

Chapter 5 – *A Woman's Mourn*

“Here, Kasha, you can sit on the end.” Thinking Kasha would have difficulty with bench seating, Titus graciously slid over to offer his spot. His part of the table was cleared, for he had finished eating his meal, and was waiting on dessert.

Mayon hadn't started. He was waiting for the newcomer. Since Titus had taken the spot he was saving, he scooted over. Mayon leaned back to see past the giant until he caught Megan's eye, “As promised, I've saved you a seat, Megan.” This cramped Pierce, knocking his arm which caused the bowman to spill his drink, and who in fact, had a plate of something that resembled boiled meat and spooned-bread in front of him.

“Hey! I'm eating over here!” barked Pierce, then reluctantly put down his drink and pushed his food over while sliding his body down the bench. He grumbled over his food, “It's bad enough I've got to eat with one hand...its not like I'm not hurting over here.”

Mayon leaned to Pierce and spoke quietly through the corner of his mouth. “At least you are able to sit.”

Pierce grinned in his cup and before taking a drink, replied thoughtfully, “Ah, a sensitive ass-ue to be sure!” He abandon his thirst for the moment to chuckle along with Mayon. Megan caught the exchange as she put one leg over the petrified bench, and didn't find it very amusing.

Mayon saw her glaring at them and he cleared his throat. “Yes, well. I think it maybe a good time to give it a rest.” Looking sternly at Pierce, he rebuked, “Enough with the wise cracks!”

With that, Pierce slammed down his cup. Liquid from his mouth, showered everything in front of him.

Still straddling the bench, Megan's temperament bordered hysteria, "I can't believe you find this amusing! Are you all nuts? How can you go about maiming one another then turn around and make light of it as if it was all in good fun?" Megan's glare transferred to Titus who laid a light hand on her shoulder, coaxing her to sit down.

"Megan, we will heal. Humor helps keep the pain at bay."

"Look, I don't know what you guys are on, but this is not right," shaking her head, "any of--" Megan stopped herself. Kasha had food stacked in front of her. *Where did the food come from?* She looked around for the server as she hesitantly continued, "Uhh, this is insane... This-it's barbaric."

Kasha's started to speak with food still in her mouth, "You're right, they are barbaric." Swallowing, she sat up straight (as best as she could under the circumstance), and with authority addressed Titus. "You must inform me when you primates jest, so that I might experience this wondrous humor that evades me and my wounds."

Pierce leaned in and called over to Kasha, "Alright Kasha, why don't you tell us what tickles your fanny- I mean, fancy?" While the men hooted, Kasha threw a meat bone, hitting Pierce square on the forehead. His eyes crossed for a moment, and he rubbed his brow. Then he nonchalantly let out a quizzical, "Ouch?," as to which Titus and Mayon roared with laughter. Kasha smiled approvingly while suppressing the amusement she felt. The jollity quickly abated when all looked to Megan who looked stunned. She sat there staring aghast, at the green flecked tabletop.

Titus spoke quietly, "Megan?" Not getting a response, he grew concerned and gave a gentle pat on her back. "Megan, everything ok?"

Hesitant, newcomer pointed at the spot where the bone had landed. “The bone...it disappeared.”

At the far end of the table, someone came forward and reiterated the idea, a matter-of-factly, “Disintegrated.” The dulcet feminine voice lured all eyes to find its owner. “Or if you prefer an accelerated form of decomposition.” Megan found a beautiful fiery redhead. Fair in color, One side of her long wavy hair was tucked behind her right ear to show off several gold hoops.

Mayon half stood, “Kind of you to visit, Hillary.” Snickering was heard from behind the woman’s long off-white smock, giving away the twins whereabouts. They suddenly out from behind her and went for the place next to Pierce.

The bowman guarded his injured hand from the boys who slammed up against him. “Hey HEY, Watch it!”

“So, the boys informed you of our last arrival. Care to join us for dinner?” Hillary’s gaze narrowed slightly as she reflected on Mayon’s attempt at social etiquette. Then her faced softened and her attention returned to the newcomer. Mayon continued, “Hillary, this is Megan...” Hillary nodded and Megan returned a weak smile. Still hovering out of his seat, Mayon gestured to the striking woman. “Megan? Meet Jeremy Hillary Boob.”

Hillary walked around the table, behind the others. Her step was smooth as if she glided on air. “Welcome, Megan,” she offered graciously. Pierce opened his mouth to ask something, but Hillary beat him too it, speaking as she walked by. “After I eat, Pierce.” She stopped between Mayon and Megan, placing a hand on each of their shoulders. She was looking to Mayon to give up his spot, “May I...” when jerked back the hand that touched Megan’s shoulder, and stared at the newcomer in disbelief. “My my...” Hillary glanced up at Damian’s perch across the tarn and

caught the man watching with interest. A cautious hand patted Megan's shoulder, but redhead smiled at her, "Ah, Megan, you have nothing to fear but fear itself, truly!"

Mayon was quick to query, "Really? Tell us, Hillary. What are you getting from our newcomer?"

There was a thud and all turned to see where Damian had landed. The tyrant spoke as he walked the last remaining feet to the left end of the table. "Yes, Hillary. Do tell."

Hillary stood silent for a moment, studying Damian. Undauntedly, she approached him with palms out. "Hmm. Damian, I believe you may be at--" Near him, she stopped and sucked in her breath. She reached out to touch him, but was halted by the threatening glare he returned. In a low voice, she admitted, "Will you ever cease to amaze me?" Not getting a response, Hillary shrugged, then turned to the others, "Ladies and Gentlemen! Congratulations are in order. Our prized competitor has reached a new plateau."

Gloating, Damian turned his back on them. He didn't need to see their faces, to know how he affected them. He spoke over his shoulder before he headed back to the tree. "I must admit, Jer. I too am surprised by your intuitiveness. You have learned to sense beyond strength. I'm impressed." He started to walk, chuckling, "You know what that means."

Dread washed over Hillary. Undoubtedly, the tyrant will persuade her to reveal the particulars of her new talent. She looked away from him and headed quietly over to where the twins were and sat down.

Megan watched the group's spirits fall and an uncanny silence surrounded them. "Wha..what just happened."

Mayon punched his fist into his palm. “Damn him! That bastard is a freak of nature!” Glaring over at Titus, he snarled in a low voice, “You have got to kill him, Titus. It’s our only chance.”

Titus slowly stood. He no longer felt like dessert. His eyes remained on the table as he spoke. “That’s a stupid idea, Mayon. I don’t want to hear it anymore.”

Mayon no longer cared if Damian heard or not. “Why?! I’ll help you. If we all pull together--”

Titus slammed his fist down on the table, shaking the ground beneath. “Stop it Mayon! It’s not going to happen.”

“Then tell me why!”

The giant looked sternly at the man and spoke slow and clear, “That would leave you.”

A sinister outburst of laughter came from the tree perch as Titus removed himself from the bench and walked into the sleeping quarters behind them. He needed his rest. Despite what he said about fighting before breakfast, he had decided to rise early and train before his battle with Damian.

“Titus is a fool,” growled Mayon, then he urgently looked to the others, “At this rate, we’ll never surpass him!”

Kasha had finished eating. She downed the last of her drink, put the glass down, and wiped her mouth with the back of hand. Her cup and what remained of her meal were absorbed back into the table. Carefully, she stood and looked to the newcomer. “Megan. You must eat well and rest. Your first day of training will not be pleasant. We begin at dawn.” Turning away, the injured warrior headed for the tent entrance.

“I’ll join you...er tomorrow,” volunteered Mayon.

Stopping cold, Kasha slowly turned her head to eye the man, and threatened, “Keep your distance, blackguard,” then resumed her slow trek into the tent.

Staring out over the abyss, Mayon snorted, and attempted to suppress his anger. It took every ounce of willpower not to lash out at any of them. He toyed with the idea of challenging Titus or Kasha. If he went for Titus, Damian would most likely interfere, saving the giant for their bout tomorrow. If he went after Kasha, he would lose Megan’s alliance for sure. Suddenly puzzled, he glanced over at the newcomer. Why was her approval so important? According to the others, there was something impressive about her. He realized she was watching him, and he gave a quick smile, “Chin up, sweetheart. As much as I would like,” side glancing towards the tent, “there have been no casualties. Everything will be just fine.”

Pierce felt the need to add his assurances, “Yeah and you know the old saying, what doesn’t kill you will make you stronger? Well, you can take that literally here.”

“Pish posh. It is a matter of desire, discipline, and dedication,” crooned Hillary. “The 3-D attributes that can make all things possible. Take Damian for example...”

Pierce interrupted, “Oh, man, he’s full of Ds: dangerous, despising, depressing, dispassionate, distraught, disturbed, dominator—ahh!” Jimmy nudged the bowman to remind him of his manners. This caused Pierce enough pain to cradle his hand again. He glared at the boy, who returned a snarling look. Nose to nose, they locked into a staring contest, mentally daring the other to look away. Timmy leaned over, putting his ogling face along side of his brother’s. The bowman couldn’t help but smile. His hand quickly came up the side of T’s face and pushed it into J’s, chuckling, “Alright guys, eat your supper.”

Mayon slapped his hands down on the table. Studying the space between them, he grunted then remarked quite casually, “All this discussion has made me hungry.” Miraculously,

food began to form in front of him. It just grew up from the table's surface. He nodded at Megan to do the same. Timidly, she put her palms flat on the table. "A little further apart," Mayon instructed. "Make room for your chow." She widened the gap between them and watched wide eyed while food began to appear before her. The food was solid but a mystery. She couldn't make out what it was exactly, and hoped that the taste would be at least recognizable. The plate and cup were the color of pewter, but the feel was warmer and the weight more like stoneware. They blended well with the table's surface, only they lacked the flecks of green, and strings of black that swirled within its makeup.

The twins and Hillary followed suite. Jimmy and Timmy ravenously dug into their spread as Hillary shared her explanation of the process, "I believe the surface reads your body's make-up, determines your nutritional needs, and then creates a suitable meal. I suspect the table itself is comprised of organic material, reacting on a molecular level." Thoughtfully, she lightly touched the surface and spoke more to herself, "It must be similar to procreation." She snapped out of her contemplating when she heard Pierce humming the Twilight Zone theme.

"You are an idiot Pierce. The key to this place is all around you. Solve the riddle and you will be handed the key to existence."

"Who cares about existing? I want to win!" Finished, what was left of Pierce's meal disappeared. He looked up and caught sight of the first rays of the setting sun. After a long breath, he rubbed his leg and then slapped it in protest. "I sure could use a cigarette right now."

Shaking his head, Mayon growled, "Must you say that every time you eat?"

Pierce shrugged and propped his arm to rest his head. He lazily watched the sunlight come through the gap in the clouds. Like every day, the streams of light eased their way up the

cliffs that sprung up from the depths across the abyss. Aside from rare gaps in the daily cloud cover, it was the only time that they were afforded evidence to the sun's existence.

Megan suspiciously picked at her food, sampling each visible rendition of what lay before her. It wasn't unpleasant. In fact, she soon found it to be quite appetizing and a great hunger overcame her. She dug in. Half way through, Megan noticed the light spectacle that played itself out before her. The rays filtered through unseen formations above, and the sun's light changed colors painting the cliffs; first yellow, then, orange/pink, to a purple hue. The newcomer was in awe. The cliffs themselves began to sparkle as the touch of light moved higher and higher. "This is a wondrous place," she murmured then rose. Megan left the table, abandoning her supper, to be drawn to the edge of the ravine to marvel at the day's ending splendor.

Curious, Mayon didn't say a word and unlike the others, watched Megan. The newcomer stood extremely close to the edge. Obviously, the woman had no fear of heights or she didn't realize it. Mayon's eyes narrowed. He recalled the brief hypnotic like feeling that came over him when he experienced his first, but it left him as quickly as it had come. Already, the air began to move up the ravine, rustling Megan's hair. The introduction of a breeze did not seem to disturb the woman's trance.

Timmy poked at Hillary's arm to get her attention and then pointed at Megan. "Look, she sees it."

"Hmm?" Hillary's eyes went from Timmy to Megan. "This soon? No, I don't think so."

"Yeah she does."

"How do you know?"

Jimmy responded this time, “We know.” He smirked at his brother. “Watch this.” All eyes were on Megan. Suddenly, she sucked in air and stumbled backwards; pulling clasped hands to her chest. She looked over to Jimmy gratefully, who smiled and nodded.

“Smooth move, Jaz!” Timmy high fived his brother, then went back to eating.

Glaring from Jimmy to Megan and back to Jimmy, Mayon hissed, “You spoke with her?!”

Shrugging, Jimmy swallowed the food that was in his mouth before he answered. “No big deal, it’s one sided.”

Mayon growled in frustration. “Why don’t you talk to me that way?!”

Jimmy pondered a moment, “Hmm, dense I guess.”

Anger overcame Mayon and he squeezed his cup until it shattered; the pieces and liquid dissolved into the table. “Your time is running out, boys. I don’t care how old you are...”

Mayon jerked around to the person that put a light hand on his shoulder. Megan seemed lost in her thoughts as she used Mayon’s shoulder to steady herself. Timidly, she sat back down dropping her hands in her lap. The newcomer blankly looked ahead. She blinked and a tear ran down her face.

Timmy and Jimmy felt her pain and looked sorrowfully to Hillary. Taking a deep breath, the Boob rose and gracefully moved to sit down beside Megan with her back to the table. She reached out in front of Megan and turned the woman to face her. “What’s wrong Megan?”

“I—I miss my family.” Her eyes welled up, “I want to go back, Hillary. I want to go home.”

Not knowing how to answer, Hillary could only pull her close and offer a shoulder to cry on. Unable to hold back, Megan cried in the stranger’s arms.

“Oh, brother.” Pierce got up, picked up his broken quiver and bow and walked up to the women. With one brow raised at Hillary, “When you’re free, you think maybe?” He held out his crippled hand. She nodded slightly, and went back to lightly rocking the newcomer.

Mayon’s anger slipped away as he watched the two. The sight did little to arouse any decent sentiment. He found the scene rudimentarily pathetic. He wondered what to do next. There would be another hour before it grew dark and thought this could be a good time to inflict some serious persuasion on the twins. Turning, he looked to the boys, but found the end of the table deserted. Looking around, he spotted them under Damian’s roost sitting across from each other. They were mirroring their hand movements.

The twins showed no fear when it came to Damian. It was strange. Their last confrontation with the tyrant ended with the two boys huddled together, clinging to one another, whimpering in terror. Now, it seemed Timmy and Jimmy were the only ones that Damian had tolerance for. Mayon’s squinted to see if he could tell if Damian was showing any sign that he was aware of their presence. Aside from the slight flutter of the tree’s branches, nothing moved. Megan’s sobbing became choked, a sign that she was trying to pull herself together. The sound annoyed Mayon and he got up to leave.

As he passed Hillary, she grasped his shirt sleeve. He looked down at her with questioning eyes.

“Mayon, leave the boys alone. Their ability will be of little use, if nobody listens to you.”

Smirking, Mayon pulled his arm away and continued on in the direction of the bathhouse, thinking, ‘I won’t be the one doing the talking.’

Taking in broken gasps of air, Megan worked to suppress the hopelessness she felt. She pulled away from Hillary, sucked in her breath through her nose, and exhaled out of her mouth.

The slight breeze helped to dry her face. After wiping her nose with her arm, she meekly apologized to the redhead.

“It’s quite alright. Under the circumstances, I say you are doing rather well. But look here, Megan.” Megan gazed at a somber Hillary through wet swollen eyes. “It’s not a dream. This world is as real as Brighton. You must first accept and adapt to your surroundings. Then you must push beyond all boundaries. Fight Megan. Fight to keep, fight to achieve, fight to surpass, fight to be the victor!”

“But why? Why fight? Why not work together for the common cause?”

“Ah, a diplomat. Alright, answer this: What cause do we work for?”

“Going home.”

“Ha, if you haven’t noticed, you are the only one pining to go.”

“Then we’ll all help each other to get what we do want.”

“What if they want to fight? Or, are content to live and play? What if some want to be better than others...what if one wants someone dead...wants all of us dead? What if...” Hillary looked away and whispered, “They want to be like God?”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Disbelievingly, Megan let out a nervous chuckle while she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, “Are you telling me, there’s a surgeon among us?”

Hillary’s head jerked back, and glaring, she hissed, “It is no joke, Newcomer. It becomes more and more apparent each day...we have yet to meet our limitations.”

“I didn’t mean...I’m sorry.” Megan dropped her head. Her mind worked to grasp Hillary’s implication.

Silence followed before Hillary answered, “You meant no harm. Tell me, what do you see across the ravine?”

“Eh,” Megan looked over to the far cliffs. The reflecting specks of light were gone, as well as the vibrant colors that once washed over them. She described her memory out loud, trailing off at the end of her thought. “I think I saw light reflecting off glass. They seemed symmetrical...like windows on a building.”

A smile appeared on the Boob’s face. Nodding slightly in agreement, she turned her head from Megan to gaze quietly upon the darkening bluffs.

In a small voice, Megan added, “I was thinking, maybe we weren’t alone.”

“My dear.” Hillary lightly poked Megan’s arm to get her attention then pointed her finger upwards. The newcomer looked up and her eyes went wide. The clouds had rolled back, exposing a dusk colored sky. There in the heavens stood out five moons...no, planets of various distances. Their coloring was similar to Earth, suggesting they were very much alive. “I agree with you, Megan. I believe there are others. We are at the beginning of their journey...now our journey.” She sighed and then slowly stood up. “Well, we all need our rest. Oh, did you get enough to eat?”

Nodding, Megan braced her arms on the table and climbed out and off the bench.

Taking Megan by the hand, Hillary started to lead the newcomer to the tent entrance. “Here, let me show you where you will sleep.

“Um, Hillary? Have you seen them?”

Stopping, Hillary glanced at the newcomer, “Who?”

“You know the others.” Megan’s free hand pointed to the sky.

“Oh.” The redhead looked to the sky and frowned. “No. Titus has though, or so he says. I believe-” She looked over at Damian’s perch to make sure he was still there. “Damian has too, although he won’t say.” She shrugged and started moving again, “It’s purely speculation...But

what do I know, aye?” Hillary winked at Megan and then exposed her perfect white teeth that came across as an almost sinister expression.

Through the tent’s entrance came a warm glow of light. Once inside, Megan took in her surroundings. Hillary didn’t stop until they stood in front of the second bed platform on the right. A bedroll sat at its foot. Gesturing to the bed, she spoke in a hushed voice, “Here you go. The last one. I’m here (pointing to the bed on the right) and Mayon is on your left. Megan looked first to Hillary’s then to Mayon’s. They were alike; thick generous mats and pillows with soft white linens. However, Hillary’s bed was neatly made with every corner tucked in. Mayon’s on the other hand, was in total disarray.

Looking past his, Megan spotted two huge feet sticking out from under the covers of the corner bed. Titus was laying flat, hands to his sides, with his eyes closed. She looked around for Kasha. Twisting all the way around, she found her in the corner across from Hillary’s, next to the entrance. She was lying sideways. Her injured leg lay on top of the blanket. Kasha had propped her head up and was lazily watching the two women. Meekly, Megan nodded to Kasha who did not move or respond.

Pierce walked in and volunteered where he slept. Pointing to the bed opposite the entrance, “My bunk is over there, between (pointing to Titus) Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum (pointing to the last corner cot.) Megan’s puzzled look prompted him to elaborate, “Damian’s spot. That left the last two across from Mayon’s and Megan’s which belonged to the twin boys.

“Uh, Hillary? It’s getting late, do you mind?” Again he stuck his wrapped hand out.

Hillary placed a guiding hand on Pierce’s shoulder; the coloring drained from his face as she quietly spoke. “Come on brave heart. You’ll want to wet that thing before you try to remove

the sash. The white blood cells, along with cellular debris and necrotic tissue have probably adhered to the cloth. You don't want to destroy the healing that has already taken place."

Megan started to follow and in a low voice, "Can I come along? I need water too."

Hilary steadied the suddenly weak kneed Bowman then looked over her shoulder and whispered, "To drink?"

Megan moved closer and replied, "Uh, no, I need to take out my eye contacts."

Hilary looked at her strangely and loudly remarked, "Excuse me?"

Pierce started to snicker, "Oh boy, what a ditz! Ehh." Hilary firmly pinched his shoulder then smiled to Megan.

"Megan, you have no contacts. Nothing came with you." Hilary and Pierce left, leaving the dumbfounded newcomer to comprehend this discovery on her own.

With a new appreciation, Megan observed the area again, noting every nook and detail, down to the very grains of the teakwood floor. Looking up, she realized where the light was coming from. An inner canvas type cloth stretched from all four monolith corners. It was illuminated. The glow reminding her of soft candlelight. Beyond the cloth, she could see where the frame of the tent roof seamlessly connected higher up on the monoliths. This left the tent interior free of structural supports. Megan noticed that the two outer sides of the tent did not reach to the floor, leaving a four inch gap to the outside.

"Time to rest Newcomer." Hearing Kasha's command, Megan obediently walked to her platform and undid the bedroll. She smoothed out the mat, fluffed the small pillow and turned down the blanket. Sitting down, she made note of the bed's comfort qualities. Megan removed her shoes and placed them on the floor.

Kasha ordered, “Put your shoes in the cubicle if you want to have them in the morning.” Megan stood and looked around for what she spoke of. “In the frame, Megan.” A square shelf was built in below the head of the platform. After she put them away, she turned around to see who was making all the commotion.

Jimmy and Timmy, ran in and pounced on their beds and then proceeded to throw a pillow back and forth. The sleeping Titus murmured something, and the two boys’ froze. Titus did not do well with sleep interruption. Timmy sent Jimmy’s pillow back over, put his sandals away, and climbed in under the covers. Jimmy did the same. They laid on their sides facing each other, one nodding ever so often to the other.

Megan followed suite. She lay down, half turned towards the entrance and pulled the covers up to her chin. Mayon came in, nodded and waived. Behind her, she heard the man ease himself into his bed and sigh. He whispered, “Good night Megan, pleasant dreams.” She looked over her shoulder and smiled. That was when she noticed the place was getting darker. The luminary light was fading.

Pierce and Hillary returned, and each went silently to their beds and settled in. Pierce gingerly tucked his precious bow and quiver behind his pillow, before lying down. He rested his now bare injured hand on top of the covers. It still looked badly, but the bones where no longer exposed.

Megan stared out into the night, watching for the last occupant to arrive.

Silently, Damian stepped into their sleeping quarters. His dark silhouette was surrounded by the subtle eerie light that reflected off the planets in the sky. Routinely, he turned to untie the knot that held the door flap, and hesitated. Sensing around him he felt the familiar calm of those sleeping except for one.

Without making a sound, Damian walked over to Megan and stood at the foot of her bed. The light that filtered in through the door was enough for him to see the tear streaks that marked her face. The woman had cried herself into a troubled sleep. Catching himself, he huffed, balled his fists, and went back to drop the canvas door. He no longer cared if he made noise and the heavy cloth raucously unrolled ending with a dull snap. Making his way in the dark, he found his bed as his mind cemented his resolution.

Damian could not afford to care about anything or anyone.