

MONSTERS

CHAPTER 1-RISE O' CHAMPION OF STYX

"Your desires are realized, now come child, entertain me," She whispered, her words lay thick with malice and cruelty.

A young man stood in the shallow waters of a small, secluded beach, taking in the scenery. Tropical water ran past his ankles and up the fine white sand that called the beach home. He felt an odd sense of calm standing there in the shallows, it was almost as if they called to him, asking him to stay. Content, he sat down in the cool water, enjoying the soothing melody sung by the crashing waves. It was as if all the pain and misery was slowly being washed away, freeing his mind to think clearly.

He felt little desire to leave, why would he? A serene beach, with clear and warm weather, white sand, and crystal-clear water. It was perfect. It was peaceful.

The portrait was disturbed as a shadow passed overhead, arresting his attention.

A figure stood above him; their visage obscured by the sunlight. They spoke with a sweet and gentle voice.

"Who are you?"

The image of the beautiful beach shattered, replaced by a painful burning sensation in his chest.

He gasped for air as his eyes shot open. The sky above was no longer clear blue but a faded black with streaks of orange, cast by the rising sun. He felt a knot release in his stomach and quickly rolled over before vomiting a mixture of bile and saliva.

Warmth crept from his centre and out across his body and feeling returned to his nerves.

With fierce determination, he clambered to his feet. It was like watching a newborn standing for the first time, with his legs wobbling beneath him – dangerously close to collapsing.

He spluttered as he tried to breathe. Shocked and confused by the recent events he could scarcely remember. The pain in his lungs hadn't faded, seemingly getting worse with each breath, but he didn't care. He racked his brain, desperately trying to remember what had happened.

Worried, he spun around, only for his legs to lag and buckle beneath him. He fell into the ashen dirt, sending a cloud of the substance skyward. Refusing to accept this minor setback, he struggled on, desperate to at least see himself sitting and after a moment of near futile strain. He made it.

He gulped and immediately began to hack and splutter trying to clean his mouth from the foul-tasting ash that had mixed with his saliva.

Amidst his fit, he began to remember. The memories surged into his mind, slowly building until they came crashing down, bearing emotions he'd sooner forget than relive.

He could remember them: Rough waves throwing a ship in the dead of night, a heartless melody sung over dying screams, the self-sacrifice of a friend to spare the rest, the whistle of steam and clanking of iron as gears moved into place, feral beasts stalking prey as it crossed their domain, jagged cliffs that touched the sky, dark twisting tunnels filled with horrors and finally the blistering heat of flowing lava.

He summited the volcano alone.

No. He wasn't alone. He racked his brain further. Someone was there; he had spoken to them – their lips moved but the words were lost.

What were they saying?

He probed his mind; a visage of the silent speaker flickered into focus. Skin purple, reminding him of the wisteria flower he'd seen only in books. And then suddenly, the only thought left was pain.

The young man grabbed his neck, finding nothing but the cool sensation of his own skin. The collar that once embraced it gone. He'd done it, he'd destroyed the artefact, he was free.

Something cold ran down his face. Quickly, he wiped at it, finding a singular tear clinging to his finger.

What right did he have to celebrate his freedom, when the friends he had held dear were now dead. Regret crept in and he could do nothing but stare onwards with a bleak expression.

The memories began to order themselves. There had been nine of them at the beginning of their journey. A journey none of them had agreed to but were forced on anyways, collared like dogs to make sure they obeyed. A great evil threatened the land, and it was they who were chosen to save it. A group unfit for such an endeavour.

Now Kairan stood alone, the sole survivor.

He sat amongst the ash, playing with it to distract himself from the pain. It drained from between his fingers as he recollected more of his thoughts. The king had said to destroy the artefact, that would save his people... but it was that person who appeared when the artefact was destroyed, why? In the end nothing had changed, all that suffering for nothing.

An expendable pawn for a king he knew not the name of.

Subconsciously, his fingers curled into a fist, squeezing the ash in his hand. The bones in his fingers began to ache.

The anger began to rise, burning for the one who had sentenced him to this fate.

He slammed his fist into the ground, a useless expression of rage, but it made him feel slightly better. However, that feeling quickly changed, as the hand that struck the dirt couldn't have been his. In fact, it didn't even look human. Charcoal grey, with rigid and flaky skin.

He scrambled backwards, spurring his mind to rationalize what he saw but the hand followed. Of course, it would, it was his after all. But he denied it, every fibre of his being denied it.

Panic began to set in but there was no denying the truth. It responded to his every whim, whether he wanted it to or not.

With frantic fervour, he examined himself, desperately wanting to know what he was, but fearful of the truth.

Yet, a part of him already knew.

He wasn't human anymore.

With panic barely held at bay, he grabbed a hold of his face. His fingers were like beach mites clawing their way through sand, as they scrambled along his face. They searched, skittering across the flatness. From the bottom they found nothing that resembled a chin, desperate they darted upwards, finding a mouth. He felt relief as the fingers forced their way inside; two rows of sharp blades meant to be teeth sliced his shaking fingers.

Hesitantly, they left his mouth and continued further up, eventually passing his eyes. He could feel his heartbeat pounding in his ears. That couldn't be correct. There should have been a nose first. With shaking hands, he pressed against the flesh just above his mouth. Nothing, albeit two small slits, cut into the flesh that would flare with each exhale.

An unsettling, nauseating feeling filled his stomach, but he couldn't fight the desire to know more. Just how much had he been disfigured.

The hands drifted higher, past the eyes until they struck something else. It was big, stretching out around the entirety of his head and just out of view. It was as if some tumorous growth clung to his head.

With unchecked panic he jumped to his feet, only to hunch over like some malformed imp. He was alone, but even so, wanted to hide the freak that he'd become.

While doing his best to cover himself, he searched desperately for a reflection. Anything that could reveal to him what he was, until a light caught his eye, reflecting off the small stones strewn between the ashen dirt. He began frantically scooping stones together, but it was of no use, they showed him nothing.

He turned his gaze to the shadow brought about by the rising sun. Light washed over his naked back, revealing what he was.

A pit formed in his stomach, and a tightness seized his throat.

The shadow before him was humanoid, maybe a bit tall and broad, but the real difference was the mushroom it wore for a head.

"I'm a monster," he said dejected, as he fell onto his hands and knees... "They did this to me," he muttered with a growl, the figure in his memories flashed him a malicious smile as their conversation drew to a close.

A new glint caught his eye, sharper than the last. Momentarily distracted from his plight, Kairan began sifting through the loose dirt, unearthing a sword. The metallic lustre of its hilt was long gone, replaced with an infection of rust. He pressed a thumb into the thick layer of dirt that clung to the scabbard, prying a chunk off. His suspicions were true; the pattern engraved on the scabbard belonged to the sword he'd carried.

Rust and dirt spewed out as he unsheathed the blade, similar to the hilt, it had been consumed by rust; to the point the tip had broken off. He held it to the light. *What*

happened? What did they do? The thought was quickly squashed as he began to rejoice. At least one partner had made it.

Yet that happiness did not last, quickly replaced by anger one more.

"You did nothing," he snarled at the rusted blade. With misplaced rage he clumsily climbed to his feet, ready to throw the sword off the mountain side, "You couldn't save a single one of my friends!" he yelled, swinging his arm, but just couldn't let go of the sword.

"I couldn't save a single one of my friends." He fell to his knees again, letting the sword slip from his grasp.

He sat at the edge of the cliff for a while, quietly staring at the world around him. Lost in thought he never took notice of his once damaged eyes now working correctly – far better than any human.

Beneath him, at the volcano's base, was a line of destroyed trees growing anew amidst the debris of the lahar – almost parasitic in nature, as they latched onto the surrounding rockface. The absence of soil staving off their advance.

His eyes drifted upwards. Far in the distance, barely visible, were the Twin peaks, two giant mountains that stood above the rest of their mountain range.

But something else caught his eye – people. He could see the marks of civilization between the Twin peaks and the volcano; there was even a town just a day's travel away.

His chest tightened, if only he hadn't been so focused on reaching the volcano, maybe he could have saved at least one friend.

"What do I do now?" Kairan mumbled to himself, watching the miniature dots move about in the fields around the nearby town.

As the sun pulled higher into the sky, he climbed to his feet, his eyes fixated on the drop before him. An emptiness cast in shadow, a deep void that called for him. His right foot shifted forward, pushing a stone over the edge. He never saw it land but he heard it striking the rock beneath with a resounding echo.

Kairan closed his eyes and drew a long breath; he held onto the air until his lungs began to burn. He released the air slowly before taking another breath.

Just one step.

"Coward," he spat and pulled himself from the edge. He could feel a prickle run along his back as if the scolding gazes of his friends were digging into him. They'd have had every right to chastise him for such a pathetic display.

He sheathed his blade; a decision had been made for him. He tore off the remaining shred of cloth that had once made up his shirt and tied it to the cross-guard. Finished, he turned back to the volcano's rim and jammed the sword into a pile of rocks swarming with black mushrooms, before taking a step back. A final grave for the nine who died for nothing – a droplet in the pond that was the king's mounting sacrifices.

A light breeze blew past, tugging on the two loose ends of cloth.

He struggled to find something to say, opening his mouth several times only to close it. Offering prayer felt wrong as he wasn't religious, so what was left? Just a simple goodbye?

He looked down at his hands. "There are darker designs at play. The nightmare we were subject to has yet to end. Perhaps growing more twisted." He paused for a

moment, turning back to the grave; his eyes narrowed. "It is clear to me now; I can only hope there is a cold spot in hell waiting." His hands balled into fists and his jaw clenched. "No fortress will be his sanctuary. The vast seas won't slow me, and his army will prove a futile defence to cower behind." He turned northward, to the horizon, his hardening gaze stretching beyond the borders of the island and across the ocean. To Dyovar. The place where it all began.

The goal set. All that was left was to take the first step and descend from the volcano summit.

A trial proven rather arduous. Near moments after starting, the strain suffered by his muscles forced him to take a break, a theme present throughout the entirety of his descent. It bewildered him, his new body seemed perfectly fine – in fact, it should have excelled at such basic task, yet each step was a struggle. After harrowing three hours he collapsed against a rock and slid slowly to the floor.

"Pathetic," he huffed, barely able to keep his breathing steady. He rolled onto his back. "All that talk, and I can't even climb down a mountain," he moaned. It was somehow harder than when he had climbed the volcano moments prior, something he'd managed to do while half-starved and...It dawned on him. The rumble from his stomach confirmed his suspicion. He was starving, a realization that came three hours too late.

With great difficulty he pushed himself up, pausing his descent in favour of even the tiniest scraps that might have grown on the volcano's cliffs.

All he found was disappointment.

"Fine," he said finally as he glared at the clump of dried leaves meant to be a bush that he was currently crouched over. "You survived the eruption only to be eaten by me...I'm talking to a plant," he said with a sigh. "Hunger makes a man do strange things." With little motivation, he grabbed a handful of leaves and shoved them into his mouth, all the while telling himself it was spinach.

He spat them out immediately and frantically started wiping his tongue. Not only did they taste horrid with an acidic aftertaste, but they were covered in fuzz that would prick the tongue as you chewed.

Dejected with the little sustenance he managed to squeeze from the leaves, he returned to the long climb down. His stomach would have no choice but to hold on until greener pastures were found.

It took every hour of sunlight for him to reach the base of the volcano, but the journey wasn't over yet. One thing remained before he'd allow himself the option of rest. He sat, heaving as he collected his breath. Above him was the cave that had saved them from the eruption, thanks to it being elevated high above the ground and the surrounding rockface slanting away from the entrance.

Ready, he began to climb. A mixture of emotions began to swell; sorrow, dread, regret but most powerful of all was hatred. This is where he'd buried James. Weak from blood-loss and starvation, the extreme heat of passing lava was the reason James never saw the morning.

Kairan stared into the cave's black maw, contemplating. Eventually he reached an answer before taking a deep breath and plunging inwards. The sounds from the outside world disappeared, leaving him with nothing but the tapping of his bare feet against the stone.

He turned a corner. "Hey James," he said. The words were caught in his throat. "How-" he froze, the sight before him made his stomach churn. He rushed towards James' grave. His legs buckled under the stress, and he fell face first into the empty pile of rocks but without hesitation he began digging, forcing his way in between the rocks until his nails scrapped the bottom.

The grave was empty; the rocks had been blasted apart, some even melted. The ground was a series of scorch marks and now cooled molten rock. His remorse changed to shock and then worry. A morbid thought squirmed its way into his mind. Something had eaten James. He sat back from the pile, unsure. At least now there was no chance of James possibly coming back. Kairan's lips pulled into a snarl and his jaw tightened as he remembered something. It was a foul memory that broke him. Better that James did not have to suffer through that fate too.

To keep the demons of his mind at bay, Kairan distracted himself with the marks left by the beast. It was not a large creature, maybe a handful of centimetres shorter than himself, if the comparison between their feet meant anything. It was also bipedal based off the pattern of the prints.

The footprints were unnaturally shaped, matching no beast he'd seen before. Thin by the heel before spreading out by the toes – though it was more accurate to call them talons – there was also no evidence of an arch. The foot was almost symmetrical.

As he explored more, he came to the realization something truly strange had occurred. Close to the grave were these scratches and soot marks, then the footprints only appeared about two metres away: facing towards the grave. Then some kind of struggle that involved the wall before the creature finally took off and fled.

The setting sun, and ensuing darkness, put an end to his investigation. Without much choice and exhausted, he decided to turn in for the night. He wasn't about to sleep inside the cave but also knew that outside would be far worse; in the end he decided to stay near the entrance, just shy of the two moon's light.

He settled himself against the wall, crossing his arms and tucking his legs to stave off the biting chill.

The night seemed to drift by silently, no beasts made a commotion, even the night critters were uncharacteristically still; mice hid in their hovels while the owls kept to their roosts. There was a thick tension in the air, a fear had been burned into every living thing that called the forest home. Just what horror could disrupt an entire forest's ecological habits?

While waiting for sleep to take hold, he reflected on the day, but his mind eventually betrayed him, dredging up images of the accursed throne room. The mark of when his life had started to fall apart

It was a vast room, the only thing bigger that Kairan had seen was an academy hall but despite its grandiose size, the throne room was relatively bare. The decorations were limited, a handful of banners bearing different coats of arms, but that was to be expected. The room was built in such a way that it pushed your vision toward the throne, and any additional clutter would have detracted from the throne's weight. The throne was golden with accents of white, crafted to mimic a flock of doves taking flight. Each dove had a small red jewel for an eye, that stared out lifelessly.

The memories twisted as sleep took hold.