

THE FREAKY NOISEBOMB wasn't usually the kind of hero who favored stealth and silence, but as he skulked through a man-made crate maze in the heart of a warehouse in Independence Port, he wondered if he should try it more. The boxes were stacked to the ceiling. Chad felt like he was working through a forest rather than a building.

Chad's head throbbed painfully. Between the epinephrine coursing through him and the choking smell of incense that the Tsoo burned at carefully measured intervals, Chad was finding it hard to concentrate. The incense sticks were crudely stuck in the polished skulls of killed animals. He felt a palpable dread when he looked at them for too long, like their life was still being cradled in the air. Chad wasn't familiar with magic rituals, but his impromptu sleepover with **STRANGLEHOLD** and what Rose had told him about Gideon's powers made him all-the-more anxious to end whatever insidious rituals *actual* criminals were planning.

Chad could hear chanting, or praying, in a language he didn't recognize. Aside from the fact that his jacket and very personal notebook were part of some Tsoo ritual, that was what was the most surprising thing about this whole ordeal. Chad recognized most languages after the first sentence. He didn't want to think about where the language was from if he didn't recognize it after several lines of the strange ritual poem (He was sure it was a poem. The way they spoke had a certain measure of rhythm to it) were read aloud.

It felt like he had been wandering the warehouse maze for hours. The painful pulsing in Chad's head soon became dulled by whatever the superstitious gangsters were burning in the incense. He could barely think straight anymore. Every step he took deeper into the warehouse's winding artificial canyons took a concentrated effort. He wanted to lay down and rest on the floor.

Chad hadn't been sleeping well...or at all, actually. When his apartment caught on fire, all of the medical supplies he had to deal with the painful parts of his mutation were lost. Every time he closed his eyes, he could hear something terrible happening, and he'd take off in the dead of night to stop it. For the past few days, he could hear a buzzing at the edge of his hearing, as if bees were swarming around him. It was a surreal sensation for Chad to hear something that wasn't there. The burning incense settling a comfy fog over his mind was almost a welcome thing. He could barely hear the strange buzzing anymore as he rounded a corner into the first wide open area he had encountered since entering the warehouse's reception area.

Chad only caught a brief glimpse of a shirtless, bald man whose body was covered in tattoos and scars before the candles and incense were snuffed by a cold wind. Something inside of his head screamed to jump to his left. He threw himself into a roll, and very narrowly dodged the lethal arc of a butterfly sword that crackled with electric power.

“You were not supposed to come yet,” the lone Tsoo warrior whispered in a particularly cold and detached voice. “The Fortune said you were to assault a warehouse. What are you doing here, Jefferson?”

“I GUESS I TOOK A SHORTCUT,” Chad whispered in a painfully loud, raspy voice to the man as he scrambled to make some distance between them. “I KNOW A GIRL--GREAT GIRL, BY THE WAY--WHO CHEATS FATE BASICALLY. IT’S AWESOME.”

“Oh. The Seer. You wrote about her in your notebook,” the man whispered in return, as if trying to match the volume Chad had wanted to be at. Chad could hear his foot steps echoing in the darkness as loudly as if they were snaps of a snare drum at a concert. “Does she know how you feel yet?”

“NONE OF MY FRIENDS KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT THEM. NOT REALLY, ANYWAY,” Chad strained to say in a hushed tone. He hid among some crates, and threw his voice across the room. There was another snap, and the man cleaved the air where he thought he heard the Noisebomb. Chad projected his voice behind the man to confound him. “I KEEP MY CARDS CLOSE TO MY CHEST. I’M TRYING TO LEAVE BEHIND A LEGACY OF LAUGHS HERE.”

“WHY DID YOU NEED MY JACKET AND NOTEBOOK?” Chad asked as he slipped away from the crates. The man had caught sight of him during the flash of light from his blade’s energized sweep. “I DON’T REALLY THINK THEY HAVE ANY OF THE JUJU THAT YOU NEED, BRO.”

“I’ll answer your questions if you answer MINE!” the man said, slicing through the boxes Chad had been hiding behind originally. He betrayed his amusement with a chuckle.

“SURE, I LOVE TWENTY-ONE QUESTIONS,” Chad said, ducking behind a support beam. “ARE YOU THINKING OF A PERSON, OR AN OBJECT?”

“I needed the coin you were given, not your clothing or poems. I scavenged

your penthouse to find them, but I was spotted after my fruitless search,” the man said. Chad could almost hear him smirking. There was a certain lightness in his voice as he dragged the edge of his sword against the ground. “We stranded the man who had spotted us and had the Hellions set it on fire for the price of a simple, worthless trinket that they thought would bring them power.”

“I SAVED HIM, YOU KNOW,” Chad shot back. He peered around the beam. A strike of lightning illuminated the man’s wizened features. The man’s eyes were showing signs of deterioration. Chad frowned as pity tugged at his heart.

“Yes, I had heard. You are brave, Jefferson, and a good man,” the man whispered as he approached Chad. The Noisebomb scrambled from cover. The man’s blade burned through the air, threatening to cut him down, but Chad was too far away from the edge of the weapon by then. “Now, indulge an old man: I’ve read your journal. Why are you so jealous of the cured beast, as well as your former friend?”

“PAUL AND ANI?” Chad projected near the man. The old warrior didn’t fall for the trick again. Chad heard him turn to look and listen around the room. “I’VE SPENT MY WHOLE LIFE DOING THE RIGHT THING, AND I’VE ALWAYS SUFFERED FOR IT. IT FEELS LIKE A SLAP IN THE FACE TO KNOW THAT OTHERS CAN KILL, AND KILL, AND KILL, AND BE REWARDED BY PEOPLE LIKE VANGUARD AND THE PPD WHEN THEY HAVE A CHANGE OF HEART.”

“I think I understand,” the man said. Chad could tell that he wasn’t lying.

“AT LEAST PAUL WAS SICK IN THE HEAD. HE *DESERVES* A CHANCE TO EARN BACK HIS GOOD NAME,” Chad continued, wary of the approaching assassin. “ANI IS JUST AN EGOTIST. I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN HE’D BE A MUTANT SUPREMACIST.”

Chad let the silence and tension build up. When the man approached his position, he threw his voice to his left as a distraction before juking to his right.

“WHAT’S SO SPECIAL ABOUT MY COIN?” Chad’s voice called out. The man turned in its direction. “ISN’T IT JUST SOME DUMB TRINKET?”

“It is an old thing, Jefferson,” the man replied, as if that would be enough. There was a sigh, before he continued. “It is the token of a Fortune: a spirit that is wise in the ways of fate. My ritual allowed me to commune with Her. I wanted answers for a crime that was committed against my family.”

“UH, I KNOW IT’S YOUR TURN, BUT WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR FAMILY?” Chad asked. He swallowed dryly as ideas of what could have happened to a gangster’s family danced through his mindscape.

There was a brief pause in the man’s steps. His breath caught in his throat.

“The Tsoo are a collective of Asian-American gangs. We were not always brothers-in-arms. There is still bad blood between many of us,” the man explained. “My grand daughter fell in love with the scion of a rival bloodline. I gave my blessing as patriarch of my house, so that the Tsoo may be more united.”

“THAT SOUNDS LIKE SOMETHING GOOD. ER, NOT FOR ME OR OTHER PEOPLE, BUT FOR THE TSOO,” Chad said from hiding. “WHAT HAPPENED?”

“Their patriarch, an old rival of mine, felt it was an insult. He put my daughter in chains and shipped her off to--to some terrible place, I do not know,” the man responded. “Then, he...*pruned* my family tree as his way of making sure his message was heard.”

“I WOULD HAVE GIVEN YOU THE COIN IF I KNEW YOU NEEDED IT FOR SOMETHING AS SIMPLE AS KNOWING THE ‘WHY’ OF SOMETHING TERRIBLE,” the Noisebomb replied. He swallowed again, and stepped out from cover. He had always felt it was a stupid thing to fill pity for someone trying to actively hurt you, but he knew that not caring for others wasn’t an option--at least for him. He held his hands up to show he meant no ill will.

The feelings wasn’t mutual. The Tsoo warrior slashed out at Chad violently as he approached. He winced and tried to weave away, but the blade found purchase across his eyes. It melted through his blast goggles as if they were nothing. Chad grit his teeth together to keep himself from shrieking in agony as steel and electricity cut through his eyes. His vision crackled like static on a television before it faded completely to black. He couldn’t even sense gentle bending of the dim, far-off light around the boxes anymore.

Blood would have been smeared across Chad’s face, were it not for the quick cauterizing the blade’s enchantments had. He convulsed in pain as he reached up, touching his sundered and scorched eyes. He couldn’t tell if they were still inside of their sockets or if they were dangling in bloody chunks outside of his head. He was

almost certain it could have been both, given the type of injury he took. Dread and hysteria claimed his heart, making it beat painfully fast in his chest, when he realized he had been struck blind.

The worst of it all was a carefully guarded secret: Chad was afraid of the dark.

The warrior didn't care for Chad's mental state. He reared his blade back to finish the fallen Noisebomb.

The world seemed to grind to a halt around Chad. He could feel the chill of death creeping up his spine. He had been here once before: bloody and laid out on the floor. It felt like there was no one else in the world, not even his executioner. The ground he rested upon was a cold and lonely crossroad between Life and Death.

"No," he heard someone whisper. He looked up at where he thought the blade was coming from. He could hear it crackle in the air as it lay suspended, barely falling. This couldn't be it for him. There were people counting on him right now to make it back alive.

"NO!" Chad repeated, realizing the first voice had been his own. He surged forward, screaming back to life from his defeated position. He held the last note of his declaration of defiance as his voice hit a crescendo

Chad's sustained shriek caught the blade on a stream of violently vibrating sound waves. The force and pressure pressing back against the falling blade was too much for the older warrior. He heard grotesque crunches as the sonic scream ran through the man's arm, shattering the bone in innumerable places. The man yelped in pain as his arm gave. Chad didn't stop. He leaped upon the man in literal blind fury, clenching his fists tightly as he pounded away at the much taller, much more muscular warrior.

"NO! NO! NO!" Chad screamed. He wanted to sob tears of frustration, but his tear ducts had been burned closed. Mucus trailed down from his nose, clumping in his fur as if he *had* been crying. He felt a bulge other than the tumor in his throat growing. How could a poet write about beauty he couldn't see? How could he see the stars? How could he enjoy what he dressed like? How could he tell someone he loved how beautiful they are?

His fists kept pummeling the surprised and overwhelmed Tsoo warrior in a

steady stream that rained down desperation and anger with every blow. He kept fighting, kept struggling, and kept punching as the man slowly stopped fighting back. The blows came softer and softer, until neither Chad nor the man could take it no longer. He slipped off of him, and crawled along the ground.

Chad Jefferson had never hated anyone in his entire life. He didn't want to start with an old man looking for answers. He continued to sob weakly to himself with heaving breaths as he blindly felt his way around the warehouse. He heard the warrior struggling to get back on his feet, but Chad sensed that there was no more fight left in him.

"I-I'M GOING TO SAVE YOUR GRAND DAUGHTER," Chad said through his heaving breaths. "I'LL SAVE HER, AND I'LL SAVE YOU. I'LL SAVE JANE, AND I'LL SAVE ZEX, TOO. I'LL SAVE *EVERYONE*."

The man replied with a pained groan.

Chad crawled blindly through the ritual circle the man had been sitting in when the whole affair started. He reached into his pocket and dialed 9-1-1, barely managing to feel through the phone's buttons for the correct number. The phone felt old and familiar in his hands as he gave the operator directions to the warehouse and explained the situation. He wondered how much he'd have to rely on touch from now on.

As if to test his sense of touch, he brushed his fingers along a row of ash and grinded down bone meal. His fingers ran across something thin and round. He tilted his head curiously and lifted it from the ground. The characters on the back of the strange thing felt somewhat familiar. His fingers drew a picture in his mind of a relieved old man relinquishing a lucky coin to a man who had suffered a beating for his sake.

Chad's phone hit the ground as he disappeared from Primal Earth's material realm, with only the whisper of wind and a confused emergency line operator to tell the tale.