

Emptiness

By Sean Madden

Ashes to Ashes. Dust to Dust.

Dark clouds crept across the sky, blending into atmosphere dyed red like a rusty metal. The dark, crimson heavens met with the black stone towers of the ominous castle, secluded on what appeared to be an island, the ground reaching down into the abyss below. A dense fog surrounded the entire isle like a thick cloak. With no civilization located anywhere remotely close to it, anyone would assume it had been abandoned. But the interior was far from empty.

The black coach wagon traveled the one winding path to the castle. It moved along the narrow pass flawlessly, drawn there by an unseen force. At last, it pulled up to the rusty metal gate at the foot of the castle, which creaked open with an unsettling moan. The wagon was pulled inside, and the gate shut behind it. In the silent, dark interior, it finally came to a stop and the door opened. People covered head-to-toe in gray armor emerged, towing a rusty chain. Two girls bound to the chain were forced out and dragged through the dark corridors.

“It’s okay, April,” said the older girl, as she glanced at the younger girl in the white summer gown behind her. “You don’t need to be afraid, your big sister is here. As long as I’m here, nothing can hurt you.”

“I’m scared, Rose,” April whimpered as she was dragged along, her flowing blonde hair caught in the chain. “What is this place? We didn’t do anything wrong, so why are we here?”

“I don’t know. But I’ll find a way to get us out of this mess. I’m determined to fix this situation. Just believe in me... believe in your big sister.”

They advanced through the dark hall, with the bone-chilling air. As they were dragged past some of the rooms, Rose saw that they were all just as dark and dusty as the hallways, with the lavish furniture and decorations untouched. It was as if nobody had ever even lived in the castle to begin with. Soon enough, they were dragged into a small compartment. One of the armored guards pulled a lever, and the gates around them shut as the compartment was lowered into darkness.

April began to quietly sob as the lift descended at surprisingly fast speeds through the black abyss. Though she desperately wanted to know what was happening, Rose knew trying to get information from the armored guards would be just as impossible as before. The guards had said nothing during the entirety of their travel, and not even made as much as a glance at either of them. Their bodies functioned like empty shells controlled by an outside force. As they all descended farther and farther underground, a large network of stone pipes soon became visible. Hundreds upon thousands of the stone serpents lined the vast chasm walls, and only more continued to show up as their trip progressed downward. Rose gripped April's hand tightly. She was also scared, but she couldn't show it, lest she throw April into complete despair. She knew that she had to look as determined and strong as usual, to fill April with the hope she needed. Trying her best to cast off her sense of dread, Rose smiled at her younger sister. All she knew was that she was going to make sure that at least April, who she treasured above all others, would make it out of this situation.

After descending an immeasurable distance, the lift finally hit solid ground. The two sisters were again pulled by the chain past dozens of the stone pipes, with copious amounts of water audibly flowing through them. The tunnels had a strange, eerie atmosphere to them, almost like another world. After a while, the armored guards stopped in a dimly lit room. A young man

with a dark violet cloak was sitting at a desk, writing with a feather pen. He brushed his dark hair aside and looked at the two girls as they entered. His eyes eventually locked with Rose's, his pale blue pupils staring at her intently.

“There is something interesting about you,” he whispered to her. His eyes quickly darted around, inspecting her long, dark red hair and her white gown. “The aura I sense from you is unlike any other I've sensed before. I've been waiting for someone like you to show up for a long time.”

“Who are you, and just what is going on?” Rose demanded, still trying to mask her fear with her usual hopeful demeanor. “What do you want with us? We didn't do anything wrong!”

“You may call me Shade,” he said as he began to scribble something down on a piece of parchment. “I'm what you might call an overseer in this place. As for your business, your presence here has already been decided by It, so that is why you have been brought here. Unfortunately for you, that is all I can say to you.”

Shade then gave the two guards each a slip of parchment. Suddenly, she and April were tugged apart. April began to cry out frantically as she was dragged out of the room. Rose suddenly dropped her hopeful façade and struggled with all of her might to reach back to her as she was being taken out the opposite way.

“You can't do this!” she cried as April's wails echoed out of the other exit. “Please, I'm begging you, don't take my little sister! She's my entire world, she's all I have left!”

“Time is short,” Shade whispered to Rose as she was overpowered and forced to the opposite doorway. “Remember, there is more than darkness within these cursed halls.”

With those parting words, Shade vanished from her sight and Rose was again engulfed by the black abyss. Eventually, she stopped struggling and hoped April was safe somewhere. Still clueless as to just where she was, Rose tried to sense her surroundings. It was difficult to make out any sounds due to the clinking of the chain and rushing water through the pipes all around her. She was able to make out a moan or a whimper every now and then from others apparently trapped here. But the scent of the area was a musty scent mixed with the stench of rotting flesh, leaving lingering traces of paranoia in her. Finally, the armored guard came to a halt. Quickly removing her shackles, it then shoved her into a small room and shut the door behind her.

The room was poorly lit by a lone torch near the door. Sure enough, the door had been bolted shut as soon as she went to check it. With no other way forward, she decided she could check the dimly lit room in hopes of finding an exit. Turning around though, she was hit with the awareness that she wasn't alone. She was just able to make out several wooden mannequins at the edge of the room, each with the appearance of a young child. Their large eyes seemed to stare blankly at her, even though they were merely painted onto their faces. Suddenly, the large rusty cogs in the room began to turn, and what sounded like a music box began to play. The puppets began to move, grotesquely moving their joints like broken dolls. Rose reeled back from the eerie sight in shock, and paranoia began to well up inside her. She wondered to herself what something like this could possibly be doing here. She shut her eyes and clutched her head as she tried to imagine herself having another picnic with April, laughing and having a fun time.

Rose lost track of time as the music continued without pause. She had been in this prison for what felt like hours, and had in the meantime curled up in the corner in fetal position. She wanted to tear off her ears as each note from the music box began to feel like a hammer striking her head, and the clacking of the wooden joints like her brain cells bursting. Against her better

judgement, she looked back at the activity. The cogs and music box dial were oozing blood. The wooden child puppets looked to be made of corroded human flesh, cracked like sediment as they grinned at her with broken smiles. Rose quickly covered her face again, but the ghastly image remained in her head. At that moment, the cogs ground to a halt and the music stopped. Stealing another glance, she realized that everything was just as it was before when she first entered, but now left at a standstill. The door's lock clicked, and footsteps ran off outside. Slowly recovering from the mental shock, Rose crawled over and found a crumpled piece of parchment at the foot of the door, which she promptly unfolded and read in the faint glimmer of torchlight:

Only those who can dare to stare death in the face, reach out to it, and be swallowed up into the darkness will know the truth. If you seek answers, locate the hidden chamber.

Beware, something is stalking you.

Rose read through the note several times, and could only assume that someone was trying to help her. Could it be Shade, or perhaps some other force? Regardless, she now had a way out now that the door had been unlocked. Not wanting to be in this demented room for a second longer, she busted out and began to stumble through the darkness. Powered by the hope to find April, she pressed onward. Soon, she realized that something seemed much more wrong than last time. There was a great feeling of emptiness in the atmosphere. Last time, she could feel the presence of other people around her. However, all of the compartments and rooms throughout the halls were eerily quiet and empty now. She was completely and totally alone here.

Just when she realized that, she heard something faintly echoing behind her.

What sounded like the creaking of steel or metal far behind her was ever slowly coming closer. Something was shifting across the ground, making an awful scraping noise that sent a

chill down Rose's spine. As she moved through the corridors, past the stone pipes with water still rushing through them, she kept hearing the dull noises behind her. No matter how long or how far she was going, she always heard the horrible sounds. Something was following her.

Rose began to hurry along more urgently, but whatever it was that was behind her was in hot pursuit and was clearly able to find its way around in the dark better than her. No matter how quickly she felt her way around the walls and the pipes, the sound behind her continually getting louder and closer. Soon, Rose reached what she could only deduce was a fork in the path. She took the left route without thinking, in hopes the thing following her would be slowed down. However, it did not, as the sounds followed closely behind. Suddenly, Rose came upon a wall. It was a dead end. The scraping sound began to corner her, and there was no way for her to go back. Seeing an extremely faint light coming from under a door, she quickly opened it and locked it behind her as the sounds closed in.

Surveying the room quickly, she had to hold in her breath not to gasp. The room was filled with strange devices, which she assumed to be for torture. As something had begun to scratch at the door with a metallic screech, she knew she had to find a place to hide immediately. Rose slipped past the large torture wheel and found a small iron maiden. As she opened it up, she recoiled as a corpse impaled by the wall of spikes slipped out. With something now banging on the door with great force, she rushed under another body suspended on a beam with a saw protruding out of it and noticed a large brass bull. Climbing into it from the door on the side, the insides were surprisingly warm. She then realized she was covered in ashes. As she tried desperately not to think of what it had been used for, a loud clanging noise echoed through the room as the door flew off its hinges, and the something followed it into the chamber.

It crept past all the devices and appeared to inspect each one. As the sounds came closer and closer, eventually something began to tap against the side of the brass bull. A deafening screech like nails on a chalkboard was produced as it slid something down the side. Staying completely silent, Rose's heartbeat pounded like a drum as she felt something truly dreadful between her and this brass shield. Rose closed her eyes and tried to reimagine the sound as the factory whistle she often heard when playing outside with her sister. The sounds continued to dance across the room for a few minutes and eventually to her relief, faded as they began to echo down the hall again. Waiting several minutes after silence had fallen, Rose climbed out of the bull, brushed off the ashes as best she could and headed out of the room.

Taking the other path of the fork this time, she soon enough found herself at a pleasing site, back in the room where she had first encountered Shade. She had no other clues as to April's whereabouts, so she searched around the vacated room for any possible leads. All of the parchment was written in symbols that she could not understand, and none of the documents were legible either. Rose soon enough checked the door behind Shade's desk and found a small alcove. The room was lit with many torches along the wall, extending the shadows of the gargoyle statues that lined the sides. Upon heading further inside, she was soon met with a massive stone skull at the end of the room, grinning at her. Something about it was so compelling to her, she couldn't stop herself from staring at it. "Why was this, of all things, here in this room?" she thought to herself. As she inched closer, still staring at the oddity that appeared to stand out, she realized that something about this object being in the room was very intentional. Suddenly, she recalled the strange note she had received and reached out to the skull. Upon a closer inspection, she realized there was some sort of lever hidden in the ethmoid bone.

Rose pulled the lever, and the lower jaw of the skull dropped to the floor, leaving a small crawlspace. She concluded it must be the entrance to the hidden chamber she was told about, and she could very well find the answers she seeks in there. Glancing inside, she saw that the small passage seemed to go directly downward dropping into a black abyss. As Rose pondered whether or not to go, a familiar noise behind her made her jump. Whatever had been following her earlier was close again. Not thinking twice about going back, Rose crawled into the maw of the skull, shut the jaw back up behind her and slid into the darkness.

After a long drop, she at last slid into a large chamber. Rose got to her feet, amazed at how something so large existed this far below the surface of the earth. The putrid smell of the area almost burned her nostrils, but she toughed it out. Getting a better look around the chamber, she noticed there was a long pathway in front of her lined with angel statues on both sides. She heard water pouring into the chamber, and saw that the network of large stone pipes from earlier fed into the area, filling the adjacent sides to the path with water. The walls were a dull red color, with great ivory bones imbedded within them. With the straight narrow path her only way forward, she pressed on through the darkness.

At last, the walkway came to a stop with a gigantic cavity at the end, and some sort of an altar isolated in the middle of a vast lake. Walking up to the altar, Rose saw a familiar face. The young man kneeling down at the altar turned to face her, now wearing elegant royal blue vest. She met eyes once again with Shade, but this time something about him was strangely different. Whereas last time his eyes were cold and emotionless, they now seemed almost sorrowful.

“I was right. Even though It just tried to kill everyone here, you and I survived,” he said. “You were protected by the aura I sensed in you. My apologies for having to put you through all of this. Please understand that It has senses everywhere, so I had to deceive you.”

“What on earth is going on?” Rose demanded, her voice now shaking, her inner hope the only thing keeping her going now. “What is with this place? And where is my sister? She’s almost a daughter to me as much as she is a sister! Answer me!!”

“I instructed the guards to have your sister moved to a safe haven. It was horribly painful for me to do this to the both of you, but I wanted to make sure you were both safe. Incarcerating you in the cells I chose until the time was right was the only way I could preserve your lives without causing suspicion. As for this place... it was originally a prison designed to house the worst of criminals. The castle belonged to royalty, being some of the closest beings to It. However, It soon demanded more and more from us, and we were forced to incarcerate petty criminals, innocents... and even children. Soon enough, everyone fled from this place, but those still forced to be here, like myself, had to expand our search for fresh blood. Over the time I’ve been here, my sins are now far too many to add up. But you... you can break this cycle.”

“What do you mean? Just what are you planning? What is It anyway?”

“I hate to ask this of you... but I need your help. Please, I want to seal It... I want to strike back against It!”

As soon as Shade shouted that, the entire chamber shook. The world seemed to all crumble away as space itself began to warp around them. With the walls of the chamber vanishing, they were left floating in a crimson red sky. Suddenly, Rose felt a feeling unlike any other slam into her like a wave of panic. Something was here. Something so huge that she couldn’t even fathom. Something with a presence as large as the entirety of the world itself was there. Petrified with terror, Rose looked at something so indescribably huge reared up. It was so enormous, Rose could only get a full view of part of its face. It stared at the two of them with

black eyes, dark as the abyss. Rose wanted to scream, but she was too paralyzed with fear to do a thing. Then, a horrible, deep voice spoke and shook her entire being:

“So, you finally state your true intentions, Shade. Can you even fathom what you’re doing right now? To turn against me is the greatest sin of all, and it shall be the last sin you will ever commit.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing!” Shade exclaimed, even though he was clearly under an immense amount of pressure from the great and terrible being before them. “For everything that you’ve lead us to do... for everything you’ve done to our people... this world ill needs something like you!”

The titanic creature laughed, causing the very space around them all to shake and distort. It then produced a great blood-red symbol, and aimed it directly at the two of them.

“You think what happens to your people matters? You are all nothing to me. You all have no will of your own. Your fates are mine to decide, and I can end your entire world’s pitiful existence without hesitation if I need to. In fact, I believe it is time to do just that.”

The symbol began to grow and enlarge as It laughed once again. Rose looked back to Shade, as he seemed to be doing something too. Still trembling, he raised his hand high, and a great blue seal of light formed above his hand.

“I knew you would try to do this, eventually, and so did my predecessors. That is why all this time, since the beginning, we’ve prepared this for now! This seal is filled with the spirit of all of those that you had us take. And over the ages, it has added up! Let me show you the power of what you call nothing!”

Saying that, Shade tossed the seal at the thing, causing it to reel back. The red symbol vanished, and the space around them warped, returning them to the putrid chamber. Shade soon collapsed to the ground. Rose bent over and checked his pulse.

“It’s no use,” he coughed as he weakly turned over. “Using that seal cost me my life.”

“What... what the hell was that thing?” Rose asked, finally regaining hold of herself.

“That was a being far beyond humanity’s comprehension. The seal I cast is the only way to limit the connection it has in our world. However, that seal isn’t permanent. That’s why I lead you here... there’s something about you that sets you apart from other people. And the fact you survived when It used its power to purge the life of all the prisoners here proves my point that your bloodline has some sort of protection against It. Your blood should be able to make the seal everlasting.”

Shade indicated the altar behind him, in the middle of the lake. A massive monolith stood up there, with torches surrounding it. “Impale your hand on the spike. Press it to the monolith. That will complete the seal. Quickly, before It breaks free. After that, escape the chamber with the staircase near where you came in, then take the lift and get out of this hell. Your sister should hopefully have already been escorted out of here.” Shade met with Rose’s eyes again. They had begun to fade darker. “Forgive me... I never even asked you for your name.”

“It’s Rose,” she said, staring back at him. “Rose Symphony.”

Shade smiled. “That’s such a beautiful name.”

With that, his eyes closed. Rose sat there for a moment, her hand over his no longer beating heart. However, something caught her eye as she looked down at him. There was blood

on the floor. Shade hadn't at all been wounded, so it couldn't be his. Following the trail, she soon realized what the source was: the water. It had never been water to begin with, but blood. All of the water in the chamber had been blood from the start, with dismembered body parts floating in it, no doubt the cause of the rancid smell. It was blood that was flowing through the giant network of stone pipes the entire time. Blood of the people who had been brought here as tributes throughout the ages. And despite this hell being devoid of prisoners, there was still enough left in the massive network for it to flow strong.

While she was still horrified at the discovery, Rose clung to her inner hope of sealing It and saving her sister as she struggled to her feet and approached the altar. Knowing it was for the greatest good, she clenched her teeth and slammed her hand down on the spike. While incredibly painful, the worst of it was over quickly. Ignoring the throbbing pain, she quickly pressed it up to the monolith. It glowed with a blue light as blood ran out from her hand and turned black. The lines of black blood turned into a pattern of thorns that began to etch an image into the great monolith. When the activity subsided, she removed her hand and glanced up at the sickening image of what looked like the being from before, but with a full, otherworldly looking body. Just then, Rose clenched her head in pain as a voice with the same pressure and atmosphere of the greater being filled her mind. However, instead of the menacing, deep voice that shook the earth, it was the voice of a young man, one she had never heard before.

“So, you finished the seal after all. Do you think you have won? No, you have only delayed the inevitable, foolish girl. You may have limited my interactions with your world, but one day, I will find a way to break it. All of your actions have been for nothing, for your victory shall one day result in the ultimate despair for your kind. And as consolation for your actions, I

will make sure your soul will never know rest. To do that, I will use the last of my power in this world to do this for you. You will know absolute terror.”

All of the light vanished from the chamber. Rose looked around frantically for something, anything to get her out, but she was frozen in place by paranoia. At the very opposite end of the chamber from where she entered, the metallic scraping noise was approaching. Rose tried desperately to move, but couldn't as she was paralyzed by fear. As the noise grew closer, her heart beat faster and faster, and the noise came closer still. Finally, the source of the noise was right within her range of vision. But there was nothing there.

Rose stood there, still as stone for a good minute. The noise had stopped. There was nothing there in front of her. Her heartbeat finally slowed down as she relaxed. Feeling that it was all just her imagination, she turned around to make sure the seal was still there.

In front of the monolith with the etching still there, stood a wooden puppet. Rose had no time to react before it reached out its giant, rusty claws and clutched her neck. Completely horrified, she couldn't even struggle as her body went numb again. She stared at the wooden puppet in complete disbelief. The body was petrified like wood, with the skin cracked and decayed. The long flowing blonde hair was tarnished and dirty, and the white summer gown ripped and torn. Rose then looked directly into the face of the sister she had once loved dearly, now solidified and cracked. Every aspect of hope died in her as she stared at the empty eye sockets dripping blood and peering into her soul. Rose's last breath came as a scream that echoed throughout the entire chamber miles beneath the great dungeon of the sinister black castle.

Ashes to Ashes. Dust to Dust.