

The Sculptor's Dreams

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“Man must be prepared to accept notions of the cosmos.”
H. P. Lovecraft

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following untitled notes were found hidden in a wall among the ruins of a former psychiatric clinic.

1.

The secret has been eating me for years. I am writing these pages as I have been in pain for too long. I have been through some frightful events I often wish I could forget. I hope writing down my story will soothe my affliction. With only the dim moon to waltz with, I am afraid to lose my mind. Ironically, this distorted place has been draining my sanity since my arrival and I feel that each day spent in this grim room damages parts of my memory. I've been carrying this burden long enough, I deem it now safe to scribble down the truth. Anyway, my jailers do not care about me or my writings. All they want to know is whether or not I have taken my daily pills.

They would not believe me even if I were to tell them what really happened that night. They all think I am mad. I was accused of being a delirious murderer. I need not say they were mistaken. They assumed that I had killed two people, including Perfection. I allegedly slaughtered her, but I would never hurt someone I love. However, it is true that I withdrew one soul from the world. Yet I am convinced that it was not the life of a human being. All I did was keep her safe. She is now in a better place, freed from all threats.

In the unlikely case someone happened to read these pages, I have to clarify some details. The story I am about to confess might seem inconceivable for the common folk. The fact that I am writing locked in the cell of an unfamous Mental Health Center in Massachusetts must not prevent the reader from keeping an open mind. One must be prepared to accept notions of the cosmos. There is more to know than the universe around and one can access other spheres of existence if the suitable conditions are set. I was nothing but a simple man until I managed to transcend my consciousness through the help of some medicine. I discovered that wonders were hidden behind the wall of sleep. I traveled across marvelous lands beyond imagination. I met all different kinds of peaceful living creatures. I learned that there were new forms of communication. Unfortunately, I also realized that there were things, unnamable things coming from outside the waking world, so terrible and so atrocious that the sight of them could permanently corrupt the intellect of an unprepared adventurer.

Before telling the story of the night that made me end up here, I need to go back to the week my mind woke up.

2.

The year was 1921. I was riding home with some groceries in my bag. It was a day like any other. The sun was rising, the sky was clear, though some nasty clouds were looming in the distance. I lived in a house on the outskirts of the town. On a decent amount of money, my father had bequeathed it to me when he had passed away. He had built the house on the edge of the forest, using mainly wood, stone and determination. It took him twelve years to finish what he had started. This is the place where I grew up, and I loved it. When I was a child, I used to play in the woods between the house and the town. My father and I would pick mushrooms in the forest. I cherish every one of those moments. My father died in this very house when I was nineteen. Sixteen years later, I was still living there, alone.

I rode up the muddy path to my property and parked my bike under the porch. Nested among the trees, my home had suffered over the years. Some shutters were missing on the second floor, the ivy-covered walls were falling apart and moisture was eating away at the shingled roof. I've never been as good a carpenter as my father was. The bulky wooden front door was still in a great shape though. My father used to say that the horrific drawings he had carved on the door would prevent real evil from entering – I guess he was wrong. After all those years, as I stepped in, I would still salute the disturbing sculpted imps. From the hall, I could hear the rats in the garret. I grabbed the rodent traps in my bag and climbed up the stairs. The upper part of the house was mostly abandoned for the first floor was big enough for me to live a decent life. After setting up the traps, I headed joyfully to the most precious part in the house: the basement. From the creaking stairs, I admired my atelier. It was more than twenty yards long by five yards wide, which left me a lot of space to store my work. I slid my fingers along the banister, feeling the grooves I had cut into the oak. The air was saturated with wood dust and, upon reaching the bottom step, I inhaled deeply in order to fill my lungs with that delightful perfume. I truly miss this smell. In the morning, the sun would beam through the large windows bordering the top of the eastern wall. My sculptures, mostly made of light wood, bright clay or shiny stone, would reflect the sunlight and illuminate the whole place. On a table were laid my inestimable tools: chisels, carving knives, drawknives, scorps, adzes, mallets, punches. Each utensil was designed and used for a very specific purpose. The idea of what I was to do with those tools still makes me shiver. I stood motionless pondering which one I should start with. I wanted to finish the little marble statue I was shaping. Eventually I decided to grab a back-bent skew-gouge. I made my way through the sculptures toward the marble effigy, and started carving it.

I had taken inspiration from bad dreams I had had the previous week. There was a man – he was a captain. His crew were being driven crazy by a strange piece of carved ivory. There was also a dire call, coming from the deep sea. In the end, I would drown and wake up with a glimpse of the remains of a sunken ancient city.

Not different from my other sculptures, the effigy was odd, disturbing and creepy. Since my father had died, I had been having vivid nightmares almost every night. My dreams were filled with atrocities. Ghouls, imps or hellish demons were haunting my most acceptable dreams. Sometimes my mind would spend the night in blinding darkness, surrounded by dismay and despair. I learned that the more detailed the dream, the more decent. That's why I was spending my days chiseling loathsome figures. Gazing at those roughly human monstrosities in bright daylight would make the nightmare disappear, until another one took its place. The decayed hound that used to chase me through boundless gardens and everlasting corridors was now quietly sitting under the stairs, watching as I put the finishing touch to another maddening cast. The statue was not made of ivory, but I knew it would be sufficient to end the nightmare. Foolishly, I believed that my following rest

would be dreamless.

3.

That night my dream was agony. Shadows were crawling around my house and down the basement. They destroyed my sculptures, freeing all my previous demons. I fled the house and made my way through the woods. I heard a cry behind me. Someone or something needed my help. I got distracted long enough to stumble on a root and fell into the mud. Creeping abominations were converging on me. I was hopeless until I smelt the sweet perfume. Fear disappeared and I started to calm down as I was gently being woken up.

She was bending over me, smiling. I was so happy to have given her a spare key.

“Hello, Perfection.”

“You know it's not my name.” Her voice was music to my ears.

I will not try to describe her for she was sweet beyond words. All there is to know is that Perfection is the finest word to be used when mentioning her. We had met a year before when she had moved into town with her family. Strolling on in the market place, I had noticed a glow in the distance. She had reached me through the crowd and introduced herself. Immediately I had been bewitched and she had felt the same about me, despite my reputation.

I sat up on the bed, trying to hide the fact that she had just woken me up from a bad dream. She told me she was free to spend the whole day with me. It took us a while to eventually leave my bedroom. Then, after lunch, we enjoyed picking mushrooms. The forest was not a friendly place and I wished I could swaddle her in an invincible cocoon. But she was not afraid of the shadows behind the trees. She was strong and I did not know how powerful she was. That day the sky was so clear the moon was shining along with the sun. Perfection insisted that we danced in a windy meadow. I could not decline the offer and we ended up waltzing together in the tall grass.

When the day darkened, I invited her to sleep over, reminding her how harmless my nightmares were when she was with me. I knew she wanted to accept. “I can't. I have family coming over this week, I have to take care of them.”

This was how kind and humble she was. Even though people ought to have bowed before her, she would always put others' needs before hers. She reached for her purse and brought out a leather pouch. Opening it, she poured some dry leaves in her palm. “It's called Kalos dust. It's supposed to help you fend off nightmares.”

A new merchant had settled in town. He sold all sorts of goods. Perfection had visited his shop and mentioned my sleep disorders. “You put it under your tongue before going to bed. You'll quickly feel its effect.” We kissed goodbye.

4.

Lying on my bed, I put some Kalos dust in my mouth and tried to relax. Determined to fight my nightmares, I listened to the music of the night and let it lull me to sleep. A queer sensation of falling seized upon me. I could feel the world spinning around. The phosphenes, twirling and whirling before my closed eyes, molded into a dark dank cavern. Faint lights could be seen in the distance. I dragged my unusually stiff limbs toward the exit. My muscles felt numb. As I plodded along on the rocky soil, I heard prowling footsteps behind me. A sudden blow sent me to the ground. The shapeless predator was playing with its game. I stood up. Strange energy was backing up my spirit. I was getting closer to the sunrays. I felt sharp claws mauling my back. I collapsed with a surprisingly loud thud. Resting on my two elbows, I glimpsed at the bulky head. It gave me a baleful glare. Though I was used to dying in dreams, I did not give up for once. I flexed my right leg and fiercely sent it into the dashing skull. I rushed for the open air. I could now feel the blazing lights on my skin. I turned my head and watched the frustated crocotta fleeing from the burning sun. For the first time in more than a decade, I was free from the nightmares.

I got blinded by the astonishing beauty of the sea. The sky was mottled with pink cirrus clouds. I could hear the roar of the billow breaking below. I followed a narrow path along the cliff. Up on the crags, I saw boundless meadows covered with asphodel flowers, whose colors were unknown to my eyes. I had never seen such a marvelous landscape and I wished Perfection had been by my side in that blissful stunning moment. Enjoying the view, I instinctively raised my hand to shield the sun from my eyes. This was how I understood why my mauled back was not hurting and why I was still alive: my hands, my arms, my entire body were made of stone. I had become a walking statue. Despite the cold new armor, I had a feeling of warmth. A long forgotten power had been unleashed within me. No more ghouls, no more demons: the whole dream was mine to explore.

As I walked on the rugged edge, I heard a faint purring whisper. In fact, it was more a feeling than a voice. First, I felt a soothing swell on my shoulders. Then a soft thrill of excitement ran down my spine. Something was trying to communicate with me. Soon a wave of happiness crashed over me. Muffled noises made me turn around. Here was this little creature. With roughly the shape of a sleek cat, its lead-grey fur was solid as rock. The animal was not meowing nor speaking but its mind was reaching into mine. When the connection was finally established, torrents of emotion submerged me. I managed to translate its first statement as follows: "Welcome to the Mountains of Limbether. My name is Virgil. I shall guide you to the great marble city of P'trahotep, where the Queen needs you. We shall brave the Blowing Fields then wash in the ceaseless icy rain of Wetland. We shall pass by P'lutus, the once wealthiest city in the dreaming world, and rest in the godless town of Ischytheos, beyond the Wrathful River. We shall make our way through the gnarled thorny woods of Via and bypass the treacherous demons that hide there. Eventually, we shall climb the Frosted Volcano and ascend to our destination."

The living statue continued to push its knowledge into my brain. Overwhelmed, I felt crushed by the tide. My head was bursting with information. The feline seemed to notice my plight and rubbed its marble face against my legs. "Calm down. Don't let reality shatter your mind. Take a deep breath."

I guess my translation was not correct for I could not breathe. I could feel the keen wind on my body but no air through my lungs. My mouth was sealed and my nostrils were clogged with stone. I began choking. The cat broke its communication guiltily with the message: "You ought to come back as soon as you can. The Queen is waiting for you." I dropped down to my knees, hands on my throat. Virgil raised its paw and, with a sudden flash of light, I spiraled into blankness.

I woke up gasping for air. The first breath felt sweet to my lungs. I checked my skin under the sunrays darting through the window. It would take me a while to fully realize what had happened. I was confused but I felt more thrilled than terrified about the new world I had discovered. I wanted to celebrate this strange event. Sadly, Perfection was not here. But now, I knew exactly what my next piece of art would be. Instead of chiseling hideous soulless figures, I would shape the strongest rock into the image of Perfection. It would be the most beautiful masterpiece ever made.

I needed to find a large marble block, so I rode to town. An acquaintance of mine would sell me what I wanted. Unfortunately, the fellow was not available. He was suffering from a sudden illness, his wife said. I needed to come back another day. I could not bear the waiting. My idea had grown into a craving wish.

I was riding home when I noticed a glow coming out of a house. I veered and stopped by Perfection. She gave me a surprised smile. I wanted to tell her how thankful I was for the Kalos dust, and how peculiar my dream had been. But she was in a hurry. We did not talk much. She gave me a hug, and she was gone.

I stood still on the pavement for a moment before noticing the abode next to me. Ancient trinkets, grotesque ornaments and shiny baubles were on display. I immediately recognized the shop Perfection had mentioned. A bell rang as I entered the musty place. An elderly man welcomed me cordially. He made his way through the messy place in a slow but nimble manner. He looked older than any objects in the room, though he had a curiously smooth chalk-like face. I shook his pallid hands as I listened to his prattle. His name was Iscar. He was talking in an unexpectedly cultivated voice with a strange foreign accent. Wide were his eyes when I mentioned Kalos dust. "So you are the famous sculptor. I've heard a lot about you. How did the medicine feel?"

Common sense kept me from detailing my baffling night. I avoided the subject by talking about my craft. He gave me a wan smile. "I have dabbled in art myself. But, sadly, I have never managed to sculpt what I really wanted. I've given up carving stone these days; in my old age, to hold a hammer requires too much energy. I still have that cumbersome uncarved stone block though..."

I tried to hide my emotion and confessed that I happened to need one for my next creation. "What a coincidence! I can sell it to you, and for a good price if you buy some extra Kalos dust." Indeed, what a coincidence. Unable to see the big picture, I pretended to bargain and bought the whole package.

Since I could not carry the bulky purchase on my bike, the merchant offered to deliver it. Off we went on his wooden mule-cart, up the hill and into the woods. The chatty old man did all the talking. He seemed impressed when we arrived home. "Nice place you've got here; but aren't you afraid of the spirits in the forest?"

I assumed he was a religious person and ignored his warnings. We dragged the white marble block into my basement. That was not an easy task but Iscar was surprisingly strong for his age. The few people having ever set foot down in my atelier had always shivered at the sight of my nefarious carvings. But the old man did not flinch, though he kept staring at my sculptures. I guessed he had had a rough life but I did not make any further inquiry to get to know him better. My mind was full of wonders at the thought of my soon-to-be masterpiece. A long week was ahead of me, I was to

play with my tools on the one hand and with Kalos dust on the other. I gladly thanked Iscar and saw him off to the front door.

5.

Here began my long dreaming-spreed. As the sun reached its zenith, I laid in my bed with a Kalos dust leaf under my tongue. Again, a queer sensation of falling seized upon me. I quickly entered the dream and faced the marble cat on the inordinate cliffs. My body had still the appearance of a statue. I convinced my brain that my lungs did not need air; the urge to breathe faded away. I opened up to the animal's waves of communication. I understood that the stony creature meant no harm to me. It asked me to forgive its previous tactless welcoming and promised to only teach me the history of the dreaming world slowly and carefully, lest my mind went stark mad. The journey to P'trahotep was long and difficult: we needed to depart at once. The ground, the sea and the sky felt unusual, yet so real. I became aware that it was more than just a dream. Somehow, Kalos dust had granted me new eyes that could see through the wall of sleep. Curiosity conquered my reason and I began to follow Virgil.

The sun was low in the sullen sky when I left the comfort of my bed. I had slept throughout the whole afternoon. I went down to my atelier and started working on my next creation. I was to see Perfection in a week and hoped to surprise her with my gift. For an unknown reason, I felt that she needed it. Laying my hands on the rock, I could sense my heartbeats resonating through it, as if the structure itself was alive. Never in my life had I worked with so bright, so hard, so gorgeous stone. While the melody of my moil chisel was echoing in the night, my mind wavered between the dreaming and the waking world. Virgil and the Queen, Perfection and the old Iscar, the two worlds were connected.

The first lesson was unforgettable and came with an eloquent illustration. We were tramping through flat wetland, maledict cold rain was pouring on our heads. Jagged mountains stood against the sun; yet the surrounding foliage shone bright green enchantedly. I could not tell how long we had been hiking, for time and space in the dreaming world were strangely convoluted. Not far behind me, I heard a shy clump. Hiding in the withered bushes, a fragile faceless man was gazing at me. His dark intangible body reminded me of a slender ghost. As if Virgil had expected him to appear, he sent me waves of explanation: "Many waking humans have tried to venture into the outer spheres of existence. The faceless man over there was one of the few that wandered in this dimension and returned free from madness. Though his body waited in the waking world, he prolonged his visit of the realm. When the blight spread in the lands, his health was already at its lowest. He helped as many refugees as he could but, in the end, he died in his bedroom. Somehow, the wretched soul has remained here; only to drift aimlessly in this ruined world as his sanity declines. Your presence must have attracted him. Don't mind him, he is harmless. However, you must never forget this tale, and you need to take care of yourself."

Kalos dust worked wonders. It had been years since I had not enjoyed oversleeping. Getting up had become a pleasantly difficult task. As instructed, I took care of my growling stomach. Though the history of the dreaming world was awe-inspiring, the atmosphere of the outer realm was more soothing than that of the waking world. Focusing on my sculpture, I managed to ignore the irksome clattering birds around my house. My masterpiece was taking shape under my tools. I was advancing faster than I had imagined, as if its realization was the stone block purpose. The rough outlines had already been drawn and now I was carving with greater precision.

I soon became used to my stiff body. I blessed this grey shell as I felt neither thirst nor hunger and I could endure the gold-melting heat that suddenly fell upon Virgil and I me. My shadow was now walking with a twin for a second sun had materialized in the sky. We crossed the ruins of P'lutus. Festooned pillars were shattered on the dazzling sand, blasted bulky gates were not

guarding the ancient city anymore. These astounding lands looked so familiar that my previous years of nightmares seemed long gone. We were the only living souls around, although I suspected the faceless man to hide nearby. An outburst of sorrow leaked through my mental connection with my guide. I realized I knew nothing about Virgil. Every time I asked about its past, it would avoid the question or subtly stray away from the subject: "This used to be a prosperous place. The Prince, leader of this city, was the Queen's most fervent friend. When the Crawling Chaos descended, these walls were the first to taste Its fury. The Prince fought bravely but ended up defeated. According to the legend, the Crawling Chaos, out of cruelty, imprisoned him in the Limbos. Wisdom has it that he passed away there and fell back into oblivion a long time ago. Others claim the Prince was cursed in a most vicious way: unable to sustain himself, he was to die in agony only to spring back to life ad infinitum."

I woke up assailed by a stench. The moon was still high in the sky, but not luminous enough. I fumbled for the matches on my bedside table. Amidst dead silence, I combed the house to find the source of the fetid odor. Under a bookcase, I found an old picture. The brisk sketch accurately depicted my father wearing his famous grin. My mother must have drawn it. I had never known her. I had been told she had died of mental fatigue when I was an infant. I inspected the traps in the garret: all empty. Eventually, I decided that I would resume my investigation in the morning and fell into slumber.

The Wrathful River was aptly named. I admired the water flowing with passionate strength under the windless night. Far away, across the river, there stood a modest town. The sight was mesmerizing. My bond with the dreaming world grew tighter and I could almost smell the sweet salty air, though I was still not breathing. We hiked until dawn along the indented bank. Under a rising lone sun, we reached a small wooden rowboat. Virgil sat near the rudder and I took the oars. I wondered if my body would be able to swim in case of an emergency. My powerful guide gave a sort of wink and cast a spell on the dinghy. Almost gliding, we crossed the restless tide with ease. In the distance, some amphibious shape emerged and headed toward us. I asked if it was dangerous. The only reply I received was an untranslatable wave of mixed emotions. Those communication problems would happen regularly during our journey. I guessed my intellect was not fast enough to thoroughly process the new form of communication. I was later to understand that Virgil merely responded to my subconscious. I shouted with joy as the friendly mammal splashed water on us. Virgil kept a serious face and hastened our ship with its magic; the cat seemed to loathe rivers. We quickly hit dry land.

At last I identified the source of the stench. A dead rat was rotting in the attic. I could swear I had checked this location. I picked up the corpse and threw it away. My house needed care and so did my body. My frequent rests were weakening my strength. My sore muscle ached as I hammered away at the hard stone. I was not hungry, but forced myself to eat: I would not end up like the faceless man.

Engraved in large russet letters, a word ending with THEOS could be read on the opening gate of Ischytheos. Joyful shouts welcomed us when we entered the city. A thick cloud of ash rose as the inhabitants danced accompanied by a cacophony of trumpets and drums. Much to my surprise, we were heroes. The baggy silver eyes all around seemed to know who we were. Ragged dirty human beings bowed religiously before us, chanting in an unknown tongue. Their dry skin was covered with a cinder-grey dye, making them almost appear like Virgil and me. My happiness was mixed with pity as I gazed at the messy dusty street and its dwellers. The joy on their drab faces was shadowed by famine and death. A feeling of despair pervaded the whole city. Until this moment, I had not realized how dire and terrible the Crawling Chaos was. Torn apart, I grasped the

seriousness of the situation I was in. I asked Virgil to translate the supplications of the beggars at my feet but the cat remained elusive: “They want you to help the Queen. She will bring back peace and harmony in the realm.”

In my atelier, I felt a growing sense of foreboding. I was impatient to explore the dreaming world but, like a mantra in my thoughts, a feeling urged me to finish my work. The statuesque beauty displayed promising resemblance with its muse.

I was too agitated to find rest and would not disturb my companion's sleep. Virgil badly needed some respite; guiding me and casting spells must have fully drained its energy. Wandering in the streets, I zigzagged through creaky wooden stalls and watched the snoring dwellers gathered around dying braziers. Faint hoots sounded in the moonless night. I had thought the Crawling Chaos was just history; but these poor souls in this scourged town made me understand that the dreaming world had never recovered from the hoary upheavals.

My larder was empty. I washed, put on some clothes and went to town. The morning was cold, few people were on the market place. I did not have much time and gladly welcomed the unusual absence of chatter. On my way home, I rode by Iscar's shop. Strangely enough, it was closed.

I was not the only one awake under the night sky. At the end of a dark narrow alley, I glimpsed at an evanescent solid shadow. I recognized the faceless man as he squatted over a sleeping refugee. I remained unseen and I stealthily came closer. The woman at his feet had an unknown yet familiar air. She was holding a modest piece of wood against her chest with motherly love. The dark shape laid his now beaming hands on the woman's closed eyes. I had traveled long enough with Virgil to understand that some spell was being cast. I sputtered a warning. The faceless man vanished with supernatural ease. I ran to the woman and examined her. She was still peacefully dreaming. No other event would trouble the still night, but the dreaming world was no longer a safe haven.

Birds used to shun my house; now they kept up their ceaseless trilling in the encircling trees. My periods of deep sleep were becoming shorter. The effect of Kalos dust was decreasing and the supply dwindled as I doubled the doses.

Eventually, Virgil opened up and told me about his past. Though he had been born in this dimension, his body had once been made of flesh. He had lived peacefully in the city of Ulthar beyond the great eastern desert, near the River Skai, where cats and humans cohabited in harmony. Virgil was a beloved poet; he would spend his day discoursing with philosophers and mathematicians. When the Crawling Chaos plagued the streets, the frenzied humans turned against the animals and forgot the ancient law that forbade the killing of cats. Virgil watched his family and friends being drowned in the River. My friend was left with no other choice than to leave town. He waded through the desert. He would have died in the endless dunes if it had not been for the Queen. She healed his wounds and offered him a new body. Sturdier, more powerful, the unique shell was made of stone.

I had still enough medicine. But anticipating a shortage I went to Iscar's shop again. I knocked and knocked at his door. No answer. I almost thought the old man was ignoring me. Some villagers watched in bewilderment when I kicked the wall in anger. I bet this scene fueled the gossips about Perfection.

Many times I asked Virgil the exact reason why the Queen needed me. My friend would simply argue that it was her will. In her infinite wisdom, the Queen had summoned me. Virgil had volunteered to guide me up to P'trahotep.

The rattle of those rats was weakening my sleep. I set more traps in the upper part of my house. I wanted to exterminate them all. The walls upstairs still imparted a strong stench of putrefaction.

Far away from Ischytheos, we sighted the brooding fringe of the Forest. A mile before the tree-line stood a gigantic ancient olive tree. Its dead trunk was as wide as my house. There was no foliage to adorn its gnarled branches, only death. Like rotten fruits, there hanged men and women and children. A portent of evil filled my heart when I beheld those putrid corpses. Swaying in the breeze, they cast their vivid gaze upon me.

I felt unsafe. I recalled the warnings of Iscar. I had never been a superstitious man and did not believe in spirits living around my house; but I did believe in the Crawling Chaos for I had seen Its toxic wake.

My worried guide told me to disregard the hanging bodies on the olive tree. He added that there was no need to be afraid; but my chest was filled with nothing but anger. I picked up some withered leaves – oddly similar to Kalos dust – and crunched them in my fist. I would not shrink back in the face of nightmares. The Frosted Volcano could be discerned beyond the skyline, P'trahotep was near. Sooner than expected, I would meet the Queen.

My statue was almost complete. Talking with her helped me soothe the pent up tension in the air – I wish I could still do so. The caress of my riffler smoothed her divine curve. Every dimple, every freckle was to appear on the shiny white stone.

I could swear the prying faceless man was still following us. What he wanted I could not say. Mistakenly, I wondered if he was a spy. Virgil was becoming more tense as we entered the Forest of Via.

My hovering between the two worlds was somehow wearing on my nerves. I had the strange feeling that the Crawling Chaos wanted to steal my masterpiece.

6.

A soft snap freed me from the grip of Morpheus. Stealthy footsteps drew nearer. I quickly grabbed the adze on the bedside and stood up. Sunrays darted through the grimy window but my sleep-fogged eyes could not see much. I was aware of a presence in the house. Wielding my sharp tool as a weapon, I honed my body and my mind. I felt overwhelmed by a sense of foreboding. I opened my bedroom door. No danger in sight. I was startled by a subtle clap coming from the kitchen. I briefly crossed the living room. I remembered Iscar, that shopkeeper, and the fearsome look he had cast at my sculptures. Was he trying to steal my masterpiece? The strange old man raised many questions. *Does he know about Kalos dust and the dreaming world? How come he had the ideal stone block for my carving?* My overwrought nerves kept me paralysed until I came back to my senses. I let go of the clenched adze and entered the kitchen. Perfection was quietly preparing breakfast. She simply wanted to surprise me.

That morning she seemed interested in what I was carving. Obviously, I stopped her before she could take a glimpse at my masterpiece. Ecstatic, I described the wonder of Kalos dust. I did not detail the other realities and dreaming lands though; for I knew how maddening those discoveries could be. I invited her to try some Kalos dust and take a nap with me. I would show her the beauty of the cosmos. "I don't think this is a good idea," was her immediate answer. She argued she had not enough time: she had to leave before noon. But, in the end, she could not resist my call. After all, it was only a quick nap, what was wrong about that?

A queer sensation of falling seized upon us. Our minds woke up in a small meadow encircled by rotten trees. The variegated ground was composed of grey bushes, charred roots and dead stumps. There was a restful silence. My elation grew as I admired the marble statue on my side. With the stone cocoon swaddling her, Perfection was glowing more than ever. Our psyches connected at once and she sent me pleasant feelings. Nevertheless, under the sparkling encroaching moon, I could sense melancholy on her alabaster face. I took her hand and asked for a dance. She laid her head on my chest. We began to waltz.

Our bliss was shattered by Virgil's chilling wave. "You shouldn't be here !" The sleek creature hurried forward. "Your body is still in the waking world. You have no power here. These lands are deadly." As the cat was chiding us, I felt an acute menace. A long sibilant scream echoed thunder throughout the surroundings. Perfection sent me a wave of fear and guilt. I did not notice the sudden shadow that came from behind. I cannot imagine what would have happened if Virgil had not cast the spell. A sudden flash sent Perfection back to safety just in time before a maw bit the air where her head had been. I got pushed and hit the ground. I took a glimpse at the winged creature that had fallen upon us. The ghastly reptile had merely the shape of a giant lizard with a long spiky tail. Furious to have missed its prey, the scaleless beast shifted its green-hued glare toward me and gave me a comprehensive view of its body. Only my long experience of nightmares prevented me from losing consciousness. Here was a second noseless but almost human head, lolling pitifully on its neck. For once, I was eager to leave the dreaming world.

Virgil sent a tidal wave telling me to flee and proceeded to distract the monster. I got up and ran. I did not go far for I glanced back and stood in awe before the swift tail that whipped Virgil away. The severely injured cat managed to hide in a nearby burrow. Never could I escape such a demon. My only way out was to wake up. I ransacked my mind for a solution as the winged death shifted its attention to me. It broke with fury and soared into the sky. The reptile swooped down on me. I had an epiphany. I knew how to return to the waking world. I forsook to hide and lay supine on the ground. Since my physical body was still in the waking world, I imagined death could only

wake me up. The beast landed by my side and hesitantly pinned me down with a cold hoof. I gave it a presumptuous gaze. The following onslaught was lethal.

Well... It was worth a try. I woke in the same forest, right behind the creature. It was still rending my first stone armor to dust when its second head noticed me and burst into laughter. The gleam in its eye turned red. Yellow fangs were the last thing I saw before blankness seized me again. I was desperate. The Crawling Chaos' spawn tirelessly continued to execute me as I was materializing into the dream. This went on and on for ages. I would die, then reappear in the dream: the Kalos dust in my veins kept me from waking up. My stone corpses were covering the area. Virgil, still hidden in the burrow, slowly healed his wounds.

I guess I could have reached P'trahotep death by death and hoped for someone to cast away the beast. But this would have taken time and Virgil recalled me that the Queen had only little. Salvation came sooner than expected in the shape of the faceless man. Out of nowhere, he grabbed the lizard's neck with outstanding strength. Somehow, he gave me a proud yet sad look underlined by this warm and unforgettable grin that reminded me of my father's. His intangible body merged into the screaming reptile. A thick dark cloud fogged the two dream-creatures and a flash of darkness sent them both back into outer abyss.

I woke up at half past noon. On my bedtable lay the following note from Perfection.
Sorry to leave without saying goodbye, I had to. Kalos dust has poor effect on me, as opposed to you. Keep going. Love you.

7.

I spent the day in my atelier, working on my statue. For long quiet hours, I gently stroke her skin with sandpaper. The long night weighed on my eyelids, but I was not ready to rest. I was still shaken by the previous dream and needed a break to recover. I gave the last brush when dawn broke over the house. Exhausted, I sat on the dusty floor. Never in my life had I finished a sculpture so quickly. I admired my masterpiece. Glowing under the rising sunlight, there stood the lifeless naked twin of Perfection. Up on the pedestal, she dominated the whole room. If they could, my other creations would have bowed before her.

There was still one detail which remained to be carved. On her pure face was missing the beautiful scar that graced Perfection's face. Like lighting in the sky, the discreet mark extended from her left ear to her jaw. I had spent days admiring it and knew by heart the complex icon. But I could not bring myself to draw it at once.

Resting in my bed, I easily ascended to the dreaming world. Virgil was waiting for me. We promptly resumed our journey and left the dangerous woods of Via. The Frosted Volcano was higher than any terrestrial mountain. On its top, above the gaudy clouds, was our destination. A large frozen lake lay before the volcano. Below its glassy surface lasted inert statues. Virgil told me they were P'trahotep's citizens.

“The Queen knew the Crawling Chaos would come. Her plan was to lure the danger into the city while the civilians would escape. The Grand Alchemist was to lead the population away from P'trahotep. He was an ambitious and charismatic man, we were all happy to follow him. I remember crossing this lake with hundreds of fellow stone beings. Up in the mountain, the Queen and her guard were hiding in the city, ready to ambush the coming evil.”

The bond with my master shook with sadness, anger and grief. I caught the misery on the frozen faces beneath my feet: the refugees had fallen into an ambush as well. I could imagine the panic that had seized them. Virgil did not describe the ensuing massacre for his pain was awfully vivid. I knew the scourged armies had been merciless.

“While every one was running away and hiding in the treacherous forest, the Grand Alchemist fled back to P'trahotep to warn the Queen. She was busy fighting the Crawling Chaos and, without the brave old man, she would not have survived.”

My tormented friend turned off his mental connection with me. I left him alone with his thoughts. He must have witnessed the unnamable during the genocide; there was no need for me to learn more. We climbed the volcano wintry slopes as a raw cold wind pushed us upward. I took the time to meditate upon the past. I had traveled with Virgil for centuries. I had discovered new wonders and met alien beings. Since I had used Kalos dust, my life had completely changed. One last time, I stared back at the dreaming lands. From up here, the view encompassed the whole realm. I paused in awe. I did not know what the future would hold but I already had some inkling.

Up on the edge of the snowy crater, we beheld the city. Resting in the mouth of the volcano, here was the proud P'trahotep. Like hugging arms, its spires rose high in the sky. The serene moon shone bright upon the surrounding sunflower fields. A dancing path led to the main entry. The aeon-worn gates were already open.

The inhabitants welcomed me as a prince. They all looked similar to Virgil and me. Marble, onyx, travertine: all different types of stone composed their bodies. The place was not as crowded as Ischytheos, but its dwellers were not starving. I was happy to walk among undamaged houses, for I had expected a ruined city. Nevertheless, some facades were smudged and charred.

All streets converged to one central point: a timeless unearthly cathedral. Held up by strong basalt pillars, the structure had a mystical aura. Large stained glass windows attracted the blazing moonlight. Its walls were festooned with peaceful carvings from antediluvian times.

I followed Virgil up in avenue. My guide opened wide his connection with me and sent satisfied waves. He was glad to start his last historical lesson: “The battle against the Crawling Chaos happened betwixt these walls. Each entity was equally powerful and their spells sent tremors through the whole cosmos. Thunder and lightings cracked the nocturnal sky. Many soldiers were struck by thunderbolts, including the Queen. She knew no one could eradicate the Crawling Chaos in this dimension. Hence she tried to send It into a place where Its power would be muffled down.”

He stopped at the entrance. The great wooden doors of the cathedral radiated a pleasing warmth. “Dear friend, our journey comes to an end. The Queen has been very anxious about your sanity, but your mind has proven to be strong enough for the dreaming world. I think you are ready to enter the throne hall.”

A man came to us. Kneeling on the floor, he humbly presented a red cushion with precious carving tools. Virgil invited me to take them: “A new body is being sculpted for the Queen. She needs you to finish it. Only you can do so.”

I entered the calm nave. On the pews beside me sat praying statuesque citizens. There were rows of flickering candles bordering the vast room. Most of the light pointed in the same direction. At the end of the aisle the Queen stayed still. Blinded by her beauty, I headed toward the throne. I stopped before the dais. There was no need for me to bow. Glowing under the rising moonlight, there stood the lifeless naked twin of Perfection. Similar to the one in my atelier, the statue lacked the lightning scar. I was not stunned by the truth, for Virgil had prepared me. I understood who and where the Queen was.

My cat friend came closer. He rubbed his head against my leg in a reassuring manner. “The Queen did manage to send the Crawling Chaos into the waking world; but she and her guard got trapped. The poor souls became mortal humans and were disseminated throughout the globe. Most of the soldiers lost their memories. Powerless, the Queen hid on Earth. She scarcely communicated with the dreaming realm; for the released energy would attract evil forces. Recently, she has found the Grand Alchemist. The elderly man has discovered a method that will bring back the Queen. In the form of two sculptures, a portal between the two worlds was to be erected. The replica here has to be an exact copy for the Queen to merge into.”

Virgil did not need to tell me the Grand Alchemist was Iscar. I understood why the old shopkeeper had supplied me with Kalos dust and the stone block. Perfection's scar was the result of her last encounter with the Crawling Chaos. In the dreaming world, no one but I knew its design. Carefully, I used the precise chisel to sculpt the mark. Like freshly fallen snow, motes of marble-dust dressed the ground. The people of P'trahotep gathered in the cathedral. Holding their breath, they watched silently as I finished the carving.

Back from my slumber, I remembered that the Crawling Chaos still lurked somewhere in the waking world. The artwork in my atelier might have drawn Its attention. I feared for my Queen. Her human body was weak and ephemeral. She needed to leave this perilous dimension at once.

I dressed and rode to Perfection's house. A servant opened the door when I rang. My voice

was shaking with excitement. I asked to see my beloved. He rudely informed me that she was dining with her family and was not to be disturbed. I assumed the boy did not know who the Queen really was. It was unwise to insist. Before leaving, I left a cryptic message that the servant promised to deliver: "Just tell her that I know everything about her and that she should come to my place as soon as possible. There is a gift waiting for her. Tell her to bring Iscar too."

I hastily tidied my house for I knew my two guests would soon be here. I made the final arrangements concerning my masterpiece. In order to make a dramatic surprise, I moved it to the far end of my atelier and put it under a clean white sheet. Following Virgil's advice, I swallowed the last Kalos dust leaves in order to expand my senses. In the event that the Crawling Chaos appeared, I would be ready.

I heard Iscar's mule-cart pulling up in front of my porch. Two sets of footsteps approached. A knock on the door. They were here. I could imagine the joy on Perfection's face when she reunited with P'trahotep. According to Virgil, she would recover her whole strength once her body transferred to the dreaming world. My Queen would save the realm and make peace prevail. I knew she would later be able to transcend both my body and mind. Sadly, I still remain locked in this hopeless cell.

8.

I will now break the chronology of my narrative and describe what took place the following days; for I dread the moment when I have to put into words what I lived during that painful night.

I was found at dawn staggering on a road on the edge of the forest. I looked miserable. My face? Muddy. My knees? Scratched. My hands? Shaking. And my clothes? Drenched in blood. So stunned was I that no words could come out of my mouth. I was driven to the nearest clinic to be taken care of. I was given some drugs and fell into a long dreamless sleep.

I woke up handcuffed in a bed, surrounded by strangers. My mind was all blurred; I could not recall what had happened. My first thought went to Perfection and I enquired about her. A man in uniform came to me; he was the superintendant of the town. His face twisted with anger and loathing, though he made tremendous efforts to control his emotions. He asked in a blunt yet polite fashion where I had spent the previous night. It had been days since I had ascended the spheres of outer cosmos, I needed to unburden my conscience. Candidly, I told them about Kalos dust, about Virgil and my dream-quest to P'trahotep. I was quickly interrupted by the man bursting into rage: "And that stone cat told you to butcher your girlfriend!"

Suddenly, the hidden memories surfaced. I suppressed a cry of pain: the night had been horrendous. I guessed the police had searched my house. The slain body in my basement must have been found among my sculptures. "Were you intoxicated when you slaughtered her with an axe!" the man continued disgustedly. "We also found some dead animals around your house. I'd compare you to your father, but you are way worse."

A doctor intervened to ease the tension. I was obviously mentally imbalanced, he said. Another police officer stepped in and explained what I was accused of. The evening before, Iscar and Perfection had been seen leaving town and heading to my house. The police never found the merchant's body. They assumed that I had scattered his limbs in the forest. My bad reputation did not help, there was a general consensus that I was insane. To make things worse, they accused Perfection of infidelity. According to the gossips, she was spending too much time with the new shopkeeper. "You were suspecting something between her and the old man, so you invited them to your house. Somehow, you understood what was going on. You snapped and killed them both." Speechless, I listened to them. I understood that they would never hear the truth and decided to keep everything inside. I knew Perfection would be safer this way.

Few days later, I was taken to the nearest city and locked in a psychiatric hospital, where I would spend the rest of my life.

9.

The background is set. My story comes to an end. I have to dig up the buried memories and describe the violent night.

I opened the door. Iscar entered. He gave me a firm handshake. Right behind him followed Perfection. Overjoyed, I welcomed her with a hug. I announced a surprise was waiting in my atelier. My guests remained speechless, for they knew exactly what the gift was.

I was ushering them to my basement when I heard loud burst upstairs. In a hurry, I ran right up to the attic. Dead rats were caught in the traps. The round window in the room was shattered to pieces. On the sill was a stern raven. Its feathers had a morbid yellow shade. I tried to come closer, but the bird flew away with a blood-curdling caw. I felt the Kalos dust in my veins expanding my senses. I was now aware of the cosmos all around. The Crawling Chaos was coming.

I rushed down to meet my two companions. I was midstairs when I glimpsed at the two souls standing at the center of my atelier. And so the horror commenced. The Grand Alchemist Iscar had his arms gnarled around the Queen, holding her tight. His lips against hers. A queer sensation of falling seized upon me.

In a jump, I reached the bottom stairs. My will sank low when I looked back. All around in the room stood paralyzed my filthy carvings whose sins were nothing compared to Iscar's. An unwholesome transformation occurred before my eyes. Perfection seemed to shrink. Her size dwindled. Deep wrinkles were being drawn on her face. Her hair and complexion aged into a sallow white. Henceforth, her appearance was of an old lady.

Iscar's metamorphosis was even more abhorrent. With a gruesome smoke, his clothes dissolved in the dust-choked air. His feeble legs gained in strength. Graceful curves toned up his torso and his naked chest swelled out. He grew long divine hair. I knew too well his rejuvenated face. Sucking the life out of the Queen, Iscar's body was becoming an exact copy of hers.

I managed to take two steps forward, but remained snared in terror. By my side was the table on which my tools lay. If I had grabbed one in time, I could have interrupted the spell. Iscar released his grip: it was too late.

Perfection reeled away from the traitor. She heavily fell on the ground. I could read shock and disappointment on her face. Iscar stretched his new muscles. I groaned to catch his attention. He faced me. His smirk blazed with malice. He rose a finger at me, and sent a harmful wave. I collapsed.

An acute pain nailed me on the floor. I convulsed. A lurid radiance dimmed the surroundings. The colors were melting my eyes. I stared in panic at my awakening sculptures. A torrent of dread flooded my entire being. The stone hound in the corner barked at me. Ghastly tentacles popped out of its back. Only a mind sanity could have resisted the assault. I did not realize it was an hallucination.

The Grand Alchemist heaved a sigh of victory. He bend down on the Queen. "Thanks for the portal, your Majesty." The deep voice was not human at all. "How could you do this?" muttered his victim in agony.

The hound attacked me. I felt an intense pain. My heart was beating wildly. Then it stopped. For a second, darkness fell upon my mind. Was it real? I heard the sweet voice of Perfection urging me to follow Virgil. The cat appeared in the void. One last time, my friend guided me toward the light. I woke up to Iscar answering the Queen:

“When I helped the Crawling Chaos taking you down, I was not supposed to come with you.” He paused. His intimate face expressed unknown emotion. He clenched his fists. “Both you and It are equally evil. I think I’ve suffered enough. I deserve to be King.”

I looked around: my carvings were back in their position. The spell of fright was gone. I spat blood on the floor. Iscar shifted his gaze toward me. “Why aren’t you dead yet?”

I rested on my side. Iscar slowly approached. He laid his cloned hand on my head. Again, I collapsed, but immediately regained consciousness. The replica faltered. Perfection was mouthing words to me. “Don’t look at her. She can’t help you. She’ll be dead in a minute. I drained all her power,” he growled.

Iscar was wrong, for I could feel her reassuring energy flowing in me. I painfully rose on my hands and knees. The Grand Alchemist sent another dementing wave. It crushed my brain. My ears were bleeding. But I stood strong. Iscar lost his haughty attitude. “Stop resisting, you infatuated scum. She won’t help you anyway. Don’t you see that you are completely in her thrall? Your bewitched soul means nothing to her!” he panted in a human tone.

The smear was proof of his impotence. He wanted to shatter my mind. But I would not break. He desired the Queen’s body that waited in the dreaming world. I was prepared to stop him. The anger inside me grew tighter. I would not let Perfection die. She kept mouthing words to me. With her help, I got up on my two legs.

Iscar stood there agape. He was wearing the most lovely face on Earth, yet still looked awful. I could almost hear his teeth chattering. He had noticed my masterpiece in the far end of my atelier. In a frantic move, he ran away from me, heading for the portal. He thought he could escape in time. My rage exploded.

Like a crocotta, I chased the fake copy. I was quicker, and violently tackled him. In the fall, he took off the white sheet that covered the sculpture. The Queen let out a faint gasp in admiration. I grabbed Iscar’s ankle. He shrieked and wriggled pitifully when I furiously dragged him across the room.

I reached for my tools on the table. Sitting down on his chest, I immobilized Iscar. I placed the pointed chisel on his forehead and rose high the hammer in my other hand. The fraud began to cry. His feminine voice besought me. “Please! Don’t kill me! It’s me! It’s Perfection!”

Someone else might have been duped by the duplicity; but I was not. I knew the soul was not my beloved, for it was not glowing. In a swift motion, I thrust the nail. The skull fractured with a terrible crack. The moans ceased. I got up and clenched at the nearby adze. I beheld the body.

I now realize how meaningless words are. I had been tortured in nightmares and felt unimaginable torments. I had seen devastated worlds, starving souls and maddening demons. I had smell the stench of death. I had heard unutterable cries and blasphemous whines. But the sight of the godlike yet hideous corpse was the utmost horror of all.

The body twitched. I brought the heavy axe down upon its chest. Blood spurted. Another twitch. Another slash. My fury controlled my actions. I hacked my way through the ribcage. The abomination was to remain dead. I did not stop until I was sure its heart could not beat anymore.

There was gore everywhere when I unhand the weapon. I darted toward my Queen. She was lying inert but conscious. Her faint smile dispelled my anger. Carrying her in my arms, I walked to the portal. She reached into my mind. She pressed me to leave, for the Crawling Chaos would be here soon. But I could still save her.

I put her against the pedestal. She leaned on the statue. Powerless, she failed to merge with it. I was willing to give her my energy and she knew it. We kissed. I did not age, though I could feel my vitality leaving me.

A loud thud broke the spell. The Crawling Chaos was on the roof. Perfection was still old and weak, but managed to fuse into the sculpture. In a flash, the strong marble cocoon swaddled her soul.

I received waves of happiness. The Queen's mind was replenished. However I knew her body was not. According to Virgil, the portal was to disappear from my atelier; yet there it stood. Perfection told me not to worry. Her damaged life vessel made it only halfway through transcendence, but it was enough to restore her power.

A shivering screech resounded in the forest. The Crawling Chaos surrounded the house. My Queen sent one last confident wave. "You must go. I can eradicate the coming evil once and for all, but the blast will kill any life around. Run! And don't look back!"

I promised her to return. In a futile attempt to hide her from the Crawling Chaos, I covered the conscious statue with the white sheet. "Good bye, Perfection."

Up the stairs and over the slugs I fled. A nauseous reek filled my lungs. Locusts swarmed in when I opened the front door. I left my home. Moving shadows crept outside. The enfeebled moon pointed me the right direction. I rushed into the forest.

Hard rain poured on my head. Reptilian goats converged on the house. Thunder deadened their dire howls. Lightnings guided my every step through the woods. I did fall into the mud, but a strange energy held me up.

I stumbled on a road. The Queen's scream echoed in the night sky. I glanced back. A blast of light burnt my brain. The whole forest fluttered. An eternity elapsed. I felt emancipated. The Crawling Chaos was no more.

10.

My narrative is now complete. Should unanswered questions remain, one is invited to speculate. I must confess that I sometimes have doubts. Some details may have slipped past my attention.

I was told my haunted house was shunned. Nobody suspects a trapped soul is waiting there for my return. The Queen is safe.

I thought writing down my story would calm my affliction; but the pain still lingers. It rises and falls tirelessly as the tide. I have learned to live with it.

I have not tasted Kalos dust in years. My nightmares have reappeared and I cannot carve the devil out of them.

Nevertheless, on unique occasions, when the stars shine high in the cloudless skies, when the endless cosmos unfurls and cries, I dream of the realm freed from the demons. I reunite with my Queen, hug her stone cocoon. We laugh. We kiss. And we waltz, right under the moon.

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