

*For Andrew. You believed in me
long before I believed in myself*



INTO
Ebanmoor

Offspring of the Throne

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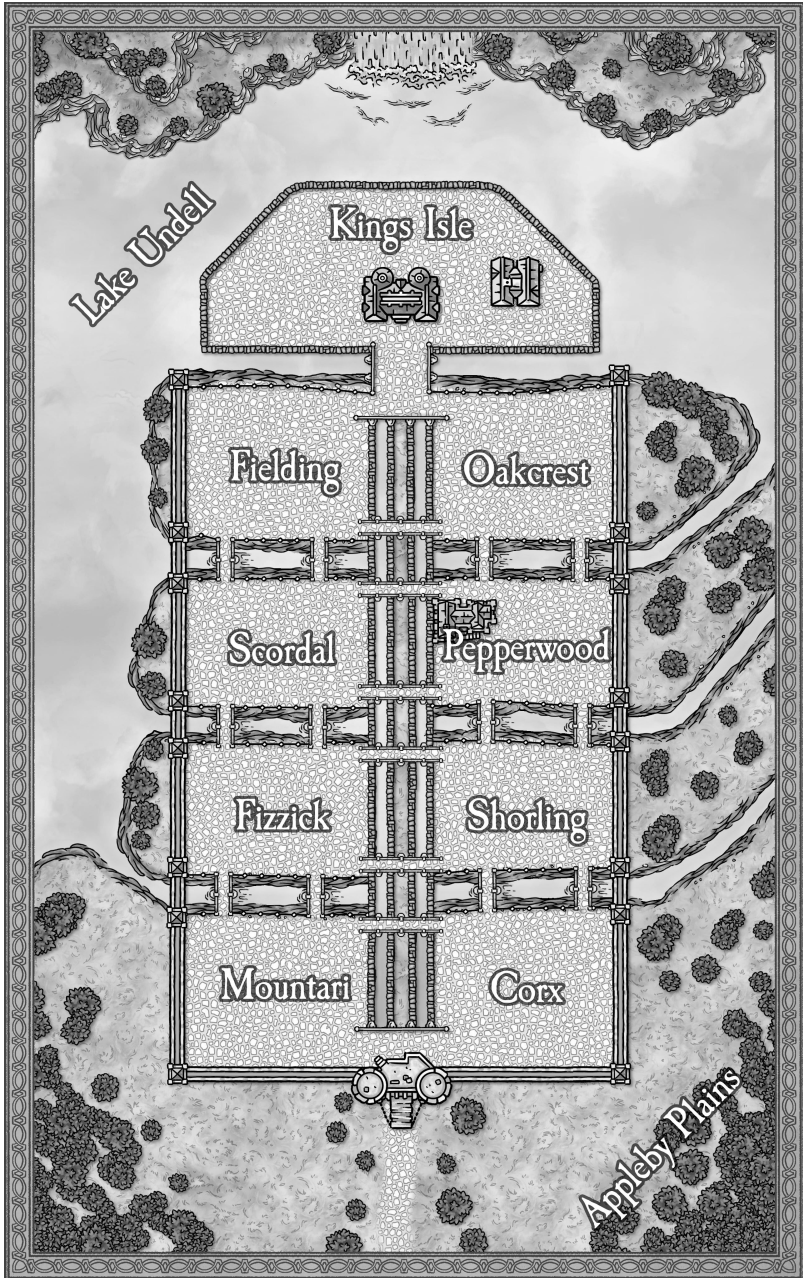
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Faded Reality

The dream was always the same.

He was inside a dark room. It had rounded walls and a low ceiling. The room was oppressively small and claustrophobic, the air heavy and stale. At the front of the room, there were twin windows with cylindrical edges. If he looked through them, Jordi knew he would see a hazy, ever-changing scene, but he could never quite make out what it was.

This time, he chose not to look.

Two rows of theatre seats, along with a carpeted, sloped floor, all ran towards the windows. As if there was anything to see. Jordi took a long, deep breath.

He was in the Control Room.

Jordi didn't know why he called it that. He was helpless within the room; he loathed being there, in fact. But that was the name of this place.

The Control room haunted his dreams and plagued his senses. It was uncomfortably hot, causing the panicked feeling one gets when they become stuck inside a thick wool sweater. Jordi's senses were repressed yet heightened at the same time. No matter how many times he found himself here, he could never escape the physical and emotional discomfort.

The dream never changed.

He was wasting time. Jordi made his way towards the back of the room, his steps completely silent. He could feel the familiar vibrations beneath his feet, close yet far, coming from some unknown source. There were

sounds, too, coming from outside the room, but they were dull and nondescript, nothing more than monotone booms like the crashing of distant waves on a rocky shoreline.

At times Jordi could almost detect voices, echoes, and whispers that bounced off the curved walls that were quickly absorbed by the darkness. Always, just beyond his vision, the shadow people lurked. They drifted along the edges of the room with sluggish movements keeping to the concealment of the darkness. Whether these were harmless or hostile, Jordi didn't know. Instinctively, however, he knew that these would never let him pass. He was trapped inside the dome-like room.

The dream never changed.

At the back of the room, Jordi raised a hand and felt his fingers brush against the black velvet curtain. He threw it aside, inwardly bracing himself. Stalling only prolonged the inevitable. There was no other path through the dream. Still, he hated this part.

He now stood within the Void.

It was smaller than the Control room, hardly more than a closet. Yet, there were no walls. No floor. No ceiling. Nothing but the never-ending darkness. Jordi knew if he were to walk into the Void, he would be lost forever.

Before him in uneven, precarious-looking stacks was a wall of TV monitors. They were of various sizes and shapes and their flickering screens flooded the exposed area with dim blue light. The buzzing electricity in the air made Jordi's skin tingle unpleasantly.

Each monitor played a different but familiar scene. Fragments of his life. Bits of half-forgotten events. Memories. At first, everything looked to be random but, in fact, every image shared one thing in common.

It was everything he wished he could forget.

Jordi sighed, fixing his gaze on the jumble of images. He knew they would not go away until he looked at them, acknowledged each and every one.

The dream never changed.

There was a boy. He was curled into the fetal position with his eyes squeezed shut. He was under a bed. A faraway voice was calling his name but the boy did not respond. He mumbled to himself incoherently.

Jordi stared at the image, his eyes narrowing. After he had taken it in, accepted it, and admitted that it was so, he began concentrating on the screen intently. The humming grew louder, the flickering light more intense. Pop! The screen went dark.

He moved on to the next one, which was simply a blur of color as if someone were spinning. It was accompanied by a high-pitched whining sound that set Jordi's teeth on edge. The combination of sight and noise made him feel sick to his stomach. He audibly moaned as he forced himself to focus. Pop! With a surge of electricity, it was gone.

He lost count after a while as images came and went. Images of his younger self. Of his family. Of the Woman.

She stood over him, a hand raised to strike. Her face was obscured by static. Jordi grit his teeth, experiencing the childlike terror her threatening pose invoked. He became distracted by the image on the screen next to the Woman, feeling a sickening dread in his heart. His brother held up a hand, a look of surprise on his face as blood dripped from his fingers.

Jeffry!

The screen went dark, leaving a faded outline of his brother's body. A momentary reminder. Then it, too, was gone.

"Not today."

Jordi's eyes moved to the image above that of his injured sibling, staring at the disapproving face of his father. He was doing up his coat.

"When?" a small voice asked. His father frowned in irritation.

"I said not today."

"Where are you?" There was laughter in Jeffrey's voice.

"There's something wrong with him!"

Wincing, Jordi looked around for the monitor matching this audio. It came from a TV on the floor, angled slightly away from him. The camera swung erratically, moving from the face of his mother to that of a stone-faced doctor. The screen glitched, distorting the man's face.

"...overly sensitive and easily upset. He seems to... negative stimulation, but... unlikely... medication. Unless, of course, there is some family history to suuuuuuuuhh-gest-"

The audio quit altogether, filling the room with static.

Jordi placed a hand on his chest and waited for his heartbeat to return to normal.

"Where are you?" There was laughter in Jeffrey's voice.

Jordi looked at the TV and smiled in spite of himself. The screen displayed an image of Jeffrey extending his hand towards the camera, grinning in anticipation. Jordi raised his own hand, reaching for Jeffrey.

A useless gesture. Jeffrey could neither see nor hear him. Jordi could not manipulate the scene in any way. The black and white image twitched manically and suddenly Jeffrey's expression changed to one of intense pain. Jordi turned away. He felt sick.

There was an image of him walking hand in hand with his twin. Jeffrey had a relaxed smile on his face. Jordi placed a paper on his brother's palm.

"I have a surprise for you-you-you-you-"

The monitor exploded causing Jordi to jump violently, shielding his face as shards of glass whipped past. The smell of smoke filled the air. The acidic substance made his eyes water.

"Get out!"

His mother's voice was shrill. The boys ran from the house, Jordi clinging to Jeff's hand protectively.

Jeffrey laughed.

Pop!

The screen went black, a crack appearing across its center. After a few seconds, thick black goo began seeping out. It had an odor of burnt wires.

"You don't get it! You never get it!"

Jordi looked at the monitor, dread welling up within him. Two boys huddled on the bedroom floor, holding one another. The angry shouts of their parents echoed up the stairs.

"You think it's my fault he's blind?! You think I wanted any of this?!"

One of the boys started to cry.

"I said, not today." His father frowned in irritation.

"Get out!" His mother's voice was shrill.

"It's a puzzle!" Jeffrey ran his hands over the note excitedly, feeling the raised indents his brother had made. *"Take a leap through space and time..."*

Jordi jumped violently as one of the monitors came screeching back to life. A blur of color, as if someone was spinning. It was accompanied by a high-pitched whining sound that set Jordi's teeth on edge. The

combination of sight and noise made him feel sick to his stomach.

Annoyed, Jordi stepped into the Void, placing his hands against the screen. He pushed, tipping the monitor over and watching it disappear into nothingness. Its sound echoed back at him, slowly fading until the darkness swallowed it at last.

His actions caused a ripple effect. Every monitor in the room suddenly flickered, displaying the same image over and over on a loop.

Jordi shut his eyes.

Tires squealed, filling the room with the awful sound.

Jordi covered his ears.

Tires squealed, filling the room with the awful sound.

Jeffry was jumping around like a maniac.

"I figured it out!"

Tires squealed, filling the room with the awful sound.

Jeffry was jumping around like a maniac.

"I figured it out!" The familiar features of his brother distorted suddenly, revealing a twisted, maniacal face, leering at him and filled with hatred.

"I need to die."

Jordi pressed his hands against his ears harder. He couldn't block out the words.

"I need to die-die-die-"

Too late, Jordi recognized the danger and lunged towards his brother. Their fingers brushed as Jeffry fell backward, a terrified expression on his face.

Tires squealed, filling the room with the awful sound.

Jordi's screams drowned it out, the animal-like noise expanding throughout the room and turning into white-hot light that consumed the Void, obliterating it.

Jordi jumped violently, gripping the edge of his desk. There was icy sweat on his forehead. Breathing hard, he looked around, confused.

He was at school.

A few of the students closest to him were staring. Jordi realized that his mouth was hanging open. Trembling, he hunched forward, picking up a book and pretending to read. His mind was racing.

How did I get here?

Jordi searched his memory, trying to recall where he last remembered being. Everything was hazy.

The blackouts are getting worse.

His chest felt tight. Jordi had to consciously remind himself to slow his breathing. He practiced what the therapist taught him.

Visualize a door.

He did so, breathing up one side of it, holding across the top, exhaling down the other side, holding across the bottom. After a minute or two he felt his muscles relax, his heart rate slowing down.

Jordi raised his hand and asked to go to the restroom. The teacher gave a disapproving nod. Forcing himself to walk slowly, he left the classroom and turned left. Once in the hall, he broke into a trot, his limbs coursing with anxiety-fueled energy. He dodged into the bathroom and leaned over the sink, staring at his reflection.

He had no memory of this day.

He was wearing blue jeans and a grey hoodie, which was his standard attire. Even so, lacking the memory of waking up and putting them *on* was worrying.

Trying to reassure himself, Jordi did a mental run-through of what Monty Elliot, his therapist, had told him about memory lapses. "*Often, in cases of complex post-traumatic stress disorder, there may be periods of dissociative episodes. Dissociation is a feeling of being disconnected from reality, where sensory experience is muted or abnormal. This can lead to a loss of connection to time, place, and identity. It can range from a mild sense of detachment to a more serious disconnection from reality. During a severe episode of dissociation, it is possible for the sufferer to experience total amnesia, although this is rare.*" Jordi had not actually told his therapist, or anyone else, about the blackouts. He was too afraid of what it could mean. His solution thus far was to go through a checklist of himself and his surroundings in the hopes that he could piece things together unassisted.

He checked his pockets, producing his phone and wallet. His bus pass was missing, although he had a vague recollection of it being expired anyways. There was a five-dollar bill folded lengthwise in the center pocket.

Jordi took it out and frowned. He didn't fold money like that. He didn't fold money at *all*. His father must have put it there, he decided. It would be enough to take public transit home.

He checked his watch. It wasn't even lunchtime yet. And there was no money for food. *Again*. Naturally, realizing this made him feel hungry. To be fair, though, he had no idea when he'd last eaten.

Jordi looked down at his phone, relief surging through him when he saw the date. It was adequately close enough to his last memory to make him feel reassured.

That's not so bad. Maybe the blackouts were not as big of an issue as he was making them out to be.

There was a text message on his phone. Jordi tapped the screen, sighing. It was his mother. It was always his mother. She had written in her clipped, slightly indecipherable manner.

Doris eggs.

Doris eggs. Because *that* makes sense. Actually, though, Jordi knew exactly what it meant. His grandmother was out of eggs and Jordi was to buy some on his way home.

So much for bus fare.

Pushing down a rising sense of irritation, he shoved the phone back into his pocket and left the restroom. He felt sufficiently calm enough to return to class, useless as that would be. Mr. Marco hated him. He was pretty much doomed to fail.

On impulse, when Jordi reached the end of the hallway, he veered away from the correct route that would take him back to class. Marching with an air of purpose he certainly didn't feel, Jordi walked straight to the nearest exit, shoved the door open, and kept right on walking.

He had never left school before without permission. He half-expected alarms to go off the second he left the yard, but no such dramatics occurred.

Jordi found himself playing hooky for the first time in his life and was surprised by how unemotional he felt about it.

No money for transit meant that he had a forty-five-minute walk ahead of him, more when the detour to the store was factored in. Jordi chose the main route, even though this took him through a busier part of town. Most of the time he would have chosen the more scenic path through the

park. Being surrounded by greenery and the nearby river soothed his nerves and helped him muster up the calm he would need to cope once he arrived home.

To the inevitable chaos and turmoil he would find there.

Jordi found himself struggling to adjust to living in the city. Granted, they had only moved here four months ago, but the noisy, crowded neighborhood was a far cry from what he was used to.

They had come to the city to live with his grandmother.

She lived in a large but neglected old house in a low-income area. To be fair, back when she had bought the home, that hadn't been the case. But proximity to the nearby university and the demand for affordable living had been a magnet for investors. They had bought up all the surrounding houses, either ripping them down to put up multi-level apartment buildings or modifying the original structure to house multiple units. These, of course, had confusing and legally questionable layouts but were cheap to rent.

No one on Jordi's street actually owned the home they lived in. The transient, student-aged demographic that the low rent attracted made the entire area less than ideal to actually reside in. The postage-stamp-sized front yards were full of garbage and grass that was knee-high. Broken windows and graffiti marked the more hopeless buildings, while dried-out flower boxes and overgrown herb gardens indicated the units of those who had made some attempts, no matter how futile.

His grandmother's house was sandwiched between two four-story-high apartment buildings. These had been built so close to the property line Jordi had to turn sideways to get into the backyard. This was not really an issue, however, as there was no incentive to go there. The remnants of an abandoned garden – cut off from sunlight now that two buildings were present – a destroyed shed, and a broken BBQ were all that was back there. Beyond retrieving the garbage bins once a week, Jordi didn't bother with it.

Jordi suspected that his grandmother could afford to move to a better location. He knew that she had, in fact, been approached multiple times by hopeful real estate agents, but she had stubbornly hung onto the property while the encroaching infrastructure rendered her home less and less valuable. That, coupled with the lack of upkeep, and the place probably wasn't really worth much anymore.

That his grandmother insisted on staying here was a bone of contention in the family. Jordi's father had grown up in the house, and his face always tightened with bitterness when his wife demanded that he take a more active role in encouraging its sale. Not that he had any love for the place. He just hated the confrontation that was sure to result from mentioning the idea to his mother. She may be a tiny woman in her eighties, but she was feisty. Just mentioning putting the house on the market would throw his grandmother into a fit.

She had lived in this house for over fifty years and apparently had every intention of dying in it.

“Besides,” she would say, “I need to be close to the University. I'm there every day.”

This would produce a frustrated sigh from her son. “Mother, you’ve been retired for *years* now. You don’t need to live near the university anymore.”

His grandmother had been a mathematics professor at the university for decades and had taken the mandatory retirement hard. This was at least partly responsible for his parents’ decision to upend their lives and move to the city. His grandmother was becoming forgetful and really needed more care than they could give her while living so far away. The other reason, of course...

“*We need a fresh start!*” Jordi’s mother had said. His father had found an accounting firm close to the house, and it was assumed there would be more money due to living rent-free with his grandmother. Jordi had learned of their plans when he came home one day and his mother was throwing Jeffry’s clothes into a box marked ‘toss.’ He remembered frowning and picking at the stitching in his brother’s baseball glove as she continued cheerfully, “*Once Doris is in a nursing home, we’ll sell the house and buy one in the country. It’ll be two or three months, tops.*”

It was not.

The deadline had come and gone. From the very start, his grandmother had resisted the new living situation. She made it clear that she did not need or want them in her home, thus beginning the bitter argument that still was not resolved.

The first few weeks were filled with shouting matches. Jordi’s mother and grandmother had almost come to blows on everything from furniture placement to grocery lists. Jordi’s mother complained about his grandmother’s obvious hoarding issues. Jordi’s grandmother complained about the stacks of unopened moving

boxes that were crammed into every spare bit of space.

Then there was the war of eggs. It turned out Jordi's grandmother had a bit of an obsession. She religiously consumed several eggs a day, both at breakfast and tea. Heaven help them if they ever ran out. Jordi's mother had only made that mistake once. Thus, Jordi's errand today.

His mother had started her share of fights, too, however. One day, she threw out massive amounts of what she considered to be garbage. Jordi's grandmother never threw anything away, no matter how broken or useless it was, so this was a problem for her.

Jordi tended to hide in his room most of the time.

His mother had a point. The house was dirty, cluttered, and bizarre. His grandmother had covered most of the first-floor windows with pieces of cardboard. There were multiple chains and locks on all the exterior doors as if she feared for her safety. During the night, Jordi would wake up to hear his grandmother wandering through the house, mumbling incoherently to herself. The family woke one morning to find that she had emptied several boxes of their clothing onto the floor, and meticulously cut them up with scissors.

When confronted, she had sat in the middle of her handiwork, a satisfied expression on her face.

That had been the final straw for Jordi's mother. She was eight months pregnant, living in a filthy, hostile environment, and Jordi's father was almost never home.

That had been the mother of all arguments.

"This has to stop! Do you even know why we live here?!"

“Because you and your horrible wife keep making babies you can’t afford, I expect.”

His father rubbed his temples, exasperated.

“Yes, mother. I made the terrible decision to become an accountant, and you’ve never gotten over the shame.”

“What a waste of an education!”

“Doris!” His mother’s voice was sharp and filled with contempt. Jordi winced. “We’re only here because the University called and said you were regularly showing up, wandering the campus, and teaching random classes!”

His grandmother sounded shocked. “What a lie! I’ve never done that!”

“See what I mean, Pete? This isn’t working!”

“That’s the first intelligent thing I’ve ever heard you say!” Jordi heard his grandmother storm out of the room, throwing over her shoulder, “Peter, tell your fat wife to stop eating my eggs!”

Surprisingly, things did get better after that night. Jordi’s parents moved his grandmother’s belongings into one section of the house, and it was agreed upon by all parties that the only shared space would be the kitchen and dining room.

Jordi was enrolled in school shortly after, allowing him some separation from the tense living situation and although it wasn’t perfect, it *was* better.

Besides, he actually got along with his grandmother.



The Opening in the Floor

With the carton of eggs tucked under his arm, Jordi finally walked up the driveway to his grandmother's house. Both cars were missing, he noted with relief, which meant that neither of his parents was home. That would save him having to make explanations.

As soon as he entered the house, Jordi heard the sound of a drawer getting pulled open, followed by the metallic clink of a knife. He quickly spoke up, reassuring his grandmother that he was not an intruder.

“Hi, Grandma! It's only me!”

He entered the kitchen, smiling at his grandmother. She was wearing a threadbare pink housecoat and mismatched slippers. Jordi set the egg carton on the counter as she stared at him suspiciously. She seemed to be trying to place him.

A flicker of recognition appeared in her grey eyes.

“Jordi?”

Jordi nodded, tapping the carton. “I brought you some eggs.”

“How kind!” His grandmother gave an incredulous laugh. “I needed eggs, you know.”

“I know.” Jordi reached for the kettle. “Should we have some tea?”

“I suppose so,” she replied, her frown slowly returning. She squinted at him, confused. “I thought you were blind.”

This was a conversation Jordi had had many times before. He forced a smile.

“That’s my brother *Jeffry*. We’re identical twins, remember?”

His grandmother nodded, visibly relaxing.

“Of course. *Jeffry*.” She looked around, puzzled. “Where is *Jeffry*?”

Jordi filled a pot with water and placed it on the burner.

“*Jeffry*’s gone, Grandma.” He studied the backsplash behind the stove. Yellowed tiles with pumpkins on them. It was hard to imagine there *ever* being a time when these were a desirable aesthetic.

He felt a hand touch his back, startling him.

Jordi’s grandmother looked up at him solemnly.

“I’m sorry, dear. Sometimes I forget things.” She looked incredibly sad as she made the acknowledgment, and he reached around and hugged her gently.

“That’s ok, Grandma. Sometimes I forget things, too.”

He dropped three eggs into the water, preparing their usual snack in something that had become almost ritualistic in nature. They would drink herbal tea in fancy China cups, and have a hard-boiled egg each, with one left over for his grandmother’s breakfast the following day.

His grandmother smiled in excitement and hurried to the opposite side of the room, prying open a cupboard with her fingernails because the

knob had fallen off. She selected the cups with great care while Jordi filled a teapot with water from the kettle.

“Do you like lilacs, Jordi?”

He grinned. “Those are my favorite flowers, Grandma! How’d you know?” It was perhaps a little deceptive to tell her this regardless of the choice she made, but it made her so happy Jordi decided it was forgivable.

When the eggs were ready, he carried them to the dining room, where his grandmother had arranged the rest of their feast: Tea and soda crackers, laid upon a faded tablecloth. His parents had left the remnants of their breakfast on the table, and she had shoved it all into a precarious little pile at the far end.

Jordi carefully placed his grandmother’s egg on a plate and set it before her. He knew better than to offer to peel it. Peeling the shell off the egg seemed to be the highlight of her day. Delicately, she tapped her spoon against the side of the egg, pulling chips of shell away with expert fingers. She caught Jordi watching her and smiled proudly.

“Eggs are very important, Peter. You must eat an egg every day.”

Jordi agreed, overlooking the name discrepancy.

His grandmother held up the denuded egg, pointing. “See this little air pocket? You’ll find one in every egg. Every single egg has one. A secret little place between the egg and the shell.”

She was speaking animatedly, waving the subject of her soliloquy around. “Our world is like this egg. Remember that, Jordi. You must *never* forget.”

“I won’t,” Jordi promised, rolling his egg across the table, cracking the shell into bits. They ate in silence, each lost in their own private thoughts.

After a few minutes, his grandmother placed her teacup down on its saucer with a clatter and stood up.

“I can’t stay much longer, I’m afraid,” she declared. “I must return to the University to teach my students.”

Jordi nodded his understanding. Experience had taught him it was better to go along with it.

“What will you talk about today, Grandma?”

“I’m a world-famous mathematician, you know,” she puffed proudly. “I’ve won awards for my important work.”

She wasn’t exaggerating. Jordi had seen the framed certificates of achievements in her office on the third level of the house. She had been the leading authority on advanced chemistry for decades, and she was also an expert on something she referred to as paradoxical mathematics, although Jordi didn’t have a clue what that was. Impossible math, he supposed.

He began gathering up the dirty dishes, brushing cracker crumbs off the tablecloth carefully. “I think your TV show is about to start, Grandma.”

His grandmother reacted with excitement to this.

“I believe you’re right!” She retrieved her purse, which was slung over the back of a chair, and pulled out the remote with a flourish. It never ceased to amaze Jordi that she always remembered where she’d put it. He smiled to himself and set about cleaning up the kitchen, listening to the sounds of daytime talk show hosts

getting scolded and laughed at by his grandmother.

He had finished the kitchen and moved on to the laundry when the side door slammed. He heard his mother's voice coming from the coatroom, grumbling about something. She came into the kitchen, leaning back as though the size and weight of her huge belly threatened to destabilize her should she attempt to walk normally. She stopped short when she spotted Jordi.

"What are you doing at home?"

Jordi shrugged. "It was a half day."

His mother looked relieved. "Good. I have a job I need you to do."

"I've got homework."

This comment was ignored. She went to the pantry and opened the door with an aggressive yank.

"I've cleared out Dad's office for the baby, so all his stuff needs to go upstairs to the attic."

Jordi cringed. The attic was where his grandmother's office was, and it was supposed to be strictly off-limits to the rest of them. His mother must have seen his hesitation because she rolled her eyes as she slammed a tube of frozen ground beef on the counter.

"It's *fine*. Doris never goes up there anymore. Your father will be home in a couple of hours, and I have a million things to get done today."

Knowing that an argument was going to get him nowhere, Jordi sighed and headed for the second floor, taking the stairs two at a time. The cramped hallway was stuffed with boxes and furniture that

used to be in his father's office. Poking his head in, Jordi looked around the tiny room.

The newly constructed crib took up a third of the square footage. The only other furniture in the room was a second-hand gliding chair and ottoman that his mother had found online. The room could benefit from a coat of paint, but at least it had been scrubbed clean. An open box on the floor was overflowing with tiny baby clothes, most of them in neutral colors. Jordi's mother wanted the baby's gender to be a surprise.

Lugging the boxes upstairs to the attic was a chore. The banana boxes were stuffed full of his father's books, the weight of them far surpassing the strength of the cardboard. Jordi was forced to balance the sagging boxes across his arms, staggering slightly as he struggled up the narrow, uneven stairs.

The attic was actually quite a pleasant room. Certainly not as disorderly and unkempt as the rest of the house.

Jordi lowered a box to the floor and rubbed his aching back. He decided he deserved a break, looking around curiously. His grandmother must have spent many hours up here over the years, he thought. He had to duck his head slightly where the ceiling sloped. The only windows were at either end of the room, but they let in plenty of light. Because they faced both the road and the backyard, they allowed for a decent view. Had they been on the sides of the room, the surrounding buildings would have blocked the sunshine almost entirely.

At the window facing the backyard, his grandmother had her desk. It was piled high with papers and books, but in such a way so as to suggest intention and some kind of method.

Beside the desk was a massive blackboard, covered in numbers and symbols that made absolutely no sense to Jordi, and he could see remnants of formulas long past visible beneath the more recent additions.

His favorite part of the attic, though, was the long table that ran alongside the protective railing by the stairs, in the center of the room. This was covered in chemistry-related objects: beakers, glass tubes, petri dishes, a *very* expensive-looking microscope, and an astonishing number of bottles with names that Jordi could not pronounce and most definitely should not touch. He leaned over the table eagerly, trying to read some of the faded labels. A dog-eared notebook lay open, every spare inch of paper covered in his grandmother's handwriting. He gingerly picked up a vial filled with a thick, greenish liquid, holding it to the light and giving it a swirl.

Cool.

It took the rest of the afternoon and into the evening for Jordi to finish dragging all of his father's things up the stairs. He tried to arrange everything in a sensible manner, cognizant of the invasion of his grandmother's sacred space. If she really didn't use the office anymore, perhaps it would be all right. He hoped so. He didn't want to cause another fight.

He was placing one of the final boxes on top of his father's desk when he carelessly pushed it too hard. Its neighboring box crashed to the floor loudly.

Jordi winced. Of course, in keeping with how the rest of his day had gone, this box contained all of his father's pens, knick-knacks, stray coins, and an entire flea market's worth of useless crap. The items scattered wildly across the floor on impact.

Groaning in irritation, Jordi dropped to the ground, trying to stop the spread. He worked quickly to retrieve the items that were more inclined to roll under bookcases or filing cabinets and be lost for all of time. The daylight was failing, and he chided himself for not turning on the light. The trinkets and objects were reduced to shadowy little piles everywhere.

Jordi grabbed everything within arms reach and shoved it unceremoniously back into the box. He was occupied with crawling under his grandmother's desk in pursuit of a roll of quarters when he noticed something glowing in the corner.

It wasn't bright, and in fact, he wouldn't have spotted it at all if it hadn't been for his awkward vantage. Jordi went to investigate, his curiosity piqued. Pushing aside a chair, he reached under a folding ladder and felt around until his fingers encircled a cylindrical object.

Exposing it to the murky light on his open palm, Jordi frowned at the curious thing. It was a small vial shaped like an hourglass. The mysterious substance within was a thick liquid, rather like molasses, but it was red, and inexplicably emitted light. Jordi tipped the vial back and forth, watching as the substance moved from one side to the other sluggishly.

He had never seen anything like it before.

There didn't seem to be any way to open the vial, nor were there any labels or markings to indicate what the substance was. What made it glow like that?!

Jordi must have spent a good five minutes staring at the mesmerizing liquid. The way it moved and shone was almost hypnotic. He found that he was reluctant to put it down as if he was

magnetically attracted to the substance in a way that surpassed logic and reason.

Jordi gave himself a shake. He had things to do. Crawling backward, he emerged from under his grandmother's desk, then looked down uncertainly at the vial. He wondered if it had fallen from his father's box, or whether it belonged to his grandmother. If it was his fathers, he had never seen it before.

It seemed more likely that it belonged to his grandmother. Perhaps it was some kind of chemical. Jordi slipped the vial into his pocket, deciding to ask her about it later.

He finished retrieving the rest of the items that he could still see in the dusky light, then placed the box back on his father's desk. Pausing, he heard voices downstairs and realized that his father had arrived home. It must be time to eat. Jordi went downstairs, the vial being immediately forgotten.

The meal was more unpleasant than usual. Both of his parents looked tense as if they were in a fight. They refused to look at one another, picking at their food with a stony silence Jordi found oppressive. His grandmother was also in a bad mood, due to her distaste for his mother's cooking. She complained fitfully.

"Why couldn't we just order a pizza?" She poked at her cold noodles peevishly. "This sauce smells like dog food."

"Mother, please."

Jordi's mother gave an irritated huff. Snatching up their plates, she stormed into the kitchen, muttering angrily to herself. Something about being perfectly fine with them all starving to death.

Jordi's father glared down at his cell phone, drumming his fingers against the screen rapidly as he replied to text messages. After a moment, he glanced up, blinking.

"How was school, Jef- er, Jordi?"

Jordi shrugged. His father frowned. He opened his mouth to speak, but his phone chimed, distracting him.

"Jordi!"

His mother sounded angry.

"I asked you to take the garbage out!" Jordi listened to a noisy commotion in the kitchen as she pulled the bag from the bin and dropped it on the floor with unnecessary force. "You act like I'm your personal maid! I'm *sick* of your laziness!"

He rolled his eyes.

"What do you think I was doing all afternoon?" he demanded heatedly, eliciting a glare from his father.

"Don't talk to your mother like that!"

"It shouldn't be too much to ask for a little help around here sometimes!" his mother went on, throwing dishes into the sink roughly. "I ask you to do *one* thing, and- Oh!"

A plate shattered, followed by a terrible crash. Jordi jumped to his feet, rushing after his father into the kitchen. His eyes widened with fear at the sight of his mother. She was lying on the floor, surrounded by broken bits of dinnerware. She clutched her belly, grimacing in pain.

"P-peter," she gasped, terrified. "The baby!"

Jordi's father fell to the floor beside her, looking back at him with panicked eyes.

"Call an ambulance, *now!*"

“What did you break?” the shrill voice of his grandmother demanded.

Jordi ran back to the dining room, grabbing his father’s cell phone. Quickly, he punched in the emergency number, his heart in his throat.

It felt like they waited forever for the paramedics to arrive. When they finally did, things moved quickly. Jordi watched his mother get placed on a stretcher, and she and Jordi’s father were loaded into the back of the ambulance. It pulled out of the laneway, flashing its lights, and Jordi was suddenly alone. The chaos was eerily replaced by silence as if nothing had even happened. He stood in the doorway looking out. His chest felt tight. He was struggling to hold back tears.

“Let’s order a pizza.”

Jordi slowly turned, staring at his grandmother with a bewildered frown. She smiled, handing him the phone.

“Extra cheese,” she said, patting his arm and wandering into the living room. Jordi looked down at the phone dumbly. In the next room, the tv came to life, filling the house with the sounds of simulated laughter.

What just happened?!

Jordi crept into the living room and sat on the sofa. His hands were shaking. His mind was going a mile a minute.

Was his mother ok? What about the baby?!

He checked his phone every few minutes for the next two hours. Finally, Jordi couldn’t stand it anymore and tried calling his father.

It went straight to voicemail.

Another two hours crept by. Still nothing. Jordi tried calling his parents a few more times, but there was never any answer.

Not knowing what else to do, Jordi eventually made his way up to the second floor and sat on his bed. His grandmother had already fallen asleep on the couch downstairs.

He checked his phone one final time, then lay down. He felt sick with worry. The prolonged stress began taking its toll.

Jordi closed his eyes and drifted into an uneasy sleep.

The dream should have been the same as always.

He was in the Control Room, but this time, he could see clearly through the windows.

The view was consistent with lying prone on a bed. Jordi could see a torso, arms, and legs, all recognizable as his own, except that they were *massive*. He felt the floor rising and falling gently as though the Control room was contained within the head of this living, breathing giant.

And he was its tiny occupant.

Jordi shivered involuntarily. It was an eerie feeling. He was inside his own head, using the eyes as windows to see the outside world. There was no sound. The vibrations had ceased. All was peaceful and still.

The dream never changed. *Never*.

Yet everything *had* changed.

Strangest of all, Jordi felt more conscious, more in control of his thoughts and movements, than ever before.

Almost like this wasn't a dream at all.

Jordi turned around, looking at the Control room. It was the same as always. There were still no exits. The dark walls were curved, seamless, and devoid of life. The rows of theatre seats remained empty, still subtly inviting him to sit and observe the world from within. Jordi touched one, surprised at how soft and smooth it felt. How *real*.

The hair stood up on the back of his neck.

This was no dream.

Beginning to panic, Jordi walked towards the curtain at the back of the room. He would enter the Void, force a power surge, and escape this place.

Only there was no curtain.

The velvet obstruction had been replaced with some kind of... skin.

Jordi touched it cautiously. The thin material trembled beneath his fingers. The movement was not the spasmed response of a living thing, but rather, the effect his hands created when pressing against the organic membrane. Jordi frowned. It felt quite fragile. He wondered what would happen if he pushed *harder*.

He hesitated. The cold, slimy texture of the barrier was unpleasant to touch. He also had no idea what he would find *behind* it. Usually, the air within the Control room tingled with electricity, but now the atmosphere felt moist and thick as if he were in a swamp. Although he couldn't know for sure, Jordi was convinced that the Void would not be there.

Or that it would at least be unrecognizable.

He became aware of a warmth emanating from his hip. Looking down, Jordi was surprised to discover a soft glow coming from the right pocket of his pants. Reaching inside, he closed his fingers against something warm and oblong.

It was the strange vial he had found in the attic.

The red liquid still glowed softly, but the fluid was not as thick now. It slipped from side to side easily as Jordi tipped it around his palm, watching the mesmerizing substance with wonder-filled eyes. He speculated as to whether it could be used as a light source. If this were the case, he could at least see how thick the obstructive membrane might be. Or perhaps even get a view of what was behind it.

Holding the vial up to the organic wall had an immediate effect.

The red liquid flared to life, activated by some physical or chemical means unknown to him. Jordi jumped back, nearly dropping the vial. While the substance within remained cool to the touch, the subtle glow increased to such a brightness that Jordi could no longer look directly at it. The Control room became a disorienting mixture of light and shadows. Within the vial, the liquid began to swell, completely filling the small chamber. Jordi's knees began to tremble.

Extending the substance towards the wall, Jordi watched as the fragile membrane melted away, leaving jagged burn marks along its edges. He felt his heart pounding in his chest as he moved the vial back and forth, close to the bubbling, hissing skin. The hole began to expand, the membrane shrinking and oozing away like a spiderweb exposed to a flame.

When the hole was large enough to fit through, Jordi took a deep breath, steadying himself. Then stepped forward, into the Void.

The expanse was reduced to a pulpy, rotten-looking mess. The walls were coated in a mucus-like substance that quivered at the slightest breath. The mass of TV wires had been replaced by throbbing black veins that snaked across the walls and ceiling, secreting a foul-smelling liquid.

Shifting, Jordi felt the floor shudder and retreat beneath his feet, the red substance continuing to react with the organic environment. Anything within arms reach began to shrivel up and melt. Whole portions of the wall began to shrink away, dripping and pooling on the ground around him in black, putrid puddles.

That was when he saw the trapdoor.

It was in the center of the room, made of wood boards that were slick with moss and rot and looked extremely old. The side that was closest to him had a rusty iron ring serving as a handle. Jordi had to assume it was a door to an underground tunnel.

An opening in the floor.

Ignoring the sizzling room around him, Jordi bent down and gripped the metal ring, pulling the trapdoor open with a grunt. He let out a gasp of surprise.

It wasn't a tunnel. It was a massive, light-filled expanse, with no visible objects or material to be seen save for a long, rusty ladder that descended downward as far as the eye could see. It disappeared into the mist below, giving no indication as to where it went or how long it was. Jordi stood and stared, completely immobilized, the glowing vial still gripped tightly in his fingers. After a moment, he shoved it into his pocket and crouched beside the opening. The air was cool and fresh, a slight breeze pushing up through the hole in the floor and tousling his hair.

He already knew what he was going to do. After all, there was no other exit, no other way out of this place.

The only way forward was down. He imagined that he would wake up at some point.

Jordi carefully wiped his hands on his pants before lowering himself into the hole, feeling around with his foot for the nearest rung. When he was certain this was

a secure place to exert all of his body weight, Jordi took a long, deep breath. Committed now, he left the Void.

He expected it to be a long climb, and it was. His muscles quickly tired of the repetitive action as Jordi carefully descended rung after rung. Every now and then he paused to look around, hoping to catch a glimpse of something beyond the thick, cloud-like mist but there was nothing. For a long time, looking up provided the only anomaly in the blank whiteness, as he could still make out the little square he had entered this place through. A small speck of black against the never-changing skyline. Eventually, however, this too faded into nothingness. Jordi was swallowed up by the heavy cloud, and still, he descended.

The cold, moist air made him shiver. Jordi began to feel pressure in his head and neck. He was able to ignore the sensation for a while, but as time went on and he climbed further and further down the ladder, the pressure intensified, making it hard to concentrate on the task at hand.

He tried taking a break, looping his arm around a rung and rubbing at his temples. That was when he realized something odd. The strings of his hoodie were dangling *up* as if gravity was reversed. Jordi tapped the string, watching it swing in front of his eyes in disbelief. He did feel as though all the blood in his body was rushing to his head. As impossible as it seemed, it would explain the dizzying pressure he felt.

Jordi decided to try an experiment. Slowly, he turned his body around on the ladder, taking care not to lose his grip on the damp rungs. The cautious shuffle concluded with his hands on the rung his feet had been on. Sure enough, his

headache drained away, and his clothing no longer tugged upwards.

What?!

Jordi was now traveling *up* the ladder but *going in the same direction as before!*

It was a bit mind-boggling. Jordi decided that it was a paradoxical event you might experience in a dream, and this was somewhat comforting to him. For surely this must be a dream! Despite feeling fully awake, there was no other way to explain it. This was indeed the most bizarre experience he had ever had.

After climbing for what felt like hours, Jordi, at last, began to note a change in the environment. He was still engulfed in a muggy, soupy fog, but it was getting darker. Imperceptible at first, but becoming more and more obvious as he continued to climb the ladder. Yes, he thought grimly, it *was* becoming darker.

Jordi glanced around, squinting. He could make out shadows in the distance, long, snakelike tendrils nearly as thick as his own body. These became more and more plentiful, and Jordi could finally see one clearly enough to identify it as a root.

He frowned, bewildered. Why were there roots in the sky? They were massive, branching out in all directions and splitting into smaller tendrils that seemed to be reaching for him. He reassured himself, after giving them a good long stare, that they were not moving. The ladder continued to go upwards, laced here and there with delicate fibers of the root system. These entwined with its eroded rungs, pulling gently but firmly, threatening the integrity of the ancient metal. Jordi brushed at the

roots nervously and hurried on, eager for his climb to end.

At last, it did so. Tilting his head upwards, Jordi could see another trapdoor above him, surrounded by roots and shut tightly. Finally reaching it, he bent his neck, placed his shoulders against the old planks, and pushed upwards, praying it wouldn't be bolted from the other side.

It swung open easily, crashing down on the floor beyond. Jordi hesitated, uneasy now that he could see the total darkness within. He didn't have much choice except to enter unless he wanted to retrace the hundreds of steps it had taken him to get here. His arms and legs were burning from the recent exertion, and he doubted he would even make it. Plus, what would he be going back to? There was still no way out of the Void.

Taking a deep breath, Jordi grasped the final rung and pulled himself through the opening.

The opening in the floor.

For that's what it was. Jordi stood up, brushing dirt off his pants and looking around, bewildered. He was in a small room like a cellar. It had dirt walls and a dirt floor, but the ceiling was made of planks. There was a yellowish light penetrating the cracks between them.

I'm in someone's house, Jordi thought nervously.

As he hesitated, uncertain of what to do next, he heard the creak of footsteps moving above.

He felt his heartbeat quicken, and his palms began to sweat. Jordi had no idea where he was.

But he knew he was about to find out.