

Mortimer's Loss

The ocean was calm, the sun shining on a clear summer morning, reflecting off the gentle waves of the waters. The Reveller, a two-masted, square-rigged vessel, sailed straight North just off the coast of the mainland. The crew consisted of ten men and five women, most of them at ease in various parts of the ship.

The merchant's vessel didn't often take travelers, and this trek was no different, carrying only one person beyond the crew and captain. Mortimer J. Montague had been granted his request to board due to his infamy as a musician and storyteller and had promised to entertain the shipmates as part of his cost of passage.

The portly man was shorter than most, standing just over five feet tall. He weighed a bit more than most, nearing the three hundred pound mark. He wore a thin leather beret with a green band tied around it, covering his balding pate. Around his thick, triple chinned face he sported some scruffy walnut sideburns. His beady eyes shared the blue of the ocean, always shifting as if to find a treasure hiding in plain sight. A thick toothpick danced about his lips, and it would be a rare sight to see him without one.

Mortimer, or Morty as he was known to the crew, wore a fine set of clothing consisting of a golden silk, collared top and a black vest with shining gold buttons. His grey pants were of an expensive fabric made only by the best fabric makers of Silverin. His shoes were made of black, finely oiled Slake skin, a rare and dangerous creature of Southern Drakkar.

By far the most mesmerizing item on Morty was his instrument, a specialized large violin made with wood imported from the deep black wood of a secluded grove of trees from Assa. The invaluable item had been given to him after he had spent a month in the ancient foreign city on the other side of Novus, entertaining visitors from all walks of the world for the 100th anniversary of surviving the Maelstrom. The instrument became Morty's most prized possession, for the sounds it could make were even rarer and more beautiful than the exquisite look of it.

Morty was about to play his instrument, partly for the thrill of playing it, and partly due to his obligation to the Captain.

With an unexpected, deafening crash the entirety of the usually sturdy vessel suddenly shook violently, as though it had struck a rock or massive wave, neither of which were around. Morty looked to the side of the ship and saw something much worse had emerged from the water.

It was a gargantuan serpentine head, larger than the entire vessel, that had smashed against the hull of the boat. It had a toothless gaping maw, but a curved upper and bottom jaw that could snap or swallow a man. It seemed like a single, giant eel attacking the ship. But then another head broke through the surface of the water, appearing a short distance from the first. Then a few more on other sides of the ship. Morty had never heard of ocean eels traveling in packs, or working together, but anything could happen in this crazy world the Maelstrom had created.

The heads each began slamming the sides and masts of the ship, striking at sailors and ship hull alike with a ferocious abandon. The intense strikes smashed apart the wooden walls of the vessel, and many of the ship's best sailors were torn apart or swallowed whole in just a few short minutes.

Morty had no concept of what he could do to help, and the sight of so much destruction was beyond his ability to comprehend and effectively act upon. He did not know how to swim, there would be nowhere to hide in the ship, and he had never used a weapon beyond an ornamental sword in a show one time. So instead of staying frozen in fear and indecision, he did the only thing he knew how to do well... play music.

He stood strong in one place, shifting his weight with each lull and dip of the ship, playing a tune of sorrow and hope from ages past. Pieces of the ship, and people, flew about him, and he knew all was lost. He was shocked to discover that the group of giant eels that was tearing apart the ship and crew was just a single, monstrous being, each head was attached to a massive body that had been below the surface,

and now partially rose above. Morty had heard of the Maelstrom either bringing or creating some incredibly powerful creatures into the world, such as the great Dragon in the south, or the evil Demon in the West, but this one was new to him. Chances are that any of the ships that had faced it before were destroyed, and today would be no exception.

Ship crew ran about in panic and frustration, some searching for somewhere to hide, some attempting to fire spears and harpoons against the creature, and others simply leaping overboard in hopes of escaping the chaotic attack. The hiding spots were discovered in short order as the five heads of the sea hydra worked together to hunt for its prey. The spears and harpoons mostly bounced off its slick, rubbery hide with no effect. The few that did manage to pierce it were of no concern to the monstrosity, The sailors that had leaped overboard were each attacked by the giant heads of the hydra, and either snapped in half or swallowed in ghastly chunks of flesh and debris.

Monty fell victim to an attack as well, when the lightning-fast head of the hydra tore into his right arm with precision and power by the center head. Water had already been washing out the ship, and most of the crew now gone. The last thing the talented bard saw before he fell unconscious from the shock was the site of his arm and instrument being swallowed by the head, while blood poured out from the right side of his body where it was once attached.

What happened from that moment, until the moment he woke up on a beach coast, Morty could not recall. He grabbed at the pain he felt in his arm, or at least what he thought would be his arm. It was gone, and only a sewn up stump remained where it had come from. He was completely alone, with no sign of The Reveler, or any other survivors of the malicious attack by the creature. Who had saved him from dying of blood loss, who had sewn his arm?

The oddest feeling came over Morty, an overwhelming sense of loss, not of the crew, or the ship, but of the loss of his arm, and the countless hours he had spent learning and understanding his musical arts over the past few decades. Now it was all gone, he had no hope of bringing it back, and the magical powers of the priests of Braell could cure illnesses or wounds but could not regenerate lost limbs.

Morty knew this area well, he knew of every major location in the world from his travels over the years. He could tell by the intense humidity, and the lush vegetation and plant life, that he was somewhere in the region of Wkawn. When he looked up from the dark brown sands of the beach, he saw before him an immense wall of vibrant trees sporting large leaves and layered trunks. The jungle looked dark inside, as the trees and plant life all fought to get as much sunlight as possible with their broad leaves, casting the entire ground beneath them in deep shadows.

The dangers of the Jungles were told across Novus, from poisonous lizards and bugs, to gargantuan constrictor serpents always searching for another victim. The most dangerous thing of all was the legendary jungle wurm, referred to as Jue R'Gon by the residents of Assa. Morty had already suffered the loss of his arm, he had no intention of losing the rest of himself by risking a walk through there. Instead, he would travel along the coast. As he looked at the rising sun, he gathered his directional bearings and made his way south along the coastline. He was still wearing the attire he had on during the destruction of the ship, including the fancy shoes that were soaked from the ocean.

He had traveled, sore, tired, and alone, for nearly two hours before his body's natural craving for food overtook his desire to find civilization. Morty knew the only sustainable food he could find would either be through fishing in the ocean, which would be a very challenging feat with just one arm, or by entering the forbidding jungle to find some kind of edible plant or berry. With slow, deliberate steps and extreme caution, he made his way into the wild nature of the Jungles of Wkawn. He had a small, thin wood carving knife as his only form of defense. It had been strapped to his ankle, and had come in handy many times for dinner feasts, but beyond that, he had never actually used it for anything.

Sticking to the first twenty feet of the jungle's edge, he began making his way South again as he looked under leaves, peered into shadows, and looked up and down trees and plants for any sign of reasonable

sustenance. After walking about four hundred feet, Morty thought he saw purple, spherical pieces of fruit that might just do the trick.

A loud shriek distracted his attention, coming from deeper in the forest. At first, Morty was about to dash away, but after hearing it a second time he realized it was the sound of a human, possibly under attack or injured in the forest. He had no idea how he could help, given that he felt completely off balance and awkward without his arm, was exhausted from the lack of nourishment, and tired from the long walk he had already endured.

The aging bard wanted to ignore the cry, he wanted nothing more than to find his way to the city of Assa and take the first caravan back to the East. But he knew he had to help, whoever it was, whatever they were facing, he had to take on the role of those heroes of the world that he always sang about. He began dashing through the thick foliage, stepping in things deep and wet, unknown strings and filaments clinging to his legs and arms as he went.

Monty heard the cries get louder and louder as he moved.

"Stay... dead... this time!" the woman's voice said, a bit strained as she did.

Monty pushed himself through some broad leaves, pushing them aside to reveal the smoking, charred remains of a large, tusked boar. It had a large knife sticking straight up from its spine, which was now charred black as well.

The woman stood near the animal, looking up at Monty while breathing heavily with fatigue. Sweat beaded her forehead and dampened her thick locks of hair. The woman had the dark complexion of the Assanian people, wearing a crimson dress with some odd webbed strings about the torso and shoulders. Her eyes were in stark contrast to her culture though, a very light blue. She tilted her head at him quizzically, but said nothing.

"Looks like I got here just in time," Morty said, grinning as he tried to break the ice with a joke.

"Guess that depends on what you were hoping to find," she said, turning her back to him as though assessing he was not a threat. "Something larger is on the way."

"I heard you scream, thought I would lend a hand if you needed it." He said, "But it seems you handled the problem fine on your own. When you say larger..."

Not turning around, she replied "Keep your hand to yourself, looks like you're already short one. You better leave before it comes."

The ground began to tremble around them, stirring up birds and small wildlife, which began running away from the direction of the sounds it made.

"Is it the Jungle Wurm?" Morty asked, mortified by the thought of seeing another monstrous creature.

"Jue R'gon, the one and only." she said. As she spoke, he saw her fingers twisting and dancing fervently at her sides, pulling together magical forces from the air, causing small glowing, flat disks of red lights and runes to float around her.

"I am about to find out." The sorceress snapped, getting irritated with the strange man. "Stay out of the way."

Morty stepped backward, crouching into a cluster of large leaves and watching for the approaching creature. He was frightened of whatever might be coming, but was too curious to leave. Whatever it was would likely outrun him and devour him anyhow.

The ground-shaking grew more intense, the sounds of something churning through the earth getting louder and louder. Then it came, bursting straight up through the earth in an explosion of rock, dirt, and plants showering in all directions.

The woman stood her ground, the red glowing discs swirling around her, destroying any rocks that would have struck her. The creature that appeared was quite large, over a dozen feet tall, but nothing like the massive wurm Morty had heard about from those who survived its attack in the past. And it was not a wurm at all, but rather a strange creature full of vines, twisted wood, moss, and countless forms of plant

life intertwined in its beastly limbs, torso, and head. Two large, twisty horns of petrified wood sprouted from its head, giving the natural creature a demonlike appearance.

"What are you," the woman whispered loudly, sounding truly surprised by the bizarre combination of magic and nature before her.

"An elemental beast," Morty called out, not sure why he was volunteering the information, but continued anyhow. "Natures Nemesis, I've heard it dubbed, they have been spotted in several parts of the world now."

The woman did not reply, instead focusing her attention on her magic, sending forth the spinning, magical discs towards the intimidating creature. When two of them struck the tree trunk sized legs of the elemental creature the red magic and runes simply fizzled out of existence, causing no harm to the creature.

"How is that..." the magic user said, at a loss for words.

"Rumors say it can be stopped, but not with magic." Morty chimed in, still hidden in the bush.

The Nemesis stepped towards the woman, whipping a long arm towards her, with thick, heavy vines unraveling as it did so. She tried to raise up her forearm to defend, upon which was a small bracer that glowed with some magical dweomer, likely a protection spell, Morty thought. The glow of the bracer vanished when the vine struck it, canceling out its magic and turning it into a simple ring of metal about the woman's wrist. The thick vine wrapped itself around her arm several times over, clenching her tightly before raising her off the ground by the arm and flailing her back and forth.

Morty gasped at the sight, the woman's arm bending in unnatural positions. Pieces of spell components flew from a satchel she had, and a small wooden trinket flew towards him as well. It landed in the bush next to his foot.

The sorceress seemed completely helpless to this creature's pure, natural power. Perhaps she had an impressive array of spellcasting ability, and an array of enchanted items to help her survive this dangerous world, but Morty could tell she relied completely on those things, leaving her at the mercy of this magically protected being. The woman screamed out loud as she was twirled through the air again, and was slammed into a large tree before being twirled again.

Morty picked up the wooden object, discovering it to be a small wooden whistle. What it might be for, he had no idea. Maybe she used it as a verbal component to a spell she liked, he had heard of all manner of requirements for some of the stronger spells discovered by powerful wizards. Whatever it was, the woman was in trouble and he had no physical ability to stop the elemental creature that was about to end her life. He placed the whistle to his mouth, said a fast and silent prayer to Aura, and blew into it.

The sound that came out of it was nothing like Morty expected. It was a beautiful sound, as though he were playing one of the finest flutes ever made, yet it came from this tiny, simple wooden whistle. As he thought about the sound, it changed. Somehow the tiny instrument could understand what he wanted to hear and turned its tune to reflect that.

The Nemesis turned its mighty, horned visage his way. The black, shadowy recesses, where eyes might be on a real creature, seemed to glare right at him. Morty thought of a horrific sound, like that of the worst musician in the world playing harsh notes on a poorly tuned instrument. Somehow the whistle adapted, and the worst sound he had ever heard emitted from the whistle. The elemental was disturbed by the sound, so impacted that it dropped the helpless wizard to the ground as it unraveled its vines from her. Morty played it louder, intensifying the god awful sound. The creature winced, squinting its branch framed eyes and stepping back, then striding away into the jungle.

He kept playing the whistle, scared the creature might come back if he didn't. After about a minute of playing, the woman rose from the ground, rushing towards Morty and tearing the small whistle from his hand and mouth.

"It's gone!" she yelled at him. "Stop already!"

"I was just trying to..." he defended himself.

"I know. Thank you." the woman said, her stunning, light eyes staring into his. "It would have killed me." "And me!" he said, clambering out from the bush. "I don't think I could have even bent a branch off of that thing."

"I've never heard of a Nemesis before, it is new to Wkawn." She rubbed her arm as she spoke, very sore from the attack.

"It may be, I've only heard of them North of the Rending River. My guess is they were created by the Great Storm in the major forests, but now roam the world to wreak havoc wherever they go."

"Who are you, and how do you know all of this?"

"My name is Mortimer Montague, better known as..."

"Morty, the Bard of Silverin." The woman said, "I should have known. My sister used to speak of you." The sorcerer stared down at the whistle, twirling it in her hands, a look of sadness across her face. "She said you were an inspiration to our city when you shared your music. I was learning more of my craft at the time, far to the North at the Cloud City."

"That was many years ago," Morty said, rubbing the stump of his missing arm. "I don't think I will be inspiring anyone this time around. You said used to... did something happen to your sister..." He paused, as though about to say her name, leaving a silent question for her.

"Davra, my name is Davra. My sister was devoured by Jue R'Gon last month, along with the hunting expedition she was escorting. One of them survived and returned to the city, I've been on the search for it ever since."

"Alone?" Morty asked incredulously, "Do you have a death wish? I've heard how powerful that thing is!" "No one else was willing to try, and I cannot let this thing keep attacking travelers or wildlife. At some point it will find our city, there are so many fragile buildings and relics there that it could destroy. I realize now, after this Nemesis encounter, that I am not ready to face the Wurm yet. I will need better defenses, and a deeper understanding of how to slay it."

"I would help you," Morty said, finding the woman's determination and tenacity quite admirable, "but I have no professional combat experience, and my other talents are now gone."

"What happened?" Davra said, finally asking the question she was trying to avoid, realizing he seemed to want to share his misfortune.

"Let us leave this jungle," Monty said, motioning towards the direction of the ocean. "I am ready to collapse but I don't want to do it here. We can talk on the journey to Assa, if you're going back that way."

"I am, I will need to gather a few things and inform a few people before I leave Wkawn."

The two began the journey to Assa, Monty sharing some of his past, and the loss of his arm to the sea hydra. Davra shared with him the foundations of magic awareness, the simplest concepts to begin opening one's mind to how it can be shaped. By the time they arrived to the visually stunning city of Assa, the two had developed a bond of friendship neither of them had expected.

The people of Assa remembered Morty well, and those that had invited him as a guest so long ago were shocked at what had happened to him, at the loss of his great talents with an instrument.

Davra and Morty agreed to travel together to Vace City, and part ways from there. Davra felt it important to travel the world with magic from there, to see what she could find and learn to enhance her skills to destroy the Jungle Wurm before it could do much more harm, and to avenge her sister's death. Morty planned to return to Silverin, and figure out how to live with one less arm and no income.

As they were about to depart with a caravan of exotic hard bread and spices, a representative of the Council of Knowledge requested to meet with Morty.

Davra grinned widely, revealing to Morty that she knew what it was about.

"Mortimer Montague, the Council of Knowledge has a request for you," said the thin, balding man, a slight hunch to his back and a sturdy blackwood cane in one hand.

"Tell me, how can I help?" Morty said, placing his hand on his portly hip, leaning forward with interest.

“Lady Davra has provided us with some insight into how we might be able to help you recover from your... loss.” The representative said. “But in order to do so, we would require special metals, and some funding, as the idea has never been created before.”

Morty looked at Davra, the woman was smiling from ear to ear, her bright eyes lit up with joy. She nodded at him, prompting him to continue the conversation.

“I would do anything to support the amazing research and engineering marvels I have seen come from your city.” He said, intrigued by the offer to support.

“Our finest artificer is testing out concepts for a mechanical arm piece.” The delegate said, “This would have limited use, enough to be able to use for focused tasks, but not for combat or spellcasting. He wants to experiment with you. If you get him the resources he needs, this idea will become a reality for you to test out.

“I will find what you need,” Morty replied, thoughts of a mechanical arm filling his head with hope. The man gave him a parchment, listing out what was required, and saying nothing more. As he climbed into the caravan with Davra, Morty began thinking of how he could complete this task.

The sorceress grabbed his hand gently unfurling his fingers and pressing the enchanted whistle into his palm.

“Our journeys begin!” she said, her voice full of contagious hope and excitement.