

**THE FREAKY NOISEBOMB** felt like he was swimming through mud as he lifted his head out of the water. He gasped for air as his head broke the surface. The strange, shimmering liquid that had washed him ashore dripped from his body. He didn't feel drenched, or cold, or...anything, actually. All he felt was a pleasant euphoria, like when **STATIC BOLTER** injected him with morphine. He groaned groggily as he laid in the sand. It had been a while since he rested, and his ears weren't buzzing or throbbing in pain from feedback or Paragon City's background noise. All he wanted was some rest.

Chad propped his body up on his hands and knees. Something danced just at the edge of his hearing. The water behind him kept flowing in around him, drenching his legs as he waited on the shore for something to happen. He didn't know who was calling to him, or why, or even where he was. All he could see was darkness in every direction that he looked. It took him several long moments to process that this was how he perceived the world now.

"Is--is anyone out there?" Chad whispered weakly. He was surprised to find his voice as he remembered it years ago, before the cancer and before the mutations.

He ran his trembling hands across his face. Something was off. Something was different. His jaw, his cheeks, his chin--all of it felt weaker; smaller. Laugh lines and worried wrinkles were missing. He frowned and looked around what he perceived to be an empty beach in bewilderment. Blindness was the least of his concerns.

"There are two things here, little one: me, and the weight of your choices" an ethereal voice called out to him. The sound of the voice struck him like the cord of a humming bass guitar. "I am Fortune, Fate, and Karma. Lay down your burdens for a moment in my home, Noisebomb."

Chad squeezed his eyes shut as something came into focus in his mind. The more he thought about where he was, the more it made sense. He was on a lone island, suspended in a night sky. The less he thought about the world and troubles he left behind, the more the world around him seemed real. He tilted his head. He felt a warm glow all around him, like he was bathed in sunlight. It was strange to think that here, he was safe. Whatever was talking to him wasn't a person or a ghost or whatever Chad thought a spirit would be. It simply existed, all around him. It felt as natural as air or water to Chad.

"The man who, ah, set up the ritual that sent me here said he wanted to ask

you questions,” Chad said after a lengthy silence between him. “Is that the purpose of this place? Is that--is that *your* purpose?”

“Not quite. I am an answer,” came the reply just at the edge of Chad’s hearing. He walked forward, deeper into the sand dunes on the quiet island.

“Oh, well, I guess that makes sense if you’re Fate, Fortune, and Karma,” Chad said aloud. He had heard of stranger things. He rubbed his strangely youthful chin as thousands of little thoughts started to dance around in his mind. “Why do I look so, uh, young? I feel like I’m sixteen again.”

“You can’t hide from what you are. Not from me,” the voice said. As if to prove its point, Chad felt breath on the back of his neck. He shivered uncomfortably. “Strip away the trappings of the world and the shell of the armor you strap around your fragile heart, and you are still a scared, hurting teenager trying to become the ideal man that you thought your father was.”

Chad trembled at the thought of being laid so bare in front of someone. He always felt vulnerable when he was with Rosemarie Madden, but this *thing* made him feel weak and broken. He lowered himself so that he sat in the sand. The spirit’s essence washed over him. Introspection was never one of Chad’s strengths. It was a strange thing for him to consider himself as the spirit said.

“Alright, here’s the question anyone who’s ever met me would know was coming: why?” Chad asked to the nothingness around him. He blindly traced his finger through the sand to draw a familiar face in it. “Why is it always me that suffers when I do something brave or kind? I do good things, so good things should happen to me, right?”

“No. You do good things, and good things happen *because* of you,” the voice replied. Chad felt the spirit sitting next to him. He swore he could feel arms around his shoulders, trying to comfort him. “That is **the Meaning of Karma**: from good seeds, good fruits are born.”

“That’s not really what I was hoping you’d say. I was hoping for an apology letter from God; maybe a couple million dollars,” Chad said, biting back a bitter smile. “But, what the heck. I like fruit. Got anything interesting to say about what I’ve done?”

“You braved flames and danger to rescue a man you didn’t know you knew. Your actions meant everything to one young woman,” the voice whispered into Chad’s ear. It sounded like a mother to him, trying to calm her child. “You gave her a chance to reconnect with her father, in a way that you never were able to do with yours after your mother left you and him behind for the sake of a passionate lover.”

“I’m not--I really don’t like talking about Mom,” Chad said bashfully. He swore he heard a laugh from somewhere. “That’s really personal. I’d hate for anyone to know about that.”

“You showed kindness and gallantry to a man who was lost and confused,” the spirit continued without a care towards Chad’s reply. “In time, he will come to realize how easily valor is inspired amongst the hopeless. He will become one of your home’s many heroes. He will suffer as you do, but he will always remember how one powerless young man wouldn’t back down for the sake of someone he would never come to know.”

“That doesn’t really explain why I always get the short end of the stick,” Chad replied quietly. He had continued to draw in the sand as he listened to the voice talk about the two good deeds that stood out the farthest in Chad’s mind in recent memory. “That just seems like the natural consequences of doing good things for people.”

“Unfortunate things have always happened to good people, Noisebomb,” the voice hissed into both of his ears at once. “Life would be short and brutal if everyone got what they deserved, don’t you agree?”

Chad shrugged helplessly. He couldn’t really argue with the spirit.

“So that’s it then, huh? That’s all my life has amounted to?” he started searchingly. “A series of actions and reactions? That seems kind of, uh, unfulfilling.”

“In a way, yes. Understand this, though: what you have done for people is important, but what you have been for them will mean more to them than any act of kindness,” the voice called out several yards away. Chad struggled to stand. The intoxicating euphoria of the world around him threatened to put him to sleep.

“Whaddaya mean?” Chad inquired to the presence as he blindly staggered forward until he was sure he where the voice had projected from last. Even though

he knew he wasn't going to see whatever was talking to him, it still felt right to look for it.

"It is in the way you carry your burdens, and how you always accept the challenges life throws at you," the essence said. In his mind, there was finally the image of a ghostly figure standing next to him in the sand. "You were turned into a beast by your mutation, but you embraced what made you different and dangerous. Lilah Brenner admires you for the...curious strength it takes to do that. You represent a type of courage she wishes she had."

"Lilah--she's stronger than I'll ever be," Chad admitted to the apparition. He stared at it, wondering quietly in his head if being observed made it uncomfortable.

"Perhaps. You will still be a source of a unique strength for her when her hour of need comes," it replied. It rested what Chad perceived as a glowing 'hand' on his shoulder. "You were the same sort of strength to Waverly Walters, when she needed more than a friend to be there for her when her father betrayed her."

Chad settled into the sand again, still drawing in it like a child would at the beach. He wasn't sure if he was actually managing to make something resembling the faces of his friends, or if the image the spirit was projecting into his mind was adjusting the likeness. He smiled anyway.

"Do you think people need me around?" Chad asked suddenly. He didn't know why the question came to his mind.

"No. They don't need you," was the answer from the spirit. Chad sunk visibly, until felt something squeeze his shoulder. "But they need what you represent."

"I don't--I'm sorry, I don't understand," he replied, guilt causing a tingle to run down his spine. "I don't know what I represent."

"They need to know anyone can be stronger than their faults..."

There was a chuckle as the spirit sifted through Chad's mind, drawing forth visual memories of things he had left buried. His heart hammered in his chest, threatening to burst open as memories of every failure, every pain, every regret, and every careless word surged forward into his mind.

“...Their failures, their weaknesses...”

He tried to grip the sand in fear as his mind turned on itself. Memories of his self-doubt came to mind, followed by an achingly long slideshow of gruesome injuries. He clutched his short blonde hair with both hands, or at least he tried to. He found his strength and the color in his face drained

“...And all it takes, is something so small, so simple, and so pure,” the spirit finished. Chad felt something tap his chest over his aching, pulsing heart. He pressed a hand over his heart, surprised

“All it takes is this,”

Chad fell hard against the sand, as if gravity was yanking him back somewhere. He reached up for the fading apparition of light above his head as the ground below claimed him. He wanted to stay; to be free to lay down the burdens life laid on his shoulders. The ground stopped swallowing him for a moment as the spirit loomed just over his almost-devoured head.

“Do you truly wish to stay, Noisebomb?” it asked, curious as to Chad’s intentions. “You could have that peace you yearn for. There would be no more trouble, no more pain, no more hate, and no death awaiting you after you’ve endured all of that.”

Chad struggled to move his head from the sand. He felt the weight of the spirit upon him, take his mettle and his mind and comparing it to an unknown second factor. He felt unnerved and weak again as it took the measure of his soul.

“I...can’t...” Chad whispered hoarsely--painfully--to himself as he fluttered back to consciousness. He wanted to stay, he really did, but there was so much left to do, and Chad knew he was one of the only people in the world who would keep fighting until everything was done.

It took him a few moments to realize where he was. The bustle and noises of a hospital erupted around him. He drank the painful sounds and took it with grace, as he always did. He groggily sat up in his bed, and looked around the room. He couldn’t see anything anymore. There was no spirit to give him sight. He clicked his tongue, and something in his mind lit up. A second click, and he had the layout of the

room committed to memory. He could see a phantom image of what any other person would have seen with their eyes.

“I still...” Chad said, struggling against delirium from the anesthetics that the trauma surgeon had used on him to keep him out while his team removed what was left of the sundered globes the Tsoo warrior had sliced through and burned.

“I still have to save everyone.”

## **The Meaning of Karma -- 4**