

longest

A Story by Inkwell AI

Chapter 1

The wind tasted of ash again. dad spat, the gritty residue clinging to their tongue. It had been three days since the sky bled crimson, three days since the earth coughed up that... *thing*. Three days of this cursed wind.

They pulled their threadbare cloak tighter, the worn fabric offering little solace against the chill that seeped into their bones. The village, once a vibrant tapestry of thatched roofs and bustling market stalls, was now a ghost of its former self. Buildings stood skeletal, hollowed out by fear and neglect. The few remaining villagers huddled indoors, their faces pale masks pressed against dusty windows.

dad continued walking. There was no point in lingering. Staying meant breathing in more ash, hearing more whispers of dread, feeling the collective despair pressing down like a physical weight. They had a destination, a purpose, however fragile it might be.

The path was barely discernible, overgrown with thorny weeds that snagged at their worn boots. Each step was a deliberate act of defiance against the inertia of hopelessness. The air hung thick and heavy, pregnant with unspoken anxieties. Even the birds had fallen silent, their songs replaced by an unnerving quiet that amplified the rustle of the wind and the crunch of dad's boots on the parched earth.

They reached the edge of the Whispering Woods. Even before the crimson sky, the woods had been a place of unease, a place where shadows danced and secrets lingered. Now, they felt... tainted. Corrupted.

dad hesitated, their hand hovering over the hilt of the worn dagger strapped to their hip. The dagger was more a symbol than a weapon, its blade dulled with age and countless sharpenings. But it offered a sliver of comfort, a tangible reminder that they weren't entirely defenseless.

Taking a deep breath, they plunged into the gloom. The canopy overhead blotted out what little sunlight remained, plunging the woods into a twilight realm. The air grew colder, the scent of pine and damp earth mingling with a metallic tang that made their nostrils twitch.

The trees themselves seemed to lean inward, their branches gnarled and twisted like skeletal arms. The silence here was even more profound, a suffocating blanket that muffled every sound, every thought.

dad pressed on, following a barely visible track that wound deeper and deeper into the woods' heart. They had traveled this path countless times before, gathering herbs, hunting small game, seeking solace in the quiet solitude. But today, the woods felt alien, hostile.

A twig snapped behind them.

dad whirled around, dagger drawn, their heart hammering against their ribs. Nothing. Only shadows shifting in the fading light.

They held their breath, listening intently. The silence stretched, taut and unnerving. Slowly, cautiously, they lowered the dagger. Must be their imagination. The wind playing tricks.

They started walking again, their pace quickening. The feeling of being watched intensified, prickling the back of their neck. They could almost feel eyes on them, unseen and malevolent.

Another twig snapped, closer this time.

dad spun around again, their voice a hoarse whisper, "Who's there?"

Silence.

They scanned the trees, their eyes darting from shadow to shadow. Nothing moved. But the feeling persisted, growing stronger with each passing second.

Suddenly, a low growl echoed through the woods, a guttural sound that vibrated in their chest. It wasn't an animal sound. It was something... else.

dad raised the dagger again, their hand trembling slightly. "Show yourself!" they shouted, their voice cracking with fear.

The growl came again, closer this time, followed by the rustling of leaves and the snapping of branches. Something was moving through the undergrowth, something big, something heavy.

dad backed away slowly, their eyes wide with terror. They knew, with a certainty that chilled them to the bone, that whatever was out there wasn't natural. It was a creature born of the crimson sky, a manifestation of the dread that had gripped the village.

The bushes in front of them parted, and a pair of glowing red eyes appeared in the darkness. The growl intensified, morphing into a guttural roar that shook the very ground beneath their feet.

dad stood frozen, paralyzed by fear. The creature stepped out of the shadows, its form indistinct but undeniably monstrous. It was tall and gaunt, with long, spindly limbs and a head that was too large for its body. Its skin was the color of dried blood, and its teeth were long and sharp, like shards of glass.

The creature lunged.

dad screamed, dropping the dagger and stumbling backward. They tripped over a root and fell to the ground, their head hitting the earth with a sickening thud.

Everything went black.

When they opened their eyes, the creature was standing over them, its red eyes burning into their soul. It reached down with a clawed hand, its fingers brushing against their cheek.

Then, it spoke.

Its voice was a raspy whisper, a chorus of voices all speaking at once. And what it said made dad's blood run cold.

"You are the longest," it hissed. "And you belong to us."

Chapter 2

The words echoed in dad's skull, a chilling pronouncement that shattered the last vestiges of hope. "You are the longest. And you belong to us." The creature's breath, fetid and reeking of decay, washed over them. Paralysis gripped dad. They tried to scream, but only a strangled whimper escaped their lips. The clawed hand tightened on their cheek, not with crushing force, but with possessive certainty.

The red eyes burned into them, probing, dissecting. It felt like the creature was looking into their very soul, stripping away layers of identity, exposing raw fear and vulnerability. dad squeezed their eyes shut, desperate to block out the sight, the smell, the sheer wrongness of the thing that stood before them.

A wave of nausea washed over them. They tasted bile in the back of their throat. Black spots danced behind their eyelids. They were going to faint again. They fought against it, clinging to consciousness with a desperate tenacity. They had to see. They had to understand.

But understanding seemed impossible. The creature's words were nonsensical, terrifying in their ambiguity. *The longest? What did that mean? And belong to us? Who was 'us'?*

The claw on their cheek shifted, tilting their head back. dad's eyes fluttered open, forced to meet the creature's gaze. In those crimson depths, they saw something that terrified them even more than the monstrous form: intelligence. Malignant, alien intelligence. This wasn't a mindless beast driven by instinct. This was something that thought, that planned, that *knew*.

A low chuckle rumbled from the creature's chest, a sound that scraped against dad's nerves like sandpaper. "You struggle," it rasped, the chorus of voices somehow both individual and unified. "But resistance is... inefficient."

With surprising speed, the creature scooped dad up, lifting them effortlessly as if they weighed nothing at all. Their body protested, every muscle screaming in agony. The world spun. They gasped for breath, their lungs burning.

The creature turned and began to move, striding deeper into the Whispering Woods. The trees seemed to bend away from it, their branches recoiling as it passed. The shadows deepened, swallowing them whole. dad struggled feebly, kicking and thrashing, but their efforts were futile. The creature's grip was unyielding.

"Let me go!" they croaked, their voice hoarse and weak.

The creature didn't respond, didn't even acknowledge their plea. It continued its relentless march, its long strides eating up the ground. The air grew colder, the metallic tang in the air growing stronger, almost overpowering.

dad tried to focus, to think, to formulate a plan. But their mind was reeling, their thoughts fragmented and incoherent. They were trapped, helpless, at the mercy of this... thing.

They glanced around desperately, searching for any sign of escape. But there was nothing. Only trees, shadows, and the oppressive presence of the creature that held them captive.

They saw a flicker of movement in the periphery of their vision. Something small and dark darted between the trees, keeping pace with them. They strained their eyes, trying to get a better look. It was too far away, too obscured by the shadows. But they could have sworn it was... watching them.

Hope, a fragile ember, flickered within them. Perhaps someone had seen them taken. Perhaps someone would come to their rescue. But the hope was quickly extinguished by the crushing weight of reality. Who would dare venture into these woods after the crimson sky? Who would risk their life for them?

The creature suddenly stopped. It had reached a clearing, a small, circular space bathed in an unnatural, ethereal light. In the center of the clearing stood a monolith of black stone, its surface covered in strange, indecipherable symbols. The stone pulsed with a faint, internal light, casting eerie shadows that danced and writhed around its base.

The sight of the monolith sent a fresh wave of terror through dad. It felt... wrong. Unholy. An affront to everything they knew and understood.

The creature approached the monolith, its steps slow and deliberate. It held dad out in front of it, as if presenting them as an offering. The red eyes fixed on the black stone.

The air crackled with energy. The symbols on the monolith began to glow brighter, pulsating in sync with the creature's breath. A low hum filled the clearing, a sound that resonated deep within dad's bones.

They felt a pull, a force drawing them towards the monolith. They struggled against it, their body trembling with fear. But the force was too strong. They were being drawn in, consumed by the darkness.

The creature released them. dad fell to the ground, landing heavily on their knees. They looked up at the monolith, their eyes wide with horror. The symbols were swirling now, forming patterns, coalescing into... words?

They couldn't understand the language, but they knew, instinctively, that the words were meant for them. They were a message, a summons, a... destiny.

The humming intensified, reaching a deafening crescendo. The ground beneath them began to tremble. Cracks appeared in the earth, spiderwebbing across the clearing.

Suddenly, the monolith erupted. A beam of black light shot skyward, piercing the canopy and disappearing into the crimson sky. The force of the eruption threw dad backward, slamming them against a tree.

They lay there, dazed and disoriented, their vision blurring. The world was spinning. They could hear the creature chanting, its voice a guttural drone that echoed through the woods.

As their vision cleared, they saw something emerging from the monolith, something that made their blood run cold. It was a figure, tall and gaunt, with skin the color of dried blood. Its eyes glowed with the same crimson light as the creature. And it was smiling.

The figure stepped forward, its gaze fixed on dad. It raised a hand, beckoning them closer. And then it spoke, its voice a chilling echo of the creature's.

"Welcome," it said. "You are home."

Chapter 3

"Home?" dad croaked, the word catching in their throat like a shard of glass. The figure smiled wider, revealing teeth that were too long, too sharp. It took another step forward, and dad instinctively recoiled, pressing himself against the rough bark of the tree. Home? This place, this nightmare, could never be home. Their home was the village, the small, dilapidated cottage they had shared. It was the familiar faces of the villagers, the comforting routine of daily life. It was gone now, swallowed by the crimson sky and the horrors it had unleashed. But even in its ruin, it was more of a home than this twisted, corrupted place could ever be. "I don't understand," dad whispered, their voice trembling. "What is this place? What do you want with me?" The figure chuckled, a low, melodious sound that sent shivers down their spine. "Understanding will come in time," it said, its voice smooth and hypnotic. "For now, know that you are among your own. You are safe here." Safe? The word was a mockery. Nothing about this felt safe. They were surrounded by monsters, trapped in a place that seemed to defy the very laws of nature. The air was thick with a sense of dread, a palpable darkness that pressed down on them from all sides. How could they possibly be safe here? The creature that had captured them shuffled closer, its red eyes gleaming in the dim light. It reached out a clawed hand, and dad flinched, expecting another blow. But instead, the creature gently touched their arm, its touch surprisingly light. "We have been waiting for you for a long time," it rasped, the chorus of voices still sending a jolt of fear through dad. "You are the key. You are the longest." The key? What did that even mean? Were they some kind of weapon? A tool to be used by these... things? The questions swirled in their mind, a chaotic jumble of fear and confusion. They needed answers. They needed to understand what was happening, why they had been brought here, what role they were supposed to play. But they knew, deep down, that answers wouldn't come easily. These creatures weren't going to simply explain everything. They would have to fight for every scrap of information, every sliver of truth. The figure extended its hand further, urging them to take it. "Come," it said, its voice laced with a strange, unsettling tenderness. "Let us show you your new home. Let us reveal your true purpose." dad hesitated. Every instinct screamed at them to run, to fight, to do anything to escape this place. But they were weak, injured, and surrounded. Resistance seemed futile. And a small, insidious voice whispered in the back of their mind, a voice of curiosity,

of desperation, of a morbid fascination. What if there was something to be gained here? What if they could learn something that would help them survive, that would help them protect what was left of their world? With a deep breath, they reached out and took the figure's hand. Its skin was cold and clammy, like touching a corpse. A jolt of energy surged through them, a strange, alien power that made their head spin. The figure smiled, its grip tightening. "Good," it said. "You have made the right choice." It turned and began to walk, leading dad away from the monolith and deeper into the woods. The creature followed close behind, its red eyes never leaving them. As they walked, dad noticed that the woods seemed to change around them. The trees grew taller, their branches twisting into grotesque shapes. The shadows deepened, becoming almost tangible. The air grew colder, and the metallic tang intensified, making it difficult to breathe. They passed strange, unearthly plants, their leaves glowing with an eerie luminescence. They saw creatures lurking in the shadows, their forms shifting and indistinct, but their eyes burning with the same crimson light as the figure and the creature. This wasn't the Whispering Woods they knew. This was something else entirely. Something... alien. Something terrifying. After what felt like hours, they reached a large cavern, its entrance hidden behind a curtain of gnarled vines. The figure pulled the vines aside, revealing a gaping maw of darkness. It gestured for dad to enter. "This is where you will rest," it said. "This is where you will learn." dad hesitated, peering into the darkness. The cavern seemed to stretch on forever, its depths shrouded in an impenetrable gloom. They could hear strange sounds echoing from within, whispers and rustlings and the faint, rhythmic thumping of something large and powerful. They took a step forward, their heart pounding in their chest. The figure placed a hand on their shoulder, its grip surprisingly strong. "Do not be afraid," it said. "We will be with you. We will guide you." dad stepped into the cavern. The darkness enveloped them, swallowing them whole. The figure and the creature followed close behind, their presence the only source of light in the oppressive gloom. As they ventured deeper into the cavern, dad began to see strange things, things that defied explanation. They saw glowing crystals embedded in the walls, pulsating with an otherworldly energy. They saw strange symbols carved into the stone, the same symbols that had adorned the monolith. They saw... things... moving in the shadows, their forms too indistinct to identify, but their presence undeniable. They were being led further and further into the heart of this nightmare, deeper and deeper into the unknown. And they had no idea what awaited them. Suddenly, the cavern opened up into a vast, subterranean chamber. In the center of the chamber stood a towering structure, made of the same black stone as the monolith. It was a city,

but not a city built by human hands. It was a city of nightmares, a city of twisted angles and impossible geometries. The structure hummed with power, its very existence a violation of the natural order. And as dad gazed upon this horrifying spectacle, the figure spoke, its voice echoing through the chamber. "Behold," it said. "Your kingdom."

Chapter 4

"My kingdom?" dad repeated, the words hollow and empty in the vast chamber. The figure, still gripping their hand, squeezed gently. "Yes," it said, its voice echoing strangely. "The kingdom that awaits the longest. The kingdom that *you* will help us build." Dad's gaze swept across the city of nightmares. Buildings twisted at unnatural angles, their surfaces covered in the same indecipherable symbols that adorned the monolith. The air thrummed with a low, unsettling energy that vibrated deep within their bones. Figures moved in the shadows, their forms indistinct but their crimson eyes burning with an eerie intensity. It was a place of darkness, of corruption, of utter wrongness. "I don't understand," they said, their voice barely a whisper. "What is this place? What am I supposed to do?" The figure smiled, a slow, predatory expression that sent a shiver down dad's spine. "Patience," it said. "All will be revealed in time. But first, you must rest. You must prepare." It began to lead them towards the city, its grip on their hand unwavering. The creature followed close behind, its presence a constant reminder of their captivity. As they walked, dad tried to take in their surroundings, to make sense of the chaos that surrounded them. The buildings were constructed from the same black stone as the monolith, their surfaces smooth and cold to the touch. They seemed to absorb the light, casting long, distorted shadows that danced and writhed around them. Strange, unearthly plants grew in the crevices between the buildings, their leaves glowing with an eerie luminescence. They emitted a faint, sweet scent that was both alluring and repulsive. The figures that moved in the shadows were of all shapes and sizes, but they all shared the same crimson eyes and the same aura of malevolent intelligence. Some were tall and gaunt, like the figure that led them. Others were short and squat, with thick, muscular limbs. Still others were vaguely humanoid, their features distorted and grotesque. They seemed to ignore dad, their attention focused on some unknown purpose. But dad could feel their eyes on them, watching, waiting. They were led through the labyrinthine streets, deeper and deeper into the heart of the city. The air grew heavier, the energy more intense. The sounds of the city grew louder, a cacophony of whispers, rustlings, and the rhythmic thumping that dad had heard in the cavern. Finally, they reached a building that was larger and more imposing than the others. It was a massive structure, its surface covered in intricate carvings that seemed to writhe and shift as dad watched. The entrance was a gaping maw of darkness, framed by two towering pillars adorned with

grotesque gargoyles. The figure stopped before the entrance, its grip on dad's hand tightening. "This is where you will stay," it said. "This is your sanctuary." Dad hesitated, their eyes fixed on the dark entrance. It felt like stepping into the belly of a beast. "What is this place?" they asked, their voice trembling. The figure smiled. "This is the Citadel," it said. "The heart of our kingdom. The place where the longest are prepared." It gestured towards the entrance. "Go," it said. "Enter. We will be waiting for you." With a deep breath, dad stepped forward and entered the Citadel. The darkness enveloped them, swallowing them whole. The figure and the creature remained outside, their red eyes watching as dad disappeared into the gloom. The interior of the Citadel was vast and cavernous, lit by a network of glowing crystals embedded in the walls. The crystals pulsed with an eerie light, casting long, distorted shadows that danced and writhed around the chamber. The air was thick with a strange, sweet scent that was both alluring and repulsive. The chamber was filled with strange, unearthly objects. There were towering pillars covered in the same indecipherable symbols that adorned the monolith. There were strange, metallic contraptions that hummed and whirred with an unknown purpose. There were tables covered in bizarre instruments, their surfaces gleaming with a cold, sterile light. And there were figures moving in the shadows, their forms indistinct but their crimson eyes burning with an eerie intensity. They seemed to be engaged in various tasks, some tending to the strange contraptions, others studying the symbols on the pillars, still others simply standing and watching. They paid no attention to dad, their focus entirely on their own activities. As dad ventured deeper into the chamber, they noticed that the figures were not all the same. Some were tall and gaunt, like the figure that had led them here. Others were short and squat, with thick, muscular limbs. Still others were vaguely humanoid, their features distorted and grotesque. But they all shared the same crimson eyes and the same aura of malevolent intelligence. And they all seemed to be... altered. Their bodies were scarred and twisted, augmented with strange metallic implants. Their skin was the color of dried blood, and their teeth were long and sharp, like shards of glass. They were no longer human, if they ever had been. They were something else entirely. Something... monstrous. A wave of nausea washed over dad. They tasted bile in the back of their throat. They wanted to run, to escape this place of horrors. But they were trapped, surrounded by these... things. They had no idea where to go, what to do. They were completely at their mercy. Suddenly, a voice echoed through the chamber, a smooth, melodious voice that cut through the cacophony of sounds. "Welcome," the voice said. "We have been expecting you." Dad turned, their eyes searching for the source of the voice. And then they saw her. She was standing in the

center of the chamber, bathed in the light of the glowing crystals. She was tall and slender, with long, flowing hair the color of midnight. Her skin was pale and smooth, and her features were delicate and refined. She was the most beautiful creature dad had ever seen. But her eyes... her eyes were the same crimson color as the others. And they burned with the same eerie intensity. She smiled, a slow, knowing expression that sent a shiver down dad's spine. "I am the Mistress," she said. "And you are home." She gestured towards dad. "Come," she said. "Let us begin your transformation."

Chapter 5

"Transformation?" dad whispered, the word hanging in the air like a death knell. The Mistress smiled, a serene expression that belied the chilling pronouncement. "Yes, dear one. A necessary step on your path. A glorious becoming." Her voice was like velvet, smooth and mesmerizing, yet it did nothing to quell the rising panic in dad's chest. They looked around the chamber, their eyes darting from the Mistress to the altered figures that moved in the shadows. Their scarred and augmented bodies were a testament to the transformation the Mistress spoke of, a horrifying glimpse into their potential future. They wanted to scream, to run, to fight, but their limbs felt heavy, their will paralyzed by fear. The Mistress glided towards them, her movements fluid and graceful, like a dancer. She stopped just inches away, her crimson eyes boring into dad's soul. "Do not be afraid," she murmured, her voice a hypnotic caress. "This is not an ending, but a beginning. A chance to shed your old skin and embrace your true self." True self? What did she mean? What was their true self, if not the person they had always been? The person who had laughed and loved and grieved? Was that all to be stripped away, replaced by something... else? Something monstrous? The Mistress reached out and gently touched their cheek, her touch sending a jolt of energy through their body. It felt like electricity, but colder, darker. Their muscles spasmed, their head swam. They gasped for breath, their lungs burning. "Relax," the Mistress whispered. "Let the process begin." Dad tried to pull away, but their body wouldn't respond. They were trapped, helpless, at the Mistress's mercy. The Mistress began to chant, her voice rising in a haunting melody that resonated deep within their bones. The crystals in the walls pulsed brighter, their light bathing the chamber in an eerie glow. The air crackled with energy, and a strange, sweet scent filled their nostrils. They felt a tingling sensation spreading through their body, a prickling of their skin that intensified with each passing second. Their vision blurred, their head swam. They stumbled backward, their knees buckling beneath them. The Mistress caught them, holding them upright with surprising strength. "It's alright," she murmured. "It's only the beginning." Dad closed their eyes, surrendering to the inevitable. They felt a burning sensation in their chest, a searing pain that spread throughout their body. Their bones ached, their muscles screamed. They felt their skin stretching, tearing, reforming. They felt... different. They didn't know what was happening to them, but they knew that it was irreversible. They

were being changed, transformed into something else. Something... more. The chanting continued, growing louder, more intense. The crystals pulsed faster, their light blinding. The burning sensation intensified, consuming them whole. They cried out in pain, their voice a hoarse, strangled sob. The Mistress held them close, her touch a source of both comfort and terror. "Let it happen," she whispered. "Embrace the change. Become who you are meant to be." They didn't want to become who they were meant to be. They wanted to go back, to undo this, to escape this nightmare. But it was too late. The transformation had begun. And there was no turning back. As the pain reached its peak, their consciousness began to fade. Their thoughts blurred, their memories fragmented. They saw flashes of their old life, snippets of conversations, fragments of faces. They saw their village, their cottage, the faces of their loved ones. And then, everything went black. When they awoke, they were lying on a cold, stone slab. The chamber was still lit by the glowing crystals, but their light seemed dimmer, less intense. The Mistress was standing over them, her crimson eyes gleaming with satisfaction. "Welcome back," she said, her voice soft and melodic. Dad sat up, their body stiff and sore. They looked down at their hands, their eyes widening in horror. Their skin was no longer smooth and supple. It was rough and scarred, the color of dried blood. Their fingers were longer, more slender, tipped with sharp, black claws. They raised their hands to their face, their fingers brushing against their cheek. Their features felt... different. Sharper, more angular. Their ears were slightly pointed, their nose more pronounced. They reached up and touched their teeth. They were longer, sharper, like shards of glass. They looked at the Mistress, their eyes wide with terror. "What have you done to me?" they whispered, their voice hoarse and unfamiliar. The Mistress smiled. "I have shown you your true self," she said. "You are now one of us." Dad stumbled to their feet, their legs shaky and unsteady. They looked around the chamber, their eyes scanning the altered figures that moved in the shadows. They saw themselves reflected in their scarred and twisted bodies. They were one of them now. A monster. They wanted to scream, to cry, to rage against this injustice. But their voice was gone, their will broken. They were nothing more than a puppet, a tool to be used by the Mistress and her creatures. The Mistress stepped forward and placed a hand on their shoulder. "Come," she said. "There is much to learn. Much to do." She began to lead them towards the center of the chamber, towards the towering structure that hummed with power. As they walked, dad noticed that the other figures were watching them, their crimson eyes burning with curiosity. Some smiled, a grotesque display of teeth and gums. Others simply stared, their expressions unreadable. They were being welcomed into their fold, accepted as one

of their own. But dad didn't want to be one of them. They wanted to be human again, to be free of this nightmare. But it was too late. Their transformation was complete. And there was no turning back. The Mistress led them to a large, metallic contraption that hummed and whirred with an unknown purpose. The contraption was covered in dials and levers, its surface gleaming with a cold, sterile light. Several of the altered figures were tending to the contraption, their movements precise and deliberate. The Mistress stopped before the contraption, her eyes fixed on dad. "This is where you will begin your training," she said. "Here, you will learn to harness your new abilities. Here, you will become a valuable member of our kingdom." She gestured towards the contraption. "Step forward," she said. "Let us begin." Dad hesitated, their gaze fixed on the humming, whirring machine. It looked like something out of a nightmare, a device designed to torture and mutilate. But they knew that they had no choice. They were trapped, at the Mistress's mercy. With a deep breath, they stepped forward and approached the contraption. As they drew closer, they noticed that there was a platform in front of the machine, a small, circular space where someone could stand. The platform was covered in strange symbols, the same symbols that had adorned the monolith. They felt a pull, a force drawing them towards the platform. They knew, instinctively, that this was where they were supposed to be. They stepped onto the platform. The symbols began to glow, their light bathing them in an eerie glow. The contraption whirred louder, its energy intensifying. The Mistress smiled, her eyes gleaming with anticipation. "Excellent," she said. "You are a natural." She turned to one of the altered figures and spoke in a low, guttural language that dad couldn't understand. The figure nodded and approached the contraption, its hand reaching for a lever. Dad watched, their heart pounding in their chest. They knew that something was about to happen. Something that would change them even further. Something that would bind them to this place forever. The figure pulled the lever. The contraption roared to life, its energy surging. A beam of light shot out from the machine, striking dad in the chest. The pain was excruciating, unlike anything they had ever experienced. Their body convulsed, their muscles spasmed. They screamed, their voice a hoarse, strangled cry. The Mistress watched, her expression serene and satisfied. As the pain reached its peak, something began to happen to them. Something strange. Something terrifying. They felt their body changing, morphing, transforming. Their bones twisted, their muscles contorted. Their skin stretched, tore, reformed. They were becoming something else. Something... more. The light intensified, consuming them whole. And then, everything went black. When they awoke, they were no longer on the platform. They were lying on the floor, their body

weak and trembling. The contraption was silent, its energy spent. The Mistress was standing over them, her expression unreadable. "How do you feel?" she asked, her voice soft and melodic. Dad sat up, their body aching. They looked down at their hands. They were no longer their own. They were long and slender, tipped with sharp, black claws. They looked at the Mistress, their eyes wide with terror. "What have you done to me?" they whispered, their voice a hoarse, unfamiliar croak. The Mistress smiled. "I have unlocked your potential," she said. "You are now ready to serve our kingdom." She extended her hand, beckoning them to stand. Dad hesitated. They didn't want to serve this kingdom. They wanted to escape, to be free. But they knew that they had no choice. They were trapped, bound to this place by their transformation. With a sigh, they took the Mistress's hand. She pulled them to their feet, her grip surprisingly strong. "Come," she said. "There is much work to be done. Our kingdom awaits." She began to lead them towards the city, towards the darkness. As they walked, dad glanced back at the contraption. It stood there, silent and menacing, a symbol of their captivity. They knew that their transformation was not complete. This was only the beginning. There were more changes to come, more trials to face. And they had no idea what awaited them. But one thing was certain: their old life was gone. They were no longer dad. They were something else entirely. Something... monstrous. And they were trapped in this nightmare, with no hope of escape. As they walked into the darkness, they heard a voice whisper in their mind, a chilling echo of the Mistress's words. "You are the longest," the voice said. "And you belong to us." They stumbled, clutching their head. The Mistress stopped, turning to them with a concerned expression. "Are you alright?" she asked, her voice laced with a strange tenderness. Dad looked at her, their eyes filled with despair. "No," they whispered. "I'm not alright." And then, they fainted.

Chapter 6

The floor was cold against dad's cheek. A metallic tang, sharper than before, filled their nostrils. Disorientation warred with a burgeoning headache, each throb a painful reminder of their altered state. They pushed themselves up, their new claws scraping against the stone. The Citadel loomed, its grotesque architecture a testament to a reality they desperately wished to deny. The Mistress knelt beside them, her crimson eyes pools of unsettling concern. "Rest now," she murmured, her voice a soothing balm against the storm raging within dad's mind. "You have endured much." Rest? How could they rest when their very being had been violated, their body twisted into a grotesque parody of its former self? How could they find peace when the voice, *her* voice, echoed in their head, a constant reminder of their captivity? They tried to speak, to voice their outrage, their fear, but only a guttural croak escaped their lips. The Mistress's smile tightened, a subtle shift that betrayed the steel beneath her velvet facade. "Words are... inefficient at this stage," she said, her fingers tracing the sharp angles of dad's jaw. "Understanding will blossom in time. Trust in us, dear one. We have plans for you." Plans. That word hung in the air, heavy with unspoken dread. What plans could these creatures possibly have for them? What role were they to play in this twisted kingdom? They shuddered, a wave of nausea washing over them. The Mistress's smile softened, her hand moving to gently stroke their hair. "Come," she said, her voice laced with an almost maternal tenderness. "Let us find you a place to recover. Strength will be needed for what lies ahead." With a sigh, dad allowed himself to be led. Their legs felt heavy, their movements clumsy and uncoordinated. The Citadel seemed to press in on them, its shadows dancing with malevolent intent. The altered figures watched them pass, their crimson eyes filled with a mixture of curiosity and anticipation. Dad felt like a specimen under a microscope, dissected and analyzed with cold, clinical detachment. The Mistress led them through a labyrinth of corridors, each more twisted and oppressive than the last. The air grew thicker, the metallic tang more intense. The humming of the city resonated deep within their bones, a constant reminder of its alien presence. Finally, they reached a small chamber, barely larger than a cell. The walls were bare, the only furnishing a rough-hewn cot of black stone. The Mistress gestured towards the cot. "Rest here," she said. "We will return when you are ready." Then, without another word, she turned and left, leaving dad alone in the oppressive silence. They sank onto the

cot, their body aching with exhaustion. The stone was cold and unyielding, offering little comfort. They closed their eyes, trying to block out the horrors that surrounded them. But the images persisted, flashing before their mind's eye with relentless clarity. The crimson sky. The monstrous creature. The Mistress's smile. Their own transformed hands. The voice in their head. "You are the longest. And you belong to us." They squeezed their eyes shut tighter, desperate to silence the voice. But it was no use. It was a part of them now, woven into the very fabric of their being. They were trapped, not just physically, but mentally. Their mind had been invaded, their will subverted. They were no longer their own person. They were a vessel, a puppet, a tool to be used by these creatures. They lay there for what felt like hours, their thoughts churning with despair. They longed for escape, for freedom, for a return to their old life. But they knew that it was impossible. Their old life was gone, shattered by the crimson sky and the horrors that followed. They were trapped in this nightmare, with no hope of rescue. As the darkness deepened, a strange sensation began to creep over them. It started as a faint tingling in their fingertips, then spread throughout their body like a creeping vine. It felt like energy, but colder, darker. They tried to resist it, to push it away, but it was no use. It was too strong. The sensation intensified, their muscles spasmed. They gasped for breath, their lungs burning. They felt their body changing, morphing, transforming. Again. What was happening to them? What new horrors were being inflicted upon them? They tried to scream, but only a guttural croak escaped their lips. The voice in their head grew louder, more insistent. "Embrace the change," it whispered. "Become who you are meant to be." Who were they meant to be? What was their purpose in this twisted kingdom? Were they to be a warrior? A servant? A sacrifice? They didn't know, but they feared the answer. The change intensified, their body writhing in agony. They felt their bones twisting, their muscles contorting. Their skin stretched, tore, reformed. The humming of the city grew louder, resonating deep within their bones. They were becoming one with this place, a part of its twisted fabric. As the transformation reached its peak, they felt something new, something they had never experienced before. A power. A raw, untamed energy coursing through their veins. It was intoxicating, exhilarating, terrifying. They felt stronger, faster, more powerful than they had ever imagined. But it came at a price. The power was corrupting, twisting their thoughts, amplifying their darkest impulses. They felt a surge of rage, a burning desire for vengeance. They wanted to lash out, to destroy everything in their path. They wanted to make these creatures pay for what they had done to them. They clenched their fists, their claws digging into their palms. They could feel their body trembling with power, straining to be unleashed. But they

resisted. They fought against the rage, against the darkness that threatened to consume them. They knew that if they gave in, they would become just like these creatures, a mindless monster driven by instinct. They would lose what little remained of their humanity. And they couldn't let that happen. They had to hold on, to cling to the hope that somehow, someday, they could escape this nightmare and reclaim their life. The transformation subsided, leaving them weak and trembling. The power still coursed through their veins, but it was tempered now, under control. They lay there, exhausted, their mind reeling. They didn't know what had just happened, but they knew that it had changed them. They were no longer the same person who had entered this Citadel. They were something new, something... more. But what did it all mean? What was their purpose in this twisted kingdom? And how could they possibly escape? As they lay there, pondering these questions, they heard a sound. A faint scratching, coming from the wall. They sat up, their senses on alert. The scratching continued, growing louder. It sounded like something... digging. They crept towards the wall, their claws scraping against the stone. They pressed their ear against the cold surface, listening intently. The scratching grew louder, more frantic. And then, they heard a voice. A faint, muffled voice, speaking their name. "dad? dad, can you hear me?" Their heart leaped into their throat. They recognized that voice. It was... impossible. But it was unmistakable. "I'm here," they whispered, their voice barely audible. "Who is this?" The scratching stopped. There was a moment of silence, then the voice spoke again, clearer this time. "It's me, Elara. I've come to rescue you." Hope, a fragile ember, flickered within them. Elara. One of the villagers they'd been closest to. She had risked everything to come after them. But how had she found them? And how could she possibly hope to rescue them from this place? "How did you find me?" they whispered. "And what are you doing here? It's too dangerous." "I can't explain everything now," Elara's voice said. "Just know that I'm here to get you out. Can you break through the wall?" dad looked at the solid stone, their claws tingling with newfound power. It seemed impossible. But Elara was here. And they couldn't let her risk her life for nothing. They had to try. They had to escape. They gathered their strength, focusing their energy on their claws. The power surged through them, tingling with anticipation. They raised their hands and slammed them against the wall, their claws digging deep into the stone. Stone crumbled. Dust filled the air. The scratching was replaced by a low groan. They had made a dent. It would take time, but they could do it. They could break through. They could escape. They looked at the wall, their eyes filled with determination. Elara was waiting for them. And they weren't going to let her down. With a roar, they slammed their claws against the wall again.

The Citadel trembled. And somewhere, in the depths of the city, the Mistress stirred. She smiled, her crimson eyes gleaming with a dangerous light. "So," she whispered. "The game begins."

Chapter 7

The dust stung dad's nostrils, each ragged breath a testament to the grueling work. Stone yielded grudgingly to their claws, each scrape and gouge a testament to their desperation. "dad? Are you alright?" Elara's voice, muffled but clear, spurred them onward. "Almost there," they grunted, forcing the words past the lump of fear lodged in their throat. "Just... a little more..." The power surged within them, a dark and intoxicating force they struggled to control. It yearned to be unleashed, to tear through the stone with unrestrained fury, but they held it back, channeling it into precise, controlled movements. They couldn't risk collapsing the tunnel, burying Elara alive. A chunk of stone broke free, revealing a sliver of light. Hope flared, burning away the despair that had threatened to consume them. "I see you!" Elara cried, her voice filled with relief. "Just a little bigger..." dad attacked the weakened spot with renewed vigor, their claws a blur of motion. The opening widened, revealing Elara's face, her eyes bright with determination. She was even more beautiful than they remembered, her features etched with worry and resolve. "dad..." she breathed, reaching through the opening to touch their face. "I thought... I thought I'd lost you." They leaned into her touch, savoring the warmth of her hand against their corrupted skin. "I'm here," they said, their voice rough with emotion. "Thanks to you." Elara smiled, a radiant expression that chased away the shadows in dad's heart. "We can thank each other later," she said. "Right now, we need to get you out of here." Together, they worked to enlarge the opening, pulling away the loose stones and widening the passage. It was slow, agonizing work, but with each chunk of stone that fell away, their hope grew stronger. Finally, the opening was large enough for them to squeeze through. dad hesitated, their gaze sweeping over their transformed body. They were a monster now, a grotesque parody of their former self. How could they possibly return to the village, to their old life? How could they face their friends, their neighbors, with this... this thing? Elara seemed to sense their hesitation. She reached out and took their hand, her grip firm and unwavering. "Don't worry about that now," she said, her eyes filled with understanding. "We'll figure it out. Together." dad looked at her, their heart swelling with gratitude. She didn't flinch, didn't recoil in horror. She accepted them, monstrous form and all. With a deep breath, they squeezed through the opening, emerging into a narrow tunnel. The air was stale and musty, but it smelled like freedom. Elara led the way, her movements swift and confident. They moved quickly through the tunnel,

their senses on high alert. They didn't know how much time they had, or if anyone had noticed their escape. They had to get out of the Citadel, and away from the city, before the Mistress realized what was happening. The tunnel twisted and turned, leading them deeper into the earth. It was dark and claustrophobic, the walls closing in on them from all sides. But with each step, they felt their hope growing stronger. They were getting closer to freedom. Suddenly, Elara stopped. She held up a hand, silencing dad. "Listen," she whispered. They strained their ears, their senses on high alert. They heard it then, a faint but distinct sound. Footsteps. Approaching from the other end of the tunnel. "Someone's coming," Elara whispered, her eyes wide with alarm. "We need to hide." They looked around frantically, searching for a place to conceal themselves. The tunnel was too narrow, offering no cover. They were trapped. "There's no time," dad said, their voice filled with despair. "We're caught." Elara shook her head, her expression determined. "Not yet," she said. She pointed to a small alcove in the wall, barely large enough to squeeze into. "Quick, in there." dad hesitated. The alcove was small and cramped, barely enough room for one person. But they had no other choice. They squeezed into the alcove, pressing themselves against the cold stone. Elara followed, pressing herself against them, their bodies pressed together in the darkness. The footsteps grew louder, closer. They held their breath, their hearts pounding in their chests. A figure appeared at the end of the tunnel, its form silhouetted against the dim light. It was one of the altered figures, tall and gaunt, with crimson eyes that scanned the tunnel with predatory intensity. It paused, its head cocked to one side, as if listening for something. Then, it began to move, its footsteps echoing through the tunnel. It was heading straight for them. dad squeezed their eyes shut, bracing themselves for the inevitable. They were caught. Their escape had failed. But then, something unexpected happened. Just as the figure reached the alcove, a loud crash echoed from behind it. The figure whirled around, its crimson eyes narrowing. It hesitated for a moment, then turned and raced back down the tunnel, its footsteps fading into the distance. Elara and dad remained pressed together in the alcove, their hearts pounding in their chests. They waited, listening intently, until the footsteps had completely disappeared. Then, Elara slowly emerged from the alcove, her eyes scanning the tunnel. "What was that?" dad whispered, their voice trembling. Elara shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "But whatever it was, it saved us." They exchanged a look, their expressions filled with a mixture of relief and confusion. They had been given a second chance. But how long would it last? They couldn't afford to waste any time. They had to keep moving, to get out of the Citadel before they were discovered. "Come on," Elara said, her voice firm. "Let's go." They

emerged from the alcove and continued down the tunnel, their pace quickening. They moved swiftly and silently, their senses on high alert. They didn't know what awaited them, but they knew that they had to be prepared for anything. The tunnel opened into a larger chamber, a vast cavern filled with strange, unearthly plants. The plants glowed with an eerie luminescence, casting long, distorted shadows that danced and writhed around the chamber. The air was thick with a strange, sweet scent that was both alluring and repulsive. As they ventured deeper into the chamber, they heard a sound. A low, guttural growl, coming from the shadows. They stopped, their hearts pounding in their chests. They knew that sound. It was the sound of one of the monstrous creatures. They were not alone. A pair of crimson eyes appeared in the darkness, followed by the shadowy form of a hulking beast. It was larger and more menacing than the creature that had captured dad. It stood between them and the exit, its teeth bared in a menacing snarl. They were trapped. "We can't go any further," Elara whispered, her voice trembling. "It's blocking our way." dad looked at the creature, their mind racing. They couldn't fight it. They were too weak, too injured. And even if they could, they didn't want to hurt it. It was a victim, just like them. A creature twisted and corrupted by the Mistress's power. There had to be another way. They looked around the chamber, searching for an escape route. But there was none. The creature was between them and the only exit. They were trapped. And then, they saw it. A small, almost imperceptible opening in the wall, hidden behind a curtain of glowing vines. It was barely large enough to squeeze through, but it was their only hope. "There," dad said, pointing to the opening. "We can try to get through there." Elara looked at the opening, her expression doubtful. "It's too small," she said. "We'll never fit." "We have to try," dad said, their voice filled with determination. "It's our only chance." They approached the opening, their hearts pounding in their chests. The creature watched them, its crimson eyes burning with predatory intensity. It knew what they were planning. It wasn't going to let them escape. They reached the opening and began to pull aside the vines. They were thick and thorny, resisting their efforts. The creature growled, its patience wearing thin. They had to hurry. They pulled and tugged at the vines, their hands bleeding from the thorns. Finally, they managed to create a small opening, just large enough to squeeze through. "Go," dad said, pushing Elara towards the opening. "Hurry!" Elara hesitated, her eyes filled with concern. "But what about you?" she asked. "I'll be right behind you," dad said, forcing a smile. "Just go!" Elara nodded and squeezed through the opening, disappearing into the darkness. dad turned to face the creature, their body trembling with fear. It was getting closer, its teeth bared in a menacing snarl. They knew that they couldn't defeat it. But they could

buy Elara some time. They could distract it, give her a chance to escape. They stood their ground, their claws bared, ready to face whatever came next. The creature lunged. But as it did, a voice echoed through the chamber, a voice that made the creature freeze in its tracks. "Stop!" the voice commanded. "Do not harm them." The creature hesitated, its crimson eyes darting nervously. Then, it slowly backed away, its growl subsiding into a low whimper. dad looked around, searching for the source of the voice. And then, they saw her. Standing in the shadows, her crimson eyes burning with power. The Mistress. She had found them. Their escape had failed. "dad," the Mistress said, her voice soft but firm. "Come to me. It is time." dad looked at the Mistress, their heart filled with despair. There was no escape. They were trapped. But then, they remembered Elara. She was still out there, somewhere in the darkness. And they couldn't give up on her. They couldn't let the Mistress capture her. They had to do something. Anything. They took a deep breath, their mind racing. And then, they made a decision. A decision that would change everything. They looked at the Mistress, their eyes filled with defiance. And they said the one thing that they knew would enrage her. "Never." The Mistress's eyes narrowed, her face contorting with fury. "So," she hissed, her voice dripping with venom. "You have chosen your path." She raised her hand, her fingers crackling with energy. "Then you will suffer the consequences." But before she could unleash her power, dad did something unexpected. They turned and fled. They ran towards the opening, towards the darkness, towards the unknown. They didn't know where they were going, or what awaited them. But they knew that they had to escape. They had to protect Elara. They had to fight for their freedom. They squeezed through the opening, disappearing into the darkness. The Mistress watched them go, her crimson eyes burning with rage. "Find them," she commanded, her voice echoing through the chamber. "Bring them back to me. And this time, do not fail." The monstrous creature growled and charged into the darkness, following dad's trail. The hunt was on. And dad knew that their escape had just become a whole lot more difficult. They stumbled through the darkness, their senses on high alert. They didn't know where they were going, but they knew that they had to keep moving. They had to stay one step ahead of the Mistress. Suddenly, they heard a sound. A faint rustling, coming from behind them. They whirled around, their claws bared, ready to face whatever came next. And then, they saw her. Elara. She was standing in the shadows, her face pale with fear. "dad," she whispered. "What's going on?" dad ran to her, their heart filled with relief. "We have to go," they said. "The Mistress is after us." Elara nodded, her eyes filled with determination. "Then let's go," she said. "We'll face her together." And hand in hand, they plunged deeper into the darkness,

ready to face whatever dangers lay ahead. They were running for their lives. And they weren't going to stop until they were free. But what they didn't know was that the Mistress was already one step ahead of them. She had anticipated their escape. She had laid a trap. And they were walking right into it. As they ventured deeper into the darkness, they heard a sound. A low, ominous humming, coming from all around them. The ground began to tremble. The air crackled with energy. And then, the walls of the tunnel began to shift, to move, to close in on them. They were trapped. The Mistress had sealed their fate. And there was no escape.

Chapter 8

The walls groaned, a chorus of stone lamenting their imminent demise. dad shoved Elara forward, urging her deeper into the collapsing tunnel. "Go! I'll hold it as long as I can!"

Elara hesitated, her eyes wide with terror. "But what about you?"

"I'll be right behind you! Just go!" dad braced themselves against the crumbling wall, their claws digging into the stone for purchase. The humming intensified, vibrating through their bones, threatening to shatter their resolve. The tunnel buckled and twisted, contorting into impossible shapes. Dust and debris rained down, choking them, blinding them.

Elara reluctantly obeyed, squeezing through a rapidly narrowing gap. "Hurry!" she cried, her voice barely audible above the roaring cacophony.

dad strained against the crushing pressure, their muscles screaming in agony. The power surged within them, a dark and desperate force. They channeled it into the wall, reinforcing the crumbling stone, buying Elara precious seconds. But it wasn't enough. The tunnel was collapsing too fast, the Mistress's power too great.

A section of the wall gave way, showering them with debris. The ground lurched beneath their feet, throwing them off balance. They stumbled, their grip faltering. The tunnel roared, its stone maw closing in.

"dad!" Elara screamed, her voice laced with panic.

They looked at her, their eyes filled with despair. It was over. They couldn't hold it any longer.

"Go!" they shouted, their voice cracking with emotion. "Save yourself!"

Elara shook her head, tears streaming down her face. "I won't leave you!"

"You have to!" dad cried. "There's no time!"

With a final surge of strength, they pushed Elara forward, shoving her through the gap. "Go! And don't look back!"

Elara disappeared into the darkness. dad braced themselves for the end. The tunnel collapsed, burying them in a tomb of stone.

Darkness. Silence. Pain.

They lay there, crushed and broken, their body screaming in agony. They were trapped, entombed alive.

But then, a spark ignited within them. A flicker of defiance, a refusal to surrender. They were not going to die here. They were not going to let the Mistress win.

They summoned the power within them, the dark and desperate force that had saved them before. They focused it on their shattered limbs, their broken bones. They felt them knitting, mending, reforming. The pain subsided, replaced by a tingling sensation.

They pushed against the weight of the stone, their muscles straining, their will unwavering. Slowly, agonizingly, they began to move.

Stone crumbled. Dust filled the air. The tomb began to shift.

They were alive. And they were fighting back.

With a final surge of strength, they burst free from the rubble, emerging into a new tunnel. It was narrow and cramped, but it was open, leading away from the collapsing chamber.

They staggered to their feet, their body weak and trembling. They had to find Elara. They had to get out of the Citadel.

They stumbled forward, their senses on high alert. They moved quickly and silently, their claws scraping against the stone. They didn't know where they were going, but they knew that they had to keep moving.

The tunnel twisted and turned, leading them deeper into the earth. It was dark and claustrophobic, the walls closing in on them from all sides. But with each step, they felt their hope growing stronger.

Suddenly, they heard a sound. A faint sob, coming from the shadows.

They stopped, their heart leaping into their throat. "Elara?" they whispered, their voice trembling.

"dad?" a voice replied, choked with tears.

They followed the sound, their heart pounding in their chest. And then, they saw her. Elara was huddled in a corner, her face buried in her hands.

"Elara!" dad ran to her, their voice filled with relief. "Are you alright?"

Elara looked up, her eyes red and swollen. "I thought... I thought you were dead," she sobbed.

dad knelt beside her, their heart aching with sympathy. "I'm here," they said, their voice gentle. "I'm alright."

Elara threw her arms around them, clinging to them tightly. "I was so scared," she whispered. "I didn't know what to do."

dad held her close, their mind racing. They had to get out of here. They couldn't stay in the Citadel any longer.

"Come on," they said, pulling away from Elara. "We have to go. The Mistress will be looking for us."

Elara nodded, wiping away her tears. "Where do we go?" she asked.

dad looked around the tunnel, their mind searching for a way out. They didn't know where they were, or where the tunnel led.

"I don't know," they said. "But we have to find a way out of here."

They began to walk, their footsteps echoing through the tunnel. They moved quickly and silently, their senses on high alert. They didn't know what awaited them, but they knew that they had to be prepared for anything.

They walked for what felt like hours, their bodies growing weary, their hope dwindling. The tunnel seemed to go on forever, leading them deeper and deeper into the earth.

"I don't think we're ever going to get out of here," Elara said, her voice filled with despair.

dad stopped, their heart aching with sympathy. They knew how she felt. They were both exhausted, both scared.

"We can't give up," they said, their voice firm. "We have to keep going. We have to believe that we can escape."

Elara looked at them, her eyes filled with a mixture of hope and doubt. "But how?" she asked. "How can we escape from this place?"

dad didn't have an answer. They didn't know how they were going to escape. But they knew that they had to try.

They took a deep breath, their mind racing. They had to think. They had to come up with a plan.

And then, they remembered something. Something that the Mistress had said.

"This is the Citadel," she had said. "The heart of our kingdom. The place where the longest are prepared."

The heart of their kingdom. The place where they were prepared.

That meant that the Citadel was the center of their power, the place where they gathered their strength. It also meant that it was the place where they were most vulnerable.

If they could somehow disrupt the Citadel, if they could somehow weaken the Mistress's power, they might have a chance to escape.

"I have an idea," dad said, their voice filled with excitement. "It's dangerous, but it might work."

Elara looked at them, her eyes filled with curiosity. "What is it?" she asked.

dad took a deep breath and explained their plan. They were going to go back to the Citadel.

Elara stared at them, her eyes wide with disbelief. "Are you crazy?" she

cried. "We can't go back there! We'll be killed!"

"I know it's dangerous," dad said. "But it's our only chance. If we can disrupt the Citadel, we might be able to escape. And if we don't try, we're as good as dead anyway."

Elara hesitated, her mind racing. She knew that dad was right. They had no other choice.

"Alright," she said, her voice filled with determination. "Let's do it."

dad smiled, their heart swelling with gratitude. They knew that Elara was scared, but she was willing to risk her life to help them.

"Thank you," they said, their voice sincere.

Elara nodded, her eyes filled with courage. "Let's go," she said. "Let's take down the Citadel."

And hand in hand, they turned and began to walk back towards the Citadel, towards the heart of the Mistress's power. They didn't know what awaited them, but they were ready to face whatever came next. They were fighting for their freedom. And they weren't going to stop until they had won.

As they approached the Citadel, they heard a sound. A faint, rhythmic thumping, coming from deep within the earth.

They stopped, their hearts pounding in their chests. They recognized that sound. It was the sound of something large and powerful.

Something was coming. And it was heading straight for them. The floor beneath them began to vibrate. The air crackled with energy. And then, the tunnel ahead of them exploded.

A monstrous figure erupted from the rubble, its crimson eyes burning with rage. It was larger and more terrifying than anything they had ever seen.

The Mistress had unleashed her ultimate weapon. And they were trapped, with no hope of escape. The beast roared, shaking the tunnel to its foundations. "You cannot hide," it boomed, the sound echoing in dad's skull. "The Mistress has shown me your path."

Before dad or Elara could react, the creature lunged, its massive claws outstretched.

Everything went black.

Chapter 9

The world exploded in a cacophony of sound and fury. dad threw themselves in front of Elara, shielding her from the worst of the blast. The force of the impact sent them flying backward, slamming into the tunnel wall. Pain ripped through their body, every nerve screaming in agony. They gasped for breath, their lungs burning. The monstrous creature loomed over them, its crimson eyes burning with triumph. "You cannot escape your destiny," it boomed, its voice shaking the very foundations of the tunnel. "The Mistress has chosen you." Elara scrambled to their side, her face etched with terror. "dad! Are you alright?" dad tried to stand, but their legs wouldn't support them. They collapsed back against the wall, their body trembling. "I... I don't know," they croaked, their voice barely audible. "Get out of here, Elara. Save yourself." Elara shook her head, her eyes filled with defiance. "I'm not leaving you," she said. "We're in this together." The creature chuckled, a low, guttural sound that sent shivers down dad's spine. "How touching," it sneered. "But your loyalty is misplaced. Your friend is already lost." It turned its attention to dad, its crimson eyes burning into their soul. "The Mistress has foreseen your path," it said. "You will embrace your destiny. You will become the longest." dad spat on the ground, their eyes filled with hatred. "I will never serve the Mistress," they said, their voice filled with defiance. "I will fight you to my last breath." The creature smiled, a cruel and predatory expression. "Brave words," it said. "But you are no match for me." It raised its hand, its claws dripping with venom. "Prepare to embrace your new form." dad braced themselves for the inevitable. They knew that they couldn't defeat the creature. They were too weak, too injured. But they would not surrender. They would fight to the very end. They closed their eyes, preparing for the final blow. But then, something unexpected happened. A blinding light filled the tunnel, followed by a deafening roar. The creature stumbled backward, its crimson eyes wide with shock. "What...?" it stammered, its voice filled with confusion. dad opened their eyes, their heart pounding in their chest. A figure stood between them and the creature, its form radiating with an unearthly glow. It was tall and slender, with long, flowing hair the color of moonlight. Its eyes were closed, its face serene. It was one of the altered figures, but it was different from the others. It didn't radiate the same aura of malevolent intelligence. It seemed... pure. The figure raised its hands, its palms facing the creature. A wave of energy emanated from its body, striking the creature with incredible force. The creature roared in pain, its body

convulsing. It stumbled backward, crashing into the tunnel wall. The figure opened its eyes, revealing pupils that swirled with celestial starlight. It looked at dad, its expression filled with compassion. "Do not be afraid," it said, its voice soft and melodic. "I am here to help you." dad stared at the figure, their mind reeling. Who was this creature? And why was it helping them? "Who... who are you?" they stammered, their voice filled with confusion. The figure smiled. "My name is not important," it said. "What matters is that I am here to guide you." It turned its attention back to the creature, its eyes hardening with resolve. "Leave this place," it commanded, its voice filled with power. "And never return." The creature hesitated, its eyes darting nervously between the figure and dad. It knew that it was outmatched. It couldn't defeat this creature. With a final snarl, it turned and fled, disappearing into the darkness. The figure turned back to dad, its expression softening. "Are you alright?" it asked. dad nodded, their body still trembling. "Yes," they said. "Thank you. You saved our lives." The figure smiled. "You are welcome," it said. "But our journey is far from over. We must leave this place, before the Mistress discovers what has happened." It reached out its hand, offering it to dad. "Come," it said. "I know a way out." dad hesitated, their mind filled with doubt. They didn't know this creature. They didn't know if they could trust it. But they had no other choice. They had to escape the Citadel. And this figure seemed to be their only hope. With a deep breath, they took the figure's hand. Its touch was cold and smooth, like polished ice. The figure led them forward, their pace quick and purposeful. Elara followed close behind, her eyes fixed on the figure with a mixture of suspicion and gratitude. They moved quickly through the tunnel, their senses on high alert. They didn't know what awaited them, but they knew that they had to be prepared for anything. The figure led them through a maze of tunnels, twisting and turning, leading them deeper and deeper into the earth. They walked for what felt like hours, their bodies growing weary, their hope dwindling. "Where are we going?" Elara asked, her voice filled with exhaustion. The figure stopped, its head cocked to one side. "We are almost there," it said. "The exit is near." It pointed to a small opening in the wall, barely large enough to crawl through. "This is the way out," it said. "But be warned. It is dangerous. The passage is narrow and unstable. There is a risk of collapse." dad looked at the opening, their heart pounding in their chest. It was their only hope. But it was a dangerous one. They had to make a choice. Risk their lives to escape, or remain in the Citadel and face the Mistress's wrath. They looked at Elara, her face etched with worry. They had to protect her. They couldn't risk her life. "I don't know," they said, their voice filled with doubt. "It's too dangerous. I can't risk your life." Elara shook her head, her eyes filled with determination. "We're in this together," she

said. "We'll face the danger together. I trust you, dad. I know you'll make the right choice." dad looked at Elara, their heart swelling with gratitude. She was so brave, so selfless. They couldn't let her down. They had to try. They had to escape. They took a deep breath, their mind filled with resolve. "Alright," they said. "Let's do it." The figure smiled. "Then let us proceed," it said. It turned and crawled into the opening, disappearing into the darkness. Elara followed close behind, her eyes fixed on dad with a look of encouragement. dad hesitated for a moment, their gaze sweeping over their shoulder, they had a feeling they could not place. Then, they steeled themselves, stepped forward, and plunged into the unknown. As dad moved through the passage, they thought they heard the approach of the monstrous beast once again; only this time, the sound was **behind** them. Was the glowing figure leading them into a trap?

Chapter 10

Stone scraped against their newly formed carapace as dad squeezed through the impossibly tight passage, the feeling of being watched prickling at their awareness. They emerged into a cavern, the air thick with the scent of ozone and something akin to...freedom? The glowing figure, Elara close behind, waited patiently.

"We must hurry," the figure said, its voice losing some of its melodic quality, now laced with an urgency that mirrored dad's own. "They are closing in."

"Who are you, really?" dad demanded, the question finally clawing its way to the surface. Trust was a luxury they could no longer afford.

The figure paused, its starlight eyes seeming to dim for a fraction of a second. "I am... a remnant," it said, its voice tinged with a sadness that resonated deep within dad. "A whisper of what could have been."

Before dad could press further, a tremor shook the cavern. The monstrous creature's roar echoed through the tunnels, closer than before.

"There is no time for explanations," Elara said, grabbing dad's hand. "We have to go."

The figure nodded, pointing towards a narrow crevice in the cavern wall. "Through there. It leads to the surface. But be warned, it is guarded."

dad didn't hesitate. They knew that any escape route from the Citadel would be fraught with peril. But with Elara at their side, and this enigmatic figure as their guide, they were ready to face whatever lay ahead.

They squeezed through the crevice, the darkness swallowing them whole. The passage was even tighter than before, forcing them to crawl on their hands and knees. The air grew colder, the scent of ozone replaced by the smell of damp earth.

Suddenly, a light flared ahead. A pair of crimson eyes materialized in the

darkness, followed by the grotesque form of another altered figure. It stood guard at the end of the passage, its arms crossed, its expression menacing.

"Halt!" it boomed, its voice echoing through the narrow tunnel. "You will not pass."

The glowing figure stepped forward, its eyes blazing with power. "Stand aside," it commanded, its voice filled with authority. "You are no match for me."

The altered figure sneered. "You think you can defy the Mistress?" it said. "You are a fool."

It lunged, its claws outstretched. The glowing figure met its attack with effortless grace, deflecting its blows with blinding speed. They fought in the narrow passage, their movements a blur of motion. The air crackled with energy, the walls trembling with the force of their battle.

dad watched, their heart pounding in their chest. They were helpless to intervene, their body still weak from their transformation. They had to trust the glowing figure to protect them.

Suddenly, the altered figure cried out in pain, its body convulsing. It stumbled backward, its eyes wide with terror. The glowing figure stood over it, its hand raised, its palm radiating with an intense light.

"I give you one last chance," it said, its voice filled with pity. "Stand aside, and I will spare your life."

The altered figure hesitated, its mind clearly torn between loyalty and self-preservation. But in the end, its fear outweighed its duty. It lowered its head and stepped aside, allowing them to pass.

The glowing figure smiled, a sad and knowing expression. "Thank you," it said. "You have made the right choice."

It turned back to dad and Elara, gesturing towards the end of the passage. "Go," it said. "Freedom awaits."

dad didn't waste any time. They squeezed through the opening, emerging into a small clearing bathed in the pale light of the crimson sky. They were outside. They had escaped the Citadel.

They looked back at the opening, their heart filled with gratitude for the glowing figure who had risked everything to help them. But as they watched, the opening began to crumble, the tunnel collapsing in on itself.

"What's happening?" Elara cried, her voice filled with alarm.

The glowing figure emerged from the tunnel, its expression grim. "The Citadel is unstable," it said. "Its foundations are crumbling. It will not be long before it collapses entirely."

"But what about you?" dad asked, their voice filled with concern. "You have to get out of here."

The glowing figure shook its head. "My purpose is fulfilled," it said. "I cannot leave this place. My destiny is intertwined with the Citadel's."

"But why?" dad pleaded. "Why are you doing this?"

The figure smiled, a serene expression. "Because," it said, "I believed that the longest, would be longest *with* humanity."

Before dad could respond, a tremor shook the ground. The Citadel groaned, its walls beginning to crack.

"There is no time for farewells," the figure said, its voice filled with urgency. "You must leave. Now."

It reached out and touched dad's face, its touch sending a jolt of energy through their body. "Go," it said. "Live. And remember what you have learned here."

Then, without another word, it turned and walked back towards the collapsing tunnel, disappearing into the darkness.

dad watched, their heart breaking. They wanted to help, to save the figure from certain doom. But they knew that there was nothing they could do. They had to escape. They had to survive.

They grabbed Elara's hand and began to run, their feet pounding against the earth. They ran as fast as they could, away from the collapsing Citadel, towards the uncertain future that awaited them.

They ran for hours, their bodies aching, their lungs burning. They didn't stop until they reached the edge of the Whispering Woods, the familiar trees a welcome sight after the horrors they had endured.

They collapsed on the ground, their bodies trembling with exhaustion. They looked back at the Citadel, their hearts filled with a mixture of relief and sorrow. The monstrous structure was still standing, but it was crumbling, its walls cracking, its towers tilting. It was dying.

"It's over," Elara said, her voice barely a whisper. "We're free."

dad nodded, their eyes filled with tears. They were free. But at what cost? They had escaped the Citadel, but they had lost so much along the way. Their home, their friends, their humanity.

They looked at their hands, their claws still sharp and deadly. They were a monster now, forever changed by their experiences. Could they ever truly return to their old life?

Elara seemed to sense their thoughts. She reached out and took their hand, her grip firm and unwavering. "We'll figure it out," she said, her voice filled with determination. "Together."

dad looked at Elara, their heart swelling with gratitude. She was their anchor, their guiding light in the darkness. With her at their side, they knew that they could face anything.

They stood up, their body weary but their spirit renewed. They were not the same person who had entered the Whispering Woods. They were stronger, wiser, more resilient. They had survived the Citadel. And they would survive whatever came next.

They turned and began to walk, their steps purposeful, their destination clear. They were going home. To rebuild their village, to honor the fallen, to create a new future.

They were the longest. And they would use their newfound strength to protect the ones they loved.

As they walked, they heard a faint whisper in the wind. A voice, soft and melodic, filled with hope.

"The longest...with humanity."

dad smiled. They were not alone. They would never be alone.

They walked on, towards the horizon, towards the promise of a new dawn. The crimson sky still hung overhead, a constant reminder of the horrors they had endured. But it no longer filled them with fear. It filled them with determination.

They were the longest. And they would never give up. The End.