



Your Sky

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May 13, 2006

Something like a dedication

Writing is a strange friend.

It is rather unreliable, suffers from frequent mood-swings and quite an apparent lack of long-term-memory and is never there when there's a deadline threatening to swoosh by. But when it does come around, it's entertaining, funny and enlightening (sometimes probably even productive). Despite its many frailties, it has been one of my most loyal friends since we've met.

We had to slowly get used to one another, first not daring to put too many words into a line, then knowing that too many words in a line may destroy meaning, as well as too much punctuation.

From poetry to short stories to lyrics – and never back again, I thought and indeed the *real* writing abandoned me for quite a long period of time and when it finally came back, nothing was the same anymore. Still, during its absence, there was someone to take its place.

This is for him.

Happy birthday, Terje.

Dennis (05 2006)

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1 The Quiet and the Storm

The few remaining leaves in the trees were silently rustling in the slight breeze. The heavy dark clouds that hovered over the city like enormous hostile space ships drowned all happiness just by their pure presence. They were waiting.

She was waiting, too. It had all been too much for her, too long. She was standing still, listening to the birds in the trees that had not yet flown south and to the sounds of the city.

The wind blew some leaves against her legs.

If it was just another time, she thought, another place maybe, she would be walking around the park or through the forest, shuffling her feet through those leaves. She would be strolling, in her own speed, her own pace, with the soft ground underneath and the big grey steel-like sky above.

She barely noticed the voice, this one monotonous voice that everyone was listening to or, as she thought, pretending to listen to.

The buzz of the city grew fainter.

Nature was holding its breath.

Everyone was.

They are all looking at me, she realized. They all had that peculiar expression on their face, a mixture of pity, worry and revulsion.

“That poor girl”, they used to say, “as if she hadn’t had enough to cope with already.”

“Honestly, I don’t know whether she’ll handle it”, they used to say, “she’s always been a little fragile. It’s always the silent ones that crack in the end.”

“Look at that, now everyone has come here for her and all she does is stand there like that”, they used to say, quite silently.

She hated that expression. She knew it from the days when she had been looking for a job. Finding one had never been easy but it had also never been any harder. Many people, just like her, were unemployed and wherever she was applying, there were at least ten other people before her.

She was not stupid. Her grades had not been excellent, though always somewhere near the top. She had never fully grasped mathematics, but had been good in history.

Her teachers had always described her as a silent kid, someone who knows a lot but talks little. They used to say that they thought there was a lot going on in that little head of hers but that she rarely spoke it out.

She had hated them for saying that. When her teachers had told her that she would have to participate in the lessons to get a good mark (she had always done her homework, she had just never seen the point in telling the teachers things they already know), they would have had that very expression on their face.

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The very same expression that she had seen on the face of managers that questioned her when she was applying for a job.

“Sorry”, they said, “but we’re looking for someone with more of an attitude, you know? Your references are very... satisfying... but we just don’t think you would fit into our company. We hope you understand.”

That’s what they said, “we are looking” and “we think”. Although they decided all these things absolutely on their own, they were always willing to share the responsibility.

She wasn’t. She couldn’t. Simply because there was nobody she could share her responsibility with.

The priest hadn’t said anything in a while, she noticed, and looked up.

They were still staring at her.

She knew what to do. It was not as if this was the first time.

She walked up to the hole in the ground which seemed to grow wider and deeper and darker with every step she made towards it, picked up the little shovel and tossed some soil into the hole. Then she turned around and left the funeral, the park and all the people there without looking back.

She had said goodbye already.

2 Once upon a Time

The city had devoured her when she had first come here. She had been on a train, rumbling over the bridges as, slowly, more and more enormous buildings rose into the clear sky until it was filled with glass and concrete and the bustle of city life.

The roads that whipped past seemed to wrap around her like soft, comfortable yet strong and sturdy ropes and tied her up so tightly that she could hardly breathe anymore.

For all her life, there had been wide fields of flowers, tiny paths through the little groves that, seemingly randomly, were placed everywhere. There had been a silence of a quality that now, as she saw the traffic around here, seemed unlikely to have ever existed. Back then, when you closed your eyes really tight, when you squeezed every bit of your brain's capacity into most closely listening to the sounds around – you could almost hear the wind in the grass and, if you listened really closely, the rumble of thunder a few hundred miles away.

Now there were loud streets, deafening cars and, what struck her as most horrible, earsplittingly loud people.

When she looked out of the window of her tiny hotel room, she felt imprisoned by a wall of sound that apparently had been built just to keep her captive, by a fountain of lights reflecting from huge walls of glass that pierced her eyes. She quickly pulled the curtains shut and stared into the dark room.

Everything seemed so soft in here, so fuzzy. The colors were casually fading into each other but from time to time a blinding streak of sunlight that somehow managed to get through the clouds and the curtains hit the floor cluttered with her clothes, the bed that was muddled with plates, towels and many books that had been thrown away carelessly, or herself, her beautiful but strained face with a frame of light brown hair around it and two remarkably green eyes that obviously had already seen too much.

She sat down on a chair and watched.

If it was just another time, she thought, another place maybe, she could see the beauty of the scenery. She pictured how an artist would imagine this room while desperately waiting for an inspiration to come, then suddenly jumping to his feet, getting a pencil and some paper and quickly drawing a sketch of it so that he wouldn't forget what it was like, what it felt like.

Yet, now this room was neither beautiful nor inspirational – it was plain uncomfortable, cold and damp.

She threw herself onto the bed which creaked with her every move, huddled under the thin blanket, reached for the remote on the bedside table and switched on the TV.

While quickly changing channels, she barely noticed that there obviously had been another attack on a foreign embassy somewhere in the Middle East. She hardly realized that the stock market had gone up quite a bit today. She scarcely heard all the commercials for shampoo and cereals.

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But when the picture of a smoking pile of debris which was oddly shaped like a cigar with wings that had been torn apart appeared on the screen, she suddenly became rigid, unable to move, unable to switch to another channel or even blink.

Her eyes were wide open, her mouth felt dry. Not again. Not again.

But, this was different. Back then they had not known for sure. Nobody had been able to tell her what had happened. They hadn't found the plane. Up until now, they hadn't found it.

Back then, when the call had come, she hadn't known what to do. She hadn't felt like crying, she had been angry; angry at her parents for getting on that plane although they knew that planes do crash sometimes; angry at herself for letting her parents go; angry at the world for letting such a thing happen; and angry at herself again for not being able to do anything about it.

She had sat in her room which was the only part of the house she was comfortable being alone in and she had waited. Usually, after a while there were the typical sounds of life passing by, of the world turning. There were the noises of cars from outside, there was the occasional rustle in the trees and, eventually, there was the sound of the key in the door and of the wiping of shoes and the voice that said the corniest thing in the world. "Honey, I'm home". These were the moments she had remembered back then, the good ones. The few good ones. And she waited for them to come back, just like they always had after one of the long periods of quarrel and dispute.

But then, she had waited in vain. She hadn't opened when the doorbell rang. She had turned on the music when people had started knocking. She had turned up the volume when the phone had started ringing and hadn't stopped for an hour.

She had known that sitting alone in this room was no good for her. She had absolutely known that the only thing that would have really helped her would have been to go out and talk to people, to cry her heart out. And sometime, after she would have finished crying and after the tears would have swept away all the sorrow and the anger and the misery and left only the numbness, the emptiness, a while after all that she would be able to go on with her life. She had known that if she didn't do that now, this would be the source of something that would probably occupy several psychologists for years.

But she hadn't cared. She hadn't wanted any help.

And although everybody had worried about the girl who had lost her parents in that horrible plane crash, nobody had said anything when she had left the house after three days with a very firm look on her face. Nobody had dared to speak to her in case talking about what had happened would tear these superficially healed wounds again – the neighbors used that image quite a lot in these days – and she hadn't felt like talking to anyone either.

That hadn't changed until now. The TV was still on. Now there was one of these quiz shows waiting for stupid people to call and make a fool of themselves.

She switched off the TV, slid off the bed and got her coat. She had to get out of here. At least, this was the city. There ought to be a place to go.

She locked the door to her room and got down the greasy stairs with the soft, sticky floor that obviously had used to be some sort of yellow, walked past the receptionist who was sitting there, watching TV with a phone to his ear. He barely noticed her.

2 *Once upon a Time*

She left the building and as she got out, she noticed that it was night already. The storm that had been brooding over the city had disappeared and through the omnipresent glow of the streetlights, she could see one or two stars in the sky.

She went down to the street and waved at a passing taxi. It stopped and she slid into the back. The driver turned around and looked at her.

“Hey, girls like you ought to be in bed by now” he said and smirked. “Where to?”

She thought for a while. Then she just said “A bar”.

“A bar then, all right. Off we go” the driver said and pulled his car over into the nightly traffic.

3 The half-empty Glass

Marge, her mother, had been a woman in her late forties who appeared at nearly every party she could get to but who never really enjoyed herself. She did not care whether she had been invited or not. She just turned up at every more or less socially important event wearing one of these revealing glittery dresses she had rented from a store next town.

Wally, her husband – his real name was Herbert but Wally seemed so much more appropriate – did not really approve of Marge’s lifestyle but he neither detested it. It provided him with enough time to take care of his hobbies: Drinking and watching TV.

Chloe had no idea how the two could have met and what had led to their marriage but she was quite sure that love had only been playing a very secondary role in that decision.

She could only recall tiny fragments of her life with her parents, little moments of day to day life that stuck with her for whatever reason.

For example, she could clearly remember the three of them having dinner, Wally in his grubby shirt reading a newspaper, Marge with the large dark rings under her pale blue eyes covered in thick make-up, all of them silently shoveling food into their mouths. Wally had cleared his throat and Marge had suddenly jumped up furiously, shouting “What, Wally? WHAT?”, had received nervous looks from both Chloe and her dad, had muttered something and left the dining room smashing her plate against the wall.

They had never been talking much, Chloe thought. In her family nobody ever said when they had had a bad day or when there was something bothering them. They met at the bare necessity of family-required events (like dinner), shouted at each other a bit over the most ridiculous subjects (for example, Marge was always too cold and Wally was always too warm and so they could never decide whether to turn on the radiator or open the window) and then headed off, each into their own worlds.

But although family life never really existed, at least not for Chloe, she still missed it, she missed them. She missed the few good times just as much as the rest. It might have not been Pleasantville but it had been something; a net to catch her up.

Somebody said something to her.

It took her some time to focus on the present, on reality, on the greasy bar, suitably equipped with peanuts and stains that closely resembled dried blood, on the thin clumsy bartender with his checkered shirt who seemed to be pretty new and pretty uncomfortable with the situation, on the mirror behind him that displayed the image of a girl around 25 in a beige coat that she still hadn’t taken off. That girl is beautiful, she thought, somewhere beyond all that sadness and misery, somewhere beyond all that mess – she is beautiful.

Somebody said something to her; again.

“What? Sorry, what did you say?” she asked, looking up.

3 *The half-empty Glass*

“I just asked if I may get you a beer or sumthin?” the huge man with the black mustache standing beside her asked again.

“No thanks. I’m . . . fine” she lied and turned back to her beer which stood, still untouched, on the counter.

“Come on honey, I don’t bite. At least not regularly” he chortled as if he was very pleased with his appalling sense of humor. He sat down on the stool beside her. She noticed how the red leather coating was bulging out to make way for his enormous behind.

“Thank you but. . . I think I’ll have to leave” she answered, got up, put some money beside her beer and stormed out of the bar.

The stranger remained sitting there and, after a while, grabbed her beer and emptied the glass with one gulp.

It was just like when she had met Seth.

She had been to a club, just like him. They were both not actually the typical kind of people found in clubs. She didn’t really enjoy dancing too much, at least not that quick throwing around of limbs which always made her dizzy, he didn’t really like getting drunk because if he did, he feared, he might lose control.

They had met when Chloe had accidentally bumped into someone else. That someone had turned around amazingly quickly, considering his perimeter, and had stared at her with a wild expression in his eyes. Alcohol had been oozing from every pore of his enormous body and, even more, from his breath when he had started shouting.

“Whaddaya think you’re doin’, missy? Cantcha see I’m standing here?”

And as he had tried to push her away, his hand had been stopped in mid-air by another one.

Seth had been looking up to him as calm as the eye of a storm. He had just gazed into the man’s eyes and after a long silence which seemed to Chloe like half an eternity, the man had stumbled back as if some kind of fight had been decided.

He had turned and left and Seth had asked whether she was okay.

That was when it started.

From then on, they had been like siblings. Chloe had once read about the idea of soul mates, people that did not need to get to know you because they knew all about you all along, people who were exactly the missing half to your personality that everybody was looking for, in one of the typical magazines that fourteen year old girls tend to read. She hadn’t liked the idea that it was just a matter of luck whether you found that one person, your soul mate, or whether you didn’t and that you could, honestly, never know whether the person by your side was this mysterious apparition.

But with her and Seth, she decided to ignore all rational doubts. They were meant for each other and that was apparent.

She had never been special and had never had the chance to experience anything extraordinary. There was a lot about her that was not typical or usual but most people seemed to be good at ignoring that and focusing on all the more conventional aspects of her.

Seth, however, brought forward certain characteristics in her that even she had no idea existed. He made her write poetry, something she had always considered either an amazing form of art

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impossible to master or a way for teenagers in puberty to express their uncanny discordance with the world.

He had influenced her in a way she hadn't believed possible and now... he was gone.

4 Meetings

She headed off to the hotel. She walked for she didn't want to take a cab again. On the one hand, cab drivers in the city were a strange folk and made a point of proving that to every single one of their passengers. On the other hand, she trusted her feet more than she trusted her head.

A slight breeze was blowing through the streets, carrying some leaves and parts of newspapers around, swirling them in little whirlwinds, lifting them up, letting them fall down, then picking them up again and starting all over.

She stopped and looked at it. It all looked so peaceful.

Suddenly, she was blinded as a single streak of light hit her eyes. Right through a tiny gap in all the buildings it came, that first ray of dawn.

How long had she been in that bar?

"Hey" a voice whispered right beside her right ear.

She jumped and would have screamed if her throat hadn't been as dry as a cotton field. As she turned around, she saw what looked like a little. . . well, something small and hairy with a long beard. . . it really did look like a dwarf. It had a long crooked nose and two small black eyes like tiny beetles, dark and deep as the universe that stared right at her.

"Hey" it said again. Its voice sounded like the cry of a bird, strangely high-pitched and creaking as if someone was opening an old and rotten coffin. It was also quite muffled and hard to understand, due to the thick beard, Chloe suspected.

"H-Hey" she answered. Did that happen all the time when you were in the city, she wondered. Strange people just saying "hey" to you didn't seem very normal to her.

"Err. . . I was wondering. . ." it began. She looked at this weird man in absolute awe, secretly pondering which direction to run if it got any closer.

"I. . . I think I can help you" it said. She stared.

"What do you mean?" she asked. It probably wasn't a good idea, talking to this strange little guy in the middle of some deserted street that. . . Just a moment.

She looked around. She was no longer in any street but in a small backyard, surrounded by brick walls on either side. Above, the black sky was slowly becoming brighter and the first stars started to disappear.

"Don't worry. You don't need to be afraid" the dwarf told her.

Yeah, sure, she thought. That's what they tell you.

But she wasn't afraid. Strangely enough, she wasn't afraid at all. Perhaps it was just the city air in her blood but she felt she trusted that guy. She felt she could watch past that ugly face and these ragged clothes, right into his soul. And what she saw made her quite confident.

"I don't need any help." she decided.

"I know you've lost someone; someone very important to you. I know. We all do. Some of us think it wasn't right" he said, the last words only a whisper she barely understood.

"You. . . who are you anyway?" She shook the last bit of drowsiness off.

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“Oh, I’m terribly sorry, I failed to introduce myself.” He – she was now sure that it was a he – bowed as low as he could with his enormous nose almost hitting the ground. “My name is Reophus. And as I said, I think I can help you, Chloe.”

“How... how do you know?” she stuttered. “Have we met?”

“No, no, oh no” he said and suddenly started to laugh, first quietly like a little sheep, then so intensely that it shook his entire body.

“No, we never met before” he said slowly calming down. “It was not your time yet. But still, I know you.”

From the depths of his pockets, he pulled out something on a long chain that gleamed in the early sunlight. He flipped it open and Chloe could see that it was a little golden pocket watch with some strange letters engraved on the lid.

He startled, let out a silent scream, snapped the watch shut, slid it back into his pocket and looked up to her.

“I’m sorry, terribly sorry, but I already have to leave you again. But...”

He stepped closer to her, rose on his tiptoes so that his nose almost hit her chin and looked at her conspiratorially.

“... if you want me to help you with Seth, meet me there” he whispered and shoved a little slip of parchment into the pocket of her coat.

A horn blew. The sound was so loud and came so suddenly that she jumped and had almost been run over by another car that missed her just by a few inches, the driver turning in his seat cursing.

“What do you think you’re doing, missy?” someone yelled at her. “Come on; get out of the fucking way!”

She looked around, confused. Everything was so bright. The sun had now fully risen and was blinding her. She was standing in the middle of a crowded street with a long queue of cars blowing their horns waiting behind her.

She scuttled off the street and when she reached the pavement, leaned to a streetlight and sighed.

5 Decisions

“Oh, come on, I’m already off the street” she thought. “What do you want me to . . .”

She opened her eyes and realized that the honking was not about her but that it was reflected by the flat surfaces of the buildings and, muffled, entered her room through the half-open window.

She took a look around. She was lying on the bed with her coat still on. Her shoes lay on the floor which was now also cluttered with books and parts of the bedspread.

As she sat up, she suddenly pushed a hand to her head and grinded her teeth. The searing pain in her head died away as she ceased to move.

She hadn’t drunk anything, had she? She had been to a bar, she remembered, and there had been this weird man with the long nose . . . no, she had met this guy with the mustache in the bar, the man with the nose . . .

Suddenly, she was wide awake. Had she been dreaming this? It all felt so unreal, now that she came to think about it. An old man in ragged clothes walking up to her in the middle of the night in a deserted street – or had she been walking up to him? – and talking to her about . . . Seth.

She patted her coat, reached into the pockets until she stopped abruptly. Her hand had found something small in one of the pockets; a small piece of parchment.

She pulled it out, looked at it, then got up to walk over to the window with the shutter through which the blazing sun outside was not more than a trickle on her skin, and examined the note.

In a neat and orderly, yet somehow ancient handwriting it said:

42 COLUMBUS AVENUE
TONIGHT

She flipped it over but there was nothing on the backside.

There was no way she was going there tonight. What did TONIGHT mean anyway? She couldn’t just . . . no, she wouldn’t just turn up there. Who knew who this guy was or what he was planning? Maybe he had been following her all the way from the funeral to the hotel and then to the bar. Perhaps he was one of these stalkers who were so fixated on a certain person that they followed them everywhere, called them in the middle of the night and threatened to kill them if they didn’t finally reply.

And what was it about that name? What had it been . . . Reophus? Who in their right mind would give their child such a name!

It was definitely a false name, she decided and although a part of her wished she wasn’t so goddamn horribly afraid, she knew that this was the right decision.

The sun set. All day long the heat outside had been almost unbearable with every ray of light being split, redirected and recombined by the myriads of reflecting glass windows but now the city was, very slowly, cooling down.

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She had not left her room. She had ordered something to eat from a Chinese delivery service and the empty packages now joined the mess on the floor. It doesn't make it any worse, she had thought.

Now she was watching TV. There was a show about the dumbest robberies ever and suddenly she noticed that she hadn't been paying attention for the last couple of minutes.

She was flipping the little piece of parchment between her fingers which now, that she looked at it in the dim light, almost seemed like a business card.

She stared at it and it stared back.

Finally, she jumped up, switched off the TV, tossed the remote back onto the bed, hurried into her shoes, grabbed her keys and wallet and was out of the room.

6 Columbus Ave.

It was only a few blocks from her hotel to the building in Columbus Ave. Chloe had asked a couple of people passing by her for the way and after they had grunted and jerked their heads into a certain general direction, Chloe was now standing in front of a building that appeared to be completely made from concrete with no windows visible in the setting darkness. The street lights around her lit up and filled the scene with this particular soft yellow light that is barely enough for you to see all the red, gleaming eyes in the shadows.

She pushed that idea off her mind as she approached the entrance. There was a neatly paved path leading towards it, flanked by an alley of poplars which were strangely illuminated by the street lamps flickering to life.

When Chloe had almost reached the brightly lit doors – the only bright part of the building – she heard someone clearing his throat behind her.

She spun around and saw Reophus, sitting on a bench, smiling and waving at her to come over.

He did not look nearly as ragged as he had the night before. He was now wearing a dark blue coat and emerald green trousers. His grey hair had been combed back and there was no trace of a beard whatsoever.

The eyes, however, were giving him away. As was his voice.

“I was not sure whether you would come” he said as she stopped in front of him.

“I wasn’t sure myself” she said and, at his invitation, sat down beside him.

The bench was facing the street so that they could see the constant flow of cars in front of them and the steadily lessening stream of people.

After a while, Reophus began “I am very sorry for having upset you so much yesterday but you have to understand that the time I had to talk to you was very limited. If the fact that I had contacted you had slipped somehow, we both would have been in grave danger. Today, however, I will be able to answer most of the questions you undoubtedly want to ask me.”

She stared at him. The two pitch black universes in this wrinkled face were the two friendliest things she had seen for ages.

“Who are you and why do you know so much about me?” Chloe asked, tearing her gaze away from Reophus’ eyes.

“Ah, I knew you would bring that up. It is probably the most difficult question to answer and the most difficult answer to believe – but I shall do my best.

“Do you know a place called Hades?” he asked.

“You mean hell?” she asked back, remembering a TV show about Hercules she had always watched as a kid.

“No, no, not hell” Reophus replied. “Heaven and hell are really overrated human concepts and they could not be farther from the truth. Heaven and hell are one and they have always been. Hades, as the old Greeks used to call it, is the only place there is – besides this one.”

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He stretched out his arms to point at the buildings, the streets, the cars, the trees and the people. Chloe accidentally caught a peek at his bare arm around which numerous watches were wrapped, all in different shapes and conditions, some digital, some really old fashioned analog watches, all showing different times.

“Do you believe in heaven and hell, Chloe?” Reophus asked.

It took her some time to think about this question; then she answered “I believe that there must be something after this life but I don’t think it has to do with either harps and curly gates or with brimstone and pitchforks.”

“Good answer” Reophus acknowledged and chuckled silently.

His voice was not as high-pitched now as she remembered and not as muffled it but it still sounded quite unusual, like a young man speaking with an old man’s voice.

“Heaven and hell are just human inventions to cope with the inevitable – but the afterlife if I may call it that is more than real.”

“And... If I may ask, how do you know?” Chloe asked.

“Well, you know” Reophus cleared his throat and then continued with a certain pride in his voice “it is because I work there.”

They sat silent for a while until Chloe silently said “You *work* there?”

“Yes, I do. The payment is rather substandard but it’s the most secure job you could get.” He chortled.

“You mean... You mean you actually work... down there... for the devil...”

“No, as I said, the human ideas about what is going on down there are quite exaggerated. There is no devil with horns and hooves and a tail. There is just... him.”

“And who is he?”

“Well, nobody really knows because nobody has seen him in a while.”

“In a while?”

“Well, for the last seven thousand years.”

Again there was silence for some time.

“That’s quite a long time to leave your company running on its own, don’t you think?” Chloe asked. This had to be a joke. Someone had set this poor old man up just to... well... why?

“Anyway” she added. “You wanted to talk to me about Seth, didn’t you?”

Let’s see where this gets us, she thought.

“Of course” Reophus, or whatever he was really called replied and the faint smile immediately disappeared off his wrinkled face.

“I know Seth. I know that you love him and I know that he used to love you too. I know that he was recently killed in a car accident. I know that you think he has been your soul mate and that you now feel like a part of you was missing. I know that he liked daffodils and thought roses were overrated. I know that he once injured himself while cutting bread and that there is still a tiny scar on his left thumb. I know that you think it was unfair to take him away from you and I know that you are right. I know that you wish there was a way to bring him back and I also know that there, indeed, is one.”

She stared at him, her mouth open.

“How... how do you know all this” she asked weakly, her eyes filled with tears. “How do you...”

“I told you” he answered softly and patted her on the shoulder.

“I know that all this must be very hard for you to understand and you probably think that all this is just a joke and that there is a team of... cameramen hidden somewhere waiting to jump out at you. But believe me, Chloe. This is real.”

She was still looking at him, a single tear running down her cheek.

Then it came. It had been building up for years and years. It had always been locked up, pushed down to some deep and dark place inside of her. She had ignored it and shoved it out of her consciousness whenever it had been nagging on her, asking, begging her to let go.

Finally she did.

And for the first time in many, many years, she cried. She sobbed and wept and wailed and Reophus put his arm around her and gently pushed her head onto his shoulder.

So they sat for a long time.

The city was passing by, cars and people, people and cars. Nobody cared for the two people on the bench in front of a tall dark building and they cared for nobody.

In the end, she felt as if all the fear and all the pain had been swept out of her; and as Reophus handed her a soft blue handkerchief made from a strange fabric she had never touched before, she felt empty. Something that had been with her for almost as long as she could think back was gone.

She wiped her face and blew her nose and Reophus took the handkerchief from her hand, slipping it into one of his numerous pockets, saying “You won’t be needing this anymore.”

She sat up again.

“So you’ve seen Seth?”

“I have” he answered. “I know of everyone who enters the netherworld. In fact, I am responsible for them making it in time.”

He pulled up his sleeve and revealed his watches.

“This is also the reason why I know that Seth was brought to us too early. It was not his time yet, I checked. Someone has been tinkering with things.”

“But... who?” Chloe asked. She felt that she had completely lost the grip of reality but that feeling was not, as she had expected, unpleasant, it was not even making her afraid.

“I cannot tell you right now. But I should probably say that we do not have much time” Reophus said. “Seth is still there but spending time down there can greatly change a person and in a while even you would not be able to recognize him anymore. And that is, having said that only you could possibly find him in the first place.”

Chloe stared into the darkening streets. This was all too crazy to be true. Perhaps I’m insane, she thought. This would explain all the weird occurrences lately.

But what if she wasn’t? What if all this was real?

She closed her eyes for a moment, breathed deeply and opened her eyes again and there was a kind of determination in them which they had never shown before when she stood up and said “What do I have to do?”

7 Going Down

The air was hot and damp and smelled of burning coal and gasoline. Chloe was sure that if something like hell did, despite Reophus' affirmations, in fact exist, it would quite be like this place.

She was slowly walking down the grubby concrete stairs. The strange flickering orange light drew dancing shadows on the walls.

Suddenly, Reophus who was walking beside her, stopped.

"Listen to me, Chloe" he said in a serious voice as she turned around to him. "You will have to make the rest of the way by yourself. You know, there are some rules that even I cannot. . . bend" he added as he saw her terrified face.

"You mean, I have to get. . . in there and find. . ." she stuttered.

"You will be alright. I know that you will be. And I'm not often mistaken. You will know where to go."

"But. . . I don't even know what I'm doing here" she replied. Now that she was slowly getting used to the idea of Seth still being somewhere in her reach, the only person that could help her find him suddenly wanted to disappear.

"I can't make it on my own" she added.

"You have always been told that, haven't you?" Reophus asked, a wrinkled smile appearing on his face.

"You always had the answers to all the questions in you but you kept asking other people for their opinions. And whether that person did or did not agree did not really matter because either answer confused you."

Chloe stood in the hot, brooding air and thought about this.

"There once was a man who had built his house near a river" Reophus continued. "When he heard a radio broadcast saying that the river was going to rise and everybody was supposed to be evacuated, he said 'I'm a religious man, I pray, God loves me and He will save me.' When there was someone rowing past his window in a little boat asking him to jump aboard he refused and said 'I'm a religious man, I pray, God loves me and He will save me.' When a helicopter flew overhead and asked him to climb the ladder if he wanted to survive he replied 'I'm a religious man, I pray, God loves me and He will save me.' And then he drowned. And when he got down here he was furious and asked everyone why he hadn't been saved. Finally, someone turned to him and said 'Listen, they sent you a radio broadcast, someone in a boat and even a helicopter, what else were they supposed to do?' "

They stood silent for a while. Then Reophus produced an old withered hand from the pockets of his coat and patted her on the shoulder.

"You will be alright, Chloe" he said again and winked. "You will find your way. Good luck" he added, turned around and walked back up the stairs. Chloe stared after him but when she blinked the stairs were empty without any trace that he had ever been there.

7 *Going Down*

Well, she thought and turned around. This is it then. Either this means that I've gone completely nuts because I'm imagining things or I'm completely nuts because I'm actually going down there.

There was only one way to find out.

The heat made her sweat. She wiped her forehead, put off her coat and simply threw it away. Then she rolled up the arms of her sweater and followed the stairs further down.

After what seemed to her like an eternity, she reached a small square room which was empty except for a small wooden door at the opposite wall and a steel drum in which a crackling fire burned. Beside the fire stood someone, his back turned to her. He wore a shabby old jacket which might once have been olive but now with all the spots and stains looked more like a piece of military camouflage equipment.

Chloe slowly entered the room and cleared her throat.

The man with the jacket did not react but instead put his hands together and held them near the flames.

Chloe shrugged and quickly tiptoed across the room to the door.

It was in fact quite small. Chloe who was not the tallest person to begin with, would barely fit through. The wood looked withered and the brass-colored handle was covered in rust.

Slowly she reached out with her hand but as she touched the handle, a sharp voice behind her firmly said "Stop!"

Chloe spun around and saw that the person in the jacket had turned around and was looking at her. The fire flickered and illuminated the shape but Chloe could not see the man's face.

"You will not go through that door" said a strangely high-pitched voice.

"I was just, you know. . ." Chloe began but was interrupted at once.

"You were just – what? Sneakin' in, weren't ya? I know your kind, I knows it. Had one of you meself. Troublemakers, that's what y'are. But you won't get me fired, no, not you. After all that happened to Cheros, poor fella. Nah, you stay right there."

Chloe looked around desperately. Perhaps she would be quick enough and get through the door before this strange man could get her. Somehow, though, she did not consider this a very good and thorough plan.

"Got fired for drinkin' on duty, ya know, Cheros." The figure produced a bottle covered in a brown paper bag from the jacket, unscrewed the lid, threw it away and took a deep gulp. "Let one of you through. But not me, no, missy, not me. I'm a better guard anyway. God, it's so damn cold in here" the guard added, burped loudly and turned around to the fire although Chloe was sure he was still watching her.

She shivered, not because she was cold, this was the hottest place she had ever been to. But just before the figure had turned around, she had seen two pale blue eyes glowing under the hood of the jacket.

"I'm the only one with inn'vation down here, ya know." This was no question but a presentation of fact. "I makes up all the new ideas but they won't even let me have it warm in here."

Suddenly, Chloe had an idea. She ran up the stairs, reached the spot where her coat was lying on the ground, hurried back down and, panting, offered it to the guardian.

Your Sky

He turned around, his face still in shadows.

“Whoa, that’s a damn fine coat. I’ve never had one of these.”

He carefully examined the material, seemed satisfied with it and put it on, over his jacket.

“That’s much better”, he said and turned around again. This time, Chloe noticed, he was not paying attention to her but focused on his hands that now rested so far down they almost touched the flames.

“That thing looks freakin’ good on me, don’t ya think. I’ve always wanted one of them beauties but I couldn’t get one. It’s quite hard to get something nice to wear down here. They always goes with these goddamn black gowns. They look like they just had a bath or sumthin’...”

This was the last thing that Chloe heard before she silently pulled the door shut behind her.

8 The Boat and the Coin

Chloe stood in a narrow corridor with damp brick walls on either side. It was as if she had entered a completely different world. The air was pleasantly cool in here, perhaps even a bit chilly. And it was humid.

Water was dripping constantly from brick to brick and formed a tiny stream that followed the slight downward slope of the tunnel.

Chloe took a few steps and abruptly the corridor ended.

She was standing in something that looked like an old, abandoned sewer system. There was a broad and dark but calm stream reaching off to both sides further than she could see. It was not very wide, she could well see the other side, but there was no shore there, just a straight brick wall. A gentle sandy slope stretched down to the river.

Well, left or right, where would she go? She tried to make out any sign, any difference between the two paths along the river that might give her a hint but they looked exactly identical, probably even down to the last brick, she thought.

So she randomly picked a direction and decided to start walking left.

The path, she noticed after a while, seemed not to be straight. She was not entirely sure but she had the impression that it curved ever so slightly to the right.

After she had walked for some time – whether a few minutes or a few hours, or perhaps even days she could not tell – she reached a small opening in the wall. A tiny stream of water flowed towards her and into the river. On the end of the tunnel she could recognize a small wooden door – the very same one she had come through.

She cursed – silently – but the echo carried the sound far away and around the cave until it reached her ears again.

But there was something else, another sound, something quiet, something barely noticeable. Like little waves hitting something.

She turned around and glared into the distance.

She could not see as far as before. Strange waves of fog approached her from one side of the tunnel, the side where – she was sure now – the sound was coming from.

And then she saw it. There was a boat emerging from the mist, black as the night and so narrow that it hardly left a ripple in the water. It was, as she noticed, barely long enough to provide room for two people.

And at the bow, there stood a tall figure, motionless, completely wrapped up in black cloth.

Not at all like coming from a bath, Chloe thought. Not at all.

The little boat seemed to be moving on its own accord. It was plowing through the water without causing even the slightest ripple in the smooth surface.

Finally, the boat reached the point where Chloe was standing and stopped abruptly.

The dark figure turned to face her.

Your Sky

It was an old man with a thin and meager face. His bald head reflected the omnipresent blue-green light. He looked calm and full of reverence but there was a certain sharpness in his gaze.

“You do not belong here” he said with a voice so deep that it reverberated even more in the cavern.

“I . . . I’m just looking for someone” Chloe whispered.

“There is nobody here – except for me” the figure said.

“Who are you?” Chloe asked.

“My name is Charon. I am the ferryman on this river, the river Acheron, which separates the living from the dead, the one world from the other” the old man replied gravely.

“Then . . . can you take me to the other side? I’m looking for my . . .” Chloe began.

“No” the man interrupted her. “Only the dead I will escort to the other side.”

“Then . . .” Chloe thought for a moment. “Then I’ll have to swim” she said, full of determination.

“This will be of no use. If you swim the river Acheron, you will die. If you die in the river Acheron, you will forever lose the ability to enter the underworld. If you cannot enter the underworld, you are doomed to tread the world of the living, invisible, impalpable, unable to talk, for the rest of eternity. Thus are the rules.”

Chloe’s heart sank.

“And you could not make an exception? I . . . I could pay you” she tried.

“Everybody who wishes to cross the river has to pay me but there is no exception to the rules. The one exception I have ever made has done great harm and I do not intend to induce this to anyone else.”

“So you have taken someone over? Someone who was still alive?”

“Yes, I have – a long time ago.” Charon’s eyes wandered off Chloe and he stared into the distance for a while.

“Then perhaps it’s time you tried again” Chloe said. She reached into her pocket, looking for anything to offer Charon and found, to her surprise, a round metal object. She pulled it out and examined it. It looked like a coin into which the face of a beautiful woman was engraved. She had no idea why she had reached into her pocket or how the coin had got there in the first place but just following her intuition, she handed the coin to the old man.

Charon, still in thoughts, took it and stared at it for a moment. Then, as his gaze fell on the coin, his eyebrows rose.

“Where did you get this?” he asked, genuinely surprised.

“I . . . I would like to get to the other side” Chloe said firmly.

Charon said nothing for a while. Then he nodded towards the rear end of the boat.

“Get in” he said shortly.

They did not talk during the travel. It appeared to Chloe that now that she was on Charon’s ferry, the tunnel actually seemed to lead somewhere because even after quite a while she had not seen the tiny pathway leading back to the door again.

This reminded her of the first and only time that Seth and she had been out to sea. He had always been afraid of boats and while he had always liked sitting on the shore watching the big

8 *The Boat and the Coin*

and small ones pass by until the last rays of sunlight glittered on the waves, he had never actually found the courage to get on one.

Chloe had also never been on a ship for her entire life and so she had decided, when they were on vacation to the sea (it must have been three or four years ago), that they both take a boat trip around the coast.

Seth had hated it, she knew that, as from the first minute they had spent on board, he had been constantly glaring at his watch and whenever Chloe had looked at him he had forced a smile on his rather pale face.

It was the first time that Chloe had been the brave one, the one who suggested to risk something, even if it only was getting seasick.

Just like now, she thought. But here, there is worse than getting seasick.

Someone talked to her.

She startled and looked into Charon's cold eyes. She obviously had fallen asleep.

"We have arrived" he repeated and pointed towards the shore of the river.

The bank was not as steep here as it had been in the parts of the tunnel Chloe had seen before. Here, it was a gentle upwards slope from the river to... to something that looked remarkably familiar.

At the end of a narrow path that led up the shore, there was a wooden door which seemed to be almost identical to the one that had led Chloe here, just that it was a lot higher. Chloe could even see from here that even someone as tall as Seth would have easily fit through that door.

Or Seth, she thought. Seth will have fit through that door.

Chloe climbed out of the boat which did not sway the least bit as she did and looked at Charon.

The old man gazed at her until he finally said: "I hope you know what you are doing. Nobody who crossed that threshold has ever been able to come back. This is your last chance as I will not be able to help you on your way back."

Chloe smiled weakly. "Thank you for your help" she said.

"Good luck" he answered and for an instant his face twitched into something that looked to Chloe like something that might once have been a smile. But as she thought about this, the boat had already slowly moved away from the shore. It turned and slid back into the fog with the dark figure standing tall and unmoving at the bow.

9 In the Depth

The door moved easily and without any sound. As Chloe stepped across the threshold and closed the door behind her, she suddenly felt a huge lump in her throat. She slowly moved backwards until she could feel the warm wood in her back and the silver doorknob in her hand.

She was breathing hard. She was sweating. Her legs were shaking.

She forced herself to close her eyes. What had she expected? Well, she had not expected anything, really. Now that she came to think of it, she had not really had time to expect anything. All this had happened so quickly.

I'm ready for this, she told herself. I got down here and now I will do what I came here for. I will find him. I will find him and take him back with me. I can do this. I'm ready.

She opened her eyes again.

The room she was standing in was so inconceivably, so unthinkably large that, she felt, the whole world would have fit in with lots of room to spare.

This impression was supported by the fact that the air in here was absolutely clear. Not a bit of haze to hide the enormous dimensions was anywhere to be seen and so she could survey the entirety of...

... of hell, she thought, or Hades or whatever they call it down here. This is it. No way denying it now – this is it.

Her mind that had meanwhile given up coping with the unbelievable measures in here now slowly started to focus on what her ears were desperately trying to bring across.

Not only the space in here was enormous, the noise was just the same.

It was as if all the sounds that an operating universe could produce had been put together, stacked in this room and played back without any conceivable order or pattern, with some reverberation added for good measure.

And besides all the noise, she could tell that there were all kinds of voices as well. Adults and children, men and women, some yelling, some whispering, some screaming in agony, some shouting gleefully, everything inextricably intertwined to one humongous schizophrenic entity of voice.

Chloe worked up all her courage and started to step forward into the bustle.

As she looked left and right besides the dusty path that seemed to stretch along into infinity, she saw hundreds, nay, thousands of people, all seemingly busy within their own worlds.

To the right, there was someone stacking a huge pile of paper. Just as he took up the last page and put it on top of the enormous pile and sighed contently, the pile swayed dangerously and then, with an enormous swooshing noise tumbled and sent thousands of pages flying all over the place. The man let out a piercing scream, braced himself and began piling the sheets all over again.

There was a fluttering sound overhead and as Chloe looked up, she saw something that looked almost like a little pig, ring-tailed and all, but with wings and little human hands scratching a

pen over a board in his hand.

“Two hundred and seventy five million, six hundred and twenty three thousand five hundred and eighty nine” it muttered and soared off into the distance.

Chloe stared at the man stacking paper again. He was obviously oblivious to her presence, fully focused on the task at hand. Chloe did not dare disturb him so she wandered on.

A little further to the left, there was a hole in the ground. As Chloe looked into it, she was almost blinded by bright white light. As her eyes were slowly getting used to the brightness, she could see some people running around each other, looking rather joyful. She looked closer and noticed, that they were actually dancing on something that looked like a rather wispy cloud. They, too, took no notice of her watching.

Chloe walked on and after a short while reached a place where another path was crossing the one she was walking on. She peered around the corner to the right and saw that this one, too, stretched off into infinity with millions of tiny segments separated on either side, with millions of people busy with various tasks.

As she went on, Chloe saw areas which were absolutely pitch black with no light visible at all, regions where the smells of brimstone and burning and the sounds of human screams were so agonizing, that she almost ran past, areas where there was a long table on which several dozen people were sitting, chatting and eating merrily. . . there was everything.

Every way that Chloe had heard people imagining what the afterlife was like – she could see it here. Every description she had heard of either hell or heaven was matched here with absolute perfection.

A thought shot through her head. The afterlife is what everybody believes it is, she mused. She had read something similar once in a book she couldn't remember anymore.

The further she stepped, the less confident she became. Although mathematics had never really been her strength, she quickly estimated that if all the people since the first human being believed in something like this had landed here, each locked up in the cell they created themselves. . . there was absolutely no chance of finding Seth.

How long had she been down here? An hour? Two? Ten? She could not tell. How long would she be able to go on, alone, without any food or water? What would she do if she was getting tired and on the verge of falling asleep where she was going? Until now the flying things above her – as she had noticed there were not only these pig-creatures supervising every single region but also tiny demon-like figures, some that looked like angels, with wings and all, just with a clipboard and a pen instead of a harp – had not really cared about her presence. It was obvious that they were sure that she would have to have a reason to be down here, otherwise she simply would not be here. But if she fell asleep right on a path like this. . . she did not dare imagine.

But she did not stop. She took a left turn, then one to the right and then went on for some time before going left again. It was as if her feet knew exactly where she had to go and as Chloe noticed that, she made sure that her mind did not get in the way.

10 The Other Skies

Chloe and Seth had never really talked about death. There were so many more important subjects to talk about: The shapes of clouds, the colors of daffodils, the sounds in the silence.

Of course they had talked about more substantial things as well, about paying the bills and the shortest way from Marrington Cross to Vible County. But although they had, of course, not always agreed upon these and although some minor quarrels had stemmed from discussions about subjects like that, they did not stick in their minds for a very long time.

The shapes of clouds did, however. Once, Chloe and Seth had been sitting somewhere in the open countryside with bees buzzing from flower to flower and the sounds of a distant thunderstorm approaching.

Seth had laid back with his hands beneath his head and stared up into the sky.

“This is a dream” he had said and Chloe had agreed that she felt the same way.

“No, I mean the cloud up there. It’s a dream” he had replied.

Chloe had laid on her back as well and Seth had pointed to a particular formation in the sky.

They had not only seen dreams but also hope, spring and verisimilitude in the sky. Seth had been spotting them and he had pointed them out to Chloe. And after first being rather skeptic about all that, Chloe had started to see them too, had started to understand what shapes he had meant.

There was blue sky – nothing but blue sky with a few wispy clouds in front of her.

She noticed that her feet had stopped walking but it took her head a few seconds to catch up, to snap back into reality, to remember where she was.

The area in front of her was, in fact, a blue sky. There were some seagulls soaring along crying quietly and as she stepped a bit closer, she could even smell the freshly mown grass.

She stared ahead and, in a little distance, there was in fact someone standing. He had black hair that reached down to his shoulders and wore a green shirt and old jeans. He stood there with his hands folded behind his back, facing away from Chloe.

She could not move, she could not breathe, she could not think. Was this really happening? Was the person standing there. . . could it really be?

She took a deep breath, swallowed the huge lump in her throat and then, without hesitating any further, stepped into the sky.

It was cold up here. The rolling green hills stretched as far as Chloe could see and where they touched the deep blue sky, there seemed to be some kind of misty haze that suggested that you could walk either way for as long as you wanted and never see anything else but the green hills and the blue sky and. . .

And the clouds. Now that Chloe looked around, she saw that there were clouds, but not the white wispy kind that she had been staring at for hours with Seth by her side. Despite the blue

sky beyond, these clouds were almost pitch black. Huge almost solid looking towers dark as the night were looming overhead, abruptly illuminated by violent explosions of lightning inside them.

It was not raining but the way the clouds looked, the way they moved, everything about them suggested that they would not wait much longer. Yet the world did not smell of rain just like it usually did before a huge downpour, the grass did not sway in the wind. . .

All this vexed Chloe so much that she had almost forgot why she was here and that she almost had missed the single poplar that stood on the hill and the tall figure standing right beside it with his back turned towards her.

She looked at him, unable to move.

She had seen him every day. When she was sleeping she had seen him in her dreams, how he walked towards her and told her that everything would be alright, just as he had always done and when she was awake she saw his face in every newspaper photograph, in the reflection beside hers when she peered into the grocery's window, in the people that had been with her on the train into the city but – it had always turned out that it had been a figment of her imagination, just as if her mind could not get used to the thought of not seeing him anymore.

And now it was no imagination, no wisp of hope that was going to get blown away like a feather in the wind. This time it was real, this time it was possible. This time it was her saving him.

She walked up to him.

"This is death", Seth said without turning around in a hoarse voice that Chloe hardly recognized as his own.

"You know?" Chloe whispered.

"No, up there" he answered, slowly raising his arm to point at a particularly violent looking formation in the sky.

"And right besides it there's decay, despair. . . and over there, there's nothingness" he went on.

Chloe softly put her hands on his shoulders and gently turned him around to face her.

The look on his face appalled her so much that she immediately let go of him and took a few steps back.

His once so delicately chiseled features now appeared worn and strained, his face looked gaunt and haggard and his lank black hair hung in his face.

But all that did not worry Chloe. She had seen him like that before, when he had spent a whole night pondering a problem or had worked for days on end. He had often strained himself so much that he had looked years older than he was. . .

Yet there was one thing that always reminded everyone – and especially Chloe – how much life, how much energy was still left in him: his bright blue eyes.

Now all the energy and color seemed to have drained from them as well as from the rest of his body. He was standing there almost oblivious of her presence, hardly more than a shadow.

She stared at him in disbelief.

"Seth?" she asked.

Your Sky

He did not answer. Instead he turned around again, folded his hands behind his back again and stared at another cloud in the ever-changing sky.

“I can. . . I can get you out of here” she said slowly.

Nothing indicated that he had heard her at all.

“Someone named Reophus helped me. I . . . I went through the basement on Columbus Avenue and I bribed Charon, the ferryman and. . . Seth?”

“Where would you take me?” he said without turning around.

“Home” she replied, a tear rolling down her cheek.

“And how would this *home*” – he almost spat out the word – “be different from this?”

“We would be together again. You and me. . .” Chloe began as another tear hit her cheek.

“It’s no use” Seth replied, slowly turning. “I’ve seen it all. I’ve seen everything there is to see – in the clouds. All the time we run away from what we ultimately have to face. Fear. Uncertainty. Doubt. Despair. Anxiety. Loneliness.”

The wind had caught up. As something wet hit Chloe’s face again, she noticed that it was not a tear but another raindrop. The world had gone completely quiet except for the constant distant rumble of thunder. The blue sky was gone; black clouds covered every visible inch of the sky, swirling, writhing, brooding.

“There’s nowhere to run. There’s nowhere to go” Seth said, closing his eyes sadly.

In this very moment, the lightning struck. It hit the poplar besides which they were standing and split it cleanly in half from top to root. The smell of scorched wood hit Chloe at the same time as the wave of unbearable heat.

Her heart gave a jolt. She grabbed Seth by his arm and pulled him down the hill.

“There’s nowhere to go. Nowhere. . .” he muttered as she dragged him along

“I won’t leave you. Not again” Chloe shouted over the howling wind.

We have to get out of here, she thought. How did you get in here? Simple, you just stepped in. But how do you step out of something you can’t see the limits of?

She began to panic. What if there was no way out? What if Charon was right? What if nobody could ever leave again?

No, there must be a way. Reophus wouldn’t have sent me down here if he knew I didn’t have a chance.

Chloe was not entirely sure that this train of thought was plausible but for now she was willing to just believe in it.

A way out, I need a way out, she thought.

“You will find your way”.

That was what Reophus had said, wasn’t it? Now, if the afterlife was formed after the ideas of the living and if she and Seth were still. . . It just had to work.

She stopped suddenly, gripped Seth even more tightly and closed her eyes.

Out. I need a way out.

11 Hope

The wind was gone.

She felt her hair slowly setting on her shoulders. Instead of the soft grass there now seemed to be solid stone beneath her feet. She was breathing heavily and did not dare open her eyes.

Her hands were still clutched around Seth's arm and she did not want to let go. She felt that if she did, he might just slip away from her again.

The noise was back as well. The enormous wall of sound hit her again with all its might.

"Let me go back" a silent voice behind her said.

She opened her eyes and turned around to look at Seth. There was an inexplicable sadness in his eyes, one she had never seen before.

"What has happened to you? What have they done to you?" Chloe asked anxiously, fearing the answer.

"Nothing. They did nothing" Seth replied "Nothing that the world hadn't already started."

"What do you mean?" Chloe inquired.

"They've finally taken away the pretence, the lies, the false belief that lets you think that things may be possible, that anything can happen if you only wish and try hard enough, that living is actually worth the hassle. They've taken away..." He fell silent.

"Hope" Chloe silently said. "They've taken away your hope."

Chloe had always been afraid of thunder and lightning. When she had been a kid, she had always pulled her blanket over her head and pushed it so hard on her ears that, sometimes, she could sleep through the muffled thunder.

It had always been like this. The thunderstorm had never come in broad daylight, when you could see it coming, see what was happening, guess when it would be over just by looking at how much of this enormous lump of cloud would still have to pass overhead.

It had never come when you could expect it.

It always started with single raindrops on the roof. The wind had rattled the shutters and she had known it was coming. She had had nowhere to go, nowhere to run. She knew perfectly well that she was reasonably safe in the house under her blanket but how could you really be sure?

"You can't" Seth had said during a particularly long and violent storm that had been brooding all night over the little house they both had lived in. Chloe had not closed her eyes at all in this night and neither had Seth.

"You can't be sure, Chloe" he had said and looked into her eyes with such confidence and such determination that she had forgot everything else. "You can only hope."

"Just let me go back. It's pointless going on, pretending you can make a..." Seth began.

"You *can* make a difference" Chloe interrupted him violently. "You always told me that you can change things, that you can turn everything for the better if you trust; if you hope. And I

Your Sky

believed you, every single time I believed you. And you were right. I did things I never thought I could do, just because you gave me the confidence to trust myself, to never give up. And I will not let *you* give up this time.”

With this she took a step forward along the path and looked quickly around. There was nothing but the endless lanes of personal fate and personal doom, nothing but the innermost fears and doubts of every human being that had ever walked the earth.

There must be something, she thought. This can't be it. Everything I've done so far I would have called impossible only a few hours ago. This is possible.

Something was soaring past her ear, close enough so she could feel the slight whisper of passing hot air. She jumped and looked around to see one of the little angle-like creatures fly towards an empty square in the row to her left.

The moment it reached the square, there was a blinding flash of lightning and a person appeared in front of it, a woman in her late forties with a emerald green dress, her hair teased up towering on her head.

The little angel, which was carrying a tiny flacon, fluttered towards her but still she did not move at all – she just stared blankly into the distance as the angel touched her face with the flacon.

A tiny tear was running down the woman's cheek and into the little bottle. Then there was another tear, and another one until the flacon was filled to the brim with a – Chloe now noticed – dark blue fluid. And with every tear that streamed from the woman's eyes, her face grew more expressionless, more vacuous and, as Chloe noticed, more hopeless.

The angel stuffed a cork into the bottle and led the woman into the free square. As it fluttered out again, there was another flash of lightning and the blank square had turned into a ballroom with lots of other people inside, all wearing dresses or made-to-measure suits, dancing and swirling merrily around the room.

Chloe looked up to see where the little angel had gone. As she did, she noticed more of the winged creatures hurtling and bustling around. But this time, she saw a pattern.

A rather notable number of them were actually flying into a certain direction. And some, as she noticed, had a strange phial in their hands or claws, all filled with differently coloured substances, some violently green, some viscuous and silver, some deep red, almost pulsating in the small bottles.

She knew what she had to do, she knew where she had to go. She gripped Seth's wrist again and pulled him along the path.

12 Haref's Room of Treasure

They had walked for quite a while – Seth was trudging behind Chloe, not really willing to go on but unable to find the incentive to stop her – when Chloe saw the citadel.

It loomed over the myriads of little spaces, as high as the highest buildings Chloe had ever seen. It seemed to have been carved out of a single enormous slab of basalt – a cone with an almost completely flat surface without any visible ornaments or structural patterns.

Chloe sped up and dragged Seth with her. This was it, she knew it. She had no idea why or how she knew what she was doing. Perhaps it still was Reophus' influence guiding her... or perhaps she was completely wrong but unwilling to admit it.

While she walked towards the enormous building, her mind explored that possibility without her being able to prevent it from doing so. She had found Seth, an almost impossible task to begin with, not even starting with the fact that a place like this existed at all. Was she exhausting her good luck?

She wiped away these thoughts as she approached the giant entrance to the citadel. It was broad enough for roughly fifty people to easily fit through simultaneously and at least a hundred feet high, just a hole in the structure's wall, at first glance dark as the night.

As Chloe got closer however, she noticed the strange surreal glow coming from inside, as if all the colours of the rainbow, mixed and then separated again in new and unfamiliar ways were casting their soft shine into the world outside.

Chloe did not hesitate for a second but directly plunged into the darkness, pulling Seth along like a little kid that did not want to go shopping with his mother.

The space they entered was, although much smaller than the humongous cave outside, a measure of its own. As Chloe's eyes got used to the twinkling twilight inside, she could see that it was in fact one giant room. On the inside of the wall, a spiral staircase led to the top, circling around shelves upon shelves, filled with an inconceivable number of little glass bottles of any shape and size.

Chloe stepped closer and now she noticed that on each little phial there was a little slip of parchment on which numbers and names were written in a very tidy and complex-looking hand.

As she tried to touch one of the glass phials, Chloe heard a voice behind her saying "May I enquire as to the reason for your presence in this room?"

She spun around and almost threw Seth on the ground.

In front of her, there stood a rather tall hunchbacked man with enormous spectacles on his short stubby nose and a long grey mane on his head, wrapped in plain grey robes. He pushed the spectacles up a bit which enlarged his eyes considerably, as he leaned down to inspect Chloe and Seth a little closer.

"We... we were just..." Chloe tried.

"*Just*, my dear girl, is a very trivial sounding word, however, one with more important implications than may be obvious on first glance."

The man had a rather heavy accent, British, Chloe suspected. He now turned around and strode along the shelves.

“I suspect you have – as you said *just* – come here to retrieve an item of my precious collection.” He spread out his arms and spun around.

“Let me assure you that since I have begun to retrieve the most prominent emotions from everyone who enters this world, nobody has ever returned to ask his or hers back. Why” and here he looked at Chloe again “would they call it Haref’s Room of Treasure if everyone came strolling in here asking for one of these?”

“Wait a minute.” Chloe said. She was starting to get annoyed by this Haref person. “You take people’s emotions away? Why?” She added as she saw Haref smiling and nodding.

“Why, she muses” Haref said, more to the room than to anyone in particular, then suddenly stared at Chloe intently. “Of course, to restore order. Before I started my collection there was chaos about! People’s afterlives were constantly hustling and bustling with. . . feelings. There was no order. I restored order.”

“And because you like order so much, people have to spend the rest of their. . . afterlife or whatever you call it like this?” Here Chloe pointed at Seth who stood where she had left him, with an expressionless face.

“This is indeed a rather amiss result of my work, I have to admit” Haref said, lowering his head slightly. “But rest assured that this state of – shall we call it *blankness* – is not as atrocious as you might be assuming, young miss.”

“Not as atrocious?” Chloe asked unbelieving.

“You have to understand, your friend here is now free from the worries of the world. He is no longer concerned with such things as hope or happiness, despair or distress. He simply *is*. He was, I have to confess, a rather intricate case which I had to handle myself. There was no single one paramount emotion in him, they were all equal and all equally important. Very peculiar I must say. . .” Haref’s voice drifted off and he mustered Seth with an expression of polite interest on his face, like an scientist surveying a particularly interesting specimen.

Chloe’s head was spinning. Of course she could just go and take Seth with her but this person right here by her side was not Seth. Nobody remained who he was if all his emotions were taken away from him – especially if this someone was as emotional as Seth used to be.

She had no choice.

“I ask you to give him his emotions back” Chloe said, her voice shaking slightly.

“And which reason should I have to do such a thing?” Haref asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Because if you don’t” Chloe took a quick step towards the closest shelf and randomly picked up two bottles from it “if you don’t, I will start spreading emotions among all people down here.”

Haref looked thunderstruck. “But how would you know which emotion belongs to whom?” he asked with a horse voice. “It is unthinkable what would happen if people received emotions other than their own!”

“I wouldn’t know” Chloe said plainly. “That’s the point, you see?”

Haref stared at her, all kinds of emotions racing over his face. Finally he said “Agreed” his eyes glowering dangerously.

He turned around swiftly and swept up the staircase and out of sight only to return half a minute later with a little bottle with a thick golden substance inside.

He stopped at the foot of the stairs and looked at Chloe.

12 Haref's Room of Treasure

"There you are" he shouted and threw the bottle in the air.

Chloe didn't think. She leapt forward, her hands stretched out. Everything slowed down. She was sure she would be able to catch it. She landed hard on the ground without really noticing the pain and heard one of the bottles she had taken from the shelf burst. Her hands were still stretched out as far as she could. Just a few inches. . .

But before the phial hit Chloes hands, there was another slight swoosh of air and a pig-like creature soared past her, catching the bottle in mid-air. It then rose again and carried its load out of the citadel.

Chloe cursed under her breath, jumped back to her feet, grabbed Seth and pulled him out of the room, shooting an angry glance at Haref who was still standing there, smirking at her.

As Chloe ran out of the citadel, she looked desperately around for the creature. She surveyed the area she could overlook and saw it, in the distance, speeding away from her.

She knew at once that she had no chance of catching up. The winged pig had had too much of a head start.

As she sunk to the ground, her eyes covering her face, there came a familiar voice from beside her.

"Don't cry, Chloe. Not everything is lost yet."

She jerked her head up and, to her great surprise, saw Reophus standing beside her, smiling.

He helped her up, then looked into the distance, raising his hand as if grasping for something invisible.

"Where do you come from?" Chloe asked, breathless.

"That is a nice greeting" Reophus chuckled, then closed his eyes, apparently concentrating hard on something.

"I am sorry that I could not get to you any sooner" he said, his voice sounding strained. "But as I told you, there are some rules that even I cannot break. One of the rules is that every injustice can and must be avenged. This is what I did back when I told you all about Seth and it is what I am doing right now.

"See" he closed his hands a little and now Chloe could see that the winged creature was slowly coming back to them, tiny wings fluttering furiously into the other direction. "The first injustice was Seth ending up here at all. I was able to almost make up for that by telling you how to get him back. The second one was Haref playing that trick on you and I am making up for this just now. But I could not interfere in between, so as to not disturb the balance myself."

The creature was now clearly visible, its face contorted with the effort of struggling against the force pulling it backwards.

"But as I notice, you did not really need my help after all" Reophus said and a smile appeared on his face. "Still I hope that you found my coin useful"

And now Chloe realized that it had been Reophus who had slipped the coin she had given Charon into her pocket. She smiled and looked around and with a muffled yell of surprise noticed that from all directions wings were fluttering towards them.

"Almost there" Reophus muttered and indeed the creature holding the tiny flacon was almost in reach when it struggled again and suddenly dropped the little bottle. It turned in midair several

Your Sky

times and then, with a muffled cracking sound, landed on the sandy ground, spilling its contents on the dust.

Reophus jerked his eyes open and now also realized that the winged creatures were all heading towards them. He looked at Chloe with an expression of urgency on his face.

“Hurry” he said silently. “Get out of here. I’ll try to keep you free from company. *Go!*” He exclaimed and Chloe jumped, taking Seth’s hand and running down the path that Reophus’ raised hand indicated.

Chloe ran as fast as she could, pulling Seth along. After a little while she reached an intersection and before going left – her feet were taking control again – she dared to take a look back at Reophus.

With a shriek of terror she gazed at Reophus who was now engulfed in a cloud of madly fluttering wings and tiny bodies.

She tore her gaze away from the horrible scene and continued sprinting along the path.

13 The Doors

Seth and Chloe had often gone to the movies. It had been the perfect way for Chloe to forget about the troubles of the world, sitting in the dark with Seth by her side, the flickering light projecting other people's lives on the canvas.

It had not really mattered what movie they were watching. Chloe liked almost every genre except for horror movies. She even had, she had to admit, developed a sort of weak spot for romantic movies that she had used to hate viciously because she never believed that something like this could happen to ordinary people with ordinary lives, outside of movies.

One day, they had been watching a pretty strange movie that described an old man's history, how he had become what he had become and why. His son had come home after hearing that the old man was ill and probably would not live for too long. At the end of the movie, the old man ultimately did die and there was a big funeral where all the people you had seen over the course of the movie appeared again, saying goodbye.

Chloe, fully immersed in the movie as she always was, had put her left hand on the armrest and had found Seth's hand, trembling.

She had looked over to him and seen his face glistening with tears. She had not said anything, she had just slung her arms around him and gently pushed his head onto her shoulder.

As strong as he always appeared, as independent and, well, sturdy, this was the moment when Chloe realized that there was more to him and knowing that, she had been sure that *he* was the one.

Now she was dragging him along the path. In the distance, she could see the wooden door with the silver handle. The way out. They had almost made it.

The angry cries from the winged creatures were slowly ebbing away. Chloe shuddered to think what might have happened to Reophus.

She felt guilty. He had helped her, he had told her all about this place, all she needed to know to find Seth and now. . .

She blinked a tear from her eye and sped up.

As they reached the door, Chloe did not take another look back. She wrenched it open, pushed Seth through and slammed it shut again behind her, breathing hard.

The air outside was moist and soggy and there was a feeble fog rising from the river. Chloe stepped to the bank, put her hands to her mouth and called for Charon.

And indeed, mere seconds later a sleek boat emerged from the thickening fog with a tall figure at the bow. The boat came to a halt exactly beside Chloe.

Charon, the ferryman turned and looked down at her.

"I see you have been successful" he said gravely, his deep voice reverberating from the walls.

"Yes, I found Seth. Now, listen, could you. . ." Chloe began.

Your Sky

Charon slowly shook his head, looking down. “I am sorry, I truly am, but I explained the rules to you. I simply cannot get you back, especially not two people.”

Chloe looked at him in disbelief. Of course, he had told her that he wouldn’t be able to take her back again but then she had been so overwhelmed with the fact that not everything was lost and that she was able to find Seth and bring him back with her. Now she was just angry.

“Why is everybody here so concerned with rules?” she shouted and looked furiously at Charon. “Reophus told me that he couldn’t help me because it would *disturb the balance* or something and now you. . .”

“This is the way it is. These rules are the only thing that holds everything together down here” Charon replied quietly. “Can you imagine what happened if everyone started existing by their own standards? What if everybody lived entirely by their own ideas? Rules are inevitable in the world of the living, just as in the world of the dead.”

“But where were these great rules when they took Seth away from me?” Chloe exclaimed angrily.

Charon said nothing but still looked gravely at her.

“I used to be just like you” he said quietly after a while. “I tried to break or sneak around every rule I did not understand. I did not believe what people told me was right or wrong, I wanted to find out by myself. I wanted to live the way *I* decided was right for me without anybody else interfering. And I paid the price.”

Charon turned around and stared into the fog.

Chloe did not know what to do. She quickly looked at the door behind her which was still firmly shut, then for the first time noticing how tired she was, she slowly sat down and crossed her legs.

“What happened?” she asked feebly.

After a long pause, Charon replied hoarsely “I lost her. I was told of a place where everything I wished for would finally come true and I persuaded her to go there with me. Everybody warned me and predicted horrible things to happen but of course I did not listen. We left everything behind, believing we were going to lead a better life, as free as the wind, without any limits or restrictions – or rules – to stop us. . .” Here, his voice trailed away.

“And, did you find this place?” Chloe stared at him.

“Yes, we did indeed find it” Charon said. “It was well hidden and the journey was dangerous but we ultimately reached the place I had been told of. But everything else I had been told became true as well. There obviously was a rule that did not permit two people who honestly loved each other to enter. The last one of the couple to step into the land would perish instantly. And of course, I went ahead in case there were any dangers.”

“So she” Chloe whispered “was your lover? And she died?”

“Yes, she did” Charon said, more severe than before. He turned on his heel and looked at Chloe who backed away. “And it was my fault.” He closed his eyes and his face straightened up again. As he opened his eyes again and continued to speak, his voice was as dark and calm as ever.

“This is why I ultimately filled this position” he pointed at his boat “I hoped that if I stayed here, not entering my own eternity, I would be able to see her again and tell her that. . .” He stopped.

“She knows. I’m sure she knows” Chloe said and got up again. With a dull thud, something hit the ground. As Chloe looked down, she saw a little phial with a translucent liquid lying on the sand.

“What is this?” Charon asked, also looking at the little bottle.

“I don’t know” Chloe replied. “It’s one of Haref’s bottles. I pocketed it when we were there.” She picked it up again and looked at the little piece of parchment that was pasted on to the glass. It read

CHARON

Chloe looked at it in disbelief. This was too wild to just be a coincidence. It could not be.

Slowly, she looked up and looked at Charon, then put the bottle into his slightly trembling hands.

Charon stood there, staring transfixed at the tiny phial. Then his eyes slowly moved to Chloe.

“This is impossible” he whispered hoarsely.

“Nothing is impossible” Chloe replied. “If there’s one thing that I’ve learned it is that nothing is truly impossible. And that nothing ever is truly lost.”

Charon’s eyes fixed on the phial again as he carefully pulled the stopper out. He seemed to ponder for a moment, then said “So much for rules”, rose the flask to his lips and drained it.

For a moment Chloe thought, nothing had happened. She stared at Charon as he let go of the bottle which landed on the ground with a soft thud.

But then Chloe could see a change happening. Charon’s features, usually hard and stiff seemed to loosen up and, she could not believe it, turned into a smile, a real smile full of happiness and memories and dreams.

Charon took a deep breath and smiled at Chloe. “I thank you” he said and even his voice sounded softer than before. “I would not have believed this possible. . . I think you deserve a reward. And I think it is absolutely justified to bend some rules in order to make sure you receive it.”

He winked at Chloe and beckoned her and Seth to get into the boat.

14 Reunions

“We’re almost there. Hold on. You can make it. We have been through so much together. Nothing can happen to you as long I am here. You will be alright. Don’t worry. I’m here. I’m here.”

Chloe’s head jerked up. They were still in Charon’s boat, slowly drifting along the river, the brick walls of the canal sliding past.

That voice... That had been Seth, hadn’t it? She looked around and saw him glaring into the cloudy water below, his eyes unfocussed. Chloe leaned back again.

Chloe had once broken a leg. She had tried to climb a high apple tree that grew on her grandparents’ property. She had been ten or eleven and the world had seemed like her playground. She had often been there in fall, helping her grandparents to pick apples and pears which her grandmother turned into wonderful pies.

Chloe had always been eager to empty a tree completely. She hated it when there were a couple of apples left at the very top of the tree, out of reach for her short arms. She had always tried and climbed and stretched but sometimes it was just hopeless.

On the day when she had fallen, the sky had slowly turned the colour of steel, rain looming.

She had not wanted to give up. There was just one apple left and, of course, it was the most beautiful one on the entire tree. And of course it was all the way up the highest branch of the tree.

She had climbed up, ignoring her grandfather’s warnings who stood below, unable to refrain her from climbing higher and higher and then when there were no more branches to go, Chloe had let go of the feeble twigs and stood up, her hand almost reaching the apple, just a few inches...

And then it had happened. There had been a gust of wind which caught her off balance. She could not remember any details of the fall, just that she had had the impression that everything was happening very, very slowly. The wind had suddenly seemed muffled and subdued, and she had been able to hear her heart thumping loudly and slowly in her chest.

They had said that it was a sheer miracle that nothing more had happened to the little girl that had fallen from the apple tree. Just a broken leg, nothing more. And how her grandfather comforted her on the way to the hospital. He always told her that she would be alright and that everything was alright because he was there. And even when the doctors examined her, even when they put the cast on her leg and when they wheeled her out of the hospital, that brave little girl still had this beautiful apple clutched tightly in her small fist.

The boat came to a halt and Charon helped Chloe and Seth to disembark. They stood there, Chloe and Charon looking at each other.

“What are you going to do now?” Chloe asked.

Charon shrugged. “I don’t know really” he said. “I guess I’ve worked here long enough. It gets quite lonely down here and I think I’ve paid my dues. I think I’ll go looking for her. I have not yet seen her pass so she still has to be somewhere.”

“Good luck, Charon” Chloe said and smiled. “I hope you’ll find her.”

“Thank you, Chloe. Thank you for everything. I hope your journey will end well. You deserve it. Godspeed, Chloe!” Here he bowed low, got back into his boat and left the shore.

Chloe turned around and walked over to Seth who had sat down on the damp ground.

“We’re going home, Seth” she said. “We’re going home.”

She stretched out her hand which he grasped and pulled him up. There was a faint smile on his face.

They set off into the short corridor leading to the wooden door. Chloe seized the rusty door-knob and turned and creaking, the door opened.

Hot, brooding air swept over them, as if they had just entered a forge. They stepped through the door and Chloe pulled it shut behind her.

Someone cleared his throat and Chloe spun around.

The figure in her old coat was standing there, facing her. The hood of the cloak was still pulled over the man’s face but the two pale blue eyes were drilling into Chloe’s soul.

“You made it” he said in this strange high-pitched voice. “I knew you would. You were always the type who didn’t give a damn about advice from other people. You could tell her again and again, no, little cute Chloe would always have to find out for herself whether it’s true or not.” Chloe noticed that the voice was not as babbling as before, more agitated and even angry. “A little bird told me that you tricked Haref but you will *not* pass me!”

And Chloe watched in pure horror as the figure pulled the hood back and revealed his face.

In fact, *her* face would be correct. Under the hood, there appeared the very strained face of a woman in her late forties. Deep wrinkles tore across her entire face but they were neither suggesting joviality nor wisdom, just pure exhaustion.

And now Chloe knew why the pale blue eyes had frightened her so much. It was because she had seen them before. The woman now standing in front of her was her mother, Marge.

“Marge?” Chloe asked, perplexed.

“Morrigan, please” the woman shouted shrilly. “I don’t want to use that cursed name any longer. My name is Morrigan and my task is guarding this door so nobody passes through who isn’t allowed to. And you my dear are definitely *not* allowed to go.”

“But... it’s me, Chloe. Don’t you recognize me?” Chloe asked desperately.

“Of course I recognize you!” Marge exclaimed. “I already recognized you when you first came down here and I immediately knew why you had come. I could see that you weren’t yet dead and there was only one thing you would come down here for – him!” She pointed at Seth who was cowering in a corner, avoiding her gaze.

“I wanted you to come down here. I wanted you to be with us. But I knew that you were just here to find him and that you would leave right away but there was nothing I could do. I could not stop you. But now I can!”

“You wanted me to come down here?” Chloe asked dumbfounded.

Your Sky

“Of course!” Marge shrieked. “What do you think we got this one” here she pointed at Seth again “down here for? Fun and games?”

Chloe’s mouth fell open. The ground was starting to slip from under her feet. Everything was tumbling down around her.

“You mean” she said with a hoarse voice “that you . . . you killed Seth?”

“Of course we didn’t kill him. We can’t just go up there and kill someone. But there was someone who still owed us a favour and he . . . he arranged some things in certain ways.” Marge smirked.

Chloe couldn’t believe it. “What did you do that for?” she shouted.

“To get you down here of course, my dear” Marge’s voice suddenly became very soft and caring but in a exerted sort of way. “I reckon, we’ve never been what you would call a good family, you, your father and me, and so I thought I’d make up for that. I knew that you would get down here eventually, but I couldn’t wait any longer. Here, we can be a real family again, just the three of us.”

“You had Seth killed only so you could make up for being a horrible parent? You took the only person that ever meant something to me away?” Chloe asked furiously.

“He is not part of the family, you see?” Marge violently shook her head. “It is just you and Herbert and me. Nobody else. Nobody else!”

Chloe breathed hard. Of all the things she had found out on her journey, this was just too much for her.

She made a few steps towards Seth, pulled him up and headed for the stairs.

“I’m leaving” she said.

“No, you’re not” Marge yelled.

“Yes, I am. And you won’t stop me.”

“Yes I will!”

“No, Marge, you won’t.”

The third voice was completely calm, like the eye of a storm.

Both Chloe and Marge spun around and saw a rather tall man with a mane of long grey hair standing in the doorway to the river.

“Haref?” Chloe asked.

“In a way . . . yes.” Haref replied. He took off his huge spectacles and straightened up. And in the flickering light of the fire in the steel drum, Chloe recognized her father, Herbert, Wally.

“What do you want here?” Marge snapped.

“I have thought things through” Herbert said “and I’ve come to the conclusion that we’ve made a mistake, a grave mistake.”

With every step that he made into the room he seemed to shrink a bit until he was the short and stubby man again that Chloe knew. The hair also receded and left a completely bald head.

“What do you mean, mistake? I thought we had agreed that this was the only way” Marge hissed.

“You knew about this?” Chloe whispered.

Herbert wiped his forehead with a patched spotted hankerchief he pulled out of his robes and sighed deeply.

“You wouldn’t understand, Chloe. I don’t understand it either. I am terribly sorry for what we did. I know that it was wrong and I don’t expect you to ever forgive us for that.”

“What *are* you saying, Wally?” Marge whispered. “We agreed upon this. . .”

“And now I’ve decided that we were wrong” Herbert bellowed. “You do whatever you like but I’m going to help Chloe to get back home.”

“You can’t be serious!”

“I am. For the first time ever, I am sure about something and you won’t dissuade me from that. Run, Chloe!”

And then everything happened at the same time. Marge had jumped at Chloe and grabbed her arm but Herbert had siezed Marge around the waist. She had to let go of Chloe and they both stumbled through the still open wooden door back into the corridor. There were muffled sounds of fighting and then a loud splash.

Chloe stood there, transfixed. Then she heard the Herbert’s gurgling voice shouting “Run, Chloe! Do it for me. *Run!*”

And in a gust of wind that slammed the door shut behind her, Chloe pulled Seth with her and ran, as fast as she could, through the room, up the stairs and out of 42 Columbus Ave.

15 Your Sky

Chloe ran until her feet were numb and her chest felt as if it was being punctured with needles with every breath she took. When she stopped, they had already left the building and were standing right in front of the bench on which Chloe and Reophus had been sitting when he had revealed everything to her.

The sky was still dark and morning seemed well away. Or perhaps it was dark again, Chloe thought. She had no idea how long her journey had taken, whether it was mere hours or days. She had no idea whether all this had been real or whether she had imagined things. She had no idea what to do next.

But then she felt a hand clutching hers and as she turned around, she saw Seth standing in front of her with a pleading look on his face.

“I don’t want to go down there ever again” he said, his eyes wide open.

“Neither do I. . . But I feel we don’t really have a choice, do we?” Chloe answered, sighed and sat down on the bench.

What had she been thinking? That if she got Seth into the *real* world again, everything would just clear up, his feelings would come back instantly and they would live happily everafter?

She sighed again. For all her life she had wished she had been a character in a fairy tale, one about evil witches and honorable wizzards, about dragons, trolls and beautiful princesses that were rescued by valiant heroes. She had not really wanted to be one of those princesses however, she would have been happy with being a side character, someone that was perhaps only mentioned once or twice in a few sentences. Because with characters like that, you could imagine what happened to them yourself. No writer forcing anything to happen and in your head, they would live forever. No world forcing anything.

There she had her fairytale. Of course, the dragons were little winged pigs, the honorable wizzards were, well, perhaps they were honorable wizzards indeed and the evil witches were her mother. . . But in a way she had got her story.

As she looked into the darkness, she thought “And I’m the main character. So I can’t get what I want.”

She did not have the slightest idea what to do now, with Seth being in his current state. Of course, he still was the person she loved, her knight in shining armor but. . . her soul mate?

She almost laughed at herself although she really felt more like crying. Soul mates. Not that nonsense again. The world had gotten in and when it did, there was no more room for girlish fantasies.

Chloe got up and had turned to Seth when she noticed someone emerging from the shadows. Chloe jumped up. There was a shimmer of gold and then a man stepped into the light of the closest street lantern, carrying a pocket watch.

“Perfect timing, as I expected” Reophus said.

Chloe just stood there with her mouth open. Reophus stepped towards her smiling and embraced her softly.

“I knew you could do it” he said. “I knew it.”

“But how... I thought you...” Chloe stammered.

“Ah, speak no more of that. Morrigan and Haref were not the only ones that knew someone who owed them. Yes, I knew about them” he added as he saw the look of surprise on Chloe’s face. “I knew what had happened, what they had done but I was unable to tell you. The balance had already been disturbed, you see? Breaking this kind of rules is a serious business and I just could not risk your life as well.”

“So you just told me little pieces of the puzzle and let me figure out the rest by myself?” Chloe asked.

“Exactly” Reophus replied, his smile broadening. “And you did perfectly, even better than I had expected you to.”

“But I failed, didn’t I?” Chloe gazed at Seth who had sat down on the bench, staring blankly into the night sky. “I brought him back but I couldn’t get his emotions back. The bottle shattered on the floor. I just wasn’t quick enough to...”

“There is a solution for that as well” Reophus said quietly. Chloe spun around again and stared at him. “But I must warn you, some would consider that being a breaking of the rules again and nobody could tell if that would not have an adverse influence on your life. Nobody knows what will happen.”

“But Seth and I will be together again, like we used to?” Chloe demanded.

“As close to that as you could ever get” Reophus said after a short pause. “You cannot possibly become the person you were before all this happened. The experience changed you – and to the better, in my humble opinion.”

Chloe hesitated a second, then she looked into Reophus dark eyes and said “Then let’s do it.”

Reophus nodded slowly, then produced something from one of his many pockets. It was a tiny flask with a vivid orange fluid inside that was shimmering slightly. There was a piece of parchment sticking on the surface of the glass. It said

CHLOE

“That... These are my emotions?” Chloe stuttered, her eyes widening.

“Indeed” Reophus answered. “It was taken from you when you fell asleep on Charon’s boat. I retrieved it from Haref’s collection when he had left. You two have to drink from it.”

Chloe looked at him, stunned. “But Haref said that nobody knew what would happen if someone received an emotion that wasn’t his own.”

“And he was right about that.” Reophus smiled again. “But this case is special. You two share something that only very few people ever had. You two are the perfect addition to each other, alike and yet opposite, different and yet the same. I am quite confident that it will work.”

Chloe mused about *quite confident* for a while, then she carefully took the bottle and went to sit beside Seth who was still staring into the distance.

“You must drink this, Seth. You’ll feel better” Chloe said.

“How could I feel better?” he asked back. “All this is in vain. You can’t possibly...”

Your Sky

And in this moment, Chloe leaned over and kissed him. Seth stared at her in surprise but when their lips parted, Chloe could see a slight streak of red streaming into his grey face.

He held out his hand. Chloe gave him the bottle which he drained half the way before he returned it to Chloe who emptied it with one gulp.

First she felt nothing. She stared at Reophus who looked back at her and nodded slowly.

Suddenly, she heard a sound, a faint twittering. She looked up and she saw a tiny bird, a fink, sitting in the apple tree above her. And as she stared up, she noticed the first streak of sunlight stream over her face and saw the first feeble clouds illuminated by a morning yet to come.

She got up. So did Seth. They looked into each other's eyes for some time. Then Chloe faced Reophus and whispered "Thank you. Thank you for. . ."

"No need for that" he answered. "Now go. There's a whole lot of mornings waiting for you."

And Chloe and Seth turned around and strode into the sunrise. And they did indeed live happily ever after – as happy as they could be.