

Levee (Worlds of Element Book 1)

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For Dad,

You have the best stories.

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Levee

By J.J. Graham

Chapter 1 Becoming Man

I looked up. The stars were so bright tonight that even the light from the fire did not dim their

glow. The nip from the air that swept across the calm water of the nearby lake shot a chill up my spine that stopped just at the base of my neck, where the heat from the fire melted it away. The sensation relaxed me as I searched the sky, hoping to find the different constellations that the Elders would point out from time to time.

There were ten of us in total, all the same age, all circled around a sizeable fire. The yearly festival had come to a close. Tonight we did not walk back to our homes with our parents, as we had grown accustomed to doing over the past years of our lives. We had all come to the age where we were to remain outside.

We were led away from the festival just before it ended, and were instructed to take our places around a fire that blazed in the center of a small clearing. Mine was a smaller group than many of the ones in the years before; at least the ones I could remember. When I was younger, I would watch in awe as each year a group of boys was led away from the village only to return the next morning as men. Many times I tried to stay awake, straining my ears to hear any clues to what takes place on this sacred night, but all I ever managed to hear was the sound of night.

By now I knew that the Elders had already ushered the rest of the town back to their homes, leaving only us, just outside our small village. From what little I had been taught of this ceremony, I knew that tradition required us to be alone for the remainder of the night, and then to not speak of this night again. Though such secrecy made tonight feel even more sacred, it also meant that none of us knew what to truly expect. The Elder that led us out to this clearing left us with no indication of what we would experience. The only things we were left with were the fire and a barrel that was brimming with water. Still, we were only a short distance away from our homes and so I was relieved to know that we were not in any danger.

The smell of the burning wood comforted me, easing my anxiety without stealing away any of my excitement. Tonight I, along with my nine companions, am to make the transition into manhood. The rest of the boys whispered among themselves excitedly about tonight's earlier festivities and each comparing what they thought we would have to do next, to achieve our rite of passage. I ignored them the best I could. I knew that it was of no real benefit to speculate what would be required of us, so I closed my eyes and allowed their words to blur together in the wind.

Despite my attempt to block out their nervous conversation, the group's collective apprehension was tangible. I opened my eyes briefly to see one of my companions poking at the fire tentatively, trying to seem bored. Each prod sent tiny flares into the air from one of the disintegrating logs that he was absently splitting in two. I watched the sparks drift lazily higher. As they disappeared, my eyes fell on the hunched, cloaked figure that was slowly making its way toward our circle.

He was an old man, and had been that way for as far back as I could remember. And, like many other old men, he stooped and hunched as he walked, clutching his walking-cane in his strong but weathered hands.

Every so often, the old man would look up ahead for a brief time, then lower his head back down to watch his carefully shuffling feet, murmuring secrets to himself as he went along his way. Like other old men, when he lifted his head high enough for us to see his face in the firelight, it revealed the canyons that time had worn into his cheeks and around his bright eyes. However, unlike other old men, this particular old man told the greatest stories. There was no doubt that this was why the Elders had chosen him as our guide into manhood.

Though I kept my eyes fixed on the old man as he drew nearer, I could tell by the slowly growing silence within the circle that the other boys had also noticed his humble approach. The old man seemed to gradually lessen his pace; each of his short steps seemed to be painstakingly long now,

as though he could sense our heightening anxiety and wanted to torture us with the tension. Still, no one in my group dared take their eyes off the visitor.

At last, the boys nearest to the man parted, allowing him into the circle. He passed through them with not so much as a glance, and continued on toward the fire, inching ever closer as we all stared.

Closer. I was sure he knew what was ahead of him; even I felt the heat of the flames, and I was even further away than the man now was.

Closer.

Surely he'll stop, I thought hesitantly, trying to ignore my quickening pulse.

Closer.

Any closer and his robe will catch fire. Yet the man continued inching closer to what would surely be death for him.

Almost in unison, we all sat upright, ready to spring as the man neared the flames.

Maybe this is our test.

I stood halfway up, ready to throw myself at our Elder to save him, still hoping desperately that he would stop.

And he did: the old man stopped mere inches from the fire, and at last surveyed the group of boys that encircled him. The light danced across the ridges in his face, leaving thin lines of shadows that masked the deep places only Time itself had seen.

He stood silently for a moment. Then, in a flowing, coarse voice, he began.

“Long ago, when our Earth was still young, there was a small, faraway solar system in grave danger from their expanding sun. Atalaya and Seraphinus, the First Worlds, were inhabited by two very powerful and very similar races. They were like cousins, these races, differing only in their physical appearances and their ability of the elements. These two races lived in harmony, but when the sun’s expansion threatened the watery world of Atalaya, the planet’s King, Castor, sought aid from the neighboring molten planet of Seraphinus. Faced with the prospect of having two planets for his growing race, the Seraphinian King, Pollux, relented to his greed and refused to send aid to his cousins.

“When it became clear that Pollux would not come to help the Atalayans, Castor was forced to evacuate his people and flee their world in search of a safe and suitable new home for his race. Eventually, they came to a world that suited their needs: Earth, only to find it already inhabited by humans. Castor’s people descended from the sky, and the primitive humans welcomed them as their gods. They named their newfound deities “Atlantians” and built for them a great city in their honor that they named Atlantis.

“Meanwhile, though their lifetimes spanned across eons, the Seraphinians were too impatient to wait for the encroaching sun’s heat to dry all the water on Atalaya. The substance was toxic to the race, and Pollux’s greed was brimming. He urged his best and brightest minds to create a device that could harness the Seraphinian element and accelerate the process. When they were successful, and Atalaya’s water had been diminished, Pollux sent his wife, the Queen, Makenna, to

preside over the newly resurfaced planet and its new Seraphinian inhabitants.

“Soon after she arrived however, Pollux’s greedy plot backfired on him. The star expanded further than was expected, engulfing Atalaya, and Makenna along with it, completely.

“Pollux swore revenge on Castor, whom he blamed for the Queen’s death. Naming his eldest son Damian as Ward of Seraphinus, he gathered an army and tracked the Atalayans to Earth, waging war on Castor’s people.

“The battle was terrible, and claimed the lives of humans, Atalayans, and Seraphinians alike. In the end, Castor defeated Pollux, but at great cost, burying him beneath the ruined city. The Atalayan king was wise; he selected a number of the human worshipers who fought bravely alongside the Atalayans, and dubbed them Guardians. He blessed these Guardians with the jewel of their goddess, Atayia, which is said to have given the Atalayans their power over their element of water.

“The blessing strengthened the Guardians, giving them powers to control the elements of Earth, as well as vastly extended life that matched that of the Atalayan race. With their help, Castor called upon his goddess to sink Atlantis to the bottom of the ocean, so that his people and their loyal Guardians could finally live without being hunted.

“There they stayed, peacefully, for many centuries. The Atlantians and the Guardians prospered and lived in harmony, serving each others' needs. After a time, the legend of the great battle slipped away into what many believed to no more than a myth, and the world continued on above the forgotten city while Pollux seethed, imprisoned beneath it.

“They came without warning. Their sun had expanded even further, consuming Seraphinus as well, but not before the Seraphinians were able to evacuate. Damian, acting from a vision of his father that he had seen in a dream, led the surviving Seraphinians away from the dead solar system, in search of their king on Earth. Damian ordered his colossal warships, which were each equipped with the device Pollux had released on Atalaya, to evaporate the world’s oceans to find the hidden Atalayans.

“They found the city, and released their king from his tomb-like prison. The planet became their battleground as the Seraphinians attacked the Atalayans, along with their human Guardians. As defeat became clear, the Atalayan king, Castor, transferred the collective consciousness of his people into the race’s most prized possession: Atayia’s Jewel.

“The king placed the Jewel in the care of his Royal Guardian, and ordered him to take it to a place far out of the grasp of the Seraphinians. He knew if they found it, they would destroy it, and with it the memory of the Atalayan civilization. The Guardian agreed, and with a small number of members of the Atalayan court, including the Queen, Nerissa, and her newborn son, fled from Atlantis on their large lizard-like mounts.

“Just as their escape seemed imminent, the refugees were found. The Queen gave her son to the Guardian and ordered him to continue his flight and hide the newborn prince and Atayia’s Jewel. The Guardian was successful in his escape, but the rest of the Atalayan Royals, including the Queen, were captured. They were escorted back to the ruins of Atlantis, where they were executed mercilessly.

“Damian, who had watched his father die during that Great War, named himself King, and the Seraphinians took the city as their own. They renamed it Singe, appropriate to the smoldering rubble to which it was reduced from the battle, and claimed Earth as their new home. Humans,

who were caught in a tragic crossfire during the war between the god-like alien races, were uprooted from their homes and herded as slaves to the Seraphinians, who greedily sought the Earth's Heart.

“Damian believed that since the planets of Seraphinus and Atalaya each contained a precious Jewel buried deep below their surfaces, so must Earth. So, the Seraphinians forced their human slaves to dig deep, hoping to one day unite their god-Jewel with the Earth’s Heart, changing the face of the planet to match their home world.

“The Humans had no choice but to relent to the Seraphinians’ rule. Nearly all the soldiers who had survived the Great War were taken prisoner and executed. The fortunate few civilians who were not collected and forced into slavery left their homes as refugees and formed small pockets of civilization around what water they could find that remained near the lowest parts of the Ocean's basin. It was rumored that the Royal Guardian and the newborn Atalayan Prince survived and lived in one of the small towns spread across the sandy Atlantic Desert, waiting for the right moment to fight back and avenge the genocide against his race.”

The old man stopped for a short time, bringing me back to the present. I realized that during his speech I had still been standing halfway up, in the same position that I had risen to when I thought the man was going to cast himself into the fire.

I allowed myself to relax back into my original seat and reminded myself to breathe. From the looks of things, many of the other boys had been unintentionally holding their breath too; a few of them were even starting to turn blue when they abruptly remembered they had lungs.

It was unbelievably easy to get lost in the old man’s words when he told one of his stories; especially because this was one I had never heard before. Looking around the circle, I could tell that I was not the only one hearing this for the first time, and so no one dared interrupt. Still, I was certain that the old man's shocking display earlier had helped in keeping us all silent for a time. That, however, was short-lived.

“Why do you tell us a bed time story on the night we are to become men?” It was the boy who earlier had been bragging about his certainty that tonight we were to form a hunting party and slay some giant animal to prove our worth.

The old man turned his head to the boy, and in the same flowing, husky yet noble voice with which he had been telling his story, the old man responded: “Why do you question your Elder, my young friend, tonight of all nights?”

Ashamed, the boy bowed his head and fell silent. He slouched in his seated position and tried to hide his face from the rest of us.

“Tonight marks the ending of the Festival of Restoration. Tonight is a holy night!” The old man continued loudly, bringing our attention back to him, as he lowered his outstretched arms to his sides. Then, placing his hand on his chest, he softened his volume. “And it is my honor to tell all of you why. Only then can you truly become men.”

The man slowly rotated, eyeing each boy individually, until he was certain he had regained our full attention. Again, he faced the one who had questioned him.

As if speaking only to the boy, the old man spoke just loud enough for the rest of the group to have to strain to hear. “Look around you. Look, and see this world that you call home. Know that everything you see has come at a terrible price. This world was once barren; a desolate, lonely

place. And now, there is life!" We all knew the story. We had all learned it during our evening prayers, but I had never heard of such things as Atalayans or Seraphinians. For that matter, I had never truly believed in the Great Restoration anyways.

"There once was a time where mankind flourished," the old man continued; his voice still hushed, "content to take their world for granted. They became the collateral damage of a war they had no part in starting, and were forced to live with the terrible aftermath! It was a time of great hardship and sorrow, until one man," he raised his finger. "One man changed it all."

The man raised his voice so we could all hear him easily. "Tonight is the very night that this one man saved all of humankind! Tonight marks the night when this world was restored! And so, tonight, of all nights, is holy..."

He trailed off, pausing for a time to look into each of our faces, making sure we understood his words.

"So, for you to become men, you must first learn from that one man. For you to understand what it truly means to be a man, you all must first know his real story."

Chapter 2 Dreams

Sam startled awake, but didn't bother opening his eyes just yet. He knew it was early: the air was still heavy and cool. The only other people who would be awake at this hour in Levee were the overnight tower guards, and even then, there was no guarantee. They switched off every three hours, one watching and the other sleeping. On most nights though, the guards would both end up asleep, only to awaken when their replacements for the day arrived. Everyone in Levee knew this happened, but it didn't cause them any concern.

After all, Levee was a quiet town. Although it received many visitors from caravaners and nomadic families, and was a great place of trade, people rarely bothered going as far west as Levee to cause any trouble. Especially at night. And so, confident that he might very well be the only one awake in the town at the far west corner of the Atlantic Desert, Sam was content to just lay there with his eyes closed.

It had been a restless night for Sam. Though the morning air had not yet reached its usual intense heat, his unnerving and vivid dream had forced him to awaken, panting heavily, drenched in his own sweat. As he was shaken violently from his slumber, the early morning sunrise had just begun to peek into the town, lightening the deep blue of the sky beyond Levee's outer wall. He opened his eyes to see the gentle rays streaming through the broken wooden shutters, shattering harshly through the thick sand-dust drifting within his room. However, Sam did not so much as squint at the sun's assault on his eyes. He had no concern for the physical world at this moment. In his mind, he was reliving the subconscious vision he had just seen, just as he had each time he awoke from it in the past. As usual, it had been unlike any ordinary dream. This one, for some reason, felt heavier. With a sigh, he stretched himself across the full length of the thick mat on his sleeping platform and closed his eyes again. It didn't take too long for him to slip back into his all too

familiar dream.

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He was in Levee, that much was certain. From what he could remember, he had been sitting on an old tire that was on the ground outside of Levee's old service station, marking in the sand with a small scrap of metal. Of course, in recent years, the oil reserves beneath the station had dried up, forcing the people of Levee to equip their vehicles with large, crudely designed solar panels. Still, the lack of oil rendered the station useless for anything more than a simple meeting hall.

There was nothing strange about this for Sam, as he would on many occasions walk the distance to the abandoned service station, sit on that very tire, and think. It was a way for him to get away from the town for a while. His thoughts usually centered on his identity. Sam had never truly fit in with the other boys his age during his childhood, and he felt as though there was no one he could truly share his thoughts with. So, he welcomed this escape.

Sam sat there on the tire as he normally would, drawing in the sand with the metal shard he had found on the ground. The wind began to blow harder, causing small whirlwinds of sand to spin lazily by him. The wind grew stronger and stronger, until the sandstorm had completely obstructed his sight.

Suddenly, the wind stopped, but the sand hung in the air, and seemed to materialize into a figure before his very eyes. Slowly, the figure stepped forth from the settling dust, and reached a still-forming hand toward Sam. Stricken with awe, he was compelled to reach back toward the figure, which was now taking on the shape of a beautiful young woman.

The dust that didn't form into the mysterious figure had settled enough now for Sam to see that the woman was about his age. Sam was taken aback by her shockingly light skin, but somehow it only seemed to multiply her beauty. She was tall, slender, and alluring. Her shimmering auburn hair cascaded around her shoulders and curled ever so gently toward her body, as though it was so attracted to her that it refused to leave her completely. Her blue-green eyes had a majestic depth to them. Those who remembered the days before the Seraphinians came would certainly have associated her eyes with the depth of the ocean. They shone brilliantly above her enticing red lips, which curled into a charming smile around her dazzling white teeth. She was dressed modestly though her clothes were tattered rags, as was the case with most people in these times. Still, Sam could not mistake her magnificently formed features. The woman had no equal in beauty.

Sam and the woman kept reaching and reaching toward each other. Sam's heart ached in longing for just one touch; just one kiss; to hold and to be with this perfect woman. But, it was not meant to be.

Just as their fingers touched, a loud roaring noise burst forth from the giant dam that held Levee's water supply. The woman crumbled back into dust, leaving Sam with the bitter stab of heartache.

The noise grew louder, and Sam turned in alarm. He watched in terror as the water that had burst through the dam stampeded toward him, engulfing him completely.

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His eyes flew open. Somehow Sam knew that the dream was trying to tell him something, but he had not been able to decipher the message. He had seen that same vision a number of times

before, and it always occurred the same way. The dream disturbed him greatly.

He knew that the dream was significant. After all, there were times before when his mind was plagued with a recurring dream, and one of his visions came to be. He recalled that when he was younger, he followed a path that he had walked in a dream. At the end of his trek, just as in the dream, Sam found a key. Naturally, he followed his curiosity and picked up the key. When his neighbor came the next day, seeking Siward's assistance in finding her misplaced storage shed key, Sam returned it immediately. And that was only one of the times he had predicted a future event.

On a separate occasion, he had dreamed of a group of marauders coming to Levee, disguised as a caravan. In the dream, the group of bandits cut down nearly half of Levee's citizens. Sam relayed the details of the vision to Siward, who took the threat seriously. After about two weeks of re-dreaming that same dream, the false caravan came to Levee. Against Siward's specific instructions, the group was allowed to pass through the gate. Siward had listened to Sam's warning vision, and acted quickly to overpower the invaders, but many people still died.

Considering how accurately Sam could predict events before they happened, this most recent dream troubled him greatly. Most of his vision was strange, but he could not argue with the way it always ended.

His thoughts of the prospect of the dam failing were more than grim. If the dam breaks, there will be no place for Levee's people to stay anymore. Families will become broken, lives would be lost, and their way of life would be completely changed.

Sam was right to think so. The people of Levee would be forced to move on to different colonies across the wide stretch of what used to be the Atlantic Ocean in desperate search for water. They would be forced to face the extreme risk of attack by bandits, the terrible creatures that scoured the desert, or worse: Seraphinians.

The other thing that bothered Sam so much about the dream was the presence of the woman. The way she materialized before him was bizarre and unsettling, and she was unlike any other person he had ever seen. Sam couldn't help but assume there was a connection between her presence and the dam breaking. Still, he refused to ignore the intense familiarity he felt with the young woman each time he looked upon her. He felt as though there was some secret she kept hidden behind her deep, smiling eyes. He felt that she was different, and he longed so greatly to discover that difference firsthand.

Maybe, he thought, she's like me. Maybe I'm not as alone as I had once thought.

All of it was too much for Sam to think about so early. He sat upright on his bed, and tried to shake the troubling thoughts from his still groggy mind. Holding his head in his hands, he tried to convince himself it was simply a dream, as he had the past fourteen times he had seen this vision. A loud crash from the lower level of the shelter jarred him into complete awareness.

Still alarmed from his nightmarish vision, Sam's first move was to reach for his knife that he kept under the head of his bed, just within his reach, should he need it.

His hand had just clenched all the way around the dagger's handle, when he heard a familiar voice call out to him.

"Ow! Dammit, Sam didn't you hear all that racket? Get down here and help an old man." The voice belonged to Siward, Sam's caretaker and close friend. A small smile spread across the young man's

face, and his crystal-blue eyes lit up under his longish, unkempt blond hair.

With a chuckle and a short sigh of relief at the welcomed distraction, he stood up, clothed himself, and headed down to help the old man.

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“Keep staring, why don’t ya?” the scrawny old man shouted angrily at Sam, who was quite enjoying seeing his prideful friend lay writhing helplessly under the pile of crudely made pans and griddles that had fallen from their hooks and on top of him.

“Tried to make breakfast again, I see, eh, Siward?” Sam said, trying to stifle his amused laughter with a fake cough.

“Oh shut up and get these damn things off me!” Siward yelled, his face and sparsely-haired head turning a bright shade of red.

Without another word, for fear of causing the throbbing vein in Siward’s forehead to burst, Sam clambered over to his friend and helped him up, handing him his walking stick.

“If you keep knocking things down, Siward, the whole house is bound to fall apart!” Sam said, laughing, unable to contain himself any longer.

“As if it isn’t falling apart already,” Siward retorted. He pointed to the planks holding up the shack from the inside, and then to the holes in the ceiling. “But I’m sure you’ll get around to fixing it... soon.”

Levee was a poor town. The houses were all nearly toppled by high winds and sandstorms. The only form of protection from the forces of nature, raids from neighboring bandit tribes, or even the fearsome wild desert-dwelling animals, was a two-layer wall that surrounded the town. The wall was sturdily constructed, in the same fashion as the dam on the north end of Levee, but of course had gone through much during the time since Levee was created just over twenty years ago. The wall was always in need of repair, but now more than ever its need for an upgrade was desperate.

Most of the trade that took place came from caravans of heavily armed vagabonds, who came mainly for what Levee was most known for: its water. But even so, the caravans only came to Levee every once in a while, and the town was overdue for a visit. Their wares usually included food, tools, clothing, scraps for rebuilding shelters, and on occasion, weapons.

As Sam kneeled down to pick up the fallen pans, his ears pricked at the inflection that Siward placed on the word “soon.”

“Soon? Are you trying to say that we’re getting new supplies?”

“The signal came in last night,” Siward’s tone was elated. “The caravan is coming down from the Highland Planes, fresh from the settlement of Suhma. They are going to be here before sunset today.”

“That’s great news! We have more than enough water for everyone; we might be able to get all the supplies we need to actually fix the wall for good.”

“Precisely,” the old man agreed. “Which is why I am going to have to ask for your help in securing

the entry and exit of the caravan. Our first priority is to keep the citizens of Levee safe.”

Sam nodded in agreement. He knew that Siward was referring to the event Sam had predicted when he was a boy. The improper check of a caravan before its entry into the town led to the murder of ten civilians. The Sandmen, a group of marauders who lived in a small settlement in the Highland Plains, had hijacked a number of trucks and posed as a caravan. The event was short, since Siward heeded Sam’s premonition, and was able to overwhelm and subdue the Sandmen, but not before the damage had been done. Still, that was back when Siward was a younger man. Sam was convinced that Siward was too old now to be of any use in a fight.

About time he lets me do something other than hunt, Sam thought to himself. One look at me and nobody will want to mess with Levee.

“Well?” Siward asked impatiently.

“Oh... uh... yeah, I’ll make sure everything’s safe.”

Siward let out an exasperated sigh. “I’m sure you will. Now go on and see what needs to be done.”

With that, Sam put the last of the pans back to their proper resting place, and stooped to exit through the low doorway. He pushed the metal door aside and allowed it to slam shut behind him with a loud clang.

Seeing the old man in such a state had swept the dream away from the forefront of his mind. For a reason Sam couldn’t explain, Siward always had that effect with him when it came to his troubling dreams. Whether or not Sam told his companion about the visions, his caretaker’s presence always seemed to cast away most, if not all, of the worrisome thoughts buzzing through his head.

As he stepped into the clearing outside of the toppling shelter that was his home, he was greeted with the unmercifully blinding sun. He blinked fiercely at the light, and waited for his vision to adjust before continuing any further. He was finally able to regain his bearings, and he started the short walk toward the large lot just inside Levee’s Eastern Gate: the market place.

Chapter 3 Sam

Sam was different. That was really the only way he could describe himself since his earliest memory. Though he was not necessarily unpopular as a boy, Sam always felt estranged and awkward around his peers. In his schooling as well as his play, he excelled far and beyond his friends. He was smarter, faster, and stronger. Not to mention, he was also much bigger. By the time Sam was in his late teens, he towered over others his age, as he stood six feet and four inches tall. By this same time, Sam had also acquired incredible muscle definition. With his heroic stature, Sam looked as if he had been chiseled from marble like the fabled statues of the Old World. Still, for all Sam knew, he was simply different.

Sam’s differences from his friends and fellow townsfolk frustrated and confused him at times. His attributes even saddened him in his earlier years, until the point where Sam would run home to his

caretaker, Siward, and let his emotions flow down his face as he asked why he was so different. And Siward, who knew Sam's parents before they died, always succeeded in reassuring Sam.

"Yes, Sam, you are different," he would say. "You have always been different, and you will always be different." Then, as always, Siward would sit back, and take a long sip of his tea, or coffee, or sometimes something with a bit more of a kick, and continue. "But you must always understand, my young friend: those very differences are what make you so special. Your differences are the very reasons why you are so loved."

Without fail, Siward knew exactly what to say to Sam in order to make him feel better. Though he was an old man, and showed it through what little was left of his white hair, his dependency on his sturdy walking stick, and his sometimes overall crankiness, Siward was very wise. Sam knew that he could always trust Siward; and he did, with his life, just as his parents had.

Though the process was gradual, after a time Sam had been able to come to terms with his obvious differences from his peers, and embraced them. Surely enough, Siward's constant positivism toward Sam's atypical features and attributes helped him in becoming comfortable with himself. Still, the thing that helped Sam the most was the realization that he matched or surpassed the strength of even the strongest men in Levee by the time he was in his mid-teens, and all of Levee knew it.

Siward had started sending Sam with the hunting parties just after he turned fifteen. At first, the men protested wildly against having a mere child with them, cursing Siward for putting them all at unnecessary risk. They claimed that the boy would just slow them down or worse, get one or all of them killed. Still, Siward insisted, and since he was the last of Levee's founders who hadn't either died or left, he was naturally the town's leader. The men had no choice but to agree, despite their reluctance.

Nothing too exciting happened on the first few excursions Sam experienced with the hunting party. After a while, the boy's presence began to grow on the men. They started warming up to him more until most of them accepted his presence whole-heartedly.

After only a few months as a member of the hunting party, Sam had proven his worth as an excellent marksman and tracker. He had even been appointed to lead some excursions himself. However, it was actually one of the trips that Sam didn't lead that caused everyone in Levee to see the true value of his differences. In fact, Sam could remember the particular hunting trip as if it were yesterday.

As usual, the hunting party met before sunrise in the market place to stock up on supplies and discuss the animals they would track that day. Sam was one of the first to arrive, and so he was automatically nominated as one of the men who were responsible for cooking their meager breakfast and sorting the group's equally portioned rations for the day.

Felix, a tall, thin man who had incredible accuracy with a bow, and even better with a rifle on the rare occasion when ammunition was available, had been selected to lead this particular trip. Sam was his second in command. The previous evening from his post in the watch tower, Felix had seen evidence of a small herd of spider crab heading south, toward the shallow canyons just a few miles from Levee.

The men were excited and intrigued by this prospect. Most of the time, the animals that the men tracked included small lizards, buzzards, or other scavenging creatures, but spider crab was a

delicacy. Most of Earth's water-dwelling creatures had died off along with the oceans just over twenty years earlier. The spider crabs were one of the few that were able to adapt and survive. In the newfound absence of any natural predator, the unique species was capable of growing to such a tremendous size that it could stand at the height of an average human. If the group was able to take down even a midsized one of these overgrown creatures, the yield would certainly be enough to feed ten people for a day. And they were tracking a herd.

"This'll give some good times, neh?" A man called Ewert exclaimed, grinning with his sporadically toothed smile. He and Sam had been prepping the rations together, and now were sitting by the fire as the rest of the men either armed themselves or hitched large trailers to each of Levee's three biggest solar-panel plated trucks, in order to carry as many crabs as possible.

Sam nodded in agreement, watching the low flames, poking them absently, refusing to get his hopes up until he saw their prey with his own eyes.

There were a total of eight men in this particular group: one of the smallest hunting parties Sam had ever been on.

"Spider crabs is easy catchin'." Ewert told Sam something he already knew. "They's just ball up an' don't even fight none when you go after'em!" He laughed hoarsely.

He's right, Sam thought to himself. Spider crabs don't usually put up much of a fight, but I've never had to track them through any canyons.

Of course, Sam knew that the group's destination was commonly referred to as "the shallow canyons" but Sam also knew that the so-called "canyons" could reach a depth up to about eight feet down and a width of about five feet across.

Ewert had a point about the spider crab curling into a ball as their defense mechanism. Sam knew that if they did so while at the bottom of one of these ditches, the men would be limited to the choice of trying to hack through their nearly impenetrable top shell, all while avoiding the razor-sharp growths on their backs. It was doable, but it would be exhausting and someone would undoubtedly end up injured. Sam knew the group had signed up for more than they bargained for.

Good thing these canyons are close. Sam thought as they rumbled away from Levee, into the hard day of work that lay ahead of them.

Ewert had just begun to doze off; drooling on Sam's reluctant shoulder when they arrived at the canyons where Felix had projected the crabs would be hiding.

"Get up. We're here." Sam shrugged the man off, who snapped awake, excited.

The group jumped out of their trucks and enthusiastically began their search for the beasts. It wasn't long before the party found where the crabs were hiding.

Sure enough, Sam had been right. The crabs were taking refuge at the bottoms of the shallow ditches. He sighed at the prospect of the hard work ahead.

It'll be worth it, he told himself, knowing he was up for the effort, but unsure about the others. With that, he got to work.

Dispatching the oversized crustaceans took about twenty minutes apiece. The hunting party, as a

whole, decided that it would be best to pair up into four groups of two in order to maximize their crab killing capability. They wanted to get enough crabs to fill the truck beds and the makeshift wagons they had brought along. And, since Sam couldn't seem to shake Ewert from his side since the early morning, it was only fitting that they paired together.

Ewert, much to Sam's surprise, actually turned out to be an excellent partner. While the rest of the pairs were busy hacking away at the crabs' top shell, Ewert discovered that if one person dug deep enough underneath the back of the crabs, the animal would stand to try and escape. When they did, the crabs would stand just high enough for the digger's partner to have a clear shot at the beast's heart through its soft underside. The digging was still hard work, and whoever waited for the crab to stand needed to be careful of the large claws that could cut a grown man clean in two. Still, this way was much more efficient, let alone faster.

Sam and Ewert relayed their method to the rest of the groups, and shortly after, the high-pitched squealing of the dying crabs filled the air.

Sam wiped the blood off his long, roughly angled cleaver, almost giving in to his compassion toward the animals, suddenly thinking of the slaughter as unfair. However, he forced himself to push past his pity. He knew that the large supply of fresh crab would feed all of Levee for the coming months.

The group kept at their work well into the afternoon. By then, all the crabs in the herd were either already loaded onto the trailers, waiting in line to be loaded, or had escaped to live another day. All the men were fighting off exhaustion, rubbing their aching muscles, knowing that the hard part of their day was behind them.

One of the men loading crab onto a trailer was the first to see the shadow. Clouds were extraordinarily rare, and even when they were visible, they hardly ever produced a shadow. Especially a shadow that moved. The man looked up, hoping his fears would be eliminated. They weren't.

"Flyer!" He yelled as he released his grip from the crab. The sudden action forced his partner to wrestle with the full weight of the dead crab, but it was far too much for him to bear; he sprang backward to prevent the carcass from crushing his legs, but the man who had spotted the flyer didn't seem to notice. "She must have smelled the blood!" The rest of the group looked up, terrified.

"Damn. We don't have any guns." Felix groaned.

Sam could barely make out the shape of the monster as it crossed in front of the sun, but he knew that the man was right. There was only one airborne creature big enough to make that shadow. It was one of the truck-sized, winged lizards that the Seraphinians had brought from their home world and used to terrorize humans.

She must be a rogue. Sam thought with a shot of relief; there was only one circling above them. There's no way a Seraphinian would attack humans so far from Singe without any backup.

Sam looked around the rest of the hunting party. They, including Felix, were all staring at the circling beast above them, paralyzed with the fear that death was close at hand. Sam knew they had to act, and so he relieved Felix of his position as their leader.

"Get under the trucks!" Sam shouted to the others. "Morris, help me with this crab!"

Sam's barked order snapped them out of the trance, and they dove under the trucks, keeping their crab-hunting weapons drawn and ready. The stout, bearded man called Morris scurried over to Sam, ready for his orders.

He helped Sam flay one of the crabs open and toss it into one of the closer ditches. Sam then led Morris behind the nearest truck, crouched, and waited for the circling terror to land.

It landed silently; the only telling sign that it had touched down was the whisper of sand against sand where the air beneath the flyer's wings wafted softly against the ground. Sam cautiously peeked around the back tire of his truck, and saw what most don't live to describe.

The demon looked just as he had imagined from the war stories Siward had told him. Its body was roughly the size of any one of the trucks they had brought; its tail doubled its length. The thing's enormous black wings were still outstretched and twitching as the beast gained its balance against the uneven sand where it had landed. The creature was still facing away, but Sam could see it well enough. The great black talons on its hind legs were rapiers as long as any man's arm. It had collapsed its wings now, and was walking on them like they were its front legs, the folded webbing shooting back from the mid-joints. The flyer crawled around the crab carcass with its threatening wing-claws curled inward, as if they were the knuckles of its newfound forelegs.

As the menacing beast stopped circling the ditch with its back facing the hunting party, Sam stuck his head out further to see the monster's back. There was no Seraphinian saddle strapped among the purplish-red scales and spikes.

She's a rogue for sure, Sam sighed at the realization that he was right. At least there's some hope.

The lizard turned its head slightly to face the trucks, as if it could hear Sam's sigh above the sound of the breeze. Sam ducked his head back behind the tire, but just enough to see its orange tongue flick, tasting the air for anything besides the bloody mess that lay in front of it.

Come on, take it, Sam thought. He could feel Morris trembling behind him, but he didn't dare move to calm him.

The flyer turned away from the trucks, apparently unable to taste anything but the already opened crab. Only then did Sam look to Morris, to find him in a puddle he made in his terror. Sam knew the man would be no help and signaled for Ewert, who just might be crazy enough to help. Signaling with his hands, he instructed Ewert to get in his truck and drive it toward the one that Sam and Morris were using for cover.

Ewert looked at him and nodded slowly, seeing Sam's plan. He ushered the rest of his hiding partners away from his truck and cautiously climbed into its driver's seat. Sam waited for Ewert to get into position, and then slipped into the bed of his own truck, leaving the sopping Morris in a fetal position on the ground.

As he waited for Ewert, Sam shuddered at the terrible crunching sound of the flyer eating. He hoped Ewert would go through with his end of the plan.

We have one shot at this. Either we get out of here alive or it does.

Ewert's truck backfired as the engine tried to turn over.

The crunching sound stopped, and was immediately replaced with the flyer's loud hiss.

Sam could hear the agonizing groans of the petrified men, now certain of their fate; he hoped none of them would try to run.

Come on Ewert, Sam urged.

The engine finally came to life and Sam heard the truck wheels spinning, kicking up sand and dust as Ewert drove madly toward where Sam had instructed.

The flyer was tempted by the prospect of killing for its next course, and jumped high into the air, pouncing hard onto the crab-filled trailer. Unimpressed with the already dead animals, the beast clambered toward the truck's cab; toward Ewert.

"Sam now!" Ewert's voice rang out clearly above the loud rumbling of the truck's engine. Sam knew he was close.

Close enough? Sam hoped.

The flyer was already clawing through the thick metal roof of the truck's cabin.

"SAM!"

In one fluid movement, Sam leaped from the bed of the truck and slammed into the flyer's solid, scaly side, knocking it off the truck and away from his friend.

Sam staggered to his feet, still tired from the day's work. The flyer had already recovered from the blow. Sam watched cautiously as the hissing beast circled him menacingly, its head slung low to the ground and its tail flicking in anticipation.

He could see his reflection in the dark slits in the flyer's purple eyes, and he remembered he had a weapon. He unsheathed his long cleaver from his back strap and brandished it. The lizard, as if mocking Sam's threat, reared up on its back legs and unfurled its great wings, revealing the startling pattern on its underside before dropping back down.

Without warning, the flyer lunged at Sam, who dove a few feet to his left, narrowly escaping the flyer's terrible jaws. Sam somersaulted into a crouched position, ready to strike back, but the flyer acted quickly, striking at Sam a second time. As he had before, Sam barely avoided the attack, rolling out of the way. The flyer reared up in frustration. Sam saw his opportunity.

Sam ran full on at the beast, who countered with a vicious swing of its talons on its wing-arm. Sam slid underneath the reptile's attempt and used what momentum he had left to spring himself upward at the monster's chest.

The flyer let out a gruesome cry, writhing against the metal shard, and toppled, lifeless at Sam's feet.

Sam's companions erupted.

They all had been so certain of death that they had for the most part accepted their fate. They had all simply been waiting for the end. They rushed over to Sam, and watched as he cut one of the creature's claws off of its wing, and held it up as his prize. They all cheered louder than before.

When the hunting party had returned to Levee that night, every man in the group eagerly shared the story of how they had come to bring back not only a great amount of spider crab, but also the

hulking body of one of the most fearsome creatures in the world.

Sam smiled casually as he remembered the event that caused his differences to become known to all of Levee; not as marks of strangeness, but instead as the traits of a great warrior and protector. He took out one of his twin daggers he had carved from the flyer's fierce talons and looked at them contentedly. He had saved many lives that day, including the lives of many who otherwise would have gone hungry.

Many of the people of Levee had grown to love Sam. As he thought about it, he couldn't help but wear his smile the rest of his walk to the market place. *

Across the expansive desert that was once the Atlantic Ocean; many human settlements have formed around what small amounts of water remain on Earth. There, the survivors live their lives in constant fear of attacks from deadly animals, raids from bandit tribes, and worse: The Seraphinians; an alien race that dried up the oceans of the world to find and wipe out their cousin race, the peaceful Atalayans.

Sam, who lives with his Godfather, Siward, in a small settlement called Levee, is different. Since he was a boy, Sam stood out from his peers. He had always been much stronger, and larger, than anyone else his age. When a caravan arrives in Levee, the Seraphinian activity suspiciously increases, and Siward appears to be hiding something from his Godson.

As the Seraphinians spread out across the human settlements, recruiting laborers to mine in their oil fields, Sam discovers a strange and powerful secret that could change him, and the face of the world, forever.

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