

THE MANHOLE COVER

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It was a bustling day in the city, with cars honking like the music of the city, people ushering about, billboards playing numerous videos advertising the most admired products, and towers sheathing the sky like a colander. I was egressing from Grand Central Terminal, in hopes to arrive at the office on time. My 8:04 departing from Cos Cob was already ten minutes late, and I lost faith in my fantasy football team when Malik Nabers hurt his ACL. I was just starting to win my league! The terminal was noisy, crowded, and a peculiar stench of sweat and cologne lingering around the main terminal.

There were countless tourists who couldn't walk the city, so I had to weave around while listening to a tourist group in a language I couldn't fathom. The click and clack was audible, but no vowels or actual speaking sounds. Whatever. My office building was two blocks south and two blocks west, so I plugged in my AirPods and zoned out for the walk. I could hear my music, but the city was still looking for attention space in my nose. I could smell the halal stands, the smoke coming from the trucks, as well as a warm chocolatey aroma coming from an open shop. I was taking my key fob out so I could open my office, a startup financial consulting business in the heart of Midtown, a few blocks down from Times Square. I opened the door, put my stuff down, and went to the small bodega a couple of stores down because I forgot to eat my breakfast. I got my classic order: an egg and cheese sandwich with some hashbrowns on the side. I was about to enter the office when I realized I had left my keys inside the room. Seriously, how on Earth will I be able to get to work? I suspect my clumsy nature will be my downfall. If I can't keep my keys with myself, what can I ever do with greater responsibilities? Whatever, I thought. Maybe Jonny will come sometime soon. I paced about the walkway, doing anything to not look like a fool. I just checked my fantasy team. At least Chase didn't have a negative game; he gave me 26 points. I walked around a little more, scrolling through my fantasy team, waiting for Jonny until he came. All of a sudden, I tripped. "Those dang manhole covers," I thought to myself. I could see the increasingly faint blackness and the emptiness of that area. My head went down first, and it slightly scraped the dirty and rusty edges, with some blood falling out, dripping down like drops of rain. I felt weightless, and my legs plummeted with me. I felt my stomach drop, like when I'm on a drop tower. I could feel the cold air going up my shirt as I plummeted down. Then, a thud. After that, there was emptiness in my brain.

I awoke in complete darkness. It was humid, and I could feel the humidity lingering on my skin. It was pitch black. It was mysterious in that area. I couldn't tell if I was in a tight or open space. I could barely see my own hand. I could hear a gloomy noise; it was one of those essences where you can't hear it, but you can feel it. I felt a shiver down my skin, and the pins and needles in my hands. It was cold, no breeze or anything, and my goosebumps arose. I got up, I got winded, I tried to walk around, clueless of what I was going to do with myself. I kept myself ducked down, hoping I wouldn't bang my head on whatever ceiling there may have been.

"Hello? Anyone?" I uttered. The words barely came out of my mouth; I was afraid of the complete blackness around me. I crept around and wondered how I got myself into this.

"Where am I?" I questioned myself. How could I fall into this place? I became more confused than I already was. I suddenly felt a gush of cold liquid. I could assume to myself that it was just water, but it could have been anything at this point. Soon after that, I heard a distant chatter.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" This time, I shrieked. I really had hopes that it was people, but once again, I was going to make myself more confused. I just told myself to calm down and relax. Surely someone was going to get me. Right?



Jonny was walking down the street while he pulled out his metallic blue fob
“Rushil, look what happened to Malik Nabers! I’m telling you, this league is mine.” Jonny announced. “Rushil, Rushil, are you here?” There was no noise, just the smoke detector beeping every once in a while. Jonny proceeded to go outside. Though he didn’t go to Vinny’s deli, he knew the guy well. He walked back down the road when all of a sudden, he saw a group of people huddling around a manhole cover. Jonny went out to ask what was going on. He was a pretty nosy person, and he wanted to know what could have happened with the manhole cover.

“Excuse me, what happened here?” He asked. “A person tripped over the manhole cover and fell inside! He was scrolling on his phone, and then once he fell, he disappeared.” The lady looked genuinely petrified as she said it. A chill went down Jonny’s spine. Was it him, was it his friend who went down that hole?

“Stop it, Jonny,” He told himself. “No way it could have been him. Maybe he’s in the bathroom, or getting something.” Jonny went to the office and started working, meeting up with his client without remembering the notion of his coworker in his head.

I was still down in the manhole cover, maybe 30 minutes had passed, and I still couldn’t get myself out of that annoying hole. Now, the chatter was becoming louder and more distinguishable. I didn’t say anything then; I just waited and tried to figure out who and what these creatures were speaking. The words ever so slightly sounded more like the tourism group that I walked by at the station. I was afraid of the people. Were they going to come at me? I covered my vital organs and my head by curling up in a ball, and I was ready to fight them.



“Click, clack, click, click, clack, click,” I heard while I was in battle position. I could hear the footsteps in the puddles since the cold liquid stopped gushing out.
“Hello? Click, click? Clack?” I asked. I could see the faint orange light of the lamp these creatures may be carrying.

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“Hello...” A distant voice mumbled. The noise rang in my ears. I could feel a tremble as the walls were speaking to me. I felt a sting as the bricks on the wall shifted in and out of position, likely because of the vibration. I chose to ignore the stream of blood flowing down my cheek as it was making way to drip down my face.

“Follow the path of the lampmen... and do what they say.” The wall shifted in and out again. The same distant voice rang again, this time, in an even more demonic and grim tone. Was the wall speaking to me? What is this noise? The light of the lamp became brighter and even more vivid until I saw a group of tall, lanky creatures with black robes covering their head, and a mask that was fully black. All of the lampmen had lamps with them. There were around 6 or 7 of the lampmen standing and examining my face. Each of the lampmen held different things with them. One had a sword, another with a net, one was equipped with a hook, and one held a rope. What have I gotten myself into? This silly key mistake put me in a dungeon with random creatures with lamps surrounding me, looking like they would kill me.

“A mortal I perceive with my mask? One of them asked. He was the tallest and the only one who did not hold anything. He had a hook for a sword on his bottom left pocket, and a diamond-plated sword inside it. He displayed a very eerie persona.

“Indeed, sir,” One of the smaller ones answered. They were all much shorter than the first one. I assumed that the tall one was the leader. I was petrified. Would I ever go back to the real Earth? Will I ever get to celebrate my 24th birthday? Will I ever see my mother again? This dungeon gave me the chill, the searing cold air spiked through my internal organs. The thin air, though we are underground, pinched my nose and lungs each time I yearned for a breath.

“Who are you... And what will you do to me?” I uttered. The words barely came out of my mouth. That cold shiver came down my spine again, and the same chill spread through my body.

“Aha, a mortal who can speak.” The tall lampman said. He had a grin on his face, and an evil one. “Peasants, chop chop!” In a split second, the lampmen started tying me and working me diligently. I was captured. I could not feel my body, and I could only see, nothing else. I was led out of a gate. I could feel the bruise on the left side of my head, near my eye, burning from the rope; the blood started dripping again. The ropes dug into my arms, cutting into skin that had never known this kind of pain. I lost the freedom of my mouth once they tied it up. I could peek through the opening of the net. In front of me was a giant chamber, draped with blackness all over, and an arch opening up with a vault-like door. Inside the chamber was a gloomy, puddled farm of wood, bricks, and slaves slaving away.

“Mortal, you will slave for us here, in the chamber of the unknown.” The tall lampman said. He dropped me violently. I shook and flopped myself around, limited in my actions. I could see maybe 3-4 people tied up like me, cutting wood, and doing other tasks. They were freer than I was, but they were wearing broken and loose-fitting or short clothing. I could see more lampmen, without the lamps holding weapons, and beating the slaves inside.

“Mortal, you shall make haste and finish chopping this block of wood into plate-thick pieces. Your fate will depend on this task.” One of the lampmen grumbled. I was ready to take on this task quickly. If I didn’t get it over with, I would lose my life. This was a game of life and death, and the lampmen were the spectators laughing whilst eating snacks. You know what, I wasn’t going to live like this. I wanted to go back to the city. I might as well rebel in this miniature world instead of dying here. I approached another one of the slaves near me. He was an older man, his grays were coming in, and he looked starved and tired.

“How did you get in here? How do you get out?” I asked frighteningly. That fear converted into courage? The man had droopy eyes, and his wrinkles were all around him. I was surrounded by dark walls that seemed to be pervaded with old, dark baroque art on every corner of the chamber, with tall pillars on each corner as well.

“I was kidnapped. I fell down the same manhole cover as you did. As per how you get out... You don’t. I’ve been slaving away here in this very chamber. I don’t know how long I have been here; they don’t let you keep any record. Word is that if you open that big vault at your 12 o’clock, there is a portal leading you back to NYC, a couple of blocks down from Times Square, near the pocket watch store.” The old man muttered. He limited the volume of his voice as one of the lampmen approached.

“Sire,” The old man answered. “May I treat you to anything?”

“I see you conversing with the new mortal. Anything you would like to share with us?” The lampman questioned.

“No, sire.” The old man responded. I could feel his adrenaline rush as the lampman dug through his pocket, maybe to pull out a weapon. Instead, the lampman just took out a bag and chucked it near us and left. The old man opened the packet.

“Our ration for the week... let’s see.” The veiny hands of the old man slowly crumbled open a bag of an unknown powdery substance, water, and a partial cookie. “Ooh! A cookie! Here, take this, visitor. The man gave the plastic bag of a brown powder merely molded in the shape of a cookie with some overly large chocolate chips inside.

“I’m Jeb. Jebadiah Lawrence. Number 1. I was the first to get captured by the reapers. It’s a whole new dimension. Don’t fool yourself by thinking that you’re down a manhole cover. You are in a different world. The chamber of unknown, as the grim reapers call it.”

So here I am. I lose my keys, pace around, fall into a manhole cover, and I end up here. Wow. I was going to ask Jeb if we could escape together. I need my body to be back in the city right now. I barely gathered the funds to start my own business, and I can't even work because I'm stuck. I took the shovel. It looked like free splinters and calluses for your fingers. I began to trudge through the ground, digging until I could fill up several drums of that dirt. I felt the mix of sweat burning the top of my head as the blood dripped down as well. It was definitely more than 30 minutes of working when I started cramping. I felt a slight nook on my right shoulder. Was it a lampman? I slowly turned my head around when the slight threads of hair showed up, and then a face. It was a young face who seemed around my age. Her clothes didn't look too shabby, so I assumed she had also fallen recently. Then I realized there were two of them, perfectly identical.

"A new mortal!" The two exclaimed. They turned their heads facing each other and had a creepily large smile surfacing their lips, touching the corners of their face.

"We are Callista and Kat. We are number two and number three. We fell in here a couple of days ago. Who are you?" I think it was Kat who said it. Her shirt in bold font said: *Katrine Tarvos: 2*.

"Hi. I'm Rushil. I just fell down here, and I hate it here right now. Please help me get out. I already met Jeb. He told me that if you open the big vault at your 12 o'clock, the portal leads you right back to the city."

"I heard. Callista told me that as well. I hate this dystopian dimension as well. I would like to leave too."

"Alright. Let's get Jeb and get ourselves out of here." I responded. These people here were nice. They shared my desire and wanted to leave as well. I saw a reaper approaching, so did Kat and Callista as they ran back to work. I just continued digging until the last drum was filled. I closed the latch on each drum and sat down. Phew, I thought to myself. That was quite exhausting. I saw Jeb from a distance looking free, so I walked down to where he was, signaling Callista and Kat as well.

"I know very well that all of us want to leave this place as soon as possible. Correct?" I felt like a leader when I spoke those words.

"Yes!" The others exclaimed.

"I was waiting for this very day. Long before you all came here, I was a lonely man working alone. I made a plan, exactly for 4 people to escape. Here's the plan. I see the drums of dirt that Rushil dug up, so we can use this as a blocking method. Then, Callista and Kat have some arrows and bows. We each equip those and go to war! Then we roll the barrels at the reapers, who have no chance of stopping them." Jeb recited. We all gave Jeb a confused look after his spiel. We thought that was the stupidest plan of all. Jeb knew that and gave us a look acknowledging that we know it was stupid.

"Do you have anything better? The only way we can get out is by cooperating as a team. That is something we can control. The reapers won't work as well as us if we stick together." Jeb announced. We all glimpsed at each other and agreed.

"Let's go to war!" Callista exclaimed. Callista thrust her bow and arrow toward the sky, giving us motivation to leave this chamber. "Yeah!" We responded enthusiastically. We all received our bows and arrows. Never have I thought I would be fighting by bow and arrow in an underground world with people I barely know to escape a bunch of grim reapers. As the reapers were off duty, we were on. We marched down the chamber, escaping close calls such as the wobbly brick structure Jeb stopped making. It was not long before we encountered our first problem. I heard a whispered shriek while walking and looked behind.

"I'm stuck!" It was Kat, stuck in what seemed like a one-person quicksand. I used all of my YMCA gym forearm strength to help Kat up. I could see the mud all the way up until her hips, where she got stuck.

"Phew, we almost lost someone." Callista sighed. Jeb indicated to us to quicken up since we were lacking behind his relatively slow pace. We continued walking across the seemingly expanding chamber until we encountered a rock wall. I signaled Kat and Callista to climb up first.

"I don't think my aged legs can do this anymore." Jeb gasped. The wall was high and steep, so Kat and I had to step up for Jeb. We each grabbed a hand, and together we went up the rock wall. The individual sediments were shaking, and they were tottering around. Callista at the top was signaling which rocks to step on and which ones weren't stable. Soon enough, we got up. I could feel the adrenaline rushing as soon as I saw some reapers walking around, figuring out where we were.

"Guys, the reapers are on us now. We have to act quickly. This escape is our game of life and death. We need to work together faster and better." I noted. We quickly went down some rocks until the four of us jumped back down on the ground. That was when the shadows started appearing. I took a look behind. The reapers and their cavalry trailing them in their entourage.

We turned back and started shooting arrows. Some of the reapers went down; others began drawing their bows and started shooting. We ran while looking back to shoot.

"Left! Duck! Shift!" We yelled. We were trying to keep each other alive by telling each other where to go. All of a sudden, I heard the worst.

"Eugh," I heard, it sounded distressed. I looked to my right. Kat was down. The arrow pierced through her calf. I could see the slight splatter of blood along her leggings, dripping more profusely by the second. I quickly picked her up and started running. The vault became more visible, though it was extremely dusty around me. I dodged the arrows while Jeb and Callista were shooting more. We used the fallen arrows to restock and reload. The reapers started running even faster, getting closer to us.

“Mortals, you escape us; we end you,” the reaper stated. We all started running faster. I was no macho man, but these people were playing with our lives, and I was not trying to lose that. This is no game. This is the reality. If you get killed, you do get killed, you don’t get a second chance. I felt a sharp prick on my right arm. The blood squirted out torrentially again. It was a reaper, and his arrow entered my system.

“Help!” I wailed. Jeb quickly downed that reaper as well as the one behind me. The vault was even more visible, and we were starting to gain distance away from the decreasing reapers. I checked my right shoulder. Kat was awake, and he put her arms up to start hitting the reapers with the arrows. I forgot I had one weapon in my left pocket. The cookie. I opened it up and threw it behind me. All of a sudden, everything slowed down. I didn’t hear the reaper’s cavalry yelling, but we were still going crazy. We all paused.

“What’s going on?” We all asked in unison. “No time to waste,” a weak Kat groaned. We sprinted the last 400 feet until, at the last hundredth, we heard the chaos of the cavalry ignite once again. The vault was so close until we saw the opening. A bomb exploded as the four of us dove into the vault. I took off into the air while holding Kat on my shoulder. I felt the boot of Jeb falling off and hitting me in the head. I felt like Superman in the air while I was trying to close the vault as well. I was soaring over the two feet of air I had jumped. The bomb exploded, creating the perfect movie-type action scene. It was the fabulous four of us: Me, Jeb, Callista, and Kat, all flying in the air as the red-orange of the fire turned into the black smoke behind us, falling into a colder passage leading us to the portal.



“Woohoo! We did it!” I yelled. Everyone was cheering. Even Kat got off my shoulder and started cheering with the group. We walked toward the portal in complete silence, our faces with grins. I held Jeb and Callista’s hands while Kat was fully on the right. Then, we jumped right into the portal. I started feeling the same weightlessness as I did when I fell down the hole when we were in the portal.

I smelled the same smells again in NYC as I landed, and perfectly crisp tailor made clothing, the same ones I wore when I fell. I was surprised to have my fob and phone in my pocket. I entered the office to see Jonny talking to a customer.

“Sorry, I’m late, I ran into a call,” I told Jonny.

“Hey, did you hear about that guy who fell down the manhole cover? It was crazy.” Jonny asked.

“Seriously, how can someone do such a thing?” I responded.

“Was it you, Rushil? You’re a pretty clumsy dude. Actually, no, you could never.” I just had realized that my bruises had vanished as soon as I rejoined the world. So where was I? Did I actually fall? Was I actually fighting against an army of grim reapers with people I barely knew? Did I triumph over evil while guiding them to victory? Regardless if this actually happened, I felt accomplished. I felt like a general leading his troops to victory. It was like leading the British against the Spanish Armada. It was a great time, down in the dark, gloomy dungeon, fighting beasts together with a squad of great people. Together.

AFTERWORD:

This story holds a special place in my heart. Firstly, the beginning of this story was inspired by my love for the Big Apple, and my dad’s morning routine: Leaving Cos Cob, going down to Grand Central, and working relatively close to Midtown. The manhole cover part was inspired by how many times I have tripped on them or seen the Ninja Turtles going inside. The first time I had my grandmother read it, it was a mere page of just the sensory settings of NYC, and a beginning. She was very impressed, and it inspired me to write even more until I created the longest story I have ever written. This also sparked an interest in writing, which I previously thought was a task. The Chamber of the Unknown was an idea I got from CS Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. A little girl called Lucy goes into a wardrobe, where she then falls in a snowy, mystical land, which she soon learns to be a dystopian nightmare. This was a key element I wanted to add since the “falling into a dystopian land” idea intrigued me a lot, and served as a main foundation for a major conflict. The idea of

teamwork stems from my favorite sport, baseball, which is the cream of the crop of team sports. Communication and team struggles are a hallmark in the sport, and overcoming them is the biggest reward of all, just like overcoming the reapers as a team.