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THE BATTLE FOR CRYSTAL HILL

Parker Spadt

Prologue

Ever since the battle of Crystal Hill, the world has been a shit-hole. The cobblestone streets of Jerricho have been riddled with everything from blood to brains, and nobody seems to notice. Buildings that seem to lean in on each other, creaking and moaning as the decaying wood planks grow weaker with each passing hour, line the streets and every so often, seem to topple from the pressure of the despair of those inside. The once proud walls of Jerricho lay in shambles and what is left of them has been turned into places for homeless to take shelter, and scoundrels to hide. The world is not a good place. Those who rule, control the people with an iron fist, and those who follow, do so reluctantly out of fear for their lives. I do neither; I don't rule, and I certainly don't follow. I'm a ghost. The citizens call me Phantom. Appearing and disappearing on command. You only see me if I want you to see me. They say its magic, I say it's a trick of the lighting, I'm good at what I do. I prefer to go by my given name however, Kipp. I'm a free-lance pocket picker turned professional thief.

I wasn't always this way, I used to have hopes and dreams. I used to have a family, and a manor on the top of the hill. You name it, I had it. My father was a government official for the previous regime, a dedicated politician and a good man. A wealthy man with power and gold to last a lifetime. Those days, the world was bright. People filled the streets, and the economy had never been better. Travelers came from far and wide to see our beautiful city and Jerricho boomed. The city expanded so quickly that new districts required new officials to watch over them. I lived in the oldest part of town and life was good.

Looking back now, I don't know how we weren't prepared for what happened. Whispers of men with the ability to control aspects of nature, body and spirit began to make their way to my father. Men with the supposed power to manipulate the physical world however they pleased began to make a name for themselves in the Southern cities. Tales of firebreathers engulfing entire buildings traveled North from the Eastern city of Zora, and those with the ability to possess the minds of any living being made their way from the West. Jerricho was surrounded by tales of sorcerers and wizards but we did not care. Our city was mighty, our walls thick and tall and our regime strong. Or so we thought.

You see, wizards were always fascinating to me growing up. Dreams of the ability to do whatever I wanted, granted I had the knowledge to do so, motivated me to be the most studious child on Crystal Hill. I wanted to be a wizard with all my heart. When the other children were out watching warriors practice swordplay, or admiring royalty strolling through the cobbled streets, I spent every spare moment I had in my fathers' library trying to decipher old manuscripts and learn new spells to attempt. I never knew if the books I was scouring had any magical knowledge locked inside, but I did not care. I read them all nonetheless. Because of this, I learned many different languages by the time I was eleven. My obsession drove my father mad.

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"I did it!" I exclaimed, "I actually did it! I performed a spell Father! I just levitated a leaf!" My father did not match my enthusiasm.

"Son, I have had enough of this obsession of yours. There is no such thing as magic.

There are no wizards, and the threat you read about while sneaking through my study, was nothing more than a group of Jokes and Jesters causing mischief in faraway lands. I suggest if you do not want to be punished further, you do not enter my study without permission again. Including this little intrusion."

"Father you didn't see it. I watched it happen, there is no way that my leaf could have just done that on its own."

"Kipp, my boy..." my father said to me, casting his eyes downward toward the mountain of papers massing on his desk, "I want to show you something." He then handed me a wanted poster for a sorcerer named Chadwick One-Eye. Bounty, a measly 100 gold pieces.

"I'm going to show you something Kipp, something no eleven-year-old boy should see, but I have had enough of this." We left my fathers' study and made our way out the grand double doors and into the sunshine. It was a crisp Autumn afternoon, much like any other in Jerricho.

The sun was shining warm rays down on the city, but the wind was blowing cold, winter air through the treetops, releasing orange and red leaves from their hold on swaying branches. My father walked swiftly, to the point where I had to jog to keep up behind him.

"Where are we going?" I would ask every so often to no reply from him. He just kept walking the same pace until we reached the city. We marched through the gates of the immense walls and immediately went left directly followed by a right, we went through a stone archway, took another right and went down into a tunnel, we reached a set of iron doors that looked as

if they had been installed by Death himself.

“Kipp, I need you to understand that what you are about to see is to stay locked within that mind of yours, okay? Nobody can know that we were here, or we will both be locked away for good.”

The look on my father’s face gave me chills down my spine. Little hairs on my arms and neck stood on end, and my mouth was void of any liquid whatsoever.

“Yes Father,” I tried to say, but did not manage to utter a single sound. He could tell I was frightened. I was.

My father was not a large man, but he was built for battle, that was obvious by his broad shoulders, thin waist and large hands, but had chosen a life of intellect instead. He was only around thirty-five years old, but already commanded the respect of almost everybody in the city. A powerless man could not have accomplished such a thing.

He looked like a warrior, but he was the most gentle man I had ever met. When my mother was alive, I watched him treat her like a spring flower. He touched her as if she was the most precious thing in the world, and to him she was. When she died in childbirth, he broke. Where once was a steady man, strong and proud, was now a frame of a legend in the making. I had never seen my father lose his temper before, I had never seen him threaten anybody and certainly never seen him physically injure someone. When he looked at me that day, when he opened those metal doors, I knew that was all about to change.

Producing a large ring of keys, he had tucked away in his dress coat, he looked through them until he found one that fit the metal door perfectly. A jagged silver key with a miniature clenched bone fist as the handle. He plunged the key into the hole and turned the tumbler. The lock made a loud hollow sound and the door creaked open ever so slightly. The sound the death doors made when they opened is one I’ll never forget. As if a thousand tortured souls screamed out at once, the large hinges struggled to rotate until the door was wide enough for both of us to walk through simultaneously.

Inside, the room was nothing special, simply a large chamber filled with cells and in the center was a wooden table, similar to a dining table at an inn, the floors were composed of large stones flattened and polished, and the walls were brick that matched the streets outside. This room looked as if it had been lost to the world. Torches placed evenly on the walls lit the space, but regardless of how hard the flame tried, it seemed to maintain a dim level of lighting. The walls dripped as moisture from the earth seeped through the cracks in the brick and left a musty smell in the air. Pools of condensed water lay scattered in spots where the ground had not been leveled properly casting reflections throughout the chamber. The only sign of life was the coughing coming from a cell in the far corner. That and I could have sworn there was a constant, low humming. Somewhere inaudible, but perceivable. Before I could mention it, my father yelled out.

“Chadwick! You have a visitor.” My fathers’ voice was not his own.

I followed closely to my father as he walked to the back corner and unlocked the door to the cell, swinging it open easily. The figure did not move, emerald green eyes watched intently as my father made a motion to enter the cell. I wondered why they called him “One-Eye,” he clearly had two eyes.

“No, stay away from me.” Chadwick bellowed

My father grabbed him by the collar with an iron grip and drug him out of the cell towards the table in the center of the room. As I got closer to the centerpiece I noticed all the dried blood. This coupled by my fathers’ instant change in demeanor made the sight almost unbearable.

Slamming the smaller man down on the surface of the table with ease, my father restrained him and took a step back as if contemplating what to do with a trapped insect.

“Go sit over there Kipp.” My father commanded, pointing me in the direction of a small desk and chair. “I want you to pay very close attention to what is about to happen because I will not be having this discussion about magic ever again.”

He then grabbed my shoulder and turned me toward the chair he had previously pointed out. The room became clearer to me now as my eyes adjusted to the lighting. I could see the beads of sweat rolling down my father’s head, down his cheeks and off his chin. I could see the veins in the arms of the captured wizard bulging against the restraints. The cuffs were incredibly tight.

Looking over my shoulder as I walked, I could also see the pleading eyes of the captured man, who for lack of hope did not say a word, but simply looked at an eleven-year-old boy in despair, spending what seemed to be his final moments in the presence of strangers, far from home.

Suddenly as if a giant had dropped a book on a neglected bookshelf, millions of dust particles fell from the ceiling raining down all throughout the room. To me, this seemed unnatural but my father was not in the slightest bothered by it.

“Now tell us; are you, or are you not a wizard?” My father’s voice sounded as if it could cut the man’s flesh itself. Chadwick couldn’t have been more than nineteen years old, laying on a table shaking, waiting whatever punishment he did or did not deserve.

“No. I’ve told you before, I am not a wizard. I don’t know what you are talking about. I’m from Jerricho, I grew up in the Moonlight district. My father is a butcher. I have no money, I have no education, how do you expect me to learn how to be a sorcerer?”

“Lies!” The weight of all the stories arriving about evil sorcerers and stress from their relevance leaking into my father’s words.

“I promise you, I am not lying. I don’t know how my name got mixed up in all of this, but I just want to go home.” The young man began to sob quietly.

“So, you aren’t a wizard?” I could tell my father did not believe him. I did not know why, but I did. I wanted to believe he was innocent, I wanted to see him released from the bindings and go home to his family.

“No.”

My father made his way around the table slowly, dragging his finger around the outline of the boy as he walked. His brow in stark contrast to his calm outside appearance. He was deep in thought. He circled Chadwick three times and suddenly placed his hand on his leg. Chadwick jumped in fear only to be reminded that he was bound to a table. The veins on his forearms were so full of blood that his hands were white, they looked as if any slight movement would cause them to burst and all his blood would spill on the floor effectively removing the relevance of his guilt or innocence.

With his hand still gripping his captives’ leg my father did something I never would have guessed. He grabbed a knife off the table and placed it gently against Chadwick’s forearm.

Tracing the bulging veins with the tip, he ever so slightly applied pressure. Blood burst through the skin as a river would burst through a weak dam. Chadwick screamed in agony as red blood gushed out onto the table. He would not survive another cut. He would not survive this cut for long.

The ground shook, and more dust fell from the ceiling. This time my father glanced up to inspect and something inside of me told me that I needed to act. My father was not a bad man, but he was broken. Shattered into a million pieces that would never be pieced together again. As my father was distracted I got up out of my chair and sprinted towards the table. I grabbed a cuff and attempted to free Chadwick One-Eye. To this day, I do not know why.

My father grabbed me and tossed me aside with ease, but this gave Chadwick the delay he needed. He burst out of his restraints and his arms were engulfed in flame. The cut seared itself shut and his emerald eyes were replaced by blazing orange balls. He faced by father, liquid flame dripping off his arms onto the floor causing the uncertain light to flare and spread.

“No!” I screamed, “I helped you.”

Chadwick turned to look at me, arm protruding out in my direction uttered, “Compassion only gets you killed quicker boy.”

As he finished his sentence a beam of searing liquid flame shot out of his hand headed straight for me. I didn’t have time to react. I simply sat there and stared in awe at the beauty that would any moment engulf me. I had been right, this whole time, I had been right. Sorcerers are real. Wizards are real.

I came to my senses to realize that I was not dead after all. I had been surrounded by a protective field. But how? The liquid flame still coming at me, pooling on the floor, dripping down the protective wall much like the water dripping down the walls of the chamber.

Frantically scanning the room, I could see my father some feet away arms out in my direction. Sweat pouring off his brow as he struggled to maintain the protection spell against the torrent of flame.

“Father.” I managed to croak though my throat was once again dry.

My father did not answer, instead he clapped his hands together horizontally in front of his chest and the protective wall solidified.

Chadwick, in awe, focused on my father now. Throwing his arm back to prepare another bout of flame. My father, hands together still, pulled them apart slowly, creating a ball of green energy surging and flickering in the dark room. As Chadwick sent his liquid flame, so did my father hurl his energy ball. The magic collided in the middle sending an energy wave through the room. Knocking me off my feet sending a ringing through my entire body.

Dust fell from the ceiling again, this time extinguishing the flames bringing the room to total darkness.

“You will not win this battle.” Chadwick whispered from the darkness. “Even if you defeat me, the real battle is not here. Your precious city burns. Your proud wall falls as we speak, and your pompous politicians and royals all lay dead where they stood.”

My father did not answer, instead, a beam green of energy shot to the part of the room where Chadwick spoke from.

“You do not understand, I am the darkness. I am the scourge sent to rid the world of men like you. I am Malmat, the greatest sorcerer to ever live and I have come to destroy everything you hold dear.” In that moment, Chadwick’s weak voice transformed into a malicious, deep tone of pure darkness. Chadwick was no more. Malmat had shown his true form.

My father shot another beam from a different part of the room. The two men were moving in circles, avoiding the detection of the other, waiting for a moment to strike. My father sent blast after blast of energy balls all to no avail.

Through the barrage of assaults, I noticed a reflection slightly to my right. Not enough to detect what it was, but anything to protect myself was better than nothing. Crawling along the floor on all fours, careful not to make a sound I ran my hands along the smooth stones until something bit my finger. I felt warm blood seep out of a wound where my hand ran across the knife blade my father had used to cut Malmat. I heard another thump but this time no dust fell. The dust must have all fallen when the energy blast went off.

As soon as I secured the knife a hand grabbed my shoulder and hoisted me to my feet.

“We need to get out of here now.” Whispered my father. “This man is much too powerful for me alone.”

We made our way towards the direction we thought the exit was. Dropping the knife, I followed my father blind. The amount of questions filling my mind made me think my head would explode. I wanted to know so

much about the world my father had obviously been hiding from me. Had I performed magic?

Creeping down the corridor we slowly found our way to the door. Malmat's voice could be heard taunting us back toward the way we had come. The light was slowly seeping through the door and my eyes were adjusting slowly as we got closer to the way out.

I was overcome with pride for my father. He had protected me from the most powerful sorcerer alive. He was a hero. Maybe he had found purpose again and would be able to rebuild his life. All of my emotions came out in one burst and I couldn't help but throw myself on my father.

Embracing him in the biggest hug I had ever given I realized too late, that I had been tricked. This was not my father, but Malmat himself. Immediately upon my discovery, Malmat snatched me by the throat and lifted me into the air to look him in the eyes. His emerald green eyes were back to normal and in any other circumstance I would have found them beautiful. I find it interesting that in moments of sheer terror, or distress, my mind wanders to the most peculiar things.

"Your father is dead boy. I ripped out his heart with my own hands. You will have your proof soon enough when you join him in the afterlife." Malmat made a point to loosen his grip just slightly so that I maintained consciousness and opened the door before us. Dropping me to the ground and grabbing me by the back of my hair, he led me out of the tunnel.

A red blaze met us immediately on exiting. Jerricho was on fire. The walls crumbled, people were running through the streets and bodies were everywhere. Malmat walked me to the edge of destruction and held me there for all to see.

"See the might of what I am?"

The scene played out so slowly. Women running through the streets screaming, their gowns on fire. Men laying dismembered over their deceased families. Everywhere I looked there was destruction. I saw a young man attempt to fight back against his assailant only to get a fire ball punched through his chest, leaving a cannonball sized hole where his heart once was. The world as I knew it was over. I thought back to the fight between Malmat and my father. The battle replayed itself in my head. If my father couldn't beat him, there was no way I could. I was hopeless.

"I am darkness..." played in my head over and over. Something about it stuck out to me.

I did not have time to figure it out however, because Malmat looked over at me, grabbed me by the shoulder, knelt down and looked me in the face.

"It's time to join your father." He reached back his hand preparing to strike.

I did the only thing I could think to do at the time.

"I am darkness. I am darkness. I am darkness." Over and over through my mind.

Malmat threw his final blow, but I was gone. I was darkness. I had morphed into shadow, into the thing that concealed me while my last remaining family member had been killed. Dumbfounded Malmat searched around frantically. Unable to believe he had been out played by a boy. I was gone. Walking in shadow back to Crystal Hill.

Amidst burning buildings, people dying and a society crumbling I found the one thing to keep me safe. I had no one left, my family was gone, and I fell into a deep self-inflicted confinement. My newly found magic was my home now. Nobody would take that away from me. I had to learn how to control it, or find somebody to teach me how, only I did not want to be around anybody. I began to use my abilities to steal. At first just to get by, but then I started hitting bigger targets. I made a name for myself and had a comfortable living. Years would pass before I realized I could use my magic for good. But that is a story for another time.