

THE HERRSCHER'S REVENGE

by Daniel Avril

I landed at the bottom of a pitch-black abyss and grinned. "Teleportation into the cataclysm was a success." As I steadied my breathing, I held out my hands as my helmet's light shined on them.

Caleb wasn't kidding when he asked for the jade necklace I had to power this suit; he claimed it has the power to make its wearer "become one with water", allowing me to pass into the cataclysm, a black hole.

I flexed my arms and my new suit's fiber stretched with me. I struck my left arm, and the force never reached my skin. Within the black hole, I squinted at a shimmering object at a distance. A floating emerald crystal was my first assumption, green light shining through its cracks.

I sprinted toward the crystal, then skidded to a halt and did a double take as I watched a *person* slip out of it while the crystal morphed and became his garment. My objective was now a hooded figure wrapped with a slender, green robe.

It stretched its arms out. Like a rug being yanked under my feet, it pulled me — pulled the world — toward it. The whole realm stretched like the black hole itself was being vacuumed by the figure.

The elders once warned me of a creature known only as the antithesis of mankind. I never believed the Herrscher existed, but now the fairy tale has stretched its hand to smite Ocean City, my home.

I did what Waveriders do best and ran. I summoned my hoverboard out of thin air to carry me through the black hole. Then a Gibraltar-sized rock burst out of the ground. Startled, I tripped off of my hoverboard.

Behind me, the Herrscher snapped its fingers and portals opened beside it.

I got up to find the rock's size blocked my path. The portals were now flinging bolts of pure energy at me. "Let's test this suit out." I cracked my knuckles with a grin, hopped back onto my hoverboard and made a prayer. Water coalesced in my hands forming swords. I sped toward the barrage, deflecting every bolt. Then I hit a home run with the last one, only for it to veer away from the Herrscher at the last second.

Why do you help them? A thought invaded my head, ringing loud enough to hurt. The pain made me stumble.

As I stopped to regain my balance, more of those portals surrounded me, lighting up as energy poured in from beyond. "You want to know why I help the aristocracy of Ocean City?" I scoffed. My suit glowed as I fused my water blades to form a broadsword. With one swing on the portals, everything exploded into fireworks. Rain pelted the area and bounced off my suit. As I now chased my opponent, the Herrscher raised its arms to conjure an emerald mirror to squash me with. I slashed through and it evaporated into green mist.

You murdered for them.

"Ugh!" I stopped, gripping my head. The recent Riptide War took its toll on everyone. The aristocracy, hellbent to put down an uprising, sent in the Waveriders. "I did kill for them. I'm sure the Creator would forgive me, but *you*? You're no better when you're tearing our city apart!" I blasted forward, then flung my hoverboard at it, but the Herrscher shot it down. I commanded a torrent of water to carry me forward, cracking a grin as I brandished the broadsword for a close-up kill.

More bolts shot out from its fingertips, but I swatted them away.

I then slashed through another mirror meant to push me back. Now, just meters away, I hesitated when I caught a glimpse of its face.

"Before you take a life," said Isaah, my training partner, always reminding me in that stern lawyer tone of voice, "You will look them in the eye and make it personal. Allow yourself to understand the very soul of the one you strike down."

All I found was a being beyond me, choosing to exist with a human face. With a yell, I sliced the creature clean in half, then the world stopped. I froze in mid-air like a popsicle. Yet the Herrscher was not dead.

It looked me in the eye, pulled me in again, and my strength drained away. The Herrscher discarded me like trash, and I cratered into the "floor" of the black hole.

I lay still and my body ached. The taste of blood in my mouth made me cough. My suit smelled like burnt plastic, but if Caleb hadn't built it, I would've been dead.

The Herrscher hovered over me like a vulture scanning its prey. Then it took on the form of Death, wearing a white robe. In its hands was a massive scythe that stole the crescent moon. With its head now exposed, a memory rushed into my mind.

“Y'know, altars and incense offerings are nice and all, but you could just ask for forgiveness,” Caleb would tell me as I knelt beside one near the edge of Garm's Cliff.

I dismissed the idea at the time, but now, I called out toward the Herrscher, “Hey, just hold on for a second! You probably aren't listening, but I don't care. Whatever we did to piss you off, take it out on me. I don't care what you do to me, just leave my city alone!” My lungs burned so much I thought they'd shrivel up.

As the Herrscher raised its weapon, I braced myself. In a flash, everything before me became a white fuzz. Within it, a figure approached me with muffled footsteps.

I wanted to move, but my muscles were stiff.

The figure, now directly in front of me, uttered words I couldn't make out.

I blinked until they came into focus: Eyeglasses. Teal-blue jacket. Curly black hair.

They said again, “Can you walk?”

“Caleb?”

He stretched out a hand. “Come with me.”