

THE
SERUM
REVELATION

FINAL INSTALLMENT
>>> OF <<<
THE SERUM TRILOGY

KAY
BOWSER



Krouching Tiger
Publications

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PROLOGUE

“WHY ARE we going this way? You know that crazy lunatic is probably going to eat us if we do...” A young college freshman said nervously. He did his best to keep his voice from wavering. He didn’t want to appear as if he were any less of a man than his buddies. His escorts didn’t seem to be having any qualms about trekking in this part of the forest.

The guys’ dorm had a challenge for every new freshman. You faced the legendary caveman’s dwelling single-handedly. If you returned unharmed or uneaten then you were considered ‘one of the guys’ and welcomed on campus with open arms. If a freshman didn’t even have the courage to go and see the dwelling, then they were shunned for the duration of their sentence – however long it took for them to finish their degree.

The legend behind the “caveman” has it that a man (rumored to be an agricultural scientist, local banker, or even a retired gentleman) was out for a friendly stroll in the forest and came upon a fascinating plant or tried to help a hurt animal when an unforeseen calamity hit causing the man to go mad and take up residence in a cave grown over by a giant tree and foliage.

No one really knows what happened to the man and because he obviously didn’t have any family to speak of in the Philippines, no one really knows if there is a man for sure living primitively out in the forest as a caveman would. The last sighting was at least ten years ago, and it hadn’t come from a very credible source. And so, the legendary caveman has remained a legend for the last fifteen years, recently developing into a campus initiation challenge in the men’s dorms.

“Ok, guys, seriously. What are we doing?” The freshman, Josh, insisted. Smirks and snickers were passed around, but no one paid any heed to Josh’s complaints.

Finally, one answered, just as the group approached a rather imposing, massive tree. “We’re here.” The mean sophomore sang. He was only too glad to be escorting a freshman to this

horrible experience passing on the tradition that he had endured. Instead of warning the poor fellow he exulted in paying it back to an unsuspecting sap such as Josh. Remembering what he had gone through only spurred the sophomore on more.

The massive tree standing before the four young men – Josh, the sophomore, and two seniors – looked like something that would grow from the fictional novel, *The Journey to the Center of the Earth*, or from J.R.R Tolkien's world in *The Lord of the Rings*. It was huge. The girth would rival a redwood. The branches fanned out in great reaching arms sprouting abundant leaves, giving the tree a full afro.

The tree's roots hugged a cave's mouth all the way around. The stone structure that the cave extended into stretched out behind the tree as a backdrop might only adding to the austere atmosphere. The stone structure stretched into the air and fell off into the ocean as part of >blank< island border.

There at the mouth of the cave three men smirked wickedly and the fourth swallowed his Adam's apple repeatedly, trying to determine if he had made a wise choice in friends or if he truly was less of a man. It was just a cave after all, right? The crazy caveman attached to all kinds of campus conspiracy theories was just legend, right? He once believed himself a man of solid logic. Standing face to face with the site of a rather ominous legend caused the man to doubt himself. *The place was real, could not the legend be also?* his conscious whispered. Josh gulped.

He begged with everything within him that the sophomore and seniors with him would be kind in whatever they challenged him to do. His manly pride refused to let him return to campus without following through. He had begun to doubt the three men were any kind of decent human beings to bring him here – it was certainly the last time he spent any kind of time with them. When he got back – if he got back – he would be saying, “good riddance.” Who needs those kinds of ‘friends’ when one had kinder enemies?

“Alright, freshman,” one of the seniors stepped forward and took the lead. “Take up your position in the cave opening, we’ll time you for how long you can face it before your nerves give out. We have a standing record of fifteen minutes.” He snorted. “Let’s see if you can stand five.” He sneered.

Josh's eyes narrowed at the slight his manly pride had taken. He was almost thankful for the anger that the insult had caused to flare within him. He took about six bold strides toward the cave's mouth glaring at all three of his escorts. They all watched him with skeptical half-lidded smiles. When Josh turned to face the mouth of the cave, he nearly lost his nerve. He faltered a step and the snorts behind him bolstered him some but not enough to keep him from questioning the reasoning behind following through with the challenge. He didn't even want these men's approval anymore. Why was he doing this? His image on campus? Sure. But, at what cost? He didn't even know why he worried. The caveman didn't even exist. Josh continued to remind himself of this over and over in his mind.

He spread his arms and legs open wide just inside the cave opening just like he was told to do and waited. They took their sweet time announcing that the timer had been set. Josh's hearing had become sonic, hearing every leaf the air passed. He listened to the air swirl around his ears. He heard distant breaking twigs. He heard animals rustling. Wait. Josh frowned. Twigs breaking and rustling foliage... Out of suspicion Josh turned to see that his 'friends' had ditched him. He suspected that this was the plan all along and became filled with rage. He was so gullible. He was never going to live this down. His life on campus would be a four-year-long torture.

A growl grew deep in Josh's throat. It surprised him when it rumbled loudly in his ears. He paused a moment to laugh at the echo his growl had caused in the cave. Then he froze in fear when a second rumble echoed in the cave. That first rumble hadn't come from him. It had come from the cave. He had just thought he had done it in anger.

Turning Josh studied depths of the cave with wide-eyed caution. Rumbles echoing in the cave became louder and closer together. Josh began to back away from the cave. Suddenly a man in ragged clothing and a mane of scraggly hair covering his head was waving wildly as he ran and hollered unintelligible syllables.

Josh had frozen in shock and awe as he witnessed the legend come to life. He was bowled over in the caveman's race to get away from whatever still growled in the cave. Josh gasped trying to regain the breath knocked out of him. The wild man scrambled to his feet after kneeing Josh in the thigh and trying to lift him to his feet.

"Argh!" Josh hollered. He glared and shoved the man away.

"Run, boy!" The man commanded in a voice that sounded as if he rubbed rocks together and toads croaked. "The devil be upon us!" He urged. Josh wheezed and hastily followed the caveman in a frenzy to get away from the now roaring cave.

The cave growled mightily, causing the earth to tremble around them, and exploded in a guttural burp just as the man in rags took Josh to the ground landing on top of him. Josh couldn't breathe for lack of air and now from the stench of the man. Had he ever taken a shower? Josh gagged.

After a few moments the man finally stood and brought Josh to his feet. He looked around him. There was so much hair on his face that Josh had no idea what his facial expression was or even how old he was. It seemed like he should be old based on the legend and the sound of his rough voice. Josh looked around while he regained his breath and sucked in clean air, trying to eradicate the rank body odor that had assaulted his nostrils.

Josh froze for what had to be the fourth time today. First, when he was approached to perform the dorm challenge. Second, at the mouth of the cave. Third, at the sight of the legendary caveman, and now at the sight of black goop splayed on the surrounding foliage surrounding the cave. The cave looked as if it had thrown up black mucus. Josh and the probably old man

were miraculously spared from wearing any of it. They must have ducked beneath the right bush just in the nick of time.

Josh expelled air he didn't know that he had been holding. "What was that?"

The caveman turned to look at him. Josh gaped. The eyes looking back at him were sharp and shone with a great deal of experiences that Josh wasn't sure that he wanted to know about. But, the skin around his eyes and the color of the man's hair, Josh realized, even though the man was raggedy and needed good scrubbing – he wasn't old. He could only be in his mid-forties.

He answered Josh's question that he had almost forgotten he had asked. The man spoke with such gravity and foreboding that Josh nearly turned to stone with fear if it weren't for the confusion.

"Khñ nãmąđin."

Tar Man.

CHAPTER

ONE

DR. MARK YASSIFF was found staring at his computer screen in contemplation when his wife came down to kiss him goodnight and to urge him to be up soon. Ever since his return from George Hornfield's compound on the island off the coast of New Jersey, his wife insisted that he work from home and rarely let him out of her sight.

Since that time when he had disappeared in the night, going up to bed without him was its own torture. Marley Yassiff would lie awake wondering if he would really come up the stairs or disappear all over again. Mrs. Yassiff had her fears that she had to work through while trying not to smother the man that had been stolen from her nearly seventeen years ago.

Mark was understanding, but he was also a man on a mission. He had made it his duty to find out where Mr. Hornfield was and keep tabs on him. Tonight, he was befuddled by the information that he found. He was downright confused.

Mr. Yassiff had finally found George Hornfield in the Philippines—dead. That's right. Dead. There were headlines everywhere on the internet. The great and powerful millionaire was dead. His home had been burnt to the ground, likely with explosives authorities claim. This was not the end he had envisioned for the man. Mark was planning to lead the authorities to his door and have him locked up for the rest of his days.

Officers kept surveillance around Mark's home and his person while an ongoing investigation into George's affairs took place. Now that George had died, the police would have all the open

doors they needed to look into his dealings, and they wouldn't have to keep watch over Mark and his family either. The threat was gone. They would find enough on the man to ruin his reputation and confiscate his riches. Mark wanted George to be alive to witness it happen. He wanted George Hornfield to live through the humiliation. But he was dead.

How? Mark wanted to know. How could he be gone? He wasn't likely to *let* that happen. George was too thorough and sure of his men's intentions. He was too actively aware of his enemies' actions while wining and dining them to allow them to take him down so easily—and in his own home no less. No, it wasn't someone on the inside. It wasn't an enemy either. So, who else could it be?

Mark couldn't imagine the man working for anyone else. Mark snorted. No, George wouldn't allow himself to be demeaned to work under someone else. He was too arrogant and financially secure in his own business dealings. The man would have to be offered the prize of a lifetime, a *really* expensive prize of a lifetime, to be persuaded to work under another man. It would be a shady business, to say the least. He had been kidnapping people already. What worse imaginings could the man have come up with?

Mark slumped back in his chair glaring at his computer screen with a sigh. He rocked back in his desk chair while he thought. Nothing came to mind right away, so he shut down his computer and turned off the light in his study. He remembered that his wife waited for him. He knew when he arrived in their room that she would still be awake pretending to be asleep. She was a wonderful woman. She pretended a lot for his sake. He knew she was benevolent in that she didn't smother him, even when she wanted to. Asking him to work from home was no hardship. He could still do what he loved and enjoy her wonderful company and home-cooked meals. What more could a man ask for?

Restitution for his stolen life. The thought sprang immediately to mind. For all those years they had held him captive, Mark wanted the man responsible to endure consequences for his actions. He wasn't bloodthirsty. He didn't want George dead. But as he stared down at his wife and thought of his daughter and all the kidnapped men and women's lives affected and still being affected by that man's treachery... He couldn't help but wish the man had suffered more than he had.

Mark, now ready for bed and not in the right mindset to go to sleep, lay down beside his wife beneath the covers. He pulled his wife into himself and savored the feeling of having her close. He reveled in having her in his arms. Sixteen years was a long time to go without having one's wife. This beloved woman was given to him by God, and with God's wisdom from now on, he wouldn't do anything to risk losing this privilege again.

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John smiled down at Kellie as they walked along the public park walkway downtown. There he felt a little like a pansy copying a Hallmark, but his girl enjoyed it. His girl. John's chest puffed up just a little more at the thought. Yes, Kellie would soon be his. He was going to ask her to marry him tonight. He was sure that her father wouldn't mind. John had meant to ask before he popped the question, but then again, he was sure of himself. Old arrogance died hard. He would be sure to secure the man's blessing. Even if he asked out of order that shouldn't matter.

Well, that's what he told himself as he listened half-heartedly to a beaming Kellie tell about how she achieved another accomplishment at work. Just as they were approaching the very oak that he had been eyeing for the last eternity it seemed, Kellie's face clouded as it often did when she talked about work.

Her friend, Hannah, and she had started work there as interns together and gained promotions working together. They were their boss's favorites. This was proven when he sent them to an exclusive charity event in his stead. They didn't feel that special by the end of the night. They were kidnapped there, and only Kellie got away. By a series of events, John found her, and they teamed up to save her father from a compound on the island where John originally had planned a vacation stay.

John and Kellie had saved her father—well, John did the actual saving, but that's beside the point. Hannah hadn't been saved that day. John hadn't had a safe chance to go after her. He hadn't had enough time to plan her rescue. Kellie didn't blame him. She blamed herself. John repeatedly reminded her that this was silly since Hannah was the one that had made the choice to stay behind in the limo that night. Kellie had urged her friend to escape with her, and Hannah had refused. She had been too scared to think past being caught again and probably murdered for trying to escape. Kellie's father had also told her that Hannah most likely had been forced into the intensive conditioning everyone else that had been kidnapped was subjected to. The conditioning was in preparation to being injected with the mutagen that Dr. Yassiff had created and had been forced to administer.

John has been working with Dr. Yassiff in private to not alarm the ladies. He planned to infiltrate the compound again with Mark's insight on the compound's layout. John plans to and release all the prisoners and see about getting Hannah specifically home safe and sound. It was a very basic plan, but he felt that he had to do it for his future wife. She was having a hard time moving forward.

The last two months have been a challenge. John has had to share Kellie with her long lost—now returned—father and also her mother. As a family, they wanted to spend time together enjoying that they were all together again. They were kind and welcomed John into their home since he wasn't from around there. Being from Norway he didn't have any connections in America other than them. He joined them in church and the men seemed welcoming enough, but making connections wasn't his priority. He had set his sights on Kellie. Since he was so sure

of her answer, John had made marrying the girl his 'number one' on his to-do list. Yeah, if she knew that he thought this way, she would totally (*italics*) be flattered.

Just as they reached the oak in the park, he had decided would be their spot for this romantic occasion, Kellie swung around to look at him with sorrowful eyes. Not the emotion he was going for. John took a second to steady himself from preparing to kneel before he popped the question too soon. Timing was everything. He would make it perfect. He prided himself on his timing and preparation for every mission.

"John," Kellie started softly, "is it wrong?" She shook her head at the awkward start to her train of thought. "Do you think it is wrong for me to be enjoying myself? To be moving on when her life is on hold? Do you think she is alive?" Kellie pleaded with her eyes for him to repeat all the reassurances John would soothingly answer her. She could quote them from memory, but she still required him to say them sometimes. He was so sure, and she was so unsure. She just needed the reassurance once more.

Kellie just could not shake the guilt from leaving her friend behind that night. Even though she knew it was for both of them, not just a selfish desire to save herself. She had intended to get help.

Kellie had gotten help. John was her help. He helped her find and rescue her father. No matter how many times they explained it to her that it was impossible to save Hannah that night— Kellie just felt that she had let her friend down. She often wondered what was being done to her. How were they treating her? Was she safe? Was she fed? Was she alive?

Kellie's morbid thoughts clouded her eyes with despair as John began to slowly and softly soothe her fears with his calm assurance that Hannah was in fact alive. She was likely going through conditioning like her father said, which meant they would feed her. Hannah would be all right until she was saved. She *would* be saved, he promised her.

After a few minutes of his rubbing circles on her back, and her listening to his reassurances once again Kellie relaxed.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I know you're right. I just can't help feeling bad, you know?" She pleaded with him to understand.

John nodded. "I understand. Kind of. I mean, I've always been a one-man team, so I guess I can't understand wholly."

Kellie nodded in understanding. Her eyes shone bright with thankfulness that this man didn't condemn her for her way of thinking. He was trying to understand and for that she was thankful.

"I want to understand what it's like to be on a team though." John continued. John gently pulled them to a stop on the other side of the oak tree, so they had a modicum of privacy from the jogger's path on the other side. "I'd like to build a two-man team with you, Kellie."

Kellie's eyes began to widen as she began to understand his meaning. John was simultaneously bending down to one knee. Kellie's right hand raised to her lips in pleased surprise. John nearly smirked at reading the moment right. His pride would get him into trouble on of these days, but not today.

"Kellie, will you marry me?" John asked, holding out a beautiful diamond ring for her to see.

Kellie let out a small mewl of a whimper. Tears gathered in her eyes as she began nodding vigorously. "Yes. Yes!" She cried. She reached out her left hand to have the ring placed on her left ring finger. She was ecstatic!

The ring fit perfectly, of which John did not doubt that it would. Kellie threw herself into his arms, and he swung her around in a victorious embrace.

"I just can't wait to tell Mom and Dad!" Kellie enthused.

"Won't they be surprised," John said casually.

"Ha!" Kellie laughed. "I'm sure my mom has suspected, and well, my dad... obviously not." She peeked up at him shyly.

John's expression didn't falter for a second even as he faltered just a little on the inside. He needed to get this blessing in the bag pronto. He had an idea. "Hey, you want a celebratory coffee to end the night?" He suggested. "I know how much you love your espresso." He winked.

Kellie did a quiet girlish squeal of delight. "I'd love coffee! I won't be able to sleep tonight, anyway." She held her ring out to stare lovingly at it. Her face was awash with delight and joy. She couldn't believe it. She was engaged! John had asked her. It was a little fast, sure; but when you know, you *know*, right? She sighed happily to herself as they drove to her favorite coffee shop. It was the only one on Main St that stayed open until late.

John got out and opened the door for her. He urged her to go in and browse the menu and even order for both of them. He would be in. He just needed to make a "quick" phone call. Too happy at the moment to care or think this was weird, Kellie entered the shop ahead of him with a little bounce to her step.

John made his call as soon as she was inside.

About eight minutes later John walked into the shop with a smile on his face. It was all for show. His slice of humble pie had been served. He wasn't sure yet how he would eat it and remedy the problem in his favor. John wrapped an arm around his *almost* fiancé and accepted the latte she handed him. He took too big of a swallow and reveled in the burn on the way down since he felt that he deserved it for taking Kellie's father's blessing for granted.



“Mark, *do* you have something against John?”

“What?” His wife’s question threw him off guard.

“Why did you say that you wouldn’t give him your blessing yet, that you were unsure?” Marley asked.

“Well,” Mark hedged.

“Seems to me you should have a valid reason for saying someone can’t get married.” His wife said airily as she snuggled down under the covers with her book.

Mark frowned. “I only wanted to make him sweat a little. He asked her already.”

His wife blinked up at her husband. Her brow was wrinkled in a smirk of confusion. “He asked her already? They’re engaged?”

“Yes.”

“He didn’t ask you first?”

“No.”

Marley snorted and rolled back over to read her book again. “Well then. I’d say he deserved a little sweating.” She laughed and peeked over her shoulder at her husband. “How long do you think you can keep the man sweating?”

Mark laughed. He leaned over and kissed her. “I knew you’d see it my way.” He chuckled. “I’ll keep him sweating as long as I can.”

Husband and wife settled snugly under their comforter snickering over John’s misstep and read quietly until they were both ready to turn out the lights.

CHAPTER

Two

THANE AND JACK JETT, Stephanie Nelson and Natalia Shaleigh stumbled just barely catching themselves before they tumbled head-long into the cave wall only four feet away from the black curtain of tar. Once they were through, they no longer heard the rumble of George Hornfield's grand mansion exploding behind them burying the man in his own home.

It was a spectacular ending for the man. He would have loved the spectacle if he had known about it. Thane suspected that George hadn't known that his end was upon him, regardless of the peaceful expression they had seen on his face. Thane was sure that George didn't know that today was his day to meet his Maker.

Looking around him, Thane wondered just who George had gotten himself mixed up with. Then he wondered what they had gotten *themselves* mixed up in. He took inventory of his friends making sure they were all right before consulting everyone for a plan.

Natalia spoke up before they could get a conversation volleying. "Don't you think we should find out where we are and maybe get an idea of what we're up against?" She crossed her arms eyeing the surrounding cave.

Funny how admitting you like someone makes them a whole lot less annoying suddenly. Thane agreed. "I'd like to know where we are, too." He looked at Jack. "What do you think?"

“We can’t move forward without knowing what’s ahead,” Jack said. “Let’s take a ‘look’ around.”

Thane nodded. “All right, brother, let’s ‘look’ ahead and get an idea of the layout of this place. Maybe we can get all we need from right here.”

They settled on the ground and Stephanie and Natalia waited while Thane and Jack searched out the labyrinth of tunnels throughout the caves stretched out past the opening at the back of the small cave they fell into.

Thane and Jack both searched in different directions. Thane searched east while Jack searched west.

Jack suddenly sat up straight. “Steph! It’s Drake,” he paused, “and the rest of the Nordoms. They’re all caged up in caves of some sort. They look like they’re in jail.”

Stephanie sat up eagerly. “Gale? Did you see Gale?”

Jack shook his head. “She’s not there. I don’t know where she is.” He frowned.

“What’s she look like? I may have found her.” Thane piped up.

“A tiny redhead,” Stephanie said excitedly. “She has green eyes.”

“Well, this girl is small and a redhead. She’s pretty dressed up in some kind of fancy, weird get-up.” Thane answered. He reached out and touched Stephanie’s forehead with his forefinger, and she gasped.

“Yes! That’s her.” Her brow furrowed as Thane pulled back his hand. “Where is she?”

“I don’t know how to explain that. There’s a large, dark cavern right next to the cave she’s in. Hers looks like a room though.” Thane’s brow furrowed. “I wonder why she’s dressed like that.”

“I think I could help with that.” A deep, slithery voice invaded their space.

All four pairs of eyes swiveled and widened upon seeing the creature standing in the cave opening before them. Men dressed in white, form-fitting suits flanked him on either side. There wasn’t enough room in the opening that was only the size of a typical doorway to see how many. The creature was a sight to behold. He was tall, hairless, and dressed in a black, form-fitting suit of his own. His skin was a greyish-green like glow-in-the-dark products looked, but more sickly. His eyes were yellow with reptilian slits for pupils. His mouth was blood red, and there were entirely too many sharp teeth.

Jack and Thane jumped to their feet in front of the girls. The creature only crossed his arms and grinned wider in amusement at their show of chivalry. The girls scrambled to their feet behind the guys. There wasn’t enough room to stand beside them. Natalia probably would have stayed back either way because she was more of a distraction than a help in this situation. She had a feeling that everyone in the room had special abilities besides her. Staying out the way seemed

to be the more prudent plan of action. She was beginning to wonder at her wisdom of joining the search party. She glanced at Thane. Well, he was worth it. She just hoped that she wouldn't cause his untimely death.

"So," the creature spoke, "who are you, and why have you barged into my home?" He smirked at his minions over his shoulder. "I always did say it was wise to guard all the doors, didn't I?" He asked rhetorically. He turned his attention back to them. "Even the back door."

The men dressed in white all nodded in agreement even as their faces showed no sign of emotion.

"Who are you?" Jack asked.

The creature's eyes narrowed, but his smile only widened. None of them thought that was possible. What was this monster? "Well, now. I do believe I asked first." He glared down at them stretching to his full height. He was working hard to be intimidating. He should know that he didn't have to try right? Perhaps they weren't shivering in fear enough, Thane thought.

He nearly smirked, but he kept himself in check. "My name is Thane," Thane answered. "So, what is yours?"

The creature's grin relaxed some at Thane's cooperation. "I'm waiting for the others to decide if they wish to be cordial guests or not." He zeroed in on the rest of them.

Jack only grit his teeth. Stephanie wilted. Natalia spoke in a rush. "My name is Natalia. She's Stephanie, and he's Jack." Stephanie glanced at her as if she had been betrayed, and Jack only seemed to become angrier.

"I don't know what their deal is; but if they don't get over it, we're going to be in some serious trouble with this guy." Thane growled to Natalia. He glared at Jack and Stephanie, and she assumed that he was relaying the same message to the others before the creature spoke again.

"Ah! Jack and Stephanie." The creature sighed thoughtfully. "I thought I recognized your faces."

Stephanie frowned. "How could you? I don't know *you*."

"No, you don't. My name is Khn nâmandin, but you can just call me Tar Man. It's easier." He sneered.

"How do you know us?" Jack demanded.

"Jack." Tar Man sighed. He seemed disappointed at the lack of intimidation his name should have invoked on them. "Isn't it obvious? I spied on you." He shifted on his feet and rolled his head on his shoulders as if relieving a crick in his neck. "I thought you four smarter than that. You evaded George's men easily enough and escaped my compound. Really. I'm disappointed."

Jack frowned. "Your compound?"

“Yes, of course,” Tar Man’s eyes widened in surprise. “You didn’t really think that fool *George Hornfield* was behind it all did you?” He scoffed. “Well, gentlemen!” He rolled his eyes at his minions-in-white. “I did a better job of covering my tracks and leaving all the blame to that poor imbecile than I thought.” When his reptilian gaze returned to them, Thane and his friends knew that Tar Man knew exactly what he had done, and how well. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve shared enough information with you. I need to figure out who you, Thane and Natalia, are and if you’re of any use to me. Then I need to return to my wedding. You see, if it weren’t for you, I would’ve revived my swooning bride and married her already if I hadn’t been alerted to your trespassing.”

All four frowned in confusion. This guy could not get any weirder. Looking at the guy, he was obviously forcing the poor girl. No girl in her right mind would marry someone like him. No wonder she had fainted.

“So, Thane, Natalia, who are you? How have you become mixed up with Jack and Stephanie, hmm?” He stared down at them intently. His look was one of impatience. He wanted to get back to his wedding.

Uh-oh, Natalia’s eyes widened in realization. Thane’s did too. The fancy garb. Gale. She must be the bride that fainted. Hopefully, Stephanie and Jack don’t figure it out, or there would be problems.

“Well?” Tar Man prompted impatiently.

“I’m just a hitchhiker.” Natalia squeaked.

“Pardon me?” Tar Man raised his eyebrows in skepticism.

“I’m just a hitchhiker,” Natalia repeated. “I didn’t know them until I ran into him.” She pointed to Thane. “Then we ran into them,” she pointed to Jack and Stephanie, “looking for George Hornfield.” Thane was trying to catch her eye, but she wasn’t getting it.

“Oh really.” Tar Man’s eyes lowered, and his grin turned thoughtful. “And why, Thane, were you looking for George Hornfield?”

Thane’s jaw ticked. “Unfinished business.”

“What kind of business?” Tar Man swiped the air with a pale hand. “And no dilly-dallying. Give it to me straight. I have a wedding to get back to.”

“He lied to me about why I was staying at his house, and I just wanted to... kind of get back at him for it.”

“Ah, revenge.” Tar Man said in understanding. “But, revenge for what? What did George deserve revenge for?”

Thane crossed his arms and shifted his stance before answering. "He put me through some tests and soaked me in some kind of goo for weeks." Thane shrugged. "It wasn't what I signed up for."

Tar Man barked a laugh. "No, I suppose not!" He grinned and hummed thoughtfully. "Thane and Jack, you wouldn't happen to be related, would you?"

Jack's eyes narrowed and so did Thane's. They watched Tar Man suspiciously.

"Ah, yes, there it is. The answer I was looking for!" Tar Man said triumphantly. "George succeeded in completing one(italics) task after all. Good man. His dying finale." Tar Man chuckled evilly. "Wonderful." He turned to a minion on his left and mumbled instructions to him. He sped off to perform his master's wish.

Tar Man clapped his hands together. "Well! This changes things mightily." His grin was one of a man whose burden had been lifted. "Everything is falling into place wonderfully. Jack and Thane, come. Be my guests at my table. The girls will join the rest of your friends in the dungeon. We have much to discuss." Immediately, Tar Man dissolved in a puddle of tar and his minions swarmed the cave to latch onto Jack, Thane and the girls. The girls were dragged off to the left while the boys were forced down the right tunnel.

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Drake feverishly worked to formulate a plan of action among the Nordom leaders to rescue Gale and find out who the "master" was. Unfortunately, the Nordoms weren't very logical thinkers, and they weren't very organized. Their meals were delivered every few hours, presumably on time, for each meal. Drake and the leaders in his alcove were interrupted in their discussions when they heard struggling. Two girls were forcibly escorted into an alcove near his. He watched as men in white drug them kicking and screaming, then locked them away. Drake watched silently until the men were gone, and he recognized Stephanie.

CHAPTER

THREE

“STEPHANIE?”

Stephanie looked up at the sound of her name. “Drake?” She asked in bewilderment. “Is it you?”

“Yes.” He assured her. “How did you get here?”

“We’re not really sure.” Stephanie started to explain, glancing at Natalia periodically. She explained how they had tracked George down to the Philippines and then found him dead in his mansion shortly after escaping from cells in his basement. She explained how the mansion seemed to have been deserted shortly after they got out. Drake agreed with her that it was odd if George was still in the house and found dead. She explained about stepping through the black curtain of slime-like tar into the cave where they were then found and imprisoned while the boys had been taken somewhere else with the creepy man-thing. Drake questioned her about ‘the creepy man-thing.’

Natalia stayed quiet and let Stephanie do the talking. *This must be Drake*, she assumed. The guy that Jack and Stephanie had asked about.

Drake asked. “Do you know where Jack went?”

“Yes—and no,” Stephanie said.

Drake sighed then as if he thought about something important, “Have you seen Gale?”

“No, we didn’t see Gale, at least not with our eyes, per se. Well, we didn’t, but Thane said that he did somewhere in the tunnels on the opposite end of this labyrinth. He showed me.”

Stephanie pointed to her forehead where Thane had tapped her to share the image of Gale.

“Thane?” Drake asked quizzically. He pinched the bridge of his nose as he began to lose patience. Apparently, the only thing more annoying than trying to make decisions with the Nordoms was trying to get information out of Stephanie! “Never mind! The beginning. Start. At. The. Beginning.” He enunciated with emphasized patience.

Stephanie began at the beginning. She explained how she and Jack had met Thane and Natalia. She introduced Drake to Natalia. She gave a short line reminding Natalia about how Stephanie knew Drake and Gale from the island. Then Stephanie continued to explain how the four of them—Jack, Stephanie, Natalia, and Thane—had been chased by George’s men and eventually tracked George there to the Philippines. Drake was surprised to hear that he was nowhere near home, the island. That he, Gale and the Nordoms had fallen into the sinkhole and landed thousands of miles away from the island was news to him. Stephanie reminded him how they had found George dead in a small room in his mansion and only just survived being blown up by jumping through the mysterious, sticky-black curtain into these caves.

Stephanie went on to explain how the creature, Tar Man, had found them and then dissolved into the floor. She told Drake about Tar Man’s minions leading the boys off to a feast while she and Natalia were dragged down here to the dungeons and locked up. Drake stared at Stephanie in bewilderment.

“Tar Man?” Drake raised his eyebrows and his tone dripped sarcasm. “Tar Man? *That’s* his name?”

“When you say it like that, it does sound kind of funny...” Natalia bit back a giggle.

“It wasn’t funny when he told it to us.” Stephanie frowned.

“Well, no. He was really creepy.” Natalia said. “Nothing is funny when something that vile is looking at you.”

“The way you described the bodyguards, sounds like you ran into the ‘master’.” Drake mused, mostly to himself.

“Yeah, I’d say he was the boss around here.” Natalia agreed, nodding.

“Hm.” Drake thought. To the girls, he asked. “He said he was taking Jack and Thane to a feast?”

“Yeah. He said he’d been interrupted from his wedding.” Natalia confirmed.

“Wedding?”

“Yes. We think he was going to force Gale to marry him.”

“What?!” Drake roared.

The girls flinched.

“Yes. At least that’s what we think.” Stephanie said softly, trying to soothe him. It wasn’t working. “Thane showed me Gale. She was wearing a fancy costume. After he said she had fainted, and we saw her sleeping, and then Tar Man mentioned the wedding, we put two and two together.” She shrugged helplessly. “It’s what makes sense.”

“It *doesn’t* make sense.” Drake disagreed, in control of himself again.

“Well, based on what Tar Man said, it made sense that that was what was happening,” Natalia argued.

“No, I mean, it doesn’t make sense that he intends to marry her.” Drake frowned across the pathway into their alcove. “Why? What would it gain him? —besides a very uncooperative bride.” He snorted.

Stephanie almost smiled at that, but she said, “I’m not sure.”

Natalia shrugged. She was just as in the dark as the others. She wished that her cross-over purse hadn’t been taken from her though. She could really use pen and paper or her phone to record the conversations for her story. Now, she was worried about missing anything for her newfound inspiration, but soon she wouldn’t be thinking about her books at all. Her priorities would certainly be set on something more important, like survival.



Gale ‘woke up’ blinking away angry tears rapidly. What a creep! What makes him think he could force a girl to marry him?! How dare he *touch* her! Gale was getting so worked up that she smelled something singeing and saw white smoke in her peripheral.

She rolled her eyes and began deep breathing to try to calm down. She had to figure out how to get out of here. Starting a fire would only draw attention she didn’t want. She had to figure out how to get back to Drake. Hopefully, he would be happy to see her. Self-doubt began to creep in, but Gale shut it down immediately. She didn’t have time for that.

Gale rolled her shoulders and struggled from the bed in her new dress. She would have changed into something more appropriate for sneaking around, but after some investigation, she discovered that her clothes were long gone and only dresses that required a host of help to assemble like the green and gold ensemble that she currently wore filled the wardrobe. So, seeing that she didn’t have any other option than to be conspicuous, Gale decided to sneak out and just do her best not to get caught.

Gale eased open the bedroom door and peered around the cracked. Nothing. She wasn't sure what she expected to see but the empty hallway surprised her. Thinking about it, she wondered why there wasn't a guard of some sort. The black hallway was void of anyone wearing a tight, white suit.

She would take the blessing and run with it. Literally. Gale ran to the end of the hallway and peered into the giant cavern sprawled with the natural columns and attempted to see if anything was lurking in the shadows created by the red lighting.

Gale shivered. This place gave her the creeps. Remembering what had almost occurred in this room nearly caused her to gag. She crept forward and along the wall to the left. She kept her hand on the wall at all times in case she had to merge with it. She was prepared to merge at the drop of a hat. She even merged with it on accident several times before she rounded the wall and found another opening. She sighed more than once in frustration at her jumpy nerves. She was moving so slowly and there was no one around to capture her.

Sniffing Gale determined to move faster. It would have been so handy to have Jack's talent of "looking ahead." She could move so much faster and with more confidence. Wishing she had Jack's talent made her wonder about him and Stephanie. She wondered if they were ok, and if they had apprehended George yet, or if he had gotten to them first.

She pursed her lips and decided not to waste any more thoughts over what-ifs. She had to keep her focus sharp if she was going to find Drake. Drake... She had almost allowed herself to wonder again if he would even be happy when she found him. She shut that thought down with a firm slam of the door on that part of her brain. She *definitely* couldn't go down that road.

Finally, coming to the end of the hallway she heard the shuffling of feet in the next room. She took a deep breath and inched as close to the opening of the long passageway trying to get a glimpse. When the shadow of one of Tar Man's henchmen passed over her, Gale merged with the wall faster than one could blink. Thankfully, she was in a position that she could see someone coming from the right. She was too close to the wall obviously since she had merged with it to see anyone coming from the left. That's all right. From this vantage point, Gale couldn't be seen, but she could still get an idea of how many people were in the room by how heavy the traffic that passed by her was.

She waited and watched barely breathing for fear someone would sense her location. She soon realized that she didn't have to worry. These people acted more like robots. As she paid attention to their movements and the intensity of their eyes, they were obviously brainwashed.

Gale humphed to herself. She wondered just how much they noticed in this state or if they were oblivious of anything but what they had been ordered to do. She itched to test her theory, but she was just as scared to try. As she warred within herself, a man dressed in a similar tight suit passed by. His suit was mustard yellow, and anger raged in his eyes. He flung his arm before him whipping a white-suit and yelling at them to move faster. He demanded one

hundred percent effort until their break in two hours. He insisted that slowing down wasn't an option.

Gale smothered her gasp and tried to merge further into the wall before she remembered if she were to do that, she would have a very difficult time reemerging if she went too deep. She watched the man obviously in charge until he went out of sight. He wasn't oblivious, but he had been influenced in a similar manner as the others that had been brainwashed.

Taking her time, she tried to gauge the best time to keep moving. She had to keep moving if she ever hoped to find Drake. She had to just go for it at the best chance she got. She didn't want to stick around for two hours until their break. If only she could stay merged and keep moving, she moaned within herself. Perhaps she could have if she had practiced like all the other captives in the compound. Yeah, that would have been wise, but it also meant work. She didn't have the motivation to work once she had graduated from conditioning. Sure, she had the itch to exercise. One didn't go through years of intensive training and instantly fall out of the habit. A long walk or slow jog down the expansive hallways that housed the hundreds of rooms containing all the other captives like her took care of that restlessness. She honestly had resented her talent feeling it was weak and useless. She didn't think that when lunch hour came around and fights broke out. Having a quick escape out of the way was pretty useful.

But now that she was faced with being recaptured and possibly killed or worse—married to a hideous creature, she had to admit her folly. Gale glared at herself mentally and focused on moving forward now. There was a lull in traffic, and she couldn't hear the yelling of the yellow-clad overseer. Gale cautiously reemerged from the wall and quickly rounded the corner only to merge with the wall immediately. She nearly choked on a gasp. She had nearly been caught! The yellow-clad man had been silently watching the marching minions against the wall just two feet from where Gale had come from the passageway.

> **END OF SNEAK PEEK** <

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