

## A World of Paper

By Jaden Cohen

I walk to my destiny alone, as all men must. Except theirs could hardly be called destiny. As I walk, the world itself seems to shy away, animals fleeing, trees bending backward and even the wind itself seems hesitant to brush my skin. Perhaps they could sense what was coming. I don't mind. I've never been keen on their company in the first place.

"World of Paper" I murmur dismissively under my breath.

The River comes to mind.

I smile.

It feels strange. I've never smiled much. Never had a reason to smile. But now I do.

*Soon, I think, Soon.*

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I was born.

I remember those days most fondly of all. The world was new to me, not yet worn out. My mother would carry me into our private gardens, singing a sweet lullaby. Her auburn hair swayed gently, her green eyes calm as she seemed to become a neverending font of love. Her voice would rise to the heavens, and then trickle back down to the earth, moving in patterns that my infant mind struggled to comprehend. In those moments, even the plants in the garden seemed to lean into her, desperate to catch more of her sweet song. When she sang to me a second time, some of the novelty had worn off, but it was still wonderful.

When she sang the same song to me a third time, I began to wonder.

Was this all there was to the world? One song and one garden?

It could not be so, I knew that truth even in my infant mind.

That night, after Mother sang the song once more and closed the door, I forced myself to my feet. The world spun and my muscles burned, but I didn't give in.

I had a goal.

The sides of my cradle proved to be mighty walls indeed, but they gave way before my determination. The cold stone stairs proved a greater challenge, but even they couldn't impede me. In circles I traveled, every step taking me higher than ever before, only to reveal the step beyond it. Time became a singular moment, and in the next, I stood at the peak of my house's turret. The window loomed above me, a view into the world beyond. It was far too high for one as young as me, but I refused to give in. The rough stonework gave me purchase as I clambered up to the window, chubby fingers grasping at its lip. And then I was there.

I stood on a windowsill, overlooking a seemingly *endless* expanse. The house I had thought my world was merely one of many, stonework flickering in the light of torches. Dirt roads connected them all, populated by giants scurrying around like ants. The smell of grilled meat and horse manure came to me on a light breeze, accompanied by the faint sounds of laughter and discussion. It was somewhere new. Somewhere exciting. Suddenly, I knew, more sure than anything I had ever known before, that I needed to go there. I needed to see what was there. *I needed it.*

I took a step, the outer lip of the windowsill directly below my chin. I leaned forward further, shifting the center of my mass over the tipping point. I started to fall, only to be interrupted by an earsplitting shriek and soft hands grabbing my chubby body. I fought of course. I wanted to see the city beyond, but where walls and steps had failed to stop me, my terrified mother proved up to the task. The sight of the window shrinking as Mother carried me to her

room, babbling nervously the whole way, sent shivers of longing and desire through my body. A whole new world to explore, one that was ever-so-slightly shrinking away from me.

I never forgot that sight.

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The further I walk the greater the heat of the sun grows, like a warning murmured against my skin. My smile grows.

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I was three.

And I was *starved*.

The sight of the shrinking city was burned into my mind, seared into my soul. A world beyond the one I lived in. I wanted to know what it was like. I *needed* to. I felt like a starving animal, trying to live off of a picture of food.

I wanted something, something I could not put in words, not then anyway. So I starved.

That day, a knock on the door interrupted my mother's song. She set me down and as she went to answer it, I snuck behind her. She hesitated before opening the door, revealing a truly ancient man. I only saw a glimpse of amber eyes before I was charging, chubby legs pumping as I ran. The light was so close, a glimpse into the greater world. I dove, redirecting all my energy to my legs. Almost...

Rough hands seized me out of the air with impossible agility. "Oh? What's this?" A voice asked, seeming to come from far away as I tried to sear a glimpse of a horse eating hay into my mind.

"Oh! I'm so sorry! That's my son." mother replied, embarrassed.

The old man raised me to his face and observed me as I observed him. He was ancient, with short white hair and a face so wrinkled it seemed like he could vanish within its folds. Yet his amber eyes observed me with clarity. There was challenge in that gaze, and not truly knowing why, I matched him, gazing into his eyes with determination.

He observed me for another moment, a strange expression coming across his face before handing me back to mother.

“Why was he trying to run out the door?” the old man questioned.

“Oh! Well...I don't really know. He's always been adventurous.”

“Hmmm... young man,” he addressed me, “Why are you trying to run away?”

Language was relatively new to me, but I spoke regardless.

“I want to see more.”

He gazed at me, that same strange expression appearing on his face, and turned back to my mother.

“Huh. He's...something.”

My mother laughed. “Yeah, he's a handful. Anyway, what brings you here?”

He laughed, “Right, totally forgot. Is the merchant here?”

Mother's smile grew strained. “He died a few years back. I'm his wife. I can handle any of your requests.”

“Oh, I'm terribly sorry for your loss.”

Mother waved aside his condolences, “It's fine. I've had time to heal.”

“In that case, I'm here to join a caravan. I need one willing to travel to the center of the Delarish desert.”

Mother smiled at him. “That shouldn't be a problem.”

I stopped paying attention to the conversation, simply observing the old man as he talked to mother. Something about him stood out. In my memories, he seemed...comfortable. Confident in the way only someone who knew his place could be.

I spent the rest of the day unabashedly staring.

When it finally came time for him to leave, he came over to me, carrying a rectangular object in his hand. He crouched before me.

“You can read, right?” he asked.

I puffed up my chest. Of course I could read! “Of course!”

“Here.” He passed me a massive book. I nearly toppled over, but he didn’t move to help, eyes far off. “You remind me of myself. I wish I had guidance like this when I was young.” His eyes refocused.

“Do you know what a Titan is?”

I shook my head wordlessly.

“A Titan is one with the conviction to walk their truth, regardless of those that stand in their way.”

He gave me a long look. “You have the makings of one”

To be honest, I have long forgotten his exact words. All I remember is the feeling behind them, their essence. A refusal to bend. A refusal to accept things as they are. To be a Titan is to defy everything, to fight the world.

And win.

The old man’s words snapped me out of contemplation, “Read that book. It's full of Titans and myths. That is who we can be. Don’t settle for less.” He hesitated. “And if you ever need advice, I will be in the middle of the Delarish desert.”

He walked away, leaving me to struggle with the heavy book.

I felt a pang of sadness, a feeling as if one who understood me had left. Then, mother rushed in to help me with the book and I felt a little better.

I didn't know it at the time, but that book would come to define me. It showed me what the world could truly be and revealed to me its deficiencies.

But at the time I didn't know that. I had been given a glimpse into the wider world and I couldn't wait to feast upon it.

All that mattered was that old book.

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The world seems to grow heavier, the last of my mortal ties trying to hold me down. But I will not compromise. I will not slow. I will not fold.

I am defiance, and I cannot be stopped.

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I was five.

Finally, I managed to escape my overprotective mother. I teetered through the streets of the city, taking in the sights. Everything was new and exciting. The clip-clop of horse hooves against cobblestone and the hearty scent of meat pie. The bang of the blade against the anvil and the sounds of girlish giggling.

The city was old, but lively. People rushed through the cobblestone streets, spurred on by the scarce nature of time. Most wore clothing of plain animal skin, sewn together inexpertly, perhaps by their wives or daughters, though the occasional flash of something brighter made its way through the crowd. Every street was packed full of storefronts, selling everything from

blades and armor to freshly cut flowers and spices. The old stone buildings were worn, but lovingly repaired, covered with the wear and tear that marked a lived-in home.

An hour into my eager exploring, I ended up in a wide-open square. The scale of it blew my mind, a kaleidoscope of dozens of people. I observed them all with a fevered intensity, unwilling to even blink. In a crowd of this size, surely there would be other Titans among them.

A commotion in the corner caught my eye. A woman screamed, and then, all at once, guards poured into the square from all directions.

I climbed up the base of the fountain in the center of the square, securing my viewpoint.

The guards pushed aside a young man and seized the young woman beside him. I remembered watching them earlier. The young man had given the girl a drawing he made, professing his intent to always be by her side. A show of sincerity, he called it. A physical sign of his commitment.

That commitment was nowhere to be seen now, as he cowered on the ground, clutching the paper with the drawing to his chest.

The guards parted to admit another young man, this one dressed up in an elaborate tunic and long coat, the both together somehow professing nearly a dozen colors. His slow clapping echoed throughout the square, bringing silence to the commotion.

“You really thought you could run away with my wife?”

“She...She...” the young man on the ground whispered, “Doesn't want to be your wife.”

The noble laughed. “Since when has that mattered.” He motioned for the guards to start hauling the girl back to wherever he came from.

“What's this?” he questioned, grabbing the paper out of the young man’s hand. The young man started to protest, but quickly silenced himself. The noble sneered at the drawing, before crumpling it into a ball and letting it fall to the ground.

I never did see what the drawing was, but I remember how easily it crumpled. How easily that promise was broken. And the young man did *nothing*. He watched. He folded as easily as the crumpled-up wad of paper.

The noble leaned forward, “Out of respect for your father's long service, I’ll let this go. But you’re stripped of your position.” He sneered. "Have fun as a peasant.”

He turned and strutted off without another glance, heading towards the young woman weeping softly on her knees.

I surveyed the crowd, seeing their desire to intervene. And seeing how they did nothing. I frowned. Where were the Titans? Why did they not stand?

I took in the crowd once more, seeing the fringes drift off in defeat without even trying.

If they would not, then I would.

I prepared myself for the first of my great trials.

I stepped forward... and was promptly grabbed by my mother, who had somehow found me.

“Mom! I need to go!”

“Oh, no you don’t, you little rascal. How did you sneak out?”

I huffed, crossing my arms and falling silent.

She shook her head exasperatedly, “Just as reckless as your father.”

I perked up, square forgotten. She never talked about my father.

“What was he like?”



“Later. We need to go. Now.”

“Bu-”

“No buts, we’re going.”

We walked in silence, unbroken until mother spoke.

“He was just like you, smart. Too smart. Eventually, he got greedy. And I never saw him again.” She turned to me and I was surprised to see tears in her eyes. “That’s why I get angry when you try things like this. You’re achingly similar to him. I worry you too will reach for more than you can handle. I already lost my husband. I *will not* lose my son too.”

I wanted to ask more, but I sensed such questions would likely not go over well. I would later learn he had been an explorer and a merchant. He had vanished into the distant mountains in search of a new mine. He had never come back, leaving behind only his wealth and pregnant wife.

Instead, after a few minutes of silence, I asked, “Why did nobody stop that noble?”

She sighed. “We don’t live in a fair world, love. The strong take what they want, and the weak must suffer it.”

“Why?”

“Why do the strong take what they want?”

“No, why do the weak do nothing?”

“Because they’re weak.”

“Can they not become strong?”

She smiled and patted my head. “I wish it were that easy.”

She was wrong. It was that easy. I had seen the surging *power* that crowd had contained, the potential for something far greater. They were weak, yes, but they could have been strong. If

only they had *tried*. To be a Titan is to defy, and together their defiance could have ripped the haughty noble asunder.

But they didn't. They folded.

Just like that crumpled ball of paper.

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I am running now, laughing with wild abandon as the world itself tries to stop me. The sunlight beats down on me, and even the wind has joined in on its suppression. But I cannot be suppressed.

Soon, I will be free.

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I was ten.

I closed the cover of the last book with a small sigh. There was no more to learn here. My room, once my refuge, now seemed too small, the diagrams and drawings covering the walls taunting me with visions of times when there was more to learn. So I walked out, melancholy permeating my thoughts. Was that all the world had to offer? Why was it so little? Was this truly the best humanity could do?

The last three years at school had been like a little slice of heaven. I remember my arrival, the excitement that had enveloped me. If the city wasn't enough, perhaps the world would do. And while I had found no friends, no peers, I had found knowledge. And I had devoured it like a starving beast, a runaway flame. Yet, perhaps inevitably, the seemingly endless spring of knowledge had dried up, leaving me right where I had started.

Doubting. And alone.

As I walked, I subtly tilted my head, narrowly avoiding the rotten fruit that had been careening at it. That was a normal occurrence, the scorn of my so-called 'peers', lesser as they were. It had been normal since the second I proved my superiority, completing the course of honors faster than anyone in recorded history.

Strange I had once hoped to fit among them. Usually, I ignored them. But that day, I remember feeling my melancholy turn into anger, a spark igniting the fire.

I turned around.

There were seven of them, boys of about fifteen years, and on the ground, two younger boys, my age, staying so still it seemed they were trying to vanish into the ground.

"What?" the blonde boy in the front sneered, "Do I have something on my face?"

"Who are you?" I questioned.

He turned red and drew himself up. "I am Rasek Lutherain the Third, heir to the Duke of the West. You would do well to remember that." He eyed me. "Peasant."

Another noble, his position built upon mountains of unresisting corpses and cowering dreamers.

I continued walking towards them, rage suffusing me. As I approached the boys in front of the spoiled heir began to stir nervously. Soon, I stood right before them. I looked up into their eyes, searching, then looked down at the still boys on the ground.

"Why?" I questioned.

Why did they not resist? Why did they not shine? Where were the *Titans*!?

"Because they spoke back to their superiors," one of the blonde boy's lackeys said.

I ignored them. "Why do you accept this treatment? Why do you not push back? Why do you *cower*?"

The boys on the ground remained silent, hardly daring to breathe.

The spoiled heir turned red at being ignored. "If you're so interested, why don't you join them!" He motioned for his lackeys to grab me. They hesitated, checking they weren't alone before advancing.

I had been raised on stories of glory beyond comprehension, tales of Titans challenging the impossible for the mere fact of its impossibility. And here were boys, silently accepting the foot of another. Where was their *defiance*? I looked into the defeated eyes of the older-looking one and willed him to do something. *Anything*. I wanted to see the faintest sign of a spark in him, the faintest sign that he too could rise, and join me. I wanted to see just a chance that I wouldn't always be alone.

I was disappointed. He only stared back with empty eyes.

It was the final straw. Something inside me broke with a silent crack.

There was nobody worth saving here. No Titans.

I could have left, walked away and never looked back, absolute in my supremacy. But I was furious. And I was sad. And I was disappointed. And I was lonely. I was a tinder of raw emotions and they had just lit the spark.

I choose the other path.

I lashed out.

The others may have been willing to cower, willing to bow to another. But I was not.

The boys didn't stand a chance.

I stepped back and tripped the first boy, meeting his falling face with my fist. He fell to the ground with an ugly crack. The second fell to a sweeping kick to the knee. The third a palm

to the sternum. I danced between them, shining like the sun, visible yet untouchable, blinding in its brilliance.

Unwavering in its purpose.

The last of the boys fell with a weak moan, and I slowly approached the blonde boy, Rasek.

“D..d..don't get any closer,” he stuttered, backing up, “M..m..my father won't let you go if you hurt me.”

“People like you” I started, “Are the reason this world is lesser.”

I swept his legs out from under him and took him to the ground.

“The reason I am alone.”

I punched him in the face as he desperately tried to shield himself.

“You hold others back, because you can't rise yourself.”

I punched him again.

“You strangle the Titans in their cradles, extinguishing their sparks.”

And again.

“And I!”

Another punch.

“Am!”

Punch.

“FURIOUS!”

I don't remember how long I spent wailing on the noble. All I remember was the rage. He became the cumulation of all the burgeoning doubts, the all-encompassing loneliness. The transformation from meager hope to grim acceptance. The Titans were gone. That crumpled

drawing was clearly visible in my mind. This world was of paper, folding at the slightest bit of pressure. Two-dimensional. Colorless. Small. Not enough.

When I finally came too, he was unconscious. I stood, ignoring the horrified looks of the boys I had saved.

As I looked at his destroyed face, a sense of annoyance overcame me. What was even the point? He wasn't worth my time. None of them were. I knew the truth. This world was lesser. It was paper.

A faint gleam on the ground grabbed my attention. I leaned down to pick up a tooth.

I examined the blood-covered cuspid.

And I laughed.

How fitting.

I was expelled that day for daring to touch the duke's son. I returned home having learned more than most men will ever know.

Yet only one thing mattered.

A bloody tooth.

Fallen from its rightful place.

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I slow as the cliff comes into view, the place I chose long ago for my ascension, even if I didn't know it at the time. The paper world stretches below it, a boundless expanse of forest and life. But I am done with its caricatures. Done with its shadows.

It's time to seize the light.

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I was 13.

I sat at the side of a campfire, staring into the dancing flame. In my hands, I absentmindedly fiddled with a sheet of paper.

The world was small, smaller than even my wildest fears. The world was paper, two-dimensional in its depth. The world wasn't enough. Not for me.

For a time, I had hoped that even if the world was paper, I could fill it in. Draw in the colors that were missing. Make the world greater. Ignite the glory of new peers.

I threw the crumpled-up paper into the fire, watching as it burned.

A world of paper could not withstand the heat of the sun. It only burned in its wake.

I had tried. Truly tried. Yet no matter how eloquently I spoke, how succinctly I summarized, they refused to see the truth right in front of their eyes. They hid behind their veils of lies and delusions of grandeur. Cowered behind their fear and weakness. Refused to embrace the glory they could be. They rejected me, rejected my essence in the truest sense. And it was *agony*.

I stood up, abandoning my fire as I ventured further into the woods. Some might have cared for the way the light of the moon shone above, casting shadows blacker than ink. The way the forest rustled gently in the wind, alive in the truest sense. Some might have cared for the gentle call of late-night birds, or stopped to view the softly burbling creek, alight with silver fire. I didn't. I had seen through them all. No paper could obscure my sight.

I advanced relentlessly, uncaring for the tinges of exhaustion that tried to stop me. Hours later, I arrived at my destination.

A verdant valley stretched out below me, dozens of miles long and miles wide. Illuminated by the silvery light of the moon, it seemed to glow with the promise of hidden wisdom. I stood on its uppermost lip, the convergence point of the two slightly curving sides.

I walked up the narrowest spire jutting out of the lip, effortlessly balancing over the nearly mile drop. The moon turned its curious eye to me, drenching me in argent light.

To be honest, I still don't know what drove me to that place. Only that I needed to be there.

I surveyed the landscape, taking it in with a single glance.

I wondered if it would be better to simply step off. To be gloriously free for an instant, then an eternity. I was so sick of this paper world, so sick of not being able to shine. So sick of being alone.

There in the moonlight, I contemplated death. Silence. Stillness. Stagnation.

The hours slipped away as I grew quieter and stiller, imitating the conception of death itself. It was quiet, peaceful. But I didn't want quiet, I didn't want peace.

I wanted challenge. I wanted growth. I wanted to *live*. I wanted to *burn*, if only for an instant.

I found myself irritated, unwilling to focus. So, I moved, breaking the spell of death and lifting my gaze to the heavens above.

Already, faint hints of violet began to appear, the herald of something far greater. Even as I watched, they shifted, becoming more vibrant, more real. For the first time that night, a hint of interest appeared in me.

If the moon was death, what was life?

The sun.

I had seen it fall, in the burning dusk, lighting the paper sky on fire in its passing. All life must fall, that dusk had promised, all things must end. Yet at that moment, staring at the increasingly illuminated heavens, I wondered.



The sky shattered into a kaleidoscope of color, and alone above all, I witnessed dawn arrive on its throne.

Rising ever higher.

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I step forth unto the spire I had stood on once, so very long ago. The River will come soon to take me away. Looking at the heavens above, and the earth below, I breathe in deep, preparing myself.

To rise, one must first fall.

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I was 15.

The sand disappeared beneath my feet as I wove between the scraggly rocks piercing out of the desert floor like fingers reaching futility for the heavens above. It had been two years since I left home to explore the world. Perhaps, I had thought, basking in the light of dawn, there was something out there. Something not of paper. The paper sun rises and falls endlessly, so how could I not do the same? How could I not do better?

Foggy memory had returned to me, an old man and a destination. The Delarish desert.

I remember my mother's reaction. She had not tried to stop me, nor tried to dissuade me. She had merely looked at me with a sad gaze that was almost... understanding.

I shook my head angrily, I was alone. No one could understand me.

Slowly but surely, the sandy desert gave way to the beginnings of grassland, evident in the shriveled stalks waving in the wind. Animals began to appear, massive gray behemoths with strange trucks, and brown speckled yellow creatures with long necks.

Suddenly, improbably, a small shack appeared in the distance. I slowed, taking in the strange sight. There were no other humans for hundreds of miles, and as I knocked on the door, I hoped this was the right place.

There was some faint shuffling, a clatter, and some light cursing before the door finally opened to reveal an old man. I studied him, taking note of his short white hair and wrinkled skin. His back was hunched with age, but his amber eyes were clear.

“Yes?” he questioned.

I hesitated. “Do you remember me?”

He studied me, squinting in effort. “Wait... you’re that child from a few years ago! The one that kept trying to run away!”

I sighed. “Yes, that was me.”

“Well come in!”

I followed him into the cramped shack. It was surprisingly clean with a small kitchen and a bed in the corner. A single table with two chairs sat in the center. He took a seat, and motioned for me to do the same.

“So, why are you here?” he asked.

I hesitated. This was new to me. Normally, I was the one with all the answers. But this man was different. It was obvious from the way he carried himself. My memory had not deceived me, but it raised a whole new set of questions. Who was this man? Was he one of the Titans?

“I... need help.” The admittance burned me far more than I expected, and I wanted to take the words back the second they left my mouth. What the hell was I thinking, some random old man could understand the weight of my plight?

My mouth opened, almost against my will, preparing to lash out before a risen hand silenced me.

“It's ok. I understand.”

And to my shock, he truly did. I heard it in his voice.

So, I closed my mouth and waited.

“It's lonely, isn't it? Nobody willing to match you. Nobody willing to try. And disappointing. Not a Titan in sight.” He paused abruptly. “Do you know what a Titan is?”

Of course I knew. “A Titan is one who walks their truth.”

He smiled. “You really have grown. I saw its seeds in you all those years ago. To think they sprouted so mightily, so fast. Tell me about it.”

I couldn't help it. For the first time, I had somebody to confide in. It all poured out of me. The hope, and the doubt that began creeping in. The crushing loneliness and the burning rage. The creeping apathy and the endless depression. I told him of the crumpled paper and bloody teeth. About that brilliant dawn. I told him my truth, as I knew it. The world was paper. He listened and *understood*.

“You've been through a lot, huh.”

I smirked. “You've probably been through more.”

“...Yeah.”

We sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes, each lost in our own thoughts.

Finally, the old man stood up. “I can't tell you what's required. It defines explanation. But I can show you. Follow me.”

We traveled for hours, weaving around watering holes and animals alike. Until, finally, we arrived at a small rocky outcrop.

“Stay here” The old man scrambled up the rocks with impressive agility, coming to a stop at its peak, about hundreds of feet up.

He took a deep breath, and something in him seemed to shift. Before my very eyes, he became *more*, shedding paper essence in favor of something greater.

“I understand the struggle,” he quietly spoke down, words somehow clear despite his distance. “The stupidity of those around you. Their weakness. The burden of being alone in your vision.” He took a deep breath, lifting his head to the sky. “Well, I found a better place. We are not the only ones. There are Titans out there somewhere.”

He took a strange crouched position, knees bent, thighs nearly parallel to the ground, back unbent. His arms tucked under his armpits, palms facing forward, head straight.

“Watch. This is perfection.”

He breathed in deeply, and the world seemed to hold its breath. For a moment there was silence, stillness, truer than any I had ever experienced. Then he moved.

“**KA!**” he roared, thrusting his palms forward.

Their movement was beautiful, perfect. Like an ever-raging river shoved into a single set of palms.

The result was catastrophic. It was like all the motion that had been sealed the moment before came back, channeled through a single old man. With a sound like the world itself cracking, the rock beneath him exploded, sending out a shockwave in all directions. I flipped out of the way, my full attention focused on the old man now floating in mid-air.

He laughed in pure joy, hurting my ears with his sheer volume.

**“See this boy? If the world won’t accept your truth, then why stay? Seek higher places! Prove your path, and the River will take you away!”**

Above him, the world seemed to crack, and from the crack descended a river. It was a color that defied description, a roaring river of something beyond this paper world. And the world knew it too. The world around the river faded, becoming an insubstantial backdrop in the face of its glory. The river was steel to the world's paper, and wherever it passed, a long cut was left in the sky, revealing the starry void beyond. I fell to my knees, barely able to maintain my consciousness in the face of its presence.

For the first time in my short life, I found myself truly shocked.

The old man turned to look at me, smirking at my shock. **"I'll be waiting for you."**

The river struck like a viper, swallowing up the old man in a single movement and carrying him away on indescribable waters.

I sagged lower in the sand. That's what I had been looking for my whole life, the challenge I desired and the life I could have lived.

There was something beyond this realm of paper after all.

I began to laugh, and soon my laughter transformed into tears.

I finally knew what I had to do.

The River was out there, waiting for me. All I had to do was summon it.

I got to my feet, eyes shining with newfound determination.

I would defy this paper world that sought to restrain me.

Ascension or death.

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Every night the sun falls behind the horizon, only to rise again the next morning. It was the fall that enabled the rise. Without it, the sun would be static. Lifeless.

Therefore, if I want to reach the heavens, higher than ever before, I must first go lower than ever.

I am eighteen.

I breathe in deep, feeling the near hurricane-force wind attempting to blow me off my precarious perch. The old man had shown me the way. A perfect act was required to open the gates of heaven, to summon the divine river.

I look over the ridge, there, directly below me, is a single marigold in an otherwise rocky landing. Its orange petals shine against the dark rock like the sun against the void.

I smile, tilting my head up to embrace the burning sun. I close my eyes, basking in its radiance and one last memory drifts to mind.

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Mother had grown old. Her once bright hair had dulled, the first hint of gray appearing within. Still, she greeted me with the same boundless love she had always had.

For a second, I was a young child again, full from the love of another. I had missed that feeling.

Still, I shook it off. I'd found the way. I couldn't let myself be distracted.

And yet...I found myself hesitating. How does one tell their mother they're leaving, never to be seen again?

The small parlor suddenly seemed huge, looming. The painting adorning the walls stared at me judgmentally, and I sneered back at them. No paper men could look down on me.

I steeled my heart and soldered on. I would not fold in the face of difficulty.

“Mother. I'm...leaving.”

“Again? You just got back?”

“This is different. I won’t be coming back.”

She frowned at that. “What do you mean, you won't be coming back?”

“I’ve found a place, a place with people like me. It’s very far away. A one-way trip.”

Her frown deepened. “Must you go?”

I leaned forward to take her hand. “Mother. Mom. I can’t stay here. It's killing me, dimming my spark.”

“I’m sure if you just—”

I stood up abruptly, suddenly angry. “I tried mom! I scoured the world! And I found not one hint of something, someone that could match me!”

I knew I was ranting, but I couldn't help it. Something about telling her of my departure rubbed me raw. It hurt, so I lashed out.

“They all fold mother! All of them! Give them a challenge, they shrink back! Give them a problem, they give up! The world is paper!”

She gave me that look only a mother could. I sat down with a huff.

“Wait here,” she said, “I want to show you something.”

I sighed and sat back in my chair as she left the room.

She returned with an old book and a basket. I recognized the book

“Is that-”

“Yeah, It's the book he gave you. I read the whole thing, hoping to understand all the things you’ve been saying.”

A surge of warmth suffused me, like a candle lit within. I crushed it. Mortal ties would only weigh me down at this point.

“And?”

“And I see your point. In comparison to these... Titans, we do all fold. We are all small.”

I smiled. Finally, somebody saw-

“But, I think you’re missing something.”

I sighed. Perhaps I was still alone in my vision.

She reached into her basket, and pulled out a figurine of...Garota? The slayer of mountains. Then Baroque, terror of the seven hells. One by one, all the Titans I had grown up admiring rose from that basket.

“What is this?”

“Look closer.”

I lifted Garota to my face, examining her. She was...paper. Origami, intricately folded and painted. I was impressed. Even I would have trouble replicating such detail.

“Paper... How long have you been working on these?”

Ever since you got expelled,” mother replied proudly, “I figured they would come in handy.”

“But...why?”

“To show you another way.” She picked up one, Hephastus, forger of divine weapons.

“These are Titans, ones with sparks like yours, and they’re made entirely of paper.”

She picked up another. “With proper care, even the most mundane paper can become colorful, three-dimensional.” She put it down and smiled at me.

“The world may fold, but you can use those folds. Guide them. You can create the Titans you desire to see.” She finished indicating the table of paper figures

I sighed. “I tried that, mom. They just shrunk back, afraid to be burned.”



“You need to be gentle. You can't crumple a piece of paper and expect it to be a masterpiece. It takes time, and effort.”

I just shook my head.

Mother walked up and put a hand on my shoulder. “I know it's hard. The loneliness. The disappointment. But you can fix it. You can fold this paper world back into shape, make it into something special. I'll help you. You're not alone, my love.”

She gazed at me with those eyes, somehow understanding despite the difference between us. Warmth bloomed within me. She was a mere mortal. I was on the verge of ascension. Yet at that moment, all I wanted to do was break down. I wanted to apologize. I wanted to hug her. Tell her I loved her.

I almost did.

NO.

**I WILL NOT FOLD.**

I shot to my feet like an arrow, terrified. I extinguished the flame of warmth with the force of my will. And masking my fear with rightful arrogance, I pushed back.

“My peers wait outside” I sneered. “Do you really think I would waste my life babysitting the failures of this paper world?” I reached out and smashed a paper Titan.

Mother gasped, covering her mouth.

My heart bled, but I could not stop. Would not stop. Not while I was so close.

“Paper is always paper, no matter the form it takes. And I will suffer it no more.”

I smashed some more paper Titans on my way to the door. I had almost left when I heard the sound of soft sobs from behind me.

“Please! Your father already left me. Don't *leave me too!*”

I froze, hand on the doorknob, desperately fighting the urge to rush back. I barely managed to break free. To be a Titan was to have the conviction to walk one's path, regardless of the obstacles in their way. Even if that obstacle was my mother. Even if it was my heart.

I had walked this far. I would not stop now.

“Goodbye,” I said stiffly, back to her.

I left.

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I flinch at the unwanted memory, a phantom arrow striking me in the chest. With an effort of pure will, I brush it out of my mind. Refocusing on the task at hand.

It's time.

My eyes snap open. A single step carries me to the precipice. The lonely marigold looms nearly a mile below.

With another step, I am falling. The world seems to hold its breath as I cut through the air like a ray of light through inky darkness. In a moment of frozen time, my journey runs through my mind. A vibrant city, an ancient book, a crumpled paper, a bloody tooth, a royal dawn, and a divine river. I have walked it unflinchingly, and now the end is upon me. A pressure builds within me, a final barrier waiting to be crossed.

This is a fall no mortal could survive.

So I will have to become something more than mortal.

A moment and an eternity pass. I hit the rocky ground like a falling star, and the world releases its breath. A perfectly circular shockwave radiates out of me, and when I draw myself to my full height, there's a marigold in my hand.

Perfect.

I can feel the power surging through me, a living embodiment of the path I have walked.  
The world around me crinkles and pops as I flex my hand.

Immediately, the sky cracks as the river emerges, surging to me with unsurpassed energy.  
This time I can withstand its presence. This time, I am no longer merely mortal.

I raise my head to the broken sky, laughter pouring out of me.

**“YES! TAKE ME AWAY, O RIVER.”**

It descends with unmatched force, striking me like the very fist of god. That’s ok. I can take it.

The river surges out of the paper realm, as eager to be gone as I. Suspended in the vast void of space, I look around in wonder. The stars shine so bright here, less stars, more like miniature suns. Yet, inevitably, my gaze is drawn toward the greatest of the cosmic fixtures. A massive river, dwarfing even the stars. It flows from places unseen and reaches further than I can comprehend.

Then I notice the other, smaller rivers. In each is a person, traveling just as I am.

I smile.

Fellow Titans. Worthy challengers. Peers. I am no longer alone.

I catch the eye of one, a middle-aged humanoid with bronze skin and pointed ears. He looks back at me with undisguised terror. He points to the big river. I watch as the smaller rivers retract back into the big one, depositing their passengers within. And I watch as the passenger dissolves shimmering gold, merging with the river. My thoughts ground to a halt. What?

Yet, even as I watch, more desperately struggling creatures are consumed by the river.

I look around frantically, searching for an answer. I notice a bored-looking man floating above the river. I frantically wave him down. He glances at me for a second, red eyes *burning*,

before going back to his floating. I reel back. That single glance almost destroyed me. I am an ant to him.

I begin to struggle too, roaring defiance in my mind. It all comes back in a rush.

A vibrant city, an old book, a crumpled paper, a bloody tooth, a royal dawn, a divine river, a lone marigold, and a...a paper Titan.

I falter for an instant before regathering myself.

I fought so hard to escape and I have finally achieved it.

I have finally found my peers.

This will NOT be my end.

Yet the river only draws nearer.

Finally, the large river seconds away, a thought occurs to me.

What's beyond perfection?

Nothing.

The paper Titans come to mind again.

I laugh bitterly.

At last, disillusioned, the truth comes to me.

I had cowered. Cowered from my heart, hid it with lesser things. Lashed out where I should have been open. Hidden when I should have faced it.

My loneliness was of my own making.

I was no different from the rest of the paper world.

I should have stayed.

My last thought before the river consumed me was of my mother.

I wondered if she would miss me.

Probably not.