

1 — Reborn?

The last thing I felt was being ripped and torn, squeezed between massive fangs, wriggled around, and, finally, hitting the soft understory of the forest.

Then?

Darkness, but only for about five minutes.

After that?

Light, but only a little bit. I was in a massive cave, with dim light falling in from a great maw at its end. I would've blinked, but for some reason I felt I couldn't. It was a shame too, because I had been really good at blinking. The best in the forest even. The ladies loved me.

“Auch!” something suddenly yelled from outside the cave.

A honking roar followed.

“Unhand me, cretin!” the first voice responded to the roar, and then quickly after that another “Ouch!”

The honking roars came in rapid succession, but it seemed the source of the first voice had managed to get away. Then my whole cave shook and I heard the sounds of someone straining themselves.

“Heyoop!” came the first voice again, to my surprise, and another tremor rolled through the cave.

A grunt followed not long after, and then, from one moment to the next, a giant's head appeared in the portal of my cave. Its tan face was childish: massive eyes like black ponds; a relatively-tiny nose above a thin-lipped slit that was probably its mouth; large bulbous growths below its eyes, which had reddish blush on them; a sporadic growth of black hair on the very apex of its cranium, like a resilient bush in a barren desert; and, lastly, a weird hole on either side of its head, which the tan skin on its head seemed to be sucked into.

Its eyes narrowed as it stared into my cave and I felt myself shiver in fear, but, in that moment, I realised that not only could I not blink, I also couldn't move!

Those black ponds settled on me, and the thin-lipped slit moved slightly.

“What the Hell?” it said.

Another quake rolled over me as the giant crawled into the cave, stooping its head low and curling up its body inside; that's how large it was. Crawling on its hands and knees, the giant came closer, each movement sending tremors over me, and yet I still didn't move. Couldn't move.

"Why are you *so* small?"

Is this giant speaking to me?

"Yes, I'm speaking to you."

It can read minds??

The giant sighed. "This is all wrong... a core is not supposed to be *this* small... nor in a tree for that matter..."

"Are... are we in a tree?" my voice sounded weird and hollow; echoey even.

"Can't you see that?" the giant asked.

"How? I can't move. I cannot even blink!"

The giant ran a sausage-fingered hand down its face. I only now took in its full appearance. It was wearing a brown pair of cropped trousers that stopped above its knees. Its feet were bare and covered in dirt and leaves. Rolls of fat drooped over the waist of its cropped trousers, and, just like its strange head-holes, another such hole sat above the top-most fat-roll. For some reason, the sight of him made me very uncomfortable, as though I was fearing for my life.

"Of course you can't move or blink..." it replied as though that much was obvious.

Before I had the chance to protest again, it pre-empted me and said, "Just force your essence into my eyes and see what I see. I'll teach you the rest after we get *this* sorted."

Now it really wasn't making any sense, this giant in my cave. Nonetheless, I imagined that I could see what it saw and then there was a sort of wet *pop* and I was staring into the darkness, at a small stone or pebble that seemed to catch the dim light from outside and sparkle slightly.

"Is *that* me!?" I exclaimed, my voice coming out of the giant's mouth.

"Wow... that's uncomfortable," it said, rubbing its lips. "But yes, that's you."

"I'm a stone!" I yelled, somewhere between distraught and confused: *Disfused? Contraught?*

"It's not a stone, it's a core. Or well, I think so. But I've never seen one *so small* before."

Suddenly, my view was spinning as the cumbersome giant turned around on the spot and leaned slightly out through the cave opening.

"Anyway, have a look at your *kingdom*." Sarcasm was thick in its voice.

Light blinded me for a moment, but then I saw what lay beyond the cave: a forest. And just below the cave, which was not a cave at all, was the trunk of a tree expanding downwards towards the ground, with thick fingerless limbs stretching every-which-way and sparse leaves growing along them.

At the foot of the tree that we were in, a honking monstrosity stood, wings spread wide in a threatening posture.

If I'd had any control over the giant's eyes, they would've widened at the sight. "That's—!"

"A pissed-off goose," the giant replied.

"THE *pissed-off* goose that killed me!" I said, finishing my revelation.

"...What?"

"It killed me! Chewed on me! Slapped me with its wings! The whole lot! It was very traumatic..."

"What kind of pathetic human were you?"

"*Whomen?*" I returned, through the giant's mouth. "I was a toad, not a whomen!"

"Don't be ridiculous!" it scolded me, keeping its stare fixed on the goose as it marched around the foot of the tree, its wings spread wide while it honked furiously. *Show-off!*

"I am serious!"

"How would a toad's soul get turned into a core?? That makes no sense."

"You tell me. You seem to know a lot more about this than I do. I just woke up here!"

The giant snapped its fingers and I shot out of its body at once, returning to the immobile little shiny pebble that was now my body. Or rather, my core... whatever *that* entailed.

I watched as it turned and used the aperture of the 'cave' to get comfortable, then it clapped its hands together and pinched the air as it drew them apart. In the space between its lumpy hands, a book covered in beige leather, spotted with purple, blue, and red, materialised itself. The giant caught it before it had a chance to fall, then immediately leafed through its many dogeared-and-worn pages with surprisingly-deft fingers.

Hmm, huh, hum, and other such sounds emanated from the giant for the next few minutes, then with a *bang* it snapped the book shut and looked towards me with the black, bottomless pits in its face. "It seems you're not a *Dungeon Core* as was expected, but rather something called a *Settlement Core*..."

"I'm still pretty lost."

"Me too," it replied. "Good thing *Lord Deathheim* deigned to give me this *Encyclopaedia of Infinite Answers*."

"Deathheim?"

“The Lord of the Unliving, The Master of Undeath, The King Who Shall Never Die, etcetera. You would’ve been serving him, if not for this nonsense.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” the giant responded. “Wasn’t your fault you were sucked into this pathetic little pebble some idiot bird stowed away in here. That said, we do have a job to do. I won’t be getting any bonuses if you don’t grow stronger, so *your* success is *my* success.”

“I am still very lost and confused.”

The giant turned around and looked straight at me, or my shiny core... pebble... thing... and said, “That’s why I’m here. I’ve usually only worked on cores affiliated with human souls, but a toad’s soul might be amusing, or at the least peculiar enough to tell to my co-workers later.”

“What exactly *are* you?”

“Me?” it replied, putting a sausage-fingered hand on its exposed breast, squishing some of the fat and skin as the fingers pressed themselves white. “I am your new fairy, and—”

“You’re not a fairy,” I immediately said. “I’ve seen them. They’re about as big as a puffed-up dandelion and they look prettier.”

A wounded expression flashed across the giant’s face, but before I could feel bad, it morphed into a scowl with a pointed forked tongue and a fat finger pulling down the skin below one of its massive eyeholes. “You hurt me with your words, little toad,” it said. “But you’re right. To call me a fairy is nothing short of lying, but, alas, that is the term by which we have become known, whether we are associated with Lord Deathheim or Lady Light.

“The true name for my kin is *Shuagh*, and, based on which Deity we offer fealty to, we can become a *Will-o’-Wisp*, *Myling*, *Deogen*, etcetera. To answer your next question: I’m a Myling due to my association with Lord Deathheim. And to answer your question after that: I’m here to guide you into becoming stronger.”

The giant was surprisingly good at predicting my questions.

“I’m supposed to grow stronger?”

“Preferably.”

“How?”

The Myling lifted a finger as though it was about to tell me, but then frowned and started leafing through its book again.

After a few minutes, it regarded me with its enormous eyes. “It seems it is not as simple a matter as for a Dungeon Core, since you have to construct certain things and reach rather peculiar milestones

in order to grow. Normally, you would just have to kill adventurers to grow stronger, but it seems a Settlement Core is not as straight-forward.

“Anyway, I believe an introduction is in order. I have taken on the appearance of a human boy as is my wont, but my name is—”

“*Boi!*” I shouted, remembering where I’d seen one of those whomen tadpoles before. Granted, this Myling looked very far from that, what with its holes in the side of its head and enormous eyes and slit mouth.

“...Look what you did...”

“What?”

“My name is now officially ‘Boi’...”

“Why?”

“Because you interrupted me... The introduction is a very formal process and interrupting it can make everything go all wonky, and thanks to your timely interjection, my name has now been set as ‘Boi’ ... I won’t be able to change this until I leave your side, and who knows when that’ll be...”

The Myling now named ‘Boi’ sighed heavily, rubbing the skin below his cavernous eyeholes, before addressing me in a measured voice again, “Now, what is your name? And remember, this part is important, because it cannot be changed ever aga—”

“I am Toad!”

“Oh, for Hell’s sake...”