Artifact

by Kyle Eggleston

Chapter One

"What do you think?"

"It looks perfect!"

"That's what you said about the last place..."

"I know... but honestly this time? This is the place."

"I'll get started."

Chapter Two

It was a quiet day in the country. I wish I could tell you it would continue to be quiet and peaceful. But well that's not my job this time around. I will tell you that terrible, nasty things are about to take place. You couldn't imagine what they were if you tried. Which is why I must tell you. I barely escaped the place alive myself if it weren't for some nice looking people in large coats. But that is another story for another time.

It all started when two boys were walking down the street. James and Joshua were their names. They were the kind of boys you would take home to mother. Father would disagree of course, but mother... oh mother would take them and invite them in. Perhaps serve them hot chocolate and cookies. They were the sort mother would want her daughters to marry.

So James and Joshua were walking along minding their own business. The sun was shining in their little town of Alventon Pennsylvania. People were friendly waiving hello to one another. It was all quite peaceful. But don't get too attached to these two men. Something will happen. Something so deadly I can't even begin to describe it... yet I must.

As the men were walking, James fell to his knees. Joshua ran to his brother's side. It looked as if the wind had been knocked out of the dark haired man. James looked to his brother with cold cold eyes. Something was wrong for sure. Joshua scooped up his brother in his hands and ran towards the nearest doctor. Now Alventon, being a small town, didn't have that much in the way of good medicine. They had a doctor that was... well how to describe the doctor. On the abnormal side I suppose? Yes that sounds right.

What are you suppose to do when your medicine doctor is also your country doctor who takes care of pets? There's no one else in sight to go to. So honestly what are you suppose to do? That's right. You go to the nearest doctor there is available. That happened to be Doctor Jackson.

Now Doctor Jackson try as he may was an honest man. A good hearted man. He just wasn't right in the head. Oh many doctors had tried over the years to well fix him. But there just never was enough time in the day to give him an adequate prognosis. So they just let him be as he was. He did a good job, I myself had gone in once to get a nasty hangnail taken care of. After the horse tranquilizer I didn't feel a thing. I should get back to the story though.

Joshua entered the main medical complex. It really was just a run down old shack in the middle of nowhere. But it was rather clean. As he entered the hospital, Doctor Jackson walked up to him.

"What do we have here?"

Joshua was out of breath. Sweat running down the sides of his face. His green eyes pleading for help to the doctor. "My brother! He collapsed. Please Jack, please save him!"

Jack looked at James. Feeling his head for a fever and anything else out of the ordinary. Taking James in his arms he walked down the hallway. "Stay here, I'll see what I can do."

Joshua sat down in the waiting room. His hands were still shaking from the shock of what was taking place. He hoped his brother wouldn't die. There was so much life left to live. So much time that needed to be accounted for. There was nothing he could do except sit there with his head in his hands as sweat dripped from his forehead into pools on the floor.

Hours passed with no word. Joshua paced around the waiting room. Back and forth. Waiting for an answer. Waiting for any kind of sign of how things were. Nurses walked in and out of rooms as they checked on patients. With each opening of the door Joshua's hopes would raise thinking they had news about his brother. But nothing came.

After another few hours a nurse walked up to Joshua. She was tall and skinny. A brunette with brown eyes. "Hi Joshua."

Joshua looked up to see Sally. A friend from high school. She placed her hand on his shoulder. He nodded but didn't say a word.

"Jack is the best doctor in these parts. You know that." She said. "If there's anyone who can save your brother, it's him."

Joshua nodded again. He wished he could believe her. Wished he could actually understand what she meant. But not now. Now he was too focused on what was taking place. His brother was in the hands of a country doctor.

Another hour passed. Jack walked through the tall doors at the end of the hallway. His hands were bloody as well as his surgical gown and mask.

Joshua's heart sank. He feared and expected the worst.

"I'm sorry son." Jack said. "There was nothing I could do. He's gone."

Joshua stood from his chair and faced the doctor. He wanted to punch the man in the face. His brother was dead. Gone. There was nothing he could do? That was a line one gave to small rabbits or innocent children.

"I understand." Were the only words that came out of Joshua's mouth. "May I see my brother?"

Jack shook his head. "I'm afraid not. He's too mangled from surgery. It would be best to remember him how he was before the accident."

Joshua started crying. He collapsed back into the waiting room chair. His brother was gone. There was nothing else he could do but cry. His best friend was no more.

"Jenny." Jack called out. "Jenny, get a car for this young man. Have him taken home.

"Yes doctor. Right away."

Jack turned his attention back to Joshua. "I know how difficult this is for you. I once lost a horse I loved dearly. You will get over it." He turned and walked back down the empty hallway.

Joshua was alone.

Chapter Three

Night passed slowly. Joshua laid in his bed staring at the ceiling. At different moments in the night he could swear he heard his brother calling out to him. It must have been the wind though. The wind tends to do that to people on occasion. Once I was laying in bed and thought I heard a six string quartet playing outside my window. No it was just the wind. It would have been odd for people to be outside my window. I was at least ten stories up in a mental institute where I wrote my first work of fiction. The Long Covered Spoon. Don't bother looking it up, the doctors burned it with the dead bodies in the morgue.

Joshua laid in bed. The ceiling had no useful information to present to him. I rarely ever did. Even the stars on his ceiling, from that mail order catalog, were of no use. He had often laid in his room starting at the ceiling. In the past it had provided amusement. Good times with his brother as they would explore the worlds out there in their minds. Tonight, of course, was different.

Turning to his side, Joshua faced the wall. There was slight scratching in the wall from when they were kids. It was a sort of self made calendar. Joshua didn't remember why they wanted to keep track of the days that way, it was just something to do when they had been sent to their room for timeout.

"I should call mom." Joshua said. "She should know about her son."

Reaching for the phone, Joshua dialed his mom's number. He stopped at the seventh digit and hung up. How would he tell her one of her sons was dead? There would be no easy way of telling her that. He would wait till morning to deliver that unpleasant news.

"Joshua."

He heard his name. Still thinking it was the wind, Joshua ignored it and tossed in his bed. There was no point in giving into something that wasn't there.

"Joshua."

The voice said again. Joshua sat upright in bed. Taking a quick look around he didn't see anyone. He shrugged it off as hearing things and laid back down in his bed.

Normally when someone hears something, they tend to go running out to see what the noise was. Joshua was too exhausted to even do that. Sitting up was as much effort as he could muster at the moment.

"Joshua."

The voice came again. Joshua pulled the covers over his head and placed a pillow over his ears. He was imagining it. He wasn't hearing a thing. Joshua repeated these thoughts over again in his head. There was nothing he could do about it.

"Joshua."

This time Joshua got out of bed. He walked around the empty dark house in search of the voice that had interrupted his non sleep. With a baseball bat in hand, he searched. No one was to be found.

"Whoever you are!" Joshua yelled out. "I can hear you! I know you're here! Come out and face me."

There was no response. The voice didn't bother to answer. Lowering the baseball bat, Joshua scratched the back of his head. Maybe he was just hearing things. Things that didn't make sense. Things that weren't meant to even bother coming around to making sense. He shrugged and walked back upstairs to his room.

"Finally." The voice spoke.

This time, Joshua saw the cause of the voice. There, in his room, stood James.

Joshua dropped the baseball bat.

Chapter Four

Joshua stared at James. Rubbing his eyes he attempted to put it all out of his head. There was no way he was seeing what he was seeing. He backed away from the ghostly image of his brother.

James stared at Joshua. His features were ice cold. Dead. Not alive. James didn't make a move. His hands were behind his back. "Don't panic."

Don't panic. Don't panic? Joshua shook his head. There was all the reason to panic. He was seeing his dead brother. Who wouldn't panic at such a sight?

"What are you doing here?" Joshua asked.

James smiled. He didn't answer the question right away. It looked as though he was thinking about how best to answer such a question.

"I just wanted to visit." James said. "I know it will be difficult for you to get along without me."

Joshua looked puzzled and confused. There was no other way about it. When someone died they weren't meant to come haunt you. "You're a ghost."

James reached his hand out and touched Joshua's shoulder. "If I were a ghost could you feel me?"

Joshua stepped backwards towards the door. Ghosts couldn't touch you. Well there were stories of mean ghosts who could do very nasty things. But they sure didn't just reach out and touch you like James had just done.

"What are you?" Joshua gasped.

"I'm your brother." James said. "Come on now, it hasn't been that long since I died."

"But, you're." Joshua fumbled the words though his mouth. "You're."

"Alive?"

Joshua nodded. "Yes! The doctor said that you died!"

James shook his head. "No dear brother. Why would the doctor say that? He was playing a prank on you. Do I look dead?"

James had a point. Dead people didn't usually come back to life. They didn't walk around houses and bother people. Ghosts haunted people but never made themselves known or manifest in the flesh.

It was a lot to take in.

Joshua walked over to the bed and sat down on it. James followed and stood before him.

"Listen. If I were dead, would I be here right now? Wouldn't I be in some other place where I wouldn't even care about coming back here?"

Joshua thought about his brother's comment for a moment. He had a point. If he were dead he would be in the after life. There wouldn't be a reason for him to be here. Unless he chose to come back to haunt people. Which was in fact a very rude thing to do. Beyond rude. It was more than just plain evil. There wasn't a reason for James to come back to life. No reason at all. Unless, and it was a big unless, he wanted something.

"What is it you want from me?" Joshua asked.

James smirked. "Oh nothing you can't afford to give up. You see, I was hoping you'd allow me to share your body."

Joshua's face went white as a sheet. A-ah! There was something strange afoot. "You want me to share my body with you? Are you crazy!"

James shook his head. "Not for long. I just have a few things to accomplish. Things I didn't manage to finish before my untimely demise."

"Speaking of that." Joshua said. "How exactly did you die? What caused it?"

James shrugged. "I don't know. It was my time I suppose."

Joshua tapped his feet against the edge of the bed. "If it was your time, then why are you here now to finish things that you didn't get done before you died?"

James rubbed the back of his head. "That's complicated." He said. "I'm not sure you would understand it if I even tried to tell you."

"Try me."

Chapter Five

Six years ago.

James ran down a dark alleyway with a box in his hand. His heart was pounding. There had to be a way for him to escape those who were chasing after him. Clutching the box close to his chest, James jumped up a fence and proceeded to climb it. It was no small feat for the box was quite heavy.

At the top of the fence, he looked behind him. James wasn't sure if they had caught up with him or not. He jumped down from the fence and continued running.

Turning the corner, James ran into the two people he had been trying to escape from. One man, a large ogre sort with dark hair grabbed the box. The other, a shorter midget with blond hair grabbed James by the arm.

"Where do you think you're going?!" The ogre asked.

James was had. He knew he was beat and couldn't escape. "I was just taking a stroll."

The ogre shook his head. "No, I don't think so. We'll take you back to our master and wait instructions. Come with us."

They dragged him through the streets back from where James had stolen the box.

Jame sighed. If only they would let him go. There was no reason for them to bother with his business. It was his business after all. So rude of them. Didn't they have better things to do than bother a lowly thief?

"Hold on! Wait a second!" Joshua interrupted James's story. "That never happened! You were studying abroad six years ago."

James looked at his brother. "Oh if only you knew brother. If only you knew. If you'll allow me to continue the story. You'll understand exactly where I was six years ago. Sure you might have thought I was studying abroad. But well let's just say I had an interesting adventure."

Joshua nodded. "Fine. Fine. Continue."

"As I was saying." James said.

The two men dragged James through the streets and up a flight of stairs where their master waited for them.

The man was in his late forties. Maybe late fifties. James never had been a good judge of age. His eyes were sunken in and his skin was a pale color. He looked like death himself. If looking like death were a thing of course. Which you and I both know one cannot look like death and still exist in this world. It just doesn't work that way.

Master turned in his chair and accepted the box from the ogre. "I see you have brought back what is rightfully mine."

The ogre smiled. He had done good. At least that's what he wanted to believe. Master wasn't really ever that bright of a man when it came to handing out compliments. In fact he never felt like giving out compliments to begin with. He was rather quite rude actually. The ogre didn't bother to point that out. He had tried it once before and things just didn't work out good for him. He was rather fond of his left ear. Master agreed to give it back to him, but that day was still waiting to come.

Master looked at the box. "Sit." He commanded.

The ogre pushed James into a chair across from Master's large oak desk.

James felt the spikes at the back of the chair lightly pushing against his skin. It was obviously not meant for anyone to become comfortable sitting in that chair. He winced as one of the spikes made contact with his skin and drew blood.

Master laughed. He rather enjoyed the chair. To him, it was a thing of beauty. A comfort to behold and enjoy. Others never found the beauty in it that he found so well. It didn't matter to him. He could care less if people enjoyed his chair. Master knew that when people sat in the chair he had their undivided attention. That's all he wanted really. Attention.

"I have brought you here for one purpose." Master said. "I could have had you killed so easily in the alley, or on that fence. But no, I had you brought here."

James nodded. It was obvious Master had the upper hand. He could have stopped him from stealing the box to begin with. I would have been so easy.

"But I didn't want you dead." Master said. "I have something in mind for you that will bring an end to decades worth of torture. It will end years of bloodshed." He paused taking another look at the box. "You repay me by stealing from me. Why?"

James looked at the box and then back to the man before him. If he told the truth, he could very well be executed. If he told a lie, again he could very well be executed. Such a tough choice the man had to deal with. Die or die. Okay so maybe not that difficult of a choice.

"I don't know." He said.

Master tapped his fingers lightly on the box. He had his merchandise back. Had the man who stole it from him, and yet the man didn't know? No. That was not an acceptable answer. He glanced to the ogre.

The ogre pushed James into the chair a bit more. The spikes dug into his back. James wanted to scream out in pain but knew to do so would show a sign of weakness. There was no winning the situation.

"I mean." James said. "I don't know how I can tell you the truth. Obviously I stole from you. Something you find quite valuable and it is very pretty."

"It is isn't it." Master agreed. "One of my most prized possessions."

"But it doesn't belong to you." James said. "None of this" he gestured around the room "belongs to you!"

Master's smile dropped. "Of course it does. I build my empire over many years! Not to have it taken away by a scrawny man such as yourself."

James wiggled a bit trying to ease the tension of the spikes against his back with no success. "You might say it is your empire, but you stole from people to gain it."

Master shook his head. "You lie! I have never stolen. I am not like you!"

James looked to the box. "Then tell me where that artifact came from! It's well over two thousand years old. You and I both know you didn't come up with it at an auction." He stomped his foot. "You stole it!"

Master stood from his chair. He wasn't much taller than the midget. Quick an unfortunate thing if you think about it. I'm pretty sure that ogre could do what he wanted to with Master and get away with it. Yet he was as smart as a pile of bricks and that is how Master kept control over him.

"How dare you accuse me of such madness!" Master yelled. "I will not be dictated to by a fool!"

James figured that was his point of entry to get out of there. "Then why don't you let me go? Obviously you have no need of me, and as you said you are not one to dabble in ways that are against the law..."

The bait was set. All Master had to do was step into it and take it. Which was easier than pie. Or cake. Cake is rather delicious on a cold afternoon.

Master pointed to the door. "Get out!" He yelled. "Get out of here before I have you thrown out!"

James stood from the chair and patted the midget on the head. "This was fun. We'll have to be doing it again sometime."

He quickly left the room never to return.

Chapter Six

Joshua looked at his brother. "You have got to be kidding me!" He laughed. "There is no way in hell that is even a true account of what you were doing!"

James nodded. "Well not a full account no. But I was trying to do something good for the people who the artifact was stolen from."

Joshua laughed. "The artifact! Right. Something that was well over two thousand years old!"

James nodded. "That's right."

Standing up, Joshua paced the floor. Back and forth he walked trying to figure out what was all going on in his brother's mind. "I suppose you want me to steal this artifact from this so called Master and take it someplace?"

James nodded. "Yeah something like that." He smiled. "What do you say? One last adventure before I go to the bright shiny place in the sky?"

"Or the fiery darkness below" Joshua said. "I'm kidding. Of course you'll go to heaven, you're not a goat."

James rolled his eyes. "That was a stupid song and you know it."

"Maybe, but it always manged to get your attention." Joshua walked over to the baseball bat and picked it up. "So one thing you've not told me... well maybe two things. One. Where is this Master, and two what is the artifact we're to recover?"

James nodded. He was glad Joshua was going to help him. "Master is located in a city off the coast of California on a small island known only to a handful of people. The artifact? Well I'd rather not say what it is." He said. "Let's just say if the wrong people were to get their hands on it? Much danger would happen and the world wouldn't be the same."

Joshua tapped the baseball bat against his shoulder gently. "So you want me to go with you... to some island that no one knows about to pick up an artifact that may or may not be there. I mean six years is a long time."

James nodded. "Uh huh. One last adventure for old times sake?"

Joshua nodded. "Right. I'll probably end up dead, you know this right?"

James smiled. "Yes, but think of the adventure!"

"Right. The adventure." Joshua sighed. Who was he to give up the opportunity of an adventure? "When do we leave?"

James laughed. "Yes! I knew you would do it!"

"Just don't make me regret any of this. You're dead already. I'd rather not fall into the same trap!"

"Don't you worry brother." James said. "We'll be in and out of that island before you know it. Artifact in hand."

James looked to his brother, who wasn't as enthused as he was. It was quite a risk to do what he had planned. James wasn't sure if Joshua would get through the ordeal alive. If he did, and his plan did succeed. Well, he could die at peace knowing he did his best.

That's all that mattered.

Chapter Seven

Morning came at last. James and Joshua were off on an adventure. That much was certain. Joshua was still hesitant on the kind of adventure that would be had. It wasn't everyday he was left with the option to help the world out. Joshua was certain the whole speech about changing the world was a joke. No artifact could be that amazing that it would actually change the world. That was just absurd.

The plane trip from Pennsylvania to California wasn't too bad. Just a few bumps and jumps here and there. Nothing Joshua hadn't been through before. Over the course of his years he had been through several bad weather flights. Turbulence was nothing to him.

James on the other hand, even though he was dead, seemed to hate flying. Joshua thought it ridiculous that a dead man have issues with flying. He had no stomach to worry about. Nothing to get upset, no queasiness, nothing at all. Yet James still moaned as though the world were ending. Joshua had to admit, that was rather amusing. Come back from the dead and still have issues with flying.

Hopping off the plane, James showed Joshua to a boat rental place. It had been in business for years. Long before Hitler and his regime. It was an old run down shack in the middle of nowhere.

Reaching the door, Joshua opened it and walked in. An old man behind the counter looked at him. "Good day. Planning on taking a trip I see." He gestured to Joshua's backpack.

Joshua nodded. "Yes sir." He said.

"Oh no reason to call me sir." The man said. "I've not been in the navy for years. Name's Mac."

The man held out his hand and shook Joshua's. Joshua felt the firm grip and smiled. "Mac." He repeated.

"Where are ya off to?"

Joshua looked to James. James looked back. "Tell him to take you to the island Maruga."

Joshua told the man where he wanted to go. The old man looked at Joshua carefully eying him. "What business do you have on Maruga? You do realize people have died there, do you not?"

Joshua nodded. He hadn't been told that at all. James had left that detail out, which would have been nice to know. But he wasn't about to let the old man see he didn't know exactly what he was getting into.

"Yes. I've heard stories." Joshua replied. "Will you take me there?"

The old man rubbed at his white beard. "What will you give me in payment?"

James gestured to Joshua's bag. "Hand it to him."

Joshua reached into the bag and pulled out a small gold brick. "A friend told me you collect these."

The old man's eyes lit up at the sight of the brick. "I've not had a new one come in these doors for over six years." He said taking the brick out of Joshua's hand. The old man examined the brick top to bottom. Inspecting it carefully before agreeing. "My my my..."

Joshua stood firm. "Do we have a deal?"

The old man nodded. "Yes, yes we do. I'll get the boat." Pocketing the gold brick he grabbed a jacket and walked to the door.

Joshua and James followed him. James grinned at his brother. "I knew that would do the trick. I often gave him bricks of similar nature many times over the course of my journeys to the island. Knew he had a weakness for them."

Joshua nodded. "I can imagine."

"What's that?" The old man asked.

"Nothing." Joshua said.

They arrived at a small fishing boat. The name on the side of the boat said Buttercup. The old man grinned at his ship. "A fine craft isn't she."

Joshua nodded. "If you say so." He said. "Will she get us to the island?"

The old man was taken back a bit. "You dare question my ship if she's capable?!" He rubbed the side of the ship's hull. "Don't you listen to him Buttercup. You're a good ship, and a beautiful ship. Of course you'll do good. You always do good."

Joshua and James exchanged glances. James circled his ear with his finger to indicate the old man had lost it. Joshua nodded in agreement.

"I didn't mean any disrespect sir." Joshua said.

The old man glared at Joshua. "Right. Get on. We're leaving."

The boat set out across the water past Catalina Island. Joshua had hoped they were just heading to Catalina instead of the one no one had hardly heard of. He was feeling sea sick.

James stood on the edge of the boat and grinned. "This is amazing!"

Joshua shook his head as he ran to the side of the boat and threw up. "Speak for yourself! You're not sea sick."

The old man could be heard laughing. "The sea air will do ya good lad! Grow some hair on your chest!" He continued to laugh.

James hopped off the edge of the boat and stood next to his brother. "Don't worry, we'll be there in the morning. Maybe you should get some sleep."

Morning? Did he actually say morning? Joshua looked to James in disbelief. "Care to repeat that?"

James shrugged. "Yeah, get some sleep well be there tomorrow morning."

Joshua didn't have any issues flying. Didn't have any issues traveling by car. But he had issues with boats. Sleeping on a boat was not one of the things he wanted to experience. He was not looking forward to any of it. "I'll die."

James laughed. "No you won't. Just take a pail with you. If you get sick, puke in that. You'll be fine." He said. "Trust me, I've been on this boat several times. It's safe."

Joshua looked back to the old man who was still laughing and obviously enjoying himself. "Right." He said. He picked up a nearby pail and tied himself down to the deck of the ship. Joshua had no intention of going overboard during the middle of the night. Closing his eyes, he tried his best to get some sleep.

Sleep didn't last long. A loud horn came crashing through Joshua's dreams as loud as day could make it.

"Batten down the hatches!" The old man yelled. "Get up kid! I need your help!"

Joshua untied himself from the deck and stood up only to fall back down to the deck. The ship was tossing and turning back and forth. Struggling to grab a foothold, he managed to walk back towards the old man.

"What can I do?" Joshua yelled over the loud crashing waves.

The old man pointed to a large pole. "See that?"

Joshua nodded.

"Secure it! Can't have it flopping around!"

Joshua ran to the pole, tripped a few times while running, but managed to get to it without falling overboard. Taking a long rope, he started tying the pole down as ordered. Once it was secured to the side of the ship the old man gave him a thumbs up.

A half hour passed before the sea calmed itself. Joshua took in a deep breath of salty air. Coughing as he did so, he managed a smile. Joshua wanted the rest of the journey to be over quickly and be back on dry land.

He didn't attempt to sleep again for the rest of the night. Joshua's nerves were too wound up to even think about sleep. He just stood by the old man as they continued their journey to the island.

Chapter Eight

Morning came without further incident. Joshua watched as the island came into view.

"Land Ho!" The old man yelled.

Joshua looked at the island. It was indeed rather small. A little larger than Rhode Island, but not much.

James stood next to his brother. "See that? We're here." He patted Joshua on the back.

Joshua nodded. "Yes we are. Safely and in once piece." He looked to the old man who smiled. "Can't believe we even got here alive to be honest with you."

James smiled. "Don't worry about it bro. We're good. We're good."

They departed the ship only to see the old man leaving quickly. When Joshua asked why he was leaving them behind, the old man had said he only promised a one way trip. He wasn't planning on sticking around for anything else. The island gave him the creeps.

James reassured Joshua there was nothing to worry about. Nothing at all. They would find passage back off the island without problem. There were always ships headed away from the island to do trading and other things.

Joshua reluctantly agreed and figured it best not to dwell on that at the moment. He just wanted to get the so called adventure over with quickly so he could be back on stable land that didn't feel like it was going to float away. Not that an island would actually float away. Islands are bits of land that are stationary in the middle of the ocean after all.

Taking the backpack, Joshua slung it over his shoulder and walked down the pier. He was greeted by some nice people who were very cautious about talking with him. He was a stranger.

The first questions out of their mouths were, where did you come from? How did you find out about this place, and how long will you be staying? They were all valid questions. Joshua answered them to the best of his ability and didn't bother to raise suspicion of why they were really there.

James told Joshua what to say and when to say it. Which cabs to take and which people to trust. It was good he was on Joshua's side and no one could see him. Joshua hated to think of what would happen if people could see James. Would they have recognized him? It had been six years, but well no one really knows these days.

James and Joshua walked to the middle of town after a cab driver dropped them off. It hadn't changed much since the last time James was there. The sidewalks were still cracked and chipped paint was looking as faded as ever.

In a way, James felt like he was home.

Walking up to the center of town, Joshua marveled at the architecture. The buildings must have been well over a thousand years old. He was amazed at how well they had managed to stand the passage of time.

"Over there" James said. "Is Master's house."

Joshua's mouth dropped open at the mansion James was pointing at. Master sure had quite a place. It was at least twenty stories high. Several windows spanned the outside of the structure. A large massive gate with the initials MQ welded into it was in front.

"He lives there?" Joshua asked. "That place is like a fortress! How do you expect us to get in?"

James shrugged. "Oh I'm sure we'll come up with a way. Come on." He said. "We don't want to be caught starting at the mansion of the most powerful man for too long. People tend to get suspicious."

Joshua nodded. "No kidding."

They walked towards the mansion and down the side of the main gate. There were several spots where trees had managed to grow through and around the fencing. Joshua was surprised it wasn't kept cleaner. It was the mansion of the most wealthiest man on the island. One would think he would have staff that cared about their jobs and actually cleaned the grounds.

At the back of the mansion, there was a small door hidden behind some bushes. Joshua managed to clear a path to the door without being seen. The door had a combination lock on it.

James looked a the lock. "They've upped security over the past six years." He said. "Must have been ticked off at me."

Joshua shook his head. "Ya think!" He looked at the combination and tried a few dozen numbers. None of which worked.

"We have to guess that combination." James said. "Can't be breaking it, don't want someone to be."

James's voice trailed off as Joshua grabbed a lock cutter out of his bag and broke the lock in two. Joshua looked at James's expression and laughed. "You were saying?"

James shook his head. "Man, I knew I should have asked someone else. That's just the kind of stunt to get us killed."

Joshua put the lock cutter back in his bag and laughed. "You're already dead remember?" Dropping the lock to the ground, he opened the door and they went inside.

Chapter Nine

The brothers found themselves in a dark tunnel. Joshua pulled out a lighter and lit a small torch that was hanging on the wall. Taking it with him they walked through the tunnel. Parts of the tunnel were so low they had to crouch and crawl at parts.

Joshua looked at the spiders as they passed by them. Several had long legs. Longer than a foot. James assured him they were nothing to be worried about. The spiders weren't poisonous. Well not as poisonous as the snakes found on the island. That didn't give much comfort to Joshua. He hated snakes and spiders equally.

After the long tunnel, there was a shorter tunnel. Joshua could stand up in this tunnel without having to crawl. A few meters later they came to a dark door.

James looked at the door. It didn't have a lock. Joshua pulled on the door. It opened without hassle.

The two brothers were deposited in what appeared to be the kitchen. The kitchen's pantry at least. Several spices and foods lined the shelves. Joshua took a piece of cheese from a shelf and took a bite. Cheddar that had been aged a while.

James looked at his brother in disbelief. "We're here to retrieve an artifact, not sample the cuisine."

Joshua took another bit of cheese. "I haven't eaten since yesterday. I'm hungry."

"Whatever." James said. "Let's get going." He walked towards the end of the pantry and peeked out. "Coast is clear."

They walked out into the kitchen. It was lined with stoves and tables for food prep. Pots and pans hung from the ceiling. It was easily the largest kitchen Joshua had ever seen. James didn't bother looking around, he had seen it before. It no longer amused him.

"This way."

They exited the kitchen into the main formal dining room. A large table sat in the middle of the room with one single chair at one end. The table was set for one. Joshua assumed food would be presented in a few hours after the kitchen staff arrived and prepared the days meals.

James continued walking through the room to the end where another door was. Joshua followed him. Opening the door, Joshua saw a long hallway.

James nodded. "Yes, we must go this way." He said. "This is the way to Master's office."

Joshua looked at James. Who was he to argue with the man who knew the place? But he did have a question. "Why do you call him Master? Doesn't he have an actual name?"

"Master is his name." James said.

"Oh." Joshua replied. "That makes sense."

James nodded. "Yep."

They continued walking carefully as to not be noticed by anyone. Joshua almost ran into a member of the cleaning staff more than once, fortunately they weren't paying attention and he was able to duck down and away before they saw him.

A few more hallways and they stood in front of Master's office door.

Joshua reached for the handle and turned it.

Chapter Ten

The door was locked. Joshua looked to James. James shrugged. "Try it again." He said.

Joshua tried the door again. Nope, still locked. He wanted to kick the door, but decided against it. Kicking the door would only alert the staff to their location. That was the last they wanted to do.

"What now?" Joshua asked.

James shrugged. "I don't know. Last time I had an escort right into the office. Didn't have to figure out a way in." He pointed to Joshua's backpack. "Hey Dora, don't you have anything else in that backpack of yours that could help us?"

Joshua glared at his brother. "You're so funny." He said. "No! I didn't think we'd have any problem with this. I figured we would have been caught by now."

James nodded. "Right. Always the pessimist."

Now you might find it odd that a man is standing in front of a door hoping to open it while talking to thin air. Of course that is what someone would see had they not known that Joshua's brother was in fact standing by him. You and I both know that his brother is there and is a ghost so only Joshua can see him, but the rest of the people wouldn't know that now would they? Of course they wouldn't.

Which is exactly what happened when the ogre and the midget turned the corner.

They walked slowly up to Joshua taking in what they were seeing. A man arguing with himself. Looking to each other, they both shrugged. It was quite a sight for sure.

The ogre grabbed Joshua by the back of his neck. Joshua froze.

"Drop the bag."

Joshua did as he was told. Placing the bag on the floor slowly, he could feel the ogre's hand tighten around his neck.

James sighed. "Well I wasn't expecting them to show up."

"Now you tell me." Joshua said.

"Silence!" The midget said. "I don't want to hear you rambling on to yourself. You are caught! Deal with it."

Joshua looked to the midget. He found it difficult to take the little man seriously. Joshua didn't have issues with little people, he just found them to be amusing. Midgets were meant for circus work, not to be henchmen to an evil mastermind.

"Something funny?" The midget asked. He pulled out a knife and ran it along Joshua's arm.

Joshua shook his head. "No shorty, erm sir. Not at all." He tried not laughing for it was not a laughing matter. The midget did have a knife and Joshua was unarmed. He couldn't fight back if he wanted to.

The midget eyed Joshua. "Don't get fresh with me!" He looked to the ogre. "Come on now. Don't want to keep the boss waiting. We did capture someone breaking and entering. Have to let him know."

The ogre looked at Joshua. "You look familiar. Do I know you?"

Joshua shook his head. Brothers tend to look alike of course, unless one is adopted. The ogre clearly was reminded of James, Joshua's brother. Joshua didn't feel the need to let him know James was his brother. What could would it have done anyways? Not much at this point. It wouldn't change the fact that the two henchmen had Joshua and were going to take him to see Master.

They walked down the hallway away from the office. James followed the three whistling as he went.

Chapter Eleven

James looked at Joshua. "I can't think of a way to get you out of this mess." He said. "Wish I would have thought of that before we came."

Joshua rolled his eyes. By this time, there was a piece of gray tape over his mouth. The ogre got tired of Joshua talking to thin air. Joshua mumbled to himself. If he could have talked he would have probably said something like, "Gee thanks, why don't you try and rustle up some help!" But since he couldn't talk, it sounded like "Mmmmbhpmmmhm." Which as you can see isn't very useful at all.

"Master will be pleased with us." The midget said. "We haven't had a break in for several years now. Our first one in a while and we caught him."

The ogre nodded. "I know huh. We'll be rewarded for sure."

They continued patting each other on the backs in this manner for several more hallways. I'll not bore you with the details however, because they are rather boring to listen to.

Joshua tried keeping track of where he was in the mansion but lost it rather quickly. There were too many corridors and hallways they traveled down to keep an accurate account of where they were from their starting place in the kitchen.

Turning the corner, Joshua thought he recognized the corridor they were heading down. If he didn't know any better he could have sworn it was the same one that led to Master's office. But that couldn't be the case, could it? The henchmen wouldn't have gone in circles just to...

"Oh my good grief." James said cutting Joshua's train of thought short. "You really have got to be kidding me."

Joshua didn't need to hear the rest. Sure enough they were back in front of the main office door. The henchmen had indeed taken Joshua on a tour of the mansion attempting to get him lost. Joshua shook his head and closed his eyes. Good grief indeed.

Upon reaching the door, the ogre knocked loudly. A quiet voice could be heard from inside the office telling them to enter.

James entered the office. Nothing had changed. The torture chair was still sitting in front of Master's desk. The box he had tried to steal with the artifact inside was on the desk as well. All was as it had been six years ago. This made him smile for a moment until he heard the ripping of duct tape off his brother's mouth.

Joshua did his best not to scream as the tape was being pulled from his mouth. The sharp daggers from the chair were poking into his back. Resting his tied hands on one of the daggers, Joshua started slowly sawing away at the rope that held his hands bound. If he could get free he might be able to make a run for it. That is, if the midget and the ogre weren't paying attention. He would have to see how it would go.

"What are you doing here?" Master asked.

Joshua looked at the man. A cloud of smoke engulfed his face. His beady eyes shined through the smoke at him.

James walked up behind Master and looked at him. "I think he's going bald."

Joshua glared at James. Now was not the time for jokes. Another time such a comment would have been amusing. But not now. Now Joshua was trying not to get himself killed.

Joshua shrugged. "I think I took a wrong turn. I'm with your kitchen staff and I."

"Silence!" Master yelled. He thrust his hand down on the table shaking everything that was resting on it. "I do not want to hear your lies."

Joshua continued to rub the rope against the sharp dagger. "I meant no disrespect Master. I was just trying to explain to you what had occurred."

Master shook his head. Puffing on a cigar his eyes squinted at Joshua. "I hire all of the kitchen staff. I would have known if I had hired you. Which I did not."

Joshua lowered his head. "Oh." There goes plan one, he thought. Lying obviously wouldn't get him through this. There was the truth he could try.

James looked to Joshua. They exchanged glances. A few more minutes and Joshua would be free from the rope that kept him bound. Had the henchmen been somewhat smart, they would have bound his ankles too. But they didn't. That made things a little bit easier on Joshua's part.

"He was snooping outside your office." The ogre said. "You told us if we caught anyone near your office to bring him here."

Master nodded. "This is true. "Why didn't you catch him earlier when he entered the mansion through the kitchen pantry?"

The midget spoke up. "The pantry is not your office. You said specifically your office. The pantry is clearly not your office Master. This is your office."

Master frowned. It was so hard to find good help these days. Even though the midget had a point, he would deal with the oversight later. "Fine fine."

Turning his attention back to Joshua, Master took another puff of his cigar. "What are you doing here?"

Joshua looked into Master's eyes. "Do you recognize me?"

Master returned the gaze. "No, I've not seen you before in my life."

James walked towards the box. He wish he could open it. Unfortunately the only objects he could interact with were people. Actual objects he had no control over. Being dead pretty much sucked.

"Are you sure?" Joshua asked.

Master looked closer at Joshua. A slight glimmer of recognition entered his eyes. But left quickly. "No it couldn't be. I had James thrown out of here years ago never to return."

Joshua smiled. "Close, but um no cigar."

Master took the cigar out of his mouth and looked at it.

Joshua rolled his eyes. "Never mind." The man was obviously about as smart as his henchmen were. "I'm James' brother." He said.

Master looked at Joshua in disbelief. "A brother?"

Joshua nodded.

"A brother?"

Joshua continued to nod.

James smiled. "It'll take him a moment. Hang in there."

Joshua kept nodding as he fiddled with the rope. When he could feel the rope was cut almost all the way he stopped. It wouldn't take much now to just let it pop by itself.

The ogre and the midget looked at each other. "Did you know he had a brother?" "No, did you?" "No!"

This continued on for a few moments.

Master slammed his fist on the desk again. "Fine he has a brother so what!" He said. "I have several brothers and haven't talked to them in ages. Who cares if you're his brother. That doesn't explain why you are on my property."

Joshua nodded. "Oh yes it does. That box." He said gesturing to the box on the desk. It was black in color, made of steel. Quite heavy from the looks of it. "I have come for that box." Joshua said. "My brother, James, tried to steal that box from you a while ago now didn't he?"

Master nodded. "Yes he did." Placing a hand on the box, he tapped it gently with his fingers. "I managed to catch him and send him packing. But that was between him and me, why have you come?"

"To settle a debt." Joshua said. "You see, he won't stop bugging me about this box. He insists that I come get it from you."

Master laughed. "He did, did he?" Master spun the box around a few times on the desk. It made a scratching sound with each pass. "Why didn't he come himself?"

"He's dead." Joshua said. "Yes, my dead brother is talking to me. He claims there's an artifact in this box that will somehow change the world."

Master stopped spinning the box. "Dead you say?"

Joshua nodded. "Dead."

"And he talks to you?" Master continued.

"Oh yes, he's been annoying me a lot lately. Would you like to talk with him? He's actually here."

Master looked around the room quickly to see if he could see James, which of course he couldn't. Sitting back in his chair he laughed.

"Oh my dear boy, you had me for a moment. He isn't here. I cannot see him."

Joshua shrugged, the daggers in the chair rubbed against his back as he did so. Wincing he nodded. "I'm the only one who can."

Master shook his head. "Why would he have you steal a simple artifact? It has no actual use to anyone. It is but a paper weight."

Joshua shook his head. "No, he says it's thousands of years old. There was something about you stole it from an ancient culture? I'm not sure about the whole story, just that it doesn't belong to you."

"What makes you think it belongs to you then boy?" Master asked. His breathing increased. The cigar was now out of his mouth and on the desk where it started a small burn mark.

Joshua shrugged. "I don't know. But I do know that in a few seconds, your henchmen will be on the floor in a lot of pain."

Master laughed more. "Silly fool."

Joshua reached behind him and grabbed onto two daggers. Pulling them from the chair he stabbed the ogre and the midget in the stomachs. They fell to the floor quickly.

Standing up, Joshua walked towards the desk. His hands bleeding from where he had grabbed the daggers. Master's face was in shock. "I wish you hadn't of done that." He said.

Joshua leaned against the desk. Blood trickling from his hands. "Oh? Why is that?"

"I find it so hard to get good help these days." Master said. "If they die I'll have to look for more help. I hate that process, all the paper work. It's annoying."

Joshua clenched onto the desk in an attempt to ignore the pain in his hands. "Well give me what I want and maybe you can get them to a hospital."

Master shook his head. "I cannot give you the artifact. It is mine. Not yours. You and your brother don't deserve it!" He stood from his chair and leaned across the table at Joshua.

"Yes, but your men are bleeding." Joshua said. "You had better get them some help."

Master shook his head. "Those daggers have poison in them. There's nothing that can be done. No doctor around here knows what to do with it." He paused. "The amount that you have given them is a lethal dose. They will be dead within the hour. Your hands, they're cut. You've been infected with the poison as well. It will take years for it to go through your system. You will die just like your brother did."

James winced. "You son of a bitch!" He yelled.

Joshua tore his shirt and wrapped his bleeding hands up in an effort to stop the bleeding. "You murdered my brother." He said.

Master sat back down in the chair. "I will murder you as well. I only wished it would have been under different circumstances. No go. Away from my sight before I call more guards. I'm done with you. Go live the rest of your miserable existence in as much pain as you possibly can."

James took a swing at Master. His hands went right through him. There was no use trying to hit the man. James could no longer grasp onto people. He was starting to fade.

"I'm sorry brother." James said.

Joshua looked at James. "Not your fault. There's nothing you could have done to stop it from happening."

Master looked around the room. "Who on earth are you talking to? I told you to leave!"

Joshua took a step to the side. Reaching in his pocket, he pulled out a small knife and rubbed it against his open wound in his hand. Hopefully enough poison will get on this blade, he thought. Walking up to Master he looked at the box.

"Just one thing before I go." Joshua said.

Master shook his hand in the air. "What is it?"

"Might I see the artifact in question?" Joshua asked. "I want to see what it was that caused my brother his life."

Master picked up his cigar and put it in his mouth proceeding to smoke it. "Fine fine. If you must." Reaching over to the box he opened it.

Joshua looked inside the box. A wooden compass stared back at him. It was of simple design. Two wheels circling a globe.

Joshua looked over at James. "This is the artifact?"

James nodded. "That's it brother. That's what will change the course of the world."

Joshua picked up the compass. "You must be very happy to be in the possession of such a marvelous device."

Master nodded. "Of course I am." He reached out for the compass and took it back. "Now go."

Joshua nodded. "Of course, of course." Taking the knife, he stabbed it into Master's hand pinning it to the table. The compass dropped to the floor.

Master looked at Joshua in rage and anger. Tears running down his face from the immense pain. "You idiot! What have you done?!"

Joshua took a step back. "Nothing that you wouldn't have done to protect your property." Reaching down he picked up the compass. "I'll be taking this now kind sir. It would be wise for you not to follow me. You might want to find a doctor who will take care of that poison I just gave you. I hear it's nasty stuff."

Joshua ran out of the room with James quickly behind him.

Chapter Twelve

Outside the mansion, Joshua and James walked down the street. Joshua cradled the compass in his hands back and forth as they walked.

"I can't believe you did that." James said. "You know he won't stop until he finds you."

Joshua nodded. "I know. But given the fact we're both infected with poison? He has what? Maybe six years? That's enough time to figure out what this thing does."

James nodded. "True, true."

"I just wish you could go on the adventure with me." Joshua said. "It won't be the same without you."

James smiled at his brother. "My life is complete. You've done the single thing I wasn't able to do when I was alive. That's all that matters."

"Yeah, but still. Life won't be the same without you brother."

James hugged Joshua. Joshua hugged his brother back. It was true, life wouldn't be the same.

As James let go, he began to fade. It was his time to go to the sparkly city up above. Joshua wished his brother could stay with him. But he knew that wouldn't be possible.

Joshua watched as his brother disappeared fully out of existence to the other side. Letting go a sigh, he figured one day he would see his brother again.

The two brothers had been close. The compass had brought them closer, and now a mad man would be after Joshua.

The adventure was really only beginning.