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Turning Heartache into Hope:
How Fantasy Reveals Spiritual Truth about Sin, Suffering, and Redemption

A Thesis Submitted

by

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Dedication

To Jesus Christ, my Savior

and

In memory of my mother, Tommie Z. Bricker (1971-2016)

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Chapter 1

Artist Statement

Some ideas start as small as seeds before growing into something larger. In 2020, I submitted a short fantasy story based on the biblical account of Jonah to a teen devotional called *Unlocked*, which was accepted and published. Following in the same vein of an allegorical fantasy story, I began brainstorming ideas for other submissions. One of these ideas was of an older man living in the woody parts of a mountain range, whose job was to lead people through the mountains to the Prince's Kingdom. The problem was that he was no longer doing his job. People could not find their way to the Kingdom and were getting hurt or killed because of the lack of guidance. While people around him were losing their way and perishing, the older man was living in a comfortable cabin, free from care because of his self-sufficiency. One day, his smug existence is interrupted by a young shepherd, who confronts the older man and convinces him to repair the signage on the mountain pass.

Impetus, Background, and Process

Originally, the micro story was meant to serve as a devotional that illustrates what happens when the church stops doing its job of evangelizing and making disciples. The story sprang from my reflections on the present condition of the church in the West, specifically in America, where some Christians seem content to stay isolated away in buildings. Instead of participating in the mission of making disciples of all nations as Christ commands, many Christians are stagnant (Matt. 28:19). David Platt, a pastor and author, says that the grim reality of unreached areas is not the fault of God; instead, "The injustice lies in Christians who possess the gospel and refuse to give their lives to making it known among those who haven't heard" (159). Therefore, the image of an older man idling away his life and ignoring his responsibilities

seemed to fit my perspective of American churches in general. Like the older man, many Christians need someone to open their eyes to the reality of the world around them.

As I devoted more thought to the work, the story bloomed into something unexpected. It was no longer a strict allegory about the state of the modern church in America, although parallels are still present. The older man and the young shepherd came to life as unique characters with individual histories and personalities. Instead of being a caricature, the older man became a complex character named Creighton, who had grown bitter toward the Prince and resented his job as a mountain guide or Mountain Pass Keeper because of personal loss. He also grew tired of seeing other people suffer and die on the journey. I learned that underneath his bitterness and desire for self-sufficiency was the buried pain of experiencing the death of a loved one.

Throughout the fiction classes and workshops in the MFA program, I created a stronger plot and completed a character chart for Creighton. By completing these assignments, I began to think more deeply about Creighton's past and the history of Cairn. The ancient stories about the Prince, the role of the Keeper, and Obsidian are all connected to Creighton's life. Thus, worldbuilding and crafting characters became interwoven activities.

Vision for the Work

Once I realized that Creighton's history of losing a loved one influenced his bitterness and isolation, the vision for my work became clear. His struggle is with the question of why evil and suffering exist. The question also applies to the other villagers in the story who experience hardship and suffering, such as Duncan and Beathan's desperate journey to cross the mountain pass to get food for their families to survive the winter, or Bridgit's forced involvement in a bandit gang. In writing *The Mountain Pass Keeper*, I want to create a story that honestly portrays

the effects of sin and death in the world while also showing that there is hope because of the redemption Jesus offers us.

In terms of theology, redemption means to be freed from sin. Redemption can occur because of Jesus's atoning sacrifice on the cross, where He paid for the sins of humankind, and results in "the actual forgiveness of sins" (Allen 26). In the story, Creighton will experience the power of redemption when Duncan, the young shepherd, willingly takes Creighton's place during the battle with the dragon Obsidian. Duncan's sacrifice mirrors Christ's sacrifice and transforms Creighton. Although the entire journey impacts Creighton, the climax point is Duncan's sacrifice.

Another way I hope to show redemption in the story is through the symbol of the sword. The old stories of Cairn speak of how the Prince was killed by the sword after the villagers grew restless with the attacks of the dragon. Padraig, the Prince's close friend, follows the Prince's instructions to use that same sword to wound and defeat the dragon. Later in the story, Creighton learns that the sword has the power to heal those inflicted with the dragon's curse. Thus, the sword meant to harm brings healing, in the same way, that "by his wounds we are healed" (*New International Version*, Isa. 53:5).

In addition to Duncan's sacrifice and the sword, I plan to show how Creighton's transformation impacts Cairn. As a result of Duncan's sacrifice, and ultimately the Prince's, Creighton receives a renewed purpose and hope. The problem of suffering and hardship is still present in Cairn, but it has been answered. Until the day the Prince returns to slay Obsidian, Creighton has work to do. He creates maps for the villagers, trains Duncan as his apprentice, and works with Bridgit to establish hostels along the mountain pass to provide weary and sick

travelers with a place to rest and heal. His newly found hope motivates him to bring hope to others.

Creighton's redemption and transformation mirror the change that comes in a person's life after knowing Jesus. Redemption comes at a great cost and radically impacts how the redeemed interacts with the world. I desire *The Mountain Pass Keeper* to be what Andrew Peterson, a Christian singer, songwriter, and author, describes as "a tale whose fictional beauty begets beauty in the present world and heralds the world to come" (*Adorning*, 73). Just as Creighton will bring hope to others because of his redemption, my story has the potential to encourage readers to think about how they can impact the world around them.

Therefore, I want my story to show the truth about sin and suffering in the world, but also that there is hope and redemption. As readers experience another world and meet the characters, I hope they can connect emotionally with the story and feel a longing for a better world. My prayer is that the longing will lead them to search for the source of their desire, which is ultimately found in Christ. Once they find His gift of grace and hope, then they, too, can spread the gift to others.

Literary Context: Genre, Influence, and Setting

Although I mentioned the influence of allegory, my story is a fantasy. A basic definition of fantasy is that it is a form of "[f]iction about imaginary worlds or happenings" (Turco 78). In this genre, the story takes place in a world that is unlike our own, usually with elements of magic and mythical creatures, although there can be similarities to the real world. Many well-written fantasies introduce readers to worlds that are uniquely created yet mirror reality. For example, Harry Potter's world is not completely foreign to readers since Rowling's wizards live in the normal world yet have access to magical places. Even in those magical places, there is a

semblance of reality. Therefore, fantasy as a genre can include magic, mythical creatures, and otherworldly places, but can also include aspects that resemble the real world.

In addition to understanding that fantasy is not completely separated from reality, it is important to acknowledge that not all stories within the genre are equal in purpose and intent. Some fantasy literature is written to entertain or provide an escape, which has its place. However, other works of fantasy present a sudden turning of the story that leads to joy, which J. R. R. Tolkien called a eucatastrophic tale (“On Fairy-Stories,” 384). I agree with Tolkien that such a turn in the story can serve as “a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world” (387). Not only does this type of fantasy move a reader emotionally, but it also points to the greatest and truest story, that of Jesus’s coming, death, and resurrection (387-388). Great literary works such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* accomplish this goal, which set them, and stories like them, apart from other forms of fantasy. I am not claiming to be of the same caliber as writers like Tolkien or Lewis, but the evangelium or gospel is central to my story, which is why I place *The Mountain Pass Keeper* in the context of their fantasy novels.

In considering the context of my creative work, though, I acknowledge that I have read a variety of fantasy books. As a child, I enjoyed reading *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll and books by Cornelia Funke, such as *The Thief Lord* and *Dragon Rider*. Throughout my teenage years, I read numerous other fantasies, some that did have a strong Christian foundation such as *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien and *The Hidden Arrow of Maether* by Aiden Beaverson, but also others that were based on old fairytales or folklore like *East* by Edith Pattou and *Winterling* by Sarah Prineas. Works such as the epic poem *Beowulf*, the classic *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* translated by J. R. R. Tolkien, and the medieval stories *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* and *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* by Howard

Pyle were also impactful. Thus, while I do place *The Mountain Pass Keeper* within a genre of books that have solidly Christian themes, a variety of authors and styles has influenced my interest in fantasy literature.

The discussion of literary context involves setting as much as genre. Like other fantasy stories, *The Mountain Pass Keeper* has a unique background and history. Within the fictional world of Cairn, there are many different villages scattered throughout the Carraig Uaine mountain range, which is famous for its green forests and abundant plant life. I chose the names “Cairn,” “Carraig,” and “Creighton” because their Scottish Gaelic meanings are connected to rocks and match the setting of the story. All the villages are blocked to some degree from the Prince’s Kingdom because of the mountain range. Certain villages, like Wealshire, have easier access to the Kingdom than a village that is farther away, such as Clachan.

In the past, thousands of years before the story takes place, a black fire dragon named Obsidian roamed the Carraig Uaine mountains, making the mountain pass even more dangerous. He ravaged the lush, green land and terrorized the villagers, demanding sacrifices of livestock. Despite the offerings to appease Obsidian’s wrath, he often destroyed villages and killed people for the sake of enjoyment. The people became weary and restless from the attacks. When help did not come, they grew angry towards the Prince. Hearing that Obsidian would stop his attacks if someone killed the Prince, a group of disgruntled villagers conspired against the Prince and murdered him.

However, the Prince already knew about his coming death. He forged a sword, the same sword he is killed by, and left a note instructing his friend, Padraig, to fight Obsidian. During the battle, Padraig pierces the dragon’s armor and weakens him because of the properties of the sword. The dragon crawls back into a cave, deep underground where liquid fire flows, to gain

strength. Padraig becomes the first Mountain Pass Keeper of Cairn, appointed by the Prince, to protect the pass and lead the people to and from the Kingdom and the other villages to trade and sell their goods.

Many years after these events, Creighton becomes the Mountain Pass Keeper as a young man. He experiences the loss of a loved one and witnesses the suffering of others in villages and during the journeys he takes as a Keeper, which makes him grow bitter. With careful thought and preparation, he decides to retire from his position. He places signs along the mountain pass to guide the villagers, assuming they will keep the paths clear through frequent travel. Instead of leading the people, as was his job, he isolates himself away from the other people of Cairn in his cabin at the edge of the Carraig Uaine mountains, near the Wildwood where people do not enter. Content with his cabin, a garden, a few chickens, and plenty of wood to whittle, he has all he needs to live.

During the years of Creighton's absence, people attempt to travel the pass, but many find the journey confusing and dangerous. Bandits begin to prey on unsuspecting villagers, stealing their goods, adding to the physical danger of the mountain pass. Over time, a few signs remain, but others rot or are changed by thieves. The paths through the mountains become overgrown and unrecognizable.

Twenty years after Creighton's "retirement," young Duncan and his friend Beathan decide to cross the mountain pass. Numerous people in their village of Clachan are suffering from a lack of food and they have no way of trading with other villages. Both Duncan and Beathan are shepherds and farmers, but they resolve to cross the mountain pass to get to the Kingdom and ask for assistance while also selling sheep and other goods to provide for their families. Their plan goes awry, though, when their "guide" turns out to be a thief and takes their

valuable goods, leaving them stranded. When Duncan and Beathan try to continue their journey, they are left to follow scattered, rotten signs and an overgrown path. Their circumstances worsen when the black fire dragon awakens and decides to make an appearance.

Modern readers might wonder why Duncan and Beathan do not pick up a cell phone and call for help or snap pictures of the unkempt mountain pass to report to the authorities. The reason they do not respond in that way is because Cairn is a society without modern technology like phones, computers, television, or the internet. Instead of cars or trains, the inhabitants of Cairn must travel on foot, by cart, or by horse to reach their destination. The world that Creighton and Duncan live in is more similar to the medieval period than the modern period.

In addition to resembling the medieval period because of the lack of modern electronic inventions, Cairn is also like a medieval society in terms of occupation and culture. Most of the villagers are farmers, though there are a few in the villages that hold other trades such as smiths, weavers, and potters. Wealthier villages have a more diverse mixture of occupations, although the majority remain farmers. In the Prince's Kingdom, there are scribes, painters, healers, and storytellers whose skills are meant to bless others. In the story, Bridgit is a healer, whose job is like that of a doctor or nurse, though she uses herbs and natural medicine instead of modern medicine and equipment. However, there are not as many people trained in these skills as in previous times, and not many people remember the famous storytellers or healers.

Significance of the Work as a Christian Scholar

An author's background and beliefs affect his or her writing, as all writing can be seen as a reflection of the writer. From a biblical viewpoint, God created us in His image, and we reflect His qualities because He is our Creator (Gen. 1:27). Similarly, the things we create will reflect us, although we do not create in the same sense that God does. An example of a work reflecting

its author is J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In a letter to Father Robert Murray from 1953, he wrote, "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" (*The Letters of*, 109). His Christian faith is reflected in his work because his faith is a part of who he is (Bruner and Ware xiv). Likewise, I believe that as a writer, I cannot separate my identity as a Christian from the stories I write.

From a Christian perspective, then, I approach the topic of sin, suffering, death, hope, and redemption based on the teachings of the Bible. The book of Genesis shows us that God created all things, including the first humans, Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:1-27). He declared everything He made good (Gen. 1:31). However, Adam and Eve disobeyed God's instructions and ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:4-7). Their act of disobedience brought sin and death into the world (Rom. 5:12, 18). Not only were humans affected, but so was the rest of creation (Rom. 8:21-23). Scripture shows us that sin, suffering, and death are present in life because we live in a fallen world.

As bleak as the picture of reality is, there is a shining ray of hope. God had a plan, from the beginning, to redeem humankind and renew creation (Gen. 3:15). Instead of leaving humans in their darkened state, Jesus lovingly chose to identify with humanity by becoming a man, which enabled Him to bear all of humankind's sin on the cross (Phil. 2:6-8). Because of His sacrifice, He paid the price to free us from sin. Through faith in His death and resurrection, people receive freedom from the bondage of sin and the gift of eternal life.

In addition to Jesus coming to the world to save humankind, the truth of His incarnation shows that He empathizes with human suffering. Christ can identify with those who suffer because He is "a man of suffering, and familiar with pain" (Isa. 53:3). When Lazarus died, Jesus

wept for him and experienced grief just as people today experience sorrow because of the loss of a loved one (John 11:33-35). On the cross, Christ also experienced terrible suffering, demonstrating that He can empathize with human pain and suffering. As Ann Ahrens notes in her essay about Jesus's suffering, "Christ died not only for our sin, but for our suffering: abuse, neglect, abandonment, loss, sickness, pain, grief, fear. Indeed, within his death is bound up the entirety of the broken human condition" (181). Christianity presents the truth of a God who paid the price to free humankind from the curse of sin and death, but also to show that He cares and understands our suffering. Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, proved His loving concern and empathy when He gave up His life for us.

In addition to being a symbol of redemption, the cross also reminds individuals that God can use evil for His good. Scripture tells us that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Rom. 8:28). Christians have various views on why the Lord allows evil and suffering. Entire theological and apologetic discussions take place over the issue of balancing God's sovereignty and the presence of evil in the world. However, the Bible is clear that God can take a terrible situation and bring good from it. For example, He used the situation of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers to bring about the rescue of numerous people from famine (Gen. 50:20). God is perfect and holy and cannot do evil, but He can use bad events, including the sinful actions of others, to bring about His will. The ultimate example of God turning a horrendous act into something good was when the Father used the Son's painful death by crucifixion to bring about salvation.

The biblical teaching of salvation is relevant to the problem of sin, suffering, and death. In Christ, believers are transformed and given a new life filled with hope and purpose. They also receive the assured promise of resurrected bodies and a renewed creation in the future (1 Cor.

15:53-55; Rev. 21:5). At the new creation, God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4). Therefore, the gospel or evangelium is central to the question of suffering and evil because in salvation we receive the solution to our sin, pain, and sorrow, both now and for the future.

The topic of suffering and hope is significant because I believe in God’s Word, but also because I have personally encountered the effects of death when my mother passed away in 2016 due to heart failure. Although in hindsight, I can see the signs of her decline, her death came as a shock to me. I did not expect to lose my mother when I was nineteen. Her passing opened my eyes to the reality and pain of death, casting me into the unfamiliar territory of grief. My life was upturned, and I felt alone in the valley of the shadow of death. In many ways, I could relate to Creighton’s desire to seal himself off and protect himself from further hurt because the world is often a dark, frightening, and unsafe place where loved ones die, and people suffer.

In the midst of my grief, though, Jesus comforted me. I had already placed faith in Jesus’s death and resurrection at the age of sixteen, but I found that I did not have a close relationship with Him until my mother’s passing. My sorrow pushed me to Him, making me rely on Him to get through each day. He gave me hope even as I felt like I was stumbling around in the dark. In Jesus, I found a living God who loves me and died for me so I can have hope and purpose now and in the future. He is the answer to the problem of sin in the world, for He suffered most of all when He bore our sins on the cross, bringing redemption for us and the promise of a new creation. Because Jesus is alive, I know that sin and death are defeated.

The issue of sin and evil is not a mere abstract idea reserved only for philosophers and theologians to discuss. Since fiction deals with relevant issues through the eyes of life-like

characters, then the problem of sin and evil is important for writers, especially Christian writers. I am not trying to answer the complexities of the question of evil and suffering, but to present the story of a character who experienced the pain of loss and comes to know the love of God. Only through encountering the powerful love of God expressed through Duncan and the Prince does Creighton learn that there is hope in his suffering. He does not have all the answers, but he learns to trust in the One who is the solution to all his questions and guilt. Through the story of *The Mountain Pass Keeper*, I have the opportunity and responsibility to show the reality of human sin and suffering while also reminding readers that there is hope because of the living Savior, Jesus Christ.

Chapter 2

Critical Paper – Literature Review

During moments of tragedy and pain, humans long for their suffering, and the suffering of others, to end. They ache for a place where pain and loss no longer knock at their doors. Perhaps that's why people immerse themselves in the tales of fantasy in which the presence of hope casts out the shadows of evil and death in the world. Fantasy as a genre has a history of appealing to our suspicion that there is something wrong in this world and that there must be something better. Using the medium of story and elements such as Christ figures and themes of sacrifice, fantasy literature written by Christians effectively conveys spiritual truth about sin and redemption, reminding readers that there is hope amid suffering. In my novel, *The Mountain Pass Keeper*, I follow the tradition of fantasy literature by conveying the power of redemption, while also hoping to add to the genre by featuring an older protagonist instead of a younger hero whose struggle with past loss converges with an ancient battle between good and evil.

Allegory and Fantasy

Before examining how key seminal texts convey spiritual truth about sin and redemption, showing that there is hope in a world filled with suffering and loss, the issue of allegory and allegorical elements need to be discussed. Multiple authors in history have used allegory to illustrate Christian truth, such as Edmund Spenser's presentation of Christian virtues through various knights in his epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*. Other examples of Christian allegory in literature include Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the legendary tale of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and John Bunyan's well-known depiction of the Christian life in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. However, many fantasy authors do not appreciate the term "allegory" applied to their works. Alexandra de Moffarts explains that

this is because allegory “shows a certain disrespect for the material (fictional) world” (80). Since Christian allegory focuses on the spiritual instead of the physical realm of the story world, allegory presumably lessens the effect of fantasy. Hence, J. R. R. Tolkien was insistent that *The Lord of the Rings* is not an allegory, although he acknowledged what he called “applicability” (*The Letters of*, 162). The discussion of allegory, then, is vital to understanding fantasy works and how authors incorporate elements that show the Christian message about sin and redemption.

To completely understand the debate over Christian allegory in fantasy, readers must consider *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan. Students of fantasy will find that literary critics, scholars, and authors set up Bunyan’s work as the epitome of allegory (Van Dyke 156). C. S. Lewis used *The Pilgrim’s Progress* to clarify in a letter to children in a fifth-grade class that his books in *The Chronicles of Narnia* were not like Bunyan’s work in which “everything in the books ‘represents’ something in this world” (*Letters*, 44). Following the same line of thought, scholars traditionally recognize that elements in Bunyan’s work have double meanings, in that everything in the book represents something else. Julie Campbell uses *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in her scholarly article as a determining point for allegory since the work contains “the primary literal level and a secondary underlying level that requires exegesis by the reader” (90). At the very least, scholars view Bunyan’s work as an example of what allegory is, which is used as a measuring rod for allegorical or symbolic elements in fantasy literature.

Although *The Pilgrim’s Progress* does contain allegory, there are other scholars who argue that the work falls into the category of a fantasy novel. C. N. Manlove highlights that many parts of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* are realistic to the story world that Bunyan creates, which lessens the effect of the allegory (30). He even states that “In a sense Bunyan is more of a writer of fantasy than of allegory” (34). Alison White prefers a different term based on Tolkien’s use of

Faerie, calling parts of *The Pilgrim's Progress* “an evangelical fairytale” (42). Careful readers will notice the underlying Christian message of the work, but also the elements that resemble other fantasy works. One example that stands out is Christian’s fight with Apollyon, where he struggles with the terrifying beast that “was clothed with scales like a fish (and they are his pride), he had wings like a dragon, feet like a Bear, and out of his belly came Fire and Smoke, and his mouth was as the mouth of a Lion” (Bunyan 74). After Christian fights Apollyon and stabs the monster with his double-edged sword, “Apollyon spread out his Dragon’s wings and flew away” (78). The biblical imagery and allusions in the scene highlight the spiritual warfare concept Bunyan is conveying, but the scene also resembles fantasy works in which a hero defeats a monster, such as the defeat of Smaug in *The Hobbit* (Tolkien 250-251). Therefore, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is allegorical in a sense, but it can also be seen as a form of fantasy.

The images in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, thus, demonstrate that certain literal elements in a story can represent difficult or abstract concepts. None of the other fantasy works I am going to discuss in this paper use overt allegory like Bunyan is known for, but they do present spiritual truth through story, creating images for readers that show sin and its effects in the world, as well as including Christ figures that bring redemption through sacrifice. Thus, fantasy authors with seminal works in the fantasy genre, like John Bunyan, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, J. K. Rowling, and Andrew Peterson, use literary elements to convey spiritual truth.

Seminal Texts and the Problem of Sin and Suffering

In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the central problem for Graceless, the man readers come to know as Christian, is quickly established. The picture of Christian at the beginning of the story is one of desperation and sadness. Clothed in rags, he tells his family, “I ... am undone by reason of a burden that lies hard upon me; moreover, I am informed for certain that our city will be burned

with fire from Heaven” (Bunyan 6). He wants relief from the weight of the burden and to escape the coming destruction but does not know how. Even death does not offer the hope of rescue because he knows “this burden upon my back will sink me lower than the grave” (7). From the start, readers recognize that there is a shadow over Christian’s life, and he desires to change his hopeless state.

Although Bunyan could have written about sin in an abstract way, the image of being weighed down by a burden gives a concrete image to the reader. People can better understand the concept of sin through Christian’s burden, which is something that he cannot remove from himself even after he decides to leave the City of Destruction. The opening scene is filled with biblical allusions, including the presence of the burden which reflects Psalm 38:4 (Davies 26). In the King James Version, this verse reads, “For mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me.” Using biblical language about sin, Bunyan creates an image of the human condition by using a physical object to represent a spiritual reality.

At first glance, readers may assume that C. S. Lewis’s well-known fantasy *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* fits into the realm of allegory. As was already shown, Lewis denied that his work was an allegory in the same sense as *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Richard Angelo Bergen, an Inklings scholar, also argues that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* “is not, generically speaking, allegory” (55). Although Lewis’s work does not have the same use of allegory as Bunyan’s classic, he does show readers, through story, important truths about the Christian message.

No burdens sit on the backs of the Pevensie children in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, but problems do loom. The Second World War forced them to leave their home and live with an old professor in the countryside. While there, Lucy tells her siblings about a magical

wardrobe that is the entrance to another world filled with snow and a nice faun. Despite Edmund finding out that Lucy's stories are true, he denies the existence of the other world in front of his older siblings. However, the central problem in the story is that Edmund becomes a traitor. He makes a deal with Jadis, the Witch who calls herself the Queen of Narnia, to betray his siblings. As a result of his traitorous act, the "moral foundations of the Narnian universe ... [are] undermined" (Walsh 142). In accordance with the Deep Magic, Edmund belongs to the Witch. As she says in the story, "His blood is my property" (Lewis, *The Lion*, 175). A price must be paid for his betrayal according to the Deep Magic; a price that is only paid in death.

Edmund stands out among the Pevensie children because of his guilt as a betrayer. In his personal letters, Lewis notes that "Edmund is like Judas a sneak and a traitor" (*Letters to Children*, 93). However, readers may find that they are more like Edmund than they might want to admit. Even for those who have never had siblings, his desire for revenge is relatable. People often long to be avenged for wrongs. Hence, Edmund can be seen as a representative of humanity, even though he remains a distinct and unique character. His breaking of the ancient law reflects the truth that everyone has broken God's perfect Law (Rom. 3:23). Through Edmund's character and actions, readers can see the problem of sin, which demands punishment and payment.

Like Lewis, Tolkien denied that *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory. In a long letter to Milton Waldman explaining the connection between *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien specifically stated that "I dislike Allegory – the conscious and intentional allegory" (*The Letters of*, 94). In contrast to allegory, Tolkien views his stories of Middle-earth as works of myth. To Tolkien, a myth or fairy-story "reflect[s] and contain[s] in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary 'real' world"

(94). While Tolkien acknowledges that a story can convey a religious truth, he also sees the value in not overtly showing the religious elements. For example, he found fault with the Arthurian legends because they were too explicit in presenting the practice of Christianity in religious form (94). Central themes in Tolkien's work are subtle instead of explicit since he did not appreciate overt allegory.

Although *The Lord of the Rings* is not an allegory, it is a work of literature deeply influenced by the Christian message which is why it has Christian imagery and themes. Tolkien stated in a letter that he intended *The Lord of the Rings* to be "consonant with Christian thought and belief" even though it would not neatly fit into "formalized Christian theology" (*The Letters*, 216). Specific characters and places do not correspond with biblical people or locations, but the story does deal with significant themes related to the gospel message. Images and scenes in the book reflect spiritual truth that impacts people in the real world.

The problem in Middle-earth at the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring* is found in a small object in the possession of a hobbit, a race of folk in Tolkien's fantasy. When Bilbo departs for the mountains on his 111th birthday, he leaves a special ring with his cousin and heir, Frodo Baggins. Not only does Bilbo's absence impact Frodo, but the newly acquired ring presents other problems. Frodo begins to hear rumors of a spreading evil in Middle-earth (Tolkien, *The Fellowship*, 47). Eventually, he learns from the wizard, Gandalf, that the ring is the legendary One Ring that can rule all the other rings, created by the dark lord Sauron with the intent of controlling Middle-earth (65-66). All these events lead to Frodo leaving the Shire and eventually embarking on the quest to destroy the Ring in the fires of Mount Doom.

Over the course of the books, readers learn that the Ring has the power to corrupt the one who wears it. An obvious example of this is Gollum or Smeagol, a former hobbit who

transformed physically into a hideous creature because he possessed the Ring for numerous years. In addition to corrupting those who wear the Ring, it is also tempting to those who desire the power and immortality it imparts to the owner. Smeagol took possession of the Ring after murdering his friend Deagol, which shows the extent individuals will go to gain the power the Ring holds (63). As a hobbit, Frodo is better suited to the role of Ring-bearer and is specifically chosen for the task, although he becomes affected by the Ring as well. In its evil power, the Ring is always working to return to its master.

Like the image of the burden in *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Edmund's treachery in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, the One Ring in *The Lord of the Rings* gives a picture of spiritual truth: the temptation of ultimate power. The Ring not only makes the owner ruler over all the other magic rings but also makes the bearer immortal. As Kath Filmer notes, "The Ring's power is directed at the self, the ego, or in Biblical terms, the carnal nature" (20). The evil of Sauron and the Ring tempts the sinful nature of people. Even Gandalf, who uses his powers for good to help those who are weak and helpless, is tempted by the power of the Ring. When Frodo offers him the ring, Gandalf says "Do not tempt me! I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself" (Tolkien, *The Fellowship*, 67). Other characters in the story, including Boromir and Lady Galadriel, are also tempted by the One Ring. Therefore, the effects of temptation and sin are central to Tolkien's story.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien brings readers into a war between good and evil, which is an epic archetype that many fantasy books include. A modern example of such a fantasy is J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. From the beginning of the series, readers see the influence of the evil wizard, Voldemort. He killed Harry's parents and intended to kill Harry as an infant to stop an important prophecy, but because of Lily Potter's love for her son, Harry was saved from

Voldemort's killing curse. Harry is the Boy Who Lived, which makes him central to the battle against Voldemort's evil plans to conquer the wizarding world and enslave muggles.

Rowling's story is a fantasy work, but there are significant Christian themes and deeper meanings. In his book that surveys the literature that influenced the *Harry Potter* series, John Granger compares *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* to medieval mystery plays and allegories, including *The Pilgrim's Progress* (119). Major similarities exist in the story between characters and biblical truths, which would suggest the presence of allegorical elements. A significant example is the symbolism of Voldemort, who epitomizes evil and sin. Some scholars have interpreted him as a type of Satan, because of his serpent-like characteristics and his snake companion, Nagini (McCarron). These discussions among scholars show that a recurring issue in Rowling's work is that of a deeper message or meaning.

As much as Voldemort resembles Satan and serves as a type of the Devil, I would also argue that Voldemort is a picture of sin and depravity taken to its fullest extent. He is a human, not a higher and otherworldly being like Tolkien's Sauron or Lewis's Jadis. Tom Riddle desired to become an immortal and powerful wizard, which is why he used dark magic to split his soul and create seven Horcruxes, six intentionally and one unintentionally. The Horcruxes are meant to protect him from the possibility of being killed, which gives him a form of immortality. Likewise, his search for the elder wand, the most powerful wand according to wizard legend, aligns with his goal of becoming an unstoppable force in the world (Rowling 432). Voldemort would consider himself the greatest wizard, one who possessed ultimate power and apparent immortality, even though that "greatness" involved murdering others to obtain "immortality," and using power forcefully over others. His goals and desires in the book demonstrate the extent of his depravity.

Voldemort also demonstrates his corruption by refusing to acknowledge and turn away from his evil deeds. When studying the history of Horcruxes, Hermione discovers that people who sever their souls can put them back together again, but only with remorse (103). As she says, “You’ve got to really feel what you’ve done. There’s a footnote. Apparently the pain of it can destroy you. I can’t see Voldemort attempting it somehow, can you?” (103). The possibility of putting a split soul back together shows that a person who created a Horcrux could know that what they did was wrong and turn away from evil. Voldemort has no intention of showing remorse or turning from his wicked course. Even at the end, when Harry mercifully gives Voldemort a final chance to show remorse, the dark lord does not express repentance (741-742). Thus, the problem in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* is the increasing evil of Voldemort. His search for power and immortality serves as a picture of sin and evil taken to its fullest extent.

Among these established works of literature, there is a newer series that is not as widely known but just as impactful because of its Christian themes. Andrew Peterson’s *The Wingfeather Saga* is a recent example of a book series that embodies the Christian message through an intriguing fantasy story. Like most of the fantasy authors surveyed in this paper, Peterson adamantly denies that his work is an allegory (Mohler). Instead, he sees the story as “deeply Christian, because hopefully it gets down to the bone-deep realities of human brokenness, selfishness, despair, and the even deeper realities of forgiveness and sacrificial love” (Grossman). The acknowledgment of “deeper realities” shows that his work is inherently Christian, though not explicitly so, and that there is a powerful message in the story.

Readers are introduced to the world of Aerwiar and the Igiby family. Living in the township of Glipwood, the Igiby family somehow manages to create a life in a world filled with terrible creatures called Fangs. Although these creatures look physically like animals, such as

lizards and wolves, they resemble humans in their ability to walk and talk. Fangs control the town because Gnag the Nameless conquered Aerwiar and overthrew the Kingdom of Anniera before the story began (Peterson, *On the Edge*, 1). The Igiby children, Janner, Tink (or Kalmar), and Leeli do not remember a time before the dreadful Fangs ruled the town.

Added to the problem of Gnag and the Fangs is that Kalmar is transformed into a Grey Fang. When Janner sees Kalmar again after having been separated, he finds that his little brother is a furry wolf, although the process of transformation was not fully completed since the Stone Keeper did not give him a name (Peterson, *North!*, 320). Janner assumes that people are forced to sing the song of the ancient stones and become dreadful creatures. However, Kalmar tells Janner that the transformation only takes place if people want the change (Peterson, *The Monster*, 177). The allure of strength and power tempts people to transform into Fangs, similar to how the One Ring in Tolkien's work tempts people with the promise of power and immortality. In the book, then, the presence of Fangs is not a matter of horrific monsters, but of people who willingly choose to become creatures because of the temptation of strength and power.

The temptation for Kalmar to give over to the Fang part of himself is strong, which creates an inner conflict. After the initial transformation, Kalmar does not remember who he is, but with the help of Janner and his family eventually recovers his knowledge of his true identity. Despite this, Janner worries about Kalmar and the wolfishness that marks his brother's character. In the third book of the series, *The Monster in the Hollows*, Kalmar mentions the terrifying desire to give into the Fang within himself even as he remembers the truth of his identity (177). The struggle is significant in the story because Janner must constantly remind Kalmar of who he truly is, the beloved son of Esben, and the High King of Anniera.

Using the struggle between Kalmar's true self and his Fang-self, Peterson creates an image of humankind's struggle with sin. As noted by Thomas M. Ward in an article for *Plough*, "one of the pervasive devices of the books is the representation of human wretchedness through literal transformations of the human form into the forms of beasts and monsters." Just as C. S. Lewis made the problem of sin and redemption organic to the world of Narnia, Peterson remains true to his story world. He does not present an allegory in which the characters and events are representatives of something else but shows readers what it looks like for Kalmar to struggle with his inner Fang, which mirrors the battle that many people have against their sinful nature.

Within all the works surveyed, the characters in the story world encounter problems that cause them difficulty and suffering. For most of them, there is a threat of death looming over their future. Graceless knows that his city will be destroyed and fears that his burden will weigh him down in death. Edmund is marked as a traitor and deserves death according to the ancient Narnian law. Frodo is the Ring-bearer of a sought-after Ring that people are willing to kill for. Harry Potter faces the threat of Voldemort knowing that one of them will have to die. Janner and his family fear capture because he and his siblings are the coveted Jewels of Anniera. Each of these stories provides readers with images of people struggling in a world where evil seems to win. Frodo's questions sum up the desperation that the characters have about their situations, "I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?" (Tolkien, *The Fellowship*, 67). In these fantasies, readers can see a reflection of their own sin, suffering, and longing for relief.

Seminal Texts and the Answer to Sin and Suffering

Unlike some stories in which the hero overcomes an enemy through strength and prowess, the answer to the problem of evil in the fantasies included in this paper is found in the

humble act of sacrifice. Offering one's life might not seem like a way to conquer evil, but that is what Christ did to save all humanity. He defeated the power of sin and death by taking the role of a servant and giving His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Since the authors of the fantasy works examined throughout this paper are believers in Christ, they infused their works with images of Jesus's sacrificial death, usually, though not always, through Christ figures.

In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian finds relief from his burden when he sees a cross and a sepulchre. When he arrives at the cross, the burden falls away from his back and rolls down into the mouth of the sepulchre, or the empty tomb (Bunyan 47). As Christian says, "[Jesus] has given me rest by his sorrow, and life by his death" (47). He receives new apparel, representing his salvation, and a sealed scroll that ensures his entrance to the Celestial City (48). In a major turning event, his condition goes from being one of sorrow since he was weighed down with sin, to being one of freedom and joy in Christ. He will encounter difficulties on his pilgrimage, but he has everything he needs for the journey because of the salvation he receives.

Bunyan does not need a Christ figure in his work, because he shows the real work of Jesus through the symbol of the cross and the sepulchre. Christian loses the burden of sin on the road enclosed with the wall called "Salvation," and finds a new life that enables him to continue his pilgrimage to the Celestial City. Since Bunyan is concerned with "the domain of ultimate 'concrete' reality," he wrote in such a way to present how Jesus's death and resurrection can save people from their burden of sin (Manlove 34). The biblical imagery and symbols Bunyan employed in his work give readers a picture of Jesus's saving work and what it means to be redeemed.

Unlike John Bunyan, C. S. Lewis needed a Christ figure in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to give a picture of Jesus's sacrificial act. He explained in a letter that when he created

the character of Aslan, he asked himself what it would look like for the Son of God to enter a world like Narnia in an analogous way that He entered the real world as a man (*Letters*, 45). As a majestic lion, Aslan parallels the description of Jesus as the Lion of Judah (Rev. 5:5). To complete the biblical imagery, Lewis also describes Aslan appearing as a Lamb at the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Lewis 540). Thus, the physical characteristics of Aslan show that he is a representation of Christ.

To save Edmund from the penalty of death that he deserves as a traitor, Aslan agrees to trade places with Edmund (Lewis, *The Lion*, 181). When Aslan gives himself over to Jadis to be killed, she mocks and humiliates him, shearing off his beautiful mane. Despite the agony of the torture and the pain of humiliation, Aslan does not say a word. The great Lion is killed and left on the Stone Table. However, the sorrow of Aslan's death is quickly turned to joy when He appears alive the next morning with the Stone Table split in two. Jadis thought she had won, but Aslan explains that if she had looked further into the deeper magic before time, "She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards" (185). Evil may have seemed to triumph, but the Deeper Magic was more powerful.

In these specific details of the story, readers can see parallels between Aslan and Jesus. First, the imagery of Aslan making the journey to meet the Witch mirrors that of Jesus's experience in the Garden of Gethsemane (179). Also, just as Aslan bore humiliation on the Stone Table, Jesus endured insults from the onlookers and did not retaliate (Isa. 53:7). Furthermore, Jesus and Aslan were killed, but they were both resurrected (1 Cor. 15:2-4). In the imagery of the split Table, Lewis draws on the biblical truth that Christ defeated the power of the Law of sin and death (Rom. 8:1-2). Each parallel in the story gives readers an image of Jesus's saving work.

Aslan's victory through death not only meant life for Edmund but also for all of Narnia. After his resurrection, Aslan breathes over the creatures that Jadis had turned into statues, including Mr. Tumnus, restoring them to life (Lewis, *The Lion*, 187-189). He also enters the battle against the Witch, bringing the restored creatures with him (191). These events mirror the work of Christ and the hope He gives those who trust in Him for salvation. Not only are individuals saved from the problem of sin, but they are given a new life where evil and death have already been defeated by the Lord Jesus.

While Bunyan used symbolism and Lewis used a Christ figure to convey the death and resurrection of Jesus, Tolkien does not use either of these literary elements. Certain characters in *The Lord of the Rings* do display Christlikeness, but there is no single Christ figure that shows the death and resurrection of Jesus. Frodo, for example, is merciful to Gollum, allowing him to live. This act of mercy proves instrumental to the final events, as it is Gollum's act of grabbing the Ring which leads to its destruction in Mount Doom. If not for Gollum, the Ring would not have been destroyed since Frodo failed to cast it away into the fire (Tolkien, *The Return*, 241). A case could also be made for Samwise Gamgee having Christlike characteristics in his tireless loyalty to Frodo and willingness to serve from a place of love (Wojcik 17). However, even he is not a Christ figure who sacrificially lays down his life for another.

The lack of an explicit Christ figure is understandable given Tolkien's desire to stay away from any direct allegory. He did mention how Eru Iluvatar would have to enter his creation to heal or save it (Dickerson 239). However, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien presents the theme of Christlike sacrifice, which brings redemption, instead of creating a direct representation of Christ. An example of the theme of Christlike sacrifice is Frodo's actions and choices in the story. The defeat of the Ring's evil, and of Sauron, comes at a great personal cost to Frodo since

Ringwraiths gravely wounded him in the first book and the wound never completely heals (Tolkien, *The Return*, 338). As he tells Sam, “when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them” (338). In essence, he gave up his life to go on the quest to destroy the Ring (Bruner and Ware 105). His sacrifice embodies Jesus’s teaching about the need to take up one’s cross and to lose one’s life to find it (Matt. 16:24-25). Frodo made a Christlike sacrifice to save the Shire and all of Middle-earth.

Also, the effects of his sacrifice mirror what happens when individuals receive redemption from Christ. Frodo must depart to the Grey Havens, but Sam is left to bring healing and life to a broken and damaged Shire (Tolkien, *The Return*, 330-331). Other people in Middle-earth are also affected by the destruction of the Ring and the defeat of Sauron. Eowyn, the shield-maiden who kills the Lord of the Nazgul, turns away from a life of battle and devotes herself to healing, to “love all things that grow and are not barren” (262). These examples, of bringing healing to a damaged world, resemble the redemption Jesus gives His followers. He entrusted believers with the task of spreading the good news and shining His light into a dark and broken world.

In addition to the themes of sacrifice and redemption, one could also make the case that the God figure in Middle-earth worked through the events of hardship and suffering to bring about good just as the Lord does in reality. As was noted earlier in this paper, Tolkien stated that there is a connection between *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* (*The Letters of*, 94). Eru Iluvatar, the God figure in Middle-earth, knew that Frodo would fail and thus used the hobbit’s merciful act to Gollum to bring about the destruction of the One Ring and Sauron (Dickerson 243). Gandalf alludes to Eru Iluvatar’s work in the events of Bilbo finding the Ring and Frodo inheriting it: “Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the

Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it” (Tolkien, *The Fellowship*, 61). The divine providence of God is thus another prevalent theme in *The Lord of the Rings* (Vassanyi 237). Eru Iluvatar used evil events and the choices of the characters to bring about his good purpose.

While Tolkien presents authors with an alternative way of showing sacrifice and redemption in a work of fantasy, modern authors have used direct representations of Jesus’s death and resurrection through Christ figures. In J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, she presents Harry as a type of Christ (McCarron). Entire books and articles have been written highlighting the ways in which Harry resembles Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the crucifixion, and at His resurrection. For example, John Granger notes the specific ways that Harry’s walk into the forest parallels that of Jesus’s journey to the cross (119). Furthermore, Granger highlights Harry’s willing death to defeat Voldemort and save his friends, noting that “Harry dies sacrificially and without resistance to defeat the Dark Lord, as Christ died on the Cross” (120). Scholars and critics widely recognize that Harry’s death and resurrection resemble what Jesus did.

Harry enters the forest without any intention of defending himself and gives up his life so Voldemort can kill him. After the killing curse occurs, Harry finds himself at King’s Cross station and cannot seem to understand that he is not actually dead. Dumbledore makes the enigmatic statement that Harry giving up his life willingly “made all the difference” (Rowling 708). When Voldemort used the killing curse on Harry, he destroyed a seventh Horcrux, an unintended piece of his soul that had latched onto Harry as a baby (708). Harry’s willingness to

die makes him the Master of Death. Only through the willingness to lay down his life was he able to find it (Matt. 10:39).

Rowling notes the importance of two Bible verses on the graves at Godric's Hallow, which provides further insight into Harry's role as a Christ figure. She explained in an interview that 1 Corinthians 15:26 and Matthew 6:19 "sum up – they almost epitomize the whole series" (Adler). On the tombstone of Harry's parents are the words, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (*New International Version*, 1 Cor. 15:26). Engraved on the tombstone of Dumbledore's mother and sister is the verse that reads, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal" (Matt. 6:19). Harry's perspective was, in Christian terms, heavenly or eternal. He did not seek to use the Hallows to save himself or to use them for power, but instead willingly laid down his life for his friends. By doing so, death was defeated, just as Jesus conquered death.

Tied to the concept of Harry serving as a Christ figure in the story is the idea of redemption. After Harry is resurrected, Voldemort's powers can no longer hurt him or those he loves. While still in the forest, Voldemort uses the infamous Cruciatus curse on Harry, which does not bother him (Rowling 726). Later, during the final battle at Hogwarts, Voldemort's curses are not binding on Harry's friends, those he laid down his life to protect (738). He redeemed them from the curses of the dark lord. In fact, he tells Voldemort that "You won't be able to kill any of them ever again" (738). Wendy Hennequin notes the power of sacrifice in her article that compares the *Harry Potter* series to the legends of saints. As she explains, "the saints, like Christ, conquer suffering and death by suffering and dying, and the weapons of the evil temporal authorities ultimately have no power" (77). Therefore, in contrast to Voldemort's ruthless

grasping for immortality and power, Harry's victory lies in his willingness to die for others.

Through his Christlike act, Harry brings redemption to those he loves.

Like Rowling, Andrew Peterson uses a Christ figure in *The Wingfeather Saga*. Firstborn children of the Wingfeather family, who are known as Throne Wardens, are the ones who serve and protect the second-born, the King (or Queen) of Anniera. Although the role is difficult for Janner Wingfeather, who struggles to see why he must protect his reckless brother, Kalmar; Janner's job is vital to the events of the story. Kalmar meets with the Maker in the Fane of Fire and is given the task of healing the Fangs and other cloven who desire to return to their human forms. The Maker's instructions for healing the Fangs and the details of Janner's job as Throne Warden are connected to a prophecy in Aerwiar that says, "a boy would come to Clovenfast, and he would be the seed of a new garden" (Peterson, *The Warden*, 257). Arundelle and the other members of Clovenfast recognize Janner as the promised seed, although they do not know how he will fulfill the prophecy.

When the time comes for Kalmar to hold the melding stone while the Fangs and cloven sing the song of the ancient stones, Janner's role as Throne Warden is given its final fulfillment. Janner remembers that when the people were originally melded into creatures, the animal they were melded to died. Janner cannot let his brother die since "That was the calling of a Throne Warden. Protect the King" (482). His desire to protect Kalmar is more than a sense of duty or calling but includes a deep love for his brother. When all the others begin to sing the song, Janner grabs the stone from Kalmar, tells him to sing, and reminds him of his love (483). As the later songs say of Janner, he "never left his brother's side. He loved him to the end" (489). The melding takes place, transforming everyone back to human form because of Janner's sacrifice as

the prophesied seed. He gives his life so that Kalmar can be changed back into the human boy he is meant to be, not a creature stuck between his true identity and the Fang within.

Peterson uses the characteristics of Janner in the story to show how he serves as a Christ figure. The servanthood inherent in the job of Throne Warden mirrors Jesus's role as a servant who came to die for the sins of humankind (Matt. 20:28). The Lord's motive for saving all people was because of His love, which is shown in Janner's sacrifice for Kalmar (Rom. 5:8). Janner loved his brother to the end like Jesus loved those who were His own "to the end" (John 13:1). Furthermore, the seed terminology Peterson develops in the book reflects Jesus's words about the need for a kernel of wheat to die to produce more seeds (John 12:24). The result of Janner's sacrificial death is redemption for Kalmar and the other cloven since they are no longer trapped in Fang bodies (Ward). New life comes because of Janner's sacrifice, which is true of what happens in the life of a believer.

The image of death bringing new life is not only a biblical reality but also a metaphor that is significant in Andrew Peterson's life. In his memoir-style book, *The God of the Garden*, he mentions how he learned that God was not hurting him by allowing him to enter a time of depression. Comparing his experience to gardening, he wrote, "I wasn't angry at the earth when I wounded it. Nor was I killing the seed when I buried it. I was giving it a chance to be born again" (116). In *The Warden and the Wolf King*, readers can see the gardening imagery that expresses the seed metaphor. Kalmar and all the other redeemed Fangs are the promised garden from Arundelle's prophecy (486). Janner's death brought healing and redemption, just as a seed is buried in the soil and brings forth new life.

In addition to giving an image of Jesus's sacrificial death, Peterson also hints at the resurrection of Christ in *The Wingfeather Saga*. After Janner's death, Kalmar sets out with his

family and friends to find the First Well, which is a gift from the Maker. As his Uncle Artham says about the well, “They say it heals – and maybe even more” (Peterson, *The Warden*, 493). Peterson specifically notes that the concept of the story is “about beauty, and resurrection, and redemption” (“A note”). Because of the hope of the resurrection at the end of the story, Peterson accomplishes what Tolkien termed as “eucatastrophe,” a joyous turning of events (“On Fairy-Stories,” 384). Janner dies in place of his brother to bring transformation, which changes everything, but the allusion to resurrection turns grief into joy because Janner’s death is not the end of the story. The resurrection of Janner completes the Christ figure image in *The Wingfeather Saga*, reflecting Jesus’s death and resurrection to bring redemption.

My Creative Thesis, the Tradition of Fantasy, and Contribution to the Genre

Like these other fantasy works, I intend for *The Mountain Pass Keeper* to give an image of the problem of sin and suffering. I hope to create an image to show how the characters in the story are separated from the Prince’s Kingdom. When they try to find their way on the mountain pass, they discover how lost and separated from others they are, without help or hope. This image is grounded in the language of the Bible, which describes those in sin as being in the same predicament as lost sheep (Matt. 18:12-14). As the other works of fantasy have successfully and skillfully done, I hope to give a lasting picture of the problem of sin in the world.

Similarly, my work will also include a Christ figure and show the effects of redemption. Duncan resembles Christ since he is a shepherd and displays a Christlike attitude. He will most clearly resemble Christ in the latter part of the book where he is willing to trade places with Creighton to protect the old Keeper from the dragon. Also, a more complete picture of Christ will be shown through the character of the Prince of Cairn. Because of the Prince’s earlier sacrifice,

Duncan, Creighton, and the other villagers receive healing, which in turn affects the entire world of Cairn. Evil and suffering do not have the final victory in *The Mountain Pass Keeper*.

Another way my creative thesis will resemble the other works I mentioned in this paper is through the use of epic archetypes. The characters in the story go on a quest, although with different goals. Creighton intends to restore the central pass to keep the officials from searching for him and forcing him to resume the Mountain Pass Keeper role. In contrast, Duncan is on a quest to obtain supplies from the Kingdom to help his family and seeks to find his lost friend, Beathan. Other epic archetypes are present in the story, such as the presence of the dragon Obsidian and the use of a special weapon, the Prince's sword, to defeat the dragon. A hero, quest, and battle between good and evil gives deeper meaning to my story and sets it in the tradition of epic literature, which has greatly influenced the genre of fantasy.

In addition to drawing influence from key works in fantasy, I hope to contribute to the genre by including an older protagonist who is dealing with the long-term effects of grief and loss. Having a protagonist like Creighton, who is older, may not seem to fit into a genre that is commonly written for children and young adults, but his story could challenge young adults while also appealing to older readers. While Andrew Peterson is correct that fantasy can pique the interest of children and teenagers, showing them the truth that there is a better world, I believe fantasy is also important for adults (*Adorning*, 72). Adults seem to appreciate works of fantasy as much or if not more than children since they can grasp the deeper truths of the books. Tolkien notes that adults "will, of course, put more in and get more out than children can" when reading fantasy ("On Fairy-Stories," 360). Children can and should read fantasy, allowing their minds to grow and engage in imaginative worlds that point to the gospel, but adults can also benefit from these stories.

Another area that I hope to add to the genre is within the discourse among fictional works about the problem of sin and death. The theological issue of evil and suffering is brought into sharper focus in *The Mountain Pass Keeper* because Creighton is more intricately connected to the issue due to his past loss. All the seminal works in this paper include the reality of death. However, the characters in those works must process the deaths quickly as the story pushes forward. In *The Mountain Pass Keeper*, Creighton has dealt with the pain of loss for many years and readers can more fully grasp how the death of a loved one can radically change a person's life.

The works discussed in this paper deal with the issue of suffering and evil. Not only do these fantasy stories portray the reality of evil in the world, but they also show that darkness does not win. The presence of sin in the world might seem as unbeatable as Voldemort or Gnag the Nameless, but characters like Harry Potter or Janner Wingfeather show readers that death and suffering have been defeated. Jesus has paid for the sins of humankind, brought salvation for all who believe, and is going to make all things new. Even now, before the renewal of all things, the shadows are being pushed out by the Light of Christ as believers faithfully follow Him, bringing healing and hope to the world.

Chapter 3

Creative Thesis – The Mountain Pass Keeper

Prologue

“Do you see any signs?” Duncan asked as he shielded his eyes and stepped out of the cool shade of the trees and into the sunlit-soaked clearing. He emerged behind the flock of sheep, adjusting one of the leather straps of his pack. The only sound came from the clanging bells around the sheep’s necks and a slight rustling from the leaves and grass.

Leading the flock, Beathan had his back to Duncan and all he could see was Beathan’s cloak and sandy-blond hair. His friend shook his head. “Nothin’. We’ve gone so far without a sign that I’m not sure we’ll find another,” Beathan called back.

Duncan sighed and kicked at a nearby rock. *First the thief, now the signs.*

The flock of twelve sheep in front of him distracted him for a moment as they continued walking up the hill. He noticed the animals’ strong white bodies were moving quicker because of a clearing of dark grass ahead. The mountainside hill reminded Duncan of farmer Malcolm’s unkempt field back home that was dotted with patches of thick weeds. *At least the sheep are enjoying themselves.*

Beathan used his staff to gently direct a sheep that had stopped on the hill, urging her to move toward the rest of the flock. Duncan couldn’t help but grin. Shepherding was natural to Beathan, like breathing or sleeping. He had been doing it longer than Duncan had, sitting out in lonely fields at night as a small boy to care for the herd his large, but poor family owned. No wonder he had won ribbons from the Clachan village fairs.

Duncan’s grin faded. *Home. How far is that from here? I don’t even know where here is!* He glanced at the grassy clearing encircled with trees and then up at the cloudless sky. At least he

knew they hadn't come this way before. Reaching the top of the hill, Duncan stopped next to Beathan, whose brow was furrowed as he moved his staff from one hand to the other.

Beathan nodded toward the sheep. "While they graze, we ought to think of a plan."

"I thought we had one already. Follow the signs," Duncan said.

Stopping his swinging staff, Beathan looked at Duncan. "I'm not sure that's a good one anymore. We could head north as the elders suggested."

Duncan laughed. "There are mountains in the way!" He waved his hand at the looming peaks in the distance beyond the tree line. "I think we have a better chance of the Mountain Pass Keeper appearing and showing us the way."

"I'm not joking. If we are going to help our families, we need a plan."

Duncan thought of his mother, who had gripped his hands the day he left, her face pale as she sat wearily at the table with her weaving supplies in her lap. She had leaned forward and whispered to him, "The Prince bless you on your journey, my son." He thought of the eager smiles of his brother and sister when he had told them he would be back with food. Real food, not the warm mush they were surviving on.

Spotting another rock, he kicked this one harder. "I say we keep following the signs. If we go wandering around out there, we will really be lost."

"But how do we find 'em? We haven't seen one today," Beathan said.

"I don't know! But at least if we follow the signs, we have a chance."

"Don't go losing hope now."

"Any hope I had is about as lost as we are!"

Duncan felt his face grow hot when he saw Beathan frown. White knuckling his staff, he took a breath. "Listen, I didn't mean to get angry. It's just—"

Everything grew dark around them as if they had stepped into the shade of a massive tree with branches that blocked the sun. But they hadn't moved. Duncan looked into the sky and gasped. Above them was the dark underbelly of a flying creature. The sunlight returned as the creature flew away, its black reptilian tail disappearing from sight.

Duncan blinked. "Was that?"

Beathan nodded, but as he did, his eyes grew wide. "It's coming back!"

Duncan tried to move his legs but found that he couldn't. The beast was turning back toward them, its bat-like wings open as it glided down. He heard the frantic bleating of the sheep as the monster descended into the clearing. Underneath him, the ground shook when the dragon landed, its smooth and shiny body filling the clearing.

The black-winged monster darted at the flock of sheep like a fox making a death strike at a rabbit. Its sharp claws were extended, swiping at a fleeing sheep. The animal was helpless, swallowed by the dragon in an instant.

Loud cries from the animals filled Duncan's ears, awakening his sense of duty. His job was to care for his flock and protect them against predators. *But I've never fought a dragon before.*

Beathan must have had no problems acting on the instinct to protect the flock, even from a dragon, because Duncan saw his friend sprint into the clearing. His blue cloak streamed behind him as he yelled for the flock to run toward the trees. The grove, with its closely growing trunks, would provide shelter against the swooping predator. Some of the closer animals obeyed, but others ran toward Duncan, their hooves kicking up clods of dirt.

One of the beast's extended claws lurched forward to grab another sheep, but Beathan intercepted the monster's attack by swatting at it with his staff. The thick piece of wood hit the lustrous black claw of the creature with a loud *whack*.

A bone-chilling roar filled the air as the beast turned its large body toward Beathan, its tail whipping the trees.

"Beathan, run!" Duncan fought down the urge to flee into the grove as the sheep had done.

His friend pivoted and tried to make a dash for the trees but tripped on the rocky ground. A growling sound that almost sounded like a laugh emanated from the creature. The black-winged monster crawled closer; its shiny head with jagged spikes rose above Beathan.

Duncan drew in a sharp breath as he saw the dragon open its jaws, revealing rows of sharp teeth. He could easily imagine bright flames leaping from the creature's mouth.

Gulping down his rising panic, Duncan reached a shaking hand to the ground and grabbed a rock the size of his palm. He had driven away wolves, bobcats, and bears from the flock before, but never something larger than his house. *Please let this work.*

Settling the large rock in his hand, he stepped back and squinted at the dragon. Locking his gaze on the target, he threw the rock and sent it flying across the clearing. It ricocheted against the dragon's shoulder, right under the creature's wing, with a *ping* as if the serpent were covered in armor.

"Over here, you ugly snake," Duncan called out. "Leave my friend and our flock alone." At the sound of his voice, the dragon turned away from Beathan and the rest of the sheep. They had a chance to escape.

"Go!"

Scrambling to his feet, Beathan dashed into the woods. Duncan felt relief when Beathan was no longer in sight. However, his sense of victory faded when the winged beast turned and set its yellow, lizard-like gaze on Duncan. The dragon's reptilian body twisted and began to move across the clearing at a speed Duncan did not imagine was possible.

Opening its large mouth filled with fangs, the creature roared again, but this time Duncan distinctly heard a word spoken with a guttural, raspy voice.

“Fool!”

A chill rushed through his back as Duncan quickly turned and ran toward the grove, urging the remaining sheep behind him forward with a shake of his staff. He felt the pounding of his feet on the hard ground, causing pain to shoot through his legs. Flashes of white dashed in front of him as the sheep rushed into the safety of the trees.

The ground shook, causing Duncan to stumble forward as he ran. He heaved himself into the shaded refuge, weaving through the trunks of the pines. With a glance behind him, Duncan gasped when he saw the dragon trying to push itself into the grove. Its front legs were clawing at the dirt and its dark head thrashed between the trees. Under the beast's weight, the trees immediately blocking its path cracked and began to lean perilously. Duncan yelled as he pushed himself forward with quicker speed. He didn't stop even when he felt the reverberations from the crashing trees or when he heard the *pop* as they hit the ground.

Grunts came from the beast behind him, but then there was silence. Duncan peered over his shoulder and saw that the dragon was no longer chasing him.

He froze and gazed at the canopy of leaves overhead, searching for indications of the black fire dragon, for he knew that's what it was. *Like the dragon from the stories Mother used to tell me.*

A faint blur darted through the mist of foliage, and Duncan flinched.

Pumping his arms to propel himself onward, he began to search for a place to hide. An old log to his left was too small. In front of him was a pile of leaves, but he didn't even want to try concealing himself under them for fear that the dragon would set the trees on fire. As he ran, crunching through the decaying leaves, he noticed a thicket of bushes near a large, arching boulder – a perfect place to hide.

Slowing to a jog, he breathed deeply before forcing himself through the thicket, wincing as the branches and thorns scraped against his legs and arms. His red cloak tore slightly as a cluster of thorns from the bushes yanked at him. Once he made it through the sharp bushes, he squeezed himself under the arching part of the boulder.

Duncan leaned back against the coolness of the rock and closed his eyes, attempting to slow his breathing and racing heart. According to the stories, the dragon was supposed to have been destroyed by Padraig. Why is it here then? His thoughts turned to Beathan and the last image of his friend fleeing from the open jaws of the monster. *Please be okay.*

Taking another deep breath, he opened his eyes to survey his surroundings. The sheep must have run through the thicket too because they were now turning back toward him, bleating. He noticed many of them trembled and appeared to have cuts on their legs.

“Come friends, come here,” Duncan called softly to the sheep. At the sound of his voice, the animals hurried toward him, their hooves crunching the leaves on the ground. Reaching out a trembling hand, he stroked the head of the first sheep that reached his hiding place and whispered to it. “It's alright friend.” He did the same to the next sheep, feeling its muscles relax under his touch.

“1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.” Half the flock was with him, which meant the other half was with Beathan. *No, not all. Only five.* He cringed with the memory of the sheep disappearing down the throat of the dragon.

Leaning over to look up from beneath the overarching boulder, he stared at the canopy of leaves. The sea of green rustled slightly, but he didn't see the black outline of the dragon. He kept his gaze focused on the trees overhead, trying to see any movement in the sky.

“Maybe the dragon's gone.” Duncan turned back to the group of sheep standing in front of him. “I need to find Beathan.” He stood up, brushing the dirt and remnants of thorns from his gray trousers. For a moment, he felt compelled to make a sheepfold. But he didn't have time. If they wanted to escape before the dragon returned, he needed to act.

Grabbing his staff, he crawled out from his hiding place, checking frequently for any signs of the dragon above. He then started off at a jog, hoping to find Beathan somewhere in the grove.

His friend had fled to the other side of the trees, so Duncan reasoned if he kept heading west, he was bound to find Beathan. However, he discovered that the farther he went, the more the sloping hill of the mountainside descended. The thick bundle of trees gradually thinned. *There's the clearing ...* To the right, he saw the wild field, the lumps of dark grass swaying peacefully in the wind as if nothing had happened. *I should have seen him by now.*

Suddenly, he stopped, realizing that the rocky hill dropped off to the forest below. A small ledge jutted out on the right side of the mountain, a dangerous path for shepherds and their flock. He saw fresh droppings on the ground, indicating the sheep had been there. Duncan looked around at the trees, trying to catch movement among the trunks. “Beathan!”

He turned his attention to the ground below, but there was no sign of his friend. *Surely, if he had fallen, I would see—*

He shook his head. Holding onto a small tree, he inched closer to the edge of the ledge but didn't see Beathan or the sheep below. Making sure to remain still, he strained to hear any sound of movement or the bells of the sheep.

Nothing.

He gripped the tree tighter as dizziness overwhelmed him. With shaking hands, he pulled himself back to the steadiness of the rocky ground.

“This is my fault. It was my idea to cross the mountain pass. What was I thinking?” Slamming his staff against the ground, Duncan felt tears burn his eyes. “What am I going to do?”

He couldn't go after Beathan, wandering around in the forest and the large mountain range. They would both be lost then. His breathing began to come in short gasps, so Duncan closed his eyes. *Think! There must be something I can do. Beathan would have a plan.* He thought of the dragon. The winged beast was still out there, flying over the Carraig Uaine mountains. If only he knew as much as the Mountain Pass Keeper did. Then, maybe he could find his way.

The Keeper! Duncan's eyes flashed open. *The elders said he lives somewhere in these mountains. He can help me find Beathan and the rest of the flock.* His revelation lost its luster though when he realized he didn't know where to find the mountain guide.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he glanced up at the trees in exasperation. A small bird landed on one of the branches, high in the tree. *If only I were like that bird, then I could see the land open before me.*

Maybe he could be like the bird.

Noticing the height of the hill and the tallness of the trees, his mind began to simmer with a plan. He would find his friend and the rest of the flock. They would make it to the Kingdom in time to supply their families for the winter. He just needed to find the Keeper first.

Duncan darted back into the grove of trees toward the place he had left the sheep as an ashy smell filled his nostrils. The smell of smoke ...

I. Creighton's Cabin

The evening sun shone through the window beside Creighton, illuminating the long piece of wood in his hands. He shifted in his cushioned chair as he continued to carve thin slices, leaving ribboned shavings on the floor. The sweet smell of the wood enveloped him, and he inhaled deeply, closing his eyes for a moment. Whenever he carved, the ache inside lessened and he could almost pretend as if he had always been moving his hands along the smooth stick, bringing a new shape to a lifeless tree branch.

Nearby, the fireplace popped and crackled, emitting warmth and light in the cabin. The flames danced, casting shadows on the surrounding walls that held frames of Creighton's delicately drawn maps of the Carraig Uaine mountain pass. Taking another long breath, Creighton leaned forward, his beard brushing against his leg, and squinted at the tip of the walking stick. He turned it slightly to the side and grinned.

"As I thought! No better bird for a lightweight stick than a sparrow. I can already see the wing, there." Creighton notched a soft indentation at the top of the wood. He glanced at the area multiple times as he began slicing ribbons again, freeing the walking stick from the remaining rough bark. A down slice, then back to the top. After a few swipes, his hands and arms worked at a steady rhythm while his mind drifted. Maybe if he kept carving, the rhythm would drive out the memories of his past, of the pass, and of her.

A whistle shot through his concentration, and he stopped carving. *Already? Well, I guess now will do.* Leaning the stick against the wall near the window, he set his carving knife on the small table beside his chair. Pushing himself up, he ignored the sounds of creaking from his joints and walked past his bookcase filled with large, leather-bound books and wooden figurines

of animals. Entering the kitchen, he saw the steam billowing out from the kettle, its whistle now resembling a high-pitched scream.

Creighton grabbed a thick dishcloth hanging beside the fireplace stove and carefully lifted the boiling kettle from the burner. Now that the whistle was quiet, he heard the soft roiling from the pot where potatoes, onions, carrots, tomatoes, and pieces of beef jerky simmered together with herbs from his garden. He couldn't stop his mouth from watering as he made a cup of tea and pulled a bowl from the cabinet. Carefully lifting the lid off the pot, he ladled the contents into his bowl, noting with a smile that he had enough for seconds.

With a sigh, he settled into a chair at the rustically carved table and looked at his steaming tea and bowl of stew. *What more could anyone need? I have everything: a cabin, a bookcase full of books, wood to whittle, and all the provisions any man could want.* His heart warmed at the thought of his brimming cellar full of dried meats, cheeses, and jars of preserved fruits and vegetables. He had everything he needed, which meant he rarely had to leave his cabin or land. *And the Prince is none the wiser.*

Thoughts of his cellar occupied him as he ate his meal in silence. He glanced around the room, content with the familiar surroundings. The stone chimney with its stove, dried herbs and garlic hanging from the ceiling, a small table, the door that led outside to the garden and well, the framed drawing of his family, an old broom, a small cabinet, a basin with a bucket to collect water, and his father's stick ... or at least where it used to sit. Creighton's gaze turned to the empty area behind the table next to the wall. The strong voice of his father broke into his head.

"A Mountain-Pass Keeper always eats with his walking stick nearby, for he never knows when he is needed."

Creighton shook his head. No, not the stick. He didn't need it there anyway.

He rose from the table and poured the rest of the stew into his bowl. Sitting back down, he forced himself to focus on the rich flavor of the vegetables. However, he kept feeling like he was a young man again, his father sitting on the other side of the table, lecturing him about following the tradition of keeping the walking stick by the door. Creighton took another mouthful of his dinner, tasting the peppery mixture of potato and beef. But he couldn't savor it as he wanted. Again, his father's words rang through his head and an image of a spiral flashed in his mind.

“A Mountain Pass Keeper always eats with his walking stick nearby—”

Creighton slammed his spoon on the table. He drew in a shaky breath. *No, it doesn't have me anymore. The stick means nothing.* Staring at the place behind the table, Creighton stroked his beard. It had been weeks since he had last put it away. Why was the guilt coming again, sooner than before?

Quickly, he got up, placed his bowl in the washing basin, and left the kitchen. He walked to the other end of his cabin where two closed doors stood next to one another. Across from these was his room, where an open door revealed a tidy bed and a desk filled with leather-bound notebooks, quills, and pieces of charcoal. Creighton paused in front of the closed doors. He deliberately focused his eyes on the one on the right, with its sleek and polished look, and turned the handle. The room was dim, but Creighton shuffled forward, past the large bed covered in an intricate tapestry. Even though he could not see the figures woven into the fabric because of the lack of light, he knew his younger self was there looking at him, along with the rest of his family as they stood in front of the cabin. Reaching his father's side of the bed, past the oaken chest at the foot of the bed, he grabbed the smooth, plain walking stick and hastily retreated. As he exited and eased the door shut, he could see the image of the colorful tapestry in his mind, of his

mother's long, dark hair, perceptive eyes, and content smile. Beside her was his father, standing tall with his curly beard and merry look. Then, there was his little sister ...

Creighton shook his head. None of them were smiling anymore.

Returning to the kitchen, he set the stick in its place and scowled. It never added anything to the decoration of the place. Rubbing his eyes, Creighton grumbled to himself before moving to the washing basin.

“At least I can eat in peace tomorrow, now that *it's* there.” Creighton rolled up the sleeves of his tunic and poured water from the bucket into the basin. Droplets hit his shirt and cooled his skin. He scrubbed hard at the bowl, scraping at the bits of residue from his meal. “Not that I need it.”



The next morning, Creighton knelt in the garden bed outside his cabin. Dirt covered his gloves and arms as he cleared the area of weeds. With each yank and pull, the earthy scent of the garden enveloped him. Around him were rows of lettuce heads poking out of the ground like inquisitive children. Next to them were his carrots, potatoes, and tomatoes, bordered by a row of marigolds. As he continued to pull at the tiny seedlings of invader plants, he noticed a slug inching its way toward a lettuce leaf. Creighton reached out and plucked the slug, placing it in a bucket that sat near him.

“No, you can't eat my garden.”

Nearby, his chickens in their wooden frame pen clucked, and he looked up to see them pecking at their breakfast of corn and grain. He resumed his task of yanking weeds and found that his arms entered a similar rhythm as they did when he carved. Grab and pull. All that mattered was ridding the gritty earth of invading plants. His cloth gloves grew dirtier as he

inched along the side of the lettuce heads, their leaves brushing against his arms. When his hands no longer found weeds to eliminate, Creighton frowned.

Slowly pushing himself off the ground, he stood up and moved to a nearby garden bed that was unused and filled with clover and patches of thorn-covered vines. Looking down at his hands, he raised an eyebrow. He wiped the back of his gloved hand across his forehead and walked to the side of his cabin, near the kitchen door, where his garden tools sat under an awning. An old shovel, garden hoe, and pitchfork waited for him, and he quickly grabbed the solid handle of the hoe. Returning to the messy garden bed, he began digging and pulling the clover from the dirt. The patches of green with small yellow flowers gave up their homes in the dirt, easily lifting out of the earth in clumps.

The thorns gave more of a fight, the vines entangling the edge of the hoe. He could see the black, pointed pods sticking out from the twisted loops of leaves. Creighton yanked against the grip of the thorny vine, but the plant became more knotted. Huffing, Creighton sat aside the hoe and felt around in the garden for the root of the vine. As he pushed through the tangle, the thorns poked at his gloves and scratched his skin. After a moment, he felt the root and began clawing at the area to remove the vine. The plant finally yielded and came loose.

Looking down at the spot, he drew in a breath. A bundle of flowers stood defiantly among the sharp and twisted vines. *I don't remember planting those.* Creighton bent down to look at the wildflowers. The tiny petals of the flowers were a dark, velvety blue. He moved his hand toward the root, ready to pull up the mound of flowers, but paused. Instead of removing them, he plucked a handful, arranging them in his hand. Stepping over the hoe, he walked to the side of the cabin where two windows were. He stopped at the nearest one, which had a carved hole in the sill, enough to fit a few sticks, with the initial "S" etched next to it. Decaying flowers filled

the hole, the only adornment of the otherwise bare wood. On the other side of the glass window hung a dark curtain, shrouding the view into the room.

Creighton grabbed the wilted flowers that currently occupied the hole. They crunched in his fingers and pieces of leaves disintegrated before he tossed the bundle to the ground. Gently, he eased the tiny, blue flowers into the makeshift vase with his wrinkled hand. Resting in the hole, the petals were vibrant against the dark wood of the windowsill. The rich color of the flowers reminded him of opening his curtains in the morning, letting the sunlight illuminate the room.

Her favorite color.

As he stared at the flowers, he felt the familiar ache. For a moment, he thought he would choke with the intensity of the pain. A part of him wanted to laugh at his fear of drowning while standing on solid ground, but another part remembered what happened when he succumbed to the tears. Swallowing hard, Creighton looked away and focused on the surrounding forest and mountain range. The deep green forests enclosed the rocky peaks which towered over the trees. Foliage and rock everywhere he looked.

But wait ... Toward the west, he saw a line of smoke drifting into the sky. *Again? I suppose we haven't gotten as much rain as usual.* Creighton rubbed the back of his neck and squinted at the line of smoke. He thought of the other wisps of haze he had spotted above the trees throughout the summer, the gray billows blocking the view of the mountain and leaving a burning smell in its wake.

Already, the scent of singed leaves and bark wafted toward him. Creighton looked at the line of trees nearby, surveying their green leaves. The forest fires he had seen in the distance had

not yet affected his part of the woods. He shrugged as he returned to the overgrown patch of weeds. Picking up the hoe, he freed the tool from the clinging vines.

The fires won't reach me, especially not so close to the Wildwood. He swung the hoe, cutting through another patch of clover. *No, out here, I'm alone and unaffected. As I should be.* The wind carrying the biting smell of smoke blew against him as his arms fell into a slicing rhythm, his thoughts tethered to each swing and pull.

II. The Door

Sitting in his cushioned chair the next day, Creighton tried to focus on the small dog figurine he was carving but found it difficult to keep his eyes open. The dog's ears were pointed, as if attentive to a faraway sound, and the animal held its tail in the air with dignity. In many ways, the figurine reminded him of the scruffy terriers that ran with the bare-footed village children. Although he had often been annoyed when the dogs dashed by him or when they begged for scraps as he ate jerky, the eyes of the animals are what made him take pride in the carving in his hand. During his journeys, he had once seen a little dog in the impoverished village of Clachan look up at a dirty-faced child with love and loyalty in its furry, upturned face. If he hadn't known better, he would have thought the dog saw the rag-clothed child as the Prince himself.

As he carved, he thought about those shining eyes, allowing his hands to slip into their rhythm. He blinked a few times and shook his head. Blade and dog became a fuzzy blur as his eyes slowly closed. With a snore, he nodded off.

A sharp prick in his hand jolted him awake. Looking down, he saw that the knife had slipped and grazed the top of his hand. He set the wooden figurine on the table beside his chair, grumbling to himself. Closing his knife, he placed it in his pocket and pulled out a cloth. As he held the handkerchief to the cut, the area stung, and he noticed a minuscule line of blood trickling down his hand. He reapplied the pressure and leaned back into his chair with a creak. Soon, his eyes became droopy again and his chin moved downward so that it rested on his chest.

Drowsy forgetfulness enveloped him.

In his dream, he heard creaking trees as they swayed in the wind. He was walking through a forested path with the sunlight washing the foliage in a golden light, making

everything appear bright and alive. Flowers dotted the sides of the dirt path, and they waved their petals as if in greeting. In the distance, he heard a woodpecker. The wind rustled the leaves, and Creighton smiled as he continued strolling along the path. He thought he saw a dash of white as a terrier bounded behind a nearby tree, its tail wagging. Around him, the woodpecker's hammering grew louder. He looked up at the trees but saw no sign of a bird.

The pounding on the wood became more urgent.

Creighton opened his eyes, fully alert. *That was no woodpecker.* An insistent knocking came from his front door. He furrowed his eyebrows in confusion as he slowly lifted himself out of the chair, his handkerchief falling to the ground. The cabin became quiet, and he held his breath, willing the unwanted visitor to leave. Moments passed, and the pounding did not return. Not realizing his muscles had tensed, he relaxed his shoulders and turned to grab the dog figurine.

The knocking started again.

Creighton glared at the door and frowned. Treading quietly across the wooden floor, he cursed himself for not having a window near the door. Standing with his arms crossed, he waited for the pounding to stop. When it grew louder, he slowly reached for the latch. It moved easily and he inched open the door, just far enough to see out. On his doorstep stood a tall, cloaked figure holding a shepherd's staff.

"Are you the Mountain Pass Keeper?" The cloaked figure spoke with a rough voice as if in a hurry. Creighton did not answer at first but stood staring at the unwanted visitor.

"Are you the Keeper?"

Creighton blinked a few times. "I ... I don't know what you are talking about. Get off my land." Creighton's hands shook as he tried to close the door. However, a heavy weight pushed at

him, and he stumbled backward as the door swung open and the cloaked figure stormed into the cabin.

Steadying himself, Creighton turned to the visitor who had entered his cabin.

“You have no right to break into my home! You must leave.”

The man stepped closer and pulled back the hood of his cloak, revealing the beardless face of a young man with green eyes and cropped dark hair. He narrowed his eyes at Creighton.

“I mean you no harm, Keeper. However, *you* owe me an explanation.”

“What? I do not have to explain anything to you, a burglar. Get out!” Creighton moved away from the man and reached for one of his walking sticks leaning against the wall.

Ignoring Creighton, the young man shook his head and scanned the inside of the cabin. He laughed. “I’m the burglar? Look at your home!” He pointed at the bookcase and the rows of walking sticks. “You know, I had heard rumors that you lived up here on the mountain away from everyone. Others said you were dead or had left years ago. As I can see now, you are very much alive and should feel sorry for what you have done,” The man said.

Creighton shook his stick. “You must leave at once! You will find no Mountain Pass Keeper here.”

“No!” The young man slammed his staff to the ground, his eyes flashing like the flames in the fireplace. “You are the Keeper, the one who is supposed to lead us. Because of you, the villagers can’t trade. My sheep and friend are lost. They might be ...” At this, the young man’s voice broke, and he wiped a dirty arm across his eyes. Creighton noticed that the edge of his cloak was singed and that cuts covered his hands and arms.

Breathing deeply, the young man said, “I’ve seen *the* dragon. The black fire dragon.”

For a moment there was silence. It was Creighton's turn to laugh. "There has never been a dragon in these mountains! And as for you and the rest of the foolish villagers, there is no need for a Keeper because of the signs. Why have you neglected following the signs, boy?"

At this, the young man rushed at Creighton, knocking the walking stick from his hand. Creighton winced as the shepherd pinned him against the wall, causing the nearby framed maps to rattle.

"You are the one who is foolish! The Prince of Cairn entrusted you with an important job, but you have spat in his face." The man balled the front of Creighton's tunic with a fist. "You sit here in your cabin while villagers work tirelessly without hope. No trading with other villages, no path through the mountains. Beathan and I couldn't even find our way because the signs were gone."

Creighton looked at the young man with confusion. "Rotten ... maybe. But gone? Someone must be up to mischief because they were secure."

"So, you are the Keeper, then?" The young man looked intently at Creighton, who struggled against the man's grip.

"No, not anymore."

"But you were, so you can still help me. I need to find Beathan."

Creighton stopped fighting against the intruder. He looked beyond the young man's pleading face, at the opposite wall where more drawings hung. Furrowing his brow, he pretended to mull over the situation as he slowly reached into his jacket pocket, feeling for the pocketknife that sat there.

"I don't even know you or your friend." Creighton's fingers moved slightly to open the knife. "Why should I help you?"

The young man loosened his grip on Creighton's shirt and closed his eyes briefly before speaking. "My name is Duncan of Clachan. Five days ago, I lost half of the sheep and my best friend while trying to cross the mountains. The sheep have probably been taken by that ... that dragon and I don't know what's happened to Beathan. A guide was supposed to lead us, but he tricked us." Duncan knotted his brow and stared at Creighton. "I must find my friend. That's why I need your help."

Gripping the handle of the knife, Creighton said, "Well, I can tell you this ... you won't get help by barging into people's houses." He flipped out the knife and cut the man's arm. Duncan let go of Creighton's tunic. Clutching at his arm, he gaped at the knife pointed at him.

"Why did you—"

Creighton advanced toward Duncan, forcing him toward the door. "I don't want any trouble. Now, open the door and leave. If your friend is lost, then there is nothing I can do for him."

Duncan grabbed at the latch and opened the door. Instead of exiting, he stood in the doorway with his palms up. Behind him, in the grass, six sheep grazed peacefully.

"Please, Keeper. The stories say the Prince gave us the Mountain Pass Keepers to help us, right?"

"I said, get out! And take your stinking sheep with you." Creighton advanced closer with the knife.

"What about the dragon? Haven't you seen the smoke?"

"I've seen plenty of smoke, but no dragon. Now, get away from here before I carve you like those walking sticks you saw in there!"

Duncan took a step back, holding up trembling hands. “The Prince, he gave you this job. He would want you to help me.”

Pausing in his advance, Creighton squinted at Duncan. “Don’t talk to me about the Prince, boy. I know the stories better than you.” He brandished his knife and Duncan went running down the log steps into the midst of the flock. Creighton heard a whistle, and the flock followed the shepherd. As a group, they ran toward the line of trees, the sheep kicking up bits of grass.

When Duncan and his sheep were finally out of sight, Creighton slammed the door shut and jabbed the wood with his knife. His arms shook, so he leaned against the door and breathed in the woody smell. *The signs are gone. But how? And what was all that nonsense about the dragon?*

He stared at the knife before retrieving it and putting it in his pocket. With a sigh, Creighton began to pace in front of the door and stroke his beard. If a reckless young man could find his cabin, what would stop the officials of the Kingdom from doing the same?

But they couldn’t know, not without a map. Creighton stopped and an image of an old, leather book appeared in his mind, thickly bound and enclosed with two clasps that required a key to open the pages. *The old volume of the histories will certainly tell me if the Kingdom has a copy of a map.* Sighing, he looked at the other end of his cabin, where the doors to the closed rooms stood. He had to know for certain.

He walked to the first door, the one he had never intended to open again. The wood was the same as the door to his parent’s room, but this one was carved with an archway of swirling leaves and intricate flowers at the top. Staring up at the carving, he thought of his sister’s jumps and squeals at seeing the door for the first time, her red curls bouncing against her blue dress.

Creighton had stood in front of his own door, smiling at her reaction as she hugged their father and said, “Oh, Daddy, it’s everything I wanted!” She had never learned that *he* was the one who carved it, not their father. *But what does that matter now?*

Creighton blinked multiple times, remembering the book he needed to find. Swallowing hard, he reached for the metal, leaf-shaped handle. With a squeak from the old hinges, he stepped into the dark room.

III. The Battle

In the darkness of his sister's room, he could only see shapes – the outline of the small bookcase, bed, wardrobe, and desk. Even without the light, he remembered what the room looked like, how the rich blue, woven blanket covered the bed. Next to the bed sat the old bookcase that was filled with her pressed flower collection, stored in thick notebooks. On the top shelf stood the most treasured items in the room, a fist-sized amber stone that was polished to a syrupy gloss and a delicate glass butterfly.

Treading lightly across the floor, as if his footsteps could awaken an unwanted ghost of the past, he made his way to the single window in the room, covered with a black drape. Pushing the cloth aside, Creighton glanced out of the pane of glass and saw the blue flower sitting in its hole on the windowsill. He stared at it for a moment before taking a deep breath and turning around.

Everything was as it had been those years ago when his mother cleaned the room for the last time and carefully placed the blanket over the bed. Creighton had stood staring from the hallway, not daring to set foot in the room. Now, looking at the relic of the blanket, he felt sorrow rising in his chest like a rushing river.

Clenching his teeth, he walked back across the room to a large chest that stood beside the wardrobe. It was the only item that had not been there that day his mother and father had wept beside the bed. No, the chest was added some twenty-five years later when he packed all the Mountain Pass Keeper heirlooms into it and shoved it into the room. For all he cared that chest was the same as a casket. When he had closed the door that last time, he had never meant to enter again.

Yet, he was here.

Focus. Remember the book. With a grunt, he knelt in front of the chest. He ran his hand over the smooth surface of the lid and layers of dust stuck to his hand. Scowling, he wiped his hands on his trousers and bent forward to blow off the rest of the dust that had gathered on the latch. He fumbled with the opening, trying to pry the old metal from its hook, but it took several minutes of pulling until he was successful. The chest opened with a creak, and he was met with the spicy scent of cedar. Contained within the chest were stacks of large volumes and guidebooks, pieces of rolled parchment, and a few smaller boxes.

A flash of yellow caught his eyes and he stared at the inside of the lid which revealed a golden plate with engraved letters and an intricate border made of spirals. He whispered the words as if pronouncing a curse: “The Keepsakes of the Keepers of Cairn.”

Each Keeper in Cairn’s history had left a memento for the next generation. The thick book containing the histories of the first Keepers was passed down from ancient times, but the smaller volumes and other items in the box were carefully chosen to be added to the treasured chest. His father had chosen a bronze compass with his initials engraved into the covering to add to the collection. All the previous Keepers, as far as Creighton knew, had added a beloved object. All except Creighton.

“You won’t get any of my possessions,” he said before digging into the contents. Pieces of parchment lay scattered across the smaller boxes. He knew the book he was looking for was large and sat at the bottom of the chest, so he began tossing items out. His hands found worn maps, a journal, and even his father’s compass. As he dug deeper, he spotted the worn leather of the volume he was searching for. Pushing the rest of the contents of the chest away from the book, he used both hands to grasp the massive volume and, with a grunt, lifted it out of the chest and set it on the floor.

The cover was worn, the edges were peeling, and the strap that held the key to the book was torn. Despite the fading of time, Creighton could still discern the embossed design of three interlocking spirals that adorned the front of *The Histories of the Mountain Pass Keepers*. He reached out a hand and touched the middle of the spiral as a sense of panic descended. The words of the old rhyme his mother would recite to him, and force him to memorize, came to mind.

“Never-ending is the job of a Keeper.

In the spiral path, he treads

Along Cairn’s mountain pass.

Like the dance of the sun and moon

Bringing light to the world’s darkness,

The Keeper’s duty will never cease

For his footsteps are ones that bring peace.”

Creighton always felt a rush of irritation at the mention of his “never-ending” duty, especially when his father and mother reminded him of the meaning of the ancient symbol of the Keepers. To them, the insignia brought great honor and even encouragement during the challenges of his father’s job, since they knew he was serving the Prince. However, the spiral only brought Creighton feelings of being trapped and restricted. When he was younger, he often dreamed of being caught in the middle of the interlocking spiral, like a fly caught in a spider’s web, struggling against the choking entanglement. He knew the job of Mountain Pass Keeper would suck every bit of life out of him. And it had ... in a way.

No, he had been free of the spiral’s web, and he wouldn’t get stuck again.

Using the key to unlock the binders on the book, Creighton eased the cover open. The spiral symbol was on the first page, but he quickly turned it. He flipped through the rough,

browning pages, past the story of the Prince building Cairn with earth and stone. The intricately written words and the border decorations of leaves and vines flew past Creighton's eyes as he continued moving through the book. With a rustle of pages, he landed on a drawing of the black fire dragon soaring over a burning village, the flames consuming people and cottages. Although he knew the story of Pdraig and the dragon, his hands paused as he thought about the fear in Duncan's eyes when he said he was attacked by the monster. The lines of smoke he had seen rising into the summer sky also flashed in his mind. Shifting to a sitting position, he pulled the book onto his lap and allowed himself to become absorbed in the words.

... Obsidian, the fearsome serpent that was born of liquid fire beneath the mountains, raged war against the Prince's Kingdom. His tyranny was felt from Clachan to Sithstrath, and the people lost hope. Now, the dragon promised the villagers relief from his fire in exchange for offerings of cows and goats, and so they gladly gave up their livestock. The few who refused perished in the fire or fled to the refuge of the Kingdom. Soon, the dragon began his attacks again, destroying stretches of the Carraig Uaine, turning the forests, glens, and meadows into a scorched wasteland. In desperation at the ongoing attacks, some villagers agreed to give their children to Obsidian to keep their land and homes.

One man, Iain the Nadairian, agreed to offer his valiant daughter, Liusaidh, to Obsidian. This was the same Liusaidh of renown who led the springtide revolt against the dragon, reclaiming a patch of meadowland in Nadairia, the last stronghold in the Carraig Uaine mountains where the villagers pledged allegiance to the Prince and took in refugees from surrounding villages. She was overtaken and bound by her father, who left her on a mountain cliff at night. Because others were left as a sacrifice to the dragon there, the people referred to

the area as Death's Cliffs. Like the other offered children, Liusaidh was inflicted with the dragon's poison and left to die a slow death, in great agony.

The Prince heard of these attacks and of the suffering of his people. His heart was filled with sorrow, both for the evil of the dragon and the wickedness of those who gave up their children at Obsidian's bidding. He planned a day of the dragon's defeat as he crafted an instrument that would bring harm and healing. Using the metals he had formed long ago, at the beginning of Cairn's history, the Prince forged a sword of the purest steel, a work of love and sorrow. After he finished the sword, he left a note for his closest friend and pupil, Padraig, to slay the dragon on the appointed day. For he knew the evil that lurked in the hearts of the villagers and the extent they would go to preserve a small piece of land. But even amid their evil, the Blessed One was working and weaving a plan, one which lips have sung in praise since the time of the dragon's defeat.

After the attacks continued for another season, the villagers grew restless and blamed their suffering on the Prince. The dragon noticed their unease with satisfaction. Thinking he could finally overthrow Cairn, claim the land as his own, and enslave the surviving villagers, Obsidian promised the people freedom and new land if they gave him the Prince. Three men from the surviving camps scattered across the mountains, Iain, Seamus, and Greum, conspired together to kill the Prince and deliver Him to Obsidian. Sneaking into the Kingdom disguised as refugees, the men appealed to others whose lives had been devastated by the attacks. When the Prince visited the refugee camp, teaching and offering healing to the people, they turned against Him. In the tumult, Iain stole the sword from the Prince's side, although the Blessed One gave no resistance. Iain killed the Prince and, along with Greum, took the body outside the Kingdom's gates as an offering to Obsidian. (Seamus was not with them because he fled after the crowd

attacked the Prince. Having experienced the kindness of the Prince, Seamus felt remorse for his part in the conspiracy).

At the sight of the body of the Prince, Obsidian gloated and declared himself King of Cairn. In his pride, he tried to burn the surrounding gates and claim the Kingdom as his own but discovered that his fire could not destroy the rock. The dragon devoured Iain and Greum in his wrath and turned his anger against the surrounding villages.

After nightfall, Padraig and a few other followers of the Prince snuck outside the walls to recover the body of the Prince. Padraig soon found the note the Prince had left for him and took up the sword with a vow to defeat Obsidian. On the appointed day in winter, the month the Prince was slain, Padraig traveled into the surrounding wasteland to find and defeat Obsidian.

Creighton sighed and skipped over the next paragraph. How many times had he heard this part of the story or seen the reenactments done by village children? He could imagine the group of children wrapped in a dark drape and holding wooden carved wings. A specially chosen boy was always cast as Padraig, and using a rare, but real sword, the boy would pretend to stab the dragon in the chest with the weapon. The children under the drape would scatter rocks on the ground, representing the shattered obsidian armor of the dragon. At the end of the play, when the dragon slithered back beneath the mountains, the boy would declare the words of Padraig, claiming victory in the name of the Prince. The next part of the story, with its strange happenings, had always caused the hair on his arms to rise, though he could never quite decide what to think about them.

As winter turns to spring, and the snow gives way to tendrils of life, the Prince rose in the morning on the same day Padraig met Obsidian in battle, heralding the Blessed One's victory over the dragon's evil. At the command of the good and right Prince, Padraig struck the ground

with the sword. The same sword that had spilled the blood of the Prince struck the dirt, and the same life that was in Him filled the earth. Where the wasteland once was, trees grew, tall and strong. Plants sprouted across Cairn and fields returned overnight, bursting with harvest as the sun rose. Wildflowers as beautiful and varied as the most beautiful sunset burst across the meadows and valleys of the land. And so, life returned to Cairn and the mountain range, as if flames had never touched the Carraig Uaine mountains.

The Prince instructed Padraig of the Kingdom to lead the people through the mountains back to their villages so they could rebuild Cairn. As a memorial, he gave his dear friend a newly grown branch from a tree, a living branch, so that all would know that Padraig was the Keeper of the Mountain Pass and protector of the people. In the spiral path, he, and all the other Keepers after him, would walk, but always their feet would lead to the Kingdom. Later, Padraig drew a map of the pass, but this was lost. In the year of the Keeper Uilleam, another map was drawn, which lies in the vaults of the Kingdom to this day.

Once the Prince gave Padraig the living branch, He left and entered Death's Cliffs and sat the sword across the remains of the children who had endured the poison of Obsidian. From the purest metal came a light that filled the valley, and in a spark that rivaled the sun's fiercest beams, the Prince and all the bodies vanished from sight. According to Padraig, the first Mountain Pass Keeper of Cairn, the Prince returned to His home beyond the farthest horizon, taking the healed children, including Liusaidh, with Him. But the sword He left to the Mountain Pass Keepers, entrusting them with His gift, to be used wisely, until the day He returns. For as the sun rises and sets, so will the Prince return to vanquish Obsidian and any who seek the dragon's way.

And so, Cairn received rest from its enemy and the promise of the dragon's future destruction. What once was knotted will be unfurled and all that was buried will be unearthed. The wise will hear and take heart.

Creighton looked up from the book at the room around him. *Another map was drawn, which lies in the vaults of the Kingdom to this day.* The panic returned as he imagined the tendrils of the spiral reaching to grab him into its midst once again. He pushed himself off the ground, still holding the book.

“But surely, they could have lost it again. They lost the first one.” Pacing, Creighton gripped the book and muttered to himself. “Why didn’t I make stone markers instead of wood? They would have lasted longer. Now look what I’m in.”

As he marched in front of the chest, not paying attention to how close he was getting to the surrounding furniture, his boot hit the bookcase. Creighton held his breath as the journals shifted and the amber stone and butterfly rattled. Before he could reach out a hand, the glass figurine went crashing to the ground, fracturing into multiple pieces.

“No, no, no. I’m sorry ...” Creighton looked helplessly at the shattered fragments as hot tears filled his eyes. “All of this is my fault. I should have never come back in here.” He closed the book and the interlocking spirals stared up at him. Frowning, his body began to shake with fury. “Look what it’s already doing.”

With a yell, he hurled the massive volume across the room.

IV. Of Sword and Stone

A ripping sound filled the room as the book landed with a thud near the window. Creighton wiped his eyes and looked at where the volume lay on the floor. Having landed on its cover, the book faced downward, revealing a hand-sized gash in the back. He squinted and saw a bulge underneath that was darker than the browned leather.

Walking across the room, the evening sun filling the room with brightness, he bent over to examine the gash. Inside the ripped covering was a dark cloth that was tightly wrapped around an object. Creighton pulled at the bundle, the leather tearing further. Finally, with a yank, the object came free. The dark bundle was carefully wrapped, but he undid the bindings. As he slowly unraveled the cloth, another small bundle fell from the cloth, landing on the floor with a muffled thump. Unrolling the last loop of cloth, the object beneath came into view with a flash of silver.

In Creighton's hand sat the handle of a sword without a blade. Not just any handle, but one with shining steel and spirals engraved on each end of the cross guard.

"The Prince's sword?" He turned the handle over in his hands and touched the smooth end where the blade should have been. The sword was not broken. Rather, it seemed as if the blade had never been there. "How can this be when the histories speak of how the sword was later lost?"

Staring down at the torn book in bewilderment, he spotted the other bundle that lay near his boot. Quickly, he retrieved the small mound and began to unravel the cloth. *Certainly, this couldn't be the blade.* As he pulled back the last piece of cloth, his eyes grew wide. Nestled in the dark bundle was a black and shiny stone – obsidian.

Holding the stone up in the light, the gem caught the rays of the sun and glistened with a kaleidoscope of colors. Creighton reached out a hand, the hand that still held the handle of the sword, feeling a powerful desire to touch the silky smoothness that seemed to dance with inner incandescence. As his fingers brushed the stone, a brilliant light exploded around him, brighter than any midday sun.

“What is—”

The handle in his hand became heavier and he squinted through the light to see that the sword was no longer bladeless. A flashing silver blade extended two arm-lengths in front of him.

Gasping, Creighton dropped the sword and stepped back.

With a clang, the sword fell to the floor and the room grew dimmer. When he looked down, the only thing he saw was the bladeless handle. Kneeling beside the sword, he felt around the area where the metal should be, but his wrinkled hands only touched the bare wood of the floor. *Nothing*. The edge of the handle was just as smooth as it had been when he touched it the first time.

But then he remembered the dark stone sitting in the cloth.

Retrieving the obsidian, which felt cool and smooth in his palm, he slowly moved the stone toward the handle of the sword. When his hand was a few inches away from the metal, the same blinding light filled the room and the blade returned.

“Hmmm.” Creighton swathed the stone with the cloth and blinked as the light from the blade faded. Stroking his beard, he stared at the handle with questions filling his mind. He knew what the stories said about the dragon, but he didn’t believe in the winged monster. No, the dragon was symbolic of the true enemy of Cairn: a warlord. Surely, there was a fire mountain at

that time in history which sparked the tales of burning villages and mountainous wasteland. But there was never a fire-spitting serpent. *There couldn't be.*

Turning his attention back to the bundle in his hand, he thought of how the sword must have been whole originally but now reacts only to the stone because of Padraig's fight with the warlord. *They must have fought near a place where the lava cooled.* He nodded before pocketing the wrapped stone, another question tickling his mind.

"But what good is a bladeless sword?" Reaching for the book, he pulled the volume closer and stuck a hand into the gash. The leather was tight around his hand, and he struggled to feel around in the secret space. After a moment, his finger brushed against something rough and brittle. Tugging the item loose, he removed a yellow piece of parchment and brought out the note into the window's light. Between his fingers, the note felt as fragile as a dried leaf.

I, Uilleam, son of Brian, son of Padraig, admit my mistake. Do not follow my path, for I melded stone and sword. Keep the sword hidden, but may the stone be a reminder. As for me, I patiently await the appointed day when all things will be unfurled.

Noticing that ink from the other side had bled through the thin parchment, Creighton turned the note over. Bordered by thick squares and spirals were the words:

Seek not to use the sword before its time,

For darkness is not conquered by darkness, but light.

Better is a faithful heart than forceful might.

Creighton's hands shook, causing the parchment to flutter. "The same Uilleam that made the map."

Somewhere miles across the mountains, a map drawn on parchment, like the note between his fingers, survived. And he knew the map would show the residence of the Keepers,

for his family had lived on the land as long as he knew, extending back to the ancient days of Padraig. *They could find me ...*

He took a breath and focused his gaze on his garden beyond the window, where his vegetables grew. If he concentrated, he could imagine his mother kneeling in the dirt, as she had so often done, her smiling face among the delicate blooms and crisp herbs. Whenever he needed to talk, he had known where to find her. He wished he could do so now.

Sighing, he closed the drape, casting the room into a shroud of darkness. *I don't want to go back on the pass. If this parchment was hidden, then maybe the map is too.* Tiredness crept through him like a chill. He no longer wanted to think about the map, but just to leave the tomb of a room he was in and take a nap.

Moving slowly as if his legs were tree trunks, he picked up the book and rewrapped the sword. He carefully packed away the volume into the chest, along with the rest of the mementos from his forefathers. Retrieving the glass fragments from the floor, he arranged them on the shelf where the butterfly once sat. Although it resumed its place in the middle of the shelf, the glass art was no longer the beautiful butterfly his sister adored. He leaned against the bookcase and shook his head as he stared at the fragments. *No, I should never have come in here.*

With the handle of the sword wedged under his arm and the obsidian stone and note in his pocket, he inched his way to the door. Before he shut it, though, he took a final look at the blue blanket on the bed.

“I’m sorry ... for everything,” Creighton whispered.



For the next week, Creighton debated the existence of the map as he carved sticks, chopped firewood in preparation for winter, and filled jars with tomato preserves. If he ever

convinced himself that an official from the Kingdom would not seek him out, his thoughts would quickly turn to Duncan and the missing signs. Doubts wormed their way into his mind, and he grew uneasy.

As he worked in the garden in the early morning sun, he would sit up from where he kneeled in the dirt to glance around at the trees. Weeding no longer offered much relief to him since he expected to see armed officials storm out from behind the trunks. He imagined them surrounding him with swords and knives, demanding that he lead people through the mountain pass again. To be a Keeper.

Once or twice, he thought he saw movement in the Wildwood. A flash of white in the distance or eyes peering out between leaves. When he fed the chickens in the morning and retrieved the eggs, he began taking his kitchen knife with him. With the long, sharp blade at his side, he collected the eggs for his breakfast. The blade also joined him as he gardened. Sometimes, for extra protection, he shouted into the forest, pronouncing threats and warnings to any who dared to enter the property. Try as he did, though, the uneasiness did not leave him.

Worse than the thought of lurking visitors was his experiences at night. In his sleep, he dreamt of spirals tangling him in their grip like snakes twisting tighter and tighter around his neck. Dragons also haunted his dreams, large black ones that set his cabin ablaze. One night, seven days after he read from the histories, he awoke with a shout. He raised a hand to his neck, where the spiral had been choking him. Sitting up, he took a breath and focused on the feel of the firm bed and soft blanket. *I'm still here, in my room. It wasn't real.* After a few more deep mouthfuls, he lay back down and closed his eyes. Listening to the hum of the crickets and tree frogs, he yawned and pulled the covers up to his chin. *It's not real.*

Slowly, he began to drift to sleep when a crashing noise reached his ears. Pulling himself out of his bed, Creighton ran to the window in his room, expecting to see an angry mob of officials and peasants surrounding his home, holding weapons and flaming torches. He pushed back the drape, craning his neck in every direction for signs of movement. In the darkness, he saw only the grass and the outline of trees in the distance. No animal or person moved in the night.

Stepping back from the window, Creighton rubbed his head. The lurker in the woods, the unease, and the dreams were too much. *I can't keep living like this.* He turned and eyed the bundles and the parchment note that sat on his desk. *Map or no map, I'm going to have to do something.*

Shuffling back to his bed, he sat on the edge and stroked his beard. His lips moved in silence as he counted the number of signs he would need, and how long the journey would take. "Well ..." he said and let out a long breath. Sitting up straight, he felt like a soldier preparing for battle. "One final trip, and then, no more."

V. Creighton's Departure

For the next few days, Creighton huddled over his desk in his room, marking the areas on a map where he would place the signs. The old route from the ancient days would suffice, although he would not be connecting the pass to each village in Cairn. Instead, he circled an area near Clachan on the old hand-drawn map, where the pass started, and indicated the locations along the mountains and the river where he would place the signs, all the way to the Kingdom.

When he wasn't staring at the map, he spent time crafting the signs – pieces of wood the size of his forearm that showed the crude etching of a mountain. These would serve as the main signs, although he also carved a few slabs that bore a large x to indicate dangerous areas where travelers should not venture. Creighton planned on attaching the signs to short posts that he carved, though he did not make as many of these since he did not want to take up extra space in his traveling pack. He could always make more on the way.

The rest of his days were filled with packing supplies for the journey, which he had calculated would take over two months for the entire trip if he stayed on the ancient route and did not stop in any of the villages. Wrapping thick wedges of cheese, hearty loaves of bread, smoked fish, and dried meats in pieces of cloth and parchment, he carefully filled his pack with the provisions he would need during the dangerous trek. He also added a few jars of his stewed tomatoes and vegetable preserves, and a small container of his favorite mushrooms that he enjoyed collecting from the fringes of the Wildwood. His belly rumbled as he placed the jar of mushrooms into his pack, anticipating the earthy flavor of a roasted treat over an open fire: A welcome comfort on an unwanted trip.

On the evening before his departure, when his rucksack was filled with provisions, clothes, healing supplies, a pot and pan, waterskins, blankets, and everything else he needed, he

debated whether to take the handle of the Prince's sword with him. The object could prove useful if he encountered bandits on the mountain pass, giving him the advantage of surprise if he held the stone as he gripped the handle. After sitting in his chair, mulling over his decision as he sipped a mug of tea, he went into his room and retrieved the carefully wrapped handle and obsidian stone. Not wanting the sword to appear accidentally and pierce his leather bag if it came loose from the bundle and encountered the stone, he cautiously packed the items on opposite sides of his bag.

The next morning, he awoke early and ate a quick breakfast as the sun rose, casting its soft glow through the kitchen window. He lingered while washing the dishes, staring out at the garden, the marigolds full and fiery among the lush stems of the tomato plants. The lettuce heads were still there, but he had already harvested the potatoes and carrots, storing them in his cellar in preparation for winter. He sighed. *I will miss my garden.*

After he had made sure the stove was cold and the back door was secure, he found himself standing in the front room. The curtains were drawn, casting the room in a shadow. Glancing around the cabin, the frown on his face increased. The fireplace was cold and dark, and the chair looked bony and worn without the warm light from the fire. After he heaved the pack onto his back, he took a final survey of his cabin with a hungry look, as if it might be his last. Creighton suddenly felt incredibly old like a tree bent by the wind. *Will it be the last?*

Shifting the bag on his back, he quickly turned his attention to the walking sticks along the front wall. The sticks all stood like soldiers lined for battle, each carved with assorted designs of birds, trees, and animals. He reached out a hand toward the stick with a sparrow carved at the top, his newest creation, but paused. *Should I use Father's?* The plain walking stick that sat in his parent's room came to mind, an ancient relic that reminded him of the duty of the Mountain

Pass Keepers. He shook his head. *No, not that one.* Gripping the sparrow walking stick, he moved to the door and opened the latch.

“So, this is it then.” He stepped into the doorway as he felt a heaviness overwhelm him, and not just from the weight of the pack on his back. Everything behind him was all he desired while everything ahead was all he dreaded. Taking a shaky breath, he walked out onto the log steps. Only stopping long enough to check that the door was shut, he stepped out into the grass that was still wet from the morning dew and trotted across the field that stretched from his cabin to the forest. He fought back tears as he moved farther away, picturing the cabin growing smaller and smaller. But he didn’t look back. He couldn’t.

The day was warm with a slight breeze, and under any other circumstance, he would have said the weather was pleasant. *A perfect day for gardening.* Birds were already awake and singing, adding their music to the chattering of squirrels and the hum of bees. Creighton breathed in the crisp smell of the trees as he left the field and entered the flourishing forest of the Carraig Uaine mountain range. He took a deep breath and tried to focus on the ceiling of green and the mountain-loving flowers that poked through the dead leaves scattered on the ground. *Only one final journey. By winter, I’ll be back in my home near the Wildwood, safe from any unwanted visitors.* He repeated these thoughts to himself as he traveled west, his boots crunching sticks and foliage. However, with each step, he gripped the walking stick more tightly.

Only one final journey, then home.

Only one final journey.

Only ...

No, he couldn’t ignore it. He was making a journey he had sworn never to make again.

The forest became a wavy blur as tears spilled down his face and wettened his beard. For years of his life, he had planned the day he would no longer need to tread the mountain pass. No longer would he have to put up with the complaining farmers, the desperate families, and the slow livestock. The guilt was already too heavy; he didn't want to carry more. Angrily, he ran his jacket sleeve over his face. *I have no choice. If I don't go, they will come looking for me.*

Creighton straightened his shoulders as if he could push away the crushing ache that he felt in his chest. A breeze danced around him, drying his face, and waving his beard. Smiling at the small comfort, the tears lessened. As he kept walking, he focused more on the placement of his steps, avoiding stones and walking around fallen branches. His ears began to grow attuned to the creaking of the trees and the sounds of the woodland animals. Around him, squirrels bounced through crunchy leaves and birds whistled.

But another sound soon reached his ears – pounding steps. Creighton surveyed the trees around him, searching for any sign of an animal. In the thick foliage and closely growing trunks, he couldn't see any movement. But whatever was running toward him was coming fast. Increasing his speed, he made it to a large tree ahead and hid behind its massive trunk.

The footsteps were louder now, drawing nearer. Holding his stick close in front of him, he prepared to use the solid wood. *I haven't come out here to be attacked by a bear or wild dog.*

Branches rustled from a bush nearby, and Creighton spun around from behind the tree raising his walking stick in the air. As he shook the stick, he yelled loudly at the brush.

Whatever was coming at him, slipped, and landed on the ground in a heap.

“Wait! Keeper, it's me. Stop!” Duncan's voice was barely audible over Creighton's yells. The young shepherd was sitting on the ground, his face upturned with a hand in the air. He looked more disheveled than before and had more scrapes on his arms and hands.

Creighton stared open-mouthed at Duncan for a moment, before narrowing his eyes. “You never left, did you? No, you’ve been spying on this old man, probably plotting to steal my food while I was gone. What would your mother think, boy?” He spat the last words before turning and resuming his march.

From behind, he heard the crunching of leaves. “No! That’s not true,” Duncan called as he caught up with Creighton. “I did stay in the wood near your house, but only because I didn’t know where to go. I hoped you would change your mind. But when I saw that you were gone this morning, I ran after you.”

Creighton didn’t reply but stared ahead as if Duncan wasn’t there. He quickened his pace.

“Please let me come with you. I ... I’ll pay you.”

“With what money?”

Duncan grew silent. After a pause, he spoke. “Once I find Beathan and make it to the Kingdom, I can pay you from what I earn for the sheep.”

“I don’t want your money.”

“Then, I’ll give you something else. Just name the price.” Duncan sounded ready to trade his arm.

When Creighton remained quiet, Duncan dashed ahead of him and blocked his way by holding out his staff. “Look, I’m sorry for storming into your cabin ... but I need help.”

Duncan’s face fell, and he looked tired and worn. Creighton paused, rubbing his chin. The forest grew quiet as he looked at the shepherd, searching for any signs of falsehood. After a moment, he pointed beyond Duncan’s shoulder, to the trees ahead. “You don’t even know where I’m going. Besides, what use to me is a shepherd?”

“You must be going somewhere along the mountain pass. Anywhere is better than staying here, since I don’t know where I am or even how to get back to Clachan if I wanted to. And I can do anything you need – hunt, fish, cook, or carry items. Please, Keeper.”

“Well ... if you are with me, then there is no chance of you breaking into my cabin–”

Duncan’s eyes lit up. “Thank you! Just wait here, and I’ll get my sheep.” He started to dash off into the trees, but Creighton yelled after him.

“Wait! I haven’t agreed yet.”

The young shepherd turned and stared at Creighton as if the old man had sprouted horns. “But you just said that if I am with you...”

Creighton let out an exasperated breath. “You can come along, but I’m not promising to help you find your friend. My path is already fixed, and I will make no detours. If you come, then you do so at your own risk. As I said before, I am no longer a Keeper.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you!” The shepherd waved in reply and darted away, his footsteps making as much noise as his arrival.

As Creighton leaned against a tree, waiting under the cool canopy of green, he grumbled under his breath. “Not only do I get to travel the mountain pass, but now I get to lead a boy and his flock of woolies. Surely the Prince is punishing me.” He held his hand up to his head, cradling his forehead.

What have I gotten myself into?

VI. The Storm

The journey was slow, as Creighton struggled up the steep hills. Although the air was cooling with the parting of summer and the awakening of autumn, he found his breathing labored and his legs weak for the task. Gripping his walking stick, he slowed to a stop as his breathing tried to catch up with his rapidly beating heart. Stubbornly, he had stayed ahead of the sheep, and Duncan, for the past three days of hiking through the mountains. “This old man still has strength,” he had boasted to himself. Now, leaning on his stick, struggling to catch his breath, Creighton wondered how he could continue to stay ahead.

Lifting his head, Creighton saw more hills in the distance, dotted with trees. If his memory of the map served him well, there were many more hills before they reached the rocky cliffs that overlooked the forested part of the mountains. It would be a few weeks before they would descend and follow the river that cuts through the mountain. Overwhelmed, he closed his eyes and let the wind blow across his face. He smelled the sweet scent of rain in the air. Around him, birds chirped to one another far up in the branches of the trees. After a few minutes of rest, he heard the clanking sound of bells from around the necks of the sheep.

“How can those wretched creatures move so fast?” Creighton did not enjoy having the sheep behind him because they often increased their speed at strange moments and then slowed when they wanted to graze on patches of grass. Livestock had always frustrated him during his time as a Keeper. He did not see any use in driving the animals through the mountain pass when they caused setbacks to the journey. But what was he to do?

As he regained his strength, taking several gulps from his waterskin, Creighton realized the sheep were mounting the hill. He saw their legs moving and heard their bleats. Duncan was close behind the flock because he could hear Duncan’s whistles and commands.

“Your livestock slows us down,” he muttered gruffly as Duncan appeared from his climb up the hill.

“Oh really?” Duncan raised an eyebrow as he called for the sheep to stop. “I thought we were moving slowly because of you.”

Creighton chose to ignore that comment, aware of Duncan’s bitterness toward his “retirement.”

“Even when I regularly traveled these mountains, sheep and cows always hindered the journey. You will be sorry you brought them along.” Creighton turned to continue walking but found that his legs were quivering. Using his walking stick to steady himself, he sighed.

“Well, since we have stopped here, we might as well place a sign. Travelers need regular markers or else they fear losing their way.” Avoiding Duncan’s gaze, he eased his rucksack off his shoulders and dug through the bag. After a moment, Creighton produced a sign, a post, and two nails. However, his arms and legs felt like jelly as he stood back up. He held out the items to Duncan.

The shepherd looked quizzically at Creighton. “What do you want me to do with those?”

Creighton pointed to a spot in the ground. “You said you would do anything. Here’s where you make yourself useful.” In truth, he hadn’t intended to place a marker at this location, but he needed time to rest.

“As you say, Keeper.” Duncan grabbed the items and went to work. He used his staff to drive the nails into the sign, connecting it to the post, and then planted it into the dirt. While the young shepherd dutifully patted soil around the sign, Creighton spotted an old log and sat down. *Now will probably be a good time for a midday meal.* Eating would give him time to recover from the uphill climb.

Duncan soon realized they were pausing for lunch and Creighton saw him sit near the sheep.

“Wait, you haven’t set up the rocks. I want to make sure that even if the signs rot again, there are still markers. Ones that will last,” Creighton said.

Duncan nodded reluctantly and set to work finding rocks to use for the pile. As he did, Creighton pulled out bread, cheese, and smoked fish to build himself a sandwich. While he sat and ate, taking his time to savor the meal and look at the trees around him, Duncan finished constructing the stone marker. The shepherd wiped his hands on his trousers and then sat in the grass, pulling out his meager provisions from his pack. He fingered bits of bread and a small piece of cheese. The traveling pair ate in silence, except for the crunching of grass by the sheep. Creighton tried to keep his eyes fixed forward but couldn’t help noticing that the young shepherd glanced longingly at his meat sandwich. A slight twinge of guilt made the Keeper’s stomach flip. *No, it’s not my fault. I didn’t promise him provisions.* He continued looking ahead.

“Do you have any plans about what to do if it rains?” Duncan asked, folding the empty cloth back into his pack. The clouds above them looked heavy.

“We will keep going unless there’s lightning,” Creighton said between bites of his sandwich. “A little rain never hurt anyone.”

“No, if it starts raining, we will need to find shelter. My sheep could die if they get cold from the soaking rain.”

“That’s your problem, not mine.” Creighton finished the last bite of his lunch and brushed the crumbs from his beard. “If you want to stop, you can. But I’m not waiting for you.”

Duncan rose to his feet, picking up his shepherd’s staff. “What? You agreed I could come with you.”

“I didn’t say anything about stopping for storms and sheep.”

“My sheep can’t travel in a storm. And I don’t know anything about crossing the mountains, but I would say *you* can’t travel either if you’re soaking wet!” Duncan pointed upward at the increasingly darkening sky.

The old Keeper glanced up at the clouds but shrugged. “As I said, a little rain won’t hurt anyone. I have walked this mountain pass in rain and snow, and the weather never stopped me.” Creighton got up from where he sat and put on his pack. His irritation gave him the energy to get moving. “Let’s keep going.”

Duncan didn’t reply but clenched his fists as he slung his pack over his shoulder and whistled for the sheep. Creighton heard him follow but noted that the shepherd was lagging. The wind began to whip around him. Although it was late summer, he noticed a slight chill in the wind, which caused him to shiver. The coolness must have made the sheep panic because they began bleating. Creighton turned and saw them pressing closer to Duncan. Overhead, the clouds loomed in a dark mass.

As they reached the next grassy hill, with a few trees scattered about, he felt a splash of cold rain on his hand. Looking down, he saw the clear drop roll off his hand as heavy rain began to splash around him. The noise from the sheep grew louder with the onslaught of rain.

“Keeper! We need to find shelter,” Duncan called out, but his voice was muffled by the pounding storm.

Shaking his head, Creighton continued to walk forward, paying no attention to Duncan’s pleas. *I am the leader of this group, and no farm boy is going to tell me what to do.* His boots squished in the grass, which was already soaked.

Feeling a hand gripping his arm, the old Keeper turned around to see Duncan, his eyes wide as the rain dripped around him.

“My sheep could get sick! Where can we go?” His red cloak hung limply around his shoulders like a dead animal. Huddled around Duncan, the sheep were bleating, frantic with fear.

“It’s just a little rain. Let go of my arm!” Creighton yanked his arm away from Duncan’s grip, irritation rising in his chest. “We need to keep going.”

“No. I will not put my sheep at risk. We will find shelter and wait for the storm to end.” Duncan slammed his staff on the ground and defiantly stared at the old man.

“They are just stupid animals. I thought *you* wanted to find your friend,” Creighton said. He never understood why people cared for livestock as if they were people. Most of the animals were going to be killed anyway.

“They are more than animals. My family is depending on the money I get from my sheep. And I care for my sheep, just as I do my family. Would you want someone in your family to die because of foolishness?”

Creighton stepped back. A memory of a young girl with red curls, feverish and shivering, flashed in his mind.

“Sorcha.” The Keeper barely said the name, but he felt himself tremble at the sound of it.

“What?” Duncan looked at Creighton with his eyebrows raised.

“Nothing.” Shaking to clear his head, Creighton pointed at the trees to his left. “Go through there and you will find a cave at the bottom of the hill. It will provide shelter for your flock.”

Before Creighton could give any more directions, Duncan was calling for his sheep and hurrying toward the trees and down the hill. The sheep followed the voice of their shepherd,

crying even louder than before. Multiple times, the young man slipped on the wet grass, but he forced himself up with his shepherd's staff and continued to call for his sheep.

The old Keeper was left alone on the hill, watching them travel downhill. In his memory, he kept hearing the name, *Sorcha*. He didn't want to think about that day, or her. No, not now.

Focus, remember your cabin. He just had to travel the mountain pass with this impulsive shepherd and then he could go home – where it was comfortable. No wet sheep would irritate him there. He forced his legs to move down the slippery hill. As he descended, he kept his eyes on his leather boots to keep his steps steady. He succeeded in keeping his balance, with the help of his walking stick, for most of the journey down the hill.

However, Creighton's felt one of his feet roll on a large stick as he got nearer to the cave and fell backward. The damp grass that soaked his trousers made him feel colder and he mumbled to himself about the stupidity of shepherds. *I am more likely to die in this weather than those oversized cotton balls.*

As he pulled himself off the ground, Creighton saw Duncan ahead in the cave scattering oats in front of the sheep. The creatures were huddled together, shivering from the cold rain, but they nosed the ground once they realized what Duncan was giving them.

“Go on, eat. It will make you warm.” Duncan continued to scatter more oats, whispering to the sheep. As Creighton grew closer to the cave, he saw one of the sheep collapse on its side.

“What's wrong with that one?”

Duncan turned when the Keeper spoke and noticed the young sheep. He rushed to the animal, which was slightly smaller than the rest. He began to rub her legs and tried to encourage her to stand. Grabbing a fresh blanket from his pack, Duncan began to dry the shivering creature as he spoke loving words. “That's it, friend. Let's get you warm.”

Entering the cave, Creighton peeled off his drenched cloak and laid it out on the ground to dry. Slowly, he loosened the straps from his back and slid his supplies to the ground. He rummaged around the pack and eventually pulled out a large woolen blanket. Wrapping himself with it, he sat on the grainy, but hard ground and continued watching Duncan's attempts to warm the cold sheep.

Despite his aversion to sheep, Creighton noticed that Duncan was attentive to his flock and responded instantly to the shivering creature. His urgent care, though, brought back unwelcome memories as if the shepherd were stoking a wildfire in his mind. Feeling increasingly unsettled, the Keeper took a deep breath and tried to close his eyes. *I'll just take a nap until the rain stops. Then we can continue our journey.* For a few moments, he was able to focus on the dripping sound of rain outside.

Sorcha. The voice in his head echoed.

"Stop. She's gone." Creighton spoke aloud to the memory, forgetting that Duncan could hear him.

"What? No, she's going to be okay." Duncan said. Creighton opened his eyes to see the young sheep standing next to the rest of the flock, munching on oats. "She just needed some extra care. That's my job, anyway. At times, they can be stubborn, but they need me." Duncan gently petted the head of the young sheep before looking inquisitively at the Keeper. "What were you saying about Sorcha? Is that a friend of yours?"

Creighton felt tears pricking his eyes but blinked them away. "Don't bother me. I'm trying to sleep," he said. Wrapping his wool cover tighter around him, the Keeper lowered his head and leaned back against the wall of the cave. He pretended to doze, but his mind was racing

with images of a young girl with a fever. Eventually, he fell into a fitful sleep as the rain pounded a steady rhythm outside; a rhythm that sounded like funerary drums to Creighton.

VII. A Scorched Land

Walking behind sheep that smelled musty and constantly left droppings was not part of Creighton's idea of a pleasurable journey. However, he couldn't maintain the pace to stay ahead, so he had chosen to start walking with Duncan behind the flock. The hills ahead stretched forward, winding higher into the mountains. A vast amount of ground still needed to be covered before reaching the Kingdom, and the old Keeper prayed for the days to go by quicker. Since he was now traveling beside Duncan, the young shepherd constantly bombarded him with questions.

Days passed, and Creighton grew weary of Duncan's endless questions. The shepherd tried to pry information out of him about his "adventures" of traversing the mountain range. Most of the time, Creighton would mumble a vague reply or ignore the incessant flow of words coming from his young traveling companion. But it was getting harder to remain silent. As they walked up hills and through stretches of meadows, Duncan began to ask about Creighton's family. Who were they? Was his father a Keeper too? Where did his extended family live? The constant drone of questions made Creighton's head pound, competing with his aching calves for the most painful body part.

"So did your father teach you everything about being a Keeper?"

Creighton spat at the ground. "Do you ever stop talking? What my father did and did not do is none of your business."

"So, there were things he didn't teach you?"

"Yes! Does that satisfy you? My father taught me about being a Mountain Pass Keeper. Though not everything."

"What did he not teach you then?"

Rubbing his face, Creighton squinted his eyes at Duncan. “If you don’t stop with your questions, I’ll go on without you.”

Duncan laughed. “No, I think you would have already done that by now. Besides, you need me to set up the signs ... But I’m sorry. Having a father that trained you and cared about you is fascinating to me. Not everyone has that.”

Creighton’s annoyance was gaining. *Cared as long as I kept the tradition of the Keepers.* However, he turned to look at Duncan and noticed that he looked sad. It was his turn to ask a question.

“Your father never taught you anything?”

The shepherd shrugged and kicked at a nearby rock. “The only reason I know about shepherding is because of Beathan. He’s like a big brother to me.” A smile appeared across his tired face, but only for a moment.

Ahead of them was a grove of pine trees, though some had recently split and fallen. *A lightning strike, probably. That could explain some of the fires.* As they advanced up the hill, they entered the grove. Through the cluster of close-growing trunks, Creighton saw a clearing with tall grass.

“Look!” Duncan pointed ahead. “That’s where we were attacked by ... the dragon.” He stopped and gazed up at the leaves of the pines. Creighton continued walking until he reached the clearing, pausing to survey the area. Turning toward Duncan, he saw that a few of the trees lining the edge of the clearing had fallen. Getting closer to one of the fallen trees, he saw that there were deep grooves in the trunk. Duncan’s story of the dragon made him think of claw marks, but he shook his head.

When Duncan caught up to him, the shepherd pointed to the left. “Over there is where I saw Beathan run. Is it possible he made it down to the forest below?”

Creighton rubbed the back of his neck. From what he remembered about the area, the grove grew on a ridge. “Not from here unless he ran in another direction. Even if he is down there, he’s probably not in the same spot.” He turned and began walking through the clearing, around the grazing sheep, and up the next hill. “Come on.”

For a while, Duncan was quiet. Creighton relished the silence as they struggled upward, the ground rising steadily. They were getting closer to the top of the ridge.

“I thought Pdraig killed the black fire dragon long ago. So why is he here?”

“Aren’t you too old to believe in fairy stories? The dragon isn’t real,” Creighton said. Exasperated by Duncan’s lack of knowledge, he eyed the young shepherd, who regularly glanced up at the cloudless sky. “Besides, according to the lore, Pdraig never killed the dragon.”

“Yes, he did. That’s what the village elders told us.” Duncan said before he whistled at a sheep that was lagging behind the rest of the flock. “They wouldn’t lie to me.”

“Clachan was never known for storytellers,” Creighton said. “You should have heard old Teague of Sithstrath. Now, he was a storyteller, skilled and knowledgeable about lore.”

“Well, if you know the legend so well, why don’t you tell it?” Duncan asked, challenging the old Keeper with a defiant stare.

Glancing down at the knotted grass, Creighton let out a breath. He tried to dodge the sheep droppings but felt his boots squish. Grumbling to himself about the absurdity of traveling with livestock, he felt his will soften. There was nothing else to occupy the time anyway.

“I’m not a trained storyteller like Teague. But if you promise not to ask me any more questions for the rest of the day, I’ll tell you the story. *The real story.*”

Duncan raised an eyebrow but nodded.

“Oh, and no interruptions!” Creighton noticed that the shepherd smiled slightly in triumph as they continued to walk behind the flock up a hill lined with rocks and patches of grass.

“You know the story of old. Thousands of years ago, when the Prince first visited Cairn, the black fire dragon, Obsidian, rebelled and gained control of these mountains. He tormented villagers by stealing their livestock and burning their crops. No one was safe from the raging fire of the dragon’s breath, especially if they entered his territory of the Carraig Uaine.

Throughout the mountain pass, the land lay desolate. Only a few scattered trees grew on the edges of the forests, but the rest was scorched land. No grass, bushes, or flowers grew here because Obsidian burned them. He hated any living thing, including the natural plants of the earth.

To save the villagers, the Prince forged a sword and willingly gave up His life when conspirators attacked Him. Using that sword, Padraig defeated Obsidian, sending the serpent back to its fiery home under the ground. The Prince restored Cairn, and the mountain range grew into the verdant landscape we have today ...”

Creighton waved his hand in the air to indicate the grassy hills around them.

“But what you don’t know is that there was never a dragon. After years of study and thought, I have discerned that later Keepers, such as Uilleam, embellished the original story of the rebellion to make it more appealing to the children of the villages. The real story is that the enemy of Cairn was a man, a warlord. He probably served in the armies of the Kingdom. There, he learned the art of war and gained favor in the eyes of many officials. With their support, he began to take over the mountain pass to gain control of Cairn. He gathered a militia to serve him and together, they burned the crops of villagers and terrorized those who opposed him. The

image of the fire-spewing dragon came about because Padraig fought the warlord near a fire mountain. Thus, that is why the later Keepers changed the story over time.”

Relishing the silence at the end of the tale, Creighton nodded his approval. *Now I can get some peace.* Next to him, Duncan’s eyebrows were furrowed as he stared ahead. They continued their trek, gulping down air as they climbed farther up.

“The only problem is the dragon is real. I saw him. He’s not just a Kingdom soldier gone crazy.”

Creighton closed his eyes for a moment. “You mean *was*. That warlord of the story has long been dead. He is no longer a threat, though the stories could be interpreted to suggest that another warlord will rise. As for your dragon, why haven’t I seen him?”

“But you saw the trees back there! Some were crushed and there were claw marks” Duncan said.

“Bah! That’s just lightning, boy.”

Out of the corner of his eyes, Creighton saw Duncan shaking his head vehemently.

“Even you said the dragon wasn’t destroyed based on the stories. How can you say this warlord was killed if the dragon wasn’t?”

Now that they were on flat ground at the top of the ridge, Creighton stopped and leaned against his walking stick. He untied his waterskin from his belt and drank deeply. After he wiped his mouth, he saw Duncan glaring at him.

Creighton shrugged. “You wanted a story, and I gave you one, the real one. Now you need to keep your side of the bargain.”

The shepherd hit his staff on the ground. “Well, you said the dragon wasn’t destroyed, and I saw him. You might say that the tales are only for children, but they are true.”

Creighton replaced his waterskin and ignored Duncan's comments, walking past him. He just wanted to get over the ridge and find a place to stop for the night. Irritation caused Creighton to walk faster across the ridge, ignoring the sheep droppings that lay in front of him. From where he walked, he was high on the top of the ridge that overlooked the leafy forest that gave the mountain its namesake.

Behind him, he heard Duncan call for his sheep to stop. *He might want to stop and look, but I'm not.* Creighton continued to walk across the ridge, grumbling to himself about the sheep ahead that blocked his path.

"Keeper, wait. Did you see this?"

"I've seen the forest more times than I wanted to," Creighton waved his arm, urging Duncan to follow. "Come on, get your sheep moving."

"No, I think you want to see this. Look!" Duncan was adamant, his voice shaking slightly.

Creighton sighed and turned back to Duncan. "Yes, Carraig Uaine is the Prince's emerald, a landscape of beauty—"

From his point of the ridge, he was able to see the trees rustling across the mountain, disappearing in the distance in a blurry haze. However, when he looked in the direction Duncan was pointing, he saw that a portion of the western forest lay bare. Instead of healthy green leaves, the trees were charred stumps. He could even see indications of the exposed rocky ground underneath. The grass had been burned to ash.

Creighton turned to look in the other directions across the ridge, his hand on his forehead to shield his eyes from the sun. A large section of the forest was now a scorched wasteland. *Right in the direction I intended to go.*

Duncan cleared his throat. "Do you still think the dragon is a legend?"

VIII. Monsters and the Mountain Pass

As the group traveled north into a rugged and rocky forest over the next four days, Creighton tried to reason with himself that the fire was started by anything other than a dragon. *Wildfire. Bandits. Malicious intent.*

Ignoring Duncan's pestering, he spent his time trying to conjure up the memories from when he was a young boy and wildfires had damaged parts of the forests. His father was unable to fulfill his Keeper duties for two months because of the burning trees. Creighton remembered his mother and father taking turns keeping watch over their cabin throughout the day, ensuring the licking flames were nowhere near their home. The window from his room had served as his regular lookout point, where he checked on his parents, worried that they had been engulfed by a raging firestorm. In the evening, as his mother prepared dinner, he would see the outline of his father silhouetted against the backdrop of the dark trees, the smoke in the distance rising into a hazy night sky.

Not only were the fires concerning, but the scorched forests encompassed a part of the ancient mountain pass. With the ash and threat of fire in the west, he would be forced to travel northward, which wasn't the direction he intended. *Just what I need, a longer trip.*

On the fifth night after observing the burnt forest, Creighton and Duncan prepared their camp in a grassy area in the northern forest, near a cluster of trees. The old Keeper wished his mother and father were there to sit on a log or nearby rock to search for signs of sparks or flames as he slept. But that was a pointless wish. *Even if they could be here, why would they waste their time with me?*

Creighton's fear worsened when Duncan insisted on building a fire. If there was any threat of the trees being dry and setting aflame like kindling, he didn't want to risk it with a manmade fire.

“But having a fire will keep away animals and insects,” Duncan argued. The young shepherd had secured his flock in a makeshift sheepfold nearby in an area partially enclosed by rocks. Now, he was gathering sticks.

“Starting a fire is a foolish idea, especially with the threat of wildfires.” Creighton carefully checked the ground before sitting down. He pulled out the supplies from his pack. Unfastening his gray cloak from his shoulders, he nimbly folded it up beside him to use as a pillow.

“You know it was the black fire dragon that set the forest ablaze, not a wildfire,” Duncan insisted.

“You need to stop saying that nonsense.” Creighton retrieved a piece of smoked jerky from his pack and shook it threateningly at Duncan. “There are more sinister monsters in this mountain than a legendary dragon.”

“What do you mean?” The shepherd brought over his stack of sticks and placed them in a pile near where Creighton sat in the grass. When Duncan stood, his stomach growled. Creighton paused to look at the thick piece of bread, jerky, and crumbly cheese that sat on the cloth spread out on his lap. His hand hovered over the piece of bread for a moment before he tore off a chunk and popped it into his mouth.

He took his time to chew before answering. “Monsters exist in life but are not like the ones in stories. They are the bandits who wait to murder you in the dark areas of the forest. Like cockroaches, they crawl around the shadowy areas of the mountain pass but flee from lighted, open spaces. As a Mountain Pass Keeper, I quickly learned to stay away from the outer edges of the forests. Villagers passed around tales of towns being raided and burned by thieves. No one could catch these monsters because they would sneak back into the shadow of the woods. This is

why I know the black fire dragon doesn't exist. The storytellers wanted to make their tales more exciting and morphed an ancient warlord and his bandit-filled militia into a fierce dragon."

Duncan glanced into the dark of the woods. "But what about Beathan? He has no idea bandits are waiting to kill him!"

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about them," said Creighton. He waved a piece of cheese dismissively. "He should be more concerned about the wolves and bears that roam the mountains."

"So, you are telling me there are predators out there, and we aren't going to build a fire?" Duncan crossed his arms.

"You forget that there are also bandits and the risk of starting a forest fire. We'll be fine." Creighton finished off the last piece of his bread and folded the empty cloth. "Now, let's get some sleep." He lay down on the soft grass, his folded cloak underneath his head, and pulled his wool blanket over him.

"But what about my sheep? An animal or bandit could attack and steal them away," Duncan said.

"That is no concern of mine," Creighton replied, his back to Duncan.

"Well, if you aren't going to build a fire tonight, I'm going to stay near my flock and keep watch." Creighton heard the rattle of sticks and the crunch of grass as Duncan picked up his kindling and stomped away into the distance.

"You can do as you please." Creighton never understood why shepherds cared so much for their sheep. *They are stupid animals, who cares if they get taken? At least it would make our trip faster.*

The night was brisk, and the sky was clear. Overhead, the wind rustled the leaves, which already had edges of gold on their leaves. *Is autumn already coming? I'm supposed to return home before the first snow.* Creighton rolled on his back and looked through the lacy treetops to the sky beyond. Bright stars blinked back at him. As he gazed at the constellations, the old Keeper began to feel minuscule compared to the heavenly bodies above him.

Sorcha.

The name reverberated in his mind and brought back a memory of a cold, starry night many years ago when he was a young Keeper. He remembered staring up at the stars, cursing them for their beauty. *How could they shine when Sorcha was gone?*

“No, not tonight. I won't think of you again,” Creighton whispered, turning back to his side. He pulled the blanket higher over his shoulders and around his neck as if he were a caterpillar in a cocoon. Struggling to fight off thoughts of his past, he finally drifted off to sleep as a few late summer crickets whined their lullaby.

Creighton dreamed of the Kingdom's large mountain dogs. When he was a boy, his father and mother had taken him to visit his aunt who worked as a healer in the Kingdom. At that time, he had seen the great army and regiment of dogs. The canines were massive, bigger than he was as a child. Brown and white fur covered their muscular bodies, fit for soldiers, but their eyes were wise and kind.

In his dream, snow covered the land in a thick, wintry blanket. He stood by the towering stone gates of the Kingdom, watching the mountain dogs march out in pairs. Although the officials dispatched the regiment of dogs throughout the year, the dogs did their best work in the snow. They were sent out along the mountain pass to find lost travelers. Sometimes, the dogs also hunted bandits, nosing them out for arrest. Curious about their mission, Creighton smiled as

he watched the dogs march out of the gate into the open fields. Tempted by their thick, warm fur, he reached out a gloved hand to pet one, but his mother grabbed his arm.

“No, Creighton. Remember, they are working.”

He nodded to his mother but didn't take his eyes off the massive animals. One by one, the mountain dogs raised their noses in the air and howled. The howls were not like he remembered but sounded long and mournful. If he hadn't known better, he would have thought they were oversized wolves.

Then, he heard a low-throated growl.

Creighton's eyes flew open. About a foot away from where he lay stood a gray wolf. The animal's eyes shone in the dark and its white teeth stood out in the blackened forest. Again, the wolf growled. The old Keeper stood still, staring at the wolf. He remembered that his walking stick was on the other side of his bedroll, out of reach of his current position. It was no use trying to dig into his pack to retrieve the sword and stone.

Sitting up slowly, Creighton reached out his hand to find his walking stick. His hand moved carefully around in the grass, feeling for the stick. As he did, he heard the growl return from deep within the wolf's throat. Just as he touched the smooth wood, the howls of wolves resounded in the night.

The wolf sprang forward with a snarl, jumping toward his leg. Instinctively, Creighton jerked back and gripped the wood of the stick. However, the wolf moved quicker than he could grab his weapon. It bit into his leg, tearing the flesh in the front. He yelled as the pain shot through his shin. Already, the howls of the rest of the pack sounded closer. Firmly grabbing his walking stick, he lifted it over his head and hit the wolf on the side of its body with all the force he could muster.

The wolf let go of his leg and inched a few steps backward. Crouching, the animal kept its gaze on Creighton. He caught a glimpse of the creature's sharp teeth behind curled lips, which glistened with dark blood.

"Go! Leave here!" Creighton commanded in a loud voice, shaking his stick at the animal. Attempting to push himself to a standing position, his leg gave out and he fell back to the ground. As he did, he felt the weight of the wolf lunge against him.

It was going in for the kill.

Protectively, Creighton held out his walking stick between both hands. The animal aimed for his neck, but bit into the wood, furiously shaking its head. He strained to keep the wolf from getting close to his face, but his arms began to shake as the wolf thrashed its head, attempting to loosen Creighton's grip.

As slobber rained down on his chest, Creighton thought about how he would die there, the pack of wolves gradually joining in on the attack. They would tear him to shreds and not a single living soul would care. Duncan might feel sorry that no one would lead him across the pass, but the old Keeper doubted if Duncan would miss his company. He didn't even think the Prince would mourn the loss of the lazy and unconcerned Mountain Pass Keeper, who hid in his cabin like a hermit.

But maybe dying there at the jaws of a wolf was supposed to happen. He deserved it after what he'd done.

Although the scene before him of a gnashing wolf seeking blood scared him, he felt an inner numbness wash over him. As if he were no longer in control, he loosened his grip. The wolf moved closer, snarling.

No, he didn't want to watch the last moment when the animal pounced on him, but he couldn't close his eyes. For some reason, the eyes of the wolf mesmerized him with its warm brown color, but cold, ruthless stare. *Yes, it was meant to happen this way.*

Creighton saw the animal raise its head; its mouth open. Before the wolf could move, a large object flashed before his eyes. In a blur of gray and white, the wolf whimpered as it rolled into the grass. There, its body lay limp.

The Keeper sat up and stared at the wolf that lay on the ground a few arm's lengths away from him. Turning, he saw Duncan running toward him.

"I got him!" The shepherd retrieved his staff and bent to look at Creighton's wound.

"You came to find me?" Creighton sat stunned as Duncan tried to examine the bitten leg.

"Of course. Shepherds never leave a lost sheep, even if it is a grumpy creature." Duncan grinned as he wrapped the Keeper's blanket around the bite and tied it firmly. "I heard the wolves when they first started howling and built a fire to protect the sheep. I didn't think they would attack you but came as fast as I could when I heard you cry out."

Creighton began to ask "why" again but was interrupted when he was pulled to his feet. Searing pain shot through his leg. Duncan grabbed the old man before he fell and steadied him.

"Come on, we need to get back to the sheep." Duncan helped Creighton walk briskly through the dark.

"Why? I thought you built a fire."

"Yes, but they are still trying to attack. We're going to need to scare them away."

The gash throbbed as they continued to stumble through the thick veil of night to Duncan's side of the camp. He heard the sheep before he saw them. When they grew closer to the fire, he saw why they were bleating hysterically.

In the shadows of the flickering flames, the dark forms of wolves roamed, their eyes shining.

IX. Playing with Fire

Duncan helped Creighton sit on the ground in front of the improvised sheepfold made of sticks and thickets. The sheep grew quiet and calm when they sensed their shepherd's presence.

Blood seeped through the blanket wrapped around Creighton's leg, but he ignored the throbbing. Duncan expected him to defend the sheep, but he was unsure how much fighting he could do. He couldn't stand on his own, and he didn't even have his walking stick to use as a weapon.

"We can't let them get near the sheepfold. If the sheep get loose, we will have no hope of saving them." Duncan grabbed a large stick that had a cloth wrapped on the end. He stuck the tip of it into the burning flames, which set it ablaze as a torch. Handing the lighted branch to Creighton, Duncan said, "You hold onto this. If a wolf comes close, wave it at them. They don't like fire."

Creighton held the flaming stick away from him but noticed that a few of the gray wolves were inching out of the shadows, closer to the camp.

"I'm going to patrol around the sheepfold. Can you keep watch in the front?" Duncan now held a burning torch in one hand and his staff in the other.

The old Keeper didn't think he had any choice. "Yes, I'll try." He turned his attention back to the wolves in the shadows. When any of them came closer, he waved his branch and yelled. Duncan passed in front of Creighton frequently as he marched back and forth in front of the sheepfold, keeping watch for any wolves that tried to attack from the sides.

Out of the corner of his eye, Creighton saw a wolf creeping near the edge of the camp. It loped away when he swung the lighted branch but returned a few minutes later. When Duncan saw the animal return, he ventured a little farther into the darkness of the woods, shouting and

waving the fire at the wolf. It dashed off into the shadows. As it did, snarls and growls emanated from the darker parts of the forest.

For the rest of the night, Creighton and Duncan struggled to stay awake as they kept guard over the sheep. Creighton regularly found himself drifting off, his head bending forward toward his chest. A few times, he almost set his long beard on fire because he forgot about the burning stick in his hand. The shepherd's repetitive pacing didn't help since his march seemed hypnotic to Creighton. Before sunrise, he found himself constantly blinking in and out of consciousness.

As the first tendrils of light crept through the trees, the howls of the wolves retreated. Birds awoke with the rising of the sun and sang high in the branches. Soft morning light filled the campsite, contrasting with the fading embers of the fire.

Creighton inched away from the sheep that were trying to munch on his hair and coat but flinched at the stabbing pain in his leg.

"Duncan!" Creighton called out. Duncan had stopped pacing hours before and leaned against his staff. Apparently, he had fallen asleep while standing guard. "Duncan, wake up! I need my pack."

The shepherd jerked awake and looked around suspiciously.

"Huh? Is it morning?"

"My pack! Can you get my things?"

Duncan yawned before assenting to Creighton's request and walked away from the camp to retrieve the Keeper's abandoned supplies. The blanket worked as a quick solution to his wound, but he needed his healing supplies if he wanted to keep the wound from festering.

Duncan returned with Creighton's pack, walking stick, and cloak. Wiping his eyes, he handed the items to the older man. "Here's your belongings, Keeper."

Rummaging through the pack, Creighton searched for a small bag made of rich purple cloth. After a few minutes of digging, he pulled out the bag, which bore an embroidered dove on the front, its wings outstretched in flight. Undoing the strings, he quickly inserted a hand into the cloth and brought out a wooden box. All his supplies were there from his time as a Keeper: dried herbs, rolls of clean cloth, small vials, a needle, a ball of twine, a knife, and a mortar and pestle. Seeing the glint of the knife caused Creighton to cringe. Depending on how the wound looked, he might have to use it.

Reaching forward, he gently untied his blanket and unwrapped it from around his leg. Some of the blood had dried on the blanket, which made the cloth stick to his skin. Biting the inside of his cheek, he quickly pulled away the rest of his impromptu bandage. A large gash on the front of his leg revealed evidence of the wolf's bite. Around the wound, the skin was fiery red. He leaned forward and gently touched the skin, which felt warm beneath his fingers.

"Oh, that looks rough." Duncan bent to look at the wound but quickly stood back up.

Creighton poured water from an unused waterskin over the wound and used a piece of clean cloth to pat around the gash. Using his supplies, he ground a few of the herbs and mixed them with water, creating a thick paste.

"How did you learn the art of healing?" Duncan asked, intently watching the creation of a poultice.

"My aunt was a renowned healer in the Kingdom. She taught me a few things to help me as I traveled as a Keeper." Creighton said.

“My mother knows a few things about healing, but severe sicknesses in the village are more difficult. I remember when a boy had a terrible axe wound. He almost ...” Duncan looked away into the trees.

“Died?” Creighton glanced at the shepherd, who nodded his head. “That doesn’t surprise me. It is easy for wounds to become festered, which makes the body sick. I am not a skilled healer, but I know enough to understand that a person must clean their wound and sew it up in severe cases. Like I’m going to do today.” He handed Duncan a piece of cloth. “But I’m going to need your help.”

“Now, Keeper, I don’t think you want me sewing you up!” Duncan protested.

“I don’t have time to argue with you.” When Creighton saw that Duncan was uneasy, he added, “If you help, I’ll share some of my provisions with you for breakfast.”

“Any of your provisions? Even meat?”

“Well ...” Creighton stroked his beard. “All right. You may even choose meat.” Duncan’s eyes brightened.

Once the shepherd had agreed to assist Creighton with the gruesome task of sewing the wound, he followed the Keeper’s instructions of feeding the fire, fetching fresh water, and finding a large, sturdy branch.

While Duncan was away on his mission, Creighton chewed a few of the herbs that helped with pain and set out his supplies to sew up the wound on his leg.

Once the shepherd returned with fresh water from the stream, Creighton boiled a pot of water and sterilized his needle and knife.

“I need you to hold my leg steady. Even if I jerk back, you must keep a firm grip. Do you understand?” Creighton glanced at Duncan, who nodded, though his face was pale. The Keeper

took a deep breath, stuck a small piece of wood in his mouth to bite on, and started his work. He tried to keep his leg still, but a few times, the pain of the needle caused him to flinch.

Because of the intricate nature of the wound, the job took longer than he expected. After finishing the two long sutures, he cleaned away the blood and covered the area with herb paste to soothe the irritation. By this time, Creighton's fingers were cramped, and he felt weak. He leaned back against the sheepfold, ignoring the musty smell of the animals. Feeling the warmth of the sun hitting his face, he dozed off. Although he slept for a few hours, it felt like only a few minutes before he was awakened by Duncan's voice.

"Do you want some breakfast, Keeper?"

Creighton opened his eyes to see Duncan extending a plate of cooked fish with a slab of bread and cheese toward him.

"So, you chose my smoked fish." Creighton sighed, regretting his decision. He wouldn't be able to enjoy them now. Though he didn't find the fish appealing at the moment, he knew that he needed food to regain strength and heal. Taking the plate from Duncan with shaking arms, he took a few bites of the meal. Duncan devoured two platefuls and eyed the Keeper's remaining bits of fish.

"We will stay here a few days before traveling north and then back to the west near the Tiodalyne River that runs through the mountain pass. That will give me enough time to make a crutch from the branch you found." Creighton said, setting the plate on his lap and leaning back against the sheepfold.

"We'll keep a fire going this time, right?" Duncan asked, grinning.

Creighton grumbled, closing his eyes. He had enough talk of fire for one day.

For the next few days, the pair camped at the same site, securing the sheep at night. During the day, Duncan led the sheep out to nearby grassy areas, allowing the flock to graze while Creighton carved a wooden crutch. He also spent his time reapplying the poultice and changing the bandage around his wound. When he wasn't sleeping that is.

Much to his dismay, Duncan began cooking breakfast each morning. While he never took any of Creighton's provisions, the old Keeper relented and allowed the shepherd a portion of his supplies. One day as they were staying in the same camp, Duncan caught a few rabbits and roasted them for their supper, freeing them from using any of Creighton's food stores for a while.

On the last evening at their temporary camp, Creighton sat near the fire with the sheepfold behind him, crafted from sticks and bushes. In the grassy clearing encircled by strong oaks and the brown bark of walnut trees, he listened to the quiet breathing of the sheep. The old Keeper was still weak, but had regained some strength from resting his leg and eating enough. He had spent the afternoon thinking and rummaged through his pack to find the bundle that contained the obsidian stone. Hours had passed as he stared at the glossy stone in his hand with eyebrows furrowed. *Surely, I should have seen a rock like this before.* Try as he did to prod his memory, though, he couldn't remember seeing any stone like it during his years of travels.

However, now that the sun was descending in a fiery hue of pink and purple, he pocketed the stone and rubbed his eyes. All he desired was his dinner, which was roasting in front of him over the crackling fire.

He felt a sense of gnawing guilt, though, at the thought of starting without the young shepherd, who had not yet returned from his evening scouting around the camp. After all, the boy had saved his life from the wolf.

Staring at the roasting piece of rabbit and smelling the peppery sweet herbs, his stomach growled.

“What do you think, maybe just a bite?” Creighton asked, turning to look at the sheep behind him. Most of them were asleep, but the one closest to him opened an eye as if annoyed by the old man’s question. “No? Well, I’ll strike a bargain like they do in the village markets. I’ll take a bite of meat but promise to ... express gratitude to Duncan for saving my life.”

Creighton yanked his coat over his stomach to quiet its rumblings and glanced back at the sheep, which now had both eyes open. Shaking his finger threateningly at the animal, he added, “But don’t think it’s because I care. I don’t want to be in the boy’s debt.”

Retrieving his plate and knife from his bag, he carefully removed the roasted meat from the fire and cut off a small piece. Tender from roasting, the meat easily dripped onto his plate. Stealing one last glance at the dark silhouettes of trees around the camp, he popped the juicy bit into his mouth.

“Maybe one more piece ...” Creighton leaned forward and cut off another slice of the rabbit. He closed his eyes, relishing the flavor. The large supply of dried jerky in his pack and in his cellar at home no longer seemed appetizing compared to fresh-cooked meat.

At the sound of footsteps, he inhaled the rest of the meat and scooted away from the fire.

“Ah, Duncan. I was waiting for you—”

“Keeper, we need to go. Beathan’s in trouble.” Duncan’s breath came raggedly as if he had run a great distance. “Look ...” He held up a shepherd’s staff with four carved notches on the top. “I would know his staff anywhere. For each shepherding festival he won, he added a new line.” He carefully traced the etched lines with a finger, his face sullen. “Also, near where I found this, there were the bones of a sheep.”

Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, Creighton thought for a moment. “I warned you already that Beathan may—”

“He’s not dead!”

Silence filled the space between them as the fire continued to pop and crackle.

“When you insisted on coming with me, I was clear about the dangers of traveling the pass.” The old Keeper spoke slowly and lifted his hands in a placating gesture.

“No!” Duncan pointed up and over the tops of the trees. “I saw a line of smoke while I was scouting. It could be Beathan’s camp. I don’t care if you come with me, but I’m going to find out if he’s there.”

“What did I say about the true monsters of these mountains? Bandits are not people you want to meet.”

“I can’t sit here and do nothing! What if he’s injured?”

“Only a *fool* would run off into the night.” Creighton glared at Duncan, who returned an equally cold and defiant stare. For a moment, they held each other’s gaze as if in a wrestling match.

“Of course you would say that. The *great* Mountain Pass Keeper with no friends or family. *You* have no one to care for.”

Creighton blinked as the words sank in. Not responding, he instead crossed his arms and looked down. Duncan stormed away.

Left alone at the camp, Creighton listened to the fading footsteps. After a few minutes, he inched closer to the roasted rabbit and carved a large piece, placing it on his plate. “This rabbit’s my friend. Now, I can have all the meat I want.” Carefully, he lounged against the sheepfold with a sigh.

Despite the pile of meat on his earthenware plate, the Keeper did not touch his feast. A frown settled across his face as he stole glances at the dark space in the trees where Duncan had left. Instinctively, his hand went down to the wound on his leg. He lifted his pant leg over his knee to see the neatly wrapped cloth, fresh and white in the glow of the fire.

Sighing again, he set aside the plate. “That boy’s going to be the death of me.” Wrapping a handful of the cooked rabbit into a handkerchief, he stuffed the snack into his pocket. He threw the rest of the meat into the blazing fire and shook his head mournfully. With a sizzle and crack, the brown-skinned roast turned into a black lump before popping into a puff of tear-inducing smoke.

Creighton grabbed his pack and dug around in it until he found the other cloth bundle. Quickly, he unwrapped it, revealing the spiral-decorated hilt of the Prince’s sword. Being careful not to get it near his vest pocket, he stuck the hilt in a pocket on the inside of his jacket. *At least if there are bandits, I can have an element of surprise.*

Reaching for his newly carved crutch, Creighton struggled into a standing position, wincing when his weight shifted to his injured leg. After a pause, he took a staggering step forward.

He turned toward the direction that Duncan had left, leaning heavily on his stick, and limped over tufts of grass into the shadow of the woods. All the while, he mumbled under his breath about the foolishness of shepherds.



Under the thick canopy of leaves, Creighton found himself engulfed in darkness. The bushes around him and the grass beneath his feet appeared fuzzy to his eyes, distorted in the veil of night. To avoid tripping, the old Keeper slowed his pace and carefully drove his crutch into

clumps of dirt before stepping forward. Each bending lurch on his stick made him shudder as he felt the stitches in his calf stretch with the movement of his leg muscle.

Time seemed to slow down as he steadily limped forward, taking slow breaths. Focusing intently on his steps, he failed to see a tree nearby and bumped into its rough trunk. His crutch fell with the collision, rolling into a high patch of grass, and vanished in the shadows.

“Great, just what I need.” He leaned against the tree for support and stretched out his leg, feeling the ground with his boot for any indication of his makeshift crutch. As he patted the ground with his foot, a melancholy howl of a wolf shattered the silence around him. He froze. Frantically scanning the dark space around him, he squinted to see beyond the blurry form of trees and bushes.

“Curse those wolves.” Creighton extended his leg farther, shifting his foot hastily through the grass. Finally, he felt the solid piece of wood under the heel of his boot.

With his crutch back in hand, he continued his journey through the woods, his ears attuned to the surrounding rustle of leaves and howls in the distance. When he found a clearing with fewer trees, he glimpsed the line of rising smoke drifting up into the starry night.

Another sound reached Creighton’s ears, but not the cry of a wolf. Mixed with the faint song of crickets, he heard Duncan’s voice calling out for Beathan. And he knew he wasn’t the only one who would hear it.

“Stupid boy!” Creighton grumbled under his breath as he swung his stick and propelled his legs with as much force as he could muster. Despite a cool breeze, sweat began to dot his eyebrows and drip down into his eyes. He stopped to lean against a tree, his breathing labored.

Again, he heard Duncan’s voice ahead, closer now.

Furiously, Creighton wiped the burning sweat from his eyes and continued forward. Ahead of him were scattered trees with less foliage, which allowed the moonlight through, illuminating the ground below in a wash of silver. Creighton paused. Near the shadow of a tree and a bundle of bushes, he saw the outline of a person holding a staff. The figure stooped, peering around a tree. In the whisper of the wind, he saw the semblance of a cloak fluttering.

Quietly, Creighton moved forward and filled the gap between himself and the figure. Duncan's face appeared, pale in the shade of the tree, with a questioning look on his face. He opened his mouth to speak, but Creighton shushed him. The old Keeper needed to focus on assessing the camp.

Across the clearing, a large fire roared, casting its glow on two men. One of them sat near the fire, lounging lazily against a log as he clutched a bowl. A few feet away, the other man, whose hair matched the flaming orange of the fire, paced back and forth brandishing a short knife, its polished blade gleaming in the light of the blaze.

Duncan's finger broke into Creighton's field of vision, pointing in the direction of four sheep tied to a wooden post. Unlike the fluffy creatures that followed Duncan, these sheep were thin and filthy.

"The rest of the flock! Beathan must be here ..." Duncan whispered.

The old Keeper ignored this comment and turned his attention back to the camp. The first man had leaned forward and placed the bowl on the ground in front of him. Now that the man was sitting up, Creighton spotted a long sword propped against the log.

These are no ordinary travelers. He had trekked the Carraig Uaine Pass long enough to recognize bandits.

"We need to leave." His face was stern as he turned to look at Duncan.

“Keeper, you see the sheep. Those men must know something.” The young shepherd attempted to move forward, but Creighton yanked him by the back of his cloak.

“Talking to them is certain death. If Beathan encountered this group, then he is beyond our help.”

The caw of a raven came from somewhere behind them.

Duncan cast Creighton a look of confusion. “Was that a raven?”

Creighton nodded before quickly surveying the camp. The bandits hadn’t moved. “Let’s go before—”

Pain shot through his arms as someone shoved him against the tree. Next to him was the sound of a muffled struggle from Duncan, and a thud as Beathan’s staff fell to the ground.

Before Creighton could turn his head to see what was happening, rancid breath hit his face as a man laughed into his ear.

“Looks like our prey came to us.”

X. Among Beasts

“Hey boys, look what the beasts caught.” The man with foul breath shouted from behind Creighton. They entered the camp where the two men stood near the fire, their dirty faces illuminated by the burning glow. On a bare patch of ground filled with bits of cloth and animal bone, the men shoved Creighton and Duncan into sitting positions.

“Tie ‘em up, Ronan.”

At this command, the shorter man scrambled to his feet. Creighton saw the man grab pieces of rope from behind a log. He winced when his hands were yanked behind his back and tied. Looking up, he noticed Duncan was just as uncomfortable staring down the knife of the flame-haired man. When Ronan finished knotting Creighton’s hands together, he secured the Keeper’s feet and did the same to Duncan’s hands and feet. Creighton attempted to wiggle his legs, but he could not loosen the tight constraints that bit into his ankles.

“What have you done with him? Where’s Beathan?” Duncan thrashed wildly against the ropes.

“Shut it.” Ronan tightened the shepherd’s bonds.

From his position on the ground, Creighton saw his assailant’s face illuminated by the fire. The man with the stench had stringy blonde hair that was tied back, revealing his sharp features. By the way he stood, the man reminded Creighton of a snake ready to strike. The other man, who attacked Duncan, had dark matted hair and a scruffy beard; his muscular arms crossed against his wide chest.

Ronan searched through Duncan’s pockets. When the thief retrieved a bundle from Duncan’s coat, the shepherd kicked his legs, growling, “You have no right under the Prince’s Kingdom to take that!”

Creighton shook his head at Duncan. “Be quiet,” he whispered.

Ronan tossed the bundle to the orange-haired youth, who unwrapped the cloth to reveal intricately knitted sheep’s wool. “What do you think, Oren? Worth anything?” Oren whistled a long note of approval, casting a freckled grin at the other men.

“Stop! My family and village are relying on—”

“Phelan, shut that boy up!” The stringy-haired man motioned toward Duncan. Before Creighton knew what was happening, the burly man stepped forward and swung a fist at Duncan’s face. The shepherd fell over onto the dirt, his breathing labored.

Ronan’s harsh laugh filled Creighton’s ears as the short man pawed at his jacket pockets. He held his breath as the thief yanked out the smooth obsidian stone from his vest pocket. The man held the stone between two dirty fingers. Even from where Creighton sat, he could see the kaleidoscope of colors that shone in the dancing light of the fire.

“Bodach, cast a gaze on this gem.” The man with the long hair snatched the stone from Ronan’s hand, holding it up to the glow of the fire. He rolled it around in his hands, a smirk widening across his face.

From Creighton’s jacket pocket, Ronan withdrew the hilt of the sword. Silently cursing himself for bringing it along, Creighton closed his eyes as the short thief tossed the piece of metal to his leader. He knew what would happen.

After a moment, he heard the bandits gasp and whistle. Opening his eyes, Creighton saw that the man with the bad stench clutched the Prince’s shining sword in his hand. On his face was a wide grin.

“Where’d you get these, old man?”

Creighton remained silent and looked down at the knots around his ankles. Bodach moved his face closer, his fetid breath forcing Creighton to lean back.

“You don’t want to end up like him.” The man’s dark eyes darted over to Duncan, who still lay on his side in the dirt.

The old Keeper avoided eye contact with Bodach. “You must know the stories.”

“What?”

“That stone came from a dragon, the renowned fiend of the mountains. According to the legends—” The man slapped Creighton, leaving his face feeling like he had been stung by a bee.

“We are the famous fiends of the mountains – the Beasts of Bodach!” All the men let out a roar as they raised their fists in the air.

The old Keeper heard a rustle beside him and saw Duncan struggle into a sitting position, revealing a bruised eye and bloody nose.

“That’s no way to treat the Mountain Pass Keeper of Cairn!” At Duncan’s words, Creighton gave the shepherd a fierce look. *They already have the sword!* He risked a quick scan of the men’s faces, gauging their response.

Phelan boomed with laughter. “The Mountain Pass Keeper is about as real as that Prince and his Kingdom.”

“Hear that boys? We have a fairytale character in our midst.” Bodach removed the obsidian stone from the hilt and pocketed it. “What wonderful surprises for me today. I get a Keeper and his magical sword.”

“I wouldn’t celebrate too quickly, Fionn.” The laughter faded as a middle-aged woman stepped out of the shadows and approached the fire, clutching the iron handle of a large cooking pot. A long scar on her cheekbone marred an otherwise gentle-appearing face.

“Don’t call me that.” Bodach sneered, eyeing the woman with the precision of a viper.

“I remember seeing you at the Harvest Festival each year. Don’t you remember the stories? You hold the Prince’s sword that defeated the dragon all those years ago.” She ladled out a bowl of broth and held it out to Ronan. “Also, everyone knows the Keeper traveled these mountains. When I was a young girl, he led my family to the Kingdom ...” The woman stared off into the night sky for a moment, her eyes shining. “But that was a long time ago.”

Creighton noticed the woman’s face scrunch in concern when her gaze landed on Duncan. “Another one, Fionn? Wasn’t the last one—”

Bodach sprang forward and slapped the pot and bowl out of her hands.

The steaming contents of the stew splashed on the ground and onto the woman’s feet and legs. She let out a cry and inched backward. Her retreat did not deter Bodach, who lunged forward and gripped her throat.

“Don’t ... call ... me ... Fionn!” With each word, he violently shook the woman, her hair unraveling from where it was tied back. He then tossed her to the ground, where she lay with her brown skirts sprawled around her. “I thought you would have learned that by now, Bridgit.”

The woman gasped for air between her cries, striking the ground with a fist. Creighton saw tears glistening in her eyes as she raised her face to Bodach.

“Changing your name means nothing. Do you think Grainestead is proud of the *fearsome* Bodach? Everyone knew you were a coward!” She spat at his feet.

“Control your mother, Ronan. Or I’ll strike her again. Maybe a scar for the other side ...” He traced a finger over the side of his cheek and turned away, settling his beady glare on Creighton like a hawk ready to snatch its prey.

The Keeper watched from the corner of his eye as Ronan offered his hand to Bridgit, but she pushed herself up from the ground, shaking her skirts free of dirt. She ignored her son's outstretched arm and snatched the pot from the ground. Before she whirled away, her eyes met Creighton's for a moment. In her stare, he saw fear, but also the hint of something else. Defiant bravery, or reckless foolishness? He looked away, uncomfortable under her gaze.

"Tell me about the sword."

Creighton felt his heart pound. "It belongs to the Prince." When Bodach continued staring at him, he cleared his throat. "According to the stories, it can defeat the dragon ... And it's meant only to be used for good."

The man laughed, a sound that resembled the hissing of a cat. "A sword like this is powerful and should belong to someone equally powerful. Someone like me." His eyes darkened. "So, if you are the Mountain Pass Keeper, you would know Cairn like the back of your hand." Creighton flinched when Bodach's mentioned his title as Keeper. "What do you know about the villages near here?"

Hesitating, Creighton said, "You should know about this area, as the leader of this group of men."

"Yes, the villages we regularly ... visit. But there are others."

Creighton shrugged, feigning innocence. "I don't know."

"Don't lie, old man!" Bodach pointed at Duncan. "The boy said you were the Keeper. I want to know about the other villages."

The shepherd kicked his legs in the dirt, flinging dust at Bodach. "Tell us what happened to Beathan!"

Bodach's eyes reflected the flames of the fire as he nodded to Phelan. "Gag him."

“No! I’m going to find out what you—” Duncan’s voice became muffled when the muscular man gagged him with a stained piece of cloth.

“The boy is confused. I know nothing about these mountains.”

A sharp pain erupted in Creighton’s leg when Bodach kicked him near his wound. Reflexively, he tried to yank his injured leg away.

“Ah, is our prey injured?” Bodach leaned forward and rolled up the Keeper’s pant leg, revealing the white strips of cloth bandaged around his calf.

“It would probably hurt if someone touched it ...”

Creighton cried out.

“Tell me about the villages,” Bodach said.

The Keeper shook his head but yelled louder when another wave of pain shot through his leg. Beside him, Duncan thrashed and mumbled something undiscernible from under the gag.

The fire made Bodach’s smirk appear devilish. “I could do this forever.”

Creighton felt sweat drip off his face. He was gasping for breath as quickly as his thoughts spun in his head. *They don’t need to know about more villages to plunder, especially not with the sword. But what choice do I have?*

Nausea enveloped Creighton as he felt Bodach’s hands press around his wound. “I can tell you about Wealshire.”

“Speak up! What was that?”

“Wealshire.” The Keeper ignored Duncan, who was adamantly shaking his head. “It is a wealthy village, but hard to find.”

“You aren’t lying? Because, if you are—”

“No! I’m not lying.” Creighton relaxed when Bodach removed his hands from around the wound. However, he felt a crushing weight settle over him. *What have I done?*

Quickly, he added, “But, if you want directions, you have to tell us about Beathan.” At least they could find out about Duncan’s friend.

“Hear that, boys? He wants to bargain.”

Phelan chuckled from where he stood behind Creighton. On the other side of Duncan, Oren grinned in the low light, a shadow hiding part of his face.

“For directions to Wealshire, I’ll tell you about that filthy shepherd. Not that it will do you any good.” Bodach moved closer to Duncan, putting his face up to the young man, who stared defiantly back. “We took his sheep, beat him, and left him for dead a mile away from here.”

Duncan’s eyes widened.

“If you are lucky, we will do the same to you, if you don’t keep irritating me.”

The shepherd strained forward, mumbling threats, and kicking his tied legs at Bodach. The bandit merely laughed and motioned to Phelan, who shoved Duncan back onto his side. With a widening grin, Bodach turned to Creighton.

“Now for those directions ...”

XI. A Drop of Kindness

When he insisted on showing them the directions by drawing a map, they untied his hands. With shaking arms, Creighton etched lines in the dirt with a thin stick, indicating the paths the gang needed to take to reach Wealshire. Although he considered giving them false directions, he decided against this plan. If they discovered the deception, he placed his and Duncan's life in worse danger.

Phelan stuck out his large boot, the leather tip pointed at a line in the dirt. "I've never heard of this pass near the rocks. Shouldn't we have seen it before?"

"Wealshire is a difficult village to reach, and this pass can only be found by those who know what to look for."

The muscular man nodded but still stared at the line in confusion. However, Bodach raised his gaze from the map and locked eyes with the Keeper.

"If you are lying ..."

Creighton quickly shook his head. "I speak the truth; Madman's Pass is the shortest way to Wealshire. You can reach the village in about three days."

"To ensure you aren't lying, I'm going to give you both the privilege of coming with us. And if you have deceived us, you'll wish you ended up like the boy's friend." Bodach flipped his wrist and a knife appeared in his hand. Creighton saw the flash of metal as Bodach sneered. The yellow teeth behind his dry lips appeared rotten in the light.

"You have the instructions. There's no need to take us with you. We'll slow you down." Creighton felt his heart racing as he glanced at Duncan. "Just let us go."

"Sorry old man, but you're going with us."

The Keeper shook his head slowly as he set his hands down on his legs to prevent them from shaking. To avoid looking at Duncan, Creighton glanced up at the night sky. Stars filled the dark expanse like they had that night long ago. The one he wanted to forget. He sighed, ignoring the feel of Ronan's scaly hands as the rope was replaced around his wrists.

“Get your weapons ready, boys. The beasts are going hunting!” At Bodach's words, the men all raised their fists, howling like a pack of wolves and pounding the air with their knuckles. Creighton anxiously watched the four men rush around the camp collecting weapons and cloth packs, his eyes darting from one bandit to another. He saw their long, flashing swords and sharp knives. The red-haired youth, Oren, even had a glossy maple bow with a quiver full of arrows fletched with hawk feathers.

While the men gathered their supplies, the woman returned with another pot, steaming with stew. She sat out four wooden bowls on a log and carefully ladled soup into each one. Creighton felt his stomach rumble when he smelled the spices and rustic aroma of potatoes. After Bridgit finished, the bowls sitting neatly in a line, she stood with a hand on her hip.

“Stew's ready! You need strength if you plan on traveling.”

Ronan was the first to arrive at the fire and take his bowl. He gulped down the meal, the contents dripping onto his chin and tunic. Once he finished, he held out the bowl toward his mother. As she ladled out more brothy vegetables to him, the other bandits arrived. They ate standing up as if they had to be ready to leave at the next moment.

Unlike the rest of the gang, Bodach sipped his soup. Once he emptied the contents, he sniffed the empty bowl.

“New spices, Bridgit?”

Bridgit collected the empty bowls from the rest of the gang, avoiding Bodach's gaze. She nodded but remained silent.

"Next time, don't use so much. And you should cook one of those sheep. Mutton stew would be better than this slop." Bodach laughed when he saw Duncan push himself up out of the dirt and fight against his bonds. "Meat will be all they're good for. Besides, we won't need to trade stolen goods anymore. Not with this." He pulled the handle of the Prince's sword from his pocket.

Creighton held his breath. What would he do with it? Uilleam's note specifically warned against using the sword for evil. Now the weapon was in the hands of a bandit leader. *What have I done?* He felt the crushing weight return and hung his head. In his mind, the familiar image flashed before him, of a girl with sweat-drenched, orange curls shivering under a wool blanket.

Shaking his head, he tried to refocus on the sounds around him. But what he noticed was the lack of noise. No movement or voices. Looking up, he saw that Oren now sat on the other side of the fire with his head slumped forward on his chest. The other men, including Bodach, were nowhere in sight. Neither was Bridgit. He let out a breath. The bandits must have slithered away to another part of the camp to collect supplies.

Rustling sounds and grunts came from beside Creighton. He turned to see Duncan wiggling against the ropes. The shepherd's black hair was matted with dirt and blood. Once he grew tired of straining his arms, he narrowed his eyes at the Keeper.

"Don't look at me like that. This is partly your fault, running off into the night as you did," Creighton grumbled.

Duncan jerked his head in the direction of the dirt map in front of the old Keeper.

“Well, what was I supposed to do?” He examined the markings on the ground and sighed. “At least you know what happened to Beathan.”

The shepherd let out a mournful sound before his body shook and his shoulders rose and fell with his weeping. His usually bright and strong face was sullied by a black eye and tears that streamed down his cheeks. Creighton felt something stir within him. What was it? Care and concern, or did he just see himself in the grief?

“Look, I’m sorry about your friend ... I know what it feels like—”

At the old man’s words, Duncan turned away his tear-stained face.

Light footsteps intermingled with the sound of popping and crackling wood. Creighton saw the woman, Bridgit, approach carrying a canvas bag. She put a finger to her lips and scanned the camp. After a moment, she crouched next to Duncan. Dipping a cloth into the bowl, she gently washed the dirt from Duncan’s face.

Irritation rose in Creighton. *What is this woman doing? She’s going to get herself killed, and us beaten!* “Woman, I don’t think this is the best time.”

Bridgit shushed him. Noticing the tears falling from the shepherd’s eyes, Bridgit touched his chin, raising his face to hers. “His name was Beathan. So, you must be Duncan, right?”

Creighton saw his own confusion reflected in Duncan’s scrunched brow. The shepherd strained to convey his smothered words to the woman.

“Here, let me fix that.” She quickly glanced up before digging into her pack and retrieving a small flint knife. With a flick of her wrist, she severed the gag encircling Duncan’s mouth. He spat and shook his head, causing the cloth to fall to his shoulder.

Seeing the rag fall away, Creighton gave Bridgit a scolding look. “What do you think you’re doing? The bandits will see.”

“No, they won’t. They’re asleep.”

He looked around the camp, but only saw Oren with his head leaning forward against his chest, snoring.

Duncan spoke up. “How do you know who I am?”

Bridgit raised a finger back to her lips. “We need to talk softly. Beathan told me all about you.”

“But I thought—”

“Your friend isn’t dead.” She smiled again, the encouraging warmth lighting up her eyes.

“Is he okay? Where was he going? Do you know where he is now?” Duncan’s weeping turned to joy as he excitedly did what he did best – ask questions. If Creighton was not so relieved by the news about Beathan, he would have complained about the shepherd’s chatter.

“One question at a time.” Bridgit laughed quietly. “You are much livelier than he was, poor soul. I never saw such a quiet and serious young man. He was very patient with my healing work.”

At the mention of “healing,” Creighton squinted in the glow of firelight to scrutinize Bridgit’s pack that sat beside her in the dirt. Although the worn canvas bag was covered with scattered blotches of mud, he could see the faint outline of a dove stitched on the front.

“After *Fionn* and the others beat the poor boy and left him to die in the forest, I found him and hid him in a cave. When the others slept the next morning, I secretly tended to him and took him food.”

“Why did you help him?” Creighton stared at the woman, searching for any hint on her face that would betray her.

Bridgit sighed and gazed into the distance, tears filling her eyes. “I’ve seen enough people hurt by the Beasts of Bodach. I am even more ashamed that my son is a part of their wickedness ... By helping Beathan heal, I guess I thought I could right their wrongs.” She looked pensively at her bag and tucked a graying strand of hair behind her ear. “But what good is a drop of kindness in a sea of suffering?”

“You saved Beathan’s life!” Duncan protested.

“For that I’m grateful.” Bridgit gave the shepherd a sad smile. She soaked the cloth in the wooden bowl again and wrung out the excess water. Reaching out, she placed the damp cloth on Duncan’s bruised eye.

“Wait! If you are a healer, you can help the Keeper. He was bitten by a wolf on his leg and sewed up the wound himself.”

“No need. Keep tending to the boy.” Creighton jerked his head in the direction of Duncan, his gray beard wagging.

Not listening, Bridgit crouched next to him with her bag of healing supplies. “Which one?”

Creighton remained silent but shook his injured leg. He watched as Bridgit carefully rolled up his pant leg to reveal the white bandage underneath. Slowly, she unwrapped the cloth. At the sight of the remains of the poultice and the straight stitches, her eyes brightened.

“Ah, looks like the Keeper remembers his healing training.” Digging into her pack, Bridgit produced a small jar. “I trained under your aunt in the Kingdom. Although she was quite old at the time, I treasure all the wisdom she gave me.” She rubbed some of the silky but pungent salve from the jar around the wound. “This will help with the swelling.”

Creighton stared at her, confused about how this woman knew his aunt. *No one living can possibly care to remember my family.*

“Lilias always bragged about you being Mountain Pass Keeper and how she taught you the art of healing.”

“Yes, well, sometimes those skills are not enough.”

“Ah, yes, I remember. Like what happened to your sister?” Bridgit slowly wrapped the wound with a fresh bandage. Despite the coolness of the salve under the cloth, Creighton felt anger burn in his chest.

“Lilias talked of her, your sister. Is that why—”

“You know nothing about her or me!” Creighton saw Bridgit’s eyes widen, but he didn’t care. She had no right to stir up the buried ghosts of the past.

Lowering his voice to avoid waking the bandits, he added, “For that matter, I know nothing about you. How can we even trust a healer who lives with bandits?”

Bridgit put a hand on her hip and raised an eyebrow. “This is why.” Drawing forth her knife, she leaned forward and grabbed Creighton’s arm. He felt the bonds fall free from around his wrists.

Creighton stared at Bridgit with a mixture of suspicion and confusion as she cut the ropes encasing Duncan’s wrists and legs. As the knots fell away from the shepherd’s wrists, he gently rubbed the red marks.

When the woman turned back and slashed the bonds from around Creighton’s legs, he shook them, glad to move his legs without restriction. “Well, this is all very nice, but I don’t see how you expect us to escape.” He squinted in the darkness and saw Oren’s form near the fire.

Why were they asleep now? They had seemed to act as if they were leaving that night. The old Keeper shook his head, deciding that the woman was foolish.

Bridgit stood with her canvas sack, and sighed. “If it were only you, I am not sure I would have done anything ...” She quickly went to a nearby log and grabbed a stick – Creighton’s crutch. Her eyes were stern as she handed him the piece of wood. “But even the hardest and ugliest jars can contain something valuable if we are willing to look.”

He snatched the stick and squinted at her. He didn’t appreciate name-calling. “What’s your plan then?”

Digging into her pack, she pulled out a handful of small dry leaves. “I put a few handfuls of these in their stew – Cadalweed. They should be asleep for hours.”

Duncan struggled to his feet and stepped forward, peering down at the green flakes in Bridgit’s palm. “So, they can’t hear us?” Duncan’s words sounded hopeful as if he intended to converse as they fled the camp.

Bridgit shook her head. “We should still walk carefully. I’ve never tried this variety of herb before.”

“Wait, so you’ve done this before?” If there were any doubts in Creighton’s mind before, they increased. *This woman is reckless.*

“Yes ... but I know it will work this time.” Touching the mark on her face, she added quietly, “At least, I pray it will.” She turned away and walked silently into the darkness. Pausing, she glanced back and motioned for them to follow.

Creighton braced himself for the pain as he pushed himself off the ground. *At least with her, we have a chance of escaping.* With his first step, he grimaced. However, as he inched forward, he felt only a few stabs around the wound. After a few more careful steps toward

Bridgit, he realized that he did not hear Duncan behind him. When he looked back, he saw the shepherd staring intently at another part of the camp.

Duncan pointed into the darkness. "We need to get the sheep!"

Creighton closed his eyes. *Not this again!* He grumbled under his breath about livestock as he limped back to the fire. "There's no time. We must go."

With the light of the fire on his face and a blackened eye, Duncan appeared tough and defiant. "No. I won't leave them." He stared intently at Creighton; his brows knitted. "Just as I didn't leave you with the wolf."

The image of the snarling animal came to mind, and he shivered. *Well, I can't argue with that.* If there was anything he could say about Duncan, it was that he was loyal.

"Have it your way. We'll get the witless creatures."

XII. Madman's Pass

As Creighton had guessed, Duncan whispered questions the entire trek back to their camp. He only heard snatches of the conversation between Bridgit and Duncan because of their hushed tone, mainly quick mentions of Beathan. To the Keeper's relief, the young man had healed and left the bandit's camp only a week before. Hearing this news, Duncan danced around in the leaves and flooded Bridgit with more questions before they reached the sheepfold and the smoldering fire at their campsite. At least Beathan had headed west, away from the rocky peaks of the north. Now, Duncan couldn't argue about the direction they would travel.

When they made it back to their camp, Creighton and Duncan hurriedly packed their supplies and hoisted their rucksacks on their backs. Blackness still covered the area, and Creighton wanted to leave as soon as possible. While Duncan herded his sheep together and tended to the sickly creatures they had rescued, Bridgit stood staring into the distance, deep in thought. Turning to look at her, Creighton noticed that she was nodding to herself.

"We need to go to Wealshire," she said. Bridgit spoke as if she had experienced a profound thought, but Creighton looked at her like she was crazy.

"We can't go in the same direction as Bodach and his gang!" Creighton shook his head. "No, we are going west, toward the river, so we can put as much distance as we can between us and those thieves."

He saw the sheep leaving their pen, and Duncan walked toward him. "Everything's ready."

"Okay, let's get going." He grimaced as he limped forward.

Bridgit stepped closer to Creighton and Duncan. "Wait, listen. I can't just let Fionn and my son hurt those people. They need to be warned."

The old Keeper remained silent as guilt pressed down on him, heavier than his pack. *I shouldn't have taken the sword with me or given them those directions.* Rubbing his neck, he tried to reason with himself. *But there's nothing I can do, especially not with an injured leg and a flock of sheep.* "We would never make it in time."

"But we can try. I'm sure they will be asleep until the sun rises. Please ... If we don't, we're no better than they are."

Everything inside Creighton wanted to argue and struggle against her words as if they were ropes binding him, but he knew the woman was right. Besides, he didn't want any more blood on his hands. Raising an eyebrow at Duncan, he saw the shepherd nod his head.

"To Wealshire it is then."



Beams of the afternoon sun poked through the swaying branches, casting shadows on the ground. Creighton trekked ahead of the flock of sheep and found a strange sense of solace in the sound of clanging bells and the clatter of hooves. The familiar presence of the sheep tempted him to think the bandits were a nightmare. Glancing back at Bridgit and Duncan, though, he was reminded of reality. *The bandits have surely awakened by now.* They had been traveling all night and morning, and although the initial urgency had propelled them up the cliffs of the mountains and around tight passes walled with rocks, he now felt his energy draining.

Creighton shakily wiped his forehead and surveyed the land in front of him. The trees thinned out and rocks covered the sloping ground that led down into a small gorge with a dried riverbed path of dirt mixed with sand. Although the pass between the gorge walls was already narrow, the entrance made it tighter because of two megaliths standing at the entrance. Many of

the villagers he led in the past had run through the length of this gorge as if being chased, afraid the boulders would collide, or the gorge would devour them with its rock-walled teeth.

The giant boulders came into full view as he led the group downhill. Creighton sucked in a quick breath of air. He was no more than a cricket compared to the size of the boulders, with the same potential of being crushed if the ground ever shifted enough to disturb the giants. Once the others caught up to where he had paused at the entrance to the pass, they stopped to crane their necks and gaze up at the megaliths.

Up close, he could see the etchings in the boulders, the grooves smooth and distinct. The inner parts of the boulders and the rocky gorge displayed images of the Prince building his Kingdom with stones and Padraig defeating Obsidian. Small carvings – swaying trees, patterns of leaves, mountain flowers, and scattered dots forming the constellations – decorated the front entrance of the pass. To his dismay, Creighton spotted the lines of a spiral. Stepping close to the megalith, he placed his hand on the rock and felt the sun-heated warmth spread through his palm. Using his finger, he traced the swirling lines in a circular motion.

My mother was right. “Never-ending is the job of a Keeper.”

Bridgit came up beside Creighton, examining the carving of the spiral. “The symbol of the Prince.”

He stepped back. “What?”

“The spiral. It represents the Prince and His Kingdom. When I trained under your aunt, she talked about the symbol’s meaning.”

“The Prince? No, that’s an old symbol of the Mountain Pass Keepers. I would know.”

Bridgit crossed her arms. “And I wouldn’t?”

Creighton did not reply. Instead, he set his gaze on the path between the rocks and into the gorge. He had no time to argue about the meaning of spirals. “Walk quickly and keep your gaze ahead. There’s a reason villagers call this Madman’s Pass.”

Duncan clutched his staff and stared at the rocks. “So, the carvings make you go crazy?”

“Some claim the creator was a madman.”

Bridgit spoke softly. “Only a master could bring beauty from rock.”

Glancing again at the spiral, Creighton said, “Art or not, let’s get moving.” He marched forward into the pass as a breeze ruffled his cloak. The world seemed quieter surrounded by rock, the walls blotting out the noise of the rustling leaves of the nearby forest and the calls of birds. He didn’t even hear the bells of the sheep or the rugged steps of Duncan ...

They aren’t following. What now? Sighing, Creighton turned around. Duncan stood at the stone entrance, looking down and shaking his head while Bridgit stood next to him, her hand on his shoulder.

“I think he’s afraid,” Bridgit said.

Duncan quickly looked up with clenched fists. “I’m not scared! It’s ... it’s the sheep. They don’t like tight spaces.”

Creighton leaned against his stick and waved his arm toward the end of the gorge. “You’re more than welcome to run through.”

The young shepherd took a step into the pass, white-knuckling his staff. He stopped. Behind him, the sheep stood watching. He whistled, but they didn’t move.

Creighton tapped his fingers against his walking stick. *Those sheep won’t follow him if they know he’s frightened.*

A spasm of pain gripped his leg. *Cursed wound! At least Duncan has two solid legs to walk on.* He looked down at his leg and stroked his beard, an idea blooming in his mind. *Yes, that should do it.*

Creighton let the stick fall to the ground as he leaned heavily against the side of the gorge wall. The intricate etchings rubbed against his clothes, the coarse rock clutching at the fabric.

“Keeper, are you okay?” Duncan took another step into the pass.

Bridgit reached into her sack and trotted toward Creighton, her eyes squinted in thought. She held out a jar of the pungent paste she had used earlier, but Creighton caught her eye and softly shook his head.

Her face crinkled before a look of realization filled her eyes. A flicker of a smile appeared. “Duncan, he’s going to need you to help him walk. His wound is too sore.”

The old Keeper nodded to her as Duncan jogged forward, the shepherd’s eyes darting back and forth between the two walls of rock.

Duncan grabbed the crutch and tucked it under his arm, the end pointing behind him. “Here.” Duncan extended his arm, and Creighton took it. “Now you can go faster. My sheep have been falling asleep all day because of your slowness.”

Creighton raised his eyebrows and his mouth twitched. “Em, well then, let’s go.”

Duncan’s whistle sounded shrill in the quietness of the trees around them. The sheep clamored after their shepherd, but a soft “umph” indicated that Bridgit had gotten in their way. Creighton heard her pace quicken and soon her footsteps were close behind them. She couldn’t go any further though because Creighton and Duncan filled the narrow pass. The old Keeper’s shoulders were mere inches away from the rock wall.

As the group moved through the gorge, Creighton tried to keep his gaze focused on the exit ahead, but the etchings he glimpsed out of the corners of his eyes seemed to swirl around him with their spirals and ancient tales. Passing beside the carving of Padraig leaping, arm outstretched as he pierced the side of Obsidian, Creighton felt his head swimming. *Come on, focus.*

He closed his eyes and focused on the feel of each step, now thankful for the slight ache that tugged at his wound. From where he leaned against Duncan's arm, he could sense the young man trembling slightly.

"Almost there, just keep walking," Creighton said.

After a dozen or more steps, Creighton heard Duncan and Bridgit gasp. His eyes flashed open, and he saw the last story etched in the rock. On the left side of the gorge wall, a carving of Obsidian filled the rock, the dragon's wings outstretched, and tail uncoiled. Flames fanned out from the beast's gaping mouth. In front of the dragon stood a figure wearing multiple crowns and holding up a sword.

Duncan slowed his pace. "The Prince! He's going to defeat the dragon!"

"That's what the stories say, although there are different interpretations about the dragon, *as I've told you before*. The dragon could be figurative, which is why I don't believe all your nonsense about seeing Obsidian."

"Well ... it seems plain to me. The artist carved a dragon, not something else." Duncan pointed to the depiction of Obsidian.

"These are just stories—"

Bridgit laughed. "Are you a story too?"

Creighton and Duncan both struggled to turn around, but when they did, they saw Bridgit staring at the carvings on the opposite side. The Keeper sighed and rubbed his head. He had forgotten about this part of the pass.

Etched on the wall were hilly inclines and trees where the outline of a man was walking and holding a stick. Villagers carrying bags and crates followed faithfully with their cows, pigs, and sheep. If someone looked closely, as Creighton once had, they could spot a thin line that made the man look like he had a long beard.

Duncan stepped close to the etching of the Mountain Pass Keeper and chuckled. “It even looks like you, Keeper.”

Creighton snorted. “Come on, we are at the exit. Why stop for the scribblings of a madman?” When Bridgit and Duncan continued to examine the carvings, the young shepherd pointing at the sheep, Creighton pulled his stick free from Duncan’s grasp.

“Hey! I thought you couldn’t walk because of your leg.”

Creighton used his crutch to propel himself forward over the last few feet of the pass. He called back, “Who said I couldn’t?”

From behind him, he heard Duncan laugh before whistling for the sheep.

Despite the pain from the wound and the unwelcome reminder of his ancient heritage, Creighton smiled.



The next morning, Creighton resumed his position in the front of the group. He continued to lead them around the distant outskirts of Wealshire, but away from the route he had given the bandits. Since they had already made it through Madman’s Pass, the difficult part of the trek was

over, but they still needed to reach the village before the thieves did. At least there would be safety there.

A hazy sky and the thick foliage of trees shrouded the area. Creighton walked slower than usual, watching for roots and sticks that hid in the shadows.

Only once did he stop so they could rest and eat. As they sat in the dark forest on old logs, Creighton forced himself to share his provision of jerky with Duncan and Bridgit. The tough chewing hindered the shepherd's ability to converse, but only for a few minutes.

“So, how did you get involved with the bandits?”

Creighton wiped his mouth. *At least the question isn't for me this time.* Beside him, Bridgit paused from eating her snack and focused on her hands. Seeing her discomfort, he spoke up.

“Come on, boy. That's not a polite question. Didn't your mother teach you manners?”

Duncan turned red and tugged at his cloak. “I'm sorry, I was just—”

“No, it's fine.” Bridgit gave Duncan a soft smile. “I wish my son were more like you, seeking out knowledge and learning about people. Ronan was never like that ... he loved fighting too much.” She returned her gaze to her hands. “I never liked Fionn, though I felt sorry for him because he was abandoned as a child.” Tears filled her eyes as she added, “And, I know more than anyone how it feels to be abandoned.” For a few moments, she grew quiet as she took another bite of the jerky and chewed quietly. “Grainestead was too small for Fionn, and despite the kindness I tried to show him, there was a thirst for power in him that was never quenched. So, when Ronan agreed to travel with Fionn, I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen. He left and became a *Beast of Bodach*.” She spat out the name as if it were a piece of rancid meat. “Five years ago, Ronan returned badly injured. Once I helped him heal, I thought he would stay, but he

told me that his friends were injured too, and needed help. I was foolish to listen, but healing is my job, my calling. When I arrived at their camp and treated Fionn for an infected wound, I thought maybe he had changed. How wrong I was to think a wolf could become tame. Ever since then, I have been forced to stay, cooking their meals and providing them with healing when they needed it. But even though I was their slave, I tried to escape many times. Maybe that was foolish too.” Bridgit rolled up the sleeves of her tunic, revealing dark bruises and scars that rivaled the one on her cheek. Before Duncan or Creighton could say anything, she met their eyes. “But, by the Prince’s good will, even my foolishness can be transformed.” She pulled back down her sleeves.

“Well, the Prince certainly used you to help us escape. The Keeper might think the dragon’s not real, but even he can recognize the power of the Prince,” said Duncan.

Creighton grunted as he packed away the rest of his supplies. Struggling to his feet, he eased his bag onto his back. “I think we’ve had a long enough rest. By the look of the sky, it could rain later. We should be going.” He waited as the others collected their bags, stroking his beard. *I don’t want to think about the Prince and His power.* Instead, he looked up at the sky. *We’ll have to find shelter if it rains.* The last storm taught him that wet sheep spelled disaster. Besides, he didn’t want to think of *her* again.

A quick movement from Bridgit caught Creighton’s attention. She kept turning her head to steal glances at the trees, her eyes wide, as if she were a wild animal being hunted.

“What’s wrong?”

Bridgit held up a hand. “Did you hear it?”

Closing his eyes, Creighton focused on the sounds around him. The wind blew through the trees, crackling the leaves overhead. Munching sounds came from the direction of the sheep mingled with a few clanging bells.

But something was wrong. The forest was too quiet. *Where are all the songbirds?*

Then he heard it ... the call of a raven.

XIII. The Hunt

“It’s them,” Bridgit said.

Creighton didn’t need any further explanation. He hobbled forward as fast as his wounded leg allowed while Duncan clapped his hands at the sheep. At the sound, the animals sped forward into the forest, with their shepherd closely following. Bridgit dashed ahead of Creighton, wisps of her dark hair streaming behind her.

As the Keeper struggled forward, he heard a whistling sound rip through the air with the snapping of wood. Beside him, an arrow struck a tree. Creighton gasped as more arrows hissed by him, flying around him like a flock of birds. Surely the shadows of the forest would frustrate the thieves’ aim. That is, if they were not used to shooting in the dark.

A fool’s hope.

Stumbling forward, sticks scraped Creighton’s legs. He ignored the stings and glanced ahead. Duncan was trailing behind his sheep, headed for a thick clump of bushes. As Creighton looked around, he saw no other sign of people. *Where’s Bridgit?*

A woman’s scream resounded ahead of him.

Creighton turned toward the noise and felt his foot hit a root. Losing balance, he slammed to the ground, pain shooting through his arm. Groaning, Creighton slowly rolled onto his back, his rucksack digging into his shoulder. People were yelling somewhere near him, but all he could see were the glossy leaves of the trees and the dark sky above him. It was hazier than before.

Cursing quietly, he gently moved his fingers and wrists. They weren’t broken, just bruised. Pushing up with his other arm, he turned his head to scan the forest while spitting out bits of grit. A few feet away, a tree stood pierced with a fletched arrow. As he looked at the

arrow, he saw a shadow move out of the corner of his eye. Creighton flinched as he saw Ronan step out from behind the trunk. The bandit brandished a flint knife.

“Get up!”

Creighton grabbed his crutch and struggled to push himself up, wincing at the soreness in his limbs. After a few seconds, he felt Ronan’s tough grip, yanking him to his feet. The bandit pulled the stick from Creighton’s hand and poked at his back with the blade.

As Ronan prodded him forward, Creighton grew closer to the sound of people talking. He emerged into an uneven clearing in the forest. On a slope with patches of grass and rocks, Bridgit was on her knees with Bodach standing behind her, one hand tangled in her hair and the other holding a sword.

She was sobbing. “Please, Fionn. Let me go.”

“After what you’ve done? I thought you learned last time,” Bodach said. He traced the scar on her cheek with his blade.

“Please—”

Winding her hair tighter around his hand, he bent down so that his face was close to hers. “Your luck’s run out.”

The bandit leader’s face turned toward Creighton and Ronan. He grinned, exposing his yellowing teeth.

“Ah, your friends are here. They can watch.”

Creighton stiffened. He turned and saw Oren standing behind Duncan with an arrow notched, ready to strike. The young shepherd’s face was drained of color. Creighton couldn’t blame him for that, not with an arrow at his back and the bandit leader looming over Bridgit like a snake ready to strike.

Bodach extended the sword. “Ronan, as much as I want to punish her myself, you should do the honor. She is your mother ...”

Ronan’s grip loosened from around Creighton’s arm. “That weren’t part of the plan.”

“I don’t think you understand – I’m *tired* of her.”

“She does a lot for us. Who else will cook?” Ronan said.

“This isn’t about food!”

The muscles in Ronan’s arms were tightening as he clenched his fists. “Killing her don’t seem right.”

Bodach scowled, his face twitching violently. He closed his eyes for a moment. “When was any of this a matter of what’s right?” Turning to look at the other gang members, he said, “Oren, Phelan, the honor can be yours.” Again, he held out the blade.

Phelan stood at the bottom of the slope in a mess of leaves and glanced at Ronan. Creighton saw a look pass between the two bandits. Kicking the pile of rotting foliage, Phelan shrugged.

Behind Duncan, Oren lowered his bow and stared at Bridgit. For a moment, Oren resembled Duncan because of his beardless face and frightened expression. But then Creighton remembered the arrows that had flown beside him. The red-haired youth narrowed his eyes and sniffed the air.

“Forget about her. We need to worry about this smoke.”

Bodach gripped Bridgit’s hair tighter, which caused her to yelp. “Have you all gone mad? Blood never bothered my beasts!”

Ronan let go of Creighton’s arm and took a step forward with his fist clamped around his flint knife. “Blood never scared me. But killin’ my mother?”

Silence filled the space around them, and the hazy smoke increased. Phelan and Oren shuffled their feet while Bridgit stared into the distance as if no one was there. Behind her, Bodach squinted his eyes at the men.

“Wolves drive out the weak from their pack. Should, then, the Beasts of Bodach allow this pathetic woman to live, to show her *mercy*?” Bodach’s voice fell to a savage whisper. “She helped our prey escape, and you want to whine like children about food and smoke.”

None of the bandits moved.

“I’ll do it myself then.” Bodach gripped the blade but paused. He quickly sheathed the sword and pulled out the metal handle from his pocket. After a moment, the Prince’s sword was aglow in the bandit’s hands, illuminating the ground and the faces of those around him.

Creighton blinked, trying to refocus on the scene in front of him. Before he could tell what was going on, the bandit yelled, and the light was snuffed out like a candle as the metal fell to the ground with a thud. On the palm of his hand was a dark singe mark. Cursing with rage, Bodach yanked Bridgit’s head back, exposing the flesh of her neck. She flinched but did not make a sound. Bodach unsheathed his sword and raised it in the air, a smile spreading across his face.

I can’t just stand here ... Creighton lurched forward, his gait unsteady without his stick. He saw Bodach’s sword in midair and tried to call out, but the words caught in his throat.

A blur of movement flashed beside him. Bodach froze in place and the blade in his hand dropped to the dirt. He clutched at his chest where a flint knife was embedded, a dark wetness seeping through his tunic. Staring ahead with a surprised expression, he fell to his side with a thud.

“I’m no animal,” Ronan said. He tossed Creighton’s crutch to the ground and strode up the incline of the slope through the patch of grass where Bodach’s corpse lay. Ronan stopped and looked down at Bridgit. She was trembling, bent forward on her knees. Her black but graying hair hung in front of her like a veil. Slowly, the bandit extended his hand to her.

Bridgit raised her head and pushed her hair out of her face. With a gasp, she glimpsed Bodach’s body and then turned to her son with wide eyes. He continued to hold out his arm and Bridgit’s face softened. She placed her palm into his and he pulled her up.

“It weren’t right to let him hurt you. I know that now,” Ronan said softly. “You can go, Mother.” He nodded toward the woods.

Bridgit closed her eyes and her lips moved in a silent whisper. Then she opened her eyes and stole a glance at Duncan and Creighton. “Not ... not without my friends.”

“Then, all of you go. I don’t care nothing about sheep.”

Creighton grabbed the stick from the ground and moved forward, pausing only to pick up the handle and the stone from where they had fallen in a clump of grass. When he lifted the metal, he noticed a cream-colored, star-shaped flower sitting underneath the handle. It grew alone among the tangle of grass. As he pocketed the sword and obsidian, Duncan treaded carefully away from Oren and whistled for the flock. The sheep obeyed and darted ahead into the safety of the trees.

Phelan stepped forward and drew his sword. “Eh! What are you doing, Ronan? We can’t let the other two go, or the sword.”

Ronan shrugged.

Oren raised his bow again, but this time he aimed it at Phelan. “Bodach’s dead and the forest seems to be burning. Forget about them,” said Oren.

“They know too much ...” Phelan dashed toward Creighton and Duncan. The Keeper held up his crutch and squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the impact of the sword. Someone cried out and Creighton peeped an eye open to see Phelan doubled over in pain with an arrow stuck in his leg.

“Ah, you rotten—” Phelan broke the end of the arrow with a grunt. Red-faced, he brandished his sword at Oren. Before another arrow was notched, Phelan slashed at Oren’s bow, slicing through the top of the weapon. Oren jumped back to dodge another swing of the sword and held up a hand.

“Do as you wish. I’m not waiting around to find out about the smoke.” Throwing down his broken bow, Oren bolted into the forest, leaving as quickly as he had come.

Phelan wiped his brow and turned back to Creighton and Duncan. As he stepped closer, Bridgit drew in a sharp breath.

Before Creighton could raise his stick again, Ronan ran and jumped on Phelan, tackling him to the leaf-strewn ground. He grunted as he grappled with Phelan’s muscular arm, knocking the sword free. The men rolled on the forest floor, causing clumps of dirt to fly in the air as Ronan struggled to pin Phelan down. He looked like a bear trying to pull a large fish from the water. Phelan kept slipping free.

Ronan glanced up at Bridgit with a wild expression and called out: “Mother, run!”

Creighton heard Bridgit and Duncan’s footsteps as they ran through the layer of leaves underneath the trees. He turned and propelled himself after them, ignoring the sounds of brawling behind him.

We need to get somewhere safe. He concentrated on Bridgit and Duncan rushing ahead of him, willing the image of his worn maps to appear in his mind. *Come on think! What’s the*

quickest way to Wealshire? The drawing of forests around the wealthy village appeared in his mind, and he remembered the small mark of a hilltop.

His stick slipped on the leaves, and his injured leg came down hard on the ground. *Blasted.* He gripped the stick tighter and blinked away the tears threatening to spill from his eyes. “Duncan!” The Keeper’s field of vision was diminishing in the smoke. He coughed before calling again. Out of the haze, he saw the outline of Duncan running toward him.

“Come on, Keeper. We need to keep going.” The shepherd grabbed Creighton’s other arm and led him forward.

“You are going in the wrong direction. We need to turn that way.” Creighton shook his stick to the right.

“But what about—”

“Come on!” Creighton leaned on his stick as he veered away. Behind him, Duncan’s strong voice called to the sheep.

Swatting at branches, Creighton traveled uphill through a cluster of bristly trees that poked at his jacket as he brushed past. The minty scent of the leaves surrounded him, mixing with the choking smoke. Rocks, pinecones, and sticks littered the ground underneath his feet, forcing him to slow down and carefully choose his steps.

The wind pushed at him as he neared the edge of the forest where the trees thinned out. Keeping his head bent, Creighton forced himself forward, ignoring the way the breeze blew his beard over his shoulder. *Almost there.*

Moving his stick rapidly as he increased his pace, Creighton passed the last aromatic tree with its spiky green leaves. He stepped out into soft grass on top of a hill. Quickly, he called back

to Duncan and Bridgit behind him who were still struggling through the branches. “We’ve made it!” Taking deep breaths of air, he felt a sense of relief flood him. *Finally, we’ll be safe.*

The area on the hilltop was only slightly more illuminated than the hazy forest. Dark clouds hung overhead, looking as if they could burst with rain at any moment. Creighton planted his stick into the grass and squinted through the scattering smoke at the land below. If he remembered the map right, the village should be ...

A gust of wind swirled around him, and the smoke cleared. Creighton gasped. In the valley below, where craftsman-made houses and pottery workshops once stood, was a wasteland of ash.

Wealshire was gone.

XIV. The Chanting Children

He had been here before as part of his duties as Mountain Pass Keeper. Only then, he had not been walking along charred streets and destroyed houses with a shepherd, sheep, and a former bandit gang member.

The village had been wealthy and beautiful. Thatched cottages with white-stained walls, the pleasant buzz of chatter as people bargained for the latest trades from the Kingdom, and the earthy smell of wet pottery. But now? Piles of ash and rubble lined the streets. The pastureland and gardens were leveled. He shook his head when he thought about the villagers. *Buildings weren't the only things burned in this fire.*

Creighton stopped and turned to Duncan, whose cluster of white sheep stood out in the burnt land. "Now you know what I mean about forest fires."

Duncan patted the head of the sheep near him and frowned. "How do you know this was one? The dragon could have just as likely done this. The dragon I *saw*."

"Don't start with that nonsense."

Bridgit cleared her throat. "You can't deny a story in stone. The stories speak of the return of Obsidian. Why do you—"

Creighton waved his arms at the destruction around them. "You both think I don't know a forest fire when I see one? There have been other patches of forest lost this year. It's ... been a dry season." He turned away from their questioning looks but felt a sinking feeling in his chest. If it were a forest fire, why hadn't they seen anyone trying to escape? *No, I don't need to listen to their peasant talk. If there were a black fire dragon, certainly I would have seen it by now.*

Taking a shaky breath, Creighton glanced ahead at the village square, which had served as a meeting place for the villagers. Singed cobblestones sat heaped in the middle surrounded by

a parched area of grass. All that Creighton could recognize of the village square was a blackened stone pillar with a metal statue balanced on top that used to depict a woman shaping a piece of clay. Splotches of metal were the only indications of the statue underneath layers of soot.

He remembered standing with his mother in the former grassy area that formed a square around the cobblestone middle as his father gave a speech to the villagers in front of the pillar. Not wanting to hear his father drone on about the mountain pass, he had watched Sorcha gather a fistful of wildflowers and tuck them in their mother's dress pocket. Now there were no traces of the meadowy square dotted with golden and orange petals. It was as lifeless as the unoccupied rooms in Creighton's cabin.

"Hey! I think I saw something," Duncan said.

After wiping his hand across his eyes, Creighton saw Duncan and Bridgit rushing toward the stone pillar. He gripped his crutch and followed. Drawing closer, he saw that three shapes stood in front of the pillar. At first, he thought they could be piles of ash, but then the shapes moved. Two girls and a boy stood in the middle of the burnt square. From underneath the soot that covered them, there was evidence of rich yellow tunics and blue leggings, though they were now soiled and torn. The children linked hands and took a step forward.

Bridgit halted and put her arm out to stop Creighton and Duncan from getting any closer. "Wait, I think they are saying something."

The children paused, standing as still as the statue of the potter, and stared blankly ahead as their voices rose:

"I consume the world in fire and flame,

Smoke will rise until the Pass is mine.

Bow down, people of Cairn, and worship my name:

Obsidian, Obsidian, the king of the skies.”

Creighton took a step back when he heard the name “Obsidian.” The eerie words of the rhyme wormed their way into his mind: *I consume the world in fire and flames*. As the children continued their chant, images flashed before him – Blazing trees falling in the night, villagers running from a black-winged dragon, flames engulfing houses, and children wailing as they clutched their parents’ hands. *Smoke will rise until the Pass is mine*.

He shook his head, but the images appeared again. A red inferno seared itself into his mind. *Obsidian, Obsidian, the king of the skies*. Why were the children saying these things?

The chant stopped, and the clearing grew quiet. The visions faded. Creighton glanced to the left to see Bridgit hugging her arms and breathing hard. Duncan had his eyes closed and was gripping his shepherd’s staff. The old Keeper narrowed his eyes at the children. *What are they doing out here? This is no place for pranks!*

The girl in the middle, the smallest of the children, stepped forward. Her face contorted in anger, and she raised her hand, a finger pointing forward. She spoke with a deep, guttural voice too large for her size. “Son of Pdraig! You owe me the rest of the battle your forefather started.”

Creighton gulped and inched closer to Duncan and Bridgit, his foot crunching the dried grass. “Who told you to say—”

Her voice rose to a scream. “I have seen you, Keeper. Meet me and fight or watch the rest of Cairn burn!” The little child’s head drooped. She teetered for a few seconds before falling forward into the ashes. As the soot settled around her, the girl looked as lifeless as a cloth doll.

At that moment, the other two slumped forward, their arms dangling at their sides; then, slowly, they lifted their heads and stretched their arms as if they were first waking in the morning.

The taller girl ran forward and knelt in the ash-covered field beside the diminutive child. “Glenna!”

From behind the two girls, the boy looked around frantically and began to sob. “Mona ... Mona, it’s gone. All of it! He must have ...” The boy fell to the ground, his arms around his head. Through his weeping, Creighton could hear him calling for “Mama” and “Papa.”

Bridgit ran toward the trio, opening her sack as she went. Duncan followed her, but Creighton remained still. The boy’s words bothered him. Whom had they seen?

Obsidian, Obsidian, the king of the skies.

Pushing away thoughts of the burning village, Creighton gripped his stick and moved toward the children. He stopped in front of the crouching boy and slammed the end of his stick on the ground. “Who told you to say that?”

Bridgit was already kneeling by Glenna, turning the girl onto her back, and wiping her head with a cloth. “Leave the boy alone.” She cast a sympathetic look at the boy. “What does it matter now anyway?”

“No, I need to know.” Creighton’s arms shook. “If Obsidian did this, then that means the stories are true, and the Prince is more powerful. And if he is more powerful – then, then ...”

Pausing in her work, Bridgit gave Creighton an inquisitive look. “Then, what?”

“I don’t know. Maybe He could have–” He felt the familiar ache again as tears pressed behind his eyes – ones that threatened to drown him. “I mean, He could have kept these children from being orphaned.”

“You of all people should know it’s not as simple as that,” Bridgit said. “There are some things we cannot know, not until the day all things are unfurled.”

Creighton shook his head. *I want answers, not explanations from stories!* He reached down and gripped the sobbing child's shoulder. "Why did you three say those words?"

Slowly, the boy raised his head and rubbed his red eyes, leaving a smudge on his face. "Who ... who are you?"

"You mentioned Obsidian! Why did you say that name?"

The boy shivered as he shook his head. "No, no, no, no. Don't say it!"

Creighton faltered in his interrogation and removed his hand from the boy. The child's fright made Creighton feel as if he were dusting off the cobwebs of doubt from his thoughts. He thought of the handle of the sword in his jacket, the sword Padraig had used to cut off a piece of the dragon's obsidian armor, a piece of stone that now felt like a boulder in his pocket. Despite the wind blowing around them, sweat pricked his forehead. "Who. Told. You?"

Instead of replying, the boy fell forward into the scorched grass and buried his head in his hands as he started crying again.

Mona stood up and glared at Creighton. "Leave my brother alone! Get away from him."

Creighton turned on the girl, shaking his stick. "Tell me why you said those words."

"I don't know!" Mona said, balling her fists. "Can't you see we've lost everything?"

Mona's lip quivered for a moment, but she continued to give him an icy stare.

Creighton felt a hand on his shoulder and Duncan spoke quietly. "I think that's enough."

The old Keeper pushed away Duncan's arm. "People can't just go around sprouting out threats from an imaginary dragon—"

"Shhh." Bridgit nodded toward Glenna, who was slowly opening her eyes. From where Bridgit had wiped the girl's face, her skin appeared pale in contrast to the soot around her. She

blinked and looked up at Creighton as if searching for a familiar face. When her eyes locked with his, the fear on her face lessened. He noticed the girl had orange curls. *Like Sorcha.*

Glenna's lips moved and her words came as a whisper. "I listened to Mama. 'Hold Evander's hand and run to the forest.'" She frowned. "But I fell. And then ... then ... *he* was there." Glenna's eyes filled with tears.

Bridgit smoothed back the little girl's hair. "It's okay, honey. You don't have to say anymore."

"It was so scary." She clutched Bridgit's hand. "I couldn't get up and he was coming toward me. He was so big and black and shiny. But his eyes. They—" A tear spilled down her face as she gulped.

Duncan spoke softly. "Were like a lizard's."

Glenna turned her head to look at the shepherd and nodded. "It was hot, and people were screaming. I didn't like it. Mona and Evander pulled me up, but the dragon was already there. We yelled at him to stop burning our home, but he laughed at us and spread out his yucky bat wings. Fire was everywhere and I thought he was gonna burn us up ... Then he said we had to wait for a mountain or the past ... or something."

Bridgit squeezed Glenna's hand. "The Mountain Pass Keeper?"

"Yes, that's what he said before he covered us up with his wings and breathed on us. Everything was dark and it hurt to breathe." She inhaled deeply. "I don't remember anything else, only his name. But I don't want to say it."

Bridgit looked up at Creighton with questions in her eyes. He ignored her as thoughts swirled through his mind like a storm. *The burnt village. Orphaned children. Smoke and fires.*

The sword. Leaning heavily against his crutch, Creighton tried to steady himself from the dizzying realization.

His words came as a slight whisper, barely audible to the others. In his head, though, the words screamed and reverberated into the sorrow-filled places of his heart. “The stories ... it’s all true.”

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Throughout the three main chapters of this thesis, I have detailed my vision for the work in terms of presenting a realistic picture of suffering while at the same time giving a glimpse of the hope that people can have because of Jesus's death and resurrection. In the literature review chapter, I examined foundational works in the fantasy genre that have Christian themes and connected these seminal works to my novel in progress. Building upon the influence and inspiration of these books and using Christian themes and epic elements, I set out to create a story that shows the effects of sin and suffering in the world, while also providing a picture of redemption, reminding readers that there is hope amid their pain. My effort culminated in the prologue and fourteen chapters from *The Mountain Pass Keeper* included in this thesis.

Before stating the specific ways I met the aims of my work, I do acknowledge multiple limitations. First, not every aspect of my vision in the artist statement is included in my creative thesis. For example, I mentioned on pages 3 and 4 that I want to show the effects of redemption in the life of the characters and through the way they interact with their world. Since the entire novel is not yet written and could not be included in my paper, the effects of redemption that I intend to show at the end of the story are not present in these chapter excerpts. However, from the beginning of the story to chapter 14, there are significant changes in Creighton's character because of the influence of Duncan's Christlike actions.

Also, the entire explanation of Creighton's suffering is not included in the creative thesis because of space and time. Since this paper only includes chapters from my novel in progress, readers of this work will understand how the loss has affected him, although they will not receive all the details about Sorcha's death. Again, while I recognize that this is a limitation of the work,

the aim of giving a realistic depiction of grief has been met, even though the information about Creighton's loss is not fully present in the excerpts included in the thesis.

In *The Mountain Pass Keeper*, the aim to give a realistic picture of suffering has been met. Throughout the chapters, readers can see the effects of grief and suffering in Creighton's life. He lives alone, isolated from the rest of Cairn, and still struggles with the pain of losing loved ones. Specifically, the loss of his sister continues to haunt him, and he blames himself for her death. His suffering is presented in the creative thesis through his emotions of sadness and anger, but also through his actions. Not only does he keep certain rooms of his cabin closed off and shrouded in darkness, but he regularly leaves flowers by Sorcha's window. Later, as he starts the journey to restore the signs on the mountain pass, he experiences flashbacks and memories of his sister, which are distressing and unwelcome. These emotions and actions from Creighton realistically portray grief and give readers a picture of how death permanently changes a person's life.

In addition to serving as a picture of suffering in life, the chapters included in this paper also present the reality of sin in the story world. When Creighton looks through the old histories of the Mountain Pass Keepers, he reads about the evil actions of the dragon. As a result of the desperation of the villagers, they engage in wickedness by agreeing to the dragon's terms and sacrificing their children for temporary relief and restoration of land. Also, Bodach and his bandits serve as an extension of the theme of sin in the story. In his greediness and lust for power, Bodach ruthlessly mistreats Bridgit, tortures Creighton, and claws for power. Like the villagers described in the ancient histories, Bodach is willing to do whatever it takes to survive.

However, Obsidian and Bodach are not the only characters that show the sinfulness of humans. Creighton also struggles with selfishness, not wanting to share his provisions with

Duncan during the journey. In his desire to achieve his goal of remaining alone, he refuses to help a young man in need, considers leaving Wealshire to the mercy of the bandits, and adds hardship to orphaned children by acting angry and uncaring. The character of Creighton reminds readers of the biblical truth that all people have gone astray and fallen short, not just those who act completely depraved (Isa. 53:6; Rom. 3:23).

In addition to realistically depicting suffering and sin in the story, my creative thesis accomplished the aim of conveying redemption and hope through the presence of a Christ figure. One component of this is found in Duncan's character since he shows Christlike behavior by saving Creighton from the wolf despite the older man's attitude. Using the imagery of a shepherd returning to find a "lost sheep," the connection to Jesus as the Good Shepherd is clear. Because of Duncan's loyalty, Christlikeness, and self-sacrifice for the sheep and others, Creighton begins to change and care about someone other than himself.

Another way that the creative thesis provides a picture of redemption through a Christ figure is the sacrifice of the Prince. When Creighton examines the old volume containing the history of Cairn, he reads about how the Prince heard of the dragon's evil and the distress of the villagers. He forged a sword to defeat the dragon, providing an answer to the suffering of the people. However, the Prince also willingly gave up His life when the people decided to murder Him to appease the dragon. These aspects give a picture of Jesus's sacrificial death and His willingness to give up His life so that all people could have the chance to place faith in Him for salvation. Similarly, the old histories indicate that the Prince is alive and will return, just as Jesus was resurrected, ascended, and will come again. Through the Prince's death, He defeated sin and evil, as well as brought the promise of new life through the healing of the land. Likewise, Jesus redeems believers from sin, which includes giving them new life and the promise of a renewed

creation where there will be no more death, crying, or pain (Rev. 21:4). The character of the Prince, thus, has the potential to remind readers of the hope that they can find in Christ.

In accomplishing my aims for the selection of chapters included in my creative thesis, I believe I have also created a work that contributes to the genre of fantasy. Drawing on the impact and influence of seminal works by authors such as Bunyan, Lewis, Tolkien, Rowling, and Peterson, my story adds to the genre by including an older protagonist instead of a younger hero, whose struggle with grief is brought into sharper focus. As I mentioned in chapter 2 of the thesis, fantasy books written for younger readers sometimes push aside the grief that a character experiences to move the plot forward (34). Since Creighton is an older man, who has encountered the death of a loved one and seen the suffering of others, readers can see the effects of grief in his life, which brings the question of suffering and evil to the forefront of the story. Not only will this element of having an older protagonist challenge younger readers while also appealing to adults, but the story deals with topics – specifically death and suffering – that affect all people and is therefore relevant to the lives of readers.

My work provides an original contribution to the genre of fantasy but also includes topics that can add to academic discussion and further research. Within my critical paper, I included an analysis of significant themes in *The Wingfeather Saga* by Andrew Peterson, which has not been widely reviewed in scholarly journals. Although I provide an analysis based on research currently available, other scholars could build on what my paper includes to provide further literary analysis of Peterson's fascinating series. Only a few Christian themes were covered in my paper, but there are many more to be explored.

Another area where my paper adds to the academic discussion about fantasy and Christian symbols is in the way I connect the problem of sin in the world with the issue of

suffering. Based on the Bible, Christians know that suffering came into the world because of the fall of humankind in the Garden of Eden (Rom. 5:12). Pain and death are not isolated from the problem of sin in the world but are closely connected, which is why Jesus's payment of humankind's sin on the cross is intertwined with His defeat of death at the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:56-57). The connection between sin and suffering is present in many literary works, and since I highlight the relationship between these issues in my critical paper, other scholars could build upon my research and further add to the discussion of the problem of evil and suffering presented in fantasy.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my artist statement, the idea for *The Mountain Pass Keeper* started as a seed of an idea. The story grew larger than I expected, but like a gardener who delights in watching their plants grow, I am pleasantly surprised at the result thus far. Rooted in the seminal works mentioned in this thesis, my fantasy story is still growing, and I look forward to seeing what it blossoms into when the final word is written. No one can yet foresee the fruit it will bear or the seeds it will produce in the lives of others, but I pray the story will offer hope to those who are hurting in this world filled with pain. By Christ's power, even the smallest seed sown in love and sacrifice can grow and reap a harvest.

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