

## Precipice of a Dream

*Splish... Splish... Splish...*

The lulling sound of the water would have been soothing had the passengers not been huddled together, rigid and alert. The paddle continued its faint rhythmic splashes, the only noise disturbing the still night as the raft glided downstream. The grassy landscape streamed by, seeming to almost glow in the pale orange light of the fiery moon.

A boy sat at the front, paddling them along, his ears attuned to the night air for any faint sounds drifting along the calm breeze. He heard nothing but the whistle of wind through leaves and the twittering of small insects. The warmth in the air that signaled the coming of spring was at odds with his emotions, and even after many minutes his tense guard never lowered. Behind him sat a father, a mother, and their young daughter, clutching each other as if protecting themselves from a nonexistent cold. Their eyes darted in all directions, searching the darkest shadows for the faintest sign of movement.

As the boy paddled endlessly, his mind began to wander, and not for the first time he wondered what he was doing. He had only just met this family, who had come out of nowhere, fleeing from the woods to the river where he had been tying off his raft after a day's journey. The father had been carrying his daughter as they ran, their faces pale and frightened. Upon seeing him at the shore, they had come to him, panting, pleading, babbling about being chased, and begging for a ride downstream. He had attempted to question them about their story, but the father had insisted that he would explain everything when they were safely away. It was complete insanity, but the pitiful face and large, dark eyes of the girl, who looked only a year or two younger than himself, had persuaded him to disregard his better judgment.

Now that they had been traveling down the river for over an hour, the boy's arms were beginning to feel the burn from paddling. Turning to the family, he said, "Would someone else like to take a turn?"

All three of their heads shot up, eyes wide, and the father put a finger to his lips. Leaning close, the father whispered, "Please don't make a sound. I'll paddle."

They shifted places, and the father proceeded to stroke the water with the small oar. The mother had wrapped her arms around her daughter, who had buried her face in her mother's shirt. After a few minutes of staring at the passing foliage, the boy grew restless with curiosity. Leaning in towards the mother he whispered, "How far do you need to go?"

The mother met his eyes, blinked, and whispered back, "Town."

With a destination, the boy sat back, more at ease. The nearest town was only another half an hour further and then he would have his answers. He closed his eyes, listening to the chirp of crickets and the gentle flow of the water, while his mind turned over the endless possibilities of what he would soon discover.

A sharp intake of breath beside him startled him from his thoughts. Opening his eyes, he saw the mother staring at the sky, terror etched across her face. Heart pounding, the boy followed her gaze. At first, all he could see was a dot streaking across the sky, but when he squinted, he perceived the vague outline of a human form. The sound of the oar became more frantic. Disengaging herself from her daughter, the mother edged up to her husband and whispered in his ear.

As if startled from a nightmare, the father's entire body tensed, and he shoved the raft to the grassy shore. He collected his passive daughter in his arms, turned to the boy and said, "Thank you." Taking his wife by the hand, they leaped from the raft to the shoreline and took off into the cover of the trees.

The boy sat staring after them, part of him urging himself to follow. Even stronger than the intrigue of the mystery was a yearning to help them, despite having no idea who they were or what their plight was. His attention turned to the sky where the humanoid shape was larger and more distinct. In a flash, a streak of fire thrust upwards from it, tracing a searing red trail across the billowy clouds.

Even as he watched, the figure continued to grow, descending toward him until he could make out the tan cloak and wild brown hair of a man. The man appeared to peer down at him from above for a second before peeling out over the forest in the direction that the family had fled. Without a second thought, the boy raced after him on foot, moving as quickly as possible through the dark shadows below the canopy of trees. As he ran, he glanced up between the leaves and saw more figures gliding silently above.

After a minute, he paused, leaning against a tree to catch his breath, and wondered in which direction to go. The forest was too silent in an eerie way as if all the animals had been swallowed by the gloom. Then the sounds of hooting and hollering reached his ears, and he was running again before rational thought had caught up. There came a shrill scream, and the boy pushed himself ever harder towards the source.

He stumbled through a thicket of bushes into the midst of them. The first thing he saw was a group of four men standing in a circle, leering and shouting. On the ground, in the middle of them, he saw a figure lying prone. At closer inspection, he saw it was the father, facedown in a growing pool of crimson. Huddled together in terror beside him sat the mother and daughter. The mother's eyes were flicking between their attackers while the girl's were glued to her unmoving father.

The boy hesitated, wondering what he could feasibly do without any weapons. While he stood in indecision, one of the men shouted, "I don't want her. Anyone else?"

"Nah, what would I want with that?" came a reply.

"All right, I guess no one objects."

The mother looked up at the speaker and said in a shaking, desperate voice, "No, please, we can -"

She was cut off by a flash of light that shot out of the man's arm and lanced into the woman. She crumpled into a heap, leaving her daughter exposed. The girl shrieked and sobbed, covering her eyes and curling into a fetal position.

"Not only can't the dumb bastards fly, they don't even know how to use resonances," the man said, moving closer to the girl.

The boy watched, horror-stricken, paralyzed. He no longer had thoughts of heroism. He no longer had thoughts at all.

The man crouched beside the girl and laid a gentle hand on her. "Your daddy shouldn't have borrowed things he couldn't return," he said in a mock soothing tone. Turning his attention to his accomplices he said, "What about this one?"

"She'll be pretty in a few years," one of them replied.

The man nodded. "And until then she'll be handy for work." He lifted her in his arms where she lay still, sobbing quietly, and then he turned to walk away.

"Noooo!" The boy was as startled by his shout as the men, who turned to face him. His stunned mind had had no conscious thoughts, but now he found himself charging at them, screaming bloody murder. "You can't take her! I won't let you!"

The men's expressions shifted from surprise to amusement. The man holding the girl waved one hand, and the boy found himself hurled backward, lifted off his feet as if a tidal wave of air had slammed into his body. He crashed to the ground, stinging pain shooting up his rear and back

where he landed. As he blinked through the pain he saw leering faces loom over him.

“Listen, kid,” the man said. “Your audacity is admirable. But no amount of determination will help you if you don’t have the power to back it up. Remember that.”

The girl, regaining an ounce of defiance, began to kick and squirm in the man's grasp, but he tightened his grip and walked away.

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Karvid awoke with a sweet smile plastered on his face as the first rays of sun filtered through his curtains. How fitting it was that he would have that dream again today. His movements as he rose to his feet were graceful, his footfalls lighter than they had ever been, despite the small, excited voice in the back of his mind. With his preoccupations, he never noticed that he had dressed and headed downstairs until he was greeted by a voice in the kitchen.

“Oh, good morning. You’re up early this morning.”

“Busy day at work. Can’t sleep in. I told you about this, right?”

His wife nodded. “Well, told me so far as you had a lot of work today. Have something to do with those new resonances you’ve been working on?”

“Yep, we’re trying to get all of them nailed down before the festival this weekend. Hoping to have a demonstration.”

“I expect you’ll be home later than me this evening?”

“I’m not sure. Depends how things go. Which is why I’d like an early start.”

“At least have some breakfast first. I made groats.”

“Gladly. I’m famished.” As Karvid spooned himself a hefty bowl, he said, “By the way, I placed the order at the bakery for our anniversary.”

“Already?” His wife's eyes widened. “Thank you! I'll cross that one off the list.”

Karvid leaned over his bowl to give his wife a kiss. “Love you.”

After a quick meal, Karvid retrieved his books and headed out the door. Lifting off the ground, he floated above the buildings, joining the flow of people heading into town for the workday. When he was out of sight of his house, he veered off course away from the town center and into the outskirts.

A short while after leaving town, he became unfamiliar with his surroundings, needing to rely on his memorization of the maps of this region. It was a long journey, one he estimated would take the better part of the morning. As anxious as he was to reach his final destination, he paused

to rest at one point, the logical part of his brain winning out, ensuring he would not be exhausted when he arrived.

He flew by rooftops, followed by farmland, followed by trees and plains, all the while gradually reaching a state of placidity. His entire life had led him to this point, and he was going to enjoy the last few moments before everything changed.

At long last, the house came into view. Pulling his notes from within the hidden compartment in his bag, he double-checked the description. It fit.

His heart fluttered as he landed, but he took a breath to bring it back in check and gather himself. He would only have one chance to play this out as he had envisioned it for years. A soothing calm came over him as he walked the clean, stone pathway up to the front door, and without hesitation, he knocked three times.

The research had been accurate. Someone was home. Footsteps approached the door, and when it swung open, an elderly man with thinning white hair and a stooped posture was standing there, gazing up with tired eyes.

“Yes, can I help you?” the man asked in a flat tone.

Karvid took a second to respond, the sight of the man momentarily paralyzing him. Despite having only seen him once over twenty years earlier, there was no mistaking the features that had been engraved into his brain. His face impassive, he spoke. “I wanted to thank you for the lesson.”

“Excuse me?” The old forehead had wrinkled, and now the eyes gazing up at Karvid were alert. “Do I know you?”

“You won’t remember me.” Pausing for a beat, he continued, “It’s taken a long time to find you, having had nothing to go on but a description and a missing poor family.” A thrill of pleasure coursed through his spine as a hint of fear crept across the old man’s face.

“Are you – are you the one who killed Trevor and Edgar?”

A crackling energy appeared around Karvid’s body as if the air was struck by a surge of static electricity. The crackling increased in intensity until the sparks had become visible, enveloping him in random bursts of white-blue arcs. Finally, Karvid allowed his mouth to break into a wide smile.

The fear had become vivid on the man’s face, and he took one terrified step back, his mouth moving incoherently. Spears of light erupted from his hands but vanished upon entering the static

field around Karvid. He moved to slam the door, but his limbs suddenly snapped to his side and he fell over, rigid as a board. He lay there, immobilized, the only movement his shimmering eyes as they locked on Karvid.

Karvid stepped inside, standing over the man, staring into his eyes. “We're going to have some fun, you and I.” He bent over, leaning in toward the man’s face. “Let me tell you a story.”

His lip curled into a vicious grin. “A number of years ago, you took it upon yourselves to pass judgment on a family for their inability to repay a debt.” An arc of electricity shot out of his hand into the man's chest, and as the man screamed, Karvid's smile widened. “You decided that the penalty was death for the entire family. The price was too high, so I've come to repay your own debt.” The man's screams rose into a piercing shriek.

“Stop!”

The room fizzled into silence except for the panting of the man on the floor. Slowly, as if moving through a dream, Karvid lifted his head toward the source of the voice. His eyes locked on those of a woman. Her gaunt face was aged beyond her years, yet like the man’s, was unmistakable, etched into his mind’s eye in a long distant past.

“You're alive...? How?” His voice, so confident a moment ago, was slow, unsteady.

“It has not been easy.” The woman's tone was cool. “He used a powerful resonance to keep me prisoner in this house. Whoever you are, thank you. I have been praying for this for a long time.”

“But you do not want me to kill him? Why? You really want to bring him to the authorities?”

“Never. He doesn't deserve that shred of humanity.” She lowered her eyes to the man, and Karvid could almost feel the fury in her expression. “You were going to kill him too quickly. Besides, the honor should be mine.”

“I see.” A flicker of a smile betrayed his solemn expression. By this point, the man on the floor was struggling to his feet. Karvid knocked him back down with a strong impact resonance and then pinned his limbs to the floor with a paralyzing resonance. “He's all yours.”

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When the body was still at last, Karvid took the woman by the shoulders and led her out the front door. She was shaking, and with each stuttering step, she nearly stumbled. He could still hear her animalistic screams echoing in his ears as she had beat the man to a bloody end. Taking her gently around the waist, he lifted her into the air, carrying her a distance away from the house

into the forest and settling them onto a log in a quiet spot beneath the trees.

“I understand you have a lot to process,” Karvid said, “but just let me know if you are harmed or need urgent help of any kind.”

At the sound of his voice, the woman clasped her hands and looked up at him. “N-no, I’ll be okay. Well, not okay. But – you know what I mean.” She took a deep breath. “I dreamed about this moment for so many years. I – I just thought I’d feel more. Or at least differently. I thought I would enjoy torturing and killing him. I imagined every detail a thousand times. And I thought I would be so happy to be free, but now that I am, I’m just... I have nothing, no one, nowhere to go, nothing to do. I’ve been out of touch with the world for so many years. I-” Her voice caught, and she focused on the ground as she fought to keep her emotions under control. Karvid watched her but said nothing. When she had recovered, she gazed back up into Karvid’s face, scrutinizing. “Who are you?”

The overwhelming surreality of the scene stole Karvid’s voice for a few seconds. At last, he licked his lips and forced the words out. “I’m the boy who failed to help you all those years ago.”

“No.” Her eyes widened. “It can’t be.” She reached out a hand and touched his features. “I wish I remembered you. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” He reached up and squeezed her hand. “I just wish I could have found you sooner. I had so little to go on, but still. All those years...”

“Don’t think about that. I’m free now.”

“And I will keep you safe from here on. I swear to you.”

“I already owe you my life. You don’t owe me anything. I’ll make my way.”

Karvid shook his head. “I could never forgive myself if anything happened to you.”

“What are you going to do? I can’t just appear in your life. People will ask questions.”

“I’ll figure something out. Come, let’s get away from here.”

## Six Months Later

Karvid pulled on a clean shirt and pants and stepped to the door of his bedroom where he stopped to listen to the footsteps pattering around in the kitchen below. Sighing, he pulled open the door and made his way downstairs. Hurrying past the kitchen, he pulled on a jacket and was almost out the front door when he was interrupted.

“Where are you going now?”

Karvid squeezed his eyes as he rotated toward the irate voice of his wife. "I need to pick something up at the market."

"You sure you aren't going to see your whore?"

He rubbed his hands across his face. "How many times...? Forget it. I don't know why you get these crazy thoughts, but I don't have to defend myself from this nonsense."

"Nonsense? Really? You're going to stand there with a straight face and tell me you haven't been sneaking around behind my back for months? Do I look stupid to you?"

"I don't know what to say. But I can't talk to you when you're in this mood. We'll talk later, okay? Promise." Without waiting for a reply, he hastened out the door.

Clenching his fists, he lifted into the air and sped off into town. Still fuming from the encounter with his wife, he was startled when he found that he had already arrived at the apartment building. He lowered to the ground and entered, heading up the stairs and down the hall to the now-familiar door. After two quick knocks, the door swung open.

"Hi." Melamy greeted him with a warm smile. "Punctual as always. Come in. Can I get you something? A drink?" Her smile faded. "I didn't sleep well last night. I thought I saw someone in the apartment, and I hid under the bed until morning. Do you think that was my imagination again? It seemed so real." At last, she registered Karvid's expression. "What is it?"

"We have to talk." Karvid burst past her in a huff, headed straight through the disaster that was the living room, and dropped onto the couch. Melamy shut the door and stepped gingerly toward him, apprehension plain on her face. When she had seated beside him, he continued. "We have to change our situation. My wife knows something is going on, and so, of course, she thinks I'm cheating on her."

"Oh no. Oh no. Oh no." Melamy rubbed her hands across her lap in the agitated way to which Karvid had grown accustomed. "Is that something that people think? Is that common? But I would never. You would never. If only she could know our situation better. Maybe I should meet her."

"I doubt that will help." Karvid gave a sad smile as he sighed. "But I can't lose my wife. We'll have to reduce the number of visits and figure out a way to meet more discreetly."

Melamy sat up straighter. "I can't come between your marriage. You can't come here anymore."

"I don't mean any offense, but look at yourself. You're a nervous wreck, and you still barely



know anything about living alone. And I don't think you'll be okay anytime soon. If ever. I can't just abandon you."

"How dare you judge me and say what I can and cannot do." She flung herself to her feet, a hint of that animalistic rage that Karvid so clearly remembered in her eyes.

"I'm sorry if that came off harsh, but you're my responsibility. And... my friend. I can't lose you again. I wouldn't be able to stop worrying about you."

The rage quieted back down to anxiety. "You've already done so much for me. I can't ask you to throw your life away too." Melamy looked around her. "It will be good for me; a way to force a fresh start. Thank you for the past six months. I haven't felt this normal, this happy, for so many years."

Karvid bit his lip as he stared into her determined eyes. A long moment passed. "Will you at least seek help?"

"I will." Melamy nodded. "You should go now." As Karvid stood, she embraced him in a gripping hug, her face pressed against his shoulder. "I'll never forget what you've done for me. I'll be okay. Don't worry. Go be with your wife."

Leaving that apartment was a harrowing experience, but at last, Karvid forced himself out the door. In the hallway, he paused but, clenching his jaw, continued outside. He willed his mind not to worry, to focus instead on how to repair his relationship with his wife.

As he lifted into the air, he glanced one last time at the apartment building before flying off to clear his mind.

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Two weeks later, as Karvid was passing by the apartment on his way into town, he hesitated, staring down at the rooftop. His marriage was finally getting back on track, but the rift was still raw. They had seen a counselor, where Karvid had invented feasible excuses for his absences. They were progressing, but his wife still did not entirely trust him. He could not chance jeopardizing that shred of trust. Yet...

With a deep breath, Karvid lowered himself to the window outside Melamy's apartment, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, to see how she was doing. The curtains were up, and as he pressed his face to the bottom of the window, prickly fingers of dread lay their icy grasp around his heart.

Melamy was on her back in the center of the living room, an overturned cup lying in a pool

of dried liquid beside her. Her sickly skin was already beginning to rot.