

THAT TALL, SKINNY, GREEN HILL

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	1
DEDICATION	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
SECTIONS	
1. AESTHETIC MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTION	4
2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT, DISCIPLINARY PARADIGMS, AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS	7
3. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT	9
4. REFLECTION.....	11
WORKS CITED.....	13
APPENDIX: CREATIVE ARTIFACT	14
Prologue - The Tall, Skinny, Green Hill.....	16
Chapter 1 - Along the Slopes of Jagpass	26
Chapter 2 - Pathways	41
Chapter 3 - The Ink-Skinned Demon.....	56
Chapter 4 - The Head of the World	68
Chapter 5 - Conversations.....	80
Chapter 6 - Homecoming.....	97
Chapter 7 - The Sheriff.....	105
Chapter 8 - The Blue Pool.....	113
Summary of Omitted Chapters	127
Chapter 25 - Vines.....	128
Chapter 26 - Fleeting Light.....	143
Chapter 27 - Sparkling Mind.....	149
Chapter 28 - Grasping.....	157

ABSTRACT

That Tall, Skinny, Green Hill

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This thesis explores the effects of trauma on relationships with parents, peers, and neighbors. It also looks into plot and scene structures of the fantasy style alongside different world-building techniques. The creative artifact contains excerpts from *That Tall, Skinny, Green Hill*—a coming-of-age, fantasy, adventure novel. It stars a boy named Cast Klyosov, who looks at the world through a different lens than others, and his mostly even-tempered friend, Dosiner Eldwin Hasden III, who prefers to go by Dox so he can escape comparison to his strict and overbearing grandfather of the same name.

Cast Klyosov was only seven-years-old when he first saw the great, green mass of Lalbahadoor's neck, whose back Cast's world lives upon, stretching into the clouds above. *That Tall, Skinny, Green Hill* follows the story of Cast, Dox, and their friends as they try to save their small, kingdom-edge village from the clutches of a malicious creature that has mysteriously appeared in the nearby mountain woods. The boys will learn to face death, come face-to-face with a self-proclaiming god, and work to survive the ongoing traumas they endure.

DEDICATION

To my friends, families, instructors, and peers who supported me throughout the research process.

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Contributors

I would like to thank my faculty advisor, Dr. Jason Harris, and my cohort—Sabastian, Erica, and LJ—for their guidance and support throughout the course of this research.

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All other work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently.

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1. AESTHETIC MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Everyone has experienced trauma in some form or another. It looks different from situation to situation, and the degree of severity is never the same, but whether it is being picked on in school or losing a loved one, we have all been there. That is why I decided to write this thesis where I seek to look at two specific types of trauma commonly occurring in adolescence and present them with the confines of a fantasy novel titled *That Tall, Skinny, Green Hill*.

The first trauma revolves around abuse. In 2018, about 3,534,000 children were subject to investigation of whether or not they were victims of maltreatment and abuse. Of that number, 678,000 were found to be so. That is nearly 20% of the cases investigated. This staggering statistic can be difficult to swallow for some, but it is a truth that must be looked at directly if anything is to be done about it. The other trauma I researched was sibling bereavement. On average, around 8% of people have lost a brother or sister before the age of twenty-five. This makes it as prevalent as parental bereavement or adolescent chronic illness.

These traumas are widespread in our society. I wanted to research them because of how many people it affects. This thesis serves as a means to bring awareness to the distress that so many undergo and to seek an answer to the best way to go about healing.

My research was double-faceted. In addition to looking at childhood trauma and its effects, I also researched worldbuilding and plot construction. I did this as a means for creating a more believable world and story to incorporate my research into. This included reading books about writing and researching cultures and architecture and even dendrology (the study of trees). Most of the research was miscellaneous to add flavor to the novel, but it helped to bring the world to life in ways it had not been before.

The focal point of my research, however, was that of childhood trauma regarding sibling bereavement and abuse. Despite the source of these traumas differing, the two can cause many similar effects in the aftermath of the trauma and the development of the child. This is especially true in the case of behavioral development. Many victims of trauma are faced with symptoms of depression and are known to act out. However, those who underwent abuse in early childhood were also more likely to develop antisocial personality disorders and struggle with alcohol abuse.

I wanted to learn more about what the healing process looked like for these traumas. According to Dr. Nancy Boyd Webb, the death of a sibling usually evokes four types of response: “I hurt inside,” “I do not understand,” “I do not belong,” and “I am not enough.” The response that the child has is greatly dependent on three factors: individual characteristics, such as gender, age, and personality; situational characteristics, such as cause of death; and environmental characteristics, such as Family environment, parent-child communication, and parental methods of grieving. In each of these responses, adults need to cater to the specific needs of the child. For example, in the case of “I hurt inside,” it is the adults’ duty to comfort and console.

The process looks a little bit different for children who have undergone abuse. Often, children can feel shame from the experience in addition to weakness. This makes them more apprehensive to even admitting they have been abused, much less allowing others in to begin that healing process. Several prevention methods have been established to try and keep abuse from happening, such as public awareness campaigns.

I explore this in my creative artifact in the form of two point-of-view characters, Cast and Dox, two 14-year-old boys living in the small village of Halses. As the novel progresses, it

begins to reveal the abusive nature of Dox's relationship with his grandfather. Dox is much more emotionally reserved around his friends when he can help it, but also has difficulty holding his temper when situations arise. At the beginning of the novel, Dox has yet to tell anyone of the abuse, as he fears it would only make things worse. Dox's real name is Dosiner III, named after his grandfather, but he chooses to go by Dox as this is one of the few forms of resistance against his grandfather he has found. This becomes one of the tools I use to develop his character further, as he learns that he can make his name his own, apart from the memory of his grandfather.

Cast's origin of trauma comes later in the novel, when his twin brother, Ennis, is killed in one of their attempts to stop the osaron. He blames himself for his brother's death. This is amplified when his father, who has always been supportive and close with Cast, becomes momentarily violent with Cast. I wanted to do this because it greatly affected the environmental characteristics of the trauma while causing a deep rift in the once-solid relationship the two shared.

Most characters in the novel do not apply a good means of consolation or comfort. This is to add tension to the story while giving better payoff when the resolution comes helping to contrast these incorrect actions with correct ones. The artifact culminates in the final chapter, where Cast and Dox confide in each other for the first time.

Another way I incorporate my research is through the antagonist of the novel, the osaron. When the monster is first introduced, it is unable to speak and matches well with the typical "monster of the woods" trope, representing the season of trauma that Cast and Dox are entering. However, throughout the book, the monster becomes more and more intelligent and its backstory begins to be hinted at, which is more similar to the children's story than originally let on.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT, DISCIPLINARY PARADIGMS, AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS

My research was conducted by reading a series of scholarly articles and websites, psychology handbooks, and novels. The articles focused more on the statistics surrounding adolescent abuse and sibling bereavement as well as common effects the trauma can have on a child leading into adulthood. These included “A Sibling Death in the Family: Common and Consequential,” “Child Abuse: Confronting Reality,” and the Administration for Children and Families website. These were useful in establishing my motive as well as helping me decide on character personality and the arcs they would take in the story.

In terms of abuse prevention and trauma consultation and healing, I used sources such as *A Coordinated Response to Child Abuse and Neglect: The Foundation for Practice* and *Helping bereaved children: A Handbook for Practitioners*. As mentioned before, most of the characters do not do well in terms of helping Cast and Dox to heal. These sources helped to establish what exactly those incorrect ways were and let me know what to do when I wanted a character to approach them correctly.

For worldbuilding techniques, I used *Wonderbook: The Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction*. This helped add more texture to my world and to keep it believable within the confines of its reality. *The Fantasy Fiction Formula* was useful when studying plot construction. It focused on both a wide view of the overarching arch as well as looking into planning out individual scenes and the beats within them.

When looking into other literature that dealt with trauma surrounding sibling bereavement and child abuse, I found several cases where they occurred. *The Ocean at the End*

of the Lane by Neal Gaiman and *Dawn of Wonder* are two examples of younger characters experiencing abuse in the home. In Gaiman's work, an unnamed protagonist is recollecting lost memories of his childhood. In one instance, his father had attempted to drown him in the bathtub when he would not listen. In *Dawn of Wonder*, Aedan is regularly beaten by his father. This causes him to lock up when facing men bigger than him in battle, as they remind him of his father.

The House of Salt and Sorrows follows the story of Annaleigh and her sisters. She once had eleven, but four of them die within quick succession of each other, leaving people to believe the family is cursed. Another source I found for sibling bereavement comes from music. In "Severus and Stone" from *The Family Tree* set of albums by Radical Face, one brother is lost to a winter sickness, leaving the other deal with the loss. His story continues in other songs in the discography, as he delves into depression due to survivor's guilt.

I felt that many of these works did a good job to set up the trauma, but in many cases, it faded to the background rather quickly, only emerging when the author wanted it to. I wanted to have it more involved than that. That's why in *That Tall, Skinny, Green Hill*, I chose to begin by having the trauma circling in the background for Dox and being nonexistent for Cast at the beginning of the book so that it could take lead at the end.

3. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT

I presented an excerpt of *That Tall, Skinny, Green Hill* at Texas A&M's URS Symposium, held from late February through early March of 2021. Sadly, due to Covid-19, it was moved to be a virtual event this year as opposed to in-person, but the experience was still useful and enriching.

The symposium was conducted on an online platform called ForagerOne. I had to video my presentation and then upload it to the platform where people could watch it for the duration of the symposium. I wrote my script, taking aspects from my research, and practiced it several times. When videoing, since it was not delivered live, I was able to have multiple attempts. This allowed me to produce the best possible form of my presentation, which is something I would not have been able to do if it were live and in-person.

One thing I felt I could have done better was to add more energy to my voice during the explanation portion of my presentation. Instead, I came out monotone, which was not something I wanted. It did not do a good job of expressing how I feel about my research: as something I care about and am proud of.

The excerpt I read came from "Grasping," the final chapter of my thesis. I found this to be appropriate as it serves as the connecting point between Cast and Dox's traumas as they confide in each other for the first time. Before the reading, I gave a brief overview of my research done, touching on the traumas of bereavement and abuse as well as giving common strategies for healing.

The presentation of my exhibit helped me learn to articulate my research better. Often, when writing, I cannot find the best way to say something until I say it out loud. I was

disappointed at the level of feedback I received from the symposium. Since it was not in person, I did not get to participate in an active Q&A. Instead, people were supposed to post comments on my video, but not many did. The comments I did receive were encouraging but offered little in means of constructive criticism. Despite this, the experience of preparing and presenting my research was rewarding on its own.

4. REFLECTION

The Aggie Creative Collective and the L.A.U.N.C.H. Undergrad Research program have been some of the most useful learning experiences of time at Texas A&M and have served as one of the most enjoyable, difficult, and rewarding endeavors I have undertaken. It is so encouraging to work all year to research and write and be able to hold up a final product. *That Tall, Skinny, Green Hill* has been a love of mine since the summer before my freshman year, undergoing several different versions of outlines and brainstorming. It was not until this program that the project began to find direction and heart. My vision for the book has transformed since I applied for the Aggie Creative Collective last spring, creating something entirely different than what I first had in mind.

When I first went into the program, I did not have a clear direction of where I wanted to go with my research. My first thought was trauma and had originally intended for that to solely come from encountering and battling the main antagonist, the osaron. With the help of Dr. Harris, I was able to come up with more concrete examples of trauma, dealing with bereavement and abuse. Because of this, I turned what had planned to be only an abrasive relationship between Dox and his grandfather into one of abuse and manipulation. Also, because of this change, Ennis came to be, who has become one of my favorite characters to write.

As an English major, I am no stranger to research papers and projects, but it was different when I was doing so for a novel. Whereas I was used to finding articles and applying them to an argument, here I had to apply my research to characters, world, and plot. Often, I took my research and turned it on its head, choosing to have people act less optimally, when writing *That Tall, Skinny, Green Hill*, allowing the dissonance to build tension in relationships. It was so

different than simply writing a research paper. It became more involved. I got to decide how to apply the research and how it would affect the novel.

The most useful part of the program was the cohort of other writers I was placed in at the beginning of last summer. With Dr. Harris as our lead, we would constantly be sharing our progress, reading excerpts and giving advice. Of course, having others read my work and give criticism was helpful, but it was just as helpful to give advice and critiques to their work. This allowed me to build an eye for what needs to change in my writing and to learn to be gracious when I did not like something.

I gave my presentation at the Texas A&M URS Symposium. The presentation aided me in learning to articulate my research as well as hone my public speaking skills, which have always been lackluster. The feedback I received was encouraging but lacked depth in many cases. Regardless, the experience was worthwhile.

That Tall, Skinny, Green Hill delves the reader into a magical, beautiful world, but it also forces them to look at the dark realities that can often be. This thesis contains thirteen chapters: a prologue, the first eight chapters, and then four later chapters. I plan to continue my research after the program and finish writing the novel. I have learned a lot from this program, but I am not done learning yet. I want to continue this process in my other stories I write. It adds so much depth to a plot and a realness to the characters that cannot be matched.

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APPENDIX: CREATIVE ARTIFACT



*To those who loved me—
who showed me the world could be beautiful*

Prologue

The Tall, Skinny, Green Hill

Light poured from Al Dran, the formless source of daylight, and shined through the treetops to illuminate patches of the road ahead. The solid wood of the driver's seat was growing hard and uncomfortable on his back and thighs and the heat of the day, despite the shade, was only adding to his discomfort. Hans was ready to be home.

Soon.

The road was lined with redwoods reaching high above the wagon, scratching at the sky some two or three hundred feet up. Their massive trunks were wide enough to drive their wagon through. Although spread apart on the ground, the tree branches converged at the top to cover the space between in shadow.

A cull, a short and fat rodent with gristles of hair forming at the ends of their front teeth, skittered across the road. The horses whinnied at the animal but continued on without much concern for it after it continued into the forest beyond. Above, a squirrel braved the menacing heights of the redwood branches, leaping from tree to tree with an acrobatic ability that Hans would have deemed improbably if he were not seeing it now.

Up ahead, a split in the treetops revealed a massive cliff face that rose five hundred feet and spanned miles to each side. Atop the cliff, three mountains overlooked the world below them. On a normal day, a mist would have been curling from beneath the greenery of the slopes but, like the second sky, the mountains were dry of any clouds. Far above the mountains sprawled an ever-present and impenetrable layer of clouds. The third sky. Hans kept his eyes on the mountains until the towering redwoods concealed them once more.

The path cut through a thick wood leading up to those mountains, which most people thought to be the end of civilization. Yet, despite people's belief, there was, in fact, one more semblance of a village on the other side of the Kholaw mountains. And that was where they were going.

His family was behind him, covered by a tall, deerskin canopy to protect them from the weather and the heat the Dran produced. They had laid out mats and were all asleep for an afternoon nap, which Hans wished he could have joined in on. The heat had started to get to him and he would have appreciated a nice, shady sleep.

He rubbed the small of his back to relieve some of the tension that had built up from the long ride from Silvalin. They had lived in the capital city for the past...how long was it? He turned to look down at his wife, Lyndsay, who was sound asleep surrounded by their three children. They were so small curled up into her, Cast and Ennis being seven and Lainie only five.

His attention turned back to the road ahead. They were about to enter the passage splitting the cliffside below the rightmost mountain Jagpass and the central mountain of Fenpass. He grimaced but held their pace.

It was dark in the pass, almost as if the Dran refused to enter through the crack at the top. The black walls of the cliff faces rose up on either side of the wagon, with streaks of brown and

white etching its way up to the top. As the walls rose they closed closer together, almost touching each other at the top. Further down the pass, Hans could see the top of the cliff begin to gently angle down with the slope of the mountain.

While the ride had been relatively smooth on the path through the woods, now the road was rough and bumpy from small rocks that must have been chipped off the passage walls and large divots in the ground.

Their horses let out low whines as they drew closer to the center of the pass, and the light that broke through the top grew dimmer. Hans was glad that everyone else was asleep for the time being. There was no real danger, the bears, cats, and cagedon that roamed the mountains did not venture into its depths. But there was something eerie about it. Something unnatural. Cast likely would have been fine, the boy already had a taste for adventure at his young age, but Lainie would have been frightened by the sudden darkness. The dark had always scared Hans more than it should have.

He couldn't say much for what Ennis would do. The boy had a maturity about him that rather unnerved him at times partnered with a sensitivity for things that was unrivaled by any boy Hans had ever met. He supposed Ennis would have been fine, but he supposed incorrectly about his son all too often.

They were nearly halfway through the pass when Cast started to scream.

Hans turned in time to see Lyndsay comforting they're crying son. Lainie was crying too, but more from the shock of her brother's sudden eruption. Ennis remained asleep.

"It's okay, Cast, it's okay. Tell me what's wrong," Lyndsay said. She was so good with them. While Hans knew she was concerned for their son right now, she showed no sign of it on

her face or in her voice at that moment. Hans would have been a mess, likely crying alongside his son all-the-while making him more and more frightened.

Cast was inaudible in his explanation, his words unable to break through the shakes of his voice. Finally, he was able to make out “I-I-I sa-saw—” Only to collapsed back into incomprehensible whimpers and cries.

“Is everything alright back there?” Hans asked knowing nothing was. Lyndsay was sitting on the floor of the wagon, back against the partition that divided the driver and passenger sections, with Cast leaning back on her, curling to grab her arm. Lainie joined them, no longer crying but still seeking comfort from her mother.

“Cast says he saw something. Do you see anything?” Lyndsay said.

There wasn’t anything on the road with them but rocks and potholes. He looked up high but still, he didn’t see what Cast was talking about. “I don’t see anything.”

Cast dug himself into his mother, lifting his head to speak, “I swe-swear I saw it! We weren’t here, but I saw it. It was scary, and it had ink skin and a tail an-and green eyes. It was big, an-an-and it smiled at me, I swear, its teeth were like a crocodile. They were long and big around.”

“No one said you didn’t, Cast,” Lyndsay reassured. She rested her hand on the back of his head and gently stroked the bridge of his nose with the other. She was *so* good. “What do you mean it wasn’t here, though?”

“You didn’t know I was gone?” Exasperation soaked his words. Pure frustration and confusion. “How could you not now I was gone?”

Hans spoke up. “Cast, I had just seen you sleeping before you woke up. You never left.”

“But I wasn’t here. *It* wasn’t here.” His body sunk down lower when he talked about whatever ‘it’ was.

“Where were you then?” Lyndsay asked.

“A lake! I was really there,” Cast said. “I was on a big rock by it and it was standing in the water, smiling at me. But it wasn’t a good smile like that man at the market who always gave us treats. It was a bad one.”

Hans cleared his throat, “From the sound of it, you had yourself a pretty rough dream.” Cast tried to interject, but Hans swiftly continued. “And I am sure why that monster caught you in a dream instead of here is because it was too scared to deal with someone like you, my boy!”

Tears still streamed down Cast’s face, but his sobs had subsided. He blew hard out his nose and wiped the snot from his face. “You think so?”

Hans nodded his head. “I know so. There’s no way anything would want to go up against you.” Cast picked himself up from the wagon floor and leaned against the partition. The red in his eyes contrasted with the dark blues of his irises, making his eyes glow like a deep river stone. “Come here.” Hans gestured for his son to climb the wooden wall. His son complied, gracelessly squirming his small body into the seat beside Hans.

Cast interlaced his fingers, then undid them, and repeated the process over and over. “But what if it comes for me here?”

Hans saw his son, saw the fear in him. It was almost too much for him. Cast had seen something rather frightening. “Listen, Cast, there are gonna be things in this world that will scare you, like this passage here. It’s dark and damp and altogether frightening, don’t you think?”

Hans explained, putting his arm around Cast, who nodded his understanding. “I’ve always hated

going through this passage, and every traveler and merchant I've ever talked to hates it too. But we have to go through to get where we're going. We have to go through to get home.

“That’s the thing, you can’t break down when those things come after you. You’re gonna have people depending on you one day and you’re gonna have to stand your ground to protect them. That’s why I have to be brave, so that I can tell you this. You’re safe right here next to me. I won’t let anything—listen to me—anything happen to you.”

Cast was enraptured by the words. The sound of sniffing and nose-wiping had stopped, replaced by the face of a boy who had just decided something. What that thing was, Hans was unsure of, but it was there, that much he could tell.

“Thank you, papa,” Cast leaned a little closer to his father.

They rode on like that for some time, Cast no longer frightened by the dark walls that they rode beside. And soon, the chill in Hans’s back began to warm by the light that started to fill his eyes again. Their cart moved out from the passage.

The wheels of the wagon rolled smoothly again across the wide dirt path snaking through the hilly field of brightly colored yellow flowers that stretched out on either side of it. A cool breeze ran its way through the rows of tall flowers as if small creatures were using one to catapult to the next.

A spark filled Cast’s eyes and he tugged on Hans’s shirt sleeve. “Papa!” He stood up in his seat, barely taller than Hans sitting down, and he pointed straight ahead of them. “What is that hill over there?”

Quizzical as ever. Though he couldn’t tell what hill he was referring to. “Which hill, Cast?”

His son seemed disappointed in his father for not understanding, giving a small shrug, and low sigh, but he did not patronize his father. Quickly, he reached out his arm and pointed directly in front of them again, “That tall, skinny, green one over there,” he said plainly.

They were surrounded by hills to their left and their right and behind them and in front of them, but none that sounded like the one he described. They were all green, if not speckled with yellow, but there weren't any that were necessarily tall or skinny.

There were, of course, special hills such as Spalen Hill with a cool, blue pond that the children would swim in when the days grew hot, although that was on the other side of Halses and couldn't be seen from where they were.

Denalin was another hill where he had spent many days with Lyndsay before they had married where they would...well, never mind. But no, that hill still could not be it. That place was wide and low and was one of the few places between the Kholaw mountains and Halses with a small grove of trees to hide in. But what could he be...

That was when he realized that what Cast had been talking about was no hill at all. And that was also when Hans broke into laughter.

His belly boomed, and his voice roared. He laughed so hard that he nearly fell between the horses and the wagon.

Cast, however, was not amused by his father's realization. Crossing his arms and trying to keep the color from his cheeks, he demanded that his father stop mocking him. “It's just a question, I don't see how it's so funny.”

Now, Hans knew that Cast had never in his life been to Halses. And he knew that you could not see the great, green mass gently rising away and up into the clouds of the third sky

from the other side of the Kholaw mountain. So, he calmed his laughter and looked his son as best he could in the eye, face still and serious.

“You’re right, son, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have laughed.” Hans lifted his son with one arm onto his lap, holding him tightly where he sat. “You’ve got a good curiosity in you, one I wish I had more of when I was your age. And there’s no need to stifle that by making fun of you for not knowing what you just couldn’t know.” He shook his head, “No, I don’t suppose that’d be right.”

Cast leaned back into his father, face still a little red from what Hans assumed to be a mix of anger and embarrassment. “It’s okay, papa. I know you didn’t mean it.” His head turned so that he was looking up at Hans. “But what is it?” He asked.

The man looked down at his son and then up to the ‘hill’ in question. “Before I tell you that, I must ask: Why skinny? I can understand tall and no one could ever deny the green, but it seems to me that it is endlessly wide more than anything else. And hill? I would say it resembled more a mountain than a hill.”

Cast’s face seemed to grow redder at the questions, more embarrassment diluting the anger. “Well, it’s a hill because a mountain is more jagged and is brown and black, not green. Also, I could walk right up that thing without getting tired. I get tired climbing mountains.” The blush had faded, his face more relaxed as he spoke, “And it’s a lot taller than wide, so I call it skinny.”

Dumbfounded by the sound logic, Hans looked the boy up and down. That was much too smart to have come from the seven-year-old that sat next to him. People had always attributed Ennis with the intellect, him in his quiet introspection. But Cast had a sparkling mind of his own, one that saw the wonder of the world and could properly articulate it. “I’m surprised by how complex your thinking was there, son, but I must say you have one assessment wrong.”

“What?” Cast asked.

“That is neither a hill nor a mountain.” A grin spread across Hans’s face, “That is the neck of the mighty Lalbahadoor, the Long-Necked Vast that allows us to live upon his back.” He gave a slight bow of his head as he spoke the name, a deep reverence pouring from the words that he spoke.

“What!” The boy repeated, but this time more excited than questioning. His eyes glided back to the neck. “That’s the neck? I didn’t know it was so, so,” he stopped thinking of the correct word to use, “wonderful,” he finished, but then frowned, obviously dissatisfied with his choice. This was one sight he could not articulate.

Hans pulled Cast back tightly against himself so that he wouldn’t fall out. “Don’t worry, son. I don’t believe I’ve met a single person who could properly describe the sight before us here.” Hans gave the ‘hill’ a look himself and marveled at its sheer size. “Marvelous,” he whispered.

Cast looked back up at his father, “What was that, papa?”

Shaking himself out of the daze, Hans answered, “Nothing, son. I was just trying to find the right word myself.” Then he gave Cast a somber smile. “But it seems I have failed as well.”

“That’s alright. I don’t think anyone will find it.”

“One day, I believe you will do so.” Hans remembered something that his father had told him when he was young. “Listen, son, listen to the wind, to the water, to the stone, to the trees. Let the world speak to you, and it might give you the wisdom you need.”

A soft breeze ran through Cast’s dark, sandy hair, tossing it this way and that, so Hans added his hand to the ruffling, his son giggling at the sensation. Hans also began to laugh again, and he reached with his other hand to tickle Cast’s stomach, which made both of them laugh

harder. Squirming ensued, and Cast could not hold back his laughter long enough to tell his father to stop, so instead he tried to tickle him back. And they laughed all the more.

And, when the ruffling and the tickling had ended, they sat there quietly watching the tall, skinny, green hill as the light of day began to fade and the wheels of the wagon drew them closer to home.

Chapter 1

Along the Slopes of Jagpass

Seven Years Later

A breeze, able to be broken by the breath of a child, slipped between the trees like invisible beings dancing through the woods. They carried leaves into the sky and rolled twigs along the ground. They gently swayed the branches as a grandson helps a grandfather to stand. They splashed the water of the creeks and streams like rocks being skipped by the children of wind. They whispered the words of the world, of Lalbahadoor, into the ears of any that cared to listen.

Cast Klyosov stood atop the roots of a spruce, his hand pressed to its lichen-covered bark. The green needles hung just above his head. His ear lifted to the sky and he listened to the hum of the wind while he waited for the others. It was melodic, in a way, like it was singing a song of its own. He could have sworn its song held some discernable meaning in it, but as soon as he thought he might decipher it, the breeze ceased.

“Why do you always feel the need to run ahead like that?” Justin was the first to come into sight. His heavy breathing was a testament to the harsh incline they traversed. “Go too far and I’ll be scared you’ll get lost.”

“More likely you’d be lost without me,” Cast called back.

“If you ask me, we’ll all be lost before this day’s done. Oh, look how adorable that is.” Justin pointed to their other friend, Dox, who was further down the slope tentatively holding the arm of Lainie.

“Y’all are just too cute,” Justin cooed. He reached the spruce Cast was now leaning against and turned to continue his mocking. “Oh Dox,” he feigned distress, placing the back of his hand against his forehead and drooping his knees, “please help me. I do not think I could make the climb without you.”

His words were met with a well-aimed pinecone to the nose. Justin let out a yelp before struggling to regain composure. “What was that for?”

Lainie straightened herself from her throwing stance and wiped the dust from her hand on her clothes. “I’d call that a good throw and a good throw don’t need a reason.”

“I’ll second that,” said Cast.

“Third,” followed Dox.

Red flooded Justin’s cheeks. He crossed his arms and turned his back, “I just don’t see why we let her come along at all.” Cast ignored the statement. After all, it was been the twelfth time Justin had said such a thing since leaving Halses.

Dox and Lainie caught up to the other boys. “Leave her be. I’m just making sure she don’t fall and hurt herself,” Dox said.

Justin rubbed the bridge of his nose. “If we have to be the one’s worrying about her falling then she shouldn’t be here.”

Dox made a retort of some kind but Cast didn’t hear it. He was inspecting their surroundings, trying to figure out where they were exactly. And where they needed to go next.

They were out along the slopes of Jagpass for the day, looking for the Lone Ash Clearing. The bittersweet berries had always been a favorite of Cast’s, a memento of his childhood. Lainie had insisted on coming, but Cast didn’t mind all that much at the request. She was, after all, his sister, and he loved her. Dox and especially Justin, on the other hand, were not as thrilled by the predicament.

Cast tried to find some distinguishing features to set them on the right path, but all he saw was the seemingly endless thicket of trees and bushes running up the mountain. He scratched his head in puzzlement. This was not like he had remembered it. Where did they go from here?

“Do you even know where you’re going?” It was Justin who asked the question. They had apparently stopped their arguing for the time being.

“Um, yeah, coarse I do. Gotta get reoriented, that’s all.” A nervous chuckle escaped him.

He had only been to the clearing twice before, once with his father and brother and another with only his father. He had hoped to be able to find the way himself with the landmarks he remembered but had lost track of them.

Justin threw his hands. “I knew we were gonna end up lost.”

Cast gave a reassuring gesture. “Hey, I’ve gotten us this far, haven’t I? A little faith would be refreshing.”

“How do we even know you’ve got us in the right place?”

“Just give me a…”

The wind picked up again, gently coursing through Cast's hair. The trees let out shy groans and tiny whispers filled his ears. It sang that wordless song again, but this time Cast swore it meant something. He moved on from the tree roots without finishing his thought. What was it trying to tell him? How could he possibly hope to understand?

A strong breeze blasted, pushing directly to the right and sending needles and leaves dancing that way. Cast had to brace himself on another tree to keep from being knocked over. Then as quickly as it had come, the breeze died down again. It was still there, only softer and less obvious.

The wind was directing him. He was sure that had to be what that song was trying to tell him. But why? Something in him told him it didn't matter, but it still scratched the outer corners of his mind. He followed anyway and hoped the others followed as well. His wish was confirmed by the voice of Justin walking next to him, trying to ask what he was doing. Cast ignored him. He needed to focus.

He turned his arms out, letting the wind slip through his fingers from behind, driving Cast as he walked.

They moved horizontally across the slope, pushing through the thicket. Everyone remained quiet through the journey, lest they catch a bitter word from Cast to let him concentrate. He didn't like snapping at them, but he feared losing sight of where they needed to go.

Eventually, they found themselves in a spot where they could not go forward any longer because the slope had grown too steep. Cast turned to go down the mountain, so they could find a place to cross, but as soon as he took his first step down, the wind hit him from behind and to the right.

Was it trying to tell him that they needed to go further down the mountain? He looked around to observe where he had brought them. The trees were less thick here than they had been before. In the distance, he could hear a flowing creek, likely crouched low in a ravine. But there had been no creek where his father had taken him. They had not even passed close enough by one to hear it. He remembered a ravine, but it had been dry.

His head lowered. He felt stupid. The wind was speaking to him? What a foolish thing to think. "I'm sorry." Cast turned to face the others. "I thought...I thought something incredible had happened, but I just got us even more lost than before."

"That's alright." Dox rested a hand on Cast's shoulder. "We can enjoy exploring the mountain. It's a good day for it."

Cast saw it floating along the wind. The large leaf twirled through the air and landed softly at his feet. He stooped to pick it up. In actuality, the leaf was made up of several smaller leaflets, each different from each other in shape. The edges of each leaflet were toothed and tapered to the tip. Without a doubt, it was from a mountain ash.

He twirled the leaf in his hand, pondering its significance. It occurred to him that he may have been misinterpreting the wind. That the wind was not rushing to where he was to go but rather was blowing from there.

The leaf slipped from his hand, catching the wind again and taking off down the mountain. His feet, however, took him running the other way, into the gust. "Oh, now where are you running off to?" Justin called out from behind.

"I was wrong! I had it all wrong."

"That doesn't answer my question in the slightest."

"Just follow me."

He led them back the way they came. Lainie had a difficult time keeping up, so Cast was forced to slow, but he kept their pace at her maximum; they had already lost too much daylight. He adjusted their path as needed to avoid heavily sloped areas and various rock formations but mainly kept straight with the wind.

When they arrived around the place they had started, the wind changed directions, taking them further up the slope. He eagerly complied and was soon rewarded with a familiar sight. Two boulders side by side, one laying down and the other standing tall to vaguely resemble an 'L.' It was one of the landmarks that marked the path to the Lone Ash Clearing.

"Ha." Cast stopped them in front of the formation. His breaths were short, but his words were emphatic, trembling with excitement. "I knew we weren't far off before. Just a little tweak and we would've been fine."

"Are we almost there?" Lainie asked. Her breathing was the heaviest by far.

"That we are," Cast said with a grand smile. "Less than half a mile that way." He pointed past the boulders.

They started off again, no longer feeling the need to rush, and soon enough came upon another landmark designating their trail, a ravine. It was obvious that a creek had once cut through its bottom, its snaking trail still visible, but it had long since been dried up.

Cast lowered himself down first and spotted Lainie while Dox helped her descend. The other two boys dropped down into the ravine. Trees had sprouted in where the creek had once run, though they were still small compared to what grew outside the ravine.

They crossed the bed, careful to avoid holes and sudden drops that might twist an ankle. The same procedure was followed on the other side to climb out: Cast going first, followed by

Lainie, and then the other two boys. Now on the other side, Cast could see a break in the trees ahead. They were almost there.

He led them through the remaining woods and stopped short of the clearing's edge and dropped to his knees to find cover. He gestured for the others to do so. They obliged without conflict when they saw the scene before them.

The four children were crouched low at the feet of spruces and firs. The lone mountain ash sat at the center of the clearing. The grass was unexpectedly low for the forest, almost kempt, sprinkled with the bittersweet berries of the ash that was the clearings namesake. But Cast's attention was not on the tree nor the berries they had come for. At the base of the ash, curled in its shade, lay a massive animal, shrouded in rock and metal. A cagedon.

Cast positioned them behind the covering of a few blueberry bushes to keep from sight and let chirps and songs of warblers and creepers overhead mask the sound of their movements. From above floated down a carpenter bee and landed on the shoulder of Lainie. She jumped, yelped, and, in the process of trying to brush the bee off, rustled the blueberry bushes.

This all prompted Justin to ask, "Remind me why you had let her come along." Thirteen. He also asked it a hard-hushed voice, which was just as loud as if he were talking normally.

"Quiet down," Cast said. He checked to make sure the cag was still asleep. "She hasn't done nothing wrong, so just deal with it."

"Nothing but slow us down," Justin mumbled under his breath. Dox gave a light elbow to Justin's side. The dark-haired boy had given his fair share of complaints, but it was clear that even he was beginning to grow tired of Justin's constant protests. "What was that for?" Justin, who was the smallest of the three boys, rubbed his ribs where Dox had hit him.

"Can you stop hissing like a pussy cat? The damn cag will here you," Dox whispered.

“Yeah, just ‘cause you hiss like a cat don’t mean you’ll stalk like one,” Lainie said. She giggled at her insult but cut off when she saw the glare Justin bore down on her.

Cast couldn’t help but smile. He even saw Dox cracking a grin. It was always a sight that brought Cast joy: seeing his friends be friends together. He knew that Dox and Justin would eventually warm up to Lainie, they just needed to make that jump. All of what seemed like fighting was only that buffer before they decided to do so.

He took in a deep breath, letting the scents of the mossy mountain forest. They surged through his nostrils to fill his lungs and he held the breath for but a moment before releasing it back into the breeze. He plucked a blueberry from the bush and popped it into his mouth. The sweet juices poured from the bitter skin of the fruit and Cast became enamored by the taste. He ate another and stuffed a handful of berries into his pocket for later.

“You all calm down,” Cast finally said quietly. He turned to look at the beast that lay inside the clearing. A large wild cagedon lay sleeping in the clearing, surrounded by the fallen berries of the ash tree. The shade of the tree did little to cover the animal’s massive size. Its metallic hide, which looked more like armor made by a master blacksmith than anything naturally occurring, overlaid its thick, tough skin on its back and head, which resembled dark stone in both appearance and texture.

It sat on six short legs and had an equally stumpy tail. But its legs didn’t keep the creature from being as tall as Cast and well longer. As far as Cast could tell, they didn’t have any nostrils, which always led Cast to wonder how they smelled. The beast let out a yawn to reveal a set of dull, square teeth that were capable of digging into a dead tree. As a testament to that, Cast’s father claimed to have seen one snap a fallen birch tree in half. Although, their size was more a

means of defense and intimidation and the aforementioned knocking down trees. They were vegetarian, after all.

The other children gathered up behind him to observe the beast. “I hear they use cag to pull the king’s wagon in Silvalin,” Lainie said. “They don’t need to armor them like you would horses ‘cause, well, you can see why, and they don’t need to go fast in the city. Though, many say it’s more of a show of power than an attempt to be practical.” The little historian. That’s what Lainie always liked to do: read old books. She would all day and all night if she could. Cast didn’t very much enjoy reading. Didn’t see the point in reading words about the world when you could just be out in it. Her brow furrowed. “I wonder what could have done that.”

She was referring to a thin gash along the left side of the cag’s metallic hide. “I don’t know,” Cast said. Nothing on those mountains was big enough for cag to worry about. An occasional bear or mountain lion, but nothing with claws sharp enough to pierce a cag hide.

Normally, cag would congregate in small herds, so it was strange to see one by itself. Cast didn’t care about that. He had never seen one this up close before in the wild. Sure, they had a few to pull the heavy wagon loads on the farms surrounding Halses, but they mostly just used horses, which were much easier to tame and keep. And besides, no one ever let any of the children near them, even the ones that lived and worked on the farms.

“Shut up about your history lessons,” Justin told Lainie. “No one gives a damn.”

“Of course people give a damn, just not culls with no brains like you.”

“What the hell you just call me?” Justin nearly shouted the words.

“A brainless cull,” Lainie did shout back.

“We should’ve left you at the bottom of this damn—”

The cag let out a low growl.

Cast jerked his head back to the clearing to see the metallic beast standing on its six legs. The blackened eyes of the cag narrowed and locked with his wide and fearful ones. It then looked over at Justin and then to Lainie. It took a step towards her. Cast's legs moved before he thought to.

He was standing on the edge of the clearing between the cag and his sister. The cag growled again, a warning not to come any closer, and Cast heeded it. The creature likely wouldn't attack if he didn't aggravate it any further. He cursed his legs for moving on their own. They would have been fine as long as none of them made any rash decisions. Like he had.

The air was still, caught in Cast's throat, as if the breeze that had winded through the trees avoided the clearing. The light of Al Dran was no longer impeded by the branches and leaves of the trees that had been above him when in hiding, allowing the heat of day fall on his back. He struggled to inhale the dry air of the midday and itched to wipe the sweat forming on his brow but dared not to move. Dared not to breathe.

He thought something was moving in the woods on the far side of the clearing, drawing Cast's attention for a second, but after he saw that there was nothing really there he placed his focused back on the cag. They stood like that only for what could have been a few minutes, but it felt an eternity to him. Neither of them made a move towards the other, nor did they elect to retreat and give the other a chance to advance.

Eventually, the cag opened its mouth, likely to appear more intimidating. To Cast's surprise, he also saw two nostrils on the roof of its mouth. "So that's how you smell," he whispered to himself.

That simple thought was all he needed to clear his mind. He examined his surroundings, searching for ways out of the situation. The cag wasn't going to attack unless he gave reason to.

He knew that much. Standing there for too long might come across as threatening. Retreating, on the other hand, would lead the cag right where his friends were. He needed a different exit plan.

Maybe to the side?

His first course of action was to get his friends within his line of sight. From there, he could decide the best course of action. Cast slowly sidestepped around the clearing, extending his arms out wide to the side and opening up his hands and turning them out as to make himself appear less threatening. The cag circled with him, keeping Cast in line with the tip of his pointed snout.

When where his friends had been standing appeared in his view, he stopped. They had all moved back deeper into the thicket, but they hadn't run away as he had hoped. "Damn fools," he let slip under his breath. He knew they didn't want to leave him alone just as much as he wouldn't have left any of them alone, but he still wished they had. Why couldn't he have been blessed with cowards for friends instead of fools?

Cast inched his way back towards the cover of the forest. Careful step followed careful step as he moved. Low growls emitted from the cag, and it started to approach. "I'm going. Don't worry, I'm going," Cast said more to comfort himself than the cag. "No need to chase me off."

His attention fell upon the gash at the cag's side. That question still remained: what could have possibly pierced the cag's hide. When he thought about that, a lot of things fit together. Whether it had been singled out or if the heard had scattered, it explained why this particular cag had been alone. The mystery attacker also explained why the cag was so defensive. So how was he to keep the cag in place?

Berries.

It seemed too simple to work, but it was worth the try. He slipped out the handful of blueberries he had stuffed into his pocket. Some were a bit smooshed, but most had held their shape. The cag's eyes locked on the berries. A smile whipped across Cast's face and he tossed the pile in front of the animal. It stared at the pile skeptically, wondering what to do with it.

It bent its head down and Cast thought it was going to eat the berries, but it just stood over the berries with mouth ajar. It took him a second to realize that it was sniffing the berries. All the while it kept one beady, black eye on Cast. Sweat formed on his brow as he waited. It still wasn't safe to move. He had hoped the cag would take his bribe, letting him run free, but it did not make any attempt to eat.

Then the animal's jaw snapped shut on the blueberries. But before Cast had time to make his escape, the cag's head popped up and swiveled around the clearing, no longer concerned with Cast. It let out a deep, gurgling growl and took off to the left, the opposite direction of the others.

Mixed feelings of relief and confusion flooded him as he watched the cag sprint away with a nimbleness it should not have possessed. He decided he did not care and the relief won over in full. He made his way back over to his friends.

"Alright, let's move out of here. Already been too loud to be pushing our luck any further." Dox was scowling at the Justin and Lainie. "Don't want it coming back this way." He was crouched the lowest and furthest away. This wasn't that Dox was scared, Cast had half a mind that Dox would take that Cag on one on one if it meant to buy the rest of them time to get away. No, Dox was just cautious. A clever deer keen to the noises of the forest.

Cast slowly rose, nodding his head, "Dox is right, we should be heading home anyway." Judging from the sky above, it was likely midafternoon, and it would take them several hours to hike down the mountain and across the Golden Fields to get home. "Let's get on our way."

A cry came from the other side of the clearing and Cast looked just in time to see the cag barreling towards them, blood spilling from its side. They dove to either side of the cag's path, Cast narrowly avoiding being trampled by the animal. "Damn cag!" Justin shouted after it, but Cast wasn't worried about the cag.

His focus was on the splatters of blood that now painted dirt. "We gotta go," he told the others. "Whatever gashed that cag is back for a second helping." The color drained from the faces of his friends. He had the feeling it was gone from his too. No one wanted to think about what could have left a gash of that size on the side of a cag hide.

Cast looked back to the clearing, but it was completely empty now, save for more bloodstains. Where did it go? "It'll be following the cag, so we should avoid the blood trail at all cost," Dox said. He turned to head right of where the cag had run through, his path clearly diverging from its trail.

It made sense to leave. To go home and forget the incident altogether. But something tugged at Cast, a nagging voice that roared in the back of his mind. "But what is it?" It was quiet at first, the breeze swarming from the cag's path, but slowly it picked up into a roar.

He heard the muted voice of Dox. Cast shook his head, unknowing what had just been said. The wind subsided and Cast could hear him repeating it. His friend, ironically, was asking about what he had said.

Cast hadn't even realized he has spoken out loud. Dox was impatient, and rightfully so, not wanting to ask a third time. If they were going to move, then they had to move now. "Oh, I was just thinking about... I want to know what it is." Dox's brow furrowed deep. Lainie and Justin looked just as confused as him. He questioned himself as well. What was he thinking? That he was going to chase after that thing? He realized that was exactly what he wanted to do.

“That’s just plain dumb,” Justin said. He too was already heading away from the blood trail, far further right than the other boy.

“Stop screwing around and let’s get out of here.” Command radiated from Dox and everyone stopped to look to him. “There ain’t no way any of us are going after that cag. We stay low and get off this damn mountain.”

“I’ll stay safe, I swear. Besides, if it ain’t going right for the cag, then it’s probably leading it into some sorta trap. And that means the creature,” he gulped, not knowing what else to call it, “could be anywhere in these woods except for on this path.” He gestured to the blood-stained forest floor that the cag had left. “There’s no need to worry as long as I stay quiet, which I can do a hell of a lot better than the lot of you.” He gave an unconvincing chuckle.

“You talking like you’d be going alone,” Dox said.

“If y’all ain’t coming, then I’ll be on my own.”

“Don’t be a cull, Cast,” Justin jumped in. “You’re gonna get yourself killed.”

“What are you gonna do when you get to the end of that trail? You’d just be running right into the same trap as the cag,” Dox said. His foot stamped impatiently on the dirt.

Cast almost agreed with him. He knew that his friends were right. Of course, it was much smarter to avoid the blood trail at all cost. They would survive if they did so. However, he looked down the blood path again and the wind called to him again. “There’s something in my head telling me that we have to follow the cag.” *Or at least, he did*

Justin shook his head, “The cag’s gonna die. I plan on *not* dying.”

“He’s right, Cast,” Dox said.

Silence surrounded them. None of the children could have broken that breeze that swept between them and through the trees even if they wanted too. Life or death: that was what this

choice felt like. But to Cast life was through the cag. Through the creature. The thought startled him. He shook himself back out of his head.

“That’s okay, Dox. I can’t expect you to follow me, and I don’t think...”

Lainie exploded from behind Cast, attacking him his back in the form of a hug. “No, you can’t follow it. No, no, you can’t,” she was shouting. His sister had been so quiet since the cag had run through that it was surprising to see her act out like this.

She squeezed him tighter, tighter than he thought her able to. “Lainie, you gotta let go...” She did not loosen her grip. If he wanted to, Cast knew he could break himself free, but at that moment he knew the only thing holding Lainie up was her holding on to him. So, he whirled on her so that they were now facing each other, and he wrapped her up in a hug as well.

There was a moment where Cast was ready to walk down the mountain with them. He was ready to forget the bloody cag and the thing that was going to kill it. To think, he had really thought it smarter to follow that blood trail. That it would lead them to life. It would just lead his friends to their death. But then the wind gave one last desperate cry and he knew he could not dismiss it any longer. “I ain’t nothing but a fool,” he whispered.

And he pushed Lainie away.

She landed squarely in Dox’s chest and he instinctually wrapped her up to keep her from falling. “Keep her safe,” was all Cast said before he took off running, blood-caked dust kicking up in his wake.

Chapter 2

Pathways

“Cast! Cast, dammit!” Dox called after him as he disappeared through the trees. What was he thinking? If Dox had half a mind he would’ve run on after him, towards whatever that thing was. But he knew he couldn’t. Not with the trap that Cast had left. “Keep her safe? Keep her safe! How can I do that when you go blindly running into the woods to get yourself killed!” But he did not release his grip on Lainie.

She too was shouting her brother’s name, asking why he had to run off like that. While she was doing that, she also managed to kick and bruise Dox’s shin in an attempt to break loose. He did not release. “Let me go! Let me go! Cast! Cast!”

He made be a fool, but he’s a smart fool. How could he possibly abandon Lainie to go after him? Or worse, risk her following him. What was he saying? Of course, she’d follow him. She’s just as much a fool as her brother.

His breath caught as Lainie’s foot landed high on his leg. “Dammit, calm down,” he said. “You ain’t going after him.”

“Then why don’t you? You can catch up to him, can’t you?” She didn’t stop struggling while she spoke. “I thought you were the quickest boy this side of the mountains.”

“That don’t matter. He told me to keep you safe—”

“I don’t need keeping safe. I need someone to keep Cast from killing himself.”

“And that don’t involve you running off to get yourself killed too! Or any of us!” Lainie stopped squirming at that. He looked over at Justin, who was still just looking down the way that Cast had gone. “That means you too, Jus.”

“But I could catch him.” Justin was still looking down the path. He looked over to Dox and Lainie. “Cast is slow. You may be the fastest, but I’m still faster than him.”

“Don’t make me come rope you up too.”

“No, I can do it. Before he gets to the cag. Before he gets to...whatever it is.” He choked when he said ‘it,’ as if it were a word you wouldn’t dare say in front of your mother. “I can save him.”

“Jus, please.” But Dox knew he could not stop him, either. No more than he could’ve stopped Cast. He signed. “Cast thinks he’s fulfilling some kind of duty. I don’t know if he’s mad or what, but just...make sure I don’t have to tell both your mothers that... Just make sure y’all both get back home. Okay?”

Justin nodded his head and turned to start jogging down the path, but he stopped after a few steps. Then instead of running to Cast, he ran to enveloped Dox and Lainie in a hug. “I’ll bring him back, I swear.” He pulled away and gave Lainie a flick on her forehead and said, “And I ain’t no pussy cat.”

Before she had time to react he was heading down the path after their friend. The no longer sang in the trees up above them, which struck an odd chord with Dox. The birds always

sang, probably all flown off when the cag had run through. It was odd. An eerie quiet had settled on the woods because of it, leaving Dox and Lainie alone in the silence.

“We all nothing but fools,” was all Dox could think to say.

Lainie was rubbing the spot where Justin had flicked her, contemplating something.

“Yeah, an absolutely irredeemable bunch.” Dox sighed again. He wished she wouldn’t use words he didn’t know. That way he wouldn’t feel the urge to ask what it meant.

“Are you gonna run after them if I let you go?”

She slowly shook her head. “I doubt there’d be much I could do. Couldn’t even catch them if I wanted.” So, against his better judgment, he released his grip on her. Although she looked after where Justin had just run, she did not move from where she stood.

Gingerly, he grabbed her hand, making sure not to hurt her in his grip, and led her away from the trail. He laughed at himself. He thought to himself how the blind fools were off having an adventure of their own, and here he was stuck walking the kid back home. But he did not complain openly, nor inwardly after that. Their path now diverged from their friends. What would come of it?

He suspected he should have been grateful. It wasn’t like they were off exploring while he was stuck at home. Cast was off running through the woods like a man gone crazy and Justin was having to follow him to make sure he didn’t get himself killed. Dox was having to get Lainie home safely, and that presented a danger of its own.

Cast had been right about one thing: that creature did not chase directly after the cag. That meant it must have taken a different route. Which also meant it could have been anywhere in those woods.

Looking down through the trees, he could see a black mass making its way between the trees but couldn't make out what it was. "Let's get moving," he said, and they started their way down the slope of the mountain, hoping to avoid whatever he had seen.

#

Cast could still hear the shouts of Dox and Lainie as he left them behind. He was used to quickly traversing the forests, ducking below tree branches and dodging to greenery that tangled at his feet, but there was no need for that now. There was a wide path that the cag had left behind, shrubs torn from the ground and trees knocked part way down on either side. Those trees whizzed past him as he ran as fast as he could, which didn't feel near fast enough. He felt as if he should be able to run twice as fast—no, five times as fast. Maybe even faster. It was just that something was keeping him from doing that. Perhaps something was missing? Nevertheless, he ran as fast as he could.

He told himself to not think like that. Like he was mad. Why was he running in the first place? To chase that cag? To chase that creature? There was no reason for this; he should be halfway down the mountain with Dox, Lainie, and Justin by now.

Suddenly, he was lifted off his feet, being tackled from behind. Cast hit the ground with a thud but quickly broke out of the grip his assailant. Using the momentum of the tackle, he rolled back up onto his feet and stood in a defensive stance, ready to face whoever, or whatever, had attacked him.

Justin laid there groaning on the ground, grabbing at his side which appeared to have landed on a tree root. Cast sighed and lowered his guard. "Justin, you damn fool! What were you thinking?"

Still holding his side, Justin hefted himself onto one knee, his other arm supporting him on the trunk of the tree he had landed on. “I was thinking,” he struggled to get the words out. His breath had clearly been knocked out by the fall. He caught his breath before continuing, “I was thinking that I would save myself from having to tell your ma and pop why their son was stupid enough to get himself killed in the woods on this fine and beautiful day.” He gestured to the sky above, trying to hide the obvious pain he felt.

Justin lifted himself onto his feet, though he had to use his hands on his knees to push himself up one foot at a time. He tried to stand tall but Cast stood nearly a full head taller. Justin was also a thin thing, even when compared to Cast, so his intimidation would have been laughable at any other time, especially with the way he tried to keep you from noticing he was still breathing hard from the run. But there was something in his eyes. A determination sat upon Justin’s deep blue eyes, one that would have stopped any man where he stood.

But Cast shot that same determination right back at him. “I ain’t gonna get myself killed.” He didn’t lie, per se. He just didn’t know. “You just wouldn’t understand. I don’t even understand it, so how could you?” When Justin didn’t say anything, Cast just turned and walked away, continuing down the path.

“Wait, Cast!” Justin clasped a hand on Cast’s shoulder.

Cast whirled on him. “I don’t have time for this! What was your plan, coming and running after me? Did you think you could come drag me off? You can’t keep me from doing nothing.”

“I thought I could talk some sense into you!” Justin snapped back. “I thought if you had some time to think about it—shit Cast, you really could die.”

“I know that!” Both boys shuddered. Silence fell upon the trees. For the first time, Cast noticed that the voice had stopped. He sighed and shrugged his shoulders. “You don’t think I know that?” He said softly, almost a whisper. “Just go away, Justin. Run with the others. I want y’all to be safe.” It’s why he was doing this in the first place. To keep everyone safe. That feeling, he still couldn’t explain it; that strange kinship he felt with the creature and the urge to stop it at all cost as if his life depended on it. As if the lives of everyone around him were at stake.

Justin just stood there, mulling over what Cast had said, which was strange because Justin never mulled over anything. “No, I don’t think I’ll go running.”

“What?”

A sly grin flashed on Justin’s face and vanished as fast as it came, a faux seriousness replacing it. “I ain’t running. I can’t stop you and you can’t stop me.” Triumphant, he crossed his arms and let the grin return. And he walked down the path in front of Cast. When Cast did not follow, he turned, concern on his face, “Are you not following?” This time he openly laughed as he continued down the path.

Realizing there was nothing he could say to stop him, Cast followed after Justin, shaking his head and saying, “Why couldn’t I be blessed with cowards for friends instead of fools.”

“I am a coward; I’m just a bigger fool,” Justin called from up ahead, already jogging. And Cast went running after him.

Cast struggled to keep up with Justin, who, despite his short demeanor, was quite fast. Well, it was more that Cast was just slow rather than Justin being fast. True, his long legs brought long strides, but it did not mean very quick ones. Whereas Justin’s looked like a blur in

comparison. Once again, he found himself believing that he should be able to run much faster than he already was.

The blood trail that they followed was beginning to become harder and harder to see. Before, the bloodstains had been splashing pools, but as they had gotten further down the mountain, the spots were no more than splattered drops. “How did that cag manage to run this far without dropping?” Justin asked. “It was bleeding buckets when it got slashed.”

Cast just shook his head. He knew he was too out of breath to speak. They kept running. It was beginning to worry him, how far they had run. Maybe the cag got away. The thought absently wandered through his mind. Fatigue was beginning to wash over him, and he could tell that it was beginning to affect Justin as well by the sound of his friend’s ragged breathing.

The two boys were so tired, in fact, that they barely noticed the sudden drop off in the path ahead.

Sliding on their heels to keep from going over the edge, they stopped short of the cliff edge, which dropped twenty feet below. “That was close,” Cast managed between wheezes. It was Justin’s turn to only nod. He doubled over and gulped in the air. “Stand up, idiot. You’re just collapsing your lungs doing that,” Cast said, but his friend did not heed his advice.

He wished that Justin had not followed him. Then he chuckled, realizing that was exactly what Justin had been complaining about Lainie earlier in the day. He hoped they were alright, her and Dox. There was nothing he could do for them but hope. She was in good hands. Dox wouldn’t let anything happen to her, that’s why he had shoved her at him.

“Cast,” Justin whispered, now properly to Cast’s surprise. The shorter boy was crouching at the cliff edge, gesturing for Cast to come crouch with him. Cast adhered and dropped his belly to the ground when he saw what Justin was wanting him to see.

Sprawled out on its side at the base of the cliff was the cag lying in a pool of its own blood. Its vulnerable underside was exposed to the forest. It was moving ever so slightly. “It’s still alive. Maybe we can help it somehow,” Cast said excitedly. The cag’s exposed beady black eye opened and locked on him. It didn’t look angry, or even scared. Only acceptance filled that black pool.

“I don’t think there’s nothing we can do, Cast.”

Cast just shook his head in agreement. He hated admitting that. All they could do was sit and wait. Wait for that creature to come for its meal. Wait for the cag to breathe its last and for its eyes to go darker than its already blacken depths.

#

Dox and Lainie moved slowly through the mountain woods. Fear of attracting the mysterious creature was what held them back from racing home. It took them over a quarter-hour to reach the ravine with the dried-up creek again. When they arrived at its edge their breaths were slow and heavy from trying to remain quiet.

He helped lower Lainie down, coaching her through the footing she needed so she wouldn’t slip. Despite that, her foot still slipped from the rock near the bottom. She cried out as her knee struck the wall of the ravine and she dropped the rest of the way, landing on her back.

Blood trickled down her leg. Her face contorted, but she was able to bite back any more outburst. Dox scrambled into the ravine and crouched low next to her. He held a finger to his lips and gestured for her to remain calm.

“It stings bad, Dox.” She tried to say it quietly. She fought her quivering lower lip into a stoical grimace. She lifted herself onto her forearms, looking down at the scene.

“I can tell that. Now quiet down.” The blood made it look worse than it actually was. The outer wound was little more than a scrape, but he couldn’t say anything for the bone and muscle. It didn’t look broken, which he counted as a good sign, but he wouldn’t be able to tell for sure until they got back to Halses. They needed to keep moving. There was no telling where that thing was. “Sorry, I don’t mean to snap. How’s your back? Hit that pretty hard. Think you can stand?”

She nodded. “My back’s fine. I think I’m good.” Dox helped her to her feet. She stood well enough, but her knee buckled when she took her first step. He caught her by the arm and nearly fell with her but managed to pull her into himself and stabilize them.

“Apparently not,” Dox grumbled. Why did he have to let her fall?

“Sorry.”

He shook his head. “It’s no mind. That climb down is tricky. Should of been spotting you better.” He looked up at the sky. At this rate, it would be night by the time they got down the mountain. They would still need to cut across the fields after that, which means they wouldn’t get home until after bluelight. Their parents would already be worried sick from them being out that late, not to mention that two of them would still be missing.

Trees rustled from outside the ravine. Dox placed Lainie’s arm around his neck—he had to bend to account for their height difference—and sneaked closer to the middle of the dry creek bed. More noises came from the trees from the side they had come from and leaves glided to the ground. There wasn’t any time to get up out of the ravine, especially with Lainie’s knee.

Further down he saw an apple lying in the dirt. A tree or bush was their only real chance at proper cover now, so he picked Lainie up from the ground and approached the fallen fruit. She gave protest but did little in the ways of struggling. Sure enough, there was an old apple tree growing from the wall of the ridge. Its trunk was bent over to the point that its top nearly touched

the ground. The vines and leaf-covered branches spilled out in front of it, creating a cave-like shelter. It wasn't perfect, but it was too convenient of a location to pass up.

He picked up the pace and laid Lainie down in the green cavern before backing up to inspect how visible she was. From the front, he could barely see her even though he knew where she was, but he worried how effective the cover would be from the top. A loose branch he broke off from the tree did well in helping him flip some of the vines over the top of the higher branches. He stepped back to inspect again.

“What are you doing?” Lainie whispered. “You’re gonna get seen.”

“That’s what I’m trying to keep us from being.”

“That won’t do us much good if you get eaten before you even get under here. Come on, it’ll be fine.”

“Okay. Just give me a moment.” He gave one last look and, though he wasn’t entirely satisfied, decided it would do for now. Then he moved under the cover of the apple tree.

They sat in silence for some time, listening for any movement in the forest above. All he could hear was the calling of bluebirds and the shifting of the wind. Next to him, Lainie was holding her knee. “Here, I didn’t really get a good look at it out there.” He leaned over to get a better look, but she recoiled, forcing herself to wince.

“No, that’s okay,” she said through it. She waited for the pain passed from her face before she spoke again. “I just need something to wipe the blood up with.” Dox patted himself down, finding his handkerchief in his back pocket. He handed it to her and she took it with care. “Thanks.”

“It’s no mind.”

He quietly watched her press the cheap fabric onto her skin, the white cloth turning more crimson with every gentle dab of her fingers. Her face was strong as she cleaned her knee, as if she was intent on keeping a grimace from reaching her lips.

“How does it feel?” Dox asked.

“Damn hurts. That’s how it feels,” she snapped.

“I meant your actual knee, not the scrape. Do you think you broke it or anything like that?”

“Oh, sorry. Um, I don’t think it’s broken.” She arched the side and under the knee, letting one of those grimaces through. “Ah! Probably sprained. Definitely bruised.” She looked back up at him. “I should be able to walk soon.”

He shook his head. “Don’t push yourself if you can’t. I can always carry you, we’d just need to take frequent breaks.”

“I don’t need nobody to carry me. Especially after you just did it earlier without even telling me you were gonna.”

“We needed to move, and you had just fallen over trying to walk. What was I supposed to do?”

“Tell me before you boost me into the air.” Her arms crossed over her chest. “I would have said yes, but I don’t need your help for every little thing I do.”

Dox looked her up and down. His face twisted as he tried to wrap his mind around what she just said. “Needing help isn’t a bad thing, Lainie. You hurt yourself and proved yourself to be incapable of the task at hand because of that injury, so I lent my assistance.”

“Don’t give me your smart talk,” Lainie said. “You sound like your grandpa.”

“Don’t chu call me that.” His accent got noticeable thicker as he spoke, and he groaned as he realized what he was doing. He put a hand over his mouth and let his fingers massage his cheeks. “Please. Don’t say that.” Dox started counting in his mind, trying to put it at ease.

“Okay.” It was as if someone had dumped cool water onto her hot words from before, leaving the hazy fog of perplexed concern in her voice and in her face. She said nothing else.

The silence seeped back under the cover of that tree, but it did not last for long. From the trees, they could hear a girl calling out. “Hello! Hello!” She shouted. “Is anyone there?”

Her voice was strange, unlike anything Dox had ever heard. More refined than anything from this region of Lalbahadoor. But he had met people from the capital and even still they did not speak quite the same as this girl did. Maybe she was from further tailward than even Silvalin?

He was about to leave the cover of the apple tree when she came careening over the edge of the ridge. A high-pitched yelp sounded from her before she hit the ground, where her body hit first and her head whipped hard into the dirt. She laid there, silent.

Dox had never seen a dead person before, at least not one he could remember, so he was nearly certain at first that the girl had died before their eyes just then. He was relieved to see the subtle movement of her body inhaling.

The ravine was quiet now after the girl’s sudden appearance. The rustling they had heard before had likely been her and if it wasn’t then it had been long enough that it was probably a past danger by now. It was safe, he decided.

He took a step out from under the tree covering. “Where are you going?” Lainie asked.

“I gotta check on her. She looks hurt.”

“What about that thing?”

“She was so loud that if it were close then either she would have already attracted it to us or scared it off entirely.” He took another step, using his arm to move the loose vines out of his way. “Just stay here.”

He approached with caution, as he did with most things. There didn’t appear to be any danger, but things had not been as they seemed that day. When he was satisfied nothing was amiss, he knelt to check on the girl. She laid belly-down on the ground, unconscious but still breathing.

She was older than him, but only by a few years. She lay wrapped in a fine, blue silk dress that clung close to her skin. Certainly an article of clothing from someone more well off than the average person along the Collar, although, she wasn’t wearing shoes. Her hair fell in circling amber halos surrounding her head.

He gently lifted her face from the dirt. No blood crusted her forehead where she had hit. Another sigh of relief. She would hopefully have nothing more than a throbbing headache.

“She alright?” Lainie appeared behind him.

“Yeah. I think she’ll be alright.” Dox didn’t care to mention he had told her to wait under the tree. It wasn’t worth it. “Your leg seems to be doing better.”

She hoped on her good foot to flex her knee. “It’s still a little sore, but I can manage.”

“Good.” He looked down at the mysterious girl. The day just continued to get stranger. “Looks like you’ll have to walk anyway. No way I’d be able to carry the two of you.”

And then something even stranger happened. When he bent down to pick her up, flowers of every color— blues and whites and violets and pinks and reds—began to sprout and bloom around her. He took a step back. Although they had just sprouted, they grew to full height before

his eyes. And then they all gently bent, latching their stems and petals to the girl, like small floral anchors.

He didn't recognize many of the species, he wasn't well-versed in that. Maybe he would ask Reis about them. He was, however, fixated on one of the flowers. A flower that every boy and girl from Halses are taught to avoid, even flee, from the moment they could walk.

It was a pretty flower. A tall flute stretched from its stem, a blaze of orange and red colliding. Five petals spread from the base of the flute, exhibiting that same fiery clash of color. Dark tendrils poked out the top of the flower, tipped in white, curling around her leg like skeletal fingers.

Fire's breath.

A dangerous necessity of nature. Late in the winter, a few would sprout around the mountain. Sparks would erupt from its flute when it reached maturity, showering the forest with fire. The fires were surprisingly tame, usually not spreading far beyond a hundred feet from a fire's breath. No one was entirely sure why. A burn could be good at the right time, but it didn't take away from the dangers. They didn't sprout every year, but still no one was allowed on the mountains during burn season, when there was even a chance they could be in bloom.

Dox knelt down next to the girl again. Although the flowers looked to be anchored tightly, they were still only flowers. He gently broke their grips, having to do so several times with some of the petals and leaves. As he did so, he slowly inched the girl away from their reach until he was able to lift her. He was most careful with that fiery flower, but no sparks erupted from its flute.

The flowers gave one final reach for her before straightening. They made up an odd, human shaped oval, and he swore they were staring up at him, contemplating. But they were

flowers, of course they weren't doing anything like that. It wasn't anything he saw. It was more that he could hear their stance. Then he read something new in the flowers. Approval? And then their petals wilted, and leaves fell and they sank back into the dirt, leaving no trace they had ever been there to begin.

The girl sighed in his arms. She was heavier than he expected, but his muscles didn't shake with the weight. It was like he could tell she should have been too heavy for him to carry for a long period and yet, he felt he could carry her all the way down the mountain and to Hales without rest.

He examined her, taking in her fine clothing and fiery hair. The scent of flowers filled his nose, wafting from her body. He didn't know what to make of her. Where had she come from?

"Are you ready?" Lainie asked. She looked around anxiously before her eyes settled on the girl. She clearly didn't know what to make of her either.

Dox nodded his head. "Yeah. Let's get out of here."

Chapter 3

The Ink-Skinned Demon

By the time the light of day had faded to orange, the sign that Sru Dran had taken Al Dran's place in watching over them, the reflection of the cag's eye had long grown glassy and vacant, the pool of its blood now dry and seeping into the cracks of the earth of the mountain slope. The song of the birds above resumed, their flippant notes sounding nothing like the dirge he felt appropriate. Cast looked up at them and wondered how they could sing their songs at such a miserable sight. But he knew that soon their notes would give way with the light—orange to blue—to the dismal caws of the crows and ravens and the beat of their dark wings. But even then, silence or mourning was all that should be present.

It felt wrong, leaving the cag's body down there like bait. They should have buried it, but he knew they couldn't lift it. Then they should have walled it up with stones, not just leave it to rest in its blood until it's scavenged by whatever first broke its skin. But that was the point, wasn't it? It was bait.

“How much longer?” Justin said from his position on the ground beside him. They had been lying there for hours and not so much as a rabbit had shot past in the clearing below.

“What do you mean?” Cast didn’t dare take his eyes off the cag; he wasn’t going to miss anything.

Justin’s long curls of hair were thrown about by a shake of his head. “We can’t just lay here forever waiting. We have to go home sometime.”

“Not until we figure out what that thing is.”

“You’re not serious, are ya?” Justin said.

“I am.” Cast fought back the urge to stare at his friend for dramatic purposes. He would’ve on any other day, it was just fun, but now was not the time for making fun. It was a time for focus. “Last time I checked, I told you to get down mountain with the rest’a them.”

Justin said nothing after that. They fell back into the quiet. They stayed like that for some time, well past after the bluebirds had grown silent and the crows and ravens began their own bleak songs. Flies descended on the cag’s corpse, though they had no chance of entering its flesh beyond the eyes. He had heard of hungry wolves and bears being able to break through the skin after long efforts with claws and fangs, but more often than not cag’s became stone filled with rotted flesh.

Suddenly, Justin lifted himself up from the ground. “What do you think you’re doing?” Cast asked.

“I’m done with this. And so are you.” He grabbed Cast by his shirt collar pulled up and in. The collar tightened around his neck, restricting his breathing, and he was forced to pick himself off the ground to breathe again.

After he was done coughing, he reeled on Justin. “What was that for!”

He gave a simple shrug of the shoulders. “What else am I supposed to do to get you up? You’re twice my size.”

“That don’t mean you gotta choke me out. Besides, I ain’t going anywhere.”

“I know you’ve always wanted to know things, but you’ve always had a little sense to go along with it. Why are you so insistent on seeing this thing through?”

In the thicket below, they heard something moving through the woods. The two boys dropped their bellies to the dirt again. Cast inched closer to the edge and peered over it. A black shape was running towards the cliff, tearing up trees and shrubs in its wake. The crows took off into the sky, their squalls and flapping wings crescendoed until they left behind only the sound of an approaching beast.

When it broke the tree line into the clearing, it slowed to a stop, and Cast’s mind snap in two.

The creature that stood below them was not of this world; something that could not possibly exist in his beautiful world. In fact, Cast was convinced that it could not be of anything conceived by imagination.

The shimmering form towered at least twelve feet off the ground, its body contorted and elongated at the waist and chest. Its head was like a fox, except flatter, sharper, and more triangular. Tall, pointed ears jutted up from the back corners of its skull. Thin, long fingers stretched out from its hands and came to terrible pointed claws. A thick tail protruded from behind its thin body, wrapping around its long legs multiple times. Its glossy appearance came from its ink-like skin that was uniform throughout its entire body, its skin flowing like a river and swirling to the command of an unseen tide. The currents whirled and turned, leading around his body until it poured into his large, slanted, green eyes.

Cast's chest locked up. Breath struggled to break through the blockade put there by fear. Now, everything in him told him to run, but he stayed there, glued to the forest's floor. Justin did the same. His friend was mouthing gibberish to himself, eyes wide and unfocused with terror seeping from his irises.

The monster roared.

With a cat-like grace, it leaped to the body of the cag and easily lifted it high above its head and heaved it to the ground. The metal corpse shattered like glass, blood and viscera and bones flying into the air and splattering across ground, grass, and trees. The monster turned and pounced on the gore, scavenging through the cag's remains lapping up the blood and devouring the meat and organs, eating even the bones indiscriminately. When it was finished, all was left of the cag was its metallic and rocky shell, which was spread across the clearing floor, looking like small bits of stone that you never would have thought used to belong to the hide of a living creature.

The monster's ears perked up and Cast thought that they had been found. Justin began to stammer in fear, hands and feet clawing at the ground in an attempt to push himself back from the cliff. Cast tried to tell him to quiet down, to at least motion to him to remain calm, but he was too frozen to move. Too terrified to not remain locked on the beast. Its ears twitched again. Its head slowly began to turn it locked on them, its body still facing the other way. The skin around its neck smoothed over as if it were facing forward.

The monster's eyes and mouth were closed, making its triangular head look as if it was not there at all, instead a beast-shaped hole cut out of the fabric of reality. Then its eyelids lifted up to reveal its dark green eyes. Cast had expected an evil stare to meet them, but the eyes were calm and seemed even a little...tired? No, that wasn't the word.

The monster stood up straight. Its arms flew into the air, turning over its shoulder to look the same way as its head. Its back began to bubble as it walked forward, the skin reforming to the shape of its chest. The rest of its body began doing the same, the sound of the bubbling skin and adjusting bones quiet yet deafening. The motions were jerky and nauseating. Its toes began retracting from behind and point forward as its knees emerged from the other side. Its hands had been on backward, the right hand on the left side and the left hand on the right side, so its hands began twisting, each finger shifting to a different length so that matched what they had been before. Its thumbs sank into the skin and reappeared on the other side so that the right hand was on the right and the left hand was on the left.

Its massive tail morphed into its body but it did not reappear on the opposite side. Instead, the monster began to grow in mass, absorbing the tail to add to its size. The monster did not grow in height; all of the mass instead was building muscle. Its thin arms and legs began to thicken, and it flexed its newly enhanced form. Its chest inflated, and its back rippled with a sickening strength.

It started towards them, flashing a toothy grin at it moved, though there was no blood staining its teeth despite its recent meal. Cast's heart drop. "Teeth like a crocodile," he said as the realization hit. He stood up and backed away from the edge, "With ink skin and a tail and green eye." As he backed up, he kicked Justin in the side as gently as he could in his haste. "We gotta go." But Justin stayed on the floor, quiet now instead of stammering and clawing.

The creature had crossed the clearing and began to make its climb up the cliff wall. As Cast looked down on it, he knew that they would die if it reached them. "Justin!" Cast shouted this time, still moving backward, but still, his friend did not move from the edge.

It didn't take long for it to reach the top of the cliff, where it loomed over Cast's friend with dark gray drool spilling from its mouth falling onto Justin. Cast was still locked in place. So still, the two bodies were; one looming tall above the other. It was as if Cast were staring at a painting. Like there was no way for him to interact nor intervene in the coming moments that would inevitably unfold before him.

He remembered fully then, that repressed memory he had shoved far down into the recesses of his mind. It had just been a dream, hadn't it? That dark beast standing in the waters of a blue lake. He could remember those swirls in its skin. Those terrible claws and teeth. And its eyes. As the memory flooded, his doubts fled. This was that same creature. He was sure it had just been a dream. But here it was now, as its hands wrapped around Justin's body preparing to bite him in half, it looked like a giant from another dimension come to reign damnation upon his world.

Cast could see it happening before it did: Justin dying with one snap of the beast's jaw. And there was nothing that could be done about it, for he could not find it in himself to be brave. Just like what his father always told him he needed to be.

And then time stopped. Not literally, but rather in his own mind's eye did everything crawl. The trembles that had rocked his body and had made cohesive thought near impossible were barely registrable now. His feet found the strength to step forward to his friend, his hands the steadiness to reach out. He could move again.

But it was all too late as the teeth of the monster bore deep into the back of his friend.

Cast didn't scream. He wanted to, but his body wouldn't let him. Instead, he just stood there and shook, every muscle quivering as he watched the monster lift its head up from Justin's bleeding back. It smiled again at him, its teeth void of blood and tissue despite everything. A

long, gray tongue slipped between its teeth, reaching far beyond the rim of its mouth and twisting towards Cast like the head of a snake preparing to strike.

Tears flooded his vision, distorting the world around him. The giant beast had become little more than an estranged silhouette that hovered in the air above a bloody shape lying on the ground; like a dark ghoul who had come to drag them wherever damned souls were taken to suffer.

Stammering words ran off of Cast's tongue; incomprehensible noises that fell to the forest floor to seep into the roots of the trees to be treaded over by some later generation of children who would later explore along the slopes of this mountain in a far-off time where his memories had been forgotten and his life considered unimportant. And when the noises had ceased, his screaming began.

The monster's ears perked up high as he screamed as if it enjoyed the sound of his terror. The sound of his desolation. Of pain. Of the ache of his heart. And as he screamed and cried, and his body grew more and more disoriented, his thoughts grew ever clearer. Justin. Why did he have to follow him! Why did he have to be a fool like him?

The monster continued to smile at him.

He was sure it was taunting him now. As if Cast was the target of a certain goal and Justin was merely the tool it used to accomplish it. And it just felt wrong, more so than the beast just killing them outright.

And then he saw it, the slow movements of Justin's breathing. He was still alive. A sudden sense of resolve flooded him. He reigned in his screams and cries, just now realizing that he had fallen to the ground during his episode, and he stood to confront the beast.

“Go on, do what you’re gonna do to me. Just leave him alone!” His entire body began to shake again. Tremors sent through his body threatening to knock him from his feet. But he stood tall and strong, and his eyes kept forward on the swirling, black ink of the monster’s skin. And all the while he thought of his father’s words from all those years ago.

The creature lifted its head and roared up into the trees, sending birds flying and small creatures jumping from tree to tree to get away. It was a ferocious roar, one that Cast knew echoed through the forest for miles around. When it was done, it lowered its head and held eye contact with Cast.

And then the creature did a peculiar thing. A low gurgle began to rise from the back of its throat, reverberating over and over again, the noise falling in on itself. Almost as if it was laughing. The noise stopped but the creature continued its taunt by raising one of its long fingers towards Cast. Its gnarled finger continued to point at him as it stood to its feet, straightening to its full height, and smiled down at Justin’s body.

His resolve began to slip in that moment, like a rope tied to nothing. What could he do? This was a creature that was unknown to him and yet he felt so interconnected with it that he knew there was nothing to be done. It was bigger, faster, and stronger than him.

And yet, there was something that still nagged at him from within. Telling him not to give in. Not to run away. Not to let his friend die. His resolve strengthened again. The beast began to move down on Justin. Its jaws were wide, its teeth terrible, as it lurched. And Cast charged.

He had expected the monster’s skin to be soft and oily; that its body would mold to him as he ran into it. Instead, he slammed into something more resembling a brick wall. And he did it with as much strength as he could muster, which wasn’t much beside. But it was enough.

Whether it was from how unexpected his charge was or if the beast's feet were already teetering on the edge, the two were sent careening over the cliff.

They hit the forest floor in a tangle of limbs, Cast landing on top of the creature. The monster squirmed to grab him, and its teeth gnashed for his blood. Luckily, it was still disoriented by the fall. Cast took the opportunity to roll away from the beast's reach. Still it trashed about like an animal, unable to find its prey.

He hopped to his feet and pain shot through his left ankle. Pushing it to the back of his mind, he quickly surveyed the area looking for something he could use to protect himself. The only thing he could find were the stony and metallic remains of the cag's corpse scattered around him.

The piece he found was heavy in his hands, even though it lacked any part of its metal hide. The gray rock was rough and crumbly around the edges. He hefted the stone onto his shoulder. The edges dug into his palms and into his neck, but he did not relent. As the beast calmed and rose from the ground, Cast pushed the rock into the air with all his might.

It hit its mark, shattering against the monster's face, small bits of the rock digging into his left eye. But the monster just stood there, unperturbed by the strike. It brushed the dust from its face. It made that low gurgling sound again, laughing at Cast's attempts. He curled his fists, preparing for what the monster would do next. And then it leaped towards him.

The monster slashed at Cast, him barely being able to avoid being cut in half, but he did suffer a deep gash in his left arm. Then it grabbed his ankle and swept him off his feet. It raised him above its head and opened its mouth wide. Its jaw seemed to unhinge like a snake and Cast could see deep down to beast's throat. It was all gray and slimy. The further he looked the darker its insides became, and the more Cast realized that was where he was going.

It lowered him towards the chasm of its jaws. Cast squirmed with everything he could, screaming for the beast to let him go. He kicked at the hand that had hold of him, but its grip would not loosen. His breath quickened as his head approached the sharp teeth. He was not prepared to die.

But then his descent halted. The monster closed its mouth and shook its head violently. Growls erupted from its throat and its mouth moved into the shapes of unknown words. It grabbed at its ears and pushed them flat against its head as if trying to shut out a loud noise. Its head continued to shake.

Cast regained control of his breathing, holding back the panic that still filled him. Instead, he focused on how to take advantage of the situation. The beast had not completely escaped his attack unharmed. Bits of stone still stuck in its eye. Thin streams of blood dripped from small cuts, red covering the green.

And looking into those eyes again, Cast found the word that he could not find before. Its eyes were not angry or tired. They were completely segmented from the rest of its being. It was deep sorrow that filled them. One that Cast had no way of comprehending. One that he could not help but feel pity for the one who endured it. But even that wasn't enough to describe it.

Then he shook himself out of his trance, not wanting to waste this opportunity. He didn't care what had overcome the monster, he only cared about escaping. And he had found his way out.

A snap sounded from his confined ankle as his body twisted about to kick the beast in its eye. His boot struck the soft flesh; the chink in its armor. They simultaneously shouted out in pain, but Cast had done what he needed to. The beast dropped him from his twisted ankle. He

had to rush to turn and bend himself in such a way that he wouldn't land in the top of his head. His upper back hit the ground first. The breath he had been holding was knocked from him.

The air left his body on contact with the ground. Dazed from the fall and being held upside-down, Cast struggled to rise to his feet. Wincing pain surged through his twisted ankle and in the toes of the foot he kicked the monster with. His body ached and trembled, but he stood to face the beast once more.

He couldn't run. That option had been taken from him. Besides, he couldn't leave Justin here to be eaten by this thing. Whether he be dead or alive. His heart pained at the thought, but he did his best to push it back. It wouldn't help him here. So, he swallowed his tears and looked the monster up and down.

It still grasped its injured eye, more blood leaking from beneath its dark fingers. Cast smiled despite himself. At least he had been able to do that much. It dropped its hand, letting the red stain the ground alongside the cage's. But it did not leap towards Cast again. It instead turned back to the cliff. Towards Justin.

"No," Cast said. He tried to step towards him, but his ankle gave out and he fell to the ground again. He reached his hand out in front of him, trying to will the beast to stop. "No," he repeated, this time weaker. But the beast did not climb the cliff as it had before. It only looked up at where his friend lay bleeding. And then it turned its back on Cast and walked back into the woods. Where was it going? There was nothing that Cast could have done to save himself or Justin, so why had it just left? He didn't care.

He needed to get up. He needed to check on Justin. He needed to save his friend. But a sudden weariness washed over him. The ground was comfortable and soft instead of its usual

rough texture. His left arm was red and sticky, clumps of dirt already caking in with blood. How much had he already bled?

He tried to lift himself again, but his body wouldn't allow for it. The last thing he saw before losing consciousness was the sharp sheen of a thin piece of metal moving through the grass.

Chapter 4

The Head of the World

The ground below Cast—the ground which his face currently rested on—was, graciously, soft. His body sank into it, leaving a human-shaped impression in whatever substance he was laying on. He noticed that, despite the soft nature this ground, it was surprisingly rough as he ran his hands along it. Almost like raw leather. Regardless, it was difficult to find the energy to lift himself up from that place.

Then he remembered the monster and Justin's form lying limp on the cliff edge. He was on his feet moments later, surveying the area around him, keeping watch for the beast. But he was no longer anywhere near where he had been. As a matter of fact, he was nowhere near anywhere he had ever been.

It appeared he was on a large plateau of sorts, the ground mostly flat except for slight depressions here and there that created pseudo-valleys. On all sides, except behind, he could see in the distance where the ground ended, dropping down to places he did not know. Behind him was a gentle downward slope into clouds. And the most peculiar thing was that all the ground

around him, no matter how far he looked, was completely green. He knew there was only one place he could possibly be.

The head of Lalbahadoor.

Again, he scanned the plateau for any indication of where else he might be. Towards the slope, he noticed a small depression in the ground. Or, well, skin. One that looked like something was pushing into the earth. He started toward it. As he approached, he realized that the something was a someone, and as he got even closer, he realized that someone was Justin.

He was lying face down in the green, body completely straight and still. Peace draped his friend, and for a moment, Cast feared he was dead. But he spotted movement from his sides, the tell-tell sign of life. His clothes were still ripped, but the injuries on his back were gone.

Then Cast became consciously aware of the fact that his own injuries had disappeared as well. The cut on his arm was gone, and the pain from his ankle and sides was none existent. His entire body seemed completely clean, not a spec of dirt on his clothes or skin. He dropped to his knees beside his friend. "We're dead," he said out loud. "That thing came back and finished us off." He shook his head violently and fought back the tears that threatened to fall from his eyes.

"Hello," said a timid voice behind him. He turned to find a man standing over him. Cast couldn't help but throw himself back in shock. Justin did not stir when landed on top of him. A chuckle sounded from the man. "I do say, there is nothing to be afraid of, young one. I am no enemy of yours." He held out his hand as an offering of assistance but Cast only stared at it with apprehension. "I told you, there is nothing to worry about. I'm not going to hurt you." The words rolled off Cast. He wasn't listening anymore. Instead, he was taking in the man before him.

The man wasn't old, though he looked worn and faded, like an old painting. His hair was white yet not timeworn and his skin was tight. He stood tall, well over six feet, and wore a brown

jacket overlaying a white shirt. His trousers matched his jacket, and his shoes were of the fancy style that Cast had seen many of the adults wear in Silvalin. A finely trimmed beard and mustache surrounded his lips. He seemed like a kind man, but something about him unnerved Cast.

He found that he had trouble looking towards his face. Like something was keeping him from looking there. He pushed himself to look. When he finally broke free of that restraint, he wanted to run far away from this man.

The skin around the man's eyes was red and puffy as if he had spent time recently crying. A thin gray streak ran from the corner of his eyes to the bottom of his cheeks, stained by what Cast assumed was hours upon hours of tears running along those lines.

And the most disconcerting thing about his face were his eyes. They were the same as the monster that had tried to kill him. The dark green color fully enveloping far past the iris, consuming the white. And his stare said the same thing as the monster's. Cast couldn't fully read it before against the sinister grin of the monster, but it was obvious on his face. It was exhaustion, pain, fear, and despair all in one.

Cast pushed himself back, further into Justin, who still would not wake. "Are you the Higher Dran?"

"No, you are far from the afterlife." The man gave a sad smile. "I'm not going to hurt you," he repeated. His hand still stayed extended towards him. When Cast still did not take it, the man brought it back to himself and sat on the ground next to him. "I knew my people didn't know me anymore," he said, "but I had expected—no, I had hoped—that when you finally saw me you would embrace me as you once had."

Cast moved off of Justin, still maintaining distance with the green-eyed man. But his words had softened him. The emotion that flowed from his eyes drew him in. He was no monster. “I’m sorry. I don’t know who you are.”

The man sighed and gave a slight nod of his head as if he understood. “It is okay. I could not possibly hold that against you.” He stood up and offered his hand to Cast once again. This time, hesitantly, he took it.

The man turned to walk and gestured for Cast to follow. “What about Justin?”

“He will be quite alright where he is. He needs the rest. Besides, he has no part in any of this.” He turned and raised an eyebrow at him. “At least, no more than you choose to draw him in on.” He laughed again, and Cast began to sense genuine merriment about this man, despite the lines that marked his face.

Cast moved to keep up with him—he was much taller—still trying to adjust to walking on the skin’s surface. They were heading towards the snout of Lalbahadoor. “Part of what?” He realized that the man had yet to answer his first question. “And who are you? Why am I here?”

“You have many questions in you.”

“My dad’s always said I got a good curiosity.” Cast eyed him, making sure he wouldn’t disappear as suddenly as he had appeared.

“I’m sure it gives your mother something else to complain about,” he joked.

“I don’t think it’s a bad thing to be asking questions when you wake up in a strange place with a strange man talking ‘bout strange things.”

The green-eyed man nodded. “Very well. I will answer you.” He gestured to the surrounding area. “As I am sure you have reasoned out, we are on the head of the world. Well, the head of your world.”

“It’s really the only place we could be,” Cast agreed.

“I brought you here so I could show you something. Something that no person who lives on Lalbahadoor has seen in a long time.”

“What is it?”

“You will see. Patience and tact are important virtues to pair with curiosity.”

They continued on towards the nose. The head was massive, of course, but Cast had never imagined it to be to this extent. Scaling the neck of Lalbahadoor was just as taboo as getting close to the edges of the kingdom, where the earth dropped off into open sky, so as far as he knew he was the first person to ever walk these grounds. It made him feel a certain degree of reverence for the skin he walked upon. Untouched but by wind and song for so long.

“Do you know what that thing was? The monster that injured Justin?” The question suddenly burst out of him. He was afraid of where it might lead. “I know you told me to be patient, but—”

“That was an osaron,” the man said slowly. He seemed almost uncomfortable giving the creature’s name. No more details were given.

“But what is it exactly?” Cast pushed further despite himself. “Where did it come from? Why did it come here?”

“Remember: patience and tact.”

Cast, frustrated as he may have been, dropped it. And they walked again in silence.

They descended into a slight valley that he guessed to be the bridge of the Vast’s snout. Walking along the head of Lalbahadoor would have lost its novelty on most anyone after a while. Cast never lost that feeling of wonder. That sense of awe as he walked the chief peak of

his home, miles and miles above the highest he had ever been. The breeze swept through his hair, bringing back memories of him and his brother playing with their father when he was younger.

It must have been hours before they reached their destination. It was hard to tell since the light did not shift up here as it did below. He wasn't sure if it was just the way it was up here or had to do with the strange phenomenon of being transported in the first place. He had not even considered the possibility that this was all just some hyper-realistic dream. But it all looked too real to be that.

When they finally stopped, they were standing not ten feet from the tip of Lalbahadoor's snout. Before them spread an ever-expanding, unpierced mass of white far beneath where they were. Upon closer inspection, the clouds ended sooner than he had originally thought; another grouping hung below it, giving them the appearance of being one.

The man cleared his throat as if to give a prepared speech. "I suppose it is time I introduce myself." He swept his arms out in front of him, forming a grand gesture that the clouds obeyed. They split to reveal layer after layer doing the same. Cast counted ten cloud layers in total. And as the last had split and evaporated from sight, he was welcomed to the most wondrous sight he had ever known.

Although he was high above the ground and it shouldn't have been physically possible for him to make anything out below, he saw everything as if he were standing next to it. Green valleys and snowy mountains, crystal lakes and flowing rivers, lush jungles and forests. The ground seemed to shift with his eyes, allowing him to see far beyond what should've been visible. He saw deserts filled with life where there should have been none. and swamps that should have been dreadful that were scenic and pleasant. Pastures filled with sheep and cattle

lined the countryside; villages and cities bustling with citizens living their lives as well as they knew how. He could have stood there for hours, only looking at the view.

“I am Akuãocu,” said the man, “and I own all that you see before you.”

He seemed different. More confidence boasted in his poise and face than the meek man he had been before. But that faded with the clouds reappearing and covering the landscapes below.

“That’s...” Cast stopped him, not wanting to taint the beauty of what he just saw with words.

“Breath-taking. It ever so was, indeed.” A strong wind blew into the faces of the pair. Cast put his arm up to the gusting wind, trying to block it from his eyes. Akuãocu made no effort to hide from the wind, holding his wide stance and embracing the passing breeze.

“Are you a god?” The question felt stupid, but it had come tumbling out of him, unable to be blocked by filter of mind.

A short chuckle spurted from the man, this Akuãocu. “It rather does depend on what you mean by ‘god.’ In many ways, I am the only ‘god,’” he put an emphasis on the word. “Above all creatures. Creator. Provider. In other ways, I am nothing more than part of this world. Intimately interconnected with all things. Yes, I play a bigger hand in its motion, but I no more am divine than a tree providing shelter for a robin’s nest.”

“Oh, I see.” Cast did not really understand it, but he decided to be content with the answer. He had caught a word in one of Akuãocu’s previous statements, holding it in his mind, a realization dawning. “Before, you said was. Why is that?” A wooziness filled his stomach and his vision began to haze in the slightest of ways.

A tear fell from Akuãocu's eye and landed on the green skin of the Vast. It pooled there for only a moment before being absorbed by the leathery ground. "I am afraid it is no longer as it once was." The words were fuzzy to Cast. His ears filled with a low ringing sound.

"What happened to it?" His eyelids drooped, and he struggled to stay awake.

"A great evil has been hiding in the Sunderland for some time. One that must be subdued before..." His words trailed off into the rolling breeze. Akuãocu looked to be contemplating what to say. Whether he should say anything at all.

"Before what?"

The green-eyed man looked down at him. He towered over Cast and those eyes of his pierced through his core. "What is your name, boy?"

He was thrown off by the question. Had he never given his name? "Cast, um, Caster Klyosov. But Cast is fine, really." It was becoming so hard to concentrate.

Akuãocu gave a nod. "Cast Klyosov." He looked as if he were tasting the name on his tongue. Rolling it around to see how it felt. "I see. Your name will be sung for generations beyond, I'm sure of it. But that will come at great cost. Of that, I am even more certain."

"What are you talking about?" His breath shortened, and he found himself wheezing for each gasp of air. "I'm just...I'm no one..." His legs gave out and he dropped to his knees, the edges of his vision black.

The man kneeled down with him and rested a hand on his shoulder. It was heavy. "I have held you in this place for too long. You must go now." Cast could just make out more tears forming in those solid green eyes as he fell back into unconsciousness, Akuãocu's final words left ringing through his mind. "I am dying, Cast. And with me, the world will be taken. Please. Save me."

#

It was the next morning when Justin shook Cast awake. He sat up with a start and was met with pain shooting through his body. His eyes clenched shut and an impulsive groan escaped him as he eased himself back to the earth. Earth. Ground. Dirt. Not skin. Not safe. His eyes shot open again and he shot back up to examine his surroundings, ignoring the pain. They were back next to that cliff face, again surrounded by the stony corpse of the cag. But there was no monster, or osaron, or whatever.

He spun around to see Justin standing over him. He shouldn't have been standing. "What the hell, Justin? You can't be moving around." But there was no blood spilling from his back like there had been. And then he remembered Justin lying there on the head of Lalbahadoor. Not a scar blotted his body.

Justin ignored the request. "We ain't got time for this." He grabbed Cast by his forearms and pulled him to his feet. Cast managed to hold in his cry of pain, but his eyes still watered. His friend didn't give him much time to recover. He was already starting to walk back down the mountain, which gave Cast a good view of his back.

It wasn't exactly like it had been on the head. His clothes were still ripped, and the wounds had closed up. But large patches where holes had been and long lines where the beast had ripped his skin marked his body.

Cast looked down to find that the gash on his arm had also closed, but the heat of pain was still burning just below the surface. Same with his ankle. He could tell that it was no longer twisted or broken, but it was still tender. Justin's back must have felt as if it had been set ablaze in the night.

“Hold up.” Cast winced with each step, but his long legs let him easily catch up with Justin. He didn’t stop. “Justin.” This time Cast grabbed his shoulder and made his friend face him.

Creases were scrawled over Justin’s forehead. A look of sheer panic filled his eyes; they darted back and forth, searching their surroundings for something to run from. “Don’t you get it? We gotta get out of here. Now. Or-or that thing’s gonna come back. Gonna eat us if we don’t...” In all his time of knowing Justin, Cast had never seen him cry. But now his friend stood before him and openly wept the tears that only came from total and complete terror.

Cast wrapped his arms around him without hesitation. Justin tried to fight him off, but eventually gave in and succumbed to the embrace. He stroked his hair like his mother always would and hushed his cries as he moved with the heaving chest the crying young boy. “I couldn’t mo-move. I just lied there and...” He spoke through his tears, falling in and out of words and sobs. And Cast just continued to hold him. There were no words he could give.

Eventually, the crying ended. Red-eyed and tear-stained, Justin stepped back from him and turned away, wiping the tears and snot from his face. “We should really get going,” he said. “People will be wondering where we are.”

Cast looked back at the clearing. It was peaceful here now in the morning light. The stones were still strewn about in random order. Strangely, anger bubbled up inside of him. “Just a second.” Justin gave a pleading look but Cast promised him that it wasn’t coming back. This was no burial for the cag that lead them into this place. It had not deserved this death, nor does it deserve this dishonor.

The stones and metal hide were heavy, but when Justin saw what he was doing, he helped as well, even if he was giving questioning glances. They moved the remains to the center of the

clearing and stacked stone atop of stone and metal atop all. When they were finished, they were left with a bizarrely beautiful memorial to the cag. A macabre monument that marked the events of the previous day.

As they stood there, Cast wondered if he should say anything. But he knew there was nothing to say. The cag had not been special to him. Not an animal he had raised since birth but rather one he had met only a day ago. Yet there was still something that broke in him when he stared at that pile of stone and metal. Something that he doubted could ever be fixed.

“What happened to us?” Justin said. “What the hell happened to us yesterday?”

Empty words formed on Cast’s lips, but no sounds left his mouth. “Honestly, I don’t know,” was the only thing he could think to say. And then he thought of everything.

He told Justin what had happened after he had blacked out. It all fell out of him like a torrent of rushing water. Everything about his fight with the monster to it suddenly running away. He even told him about how he had seen it in a dream when he was younger, riding through the mountain pass. He told him about the strange green-eyed man and all of what he had shown him.

And while he was describing the depth of those dark green eyes of Akuñocu, Justin cut him off. “Cast?” His voice was uncertain like he had noticed something that he didn’t think was real. Justin hadn’t made any other interruptions during his retelling, he hadn’t even balked when he told him that they had somehow ended up on top of the head of Lalbahadoor.

“What is it?” Cast scanned the area, but he couldn’t find anything. “Did you see something?”

“No, it ain’t anything like that.” He looked hard at Cast, studying his face. He looked like he wanted to make sure of what he was seeing. “It’s your eyes. I hadn’t noticed before, but...” He shook his head. “No, I’m sure of it. Your eyes turned green, Cast.”

“What?” Cast frantically ran his fingers over his eyes as if he would be able to tell from touching. But there wasn’t anything around to see his reflection in. Nothing to test Justin’s ridiculous claim. “Green like the monster’s?” He couldn’t hide the panic in his voice.

“Not all green. Only the color part. You still got the white in ‘em.” Justin sounded like he was trying to reassure Cast. It wasn’t doing much to help.

A breath released in Cast that he hadn’t known he was holding in. At least he wasn’t like the osaron or Akuãocu. But how had they turned green? He had blue eyes. Had them since he was born. Deep and dark like river stones. He had never met anyone without blue eyes. Justin must have been joking. But he had not made a joke since they had woken up. He had been uncharacteristically somber and poised.

He realized that he was now hyperventilating instead of holding his breath, which wasn’t much improvement if any. He fought to reign in his breathing and felt his chest to make sure his heart wasn’t beating too hard. He closed his eyes and breathed deep and slow. Calm. That’s what he told himself. Be calm. The breeze rolled over him, soft and gentle after reaching through the barricade of trees. And he nodded his head and opened his eyes again.

“I guess there’s nothing to be done about it.”

Justin looked him up and down and nodded his head as well. “I guess not.”

From there they turned and walked in silence and pain. Cast tried to keep panic from his mind and wondered if Justin was trying to do the same.

Chapter 5

Conversations

Dox laid in his bed, his eyes still wide open despite the morning light of Do Dran peeking in through the window. He hadn't slept the night before, not with what had happened yesterday on the mountain. Certainly not with his friends still somewhere out there facing down whatever beast had been able to tear through a cag's armored hide.

He sat up, content with his lack of a night's sleep. His room was not neat, although he supposed it was a great deal neater than many of the other children's in the village. What few clothes he owned lay in a pile in the corner of the room instead of the dresser that sat next to it. Books that he had no desire to read were strewn across the small desk that his grandfather had insisted he needed. Dox only thought it an unnecessary expense.

His bare feet drifted across the rough wood flooring and he grabbed his boots from the corner of the room. Slipping them on, he decided not to change his shirt today. Wasn't worth the trouble. He surveyed the room one more time before leaving the cluttered space behind.

Having his own room was one of the benefits of being an only child. Most of his friends had to share with their other siblings. He also supposed it was the only good that came from being raised by his grandfather.

The old man wasn't in the main room downstairs, which meant they didn't find Cast or Justin the previous night. Dox just sighed. After him and Lainie had made it back to Halses, they told his grandfather everything that had happened, at least the parts they knew for sure. His grandfather had an easy enough time gathering a group of men to ride to the mountains to search for the two boys. He had told Dox to stay home and study.

Dox knew there wasn't anything he could do about it now. Even if there was, he's not sure anyone would let him. He was fourteen, a year shy of being anything important. That year meant everything. It didn't matter if his birthday was less than a month away, until then, he was just child.

The meat he found in the pantry was tough and salty and the bread was stale. Each bite was savored despite the taste. He didn't eat the night before in an anxious fit for his friends, but, even though that was still there, the pit of hunger sitting in his stomach could no longer be ignored. The bread was quickly but the meat grew increasingly more difficult to chew. A second piece of stale bread was needed to go with the remaining meat.

As he ate, he walked around the main area of the house, taking in the scenes of bookshelf after bookshelf. Six in total, wide and tall, sat side by side on the far wall. Each shelf was stuffed full with items. Books dominated the majority of the space, bounded in solid leather that Dox presumed to be far too fine to be in a place like Halses, but other things, such as decrees and edicts, lined the shelves as well. Some had been bounded by Dox's grandfather by hand. Even some of the old man's self-written papers had been jammed in here or there.

He looked them up and down. Normally, he would try to push down his disdain for these shelves, but in the mental cloud of morning and coming off of a sleepless night, it bubbled up and nearly overflowed.

His grandfather had spent years collecting for the shelves, spending every morsel of leftover funds for a trip to the capital so he could buy more books and receive the latest news on the bureaucracy. That wasn't what set Dox off. His grandfather never overspent, only used what they had in excess, leaving them plenty to live comfortably. No, it wasn't that.

After one final bite of his second piece of bread and jamming the remainder of the dried beef into his mouth, he lodged his fingers behind the leftmost bookshelf and made as if to pull the shelf from the wall. He wanted to. Seeing each of these shelves crash to the floor would be satisfying, but he knew he would regret it. All it would be good for would be angering his grandfather. It wouldn't change anything.

His fingers squeezed from behind the shelves and the heat of anger in his heart quelled to a smoking stillness. What was left behind was the shallow shell of a boy who had forgotten how to fight for himself a long time ago.

One of the chairs in the main area became a place a restitute for his composure, although he didn't last long there. The bookshelves were too sour of a sight for him. He was quick to stand from the chair and walk out the door to the empty streets of Halses.

Streets would be a strong word to use. Dox had seen streets in Silvalin, spreading through the winding city. He was sure that if his grandfather had not been there he would have been lost wandering there forever. No, it was better to describe Halses as having one street, made of cobblestone, running through its center with a few branching dirt pathways.

His boots clipped along the cobblestone as he exited his home, one of the few residences that sat directly on the main road. Wooden shingles covered the roof of the house. They looked out of place, but that was because the building had been made with a thatched roof originally, as did all the buildings in Halses. Roof fires had been a common thing, leading to a quick switch to the safer material.

He stared up at the building, the sight striking him as odd. A creation changed from its original design, making it more out of place—the roof did not line up right in certain places and overlapping pieces were needed to ensure there were no holes—yet at the same time brought about overall improvement.

Clay tiles would have been even better than the wooden shingles, both in style and in practice. The roofs in the capital were a beautiful sight. Thick dark red and blue tiles made of the finest clay on Lambahador, a city set in uniformity, which made its beauty.

He shook himself from the thought. Thinking too much like his grandfather.

To the left of the house was his grandfather's place of work—the sheriff's office and jailhouse. A sign jutted out above the door of the building depicting a horse head. He had told his grandfather it was too vague of a sign, it needed some words telling people what it was, but he had just ignored him.

Dox's eyes drifted further to the entrance of the town. The mountains sat in the distance, looming over the golden flowers that swept the hills rolling from their bases. Somewhere out there was a hoard of men searching for his friends. And here he was, safe in the town. He clicked his tongue and turned his back on the sight.

Lambahador's neck was an ever-present thing on this side of the mountains, unable to be hidden by any man-made structure. It gently sloped high into the sky, disappearing into the

clouds. He started moving further into Halses, aimless of where he would end up, but his eyes still locked on the neck.

It made the Kholaw mountains look like ant hills. It had been strange being without them there when he had visited Silvalin with his grandfather. He remembered always looking neckward, expecting to see the green mass blotting out the sky.

Now he was thinking like Cast. Everyone always caught his friend staring up at the neck, sometimes getting sidetracked in the middle of conversations. Also, he called it a hill, which Dox found to be ridiculous. It looked nothing of the sort. His stomach sank thinking of his friend. He hoped the search party would just come back with them already.

The banging of metal on metal caused him to stop in the street. To his right was Justin's house. His father was the village blacksmith but should have been out looking for the two. So who was working the forge?

He walked around to the back side of the house to find a Hak Aldor down in the blacksmith's pit. The younger boy was steeped in sweat and hammering at a thin piece of dark iron resting on an anvil. Dox tried to wave to get his attention, but the apprentice was too enthralled by his work.

"Hey!" He shouted.

Hak gave a start and looked up at Dox. "Oh, Dox, it's just you. Gave me a bit of a jolt in my heart there. Don't you know you ain't supposed to scare a man at work."

Dox descended the stairs cut into the ground at the back of the pit. The pit was circular and sat at a depth that let him just barely see above the ground. A roof rose over it, sitting on several wooden columns jutting out from ground level. He was hit by a wave of heat coming from forge at the far end of the pit.

“I was standing ten feet away and saying hello. Not much of a scare. And you’re not a man,” Dox said. More of a man-child.” Hak was younger than Dox by a good half a year but he stood the same height as him and was about twice as wide as him. Built like a trunk and able to match the carry weight of a mule, it was no wonder Master Aldona had picked him as his apprentice even though he was technically too young.

“More man than you, I’d say,” Hak said. “But that’s not a fair comparison. I’d say most village girls are more man than you.” He set his hammer down on a table and laughed. His hand extended and Dox took it.

“What are you doing here? I thought you weren’t supposed to work without Master Aldona here.”

“Ah, I suppose I ain’t.” Hak took the towel he had tucked into his waistline and wiped the sweat from his face. “I heard the news about Cast and Justin just after I woke up. Put me into such a stir that I needed to use my hands for something. I knew we had a large order of nails from Master Tahan for some wagons he’s making, so I figured I could get ahead on that.” He was now ringing the towel in his large, calloused hands. His brow had furrowed, and his lips pursed together. “The old wheeler can be impatient if it’s not done within the week, you know. Even if we’ve got a lot of orders. He don’t hear no sense you give to him.”

“Yeah, I know how he is.” Dox gave a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry so much, those two will keep each other safe. Probably just a bear or something. Nothing they can’t handle.” One thing he was certain of after thinking it over was that it was definitely not a bear that they had encountered yesterday.

Hank returned a smile, but his hands didn't stop moving. "I pray they will. By the sky, I hope they will." He shook his head. "Anyway, how are you holding up? Heard you had a wild night yourself."

"I'm doing fine. I'm more worried for Lainie. She busted her knee pretty bad. And for that girl..." Dox waited a moment, considering, before proceeding to tell Hak about their encounter with the red-haired girl. "Not sure what they did with her after we got back into town."

Hak slowly nodded his head as he had been for the duration of Dox's story. "Ah, I did hear my ma talking about a girl. No way it isn't the one you're talking about. Think they're keeping her at the inn for now. Plenty of rooms open with it being before the trade season and all."

"Good," Dox said. A knot he hadn't realized was in his chest subsided. What had he been worried about? That they were going to leave her outside in the night? "I'm glad they are taking care of her."

They sat there for a moment longer. Hak's hands still fidgeted with his rag and Dox could tell he was itching to get the hammer back in them. "Well, I'd better get going. Got a lot of stuff to get sorted out."

Hak nodded his agreement. "Yes. I should get back to work on these nails. Master Tahan is not a patient man, as you know." The boys traded their goodbyes and Dox made his way back up the stairs as the loud clangs of Hak's hammer began again.

The inn was not far from the blacksmith's home, only across the cobblestone street and into the town square. As with the street, town square was not exactly the best word for it, but there wasn't another he could think to call it. It wasn't even a full square shape. One side and the bottom of it were cut off by the road, only leaving two of the four sides to harbor buildings.

The Gold Petal Inn was sat catty-cornered between those two sides, spreading wide to be largest building in Halses by a fair margin. On its left was the town hall, which was connected to the reeve's manor, where Cast lived. Both buildings led out onto the packed red dirt facing the neck of Lalbahadoor. On its right was a small stable for the inn and the school that Master Klyosov had insisted on having built when he was instated.

Again, there were the roofs. Only the school had been originally built with wooden shingles, which, strangely enough, made it look out of place among the surrounding misshapen roofs. He shook his head. There was no reason for them to bother him as much as they did. It didn't appear to bother anyone else.

In his contemplation, the door to the inn opened. Ennis Klyosov stepped into the square and Dox's breath caught. It may have been because his friend was still lost on the mountainside or maybe it was that the two looked so much alike, but for just a moment he thought that it was Cast who was standing before him. The moment faded as Dox recognized what set the brothers apart.

Ennis was just as tall as Cast and had that same ruffled sandy, brown hair. Their faces were nearly identical, and his blue eyes matched the darkness that his brother's bore. The similarities started to end whenever you noticed Ennis was a little thinner, a little paler, and overall a little sicklier than his brother.

His eyes were downcast, not in distress or sorrow, but in consideration. It was a posture that Dox had come to see a great deal from the twin. He was also talking to himself, a habit shared by the brothers. Dox could just make out the mumblings of, "It just doesn't make sense."

"Ennis!"

The boy's eyes immediately locked with Dox's and a shy smile crept across his face. "Ah, Dosiner. How are you doing this morning?"

"I'm doing the best I can. A bit of an unusual night," he replied. "How about you? You seem to be doing better than yesterday."

He didn't bother to correct the name. Anytime he had told Ennis to call him Dox the twin had been insistent, usually saying something along the lines of, "I've never been one for nicknames. I find them to be a retitling of our genuine selves." He didn't seem to care that that 'genuine self' was something that Dox wanted to put as much distance from himself.

"I am." Ennis said. "My fever subsided not long after your departure. By midafternoon, I felt well enough to go on an adventure of my own. Although, I'm sure it was much less exciting than yours, though it was plenty stimulating for my own taste."

That was the sort of formality Ennis always spoke with, one that Dox's grandfather would always praise. The old man pointed to Ennis as an example of how the 'properly' speak. Dox merely found it precocious. There was no superiority in his voice, it was just the way he talked. What was one to expect of someone who was forced out of sickness to spend more time reading books and writing in journals than interacting with others. He just needed to learn that people didn't talk the same way as the way his books were written.

That was something that Dox had come to learn in his own studies—people rarely talked the same way that they wrote. Writing could be bolstered beyond the authors skill, polished in ways that real speech could never match. Ennis was one of those few people who that rule didn't apply to.

"Speaking of yesterday," Ennis continued, "what exactly happened?" Confusion was not something Dox often saw on Ennis's face. The closest it usually came was more of

contemplation and analysis. “I’m almost certain that Caster never returned last night, and he was not in our bedroom when I woke up this morning. What’s more is that my father is also gone and Lainie is laid up in her bed with an injured knee. My mother told me that Caster and Father were off doing something on their own and Lainie had fallen down. I suspect that there is some truth in what she said about Lainie, but I cannot help but doubt that Caster would have come so late in the night and gone so early in the morning without me knowing.”

Had really no one told him of what was happening? Dox had failed to account for the other reason Ennis acted the way he did. Simply put, he was sheltered. People saw him as weak and tried to protect him. The only thing was that Ennis actually was as smart as he talked, if not somewhat naïve, and all hiding the truth did was feed his curiosity.

“You really don’t know?”

Ennis shook his head. “I’ve tried to get something out of my mother, but she wouldn’t tell me anything.” He gestured behind himself. “So, I’ve taken to asking around town. The Mistress Dalorius won’t tell me anything either.”

A quiet rage slowly filled Dox. People insisted on keeping this boy safe, citing his sickliness and calling it necessity, but at times it only worked for his detriment. Why could they not just let the boy live. Let him know. In the fumes of that quiet rage, he spoke. “Cast is missing on the mountain.” It came out cold. He didn’t mean for that.

“What do you mean?”

Dox took a deep breath. There was no need to be sharp. “Cast and Justin. We were on Jagpass yesterday and saw...something. Probably a bear is what we think. Me and Lainie made it off the mountain but...” He was choking up. This was first time reliving, really facing head on,

what happened to them to day prior. “Cast ran after whatever thing it was and Justin went with him to try to stop him.” He closed his eyes, envisioning his friends. “They never came home.”

A contemplative *hmmm* came from Ennis and Dox opened his eyes to find the boy with arms crossed, scratching the skin below his lip. “That would explain why my father was gone this morning, as well as Master Dalorius. I take that they gathered a search party to look for my brother.” He raised one eye to the sky. “Perhaps Conrad as well. I thought he was at the mill, but he is of age. Besides, he shouldn’t have to go in this early at this time of year.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Ennis’s face turned to a new kind of confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Here I am thinking you are showing some genuine emotion for once, but all you are trying to do is satisfy some kind of morbid curiosity that you have.” Dox shook his head. “Is it a game to you? Is that what it is? The safety and well-being of your brother—of my friends?”

“Don’t question my care for my brother, Dosiner.”

“Then why don’t you act like it?”

“I only know how to keep my emotions in check.”

“Well, maybe you should check to see if you have any.” The words hung in the air. He didn’t mean to bring up Ennis’s lack of emotional understanding. It was something they all tried to avoid pointing out. Neither boy said anything. What was done was done. Dox walked past Ennis and into the inn. The sickly boy made no attempt to follow.

The inside of the inn felt emptier than the town outside, if that were possible. Shutters covered most of the windows, shut tightly to only allow in small slits of light. Empty tables were scattered about the common room. Most of their chairs were pushed in but some were ajar from the table, humbly awaiting patrons.

Female voices were coming from the kitchen behind the counter to the right. Wooden floors creaked as he walked further into the room and the voices ceased. The door to the kitchen opened and Mistress Dalorius walked out. “Dox?” Her voice was soft, holding off that creak old age brought. “What are you doing here?”

Silver lined her oak-hued hair, tied up above her head to keep the strands from her eyes. A flour-covered apron was strewn over her shoulders and wrapped around her torso, leaving Dox’s imagination to wonder what kind of pastries she was preparing this morning. His mouth watered at the thought.

He realized he had not answered the mistress’s question. He was standing there like a gaped fish. “Oh, I thought I, well, that I would check in on, um, on the girl.”

“The girl?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Yes.” His eyes wondered around the room. Had Hak been right about her being here? “The one with the red hair. I heard she was brought here.”

The mistress eyed him up and down and then nodded. “We are taking care of her.” Dox smiled hopefully and opened his mouth to ask if he could see her. “But she’s in no shape to be seeing anyone,” she said.

“Oh,” was all that trailed from his parted lips. Had she been reading his mind? That couldn’t be true. Either way, she was probably right. With the way that girl hit her head he wouldn’t be surprised if she needed to be in bed for another whole day. Why was he so enamored with this girl anyway?

“I’m sorry, dear. I know you carried her down.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “As long as she’s doing well.” He eyed the kitchen door. The usual smells of a baking food were absent from the common room. They hadn’t started the ovens for the day.

“I assure ya, she’s in good hands. Quite a strange one, I’ll say. Don’t know where she’s come from. Speaks perfectly fine but that accent isn’t anything I can pin down.” She placed her hands on her apron, finding a spot caked in flour. Then she looked over her shoulder to the left side of the inn. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Dox wondered for a moment. “Could I have a sweet cake?” She eyed him again. “It’s just that—well, with gramps out looking I didn’t get too good a breakfast. It’s hard enough to sit around waiting. I’d rather not do it on an empty stomach.”

That swayed her. Her lips pursed and she touched his cheek. “Sweet boy. I know it’s been a rough day. Just give me a moment, haven’t had time to get anything but the flour ready with everything happening this morning.” She disappeared into the kitchen. Dox could make out her giving commands to her daughter, Clauda. A nice girl, but she acted far younger than she should have for her age.

He waited for just a moment before he took off. Mistress Dalorius had been looking to the left side when she had talked of the red-haired girl. The ovens would take some time to heat up and the cakes would take even longer to bake. He just hoped she didn’t come out to check on him in the middle of the process. He couldn’t face the quiet of the streets again.

The left side-corridor was long, stretching close to the edge of the building. He didn’t think it would take him long to find her room. All of them were the same so they would have put her in one close to the common room. His assessment was right. He opened the third room door and found her asleep in the bed.

His feet stayed in place when he saw her. Why had he done this? He had been told she was fine, had he not believed the mistress? But here she was, sure enough, well as he'd been promised. He wanted to step into the room as much as he wanted to run back to the common area. His body was locked in battle with what he should do. Slowly, he began to lean forward.

The girl's eyes fluttered open, eyelids peeling back to reveal a stunning blue shade. They found him, and she sat up in the bed, pulling the blankets to cover herself. She then winced. Her hand grabbed her forehead and she sucked in air before letting it out in a slow breath.

Meanwhile, Dox footing gave way and he stumbled into the room. "I am so sorry," he said followed by a fumbling of attempted apologies.

"Who are you?" Her voice was high and soaked with discomfort. She was still holding her head.

He stood up straight, trying to gather his composure. This was not going as he expected. Although, looking back on it, how else could this have gone. "My name is Dox, or, er, actually it's Dosiner Eldwin Hasden III." Why would he give her his full name? What could possibly be the purpose of that? He hated people calling him that. "But, uh, all my friends call me Dox. Actually, everyone calls me that, except for my grandpa. Oh, and Ennis. That's Cast's brother. But you don't know who that is either, so that probably doesn't help you."

The room came to silence when he finally stopped talking. "And why, might I ask Dosiner Eldwin Hasden III, have you come to sulk inside my rooms while I sleep?"

His cheeks flushed. It all must have looked awful to her. "Please don't call me that." He cleared his throat. "And I only meant to check on you, I promise you that. I was the one that carried you off the mountain after you fell."

She looked surprised to hear that. Her hand fell from her head and found haven folded into her other on her lap. “You couldn’t be him. My fl...” She cut herself short. “I remember him being older and more composed. A leader.”

“Trust me, I’m usually not like this. But I did carry you down. You were out cold when I found you. Must have just dreamed it was someone else.”

“Of course.” His words were slow. “Might I ask what that is on your face?”

Dox reached up to touch his face. When he pulled away his finger was covered in a white, dusty substance. Flour. “Ah, Mistress Dalorius must have done that.” He wiped it away as best he could with his shirt sleeve. “Just embarrassing.”

“Unlike the rest of our meeting, hmm?” She laughed. Dox couldn’t help but be overcome by its infectiousness and joined in with her. When they stopped they were left gasping for air. “I suppose I should thank you for saving me.”

He gave a slight bow. “It’s the only thing I could have done. I couldn’t leave you in those woods. Not with...well, never mind.”

“What is it?” When he didn’t say anything, she motioned for him to sit on the foot of the bed.

He sat down and tried to think of what to say. “I don’t want to scare you. But yesterday in the woods, me and my friends encountered something.” He was looking at the floor while he spoke. “I still don’t know what *it* was, but two of my friends ran after it to find out. They’re still out there.”

“I’m so sorry. You must be worried sick.”

“I am. I’ve been wondering around town all morning to keep from thinking about it. That’s why I came to check on you.” He frantically looked up. “Not that I wasn’t worried about you. I knew you were in good hands.”

She rested a hand on his knee. “It’s quite okay. Go on.”

He nodded and his eyes found the floor again. “I just can’t stand not being able to do anything about it. All the men are out looking for them and I’m stuck here because I’m too young.” He could feel the tears forming in his eyes, but he held them back. He could always hold them back.

“Why do you listen to them?”

He looked at her. “What do you mean?”

“If you care so much for your friends, why do you let the word of those in authority stop you?” She said. “You should be out there, searching for them.”

Who was this girl? She couldn’t have been but two years older than him, maybe not even that much. “I don’t know,” Dox said. “I can gather the others. Hak would come. Same with Rang. Sky, even Lainie would probably join in if it weren’t for her knee. She might do it anyways.” He stood up. “I’ll get them right now. Thank you, uh.” He turned to her. “I just realized I never asked your name.”

“Lilakin.”

He smiled. “Thank you, Lilakin.” He rushed through the still open door but stopped. There was still one more thing he wanted to ask her about. She was still sitting up in her bed when he reentered the room. “There was something else strange about yesterday. When I found you, there were...”

Mistress Dalorius burst into the room. “Oh Dox, there you are.”

His eyes widened in a panic. “Mistress. I am so sorry. I know I wasn’t supposed to come see her but...”

“Never mind that. I’ll have you washing pots some other time. It’s the boys. They’ve come back.”

Chapter 6

Homecoming

It was still morning when Cast and Justin arrived in Halses, now accompanied by a brigade of men who had formed most of the search party for them. A group had stayed behind to gather the rest. It had been Conrad and Reis who had found the two boys, although the sixteen-year-olds had not actually been searching for them. Cast and Justin had managed to avoid anyone else until they reached the bottom of the mountain, where they found a bored-faced Conrad standing watch just past the tree line. Conrad's face had lit up with excitement when he saw them, and he raced between the trees and the yellow field to yell for Reis. It was apparent he had not been expecting to be the one to find the two.

After some time, they had most of the search party gathered. They all were in a good manner to see them right and well, but Cast couldn't help but feel bad for causing such a stir. Every able-bodied man in Halses and the surrounding area over the age of fifteen must have come to look for them. That just showed what lengths these people would go to protect their own. And the efficiency of his father's emergency systems.

Hans had embraced Cast when he first saw him. It felt good to be wrapped in his father's arms. But that warmth quickly turned cold when their reunion had ended. "I told you never to go to the mountains alone, Cast." Hans's voice was stern and steady. Cast kept his eyes low and waited for his father to continue. "It was dangerous, disrespectful, and plain stupid. You sent the entire village into a frenzy and cost us a night's sleep and a morning's work. You're lucky no one got hurt, or worse." Images of Justin's mangled body flashed into his mind. He shivered.

Cast held back a retort about how he wasn't alone. How he had been with his friends and they could all take care of each other. But that all felt foolish to say all things considered. The truth of it was that he and Justin should be dead, and that was all because he couldn't hold down his curiosity. Besides, he knew his father didn't like to be strict with him. He decided not to make it any harder than it needed to be.

"I know, papa." His eyes locked with Hans' for just a moment and he regretted it immediately.

"Sky! What happened to your eyes, son?"

Cast sighed. "I'm...not sure." He lost eye contact. "Can we not talk about this here?" He had been intent on not making eye contact with anyone for this reason. He wasn't in the mood to answer questions he didn't know the answer to.

His father's face softened. "Of course. I shouldn't be so hard. Not after the night you've had. We will talk later, but for now—" He knelt and pulled Cast's forehead to his. Hans' eyes bore into his, searching to break that knuckle-width gap separating them. "—I'm just glad you're safe."

Cast didn't speak to anyone on the journey back to Halses. He thought he might cry if he said anything. Conrad pestered him with questions about what had happened but quickly gave up

after several failed attempts to get Cast to talk. He tried the same with Justin, but he seemed to be having an even harder time holding it together.

“Will you just shut up already?” Justin said.

“I’m just trying to get an idea of what went down. People will be talking, you know,” Conrad said. “Better to give them the truth right out. People got a funny way of putting a little too much imagination into it when they don’t have all the details. Got a need to add the missing ones in themselves.”

“I don’t give a damn about what people will be talking! I just want some silence right now.”

The company grew quiet after that until they reached the village.

The feel of the cobblestone road was comfortable beneath Cast’s feet as they entered Halses. Much of the party had branched off as they had approached the village, eager to return to their tasks required of strenuous farm life, if not getting in a quick morning nap first. Now all that remained were those who lived further neckward, which there were few, and the residents of Halses.

A small library on their right marked the first building at the entrance of the town. Hans had always said that a village’s strength was built upon the knowledge of its people, so he had it built as the first thing seen when entering the town. It was the same reason he had the school built.

Sitting at the top of a hill, a ways behind the library, was the town farm where Justin lived. It wasn’t as large as some of the farms surrounding Halses, but it provided food for the immediate needs. To his left laid the market field. It was empty right now but during market days

the field would be filled with tents of farmers selling seasonal crops alongside other craftsmen selling wares. It was also used during festivals and for the children to run and play games in.

Cast had gotten his favorite wool cap from Mistress Aldona on a market day. He had been shocked to find it at the blacksmith tent. He had no idea that the blacksmith's wife could knit. She knew her way around a forge almost as well as her husband but the stitching on the cap was finer than any he had seen from Silvalin.

As they moved further into Halses they came upon the residential area. A clustering of houses seemingly arranged randomly came up on their right. This was where Halses had begun. The village had been slowly expanding since its origin, but it was still so small that Cast could have run from one end to the other in under a few minutes.

A woman peeked her head out from one of the houses. It was Conrad's mother. She looked to be searching through the small company of men and her eyes stopped on him. A smile whipped onto her face and she poked her head back into her house. Cast could faintly make out, "They found them."

From the house exited her and all of Conrad's seven siblings, all younger. They started calling for Cast and Justin as well as Conrad and Reis. Conrad feigned annoyance when his brothers and sisters asked him about the search, but it quickly turned to the story of how he had heroically been the one to find the two lost boys.

They made such a ruckus that other doors started to open as well with their own set of searching eyes. Everyone came out of their house when they saw him and Justin and rushed to greet them. It wasn't every day that two children went missing and it wasn't every day that missing children came home. Soon, almost every person in the town had formed a crowd around them, trying to get a word in.

Across the street from the residence, he noticed Mistress Dalorius come out from the inn. She darted back inside when she saw him only to emerge out a few minutes later with Dox in tow. Justin must have seen him too because he took off running before Cast. Cast dashed between people, knocking into someone and spinning to stay on his feet. To his surprise, Cast managed to beat Justin to Dox.

The three boys embraced in the village square.

“I thought I’d lost you,” Dox said. Oddly enough, he was the one hugging the tightest.

“Can’t say I didn’t think the same,” Justin said.

They held each other for a while longer before coming out of it. Once they had let go, Dox punched Cast in the arm. Cast recoiled and grabbed his arm. “What was that for?” It took him a moment to realize that the punch hadn’t hurt at all. Slowly, he released his grip.

Dox was gripping his hand. “That’s for running off after sky knows what and leaving me to babysit.”

“I thought it was clever.”

“It was damn too clever. You scare me sometimes, you manipulative little cull.” Dox flexed his hand. “And why did that punch hurt me more than it hurt you?”

“Probably bad form,” Justin said.

Dox returned the comment with a jab at Justin’s arm. The smaller boy yelped loudly and grabbed at his arm. “How’s that for form?” Dox said.

“Did you have to do that?” Justin said. His breath was sharp from the pain.

Dox shook his fist. “Ah, I may have put a little much on it.”

Cast broke out into a laugh. Dox. The other two boys eyed him for a moment before joining in with him. He missed this. It hadn't even been a day, but there was a time on the mountain when he thought he might never see his friends again.

"So, what happened?" Dox asked after the laughter had calmed down.

Cast looked to Justin who shrugged. How much should they tell? How much could they tell? He didn't know left from right as to most of what happened the day before. The crowd had surrounded them again and he decided it was best not to talk about it in front of the entire village.

"We'll talk later," Cast assured him. He gestured with his head towards the crowd. Dox nodded back his understanding. "How's Lainie?" Cast found himself asking.

"She made it down safe. Fell and scrapped her knee in that ravine we passed through and may be laid up for a bit, but all and all is well."

"Good," Cast said. Everyone had made it home. It felt like a miracle.

Dox opened his mouth to say something else but was interrupted by a cry of Cast's name. His full name.

"Caster!" He couldn't tell if his mother shouted his name out of relief or anger. He had a sneaking suspicion it might have been both. Either way, he was about to find out.

His mother looked tired. Dark bags dropped beneath her eyes, which were red from crying. She pulled up short when he turned to face her. "What happened to your eyes?" Her face twisted in confusion and maybe a hint of fear.

"Shit," Dox said from beside him. "I didn't even notice."

Cast knew his mother was truly taken aback when she didn't even threaten to wash Dox's mouth out for cursing in front of her. He almost let one slip out then and there. He had hoped that

no one would notice, and no one had up until then. Of course, his mother would, just like his father had. Even if they hadn't, someone was bound to eventually.

Suddenly, Cast could feel everyone staring at him. "Please, not now, mama."

She slowly nodded her head, realizing that she had just brought the attention of the whole village down on her son. "Of course. Later." But it was too late.

The crowd converged on him and spouted forth questions of all kinds. Some were sparked by the realization that Cast's had mysteriously turned green and some that had probably been brewing since they heard him and Justin had been lost on the mountainside.

Cast slowly backed up to the inn. His homecoming had quickly turned into a mass interrogation. The villagers were only curious and even a little scared, but Cast's chest tightened as the crowd closed around him.

"That's quite enough, everyone," Cast heard his father's voice rise above the crowd. He moved his way through the people and placed himself between Cast and them. "I know you all have your questions. I have plenty of my own." He gave a glance to Cast before looking back. "But these boys have been through enough for one day. Sky, even one year. Right now, they need some food and some proper sleep."

Hans took Cast's hand and began the walk towards their home on the right side of the square. The villagers made a way for the two. Cast's mother followed behind and she beckoned Justin and Dox to come as well. "Come now. I can cook you up some lunch." Cast's stomach rumbled, and he realized he hadn't had anything to eat since they had stopped to eat before they broke for lunch the day prior.

“Thanks for the offer, Mistress Klyosov, but I’ll be alright for now,” Dox said. “Had some food earlier,” he patted his belly to make a show of it, “and I have to do some things before my gramps gets back.” Dox’s face soured a little at the mention of his grandfather.

“I’ll stay behind too. Bet my parents hadn’t heard we were back yet, and they’ll want to see me and feed me themselves,” Justin said.

“That’s okay, dearies. Just know your welcome anytime.” Cast’s mother turned and followed behind Cast and his father.

He could still feel the eyes of the people on his back as he walked into his home.

Chapter 7

The Sheriff

It was true that Dox was supposed to do things before his grandfather arrived, but he couldn't muster the motivation to poke his nose into any books. The truth of it was that his grandfather didn't like him going into the Reeve's manor and Dox would be worse for wear if he found out he had lunch there.

He and Justin stood in the square for a time after the Klyosov's had gone inside. Some of the villagers tried to come and talk to the pair but were quickly deterred by stares from Mistress Dalorius. Soon, most of the villagers had returned to their homes as the Al Dran's light hovered fully overhead.

The mistress of the inn went inside for a moment before returning with a tray of sweet cakes. "They're a bit cold now after sitting on the counter during all the commotion, but the taste shouldn't be spoiled." She offered them to the boys, which Dox gladly took. He felt bad for having her make the patch as a ploy to see Lilakin, but the mistress did make the best sweet cakes in the village.

The cake melted as it touched his tongue. The sweet taste washed over him and emptied his mind of any other thought than the next bite. Maybe they were the best in all of Lalbahadoor. Justin was enjoying his cake as much as Dox was and was quick to grab a second after he was done. Dox did the same.

“Ah, ah, ah.” Mistress Dalorius pulled the tray away when Dox tried to grab a third. “Don’t be spoiling your lunch by eating too much.” Dox let his hand lower in disappointment.

Justin finished the last bite of his cake and wiped his hands on his tattered shirt. What had happened to them the previous day? “I should get back to the farm.”

“Probably should have stopped by there when you first got back,” the mistress said. “Your mother’s been worried sick.”

“Probably has a few choice words for me too.” Justin’s eyes widened. “And a heap of chores.” The small boy sighed. “Best get on with it.” He waved his goodbye and was on his way.

When he had turned out of sight onto one of the side roads, the mistress said, “Don’t know what they went through, but those two not acting themselves.”

“Whatever they saw tore through the stomach of a cag. I can’t imagine what it could have been.” Bile churned in his stomach at the thought of that creature. If they had come face-to-face with it, how did they survive?

The mistress shook her head, “In any case, I’m glad for them to be home.” Dox nodded. “I think that girl might enjoy some of these sweet cakes. Would you mind taking some to her?” She extended the tray to him.

“I didn’t think you wanted her seeing anyone.”

She shrugged her shoulders, “She looks to be doing better. Besides, she didn’t seem to mind your intrusion.” She gave a knowing wink and heat rushed Dox’s cheeks.

“I guess I could bring her a few.” He moved to take the tray but the sound of hooves slapping cobblestone stopped him. The remainder of the search party must have arrived. His eyes lowered. “My grandpa will be wanting to see me.”

“That’ll probably be true. I can take them to her myself,” the mistress said. “Here. Take another cake before you go.” She offered the tray to Dox.

He managed a weak smile before taking one. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.” The mistress turned and walked inside with the tray of sweet cakes.

Dox saw his grandfather as soon as he turned onto the main street. They had turned off the main road soon after entering the village to drop the horses off at the stables on the other side of the market field. The stable boy, Raden, was helping to get the horses into their stalls and running between the stalls and stable house, bringing food for each of the horses.

The stable was larger than the town needed. It held the horses owned by residents who lived in Halses proper, most of the farmers having stables on their land. The inn also had its own smaller stable for guests, so this one rarely filled up.

Raden was the first to see Dox approaching. “Heyo, Dox.” The boy flashed a grin and lifted a bag of feed over his shoulder. The boy was the youngest of Dox’s friends having just turned twelve. What Dox hoped was mud-stained his dark trousers and shirt. Even a small bit smeared along his cheek down to his chin.

Dox took the last bite of his third cake. “How goes it, Rang.”

Raden’s smile widened at Dox’s use of his nickname. “It goes good. You know, I can’t for the life of me get anyone else to call me that. You’re the only one.”

“I don’t see why I wouldn’t.” Dox didn’t know why Raden insisted on being called by his nickname but he understood the sentiment better than most.

“Ah, Dosiner.” Dox winced at his name. His grandfather came out from between the horse stalls wiping his hand with a handkerchief.

Sheriff Dosiner Eldwin Hasden I was not as old as Dox always made him out to be. He was a tall, slender man with a short beard that was mostly dark, like his hair, save for a small patch of white just to the right of his chin. He wore creme trousers and a red vest that, despite the long night searching for the two boys in the woods, were totally free of any dirt or residue.

“Why aren’t you at home?” He asked but continued speaking before Dox could give an answer. “It doesn’t matter. I suppose I would rather you be here than somewhere else. This way I won’t have to waste my time looking all over for you.”

“I was just in the town square,” Dox said, his back rigid while he spoke. “I wanted to see Cast and Justin.”

His grandfather nodded. “I see.” He turned to Raden. “Thank you for the help. Please make sure that Winterflow gets plenty to eat. She deserves an extra helping tonight, and I good brush.” The sheriff reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a silver drani.

Raden took the coin and flashed another grin. “Always do, sir. She’s one beaut of a mount. Best this side of the mountains, I’d say.” The boy twirled the drani between his fingers before stowing it away in his pocket.

The sheriff chuckled. “I sure hope so. Shilled out good money to get her here.” He patted Raden on the head. “Now, we should be going. Thank you again.” He tipped his head to the boy and began walking down the dirt road towards the main street. “Come along, Dosiner.”

“Yes, sir,” Dox called to him before turning to Raden. “See you. I’m sure we’ll all meet up this week. Got a lot to talk about.” The younger boy nodded and Dox turned to chase after his grandfather.

His grandfather didn't take notice of him when he caught up and the pair walked in silence to their home. Thoughts raced through Dox's mind the entire walk. What would his grandfather say when he found out he had spent all morning perusing the streets instead of reading? His chest tightened as his imagination roamed.

They reached the house and walked in. His grandfather stood in front of the bookshelf pressed against the far wall, examining his collection. He clicked his tongue. "Hans has asked me again to donate my books to his library," he said. "'Help to meet the cultural needs of the village' he had said." He turned to face Dox. "Bah, this village has no desire for culture. Bastard just wants to near double his library size with my help. Try to make it look like it wasn't a waste of time and money."

Dox gritted his teeth. He would have been glad to be rid of those bookshelves, but he knew his grandfather would never do it. "Haven't you already told him no?" Dox asked knowing the answer. He received this speech every time Hans asked.

"Yes, he has," The sheriff said sourly. "And I always decline as respectfully as I can, but my patience is running thin."

"You could donate just a few books you don't care much for. Might get him off your back."

His grandfather was on him in a second, towering over him. He slapped Dox across the face. Hard. A vibration rocked through Dox and he crumpled to the floor. He bit back tears. No sympathy would come of them.

"I care for all of my books. And I will not have them fall into the hands of sorry excuse for a reeve." Dox couldn't help from releasing a slow exhale of breath. "Stand up, boy. I didn't teach you how to cower on the ground like a bitch."

His legs shook when he stood and the straightness of his back had waned. He fought the urge to put a hand to his cheek. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply any of your books were worth less than another."

His grandfather straightened his vest. "Right. I didn't think you would." He held his hands behind his back. "I understand trying to find a solution but be wary of what waters you tread in doing so."

"Of course." Dox had no idea what he meant by that, he had merely offered a solution, but he had no intentions of telling his grandfather that.

"Are you hungry? I'm sure you're hungry," his grandfather said.

Dox nodded his head. He was still full from Mistress Dalorius's cakes but he was happy for the change the subject.

Dox moved to the table in the kitchen and sat down while his grandfather pulled an assortment of salted meats, vegetables, and stale bread from the pantry. He started a fire under the stew pot and began to add his ingredients. When he was done, he poured the stew into two bowls and brought one to Dox. His grandfather sat across from him and they both ate in silence. The stew wasn't great but Dox ate it without complaint.

The sheriff finished before Dox and watched him finish the last of the stew. "Why don't you tell me what happened yesterday," his grandfather said. It was not a question.

"I told you everything I knew." Dox rested his stew on the edge of the bowl. "We were out getting berries for Ennis and some *thing* attacked a cag. Split its side open. Cast and Justin chased after it. They left me to take Lainie down by myself."

"And this girl?" the sheriff asked.

"We found her on the way down. I have no idea where she came from."

His grandfather mulled over this for some time. His eyes searched over Dox as if looking for any cracks in a façade. “This girl and the creature. They have nothing connecting them?”

“Not that I know of. Nothing beside them both being on the mountain,” Dox said. What was he getting at? There was no way Lilakin had anything to do with that monster.

“Hmm.” His grandfather sat in thought for several minutes. His brow furrowed, and his face ran through different emotions. It landed on one that Dox could have only described as disgust. “I’ll have to talk to Justin and Cast. Get their side of the story.” He stood as if to go but then quickly sat back down. “They’ll need some time to rest, won’t they?”

Dox slowly nodded his head. “Hans said they needed food and sleep before anyone could talk to them.”

Anger flashed across his grandfather’s face at the mention of the reeve. Dox jumped at the sound of his hand slapping the table. “Damn that man. The village will be erratic until this gets sorted out.”

Dox let the room go silent. His grandfather slowed his loud breaths. “I’m sure they can talk tomorrow. Maybe even later today.”

“I know that,” his grandfather said. “But these things are time-sensitive. Waiting can be such a risk.”

Dox just nodded his head in agreement. No sense in arguing with the man.

“Dosiner, did you get your reading done?”

The question came out of nowhere, but it had been the one Dox was fearing the most. “I was in the middle of it when Cast and Justin got back,” he lied.

“I see.” His grandfather rose from the table and scooped more stew into his bowl. “And I’m sure yesterday’s misadventures had your bed calling you for an early night, hmm?”

“Yes, sir.” It was less a lie this time. He had spent all night in bed. He just hadn’t slept.

“I see,” his grandfather repeated. He took a bite of his stew. His mouth moved slowly as he chewed. He then threw the bowl at Dox.

Stew splattered across Dox’s face and chest. He gasped from the heat, but it wasn’t hot enough to burn. He spat out the stew that had landed in his mouth and had to blow some from his nose. “What in the blazes was that for?”

The sheriff was standing over him again, one hand on the back of Dox’s chair and the other pointing a finger in his face. “You don’t get to lie to me. I know you haven’t read a wink of what I told you to.”

Dox locked eyes with him. “So what if I didn’t? I don’t have to live the life you want for me.” He received another slap for that. Not as hard as the one before, but it didn’t need to be. Dox’s resilience burned to ash and he slumped in his chair.

“You do as I tell you when I tell you. I don’t care if you climbed the neck twice in an hour, if I tell you to do something that day you do it that day.” The sheriff stood straight and adjusted his vest. “I’m going out now. Clean up this mess and read your damn chapters. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

Dox waited for the door to close. He removed his shirt and grabbed a rag to clean the spray of stew. Once he finished, he walked upstairs to his room. Not bothering to put on a shirt he sat at his desk, opened his book to the right page, and cried.

Chapter 8

The Blue Pool

Ennis and Lainie were waiting in the front room when Cast and his parents entered the house. “Cast!” Lainie spoke first. She was sitting on the beige-cushioned seat pushed up under the window. Her leg laid straight on the seat and a bandage was wrapped around her knee. A wooden crutch rested against the wall next to her. She grabbed the crutch, swung her leg over the side of the seat, and went to stand.

“I don’t think you should be doing that, Lainie,” Ennis said.

She winced as she rose but hid it well. “I’ll be fine.” She tapped her crutch on the ground twice. “I don’t really need this thing. Pa just wants me using it for a few days. You know, just in case.”

She made her way over to Cast and laid herself out in a hug. “What happened to you?” He asked her.

She jabbed the end of her crutch into the top of his foot. Cast reeled and lifted his foot into his hands, having to hop on the other. “What happened is that you left me and Dox to get down the mountain all by ourselves.”

Cast pushed out his breath slowly, trying to control the pain until he realized that there was no pain. He looked at his foot in his hands for a moment before slowly lowering it to the floor. “Never thought I’d have to start looking to defend myself after a hug.”

“Maybe just raise your guard after you scare the people who love you by running off into the woods by yourself,” Hans said. He emphasized the point with a light slap to the back of Cast’s head. “And by making them stay up all night looking for them.”

Cast hadn’t noticed it before, but his father looked terrible. His hair was slicked to one side of his head in sweat and dark bags had started to form under his eyes. He tried to keep the tiredness from his face, but Cast could tell that he had spent the night in anxious haste to find him.

“I’m sorry, pa.” He looked to his mother. She wasn’t in any better shape. “You too, mama. I’m sorry.”

His mother wrapped her arms around him. “It’s okay, button. We’re just glad you’re back here where you belong.” She pulled back and wiped a tear that had escaped from her eye. “And don’t worry. I’m not going to hit you.” She smiled. “No matter how badly I want to sometimes.” She poked his nose and turned to walk out of the room. “I’ll make everyone something nice for lunch.” She disappeared into the kitchen.

Cast turned to his brother. “Why didn’t you come out?” A distant stare filled Ennis’s eyes. He didn’t appear to be paying much attention. “Ennis?”

Ennis came to, finally noticing Cast was speaking to him. “Sorry, must have been lost in thought. What was that?”

“I was just asking why you didn’t come out to greet everyone,” Cast said.

“Ah. I would have, but mother did not want me going out into the crowd. If I am being honest, I did not want to go out in the crowd myself.” He cleared his throat. “Besides, I knew you would be coming in momentarily, so it made sense for me to bide my time here.”

Cast nodded his head and decided not to dwell on his brother’s actions. A thought crossed his mind. “I almost forgot.” He reached into his pocket and felt the mushy mess of blueberries he had stuffed there the day prior. His fingers were stained purple and covered in the slime. In his hand was a single, whole blueberry. “I had meant to get you some ash berries, but there was a massive cagledon guarding them, but I managed to find a blueberry bush before...” His words trailed off, but he held the berry out to his brother.

Ennis eyed the small fruit and took it gingerly in his fingers. Cast had hoped a few more berries had made it through the night, but he was glad at least one was still intact. The blueberry slowly rolled between Ennis’s fingers before he plopped it in his mouth. His eyes widened, and a smile formed on his lips. “A tad sour and a bit slimy from sitting in your pocket, but it was delicious.”

“And what about my gift?” Lainie asked.

“You were there. You could have grabbed some on your own,” Cast said.

“Doesn’t change that it’s rude to bring a gift for one person and not another.” Lainie tossed her head to the side and gave a harrumph.

“What about a birthday party?” Ennis said.

“Is it your birthday?”

“Well, no.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“There’s a flaw to your thinking that I don’t care to find,” Ennis said.

Lainie opened her mouth to say something else but her face slowly morphed into one of surprise. “Ennis, did you just make a joke?”

Hans, who had found his way into one of the entryway chairs, erupted in laughter. He slowly rose from it and clamped Ennis on the shoulders. “My boy, you find new ways of surprising us every day.” A look of discomfort grew on Ennis’s face, but their father either didn’t notice or chose not to acknowledge it. “Let’s go ahead and get set up in the dining room while your mother cooks some lunch.”

The food came and went fast with not much room for talking. When they were finished, the weariness from all that had happened hit Cast all at once. He raised his arms over his head and let out a yawn, one teeming with the exhaustion earned from a hard day.

“I think it’s time you get to bed,” his mother said.

Cast shook his head. “It’s barely past mid...” His words were cut off with another yawn. “midday,” he finished. “Besides, pa wants to know about what happened.”

“You can tell me all about it in the morning,” his father said pointedly. “I’m sure the sheriff will be wanting to talk to you as well. We can meet with him too, so you don’t have to tell it twice.”

Weight pushed down on Cast’s eyelids and he let them slip close once before opening them wide. Maybe he needed the sleep. “Okay, papa.”

“But please do bathe,” his mother said. “You smell worse than a cull in a garbage ditch.”

Normally, Cast would have called bathing to be man’s worst invention, but he relished his time in the warm water that day. A night passed out in the woods had left him covered in dirt and grime caked deep in the crevasses of his skin.

When he had finished bathing, he dried himself and put on his nightwear: a pair of thin, brown trousers and a linen white shirt. He made his way to his room and found Lainie sitting on his bed. Ennis was there too, writing in his notebook at the desk of their shared room. “What are you needing?” Cast asked.

“Just thought I’d come say goodnight,” she said. “I was thinking of going to bed too.”

Cast looked out the window. He had spent longer in the tub than he had expected, but the light was still very bright out. Why would she be going to bed so early? Then it dawned on him. “You didn’t sleep last night, did you?”

She shook her head. “Nope.”

He sat down on the bed next to her, careful to avoid her injured leg. “Look, I’m really am sorry Lain. I didn’t mean to scare you like that.”

“I know you didn’t. You never do. But you also never stop doing it. You just needed to, to...” She searched for the word.

“Sate,” Ennis offered.

“Thank you. Needed to sate your own curiosity.” She inhaled deeply and the gleam of forming tears filled Lainie’s eyes. “We could have lost you, Cast.”

Cast looked down at his sister. He was always so confused by her. Sometimes, she was braver than him, ready to take on whatever the world threw their way. But then she could be fragile, like now, and he feared that she might break at any words that he said. “This was different, I swear.” Saying nothing probably would have been the wise thing to do.

The tears that had been in her eyes receded and a stone coldness took their place. “Different. I get it.” She stood up, the good foot slapping against the floor. “We’ll see how

different it is when you wind up dead in the woods.” She hobbled out of the room, leaving the air feeling cold.

Ennis suddenly spoke up from his place at the desk. “I think I angered Dosiner today. Would you help me to reconcile?”

“Did you hear any of what just happened? I don’t think I’m the best person to talk to.”

Ennis turned in his chair to face Cast. “Oh, that? She’ll be over it by morning. I’m not so sure about Dosiner. I fear he doesn’t like me very much.”

“What are you talking about? Dox likes you,” Cast said. He shook his head and pointed out the door. “And how do you know she’ll be over it by morning? You said one thing the whole time, which thank you for being her dictionary.” His eyebrows furrowed. “She looked real mad.”

“I don’t do all my listening by talking. I do it by actually listening.” Ennis was matter-of-fact with his words. “And I know that she will forgive by morning is because you’ve had this conversation more times than I can count.” He held up and finger and flipped through his notebook. “No, my apologies, I have counted. This was the…” He flipped through a few more pages and emphatically jabbed his finger when he came across something. “Sixth time. And that’s only in front of me.”

“I’m usually more tactful. My brains just a puddle.” He looked to his brother. “You really think we’re gonna be okay?”

“All I do is watch how others interact. I would be disappointed in myself if she’s still upset with you.” Ennis closed his notebook and looked to Cast. “But I seem to have issues with interjecting myself into interactions. So please, Caster, would you help me with Dosiner?”

His brother genuinely looked confused about what had happened. Not only confused but also concerned. He wanted to make amends. “Alright, fine. Whatever happened between you two, you should start by calling him Dox.”

Ennis perked up and quickly turned, flipping open his notebook to write. “I know he doesn’t like it, but why doesn’t he want to be called by his name? It is his name, after all.”

Cast thought over it for a moment. He knew Dox had an abrasive relationship with his grandfather, but he had never been exactly open to talking about it. “He wants to be his own person, I think. But that’s beside the point. He’s said he wants to be called Dox, so you should.”

Ennis’s pen rapidly scribbled notes on the page. “I don’t understand it completely, but I will do my best to.”

Cast shook his head. “It isn’t always about understanding everything. Sometimes, it’s about listening to others and doing what they ask.”

“But Lainie is always asking you not to put yourself in harm’s way, but you never listen to her,” Ennis said.

Cast winced at that. “That’s, uh, different.”

“How so?”

Ennis prepared his pen to write, but no words came from Cast. He was lost in thought. Was there any difference? Or was he just being selfish? Of course, it was different, he wanted to tell himself, he just couldn’t come up with a reason why.

“Never mind that.” He rushed to change the subject. “What did you do to make Dox mad?”

There was a rustling of pages as Ennis turned in his notebook. “He said I was only trying to ‘satisfy some kind of morbid curiosity that you,’ as in I, ‘have.’” He closed his notebook once

again. “This was in reference to me inquiring about your whereabouts. He suggested that I did not show enough distress at your disappearance.”

“That wasn’t very fair of him,” Cast said.

“That was my thought at first,” Ennis said. “But I can’t help but think that there was some truth to his words. What if I was not truly worried for you? I didn’t even rush to see you when you arrived back in town.”

Cast leaned forward. “You worry in your own way. I know that. And Dox doesn’t do well when people don’t react the way he would.”

“What do I do then? I don’t want him to be upset with me over this.” He reached for his notebook again and Cast extended an arm to close it back.

“The best thing to do is to just talk to him. Be open about the way you think.” Cast straightened back in his bed. “And let him know that you have your own way of doing things. If he knows what’s going on in that head of yours, then I think he’ll lay off a little.”

“Okay,” Ennis said. He anxiously eyed his notebook. “Can I write that down?”

Cast chuckled. “Yes, you can write that down.” A large yawn erupted from Cast. “Now if you don’t mind, I think I’ll get some sleep.”

“Of course. Sorry for keeping you.”

“No worries.” Cast stretched out in his bed and pulled the wool blanket over himself. He barely had time to shut his eyes before he slipped into sleep.

#

For the second time in as many days, Cast did not wake up where he had fallen asleep. Strangely enough, he woke up standing upright, surrounded by trees, a thick fog enveloping the

area. He was still in his nightwear, his bare feet exposed to the night air. The fog made it difficult to see anything, so it was hard to determine where he was.

It was night and the light of Ri Dran was at its brightest deep blue, but it was distorted by the fog. He scanned his surroundings as best he could but saw nothing but trees as far as he could see, which was not very far.

He decided this had to be a dream of some sort. But what if it one of those ‘real dreams’ his father had told him about. It was similar to when he had talked to Akuãocu on the head of the world, and he was convinced that must have been a real dream.

There was movement beneath the fog. He couldn’t see what the creature was, but the fog shifted and swirled where it ran. It took off through the trees. Cast didn’t give a moment’s hesitation. He followed.

The figure dashed between the trees, nimbly dodging roots and shrubs. Cast had a harder time, having to weave his body to keep from hitting the branches of trees, which the figure passed beneath with ease. Despite the impairment, Cast didn’t have to exert himself to keep up. In fact, he could have sworn he was running faster than he would through an open field.

They hadn’t been running for long before Cast saw a faint blue light shining in the distance. It wasn’t like the dark blue that peaked through the treetops above. This light was much lighter and more soothing, like reflecting water. The figure turned that way. As they approached, Cast was filled with a sense of familiarity. He had been here before.

The trees ended, and Cast was standing in a small clearing nestled beneath a small cliff face, maybe twenty feet tall. He recognized it as the clearing where they had traced the cag to, only now the improvised grave he and Justin had made was gone. In its place was a small body

of water, about the same size as the monument it replaced. Bright blue light radiated from an obscured object laying at the bottom.

Cast walked up to the edge of the pool, staring at the object. The pool wasn't that large, maybe ten feet in diameter in the shape of a near-perfect circle. The object was hard to see, obstructed by the depth of the water and its own light. Cast focused on it, trying to piece together what it could have been based on its size and faintly visible outline. He was so intent on deciphering the object that he didn't notice the small creature that now floated next to him.

It rubbed the top of its head against Cast's calf and he flailed his body away from the thing, nearly falling into the water. What stood next to him most closely resembled a cat. It had four short legs and a long bushy tail. Tall ears sat on its circular head, which was tipped with a short snout. It would have been altogether ordinary, albeit something Cast had never quite seen, if it were not hovering a few inches off the ground and if its body was not formless and transparent, only a tinge of ghostly white outlining it.

Cast backed away from whatever the thing was, but it was quick to follow him, pushing the top of its head against his thigh now. He leaned over and rested a hand on its back and was met with the feeling of slick fur beneath his fingers. The fur rippled as he came into contact with it, shimmering down the entirety of its body before it all came to rest again. So it was physical. Or, at least somewhat. It had been able to touch him, after all.

Cast bent and lifted the creature into the air. It didn't have any weight to it. He stared it in the eyes, which had no color to them. "What are you?" He asked it. Was this what he was following through the fog?

As if provoked by the question, the small creature slipped from his grip and jumped at his chest, paws extended. Instead of landing on him, the creature passed through his chest, sending

chills through Cast's body. Shock grasped as Cast and he clawed at his chest, trying to get the creature out of him. What was happening? His vision slipped for a moment and he lost his footing, falling into the blue pool.

The water was cold. His body thrashed, and he tried to claw his way back to the surface, but he was being dragged down by some unnatural current. He kicked his legs and swung his arms in vain attempts, eventually sinking to the bottom. The water whipped him around to face the strange object that emitted the bright light, which he now saw was actually some kind of substance pouring into the water.

He stared at the object, a long arching wire extending from the bottom. The wire was actually three thick wires braided together to form a singular whole. There was no spout or faucet that the glowing substance was coming from, rather it was coming off all around the wire, slowly spreading to the rest of the water.

The substance didn't seem to have any form, as it didn't push any of the liquid away as if it were just light. But Cast could see it swirling like an encompassing mist, like... like, "*like pure energy.*" Spoke a harsh and raspy voice. He spun about, trying to find the source. But it was too clear to have been said through the water.

The light, or energy, as the voice had called it, began to pulse and darken. The air still left in Cast was pulled from his lungs and water was pushed up his nose. The voice continued to speak, Cast now realizing it was speaking directly into his head. "*You will see now, Caster Klyosov, that Death is painful; Sorrow is consuming; Evil is powerful.*" The voice was rusty and metallic as if it were the wire itself speaking.

Cast began to panic and thrash again as the energy blackened, consuming the light from above like some kind of beacon of darkness. The rim of Cast's vision began to darken as he

struggled to find air. His arms and legs slowed, his lungs burned, and his mind numbed. All the while that voice began to repeat like a vilified mantra, “*Death, sorrow, evil. Death, sorrow, evil. Death, sorrow, evil...*”

Cast slowly blinked. Then he blinked again. And again. Each blink slower than the last. Each time he took longer to open his eyes. On the seventh blink, the world erupted into a new kind of color. The shock of it all was enough to pull him from his lulling sleep. His lungs still burned, but a new energy pulsed beneath his skin.

The water now looked to be made of pastel paints, each brushstroke unique and moving continuously. The colors must have been moving with the current of the water, Cast realized. The current ran down in a spiral, pulling the water towards the wire at the pool’s center. But the water had to go somewhere from there. Some of it had to push back up to the surface to be brought back down again.

His eyes searched, the lull of unconsciousness coming back on the longer he waited. At the bottom, right next to the wire, the water took a sharp turn towards the wall. The water must have been rising up on that side of the pool. He turned his body and kicked toward the wire, and let the current take him. He was relieved when he was dragged to the outer wall and began to shoot to the surface.

His body came to a jolting halt halfway up. He looked down to find that the wire had reached out and wrapped around his ankle. Slowly, it started retracting into the ground, pulling him back to the center. The voice started screaming now, “*DEATH, SORROW, EVIL! DEATH SORROW EVIL! DEATHSORROWEVIL!*”

Cast kicked at the metal wire, managing to break free. The current shot him back to the surface and he clambered out of the water. Cast tried to take in a deep breath but couldn’t

because water still filled his lungs. Coughing, he threw up water and bile and flopped onto the ground on his back. His chest heaved as he took in delicious breaths of sweet air. He had survived.

He had *survived*. He was sure he was going to die, but he had survived. With a sudden burst of energy, he jumped up and pumped his fist in triumph. He screamed, "I SURVIVED!" He jumped up and down in celebration. He should have been in tears. He should have been on the ground, chest heaving from all the sobbing. He *should* be dead. He had every right to celebrate the fact that he wasn't. But what would have happened if he had died? He was dreaming, right? He decided that it was better if he didn't figure that out on his own. It all felt too real to risk.

The energy left him and he slumped to the ground again. He looked to the pool, peering at the wire at its center. The voice had stopped its screaming, but he could still hear the faint echo of its words in his head. Death. Sorrow. Evil. "What are you?" He said aloud. Then he thought about the pastels that had enveloped his vision. It too was gone now. "What is happening to me?"

A sudden pain erupted from his chest. He fell backward, his back arching, and he cried out in anguish. A brilliant light burst from him, and a small silver paw slowly tore through his nightshirt. Cast screamed in horror as the small creature from before climbed from his body.

When had fully emerged, it sat on Cast's chest. Promptly, Cast pushed it off of him and rolled to his feet. It was no longer transparent and formless but had silver fur except for a thick ring of black around its tail. It stared up at him with dark green eyes, the color fully enveloping the space like with the osaron and Akuãocu.

The creature looked entirely perplexed as to why Cast would want to shove it off of him. “I don’t do well with things popping out of my chest,” Cast said in response to the stare. He felt at his chest. Aside from the gaping hole in his shirt, everything was intact.

The creature rubbed up against Cast’s wet leg as if apologizing. Cast stooped down to pick it up. He lifted it in the air as he had before. “It’s alright. I forgive you.” Cast noticed a black oval of fur on its stomach like patching on a poorly sewn pair of trousers.

“Patch,” Cast said to himself. The small creature started squirming in his hands, so he set it back on the ground. It took off into the woods. “Hey!” Cast called after it. “Where are you going?” He gave chase, delving back into the fog, and found himself back in his room after a few steps.

He spun around. What had just happened? His eyes scanned the room, but everything appeared to be normal. Dream or not, the experience was over. He forced himself to relax. And then he noticed Ennis.

His brother breathed in soft wheezes. He had tossed the blanket from the bed and the sheets he laid on were soaked with sweat. Cast rushed to his side and felt his forehead. It was hot to the touch.

Cast darted out the bedroom door shouting for his parents to come and save his brother.

Summary of Omitted Chapters

Ennis ends up stabilizing from his fever, though is still bed ridden. The sheriff conducts interviews on everyone who was there, including Lilakin, who Dox becomes close with. At one point, he finally asks her about her powers and she tells him that she was cursed as a child and sometimes plant life will try to protect her.

Meanwhile, the osaron has become a menace to Halses, killing livestock and even a few farmers, who are only presumed to be missing for the time being. Hans writes to his old friend and coworker, Representative Molson. The representative comes to Halses to give an assessment of the situation, deciding it was best to wall up inside of the village, inviting the farmers to join, instead of trying to get rid of the osaron. After much deliberation with his father and his friends, Cast, at first, gives up on trying to get rid of the monster. What finally tipped him over was after meeting the monster in the “dream world,” where it is revealed to be intelligent and capable of speech now. It tells Cast that it will not stop.

This urges him to fight and, with the aid of his friends, they attempt a mission into the mountain forest. It is quiet for a few days, but one day when scouting, one of the groups sights the monster, leading into the chapter where we pick back up.

Chapter 25

Vines

The osaron loomed in the distance, its peering green eyes locked on them, and it smiled.

“Cast,” Dox said from beside Cast. “Is that...” The boy’s words fell short.

Cast nodded his head. “Yeah. That’s it.” Memories formed from when he had first seen the monster that day in the woods. The terror he had felt as his mind tried to comprehend what he was seeing. Dox must have been going through the same thing then. He looked to Lilakin expecting to see a similar look of dread, but her face was serious.

The beast took a step towards them and Cast could have sworn it was smaller than it had been. Patch jumped from Cast’s shoulder and let out a low growl, but the osaron continued its advance.

“You know not your fate, young desen, if you stand in my way.” The osaron’s words rolled smoothly unlike before, its voice like silk despite being called from a distance. It then swept its arm in front of itself to gesture to them. A familiar motion made alien coming from such a beast. “Nor do any of you.”

Cast drew his sword. The crudely made blade glimmered in the cascading light poking into the forest. “But we do know our fate if we let you run loose,” Cast said, surprised to find his voice steady and firm. “We won’t stand for you terrorizing our village while we do nothing.”

His vision shifted to the world of vibrant pastels of exploding color. The osaron looked the same, still a black mass of swirling ink, but now he could see the patterns of the wind and the roots of trees reaching far into the earth and coalescing with one another. Birds called in the trees and, if he wanted to, he could have pointed to their exact position.

The metal of his blade grew bright. The faint white lines he had seen before stretched from hilt to tip, all in a tangled mess of misshapen forms. Those lines had confused him before, but he felt he knew what to do now. He imagined those lines unraveling and straightening, willing the blade to do as he told. And they did. The sword morphed into something less crude. The rough bumps that marred the blade smoothed and the edges sharpened. The weight balanced in his hand.

The osaron stopped where it was. It had gotten smaller, Cast was sure of it. “Daishyuin. My life has been one nothing more than obedience. Before, I only did as my master commanded.” Its hand reached to awkwardly cover its face. “But you awoke something inside me when you said my name,” it continued. “Something I don’t think my master wanted me to know. A faint reminder of what I once was. A desire I cannot satisfy.” Its arm dropped. “So now, I will kill those who possess what I cannot have.”

Cast readied himself. “And what is that.”

And then he saw that same pain that was in the osaron’s eyes the day it first appeared. “A chance to be human,” it said.

With a speed faster than Cast could process, the osaron swiped at Patch, sending the small creature flying through the air. Then it was on top of Cast, mouth agape and teeth poised to tear his flesh. Cast jumped backward, losing his footing and falling to the ground.

Cast's mind rushed with what he should do, but the osaron lunged at him again. On the ground, he was defenseless. He raised his sword in a desperate attempt to block.

A stone crashed into the osaron from the right. The rock crumbled as it came into contact with the beast, but it was enough to take its attention for a moment. And a moment was all Cast needed. He rolled backward and onto his feet, gripping his sword tight.

From behind the beast, he saw Lilakin holding another stone ready to strike. Dox was next to her, his eyes still wide and brows furrowed in dismay, but he looked to be the one to throw the first rock. The osaron turned on them and Cast took the opportunity to strike, slashing the beast across its lower back. To his surprise, the blow managed to tear its skin, dark gray liquid seeping from the thin gash. A howl exploded from the osaron and it reached to feel the wound. "What have you done?" It cried before swiping its claws at Cast, which he jumped out of the way of.

Lilakin hit it with another stone followed by a third from Dox. The beast backed away from the three, Cast running to join with the other two. "Petty children," the osaron muttered. "When will you see that your efforts are in vain?"

Cast ignored the beast, instead saying to Dox and Lilakin, "Go warn the others. I'll distract it until y'all are ready."

Dox let out a slow breath as if he had been holding it in. "Not leaving you."

"I can handle it. I'm gonna distract, that's all."

"Doesn't matter," Dox said.

Cast shook his head. "I'm glad you're not a coward, but stop being a fool. If we don't warn them, then this was for nothing."

Dox opened his mouth to say something but Lilakin spoke first. "I will stay with him."

Cast's eyebrows curled. "No, you both need to go. It's not safe here." But she wasn't looking at him.

"Are you sure?" Dox asked. After a moment, she nodded her head. "Okay. I trust you."

She gestured towards the camp. "Go. We must stop this thing. Run with all you can."

They looked to one another one last time before Dox took off running through the trees.

"What are you doing?" Cast asked.

"Trust me."

Cast nodded. He didn't like it, but he was beginning to suspect this mystery girl was capable of more than she had let on.

Low grumbling laughter sounded from the osaron. "You and your schemes will do nothing for you." Its green eyes widened, and its mouth stretched into a smile. "I will kill you, daishyuin, and your friends. Then I will take your village when and how I see fit." Its tongue slipped from its mouth and slid along its lips, saliva dripping onto the ground in front of the beast. "Your people shall be my dinner."

"Then you'll starve," Cast said. He rushed the osaron. When he was upon the creature, he raised his sword and prepared to swing. The osaron sidestepped the attack with ease and began to run towards Lilakin.

Her scream filled the air as the osaron fingers reached around her neck and lifted her into the air. Cast dashed towards the creature but stopped when it raised a hand. "Halt! Or you will see the things I can do."

What was he thinking? Rushing in with no regard for Lilakin. What did he think it would do if she were alone? “Damn it,” he said. He should have made her go with Dox. She tugged at the osaron’s fingers, but they stayed locked in place. “Let her go, Raoole.”

A rumbling growl emitted from the osaron’s throat. “That is my name no longer.” His fingers tightened and Lilakin’s eyes bulged and her screaming ceased. “You seek to use my former name against me again. Have you not realized what my remembering has done to me? The trials you have created for yourself are so much more than what was intended.”

Cast widened his stance and gripped his sword. “I don’t know what you are talking about, but you better let go of my friend.”

The beast laughed. “You’re friend? You do not know the first thing about this snake.” Its head turned towards her. “But I supposed you will now see what she looks like on the inside.” Its mouth opened like a constrictor and it pulled her to his teeth.

From the trees behind the osaron, Patch in his wolf form crashed through the trees, a mass of silver and death, and hope sprung up inside of Cast. He howled and leaped at the osaron. With its free hand, the beast grabbed Patch by the neck and slammed him to the ground. There was a thundering crash and dust rose from the small crater that Patch had formed.

The osaron straightened, resting its foot on the throat of Patch. The wolf-like creature struggled to rise, clawing at the ground and the osaron’s leg. “Rest now, desen.” The beast raised its foot and dropped it onto Patch’s throat. There was a whimper and then silence.

“Patch!” Cast screamed. The osaron kicked aside his body with no regard for the boy. Cast fell to his knees at Patch’s side, the world’s colors returning to normal. “What did you do?” His fingers stroked at his fur, but the creature did not move.

“I ended his pitiful existence,” the osaron said. “And now, I will end your friend’s.”

It opened its mouth again and turned on Lilakin. Cast expected her face to be one of fear, but she looked more like she was concentrating on something. Her eyes flicked down at the ground. Was she trying to signal him? The orason moved to strike.

Thick vines shot from the ground. One looped over the beast's jaw, filling its mouth, and dug back into the ground, stopping the osaron's head from moving forward. Others twisted around its legs, arms, and neck, holding the osaron in place. It tried to howl, but the sound was muffled by the vine in its mouth.

"Release me," it said.

Thinner vines climbed from the ground, wrapping around the fingers holding Lilakin. One by one, they pried the fingers from her neck and she dropped the ground, landing in a cradle of vines that had formed. More of the foliage sprouted from the ground, encasing the osaron in a cocoon of dark green.

Cast sat there, stupefied from what he had seen. "Who are you?"

A breeze kicked up as Lilakin rose from the vine-bed, pulling her auburn hair with it. "That doesn't matter right now."

"Like the Dran it doesn't," Cast said.

"You! Undo my bonds, you scarlet snake. Release me!" The osaron screamed. Another vine slithered around its mouth, holding it shut. It continued to struggle beneath them, but the vines held the beast in place.

"That should keep you quiet," Lilakin said. She looked down at Cast, still kneeling over patch. "He'll be okay. Your desen."

"But," Cast ran his hands over Patch's neck, where the osaron had stomped his foot, "he won't move. He's not even breathing."

“Did it feel like something had been ripped from your chest?”

“What?”

“Like someone had taken a knife and carved away a part of your heart you never knew was there.” Cast continued to stare at her. “I mean that all literally. There would be no mistaking the physical pain if he were dead.”

“I guess not,” he said.

“Good,” she nodded her head. “He should wake back up soon then. Takes a lot to kill a desen. Part of your soul, after all.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Because my desen died a long time ago. It was the single most painful thing I ever had to go through.” Her eyes drifted away from him, back to the osaron. “Go ahead. Listen.”

Cast put his head on Patch’s neck and a sound like shifting sand filled his ears, like when his bones had healed. “You’re right.” He lifted his head and stared at the older girl in a new light, a new air of mystery forming around her.

Suddenly, Patch’s eyes opened. His head shot from the ground and his eyes searched. They landed on Cast and he could feel the outpour of emotion from the creature. His friend. Slowly, he shrank back to its feline form and jumped up into Cast’s arms, and he wrapped the small creature in a hug. Lilakin extended a hand to him. Cast moved Patch to his shoulder and took her hand. With a pull, she helped him to his feet.

“Thank you,” he said, sheathing his sword. “You’re like me, aren’t you.”

Lilakin released a sigh. “Yes. I suppose we are the same.” With both hands, she reached up to her eye, using one to hold the eyelids apart. With the other, she gently slid her finger along her eyeball, removing a clear, filmy circle with a blue ring matching the width of her iris. Now

she stared at him with two different eyes. The one she hadn't touched was the same blue of everyone on Lalbahadoor, aside from Cast's own. The other, a dark green. Like the osaron's. Like Akuãocu's. Like Patch's. Like his.

Questions raced through Cast's mind, many spilling from his lips. "Where did you come from? Why are you here? Why did you not tell us? Or at least talk to me about it? When did this happen to you? How long did it take to get used to it?" The questions continued to pour until Lilakin rose her hands, pleading him to stop.

"I can't answer all of that right now." She gestured to the osaron. "We have other things to take care of."

Cast took in the meshing of vines tangling together, holding the beast that had been terrifying his dreams with ease. "We could have planned on using this all along. Were you going to stand back and let the osaron have its way with us?"

She placed the small object back in her eye, her iris turning back to blue. Only now, Cast swore he could see the green peeking through. "I didn't know if it would be enough to hold it," she said. "I don't have much more control than you do. Sometimes, it just works."

The osaron gave a sudden, violent shake in an attempt to escape, but the vines did not give. "I was ostracized as a child," Lilakin continued, paying no attention to the beast. "Unlike you, I was born with my eyes like this. My parents forced me to hide them because they feared what others might do." Cast nodded. He understood that feeling all too well. The looks he received from other villagers, even his friends and family at times.

"They tried to abandon me when they discovered more about me was strange than just my eyes," she said, eyes still not meeting his. "Another family found me and brought me in.

They took care of me, told me they understood me. They only needed to see my eyes to throw me out.”

“I had no idea,” Cast said. “That’s terrible.”

“It was.” She shook her head, a tiny glistening of tears sailing into the air. “But I’m here now. Lucky to have the friends I have made.” She looked at him intently now. “The friends who accepted your change. One’s I hope will one day accept mine.”

“They can’t until you tell them.”

She nodded. “All in time.”

There was a crunching of leaves and sticks and Cast jerked his head to find Dox making his way up the hill towards them. He moved slowly, approaching with a clear caution. “It’s alright. We’ve secured the beast,” Cast called down to him.

Dox peered up at them. “How in the name of the sky did you do that?” Dox called back as he began to move swifter.

“A secret we’ll never tell!” Cast looked to Lilakin, who had crossed her arm over her stomach and was gripping her elbow. “Does Dox know about you?”

She shrugged. “More or less.” Then she shook her head. “But not everything.”

“Perfect,” Cast gave her a reassuring smile. He turned back to Dox and was surprised to see Ennis walking close behind him now. “What are you doing here, anyway? You were supposed to getting everyone ready.”

“Everyone is ready. I came back to make sure you hadn’t gotten yourself killed. Your death wish has been getting increasingly concerning.”

“And Ennis?”

Dox looked over his shoulder and then back to Cast. "It was his idea to come back out." He shrugged when Cast gave him a perplexed look. "What can I say? Wasn't gonna stop him. So I showed him the way."

"What? No Lainie?"

Dox let out a chuckle as he reached them. "I'm sure she would have followed if we hadn't sneaked away." He looked back at Ennis again. "Also his idea." When he turned his head back, he jumped, staring at the entangled body of the osaron. "Dran! What did you two do?"

Ennis passed Dox, walking up to right beside the monster. "Fascinating." He pulled at one of the vines and wasn't able to move it at all.

"Get away from there, Ennis," Cast said.

"But it is secured," Ennis said, moving further up the osaron. "How could I possibly miss this opportunity to study such a specimen?" He reached its head, the only part of the beast that was still visible, and his eyes widened. Not in fear, but rather, of course, in curiosity.

"That 'specimen' has killed people," Dox said.

"And so have mountain lions and bears, but that hasn't stopped people from researching them." The beast jerked at Ennis when he reached for its face, growling until the boy stepped away. It tried to speak, but its words came out muffled and incomprehensible.

Cast pulled his brother away from the monster. "And this thing is different than a lion or bear."

"All the more reason to study it," Ennis mumbled under his breath.

Cast sighed. "Why did you want to come up here anyway?"

Ennis tilted his head. “Dox said you had encountered this ‘osaron,’ as you call it, We should ascribe a new name to it. Anyway, I told him we should check to make sure you two were alright.”

A smirk whipped across Cast’s face. “And so the first thing you did was start inspecting the twelve-foot beast we’ve been hunting?”

Ennis’ eyes began to wander, and his fingers made their way to scratching his scalp. “Well, I saw you were okay, so I figured it would be appropriate.”

Cast wrapped his brother in an embrace. He could feel him recoil at first, but Ennis eventually conformed to the hug. “I’m glad you came. I’m safe now” He released him and turned and smiled at Lilakin. Thanks to her, he thought.

“That is what intrigues me most,” Ennis said. “How did you capture it?”

Lilakin’s looked to the ground, still holding her arm. “We’ll talk about that later,” Cast said. “Right now, we need to focus on getting this thing down this damn mountain.”

“You aren’t planning on disposing of it immediately, are you?” Ennis asked. “Please, we must take the time to learn more about it.”

Cast was about to say “of course, we’re going to throw this beast from the side of Lalbahadoor as fast as we can” but stopped. Maybe Ennis was right. There was a chance the osaron would come back. After all, Akuñocu said that the fall probably wouldn’t kill it. And what if another one appeared? They could prepare better if they knew more about it.

Then and there, part of him wanted to say no, they weren’t, but deep down, he knew the reason he wanted to was so he could show everyone in Halses that they were wrong. And it wasn’t worth risking people’s lives to prove he was right. “We have to, Ennis. We can’t risk it.”

Ennis' cheeks indented, meaning he was biting the inside of them. "I understand," he said. "Oh, but just one more look?"

Cast shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ennis." He turned to Lilakin and gestured to the mass of vines. "Think you can bring this creeper down the mountain?" He looked up at the sky. Sru Dran had already replaced Al Dran. "We don't have much more daylight.

"I think so." She moved to stand by the osaron and leaned over the pile. The monster still struggled against its restraints. "It could take..." A sudden and loud pop interrupted her. More followed until the final vine tore, and the osaron's arm was free. Lilakin dove backward, narrowly missing a swipe of the beast's claws. She cursed under her breath. The monster reached for her again and she had to roll further away. Cast drew his sword, which had returned to its unpolished form, and rushed to stand between the two. Patch joined him on the ground. The osaron clawed the vines from its face, releasing a rush of air as it let breath slip in and out.

"Cease this vain struggle." Everyone stared at the beast as it spoke. "Your desperate hold on life will not win you this war."

Ennis took a step closer to the beast. "You had said it could speak, Caster, but I had not realized it was so articulate."

"I told you, it's different from a lion or bear."

Ennis scratched the back of his head. "Even then, it's impressive to see a specimen such as this portray such human abilities."

"Do not relegate me to a mere experiment to be observed," it said. "I am corruption unbound!"

"You seem rather tied up at the moment," Dox said.

The monster roared. As it did so, vines shot from beneath its body and at Dox. Cast swung his sword to chop the vine in two. Instead, it wrapped around his blade, unscathed by its edge, and tore it from his hand. “Lilakin!” He shouted. What are you doing?”

Confusion twisted onto her face. “That was not me.”

He turned back to the osaron, it looking as confused as Lilakin. It looked at its hand and then gripped the vines that held its body. With a tug, they unraveled, allowing the beast to rise to its feet. Terrible laughter rose from the monster. “I say, sometimes, I even surprise myself.”

Cast grabbed his brother by the wrist and turned to run. He called for the others to do the same. But the beast was faster than them. Cast would have been able to outrun it, and perhaps Lilakin too, but there was no way for Dox and Ennis to get away. It was soon on top of them.

More vines rose to combat the osaron, but it swatted them away with ease now, as if they listened to its will now. The beast turned to face Lilakin. “How is this possible?” She said as she dodged the osaron’s attempt to grab her.

Dox darted past Cast, running towards the osaron. Cast reached a hand out to try and stop him, but his friend ducked out of the way of it. He dove at the beast’s leg, curling his arms and legs around it.

The osaron stared down at the boy. It pried him from its leg and lifted him into the air. Another vine whipped the creature in the back. A low growl emitted from its throat and it turned on Lilakin again. “Do you not know the futility of what you do?” She ignored the beast, sending another vine to loop around the arm holding Dox. “Silly child,” it said and flexed its wrist. The vine released with ease, but immediately there was another to replace it, this one with thorns able to pierce the beast’s skin.

Again and again, the beast would break free, but the vines would not stop coming. Lilakin's stare was locked on the osaron with intense focus. "Let. Him. Go." Each word she spat at the beast.

Cast's mind raced, trying to figure out something he could do. His sword had been thrown somewhere beyond where he could see. Even if he had it, he didn't want to leave Ennis, who was now cowering behind him, clutching the back of his shirt. He let his breath slow, slipping back into the pastel world, looking for an answer.

"Pest!" The osaron bellowed. It caught a vine in its hand and pulled, ripping the tendril from the earth. "Enough of this madness." The vine cracked like a whip and wrapped around Lilakin's ankle. The osaron jerked the rope back, yanking her legs from beneath her. Her fingers clawed into the earth as the osaron dragged her across the ground towards itself. She reached the osaron and was lifted into the air beside Dox, held up like trophies of a hunt.

There, beneath the beast, Cast saw more faint white lines. They were faint, like the first time he'd noticed them on his sword. As he focused, they became clearer. The lines were woven together, forming a mesh structure. Like he had before with the blade, he willed the lines to move, this time trying to widen the gaps between the lines. Nothing happened. They wouldn't listen.

Patch climbed onto his shoulder. A dim glow emitted from the small creature, the hairs on its back rising towards the trees above. Cast took a deep breath and concentrated. He didn't need to do so much. Instead, he focused on the area beneath the osaron's left foot. His hands gripped the air in front of him and slowly he pulled them apart.

The ground he had been focused on suddenly ripped open, collapsing the osaron's leg into the small chasm he had created. Taken by surprise, the monster fell, flinging Dox and

Lainie, and landed with a thundering slap. Dust kicked into the air, surrounding the osaron. Cast released his grip on the air, collapsing to the ground.

“Dox! Lilakin!” He called out, unable to see anything through the dust, which looked like a splotch of brown paint. His heart stopped in that brief moment of quiet.

“We’re okay,” he heard Dox shout from the other side of the dust cloud.

“Good,” he said to himself.

After a time, the dust began to settle. Lilakin was clinging onto Dox. Blood was amassing in the cuts she had received from being dragged across the ground. The osaron was kneeling, its leg stuck in the ground, sunk to its knee where the hole had been. It dug at the dirt, trying to tear the ground open.

“Why will the earth not obey me as it does you?” It said. Vines amassed around the beast, wrapping around its arms. It grabbed them and pulled, but the monster did not budge. Finally, it collapsed to the ground, landing on its face, its knee bending at an impossible angle to do so.

Dox and Lilakin, careful to stay out of the osaron’s range, walked back around to the twins. The four children watched the beast struggle in vain. They looked to each other, looks of “what now” on their faces.

“I tire of this tribulation.” It rose again to a kneel, a flower now blooming from where it had risen. “What is this?” Cast’s eye widened. That flower, a blaze of orange and red, was a fire’s breath. The osaron’s fingers wrapped around the flower’s base

Glowing orange spores erupted from the tendrils of the flower, splashing the osaron in sparks, and rained down upon the forest. For a moment, it was beautiful. The sparks dancing peacefully in the air, like lanterns all lit up on festival nights. But as they landed, all caught fire like paper.

Chapter 26

Fleeting Light

The underbrush went first. Shrubs and grass burned, withering from the heat. Low-hanging vines caught, and the fire traveled up their stalks to giant creepers high in the treetops. The clusters fell to the ground, a scattering of bonfires. And then the trees began to catch.

The fire shouldn't have been hot enough to burn trees. Fire's breath was only meant to burn away the underbrush of winter to make way for spring's new life. Despite this, within seconds, the world was burning.

"Run!" Cast wasn't sure who shouted it, but they all did as told. He turned and ran. If he wanted, he could have outrun them all. Escaped the fire without a second worry. But he couldn't leave them. He made sure to keep pace with everyone else.

"No!" The osaron cried out. "Do not leave me!" Cast jerked his head around. The beast was clawing at the ground, its leg still stuck. "Please, do not let me burn! I don't want to burn again." A flaming creeper fell from the trees, enveloping the osaron in fire. There was a chilling scream, filled with an eternity of pain, and then silence. Cast turned his head forward and lifted his shirt to cover his mouth, pushing that sound from his mind.

Soon, the forest, as far as Cast could see, was alight, and the flames were spreading faster than the group could run. “Don’t stop moving!” Cast yelled, not sure if anyone could hear him over the roar of the fire. Patch’s claws dug into Cast’s neck as he struggled not to fall.

In front of them, a tree collapsed, crashing to the ground. Cast grabbed Ennis by the shoulder, pushing his brother behind himself as a shockwave of heat and smoke swallowed them. The smoke filled his mouth despite his covering, the ashy flavor enough to make him want to sick up.

Cast looked down at the burning wood blocking their path. What were they to do? He turned to ask Dox what he thought but found that he was alone with Ennis and Patch, the fire closing around on all sides. “Dox!” He yelled. “Lilakin!”

“We must have been separated in the chaos,” Ennis shouted. “We’ll never find them in this.”

“We have to find them.”

“The best thing we can do is stay alive ourselves.”

Cast hated it, but it was true. There was nothing they could do now. He turned to his brother. “So what do we do?”

Ennis looked around at the scene. His lips were tight, jawline stern. “Get somewhere low and wet. A ditch or something of the sort. Even then, chances are slim, but it’s our best option.”

“A ditch,” Cast repeated. “There should be a ravine right that way.” He pointed to the left of the fallen tree.

Ennis nodded. “If we make it there, we could wait the fire out.”

Cast took his hand. He wasn’t going to lose another friend. The two took off running through the fire again. They jumped over fallen trees and dodged burning debris. Sweat dripped

into Cast's eyes, which he wiped away with his hand. "You know, I've got plenty of water coming out of me."

"That won't work."

Cast laughed despite himself. "I know, Ennis. It was a joke."

"Oh, I see. That's rather clever."

Up ahead, about fifty yards, the ravine came into view. "We're almost there," Cast said. "Stay close." He lowered his head and pushed forward. All around the world was in chaos, but he kept his focus on that ravine. His hand gripped his brother's, not wanting to let go.

They approached the edge and Cast could see that the ravine had been mostly untouched by the fire aside for a few charred sticks and leaves. Good. They could make this work. They could survive. He had done it before and he would pull them through this now.

When they were within the last few feet, Ennis shouted something from behind Cast. His brother tried to stop, but Cast was moving too fast, and their hands tore apart. Cast whipped around to see what the problem was. He was met by Ennis's hands in his chest, shoving him back into the ravine.

As he fell, he saw what his brother had tried to warn him of. A massive spruce, lit brighter than the light of Al Dran, falling towards where he had been. Where his brother now lay, arms outstretched in front of him.

Cast landed, the air flying from his lungs, as the tree collided with the ground. Sparks spewed into the air, dancing into the open sky above. The spruce snapped on the edge of the ravine and the top of the tree hurtled down at Cast. He rolled to the side, tucking Patch beneath him, avoiding the treetop.

Pain surged through his body, he couldn't move. But he needed to. He only looked up into the sky, the light of Si Dran shining down on him. "Ennis," he said softly. He fought to stand, only able to get to his knees. "Ennis," he said again, louder this time. On hands and knees, he crawled to the wall and, using it for support, managed to get to his feet. "Ennis!" He screamed it this time, his voice unrecognizable to himself. After a moment to catch his breath, he climbed back into the smoke and ash.

He heaved himself over the ledge, ignoring the pain burning in his left shoulder. The foggy haze clouded his vision, leaving him to stumble blindly towards the dimming light of the fire, not caring to cover his mouth. When he reached the tree, he fell to his knees and wretched. Bits of black ash dotted the bile.

"Ennis!" He called again. His throat rasped like a wraith calling in the night. Through the smoke, he could make out a form pinned beneath the tree. "Ennis." His voice was but a whisper now, a needle slicing wind.

He didn't think, only moved towards his brother. The fire had weakened after the fall, the top of the tree had been burning the brightest, but the branches still burned his hands as he pushed them aside. Some snapped and turned to dust, but others dug into his arms and legs as he moved deeper into the tree, drawing blood that ran like rivers through the soot and dirt that caked his skin.

As he grew closer, Ennis's form became clearer. The trunk, still glowing orange, crumbling embers flaking off in the breeze, laid on top of him, pinning him to the ground. Ennis must have been unconscious because he was not screaming. The pain must have been immense.

Cast reached beneath the trunk, burning his hands and forearms further, but he paid no mind to the heat and lifted with all his strength. It was as if the tree did not even notice his

attempt. He tried again. Still, the trunk remained in place. "I'm gonna get you out of this," he said. "Don't you worry about a thing."

Again, he pulled, his arms straining for something. Anything. The tree would not move but he did not relent. As he pulled, the world became pastel. The colors shifted and swirled as the fire danced around him. A scream pierced the night, one of ferocity and desperation. It went on for some time before Cast realized it was he who was screaming.

His fingers split the wood from underneath as if it were rotten. Lower down the trunk, the wood splintered, allowing him to lift the section on top of Ennis. Now Cast could rise, lifting the trunk with him. He tipped it onto its base and let it fall the other way.

Cast stood over his brother, who was laying on his stomach. The back of his shirt was burned open, the skin underneath charred and melted. The stench of burning flesh almost made him vomit again. He looked at his hands and saw they looked the same at Ennis's back.

He took his shirt off and laid it on the ground, flipping Ennis over to lay on it. "There you go," he said. It was only then that he noticed his brother's eyes were open. "Ennis?" He asked. "Are you awake?" There was no response. "Ennis." Cast shook him, but Ennis's eyes stayed locked on some invisible thing behind him, mouth slightly ajar.

"No. Please, no." Cast placed his head to Ennis' chest. Nothing. "No, no, no." Tears shaped in the corners of his eyes and he pulled his brother into his lap. "Ennis, please, don't leave me. You can't..." But the light had already left his brother's eyes. They now sat like glass in his skull, vacant like the cag. He didn't look real.

It couldn't be real.

Cast cried out, power coursing through the sound. With it carried a rolling wind that swept over the forest, snuffing out the flames. When reaching the edge of the fire, the gust shot

into the sky, bringing dark clouds, which brought rain pouring onto the smoldering remains of the forest.

But Cast didn't notice the rain. He cradled Ennis's head, rocking them back and forth, stroking the bridge of his brother's nose, and running his hands through his soot-soaked hair. Tears landed on Ennis's face and streaked down his chin as if they had come from him. "Please," Cast pleaded, "wake up."

But, of course, his brother did not. He never would again.

Chapter 27

Sparkling Mind

The precession of mourners made their way to the cemetery on the outskirts of the neckward end of Halses. It should have rained that day, Cast thought, as it had three days ago amongst the smoldering desolation of the forest, but there was stillness in the air and all of Lalahadoor felt at ease.

Leading the procession was the wagon carrying Ennis's body in a much too large a box. Cast and his family walked behind the wagon, and he was able to see that coffin, crafted from pine with elegant carvings etched on the sides just below the lid. He couldn't bring himself to look at it and spent the march staring at anything else.

He looked at the rolling hills surrounding Halses, and the Vast's neck stretching into the sky. He looked at Patch walking beside him and at his hands, the scars now healed as if the fire had happened on a distant day in the past.

His father, however, kept his eyes ahead, locked on that box, the entire way. Since Cast brought his brother home, Hans had barely spoken to anyone, least of all him. He wouldn't even

look at his son. His mother was much the same, but at least now she held his hand as they walked down the dirt path, even if her eyes wouldn't meet his.

The cemetery sat before the crest of a low hill between taller ones. The location was said to give the dead privacy as they moved on, taken by the Higher Dran to wherever dead things went. The graves themselves were above-ground stone crypts, slightly bigger than the coffins they held, stacked on top of one another. They walked between the crypts, each with a name engraved into its side. Most were gray stone, but some had been painted with trims of blue or yellow.

Towards the center was a single open crypt. The stone was clean the others, where grime and stains had built up over time. Beneath it were two other crypts sitting next to each other. The names on the side read Danen Klyosov and Roanie Klyosov, Cast's grandmother and grandfather.

The entire population of the Collar circled around, forced to stand between the graves. They packed in close to one another, only giving space to the Cast and his family. Ennis's coffin was taken from the wagon and lowered into the crypt.

Despite all the people, Cast felt he was alone in the silence of that moment. Not a whisper or a word came from anyone in the cemetery. Even the wind was still for a time.

The quiet broke when his mother started crying. Her head fell into her hands and she covered her mouth, trying to fight back the sobs. Lainie followed soon after along with others from the crowd. Hans finally stepped forward, turning away from the crypt. Cast hadn't seen his father cry at all. He wondered if had done his mourning in private or if the emotion was so much that it could not foster tears.

He cleared his throat, and said, “Thank you all for coming, on behalf of myself and my family, to mourn and to celebrate Ennis’s life with us today.” His voice carried through the area. Even those who had circled to the other side could hear easily. “It is humbling to see the love he received from this community.

“Today, we grieve. Grieve the loss of life, which is always difficult to do. But that is further inflated when life is taken from someone so young, and even further when you must do so for your son. My boy—my Ennis—was a light in this, at times, dark world.

“My, was he smart. All was made bright by his sparkling mind. Would spend most of his time reading histories or the latest philosophies in his room. Even wrote some himself. And he knew people. He had trouble talking to them, but he would study us. Taking his notes in that journal of his, writing down how we interacted with each other. Knew what you were going to say by the expression on your face.

“People wouldn’t dare see the world the way he did. As one unified body affected by each part. Once, I caught a glimpse of this picture he had drawn in his journal. When I asked to see it, let me tell you, I’d never seen him move so fast. It was a collection of letters within circles enveloped and overlapping with other circles. Arrows were strewn all about the page, connecting everything in some way or another.

“It was fascinating, but I had no idea what it meant. Then he pointed out that the letters were actually initials. Sure enough, I saw my family grouped together, the kids in a smaller circle with arrows pointing to the other children in the village. He had created this mapping of how we all connected. The next page was filled with notes about what was happening between people and how it affected their relationship. And beyond that, he would theorize how that relationship affected other relationships and people’s moods and so on.”

Hans's voice was silent for a moment, the smile that had formed on his face sliding back to the reality of where he was. "He was brilliant. And he loved so well, even if it looked different to the rest of us. He loved his mother, his friends, his brother and sister, and even me. Even when I failed him." Tears formed at the corners of his eyes and fell. He took a moment to wipe them away. "May you walk through meadows, dance along mountain tops and valley floors, and sleep beneath the trees. May the High Dran watch over you, my beautiful child, and bring you peace."

Cast stepped forward and reached a hand out towards his father, hoping he would take hold of it and pull him into an embrace. He only stared at it. "Thank you all for coming," Hans said before walking past Cast, into the crowd. Cast watched his father walk through the splitting sea of people. Hans made it to the edge of the cemetery and stopped to look up at the sky.

For a time, people came up to the grave, saying a few words to its open top, and then left, giving their condolences to Cast, Lainie, and their mother as they passed. Cast stopped saying thank you after the fourth group. It was odd to Cast, this ritual that so many of the villagers underwent. Most of them had not had more than a handful of conversations with Ennis yet here they were, having an intimate moment at his grave.

Even when his friends came by, he couldn't help but think that they didn't know him as well as Cast did. They didn't sleep next to him, or care for him when he grew sick, or try to understand the way his brother's mind worked. Most would call Ennis in his eccentricity strange and only play nice words with him when he spoke. It was selfish, he knew that, but he wanted everyone to leave.

"How are you holding up?" Dox had asked him.

What was he supposed to say? That he was doing well? Taking the death of his brother, which he was responsible for, in stride, ready to face the world again. “I’ll be okay,” was what he decided on. In truth, he didn’t think he would be.

It was mid-afternoon when the heavy, stone slab was placed over the opening of the crypt, sealing his brother in darkness forever. Most had gone home by then, leaving only Cast’s family and a handful of others, who slowly trickled out. One of the people still there was Representative Molson, who was talking to Hans at the edge of the cemetery.

“Come now,” Cast’s mother said. “We should be on our way.” Her head was held high now, but Cast could tell she could break at any moment. He looked at his brother’s grave one final time before turning to follow his mother.

The representative joined them on their way back into town. Cast walked behind everyone, staring at the dirt road. “It’s quite the sight, isn’t it?” Molson asked from beside him.

Cast looked at the short man. “What do you mean?”

“The road,” he said. “Infrastructure can be a beautiful thing.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Cast said. What was this man getting at?

“But I much prefer this sight behind us.” The representative raised his hand up and behind him, gesturing to the great green mass rising into the sky. “It’s a view I could stare at forever.” He shook his head. “Good thing I live in Silvalin. I don’t know how people get anything done around here.”

Cast shrugged his shoulders. He wanted the man to go away, back to not acknowledging his presence like before. “You once mistook it for a hill, isn’t that right?” Molson asked but continued before Cast could answer. “Your father wrote to me about that in the first letter he sent

me after he moved back here. Told me how you described the hill and your expression when he told you what it really was.

“I wouldn’t have believed him if I had not already met you and watched you grow and learn for seven years. Would have called it rubbish, but you always did have a curiosity that had its own conscience. Sneaking around the palace in places you shouldn’t be, running through the gardens and courtyards pretending to be on a new adventure every day. When Hans told me I should come, I was relieved to find that you had not changed.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” Cast asked.

“Because I don’t want to see you lose that spark in you,” the representative said.

“With all due respect, that’s the least of my concerns right now.” His eyes found the dirt road again. “Besides, isn’t my curiosity what got Ennis killed?”

“Boy, don’t get yourself talking like that. Worst thing you can do.” Molson’s lips tightened into a tight smile and his eyebrows arched, defining the creases on his forehead. “You didn’t kill your brother.”

“Then tell me why he was just put into that box.” Cast spat the words. “If I had stayed out of this whole mess, I’d still have my brother.”

The representative sighed. “I suppose, yes, that would be the case.” He removed the bowler hat from his head, running his hand through his receding gray hair. “Son, we all make mistakes, the greatest ones when we are trying to do what we think is right. My job revolves around keeping people safe and I could not tell you how many times I have failed in that. It’s something we wear on our chests, for everyone to see, and bear on our backs for the rest of our lives. But we cannot let it define who we are.”

He poked Cast in the chest, and said, “You are brave, Caster Klyosov, and you have a good heart. One that seeks to protect what you love with a ferocity I have yet to see matched by anyone but that man.” He pointed to Hans, who was far ahead of them now. “Be gracious to yourself. It will help you when you need to be gracious to others.”

The man set his hat back onto his head, pushing it down to fit it in place. His step quickened to catch up with the others, leaving Cast to contemplate the meaning of what he had been told.

When they arrived back in town, Molson resigned himself to his room at the inn for the night, leaving the bereaved family to walk into their home alone. The entryway felt empty as they passed through.

Hans headed straight for the stairs. “Where are you going,” Lyndsay asked.

“To my study,” he said, taking the first step. “I have work that needs finishing.”

“Mistress Aldona is coming to make us dinner tonight,” she said. “Please don’t miss it again.”

“I’ll be sure to be down.” He continued up the steps.

When he had reached the top, Cast moved forward. “Wait, pa.”

Hans stopped where he was. His shoulders slumped forward, giving him an aged appearance. He didn’t turn around. “Yes, son?”

Cast walked up the stairs to him, standing directly behind his father, and wrapped his arms around him. He buried his head into his back.

His father sighed. “Please, Cast, not now.” But Cast did not let go of his father. He locked his fingers together. “Let go. I am not in the mood for this.” Hans tried to undo Cast’s grip, but he held on tight.

“Why won’t you talk to me?” Cast’s words were muffled by his father’s shirt. “You won’t even look at me!”

“I told you to let go!” Hans finally broke Cast’s grip and threw him back. Cast rolled down the stairs, landing hard at the bottom. His ears rang, and a metallic taste filled his mouth.

“Hans!” Cast’s mother rushed to his side. She leaned over him, gripping his head.

He pushed her off of him and lifted himself from the ground. “I’m fine.” He put his hand to the side of his head, which throbbed at the pace of his heartbeat. His fingers came back crimson.

“Do you see what happens when you disobey?” Hans stretched out his arms to either side. “The pain it can cause? The destruction it brings?” His arms dropped. “No, you only see what’s in front of you. You were supposed to look after him. Make sure he was safe,” he said. “But you led him head-on into danger.”

“Stop!” Lainie cried. She leaned against the wall, her hands covering her ears. “Please, don’t do this.”

The room fell into silence after that. Cast looked up at his father, his mind trying to cope with what had been said. “I...” He started, but his voice trailed off.

Hans cleared his throat like he had before the eulogy. “If you will excuse me, I must mourn the loss of my son, and pray I may forgive my other so that I might not lose him too.” He walked out of the sight. A moment later, the door to his study slammed shut.

Cast’s mother looked at him. “Your father, he just needs some time.”

“I think we all need some time,” Cast said. He walked out the door into the square, not bothering to close it behind him.

Chapter 28

Grasping

The night air was colder than it should have this time of year. It stiffened Dox's walk which exaggerated the pain from the beating he had just received, the third in as many nights. The others had not been as bad as the first, but that mattered little. He muttered curses to himself under his breath and swore he'd never go back to that forsaken house, but his words lost their heat as he neared the hangout.

Where else would he live? How would he provide for himself? He wasn't old enough to work, not for another half a year. No, he needed the old man, if only for a little while longer. Then he could leave. Then he could make his own way.

He made it to the door of the small, abandoned house they used for their hideout but stopped before opening it. What was that noise? It was soft and quiet, like the gentle moaning of ghosts. He put his ear to the door and heard the distinct muffled sobs and hiccups of someone crying.

It looked like someone had the same idea as him. He opened the door. The front room was empty, but he could hear the crying coming from another room down the hall to the right.

He knocked on the door and the crying stopped. There was a pause for what Dox assumed to be a frantic wiping of nose and eyes, and then a nasally, “Hello.” It was Cast.

“It’s just Dox. Is it alright if I come in?”

There was another pause and then the door opened. It was hard to see in the dark but Dox knew that Cast must have looked a mess then. Patch appeared at Cast’s feet and rubbed its head against his calf. “What are you doing here?” Cast wiped his nose with his sleeve.

“Oh, you know, out for a little late-night stroll.” Dox waited for Cast to respond but didn’t receive any. “And why are you here?”

Cast shook his head as if coming out of some trance. “I was, um, I was just...crying?”

Dox slowly nodded his head. Here he was sulking over his problems when his friend had just lost a brother. “I see.” Dox took Cast’s wrist. “Come on, let’s get out of the dark and cold.” He led them into the front room and had Cast sit down by the fireplace before going to work on getting a fire started with the supply of wood stacked on the floor.

The wood caught easy and they soon had heat and light. Now Dox could see just how disheveled his friend was. Cast’s eyes and nose were red, as Dox had expected, but his hair was unkempt too and parts of it were slicked to the side of his head as if he hadn’t bathed in several days, which was odd since Dox had seen him earlier that day.

Cast sat on the floor with knees curled to his chest, Patch sitting on its hind legs in front of him. The strange creature looked up at him concerned, but Cast’s gaze was fixated blankly on the flames. Dox sat down next to him. He tried to imitate his posture, but his legs were too sore, so he let his legs stretch in front of himself and leaned back on his hands.

“Why are you limping?” Cast asked suddenly. He didn’t look away from the fire.

It took Dox a moment to process what he had just asked. “I’m a bit stiff from the cold, that’s all.” Cast slowly nodded his head. “So why did you come out here? It’s cold and late. I bet your ma and pa are worried about you.”

“I don’t wanna be home,” Cast said. “My room feels empty. I can’t stand to look at his bed. And, and…” He let out a shaky breath. “My pa doesn’t care about me. Not now, anyway.”

“That’s just not true.”

“He threw me into a table,” Cast said. He was looking at Dox now, the look in his eyes a haunted one. “He screamed at me for what I did. Said I should have listened. That I should have been a better brother and a better son.” His gaze slowly drifted back to the fireplace. “Can’t say I blame him.”

The crackling of the fire filled the silence for a time. “That’s not right,” Dox finally said. “He should never talk to you like that. And there is never a good reason to hurt you the way he did.” His voice raised little by little as he spoke. “He’s your father. Your protector, first and foremost. He failed you, Cast. Not the other way around.” Dox waited for a response from Cast, but the room once again fell into silence.

“And I failed Ennis,” Cast said after a few minutes.

“No.” Dox wouldn’t let his friend slip into this way of thinking. “We all knew the risk of going out on that mountain. You were the one to make that clear.”

“And I should have gone alone!” Cast jabbed his thumb into his chest. “I’m the only one who can face the osaron. I should have left you all out of it. But I put you all in harm’s way. And Ennis got killed for it, saving *my* life.”

“Because he loved you!”

“So he gave me a life without him? How is that love? How am I supposed to live knowing he died because of me? I have to go to bed every night looking at that damned empty bed, which is nothing but a tombstone now. And I can’t do it anymore. I don’t know how to do it. Tell me, how do I keep going?”

Dox opened his mouth to say something but no words came. He didn’t know what to say. “I don’t know.”

Patch started purring relentlessly until Cast let him into his lap. He walked in a few circles before lying down and pushing its head against Cast’s hand, demanding to be petted, which Cast did.

“It’s almost as if…” Cast started. “It feels like if I just reach with my mind—if I could reach far enough—I can somehow grasp onto his soul and bring him back. And I know that’s not true. It’s just not possible. But I can’t stop trying. I don’t want to stop trying ’cause when I stop trying that means that he’s gone for good. And when he’s gone for good it means I’m never going to see him again. And that fact keeps bouncing around in the back of my brain, hammering into me. I am never going to see Ennis again. And I can’t come to terms with that. I just can’t.”

Tears started sliding down Cast’s cheeks. He looked Dox in the eyes, green instead of the dark blue he was used to. Cast had changed a lot that day he got new eyes, but he knew that it was nothing compared to what had happened in him the day Ennis died. Dox worried he would never be the same. In his heart, he knew Cast wouldn’t, because, how could he?

“I’m sorry,” Cast said. “I just miss him, you know.”

“I miss him too.” It was all Dox could say. And it was true, he did miss Ennis.

“It’s been three days since he’s gone, and it hurts to see his bed at night. I can’t sleep when I do.” Cast looked back to the fire. He had stopped crying. “It might be selfish, but, to help

me sleep, I tell myself he's gone away on a trip somewhere. He's always wanted to travel somewhere. Back to Silvalin or even all the way to the tail. And I say that he'll be back at the end of the week. In my forced ignorance, I can slip into sleep." He paused for a long moment, letting the flames dance in his eyes. "But I know soon that week will be up."

Dox shook his head. "I don't think that's selfish. I think that's sane." The wind outside blustered suddenly and howled as it ran by the house and Patch curled tighter on Cast's lap. Dox sighed. "What are you gonna do now?"

"I'm not sure," Cast said. "I don't know if Pa will ever want to see me again."

"You know that's not true."

"You didn't see him. He was angry, Dox. First time I've ever seen him so angry." Cast's entire body shook as he spoke. "I just wanted to hug him, but he pushed me away."

Shivers visibly ran through Cast and Dox knew he was holding back another sob. Before he could, Dox pulled his friend into an embrace. "I'm sorry he did that, Cast. It's inexcusable." Cast sat limply for a moment before hugging Dox back.

"He hates me," Cast said through his sobs. His grip around Dox strengthened.

"He doesn't hate you." Cast slowly pulled away from Dox. Tears clung to his cheek. "He loved Ennis, and he loves you and Lainie."

"How do you know that?"

Dox didn't know what to say. How was he supposed to explain to Cast that he could see the joy in his family? Something he had never experienced. And that, despite all they had been through, he didn't see in Cast's father what he saw in his grandfather. There was only one thing he could say.

“Because...” Dox trailed off. His gut clenched in anticipation of the words he could not form. His cheeks grew warm and then he felt the streaks of wet. It was his turn to cry, but his voice didn’t shake as he spoke. “Because he’s not my grandfather.”

“What do you mean?” Cast asked.

Dox turned his head away, blinking to keep the tears from coming. He didn’t know how to say it. The bruises began to grow warm beneath his shirt. He couldn’t speak so he would have to show. Slowly, Dox stood.

“What are you doing, Dox?”

He lifted his shirt to reveal the dark blacks and purples of his grandfather’s work blotting his stomach. Areas of green and yellowish hues dotted his sides, the bruises of the past few days mixing with ones of beatings of long ago.

He felt the gaze of his friend against his naked skin. Would he think him weak? “Your father cares for you, Cast. My grandfather cares only about how well I match up to Dosiner. If one thing is wrong, he needs to correct it.”

Cast rose to stand with Dox, realization dawning on his face. With trembling fingers, he reached to touch Dox’s skin. “What did he do to you?” Dox pulled his shirt down when Cast’s hand got too close. “Sorry,” Cast said as his hand fell away. Another gust of wind slammed against the side of the house and was soon followed by the gentle pattering of rain.

“It’s okay.” Dox’s eyes locked on the floor to his right. The wood glowed orange in the light of the fire.

“How did I not know?” Cast said, but he was speaking to himself.

“How could you?” His grandfather made sure to only bruise places that could be covered. “It’s fine. He doesn’t do it often.”

Cast stared blankly at him. “That doesn’t matter. Why didn’t you tell me? We could’ve stopped him.”

“You think I didn’t want to?” Dox said. “Every day, I live in fear of what he will do to me. I wonder how I will fail him and how he will correct me.”

“That’s not correcting you,” Cast said. He grabbed Dox by his collarbone. “We need to tell someone.”

Dox shook Cast off of him. “No!” The room fell silent. The rain continued to fall on the roof, harder now, drowning out the crackling of the fire. Dox took a deep breath and wiped the tears from his eyes. “No, we can’t tell anyone about this. Okay?” He tried to get some sort of confirmation from Cast, but he said nothing. “That isn’t why I told you about it.”

“Then why?”

“So you would know that your pa didn’t push you away because he hates you. He’s in pain and made a mistake,” Dox said. “One he’ll have to answer for, but I don’t want that take away from the man he is. I told you, he isn’t my gramps. If I had to guess, he’s tearing himself up over it right now.”

Cast nodded his head. “I guess you could be right.” The tall boy scratched the back of his neck like he always did when he was thinking. “We gotta tell someone,” Cast repeated.

“It would only make things worse.”

“How?”

“It just...It just would.” Dox lowered himself down to the ground, ignoring the pain from his sore legs. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” Dox muttered.

Cast ignored his request. “Is that why your legs are sore?”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it.” He said it louder this time. Why would Cast not understand there was nothing to be done about it?

“And I don’t want my friend living in pain,” Cast said. He was standing over Dox now.

Dox’s belly filled with fire and he could feel the flames of his tongue wanting to lash out. He breathed in. And then out. “Leave it be, Cast. Would you?” He gestured towards the fireplace. “Put another log on.”

Cast stood with his mouth agape but did as he was asked. The fire flared up and Cast joined Dox on the floor again. They sat staring at the flames. “What happened to us?” Cast asked.

“I’m not sure,” Dox said, glad to move on from the conversation.

They sat on the floor for some time, not saying anything. The rain continued to pour outside and the wind roar. Eventually, Cast spoke. “You know, sometimes, I think back to that first day we saw the osaron.”

“What about it?”

“I wish I had never chased after it. I should have gone down with you,” Cast said. “Maybe things would be different now.”

Dox shrugged his shoulders. “It might have been someone else’s problem,” he said. “But it could have still been ours.”

Cast nodded his head. “That it could have.”

“I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I would wish that thing on anyone else.”

“I would,” Cast said. “I would to get Ennis back.”

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

“I guess I don’t really feel myself right now.”

The heat from the fire had started to dry out Dox's cheeks and lips. His skin tightened around his face. He licked his lips. "I know how you feel." A sudden yawn erupted from Dox and he stretched his arms above his head before laying on his back. "Are we sleeping here tonight?"

"It is raining."

"That settles it then," Dox said. He stood up. "Where are the blankets? I'm not getting wet."

The blankets were kept in a back closet for during winters when it was cold in the house. The wool was rough but the two laid them out on the ground in front of the fireplace and wrapped themselves within their scratchy warmth. They didn't say anything and let the dying crackling of the fire and the patters of rain slowly ease them into sleep.