

## Undine's Cave

By

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Her fair fingers tightened around the grey directional pad as she moved her armoured hero again into the entrance of Undine's Cave, where he had died so many times before. Sara couldn't understand why he kept getting annihilated, but she wasn't ready to ask her brother. She wasn't ready for him to bend over and pull at the ribbon around her ponytail, chewing gum as he smiled – the same smug smile that appeared whenever he knew something she didn't. Sara pressed the X button on the controller repeatedly, believing that this time her swarthy swordsman Randi, now armed with additional battle experience, would prevail.

Sara sat with only her hands moving, and watched as her character beheaded Biting Serpents quietly on the TV screen. She reached forward for the volume knob, and then remembering what Father had said, withdrew her arm again. She glanced instead at the open Secret of Mana guide resting beside her, and turned over a page as gently as she could. She wished she didn't have to consult it.

Somebody yawned. Sara looked quickly at the Nintendo console, and almost hit the OFF button. She wasn't in the mood for conversation. But like an unfinished Popsicle she couldn't put the game down. She couldn't leave Randi alone in mid-adventure, fending for himself and stuck in an incomplete quest. Sara already knew her grandmother would wake up anyway. She always did, at the strangest hour. Her lined eyelids slid open easily, and would stir if their family Shih Tzu so much as padded

past. Nothing escaped her ears. Sara once told Father about this, but he'd said not to be jealous.

Sara considered the button briefly as she heard her grandmother stir from across the room. Less audible sounds came from the TV system beside her. The loop of dramatic drumbeats was still playing; it'd sustained the mood for Randi's adventures for the past hour. It was purposeful music, and Sara liked it. It reminded her of the flight of the pregnant pigeon she'd once seen visit from a great Angsana tree opposite their block of flats. Pale grey with black bars across its wings, its eyes like tiny blood droplets. It'd pecked at the ground for a while, then flapped its wings and flew – all eighteen storeys high – stopping only at the narrow landing outside their kitchen windows. Dry twigs and bark had fallen from her beak, and after arranging them swiftly with her pointed mouth, it'd flown back down again. It'd repeated this flight a few times before finally stopping to lay two eggs inside the nest. Then the bird disappeared once more. Sara remembered waiting for it to return, but it never did.

A muffled yelp sounded from the speakers and Sara's eyes flicked back to the TV screen. Randi had died again, this time from the bite of a Serpent. She let out a short breath.

“Who's there?”

Sara hesitated. “It's me, Ah-Po.”

“Gary?”

Sara shook her head slowly, and then remembered that her grandmother couldn't see. She opened her mouth to reply, then closed it. She glanced across the capacious room; from where she sat she could see both the TV and the single oak bed where Ah-Po

slept. Her grandmother's head had left the flattened pillow, which was cream-coloured and bore sleep streaks. It was creased, like the lines on Mother's lips when she'd glided into Sara's room many nights ago with her arms outstretched. Her eyes had been glassy and her skin dry, like a disillusioned mermaid who'd been out of the water for too long. Sara remembered the numbing arms that were wrapped around hers; she'd waited a long time for Mother to say something, but nothing came.

Sara picked up the controller again. Ah-Po was now sitting on her bed, massaging her short legs. They were aching more often lately, and she'd complained. Her wrinkled limbs spread open on the sheets, and her wide back was curved, like a curious turtle on its hind legs. A green Batik sarong knotted loosely over her chest. It was her favourite one from her sarong set, the rest of which she would unpack and fold many times on occasion, feeling the flat fabrics as she talked in detail about the intricate patterns that were never there. A moment later, her hand reached beneath a corner of the mattress and Sara knew Ah-Po was searching for her weaved straw fan. The same yellow one that Father had bought for her many years ago, now with loose bits sticking out adamantly at odd angles.

"I thought you your sister," Ah-Po said, as she finally retrieved the fan and dusted it off in mid-air. "She sometimes come your room play your games, you know. When you in school."

Sara said nothing, and pressed the O button to resurrect Randi with a Revive Potion. She would need to buy more of those soon.

"She always play. Many hours," her grandmother continued, fanning herself slowly.

"I always tell her don't. But that girl never listens. I don't know why she likes play so much. Don't think she ever study. But then, no use for study too. When I was young

like her I no study. I had five children. Your father youngest. We were poor, hungry a lot. It was very hard. But we survived. What use for study if girl will marry anyway? Your sister will too, when she grows up... how old she now?"

Sara wondered if Ah-Po remembered anything her granddaughter told her.

"Twelve." She spoke as quietly as she dared.

"Twelve?" Ah-Po said, incredulous. Her white hairs swayed slowly like those on a dandelion clock, awaiting their inevitable fall in the breeze. "So young... know nothing. Even if she study, no difference. Your mother study a lot... but what's the use? Know everything, but not know how to be a mother." She nodded. "Good thing she gone now."

Sara concentrated on Randi as he narrowly dodged the edge of an Ice Harpoon that a passing Nymph had thrust upon him. He was soon reaching Level 3 of the Cave.

"Only thing she do is yell. Yell at everything. Ever since I move here she yell. But ngai mao giang eh... I'm not afraid of her. Never was. You, boy, lucky you not a girl. Or end up like her. Lucky you not your sister... what time is it?"

Sara looked up towards the drawn windows. She has heard all this before. The same words that pelted and melted on her like the little ice cubes blown from her brother's straw. It didn't matter if she was herself or Gary; it was always about the same things. She narrowed her eyes briefly. The sun was alive, but it was in hiding. Sara wondered if the sky made a good hiding place.

"Day or night?" her grandmother said impatiently.

"Day."

Ah-Po said nothing for a moment, then nodded. She hid the fan below the mattress before reaching for the flat headboard of her bed. She felt around slowly and silently, with an acquired attentiveness.

A pause, then a sudden percussion rhythm erupted softly from the speakers. Sara's heart gave a little leap. Randi was now at the topmost level of Undine's Cave; he only had to find and defeat the residing Boss, and then he could move on to explore other Dungeons. In an excited moment she turned to look at Ah-Po again, half expecting her grandmother to share her small triumph.

The wrinkled wrists were still roving on the headboard. Ah-Po coughed – that dry, grating cough - as if she always had sand in her throat. Her fingers finally closed in on her small leather purse and she slowly unzipped it, tipping gold and silver onto the mattress. Sara watched as Ah-Po counted the money. The money Father still gave to her regularly, the one she now calculated with almost agonising deliberation. Ah-Po ran her fingers over the coins and patted them flat on the sheets. They sat very still, twinkling, like tear-stung eyes that wouldn't blink. From the bottom of the purse she extracted a small roll of banknotes, tilting her head in Sara's direction.

“Gary, come here.”

Sara looked at Randi, who was just a few steps away from facing Boss Undine. His arm was clutched confidently around his Excalibur; he was ready. Sara sighed, and put a finger over the PAUSE button.

Ah-Po was carefully peeling a five-dollar bill from the colourful stack when Sara approached. She gave the note a little wave. “How much?”

“Five,” Sara replied.

Her grandmother replaced it in her palm and felt for another.

“This?”

“Ten.”

Ah-Po nodded, then extended the note in Sara’s direction. “Take. Go buy me some Prawn Crackers. Two packs. And something for yourself. Boys need eat more.”

Sara hesitated. Ah-Po has never before given her money. Coral red and hanging limply between the fingers, it looked like the hair ribbon Mother had tied around Sara’s ponytail before she left.

“Gary?”

Sara slowly reached for it, mumbling a thanks as Ah-Po nodded vaguely and returned to her coins. Sara looked briefly at Randi, then back at the ten-dollar note in her hands. She was almost out of the door when her grandmother spoke again.

“Oh...maybe some crackers for Sara too. Maybe she like them.”

At the provision shop, Sara wondered why Ah-Po had wanted Prawn Crackers. She wasn’t sure her grandmother had the teeth to bite them, to create the self-satisfying crunch that one did when eating crispy snacks. In fact, she wasn’t sure she could do a lot of things. But that had never before kept Ah-Po in her shell. Her grandmother believed that at eighty with her sight gone she could still do anything, and anyone who disagreed with her was evil and would die from the cold of their unfeeling, clouded hearts. Sara thought about Mother for a moment, about how Mother never saw the colourful visions that Ah-Po did in her own lightless universe. Sara never saw

them either, of course, but she'd heard it all. She now looked around and picked up the crackers, the gum Gary loved chewing loudly in her face, and some candy. As the expressionless Chinese cashier packed her items silently, Sara watched the stranger, wondering if this heart too, felt nothing.

On her way home Sara decided she would tell Ah-Po that her preferred snack was actually Rabbit Candy. She would offer her a piece; it would be sweet. When she returned, she saw the coins have been cleared away and that Ah-Po was no longer sitting. Instead, she was lying still on her back with her eyes closed, as though asleep.

“Ah-Po?”

There was no response. Sara carefully placed the bag of snacks next to the bed and returned to her spot before the TV. The screen was black, and Sara stared at her static reflection for a moment, wondering if she was always this unsmiling. She un-paused the game, and watched as a myriad of colourful pixels erupted; Randi now ran around the gleaming walls of the Cave, life once again flooding back into him. It was deathly quiet and Sara knew that the Boss was near. She cast several Protection Auras onto Randi and watched as they glowed in multiple halos above his head. She moved her hero forward.

Something like a crack sounded from Ah-Po's bed, and Sara blinked.

“Ah Po?” she said in a clear voice.

Still there was no reply. The TV flashed; the final Boss Battle has commenced. Sara tried to keep her eyes on Randi. She held the X button hard and watched as Randi made his first strike. In one swift moment he dashed for Undine's legs, and slashed.

“Ga...?”

It had been a critical hit, but Sara was no longer looking. Something about the voice called out to her and she found herself walking quickly to her grandmother's side. She looked at Ah-Po as if for the first time. Her hands were thin and cockled; her face hollow, like a winded puffer fish.

“Ah-Po?” Sara said hesitantly. “It's me... Sara.”

Ah-Po's eyelids slid open slowly. Her black pupils were glazed, fixed in a gaze nobody has met in a long time. “Sa...ra?”

The air tasted of salt and talcum powder. Sara watched as Ah-Po said nothing else, the side of her grandmother's lips curving into a mirthless smile.

“Time...?”

Sara glanced at the windows.

“It's almost night, Ah-Po.”

Her grandmother was barely listening; the fire in her eyes seemed to die away with the sun. Sara considered telling Ah-Po about the candy.

“Sara ...” Ah-Po said slowly. “Ngai mao giang eh... I not scared.”

Sara watched as the smile continued to dangle precariously from Ah-Po's face. She reached for the packet of Rabbit Candy and held it; it made her hands feel less empty.

“Sa..ra...? You good girl, you know... good. Not like your mother.”

Sara decided she would tell Ah-Po about the candy another time. She rose quickly and left the room, where Father came rushing in a few minutes later, frantically feeling Ah-Po's unfeeling limbs and talking to her urgently in a stream of choppy Hakka.

As Father stood fumbling with the phone – he cursed it for not working - Sara trained her eyes back slowly onto the TV. Randi was once again defeated, lying motionless in a crumpled heap. A wistful tune of percussion and woodwind was playing, the same one that sounded every time he fell. It was a hollow, soulless tune, the kind she sometimes imagined her own heart to play. Sara waited, and thought about caves, potions, dungeons.