

Chapter 3

The Squirrel and Maiden

Cody went to bed early that night. Right after slipping on his night clothes - clean gym clothes, he turned off the lights. In bed, he tossed and turned, thinking about Penny, the bull, and even that dumb crate. He tried to focus on the crate, the least painful memory of today. It was tough to recall. He couldn't even recollect what the company brand looked like. The metal plate was worn out, but its logo stuck out. It looked like a tree growing out of a pond, surrounded by wavy clouds. Before he was able to discern those boring details, he dozed off into the night. He hoped a better day was waiting for him on the other side. In a way, today was full of sadness.

Something strange happened the next morning. When Cody woke up, the sun was aggressively shining on his face. His bed had been swapped with a red wagon. And instead of his bedroom, he was now in a place he had never recognized - a desert marketplace! Beyond his wildest expectations, someone had seemingly picked him up in his sleep and transported him into a different region.

Did my dad drop me off in Arizona as punishment for messing with that minotaur creature?

The buildings here looked like three-story igloos made of sandstone decorated with colorful awnings. The whole market was decked out on one wide street - a neat, cemented gravel road with smooth limestone sidewalks. Bulky rocks separated the sidewalk from the road. Various carts and stands lined in front of these rocks, stretching on as far as the eye could see. Their contents ranged from pretty jewels to tasty fruits. Besides those details, the whole place was empty. If there was a crowd, they entirely disappeared. There was no wreckage. No sign of a disaster. Not a single body in sight.

It was as if everyone had suddenly packed their bags and left.

I've woken up in weirder places. Cody thought to himself as he sauntered down the empty road. He was wrong. The poor kid was clearly in denial because he had never woken up in a place as strange as an abandoned desert town.

Suddenly, he heard quiet scrapes from far away, like shovels dragging against rock. He stopped. The scrapes did not. These sounds could only mean one of two things. Either a very incompetent stone mason was cutting bricks far away, or there was a MONSTER. Cody inhaled deeply and slowly turned to see which it was..

"Oh," He said in absolute stillness, "How'd you get up there?"

Crawling on the roof of a distant square-shaped building was a gigantic, vicious, four-legged beast. It had the appearance of a rabid squirrel with a body as big as a pickup truck. This

creature was terrifying, but Cody couldn't help but step closer to get a better look. Its messy brown fur was spiked like a porcupine. Its foaming jaw had two long upward saber teeth that vibrated from its growls. The beast didn't quicken its pace upon being spotted. Instead, it lay down on the roof of the square building.

"Is that my kidnapper?" Cody muttered to himself while stepping back slowly.

He grabbed a giant wooden spoon from a soup stand. As the boy readied himself for defense, he saw the animal take a seat. Seconds later, it fell to its side, passed out.

Maybe he's just a napper.

Using protruding sandbricks from the square building, Cody climbed to the roof. It was surprisingly easy to do, almost as easy as going up the ladder at the gas station. On the roof, the beast snarled and drooled out green slime. Standing from the other side of the roof, Cody could feel the hot, putrid breath of the foul creature; and he tried his best to not show any sign of disgust. This gargantuan squirrel beast may have been a monster, but it still deserved some respect -- even while asleep.

Kneeling at a safe distance, similar to how his dad approached the dying bull from earlier, he stretched out his giant wooden spoon. With all his willpower, he attempted to tap the beast on the nose. Thinking on his feet, it sounded like the best way to test the deepness of this beast's sleep. He failed, he accidentally lost balance and jammed the spoon against the monster's mouth. Its gargantuan arm instantly backhanded Cody, causing him to go flying high in the air. As he soared over the buildings and started to plummet back to the marketplace, he should've now realized he was in a dream – but he didn't. Cody braced for impact, landing on and smashing a pile of melons on a fruit cart. The beast jumped down to the market road, glaring at Cody. Now fully awake, he growled like a feral wolf.

"What the dang!" Cody looked down to the now-collapsed melon cart. Embedded on a board was a fruit-cutting knife. "Aha! This'll get him."

Cody snatched the melon knife; and he ran towards the beast as fast he could. His legs were numb from total fright, but there was no need for fear. Before his wobbly feet could stumble onto the dusty road, the squirrel beast fell down first, violently shaking the ground. The rumbling earth nearly brought Cody down too. To break his fall, he slid to the ground and crawled the remainder of the way to the fallen beast. Cautiously approaching it, Cody noticed its belly was purple and swollen. It looked like it swallowed a giant water balloon from hell.

"You must have

The belly started to vibrate and kick around.

"You're pregnant?"

The beast roared back, seemingly offended by that comment. Cody looked down and immediately realized there's no way that could've been possible.

"Looks like you ate a bad dinner."

The beast responded by rigorously clawing at the bulge in its belly. It then solemnly looked at the knife in Cody's hand, not with fear but desperation.

"You want me to cut it out?"

The beast slowly blinked, almost like that was its way of agreeing.

"Fine. But I'm only doing this because I already failed to save another helpless monster, and I don't want TWO of y'all dying on my account today."

It took him nearly four attempts to muster the strength to thrust his melon knife at the belly. Once he did so, it bounced right off. There wasn't even a mark left on the leathery skin on its belly. To make matters even worse, the monsterly squirrel went completely still. There were no more big breaths or drooling slime. He placed his fingertips on its neck. There was no pulse.

"No, no, no, no! You weren't supposed to die from that." said Cody.

"Calm down. You didn't kill anyone." said a female voice.

"What the dang!" said Cody, staring at the fallen squirrel beast. "You talk? Also, I thought you were a boy because of your-"

"No, idiot. I'm not the monster! I'm the one who just slayed the monster."

Cody looked up.

A young lady in a red cape hopped down from the top of the dead monster. She wore a crimson leather jacket, baggy purple jeans, and maroon boots. Additionally, she wore a chocolate-colored cowboy hat and a white bandana that covered most of her face. This lady appeared to be around Cody's age and height. She took off her hat to greet him, revealing rose-red hair. She looked awfully familiar, but he couldn't pinpoint how due to her face covering.

"How'd you do it? A sharp knife didn't even cut him?" Cody asked.

"I used Priscilla." she said while using a pink umbrella as a lever to prop the squirrel on its back. "Priscilla's my umbrella. It becomes indestructible when I hold it. Against her, the squirrel demon's hyde didn't have a chance. You should've run."

"Squirrel demon?" said Cody. "He was sick. And he needed help."

“You would've gotten killed if you helped him. Monsters don't spare people who help them. And they can't be pierced by mere kitchen utensils. You need REAL monster weapons.”

The red-caped lady stuck the umbrella in the beast's snout. She then opened the umbrella, causing the squirrel demon's jaw to draw. Snot and slime seeped out. There was no blood showing, but Cody felt sick seeing it. Seconds later, the body of a rabbit-eared blob creature slid out of the mouth opening and onto the street. This rabbit-eared blob was covered in snot, but she was alive.

"I'm saved!" said the blob as she raised her jelly arms in the air.

Eventually, the entire market crowd poured out of the squirrel demon - all blob spirits with various animal ears. It was quite the sight. They looked like fish pouring out of a barrel. The opening on the beast's body seemed to be a portal to a bottomless pit. At this point, Cody was slowly starting to realize he was in a dream. Nonetheless, everything around him still felt eerily real.

Cody's jaw nearly dropped. "How does a demon fit an entire village in its stomach?"

"Spirits are weird, dude." The red-caped lady snickered as she took her bandana off. "By the way, I'm Penelope."

"Penny?" said Cody. He recognized the face immediately with the hat and mask off. "Since when did you have red hair?"

She chuckled. "No one's called me 'Penny' in years. And I've also had red hair since-"

"Penelope!?" shouted one of the blob spirits as he crawled out of the opening. "She saved us from the monster! And Cody was useless!"

The crowd began to cheer for Penny and simultaneously jeer at Cody.

“Are you kidding me! I never even said my name. How did you-”