“I’m not Mister Crab!” Joe blurted, eyes wide with the horror of realisation. “I just look like him! I’m not even from Carousel! What do you want?”
The man narrowed his eyes. Was it possible? He could detect the signature of granted powers on the pair of them. Crab was more than capable of disguising his abilities, but was this sandman? What about the catcher and the benzedrine? They had all been hiding and assisting Crab; they were equally guilty in his eyes. Was it possible that these men merely looked the same? The man he believed to be Crab had never resisted him. Was it because he couldn’t?

“Bring me Crab and his associates and I’ll let you live.”

Falling suddenly through the returned and open door as the man disappeared from sight, Pete and Joe gasped in breathless shock. They still had no idea who he was, but they now knew what he wanted, if not why, but the price was far too high as were the consequences.

“Joe?” Pete said between stilted breaths. “Are you okay?”

“Y… Yeah, you?”

“I think so. What do we do?” Pete shuffled until he sat upright, leaning once more on the wall.

“I wish I knew,” Joe replied grimly. “But I doubt Mister Crab is going to show any time soon.”

Pete blew out a long breath as he considered Joe’s words. It seemed all too likely that he was right, but where did it leave them?
The heady scent of the herbal tea filled the kitchen and the soft clink of cups and plates being fetched from cupboards were the only sound. Donnie lived on the outskirts of The Hills in a quiet neighbourhood called the Old Quarter. There was crime in The Hills, but much less than in some of the more apparently lawless districts as Eddoo River, Es Galleons and Ceramistten. The Hills was, in fact, one of the safest districts in the whole of Carousel and along with Danloka, had possibly the lowest crime statistics of all areas. Even within this safe environment, Donnie lived in a good area. To the best of his knowledge, he had never heard of a crime being committed in his corner of town, and like Marcus, he had lived a very long time. The thought suddenly struck him.

“Marcus?” he began, tentatively as he picked up the cups and carried them to the table in the adjoining room.

Barely daring to look up, the nervous sandman dreaded what Donnie was about to say, believing him to be about to try to coax out the story of his relationship with the feisty Spymaster. Donnie couldn’t help but feel anything but sympathy for his friend. Once more he looked on the verge of tears, the memory tormenting him and tearing him apart. But first, perhaps a distraction was the best course of action?

“If you didn’t know I was a member of the royal family, why did you never query why I lived so long?”

Marcus was thrown by the question, at first merely sitting, mouth open. The unexpectedness of it wiping all coherent thought from his mind.

“I thought we were…” he stammered, slowly shaking his head in confusion.

Donnie smiled as he placed the two cups of the fragrant tea on the table.

“I do have some krets, I’ll be back in a second.”

“Donnie?” Marcus paused as the catcher turned back to face him, a questioning look in his eyes. “I… I don’t understand.”

Patting his friend on the shoulder, Donnie turned back and headed toward the kitchen. “Just relax, Marcus. I’m not trying to confuse or hurt you. I’m just talking to you.”

The sandman slumped forward on the table, dropping his head onto his crossed arms. Sighing heavily, he tried to slow his heart rate and ease the dizzy, swirling sensation caused by his nervous state.

“You sure you’re up to something sugary?” Donnie asked as he re-entered the living room with a plate of circular pastries.

Marcus smiled at Donnie then at the plate. “They’re my mother’s favourites.”

“I know,” Donnie placed the plate within easy reach of the troubled sandman. “Go on.”
Tentatively reaching out for one of the pastries, Marcus broke it in half sending a tiny cloud of powdered sugar into the air, before popping one of the pieces into his mouth.

“Now, we’re almost the same age, but you never queried that.”
“And you only just noticed?” Marcus replied after swallowing.
“Yeah, I guess,” Donnie shrugged. “When did you?”
“I… I guess I was about nine hundred or so. I never really saw anyone grow up other than Silas, you and…”
“And my brother, Michael. You can say his name, Marcus,” Donnie added with a reassuring nod. Marcus took up the nod appreciatively before continuing: “So, I never really noticed before.”
“So what did you notice?”
“I noticed father’s aide growing older, the carnival men being replaced by younger men so quickly and eventually, children, apparently my own age becoming grown men but I was still a child. I asked mother about it and she explained about how we lived so long, that it was probably a gift given by Mister Crab and how we could grant the same gift to others joining the family. I already knew powers could be granted and some were hereditary. Both Silas and I could move objects and he had this amazing ability to make people forget that they had seen him. Oh, boy, did that get him out of so much trouble when we were kids! This is why it was always me getting the blame for things! They could only ever remember seeing me! I couldn’t do it! Don’t get me wrong, I tried. Believe me I tried, but every time I asked him to show me, he’d make me forget he was there and… well, obviously, I forgot.”
“That’s the only reason you used to get into trouble?”
“Well,” Marcus shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “No, obviously not, but, it didn’t help.”
“What happened?”
“Father took away the power until he was two thousand,” Marcus replied with a satisfied smirk.
“Silas was not happy.”
“He blamed you for it?”
“Yeah!” Marcus frowned, as if grievously wronged.
“Was it you?” Donnie pressed.
The mischievous smile was back and Marcus was finding it hard to suppress it. “It might have been. Although,” Marcus lowered his head and sighed. “I don’t think things were ever really the same between us after that.”
“And me?”
“Oh, yeah,” Marcus nodded as he picked up the thread. “Mother told me that you were my best friend and you would grow with me. I guess I just always thought you were one of those people who had the Extension Ceremony and as a child, I never asked why, I just accepted it.”

Donnie nodded; he had always had a great deal of respect for his aunt, The Lady Eleanor, but she had surpassed herself with this.

“And Spicy?” Donnie’s expression grew solemn. “What happened, Marcus?”
“The truth?”

Donnie nodded.

“I don’t know,” Marcus’ voice grew smaller as he tried to recall the events of ten years ago. “Come on, we both know that ten years is nothing to us.”
“It’s not the passing of time, Donnie,” Marcus struggled to explain. “I genuinely can’t remember some of it.”

Donnie frowned; he had felt that something seemed wrong. Perhaps it was just his need to believe in and protect his friend, but perhaps it was more than that. Giving the sandman’s arm a comforting squeeze, Donnie nodded, encouraging him to tell the tale.
“I met Spicy at Silas’ hospital and people talk about love at first sight, but it was…” Marcus sighed and lowered his eyes, a smile stretching across his face.

“Oh, I remember!” Donnie grinned in reply. “Pretty young doctor and you swooping in like a bird of prey!”

“I wasn’t that bad!” Marcus protested before giving a resigned shrug. “Okay, I was that bad. But, Donnie, she was so beautiful and her figure,” he gestured descriptively with his hands, much to Donnie’s disapproval. “She was perfect! She still is. Oh, Donnie! What did I do?”

Leaning forward, the worried catcher placed a hand on the shoulder of the now crumpled form of his best friend. On getting no response, he shook him gently.

“Hey, come on, talk to me,” Donnie encouraged. “So, you met and you hit it off. Then what?”

“There was an age difference…”

“You’re three thousand years old, Marcus! Of course there’s an age difference!”

“A relative age difference,” Marcus frowned as Donnie missed the point. “She was just qualified, just turned twenty two.”

“She qualified in seven years? That’s quick!” Donnie looked impressed.

Filled with sibling pride, Marcus shook his head. “Silas qualified in five years and he was also a full time Benzodrine and Governor of The Waking World when he began his training.”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t have to sleep!” Donnie argued, earning a pout from his friend.

“It’s a full time job in the true sense of the word! He doesn’t have time to sleep!”

“Okay,” Donnie waved his hand dismissively as he realised they were, once again, drifting from the point. “So, Spicy was young.”

“Yeah, young, innocent… She trusted me and…”

“Stop!” Donnie frowned as he saw where the conversation was headed. “Don’t go down that route, just tell me what actually happened.”

“Our relationship was very physical and quite tempestuous,” Marcus nodded regretfully before smiling wistfully at another memory. “We argued a lot, but we had a great time making up.”

“What did you argue about?”

Marcus heaved a sigh. “Father. Silas. She was so close to her family, it hurt me to see the mess my own was in. But instead of doing something positive about it and fixing my situation, I berated hers.”

“Marcus!” Donnie cried, disappointed in his friend’s conduct.

“I told you there was an age difference,” Marcus threw up his hands in despair. “Mentally, she was a lot older then me. I was spiteful and selfish and if it weren’t for the physical side of our relationship, I very much doubt we’d have stayed together for more than a few dates.”

“That doesn’t say much for her, either! I think perhaps you’re forgetting all the good times you shared?”

“Yeah,” Marcus nodded. “Walks by the river, picnics in the Dream Forest, not the one with the nightmares in it, the other one. I loved her, Donnie, even more now I’ve grown up a bit.”

“Quite a lot, actually,” Donnie offered an encouraging smile. “So what happened?”

“Now, you see, this is where it starts to get a bit fuzzy. One of my ex-spinners’ daughters, Anna, approached me one day. Well, she didn’t approach me exactly, she was all over me. Don’t get me wrong, Donnie, she was gorgeous and if I’d been single, well… you know me well enough. But, I wasn’t single and I knew I shouldn’t, but…” Marcus sighed. “It was all happening in slow motion and I mean that literally. It was like moving in treacle. Everything was slow, hazy and muffled. I don’t remember anything after that. The next morning, Spicy and I were supposed to be going to the carnival. I didn’t show, so she came here to find me. When she walked in, she found me in bed with Anna. Spicy was… well, I could see she was devastated, but she was so controlled, so composed. Donnie, I… I couldn’t have admired her more than at that moment, but… what I’d done! Anna was… she acted as though it was a triumph, some sort of conquest for her. She couldn’t see that I was mortified by her presence, that I cared nothing for her. She just carried on as if she’d won some sort of prize. Spicy just left. I begged her to stay, but she wouldn’t even listen to me, not while that
“Did you go to the hospital?” Donnie asked quietly.
“To find her?” Marcus asked. “No, she wasn’t there, she’d already decided to become a Spymaster by then. We even argued about that. Her father’s Master Spyvie, you know?”
“Yes, I know,” Donnie nodded, an inquisitive expression on his face as he waited, apparently for Marcus to notice something. “Marcus, I meant did you go to the hospital for any tests?”
“Tests?” Marcus frowned, puzzled by the question.
Donnie sighed and shook his head in disbelief. “And all these years you’ve blamed yourself?”
“Well, of course I have! It’s hardly Spicy’s fault, is it?” Marcus replied irritably.
“Sometimes, Marcus, I swear you don’t have the brains you were born with!” Donnie sighed with frustration.
“I know,” Marcus slumped forward, pushing his arms flat across the table and dropping his face between them, almost in an attempt to hide.
“You were set up,” Donnie explained bluntly.
“What?” Marcus finally raised his head in confusion.
“This ex-spinner of yours? Would he be one of the spinners who was manufacturing hate to try to kill your father?”
Marcus stared at Donnie, blankly at first, then with an expression of ever increasing horror as Donnie continued.
“So, the daughter of your ex-spinner destroys the relationship between the son of the man her father tried to kill and the daughter of the man who discovered the plot. How could you not see that?”
Donnie cried incredulously.
“I didn’t know about it!” Marcus finally replied after a long pause. “Father kept it from me! I only just recently found out that he was ill. Remember when Patrick got infected by my nightmare’s hate? That’s when I found out about father’s illness!”
“Well how did you know to fire the spinners?”
“I was ordered to!” Marcus replied with an indignant ring to his tone. “I didn’t know why and no one would tell me. I figured they’d done something wrong and something big because… they didn’t even go to a penal colony. But I didn’t know, Donnie, I really didn’t.”
“And Spicy wouldn’t have known because of the District Secrets Laws. Spyvie wouldn’t have told anyone, not even his own daughter.”
“You’re telling me that valptje did this to me for revenge?” a fury was descending over Marcus’ eyes as he thought more about Donnie’s words.
“She probably drugged you,” Donnie frowned sympathetically. “It would explain the strange sensations you felt and the memory loss. You should have been tested.”
“I didn’t know there was anything to test for! I’m going to find Anna,” Marcus fumed bitterly as he rose to his feet, “and when I do, she’s going the way of her father!”
Watching in pity at the thought of a decade of wasted time, Donnie nodded. “And Spicy?”
“I love her, Donnie, I always will. I’ve got to find a way to tell her.” Now pacing rapidly across the room, Marcus appeared worried and agitated. “Will you help me? I doubt she’ll believe me, not without your help.”
“Of course I will,” Donnie nodded, pulling him into a reassuring hug. “I’m so sorry.”
“Sorry?” Marcus pulled back, his eyes wide. “If it hadn’t been for you… ugh!” Marcus rolled his eyes. “I can’t believe I was so stupid!”
“We’ll fix this, Marcus,” Donnie’s voice was certain, so absolutely certain. Nodding, as if to confirm his words, Donnie smiled as noticed Marcus nodding almost automatically along with him. “We’ll fix this,” he repeated confidently. “It’ll be okay.”
To Laura’s relief, there was no large, grand imposing hall, just a small, quiet, semi-darkened room. Having also returned from the hospital, Joshua stood in the centre smiling kindly, gesturing for Laura to join him. In her mind, she had pictured many different scenarios, but none of them were anything like what was now being presented to her. Her over-active imagination had scared her, not just on this occasion, but in the past also. Now, she was pleased to see that there were no long splintered wooden operating tables with straps to hold her down, no instruments of torture, no lightening machines and no gathered henchmen. The room was simply furnished with several comfortable looking seats, soft lighting and pleasant music playing.

“My dear, Laura,” Joshua began. “I can see by your face that you’re concerned about the ceremony. You don’t need to be, I assure you. We will explain everything to you and if there’s anything…”

“My Lord, I’m not…”

Joshua raised a finger into the air, causing Laura to pause. “You must call me Joshua.”

Laura smiled graciously and nodded. It had all happened so fast for her. Only a matter of weeks earlier, she had been a prisoner on board her own brother’s slave ship, destined to lead him to those inhabitants of Carousel’s various districts who possessed powers. Using her own power as a Locator, she was forced to find and help imprison others. Now, here she was about to marry into the most important and powerful family in Carousel. The difference was beyond comprehension and that was difficult enough to accept without the comparatively minor detail that she was expected to address the royal family by their first names. She had fallen for Silas utterly without being aware of his lineage. All she knew about him was that he was a Benzedrine. No, that wasn’t true. She also knew that he was a kind, handsome and very sweet man. But above all, she knew that she adored him. She was prepared to do anything to be with him and even though the idea of the Extension Ceremony scared her, it would ultimately lead to a long and happy lifetime with her beloved Silas. Now, here she was, and as Eleanor had said, it was time.

Stepping forward gingerly, Laura tried to recall Eleanor’s assurance that the ceremony wouldn’t be painful. It was hard to imagine something this complex and life altering. Equally, it was impossible to imagine it being painless, but as Laura knew from her experiences in the hold of the ship, there was a full range of possibilities between painless and painful.

She hadn’t intended to read Laura’s mind, but her thoughts were streaming unguarded into the room for anyone with the gift of mind reading to hear. Eleanor frowned as she heard and felt the young woman’s fears; even wondering if her thoughts were so loud as to be detectable to anyone without that particular gift.

“Oh, my!” Eleanor began, ushering Laura to one of the chairs. “Please my sweet Laura, please sit down. There is nothing you’ll experience today that will hurt you. This is a celebration of family, there’s no pain, no discomfort and certainly nothing to worry about. The chair is simply for your comfort. I know you’ve suffered so much, I simply wasn’t sure if you would be strong enough to remain standing for the entire ceremony. That’s all.”

Laura turned an embarrassed expression toward Eleanor, her eyes closing in an attempt to hide her shame and the beginnings of tears as they welled in her eyes.

“Sweet child,” Eleanor laughed, drawing Laura into a tender and warm embrace. “You are so caring. You thought it might hurt, but you were willing to go ahead anyway to be with Silas. You are so right for him, I couldn’t be happier. But tell me,” she relaxed her embrace and looked into Laura’s eyes, “have you never had a power granted to you?”

“I… I don’t think so,” Laura stammered. “I think everything I have was hereditary.”
“Ah, I see,” Eleanor nodded. “So you think that granted powers hurt?”
“Well, I… I never really thought of this as a power, if I’m honest. Besides, even if it was, my brother once told me that when he had his powers removed, that it was agony.”
“Yes, I remember you telling me that he had powers removed.” Eleanor nodded.
“He misused them… for his own gain.”

It took all of Eleanor’s restraint not to roll her eyes. Mister Crab’s gift was a significant and a welcome one. It allowed the people of Carousel to function comfortably on a daily basis, enjoying the benefits of enhanced abilities, but there were far too many loop holes in the nature of the granted powers that allowed many immoral people to take advantage. It had also left this one very kind and sweet person in fear; it was time to correct the misapprehension.

“No, my dear. Removing powers, even hereditary ones, isn’t painful. His pain was either punishment for his actions or a lie to hurt you.”
“You’re sure?” Laura asked, her uncertainty clear to the royal couple.

Eleanor smiled as she gently smoothed Laura’s hair, in an attempt to calm her fears.

“Yes, my dear. I know because I, myself, had to remove one of Silas’ powers when he was a child. One that he was using to cause mischief. Your husband-to-be hasn’t always been the very picture of innocence, you know.” Laura laughed briefly as Eleanor continued. “Not that he is now mind you, but his virtues outweigh his vices.”

“I knew my brother was a liar… well, that is, I do now, but I didn’t know the extent of his lies.”
“Well, let me tell you about today. We will spend an hour, or more, if you prefer, in celebration of our family… our growing family. And by the end, you will feel no different, but you will be different. You will age at a much reduced rate and you will be ready for the wedding.”

“Will Silas?” Laura lowered her eyes in concern. “Will he be well enough?”

Eleanor tipped her head to one side. “He probably won’t be, but the wedding will still go ahead as planned.”

Laura frowned as she took in the words. She still felt a little awkward with her new in-laws but the words seemed so out of character, almost callous.

“With respect… Eleanor, I know it’s all planned and everything, but, well…” Laura sighed inwardly, having no idea how her next words would be received. “If Silas isn’t well enough, and I mean, properly well, so he can enjoy it, I really think it should be postponed.”

“Postponed?” Eleanor pressed, her expression unreadable.

“I… I understand how important this is, to everyone, but my main concern is Silas and I just…” Laura paused as Eleanor beamed a broad and clearly delighted smile at the confused woman.

“Welcome to our family, my dearest Laura. You are as perfect for Silas as he is for you. I have no doubt that you will be happy for the rest of your lives.”

“You… that was a test, wasn’t it?” Laura frowned with uncertainty.

“I’m sorry, I had to ask. You do understand, don’t you?”

“You love Silas,” Laura smiled. “If you weren’t protective of him, I’d be worried.”

The low shimmering sound of a gong reverberated around the room, drawing everyone’s attention.

“My dear, Laura,” Eleanor took hold of Laura’s hands as she smiled down at her. “I must ask you, do you freely and willingly choose to become a member of this House? To age as we do and knowingly extend your life a hundredfold as wife to our son, Silas?”

“With all my heart,” Laura replied with a happy smile yet also with dampened lashes.

“The celebration is about to begin.” Joshua announced as a hologram emerged from the low black glass table in the centre of the room.
“This will show the history of the family,” Eleanor explained as she passed a tall fluted glass of champagne to Laura.

“Is this…?”

“My dear, the power has already been granted, now it is simply time for celebration.”

Laura grinned broadly; she would grow old alongside the love of her life. Celebration - yes, that was exactly what was called for.

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Pete paced the room. As yet, neither Mister Crab nor Patrick and Andy had arrived and he was growing increasingly impatient.

“What are we going to do?” Pete threw his arms up in frustration. “We can’t do what he wants and we can’t not!”

“We need to find out who he is,” Joe suggested.

“You think Marcus knows?”

“No,” Pete sighed. “But it doesn’t mean that no one in Carousel knows.”

“Joshua?”

“Maybe? Or Spyvie, perhaps?” Pete shrugged his shoulders.

“Mister Crab knows,” Joe sighed. “But I doubt he’ll turn up now, not while that man’s looking for him.”

“But wait!” Pete cried. “He said he was going to repay the debt to all of us.”

“What debt?” Joe frowned at the words.

“Because you released him he said he hoped he didn’t have to, but he would save all our lives.”

“Well, hasn’t he already?” Joe shrugged.

“He’s saved me, Patrick, Silas and Marcus. But not Andy or Donnie and certainly not you and you freed him!”

“Well, this is his big chance!” Joe replied looking around the room in an exaggerated manner. “No,” he shrugged, “perhaps not.”

“We need to go to Carousel again,” Pete decided with a regretful sigh, completely lost for any other options.

“Not before Patrick and Andy get here,” Joe insisted. “I’d feel a lot better if we were all together.”

“Yeah,” Pete agreed emphatically, “that way we got each other’s backs.”

A knock on the door with a distinctive pattern drew a smile to Pete’s lips.

“They’re here,” he announced with relief as he headed towards the door.

Briefly he wondered whether it was safe to leave Joe alone even for a moment, but found himself nodding to himself as he decided it was. The man had effectively told them to hand over their friends, so he now knew Joe wasn’t Mister Crab. In the short term, the very short term, Joe was safe.

Joe smiled as he heard the familiar voices as they entered the hallway. Even though they were still in danger, the fact that they were now all together was comforting.

“Joe!” Andy cried as soon as he opened the door to the living room. “Are you okay?”

“Are you kidding?” he smiled. “Just part of my very elaborate plan to get you all to visit.”

Andy grinned; Joe might be okay, or he might be lying to cover how scared he felt, but his sense of humour was irrepressible.

As the four men exchanged hugs and greetings, it became apparent to each of them that although they were scared, the closeness of their friendship was providing immense support. Apart, they had
felt vulnerable and alone. Now it all felt so much easier to bear.

“So,” Patrick began. “Any clue as to what this is all about?”
“Yeah,” Pete began. “Well, some anyway. He’s after Mister Crab and he thought Joe was him.”
“Because he looks like him?” Andy asked.
“Yeah, but more than that, he detected the power Joshua granted us to make portals. He also thinks, well, thought I was Marcus for the same reason.”
“And he thought I was Silas and Andy was Donnie?” Patrick queried.
“Yeah,” Pete replied with a nod.
“That doesn’t explain how he knows them. I mean Mister Crab didn’t know Silas, Marcus and Donnie until recently. And what does he want?” Patrick asked almost as confused as earlier.
“He wants all four of them,” Pete replied with a worried frown. “And I think he wants to kill them because he said he’d kill us if we didn’t give them to him.”
“When did this happen?” Patrick asked, astonished at the news.
“Just now,” Pete sighed. “He had us trapped in here. The door just vanished.”

Patrick frowned as he took in the words. With everything that had happened to all of them a picture was forming. It wasn’t clear and there were many pieces missing, but it was there, coming together slowly.

“Everything this guy has done has been a power we’ve seen used by someone from Carousel. The dreams, the door disappearing, the forgetting you’ve seen someone, them being able to find us based on us having a power.”
“What about the messing with time?” Andy asked. “We haven’t seen that.”
“No,” Patrick replied, a thoughtful expression fixed on his face. “But I bet the power exists.”
“So this guy is from Carousel,” Joe nodded.
“No,” Patrick shook his head. “That’s not what I was thinking. This guy knows Mister Crab, I mean actually knows him. He doesn’t revere him or fear his level of power.”
“Then he knows him from wherever he originally came?” Andy suggested. Patrick nodded. “And he’s come looking for him now he’s no longer trapped in the dream.”
“And he’s after Marcus and the guys because they helped him?” Joe nodded; the idea making increasing sense to him the more he considered it.
“If that’s true, then this guy probably has more power than anyone else in Carousel,” Pete frowned as he considered the idea. “Possibly even Mister Crab. Remember he said he lost some of his powers fighting with his family.”
“But we can’t just give them to him,” Andy insisted. “They’re our friends.”
“No we can’t,” Patrick agreed.
“But it’s not just them, we’re not safe either. It’s only a matter of time before he finds out that I’m the one who freed him and that we helped him too.” Joe put in.

Exchanging concerned glances, all four friends realised the situation was dire. All of them were in danger from whoever this man was. It was vital that they found out more about him in whatever limited time he was prepared to allow them.

“We think Joshua might know something or maybe Spyvie,” Pete announced, his tone clearly a mixture of hopeful and desperate.
Patrick nodded. “Let’s go to Carousel and ask them. It doesn’t sound like we have much time.”
Your Secret's Out

Chapter Summary

Spicy is tricked into giving up a secret she's kept for almost ten years and we find out more about the white-haired man.

Spicy waited in the anti-chamber to Lord Joshua’s office, staring occasionally at the many portraits of previous rulers. Gazing at one in particular, she had already worked out that it must be Lord Joshua’s father, Alexander. Her brows knit in brief torment as she noticed the astonishing similarity between man in the portrait and Marcus. It was mostly in the eyes and nose, but they shared a dark complexion and a luxuriant head of almost black hair. Spicy lowered her eyes and thought more about it… him. His smouldering good looks and sparkling eyes. The smile that could light up a room full of people and yet, at the same time, make you feel as though you were the only two there. That, when no one was watching, how he would kiss you, so softly, so gently and could make you feel as though you were the most special person in Carousel. And when he…

“Olivia?”

The voice commanded her attention; it was her father. Even he, over the years had begun to call her Spicy; a name earned through a combination of her chestnut and flame red hair and, of course, her temperament. But there were occasions, few as they were, when he needed to instantly reach to her very heart and soul and those moments demanded her real name. It had been her mother’s name also. She had been precious to both of them and instrumental in the young Olivia being allocated to train as a doctor. As a Spymaster, like her husband, Spicy’s mother had undertaken some very dangerous missions and was determined that her daughter would not follow in the family business. Dutifully, Spicy had applied herself to her studies and been accepted into medical training at the tender age of eleven, rather than the usual thirteen. Both parents had been proud of their young daughter but only one had still been alive to see her graduate and qualify seven years later – Spicy’s mother having been killed during a particularly dangerous mission.

The qualification was a bitter day for the young doctor. She had wanted to follow in her parents’ footsteps but was equally eager to please them. Now qualified as a doctor and working in one of the best hospitals in Carousel, she found that her heart wasn’t in the work. The only happiness that her lifetime of study had brought her was meeting Marcus J Sandman, but even that hadn’t been enough to engage her to remain a doctor. Her dream still lay in becoming a Spymaster and it was a little over two years later that she gave up her position at the hospital to begin her training.

Only a few months into her training, a second wave of bitterness swept over her life. Marcus Sandman, the man she had entrusted with her heart, the unknowing father of her unborn child, had crushed her utterly on the day she had found him with another woman. All the cliche and stereotypical excuses had poured from his lips. How he hadn’t meant it. How he only loved her. How he had no idea how it had happened. He had seemed repentant and regretful, but of course, that was purely because she had found him with her. How long might it have continued if he hadn’t been caught? How long had it already been happening? How could she forgive him? He had been unfaithful and she was carrying his child. She was devastated. Utterly torn apart and yet – she sighed, angry with herself at the knowledge of it – still very much in love with him.
“Father,” she rose to her feet as Master Spyvie entered the room. “You’re here to make your report?”
“Yes, father, although,” her shoulders dropped at the thought of what she was about to say. “I have very little information, as yet.”
“You saw The Lord Marcus?”
“Yes,” she replied, turned half away from her father as she spoke. “Olivia, I accepted your decision not to ask for anything from him. I didn’t agree with it at the time, and, in truth, I still don’t, but I can stay silent no longer. The man must face his responsibilities! William is nine years old, nearly ten and because of the royal family’s aging differences, still an infant. He must be involved in his child’s upbringing…”
“No!” Spicy looked away completely. “I told you, father. No!”
“Olivia, your baby is aging one year for each one hundred of ours! I hate to say this, but you will be long gone before William says his first word. As much as I care for and respect Lord Joshua, his good-for-nothing Sandman son has to face his responsibilities!”
“Father, you don’t understand!” Spicy complained quietly, trying to contain her unhappiness. “You’re right! I don’t!” Spyvie placed a hand on her arm only to recoil as she pulled away. “If you were going to take up with one of Lord Joshua’s boys, why couldn’t it have been The Lord Silas? He wouldn’t have…”
“Marcus doesn’t know about William!” Spicy turned finally, her eyes reddened and puffy.

Spicy’s jaw dropped as she saw Lord Joshua standing alongside her father. As a Spymaster, he was exceptional. Equally so as a father. But now, he had tricked her into giving away a secret that she had kept from almost everyone for nearly ten years and it was too difficult to bear.

“Father,” she began through a clenched jaw, “I’m not certain I can forgive you for this.”
“For your sake, and for William’s…” Spyvie nodded his understanding. “It’s a chance I have to take.”

Lord Joshua forced a smile, but despite it being forced, it was a kind smile.

“I await your report,” he nodded benevolently. “But it’s not all we have to discuss.”

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“Donnie?” Marcus began tentatively. “It’s true isn’t it?”
“What’s true, Marcus?” Donnie prepared himself mentally to fight off another volley of the Sandman’s self-deprecation.
“Silas got all the intelligence,” he sighed and looked down at the floor, playing with his hands, as he remained seated at the table in the corner of Donnie’s living room. “How could I not have seen what was happening?”
“Oh, that’s easy,” Donnie took a seat opposite. “You’re a good man and you see the best in everyone. Even when it’s not there.” Donnie frowned as he said the words. “Except… you don’t see the good in yourself.”
“I hurt her, Donnie.”
“No, you didn’t! Anna did!”

The distressed Sandman dropped his head into his hands; his elbows resting on the table.

“She doesn’t know that!”
“I told you! I’ll help you convince her. We’ll sort this out, Marcus.”
“When I first mentioned it, you said you wanted me to be sure it was in her interests rather than just mine. Okay, that was before you worked out what happened… but doesn’t the same apply? Doesn’t it still have to be right for her?”
“You don’t think she’d want to know that you didn’t cheat on her?” Donnie’s eyes widened at the suggestion that it was better to keep what they now knew hidden.

“Didn’t I?” Sandman looked up, his eyes brimming, his cheeks pale and drawn. “I was still with her.”

“Marcus,” Donnie took hold of the Sandman’s hands and, in his own clasped hands, shook them lightly, desperate to gain his attention. “She drugged you. You don’t even remember what happened…”

“Then…”

“Chances are, nothing did happen! After being drugged, nothing could happen! Marcus, don’t you see? Just because she was with you when you woke up, it doesn’t mean anything! She set you up. She set out to destroy your relationship. To hurt you in the only way she could. Her father tried to kill yours and she got her revenge for his sentence by hurting you! How can you not see that?”

“Because… because it’s easier to believe I deserved it.” Sandman lowered his eyes once more. “Even without all that, I wasn’t good to Spicy. I told you we argued and it was all over my own insecurities. I didn’t deserve her. What happened… that’s what I deserved!”

“Stop it!” Donnie yelled curtly, gaining a wide-eyed look of surprise from his friend. “Look, I was more surprised than anyone to find that underneath your brash, confident exterior, you’re insecure and full of self-doubt. I’ve known you all my life and had no idea. You cover up a little too well, Marcus. When I found out… when finally you admitted to me and Patrick how you really felt… well, I was shocked. But more than that, I really felt as though I’d let you down. I thought I should have known. If anyone had known how you really felt, it should have been me! I’ve been with you all these years… apparently with my eyes shut! I really didn’t know and I felt so bad. I should have been helping you.”

“N… No, Donnie… I…” Marcus tried to interrupt, only to be waved down by his friend.

“But,” Donnie began in a calmer tone, “I realised that because you know me, that you figured out a way to hide it from me.”

“What’s your point?” Marcus asked unhappily.

“My point, Marcus, is that if you know what to expect… how someone will react to certain situations, you can make them believe anything. And that’s what she did, with both of you.”

Marcus sighed and nodded. Pulling one hand free and placing it over the top of Donnie’s hands, Marcus gave a grateful squeeze.

“You’re amazing, you know that?” he spoke quietly.

“Well, I have a friend who’s always been there for me. He’s helped me through my darkest moments, a friend I’d do anything for.”

“He’s a lucky man,” Marcus nodded and smiled faintly.

Donnie shook his head in wonderment. “He’s you, you idiot!”

Marcus didn’t see the comforting embrace from his friend, his eyes were already misting at the words, the heartfelt emotion that he knew was backed by the truest depth of feeling. Donnie was his best friend, and everything he had just said could easily have been returned to him a thousand-fold. Pulling Donnie closer, Marcus spoke the few muffled words into his friend’s shoulder.

“I don’t deserve you.”

“Shut up, Marcus.”

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The white-haired man turned his cold blue eyes toward the sleeping man. He could tell he was unused to sleeping and that this was, in fact, an artificial sleep forced upon him. He seemed weak, his strength at a low ebb. It was perfect. He would be unable to resist him. Stepping forward, he placed a hand on the man’s forehead. Beneath his fingers, he could feel a slight trembling as the man reacted
to his presence, unable to wake.

“Who… who are you?” Doctor Benzedrine stammered, unnerved to find the white-haired man standing inside his own mind.

“Where is Crab?” he demanded, ignoring Silas’ question.

“I… I don’t know,” Silas replied honestly. “I don’t know where he goes. Who are you?” he demanded again. “What do… how did you…?”

“Silence!” the man growled. “You are guilty of freeing and harbouring a fugitive. Your own sentence will depend entirely on your actions now. I may let you live if you hand him and his siblings over immediately. If you don’t, then your sentence will be carried out swiftly and without mercy.”

“Who are you?” Silas demanded, terrified by his inability to move and escape. “What do you want? What do you mean, a fugitive? What are you talking about?”

“Silence!” the man growled again. “You are guilty of freeing and harbouring a fugitive. Your own sentence will depend entirely on your actions now. I may let you live if you hand him and his siblings over immediately. If you don’t, then your sentence will be carried out swiftly and without mercy.”

“Who are you?” Silas demanded, terrified by his inability to move and escape. “What do you want? What do you mean, a fugitive? What are you talking about?”

“You will do well not to waste my time, benzedrine! Your powers are nothing next to mine! Where do you think your powers originated?”

“Mister Crab,” Silas swallowed hard, exhausting himself still further as he continued to struggle fruitlessly against the effortless grip.

“Like me, Crab hails from Annenstad, another world where powers like mine are commonplace. However, unlike me, Crab is a fugitive and it is my duty to locate him and his siblings and bring them to justice. Anyone harbouring them is equally guilty and you and your friends have one chance only to correct your potentially fatal mistake.”

“You can’t come to my world making demands and threats!” Silas insisted with more authority than he truly felt. “Release me and we’ll talk.”

“I have neither need nor inclination to listen to words of those that harbour fugitives from my world. You will hand him over now or…”

“What crime has he committed? And who are you to demand anything of me?” Silas drew on all his reserves of authority and courage.

“I am Gideon Pryke, Guardian of Annenstad. And indeed, who are you to speak to me in such a way, benzedrine?”

It would be one of the few times he would refer to himself in such a way, but the man seemed impressed by titles and authority. It seemed the only option available to him.

“I am His Highness, The Lord Silas, Governor of The Waking World and second heir to the throne of Carousel.”

“A prince?” The speech had the desired effect and the man seemed to visibly calm, having suddenly a modicum of respect for the still immobile Benzedrine. “Consorting with known criminals? I find this highly unlikely.”

“He’s not known to us as a criminal, Mister Pryke,” Silas replied as calmly as he could manage. “I repeat, release me and we can talk.”

“Release you?” the man scowled. “I don’t need to do that. I don’t even need to talk, but I can see from inspecting your mind that you tell the truth. I will find him, Lord Silas, and if you try to prevent me or warn him, I will kill you. Don’t doubt that I will.”

“Hey!” Seth’s voice cried as he entered the room, wrenching Pryke’s attention from Doctor Benzedrine.

As he removed his hand, it was as if Silas had been torn physically from a terrifying nightmare. Now sitting upright, awake and gasping for breath, Silas reached out with a shaking arm as he constructed a weak, but protective invisible wall in front of Seth.

“Feeble, but commendable,” Pryke laughed. “Bring me my prisoners, Lord Silas, or your refusal will be the last thing you do.”
As the man faded from view, Seth ran forward, pressing Silas back down onto the bed and placing an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth in an attempt to calm him.

“Sir, are you all right? Did he hurt you? I’ll call Lord Joshua and The Guard!” Seth fussed, pressing a button on a small device attached to his belt.

Snatching the mask from his face, Silas exhaled slowly, controlling his breathing and slowing his heart rate before frowning deeply at the orderly’s response.

“Seth, why do I get the feeling that I’m being kept in the dark about something?”

* 

It was dark. The kind of darkness that can only be achieved by light having never even coming close to penetrating the empty hollowness in which he now stood. As he waited, in absolute silence, it was just possible to hear his breathing and the occasional rustle of clothes as he raised his hand, gesturing to the air. As he did, a faint light grew as if emanating from the rock surrounding him until the entire cavern was lit. It wasn’t a bright light, neither was it even pleasant ambient lighting that suggested home. It was, at best, adequate. Enough to see the red granite walls, the treacherous drops into a still dark abyss and the single object occupying its place in on a plinth in the centre of the entirely enclosed cavern deep inside the mountain.

Mister H Shoe Crab stared into the swirling void. It was a hurricane, a torrent of epic proportions, a great swirling mass of blackness and, if it weren’t for the fact it was contained, deafening noise. A glass globe of incomprehensible activity and torment. He held it in his hand and to do so it captured most of his power, but it was ultimately worth the sacrifice. As he stared, images formed; tantalisingly brief snatches of something almost appearing before being whisked from sight, torn apart to form new and stranger forms – some familiar to him, others, all too familiar. Lost within its midst voices drifted to his pained ears.

“You had to know he would find you, brother?” one voice mocked. “Or did you truly believe he had given up?”

“Oh, he knew!” another voice chirped. “My guess is that he’s been waiting. You can’t fight him, not as you are. Not while you use so much of your power to hold us here.”

“Free us,” the first began again. “Free us and all your powers will be returned to you.”

“And you?” Mister Crab asked; if humour had been part of his nature, he would almost certainly have been amused by the exchange.

“Us?” the first voice continued. “We’ll deal with Guardian for you.”

“For freeing us,” the second added. “We have no desire to return to Annenstad.”

“No,” Crab smiled. “You would rather stay here, kill me and crush Carousel.”

“Dear brother,” the first growled, “thanks to you, Carousel has enough combined power to repel us. We would be forced to move on. Carousel is yours. Release us. We will kill Guardian and leave. Then… we will all be free.”

“Debating my options was something I truly did not see coming. Carousel… Carousel is transparent to me and if I care to look, I see it all, past present and future. Some of what I see saddens me, I’ll admit but Annenstad is a mystery. Guardian’s presence necessitates that I limit my powers and my future is suddenly shrouded in mist.”

“No so lucky now, are you?” the second voice chuckled.

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“My Lord Joshua,” Ambrose rushed into his private office only moments after Joshua and Spicy had entered.

“How dare you burst in here! I am in conference. You…”
“The Lord Silas has been attacked, My Lord,” Ambrose hurriedly explained, casting aside all formalities.
“Come with me, it may be relevant,” Joshua glanced quickly at Spicy as he signalled for his aide to lead the way. “My apologies, Ambrose, I should have realised that you wouldn’t have broken protocol had it not been an emergency.”
“No, My Lord but I do apologise for the shock of it.”
“What happened? Is he all right?”
“He seems to be, My Lord. Seth and Doctor Poulson are with him.”

Joshua smiled; he trusted Doctor Poulson. She had been one of the few doctors sponsored and trained by both him and his son. She had matured into a fine doctor. Specialising in bacterial and viral diseases, she had been instrumental in preventing a particularly resistant strain of a viral outbreak that had begun in Dia Engos some years earlier that had threatened to spread in pandemic proportions. His son was certainly in good hands.

“What happened?” Joshua repeated.
“We’re not certain, My Lord. A man broke into his room…”
“He got past the guard?” Joshua asked angrily.
“No, My Lord, he swears no one went by him,” Ambrose replied quickly as they headed down the connecting corridor between the palace and the hospital. “I believe him.”
“How is that possible?” Joshua scoffed angrily, still concerned for his son’s safety despite his aide’s reassurances.
“Please, My Lord, speak to them first, before you make your decision.”

Gritting his teeth, Joshua nodded. His aide was not given to flights of fancy. On the contrary, he was somewhat mistrusting and more likely to judge than forgive. As they drew closer to Silas’ room, Joshua was less inclined to consider his anger or possible punishments; he just wanted to see his son.

“Majesty,” the guard standing at the door to Silas’ room stood to attention. “Nobody came by me, entering or leaving. I don’t…”

The guard was abruptly cut short as Joshua merely swept past him, ignoring him utterly and hurried into the room.

“Silas,” Joshua breathed a sigh of relief as he saw his son, lying back in bed, resting, or at least being held down by Doctor Poulson holding the oxygen mask in place.
“Father!” Silas immediately sat up, pulling the mask away from his face, to the annoyance of both Doctor Poulson and his father.
“Put that back on,” Joshua demanded, “and lie down.”
“But I can’t talk to you if I do that,” Silas murmured sheepishly and he settled back against the pillow on his father’s command, his hand, holding the mask, hovering near his nose and mouth.

Standing silently, Joshua stared at his son. He looked pale, but then, he always did. But, there was a look in his eyes that Joshua recognised, drawing a faint smile to his lips. Silas had that determined look in his eyes; the look that suggested that he would not be fobbed off with lies or dressed half-truths. He also had a fire in his eyes that Joshua hadn’t seen since he returned.

“May we have the room, please?” Joshua asked politely, with reverence to the assembled medical staff. Waiting patiently until the room emptied except for Spicy who remained standing discreetly near the door, Joshua cleared his throat and moved to the side of the bed. Reaching for a small device, he placed it on Silas’ temple.
“Forty-two-point-three,” Silas commented with a knowing smile.

Examining the read-out from the small screen on the side of the device, Joshua nodded.
“Still too low.”
“Well within normal,” Silas corrected.
“You’re always forty-two-point-five.”
“Point-two out?” Silas cocked his head to one side. “I can cope.”
“Perhaps,” Joshua nodded. “But I’m your doctor…”
“And I’m yours!” Silas interrupted.
“But, I’m not the one who’s ill.”
“Neither am I!”
“That’s my decision, not yours.”
“Father, I’m fine!”
“We’ll get to that, but let’s discuss what happened in here first, shall we?”
Silas sighed. “I think that would be a very good idea. That way, I might actually find out what’s been going on.”
“What do you mean?” Joshua frowned.

Silas tilted his head to one side as he stared expectantly at his father. On receiving no response, he continued:

“There’s a guard on my door, isn’t there?” Silas raised an expectant eyebrow.
“How do you know?” Joshua frowned. “You didn’t see him, you were asleep.”
“When granting me powers, you equipped me well,” Silas stated before explaining further. “And, I’m sure unintentionally, Seth thinks very loud and quite unguarded.”
“Enough for it to penetrate your sleep?” Joshua’s brow creased at the thought.
“Like I said, you equipped me well.”

Joshua sighed; he had not considered Silas’ use of his powers.

“I didn’t grant you that much ability,” Joshua shook his head.
“Well, let’s call it natural talent,” Silas smiled as he realised, with practise, he had increased the effectiveness of his powers. “Also, Seth was carrying an alarm with preset alerts programmed into it. That’s not standard hospital issue. And the only power I needed for that was observation.”
“Sometimes I think you and Marcus forget who you are and your positions. It’s not standard for my son to be a patient,” Joshua replied calmly.
“Well even if it were, it’s not standard to require an alarm, or a guard on my door. Or,” Silas nodded in Spicy’s direction, “have a Spymaster in tow.”
“We were in conference when the alarm was raised that you were attacked,” Joshua began.
“And the expected response would be to resume your briefing on your return. Spicy is here, because this is relevant to whatever she’s reporting on. Isn’t it? What’s going on, father?”

Joshua tried hard to hold in both the expression and sigh that would reveal to his all too intelligent son that he was correct. He was a doctor, and a fine one at that and he had been taught how to rule. Silas knew that his reading of the situation was correct and was waiting for confirmation. Something that his father had to hold back for the sake of his health.

“You’re reading too much into this, Silas…”
“Is it Marcus? Is he all right?” Silas gave a worried frown, alternately switching between Joshua and Spicy.

At the question, Spicy registered her surprise. When Marcus had spoken about the Normal Worlders being friends of himself and Silas, she had commented on the suggestion, even mocked it, but somehow forgotten it. Yet now, here was Silas, worried for his brother. Had they reconciled? After so long at war with each other. Was it possible?
As long as she had known either of them, which, admittedly, in their terms wasn’t long, she had never heard a good word from one about the other. It had mostly been Marcus complaining, but even Silas had occasionally let his guard down and made infrequent, but bitter remarks about his brother. The concern was there in his eyes and it had startled her.

Her surprise manifested itself subtly in her body language as she straightened more so than usual, her body stiffening and her eyes showing ever so slightly more white that usual. Silas picked up on the faint signals, causing him to worry all the more.

“It is Marcus! Father, what’s going on?”

“It isn’t Marcus!” Joshua insisted, growing increasingly concerned over his son’s agitation. This wasn’t what he had planned at all. There was only one thing he could do – be honest. “It’s Joe. There’s somebody… he seems to be following him, attacking him. We think it’s possibly something to do with Mister Crab.”

“Oh! Now, that I know about,” Silas nodded. “His attacking Joe, I did not know.”

“You know?” both Spicy and Joshua spoke simultaneously, Spicy taking a few steps closer.

“Yeah,” Silas nodded again, before placing the oxygen mask briefly up to his nose and mouth. “It just didn’t make any sense until now. The man who was just here, the one who threatened me…”

“He threatened you?” Joshua’s eyes narrowed. “Who is he?”

“Gideon Pryke. He called himself the Guardian of Mister Crab’s home world. I… I think Mister Crab’s a criminal.”

“What?” Joshua’s expression of confusion spoke volumes.

“Well… at least that’s what he said,” Silas explained. “I don’t know if it’s true.”

“And he threatened you?” Joshua pressed.

“He thinks we’re harbouring him. He wants us to hand him over and… his brothers. He wanted me to tell him where they are.”

“Where are they?” Spicy rolled her eyes in realisation as she made the connection. “That’s what Andy said he was asking him.”

“Andy?” Silas’ eyes widened. “He’s attacked the others too?”

“I think we need to gather everyone together,” Joshua nodded decisively.

A rap at the door called for Joshua’s attention.

“Enter,” he replied, eventually turning to see Ambrose approach.

“Majesty, the Normal Worlders have arrived. They’re requesting an audience with you.”

Joshua raised an eyebrow; their arrival was fortuitous but unexpected. Perhaps they would be able to add the missing pieces to the puzzle.

“Thank you, Ambrose. Find Lord Marcus and the Captain of The Guard and ask them to come to the Counsel Chamber immediately.”

“Yes, Sir. And the Normal Worlders?”

“They too.” Briefly glancing at Spicy, he continued. “And Master Spyvie.”

“At once, My Lord,” Ambrose nodded before turning to leave.

“Silas? Do you feel well enough?” he asked with a smile.

“Forty-two-point-three,” Silas returned cheerfully with a smile of his own.

“Okay, get dressed,” Joshua replied, waiting as Spicy left the room. “Twenty minutes, then you’re back here.”

“Father!” Silas complained.

“Do you want to be well enough for your wedding?” Joshua scolded.

“Me? If mother finds out you let me get up, you won’t be going to it either!”

“Don’t!” Joshua rolled his eyes dramatically. “I still have to tell her about all this.”
Mr Crab talks with his brothers

Chapter Summary

Mr Crab's brothers - not so nice as it turns out

“And where do you think you’re going?” a voice asked in an imperious tone.
“Mother!” Silas’ head snapped up in surprise and his hands hung in place, his fingers still holding one of the buttons on his half open shirt.
“Silas?” Laura followed Eleanor into the room. “Shouldn’t you be resting? Your mother explained everything to me.”
“Ellie, I was...” Joshua stepped forward to reassure his wife, but the expression on her face demanded more than a simple brush off.
“Joshua, can we talk, please?” she smiled thinly.
“Ellie, can we talk later, please?” Joshua nodded. “We have some idea what’s happening to Joe and I’m calling a Counsel meeting to discuss it.”
“Is it very serious?”
“It’s... confusing, to say the least. I believe everyone has a little piece of the story. The Normal Worlders, Spicy...”
“Spicy?” Eleanor queried. “She’s involved in this?”
“She’s the assigned Spymaster,” Joshua explained to the small family gathering.
“Does Marcus know?” Eleanor asked, concerned for her eldest son. “Is he okay?”

Joshua sighed heavily; there was no point having two discussions, especially when he knew all too few of the answers. He really needed to gather everyone together, to conduct an organised, calm meeting, but as a courtesy to his wife, she at least needed to be aware of the attack on Silas before she heard it in the Counsel Chamber.

“Marcus is fine. Ellie, Laura, I’ll explain everything in the Counsel Chamber, but I should tell you something now.” Joshua began in a calm, quiet tone. “As you can see, Silas is okay, but the man stalking Joe did attack him.”
“Attack?” Eleanor’s eyes widened as her head spun to look at her son, only to find Laura already at his side. The sight of the concern in the young woman’s eyes, and the gentle and tentative brushing of her hand on his arm brought a smile to her lips, despite the situation. “You are all right? What did he do?” Eleanor finally asked.

“Nothing really,” Silas admitted with an embarrassed sigh. “He just scared me a little. He held me immobile and entered my mind. He did threaten to kill me though... if I didn’t hand over Mister Crab and his brothers.”

Joshua frowned deeply. This was all new to him and Eleanor didn’t even have to ask, she could see it in his eyes. Silas had told his father that he had been threatened, but not how and the dark glowering expression that had settled on Lord Joshua’s face spoke volumes. Whoever this man was, he would find out and when he did, that man would answer to him.

“Ellie, perhaps you and Laura should attend the counsel meeting? I think this is one for all of us.”
“And Silas?” Eleanor pressed. “Is he well enough?”
Joshua nodded. “He’s well enough to attend the meeting, then come straight back here.”
“Father, I’m perfectly...”
“Do I have to lock you in here, Silas?” Joshua asked abruptly. “Don’t push this, son, you know I’ll do it.” Silas sighed regretfully and looked down, returning to fastening the buttons of his shirt. “No, sir,” he murmured.

Laura gave Silas’ hand an encourage squeeze as he finished the last button. Looking up into her concerned face, he was suddenly reminded of why he had to rest. Thankfully, the importance had not been forgotten by his parents and he knew they were merely doing their best to take care of him, in a way that he should have been doing himself.

“I’m sorry,” he smiled faintly, as he pulled on his waistcoat, carefully smoothing the fabric. “I haven’t forgotten why I’m here, but sometimes I do forget that I’m not superhuman. I don’t get ill often and… the thing is, I never had such a good reason to get well so quickly before.”

Eleanor smiled at the words. If there was one thing Silas was exceptional at, it was diplomacy. It wasn’t that he didn’t mean what he said, but he had a very good feel for what would be the right words and when to say them. He was merely impatient and almost as stubborn as his brother, Marcus.

“Ready?” Joshua asked, waiting for a nod of confirmation. “I’ll get the Heisseng Transport…” “No!” Silas interrupted, one hand thrust out in front of him, begging his father not to fetch the hovering bed, his tone both urgent and alarmed. “Son, you…” “Please,” he replied, clearly upset at the idea. “I… I’d rather walk. It’s not far. I don’t even have to go outside, we can use the private entrance.” “You still use that?” Joshua raised an eyebrow. “When it rains,” Silas shrugged. “It’s not a security risk,” he insisted. “The palace can’t be breached that way. It requires a recognised palm print, like your office and the Guard House.” “And it’s monitored by The Guard?” “Constantly,” Silas confirmed with a nod of his head. “It always has been.” “I wasn’t aware of it when I was Captain,” Joshua pressed. “Are you sure about that, Silas?” “Yes, sir,” his voice was quieter, but confident. His face, however, told a different story. “I will be checking that with Robert.” “I’m not lying to you, father!” Silas’ brow furrowed deeply at what he saw as his father’s accusation. “I believe you, Silas, but you could still be wrong.”

Silas frowned with concern. He had been certain that it was monitored, but now his doubts were nagging at him.

“If I am, father, I’m really sorry,” he replied with a look of genuine contrition. “It’s okay, there’s no harm done.” Joshua smiled reassuringly as he picked up Silas’ hat from the nearby desk and smoothed the damaged feather, as his son donned his tailcoat. “You like this hat, don’t you?” “It’s my favourite,” Silas smiled, despite the concern still eating at him. “It’s damaged, you know?” “Yes, I know,” Silas replied almost cheerfully as he took it and placed it carefully on his head. “Don’t you want a new one?” Joshua asked, slightly puzzled by the response. “No, I’m quite happy with that one. Laura?” he turned his smile towards his fiancee along with an arm for her to link. “You lean on me,” she whispered as his parents left the room. “Thank you,” he answered gratefully, placing a light kiss on her cheek.

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“So, now, Shoe,” a voice cackled from within the glass sphere. “What are you going to do? You’ve been called, haven’t you? Don’t think we don’t know.”

“And what do you think you know, Lee?” Shoe sighed, mildly irritated by his younger brother’s taunting.

Within the sphere the black and silver mist was in constant turmoil and yet, somehow, in the midst of the morass, a single coherent image hung just visible in the chaos. An image of a young man. There was a strong family resemblance and apart from the lack of a moustache and a few lines around the eyes, he could easily have been Mister Crab. In the man’s eyes, there was no sign of boyish humour or enthusiasm, only malice and weathered cynicism.

“I know all about your friends, the ones that freed you. I know that Guardian has mistaken one of them for you.”

“He always was a fool,” the other brother chimed in. “Even when he was Under-Guardian.”

“Especially when he was Under-Guardian. It didn’t matter, though; he had no real legal power then, Sea,” Lee agreed. “Or ability.”

“And yet, he successfully tried you and Sea for your crimes though, didn’t he, Lee?” Shoe commented dryly.

“And your crimes, Shoe, don’t forget they’re your crimes too,” Lee cackled.

Mister Crab scowled at the words, earning only a broad smile from his younger brother.

“And we repaid him for that when we escaped, didn’t we?” Lee continued.

A second face, that of Mister Crab’s older brother, appeared alongside Lee. He was noticeably older, with a broader face, much less hair and a seemingly permanent angry expression.

“Guardian Callum was corrupt,” Crab looked away, refusing to meet his brothers’ gaze.

“So we dealt with it, with him,” Sea added, his tone sounded almost bored. “What of it Shoe? What is your point? We were all convicted, all of us.”

“Under Annenstad laws we had to be,” Crab sighed irritably. “I am not like you. You kill, steal, destroy…”

“Oh? Is that so, Shoe?” Sea interrupted. “Then exactly what happened to the slavers who had your friends? Did you…? Oh, yes, I think you did kill them. What was that, then? Why doesn’t that make you like us?”

“Statute Thirty-One,” Crab replied evenly.

“Oh, please!” Sea growled. “Statute Thirty-One is to protect Justices when they kill to protect themselves or the public. You’re not a Justice!”

“Here… I am. I created the Laws and the powers. I am the Chief Justice and if I kill it is to protect those I care about.”

“Aww!” Lee mocked. “He cares about Normal Worlders!”

“Guardian Pryke won’t see it like that,” Sea added.

“Guardian Pryke will return to Annenstad empty-handed,” Crab returned with an irritable frown etched on his face.

“He’ll find you, Shoe and you can’t protect yourself against him, you don’t have the power.”

“If I need to, I will retake the powers of the people of Carousel,” Crab replied, now turned away from the sphere.

Sea offered up a hearty laugh, mocking the suggestion. He knew his brother well enough to know that the people of Carousel meant a great deal to him. They were the main reason he and their brother, Lee, were now imprisoned in the glass sphere. Crab had wanted to help the Carouselians, to grant them powers, to make their lives easier and their world more bearable and organised. His brothers had wanted nothing more than to subjugate the people, to kill, maim and torture at their
leisure. They had fought hard. The battle had been played out in the wastelands to the south of an expansive mountainous district of what would become the capital city of Carousel, The Hills. The battles were intense in their use of power and magic and vast dreamscapes were created where nothing was ever quite as it seemed. It was inevitable that the wastelands were destined to become The Dream World, but that would be millennia later and in the interim the people of Carousel cowered from the powerful titans locked in combat.

It seemed to all that Carousel would be destroyed. How they had lost the battle had been a never-ending source of confusion for the two brothers. They were certain they had been winning. Shoe was just one man and their combined powers was almost double that of their brother. But they had not bargained for his one solitary act of selflessness. Rather than use his powers to try to destroy them, as they had expected, Shoe had voluntarily offered up the bulk of his powers to permanently bind them.

They were utterly unprepared and the trap was sprung. Imprisoned inside the glass sphere, they were forced to watch as Shoe rebuilt Carousel. For millennia, they watched, helpless from inside their prison as their brother established cities, districts, laws, powers. Reluctantly, they had to admit, if only to themselves, that he made a good Chief Justice, but their personal interests did not lie with the law, except to break it.

A partial revenge had given them millennia of pleasure as they watched Guardian Pryke work with Ruler Owen, a violent dictator who had usurped the throne, and the then Governor Sandman to trap Shoe inside a dream. Despite their own imprisonment appearing to be for eternity with his capture, they had celebrated, long and hard. His recent release on the single word of an ignorant Normal Worlder had made them, perhaps, even more bitter than ever. However, now the chance of freedom now hung tantalisingly close.

To fight Guardian Pryke, Crab needed his powers. To regain his powers, he had to free his brothers. Freedom was so close; they could almost taste it.

“Aren’t you going to go to them, Shoe?” Sea growled mockingly. “They’ve asked for luck, you have to go to them. You don’t really have a choice, do you?”

*  

“Marcus,” Donnie began quietly. “Sit down, please.”

The sandman sighed and stopped pacing, his long coat finally settling back against his legs. It was only a matter of time before Donnie made the simple request. Donnie knew that Marcus only ever paced when he was upset about something. The greater the anguish, the faster and more intense the pacing and, this time, it was as if he had worn a year’s worth of leather from the soles of his boots. He hated to see his best friend in such pain, but the source of his distress was approaching the Counsel Chamber and, as much as Marcus wanted to put things right between them, now was not the time. Even Marcus knew that. For all his stubborn impatience, he knew, deep down. But, even so, all he wanted now was for all the other issues to simply disappear so he could focus on his own problems. It sounded arrogant and selfish, even in his own mind, but it wasn’t, not really; he wanted desperately to put things right with Spicy.

“Marcus…”

“I know,” Sandman interrupted with a sigh, lowering his eyes and trying hard to calm down. “No, you don’t,” Donnie pressed. “I just wanted to say that…” he paused as he tried to find the right words, but he didn’t think they even existed. “I don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

“What do you mean?”
The downturn of his mouth accompanied by the widening of his eyes gave the unhappy sandman a despondent expression and made Donnie’s heart sink; how could he say this to his best friend.

“Even if you tell her what happened, even if she believes you. If we find Anna and she admits it…”
“Yes?” Marcus’ tone was expectant, and yet knowing at the same time. It was as if he knew exactly what Donnie was about to say, but refusing to accept it as real.
“There’s no guarantee she’ll want to be with you again.” Donnie tilted his head as he saw the blank expression on Marcus’ face. "You do understand that, don't you, Marcus?"
“But…” Marcus stared; the words he hoped Donnie wouldn’t say had just emerged from his mouth. It was as if it had been entirely unexpected and he had no idea how to react. “Donnie, I love her.”
“I know, Marcus, but…”
“No! No buts, Donnie, I…”

Marcus stopped speaking, turned suddenly and began pacing once more. Before he had taken more than three steps, Donnie was in front of him, holding his arms.

“You have to face the possibility, Marcus.”
“I don’t,” he insisted quietly.
“Yes, you do! It's been ten years. You can’t make her love you.”
“I don’t need to, she already does.”

Donnie raised an eyebrow and Marcus exhaled suddenly, almost with a laugh of realisation tagged on at the end.

“I know how that sounds, Donnie. I’m not that arrogant, believe me. But I know she still loves me.”
“You mean, you hope she does?” Donnie forced a smile.
“Yeah,” Marcus sighed helplessly. “But I have to believe it, don’t I?”
Yeah,” Donnie released the sandman’s arms and patted them. “I guess you do. Of course you do. But, she’s on her way, Marcus, you have to pull yourself together for the Counsel meeting.”

Marcus inhaled and exhaled slowly before allowing a slow nod to confirm his readiness to join the meeting.

“It’s been a long time since I was at a Counsel meeting,” he forced a smile.
“Trust me, nothing’s changed,” Donnie shrugged dismissively.

The sound of footsteps drew their attention as Ambrose led Patrick, Pete, Andy and Joe into the cavernous room. Pete looked around and whistled at the sheer size and impressive grandeur of the chamber. In the centre stood an imposing mahogany table with twenty intricately carved wooden chairs tucked neatly under the long, highly polished top. In keeping with the serious purpose of the room, the decorations, while still magnificent and stately, were much subtler than in the foyer and were, in fact, much more like what Pete remembered of Lord Joshua's private office. Muted, understated colours abounded, and even the eaves and coving high above them were unfussy and even plain. The chamber carried an air of sober propriety which somehow conferred an instant feeling of calm to anyone entering. This was, he concluded, definitely the home of a statesman and diplomat.

"Pete!" Sandman cried joyously as he ran to meet the four Normal Worlders. "Joe," he added with a concerned expression. "Are you okay?"
"I'm fine," Joe nodded appreciatively. "How's Alistair?"

Marcus smiled broadly at the question; it was so typical of the guys in general and of Joe in particular to remember his sandman's broken arm and ask after his health.
"He's doing well, thank you."
"And this, I hear from my brother, not his doctor, mind," Silas commented from the open door of the chamber. "My patient."
"Mine, I think you'll find," Joshua, a few steps ahead of him, half turned to face his son with one corner of his mouth turned up.
"Only because I was unconscious!"
"Only because you'd allowed yourself to get so ill that your mother intervened."
"Ah, but..." Silas began only to pause as Laura squeezed his hand.
"Silas," Laura smiled sweetly at him. "You're not going to win this one."

Sighing resignedly, Silas nodded; she was right and already Lord Joshua was chuckling.

"You were right, my dear," he smiled at his wife.
"Right about what?" Silas asked indignant.
"Laura is perfect for you," he explained simply, raising a broad smile to Silas' face.
"Well, I could have told you that, ages ago!" Silas beamed proudly as he took her hand and walked, Marcus noted, slowly and a little gingerly, into the room.

Moving forward to check on his brother, encouraged by the cheerful banter with their father, Marcus stopped in his tracks as Spicy appeared in the doorway, followed almost immediately by her father, Master Spyvie. Marcus' mouth dried instantly as he looked from one to the other. Resisting the urge to blurt out everything he had learned about what had happened between them, Marcus found himself uncharacteristically speechless and uncomfortable, not knowing quite what to do or say. It was particularly disconcerting that Spyvie was apparently regarding him with a somewhat sympathetic expression. Having broken his daughter's heart, Marcus had assumed that he deserved nothing but absolute contempt from her father, but, not only did he try to save him from capture by the slavers, but here he was actually turning a kind expression towards him. It was possible, Marcus considered, that it was for his own father's benefit or merely out of regard for his rank, but there seemed to be more underlying the look in his eyes than simple respect; there seemed to be real affection. It was confusing to say the least.

"My Lord," Spicy gave a perfunctory nod as she stepped into the room and walked past Marcus without a second glance.

Marcus' heart sank and he felt instantly physically nauseous at her reaction towards him. Lowering his eyes, he sighed as his shoulders drooped along with his head.

"My Lord Marcus," Spyvie placed a hand gently on the sandman's arm. "Try not to worry, I'm certain everything will turn out well."

Marcus frowned with a mixture of confusion and concern; was Master Spyvie referring to the situation they were about to discuss or... no, it was impossible, surely? A faint smile and a knowing nod from the old man only served to confuse the sandman all the more.

"Master Spyvie," Marcus began tentatively. "I didn’t..."
"We should join the others," Spyvie nodded for emphasis. "Lord Robert has arrived through the Guard House entrance."

Indicating toward the centre of the room, Spyvie was already walking as Marcus turned automatically. Realising that he had missed his opportunity to discuss what Spyvie had been referring to, Marcus sighed once more and nodded to himself. Spyvie was unique. He seemed to know everything. He was an exceptional Spymaster and Marcus had always known that his parents held him in exceptionally high regard but it was only recently that he had discovered why.
His parents had recounted the tale of the time when the throne was threatened by his mother’s brother when Marcus was just an infant. It went some way to explaining why they were somewhat overprotective of their sons, and why both he and Silas should be much more conscious of their own safety. But it also explained Master Spyvie’s exalted position at Court. If it hadn’t been for Master Spyvie, his parents would almost certainly be dead, Silas would not have been born and, if not dead, he would be, at best, his uncle’s prisoner. They were all very much indebted to Spyvie, but he had repaid that debt by cheating on his daughter, or… at least that’s what he had believed had happened. Now with that idea in disarray, Marcus couldn’t help but wonder what Spyvie knew that he didn’t. Certainly something was causing Spyvie to act kindly towards him, and somehow he doubted that it was his rank.

But, it was too late now; Spyvie was taking his place at the long table and Donnie was at Sandman’s side, steering him towards his seat, on his father’s right.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I believe everyone is acquainted.”

“Actually, no,” Patrick interrupted. “Unless she really is a nurse, we don’t know who she is.”

Joshua smiled; Spicy had been undercover when she had met him and Andy. In her role as nurse, she had managed to obtain a surprising amount of information but they were, of course, left uncertain of her real identity.

“This is Spymaster C42, or Spicy, as she’s known. She was assigned to watch over you and find out what was happening… but events moved on rather quickly and it was necessary for her to break her cover and join us to discuss the problem.”

“I don’t understand why she was undercover,” Pete questioned. “Are we some sort of threat?”

“On the contrary,” Joshua confirmed immediately. “She was maintaining a cover so she could observe what was happening to you without revealing herself to whoever was causing the problem. But to do that, she had to also conceal her identity from you. Whoever this man is, mind reading would be no problem for him at all. Provided he had no reason to read Spicy’s mind, she could observe and report without putting anyone in any danger, including herself.”

Pete nodded, the explanation made sense but he hoped that the information about to be shared would explain more to them all.

“I can only tell you what I know following an attack on The Lord Silas,” a comment which raised several concerned eyebrows. “The man in question is Gideon Pryke, Guardian of a world called Annenstad. He is looking for Mister Crab and also his brothers who he believes may also be here.”

“Why?” Joe asked, frowning deeply.

“He is apparently an escaped convict.”

“He’s what?” Joe responded, his pitch rising as he spoke. “No, I don’t believe that.”

“What was he convicted of?” Patrick asked also unconvinced.

“I don’t know,” Joshua confirmed. “I don’t even know if he’s guilty, but Mister Pryke is determined to find him and is willing to threaten anyone who stands in his way. Let me assure you all, that in this world, I rule and he will answer to me if he continues to threaten any of my family or people.”

“Majesty,” Robert began. “I will arrange for additional Guard for your entire family, around the clock protection.”

“Thank you, Lord Robert, I appreciate your concern.”

“What about Joe?” Andy asked.

“All of us,” Joe added. “He’s attacked all of us in one way or another.”

“We think he used the Locator power to find us, because you granted us the power to make portals. He thought Joe was Mister Crab,” Patrick added.

Joshua nodded. “But he knows now that you’re not?”

“Yeah,” Joe nodded, “but sooner or later he’s going to find out that it was me that freed him from the
“dream.”
“From what he’s done, we think he may actually have more power than even Mister Crab,” Andy explained.
“If he’s from Mister Crab’s world, he probably will have,” Patrick added. “You can’t fight that, can you?”
“It’s my job to find a way to stop this man from threatening us and to return to his world. And I’ll do that. If diplomacy doesn’t work, then we have to consider all our options.”

They all knew what that meant. A battle with a man more powerful than Mister Crab seemed a daunting prospect.

Joshua asked each of the gathered Counsel and guests to recount their own personal experiences with Mister Pryke and it struck Patrick as odd that nobody seemed remotely surprised by any of the strange powers used in any of the attacks on the Normal Worlders.

“So,” he began tentatively, “all of these powers are commonplace to you?”
“Not necessarily commonplace, but, yes, they all exist here,” Silas replied with a sincere nod.
“You’ve seen most of them, Patrick,” Marcus added. “I mean, I pulled half of them on you, myself.”
“But what about the time thing?” Patrick continued. “Is that possible?”
“I have to do that quite a lot in my job,” Marcus replied, his voice sounding as though it was so second nature to him as to barely consider it a power. “Although we have sandmen controlling their own districts across Carousel, there are some things that when they happen, as Governor of The Dream World, they have to call on me to resolve. Like using Dream Memory Bottles, or preventing someone slipping too far into a dream state. If they slip too far, it makes it really difficult to wake them up.”
“I could do it though,” Silas replied with a slightly indignant tone to his voice.

Marcus laughed. “I know, Si, you do it all the time. Sometimes it’s not obvious when it happens and then the district Benzedrine has to call for Silas, as Governor of The Waking World. So we both have to bend time occasionally. It depends on how many calls we get each night or day in Silas’ case. It’s a full-time job, and then some.”
“So it’s probably reasonable to assume that this man has the same powers as Mister Crab?” Andy clarified.
“Yeah,” Marcus nodded, “and as you said, probably more so given that he already told us that he lost some of his powers fighting with his brothers.”
“This doesn’t look good,” Joe frowned.
“No,” Joshua confirmed, “but we’ll resolve this. There will be a way, I’m sure.”

Everyone fell silent around the table. They wanted to believe Joshua’s words, and in truth, so did he, but they knew it would be a challenge.

“We asked Mister Crab for some luck,” Pete added. “To find out what was going on, but there’s been no sign of him yet.”
“Then perhaps I should correct that?”

Everyone around the table turned towards the source of the voice. In the doorway stood Mister Crab. Although he had never seemed anything but calm and collected before and was now, there seemed to be something else underlying his demeanour, something troubling him. Joe stared with concern in his eyes for his counterpart. Even if no one else had noticed, Joe could see that Mister Crab needed their help.
Anyone else might have felt awkward, standing alone and being stared at by so many people in so large a room, but Mister Crab didn’t seem affected and merely waited for what seemed like a suitable pause before he spoke again.

“I can only apologise for the suffering that has been caused to you all. I am, as you are now all aware, the cause of your present situation and, while I would accept my fate if you were to return me to Guardian Pryke, I beg you first to hear my story before you decide.”

Joe frowned; he had been right, Mister Crab was deeply troubled. Turning to speak to Lord Joshua, Joe paused as the man rose to his feet.

“Mister Crab, we don’t need to decide. Carousel and its people is what it is today because of your good grace and generosity. I would be remiss in my duties if I were to do anything but support you.”

Mister Crab smiled wistfully, as if he were remembering a similar conversation. The look struck a chord with Marcus and he too rose from his seat.

“Mister Crab,” he began sincerely. “I have the feeling you’ve been in this situation before and in that situation, the Ruler at the time and the Governor of The Dream World lied to you before trapping you in that dream. Am I right?”

Briefly, all eyes fell on Marcus. There was a clean inevitability of the reply and they turned back to watch Mister Crab’s response.

“You will forgive me if I seemed uncertain. You are correct.”

“My father is not Ruler Owen, he is a good, kind man who knows what’s best for Carousel and its people. What’s best for them, for all of us, is to stand by the man who helped us all and not just us, all of Carousel.”

“Well said, Marcus,” Eleanor agreed.

“That is kind of you, and more than I’m sure I deserve. But I cannot ask you to put yourselves at risk, and believe me, there would be considerable risk.”

“Silas,” Laura whispered, squeezing his hand. “He’s not here.”

Silas turned a puzzled expression towards Laura who nodded almost imperceptibly at Mister Crab. Turning his gaze toward the man, Silas noticed a growing smile on his face.

“Your fiancee is correct, I am not here. I am merely a projection of myself. This way, I am… less detectable. I am hardly likely to risk bringing Guardian Pryke to your home.”

“Mister Crab, we would still like to hear your story, if you don’t mind. If Guardian Pryke comes looking for you, we will need all of the facts to attempt a diplomatic exchange.”
“I’m afraid Guardian Pryke will not succumb to diplomacy, he is very single minded and he will not 
stop to worry if accepted practices in our home world would be tolerated here.”

“Accepted practices?” Joshua queried.

“He will do anything to get what he wants and while he is bound by my home world laws, other 
world laws will not trouble him.”

“I see, then we must know more about your world’s laws and customs.”

Mister Crab frowned but, at the same time, nodded slowly.

“I’m sorry, I know that you are a very private man, but we must know everything.”

“Very well,” Mister Crab nodded. “Let me begin with my family. I have two brothers, one older, one 
younger. Our parents are long since gone,” Mister Crab sighed. “And I have grave doubts about how 
that came about. My older brother, he is much older than I am.”

Remembering that Mister Crab told him that his age was approaching twelve million years, Joe 
raised his eyebrows, utterly unable to comprehend such an extended time span.

“His name is Sea Horse, and he is the reason I go by my second name, Shoe, my first being Horse. I 
did not want to be confused for him in any way. He is… he’s not a good man. My other brother, J 
Lee Fish, is somewhat younger and has always worshipped the ground Sea walks on. To his eyes, 
he can do no wrong and as such, will do anything he asks of him and do it happily. My world is 
called Annenstad and our laws are restrictive and quite extreme. As a result, there is very little crime 
and because of that, what there is seems very shocking. But despite this, the crimes my brothers 
committed went beyond anything that had been seen in Annenstad for thousands of millennia.”

“You were blamed too?” Silas asked, rapt by the tale.

“Ah, that is one of our most extreme laws. Crime is low because it is in all families’ interests to keep 
it so. When one member of a family is convicted of a crime, the entire immediate family is 
incarcerated.”

“But, that’s…” Marcus began, aghast, pausing as he struggled to find the right word to express his 
condemnation of the law.

“Barbaric!” Silas finished the sentence for him.

“Yes!” he cried in agreement. “It’s barbaric! You mean to tell us that in your world, if I commit a 
crime, then Silas would be locked up too?”

Mister Crab nodded. “And your parents.”

The room was stunned into silence as Mister Crab continued his story.

“My brothers believed they could exist outside the law, they would steal, threaten, torture, even kill. 
They managed to evade justice for a long time, mostly because the Chief Justice at the time, 
Guardian Callum was taking bribes from them. As long as he knew he was getting paid, he was 
happy. But he got greedy, wanted more than my brothers were prepared to pay him and they were 
arrested. As was I. Eventually, they were brought to justice, but I was convicted with them under our 
laws and incarcerated. You will recognise the penal system as it was the one I established here 
millennia ago for the most heinous of crimes. We were sentenced to five years in a penal colony to 
be executed at the end of the term. But, and I’m ashamed to say, I took advantage of the situation, 
bribery and corruption reigned in the penal colony and my brothers were able to buy our freedom. 
We escaped, left Annenstad, created a portal and came here. But not before my brothers found and 
killed Guardian Callum. Under-Guardian Pryke was given the Guardianship and vowed to find us. It 
took him almost a million years to do so – we were very careful about the portal that it wouldn’t 
leave a trail for him to find, but he is a very resourceful man. When he came, he found only me. I 
managed to evade him, but in the interests of Carousel, I approached Ruler Owen to warn him and 
ask for his assistance. He vowed to help me but instead he arranged only for a trap. Guardian Pryke 
granted him and Governor Sandman sufficient power to imprison me inside an inescapable dream.”
“That’s not possible!” Marcus shook his head. “All dreams have a way out.”

“Indeed,” Mister Crab nodded. “But my way out was for someone to say the word ‘luck’ which was subsequently banned, under threat of death. As generations went by, the chances of someone using the word dwindled and effectively the dream seemed inescapable. As a reward, Guardian made sure Owen had sufficient power to ward off any attempts by the rightful Ruler to overthrow him. Now, thanks to Joe, I am released from the dream, but it would seem that Guardian has continued to monitor Carousel and has sensed my powers in use once more. He is back and I’m afraid if you don’t bend to his wishes, he will kill you as he threatened.”

“As I said, I rule here and I will not be threatened in my own world. Neither will my family, friends or people. Now, what about your brothers? Is he looking for them too?”

“Alas, yes and they are the main reason I can’t simply leave and remove this problem from your door.”

“You care for them? After what they did to you?” Pete asked astonished by his reaction.

Mister Crab took a deep breath as he contemplated the question. “My feelings towards them are… complicated but that isn’t the reason I can’t leave. When we arrived here, the world was much different. The people lived simple lives without powers, without the luxuries of everyday life that you know now. They even slept as and when they saw fit.”

Marcus raised his eyebrows at the idea. “How?”

“Probably the same way we do,” Andy shrugged.

Marcus’ face crumpled as he tried to understand the mechanics of it. “Yes, but I don’t understand how you do it, either!”

“It was, as in the case of Normal World sleep, a very haphazard affair with frequent sleepless or disturbed nights resulting in tiredness during the day.”

“You mean there was no one to wake them, either?” Silas asked, as bewildered as Marcus.

Patrick smiled at the reaction. It seemed odd to him that they had accepted the strange differences in Carousel and yet their friends were still utterly unable to comprehend their world.

“No, there were no powers at all. Consequently, my brothers saw and seized upon the opportunity to rule. But not only rule, they wanted to be treated like gods, and unfortunately, they had the power to enforce that. It wasn’t long before they were back to their old ways of theft, torture and murder. I had to stop them. I couldn’t stand by and let them do this, especially as these people had no method of defence against them. We fought, for a long time. There was an area not far from here that was simple wasteland and on that plain; we battled for many years. I was able to keep it contained to that one area and none of the inhabitants of Carousel were hurt. But the battle was wearing me down. Two of them against one of me. Their combined powers were almost double that of mine and I knew that without luck on my side that I would lose. I converted some of my powers, enhancing my ability to create luck. With that I used the remainder of my powers to capture them inside a ball of energy. The ball shrunk and hardened to a special kind of glass. The energy from the outer shell dispersed their bodies and they exist as spirit inside the ball, in a torrent of anger and fury of their own making. The energy that holds them there is my own and is still connected to me, they cannot use it, but I cannot claim it back without releasing them. Unfortunately, because my energy holds them, I have to stay in close proximity to them, so I cannot leave without the connection breaking which would automatically free them. I cannot risk releasing them, they would destroy Carousel.”

“And if Guardian Pryke takes you back? Wouldn’t that release them too?” Joshua asked.

“I would not allow him to leave them here if he took me back. They would return with me.”

“What if, and please believe I don’t wish this, but I need to know…”

“What if he kills me?”

Joshua nodded.

“If he kills me, my energy would die and so would they. You are only putting yourselves at risk if you help me.”
Marcus turned a pleading eye to his father, his jaw clamped tightly shut as he waited for the response.

“We will protect you, Mister Crab, as you have protected us.”
“Thank you,” Mister Crab nodded gratefully. “I will leave you now. I sense you have other matters to discuss.”

As Mister Crab faded from view, a collective breath was released around the table. Everyone was relieved by the decision, but at the same time they suspected the worst. If Mister Crab was right, Guardian Pryke was not going to be convinced to leave alone.

“Ambrose,” Joshua gestured for his aide to step forward. “Mister Crab was right, I do have another matter to discuss. Could you show our friends from Normal World and Donnie to the Blue Room, please? I need to speak with Marcus, Spicy and Master Spyvie for a few moments alone.” Turning towards Eleanor, Joshua smiled sincerely. “My dear, would you and Laura excuse us? And Lord Robert, thank you.”

The request drew a mixed reaction across the gathering. At first, oblivious to the problems between the Spymaster and Sandman, the four Normal Worlders barely registered any curiosity except to wonder what the Blue Room was and to continue pondering Mister Crab’s words. It was only when Donnie’s head snapped to look at Marcus, an urgent and concerned expression in his eyes, matched only by the sandman’s own worried face, that anyone realised that it was more than a simple report meeting.

Ambrose too recognised the signs; he had been Lord Joshua’s aide for many years, but knew well enough to carry out his orders, quietly and efficiently.

“Father,” Marcus began urgently. “Let Donnie stay.”
“This doesn’t concern him, Marcus.”
“It does!” Marcus objected. “Well, no, it doesn’t but he…”
“I do have information that might be relevant… or at least, I think I do,” Donnie approached the small group as Ambrose herded the unwilling to leave band members out of the Counsel Chamber.
“I have no objection to Donnie remaining,” Spyvie offered.
“Spicy,” Joshua queried.
“No, My Lord, though if I may speak frankly?”
“Please do.”
“I don’t wish to be here. I believe that the topic of conversation doesn’t concern anyone in this room except me.”
“Well now,” Joshua stared back. His expression wasn’t harsh, but his tone seemed clipped. “We both know that isn’t true, don’t we?”
“What’s going on?”

Marcus asked, unsure if he wanted to know the answer. Yes, they had broken up on bad terms, they had to work together and it was proving difficult. But did it really warrant intervention by his father and master Spyvie? Joshua rose and nodded thoughtfully.

“I think we need to take this to my private office.”

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As the small group approached Lord Joshua’s private office, they were met by The Captain of the Guard, Lord Robert and five officers. Immediately bowing respectfully, Robert rose before addressing Carousel’s ruler.
“Majesty, as promised, I’ve arranged for a special guard for you and your family.”
“Five?”
“A personal guard for each of you, My Lord.”
“That’s quite a lot, are you sure you can spare that many?” Joshua queried, quietly impressed at the speed of Robert’s actions.
“My Lord, sparing five men is far preferable to losing any member of your family.”

The sincerity in Robert’s tone brought a smile to Joshua’s face. He had been right to promote him. Certainly it had been The Lady Eleanor’s idea, but it had been a good decision; Robert obviously genuinely cared about them all. Perhaps it was all the time he had spent protecting Marcus and Silas at Allandra’s mansion or perhaps it was simply in his nature, but he knew the right man was in the position of trust that he relied on so much.

“Thank you, Lord Robert,” Joshua nodded. “The Lord Silas should be on his way back to the hospital. Could you ensure he doesn’t get distracted along the way, please?”
“Yes, My Lord,” Robert offered a knowing smile, almost mirroring Marcus’ own at Joshua’s words. “I’ll leave two men with you and continue placement.”

“Thank you.”

The now larger group continued quietly towards Joshua’s office. Joshua could almost hear his son’s thoughts as the two guards accompanied them the rest of the way. He knew Marcus would object; they probably both would, but they would have to accept it as necessary. As the faint grumbling grew louder in his mind, Joshua intervened telepathically as they reached the door to his office.

‘Deal with it, Marcus.’

Placing his palm face down on the scanner, Joshua waited before entering a code that indicated the additional number of people entering the room. For security’s sake, this was not a simple number four. He was keen to prevent entry by force, or at least limit the damage that could be done if the room were ever breached. A series of heat and pressure sensors in the room would calculate the number of occupants and an incorrect code would alert The Guard to the presence of an intruder. As each person entered the room, they each placed their palm on the scanner. All were recognised; each with their own varying levels of security clearance, but anyone without a record of recognition by the scanner would require a further code entered by Lord Joshua to override the alarm. It was a fairly comprehensive security system; one that he hoped offered suitable protection and would never fail him and his family.

“Sit down, everyone, please,” Joshua indicated to the couches and seats available near to the window.

With the curtains pulled wide open and the sunlight streaming in, the office, despite its sombre furnishings, appeared bright and welcoming. Marcus, deeply sunk into an introverted mood seemed both sullen and nervous. So introspective was he that he hadn’t even noticed that his father had dropped all formality and was encouraging people to settle themselves comfortably. Donnie noticed. Suddenly the catcher became acutely aware that this was more than about having difficulty working together.

“Marcus,” Joshua began gently, “as you know, since taking over the Governorship of The Dream World, I’ve taken a step back and only become involved in matters that affected the family or the State. Perhaps that was the wrong thing to do, I don’t know, but we have a matter to resolve here that I cannot ignore.”

“Father, we can work together, we’re both adults,” Marcus replied unwilling, or possibly unable, to make eye contact.
“I’m afraid there’s more at stake here than your ability to work together,” Joshua replied bluntly, finally gaining Marcus’ full attention.
“What do you mean?” the sandman frowned deeply as he stared at his father.
“I need to be certain of one thing before I answer that.”

Joshua paused, keeping his thoughts closely guarded so as to not be telepathically heard by his son. He desperately wanted to believe Spicy when she said that Marcus was unaware of their son. The alternative – that he knew she was pregnant and had abandoned the mother of his child and refused to acknowledge the boy – was simply unthinkable, but above all, it was abhorrent to him.

Marcus saw it in his eyes. His father was deeply troubled. He felt Donnie’s unease as he sat next to him. Had he been so oblivious? What did his father know? What was he going to ask him? Was he going to let him down? Marcus’ heart raced as he fretted over the possibilities. Sensing his son’s distress, however well disguised, only served to worry Joshua further. Was his son about to say the one thing that would ruin their newly built relationship?

“Son,” he took a deep breath. “I need to know why you and Spicy broke up.”

Marcus chewed his bottom lip nervously. It was tempting to be absolutely honest and admit that he didn’t know what had actually happened. It was also tempting to say that he had cheated on her – for want of any hard evidence to the contrary. But, he had vowed to stop lying. Not only that, but also not even to tell selective truths. He knew what he was about to say sounded ridiculous and possibly more like a lie than any lie would. Taking a deep breath, he nodded.

“If you had asked me that yesterday, I would have said, with great shame, that I had cheated on her. I would have said that Spicy left me with another woman in my bed and that I deserved everything she said to me then and since.”

“Oh!” Spicy interrupted. “But today, you’re going to say it didn’t happen?”

“No,” Marcus shook his head abruptly and the group fell silent once more. “I didn’t realise it until I told Donnie what I remembered.”

“What you remembered?” Spicy scoffed. “And, what? You only told Donnie today? Am I supposed to believe this?”

“Spice, I wouldn’t blame you if you never believed a thing I said to you! I didn’t give you any reason to, did I? We argued so much because I was stupid and jealous and… and then when you found me with that girl… No, I don’t expect you to believe me, but at least listen to me, please?”

Marcus rose and began to pace. It was unsettling to watch. Quick, jerky movements that told of his extreme agitation. Joshua watched with mixed emotions; relieved that it appeared that Marcus was genuinely unaware of his and Spicy’s son, but heartbroken to see the distress and despair in his son’s eyes.

Unable to find the words to answer, Spicy offered what appeared on the outside to be an indifferent shrug.

“Her name was Anna Dreamspinner, she worked for me in the Elements Section…”

“Elements section?” Spicy snapped curtly.

Marcus frowned, turning a brief puzzled glance in her direction until he realised that the phrase meant nothing to her.

“She made elements… rain, clouds, wind… elements. You know, for dreams. You have to be careful with elements, they’re much softer than real life elements because, well, they have to be otherwise…”

“I don’t care. Rain, clouds, we get it!”
Marcus grimaced at the harshly spoken words and nodded. “I didn’t know her…”

“And yet…”

“No!” Marcus interrupted. “I didn’t, that’s the whole point. I wasn’t going to say any of this now, because I can’t prove it yet. I was going to find her, bring her to trial before…”

“Trial?” This time it was Joshua who interrupted. “What did she do?”

“I think it was a revenge attack. I never made the connection… well, I didn’t know until now. It was Donnie…”

“Marcus,” Joshua raised his hands to stop the sandman’s distracted ramblings. “Don’t qualify it, just tell me what she did, or what you think she did,” he corrected himself on seeing Marcus about to object.

“She was the daughter of Thelonious Revenor,” Marcus began.

At the mention of the name, Joshua’s expression hardened and Spivy glanced up, clearly recognising the name, but making no comment. The reaction was not lost on either Spicy and especially Donnie, who was swiftly coming to the conclusion that he had been right in his assumptions.

“I… father, I didn’t know he’d tried to kill you!” the pain in his eyes was evident to all, and obviously genuine.

Spicy shifted forward in her seat a few inches, her whole body held tense as if she may leap to her feet at any moment, but within moments, Marcus continued, desperate to justify his actions before those actions were even known to the group.

“If I’d known… I… she wouldn’t have. I…”

“Marcus,” Joshua nodded slowly. “It’s okay. I didn’t tell you until a few weeks ago. You couldn’t have known and it was wrong of me. I didn’t tell you, because it was some of your dream spinners that were creating the artificial hate that was used to try to kill me. I knew you’d feel responsible because it was happening in The Dream World.”

“That’s why you ordered me to remove those spinners?” Marcus’ eyes widened and his mouth fell open and refused to close. “They were trying to kill you? Anna? She…? No… it was before she…” Marcus puzzled momentarily over the logistics.

“No, it was her father,” Joshua explained. “Not just him, but he was the leader.”

“She came to The Dream World and trained for four years as a spinner just to get close enough to me to ruin my life?”

Marcus spoke the words as if they couldn’t possibly be true. It seemed so unlikely, so preposterous. There was no way anyone was going to believe it; even he didn’t.

“No, it’s not possible,” he concluded shaking his head. “She came to The Dream World before I was with Spicy. She couldn’t have known.”

“She might not have known exactly what she was going to do when she went to The Dream World though,” Donnie suggested.

“It’s a stretch,” Marcus shook his head again.

“No,” Donnie insisted. “When you met Spicy, she must have thought all her Fest-tides had come at once! She knew who she was somehow.”

“That’s impossible,” Spicy shook her head. “Spymaster training is a closely guarded secret. There’s no way…”

“Damian,” Marcus interrupted quietly. “The spinner I brought to the hospital when we met. He must have heard us arguing about it.”

Spicy lowered her eyes; ashamed to admit that she had publically spoken about her intention to train as a Spymaster and in front of one of Marcus’ employees. It was almost certainly grounds for
dismissal.

“If you did it now,” Joshua turned to look in her direction, “you’d be right. But this was before your training, a genuine error of judgement that… would normally not be an issue. What are you suggesting, Marcus? Who is Damian?”

“Anna’s brother. The pair of them were in on this,” Marcus’ tone grew angrier as the sentence progressed. “He told her and they planned it together.”

“Where is this Anna now?” Spicy rose to her feet, her tone equally clipped and tense.

“Gone,” Marcus sighed hopelessly. “I don’t know where. I understand you want to question her, but…”

“I want to do more than question her,” Spicy growled angrily. “What do you suggest she did?”

“I really don’t have much memory of the whole thing, everything’s hazy and fuzzy. Donnie said he thought she drugged me and set up the whole thing to look like I’d spent the night with her. I must admit, I wanted to believe it, anything that stopped it being what it seemed to be, but I wasn’t sure. It all sounded so unlikely, but now…” he shrugged helplessly. “Now, I’m wondering if it’s true.”

Spicy looked from Marcus to Donnie and back. Pulling her lips into a thin line as she concentrated, she glanced at her father for silent confirmation of her thoughts. It took only the slightest of nods for her mind to be made up.

“I believe you.”

The quiet words almost didn’t register with the troubled sandman and it was a moment or two before he looked up.

“You… you believe me?” he gasped in surprise.

“I believe you were set up, that she deliberately set out to…” Spicy smiled as she repeated Marcus’ own words. “Ruin your life.”

“Spice… I’m sorry! I never wanted to hurt you!” Marcus blurted unhappily.

“You didn’t. She did. And she’ll be the one who’s sorry,” Spicy returned coldly.

“Do you think… maybe one day, we could… well, at least be friends?” Marcus asked, looking away; embarrassed to even ask the question in front of so many people.

Spicy sighed awkwardly. “Marcus, I think you should sit down. I’ve got something to tell you.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone! Thanks, as ever for reading. I hope you're continuing to enjoy this little tale. It really means a lot to me that you've stayed with me this far in to 3 stories! Thanks again! Sas xo
Mr Sandman Hears Spicy's News

Chapter Summary

Mr Sandman discovers he has a son and Guardian Pryke makes his move

Marcus turned a concerned eye to each of the people in the room. He wanted to ask for privacy, but felt extremely uncomfortable asking his father to leave his own office. To his relief, the discomfort of voicing the request was removed, as Joshua stepped towards his son with a generous and understanding smile fixed on his lips.

“I’m going to see Silas,” he nodded, patting the sandman’s arm. “Donnie, would you like to accompany me?”

Donnie looked over at Lord Joshua. There was a strange atmosphere in the room. Not an unpleasant one. There was no sensation of dread, no anger, just a sense of apprehension. Before he was able to pinpoint the source, his uncle had asked the question – except, somehow, it didn’t feel like a question. More to the point, perhaps, he didn’t feel as though he had an option to refuse.

“Yes, My Lord,” he replied, accepting the situation without question.

“And if you’ll excuse me, My Lord Joshua,” Spyvie rose slowly and carefully to his feet. “I have training sessions to prepare for the cadets.”

Joshua smiled and nodded. “They’re very lucky. I trust you’ll ensure they realise that?”

“I have ways to achieve most of my aims, My Lord,” came Spyvie’s cryptic reply.

Joshua understood; smiling with a quick glance back to Marcus, he continued:

“You will seal the room afterwards?”

“Of course,” Marcus nodded, surprised to be reminded.

“Come and find me when you’re finished,” Joshua asked as he herded Donnie out of the open doorway, waiting only for Spyvie to follow him out before entering another code and finally closing the door.

“Will he be all right?” Spyvie asked without giving anything away to Donnie.

Joshua looked thoughtful. “If he hasn’t come to me in an hour, I’ll send in the medics with smelling salts,” he chuckled.

“What’s going on?” Donnie asked, concerned for his friend and cousin and feeling decidedly left out of the conversation.

“I’m sure Marcus will tell you later, Donnie.”

“He’s keeping something from me?” Donnie frowned with surprise.

Joshua took a deep breath. “No. Don’t worry, Donnie. If I know Marcus, when he hears what Spicy has to say, he’ll waste no time in telling you everything.”

Donnie’s brow furrowed. He was never keen on being kept in the dark about anything. He hated secrets. Secrets were often why relationships failed. Or why things went so badly wrong. He only had to point to Marcus and Silas’ own relationship to prove his argument. Hopefully Joshua was right. After all, if Marcus had told him about what had happened with Spicy ten years ago, he would have reached the same conclusion. Most importantly, they might perhaps have stayed together.
“So,” Marcus swallowed hard, resisting the severe temptation to start pacing again. “Do you really believe me?”
“I do, yes,” Spicy replied simply.
“Why?” Marcus’ brow creased with confusion. “What I said… it sounded so ridiculous. Even I didn’t believe it, as I was saying it.”
“A few reasons,” Spicy nodded. “Firstly because it sounded so ridiculous. Something that outlandish sounding has to be true. You’re a good liar, Marcus and…”
“Was,” he corrected. “I was a good liar. I don’t do that now.”

Spicy smiled; hoping desperately that it was true. If he had managed to do that one most significant thing, then perhaps he truly had matured into a healthy and settled man. One thing was certain – once she gave him her news, he would need that.

“You were a good liar,” she smiled and nodded to show that she believed that change too. “You would have invented something more plausible. Second, you said she ruined your life.”

Marcus raised his eyebrows. Even he hadn’t realised the significance of that one simple phrase. Anna had, indeed, ruined his life. Even though they argued constantly, his life, his world had revolved around her. Losing Spicy had ruined his life and speaking the words out loud had somehow seemed cathartic and admitting how he felt was something he should have done long ago.

“She did,” he whispered sombrely. “I lost the best thing that ever happened to me that day.”
“Not the best thing,” Spicy shook her head.
“Yes, the best thing!” he argued, stepping forward towards her. “I can’t expect you to believe me, but it’s true.”
Spicy smiled. “Please sit down, Marcus.”
“I can’t,” he sighed. “You know me better than that.”

Spicy nodded resignedly. Marcus was physically restraining himself from pacing, that was obvious, but he couldn’t go so far as to sit. That was too much – far too much for her to expect.

“I know you haven’t dated since,” she commented bluntly.
“Well, neither have you!” he blurted before suddenly realising the significance of her words. “You know that? You kept an eye on me?”
“I kept both eyes on you, Marcus,” she admitted. “I wanted to hate you, I did, but I couldn’t.”
“Why?” Marcus shook his head. “After what I did! Or thought I did, anyway. I mean…”
“I’m coming to that. But, you know about me too?”
“Yes,” the sandman nodded slowly. “But you were hard to keep tabs on. You disappeared for months. When I finally tracked you down, you had already begun Spymaster training, so it was much harder to keep a track on you.”
“Impossible, surely?” Spicy tilted her head. “Are you telling me I was indiscreet?”
“No,” he smiled, embarrassed to admit his methods. “Heir to the throne,” he shrugged with a shy smile. “If I ask the right people, I can pretty much get whatever I want.”
“And your spies told you everything?” she smirked, impressed at his tenacity.
“Yeah,” he replied, guilty at the invasion of her privacy, but still somewhat smug at his own ingenuity. “I couldn’t just let you disappear.”
“I think you need new spies,” she replied, holding in a laugh.
“What do you mean? They didn’t get anything wrong.”
“Maybe nothing you specifically asked them, no,” she agreed enigmatically.
“That’s what I said,” Marcus frowned; he had the distinct impression she was toying with him.
“When I said I wasn’t the best thing to ever happen to you, it was because I had something else in mind. Something very specific.”
“Spice…” Marcus sighed and looked down briefly, trying hard to gather the courage for what he
wanted to say. Looking up, he continued: “I love you, Spicy, always have, always will. What could be better than you?”

Spicy ground to a halt at the words; all coherent thought slipping out of reach.

“You love me?” she gasped. “Even when we were dating you never said that.”
“That’s because I was a fool. Or, in the words of my father – an impetuous, self-centred, insecure, paranoid fool.”

Spicy raised an eyebrow. “He doesn’t mince his words, does he?”
“He was right,” Marcus nodded, ashamed of his former self.
“Was?” Spicy questioned. “And now?”
“I’m not perfect, Spice, but I’m really trying not to be all those things.”
“Then, I have the perfect way to help you grow.”
“Anything!” he replied eagerly. “Provided you give me another chance. Please?”

Reaching inside a hidden pocket within her sleeve, Spicy pulled out a small silver disc. At only two inches across, it was much smaller than a typical Nyheter Disc. Handing it to Marcus, she chewed her bottom lip and waited expectantly.

“Play,” he offered a puzzled expression as it did nothing.
“It’s DNA coded, you need to kiss it,” she explained.
“Kiss it?” he returned with disbelief.
“Trust me, you’ll want to.”

Marcus raised his eyebrows in wonder at the instruction. Nodding, he brought the small disc up to his mouth and gently pressed his lips onto the cool metal. As he pulled it away, a hologram rose from the centre – the image of a tiny baby, smiling, laughing, gurgling and happy turned slowly on the disc. The image brought an instant smile to Marcus’ lips, followed almost immediately by a pained expression.

“He… he’s yours?” he exhaled noisily. “No wonder you told me to get new spies! Of course you’ve dated someone since. I… I won’t bother you any more. I’m sorry. How… how old is he?” he added, trying desperately to make conversation to disguise his pain.
“He’s nine,” she smiled, watching for Marcus’ reaction.
“Nine weeks?” he shook his head. “My spies really are poor, aren’t they?”
“Marcus, please give me the credit for hiding his existence, rather than derision for your spies for not discovering the fact.”
“I… yes, you’re right, I’m sorry,” he sighed, still unable to tear his eyes from the baby.
“And, he’s nine years old, not nine weeks.”
“Oh, sorry,” he shook his head. “Do you have a recent one?”

Spicy waited; it was only a few seconds.

“Nine years! But we…” Marcus’ eyes widened.
“That is a recent one,” she confirmed with a broad smile.
“He’s a baby… and he’s nine, but…” Marcus tapered off as his mind fogged. Looking down at the disc again, reminded him of her earlier words. “DNA coded? You… you mean…” he stammered.
“His name’s William.”
Marcus raised his wide, almost unseeing eyes toward Spicy. “He’s mine?” he whispered, barely daring to believe it.
“He’s yours,” she confirmed, now staring trying hard to see some indication of whether this was good or bad news to the sandman.
“William?” he asked, his mouth turning up into a slow forming, but obviously thrilled and delighted
smile. “Mine? I have a son? We have a son?”

Marcus exhaled suddenly as he pushed his hand out, grabbing the back of a chair to steady himself. Taking a few more deep breaths, still smiling dazedly.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked without animosity after he recovered from the initial shock. “After what I thought you had done, how could I? I thought I didn’t know you any more. What if I had been completely wrong about you? What if you used your influence to take him from me?”

“I wouldn’t! I would never do that! Spicy, I…”

“I know!” she raised her hands in a calming gesture. “I know that now, but I didn’t know it then.”

Marcus nodded, accepting the explanation. “Can I see him?” he asked tentatively.

“Of course,” she smiled in return. “He’s your son, Marcus.”

“My son,” Marcus briefly chewed his bottom lip, before beaming with pride. “Spicy, give me another chance, please? I won’t let you down. I’ve changed, really, I have.”

Stepping forward, gently caressing the sandman’s cheek with her hand, Spicy leaned in, her lips almost teasingly close to his.

“Not too much, I hope.”

Quickly closing the gap, Marcus pulled her into his arms and crashed his lips against hers. At first the kiss was urgent and almost aggressive. He had wanted this moment for too long and it was all he could do to restrain his desire. After a few moments, whilst still passionate, the kiss softened, their grip on each other grew gentle and tender. His fingers running through her long chestnut hair, breathy sighs signalling approval. Ten years of longing exploded into one kiss and Spicy shivered with the tingling sensation that had always run from her lips and through her body every time he kissed her. Melting into each other’s embrace, they both felt that they could have remained in each other’s arms forever. Finally drawing back, Marcus gazed lovingly and hopefully into her eyes.

“Is that a yes?”

“That’s a yes,” she smiled in return.

His humbled uncertainty, even after the passionate exchange only served to convince her more than ever how much he had grown since their break up. She had grown too, they were both different people, but one thing hadn’t changed. This time, she hoped, they would both make it work.

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“Well, at least if the wedding is postponed it will give Silas more time to fully recover,” Laura held back a sigh and forced a smile.

Eleanor offered a pitying and concerned frown, noting that Laura had accepted the situation graciously. She had been thrust into a world she was barely prepared for and was coping surprisingly well under the circumstances. It was now also true, they might have to prepare for a battle but it didn’t necessarily mean that everything had to be placed on hold; it would depend entirely on the actions of Guardian Pryke. But one thing was certain, more than ever before Eleanor could see for herself the depth of feeling in Laura’s large and pretty eyes. It made her angry to see the hurt and disappointment that Laura was doing her very best to disguise.

“We won’t necessarily have to postpone the wedding,” Eleanor replied, determined to do all she could for her son and future daughter in law’s happiness. “This man may...”

Eleanor stopped abruptly as Laura’s eyes widened in panic.
“What’s wrong?” she asked urgently, placing a comforting hand on Laura’s arm. “Silas,” Laura looked into Eleanor’s worried face. “He... He’s gone.”

“Gone?” Eleanor shook her head puzzled by the words. “What do you mean, he’s gone?” “I’m a Locator, I always know where he is,” she explained. “But I can’t sense him. He’s not here, not anywhere... but it was sudden.” “How is that possible?” Eleanor asked, rising to her feet as Laura jumped from her seat, as if to go in search. “I don’t know… I…” Laura began only to be cut off by a wailing alarm.

The sound pierced the air, drawing an anxious expression from the pair as it grew in intensity. Eleanor’s eyes flew open in panic; the last time she had heard that alarm, her brother had breached the palace and she and Joshua had been briefly imprisoned in their own dungeons until rescued by The Guard and Special Forces.

“Wh… What’s wrong? What is that?” Laura asked as she noted the terror ingrained in Eleanor’s face.

Shaking her head, trying desperately to regain control, Eleanor pulled at Laura’s arm. “We must find Joshua and…” she looked around, still with memories of the previous occasion heavy in her mind. “And the boys.”

Opening the door of the drawing room, Eleanor was immediately confronted by two men. Staggering backwards, pushing Laura behind her protectively, Eleanor held her head high and defiant. Only when the men bowed low and introduced themselves did she relax.

“Majesty,” said one, “The Captain sent us to protect you and The Lady Laura.” “From what? What’s going on?” Eleanor demanded. “My Lady, please, come with us, you’ll be safe.” “What’s happening?” Eleanor repeated sharply, refusing to move until she had more information. “Where is Lord Joshua? Mister Sandman and Doctor Benzedrine?” “Safe, My Lady,” one assured her. “All of them?” she pressed.

“Doctor Benzedrine is missing, isn’t he?” Laura added. “Please,” the guard who had previously stopped short of physically dragging her, placed a hand gently behind her elbow and coaxed. “Please, My Lady, we have to get you to safety.”

Eleanor nodded; while she resisted, there were fewer people to find Silas and much less chance of finding out what was going on. Turning to Laura, Eleanor nodded again. “We’ll find out much more, much quicker if we let them do their job.”

Reluctantly agreeing, Laura followed the two guards to wherever they were being taken for safety. They realised within moments that they were heading back to Joshua’s private office and were the last of the family to arrive.

“Joshua!” Eleanor cried as her eyes scanned the room. “Where’s Silas?” “Ellie!” he pulled her into a brief embrace filled with relief, before pulling back to explain. “His guard was attacked, he managed to raise the alarm but we don’t know where Silas is.”

Eleanor turned expectantly towards Laura; she knew he had gone the moment it had happened.

"What’s that noise? What’s going on?” Pete demanded only to be ignored.

Ambrose turned quickly for the door and locked it with a series of hidden deadbolts. Turning his attention toward the rest of the room, Lord Joshua’s aide drew a device from his pocket and, entering a sequence of numbers, watched as a thick sheet of impenetrable steel slid quickly into place over each of the windows.

“What’s going on?” Pete repeated.
“Ambrose,” Patrick moved forward, hopeful to get a reaction by addressing him personally. “That alarm, what is it?”
“It’s exactly that,” he finally replied. “An alarm.”
“But why?” Patrick sighed at the lack of information.
“I’ve no idea,” Ambrose replied curtly. “It’s not as though we have many emergencies here, you know. I’m certain Lord Joshua or a member of Special Forces will advise us shortly. You should make yourselves comfortable. This may be some time.”
“Comfortable?” Andy frowned. “With that noise? Oh!” he smiled suddenly as he fished a pair of earplugs from his pocket and inserted them into his grateful ears. “Drummer,” he explained. “Always got earplugs.”
“Yeah, we have too,” Joe grinned, “but only for when you’re playing.”

Andy scowled briefly, only for his expression to turn slightly smug as he saw the pain in the others’ eyes as the wailing alarm continued to hurt them. Settling into a comfortable chair Andy closed his eyes and smiled contentedly.

“How is that not hurting you?” Pete asked with a puzzled expression as he stared again at Ambrose, who was busy at the desk on which an avstandball stood.

Ambrose glanced briefly and dismissively at Pete, before looking down again, waving his hand over the glass sphere.

“The question is really, why does it bother you so much.”
“Because it’s so loud and shrill!” Pete snapped back.

Ambrose slapped the table and stood quickly, leaning over the avstandball as he spoke.

“No, you’re loud and shrill and you serve much less purpose than the alarm, now will you please shut up! I have work to do!”
“I don’t have to…” Pete began, his eyes wide and flaring with anger.
“Leave it, Pete,” Patrick pulled at his arm. “Whatever’s going on, we’re not helping by arguing.”
“Listen to your friend,” Ambrose cut in unhelpfully. “I’m not here to babysit.”
“That’s it!”

Patrick and now Joe both grabbed at Pete’s arms, with Andy rushing from his seat to place his hands on Pete’s chest, pushing him back.

“Just leave it, man!” Andy encouraged, as he looked his friend in the eyes.
“But he’s so…” Pete began, frustrated to be held back.
“I know,” Andy nodded his agreement.
“He was just the same when he made me do that interview as Mister Sandman,” he glanced at Patrick. “You saw that, right?”
Patrick nodded. “So, he’s just like that?”
“And is he likely to change if you argue with him?” Andy added.
“No,” Pete sighed, shaking his head. “But he’s…I don’t like him,” he frowned, irritated to have to let it go, and pulled out of their grip, moving sit sulkily in a nearby armchair.

Patrick sighed. They were all on edge; the alarm was getting to them and so was the lack of information. They guessed that the reason for the alert probably had something to do with Guardian Pryke, but they couldn’t be certain. Ambrose’s assurance that emergencies were rare didn’t tell them anything. How rare was rare? What was likely to happen? Where they in any danger? Was everyone else all right? When would they know?

“Oh! You Normal Worlders really have no idea how to guard your thoughts do you?” Ambrose complained.

“What?” Patrick turned a questioning expression towards Joshua’s aide.

“Honestly, I think you’re so loud anyone could hear you! Can’t you see I’m busy here? You’ll get your answers when I have them, but for now, just sit down, shut up and stop thinking so loud!”

Patrick looked at Pete, still slumped in the armchair, but rolling his eyes at the new tirade. It took a lot of strength not to respond to the irritable man but it was in all their interests to try to relax.

“We’ll try,” he finally offered.

“Try hard,” came the biting retort.

At the words, the alarm was suddenly silenced and Ambrose waited with baited breath. The wait for him was agonising and the whole room felt the tension. Now was not the time for comments and questions. As the avstandball lit with a faint white glow, Ambrose exhaled suddenly, having barely realised that he had been holding his breath. A hologram formed in the centre, that of Lord Joshua.

“The palace is secure, Ambrose, please return to my office.”

“And the Normal Worlders, Majesty?”

Joshua stopped to consider the question. The situation was dire, potentially dangerous. He could not be responsible for their safety. Reasonably confident that they would be safer in their own world than remain within Carousel, he said the one thing that he could.

“They must return immediately to Normal World.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Wait!” Patrick ran forward, drawing a pained expression from Joshua as he was suddenly face with the image of his missing son. “What’s happened? What’s wrong? What was that alarm for?”

“Ambrose, they have to return immediately.” Joshua ignored the question. “See to it, please.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

Ambrose looked up as the avstandball faded to a smoky black.

“You can’t make us go back,” Pete said, now standing only feet from the aide. “And you know better than that,” Ambrose replied, unimpressed by Pete’s defiance.

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Opening his eyes, Silas found himself physically shaking. It was all he could do not to be physically ill. Whatever had happened, it had happened quickly and violently. He felt nauseous and weak. His heart thumped in his chest and he was sweating. He felt cold and clammy and his head spun. Closing his eyes briefly, he tried to make the spinning stop but it had started and it showed no signs of stopping. He found himself retching, his tortured stomach and throat muscles screaming in their agony at the motion. Tears welled in his eyes as a wave of echoing sound built behind his eyes and had he not already been on the floor, he would have collapsed. Groaning miserably, he at least felt
some relief that the retching had stopped without him spilling the contents of his stomach. He felt a cool, almost cold hand against his forehead, which offered further respite against his symptoms. As he lay, the headache, dizziness and nausea all disappeared. Opening his eyes once more as the hand was removed, he finally focussed his initially blurry vision on a well-dressed man in a dark suit with white hair – Guardian Pryke.

“Let me help you,” Pryke nodded soberly as he offered a hand to the still weak and shaky man.

Taking the proffered hand and rising slowly and unsteadily to his feet, Benzedrine turned an uncertain and nervous expression to his surroundings. It was grey. Everything was grey. A mottled, almost marbled affect was all around him. He couldn’t tell where the floor ended and the walls began, or if there even were walls, the were no shadows, no lines, nothing to distinguish where he was, how large the area was or how he could escape. It was like standing inside an all-enveloping fog with no sense of position or distance. The only other thing he could see was Guardian Pryke and he wanted answers.

“Where am I?” he demanded, annoyed to find his voice had developed a slight tremor. “What do you want? What have you done to me?”

“You understand that I don’t need to answer any of your questions, they are irrelevant to me.”

“You…” Benzedrine was cut off almost immediately by Pryke raising a hand in a calming gesture. “But I will. In your world, you have stature and in mine, we respect that.”

“Kidnapping a member of the royal house doesn’t show much sign of respect,” Benzedrine snapped. “We both know that you think of yourself first and foremost as a doctor and that you are playing on your status purely because I recognise you as such.”

“It doesn’t matter to me how you see things,” Benzedrine raised an eyebrow, unimpressed at the man’s reply. “What matters is why I’m here.”

“You have something that belongs to me and I want it back. The easiest way for me to engineer that is to offer a straight exchange.”

“And abduction is allowed under your world’s laws, is it?”

“It is not an offense to detain a criminal.”

“You’re suggesting I’m a criminal?” Benzedrine’s reply emerged shocked and angry.

“Not only are you harbouring an escaped prisoner of my world, but you were one of those that freed him from the dream in which he was placed on my authority. I have examined your memories of the moment he was released and I see that you were not present but when I discover who actually freed him, he too will be taken back to my world for trial. However, until then, I have you and I have no doubt that an exchange for Crab will shortly be made possible.”

Benzedrine could only stare in reply. What could he do? The man held all the cards.

“Where am I?” he finally asked. “You are still within your room at the hospital, but held in a Pocket of Unreality.”

At the words, Benzedrine’s lips parted slightly. He had heard of such things, but part of him had believed them to be merely a myth, yet here he was, actually inside one. As a doctor, the concept fascinated him, as a prisoner, the idea terrified him and even more so as Pryke continued.

“You will remain here until Crab is returned to me.”

“I… I’ve heard of Unreality Pockets,” he began nervously. “Aren’t they supposed to be unstable?”

“Well then,” Pryke smiled coldly, his icy blue eyes staring harshly back, “you should hope for a quick exchange, shouldn’t you?”

“I’d rather hope for escape or rescue,” he answered defiantly.

“You cannot be seen, touched or heard and you certainly cannot escape,” Pryke replied bluntly. “I have relieved you of all your powers; I imagine that’s why you feel so weak. Do not try to escape,
Lord Silas, you will only succeed in hurting yourself, or worse. Do you understand?"

Benzedrine glared angrily at the man who had taken him by force with utter disregard for anything but his own needs.

“And now I have work to do. I bid you farewell.”

As the man faded from view, Benzedrine glanced around uneasily; barely able to take in what had happened to him. Stripped of all his powers, abducted to an area of Unreality, held in exchange for Mister Crab and fearful for Joe, should Pryke discover that he released him, missing his family and his beloved Laura, Benzedrine had never felt so afraid.
Chapter Summary

Silas ponders the experience of Unreality and Pryke goes on the offensive

Pete was vaguely aware of someone shaking him gently. There were voices too; it seemed to him in his groggy state that they were a little too loud.

“Pete?”

Finally, that one single coherent word had filtered through to him. He felt that either he was experiencing everything in slow motion, whilst everything around him was happening so much faster. The voices – he was still unable to determine much more than the simple fact that they were voices – were demanding his attention and he was unable to respond. Even moving was proving to be a logistical nightmare. Firstly, he couldn’t feel his left arm and his right arm and leg seemed to be restricted in some way.

“Pete?” the voice persisted in trying to gain his attention.

He was fairly certain it was Andy.

“Is he okay?”
“Is he awake, yet?”
“I don’t think so,” Andy replied. “He really did a number on him.”
“What’s his problem?”
“I don’t know, but it’s pretty obvious he doesn’t like him.”
“Any sign?”
“I don’t think so. We can’t move him, he might be hurt.”
“I’m okay,” Pete finally murmured into the deep carpet.
“Pete?”

That was definitely Patrick; the voices were finally becoming quite distinct to him.

“Did you hear that? Did he say something?”
“I’m okay,” Pete repeated, slightly louder this time.
“Pete? Are you hurt? Can you feel everything? Your toes?”
“My left arm,” he slurred with a frown.
“It’s okay, Pete,” Joe encouraged. “You’re just lying on it. Let’s get him up,” he suggested.
“Pete, we’re going to turn you over, but before we do, does everything feel okay? Is anything broken?” Patrick asked again.

Pete groaned with the effort of thinking and trying hard to mentally check himself over. The final effort came when trying to form a coherent sentence.

“No, I don’t think so. But I can’t move my right arm and leg.”
“You’re squashed up against the wall,” Andy explained. “You’ll be fine when we move you.”
“Okay,” he sighed as he tried, unsuccessfully, to roll onto his back.
“Hey!” Patrick objected. “Let us help you.”
Pete couldn’t help but frown with concern. What on earth had happened to him to make them so worried?

As they gently rolled him onto his back, two sensations hit him immediately. The first was a flood of tingling rushing into his left arm as it was released from under him, the second a stabbing pain across his ribs as the very act of taking a deep breath threatened to send him into unconsciousness once more.

“What happened?” he asked, as he stared up blankly at the concerned faces of his friends.

“Ambrose sent us back home,” Patrick began to explain. “He sent you back first, then us, but when we arrived, you weren’t here.”

“But... where...? I mean, I am... surely...?” too confused, Pete didn’t even know the right questions to ask.

“We don’t...” Patrick paused and briefly lowered his head, uncertain what to say. “We don’t know where you went, Pete, but when you did arrive, you literally fell from the ceiling to the floor and you’d been beaten up.”

“That’s why we couldn’t move you,” Joe added.

“Another few minutes and we’d have called an ambulance,” Andy continued.

“Ambrose did this to me?” Pete asked, stunned at the idea. He knew that Ambrose didn’t like him – Ambrose didn’t seem to like anyone except Lord Joshua, but would he do this? Especially in the full knowledge that the four of them were favoured by the royal family. “How long was I gone?”

“About twenty minutes,” Patrick replied.

“Long enough that we were about to make a portal to go back to see if you were still there somehow,” Andy added as he helped the bassist to sit up.

“Do you know where you were?” Joe asked, frowning as he watched Pete’s pallid features twist into a pained grimace.

“I don’t even remember being sent back,” he admitted with a sigh.

“No, this is... ugh!” Patrick shook his head. After a short pause to collect his thoughts, he continued. “As much as I’m sure he doesn’t like any of us, I really don’t think it was Ambrose. Pete, this is the second time you’ve disappeared and not remembered anything. Lord Joshua sent us back because he thought we’d be safer here. Well, I think he’s wrong. I’ve got a bad feeling that Guardian Pryke isn’t finished with us yet. He’s looking for something, not just Mister Crab, something else.”

“What?” Pete frowned as the word emerged surprisingly quietly.

“The person who freed him?” Joe asked nervously.

All eyes turned toward the guitarist and everyone fell silent at the words; it seemed likely that Joe was right. But if it were true, how did he not know that Joe was the one? Were their minds so disordered, as the Carouselians had said, that he couldn’t read them? Whatever the reason, it seemed only a matter of time before he discovered the truth.

“Now, I know we’re not safer here,” Patrick commented.

* *

It was a terrifying situation to find himself in, and yet Silas couldn’t help but feel a chill of exhilaration. Here he was, trapped in a Pocket of Unreality – it was impossible, and yet absolutely real. He laughed; technically it was unreal.

There were no walls, no floor, no ceiling. In effect he was floating, yet standing perfectly still, or able to walk if he wished. It was staggering to contemplate.

Perhaps he should have been trying to find an escape route, but within moments, he found his mind wandering back to his college days. It was there that he had first had the privilege to meet and be
taught by Professor Warwick, Head of Advanced Unnatural Sciences. The elderly professor had pioneered the research into the unexplored field of Unreality Theory and had put forward the hypothesis that Pockets of Unreality existed, or at the very least, could be created.

Anyone else suggesting the theories may well have been shot down in flames, but the quiet authority and reputation of the man preceded him and people had listened. In fact, people had more than listened and following his death, they had continued his research, moving ever forward towards the seemingly inevitable conclusion that he had been correct. Although a Pocket of Unreality had never been found or created, the undeniable logic behind the research showed that they existed and that it was merely a matter of time before one was found. The proof of Professor Warwick’s theories had opened up whole new branches of mathematics and physics and his name was legend.

Whilst in college, Silas and Warwick had spent many a long night discussing the theoretical nature and composition of such Pockets. Smiling to himself, Silas recalled how the college grounds straddled the border between The Hills and Danloka. By simply crossing over into the adjacent district, they were able to avoid the order to sleep handed down by the sandman from The Hills, to which they were both attuned. Perhaps if it had been Marcus at the time, they might not have got away with it, but the pair were able to spend entire nights discussing the theories, unhindered by the need to sleep.

And now, after all this time, here he was inside a Pocket of Unreality. He – Silas Benzedrine – he alone knew what they looked like and how they felt. He was barely able to suppress the smile that was growing in his face. The idea that he would be able to shed light on the debate, to give a definitive description, to continue the work of his much respected professor. It was more than he could take in.

But then, another thought seeped in, a much more insidious thought crept into his mind as he contemplated his situation. Would he be able to escape to tell anyone? What exactly was the likelihood that he could find his way back? The smile quickly faded and he took a deep breath. He had to figure out how to escape and quickly. If there was one thing he was certain of from his many discussions on the subject – Pockets of Unreality were unstable. The exact nature of that instability was unknown to him, but he feared that, given time, it would simply cease to exist and he would vanish with it.

Looking around, Silas searched the grey mist around him. There had to be something in this marbled, swirling fog that signalled a possible escape route. Scouring his mind, he clawed at the long forgotten memories for some hint of what to do. It was all he had left.

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“Be quiet!” Joshua yelled above the noise.

Confusion and panic had begun to take hold. Concern for Silas was paramount in their minds, but the worry over how to deal with Guardian Pryke, the location of Mister Crab and how to keep everyone safe was causing several discussions at once and the room was descending into chaos.

Lord Joshua had to regain control and re-establish some semblance of order.

“Now, I want everyone to sit down.”

“But, father…”

“Everyone, Marcus,” Joshua turned sympathetic eyes to his son before softening his tone. “Please.”

Pausing to gather his thoughts as the family, took their seats, leaving only the Guards, Ambrose and the two Spymasters standing.
“Master Spyvie, Spicy, I’d appreciate it if you would take seats too.”

Indicating with his eyes that Spicy should take the empty seat next to him, Marcus smiled faintly as she squeezed his hand as she sat beside him with Spyvie taking his place in a seat nearer to Eleanor. Even in this moment of crisis, it did not escape Eleanor’s notice that Marcus and Spicy seemed suddenly to have reconciled. Now was not the time to discuss their change of heart towards each other, but she made a mental note to address the question at some later date. In the meantime, she offered a smile and a welcoming nod to Spyvie who had lowered himself onto the seat next to her.

“Now, I…”

Joshua paused and frowned as he spotted a sudden movement in the centre of the room. It was barely more than a change of light, or a shadow that briefly flitted across his field of vision, but whatever it was, it caught his attention. Without even having to give the order, the four attending guards moved forward protectively, drawing their weapons and awaiting the arrival of whatever had caused the shadow. Spicy pulled her hand out of Marcus’ grip and rose to her feet, only to be pulled back down again.

“Marcus!” she hissed quietly. “It’s my job!”
“Not any more, it’s not,” he whispered back.

Glaring in response, Spicy clearly did not appreciate the remark, furious that Marcus would try to dictate to her now that he knew about the baby.

“You’re not even armed,” he continued in a hushed tone, but such was the silence in the room that his voice carried along the length of the table.
“It’s my job!” she repeated with frustration.

Both Eleanor and Joshua turned on hearing the final comments of the exchange but it was Joshua’s reaction that revealed more than anything to his wife.

“The Guard will be suffice,” Joshua insisted. “Thank you, Spicy.”

Raising her eyebrows, Eleanor made another mental note to quiz her husband on a subject on which he was clearly withholding information.

Another flicker in the centre of the room revealed Mister Crab, but strangely in an almost ghostly form.

“Mister Crab?” Joshua queried. “What’s happening? Where is my son?”

Crab appeared almost distressed. The flickering, transparent image seemed to be taking its toll on him as if his powers were in full use elsewhere and that, following the earlier revelation of the use of his powers to imprison his brothers, seemed only to worry the gathered family more.

“I am deeply sorry, Lord Joshua,” the familiar voice emerged crackly and intermittent. “I am trying my best to restore him to you.”

“You know where he is?” Joshua pressed.
“It’s not quite as easy as that,” Crab hedged cautiously. “It’s not so much where as… if.”
“If!” Marcus leapt to his feet, before almost immediately falling back down as the wave of shock momentarily took away his strength.

“What do you mean… if?” Eleanor asked nervously, noticing that Laura had paled so much that she appeared to be on the brink of passing out. “My… my baby boy?” she whispered.
“He is… alive,” Crab shook his head, uncertain how to explain. “Just… I need to…”
“Mister Crab!” Joshua shouted, his eyes widening as the man flickered and faded from view once more. 
Briefly reappearing, Mister Crab smiled reassuringly and nodded. “One way or another, I will make this right.”
“Where is he?” Joshua repeated urgently, deeply concerned over how a man as powerful as Mister Crab was having such difficulty maintaining contact.

A deathly silence slipped over the room as Mister Crab faded for the last time. Placing a reassuring arm around Laura as the young woman’s own personal strength refuse to allow her to pass out, Eleanor turned an anxious expression towards Lord Joshua. The salt water welling in her eyes said it all. Fearing once again for the life of her youngest son, whilst desperately trying to comfort his bride-to-be, Eleanor was being torn apart by her own personal fears. Welcoming her husband’s embrace, she sought the strength and solace in his arms. Her baby boy had to be safe; he just had to be.

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Silas took a tentative step forward; nothing happened. So far so good. Three more steps and Silas found himself sighing hopelessly. Nothing was happening. At first he had thought that a good thing – after all, nothing bad had happened. But now he realised that not only had nothing good happened, but he wasn’t even certain that he was moving. He could feel nothing beneath his feet and reaching out, his fingers brushed against nothing. With every step he took, he was in all probability going nowhere.

“Silas!”

The benzedrine’s eyes widened as a sudden wind whipped around his ears, and bringing with it his whispered name. Turning sharply in all directions, Silas looked everywhere, but there was nothing and no one to be seen anywhere. A stillness fell around him and as suddenly as the wind had appeared, it had simply died. He had almost managed to convince himself that he had imagined the voice. There was something strangely familiar about the sound, but the ghostly echo that had accompanied it had terrified him. His heart still raced as he fought for breath, feeling instantly exhausted as his fear subsided. It wasn’t something he was used to. Feeling so tired, that was. Fear? Yes, he’d grown quite used to that of late. There had, quite frankly, been rather too much of that lately.

His shoulders sagged as he mentally scolded himself. The wind was a phenomenon of Unreality and his name being called had been imagined. He was quite certain. Until it happened again.

“Who’s there?” he shouted, trying hard to sound confident.

“Silas!”

The voice echoed, bouncing off non-existent walls, coming at him from all angles at once, leaving him dizzy as he turned and turned again hoping to pinpoint the direction of the voice. If only so that he knew which way to run.

“Silas!”

Gasing in surprise as the voice was suddenly loud in his ear, as if whoever or whatever was speaking was literally standing at his shoulder. It was an involuntary reaction, but Silas lurched forward in an attempt to get away from the invisible entity at his side. As he took one last step, his horizon tilted and he was falling. Silas’ shoulders jarred as his fingers scrambled for a hold on the almost razor sharp edge of what he now realised was a hole, but no amount of staring could determine its outline.
His arms screamed their pain at carrying his entire weight on just his fingers. Below him, his legs swung in a maelstrom of light and noise. Glancing briefly down, Silas cried out in terror as the area beneath him appeared to consist of nothing more than a monochrome tornado. Great swirling black and white shapes flew past and around him amidst blinding white lights. Grey spirals rushed up to meet him, engulfing him, and flying past his eyes. They moved with apparent purpose, almost as if they were trying to force him to lose what grip he had by rendering him faint and lightheaded enough to let go. But that was impossible, wasn’t it?

It was when the shapes began to tug at his clothes that he finally found his voice.

“No! Get away from me!” he yelled as he kicked backwards.

It wasn’t worth shouting for help was it? Could anyone hear him? Could anyone help him? Perhaps Guardian Pryke, but would he do anything? He wanted him trapped but alive, didn’t he? A spiral shadow coiled around his right leg and began to pull. Kicking at the apparently living shape only seemed to cause himself pain with no effect to the deadly spiral. A second shadow coiled itself around his left arm and squeezed, slowly and painfully. Cutting off all feeling to his hand, it was only when Silas swung unexpectedly to the right did he realise that he had lost his grip on the edge of the hole. Hanging on now only by his right hand, the sharp edge of the hole digging painfully into his curled palm, he knew it was only a matter of moments before he fell to… to what? His death?

“Silas!” came the strange voice again, this time clearly above him.

A third shape crept slowly up his chest, slithered past his neck and spread itself across his mouth. His breath coming in short gasps, Silas realised to his horror that he was no longer able to speak or even move his lips. The shape edged slowly higher and Silas emitted an internal cry of terror as he realised that only one more inch and he would be stopped from breathing.

“Silas!”

Another shape looming above; it gripped his arm, pulling his hand back from its clawing grip. Now hanging in mid air, Silas had no choice but to wait, either to be thrown into the vortex or to suffocate as he hung, dangling between two Pockets of Unreality.

* 

Joshua locked eyes with Spyvie. It was almost as if the two men were having a conversation merely with their eyes, it wasn’t even necessary for them to communicate telepathically. Joshua nodded and sighed.

“I don’t have a choice do I?”

Marcus turned with a wide-eyed stare towards his father; he couldn’t believe his own ears.

“You’re not serious?” he rose, pushing Spicy protectively back into her seat, much to her annoyance. “You’re not really going to give him Mister Crab, are you?”

“I’m going to negotiate,” Joshua replied, though it pained him to say the words. “You have nothing to negotiate with,” came a voice across the other side of the room.

Turning abruptly, Joshua’s eyes fell on the self-righteous expression of Guardian Pryke. The man stood stiffly by one of the partially drawn dark-blue velvet drapes of one of the many almost floor-to-ceiling windows that ran the length of one side of the chamber. With his dark suit in the semi-dark room, he almost blended into the background with only his white hair standing out against his otherwise camouflaged appearance.
“Return my son to me, Pryke and we’ll talk,” Joshua growled defiantly.

Stepping forward with slow, careful strides until he approached the long table, Pryke stared coldly at Joshua.

“I have kept a close watch over Crab and his brothers for many millennia. I have seen them imprisoned twice and I will again. I will get what I want in good time, but I suspect that your need to have your son returned to you is rather more urgent a need than mine. As such, I have no need to acquiesce to your demand. Rather, you have need to acquiesce to mine.”

“Guardian Pryke, I can’t give you what I don’t have…”

“Father!” Marcus cut in, shocked by the statement.

“Do not alarm yourself, Sandman,” Pryke shook his head lightly. “Despite his words, your Ruler has no intention of doing as I ask. My last visit to this world was rather more fruitful. It would seem that the Ruling House has weakened over time.”

“Weakened!” Marcus broke from behind Spicy’s chair and rushed towards the unwelcome visitor. Grasping at his son’s arm as he tore past him, Joshua cried out in frustration as he pulled free.

“Marcus! No!”

The sandman pulled up sharply, throwing his arms up defensively as long bands of glowing orange light sprang up in front of him, flickering like fire, but thankfully not actually burning as his own momentum caused him to crash into them. As solid as iron bars and just as secure, Marcus screamed his frustration as he found himself encircled by ten shimmering orange beams of light. Slapping his palms against two of the shafts of energy, he curled his fingers around them and alternately pulled and pushed.

“Let me out of here!” he cried; frustrated, angry and humiliated.

“You’ve been here before?” Joshua edged forward, telepathically willing his son to be quiet. “When was that?”

“I think you know, Lord Joshua,” Pryke nodded. “You seem an intelligent man. Certainly advising your hot-tempered son to be silent is in all your interests.”

Marcus bit his lower lip in an attempt to force himself not to reply.

“You imprisoned Mister Crab in the dream.”

Guardian Pryke was nodding, but Marcus was already opening his mouth to speak.

“If, Sandman, you are about to suggest to me that one of your predecessors imprisoned him, then ask yourself one thing. Could you do it?”

Marcus’ mouth remained open, but no words emerged.

“I created the dream and granted the Ruler at the time and Governor Sandman sufficient power to perform the act, nothing more. In return, I ensured their longevity.”

“You granted him an extension to his life?” Joshua growled angrily.

“I am aware that in this world all rulers live for millennia. It was no more than would have happened anyway, only the Sandman benefitted.”

“Owen murdered my grandfather,” Joshua snapped bitterly. “He was not the rightful heir, he would have lived a normal length life but you!” he spat, stepping aggressively forward. “You ensured that he lived long enough to subjugate the people of Carousel. To destroy the harmony between districts, to encourage crime and disorder for his own ends. You nearly destroyed this world, and for what? To imprison a man who has done only good things for my people!”

“You have aided a criminal of our world,” Eleanor stepped forward, standing alongside her husband. “You may be judged equally guilty.”
Pryke glanced in silence from Joshua to Eleanor and back, refusing to comment on their revelation.

“I presume,” Eleanor continued stiffly, “that you are not able to pursue your criminals with complete disregard for other worlds’ laws?”

“I may do as I see fit,” Pryke replied, his confidence and certainty somehow lessened. “Free my sons!” Eleanor barked, stepping sharply forward, her gown swishing against her legs at the suddenness of the movement.

“One last thing,” Pryke smiled with renewed confidence as he turned his gaze toward the imprisoned sandman. “What?” Marcus asked nervously.

“I see something that I never did before,” he cocked his head to one side. “Your facsimile’s mind was blocked to me. Your brother wasn’t there, but you were, weren’t you, Sandman?”

Marcus swallowed nervously; sensing he knew what Pryke was alluding to.

“Blocked?” he replied, his voice almost shaking as he tried to change the subject. “My facsimile? What are you talking about?”

“All of them had a power signature. It was faint, but initially, I mistakenly believed them to be you, your brother, your cousin and Crab; each of you disguising your powers somehow. I soon realised that they were mere facsimiles; a feeble attempt to throw me off track.” “Facsimiles?” Marcus gasped. “They’re real people! They’re from Normal World. They just look like us!”

Pryke raised an eyebrow at the words. He scarcely believed what he was hearing. Normal World had appeared to him only slightly more tangible than a poorly constructed dream by a disordered mind. It had been too easy to manipulate both the fabric of its time and space and its inhabitants. Once he had realised that the counterparts were not his prey, he had dismissed them, with the exception of Pete. He had made two attempts to delve into his mind and both had been countered. It had appeared to Pryke as if his mind had somehow been blocked to prevent him from viewing the real Sandman’s memories. But now, he realised to his surprise that he was real, not merely a reflection of the Sandman. Not only that, but the others too – all real.

“Impossible!” he suddenly concluded, against all evidence to the contrary. “Normal World is weak, there is no way he could have closed his mind to me.”

“Normal Worlders are…” Marcus began only to be interrupted. “Unless… Crab’s been in his mind, hasn’t he?”

Marcus’ lips parted, his breathing fast and shallow as he recalled being informed of the events leading up to the rescue of both him and his brother from Lady Constance Allandra’s mansion. Following Silas’ capture by power slavers and subsequent sale to the self-titled thief, Mister Crab had destroyed the slave ship, freeing the captives, including Silas’ beloved fiancee, Laura. Another freed captive, Francis, had wanted Laura’s affections for himself and had tried to lead them as far from Silas as he could, planning to eventually kill them. Pete had inadvertently discovered his plan and had it not been for Mister Crab marshalling Pete’s mind’s defences against a mental attack by the self-serving traitor, Francis, he might just have achieved his aims.

But now, it seemed that Mister Crab’s intervention had served a second purpose.

“I see that he has,” Pryke nodded. “But he hasn’t been in yours, has he, Sandman? Who freed him, Sandman? Was it you?”

Marcus merely stared in return; too petrified to move.

“Tell me, or you’ll regret it.”
“Let him go!” Eleanor cried alarmed at the threat. “I told you to let my sons go!”

Screaming in sudden overwhelming agony, Marcus fell back against the bars, clutching his temples and sinking gradually to the floor. Barely able to move a muscle, Joshua and Eleanor found themselves held in position, watching their son writhing in distress.

Movement by Robert, The Guard and Donnie behind them had resulted in nothing but the sound of crashing, as all were, in turn, flung back against either the table or the wall. Only one person managed to get close, but even as she did, she was held unmoving and choking in front of the recently formed cage surrounding the tortured sandman.

Falling forward, with barely time to focus his eyes or catch his breath, Marcus gripped the bars with a look of panic on his face as he saw Spicy’s face slowly turning purple as her airways were closed off by the slightest gesture of Pryke’s fingers.

“Please! No!” he cried in desperation. “Who was it, Sandman?” Pryke growled. “Joe!” he gasped as Spicy’s head flopped forward. “It was Joe. Please! Let her go!”

In a blink of an eye, Spicy was falling to the floor, choking and gasping for breath. The light beams acting as bars around the desperate Sandman vanished and he was scrambling forward, gathering the Spymaster in his arms. Joshua and Eleanor dropped at his side, signalling for medical assistance.

“I’m sorry!” Marcus cried, tears streaming down his face as he caressed Spicy’s cheek and hair. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!” “You did what you had to do, son,” Joshua offered the grim words of comfort. “He gave you no choice.”

Standing as Eleanor threw her arms around her son, Joshua turned concerned eyes to the remainder of the group, checking first that Laura and Donnie were safe. Relieved to see that they were both now standing and helping Spyvie to his feet, Joshua barked an order.

“We have to warn Joe.” “My Lord, I don’t think it’s safe to…” “Ambrose, I don’t expect to have to repeat myself!” “I’ll go, My Lord.” Joshua allowed a weak sigh to escape his lips. “Master Spyvie, your daughter needs you.”

Even as he spoke, Lord Robert was signalling to two of The Guard, but Donnie was already gone from the room.

“Why is my entire family so wilful!” Joshua screamed his frustration. “Lord Robert, warn Joe, protect him but… find Donnie, keep him safe.” “Yes, My Lord.”

Joshua looked down at Marcus, still cradling Spicy in his arms, riddled with guilt for what he still saw as his betrayal of Joe. Turning back, he extended an arm, inviting Laura to approach, he sighed as he curled his arm around her.

“We’ll find him,” he sounded more confident than he felt. “I promise you, we’ll find him.” “I’m not giving up,” came the surprisingly determined reply.
Looking down back at the hole through which he had just been dragged, Silas exhaled deeply. He could see now the grey and black shapes, were mouths and hands, all reaching and clawing, just beyond the entrance to the gaping abyss. Somehow they remained beyond the hole, not even trying to follow him. Now looking up at his surroundings, he found that he was once more in the featureless, marbled grey world. Nothing had changed, except now a man he knew well stood alongside him.

“Mister Crab! It was your voice I heard?”
Crab considered the question. “Most of the time, certainly.”
“Not all?”
“Unreality is a dangerous place,” he replied without really explaining.
“What was that?” Silas pointed to the hole, which seemed now to be disappearing.
“I think it’s best that you don’t know,” Crab replied, his tone one of warning than dismissal.
“It was going to kill me, wasn’t it?”
Crab looked thoughtful for a few moments. “Not intentionally,” he corrected. “It probably wasn’t even aware that you’re alive.”
Silas frowned; his brows knitting at the words. “Wasn’t aware that…”
“It was alive, the shadow you saw. Did you know?”
“It seemed to move with purpose, contemplation,” Silas replied without really answering the question. Crab raised a questioning eyebrow. “But, no,” Silas admitted. “I didn’t realise it was alive. You know about Unreality?” Silas asked; uncertain if it might be a disrespectful question. “You know how it works?” he clarified his concern.
“I’m afraid I created Unreality. Well… my brothers and I. During a prolonged battle, two columns of power collided, shattering into miniscule pieces that carried like dust in the air around Carousel. How can I explain?” Mister Crab looked thoughtful for a moment before continuing. “In Normal World, they believe… in fact they have a proven scientific law that states that energy may not be created nor destroyed.”
“But that’s ridiculous!” Silas protested. “Of course it can!”
Crab smiled. “In Carousel. Or, at least, that’s how it seems. The energy you create when you use your powers to, say, move or conjure an object is sourced from the explosion of power I mentioned earlier. More energy than you can imagine literally hangs in the air in Carousel and you can access that energy and use it, even though, until now, you have been unaware of it.”
“How brief?” Silas frowned.
“It rather depends how you use your powers.” Crab smiled “My answer isn’t intentionally vague; it genuinely seems to rely on usage. But there is no linear measurement – some powers are simply more energy hungry than others.”
“Is that how you have powers in your world?”
“Something similar, I believe, but infinitely greater.”
“You believe?” Silas frowned. “You’re not sure?”
“The tale of how powers came into being in my world has long since been lost to folklore and exaggeration. You yourself are unaware of the complete story behind your own powers, it’s the same for me.”

Silas nodded his understanding.

“Won’t you tell me what you do know?”
Crab nodded. “If you wish, but not here. I have to return you to reality and quickly.”
“There may be some side effects,” Crab lowered his eyes. “Please don’t be alarmed, they should wear off soon.”
“Should?” Silas asked nervously.
“The timescale is the issue, not the effect,” Crab reassured him. “Now…”

An expression of alarm settled briefly on Crab’s face before he placed a hand on Silas’ shoulder.

“I will transport you now, but I will not be with you, I have something else that demands my attention.”
“What about my powers?” Silas asked urgently, but he was alone.

Falling to the floor, Silas gasped as he lay sprawled at the foot of the bed in his hospital room. He felt weak and exhausted. Even before he tried moving from his prone position he raised a hand and tried to move an object – nothing heavy, simply an empty wastepaper basket, but he was met with no response.

Joe wanted a coffee. He wanted a lot of things, but coffee was high on the list, possibly fifth. Needless to say, it quite a long way behind leading a normal life without somebody wanting to kill him.

Sitting in his favourite chair in his living room, he watched quietly with a grim, worried expression as Patrick cleaned Pete’s cuts and grazes, applying band-aids wherever necessary. With every flinch, Joe’s brow furrowed deeper. It wasn’t as though he regretted freeing Mister Crab from his imprisonment – the act itself had been entirely unintentional – but he now felt responsible for Pete’s pain.

Patrick’s statement had made sense. It seemed more than likely that Guardian Pryke had caused, and continued to cause, problems for the group and their friends in Carousel. He had originally attacked Joe inside something that had resembled a dream. He had disturbed time and placed both Patrick and Andy in an almost trance-like state while he questioned them. Strangest of all, he had caused Pete to vanish twice, once for nine hours and just now for twenty minutes. What had happened to him during those nine hours was unknown to him, but they now suspected that he had been taken somewhere and interrogated at length over the whereabouts of Mister Crab and his brothers. In the twenty minutes he was gone on the last occasion, it was clear that he had been severely beaten, possibly for the same reason, but it was unclear precisely why.

One thing that puzzled Joe was that Pryke’s methods had seemed sloppy. This man had powers that Joe couldn’t hope to understand and all manner of tricks at his disposal. And yet, he had not realised that he wasn’t Mister Crab, neither did he realise that he had freed him. Mind reading and telepathy were not only common powers in Carousel, but Ambrose had told them that their thoughts were loud and unguarded. It seemed unlikely that Pryke had been unable to pick up the information he was looking for. His interrogations of Pete had revealed nothing and his brief questioning of Andy and Patrick had taken him no further in his quest. Either there was something preventing him from
discovering the information or perhaps he wasn’t quite as powerful as they first thought?

“How are you feeling now, Pete?” Andy asked, breaking the silence.

Patrick was applying the last of the band-aids to his friend as Andy voiced the concerns of them all.

“I’m okay,” he sighed as his jaw ached from the movement. Someone had definitely punched him quite hard at some point. “I just wish I could remember what had happened.”

“You have no knowledge of the events because your minds are weak.”

All heads turned, astonished to hear the sound of Guardian Pryke’s voice in Joe’s home. Pete’s eyes narrowed as a flicker of a memory came back to him, brief and unclear, but it was enough for him to remember that he had suffered at this man’s hand.

“What do you want?” Pete demanded angrily, jumping to his feet despite the pain of the movement. “How did you get in here?” Patrick asked, noticing that the door was still closed.

“Your doors or even walls are no consideration to me. I have come for the one that freed Crab.”

Joe swallowed hard. He had suspected it, they all had, but to hear the words confirming it was unnerving.

“We don’t know what you’re talking about,” Andy insisted, his voice trying hard not to shake. “Yes you do,” Pryke replied harshly, stepping forward. “I could have discovered all this so much sooner but for Crab’s tricks. You!” Pryke stared unyielding at Pete. “I interrogated you at length about Crab and who had freed him and obtained no information. It was as if your mind was blocked to me and then, of course, I realised that he had been in there, hadn’t he?”

Pete gave nothing away externally, but recalled the incident with Francis where Mister Crab had organised his mind’s defences against the attack by the rogue renderer. Had he done something else while in there? Apparently he had.

“And you two,” Pryke continued. “I made the mistake of simply asking where Crab and his brothers were. But you genuinely didn’t know. You weren’t even aware of his brothers. And you,” Pryke finally rested his eyes on Joe. “At first I thought you were Crab, disguising your powers. But you offered no resistance to me. Of course, you couldn’t. But, I neglected to check for the one thing that would have shortened my search in a moment. You freed him, didn’t you?”

“No!” Patrick stepped forward. “I did.”

“Trick! No!” Joe’s head spun at the words. Pryke smiled unpleasantly. “Commendable, but pointless. Your friend, the sandman has already informed me who is to blame.”

“Marcus?” Andy shook his head lightly in disbelief.

“Yeah, he chooses now to give up lying!” Pete added, scowling deeply in his frustration.

Each of them knew that this man was more powerful and dangerous than they could possibly imagine. They had no method of defending themselves, let alone attacking him. The possibility of escape seemed slim indeed, even more so as Pryke offered an even broader smile and began slowly shaking his head, indicating that he had heard their thoughts.

“You will return with me to my world, where you will stand trial for unlawfully releasing a prisoner.”

“No!” Pete stepped forward, with Patrick and Andy fast on his heels, making a protective circle around their friend. “If you’re going to imprison someone with the key being a simple word that anyone can say, you only have yourself to blame! Put yourself on trial!”

“Stand aside,” he replied simply.
“No,” Patrick replied for them all, staring defiantly at Pryke.  
“I have no interest in hurting you, but it will be inevitable if you don’t do as I ask.”  
“Guys,” Joe began quietly. “We can’t win this.”  
“Your friend has more wisdom than the rest of you,” Pryke began in a condescending tone. “I suggest you listen to him.”  
“Joe is going nowhere and neither are we,” Andy insisted, his eyes staring harshly at the white-haired man.  

Sighing and shaking his head, Pryke raised his right hand.  
“I gave you the chance.”  

Bracing themselves for whatever was about to happen, all four held their breath, letting it out sharply in one collective gasp as Pryke was suddenly lifted from the floor and flung bodily back against the far wall. Once there, the group watched as the man spun in constantly changing directions as if held by some gyroscopic pivot.  

“You must leave,” came an urgent voice from behind them. “Hide.”  

Turning, still in shock from what they had experienced and witnessed, the four men reeled at the sight of Mister Crab standing behind them. Turning their gaze alternately between the Mister Crab and Guardian Pryke, it was Joe who spoke first.  

“Something’s wrong,” he frowned.  

The statement came as a surprise to the others. Clearly something was wrong – they had been attacked by Guardian Pryke. He was about to take Joe back to his home world for trial. Joe’s statement seemed an understatement to say the least. It wasn’t until he continued that they realised that he meant something else.  

“You’re different… somehow.”  
“We have no time to discuss this,” Crab ignored the statement. “I will throw a protective shield around each of you and transport you somewhere safe.”  
“Carousel?” Andy asked.  
Mister Crab sighed heavily. “Carousel is no longer safe. Not for you, not for anybody.”  
“What!” Patrick cried. “What about Marcus and Silas and the others?”  
“I will do what I can, but for the moment,” Crab’s eyes motioned toward Guardian Pryke, “I have another matter to deal with.”  

Raising his hand, Crab stopped suddenly as Joe stepped forward.  
“Don’t send us anywhere,” he pleaded. “Whatever it is, let us help.”  
“It’s too dangerous,” Crab shook his head. “I can’t expect…”  
“It’s not just us is it?” Pete pressed. “It’s Carousel too. What’s he done?”  

Joe’s eyes widened as he stared at Mister Crab.  

“You left Carousel to help me,” he began, pausing only to check the response in Crab’s eyes.  
“You’re brothers. You need to be close to hold them in their stasis don’t you?”  
“They’re free,” Crab confirmed unhappily, his eyes briefly lowered.  
“You have your powers back, then?” Joe pressed.  
“Yes,” he nodded, “and greater even than before.”  
“What does that mean?” Andy asked, puzzled by the significance.  
“It means my brothers’ powers must also have increased.”
“What does that mean for Carousel?” Pete asked with concern etched on his face.
“It means… It means destruction if I can’t recapture them.”
“Let us help!” Joe insisted.
“There is nothing you can do,” Crab shook his head.
“Our friends are there!” Patrick cried. “Make him help if you need more power!” he added, pointing to the still spinning Guardian Pryke.

Crab turned a curious eye to his erstwhile jailor, and pondered his options for a few moments.
“A truce?” he nodded. “Perhaps, it might be possible.”

* 

“Doctor Benzedrine!”

Silas groaned as he tried to push himself upright with little success. Only moments later, a wailing alarm filled his ears and he screwed up his face as the overbearing alarm assaulted his senses.

“Doctor Benzedrine? Can you hear me? Are you all right?”
“Yes, Seth, I’m… no, I’m not fine, but I will be. Please, switch off that alarm.”
“I… I can’t, Sir, it’s… Oh!”

As the alarm suddenly silenced, Benzedrine sighed his relief.

“Seth, please help me up,” he asked quietly, reaching for the man’s arm.
“Silas!” a familiar voice cried as the door burst open.
“Laura?”

Suddenly trying to sit up, Silas’s head reeled and he slumped towards Seth’s arms as he bent to help him. Hitting the floor again, Silas didn’t realise at first that something was wrong until he heard the gasp of shock from both Seth and Laura.

“Silas,” Lord Joshua burst into the room, having followed close behind Laura as she bolted from the Counsel Chamber elatedly exclaiming that she had found him. “Are you all right? Seth, why haven’t you helped him up?”
“Majesty, I… I tried,” Seth stammered, unable to explain what had happened.

Bending down at his son’s side, somewhat irritated that he had been left lying on the floor, Joshua reached out with a comforting gesture to smooth Silas’s hair. Gasping in shock, he pulled his hand back, alarmed.

“Did… Did this…?” Joshua turned an astonished expression toward Seth.
“Yes, Majesty,” the ashen faced orderly reported.

Only then did Joshua see the horrified expression on Laura’s face. Her already large eyes had widened further, the tears standing in them appearing almost like a river about to burst its banks.

“What’s wrong?” Silas asked, with concern, now finally able to push himself into a sitting position.
“Why is everyone just standing there looking at me? Laura?” his own expression turned to one of deep concern at the sight of his fiancee appearing on the verge of losing consciousness. “What?” he demanded. “What’s wrong?”

Joshua tentatively stretched out a hand towards his son. Reaching out with his own, Silas closed his fingers around his father’s hand.
“Oh!” he whispered, staring almost unseeing as his hand passed through his father’s. “That’s not good.”

Lord Joshua turned to look back at Laura and Seth and took a deep breath at the sight of The Lady Eleanor standing in the doorway. She appeared calm, strong, resolute; it lifted his spirits just to see her. Silently, he watched as she stepped forward and placed comforting arms around Laura, turning her around and pulling her closer.

“My dear, don’t upset yourself,” she consoled the now tearful woman. “There is nothing we can’t resolve.”

It was a bold statement, but one that somehow seemed more than achievable when spoken in such a certain tone. Joshua smiled proudly up at his wife; she constantly amazed him with her strength and caring. He never needed to question why he loved her; he was reminded constantly.

“It’s okay,” Silas added, finally finding the strength to get to his feet. “It’s a side-effect of Unreality,” he reassured them. “Mister Crab said it would wear off… at some point.”

“At some point?” Joshua asked sceptically. “Soon?”

Silas shrugged. “I hope so!”

Laura turned back to face her fiancee, growing calmer at the words. All occupants of the room stood staring at each other in silence until Silas spoke again.

“Well now, this is awkward!”

Joshua broke into a quiet, relieved laugh to hear his son’s reaction. Despite everything that had happened to him, his spirit was still strong and he was coping remarkably well.

“One thing, sir?” Seth began tentatively.

“Yes, Seth?” Silas asked, glad that people’s reactions to him were approaching normal again.

“If you can’t touch anything… you know, I mean, without putting your hand through it…”

“Yes?” Silas prompted as Seth paused his question.

“Well, how are you standing on the floor?”

Silas considered the question and glanced down at his feet. As he did, he cried out loudly in shock as he began to plummet through the floor.

“Silas!” Joshua cried, stepping forward to help him, but realising to his distress that he could do nothing.

Throwing his arms out to stop his fall, Silas frowned in bewilderment as he jarred to a sudden halt. His lower torso and legs gone from sight beneath the floor, while his arms, shoulders and head remained in the room.

“How…” Seth began. “I don’t understand.”

“You don’t understand!” Silas replied, dumbfounded by his situation. “This is ridiculous! Oh! I have no words for this!”

“Is it just belief?” Laura asked, finally stepping forward and kneeling in front of Silas.

“Belief?” he asked looking up, comforted by her nearness. “What do you mean?”

“You believed you should be standing on the floor, so you did. Then you threw your arms out to stop the fall, and it did. So, can you believe yourself back into the room?”

Silas took a deep breath and concentrated; his eyes widening as slowly but surely, his body rose back
through the floor until he was, once again, standing on the floor with the rest of the gathered onlookers.

“I doubt I’ll get used to that,” Silas commented. “It had better wear off soon! Oh, father, Pryke took all my powers. I can’t even wake someone up right now.”

Joshua glowered. Pryke was causing havoc in his world and he did not appreciate it. Yes, it was true that he could reinstate Silas’s powers, but could he do it while he was insubstantial? Possibly not, or at least, the potential for something going wrong prevented him from even attempting it.

“I’m sorry, Silas, I don’t think it’s a good idea to reinstate your powers while you’re in this condition. I just don’t know if it would cause you any damage by trying. Best to wait until you’re back to normal again.”
“But other than that, you’re okay?” Eleanor asked. “You’re not in any pain? Or discomfort?”
“No… I’m…”

Silas looked thoughtful before he slowly rose to begin hovering in mid-air. Stretching out his arms he grinned as his legs rose, slowly tipping his body upside down. Once perpendicular, he turned a full circle around whilst remaining upside down.

“I could get used to this!” he laughed.

Joshua and Eleanor exchanged glances; rolling their eyes as they did. Silas had always been quite self-contained, resilient and adaptable and it seemed that this situation was no exception. Although, if asked, he would have been the first to admit that he was only able to be so cheerful about it because he had already been told that the effects were temporary.

“This is what you’re marrying into, Laura. I hope you realise that!” Joshua smiled broadly.

Laura cast a speculative eye over Silas and smirked as he righted himself once more and landed back on the floor, without really touching it.

“I think I’ll be okay, I’ve seen stranger things,” Laura smiled.
“She has met Marcus, you know,” Silas chuckled as he approached the young woman. “I just wish I could hold you.”
“It’ll wear off soon,” she reassured him. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

*  

Standing in one of the many rooms in the hospital, Marcus Sandman had been ushered from Spicy’s bedside while she was examined. She hadn’t wanted to go; insisting that she was perfectly well and almost recovered from her ordeal. Normally, the strong-willed Spymaster’s word would have been enough. Many of the staff at the hospital still remembered her as having worked there as a doctor and would have been unwilling to argue with her. But, they were even less likely to argue with the equally determined sandman. As heir to the throne, he almost invariably got his way and this was no exception. Within minutes of Guardian Pryke’s departure, Spicy had been installed in a room of her own, not far from Silas’s and Marcus had not left her side until forced.

“Marcus?” Spicy began, politely dismissing the nurse attending to her.

Marcus turned concerned eyes towards the young woman. She still looked pale, and her voice was a little hoarse. Frowning as he noticed that she was sitting alone at the side of the bed.

“Where’s the nurse? Where did she go?”
“I’m fine,” Spicy insisted. “I sound worse than I actually am.”

The sandman stared, quietly contemplating her words, trying to decide if she was genuinely telling him the truth.

“I’m okay,” she nodded to emphasise her words. “But… are you?”

Considering the words for only the briefest of moments, Marcus rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“Silas has disappeared. The man who has him is unstoppable. I’ve betrayed our friends from Normal World and… he…” Marcus paused, his anger bubbling up from within. “He threatened you. You! And I was completely useless! I couldn’t stop him, I was…”

“He had you in a light cage, Marcus! What were you supposed to do?”

“I… I should have disabled it. I should have got out. I should have been able to help you! But no, instead, he did whatever he wanted and I just stood there… letting him!”

“You told me you’d changed,” Spicy cut in, her voice harsh and biting.

“What?” Marcus shrank back, his eyes widening at the accusation.

“You told me you’d grown up,” Spicy shook her head.

“That’s not fair!” the sandman cried, shocked by the accusation.

“You’re acting sorry for yourself again,” she replied folding her arms across her chest.

“Well, I think I’m entitled!” he snapped. “I couldn’t help you! He had me trapped in that damn cage. He’s way more powerful than even Mister Crab. What was I supposed to do? It’s not as though I didn’t want to stop him! It killed me to see him do that to you!”

Spicy smiled kindly; her expression soft and sympathetic.

“Sometimes, Marcus, you just need shaking up to see the truth of a situation.”

The confused sandman shook his head as if trying to clear his vision. “What are you…? I don’t understand. First you yell at me… Now… I…”

“You claimed you were useless only a moment ago. That it was all your fault. I tried to tell you that it wasn’t, but you didn’t want to hear it.”

“So you made me say it instead?” Marcus sighed with an embarrassed smile as he offered a hand, pulling her towards him as she took it. “You know me better than I know myself.”

“And yet I allowed myself to be tricked by that woman,” she replied sadly, referring to Anna Dreamspinner who had managed to convince them both that Marcus had cheated on her.

“It’s hard to argue with the evidence of your own eyes,” Marcus replied with a solemn nod as he pulled her closer. “She knew what she was doing.”


“And I’m never going to give you a reason to ever stop,” he smiled as he stepped closer still. Their breath on each other’s cheeks felt hot and exciting. It was all he could do to prevent himself pulling her sharply towards himself.

But something was preventing him, distracting him. He felt uneasy and apprehensive. Running his tongue across his lips as his mouth suddenly dried, he was surprised by how anxious he felt. There was something unnaturally edgy and tense hanging in the air. It brought with it the sensation and threat of danger, of violence. He had no knowledge of what it might be, but it was obvious to everyone once it actually struck.

It was possibly the explosion and the flash of blue light tearing across the blackening sky that heralded the start of something terrible. All eyes of the inhabitants of The Hills district of Carousel and neighbouring Danloka turned skyward as the rumbling grew louder; physically shaking the ground in its intensity.

Marcus Sandman pulled hesitantly back from the embrace and looked out at the darkening sky,
confused by the sight before him. He had never before seen anything remotely resembling this. Yes, he had seen gloomy days in The Hills. They were rare, but he had seen them. This was something entirely different; something sinister and threatening.

“What is it? What’s going on?” Spicy asked moving closer to him for a better view of the sky. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” Marcus offered a worried frown in return.

More blue flashes ripped across the sky before the first drops of rain began to fall; fat heavy drops, bouncing off the floor in a shower of sparks and flames.

“What The Hills!” Marcus cried as he realised that the rain was some bizarre form of liquid fire.

The screams could be heard far and wide from people in the streets, caught in the potentially lethal storm. The pair pressed up against the window, aghast at the sight of the scorched grass on the rolling hills, the carnival tents ablaze with a bright and fierce flame. Small older buildings, with fires raging inside them with no hope of being extinguished while the strange rain continued. Spicy gasped and pulled a hand to her mouth as, further up the street, she caught sight of two charred bodies lying in the road, almost out of view. Turning swiftly, she cried out in surprise as she was suddenly stopped. Turning her head, she saw Marcus with a firm grip on her arm.

“Marcus! I have to help them!”
“Your can’t, Spice, you’ll…”
“I’m a doctor!” she replied angrily. “I have to help them!”
“You’re not fireproof! You can’t!”
“I have to…”
“No! They’re dead, Spice,” Marcus choked on the word and looked down. “You can’t go out there. I won’t let you.”
“You won’t let me!” Spicy gasped at the words, furious at the reaction.
“No, I won’t!” Marcus grabbed at Spicy’s other arm. “Whether you like it or not, you’re the mother of the second heir to the throne of Carousel and with that comes a certain responsibility. You cannot put yourself at risk!”
“You? Marcus Sandman talking to me about responsibility? You’ve never done a responsible thing in your life!”
“I’ve never known I had a son before! I have to step up. And, besides…” he paused.
“Besides, what?” Spicy snapped, trying to pull out of his grip.
“I… I need you. Can you blame me for wanting to keep you safe?”

Spicy sagged in his grip. He looked afraid; his world was falling apart. Silas was missing, a man was attacking and threatening everyone he loved, his birthplace was in flames and now, she had to admit, the mother of his child was behaving recklessly. She pulled him closer.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “You’re right, but…” Spicy turned to look out of the window once more. “What is this?”

Turning back with her, Marcus stared bleakly, thankful that, from where he stood at least, the casualties had been few. Finally the mysterious rain was dying and still with their eyes fixed on the street below, both Marcus and Spicy witnessed something new. The figures of two men formed slowly. One looked slender and young, shorter than the second with mid length, messy hair. He grinned mischievously as he stretched out an arm, flexing his fingers as if he had suddenly regained its use. The other was much older and muscular with cropped thinning hair. Marcus couldn’t help but notice that the younger of the two bore an uncanny resemblance to Mister Crab.

“Mister Crab’s brothers,” he whispered, still staring in disbelief.
Donnie in Danger

Chapter Summary

Donnie is in serious danger - can Silas help?

Guardian Pryke dropped to the floor and immediately fell onto all fours; crumpled, dizzy and reeling. Desperately fighting the sensation that had overwhelmed him and, in particular wanted not to appear weak in front of Mister Crab and the Normal Worlders. But Crab had done exactly what he needed to do; he had identified one of Pryke’s few limitations and used it to his advantage. Mister Crab watched impassively as Pryke gathered his senses and finally, with great uncertainty and discomfort, pushed himself to his feet. Even standing, he appeared unsteady and was far from upright.

“If I even sense a thought of attack against any of my friends or myself, I will crush you, Guardian. You are temporarily debilitated and I am aware that you will recover quickly, but…”

“Don’t think you’ve got the upper hand, Crab!” Pryke spat venomously. “The sensation is momentary and you are far from…”

“Shut up!” Pete snapped angrily. “You’re damn lucky if he doesn’t crush you! If I had his powers, I definitely would!”

Pryke laughed unpleasingly as he sneered at Pete.

“You are two dimensional to me. As flimsy as paper and just as worthless. You’re complaining about my treatment of you? You’re lucky I wanted something from you or I would have called justice on you by now.”

“Called justice?” Pete frowned, his eyes displaying his uncertainty. “What does that mean?”

“He means he would have killed you,” Mister Crab explained evenly, not moving his eyes from the still incapacitated Guardian.

“Killed me!” Pete gasped in surprise.

“Surely that’s illegal,” Joe added. “Even in your world!”

“Even in my world?” Pryke laughed unkindly. “Annenstad has the greatest, fairest and most successful legal system in the Tri-Dimensional Alliance!”

“The what?” Pete asked, his voice heavy with anger fuelled by the man’s arrogance.

“It’s not important, Pete,” Crab assured him.

“Not important to you, certainly,” Pryke scoffed. “But since when has the law ever mattered to criminals?”

“Mister Crab is not a criminal,” Patrick insisted calmly. “His brothers may be, but he’s done nothing wrong.”

“He is related, the crimes are as much his as theirs,” Pryke responded in a tone that suggested the question of a lack of guilt was a ridiculous one.

“No!” Patrick insisted. “Don’t you see that the guilt only belongs to the person who committed the crime?”

“Tell me, is crime rife in your world?” Pryke raised an eyebrow. Patrick paused. “There’s… some.”

“And by some, you mean it’s widespread?” Pryke mocked scornfully.

“We’re not perfect, no, but…”

“We are.” Pryke interrupted. “We have a perfect system, blotted only rarely by people such as…” he turned his head pointedly to look at Mister Crab, “you.”
“He didn’t do anything!” Andy insisted.  
“You’re wasting your time,” Crab sighed. “He won’t accept that he’s wrong but he will join with me in a truce.”  
“I will not!” Pryke replied indignantly, now recovered from his previous ordeal. “You have nothing to bargain with, Crab, you are my prisoner.”  
“On the contrary, Guardian Pryke, you are mine.”

Mister Crab smiled. It was possibly the first time the four friends had seen him smile in a very long time, and the very action of it made them feel as if he had more than a little something up his sleeve.

Pryke stared in return, uncertain how to respond to the statement. It was ridiculous, surely. Crab continued, clarifying his position:

“I am, regardless of my status in Annenstad, Chief Justice of Carousel. Under my office, two criminals of both worlds have long been detained at my word. Your actions here have caused their release.”  
“They’re free? Your brothers? You freed them?” Pryke stared wide-eyed with surprise.  
“Their incarceration required my presence in Carousel, I could never leave. You were aware of this when you imprisoned me. That’s why you held me in a dream with a window; technically I remained connected to Carousel, enough to hold them in their sphere. But, I was beyond the real world with no escape but for the one word that centred around my remaining power. The irony was not lost on me.”  
“It’s nothing to do with me that you came here,” Pryke insisted. “You chose to come here, I didn’t force you. Their escape is just another of your crimes.”  
“You were aware that Pete had asked for luck to uncover what was happening to Joe. You found that out when you questioned him. You knew that I had to come to him and, you also knew that if there was a threat to him then I had no choice. You drew me here purposefully and in the full knowledge that Sea and Lee would escape their prison. I call judgement on you, Guardian Pryke and I judge you guilty.”  
“You… The word of…” Pryke began only to be cut off.  
“And your word? What if the Ruler of Carousel, Lord Joshua or the Ruler of Normal World were to contact the Alliance or the High Chamber?”  
“They wouldn’t,” Pryke drew himself up, certain of his next statement. “They couldn’t!”

Crab smiled again. This time it was an almost sinister smile. One that suggested an air of satisfaction, the beginnings of a long overdue revenge.

“Oh, but they could.” He continued to stare at the now visibly shaken Guardian. “And then tell me, do you imagine your family will appreciate incarceration under Annenstad’s familial laws?”  
“It’s not the same when it’s you, is it?” Pete added triumphantly.  
“A truce. We work together to recapture my brothers, or…” he lowered his eyes, “whatever is necessary. They are to be gone from Carousel… and Normal World,” he added as he saw a glimmer in Pryke’s eyes which faded almost immediately. “Never to return and this with the minimum disruption to both worlds.”  
“You ask too much,” Pryke shook his head dismissively.  
“I’m not asking,” Crab replied sternly.

Pryke closed his eyes briefly; there was nothing he could do.

“A truce,” he nodded curtly.  
“Come then, we don’t have much time.”  
“Wait!” Joe cried, concerned by what was happening. “What about us? We can help.”
“No,” Crab shook his head. “It’s too dangerous.”
“If it’s that bad, then they need us more!” Pete insisted.
“There is nothing you can do and I suggest that you do not try.”
“Wait, no, you can’t just…” Joe began only to have his voice fade as Mister Crab and Guardian Pryke also slowly disappeared from view. “We can’t just do nothing!” Joe directed his comment to the rest of the group now standing as equally bewildered as him.
“We can do something,” Patrick suggested. “We can make a portal.”

Even as he was saying the words, a long black oval was forming in mid-air, less than six feet away. Turning concerned eyes, all four friends wondered who or what was coming through. Aware now that Mister Crab’s brothers had escaped their long imprisonment, they knew that anything was possible. Their relief at the sight of Lord Robert and two Guards drew a collective sigh of relief.

Immediately on exiting the portal, Robert stood to attention and nodded his head respectfully.

“Highnesses.” He paused awaiting the response to continue. When none came, he pressed on.
“Highnesses, you’re safe? I have to warn you that Guardian Pryke…”
“Has been and gone,” Pete cut in.
“Gone, Sir?” Robert repeated confused.
“Mister Crab found a legal argument to threaten him. They’ve both gone back to Carousel to fight Mister Crab’s brothers.”
“Fight them?” Robert asked, now puzzled over how they could possibly know so much when he knew so little. “They’re free?”
“Is that not why you’re here?” Patrick asked. “To protect Joe?”
“Oh, Pete frowned, considerably more subdued at the words. “I… I owe him an apology then.”
“Excuse me, Sir, but where is Donnie?”

Robert cocked his head to one side at the unexpected response.

“But that’s not possible, he came directly here from the Counsel Chamber, as did we. We were less than minutes behind at most.”
“Then Pryke would already have been here,” Andy’s eyes widened in concern. “Could he have done something to prevent him getting here?”
“He is extremely powerful,” Robert frowning, his brow creased with worry. “I have to find him, he’s in my charge.”
“Is there any way you can… I don’t know, just know where he is? Sense him, or something?” Joe asked urgently.
“Laura!” Patrick cried. “She can locate him. Robert, we’re coming back with you to Carousel.”

* * *

Lord Joshua was pacing. The carpet in his office seemed already worn in patches from what now appeared to be a habit picked up by his eldest son. His eyes were focussed on nothing in particular, but anyone could see the thought processes in full flow behind them. He stopped pacing only when Ambrose stood to attention having previously been hunched over a large grey sphere, similar to an
avstandball, but it allowed multiple holograms to appear at once.

“Damage report, majesty.”
“Go on,” Joshua replied grimly.
“Any buildings built from baksteen are safe from the rain,” Ambrose began.

Joshua briefly closed his eyes, those buildings were so few. A particularly strong stone, baksteen was used for buildings requiring strength or security. The palace, hospital and Guard House were the three that immediately came to mind, but few other buildings were built from such a hard-wearing material. Worse still, many of the older buildings would have suffered greatly.

“The Old Quarter is badly damaged, only a few houses remain standing and those that do probably won’t for long.”

Marcus gasped his surprise at the words. Donnie lived in The Old Quarter. It seemed so small and meaningless to worry about his cousin’s home when such great devastation was afflicting his home world, but he simply couldn’t help it.

“Central Hills is scorched and burning as we speak, the fires show little sign of stopping, there are…” Ambrose’s voice tapered to silence before finally finding the strength to continue. “There are many deaths.”

Joshua gritted his teeth, the anger swelling inside him. He searched through the turmoil of his own thoughts for the right words, but they constantly eluded him.

“How many?” he finally choked out.
“Upwards of four hundred, My Lord, the hospital is filling with casualties.”
“And the rest of Carousel?”
Ambrose lowered his eyes. “Much of Danloka is in ruins. Similar details are coming in from Eddoo, The Ramen Coast, Geban Loch, Ceramissten… all over. Many areas have been destroyed, several penal camps have been breached… there is looting and…” Ambrose shook his head. “Devastation.”

Joshua nodded; the news had come as a hammer blow. Certainly, this was the greatest disaster Carousel had ever suffered.

“Send out a telepathic message to all citizens of Carousel. They must remain inside, do everything they can to barricade and protect themselves. Deploy the Guard, the people are the priority. Get them to safety. A special message to anyone with powers…” Joshua looked thoughtful, an idea, a risky potential idea entered his mind. “Tell them to stand by.”
“And Mister Crab’s brothers?” Ambrose asked quietly.

Joshua was at a loss. He knew he couldn’t possibly deal with them alone. They had the power to cause rain that fell as destructive fire. At least as powerful as Mister Crab, what could he do?

“I will call Mister Crab and hope he hears me.”
“Yes Majesty,” Ambrose replied bleakly, wishing the situation wasn’t as dire as it so obviously was.

Joshua stood in helpless frustration as Ambrose left the office to carry out his orders. Out there, somewhere, two men, two evil and vicious men intent on killing Mister Crab, their own brother, and content to destroy Carousel in the process. From the display on their escape, they would do it purely for their own amusement. He had to find a way, some way to stop them, but first, he had to speak to Mister Crab. Looking around, he was grateful for the nearness of his family. Eleanor moved closer, sensing his desperation, and near the desk stood Marcus and Spicy, behind them, near the wall, Silas and Laura. Only Donnie was absent, but he was happy in the knowledge that his nephew was in the
relative safety of Normal World.

The first indication that something was amiss was the wailing alarm as the portal appeared before him; the security system in the room suddenly counting an increase in the number of occupants. Within moments, a rear door opened and several members of The Guard appeared, weapons drawn. Only lowering them as Lord Robert stepped into the room followed by Patrick, Pete, Joe and Andy.

“Majesty,” Robert bowed his head politely and urgently. “Why did you bring them back here? It’s not safe.” Joshua demanded angrily as he entered a code to disarm the alarm. “Majesty, Lord Donnie, he’s not in Normal World,” Robert replied, ignoring Joshua’s question. “We think Pryke may have diverted him as he tried to transport.” “Laura,” Patrick cut in. “Can you locate him?”

All eyes fell on the young woman as she concentrated hard, her eyes and nose suddenly crumpling with distaste. “There’s smoke, everything’s blackened.” She shook her head as though frightened. “He can’t move. He’s at home, there’re flames everywhere!”

*

“What?” Marcus cried, alarmed. “Donnie lives in The Old Quarter! I’m going to him!”
“No!” Joshua shouted firmly. “You heard what Ambrose said! The Old Quarter’s all but destroyed, his house won’t stand much longer. I’m going!”

Marcus turned swiftly only to freeze in mid stride, held in place as a warm sensation wrapped around each of his muscles preventing all movement.

“Your father said no, Marcus,” Eleanor said, stepping forward and walking around to face him. A look of pained anguish filled her eyes as she spoke again. “You can’t leave here, not at the moment. It’s not safe.”
“But, mother…”
“You promised us you wouldn’t act on impulse any more. The Guard…”
“He’s my best friend,” Marcus forced out, clearly distressed at being forced to stay. “He’s family!”
“I can go,” Silas stepped forward. “Like this, nothing can touch me. I probably don’t even need to travel, I can just believe myself there. Please, father! I can get there faster than The Guard.”

Joshua frowned. It made sense, but he simply didn’t like the idea of letting either of his sons out of sight with Mister Crab’s brothers free to cause chaos. But then, was anywhere safe from them? Looking at the pleading expressions on both his sons’ faces and knowing himself that he was concerned for Donnie, he felt the his limited choices dwindling.

“I’ll be careful, father,” Silas assured him. “And the Guard will be there soon.”

“All right,” Joshua agreed, to the sound of audible sighs. “If it’s okay with Laura.”

Silas took a deep breath and turned to face his fiancee. Reaching for her hands before realising moments later that he couldn’t even hold her, he smiled.

“Laura, I don’t want you to feel like you have to say yes, but…”
“Just promise me you’ll be safe,” she interrupted.
“I’ll be safe, I promise you.”
Silas nodded to emphasise his groundless statement while Laura stared back bleakly. She found herself nodding in return, less out of belief than desperation.

“I’ve come back from worse,” he shrugged.
“Silas, how are you going to get there?” Eleanor asked quietly. “You’ve seen what they can do. How can you even be sure they won’t…?”
“What I know is that Donnie’s in trouble,” Silas replied, determined not to be swayed.
“But what are you going to do when you get there?” Marcus reasoned. “If he’s hurt…”
“I’m a doctor,” Silas interrupted.
“Yeah, a doctor who can’t touch anything!” Marcus argued. “You’re not solid, Si. What are you going to do?”
“I don’t know!” Silas flapped his arms at his side. “I don’t know, Marcus. Okay? I don’t know, but do you have any other ideas?”
Marcus shook his head sadly. “No,” he sighed. “Just… just take care of yourself, okay?”
“Yeah,” Silas nodded sincerely. “I’ve got good reason to now,” he added turning a shy smile towards Laura.
“You did before too, you dimwit!” Marcus smirked.
“Having a romantic moment here, Marcus!” Silas cried in exasperation, but Laura was already turning her lips up in amusement despite the dire situation. But only seconds later Laura’s expression changed as she sensed Donnie losing was consciousness.

“Silas,” she whispered. But she didn’t need to explain, he was fully aware of how grim things were. “I’d better go,” he added, suddenly cheerless.

Concentrating, Silas lowered his eyes, trying hard to believe himself across town in The Old Quarter; he didn’t hear the gasps of surprise as he started to vanish. It wasn’t until he almost choked on the smoke in the air and his senses were almost overwhelmed with the heat and noise of the flames and splitting timber that he realised it had worked and he had actually arrived.

Somehow, with one less person Joshua’s office now seemed crowded; certainly it was now holding more people than it was ever intended to hold. The room was well equipped for an emergency and was extremely secure and well protected. When built over five thousand years earlier, this room had been at the centre of the palace. The entire building had been much smaller then and had since been partly demolished, rebuilt, extended and enlarged greatly. Consequently, the office was now much closer to the rear of the palace than the centre, and was connected by an underground passage to the recently build Guard House.

Over the centuries, security had become increasingly important and necessary. Whilst the huge white-stone building was still elegant and beautiful, it was now more of a fortress than a residence. Given what was happening outside, Lord Joshua couldn’t help but count his blessings for his and his ancestors’ foresight in building in the extra security. But, mixed in with his relief for the relative safety of his family were his intense feelings of guilt for the distress and anguish currently suffered by his people. He felt as helpless as he felt angry. Right now, all he could hope was that Mister Crab would hear his plea for help.

They had all witnessed a series of shocking and disturbing images and as Silas disappeared from view, an unnatural quiet had slipped over the room and everyone found their own space to contemplate what was happening. Quiet, introspective, subdued.

* 

Silas hadn’t known what to expect. It was probably fair to say that he simply hadn’t given it a great deal of thought; he had simply wanted to find Donnie as quickly as possible. Now standing in what
remained of The Old Quarter, he found himself shocked and disorientated as he slowly surveyed the devastation. He was familiar with the majority of The Hills and could easily have found his way around most neighbourhoods, but he was at a loss to work out exactly where he was. It seemed as though all of the landmarks had disappeared. Streets were strewn with rubble, grass verges were blackened and scorched. Those houses that had not completely fallen were torn open as if the walls had been made from paper revealing the badly damaged interiors. Picking his way carefully through the derelict and crumbling remains of a street, Silas cursed his stupidity on the realisation that he didn’t need to be so cautious – he could simply walk through the dangerous rubble without harm. Looking around once more, determined to find his bearings and locate Donnie’s house Silas chewed his bottom lip.

“Donnie!” he finally yelled to no response.

Pursing his lips, he looked around desperately, almost gasping with relief as he saw what he believed was Donnie’s house, over half of it still standing, but leaning at a precarious angle. The only thing that gave it away as being Donnie’s house was the sight of the remains of an antique Normal World piano, lying almost on its side, scratched, battered and partly crushed. There had been some trouble over that particular item of furniture in the way that Donnie had acquired it.

The existence of Normal World was believed by many Carouselians to be merely a legend – but with the twist that this great mythic land was not full of titans with great power and impressive stories of feats of courage. No, Normal World was… well, really quite normal. The inhabitants were physically weaker than even those in Carousel that possessed no powers, but they did possess a generosity of spirit that was lacking in many from Carousel. Certainly areas such as Es Galleons and Eddoo River could have taken a lesson or two from the Normal Worlders. Silas reflected on the thought that Ceramisten was probably beyond hope.

The Royal Family knew about Normal World. They had known about it as long as anyone could remember. It wasn’t considered a secret, as such, but they simply didn’t confirm its existence. The last thing Normal World needed was being overrun by possibly unscrupulous Carouselians. Donnie wasn’t unscrupulous, not by a long stretch of the imagination, but he had spent several months in Normal World – much longer than was generally considered acceptable, but he had wanted something. Through Marcus’s modified avstandball, he had seen it — the beautiful, highly polished, ebony antique piano sitting in the window of the music shop. Now as he stared at the object, the memory of how Donnie had acquired it came flooding unexpectedly back into his mind.

‘It’s… it’s beautiful, Marcus! How can you not see that?’
Marcus tilted his head to one side as he stared at the curious object. ‘What is it?’ he finally asked.
‘It’s a piano,’ Donnie replied without really explaining.
‘Well… what do you do with it?’ Marcus asked, his brow creased with confusion.
‘It’s a musical instrument.’
Marcus laughed heartily. ‘No it isn’t!’ he continued to chuckle. ‘Look at the size of it! How could you hold that?’
‘You don’t hold it,’ Donnie explained. ‘You sit at it and play it that way.’
‘Sit?’ Marcus raised an eyebrow. ‘Sit? Are you serious?’
‘You should hear it, Marcus,’ Donnie adopted a dreamy expression. ‘It sounds like vandraps dancing on glass.’
‘Vandraps? You’ve heard that?’
‘Once,’ Donnie nodded. ‘Just once, and it was beautiful.’

Marcus smiled at the description. The rare and matchless experience of the unusual weather anomaly of vandraps was something that a normal person could go their entire life and never witness. Both Donnie and Marcus had lived for thousands of years and only witnessed the amazing
spectacle once or twice each. But the sound of the shimmering droplets of blue ice was not something you ever forgot. Each ice droplet vibrated at a specific pitch, releasing its sound on contact with the ground. As each tiny sphere hit the ground, the swell of music would fill the air in a crescendo of noise as the storm progressed. Different sounds would be created depending on the surfaces on which the ice fell. By far, the most beautiful was created by the vandraps falling on glass. An almost melancholy and haunting symphony would fill the ears of anyone fortunate enough to be present. If Donnie was right, the gentle flowing, almost bell-like sound was something he would give anything to hear on a regular basis.

'So, how are you going to get it? I guess with a big enough portal…'
'I’m going to work in Normal World until I have enough currency to buy it.'
'In Normal World! Doing what?'
'As a Catcher,' Donnie shrugged. 'There’s a sport called baseball. Someone hits a ball and tried to run around a set of things call plates. If the ball gets to the plates before he does, he’s out.'
'Out of what?'
'The game, I guess. I’m still learning. But he’s also out if someone catches the ball. I tried out, they want me.'
Marcus grinned. 'I bet they do!'
'I’m pretty good,' Donnie smirked in response.
'The world’s best.'
'Probably their world’s best too.'
'I’ll come home after and between games. I don’t want to have to retune to a Normal World benzedrine.'
'Or more accurately, you don’t want to Silas to know what you’re up to,' Marcus tilted his head and smirked.
'I’m pretty sure he’d disapprove.'
'Disapproving of your using your powers to get something? Yeah, that sounds like him.'
Donnie sighed. 'I know you don’t get on, Marcus, but he’s not that bad, you know.'
'Really, so why are you hiding this from him?'
'It’s not him,' Donnie shrugged. 'It’s your father. There’s no way he’d let me go and no way I’d defy him.'
Marcus nodded. 'So, better he doesn’t find out in the first place.'

Sure enough, Donnie was much better than the best, even with limited use of his powers, and with salary and bonuses, it wasn’t long before he had saved enough for the piano.

No one knew how Lord Joshua had found out about Donnie’s excursions but once the piano was installed in Donnie’s house, the young catcher had been called to the palace. He never told Marcus what Lord Joshua had said to him, but for a long time after, Donnie seemed different. It was hard to put his finger on exactly what the difference was, but it seemed to Marcus that something was troubling him. Of course, with hindsight, it was probably the moment that Lord Joshua had asked him to keep a close eye, effectively spy, on both his sons. At first, he had worried about the implications and the effect on their friendship, but as he soon discovered he was merely helping a worried father take care of two difficult boys.

Having found Donnie lying face down and unconscious amidst the rubble, and pinned by a long wooden rafter lying across his legs, Silas immediately raised his hand in preparation to wake his cousin and cursed. It was only then that he realised that being insubstantial wasn’t the worst of his problems. With all his powers gone, he felt useless. All around him, the house was crumbling and creaking. Somewhere behind him he could hear the light flutter of small debris tumbling down what remained of an interior wall. Whilst above him and to his right, a sudden cloud of dust filled the air following the collapse of part of the ceiling.
With all his powers taken, Silas was at a loss to know what to do. In his current state, even the strange Normal World method of shaking wasn’t a practical alternative. In the desperate hope that the Unreality side effects had worn off, Silas extended a hand and tried to place it on one of the wooden rafters pinning Donnie to the floor. He wasn’t expecting it to work and even despite the knowledge of that, his heart sank when his hand moved through the beam as if it were a shaft of light, rather than a heavy solid oak rafter.

“Donnie?” he shouted over the increasingly loud noise of the splitting timbers and crumbling mortar. “Donnie, please! Wake up!”

“Hey!” A voice called from beyond what used to be the garden. “That whole side’s going to come down any second now, you have to get out!”

Silas turned; eyes wide with relief at the sight of a man. Through the hazy cloud of dust starting to settle, he could see he wore a uniform of a Lieutenant of The Guard.

“Lieutenant! Help me, please! My cousin’s trapped!”

Picking his way carefully through the wreckage, the guardsman finally made it to Silas’s side. One quick glance told him all he needed to know and he frowned deeply as he saw the heavy wooden beam resting across Donnie’s legs.

“He’s crushed,” the guardsman frowned, bending down. “Is he alive?”

“Yes,” Silas answered quickly. “And he’s not crushed, see?” Silas knelt at the guardsman’s side and indicated to a second beam lying almost perpendicular to the one across Donnie’s legs. “It’s supported by this other beam. He’s not crushed, he’s just pinned.”

“Good catch,” the guardsman exclaimed. “You should be a doctor!”

Silas rolled his eyes and let it go. In fact he let both comments go.

High above, a series of deep booming crashes drew Silas’ eyes upwards, widening as what remained of the roof slid to a thunderous crash behind the house, dislodging two more rafters as it fell away. One dropped immediately, almost burying itself in the floor only feet away. The other, immediately overhead, hung for a few moments before plunging towards the unconscious catcher.
We Trust Mr Crab

Chapter Summary

Crab and Pryke prepare for battle and Dr Benzedrine finds himself in difficulties again

Pete turned a worried glance toward Patrick who, in turn, was staring at Marcus. They had all noticed that Marcus paced when he was upset about something, but this was different. The quick jerky movements had given way to long slow purposeful strides and the expression on his face was one that they had not seen before. His eyes seemed glazed, his stare distant and unfocussed. It was as if he wasn’t aware of another single person in the room. Even Spicy simply stared at him, not moving to his side as he swept slowly back and forth across the room.

“What’s he doing?” Patrick finally asked only to receive a harsh scowl from Ambrose, which in turn caused a sigh to slip from the singer’s lips.

Stepping closer, noting the exchange, Joshua kept his voice low.

“What do you mean, Patrick?” he asked quietly.

“Well, I can see he’s pacing and he’s worried, of course. But…” Patrick let out another exasperated sigh.

“Yes?”

“Well, is he doing anything else? Or is everyone just letting him do that?”

“What do you mean?” Joshua repeated.

Patrick rose from his chair and strode quickly over to the agitated Sandman. Grabbing his arms, he pulled him quickly and firmly into a hug.

“We’re all here for you, Marcus,” Patrick announced to gasps of surprise from the Carouselians.

Even Marcus suddenly pulled back, with a nervous glance towards Ambrose.

“No… no, I’m fine!” he cried before adding under his breath: “What are you doing?”

“You looked like…”

“I’m fine,” Marcus cut in, drawing himself up to his full height, pushing his shoulders back and taking a deep breath.

All eyes were on Patrick, leaving him feeling a little self-conscious.

“Well, no wonder!” Pete finally announced, only to have everyone turn their surprised expressions towards him. “You’re scared of what he’ll think of you?”

Pete shook his head in dismay.

“No, Pete,” Sandman shook his head. “We just don’t…”

“No wonder all your relationships went wrong…”

“Pete!” Marcus cried, alarmed at the words.

“This guy? I just can’t believe you’re concerned about what he thinks! He’s been nothing but rude and condescending towards us. Is that because we don’t mind showing our feelings? Is it that much of a crime here?”
Lord Joshua raised his eyebrows at Pete’s words and finally it was Ambrose’s turn to look shocked.

“Is this true, Ambrose?” Joshua folded his arms as his aide spluttered in front of him. “Even knowing the high regard in which they are held, you treated them poorly.”

“Majesty…” Ambrose began. “It was an emergency and they wouldn’t stop talking and thinking so loudly! I just asked them to be quiet, that’s all.”

“Actually,” Andy corrected, “you threatened us.”

“No… I…”

“And it’s not the first time,” Pete added.

“Explain yourself, Ambrose,” Joshua pressed, his tone clipped and angry.

“Lord Joshua,” Patrick intervened. “I think perhaps Ambrose views us as problems. That maybe we’ve thrown your lives into turmoil and just created issues you never had to deal with before. I believe he has your best interests at heart but perhaps thinks that we don’t.”

“Is that so?” Joshua frowned as he glared at his aide.

Ambrose merely stared back, uncertain whether agreeing to the explanation would make matters worse or not.

“But either way, you’re still afraid of him,” Pete repeated.

“Probably not just him, and not really afraid,” Patrick corrected diplomatically. “You’ve just got into the habit of hiding your emotions in front of people outside your family.”

“And for long enough, with the people in your family, too,” Joe added with a sympathetic smile.

Joshua placed a hand up to his mouth as he pondered the words. Even as he listened to them speaking, it was like listening to a conversation with his sons. Pete, like Marcus was reacting emotionally, venting his anger regardless of the appropriateness of the situation. Patrick, like Silas, ever the diplomat, trying to make the best of a difficult situation, while still making his point. They were both right. Years of hiding their feelings from each other had made showing them in front of others almost impossible. It was time to break the cycle. Reaching forward, Joshua took hold of his son’s arm and pulled him closer. At first, merely staring into Marcus’s worried face, Joshua nodded and pulling him into a reassuring embrace, took a deep breath.

“I’m worried too, Marcus, but we will get through this.”

Eleanor took a deep breath at the sight of her eldest son openly accepting the comfort of his father’s arms; neither of them afraid to show their feelings. Turning, she offered Patrick a discreet smile and nod of thanks. Seeing the nod, Spicy was on her feet and at Marcus’s side in an instant, while Eleanor remained at Laura’s side, gathering her close. Breaking off the embrace and allowing Spicy to comfort Marcus, Joshua turned a stern eye towards his aide.

“Ambrose, regardless of your personal feelings, whatever they are, these men are our friends – our family and you will treat them as such.”

“Yes, majesty. Please forgive me,” the aide agreed, unable to even look Lord Joshua in the eye.

“Lord Joshua.”

The familiar voice attracted everyone’s attention, but when he turned to welcome Mister Crab, Joshua stopped in his tracks at the sight of Guardian Pryke standing alongside him.

“What’s he doing here?” he demanded.

“Guardian and I have formed a truce to deal with my brothers.”

Joshua glared with suspicion at the man who had indirectly caused so much devastation to his world. Could he really be working now to put things right? Mister Crab seemed to think so, but Joshua
couldn’t help but wonder over the man’s motives and if indeed, when it came down to a situation where he needed to choose between his own needs and that of the people of Carousel, what he would choose.

“I am bound by the laws of Annenstad to assist you,” Pryke replied to the unspoken question. “I have no choice.”

Joshua nodded; it was better than nothing. His desire to help rather than by obligation would have made him feel more comfortable about the situation, but he too had no choice but to accept the situation.

“What can you do?” Joshua addressed his question to Mister Crab. “And what can we do? Your brothers have been free a matter of minutes only and have already destroyed so much of our world, killed so many of my people.”

Mister Crab lowered his eyes and nodded his head. There wasn’t a single person in the room who couldn’t see how painful this was for him. No matter how evil, no matter what they had done or were capable of, they were still his brothers and it was crushing him to have to face this moment.

“You love them, don’t you?” Joe finally spoke up, but even as he asked the question he was nodding his understanding.

“I was willing to give up almost all of my powers to imprison them rather than kill them. I would have given everything – my life, if I had to. This situation is one that I have wanted to avoid for millennia. Even before we left Annenstad I knew this day would come and I have dreaded it.”

“Why didn’t you leave them in Annenstad?” Joe asked with a slight frown.

“For the same reason. I escaped… we escaped our imprisonment. I have never accepted the familial laws of guilt that condemn us all, but whilst I would like to say that we were all innocent of crimes, I cannot. Every single charge laid against my brothers was true. They were guilty of fraud, theft and many counts of embezzlement. But there is one more charge I believe was missing from the list and if only for that reason, I must see my brothers incarcerated for life, or other even more severe justice brought to them.”

“What did they do?” Joe asked quietly.

“I have no proof, but I’m certain they killed our parents. I believe my parents discovered their crimes and were…”

“They would have done nothing,” Pryke scoffed. “Who would cause their own incarceration by reporting their sons’ crimes?”

“My parents would have. You forget, Guardian Pryke; my father was Under-Secretary to the Alliance. A good, honest man.”

“A man who spoke out against our perfect laws. A man who tried to get the familial laws abolished!” Pryke argued. “A man who taught his sons that the laws were not there to be obeyed!”

“That wasn’t what he taught us, but, certainly my brothers behaved as though he had. Guardian Pryke, make no mistake, I am ashamed and appalled by my brothers’ actions. Enough to bring justice to them, but it pains me still.”

“Do you know where they are?” Marcus asked. “Are they…” he paused, almost sighing at the thought. “Are they hurting anyone?”

Mister Crab appeared thoughtful for a moment, his eyes glazing as he seemed to almost step out of touch with the real world. His voice began again, it sounded hollow, distant, as if he wasn’t even in the same room.

“They are in The Old Quarter. They are watching.”

“Watching what? Who?” Marcus became instantly agitated. “Silas and Donnie are there! Are they okay?”
“It would seem that something is about to scare them. They will shortly leave.”
“Scare them?” Marcus frowned. “What could possibly scare them? Where are they going?”
“If they’re leaving, then our truce is over,” Pryke cut in coldly.
“On the contrary, Guardian, it means merely that the battlefield will change,” Crab corrected him.
“Battlefield?” Pete asked, unnerved at the possibility that he might actually have understood. “Where are they going?”
“Normal World,” he announced in a solemn tone.
“Normal World!” Patrick cried, only to be joined by Pete, Joe and Andy, all worried by the announcement.
“They’ll kill everyone,” Joe added. “We have no powers. We can’t stop them!”
“What can we do?” Andy asked, only to be ignored.
“They have sufficient powers of their own, but they are about to discover a weapon of immense power and they plan to use it.”
“A weapon of immense power?” Joshua stepped forward, his expression a mixture of concern and confusion. “Here in Carousel? What? Where?”
“In The Old Quarter,” Crab replied calmly. “Your son.”
“Silas!” Eleanor gasped rushing to her husband’s side. “A weapon? What are you talking about?”
“We can help you rebuild Carousel,” Crab continued, ignoring the question. “All my powers have returned on their release. I can return the buildings to their former glory at the wave of a hand.”
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“What about our world?” Pete added.
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“What do you plan to do?” Joshua asked quietly.
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“Thank you,” Crab nodded appreciatively.
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“Marcus!” Joshua cut in curtly. “We trust Mister Crab.”
“We trust Mister Crab,” Joshua repeated.

Even as the words were being spoken, Crab and Pryke were fading from view leaving the overcrowded office in silence. Each of them, be they the royal household, aide, guard or Normal Worlder, stood in silence as they contemplated what was to come and what, if anything, they could do to help.
Pete turned a worried glance toward Patrick who, in turn, was staring at Marcus. They had all noticed that Marcus paced when he was upset about something, but this was different. The quick jerky movements had given way to long slow purposeful strides and the expression on his face was one that they had not seen before. His eyes seemed glazed, his stare distant and unfocussed. It was as if he wasn’t aware of another single person in the room. Even Spicy simply stared at him, not moving to his side as he swept slowly back and forth across the room.

“What’s he doing?” Patrick finally asked only to receive a harsh scowl from Ambrose, which in turn caused a sigh to slip from the singer’s lips.

Stepping closer, noting the exchange, Joshua kept his voice low.

“What do you mean, Patrick?” he asked quietly.
“Well, I can see he’s pacing and he’s worried, of course. But…” Patrick let out another exasperated sigh.
“Yes?”
“Well, is he doing anything else? Or is everyone just letting him do that?”
“What do you mean?” Joshua repeated.

Patrick rose from his chair and strode quickly over to the agitated Sandman. Grabbing his arms, he pulled him quickly and firmly into a hug.

“We’re all here for you, Marcus,” Patrick announced to gasps of surprise from the Carouselians.

Even Marcus suddenly pulled back, with a nervous glance towards Ambrose.

“No… no, I’m fine!” he cried before adding under his breath: “What are you doing?”
“You looked like…”
“I’m fine,” Marcus cut in, drawing himself up to his full height, pushing his shoulders back and taking a deep breath.

All eyes were on Patrick, leaving him feeling a little self-conscious.

“Well, no wonder!” Pete finally announced, only to have everyone turn their surprised expressions towards him. “You’re scared of what he’ll think of you?”

Pete shook his head in dismay.

“No, Pete,” Sandman shook his head. “We just don’t…”
“No wonder all your relationships went wrong…”
“Pete!” Marcus cried, alarmed at the words.
“This guy? I just can’t believe you’re concerned about what he thinks! He’s been nothing but rude and condescending towards us. Is that because we don’t mind showing our feelings? Is it that much of a crime here?”

Lord Joshua raised his eyebrows at Pete’s words and finally it was Ambrose’s turn to look shocked.

“Is this true, Ambrose?” Joshua folded his arms as his aide spluttered in front of him. “Even knowing the high regard in which they are held, you treated them poorly.”
“Majesty…” Ambrose began. “It was an emergency and they wouldn’t stop talking and thinking so loudly! I just asked them to be quiet, that’s all.”
“Actually,” Andy corrected, “you threatened us.”
“No… I…”
“And it’s not the first time,” Pete added.
“Explain yourself, Ambrose,” Joshua pressed, his tone clipped and angry.
“Lord Joshua,” Patrick intervened. “I think perhaps Ambrose views us as problems. That maybe we’ve thrown your lives into turmoil and just created issues you never had to deal with before. I believe he has your best interests at heart but perhaps thinks that we don’t.”
“Is that so?” Joshua frowned as he glared at his aide.

Ambrose merely stared back, uncertain whether agreeing to the explanation would make matters worse or not.

“But either way, you’re still afraid of him,” Pete repeated.
“Probably not just him, and not really afraid,” Patrick corrected diplomatically. “You’ve just got into the habit of hiding your emotions in front of people outside your family.”
“And for long enough, with the people in your family, too,” Joe added with a sympathetic smile.

Joshua placed a hand up to his mouth as he pondered the words. Even as he listened to them speaking, it was like listening to a conversation with his sons. Pete, like Marcus was reacting emotionally, venting his anger regardless of the appropriateness of the situation. Patrick, like Silas, ever the diplomat, trying to make the best of a difficult situation, while still making his point. They were both right. Years of hiding their feelings from each other had made showing them in front of others almost impossible. It was time to break the cycle. Reaching forward, Joshua took hold of his son’s arm and pulled him closer. At first, merely staring into Marcus’s worried face, Joshua nodded and pulling him into a reassuring embrace, took a deep breath.

“I’m worried too, Marcus, but we will get through this.”

Eleanor took a deep breath at the sight of her eldest son openly accepting the comfort of his father’s arms; neither of them afraid to show their feelings. Turning, she offered Patrick a discreet smile and nod of thanks. Seeing the nod, Spicy was on her feet and at Marcus’s side in an instant, while Eleanor remained at Laura’s side, gathering her close. Breaking off the embrace and allowing Spicy to comfort Marcus, Joshua turned a stern eye towards his aide.

“Ambrose, regardless of your personal feelings, whatever they are, these men are our friends – our family and you will treat them as such.”
“Yes, majesty. Please forgive me,” the aide agreed, unable to even look Lord Joshua in the eye.

“Lord Joshua.”

The familiar voice attracted everyone’s attention, but when he turned to welcome Mister Crab, Joshua stopped in his tracks at the sight of Guardian Pryke standing alongside him.

“What’s he doing here?” he demanded.
“Guardian and I have formed a truce to deal with my brothers.”

Joshua glared with suspicion at the man who had indirectly caused so much devastation to his world. Could he really be working now to put things right? Mister Crab seemed to think so, but Joshua couldn’t help but wonder over the man’s motives and if indeed, when it came down to a situation where he needed to choose between his own needs and that of the people of Carousel, what he would choose.

“I am bound by the laws of Annenstad to assist you,” Pryke replied to the unspoken question. “I have no choice.”

Joshua nodded; it was better than nothing. His desire to help rather than by obligation would have made him feel more comfortable about the situation, but he too had no choice but to accept the
situation.

“What can you do?” Joshua addressed his question to Mister Crab. “And what can we do? Your brothers have been free a matter of minutes only and have already destroyed so much of our world, killed so many of my people.”

Mister Crab lowered his eyes and nodded his head. There wasn’t a single person in the room who couldn’t see how painful this was for him. No matter how evil, no matter what they had done or were capable of, they were still his brothers and it was crushing him to have to face this moment.

“You love them, don’t you?” Joe finally spoke up, but even as he asked the question he was nodding his understanding.

“I was willing to give up almost all of my powers to imprison them rather than kill them. I would have given everything – my life, if I had to. This situation is one that I have wanted to avoid for millennia. Even before we left Annenstad I knew this day would come and I have dreaded it.”

“Why didn’t you leave them in Annenstad?” Joe asked with a slight frown.

“For the same reason. I escaped… we escaped our imprisonment. I have never accepted the familial laws of guilt that condemn us all, but whilst I would like to say that we were all innocent of crimes, I cannot. Every single charge laid against my brothers was true. They were guilty of fraud, theft and many counts of embezzlement. But there is one more charge I believe was missing from the list and if only for that reason, I must see my brothers incarcerated for life, or other even more severe justice brought to them.”

“What did they do?” Joe asked quietly.

“I have no proof, but I’m certain they killed our parents. I believe my parents discovered their crimes and were…”

“They would have done nothing,” Pryke scoffed. “Who would cause their own incarceration by reporting their sons’ crimes?”

“My parents would have. You forget, Guardian Pryke; my father was Under-Secretary to the Alliance. A good, honest man.”

“A man who spoke out against our perfect laws. A man who tried to get the familial laws abolished!” Pryke argued. “A man who taught his sons that the laws were not there to be obeyed!”

“That wasn’t what he taught us, but, certainly my brothers behaved as though he had. Guardian Pryke, make no mistake, I am ashamed and appalled by my brothers’ actions. Enough to bring justice to them, but it pains me still.”

“Do you know where they are?” Marcus asked. “Are they… he paused, almost sighing at the thought. “Are they hurting anyone?”

Mister Crab appeared thoughtful for a moment, his eyes glazing as he seemed to almost step out of touch with the real world. His voice began again, it sounded hollow, distant, as if he wasn’t even in the same room.

“They are in The Old Quarter. They are watching.”

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“Watching what? Who?” Marcus became instantly agitated. “Silas and Donnie are there! Are they okay?”

“It would seem that something is about to scare them. They will shortly leave.”

“Scare them?” Marcus frowned. “What could possibly scare them? Where are they going?”

“If they’re leaving, then our truce is over,” Pryke cut in coldly.

“On the contrary, Guardian, it means merely that the battlefield will change,” Crab corrected him.

“Battlefield?” Pete asked, unnerved at the possibility that he might actually have understood. “Where are they going?”

“Normal World,” he announced in a solemn tone.

“Normal World!” Patrick cried, only to be joined by Pete, Joe and Andy, all worried by the announcement.
“They’ll kill everyone,” Joe added. “We have no powers. We can’t stop them!”
“What can we do?” Andy asked, only to be ignored.
“They have sufficient powers of their own, but they are about to discover a weapon of immense power and they plan to use it.”
“A weapon of immense power?” Joshua stepped forward, his expression a mixture of concern and confusion. “Here in Carousel? What? Where?”
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His eyes wide in panic, Silas stepped forward and threw a hand up into the air as the rafter hurtled towards him.

“What are you doing?” the lieutenant cried as Silas stepped into the path of the falling beam.

Reaching forward to pull him back, the man gasped in surprise as his hand travelled straight through the benzedrine. Silas’s heart seemed to sink and at the same time to pound violently inside his chest as the reality of the situation hit him. At his feet lay Donnie, his cousin. Above him, a rafter falling on
a collision course and he was still insubstantial with no powers. Even if he had been solid, there was nothing he could have done and the rafter would kill them both. With every ounce of his being he wished the rafter would simply vanish.

If it were possible, his eyes grew wider as inch by inch as it fell, the rafter disappeared, until finally there was nothing but a few splinters of wood floating in the air. There had been no noise, no breaking apart, no debris – just a swiftly vanishing beam of wood, disappearing as though it had fallen into some invisible void. Silas stared in wonder at his hand. Had he done that, somehow? Apart from the lieutenant, no one else was near by and it was clear from the expression on his face that the vanishing beam had not been his doing.

“H… How did you do that?” the man finally asked the bewildered benzedrine.
“I don’t know,” Silas replied as he turned his gaze alternately between the crumbling roof and Donnie. “I don’t even know if I did.”

* *

“We can’t fight that, Sea,” the younger of Mister Crab’s two brothers whispered, concealed from view yet less than twenty feet away.
“I agree,” the older man frowned deeply. “If they’ve mastered Unreality and can control it to that extent…”

Lee, the younger of the two, stared worriedly at his brother as he left the sentence hanging.

“We’ve been trapped in that sphere too long. I had no idea they’d come so far.”
“And yet…” Sea stared icily at Silas, now trying to convince the lieutenant to help Donnie from the wreckage of his home.
“What, Sea?” Lee’s worried face creased as a malicious smirk spread across it. “What have you seen?”
“He doesn’t seem comfortable with its usage,” he noted. “It’s as if he has the power, but doesn’t know what it is he’s doing.”
“You mean he can’t control it?” Lee asked, puzzled as to what his older brother had seen that he had missed.
“No, I think he can. He certainly had the power he needed, when he needed it. I believe he has the power of Unreality, and I believe he knows how to use it.”
“Then what?” Lee pressed.

Sea tapped his lips thoughtfully before nodding, finally accepting the conclusion he had drawn.

“I don’t think he understands the level of power he holds.”
“He must do!” Lee scoffed, only to receive a harsh glare and an angry scowl from his brother.
“Well…” he continued, suddenly subdued and meek. “How could he not?”
“You forget, these people have been granted their abilities by our foolish and sentimental brother, but they are not equipped to understand the intricacies of the powers they wield. They use them as toys or functionally, they have no concept of what they can actually achieve.”
“Well, he obviously does!” Lee argued. “And that’s not one of Shoe’s powers. That’s Unreality.”
“I’m telling you, he doesn’t understand.”
“Well, what of it? Even if he doesn’t understand it, he can still use it against us! We can’t stay here, Sea!” Lee replied, his tone edgy and nervous. I didn’t wait all those millennia to escape only to be killed by a Carouselian with no clue of the power at his fingertips!”
“Oh, Lee! You are as short sighted as you are violent! Don’t you see the opportunity we have here?”
“I see an opportunity to leave and stay alive!” the younger brother complained.
“Well, I see an opportunity to crush Carousel and its sister world. A chance to bring Shoe back under
our control and to take over any world we choose. Our friend with Unreality at his fingertips is the ultimate weapon. Don’t you see?”

“Until he uses it on us!” Lee complained.

“Oh, he won’t do that,” Sea sneered. “Not unless he truly wants us to obliterate both worlds. Subjugating and enslaving everyone is one thing. While in that state, he has hope and while he has hope, he’ll do anything to keep them alive.”

“I know they lack our mental capacity, but they aren’t completely stupid. Even he will know that if he manages to kill us, he will free both worlds.”

“My dear brother, we are the most powerful, most intelligent beings this creature will ever meet. I have no doubt that we can convince him of anything. If you prefer, we can even distort his logic processing so that he is unable to make that connection. In short, Lee, we can use this man – he is the most powerful weapon I have ever seen.”

“If we don’t act scared…”

“He won’t even know that if he wished it, he could defeat us at the flick of a finger.”

“It’s dangerous, though, Sea,” Lee replied still unconvinced.

“How? He doesn’t…”

“But Shoe does.”

“Then maybe it’s time for Shoe to step out of the picture?” Sea stated coldly.

“Sea!” Lee gaped at the idea. “Kill our brother?”

“After all those millennia trapped in the sphere, you still have a loyalty toward him?” the older man spat in a disgusted tone.

“Sea, he’s our brother,” Lee tried to reason.

“We’ll see what he is to us when we see how he treats our escape from the sphere.”

“He won’t kill us, Sea, you know that.”

“Then we have the advantage. We know his weaknesses and we won’t have any. He won’t trick us like last time.”

“But we can’t…”

“We won’t need to, Lee.” Sea changed tactic; now trying to regain his brother’s acceptance. “We’ll be gone from here, conquering worlds he cares nothing about. Even he’s not going to care if we take one man. And I still say that man has no idea how much power he holds in his hands.”

“How are we going to stop him using it on us?” Lee complained, going back to his original concern.

Sea exhaled noisily, frowning as he did so.

“These people believe they need their hands to use their powers.”

Lee raised an eyebrow and almost laughed at the idea as Sea continued.

“A simple piece of rope will prevent him even trying.”

“Sea, Shoe is looking for us,” Lee warned. “I can sense him.”

“Yes, the barrier I placed around us that keeps us hidden is weakening as he draws near. We need to take our prize and travel to Normal World.”

“Normal World?” Lee frowned. “At least here there’s a modicum of intelligence!”

“I agree, on the evolutionary tree, Normal World is low hanging fruit. But we can hide there with no chance of discovery and destroying it, ruling it… whatever we choose, will be…”


“Patience, dear brother. We need somewhere to practise with Unreality.”

“If he doesn’t even know he has the power of Unreality, how can he practise?”

“He doesn’t have to,” Sea explained. “In fact, he won’t. We will control him. He will be completely under our control, unaware of what he’s doing. We will harness the power and use it through him, that way if there are any side-effects, they’ll happen to him and not us. Once we have mastered Unreality, we can take control of any world we want.”

“But why bother with Normal World at all?” Lee pressed.
“We need to learn to use Unreality. It doesn’t matter what havoc it causes there, does it? It’s not as if we want the world.”

“True.”

Lee smiled, appreciative of his brother’s reasoning. He had thought of everything. Now it would be a simple matter of capturing the stranger dressed in gold.

*

“Wouldn’t it be better if he was woken first?” the guardsman asked, concerned about causing more damage by moving him.

“I can’t, I lost my powers when I was discorporated,” Silas replied in a frustrated tone.

“You’re a benzedrine?” the guardsman turned a curious eye towards Silas, before suddenly standing stiffly upright. “You’re Governor Benzedrine! I’m sorry Highness, I didn’t recognise you.”

Silas shook his head dismissively.

“Good! I don’t like being recognised. But we have to get Donnie back to my hospital, quickly.”

“I’ll call for back up. What’s left of the roof looks pretty safe n…”

Silas groaned weakly; his vision blurred and a sense of nausea washed over his aching body.

“Well, now.” A voice assaulted his ears from above. “You’re much more interesting than we expected. A discorporated benzedrine? And a doctor too. One of the few relatively intelligent beings in this sorry world. And I stress – relatively intelligent.” The voice chuckled at his own joke before continuing, tapping Silas’s side with his foot. “Are you aware yet? Come now, we have business.”

Still physically shaking, Benzedrine’s entire being felt as if it had been torn apart and reassembled poorly. He recognised the feeling from the slave ship after Martha, the Reader, had ransacked his mind to weaken him prior to the injection of the governor on his powers. Oh, but this was infinitely worse and he was having trouble even locating his limbs, never mind moving them. Soon, after much effort, he finally realised that he was lying face down with his hands bound behind him. Beneath him lay cold red granite and wherever he was it seemed dark. He couldn’t even begin to formulate the words he needed. But which words? The questions appeared in his tortured mind in a jumble, mixing together, confusing him even more.

“Wh… what? Are… who are…” he paused, unsure if he was even forming words, much less, making sense.

Pulled over onto his back, Benzedrine’s eyes rolled back as he stared up, willing the nightmare away.

“You don’t even sleep, you certainly don’t dream! How can you think this is a nightmare?” the older brother growled with irritation as Silas struggled to recover.

“And don’t forget Benzedrine, this particular nightmare has more power than you’ll ever have. More than you could dream of… if you were even capable.”

“Who are you? Where am I?” Silas finally whispered, fearful and in pain. Only at the sensation of pain did he realise that his body was solid once more.

“Of course you’re solid! Did you really think we would allow you to believe yourself to freedom?” Sea snapped unkindly.

“You’re going to perform a great service for us, Benzedrine. A great service indeed.” Lee laughed, before allowing his laughter to fade into a knowing chuckle. “Oh! Well, aren’t you the popular one?”
“What is it, Lee?” Sea asked with a frown.
“There’s a Locator on his tailcoat. Oh! So much emotion! She’s so scared for you!” he added mockingly. “We don’t want anyone finding you, do we? Maybe I should just kill her?”
“No!” Silas cried, alarmed at the words. Struggling to rise, he found himself unable to coordinate his limbs, and instead that he was only able to plead with them. “No, please don’t hurt her. I can cut her off, she won’t find me.”
“No, you can’t, Benzedrine. You lost your powers, didn’t you? All you have left, you don’t even understand!”
“What?” Silas frowned.
“Lee!” Sea yelled, angry with his younger brother.

It was now apparent to both of them that while Silas held the power of Unreality still, he was neither aware of it, nor able to control it. But, that said, there was always a risk, a small risk admittedly, that the doctor was intelligent enough to understand and master it for his own purposes. Sea wasn’t about to take that risk.

“Cut the link with the Locator,” Sea growled. “Don’t kill her.”
“Why not?” Lee pouted, annoyed at being denied his fun.
Sea knelt at Silas’s side. “Something we almost missed. You’re a friend of our brother’s, aren’t you?”
“You’re…” Silas glanced back and forth between the two men. “Mister Crab’s brothers?”
“I am Mister Sea Horse, and my brother is Mister J Lee Fish. Our brother chose to go by his middle name so that he wouldn’t be mistaken for me. Apparently he’s not as proud of us as he should be. Do you have any siblings, Benzedrine?”
“No,” Silas lied, fearful for the reason for asking and afraid for Marcus’s life.
Sea smiled. “Apart from the Sandman, of course? I have been in your mind, Benzedrine, your thoughts are scattered. It will take you some time to reorder them, but don’t think you can hide anything from me. Be aware that the only reason we won’t kill the Locator, is that Shoe will be able to pinpoint us from the signature on the power and at the moment, we have no wish to be found. This time you get what you want, but trust me, Benzedrine,” Sea lifted Silas’s chin with a finger. “Every other time, it will be what we want. You will do whatever we ask, without question and, of course, without free will.”
Mr Sandman makes a difficult decision

Chapter Summary

The guys return to Normal World with Marcus, Laura and Robert and Silas learns more about Mr Crab's brothers

Exchanging brief glances and a few murmured words, the four band members nodded with grim expressions fixed on their faces.

“We’re going back to our world,” Pete announced flatly.
“No,” Lord Joshua shook his head. “No, I’m sorry, I can’t allow that, it’s far too dangerous at the moment.”

Pete raised an eyebrow; perhaps Lord Joshua hadn’t understood? It wasn’t a request; it was an statement of fact.

“No,” Pete corrected. “I don’t think you understand. We are going back.”
“It’s far too chaotic and unpredictable at the moment, you…”
“I’m sorry,” the bassist interrupted. “I know things are bad here, but our world is almost certainly under attack, or will be soon, and no one knows except us.”

Joshua, about to insist once more, exhaled deeply at the words. He had been thinking purely from a protection point of view and, certainly, it was much more dangerous to travel now, but Pete was right. Normal World was, potentially, in considerable danger and whilst they could do nothing to stop Mister Crab’s brothers as such, at least Pete and his friends knew what they were up against. They could warn Normal World’s powers-that-be what was happening and who was to blame – for all the good it would do.

“I’m coming with you!” Laura announced suddenly.
“Laura?” Eleanor stepped closer to the clearly distressed young woman. “The Extension Ceremony grants extended life, not invulnerability. It’s far too dangerous for you.”

Laura turned a determined expression towards Eleanor, her would-be future mother in law, and tried to find the best way to phrase her next statement. It would be difficult, practically impossible, but there seemed no other way to make her point.

“Eleanor, I don’t want to scare you, but I’ve just lost contact with Silas again. I could be wrong, of course, but believe it’s because he’s been taken to Normal World. If so then he’s in danger too. But wherever he is, however he is, I can’t stand here doing nothing. I have to find him, help him, and bring him back safe. If I don’t then… my own safety, my life… it’s all for nothing without him.”

Silently, Eleanor gathered the brave young woman into her arms and held her close.

“My dear,” she whispered into Laura’s ear. “I love Silas dearly, with all my heart and you equally.”
“I love him too,” Laura began. “I just…”
“Promise me you won’t be reckless.” Eleanor interrupted.
“I promise,” Laura replied with such sincerity as to raise a brief smile to Eleanor’s lips. “I’m no use to him hurt or worse.”
Resigning herself to the inevitable, Eleanor was almost able to accept Laura’s decision when another even more shocking statement echoed around the now silent office.

“And I’m going with them, too.” Marcus spoke up in a stern, clipped tone that suggested he would brook no argument.

“Absolutely not!” Eleanor stood stiffly upright, the sound of her voice falling somewhere between anger and panic. “You’re the heir to the throne, you you’re your people and… You… you have to stay,” she insisted, clearly unhappy.

It was possibly the most sensitive and caring thing the sandman had ever done, but at the reply, instead of reacting as he normally would with argument and indignation, he simply moved slowly to his mother’s side. As he stared into her eyes, she expected to see defiance but instead she saw something quite different. His eyes were calming; deep pools of molten chocolate, reflecting her concern and, in turn, understanding her anxiety. Brushing his fingers against her cheek, he smiled briefly.

“When I needed help, they came, without question. Without any knowledge of what was wrong, how they could help or how difficult the undertaking. When Silas needed help, again, despite the dangers, there was no hesitation. They’re my brothers now too and without a moment’s pause, I’m going to help them. You do understand, don’t you, mother?”

With the first signs of tears welling in her eyes, Eleanor cupped Marcus’s cheeks and smiled proudly.

“I have two such brave sons. Do what you need to do, but…” she paused as her breath hitched. “Come back to me safely. Do you promise?”

Marcus forced a smile; it was a promise he was strictly unable to make. He would do anything in his power to find and help Silas, to prevent the attack on Normal World and to return safely, but it was far from certain. There was, however, something on his mind that powered an additionally strong need for self-preservation.

“Mother, I have something to tell you.” Glancing with a smile toward Spicy, Marcus extended a hand and encouraged her to join him to stand by his mother’s side. “We have something to tell you.”

“Forgive me, Marcus,” Eleanor smiled kindly, “but I think I already know what you’re going to say.”

Marcus nodded and laughed lightly but with uncertainty as he squeezed Spicy’s hand.

“I really don’t think you do, mother.” The sandman gathered his thoughts, nodding before continuing. “I assume you’ve guessed that Spicy and I have resolved our differences?”

“It looks like more than that,” Eleanor noted with a gentle smile.

“I hope so,” Marcus replied almost shyly, sparing a glance to the woman at his side before continuing with considerably less confidence than he had begun. “Mother, there’s something you don’t know. Something I didn’t know until today.”

Eleanor frowned; sensing her son was ill at ease, she turned a concerned glance toward Spicy who now appeared to be looking anywhere but at the woman standing before her.

“What’s going on Marcus? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” the worried sandman replied quickly. “No, I think you’ll like this news.” He sighed as he thought about how he was going to break it. “Eventually.”

His forced smile softened and became more natural as Spicy retrieved the Nyheter disc from the secret pocket in her sleeve. Taking it from her reverently, he kissed it softly and smiled broadly as the
hologram of a baby, a happy, laughing and gurgling baby emerged from the disc. Unnoticed by all of them, Joshua drew closer for a first glimpse of his grandson.

“Mother, this is William, our son.”

Amidst astonished murmurings from the four Normal Worlders, there was, what felt like an eternal pause as Eleanor processed the words. In reality, the pause was the briefest of moments but so many questions had simultaneously swamped her mind that she scarcely knew where to begin.

“Your son?” she merely whispered in return.  
“Mother,” Marcus began again, concerned about her reaction. “Because it seemed that I’d cheated in her, Spicy was worried that…”

“You have a son?” Eleanor continued slowly, oblivious to Marcus’s attempt at an explanation. “Mother?” Marcus pressed with a deeply furrowed brow as he watched Lady Eleanor’s confused and rapidly blanking expression.

“How old is he?” she asked unnervingly calmly. About to reply, Spicy paused as Eleanor continued. “He looks about ten or eleven.”

“He’s nine,” Spicy’s words emerged almost silently. Never before had she felt so intimidated and so scared, but he was her child, and she had kept him a secret for what she felt were valid reasons. “He’s nine, majesty,” she repeated.

“Nine?” Eleanor nodded, still making no comment.

“Spicy was worried we’d take him away, that she’d lose him,” Marcus explained hurriedly, only to prompt a pained expression from his father and a look of dismay from his mother.

“You thought us so unkind?” Eleanor gasped as she turned a wide-eyed look of horror toward the worried spymaster.

“No!” she cried instantly. “No, no I…”

“She thought I was,” Marcus explained, shamefaced at the admission. “She thought I would take William from her to be raised in the palace. That she wouldn’t see him again. She thought I’d cheated on her. So did I… It’s a long story, but she was right to be worried. She’s a mother; proud and protective, like you. Wouldn’t you do everything to keep your son with you?”

Joshua smiled proudly; his son had explained the situation in terms that his mother could relate to. He had gone out of his way to consider her feelings and to soften the potentially explosive situation. From the look on her face, he had succeeded. At that moment, Joshua couldn’t have been more proud of his eldest son.

“I’m a grandmother?” she asked, finally.

“Yes,” Marcus almost gasped in relief as a smile slowly began to form on his mother’s face. “I can explain more,” Joshua cut in.

“You knew?” Eleanor turned an astonished glare towards her husband.

Holding up his hands defensively, Joshua shook his head quickly.

“Ellie, I just found out, just minutes before all this madness began. I haven’t seen him. I didn’t even know he existed before and had no idea he was so cute until now.”

“No idea he was cute?” Marcus cut in in mock indignation. “You know who the father is! How could you not know?”

“Where is he?” Joshua asked, his brow creased with concern as he thought again about what was happening all across Carousel.

“The moment there was any threat to The Hills, he would have been safely removed to a secure bunker,” Spyvie explained quietly, to the relief of all.

“The Hills?” Marcus turned, excited by the news. “He’s here?”

“Of course he’s here!” Spicy returned, surprised by the question. “Do you not think he would live
“Majesty?” Robert stood to attention. “Might I suggest that the infant is brought to the palace under guard for his protection?”

Catching his wife’s expression of part delight, part excitement, Lord Joshua found it difficult to maintain a serious expression. It would certainly be in the boy’s best interests to be housed in the considerable safety of the palace with the rest of his family.

“That’s not my decision,” he replied diplomatically. “You must ask his parents.”

Marcus turned toward Spicy and taking her hands offered her a pleading expression.

“I’m not taking him from you,” he assured her. “But he’ll be safe here.”
“And he’ll be with all his family,” Spicy smiled. “Not just half.”
“Yeah,” Marcus grinned broadly before turning his gaze towards his parents. “He’ll be with Grandma and Grumpy!”

Joshua folded his arms across his chest and raised an eyebrow. Glancing briefly at the Nyheter disc, Joshua smirked.

“Joke while you can, Marcus,” he nodded. “You have all this to look forward to yourself. I hope you’re ready.”
“I’ll have him brought over,” Robert nodded. “Master Spyvie, can you give me the location, please?”
“I’ll take you,” he nodded. “It’s complicated. It’ll take about an hour.”
“An hour?” Marcus suddenly took on a grave expression, deeply troubled by the new thoughts racing through his mind.
“Yes, Highness, is that a problem?” Spyvie asked, although reasonably certain that he knew what the reply would be.
“I have to find Silas… and… Normal World is in danger. I can’t wait that long.”

For the first time, Marcus was to feel something of the difficult position his father found himself in during times of crisis. More specifically, he discovered the necessity of choosing priorities – other priorities than his own personal needs. It had been a particularly difficult time following his sons’ return following Silas’s misadventures, trapped inside a nightmare and tormented by nightmare versions of Sandman. The people of The Hills had gone without sleep on the incapacitated sandman’s return. Equally, after his sons’ abduction and imprisonment by Constance Allandra, a notorious, but wealthy and influential, thief from Ceramitten, there had been many calls on Lord Joshua’s time. Dealing with the needs of his people had come first – a necessary but testing duty to perform before he could concentrate on the needs of his family. And now, here Marcus was, desperate to see his son, but with so many people relying on him. He knew were his duties lay and it pained him, certainly, but with strength drawn from the example set by his father, he carefully hid his personal pain and resolved to perform his duty to his brother and friends.

If Joshua thought he was proud of his son earlier, he was to find his heart soar at Marcus’s next words.

“I’ll be here for William when he needs me, but right now, Normal World is where I need to be. Master Spyvie, could you fetch William, please? Lord Robert, you must come with us.”

Feeling a light squeeze of his hand, Marcus turned a happy expression toward an obviously proud Spicy. This was indeed a new Marcus J Sandman.
“Of course, Highness,” Robert nodded. “And might I also ask Master Spyvie to act as Captain in my absence?
“Of course, My Lord Robert, it would be an honour,” Spyvie nodded his agreement.

Constructing a large portal took Marcus only moments and, leading the way, with a determined expression, it seemed to take only slightly longer for all eight to pass through, for the journey to Normal World. Suddenly, the office was left feeling empty and Joshua turned a worried glance toward his wife, only to find her eyes still fixed on the hologram of her grandson. His spirits lifted on noticing her peaceful and loving expression, Joshua placed an arm around his wife’s shoulders.

“I want one,” Eleanor announced, smiling meaningfully at her husband.
Paling instantly at the words, Joshua objected. “Ellie, you already have two and they’re a real handful!”
“I want one,” she repeated in a tone that suggested she expected no further argument.

Turning her attention back to the hologram baby, she tilted her head to the right and smiled broader still. Still at her side, Joshua found the corners of his lips turning unexpectedly upward as he watched his wife daydream as she stared at the infant. It had been a long time since either of them had held a baby in their arms. The moment of his arrival was rapidly approaching and even Lord Joshua felt a pang of excitement. After all these years, a grandfather! His lips curled up as he thought about how Silas would react to the news; if he wasn’t already, Joshua felt certain that in the exalted position of favourite uncle, he would spoil the boy, showering him with gifts and attention.

To Joshua, his family was everything and more, and they had all been brought close again by the unselfish acts of friendship and kindness of the four men from Normal World. He simply couldn’t begin to thank them enough. But now, losing his smile, Joshua briefly closed his eyes at the thought that this extraordinarily dangerous situation could prove too demanding. Everyone had to survive this ordeal, but it seemed so difficult, so perilous and, in turn, possibly too much to hope for.

Perhaps even more worrying, it seemed that hope was all he had.

*S*

Silas glanced discreetly around what he now realised was some sort of cavern. The red granite surrounding him seemed cold and possibly even damp. Every movement, every scrape of his boots on the floor, even the sound of his elbows moving against the small stones beneath him as he tried to shuffle into a seated position seemed to echo and bounce off every surface, assaulting his ears until he felt as if he could almost see the noise as a face laughing at his wasted efforts to free himself.

No matter where he looked, there seemed to be no exit in sight, not even a glimmer of extra light that might indicate a possible way out. He frowned as he realised that he must have been unconscious several hours, making it too dark outside to get an indication of a possible escape route. Even as he thought the words, keeping them as guarded as he was able, he heard the amused chuckle of Mister Crab’s younger brother, Lee. Looking up, his heart sank as he saw the man rise and walk over to where he half lay, half sat. On appearances alone, he would say the the man looked to be late teens, or early twenties. Certainly younger than he would be if he led a normal life. But, he sighed inwardly, something told him that as old as he actually was, this man was infinitely older. His heart sank as he heard a second laugh and he realised that the first had been no coincidence. Even with his best efforts to conceal his thoughts, Silas couldn’t prevent Lee from hearing him.

“Oh,” Lee began, his lips turned up in a mocking sneer, “poor Doctor Benzedrine! What are you worried about? You don’t think we’re going to hurt you, do you?”
Silas’s face blanked in surprise at the words. He had expected him to comment on the thoughts that had raced through his mind, but he had thrown him off balance at the directness of his question.

“You might,” he finally answered, trying hard not to allow his voice to shake too obviously.

Lee smiled broadly, almost laughing as he stared down, crossing his arms as he gave the answer some thought.

“Yes, we might, but it’s not what’s worrying you is it? You’re worried about your family, your brother and… Oh, how sweet!”

Silas’s eyes widened as he realised exactly what Lee had sensed and was now on the verge of panicking over what action he may take. Surprisingly, it was another hearty laugh from the younger of the two men that almost settled his nerves.

“I’m not going to hurt your lady! What do you think I am? A barbarian? You should have said what the Locator was to you earlier, when we first sensed her. But… I suppose I understand why you were hesitant. You don’t know us or our motives.”

“No, I don’t.” Silas began nervously. “How can you be so careful over one life but kill so many with your firestorm?”

“You really want to know about us?”

Silas nodded slowly; part of him did, part of him didn’t.

“First, you have to stop looking for ways to escape, there are none. There are no exits to this cavern; it is entirely enclosed by half a mile of solid granite. We are inside the mountains beyond The Dream World, near a place you know as Geban Loch.”

“Inside the mountain?” Silas lost control of the shake in his voice.

“That’s right, Benzedrine!” Sea rose to his feet and ambled over to where Silas still lay. “I suggest you don’t cross us. It would be a simple matter for us to leave you here. You would never escape, no one would ever find you and even if they knew where you were, they could never reach you.”

Chuckling, the younger man smiled at his brother. “Oh, Sea, don’t torment him! Can’t you see he’s terrified already?”

“Good!” Sea growled. “He has very good reason to be.”

“If, there’s no exit…” Silas began tentatively. “Where’s the light coming from?”

Lee grinned. “I’m making it. See?”

The entire cavern was instantly plunged into darkness. Such absolute blackness that drew an audible gasp from the shocked benzedrine.

“And that’s what you’d have if you crossed us,” Sea warned. “Entombed until you die in a cold black void. Do you understand?”

Silas struggled to find his voice; every sound sticking in his throat as he tried to speak. Only when a very faint light began to emanate from the rocks behind and underneath him did he start to feel calm enough to respond. But as he did, he caught sight of the expressions on the brothers’ faces.

“You’re not doing that, are you?” he asked quietly as both men simply stood, apparently nervous, in front of him. “I am, aren’t I? That’s why I’m tied up, isn’t it? So I can’t use my hands. You’re afraid of me.”

“We’re not afraid of you! You’re our way to take or destroy worlds.” Sea sneered. “And nothing more. Put him to sleep!”

“But, Sea! Don’t we need to…” Lee began, only to be interrupted.

“You heard what I said!” The older man raised his hand and within it lay a swirling black and white
ball of energy. “Unless you want me to do it?”
“It… It’s okay, Sea, I’ll do it, don’t worry.”
“See that you do,” he growled.

Watching nervously as the older man walked away, Silas looked up at Lee with questioning eyes.

“What was that?” he asked nervously.
“Listen,” Lee began edgily as he knelt at Silas’s side. “I look up to him, he’s my big brother, you understand that?”
“Yes, but my brother isn’t…”
“When I was growing up, Sea was the fun ‘we can do anything’ kind of guy, and Shoe, he was the dull ‘no, that’s wrong’ kind of guy and… well…”
“You followed your eldest brother?”
“Yeah, but I didn’t know what he was really like, not until Shoe imprisoned us in the sphere. I heard all his thoughts and they’re pure evil. Believe me. That ball of energy, that would have wiped your mind.”
“And why don’t you want that to happen?” Silas narrowed his eyes as the logic of the younger brother’s argument seemed to be flawed.
“Maybe I’m just not as bad as all that. Look, he’ll kill you if you cross him.”
“And you won’t?” Silas asked sceptically.
“I’ll try not to, Sea won’t try. Do you understand?”

Silas nodded, grimly. The idea that whilst one was complete psychopath, the other was a well-intentioned psychopath did nothing to calm his nerves.

“If you wanted to, you know, you could just let me go and reconcile with Shoe,” Silas ventured. Lee sat back on his heels and smiled, almost smirked.

“You really believe he’s some sort of all-seeing, all-knowing power of good, don’t you?”
“He’s been good to us, and been treated badly by your home world for your crimes,” Silas replied, hoping that he wasn’t making a huge mistake with the bold statement.
“Our crimes? Shoe’s no paragon of virtue you know! Is that what he has you believing? That he’s guiltless? Maybe after all this time he’s managed to believe it himself?”
“You’re saying you’re innocent?” Silas asked, his tone heavy with scepticism.
“Me?” Lee laughed at the idea before shaking his head. “No, whatever he said I did, I probably did it, but if he’s said he’s innocent, then he’s lied to you.”
“He’s got no reason to lie,” Silas frowned, refusing to accept the statement.
“No reason?” Lee raised an eyebrow as he stared down at the still nervous doctor. “Tell me, Benzedrine, if you knew he was a murderer, would you still respect him the way you do?”
“Murderer? No.” Silas shook his head. “It’s just not in him, I don’t accept it.”
“Accept it, Benzedrine. He might have been no fun when we were young, but he changed when he grew up. Our father was Under-Secretary to The Alliance. He was trying to get the laws changed, something that I know Shoe wanted too. He was a born politician, like our father, but unlike him, his morals were changeable.”
“What do you mean?” Silas frowned with uncertainty.
“Shoe’s your classic vigilante. He talks big about justice and freedom, but if he sees something he personally disapproves of, he doesn’t shy away from murder. In our world we have Justices who keep the peace. The law is entirely in their hands and they are judge, jury and, if necessary, executioner.”
“Shoe was a Justice?” Silas asked hopefully.
“No, I told you, he was a politician, following in our corrupt father’s footsteps. Only Shoe wasn’t corrupt, not in the same way, anyway. When he saw what was going on in The Alliance – the
favour, the bribery, the corruption, he reacted the only way he knew how.”
“He killed them?”
“He called it justice, but the law wasn’t his to carry out. A lot of people died that day, including our parents.”

Silas’s head snapped up at the words and Lee found himself laughing at the reaction.

“Yes, this must be hard for you to take in, but, like I said, Shoe’s not the victim he paints himself and it’s best you find that out now, before you do something to cross him and he kills you and your family too.”

Silas remained silent, merely staring up. Aware that Lee could read his mind, he focused all his energy on the words just spoken to him, and doing everything to disguise the memory of Shoe stating that he was uncertain about what had happened to his parents. It was, perhaps, fortunate that he had been gone from the Counsel Chamber before Mister Crab had announced that he believed the deaths of his parents to be his brothers’ doing – that would certainly be a memory that would be difficult to disguise. But, either way, one of them was lying and he was suddenly unsure which of them. Another sudden memory struck him. He recalled being told about what had happened to the slavers who had captured him and sold him to Constance Allandra. Mister Crab’s destruction of the slavers’ ship and his refusal to acknowledge that what he had done was wrong in any way had shocked everyone but now, did it make some sort of sense? Was Shoe a vigilante? Did he take the law into his own hands and as a consequence view himself as innocent?

“Lee!” Sea barked from the other end of the cavern.
“How long is it since you dreamt, Benzedrine?” Lee smirked. “Well?” he prompted as Silas didn’t reply immediately.
“About a thousand years,” he finally answered quietly. “A little more, maybe.”
“Well, today’s your lucky day.” Waving his hand over Silas’s eyes and watching him slip into a deep sleep, he added with a deep chuckle. “Well, maybe lucky’s the wrong word, all things considered.”

* *

“Well, you know, if no one else is going to say it, I will.” Pete opened, surprised by the lack of comment. “A son?”
“Could we not have arrived somewhere a little less conspicuous?” Andy complained, as he looked around to get his bearings. “Fifth Avenue? What were you thinking?”

Marcus returned a blank expression, unsure which question to answer, if either. Of the gathered Carouselians, he was the only one not phased by their surroundings. Certainly Spicy had been to Normal World once before, but she had homed in on their position, it was evening and she was in a hospital in the suburbs of Los Angeles. Nothing had prepared her, Robert or Laura for the sights and sounds of the busy New York street. All around them, tourists and richly dressed locals bustled past them, trying hard not to notice them. Perhaps in Greenwich Village a troupe of strangely dressed people in the heart of New York would be barely noteworthy, but on Fifth Avenue, they were drawing attention. As Pete and Andy tried to get a response for their questions from the slightly disorientated sandman, Patrick and Joe couldn’t help but notice that Laura, Robert and even Spicy looked nervous, their eyes drawn skyward following the line of the huge buildings towering over them.

“What is this place?” Laura finally managed, the words almost sticking in her throat as she spoke.
“This is New York,” Joe explained. “I live here.”
“Live? Here?” Robert gasped. “But… It’s so…”
“What?” Joe pulled a face, wondering what they could possibly be objecting to.
“It’s so loud!” Robert turned a look of distressed wonder toward the guitarist. “How can you hear yourself think?”
“Oh!” Joe laughed at the question. “You get used to it.”
“I can’t imagine,” Robert shook his head, stepping quickly to one side as a smartly dressed businessman almost collided with him.
“Your son?” Pete prompted again.
“Pete, you have one yourself, it’s not as if…” Marcus began, only to halt abruptly as Spicy pulled Pete around by his arm.
“He’s my son, and I’m not feeling any need to explain myself to you.”
“I… I was just… I mean, I didn’t… It was a surprise,” Pete stammered.

Andy raised an eyebrow as he watched Pete’s discomfort. Right up until Spicy’s harsh response, Pete’s interest hadn’t seemed out of place, but now it almost appeared intrusive.

“He didn’t mean anything by it,” Andy tried to explain. “We just…” Andy paused, confused by the kind expression now aimed at him by Spicy – uncertain why she was responding differently toward him. “We’re concerned and… well, interested.”
Spicy nodded. “We have a son. But now isn’t the time for that.”
“We need to split up,” Patrick suggested.
“To cover more ground?” Spicy nodded. “I agree.”
“Not just that,” Patrick nodded towards Pete and Marcus. “There’ll be a lot of confusion if they’re seen together.”
“And the chances of that are pretty high if we stay here,” Andy cut in. “We couldn’t have arrived in a more conspicuous place.”
“What do you suggest?” Marcus asked, addressing the whole group, but specifically Patrick.
“Pryke came here and also to LA,” Patrick explained. “I think it’s reasonable that Mister Crab’s brothers will end up in one or other.”
“Why?” Marcus frowned. “How can you be so sure?”
“I’m not,” Patrick shrugged. “But let’s say you were coming to Normal World for the first time and there was a residual energy in two locations that you recognised. Wouldn’t you go there first? If only to find out why?”
Marcus nodded. “Good point. So, we split up. Spicy, Andy and I will go with Patrick to LA. Pete and Joe, you know your way around here. You stay with Robert and Laura.”
“What do we do if one of us finds something?” Joe asked grimly, deeply worried about the likelihood of an attack.
“Laura and I will stay linked,” Marcus replied decisively. “If the link breaks or one group calls for the other, then the two groups meet at the call location. Agreed?”

Marcus began to make another portal only to be stopped by Andy.

“You can’t do that here! Not in the middle of the street!”
“Of course he can,” Joe laughed. “We arrived in the middle of Fifth Avenue out of nowhere and no one missed a step! We’re in New York!”
“Oh,” Patrick chuckled. “Even more so!”
“This is a very strange world!” Spicy shook her head as she moved toward the newly created portal.
Mr Sandman is arrested

Chapter Summary

Marcus gets into a fight with journalists who think he's Pete and Silas's nightmare is too upsetting for him to cope with

“Are you sure this is such a good idea?” Andy sighed as they emerged in, much to his relief, a quiet corridor in Los Angeles’s large and imposing international airport.

“This is where Pryke attacked me,” Patrick offered a solemn frown.

“I know,” Andy gave a sigh of exasperation. “I was there! Even though…” he sighed again, shaking his head as he did. “He messed with my memory of it. When you told me what happened it was nothing like what I was sure I’d seen. Even now, I don’t remember seeing a guy standing over you.”

“Maybe Andy remembers?” Spicy asked, earning a look of confusion from everyone gathered. “I just said, I don’t remember,” he repeated.

“No, I don’t mean you, I mean the other Andy,” she tried to explain before remembering that Andy was unaware of his other self. “Oh! Sorry, I mean…”

“You mean Donnie?” Andy asked, tilting his head, surprised to ask the question.

“No, the one inside your mind, you…” Spicy stopped, suddenly uncertain if she should make Andy aware of his inner-self counterpart.

Guessing where the sentence was heading Patrick smiled, remembering that Marcus and Silas had told him that Pete was inside his mind, acting as a guardian. Did she mean that in Andy’s case, he was his own guardian? It seemed, from the expression on his face that Marcus had drawn the same conclusion, leaving Andy the only one in the dark.

“What?” he asked with a deep frown of frustration as he glimpsed the expressions on his gathered friends’ faces. “This makes sense to everyone except me?”

“When I was in your mind,” Spicy began to explain. “You were in there, but another you that you’re unaware of.”

“Another me?” Andy asked slowly, with uncertainty. If it had come from anyone other than the spymaster, he would have been certain that this was just a wind up. Perhaps under normal circumstances it would be easy to believe it was merely a joke to make him look foolish, but right now and with Spicy’s serious, almost self-conscious expression, he knew that they were being absolutely serious.

“Yes, I should have…”

“Pete!”

Patrick looked up sharply at the shout. He knew all too well that appearing in Los Angeles airport was a risk, but how much of a risk and how quickly they had been spotted had been a surprise, even to him. Of course, it stood to reason that ‘Pete’ had been sighted first. There were many things that Patrick was grateful for, one of them being the ability not to go noticed while out in public. Pete, on the other hand, attracted attention; in particular the press would gather around him like bees around a honeypot. Of course, this wasn’t Pete, this was Marcus but these particular bees had no knowledge of the sandman. To them, he was Pete and, Patrick sighed again, a particularly strangely dressed Pete at that. There were at least four of them, certainly four photographers; even from fifteen feet and closing he could see the cameras being raised. The other men in the press entourage were possibly
cameramen, soundmen, or interviewers, maybe all three depending on why they were at the airport. They could have been there for a particular event, or even simply be airport-based freelance journalists. He had noticed personally that you frequently saw the same press men and women at the same airports – perhaps this was no exception. Either way, they were on their way over.

As yet, Marcus remained oblivious with their back to them, having either not hear their shouts or simply not connected them with him. Patrick could see them bearing down at speed, hungry for a story, possibly intrigued by ‘Pete’s’ attire. Sighing, he turned to Andy who had also spied them.

“We should have prepared for this,” he shrugged. “What are we going to say?”
“It’s not going to take them two minutes to realise something’s wrong,” Andy replied, equally concerned. “Especially with him dressed like that!”
“What?” Marcus asked, finally realising they were talking about him. “What about me?”
“They think you’re Pete,” Andy half explained.
“Who do?” he asked, turning his head as he noticed the direction of Andy and Patrick’s line of sight. “Journalists,” Andy explained simply.
“Journalists!” Marcus replied in a horrified tone.

The level of discomfort and even venom in the sandman’s reply took both Andy and Patrick aback. Spicy too appeared suddenly defensive, puzzling them further.

“We can deal with them,” the spymaster added with an equally angry tone.
“I got it,” Marcus growled.
“No, wait, what’s wrong with journalists?” Patrick cut in, realising that for some reason Marcus was taking an aggressive stance.
“Pete!” one photographer called cheerily. “Over here!”

Turning sharply, Marcus turned a harsh glare toward the lead man who was raising a camera as he spoke. Quickly lifting his right hand, Marcus drew an intricate symbol in the air with astonishing speed. As he did, the photographer felt an almost crushing sensation in his chest as he was lifted from his feet and propelled backwards at force. Crashing violently into the men and women behind him whilst simultaneously, his camera exploded with flame. Dropping it as the flames licked at his fingers, he watched from the floor, stunned as it turned almost instantly into a mass of molten metal and plastic.

A clamour erupted as the remaining journalists surprise turned to anger. With the photographer still lying on the floor and a few of his colleagues alongside him having toppled with him, the remaining press men moved forward, as one, intent on giving ‘Pete’ a taste of his own medicine.

“No!” Patrick cried, still shocked at Marcus’s reaction, but panicked by the retaliation and the resulting attention it would bring. “It was a mistake, an accident!” he tried to insist as the angry journalists closed on Marcus.

“No it wasn’t!” Marcus insisted venomously, raising his hand once more.

Making another swift symbol, the air seemed to suddenly move, almost shimmering like a heat haze. Patrick gasped with horror as the line of press men clamped their hands over their ears, grimacing in pain as if suddenly hit by a wall deafening sound.

“Marcus! Stop it!” Patrick yelled, pulling at his still extended arm.
“Why are you trying to stop him?” Spicy frowned; confused by the reaction. “They’re journalists, bounty hunters!”
“In your world, maybe!” Andy countered. “Not here… although…” he shrugged momentarily.
“You mean… Oh!” Marcus turned a guilty expression towards the two Normal Worlders. “What should I do? Stop?”
“No, look we can’t just stop, they’ll kill you. Can’t you immobilise them and make them forget or something? Give us time to get away?”
“Yes, I can do that,” Marcus nodded.

Tapping his thumb and index finger together, the sound wave halted, leaving the journalists momentarily gasping for breath as they recovered. Now making another symbol, Marcus’s eyes widened with surprise and horror as nothing happened. Trying again and a third time with no response left the sandman confused and even frightened.

‘Patrick… I…’

It was all he managed. So distracted by the loss of his powers that he barely even noticed the angry scowl of the man coming straight at him. Only when the big man’s fist collided with his jaw and he was spinning to the floor did he realise that he was in trouble. Even then, he had no idea how much. A small pat of him still believed that - as Pete had been on his first visit to The Hills - he was about to be captured by bounty hunters posing in their semi-professional guise as journalists, and Marcus was doing all he could to avoid looking directly at a camera. But he needn’t have bothered. As he lay on the floor, the journalist who had floored him landed a vicious and debilitating kick. Racing into the melee, Spicy landed a well-aimed kick in a martial art style to the lead man, still trying to land blows to the prone sandman. Andy had knelt to help the photographer to his feet again as Patrick tried his hardest to come between the journalist and the Carouselians. But for all his efforts, Patrick found himself roughly shoved aside as the fight escalated. Scrambling to his feet at last, the worried sandman was increasingly less concerned about the journalists and more so about his apparent lack of powers.

“Patrick! I can’t stop them, my powers are…”

Another punch stopped him mid-sentence and drew him back to the reality of the fight. Balling his fists, Marcus turned a vicious blow back on the man who had hit him only to feel another stinging punch coming from another direction. Blows rained down from all sides and even with Spicy’s intervention, the sandman was losing the battle. Beyond the circle of irate press men, Patrick and Andy were trying desperately to pull them back, only to be pulled away themselves by the men originally attacked and still recovering.

Only at the arrival of the police did the men finally respond to the call to break up the fight. Spicy dropped to Sandman’s side, now kneeling, slumped on the floor, bruised and bloodied.

“He started it,” the first man shouted, pointing at Marcus. “He just attacked me for no reason.”
“What happened?” one of the officers turned a suspicious glance around the large group intent on beating one man to a pulp.
“I told you…” the man started again, to be interrupted.
“It was unintentional,” Patrick offered. “He thought…” Patrick shook his head. “It was a misunderstanding.”
“Oh really? A misunderstanding was it?” one of the men growled angrily. “That’s why he shoved me so hard I could hardly breathe?”
“And then he did that other thing with…” the second man stopped, unsure how to explain it.
“What other thing?” the officer asked.
“He sort of screamed at us…”
“He screamed at you? Oh yeah, that’s very threatening,” the officer returned, unimpressed by the reply.
“But it was painful. I don’t know what he did but…”
“No, no,” the officer shook his head. “We’re doing this down the station.”
“You’re arresting us?” Patrick’s eyes widened.
“All of us?” the second man asked, as Spicy helped the still unsteady sandman to his feet. “I need statements from all of you and he needs medical attention.” “Can’t we work something out, here?” Patrick suggested, almost begged; the last thing any of them needed was for Marcus to be arrested. “It was a fight, but no one’s hurt, right?” “I don’t want to go to the station, I have work to do,” one man announced. “I’m here to meet the London flight, I’ll lose my job if I can’t stay,” a woman added. “Okay, is anyone pressing charges?” the officer sighed. 

Grumblings and murmurs followed, forcing Patrick to make a further plea.

“We’ll give you interviews, exclusives… by way of apology.” “All right.” “Okay.” “Guess so.” “So, no charges?” the officer nodded, glad to have avoided a mass arrest. “You’re still coming with me though.” Marcus’s head snapped up to the sound of cynical laughter. “No, but…” “You can’t arrest him!” Spicy argued. “He’s…”

Stopping abruptly as she saw Andy with his finger to his lips. Their response had already caused so much trouble, and now the suggestion was that whatever she was about to say would make things worse.

“I need all your names and contact details. He’s going to see a doctor.” “My father’s a doctor, I’m fine. I don’t need…” “Your father’s a lawyer,” one of the press women stepped in. “No, he…” Marcus looked helplessly at Patrick who was nodding in return. Of course, they thought he was Pete but he knew so little about him, about any of them, or their world. “I’m really sorry, I didn’t mean to attack you. I… I’ve not been myself lately, I guess.” “Dressed like that, you’re not kidding!” the woman added.

Patrick stepped forward, his expression solemn and determined. Indicating with his hands that he was about to tell them something private, he ushered them all closer.

“Look, we’re trying to keep a lid on this, but Pete’s really isn’t himself right now. He is really sorry, I promise you. Can we keep this out of the papers? Please?” “We need an exclusive,” the first man piped up. “You’ll get it, I promise you,” Patrick assured him. “Who’s the woman?” another asked. “She’s a friend,” he raised his hands as they raised their eyebrows and pens. “Just a friend… Oh, but she’s a doctor too, so she can look after him,” he added with a purposeful nod to the police officer. “Look, I don’t have time for this,” the officer raised his hands. “I’m taking him to the station. If you want to, you can come too… get him some medical attention… for his bruises and his issues.” “But...” “You, come with me,” the officer pointed at Marcus. “Andy?” Patrick turned a worried expression back to the drummer. “You go. We’ll keep looking for them. Call me later.” “Patrick, you can’t just…” Spicy began, her tone and expression showing deep concern. “We don’t have a choice,” he replied quietly. “What will happen?” “I don’t know,” Patrick shook his head. “Photographed, fingerprinted… I don’t know. Maybe not even that. We’ll be back as soon as possible.”
It wasn’t good. In fact it was very bad. Patrick wasn’t certain, at this stage, if anything would come of the arrest, but one thing was certain – Pete was going to kill him.

*

“Don’t question me, Lee and never criticise me. Understand?” he asked with an almost casual and indifferent tone.

On returning to his brother's side, Lee had endured a brutal assault that had left him reeling. So much so that the question barely registered with the still recovering younger man, causing the impatience to reappear in Sea’s tone.

“I asked you if you understood,” he snapped irritably.
“Yes,” Lee replied with a bitter edge to his still weak voice.
“Good,” Sea replied, satisfied that he had established his superiority once more.
“Sea?”
“Be careful what you ask me, Lee.”
“Shoe didn’t kill our parents, did he?”
“Is that a question or a statement?”
“It’s a question.”
“Really?” Sea raised a surprised eyebrow. “I thought you knew.”
“No,” Lee replied quietly. “Not for certain, anyway.”
“No, he didn’t. Shoe is as guiltless, moralistic and self-righteous as he claims to be.”

A pause followed and Sea couldn’t help but wonder whether or not his brother would have the courage to ask the question that was burning on his lips. To his surprise, the question began almost immediately.

“Sea…”

Another pause marked his brother’s extreme discomfort as he took a deep breath before continuing.

“Who did?”

Sea turned a half-smirk towards his younger brother; the smile broadening as Lee’s uncertainty and unease became increasingly marked.

“Are you sure you want the answer to that question?”

The question was less evasive than it actually sounded and it was all too apparent to the youngest of the three brothers exactly who had murdered their parents. Lee paled and shrank back. Still weak from the severe waves of pain he had just been subjected to, he felt suddenly weaker still as he was provided with further proof of his brother’s evil nature.

“Well?” Sea goaded, revelling in his brother’s anguish.
“No,” he whispered in return.
“Good,” Sea replied simply as if the subject simply didn’t matter. “Now, you gave the Benzedrine a dream?”
“Yes,” the younger man replied, unable to explain further.
“Why?” Sea pressed.
“To occupy him… keep him asleep,” he explained dully. “Without one, his body might reset and wake up before we want him to.”
“What kind of dream?” Sea pressed.
“I don’t know, I just put him in a dream state. I’m sure his mind’ll conjure something up.”
Sea’s smile broadened once more as he turned to face Silas, still lying on the floor near the wall, bound hand and foot.

“Oh, I’m sure we can do better than that!”

* 

Hovering midway between both worlds, shielded by a shimmering haze. The energy field, made up of two finely balanced waves of energy created by both of them, overlapped and interlaced while remaining at different frequencies. Unless whoever was looking for them was fortunate enough to guess which frequencies both were using, it seemed unlikely that either Crab nor Pryke could be visible or detectable by anyone, even Mister Crab’s brothers. There they waited for some indication of Sea and Lee’s intended destination.

“I have a question.”

The tentatively posed question intrigued Guardian Pryke and as he turned to look at Mister Crab he noted an expression he had never seen before. He seemed reflective, almost sad.

“Go on,” Pryke encouraged.
“Tell me about Annenstad.” he sighed. “Has it changed much since I left?”
“If you’re asking if they abolished the familial laws, then no, Crab, you are still very much a wanted man,” Pryke replied in a tone that even he felt seemed unnecessarily harsh.

The response seemed to provoke an even more pronounced sadness in Mister Crab’s distant stare.

“No, Gideon,” he sighed, “that was not why I asked. As I’m sure you’re aware, I was actually thinking about my wife.”

Pryke lowered his eyes and heaving a deep sigh, he nodded.

“My apologies, Shoe,” he finally replied after along pause. “So long have we been enemies, I had forgotten the finer things we so often take for granted.”
“Is she… is she well?” Shoe asked, barely daring to form the words.
“The Lady Mandel is… coping,” Pryke replied carefully.
“Has she…?” Crab looked away despondently and shook his head; it seemed as though the weight of the world had rested gently, yet heavily on his shoulders.
“You know she wouldn’t, Shoe. She will never perform the Ektescap ceremony with any other man.”

“Even after she thought I was dead?” Crab raised an eyebrow, surprised at his wife’s loyalty.
“She never thought you were dead,” Pryke admitted; his lips drawn thin as he spoke the words.
“Gabriel, my beloved Mandel is powerful, but even she could not have known of, found or even reached into the dream in which you trapped me. My existence would have been blocked to her, she would have believed me dead. Neither do I believe it was blind loyalty. How did she know, Gideon? Was it you? Did you tell her I was purposely blocking her to hide from you?”
“You think I could lie to a member of the High Council?” Pryke replied haughtily, earning an unexpectedly hearty laugh from his companion.
“Yes, I do!” Shoe raised an amused eyebrow at the older man, before his expression grew sincere, almost grave. “But perhaps not to your daughter?”
“No,” Pryke slowly nodded his agreement. “No, never to Mandel. Not that she could be fooled for a moment even if I had.”
“No, she has a way of seeing into your soul,” Crab smiled wistfully.
“A power?” Pryke asked with a raised eyebrow, indicating his reasonable certainty that no such specific power existed.
“No, merely a gift,” Crab replied, watching his fingers as they laced together slowly before releasing them again and bringing the tips together. “A blessing, perhaps?”
“She is… She is well enough, Shoe and… I informed her you were imprisoned but still alive.”
“Thank you. And your relationship with her?” Mister Crab asked in a surprisingly sympathetic tone. Pryke laughed awkwardly. “I would like to say she understands, but I can’t. Our relationship is strained, but there is no other choice, it is…”
“The law,” Crab nodded unenthusiastically; he had long since grown weary of Pryke’s tired and worn explanations. On too many occasions they had had the same argument. “Yes, I know. But the law is wrong, Gideon.”
“The law is… The law. We’re not required to like it but we are required to respect it.”
“It would be easier to respect a law that wasn’t barbaric.”
“Ease is irrelevant.”
“And yet, when faced with the prospect of arrest yourself, you chose to assist me.”
“Our truce is temporary, Shoe, remember that!” Pryke warned, his tone edged with the discomfort of having his double-standards highlighted.
“Please do me one thing,” Crab, began solemnly. “Tell Mandel that I love her.”
“You will see her yourself at your trial when we return,” Pryke returned stiffly.
“I won’t be returning, Gideon,” Crab sighed. “I’ve always known my future and I’m afraid I won’t be returning to Annenstad.”
“There is only one way you won’t be returning to Annenstad,” Pryke replied angry to be challenged.

Crab returned with a half-smile, and a suggestion of a deep understanding of the future and what it held for all of them.

“As I said, Gideon, you will return without me, but Mandel…”
“If I return alone, I will send her to collect your body.”
“As you wish,” Crab nodded reflectively. “Then we will be together.”
“I know what you’re thinking, Shoe, but…”
“Gideon,” Crab raised a hand calmly. “Trust me, you do not. I bear you no malice. You are Guardian, you guard the laws of Annenstad. It is right.”
“And what of your brothers?”
“They have been judged guilty in two worlds,” Crab drew his lips into a thin line. “We… They must…”
“We will call Justice on them, Shoe.”
“Yes.”

*

When he opened his eyes, at first, all he could tell was that it was dark - dark like he’d never before experienced. Well, perhaps just once. Grateful that he had at least been untied, Silas extended his left hand gingerly. He had read that somewhere that if you were going to do something that involved an element of danger and uncertainty, start with the hand you use least. That way, if it got damaged, you still had your good hand intact. But now, in a situation like this, where all he felt was fear and uncertainty, it was small comfort to think that he was risking damaging even his left hand.

Beneath his fingers, he could feel the rough red granite and even his breathing seemed to echo off the walls.

“Hello?” he ventured with nervous uncertainty.

The sound echoed back to him, bouncing off all walls. As the call moved around, seeming to come from all directions at once, somehow it seemed to expand in the emptiness around him, assaulting his ears and crushing his spirit.
Even as his call faded, the darkness closed around him, enveloping him like a shroud. In the back of his mind – and desperately trying to hold it there by force – Silas knew where he was. Trapped inside the mountain, within a small cavern with no light and no escape - even the very thought of that possibility creeping into his mind terrified him and he tried his best to conjure another rational explanation for his situation. Of course, there was none. His assumption was correct – he was trapped and alone, with no hope of rescue.

Only then, as the realisation came upon him, did he feel the first glimmer of hope. And a glimmer was exactly what it was. As had happened before, the granite beneath and behind him, appeared to shimmer with an eerie gold-orange light. Immediately the cavern was lit by a faint but distinct glow. Initially distracted by the light, it was a few moments before Silas even noticed the outline of two figures standing only feet away from him, near the opposite wall.

“Marcus?” Silas cried, elated to see his brother. “How did you get in here? How did you find me?”

The sandman remained silent as the gloom continued to lift and the identity of the second person became apparent.

“Laura!”

Scrambling to his feet, Silas rushed to join them only to find himself thrown back to the floor as he got within inches of them. Looking up, he saw Marcus’s left hand raised and caught the end of a symbol drawn that he didn’t know. As he lay, still shocked at being thrown back to the floor, two lengths of rope slithered at speed across the floor and curled tightly around his wrists and ankles leaving him unable to move.

“Marcus?” Silas gasped in surprise. “What are…?”

Only then did he realise that Marcus’s arm was wrapped around Laura’s waist.

“What can I say, little brother?” Marcus sneered. “Laura’s come to her senses. She only fell for you because of the whole rescuing thing, but you know, you didn’t even do that. It was us arriving with Mister Crab that finally got her of that slave ship.”

“You didn’t exactly save the day yourself!” Silas snapped in reply. “Or did you forget that we were both locked up in Allandra’s mansion?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten,” the sandman snapped. “But it’s irrelevant. What matters is that Laura’s finally come to her senses and realises that there’s more to a marriage than sympathy.”

“Sympathy?” Silas’s shrank back, his voice little more than a whisper. “You don’t really expect someone as beautiful and charming as Laura to stay with you for your… What do you have to offer her Silas? It’s not good looks or personality, is it? Wealth? Perhaps, but Laura’s not that shallow. Position? Again, you have nothing. You might have been the second heir once, but now look, you’re the third heir now I have a son. Your stock is falling Silas and, let’s face it, it was never very high.”

Silas stared back up, lying in silence, praying it wasn’t true, choking back the tears against the hurtful words. It was only when Laura’s arm snaked around Marcus’s waist that Silas finally allowed the lightly dammed torrent to spill onto his cheeks.

“Yeah,” Marcus chuckled. “You have a good cry, Silas. Like I said, Laura’s come to her senses and chosen me. But we couldn’t just leave you here, well, not without telling you anyway.”

“You’re leaving me here?” Silas choked out.

“Of course we are!” Laura laughed. “Why would we want you around?”

“Yeah, Si, don’t you think that would be a bit awkward?” Marcus frowned. “Look, if you can’t handle it, I can put you to sleep. It won’t take you long to die. You know, no food, no water, broken-
hearted."

Fighting without success against the ropes, Silas struggled to come to terms with what he was hearing. His own brother was leaving him to die inside the mountain to be with his fiancee. No, it couldn’t be true, it just couldn’t!

“Deal with it, Si, she doesn’t love you any more, she probably never did.”
“No, I didn’t,” Laura added in a cutting tone. “As Marcus said, how could I?”
“Leave me alone!” Silas screamed unable to bear the hurtful words. “Just get out and leave me alone!”
“We were going anyway, Si, I told you,” Marcus chuckled.

As the pair faded from view, the distraught benzedrine slumped onto his side, the dust beneath him growing ever damper as his tears splashed down onto the rock.

*

“Can’t you stop him screaming?” Lee finally asked his brother. “It’s really annoying!”
“You do it,” Sea growled back in return.
“It’s your nightmare that’s caused it! Look at him!”
“What? You care about him now?”
“No, Sea! Look at him!”

With a deep irritable sigh Sea turned his head only for his eyes to widen in surprise. As Silas lay in the far corner of the cavern, a myriad of grey shadowy shapes briefly emerged from behind or above him before returning to their original positions, lights of a hundred different shades shimmered around him like a haze. As they watched, a light would occasionally flare and shoot upwards, bouncing back from the cavern wall, briefly forming a shape, a moving, seemingly alive shape, before dissipating as fast as it formed. Behind him, the rock wall seemed to ripple gently.

“This is your nightmare, this is!” Lee yelled. “He’s using Unreality. If we’re not careful, Sea, he’s going to learn how to use it and when he does, we’re both dead!”

Without a further word, Sea waved his hand and seemed to snatch at something invisible in the air. As he did, Silas fell silent and unmoving, apparently exhausted, to the floor.

“Then perhaps it’s time we go to Normal World?”
To The End

Chapter Summary

Is the end of the world approaching?

There was absolute silence in the back of the police car as it made its way to the station. Patrick’s mind was racing with half a dozen thoughts. What would happen when they got there? What would they say? How could he keep Pete from getting a record? What would Andy and Spicy do while they were away? What would happen if the brothers turned up while they were at the station? For that matter, what would happen when the brothers turned up, period. It was only when he heard a small voice next to him that he was pulled from his musings.

“Patrick?”

Turning his head, he saw the pale and distressed looking sandman beside him.

“What will they do when we get there?”

“I don’t know,” Patrick shrugged. “Well, no, I do know,” he sighed. “It depends if they’re actually going to arrest you. They’ll probably photograph you and take your fingerprints.”

Frowning worriedly, Marcus shook his head, prompting Patrick to reassure him.

“What do you have against having your photo taken?” he asked.

“In my world, the Journalists capture you with cameras, they take your photo and you end up trapped inside. They’re bounty hunters, it’s how they get you.”

“So any time…”

“No, it’s not all photographs,” he explained. “They have special cameras.”

“So it’s not the photograph that’s bothering you?”

“No, it’s not that, well, not now anyway.”

“What then?”

“My powers, they’ve gone,” he replied, his tone edged with nervousness. “What if I can’t get home?”

“Marcus, we can make portals now, we’ll get you home.”

Marcus offered a faint smile. “But what if it’s them, what if you can’t make them either?”

“There are dozens of people that know where you are, if you can’t get home and we can’t send you then they’ll come for you. You’ll get home, Marcus, I promise you.”

Marcus heaved a relieved sigh. “Thanks, Patrick. One other thing, what are fingerprints?”

“The ridge pattern on your fingertips,” Patrick held out his palm for Marcus to see. “Everyone’s is different.”

Marcus’s brow furrowed as he glanced from Patrick’s hand to his own.

“I don’t have any,” he finally announced.

“What do you mean?”

“We don’t have them, it’s not just me.”

Lifting Marcus’s hand, Patrick turned it to inspect his fingers for himself, raising his eyebrows in surprise as he saw that his fingertips were perfectly smooth.
“What’s worrying you?” The sandman asked, astutely noting the frown and furrowed brow on the singer’s face.
“I’m trying to think of a way to stop Pete getting into trouble.”
“He won’t get into trouble,” Marcus announced with a puzzled expression.
“I don’t see how,” Patrick replied. “It’s not like we can pretend it didn’t happen.”
“Leave it to me, I’ll sort it out,” Marcus replied confidently.
“Er… What exactly are you going to do?” Patrick asked, his voice sounding nervous at the bold statement.
“Patrick,” Marcus grinned. “I’ve lost my powers, not my ingenuity!”

Refusing to expand on his plans, Marcus revelled in Patrick’s uncertainty as the car ride neared its final stages.

*

“I don’t think Pete meant anything by it, you know,” Andy offered as the pair took a seat in a small airport coffee shop.
“By what?” Spicy tilted her head to one side, slightly puzzled by the sudden comment.
“About the baby,” he explained. “I think we were all a bit surprised by that. It’s just, he’d never mentioned having a son before.”
“He didn’t know,” Spicy smiled. “You were there when he told his parents and he said he only just found out.”
“Yeah, but I don’t think that part really sank in. He really just found out? Why didn’t you tell him?”
“I had my reasons, Andy.”
“How old is he?”
“He’s nine, and a few months. He’s still a baby because of the whole business with extended ageing for the Royal Family.”
“But you don’t look old enough to have a son that old.”
Spicy smiled shyly. “I don’t exactly age normally myself,” she admitted. “My father has served Lord Joshua since even before Marcus was born. After the palace was stormed when Marcus was very young, my father was granted an extension on his life. Of course, he’s old now, but it does mean that I age slower too. Although not nearly as slowly as Marcus, and without a further extension, I won’t see William grow up.”
“Is that why…”

Spicy’s eyes flared at the words. She knew exactly where the sentence was heading and from her reaction, Andy knew that he had hit a raw nerve.

“I’m sorry!” his hands flew up in a gesture of reconciliation. “I’d really like to be able to say that I wasn’t going to ask whether that’s why you reconciled with Marcus, but I can’t. But I have to tell you that even as I was saying the words, I realised how callous it sounded. I just wish I could rewind and say something else instead.”
“What would you have said instead?” she asked forcing a smile.
“I don’t know,” he returned, feeling equally awkward. “Maybe something like, you’ll be good for him.”
Spicy laughed; the awkwardness having passed. “Thanks. So what now?”

Andy took his phone from his pocket and placed it on the table.

“We wait. We wait for a phone call or for the world to end.”

*

Eleanor inhaled deeply as the door to her and Joshua’s private apartments opened and a nurse
entered - in her arms a small baby appearing outwardly to be only a few months old, but in reality, he had turned nine some months earlier.

Eleanor was the wife of the ruler of Carousel, a queen in her own right. But, in her own priorities, first and foremost she was a mother.

“And now you’re a grandmother,” Joshua whispered in his wife’s ear as he gave a gentle squeeze to her shoulders as the nurse held the baby out to her.

Taking him gently in her arms, Eleanor’s lips broadened into a wide grin as she raised her right hand above the child’s head and at the tiniest gesture, conjured a string of multi-coloured, sparkling lights that danced and weaved amongst each other. Entranced by the colours and movement, William responded with happy gurglings.

“Thank you, Nurse Raynor,” Joshua offered a smile and nod toward the baby’s nurse. “We’ll call you when it’s time to collect him.”

“Of course, My Lord,” the nurse replied politely before turning to leave.

Looking down once more, Joshua smirked at his wife’s expression as she sat, cradling the baby and looking up, eyebrows raised as if surprised by the idea of having to hand him back to the nurse.

“There’s no reason why…”

“Yes there is, Ellie,” Joshua chuckled. “Now, may I hold him?”

Eleanor’s expression became one of deep surprise, prompting her husband to raise his hands defensively.

“Of course not!” He shook his head. “What was I thinking?”

“Oh, Josh, don’t make me feel guilty,” Eleanor pouted. “This is the first time I’ve held him.”

Joshua merely smiled; it would do no good to point out that it would be a new experience for him too.

“That’s fine, my dear. Take as long as you need.”

“I think…” Eleanor began tentatively only to pause as she noticed her husband roll his eyes.

“What?” she asked somewhat abruptly.

“I can hear you, you know,” he grinned. “You’re thinking quite loudly.”

Eleanor pouted. “Well then? What do you think?”

“I think his education is important and yes, I do believe he should be tutored here at the palace.”

“So…”

“But,” he raised a finger. “We can perhaps suggest, but the decision rests with Marcus and Spicy.”

“But, Joshua, we can’t just…”

“We can and do you know what?”

“We’re going to, aren’t we?” she nodded with a sigh. “Can’t we do anything?”

“We can spoil him,” Joshua replied with a knowing smile. “I know Silas will, and I don’t see why he should be the only one who gets to fuss over him.”

Smiling her agreement, Eleanor rested William on her knee and looked him in the eyes with a serious expression.

“William, I know you’ll understand me, so pay attention. I’m sorry you’re only meeting us for the first time, but you are our dear grandson and we love you very much. All the time you’ve had so far with Master Spuyve… I mean, Grandfather John, has been wonderful for you because he loves you dearly, but now it’s time for you to meet us and we’re very excited. You might be wondering about
your father, well, let me tell you about him. Your father is a brave, kind and truly wonderful man. He’s creative, handsome, thoughtful and loyal. And one day, when the time comes, he will rule Carousel and he well be as good and benevolent a ruler as his father before him.” Eleanor tickled William’s feet as she continued, raising a giggle from the boy. “You have very big shoes to fill, my dear one, but you will always have lots of friends and family around you to help and guide you. You’ll never be alone, you need never be afraid and you’ll always be loved.” Leaning forward, Eleanor pulled him close in a gentle embrace. “You’ll meet your father soon, William. He’ll come home, safe and sound, I promise you. And you’ll love and admire him as much as we do.”

Joshua gazed down lovingly at his wife. Her words had brought a lump to her throat and even to his. The promise was one they both desperately hoped would be kept, even though it was completely beyond their control.

*

Thrown roughly onto his back, Silas’s eyes flew open with a start. Gasping with surprise as the scene around him flooded his senses. Still inside the mountain, the sight of it was unfamiliar enough to him to cause his heart to race and he found himself staring up, wide-eyed and afraid. Looking down at him, Crab’s older brother, Sea Horse found himself smirking with satisfaction. If nothing else, Silas was apparently still terrified of him. He knew that the situation held a delicate balance. At any moment, the benzedrine could master the powers literally at his fingertips and use it against them. But the power of Unreality was a formidable weapon to wield and, as yet, a clear understanding of its usage and capabilities were far beyond Silas’s reach.

It had been during the battle between Crab and his brothers that Unreality had come into being; the shadows and shapes found within its confines possessing the power to swallow up anything that crossed their path. But even Sea, who cared little for the effect of Unreality, knew that once unleashed into a world, it could never again be contained. It mattered little to him. Normal World wasn’t something to be conquered or controlled. There was nothing there he wanted or cared for. No, Normal World was to be destroyed; an example to other worlds that they encountered. Everyone would fear Sea Horse and his brother J Lee Fish. And when they were done, when worlds cowered at their feet, they would return to Annenstad. They would return as conquerors, aggressors, oppressors or it would be destroyed - all at the wave of Silas’s hand. Yes, the benzedrine might fight, or at least try to, but it would be a simple matter to control him. To hold him in a trance as he carried out the destruction of entire worlds. Sea imagined sitting back and watching as the dark, shapeless creatures of Unreality slithered and crawled across the land, spreading out like a lengthening shadow in the afternoon sun. Absorbing entire populations as they passed, until the sheer mass collapsed in on itself and the world was torn apart.

“Wake up, Benzedrine,” Sea sneered at the bound figure at his feet.

Turning unfocussed eyes on the older man, Silas wished he could remember what it was that was racing through his mind. Something terrible, something cruel and unjust. Something that both angered and saddened him. But right now his head was reeling. Whatever had happened to him had confused and upset him deeply and he was struggling to wake from the unusually deep sleep. Something, a flicker of a memory, told him that he had dreamed. But that was impossible - benzedrines didn’t dream. Whatever it was, it could only have been real but in the confusion he now felt, the memory of it was too far out of reach. All he was aware of at this moment was being dragged from a deep sleep into a living nightmare.

“Wake up, Benzedrine! It’s time for you to destroy Normal World,” Sea yelled harshly, revelling in Silas’s distress.
The police car drew to a smooth halt in one of the station parking spaces immediately outside and Sandman flashed a grin in Patrick’s direction noting a lightly furrowed brow in response to his words.

“Trust me, Patrick,” he grinned again, leaning forward he patted the singer on the arm. “Don’t you trust me?”
“I just wish I knew what you were going to do,” he frowned in reply.
“Ah, but that would spoil it wouldn’t it?” he laughed. “Just... Whatever I do or say, just go with it.”

Patrick took a deep breath as the doors were opened for them. He desperately hoped that whatever the sandman had in mind it wouldn’t be too difficult to work with. After all, he and the rest of the band had to live here, but Marcus would return home and could forget all about whatever he was about to do.

“Marcus, just don’t...”
“Trust me,” he cut in in a serious tone.

The certainty in his tone came closer to settling Patrick’s nerves, but the whole effect was ruined once more as he grinned and gave a conspiratorial wink. Patrick could feel the butterflies in his stomach rising with his blood pressure – apprehensive didn’t even seem to come close to describing how he felt.

Led into the station, through a short maze of corridors, the pair arrived in a cavernous room filled with desks, and a multitude of people. From their posture and apparent ease in their manner, roughly one third were obviously either uniformed police or detectives. The remainder, Patrick presumed, were a mixture of criminals and witnesses. With some, the handcuffed ones, it was obvious, but, he noted, the others showed varying levels of what could easily have been guilt, remorse, worry or even misery. It was impossible for him to tell, but he guessed that the police and detectives would know the difference. He found himself smiling faintly at the thought of what seemed to him to be a real skill.

Before he was even aware, they had stopped at a small desk and a second chair pulled up for them both to sit down.

“I just need a statement, for the record,” the police officer began; he sounded tired, possibly bored.
“Are either of us under arrest?” Patrick asked hesitantly.
“Not yet,” the officer replied with a scowl. “I’ll hear your statement first. Okay, so, Wentz, you go first.”
“I’m not Pete Wentz,” Marcus announced, earning a raised eyebrow from the officer. “My name is Marcus Sand...”

An alarmed expression from Patrick cut the sentence short. Perhaps, Marcus concluded, Sandman was even less common as a last name in Normal World than it was in Carousel.

“Marcus Sand?” The officer frowned as he stared at the man seated opposite him.
“Yeah, I work as a look-a-like... for parties and things like that.”
“And you?”

Patrick smiled thinly. He knew that all it would take was a quick fingerprint check to establish his identity. There was very little he could do than admit he was who the officer thought and hope it wouldn’t upset Marcus’s plan.
“Patrick Stump.”
“So, not an actor then?”
“No, he’s the genuine article,” Marcus cut in. “We’re doing a publicity appearance together tomorrow. Obviously, Pete was going to be here, but something personal came up at the last minute and he’s not available. We were going over the details.”
“Is that so? And the journalists?”

Marcus sighed and looked down briefly with an embarrassed expression.

“That was a misunderstanding,” he inhaled deeply and let it out slowly, shaking his head regretfully. “Patrick was telling me something and I was listening to him so intently that I didn’t hear them approach. One of them grabbed my arm to turn me around. I thought he was trying to mug me, or something, and I just lashed out him. I guess I panicked; I had no idea who they were and I’m not used to people doing that. By the time I realised and I stopped, they were all on me. Of course, they thought I was Pete but unless I’m actually in performing mode, I don’t really think about who I look like.”

The officer nodded; the tale was more than plausible. A misunderstanding, confusion and an overreaction on everyone’s part – simple. The actor had come off worse already, and no charges were being brought, the best course of action seemed to be to provide medical attention and send him on his way.

“Okay, I’ll get you to the doctor, get you some... Hang on, how come you didn’t correct the journalists about your identity when you had the chance?”
“I still have to do this publicity appearance tomorrow. If I said I wasn’t Pete, I could hardly do it, could I?”
“No, I guess not,” the officer nodded.

Patrick watched in astonishment as the police officer stepped away from the desk to file his report.

“That was...”
“I know,” Marcus grinned impishly. “I told you, I haven’t lost my ingenuity.”
“Okay,” the officer began in a bored tone, as he began to walk back to the desk. “So, I’ll just take your fingerprints, then I’ll call the doc and get you fixed up then you can go.”

Marcus turned a worried glance toward Patrick as the officer walked back toward the desk.

“Is there no way out of this?” he asked quietly. “Am I allowed to refuse? I don’t have fingerprints. They can’t find out about our world, Patrick!”
“I don’t know... I don’t think you have to, not if he’s not arresting you,” Patrick frowned.

He need not have worried about what was soon to seem a small detail. As the officer approached the desk, the whole room fell into a sudden deep gloom. Outside it appeared as if a late dusk had arrived, even though it was still early. Through the windows they could see what seemed to be an eclipse rapidly taking place.

Standing slowly, Patrick and Marcus edged toward the windows, now only able to see out over the heads of the public and police already gathered. High above, something was blotting out the light from the sun. Black and orange, the covering seemed almost to crackle and smoulder like the embers of a dying fire. Flames occasionally licked outward, lighting what was now a blanket of black across the sky.

“What is that?” One man asked, hardly expecting a response.
“I’ve never seen anything like that,” another whispered.
“Hey!” an officer shouted from the back, turning up a radio as he did. “It’s all over! And I mean, all over the world. Reports are coming in from everywhere. And it’s not just the sun, the moon is turning!”

“Well, of course it’s turning,” a man in handcuffs piped up. “It always turns. Are you dumb?”

“But it always shows the same side, but now it’s turning to the other side.”

Everyone stared blankly at everyone else. Whatever was happening, it seemed apocalyptic and it was all they could do not to panic. Only two men exchanged different glances – they were dour, but they were knowing expressions.

“This is it, they’re here,” Marcus whispered grimly.

“We have to find the others,” Patrick began quietly only to then have to raise his voice as the room erupted into panic almost as one voice. “We have to find where they are exactly. If this is all over the world, how are we going to find them?”

“They have Silas,” Marcus growled angrily. “And we have Laura. She’ll find a way to locate him and then we’ll know.”

“Can you send a message to Laura?” Patrick asked. “Can you still do that?”

“Yeah, that’s not really a power, at least I don’t think it is.” Marcus paused as he thought more about it. “If my link had been broken when I lost my powers, they’d be here by now. Unless… unless they’ve lost their powers too.”

“Joe or Pete would have called if Laura had lost her link to you and they couldn’t come,” Patrick reassured him.

Marcus nodded. “That makes sense. Okay, I think we should go. If there are no charges, we have no reason to stay, yes?”

Patrick looked around; the room was in chaos and no one seemed to be paying attention to them, it seemed an ideal opportunity to be on their way.

“Let’s go, they look busy enough without us.”

*

Sea Horse grinned a sinister smile and watched with intense satisfaction as the sky darkened, the covering over the sun glowing like a dying fire. Already the temperature was dropping and a chill wind whipped up from nowhere. The rapidly falling temperature didn’t seem to be affecting him or his brother, but the third man with them seemed to be losing consciousness.

“He’s Carouselian, Sea, he can’t survive this unprotected.” Lee tapped his brother’s arm in an attempt to attract his attention.

The man continued to gaze skyward, his eyes fixed on the moon, its rate of turn slowed so that it was now slowly but visibly turning in the sky. At his side, Silas stood, his eyes glazed and unseeing, his hands still bound behind him. Even as he stared upward, Silas was crashing to his knees and slumping to the floor.

“Sea!” Lee yelled, finally earning an angry scowl from the older man.

“What?” he snapped.

“Look at him! Are you trying to kill him? He’s no use to us dead.”

As Silas lay on the floor, the air around him shimmered constantly. Colourful shapes emerged like shadows from beneath him, groaning and whispering, taking form and skittering away as if escaping from captivity. All of him glowed with a silver light, with occasional bursts of incandescent white light that shot like a beacon into the blackened sky.
“You’re wasting Unreality, it’s getting away. He can’t control it like this!”
“Like what?” Sea asked unable to see the problem.
“It’s too cold for him to function. He’s passed out, but he’s still releasing it. It’s getting away, it’s going to change the fabric of Normal World.”
Sea shrugged. “Why should I care about that?”
“We’re using Unreality to destroy a world. It’s never been done before; don’t you think we should keep control? Whenever he releases some it might work against us, we don’t know.”
“I doubt it,” Sea replied with an indifferent shrug.
“Well, don’t you think we should at least keep him alive?” Lee argued. “He’s no use to us dead, is he? Sea… the cold. Can’t you see it’s killing him?”

Sea looked down and frowned. Silas was paling by the second. He looked weak and drained. Even as he lay, more and more shapes emerged and scurried away, and the lights shining flooding from him were dimming. Sea nodded; even he could see that the young man was no longer in control of his new and unusual power. He had to do something to contain him; the was always the possibility that Unreality itself would take over control and that would prove disastrous for the brothers. Raising his hand, he spread his fingers and waved his palm a few feet over Silas’s limp body. As he did, a shimmer, followed by what looked like a bubble formed around his entire body. Enveloping the benzedrine completely, the film was tinged a slight red while remaining transparent.

“There, that will keep him warm and Unreality from escaping. We want any that escapes charged with our energy, as you say.”
“What’s he done?” Lee asked with an eager smirk.
“As you can see, the sun is covered. No warmth can reach this pathetic world and it will freeze. First the land, then the seas. Everything will die, but also, the moon is slowing its rotation and he has shifted it out of its orbit.”
“It’s on a spiral path now?” Lee raised an eyebrow. “Away?”
Sea laughed. “No, my brother – down. The moon will slowly spiral in on this world and it will be a matter of simple timing whether the freezing destroys it first or its own satellite crashing into it. Either way, this world has a matter of days to live.”
“That was easier than I thought,” Lee cocked his head to one side.
“I’m controlling Unreality through him. It will be some time before he manages it himself, I’m sure. But he is weak, vulnerable, ripe for control. Of course, the beauty is that Carousel is like the opposite side of a coin to this world. Connected by a flimsy line of Reality.”
“You mean…?”
“Yes, when this world dies, so will Carousel.”
“But, Sea… Shoe…”
“Will no longer have to worry about us. With all the other pathetic half-creatures he loves so much, he will be dead.”

Sea scowled at his brother’s expression that bordered on thinly disguised shock.

“Problem?” he growled. “Because you know, it’s easy for me to control him alone.”
“No…” Lee’s voice emerged strained before resetting himself and announcing more clearly. “No, Sea. No problem.”
“Good,” he smiled. “Now then, use your powers to prevent portals from Carousel. I don’t want him arriving unannounced.”
“But, Sea…”

Dropping like a stone to the floor, Lee gripped his temples as pain coursed through his mind, tearing at his essence and being. Stopping as suddenly as it had started, Lee was left gasping for breath, disorientated and reeling.
“I warned you not to argue with me, Lee. I will not be so lenient next time. Do as I say!”

“Y… Yes, Sea,” Lee gasped his agreement as he gathered his wits. “No one can enter from Carousel to this world. We are alone.”

Sea smiled. Everything was going well. The Normal Worlders were weak; certainly nothing could stop him now.
And so we go into battle

Chapter Summary

Mr Crab prepares everyone for battle but in the strangest of ways

Donnie began to open his eyes slowly, groaning lightly as he came to. His mind felt fuzzy and clouded, so much so that even at the sensation of a light squeeze of his hand, he barely registered with a reaction.

“He seems to be waking, My Lady,” the voice of what seemed an older man stated gently.

“Thank you, Cornelius,” came the soft reply. “Tell me, is he in any pain?”

“He shouldn’t be, My Lady, his treatment is complete,” the doctor replied reassuringly. “He is back to full health now, he just needs to rest. The treatment for this sort of damage is quite draining.”

“How long?”

“My Lady?” Donnie whispered in a puzzled tone, as he turned his head slowly to his right.

“Just a few days, My Lady,” the doctor replied as he set the chart down at the end of the bed. “He’ll be fine in a few days. I’ll leave you alone now.”

“Thank you, Cornelius, I appreciate it.”

Eleanor gave another light squeeze of Donnie’s hand and smiled at his half open eyes.

“Well now, Donnie, you have given us all quite a scare,” she admonished lightly.

“I’m sorry, My Lady,” the catcher frowned. “What happened?”

“First, we are going to discuss how you address me,” she began with a slight sigh.

“My Lady? Majesty?”

Eleanor exhaled loudly and shook her head.

“No,” she replied, exasperated. “If you remember, you only insisted on addressing me so formally because you didn’t want Marcus or Silas to discover that you were the son of my traitorous brother. But, now that they know, and more importantly, that, like us, they don’t care who your father was, it is time for you to address me as a member of the family.”

“My Lady?” Donnie replied awkwardly, with obvious discomfort.

“No, Donnie, from now on, you are to call me Eleanor and your uncle is now simply Joshua.”

Donnie shook his head. At first the movements were small, barely perceptible but on taking a deep breath they became more definite.

“I don’t think I can…”

“This is not up for discussion, Donnie. How do you think we feel not being acknowledged as family by our only nephew?”

Donnie paused his protestations and merely stared open mouthed. It had never occurred to him that it might be a problem; in particular, he had never even considered it from their point of view.

“I’m sorry,” he lowered his eyes. “I didn’t even think…”

“I know, my dearest Donnie, I know,” Eleanor squeezed his hand once more. “You would never do anything to intentionally hurt anyone.”
“Oh, I don’t know, I think I could cheerfully throttle Anna Dreamspinner right now.”

Eleanor’s expression hardened at the mention of the woman who had plotted to break up the relationship between Marcus and Spicy. It had worked for ten years before the truth had come out.

“We will find her, Donnie. When all this is over and things get back to normal, we will find her.”
“What’s been happening?” Donnie frowned. “All I remember is trying to get to Normal World, then suddenly I’m at home and everything is crashing down around me.”
“Mister Crab’s brothers are free,” Eleanor nodded grimly. “There was much devastation here, but we think they’ve gone to Normal World.”
“Normal World!”

Donnie’s eyes widened and even as he pushed back the covers on the bed he felt a warmth wrap around him. Each of his muscles seized and stiffened, not painfully, but leaving him unable to move.

“Donnie, you have to rest,” Eleanor tried to explain, but her expression told of the pain she felt at restraining him.
“Please, My…” Donnie frowned. “Aunt Eleanor, please let me go.”
“You’re not strong enough,” she insisted. “Besides, Marcus and Silas are already there and…”

Eleanor turned her head sharply away as her eyes stung painfully with the effort of holding back her tears.

“What’s wrong, what’s happened?” Donnie pressed only to receive silence in return.

It wasn’t that Eleanor was holding anything back from him, but merely that a single solitary word from her lips would almost certainly allow the first drops of a torrent to fall from her eyes.

“Let me move,” Donnie whispered. “I’m family, let me comfort you.”

With only the slightest of nods, Eleanor dropped the binding power encircling Donnie’s muscles. Half expecting him to leap from the bed, she was quietly relieved when instead he merely sat up and turning his legs so they hung out of the bed, he pulled her into a reassuring embrace. Donnie looked down with concern as a large salty tear landed on his arm as he pulled his aunt closer.

“Tell me what’s happened.”
“We’ve lost our connection with them,” came the strangled reply. “And this time, we know that they’re not being held behind a maktval. Normal World has no such technology.”
“They’re still alive though? Aren’t they?” Donnie tried hard to contain his alarm. “They…?”
“I don’t know,” she whispered in return.
“Then… Then I’ll go to…”
“No!” Eleanor looked up once more. “We’ve tried. We can’t get through to Normal World, it’s been blocked. It can only be Mister Crab’s brothers.”
“They’re stuck there?” Donnie’s voice fell almost silent.
Perhaps. We have the best minds trying to find a way to create a portal and…”
“We don’t know where they are. We can only hope that they can get to Normal World and stop them. If they destroy Normal World, Carousel will be destroyed with it.”
“What can I do?” Donnie asked grimly.
Eleanor forced a smile. “Well, my dear Donnie, you can meet your first cousin, once removed.”
“My what?” Donnie’s brow creased.
“Marcus’s son, William.”

Eleanor found herself laughing unexpectedly at the expression, or rather, the multitude of
expressions, forming on Donnie’s face. Finally settling on bewildered, Donnie shook his head.

“Marcus… he… what?” Donnie stammered.
“Marcus has a son,” Eleanor smiled. “Don’t worry, he’s not been keeping secrets from you, it was news to him too. To all of us, in fact.”
“Is this what he was talking to Spicy about? My Lord Joshua…”
“Joshua,” Eleanor cut in. “Remember?”
Donnie nodded. “He said Marcus would tell me as soon as he found out. He didn’t know?”

Leaning over, Eleanor pressed the Call Button and smiled. Only moments later, a nurse entered carrying an infant, drawing a wide smile from both occupants. Reaching out for the baby, Eleanor took him into her arms and held him close for Donnie to see.

“Lie down, Donnie, I’ll tell you all about him.”

*  

“They’re in New York,” Marcus announced suddenly as they ran for the doors.
“You’re sure?” Patrick asked, turning his head sharply. “How do you know?”
“Laura,” Marcus explained. “She got a fix on Silas. They’re not bothering to block him here, they don’t seem to realise that we’re here. But there’s something really strange. His signature is different.”
“Signature? What do you mean signature?” Patrick asked as they both jumped sideways to avoid four men running past them at speed.
“His power signature, it’s completely different. Whatever he’s doing…”
“I think it’s pretty obvious what he’s doing!” Patrick replied in exasperation.
“What? This? No way! Silas isn’t capable of doing this!”
“Not on his own,” Patrick placed a hand on the sandman’s shoulder. “Not acting on his own, but he’s not, is he?”
“He wouldn’t do this, Patrick, he’s a doctor!”
“I doubt it’s his first choice, Marcus, but he’s obviously doing something for Laura to find him.”

Marcus’s shoulders sagged and he nodded sadly.

“This isn’t him,” he added unhappily.
“I know, Marcus,” Patrick nodded. “Don’t you think I know what you’re both like by now?”

Marcus’s spirits were strangely lifted by the comment. It didn’t change anything but how he felt. And the absence of the need to defend his brother seemed to renew his strength. Slapping Patrick’s arm gently, the pair renewed their race for the exit.

Running from the police station, Patrick and Marcus pressed themselves immediately against the wall and stared at the scene around them. Already there was chaos.
The streets were alive with panic. People ran without apparent purpose or direction, but they ran at speed, desperate to get away from or to somewhere unknown. Screaming engulfed the air, leaving Patrick and Marcus needing to shout to be heard above the clamour. Above them, the glowing orange ripped across the blackened sky and the moon seemed easily twice as large, turning slowly, but visibly in the midst of the cloudless blanket that hung above them.

“Marcus, what are…” Patrick shouted as he turned to face the sandman. Immediately, he stopped mid sentence as he saw his friend, his hands clasped tightly around his arms and his knees bent as if he might collapse at any moment. “Marcus? What’s wrong?”
“C…Cold,” he whispered, his teeth chattering.

It seemed silly that he had only just noticed that the temperature had dropped dramatically and whilst
it was definitely colder, it was certainly no colder than a sudden October chill might cause on a typical New York fall night.

“Marcus, it’s not…”

Patrick paused as he thought back to his time in Carousel. No matter where he had been in any part of Carousel, even when they had camped outside the night before they had managed to rescue Marcus and Silas from Allandra’s mansion, it had not been remotely chilly. They had built a fire to sit around, but it had been small but entirely adequate for their needs. Then, and only then, did he realise that the temperature in Carousel never fell below what could be considered warm and now that the sun had been covered and the temperature was falling, Marcus was suffering. Worse still, Patrick knew that it would be unlikely that the effect would be limited to the sandman. All of the Carouselians would be susceptible to the cold. Pulling his cell phone from his pocket, Patrick called Andy first.

“Hey, Patrick,” Andy answered quickly. “What’s going on?”
“Are you okay?” Patrick ignored the question. “Is Spicy okay?”
“Ugh! Marcus!” Patrick groaned as he watched his friend slip to the floor, apparently barely conscious.
“Patrick!” Andy called. “What’s wrong?”
“What is it?” Patrick could hear Spicy’s voice in the background. “What’s wrong?”
“Marcus is affected by the cold, he’s practically passed out. But Spicy’s okay?”
“We’re still at the airport, it’s heated,” Andy replied.

Patrick grimaced as he watched a car plough into the back of another as the drivers continued to drive while staring at the sky. Taking a deep breath as a third crashed noisily, accompanied by a screech of brakes he frowned deeply.

“Andy, I’m going to have to get Marcus back inside, or, I don’t know, at least some sort of giant padded coat or something. You’ll have to do the same for Spicy. If it’s like this in LA, you can imagine how cold it’ll be in New York!”
“They’re in New York?” Andy gasped. “How do you know? Ugh! Strike that, Laura, obviously, but where? Does she know where?”
“I don’t know, Marcus never got to that bit. Call Pete, I’m getting Marcus inside before he freezes! Tell him to get Robert and Laura to somewhere warm.”
“Will do, we need to get over there too,” Andy nodded to himself. “Is he up to making a portal?”
Patrick sighed noisily. “You and Spicy may have to pick us up. Marcus has lost all his powers, I don’t know if he can make a portal any more! That’s a point, tell Pete to stop Laura from using her powers too much, there must be a limit here or something.”

Patrick waited impatiently, alternately trying to pull Marcus to his feet and calling into the phone.

“Andy!”
“I’m here! Look I just spoke to Spicy, she says her link to Marcus is weakening because of the cold. Get him inside and we’ll be with you in a few minutes, okay?”
“Okay,” Patrick looked back at the police station. “I’ll try to get him to somewhere not too many people will see you appear out of thin air. We have enough to explain already!”
Andy laughed despite the dire situation. “See you soon, Trick.”
“Yeah, bye Andy.”
Pushing the phone back into his pocket, Patrick called on all his reserves of strength to lift the now unconscious sandman lying crumpled at his feet. Pulling one arm around his shoulders, he grunted with the effort.

“And I think I need to lose weight!” he grumbled quietly to himself as he struggled to lift his friend. “You could stand to lose a few yourself! That, or I really need to workout more!”

*

When the phone rang, Pete, Joe, Laura and Robert were already in a cab, crawling through the noisy busy streets of Manhattan heading for Joe’s West Side apartment. Joe was frowning deeply as he watched Robert struggling to stay awake and Laura already unconscious but clearly in pain, writhing and moaning in her sleep.

“She’s not gonna be sick, is she?” the driver called back from the front seat. “Is she drunk?”

“She’s in pain, she’ll be okay,” Joe replied placing a comforting arm around the stricken woman. “Don’t mind me asking but, you’re worried about her hurling in your cab, but you say nothing about the sky?”

“I can’t do nothing about the sky!” the driver called back gruffly in return. “My cab, I can!” he added.

“New York,” Joe offered by way of an explanations as he grinned at Pete’s expression of surprise. “You know, you’d think nothing would surprise me about this place by now,” he shrugged as he dug into his pocket for his phone. “It’s Andy,” he announced as he accepted the call. “Hey, Andy, where are you?”

“We’re still in L.A., Pete, but we’re on our way to you now.”

“You’re coming here?” Pete cried, earning a look of surprise from Joe. “You mean they’re here? How do you know?”

At the words, Joe glanced again at Laura, still in obvious pain. Was Silas in pain? If so, was she sensing it? Perhaps she was being overwhelmed by the brothers’ power? He was simply relieved she was unconscious and hopefully unaware of her discomfort.

“Laura contacted Marcus,” Andy explained.

“She’s really out of it, Robert’s practically frozen solid. How’re Marcus and Spicy?” Pete asked, turning to look at the ever paling Captain of The Guard.”

“Spicy’s okay, we’re still at the airport and Marcus isn’t here, he and Patrick were arrested.”

“Arrested!” Pete cried loudly into the phone, gaining the attention of both the driver and Joe. “What for?”

“Marcus got into a fight, it was a misunderstanding. It’s okay now though. Look what are…”

Andy pulled the phone sharply away from his head as the loud, piercing scream filled his ear. Likewise, almost dropping his cell phone in shock, Pete turned sharply to face Laura, still with Joe’s arm around her. She had almost become plank-like as she extended and stiffened her body, her unnaturally pale features suddenly flushed red and Joe was forced to pull his arm away as her temperature rose sharply. Still screaming, Laura threw her head back and trembled, almost shook, visibly.

“What’s wrong?” Pete cried in alarm as he turned a confused and agitated expression towards Joe. “I don’t know,” the guitarist replied, flustered and equally alarmed.

As he replied, the driver pulled the cab to an abrupt stop.

“You either calm her down or you can get out! I don’t need this in my cab!”

“What’s happening!” Andy continued to call down the phone, adding to the confusion.
“She’s a Locator,” Robert explained quietly through chattering teeth. “She must feel a great power surge. Either that, or someone’s in her mind.”
“Hey, I don’t know who you people are, but I want you out of my cab now!” the driver insisted.
“Get out, before I call the cops!”
“What are we gonna do?” Joe turned a helpless gaze toward Pete. “We can’t carry them, we…”
“I’ll be fine,” Robert insisted weakly and unconvincingly. “You only have to take care of The Lady Laura.”
“Get out!” the driver screamed. “I’m calling the cops!”
“No!” Pete replied hurriedly before turning a resigned expression toward Joe. “We need…”
“Him!” Joe nodded toward passenger side window.
“What?…” Pete turned his head sharply, following Joe’s gaze, only to raise a smile as he did so.
“Sir,” one of the two men standing on the sidewalk waved a hand downward. As he did, the front passenger door window lowered, allowing him to lean into the cab.
“How… What? Who are you?” the cab driver stuttered.

Offering a smile in Laura’s direction, the man nodded silently to himself as her screams subsided and she once again hung limply in Joe’s arm.

“My name is Crab and you need not concern yourself, Sir,” the man spoke slowly and calmly. “Your passengers are going to leave with me and will do you no harm. Everything is as it should be.”
“The sun’s blacked out and the moon is twice as big in the sky and spinning like a top and you say everything’s as it should be? Are you crazy?”
“Now he notices the sky!” Pete rolled his eyes.

Crab smiled again. It was a peaceful, reassuring smile that suggested that whatever was happening wasn’t beyond either his comprehension or even his control.

“Do not worry,” he nodded deeply and slowly. “We will put things right.”
“Oh,” the driver’s brow furrowed as he thought about the reply. “Okay, but I still want them out of my cab.”

Joe raised an eyebrow; the driver now sounded completely calm, reasonable, almost apologetic.

“But of course, Sir, they are coming with me.”
“But, Shoe, Laura and Robert are…” Joe began, only to halt mid-sentence as Crab gestured with three fingers.

Only moments later, all the colour flooded back into Robert’s cheeks and Laura’s eyes fluttered open.

“Are you ready?” Crab nodded as if to emphasise that they should leave the cab at once.
“We’re ready,” Pete answered for them all. “But what about…”
“Your friends are already on their way.”

* * *

“Woah!” Patrick cried suddenly as Andy landed in a crumpled heap at his feet in the small but deserted stationery supply closet that Patrick had found in his quest to locate a quiet room that would prevent attention being drawn to the sudden and apparently dramatic arrival of their two friends. It didn’t remain quiet as Andy’s sprawling fall knocked over a small metal cabinet and a stack of copier paper flew at speed into a shelf sending boxes of pencils clattering to the floor.

Disorientated, Andy’s eyes were almost rolling in their sockets as he looked up to vaguely make out the form of Spicy arriving with a little more elegance and composure, but still stopping with a small
skidding halt, arms slightly outstretched for balance.

“Out of practice?” Marcus, now warm and conscious once more, chuckled as he held his hands out to steady the Spymaster’s balance.
“I didn’t do that,” Spicy announced, drawing a frown from Marcus as Patrick helped Andy to his feet.
“Then who…”

It was all he managed to say before the four of them vanished.

“…did?” Marcus finished his sentence before opening his eyes wide as he found himself now outside in the streets of New York once more. Momentarily he felt a chill cut him to the bone before miraculously, a warmth seemed to slip through every inch of his body.
“Mister Crab!” Patrick gasped as he saw the dumbstruck expression on the cab driver’s face at their sudden arrival.
“They… They…” he stammered in confusion.
“But they were here all along,” Mister Crab smiled. “Don’t you remember?”
“Er… Yeah, yeah, of course,” the driver shrugged. “I… Er… I gotta go, I have a fare.”
“Of course,” Crab nodded.
“May the Force be with you,” Joe chuckled with a wave as the cab moved off.
“He didn’t even notice there’re two of half of us!” Andy announced, patting himself, checking himself over after their unexpected journey.
“Of course he didn’t!” Guardian Pryke, who had thus far remained silent, scoffed. “Normal Worler’s are weak-minded and irrelevant.”
“And yet,” Pete raised an eyebrow as he approached the man, his body language both aggressive yet somewhat defensive, “we’ve managed to force you to help us. We can’t be that weak-minded, can we?”
“You did nothing,” Pryke growled. “I am forced by our laws, nothing more.”
“Just make sure you are,” Pete’s eyes narrowed as he regarded the man with distaste.
“Mister Crab,” Marcus stepped forward. “I’ve lost my powers, I’m not even certain I can make a portal. What’s happened? Is it your brothers? Is Silas okay? Was it to keep me from finding him?”
“My dear, Sandman, it is simply your powers have limited availability in Normal World, you have merely used your allowance. All your abilities will return when you go back to your world, I assure you. However, at the moment, that is not possible. My siblings have prevented the formation of portals to or from your world.”
“Then how did you get here?” Joe asked, puzzled. “Or where you already here?”
“No, if we had been here when my siblings arrived, they would have detected our presence, we… we waited in an alternate plane until their intentions were known to us.”
“And this?” Andy waved an arm upwards, a deeply concerned frown settled on his anxious face.
“Yes,” Crab began with a solemn tone, “this will destroy your world.”
“And ours,” Marcus added. “We’re on opposite sides of a dimensional wall, but it’s not thick enough to withstand the loss of one world, it would collapse!”
“I am aware of that,” Crab nodded. “And even if it were not the case, I know you would wish me to prevent the fall of Normal World.”
“Yes,” Marcus replied bleakly. “Of course I would.”
“Now, we must do battle with my siblings,” Crab nodded gravely.
“What do we do?” Patrick asked, taking a deep breath as he thought about the gravity of the situation.
“No, my friends, you are unable to assist us,” Crab shook his head. “This is something Guardian and I must do alone.”
“No way!” Pete cried.
“No,” Patrick agreed. “We’re in this together.”
“We have come from Carousel to save our world,” Robert insisted. “We will do what we can to help.”
“With or without your approval,” Spicy folded her arms across her chest.
“They may be found between a large expanse of water and a much smaller one. I see a great stretch of green and a tall pointed stone pillar on a mound,” Laura explained, all the while not taking her eyes from Mister Crab.
“Central Park,” Joe nodded, recognising the description. “They’re on the Great Lawn near Cleopatra’s Needle. Just through there,” he pointed into the darkened park. No wonder you were in pain, they’re less than a mile away.”
“And they have Silas,” Marcus added. “You think I’m just going to step back from this?”
“Any of us?” Laura remarked pointedly.
“Shoe,” Joe began firmly. “You need to tell us how to help you, or we’ll do our own thing and maybe, we won’t get things right. You don’t want us all asking for luck, now do you?”
“How are you beholden to these people?” Pryke rolled his eyes. “They are even beyond pity!”
“Guardian, I have promised my life to these people, my friends, and you will assist me to the same extent…”
“I will not!” Pryke objected.
“Then I call…”
“No!” Pryke interrupted. “I will do this in payment to you, but when this is over and our truce is at an end, I will take you as my prisoner, Crab and you will…”
“I told you, Guardian, I will not be returning to Annenstad.”
“The only way you escape justice is in death. What are you planning, Crab?” Pryke narrowed his eyes.
“Only my destiny as I see it, Gideon. It is clear to me what must happen, my powers as a Visior were always strong; you know that. It is a blessing and a curse to see everything with such clarity.”
“What will happen with the battle?” Andy asked. “Will we win?”
“He can’t say,” Laura’s voice almost cracked as she spoke. “If he reveals his own future, he changes the outcome. He makes it someone else’s future. My brother… he used the changing nature of future sight to read other futures and make them his own.”

Crab nodded. Laura’s insight was correct to a degree. Certainly it was true within Carousel, but the significant difference with how it would affect Mister Crab himself went unspoken. Grateful that Pryke made no effort to correct her belief, Crab continued.

“We will go into the park, but do not worry, they will not sense you. I will overwhelm your signatures and hide you from them. You must surround them at a distance and stay hidden. To each of you I will give a ball of energy and a grain of pure luck. When the moment feels right, and you must trust your senses, you will throw the energy into the air, it will do the rest.”
“But… how…” Robert began.
“You will know,” Crab nodded. “Trust me. And so, we go into battle.”
Mr Crab tries to reason with his youngest brother

Chapter Summary

The battle continues - who is winning?

Silas wasn’t at all sure how he had managed it, but he was finally conscious and aware. Still lying on his side, it was all he could do to keep the gasp of shock from escaping his lips as he slowly took in his surroundings. He knew without much thought that he was no longer in his home world, but he certainly didn’t recognise his surroundings. Trying to look around without attracting his captors’ attention was proving difficult and it would be a few minutes before he managed to take it all in. It didn’t take much effort to realise that the blackness and overly large rotating moon were unnatural. Apart from the ominous feel about the scene, he could hear the terrified screams and shouts of local people as they ran and pointed in their terror. He also realised that some sort of barrier had to be shielding both him and the brothers from view. The inhabitants of this world were clearly human and the feeling of nervous tension bubbling and churning in the pit of his stomach told him that this was Normal World.

Twisting his hands back and forth, Silas pulled as he turned them with what little strength he possessed, all to no avail. However his wrists had been bound, the ropes were firm and determined to remain so. This was the first time since leaving the cavern that he considered himself in control of his senses. But above all, he felt weak. Weaker even than he had felt when he was admitted to the hospital. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes as he recalled the reason for his hospitalisation. It was inconceivable to him now that he would ever see his beloved Laura once more, let alone marry. Desperate to find some hope, some tiny glimmer of hope, he recalled how isolated and alone he had felt when held captive in the hold of a slave ship and couldn’t help but allow a flicker of optimism cross his mind at the memory of his rescue. Marcus’s determination and resolve had seemed limitless and, in the end, he had found him. It hadn’t been an easy journey, but they had all escaped and returned home. Could it be possible again?

These men were Mister Crab’s brothers; easily the two most powerful people he was ever likely to meet. His throat tightened as he held in the scream of frustration and anger that was bubbling up inside him. Pulling harder on the ropes around his wrists, he turned a furious expression towards his captors standing only feet away.

“What do you want from me?” Silas yelled suddenly. “I have no powers, I’m no use to you. Let me go!”

“No use to us?” Lee chuckled as his older brother walked slowly past him and over to Silas.

“Then how do you imagine you’re doing this?”

“No,” Silas whispered, shaking his head as he stared upward. “No, I don’t have the power to do this. I didn’t before my powers were taken, I definitely don’t now!”

“Your normal powers are nothing compared to this, Benzedrine. This is the power of Unreality and you have absorbed enough of it to give you unlimited…”
“Sea!” Lee snapped sharply, his eyes wide in surprise as his brother almost gave away far too much information. “Unlimited power? Is that what you were going to say?” Silas asked; his eyes narrowed slightly. “Is that why you’re afraid of me?”

Sea lifted his left hand sharply. From the palm a brilliant white light glowed from the centre of his palm and as it radiated out turned a soft golden colour. It seemed to pulsate gently and Silas was transfixed by the low gentle hum that accompanied it. It was only when, without a moment’s notice, the light suddenly expanded, washing over him, covering him like a blanket, thick and clinging that he realised its terrible purpose. Gasping for breath, Silas slumped once more, alternately curling forward then straightening, stiffening and swaying as the sensation overwhelmed him.

“I… I can’t breathe…” he stammered, struggling to free his hands once more to reach for the invisible obstruction. “So, Benzedrine,” Sea laughed harshly as Silas coughed and choked, gasping for air. “Tell me about your unlimited power. You seem quite helpless to me.”

“Please…” he whispered as the surrounding parkland seemed to move in and out of focus, blurring and growing dimmer in his eyes. “Let him go, Sea.”

The voice was calm, yet insistent. It commanded attention, but was, at the same time, strangely unthreatening.

“Well, well, well,” Sea laughed mockingly as he turned to the source of the voice. “If it isn’t our dear brother… and Guardian Pryke too? Now that is a surprise.”

As he did, Silas collapsed forward, sagging as if suddenly dropped. Slumping forward he both gasped his relief and groaned in pain as he was released from his torment. But no one was paying attention to the stricken Benzedrine. The four men stood in the centre of the Great Lawn merely staring at each other. There had been others in the park, local residents and people who worked nearby, outside in panic over what was happening with the sun and moon, but even as the man spoke the words, the entire of Central Park seemed to empty. Where the people vanished to, it wasn’t clear, but Silas could only assume that they were well and safe. Desperately, he hoped that the arrival of Mister Crab would bring safety to them all.

“You can’t be so surprised to see us,” Mister Crab offered. “You didn’t truly believe that your Portal Block would prevent us from arriving, did you?”

“Congratulations, Shoe, you must have some new powers,” Sea scowled; a bitter frown forming on his face. “What else are you capable of, I wonder?”

Mister Crab merely smiled in return. In truth, the Portal Block hadn’t worked solely because he had not stayed in Carousel until the last minute. He and Pryke had waited in an inter-dimensional space until it became apparent where his brothers had gone. It was vital that he appeared more powerful than ever and solely intent on destroying his brothers. But, perhaps even more importantly, Mister Crab was acutely aware that they were holding Doctor Benzedrine as their prisoner. He knew without a moment’s thought that Guardian Pryke cared nothing for the life of the Carouselian, but it became imperative that he too pretend that Silas’s life was insignificant to him in the hope that they would prefer to keep him alive for his power over Unreality rather than use the doctor as a pawn to defeat them.

“What do you want, Shoe?” Lee stepped forward to stand at Sea’s side. “The Benzedrine? You can’t have him, you know.”

“No, Lee, I think you know what I want.”
“It doesn’t matter what you want,” Sea smirked. “You must know that we’re stronger now, that we can beat you easily.”

Some distance away, yet somehow still able to hear the conversation, Robert’s eyes widened at the words and he launched the ball of energy he held in his hand high into the air. As he did, the scene seemed to freeze before him and a shimmer, something akin to a summer heat haze surrounded the small group.

Lee turned his head sharply as everything changed around him. The transition was almost instantaneous and confusing.

“What… What… Where…”

He was home. At first confused and afraid, he instantly calmed at the sight of his parents. But, the moment of calm was brief as he remembered they were both dead.

“What’s going on? Father?” he looked around frantically. “What’s going on? How is this…? Sea?”

Watching with puzzled interest as his brother strode into the room, Lee frowned as Sea didn’t even acknowledge his presence.

“Sea!” he repeated, reaching out to grab his arm, and gasping as his fingers closed on nothing.

Only then did he realise that this was a mere vision, a memory perhaps, but not one of his own. However it was being created, he realised he was being forced to watch.

“Sea,” their father addressed the older brother sternly.

“Father?” Sea tilted his head, a superior smile fixed on his face.

“I have received grave news today,” the older man began, hesitating as he saw his son’s smirk widen. “News that I scarcely want to think about, let alone believe.”

“News, father?” Sea replied in a tone reflecting mock-innocence.

“Son, I want you to tell me it isn’t true,” the man almost pleaded.

“Tell you what isn’t true, father? I don’t know what you mean.”

“You’re telling me that you have committed no crime?” the relief in the older man’s voice was palpable.

Sea laughed. The sound fell somewhere between pity and mocking and he turned slowly on his heels, shaking his head.

“Oh, father, I can’t answer your question because I’ve committed so many crimes, I simply don’t know which one you mean.”

As he watched, Lee saw the tears welling in his mother’s eyes as she rose to stand next to her husband. Under Annenstad laws, the entire family would be condemned to a life in prison for his crimes, yet somehow, Lee knew that her tears were for her lost son and not her freedom.

“So, what now, father?” Sea turned a harsh expression toward his parents. “You’re Undersecretary to The Alliance, fighting for the laws to be changed but they haven’t been. Not yet? What are you going to do? You can’t turn me in; everything you’re fighting for would crumble. Your position, your wealth, your power all gone in a moment. You won’t risk that. So we’ll keep this amongst us, shall we?” Sea folded his arms across his chest, an air of superiority and defiance radiating from him.

“I’m afraid not, Sea,” the older man shook his head. “The Guard are on their way. We feared the worst and we cannot break the laws, no matter how much we disagree with them. If we did that, we
would be making a mockery of them.”

Sea scowled deeply, his brow furrowing at the words.

“Then I have no choice, have I?”
“IT’s too late for you to run, Sea, and there’s nowhere for you to go. We’ll always know where you are.”
Sea nodded. “That’s true and I have no doubt that wherever I go, you will tell The Guard where I am.”
“I am duty bound, I have no choice.”
“Then neither have I,” Sea nodded gravely before lifting his head once more, a terrible smirk plastered across his face.

The bolt of energy seemed to appear from nowhere, but as it slammed into his parents, Sea dissolved into a torrent of laughter.

“No!” Lee screamed, racing forward at the sight of his parents’ scorched and lifeless bodies.

Frustrated by his inability to affect the events unfolding in front of him and aware that this was a memory, Lee could only watch as Sea stepped forward, kicking his mother away from he husband and stamping a foot down onto his chest to ensure his death.

“Oh, father, of all the many crimes I’ve committed, I don’t think I’ve enjoyed any quite this much. I think that maybe I should have done this a long time ago. But I don’t have time to relish the moment, so I’ll say farewell and good riddance to you and this pathetic world.”

“Huh!” Lee gasped, throwing his arms out as if to stop himself from falling.
“What’s the matter with you?” Sea snapped.
“I… I…” Lee took a step back, still confused and more than a little shaken by the vision.

Had it been real? Was it a trick or a memory? Sea had already told him that he had killed their parents. Had it really been in that cold, calculated and callous manner? And even if it hadn’t, did it really matter? He had still done it, did the how really matter that much?

“I will give you one chance to put everything right with both worlds, Sea,” Mister Crab’s words emerged almost threatening and Sea’s lips curled up as he heard the tone.
“This time you won’t win, Shoe. This time we have more power at our control than you can even imagine.”
“What I can imagine holds much less power than what I can remember.”

Lee turned a shocked glance toward his middle brother. It had been a memory. Shoe had always had incredible powers as a Visior. He could see other people’s future, but could he also see their past?

* *

“I can’t believe that Marcus has a son and didn’t know,” Donnie frowned as he thought about it.
“Now more than ever, we have to find Anna; she really destroyed both their lives.”
“We will, Donnie,” Eleanor nodded. “She won’t get away with this although I expect she’s changed her name back to Revenor now that she’s left The Dream World.”
“It wouldn’t surprise me if she’d changed it completely,” Donnie replied turning another smile toward the baby still cradled and sleeping in his aunt’s arms.
“We will find her, Donnie, trust me. The spymaster network is extensive and effective.”
“So,” he nodded, “how long has Marcus known?”
“About the baby?” Eleanor asked, soliciting a nod from the catcher. “Just today.”
“What did he say when he saw him?” Donnie asked trying to imagine the scene with the possibly nervous and awkward sandman meeting his son for the first time.

Looking up on hearing no reply, Donnie’s heart sank as he saw the glistening in Eleanor’s eyes as she averted her gaze.

“He… he has met William? Hasn’t he?”
“No,” Eleanor whispered. “Everything happened too fast and he elected to travel to Normal World to help try to stop Mister Crab’s brothers. There wasn’t time to fetch the baby before he had to leave.”
“…”

Donnie was at a loss. It had been a most selfless act, a brave and fearless decision on the sandman’s part. There was a strong risk involved battling two men who were both unimaginably strong. Even with Mister Crab, and, as he had learned, Guardian Pryke on their side, it was still extraordinarily dangerous.

“You must be so proud of him,” he finally managed in a hoarse whisper.
“Donnie, I’ve always been proud of him,” came the strained reply. “I’m worried I’m going to lose him. My boys, Donnie… I just want them to come home. Is it too much to ask?”

Draping his arms around his aunt and pulling her closer, taking care not to disturb the sleeping infant, Donnie rocked gently and slowly back and forth. He had never seen The Lady Eleanor so afraid, so vulnerable. It was all he could do and he hoped it was enough.

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“Take your position, Shoe, I don’t see this lasting very long,” Sea sneered, confident of victory and instantly aggravated by the smile offered in return. “What?” he snapped.

Patrick’s head snapped up and instantly he knew it was time to throw the ball of energy he held, momentarily thrown by the sight of Spicy and Pete launching theirs into the air, Patrick hoped that he was right and, if so, the slight delay hadn’t created any problems.

It felt as if he had slammed into a wall, or more accurately, the wall had slammed into him and Lee found himself throwing out his arms before crashing to the ground. Everything around him was frozen in time. Sea seemed to be caught mid-sentence as he berated Shoe. High above, even the ever growing moon that loomed ominously in the blackened sky had stopped turning and no sound, not a bird, a scream or even the wind rustling through the leaves in the sprawling park, could be heard.

Nervously looking around Lee was momentarily at a loss to understand what had happened. Only when his other brother stepped forward and offered a brief yet warm smile did he put his confusion to one side.

“How are you doing this?” he asked with uncertainty. “You know I could just kill you,” he added, but his voice lacked any hint of a threat.

“You’re wondering if what you see is real,” Crab stepped forward, one or two paces as he brought his fingertips together near his chest before interlacing his fingers.

“Don’t try to guess what I’m thinking, Shoe,” Lee snapped, narrowing his eyes.

“You don’t know how I’ve done this, so, you’re wondering if you kill me, would time remain stopped.”

“You can’t possibly know what I’m thinking!” Lee stepped closer to the frozen form of his elder brother and shook his arm. Even if he hadn’t previously thought about the resumption of time, the idea was now firmly lodged in his mind and a previously unfelt level of unease settled over him like a dusting of snow on a winter’s day. “How are you doing this?”

“I have powers you cannot even begin to imagine, Lee, but that’s not your biggest concern, is it?”
Crab pressed, certain of his ground.  
“I’ve… I suggest you leave Normal World and Carousel, Shoe. We’re going to destroy it, then we’re going to take the benzedrine and conquer other worlds. We don’t want to kill you.”
“I can’t let you do that, Lee. You know that, don’t you?” Crab took another step forward, turning a side glance toward Sea he looked back at his younger brother. “He wants to kill me, doesn’t he? He’s not the man you thought he was, is he?”
“In the sphere… I heard his thoughts…” Lee’s words trailed off as he realised he had said too much. “He’s my brother,” he snapped.
“As am I,” Crab nodded taking another step closer, now almost within touching distance. “You have to leave, Shoe,” Lee frowned. “I don’t want you to be killed.”
“My fate is decided as is yours, you know that.”
“That vision, it was you, wasn’t it? You created it,” Lee spat accusingly.
“Created?” Crab shook his head. “No. You know it was real, you just don’t want it to be.”
“Shoe, I’m not going back to Annenstad. I don’t know what deal you’ve got with Pryke, but…” Crab laughed. “Guardian Pryke believes that after all this is over, I will return to Annenstad with him to hear justice called. I won’t be returning.”
“Shoe, we can kill him, leave here,” Lee reasoned. “There’s no need for anyone to die, well, anyone else. We’ll even leave Normal World as it is.”
“In darkness with its satellite on a collision course?” Crab raised an eyebrow.
“Why do you care?” Lee’s brow creased. “It’s not even as if they’re worthy of consideration. They’re barely registering as intelligent.”
“Sea killed our parents, Lee.”
Lee frowned bitterly but remained silent. It was hard to reconcile the terrible act with his loyalties. It felt as though for so many millennia, he had followed the wrong brother, but was too deeply involved to back out now.

“I didn’t know that,” he finally admitted. “I thought it was you.”
“No, but that isn’t the question at hand. He wants to kill me and if you cross him, he will kill you too. You know that, don’t you? This has to stop now.”
“What? You’re asking me to…” Lee took a step back, shaking his head as he did. “I can’t, Shoe.”
“Then whatever happens now, I’m afraid to say, you won’t survive. But you could make sure our parents are avenged.”
“There’s a flaw in your logic, Shoe,” Lee scowled angrily.
“How so?”
“Your assumption is that you’ll win the battle, but what if Sea and I win?”
“You will kill me.”

The statement gave Lee pause. The youngest of the three brothers was plainly uncomfortable with the idea of killing his brother, but could he betray him?

“No,” he shook his head sharply. “I won’t.”
Shoe’s smile broadened. “Then you will watch as Sea does it or more likely, be forced to complete the task yourself.”
“He’s not that cruel.”

Even as he spoke the words, it was obvious that Lee didn’t believe them.

“Yes he is, Lee. You know it. You said yourself, you heard all his thoughts.”
“I can’t go back to Annenstad. He’s my only escape,” Lee insisted.
“Then, I’m truly sorry for what I must do,” Crab nodded sadly as he began to take steps backward to rejoin Guardian Pryke.
“Leave, Shoe,” Lee called. “Can’t you escape too?”
“I am committed to assisting Carousel and Normal World.”

“Then we’ll go, you don’t care about other worlds, we only need the benzedrine,” Lee pressed.

“I cannot allow it,” Crab saw a flicker in Lee’s eyes, something that he had tried to avoid. It was all he could do to try to cover up the error. “The benzedrine is irrelevant, but I must stop you from infecting the multiverse with your terror and cruelty.”

“Then you’ll have to fight us,” Lee snapped bitterly. “This intervention has been for nothing.”

Crab offered a thin smile, suggesting the exact opposite of Lee’s words. It was troubling to see. In a moment, all the sights, sounds and smells previously blocked rushed back as Sea released an emerald green light from his palm. As the beam arced upwards, golden sparks crackled against his palm. Had it not been so obviously deadly, it would have been beautiful.

Oblivious to the stoppage of time and the conversations and visions taking place, Pryke raised his hand and release an arc of deep, almost blood red light. The two beams of light met midway between the two men and spread into a wide sphere then an archway before finally becoming a ten foot wide and long tunnel. The colours edged back and forth as one man or the other gained an advantage. Within the tunnel, shapes slowly emerged, giant gladiators battled each other, their impressive swords clashing and glinting in the moonlight. Alongside them, beasts of all shapes and sizes, some with wings, but all apparently with sharp claws and fangs rose up, hissing and shrieking, lunging and tearing at one another. It was a scene from mythology, a terrifying instalment of a graphic novel come true.

“Crab!” Pryke yelled above the clamour as he struggled to defend himself.

Reluctantly raising a hand, a soft golden light pulsed from his hand and a thousand daggers formed from the light before racing toward the tunnel. Each dagger found its mark, slaying the beasts and gladiators created by Sea. Turning a sharp eye toward Shoe, Sea raised his left hand, releasing a ball of pale green light. Racing at speed, the ball hit Crab squarely in the chest, knocking him flat.

“No!”

The concealed Normal Worlders and Carouselians all turned to look at the unexpected source of the shout - Crab’s younger brother, Lee was wide-eyed and clearly devastated at the sight of the attack. At the same moment Andy threw his ball of energy into the air. As he did, all activity ceased and the area fell into a hushed silence.

“Lee, you disappoint me,” Sea growled, momentarily caring little for the presence of Pryke and barely noticing that the man was unable to attack. “Whose side are you on exactly?”

Lee swallowed hard and shook his head lightly. His older brother had killed their parents, now he was trying to kill their other brother. He was cold, calculating and cruel, just as Shoe had said. He had known it, of course he had. He had known all along, but only now, only now that the truth was out regarding the deaths of their family did he care. He had followed the wrong brother and he was backed into a corner. Shoe was right - he wouldn’t survive this, but what mattered now was how he died, not how he had lived. Raising a hand he unleashed a deep blue beam of light that wrapped around his brother, spreading like a viscous fluid binding his arms and constricting. What he saw as betrayal drew an expression of fury to Sea’s face as he battled against the energy securing and restricting him. In one final explosion of anger, Sea seemed to shatter the bonds and disperse the energy all around, setting fire to nearby bushes and trees. With a snarling expression he lifted both hands and delivered a fatal bolt of power to his youngest brother. Lying still on the floor, his chest charred and smoking, J Lee Fish was dead and Sea’s jaw was clamped firmly in an uncomfortable mixture of anger, frustration and an emotion he didn’t recognise, but it was bringing a tightness to his throat that he had never before experienced. His fury grew ever more intense as he watched Shoe
rise smoothly to his feet, apparently unhurt and very much alive.

Now it was two against one, but he was powerful and he was enraged.
Casualties of War

Chapter Summary

The battle is over, but what is the cost?

Marcus’s right fist was clenched tightly as it shook agitatedly. Spicy, crouching next to him, placed her hand over his in an attempt to calm him. He knew that physically, they could do very little and that the fighting had to be left to Mister Crab, but it killed him to watch his brother lying only yards away, originally struggling to free himself but since the battle began, he had lain still with a glazed distant expression. It was as if the powers displayed by Crab, his brothers and Pryke had somehow subdued him. The sandman looked down at the energy ball in his left hand - was he supposed to have thrown it yet? Like everyone else, he wondered how he would know and now, only he, Laura and Joe still held the small glowing spheres.

He had paid particular attention to what had happened whenever someone had thrown one of the energy balls and each time something different had happened. The act of releasing the energy, the very specific timing, the result - it was so precise, so carefully orchestrated.

“He knows,” Marcus whispered, aghast at the realisation.
“Knows what?” Spicy asked in equally hushed tones.
“He knows exactly what’s going to happen and when. He knows it all already. That’s why the energy balls are being realised at very specific times. He know exactly when, because he can time it to the second.”
“Then we’ll win,” Spicy whispered hopefully. “Remember he said that Silas would play a part in their downfall.”
“Yes?”
“Well, he didn’t say attack, did he? He said downfall. So we’ll win! Everything’s going to be all right”

Mister Crab turned a wide-eyed alarmed expression in the direction of the spymaster as she spoke the words. As he turned his head, both Joe and Laura released their energy balls into the air. As they did, everything froze. Literally everything, except for Mister Crab and Guardian Pryke.

“I wondered why you didn’t correct The Lady Laura earlier,” Pryke raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps you should have done, rather than risk them predicting the outcome?”
“Carouselian Visiors may not predict their own future or they will change it. It is not a gift intended for personal use, it’s too dangerous.”
“Dangerous? The whole purpose…”
“I know, Gideon,” Crab sighed. “In Annenstad the sight of a Visior is a true gift for one who has come to know his own self and wishes to take that knowledge to a spiritual level. I had that gift, something neither of my brothers will ever understand.”
“But to know your own self is a difficult enough thing to manage,” Pryke nodded. “For others to know you, that is where the problem lies.”
“I prevented Carouselians using it for themselves. It was too unpredictable, so I turned it around. If they predict their own future, it doesn’t happen.”
“But with you, if someone accurately predicts your future, it won’t happen.”
“Precisely so,” Crab pulled his lips into a thin frown. “Spicy has predicted that we will win and that
everything will be well. This presents me with a difficult decision.”
“Technically, she predicted the future of you all,” Pryke seemed to clutch at straws.
“You know that mine is included. It is enough to change it, but it doesn’t have to change completely, perhaps just one element?”
“That she said everything will be all right?” Crab nodded sadly. “Yes, that part must change.”
“What will you do?” Pryke asked gravely, finally appreciating that Crab was willing to do anything to prevent his brothers from causing more carnage and chaos.

Turning his attention towards the still frozen in time spymaster, and taking a moment to stare at each of the hidden Carousellians and Normal Worlders, Crab shook his head.

“Whatever I do will be for the greater good,” he sighed. “Remember that, Gideon. When the time comes, you must remember that.’’

Pryke’s brow creased with the deep frown spreading across his entire face.

“What are you going to do?” Pryke asked, his tone dripping with suspicion. “There’s only one way you can force a win now.”
“Perhaps I will be lucky?” Crab raised a faint smile as he spoke the words.
“Luck cannot help you with this, Shoe, you know that.”

Pryke’s voice dropped almost to a whisper as he uttered the last three words. Something in the way Crab held himself told him that he was more than aware of the gravity of the situation. He looked immeasurably sad; this was something that he had tried to avoid at all costs. Yes, the presence of the Carousellians and the Normal Worlders had allowed the use of the energy balls and as a result, he had managed to speak with his younger brother, but already, Lee was dead. And now? Now he knew he had to resolve the situation. Sea would never give himself up, so it seemed that he would have to suffer the same fate as his younger brother. But now, thanks to Spicy’s prediction, his future had been altered. Instead of the clean, relatively swift victory, Mister Crab had a difficult decision to make.

“Who will it be?” Pryke asked gently.
“I think you know,” Crab replied, his voice cracking as he spoke.
“For the greater good.”
“Yes,” Crab sighed.

As movement resumed all around, Marcus’s eyes widened as instinctively he knew to release the energy ball resting in his hand. Flying straight and fast as a bullet the tiny globe of swirling light collided with Sea’s head in a shower of sparks and a weak fizzing sound.

“So,” he growled, turning a narrowed eye toward his brother. “You think you can kill me? No Shoe, I’ve survived this long. You aren’t going to win today. You think that because it’s just me now that I can’t beat you? Well you forgot something. I know you! I know what motivates you, what drives you. But most of all, I know what hurts you!”

Taking a few steps back, Sea turned and ran the few extra feet to where Silas lay, oblivious to the drama unfolding around him. Placing a hand firmly on Silas’s shoulder, Sea used his powers to lift him from the floor, raising him slowly, gracefully.

“You can try your best, Shoe, to pretend that this man means nothing to you but I know he does, I know that even as we speak you want to protect him.”

Manoeuvring Silas so that he hung a few inches off the ground, eyes still glazed, Sea offered an
almost maniacal grin.

―Leave Shoe,‖ he ordered. ―You and Pryke; both of you leave or I kill the benzedrine.‖
―Sea…‖
―Don‘t bother trying to negotiate, Shoe. I mean what I say and… you know I‘ll do it, don‘t you?‖
―I know what you‘re capable of, Sea. I‘ve seen your entire life, past, present and future and I know
what you can do.‖
―Well now, that is interesting! You‘ve seen my future have you, Shoe? So I do have one?‖
Crab smiled faintly. ―You know I can‘t answer that, Sea.‖
―Well, let me tell you my future. You and Pryke leave, allowing free passage to me and the
benzedrine. We go, and you never hear from us again. We‘ll go to a different dimension – everybody
wins.‖
―I told you, Sea, I can‘t let you do that.‖
―Then the benzedrine dies,‖ he smirked threateningly. ―It‘s that simple. I can still beat you, Shoe,
both of you, but you‘ll lose too.‖
―Let him go, Sea,‖ Crab insisted.

The slightest wave of a finger was all it took for Silas‘s eyes to roll in their sockets. Suddenly, despite
remaining oblivious to his surroundings, he was animated by the pain coursing through him.
Screaming in intense agony, he appeared to stiffen, throwing his head back as he continued to hover
above the ground.

Before anyone could stop him, he was running, screaming his brother‘s name. Behind him, Spicy
was on her feet, alarmed at the sight of Marcus racing toward the man who held his brother, the man
who could so easily, and even cheerfully, kill them all at the blink of an eye. Marcus had no plan. He
was going against everything he had promised his father that he wouldn‘t do – once again he was
acting out of pure impulse. But it wasn‘t what was going through his mind right now. He hadn‘t
thought about the consequences, he was thinking only of his brother and somehow saving him. Even
as he was half way to the small group, he knew how bleak and hopeless the situation was. If he were
honest, he had always known, even before they had left Carousel. There had been a part of him that
felt he would never see his son but as he glanced briefly at Silas‘s face contorted with agony, he
knew that he had to do this. There was really no question in his mind.

―The sandman?‖ Sea laughed as Marcus raced towards him. ―Perhaps, Shoe, you don‘t believe me?
Maybe you need a demonstration?‖

Mister Crab remained silent and perfectly still, the only sign that he was aware of anything wrong lay
in his eyes. An unfathomable depth of sadness lay in them as he watched his older brother raise his
free hand.

―Say goodnight, Sandman,‖ Sea smirked cruelly.

An explosion of green light hit Marcus squarely in the chest, the blast stopping him abruptly in his
tracks, his arms swinging out to the side, carried by the sudden cessation of motion. The bulk of the
beam seemed to pass straight through him, crashing into the floor several yards behind him, leaving a
small yet deep crater. Momentarily every inch of him glowed with a vivid green light, fading to a
pale green-gold as it almost seemed to leave through his fingertips, crackling as it faded. Held in
place by some unseen force for one single moment more, Marcus crumpled lifeless to the floor.

Everything fell silent, but for the light satisfied laughter emanating from Sea as he turned alternately
from Crab, to Marcus, to the Carousellians and Normal Worlders, now standing in utter
consternation at the sight of their friend and prince lying dead on the ground. Patrick pulled Spicy
into an embrace, trying to both comfort the spymaster and prevent her from running forward herself.
“Well now, Shoe,” Sea began. “You kept those hidden well,” he smirked. “It looks as though I get to torture you over and over.”
“I’m sorry, Sea. I would have been happier for you to remain in the sphere. As much as you and Lee… well, mostly you, were evil and cruel, you were family and I could no more kill family than you could show humility.”
“Humility?” Sea laughed. “I have the multiverse at my command. With Unreality in my control, I can do anything.”
“But, you have crossed an unspoken boundary.” Crab lowered his eyes and sighed. “Unreality is no longer under your control.”

Frowning, Sea turned a concerned glance toward Silas. The benzedrine was staring directly at him, a harsh glare fixed on his face. A pulsating gold glow shimmered all around him while his and other shadows moved independently of the objects to which they were related.

“I’m sorry, Sea, I didn’t want it to end like this,” Crab added.

At the words, the rope around Silas’s wrists seemed to shatter into a million needle-like shards and as he pulled his hands around to the front, each one followed and aimed itself directly at Sea. Throwing up his hands, Sea gasped as no power or protection emerged from his fingers. Each of the tiny needles pierced and slashed at him, causing him to screech in pain as they continued to burrow beneath his skin. Clawing at his own bloodied body as the minuscule but deadly sections of the rope continued to tear at his organs and veins. Boring into his bones, it was as if each one had a life of its own, a mission, a deadly purpose. Silas watched, eyes still glazed, as the needles fashioned from the rope that had held him their prisoner for so long, literally ate and cut away at his captor from the inside. Finally crashing to the floor in a pool of his own blood, Sea was almost crumbling before them. Their prey long dead, the needles continued their work until there was nothing left but a cloying stillness in the air.

Silas gasped, his eyes widening, as if waking from a vivid and terrifying nightmare, but part of that nightmare was real. Turning sharply, he saw his brother lying on the floor. He knew, deep inside, but he refused to accept it. Racing to his side and skidding to a halt on the floor, Silas pulled Marcus up onto his knees, desperately searching for a pulse, some sign that he could be saved.

Pulling away from Patrick’s arms, Spicy ran, half staggering and falling, in her desperation to reach Marcus’s side.

“Silas?” her voice was small, trying to sound hopeful as she watched Silas cradle his brother, silent tears streaming down his face.

All he could do was shake his head, his eyes closed tightly against the pain.

* 

Pete stepped forward, placing a hand on Patrick’s back, both of them fighting back their own pain at the sight of their friends and counterparts either dead or distraught. Silently, they watched as Spicy knelt at Marcus’s side with Silas and wept. Everyone wanted to comfort them, but no one wanted to be the first to disturb their grief. It was a difficult and awkward feeling for each of them, trying to handle their own sorrow while watching that of his brother and his love both inconsolable in their grief for him.

“He did it,” Andy almost whispered. “Silas, he did it.”

Patrick glanced at the drummer with a blank expression before he realised that it was daylight once again. Looking up, he saw a faint and, once again, distant outline of the moon in the morning sky.
Everything was indeed back to normal except for the heart breaking death of their friend. Each of them, numb with shock, had barely noticed that the sky looked as it should once more. Even the warmth from the newly restored sun couldn’t distract them from their grief.

“It’s back to normal,” he offered a thin smile. “It’s even the right way around… you know, after all it’s spinning.”

“I hope the scientists took the time to look at the other side while it was there,” Joe attempted a smile.

The joke was a half-hearted attempt to raise spirits, but even Joe couldn’t lift them now. There was simply too much sadness.

Patrick looked around at each one in turn. Silas and Spicy were obviously heartbroken, pouring out their grief with dignity but without care of being watched. Laura’s eyes were fixed on Silas. She somehow managed to look stunned and as if she was trying to decide something, both at the same time. Robert was pale, standing away from the group; he seemed mortified and even shaky. With his eyes lowered, it was clear he was immersed in a private moment. It was Mister Crab that confused him the most. Yes he appeared sad, but there was guilt in his eyes, it was as if he blamed himself. Yes, it was true that he had committed himself to protecting them but surely he didn’t hold himself responsible for Marcus’s death? He wasn’t, was he? Guardian Pryke appeared devoid of an expression, almost indifferent. For him the sandman’s death had resulted in a situation being resolved, it seemed to him to be a satisfactory outcome. The callous attitude made Patrick feel angry above everything else. But even as he considered what he might say to Pryke, a movement caught his eye. It was Laura, heading stiffly and suddenly towards Silas. If they had thought about it, it would have made perfect sense to them that Laura would be the first to step forward, but the response did not.

“Silas?” she spoke softly as she knelt at his side.

Looking up, Silas’s misery was complete. He recalled the conversation in the cave when Marcus and Laura had told him of their love and how it was for the best. Marcus, he had forgiven; lying dead in his arms, what else could he do? But Laura? She had broken his heart but he couldn’t show it. He would be reserved, understanding but most of all, he would hide his true feelings. He was almost glad he was already crying, because his next few words would almost certainly cause the same response. He loved Laura, even though she had left him for his brother. His emotions were not so easily switched off and despite the terrible pain of her betrayal, one look into her eyes and he fell all over again.

“I understand if you want to return to your own district,” he began, his voice clipped and stilted, desperate to hide the catch in his throat.

“Wh… why?” Laura asked, taken aback by the comment.

Silas sighed; exhausted by the question and the flood of thoughts it caused to race around inside his mind. Laura didn’t love him. She had told him as much, she had practically gloated about it. Surely she wasn’t still expecting him to marry her just because Marcus was dead? But how did she sound so hurt? Even Spicy was looking up from her grief staring at him, her lips slightly parted in surprise.

“You told me,” he frowned. “In the cave inside the mountain…”

Even as he spoke the words he could hear that something was wrong. The words simply didn’t make sense to him. How could either of them have appeared to him whilst inside the mountain?

“I haven’t seen you since you left the Counsel Chamber to go back to your room?” Laura shook her head. “Silas, are you sure you can’t dream?”

“But I don’t… I…” Silas frowned. It had seemed so real to him, but he remembered enough from
when he used to dream before becoming a benzodrine, that dreams could seem absolutely real. “It could have been, but I don’t dream.”

“Marcus had dreams… well, nightmares and he’s not supposed to either,” Patrick offered.

“Marcus? He had nightmares?” Silas replied staring up blankly at the singer.

“He must have,” Patrick explained. “How else did he make the nightmares that attacked you?”

“Oh… yes. Well, I suppose it must have been, I guess Mister Crab’s brothers must have made me dream, but…” his brow furrowed in confusion as he thought about it, before his head snapped up in realisation of what it meant. “Then, you didn’t say…? You mean… you still love me?”

Laura gasped, shocked by the question and the hurt in his eyes. Something other than his brother’s death had hurt him deeply and now despite the fact he was still cradling Marcus on his knees, there was a glimmer of hope and a faint smile perched on his lips. Dropping instantly to his side and pulling his head towards her, Laura’s tears mixed with Silas’s.

“Silas, my love, I will always love you. What happened to you in there?”

“It felt so real, you even told me that Marcus had a son,” he shook his head. “I should have known it wasn’t real just from that.”

“He does,” Spicy whispered in horror.

“He does?” Silas’s eyes widened in surprise at the words only to be presented with Spicy’s overriding fears now pushing all personal concerns temporarily out of his mind.

“If they put that thought into your dream… If they knew… Oh no! I have to know if he’s all right!”

“Please,” Crab placed a hand on her head reassuringly. “Your baby is well, no harm has come to him or any of your family in Carousel.”

Spicy almost sagged under the weight of relief at the news. Holding Marcus’s already slightly cooled hand, she smoothed his hair and caressed his cheek lovingly. Silas had so many questions racing inside his mind, not least of which was how he had a nephew that he knew nothing about, but one look at Spicy, lost in her grief, told him that now was not the time.

“Mister Crab,” Pete stepped forward, feeling slightly awkward about his obvious resemblance to the man lying at his feet. “Is there anything you can do? Can you not bring him back to life somehow?”

The question was totally alien to him, but Crab possessed phenomenal powers he could never hope to understand. It was certainly worth asking the question.

“Pete,” Crab sighed heavily. “What you’re asking is…” he paused again.

“The most heinous crime,” Pryke finished the sentence.

“A crime? So, it is possible?” Joe asked, his head cocked to one side trying to gauge the expression on Crab’s face.

“No, it is not,” Pryke insisted sharply.

“You just said it was a crime,” Patrick pressed. “Not that it was impossible.”

“It is impossible because it’s a crime,” Pryke clarified. “And if Crab is to be believed in his assertion that he is innocent of all crimes and is a Spiritual Visior, he will not perform this abomination.”

Crab sighed and tapped Spicy lightly on the shoulder. Instantly she knew to rise and step away as he knelt opposite Silas.

“Silas,” he began in a soothing tone, “as Guardian Pryke states, bringing someone back to life is a terrible crime under Annenstad laws, and one that is punishable by death. If Guardian were to witness such a crime, he would be within his rights to execute me on the spot, without trial.”

“I understand,” Silas nodded slowly. “Guardian Pryke, as you can see, Spicy is distraught at the thought of being absent from her baby, especially now. Do you think you could try to re-establish
contact with Carousel, please? Perhaps create a portal?"
“I must return to Annenstad with my remaining prisoner,” Pryke replied bluntly.
“I understand that, Guardian, but my family must know if we are able to return to Carousel and you may be the only one able to create a portal at the moment. You will accept I can’t ask Mister Crab to do it in case you’re concerned he might use the opportunity to escape you.”
“I take your point,” Pryke nodded. “Thank you for being so considerate. It is more than I could expect after recent events.”

Silas watched as Pryke turned and raised a hand, drawing his fingers apart, the beginnings of a portal were being formed. Lowering his eyes, Silas smiled briefly at Mister Crab, taking his hand for a few moments.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for us, Mister Crab,” Silas finally managed; his diplomat training cutting through and overriding his grief.
“My dear, Doctor Benzedrine, it has been my honour and privilege to know you, and if I may, I would know you more, but as I told Guardian, I will not be returning to Annenstad.”

Silas frowned lightly and shivered as Crab closed his eyes. Moments later, the glimmer of happiness fell from Silas’s lips as Mister Crab’s hand slipped from his grasp and the man slumped heavily to the floor.

“Mister Crab!” Silas gasped, shocked at the sudden collapse. Immediately checking for a pulse, Silas exhaled deeply as he found himself unable to locate any sign that his friend was still alive.

Turning sharply, Pryke’s gaze fell on the limp form of Mister Crab.

“What!” Pryke cried angrily. “You have allowed him to escape!”
“Escape?” Silas shouted as Spicy confirmed his thoughts with a nod – Mister Crab had no pulse.
“The man is dead! Have you no compassion?”
“I will rule on his condition,” Pryke growled at the two doctors. “You are Carouselians and easily fooled.”

“And to think, he has an even lower opinion of us!” Pete muttered quietly to Patrick.

Stepping closer to the body, Pryke pulled at his shoulder until he rolled onto his back. Checking his eyes and placing his thumb on a spot just in the crook of Crab’s earlobe, Pryke paused a few moments.

“You’re doing it wrong,” Silas observed with a tone still edged with irritability at the insult.
“You may find your pulse where yours is located, I will find ours where ours is located,” he snapped in return.

Silas raised an eyebrow; somehow it had not occurred to him that Mister Crab might have a completely different physiology.

“Even Crab can’t fake this,” Pryke sighed pulling back. “He is dead.”

Yet another wave of sadness swept over the small group, something felt especially keenly by Joe as he looked on. He was the reason Mister Crab was free from the dream in which he had been imprisoned. He tried hard not to let the reasoning progress to its logical conclusion, but as he stared at Marcus’s lifeless form lying alongside, he couldn’t help but feel a pang of guilt and responsibility.

Silas turned a harsh glare towards Guardian Pryke, furious at his apparent indifference. Gently resting Marcus’s body on the ground, he rose to his feet, narrowing his eyes as he stared angrily at
the man.

“Guardian Pryke, you have brought chaos, terror and much death and destruction to both of our worlds in the name of justice. What kind of justice is it that causes so much misery? Because of you my brother, the heir to the throne of Carousel, is dead and my world stands in ruins. But what I find most offensive is that you simply don’t care. You have never given any thought to anyone’s needs or desires except your own single-minded, officious mission. Well, Guardian Pryke, your prisoners are dead; there is no reason for you to stay. You will return to your world and you will not, on judgement of treason to the Ruling House, return, either to Carousel or Normal World. If you do, you will be sentenced to death under our laws.”

“You haven’t the authority to judge me,” Pryke replied in an aloof tone.

“I do and I have,” Silas returned sternly. “The only people I wish to see from your world are any immediate family of Mister Crab, who may come to observe his funeral and no more.”

“No, I will be returning to Annenstad with his body,” Pryke insisted.

“You will not!” Silas gave a clipped response. “He is our friend and Chief Justice, he belongs in our world, in the place he helped build. He will remain here amongst friends and you will direct only family members to us.”

“Very well,” Pryke conceded finally. “As you point out, my prisoners are dead, my work is finished here.”

“Family?” Silas prompted curtly.

“He has a wife,” Pryke finally acknowledged with a solemn nod, raising surprised murmurs within the group. “I will inform her immediately. I have no doubt that she will be pleased to have him remain with the people he cared enough to die for.”

“Thank you,” Silas replied, his angry tone subsiding at the unexpected kind words.

“I… I will say that even with his disregard for our laws, Shoe was a good man. He also promised to restore the buildings in your world,” he nodded slowly, thoughtfully. “Consider it done. Now I take my leave. Good luck, Lord Silas, and I am truly sorry for your loss.”

Taking himself a few feet from the rest of the group, Pryke stood perfectly still, one hand overlapping the other, behind his back. The expression on his face was indecipherable; part of him seemed satisfied, another part sad. Silas didn’t try to work it out, merely deciding to wait a few moments after Pryke had vanished before turning back to address the group.

Finally stepping forward, Robert appeared shamed and unhappy. “I am so very sorry, Highness, I was here to protect you both and I failed.”

“On the contrary, Lord Robert, we have to return to Carousel as quickly as possible.” He patted the Captain on the shoulder. “We have to get back to my hospital.”

“Why the rush?” Joe asked, surprised by the unexpected announcement.

“Silas!” Spicy cried in a combination of alarm and sheer joy. “Marcus has a pulse!”

“I know and it’s going to take everything I have to wake him. Mister Crab did what he could but the rest is up to me. Robert, go ahead and advise Lord Joshua to be ready to reinstate my powers. Also, that I will need the help of every benzedrine in Carousel.”

“And Mister Crab?” Robert asked quickly.

“We will bring him, and Marcus. Quickly, Robert, there isn’t much time.”
The world could wait

Chapter Summary

Marcus is resuscitated but at an unexpected cost

Ambrose, Lord Joshua’s personal aide, rushed breathless into the Counsel Chamber, his expression one of either extreme agitation or excitement.

“Ambrose?” Joshua looked up from the death and damage report that he and Spyvie were reviewing.

Seeing the expression on his aide’s face drew a worried frown as he rose to his feet ready to hear the worst.

“What is it, Ambrose?”

“Majesty,” he bowed his head respectfully. “Master Spyvie, the buildings are back to normal. All of them repaired! Reports are coming in from all over Carousel. All damage has been repaired, Danloka was practically destroyed, but it’s all perfect again.”

“And the people?” Joshua asked hopefully. “The deaths? The injured?”

Ambrose’s excitement suddenly seemed to fall completely flat at the question. His shoulders sagged and his head bowed as it shook.

“Sadly, no, My Lord. The toll remains as before.”

Joshua sank back down into his seat as he gave it more thought. He recalled Mister Crab saying that the buildings could be restored, but he had said nothing of the people. But if that one act had taken place then maybe the war was over? Could it be possible?

“Ambrose? What news of the portals to Normal World? Are they accessible again?”

“I’ve heard no word on that, My Lord, I will return…”

“No need,” Joshua raised an eyebrow as a black oval shape began to form about ten feet away.

Pressing an alarm fastened discretely about his wrist, Joshua waited as even before the portal had finished forming, a contingent of The Guard had arrived as protection from whatever was arriving.

“Majesty,” the lead Guardsman announced their arrival, only to see immediately why they had been called. Forming a protective line in front of their ruler and Spyvie they waited.

As Robert stepped through the portal, a proud smile crept across his face as he saw his Guardsmen in place and doing their duty without fear.


He knew his tone was clipped and brusque, but there would be time to apologise later. Almost his entire family had gone to Normal World to battle with Mister Crab’s brothers and he was desperate to know the outcome, but most importantly, were they still alive?

“Majesty, Mister Crab’s brothers are defeated and Guardian Pryke has returned to his world.”

“Casualties?” He tried to say the word without emotion, but it was impossible and he simply didn’t
care who heard.
“His Highness, The Lord Silas requests that you be ready to reinstate his powers and that every
benzedrine in Carousel should prepare to assist him.”
“Ambrose,” Joshua turned quickly to his aide. “Issue the message at once. Have all benzedrines
standing by. All, no exceptions.”
“Yes, Majesty,” Ambrose nodded briefly and left the chamber.

Joshua turned a worried expression to the Captain, swallowing before he asked the question he
dreaded.

“Why?”
“My Lord, his Highness, The Lord Marcus was killed in battle but Mister Crab brought him back to
life, although he is in a very deep sleep.”

Joshua took a couple of deep breaths as he recovered from the news. The first half of Robert’s
statement had almost shattered him and he had barely heard the remainder.

“We must thank Mister Crab for performing such a task,” he finally managed. “He is truly a great
man.”
Robert lowered his eyes. “It was his final act, My Lord.”
“You’re telling me he’s dead?” Joshua gasped.
“The act of restoring His Highness seems to have killed him,” Robert replied sadly. “They’re
bringing his body back with them.”
“Other casualties?” Joshua asked with a brief glance towards Spyvie, waiting tensely for news of his
daughter.
“Everyone else is quite well, My Lord but their powers are depleted. It seems that there is a limited
usage in Normal World.”

Joshua heard a faint but audible sigh and allowed his mind to consider the logistics of their return
given the possible lack of powers.

“Then they may need assistance to return quickly. Robert, arrange for two portal builders and four
medics to return to Normal World to bring them back. You can give the coordinates, yes? “Also,
have the hospital on alert, I want a Heisseng transport… No, two transports and the room nearest to
Doctor Benzedrine’s office made ready with an avstandball and a full complement of nursing staff.
Also, call Doctor Masterson.
“Yes, Majesty, immediately.”
“Bring the rest of my family and our friends here,” Joshua ordered, “so that Master Spyvie may see
his daughter arrive and know that she is well.”

Robert was almost out of the chamber when a second portal formed larger than the first and another
figure arrived – that of Doctor Benzedrine, carrying Marcus. He seemed pale, exhausted and drained.

“Father!” he cried as he stepped fully into the room. “I need to get him to my hospital.”
“Yes, Robert explained. Here,” he stepped forward with his arms outstretched, “let me take him, you
look exhausted.”

It wasn’t an easy thing for him to pass Marcus’s limp form to his father, preferring to hold on, as if
the act of which would help his brother cling to what little life he had. But he knew it was for the
best. Cradling his eldest son, Joshua offered Silas a brief encouraging smile.

“Father, Spicy created this portal, but it may have drained her powers…”
Joshua nodded. “Robert already explained, and I know that locational portals take more effort that
those that require Catchers. I’ve asked him to sent two portal builders and four medics to bring them
home.”

Silas smiled thinly, trying hard to appear stronger than he was, but Joshua could see that physically he seemed fit to drop, but even though he knew his son was resilient and determined, somehow he saw an inner strength that seemed to carry him even further.

“I have Heisseng transports on the way. How bad is it?”
“We haven’t time to wait for the transports. We have minutes, father, possibly as few as fifteen, but certainly less than thirty.”
“Let’s get to the hospital,” Joshua nodded as he set off toward the private corridor that led from near Silas’s private apartments to his office at the hospital. “He was killed?” Joshua almost choked on the word.

There was a slight hesitation in Silas’s stride as he tried to recall the events, but many of them seemed hazy.

“Mister Crab’s brother was torturing me,” he sighed as they strode briskly on. “The next thing I remember is the brother was gone and Marcus was lying on the floor. I don’t know what happened. I don’t even know how much time there was in between.”

As they reached the private entrance, Silas sighed sadly. Placing his hand on the palm scanner, he gave the code to allow them to enter.

“Seven-two-one,” waiting for the door to slide back, Silas took a deep breath. “I think he was trying to save me,” he added quietly. “It’s my fault.”
“Silas, I don’t accept for a moment that his situation is even close to being your fault,” Joshua replied sternly, “and I will lecture you at length later for thinking such nonsense, but right now, you have to forget blaming yourself and work on bringing him back. Right?”
“Yes, father,” Silas swallowed hard as the pair moved on swiftly into the hospital. “You… You need to reinstate my powers.”
“I know, Silas, Robert told me, please stop worrying and focus. You’re a doctor, do what you do best.”

Silas took a deep breath as he opened the door at the end of the corridor that led to his office at the hospital. As he opened the door, the scene was instantly familiar to him. Waiting at his desk were Seth, his personal orderly, and two senior nurses.

“Doctor Benzedrine,” Seth began, “I have room two-twenty set up with an avstandball and a resuscitation cart… should you need it,” he lowered his eyes.
“Thank you, Seth, I probably will. Please link the avstandball with all benzedrines, I’m going to need their combined power.”
“They’re standing by, Doctor, it’s all ready for you.”
“Thank you, Seth,” Silas smiled thinly. “What am I going to do for an orderly when you begin your nurse’s training?”
“Silas,” Joshua prompted, as he headed toward the room waiting for them.
“Doctor,” Seth began. “I placed a vinkskapper in the room, I wasn’t sure if you would need one or not.”

Silas nodded, making no comment. The last time he had seen a vinkskapper it was at Allandra’s mansion when he and Marcus had been prisoners there. Of course, that particular vinkskapper had been oversized and used to torture him. By contrast, a standard version may just save Marcus’s life.

Entering the patient room and placing Marcus quickly on the bed, Joshua checked his watch.
“We should assume that we have ten minutes left. Silas, come here, you need your powers.”

Moving quickly to stand in front of his father, Silas looked up. He saw the worry and concern in his father’s eyes and instantly he knew that he had to be strong. As brave as Lord Joshua was, Silas knew now he couldn’t bear this alone. It was a more vulnerable side of his father that he had never before witnessed.

“I can do this father,” Silas confirmed in a solemn and confident tone as Joshua placed a hand on his youngest son’s head.

A rush of energy seemed to fill the exhausted benzedrine as his powers were, at last, reinstated and he almost gasped as it seemed that a new level of vitality sparked within him.

Pulling back when Joshua raised his hand, Silas turned a stern eye around the room until he found what he was looking for – the vinkskapper. Fitting it gently but firmly to Marcus’s temples, Silas pursed his lips as he set the dial to a level that he hoped simulated his brother’s normal brain activity.

“Is that not a little high, son?” Joshua frowned as he watched the monitor.

“I know it’s higher than we would normally begin with, but we have to set it to an end state now, we don’t have the time to increase it slowly,” Silas explained.

“I understand, but even so…” Joshua left the words hanging.

“Marcus has no off switch, you know that. I believe his brain activity would be higher than typical. Besides…” Silas shook his head and sighed; he had no way to explain how he had drawn the conclusion given by his next statement. “It feels right.”

“Okay,” Joshua nodded; there literally wasn’t time to question anything.

Stepping to the avstandball, Silas was met with over a hundred tiny images of all of Carousel’s complement of benzedrines displayed in the glass as miniature holograms. Silas allowed his gaze to sweep across them all.

“You’ve all been briefed, you know what needs to be done. I want you all to lock into Governor Sandman’s signature and give everything you have to waking him. And I mean, absolutely everything you have, even if it means passing out with the effort, do you understand?”

A chorus of replies, all variations of agreement and acknowledgement came back to him.

“Great… Thank you,” Silas nodded. “We have only a few minutes. Please begin.”

Settling himself alongside the bed, Silas closed his eyes and concentrated. A mild tingling ran through his body and with a slight crackle, a white light tinged with gold flooded from his fingertips. Raising his hands, he allowed the energy to pour over the pale and still form of his brother. At first, the energy merely seemed to sink into him, before finally it was as if no more could enter and his body shimmered with a pulsating soft golden glow.

“Come on!” Silas muttered through gritted teeth. “Stop fighting me, you stubborn sandman!”

Turning his head toward the avstandball, Silas appeared almost in pain with the effort. His brow glistened with sweat and once or twice the light emitting from his fingertips flickered.

“More!” he yelled to the holograms. “Everything! I told you, everything!”

The glowing around Marcus began to pulsate and Joshua noted that the occasional flickering seemed to coincide with the disappearance of a holographic figure. It could only be that the benzedrines were giving so much, they were collapsing with the effort, but still it wasn’t enough. Gritting his teeth, Silas poured every last ounce of his power into Marcus’s body. The gold tinged light became
momentarily a vivid sunburst of yellow, flaring up almost to the ceiling, bringing an alarmed expression to Joshua’s face. As the light faded abruptly, Joshua caught his youngest son as he fell like a stone, pale, almost grey.

“Resuscitation cart, now!” Joshua yelled.

*

Exasperated by the lack of response, Spicy tried again to create a portal with no response. One final attempt drew a scream of frustration from the Spymaster as she turned to Laura, her eyes pleading.

“Laura, please try, I know you need to get back as much as I do.”

Nodding, Laura raised her hand and managed a part delighted, part relieved smile as a black line formed in mid-air and began to lengthen and widen. Stepping closer, Spicy was surprised as Joe pulled her back.

“What are you doing?” she cried, pulling her arm out of his grip. “You know I have to get back. I need to see Marcus!”

“No…” he shook his head, uncertain in himself why there was a problem, but more than that, how he knew.

“What do you mean, no?” Spicy snapped, angry at what she saw as Joe being either obstructive or even cowardly.

“You can’t use that portal,” he finally insisted.

“What’s wrong, Joe?” Andy asked, more than aware that the guitarist’s behaviour was decidedly out of character.

Joe turned an almost helpless glance over to his friend. It was clear from the look on his face that he too was searching for the reasons for his statement, but even though he was bemused by his own insistence, he knew he was right.

“I don’t know what you’re afraid of,” Spicy cut in before Joe could reply, her voice brimming with distaste, “You know I have to get back. I’m going home, now!”

“It’s unstable,” he finally blurted.

Spicy turned a questioning expression toward Laura, who merely stared back in return. Shaking her head, Laura continued to expand the portal forcing Joe to grab again for Spicy’s arm.

“No! I don’t know how I know, but I do. I’m telling you, it’s unstable!”

There was an absolute certainty in Joe’s voice that gave them all pause. How could he possibly know? He had never made a portal and had travelled through one so few times as to be negligible. It seemed unlikely that he had seen or somehow detected something that two Carouselians experienced in portal building had missed. But it didn’t detract from the surety in his voice.

Spicy paused; if he was right she risked being lost somewhere between worlds, but if he was wrong, he was keeping her from Marcus – but even as she considered her options, the portal collapsed. Laura gasped her surprise, her eyes widening in horror as she realised that Joe had almost certainly saved Spicy’s life and yet none of them, Joe included, understood how he could possibly know.

“Joe?” Spicy began. “I… I don’t know… Thank you!”

“Joe… How did…” Pete began, as his eyes switched from Joe to where the portal had stood and back again.

“Before you ask, I have no idea,” Joe shook his head, an expression of confusion firmly fixed on his
“Can’t you get home now?” Patrick asked, kicking himself as he saw the deflated expressions on the two women. “Robert will be back soon, I’m sure,” he added hopefully.

“Wait a minute,” Andy turned to face Patrick. “We can create portals. If it’s open again, we can make them.”

“You can make portals?” Spicy turned a shocked expression toward Andy. “All of you? But you’re Normal Worlders! How?”

“Marcus,” Pete explained simply. “But if powers are limited over here, I don’t know if we can still do it. Seems it’s like a battery, when you run flat, nothing happens.”

“But, I haven’t used any,” Andy continued. “Let me try.”

“Let’s all try,” Patrick suggested. “It won’t matter if we all do it, but if we can’t it’ll save time.”

With murmurs of agreement, all four raised their hands. Pete didn’t honestly believe that anything would happen. Having created a portal already and it having remained open for several hours while he was missing, he suspected that his powers were drained. But even he was surprised to find that neither Patrick nor Andy could manage even the beginnings of a line in the air. His battery theory seemed also to include the concept that their powers also had a shelf life and that their abilities had simply drained away with time despite lack of use. Perhaps what surprised them more than anything was that with no apparent effort Joe produced a perfect locational portal – standing as a seven by four foot shimmering silver door. More than that, a second portal opened up alongside.

“I don’t know how I’m doing this, but I’m definitely not doing that!” Joe announced pointing to the second door.

Recognising that the second portal was being formed from Carousel, Spicy stiffened, readying herself for whatever was coming through, relaxing only when she saw Robert and six other men and women arriving.

“We have two portal builders and four medics,” Robert began only to be interrupted.

“How is Marcus?” Spicy asked urgently.

“I don’t know Mistress,” Robert replied carefully. “My Lords Joshua and Silas took him directly to the hospital.”

“Then take me there,” Spicy ordered.

“I am to take you to the Counsel Chamber ma’am,” Robert replied with an uncomfortable expression.

“No, I…” Spicy began only to pause when she noticed the discomfort in Robert’s face.

“No, ma’am,” he began. “He’s waiting for you.”

Spicy nodded, somewhat unhappily. She felt guilty about wanting to see Marcus more than her father. Deep down she knew he would understand, but she also knew that she could be certain of hearing about the sandman’s health at the same time. Nodding, she agreed to go direct to the Counsel Chamber.

“I am to take you all there,” Robert announced as everyone else gathered, concerned for their friends.

* “Where’s that cart?” Joshua yelled impatiently.

“For… for Doctor Benzedrine?” Seth stammered in surprise, having already positioned himself with the cart alongside Marcus’s bed.

“Yes!” Joshua shouted, exasperated by the delay. “He’s not breathing.”

“I’m sorry, My Lord,” Seth replied hurriedly as he brought the unit to the floor. “I assumed it was for My Lord Marcus.”
Joshua sighed heavily; both his sons were critically ill and he was struggling to concentrate on one over the other – no matter which he focussed on his mind was demanding that his attention be diverted. As he attached the ventilator and defibrillating pads to his youngest son, he couldn’t help but spare a glance up toward Marcus, still lying unmoving and very pale in the bed.

“Make sure the benzedrines keep trying to wake him,” he said as he added the last pad. “Clear!”

Sitting back, Joshua flipped a switch and watched grimly as Silas’s body jarred and stiffened as the electrical current flowed through him.

“Give me a status on Marcus,” he asked through gritted teeth as he reset the unit to give another burst of electricity.

“I’m okay,” came a hoarse reply.

“Marcus!” he shouted as his head swivelled so fast he felt a sharp momentary pain travel up his neck. Recovering quickly, he continued: “I’m with Silas, I’ll be there as soon as I can. Seth!”

“Already here, Majesty,” the orderly replied, on the one hand delighted at Mister Sandman’s recovery, but still concerned for Doctor Benzedrine.

“Silas, please,” Joshua muttered unhappily at the continued lack of response. “Clear!” he yelled again.

The sound of the monitor attached to the electrodes changed and a low monotone wail filled the room.

“No!” Joshua screamed. “Silas, come on!”

Firing up the electric current once more without even giving a warning, Joshua’s brow creased with the agony of no response. His vision blurred as tears filled his eyes.

“Silas.”

This time his voice emerged merely as a whisper, with the only movement the shudder of his hunched shoulders as they shook with the effort of holding back his screams of emotional pain.

“My Lord,” Seth knelt at his side and removed the switch for the electrodes from his shaking, tear-dampened hands. “Let me help you,” he added quietly.

“What’s happening?” Marcus asked nervously, worried that he might have correctly guessed the situation.

“My Lord?” Seth spoke again, encouraging Joshua, still lost in his grief, to look up. “Let me take care of him. Mister Sandman needs you.”

Joshua pushed his shaking hand across his eyes and cheeks, his glazed stare desperately trying to focus. Looking toward the bed, he faced a new horror – how could he tell Marcus that Silas had just given his life to save him?

“Father?” Marcus’s voice was small, almost childlike.

As Joshua rose slowly to his feet, he took a deep breath to compose himself. Stepping over to the bed, he was fully aware, before he had spoken even a single word, that Marcus knew what had happened. All that was left was confirmation.

“I’m sorry, Marcus,” he faltered as he took his son’s hand. “He’s gone.”

The sandman was visibly shaking as he held his emotions carefully in check; trying so very hard to be strong as his tired and anguished mind tried to process the news.
“Son, it’s okay, don’t hold it in.”

The words felt like more than permission to show his feelings. He felt sanctioned, even encouraged but either way Marcus couldn’t hold his tightly reined feelings back any longer and all his resolve was washed away in an instant by the flood of tears flowing like small rivulets from his bloodshot eyes.

“It’s not fair,” he muttered, his breath coming to him in gulps and snatches as he began to hyperventilate. “It’s not fair. Why him? Why not me?”

It had so very nearly been both of them, but that detail wasn’t going to help him now. Joshua chose to remain silent, merely pulling his son into a comforting embrace. Now was the time for simple grieving, not explanations or rationalisation. But even as he held his eldest son, his thoughts turned to his wife, Eleanor, and how he could even begin to tell her that her baby boy was dead.

Through the veil of tears, Marcus strained to look behind his father, to see for himself. His gaze fell on the pale, still form. Silas looked so different; all lines that might have indicated even the smallest cares or worries were gone. He looked completely at peace with even the faintest of smiles resting on his lips. Marcus wanted so much to believe that he was simply unconscious. It was as if he believed that the act of staring at his brother might bring him back to life. Or possibly that if he looked long enough he might see some flicker of life that perhaps his father had missed. But he knew, deep down, how impossible that was. Lord Joshua was a very good doctor and with the possible exception of himself, there was no one in that room that would have looked harder for any sign of life than their father. As he stared, he watched, unblinking, holding his breath for what seemed an agonising wait. Willing Silas to merely flicker an eyelid, anything to show he was still alive. But all his desperate hope was taken from him as Seth pulled a sheet over his brother’s limp form. Burying his face in his father’s chest, Marcus shuddered, pulling in his breaths in deep, unsteady gulps. Joshua stroked his son’s hair, lost in his own pain, simply staring at nothing. Willing the world away, Joshua shunned his responsibility, momentarily unable to face anyone.

He had lost his son; the world could wait.
Wait... Is that the glimmer of hope?

Chapter Summary

What does happen to someone’s energy when they die?

“Ellie?”

Lord Joshua stood in the doorway to Donnie’s room. He had been there for some time now, remaining standing, very still and silent as he watched his wife. Still seated on the edge of Donnie’s bed while he slept, she cradled William, Marcus’s son, in her arms, cooing softly as she rocked him gently. Turning as he spoke, Eleanor offered a smile which slowly faded as she noticed his pale and drawn face. Beside him stood a nurse who, without a word, stepped forward, her arms outstretched to take the baby.

There was something about the way the nurse moved, confident and silent, that actively encouraged Eleanor to simply hand over the infant without questioning the reason. She was deeply distracted by the expression on her husband’s face. Drawn and restrained, he looked tired and troubled. There seemed to be much more on his mind than the problems facing Carousel and Normal World because of Mister Crab’s brothers.

“Josh? What’s wrong?” she questioned, offering a frown of concern as he waited for the nurse to leave before replying.

“Come with me,” he extended a hand toward her and nodded to emphasise that it was important.

“But… Donnie?”

She tilted her head slightly, trying to decipher the puzzling expression on her husband’s face. Something was troubling him, that was certain, but he was giving the impression of trying to hold his features perfectly still.

“He’s sleeping, Ellie, he’ll be fine. Please, I need to speak to you, in private.”

“What can possibly…”

“Please.”

Eleanor’s heart sank and a flush of dread swept over her as the word seemed almost to be squeezed from his throat. Whatever was wrong, she knew instantly that it had to be the worst possible news. What followed surprised even her, but instead of pressing immediately for the terrible information, she merely rose and moved to her husband’s side. As she reached the door, she pulled his hand gently into hers; whatever this was, it seemed to her that he would need her support as much as he was trying to offer his.

Walking in silence to their private apartments, Eleanor couldn’t help but notice that as they passed by any of the palace staff, they would immediately look away, some even appeared to have been crying.

“Josh…?” she began only to pause and shake her head. Whatever this was, it was essential to be delivered in private. But the wait was sheer torture.

The last few yards to their rooms were agonising and it was all she could do not to run the last few feet, dragging her husband and insisting that he explain. As Joshua closed the doors behind him he
looked into the elegantly and tastefully decorated sitting room and found himself looking everywhere except at his wife now standing expectantly only a few feet away. Joshua cursed himself; he had had time to prepare but now the moment had come and his throat had dried to dust and he had no words that could adequately explain or offer even a modicum of comfort.

“Joshua, please?” Eleanor begged, her voice small and tight.

Joshua took a deep breath before nodding almost imperceptibly, reluctantly accepting the burden of the task he had to carry out. Moving forward, he encouraged Eleanor to take a seat on one of the plush deep blue couches near the centre of the room. The high backed three-seater couch was edged with gilt beading along its lightly curved outline and with firm cushions gave the impression of being more decorative than functional, yet it was surprisingly comfortable. As Eleanor lowered herself down, watching Joshua intently as he took his place next to her, she silently begged him to tell her whatever it was that was so obviously tearing him apart.

“Ellie, the boys came back from Normal World,” almost closing his eyes at the brief elated expression on his wife’s face, Joshua searched for the strength to continue.

“What’s wrong? They… They’re hurt?”

“Marcus was badly hurt,” he continued only to be interrupted again.

“But… He’ll be all right, won’t he?”

“Ellie… Please.”

Eleanor bit her lip, Joshua was very clearly now losing the battle to control his emotions. She prepared herself for what she believed was the worst – Marcus was injured. Maybe he had damaged a limb? Perhaps he might not fully recover?

“Marcus is okay,” he took a deep breath. “He’s well, but… Silas.”

Eleanor’s eyes widened as she emitted a gasp at the sight of her husband looking sharply down and tightly closing his eyes, his dampened lashes giving away more than any words could.

“What’s happened?” she prompted urgently. “Joshua, please tell me!”

Composing himself for a few more moments, Joshua found the strength to reply.

“He gave his powers to bring Marcus back from the brink of death. He pushed all his energy into him in one burst of power.”

“Is… Is he… He’s going to be all right though, isn’t he?” she stammered. “Josh?”

“All his energy, Ellie.”

The explanation was a simple one, and Eleanor new the implications of the words, but her shattered mind refused to accept it.

“No…” she shook her head lightly, her voice speeding up with each word. “You’re wrong, he’s okay. Go back and check on him. He… He just needs a bit of care, I’m sure, he…”

Almost choking on the final word, Joshua screwed up his eyes and finally broke down, allowing all his pain, fear and grief to pour out in gut-wrenching sobs.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!” he cried, his shoulders shaking with the effort of breathing.

Pulling him close and wrapping her arms tightly around him, Eleanor stared blankly to the wall beyond. It was inevitable that her eyes be drawn to the series of family portraits hanging just above eye-level. The fourth portrait, displayed in an ornate yet tasteful gilt frame was of Silas attired
elegantly in his full dress uniform. His gentle, proud, but happy smiling face looked down on her somehow giving her the strength to put her own desperate unhappiness aside for her husband’s sake. Still weeping and shaking in her arms, he almost didn’t hear her question.

“Why are you apologising?” she asked quietly, infusing her tone with as much empathy as possible. “I couldn’t save him,” he whispered in return. “All my training, the thousands I’ve helped over the millennia and all for nothing. I couldn’t even save my own son.” “I won’t have that kind of talk,” she replied stiffly, pushing him back so he held him a few inches away. “You’re a doctor, Joshua, not a miracle worker! Silas gave everything, there’s nothing you could have done about that and you know it.”

Joshua looked up, his tears halted, but his exhaustion deeply apparent.

“But it doesn’t change what happened.”
“No, but you can’t blame yourself.”
“But…”
“No!” she replied firmly. “And you know it… don’t you? Why are you insisting on blaming yourself?” “Because if it’s my fault, I can’t be angry with him for leaving us!”

Pulling Joshua close once more, Eleanor lost her resolve and allowed her own tears to flow freely. The surprisingly honest words from her distraught husband had been the catalyst but she still, somehow, managed to hold enough in reserve to reply.

“Be angry, it’s irrational, but it’s part of grieving, you know that. But you also know that Silas gave his life for Marcus. He is the man we always knew he was and I am very proud of him.” “So am I, but…” “I know,” Eleanor sighed, resting her forehead in the crook of Joshua’s neck as the pair supported each other in their grief.

It was only a few moments later that Eleanor pulled back, a horrified expression on her face.

“Oh my goodness! Laura? Does she know?”
“No,” Joshua sighed heavily. “I’m advised that they are all back in Carousel now. I have to tell her before she finds out from someone else.”
“No,” Eleanor shook her head. “Ellie, I can’t just not…” “I’ll do it,” she pulled her lips into a pensive frown as she cupped his still tear dampened cheek. “This is a burden we share.”

* 

“Father!”

Spicy threw her arms around Spyvie, patiently waiting for his daughter’s return from Normal World. Over the years, he had grown almost used to the idea that she was a Spymaster but had never lost the tightness in his stomach whenever she was on a dangerous mission. But now on her safe return, his shoulders relaxed and he realised just how much tension had built in them.

“I’m so glad to see you, father, but will you understand if I go to the hospital to see Marcus? Won’t you?” “Olivia,” he began gravely. “I have received news from Lord Joshua’s aide that we are all to remain here in the Counsel Chamber. No one is to go to the hospital.” “But why?” Spicy frowned in concern. “He… Marcus is all right, isn’t he?”
“I don’t want to upset any plans here,” Joe interrupted, “but I would like to get Mister Crab to the hospital.”
“Mister Crab is hurt?” Spyvie turned sharply to the right to see Joe, kneeling at Mister Crab’s side. “I’ll call a medic.”
“A medic won’t help, I’m afraid. His body is lifeless, but I do need to get him to the hospital.”

Patrick rubbed the back of his neck and turned a puzzled eye towards the guitarist. The phrasing of the statement seemed awkward and forced. Was he so upset?

“Joe? Are you okay?” he finally asked, placing a comforting hand on Joe’s arm. As he did a slight crackle prickled his fingertips and it was almost as if a shimmer of light moved along his arm. “Joe?”
“I must get the body to the hospital, will you help me?”

Patrick looked into Joe’s eyes. To the casual observer, Joe merely looked tired but Patrick knew him better. The happy twinkle was gone from his blue eyes but it wasn’t tiredness or even grief that clouded his expression. It was age. An unfathomable age and wisdom that Patrick had only ever seen in one man before.

“Of course,” he nodded, the ends of his lips turning up slightly in a hopeful smile. “We have to go to the hospital, right now.” Patrick announced.
“I’ll order a Heisseng Transport,” Spicy returned hesitantly, uncertain about the urgency, but appreciative of the need to show Mister Crab’s body some respect.
“Thank you,” Joe replied with a nod.

Patrick looked hard at Joe, pulling him quietly to one side.

“Mister Crab?” he whispered.

Joe smiled in return.

“I have split myself across two people. It’s not difficult for me, but your friends will find it hard to host my being for long, I must re-animate myself very soon or I fear there may be damage.”
“Two?” Patrick’s brow creased.

Before he had the chance to question further, the Heisseng Transport arrived and Spicy was already instructing the orderlies to move Mister Crab’s body to the hospital.

“We have to go too,” Patrick insisted, placing a hand on Joe’s back. “But Lord Joshua’s aide…” Spyvie began only to be interrupted. “He won’t notice,” Pete insisted. “He doesn’t like us anyway.”
“We’ll be back before you know it,” Patrick added. “But we have to do this.”

Joe paid careful attention to the carrying of the body to the transport as Patrick tried hard to explain the situation to Andy and Pete without giving too much away, suspecting that discretion was required.

Only moments after the pair left with the orderlies and Mister Crab’s body, Joshua and Eleanor arrived with Ambrose accompanying them a few discreet paces behind. They appeared sombre, despite their obvious relief to see everyone returned safely from Normal World.

“Our advisors tell us that not only did you defeat Mister Crab’s brothers, but all physical damage has been put right in both worlds,” Joshua forced a thin smile.
“Yes,” Andy stepped forward, somewhat hesitantly. “But Mister Crab didn’t survive.”

Andy frowned as he noticed Joshua lower his eyes and Eleanor pale visibly. Certainly it was a
terrible loss, but were they so affected by his death? Was there more to it than that?

“I need to see Marcus,” Spicy blurted unexpectedly.
“Soon,” Eleanor replied only to raise her hand as Spicy began to object. “He is well, but sleeping.”
“Sleeping?” Spicy’s eyes widened.
“An enforced sleep,” Joshua explained. “To aid recovery.”
“Laura,” Eleanor held out her hand. “Will you please come with me?”

Unaware of the terrible news that awaited her, Laura stepped forward, and taking Eleanor’s hand, was escorted quietly from the Counsel Chamber.

“We have arranged for some food for you,” Joshua began, “Please follow Ambrose.”

Andy held back as, one by one, everyone filed quietly from the room.

“Lord Joshua?” he finally asked as the pair were left alone. “Something’s wrong. What is it?

The innocently yet sympathetically asked question cut deep through Joshua’s defences and he lowered his head. Looking down, Andy grew alarmed as he saw tiny droplets of water splash onto the floor.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” he asked, placing a hand gently on Joshua’s arm.
“I have lost my son,” he replied simply.
“Marcus?” Andy questioned. “But you said…”

Then it hit him. Eleanor had removed Laura from the group, discreetly, quietly.

“Silas? But… how? He was…”
“He gave his life to save Marcus,” he sighed. “And the cruelest thing is I can’t even say that I wish he hadn’t done it. How can I choose which son I want to survive?”

Pulling Joshua into a comforting embrace, Andy was surprised when the man accepted the gesture gratefully. Knowing how guarded he was told Andy of the depth of his emotions and grief. He wished he could do more.

* Patrick turned to look at the man walking at pace alongside him. He had questions and he had to know the answers, they simply wouldn’t wait.

“I know what you need to ask,” Joe’s voice stated, but the words confirmed that it was in fact Mister Crab who had replied.
“Are you Joe or Shoe?” Patrick finally asked as they continued down the corridor toward the hospital.
“Both,” he smiled, “I am both, currently. A state of affairs that cannot last long.”
“Oh,” Patrick sighed with relief. “I was worried that…”
“Do you not think that if the man on this transport were your friend, I would have told you?”
“Yeah, I’m sorry,” Patrick replied, somewhat awkwardly. “But Joe is okay, isn’t he? I mean he’ll be all right after you… What will you do?”

The situation was clearly difficult for Patrick to take in. In truth, it would be difficult for even a Carouselian to comprehend, but much harder for someone from Normal World where powers were neither commonplace nor readily accepted as real.

“Let me explain,” Crab nodded sympathetically as the pair walked as quickly as the transport would
allow. “With the act of bringing Marcus back to life, I committed the most heinous of crimes. It is an unforgivable sin on Annenstad, but it is a crime against nature also. While I don’t regret the decision, I am wrestling with my conscience. But equally, I knew that my presence here would still be required and the only way to evade Guardian Pryke was to die, which, in truth, I had planned to do all along.”

“But you’re not dead,” Patrick felt foolish for pointing out the obvious, but it seemed the only thing to say.”

“I stored my life force in Joe and some of my powers inside Doctor Benzedrine.”

“Some?” Patrick raised an eyebrow.

“More than a small amount would kill him. His body is simply not strong enough. Every power anyone possesses seeps into each and every cell of the body. Those cells have to have the integrity and strength to hold under such terrible strain. This is why you cannot have powers as the Carouselians have.”

“But they gave us the power to create portals,” Patrick corrected.

Mister Crab smiled as he considered how to reply.

“Patrick, your universe is just over fifteen billion years old. Incidentally, your scientists are wrong by almost one and a half billion years, you may want to let them know. Anyway, let us imagine that my powers equate to that timespan. The time equivalent to the power required to create a portal is less than one hundredth of a second. Do you follow me?”

Patrick stopped dead in his tracks and merely stared, his eyes glazing over. Mister Crab frowned, once again, as with his age, the enormity of the situation had left his companion dumbfounded.

“Needless to say,” Crab continued to walk, encouraging Patrick to move again. “I found a place for my powers within an enclosed, self-contained dream. They are inaccessible, but again, I must retrieve them soon or risk an explosion that, I fear would tear numerous worlds apart, not just this and yours.”

“You’re that powerful?” Patrick’s voice almost shook as he spoke.

“Back when my brothers and I came to Carousel, we were revered as if gods and even Mister Sandman once tried to refer to me as such.”

“When?” Patrick’s brow creased; he felt sure he would have remembered.

“In Es Galleons shortly after you were captured by the slavers. He had called me and I responded. He had found Ruler Owen’s journals and he knew enough about my past to draw the wrong conclusion.”

“To most eyes, your powers do seem god-like,” Patrick shrugged, trying to explain the reasoning for what Mister Crab saw as a mistake.

“Possessing god-like powers is probably the closest acceptable description,” Crab nodded thoughtfully. “To the untrained eye, perhaps. But I am no god, Patrick. I am… fallible,” he nodded again, this time sadly. “Decidedly fallible.”

Now inside the hospital, Mister Crab was heading very specifically toward one particular room. Deep in conversation, Patrick remained unaware of their destination or the reasoning behind it.

“What does this have to do with Marcus?”

“Technically, the power to bring someone back to life does not exist…”

“But…” Patrick began only for Mister Crab to raise his hand as an indication that he was about to explain.

“The specific power, but it is possible by using a combination. In Annenstad, the amount and combination of powers required to bring someone back is sufficient to kill the originator of the power, but to guard against its misuse, it was decided that if anyone were to ever try and succeed without dying then the penalty would be death for both parties. That way, not only would one person
be giving their life, it would be for nothing as the person they sacrificed themselves for would also
die.”

“Did it work? Did it stop people using the power?”

“On the whole, yes,” Crab suddenly stopped walking; he appeared sad and reflective. “But do you
know how harsh it is to possess such power and prevent yourself from using it because of your
respect for the law.”

“Your parents?” Patrick asked with a respectful hushed tone.

“My parents,” Crab sighed regretfully. “My father could have forced a change in the laws but for my
elder brother’s greed and violence.”

“But could you have done it anyway?” Patrick frowned, confused as the pair resumed their brisk
pace travelling the few feet more toward the door to the room where Silas’s body had been laid out.

“Wouldn’t all your family be arrested?”

“Yes,” Crab took a slow deep breath. “Ridiculous, isn’t it? Come, time is short.”

“One thing I don’t understand,” Patrick ventured. “If it drains you to the point of death to bring
someone back to life, how did you bring Marcus back without dying?”

“Technically, I did,” Crab waved a hand to indicate the dead body lying on the Heisseng Transport
as they arrived at the particular door that Crab had been looking for. “But I chose to. You see, in the
same way Carouselians cannot hold all of my powers they don’t need all to be brought back.”

“But Guardian Pryke didn’t kill Marcus. Shouldn’t he have done under those laws?”

“As luck would have it, Marcus’s pulse didn’t show itself until after Gideon left. He believed that I
killed myself rather than return home for trial. Now,” Crab paused as he placed his hand on the door
handle, “you must prepare yourself for something of a shock.”

“What?” Patrick screwed up his face, uncertain if he wanted to know the answer.

Crab stared intently at Patrick, trying to gauge how he might react without intruding into his mind.
Finally satisfied, he looked back to the door, turning the handle slowly. Both stepped inside and
immediately, he turned, aware that Patrick had allowed a short gasp of surprise to escape his lips.

“Is he…?” Patrick stopped himself short of saying the word.

“I’m afraid he is,” Crab replied solemnly.

“Oh… Er… Maybe some luck?” Even Patrick felt he was clutching at straws.

“As I explained once before, luck can only work if something is actually possible but needs to be
assisted. I’m afraid that luck cannot help your friend.”

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Familiarity seemed the best option available to Eleanor. Familiarity and privacy. Leading her young
would-be daughter-in-law into the room that had not long since occupied for the Extension
Ceremony, Eleanor fretted silently over her choice of room. Certainly it was familiar to the young
woman, but there was, she now realised, a good chance that the room’s purpose being reused to
explain about Silas’s death might be too upsetting. Almost shaking her head at the idea, Eleanor
cursed herself internally for being so stupid. She was about to tell Laura that the man she adored, the
man she hoped to spend the next few millennia with was dead. It seemed unlikely, in retrospect that
Laura would be focussing on the room. There was no right or wrong for this news. No good way to
tell her. Only pain.

“Eleanor,” Laura opened.

There was a slightly nervous hint to her tone that prompted Eleanor to turn and take her hand. She
clearly knew that something was wrong, but she had no way of guessing just what. It was time to
speak, time to simply get it over with.

“Eleanor, I… I can’t sense Silas.”
The woman paled; maybe she already knew? Pausing to still the shake in her lips, Eleanor thought back to hearing of her son’s bravery and fought to maintain her composure.

“How dear,” she encouraged Laura to take a seat next to her, reaching up to push a few stray hairs from near her eyes. “Silas and Marcus returned from Normal World…”

“How is Marcus?” Laura asked before glancing down, again nervous. “I still sense him, but… but not Silas.”

The stress in her voice was apparent and Eleanor knew now that she was merely prolonging the agony by explaining slowly. Trying to tell herself that she was doing so out of kindness, Eleanor couldn’t even convince herself. She was overcome with grief and finding it extraordinarily difficult to say the words aloud that her son, Laura’s fiancé, was dead. Her appreciation for her husband’s ability to continue to function and still deliver the news rocketed. He was so strong and right now, she felt so very weak.

“Laura,” she took a deep breath, “Silas gave his life to save Marcus. He was very brave… He…”

There was quite a distinct catch in Eleanor’s throat and the words remained, unspoken, as she watched Laura appear to crumple before her. Laura’s unguarded thoughts streamed into the room and before she could block them, Eleanor became aware that Laura was beginning to doubt the level of Silas’s love for her, given that he chose to save his brother rather than remain with his future wife. Those thoughts were immediately followed by a terrible wave of guilt as she realised the implication for Marcus.

“Oh, my dear!” Eleanor cried, pulling Laura close to her, their grief pouring out along with their tears.

There were no suitable words. Nothing to adequately express the terrible finality and the desperate unhappiness they were both feeling. Clinging to each other for support, both women wished that they could do more for the other.

Eleanor’s mind began to drift as she thought more about the young woman in her arms. Without Silas, would she stay with them? Ask for the Extension Ceremony to be reversed? Eleanor tried to hold back the worried frown that threatened to spread across her face. How could she tell Laura that, once performed, the ceremony could not be reversed? That she would live for millennia without her beloved Silas. It seemed too cruel – if his death wasn’t enough of a blow.

Slowly, uncertainly, Laura leaned backwards and Eleanor panicked at the possibility she had allowed her thoughts to slip out and be heard.

“Silas,” Laura whispered, tears still standing in her eyes. “Silas!”

Without another word, the young woman tore herself from Eleanor’s grip and ran from the room.

* * *

“How are you going to do this?” Patrick asked. Fairly certain that he wouldn’t understand, the expression on his face was suggesting confusion before he had even finished the sentence.

“That’s not an easy question to answer,” Crab replied thoughtfully. “May I simplify?”

“I kind of figured you’d have to, and hoped you would,” Patrick replied, now used to a general feeling of inadequacy whenever he was in Carousel.

“I will reanimate my body. It is merely lying in a sort of stasis – more than hibernation, less than death.”

“Well, it fooled Pryke,” Patrick commented.
“I’m pleased to say it did,” Crab smiled. “I had no pulse and no discernible powers, but Gideon did
not search very far. As I mentioned, neither my life force nor my powers went very far, he just didn’t
look. Now, Patrick, if you would be so kind as to remain very quiet, please?”
“Just one question before you start?”
“Go on,” Crab encouraged.
“Why am I here? I mean you don’t actually need me for this, do you?”

It was less of a question and more of a statement and Crab couldn’t help but smile wryly as Patrick
offered a questioning look.

“Me? No, but Joe will. When I leave his body, I’m afraid he will be quite disorientated and confused.
He may even feel a little unwell.”
“Okay,” Patrick nodded. It made sense to him and he was grateful to Mister Crab for having
considered the effect on his friend. It seemed to make Pryke’s insistence that he was a criminal all the
more ridiculous. Of the two of them, Pryke was the one who had caused most damage and harm.
“I’ll sit over there.”

Patrick nodded towards a high backed leather chair with an accompanying footstool and made
himself comfortable. He tried not to think about what was to follow as some sort of show, but he was
more than aware that nothing he had ever seen in his life – even including his visits to Carousel –
would ever compare to watching a man apparently brought back from the dead.

Crab closed his eyes. To Patrick it almost seemed as if he had watched it in slow motion, but finally
Crab’s eyes were shut and a stillness and calm descended over the room. A quiet peace hung in the
air, a gentle tranquility that seemed to radiate from Crab standing in the centre. Patrick pressed
himself further back in the chair as a soft, thrumming noise seemed to fill the room, even causing the
chair in which he was sitting to vibrate slightly. As he stared at Crab, Patrick couldn’t help but notice
that, impossibly, the lines of his face seemed to shimmer as if a light haze was obscuring his view.
Continuing to stare, Patrick frowned as he tried hard to understand the strange phenomena only to
exhale in surprise as finally he saw that the apparent shift was caused by a ghostly likeness of Crab
moving less than an inch away from his face. It was only then, with what he realised was Crab’s
spirit and Joe’s body, so close, that he realised that what he thought were small physical differences
between them were actually significant enough to tell them apart. Perhaps it was the experience of
someone who knew both men well, like a mother able to distinguish between identical twins, but
Patrick could see both men as if they were utterly different and it surprised him.

A single pinprick of light moved from a spot between Joe’s eyebrows and began to dart, apparently
erratically, in a small six-inch space, as if enclosed within an invisible cube. Flying forward
suddenly, the light hovered as if determining what to do or where to go next. Only then did Patrick
notice that the ghostly image of Crab had disappeared, leaving what he knew was only Joe, standing
very still only a few feet away.

The tiny light began to grow, pulsating as it did, until it reached the size of a golf ball, turning slowly,
roughly four feet off the floor. The next stage happened in a mere blink of an eye as the sphere
crashed down onto Crab’s body in the exact same place above the bridge of the nose. The ball of
light seemed to explode on contact with the body sending a shower of silver and gold sparks high
into the air and all across the room. The noise stopped suddenly as a bright light erupted above the
body and spread upwards and out, quickly filling the room. Disappearing as abruptly as it had
appeared, it was followed by a sudden gasp of breath as the body of Mister Crab jerked sharply
upright on the Transport. Patrick’s eyes widened at the suddenness of the reanimation. But he had no
time to think about out it as he found himself scrambling out of his seat as he saw Joe about to
collapse. Catching his friend only about a foot from the floor, Patrick saved Joe from the brunt of the
fall, but now severely off balance, both were pulled down to the floor with a painful crash.
Patrick swung his head left and right, unsure what to do first. Did Mister Crab need assistance or did Joe need it more? It was hard to say, but he could clearly see Joe was, as Crab said he would be, severely disorientated. His skin seemed devoid of all colour, his eyes rolled in their sockets, he was incoherent and he seemed unable to support himself.

“Joe?” Patrick frowned as he pulled his friend into a sitting position, only to find it almost impossible to keep him there. “Are you okay?”

“One moment,” Crab announced in a husky, croaky voice. “I need my powers.”

Easing himself off the Transport, Crab stood for a few brief seconds as he reconnected with the powers stored in a dream. Patrick stared at him fascinated by the transformation. It could have been that he merely saw what he imagined or expected to see, but as Crab reinstated his powers he almost seemed to fill with energy and vitality. Only moments before, he had appeared almost grey and tired, yet in less time than it took to think about it, Crab was not only himself again, but seemed infinitely more so.

“You are correct in your thinking, Patrick. With all my powers returned, I will appear different to you. Gone is my reliance solely on being able to provide luck.”

“You mean you can do anything?” Patrick asked tentatively.

Crab smiled enigmatically. “I am a Spiritual Visior, Patrick. I see the future. To an extent, I can control it, and you may ask me to change it but I am not a magic wand.”

Patrick grimaced; he had no real idea what that meant, but he did still have questions that needed replies.”

“Ask me anything,” Crab encouraged, making it quite clear that he had heard Patrick’s thoughts.

“Can you do something to help Joe?”

“Of course,” Crab nodded as he waved a hand slowly. “That, you didn’t need to ask.”

Patrick’s expression became one of disbelief mixed with relief, as Joe’s cheeks suddenly seemed to flush with colour, his eyes opening without a hint of tiredness or confusion.

“Joe?” Patrick questioned, barely expecting a reply.

“I’m okay, Trick,” Joe smiled as he pushed himself onto his knees before flopping back down.

“Maybe a few more minutes?” he chuckled as he gathered his new-found strength.

“Patrick?” Crab prompted. “You have more to ask?”

“You said that some of your powers were in Silas. Have you got them back?”

“No, I need a live connection,” Crab explained almost dismissively.

“So, you mean… if Silas…” Patrick began, almost afraid to ask. “I mean, what about the rest of your powers? Are they gone too?”

“Gone?” Crab tilted his head as if he hadn’t understood the question.

“Yes,” Patrick replied; now it was his turn to feel confused, but this time he didn’t feel the need to hide it. “I don’t understand,” he admitted. “Silas is… he’s dead.”

“Tell me, Patrick, when a person dies, where does all that energy go?”

“I… I…” Patrick stammered at first. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Here,” Crab held out his hand. Above it, a small golden light hovered about an inch above it. Rotating slowly, the sphere throbbed and pulsed.

“Silas?” Joe asked, now reasonably recovered from Crab’s occupation of his body.

“One of your physical laws, that of Conservation of Energy, states that energy cannot be destroyed or created. It is a little inaccurate, simplified and crude, but the premise is basically correct. The law applies as much here as in your world.”

“What does that mean?” Patrick asked; hoping he knew, but uncertain.

“It means, my friends, that nothing is ever truly gone.”
As Crab released the ball of light, it moved slowly but purposefully toward Silas’s still body. Once there, the ghostly shape of Silas Benzedrine gradually formed before finally lying down on the bed. Patrick watched in wonder as the spirit simply slid effortlessly into the body and a matter of only moments later, Silas’s eyes fluttered open and he turned his head slowly towards the small group.

“Marcus? Is he okay?” he asked hoarsely. “Did I manage it?”

Patrick stood with tears welling in his eyes. He had seen the impossible, twice and was humbled by it. But at the response, Silas’s expression turned increasingly concerned.

“He is well,” Crab confirmed with a smile as Silas’s face contorted into an expression of panic. “Everyone is well.”

All eyes turned sharply as the door was thrown open so forcefully that it slammed into the wall and bounced back.

“Silas!” Laura cried, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Your mother told me that you… But then I sensed you and I… I… I could barely believe it!”

Extending a hand towards her, still too weak to move, Silas gasped with delight as Laura ran to his side, draping herself over his exhausted body, clinging on as if she intended to remain there forever.

“Never leave me again,” she sobbed into his chest. “I won’t,” he whispered in return as he wrapped his arms around her in a firm embrace. “I promise.”
Chapter Summary

Why does Ambrose hate Pete? And Marcus desperately wants to prove his innocence or guilt over Anna - there is only one way, Spicy has to find the memory that he can't retrieve.

Eleanor stood in the doorway to Silas’s room, silently, discreetly watching Laura still draped over Silas’s chest, sobbing relentlessly. It broke her heart to see the young woman so obviously distressed and it forced tears of her own to well in her eyes, blurring her view of the room. Swallowing hard, she looked down and wiped away what she could of her tears, but even as one left clinging to her finger, another replaced it, quivering on the brink of her lashes.

She had paused at the doorway for one reason only and that was purely because Laura and Silas were, somewhat inexplicably, not alone. It seemed very strange to her that Joe, Patrick and Mister Crab were already there, watching. Then, very suddenly, she noted with some confusion that they were smiling, as if appreciating the scene. What, she wondered, could possibly be bringing smiles to their faces? What in Laura’s distress were they finding such pleasure? Her question was answered almost immediately as Silas lifted an arm a few inches and gently stroked Laura's hair.

At the sound of her surprised gasp, all eyes were instantly drawn to the doorway, where Eleanor stood, wide-eyed and momentarily dumbstruck.

“Mother,” Silas turned his head to the left and stretched out his arm, his fingers stretching out, almost as if he were trying to physically reach her.

Now standing upright, Laura stepped back as Eleanor rushed forward, cupping her son’s cheeks, smoothing his hair and glancing between him and Laura, her eyes displaying her desperation for answers.

“Silas!” she cried, lost for words. “But your father said…” she paused, unwilling, possibly unable to speak the words.

“I was,” he nodded weakly. “Mister Crab brought me back.”

Eleanor turned, a grateful smile forming on her lips as she stared at Mister Crab. It wasn’t a decision made, merely an impulsive reaction to the situation, but when Eleanor ran swiftly forward and pulled Mister Crab into a firm embrace of thanks, the unexpected move precipitated an equally unexpected response. Mister Crab’s vivid blue eyes widened to the point that white was visible all around the iris, such was his surprise, even shock. He appeared uncomfortable; his upper body stiffening and his cheeks became flushed. Possibly most apparent was his uncertainty over what to do with his arms and he now found one hanging almost limply at his side, with the other hovering awkwardly over Eleanor’s back. Noticing Joe smirking at him, Crab turned what could only be described as a helpless yet slightly concerned expression toward the guitarist. Eventually, after what seemed an age, but was probably only a few seconds, Crab felt his shoulders drop – less as a sign that he had become comfortable, or even accepting, but more that he felt it was finally time for the embrace to end. Gently patting Eleanor’s back in indication that he was grateful, Crab heaved an internal sigh of relief when Eleanor pulled back and he tried hard not to show his extreme discomfort.
“Where is Lord Joshua?” Eleanor asked as she turned back to look at her son, now being comforted once more by Laura. “Joe, would you be so kind as to go to the nurse’s station and ask them to call him immediately, please?”

“Sure!” Joe smiled.

“Perhaps, Patrick?” Mister Crab smiled as Joe rose from his seat only to fall back into it once more. “I’m afraid you will remain a little weak for an hour or so yet.”

“Oh,” Silas sighed sadly as Patrick headed out of the room, glad to deliver the good news.

“What’s wrong?” Laura asked. “Can I get something for you?”

“No,” Silas shook his head. “It’s just… it’s the wedding tomorrow and… well… Clearly I’m in no condition to even stand. I know I tend to ignore it when something’s wrong, but I can’t even fake being well right now. Besides, Marcus is probably the same way.”

“On the contrary,” Mister Crab cocked his head in surprise at the comments. “Even as we speak, Mister Sandman is awake and making a very fine recovery, as are you.”

“Perhaps, but not nearly enough to… Oh!”

Silas paused as a new vitality he hadn’t felt for weeks washed over him. Slowly sitting up as if he felt that his new energy might desert him at any moment, Silas found a broad smile creasing his face as he swung his legs from the bed. Tentatively pressing his feet to the floor, Silas rose to his full height, now satisfied that he had sufficient energy to do so. Now briefly bending his knees he flexed his once tired and aching muscles, grateful to not just feel well, but well enough for his wedding. Looking up he could see his mother clearly aching to hold him, to feel his warmth in her arms and know that he was well. She seemed to be restraining herself, pulling back as if afraid to approach. After a moment’s consideration, Silas thought knew the reason. There was his future wife standing nearby and for the first time in his life, Eleanor was uncertain of her place to comfort him. Stepping forward, Silas bridged the gap and pulled her toward him, grateful that once again he had survived to enjoy the relatively new closeness of his family.

“It doesn’t matter if I’m married or not,” he whispered into her ear. “You’re my mother, you always will be and I love you.”

“Si!”

Silas looked up grinning elatedly at the sight of his brother, merely a blur, as he raced towards him almost bowling over the pair as he crashed into his mother and brother, his arms flung around them both.

“I saw what you did for me,” Marcus sounded choked as he remembered the heartbreaking moment when he witnessed his brother give his life for him. “I can’t believe you did that!”

“You’d do the same for me,” Silas released his mother to give his attention to Marcus. “Ah… Maybe?” he replied as if considering the possibility and waving his arms expansively. “You nearly did!” Silas slapped Marcus’s arm and laughed at his brother’s almost mocking expression.

“How about… Just a suggestion, mind… How about we stop getting into trouble for a while?” Marcus raised his eyebrows playfully, yet at the same time, the words somehow seemed almost serious, and decidedly heartfelt. Silas nodded his agreement. “I think that’s a good idea.”

“I’ll second that,” came a deep, slightly gruff voice from the doorway.

Eleanor turned an exhausted smile towards her husband; it was over, really over and everyone was well, or at least would be soon.

“I’ve sent Ambrose to fetch the others, I think it’s going to get crowded in here,” Joshua added returning the smile.

“What about Donnie?” Eleanor asked.
“I think you’ll find he’s feeling much better, also,” Crab bowed his head politely as he responded only to receive a sigh of gratitude from Eleanor.

“Mister Crab,” Silas began solemnly, stepping back from his reunion with Marcus and facing the man who had literally saved both worlds. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Before you worry on that too much, Doctor Benzedrine, you should be aware that everything that happened to you was either directly or indirectly my fault or my own doing.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, shaking his head, puzzled by the response.

“Guardian Pryke came here looking for me as an escaped criminal of Annenstad.”

“That’s not your fault!” Silas objected with a definite shake of his head.

“There is so much more,” Crab sighed heavily. “I have searched my conscience and am struggling to reconcile my actions.”

“What actions?” Joe asked; his brow creasing as he saw his counterpart in obvious distress.

“My crimes are many,” Crab insisted.

“I’m ruler here, Mister Crab, please list your alleged crimes and I will judge.”

“Father!” Marcus hissed quietly, alarmed by the statement, only to be overruled by a wave of his father’s hand.

“Thank you, Lord Joshua,” Crab replied gratefully as he knelt down in front of him, lowering his eyes and crossing his hands over his knees.

At the sight, Joshua felt uncomfortable to have so powerful and important a man bowing to him, but he seemed to understand what Mister Crab was doing and why. Above all, he could see that Crab had something, possibly several somethings, eating away at him and it was necessary for him to air his – as he saw them, at least – crimes.

“I kept my brothers in your world, even knowing the danger. I lacked the courage to deal with them permanently. I knew that on my escape from the dream, Guardian Pryke might return to find me. I placed my needs over those of two worlds and more when I left Carousel to protect Joe and Pete from Guardian. I have murdered my brothers, I allowed Mister Sandman and Doctor Benzedrine to die for my own purposes and I have twice committed the ultimate sin of returning life to a body. I am at your mercy.”

Joshua considered the words carefully. Clearly Mister Crab believed everything he had done was punishable and severely so, but it was all from one perspective only. From Lord Joshua’s point of view, he had contained a problem for millennia and only on the arrival of Guardian Pryke were his brothers released, even then only because Crab chose to save his friends. The rest seemed even more clear-cut to Joshua and finally, when he had ordered his thoughts, did he begin. But he would begin with questions.

“Mister Crab, what did you mean when you said that you allowed Marcus and Silas to die for your own purposes?”

“I am a Spiritual Visior, I see the future. My own future is visible to me, but I cannot change it, not directly anyway, only by changing other’s futures. For example, I knew that I would not return to Annenstad, to do this, I had to die, but for my plan to work it had to be under my own terms and so, I had to adjust the futures of your family and friends, while still ensuring their safety. The only time my future can be altered is when someone accurately predicts it, then it cannot take place and an alternate path is chosen. When Mistress Spicy correctly stated that we would win and all would be well, she inadvertently changed the future and the only way we could continue to win was if everything was not well. To that end, Mister Sandman met his fate. But it was important, as much to me as to you, that he returned and to do that I had to die temporarily in order to remain and ensure everyone’s safety. I had stored some of my powers in Doctor Benzedrine and he was able to use them to wake Mister Sandman. I’m afraid, even with all his powers returned, he would still have been unable. But, as you know the act of waking his brother drained him and he died. That part of
my power within him kept his energy intact and it was a simple matter for me to retrieve it once I had reanimated myself. And to answer your original question, I mingled my powers with that of Doctor Benzedrine so that my signature would change. If Guardian Pryke cannot detect my power signature he cannot know that I survived, neither will he return to this world to find me. I’m afraid, as a result, Doctor Benzedrine’s signature will have suffered a slight amendment too, but I believe that you will not find this to be a problem.”

“I see. Thank you for explaining.” Joshua nodded, glancing to the side as Eleanor joined him smiling up appreciative of what she knew would follow. “Mister Crab, I see the situation somewhat differently. I see a man who imprisoned his brothers, which was meant to be a permanent solution only to have that disrupted by the interference of Guardian Pryke. I see a man who had not murdered his brothers, but judicially sentenced them for their crimes on two worlds. A man who, through all this, had the best interests of our family and friends at heart. Who considered the long term future and found a way to protect us from an unwelcome repeat visit from Pryke. As for bringing two people back from death, you are correcting his mistakes…”

“My Lord Joshua, I…”

“I understand from a spiritual perspective, you are struggling to justify that last action in particular.”

Joshua paused as Crab nodded, continuing to look down.

“Mister Crab, I doubt I am going to find an argument to satisfy your conscience. But I will say that you have ensured the succession and brought peace to Carousel and all its people. We are indebted to you, sir.”

“You are my judge. What is to be my punishment?” Crab asked gravely.

“Mister Crab, you are to forgive yourself. You are to accept that everyone must do things that they regret, but that we grow strong in this knowledge. You are to accept that we are who we are because of your kindness and good grace and that you have the deepest respect and friendship of all of us.”

“Forgive myself?” Crab looked up, puzzled at the words.

“Will you struggle to do this?” Joshua asked; his head tilted in the sure knowledge he knew the answer.

“I will find it impossible, My Lord.”

“Then it is a punishment,” he explained.

Mister Crab smiled faintly and nodded. “Indeed. I will try.”

“Now, please rise and say you will attend the wedding,” Joshua smiled broadly, extending his hand to help Mister Crab to stand.

“I will,” Crab nodded, “but first, I must retreat to contemplate your words. Will you excuse me?”

“Of course,” Joshua patted Crab’s arm gently only to feel a slight crackle as he did so.

“That will settle,” Crab smiled and shrugged lightly. “In the meantime, I think you have some family matters to attend.”

“One question, please, before you go?” Silas began, waiting for a Mister Crab to acknowledge him.

“How am I fine, but Joe has to recover over a few hours?”

“Oh, I can field this one,” Patrick piped in, only to raise a smirked from Mister Crab. “I’m going to bet that Normal Worlders are so weak, you can’t even use powers to heal them quickly. Am I right?”

“To an extent,” Crab nodded. “But then, Joe has had to deal with much more than most Normal Worlders. Perhaps, I should reappraise your strength? Your physical make up is quite different, you know. Now, I must leave and you have much to do also.”

Even as Mister Crab was leaving, the sound of footsteps down the corridor announced the arrival of the remaining friends and family. It would be a long but happy reunion.

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Three sets of footsteps approached Silas’s room and the already crowded room was about to get fuller still. Looking over towards the door, Marcus grinned as he saw Donnie, now apparently back
to full health. It was good to see Donnie, of course, but Marcus had now pulled away from the group slightly, staring, nervous with anticipation. He had a sense of who was approaching and it was taking him all his effort to wait patiently. Finally turning the corner and stepping into the already overcrowded was Spicy. As she caught sight of Marcus, her already broad smile widened still further as she noticed his expression as he saw the infant in her arms.

It felt to Marcus as though the room had suddenly emptied. All commotion and joyous laughter fell away and all there was to see was Spicy and their son, William. Marcus’s eyes shone and glistened in equal measure as he approached the boy, held lovingly in his mother’s arms.

“Can… Can I hold him?” he asked with some uncertainty.
“Of course, Marcus!” she laughed. “He’s your son!”

Passing the boy into his father’s arms for the first time proved easier than either of them had expected with the concerned sandman needing only the briefest of instruction.

“Yes, that’s right,” Spicy encouraged as Marcus held the boy. “Support his head.”
“Like this?”
“Perfect,” she smiled at Marcus, now clearly ecstatic to be holding his first born son at last.
“He is,” he agreed. “Just like his mother.”
“Definitely not like his father,” came a voice at his side.

Turning to look to his right, Marcus manoeuvred William’s arm to emulate a small wave.

“Hello, Uncle Silas,” he spoke in a high-pitched voice. “My name’s William.”
“You know by that age he can understand you don’t you?” Silas commented dryly.
“I know but he wishes he could tell his favourite uncle how much he’s going to love him!”

Marcus turned a happy and emotional glance toward his brother, standing with one arm wrapped around Laura’s waist, the other holding the baby’s outstretched hand already. In the bright lights of the hospital room it was obvious that Silas was tearing up at the sight of his nephew.

“Don’t leave it too long, Si,” Marcus grinned, to both Silas and Laura’s embarrassment. “I want William to have a little cousin to play with.”

“Is that him?” It was Patrick who noticed the happy little gathering first and only moments before the small family unit were surrounded.
“Oh, he’s adorable!” Joe enthused.
“Look at the li’l dude!” Pete grinned.
“Oh, would you look at that! He’s got drummer hands!” Andy cried.
“You think everyone should be a drummer!” Pete laughed.
“Ah, but he’s right,” Patrick agreed, earning a high five from his friend.
“Come on, enough,” Joshua interrupted. “Silas, as improved as you look, I need to run tests on you. You too Marcus and Donnie. I need you to go back to your rooms.”
“But…” Marcus turned a disbelieving expression toward his father.
“With William,” Joshua smiled meaningfully. “It may be an hour or so before I get to you. It’s a lot of tests and I’ll check on Silas and Donnie first.”
“Thank you, father!” Marcus replied, overjoyed to finally have time to spend with his new family.
“As for the rest of you, we have rooms prepared at the palace. I’m sure you could all do with a well-earned rest.”

It was almost as if no one had realised just how tired they were until it was mentioned. None of them could remember exactly how long it had been since they had slept, but they were all feeling the effects of the lack of it.
“I’ll see to it, father,” Marcus announced.
“No need,” Joshua advised. “Alistair is recovered well enough, he can grant them sleep. Everything is arranged. Please follow Seth.”

Marcus wasn’t going to argue. He barely managed time for goodbyes before hurrying back to his room with Spicy walking alongside, both fussing over the baby. It was an incredible sight, and not something Joshua had ever expected to witness. As the room began to empty, Joshua pulled his wife closer and sighed happily.

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Several hours later, after a short but luxurious sleep and a long hot bath, everyone was feeling as if they were finally able to relax. They had all been given their own rooms in the palace, but right now, everyone was relaxing in Silas’s suite of apartments. Tastefully decorated in a very pale azure blue with burnished gilt trim along the picture rails and furnishings. The plush rich navy carpet was welcome beneath their feet, but there was a loneliness to the room that they had not expected. As they had arrived, possibly the most observant of the four friends from Normal World, Andy, had noticed that only one of the three comfortable but stately couches seemed to have any sign of repeated use. It was, of course, possible that they were new, but he had the impression that they had all been installed at the same time and that Silas received few visitors. It was an assumption that appeared to be confirmed by the slight apologetic smile raised to Silas’s lips as he turned to look at him.

But finally everyone had merely settled and relaxed. Stretched out across one couch, Laura almost appeared asleep, enjoying a foot rub from Silas who was sitting at the end, gentle caressing her tired arches and toes. Only Marcus was missing from the scene, having briefly returned to The Dream World to attend a sleep emergency via avstandball at the request of one of his sandmen.

“I’d still prefer to wear my own clothes,” Pete announced to nobody in particular.
“Relax, Pete,” Donnie smirked. “We know the sort of styles and colours you prefer, the Royal Outfitters will find something more than suitable for you to wear at the wedding…”
“Yeah, but…”
“In a style you’re happy with,” Donnie added in as calm a voice as he could muster.
“Go pick something out, Pete,” Patrick encouraged. “Joe and I have already and…”
“All right! All right!” Pete cried, finally giving in and rising from his seat.

Turning his gaze towards Ambrose who was waiting to escort him to the Outfitters, Pete resisted the temptation to sigh heavily and roll his eyes. Ambrose, he was sure, didn’t like him. He probably didn’t like any of them, but he particularly didn’t like him. This experience – going with him to the Outfitters – would be a painful one.

“Ambrose?” Gently setting Laura’s feet to one side, Silas rose from the couch and approached his father’s aide. “Tell me why you don’t like Pete.”

The direct question shocked most people in the room, especially as it had been asked by the only one of them who was a trained diplomat. But no one was more shocked than Ambrose.

“Highness, I… I mean… No, there’s no question…”
“Pete thinks you blame them for everything that’s happened. Is that true?”
“No, Highness,” Ambrose sighed faintly in reply; it didn’t seem that he was going to let this slide.
“Then what is it?” Silas pressed. “Why do you treat him as if he’s not to be trusted?”
“It’s not that at all, Highness. Please forgive me,” Ambrose begged, clearly feeling awkward to be pressed on the matter.
“It is just me, though, isn’t it?” Pete insisted. “I mean it’s not the others, not really. It’s just me.”
“Please,” Ambrose grew increasingly flustered. “It isn’t you. I’m sorry I gave the impression that…” “It’s me,” a voice stated from the doorway.

All eyes turned to face the man who had spoken. In the doorway, Marcus was leaning against the frame casually, with his arms folded in front of him.

“It’s me,” he repeated. “Ambrose doesn’t like me, in fact, he despises me and there’s not much he can do about it. But, when presented with someone who looked like me and the chance to speak to him how he liked, he took it. It made it easier that he didn’t realise that Pete was a friend and it seemed likely he would never see him again. Isn’t that right, Ambrose? That’s how you really want to treat me, isn’t it?” “Highness…” Ambrose lowered his eyes and sighed heavily, his shoulders slumping as if laden with a heavy burden. “I will present my resignation to My Lord Joshua at once.” “You will not!” Marcus insisted as he walked into the room, lowering his arms and taking a deep breath as if calming himself for a difficult task. “But, Highness, I… I have disrespected you,” Ambrose admitted reluctantly.

Everything the sandman had said was absolutely true. Ambrose loathed him. He had done everything he could to pretend otherwise and go about his duties, serving his father, for whom he had the deepest respect. He didn’t have to deal with Joshua’s eldest son on a daily basis, and he was glad of that fact, but the times on which he had to had been sufficient to stir strong negative feelings toward the young prince. Even the recent reconciliation within the family hadn’t managed to change his opinion, so deeply was it set.

“Maybe, but what have I done to you?” Marcus questioned. “Nothing,” Ambrose replied quietly. “Now who’s lying?” he raised an eyebrow at the response. “Ambrose, for so many years you would come to The Dream World at my father’s request to deliver reports, Nyheter discs and invitations to state occasions and I was nothing but arrogant, vindictive and rude to you. I was angry at my father and I took it out on you. You accepted every last venomous word without even a single angry thought slipping out. You were well-guarded and discreet; possibly the finest aide my father has ever had. I gave you every reason to hate me and when presented with Pete and no reason to restrain yourself, you reacted in… well actually, I expected a lot worse from you. Ambrose, I’m deeply sorry for all the pain and aggravation I’ve caused you. Please, can you forgive me?” “Highness, I…” “No,” Marcus interrupted. “Not Highness. Right now, I’m just Marcus, a guy who’s been mean to you for no good reason. If you can’t forgive me, I will understand and I’ll do my utmost to earn your respect, but if you can, it has to be because you want to. Not because you feel obliged or because of who I am.”

Ambrose thought about the words, at first frowning lightly at the stream of unguarded thoughts from Patrick, Pete, Joe and Andy, willing him to accept the heartfelt apology. Finally nodding, he held out his hand to the sandman as a gesture of forgiveness and equality. Gratefully accepting the outstretched hand, Marcus’s shoulders dropped as his tension was released.

“Thank you,” he added, giving the man’s hand a grateful squeeze. “Thank you, Highness,” Ambrose nodded with a smile. “But now, I must apologise to Pete.” “No,” Marcus shook his head to everyone’s surprise. “That’s my job too. None of this is your fault. Pete, my actions precipitated this entire issue, will you accept my apology and regret?” “Dude!” Pete rolled his eyes. “Pete?” Marcus stared with uncertainty, not understanding. “Oh course, you idiot!”
Marcus raised an eyebrow, more at Ambrose’s reaction than the words themselves.

“Oh, so you liked that, did you?” he asked, initially wiping the smile from the aide’s face. “Yeah, I deserved that,” he shrugged and gave a light chuckle. “Please, Ambrose, find Pete something at the outfitters. Something a bit special.”

“Yes, Highness,” Ambrose replied with a light bow, before leading the still reluctant Pete from the room.

Silas offered his brother a thin smile and a shrug.

“How many more apologies do you have left?”

“You knew?” Marcus replied, aghast.

“You spied on me?”

Spicy chuckled lightly to herself. “Oh, don’t be so paranoid, Marcus. It’s the hospital, the fount of all knowledge. People are much less guarded in front of doctors or nurses.”

“How?” Marcus considered the words before frowning as a new thought entered his mind. “Oh! What else do you know?”

“I know you have something else you need to say.”

Marcus nodded solemnly before turning and dropping to one knee.

“Spicy…”

“What are you doing?” Spicy grew quickly alarmed and unnerved by the large audience in the room.

“I want to vow in front of everyone…”

“Get up, Marcus! This is not necessary!”

“No, it is! I want to vow that I will find Anna Dreamspinner and have her admit what she did to me… What she did to us.”

“You don’t need to, Marcus, it’s not necessary. We’re back together and we have William, that’s what counts.”

“But, you have to believe me, Spice,” Marcus pleaded.

“I do!” she insisted in reply. “How can I prove it to you?”

“Prove it! Yes! I can prove it to you!” Marcus cried, suddenly elated.

“Not you!” Spicy found herself laughing at his over-excited puppy-like expression. “Me! I want to prove I believe you.”

“Yes, but if I can prove it, you won’t need to believe me, it’ll just be true.”

“You can’t prove it without finding her, Marcus. Please, you just have to trust that I believe you.”

“No,” Marcus shook his head enthusiastically. “You can go inside my mind. Just because I don’t remember, doesn’t mean you won’t be able to see what happened.”

Spicy hung her head and sighed heavily. It wasn’t something she ever wanted to admit to him, it was such an invasion of privacy. Even now, she could simply have gone along with the idea and then explained that she hadn’t been able to unlock some of the files. But it seemed wrong, it felt like more lying and she couldn’t do it. Hoping for an understanding response, she continued.

“Marcus, I… I’ve,” she heaved another heavy sigh a she fought for the words that might inflict the least damage.

“What’s wrong?”

The tenderness in the Sandman’s voice as he reached for her hands comfortingly only made it more difficult for Spicy to speak the words.

“I’ve already tried,” she admitted quietly.

“You…”
Spicy exhaled in surprise as Marcus dropped her hands, more out of shock than any other reaction. But she read the worst into the move.

“You went into my mind? Without my knowledge?”

‘Don’t mess this up, Marcus,’ came a voice in his mind. ‘Let it go, it’s not like you’ve never done the exact same thing!’
‘Relax, Si, contrary to popular belief, I’m actually not that stupid!’

“I’m sorry, Marcus, I know I shouldn’t have, but…”
“Hey! No! It’s not a problem, I’m just amazed you managed it without me knowing.”

Spicy raised an eyebrow as she regarded the sandman with mock coolness.

“I am a Spymaster, you know,” she smiled.
“And a damn good one too!” Marcus grinned in return. “But you couldn’t find what happened? Or… Did I…?”
“Some of the files were locked,” she explained. “I assumed you had done it… somehow.”
“Locked? You thought I could do that? I wish I could, but…”
“Whatever she drugged you with, Marcus,” Donnie began, “it must have locked the memories too.”
“Then maybe there’s an antidote? Something that will unlock the memories again,” turning a hopefully eye toward Silas, Marcus waited for a reply, his shoulders sagging as Silas shook his head.
“There are drugs that can do that, but reversing the process without losing the memory… well, it’s tricky. I could try, but I can’t promise it’ll work and you may lose the memory altogether.”
“Perhaps you need a key?” Andy suggested loudly.

Met with a few smiles and nods, only Spicy reacted differently.

“What did you say?”
“When?” Andy frowned clearly uncertain.
“Just now,” Spicy returned, equally puzzled by the reply. “You said I need a key.”

Andy shook his head, his brow furrowed at the sight of the nods and murmurs of agreement.

“Yeah, dude, you did,” Pete added.
“I didn’t say a word!” Andy protested, looking from one to the next of the gathered group.

Spicy smiled; perhaps it was a message from the ‘other’ Andy that she had met inside his mind. He wasn’t aware of his presence, it almost made sense that he was unaware of him speaking through him. Either way, she had the answer she needed.

“I think I need to try again,” she nodded. “Get comfortable, this could be a long one, you’re going to have a lot of files in there.”

Marcus smiled. At first a small almost tentative smile before broadening at the idea that he and his beloved Spicy would briefly occupy the same space. Lying back on the bed, Marcus blew a kiss before closing his eyes, ready for her approach.

At first there was nothing to be seen but absolute darkness but within moments the blackness gave way to slowly forming shapes and finally Spicy nodded to herself as she was finally presented with a seemingly endless series of rows of ornate mahogany filing cabinets.

“So,” she mused, “where are you?”

Taking a deep breath Spicy turned slowly on her heels looking for the locked cabinets. Last time she
had entered his mind they had been at the forefront of his mind and so easy to find. Now ten years later, they could have been anywhere. As far as the eye could see, row upon row of tall dark wooden cabinets, seeming to disappear on the horizon.

“So many memories!” Spicy marvelled at the endless number of cabinets, all neatly arranged in regimented rows stretching out all around her. “Can’t you give me a hint, Marcus?” she called. “I guess not,” she shrugged after a moment’s pause. “Oh, well, here goes.”
Inside Marcus's Memories

Chapter Summary

Spicy discovers the reason's for Marcus's paranoia and self-inflicted isolation

“I understand you know,” Pete ventured as the pair walked initially in silence toward the Royal Outfitters.

Crossing the courtyard in the centre of the palace buildings, Pete squinted in the bright sunlight as he turned to look at Ambrose who was making every effort to avoid eye contact.

“You still hate me, don’t you?” he finally asked with a disappointed sigh. If it were true, there seemed little he could do about it.

Ambrose pulled up sharply. Pete could see he wanted to look at him, to say something, but it was as if something was physically stopping him. Taking a deep breath, Ambrose finally turned slowly, still unable to lift his eyes to meet Pete’s.

“I am truly sorry, Highness,” Ambrose began only to be interrupted.

“Pete,” he corrected. “Not Highness, just Pete. It’s too weird, sorry.”

The word of apology brought Ambrose’s eyes sharply up until he stared in alarm at the man standing before him.

“No! Highness, I should be apologising to you!”

“Relax!” Pete raised his hands in a calming gesture. “Breathe,” he suggested with a smile. “Look, I get it, you know,” Pete smirked. “He annoyed the hell out of me too.”


“Yeah,” Pete smirked, not even trying to explain. “He annoyed the hills out of me too. But I got used to him and... he’s changed a lot you know.”

“I’m sorry for how I’ve treated you, sir,” Ambrose repeated his earlier apology.

“What was it about him that really irritated you,” Pete smirked playfully.

“I’m apologetic, sir, but I’m not reckless,” Ambrose headed toward the far corner of the courtyard once more.

“Reckless?” Pete whined. “Oh, you can tell me! I won’t tell anyone.”

“You really are quite similar in many ways,” Ambrose turned a concerned eye towards the bassist.

“Sir.”

Pete paused, stopping dead in his tracks, gaping at the aide, who, without even breaking stride had continued towards the Outfitters building with a mischievous smile fixed on his face.

“Hey!” Pete called after him. “You just insulted me!” Running to catch up, Pete turned Ambrose by the shoulder. “Didn’t you?”

“I’m sure can also find a complimint in there too,” Ambrose replied, non-committal.

“Come on, what do you really think?” Pete pressed as he drew alongside the aide.

Pausing to reflect, Ambrose nodded. “I’ve seen many strange things during my time as aide to his majesty, and I fully expected to see many more. But of everything I ever expected to see, My Lord Marcus taking responsibility and behaving in a regal and stately manner with aplomb and dignity...”
was not one of them."

"You think he’s going to slip up? Revert back?" Pete asked, uncertain where Ambrose was going with the statement.

"No, sir, I think My Lord Marcus has finally matured. Something I know now that was achieved through your intervention. I see now why My Lord Joshua holds you all in such high regard."

Pete smiled. "Having a kid’ll do that to you."

"You have a child?"

"Well, don’t say it like that!" Pete rolled his eyes at Ambrose’s surprise.

"I’m sorry, sir. It just didn’t occur to me. Please, follow me and tell me about him. That is, if you don’t mind."

Glad to have found some common ground for discussion, the pair walked towards the opposite building, with Pete growing increasingly animated over the description of his son.

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Spicy walked down another bank of cabinets, reaching yet another dead-end. Sighing her frustration, she looked around once more at the miles of cabinets that seemed to disappear into the distant horizon. Turning almost full circle, she cocked her head slightly to the right as something caught her eye. No more than thirty feet away a small row of cabinets seemed to hang in an unexpected darkness. Stepping closer, almost hesitantly, she noticed that the area seemed gloomy, forgotten and abandoned. The cabinets stood thick with dust. Above and around them, it seemed that the no light could penetrate a six-foot circle that completely surrounded three cabinets. As Spicy approached it she felt sure that she spotted something small and multi-legged scuttle away, but in the darkness, it was impossible to see what it was. Above the cabinets, cobwebs hung from the ceiling, some trailing all the way to the floor, with others loosely attached to the cabinets themselves. She knew she had arrived in the right place when she moved to face them and noticed that large chains wrapped around them and each of them fastened with a heavy padlock. Thinking back to when she had first seen the cabinets, she felt certain that the number and size of the chains had grown and the lock, which had been secure but quite small, was now the size of her entire hand. Whatever Anna Dreamspinner had done, she had done a good job. Not only was it unlikely that Marcus would ever access these memories, but it seemed unlikely that Silas would be able to concoct any potion of sufficient strength to break the locks. Now digging deep into her pocket to retrieve the key found under the cork tree in Andy’s mind, she fervently hoped that somehow it would fit. That the memories would be unlocked and perhaps Marcus could finally forgive himself.

Placing the key in the first padlock, Spicy held her breath as she tried to turn it. Nothing happened and her shoulders sagged as all anticipation turned to distress at the idea that the effort and hope was for nothing. But, even as she decided to give up, the key shifted in her hands, turning in the padlock by a fraction of an inch.

"Ah!" she cried, elated. "It’s just stiff!"

Working harder, turning the key gradually, being careful to not risk it breaking in the lock. Spicy smiled broadly as finally, with a thick grinding sound, the key turned sharply and the padlock almost fell open in her hands. Unhooking it quickly, she allowed the chains to fall to the floor. Placing her fingers on the handle she paused. This would be the moment of truth. She believed Marcus, that wasn’t the issue. The problem for her now was hoping that the memories that lay within hadn’t been tampered with in any way. The last thing she needed was for Marcus to be able to see the memories and for them to be false, telling a different set of events and possibly hurting him still further. But she was here now and the first cabinet was open. Pulling at the draw, a swirl of light and sounds drew her in and enveloped her. The memory filled the area around her, blotting out the sight of all the cabinets and became the entire room with her merely as an observer. The room, in this case, was
Marcus’s small but comfortable living room in his home in The Dream World.

Marcus looked up as an unexpected rapping sound caught his attention. Closing the book he was reading and placing it on the table, Marcus rose and headed for the door. He wasn’t expecting anyone and other than Donnie or occasionally Ernest his Chief Weaver, he rarely had visitors – especially unannounced. Opening the door, Marcus tipped his head to one side, surprised to see one of his junior spinners, Damian waiting outside.

“Damian?” he began, “is everything all right?”
“No, Highness, I…”
“I’ve said this to all my staff, Damian, I don’t like to be called Highness. If you must call me anything, then ‘sir’ is more than sufficient.”
“Yes, sir,” Damian nodded gravely. “I… Can I come in, sir?”

Marcus frowned; this really was an odd situation. Normally if something were wrong, a request would be made by one of the department heads to one of the Liaison team and Marcus’s presence would be requested. Nobody ever went to his home and certainly not a junior spinner.

“This is… unusual, Damian. Is it…?”
“Are you alone, sir?” Damian pressed, interrupting him.

Surprised by the question, Marcus found himself replying, more out of a need to establish what the issue was than out of feeling obliged or even pressured to respond.

“Yes,” he nodded. “I’m alone, but what is…?”

Spicy’s eyes widened sharply as Damian lifted a small handheld device and thrust it into Marcus’s abdomen. The smallest of blue flashes and an accompanying loud crackle preceded the sandman being thrown backwards half way across the room. Lying dazed on the floor, Marcus seemed unaware that Damian had entered the house and closed the door behind him.

With a superior smirk, Damian looked dispassionately down at the incapacitated sandman before grabbing a handful of his hair and hoisting him up to almost a sitting position.

“You’re not going to remember this,” he laughed, “I’m going to make sure of that, but I still want you to know why. You’re lucky, Sandman. You see Anna wanted to kill you. When you handed over our father to Lord Joshua you knew you were sending him to his death and you did nothing, said nothing. You could have asked your father for leniency, but no, you just let him kill him. It wasn’t his fault. He wasn’t trying to kill anyone; that was your father’s corrupt Council! They were the ones who asked for the hate to poison Lord Joshua. Yeah, my father was one of those who made it, but he didn’t use it. You could have made the distinction, but you didn’t. So maybe it’s time for you to suffer? I could kill you, but you won’t know about it and it won’t even bother anyone else! You live here like a hermit and not even your family want you. The only one who cares if you live or die is your doctor girlfriend and soon, you won’t even have her. You’ll be all alone in the world and the best part is that you’ll believe that your own selfish stupidity was what caused it. And, you know, in a way, it was. You didn’t try to save our father, and now you’ll lose someone precious to you. How fitting!”

Marcus groaned weakly as his eyes tried hard to focus. Raising his hand a few inches from the floor, he steadied himself to send his attacker to sleep only to be dropped and have his hand slapped down again. Falling heavily to the floor, his head slamming into the hardwood beneath him, Marcus didn’t see or feel the device pressing into his side again. Damian smiled cruelly as he watched Marcus’s back arch sharply as the electric current coursed through him causing him to shake violently before slumping suddenly as it was pulled away.
Checking the sandman’s eyes, Damian smirked and nodded to himself as he confirmed that Marcus was virtually unconscious. Pushing himself to his feet and attaching the device back onto the protective holster attached to his belt, Damian returned to the door, and opening it, quickly ushered his sister Anna Dreamspinner and a middle-aged man in long robes into the room.

“You’ve got the potions?” he asked the older man quickly.

“Of course,” the man nodded. “You have my fee?”

“Five thousand dupons is a small price to pay,” Damian smirked.

“Then perhaps we should make it ten?” the man replied.

“Don’t test me, apothecary!” Damian snapped angrily. “Just do what you’re paid for.”

“He is the heir to the throne, I’m taking quite a risk.”

“You’ll be taking a much bigger risk if you don’t do what we want,” Anna announced, pushing him from behind. “Now, drug him. Lock his memories of this and do it quickly before we decide just to kill him and you too.”

Adjusting his robes, the apothecary scowled at the brother and sister before retrieving two potion bottles from a large bag slung across his body.

“This will do what you want but, I warn you, he will fight it. This, however,” he raised the other bottle, “will distract him. He will be quite occupied battling his own personal demons. Too busy to even notice the drug. You will achieve exactly what you want.”

As the memory began to fade, Spicy remained unmoving and shocked. It was worse than she thought. Both of Thelonious Revenor’s children had not just drugged him, but had attacked him with the absolute intention of harming him physically and emotionally. But there were still two memories left. Lifting the key, she hesitated momentarily before releasing the lock on the second cabinet. Whatever they had done to him, she had to know, but one thing she was sure of, they would certainly pay for their crimes.

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Spicy turned the key in the oversized padlock. She wasn’t sure if this one was easier to turn or she was simply prepared to have to force the stiff and part-rusted lock. Lifting the lock away from the chains and, again, allowing them to fall to the floor, she pulled at the drawer, which moved surprisingly easily. Once more, the atmosphere appeared to thicken and an almost syrupy haze hung in the air before clearing on the sight of another memory. Already tense after witnessing the final images of the last memory, Spicy simply didn’t know what to expect, but her mouth was already drying as she looked around. She couldn’t see Damian, but Anna was there. Tall and confident, with long blonde hair falling in soft curls over her shoulders, Anna was certainly attractive in an obvious way, but tainting her natural beauty was a sense of arrogance and bitterness that Spicy couldn’t believe was entirely because of what had happened to her father. There was more underlying her attitude. She could see that the dream spinner hated Marcus beyond all reason. Every single glance that she witnessed was full of loathing, triumph and satisfaction. If Spicy hated her before, her feelings had now escalated a thousand-fold.

Marcus still lay where he fell, barely conscious and reeling from shock. His hands were bound behind him and his eyes were rolling back in their sockets. Occasional faint groans emerged from his lips as he tried desperately to gather his senses.

“Quickly!” Anna snapped to the apothecary now standing near the table in the corner.

Spread out across almost the entire table were a selection of potion bottles, some being heated by portable burners. A pink foam bubbled in one flask, a wispy blue smoke from another threatened to fill the room but for a small vent sitting alongside, drawing in the noxious fumes.
"I’m working as fast as I can," the apothecary complained. “Kepelse Ointment has to be brewed fresh and it’s not easy.”

“Kepelse!” Spicy cried, turning sharply, alarmed by the announcement.

“And you’re sure it’ll work?” Anna asked, looking down at the still immobilised sandman.

“Why wouldn’t it?” the man asked not even looking up from the mortar and pestle he was using to grind up some dried seeds.

“He’s a sandman,” Anna pointed out, clearly unimpressed by the reply. “Sandmen don’t dream.”

“They don’t, not ordinarily, but it can be forced on them, and it’s not a dream in the way we understand it.”

“Then what is it?” Anna asked, mildly confused by the reply.

“His mind will reject itself,” the apothecary snapped as he finally turned to look at her. “You aren’t just distracting him, you know. This?” he held up the bottle. “This is pure torture. He’ll turn himself inside out. If he lives, he’ll suffer with paranoia for the rest of his life.”

“And the Lastrod Juice?” Anna pressed, callously ignoring the apothecary’s statement.

“It’s ready,” he replied waving absently over to a small blue bottle sitting near the wall.

“Then give it to him!” she almost shrieked, snatching it up and pressing it into his hand.

“I can’t! Not yet! Not without the Kepelse Ointment in him first.”

“Really?” Anna folded her arms and cocked her head to one side. “Are you being entirely truthful, apothecary?”

“Of course I am!” he snapped indignantly. “If you use the Lastrod Juice he’ll only lose his memory up until the point he takes it. If you then give him the Kepelse afterwards, yes, he’ll turn himself inside out with nightmares, but he’ll remember everything that happens, including your presence and your attempts to torture him. If you want that, I can do it.” Turning back to the table he muttered quietly: “I’ll gladly do it!”

Spicy caught the last few words and watched closely as he poured the final ingredient into the mix.

“Soffel leaves?” she gasped at the sight of the poisonous plant extract. “That’s not how you make Kepelse! What are you doing to him?”

Stepping forward, Spicy snatched at one of the ingredients only to have her hand swept through the bottle. Sighing with irritable frustration, she reminded herself that she was standing in the middle of a memory and nothing more. At best, she knew that Marcus would at least be alive and relatively well at the end of all of this, but she was desperate to know what the apothecary had done to him. Glancing into the pot warming on the burner, she nodded; the smell of aniseed seemed to confirm the contents as Kepelse, but there was another faint scent, an underlying aroma not unlike burnt hops. It was subtle, but to the trained senses, it was there.

Positioning herself carefully, she read the labels of the bottles lying on the table. It was difficult at first; all the ingredients for Kepelse were grouped together, but it was plain that other ingredients had been used to produce a similar smelling and visually similar ointment. Stirring the thick, viscous fluid, the apothecary reached for a small tub. Only when he moved it could Spicy see the label of the last ingredient.

“Beskytt?”

At first Spicy frowned deeply; the combination of flora was a difficult one to place and she wished she could confer with Silas. Her knowledge of old-world potions was limited but she felt she knew this one. If only she could remember. Thinking back to the addition of the Soffel leaves to the bottle gave her pause. At first she had recognised only their poisonous aspect, but now her latest discovery changed everything.

“Soffel leaves and beskytt,” she shook her head. “You’re making Stotte in ointment form. It looks
and smells the same but it… You’re protecting him! An apothecary? Protecting him?”

Another faint groan coming from the floor drew their attention – it seemed that Marcus was beginning to recover.

“What do you want?” Marcus whispered hoarsely; believing himself about to be kidnapped and ransomed.

“Want, Sandman?” Damian appeared from an adjoining room, pacing slowly across the floor. “I have what I want – you suffering. But it’s going to get worse than this. You’re about to experience something very new and hopefully painful.”

Marcus frowned deeply. He had no idea what they wanted or even why, but he was in no condition to ponder the situation rationally. He already felt so ill and tired. Whatever that device had been, it had completely drained him, and now, bound and weakened, he was helpless against them.

“Let me go,” Marcus asked, his voice steady and calm. “There’ll be no repercussions, I promise.”

“Oh, no, Sandman,” Damian replied scornfully. “The time for promises and mercy is long past. You could have saved our father, but no. You sent him to his death. We’d do the same with you, except this is more entertaining.”

Marcus shook his head.

“I don’t know what happened to your father. Neither do I know why,” he explained; frustrated by the need to justify his response.

“Yeah, sure!” Damian snapped. “Is that ointment ready yet?”

Handing over a small tub with an equally tiny palette knife, the apothecary stood back, watching as Damian knelt at Marcus’s side.

“Oh, dear!” he smirked. “You’re about to have a very bad nightmare!”

Marcus’s eyes widened in horror. He knew, of course, that sandmen never dreamt, but he also knew that certain drugs could force the issue. As Damian gripped his throat, holding him still, the helpless sandman could only stare in panic as the spinner smeared the pale blue almost green ointment onto his lips. Sneering with satisfaction as the ointment seeped, slowly at first, then quicker, into Marcus’s lips, Damian grinned cruelly as he watched his eyes seemed to glaze.

“Goodnight sandman!” he chuckled as Marcus’s eyelids fluttered before finally closing.

Marcus didn’t even hear Damian’s final words. His voice had become a distant and hollow sound and appeared to be moving further away with each syllable. Around him an impossible blackness formed that seemed to drag him spiralling down to some unseen and unknown pit as if he were being taken to Underverden itself.

Landing suddenly and awkwardly in a dark void with only the faintest of shapes beginning to form, he knew the nightmare was starting to take hold. Almost at the same time, the rope vanished from his wrists and he was momentarily relieved to have his hands released, although knew at the same time he was now trapped inside an enforced sleep with a nightmare, his worst nightmare, bearing down on him. With no idea what to do or how to escape, Marcus scrambled to his feet. Looking around, he could see the shapes slowly forming a landscape he knew well. It was The Mareritt Forest; a dark, twisted place with shadows that appeared to move quite independently. It had a magic all of its own, but it was a malevolent magic with an evil presence that pervaded throughout.

Marcus had always forbidden anyone from entering the Mareritt Forest and it was with good
reason. Even he was reluctant to venture into its depths with its mysterious and eerie paths that appeared to change and even vanish as you walked their length. The sandman knew his way down the dark paths reasonably well, despite their efforts to confuse him, but somehow, he felt that the nightmare would refuse to hold to even the few laws the forest obeyed.

Unknown to Marcus, within the confines of his living room, his sleeping body was writhing and screaming in apparent agony, much to the delight and celebration of Damian and Anna Dreamspinner. Spicy watched unhappily as Marcus rolled and moaned, his jaw clamped tightly shut between screams and his brow furrowed deeply. Despite knowing that the Stotte Ointment was only simulating the reaction of Kepelse and that in reality he was in no pain at all, the sight of the two spinners enjoying his torture upset and angered her greatly. With every raised glass and every laugh, her expression darkened with fury and by the time he hung limply, almost whimpering in his exhaustion, she had vowed revenge against the pair cruelly enjoying his suffering.

With the thought that somewhere deep in his mind, a terrifying nightmare was plaguing him, Spicy was torn. Her hatred for the brother and sister who had attacked and tortured Marcus was absolute. There was no doubt in her mind that they would pay dearly for what they had done to him, but she couldn’t help but spare a worried thought for how he would cope with a nightmare. It had been almost a thousand years since he had experienced any sort of dream and it was likely to be very confusing at best.

The sandman was running and running hard. Something – he wished he knew what – was after him. Chased down; he know instinctively that this creature had the advantage of speed and surprise. It was confusing and frustrating. Threatened by a creature he had personally created yet had not seen nor had any control over was irritating in the extreme.

“Ugh!” he pulled up sharply; no one understood the rules, or rather, non-rules of nightmares better than Marcus. “There’s no point running, it’s still going to happen.”

“And this is why sandmen don’t dream a voice complained. You’re no fun at all.”

The voice was familiar but at the same time, he was having trouble placing it. The drawl made it seem as if it were a normal voice, one he recognised, but slowed unevenly.

“How can I terrify you when you know all the rules?”

Marcus turned at the sound of the voice now at his shoulder. His eyes moved up, his head tilted back and his jaw dropped at the sight of a nightmarish figure dressed in one of his own outfits but looked disproportionate and unnerving. The figure standing before him was a just recognisable but tall and terrifying, twisted version of himself. The creature was stretched and elongated to the point of emaciation, it moved in a snake-like manner with an unnatural fluidity to its movements. Although in proportion, the unusual length of his fluid, grasping arms seemed to heighten Marcus’s fear but it was the sight of the skull with leathery skin stretched tightly across the bones that drew the horrified gasp from the sandman’s lips.

“Ah!” the creature laughed mockingly. “I see I can terrify you after all. Now then, sandman, as you recognise me, perhaps you ought to know how I arose?”

Marcus could only stare in return. Yes this was a nightmare; it was terrifying, it was unnatural but was it real? Was it truthful? Normally the answer would be, no, of course not, but, for the sandman, dreaming was unnatural. Could the rules have been turned around?

“You may wonder how I came about,” the nightmare creature began again. “Well, to answer your concerns, I am very real. I was created out of intense negative emotion,” it announced. “I am your brother’s creation.”
The nightmare sandman smirked at Marcus as his face fell at the news.

“‘It’s how he sees you,’” the nightmare went on to explain. “He hates you.”

“No,” Spicy shook her head. “‘He never created that!’” but of course, Marcus couldn’t hear her.

“It’s just a nightmare, Marcus! Don’t listen!”

“And I’m how your father views you,” a second nightmare appeared with an explanation.

“And your mother,” a third opened.

“And Donnie,” a fourth added. “My, you truly are despised.”

“And if you were wondering,” began another slowly. “I was created from hatred by Spicy. You are alone in this world.”

“No!” Spicy cried in shock as Marcus was surrounded by five horrifying versions of himself, stretched almost beyond recognition. “‘I never hated you! Not ever! This is all lies.”

Within the circle, Spicy could see Marcus struggling with the idea that his entire family hated him so much that they would create such creatures, even unknowingly.

“Leave me,” Marcus whispered unhappily as he crumpled to his knees.

“And we shall,” the main figure smiled. “You have created us all, but you can never be rid of us.”

“Go!” Marcus screamed.

Tearing, almost shredding, them from his mind, breaking the nightmare, Marcus fell backwards shocked to find them still quite independently powerful. As he slumped back, all five Nightmare Sandmen rose up and left his mind.

Slumped on the floor, swallowed whole by heart-rending sobs was Marcus. Ashamed to think about his family hating him, it simply didn’t occur to him that it was a lie created by nightmare creatures. Bordering on the edge of a nightmare and reality, Marcus accepted the worst somehow but he was to find that facing a situation and accepting it were poles apart. He didn’t know, but it would be many years before he would come face to face with his demons and try to defeat them. Very many long years but sadly the damage was already done.

Looking beyond the dreamscape, Spicy was shocked to see herself suddenly back in her own body. As she did, she noticed that the Nightmares were escaping into the nearby Mareritt Forest.

Spicy turned her attention to the last cabinet. Yes, even without opening it, she knew exactly what she would find, but she was resolved to continue – she wasn’t the only one who needed to know. Marcus had to recall the memory and she had a feeling that this would be a painful one.

"Come on, Marcus,” Spicy encouraged the distraught sandman even though he could not hear her.

“Be strong, my dearest love. We will get through this.”
Chapter Summary

The last memory is more than they bargained for and finally... Silas and Laura get married.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Silas was frowning with mild concern as he stared at his brother, still lying on the bed; something didn’t seem quite right, but he was unable to put his finger on exactly what was bothering him.

“Is he okay?” Patrick whispered, leaning closer to the doctor.

“You’ve seen it too?” Silas turned a hopeful eye toward his friend.

“No,” Patrick shook his head. “I just saw that look on your face.”

“What look?” Silas asked, surprised by the statement.

“The one I have when I think Pete’s about to do something stupid.”

The comment drew a broad grin from the benzedrine as he realised just how similar they were at times.

“Well, I’ve just got a feeling, you know? Something isn’t right, but I just don’t know what.”

Patrick turned a steady gaze toward the sleeping sandman, willing himself to see what Silas was seeing and help him to isolate whatever it was that was troubling him. About to give up, he paused and raised a finger tentatively.

“What?” Silas leaned forward eagerly. “What have you seen?”

“It’s not him,” Patrick finally announced as he realised his eyes weren’t playing tricks on him. “It’s Spicy, look at her arm!”

“Oh, sverg!” Silas cried. “Marcus!”

All eyes looked up in alarm as Silas raced to his brother’s side, his hand outstretched and a golden light streaming from it.

“Stand back! Everyone, stand well back,” he yelled as he reached for Spicy’s now almost transparent arm. “Come on!”

“What is it?” Andy asked, the pitch of his voice raised as he stared alternately between Silas and Patrick.

“Her arm!” Patrick replied, able to see the problem, but was, of course, not aware of the cause.

“Pull back!” Silas yelled as even more of the spymaster began to fade. “Pull back! Marcus! Fight it! You know what’s happening. Fight it!”

Marcus’s back arched suddenly as he grimaced and screamed in pain, forcing out what few words he could.

“A… Anna… a… trap! He… help…!”

Joe, Andy and Patrick felt like helpless onlookers. Only Donnie seemed to possess some
understanding of what was going on.

“Andy!” Donnie gripped the drummer’s arms as Silas grunted with the effort of sinking all of his energy into stopping Spicy from fading altogether. “Talk to her! You’re connected to her somehow. Bring her back.”

“Me? How?” Andy gasped, turning panicked eyes to his friends as they pushed him forward. “Just try!” Joe urged as more of Spicy faded and grew ever more transparent.

Placing his hand on her left shoulder, now one of the few areas not transparent, Andy tried hard to think of what he could realistically do.

“Spicy?” he ventured nervously.

Inside the tortured sandman’s mind, Spicy’s mind was whirling, along with her surroundings. When finally everything grew still, she found herself sprawled on the floor, the third cabinet tipped on its side and a woman standing over her.

“Anna Dreamspinner,” Spicy spat with venom in her tone, as she pushed herself to her feet. “Revenor,” Anna corrected. “Just like my father, who you had murdered. I only became a Dreamspinner to get close to our foolish prince. To get my revenge.”

“Revenge!” Spicy scoffed. “Your father was a traitor, but I see now that it runs in the family.”

“What you want to call it – it doesn’t matter, not now. Not now that you’re here.”

“What do you mean? Not now that I’m here.”

“You’re pitiful spymaster,” she laughed. “Yes, I actually pity you! You have no concept of my abilities, have you? I’m a revenor, which means I can ghost the powers of those I’ve met.”

“Only if they’re nearby,” Spicy corrected.

“But they are,” she laughed again. “I don’t think you quite realise just how carefully I planned this. Why do you think Damian got hurt enough to go to hospital? So, I, as the dutiful and concerned sister could meet Doctor Benzedrine and sample his powers. I can ghost Sandman’s powers and his brother’s. From Benzedrine, I learned how to pull a dream into the waking world and from Sandman I learned how to construct a dream. So, here I am, I spun a dream of myself and placed it locked in his memories. When you tried to open the third cabinet, you thought you were opening a memory, but no, you opened the dream. That’s where Benzedrine’s power comes in. I reversed it, so I can pull you in. Instead of a dream pulled into the Waking World, you are a real person, trapped inside a dream in your own boyfriend’s pain-racked mind. He can never wake while I hold you here and you can’t leave now. You’re both trapped. How do you like my final revenge?”

Spicy took a step back, unwilling to show the woman, or at least the memory of a woman, standing before her just how nervous she was. Silently, she tried to retreat from Marcus’s mind. As she did, it was as if a great shuddering sensation hit her, throwing her onto her knees and leaving her gasping for breath. In that moment, she could feel Marcus’s pain and hear his desperate screams as he tried to fight the dream that had invaded him. As she rose to her feet, Spicy realised that Marcus was unable to fight Anna while she was inside his mind. Any of his defences would be unable to distinguish between the two women and either both would be attacked or neither. If she did nothing, Marcus would never wake, living his life in terrific mental pain and anguish. There was only one possibility. Only one option.

“You can’t kill me,” Anna gloated as if she had read the mind of the spymaster. “I’m just a dream. But you can kill yourself.”

Alongside the pair, a small circular decorative mahogany table appeared. On top of the highly polished, rich dark wood surface lay a dagger. The handle was a rich but plain ebony, with both the hilt and ornately engraved blade in silver. The metal gleamed and shone in what little light was
available and Spicy found herself staring at the weapon, whilst contemplating what few options she had.

“If you kill yourself, Sandman can free himself. You know that. Is your hesitation because you really don’t love him after all? What a terrible realisation for you! Especially as you have no choice but to either die or remain trapped in here.”

Spicy’s hesitation wasn’t for the reason given, but for a myriad of others. That she would never see her son again, that Marcus would suffer in the knowledge that his insistence on proving his innocence had unwittingly led to her death. That despite never having stopped loving him, her pride had prevented her from forgiving him when she believed he had cheated on her. For all those reasons and too many more to contemplate, she was filled with regret but, if anything, it would be her love for Marcus that would lead her to kill herself to allow him to free himself from the dream. But she wasn’t about to give up, not just yet.

Anna laughed at the expression of frustration on Spicy’s face. But her moment of triumph was to be short-lived as the dream jarred violently, knocking them both to the floor.

“What was that?” Anna cried, looking around urgently, before turning suspicious eyes towards Spicy. “How did you do that?”

Spicy smiled with a mixture of surprise and hope – was someone trying to rescue her? She had no idea what had actually just happened and presumed that Marcus had somehow gained a little control. Whatever the cause, it had served to shake the smug and self-satisfied revenor and that had been enough to bring a smile to her face.

“What did you do?” Silas turned his head sharply to look at Andy as Marcus fell limp and exhausted to the bed, no longer screaming in pain.

“I… I’m not sure,” Andy admitted mystified by the response.

“Well, whatever it was, do more of it!” Donnie encouraged, placing a hand on Andy’s shoulder.

As he did, the occupants of the room each gasped their surprise as Andy vanished.

“Andy!” Joe cried, his eyes as wide as his gaping jaw.

“What happened?” Patrick grabbed Donnie’s arm. “What did you do?”

“Nothing!” Donnie cried raising his hands defensively. “I didn’t… I don’t know!”

Silas turned a worried eye to look at Marcus, now lying quietly, taking slow, deep breaths as he remained still and unmoving.

“Donnie, quickly, please call for The Guard and a sandman with a DMB labelled Anna Dreamspinner,” Silas asked quietly. “And Anna Revenor… just to be sure.”

“I know where he is,” Laura took a deep breath.

Silas nodded, before looking back at his brother. “So do I.” Taking Laura’s hand, he nodded. “Can you link to Andy? Gently, very gently.”

“I can link to his aura, that won’t hurt him, but will it be enough?”

Silas squeezed her hand. “Just watch me.”

A determined and purposeful expression formed on his handsome face as he closed his eyes. Connecting to Andy through Laura, Silas began to see the scene through the drummer’s eyes and a smile slowly formed; he was going to enjoy this.

Andy swallowed hard, trying to take in his surroundings without appearing overwhelmed. He had no idea how he had been drawn into Marcus’s mind, but somehow he felt it imperative that he didn’t
“How did you get in here, Catcher?” Anna spat angrily, although it was clear from her tone that she was shaken by the sudden appearance of who she believed was Donnie. “Spicy, are you all right?” Andy asked, ignoring the woman’s question.

Snatching up the dagger to prevent Anna causing any harm to Andy, Spicy stepped back and drew alongside him.

“How is Marcus?” she asked urgently. “Is he still suffering?”
“No, he’s okay now,” Andy replied, glad to be the bearer of good news.
“Liar!” Anna snapped. “There’s no way…” she paused as she sensed the sandman seemingly at peace. “How? You’re nothing! How did you do that?”
“You don’t know what I’m capable of,” Andy replied, hoping it sounded both confident and threatening.

Anna stared thoughtfully at Andy, seeming to be considering something. Finally satisfied, she laughed mockingly.

“You have no powers, not one. You’re not here to rescue her, you got sucked in somehow. You can’t help her at all. You’re both trapped.”
“Is that so?” Andy raised an eyebrow and sneering as he stepped forward. “Well, I have a surprise for you.”

Spicy raised an eyebrow; it sounded like Andy, but the sudden change in demeanour suggested someone entirely different.

“Oh, and what’s that, Catcher,” Anna asked scornfully.
“Not Catcher,” Andy grinned as he raised his hand. “Benzedrine.”

Anna’s eyes widened as a beam of golden light edged with silver hit her squarely in the abdomen causing her to double over. Clutching herself in acute agony, Anna fell to her knees before toppling forward onto one hand.

“I don’t have to make this painful,” Silas, spoke through Andy and smirked. “But, you know, as it’s you I’m prepared to make an exception.”
“If you kill me, you will only seal your own fate and that of everyone in here!” she spat through gritted teeth. “You have to let me go.”
“On the contrary, I have just the thing for you. I’m going to wake you up!”

Allowing the beam of gold light to pulse, it slowly turned a silvery colour, then a silvery-white, so bright as to be phosphorescent. Anna seemed to slowly change shape, becoming willowy and to twist and bend like a palm tree in a hurricane. Finally screaming in her torment as she was stretched into a long thin strip and sucked from Marcus’s mind.

Emerging still misshapen and stretched in Silas’s room, she was immediately drawn toward the now fully recovered Alistair Sandman and the bottle lying unstoppered in his hands. Patrick, Joe and Donnie, now standing with two Guardsmen, watched in astonishment as she was sucked into the Dream Memory Bottle before the stopper was replaced.

Appearing at Donnie’s side once more, Andy fell to the floor, having lost his balance on his return and simultaneously, Spicy reappeared at Marcus’s side, still sitting on the bed. Sitting suddenly upright, eyes wide and arms reaching out for Spicy, Marcus pulled her towards him in a firm embrace.
“I nearly lost you!” he gasped, panicked by the thought. “It would have been my fault! I’m so sorry!”
“No, not your fault,” Spicy corrected, turning an angry glare toward the Dream Memory Bottle.
“It’s complicated,” Marcus replied with a sigh, finally releasing her from the embrace. “Firstly, she was a reverse-construct nightmare and she was in my mind. But technically I can’t dream, and because it was induced, she had to convert it into an artificial nightmare. But to do that she had to become artificial too—neither dream nor real. The DMB still works, but it can’t erase the memory of something that wasn’t real to begin with.”
“Did you just make that up?” Spicy folded her arms and frowned with disdain.
“No!” Marcus pouted before shaking his head with a sigh. “I simplified.”
“That was simplified?” Joe raised an eyebrow. “Are you okay? Both of you?” he asked as Donnie helped Andy to his feet.

Turning a similarly questioning eye toward Spicy, Marcus’s expression clearly demanded a quick reply.

“I’m fine,” she sighed. “But, I just can’t believe she managed to do that.”

Marcus turned a relieved and thankful smile towards Alistair and the Guardsmen.

“Thanks Alistair,” nodding as he saw the Dream Memory Bottle in his hands. “Please take that to the vault, but don’t open it even after twenty-four hours. I need to calculate how long that will take to disperse, it may be some time.”
“Of course, Highness,” Alistair replied.
“Alistair, just call me Mister Sandman. It’s fine, really.”
“Call him sir,” Silas chuckled. “He loves that.”
“Si!” Marcus turned an exasperated expression to his brother who merely smiled mischievously in return.

“Thanks, Alistair,” Marcus sighed.
“My pleasure, sir,” he replied with a stifled laugh as he headed with the Guardsmen from the room.
“So, those drugs she used must have been powerful,” Silas commented taking a deep renewing breath.
“He used Kepelse on me,” Marcus replied miserably.
“No, he didn’t he used Stotte, in ointment form. I watched him make it,” Spicy explained. “He claimed to be making Kepelse, but he didn’t.”
“What’s Stotte?” Marcus frowned confused, with Patrick, Joe and Andy glad to finally hear an explanation without having to ask for it themselves.
Silas tipped his head to one side and turned questioning eyes to Spicy. “Never mind what. Who?”
“They had an apothecary with them,” Spicy replied.

“An apothecary?” Silas asked again in sheer disbelief.

“Wait,” Joe cut in. “This is going to get very complicated. Spicy, what happened to Andy?”

“He came into the dream, we were linked, he gave me the key to open the locks on the cabinets.”
“No I didn’t,” Andy replied, confused.

“When I was in your mind,” Spicy began to explain. “I found it there, under a cork tree.”

“A cork tree?” Andy repeated. About to say more, Andy shook his head; it was probably best to let this one go.

Okay,” Joe took a deep breath and continued, realising that he was slowly growing accustomed to the strange happenings in Carousel. “Now explain what Stotte is.”

Spicy nodded; Joe’s intervention was certainly proving to be helpful.
“It’s a herbal drug that it will induce a form of sleep similar, I imagine, to what is experienced in Normal World. Also, it makes you susceptible to suggestion, so when she told you you were going to dream, you did because the suggestion was placed. He also must have placed the suggestion that you were in pain, because you were screaming, but I saw you in the dream and you were okay.”

“And Kepelse?” Joe prompted. “For our benefit,” he added as Spicy turned a glance towards him that suggested that everyone knew what it was.

“Of course, I’m sorry. Kepelse is basically an hallucinatory drug that would have turned his mind against him and, if he survived, would have left him nervous and paranoid for life.”

At the muffled sound of a chuckle, Marcus spoke in a defensive tone, pointing a finger at his cousin.

“And you can wipe that smile off your face, Donnie Catcher! I am not nervous or paranoid already!”

“Didn’t say a word,” Donnie chuckled, his smile now broadening.

Grinning at the exchange, Joe continued. “So, Silas, what do you have against apothecaries?”

“Oh!” Marcus rolled his head back in an exaggerated manner. “Don’t get him started on apothecaries!”

Silas drew himself up and his face took on a haughty expression as he adjusted his cuffs.

“Joe,” he began pointedly. “To answer your question succinctly…”

“They hate us,” Marcus cut in. “They hate the Royal House and The Guard and Si hates them because they pretend to be doctors and his professional pride gets hurt.”

“How would you like it if someone pretended to be able to make dreams?” Silas snapped in reply.

“Well given that I just had one try to kill me, I can’t say that I like it either!” Marcus replied, his arms animated to express his distaste. “But at least I don’t have a psychotic need to have them all locked up!”

“Psychotic!” Silas gasped. “Do you even know what that means?”

“Maybe I mean pathological?” Marcus paused, looking off to the left as he considered his words. “That’s not much better!” Silas responded, still insulted.

Marcus straightened up and crossing his arms, offered Silas a cheeky smirk.

“This is nice,” he nodded. “We don’t do this enough.”

“You,” Silas raised a finger and drew his voice low to hold his temper in check, “are a very disturbed man.”

“But you love me,” he grinned. “Don’t you?”

Silas exhaled deeply; it was impossible to stay angry.

“So,” Silas exhaled, composing himself before continuing, “you’re telling me that an apothecary had the chance to potentially kill him, but protected him instead?” Silas clarified.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Spicy nodded. “Huh!”

Silas gave it some thought. As much as it pained him, he was forced to conclude that maybe they weren’t all bad.

“Okay,” he shrugged, “but it’s still illegal to be an apothecary and there are so many bad ones. They prey on sick people in the poorer areas, taking their money but they don’t have the right skills to cure them.”

It was clear that Silas’s real reasons were less about professional pride and more about the people of Carousel and it drew a look of admiration from his older brother.
“We’ll address it, Si,” he nodded. “After your wedding. You and I together, we’ll help them.”

Silas smiled and nodded gratefully; the plan was worthy of the prince that Marcus was and future ruler that he knew he would become.

“So, what did I miss?” asked Pete as he returned from the Royal Outfitters.

Andy raised an eyebrow; this was going to take some time to explain.

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Silas looked up and stared at himself in the mirror. It was that day. It was his wedding day and he felt… happy. He had always been told that his wedding would be the happiest day of his life and he had accepted the sentiment, but had never truly thought it would happen. Of course, he wanted it to happen, but despite being analytical and quite serious in his work, at heart, he was a romantic. He had always believed that there was one woman, one true love that he had to find. It was a very romantic notion, but the logical side of him would always step in, quoting him the odds of actually finding that person. Part of him had accepted the futility of trying and he had resigned himself to a single life, insistent that he wouldn’t marry just for the sake of it or solely to produce an heir – being reasonably confident that Marcus would take care of that side of things.

Now here he was on his wedding day, blissfully aware that he had found his one true love and that he would be happy for the rest of his life. It seemed too good to be true and even though so many things had conspired against him, here he was. Checking the time, he knew he had a little over ten minutes before the coach would come to take him to Gifort Abbey, the largest church in The Hills, and indeed the whole of Carousel, where the ceremony would take place.

He hadn’t wanted a fuss, and he seriously doubted that Laura did either, but as second, no, third heir to the throne, it wasn’t just expected, it was demanded. Hundreds of visiting dignitaries would be there and he didn’t care. Their presence was irrelevant. If left to him, there would be roughly twenty guests – only those dear to him. But now that he began to think more about it, he started to well up. The reaction surprised him. Why would he cry? This was truly the happiest day of his life and he felt every ounce of that happiness flowing through him.

The knock on the door surprised him more than anything. Was the coach early? Was it Marcus, come to tease him with a ridiculous tale to stress him? Another light knock reminded him that he still hadn’t answered it and rising, he straightened his waistcoat and dabbed his fingers lightly across his eyes to catch the tiny droplets threatening to fall.

On opening the door, he smiled as he saw his mother, The Lady Eleanor. She stood resplendent in a damask silk and chiffon gown. The bodice and sleeves in a rich purple, delicately embroidered incorporating hundreds of tiny fresh-water pearls. The full skirt emphasised her tiny waistline, and over it were layers of carefully dyed chiffon that flowed with even the smallest movement.

“Mother!” Silas cried in admiration. “You look breathtaking!”

“You should save your compliments for Laura, my dear, you’re going to need them,” she cupped his cheek gently as he stood aside to let her in.

“You’ve seen her?” he asked with a gleam of excitement on his face.

“Indeed,” Eleanor smiled.

“And?” Silas prompted. “How does she look?”

“How do you imagine?”

A dreamy expression crossed Silas’s face as he considered the question.
“Like she just drifted down from Overwerden,” he smiled at Eleanor.
“And so she does,” Eleanor nodded. “But look at you,” she sighed as she cast a loving eye over her son looking elegant and regal his dress uniform, trimmed with medals and with an ornate sword slung low on his left side. “My baby boy!”
“Are you ever going to stop calling me that?” Silas sighed and shook his head; all the while a smile graced his lips.
“No,” Eleanor smiled in return. “You will always be my baby boy.”
“But, you don’t have a name for Marcus,” he pointed out.
“Oh, I do!” Eleanor corrected with a light chuckle. “Although, for a long time it was That Boy as in That boy will be the death of me!”

Silas laughed; it was indeed a typical response to Marcus for a very long time.

“I’ve never heard you call him anything other than Marcus.”
“No,” Eleanor began thoughtfully, “well, I used to have a pet name for him and then you were born and I didn’t like to use it in case you thought I cared for him more and grew jealous. With hindsight, now I realise that stopping using the name after you were born probably sowed the seeds of his insecurity, but of course, it was unintentional.”
“What did you call him?” Silas asked with a mixture of sadness and curiosity.
“I called him My darling prince.”

Silas roared with laughter and clapped his hands together with sheer joy.

“Oh, you have to start using that again!” he cried. Tears stood in his eyes once more, but this time with laughter. “Today! Use it today! Please!”
“You want him to be embarrassed?” Eleanor smiled knowingly.
“Yeah!” Silas replied as if the answer was obvious. “It’s my wedding day. That can be your gift to me!”
“You may be setting a dangerous precedent, Silas,” she smiled knowingly. “Are you sure?”
“Of course!” Silas laughed, not considering her words until she turned to leave.
“I’ll see you at the Abbey,” she smiled. “Enjoy today, my dear Silas. It truly will be your best day.”
“I will, thank you, mother,” he paused briefly. “What did you mean, a dangerous precedent?”
“Well,” Eleanor smiled as she turned back from the doorway. “I doubt it’ll be long before Marcus marries. What will he request as his gift, I wonder?”

Silas’s eyes widened; it was not something he had considered for a moment. But even as the door closed, his expression of wide-eyed panic returned to a broad grin as he now imagined Marcus, uncomfortable and fidgeting in his dress uniform. Today would be bad enough, but the additional finery required for his wedding would be unbearable for him. Breaking out into a restrained chuckle, Silas draped a short white cape trimmed and embroidered with gold thread across his back and right shoulder and reached for the tricorn feathered hat resting on the stand at the side of the desk. One last look in the mirror left him satisfied that he looked his best, but in his mind it was almost irrelevant. All he wanted was to see his beloved Laura.

A second knock on the door drew a satisfied sigh from the benzedrine. The coach was ready to take him to the Abbey.

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Even by The Hills’ standards, the day was exceptionally bright and sunny and it seemed that everyone had come out to celebrate the young prince’s wedding. The procession route was lined with well-wishers crammed against the waist-high barriers, all eager to catch a glimpse of the bride. By now all guests and visiting dignitaries would be safely ensconced inside the great church. All that
was left now were the members of the Royal House.

All along the route, the contingent of Guardsmen had doubled and several members of the crowd were spymasters, their eyes keenly looking for any sign of trouble. In the first coach – open-topped, decorated with intricate carvings, sat Patrick, Pete, Andy and Joe, each smartly dressed in clothes that almost resembled an Edwardian style. They had managed to eschew the vibrant colours favoured by most of the occupants of The Hills and opted for subdued colours, but in fine fabrics. Each sat forward in their seats, looking around eagerly, drinking in the atmosphere and occasionally waving to the excited crowds.

“You know,” Pete began hesitantly. “I’m kinda used to people looking at me, even waving and cheering, but not when they haven’t a clue who I am!”
“I know,” Andy agreed, perplexed by the idea of the people cheering for what he could only assume were unknown royalty. “It’s really strange.”
Patrick shook his head. “They’re not really cheering us, they’re just cheering. They’re happy for Silas and they’re just enjoying themselves.”
“I guess,” Pete smiled. “He deserves it too.”

Only yards behind the lead coach came the second, containing Marcus, Spicy with William in her arms and opposite them, Spyvie was sitting and finding himself surreptitiously joining his fellow spymasters in checking for danger.

“Father,” Spicy leaned forward and placed her fingertips on Spyvie’s knee. “There are sufficient Guardsmen and Spymasters here, you are allowed to simply enjoy yourself today.”
“Don’t tell me you’re not doing your share, Olivia,” he nodded knowingly. “I have seen you.”
“Well, why don’t we both stop?” she suggested with a light laugh at his honed observational skills.
“How will you be at my wedding, if I say nothing now?”

At the words, Marcus tried hard not to react, but he had already turned his head sharply to his left to look at her. Smiling as though amused in return, Spicy turned to the sandman and added:
“If you think I could put up with you, that is?”

Marcus grinned – had Spicy just proposed to him?

“Well, if you’re prepared to take the chance, I think you’ll manage,” he smiled meaningfully, “as long as we both shall live.”
“Well then, I’m going to need an Extension Ceremony.”

Marcus moved closer.

“You can have,” he whispered as their lips brushed, “anything your heart desires.”
“I have that already,” she replied pulling him the few millimetres closer until their lips met, the sandman holding both Spicy and their baby as closely as he dared without waking the child.

At the sight of the couple’s embrace, the crowd let out an uproarious cheer, managing to embarrass the pair into pulling back and offering instead only smiles and laughter.

In the third coach, Silas, Donnie, Joshua and Eleanor watched in amusement.

“I have a feeling that Marcus may marry sooner than we thought,” Eleanor commented with a knowing glance toward Silas.
“Just so long as he doesn’t do it before we get there!” Silas rolled his eyes.
“If he even thinks about marrying secretly,” Joshua began, “he’ll be…”
“Just being himself,” Donnie commented dryly. “He won’t,” Eleanor shook her head. “Or rather, Spicy won’t. If there’s one person who can keep him in check...”

“Other than you,” Silas cut in, raising a smile to his mother’s face. “He can’t argue with you.”

“My dear son,” Eleanor smiled sweetly, “nobody can argue with me.”

“Well, that’s true enough,” Joshua commented with a smirk, earning a mock stern glare from Eleanor. “What? I was agreeing with you!”

Eleanor allowed her lips to curl up into a smile, unable even to pretend to be angry today.

Some way behind, out of sight of Silas, the fourth coach, carrying Laura and Mister Crab, made its way to Gifort Abbey. Laura stared in wonder at the sheer number of people lining the route and the outpouring of goodwill and happiness all in their name. Waving shyly, Laura found her joy increasing tenfold as she heard the crowds cheer and call their names. It was important to her that not only was she accepted into the family, but that the people were happy. Clearly they were and she felt more able to relax.

“You doubted that they would accept you?” Mister Crab asked the question almost as a statement. Laura turned a thoughtful eye towards her companion. “Perhaps... No, not really. I suppose, I still don’t believe it’s happening.”

Mister Crab smiled. “You have suffered so much, but you are so strong.”

“I don’t need to be now, I’ve found my rock,” she sighed happily.

“Indeed you have,” Crab grew serious. “But always remember that even rocks need solid support to keep them from falling. Do not allow the ground to shake beneath you and he will never fall.”

“What do you mean?” Laura frowned, growing increasingly concerned by the cryptic message.

“Always believe in him,” he replied carefully. “Believe in him and he will never let you down, nor you him.”

Laura found herself nodding gravely, uncertain whether this was just a piece of matrimonial advice from a wise and ancient man, or if there was more underlying his words. Before she had time to ask, the coach slowed to a gently stop.

“We have arrived,” Crab said simply.

“Wait, I... I just want to say thank you.”

“What for?” Crab asked, genuinely puzzled.

“I have no family,” she explained. “You standing in as my father for the wedding, it means a great deal to me.”

“And so much to me also,” Crab smiled in return. On seeing the expression of puzzlement, he continued: “You, any one of you, could have handed me over to Guardian Pryke and I would have gone willingly but you stood by me and fought with me. For that, I am eternally grateful.”

“For everything you have done for us and all of Carousel, we would never do anything else,” Laura replied placing a hand on his, drawing a smile to his lips.

“Because you are all special – kind, brave and unique. I am in your debt and this task seems so small in comparison to what I owe.”

“No, this is my most special day. This is everything to me.”

“Then allow me to escort you, My Lady. Your Lord awaits within.”

Stepping from the coach, Laura barely heard the joyous cries from the crowd or the fanfare begin. With her hand resting on Mister Crab’s arm, her long train floating an inch off the ground courtesy of two finely attired Kinetors following at a discreet distance, all she could think about was Silas and it brought the widest smile to her face.

*
Silas rose and turned immediately the fanfare began, straining to see Laura at the back of the abbey. Finally after what seemed an impossible wait, Laura swept into view. He gasped as he gazed down the aisle from the altar. Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he remembered his mother’s words. She really and truly was beautiful beyond words. With her hair piled up in a complex arrangement of soft curls around a diamond tiara, Laura’s slender neck was decorated simply with a string of diamonds that glittered in the sunlight streaming through the windows. Glimpsing the dress for the first time, the guests and dignitaries were in awe of the simple beauty that she carried with such elegance and grace. The white silk bodice, overlaid with antique lace, fell just off the shoulders. A sweetheart neckline at the front showed off her alabaster skin perfectly and the deep scoop at the back led into a corseted styling ending with a thick white silk bow. Falling away from the waist in deep folds of luxuriant silk trimmed with diamante, the back view resembled a flowing bustle ending in a long train with the front hem raised just enough to allow the points of her delicate white satin shoes to come into view with each step. The trailing bouquet of burnished-yellow and white roses matched perfectly with Silas’s dress uniform.

As he gazed, his mouth dried slightly as he fought to find the right words to express how he felt. As she drew alongside him, there was only one thing he could say.

“I never knew it was possible to be this happy,” he smiled adoringly.

“Then you should get used to it,” she beamed in return. “I’m never going to give you a reason to feel any different.”

“I love you,” he sighed.

“I love you more,” she replied as they both turned to face the altar for the ceremony to begin.

Stepping forward the minister addressed the congregation.

“Friends, we are gathered to witness the marriage of these two fine people. They have been brought together in love a bond that no one should attempt to break. To symbolise this bond are the Ribbon and Rings. Who has these precious tokens?”

“I do,” Marcus rose and stepped forward. In his hands he held a gold velvet cushion and on it lay two gold bands and a white silk ribbon.

First taking the ribbon, the minister held it high for all to see before wrapping it loosely around Silas’s left hand and Laura’s right as they held them out towards him, their wrists overlapping. Finally, he tied a bow.

“This ribbon symbolises the pure and everlasting bond between the two and the tying of the knot represents the permanence of their union. These rings,” again holding them high, before placing one on Silas’s right hand and the other on Laura’s left, “made from metal as precious as their love, symbolise the never ending nature of their commitment to each other and their promise to stand together through all trials and happiness equally. I pronounce them one together and together as one.”

Lowering their hands so that they faced each other, Silas beamed broadly.

“This is the start of something wonderful,” he sighed.

“It started a long time ago,” Laura whispered in reply. “And it’s never going to end.”

Silas paused; he wanted so much to say something profound and adoring, but swept away by her beauty and his overwhelming adoration, he found himself simply pulling her close for a tender kiss, not caring how many pairs of eyes were on him.

“That was awesome!” Joe whispered. “So different to weddings we have.”

“Is there much here that’s the same?” Patrick replied with a smile.
“The party afterwards, I hope,” Pete grinned.

The congregation, prompted by the first bars of the organ, rose as one to watch Silas and Laura, the ribbon now untied and safely tucked into Silas’s pocket, walk gracefully, arm in arm, down the aisle. Only now as people turned did Andy notice that Eleanor and even Spicy had dampened eyelashes and Eleanor held a small lace handkerchief. Joshua seemed merely proud and clearly happy. Andy couldn’t help but hope that the family’s troubles and trials were over.

*  

“You’re not celebrating?” the man asked as he placed his drink down on the table in the dark and dingy bar in one of the few seedier areas on the outskirts of Geban Loch, located on the far side of The Dream World, some twenty or more miles from The Hills.

“Hardly,” came the growled reply. “That’s not why I came here.”

“Oh, and why did you come here, exactly?” the man asked, again without looking up.

“I need your expertise, as an evoker,” the stranger replied, taking a seat at the table and earning himself a harsh angry glare in return. “I need my powers reinstated, I heard you could do that for a price.”

“Did I say you could sit?” the man snapped.

“Look, I don’t have time to waste arguing with you. I don’t just have money, I can help you,” the visitor ignored the angry tone.

“I don’t need your help.”

The stranger slapped a sheet of paper down onto the table. It was a Wanted poster and on it, pictures of a man and a woman with the words:

\[ \text{Wanted For Treason – Dead or Alive} \]
\[ \text{£2 Million Dupons Each:} \]
\[ \text{Damian Evoker (aka Dreamspinner) and Anna Revenor (aka Dreamspinner)} \]
\[ \text{for crimes against The Royal House and Carousel} \]

“You think you can collect on that?” the man laughed.

“I would hardly have approached you if that was my intention, Damian.”

“Then what is your intention?”

“I told you, I need your assistance in exchange for my help.”

“And I told you, I don’t need your help!” Damian replied, pushing the sheet of paper back across the table.

“You don’t know what kind of help I can give you.”

“Whatever it is, I don’t...”

“I can bring you Marcus Sandman,” the newcomer interrupted.

Leaning forward, the man turned his glass a few times before looking up at the stranger. As he did, two heavy-set men took seats either side of the stranger, blocking him in.

“Weapons?” he asked.

“No.”

“Foolish.”

“Not really,” the stranger replied coolly. “How else are you to trust me?”

“What makes you think I’m going to anyway?”
“Fine,” the stranger replied. “I’ll be on my way.”
“Wait,” a female voice emerged from the shadows and Anna Revenor stepped forward, regarding
the man with an icy stare before adding with a tone dripping with sarcasm: “What do you have
against our glorious prince?”
“Nothing,” he replied before shrugging lightly. “Well nothing specifically against him. My problem
is with the other one.”
“Then why should you bring us the sandman?” she asked suspicious of his motives.
“Payment for your help getting what I want.”
“And what do you want?” she asked, her eyes narrowed.

Looking up at the hologram near the wall displaying scenes of the procession of the Royal coaches
to the abbey, he exhaled deeply as he pointed at Laura.

“I want her with me and the benzedrine disgraced and dead.”
“And you can bring me Marcus Sandman? Alive?”
“Yes, I can do that,” he smiled in return.
“Then maybe we can do business, Mister…”
“Renderer, Francis Renderer.”

THE END…?

Chapter End Notes

Huge thank you to everyone who read and commented on this series of stories. I
thoroughly enjoyed writing them and reading all your comments. I hope you enjoyed it
too - it's been quite a ride! There is a sequel but only 2 chapters have been written. If I
get my act together - maybe after I've finished at least one of my MCR fics, I'll crack on
with it. If I do, it's called 'I Must Confess'.

Once again, a final shout out to Lindsey who let me know about the individual who had
stolen 3 of my stories and was claiming them as her own on Wattpad. Her account has
now been shut down - shame on her!

Thanks everyone!!

Sas xox

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!