

MINERS OF THE MYSTICS

PENNY MOSS



MINERS OF THE MYSTICS

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First Edition

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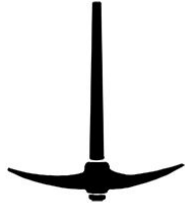
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Acknowledgements

Trivia



The Miners Mine Tetralogy.

Miners of the Mystics ← You're here

Miners of the Tempest

Miners of the Resilience

Miners of the Endlong

This is an m/m romance story of a human male falling in love with a non-human male.

Warnings:

Contains descriptive injury, gore, death, dead bodies and monsters. Strong sexual content, mild swearing, some use of alcohol, child abuse (in one chapter only), vague mentions of suicide, violence.

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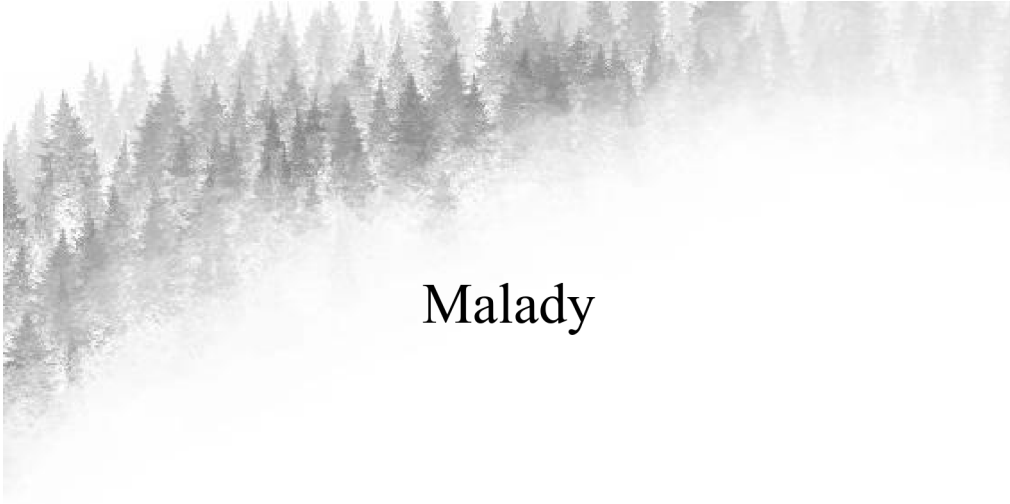
Dedicated to me.

*The chapter art, though? That's dedicated to all my pals with
aphantasia.*





One



Malady

The first thing Oliver did on his first day as a Miner of the Mystics was fall down a winze and break his leg. The winze was deep, his fall nasty. He sat up, looked down at his leg, and instantly regretted it. Forcing his gaze up, he met deep brown eyes, wide with horror.

“It’s not so bad,” Oliver managed, sucking a breath in through his teeth and holding it. Halfway between screaming and expelling his breakfast.

While the dust cloud that had erupted around him settled, the scent of blood rose to tease his nausea into a frenzy.

“I’m so sorry,” cried his new friend.

She would be his friend because she tried to warn him about the winze, then he fell and broke his leg anyway. Oliver stared at the young woman, only a blur of gold and black with how frantic her movements were. Or maybe it was that his eyes had welled with agony. He should have paid better attention instead of gawking at the magic lining the adit.

“We need to move your leg, I think.”

Her dainty hands closed around his shin, below the jut of bone peering out from the denim of Oliver’s overalls. Nausea gurgled up into his throat again. He flung his focus to the light trickling in from above, not yet willing to vomit all over his new friend—who yanked at his leg without warning.

Oliver swore, the back of his head colliding with stone as he flopped down. He told himself he wouldn’t cry, but when he blinked, the tears spilt anyway.

“Oh—Oh my *dahlia*s,” she warbled, panicked. “I’m—I’m sorry! I don’t think that was right.”

An agonised moan was Oliver’s response. The sob-like noise that followed was definitely *not* him crying.

“It’s okay, it’s okay!” The young woman awkwardly patted his thigh. “Sentinel Tau will be here any minute. They’ll fix this.”

As if speaking the name had summoned Them, the Sentinel approached in an elegant walk, more so a glide. Even in his agony-ridden, blurry-eyed state, Oliver caught sight of pristine white robes. Of fabric shimmering like sunlit snow and gleaming gold trims.

His breath caught in his throat, the Sentinel’s tall figure vivid against shadows slanting across the driftway. Their face hidden by an expressionless mask, featuring no more than two narrow black triangles for eyes, outlined by more gold

lambency. Clawed sabatons soundlessly moved across stone, coming to a stop just by him.

Oliver lay panting in the dust and grime, too awestruck to do much else. The Sentinel bowed low, dark pointed hood unmoving, and reached out with a gauntlet. Metallic claws glinted umbral green, like the pine forest that lurked outside the mountain. Mirror-like, when light poured from the palm to encapsulate Oliver's leg in a soft glow.

His skin prickled and hair stood up, a tingling sensation coursing through the whole of his body as protruding bone painlessly slid back and skin knitted, healing over. Were it not for the ripped denim and blood attesting to his clumsiness, Oliver would have thought this all a dream.

Grasping for words and failing, he sat up, lacking all the grace Sentinel Tau possessed. Even when They condensed into a dazzling, floating globe and sped away, Oliver continued to stare. The round, empyreal image had burned into his vision and he didn't want to blink for fear of losing it.

“You okay?”

Oliver turned to his new friend, mouth dry when he uttered, “They're *beautiful*.”

The young woman smiled and stood, holding out her hand. He clasped it, but since she was so tiny, Oliver mostly lifted himself.

“Thanks.” He turned back to where Sentinel Tau had disappeared.

Aside from a mining hutch and a broken shovel, there wasn't much else of interest. The vivid afterglow faded, but the Sentinel's broad shoulders and slender waist lingered in his mind as he flexed his leg.

No longer sore. Nothing was, now that he thought about it. All the usual aches and pains from years of manual labour were gone. Even that persistent tickle in his chest wasn't bothering him any longer.

"I'm Maji." She flicked her thick plait over her shoulder, flyaways fanning her round head.

"Oh, right." He wiped away any stray tracks of tears. "Oliver." His loud sniff danced over the cragged walls. "Uh, can you point me to—"

"The hovels? I'll show you." She led the way up the ladder, the very same Oliver had tripped on and fallen past without catching himself.

He collected his canvas rucksack off the ground and followed to a cage lift a long way from the adit's entrance. The gate squeaked when pulled open, and they piled inside with several other miners, pushing Oliver against Maji's soft frame.

"Sorry," he mumbled, knowing damn well he needed a bath.

She grunted when yet more people boarded the cage. "It's fine."

Oliver was thin, but the cage wasn't exactly spacious. It was noisy, metal rattling and creaking under the weight.

"Where's your hovel?" Maji asked.

“Er, I don’t know.”

She prised her hand out from between them. “Let’s see it.”

“Eh?”

“Your manual, obviously.” Maji wiggled her fingers. “They should have put the location down.”

“Oh.”

The examiner had handed him a stack of bound papers after he left the training facility, along with dismissive congratulations. Oliver had yet to glance at them, not that it would do him much good. Five other workers were inside with them, and trying to grab the manual from his rucksack became a struggle turned fierce.

“You’re pretty far down,” she said, then shoved her way past the others before the cage came to a stop. “Come on, we’re taking the long way ’round.”

Oliver readily agreed, eager to see more of the Tesera Mine. How strange to walk its drifts now, when joining any magical ambit had only been a fancy. A flighty one at that.

One afternoon while feeding chickens at the farm he worked, another farmhand mentioned trying to become a Mystical Miner, that he failed, and the idea popped into Oliver’s head to try. Like everyone else, he heard the tales of those who earned unimaginable wealth by discovering magical artefacts. The idea of being filthy rich was appealing, of course, but his desire to meet otherworldly entities was stronger.

“How long have you been here?” Oliver scoured every bit of magic they passed, taking care not to trip on the tracks.

Vibrant spheres stippled the passageways above them, hues turning to a steady orange reminiscent of the setting sun. Oliver reached out, his splayed fingers collecting the warmth of a summer’s evening. Rays of light poured from several cracks in the ceiling and walls, catching floating dust and stretching shadows.

“Only a year,” said Maji as they made their way through a short crosscut to a set of lodgings.

The lodgings were burrowed into the hard rock of the mountain, lining either side of the passageways with arched doors and circular windows. Crates and casks crowded the walls and clotheslines extended across, dripping soap-tinged water onto the people below. The further down they went, the more cramped everything became.

The drag of wind was faint, but the mine was busy and the stink of sweat lay thick in the air. The Tesera Mine was the biggest to exist in the world, and the most dangerous. Unlike other mines of the transmudane, this one was known for its infernal activity, and accidents were common. From what Oliver heard, Sentinel Tau’s body count was stacked high against Them, something the daring took as a challenge. He’d certainly taken it as one.

“You find anything valuable yet?” asked Oliver.

“I’m not in it for the money.” Maji flashed a brilliant smile over her shoulder, her glossy black hair sharply reflecting the

enchanted suns above. “I’d rather we found something useful for people.”

Barking mad.

“You find anything useful, then?”

“Not yet!” She led him further down. The passageway was wide and high, but the herd of miners was dense, making Oliver feel like he was inside a forcing pen. “Why’d you join the T. Mine?”

He shrugged. Not that Maji saw it, since she was ahead of him. “Seemed like fun.”

“In that case, I think you’ll love it here.”

She handed the manual back when stopping by an old, unmarked door, its grey paint chipped off and pull-handle rusty. When Oliver hesitated, Maji opened it. He followed into what was essentially a hole.

Ancient rugs covered the floor, the blue pattern faded, in parts worn to the jute backing. The bed was narrow and though it had an old, stained mattress, it was without linen or a blanket. Even the cupboards looked sad, their doors askew and varnish crumbling.

The only remarkable things inside the hovel were the hearth and a window carved into the wall. Since they were so deep inside the mountain, one of Sentinel Tau’s sun spheres rested within the arched hollow. Below it, the raised hearth featured a smokeless fire, hints of purple reaching into deep orange. Oliver recognised it.

“Theta’s fire?”

Maji looked at him in surprise. “Yeah! How’d you know?”

“I know a few things about a few Sentinels.”

Fact was, Oliver knew a lot. Like most, he adored Sentinels, beings considered gods for their exceptional magic and ability to heal the worst of ailments. Oliver devoured what information about them he could, usually through what others told him and pictures in newspapers when he could afford them. What he didn’t know was why Theta’s magic was available to this mine, when the Sentinel here was Tau.

He approached the sphere casting warm orange hues throughout, too big to fit in his palm. “Is this mine? Am I allowed to touch it?”

“You should read your manual,” said Maji. “You can, but we’re not supposed to move it. Same for the fire.”

The tips of his fingers connected with the sphere and he gasped in astonishment. “It’s cold.”

Yet when he pulled away, the warmth was unmistakable. No warmer than the fire, but comforting.

“My hovel isn’t a whole lot better,” said Maji, now wandering the rocky confines. “Yours *is* kind of small though.”

“I’ve had worse.” Oliver swung the rucksack off his shoulder and moved to the bed, dropping into it. Its creak of complaint bordered on a whimper. “Where’s yours?”

“Two levels up from here, six doors down.” Maji eyed his rucksack. “Is that...all you came with?”

Oliver snaked his hand across the worn canvas, toying with the straps. “Yeah, why?”

“No reason. Do you need anything? Like water or soap?”

Subtle.

His lips twitched into a smile. “What do we do for bathing around here?”

“Buckets and the water reservoir.” Maji motioned at the wall behind her. “Or you can go to the communal hot springs, a few levels down from here. You should have a map in your manual.”

“Thanks, Maji.”

She beamed at him. Oliver observed her little stature, the curves, how her overalls were folded up over her hobnail boots a few times. Even her shadow was tiny.

“Oh, have you been assigned a group yet?” she asked, hand flat against the door.

“Er, if I was, they haven’t told me who.”

“My group is one man down since... Well, we didn’t really get on with him. I’d love it if you joined us.”

Oliver raised his eyebrows at her, not quite believing his luck. “Thanks, I appreciate that. I’ll see you—”

“Tomorrow morning.” Maji’s look pinched with displeasure. “My friends are early risers.”

Something he was used to, anyway. “I’ll be up bright and early.”

Maji left, and Oliver was alone in the hovel. The orange of the orb by the window seamlessly shifted to moonlight silver.

Stunning.

There were other mines Oliver could have joined, but felt a pull towards this one in a way he couldn’t explain. Not for a second had he expected to make it, especially not after handing the written exams in without so much as glancing at them.

The scribbles on the manual remained a mystery to him, so he tossed it to the floor. He swung his legs up on the bed, adjusted the collars of his green mackinaw, and settled his head on the rucksack. It made a terrible pillow, but it would have to do for now.

With a wistful sigh, he closed his eyes. Remnants of Sentinel Tau’s magic still coursed through him, pleasing pinpricks travelling up his leg and through his chest.



Light inundated his hovel when Oliver awoke. His vision was blurry, eyes crusted and still heavy with sleep. He ground the bases of his palms into them, stretched with a loud groan until his back popped, and paused.

Grey stone stared back at him from all angles, the enchanted sun dazzling. It was quiet, other than the chatter floating in

from under the door.

Oliver hopped out of bed with bubbling excitement.

Because he had nothing to eat or wash with, he left the hovel. His belongings didn't concern him when he had nothing of value. There were guards stationed along the passageways anyway, clad in a dark red, complemented by the yellows of the buoyant suns aloft. Rays of light pouring in from the cracks were especially bright in the morning, although Oliver supposed he shouldn't look directly at them.

"There you are!" he heard Maji say from somewhere.

Oliver peered past the many faces, then remembered he had to look *down*. Maji squeezed past a few miners and reached out to grab him by the arm with her free hand, the other dragging a pickaxe.

"You're so short," he blurted.

Maji scrunched her face. "I actually know this."

"How do you—"

"Mine? Like everyone else." She yanked at his arm, dragging him along.

"At least if there's ever a cave-in, you can crawl out through any crack."

Maji glowered at him over her shoulder.

"Is it morning?" Oliver quickly asked. "I don't have a watch."

“Neither do I. The suns give us the time.” She released him long enough to point up at them. “It’s late morning. You’ll learn to tell the difference in the colours. I thought you said you’d be up bright and early?”

“I usually am. I don’t even remember falling asleep. Never slept this well before.”

“I had that on my first night here too.”

Several cage lifts and a manifold of passageways took them into the deepest parts of the mountain. Oliver didn’t have a hard-boiled hat. Neither did he have tools, or gloves—something he became increasingly aware of the more he observed the other miners, who *did* have all those things.

“Where’s your stuff?” asked Maji when they reached what he hoped would be the last level. Any deeper and they would enter Hell itself. Before Oliver could respond, she waved a dismissive hand, then squirmed past the other workers to the gate to wrench it open and leave. “Never mind. We’ll get you sorted.”

Oliver stared at her in disbelief, catching up in just a few strides. “So I have to buy all my own tools?”

“Yes, of course. What did you think?”

“Back in the coal mine, I didn’t have to. Prospector always provided them.”

He slowed his gait to walk alongside her past several drift entrances. They were wide and high enough to accommodate

their Sentinel. Most of them were already manned with groups of miners in each, chipping away at the working face.

“You were a coal miner?” asked Maji.

Maybe he was fooling himself, but as the morning light slipped across her golden face with each passing sun, Oliver thought she was impressed. Unusual, when Miners of the Mystics looked down on pitmen.

“For years. We had a resident ghost.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah. Kind of an asshole, but she usually left me alone.”

Maji and Oliver stopped by the entrance of a drift in time to watch five miners pull a hefty tome out of the stone face. Leather bound and ancient, its edge yellowed and grimy. The moment the miners opened it, a blast of purple dust permeated the drift entirely, ringlets billowing towards Maji and Oliver, reaching like fingers, beckoning them to approach.

Maji snickered. “That was stupid.”

She dashed away before the dust touched them. When she finally ran into a drift to their left, Oliver stopped just outside of its entrance at the sound of loud crackling. He arched his back as far as it would go, eager to catch a glimpse of the Sentinel further down the main passageway.

The incandescent globe rifled through the air, stopped a few feet away, then transformed into Tau’s humanoid form, giving Oliver a good look at Them before disappearing into another working drift.

Nerves swooped his stomach.

Gorgeous.

“This is Oliver.”

He jerked his focus forward. Three other people stood facing him, looking like they had taken a dust bath. Another ethereal sphere hovered above them, casting vibrant rays of light through the swirling dust.

“This is Lucetta,” Maji continued, pointing at a woman with strong shoulders, dark curly hair, and umber skin smeared with sweat and dirt. “And Samuel.” Tall, dark skin, of a sturdy build and eyes deep-set. “And Benjamin.”

Oliver’s gaze slid to the man standing furthest in the back. Also tall, and muscular. Brown hair thick and short like his beard. The grey shirt stretching across his broad shoulders as filthy as the fawn skin exposed.

“Where’s your hat?” asked the man with the sturdy build.

Oliver cast for the name, having neglected to pay attention. Struggled to answer his question, too. “I don’t—”

“Here.” Maji leaned far into the hutch that stood by the entrance. She tossed a hard-boiled hat at him, along with gloves. “They’re Sam’s spares but you’re okay with that, right?”

“I suppose I’ll have to be,” said Sam, full lips holding an easy smile.

The woman with the curly hair gave the pickaxe in her hand a whirl. “Why do we get the rookie?”

“I know what I’m doing,” said Oliver immediately. He flipped on the hat and grabbed the scaling bar Maji handed him. “I worked a coal mine.”

“Great. What do you know about mining for magical artefacts?”

The woman’s tone wasn’t condescending, nor was it friendly.

“Enough. You don’t gotta worry.” He knew very little, most of what he’d learned the day before already forgotten, but didn’t feel like divulging that. Boldly, he made his way further in to stand beside...*the other man*. “Alright if I work next to you?”

“Sure. Welcome.”

Oliver offered him a pallid grin and set to it.

He was an efficient worker, nimble, and he knew it. Eyes were on him, he could feel them digging into his back. It took a while for the others to resume working, the hum of steel eventually filling their drift.

Oliver wasn’t sure what exactly he was looking for, seeing no bodies of ore. It didn’t look like the others were mucking for anything in particular. Rather, they seemed intent on tunnelling and nothing more.

Beside him, the man’s breaths were heavy as he worked. So close, his musk reached Oliver with every sharp inhale. It wasn’t bad, exactly. Farms certainly smelled no better.

Oliver fell into rhythm with ease, jabbed at the stone, pulled it away, allowing his partner for the day to proceed with a pickaxe. Every once in a while, the man's amber eyes turned to him. Oliver liked to think he was impressed. The third time the gaze set on him, he met it.

"I know. I'm very good at what I do," Oliver said, self-satisfaction making itself known in the twist of his mouth.

That earned him a grunt of amusement. Along with a look-over. "I can see that."

When this far in the earth's underbelly, it was easy to lose track of time while mining for *stone*, since that was all Oliver and the others seemed to find. No books and no ore. Before he knew it, the light waned.

"Call it quits?" shouted Samuel over the clanking of tools.

Oliver bumped his partner's arm upon turning. A glance up at the sphere suggested it might be evening again, orange contouring a deep yellow. They hadn't even stopped for lunch. What would he do for dinner?

"You're an efficient miner," said Sam, clearing away the tools into the hutch. "We'd be pleased to keep you."

"Er, that'd be great," Oliver said, turning to the curly-haired woman. He cast for her name too, finding only a sliver. Luce...? "Er—If it's okay with you?"

She shrugged. "Fine by me."

The other man's gaze was already on him. He hadn't yet moved, their arms still bumping with every slight shift.

“Happy to have you.”

Oliver slipped past him to return the tools. When he tried to give back the gloves and hat, Sam shook his head.

“Keep them until you’re settled.” And what a charming smile he had when he said it.

They left into the main passageway with little fanfare and waited for the other miners to leave before taking the cage back up. Oliver leaned against the rattling bars, denied himself the joy of opening his mouth and hum as his body shook along, and rubbed his cramping stomach.

“What’s for dinner?”

Sam’s tone seemed strangely chilly, considering the burly man snaked his arm around his hips and whispered into his ear. Despite the burning need to watch them, Oliver forced his gaze away from their rings, glinting in the light.

“You’ll be alright?” asked Sam once the cage came to a stop.

“Course.” Oliver got out, hoping this was his level. “I’ll be up earlier than yesterday.” His internal clock wouldn’t let him down twice.

The others bid him goodnight, and Oliver watched the cage carry them off. He walked down the long and busy passageway, trying not to panic at his inability to remember where his hovel was. Most doors sported bold colours, but several had the same tired look as his own.

Oliver’s eyes drifted up, mouth opening in wonder at the green embers flickering into existence. So much like fireflies.

Floating in abundance along the ceiling, seemingly easing the weight of all his worries.

He relaxed the hunching of his shoulders. Then, with a deep inhale, summoned the courage to try a door. He sighed, relieved, at the sorry state of the furniture and his rucksack, untouched on the bed. His feet scraped across the rugs before he collapsed into bed with a tired groan.

Tomorrow he would find something to eat. Hopefully.



He slept heavier than a boulder and woke up late again. Maji collected him and needed to show him around a second time. Repeated everyone's names when he asked, too.

Once back in their assigned drift, Oliver worked as hard as the day before. Benjamin seemed to enjoy working with him, even shared his water and lunch when they stopped for a break. It wasn't much, but the meat rissoles were delicious.

Oliver stared up at the sphere whenever he got the opportunity. Until the after-image was firmly embedded in his vision. Unfortunately, Sentinel Tau was so busy, he didn't get to see Them, not even a glimpse.

A final gulp from Benjamin's water canteen and he set back to work. He delivered the swings of his borrowed pickaxe seriatim, chipping away at the dull stone until the metal pinged with a different tune. Oliver dug through clay and loose rock with his hands, freeing a cluster of blue.

His sharp intake of breath pulled Benjamin's attention to him. He hummed in approval as Oliver held the crystal up against the light. Pretty, bright as a summer's sky. He ran his fingers across the glassy edges. Despite wearing gloves, the odd sensation of dipping his hands into chilled water was unmistakable.

"I think...this is magical," he murmured.

Samuel came for a closer look, drawing as close as Benjamin already stood. He ran a finger over one of the narrow formations.

"You're right," said Samuel. "It's lovely. Keep it for good luck."

Oliver nodded. He didn't think he needed luck when he had nothing *but* since coming here. All the same, he pocketed the crystal to set it on an empty shelf in his hovel later that night.



He roused late again. This was turning into a habit. Not that the others seemed to mind much. Samuel's smile was forgiving when Oliver ambled into the drift alongside Maji. Not even Lucetta said anything about it, as if they expected it. Maybe his skill and newfound luck earned him some leniency.

"I found something!" shouted Maji a while later, gesturing at a wide pocket inside the working face of her area.

Oliver darted across the rubble to have a look. Gnarly feet poked out from the shadow of the cavity, ancient fabric turned

brown revealing leathery toes.

“What’s a corpse doing in the mountain?”

Oliver’s question was met with laughter. His face grew hot.

They didn’t answer. Instead, Benjamin’s gloved hand curled on his shoulder and eased him out of the way. Oliver was left standing out like a spare pickaxe while the others worked to widen the cavity. Not until Samuel and Lucetta reached inside to shift the stiff body out did Maji wave him over.

“Come on. Sentinel Tau hasn’t shown, so it’s probably safe.” Maji stepped aside. “Grab the feet.”

“But you found it,” Oliver mumbled, doing as told anyway.

“That’s not how this works,” said Lucetta. “All finds and proceeds are shared. Did you not read the manual? Careful now, don’t want the *corpse* to fall apart.”

“He isn’t wrong, you know,” said Samuel. Something that appeared to bother Lucetta a great deal since she mocked him in an unintelligible mutter.

Oliver tried to focus on the disgusting feet instead of their odd bickering. Together, they eased the body out. Benjamin stepped in once the shoulders came into view to cradle the head, fabric flaking away under their fingers as they lowered it to the ground. Oliver squatted by its feet, grateful for the borrowed gloves. The body was skeletal, a plank with limbs and a hideous head. The smell wasn’t great, either.

“A mummy,” said Maji, chipper as a songbird. She hopped over the body to inspect the head. Exposed parts of the face

were waxy, like black leather stretched over a skull. “Still has most of its teeth, look!”

She had pried open the mouth. Oliver grimaced while the others leaned in. Maji motioned for him to take the feet again and together, they hoisted it up. It wasn't heavy so much as fragile. Oliver shuffled backwards, even though he didn't know where he was supposed to be going.

“Wait,” said Samuel. “It just moved.”

The body emitted a dusty exhale. Oliver stared, transfixed, still clutching the ankles and only dimly aware the others had dropped it to step back. The mummy moved its mouth, worked the jaw, and groaned around the dryness of a hundred years. The head snapped up, eyelids opening to reveal empty sockets.

“Curse you, breadstick!” rasped the mummy.

Oliver froze.

“Oliver, you have to move,” someone warned him. Samuel, maybe.

“An unpredictable strength like none other you shall have, with no means of mastery for as long as you live!”

Crack!

The sharp end of a pickaxe gored the mummy's skull.

Maji wrenched the tool out with a quiet grunt. “You okay?”

Oliver willed himself to unfreeze, then carefully dropped the feet and straightened back up. He stared at his hands, turning

them, expecting to see signs of damage. All he saw was dirty leather.

“Er, yeah.”

“Oh, good. I guess their magic lost its potency,” she said.

“That was *stupid*.” Frustration ignited Lucetta’s dark eyes, the look directed at Oliver. “This better not negate the value.”

“Go easy, it’s only his first find,” Samuel said before Oliver could respond, moving to lift the body again. “Besides, if the magic had no effect, it’s probably worthless.”

Unsure of what to do with himself now, Oliver stayed behind even when everyone, including Maji, left the drift, carrying the mummy off somewhere. Feeling foolish and inept, he tossed the remaining tools into the hutch, along with the borrowed gloves and hat. He combed his fingers through sweat-soaked hair and realised his hands were trembling.

Oliver’s gaze flicked up. His heart skipped a beat.

Sentinel Tau. He’d not even heard Them approach. In perfect stillness, the Sentinel lingered by the entrance, masked face turned toward him. Watching. Waiting, maybe, for him to do something.

Oliver wanted to be clever, but all that left him was an odd squawk. Sentinel Tau regarded him for a few moments longer, then moved on.

Unsteadily, Oliver left the drift. Before he could escape with other miners, Maji called his name.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she asked. “We always go to Ben and Sam’s for dinner after a discovery.”

“But I mucked up. I should’ve moved—”

“It’ll be fine.” Benjamin patted him on the back. “Only your first discovery. You did alright.”

“Exactly,” Samuel added, his calm tone easing away Oliver’s worry. “Everything’s fine.”

Lucetta said nothing, her disposition sour.

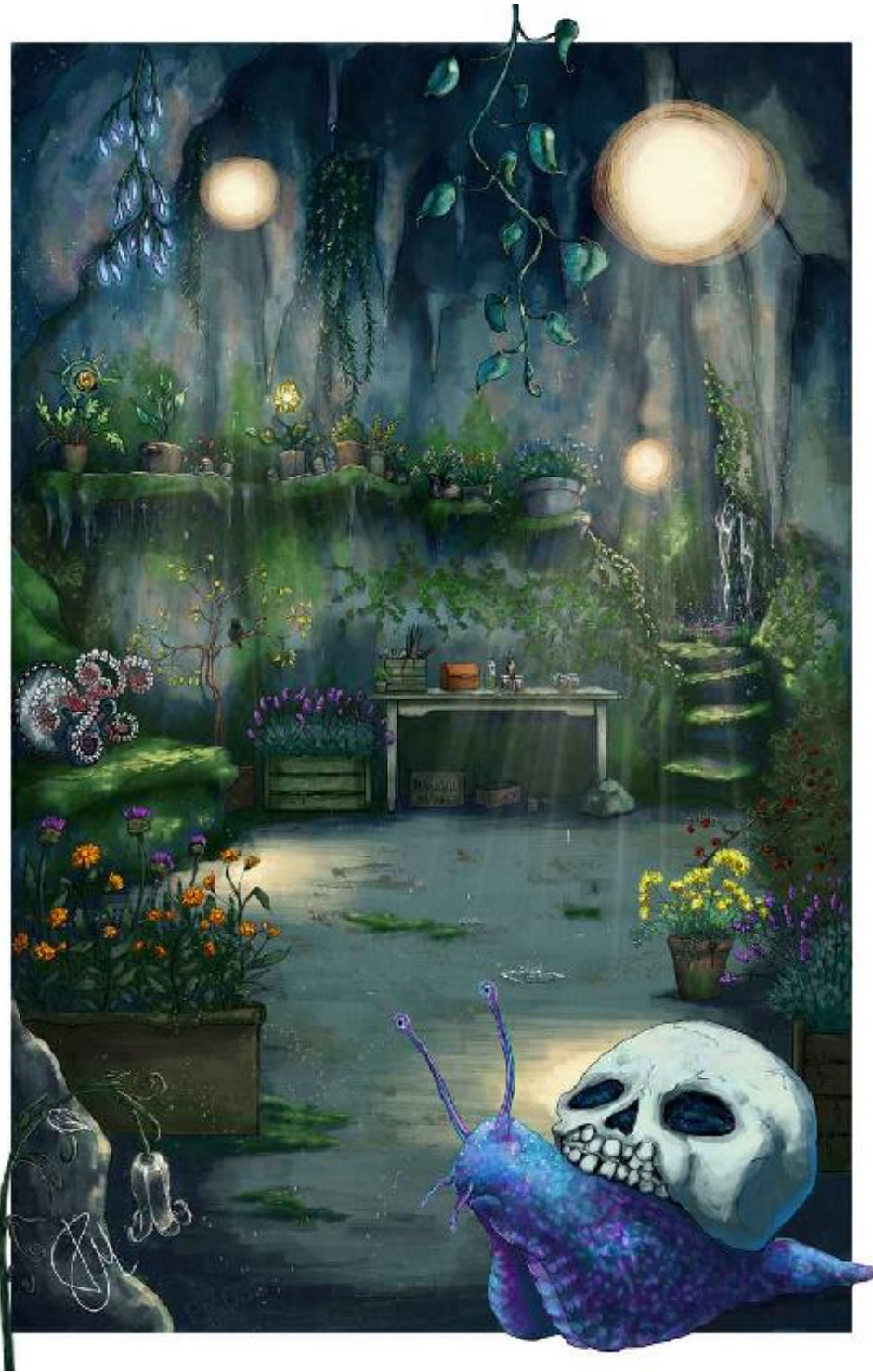
Oliver followed the others into the cage lift. He grasped the gate to slide it closed when his jaw locked and body tensed. The gate shut with a shriek of rending metal. It crumpled like paper under the force of his hand. He stumbled backwards, collapsing against someone, a scream lodging itself in his throat.

He stared at his fingers.

The muscles had torn, ligaments snapped, the bones broken, all the way to his forearm. Several fingers dangled by a thread. And there was blood. Spurting in arcs to coat the metal below his feet, drenching his boots.

An arm held him by the midriff as he swayed. He still couldn’t scream. He couldn’t breathe, either. The others turned frantic. Benjamin kicked the gate open, boot-clad feet stomping and stomping until it relented and fell forward with a loud clatter. Whoever kept him upright dragged him out, laid him down. Moved to squat in front of him—Lucetta. She looked at him with worry.

Chestnuts. Her eyes were the colour of chestnuts.





Two



Purblind

It was a sunny day up top, early afternoon. Oliver knew this from the vibrancy of the enchanted sun, the thinnest hint of a bright yellow gracing its contours. He shouldn't stare at it, but the alternative was to look at his hand. Seeing as he'd jammed a sewing needle dead through the bone of his pointer finger, Oliver much preferred to blind himself than focus on the pain and blood. He'd tried to get the needle out but lacked finesse, and only ended up breaking it. Along with his finger. So now it stood at an odd angle with a broken needle through the tip.

Five years of this shit.

With a frustrated sigh, Oliver pushed the fabric off his lap to the floor. Bold black lines gave shape to berries and flowers of purples and reds. Such a shame he'd just ruined it with blood. He left his boots untied and shuffled out of the hovel.

The lodgings passageway was quiet. A blessing, when the other miners still threw wayward insults at him. Something the guards did nothing about. They never had.

It didn't usually take Tau long to get to him, although Oliver suspected the Sentinel might be busy. It was his day of rest, but that didn't mean others weren't working. Or maybe Tau hadn't sensed his injury, like he hadn't sensed other ailments before. Leaving him no choice but to search for Maji, hiding his hand from prying eyes, unwilling to provoke jeering remarks.

News of his curse had travelled fast the day it happened. At first, his fellow miners were afraid of him. Then, they tried to cast him out. It took intervention from Mister Pavlov, the owner of the mine, for things to settle down. Fortunately, the man had deemed his curse Minor and let him stay.

Oliver risked a knock on the worn surface of Maji's door. She had stripped it of paint years ago. Told him all the houses in her village had brightly coloured doors and wanted something different. It made no sense to him, but Oliver didn't question it.

There was no answer.

He proceeded further up the mine, through bricked passageways to her greenhouse, a generous term for a cave she staked claim to years ago.

Stalactites extended across the ceiling, forever trickling with water into tins and repurposed crates. Flowers and herbs glutted every inch of the mossy space. Some plants whispered, one strummed like a guitar with each droplet pelting its leaves. Others just smelled nice, or had medicinal uses, or hissed at him if Oliver got too close.

Among trailing plants, Maji swept the floor with a new straw broom. New, because he'd accidentally broken her last one.

"Hi, Sticky," she said.

Ugh. Oliver hated the nickname. He never said anything about it though, too milky to contest it.

Maji's smile faded when he held out his hand, blood trailing along the curves of his knuckles. "Oh. Hang on."

From an old, salvaged table with uneven legs, she collected a wooden box, containing splints and bandages, even balms she'd made for him over the years.

"Sorry," Oliver mumbled.

"Don't be silly." She grimaced once she got a good look at the injury. "I don't think this is something I can fix. Tau's busy, I guess?"

Oliver shrugged, then snapped his focus back to the entrance of the cave, *knowing*. A smile pulled at his mouth when Tau glided inside and, without hesitancy, gathered his blood-soaked hand in a claw.

So massive in comparison. The metal cool and somehow warm at once.

Oliver fought not to collapse, reminding himself that he needed to breathe. When sharp nails dug in for the broken needle, he needed to steady himself for an entirely different reason. With little effort—but plenty of pain on his end—it was extracted, and the familiar sun-like glow enveloped his

hand. His finger mended, the pain eased, and the needle was gently deposited into his open palm.

“Thank you,” Oliver managed.

Tau dipped his head, then condensed into a vivid globe and surged through the air, waves of light stretching, waning across the ground.

“But never too busy for *you*,” Maji teased. “Any luck getting him to play cards yet?”

Oliver’s chuckle was breathy, sure his otherwise pasty face was bright red with how hot it felt. “Not really. Sometimes he holds them. Mostly he just stands still.”

While staring at him, Oliver wanted to add, but as there was no way to be sure what Tau was looking at, he didn’t.

“Since this was my last needle,” he said instead, tossing the offending item to the old table, “I’ve got nothing else to do but work. Wanna come with?”

Maji grabbed her broom again. “I’m too tired to work.”

“Gardening is work!”

“No, gardening is *relaxing*.”

In the midst of wanting to argue that, it occurred to Oliver he had neglected to share vital information. Hesitantly, he said, “Ben and Luce are down there. Tau thinks we’re close to something, so they couldn’t wait to keep going.”

“What?” Maji sounded scandalised. “When did you hear about this?”

She let the broom clatter to the floor and darted past him out of the cave.

“Luce told me yesterday,” he called out and followed.

“*Yesterday?*”

Oliver chose not to respond. He teetered and danced past other miners who glared at him whenever he got too close. The mine was nigh bottomless, getting anywhere was an expedition. Winds howled through its passageways, whipping at his hair and blustering past the few guards stationed throughout.

“No running!” shouted one of them. Both Oliver and Maji ignored it. Everyone ran when it suited them, including the guards.

Heading back into the deepest parts of the mine was routine by now. Most of the working drifts were empty for lunch hour, although one further along emitted barks of laughter and cheers. Lauper and his group must have found something good. A suspicion confirmed when Tau emerged from the drift.

Oliver’s heart soared at the sight of him.

“Hi again,” he lilted upon passing.

Twice in one day. Far from unusual, but he would never stop appreciating it. When he caught Maji’s sly look, Oliver averted his gaze. Peered behind him, discreetly, and realised Tau had stopped to watch him. Probably.

As expected, both Benjamin and Lucetta were hard at work. Surrounded by rubble, dirt clinging to their skin, and hair turned ashen by dust.

“About time you got here,” said Lucetta when she caught sight of them, prying away loose rock with her scaling bar.

Oliver huffed in amusement, grabbing his chisel, while Maji secured her hard-boiled hat, collected her tools, then positioned herself near Lucetta. As the hum of steel warbled through the drift and sparks burst with each firm *whack*, Oliver crouched by Benjamin’s feet to continue where he’d left off the day before in a narrow pocket. The schist was slightly discoloured. He hoped he was onto something. It had been a while since he last made a discovery.

“Tau said we’re getting close to something?” Maji grunted behind him.

“As much as he says anything,” said Lucetta. She stopped to wipe at her forehead, only to smear more dirt across her face. “Soon, we reckon.”

“Why didn’t you tell *me*?”

When Lucetta gestured at Oliver, he shrank.

“I would have told you sooner,” he muttered, “but I forgot.”



Although Oliver’s idea of “soon” was at most a few days, to Tau it meant something else entirely. As an eternal being, the Sentinel’s perception of time wasn’t quite the same. Oliver

learned that early on. He was far from surprised when, after three weeks, they still hadn't found anything. Typically, the discoloured schist had only led to a pocket of water, doing little more than soak his knees.

Nursing his wrist against his chest, Oliver sat among damp rubble and winced every time Maji's chisel shot debris his way. She had uncovered a patch not unlike obsidian two days ago and needed to proceed carefully in her area. Flicking glass-like mineral into anyone's eyes was frowned upon, after all.

"You going to be alright?" asked Benjamin. "Want me to have a look?"

Oliver peeked at the drift's entrance. Distractedly, he mumbled, "Nothing's broken. It's just sore."

A bit of an understatement. His wrist had doubled in size, the leather glove now a tight fit.

Maji lobbed a sizeable chunk of the dark mineral in the hutch's direction, missed, and it shattered on the ground. Oliver snickered. He didn't see her glare for long, squinting when an incandescent globe floated into their drift, the burring noise loud. As it morphed into Tau's humanoid shape, Oliver's stomach began its usual whirl of nerves.

Unfortunately, Tau didn't move from his position by the entrance, suggesting he wasn't here for Oliver's wrist. His presence could only mean one thing: they were about to uncover something and it would be tricky to deal with. Or, if

deemed Dire by Tau, he would whisk it out of their world and kill it elsewhere.

“It’s got to be yours.” Lucetta motioned at the perfectly innocent looking mineral. “No way that’s just obsidian. It’ll be fine,” she continued as Maji’s look pinched with reluctance. “We got you.”

She stepped back to give Maji room. Like Oliver and the others, Lucetta was armed with a hatchet tucked away in her belt, just in case. It always paid to have a backup weapon.

As the black mineral yielded under the chisel’s persistence, something curved and bone-white gradually revealed itself. Maji jiggled it until its blackened prison released it with a satisfying *click*, leaving behind an inverted impression of its exact shape. In gloved hands, she held up a skull for them to see.

“That’s a child’s skull,” said Lucetta.

“What’s so bad about that?” Oliver blurted, then cringed, realising his mistake. “I mean, besides that it belonged to a kid, which is horrible, I *know*. But there’s a reason you’re here, right Tau?”

“*Sentinel* Tau,” Benjamin grumbled.

Oliver made a face at him, pushing up to get a better look at the skull.

A thin, faintly glimmering film covered the hollows of the eye sockets and nose. Besides cracks feathering the top and far

more teeth than any ordinary human would need, it was in good condition.

Maji turned it over and peered into the bottom. She jerked away with a gasp, stumbled back, and flung the skull away from her in disgust. Tau flicked forward, faster than Oliver could see him move, appearing right beside him without so much as a flutter of his robes. Skull in his claw, held out for their benefit.

“Maji!” cried Lucetta.

“Sorry! I saw something *move!*”

Oliver’s amused snort turned into a delighted, “Oooh,” as the skull wobbled within Tau’s claw, a fat, slimy snail slowly emerging from its hollow, the skull serving as its home.

“Oh, that’s foul,” muttered Lucetta.

“I told you!”

His friends looked repulsed, although Oliver thought it lovely. In the cool light of the drift, the snail glistened in hues of turquoise and purple. Stalked eyes extended forward, swivelling. Oliver tilted his head, certain it was looking at them with disdain, its mouth downturned.

“Who rests in darkness, only to be disturbed from their slumber?” the snail asked, its voice unnatural, as though speaking through a tin can.

An uprush of fear turned Oliver’s blood and sweat frosty. Were it not for Benjamin nudging him to get past, he would

have remained frozen. He jounced over the rubble and ducked behind Tau, grasping his robes to keep from falling over.

“It’s the mummy all over again!” he gasped.

Tau remained where he stood. Taciturn, unmoving—not unusual. All Sentinels stood like trees caught in a winter snap. It was the unease he exuded that was worrying. He must have sensed a threat or he wouldn’t have come, and Oliver wasn’t going to take any chances by standing in the line of fire. Even if his friends didn’t seem perturbed by it.

“You,” said Benjamin to the snail, tapping his bearded chin. “The answer to your question.”

“Don’t Ben, it might curse you!” hissed Oliver, peering out from behind the Sentinel. And if he was still holding onto the back of Tau’s robes, well that was nobody’s business. Because he was being discreet about it.

“Who wishes to return from whence they came, lest they lose what little dignity remains?”

One of the snail’s stalked eyes wobbled in Tau’s direction, as though accusing him of such an affront. Maji reached high to collect the snail out of Tau’s loose grasp, taking extra care not to touch him, and lowered it to the ground.

“Let’s see what it’ll do,” she said.

“Better yet, let’s bag and tag this thing,” said Lucetta, who was far less patient. She grabbed a burlap sack from the hutch and held it open. “A pet-sized snail should fetch us a decent

wage. I've never heard of one before, anyway. Come on, stick it in."

The snail squeaked, tinny voice dull against the walls of the drift as it tried to flee. Even at its fastest, it was painfully slow. Oliver wanted to feel bad for it, but he really needed money.

"Who ought not to be removed from their place of banishment, lest unimaginable dangers befall those you care for?"

Benjamin plucked the snail off the ground with a wet pop, its slimy body flopping when he turned it over. "Is everything out of your munch flap going to be a question about yourself?"

"So we found a self-absorbed snail in a child's skull. Doubt that'll increase the value." Lucetta poked at one of its eyes, causing it to retract and yelp in anger. It glared at her with the other. "But we can hope."

"Who dares—"

"Alright." Benjamin tossed it into the bag.

Lucetta closed it over the snail's protests and attached a tag with their names on it. Tau stepped forward to leave, and Oliver barely remembered to release his beautiful robe. He must have decided there wouldn't be any danger, after all.

Weird.

Things were either a threat or they weren't. Tau had never hesitated like this before.

“I wonder what it meant by banishment?” Maji mused while they tidied away their tools into the hutch and made their way out.

“Maybe it ate an infant to use its skull,” said Lucetta, slinging the bag over her shoulder.

Maji made a face, and Oliver chortled. He stopped at Benjamin’s raised eyebrows and looked away, shamefaced. He supposed if that truly was the case, it wasn’t funny.

Together, they strode to the collection area near the end of the main passageway. A group of miners had gathered there—Lauer’s group. Of course, it had to be. Their obnoxious boasting bounced through the hollow, and Oliver groaned.

“We got a demon with stibnite for skin,” said one of them upon their approach. “Did a number on us. Turns out it’s toxic.”

“It’ll be worth plenty! Reckon we can skip working for at least a month,” said Lauer, his grin invoking a need in Oliver to hit him. “Bet you wish you hadn’t kicked me out of your group now, hm?”

Benjamin sighed, exasperated. “It’s been five years, man. Let it go.”

When Oliver caught sight of several parcels inside the nearest hutch, he pursed his lips in annoyance. It had to be the demon’s severed remains, neatly packed in wax paper. Lucetta deposited their comparatively small bag on top, double-

checking that the tag was secure, and walked off, acknowledging no one.

“What did you lot find?” asked another, twirling their hard-boiled hat on a finger.

“A snail with the gift of foresight,” said Oliver immediately, grinning when the hat flung off and dropped.

Lauper made a derisive noise. “Not a chance, that doesn’t exist.”

“Now it does.” Oliver stopped short of giving them all the finger.

“You lot aren’t good enough for firsts!” Lauper insisted.

This time, Oliver *did* give them the finger. Two, in fact, as he backed away. “Reckon *we* can skip work for the next four months.”

Benjamin and Lucetta both chuckled, but Maji side-eyed him while they trudged back to the cage lift.

“Barefaced lie,” she said.

“Never know,” said Oliver, waiting for them to pile in, “it might be true.”

“If it is, I guess that might be useful for people.” Once the gate squeaked shut, Maji slammed an open palm on the worn button to bring it up. “I hope it was wrong about dangers to come.”

“We’ll find out, or we won’t.” Lucetta shrugged dismissively.

It wasn't unusual for entities to make threats, none of them were ever eager to leave the mountain.

Tired, dirty, and starving from working all day, they made their way through the lodgings passageway. Even after everything that had happened, it was still customary for them to retire to Benjamin's hovel after a discovery. It was the more furnished one and, wages permitting, he had a stash of food and ale to match his size. Benjamin was a fine cook too, often ensuring they were well fed.

Lucky, since Oliver was no good at cooking.

Through a crowd of equally exhausted miners, Oliver and Benjamin led the way. They both had a way of clearing a path for Maji and Lucetta, especially since no one wanted to come within Oliver's vicinity.

He cast a glance upward. Magical suns dotting the passageway had dulled to pink and orange, now accompanied by the firefly lights drifting along the ceiling. A beautiful sign that it was time to rest. The clotheslines were still up, though, which meant Tau hadn't yet come through. These days, the Sentinel had very little tolerance for things being in his way and often knocked the lines down.

"A bit of grub first?" Benjamin held open the burgundy door to his hovel with a foot, allowing Oliver to bolt inside and inhale the aroma of a rich stew.

His stomach rumbled when he dropped down on the high-backed corner settee. It was so old and hopeless, Benjamin had

resorted to throwing blankets in earthy tones over it to hide its state.

Nearby was a raised stone hearth, sporting Theta's smokeless fire. A stool Benjamin liked to occupy stood in front of it, only a few feet away from where Maji and Lucetta sat on either side of Oliver.

As usual, Maji's gaze sought the flower on a table further away, in a tapered vase carved from quartz, its petals of a purple so deep it neared black. She had told Oliver it looked like a dahlia, although he didn't know what a dahlia was. The flower had been there for three years now without wilting. Maji often asked Benjamin about where it came from, but he never gave her a proper answer. Oliver knew why.

By the flower's table, pillows drowned out the dark red sheets of the bed with their vibrant colours and patterns. All lumpy and poorly stitched, too small to serve any purpose. Oliver knew they were awful, but Benjamin kept them all anyway, and that was nice.

"I'm working on another one for you," he said, keeping his hands clear when Benjamin set a bowl of stew in his lap. "Hopefully, this pillow will be bigger. Not sure what I'm doing wrong for them to always come out so small. I need to get more needles, though."

He also needed to find more of the same fabric.

"Oh, really?"

It did not escape Oliver's notice that Benjamin's voice was strained. He must have burned his finger on the cauldron.

Oliver eagerly grabbed the bowl handed to him. "It's the least I can do when—"

An audible *crack*. Pieces of the bowl scattered to the floor, and stew hot as magma pooled all over Oliver's lap. He hissed through his teeth, bounced his legs against the burn, the safer alternative to punching something.

"Swiving Sentinels!"

After all the injuries he'd suffered over the past five years, there was some consolation to be had that the 'breadstick' part hadn't been literal. Even if he was thin enough to be compared to one. Although by now, Oliver would have preferred to be a breadstick. Let someone consume him and end his misery.

Both Lucetta and Maji helped clean vegetable bits and meat off his thighs. Maji flicked a chunk of carrot off his knee, taking aim at the fire and missing entirely. It stuck to Benjamin's jeans instead. Luckily, he hadn't noticed, busy tossing a terry cloth to Oliver.

The door slammed open. It bounced off the wall and wobbled while Tau bent low to enter.

Oliver grinned. He really needed to teach him how to open doors properly.

"Hi Tau. I'm alright, only burnt myself a bit," he mumbled, collecting a piece of meat from between his thighs and popping it into his mouth. Maji's disgusted expression didn't

deter him from doing that again, this time with what he thought might be potato.

Tau moved further inside regardless, extending a clawed gauntlet over Oliver's lap. The glow of subdued sunshine encased him, eliciting a sigh of relief when it eased both the burn and the pain in his wrist.

"Thank you." Oliver caught Benjamin's gaze and jerked his head in Tau's direction.

Benjamin glowered. Oliver kept jerking his head.

"Since you're here," Benjamin grumbled, "would you care for some stew?"

They all knew Tau didn't eat and that Benjamin hated wasting food, but the Sentinel ducked further still to avoid catching his hood on a beam. Stiffly, he lowered himself, claws awkwardly settling atop the dark poleyns. Oliver regretted sitting between the two women when Maji scooted to make room since they weren't permitted to touch Sentinels. Although, Oliver rather enjoyed the warmth of Lucetta's muscular thigh and Maji's decidedly softer leg.

Benjamin handed Tau a bowl of stew without looking at him, then gave Oliver another.

Oliver mumbled his thanks. He hadn't eaten all day and tucked into his like a beast ravenous enough to eat its own tongue. The others were no better, while Tau only sat there, cradling the stoneware in his claw.

Adorable.

“What kind is this?” Maji asked around a mouthful and Oliver hid a smile.

“Butcher came down only yesterday, caught him just in time. It’s beef,” said Benjamin.

“Thank the Sentinels. Not sure I’ll be able to tolerate you serving us more gnome meat,” said Lucetta.

“As if I would, after your theatrics the last time.”

Except he *would*, and they all knew it.

Gnomes were all over the mine, considered a pest but easy to catch. They looked like fleshy rutabagas with pointed heads and spare sprigs for hair, bred in obscure places and liked to chew on clothes. A few weeks ago Benjamin had found what was a fresh-looking gnome, according to him. A youngling, in other words. It went down as a meat pie fairly well until he told them what it was.

“Not that it tasted all that bad,” said Oliver. He had already polished off his dinner.

Benjamin grunted in amusement. “Thank you. That’s all I want you to admit.”

“Can you let us know why you were worried about the snail, please?” asked Maji.

The Sentinel didn’t move, not even when Oliver carefully manoeuvred the bowl out of his claws to eat the stew for him. The last thing he wanted was to spill food all over Tau.

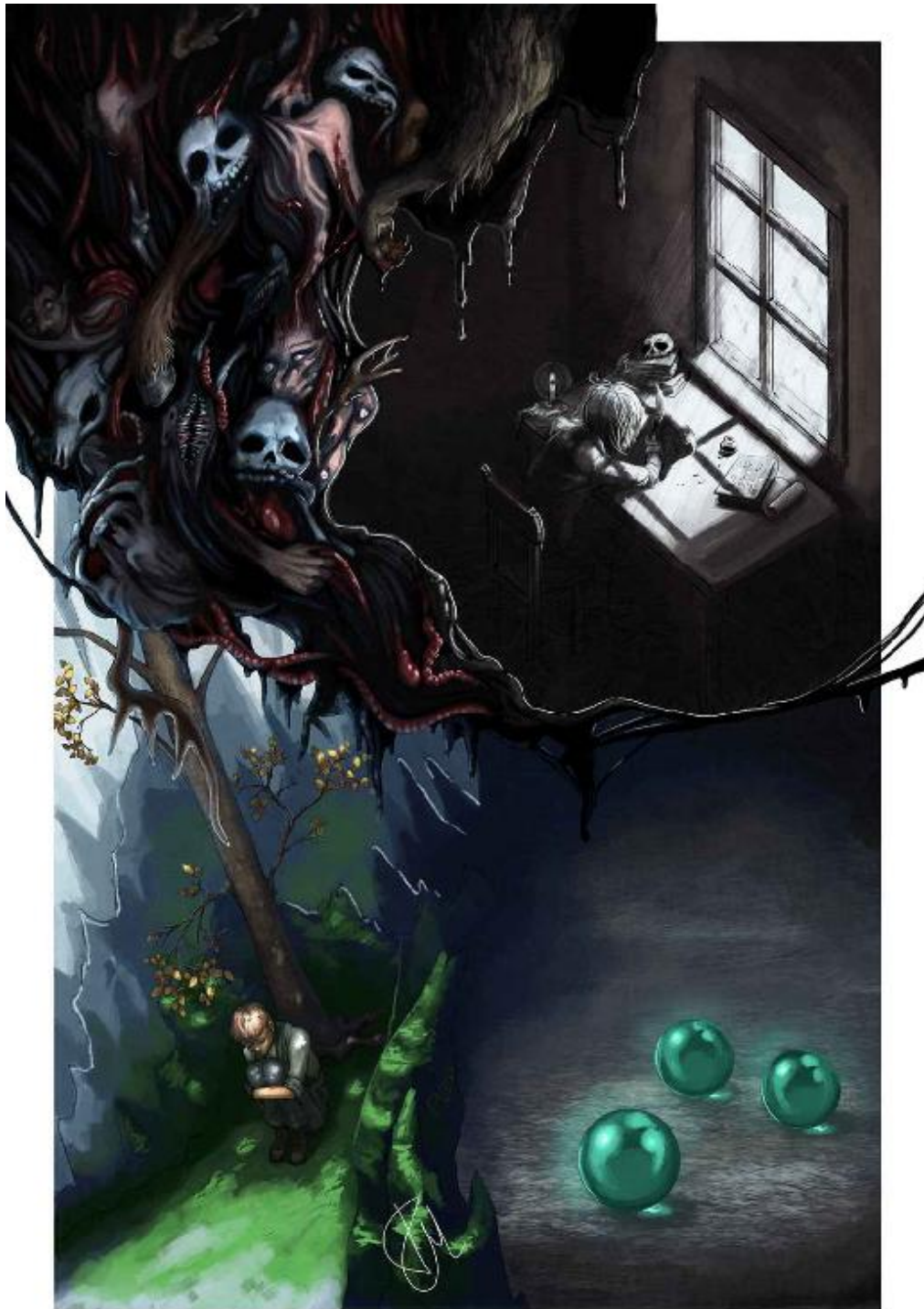
It was of no surprise when Tau didn't respond, but there were no sensations coursing in Oliver's chest either. The only way the Sentinel could communicate with them, on the rare occasion that he did. He might not have an answer, or maybe didn't want to give one.

"I'm sure it's fine," said Lucetta, then she snorted. "It was probably just warning us about mystery meat in Ben's stews."

"Hey!"

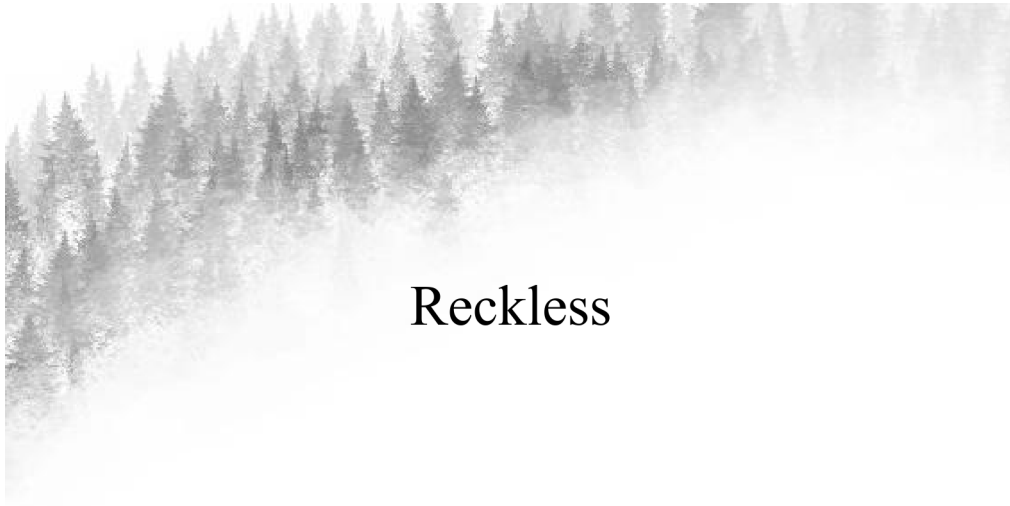
Oliver chortled, and Maji did a poor job of hiding her mirth.

It didn't matter. No one had come to harm, the snail was bagged and in a few days, they would be paid. A good thing, when he was down to his last two tools, still needed to reimburse Benjamin for food, and was about to ask for ale to help him through the night.





Three



Reckless

After too much ale the previous night, rising before the sun was a suffering Oliver preferred to do without. Unfortunately, it was his turn to pair up with Benjamin and, more unfortunate still, that beautiful bastard was an early bird kind of man. Oliver hated it, convinced he rose early just to torment him.

“There’s lots of things to do in the morning that’s not work, you know,” Oliver said, brushing loose rock away from an unusual blue vein in the schist. “You could sleep. I like the sound of that. If you have to be awake though, then you can eat. You could yank off... At least *you* can.”

“Be quiet and work,” said Benjamin behind him.

“See?” Oliver turned. Benjamin’s stained shirt was drenched in sweat, and a tight fit. Mountain-sturdy muscles rippled with every movement. Almost as mesmerising as the flow of Tau’s robes. “...That’s what I’m talking about. You’re as bad as Luce. We could have played cards instead.”

Even though he kept crushing them. While Tau kept piercing them with his claws. By now, Oliver owed Benjamin a new deck.

Benjamin stopped mid-swing, sighed, and turned. “We can play cards later—”

Startled amber eyes flicked up and stared past him.

Oliver whirled.

Then spluttered.

“That about sums it up,” said Benjamin, coming to stand beside him.

Oliver gawked at the double doors, manifested inside their working drift. Worn blue paint revealed ageing wood, and ornate handles looked solid despite rust tarnishing the iron. Cracks serrated its thick stone frame, in part curtained by ivy trailing around the elaborate lunette. The doors stood taller even than Benjamin, resonant with mystery, making Oliver vibrate with excitement.

“Almighty Sentinels, tell me, am I dreaming?” he asked, breathless.

“I hope not.” Benjamin seemed remarkably calm considering they were looking at their first portal.

“I’m so happy right now I want to kiss you.”

Benjamin cleared his throat. “Why don’t you fetch Lucetta and Maji? I’ll stay here and keep an eye on it.”

“What?” Oliver tore his gaze away from the door to glare.
“No way, you go!”

“You’re faster than I am.”

Panic cinched his chest. The last time Oliver had left someone alone, things turned out horribly for all of them.
“What about the rule of two?”

“Sentinel Tau isn’t here. I’ll be fine.”

“But Ben—”

“It’s fine, just go.”

Oliver shook his leg in frustration. He glared at Benjamin again. Scoffed and huffed, but the man didn’t budge, only stood there ignoring him.

With an infuriated groan, Oliver forced himself to leave.

There were two obvious places his friends might be, and he made for the nearest first.

The closer he drew to the underground hot springs, the more humid the air, turning his cotton shirt tacky. Oliver bolted around a bend and skated to a stop inside the cave, the stone slick under his boots. He doubled over with a whine, gasping for air, grateful to see Lucetta and Maji both there. Visible past the basin, Lucetta’s square shoulders were dulled by thin swirls of steam. Maji was seated on the stony edge beside her, dark hair cascading over her back, curtaining a stretch of exposed golden skin.

“Maji, Luce!” His voice echoed through the cave, successfully startling the hell out of all its occupants.

“Damn, we’re trying to relax here.” Lucetta turned to glare, arms slinging over the side.

“Oh, okay. Me and Ben will explore what we found on our own, then.”

That got their attention. Cascades of water plashed in their wake, the two nearly meeting their maker running down those slippery steps. Lucetta didn’t dry off, jamming herself straight into her clothes while Maji at least made an attempt with her hair. She squeezed the water out and slapped Oliver in the face with the ends as she darted past.

“Hats!” he yelled after them. That was a rule they couldn’t ignore.

Hard-boiled hats secured, the three of them hurried back. By the time he reached their working drift again, Oliver thought he might lose consciousness. He clutched at his stomach, panting, certain a ghost was stabbing him several times over in the sides—he caught sight of Tau standing by the blue doors.

Oliver immediately silenced his suffering.

“It just appeared. We didn’t dig for it,” Benjamin said to Tau.

“Isn’t it amazing?” Oliver wheezed. Once he’d gathered his composure, he strode past the others to open the doors.

“Hang on a minute.” Lucetta grabbed him by the sleeve. “There’s something off about this. We have to inform the guards first, and it might be better to get the Explorers.”

“And share the reward?” asked Oliver, aghast.

Explorers were specialised warriors and diplomats who took the risk of heading into the unknown. Useful when it came to portals that appeared dangerous from the get-go.

“No thanks. I’ll go in. I’m sure Tau wouldn’t mind coming along.”

“*Sentinel* Tau,” Benjamin groused.

Oliver ignored him.

“Don’t be silly, you know Sentinels won’t go into other worlds,” said Maji, unimpressed.

“Right. I forgot,” Oliver muttered. “Okay, look, we’ll only take a peek, alright? We won’t go in.”

Tau regarded him. Dread coursed through Oliver’s chest, warning him off. Tau didn’t want to let him go, but Oliver would be damned if he endured more suffering that had long since lost its meaning. At least with this discovery, he could say it had all been worth it.

He yanked the door open.

It was heavy, the groan low, revealing an old town with muddy streets, stone houses, and a well. Chickens clucked nearby as people hurried past the doorway, clad in frock coats and oversized dresses. None of them appeared to have noticed the doors. Stranger still, everything was in tones of sepia.

“See? Perfectly safe.” Oliver jerked open the other door for a better look.

An invisible force wrenched him forward that same moment. He yelped, pulled through just as someone's hand grabbed his own. His surroundings flitted past with dizzying speed, then came to an equally abrupt stop. A sudden onset of nausea dropped him to his hands and knees.

"I feel sick," Oliver moaned, pushing himself off the ground with a damp cough and wiping a sleeve over his mouth. Beside him, Lucetta was in a similar state. "You okay?"

A miserable groan. Lucetta rose and pinned him with a glare.

"What the hell Sticky, you idiot!"

Oliver took that to mean she was fine. He chose to look around instead of responding, knowing full well that he was, in fact, an idiot.

They were in the town he'd been looking at, but the mud didn't cling to his hands or boots. More people rushed past, none taking any notice of him.

Aside from Lucetta and himself, Oliver could only see in shades of black and brown. The sky was neither dark nor bright, the horizon inscrutable. Like being in a dream, where everything was vague yet vivid at the same time.

"Damn it, how do we get back?" snapped Lucetta.

The doorway was nowhere in sight when he looked behind him. Oliver pushed away the twinge of regret, focused instead on the rush of excitement swirling his belly.

“I’m going to wake up with a walloper for *months*.” He might finally afford new bed linen, too.

Lucetta made a face. “Sentinels smite me—”

A shrill wail pierced the otherwise still air, unlike anything Oliver heard before. The agony encumbering it sent a shiver down his spine. Coming from where a crowd gathered. He cast Lucetta a nervous look.

Wordlessly, they both moved forward. Reaching the outskirts of the crowd, another bone-chilling wail clawed at Oliver’s heart. He swallowed, all excitement evaporated as he manoeuvred past onlookers.

And froze.

Lucetta’s hand shot out to grab him by the arm, squeezing hard.

In the centre of the onlookers, a child knelt in the mud, shoulders shaking with shrieks and sobs. One hand covered his mouth, the other held in the firm grasp of an older man. In his free hand, the man held a knife, blade glistening with brown fluid.

Blood.

“Perhaps now you’ll cease your lying, boy!” the man hissed between clenched teeth. “Consider yourself fortunate I took nothing else!”

He pushed the little hand away in disgust, then smoothed out the front of his dark attire and slipped the bloodied blade into a thick belt. Oliver couldn’t look away, even when the man

ushered the crowd to disperse. He realised, slowly and in utter horror, that the boy's tongue had been cut out. Blood poured from his mouth, between little fingers, the muscle lying by a mud-soaked knee. Not knowing what to do but longing to help, Oliver moved toward the boy.

Nails dug into his biceps. When he turned to look, Lucetta shook her head, horror contorting her face.

“We don't know what will happen if we interact.” The words were whispered, her voice aquiver.

The world lurched, his surroundings blurred past him. Oliver staggered where he stood on moving ground, held up by Lucetta's firm grip on his arm. The muddy village and boy melted into a simple bedroom.

Seated at a cluttered desk was the same boy, the rickety window nearby doing little to keep the wind out, whistling noisily with every gust. He had to be a few years older, his legs were longer, but he had the same uncared-for look. His dark hair greasy, clothes wrinkled and stained.

Swathes of molten wax had fused to the old wood of the desk, drooping off its sides. An abundance of quills, bottles of ink, parchments and childishly drawn maps were stacked atop books, a skull with too many teeth resting on top of it all. Jars littered the floor, several filled with feathers and insects, others with soil and mushrooms and rocks.

The boy scribbled on a piece of parchment, spilling ink with every hastened dip of his quill, as if racing against time. Writing as much as he could before—

Footsteps thumped outside the bedroom. The door slammed open, bouncing off the wall with such force the jars on the floor rattled. That same terrible man barged in, his breathing loud, wheezing. He too had aged. Despite his looming presence, the boy ignored him. Scratches of a quill against parchment the only sound, everything else deafeningly quiet.

Then the man flung himself forward, grabbed the boy's wrist and wrenched it away. He pulled him out of the chair and twisted his arm around. The boy cried out, yet looked up in astonishing defiance.

“Removing your tongue wasn't enough? Now you're writing about it?”

A fist to the jaw sent the child sprawling to the floor.

Oliver snarled in anger, Lucetta's swear falling flat around them. She swung for the man's face.

Her fist passed through as though he were a spectre. She stumbled forward with a grunt, neither the boy or the man having taken any notice. Oliver freed the hatchet from his belt and slashed at him, but it too went through the man's head. Hacking at a cloud of dust would have had more impact.

There was no stopping him from beating the child. Nothing they could do but watch when the boy was incapacitated and dragged outside the room by his scruff.

“Let's see if you'll obey after I take your fingers!”

Their surroundings lurched and shifted again. Oliver and Lucetta appeared in another place, and by the looks of it,

another time. Sick to his stomach, Oliver's gaze fell upon the boy again. Or rather, the young man.

He might have been in his late teens now, perched on a chair by an old kitchen stove and doubled over, head dipped low. Limp hair obscured his face, laboured breathing marking each passing moment while he rubbed at his shins. Oliver sucked in a startled breath.

Instead of taking only five, all ten fingers were gone, cut off to the knuckle.

By now, Oliver was too scared to say or do anything. A fire's crackling filled the kitchen, undefined light pouring in through dusty windows. It was peaceful, for now, but he'd seen enough. He wanted to leave, if only he were able, if only the doors would reappear.

The young man sat up with a pained grunt. A gash marred his left cheek, right eye hidden by swelling. Blood matted his hair, his movements strained.

A pressure against Oliver's side made him jump. Lucetta's elbow left him as she jerked her head at a table to their left, cluttered with an array of parchments and books. There lay drawings of portals, not unlike what he and Lucetta had come through, of strange flowers, canaries, and uniquely shaped rocks he'd never seen before.

Had this young man found other realms and mystical objects, just like a miner? Was *this* the reason he was being punished, for telling people about it? Oliver looked up to see Lucetta reflecting his confusion.

Something clattered to the floor. The young man stumbled to his feet, his head turned towards a doorway in the back, framing the shadow of a broad-shouldered man. They stared at each other, the air so tense, Oliver was afraid to breathe.

The intruder lunged. Whipped a long piece of rope around the young man's neck. They fell to the floor with bone-crunching impact. Gasping for air, the young man reached for something, *anything* that might help him. The rope tightened. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, high-pitched rasps increasingly strained.

"I can't take this," Oliver croaked.

Lucetta pulled him close by the shoulders. He resisted burying his face into the crook of her neck.

"COME ALONG."

A terrible, ghastly voice. It hadn't come from the assailant or the young man. The voice had come from nowhere, yet everywhere at once. It sounded masculine, feminine, angry and happy and everything in between. Like a discordant chorus of a hundred people speaking, deafening and intense, causing Oliver's ears to ring.

"COME. WILL ALLEVIATE ALL."

His heart hammered so wildly it hurt. Lucetta was in no better shape, her hold vising, fingers digging into the skin of his back. The young man's eyes had flown open at the voices and, desperately, he grunted an agreement. He was staring at something, nothing Oliver could see.

Without warning, the intruder flew off and knocked into the wall opposite. Shelves rattled and dust kicked up. The intruder raised his hands to his throat, gasped for air, attempted to wrestle away something clutching at him. His body remained afloat, pinned to the wall by an unseen force. The skin of his neck stretched, ripping to reveal flesh and tendons, audibly snapping. Blood sprayed in wide arcs, painting the walls and floor when his head separated from his body.

Oliver turned away and closed his eyes. He didn't want to see this. He could barely tune out the wicked laughter scraping the room or the horrified screaming that turned into frantic gurgling.

Only when he was pulled backwards did he open his eyes again, in time to see the monochrome world disappear, replaced by the visage of Tau looming over him. The Sentinel's long body drifted past his line of sight. Oliver remained where he'd fallen on his back, on a ground he couldn't see. Absolute darkness drowned him, there weren't even any shadows. The only light came from Tau's perpetual glow, and it illuminated nothing.

The Sentinel extended his arms, vivid orbs springing up from his palms.

Instantly, Oliver wished for no light at all, when Tau stood facing one of the largest demons he'd ever seen.

A behemoth of mangled flesh, matted fur, and thousands of bodies fused to make one being, an amalgamation of dead humans, animals, and creatures alike. Fungi grew from various

parts of damp, loosely hanging flesh, trailing off into black tar-like fluid, dripping ceaselessly. The putrid stench of death clawed Oliver's throat as the behemoth looked down with its countless rotten skulls and leaking eyes that shaped its head, utterly dwarfing Tau.

“Unfamiliar. Explain?”

Another unknown voice. Its dulcet tone mellifluous and soothing, promising eternal safety. Calm, despite the monstrosity before them. Oliver forced himself to sit upright, certain that it had to have come from Tau. He realised only then that Lucetta sat beside him and extended his hand for her to take. While her eyes remained on the monster before them, she squeezed it.

“NOT YOUR CONCERN YET,” said the behemoth and Oliver now understood that the terrible cacophony of voices belonged to it.

Tau's spheres abruptly expanded, then erupted. Celestial light shredded the dark, enveloping them in such vividness, Oliver had to shield his eyes or risk being blinded. A familiar warmth spread over him then, draining away every bit of awfulness they witnessed. He and Lucetta could relax, they could breathe again.

They were back in the mine and they were safe.

The light had become evanescent, both the double doors and terrifying behemoth now gone. Everything in that world had disappeared like it never existed in the first place. Oliver's mind spun and his eyes burned, the lingering fear foetid,

trapped in his nostrils. He barely registered Maji and Benjamin running up to him.

“What happened?” Maji hoisted Lucetta to her feet. “You just disappeared, and the door shut behind you.”

“We couldn’t get it to open again,” said Benjamin, helping Oliver up and clapping him on the back. “Sentinel Tau had to bash into it.”

Now that he was on his feet, Oliver looked to where the portal had disappeared. Tau stood there now, unmoving, surrounded by nothing but rock. Watching him. Lucetta was rigid in Maji’s embrace, eyes wide and haunted. Oliver searched for his hatchet, but it was nowhere in sight. Frustration swept up like a storm, raging until it burst from him in a series of shouted swears that echoed around their drift. Just another damn tool he had to replace.

He needed space. He needed air.

Oliver walked away. Maji called out after him but he ignored her. Benjamin’s heavy footfalls followed, and Oliver sped up. He weaved past miners, went up in cage lifts. Through a modest market, he stalked in silence until reaching a narrow path leading to the Bank, a cave popular with lovers.

It was the closest place to being outside without making the trip to the surface. The ceiling of the cave reached far, revealing grey skies through a wide opening. The gap was too high to climb without the use of equipment, the ropes of which still hung from the sides, overgrown by trailing leaves and rendered inaccessible by ghostly bats.

Unsurprisingly, the cave wasn't empty, but Oliver was too drained to care and proceeded further in. He ignored the curious glances from those who were otherwise engaged and looked up.

For years now the mountain's walls had encroached on him, squeezing him for every drop of joy. He gazed past the sparse brown leaves and snoozing spectral bats at the sky, clouds like shale, realising he'd not been outside in months.

Behind a rock formation near a tall and narrow tree, he hid from prying eyes, sliding to the cool, damp stone of the cave floor. His boots pushed at thin layers of grass and moss speckled with late signs of autumn. The breaths he took were shaky, the stress of what he'd witnessed pouring out of him at last. Shaking his shoulders, his breath.

Not until the last tear dripped from his chin did a presence make itself known to him. A soft glow swept the moss, dewdrops glinting like precious stones.

Oliver couldn't yet move from where he had his legs drawn up to his chest, but was grateful for the silent company. A metal claw brushed across his back, cooling through the fabric of his shirt, filling him with the warmth and comfort that was so uniquely Tau. Oliver inhaled nervously at the touch, eyes fluttering when he turned to look.

The Sentinel was bent low, peering at him with what he knew to be concern.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, voice thick. "I'm so stupid. You tried to warn me off, and I didn't listen."

“Hey, buddy,” said Lucetta, coming up behind Tau, who jerked his claw away. Her touch was gentle when she removed his hard-boiled hat and combed her fingers through his hair.

“Sorry,” Oliver mumbled, shamefaced. “You were there too.”

And it was his fault, much like he’d mucked up their chances of an early retirement. He was such an idiot.

“It’s alright,” Lucetta said, her smile comforting. He didn’t know how she always stayed so calm.

Maji and Benjamin approached shortly after. The three of them swooped down and smothered Oliver in embraces he couldn’t return. Tau had since straightened up and moved to stand nearby as if keeping guard.

They were attracting attention, curious miners coming to investigate prompting Tau to raise his claw. From the palm, several marble-sized orbs rolled into existence, green and lambent. He pelted them across the cave. They clattered to the floor, trundled towards the egress. Tau faced the onlookers then, as if expecting them to give chase.

“We’re not cats, Sentinel Tau,” said one of them—Helen. All the same, she unfurled from where she’d been sitting with her partner on a mossy stretch of stone and pulled her along. “But we get the hint, we’re going.”

Those who left pocketed the marbles on their way out. Although Oliver couldn’t see much of the cave past where he hid, he thought it was now empty aside from him and his

friends. He crossed his legs and went slack against Benjamin, who held him firm against his side. Oliver drew comfort from Maji while she stroked his knee and Lucetta, who ran her fingers through his hair.

It wasn't easy, but he told them about what occurred, stopping only to let Lucetta explain the things he couldn't.

"I'm so useless," he said, shame burning his throat. "What's the point of being able to go into other worlds, of knowing how to fight, of having this stupid strength, if I can't help anyone? I don't even know that poor kid's name."

"Jacob," said Lucetta. "His name was Jacob Burton, I think. Saw it in some of the drawings."

He would have to remember that name. It was the least he could do. Oliver glanced at Tau, wondering what he made of it all, especially the behemoth. Its horrors were unlike anything they had ever seen before—

"Hang on!" Oliver exclaimed, catching the Sentinel's attention. "You talked! I heard you. That was you, wasn't it?"

"He did what now?" Maji sounded offended.

"You heard him, didn't you, Luce?"

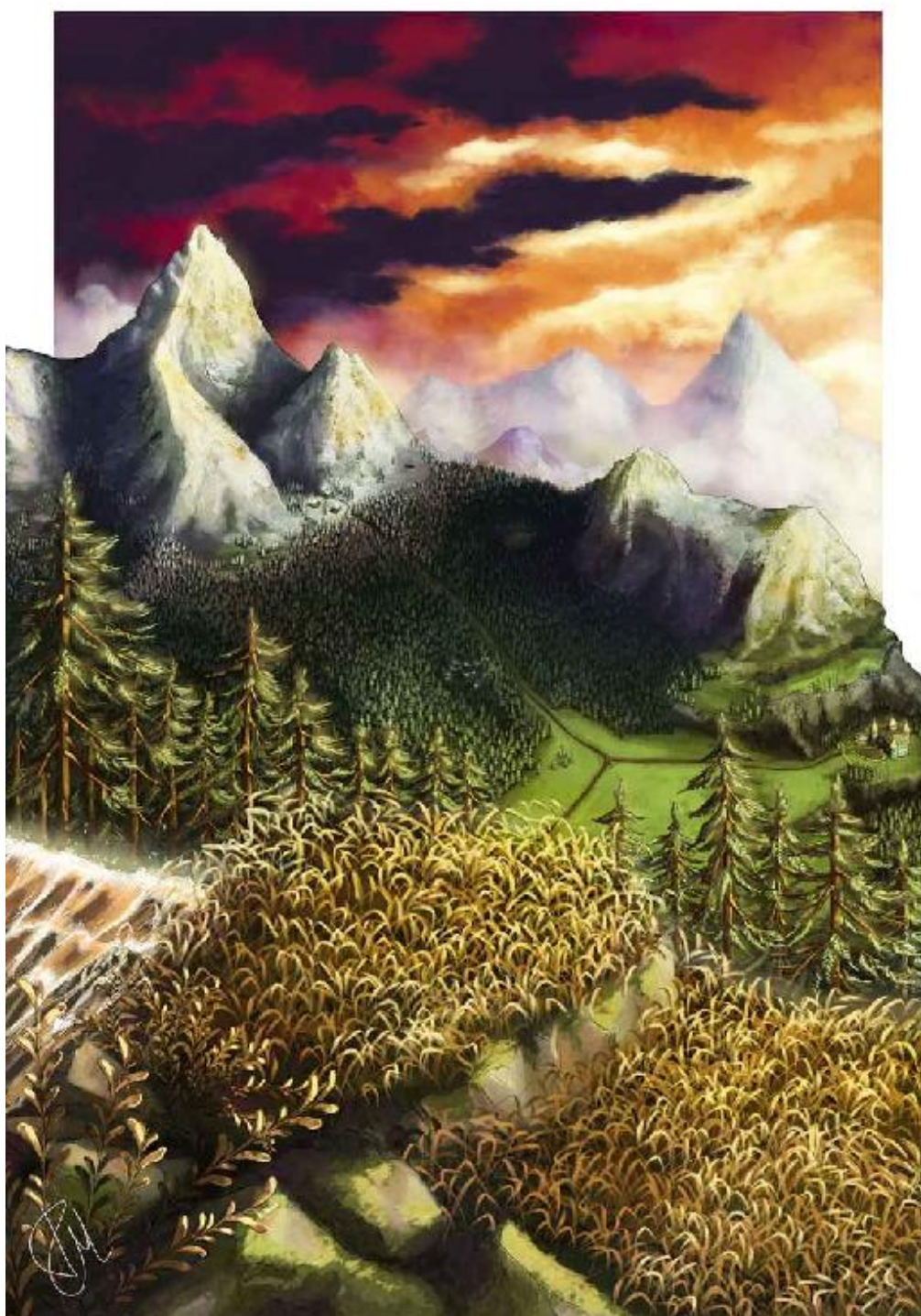
Lucetta's look was mildly annoyed and she pursed her full lips. "I did."

If Tau could form expressions, Oliver was convinced he would look sheepish. He could have been speaking with them all this time, but chose not to. Although there was no telling what was going on with his face or in his mind. Especially not

when Tau morphed into a vivid globe and quickly floated away.

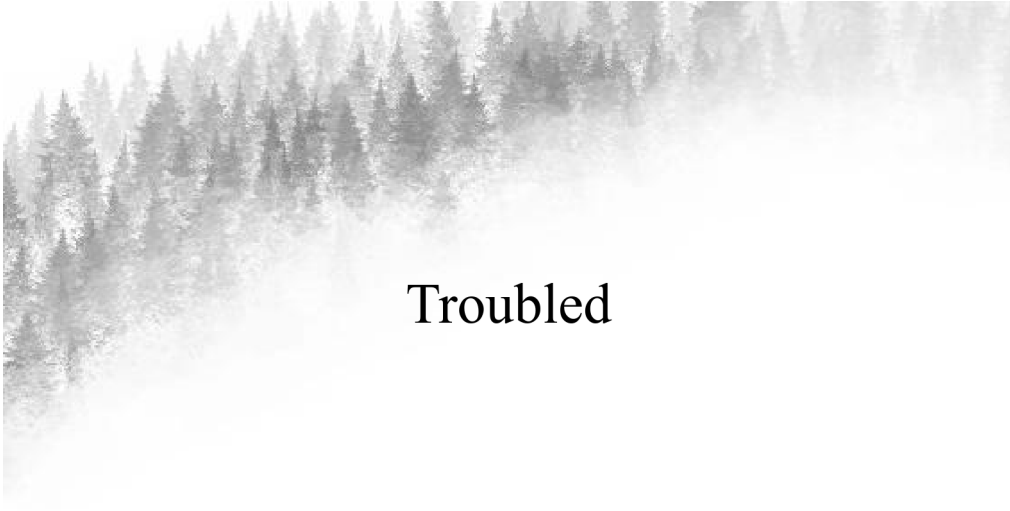
“Can’t believe that,” said Benjamin, amused. He clapped both hands across his thighs and stood. “How about some tea and toast?”

“I could go for that,” said Oliver.





Four



Troubled

Some stale bread, the last bit of strawberry conserve. Oliver tipped the jar, watched it drip onto the slice and grimaced. The nightmares still festered inside his skull, the red glop of conserve roiling his stomach. He stuffed it into his mouth anyway, ignoring the ache in his throat as he forced the bread down.

Getting into his jumper was always a risk, but it was a lovely dark red, oversized, and his favourite. Wearing it comforted him during sleepless nights. He slipped into his hobnail boots and left the hovel. The passageways were dead, and the guards asleep. The spheres throughout were a misty silver, surrounding stone ghostly in their glow.

The rattling of the cage lift was jarring in the silence of the mine. Oliver leaned back, his body trembling along.

He closed his eyes and saw a child kneeling in the mud, clutching at his mouth, rivulets of blood pouring. Oliver had seen awful things before. Mostly his own injuries and before that, young miners dying of black lung, or accidents, but

nothing as deliberate and cruel as what he'd witnessed in the portal.

With a shake of his head, the lingering memories subsided.

Knowing Maji would be asleep, Oliver invited himself into her hovel without knocking. A blanket covered the enchanted moon, and the hearth's fire was no more than a sliver of deep purple.

Oliver's heart stuttered, his feet rooting to the rugs.

In the shadows, corpses flailed weakly, sluicing rot. Dead eyes stared at him, sunken deep within twitching heads, sending an icy shudder down his spine.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

When he opened them again, the amalgamated carrion was gone. Oliver stepped forward. His foot connected with something hard, the sound of a pot breaking shortly following.

"Did you just hurt one of my plants?" A sleepy mumble in the dark.

"Sorry, Maji," Oliver said in a pointless whisper. "They're everywhere."

A tired moan, rustling, and bare feet padding across stone. The blanket whipped off the floating moon, lining Maji's silhouette with a pallid glow. Her hair was a mess. She'd taken it out of its usual braid and there was a lot of it. Not being able to see her face filled Oliver with an odd fear.

"You hurt yourself?"

Oliver started. “Oh, no. I—Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

He had only wanted to lurk, to listen to her breathing. Oliver glanced down. The plant he’d kicked lay on the ground, yellow flowers staring up at him accusingly.

“Guess I owe you a new pot.”

“At least you didn’t kick it across the hovel. You okay?”

She approached and peered up at him, knowingly. He shivered and blamed it on wearing only his long-johns under the jumper.

“I’m fine. I just...” Oliver gestured at nothing, feeling daft. He couldn’t very well admit he was scared of a few nightmares.

“Do you want to stay for a bit?”

“Oh sure, if you want me to.”

He beelined for the chair near the hearth. More flowers occupied it, which he gingerly moved to the floor. With a prod of his finger against an eternally burning log, the fire sprang back to life, bright orange flames fluttering.

“Come under the blankets.” Maji rubbed her eyes, rolling back into her bed.

He hesitated. “It’s okay. I’d...” Rather not maim her. “This is fine.”

The chair wasn’t the most comfortable, but the fabric wasn’t bad. Soft with a shell pattern, in a deep red. Lucetta said it was

like garnet, Maji had said it was like cockscomb, then immediately scolded Oliver for laughing at the name.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

He started again and grunted. He’d never been this jumpy before. “I already did.”

Nearly a week since he’d gone through the portal. Wasn’t it time he forgot about it?

“But you’re still having trouble.”

She was right. Oliver hadn’t seen much of Tau since the Bank either. He had a way of comforting him like no one else could. Maybe he should have sought Tau out instead of bothering Maji. Tau, as far as he knew, didn’t sleep. But then, maybe he’d upset him by confronting Tau about his ability to speak.

“Part of me hopes we’ll find the portal again,” Oliver admitted after a while. “Just so... I don’t know. I just want to help that kid.”

“You said you tried, but they were like ghosts,” Maji mumbled. She shimmied under the blankets. Oliver ached to join her. “There wasn’t anything you could do.”

Maybe not, but he couldn’t help thinking he should have tried harder. Oliver refrained from rubbing his face. He leaned back instead, staring up at the cragged ceiling. Teeth-like shadows flickered across it. “It makes no sense, but—”

Light snoring told him Maji had fallen asleep and Oliver pursed his lips.

It made little sense, but he thought he'd been seeing memories. Impossible, of course. Portals to memories were unheard of, even more so than snails with the gift of foresight. Some things just didn't exist.



He awoke with a start to a hovel brightly lit, and vacant—abundance of plants aside. The one he'd kicked had been moved somewhere, the shards of the broken pot gone, the spilt soil swept up.

Oliver checked himself over, surprised to find no injuries. He left into a calm passageway, unsure of where he wanted to go. It was supposed to be his day off and he hadn't taken a break in a while. Maji and Lucetta would be mining, Tau would be busy. Benjamin was probably free, maybe he could bother him for a game of cards.

“Good morning.”

Oliver jumped. “I was just thinking about you—”

And faltered.

Benjamin's brown slacks and short-sleeved undershirt did little to hide his sculpted bulk. A terry cloth was draped over his shoulder, and his hair tousled. In the bright glow of mid-morning light, a rosy hue graced his cheeks. There was a *very* specific relaxed air about him that Oliver picked up faster than a dry-cured sausage.

“You were?” asked Benjamin, eyebrows raised. “I’m going for a bath. Care to join me?”

That would be a terrible idea. He’d woken up horny and the last thing Oliver wanted was to put Benjamin off with his broom handle. He was glad for the jumper being as big as it was.

“No, thanks.”

“Come with me.” Benjamin wrapped a hefty arm around his shoulders and pulled him along. “You could do with a wash.”

So it had been a while. Bathing was such a *bother*.

“I don’t have a terry cloth,” Oliver muttered, forced to shuffle along.

“You can use mine.”

“What about soap? No point in bathing if I don’t have soap.”

“In my pocket.”

“Ben, I don’t feel like hurting myself.”

“I’ll help you.”

That was it, he’d run out of excuses.

Before Oliver knew it, they were in the hot springs with Benjamin easing him out of the jumper and long-johns. Clothes left in a pile on the ground, Oliver sidled up slick stone steps to the basin, naked as a gnome, his shoulders hunched. Thin veils of steam coiled across the water’s surface, doing little to shield him from prying gazes. Or Benjamin’s contoured backside, disappearing into green-tinged water.

Oliver avoided making eye contact with anyone, slipping in with a grimace. The water was too hot for his liking, coming up to his chest. He bounced on his toes to the back by the cascade, where Benjamin waited with an encouraging smile. All sinew and good looks and relaxation, holding up the bar of soap like it was a weapon. Oliver met him with a pained look, pivoted to turn his back to him.

Wordlessly, firm fingers worked soap into his hair.

And damn, it felt good.

“You should ask Maji to cut your hair again,” Benjamin murmured, far closer to his ear than Oliver was comfortable with at that moment. “Mind, I like those blond waves the way they are.”

“Sandy. Not blond.” Oliver curled his shoulders over his chest. He tried to focus on the splash of the cascade, the persistent *drip-plop-drip* of stalactites.

Benjamin chuckled. A deep, kind rumble. Those firm fingers moved to his nape, even washed him behind the ears, thumbs pushing and rubbing at the tightness in his neck. Forcing Oliver to tense his jaw, locking any inappropriate sounds away. He could blame the heat for his flushed cheeks, but his rising gravy-maker would be difficult to explain.

Hands journeyed to his shoulders, upper back... Lower back. Oliver closed his eyes in dismay.

Gnomes. Naked and wobbly. Looking like a pile of folded skin while breeding. Little gnome babies resembling peeled

turnips—those hands moved around to his sides, the bar of soap sliding across his ribs under the water with ease. Its floral scent curled up with the steam, pleasant, tickling his nostrils. Benjamin was so close, if he were to lean back, their sweat-slick skin would stick together.

Oliver induced memories of that infernal entity with no discernable face, only a stretch of skin. A set of legs for arms, and a centipede-like body with skeletal arms for legs. It whispered his name in a most innocent voice. Child-like. *Spine-chilling*. How had it even known his name?

Benjamin now stood in front of him. Flawless tan skin glistened, fine droplets collecting on dark abdominal hairs. Those firm hands moved across his stomach, and Oliver turned his head away.

An awful, one-eyed imp. No teeth until it cracked its mouth wide open, taking a huge bite out of his leg. Tearing away skin and muscle. He had to chase it down to get that piece back, thinking Tau needed it to recover his leg.

Tau.

Tall and unwavering. Godly. *Beautiful*. Ebbing away his worries when near. Great gauntlets holding his hand, touching his shoulder. Stroking his back.

Oliver squirmed away from Benjamin. This wasn't working.

“You alright?”

“Yeah, thanks. I got this,” he choked out.

“Oh, you’ve heard?” Maji’s voice floated towards him before Oliver spotted her paddling towards him.

“Heard what?” he asked.

“We got a telegram from Pavlov,” said Lucetta, making her way over. “Figured that’s why you might finally be bathing, polecat.”

Rude. He didn’t smell *that* bad yet. ...Did he?

Oliver ducked under the cascade to rinse his hair.

“Finally.” Benjamin leaned against the rocky side of the basin, lifting muscled arms to rest his elbows atop it. “Not like we need money or anything.”

“It’s been longer than usual. Maybe that just means it’s especially rare,” said Maji. “Just think, we might be able to retire and I can finally tell my mom it was all worth it!”

“We’ll see,” said Lucetta.

“Is that why *you’re* bathing instead of working?” grumbled Oliver.

Lucetta scoffed. “We had no luck this morning—”

“*Night*. You woke me up before sunrise. I consider that night-time,” Maji grouched.

“Anyway,” Lucetta smirked, “we only found quartz, so let’s hope that the snail sold well. Pavlov actually invited us to meet.”

“No hockie?” Oliver shook himself off like a dog.

“Stop, you’ll throw your neck out,” Lucetta chided.

He did as told, resisting the urge to duck into the water and move away.



In a drift beyond the lower lodgings, a line of hutches awaited haulage. Lucetta clambered into one at the front with Maji settling between her legs. Maji's broad smile dimpled her cheeks, her tiny frame practically vibrating with excitement. Carefully, Oliver slid into Benjamin's lap. The man was big enough to take up the entire hutch, and there was little choice but to sit on him one way or another.

"I know you always cook for me and you're impossibly handsome, but you're still not my type," said Oliver, hoping to dispel the awkwardness of sitting arse to groin. Although he ought to be grateful Benjamin was willing to risk becoming a casualty. He could have told him to walk.

"Yeah, we all know your type." Benjamin's voice was a low grumble in the back of his throat. "Twice the height of you and magical."

Heat pooled Oliver's face. Maji's laughter bounced over the clicking of the hutches, while Lucetta didn't turn, but he could tell she was smirking.

"Don't you start teasing me about that too!"

"I'm not," said Benjamin. "I'm telling you it's inappropriate."

Oliver huddled, glad he wasn't facing him. "If we end up filthy rich after this, let's promise to meet up and mine together at least once a month, alright?"

"You bet," said Lucetta, then snorted. "I wouldn't know what to do with retirement, anyway."

"Wouldn't mind getting away from this mountain," said Benjamin. "Buy a cottage somewhere."

Words that cut Oliver like a hatchet across the stomach. His friends had ambitions outside of mining, he knew that, and they wouldn't spend the rest of their lives here if given a choice. He would be daft to think they would stay just for him.

All the same, he muttered, "But I can't go anywhere."

"Speaking of, has anyone seen Tau?" asked Maji.

"*Sentinel* Tau." Benjamin sounded exasperated. "Glimpsed him on my way to the hot springs earlier."

"I never thanked him for dragging us out of that realm," said Lucetta.

"Oh, yeah." Maji's look darkened. "I'm glad he did."

Oliver shrank further against Benjamin. He didn't have the courage to ask Lucetta how she fared. She was tough, good at stamping down her feelings until they were nothing more than dust under her boots. He envied the tenacity, but he'd seen her face after Tau pulled them out, the terror and disbelief of what they'd witnessed frozen on her features.

His gaze flicked to the lodgings lining either side. Bricked and panelled walls, less clutter, spacious hovels. The closer to the surface they got, the more luxurious everything became. If they were luckier with their finds, they could have moved up here.

“Are we going to tell Pavlov about the doors?” he asked.

Lucetta glanced over her shoulder, although Oliver couldn't meet her eyes. “What would we tell him? No one has seen anything, I doubt Pavlov knows. Better to keep it to ourselves.”

What they saw was better left alone, in other words. Oliver wondered if she was right.

After being cramped for nearly an hour, he was more than ready to stretch his legs. The hutches jerked to a stop inside a log building sheltering the adit from the punishing mountain elements. Maji sprang out like a frog and bolted for the exit. Oliver took greater care, scouring the sign right by the doorway. Rustier than he remembered. Big bold lines still meaningless.

Crisp air welcomed him outside, laced with frost from a night of heavy snowfall crunching under his hobnail boots. The beginnings of a bright sun peered from between the jagged tips of pines, glinting sharply against the snowy peak of the mountain. Birdsongs echoed over the expanse of snow, accompanied by the distant grunts and swinging of tools from a handful of miners in training. Fine mist trailed across the

ground to veil the foot of a modest chapel, clinic, and training centre gathered around the adit.

Oliver inhaled, deeply, and held it. The iciness cleared the dust from his lungs, even some of the cobwebs from his head. He huffed when Lucetta brushed past him. Deliberate in the way she'd knocked the air out of him with her shoulder, if her teasing smirk was anything to go by. Still, Oliver couldn't quite meet her gaze, his attention pulled towards two automobiles on the road nearby. Green and flashy, being loaded up by curators who gathered anything brought up with the hutches.

"If you wait, we'll give you a ride," said one of them, a stout fellow broad of chest.

His wool coat flapped behind him as he carried a quivering wooden crate in his arms. Something inside it banged around, a deep voice demanding to be released. Oliver would have loved a ride, unfortunately, his friends shook their heads.

"We'll walk, thanks," said Lucetta.

"Suit yourselves."

Oliver looked back with longing before his foot caught on a stone. Nearly falling flat on his face reminded him to move with caution.

"Wonder if Pavlov got the gastropod to talk," Benjamin mused with a hand on Oliver's arm to steady him.

"Couldn't say," said Lucetta. "It's interesting, in any case. Seen nothing like it before."

“We’re not lucky enough for firsts, are we?” said Oliver, then frowned. That was too close to Lauper’s claim. And yet, they’d stumbled upon the blue double doors.

Maji’s breath misted in trails after her, feet quick to keep up. “What if you’re right and it has the gift of foresight?”

“More in line with Sentinel abilities,” said Lucetta.

“Hah, a Sentinel Snail.” Oliver grinned.

Lucetta’s lips twitched. “Don’t get a crush on it, now.”

“Oh, shut up.”

She clapped him on the back, doing little to ease the rigidity setting in him like mud. One misstep, one accidental brush along his face, or against someone... Oliver’s heart thudded with sudden fright, reminded of *why* he never left the mine.

The umbrageous forest was vast on either side, ancient pines creaking in the morning breeze. Rolling fog liked to linger here, adding to the eerie feel that forever clung to the area. It was quiet, the occasional crack in the woods making Oliver’s hair stand on end.

Once they emerged from the trees, the sun embraced them in full. An expanse of brush and grass blanketed by thin layers of snow lay on either side, and their path split in two with a sign standing between the prongs of the road. Oliver knew one pointed to “Plainwall” in simple text, while the other sign read “Pavlov Estate” in lettering so elaborate that even if he could read, he wouldn’t be able to make sense of it. He only knew what it said since Maji once mentioned it.

Pavlov Estate hid behind a tree-laden cliff. The mansion was massive and old. Its blue bossage walls immaculate, with detailed cresting and countless windows. At the front, a half-moon balcony overlooked an extravagant garden.

“I swear this place gets bigger every time we visit,” Lucetta said while they walked through a set of gates so ornate, it was a wonder they hadn’t collapsed under the weight of the iron.

“It has.” Benjamin pointed to a rounded structure protruding from the mansion beyond the balcony.

“Why does anyone need a house this big?” The largest house Oliver had occupied was the farmhouse before joining the mine, although he’d slept in a room shared with three others.

Maji scoffed. “For all the staff they keep.”

On their way to the wide stone steps that led to the entrance, a poignant melody repleted the air, cutting their conversation short and prompting Oliver to glance up at the balcony with a grin. Beside him, Lucetta heaved an exasperated sigh.

There was Mister Pavlov, renowned owner of the Tesera Mine, seated at a piano and performing with theatrical flair. Servants wheeled him out onto the balcony, pushing him in circles.

“Welcome!” Pavlov hollered once near the balustrade, gloved fingers dancing across ivory keys.

Not until he hit the last, resonating note to mark the end of the impromptu concert did the servants stop, looking sweaty and undignified. Pavlov swished his extravagant black cape

behind him when he stood, revealing neat black slacks, a russet waistcoat with a detailed paisley pattern, and highly polished shoes reflecting the sky.

“Welcome,” he said again, his smile so broad it looked painful. Pavlov extended his arms on either side. “My beautiful, most elegant, *most* gracious wife and I are thrilled you came!”

“Well yeah, we want to get paid,” blurted Oliver, earning him an elbow to the side from Lucetta.

If Pavlov heard, he ignored it. With a twirl of both hands, he motioned to the entrance of the mansion. Another servant led them through wide double doors. They all wore the same uniform of flawless white, the cravats and shirts a shade of green reminiscent of Tau. Neither Oliver or his friends had made the effort to dress up, but at least donned clean denim overalls and shirts, along with jackets to block out the morning cold. Compared to the servants, though, and with the way they looked at him with distaste, Oliver felt like a scruff.

“Wipe your feet,” Lucetta said, hushed. “Don’t want to track dirt all over Mister Magnate’s magnificent marble flooring.”

“Say that three times fast,” hissed Maji through a snicker.

The two-storey entrance hall boasted ornate columns and dark marble flooring. A gigantic staircase dominated the room, and two life-sized statues of Tau stood on either side at the bottom. Carved out of white stone, they held round lamps in each claw-like hand. The last time Oliver had been here to meet with Mrs Pavlov, they were gas lanterns. Now, they

looked to be powered by electricity, something afforded only to the wealthy. Oliver loved these statues, they held such a wonderful likeness.

Mister Pavlov stood waiting for them at the top of the stairs. Oliver wondered if he'd run there, disappointed he'd done so without the piano. With measured steps the man walked down the wide staircase, arms again extended.

“My esteemed labourers, most respected miners,” he simpered. When reaching the bottom, Pavlov shook all their hands, aside from Oliver's. “I am honoured you've made the trip!”

“You asked to see us about the snail?” Impatience sharpened Lucetta's voice.

“Straight to it then!” Pavlov clapped his hands together, then beckoned them to follow. “I'm afraid it wasn't auctioned off.”

Oliver exchanged a worried look with Maji, who shook her head in confusion.

They entered an auction hall that eventually led them into an impressive storage room, where racking lined the walls, housing a myriad of crates and smaller boxes. This was where everything of value ended up, where the curators tested, identified, and prepared artefacts for auction. Oliver peered at the crates, hoping to catch a glimpse of something Chancy. The worst that would be found here, since all things Dire were isolated, then destroyed by Sentinels. Unfortunately, the crates were all sealed.

Pavlov approached a table in the back, on which stood a box hidden beneath a cover of the most stunning green velvet Oliver had ever clapped his eyes on. He whipped it off with a flourish, and to Oliver's chagrin, let it fall to the floor, revealing a vivarium. It held a spare few plants and a familiar, child-sized skull with a ghastly amount of teeth.

"You see, it's still here. It came out only once, asked me an extraordinarily rude question, and has since refused to emerge. I can't sell this, I'm afraid. I don't know what it does, aside from insult."

Oliver snickered. "What'd it say?"

Pavlov shot him a baleful look.

"You had us come down here just to tell us we can go back without pay?" Lucetta snapped.

"I'll take the velvet," said Oliver. It wouldn't pay for food or tools, but it was so pretty. Maybe Pavlov would let him touch it, just for a moment.

"No, of course not!" Pavlov held up both hands. "I am going to pay you. My wife was particularly interested in the creature. We shall keep it for ourselves, for now."

"Wait, it's basically useless and you still want to pay us?" Oliver grunted when Lucetta elbowed him in the ribs again. "*Oof!* I mean, why?"

"I will have to coax the gastropod out before I can answer that, Mister Ducharme," said Pavlov. "Call it simple curiosity,

an eagerness to know the unknown. That is our motto, after all!”

Oliver frowned. That wasn't right. “I thought it was ‘to discover the unknown.’”

Pavlov wrapped his gigantic cape around himself and walked to another door, apparently expecting them to follow into a library. Two stories high, as elaborate as the rest of the mansion, and crammed with books. So many books. Who even had the time to read them all?

What little space remained held portraits, all of Pavlov's wife. In every painting, she wore the same dress, hairdo, and faint smile, like her red lips held back a delicious secret. Dark hair was styled in a look outdated, skin pale, eyes a frosty blue and the dress always dark green with a silky sheen and lace trims.

She was beautiful, but thinking about it, there were no other paintings and none varied. There wasn't even a portrait of Mister Pavlov himself anywhere.

A curator sat at a desk in the centre, scribbling away in a leather-bound book. She didn't look up when lifting the fountain pen off the page to point it at four leather pouches sitting atop the highly polished wood beside her.

“Your legal tender!” announced Pavlov with a sugary smile. “You'll find I was quite generous for something that is ‘basically useless.’”

Oliver shrunk under the glares sent his way.

“Here you are then.” Pavlov collected the pouches off the desk. They clinked invitingly when he handed one each to Lucetta, Benjamin, Maji and Oliver. “Miss Demir, Mister Kavak, Miss Willows and... You.”

He deposited the pouch into Oliver’s open hand like Pavlov was afraid to touch him. Then he took a generous step away.

“How are you holding up, Mister Ducharme?”

Oliver jerked his attention to him. “Er? Fine.”

“Are you? I hear you’ve been quite...*miserable*.”

A tightness clenched his chest. Had Pavlov changed his mind about letting him stay?

Lucetta was quick to stand beside him, her shoulder bumping his in silent support. Her look was sharp, but all Oliver saw was the possibility that he would have to suffer without Tau’s help.

“I’m okay. Never better, really!” His voice shook. He wanted to run off, to avoid Pavlov telling him to leave. He relied on Tau, yes, but to leave his friends would devastate him.

“Very good,” the man said. His golden-brown eyes flicked up to one of the many portraits. Looked like there was more he wanted to say with the way his thin lips parted.

Oliver knew he was a risk to himself as much as others, but it had been years without an incident involving anyone other than himself. The last was when he’d finally worked up the courage to pay someone to jerk him off. That had ended

poorly for both of them and he'd learned his lesson—as had the other guy.

“We’ll be going now, then?” said Maji. She had come up on his other side, stroking her hand down his forearm.

“Not so fast! I must speak to you about that portal you found.”

Swiving Sentinels.

Oliver was certain his shirt was drenched with sweat by now. Lucetta pocketed the pouch and cast him a look.

Shut up, it said.

“A door randomly appeared, then disappeared. That’s all we know about it.”

“That’s not quite true now, is it?” Dramatics momentarily forgotten, Pavlov’s face was an expression of shrewd distrust. “A little bird tells me two of you entered and Tau needed to rescue you. You understand, of course, that this is highly unusual. Sentinels are not meant to enter certain realms. I have it on good authority that the repercussions of doing so are punishable by death!”

“Applesauce. They’re gods,” snapped Oliver. “Who would even punish them?”

“Sentinel Tau never entered that doorway, and neither did anyone else,” said Benjamin. “I was there, so I would know.”

“We didn’t have time to open it,” added Lucetta. “It disappeared before we could notify anyone.”

“Is that so?” Mister Pavlov’s copper eyebrows creased with doubt. The curator finally looked up with her own expression of disbelief. “What a shame. Highly unusual. Discovering a portal is rare enough on its own. You can imagine my disappointment.”

Oliver shied away from Pavlov’s scrutinising gaze, his anger at the man’s subtle threat towards Tau buried by guilt.

The last portal uncovered was three years ago on another continent. From what Oliver heard, it led into a forest, and those who entered were never seen again. That portal remained locked away in the Library of Portals, but the miners who found it were still enjoying retirement. If he hadn’t mucked things up so badly, they would have been rich and famous by now.

“We’re just as disappointed,” Benjamin said, tightening the knot in Oliver’s stomach.

“Very well.” Pavlov sighed. “I ask that you return to work posthaste. Perhaps you’ll uncover this door once more?”

They left the mansion in a tense silence shortly after. The door slammed shut behind them, and it wasn’t until they were well out of earshot that Maji spoke up.

“Can’t believe Pavlov bought it.”

“He didn’t,” said Benjamin. “But what’s he going to do? Keep playing the piano until we give in?”

“There’s no portal either way,” said Lucetta. “Maybe Tau got rid of it.”

Oliver's lips thinned into a line. He wasn't sure what to hope for.

"Exactly." Benjamin rattled his pouch. "We've got money to spend, even if it's not much by the looks of it. Why don't we head down to the market, then get some lunch?"

Peering into his own pouch, Oliver gave it a shake and moaned. "It's barely a month's worth! I'm going to be spending all of this on replacing my tools again."

So much for getting more fabric, or even needles.





Five



Ruth

Plainwall was, as the name suggested, plain and wedged against a wall—a cliff, in actuality. The town was age-old, cloistered by high walls and accessible only by a bridge stretching past an inclement river. Oliver rarely visited. It didn't appear to have changed much: the cobblestone alleyways remained the same, as did the well-maintained shops lining the only street.

Although the town itself was tiny, its market was ever-expanding, in part overhanging the agitated waters. Being so near a mine of the transmundane made it a desirable place to trade and there was something different with every visit. Like a town itself, the market was home to anything from the ordinary to the unusual. Trinkets, cursed and hallowed alike, could readily be found. Some stalls sold magical creatures to eat and others sold them as pets. If it wasn't available at the Plainwall market, then it didn't yet exist or wasn't legal.

One of the more peculiar stalls was manned by a humanoid fungus, selling mushrooms of this world and other realms.

What was visible of him behind piles of animated, glowing, and growling mushrooms was clad in a holly green poncho with fox fur trims. Heavily lined, rough and unpigmented skin resembled the gills of a mushroom. His hair, if it could be called that, was a bundle of fine white mushrooms reaching his shoulders, the caps tickling dead fox heads encircling his thick neck.

As Oliver gaped up at him, unable to help it, two bulbous white eyeballs lacking pupils stared back. A slit for a mouth opened.

“What are you staring at, Breadstick?”

Oliver’s mood plummeted. “Wha—”

“Afternoon, Earl,” Benjamin interrupted.

“Very observant.” Earl sneered. He waved them away with stubby hands, his arm covered in round, colourful and pulsating mushrooms, ready to burst. “Leave, before your stench of misery attracts the unwanted.”

“Always a pleasure,” said Benjamin, hands firm on Oliver’s shoulders, steering him away through a crowd.

“What a dick,” Oliver grumbled. “And I bathed!”

“He’s something,” Benjamin agreed. “Used to buy mushrooms off him when I was a chef at the inn. Don’t remember him being that grumpy, then.”

“Sticky, Ben!” Maji called from a fruit stand further down, clutching a fat, round apple that she then shoved against Lucetta’s mouth. Left with little choice, Lucetta took a bite.

Hungrily, Oliver scoured the fruits. Most were familiar to their world, although he spotted Void Pits—pitch-black lumps. Harvestable only by the Evainne, a magical race recognisable by their lambent white hair and lack of desire to harvest things. They were great admirers of Tau, often seen flocking around the Sentinel’s statue that stood somewhere in the market. The closest they would ever get to him.

“Hey look, bearries! I haven’t seen these in ages,” exclaimed Maji, pointing at palm-sized fruits that were pink, hairy and vaguely resembled a bear’s paw. “I thought the portal to that world was closed for good.”

“Oh yes, nearly twelve years now,” said the fruit peddler, voice quivering with age. “Dangerous, those Ursidae. Far too violent. These are variations of the bearries, my dear. Homegrown!”

Oliver exchanged amused looks with Lucetta and Benjamin. They all knew Maji didn’t agree with such exploitation, especially when humans permanently shut portals afterwards. She’d be too polite to say anything, though.

Ursidae people still lived in this world. Having acclimated to human culture they were allowed to remain, although there weren’t many. Oliver only ever heard tales about them, including a miner further south who had made quite the name for herself. Less for her discoveries, and more because she got into regular fights with Sentinels.

“I’ll just skip those.” Maji paid for the apples, taking them away in a paper bag. “Here you go.”

“Thank you.” Benjamin took the fruit, offered to him a little more politely than it had been to Lucetta.

Since he wasn't willing to risk injuring himself without Tau, all Oliver could do was watch, mouth watering with each juicy droplet rolling into Benjamin's beard. He manoeuvred through the crowd with care, going from stall to stall, waiting while his friends made several purchases to enjoy later—most of them edible.

“What's that?” Oliver asked, pointing at a scroll laid out on a table.

The vendor was a tall fellow, thin like him but ancient with long grey hair. He sniffed haughtily while Benjamin unfurled the scroll and glanced at it.

“A single-use spell to clean all of one person or thing.”

That would have been helpful earlier. “What about that?”

He grabbed the next thing Oliver pointed at, another scroll and said, “Revitalises your hair. Looks like Fae magic.”

“Hm. And that?”

Benjamin side-eyed him, and he fought hard against a smile. When Benjamin reached for a delicate glass bottle, its contents purple, Oliver couldn't help the laugh that burst free.

“I'm kidding,” he said. No point in looking at stuff he couldn't afford.

“Just as well,” said Benjamin, “since that was lubricant.”

“For what?”

Rather than supply him with an answer, Benjamin tutted and clasped his neck, giving him a playful push.

When they passed a fabric vendor, Oliver tried to scurry away, not one to torment himself to such a degree. He'd already caught sight of the silks, of course. Not that he had the skill to handle something so fine.

“A few yards of this?”

When Oliver turned, Benjamin was pointing at dark red wool twill. He'd asked, then didn't wait for an answer to purchase it.

“You don't have to!” Oliver said, breathless. “I still have scraps left. Just need needles—shit, I need scissors too.”

“It's fine,” said Benjamin.

“I'll buy your needles,” Maji offered, coming up behind him.

“Got your scissors,” added Lucetta.

“No, don't. I can't afford to pay you guys back!”

They gave him a look telling him to just accept it.

But how was he meant to? It had been years since he was last able to buy them anything. Frustration burned his chest as they carried his things for him. All he could do was, yet again, follow while Benjamin led them out of the market and through several alleyways. Although he'd only been once a few years ago, Oliver knew where they were headed and he frowned up at the back of Benjamin's head, worry churning his gut.

The Crowded Foxhole Inn hadn't changed much either. Mostly empty and dingy, paned windows cloudy with dust, the ceiling so low in places Benjamin would need to duck.

As the creaky door swung shut, Benjamin came to an abrupt stop. He stood there, unmoving, and Oliver carefully neared, stomach leaden.

The memories attached to the inn hit Oliver hard. They would plunge Benjamin into anguish. Guilt rose like bile. Oliver swallowed against it, standing so stiffly it hurt.

“Do you want to go back?” he asked in a strained whisper.

This was his fault. All his fault.

Amber eyes focused on him when he rounded Benjamin, awash with grief. Yet he shook his head, and Oliver strained a smile.

“I'll order the drinks,” said Benjamin, heartbreak tightening his voice.

Lucetta patted him on the back as she walked past, and Maji stroked his forearm. The two made their way to a table in the back, hidden by a half-wall and a strut that looked as though it supported too much weight.

Oliver followed Benjamin to the bar. The least he could do was stay nearby. A broad woman stood behind the counter, serving a group of haggard-looking peddlers with a greenish ale, froth sloshing over the brims of their glasses.

“Marcus, is that you?” said Benjamin.

The woman looked up, and her hazel eyes brightened with joy and recognition. “Benji!”

“It’s been so long, I hardly recognise you!”

“It’s Marcy, now,” she said, thin lips blossoming into a wide smile.

She ran her hands down the front of a frilly apron while Benjamin gave her an appreciative once over. Though stained, the white of the apron went strikingly with her green-chequered day dress. Her dark blond hair was long, stray greys visible in the loose bun. She leaned across the counter and pulled Benjamin into a firm embrace with brawny arms.

“You don’t say?” said Benjamin. “I guess travelling did you some good, then!”

“The things I’ve seen you just wouldn’t believe,” said Marcy. She paused, then added, “Then again, you’re a miner, so I’m sure you’ve seen more than I could dream of.”

“Not at all.” Benjamin leaned an elbow on the counter. “Mostly, I only get to look at rock. Sometimes I find schist, sometimes sediment.”

Oliver huffed in amusement and Benjamin cast him a look that was—approving? His mouth had a peculiar quirk to it, as if pleased.

“Although, just the other day,” Benjamin continued, “my friends and I found a talking gastropod.”

“Was it worth a lot?” Marcy grabbed a clean pitcher from under the bar to pour a frothy violet drink, shimmering in the

dim gas lights.

“Afraid not.” Benjamin held up two fingers, then gestured at Oliver. “Two of those and a straw, please. Got friends with me and this one likes to pack them away.”

“Oh, of course. Hope Cosmic Ale is still your drink.” Marcy cast Oliver a curious look. “And who might you be?”

“Oliver,” he said before Benjamin could introduce him as Sticky. “The pebble over there is Maji, and that’s Lucetta.”

Marcy hummed in interest, her gaze flicking between him and Benjamin. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Join us when you get a moment,” said Benjamin, paying for the drinks.

“I will!”

Oliver edged across the bench to sit next to Maji, while Benjamin set the pitchers down and joined Lucetta’s side.

Lucetta raised her glass in a toast. “Here’s to another useless discovery.”

“Hope the snail comes out and insults him some more,” Oliver added without touching his.

“And may we find many more useless things together without dying,” Maji sang.

With a wry smile, Benjamin held up his glass, then downed the drink in a few gulps.

Oliver drained his glass as quickly as he could through the straw. It was a sweet, fruity drink, the shimmers leaving a

tingling sensation on his tongue.

They were on their second round of ale by the time Marcy came by with some sandwiches, sitting beside Oliver while they ate.

“Where have you been on your travels, then?” asked Lucetta around a mouthful of bread and egg.

Marcy sighed wistfully. “All over the world.”

“You’ve been travelling all this time?” asked Benjamin.

“Oh, I settled down here and there for a while,” she said. “I’ve also visited and lived in a few other worlds.”

“Which ones?” asked Oliver, trying his best to get every last drop. Slurping through his straw had Maji bumping into him with her shoulder.

“I’ve been to the Fae world and the Strigidae’s. Why aren’t you eating? Please help yourself, it’s on the house.” Marcy pushed the plate of sandwiches closer to Oliver.

“Thanks. Not that hungry,” he mumbled.

A lie. He was starving, but he didn’t feel like divulging that Benjamin hung around someone with a curse. The last thing he wanted was for his friend to run off in fright.

“Why did you come back here?” asked Benjamin quickly. “There have got to be better places to settle than this town. I hear the Evainne’s realm is interesting.”

“Yeah, if you like permanent night,” said Lucetta.

“I could never,” mumbled Maji.

Marcy leaned back with a thoughtful hum. “Honestly, I’m getting too old to do any more travelling just for the fun of it.”

Benjamin looked at her, offended. “You’re two years younger than I am!”

Maji and Oliver bowed their heads together and snickered, ignoring the glare sent their way. Last Oliver asked, Benjamin was in his late thirties and even then he’d been sensitive about the subject.

Marcy’s laughter was sonorous and kind. “I’m not a scholar and have no interest in telling stories or writing articles. I’m glad I found myself along the way, but I’m ready to settle, which is exactly why I’m investing in this inn.”

Oliver’s brows drew together in disbelief. “But this town is so small.”

“It is. I came back here because it’s home, and a snapshot of everything I’ve seen. And you know, the quiet life has always suited me better.”

“Ah Marcy, I’m glad you’re back,” said Benjamin. “I’m sorry I haven’t kept in touch.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t, either.” Marcy’s smile was rueful. “I guess we all had different ideas of what life was supposed to be like. Speaking of, where’s Samuel?”

Oliver flinched. The air tensed and gazes lowered.

What had happened to Benjamin’s husband was no secret, but they never discussed it.

“He’s no longer with us,” said Lucetta evenly. “Sam was snatched by the Wandering Horror three years ago.”

Oliver stared hard at the cracked wall across. His guilt bubbled and churned, and the lingering sweetness of the ale dissolved, turning bitter on his tongue. He didn’t dare a glance at Benjamin.

“Oh, Benji. I’m so sorry.” Marcy’s voice broke.

A long pause followed. Then, in a strain, Benjamin said, “Me too, Marcy. Sam would have been so proud of you.”

“You’re going to make me cry.” Marcy dabbed at her eyes with the apron. “I-I better get back to work. It was—it was great to see you, Benji, and such a pleasure to meet all of you.”



Any desire to continue exploring the market was gone. They wouldn’t reach the mine until nightfall, but the woods were safe to travel at night since the stationing of guards along the road after a string of attempted robberies.

The walk back was made in silence, disturbed only by the serene upleap of magic humming and distant hoots among looming, shrouded pines.

Maji walked close to Benjamin, offering quiet comfort. No matter how difficult, Oliver stuck to his other side, while Lucetta trailed behind them. He couldn’t bring himself to turn and look at her, but knew she had turned to stone. The way she always did when it came to her brother. She’d never said

anything but, like Benjamin, Oliver knew she blamed him for what had happened to Samuel.

And she was right to. Oliver certainly hadn't forgiven himself. It haunted him to this day, seeing the Wandering Horror swallow Samuel with its stomach before vanishing. All while he'd done nothing to stop it, only stared.

Then, Oliver remembered how it felt needing to tell Benjamin. How the man reacted. How there were no traces of his husband no matter how hard they both looked, with nothing out of place save for a single, deep purple flower.

Oliver looked up from staring at each pebble they passed, in time to catch a tall figure standing under trees. Although hidden by shadows and the darkening sky, there was no mistaking the snow-shimmer of the robes and mask. His stomach lurched with worry.

"It's Tau." He hopped off the road and beelined for the Sentinel. "What are you doing here, are you okay?"

Tau moved forward to meet him, shadows of pine branches slipping across the mask and hood. Standing but a foot away now, Oliver spotted a bird in one of the enormous claws. Tiny, and black.

"Aw, you found a bird!" Maji was next to Oliver within moments.

Lucetta soon followed. After a moment, Benjamin too joined them. Only then did Tau move again, to extend his claw and

allow the bird to hop off and perch itself on Benjamin's shoulder.

"What am I supposed to do with it?" Benjamin asked, as though he expected an answer.

No explanations were offered, and he sighed, obviously peeved.

Oliver pursed his lips at the lack of gratitude, glancing back at Tau. He'd missed looking at him, his presence. He longed to reach out, to touch his robes again.

"Wait, where are you going?" he called. Pointless, since Tau moved away without a response, headed deeper into the forest.

Oliver resisted the need to run after him. The bird chirped, still perched on Benjamin's shoulder, showing no signs of wanting to leave. Unsure of what else to do, they resumed the trip back up to the mine.

"That was weird, but now you have a new friend," Oliver said, walking behind Benjamin.

"Sentinel Tau has been erratic for as long as I've known him," said Benjamin.

"I like that about him," said Oliver, defensively.

Loved it, in fact.

"So does everyone else, it's why we're here and not in another mine," said Maji confidently, although it wasn't quite true.

The bird stayed with Benjamin for the remaining trip. None of them would have any hope of understanding why Tau would give him a bird, or how he got his claws on one. That at least explained why he'd been out in the woods, to an extent. Tau had been chasing after birds. Oliver pictured what that looked like and turned his head to hide the smile threatening to show itself.

“Please don't wake me up early,” he whined once they piled into the cage to make their way down to the lodgings.

“Lucky for you, it's all four of us tomorrow.” Lucetta stretched her arms over her head. “I'll team up with Ben so you can get a lie-in.”

He looked at her with enough appreciation to fill a hutch. The light of the purpling sun graced her dark skin beautifully, highlighting the tight coils of her hair and lush smile.

“Careful, or I might propose to you,” Oliver warned, barely refraining from rubbing his eyes.

“Don't think I'm the one you want pulling your pud,” she said.

No, the only one he wanted doing that was twice the height of him and magical, and Oliver said as much. Lucetta responded with snorts of laughter, while Maji appeared to choke on absolutely nothing. Benjamin had discovered an interest in the metal bars of the cage.

The others bid him goodnight, and Oliver was left with the paper bag in his arms, headed down to his level.

The door to his hovel squeaked open, the air inside stuffy and unwelcoming. It was messy and Oliver hated it, his feet heavy as he stepped over spare fabric, snippets of thread and poorly sewn things. Most of which he'd thrown in frustration.

The one thing he was proud of was the patchwork quilt on his bed. It wasn't good. None of the shapes matched and it sported heavy blood stains refusing to come out, but it had taken him a long time to finish. One of the few things he could truly call his own.

He set the bag on a round dining table that saw no use, atop books on sewing given to him by Lucetta. The thick layer of dust they had collected was shameful. As neglected as the bunches of dried flowers hanging from the walls. Maji had told him what they were, but he'd forgotten. They were lovely despite being dusty, and that was all Oliver cared about.

He shrugged out of his green mackinaw, letting it fall to the rickety chair, and looked inside the bag. Two fat apples lay nestled in the fabric. The rigidity that claimed him outside eased away, but an ache he couldn't identify stirred in his chest. His mind wandered to Tau.

Would he be back inside the mountain yet?

Without fully thinking about it, Oliver left the hovel. The one guard stationed was accustomed to his nightly wanderings by now and no longer bothered him about it. He passed her without a word, searching for his Sentinel.

Tranquil fireflies drifted above, easing away the pain in his chest. Through a crosscut, he stopped by a cave, its opening

covered by a sheet of green. Diaphanous, rippling like water. Behind it stood Tau.

Oliver waited. It never took long for barriers to be lowered, for the Sentinel to allow him entry. Restless hoots floated through the cave when he stepped inside. Shadows resembling spherical cats sat perched on ledges all over, watching him with vibrant pink orbs that had no pupils, only specks of white. The tips of their pointy ears fluttered, smoke-like.

He didn't know what they were, or why Tau had deemed them dangerous enough to block access to the cave, but they didn't do anything beyond stare at him.

"Hullo," Oliver said. As his gaze drifted along Tau's stately form, from pointed hood down to clawed sabaton, all remaining guilt and loneliness crumbled away.

Tau had his claws parted. Between them floated a massive tome. It too was translucent, made of thousands of tiny green sparks. He brought his claws together, and the tome dissipated with a faint *swish*. Oliver had seen it before, but there was no point in asking about it.

"I was worried when I saw you in the forest," Oliver murmured, approaching. When the Sentinel turned away, he hesitated. "Hope you're okay? I don't think I've ever seen you outside before—"

Tau held a bottle out to him. A simple glass bottle that had seen some use and had no lid, but its contents were what had Oliver gaping. Tau's fireflies filled it, the mass of them like a captured wave of luminescence, writhing and swirling.

“For me?”

A warmth coursed through Oliver’s chest, pushed into him by Tau.

Yes, it told him.

As he closed his hand around the bottle, his fingers brushed Tau’s clawed digits, the metal both cool and warm. The lingering touch brought a whirlwind of nerves into his stomach. His breath caught at the centre of his chest, a flush pooling across his face.

Too hot. It had gotten too hot.

His hand dipped when Tau released the bottle, the weight of it startling. Oliver held it tight against his chest.

It was a gift. He knew it was.

He squeezed his eyes against the sudden stinging in them. Stayed that way until something brushed his shoulder. Blearily, Oliver stared at the circular shadow, its image aflutter, now perched on him. Two gigantic pink eyes swivelled to stare right back.

The white specks flurried, disorientating. As if moving forward through snowfall. In the distance, Oliver felt himself tremble. First his hands, clutching the bottle to his chest still, then his arms. His shoulders and head shortly followed. Quaking his vision, filling it with blurs of vibrant pink and white. The trance breaking only once a sharp glint sliced the soot-black shadow in half and the large, round eyes disappeared with one last, mocking blink. A wisp of smoke

fluttered through the air, returning to an empty perch, and regained its spherical form.

Oliver swung his focus towards Tau with a startled laugh, now a few inches away from him. “What was that?”

Not that Tau would answer, seeming adamant with his silence. Oliver couldn’t help the sliver of hope that maybe one day, Tau would be comfortable enough to break it.

Cradling the bottle as carefully as he could, Oliver walked further into the cave, now a touch more wary of the owl-like spheres.

“I didn’t bring any cards, sorry.” His hobnails scraped stone as he lowered to it. Crossing his legs, he flashed Tau a smile.

Prompting the Sentinel to turn his entire body, rather than only his head to look at him.

“Thank you for giving Ben that black bird,” Oliver murmured, glancing down at the bottle, the wafture of green sparks mesmerising. Comforting, above anything else. “I know he gives you a hard time but... Try not to take it too personally? You tried your best, I know you did.”

Which was far more than Oliver could say about himself. His shoulders slumped, even as Tau moved to stand directly beside him. Forcing him to resist tipping sideways to rub his face against shimmering robes already brushing his arm.

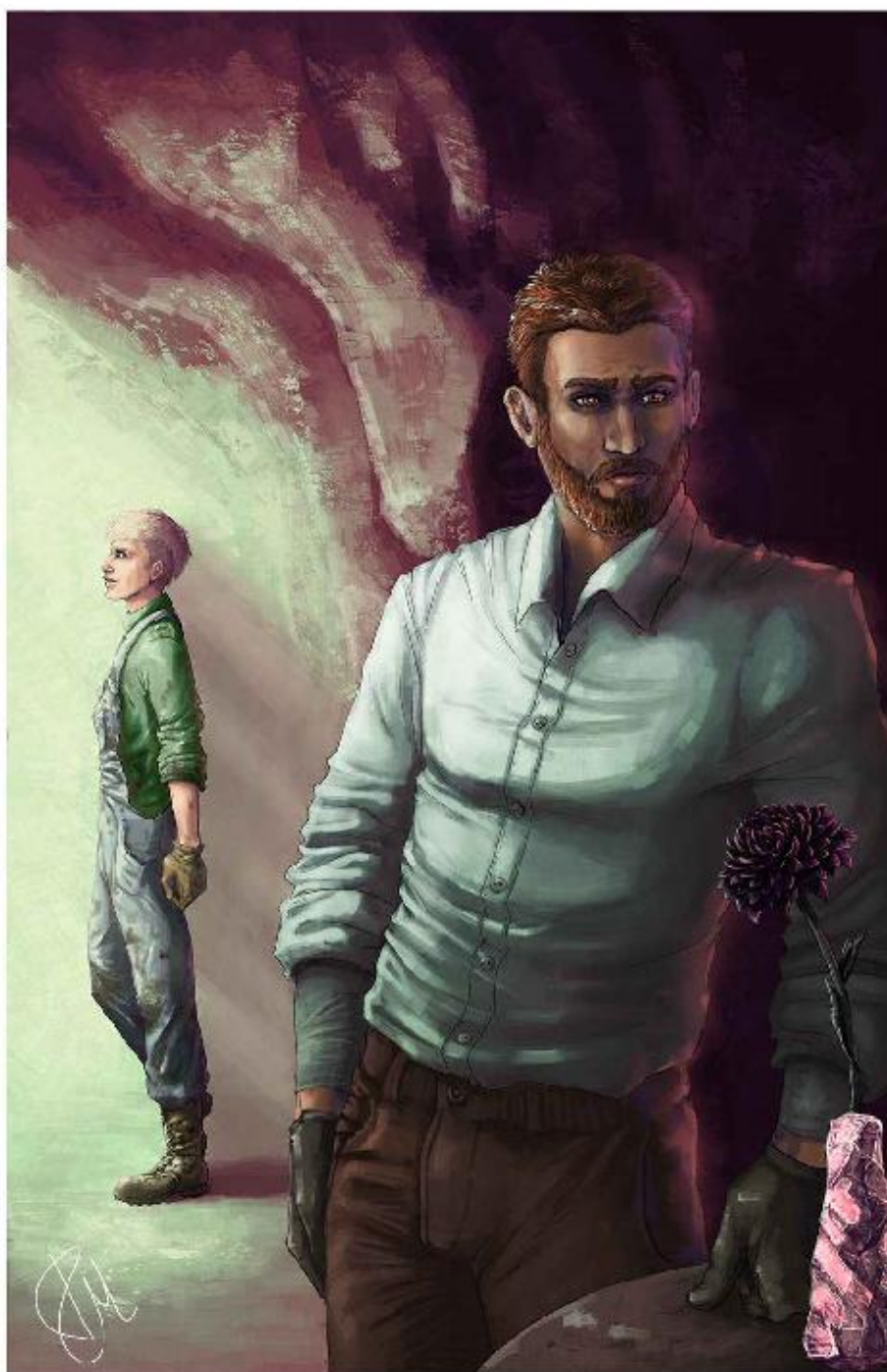
“He blames both of us.” Oliver’s voice, though low, echoed. Several hollow hoots answered. “But I think it’s easier for him

to let it out on you, instead of someone he has to be with most days.”

No sounds when Tau sat on the nearby ledge, resting his claws atop exposed poleyn. Oliver squinted when the armour reflected a glare of moonlight into his eyes.

“Do you want to learn Xs and Os?”

Tau inclined his head, and Oliver grinned.





Six



Malcontent

Benjamin leaned against his door in exhaustion. The bird flew off his shoulder and beelined for the clunky quartz vase. He sucked in a sharp breath, deflating again when all it did was sit on the table and sing. When he closed his tired eyes, memories of Samuel flooded his mind, unbeckoned.

Three years, and still it cleaved his heart in two. It ashamed Benjamin that he'd not managed to tell Marcy anything, when she and Samuel had been friends. That memory of him walking in through the Crowded Foxhole's door, travel-fatigued and nigh penniless, was as vivid as oil-sparked flame.

Bright brown eyes turning to Benjamin, cleaning up for the night. Not quite pleadingly, but close enough. Full lips holding a tired smile, head cocked slightly. A hint of swagger to the way he moved and spoke.

Benjamin had proposed to Samuel on the day they became miners ten years ago, when Marcy decided she wanted to travel. She put off leaving to be at their wedding.

With a sigh, Benjamin glanced back at the bird. Such a tiny thing. He thought it to be a blackbird at first, but the longer he looked, the more he believed it to be a canary. There was nothing to feed it, other than fresh fruit and oatmeal—if that's what they ate. Maybe it would take dried gnome meat.

He left the bird to it and washed his face in the basin near the end of the bed. Listlessly, he stared into the mirror, watching droplets trail down his cheeks to dampen the terry cloth held against his chin.

Somedays, he saw Samuel's reflection behind him. Their eyes would meet and Samuel would offer him a smile. Then, Benjamin would turn around and realise no one was there. His husband was gone.

Brushing his teeth, his gaze fixed on Samuel's toothbrush. It remained untouched in the same brown glazed cup, the wood handle cracked. He hopped into pyjamas, his hand drifting to Samuel's maroon housecoat, still in the wardrobe, still soft.

He draped Samuel's favourite throw over the moon to block out the light. In one sweep, the many pillows scattered to the floor. Benjamin cast the table one last look before turning over in bed to face the wall, trying to ignore the scourge of loneliness.

It still didn't feel right, sleeping on his own. His thoughts strayed to Sticky, as they often did these days. Benjamin debated going down to him. Ask to join him in bed. They could make it work, somehow.

What he wouldn't give for a taste of those rose-apple lips.

Chirp.

Benjamin grunted, pulled back from the doze he'd slipped into.

Chirp.

Like the eternal trickle of water within the mountain, paying the chirps any heed amplified its disturbance. Unlike water, it was already loud in the hush of the night.

Chirp.

“Stop.”

Chirp.

“You’re going to wake people up.”

Chirp.

He turned to glare at the bird, although it was impossible to see in the dark. The hearth’s fire had long since narrowed to a line of aubergine purple. He was sure the sound still came from the table, though.

Chirp.

It was still on the table.

Just when Benjamin got up to see what he could do to shut it up, wing-flaps sounded in the darkness, followed by a *pop* and the abrupt appearance of... A window in his wall?

That couldn’t be right.

He whipped the blankets off and crossed the short distance of his hovel to the odd window, hanging by the hearth at eye

level. Black clouds shifted and churned within, like large flocks of birds, stark against the lychee-pink sky, its strange light sifting into the hovel.

Benjamin reached over and slipped the throw off the moon-like sphere by the carved hollow. That didn't help. He peered behind the supposed window, but it was stuck to the wall. It had to be another world he was looking at. A portal.

Although he wanted to poke it, he didn't, old enough to know better by now. At the very least, Benjamin figured he could throw something at it. With a quick look around, his attention fell to the many pillows. There were at least sixteen of them.

Surely, Sticky wouldn't notice.

Benjamin grabbed a particularly horrid one, no bigger than his hand, with a dizzying pattern of red flowers on pink. It was bursting at the seams, overstuffed and looked like it wanted to be put out of its misery. He inhaled deeply to calm himself, to think his decision over, then lobbed the pillow before he lost his nerve.

It fell through the window and out of view with only silence following.

He wasn't sure what he expected to happen, but for the pillow to disappear and absolutely nothing else to occur was... disappointing.

Chirp!

“Holy cats!”

Benjamin ducked, dodging the bird zipping back into his hovel. Another *pop*, and the window vanished. The bird flew overhead in circles, twittering, before settling on a shelf above the bed. Its preening offered no explanations.

He stared at the hearth. There was no evidence now. Nothing to suggest he hadn't just hallucinated.

And for as long as it took him to fall asleep, he was left wondering why the Sentinel had given him such a peculiar bird.



The following morning, Benjamin re-examined the hearthstone, but all traces of the portal remained gone. There was little choice but to chalk it up to being tired, possibly having dreamt it.

Porridge spiced with cinnamon settled in his stomach, he was more than ready to find something worth more than half a month's wage. He packed some pemmican for Sticky, leaving his hovel to meet with Lucetta by the cage lift. Having little in common these days, they rarely spoke. All Benjamin could think to say was a guess at the weather, based on how bright the enchanted sun in the cage looked.

Down in the working drift, the bird perched herself on the hutch near the entrance instead of his shoulder, having disagreed with his sharp movements. Since neither of the two were early risers, it took hours for Maji and Sticky to finally show.

“Morning,” Benjamin said and silently damned himself for the way his heart stuttered. Like a school boy with a crush.

“Good morning,” said Sticky, smiling with a hint of dopiness, his walk more of a saunter rather than the usual drag of sluggish feet.

Benjamin carelessly dropped his pickaxe to grab the tin of pemmican from where he’d put it inside the hutch.

“Brought you this,” he said in a throaty murmur, stepping close.

Sticky looked bewildered when he opened it, even though he’d brought him lunch many times before. “Oh, wow. Thanks.”

“It’s—it’s mostly meat.” There was some gnome in it.

The gaze that turned to him was suspicious, but Sticky’s rose-apple lips still held that dashing smile.

“It smells great.”

As did Sticky, Benjamin thought. Maybe not of flowers or fruit, but he’d come to like the earthy notes of his sweat. Benjamin licked his lips, steeling himself. Now was as good a time as any. All he had to do was ask.

“Would you like to join me for dinner tonight? I’ll cook, of course.”

Sticky’s basil eyes lit up and a sweet smile graced those lush lips. “Sounds good. We can play cards after?”

“Of course.” And hopefully more than that.

“Stop flirting and get to work.”

Benjamin stepped back, tearing his gaze away from Sticky’s mouth and suppressing his hunger for it.

He’d forgotten about the other two entirely. He avoided meeting Maji’s curious expression, and Lucetta’s scrutinising look, striding back to his area. Sticky didn’t seem bothered, his chuckle light, as though he didn’t have a care in the world. Enchanting in his affable ways, so much like when Benjamin had first met him, aeons ago now.

“I have something to tell,” Sticky said.

Maji yawned, dragging her pickaxe across the rubble, the clanking loud. “Whassat?”

“Tau gave me something last night.”

Benjamin stopped himself from whirling around, his grip tightening in horror around the pickaxe.

“He gave me a bottle full of those firefly lights,” Sticky added.

Nowhere near as bad as Benjamin had feared. Still not what he would have preferred.

“That’s...nice?” Lucetta said.

There were many things Benjamin thought such a gift was. Nice was not one of them. He hid his displeasure by hacking at stone.

“Where’s my bottle of lights?” Maji grumbled, then turned on Benjamin. “And where’s *my* pemmican, or invitation to

dinner?”

Beside him, Lucetta snorted out her laughter. Benjamin said nothing, grateful she didn't offer clarification to Maji, who was so naive sometimes it was painful.

The day went by with no discoveries. Benjamin was far less bothered by that than he ought to be, too distracted by the building anticipation for dinner. He already knew what he would be cooking, too. Potato soup, with crusty bread. Not exactly fancy, but it was Sticky's favourite. On their way to the lodgings, he stood so close to Sticky that their arms touched. He shouldn't, this was a bad idea. He *shouldn't*. Sticky's curse would maim him if he kept too close, sooner or later. Yet there he stood, pressing in closer and relishing in the boiling heat radiating off that lissom frame.

Sticky yawned loudly and slumped against the cage. “Ben.”

What a delight it was to hear his name fall so gracefully from those sweet lips. Benjamin wanted nothing more than to taste his name on them. He schooled his expression when he moved away to regard Sticky. There was no need to look too smitten.

“I think I'm too tired.”

“Oh.”

His disappointment must have shown since Sticky immediately straightened up with a look of panic.

“Actually, I can do it. I'll stay awake.”

He placed a hand on Sticky's slender shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "Don't fuss. There's always tomorrow."

"I'll come?" said Maji, hopefully.

"Ah, sure."

He pretended not to see Lucetta's knowing look.



"You should give her a name," said Maji off to his side, huffing after a hard swing of her pickaxe. "Shadow, maybe?"

They had been discussing the bird for some time while working. Benjamin hadn't told them about the portal. There was nothing to tell, let alone show. He could have very well imagined it.

"Nah, too obvious." Sticky struggled to remove his scaling bar from where he'd rammed it into the wall nearby, grunting noisily. "How about Plucky?"

"What about Onyx?" said Lucetta, her expression turning smug when the bird twittered from where it perched on the hutch. "See, she likes it."

"Onyx it is," agreed Benjamin. He didn't especially care, although "Onyx" did have a zest to it.

Relentlessly, they chipped away at the hard stone. It was especially satisfying when the larger pieces came crumbling down, revealing a little more as they drew ever closer to discoveries.

That was how it normally went, anyway. After a solid three days of mining without finding so much as a single piece of quartz or nest of geodes, or Sentinel Tau showing up to let them know they were close to a discovery, Benjamin wondered if they had drained the area of its mythical resources. In all his years of mining, not once had he struggled to find anything to such a degree, and soon gave voice to his concerns.

“This ambit is over fifty years old. That just doesn’t happen here,” said Lucetta across from him. “We’ve got a dry spell. It’ll pass.”

Covered in sweat and grime, they sat amidst rubble for a break. Sticky was nearby, busy catching blood pooling from his mouth, having bitten too hard on the inside of his cheek.

“Did you crack a tooth again?” asked Maji. She sat beside him, holding a blood-soaked handkerchief against his mouth to staunch the flow.

“No, I’m okay.” Sticky’s gaze flicked to the entrance of their drift.

Benjamin knew he was hoping Sentinel Tau would show up for him. Sticky still hadn’t come for dinner. Something told him that the Sentinel was at fault. Sticky’s admission of Sentinel Tau apparently seeking him out at night to give him things now constantly haunted Benjamin’s thoughts. How often did they spend time together, most likely alone?

“I would prefer not to see Pavlov again so soon, just to be told the same thing,” added Lucetta.

With a sigh, Benjamin let the back of his head rest against the stone behind him. He started slightly at the burr echoing down the drift. For one hopeful spell, he thought the Sentinel would let them know they were close to a discovery. The bright globe took its humanoid shape. Without pause, Sentinel Tau walked past him directly towards Sticky, who scrambled to get to his feet.

Benjamin narrowed his eyes, watching with increasing anger as a claw reached out to Sticky's face. A sharp, metallic thumb made indisputable contact with the fleshy fold of his lower lip, healing whatever damage his teeth had made in one firm, deliberate and outrageously intimate stroke.

Sticky's eyes were wide, and even from where Benjamin sat, he saw them glaze over with arousal.

"Th-Thank you," Sticky croaked.

The Sentinel disappeared again, as did Benjamin's hope of finding anything soon. His anger, however, tarried.

"Oh, my Sentinels," breathed Sticky, sliding back to the ground with his eyes closed and cheeks brighter than tomatoes.

"You'll have happy dreams tonight," teased Lucetta.

Sticky made an odd, glottal noise. "I'm *hard*."

"Don't look at me, I'm not helping with that," said Maji immediately.

A moan of misery followed. Benjamin cast his attention out the drift, the better place to look when all he wanted was to

bend Sticky over and give him a good seeing to.

Lucetta chortled. “Go chase after Tau, maybe he will.”

“I’d chase after him this instant if I thought he’d help me get off.”

“Well, if you break your pendulum, he might just do so by accident,” said Lucetta.

“I’ve already done that once. Never again.”

Benjamin sealed his mouth around his disapproval, afraid that at this point, his anger would seem like jealousy. Maybe it was, but more so, Sentinels weren’t meant to touch anyone at all. If someone ever saw it, there would be legal repercussions for Sticky. Not that it made a difference to the Sentinel, who could do whatever he liked and never worry about reproach.

Unlike most people, Benjamin was not an admirer of Sentinels. He never cared much for the beings who, even after a century, were still shrouded in mystery.

Sentinel Tau, in particular, he thought incompetent. Far from worthy of Sticky’s affections. It was the Sentinel’s delayed response to the Wandering Horror that had led to Samuel’s death, and for as long as his heart ached for his husband, Benjamin would resent him, even despise him.

Simmering with frustration, he hoisted himself upright with a grunt and set back to work.



A full week without a single find. Even Maji and Lucetta were becoming frustrated, complaining every chance they got, while Sticky was losing hope entirely. He'd suffered several more injuries and with nothing to show for it, his spirits were dismal. Onyx remained with them, mostly. It often twittered at them at length. Maji referred to it as songs of encouragement, but Benjamin didn't feel especially encouraged.

Once again, they sat among dust and rock fragments, utterly exhausted. Maji reached into the leather satchel she often kept on her and handed out vials. Benjamin held it up, amber liquid turning gold in the light. He knew it would help revitalise his energy, although he was almost content to feel defeated at this point.

Maji drained her vial, then resumed chipping away at the black, glass-like stone. Being such a hazard to remove, they had left that part alone. Unfortunately, times were desperate. Realising it wasn't fair to let her do all the work, he tipped the contents of the vial to his lips and downed the bitter liquid in one gulp.

Maybe whatever deities were listening had heard their complaints at long last. Or maybe it was sheer luck that with the next stab of his scaling bar, the tip cracked through to reveal an opening. Benjamin made a noise of elation, catching the attention of the other three.

He peered into the crack and caught a glimpse of pastel hues. There appeared to be a chamber beyond. Sentinel Tau had not yet arrived, suggesting it was safe for them to proceed.

Benjamin's heart raced with excitement as Lucetta and Sticky helped create a seam big enough for them to fit through. Throwing their tools down, they slipped inside.

Glowing mushrooms and luminescent moss lit the chamber, casting soft colours throughout. Flowstones dripped into puddles below, rippling vivid yellow.

"Oh, my dahlias!" Maji bounced further into the cave, the clapping of her hands echoing.

"Beautiful," said Benjamin in wonder.

He raised his eyebrows at a wooden statue in the very centre, circled by more lambent mushrooms. Old and gnarly, of an elderly woman sitting on her haunches. The wood rotten and damp, black cordyceps sprouting from its head and shoulders.

"Wow, it's hideous!" said Sticky in delight, coming up to Benjamin's side.

"I'm taking these mushrooms," Maji declared.

"Let's not touch anything just yet. Tau might still get here," said Lucetta.

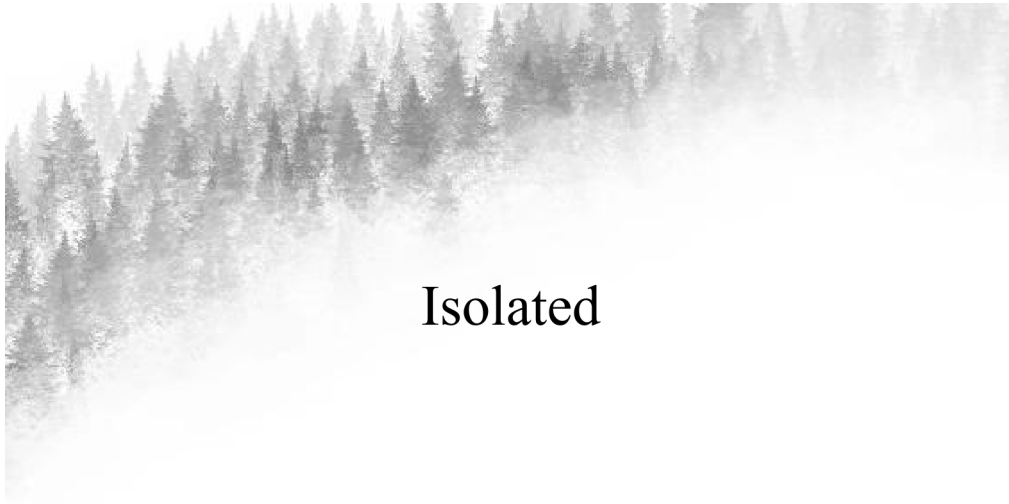
Benjamin sighed. "*Sentinel* Tau. He's not your friend. Stop acting like—"

Then came the sound of crackling. Approaching at rapid speed was Sentinel Tau, and with him came a sense of agitation to course through Benjamin's chest.





Seven



Isolated

Tau scoured the driftways of the mine, ensuring all miners were accounted for and not moribund. At least, not immediately.

The mountain was vast, begot the unearthly in alarming proportions, and crawled with humans forever in need of this and that and more. Accidents were a given. Especially so when risks other than portals and cursed artefacts plagued the mountain's stronghold.

There was the ever-present risk of asphyxiation. Tau had discovered that one the hard way, some time ago. He'd not realised his humans needed air to survive in addition to everything else.

So many needs.

After losing several to poor ventilation, Tau adapted himself to sense whenever a miner had difficulty breathing. Fortunately, this coincided with faulty lungs. And drowning, which was another risk.

Somehow.

Cave-ins, exhaustion, extreme temperatures, sickness—humans had a terrible habit of perishing and blaming him for it.

Ungracious things.

All the same, Tau did what he could to keep them from expiring.

No choice.

It was the sole purpose of his existence. Although if anyone asked, which no one ever did, he would admit his role as Guardian had long since become festering tedium, his tolerance slipping with each whispered belittlement and tarrying resentment. Benjamin's rancour, in particular, hurt. Sloughing off him like rot each day.

Tau ignored him, as he often did, in favour of watching Oliver, moving with an inelegance only he seemed to possess. Oftentimes, Oliver was aware of being observed. Sometimes, Tau got to do so in secret, stirred from his watchful trance whenever something pulsed out to him—on the rare occasion it did.

This time, it was the creature. That entity which had taken Benjamin's favourite person. *Unpredictable.* Appearing at random through portals opening within the mountain's walls. Remaining unknown, uninterested in lingering.

The Elders didn't appear to possess knowledge of it. Not that Tau had asked.

He had a poor concept of time, but for a while now it had made several appearances, with only one resulting in injury and one fatality. Although he had yet to catch it, quick as it was.

What worried him more was that, unlike his kinfolk, Tau had trouble sensing things. The constant pulse of artefacts was muffled, registering only as faint taps within his core, if at all. The humans called him broken. His kin, functionless. Tau didn't much care for it.

Now standing at the ingress of a drift, Tau watched a group of miners—Mariet, Roger, Jarle, Kit, Glenn—work their way through the stone. A flicker of dread had made itself known to him, however briefly, and he lingered to ensure it wouldn't be harmful.

“I think I found something!” Mariet called out.

Tau tensed. Someone had just gotten hurt further down the mine. Their distress and pain like an echo ricocheting his core.

Roger and Mariet removed a bauble from a stone pocket, scintillating flurries of yellow swirling within the glass. Roger held it up in cupped hands for Tau, and to his displeasure, a crack formed across the orb, followed by sharp whistling.

He pulled the bauble and himself into a chambered dimension with only a thought, in time for the glass to break in his grasp, for the glittery, yellow smoke to burst free.

Tau stood still, his surroundings inscrutable, as the entity took shape before him: a round head and raggedy yellow cloak. Its grin narrow, round eyes of bottomless black, and face bone white. No sooner had it manifested than Tau inscribed the ground with an undulating circle. Green, his favourite colour, aflame and encapsulating both him and the entity. A barrier to prevent escape. If it tried, it would burn to nothing.

Burn, burn.

The creature looked at him in disappointment, its grin faltering.

“This isn’t fair,” it said. “I’ve only just been freed.”

Too bad.

He was in a rush.

With practised ease, Tau willed open a portal beyond, expelling a vivid light within the surrounding darkness. Always reminding him of home. Not large, still big enough to fit things through if he shoved hard enough. With nothing but intent, he pushed the entity through. The portal closed after it with a swirl and Tau returned to the mine.

“Guess we won’t get paid again. Why even let us see it?”

“I swear, They’re getting worse.”

Remarks he couldn’t dwell on.

He rushed to another drift. The miners here had neglected to erect support, and part of their tunnel had come down. Yago’s

leg was trapped under rubble, blood and dust turned mucilage beneath it all. Tau flicked the rubble off with ease, ignored the man's howling and let his hand hover over the crushed limb. He'd long since become acquainted with the inner workings of human bodies, no longer needing to pay attention. Simply expelled raw vitality to mend all that was broken.

Fragile things.

"That took you a while." Yago got up with a grunt. He dusted himself off without looking up.

There was nothing Tau could do for their sulky dispositions, however.

Another miner's distress pulsed out to him, as did something perilous.

Tau didn't stop to acknowledge Yago or his group—Nina, Gabe, Lowenna, and Alice—and condensed, flitting past guards and miners to reach the threat before it was too late. Whoever was in pain was within the throes of death, but if he didn't focus on the perilous first, more than one human might perish.

A tough choice to make, one he needed to make all the same.

His days had long since melted into an endless stretch, with little opportunity to rest as he healed the injured, recovered the sick, captured things too perilous for the human world, and ensured artefacts were safe...enough.

Never mind that maundering man in his oversized home, who would often request Tau's presence. If not outright hunt

him down.

Tau looked down at a worker. They were afraid of him. Most non-miners were, something that was beyond his control.

“Mister Pavlov has asked you to join him today.” He didn’t know their name. This one was bland, lacking that note of dwimmer the miners all possessed. “A new drift he wants to open.”

Tau did not care. Changes made little difference when humans hurtled themselves into ruin no matter what.

He walked away.

“I’ll take that as a no?” the worker called after him.

Not even once all his charges went to rest could Tau relax, when someone’s distress often called him over. Humans felt shock in equal measures, whether they burnt themselves on sustenance or discovered their bones broken. Every accident, insignificant or deadly, needed to be investigated for that reason alone.

His role was taking its toll. A sense of hopelessness eking its way into his core where his only solace had become Oliver.

So accident-prone, always taking up a good portion of his vitality, but forever pleased to see him. Oliver often spoke at length about things Tau didn’t always understand, but he listened intently all the same. Content to let the soothing tone of his voice drift around him. Storing it for later, when he needed it.

“I still need to pay Ben back for feeding me,” said Oliver.

Tau had just recovered Oliver's forelimb, which had been shattered. Tau still didn't understand how his human injured himself so severely, and so often at that. He *did* know Oliver sometimes needed a moment to recover from the shock of his injuries. So, Tau stood with him outside of his working drift. While Oliver sat, slender legs spread and curious green eyes—his favourite, *favourite* colour—peering up at him. Tau always had a moment to spare for him, everyone else could wait.

Favourite.

“Would be nice if I could get more fabric though,” Oliver continued, his shoulders slumped with the weight of defeat. “Ugh, just wish we'd find *something*. I hate these dry spells. Why is it always us?” Favoured green eyes drifted up, flicking from the tip of his hood down to his toes. “One day, I'm going to find out what fabric your clothes are made of.” Then that beautiful gaze shifted from side to side, guiltily. “It feels amazing.”

Tau turned to his gawky human in full. He wished Oliver luck, he would never find out. No matter how often Oliver snuck touches that were most welcomed.

“Maybe when I learn how to sew properly, I can make you something. Would you wear it?”

Did he mean he wanted to give him a gift? Tau couldn't recall a time anyone had given him anything, other than grief. He rather liked the idea of a gift.

“I might be able to make you a pointy hat. Seems easier than pillows,” Oliver continued. “You could just pull it over your

green one, wear it as a nightcap.”

Oliver looked over his shoulder into the drift, at his friends. They were still hard at work. Maji was listening in, failing to be discreet. Tau resisted the need to pelt her with a rock, unsure of where that need even came from when he liked Maji well enough.

“I know the stuff I make is terrible, but I try, you know? I just want Ben to have something to cuddle.”

Cuddle.

Tau didn't know what that was, but maybe Oliver would show him some time. Needing to move on, he bent low to touch that angled yet lithe shoulder in farewell, then condensed.

He sensed a calling from the Elders, had for a while now, although ignored it in favour of performing his duties. Annoyingly, the call became more urgent with each passing day. Like a persistent scratching in the centre his head, ignoring it would only drive him to madness.

One reluctant evening, Tau made his unwilling way up. Most of his charges were resting, others in town or struggling with unsettling visions that sometimes occurred while they slept. It would have been easy enough to ignore if he didn't also endure their distress.

For his own sake, he increased the number of solace lights in the passageways. The ceiling grew dense with green embers, easing the humans into a more comfortable state.

He winged through the passageways in his condensed form, the preferred way to travel when he made use of lifts that did not accommodate his height. Once reaching the cave where humans partook in activities he also didn't understand, Tau shot upward and out to the surface.

The sky was ablaze with some of his least favourite colours as he slipped past the first line of trees, enveloped in the hush of nature and pliant layers of snow. Far into the forest, a circular clearing awaited. A warm zephyr swept through long grass, enlivening the blades with ghost-like whispers, tips awash with deep pinks of the waning sun. The snow did not reach this place, nor the rain. If he listened keenly, Tau could hear a strange buzz, not dissimilar to what he heard from the odd statues of him in the oversized home.

Electric.

He stilled in the centre of the clearing and waved his arm once. Within the invisible wall separating their realms, a triangular door blinked into existence, casting an unnatural light across pinkened grass.

A doorway to his home.

One he could not travel through again, not until he completed his task as Guardian. Humans needed to be protected for as long as they wanted to uncover the transmundane. It was meant to be an honour. Gazing into the light beyond, a pang of homesickness hit him all the same.

Not that he could remember what home was like when it had been too long.

Although unwilling at first, Tau didn't want to trade his role for anything now, having put too much into it. Even if it was often spoiled by lingering memories of how the Elders had forced him into compliance. They still made him shudder.

Tau's dislike for them, however, didn't ease the ache in his core, knowing he might never return. Not for as long as humanity existed. It wouldn't be forever, but a long time even by his standards.

With rapidly dwindling patience, Tau faced the Proxies who emerged, humans acting on behalf of his Elders, expecting reprimand for his failures.

He shouldn't have entered another realm, even if it was to drag Oliver and Lucetta out. The consequences to his core were dismal at best. Similarly, Tau knew he shouldn't have pulled both humans into a chambered dimension, even if they had been in the way. Much like he shouldn't have allowed himself to be surprised by the behemoth.

While Tau had detected some amount of risk emanating from the portal, the true scale of it had remained hidden until he came face to face with it. Rather than attempt to transport it to his home for the Elders to deal with, he'd panicked. Done the only thing he could think at the time and pushed the entity back into a realm already open, the less consuming alternative to opening a new portal.

Eventually, the behemoth would return. Tau knew that, too.

Problem for another time.

Strangely, the Proxies said nothing of those things. They offered him meaningless platitudes, then handed him a black canary.

“From—fuck,” said one, gesturing wildly, “What was the name?”

“Why are you asking me?” said the other. “For miner number nine hundred-thirty-four. Benjamin...something.”

Numbers were meaningless to Tau. He wondered which Benjamin, since there were two. Were they going to make him guess?

Maybe so.

Since he wasn't given a choice in the matter, Tau took the bird. It was minuscule, delicate. If he squeezed, it might pop with a tiny explosion of feathers. Distracted, Tau scarcely noticed the Proxies bidding him farewell. He looked up only once the door closed with a hiss, shutting away the odd light and vanishing.

For a while, Tau remained in that same spot. He liked the way mice sprinted through the grass, the chitter of insects, and how owls flew overhead with enviable silence. Sometimes they hooted.

Tau thought they were saying hullo, the way Oliver always did when he passed him by. The benighted canary's tweets were jarring in the surrounding stillness. He refrained from squeezing the bird no matter how tempting, familiar with their

ability to warn of hazards. Although there was something unique about this one. He just couldn't pinpoint what.

Tau glanced past the trees, sensing his favourite humans returning—and Benjamin.

Good.

He'd worried for Oliver.

Clumsy Oliver.

Tau neared the edge of where a path fractured the forest. For a moment, he observed the four from the shadows. He felt their sadness, knew what brought it on. The dolour of loss too specific to ignore. He didn't want to put up with it. He could deliver the bird to the other Benjamin—

“What are you doing here, are you okay?”

Regrets.

Maybe with the gift would also come some semblance of forgiveness.

Maybe not.

With the bird delivered, Tau resumed his duties. He missed the days spent outside, attempting to comprehend the time for humans to keep, back when they appreciated his efforts. But he could no longer afford to indulge in staying outside. The miners liked to speak ill of him enough as it was.

Tau peered inside Maji's nursery on his way down to ensure everything remained healthy, helped himself to a wayward bottle, then scouted every crevice and niche as he always did.

Despite his dislike for wetness, he leaned into the hot springs cave on occasion. Checked over other caves too, often lingering in the one where the humans did things with each other. Sometimes, he watched.

Touch, touch.

He might never comprehend what it was they did, but Tau understood they were enjoying themselves. He moved on, and a unique sense of disquiet pulsed out to him, settling like a rock in his core.

Tau brushed past miners to hurry down, squeezed through a narrow gap and entered a chamber. His insides writhed at the brand of dwimmer filling the space.

“Hi, Tau.”

Oliver was pleased to see him, as always, straightening up from where he crouched by a diminutive statue. A prison, maintained as such by the mushrooms. That made the dwimmer no less revolting.

Tau dipped his head, then reached out to graze a shoulder radiating with heat. Oliver smiled up at him, bright green eyes reflecting many colours, filling Tau with the urge to touch them. Pluck those eyes out to keep whenever he wanted to look at them.

Bad concept. Bad.

“Is everything okay?” Maji asked, lingering near a cluster of mushrooms pulsating with light, fingers twitching at her sides.

“We didn’t touch anything,” said Lucetta with a sharp look at Maji. “No matter how much one of us wanted to.”

“But they’re so pretty!”

Taking no chances this time, Tau opened a chambered dimension to pull himself and the wooden statue inside. Surrounded by nothing but darkness, the vibrant green barrier encircled both the casing and him. Patiently, he waited for whatever lurked within to reveal itself when from his peripheral, something scrambled about on four bony limbs.

Clumsy but quick, barely visible, cackling with glee. Tau stayed, confident the creature was still inside the circle.

Fingers grasped at his attire from behind, thin legs scaled him and wrapped around his waist. They locked at the ankles and forelimbs snaked around his neck, holding tight. Tau knew he outmatched nearly everything, including whatever this thing was, and wasn’t bothered. That he didn’t need oxygen to survive helped.

“Ooh, a Guardian,” said the creature, cackling still. *“You don’t sleep or dream? How dull!”*

Limbs released him. A push of two feet against Tau’s lower back—he turned in time to see bony legs and ragged clothing vanish. The creature had just hopped out of the circle and disappeared into the darkness without being burned.

...Bad.

He shot light spheres after it, crumbling the darkness away like sandstone. He was back inside the cave aglow with

mushrooms not of this world. The wooden prison remained, although he knew it to be empty now. The creature was gone, and so was everyone else.

Tau was alone and confused.

Listening for disturbances, he squirmed through the narrow exit. Unable to detect anything that didn't belong, he carried on, making his way through every quiet passageway upwards. Once near the lodgings, Tau focused on his humans. They were all accounted for and tucked away in their safe spaces. Although many of them endured bad visions.

He ignored it as he often had to and carried on, stopping only once outside Oliver's home. Sensing him to be awake still, Tau invited himself in, hoping he'd be able to help clear things up.

Oliver jumped where he sat on the bed.

Mistake.

Humans had a way of announcing their arrival first.

Too late.

Tau ducked inside once the door finished wobbling and claimed a seat on the lowest possible surface other than the floor. As it happened, it was beside Oliver, who looked stunned and out of place amongst the many bold colours of his furnishings. He was clutching at the bottle of solace lights he'd given him and the sight of it filled Tau with joy. He needed to find something else to give him.

“We wondered where you went!” Oliver shifted to give him more space. “We're used to you disappearing with the bad

stuff for a while, but you were gone for *hours*. Maji nearly robbed the cave blind. I tried waiting for you, but it got late. The guards doing their last rounds told me to get lost. As you can see, I'm...oh. I'm in my long-johns."

Oliver was always kind and behaved in a way that fascinated him. On occasion, such as in that very instance, his face went pink, most prominently over his nose and cheeks. Tau didn't fully understand why, not yet, but he thought maybe he liked pink, after all.

"So uh, why are you here on—on my bed? Not—Not that I'm complaining! Long-standing fantasy of mine. What I mean is, you look good there. No, wait—what I meant—"

An odd noise left Oliver. Tau didn't have the faintest idea what he meant, but it amused him all the same. The scant yet sometimes mighty human watched him with those eyes. Like moss turned vibrant with dwimmer in an otherwise impenetrable darkness. Oliver's hair, an undulation of gold. That skin, alabaster tinged pink. And his mouth.

Soft.

Tau knew it was because, in a moment of daring, he had touched those lips. What if he were to touch them again, right now? What if he were to touch other parts? Just being here, sitting so close, thrilled him in ways he had no hope of explaining. All Tau knew was that he wanted to touch.

Touch.

"Are you okay?" asked Oliver.

Tau pulled himself back, wondering how he might explain what had transpired. Wasn't confident he could make sense of things himself. An entity not only escaped the barrier but the chambered dimension, something that shouldn't have been possible. And somehow, there were no traces of the creature.

He sensed nothing out of the ordinary, which on its own was unusual when there was always background noise. Artefacts, creatures and portals alike pulsed out signals non-stop, even if obscure. Now there was nothing but silence, broken only by the distress of sleeping humans.

Many more, now.

“Tau?”

He looked back at Oliver and pushed that a creature lurked within the mine. It had to be.

“I appreciate the warning, I think.” Oliver's face scrunched up. He drew his legs up and shifted further onto the bed, cradling the bottle tight. “But now I'm just scared there's something under my bed waiting to get me. There isn't, is there?”

Tau wanted to be understood, pushed again that Oliver needed to be cautious, to be ready for the unknown.

“You're scaring me like nothing else right now,” said Oliver. “Look, Tau, I know you can talk. I tried not to bring it up again. I'm sorry if it upsets you but... Why won't you? It's just us here. I won't tell anyone, I promise.”

A concept.

A bad one, but a concept all the same. Even if Tau could be bothered with the effort it took to speak, his voice was lost on this plane. It would require transporting Oliver into a chambered dimension, at least, for him to be heard. Unfortunately, humans weren't meant to be inside temporary planes, or any realm where the flow of existence passed so significantly, it would alter their physical well-being. Not without certain dwimmer. Oliver and Lucetta didn't know how lucky they were to have come out so quickly. All of which was well beyond Tau's ability to explain.

He tilted his head. Oliver heaved a sigh.

"Never mind. I'll just pretend I imagined it." Oliver leaned back against the wall. "Shame, though. If that *was* you I heard, then you have an amazing voice. I could listen to it for days."

A compliment. Tau didn't get them often.

"Especially compared to that gigantic pile of corpses."

A shudder ran through Oliver's lissom frame. Tau didn't disagree. It had been unpleasant.

"I kept having nightmares about it until you gave me this."

Green eyes were on him. They made Tau want to neglect everything, just so he could stay and relish looking into them. Bask in how close they were. Oliver was *so warm*.

"Probably shouldn't say this..." Oliver stroked the bottle cradled against his sternum, and Tau willed him to say whatever he wanted to. Say it. *Say it*. "But I sleep with this. It helps. The more I stare at it and hold it, the better I feel."

It pleased him that his gift worked as intended. He'd been well aware of the disorder in Oliver's mind, the worry. The fear muddling his thoughts. Tau leaned in, so closely Oliver's breath hitched, green eyes widening. Pink tongue darting out to glisten soft, pink lips. That green gaze left him, directed out the window instead, as that pink hue spread down Oliver's neck.

Pink was a good colour, definitely.

“Thanks, by the way. I don't know if I say it enough but—
WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?”

Tau jerked back at the astounding volume. He was glad Oliver's lungs were in good working order, at least. Unlike when they first met.

Oliver jumped to his feet and pointed wildly at the circular window, an intense fear creeping through him.

“It was a goblin or something. I just saw it crawl through Helen and Anna's window!” Oliver gasped, whirling to stare at Tau. “It's a *Nightmare Hag*. The wooden statue we found held a Hag! I thought you were supposed to take care of it?”

Tau tried not to take that personally, rushing out. His foot connected with the door to the other burrow. It splintered under the impact.

Sitting atop Helen's chest on the bed, the hag gleefully looked down, inhaling through wide, twitchy nostrils as it fed on her fear. A surge of anger coursed through Tau, manifesting as empyreal spheres. They trounced the creature, sent it flying

across the burrow. It screeched, colliding with a wall before thumping to the floor.

The hag scrambled up. On both hands and feet it made to flee. Another sphere hit it squarely in the face. The hag jerked and twitched where it lay on the ground, then rose back up, crawling as far as the window before Tau hit it another time. It thumped to the floor again, cordyceps flying off it to scatter across the floor.

He was holding back. He had to when sending the creature anywhere other than back to its prison was forbidden. Even if it was invasive and annoying. Still, for the hag to have withstood one of his blows, let alone three was impressive. Unusual and disconcerting, but impressive.

“What on Earth is going on?” Helen curled up in fright with her favourite person on the bed, shivering and eyes wide. “Sentinel Tau, what *is* that?”

It didn't assuage their fear when Oliver burst inside, breaking what little of the door remained flapping on its hinges. He muttered a quick, “Sorry about your door,” as he hurried to Tau's side for a look.

The creature was but a skeleton with loose skin and sinew, wearing what resembled the sacks miners used to carry artefacts in. The rough fabric was stained and torn, haphazardly tied to its meagre form with rope. Its matted hair stuck to the sides of its head, the skin wrinkled and filthy, cordyceps sprouting in various places. Tau recognised the kind, although failed to place where he'd seen them. They

were different to the glowing fungus within the uncovered chamber, he knew that at least.

“Knew I saw something!” Oliver’s heart blazed with excitement despite the face he made at it.

“Someone explain what just happened!” demanded Anna. “Is that a Nightmare Hag? What’s it doing here?” The commotion drew several other miners out of their homes to peer in with flagrant curiosity. “Close the door!”

“It’s broken!” yelled Oliver.

“Then fix it!”

Their distress was distracting. Tau needed to make things better, held up his hand to cast more solace lights—but he had an entity to deal with. Tau turned back. The hag was gone.

Very Bad.

His humans would never let him forget this.

Oliver’s half-hearted attempt to fix the door was pointless. Tau watched him with an increasing sense of misery. The hag couldn’t harm them, but their mental contentment was as important to him as their physical well-being.

“Come on, Tau,” said Oliver, now simply kicking at the last remnants of the door. “We can go chase after it!”

Tau darted past Oliver and out the burrow. He shoved at and yanked aside anyone not quick enough to get out of his way. He stopped in the middle of the passageway, scouring for signs.

Gnomes scurried out from behind a stack of crates, their fleshy folds wobbling with every hop. A flick of his wrist. Light lanced the crates, scattering wood and lumpy stones that rolled a distance away. They developed tiny, rocky legs and ran off in every direction, quick like mice, their delighted squeals echoing.

“My geodes!” someone cried.

Tau glimpsed the hag, moving so much faster. Its cackling raked the passageway, taunting him. The hag disappeared through a window, narrowly missing another blast of light. The spheres hit the wall instead, a crack serrating to the ceiling. Tau leapt forward with a growl. He tore out a door, the tips of his digits digging into the wood. He shook it off, tossed the door aside, nearly maiming a miner.

As soon as he entered, Tau nearly tipped forward, catching himself in time and ducking low to avoid hitting his head at the same time. The burrow was so cramped he couldn't go beyond its entrance. He ignored the elderly occupant sitting at a desk and blasted a path through the clutter, sending books and papers and all manner of things asunder. Too late. The hag was gone. Now there were only ruined things.

Fury turned hot in his chest. More cackling leapt at him from somewhere outside. This was maddening. He was going to kill it. His pride suffered, all while the hag threatened his humans. If it managed to escape him, withstand his dwimmer, Tau dreaded to find out what else it could do.

“Sentinel Tau!” Lucetta stood in his way, just outside the burrow. “Listen, we can get this thing together.”

Tau grabbed her by the shoulders and set her aside. He was less reserved about pushing his way through the others who came to observe the chaos. The crowd quickly became too dense and he had to stop himself from kicking them aside.

Despite the cost to his vitality, Tau transported to the end of the passageway.

He drew his arms against himself. Recalled every single extension of him that occupied the mine.

Hundreds of spheres. An avalanche effulgent as the sun, easing through the air towards him. Slowly. Gaining traction the closer they drew. Absolute darkness cloaked the mine when the last sphere sucked into him.

Tau vibrated with a vivacity he hadn’t experienced in a long time. As the power of his dwimmer built, so did the hum accompanying it. Until it became a steady, loud strum shaking the surrounding stone.

“Get inside!”

“Cover your eyes!”

Release.

A shockwave of incandescence erupted, shaking the walls, the ground. It sent parts of the ceiling crashing down, ruined struts, shattered windows and created chasms throughout the mountain. Miners screamed, their terror intensifying with each wave until the last remnants of light swept the tunnels.

All went dark again.

Disembodied whispers and pained whimpers breached the gloom. Tau held up a hand, recast each sun. The spheres made their way back to where they belonged in the mountain, innocent and stationary once more.

Feeling calmer now, he approached the twitching form lying near someone's home. Its aliveness was a wonder, but that would not be the case for long. Tau bent low and picked it up by the ankle. The creature swung to and fro, upside down, its cackle no longer blithe. The mushrooms covering it were gone. Tau now remembered where he'd seen the same cordyceps. He had seen them on the behemoth.

"Was I difficult, so-called Guardian?" asked the hag with a grin that had no traces of humour.

A vivid green circle encased them both. Tau tossed the hag to the ground before him. He expected it to move again, almost dared it to. He couldn't allow this thing to exist in the human realm. Neither did he want to risk it escaping inside his home world.

The hag sat still, looking at him with hooded eyes, knowing its fate.

Tau raised a hand.

Closed it into a fist.

The undulating circle narrowed, lifting off the ground until caught around the creature's midriff. The hag's screeches of pain scraped the rugged walls, its body cleaving in two. Thick

blood oozed beneath the two halves when they flopped to the ground, twitching idly.

Tau looked at it for a moment, then left. The humans would have to deal with the aftermath on their own. He was tired.

Many mutterings and whispers of demur followed that Tau tried to ignore. It was another night, blessedly quiet. He sought solace in a modest cave deep down, long since forgotten about. Once, it housed a brightly glowing tree, its leaves aflutter, like moths. Tiny, long-bodied creatures used to live inside it, called the tree their home. They had always greeted him with a kinship he couldn't find anywhere else.

That was gone now, and the cave was barren. He sat on an outcrop in the back, taking a moment for himself before the inevitable drag of the following day. Tau raised his hands to open his compendium, ready to compile the events with the hag, when movement near the ingress of the cave caught his attention.

“Oh, there you are.” Oliver walked inside, in a red jumper Tau had seen on Benjamin long before. Even though it hung off him like a sheet, Oliver wore it on nights he wandered the mine. “I messed up my fingers. It's not too bad, but kind of annoying. Would you mind?”

Oliver shook back the long sleeve and held out his hand. The digits were at odd angles. How had he not sensed such an injury? Oliver was tough, maybe that was why.

Tau reached out and set them right, satisfied when bones popped back in place. Oliver wiggled his fingers to test them

and smiled. Something about it shone light into his core and made him ache at the same time.

“Thank you.” He moved to sit at the foot of the outcrop, directly beside Tau’s legs. Oliver was so close he could feel the warmth radiate off him. “Are you okay?”

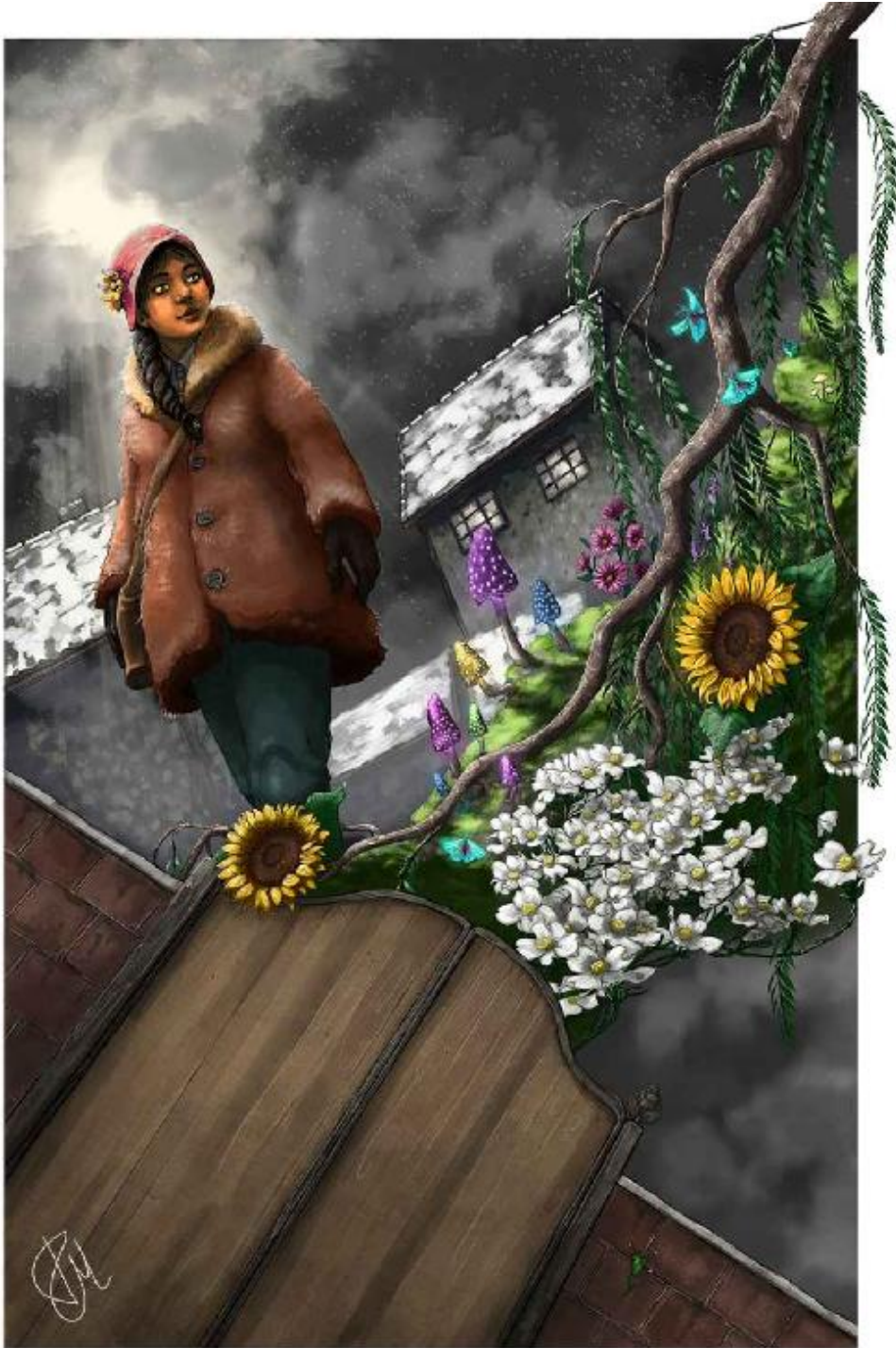
Although the question was directed at the ingress, Tau assumed it was meant for him. He observed his human’s frame.

Lithesome. Pliant.

What would he answer with, if Oliver could hear him? Would he confess he wasn’t feeling well? Because he wasn’t. He was worn down, like every remnant of him drained away in a persistent trickle, impossible to plug.

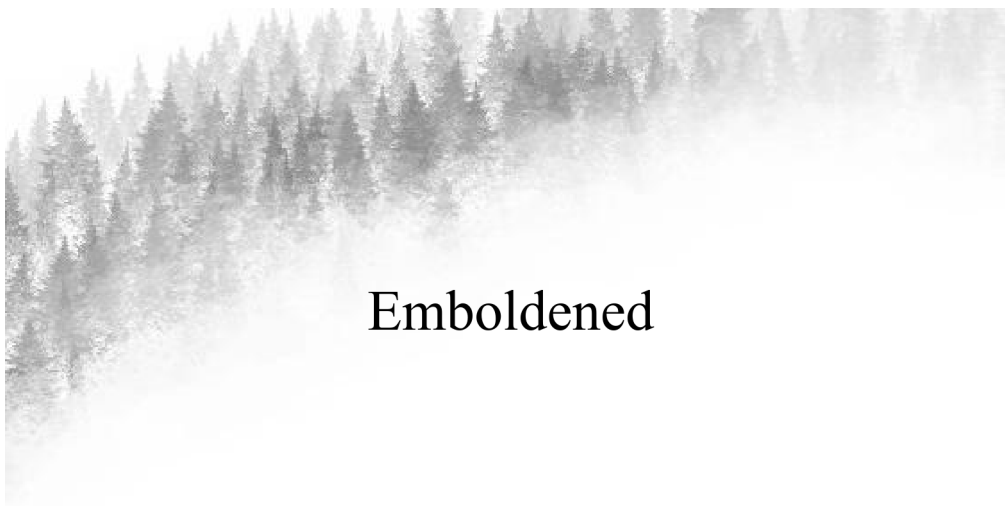
“I’m sorry. I wish there was something I could do.”

His company was enough. Tau appreciated it, more than he could ever express.





Eight



Emboldened

Rays of a late afternoon sun graced the edges of gloomy clouds, resplendent in primrose yellows.

Winter had arrived early in Plainwall. Fine layers of snow dusted gabled rooftops, although had yet to reach the cobblestone. Maji shrugged her shoulders and stamped her feet against the cold, longing for the reprieve of Tau's magic. She often wondered if the Sentinel was made of sunlight. His magic appeared to be, dazzling as it was warming.

For a century, Sentinels had occupied their world and still were a mystery. The only one who ever spoke to humans was Alpha, declared expired so long ago. Their existence was only a distant memory. No other Sentinel ever spoke a word since. Books told Maji they first emerged through a triangle door. Now, they miraculously appeared where new magical ambits did.

Originating from a world made perfect by magic, Sentinels introduced humankind to it, aiding in the discovery of magical artefacts with a wish to protect and nothing more. Since, the

human world had laid itself open to numerous miracles. Maji's own village sat by a Minor ambit, its hum a gentle melody she'd grown up with.

She packed away unsold stock from a day spent at the market and slung her leather satchel over her shoulder. Sweeping her gaze over the concourse of people, a familiar tweed cap and dark curls stood out by a vendor several stalls down.

"Do you think Tau's homeworld is the sun?" Maji asked when reaching Lucetta.

"Hi, Maji," said Lucetta dryly, depositing coins into the vendor's hand, her smile sugary when he passed her a parcel. "Nobody knows. You can try asking Tau again. He might give you an answer this time, now that we know he can talk."

"That's unlikely," said Maji, sighing.

"Thanks, Nils." Lucetta offered the vendor a saucy wink. "It's always a pleasure doing business with you."

"Please, don't come back," the vendor called after her, sounding defeated.

"What did you get?"

Lucetta's full lips stretched into a wide, satisfied smile. "Beef jerky. Only twenty-two cents."

"One day, you're going to pay people the full asking price," said Maji.

"That's unlikely."

“As unlikely as asking Ben to cure meats for you?”

They both threw their heads back and cackled, trekking uphill out of the market.

Entering the Crowded Foxhole, Maji sniffled noisily. It was a relief to be out of the cold, but the inn was fusty and loud. She removed her peony-pink cloche and fought through the dense crowd. Sticky and Benjamin were at the table in the back with Marcy and two pitchers of Cosmic Ale.

“Hi, Marcy.” Maji nipped at her gloves to slide them off, sitting beside her.

“Hi, you two!”

“This place is heaving,” Lucetta grouched, squeezing in beside Maji.

“I’ve been running around like a headless imp,” Marcy said, not entirely displeased. “Had to hire temporary help.”

Word about Tau’s frantic hunt for the Hag had spread quickly. Worse still was that he’d killed it in front of miners, something previously unheard of. It was of little surprise that reporters and scholars were flocking to Plainwall in droves. Three days since then and still, they lingered, hoping to learn more about what had been so powerful that it warranted such an unrestrained reaction.

“I know.” Sticky made a face. “I overheard someone planning to sneak into the mine.”

Lucetta scoffed. “Because that worked out so well for everyone before them?”

It had been no different when miners first encountered the Wandering Horror years ago. Maji would have thought that a tale of such a terrible creature would keep others at bay. It had certainly made her question whether she truly wanted to brave the Tesera Mine. Somehow though, it had done the exact opposite for others and everyone was just as eager to learn more now.

The only difference was that the Nightmare Hag hadn't been powerful. As demons went, Hags were harmless. Whatever his reason, that Tau had killed it was a rude awakening to what normally happened unseen. Of course, Maji knew that anything too perilous for humankind to endure was killed, but she had never *seen* it before. No one had.

“Did you do well selling your things?” asked Benjamin.

“I did.” Maji set her satchel down by her feet. “My lavender soap is popular. Sold so much more than last time.”

Enough that being short on funds for the upcoming month was no longer a worry. Lucky, when the Hag's wooden case had been far too ugly and damaged, fetching a pittance with a peddler. Since the two halves of its body were burned, they hadn't been able to sell those parts, either.

“Word might have gone 'round when you treated those idiots for burns after Tau...uh, did his thing,” said Sticky.

“Sent—” Benjamin sighed when Sticky stuck his tongue out at him. “It's about time your talent got the appreciation it deserves.”

“Erm, yeah.” Maji wiped her nose with a sleeve, frowning.

Lucetta helped herself to some ale, violet glimmers turbid in her glass. “Wonder if Pavlov will address it?”

“Since we’re on the subject,” Sticky gestured at the pitcher, “I was saying to Marcy how I’d love to get Tau a present since he’s always there for me—for us. Turns out you have the perfect gift in mind. Right, Marce?”

Ever so carefully, Marcy stroked Sticky across the hand he had resting on the table, her expression sombre, before she poured him another drink.

“Thank you.” Sticky beamed. “As it happens, Marcy said she knows a guy who knows a guy who will sell us a special trinket that Tau will like.”

When Maji turned to her, she appeared embarrassed.

“Not exactly,” Marcy said. “I know someone personally who might have an item that would be of interest to Sentinel Tau.”

“Sounds good, what is it?” asked Lucetta, tipping her glass to her lips for a hefty swig.

Sticky’s mouth twitched into a devious smile. “Sentinel Magic.”

Lucetta sputtered, successfully dousing Maji in violet glimmers. As Lucetta fought to regain control, Maji wiped her fur coat off as best she could when Marcy offered her apron.

The *thunk* of Lucetta’s glass sounded over the clamorous crowd when she set it down, movements slow and deliberate,

her throat flexing around coughs.

She glared at Sticky. “Why on Earth would we want to give a Sentinel, *Sentinel* Magic? He can produce his own!”

“Keep your voices down,” hissed Benjamin, his gaze nervously flicking to the patrons nearby.

“Not to mention you’re talking about something *illegal*,” continued Lucetta, as though she hadn’t heard him. “What else? Oh yeah, *it would cost a fortune.*”

Sticky’s smile turned toothy. “Marcy said she’d put in a good word for us. Didn’t you?”

“I did. They’re quite fond of me. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“You know what Tau’s magic does for us when we’re not feeling well, right?” said Sticky. “It would do the same thing for him. And anyway, it’d be like giving magic back to its source, wouldn’t it?” His look became pleading. “Please. He’s done so much for everyone, for me especially. I owe him my life several times over and I want the gift to mean something. I’ll pay you guys back. You know I will.”

“Well shit, when you put it that way.” Lucetta leaned back with a relenting sigh.

Maji looked at her in amusement before turning to Benjamin, surprised he hadn’t yet voiced any objections. Out of the three of them, he was the least likely to do something of questionable legality.

“You agreed to this?” Maji asked.

Benjamin shifted uncomfortably. “He did give me Onyx.” There came an odd pause. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Then, he said, “Still not sure what for, mind you. But the bird has been agreeable company.”

“Noisy, you mean,” interjected Lucetta. “I can hear that ball of feathers from my hovel.”

“Where is Onyx, anyway?” Sticky wrapped his lips around a paper straw to suck up the last remnants of his drink.

“No idea. Sometimes she disappears—mind your manners.” Benjamin nudged his shoulder. “I suppose I’m...happy enough to contribute.”

“I don’t mind either. I can’t believe we’ve never thought of this before,” said Maji. “Besides those commemorations he never goes to, does anyone ever bother to say thank you? It’s high time we did something for Tau. What a great idea!”

Looking especially pleased with himself, Sticky resumed his slurping, much to everyone’s annoyance.

“I’m surprised you know someone like that,” said Lucetta, to which Marcy appeared more abashed, still.

“Well, you know.” She waved a dismissive hand. “You meet all kinds of people when you travel.”

Marcy excused herself while they polished off their drinks. The four of them fought past the crowd, escaping with sighs of relief outside, where she caught up and pressed an envelope into Sticky’s hand. Maji peered at it in open curiosity.

“Their name is Hennessey,” said Marcy. “I’ve included directions once you reach Clathstead. What you’re after is called the Solar Octahedron. If I remember right, it’s Sentinel Tau’s magic. You’re forbidden from calling it a trinket.”

“Thank you, Marce. This means so much.”

Sticky lingered near her, staring at the ground by her feet. Marcy’s thin lips eased into a smile, and she pulled him into an embrace that nearly swallowed him whole. Sticky looked so pleased coming out of it that Maji immediately swooped in after.



“So who’s going down to meet with this Hensee?” asked Sticky on their way back up to the mine.

“It’s your day off tomorrow, isn’t it?” Maji said to Benjamin.

“Guess I’m going, then.”

“I’ll pass,” said Lucetta. “Got mining to do.”

That was of little surprise, when Lucetta preferred to work instead of actually enjoying things.

“I’ll go!” Sticky bellowed, nearby trees catching the echo of his voice.

He couldn’t, but Maji didn’t have the heart to say so out loud. Not when he looked so eager to banish good sense. There were other ways to get him to back down, though.

“We can rock, paper, scissors for who goes with Ben?”

Sticky made a noise of excitement. He stopped in the middle of the road to face her. “On three.”

Maji hid a smile when Lucetta cast her a discerning look. “One, two, three—”

“Aw!” Sticky cried, lowering his fist. “Best out of three. Come on!”

It was a contest she won. Sticky was far too easy to read. If Maji used rock, he would use paper the next round. If she used scissors, he would use rock the round after that. The trick was not to laugh when he sulked the rest of the way to the mine.

“I’m off to find scrap wood,” Benjamin announced, turning to Sticky. “Want to accompany me?”

“Bring me your money,” Maji called after Sticky, who grumbled something she didn’t catch. She followed Lucetta to her hovel, musing, “Ben’s been asking Sticky to go everywhere with him lately. Wonder why?”

“Oh, Maji.” A defeated sigh followed, but no clarification.

Lucetta’s hovel was clean and tidy, but her decor clashed horribly. Not a single piece of furniture matched. The patterned rugs faced various directions to better block out the cold, and her many books on geology and the transmundane were organised by colour, rather than title.

“I still think this is a silly way to organise your books.”

“So you’ve said.” Lucetta’s eyes sparkled with amusement.

The two trailing plants Maji had given her remained alive and well looked after atop the sturdy bookcases. Nearby, Lucetta snatched a glowing stone the size of her fist off a shelf. A mineral she had discovered, named Aqur—it was the first thing she had shown off when they met.

“What’s that for?” Maji asked.

“Sticky’s damn gift for Tau.” Lucetta released a long sigh. “This should fetch a good price, and I won’t have to dip into my savings.”

Maji gaped. “But—”

“It’s fine. It’s just cluttering the place up anyway.”

Maji ruefully eyed the stone. It was gaining traction as a jewellery stone with the middle class, from what Lucetta told her. The brilliance of the enchanted sun dulled its glow, but it was beautiful, the colour like tweedia.

“You’re such a softie.”

A click of a tongue met her remark.

They trudged along the tracks, eventually turning into an entryway supported by heavy and rusted steel arches, beyond which lay a spacious cavern. The Tesera Mine market wasn’t a fraction of Plainwall’s, but it had the essentials, including a tool dealer and barber. Large, arched windows were carved out of the rocky walls, with clusters of Tau’s suns pushed against them, allowing the illusion of surface-dwelling. The impressive formation of a turquoise dripstone occupied the

centre of the cave, luminescent water dripping into an abyssal, bottomless well below it.

Dropping coins into the well was considered bad luck, falling into it wasn't recommended either.

Peddlers liked to gather to outbid each other further in the back, surrounded by trickling stalagmites. They were haggard from travel, damp satchels bulky with wares and unique finds. Maji caught a glimpse of movement inside a leather bag, lambent moth-like wings whispering against a glass jar.

It didn't take long for Lucetta to sell the stone, or for Sticky to find them on their way back down to the lodgings. He was still sulking.

"Here." He threw a can near Maji's feet with a bit more force than strictly necessary, even without the curse's effects.

She eyed him, gathering it off the floor. "That's not all of your money, is it?"

"Nah. Just so you know, I let you win."

"Uh-huh." Maji smiled wryly.

At a sudden commotion behind them, Sticky's eyes lit up. That, along with the sound of lines snapping and people shouting suggested Tau was once again tearing laundry down.

"I just put those up!" someone cried as Tau strode past, dragging a clothesline across the ground behind him. The Sentinel abruptly turned his head to look at Sticky, whose smile became blinding.

“You’re the only one he ever acknowledges like that,” Maji said with some envy. She stepped aside to make room for those chasing after their now grimy washing.

Mostly, Tau ignored everyone. He popped into her nursery on occasion, the most she got out of him that wasn’t work-related.

Sticky’s smile turned coy. “Yeah.”



A day later found Maji in a cabriolet, trapped between its side and Benjamin. The driver’s whip cracked, jostling her into discomfited grunts as the mottled horse trotted down the cobblestone street. The town wobbled out of view, replaced by wayward trees and long grass speckled with the last remnants of late autumn flowers, otherwise bright yellows and vibrant blues dulled by the clouded sky. Maji almost regretted not letting Sticky go instead when the winter chill bit at her cheeks, and Benjamin knocking into her had upchuck threatening to make an appearance.

“How far is it again?” she asked, strained. “It’s been so long since I was last down there.”

“A few hours.” Benjamin held out his hand. “Give me those directions?”

Maji slapped the envelope into his hand and gasped at the bank notes sliding out of it. “I can’t believe she included money!”

“Her note says to use it. She wants to help and insists.” Benjamin sighed, idly sliding the notes between his fingers. “She’s always been kind like that.”

“I like her,” said Maji.

“She helped Sam get on his feet when he first came to Plainwall, you know.”

Maji hid her surprise at the mention of Samuel. “That’s right, you met in the inn, didn’t you?”

“Most handsome server I’d ever seen.”

Benjamin’s smile was sad, and Maji’s heart twisted at the sight of it. So she turned her focus to the directions, snatching the paper out of his hand.

“Through Midtown district, take a right on Pinnacle row, left on Mine Avenue. Look for a narrow alleyway on the right. You’ll know the house when you see ‘*them*’?”

Nestled at the foot of the mountain, Clathestead was a city of industrialism, built around machinery operating all hours of the day. Smokestacks stood against the grey sky, billowing plumes of a phillomot haze staining the horizon. Soot and grime blackened the brick structures, the streets were noisy with horse-drawn carriages, and automobiles haphazardly drove about.

The mine was far from quiet, with the constant trickling of water, howling winds, and its persistent hum, but the city was a different type of hectic. Smoke drew into Maji’s lungs with each breath, the people looked shady. Some so busy they

didn't stop to apologise for bumping into her when she tried to get out of the cabriolet. She couldn't say she cared for it.

“You alright?” Benjamin placed a supportive hand on her shoulder as they stood on the pavement.

“I'm not used to cities at all.” She was more than happy to stick close, already feeling lost. “Figures someone so shady would live in the city.”

Benjamin chuckled, then abruptly yanked Maji back.

The automobile that had nearly maimed her zoomed past, exhaust sputtering as if to insult. With widened eyes and more caution, they headed down to Midtown District, roads shimmering with recent rain, reflecting the shale grey sky. Beyond a narrow alleyway, uneven steps led them down a bricked path at the end of which stood a sturdy, two-door wooden gate, guarded by two Ursidae.

They were massive, looked like bears, yet were hairless from head to waist with the rest covered in fur, or so Maji presumed. They could have been wearing furry brown trousers for all she knew. Midnight armour looked heavy, imposing pauldrons in the shape of roaring bear heads and chest plates moulded into gaping maws. Massive, hairless clawed hands wielded halberds, their tunics bold in colour. One violet and yellow, the other rose red and white, which Maji remembered to be clan colours.

She had only ever heard about them and the war that sprung from opening a portal to their world. There remained plenty of animosity between humans and the Ursidae. If they were

standing guard for a human, then they had to be well compensated.

When she and Benjamin approached, Maji realised with a healthy amount of fear that the Ursidae were about twice her height. That on its own wasn't impressive, but they towered over Benjamin. They were taller even than Tau and burlier by far.

“We're here to see Hennessey. Marcy should have sent you a telegram.” Benjamin was remarkably calm even when both Ursidae pulled themselves up to their full height, glaring down their canescent snouts.

Maji fought the need to apologise and run away. Benjamin was a fierce combatant himself and surprisingly nimble, but if what she read about the Ursidae was true, then he stood no chance against even one of them.

“Oh, alright then. You can go through,” said the one in violet and yellow and Maji had to quell a laugh. He sounded so *normal*, his voice a much higher pitch than expected, a distinct accent marking each word.

“Sentinel's hindquarters, I thought we agreed to make visitors answer a riddle!” roared the one in red and white.

“Gorblimey, yeah. Uh, one of us always tells the truth and—hang on, how did it go again?”

“Ed, we rehearsed this!”

“I know. I'm sorry Fred.”

Fred snorted angrily. “Never mind! Just go. Pick either door, both open.”

“I’m sorry, alright? I’m forgetful,” said Ed. “Besides, I don’t think one leads to death. Both doors open to the same place, right?”

Maji and Benjamin edged between them through the gate, walking up to a brick estate, followed by the arguing that continued after the gate slammed shut.

“Wow, they’re adorable,” murmured Maji.

“No, we’re not!” Fred shouted over the gate, round naked ears twitching. “We’re fierce warriors and you better remember it!”

“Sorry!” Maji slapped her hands across her mouth to stop her giggling.

Benjamin grunted in amusement. “Wasn’t expecting that.”

He rapped on the door with a knocker beautifully crafted into the shape of a delicate hand. It was odd, as was the entire atmosphere of the estate. Its brickwork and cresting were clean compared to the rest of the city, yet everything had a neglected air about it. Dusty windows, overgrown plants, rose bushes in dire need of cutting back.

The door swung open, revealing a person so ancient her head hung well past her shoulders. She moved aside in a stagnant shuffle to let them enter, and the heavy door groaned shut behind them on its own accord.

“We’re here to see Hennessey?” said Benjamin.

The woman didn't respond, her wooden clogs scraping across worn flooring as she led them down a hallway into a study. The room smelled of something familiar, although Maji couldn't put her finger on what it might be. Cobwebs fogged the corners and paintings choked the burgundy walls. One to Maji's left was of an empty room with only a hearth and a rocking chair. A long face flickered up within the flames.

Below it, a dusty dresser featured a peculiar cube with smaller, boldly coloured squares. Beside it, a plush bear that had seen better days. Displays of insects and vivariums with furry little creatures occupied most of the room, and an ornate desk was situated near tall windows. Rather than permitting daylight through, the navy curtains were drawn and the electrical lights were on, their buzz interfering with the hum of magic that vibrated throughout.

And at the desk sat Hennessey.

Well groomed, delicate build and features, their skin pale. Hennessey's sleek hair neared white, combed back and just long enough to tickle the shells of their ears. They were dressed in a smart black morning coat, barely revealing a teal vest. As soon as the tiny old woman coughed to announce their arrival, Hennessey looked up with violet eyes.

"Hm, who are you?" Hennessey asked, only to raise a slender finger. "Marcy's friends. Good old Marcy, how is she?"

"Not old," said Benjamin and Maji had to hide a smirk.

"Indeed." Hennessey looked at them, and said nothing else.

Maji had the crazy notion their eyes were now green. “Uhm, we’re here to buy the Solar Octahedron?”

Since her initial judgement of the Ursidae was obliterated, she felt brave enough to speak up. Maybe Hennessey would not be so bad either, despite dealing in illegal items. And maybe those weren’t the same caterpillar-like creatures that had been removed from a cave in the Tesera Mine years ago, tapping their tiny fists against the glass, trying to get her attention.

“Why?”

The question caught Maji off guard. When both she and Benjamin floundered for an answer, Hennessey tittered. They rose from the chair to round the desk, perching on the edge of it and crossing their legs at the ankles, hands sliding into the pockets of grey pinstripe slacks.

“You’re miners. You have Sentinel magic at your disposal, do you not?”

“Oh, right.” Maji wondered if Marcy had divulged such information. “We want to do something nice for our Sentinel, cheer him up a bit.”

“*Him?* Goodness, the disrespect!” Hennessey laughed again.

It was a strange, mendacious kind of laugh, and Maji bristled. Becoming overly friendly with Tau was Sticky’s doing, and it had caught on—mostly.

“Uhm, in any case... Since I can’t bottle sunlight, we wanted to get him the next best thing.”

Hennessey's mirth intensified. "Bottling sunlight. My, what an idea. Why can't you?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Why can't you bottle sunlight?"

"I..." Maji didn't know how to answer that. She felt stupid. It was possible to contain Tau's light magic, which was what a Solar Octahedron was, from what she gathered, but not actual sunlight... Surely?

"I don't know," she finished lamely.

Hennessey regarded her for another moment, then shrugged their lean shoulders. "So you want to do something nice for your Sentinel. Very touching. What's got Sentinel Tau down? They've been around for far longer than you two combined, you know. What makes you think a god needs your help?"

"He doesn't need our help," said Maji, now convinced Hennessey was deliberately needling her. "We want to do something nice for him, like I said. Tau deserves it, he's our friend."

Seemed Hennessey's amusement was unlikely to wane any time soon. "A friend. Do you truly believe that? We throw annual ceremonies in their honour, isn't that enough?"

"For constantly saving our lives? No, I don't think it is."

"Look," Benjamin began, tersely, "we want to buy the Solar Octahedron, we have money. What difference does the 'why' of it make to you?"

“Take no offence, little darlings. You understand, of course, that Sentinel magic *outside* of any mystical mine is highly illegal. If I had anything of the sort, I’d be placing myself at risk of arrest. Prison is no place for me, my constitution is far too delicate. Would you care for some tea, by the way?”

“No, thank you,” said Benjamin. “I would’ve thought having a Silt Parasite would be enough to get you into trouble, were the wrong person to walk in here.”

He pointed at a square vivarium halfway filled with loose grey silt. It stood positioned in plain sight near the desk on a wood pedestal. Something dark slithered inside. Maji didn’t know what a Silt Parasite was, but it sounded awful. Hennessey made a noise of delight.

“Clever pitman. Why yes, that’s exactly what that is. Nasty critters. This one was caught in the T. Mine, you know. Only dear, broken Sentinel Tau would permit something like that to escape.” Hennessey smiled in a way that made Maji want to jump up and smack them in the face. “In any case, I’m afraid I can’t sell you what you’re asking for.”

“What? I thought it was all set up!” snapped Benjamin.

“It was, and then I changed my mind.” Hennessey sounded very casual about it.

Maji blinked.

Then found her vision obstructed by Hennessey, so close she smelled something sweet on their breath. Their skin changed

from fair to pallid and those eyes, they were without a doubt violet.

“Give me what you have in your bag. It belongs to us.”

Maji yelped, stumbling backwards. Something caught her heel and she flailed, falling flat on her backside. Her satchel slipped off her shoulder and to the floor, the bottles within clinking harshly. When she looked up, Hennessey was right where they were before, sitting at the edge of the desk and feigning bemusement.

“You alright?” Benjamin hoisted her back up by an arm.

Wordlessly, Maji gathered her satchel and, careful not to injure herself on glass bottles that might be broken now, reached inside to pull out a round wooden container. She ignored Benjamin’s perplexed expression as Hennessey pushed off the desk and snatched the box out of her hand. Setting it aside on a table cluttered with displays of glittery insects, they approached an old-fashioned wardrobe near the door. It opened with a high-pitched creak, releasing moths the size of birds that took to fluttering along the ceiling.

“If I know Sentinel Tau, and I assure you, I do *very* well,” continued Hennessey, “then They’ll simply consume the Solar Octahedron and it would forever be lost. So instead, I shall allow you to use this!”

They whipped out a fur mantle of such a pristine, vibrant white that it shimmered much like Tau’s robes. It had clean, unused brown leather straps with gold buckles, sharply reflecting the electric lights. Maji gasped in delight. It was

stunning, perfect for Tau. He liked to wear many layers anyway, maybe he'd enjoy wearing fur.

“Oh, that's nice. How much for that?” asked Benjamin.

“It's a gift!” Hennessey's thin lips peeled back to reveal unnaturally white teeth.

Benjamin tried to take it, but Maji slapped him across the forearm.

“No, thanks,” she said. “We'll pay for it. We have money.”

Hennessey's look dropped.



The price had been steep. Hennessey drained them of nearly every penny, including Marcy's contribution, only leaving them enough for the ride home. All of their wages combined for the next month, gone just like that.

Now that it was in her hands though, Maji couldn't stop stroking the mantle. Just touching it made her tingle, wearing it would feel like a mother's embrace. This was, without a doubt, imbued with Sentinel magic.

“Tau will be so happy with this,” said Maji dreamily once they were back inside a cabriolet. “I wonder whose magic this is.”

“He better be. Must admit, giving Hennessey all our money made my eyes water. Wasn't expecting it to cost that much. Why did you insist we pay for it?”

“Hennessey is Fae.”

Benjamin looked at her in shock. “What? How did I not pick up on that?”

Maji knew why. He’d lived in the mine for too long and before that, in a tiny town. Fae weren’t uncommon. Easily recognisable by their geometrically shaped magic and fanciful attire, but they avoided human places unless they had monetary reasons for being there. Maji hadn’t known for certain Hennessey was Fae until they showed their true colours. The offering of tea had been subtle. Intentionally so, she was sure, when Fae weren’t permitted to trick humans into servitude with offerings of hospitality, not while in the human world.

“What was in the box you gave?”

“I took some of the glowing mushrooms from that cave with the Hag. Forgot I had them, to be honest.”

Benjamin’s brows furrowed in confusion, but there were no explanations she could offer him. Maji didn’t know how Fae mushrooms found their way inside the mountain to grow around a prison for a Nightmare Hag. But then, she didn’t know how anything ended up inside the mountain, or any other mystical mine. Maji only knew what she’d learned during her training, which was no more than what anyone else knew. Nobody truly understood what created these areas so rife with magic. The only ones who could tell them were, most likely, the Sentinels.

“I suppose it’s a good thing you didn’t grow any,” said Benjamin, eventually.

“My mom would kill me if she found out I nearly tinkered with Fae magic. The mushrooms must have been enchanted.”

“To keep the Hag trapped where it was, you think?”

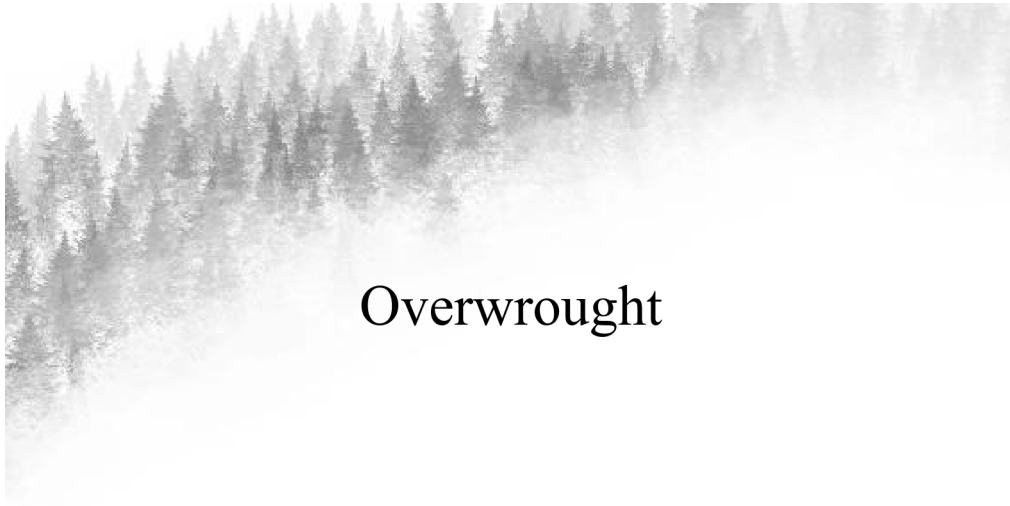
Maji made a noncommittal noise. She’d never been one to question a Sentinel’s decision on how to handle an entity, but there were entire groups of people who devoted their lives to proving Sentinels weren’t to be trusted, that they had an ulterior motive. Demons in disguise, using humans to upend things that needed to be left alone.

A bunch of horsefeathers told by the Antisents, of course.





Nine



Overwrought

Lucetta wrapped her citrine-coloured scarf more securely around herself, trying to block out the cold as much as the odd sense of loss. Eight years of working the mine, and she'd not once been without either Maji or Benjamin since meeting them.

Thick fog strangled the mountain, the gas-powered lanterns scarcely penetrating. Faint silhouettes of snow-heavy trees lining the road looked ghostly and unwelcome this time of the year. It was bitter in ways Lucetta was no longer accustomed to. Thankfully, Sticky was like a furnace, walking close by in silence.

Since entering the blue double doors, he seemed unsure around her. Lucetta knew he blamed himself for dragging her in, but there were only so many ways she could explain she'd grabbed him on her own accord. Even if she still struggled with nightmares, even if she continued to see a mountain of carrion and a boy with fingers cut off to the knuckle whenever

she closed her eyes, she was glad Sticky hadn't suffered those things on his own.

"You okay?" Lucetta asked.

"Yeah, why?" Sticky seemed to realise what she meant shortly after. Peridot eyes lowered to the road carpeted by snow. "Luce, I'm—"

"It's not your fault." She wound an arm around his shoulders and pulled him close. For good measure, she pressed a kiss to his temple and tried to ignore the twinge of sympathy when he closed his eyes and practically keened.

Sticky recovered shortly after with a clearing of his throat. "Haven't been out in months and suddenly I'm back here three times in a row. Should've picked a better time, I'm freezing my clock-weights off."

Lucetta's gaze snapped to a shadowy figure among the trees, her grin dropping. The guards weren't in this particular part. For a heart-stopping moment, she thought someone was looking to attack them. Her feet threatened to root themselves to the spot when out from the dense fog, an ageing man stepped over browned ferns.

It was just another miner. She recognised him as the man whose hovel Tau destroyed while hunting for the Hag.

"Suffering Sentinels!" Sticky's indignant cry fell flat against the snowfall. "You scared me! What are you doing off the road, you dunderpate?"

The old man furrowed his bushy brows but offered no response.

“You’re new, right? Welcome to the T. Mine. My name’s Lucetta, this is Oliver.”

“Thank you.”

An awkward pause followed.

“You’ve met our Sentinel with a bang, huh?” said Sticky. “He’s not normally like that.”

“Isn’t he?”

The old man didn’t sound impressed, surprised, or anything else discernible. He was no different from the average miner, if not too old. A charcoal cap hid his long and silver hair, and the lines of a man in his late sixties fanned his face. The clothes were typical, with denim coveralls and leather hobnail boots, along with a thick woollen coat.

Lucetta remembered the state of his hovel before Tau plucked her off the ground to set her aside. It looked like it had been chaotic well before invaded. On its own, finding heaps of things inside a miner’s hovel wasn’t unusual, a lot of them liked to hoard. For someone new to have accumulated that much in such a short amount of time was impressive, though. She was sure the old man joined only a month ago.

“Not to be forward,” said Sticky, and Lucetta immediately knew he was going to say something rude, “but aren’t you too rickety to be starting a mining career? You’ll drop dead before you even find a gnome.”

She moved to elbow him in the ribs. This time, Sticky hopped out of the way and flashed her a toothy grin.

“Never too old to learn new skills.”

“Right,” said Sticky, walking backwards. “Nice meeting you, I guess. Stay on the road. Tau won’t help if you do stupid things outside the mine.”

“Sentinel Tau,” said the old man, stopping them in their tracks.

“What’s that?” Sticky raised his eyebrows.

“You ought to refer to him as Sentinel Tau. Nothing good comes from trying to befriend them.”

“Right,” said Sticky again, this time in a huff. “*Sentinel* Tau won’t rescue you if you get lost in the forest.”

Lucetta snorted once they were out of earshot. “He’d get on great with Ben.”

“They’re so annoying with that. Tau doesn’t mind.”

Despite being too forward about it, Sticky had a point. Regular mining was difficult enough, mining for the transmundane was much more arduous. Everything needed to be done without the aid of machinery and required skills as a combatant. Perhaps the old man had little choice, or felt adventurous, or was just looking to gain new skills, as he’d claimed.

Once back through the adit, Lucetta and Sticky took the numerous cages down to resume work. Boarding one, in

particular, Tau entered in his condensed form, forcing them both into the corners of the cage. It hurt to look directly at the Sentinel like this, yet Sticky always stared as if it were a sport.

“Hi, Tau,” said Sticky, gaze lowering, shyly.

The Sentinel did nothing, leaving Sticky to look after him in dejection when he exited at another stop.

“Guess he’s still in a mood,” murmured Lucetta.

“Everyone’s being such an arsehole about the whole thing. It wasn’t even his fault.”

Lucetta smiled ruefully. Sticky would defend Tau regardless of what the Sentinel did. She didn’t know what to make of things, didn’t have enough information to draw any conclusions. So she kept her nose out of it.

“Sometimes I sit with him.” Sticky flushed, red cheeks visible in the luminous sphere directly above their heads. “At night, I mean, when I can’t sleep. We sit together.”

Lucetta pushed the gate open when the cage came to a stop and led the way. Maji had told her that Sticky and Tau spent time together, but he’d never directly mentioned it to her before.

“How long have you been doing that, then?”

“I don’t know. Started doing it after I...you know.” Awkwardly, Sticky embraced someone who wasn’t there.

Lucetta’s brows drew together. For two years, then. Right around the time Tau became less patient with everything and

attempted to communicate through feelings. There had to be a connection.

“Does he ever do anything?” she asked.

“Mostly I just talk to him and he stands in one spot, sometimes he sits. I’ve been trying to teach him games, like cards—”

“So *that’s* where Ben’s deck has gone.”

It looked like there was plenty Sticky wanted to say, or maybe confess, but he was about to reach for his hair. Lucetta snapped her fingers to stop him.

They walked past another drift entrance. A group of miners chased after a pint-sized creature running on its hind legs, dark robe and long tail swishing behind it. The lizard cried in dismay when the miners caught it in a sack and cheered.

Sticky stopped. He turned to Lucetta.

“I think I love him.”

The intensity behind the words made Lucetta do a double-take. When it became clear he wanted a response, she said, “Well, that was kind of obvious. But uh...”

“I know. You don’t have to say it.”

She hoped she didn’t. That was a love that would be forever unrequited.

“What about Ben?” she asked, hesitantly.

“What’s he got to do with it?”

“Well, you know...”

Sticky's straight brows knotted in confusion as they strode on. "Er, I'm sure he'd have some things to say about it. He doesn't need to know though. Don't tell him, alright? I know I'm being an idiot. I don't need him to say it too."

Lucetta gave him a look of incredulity. Did he honestly not know Benjamin harboured feelings for him?

"You daft bugger."

"What?"

Lucetta walked away without responding.

The chamber where they discovered the wooden statue was empty. In part thanks to Maji's efforts, but she'd heard Fae had snaked into the mine to retrieve what was, apparently, theirs. It was now blocked off by the same barrier Tau used for places off-limits. Coruscant and green, deceptively innocent in its appearance. Lucetta knew from first-hand experience that touching such barriers resulted in severe burns.

Jabbing at the stone in short, swift strokes, she snorted at the memory. Back when she first started, Samuel had warned her not to touch it, but she needed to see for herself. Too fresh-faced, stubborn, and eager to do the opposite of what he said. The faintest contact had resulted in burns so severe, she'd lost her fingertips. The pain had been ungodly, but Tau restored her fingers in full.

At least giving up her scholastic pursuits in geology hadn't meant an end to receiving valuable lessons.

Why access to the chamber was blocked was a mystery, although Lucetta understood it was for their safety. Like most, she trusted Tau to do what was in their best interest.

“I wonder how Maji and Ben are getting on.” Sticky was on his back in a raised cavity, hammering at a prop to steady it.

“Better than us, I’m sure.”

Pulling the scaling bar away from the stone face, Lucetta watched in satisfaction when chunks came crumbling down. A glowing blue seam the width of a large blood vessel revealed itself before her. That was interesting, although it didn’t look like a new mineral. She reached out to trace it. Faint pinpricks of magic penetrated her gloved fingers. *Finally*, they were onto something.

“I miss that one pickaxe I had years ago that lasted more than a few hits.”

Sticky held only a splintered handle, the tip of the pickaxe wedged in the cavity. Lucetta stretched with a groan and moved to the hutch to hand him a spare. Being in her thirties was catching up to her, although Benjamin would be appalled to hear her think that way.

“Luce. Luce. *Luce!*”

She turned back, and her heart stumbled in its beats.

The blue double doors. Jacob Burton’s portal had materialised in front of Sticky. Tall and ominous, older than before, the glass of the lunette now cracked.

“Where the Hell is Tau?” Lucetta fretted, an onslaught of panic working to undo her.

Memories resurfaced, and she swallowed hard against them. Her heel caught rubble, she barely kept herself from falling over. Her glove scraped the rocky wall, sweat running cold.

She had worked so hard to convince herself she was safe from seeing such horrors again. She’d seen enough at home to last her a lifetime, and now—

Sticky reached out to grab one of the door handles.

“What the—NO!” Lucetta flew forward, snatched his hand away and delivered a firm slap to the side of his head. “*Idiot!* We are not going in. We’re getting Explorers to go instead. Come on!”

Sticky grimaced but otherwise did nothing. Her hold on his wrist firm, she pulled him along.

Lucetta’s arm jerked back—a startled yelp sundered the drift.

She whirled.

Black, writhing tendrils were snaked around Sticky’s midriff. They wrenched him towards the doors, now open. Lucetta planted her feet on the ground and tried to pull him back, hobnails scraping across rubble. She grunted, strained, as more tendrils extended, chittering. Like a myriad of arms they wrapped around Sticky, drowning him out. Umbral insects crawled up Lucetta’s forearms, biting and stinging.

She cried out, coughed and spat when they wiggled into her open mouth, yet refused to let go of Sticky. Their surroundings whisked past in a blur—

“Shit!” Lucetta hissed, pushing herself back up, shuddering as the insects left in droves around her. She slapped the strays off and stomped on others for good measure. They crunched like brittle rock under her boots.

“It wasn’t my fault this time,” breathed Sticky, unsteady on his legs, clear of insects and stark against the surrounding monochrome.

Lucetta could only see in tones of sepia again, but this time, they were inside a glasshouse. A variety of eerie plants dominated their surroundings. Like elongated human arms, branches stretched high above them, hand-shaped twigs splayed out against the panes as if scratching to get out. Long moss trailed from the ceiling, grazing foliage with humanoid shapes below. There were bushes with fruits that resembled eyes, and distorted flowers that bore human characteristics. The entire place was alive with the unsettling chitters of insects.

“Great, this place is so much worse,” she jerked out.

Not to mention the doors were gone again. Lucetta wrapped an arm around Sticky’s thin shoulders to pull him close, for her own comfort as much as his. Whatever pulled them in here was now gone, aside from a few wayward bugs scurrying away across detritus-covered brick.

“Should we wait for Tau to come get us?” asked Sticky in a hush.

“Yeah, I’m sure he’ll be here any—”

Still tall, still angry but younger than before, the same man who had tormented Jacob Burton stalked past them, unaware of their presence. Lucetta exchanged a look with Sticky, and they both followed as if an unseen force pushed them to it.

By the end of the glasshouse stood a long and sturdy table, cluttered like Jacob’s. Among several books and papers stood a collection of jars, filled with murky fluid too dark for her to see what was inside them. That was fine. Lucetta didn’t want to know.

“Well?” Jacob’s tormentor demanded.

“Well,” replied another voice, feminine, the sneer in it blatant. “Any progress with the boy?”

“Defiant as ever,” said the man. “At least he’s found some noteworthy things. Any progress on your end?”

“See for yourself.”

The man moved away, revealing who he had addressed. Lucetta frowned, recognising the woman from the many portraits inside Pavlov’s estate.

“Mrs Pavlov?” Sticky breathed through his teeth.

In an antiquated armchair so lavish it was out of place sat a woman in an elegant dark dress with lace trims. Her skin was

fair, hair braided and twisted at the top of her head. She looked exactly like Mrs Pavlov.

“Maybe she’s related to her?” Lucetta suggested weakly.

“But...the hair and...”

Sticky stopped dead, eyes widening and his trembling visible. Lucetta followed his gaze. She squeezed her eyes shut in dismay shortly after.

Past the table where the man stood further away, stacked cages lined the wall, too small for the people held captive within. They might have been human once, anyway. Now they had such severe deformities that it was likely killing them.

Near the top, someone’s face was unrecognisable, fungi growing from every part of their skin. In another cage, a man scratched relentlessly at his bleeding skin. He pulled out his hair in chunks, rocked back and forth, pleading in frantic whispers for mercy.

An entity possessed this man, Lucetta had seen this before in her studies. It must have been locked in a cage for too long, stressed and chipping away at its host. Further to the ground, a single mass of flesh filled another cage, sagging skin pooling between the bars with protrusions of fingers and glassy eyes, sclera yellowed and bubbling.

These were all people who had come into contact with magical artefacts and suffered Dire curses. This was what happened without the guidance of Sentinels, why they were so essential in the process of mining for magic. Worse still, the

man who had accused Jacob of lying about magical artefacts must have known all along that it was true.

Livid, Lucetta stalked towards him, ignoring Sticky's quiet plea to stop. She'd be damned if she wasn't going to try.

"You bastard!" she snarled, swinging her fist. It went through just like last time. Lucetta whirled to glare at him, ready to spit further insults.

She stopped in her tracks, horror glueing her mouth shut.

Dozens of cages lined the entire length of the glasshouse wall, previously hidden by eerie foliage.

Lucetta hurried down the path, needing to do *something*. Maybe this place existed outside of this awful realm. Maybe she would recognise someone, be able to save them if she could only connect them to people she knew. If nothing else, she could take this to the authorities.

Few cages were empty. Others contained corpses, although they were animated. Some held people still in good health, bound and whimpering around gags. She stopped by one cage—it rattled and shook. Trapped inside was a child, convulsing violently and choking, saliva and slime dripping from the mouth. Lucetta reached out. Her hand drifted through the cage, its image flitting past her fingers like vapours.

She turned away from the repulsive sight. Sticky called out, his face growing ever more horrified. Lucetta rushed back to stop him from going further. He didn't need to see the rest of this.

“We need a better method to extract those artefacts,” said the Mrs Pavlov look-alike.

The woman now stood beside Jacob’s tormentor, who observed the cages with cold disdain. She crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her fingers along the biceps, staring down to where Sticky and Lucetta were.

“What would you suggest, Ondine?” asked the man with poorly concealed contempt. “Guards? Train the workers to fight?”

“None can fend off what we’re uncovering. None that are human.” There was a hint of annoyance in her tone, like having to address the man at all was an inconvenience to her.

“Then cease tormenting it! What good will it be to us when dead? Since you’ve scared Emergence off, it’s our *only* tool now.”

Ondine’s look became glacial. “All things eventually outgrow their usefulness, Durant.”

Lucetta had a feeling that while the woman appeared to be looking down the line of cages, her eyes were on *them*. Unnerved, Lucetta steered Sticky towards an overgrown path that would take them away from the cages. She glanced back over her shoulder.

Ondine’s gaze had followed them.

Lucetta ran, dragging Sticky along by the arm. Down several pathways, past more humanoid plants. Claw-like branches reached out to grab them. Lucetta ducked, Sticky cried out and

bashed his way through them, wood splintering against his forearms.

Vivid light flashed in the distance and she ran towards it.

The Sentinel stood inside a doorway, armed with spheres. They shot forward, whizzed past her head and created flashes too bright. Lucetta tripped, she heard Sticky swear. Blindly, she tried to catch herself when powerful arms encircled and pulled her upright. With grunts of pain that echoed, she fell harshly to a rubble-laden ground.

She was back in the mine, Sticky groaning beside her.

Lucetta pushed herself up in time to catch sight of Tau sidestepping a wave of human remains, spilling to the ground. The doors shut behind it and vanished. Bones, torn skin and sinew distended into the shape of a bipedal creature. It raised itself off the ground, stumbled forward, and reached out for them with a warbling moan. Lucetta scrambled back, rock digging into her hands and backside.

Tau and the monstrosity vanished from sight, leaving her and Sticky alone in a silence that pulsed inside her ears. Lucetta trembled, couldn't think how to stop it, the subtle wind that blew through the drift turning her cold sweat to ice. She moved to lean against the wall, afraid of collapsing if she didn't, barely realising Sticky did the same beside her.

“It wasn't my fault this time,” he croaked. “Please, I'm sorry!”

Lucetta didn't know what to say, too rattled to offer Sticky any comfort. She closed her eyes, counted to ten—twenty—fifty, pushing all the gruesomeness down, down, *down*.

It was a while before they heard the familiar *snap*, like fingers clicking together, that told them Tau had returned from wherever he went to dispose of dangerous entities. He stood before them, taciturn and unmoving. Lucetta glared up at him, anger swiftly replacing her fear.

“Where were you?” She pushed herself to her feet so as not to be dwarfed. A pointless effort. “Sticky got dragged in. I tried to stop it. That’s supposed to be *your* job!” To Lucetta’s horror, her voice cracked.

Tau did nothing, he said nothing and her frustration distorted into fury. After all the things she had witnessed in both doorways, she wanted answers.

“I know you can talk, so why don’t you start by telling us what this is all about?”

Nothing.

“Damn it, *answer* me! Or are you going to let this be another case like Sam’s?”

“Whoa, Luce!” Sticky stumbled to stand between her and Tau. He levelled her with a dour look. “You’re being unfair. None of this is his fault.”

“Sentinels are supposed to know danger is coming before it arrives! Do you honestly think he couldn’t have helped us, or helped save Sam—”

Lucetta choked on the last part of her accusation, her face shoved against Tau's upper abdomen. The chill of winter bit at her exposed skin. She pulled away, out of the unwelcome hold and flailed when she sank. Tau caught her by the arm, sparing her from falling into snow.

Casting a wild look about, Lucetta realised they were at the bottom of the mountain peak, near an opening in the ground that might lead down to the Bank.

"Wow," breathed Sticky.

While Lucetta stumbled away in confusion, Sticky didn't look very inclined to go anywhere, his face pressed up against Tau's stomach. Lucetta flinched when Tau's claw came up to her face. The thumb that brushed across her cheek was gentle and warm, despite the gauntlets being metal. She felt the skin on her face tighten. He had just mended a cut she'd not even known was there.

Lucetta stood quiet for a moment, her anger blowing away with the wind, then muttered, "Thank you."

"So uh, what now?" asked Sticky.

Tau walked off without sinking into the snow. Lucetta faintly scoffed at Sticky's look of dismay. There wasn't anything to do besides follow despite the heavy snowfall and setting sun.

Wading through the frost was taxing and painful, it came up to their shins. They were exposed, the cotton of their shirts doing little to protect their skin. Before long, Lucetta was trembling and desperate for warmth.

“Would you mind warming us up, please?” she asked through chattering teeth.

The Sentinel reached behind him without looking, a sphere growing like a bubble from his palm to float between them within moments. It had a pleasant emerald glow, much duller than his usual ones. The rush of warmth flowing towards her elicited a sigh of relief. With it, a strong sense of embarrassment crept up. Lucetta wanted to apologise for her outburst, but the silence was tense. She didn't want to break it.

“Where are we going?”

Naturally, Sticky wouldn't have the same qualms.

Tau didn't respond. They carried on until reaching the edge of the forest to cross its threshold. There was less snow here. The canopy of pines shielded the ground, although Lucetta's feet were frozen already.

In the waning light, Sticky looked nervous. “Do you think what we saw—”

“Was how mining for magic started?” Lucetta finished for him. “I don't know. I guess it had to start somewhere.”

She didn't mean to be callous. What they witnessed completely contradicted what they were taught during their training. It was supposed to have been the Sentinels who first introduced humans to mining for the transmundane. Yet what they witnessed suggested that the discovery of magical artefacts came first, at the cost of unsuspecting people.

There must have been so many casualties, so much suffering. Never mind that this Ondine had deemed it fit to keep afflicted people inside cages like they were diseased animals. And never mind that ghastly glasshouse with the humanoid plants. Lucetta didn't know where to begin with that.

Tau glanced over his shoulder as they threaded through the forest. For a hopeful moment, she thought he might say something. Of course, he didn't.

The silence lingered until eventually, they came to a clearing. A perfect circle with long grass whispering in a gentle breeze. Somehow, it remained untouched by the weather beyond. Lucetta never ventured into the forest, there was no need to when Explorers had combed it years ago. Surely this place would have been found, had it existed then?

Tau came to a stop at the edge. He placed his claws on both Lucetta's and Sticky's shoulders. Lucetta tried not to squirm under the touch, entirely unaccustomed to it. He guided them to a tall bush, its branches encumbered by snow and blocking the view into the clearing. Lucetta guessed what he was asking them to do.

She ducked behind the bush with Sticky following suit, and Tau pushed the warming sphere into her arms. He raised a pointed finger to where his mouth would have been, before moving both claws up to the black triangles of his mask, covering them.

Numbly, Lucetta nodded and watched in confusion when Tau condensed and manoeuvred out into the clearing, his

vividness forcing her to squint.

An abrupt boutade of light nearly blinded her, so bright it rivalled Tau's. A series of deafening blasts drowned out Lucetta's swearing. Then, a loud *clank* and a heavy *thud*. The light vanished as quickly as it had erupted, but Lucetta kept her eyes closed and stayed put. Based on the quiet grumbling beside her, Sticky had made the same mistake and not closed his eyes in time. Only when her knees ached from squatting did Lucetta move. She peeked into the dark. Afterimages made it difficult to see anything besides.

"Tau?" Sticky called out.

The wind had picked up around them, sending snow tumbling from the trees down their necks, but not a single sound could be heard from the clearing, nor a source of light seen. Lucetta pushed the lambent sphere towards Sticky, who took it against his chest with a shuddering breath. Its brightness was only that of a candle, but it was enough for them to see their way into the clearing.

Tau and his perpetual glow was nowhere in sight. In the faint light further in, glints of green and silver flashed at her. Lucetta willed herself to stop quivering with unease and rolled her shoulders against the feeling of being watched.

Near the centre of the clearing stood an unusual cage several feet taller than them. It was triangular and of such polished metal, it couldn't possibly have been man-made. Its bars were inches thick with gaps wide enough to fit an arm through. And

in the middle of it, floating in the air, was an emerald crystal globe.

“Shit,” hissed Lucetta. “I think that’s Tau!”

In a moment of blind panic, she thrust her arm through the bars.





Ten



Inspirited

Oliver stood rigid, breath trapped in his chest as Lucetta's scream rang shrill into the night, trailing off into a haunted echo. The stench of burning skin was foul. She pulled herself free and fell back into the grass, writhing, arm blistering and sizzling in the low green light. And all Oliver could do was stare.

The bedimmed light floated by, it nudged his shoulder, jerking him out of his trance. He scooped Lucetta into his arms, thankful that for once, his curse hadn't made things worse, and ran into the dark to the edge of the clearing. Oliver knew nothing about dealing with injuries, especially not burns as severe as these. That was Maji's job if Tau wasn't around, but she wasn't there to help and he didn't know what had happened to Tau.

He was on his own.

He'd never been on his own like this before.

"Shh, it's okay," he whispered.

He lowered Lucetta, grabbed a handful of snow and carefully rubbed it across her arm. She stopped whimpering, instead shivered so violently that Oliver's heart recoiled with panic.

“H-Ho-hold on, Luce.”

He pulled her back into his arms. His muscles spasmed, his jaw locked, and he nearly sent her flying over his head. Swearing, he grappled with the fabric of her shirt and overalls to stop himself from flinging her across the clearing. After a brief struggle, Oliver got her resting against his chest, then followed footprints left behind in the snow.

Lucetta still shivered, struggling to stay awake, her mouth parted around rapid gasps of pain. He glanced behind him, wishing he had spent time to see if he could have freed Tau another way.

His foot caught on a root and he fell to his knees, hard. Oliver grit his teeth, sucking in his breath through them.

He hadn't dropped Lucetta, and that was all that mattered.

With a grunt, he forced himself upright again. It was too long until he reached the edge of the forest. His fingers burned from the cold and his feet were numb. He should have brought the warming sphere, but it was too late to go back for it.

The wind had picked up, the snowfall heavier still. The chill cut at his exposed skin as he fought through endless white. Their tracks were already difficult to see, it would only be a matter of time before they disappeared. His eyes had adjusted

to the dark, but it did him little good when snow pothered his vision.

Lucetta's weight shifted, his arms strained one minute, only to lift her above his head the next. Oliver heard a crack and dreaded to think what damage he'd just done. He didn't have the stamina to match the random bursts of strength, either.

He panted for air, received lungfuls of ice. He lost his footing, dropped Lucetta into the snow. With reddened hands, he dug through the icy cold to pull her limp form back against himself. His forearms burned, fingers so stiff it was difficult to move. It hurt to breathe. Everything hurt.

The blizzard intensified, but he kept going. They had to be close to the cave opening by now.

Oliver lost his footing again.

He watched in helplessness when Lucetta slid out from his frozen arms, stiffly moving forward to catch her. Something held him back. Like an invisible hand it pulled him upright. He would have cried with joy were he not so winded.

Tau. His beloved Sentinel, once again coming to his rescue.

"You're a bit late," he rasped, flopping back against that firm body. It was a lot firmer than he remembered.

Oliver tilted his head back to look up through burning eyes. It took a moment for things to click into place, for him to realise that he was looking at an unfamiliar face. He yelped and pushed himself off, scrambling to get away. He bumped

into Lucetta's floating form with a surprised grunt and squared himself against the strange being.

Tall, wide, and bulky. The helmet was an off white and ridged, leading to pointed sides resembling thick horns. There was no mouth and no eyes, the rest of Their body shielded by armour fashioned out of bone. The pauldrons were enormous, a long cape rich in purple and silver details unmoving in the wind. Oliver did not recognise this one, but he knew it was a Sentinel.

“Please, help her,” he cried over the gales once he found his voice.

There had been no need. Lucetta remained floating some feet above the snow while flurries of tiny green leaves spiralled her injured arm and ribcage. Hanging, charred flesh mended, folding back over her arm. Oliver sank to his knees with a sob of relief.

Unable to muster the energy to fight, he grabbed the collar of his shirt to keep from being choked when the Sentinel snatched him by the scruff and dragged him through the snow. It was uncomfortable, frost gathering up his back and between his arse cheeks, but at least he now knew he hadn't been far from the entrance to the Bank.

A broad and bony claw came around his forearm, the grip firm, almost painful. Uselessly, he dangled, carried through the opening before Oliver collided with the mossy stone below. Lucetta was deposited to the ground far gentler. Oliver crawled towards her as the new Sentinel condensed, Their

globe less vivid than Tau. They flew off through the cave's exit, hues of purple stretching across the ground until They disappeared.

“What happened?”

A man approached from behind a rock formation, hoisting his jeans up, followed by a woman, her steps quick, looking equally dishevelled.

Oliver didn't know who they were. He tried to stay away from others as much as the constraints of the mine allowed, although he had seen the two a few times down in the working drifts before.

“Help me carry Luce to her hovel? I can't because—”

“You're cursed. We know.”

The man's tone was off, and he could guess why, but Oliver was too tired to care.

He followed as they carried Lucetta by her feet and underarms, out of the Bank and down to the lodgings. Neither of them made an effort to acknowledge him, and the passageways were mostly empty. Both suited Oliver just fine. Reaching Lucetta's hovel, he opened the door when his muscles spasmed and his jaw locked again. The door slammed against the wall and cracked. He glared at it, holding it open for the two to carry Lucetta inside and to the bed, where Oliver eased a crocheted blanket over her.

“Thanks,” he murmured. When he turned, they were both glowering at him. “What?”

“Nothing,” said the woman. She made to leave, but her partner didn’t budge. He looked like he had something to say, and Oliver was sure he knew what.

“I’ve heard it all before. You don’t need to say it.”

“Then why are you still here?” the man demanded. “You’re both useless *and* a risk.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Oliver focused on Lucetta.

“Who do you think you are? Get out!”

He lit up at Maji’s voice. “Maji. Ben!”

Benjamin slammed the door shut once the couple slipped past his solid frame.

“What happened?” Maji stroked down Oliver’s arm on her way to the bed, where she perched herself on its edge. “Lucetta?”

“She’s fine, I think,” said Oliver. “She was healed. I don’t know why she isn’t awake.”

He shifted a desperate look to Benjamin.

“Come on.” Benjamin’s voice was soothing. He was worried, it was plain, but he was encouraging Oliver to sit with a patient hand on his back. “Tell us what happened.”



Oliver sat on the bed, an itchy woollen blanket over his shoulders. His gaze wandered the hovel for the hundredth time. Out of the four of them, Lucetta hoarded the least. Books

aside, there were very few personal items, and the case that used to house the chunk of Aqur now stood empty on a shelf. He wondered what she had done with it.

Maji remained seated by Lucetta, gently stroking her face. Lucetta's arm was healed, in a sense. Scar tissue marred every inch of her left arm up to her bicep. It made Oliver think of a sleeve of wrinkled fabric, pinched together in several places with patches of pink and dark brown. She looked peaceful asleep, downy black curls surrounding her diamond-shaped face in such a way that made him love her so much more.

Benjamin occupied a sturdy wood chair, tending to a pot overhanging the hearth. The scent of potato soup laced the air, but it did little to comfort. Onyx was on his shoulder, round and puffy, for once refraining from making noise.

Oliver had to keep reminding himself not to chew his chapped lips, his mind drifting to Tau again. All alone, stuck in a cage in the forest.

At long last, Lucetta stirred. Chestnut eyes momentarily glazed over as she reached consciousness. She tried to push herself up, although Maji's hand across her chest eased her back down.

"Sentinel's backside. Feels like my arm got stuck in a geothermal pocket."

"Are you in pain? I think I can make you something for it," said Maji, fretfully brushing hair out of Lucetta's face.

“I’m fine.” Lucetta sat up again, this time refusing to be stopped. “That might teach me not to stick my arm into weird places.”

Oliver admired her for trying to joke it off, but Lucetta wasn’t quick enough in hiding her shock upon examining the state of her arm. Guilt contorted his gut, painfully. It should have been him sticking his arm through the cage. He should have stopped her.

“Stop that,” said Lucetta.

Startled, Oliver looked at her. “What?”

“I know you’re coming up with ways to blame yourself.”

Oliver sighed. “It should’ve been me.”

“Sticky told us a bit about what happened. You guys found another portal?” Maji cast him a glance over her shoulder.

Maji and Benjamin told them of their adventure and the fur mantel they bought instead. In turn, Oliver and Lucetta ran them through everything that occurred on their end in as much detail as they could muster.

“When you stuck your arm in, your skin just...” Oliver grimaced. The stink of burning flesh still clung to his nostrils. “I think it’s Sentinel magic keeping Tau trapped.”

“But what did he do?” asked Maji, her brows knitting with concern. “Who would want to do that to him? Can Sentinel Nu do anything to help?”

Lucetta ground the base of her palm against her forehead.
“Sentinel who?”

“Right, you weren’t awake to meet Them.” Benjamin turned from stirring the soup. “Sentinel Nu is the replacement, we think. Came across Them on our way down. They used to work a mine not too far from here.”

“All of Tau’s magic has been replaced.” Maji pointed to the corner near the bookcase, at a wreath of vibrant flowers, glowing with warm purples.

Oliver knew Maji was torn about it. Centred around nature, Nu’s magic was to her what food was to Oliver. One look out the window told him as much. Oliver, however, was loyal to Tau and so he hated it. He missed Tau’s suns, the faint and deadly shimmer of closed-off areas. He missed the fireflies, always easing his worries. He missed Tau.

“I’m going to rescue him,” Oliver blurted.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” said Benjamin. “If Sentinel Tau is imprisoned, which is what it sounds like, then there must be a reason for it.”

“Applesauce,” snapped Oliver. “What reason could there be?”

“Maybe he’s the reason you two keep being pulled into that doorway.”

Oliver jumped to his throbbing feet, the blanket sliding off his shoulders. “What did you just say?!”

“Please, Ben didn’t mean it like that,” said Maji.

“No, I did. Think about it for a moment.” Benjamin squared against him. “Why only ever you two? Why did he let you go the first time, then wasn’t even there to stop you the second? Maybe he’s just not good enough to be a Sentinel anymore. He might actually be broken, or too old. I’ve never seen a Sentinel touch humans before for a start, but Sentinel Tau’s been doing it—”

“After all the things he’s done for us?” Oliver resisted the urge to throw something at Benjamin. “He’s saved my life hundreds of times!”

His friends only knew what they saw of his curse, which was bad enough, but they didn’t know how terrible it truly was. They didn’t know how desperately he needed Tau if he had any hope of surviving. He doubted Nu would help him as much as Tau always did.

He should have said that.

Instead, Oliver snarled, “The only reason you’re so quick to dismiss him all the time is ’cause you still blame him for Sam.”

And him. Benjamin blamed him for it, even now. He’d shouted and thrown things around, at Oliver, told him what a useless pile of waste he was, and how could he have let it happen, what had he been doing, where had he been. Why was he so stupid, so useless, and just go. Get away.

Oliver wore the words like a brand on his chest, and it still burned, it still hurt. Remembering every awful thing Benjamin said had him shaking with heartbreak and rage.

“Except, the only reason Sam got killed was because he went in alone, like an *idiot!*”

Benjamin flew up. The chair clattered to the floor behind him. Onyx fluttered off his shoulder with an indignant tweet, perching on an overhead beam. In three long strides, Benjamin closed the distance between them, and Oliver tilted his head back to glare up at him.

“Stop,” warned Lucetta.

“Take that back,” Benjamin growled low in his throat, threatening in a way Oliver had never heard before.

He knew he was treading dangerous waters and he couldn’t even swim, but he was angry. His heart hurt. He wasn’t being fair, it hadn’t been Samuel’s fault. Not really. But years of guilt made him want to lash out no matter how unfair, or the consequences.

Oliver felt his lips pull back, baring his teeth. “Or what?”

Rough hands grabbed him by the straps of his overalls, jerking him closer, forcing him to resist pushing away. He scoffed, unfazed. They both knew that if he were to throw the first punch, he would win. Permanently. The same was true for Benjamin even without inhuman strength though.

“It wasn’t Sam’s fault, don’t you *dare* blame him.”

“If I hadn’t listened to him, then he’d probably still be here!” Oliver hated himself for the thickening of his voice. “You can keep blaming me, I can take it. But *stop* blaming Tau, he doesn’t deserve it!”

Benjamin's anger visibly wavered. "You—what?"

Oliver's lower lip trembled and there was nothing he could do to hide it.

"You were right, it's my fault!" Furiously, he blinked against the stinging in his eyes.

Benjamin released him, and Oliver faced Lucetta, a sob hiking in his chest.

"I could've punched that Horror into oblivion, but I had to run to get my hat." He'd forgotten it. Samuel had told him he would be fine. "I was—I was *so close*." He'd rounded the corner, on his way back, and frozen to the spot at the sight of the cryptid. Massive, oozing with black fluid. Samuel disappearing into its belly. "We're always supposed to stick together." If only he'd moved. If only he hadn't left Samuel alone. "It's my fault he's gone, not Tau's!" Tau had arrived, a second too late. The cryptid had disappeared into a round portal far too small, closing moments after. "I'm sorry!"

He didn't know what to expect. A fist to the face, maybe. Not to be swooped into one of the fiercest hugs Benjamin had ever given him. Oliver's face pressed against the broad chest, arms stiff at his side, the gnawing need to hold him back nearly impossible to resist. A steady heartbeat drummed against his face as he buried his tears into the knit jumper. It was soft, it had pilling. It was warm and comforting and the arms squeezed the distress out of him.

For the guilt that continued to haunt him, it did nothing.

It wasn't fair everyone blamed Tau, who only ever did his best.

"You idiot." Benjamin's breath was hot in his hair. "Sam's death wasn't your fault. I'm..."

Oliver sniffed loudly, an exhale shaking free when he was released. He saw Maji wiping her eyes with a sleeve when he dared a glance at Lucetta. Her features were stony, the way she always looked when it came to the subject of her brother.

Lucetta's relationship with Samuel had always been strained. She hated him, had come to the mountain specifically to make him answer for something. Although for what, Oliver still didn't know. She refused to tell them.

"It wasn't anyone's fault," said Lucetta eventually, breaking the silence that had swallowed them. She looked up and Oliver was pinned by her gaze. "Sam wasn't the only one who broke the rule of two and went without a butty to work. He *was* the only one to get unlucky. I don't think it's fair to blame ourselves, or Tau, for bad luck."

"So that's it, huh?" said Benjamin, clipped. "Shit just happens?"

"Shit just happens," repeated Lucetta.

The two stared at each other for a tense moment, then Benjamin returned to the hearth. Oliver dropped into the bed, gathered the blanket off the floor and cautiously wrapped it back over himself. He sucked in trembling breaths, trying to calm himself.

“Do you think Tau knew he was going to get put in a cage?” he asked once his nerves had faded.

Lucetta flexed her scarred arm. No doubt it was stiff and painful, still. Tau would have done a far better job of healing it, Oliver knew.

“Might be why he brought us along,” said Lucetta.

“I’d like to suggest that we help Tau together,” said Maji, and the intense amount of appreciation Oliver had for her was unparalleled. If he could kiss her, then he would have.

Benjamin sighed. “I don’t fancy getting burned trying to get him out.”

“Yeah, done that. Wouldn’t recommend it.”

“I doubt Nu will help,” muttered Oliver.

“If They’re here to replace Tau, then probably not,” said Maji. “They might have even been the one who imprisoned him.”

“Why are They here, anyway?” asked Lucetta. “Doesn’t Nu’s mine need Them?”

“It’s only a minor ambit with twenty miners. Sponsored by some health company from what I heard. It might have been declared void of magic,” said Benjamin. “I still think we should leave it alone. The bigger concern is those blue doors.”

“Nothing we can do about it,” said Lucetta, picking at the crocheted blanket. “The portal vanished like last time.”

If anyone would have answers to that, it would be Mister Pavlov.

Oliver shook his head. He couldn't think about that now.

He knew Benjamin had a point. Tau was his friend, he would never do anything to harm anyone, but there had to be a reason he was imprisoned. It was safe to assume the cage was the work of other Sentinels. There was something very specific about the feeling of their magic.

Why had Nu left Tau out in the middle of nowhere? Were they that confident no one would find him and break him free? Oliver's heart ached with the idea that Tau might still be aware of his surroundings, all alone in the dark and cold.

"You said it was deep in the forest. Do you think you'll be able to find it again?" asked Maji.

"I don't know," Oliver admitted, longing to rub his face. "Maybe if I leave through the Bank? That's where Tau transported us, I think. Maybe the bats stopped being aggressive and I can try using the ropes."

The spectre bats had been there for years now after a fool miner read from a grimoire, releasing them from its pages. They caused demonic possessions with their bites, although hadn't come down to nibble anyone in a while.

"Are you willing to chance that?" asked Maji.

Oliver grimaced. He wasn't. It was bad enough he wrecked himself just by existing. He didn't need another entity added to that.

“Even if you find that clearing, how will you get Sentinel Tau out?”

Benjamin placed a bowl in his lap, the only reason Oliver didn't glare up at him. He didn't fail to notice the choice in words. Apparently, he could count Benjamin out.

That was just fine. Oliver could do this on his own.

“What about the mantle you got?” he said after a moment. “People can't reach into the cage, but a Sentinel might. What if I put the mantle on? It might let me touch the cage at least. I can break the bars then.”

Maji looked at him in surprise. “That might work. It's in my hovel.”

“Great, so I'll just put it on and go.” He didn't move yet, he couldn't. Oliver stared down at the bowl, watching the dried parsley swim around boiled potatoes in evaporated milk. It was hot. If he broke the stoneware, it would hurt. “Please, can you take this off me?”

“No. You need to eat and you need rest.” Benjamin handed him a spoon. A spoon he might knock into his teeth and break them.

Oliver made a quavering noise, his heart hammering with sudden terror.

“It's been a rough day and night for you both. Take the day off. Maji and I will go down to work,” said Benjamin. Then, when Oliver remained adamant about not touching the soup, added, “Do...you want me to feed you? I don't mind.”

“No! I’m–No.”

He was going to die.



Oliver didn't. It shouldn't have surprised him that much. There were entire days he went without damage. The curse was random, after all. Despite filling his stomach with one of his favourite meals and now lying beside a warm, slumbering Lucetta, he couldn't sleep.

Not only was it dangerous for him to do so, but his mind kept returning to Tau. How lonely and scared he must be out there. His gaze trailed along the rugged ceiling, speckled with taunting shadows. Benjamin and Maji were gone, leaving him alone with Lucetta's arm slung over his midriff.

Oliver sighed. He couldn't just do nothing. He owed it to Tau to at least try and help him. Working at roughly the pace of a snail, he shimmied out from under Lucetta's arm and let himself fall to the floor, wincing at the jolt of pain in both hip and elbow. He took a moment to cover her back up with the blanket that had come down with him, then put his boots back on. He didn't lace them up, counting his blessings that he'd been able to do that much, and left the hovel.

Oliver paused outside the door, looking around in utter dismay.

Every bit of Tau's magic was replaced. Ivy trailed along walls, flowers adorned nooks and seams, and upside-down

trees hung from the ceiling, vibrant with autumnal leaves. There were more wreaths of glowing flowers to light up the passageways, bathing the stone in warm shades of purple and damn it, it was beautiful.

“Load of applesauce.”

He walked to the cage, unsure of what the time was. It didn't look like Nu followed a system similar to Tau's. Busy glaring at the awful magic around him, Oliver started when he nearly walked into two women.

“Oh, hullo,” he said, intending to carry on.

“What do you think of all this?” asked Anna, her rounded hair like a violet halo.

Helen smiled brightly. “It's gorgeous, isn't it?” The two were attached to the hip, never leaving each other's side. It was sweet. “Maybe Sentinel Nu will help us decorate for our wedding!”

“Uh, yeah, I guess. Wait, you two are getting hitched?” Oliver's eyebrows rose when Anna held up her hand. The ring was a pretty gold, holding a teal stone with a familiar light blue glow. “Oh no way, congrats! You should show that to Luce, she'll love it.”

“Thank you!” Helen beamed at him, flicking silky red hair over her shoulder. “We already told her. She said we better invite her to the wedding or she'll crash it.”

Oliver mustered a smile, then tried to move away.

“Do you know what happened to Sentinel Tau?” asked Anna.

“No idea.” He didn’t know why he felt the need to lie. Part of him couldn’t be bothered to explain it when he was in a rush to find his Sentinel.

Impassively, Anna said, “You were sweet on him, weren’t you?”

Oliver gaped at her. Was he *that* obvious about it?

“I’m so glad Sentinel Nu is here. They have an excellent reputation, did you know?” said Helen. “No deaths at all on their watch from what I’ve heard. I can’t wait for Mister Pavlov to throw a welcome party.”

“Big feat when Their mine had what, twenty people?” Oliver countered, waspish. “See you around!”

He walked away before either of them could respond. Oliver didn’t give two coal lumps about how good Nu was or how pretty the passageways were. He just wanted Tau back.

When finally reaching his hovel, Oliver bolted inside to check on the bottle. He ignored the tensing of his jaw, the way he flung his pillow against the door, only sighed with relief when Tau’s gift was still there. The mass of green sparks floated inside the glass, never inclined to leave. He held it tight against his chest, glad he hadn’t yet broken it, that it hadn’t been replaced.

Hiding the bottle under his pillow again, Oliver grabbed his mackinaw, gloves and a scarf. He knew the smart choice

would be to go with his friends, but he'd be damned if he risked any of them getting hurt again. It was bad enough Lucetta nearly lost an arm.

Shrugging into his outwear, he opened the door and stopped in his tracks.

“Going somewhere? Not without us, right?” said Maji with a sly grin. She, Lucetta, and even Benjamin were wrapped up warm and ready to go, a beautiful white pelt in Benjamin's arms.

“I guess not?”

“Nope,” said Lucetta.

“The way up and then all around the peak will take too long,” said Maji while they made their way to the cage lift. “I once read about how to get rid of Minor infernal pests. So instead of mining, guess what I did?”

Oliver's eyes trailed from the sack she held in one hand to the vials and slingshot in the other. A bright red fluid filled the vials. “You...made things?”

“I sure did!” Maji didn't elaborate further. He hoped it would work, whatever it was.

Bell-like blossoms dangled above them in the cage, casting a dull purple glow. The carved-out windows in the market were covered in glowing ivy, and tall grass and flowers surrounded the bottomless well. The closer to the Bank they got, the worse everything became, verdure and flowers covering nearly every inch.

It was disgusting.

Oliver tried to ignore the way Maji vibrated beside him, sure that had her hands not been occupied, she would have been clapping with poorly contained joy.

Things were no better inside the Bank. The pallid, translucent forms of the bats were still plainly visible at least, past the bare branches of the tall and slender tree that had long since set its roots down.

Where Tau had comforted him with a touch to his back.

“You think this will work?” asked Lucetta.

“No idea,” replied Maji. She sounded confident, regardless.

She aimed the slingshot, released a slow, steady breath, then fired. The vial pelted up with a faint *plink*, glinting sharply in the light. Shattering against the rocky ceiling by the bats and sending red tainted glass sprinkling. The fluid hit only one bat. Its screech of anger scraped the cave as it flew out the opening. Further shrill cries were the only warning they got before the rest of the bats came swooping down, teeth bared.

Maji’s tiny “uh-oh” was lost amid the racket. She ducked behind Lucetta, who swung the bag, an arc of white grains slinging, creating a barrier. The bats screeched again and swerved, headed instead for the nearest exit. Startled cries carried into the cave from the passageway beyond.

“That sort of worked,” said Maji, slapping at her face to get her hair out of it. “Hope nobody gets bit.”

“What was in the vial?” asked Benjamin, sounding impressed.

“Sage, rue, mixed with cochineal for the red. I’m so glad I hoard these things. Can’t believe it was this easy to chase them away.”

“I always wondered why Sentinel Tau didn’t bother with them,” said Benjamin. At Oliver’s glare, he hastily added, “I guess because we could have done it ourselves all this time.”

“We’re going to have to deal with them wherever they go, but at least we have our shortcut back,” said Lucetta. “Well, *you* do. I’m not going up there—Sorry about your salt, Ben.”

“It’s fine, there’s some left...”

“Here.” Maji took the mantle off Benjamin and slipped it over Oliver’s shoulders.

The moment it encased him, tingling travelled up from the tips of his toes all the way to his head. So powerful, he sucked in a breath and swayed where he stood, tilting his head back. His shoulders sagged, his body slumped, the weight of a thousand boulders finally lifting off him. It weakened his knees, made him want to drop to the floor and weep with relief. The magic strummed through with such pleasurable intensity, he had to resist the urge to just *moan*.

“Holy shit,” he breathed instead. It felt *so familiar*. If he didn’t know any better, he thought the mantle might have belonged to Tau.

“What’s it like?” Maji’s deep brown eyes flicked up, glimmering with cheer.

“Incredible.”

“Looks like it,” said Lucetta, amused.

Feeling dizzy, Oliver tried to ground himself by focusing on Benjamin. Who was staring, lips parted, amber eyes intense.

“You should go first. In case you yank out the ropes.” Lucetta grabbed Oliver by the shoulders. She pulled him close, pressed her lips to his forehead and murmured, “Thanks, by the way.”

It took all his might not to lean into the kiss. Oliver’s eyes drifted shut while he grappled with the urge to let himself sink into her hold.

“Nothing you wouldn’t have done.” He stepped away. “I... really appreciate you helping me with this.”

Maji stroked down his arm. “Tau would have helped us.”

With Benjamin’s help, who remained at the bottom as the belayer, Oliver ascended the ropes. It was so much further up than he first thought. Looking down wasn’t a good idea. He did anyway, and immediately regretted it. No wonder Lucetta didn’t want to come, being afraid of heights. If he pulled the ropes out, he would break his legs, or his back. Or his head.

“Catch me if I fall, please?”

“Not from that height,” said Lucetta.

“I’ll do my best, don’t worry.” Benjamin looked no bigger than his foot from where Oliver dangled.

Once reaching the top at long last, he fought through deep snow, crawling and burrowing until managing to get atop it. The sun was setting already, he had wasted too much time not sleeping.

Unlike the night before, there was no blizzard, although there remained little to see other than the faint forest line in the distance. Everything else was white, a gossamer blanket of fog swaying across the snow, pink in the waning sun.

“This way, I guess,” said Oliver when Maji reached him, huffing and panting, still on her hands and knees.

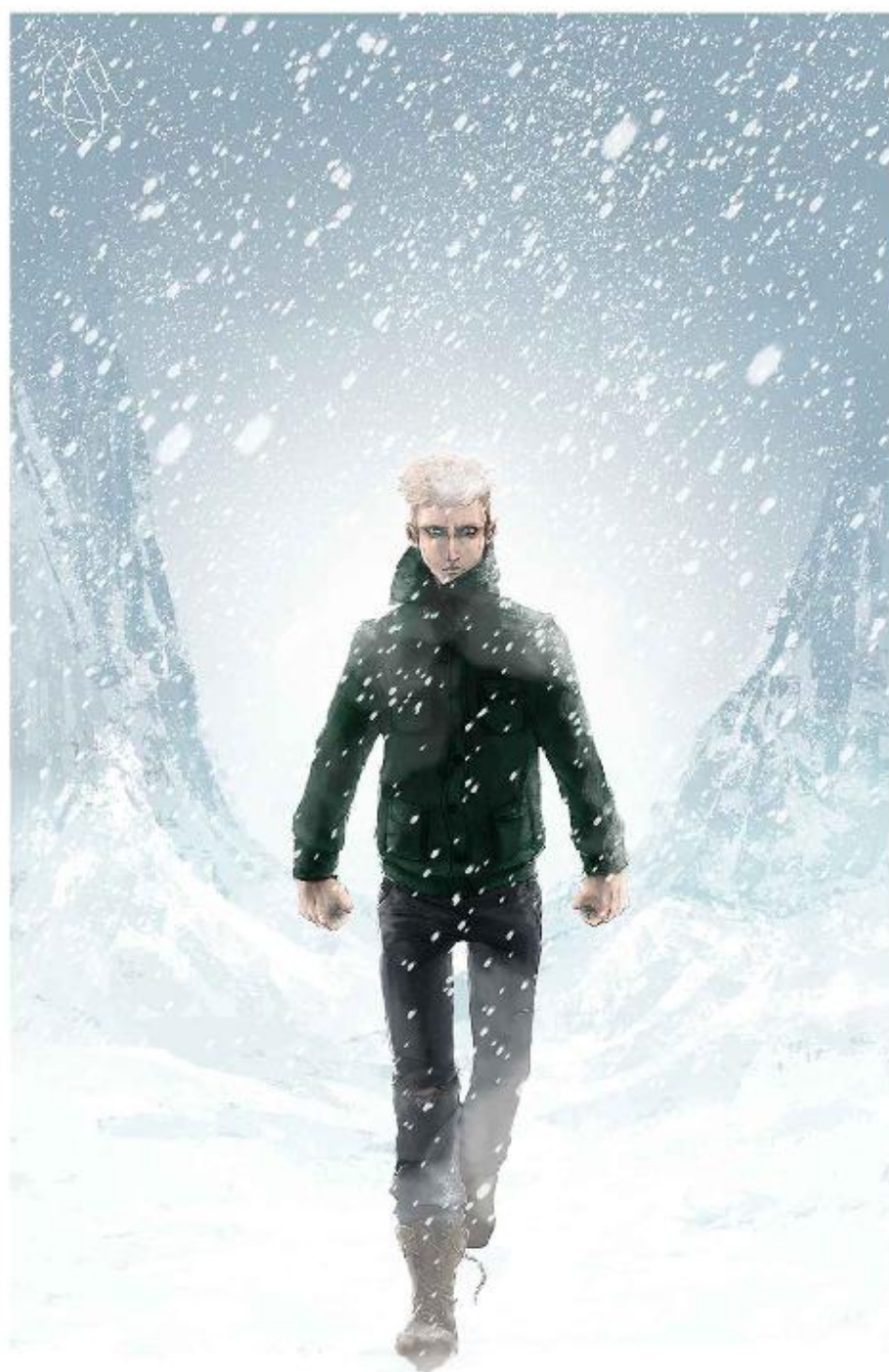
He took a step forward, feet sinking into deep snow. A whirlwind stirred to life right before him, of a thousand tiny leaves, the green harsh against all the white.

Swearing loudly, Oliver dove past the vortex to make a run for it, knowing damn well he didn’t stand a chance. Nu manifested within seconds in a twist of purple and green, reaching out with a large bony claw, snatching him by the end of his scarf. They wrenched Oliver back, bodily, a glottal noise jerking free.

The fabric cinched his neck, tightly enough to choke. Tightening more when he lifted out of the snow. Maji cried out behind him as his vision began to spin. Nu was swinging him around. Like the world’s worst carousel, he swung around and around—until he didn’t. Oliver flew across the snow, past

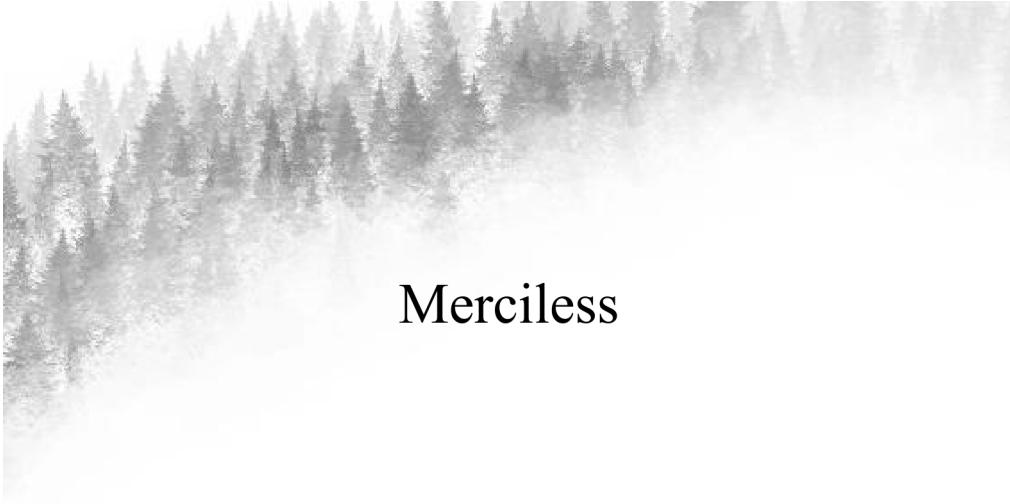
Maji, back to the opening. His flailing hands grazed the frosty edges, body momentarily suspended.

Then he plummeted.





Eleven



Merciless

Heat swelled his face, clouded his vision. He rasped, struggling for air, only vaguely aware of Benjamin kneeling beside him. Of calloused hands working to undo the knot in the scarf. The series of uttered apologies. Oliver stared up at stalactites, constricted by a panic that had him arching off the cold stone ground. When the wool slid off his neck, the rattling breath he took echoed through the cave. He gasped for more air that had yet to reach his lungs and coughed against the pain in his throat.

Onyx twittered loudly, circling overhead.

Benjamin's amber eyes were wide. "Holy cats, are you okay?"

Those same hands checked Oliver over, then pulled him to sit upright by the collars of his mackinaw.

"That was Nu!" cried Maji in outrage, somewhere behind him. "They tried to strangle him!"

“What the hell?” Lucetta’s face obstructed Oliver’s vision next. She stroked his cheek. “You alright?”

Oliver thought to answer, but while his mouth opened, he couldn’t form any words. He found himself up on his feet, guided out of the Bank. It occurred to him that Benjamin had said something about taking him down for tea. But there was no time for that, he needed to help Tau.

Next thing he knew, he was sitting on Benjamin’s bed, and Maji was trying to get him out of his clothes.

“No, don’t. I need to go back. I’ll just go the long way around.” His voice was hoarse, it hurt to talk.

“You need sleep.” Benjamin filled the kettle with water from a jug by the hearth, then grabbed a tin out of the cupboard nearby.

“Tau needs me,” Oliver rasped.

“*No*,” Benjamin said again, more firmly. “Rest first.”

“I owe him my life!”

His voice grated the stone walls. It made Maji wince, but he didn’t care when she removed his mackinaw anyway. He couldn’t even nudge her away. She eased his boots off, and he glowered at her.

“*Please*. Don’t.”

“Do you want the mantle back?” she sheepishly asked, setting his boots nearby.

“No.” Benjamin fixed Maji with a stern look. “You two are welcome to stay, but you’ll have to sleep on the settee.”

Maji stroked Oliver’s head on either side when she stood. “I’ll cut your hair later, okay?”

“Get some sleep, Sticks. We’ll figure this out tomorrow.”

He watched the two women leave with the fur mantle, the door latch sliding shut behind them. A mug was pressed into his hands, and he resented Benjamin for wasting time. For being kind.

“Drink.” A gentle command Oliver intended on ignoring. “Please.”

Oliver’s shoulders slumped. Blowing across the mug, the scent of lavender and something herbal drifted up his nose. He took a careful sip. It was hot, burning the tip of his tongue, but the sweetness of honey was unmistakable.

“Why am I here?” Oliver refused to look up, even when the mug was eased out of his grasp.

Benjamin hesitated, then sat beside him among the abundance of pillows. Why did he even keep them? They were awful. Oliver hated every single one of them.

“I’m...sorry,” Benjamin murmured. “I didn’t know you carried that guilt with you.”

Oliver remained silent, glaring at the dull carpet.

“I said terrible things to you that day. It wasn’t right. I shouldn’t have blamed you.”

“You shouldn’t have blamed Tau, either.”

The tense silence that followed told him, quite plainly, that Benjamin disagreed. Oliver closed his eyes, willing the flurry of anger to die back down. Benjamin had lost his husband, he was grieving to this day. It wasn’t fair he blamed Tau, but it was how he dealt with loss.

Oliver stood. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but I don’t need to be babied. Thank you for the tea.” He shuffled into his boots, gathered the mackinaw and made for the door.

“Just promise me you won’t try anything until you’ve had some rest, at least.”

“I will.”

With that lie, Oliver left.

A throng of miners flooded the passageway, walking around him as though he carried an infernal plague. Doors opened and slammed shut, curtains drew, and slowly the place emptied again.

He pushed away from Benjamin’s door. His thoughts a mangled mess, Oliver left for his own hovel. There, he pulled Tau’s bottle against himself. As the relief slowly pooled into his chest to flow through him, he rolled into bed with a tired moan.

He’d done this every night since Tau gave it to him. It brought him such comfort and relief that he’d even sidestepped Benjamin’s dinner invitation. He felt bad about that, but he enjoyed staring at the green lights so much.

With a sigh, Oliver pushed out of bed, leaving the bottle under the pillow again. He approached the glowing flowers, slowly rotating mid-air in the corner of his hovel, and tapped the wreath with his pointer finger. A drizzle of purple glimmers dissipated before reaching the ground.

Refusing to think about it, Oliver stuffed the wreath between shirt and overalls. He shrugged back into his mackinaw and this time, forewent the scarf in favour of not getting strangled again.

Everything was quiet. The only guard in the passageway wasn't paying attention, curtailed by trailing verdure. Oliver sprinted for the cage, cursing the racket it made when he journeyed up. As far as he knew, there was no rule stating he couldn't leave the mine at night. And if there was, well, none of the guards lining the adit did anything to stop him.

Heavy clouds obstructed the sky, no stars to be seen or the moon to help light his way. It was bitter, the howling wind sharp and dragging dustings of snow, but there was no blizzard and he was thankful for that.

Curling his shoulders against the cold, Oliver threaded deep snow to where he thought Tau had led them before. Absolute darkness lurked among the trees once he finally reached them. He pulled free the wreath, sticking his arm through its centre to keep it secure, suffusing white and shadows alike in purple.

Oliver searched for the clearing, but even after what had to be a few hours, couldn't find anything other than more trees and thorns that snagged his denim. He could no longer see the

edge of the forest either. Each tumble of snow from the trees filled him with further unease. Until finally, a faint glint caught his eye. Chest tight with anticipation, he darted forward.

Then stumbled to a halt with a startled gasp.

Nu stood ahead of him, teasing with a coruscant cluster in Their palm. Oliver swallowed harshly, stepping back when Nu moved. They didn't move toward him. They walked away, slowly, as if telling him to follow. Oliver did. His other option was to stay lost in the forest.

Nu's footfalls were silent. Unlike his own, crunching through snow and pine-litter.

Eventually, trees gave way to the clearing, still void of winter. Oliver dashed past Nu, giving the Sentinel a wide berth. The grass parted around his feet, as if it didn't want to be tread on, a ghost-like breeze whispering the blades. The cage was just ahead, the green crystal globe still floating in its centre—Oliver swore, realising he had neglected to fetch the mantle.

A stone's throw away from the cage, something hard and scratchy coiled his throat, wrenching him back, then down. His back collided with the ground hard, sight obstructed by grass and dizziness. The crush and grind of trees bore into his ears, holding him down.

Oliver clutched at the thing around his neck, fingernails digging into bark. A flash, and Nu towered over him, staring down with Their faceless helmet. He kicked his legs, choked

out a swear, and dug further into the branch, crunching, breaking under his strength.

Then he was up in the air, hanging by the neck, flailing wildly, vision swimming and head turning hot.

A crack, and the branch gave under his grip, splinters slicing the skin of his throat. Oliver fell back into the grass, pain blasting through his body. He rolled over, scrambled up, and ran. Just past the line of pines before roots sprang up and branches came down, entwining. Oliver swerved but met the same on his right, and to his left, and behind him. Wildly, he spun in circles, refusing to accept he was trapped even as the cage of branches and roots and *thorns* encroached until he had to duck, then crouch, then foetal. With a startled cry, he shifted. A blade-length thorn snagged his mackinaw, gouging his arm. Oliver jerked away, yelping, only for his shoulder to catch. One movement of his head and a thorn carved into him there. A hot trickle down the back of his neck told him he was bleeding.

“What did I do to you?” he croaked, keeping his head between his knees and glaring at frosty pine needles.

The earth welled up by his feet, and to his horror, barbed branches snaked through the snow, closing off the bottom of the cage, forcing Oliver to shift and move to avoid shredding his feet. Yet every time he did, another thorn would catch him elsewhere, until he was only a panic-stricken, trapped, and screaming mess.

His legs were at an uncomfortable angle, as was his head, elbow digging into a thigh and a spare few fingers hooked around what parts of the cage weren't covered in thorns to steady himself. His muscles quivered, his breathing harsh, misting before him. Snow turned red beneath him, drenched in endless trickles of blood, soaking his clothes, freezing him over further.

Nu eventually moved, he caught sight of Them from his peripheral. They rounded the cage and stood there, watching him. Oliver could only stay in the same position, shivering, whimpering. Cursing at whoever circled him. He couldn't see who it was, they never said a word and hid in the shadows, but there was someone else there with Nu. Their feet crunched through the snow and the pine-litter. Until the morning, when they disappeared into the silence of the snowfall.

By then, a layer of snow had collected atop him. At long last, the thorny branches moved, creaking as they receded. Oliver flopped to the ground, exhausted and rigid as a corpse. It took him a while to gather the strength to get up.

When he did, he didn't look at Nu once. He turned to the clearing instead, face raw from tears and frost. Anger coiled inside his gut, it twisted upward into his chest.

He took a step toward the clearing.



Oliver blinked up at stalactites, flinching when a droplet pelted his cheek. His head was throbbing. With a groan, he sat up and

dragged his gaze around. He was inside the Bank. The lone tree gently swayed. Although the clouds through the opening were dark, he thought it to be daytime, still, and got to his feet with a grimace. Every part of him throbbed and stung.

“Guess you’re no longer the Sentinel’s favourite,” jeered someone to his side as he limped to the exit.

The walk back to his hovel hurt. Others were gleefully taking notice of his state, of the news that had travelled so quickly: Nu didn’t like him. When he finally reached his hovel, he grabbed Tau’s bottle, held it close, and fell into bed. He longed to sleep, but couldn’t. Not yet.

Since he’d not turned up for work, his friends would come looking soon. With great difficulty, Oliver stripped. He flung his clothes on the chair near the hearth to dry and did his best to bandage himself. When he nearly garotted his leg though, he quickly gave up on that idea and slipped into clean long-johns. Most of his wounds had stopped bleeding by now, but they were raw, swollen, and stung like he’d jumped arse first into stinging nettles.

“Sticky?”

He started, then quickly jumped into bed to wrap the quilt around himself. The door opened just as he pulled his feet up and crossed his legs.

“Alright?” Benjamin asked, letting himself in. Maji and Lucetta entered after him.

Oliver did his damndest to hide his discomfort. “Yep.”

Said with some strain, but he thought he sounded convincing.

“What happened to you?” Maji plopped down next to him, frowning.

“Nothing. I just didn’t think it was a good idea to work when...”

When Tau was gone and Nu hated him for no reason.

Benjamin’s gaze moved to the chair, scrutinised his clothes, and Oliver’s breath caught. His clothes were shredded, the green of his mackinaw doing nothing to hide the thick patches of blood.

“Nu will help,” said Lucetta.

Oliver refrained from shaking his head. “No, I don’t think They will.”

“It’s Their job,” Benjamin said.

“Fine,” Oliver ground out. “I’ll work tomorrow.”

Benjamin narrowed his eyes. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Get some rest.”

Oliver stopped himself from nodding.

Benjamin and Lucetta left, but Maji remained.

“I’m just gonna cut his hair,” she called after them.

“You don’t even have your clippers with you,” Oliver told her once the door closed.

“What happened?”

“Nu’s insane, Maji,” he confessed, knowing there was no fooling her. There was no fooling Lucetta or Benjamin either, but they weren’t as pushy. “They lured me to Tau and then just attacked me.”

There was no need to give her the grisly details.

Maji reached up and eased the blankets off him. The gasp that left her was horrified. She hopped off the bed and scurried to get his box of medical supplies, one she always kept topped up for him with things she swiped from the clinic. She brought his ewer and basin to the bed, along with a washcloth, then gently eased him out of his long-johns.

“Oh,” she croaked as he stood before her, naked, every welt and gash on display.

What Oliver could see of himself was covered in blood, some wounds so deep they looked black. Maji’s hands trembled when she reached to his neck and plucked the splinters from it. He tried not to flinch while she cleaned and bandaged his injuries. She got him back into his undergarment and sat him by the hearth for a haircut. He did have new scissors, as she reminded him. They were nice and sharp, and he liked the way they *snip-snip-snipped*. It was a wonderful sound. He drew comfort from it, or maybe it was that he cradled Tau’s bottle.

“Thank you, Maji.”

She ran her fingers through the hair on top, his sides once again trimmed the way he liked. “It was nice of Tau to give you that.”

“It makes me feel special,” Oliver admitted, quietly. “Like I mean something to him.”

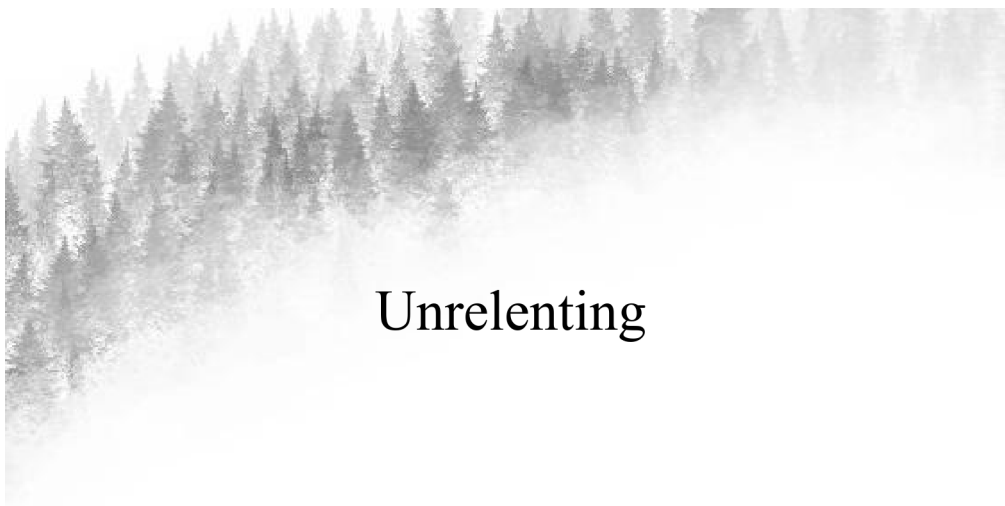
“I’m sure you mean lots to him.” Maji came to stand in front of him. “But... I don’t think Tau would want you to get hurt for his sake. He’s spent too many years healing you for you to go and wreck yourself on purpose.” She offered a faint smile. “Just come to work with me tomorrow, give it a rest for a bit. We’ll come up with a better plan, okay?”

He sighed. “Alright.”





Twelve



Unrelenting

Oliver headed down to their working drift the following day with great reluctance. He wasn't exactly looking forward to maiming himself.

"Don't do any work, just look busy."

Maji had helped him get ready, fed him beef jerky, and chaperoned him to their working drift. She kept her hand on his forearm the entire way. The intention was to help fortify him, Oliver knew, but her hand was around a gash and it hurt. Not that he had the nick-nacks to say anything.

Both Benjamin and Lucetta smiled encouragingly when he entered their drift. Oliver did his best to mirror it and grabbed a shovel to clear rubble, the safest thing for him to do. When he caught Maji's shake of the head, he stopped and instead, tried to only look like he was working.

"Hi, Onyx," he said. Onyx perched the hutch nearby.

She tilted her head with a chirp. Then kept chirping, her song rapidly growing in volume. Onyx took off, zipping down the

drift and disappearing into the stone face by Benjamin with a *pop*. In her wake, a round window. Oliver stared, dumbfounded.

“What the hell...?” Lucetta got up from nearby to have a look.

“She does that.” Benjamin sounded so casual about it, but his face spoke of the guilt that came with keeping secrets.

“Wha—Why didn’t you tell us? What is it?” Maji hopped up, several times, the odd window still too high for her to look through.

Inside it, a field of grey sedge spanned to a snowy-white horizon. The sky was an odd shade of luminous pink, smeared by black, rapidly moving clouds of indistinct shapes, reminding Oliver of starling murmurations. An old hut stood in the distance, webbed by silver and smoke curling from its crooked chimney.

“Looks a little different from when it first happened. Thought I imagined it,” said Benjamin. “I’m sure it’s a portal. I threw something at it the first time and it just went through.”

“Do we go in?” asked Oliver.

The three of them turned to glare at him, chorusing a resolute, “No!”

He did a poor job of not flinching.

The moment they had taken their eyes off the portal, Onyx returned with another song. The portal vanished with a *pop*

behind her, and she perched on the collection hut again. She looked very smug, for a bird.

Oliver turned a questioning look to Benjamin, but he only shrugged. "I know as little as you do."

"Tau gave you that bird," said Oliver.

"And I dice vegetables with my right hand. What of it?" Benjamin turned his back to him, hacking at the stone in swift strokes.

"I'm just thinking, there's got to be a reason. We can ask him when I get him out."

And by Sentinels, he would get Tau out. He already knew how, too.

"Speaking of," he continued, leaning on the handle of the shovel, "I was hoping you'd help me."

"Whatever it is, it's a bad idea."

"Obviously we'll help," said Maji without pause, regarding him. "What do you need?"

"I don't think we should do anything," Benjamin insisted.

"What do you want us to do?" Lucetta smirked when she too faced Oliver.

"I... I might not have been honest yesterday." Oliver turned to Onyx, busy preening herself, having resumed her spherical shape. "I went out the long way and... Nu caught me."

"We knew you were up to something," said Lucetta calmly. "You alright?"

Oliver hunched his shoulders, trying to suppress the shudders that came with remembering how punishing the night had been. And how eerie, being watched both by Nu and some other entity.

“Yeah. I need you to create a distraction so I can sneak into the forest.”

“Sure, what do you want us to do?” asked Lucetta.

He paused, a tweak of shame making itself known before the half-truth even left his mouth. “Gabe’s drift further up. There’s a lot of cribbing. I need you to dislodge it.”

“Whatever for?” Benjamin stopped working long enough to give him a stern look.

Oliver couldn’t meet his eyes. “Nu will have to put it back. They’ll be busy with that.”



Maji and Lucetta didn’t question him and simply went to do as asked. A relief, when he hadn’t wanted to lie to them about whether that particular working drift was empty—and it wasn’t. Something he let slip on his way up to the Bank with Benjamin.

“Someone might get hurt!” he snapped.

Oliver deliberately didn’t look at him. “It’s Nu’s job to heal, right?”

Benjamin said nothing else after that.

They stopped by the climbing ropes inside the Bank, panting for breath, glancing up at the wide opening. Snow drifted down, melting before it reached them. Benjamin sighed, looking ready to argue again while grabbing the ropes. Oliver readied himself with a rebuttal when dry creaks scraped the air.

Thick branches twisted around his throat, jerking him back. Oliver hit the ground with bruising force, seeing stars. He fought against the restraints, felt several bones in his fingers fracture, cried out at the thorns plunging into his skin, piercing his palm, his neck. He rasped for air, vision quickly failing him and only then did the branches relent, slithering into the cave floor and vanishing from sight.

Benjamin rushed to his side, wide-eyed. “*Holy cats*, are you alright?”

Oliver struggled to his knees. A steady stream of blood trickled to the stone, painting it red with indelicate splatters.

“Never better,” he rasped.

Benjamin hovered, hands outstretched, palms cut through the thick leather of his gloves. Oliver hadn’t even realised he’d been trying to help.

“We—we need to...” Benjamin trailed off, evidently lost for words.

“Yeah,” Oliver said, although he wasn’t sure what he was agreeing to.

Benjamin looked like he wanted to stay with him, but Oliver was quick to excuse himself, hurrying back to his hovel on shaking legs. He needed to come up with a better plan. Trapping a few miners in a drift during lunch hour clearly wasn't enough to keep Nu busy.

The door to his hovel creaked open. He stepped inside and stopped.

He stared in horror.

“Don't. *Don't*—”

In the shadows, Nu stood by the bed, bent so low They were doubled over, horns scraping the rugged ceiling, the width of Them occupying most of the space. And in Their bony claw was Tau's bottle.

“Please, *don't*—”

As the words left him, broken to his own ears, the fireflies transformed into tiny blue flowers. They collected like dreck at the bottom of the bottle, shortly discarded to the bed. Nu vanished in a flurry of whispering green leaves that left no traces.

“Why?”

The encroaching silence, thick with heartbreak, didn't respond.



With the wreath gone, the only remaining source of light was Theta's fire, and it was no brighter than a candle. Oliver sat on

the edge of the bed, staring at the tiny blue flowers he'd tipped out onto the floor by his feet. He'd been sitting there for a while now, the fingers of his left hand swollen and throbbing. He could no longer get himself to move, to do anything about the open wounds, too preoccupied wrangling with the image of Nu robbing him of Tau's fireflies.

Why hadn't he done anything to stop the bastard? Why did he always have to *freeze*?

The door slammed open, wresting Oliver out of his stupor. Maji and Lucetta stood before him, covered in grime, handkerchiefs in their pockets blackened, and shirts clinging to them with sweat.

"Why didn't you tell us Gabe and his team were still in there?"

Lucetta's tone was calm, but he could hear the storm kicking up underneath it.

Oliver slipped back into his benumbed state. "Sorry."

His apology fell as flat as his voice. He didn't even mean it, couldn't muster the energy to be sincere.

"Right." Lucetta's expression was taut. "Thanks to you, we spent the entire day replacing the cribbing and lying our arses off about why we did it."

"Sorry."

Maji was quiet, while Lucetta's anger visibly bubbled.

“When you come to your damn senses,” she said, and he caught the way she clenched a fist around her dirty handkerchief, “get yourself up to the clinic. Enough is enough.”

She spun on her heel and left. Maji didn't.

“Forget-Me-Not.”

Oliver blinked, slowly. “What?”

“Those flowers by your feet, that's what they're called. Where'd you get them? I haven't seen any in the mine.”

His lips pulled back in a sneer. “A special gift.”

Maji frowned. “Are you okay?”

“Never better.”

She lingered. When the silence stretched on for too long, Maji told him to rest in a quiet murmur and left. But Oliver had no intention of resting, for as numb as he'd felt moments ago, the rage that boiled in him now fulminated, threatening to burn him up.

He clenched his swollen hand into a fist, relishing the pain.

Oliver pushed himself up, mind buzzing with the need to come up with a plan, heart blazing with the desire to do harm. Whatever time it was, people were out and about and not working. Early evening, maybe. He wandered, no longer in control of where he was going, barely aware of walking with a limp, surprised to find himself in the mine's market.

It was bustling, the ghostly bats restless above him, and he scoured the stalls in search of *something*. He didn't know what yet.

“Hey.”

Benjamin was behind him when he turned, amber eyes brimming with concern. “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” Oliver ground out.

It was clear neither of them bought it. Benjamin's hand twitched up, like he wanted to touch him, but didn't. His hands were bandaged, he had better sense than Oliver. After a moment's pause, Benjamin moved to grab a tin of peas off the table just beside Oliver. It was rusted and battered, the label hanging by a thread of glue, but at least it was unopened.

“Do you want to come over for dinner? I still have fresh carrots and salt-cured meat—”

“Yeah, sure,” Oliver said, distractedly. He no longer had Tau's fireflies, and until he found a way to kill Nu, there wasn't anything else for him to do.

Uncertainty quickly replaced the look of surprise on Benjamin's face. “It's gnome meat.”

At long last, Oliver pulled himself out of his head long enough to look at Benjamin properly. He seemed nervous. “I don't mind.”

Benjamin smiled faintly. “Come with me, then.”

They scoured the market for a short while until Benjamin led him back down to the lodgings, where he held the door open. By the time Oliver sat down, he was reminded of just how exhausted he was, how little sleep he'd gotten over the past few nights, and how much pain he was in.

He sunk into the settee, eyes drifting shut in a futile effort to block out the stinging of all his injuries. It didn't take long for the sound of a practised hand slicing carrots to travel the hovel. When he opened his eyes again, he allowed himself to watch Benjamin, filling a cauldron with water and hanging it over the fire, before Oliver's attention drifted, inevitably, to the dark flower.

Samuel's death wasn't his fault. It was the first time in three years Benjamin had said so. Oliver wasn't inclined to believe him.

"Is your hand alright?"

He looked at the purpling of his fingers. "Might be broken."

"Do you want me to take you up to the clinic?"

"I'm fine." His gaze turned back to the hearth, deep orange flames squashed under a skillet while Benjamin fried the meat.

Oliver stilled, his gaze fixing on the fire.

Theta's fire.

"Sticky?"

He was out the door before he even knew it, headed for his hovel. Inside, he scooped up the litter of flowers, shoved them

into his pocket and grabbed one of the perpetually burning logs, holding it tight in his fist. Oliver stared at it, his mind at a standstill, refusing to think about it. On his heel he spun, making his way to the Bank in a deliberate stride. He hid the burning log against his side without allowing it to touch him, but just then, Oliver cared little. Let them see, let them watch him kill a Sentinel, give them a *real* reason to be afraid of him.

A group of miners came too close, deep in gossip, and Oliver swerved out of their way. A branch snagged his sleeve and the log. He scoffed and stepped back, eyes widening as flames slithered up the branch, swallowing the foliage whole.

Within moments, the passageway rumbled with a roaring fire. Trees and bushes were burning. Nu's *magic* was burning.

Surrounding people screamed, scrambled and panicked. Oliver backed away from the blaze, hot against his face. He ran. The panic had already reached the market when he sprinted through it, sliding to a stop inside the Bank, panting, aching, *terrified* of what he was about to do, of what he'd already done.

The audible frenzy drew people away from the cave, out into the passageway beyond. Oliver dodged them, walked into the cave and stood near the ropes, waiting, hiding the log behind him.

It didn't take long for Nu to show Themselves. The flurry of green leaves died down, and They stood before him, impassive and yet—Oliver's eyes widened at the sight of dark orange flames protruding from beneath Nu's armour, flickering and

lapping at the air. Ignoring the pain in his hand, he grabbed the fistful of blue flowers from his pocket and discarded them to the ground between him and the bastard.

Then, Nu's faceless helmet was just an inch away from him.

A bony claw came around his throat, hoisted him up. Oliver choked, broken fingers clutching at the vambrace. He kicked. His shin connected with Their chest and he released a sharp cry at the agony shooting through his leg, the crack of bone echoing.

He snarled and swung the log up, jamming the burning end directly under Nu's helmet. Oliver met the stone floor, watched in satisfaction as the Sentinel stumbled back and fought the onslaught of flames. They pulled the log out, tossed it aside but crumpled to their knees, quickly engulfed by fire. Oliver pushed himself up, limped his way to Them, just out of reach. He cast a look about, but found nothing to attack Nu with.

His body would just have to do.

He was going to die either way. It might as well happen on his own terms.

Oliver clenched his good fist, drew his body back, and swung.

The fist that connected with his stomach blasted the wind out of him. It had him spewing blood. Something in his chest cracked, lifting him off the ground with the sheer force of Nu's punch. Oliver fell back to the ground, his chin connecting with

stone, teeth clacking. He struggled to suck in air, vision spinning wildly.

Something hard connected with his side. It sent him rolling across the floor until his back collided with damp rock. Desperately, he blinked, trying to get a sense of where Nu was. The second his vision cleared just enough to see, a pointed, bone-covered foot came at his face.



Faint chatter floated around him. Quiet, but it hurt his throbbing head all the same. His eyelids were too heavy and he couldn't open them. He groaned when consciousness insisted on tugging him forward.

“Sticks?”

Lucetta's voice was reticent. The anger in it had subsided, now worried, the only reason Oliver forced his eyes open.

Regret and shame for his behaviour flickered up the moment his gaze settled on her face. Maji stood next to her, peering at him, as was Benjamin. They looked so anxious—he didn't deserve it.

“I'm...” Sentinel's orbs, his throat hurt. “Sorry.”

“Don't talk.” Benjamin cupped the back of his neck to guide him upright.

He was being gentle, but every part of Oliver screamed in agony. In particular, his ribs. He moaned, miserably, body trembling with the labour of moving.

“You’ve broken a few bones,” said Maji. “I did my best, but you’ll need to go to the clinic.”

Once settled against the terrible pillows, Benjamin tipped a cup of tea to his lips. Oliver drank, realising just how parched he was. He couldn’t recall the last time he had bothered to drink. Swallowing hurt, but the herbs and honey were soothing.

Briefly, Oliver glanced down at himself. He was naked, he thought, but there were so many bandages on him it didn’t really count. Lucetta shifted the blankets further up to his stomach, just below where his ribs hurt the most.

“The good news is you’re still alive,” Lucetta said, and Oliver wasn’t so sure if that was truly good news. “The bad news is, you’re in a lot of trouble.”

He tried to talk, but could only croak. The mug was pressed to his lips again, and he took another sip, eyes fluttering closed as the brew ran down his throat.

“Foolish thing you’ve done, Mister Ducharme.”

Oliver started.

Mister Pavlov sat by the hearth, looking out of place in his long, navy coat with fur collars and pinstripe suit that was too similar to his ginger hair. Oliver remembered that suit. It was the same he’d worn on the day he met Pavlov’s wife.

Ondine.

“A tough one to explain,” Pavlov continued, rising. Nu’s ugly light glinted sharply against his shoes as he approached to

look down at him. “This mountain is not known for gases, but perhaps you walked into a pocket and momentarily lost your senses?”

“I didn’t lose my senses,” Oliver said, wincing. His voice was barely recognisable even to his own ears.

“Ah, what’s that? Temporary madness, you say?” Pavlov said cheerfully, peering up at the ceiling in thought. “Yes, well. This job is tough, it can happen to anyone. I’m pleased to see you’re of sound mind again.”

“Wha—” Oliver glanced at his friends in confusion. “I said I *didn’t* lose my—”

“The gases, I say! Or perhaps it was an infernal entity, toying with you, making you do things.” Pavlov walked to the door, adjusting the thick fur of his collars with gloved hands. “You never know in these mountains. I will tell the guards to be on high alert for any...misunderstandings regarding your fugue state.”

“Wait,” Oliver rasped, “what happened to Tau?”

Pavlov barely regarded him, still fiddling with the collars, as though nervous. “Ah, Sentinels. They do as they please, don’t you know.”

“Can’t you get Nu to heal him? He can’t work like this,” said Maji.

“It’s as I said, Miss Willows.” Pavlov regarded Oliver, tawny eyes examining. “I might suggest, Mister Ducharme, that you

stay well away. A Sentinel killing a human is currently unheard of. I would hate for you to be the first.”

“We saw your wife.” Oliver’s heart thudded wildly at his mouth’s betrayal.

“Why, yes,” said Pavlov after a pause. “A few paintings capturing her flawless beauty in the estate, not nearly enough if you ask me! And you’ve met her briefly, as I recall, upon being cursed.”

“I mean we saw her in a portal,” said Oliver. “Those blue doors you magically knew about? We found them again.”

“Indeed?” Pavlov’s face took on a neutral expression that bordered on wooden. “Where is it now, have you informed the guards?”

“We didn’t get a chance to inform them since we got dragged in,” said Lucetta, hesitantly. Then grew bolder when she added, “Saw some awful shit in there, and your wife was at the centre of it. The doors disappeared again after that.”

“So you are, once again, without a portal and have no evidence of what you saw?”

Something cold settled in Oliver’s stomach. A feeling of agitation so heavy it was unlikely to budge. There lay a realisation trapped under it, but he didn’t know what it was. The door snapped shut behind Pavlov, leaving Oliver to stare at it, baffled and frustrated.

“What’s a fugue state?” asked Maji.

Lucetta shrugged, brows drawn, while Benjamin busied himself offering Oliver more tea. The heat of it spread pleasantly in his belly, but was undone with every aching breath he took. Maji crawled onto the bed and settled down beside him. He tried not to wince when she knocked into his side.

“I thought you said I was in trouble?”

“That fire caused a lot of damage.” Lucetta pulled her focus from the door. “Nobody got hurt, but people aren’t going to forget this.”

“Are your hovels alright?” Oliver asked.

“Yeah. We got lucky. Others not so much,” said Maji, peering up at him, although he couldn’t meet her gaze. “I think it’s best if you stay here for a while.”

Oliver sighed, wincing from the pain pinching his ribs. As if he wasn’t unpopular enough already, and it had been for nothing. Nu was still alive. The absolute bastard.

“What if I put the mantle on? Maybe Nu won’t be able to sense me then.”

“Sticks, *no*,” Lucetta snapped. He kept his eyes shut so he wouldn’t have to see her scorn.

“What do you expect to do in your condition?” asked Benjamin, cradling the mug.

It occurred to Oliver that he’d run off while the man had been kind enough to cook for him. That would account for his

clipped tone. Oliver looked at him, lips thinned into a line while he searched for an adequate apology.

“I mucked up.”

“That’s an understatement,” said Lucetta. “I don’t think you understand the gravity of what you did.”

“I do. I just... I was upset.” Oliver stared at the door, hard.

“I get upset too,” she said. “What I don’t do is set fire to things and risk people’s lives.”

And not just people’s, but the lives of his friends. It remained unsaid, but there was little need to give voice to such truth. Oliver gasped for breath, and furiously blinked, refusing to allow the tears to shed.

“What happened?” Lucetta nudged his foot. “What did Nu do that made you want to try and kill a damn Sentinel, of all things?”

Oliver shook his head. “Doesn’t matter now.”

“It matters.” Benjamin’s fingers turned white, clutching the mug.

“You can tell us,” said Maji softly.

Oliver shut his eyes, willing away the lingering memories. He didn’t want to think about it. He needed to get to Tau.

“I—I know the mantle was expensive, but you’ve got to let me try.”

“Out.”

He stared at Benjamin, a fury marring his face Oliver had seen a few times before. It still startled him, sending a pang straight through to his stomach. He opened his mouth—

“No. I won’t hear it,” Benjamin snapped. “If you insist on being reckless and getting yourself killed, you need to leave. We’re done picking you up.”

Oliver worked his jaw. His gaze flicked to Lucetta’s hard look, then to Maji’s conflicted expression. What was he supposed to do? He was naked, his clothes were nowhere in sight, and he was fairly sure he’d shattered his shin on Nu’s stupid armour.

Glaring at the ugly beige carpet for a moment, Oliver shifted and fought against making a sound from the agony tearing through him. That he was wrecked and exposed was bad enough, but the three of them seemed intent on watching him struggle.

He freed himself of the blankets and slipped out of bed, put weight on his injured leg, and crumpled to the floor with a startled, gasp-tinged cry.

A hand touched his back then, warm and comforting.

“If you can put it out of your head,” Benjamin said, his tone a touch softer, “then...stay the night with me.”

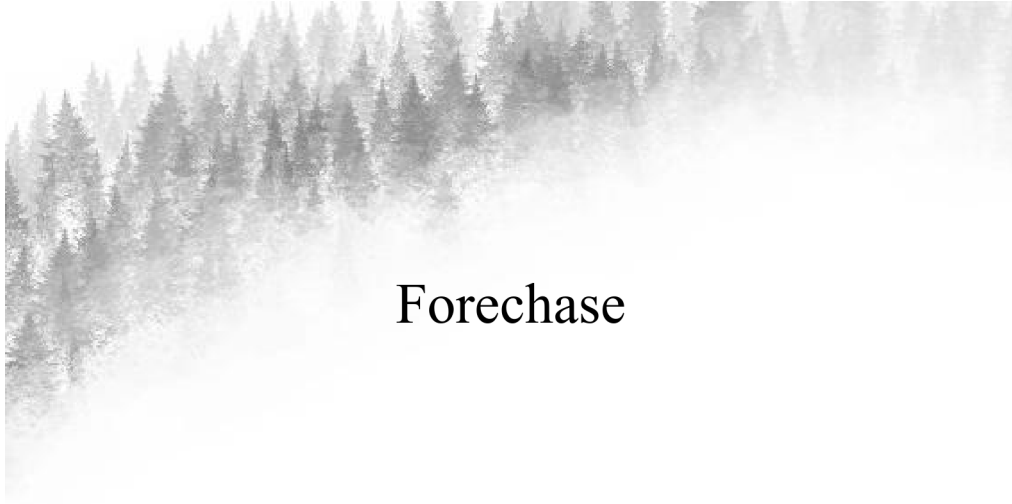
“I don’t even know what time it is,” he mumbled. Stupid Nu and Their stupid inability to give them the time.

“Please, just stay with me.”





Thirteen



Forechase

Benjamin stared at the door, wide open, Sticky having vanished through it without a word. The rolling boil pulled his attention back to the dinner he was supposed to be making, although he didn't ease the cauldron off the fire.

Maybe Sticky just needed the latrines and was too embarrassed to say. Not that he had issues announcing it in the past, reminding them all that if he killed himself wiping, to just use the paper that would be protruding from his mouth as kindling.

Whatever had been so urgent, he would be back. Benjamin worked on convincing himself of that while he finished dinner. While he served it, while he sat there, staring at the two plates resting by the hearth.

While the food got cold.

Then, staring at the half-finished birdhouse for Onyx on the floor, he realised that this must be Sticky's peculiar brand of revenge. Equal parts frivolous and hurtful. Benjamin knew he

deserved to be stood up like this, again. Probably deserved a lot worse. He remembered all too well the rotten things he'd said to Sticky, who had taken it all with a grace Benjamin would never be capable of. At the time, he'd shrugged it off, convinced Sticky would know better than to take a grieving man at his word. To learn he'd been carrying such guilt for so long broke his heart.

He definitely deserved to be stood up, but gods, it hurt.

Benjamin didn't know when the shift happened. It must have crept up on him. That his heart was willing to let go at long last wasn't as terrifying as he thought it would be. Sticky was desperate for love, and Benjamin was cautiously willing to provide it. The curse complicated things, but they could make it work, *somehow*.

If only Sticky would return.

Benjamin sat there for a long time, eventually deciding to get up and close the door so that passersby would stop looking in and witness just how pathetic he was being. Stood up by a twenty-something year old.

A commotion echoed down the passageway. He stepped outside, his eyes widening in horror.

Tendrils of orange lashed about, engulfing trees and flowers and undulating across the ceiling into hovels. Miners were throwing buckets of water at the fire, desperately trying to save what they could of their homes.

Benjamin cursed, grabbed his pickaxe and ran, dodging flailing buckets and ducking past flaring coils. He needed to take the long way around, already knowing where he would find the missing Sentinel, and Sticky.

He skidded to a halt inside the Bank, choking on his sharp inhale with terror.

Sticky lay crumpled on the ground. Sentinel Nu was ablaze, yet had Their foot raised over his head. Benjamin didn't stop to think, swinging the pickaxe at the Sentinel's back. The clang of steel hollered through the cave, followed by a distinct *clack*. The tip broke off, clattering to the ground. It hadn't done so much as scratch Their cape.

Frozen to the spot with the pickaxe still raised, Benjamin knew he'd made a mistake. The Sentinel dragged Sticky off the ground by the scruff and flung him hard into Benjamin. The blow propelled him backwards into a rock formation, sending stars into his vision, knocking the wind out of him.

Things happened in a blur after that. He'd come to and panicked, thinking Sticky dead, gathered him into his arms and ran down to Maji, closer than the clinic. The fire was nowhere to be seen on his way. Pavlov had been informed, he heard someone say, and people were out for Sticky's blood already. Benjamin had brought him back to his hovel, the safest place he could think of.

Now he stood bent over, hand resting on a back bruised and flayed, not an inch unmarked, begging Sticky to stay with him.

Benjamin knew he would be resented, forcing the choice, but thought he saw relief in those green eyes after guiding Sticky back into bed. Maji and Lucetta stayed for food, then retired to their own hovels.

It was just Sticky and him then, sitting on the end of the bed, holding a terrible hand.

Instead of being reasonable and sleeping, Sticky wanted to play cards. Good thing he'd picked up a new deck a few days prior. Benjamin supposed he ought to be grateful he'd even gotten him to stay. Sticky was so stubborn it was like a curse.

Benjamin glanced up from his cards to see Sticky's jaw tense and expression shudder. His fingers clenched around the cards, bending them all. That sight used to fill Benjamin with fear. All it did now was evoke a tightness in his chest and a desire to hold and comfort him.

"Sorry," Sticky grunted, exhaling sharply.

"It's fine," said Benjamin. "I guess we can call it a draw."

"I'm failing him."

Quietly spoken, but unmistakable. Benjamin searched downcast basil eyes, a whisper of remorse stirring in his chest. Maji and Lucetta thought Sticky's infatuation with the Sentinel was cute. After nearly killing himself as a testament to what was clearly an obsession, hopefully the two would reconsider encouraging the behaviour.

Benjamin doubted the Sentinel was capable of romantic love, he hardly understood humans as it was, never mind their

more complex emotions. All the same, the Sentinel had always shown up for Sticky, sometimes for the most idiotic things. That Sticky had formed an attachment was a given.

“Nu will have to do Their job, eventually. They can’t just let you suffer like this.”

Sticky scoffed but said nothing.

“Ready to sleep?”

“I should sleep in my hovel.”

“That’s...not a good idea,” said Benjamin. Pavlov might have told the guards to keep an eye on Sticky, but he didn’t trust them any further than he trusted Nu.

Sticky winced when he shifted. “The settee.”

“That thing is far too uncomfortable.”

“Where are you going to sleep, then?”

He had him there. “Suppose I’ll just sleep next to you, if that’s agreeable?”

Sticky hesitated. “It’s not safe. The curse... It stays active when I sleep.”

Benjamin leaned back. He stared at the drawn brows, the deep gash across Sticky’s cheek, and the many other cuts all over his face, yellowed by yarrow powder.

How had he not known? All these years, Sticky had been suffering day *and* night, and not once said a word about it.

“It’ll be fine,” Benjamin said, more certain than he felt.

“It’s a bad idea.”

He was probably right. Against better sense, Benjamin stripped to his undergarments. He left his clothes on the floor like a prepubescent boy and climbed over that lissom frame, disregarding the cards haphazardly sliding across the bed. Taking a moment to deliberate the foolishness he was about to commit, he slipped under the sheets with a *very* nervous Sticky. Who was still bare, Benjamin remembered. He sucked in a breath, softly, hoping the sudden, stirring heat wasn’t noticeable.

“I’ll just hold you. How about that?”

“Hold me down?”

Gods. If only. “Just so you can’t move.”

“I—Would that even work? If you want to—*Ow*.”

“Sorry. You alright?”

He’d been too careless pulling him close. Nothing to do with eagerness, of course.

Gentler this time, and Sticky going unhelpfully limp in his hold, Benjamin got him where he wanted. Well, not *exactly* where he wanted, but it would have to do for now. With one arm supporting the neck and the other across his lower abdomen, Benjamin resisted the need to slide his hand across the bare skin. Should he start, he wouldn’t be able to stop. Sticky was small and frail in his arms, flat stomach receding with every strained, nervous breath he took. He looked so scared.

“It’ll be fine,” Benjamin assured again, shifting closer until his face pressed against the side of Sticky’s. The pine-like scent of the yarrow, paired with blood and sweat would take some getting used to, it was sharp in his nostrils.

“Only for a bit,” Sticky muttered, eyes droopy with fatigue. “Then I’ll move.”

The lights in the hovel had already dulled. It was pleasantly quiet, in particular since Onyx had disappeared again. Benjamin didn’t know where she went, only that so far, she always came back.

Feeling more content than he had in ages surrounded by a bounty of pillows, he closed his eyes with a soft sigh. As long as he held him, it would be alright. No harm would come of this.

“Ben?”

“Yes?”

“Why do you keep these stupid pillows?”

“I like them.”

“Oh.”

Silence. Then, “Ben?”

“Mhm?”

“Where’s the pink one with the red flowers?”

He tensed. Of course, Sticky would’ve noticed. He loved his awful patterns and colours.

“It’s not here?”

“No.”

“Ah. I’m not sure, sorry.”

More silence.

“It’s okay. I can make you another one. I should go get some fabric to get started. Sit on the settee.”

“It’ll be fine. Go to sleep.”



Benjamin couldn’t remember the last time he’d woken up to such serenity. Sticky was like an oven, impossibly hot in more ways than one. Watching him doze, Benjamin wondered why it had taken him this long to invite Sticky into his bed. Holding him throughout the night had worked brilliantly.

He reached out to trace the pronounced jawline, smiled at the way Sticky moved into the touch.

Then, Sticky turned. A hand came down, and the next thing Benjamin knew, he was on his back, eyes watering and unfocused with pain, nose shattered and gushing blood into the back of his throat and across his face. Beside him, Sticky remained fast asleep, innocent and unaware of the damage he’d just caused.

Cupping a hand over his nose, Benjamin crawled out of bed, grabbed a terry cloth to staunch the flow, and escaped the hovel on bare feet and in undergarments.

What magic had caught fire was replaced, but the damage to people’s hovels was done. Black streaks permanently marked

the stone with Sticky's crime. Or fugue state, whatever that was.

Fortunately, Nu was just ahead, seemingly waiting for him. Benjamin would have preferred to go up to the clinic. Nu's treatment of Sticky was nothing short of barbarous, but he didn't want Sticky to wake up alone, for fear he might abandon sleeping in the same bed a second time. They would just have to come up with a different plan. Maybe Sticky wouldn't oppose to being tied up.

Now there was a thought.

Nu healed his nose with little fanfare. A glow of purple that lasted several moments, and it was done. He should have been polite and said thank you, but couldn't rustle up the manners. Especially not when he was sure Nu would have killed Sticky, had he not intervened.

Sticky was still asleep when he returned, giving him time to wash his face and dress, and to inspect his nose in the mirror. Was it a little more crooked?

"Did something happen?" A groggy mumble.

Benjamin stuffed the bloodied terry cloth into the hamper before it could be spotted. "How'd you sleep?"

Sticky grimaced when he moved to sit up, his groan pitiful. "Not bad."

With a hum, Benjamin moved pillows behind Sticky's back to prop him up. "How about I take you to the clinic and get you sorted?"

“I’m going to die even if I do go.”

Spoken in no more than a murmur, but the words delivered a blow to Benjamin’s gut that left him reeling. He dropped into bed, weakly.

Benjamin knew the curse was dangerous, even if Pavlov had declared it Minor. Too many close calls told him that man wasn’t in his right mind.

“I’ll take care of you,” he said, knowing he sounded desperate. He took a limp hand in his, holding it tight and peered into downcast eyes, willing Sticky to believe him. “I promise, I will. If you’ll let me.”

Sticky looked hopeless, his harsh reality visible in the slump of his shoulders.

Benjamin drew in a breath and with it, summoned his courage. He cupped that slender face in both hands. He leaned in.

Blond brows raised in sharp surprise, the confusion in those green eyes agonisingly obvious. He faltered and missed, the kiss dropping to the corner of Sticky’s mouth instead. Benjamin pulled away, clearing his throat, looking elsewhere once he caught the way Sticky shifted awkwardly.

A knock on the door brought Benjamin up on his feet. He combed his fingers through his hair when Maji let herself in, looking like she had recently been roused. Her eyes weren’t even fully open, her braid a mess, like she’d slept in it. She carried the fur mantle behind her, shuffled to the bed and

collapsed into it. With her face firmly planted in sheets that still held spare cards, she flung her arm in a wide arc and whipped the mantle at Sticky.

“Ow, Maji, the buckles!”

Her apology was muffled and half-hearted. Turning her head, she added, “Thought you might like to wear it while you rest. Because you’re going to stay in bed and rest, right? You won’t lie to us again and run off to get yourself killed, are you?”

Sticky lowered his eyes. “No, ma’am.”

“You coming?” Lucetta poked her head in and clicked her tongue in annoyance at Maji curling up with a tired moan. “We need money. Let’s go!”

Benjamin grabbed a mug of water and some leftover pemmican, placed it on the table by the bed, and avoided looking at the flower. “Help yourself, be sure to drink. *Stay*. I’ll be back for lunch.”

Recalling the show Sticky put on when he first wore the mantle, Benjamin hurried to lift Maji off the bed. It wouldn’t do to have his way with Sticky when that could very well end in his demise. Or when, quite possibly, he didn’t feel the same way. Benjamin carried the grumbling Maji out, depositing her to the ground once he securely shut the door.

“Just because you *can* carry me around doesn’t mean you should,” she snapped.

“Alright. Sorry.”

“Reckon he’ll listen this time?” Lucetta asked as they made their way down.

“Not much he can do in his state, I hope,” said Benjamin. “I don’t like that you gave him the mantle.”

“He needs it,” Maji said. “I think Nu took away Tau’s gift.”

Lucetta sucked a breath in through her teeth. “Hell, you think that’s why he...?”

So it had stopped being about Tau and more about revenge. And now that the Sentinel was gone, the mantle would otherwise only collect dust. What a waste.

“Don’t suppose we can return it, get our money back?” Benjamin muttered.

Maji scrunched her face with displeasure.

Exiting the second cage to head for the third, Onyx announced her return with noisy twittering that echoed around the passageway. She landed on Benjamin’s shoulder with a final chirp, and he reached up to carefully stroke her head with a fingertip.



The day went by slower than percolated treacle. It soon became clear that there was a dry spell for everyone, not just their group. By the time other miners left their working drifts to have lunch, no one appeared to have made even a single discovery.

Benjamin tossed around water to subdue the dust, then haphazardly threw the bucket aside.

“I’ll go up and check on him,” he announced.

“I want a word first.” Lucetta’s tone was stern, her look even more so.

Why did that make his stomach drop? As if he had to justify his fondness for Sticky. Who was around half his age, whose foolishness was like an affliction, and who he had blamed for his husband’s death.

Benjamin pressed his lips together. Lucetta wasn’t wrong to confront him about it.

Onyx chirped noisily again before he could respond. She flew up from the hutch, and down the drift to disappear into another portal, leaving it open much like before. Benjamin sighed, wishing he knew why the Sentinel had given him this peculiar bird. Approaching the portal, he pondered selling her.

It gave him a similar view, but closer to the hut. It was shabby, silvery moss growing across the roof and log walls. The window was a cut-out, unrevealing of what lay inside other than an orange glow. Whatever light source that realm had, it changed directions far too often.

“Let’s throw something in,” said Maji eagerly.

Benjamin looked at Lucetta, who shrugged. Deciding it couldn’t hurt, seeing as he’d done it before, he collected a piece of rubble that Maji snatched away from him.

With a running start, she chucked it through. It pelted the hut with a hard *thunk*, then disappeared into grey sedge.

“Good arm,” said Lucetta.

Keenly, Benjamin peered into the portal without putting his head through. His heart stuttered and hair stood on end when the silhouette of a man appeared by the hut’s window, rapidly shifting light pulling him from the shadows of the interior.

Dark skin, deep-set eyes, short hair and broad shoulders. Benjamin froze at the sight of him.

“Sa–Sam?!”

Samuel’s head jerked in his direction. “Benji? What the—”

Grass fluttered under a heavy weight. Long, spindly fingers dripping with black snaked through the portal, grasping at its edges. A dark mass poured through, a legion of large and pointy yellow teeth carried along with the flow, slopping to the ground. Benjamin stepped back, not knowing what it was—except, he did know.

It was the Wandering Horror.

Liquid char oozed, taking shape on the ground, tripling in size. Benjamin’s heart tore around his chest, cold sweat beading on his forehead, fingers clenching the hilt of his pickaxe.

“RUN BEN!” Lucetta shouted.

Like a malformed spider with a dozen stalked limbs, it had pointed teeth covering its body in trails, leading up to a

sagging mouth of what vaguely resembled a human head. It was massive, barely fitting inside the drift. Benjamin was trapped between it and the wrong end of the drift. All he had to defend himself with was a new pickaxe, and he didn't even like this one.

He swung it, hitting a dripping leg that latched on and swiftly sucked the tool into its slick, wrenching it out of his grasp. The monstrosity turned to look at him through misshapen eyes, too human regardless, its mouth set in a permanent scream.

A sudden whirlwind of tiny leaves ensnared it, lashing at its face, body and legs, flicking ooze his way. The storm of green and thick branches dragged the monstrosity out into the wide passage beyond. Giving Benjamin a chance to escape. He ran forward with a last look at the portal—it was gone.

The Horror splashed out from between Nu's woodsy trap. Black sprays formed into legs, jagged with teeth, and launched forward, knocking into the Sentinel's chest, pushing Them back. More vines and roots shot upward from the ground, entwining the cryptid, but the Horror slithered forward to engulf the Sentinel.

Benjamin swung at it with gloved fists. He grabbed a leg, fingers wrapping around thick liquid as sharp teeth dug into the cuts on his palms and ooze poured over his forearms. He pulled, but all the monstrosity did was turn its ghastly head to look at him. It snaked one of its legs around his arms, dragging him into itself.

His boots scraped across the stone even as he planted his feet firm. A cluster of giant roots sprang up from the ground to pierce the cryptid through its stomach. It split, allowing the Sentinel to break free. Nu hurtled forward, past Benjamin, and away.

He kicked to free himself and scrambled to escape. There was no sign of Lucetta or Maji, he hoped they had gotten to safety.

Dashing through a crosscut, he heard Onyx behind him. He chanced a look over his shoulder to see the bird doing its best to distract the monster, fluttering and chirping. It seemed to be working.

Until Onyx beelined for him.

Even as panic seized him by the neck, Benjamin jumped into the closest hutch and pulled a tarp over himself. Panting heavily, he heard Onyx's wild twittering drawing nearer. The sound zipped past him and then faded.

And at the bird's heel was the Wandering Horror.

The racket of its legs and body slapping across stone echoed throughout. He could hear the clattering of tools and the breaking of props. Hutches were being upended. Benjamin braced himself.

The hutch shook and trembled, then lurched. He flipped, momentarily suspended, before connecting chest first with the ground. The hutch collapsed atop his extended leg with a

painful crunch. Benjamin bit the inside of his cheek to keep from crying out.

The monstrosity ran off. It hadn't seen him.

Not until Benjamin heard the distant screams of others did he dare move. He struggled to get out, grunting as he shoved at the heavy hutch until it tipped sideways. Benjamin gasped in pain the moment he tried to get up. His leg was broken—he didn't need to inspect it to know.

He dragged himself across the ground, eventually pushing up and hobbling forward. Lucetta bolted around the corner ahead of him, Maji just behind her. They spotted him and ran faster, Lucetta grabbing a wayward shovel on the way.

“Use this,” she panted, ducking under his arm. “Where is Nu?”

Benjamin leaned on the makeshift crutch—the agonising pain in his leg wrangled grunts out of him. “That coward disappeared. We need to get Onyx. Sam is alive!”

“We will, but we need to deal with this first!”

The commotion of the Horror tearing its way through the mine grew more distant. Panic clenched Benjamin's chest when he realised Sticky was inside his hovel, completely helpless. He hobbled faster.

When they reached a hutch that miraculously remained on its tracks, Lucetta and Maji helped him into it. He emptied the contents to lighten the load, tossing out ore, a few things wrapped in paper, and geodes that were happy to be free.

Maji and Lucetta two pushed with all their might. Benjamin turned to look ahead.

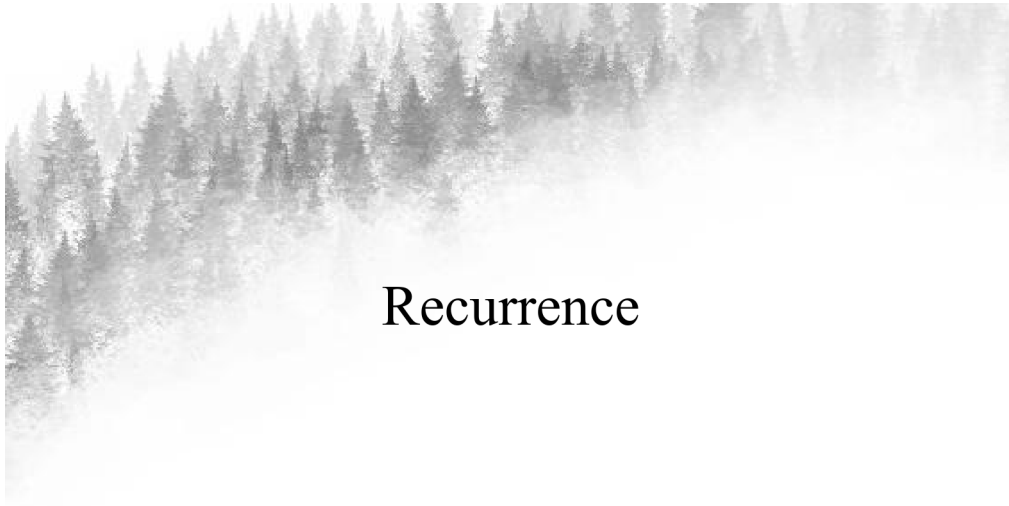
His blood ran cold.

A mass of black, heavy and slick, barrelled down the drift towards them.





Fourteen



Recurrence

Oliver did the only thing he could while confined to the bed: he glared up at the ceiling. He'd put the mantle on as soon as Benjamin and Maji left. Its effects were as toe-curling as the first time.

Then he'd tried to get up, and every inch of him shrieked like a banshee. Being idle was one of his favourite pastimes, but now that he was forced to be, it was a different matter.

His head burst at the seams with thoughts, and he hated it.

He didn't want to think about Pavlov's wife, or how Pavlov thought him mad. Neither could he bring himself to ponder what that odd kiss from Benjamin had been about. He was trying to figure out how to take Nu down so that he might finally reach Tau, which meant he was thinking about betraying his friends' trust again. The thought alone tightened his chest.

But Tau was still out there, trapped, alone. He'd brought him and Lucetta along for help, Oliver was sure of it. He had to do

something.

With difficulty, he slid out of bed and limped over to the wardrobe. He faltered at the sight of Samuel's clothes, needing to reach past them to borrow a shirt and slacks. Dressing was another challenge, made easier only by his curse not kicking in. Small blessings. Oliver shuffled into his boots, had to forego lacing them up, and unsteadily faced the door, hesitating.

At best, Nu would kill him, take the fur mantle away at worst. And if Nu didn't kill him, then his friends would. Maji had put trust in him by leaving the mantle, trust he didn't really deserve. Was he going to betray that just to end up dead?

Was there any point in worrying if he was going to die sooner rather than later, with or without Nu's help?

Oliver fiddled with the straps of the mantle, then limped back to the bed. Sitting on its edge, he resigned himself to staring at the hearth when a racket rebounded outside. Screams and crashes, a stampede of footsteps, people's shadows slipping past the window.

The door slammed open and a large, bulging boulder squirmed inside, sticking to the stone with strings of slime as it rolled forward. A giant black mass, dripping and churning, freezing Oliver in place when a sagging face bubbled forward and stared at him with milky, drooping eyes. Its lopsided mouth hung open, soundlessly drawing closer to hover above

him. A blackened tendril protruded from its round stomach, lashing through the air and crashing into the bedside table.

That same wobbling stalk slithered around his midriff moments after.

Oliver howled in pain, raised off the bed, drawn towards its belly. He slammed his arm into the tendril, pushed until the sticky ooze snapped. Dropping to the ground, he didn't give himself time to reel from the pain, crawling past several legs to the hearth. Oliver snatched the fire iron as something thick and warm snagged his leg, dragging him back.

Wet darkness enveloped him. His surroundings became cramped, slimy, the pungency of decay curling up his nose. He elbowed the soft walls, tumbling around, his pained ululating muffled. He caught brief flashes of stone through gaps, and placed all his might into a downward swing, plunging the fire iron hard into the ooze. Tar parted. He fell out, back onto stone with a shriek of misery.

Spittle clinging to his lips, Oliver pushed himself back up, launched at the Horror slithering away. He hacked at the stalks of tar-like muck, breaking away two of its hind legs. It stumbled to the side, revealing Maji, Lucetta, and Benjamin just beyond it, collapsed on the ground by an upended hutch, retching and coughing. Oliver limped forward to stand in front of his friends, staring the Wandering Horror down, gripping the iron tight.

He and this thing had a quarrel to settle, and he was going to settle this no matter what.

“You okay?” Oliver asked the three behind him.

Maji clapped both Lucetta and Benjamin on the back several times before she scampered to his side. She had vials in her hand, the same she used against the bats. She flung all four of them forward with a laborious grunt. They shattered at the Horror’s stalked legs, spraying glass and red fluid.

It had no effect.

The cryptid whipped a teeth-covered stalk at them. Oliver swung upwards, hard, hacked it away before it could make contact. Yet another tendril, and he swung at that too, quick, perfectly controlled, but in so much agony he thought he might drop.

The horror bouldered the narrow passageway as though lost, then burst outward. Viscous black fluid stretched across the width of the tunnel—a thick spider’s web covered in teeth with a spare few gaps. It flew at them like a net.

Oliver stabbed upward, but the deluge of blackness slammed down on him, his friends. He fell back against Maji, placing every crumble of strength he had left into pushing the iron through, to tear the blackness open again. Oliver screamed, pain searing his entire body. He pushed harder, squinting against flaring light.

The black mass recoiled. Oliver gasped for breath, dizzy, his eyes burning, but he caught the flash of white, the dark green glints of armour.

Tau stood on the other side, spheres of light trouncing the Horror until it relented in full, turning into a muddled boulder to roll towards him. Nu joined in, standing just beside Tau. They cut at the monstrosity with a vortex of leaves and together, the Sentinels forced it to swerve.

Panting, Oliver got to his knees, hovering over Maji to shield her, and glanced behind him to see Lucetta still heaving, black fluid dripping from her mouth while Benjamin wiped at his. The Horror slithered past them in a series of slaps against stone, a much smaller boulder than before, quickly caught in a shimmering green wall that expanded behind Lucetta and Benjamin. Its tar-covered body sizzled, the combination of burning flesh and rot overpowering, its pained screech echoing far.

Nu's leaves and branches did nothing to stay its agitated attempts at escape. For every piece cut off, it snaked back to join the primary mass. More flashes of light made Oliver's eyes water. A welcome burn.

As if Tau had merely been toying with it until now, he and the Horror both disappeared with that familiar *snap*.

An ear-thumping silence followed, where the drag of wind was inaudible over the fierce hammering of Oliver's heart.

Maji eased out from under him, to Lucetta and Benjamin. She slapped them on the back. They were both coughing and retching, as though they'd been drowning. With her help, they made it to the wall, while Nu almost lazily administered healing to Benjamin's leg from a distance. Oliver refused to

move. Still on his knees, he stared at the spot where Tau had disappeared.

“Are you okay?” Maji murmured.

A series of strained coughs from Lucetta. “Just fine.”

Nu strode away then, past Oliver to disappear into a crosscut without bothering to heal him, but he didn’t care. His chest too tight with anticipation, hand clenching the iron as he waited.

“Sam’s alive.”

He jerked his focus to Benjamin, who stared at at the wall across, his expression flickering from distant to distraught. “He’s *alive*.”

“Yeah,” breathed Maji.

She met Oliver’s searching look while crouching in front of Benjamin and stroking his forearm. The man buried his face in his hands and said nothing else. Lucetta was beside him, her gaze conflicted, stony.

“Wherever Sam is, Onyx can lead us to him,” Maji said. “Where is she?”

Snap.

Tau reappeared.

Beautiful, omnipotent, vibrant against the surrounding murk. He extended a claw, unfurled it, and a very ruffled Onyx fluttered out of it, past Oliver’s head.

His heart seized, his vision blurred. The clatter of iron rang through the passageway as Oliver tipped backward, eyes

rolling into the back of his head.

Musclebound arms wrapped around his shoulders, easing him to the ground, as the strum of magic flowed through Oliver's body. The familiar feel of split skin closing, of bruises fading, and bones mending evoked a sob. All his pain spilled away in a rush, like his breath, as he gazed into that stunning mask.

So expressionless, so full of emotion all the same. Tau was worried about him, he knew and reached out, tracing the brim of the hood with the faintest of touches, his fingers trembling. The Sentinel leaned into him, not letting go.

“Loads better,” Oliver whispered. “Thank you.”

Tau helped him back up, metal fingers both warm and cool under his mended ones. Oliver turned to face his friends and, with a lingering touch to Tau's claw, moved toward them.

“Ben?”

Benjamin wept when he knelt by him and touched his arm, fingers brushing Maji's.

“We saw Sam through Onyx's portal,” Maji murmured, easing his hand away.

Oliver's gaze flicked to the bird, once again on Benjamin's shoulder. His stomach twisted with a sudden realisation.

The portal. It was what he'd seen before, that portal the Wandering Horror had escaped into with Samuel.

“Sam’s...alive.” He swallowed thickly, wondering if Benjamin had seen a memory. Portals to memories were unheard of, yet he and Lucetta had stumbled upon two now. The feeling that’s what they were hadn’t left Oliver once. “Are you sure?”

Lucetta shrugged. “Sure looked like him. He saw us. Said Benjamin’s name.”

Oliver’s exhale quivered. “That’s—that’s—”

An odd sensation coursed his chest. It took him several moments to recognise it for what it was, he’d not felt it for so long.

It was hope. So foreign that it scared him.

He pushed up and faced Tau. Motionless, silent. Watching him. “Nu won’t turn you into a marble again, will They?” His heart stuttered madly when Tau canted his head. “Good. ’Cause I can’t stand that bastard.”

Maji’s chuckle was breathy and faint. Her boots scuffed stone when she got up and held out her hands for both Benjamin and Lucetta to take. “We better go see if Pavlov’s been notified of what’s happened.”

Dread filled their walk back up. Most of the magic had vanished. Everything had gone dark. Tau recast the suns and sent them through the passageway with casual flicks of his wrist.

When they reached the lowest lodgings, Oliver staggered.

Light bounced off motley pieces of human remains clinging to clotheslines, stuck to doors. Blood painted the walls, soaked the ground and trailed off the ceiling with audible drips. There was no way to tell who had died or how many, the gore smearing nearly every inch of rock.

Windows were smashed in, doors broken down. Maji clutched at her mouth to keep from retching, only for upchuck to spray between her fingers anyway. Oliver sidestepped it, bumping into Tau.

He didn't move, neither did Tau.

"Please stop," Lucetta groaned, reaching out to stroke Maji across the back. "I'm going to hurl too if you don't—*ugh*."

It was Maji's turn to sidestep. Benjamin didn't appear to be in better shape and did a poor job of masking it. Oliver's stomach wasn't roiling as it probably ought to be, despite the stench of vomit and viscera invading his nostrils. His arm still pressed against Tau's and he couldn't bring himself to think about much else.

Until Maji reached for him, her legs visibly shaky. He let her clutch at his sleeve without a word, casting a longing glance up at his Sentinel, who was looking at him again.

As they trudged through the grisly passageway, Lucetta checked hovels for survivors on unsteady legs. Maji still trembled, trying not to look at the gore by pressing her face against Oliver's arm. He didn't know why the Wandering Horror had ripped through the mine so ferociously, or why it had barrelled into Benjamin's hovel and taken him out of it.

The first time anyone encountered it was well before his time. All it had done was scurry to get away. It had trampled a miner with its second appearance, and Oliver hadn't seen it then, busy getting a rundown on proper tool care from Benjamin, since he'd been doing it all wrong.

The third incident was when it took Samuel. Still, not once had it caused such destruction. Even Tau, who walked alongside them, was actively looking around.

“Did...did we make it angry by throwing a rock through the portal?” Maji's fingers found their way around Oliver's.

Lucetta, coming to stand by them, shook her head. “Don't think about that. There might be survivors on the surface.” She removed the hard-boiled hat to card her fingers through her dark curls. “I'm going up to see.”

“I'll come with you,” said Benjamin, stiffly.

Tau set to recasting the firefly-like lights, sending several to chase after Lucetta and Benjamin. Comfort washed over Oliver the moment they floated above. He tilted his head back and watched with satisfaction when what little remained of Nu's magic was replaced by Tau's. Vines dwindled, flowers shrunk and trees disappeared back into the ceiling. Replaced by glorious shafts of light and vibrant suns.

“I hope that means Nu will go away,” he said.

“Everyone who's dead... I think—I think it might be our fault.” Deep brown eyes turned to him as if pleading with him to refute it.

Oliver asked Maji what had happened, she told him. He didn't know what to say, so he chose to say nothing and led her into Benjamin's hovel with another lingering look at Tau.

Like a storm had blazed inside, everything of Benjamin's was upended.

Together, Oliver and Maji gathered pieces of broken furniture, ruined books, and swept up splinters and shattered things, including what remained of the quartz vase. The dark flower was nowhere in sight. Maji put Samuel's toothbrush by the basin, the chipped cup that used to hold it now in several pieces, while Oliver tried his best to repair the settee, broken down the middle. He didn't know what the Horror had done with it.

Benjamin and Lucetta returned after some time, their faces dour.

"There are a lot of survivors," Lucetta said. "Pavlov's been notified and they're going to come down, help clean the place up."

Oliver turned to her. She was always so calm in the worst situations. He was almost afraid to ask how Lucetta had become this tough. They had seen awful things in this mountain, not least of which were miners maimed by infernal entities or mining accidents, but nothing so terrible that it warranted such steely resolve.

Especially considering Samuel was alive. What must she be going through?

“That’s good news,” said Maji, subdued. “Did you see anyone we know?”

“Gabe, Helen and Anna. Didn’t look much further.” Lucetta turned her focus to Oliver. “Tau’s loitering outside.”

The urge to go was so strong, Oliver had gotten up and taken a step toward the door without thinking. He stopped only when Maji spoke up again.

“Do you think we can get Onyx to open that portal again? It’s small, but maybe Sam can squeeze through?”

“At least there’s no risk of the Wandering Horror reappearing.” Lucetta picked up where Oliver left off with the settee, although it was unlikely to be properly fixed. It would just have to be lower to the ground from now on.

Benjamin opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Onyx chirped, then fluttered off his shoulder to perch herself on the support beam above the hearth. Oliver lingered by the door, watching while Lucetta pushed the two ends of the settee together.

For the time he’d known Samuel, all Lucetta did was accost him, something her brother never responded to. To see her behave as though nothing was remiss worried Oliver, when normally she became colder than the stone around them. As much as he wanted to though, he knew better than to broach the subject. He’d tried it once before and the withering glare had been enough to subdue his curiosity.



Oliver leaned against the wall outside his hovel. He'd left the mantle inside, not wanting to get it dirty. He would give it to Tau when his friends were present and in better spirits.

Now that he was no longer wearing it though, it was like the hands of a goliath pushed him into the ground. The weight on his shoulders had returned, reminding him of how tired he was, how much he always ached. Although he couldn't get himself to go to bed, his gaze affixed to the celestial being across from him.

Guards, day workers, and miners had returned, the pallor of horror overhanging their faces. The death toll remained uncertain as others set to cleaning the mine. What few body parts could be collected were loaded into hutches, while blood was scrubbed and viscera peeled off. People glared every time they passed Oliver by, but he barely saw it.

He and Tau looked at each other. Oliver didn't know if he was imagining things, but the distinct ache that came with missing someone piled on top of his own longing. The intensity of his need to be with Tau had him trembling where he stood among sprouting foliage and gently bobbing orbs of light.

“Do you want to spend the night?”

Maji shuffled toward him, exhausted. She had joined the efforts in cleaning. A thin layer of blood reddened her hands, crusting under her nails.

Oliver offered a smile he hoped was reassuring.

What he wanted was to close the distance between him and Tau and pull the Sentinel down for a kiss. Not that he could say that, let alone do so. Maji had gotten it into her head that the attack was their fault, and being no stranger to guilt, he knew how crippling it was.

“Yeah. We should spend the night at Ben’s.” Neither Lucetta or Benjamin ought to be alone either.

“That’s a good idea,” Maji mumbled.

A final look at Tau, one he hoped communicated how thankful he was for his return, then Oliver moved away from the wall and walked alongside Maji to the cage lift.





Fifteen



Environ

As Guardian, Tau was not to play favourites with humans or other entities. He wasn't to pick which task he performed above others. He *was* meant to be a neutral force, objectively sorting the perilous from the beneficial. More importantly, Guardians were forbidden from destroying any discoveries, including the dire, which were to be transported to the Elders.

And under no circumstances were they to form bonds, *especially* not with humans. A thought that never even occurred to his kinfolk. It had never occurred to Tau, either, until Oliver changed his mind for him.

Tau's recent, constant disobedience did not impress the Elders, but what were they going to do? These mountains required his specific abilities. They *needed* him.

They knew it, and so did Tau.

Giving him the freedom to flout the rules to his core's content. A means of revenge, for being forced into the role.

That he more or less enjoyed it now was beside the point.

After vanquishing the hag, Tau expected a call—and delayed answering for as long as it took to become a burning pain in the centre of his head.

Unsurprisingly, the Proxies were unhappy with him. They wagged their breakable fingers, tutted their sliceable tongues, and reminded him of what he was *supposed* to be doing. And not doing.

Tau watched them in silent contempt, relieved that at least, they didn't seem to know about Oliver. All the touches he'd snuck remained his and his alone.

So he took the reprimand, forced to quell the desire to blast the Proxies back in through the door.

All it would take was a flick of his wrist and they'd be gone.

Burned to dust.

Tau jerked forward, twitched his claws for good measure, relished in the way the two startled back.

“No! *No!*” one Proxy shouted, pointing an angry, trembling finger at him. “*Don't* make me call her.”

Her.

Tau didn't know who they referred to, but was fairly certain he didn't want to find out. He left for the mine before they could dismiss him.

During his return, Tau sensed it again. Intense, but only a flicker.

He rushed to the source of unease, pondering how the sky-coloured doors eluded his senses a second time. Yet here they were, standing unmanned inside the tunnel, more decrepit than before.

Where was Oliver?

And Lucetta?

Staring at the chipped blue paint of the portal, icy realisation hooked its talons into Tau. He wrenched the doors open. Easier than before, like what was inside wanted him to enter.

He didn't hesitate to journey into it, no matter the toll on his core, his vitality trickling out like blood from an open wound. A quick look told him little of where he was. Some type of garden, not as pleasant as Maji's.

Tau jerked to a halt at movement ahead of him. Oliver and Lucetta burst out from unsettling foliage, terror-stricken, chased by clawed branches and something else—a surge of impenetrable shadow churning and chittering. Tau panicked, instinctively blasted it with light. He pulled Oliver and Lucetta with him, then tossed them out of the line of danger.

Fortunately, the behemoth wasn't present. A good thing, when he had taken the risk of not bringing up a chambered dimension before opening the doors.

Tau dodged what he thought might be a part of it and, lest the creature further merged with others, took it with him.

Surrounded by darkness and the vivid green circle, the amalgamated being stumbled about as though lost. It turned

several eyes and sharp teeth to him. A limb made of exposed flesh and bone extended, several hands reaching out. It warbled in misery, pinkened saliva dribbling from mouths begging him to end its pain.

Humans.

Those were once humans.

Tau closed his fist, watching his dwimmer burn the cluster of mortals to nothing. Not until the last of its screeches faded did he return.

While Lucetta shouted at him about her least favourite person, Tau realised just how exhausted he was. He had been for some time now, but having entered the doors had drained him so much, he now had little hope of transporting the behemoth, should it show itself again. It already outmatched him. Surprising it with a bit of light wouldn't work again.

The thought made Tau squirm, but he knew what he had to do.

Begrudgingly, he left for the forest, intending to confess to the troubling forces he'd been dealing with.

This time, however, it wasn't the Proxies he faced, he was certain of it, but it happened too quickly: a beautiful light surprised him and before he knew it, he was trapped.

In this state, Tau's world was dark and lonely. He only had his thoughts to keep him company.

Dull. Dull.

Leaving Oliver and Lucetta hadn't been his intention. He'd only wanted to keep them safe. At the very least, Tau thought he would be allowed to explain himself.

What would Oliver do without him? His favourite was too prone to injuring himself. Tau worried, fretted, fought the tedium of his own thoughts, hating every moment of darkness and helplessness. Expecting it to last for as long as it took him to expire.

Yet here he was, inside the untouched circle within the forest, facing Cultivation. Pleasantly and *gleefully* aware they had just freed him.

"Need assistance," they said.

Tau sensed the disturbance in the mountain.

Or lose mine.

He cast Cultivation a look. He was going to hold this over them for as long as they lived, which would be a very long time indeed.

Tau condensed. Shot into the mountain, tried to ignore the dead humans spattered throughout, and flicked light at the large, umbral web. Now that he knew what to expect, now that it was right there in front of him, fighting the cryptid needed no effort.

With a flicker of a thought, Tau pulled it inside a chambered dimension. He watched it scurry about, its movements frantic. It burned itself on the barrier that flared up in vivid green whenever it made contact.

No mind.

No soul.

There was nothing to this entity. What remained of its humanity was feeble. It could only exist, hopelessly attracted to the same dwimmer that had transformed it into what it was now. Killing it was almost cruel. Mindless though it was, the creature had taken many of his humans.

Sending it to the Elders would earn him their forgiveness.

Tau closed his fist.

The barrier narrowed, burning the creature until the last of its ooze disappeared with a bubbling pop, expelling a tiny animal. It made a lot of angry noises, fluttering to Tau's extended hand.

No squeeze.

The surrounding darkness vanished, replaced by stone, where he released the bird to do as it pleased.

His attention fell to Oliver. Hurt and battered and waiting for him.

Tau hurried forward to catch him, pressing his hand against that frail chest. He placed far more influence behind healing than was wise.

Worth it.

When green eyes opened and looked at him, they brightened with appreciation and a sorrow that hurt Tau's core. He didn't want to let go, keen to hold onto that tiny, *tiny* body running

on magma, but Oliver moved away to be with his friends. Tau could only stand there and watch them.

Follow, when his humans moved on. He took stock of each remaining miner, many of them gone.

Surprisingly, there was no pull from the Elders this time.

Likely, they would have been reminded of why they tolerated him in the first place. Shame it had come at the expense of so many lives.

Tau had glimpsed the state of the tunnels on his way down, but he was no less devastated to look upon it now. He drew comfort from Oliver standing so close, radiating heat and longing and sorrow still. Ringed in by gore, it was certainly an odd state for them both to be in.

Tau waited for Oliver outside when he left again. Other humans filed back into the mine, several of them surprised to see him.

Cultivation's dwimmer cropped back up, pushing his out.

So, the Elders wouldn't call on him. Instead, they would leave him to deal with the sapling.

Annoying.

An offshoot snaked from a crevice just beside him. He pulled it out before it could grow into a branch and watched it shrivel to nothing. Tau perked up when Oliver reemerged and placed himself in front of him, yet entirely out of reach.

Too far away.

Tau was happy enough only looking at him, both curious about and amused by his refusal to join the effort in cleaning the mine. Then, all too soon, Oliver was pulled away by Maji, and Tau stood in the passageway.

Alone, until the mine owner announced his arrival with a grating noise. When Tau didn't turn, the man moved to stand in his way. He didn't look down.

“Ah, it's good to see you back.” Mine owner's eyes shifted from one side to the other. “I was most concerned, having come to see you as a son—a ludicrous claim, of course, my apologies. What I mean is, I've come to appreciate you. Hence, ah,” he stepped closer, “I was told to tell you not to catalogue recent events.”

Tau's attention snapped down.

How did he know he kept records? Guardians weren't supposed to do that. Did the Elders know? He shouldn't be surprised, they knew most other things.

Tau decided he would catalogue these events as soon as he got a moment. He was going to find that moment right now, in fact.

He hid inside a mossy cave and opened his compendium. Memories turned to scintillating images, placed inside as new pages to catalogue everything from the second set of doors to the Wandering Horror, to Oliver touching his hood. That was nice.

Wreaths continued to replace his spheres, trees grew past his solace lights, and hideous blossoms protruded from crevices, blocking out his light. Given that Tau knew his dwimmer was superior by far, this was nothing short of insolent. As if that wasn't bad enough, Cultivation had the audacity to interfere with his duties, appearing wherever he didn't want them—which was anywhere—to argue.

“This one is perilous,” said Cultivation.

Tau cast them a look of incredulity. It was merely an imp, dancing about on short legs, shouting questionable things and causing his humans to suffer frostbite. All while his kin debated with him. Of course, they would think an imp to be perilous. It shouldn't surprise him when Cultivation was weak.

He left them to it, travelled further down the passageways, longing for a glimpse of Oliver. His favourite was hard at work, as were Maji and Lucetta. Benjamin hadn't joined them, he sensed the man further up, distraught, lamenting.

Too bad.

As much as Tau wanted to get Oliver's attention, Maji and Lucetta were working through their emotional pain, and Oliver was there to help them. He knew not to interrupt.

Tau stepped away, in time to see the frost imp escaping, leaving a powerful blizzard in the drift behind it. Its wild cackling echoed down the tunnel. He debated capturing it, but he did rather like snow. It was pretty.

Laughter beside him pulled Tau's focus down.

Clever Oliver.

Sneaking up on him like that.

“Gotta say, I’ve had my fill of snow, but it looks nice. As long as it stays over there.”

Oliver’s mirth perished the moment Cultivation emerged from the drift. A fear crawled in him then, as cold as the gathering frost ahead. He hurried back into his drift, and Tau turned to Cultivation, hot fury burning his core. It manifested as a vibrant sphere from the centre of his palm and connected with Cultivation’s back, sending them flying forward, face first into stone.

Pathetic sapling.

At night, Tau wandered the mine, pushing away Cultivation’s unfortunate excuse for dwimmer, trying to decide which cave to occupy so Oliver could find him. He stopped in his tracks when he caught wind of his favourite out and about already.

Oliver’s signal was unique. Like the hush of an umbrageous forest, teeming with life and mystery. He was somewhere further up—where was he going? Tau followed, through the exchange cave, into another that was empty aside from a few humans. Their quiet moaning bounced around the hollow. Moss yielded underfoot as he strode across it, following Oliver to a large rock formation, where he had slid down—and started upon catching sight of him.

“Oh my Sentinels,” Oliver hissed and wildly motioned for something. “Tau, *duck!*”

Confused, Tau tilted his head. Oliver jumped up, fisted the front of his robes and yanked him down hard. Tau stumbled forward, then lowered to his haunches, amused at the sheer power behind his tiny human.

So frail, so mighty, being so secretive.

Oliver settled back down, boots pushing at detritus, legs spread on either side of Tau. Nervous eyes looked at him. Oliver licked his lips, and Tau focused on their sheen, reflecting his glow.

“I’m not being weird,” Oliver whispered, defensively. “Okay, maybe a little. I just... Sometimes it helps if I...listen.”

Listen.

Further moaning, and Tau realised what Oliver meant. He stood again. Oliver hissed something else, although he didn’t catch what, wanting to investigate. Firm hands snatched him back down.

“Holy shit, Tau,” Oliver strained. “You can’t do that.”

They were so very close to each other, something Oliver seemed to realise a moment later. His eyes held that shine of surprise. His pulse quickened, Tau could hear it, feel it through the fingers still curled against his sternum. Those pink lips parted. Hot air brushed across his face with each heavy breath. *In, out.* Chest swelling, falling. Heartbeat unsteady. *Fast.*

Tau reached out, and that heartbeat stuttered.

He hesitated, stopped entirely when the others in the cave became noisier, and noisier still until it ended with gasps and grunts and was followed by silence. There was some chatter then, a chuckle, the rustle of attire. Footfalls echoed, receding.

Oliver let go of him, scrambled up and hurried away to the egress. He stopped, then turned back. His breathing heightened still, more so. Tau followed, but Oliver stepped to the side. Tau did the same, in the opposite direction. They circled each other, the air rousing and tense. His footsteps silent, Oliver's scuffing the moss.

Noisy little human.

He had no idea what he and Oliver were doing, but took great enjoyment out of it. Oliver looked at him in a way he wanted to identify.

Tau took a step toward him, but Oliver moved back, breaking what had been building between them. Light shimmered across the gold waves of Oliver's hair as he shook his head.

"I won't be able to control myself."

And with that, Oliver ran off. There was a moment where he stumbled, a sharp pain making itself known in his knee, but not so bad that it stopped him from fleeing.

Mm...

Escaped Oliver.

Tau remained for as long as it took daylight to pour in through the openings.

He stopped by the nursery to check in on things, where he found Maji and Lucetta. Although he had plenty of things to do, he walked further in to have a proper look. It had been a while since he'd stayed in this cave, having vacated after Maji claimed it.

“Oh, hi Tau.” Maji pushed herself up to her feet using Lucetta's shoulder for support. “Everything okay?”

Obviously not.

Tau could feel their emotional suffering, the guilt that wrecked Maji in particular. He reached out to conjure solace lights, pushing them forward to dance around Maji's head.

She sniffed and wiped her eyes. “Thank you.”

“You done messing with Nu yet?” Lucetta remained seated on the damp steps leading up to a cascade, arms resting across her knees. “If not, I saw Them down in the second cave past the market.”

Amused, Tau spotted an unfortunate plant on a ledge in the back. Ducking past stalactites, he reached out to tap the browned leaves with a fingertip. It rejuvenated, once more a plush little plant.

Maji gasped, looking offended.

“All this time! I thought I was good with plants!”

She was. He only offered the occasional helping hand, he didn't know why that was a problem. Deciding he had overstayed his welcome, Tau left.

In retrospect, he should have gone the long way, coming across Benjamin on his way down. The man's agonising was obvious and...

Annoying.

Tau stopped by the cage before condensing to let him get whatever he needed off his chest.

Benjamin scowled up at him. "I don't suppose you've seen that bird?"

He had. It was splashing around in a puddle further up. Tau pointed toward the ceiling. That earned him a scoff.

"Helpful."

Would it be wrong to backhand him? Sometimes, Tau was tempted.

He searched for Oliver instead.

Tau found him hiding in a fissure near the outhouses and waited for him to come out. It didn't escape his notice that Cultivation had just passed by, that they were the source of Oliver's fear yet again. Tau could only conclude that they had hurt him.

"Oh, he-hey Tau." Oliver shimmied out, seeming unsure of himself. "You okay?"

Tau glanced at Cultivation's retreating form, then shot a sphere down the passageway. It trounced their back and erupted, painting the surrounding stone with light. When it faded, Cultivation lay face down on the ground.

“Nice.” Oliver laughed, a most stunning smile blooming across his lips. “Where...are you headed? I could keep you company, if you want.”

If it had been up to Tau, he would have stayed to be with Oliver. Unfortunately, the familiar taps in his core told him Cultivation was once again failing in their duties. That they were currently lying face down was irrelevant.

With a lingering touch to Oliver’s shoulder, Tau condensed and journeyed down to the working drifts—in time to see a plume of smoke burst from an old pipe clutched in a miner’s hands.

Gabe.

Tau remembered him crouching between Oliver’s legs once, inside the cave with the moaning and touching humans. Hand shattered, bone protruding from his elbow. Weeping, while Oliver tried to soothe, his face aglow with pink.

Between Oliver’s legs.

Tau wanted that to be his place.

“*Do something!*” Cultivation demanded, struggling to pull a snake-like being into a chambered dimension.

Reflex had Tau take a step forward—before he reconsidered.

He watched, instead, as the entity swiped at Cultivation with three long talons. It missed, regrettably.

Like a smoky updraught it undulated through the drift, dusting all with ash. Hatchets and pickaxes did little against

the spectre, the miners' cries becoming increasingly panicked every time the entity escaped Cultivation and plumed back into the drift.

"Do something," Cultivation said again when the spectre slipped free of their chambered dimension a third time.

Delighted, Tau brought up his own. The creature floated in circles, trapped. It was strangely beautiful, mesmerising in the way it wiggled up and down midair. Tau was tempted to vanquish it just to spite them all.

Nevertheless, he opened the portal into his home and pushed the entity through before returning, ready to gloat.

"That should have been ours!"

"First the dry spell and now Tau's stealing our discoveries."

"If Sentinel Tau had never left in the first place, we wouldn't have lost George and Nina or all the others!"

"Humans don't like you very much," Cultivation said. *"None of us do, either."*

Tau looked at his kin, and he looked at the group of miners who had just dared blame him for the losses suffered. The humans had been vocal about him for a spell, but *this* was going too far. Having lost so many of his charges hurt. Being blamed for their deaths crushed him.

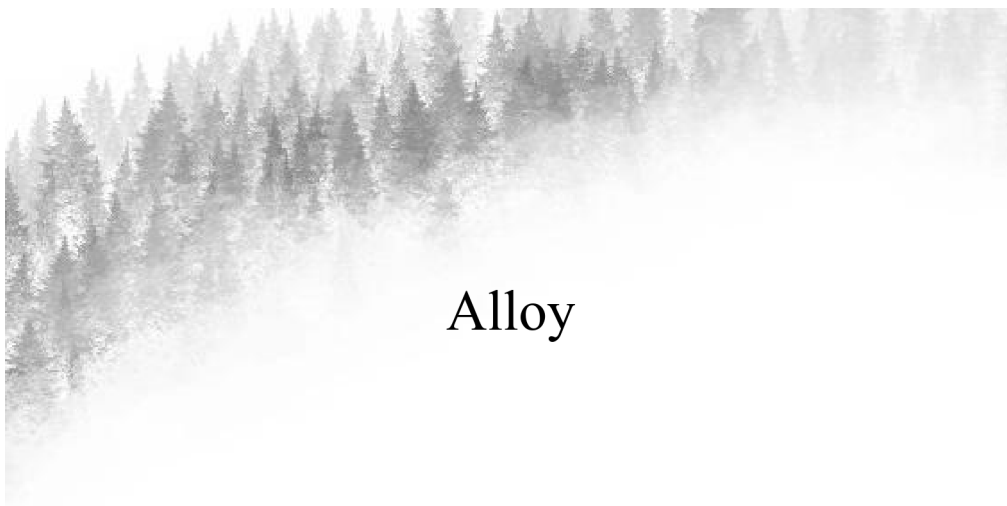
Enough.

Cultivation could have this place and the ingrates it contained.





Sixteen



Alloy

Oliver lay on his back on the lopsided corner settee, legs over Lucetta's lap, and head in Maji's. Both idly pet him in silence. They had told him to come to them time and again, whenever his need was so strong he neared bashing his skull in. Normally, Oliver didn't want to bother them, but sleeping with Benjamin had shown him what he was missing out on. After his run-in with Tau in the bank, especially, Oliver ached too much. Having fingers tuck into his hair and a palm idly stroke his shin was nowhere near what he needed, but it helped. A little.

It was nothing like being held by Benjamin, inhaling that distinctive scent of dust and sweat, while hot breath brushed his neck. Or like he imagined being naked and pressed up against Tau would be.

The door opened and slammed shut, and Oliver reminded himself not to move.

"Bloody bird," Benjamin growled. "Can't find her anywhere."

“She’ll be back,” Oliver tried to reassure. Lucetta shifted out from under his legs, allowing him to sit up. “It’ll be alright. We’ll get to Sam.”

Benjamin said nothing. He couldn’t seem to look at him either, busying himself making tea. When Oliver got up to offer comfort, that bulky frame turned away from him in full. He stopped in his tracks, recognising the behaviour for what it was.

Benjamin was pushing him away.

He’d done it before, much like Samuel, shortly after Oliver suffered his curse. Both men had been adamant about pushing him out, one by pretending he didn’t exist, the other by consistently encouraging him to quit mining. It had been expected back then.

Now it was different, and it hurt plenty more.

The sting of betrayal burned his chest. Oliver stalked out of the hovel, slowing only when he heard Maji’s rapid footsteps behind him.

“Are you okay?” she asked, catching up.

“Yeah.” He wove past the abundance of magic within the passageway, enchanted suns and ugly plants everywhere. “You don’t have to come with me wherever I go, you know.”

Maji’s lips pressed into a line. “You’re not exactly popular right now.”

That was true. Even after everything that happened, people were still angry with him for setting their things on fire. Death

glares and threats were now a common occurrence. Not that they could do anything. Nu might have been happy enough for him to get killed, but Tau would have something to say about that.

“Just like it’s always been,” he said, flippantly. “I was going to bathe.”

“Oh, good. You need it.”

Oliver’s shoulders dropped with hurt.

“Sorry,” said Maji, “but you still have blood and yarrow powder crusted on you.”

Oh. “That *is* disgusting.” And to think he’d come within inches of kissing Tau in this state. “I guess you’re coming too?”



Oliver and Maji sat on the edge of the hot spring basin, where the water ran off in rivulets to a cave below. Maji liked sticking her feet in the flow, her back resting against his damp side. After he socked himself in the face trying to wash it, Maji had taken over for him, although stopped short of washing his privates. That was a risk he needed to take himself.

“Didn’t do a *thing*. Showed up and only watched!”

Oliver turned at the voices floating in through the cave and eyed the group of miners walking in. He didn’t need to guess

who they were complaining about. Most had become increasingly vocal about their frustrations.

While the Sentinels never exchanged words, they appeared to argue over everything. Discoveries were taking twice as long because of it and weaving around all the magic was a pain.

Oliver now knew why mines didn't house more than one Sentinel: they couldn't get along with each other. Although he was sure that had more to do with Nu being a bastard.

"Bet Tau's back as a stunt to regain our favour after the Hag," said another in the group.

"Shut your gobble!" Oliver's voice echoed loudly. "You know nothing about what happened!"

"Stop," Maji hissed, underbreath. "I don't wanna fight with people while naked."

"And what would you know about it, *Breadstick*?" jeered a barrel-chested man. He slipped out of his clothes, let them lie on the floor, and ascended the steps to stand at the other end in all his naked glory.

"You don't get to call me that," Oliver snarled, sliding back into the water to hide. He hated the way he looked, that others were making his appearance fair game was a low blow.

"Yeah, that's rich coming from a sentient hairball," Maji sniped.

She extended her arms on either side of her, teetering on the edge of the basin, and jumped down to get dressed. Oliver

waded through the water to the other end, needing to slip by the hairy man, who looked ready to beat him.

“You owe us for all the damage you caused!” shouted one of the man’s friends, ascending the steps. She pulled her shirt off and whipped it across Oliver’s bare arse while he scampered past, squawking. “I lost my books, my rugs, my *paintings!*”

Oliver hurried to gather his clothes. “That’s your fault for having those things!”

“You’re lucky Sentinel Tau is back!”

He was, and he knew it.

The last time someone tried throwing fists, Tau blasted them out of the mine. Rumour had it they suffered permanent blindness as a result, the only reason the group did nothing to stop him and Maji from leaving.

“You know what you did was bad, right?” said Maji on their way out of the cave.

Oliver gave her a sullen look, unbunching his clothes as they walked.

“Yeah, I know.”

They reached the cage, where Maji squeezed water from her hair before boarding. “Do you?”

He hopped from one foot to the other to get into his overalls, then stared down at the metal floor, chilly against his bare feet. Maji’s sigh was tinged with frustration. Oliver thought she might reprimand him.

To his relief, all she said was, “I wonder why Tau’s back.”

“Cause Nu’s incompetent, obviously.”

“But why was he jailed in the first place?”

“How am I supposed to know? I’m just glad he’s back.”

Elated, in fact. His future no longer looked as grim, and he and Tau were playing some kind of game, thrilling Oliver in ways that made his stomach jittery. He’d never had constant wallopers before.

They reached the upper lodgings where Maji opened the gate for him. The windows of hovels were paned here, and the tunnels bricked. Fewer gnomes scurrying around corners, too. Following several upward curves of a narrow passageway, they reached Maji’s greenhouse.

Before Oliver could claim his usual seat on the steps by the cascade to watch her muck around, Maji beelined for the wobbly table. From a canvas sack beneath it, she pulled out a shimmering white pelt.

Oliver raised his eyebrows at her. He had kept that mantel inside his hovel. While he was sure the mantle had cost a fortune and he contributed far less to it than the others would have, he didn’t like she’d just gone into his hovel without asking. Was nothing sacred?

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said. “I was worried people were going to barge into your hovel and find it.”

“Oh.” He hadn’t thought about that. A realisation hit him then, and Oliver’s mouth parted in shock. “*That’s* why you’ve

been asking me to sleep over. You thought I was going to get murdered in my sleep!”

Maji gave him a look, pressing the mantle against his chest. “Put it on and help me. I think the mantle neutralises your curse.”

“How do you reckon?” Oliver knew it did. He hadn’t figured it out until Maji said it just then, but it made sense.

He shrugged it on and kept his pleasure to himself when the magic unburdened him in full.

“It’s just a theory.”

A solid one.

“Not like I can keep it.”

Maji grabbed her scissors and set to collecting sprigs of a purple flower—lavender. “Why?”

“It’s for Tau, it wouldn’t be right to keep it, and I didn’t have a lot to put towards it.”

“Don’t be silly.” Maji frowned from where she squatted by the grow box. “It’s our fault you’re cursed. The least we can do is let you have it.”

Oliver glanced at her in confusion. “How do you figure that?” He stepped further into the nursery and took the bundle of lavender she held out. “It could have been any of us. I got unlucky, is all.”

A painful thought occurred to him then, one that twisted his features into an agonised look.

“...Is that why you put up with me? 'Cause you think it's your fault I'm cursed?”

“What? No!” said Maji, aghast. “Why would you even think that?”

Oliver shrugged, gaze shifting to the side. “Because I'm useless.”

Useless, stupid, unlucky.

Dainty hands found his shoulders. Maji peered up, waiting until he forced himself to look at her. “You're there for me every time I need you, and for Ben and Lucetta too. You might not be lucky with discoveries—”

“The last big discovery I made was that demon with the gouged-out eyes, and that was two years ago!”

She grimaced at the memory, as did Oliver.

That thing had been awful, telling them not to be afraid, then trapping them in their own minds to suffer through their worst fears and experiences.

Vividly, Oliver remembered all it had shown him. From maiming himself to the point of death, to all his friends turning their backs on him. Reminded him of things he preferred to forget, too. Like his mother, selling him and his siblings into labour. Watching his brothers and sisters die of black lung and mining accidents.

Tau had pulled him out of that nightmare, and in a moment of sheer gratitude, Oliver had embraced the Sentinel. It lasted for only a few moments, but he'd taken every bit of comfort he

could out of it and not once regretted committing the crime. Benjamin had been livid, of course. Even Maji and Lucetta were upset, but they kept his secret.

“Yeah, but you’re always there for us,” Maji murmured.

Oliver stared down at the ground. When he didn’t respond, she patted him on the chest and moved away. “I think you should keep the mantle.”

“Gotta be honest,” he laid the bundle of lavender down on the table, “it’s been nice not to be in pain all the time.”

And that’s when he froze. His eyes bulged and mouth unhinged around a loud gasp, a realisation hitting him harder than Nu’s blow to his stomach. Across from him, Maji tensed, clearly terrified and ready to run.

“What?” she breathed.

“I can dub myself off!”

There was a moment’s pause as his voice bounced through the nursery. Maji stared at him, dumbfounded, before she snorted with laughter.

Oliver was out of the cave.

He was *running* to jerk himself off. The thought was ridiculous, yet he bubbled with excitement, found himself inside his hovel and undoing his overalls faster than he could think. His hand shook as he gazed down, his prick already stiff and aching for release. Oliver sincerely hoped he was right about the mantle.

He grasped at himself, legs unsteady, forcing him to lean against the door. It didn't take long. A few strokes, just one thought about Tau, and he gave himself his first, toe-curling orgasm in five years.

His moan was guttural, tinged with delirium.

Oliver crashed to the floor with a sob. All the pain he'd suffered, years of pent-up sexual frustration, never being able to touch himself or have someone do it for him came flooding out.

For a long time after, he sat staring up at the ceiling and wept. It was pathetic, but damn, it was good. Like a winter-long storm had lifted from his mind, revealing bright blue skies and sunshine at last. He could finally *think* again.

Not that he was inclined to. Oliver much preferred to touch himself. Again and again, until he was too exhausted and sore. He jerked himself off one last time for good measure, then tidied his mess. That his climaxes hadn't just been puffs of dust was somewhat surprising.

Oliver wanted to sleep, or climax again. More so, he wanted to see his source of joy—and sexual frustration. A glance at the particularly vibrant moon by the window told him it was late. Making himself presentable and easing the mantle off his shoulders so Tau wouldn't see him wearing something meant for him, Oliver left the hovel.

It never took long to find his Sentinel, even if he now had to thread around an abundance of lambent spheres and flowers. Although he was aghast to find Nu first, in a narrow cavern

just beyond the outhouses of the lower lodgings, standing still like a gaudy prop.

Nu's head snapped in his direction. Oliver's heart jerked to a stop. He backed out, slowly.

Once out of sight, he stuck both middle fingers up.

He spotted Tau inside a high-reaching cave holding an ancient, miniature temple. Persistent moisture and magical light allowed fine moss to grow, covering the cave entirely in green. Tau sat atop the sloped roof of the temple, his clawed sabatons resting on its front steps. Oliver ambled inside with a smile and hopped up to sit beside him.

"I'm sorry I ran off the other night," he murmured. "I hope you know how much I missed you." Something about Tau's constant silence made it so much easier to say these things. "Wish I knew why you got put in a cage, but I'm so glad you're back."

Tau turned his head, perhaps to look at him. Oliver ached to hear him say something. Anything, even if it was to tell him to get lost.

"It's been horrible without you."

He scoured those pristine features, stunning in the ambient light. His gaze trailed from the dark green fabric covering Tau's neck down to his arm, where more of the green fabric bunched around his elbows. He ended on the clawed gauntlet resting on the roof beside him, glinting in the moonlight.

Swallowing against a sudden dryness in his mouth, Oliver edged his hand a little closer.

“I hope you weren’t in any pain.”

And closer still.

“I tried to get you out.”

Until his pinky touched Tau’s.

“Didn’t have much luck.”

He was somehow still talking, his voice but a hoarse whisper, heart punching his throat. His finger twitched up, then curled around Tau’s.

What was he doing? Benjamin would kill him if he found out.

Tau’s hand moved.

Oliver’s hair stood on end. A storm whirled in his stomach, so violently he thought he might vomit.

Metal fingers curled over his. Oliver’s mind purged itself of all thoughts.

They were holding hands.

Tau’s was massive in comparison, somehow warm and chilly at once. It quickly became the most intense sensation Oliver had ever experienced. Better even than his orgasms earlier.

This was different to being held for transport, to pulling Tau down to stop him from interrupting group sex. This was a shared desire to touch each other. His hand tingled, the sensation journeyed up his arm, coursing through his entire

body and popping like fireworks. So much like wearing the fur mantle, but more intense by a thousandfold.

Oliver looked back up, ready to form another confession with quivering lips.

A sudden *cough* had him bolting off and away so fast his vision blanked.

Oliver clutched at his chest, heart hammering painfully, trying to break free of his ribcage. He stared, bug-eyed, at the odd creature that had come waddling out of the archway of the temple, now standing between Tau's feet. The thing looked no better than a wrinkled bollock with squinched eyes, pointy legs and colourful crystals poking out from the top of its knobbly head.

“Swiving little bastard,” Oliver snapped. It peeped up at him, coughing again, and he wished Tau would step on it, just a little.

He'd seen the thing only a handful of times, unsure of what it did or why it hadn't been captured yet. It might be too ugly to sell, or too useless.

He glanced back at Tau, who appeared to be watching him, and his cheeks grew hot.

Oliver cleared his throat. “I uh, I better...go sleep. Good night, Tau.”

And he already knew exactly how he would sleep: like a damn baby. After he brought himself off by hand again.



He was damned for thinking it, but in a way, the Wandering Horror had been a blessing. If not for its appearance, Oliver would still be fighting to free his Sentinel, likely died trying. And despite their frustrations with him, Oliver knew that his jovial mood hopped over to both Maji and Lucetta.

The two were inside the greenhouse more often than not during their free time. He brought the mantle with him whenever the passageways were empty, and Maji let him help with the balms. He was becoming adept at stripping twigs of their leaves, although he enjoyed pouring beeswax the most. There was something very satisfying about sticking his fingers into hot wax, despite Maji telling him off for it.

Better still, he could touch Maji and Lucetta at will, which he did, often. He needed to practise caution, seeing as he still had his strength, but he would wrap his arms around Maji, lift her up, press kisses to her face. It seemed to delight her. She didn't even mind when he pressed a cheeky kiss to those heart-shaped lips. Oliver was no more reserved with Lucetta, who despite her mood, let him do as he pleased. She even indulged him in a kiss, although it was far from intimate.

“I prefer women, you know,” she told him.

Oliver grinned at her. They were the same height, it was easy to press his nose to hers. “I can put on a dress if you want.”

Lucetta snorted, patting him on the head. “It's your turn to be with Ben.”

He stepped away, making a face. “There’s nothing I can do for him.”

“Just be there for him.” Maji held out an old tobacco tin. “Take this to him, it’s a new tea blend.”

He sighed loudly, grabbed the tin, and left the mantle with Maji.

Trudging down along the tracks, he caught sight of Tau around a bend, replacing some of Nu’s magic by burning it with green sparks.

“Hullo,” he said, face splitting with a grin.

Tau turned to face him so quickly it made Oliver dizzy. And oh, was that his imagination, or was Tau watching him leave as he walked past? He turned to walk backwards. Flashed his Sentinel another smile for good measure. Maybe tonight, they could hold hands again.

Giddy with love, Oliver was ill-prepared for Benjamin’s miserable mood. Frustration and anger clung to his hovel like a bad smell. Against better judgement, Oliver sat on the settee, toying with the tin in his hands until it dented. He set it aside.

“Do you want me to have a go at training her?” Oliver asked when all Benjamin did was pace back and forth. By the state of his hovel, he must have thrown things, including the pillows. He tried not to take that personally.

“What do you expect to do?” Benjamin stopped long enough to scowl at him. He looked terrible. His hair was greasy, he

had bags under his eyes. “Do you think you’re any better at training a bird than I am?”

Oliver frowned. “Well, I did one time teach chickens to follow me when—”

“It’s not a chicken!”

He tried not to recoil at the anger. “Sorry. I just want to help.”

“You can’t. Just go away.”

Oliver got up to do as told.

A hand clamped down on his shoulder when he reached the door and spun him around. Startled, he stared into amber eyes, dark with—anger? Benjamin had said Samuel’s death—supposed death—was beyond his control.

Oliver had been working on believing him, that things might even work out now there was some kind of access to Samuel. He wasn’t there yet, the things Benjamin spat at him still stuck, but he’d been making progress. If Benjamin told him it was his fault after all...

He resisted the need to gnaw his lower lip. Benjamin said nothing, only looked at him. The silence between them was heavy with—as of yet—unspoken blame. Slackened fists traced knuckles down Oliver’s chest, lingered by the stomach, tapping him there as if itching to hit. Oliver willed him not to say it, not to blame him for his misery. He couldn’t take it, not again.

“I was ready to move on.”

Pain threatened to devour his heart. Oliver made to reach out, but stopped himself.

“I’m...sorry.”

Wholly inadequate, but what else could he say? Sorry he allowed a cryptid to take his husband? Sorry he was such a colossal failure? Both were true, none of the two he could bring himself to say out loud.

“I was...” Benjamin hesitated, looked at him, beseechingly. “Ready to move on. And then—”

The guilt resurfaced like it had every day for the past three years. It chewed Oliver up, gulped, and hurled him back out. He shook his head to hide the quivering of his chin. He squirmed away, wrenched the door open, and fled.

He ran back to where he’d last seen Tau, but the Sentinel was no longer there. Oliver stood near the tracks, panting and desperate. Unsure of what to do with his shattering heart. Back to his hovel was the only place he could go. So he turned, and stopped.

Tau stood there.

This time, when the Sentinel took a step toward him, Oliver didn’t move away, but neither could he meet him. They weren’t alone, others were going about their business, celebrating their discoveries. Their cheers echoing down the drifts. The dry spell was broken for most of them, hitches brought up bearing several bounties, flanked by overjoyed miners.

Yet Tau didn't stop advancing on him, each step deliberate until he was but a grab away.

And grab he did.

Sharp digits snatched the straps of his overalls, tugging Oliver up off the ground. His startled squawk echoed, faded to nothing. Still dangling, he tore his gaze away from Tau's face long enough to cast a glance about. They were high in a cave, nearly at the same level of openings to the surface.

Oliver yelped when he realised just where they were.

The Tumble, and miles below it was the Bank. Access to it had been blocked off after a string of suicides, the narrow crawling space to reach the ledge boarded up.

Tau set him down, then pushed him with large hands against his chest. Oliver's back collided with cold stone, vision obstructed by hanging foliage soon clawed away. He gulped for breath, equally anxious and thrilled when metal fingers came down to comb through his hair, outlined his face, traced down his nose. A thumb pressed against his lips, brushing over them, sending a shiver down the length of his spine and heat straight into his cock. Then the hands moved lower, down his throat to his chest, where a palm pressed firm as if feeling for his explosive heartbeat.

When those same hands ran across his stomach and down to his throbbing prick, Oliver's breath audibly hitched. He tilted his head back, grasped at stone on either side of him as Tau fondled the length of it. There was nothing Oliver could do to stop from thrusting forward with a moan. Unfortunately, Tau

didn't linger there, touching every part of him as though trying to discover what he was made of. He crouched low to reach Oliver's shins, lifted his boot-clad feet up and brushed across the hobnailed soles. Then he stood, so quick Oliver missed the movement, and spun him around just as fast. It left him dizzy, and the moan that escaped when Tau explored the back of him couldn't be helped either.

Needle-sharp fingertips raised gooseflesh as they traced down his neck, across his back and lower still. Oliver's mind turned to the sparse knowledge he had of these things and wondered how far this would go. Swiftly, he decided he *needed* everything Tau wanted to give him. He spread his legs when determined hands reached his backside and squeezed the globes with unabashed curiosity.

Pointed gauntlets pricked the skin of his arse, what little there was. He inhaled sharply through his nose, stone indenting his fingertips.

Oliver shifted. Either to thrust his arse out or edge away, he wasn't so sure when the pain made his cock strain against the denim of his overalls. His foot slipped off the edge then, and he yelped in terror, steadied by Tau who gave no pause to him nearly falling to his death.

He expected the Sentinel to be satisfied once reaching his heels, but he flipped Oliver to face him again and pressed that thumb back to his lips.

Breathing so quick he thought he might drop, Oliver did the only thing he could think of and opened his mouth. The thumb

slid in, its point dangerously close to slicing his tongue, and he panicked with the realisation that he didn't know what to do.

He'd never had sex, nor been kissed in any meaningful way. Although he suspected nothing could have prepared him for this moment, when a Sentinel had a finger in his mouth.

So, Oliver worked his imagination. Tentatively, he swirled his tongue around the thumb. He expected it to taste like metal, but all he got was faint bitterness. Maybe Tau liked that, since the Sentinel jammed another finger into his mouth, and then another, close to making him gag or gouging the back of his throat. Oliver choked but didn't move to stop it, relieved when Tau pulled his fingers out.

Slick with saliva, Tau held them up to his mask as though to inspect.

“What's happening?” Oliver's voice quivered, his fingers aching with the need to touch.

He hadn't wanted to speak at all, lest he ruin whatever was going on, but he thought he had a right to know. Especially considering they were on a ledge he'd been to only once, for an entirely different reason.

Tau lowered his hand back to his hair and stroked. Oliver let his head drop to the stone walling in the ledge, eyes drifting shut as he dissolved under the affection. For as firm as Tau was moments ago, he was now gentle, taking his time. Another metal digit found its way across his nose, and Oliver smiled. He tilted his head up, pressed a kiss to the finger. He wanted to tell Tau he loved him, but his Sentinel cocked his

head, pressed the finger back to his lips, and Oliver kissed it a second time.

“I’d rather do that to your face, you know,” he murmured, reaching up to grasp Tau’s hand in both of his. He pressed his trembling mouth to the base of the palm. “But I’ll take what I can get.”

And this was so much more than he ever thought possible. Curse be damned, if anyone could take his blows, it would be Tau.

He let his free hand drift up the vambrace, to the green fabric covering a muscular arm, stepping closer to run both hands across Tau’s chest, covered in flawless white. The robes had the drape of silk, softness of rabbit’s fur, and the shimmer of sunlit snow. There was an ethereal flow to them, hiding any definite features of his torso and yet, as he explored, Oliver felt nothing but toned muscle, tangible power.

It took a lot of reaching to discover the neck and broad shoulders, and firm fingers to squeeze along biceps. He shifted his focus to Tau’s abdomen, traced every hidden divot and curve, delighted in the way muscles jumped under his touch, then stopped shy of the pelvis.

Oliver was harder than a rock, but he didn’t know if this was sexual to Tau. If he lusted after him the way Oliver did the Sentinel, the only reason he hesitated.

Thickly, Oliver swallowed. “I-I need you.” Then leaned forward, pressed his face to the solid abdomen. He nuzzled the

fabric, couldn't stop himself from mouthing it. "So much it hurts."

So much his insides were burning up. He didn't know if Tau even understood sexual urges. How was he meant to know, when Tau refused to talk to him?

Arms encircled him, easing Oliver flush against that tall body. The sound that left him was a gallimaufry of surprise, delight, and carnal starvation.

Even with all the fabric between them, Tau's erection was unmistakable, pressed against his stomach, hot and hard and *holy shit*. Oliver's fingers dug into the fabric of the robes along a muscled back, fighting his instinct not to drop to his knees and worship Tau in the way he deserved.

He took several calming breaths, forced himself to pull back to look up at Tau, and tried to ignore the way his prick shouted at him from its denim prison. He reached up with both hands, fisted the large collars of the robe, and tugged until his Sentinel obliged and bent low.

Tau wouldn't be able to kiss him back, wouldn't even feel it, but that was okay.

Oliver pressed his lips to where he thought Tau's mouth might be. His heart swelled with adoration, he poured every bit of love he had for his Sentinel into that kiss. Hoping that at the very least, the intention would be understood.

He lingered, cheeks blazing, body trembling, the mask both warm and cold at once, like the hands that had come to cup his

face.

After what seemed an eternity and not nearly long enough, Oliver moved to get out, his face too hot and breathing far too quick. If he didn't back up now, he would lose all sense and start rutting against one of those powerful legs.

Nervously, Oliver tried a smile once those arms relented their hold. He reluctantly stepped away, and his stomach flipped as his foot slid past the edge, a yelp wrenching itself free.

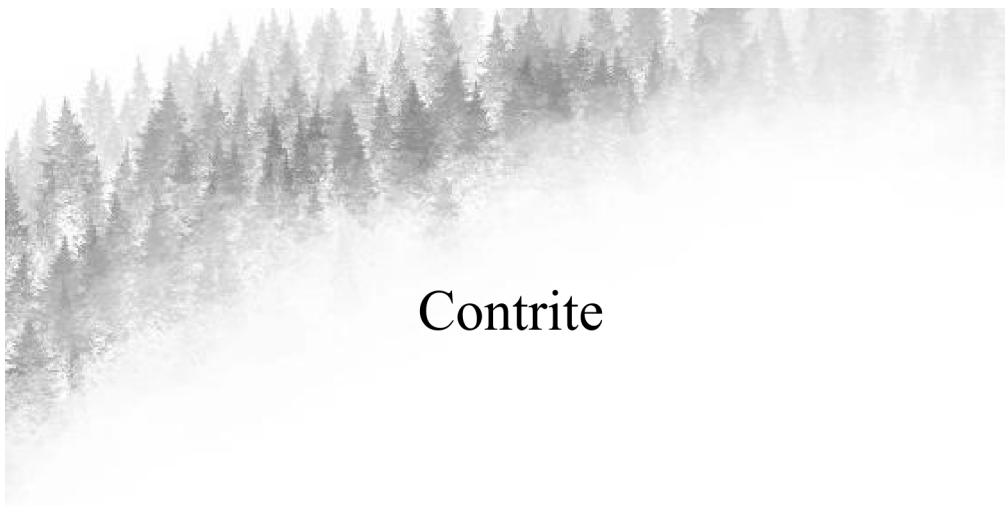
Tau caught him by the underarm and dragged him back.

"I want to spend an eternity with you," Oliver gasped, clutching at the white robes. "Something I don't think will happen here."





Seventeen



Contrite

Maji rose from where she mucked by the working face, a sizeable crystal in hand. It was a pretty raspberry pink, but if it had any traces of magic, she couldn't feel it.

Loud blasts echoed outside, bright flashes following. She glanced over her shoulder in time to see people scurrying past the entrance of their drift and pursed her lips.

Sticky darted to poke his head out, then jerked back, dodging Sentinel Nu in time, Their long, bone-covered arms flailing as They hurtled backwards. Tau walked past shortly after. He canted his head towards Sticky, who arched back with a guffaw.

“Tau is kicking Nu's arse again.”

“Yeah.”

Maji wanted to reprimand him for being so cheerful while they were dealing with the aftermath of the Horror, but couldn't bring herself to drag him down. At least someone was happy, and Sticky had been *very* happy the past few days. A

startling contrast to Benjamin, who remained up in arms about Sam. While Lucetta behaved as if nothing had changed.

Then there was Tau.

Maji now knew what the group of miners in the hot springs had referred to. Despite being right by incidents as they occurred, unless there was an immediate risk of death, Tau didn't lift a claw. He made the effort to come, only to stand and watch Nu struggle with entities they must be unfamiliar with—and there were many.

Less so for Maji and her friends. The best thing they found so far was the piece of quartz she placed inside the hutch with care. Peeking down the long line of drift entrances on occasion, other groups were busy discovering and fighting off a variety of things. Several miners had to come running after being burned, frozen, or otherwise harmed by some magical entity or artefact.

Tau was making them *ask* for his help and even when they did, he seemed particular about who he healed.

His antics amused Lucetta. Benjamin was hardly there to witness it, while Maji wasn't sure what to make of it. Especially not once Tau abandoned his responsibilities altogether and followed Sticky wherever he went.

If Maji hadn't personally seen how miserable Sticky had been over the last five years, she would have resented his happiness. The loss of a staggering fifty-three miners prompted tears to spill several times a day and all Maji wished for was her own bottle of fireflies.

Watching helplessly as black cirrus rammed into Lucetta's and Benjamin's mouths to suffocate them still hounded Maji every time she closed her eyes. They had nearly died, lost so many others, the death toll the highest it had ever been in the Tesera Mine.

All because she threw a rock into the portal.

It was easier not to think about things while Sticky was around, his jovial mood propagating Maji's. When he wasn't, the guilt returned to consume her like blight. The only thing that kept her sane was to focus on her plants and making balms, something she set to as soon as they finished work for the day.

Maji cleaned an old round mirror with care, ensuring the Feint Fern that stood in front of it could still see itself. She swept the floor, focused on the sound of straw swishing across stone. Clipped dead leaves to add them to her compost pile, only to groan in frustration when the dulled scissors refused to come apart.

"Knock, knock." Lucetta walked into the nursery just as Maji threw the scissors away from her. They clattered to the ground by Lucetta's feet.

"Damn, okay."

Maji looked at her in defeat. "Sorry, that wasn't meant for you."

"You alright?"

"I should ask you that."

“I’m fine.” Lucetta shrugged. “No more residual black goo coming out of me, so I’m good.”

“And Ben?” Maji dreaded asking.

Benjamin’s mood was nothing short of foul. Not that she could blame him. Having found out his husband was alive after three years, with the only access to him an unruly bird, would be enough to drive anyone mad.

“Still no luck.” Lucetta reached up to touch the rounded leaves of a trailing plant near her head. It pinged like wind chimes under her fingers.

Maji wondered what Lucetta made of it all, but by now, she had given up hope that anything would be divulged. “I wish there was something we could do for him.”

“Not much we can do.”

“Like with those blue doors?” asked Maji.

Lucetta shrugged again, perching the outcrop right by the Feint Fern. The plant bristled, colourless leaves whispering as they shook, and Maji shushed it.

“This thing is creepy, you know that right?”

Maji shushed Lucetta then. “It has feelings. It doesn’t like that your reflection is visible in the mirror.”

With a disconcerted look, Lucetta shifted further away from it. “What does it even do?”

“I don’t know. I just thought it looked neat.” She still did, with its heavily curled, fern-like appearance and bright red

veins.

“I keep thinking about those doors, about what we saw with the Mrs Pavlov look-alike.”

Maji looked at Lucetta in surprise.

“Something about both those portals felt like... I don't know. Memories. And if what Sticks and I saw in the glasshouse were memories, that must have happened over a hundred years ago. Before Sentinels.”

“Right,” said Maji, unsure.

“But then, there's no way this Ondine can be Pavlov's wife. She sure looks great for a hundred-something-year-old, otherwise. I've never met her in person though, so I couldn't say what she looks like now.”

“Same as her paintings,” supplied Maji. At Lucetta's questioning look, she continued, “I met her when I applied. She made me do the tests again and watched.”

Lucetta's expression tightened. “Something about what Pavlov said made me feel unsettled. Like he knows about the portal, what it contains.”

“Yeah,” Maji said. “But portals to memories don't exist.”

“Neither does most of what we uncover in this mountain.”

Something Maji couldn't argue with. “Still, I doubt we'd be the first ones to uncover a memory portal. We're not exactly lucky like that.”

Or unlucky, as the case would be with that portal in particular.

“It still makes sense for them to be memories, when Ondine was talking about the need for non-humans. That begs the question of how she even came across Sentinels.”

Maji worried her lower lip. Until now, Lucetta and Sticky had spoken little about the doorway. Not that they had much chance to. Never mind that Lucetta buried her feelings deeper than the Earth’s core. That she was talking about it now was almost unsettling. Maybe she had convinced herself Onyx’s portal too led to a memory.

“Has Sam ever been to a hut like we saw?” Maji asked, then immediately regretted it.

“I don’t know what that useless bastard got up to when he —” Lucetta snapped her mouth shut.

“Why are you so mad at him?” She could have kicked herself. The question had spilled free on its own.

Lucetta glared at her and got up, as though ready to leave. She stopped halfway, and her expression softened. “I heard they’re planning to hold the funeral in town in two days.”

Maji dropped her gaze. She had been trying very hard not to think about it. “Are you going?”

Lucetta shifted her weight from one foot to the other, visibly uncomfortable. “It wouldn’t feel right not to pay my respects when...”

When it was likely their fault the Wandering Horror had come out.

“I should’ve made more of an effort to get to know everyone,” said Maji. “I don’t recognise most of the names that were listed as dead.”

She had never bothered to get to know others beyond acquaintanceship, content to stay in her little group after years of living with eight siblings, in a village where none were strangers. She had only known the other miners by face, never exchanging more than the occasional greeting.

Her mother would be ashamed of her for being so uncaring.

Lucetta curled her fingers around Maji’s shoulder. “Come with me, then. It’s the least we can do.”

“You’re right.”



A miner’s funeral was customarily held in the chapel right outside the mine, where the decorations changed depending on what deity—if any—mourners worshipped. This time, the number of deceased was too great.

The snow had made its way to Plainwall in full. It blanketed everything in layers of brilliant white, shimmering gold in the waning sun by the river. Boats lined the riverbank, holding all fifty-three pine caskets adorned by dark flowers, and black petals scattered across the snow like confetti. The caskets had

to remain closed. Relatives and friends of the deceased, along with most miners, gathered nearby.

Maji's gaze journeyed from face to face, her gut twisting at the sight of their grief.

"It's not our fault, you know."

She glanced up at Sticky, standing beside her, watching Mister Pavlov give a speech near the water.

"What makes you so sure?" she croaked.

Sticky's face was sombre. "Shit just happens, right? We weren't responsible for the first three times that thing showed up, we aren't responsible for it now."

Maji knew what he was doing. If she refuted his words, then that would be like saying he was at fault for Sam's death—*disappearance*. If she accepted what he said as truth, then that would relieve her of her guilt. She didn't know whether to be upset with him for being so clever, and so said nothing. Maji turned her attention to Mister Pavlov, barely audible over the noise of the agitated river.

Nu and Tau stood on either side of the band of boats. While Nu remained stationary, Tau had taken to casting his tiny green lights. He sent them forward to float above everyone, amplifying the surreal beauty around them.

Mister Pavlov said something about honour and sacrifice, about the greater good of humankind.

Maji wept.

Not because the man's speech was moving, but because suddenly, it was all so ridiculous.

They dug into rock all day for magical artefacts and portals, risking everything, and for what? Maji had convinced herself it was for the betterment of humankind, but in Clathstead, she witnessed first-hand how far technology and science had come.

There were noisy automobiles and electricity, she heard about radio broadcasting not long ago, and moving pictures were becoming mainstream. The world was moving forward without the use of magic. Still, they continued to toil away in magical ambits, hoping to find the next wish-fulfilling entity or anything that might give them a good payout.

Because that was all it was about.

She had only been fooling herself into thinking otherwise. Maji's lower lip quivered. She looked up at the sudden burst of orange light. The pyres had been ignited, the boats pushed out by guardsmen clad in their dress uniforms of maroon and navy.

As the boats drifted away, Maji took Sticky's hand in hers. She leaned her head against his arm and sucked in a harsh breath.

"Don't cry, Maji. You know I can't hug you right now," Sticky said. "Wipe your face on my jacket."

Maji sniffed and turned to wipe her nose on his arm. "Thank you."

“I love you, you know that, right?”

“Yeah. I know.”

Maji pulled herself back to the present to glance around. Other miners and relatives of the deceased were dispersing, their laments carried off by an icy wind turning black petals and snow dust into whirlwinds.

“The problem is that there is no way for me to get Onyx to open a portal on command,” Benjamin said in a hissed whisper. It occurred to Maji that he and Lucetta had been in a heated discussion behind her for a while now. “I can’t tempt her with food. She never eats, and she disappears into the portals so I can’t even reward her. Not to mention she keeps leaving!”

“What if it’s a certain number of days between each portal?” asked Lucetta.

“Hi, Tau.”

Sticky eased away from Maji and ran to walk alongside the Sentinel, approaching with forever quiet footfalls.

“You!” Benjamin pointed at Tau, who came to an abrupt stop. “This bird you gave me, there’s a reason. Right? Did you know it would show me Sam? Where is he?!”

Benjamin stalked towards Tau to glare up at his masked face. Maji knew he was desperate and it was manifesting itself as anger. But for someone who constantly chastised them for forgetting Tau’s title, he didn’t have any issues with how he addressed Tau now that it was convenient.

“Answer me, damn you!”

“Pickle it, Ben!” snarled Sticky. “Just be grateful Tau even gave you Onyx! Maybe if you weren’t such a colossal arsehole, she’d stick around!”

Maji’s eyes widened, as did Benjamin’s. Sticky had never spoken to him like that before.

“Calm down.” Lucetta placed a placating but firm hand on Benjamin’s shoulder. “If Tau knew, he would have shown us how to put Onyx to use.”

Tau did what he did best and stood there, perfectly still, giving nothing away.

With the way Benjamin’s fists clenched at his sides, it looked like he might lash out. Having better sense than that, he growled in frustration and stomped off, heavy feet crunching on snow and river rock. Lucetta sighed and motioned she would follow him. Maji nodded, offering her a sympathetic smile.

“If you know anything at all, now would be a great time to tell us,” said Sticky, sounding hopeful.

Unsurprisingly, the Sentinel remained reticent. Maji’s eyes widened in shock once she caught the way Tau and Sticky stood so close together. Their arms were a petal’s width from touching. She cast a quick look about—they weren’t alone. Several onlookers lurked at the top of the slope, hoping to catch a proper glimpse of the Sentinel, some hopping around in an attempt to catch elusive fireflies.

“Uhm. It’s getting pretty dark and cold,” said Maji.

Sticky smiled up at Tau. “I’ll see you in the mine?”

With a faint *snap*, Tau disappeared.

Maji snuck her arm around Sticky’s to lead him up the incline. “Hopefully Ben will be calmer by the time we’re back home.”



He wasn’t. Benjamin became more agitated with each passing day, to the point that he was intolerable.

Maji was grateful he had skipped work that day. She wasn’t in the mood for his griping and grumbling about Tau and Onyx. Although she was sure she’d be worse, had she been in his shoes.

She had liked Samuel, to a certain point. He hadn’t been very kind to Sticky after he was cursed, but had always been cordial to her. It was Samuel who started the tradition of inviting them over for dinner to celebrate discoveries, despite the animosity between him and Lucetta. He was also the one who helped her haul several tonnes of rich soil from the forest down into the mine for her nursery.

Maji smiled ruefully to herself, once again on her knees inside their working drift, reaching into a cavity she had just uncovered. Several geodes rolled past her arm and made a break for it, running on stubby little legs, scattering.

“Oh, no! Help me catch them!”

They were quick, easy to lose among the rubble. Sticky dropped his pickaxe to give chase. Tau, who had been standing near the entrance of the drift to observe, kicked one of the escaping geodes back inside. It clanked against his clawed sabaton and pelted across the tunnel, cracking open against the stone directly beside Lucetta's head. She whirled to glare at Tau. Sticky swore and lunged for the other two nearing escape. Maji caught three of them before they could bury themselves and shoved them into a burlap sack, holding it out for the two Sticky caught.

She closed the bag to prevent further escape, then walked over to what remained of the one Tau kicked. It was in several pieces now, the crystals within a gorgeous purple, but it was the fluid inside that was the valuable part. Unfortunately, that had drained out, now staining the ground with gold. That would have been a profitable one, too.

“Tau...” It was a whine and yet, Sticky grinned.

“I found something!” shouted Lucetta. “Grab me a chisel.”

Maji slipped one free from her tool belt and, after depositing the sack into the hutch, trotted over to observe. A rounded corner of something pale blue poked out of the stone.

“Whoa, what is it?” asked Sticky.

“I don't know,” said Lucetta dryly, “But it looks like incolay.”

Burring reverberated the drift. Maji and Sticky groaned as a bright purple globe floated past Tau and transformed. Now

Maji had to hope that whatever Lucetta had just uncovered wouldn't send Tau on another rampage. Maybe it was a good thing Benjamin wasn't with them. At least he would be spared from whatever would come next.

Maji debated telling Lucetta to leave it alone, but they were so short on money now that they had started skipping meals. It was making them all cranky. The five geodes wouldn't bolster them for long, either.

"Let's just get this over with," Maji grumbled.

An oval jewellery box, its blue a Forget-Me-Not, with carvings of people forming into trees. Maji thought it to be a pretty box, although Tau and Nu must have had a different opinion since the two abruptly reached out, then cast one another a *look*.

Without hesitation, Lucetta handed the box to Tau and Maji snickered. Nu could kiss their backsides.

The Sentinels stood across from each other, the box held up in Tau's clawed gauntlet between them. Nu snatched the box away and flicked open the latch with a long nail.

Maji sucked her teeth in anger, only to realise she was no longer inside the mine.

The first thing to stand out was *green* and the fresh scent of dewy nature, of soil damp with rain. A fresh summer breeze laced with the scent of honey teased her hair. Maji's eyes stung at the sight. Nothing but trees awash with vibrant leaves, thigh-high grass, and wild flowers stippled throughout as far

as she could see. The sky was a vivid blue, broken by clouds resembling quick flicks of a brushstroke. Maji knew where she was.

She was *home*.

Heart dancing with excitement, Maji ran through the field. She felt so weightless, like she might float. Fingers splayed, grass teased her open palms, tickled her legs, swishing with every move.

Past a giant willow tree across a brook, she would find her village.

Would her mother be home, would she be happy to see her?

Maji stood before the gates to Willows Rest. They were open, they always were. Willow trees enclosed the entire village, trained to form a stately, endlessly twining barrier. The houses were hidden by evergreens and pipevine, rooftops shrouded by bountiful gardens. Colourful doors and lattice windows the only giveaway that there might be houses underneath it all.

Down the main path that had long since resigned to clover, she veered left along a narrow trail, hardly able to see the yellow walls of her house beneath all the verdure and white blossoms. Below a thick, stony arch, an orange door awaited.

Maji reached for the latch, her hand trembling.

She had been twenty-one when she left. Her mother hadn't agreed with her decision to become a miner. She'd done her

best to be supportive all the same, with Maji wholly convinced she would become famous for finding beneficial magic.

What would her mother say now, after six long years? Maji had done nothing to be proud of at all, earned no success and no riches. She made no worthwhile discoveries and now she was to blame for so many deaths. She was a complete failure.

At least now, she could apologise for not listening. It meant swallowing her pride, but what choice did she have? Inhaling deeply, Maji opened the door. It groaned lowly on its hinges just like it always did.

Her world went dark.

Why had she closed her eyes?

Maji opened them, yet there was nothing to see. No sky, no walls, and no discernable ground. Her surroundings weren't dark, nor were they light. She stood in an ocean of grey. Maji walked, although like a disconcerting case of vertigo, whether she was moving forward at all was unclear. She held up a hand, her otherwise gold skin dulled by the surrounding void. When she looked up again, something caught her attention.

“Hello?”

Her heart thundered. Bright blue eyes looked down at her in surprise. She stared at an ageing man, vaguely familiar.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, bewildered.

“I'm not sure. What is this place?”

The old man's bushy brows knotted. "You don't belong here, you need to leave, quickly."

"I'd love to, if you tell me how." Maji looked around, there still wasn't anything discernable.

Except—there was something behind the man. A distant mountain, moving forward. Maji whimpered in terror as it now stood behind the old man, looming with impossible height.

A colossal mass of corpses and bones, of rotting flesh and fungi all fused and dripping with blackened filth. Its stench burned her throat, made her eyes water.

A massive claw came down right beside her and Maji's legs gave out, nails thrice the length of her yellowed, the bones of its hand covered in loose and matted fur and decay.

"WHERE IS YOUR GUARDIAN?" asked the behemoth, its cacophony of voices causing her ears to ring.

Guardian. Did it mean Sentinel? Did it mean Tau? Not a chance she would give Tau up to this horror of a being. Maji couldn't form any words, anyway. She couldn't even bear to look at it, staring instead at the nothingness beneath her, covering her ears.

"LIGHT OF DAY," the behemoth rasped, causing Maji's very bones to tremble.

She squeezed her eyes shut, expecting this to be the end, heart tight with the knowledge she'd never see her friends again. Her family, her nursery.

"ASK HIM TO QUESTION, IF YOU EVER SEE HIMA GAIN."

Like being shoved from a great height, Maji fell through the nothingness. She thrashed, sheer panic constricting her throat as she spun, ceaselessly.

Then everything stopped.

She stopped spinning, could no longer thrash, her arms and legs splayed out on either side. Maji couldn't turn her head or move at all. She opened her eyes, breathing frantic, recognising the schist in front of her, but an inch from her face. She was back in the mine. Only, she was trapped inside a narrow chasm with no means of escape.





Eighteen



Azure

Keeping his hands to himself was tougher than ever, a habit too easily broken. Oliver had gotten a taste of what it was like to be normal again. Now, every time he needed to leave the mantle behind, he struggled with the impending desire to touch. He ached to touch things, his friends, *himself*.

He wanted to touch Tau most of all, so much it welled into a burning need. That he couldn't while in the company of others was a given, but Tau stuck by him, lingering just behind him, beside him, in front of him—always within arm's reach. It was torture.

There had been no opportunity for further explorations once leaving the Tumble. The mine was busy and few caves were left empty for long enough. Especially since Pavlov increased the number of guards. Needing to keep his friends company at night, Oliver had to make do with the faint touches he could sneak whenever people's backs were turned.

While Lucetta and Maji kept busy uncovering something, he reached behind him, hair standing on end when Tau traced the side of his hand with a sharp fingertip. Not hard enough to hurt, but enough to leave a lasting impression.

Then Nu crowded in on them, and Oliver discreetly moved to hide by Lucetta. Soon, they were left staring where Maji had stood, now gone, whisked away by a spiralling blue mist from the box.

“What the *hell*?” Lucetta raised her pickaxe at Nu, standing around like a useless boulder, still holding the box in Their stupid claw. “What were you thinking, opening that here? Where is Maji?”

“Hang on.” Oliver pushed the tool down. “Not that it wouldn’t be fun to watch you bump Them off, but we need to find Maji.”

Tau caught his attention then, turning his head up, side to side, as if listening for something. Oliver frowned, opened his mouth to say something—and ended up bowled over by a wave of terrifying power grating the surrounding stone. He kept himself from falling face first, jagged rock digging into his gloved hands, while Lucetta’s knees had stopped her collision. He cast her a confused look before glancing over his shoulder, where Tau had rammed into the working face.

Where before there had been a level wall, there now was a crater. Tau slammed his fist into the wall again. And again, and again, until debris pelted off Oliver’s hard-boiled hat to collect around him and still, Tau barraged the stone.

“Tau, stop!” Oliver waved his arm at the dust, pushing himself upright. “The whole place will come down on us.”

Lucetta scrambled out of the drift while Tau retreated from the wall. He bent low to collect a scaling bar off the ground and thrust it at Oliver, then pointed at the crater. Oliver fumbled with the tool so as not to drop it and gawked.

“You want me to dig, *now*? Shouldn’t we find Maji?”

As the question left him, cold understanding clobbered Oliver like a cave in. He froze in place, stared at the crater.

Maji was stuck inside the stone.

That’s what, or *who*, Tau had tried to get to.

Oliver cried out in horror, leapt forward and swung the scaling bar hard. It broke within three hits. Pain bolted through his arm down to the elbow. He left the tool where it was lodged in stone, still rattling, and hurried to find another. Oliver dug as fast as he could, having moved on to Lucetta’s pickaxe. He didn’t see her returning with Benjamin and several other miners until they were by him, working fast to place supporting struts.

Breaking the third pickaxe, Oliver cried out in agony when his forearm shattered in full. Bone tore through skin and blood bloomed along the fabric of his shirt. Lucetta cast him a look of distress while he desperately searched for another tool to use.

“Maji. Inside wall,” he panted, blinking away tears, his arm dangling uselessly at his side.

His friends were faster to catch on. Oliver stood by Tau, who returned his arm to normal as the others laboured hard and fiercely. Tau had taken to pacing, agitated. Digging was taking too long.

Was Maji even still alive? If only he hadn't left the mantle at home, Oliver realised he could have been of actual help. When he made another attempt by grabbing a broken pickaxe, Lucetta snapped at him to get away.

He cast a desperate look at Tau, who ceased his pacing. Tau looked back.

“Move out of the way!” Oliver shouted over clanging metal. “Please, Tau. I don't care if we get caved in, get her out.”

That was all his Sentinel needed to hear. The other miners hurried out, while Benjamin and Lucetta reluctantly cleared the way. Tau clenched his metal hands into fists again, paused, then dashed at the wall, barraging it. Large cracks formed, the ceiling crumbled, the display of power sending the very earth beneath Oliver's feet aquiver. Lucetta and Benjamin had the sense to get out of the drift, trying to pull him along but he refused, shaking Benjamin's hand off.

He was staying. He couldn't help, but he was staying.

Then finally, a crack, a crumble.

A narrow gap revealed itself, emitting desperate gasps for air. Tau clawed at the edges, further revealing the rugged confines beyond, and Maji's hand. Lucetta shoved Oliver out of the way to hold it through the seam created.

“We’re here, we’re getting you out!”

Maji’s panic-stricken cries seeped through the gap, her terror dragging through the drift. Oliver told himself he shouldn’t cry, rapidly blinking away the burn in his eyes. Over Lucetta’s head, he did his best to help, now down to a chisel. Tau did most of the work, his hands ripping away at the stone as though it were denticulated flesh. It damaged his armour, leaving scrapes and dents, but he didn’t seem to care.

At long last, the gap became big enough for Maji to squeeze through, her face blotchy as she collapsed into Lucetta’s arms. Oliver stood there, desperate to hold them. He watched in envy while Benjamin came and pulled the two women into a firm embrace, squeezing until they both grunted with discomfort.

They encouraged Maji to sit down and drink. Sweat drenched her, she looked exhausted, panting into the canteen and hiccuping. Oliver took a moment to peer inside the cavity. It was in the exact shape of her body, like she’d been just another magical artefact.

“Nu helped,” murmured Benjamin, sitting next to the hiccuping Maji with an arm secured around her tiny shoulders.

Thick branches criss-crossed, securing the ceiling of their drift, slowly sprouting bright green leaves. It looked like an elaborate gazebo. Nu, however, was gone. Tears spilt anew when Maji looked up, her heart-wrenching sobs eating Oliver through the chest.

Furiously, she wiped at her face. “It–It–rem–reminds me of h–home!”

Refraining from holding her hurt, when all Oliver wanted was to comfort his best friend. He sat on his haunches in front of her while she did her best to explain what had transpired between hiccups and sobs.

“You’re saying that the demon was inside your house?” Oliver asked.

“No!” she bawled. “I ended up in a different place. Like a void.”

Maji inhaled sharply. She looked up with reddened eyes at Tau, who remained by the crater.

“Light of Day?”

Tau quirked his head. A profound sense of familiarity coursed through Oliver’s chest, a little like seeing someone after years. He gasped.

“Is that your real name?” Lucetta asked before Oliver could.

“Tau is only the name officials gave him, isn’t it? Like with every other Sentinel,” said Benjamin, calmly.

“Wait, wait.” A realisation cropped up, and Oliver desperately grasped around for it before it could escape. “If that’s your name and that ugly brute knows it—”

“That demon knows you!” Maji breathed.

Oliver pouted. “I was getting to that.”

“It called you a Guardian, too.”

“Sentinels help me, my head can’t handle this.” Oliver barely remembered not to rub his forehead. “Are you telling me they just made up a name for you, nobody ever asked what you’re called?”

“Not like they talk,” muttered Benjamin.

“Who the hell came up with ‘Sentinel’? I like Guardian way better,” said Lucetta.

“It told me to ask you to...question something? I don’t know.” Maji swiped at her tear-stained face with the back of her hands. A quick, angry motion. “All I know is, I never want to see that thing again.”

“Can’t blame you.” Oliver straightened up with a grunt. “It’s a right ugly dummock. Smells like one too.”

Lucetta followed suit with a faint snort. “Wonder where Nu went?”

Oliver blew a dismissive breath past his lips, flapping them. “Who cares?”

Rising to his feet, Benjamin clapped a hand over his thigh, as if the matter was settled and they hadn’t just nearly lost Maji. “Let’s get some tea.”

Oliver wasn’t so sure if that invitation extended to him. Regardless, he said, “Come on,” and held his hand out for Tau to take. Then quickly realised that was a terrible idea. Tau caught his meaning, anyway, and followed.

A massive, metal gauntlet found his shoulder on their way down the main passageway. Gooseflesh swarmed his whole

body. Nervously, he smiled up at his Sentinel. This was far more than a sneaky touch, and they were far from alone, with several miners coming to check on Maji.

“I’m fine,” she sheepishly assured them, dodging the questions of *how* she’d gotten stuck.

Oliver expected Tau to condense when they reached the cage, but he didn’t.

“Uh, I guess I’m taking the long way?” Oliver did his best to pretend that having Tau’s hand on him was perfectly normal. He also tried to ignore Benjamin’s glower, the obvious disapproval bespattering his already climbing frustration with the man.

The rattling of the cage was as loud as his pummeling heartbeat when the others disappeared from view above him. Glares scorched holes into Oliver’s back, yet Tau continued to hold his shoulder, making his hair stand on end and his skin prickle. Deflecting questions about what he’d done to warrant Tau snatching him up and transporting him away had been hard enough. This one would be tougher to explain. There were only so many crimes he could commit before Pavlov expelled him, and then what would he do?

Doubling back, Oliver walked past the collection area, rife with finds neatly packed, up along the tracks, continuing to ignore the looks speared his way. The longer they carried on, the more aware Oliver became of the weight on his shoulder, that it hadn’t left him yet, that it was doing things to him he would have to find an outlet for later.

“Thank you for getting Maji out,” he murmured, strained.

There was more he wanted to say, but his mouth quickly ran dry as Tau’s hand drifted up to his neck, stroking a thumb across the skin. Once, twice. Three times. It didn’t occur to Oliver that they had stopped moving, that he’d stopped breathing. Sharp tips scraped his nape, ran further up and grabbed him by the hair to tug his head back, exposing his throat. He shuddered, lips parting around a heated gasp. Aching desire ran straight down to his groin, he pressed against the firm body behind him. Tau lowered, mask a scrape away from his face, hand still in his hair, the other coming round to stroke down his chest, to his stomach.

Oliver remembered to inhale, the breath he took a quiver.

“Light of Day.” He tasted the name, let it slide off his tongue in a whisper. Craned up to press a kiss to the smooth surface of the mask.

Tau’s hands left him, then.

Gently, he was nudged forward, a hand finding its way back to his shoulder. Voices floating toward them forced Oliver to carry on, legs now unsteady and his heart fighting to escape his chest.

Thank the Sentinels for his loose overalls.

Oliver didn’t know if Benjamin wanted to see him. They hadn’t spoken since their exchange after the funeral. Maji was inside though, and he had every right to see her. He pushed into the hovel and guided Tau inside.

While still worn, Maji looked calmer. She held a mug in both hands, the steam curling past her round features while she leaned heavily against Lucetta, whose arm held her snug by the shoulders. Benjamin sat on his stool nearby, cooking something of no discernable smell. Tau's hand left his shoulder only when Oliver sat.

He tilted his head back once Benjamin met his gaze, silently daring the man to tell him to leave again. But there was no anger any longer, only uncertainty. Oliver turned away, patting the spot next to him, suppressing his delight when Tau immediately sat beside him.

"Here." Benjamin placed a bowl in Oliver's lap. Calloused fingers grazed his knees and lingered, before drifting away a moment later.

Oliver stared at the bowl. It was grits, and he was starving. The last thing he'd eaten was an old can of peas he discovered under the bed, among the treasure trove of dust bunnies and broken, irreparable things. Still, he was hesitant to take it when he had yet to pay Benjamin back for feeding him, having used every cent on the mantle. He glanced at Maji. He would prefer it if she ate instead.

"Go on, take it. Maji isn't hungry and Lucetta already had hers," said Benjamin.

With a look of gratitude, Oliver dug in. Not eating for the last two days made even plain grits the tastiest meal, and it was gone within moments. Gingerly, he let Benjamin reclaim

the stoneware. He definitely couldn't afford to replace any dishes, let alone the many tools he'd broken that day.

"You okay?" he asked Maji.

She made a noncommittal noise and gave a faint, reassuring smile. His heart warmed with love for her. So damn courageous.

"Wonder who that man was. You think he's dead now?" Oliver asked.

"I don't know." Maji's voice was quiet as she fiddled with the mug, tapping a fingernail against it. "I got the impression that I...interrupted something."

"You know, this all started when we found that stupid snail," said Oliver.

An idle remark that carried a heavy weight, he realised. The snail's words of foreboding meant very little at the time. Maybe they should have paid better attention.

"You may be right," said Benjamin, staring at the smokeless fire. "We should visit Pavlov and see if we can't get that gastropod to talk."

"We didn't hear back from him," said Lucetta. "Suppose that means he still has it."

"Hell, maybe it does have the gift of foresight," Benjamin grumbled.

"If I never have to see that monster again, it'll still be one too many times. But I want answers," said Maji.

Oliver felt for her. Thinking about that massive horror still made him shudder, and he had Lucetta and Tau with him then. Maji had been all by herself. Never mind that she somehow ended up trapped in stone afterwards. He looked up at Tau. Wondered what his statuesque Sentinel made of it all. Pondered how such a disturbing behemoth knew more about him than any human learned in half a century.

“None of this can be a coincidence,” said Lucetta after a while.

Like they were being targeted. Oliver frowned at the thought.

“We’ll take tomorrow off and go see Pavlov,” said Benjamin.

“Sorry about your flower by the way. I never found it.” Maji sighed, looking toward the shabby table with nothing on it.

Benjamin’s gaze flicked to Oliver. He had no hope of understanding what lay hidden in those amber eyes. He turned his attention to Tau’s thigh, huge and long and so close to touching his.

“Have you made any progress with Onyx at all?” asked Maji.

Benjamin shook his head. “Half the time I don’t know what to do with myself. Sam is alive somewhere and I’m not getting any closer to him. Onyx keeps disappearing. I don’t know where she goes. At least she’s always come back so far.”

Oliver shrank, knowing he should have sucked it up and tried to help more. He focused on Tau’s damaged gauntlets and

vambrace, longing to touch him, press himself against those hips, explore that massive thing he had hidden in those robes.

“I’m sorry. If there was anything I could do...” Lucetta trailed off.

Oliver jerked back to the present, chewing the inside of his cheek in an attempt to stop the heat of longing from spreading into places it shouldn’t just yet.

“No point in fretting. Knowing Sam is alive is a hell of a lot more than what I had before. I’ll find a way.”

Oliver knew what Benjamin was doing. Ever since his first day, Tau had become a constant in his life. It wasn’t until he was gone that Oliver realised the extremes he would go to get him back. That Benjamin could do nothing other than rely on a bird for help had to be maddening. Oliver knew he was playing it down for Maji’s sake, that Benjamin was beside himself. He saw it in his reddened eyes, the crease in his brows.

Briefly, he debated apologising for calling him an asshole.

His mind flickered to Samuel, who had never once referred to him by anything other than his given name, something Oliver always appreciated. After suffering the curse though, Samuel’s behaviour had turned frosty. Oliver always suspected the man spoke down to him, often trying to convince him to leave the mine. Benjamin hadn’t encouraged Samuel’s behaviour, but neither had he said anything, instead only ever cold-shouldered Oliver for several months.

He decided against recanting his insult.

“For now, I think we should get some rest,” said Benjamin after a while.

“I have to say,” Maji sat up to stretch, “I’m exhausted, but I don’t want to sleep alone.”

“I’ll take you,” Lucetta offered before Oliver could. He considered asking to join the two, but wanted to see if Tau would spend the night with him. With the way things were going, he was hopeful.

“I’m sorry,” Maji mumbled. “I’m such a baby.”

“We’re your friends,” said Lucetta. “Be as big of a baby as you want, we’ll only judge you a little.”

“Wow, thanks.” Maji smiled faintly.

“You two are so cute,” said Oliver, unable to help himself.

Maji waved him away with a dainty hand, while Lucetta’s smirk was wry. He followed the two to the door with Tau bent low just behind him. When Maji turned, Oliver blew her a kiss. She smiled at him and disappeared. Tau followed her, likely itching to straighten back up.

Before Oliver could leave, Benjamin cleared his throat.

“Can I talk to you?”

Oliver puckered his lips, not sure if he wanted to give the man another opportunity to maim his heart. Seeing as he owed him though, he shut the door with a sigh. “Course.”

Benjamin took a step closer. “I’m...I’ve been terrible to you, and I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

It wasn’t.

“It’s not,” Benjamin said, face taut.

Oliver’s jaw tensed. He was too raw for this conversation. “You’re right, but I don’t really care, Ben. I’m—” He couldn’t say he was happy. That would require an explanation, and it would be cruel. Neither could he say that he’d stopped caring about the man, when that wasn’t the truth. “I draw the line at you disrespecting Tau.”

“I know.”

Oliver tilted his head back again, gearing up for a fight, but there didn’t seem to be one coming. All Benjamin did was look at him with pleading eyes.

“Treat Tau better, and we’re good.”

Benjamin hesitated, then stiffly nodded. With that, Oliver left into an empty passageway.

Tau had gone without him.

He sighed, exhausted.



Although anxiousness had carved its way into Oliver’s heart, he was so tired he slept soundly, aided by wearing the mantle

to bed. Were it not for Lucetta, he would have snored the entire day away.

“Oliiiver,” her sing-song voice called out to him. “Wakey, wakey. We have no eggs and zero bakey.”

That wasn’t motivating in the slightest. Oliver buried himself deeper into the blankets.

“Come on, get up. We’re going to Pavlov’s with or without you.”

He groaned. That wasn’t enticing. Being walloped in the head by one of his hand-sewn cushions wasn’t enticing either, but it encouraged him to sit up at least. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes before glowering. A smirk curled Lucetta’s full lips.

“I demand a fair fight.” Oliver stretched until his back popped. Hell, that felt good to do again. “If you get to beat me with a pillow, I should be allowed to defend myself.”

“No way. Your pillows are way too hard and lumpy. I’ll suffer a head injury.”

“Hey!”

“I’m kidding,” she said, ready to leave. “Not about the ‘get up’ part, though.”

“Wait.” He waved her back over. Through a loud yawn, he mumbled, “How was it with Maji?”

Lucetta made a face at him. “We just slept.”

“You two didn’t...?”

“Damn, no. Talk about wrong time. Not that it’s any of your business.” Frustration edged her voice. “Apparently none of mine, either. She won’t make a move.”

“It’s Maji,” said Oliver, as if that explained everything. At Lucetta’s look of annoyance, he added, “If you want something you gotta tell her outright. But I didn’t think she tilted any sort of way.”

Lucetta snorted and walked away, disappearing from view. Without closing the door.

“Luce!”

Oliver groaned. It was too early for her to be this mean. He whipped the blankets off himself with a shiver, his hovel cold without the fire, and hopped towards the door to snap it shut. The door split halfway through, the wide gap it now sported like a lopsided grin.

“*Sentinel’s orbs!*”

In his own time, he dressed in overalls and a green flannel shirt. He wriggled his feet into wool socks and sighed at the big toe poking through, taunting him. That was his last pair and didn’t even match. Oliver eyed the mantle that he’d shrugged off on the chair. Its snow-shimmer was as captivating as Tau. He had enjoyed wearing it, but it was time to gift it. Even if it meant going back to being sexually frustrated.

He stuffed the mantle under his ruined mackinaw and made his way up. Other miners gave him the stink-eye and

nervously he clutched at his bulging abdomen. There was no sign of Tau, but there were more guards the closer to the collection hutches he got.

His friends were waiting for him there. He mumbled an apology he didn't mean for being late and slid into the hutch with Benjamin.

It occurred to him, much too late, that he should have sat facing him. That chest was surprisingly warm and comfortable, and Oliver's backside was planted firmly against Benjamin's crotch. It didn't take long for discomfort to make itself known.

Oliver squirmed. "An-Anyone seen Tau? I wanted to give him the mantle."

"Maybe he's stopped shirking his responsibilities," said Lucetta with a laugh.

Oliver ignored her. He enjoyed the time Tau spent with them. It was a privilege his friends were taking for granted.

"I think you should keep it," Maji piped up, hidden by Lucetta's taller frame.

"I can't—"

"Sure you can. You need it more than Tau," said Lucetta.

"We don't mind." Benjamin's breath was hot across the side of his face, the rumble of his voice deep, vibrating against his back.

Oliver squiggled again, hoping to adjust his erection without touching it. “Doesn’t feel right.”

“Stop moving, you’re hurting me.”

An arm snaked around his hips to hold him still and *oh*, Benjamin was stroking his stomach with a thumb, just past the belly button. Was that on purpose?

Heat rose to his face, threatening to boil his skin. The moment the opportunity presented itself, Oliver bolted out of the hutch and ran outside to cool off. He stopped short of burying himself in the snow.

Down the curvature of the road, he was surprised to see Tau standing near the forest’s edge. Against the unsoundable dark of pines, he was like the moon in a starless sky. The Sentinel had his back turned to them, looking past the many trees, mere shadows against shale grey skies. Although for all Oliver knew, Tau was asleep under that mask. When he approached, he threw caution to the wind and stroked an elbow, much to Benjamin’s sibilated chagrin behind him.

“Hullo,” Oliver said, smiling brightly when Tau jerked slightly. This was the second time he’d caught his Sentinel off guard. Tau must have been deep in thought. “Do you want to come with us?”

Tau turned and gave him... A nod? Was he nodding? Tau had only moved his head down once and then back up, but Oliver was *sure* that’s what it was. He grinned.

They made the trip down in silence, and Oliver continued to grapple with his decision to give away the mantle. He wanted to give Tau something meaningful for always saving him, but if he wore the damn thing, Tau would no longer need to do so.

Oliver's elbow constantly brushed Tau's hand, too, distracting him from his internal debates. And every time he looked up at the Sentinel, Tau was looking right back at him.

Excitement and love swelled Oliver's chest, making it difficult to breathe. His mind whirled back to that stolen moment at the Tumble, where he'd kissed the smooth face, revelled in Tau's simmering chill. Resisting the need to kiss his Sentinel again right then and there took far more willpower than Oliver ever believed himself capable of.

Since they hadn't been invited by Pavlov or bothered to send down a telegram, there was no fanfare to greet them. A tall servant dressed in their usual mimicry of Tau paired with a sneer answered the heavy double doors. The woman stared down her bold nose at them.

"You were not invited," she said. When she noticed Tau, her mouth thinned into a severe line. For a second, she looked like she might slam the door shut in their faces.

"We sent a message to say we're coming down. Didn't you get it?" said Lucetta.

The woman didn't seem to buy it, at which point Tau pushed past them. It was the woman's turn to be loomed over and Oliver uttered a tiny, "hah" under his breath.

“I will not be intimidated into allowing you to enter,” she said. “Not even by you, Sentinel.”

Begrudgingly, Oliver admired her chops for talking to a Sentinel that way. A surprised chuckle escaped him when Tau threw a handful of tiny glowing orbs at her. The woman tried to catch them when they pelted against her chest—most clattered to the floor. Tau brushed past, as did Oliver and the others.

“This won’t work every time!” shouted the woman after them. Instead of giving chase, she hurried to pocket the glowing marbles.

“You do this a lot?” Oliver asked. His heart was ready to burst when Tau stopped long enough for him to catch up, so they could walk alongside each other.

Mister Pavlov was nowhere in sight, and since it was him they needed to see, Oliver wasn’t sure if that was a good thing. The mansion was quiet, only the occasional servant crossed their path, all surprised to see them but none bothering to pursue. They followed Tau all the way to the storage room, where Maji beelined for the vivarium.

It was empty.

“What did he do with it?” She tossed aside the velvet sheet that had covered the case, which Oliver heavily debated just taking with him. He was a criminal already, anyway, what harm would it do to take some fabric?

“Didn’t he say he’d give us what we’re owed if he sold it?” Oliver asked, removing himself from the temptation, then turned at the sound of clangs and clatters. “Tau, what—”

Tau had taken to rummaging around wooden crates and boxes. He lifted lids and tossed them away, pulling various items out, which he also threw aside. Urns went smashing, old knives clattered to the floor, and jewellery disappeared under the racking. Tau extracted a reddish gemstone in the shape of an eye from a delicate silver box, which he’d already cast aside.

Lucetta gasped loudly, causing both Maji and Oliver to jump in fright.

“That’s Alexandrite!” Lucetta was next to Tau within moments.

“Don’t do that!” cried Maji incredulously.

Tau held it out for her to admire, while Lucetta clasped her hands behind her back, fingers twitching.

“I didn’t know it could be found in this region, let alone be this huge! Do you know how much this is *worth*? Oh, my Sentinels, whoever found this is set for life and the next! Why is it in the shape of an eye, what significance could that have? I want to touch it. Can I touch it? I shouldn’t touch it, but can I?”

“Please don’t,” said Benjamin in alarm.

It went flying over Tau’s shoulder, smashing into several pieces across the wood flooring. Lucetta made an awful,

glottal noise, as though she'd just been strangled, while the Sentinel continued his fervent search. What he was looking for, Oliver didn't know. All they could do was watch Tau destroy the place, sucking in their breaths and wincing every time he broke something that looked especially valuable.

Distracted, Oliver barely registered the faint *click* behind him. He turned, and his hair immediately stood on end at the sight of the blue double doors.

And standing in front of them was none other than Mister Pavlov.

The man froze, his hand still on the iron door handle, eyes wide with shock. "What the fuck are you all doing here?"

Now he looked livid, and oddly dishevelled and grease-free, with white shot through the ginger tresses. He sported dark circles under his eyes, even his clothes looked tired, like the man had rapidly aged.

Benjamin moved to stand in front of Oliver and Maji, the act fluid like it was an instinct. "I think the more important question is, what are you doing with that portal?"

"That's none of your business!" Pavlov released the handle, and the doors vanished from sight that instant.

"That door has been plaguing us for weeks now, and *you're* behind it?" snarled Lucetta. "The things we've had to see in there makes it every bit our business!"

Tau flicked past them, so quick, it sent nothing aflutter. He snatched Pavlov by the throat, raised him off the ground. The

man's kicks to his stomach didn't so much as nudge him, the slaps delivered to the vambrace no more effective than droplets of rain. Oliver's hand drifted up to his own throat at the memory of Nu doing the same to him. He swallowed against the surge of fear, the shock of Tau laying his hands on anyone like that.

"Un-Unhand me!" rasped Pavlov. "I-I owe you-no explanations! You-You saw no-nothing. Imagined it!"

"Wow, you're serious? We all just imagined you coming out of that door?" Maji's bold tone did not match the fright in her eyes.

"Y-Yes. You're all in-insane!" cried Pavlov. "It's-th-the-gases! *Agh!*"

Tau's grip tightened, nails digging into pale skin, blood trickling down Pavlov's flushing neck. The man flailed, made terrible noises—the blue doors reappeared directly by Tau, more pristine than the previous two times it had materialised. They opened on their own accord with a *woosh* and a ghostly chill, revealing another set of doors beyond, glass panes dusty and stained green.

Oliver took a nervous step back.





Nineteen



Consumed

“*M*y apologies,” coughed the creature between Tau’s feet.

Tau glared down once Oliver bid him goodnight. Already he missed him, missed his hand. Warm and soft. Easy to crush and therefore fragile. It wasn’t the first time he had Oliver’s hand in his, but to hold it for reasons other than recovery was new. Tau hadn’t known they could do that.

It had elicited such a peculiar feeling, both thrilling and alarming at once, building into an ache inside his very core that showed no signs of waning. He wanted to relieve it, convinced he could do so only by touching Oliver.

“*Dusty in there, you know,*” the creature added while Tau struggled with his decision to kick it. It was minuscule in size, yet astronomical in wisdom, the only reason he refrained.

Dust was indeed a common issue in the mine. As was water, and Tau cared for neither. It didn’t matter, he supposed. He

would just have to encourage Oliver to hold his hand again another time.

The distress of miners increased every day Tau kept his dwimmer away. They were angrier, slept less, were more stressed than ever before. He longed for the quieter days, wished their suffering didn't bother him so much, but it did. All he wanted was to help. Not doing so went against his very nature.

No longer deserving.

It was fortunate he had his very own solace light in the shape of a gawky human. Adorable, palpable. *Soft*. So soft. Everything about Oliver was soft, despite the hard angles of his shoulders, the narrow, bony hips. Soft, but not delicate. There were none as strong as Oliver, Tau had come to realise that long ago and recognised it more with each passing day.

But he was hurt. Tau sensed the pain in his heart as though it was his own, and was quick to chase after him. He found Oliver standing along tracks, surrounded by humans emanating fury. Tau wanted to take him away from all the hurt and the dislike neither of them deserved. He snatched Oliver up, taking him to the only place where they wouldn't be bothered, where they could freely hold hands.

Discover.

And discover he did. Touched every part of Oliver, longing to understand him as best he could. Yet the more Tau touched, the more ferocious the fire became, now a roaring firestorm inside him, impossible to extinguish.

Amplified, when Oliver pressed those impossibly soft lips against his finger, his hand. When those same lips connected with his face. Setting his entire being alight, making his head spin, building an aching, heated pressure Tau didn't understand.

This touch of lips was what humans did to each other in the cave below, he'd seen it and plenty more. He grasped Oliver's head in both hands and held him there, needing more, longing to do what he'd seen humans do, even if he didn't understand *why*. Although as Oliver shifted and nearly fell off the ledge again, Tau eased him upright to transport him away at his request. They had little choice but to part ways after that, Oliver too flustered, his pounding heart audible even from where Tau stood watching him slink away.

Thud-thud-thud, the sound intoxicating.

Spend eternity with him. The words inscribed themselves into his core, leaving a glowing imprint that made Tau swell with....

Something.

He thought it meant Oliver wanted him by his side, even if they couldn't touch. Now that he'd gotten a proper taste, Tau needed it, his longing a perdurable conflagration that would surely burn him alive. The only time he left was when Oliver spent the nights with his friends, but never without sneaky touches, looks of want, and cores blazing with desire.

Ignoring everyone but his favourite again, Tau delighted in running his finger down Oliver's hand, but that was when he

sensed it. There for the briefest of moments, yet its foreboding was unmistakable. So much, it even pulled Cultivation down to them.

“What is that?” they asked the moment they manifested.

Tau ignored them, reaching out to take the container to inspect it.

“Feels familiar. Let me see.”

As with anything that was sky-coloured, it felt entirely innocent, but Tau knew better by now. He debated presenting the box to the Elders when Cultivation snatched it out of his hand and opened it. As the sparkling mist stole Maji away, Tau deliberated vanquishing Cultivation. Maybe he'd make it personal and backhand them into another dimension.

He couldn't sense Maji anywhere, the container now empty. There was no portal for him to go through this time. Oliver and Lucetta were in distress. Tau didn't know how to reassure them, didn't even know how to reassure himself. He couldn't deal with yet another loss, certainly not Maji's.

Then, after several moments of blind panic, the signature that was so uniquely Maji returned, snapping back like a band attached to his core. Vibrant, always reminding him of large yellow flowers in the sun, even when she was scared.

“Maji returned,” Tau managed to say, trying to discern where she was.

“How do you know?”

Tau could have laughed—and they called *him* broken.

Pinpointing Maji, he set to work. Hammered away at the stone, enduring her distress, her hopelessness, the realisation that she might suffocate as though those fears were his own. Overwhelming him, filling him with a terror that nearly had him trembling.

“You’ve gone deranged,” said Cultivation behind him. *“Disgracing us with that human is bad enough. Now this?”*

Tau ignored them, drawing every remaining speck of strength he had left to break down the stone, reprimanding himself for wasting so much energy on the sapling.

Freeing Maji was his only task. It didn’t matter that he retained damage, that he was so drained he couldn’t recover from the lacerations on his arms. It hurt, but it wasn’t in vain. She was freed, returned to the arms of her favourites and Tau could take a moment to gather what was left of himself. He remained where he stood, worried he might collapse if he moved.

“Light of Day?”

Tau jerked into alertness and stared for a moment. He’d not heard his name in a while—

A revelation, creeping up his spine like a spectral chill.

At the very centre of the behemoth’s mass, amongst the festering atrocities and trapped souls, there lay the core of a Guardian. Tau didn’t know what to do with such information, it only begged further questions.

“Wonder where Nu went?”

“Who cares?”

Agree.

Cultivation’s disappearance meant very little. Although he was surprised that they had been of some use. A first time for everything, Tau supposed.

Following his favourite out, he was careful not to fall over, stone and humans alike spinning around him. He placed a hand on Oliver for support, certain he wouldn’t mind. Reaching the lifts, Tau wasn’t convinced he could condense in his current condition. He longed to be stationary, but allowed Oliver to help him figure things out.

They walked, uninterrupted, and absent-mindedly, Tau gave into what he’d been itching to do for an eternity. He ran his fingers across Oliver’s nape. That steady heart palpitated under the touch, a tremble running up the lissom body. Not with fright, but furore. They were alone, for now, and Tau took the opportunity. He pressed his face down, revelled in the contact of soft lips, having craved it so desperately. He longed to draw Oliver into him, to consume him in the same way Oliver devoured him.

Unfortunately, he sensed others approaching, their voices carrying along the tracks, and Tau was in no mood to put up with any of them.

Whether he stood or sat made no difference. Being stationary was what let him recover, and what better way than to sit next to Oliver? It was comforting, the sound of human voices lulling him into a contemplative state.

The behemoth had asked him to question, but there were an infinite amount of things Tau didn't understand. Where was he meant to begin?

Humans?

Own Existence?

Why was water so wet and disgusting?

Those were all things he preferred not to think about.

He wondered what caused the Guardian to become what it was now, a vacuum of living things to feed on. It explained how they survived in realms which ought to diminish them to nonexistence, Tau realised. They were feeding off the lives of those they enslaved, replenishing their own and hiding behind all the misery to boot. It was brilliant, if not cruel. He didn't know for what purpose this Guardian had to stay alive in such a manner. It seemed like a miserable existence.

His humans filed out of the home, and he followed. Tau turned, eager to be with Oliver.

The door was closed.

Oliver had stayed with Benjamin.

The urge to drop to his knees and lament was...

Overwhelming.

With little else to do, Tau made for the surface, condensing to reach the openings. If nothing else, he could soak up some moonlight.

Upon reaching snow that glittered beneath him, Tau was content to drift along the blustery wind.

Until something peculiar pulsed out to him from the blackened forest.

So tired.

Ignore problem. Ignore.

...Duties.

The duty-bound part of him pushed Tau to investigate. He already knew it wasn't anything dangerous. Rather, it was one of his humans, a more recent recruit. He lingered by the trees in his humanoid form to see if the person would come out. They didn't appear to be in any distress, yet stayed amongst the shadows.

Peculiar.

Dark gave way to daylight even under the thick grey clouds obscuring the sun, something Tau would never become accustomed to. This world was dreary, glum. He longed for the vividness of home.

Oliver drew his attention away from the trees with a gentle touch that Tau very much enjoyed. At the invitation to join, he followed. There was little point in waiting for someone who didn't want to come out. Besides, he wanted to stay with his favourite, especially since Oliver and the others had such a habit of being pulled into danger. Tau might be weakened, but he could still protect them.

Hopefully.

Green eyes kept looking at him from under thick lashes. He wondered when Oliver would show him that item under his clothes. Tau knew what dwimmer he kept hidden. So familiar, he thought it might have once belonged to him. That the item didn't come from him directly amused Tau a great deal. How would Oliver have gotten his soft, crushable hands on such an item?

They strolled together behind the others, and he inspected every detail of Oliver's features. With each lantern they passed, Oliver's hair glinted like gold-dusted dwimmer, pink lips lifting in a smile. The way they always did whenever he snuck a glance.

Tau liked his appearance, similar to other humans, yet entirely unique. To hold his hand would have been nice. He wanted to run his finger down the bridge of that nose again, touch the slight bump to it. He longed to explore what the rest of him would feel like. *Without* the attire, fully aware of all that alabaster skin Oliver kept hidden, having seen him a few times before in the hot water cave.

Before Tau knew it, they were by the oversized home.

Why?

Something about the place he never liked.

Upon granting them entry though, Tau decided that this was just fine. He knew what he wanted to do now and led the way.

He set to searching for anything blue that connected to the behemoth, stopped only once Lucetta showed interest in an

item Tau recalled rightfully belonged to them. She was very excited about something they never picked up at the time, after dealing with an entity with many missing eyes in its wings and body. He expected Lucetta to take it, but she didn't.

Too bad.

Something must have heard his mind eventually, for the portal appeared. Tau hadn't expected Mine Owner to be part of whatever was going on. His dislike for the man distorted into disgust.

If he came out of the doors alive and well, then that suggested whatever was inside would mind if he hurt him—a little. Maybe he could provoke the behemoth into telling him what questions needed asking.

Tau slipped from behind the shelves, snatched the man up by the neck and squeezed, tempting whatever was behind the doors to come out. Humans were so fragile, and this one meant nothing to him. Tau could end him and never think about it again. He squeezed harder.

The doors reappeared.

He tossed the man across the room. Crashes and cries of pain behind him suggested the landing had not been soft.

The doors opened.

Another set with lichen-stained panes awaited beyond. Tau didn't especially want to go in, knowing what it would do to him. If his humans wanted answers though, then he had no choice.

Tau braced himself, summoned his courage with one last look at Oliver, then stepped inside.

The doors slammed shut behind him, sending detritus flying across a reddish floor, and drowning out Oliver's panicked attempt to call him back.

It was fortunate he hadn't followed inside. Tau couldn't say he cared for what he saw. It looked familiar, yet far more gruesome than before.

A home for nature. A glasshouse, although nothing inside was what he would consider natural. Plants were morbid hybrids of humans, mostly, and vegetation. Some were alive and aware, whimpering and gasping in pain. Others not so much, their flesh and bone serving as fertiliser.

"I wasn't expecting any guests," said a voice from behind a bush with masses of eyes, hanging from bone-like branches by fleshy threads. They blinked in rapid succession, as if surprised at being a bush in the first place.

"Explain?" Tau already knew it wasn't the behemoth based on voice alone.

"You may call me Ondine if you like." She stepped out from behind the bush, green dress hissing across garden dross. "Light of Day. You're not looking very 'light' these days."

He didn't much care for the insult, but wouldn't take the bait. She knew his name, yet wasn't Guardian. He had to know how.

"Explain."

She smiled at him. Tau didn't like that. "No."

Annoying.

He had come here specifically for answers. How was he supposed to get them if she wouldn't provide any?

"Hiding?"

It had to be the reason she kept such morbid vegetation, for it masked her signal in the same way the behemoth masked theirs. He had an inkling she wasn't human, yet couldn't feel her dwimmer's signature. Casting another look about, he took stock of shadowy mushrooms, sprouting from legs and arms and eye sockets of the surrounding hybrids. They were the same as on the behemoth, and the hag.

Peculiar.

"Like that coward, Emergence? No." Ondine reached out to stroke a protruding hand, one of several, merged with thick green stems in a large, old pot beside her. She played with its fingers, tickled the palm. The hand twitched under her touch. "No, these serve a different purpose. They're unique."

That was one way to describe it.

At least one of his theories was confirmed, and now he had a name for the behemoth. Tau approached nearby staging with more planters upon it. Crates and pots, not unlike Maji's but so, so different all the same. There were flowers of strange shapes—dismembered body parts, pieced together to give them the appearance of blossoms. Human heads protruded from the soil, blinking up at him, their mouths open around

silent cries for help. Insects crawled over their faces, into orifices, making deposits and extracting particles all the while.

Disgusting.

He was certain not even Maji would enjoy this.

“*Explain,*” he said again, tired.

Ondine moved to stand beside him, long fingers idly raising the fine fabric of her dress. He resented her for wearing green. That was *his* colour. She reached out to stroke a head around the shell of its ear, and the list of things Tau didn’t like about this place was ever-increasing.

“You shouldn’t linger for much longer. You do realise what it’s doing to you, or are you that simple that you’re unaware? I can see you fading as we speak.”

Tau glared at her. Of course he was aware of it, but he wanted answers. Enough to yet again say, “*Explain.*”

Speaking, so cumbersome.

The woman looked at him with a smile. “No need. I will, however, tell you to leave Tristan alone. I’ve grown fond of him. And if you happen to see Emergence again, let them know that it won’t work.” She regarded him, craning her neck somewhat, that smile twisting further. “Oh, and I suppose you can send my regards to your paramour. His misery has been delectable.”

Tau didn’t expect the sudden push to his shoulders, let alone the force behind it. It knocked him sideways into green and

skin, foliage and limbs alike breaking under his weight. They screamed, and he recoiled, the chorus of agony deafening.

He didn't like these plant-things, and he didn't like being pushed, either. Tau released a vivid flash and sped away, down pathways, slipping between gruesome plants to hide. Unable to hear or sense Ondine through the surrounding distress made evading her a precarious process while he searched for an egress.

Tau didn't see her until she appeared from behind another bush at a run. Umbral tendrils projected from her stomach and sides. They lashed him, entwined his face and limbs and *squeezed*. A searing pain shot through his face when it cracked under the pressure. The tendrils hoisted him up, slammed him back down to the ground. Lifted him back up, leaving no time for his senses to return.

Tau panicked and condensed to get out of the hold. He zigzagged down a manifold of pathways before transforming back, only to stumble and drop to his knees in exhaustion.

The two spheres he managed to conjure feebly crackled. He sent them spiralling towards the woman running at him again from behind. They connected with her stomach, knocked her off her feet. More black, writhing vines protruded from her back to catch her fall. Tau stood, attempted to pull her into a chambered dimension, to get away from the tortured souls clouding his mind.

It didn't work.

His surroundings flashed to dark and back and Ondine laughed at him. Another tendril coiled around Tau's midriff, wresting him forward. His face connected with her chest and more cirrus trapped his shoulders and legs. On his knees again, Ondine looked down at him. Had she always been this tall?

Now Tau understood he'd made a mistake. He shouldn't have come here. He tried twisting out of her grasp, but Ondine's hold on him remained violent.

"You're unique, you know." Pale fingertips on the edges of Tau's face teased him with the threat of removing it. "Like Emergence. Sometimes I miss how helpful they were."

Panic permeated his mind, he couldn't think what to do. He had to get away, too close to perishing. There were better places to die than this.

"I said I wouldn't take more off you," Ondine murmured, lips still coiled with that awful smile, "but maybe just a little more. It probably won't kill you. You've survived everything else so far."

Tau pinched his fingers together, summoned every last grain of strength, snapped free of the chittering and the biting vines and frantically drove his hands into Ondine's sides. He delved deep into her flesh, clenched around the innards.

Her startled screech quivered the glass panes as he wrenched his fists back out. Blackened blood and entrails pulled free, slopping to the ground upon release. The hold on him slackened. Ondine stumbled away and tripped down the brick path, clutching at her stomach, dripping with gore.

Tau staggered upright and produced several more spheres. They exploded on impact with her flailing form. He worked to produce another, knowing this might end him.

His surroundings flashed, from glasshouse to grey and back. Exhausted and confused, Tau dropped to his knees, the sphere between his hands fizzling out.

Then he was hauled backwards.

Out of the glasshouse and into a different world—he didn't know where he was, dragged into yet another realm, across a ground that didn't exist. This place was bleak, lacking details of any sort, reminiscent of the mountain fog. There was nothing Tau could do, scarcely able to move. He could only lie there, flat on his back.

“FOOL.”

There was no mistaking the many voices of misery and anger.

“FORTUNATE WE FOUND YOU.” Emergence's dominant form looked down at him. Tau flinched at the carrion sliding off, splattering all around him.

A gigantic hand reached up, fading into the grey fog above before reappearing. A weakly flailing body now in its grasp, it clung to the behemoth with stretching trails of decay. Emergence flung the corpse at Tau, sending thick blood and ooze spraying.

Tau convulsed in disgust, willed the behemoth to stop. He didn't want to merge. He could take the damage, he could

recover from this if only he were released.

“STUBBORN,” conceded Emergence. *“YOU WILL SUFFER. COME SPEAK WHEN READY, IF YOU SURVIVE.”*

What remained of the mangled corpse slid off. Massive fingers consisting of bones and rot drowned him in its grasp. Raised off the ground, Tau was thrust forward.

And out.

The grey broke away—he tore through shelves and crates until a wall ended his fall with a loud crack.

Tau slumped into a heap on the ground.

His humans clamoured to get to him. Hands cradled his aching face, the touch gentle. Tau wanted to let them know he was fine, but it had been a rough journey and he needed a moment.

“Tau, hey,” Oliver croaked, holding his face with such tenderness. “What happened? Your mask, it’s cracked!”

This time, when fingers stroked the outline of his face, Tau didn’t mind. He lifted his head, longing to look at his love.

“You’re a mess.” Oliver’s whispered words held tremors of worry.

Lucetta picked a long piece of blackened skin clinging to his robes. It dangled between her fingers as she inspected it. “Ugh, what *is* that?” She flung it away in disgust.

“Hah!” shouted Mine Owner, smug even as he struggled to come out from the destroyed racking. “My spirited wife is more powerful than you!”

“Shut up!” Lucetta snapped.

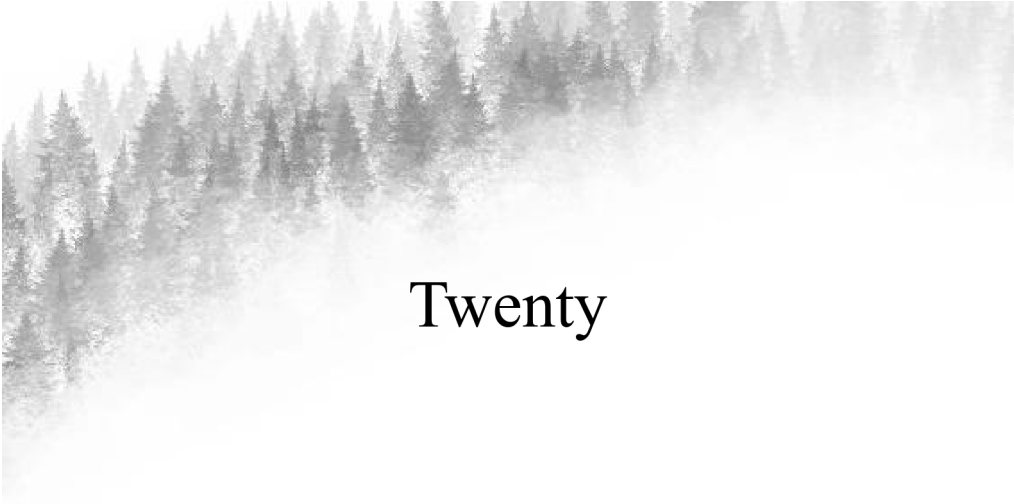
Having no desire to be in this place any longer, Tau attempted to rise. He wanted to rest with Oliver, watch him sleep. Do other things, too.

With Oliver’s help, he stood, wrapping his arm around the frail shoulders, along with Lucetta’s sturdier ones to help carry him. He took a step forward and buckled. He was exhausted, too drained. There was very little left in him.

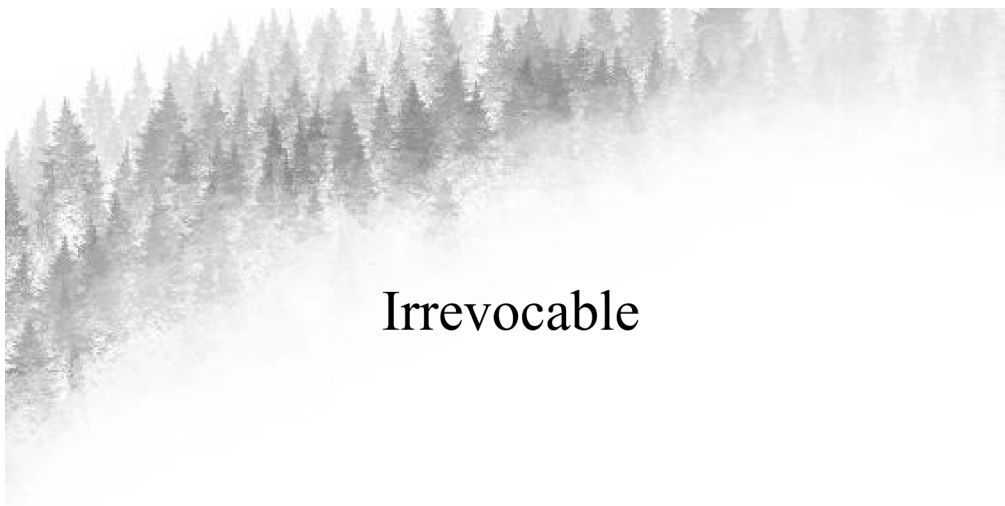
Remorse, Oliver.

Tau condensed.





Twenty



Irrevocable

A mangled twist of a horrified gasp and wail wrenched itself out of Oliver. He dropped to his knees, wrapping his arms around Tau, now only a globe. Tenebrous and solid, cold against his cheek. A hand on his shoulder tried to pull him away. He held on tighter, the large crack along the centre catching his skin.

“No, no, no, *no!*” he cried, each more desperate than the last, his breath fogging the green glass.

“Do you know how much damage you have caused here?” Mister Pavlov screeched behind him. “Irreplaceable, all of this. Get out now!”

“Hang on,” Benjamin said, “we just wanted to ask you about the snail—”

“OUT! I will have you arrested, or I can smite you with this sword. Your choice!”

The hand on his shoulder became more insistent. Oliver tried to pull the globe against himself and failed. It barely rolled,

megalithic. “Not without Tau!”

Maji appeared at his side. She prised the mantle out from under his mackinaw and slung it across his shoulders, fastening it with difficulty.

“Come on,” Lucetta urged, shaking his shoulder.

Oliver hoisted Tau into his arms with a choked sob, steadied by Benjamin’s hand on him, and caught sight of Pavlov: one arm at an odd angle, the other brandishing a white sword. In the distance of his foggy mind, he recognised that deceptively beautiful blade, cursing anyone struck by it with damnation.

“Begone with you!” Pavlov swung the sword in Oliver’s direction, face red with fury, looking nothing like the mine owner they knew.

They left the mansion unharmed, but each step Oliver took was too heavy and became heavier still, his knees ready to buckle.

The walk back to the mine was slow, ruthless. Another blizzard had set in, obstructing the road from view, lashing his face. Even the guards had abandoned their posts for shelter, their dark red uniforms nowhere in sight. The wind stung Oliver’s fingers, froze over the tears that blurred his vision. With each icy gust, the realisation that Tau was gone again carved its way into his chest, hollowing it out with dread and panic and worst of all, heartbreak.

Oliver gasped for breath, wobbled, and would have crashed to the ground had Lucetta not such a firm hold on him.

“Come on baby,” she shouted over the gales, “only a little more to go.”

“We’ll find a way to bring him back,” said Maji, holding his other side.

Benjamin used his body to shield him from the punishing frost, hands cupping his face, forcing him to look into amber eyes. “He’s been in this state before and came back, right?”

“But the—the crack!” Oliver choked. “It feels different.”

Unlike before, there was an emptiness in the very centre of his soul. A hopelessness, rendering him unsure of how to carry on.

“Maybe Sentinel Nu will help. They’ve brought him back before, right?” Benjamin said. “But we can’t help him unless you get up.”

Oliver gave pause to consider. His grip on Tau tightened. He pushed up to carry on.

By the time they reached the adit, ice ran into his bones, but he refused to stop until he found Nu, peering into any caves and hollows they passed.

“Where is that useless bastard?” Oliver croaked after finding nothing but a few curious guards.

Lucetta stroked him across the back. “They might have left the mountain for the evening. We’ll find Nu tomorrow.”

Oliver didn’t want to accept that. He wanted to shout and throw things and set fire to Their magic again until Nu came

back. Instead, he was led to Benjamin's hovel, the man's grip on his shoulder firm.

Without a word, he rolled into the bed, held Tau tight against his stomach and didn't stir when Benjamin eased the boots off him. They thudded to the floor, shortly followed by Benjamin's own, who moved to lie beside him. Maji and Lucetta curled up on the settee under a pile of blankets.

The dim glow of orange from the hearth's fire refracted through Tau like he was a ball of crystal. Oliver traced the jagged crack running down the middle with a fingertip, didn't look up when Benjamin placed a hand atop him and stroked his forehead with a thumb.

"It'll be alright."

Whispered words meant to comfort, but they nearly broke him. Oliver bit down hard on his lower lip, focused on the jolt of pain rather than the desperate need to cry.

"I just got him back." His voice had cracked, his inhale shuddering, bringing no air to his lungs.

He'd not even told Tau he loved him.

Benjamin didn't respond, only continued to stroke his head.

Was Tau alive, or dead? His magic was nowhere in sight, something that could have been Nu's doing again. Oliver wrapped his arms around the globe, holding firm, knowing he would have to face his fears and demand Nu turn him back.



Quiet snoring and heavy breathing broke the silence Oliver woke to. It was still dark, the hearth's fire a sliver of purple, Nu's wreath barely glowing. He crawled out of bed with Tau in his arms, set him down long enough to put his boots on, then left the hovel.

A spare few day workers were about, suggesting the hour to be early. They cast odd glances at the globe, but no one asked him anything about it. Almost mindlessly, he searched in every cave, down every passageway, even as other miners emerged to go about their day.

“Where's your boyfriend Sentinel, then?”

A vaguely familiar jeer behind him that drew tension into Oliver's frame. He didn't stop on his way up to the Bank. More footfalls joined in, still behind him, and he hurried his pace.

Someone snatched him by the back of the mantle, and yanked. Oliver stumbled, his back colliding with the cragged wall of the passageway. He clutched more fiercely at Tau, briefly catching sight of the hairy man and his friends as he curled over the globe.

“What do you want?” Oliver grumbled, glancing sideways to where he could possibly run. There was a guard just up ahead, out of sight around the bend. Not that they'd do anything.

“It just occurs to us, we saw Sentinel Tau leave last night,” said a woman—the one who had whipped him across the arse with her shirt. “They've never done that before, have They?”

“Shows what you know.” Oliver grit his teeth shortly after, aware he shouldn’t provoke. He edged away.

“Oh no you don’t,” said the hairy man and he and the four others swiftly caged him in. “What’s that you’ve got there? Looks expensive.” He held out his large hand, as if Oliver would just hand Tau over. “We’ll take that as payment.”

“You get I can sock you into another realm, right?” Oliver snapped, twisting away to keep Tau out of prying gazes.

The fist that connected with his jaw sent Oliver reeling sideways. Tau nearly slipped from his grasp, his fingers gone sweaty as he staggered to remain upright. He shook his head, clearing some of the dizziness, as someone’s grip slapped around Tau, pulling.

Oliver quickly wrenched the globe out of reach, sending another man flying forward with the momentum. They crashed to the ground, likely scraped their face, too. Spurring venomous anger. The other three snarled at him, clenched their fists, leaving Oliver to panic about whether he ought to defend himself.

If he did, he might kill someone.

If he didn’t, they might kill him.

“Enough of that,” groused a voice hoarse with age, again behind Oliver. He faltered at the old man walking up to stand by his side.

“He owes us!” said Hairy Man. “What, you think you can stop us?”

Whatever the scraggly old goat hoped to accomplish against four strong miners, interfering was as daft as wandering off the road into the forest.

Dunderpate scoffed. "I'm sure Mister Pavlov would be interested to hear about how you retaliated against someone he expressly said should be left alone."

Oliver hadn't thought that would work, yet the four of them hesitated, even the one he'd sent to the ground, his cheek chafed raw. With dirty looks and muttered insults, they left, although not without slamming their shoulders into Oliver's.

He adjusted Tau in his hold and turned a confused look at the old man. "Why?"

"I don't like pointless violence." Dunderpate's blue gaze lowered to the globe before he shuffled away from him, adding over his shoulder, "Keep that out of sight, you fool."

While still rattled, Oliver carried on with his search for the Bastard. Hid Tau better, too, wrapping him under his mackinaw as best he could.

He found Nu inside the Bank of all places, looming right where he'd waited to set fire to Them. Oliver lingered by the entrance, heart thudding harshly against his ribcage.

Nu could bring Tau back. They had done it before, but what if Nu didn't and took Tau away from him instead? What if They trapped him inside another thorned cage, now that Tau wasn't there to protect him?

Oliver swallowed hard.

“Hey.”

He jumped. The moment Lucetta set her hand on his shoulder, Oliver’s breath hitched with panic at the stinging in his eyes.

“Someone get you?” Her touch to his throbbing jaw was tender, but it still made him flinch.

“It’s fine,” he rasped.

Lucetta tutted softly. “Have you asked?”

Jerkily, Oliver shook his head, biting his lip hard. “N-No.”

“We’ll go together.”

Feet heavy like someone had tied rubble to them, Oliver followed her into the cave, all the way to Nu. By the time they reached the Sentinel, he was shaking, his sweat cold, and grip on Tau tight enough to hurt both hands and chest. When he opened his mouth, the strangled, glottal noise that tumbled free made Lucetta look at him in concern.

Before anyone could say anything at all comprehensible, Nu walked past them—*away*. They were walking away from Tau without so much as a glance, gaudy cape fluttering soundlessly behind Them.

“That—ba-*bastard!*” Oliver sharply inhaled, the sound an awful keen.

Lucetta pulled him close and pressed a kiss to his temple.

“It’s okay.” She squeezed his shoulders. “We’ll get Nu to do what They need to. It’ll just take some convincing is all.”



If time passed, it did so in a blur. Oliver stared up, unseeing, at the ceiling. Like he had done for an eternity already. Since Nu's refusal to help, all he'd done was lie in bed, Tau beside him. Miners passed his hovel regularly, their distinct chatter and silhouettes slipping along the window and through the crack of the door. Lucetta had opened the curtains to allow a hint of light into his otherwise dark hovel.

She had taken up residency by the fireless hearth, while Maji occupied the old and decrepit chair that was hardly fit for sitting. They had brought him some tea, and told him they recovered the oval jewellery box, fetching them a month's worth of wages for one person alone.

"The geodes escaped though," said Maji, the chair creaking as she stood.

"Pavlov wants nothing to do with us right now," said Lucetta. "So we can probably forget about future prospects for a while."

Oliver said nothing.

"Nobody seems to have heard about what happened to Tau," added Maji, the chair creaking as she rose up to pace.

"At least we're not being held accountable for all the damage."

"Ugh. I just want to go back down there and demand answers," said Maji. "How does Pavlov think he can get away

with *whatever* they're doing inside those doors?"

"Nothing we can do about it." Lucetta sounded as defeated as Oliver felt.

It wasn't as if they had any proof at all, of anything. The doors vanished once Tau entered the portal, and never reappeared no matter how much Oliver had shouted at Pavlov to bring them back.

"I know, I know." Maji collapsed into his bed with an angry sigh. "It's just so frustrating."

Oliver glided a hand over Tau.

"Ben invited us up for dinner," said Lucetta, her boots scuffing the threadbare rugs on her way out. "You coming, Sticks?"

He curled further around the globe and didn't answer.

Maji left him with a pat on his hip, the door clicking shut after them. Oliver expected that to be it, for them to leave him alone, but some time later knocking on his door stirred him from his restless sleep.

"Hey."

Oliver didn't acknowledge Benjamin, who had already paid him several visits to bring him food. An entirely wasted effort when he wasn't hungry and hadn't touched a single dish.

"I know you're grieving, but this isn't healthy. You need fresh air and to...eat."

Benjamin must have spotted the plates that were still on the floor, some nibbled on by gnomes already. Oliver knew he hated wasting food, and the shame that burned in him made him curl over Tau more fiercely. He didn't need this.

“What the hell would you know about it?” Oliver spat without meaning to. Benjamin had said nothing, but he could guess the man didn't mind Tau being gone one bit.

“Plenty.”

Oliver snorted and turned to glare at the ceiling. “You've been stuck on Sam for how long?”

“You listen here, I know *exactly* how it feels to lose someone you love and I can tell you from first-hand experience that what you're doing is only hurting you.”

More shame, and Oliver tensed his jaw. He couldn't bring himself to apologise, even though he knew he ought to.

“You're right, you know,” said Benjamin after a moment, and the bed whined when he sat by his legs. “I had a lot of trouble moving on from Sam. Honestly, I don't think I ever did. I don't want you to fall into the same pit I have.”

“Sam isn't gone. Neither is Tau.” Oliver didn't know if he believed himself.

“I don't know that for sure. I saw him, but who's to say it was really Sam?”

When Oliver looked at him, Benjamin's stare was fixed on the door, his jaw tight and eyes filled with a hopelessness Oliver was all too familiar with.

“Don’t lose hope, Ben,” he found himself whispering. “They’re not gone. I know they’re not.” He didn’t know that at all and hated that he couldn’t convince himself otherwise. “All we need to do is teach Onyx to behave, and all I have to do is make Nu turn Tau back.” He needed to stop being so terrified and threaten Nu with more fire, for a start.

Benjamin turned to him, and Oliver looked away, knowing he was a mess, that he smelled, not having bathed or changed his clothes in far too long. He could barely get himself out of bed to go to the latrine.

“How about I try to talk to Sentinel Nu for you this time?”

At that, he sat up and cursed himself for the way his vision watered. “You’d do that for me?” And he cursed himself again for his voice breaking.

“Of course,” said Benjamin. “We all would. You just have to tell us when you need help. You can’t take everything on by yourself.”

A calloused hand cupped his neck, thumb stroking the side of his face, and all Oliver wanted to do was proclaim his love for Tau. He wanted to tell Benjamin how they had touched each other, that Tau felt the same way about him, how much he missed his Sentinel and how lost he felt without him. He opened his mouth, but all that came out was an awful cross between a gasp and a sob.

Without hesitancy, he was pulled into a tight, one-armed embrace. A kiss dropped to his forehead and those lips stayed there. For a moment, Oliver allowed himself to melt into

Benjamin's broad chest, desperate for the comfort his warmth provided.

"How about I clean up a bit while you eat?" Benjamin asked, chest rumbling against Oliver's ear. He didn't wait for an answer before pressing a kiss to the top of his head, then a bowl against Oliver's stomach.

He hadn't even seen him carry in any food. Tiredly, Oliver stirred the baked beans with a spoon, wincing at how it clanked against the bowl as Benjamin set to collect all the dishes he'd left on the floor.

"I can clean now, you know," Oliver mumbled.

"Along with other things," said Benjamin, almost casually. "I still owe you that dinner I promised. Before..."

Before he went off the track and risked everyone's safety.

Oliver didn't think he deserved Benjamin's kindness, didn't think he had the will to get out of bed either. He glanced at the globe, covered by his quilt. "You don't owe me anything."

"Well, I would like it if you came to dinner."

"I..." He couldn't say no, no matter how much he wanted to. "I'll come... Soon."

With the last of the dishes in his hands, Benjamin balanced the stack against his chest and made for the door, then turned back to regard him. "I know you're not in the mood to celebrate, but Sentinel's Day is tomorrow. It's going to be held in town. It'll be a once in a lifetime for us, I reckon. Join me for some fresh air?"

Oliver's mood soured further. "I'll think about it."

He didn't think about it, merely set the bowl to the floor, the beans untouched, and laid back down.

It took Lucetta coming to check on him the following day to get him out of bed.

"Up," she said, pulling him by the arms, out of bed. "I'm bathing you and then we're going to the surface."

Oliver moaned in misery, sliding, flopping to the floor. He refused to move.

"Word has it that there will be several Sentinels." She grabbed him by the ankles next, her grip tight, and Oliver moaned more miserably still.

"What, I can just fall in love with another one? No one can replace Tau."

"No, you pillock. If Nu won't help, maybe the others will."

Even as Lucetta dragged him across the floor and gave him rug burn, Oliver twisted around to face her with a startled look. He hadn't even considered that. He was up before he knew it, accompanying Lucetta to the hot springs in nothing but his long-johns and fretting about leaving Tau behind.

"He'll be fine." She motioned for him to join her.

He left his undergarment with Lucetta's clothes and followed into water that was forever too hot. The moment he submerged though, the tension across his shoulders eased somewhat. Full lips held a kind smile when Oliver came back up, and he

bounced on his toes after Lucetta. There were only two others in the hot springs, Gabe and his current fling by the looks of it.

The man's dark eyes followed him. Oliver refused to meet them. The memory of breaking Gabe's arm after thrusting his cock into his hand still plagued Oliver with mortification. He'd not even kissed Gabe. Refused it, in fact, wanting to get straight to it.

Once reaching Lucetta by the cascade, she worked shampoo into Oliver's hair with firm fingers. The scent was familiar to what he often smelled on her, although Oliver didn't know what it was other than sweet. She was stunning, refracted light dancing across dark, flawless skin. Her upper works were something to behold, too. Not that Oliver would ever say such a thing.

"Stop staring," she admonished, although didn't sound particularly upset.

"You've always been good to me," he mumbled, to which Lucetta snorted.

"Somebody has to be."

"I didn't think you liked me much when we first met." Not until he became cursed did Lucetta warm up to him. So much, it made Samuel's behaviour all the more frosty in comparison. They might have been related, but couldn't be more different. "Why?"

“You’re asking me why I’m nice to you?” asked Lucetta with incredulity.

“I’m asking why you and Sam are so different.” Why she was adamant about protecting someone with a curse, while Samuel had been all for pushing him out. “I know I’m not supposed to ask you about him.”

Lucetta sighed, lathering up a cloth with lavender soap to scrub him down. “My mom was cursed.”

Oliver jerked his attention off her breasts and to her face. “She was? What kind of curse?”

“Tell me what Nu did to you.”

He pressed his lips into a line, realising what she was doing.

“They...They lured me to Tau in the forest. Then...hurt me.”

If the information bothered Lucetta, she didn’t show it, her expression schooled into neutrality while she encouraged him to sit on the edge of the basin to work on his lower body.

“A curse of shared visions.”

“What, like foresight?”

Lucetta shook her head. “I’m not sure. She saw horrible things, and that was all she ever saw. How did Nu hurt you?”

Oliver looked at her, watched those chestnut eyes, intent on his body while she worked the cloth against his stomach and dug into his belly button with it. “Nu used branches to choke me. What things did she see?”

“Murders, mostly.” Her tone was painfully casual. “Some so grisly it made me question if kindness even existed.”

“You said it was shared?”

“Mhm.” She nudged him to turn around. “I could see what she saw by holding onto her whenever the attacks happened, and shared the burden that way.”

Facing Lucetta with his bare arse didn’t feel right at that moment, not that she gave him much choice. She was the only one bold enough to scrub him *everywhere*, and wasn’t shy about it either. At least she was thorough.

“And Sam...?”

“What else did Nu do to you?”

“Why is this so important?” He knew he should just tell her, knew what Nu had done to him didn’t compare to what Lucetta was finally divulging, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it.

“I need a reason why you endangered everyone. I know you,” Lucetta continued, pulling him back into the water and spinning him by the shoulder. She pinned Oliver down with a look he couldn’t break away from. “You were reacting. So, what did They do to you?”

Oliver felt trapped, and his mind wheeled back to Tau, all alone in his hovel. He wanted to crawl back into bed, but Lucetta was talking to him about the forbidden topic, he couldn’t just let that slide. Neither did he want to talk about

what had happened, and so he grasped at the first thing that sprang to mind.

“Tau has a pillock.”

The spluttering that followed was expected.

“Come again?”

Oliver lowered his eyes to her breasts again without meaning to. “He’s got a prick.”

“Wh—And you know this, *how?*”

Awkwardly, he pretended to embrace someone who wasn’t there. “Felt it.”

Lucetta continued to stare, dumbfounded. “What does that mean? Can he reproduce?”

Oliver shrugged. “He touched me all over. He got...he got hard for me.”

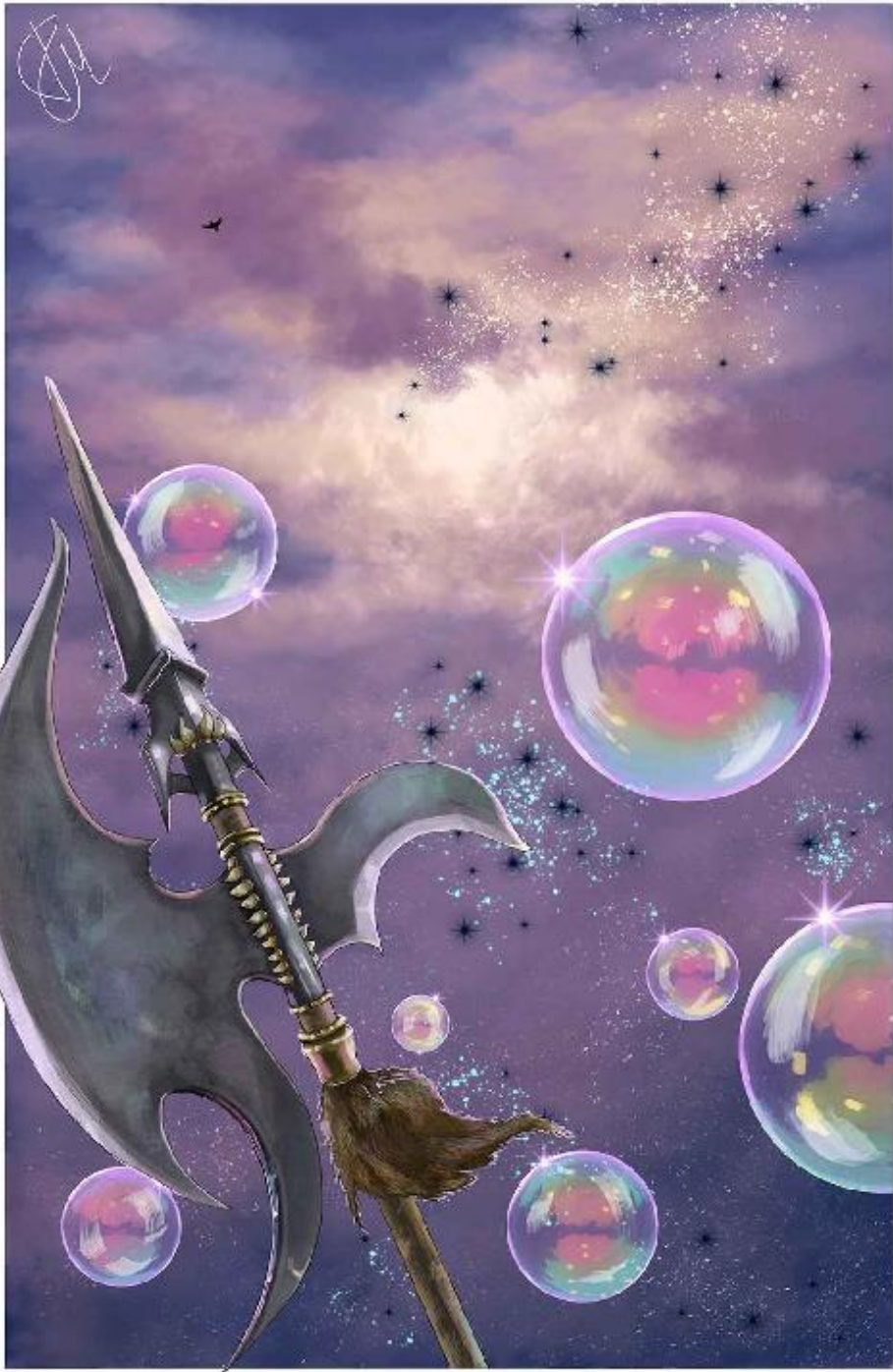
That stare turned into a gawk. “Wha—*When*—how—what—*how far did this go?*”

“Not—Not very.” And damn, did he regret putting a stop to it. “I think he was just curious about how I’m put together. But... But I kissed him. His mask, anyway.”

It took several moments for Lucetta to gather her composure. When she did, she prompted him to get under the cascade and rinse his hair.

“Are you going to tell me more about Sam?”

She scoffed, then splashed water at him. “Not how this works.”





Twenty-One



Besieged

For the first time ever, celebrations for Sentinels Day were held in Plainwall. Being so close to the Tesera Mine, safeguarding measures had been tripled since visitors often tried to sneak in. Guardsmen apprehended the lucky ones. The others sustained injuries from falling down a winze, or by touching Sentinel magic, something that remained prohibited to non-miners for good reason.

It was also the first time in five years Oliver had ever seen his friends in fine attire. He'd gotten the opportunity to watch Lucetta dress in a dashing ochre vest and trousers. Along with a mink stroller coat, the most feminine thing she owned, and almost as nice as the fur mantle. Even though Oliver was adamant that he wasn't attending the festival to celebrate, but to approach the Sentinels and ask for help, Lucetta made him borrow overalls, a shirt and a brown wool coat from her. On account his mackinaw was unsightly.

Walking up the adit to meet the others, Oliver adjusted Tau in his hold, now covered by the burgundy fabric Benjamin had

bought. Maji wore a lovely teal jumper and a long, white layered skirt. The orange shawl around her shoulders featured intricately embroidered flowers he had no hope of identifying. Like Lucetta, she wore her hobnail boots, there was no choice when they needed to walk through the mine and snow.

When Oliver caught sight of Benjamin, he let his gaze wander down the long, muscular body, then back up. The man sported a handsome black overcoat with grey fur trims and a well-fitted, light grey suit. He'd also taken the time to shine his hobnail boots. Benjamin looked... Well, he looked amazing. Oliver had to lick his lips, they'd suddenly gone dry.

"You're bringing..." Maji trailed off, glancing at the hefty orb in his arms.

"I'm going to ask the other Sentinels to help him," said Oliver. "Nu might be a stupid bastard and refuse to help, but the others won't be."

The trip to Plainwall wasn't as unpleasant as he'd expected it to be, optimism building the closer they got. Crossing the bridge, the noise of the waterfall and agitated river did little to drown out brass instruments rolling past the walls. The smell of fried cakes wafted along with it, causing Oliver's nose to curl. He still hadn't eaten, his stomach was far too empty to tolerate even the smell of food.

Once past the gate, an elaborately decorated archway drifted into view and beyond it, the market. Cleared of its usual vendors, the market churned with visitors from far and wide, while remaining stalls offered food and souvenirs. A staging

area dominated the very centre of the market, and a band in yellow uniforms played below, drums and trumpets blaring over excited chatter and laughter.

Magical lights dotted the entire place, varying in size, translucent with faint sheens of colour. Like soap bubbles, floating several feet above and keeping the snowfall at bay, bleeding soft pastel hues and warmth. Flower arrangements festooned stalls, tied with gold ribbons and scintillating lights that twinkled merrily.

None of it was Tau's magic. Oliver wasn't sure why he had expected to see any. His heart dropped with the realisation that he still carried what might very well be his love's corpse.

What little optimism had built crumbled away, and he glowered at the magic. Absolute bastards, the lot of them. Why did he have to approach the Sentinels? Why couldn't they come to help Tau? Did nobody *care*?

"Come on." Maji encouraged him to move forward with a hand on his elbow.

Guardsmen stood sentry around the borders of the square in their full dress uniforms. White ruff collars, puffy sleeves and gold trims embellished their navy tunics. Their breeches and boot covers a dark red, comb morions sporting plumes of bright red feathers, and rifles slung across their backs.

"They went all out," said Lucetta.

"This is so exciting." Maji jumped up and down, trying to see past the boscage of visitors. "I've never been able to attend

a Sentinel gathering before! How many do you think will show?"

Benjamin shrugged. "Always a surprise, from what I know."

Through a crowd, they made for the staging area. The festivities had begun early in the morning and were well on their way. The air was sickly sweet, everything was loud and merry, and Oliver's mood turned bilious. He snorted and scoffed at the souvenirs on offer, some of which were masks fashioned to look like Sentinels, including Tau's.

"Not allowed to touch them but we can wear their faces. That makes sense," he grumbled.

Benjamin patted him on the shoulder and when Oliver glowered up at him, that pat turned into a one-armed embrace.

The stage was just as heavily decorated with flowers and lights, with more guardsmen encircling. Two massive figures stood above the rest, the sharp points of their halberds glinting dangerously in the lights. They were Ursidae, and Oliver started when Maji walked up to them as though she knew them.

"Maji!" he called, but she ignored him, forcing Oliver to slip out from under Benjamin's arm and follow.

"Hi Fred, hi Ed," said Maji brightly.

The two bear-like beings stared down their long noses at her, looking ready to finish her off in one gulp.

"Oh, hi there, tiny human," said one of them, baring his teeth—a smile, Oliver realised.

“Hennessey isn’t available right now, but I can take a message?” said the other Ursidae.

“No, thank you,” said Maji. “I just wanted to say hi, see how you two are doing.”

“Oh! Well, that’s really nice. Isn’t it, Fred?”

“Sure is, Ed. It’s rare that people ask us how we’re doing. We’re alright. You know, guard duty. It never ends.”

“But it’s a living, innit? We like it, it’s alright,” said Ed. “Can’t wait to meet the Sentinels again. Last time I got two whole insults in before they took a swing at me.” Another awful grin, yellowed teeth bared. “This time, I’m aiming for three.”

“Yeah, that was good fun!” Fred roared. It took Oliver a moment to recognise it as laughter. He cast a questioning look at Benjamin, but he only smiled down at him.

“I guess you don’t like Sentinels much?” Maji didn’t sound surprised.

It made sense, when it was the Sentinels who pushed the Ursidae back into their realm to put an end to the war that raged between them and humans for a year. The Ursidae had not taken kindly to strangers visiting their world.

“Can’t stand ’em. Bunch of show-offs,” said Fred.

“Think they’re so strong. Well, I’ll tell you, if we were your guards, you wouldn’t have lost over fifty of your people.” Ed sounded confident, and Oliver wanted to box him around his big bald head.

Maji visibly bristled at the claim but was too polite to argue. Instead of saying anything to refute it, she opted to say goodbye. Oliver wasn't going to let them get away with that though, and he opened his mouth, ready to fire off several insults, but Benjamin was quick to pull him close and steered him away.

“Bye, tiny human,” said Fred.

“It was nice seeing you again,” Ed called over the crowd as they moved away.

“Do they seriously think they could've stopped the Wandering Horror?” Oliver snarled.

“Nobody but Tau could have, that was proven.” Lucetta soothingly combed her fingers through his hair. It didn't help ease his agitation in the slightest.

As a group, they squirmed past others to where they could watch the event from a comfortable distance. The band's upbeat timbre of honks and braying came to an end, and Mister Pavlov jumped on stage with bouncing eagerness. He approached a microphone at its centre with one arm extended, the other wrapped against his abdomen in a sling. He looked daft, dressed in a blue suit, the long cape a bright yellow that flapped wildly with every exaggerated movement.

His usual flamboyancy was back, his welcome equally showy while people continued to crowd the stage. Pavlov's expression was that of absolute delight, looking out across the sea of faces, no doubt pleased to see the press at the front, reporting on his ability to host.

It had further anger stirring in Oliver's chest, his fingers twitching against the fabric covering Tau. Maybe he should get Pavlov to undo whatever happened to Tau inside that portal instead. He could make him, it would only take a firm slap to the head. Mining career be damned.

“Welcome, my esteemed miners and welcome, talented journalists, professionals and all other gentlefolk!” Pavlov's voice boomed across the market. “I am pleased you've come to help me honour our Sentinels on this glorious day, as we have done across the globe for over eighty years! We have recently suffered a terrible loss, but such is the life of a Miner of the Mystics! We know the dangers, the risks. Regardless of the cost, we uncover the unknown for the betterment of humanity!”

Lucetta scoffed. “We? You sit in your mansion and bleat about your wife, while she runs experiments. *I've* never seen her in person before.”

“Neither have I,” said Benjamin.

Maji's expression turned fretful. “Why did she only meet with us, then?”

“Maybe she wanted us for her experiments,” said Oliver, lips pressed in a stern line.

“Don't even joke about that,” snapped Maji.

“I'm not joking.”

“You don't know for sure it's her you saw,” Benjamin reminded them with a sideways glance.

“You’re kidding, right? You heard what that milky cluck said after Tau—” Oliver ground his outburst to a halt when he felt a sob ready to choke him. He glared back at the stage, grinding his teeth against the sting in his eyes.

“Science has improved our lives in such marvellous ways, but nothing compares to the magical discoveries we’ve made! Miners all over the world toil endlessly to bring you other improvements. We have new worlds to explore, we have enriched ourselves with otherworldly beings, their foods, cultures, and medicines! We have *magic* at our disposal!

“And none of this would be possible without our most godly Sentinels! For a century they have blessed us with their might and guidance, all out of the goodness of their hearts! It is thanks to Sentinels our world has opened up to what would otherwise be unfathomable. Gentlefolk, it is my sublime honour to present to you, the Sentinels!”

Pavlov took a dramatic bow, bending so low it was a surprise his slacks hadn’t split across his arse. A hush fell over the crowd.

Nothing happened. Worry swarmed Oliver’s gut. Had none decided to show, after all?

The crowd became restless, sounds of disappointment and indignation carrying along the faint breeze. When suddenly, the air turned electric. The atmosphere moiled. Oliver’s hair stood on end as crackling sundered the air and a fierce hum vibrated his head, quaking his vision.

Several onlookers gasped, some screamed, and infants wailed when lightning cracked on stage, bolt after bolt clapping with teeth-shattering volume. Black smoke erupted, shrouding the surrounding lights, casting shadows that were broken by roaring fires pluming behind Pavlov. The man jumped at the intensity of it all and stepped back several paces.

When the smoke, flames, and lightning settled at last, a staggering twenty Sentinels lined the stage. The omnipotent energy ruptured the air like a thunderstorm, unnerving and uncomfortable.

Oliver recognised most of them: Theta, in Their distinctive gold armour and cape of flames. Sentinel Sigma too, protected by coruscant black armour, the cape of gloomy clouds with silver linings. Rho, who looked like a tall knight in stone armour, and Kappa, with long stilted legs, body of volcanic rock, and stippled by eye-like protrusions glowing and churning like lava. Each of them looked imposing at best, sinister at worst, with their faceless helmets and masks. And of course, there was Nu to the far left, the most hideous of them all.

A roar of cheers and applause followed once people overcame their shock. Those around Oliver and his friends crowded in on them to get closer to the stage. A few people jumped up and down with shrill cries, many of them wept, begging the Sentinels to heal their ailments, cure their children, or touch their hands. Others tried to climb the stage, swiftly subdued by guardsmen.

Fred and Ed took no issue using their halberds to curtail the attempts. Although violence and drawing blood didn't appear to be a problem, they at least refrained from outright murdering people.

The crowd's reaction was a fierce reminder to Oliver of how lucky they were. Sentinels could heal things in ways humans and most other magical entities could only dream of. There was a reason every miner was fit as a fiddle. Sentinels could bring living beings back from the brink of death and possessed some of the most intense and beautiful magic of any world uncovered. It was of little surprise that they were held in such high regard, that any ordinary human would want to touch them, kiss their feet like royalty, and praise them like deities.

"Look at those idiots," said Lucetta, pointing to a group of people further away. There was a hint of amusement in her tone.

It was the Antisents, so furiously against Sentinels that they were brazen enough to throw things. Tomatoes, cabbages and apples, all effortlessly deflected. It was impossible to tell by which Sentinel, since none of them moved in the slightest.

"What a waste of food," groused Benjamin. "We're starving and they're throwing perfectly good produce—ah, there they go."

Guardsmen knocked the rancorous group away with the butts of their rifles, one of them threatening to shoot. Oliver's attention returned to the Sentinels to gauge their reactions but,

naturally, there were none. They only stood there, reminding everyone that they were untouchable.

“Thank you, thank you,” Pavlov simpered into the microphone over the boisterous crowd. “Our Sentinels are our gods and we shall forever be in their debt! Now, I would graciously like to present to you our most fortunate of miners. They have come all this way to tell their tales of adventure and hope to inspire young women, men, and anyone in between to join us in what can be a most lucrative career!”

Oliver edged through the crowd, trying to get closer to the stage, but both people and guards blocked his path entirely. He pushed his way through, closely followed by his friends, and used enough force to knock people out of his way, their startled cries lost against those they crashed into.

“Sticks, calm down,” Lucetta uttered over his shoulder.

“I need to get to them!” he snapped, kicking someone out of the way with a foot.

He reached the side of the stage, still too far, although he caught movement from one Sentinel—Mu, their mirror-like armour reflected all the pastel lights. The shimmering of the fabric clinging to their shoulders and waist rippled like water. They had turned Their head in his direction. The other Sentinels shortly followed. All twenty were looking at him, or maybe they sensed Tau.

Did that mean Tau was alive, if there was something to sense? Oliver’s heart raced with hope. He lifted the globe above his head, the fabric veiling half his view.

“Please, please, *please*,” he whispered hoarsely. “Help him!”

He was attracting the attention of those around him, but Oliver’s focus was fixed on the Sentinels as he willed them to help. The moments slipped by, his arms quivered from the strain as he watched, hoped, silently pleaded with them. But all they did was look away in unison. Like he didn’t exist, like Tau meant nothing to them.

Benjamin’s arm came around him again as he lowered his, holding the globe close. Oliver shook his head, then squirmed out of the hold to get away.

“Sticky, don’t go,” Maji pleaded.

“Over fifty years he’s been the Sentinel here, and no one could say just one thing?” His voice cracked, he couldn’t look at his friends. “They can all go to hell. I’m going to Marcy’s.”

For a place that barely passed as a town, it was easy to get lost. All those damn alleyways looked the same, the only difference being that one roof leaked more water down his neck than the other. The warmth of the market reached far, all the way to Marcy’s when he finally found it. He pushed through what he realised was the back door and walked down a narrow hallway that opened into the inn.

It was nearly dead, with only two Evainne seated at a table by the paned windows. They turned their heads towards him, their lambent white hair flowing like wisps of smoke around them, eyes vibrant swirls of green and orange.

“Hi, Oliver!” Marcy was behind the counter, stunning in her deep pink day dress, with white collars and a bow at the front.

His vision blurred at the sight of her. Something in him finally snapped. Oliver stood there, gasping for breath, unable to control the flow of tears that spilt. Marcy scurried to embrace him from the side, but all it did was wrench further cries from him.

Twice now he’d done this in front of her. The first time, he had to tell her about his curse when she asked him to carry pitchers of ale. Rather than flee, she had been kind, even sympathised.

Much like now, as she guided him to their preferred table in the back, encouraging him to sit. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I love him, Marcy.” His voice was claggy with tears that had yet to stop falling. He set Tau down next to him on the bench and wiped his face with both hands, a pointless effort. “I love him so much it’s ripping me to shreds. I don’t know what to do.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Marcy cooed, sitting down across from him. She reached out and clasped his hands, her own so much softer. “It’s a wonderful thing, to love someone so dearly.”

Oliver pulled off the fabric to reveal the green globe. “Not when he’s dead!”

Marcy’s hazel eyes flicked from the globe to his face and back. “That’s...not Benji, is it?”

“No! Why would it be?” he bellowed, then sniffed. “I’m—I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine, don’t fret.”

“It’s—” Oliver wiped his face again, then cast a quick look at the two Evainne. They were clearly eavesdropping, so he lowered his voice to barely a thick whisper. “*Tau.*”

“*Oh!*” Marcy stared at the globe. “Oh. But of course you do. I—He’s dead?”

Oliver too glanced back at Tau. “I don’t know, but he’s no good to me as a giant marble!”

“I see we need a drink,” said Marcy.

“I don’t have any money.”

Never any money, always on the nut, forever indebted to others. Was there any point in *anything* any longer?

“Don’t worry about that.” She gave him an encouraging smile. “I’ll be right back.”

And she was, with two pitchers of Cosmic Ale and a straw. Briefly, Oliver thought about telling her that the mantle neutralised the unpredictability of his curse, but decided not to waste any time.

“Oh my,” murmured Marcy while he grabbed a pitcher and greedily drank straight from it. “Benji said you could pack them away.”

He was soon on the second, and his vision was blessedly blurry from something other than tears. By that time, Marcy

had left to serve new arrivals. He watched her with his head resting on the table. The marred wood was cold and hard under his cheek. Shakily, he inhaled, turning his unfocused gaze to the glimmering violet drink inches from his face. He had less than a few gulps left.

“Still drenched in misery, Breadstick.” A croak of a voice.

Without lifting his head, Oliver glared at the mushroom man now standing by his table.

“Shove it...up your trill and...swirl it around,” he slurred. “Why...why is everyone so obsessed with how miserable I am? I’m...so miserable I want to die. Does...does that help?”

“Not me it doesn’t,” said the fungus, inviting himself to sit across from him, though he barely fit, thick as he was.

Oliver’s eyes were ready to roll into the back of his skull. He wanted to finish his drink and sleep until dead. “Wha–What do you want?”

“Came to gloat.”

He responded by slamming his hand on the table, ignored the ache in his knuckles, and stuck the middle finger up. “Get swived.”

“Isn’t that what happened to your Guardian?”

Oliver jumped to his feet and banged his knee on the underside of the table. He swore, awkwardly shimmied out, and stood swaying with a fist raised.

“I could just kill you.”

“An unpredictable strength like none other,” the fungus sneered.

“Wait... How...do you know?” Hell, he was dizzy. Standing upright was proving difficult.

“Earl!” Marcy snapped, coming to stand beside Oliver. She put a calming hand on his shoulder and he lowered his fist. “Stop winding up my customers.”

“Not...really a customer if I...I can’t pay you,” Oliver mumbled.

“Merely asking what he thought of my cordyceps.” Earl sneered. “More powerful than a Guardian’s, my magic is. I warned her, she wouldn’t believe me. So I proved it.”

Oliver’s head lolled as he looked at Marcy in confusion. She shook her head in equal bewilderment.

“...Wait.” He turned back to Earl, and his vision spun so much, he had to steady himself by planting both hands on the table. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried his damndest to focus. Magic. Stronger than a Guardian—Tau, he had to be talking about Tau. Gordyceps. ...*Gordyceps*.

“What’s a gordyceps?”

Earl made an odd croaking sound and squirmed to stand. He wasn’t much taller, putting Oliver at level with the two white bulbous eyeballs.

Ugh.

“Something that might help,” said Earl and he grabbed a basket off the bench, quaintly woven and filled with an assortment of mushrooms, from thin and glowing to round, yellow and squeaky. “For the right price, I may consider selling—”

“You are not selling him anything, Earl,” Marcy admonished. “Our business is done here, my chef thanks you, now out with you.”

Earl squawked indignantly, and a mushroom on his textured arm hissed with a spray of pink. Marcy covered her face with a rag and waved at the dust with her free hand while it enveloped Earl entirely.

“Don’t breathe that in,” she said, furiously waving what looked a lot like spores away.

Oliver held his breath. Only once the plume of pink dissipated to reveal Earl gone did he dare breathe again, wheezing when he did.

“What a prick,” he mumbled, his knee colliding with the bench before he managed to sit down again.

“He’s... Well yes, a prick,” Marcy conceded. “Unfortunately, he sells specialised mushrooms my chef enjoys using that are difficult to find elsewhere.”

Oliver quickly downed what little remained of his drink and mournfully sighed. “All gone.”

“Did you—did you want more?” asked Marcy. “I wasn’t expecting you to drink so quickly.”

“Sorry.”

He leaned back to stare at the low ceiling, knocking the base of his skull against the backrest. He grimaced. What he wanted was to have Tau back, and to go out there and find his friends.

“I’m a shit-stain of a friend.”

“What makes you say that?” Marcy’s warmth pooled over him as she sat down beside him.

“Luce, Maji, and Ben, they’re always there for me. I can never be there for them, I’m... I’m useless.”

“I’m quite sure that’s not true.”

“Is love supposed to hurt this much?” Oliver lifted his head to look into hazel eyes.

Marcy considered her answer, the response building inside her mouth with care. “Losing someone always feels like a piece of you has been torn out. I’ve lost people before, of course, although I’m not sure I can compare my losses to your case. You’ve certainly picked an interesting one to fall in love with.”

“I didn’t...pick him to fall in love with,” said Oliver. “I don’t think he picked me. We just...” He held up his hands and interlocked his fingers.

That made Marcy smile, for one reason or another. “That’s how it goes, with true love.”

“True love,” Oliver echoed. That somehow didn’t seem adequate. What he had for Tau was stronger, although he

didn't know what could possibly be stronger than true love.

“Where are Benji, Lucetta, and Maji, anyway?” asked Marcy.

“I left them...at the market,” he muttered and rolled Tau into the burgundy fabric. “I should go find them.”

“Are you fit to walk?”

With a nod that left him dizzy, he slid off the bench after Marcy, then tied both ends of the fabric together to create a sling, easing it over his shoulder. Tau pressed painfully against his hip.

Oliver swiftly pulled Marcy into an embrace. “Thank you, Marce.”

She was tense under his hold. He'd not told her about the mantle, Oliver realised. Marcy smiled hesitantly before he stumbled out the back door.

His vision was swimming. He reached out to nearby walls for support while he staggered around, accidentally knocking Tau into a crate. Oliver gasped, horrified, and uttered a series of apologies even while he searched for the market on unsteady feet. If finding his way to the Crowded Foxhole had been difficult sober, the way back to the market was nearly impossible to find. He managed to do so only by following a group less ossified than him to the overly decorated archway.

It occurred to him that finding his friends in an ocean of people was going to be an impossible task. Oliver abruptly stopped, stumbling forward when someone knocked into his

back and swore at him. He flicked his middle finger up at them.

“Sticky!”

He looked closer to the ground for Maji.

“Up!”

Oliver tilted his head up and released an odd noise, a cross between a sob and laughter. Maji sat atop Benjamin’s shoulder, furiously waving at him, with Lucetta trailing after the two, holding four sticks of something. He hurried towards them, pushing someone out of the way to do so, and cinched Benjamin’s midriff with an embrace. As muscular arms came around him, he nuzzled the soft fur collar of the beautiful coat.

“Hey,” Benjamin said throatily.

“I told you we’d find him like this,” said Lucetta.

“Fine, you were right,” groused Maji. “Let me down now.”

It didn’t seem like Benjamin was listening, Oliver’s chin resting on his chest, Maji’s boot-clad feet on either side of his head. Oliver had yet to ease his hold, although it didn’t seem like Benjamin minded, especially when he stroked a thumb across his cheek. Oliver’s lower lip trembled.

“I’m sorry about Sam,” he croaked, finally understanding the pain Benjamin had to be enduring every single day since losing his husband. “I’m... I’m so sorry.”

“You’re drunk.” Benjamin’s eyes were bright, the reproaching words dulled by the crack behind them.

Oliver mumbled that he only had a couple of drinks into the coat, and clung on even when Lucetta nudged his shoulder.

“You should really eat something,” she said, holding out what had to be a whole, battered and deep-fried pickle. It dripped with grease. “This was all we could afford.”

All the same, Oliver released Benjamin to grab the offering, while Maji grumbled her complaints about finally being lowered to the ground, and took an immediate bite out of hers.

“Ugh, it’s disgusting!” she said, making retching noises.

“Better than scraping tomatoes and cabbages off the ground by the stage,” said Lucetta.

“Don’t tempt me,” Benjamin grumbled. “Awful waste.”

Oliver inhaled his with little thought. With his focus on food, it took him a moment before he heard repeated *pops* among excited chatter and music. Only when Lucetta swore and pointed up with her fried pickle did he pay attention.

In the purple-tinted sky past the many decorations, circles that resembled mirrors spotted the breadth of his view, all reflecting odd images. It took Oliver yet another while to realise just what they were.

A flock of birds came swooping down. Hundreds of black canaries, all having left portals in their wake. The murmuration turned, the flapping of wings and twittering loud even over the clamour of people. They disappeared through the portals shortly after, which closed behind them with another chorus of *pops*.

“You think Onyx is with them?” Oliver wondered.

The birds returned. As they swooped past, through several of the portals black slick slopped to the ground below, coating stalls and onlookers. The puddles of the tar-like fluid bubbled up, took bulging shapes.

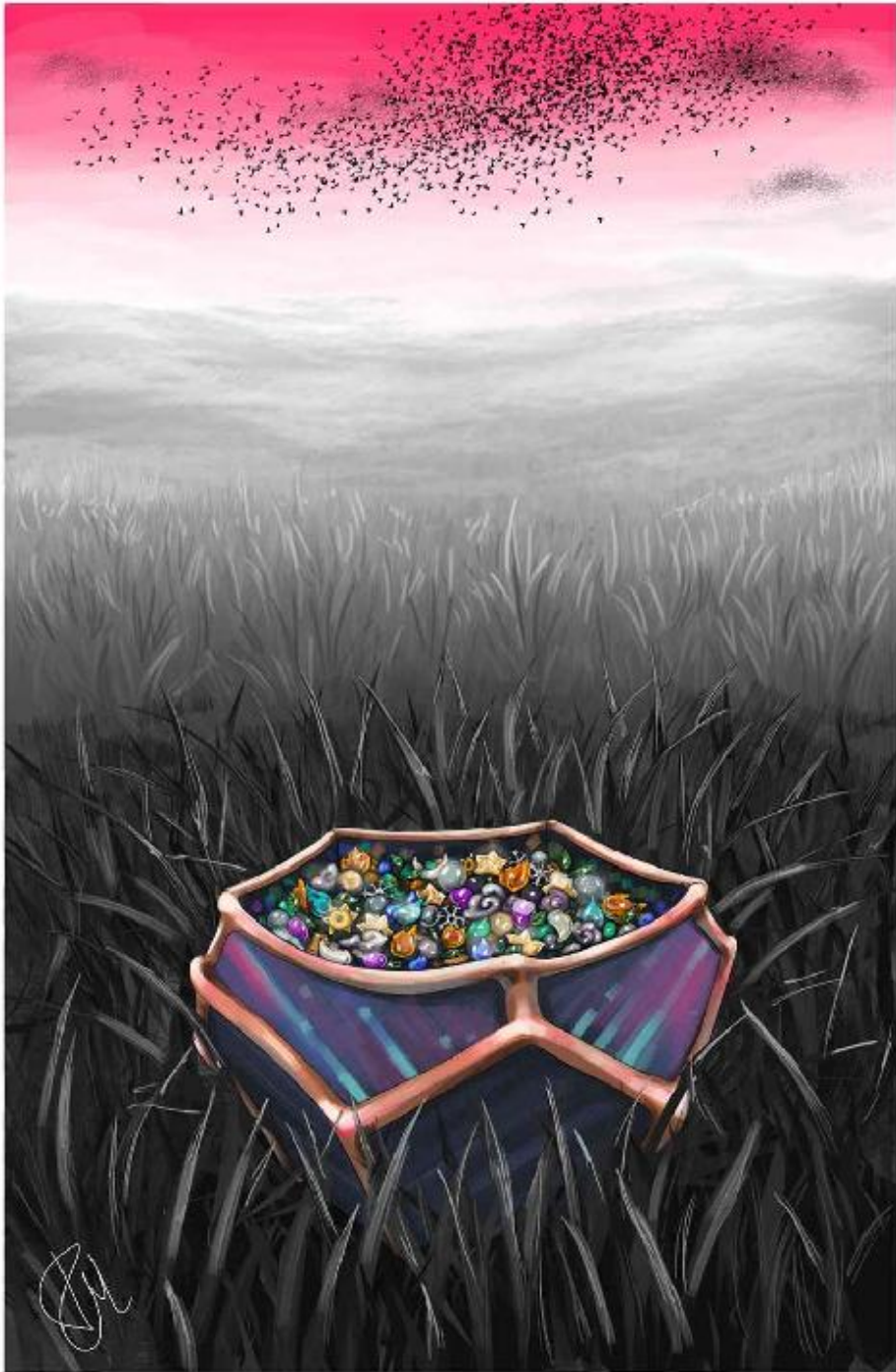
“Holy—RUN!” Benjamin bellowed. “Everyone GET OUT OF HERE!”

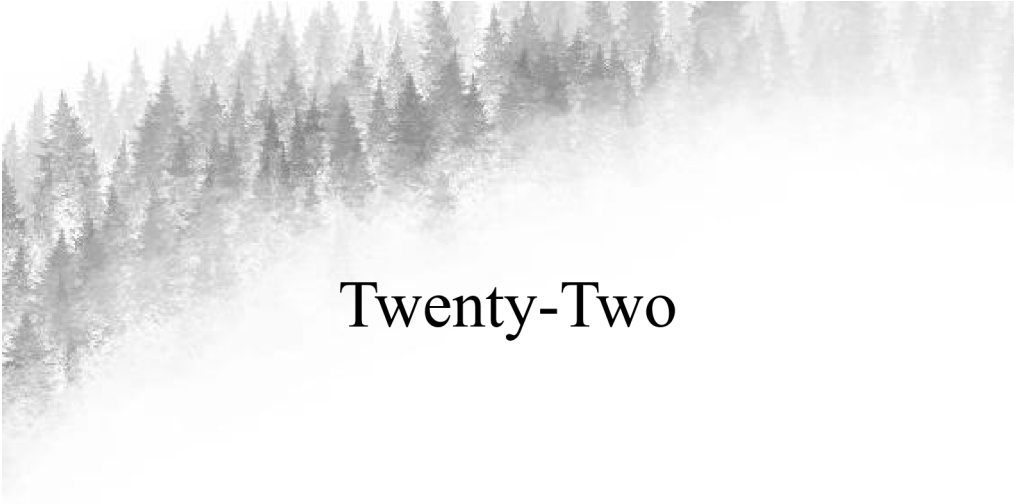
Oliver stumbled when dragged by his scruff, spun around and ran, his friends a few paces ahead. They dashed through the horde of panicked people trying to do the same. Screams of terror pierced the sky, blood scattered over them like a downpour. Limbs and entrails slung through the air. Stalked legs covered in teeth slammed into those around them, their bodies expanding, filled with black ooze to the point of eruption.

The wet explosion and splatter of blood wrenched a horrified whimper out of Oliver. He ran as fast as he could, but Tau was heavy—they reached the end of the market. Oliver chanced a look behind him.

The Horrors were everywhere. Like giant spiders above the dwindling crowd, shrouded by misting blood. Black canaries frantically flew over them, appearing and disappearing through their portals, bringing with them more of the monstrosities. An arc of thick ooze aimed for them, whipping through the air. Oliver cried out, whirled to shove Lucetta out of the way.

He didn't see where she landed as blackness engulfed him.





Twenty-Two



Convalescent

Thanks to the juice in his system, Oliver was content to float along, surrounded by darkness. Tau had come loose from the makeshift satchel and he kept him close, unsure of what was happening, or if he was still alive. There was nothing to see, though it was warm, smelly, and damp and he thought he might be inside another Wandering Horror.

Years ago as a boy, Oliver and his childhood friends would take turns climbing into a barrel and roll down a steep hill. It had never been fun, painful more than anything, but it was the distinct sense of spinning that stuck with him. It was similar now, the only difference being that he was sloshed and almost definitely not in a barrel. More like a whirlpool of goop that somehow didn't suffocate him.

Whatever kept him contained released him without warning. Oliver fell atop Tau with a strangled "oof!" into tall grass. Heaving from the impact, he slid sideways off the globe and stared up at an oddly coloured sky. Not quite pink, not quite

orange. It was pretty. He hoisted himself to his feet and peered over the tips of grey sedge.

He didn't know where he was. No longer in Plainwall, that much was obvious. Not to mention there were several Wandering Horrors scattered about.

Something running up behind him had Oliver diving back into the grass. A Wandering Horror rushed directly overhead, its many legs swift on either side, sending grass and the short curls of his hair ruffling in the wind of its haste. When he stood back up, it occurred to Oliver that he should probably be scared, but he wasn't.

Another Horror ran past, grass hissing, and ignored him even though he hadn't bothered to hide this time.

He stumbled about, Tau back in his arms, not knowing where he was going. The odd sky melted into a snowy white towards the horizon, the long and speckled black clouds ever-changing. Murmurations.

There didn't appear to be a sun. Most of the light came from various portals opening and closing in the air, far out of reach, with birds popping in and out. One minute his shadow was to his left, the next it spread around him, then before him. It was dizzying.

Grey grasslands stretched as far as he could see, dotted with dark flowers. Upon closer inspection, Oliver thought the flowers looked similar to the one Benjamin used to keep in the quartz vase.

It dawned on him that he knew this place.

This was where Onyx opened a portal to. Which meant that the hut, and Samuel, would be here somewhere. That maybe, *hopefully*, this wasn't some kind of memory. Oliver quickened his pace, observing the Horrors with interest while ascending a gently sloping hill. They all dropped or scooped up various objects, splashing back and forth through the round portals.

Every once in a while, he tripped over something hidden in the tall grass. He'd stumbled over a broadsword, a chicken carcass, and accidentally stepped on a slender doll made of a smooth material he'd never seen before. It had a very peculiar look to it, with a revealing black and white outfit.

Although a great many peculiar things littered the ground, Oliver chose not to touch anything. This place was ablaze with magical energy, and he had no desire to turn into a puddle of skin. When he stubbed his toes on a strangely angled bowl that contained colourful gemstones though, he couldn't resist.

"I'll have some of that," he said, eagerly grabbing a handful of tiny flames and droplets and stars, stowing them in his pocket. "Finders keepers, right Tau?"

The Horrors continued to ignore him, whether they ran past or overhead. They were loud, their fluid legs slapping through grass with every rapid step. Objects continued to *clink* and *crash*, hitting the ground when expelled from their bellies, the air brimming with constant *pops* and the intense buzz of magic. It was loud, unsettling. Seemingly endless.

Oliver crested the hill and gasped.

There in the distance was a shabby hut. His heart leapt with joy, a burst of excitement pushing him forward. Benjamin would be so happy if he brought Samuel back to him. Assuming he could find a way out of whatever this place was.

“Sam!” he shouted, reaching uneven steps leading to the door. He knocked, it was only polite. “You in here?”

No answer.

Oliver shouldered open the door and peered inside. The hut was vacant. There was little to observe inside: only a rickety table and chair, a firepit in the centre and a makeshift bed in the furthest corner made of dried grass, sporting a little pillow. Etchings adorned the log walls—there was an attempt at counting the days, he thought. Oliver wondered why Samuel hadn’t looked around for actual furniture. The cryptids were dropping just about everything into this realm. He’d even spotted a big yellow bus further away.

He closed the door and set Tau down on the straw bed. Flexing his aching shoulders, his attention drifted to the pillow.

Lumpy, poorly stitched. Red flowers on pink.

“That *dick!*” With a scoff, Oliver stuffed it down the front of his overalls.

He approached one of the windows, below which stood a drying rack with bits of what might be birds, maybe rats. He didn’t know and didn’t especially care when he eased one of

the tiny bodies off the stick and gave it a careful nibble. It wasn't very good, but Oliver took a bigger bite anyway.

Hm, bird. Unless it was a rat.

Unconcerned, he glanced out the window, wondering if those gooey monsters ever slept. It was so noisy. If Samuel was still sane after surviving here for so long, it would be a miracle.

His gaze wandered the many portals that opened, several of them leading into nothing more than stone. While watching them, he realised he was also watching something else, off in the distance. It was massive, a bit like a mountain. It took him several moments longer to comprehend what he saw.

He was looking at the behemoth.

Oliver swore under his breath. He dropped the poorly dried meat in his haste to get Tau. With the globe back in his arms, he lowered against the wall under the window.

Heavy breaths raked the air, raspy and chilling. The behemoth's footfalls were like a stampede, accompanied by disturbing sounds of squelching as it drew near. Unable to help it, Oliver got to his knees and peeked out the window again.

He'd forgotten just how big the demon was. Or maybe it had grown since seeing it the first time. Maji said it was a mountain, but compared to her, everything was. The behemoth soared over the Wandering Horrors, waving its gigantic fists. It snatched them up, swung them through the air until they were thick strings of slime that the behemoth flogged itself across

the back with. Thick globules slithered along its back, adding to skin of decay and solidifying, becoming part of it.

“COME OUT,” shouted the cacophony of voices. *“YOU CANNOT HIDE DESPITE YOUR INSIGNIFICANCE, HUMAN.”*

The behemoth was only a short distance away from the hut, and Oliver thought now was a good time to feel some fear—and by Sentinels, did he ever. He clutched Tau more closely to his chest and pressed his lips to the smooth surface.

“I love you,” he uttered. Maybe in whatever life awaited this one, he could search for Tau and they could be together.

“COME OUT!”

Oliver swore. He didn't want to be courageous while facing his demise. He preferred to hide, die like a coward. All the same, he summoned the willpower to get to his feet. The floorboards creaked under him, the sound somehow atrociously loud. He hopped down the rickety steps, rounding the hut shortly after to face the behemoth.

It truly was a mountain, undoubtedly larger than before. He stood close to the foot of the grotesque being and glared up. Now that he was out here, he wanted to say something bold. When he opened his mouth though, all that came out was a squeak.

“LIGHT OF DAY DID NOT MAKE IT.” The multifarious voices thundered through the sky, shaking the earth beneath Oliver's feet.

“He's fine, mind your own business!”

There was his voice. Shame it would get him killed.

The behemoth laughed. Oliver could hear laughter anyway, among the wails of terror and despondency. He clenched his teeth against the pain in his ears.

“I WILL ALLEVIATE.” They snatched up a nearby Horror and swung it.

There was no time to run. Oliver stood his ground, bent over Tau to shield him. The body of the monstrosity collided with such force, he might have lost consciousness for a spell, ungodly pain hammering his skull. He crashed to his knees. Tau slipped from his grasp in the deluge of blackness as he choked on viscous fluid.

Something moved across his back, bored into his skin, crawling under it. He yelped, reached behind him to scratch at it as the last splashes of black disappeared. Oliver forced his eyes open, searching for Tau.

Among flattened grass before him, the emerald globe was now only a solid, abyssal sphere.

Lifeless.

Oliver clawed at his aching chest, loss running him through like a blade. He cried out, crawled towards the globe, reaching for Tau with violently trembling hands when a sudden spark flared up inside the globe.

The glimmer turned bright and beautiful and with it came a fraction of hope. Oliver inhaled sharply from his heartbroken

howl, the spark forming into a flaring light, and that fraction of hope became whole.

He lowered his arms from shielding his eyes, whimpering, unsure if he could trust what he saw. His head was throbbing and vision blurry with tears, but his Sentinel stood where the dark globe had been.

It had to be him, even though Tau looked different. His robes were no longer the pristine white Oliver had come to love, and the armour appeared black. He got back to his feet, unsteady as his skin crawled still, and approached Tau from behind to reach out and touch him on the elbow.

Tau inclined his head.

Oliver gasped around a sob, grabbed at the robes, stopping short of pressing his face against the soft, dark fabric.

“Should have withheld.”

His breath caught. Tau sounded so annoyed, but his voice floated all around him, blocking out everything else. It was encompassing. Impossible to describe, yet it sounded so unequivocally like him. The most beautiful of melodies, it made his head spin and heart dance.

“UNGRATEFUL,” bellowed the behemoth, rudely jolting Oliver out of his happiness. *“WILLING TO SPEAK?”*

Tau said nothing.

“I AM EMERGENCE, THE ORIGINAL. I AM THE ONE WHO BEGOT THOSE YOU CALL ELDERS.”

“Explain?” said Tau.

“I LEFT TO ENTER THE HUMAN REALM AND NOW, LIKE YOU, I CANNOT RETURN. I HAVE MADE MISTAKES. MISCALCULATED.”

Tau remained silent. A pang of sadness jabbed Oliver’s heart. It wasn’t his own. He didn’t understand any of it, but placed a hand on Tau’s elbow again, wishing to console without overstepping.

“Mistakes?” Tau asked after a while.

“MISTAKES BORN OF ARROGANCE. THEY CARE ONLY FOR KNOWLEDGE, YET DO NOT POSSESS THE ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND. I CANNOT STOP THEM. THE DOOR WILL NOT APPEAR FOR ME.”

“What’s so bad about wanting knowledge?” whispered Oliver. Tau didn’t answer him, only extended an arm as though to shield him.

“Explain.”

“HAVE YOU NOT ONCE STOPPED TO ASK WHAT THE PURPOSE OF YOUR ROLE IS?” Emergence shifted. Carrion rolled down their massive shoulders, crashing to the ground in explosions of decay. *“WHY YOU ARE MADE TO TRANSPORT THE CREATURES UNCOVERED?”*

Tau paused. *“No.”*

Oliver bit his tongue, certain he shouldn’t interrupt the conversation again.

“I TOLD YOU TO QUESTION! DID YOU TRULY BELIEVE THAT THE ENTITIES YOU TRANSPORT WOULD BE KILLED, WHEN YOU YOURSELF ARE

MORE THAN CAPABLE OF DOING SO?"

Once again, Tau remained silent. Oliver was sure he was gleaning insight into the inner workings of whatever Sentinels did. If only he could make sense of it.

"THEY HAVE UNLEASHED HORRORS UPON THE HUMAN WORLD YOU COULD NOT IMAGINE," said Emergence. *"THAT IS YOUR FAULT. AS MUCH AS IT IS MINE."*

"Explain," said Tau, this time in exasperation.

"SUMMON THE DOOR. THAT IS ALL I ASK. I WILL RECTIFY MY MISTAKES."

"Kill?"

"NO. ONCE THE DOOR APPEARS, I WILL CLOSE IT FOR ETERNITY. THEY WILL NO LONGER HAVE ACCESS TO THE HUMAN REALM, OR ANY OTHER. THEY WERE NOT MEANT TO MEDDLE IN THE WAY THEY HAVE. CREATURES AND HUMANS ALIKE HAVE SUFFERED, YOU HAVE SUFFERED AS A RESULT."

"Wait, what's that going to mean for you, Tau, and all the other Sentinels? Will you have to go back, will I never see you again?"

Oliver kicked caution aside and clung to Tau's arm. He just got him back again. He would *fight* that behemoth to keep his Sentinel if he had to.

Emergence lowered their colossal head. Hundreds of faces stared down at him with vacant expressions, eyes leaking and mouths moving as they spoke. *"REMAIN OR GO, IT WILL BE YOUR CHOICE."*

All Oliver could do was stand there, clinging to Tau, terrified of what his choice would be, praying that he would choose to stay. After several tense moments, his Sentinel's head canted.

Before Oliver could make sense of anything at all, Tau rushed to lift him into his arms. He wrapped his own around Tau's neck and buried his face against the side of his head, the fabric of the hood soft under his lips. He didn't know what was happening, but he was loving it, especially when he inhaled.

Tau smelled like rain.

And then he caught sight of colossal fingers encasing them both. Oliver yelped and choked on the stink as they lifted high into the air. Canaries twittered, pummelled him with their wings.

“Wait! What about Sam?” Oliver screeched. “I have so many questions!”

The air whipped his head as they swung back, then lashed at his face when he and Tau flung forward. Oliver squinted against the burning wind, barely able to make out overlapping portals. He held on for dear life as they burst through, moved his legs to entwine Tau's hips, his stomach lurching when the Sentinel controlled their projection. Oliver dared a peek, and his stomach flipped again.

They were high above Plainwall. He could see the turbulent river, the waterfall, and the Wandering Horrors rampaging through town. There remained a few Sentinels, still fighting.

Tau and Oliver landed amidst what was left of the stage, fenced in by bloodied debris. As disinterested as the Horrors were in the other realm, here they scrambled to get at them and Oliver's mind whirled with panic. He was still wearing the mantle but was otherwise unarmed.

Dripping tendrils of black snatched a Sentinel out of the air nearby, Their limbs torn off like They were nothing. Long white body parts evaporated, misting in the air before They hit the ground.

Protuberant blackness swiftly encased him and Tau.

Tau's hands encircled Oliver's wrists and raised his hands to his face, encouraging him to cover his eyes. He did, staying close, their bodies still connected. A gust of wind humming with godlike power drew inwards, like the inhale of a hundred Sentinels. It surged through Oliver, lifted him off the ground. It stole the very air from his breath.

For a brief, staggering moment, Oliver was weightless, floating. His heartbeat quieted, everything became deafeningly still.

Then it broke loose.

An incandescent light so intense, he saw the shadows of the bones in his hands through closed eyelids. It singed his skin and rumbled the earth. It made his very soul tremble with the unfathomable might of Tau's magic. More radiant and intense than what he'd done in the mine by a thousandfold.

The silence that enveloped Plainwall once the last sparks faded made Oliver realise his ears were ringing. Tau bent over him, face but a breath away from his. Oliver reached up and stroked an open palm down the side of his hood. His fingers curled into the dark fabric, and he pulled him down.

“You’re back,” he whispered and stood on his toes to press his lips against Tau’s face.

He was pulled up, held in a firm embrace and Oliver held on just as tight, keeping his mouth pressed to the mask. He squeezed his eyes closed, ignoring the moisture that trickled down his cheeks as his heart soared high.

Tau was back.

And he smelled like rain. Fresh springtime rain.

It was quickly becoming his favourite scent.

He pulled away enough to trace the crack in Tau’s mask with a fingertip. Running from just under the pointed hood down to the right triangle, the jagged line glowing green. Was it a scar? He pressed a kiss to that too, before Tau lowered him to the ground.

Oliver would have liked nothing more than to stay as he was, but the realisation that he left his friends behind dawned on him. He might have been transported to safety, more or less, but his friends could now be dead. Chest tight, he turned a desperate look to Tau. His Sentinel caught on and together, they climbed their way out of the debris.

Clambering over several metal rods and planks, Tau struggled to move. Oliver reached out to hold his hand.

“You okay?” he asked, although knew straight away that Tau had to be tired after such a display. “You overdid it a little, huh?”

He kept his hold on the metal hand. Once clear of the rubble, Oliver gazed around in dismay. It was dark, the only source of light was Tau’s faint glow. Still, it was enough to see the gruesome state of things.

There was no one left alive. Viscera covered all of the market, blood and entrails slick under his boots. What that could mean for his friends lay heavy in his stomach.

Wordlessly, they wandered, a weight on his shoulders that had nothing to do with the mantle. Oliver went to the only place he could think of, but when he reached the inn, his stomach dropped further. The windows were shattered, the door flat on the ground, and it was dark inside. He hesitated, unsure if he wanted to see what would await him. Tau eased himself out of his grasp and went ahead. He bent low into the doorway and vanished from view.

“Tau? Tau! You’re alive, we knew it had to be you!”

That was Maji.

Oliver hastened through the doorless entrance. His face split with a grin when he caught sight of his friends. Lucetta, Maji, Benjamin, and Marcy were all huddled together, behind a fortress of tables and chairs in the very back.

“Thank the Sentinels, you’re alive!” Oliver cried.

A momentary pause, followed by violent shoving at the barricade of furniture. His friends were upon him with fierce embraces. Maji planted messy kisses across his face, while Benjamin took his hand and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. Lucetta got his temple. She was the first to pull away, chestnut eyes looking him up and down.

“You look different,” she said before turning to the Sentinel, who produced a glowing sphere for them. “Got yourselves matching outfits? That’s cute. Welcome back, Tau. You had us worried.”

Sunlight illuminated the inn, the sphere now floating above. All of Tau’s white, including his mask, had changed into charcoal grey, but the gold trims remained. His hood and armour were a much darker shade of inky green, nearly black. Still astonishingly beautiful. A glance at himself and he realised the mantle was no longer white either, now the same dark grey as Tau.

“Huh, weird.”

When Oliver caught sight of Marcy lingering behind the others, he eased his hand out of Benjamin’s and weaved past to wrap his arms around her. “It’s okay. I can hug you without hurting you now. Forgot to tell you.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” sighed Marcy and she held him firm.

“What happened?” asked Maji.

Oliver let himself linger in the embrace before stepping away and rubbing at the back of his head. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“Why don’t you start by telling us about what happened after that Horror got you?” Benjamin hesitated before he reached up to run his fingers through Oliver’s hair. He couldn’t help but lean into it.

“We saw it drag you off and kind of...swallow you with its stomach. Thought you were a goner.” Lucetta’s face fell into a grimace. “Thanks for saving me from that.”

“Oh. Yeah, right.” They must have been so worried.

Oliver told them everything while sorting out the inn. From the way the Horrors appeared to be displacing magical artefacts to the unusual things he’d seen. When he mentioned the hut, it didn’t matter how carefully he worded it, he still saw all of Benjamin’s hope vanish. Oliver’s stomach churned with guilt as Benjamin sat with his face in his hands.

“I don’t get it,” said Maji, quietly. “If it’s the Horrors putting magic inside the mountain, then how does that explain all other magical ambits and mines?”

Oliver shrugged, sweeping away broken glass, glad for the change in subject. “It’s just a guess. I’m probably wrong.”

“Maybe the Horrors aren’t unique to just the Tesera Mine?” suggested Marcy. She sat on the bench beside Benjamin, rubbing him across the back.

“Anything’s possible, but that’s a horrifying thought,” said Lucetta. She regarded Tau when she added, “What of this Emergence?”

Oliver told them but glossed over the details of how Tau was coaxed none too gently out of being a big marble. Something about it didn’t sit right, he could still feel things crawling under his skin. The band of dull pain around his head hadn’t eased yet, either.

“I don’t really understand it, but I think Emergence is bad with maths. Miscalculations is what they called it.” He straightened out the last chair nearby. Tau remained crouching by the bar, and Oliver traced his fingers down the vambrace. “Come sit with us?”

The space between bench and table was cramped, Tau’s movements stiff and clumsy as he struggled to sit. Oliver nearly failed to contain his laughter until he remembered he could bite down on his lower lip. He slid across the bench until his thigh touched Tau’s. The cool-warmth, the way it made his skin tingle from head to toe, was something he wholly relished in. Just being near Tau diminished all his worries. Oliver stole a glance at Benjamin across from him, but he wasn’t looking, almost pointedly so.

Marcy disappeared into the kitchen, emerging soon after to serve them refreshments and food. Oliver was more than happy to shove cucumber sandwiches into his mouth without restraint. He was *starving*.

“Why don’t you sit down?” said Lucetta.

“I need something to occupy myself with.” Marcy’s hands trembled, so much that she spilt the drink she’d been pouring for Tau across the table. “I’m terribly—I’m so sorry!”

She dabbed at the glimmering ale with her apron before it could dribble down into Tau’s lap, who remained unmoving.

Oliver didn’t keep himself from laughing this time. “He doesn’t eat or drink, you know.”

Marcy looked even more embarrassed. “You better pay for those drinks soon.”

His mirth immediately died off.

“So Emergence was the original what? The original Sentinel?” asked Lucetta, her brows knotted in confusion. “Does that make them Alpha? And what in the world are these Elders?”

Oliver glanced up at Tau, who wasn’t being helpful even though he knew, without a doubt now, that he could talk. “Tau, if you could tell them, that would be helpful.”

They all looked at the Sentinel, who chose silence. Oliver groaned and slumped back.

“Maybe Tau answers to them?” Maji offered.

“If Sentinels answer to anyone, then that’ll be interesting news. Especially if there’s a door to go with that,” said Lucetta.

“Hang on.” Benjamin rubbed two fingers across his temple like he had a headache coming on. “This Emergence wants to

correct their mistake. What exactly does that mean?”

“To be honest, I didn’t get what they were saying. Emergence said Tau couldn’t go back, but then said he has the choice of staying or going. Maybe they don’t even know themselves.”

“Sounds a lot like they’re planning on killing the Elders,” said Benjamin.

“Nah, just lock them in?” Oliver glanced back to Tau for help, although wasn’t sure why he bothered.

“And we’re going to believe that monstrosity?” Lucetta sounded doubtful, and he didn’t blame her. She crossed her arms with a sigh. “I don’t know about you, but a mountain of corpses doesn’t have my trust.”

“Does that mean you’re leaving us?” Maji’s deep brown eyes turned to the Sentinel and Oliver’s heart sank deep.

“Don’t... Don’t be daft. I just—we just got him back. You’re staying, right?”

He wouldn’t be able to handle Tau leaving him. He barely coped with him being an oversized crystal ball, but at least there had been the faint hope that his Sentinel could be returned somehow. If this door to Tau’s presumed home would be shut permanently, and Tau chose to go, Oliver would never see him again with absolute certainty. His insides twisted with the thought of it alone, quickly building into intolerable pain.

Tau turned his head to regard him, then reached out to trace a sharp finger across the back of his hand, which he had resting

on the table. In plain sight. Tau was tracing his knuckles in a way that could easily be described as intimate, and he was doing it in front of his friends.

Oliver forgot to breathe, his heart performing circus acts. His fingers curled around Tau's on their own accord, and he held on tight. Desperately, he hoped that meant Tau would stay with him.

“Uhm, so...so where is this door?” asked Maji.

Oliver jerked up, his face hot, feeling caught out.

“I—I have n-no idea.” His head locked up like rusted gears. They were still holding hands, and he had become lightheaded with an aching need. “How—How did you survive?”

“Oh, we're not going to address you two holding hands? Okay then.” Lucetta snorted, causing his stomach to clench. “We're sure Tau is the only one who can kill those things, but Sigma opened a portal into what looked like the night sky. They caught the Horror that came after the one that ate you,” said Lucetta.

“We only saw the portal for a short while but it was beautiful,” Maji cooed. “So many stars and colours!”

“Sigma saved our lives. We ran in here and barricaded ourselves because hiding worked for Ben before.” Lucetta gently patted Maji's forearm. “It was a close call a few times but hiding works.”

“Speaking of, where are the other Sentinels now?” Benjamin turned to look at the doorway as though expecting one to

casually stroll in.

“Saw a few of them out there. Watched one get torn limb from limb. Unless some escaped, there aren’t many left.” Oliver squeezed the gauntlet tight, hoping Tau wasn’t too broken up about losing them.

He polished off the last sandwich, then shimmied from the booth and held his hand out again. When pointed fingers laced with his, Oliver thought he might die. So, they were officially going around holding hands now. Did that mean they were going steady, would he need to ask first? The thought made his cheeks hot, but it was thrilling.

Tau struggled to get out of the cramped booth. It was so adorably clumsy, and when he finally freed himself, Oliver chuckled, then clutched his hand more tightly to make sure he wouldn’t let go. He stole another glance at Benjamin, whose gaze fixed on their threaded fingers.

Now was not the time to gloat, but *damn*.

Sunrise slowly inhaled the dark as they made their way outside, ribbons of pink and gleaming yellows at odds with the depredated streets. Oliver’s mood sobered as he tried his best not to look too closely, ensuring he stuck to Maji, pulling her attention to him whenever her gaze drifted.

Surprisingly, there were several survivors near the entrance to the market by the stone arch, one expelling the contents of their stomach. Oliver had to swallow the urge to do the same. The sandwiches were no longer sitting well.

Although he intended to go back home, Tau led him to the market. Four Sentinels stood in a cluster some distance away as though waiting, and turned in sync at their arrival. Tau kept hold of his hand, but Oliver got the impression he needed to leave him to join his siblings, if that's what they were. With great reluctance, he released his hold and his Sentinel walked in that elegant way of his to stand by the others. His own kind, and yet, Tau looked so different to them, both stately and gentler.

The silence was deathly, even the wind that pulled across the old cobblestone seemed silenced. Sigma was still there, as were Theta and Kappa. The other one Oliver was sure had to be Upsilon. He'd never seen them before, but was told about their armour, akin to a metallic rainbow with sharp, unnatural angles.

“What do you think they're talking about?” asked Marcy.

Oliver hadn't realised she'd followed them, and by how pale she looked, wondered if she regretted her decision to do so. He shrugged, then regarded Benjamin.

“Did Onyx ever come back to you?”

Benjamin shook his head, his shoulders slumping, defeated.

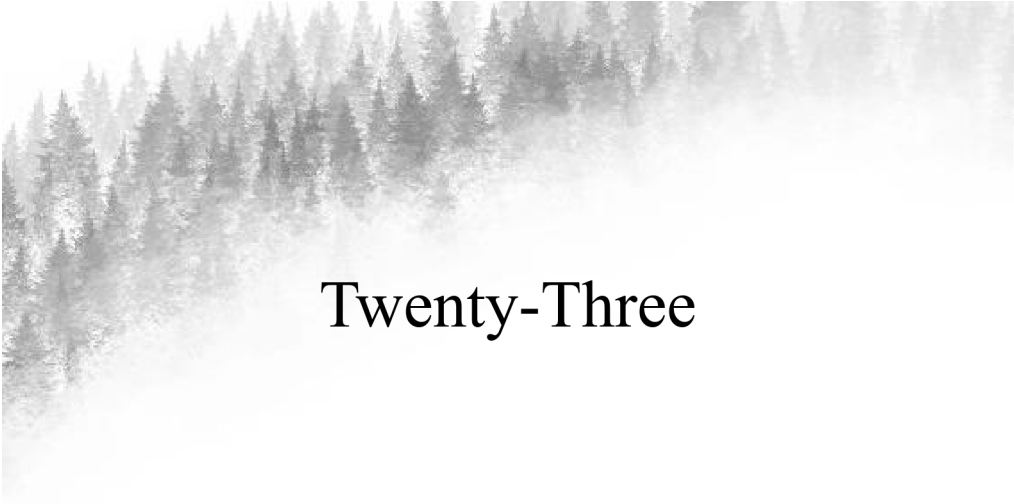
“I'm sorry. It's the first place I went to. But now we know for sure that the place exists and by the looks of it, someone's been living there. Maybe Sam jumped through the portals to escape?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

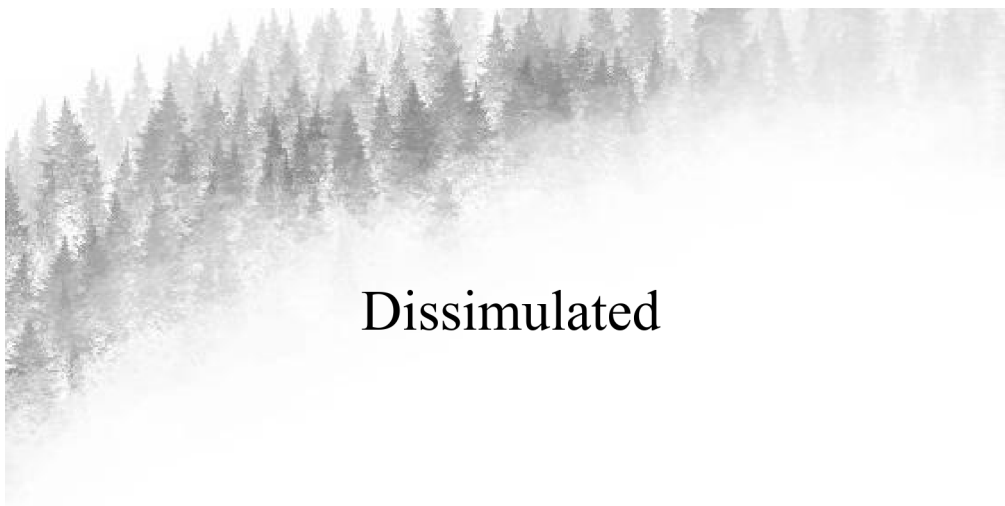
Oliver didn't think he sounded confident. Hesitantly, afraid he might get rebuffed, he snaked his hand around Benjamin's arm to pull it against his abdomen and hold it close. Amber eyes met his in surprise, and Oliver smiled in a way he hoped was encouraging.

“We'll find him, Ben.”





Twenty-Three



Dissimulated

The remaining four Sentinels condensed and launched into the sky. Like Nu, they were much slower than Tau. Oliver watched them until they were but glints in an expanse of grey, leaving him and Tau standing in human ruin.

He glanced up at his Sentinel, a knot in his stomach. “Are you okay?”

Tau nodded once.

Officials trickled in from Clathestead, their automobiles noisy in the silence that had befallen the town. Once overcoming their shock, they tended to the survivors and nauseating scene. Now that all the magic was sucked dry, the snowfall reached them once more. It was bitter, white melting into red the moment it touched ground.

Along with the others, Oliver helped clean the market as best he could. Dragging limbs and peeling entrails off broken pillars and crushed stalls was an unsavoury task, it churned his stomach, but Maji had insisted they stay.

“It’s the least we can do,” she’d said.

Tau followed him around, never pitching in. Benjamin and Marcy had gone to the inn to look after the survivors, and Lucetta and Maji stayed close, collecting what little they could find of victims to burn. Uniformed officials did their part, more or less. It was gruesome, and many of them struggled. The stink of blood was so strong, Oliver could taste it in the back of his throat.

“I’m gonna have nightmares for months,” he grumbled. He flung another dismembered leg at the pyre and watched in grim satisfaction as it spun several times before landing, spraying embers high into the air.

“And me,” Maji muttered, picking up pieces of broken wood.

Blood and grime stained her skin, blotted the white of her skirt, the beautiful shawl lost somewhere. Lucetta was in no better state, her mink stroller coat forever ruined. She tossed a bucket of water across a blood-soaked area of the cobblestone, and they all grimaced at the eyeball rolling away in sudsy pink water.

“The Horrors spawning isn’t our fault,” said Lucetta, straightening up and arching her back with a groan.

Maji tossed another piece of wood at the pyre and missed entirely. Her look was fierce, but her chin wobbled.

“What if us digging around, looking for the same magic they’re collecting—”

“For over a century,” Lucetta interrupted. “Magical ambits have existed for over a century, and there have only been three Horror attacks to date.”

“Until now,” said Oliver, then quickly mumbled an apology when Lucetta glared at him.

“Those Elders could have been responsible for the attack,” Lucetta continued. “Maybe that’s what Emergence meant when they said they unleashed unimaginable horrors on our world.”

“I don’t know.” Maji looked away, the corners of her mouth down-turned.

Oliver focused on the fire, sweat trickling down his temple from its intensity. He’d not told them Emergence had blamed themselves and Tau.

Ever since Sentinels first emerged there were arguments about whether what Miners of the Mystics did was for the greater good. That awful things came out of opening portals and uncovering magic was the primary argument made. No one knew Sentinels even answered to anyone. They only ever did as they pleased, and it was always restricted to mines of the transmundane.

“Maybe we should all take a break,” said Lucetta, stirring Oliver from his musings. “Visit Willows Rest when we get the chance. I’d love to meet your family.”

The storm darkening Maji’s features suddenly cleared, her eyes lighting up. “I would love that!”

Oliver turned to his Sentinel with a searching look. Tau was watching him, it was hardly an answer to a question he was too afraid to ask. He grit his teeth against the panic gripping his heart.

“It’s been on my mind for a while.” Lucetta sighed, wiping her hands down her thighs. “I could do with a break. And anyway, what you’ve told us about your village sounds amazing. I want to see it for myself.”

“Oh, I haven’t even *started* telling you about it...”

Oliver blanched when several officers headed in their direction, their faces grim and navy coats snow-dusted. He excused himself with a mutter, motioned for Tau to follow, then darted in the opposite direction, past the pyre and up to the market’s exit.

“Sorry. Never got along with coppers,” he said. “My last run-in with ’em, they tried to arrest me for assault.” He walked down an alleyway with Tau beside him, not entirely sure where to, just that he wanted to hide. “The guy had it coming,” he continued, “him and his butty attacked one of mine, nearly killed him. Had to make sure it wouldn’t happen again, y’know?”

They rounded a corner, at which point Oliver realised he was leading Tau out of Plainwall. The river vibrated the bridge’s stone, frosty and shrouded by flurries of snow. Not until they reached the end did Oliver stop to stare at the curtain of white blocking the road ahead.

“Please talk to me.” He’d said it so fiercely without meaning to. Now that it was out, he looked up at Tau, a shadow among the snowfall. “Please. It can’t be that I’m unworthy. You let me touch you and...and kiss you.”

And he wanted to kiss him again. Wanted to do plenty more than that.

Tau’s hands were suddenly cupping his head, movements so swift Oliver hadn’t seen him descend. Claws dug into his scalp as he shuffled backwards in quick succession, boots dusting across snow, the backs of his legs colliding with the bridge’s wall. Then, Tau’s face was on him, mask urgently shoving against his mouth, now open around a gasp of surprise, or heat, or both. Oliver’s hands sought the emerald waist sash to pull him closer, lingered there, fingers itching to explore.

He kissed Tau as best he could. It was strange, he was inexperienced, and Tau couldn’t kiss him back. But he could do other things, metal hands journeying down to his arse, squeezing, pulling him close. And Oliver could love him just as he was, tall and silent and godly, igniting a fire in him that had him clutching at his robes and gasping. His insides boiled with need, but his chest was tight with dread.

“I love you,” he choked out against the charcoal mask, horrified at the sob that had wrenched itself free at the same time.

Tau hoisted him up by the backs of his thighs.

On their own accord, Oliver’s legs circled strong hips, locked at the ankles. He held on, arms around the neck, fingers

twisting into the large collars. Lips still firmly pressed to the mask, he squeezed his eyes shut against the burn in them.

He wanted to beg Tau not to leave him, not to return to his home. His hands shook with the very need to make the plea, but he wouldn't. *Couldn't* ask him to choose between home or him no matter how much Oliver needed Tau.

Someone called his name, the sound barely penetrating the thick stillness. Oliver was unsteady when Tau lowered him to the ground. He stepped away, spotting his friends' outlines through the heavy snowflakes. Maji and Lucetta must have collected Benjamin from the inn since he was with them. They all looked tired and worn.

“Any particular reason why you ran from the police and left us to answer their questions?” Lucetta queried with a hint of amusement.

“I'm completely innocent,” he said flatly, leaning to the side just enough to whisk his shoulder against Tau's arm.

“Come on, we could do with some sleep,” said Lucetta.

Benjamin's look was sombre. “Marcy offered the rooms at the inn, but...”

The thought of sleeping in a town painted red with blood wasn't exactly appealing. The mine would be emptier now, but it was better than Plainwall.

As they made their way up, soon reaching the forest and its peculiar hum, Maji's rambling interrupted the surrounding hush.

“The pigs were only little when I left, but I bet they’re huge now. In the summer we always make them mud puddles. I used to push my sister into it for tattling on me whenever I left the borders.”

Lucetta snorted. “That’s mean.”

“Oh, it was really mean, especially since it’s not just mud in there! I’m a terrible sister.”

The way Maji said it, she didn’t sound like she had any regrets at all. Mostly, it was the grin that betrayed her. Oliver snickered and turned back around.

Tau encouraged him to hold his hand whenever they were out of sight of what few guards remained, causing a ruffling in Oliver’s stomach that bordered on nausea. He threaded his fingers with Tau’s and tried not to let being watched bother him—his friends whispered something, and he had a pretty good idea what it was about.

Tau came to a sudden stop and in one movement, faced the gloomy trees. Shrouded in part by the rolling fog, someone approached. Their sluggish footsteps crunched through snow, shoulders hunched against the cold.

Oliver squinted at the old man, and his head whirred back into motion. “Oh hey, it’s Dunderpate.”

He released Tau’s hand as the old man canted his head, stepping over a bush and onto the road. Extraordinarily, Tau’s bedimmed sphere trailed after him. The very same Tau had created the night he was imprisoned.

“It’s you!” exclaimed Maji, pointing wildly at the old man with a trembling hand.

“Jacob,” said the old man. “I imagine you’re upset. It wasn’t on purpose.”

“I nearly suffocated!”

Lucetta and Benjamin swiftly moved to stand in front of Maji, while Oliver squared himself against the old goat. Was this the one she had told them about, who had been in the void with Emergence?

“Wait, what did you say your name was?” Lucetta asked.

“Jacob,” he said. “Burton. And I’m not the one who transported you. That was Emergence. It was an accident, as I said.”

“An *accident*?” hissed Maji, peering out from behind Lucetta. “You’re telling me a gigantic demon like that couldn’t put me in a safe place?”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you. The ability to transport was bred into Guardians after Their time.”

“Wait, *wait*. Hang on. Just wait—” Oliver desperately tried to grasp the thoughts that were slipping through his fingers faster than silt.

“Maji. I think this is the kid we saw the first time we went through the doors,” said Lucetta, eyeing the man. “Except now he’s...”

“Old!” Oliver bellowed. And he had all of his fingers, *and* he could talk.

Jacob raised his bushy eyebrows, flicking strands of white hair out of his face with gloved hands. “You saw me, where?”

“You sound like you know a lot,” Benjamin said, “and this is a conversation we’re going to have, but not here. There’s another blizzard coming in.”

He was right. The clouds looked threatening beyond the mountain peak. Jacob turned bright blue eyes to the sky, then towards the mine. He shook his head.

“I’d rather not. Plainwall isn’t the only place those things wreaked havoc.”

Oliver huffed out a startled breath, mind at a sudden standstill. Not once had he considered that possibility. Lucetta ran off, Maji darted after her and Tau left his side, snowflakes turning electric as he condensed and whipped through the air, vanishing from sight within seconds.

Oliver turned to Benjamin, then to the old man. “You coming?”

“Do I look like I can run?”

“On my back,” said Benjamin, and he stooped low for Dunderpate—*Jacob* to climb on.

“I’m not—”

“Climb on, or I’m dragging you by your feet,” Oliver said. When the goat still didn’t move, he swooped low to grab his

ankles.

“Don’t touch me!” Jacob snarled, jumping away with surprising quickness. After a moment though, he clambered onto Benjamin’s back with incoherent grumbles.

As much as Oliver wanted to run full speed to get to Tau, he couldn’t leave Benjamin behind.

Reaching the adit took a while, reaching the unsightly state of the mine far less. A spare few wreaths were scattered about, their glow frail but even in the shadowy murk, it was clear the mine had suffered a similar fate to Plainwall.

The Horrors were no longer around, they had done all the damage they could. Every breath Oliver took burned as he walked on, stomach roiling at the stench of death clinging to the drifts. Everything from the market to their hovels was demolished, crates, tables, and valuables broken, smashed. Those who hadn’t attended the festivities were now dead, their blood and entrails blotting the stone.

They would have had no chance at survival in these tight spaces.

Not until reaching the lower lodgings did he find Lucetta, Maji, and Tau, on his knees in the middle of the passageway, illuminated by a vibrant sphere above. Nu lay on the ground by him, only a torso and one arm. What Oliver thought were innards pooling from under cracked bone armour looked more like roots when he drew near.

“What in the third circle of Mining Hell is this?” he asked once he caught his breath.

The roots twitched and curled like disturbed earthworms as familiar sunlight encapsulated Nu. Tau was trying to heal the bastard, although what he hoped to accomplish, Oliver didn't know.

Lucetta and Maji were gawking even as they struggled to breathe, and when a panting Benjamin reached them, he stammered something incomprehensible. Jacob's expression was bilious, especially when Benjamin dumped him nearby. He staggered, struggling to stay upright as though suffering from a bad back.

“Should we find the rest of Nu?” managed Maji between her wheezing. “Tau can probably heal Them better that way.”

“Good thinking, but we're not splitting up.” Lucetta glanced at Jacob, who glowered down at Nu. “Stay here. You have answers and we want them.”

“What makes you think I'm going to give them to you?”

“I'll send Tau after you if you don't,” she said without a hint of amusement.

Oliver gave Lucetta a look, knowing she didn't mean it. Tau was not her attack dog, and Jacob had been through enough in his life. The threat seemed to subdue him all the same.

Finding the rest of Nu wasn't difficult. They recovered a leg still attached to the hips inside someone's hovel. The other they found across a barrel and the remaining arm hung from a

clothesline, for which Maji had to get onto Benjamin's shoulders. Nu's armour would be beyond repair by the looks of it, not that Oliver cared, Their stupid leg slung across his shoulder.

“So heavy,” Maji complained, helping Lucetta carry the other leg.

Heavy and stupid and ugly. Curiosity got the better of him then, and Oliver adjusted his hold, discreetly peeking at what was behind the bone armour.

“The bastard is a tree?”

“Sticky! We're not supposed to—wow.” Maji's eyes went round as she peered at the leg in her grasp. “Is this what they all look like?”

Oliver grimaced. “I hope not.”

“Maybe it's just Sentinel Nu?” Benjamin looked as perplexed as the rest of them, gaze fixed on the inside of Nu's arm in his grasp. “We shouldn't be looking.”

What Sentinels looked like underneath their heavy garb was left up to speculation and wild fantasy. No one was even permitted to ask about their appearance. To discover that Nu wasn't made of flesh and bone, but of bark and heartwood was bewildering, to say the least. Their limbs were like broken tree stumps, even had growth rings. Thin roots extended from behind the layer of bark, twisting and curling, reaching for something and oozing with sap. It smelled like pine.

“It’s not even maple,” Oliver said, wrinkling his nose. Stupid bastard was useless at everything.

“You guys!”

Down the other end of the windy drift, two miners ran towards them—Helen and Anna, looking like drowned rats, leaving rivulets of water in their wake.

Oliver raised Nu’s leg high above his head in greeting. “You’re alive!”

“Figures you lot are,” said Anna, gasping for breath. Despite the peculiar phrasing, there didn’t appear to be any malice behind the words. “Oh, you found Sentinel Nu.”

“Guess we’re just lucky that way,” said Lucetta. “We should hurry back before the arsehole croaks it.”

“Yeah, maybe we should just let it happen,” grumbled Oliver, earning him a pat on the shoulder from Benjamin.

Jacob was still there when they returned, either willingly or because he didn’t stand a chance running off. He was so much more decrepit than last time, hunched over like a man far older than he appeared.

“Sentinel Tau, you’re back again!” said Helen. “We thought you might be, with all the light that flooded the mine.”

“You look different,” said Anna in her usual deadpan voice. “I’m not sure I like it.”

“You can help Sentinel Nu, right?” Helen knelt nearby, face forlorn. “They saved us.”

Oliver unceremoniously tossed the leg within vicinity of where it might go, and the others followed suit before retreating to watch Tau work his magic.

It took a long time and didn't seem to be working. The root-like protrusions from Nu's bark or skin, Oliver supposed, tried to connect, but failed to close the gaps between limb and body.

He didn't feel especially terrible about watching Nu kick it, but he *did* feel for Tau, who had lost many of his siblings in a very short amount of time. Sentinels dying wasn't unheard of, but it rarely happened—aside from recently. Oliver wanted to reach out to console Tau, but could only make do with standing near his side.

Eventually, as Tau's hand left Nu, so did the light that had encapsulated Them. Inky green fingers pinched together. In one swift movement, they drove into the centre of Nu's chest with a loud, wet crunch. Helen screamed in shock, stumbling away as Nu thrashed, then went limp.

“Brilliant,” Oliver blurted while his friends only gaped.

The armour splintered and cracked under the driving force of Tau's claw. There was no blood, only viscid, amber-coloured fluid that slowly trickled out like tree sap. He ceased his rummaging, pulled out, and Nu's body collapsed inward.

Bone armour and bark-limbs disintegrated into crumbs and twigs as though Nu had been nothing more than a decaying tree until, finally, there remained only a handful of detritus. The persistent drag of wind pulled the remains away, strewing them into divots and narrow cracks of the stone floor. Oliver

resisted the urge to give chase, just so he could spit on what was left.

Good riddance.

“What did you just do?!” shrieked Helen.

Tau stood up, momentarily paused as though deliberating, then turned to Maji. In his pointed digits, he held a small item suffused in a purple glow. It was like a rose, but pointed like a pinecone. Maji gripped Lucetta’s arm when the unusual flower was extended towards her. She didn’t move to take it.

“What do you think you’re doing? You can’t give that to her,” grumbled Jacob, straightening up.

Maji deftly snatched away the strange flower and cradled it against her chest. “Why, what’s it to you?”

Oliver chortled while Jacob opened his mouth, then snapped it shut and hunched over again. Having caught sight of how blackened the inside of his mouth was, Oliver grimaced. He’d seen Jacob get his tongue cut out, yet he could speak, and he had seen the fingerless hands, but somehow, Jacob appeared to have all ten now.

“I think it’s time you give us the answers we *need* at this point,” said Lucetta. She moved towards Oliver’s hovel, prompting him to squirm. He wasn’t so sure he wanted anyone in there.

“Wait, where are you all going?” asked Helen. “What about Sentinel Nu?”

“Nothing we can do about Them.” Lucetta jerked her head, suggesting they should follow.

Oliver darted ahead to open the door and cringed. Tau’s newly cast sun illuminated the affront that was his hovel in vivid detail, highlighting all the dust and scattered items. Benjamin had missed one of the bowls, hidden just behind the strut. A particularly wobbly gnome skittered away with tiny huffs to hide in the shadows. Oliver’s gaze flicked to the bed. At least there were no visible signs of his favourite activity.

Lucetta brushed past, guiding Maji to the fireless hearth, where they perched on the edge. Benjamin tried to make himself comfortable on the awful chair, and Oliver plopped down on the bed. He patted the spot beside him for Tau to sit, a warmth coursing through his belly when he did. Anna and Helen hesitated near the door before braving his hovel, sitting on the ground near Benjamin. That left Jacob to stand by the door and boy, did he look angry about it.

“Are you the kid we saw in the blue doors?” asked Lucetta. “Why did you get punished for finding mystical things? Who was that man?”

“How do you know that awful monster and why were you in that place with it?” demanded Maji.

“How do you know they’re called Guardians?” Benjamin added. “What else do you know?”

“Let me get a word in if you want your questions answered!” Jacob hunched his shoulders and clasped both hands behind his back. A glower was firmly fixed in place when he turned

his attention to Tau. “You’re the only one with some kind of spirit, you know. Do you remember anything at all?”

Tau only looked at him. That reaction, or lack thereof, wasn’t exactly surprising.

Jacob sighed. “You said you saw me in...a door?”

“A portal in the shape of blue double doors,” said Lucetta. “We...saw the awful things that were done to you.”

He considered this for a while. “I suspect what you saw were memories.”

Oliver resisted the temptation to look smug, instead leaned slightly closer to Tau. Not quite touching, close enough to feel his comfort.

“And I suspect they weren’t *my* memories. I’m not special, I don’t have any magical abilities. At least not enough that it would create a portal.”

“Whose memories were they, then? Portals to memories, of all things, are unheard of,” said Lucetta.

“I’m aware.”

“Do you know of a woman named Ondine?” asked Oliver. “She was in the same portal. It was the second time we came across it.”

“I do, yes.” Jacob’s expression was inscrutable. Too many wrinkles.

“Is she the same person as Mister Pavlov’s wife?” asked Lucetta.

“She isn’t his wife, he is her servant. That’s irrelevant right now, anyway. You, young madam,” Jacob turned to Maji, “saw me with Emergence because we were having a conversation, which you interrupted.” Maji looked ready to argue, but Jacob cut her off. “As for the man who punished me, that was Father Durant, as he liked to call himself. He was neither an abbot nor a father. He learned about magic well before me, although couldn’t allow word to get out. I was too naïve to realise this at first, then I simply did it in defiance of him.”

“Why didn’t he just kill you?” The question escaped Oliver before he could control it.

“It takes people with a unique talent to find the transmundane. They needed me alive because I still had that value. That’s right,” Jacob said, still refusing to be interrupted, “you all have a unique ability to draw in magical artefacts. That’s how you were selected for the job. You’re truffle hogs, but for the magical.”

“You’re a hog,” retorted Anna lamely. Helen soothingly patted her on the arm.

“*Every* miner has this?” Doubt laced Maji’s voice.

“Don’t you listen? That’s what I just said!”

“Is that why Sentinels don’t just get things for us?” asked Benjamin. “Because they don’t have this ability?”

“Seems that way, doesn’t it?” Jacob grumbled.

“Suppose that explains those stupid tests we had to do,” Lucetta mused.

Oliver's mind spooled back to the way he'd been asked to isolate the magical artefacts out of identical items several times over. It made sense now. He'd thought himself clever at the time for not failing once.

"Explains why we can feel magic, I guess," he mumbled.

"Oh, yeah," Maji trailed off. "I just assumed everyone could do that."

"I don't understand," said Benjamin, his brows furrowed. "If not everyone has this ability, why are we only now learning about it? Why isn't this common knowledge?"

Jacob grunted, visibly uncomfortable. "I suspect for the same reason you don't tell a child they're better than the others because they have some kind of talent."

Maji gasped in outrage, and Oliver had to mask his bark of laughter with a cough. Tau's head turned to him, and he bowed closer, his forehead but a touch away from the green fabric covering the muscular arm.

"We're not better than anyone else!" said Maji.

"I didn't say you were, and you're not," said Jacob. "You're as stupid as everyone else."

She scoffed at him. "Wow, okay."

"You're kind of a dick," Oliver said, indifferently.

Jacob looked towards the chair Benjamin occupied with weary longing. "Seems that way," he grunted. "And before

you ask, Emergence gifted me a new set of fingers and a tongue.”

Oliver shifted, curious about how. Maybe they belonged to one of the thousands of corpses that were now permanently stuck to Emergence. He grimaced at the thought.

“Explain to us, if you’re willing,” Lucetta said, “and preferably without insulting us, what makes you so special that Emergence would help you?”

“I already told you I’m not special. I’m not about to look a gift horse in the mouth, but I guarantee you it’s not because Emergence cares about me in any particular way.” Jacob cast a very pointed look at Oliver then, whose expression turned pernicious in response, certain he knew where this was going. “Sentinels, as you call them, don’t care about humans regardless of what you think.”

“What the hell do you know about it?” Oliver snapped. “You’re talking about Tau? He’s different from the rest.”

“I already said that. We’re going in circles now! The rest of them only care about providing these so-called Elders with what they want.”

“Knowledge, right? You want to stop them because they want to learn more? That’s ridiculous,” said Maji.

“Pursuing knowledge with no interest in *understanding* what possessing such knowledge means is dangerous. They’ve been messing with things and then discarding them without care. They’re not even trying to understand, consistently refusing to

acknowledge the harm they're causing this world.” Jacob turned his scowl at Tau then. “Have you honestly *never* questioned your role?”

Tau did nothing. Oliver didn't know why that amused him so much.

“Greedy for power is what they are,” Jacob continued, blue eyes briefly flicking to Oliver's thigh, the way it now connected with Tau's, “and the rest of us have had to suffer because of it.”

“Like what?” challenged Oliver. “Give us an example of what made us suffer.”

“They opened other worlds into ours,” said Jacob.

“We've gained so much from that,” said Maji. “We have medicine that we could otherwise only dream of. Even Fae magic has given us unique benefits.”

“And foods,” supplied Benjamin.

“Sure,” replied Jacob. “You know what else it got us? The war with the Ursidae, the *supposed* war in Malimoure that's still ongoing. The Infernal Plague, *Wandering Horrors*. Never mind that the number of cursed discoveries completely overshadows the spare few hallowed ones. Do you want me to keep going?”

Maji snapped her mouth shut. Helen and Anna appeared outraged but said nothing. Benjamin looked like he wanted to argue and Lucetta steepled her fingers, clearly searching for

something to work with. Oliver puckered his lips, unimpressed with everyone's lack of rebuttal.

“Sentinels orbs—Sorry Tau—you really are a dunderpate,” he said. “Spending all that time with a gigantic pile of corpses hasn't done *you* any favours. Everything's got a drawback. That's part of *life*. All the good that's been found far outweighs the bad.”

“Oh, yeah?” Jacob grumbled. “Give *me* an example of at least one good thing.”

Oliver smiled. He held up two fingers, the back of his hand facing the old man. “I'll give you two. First one is Field Restoration magic.”

“I'm surprised you know about that.” Maji sounded impressed.

“I know things! I don't fully understand it 'cause it's so new, but I hear it can help with lost crops.” He lowered the index finger, leaving his middle sticking up. “And the second is Tau. There is absolutely nothing better than him.”

Dunderpate glared. Oliver's smile melted into a smirk when he caught a twitch in the man's left eye. He was itching to argue, or maybe he would bite his finger off. Oliver held it there, daringly.

“We tried to help you,” Lucetta said before blood could be drawn. “What happened to you was terrible. It...it shouldn't have.”

For a moment, Jacob looked like he'd been caught off guard. In the end, all he said was, "That's neither here nor there. I got my revenge, I assure you. Now I'm here to help Emergence because I see the bigger picture."

"Alright, fine. What are you planning?" asked Benjamin.

"Close the door for good so they can no longer access this world or any other. To do that, we need at least one active Sentinel to summon the door."

"Would that put an end to Mystical Mining?" asked Lucetta.

"You're not listening to me," snapped Jacob. "All magic will still be misplaced. That never had anything to do with them. So mine away, if it's that important to you!"

"Emergence said that Sentinels could go home if they wanted," said Benjamin, "but what would that mean for miners if they did?"

"What do you think?" Jacob turned to face the door then.

"Wait, one more thing," said Lucetta. "Why did all those Horrors appear in Plainwall, and here? Did we anger them, or was it these Elders?"

The old man turned back to regard her, although his gloved hand stayed on the door handle. His face held nothing but a scowl, angry yet impossible to read. "I think...they were attracted to all the magic."

Oliver pursed his lips. This made sense, but it also didn't. Why had this never happened before with any other Sentinel gathering?

“I’m confused,” said Helen. “Any chance you guys are going to explain?”

“Maybe later,” said Benjamin, rising to his feet with a tired groan. “There could be more survivors, we should look for them.”

“There are,” said Anna.

“We left them in the hot springs,” Helen chimed in. “The Horrors could sneak through anything, but they wouldn’t sneak into places where they didn’t know to look. A few of us hid in the water.”

“You’re so smart.” Oliver grinned. Helen and Anna looked pleased with themselves.

“I’ll go home and see what’s damaged. Again,” said Benjamin. “Then I’ll start cleaning this place up. Can’t stand the thought of sleeping here with the place being in such a... state.”

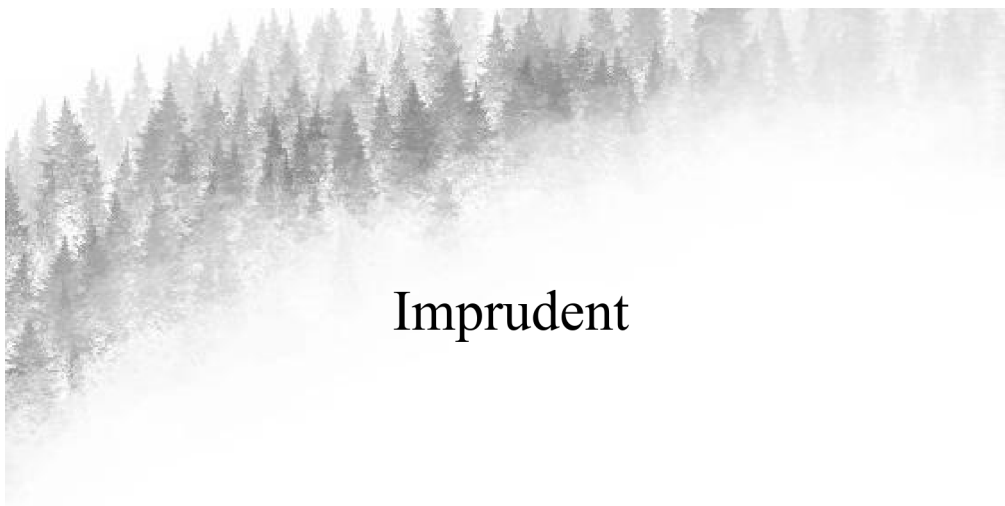
“In that case, we have an intensely long day ahead of us.” Lucetta sighed. “Thank you, Jacob, for taking the time.”

Jacob scoffed and left without another word.





Twenty-Four



Imprudent

Helen and Anna were the last to trickle out of his hovel. They lingered just outside the door with suspicious looks. Oliver raised his eyebrows at the two in silent challenge until they left. He would go out there and help, but he didn't know how much time he had with Tau. He wanted to take what he could, even if it would only be a momentary reprieve from the bloodied nightmare that was now their home.

The second he faced Tau, fingers grazed across his scalp, then twisted into his hair to tug him forward. Oliver yielded to the request without thought. He planted his mouth on the smooth face and straddled Tau's hips, a motion that would've been swift, but his knee collided with a hard stomach. He whispered an apology, although Tau didn't seem to mind much, his hands lowering to cup his backside and help him up.

Oliver still didn't know whether this was sexual to Tau, but his cock reawakened with vigour as their groins collided. It had him panting with need, his chest tight with a longing so fierce it hurt. He pawed at everything within reach, sliding his

hands across that spectacular chest, down to the stomach where he curled his fingers into dark robes.

When Tau groped his backside and pulled him even closer, moved his hips in a grinding motion, Oliver wanted to believe he knew exactly what he was doing. Regardless, he had to force himself away. He pushed against broad shoulders, slid off Tau's lap, and stumbled upright.

He stood there a few feet away from his Sentinel, face boiling, prick harder than bedrock.

"I—I don't know what this means to you." Because Tau wouldn't *talk*. "Maybe—Maybe it's that you can't. Maybe I imagined it. But I need..." Confirmation. An unmistakable sign that Tau knew what this was. "Maybe..." He inhaled and fanned his face with a hand. The air was too warm, his skin damp with sweat. "Do—Do you want to—" Even his breaths were shaky now. "Tau—I mean, Light of Day, would you—would you do me the—the honour of going steady with me?"

Oliver thought he might combust that instant. With embarrassment, mostly. That his voice had raised several pitches made it so much worse, but he wanted to do this properly. Briefly, he wondered if he should have gotten on a knee.

Unfortunately, all Tau did was tilt his head and stare for an eternity, while Oliver's heart neared exploding.

Until at long last, there came a singular nod.

The relief that whipped out of Oliver made his knees buckle. He spilt forward into an embrace, straddled Tau's thighs again, and fisted the large collars to tug him down. There was something enslaving about kissing him, the way his lips tingled wherever they connected with the mask—his face. Oliver's eyes drifted shut, and he instilled every drop of love into the kiss, hoping it would transfer, that like Tau, he could inscribe the feeling into his chest. Brand him with it, the way Tau had branded his heart for so long. Just by always being there for him, seeking him out, comforting him with only his presence.

Always healing him, forever by his side.

Large hands found their way to his arse once more, pointed fingers digging into the skin through denim. It felt needy, it hurt. Oliver sucked in a sharp breath, heat shooting right down his already aching prick. He thrust his hips to gain friction, keened when he felt the length of Tau's erection trapped behind the layers of fabric. Daringly, Oliver swiped his tongue across the bottom of Tau's face, leaning back to offer a cheeky smile.

And then he was on his back, pinned between lumpy mattress and Tau, looming over him. A moan of delighted surprise slipped free and Oliver's legs wound to trap Tau by the hips, locking at the ankles. He grabbed the collars again to steady himself and thrust his hips upward, aching too much to feel in any way abashed at his own neediness. Tau's pelvis met him, ground against him hard. He arched over him, practically

smashed his face against Oliver's mouth while clawed hands found their way to his face to hold him steady.

Oliver was happy to oblige, although lacked finesse and Tau's shoving was persistent, nearing painful, knocking against his teeth with every urgent roll of hips. He left streaks of saliva that he chased with his tongue, marvelling at the faintest hint of bitterness.

His need became an ache, so he reached between them, fingers clumsy and trembling while he worked to undo the clasps of his overalls without removing the fur mantle. He pushed the denim down his front and knocked away the lumpy pillow he'd forgotten about. His cock sprang free, only to trap itself on the borrowed shirt. Quickly he undid the buttons.

Tau moved back to kneel between his legs, spread so wide it hurt his thighs, giving Oliver an opportunity to *breathe*. His hands fell on either side of his head as he lay completely exposed.

Vulnerable, heart clobbering his insides, cheeks hot enough to melt stone. Tau looked at him, did for some time. He ran an open palm across Oliver's naked chest, down to his stomach and Oliver wet his lips with anticipation. He brought his hand around Tau's, guiding it further. Slow enough that should his Sentinel not want to, he had the opportunity to pull away.

He didn't, and metal fingers closed on his cock. The sensation of cold and warmth and *finally* someone else touching him made the moan that escaped Oliver raspy, wanton, and too loud. It bordered on a sob. He scraped his

teeth across his lower lip, fighting the need to come, refusing to let himself thrust into the hand, longing to draw it out.

“Is–Is it okay if–*oh!*” Tau’s hand picked up a rhythm. Oliver bucked his hips, desperately reaching out for his Sentinel. “*Please*, let me touch.”

He lifted himself up on an elbow, giving him the reach needed to grasp at Tau’s cock through the robes. Just in case there was any confusion as to what he meant. There was a helpless twitch of hips and he bit his lower lip, gaze flicking up when Tau jerkily nodded.

With ungainly eagerness, Oliver hunted for an opening just below the inky green waist sash. It took a moment, but then his fingers dove under the robes past the waistband, and traced down naked skin. He moaned, his mouth watering with the need to taste.

Tau’s skin.

He couldn’t see it yet, but like the rest of him, it was both warm and cool at once. Something he couldn’t ponder for long when his fingertips connected with the unmistakable length of Tau’s cock.

Oliver’s breath hitched, and all remaining thoughts pitched themselves from his head. He grasped at the girthy length, lips parting around a groan, his whole body quaking with desire and *love*. Desperation, too. He tried to pull the thing free when a firm grip trapped his face.

Chin caught between the curve of thumb and index, Tau nudged up and he met black triangles nearly hidden among the charcoal of his face.

“It’s okay,” Oliver whispered in understanding. “I won’t look.”

Carefully, worried he might be pushing his luck, he fixed his eyes on Tau’s face and eased his Sentinel’s cock out. His breath caught again when it slapped down on his stomach, heavy and hot.

Holy shit.

He lowered himself back down to the mattress with Tau closely following, face once again pressed against his. His legs spread wide, one dangling off the edge of the narrow bed. Oliver let his fingers dance across Tau’s erection, shuddering at the impossible length, at its firmness, the ridges leading up to a long head, slippery with pre-come. Oliver indulged in exploring, dipping his fingertip against the leaking slit, flicking his tongue out to lick Tau’s face every time he jerked his hips as if aching for more. Oliver took hold of both their cocks, holding them together, and squeezed. Tau’s hands slammed down on either side of his head, the sound of fabric shredding jarring in his ears.

Oliver groaned against the smooth face, rapidly working his hands up and down, and relished in the way Tau drove into his grip. Their movements turned frantic, the shrieks of his bed accompanied by his panting and keening sent him spiralling.

The sheer ecstasy of Tau's textured cock sliding against his own maddening in all the right ways.

He gasped and griped, drew his teeth across Tau's face among breathy confessions of love until he could no longer hold back.

Oliver unravelled, went rigid, his hold on them both tight. Eyes squeezed shut, he arched up off the mattress and came with a resounding, guttural moan. His climax hit him in tidal waves of bliss, pulling him under, drowning him, until he became a rasping mess.

Fluid doused him then, hot and cold and so messy. Oliver's eyes flew open. Tau too had stilled—he was climaxing all over his stomach, sharp fingers digging irreparable holes into the bedding. A final few, desperate thrusts against his sensitive prick and Tau slumped, dropping like a slab of stone on top of him.

He was megalithic. It quickly became difficult to breathe, but Oliver wouldn't have it any other way. Hidden almost entirely underneath, he felt more secure and gratified than ever before in his life.

Tau eventually hoisted himself off, although he hovered rather than laid down, face fixated on him like he was watching again. Oliver refused to let his own gaze wander, even as he relaxed his grip on their members and ran fingers through the mess all over his stomach and chest. It had even pelted his throat and chin. Tentatively, he brought his fingers

up between their faces. His eyes fluttered at the sight of Tau's climax.

"This...is the most beautiful gravy I've ever seen," he breathed, inspecting the coruscant fluid.

Translucent with a distinct shimmer. Briefly, Oliver's mind flicked to the empty bottle he knew had rolled under his bed. No... He shouldn't collect it. That would be too weird.

But it was tempting.

Leaning on one hand, Tau stroked Oliver across his forehead with the other, so gently that it was difficult not to close his eyes and risk sleep. Tau seemed content, happy even, the feeling swirling inside Oliver's whole body akin to a warm summer breeze. It brought a smile to his lips.

When Tau shifted, Oliver closed his eyes to ensure he wouldn't catch any accidental glimpses. No matter how much he longed to discover what Tau looked like, he wanted Tau to trust him more. There was a brief pressure against his forehead. Oliver wondered what it was, thinking it might have been Tau's face.

He gave his Sentinel a few moments before checking with a touch that he was back in order, then cracked his eyes open to look up at him again, a shy smile fixing itself in place. Tau was still nestled between his legs, and Oliver became aware of the state he was in. Limp cock still exposed, slathered in a mixture of their orgasms. It occurred to him that he might make an obscene sight, and yet felt entirely unashamed.

“I... I hope you enjoyed that.” Tau’s silence had persisted throughout, not a single groan or grunt. Oliver hoped he’d read all his signals right.

A stiff nod and his smile turned into a grin. Tau leaned back, allowing him to sit up, and he huffed at the fluid dripping down all over Lucetta’s clothes.

“I better buy them off her,” he mumbled.

“Sticky?”

The pull handle jiggled.

Oliver’s heart jumped up into his throat. “Don’t come in!”

He scrambled off the bed, tripping on the old rugs in his rush to find any old thing to wipe himself down with. Oliver was loath to do it, but cleaned himself off and tossed the terry cloth into a corner of the hovel before straightening himself out. He’d barely done up the overalls when Maji opened the door and peered inside.

At that moment, Oliver resented her for interrupting. He had wanted to lie in bed with Tau and just *be* with him. Although he realised, guiltily, that it wasn’t fair his friends were out there with all the death and gore, while he had just gotten into Tau’s robes.

He reeled, gaze drifting to Tau—his *boyfriend*—and felt himself flushing so much he became dizzy.

Maji wandered in and Oliver did his best not to look as flustered as he felt. Tau stayed on the bed, perfectly composed as she invited herself to sit next to him. She had changed out

of her bloodied clothes and into mining attire, looking minuscule and forlorn. Maji reached into her shirt and pulled free a vial attached to a leather cord around her neck. Inside it lay the purple pinecone.

“What is this?” she asked.

Oliver shrugged and Tau, predictably, didn’t answer. So Oliver sat beside her and peered at it, pursing his lips at what might very well be Nu’s heart. He wanted to crush it.

“Maybe it’s Sentinel magic,” he said, tapping the vial with his index finger.

“Why me?”

He frowned at her. “You’re asking why Tau gave you a gift?”

Maji’s look soured. “When you put it *that* way it makes me sound ungrateful.”

“Better not let anyone see you with that.” It would likely be the only one of its kind.

Oliver got to his feet and walked to the door. He waited for Maji and Tau to follow.



They did what they could for the mine with the help of the other survivors—all fifteen of them. It took hours to return the lodgings to an acceptable state. With so few of them left, the mine was empty and felt haunted. Despite the constant drag of wind through the drifts, the trickling of water, it was too quiet.

What once passed for a home was now a graveyard.

Oliver sat against the wall of Benjamin's hovel between Maji and Lucetta, exhausted, grimy, his arms around both their shoulders, hoping to comfort.

"I miss home," Maji mumbled, her voice on the verge of breaking. "I... I have nothing to show for all these years."

For all the risks they took, the losses they suffered. Oliver understood what she meant. Maji had expressed her desire countless times to prove to her mother that being a Miner of the Mystics was worth it, that she had chosen the right path. He couldn't think of what to say, and so leaned in to press a kiss to her temple.

"It'll be okay," he murmured. "If your mom's anything like you, she'll be proud of you no matter what."

Like everything else, these nightmares would pass.

"I think she'd love you."

A sob shook Maji's frame, and Oliver pulled her close, resting his forehead against hers. "Good, 'cause I plan on coming too."

He glanced across to his boyfriend, stationary and watching him from the other side of the passageway. Oliver wondered if he was working on making a decision, or if he had already decided.

Stay, and be a Sentinel, or go home and never return? Would Tau leave behind what he'd known for fifty years?

According to Helen and Anna, his magic had flooded the mine, ridding it of all Horrors. That Tau's magic had reached this far was astounding. Oliver knew he was powerful, but he'd never comprehended just how incredible Tau was. So much stronger than any other Sentinel, his instinct to protect humans always at the forefront.

"Where's Ben?" Oliver asked after a while.

His place had once again been ransacked. They were all robbed of nearly every item with any sort of magical value. It was a miracle the hearth fires were still there.

"Don't know," said Lucetta, rubbing her face. "I'll go find him."

"I'll grab my pillows and come to yours?" said Maji to Lucetta.

"Sure, doll. You're welcome too, Sticks."

With that, she left, and Oliver and Maji parted ways long enough to gather pillows—including the one Benjamin had cast out—and blankets to meet back up. Since Lucetta didn't hoard and had nothing of interest, the Horrors had left her hovel alone. Maji made herself comfortable on the bed, tossing a spare blanket to Oliver, who found himself a spot near the hearth with a heavily crouching Tau.

"Sit like this," said Oliver, crossing his legs.

Tau lowered right beside him, and after taking a moment to consider, folded his long legs. Oliver beamed up at him,

yelped in surprise when his Sentinel grabbed hold of his hips and pulled Oliver against himself, into his lap.

Where had he learned that one, Oliver wondered, grinning. He ignored the way Maji gaped at him in favour of nuzzling Tau's massive chest. Snug and happy, when musclebound arms enveloped him.

Like this, Oliver felt as though they could be together, like anyone else. And like this, Oliver braved uttering, "Maybe you'll come to Maji's village with me? You need a break, too."

Not that he expected an answer, his heart giving a great thud when Tau moved—to extend a palm. From its centre, a lambent sphere sparked to life. He sent it afloat, warming the hovel further, washing away any lingering unease.

"Will you ever tell us where you come from?" asked Maji, folding her dainty hands under her head.

Silently, Tau regarded her even as he squeezed Oliver, keeping him flush against his abdomen. Oliver nosed the soft fabric just below hard pectorals, smiling at the way sharp fingers took to whisking through his hair, toying with the strands.

The door swung open and Oliver started, twisting around to see Lucetta and Benjamin carrying blankets and pillows. Benjamin too had changed his clothes and held a filled rucksack. Oliver got the impression the two had been arguing, both looked acrimonious.

Benjamin's gaze flicked to Oliver, to Tau, then away, face tightening with disapproval.

"We've got news." Lucetta's tone was clipped. She joined Maji on the bed, glowering at Benjamin, who stepped past Oliver to linger near the hearth.

He made a face, as though he didn't want to say anything. "Sam was here."

"What?" both Oliver and Maji hollered in unison.

"He left a note." Benjamin hesitated before reaching into the pocket of his trousers and producing a piece of crumpled paper. Oliver sucked in a nervous breath, one he exhaled when the note was handed to Maji, now sitting upright.

Out loud, she read, "I'm alive, found my way back. Horrors everywhere. Going into portals. I see large rings of stone. Signed 'S'."

Oliver pulled at his hair in shock, a movement that appeared to concern Tau a great deal, who immediately peeled his hands away from his head and clutched them.

"He was *here*?" Oliver cried. "I knew it, I knew he jumped a portal! Didn't I say?"

"But he's in a different world now, if he jumped through another portal." Maji scrunched her face with concern.

"Which is why I'm going to the Library of Portals," said Benjamin.

“And I told you that’s a stupid idea,” countered Lucetta. “Not only is that place nearly inaccessible, but you need money to travel *and* there’s little chance they’ll have a portal that leads to wherever Sam went. The description he left is too vague.”

“I hear you,” said Benjamin and Oliver could tell he was practising restraint in the way he spoke, “but if there’s even a slight chance I can find him, then I have to go.”

“I get it.” Oliver kicked his legs out and leaned back against Tau. He drove a hand into his pocket, the tip of his tongue poking out before he pulled free the gemstones. They twinkled prettily in his hand. “Got these from the Horror realm. Pretty sure they’re magical. Might be worth something. Here, take ’em.”

Benjamin gawked at him. He hesitated, then lowered to his knees, strong features expressing a gratitude that didn’t quite reach his tongue. Oliver only smiled, letting the gemstones roll into Benjamin’s cupped hands.

“I... I don’t know what to say. Are you sure?”

“I would have done anything if I found out Tau was alive somewhere,” said Oliver and he felt his cheeks warming. “Including crossing a war-ravaged country. We have to go find Sam.”

“We?” interjected Lucetta, crossing her arms. “You expect me to drop everything to look for him? I already did that once and it bit me in the arse.”

“I know you didn’t get on well,” began Maji, carefully, “but aren’t things different now?”

“We didn’t get along at all!” Her fierce tone made Maji flinch. “The only reason I didn’t strangle him with my bare hands is because you were friends with him. He’s been dead to me for a lot longer than three years.”

“That’s not true though, is it?” Maji looked terrified at her own daring. “You gave up becoming a geologist to come to the T. Mine, just because he sent you a letter telling you about how exciting it was here, right? You could have gone to any other of the twenty-odd Mystical Mines, but you chose the one where Sam worked. I don’t believe for a second you came because you wanted to kill him. I mean... You had five years to do it and didn’t.”

Lucetta’s look could have burned the mine down worse than Theta’s fire, and Oliver was glad she didn’t direct it at him, for once. She had nothing to say to that. Part of Oliver wanted to tell her what Nu had done to him, just so she would divulge what Samuel’s misdeeds were.

“I’m not asking anyone to come with me,” said Benjamin, pocketing the gemstones. “It’s too dangerous and I don’t expect any of you to put your lives on hold.”

“Okay. So we’re going to sleep, then make plans to head for Malimoure in the morning. *Together*,” said Oliver. “Because we’re going to find Sam, *together*, like we do everything else.” He erupted into a loud yawn and stretched, his arm knocking

into Tau's stomach. "It's decided, so let's get some sleep. I'm beat."

Mostly, he wanted to touch Tau and quietly recall what they'd done earlier. Maybe they could sneak off and repeat it. He slid out of Tau's lap and made himself a nest with his quilt right beside his Sentinel.

"You reckon Mister Pavlov is still alive?" murmured Maji when Lucetta flopped down into bed and turned her back to them all.

"Dunno." Oliver wasn't especially concerned. It wouldn't make a speck of difference now that they were going to set out to find Samuel. Tau was coming with him, he decided.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Found this."

Oliver dug into the front of his overalls and pulled free the lumpy pillow. Without looking, he tossed it over at Benjamin, stretched again, and settled down to press his face against Tau's thigh. Metal fingers combed through his hair, soothingly and sweetly. He sighed and slung an arm over the muscular legs to hold on to him. His fingers danced along a hip.

"I hope you're okay," he whispered into Tau's thigh.

He had lost so much in so little time, yet wouldn't communicate his grief. Maybe Tau thought he couldn't.

Oliver tightened his hold on him.



Through the haze of slumber, a voice called out to him. It floated in the distance, soft and sweet. A tender touch to his face followed. Oliver relished the contact, audibly humming. That gentle touch turned into a full quaking of his body and he bolted upright, an incoherent mumble spilling free. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, but his vision stayed so blurry he could scarcely see Lucetta in front of him.

“You are both harder to wake than the dead. Ben and Tau are gone.”

Oliver jerked to attention. Across from him, Maji struggled to rouse while Lucetta was already at the door. He scrambled up, glad he hadn't bothered to undress. He grabbed Maji by the arm to hoist her to her feet and darted after Lucetta. They hurried up to the adit, the knot in Oliver's stomach tight enough to hurt. Without Tau by his side, all the worries and fears that had been so easily forgotten before now piled on, crushing him.

“Where the hell would they have gone?” Oliver asked.

“Don't know about Tau,” Lucetta panted, “but Ben will have to go through Plainwall to get anywhere at all.”

By the time they reached the surface, Oliver was ready to collapse, each breath dragging a burning pain through his lungs. The blizzard had yet to let up, the wind biting when they set on their path, huddled together.

“I can't believe I gave Ben all the gemstones,” Oliver moaned.

Lucetta clicked her tongue in exasperation. Whatever she might have wanted to say fell away, their attention drawn to the sky above the forest. In the dark past thick snow, flashes of green illuminated the faint silhouette of a mountain peak.

Oliver gasped, loudly. “Ah shit, it’s Emergence!”

The three dashed into the jaws of the snowstorm. Auras of green ballooned above the pines as ghastly snarls and wails raked the winds, growing louder the closer they drew. Oliver vaulted across underbrush, ignoring the thorns and branches snagging at his clothes, scratching his skin. The forest was murky with the stench of death. It invaded his nostrils, burning the back of his throat. Green flashes guided their way, trees casting long, eerie shadows across the ground every few moments, bolstered by despondent cries. At the edge of the clearing he came to an abrupt stop, eyes widening in horror.

Piles of creatures sloughing decay swarmed the area. Putrid, blackened ooze dripping, trailing innards that slopped into the grass as they moved like an amalgamated swarm. They were fighting, flailing, crowding into a massive triangle door that stood unconnected in the centre of the clearing. The screams came from inside it, unmistakably human.

Oliver tried to step forward but Lucetta yanked him back. He peered past a pine’s trunk, his mouth hanging open when he realised the creatures came down a colossal arm.

It led up to Emergence.

Off to the left of the clearing stood Jacob. The decaying monstrosities were disinterested in him, avoiding him entirely,

focused only on invading the doorway.

“Where’s Tau?” Oliver hissed.

“There, I think!” Lucetta pointed to a thick concentration of suppurating decay some ways from the cramped door.

They writhed and slithered in their pile as indiscernible shadows. Oliver moved to dive in, but Maji ran straight past him before he could. She jumped across a mangled creature and launched herself forward to tackle Jacob to the ground. Oliver and Lucetta chased after her, saw her raise her fist, then hesitate.

“Maji!” Oliver shouted, but too late, a beast with antlers bashed into her, knocking her sideways and off Jacob.

Oliver crashed to his knees beside her with Lucetta just behind when brilliant beams of light burst forth from the pile near the triangular door. It tore apart tar-covered corpses of humans, demons and animals alike.

He was on his way to Tau before he could think about it. He kicked and shoved at anything that blocked his path, vision blurring every time something rammed into his side, his stomach, his back—he flew forward, face first into the ground.

Oliver scrambled back up again. Tau was almost within reach, clawing at anything he could. Oliver wanted to cry out for his Sentinel, but the earth beneath his feet rumbled, then opened. It swallowed him, muffled his shout as it rapidly piled on top to bury him. He kicked and flailed, trying to climb his way back up. Dirt invaded his mouth, choking him. The more

he struggled, the further he sank. His heart stuttered with the realisation that he was going to suffocate.

A hand grasped his and pulled. Oliver kicked until he rose back out of the ground. His nostrils flared with a desperate breath. He wanted to sob in relief, but spat dirt instead. He stared, wild-eyed at Lucetta and Maji, gratitude at the tip of his tongue when the ground gave way beneath him again.

Oliver heard Lucetta and Maji cry out, saw Tau disappear under another heap of putrid carrion—they were all sinking. He whipped around, spotted Jacob, and cried out in disbelief.

It was *him*. Jacob was causing this.

The hum of Sentinel magic was unmistakable now, completely different to Tau. It felt heavy, like a downpour of coarse sand. Lucetta's hand slipped from his grasp when Oliver kicked back up, placing every ounce of inhuman strength he possessed into freeing himself. His hands smacked the ground and pulled at the parting grass until he could crawl. Immediately he dived in to pull Maji out, already submerged in the silt, then Lucetta.

“Jacob's got Sentinel magic,” he panted, drawing a gasping Maji close. “You've got Nu's!”

Maji stared at him. “How—”

“I don't know!”

Oliver grabbed what once might have been an oversized lizard and swung it by its tail. He hurled it at Jacob before he could bury them a second time, but the old man was

annoyingly spry, hopping out of the way and raising his arms. Oliver charged at him. His shoulder didn't connect. He tumbled forward into the grass with a grunt, swearing. Jacob had dodged him again.

Spinning, Oliver clutched the leg of a half-decayed deer running past, letting it drag him across the ground. He swung his legs, kicked Jacob's feet out from under him, and sent the man crashing into the grass. Oliver swiftly staggered at the old man. He jumped onto his back, trapped him with his arms firmly around his wrinkled neck.

“Let go of me, you fool!”

He pushed forward until Jacob caved, forced down to his knees. When Oliver felt the earth rumbling again, he craned his neck in time to see three colossal taproots shooting from the earth to gore everything in their path. Creatures twitched and flailed on the points, dripping foetid ooze down onto Maji and Lucetta, both standing on quaking legs, awestruck. Oliver grinned at them.

Jacob grunted a swear, the only warning, before the back of his head slammed straight into Oliver's nose.

Searing pain sent him stumbling, his cry claggy with blood streaming down his face and throat. He held his hands over his nose, doubled over. Something damp collided with him, knocking Oliver to the ground and dragging him along. He fought against it, sharp protrusions of bone cutting him, decay invading his mouth. He kicked and flailed at the carrion trying to drown him, pushed at the claw grasping his arm—the

rattling breath he took shook his very soul when he surfaced from the deluge that had tried to drag him into the triangular doorway.

Oliver batted black fluid out of his face to see Tau standing over him, metal hand still firm on his forearm. He would have uttered his thanks, but Tau turned away. He rapid-fired light at the endless flow of festering atrocities in a nigh pointless effort to stem the invasion into what had to be his home world. Oliver joined in, kicking at and punching away what he could while trying to ignore the fiery agony in his face.

A vortex of green cropped up beside him, made him jump sideways into Tau. Razor-sharp and quick, thousands of tiny leaves shredded anything that came within its reach. For a horrible moment, Oliver thought Nu had returned. Until he remembered Maji now had Their magic. Sentinel magic.

Like Jacob.

Oliver swore. The ground gave way under him and Tau. Oliver sank down to his chest before it stopped. Hooves and feet kicked his head, scratched his face, peeling past him, all desperate to penetrate the large doorway. The terrified screaming from inside it had yet to stop. He clawed his way back out, helped Tau out of the ground, kicked away anything trying to latch onto the Sentinel. When Tau was freed, he straightened up, then became eerily motionless.

“What are you doing?” Oliver cried, dodging a slouching human corpse lunging for him, gurgling with wet snarls.

“Tau, no!” Maji’s cry came from somewhere past the tidal waves of death.

Thick blades of green whipped up from the ground. Like a bundle of hair, they wrapped around Tau’s arms and legs and wrested him away. He fell to the ground, slid through the grass, all the way out of sight. Oliver wanted to run after him but caught sight of a colossal hand coming down. Blindly he darted forward, rammed his way through more bodies, burst out from the other side and snatched Maji by the braid to yank her out of the way. No sooner had he hurled her several feet across the clearing than the hand came down, spraying rot and black fluid and shaking the ground beneath him, narrowly missing his legs. Blindly, he made his way to where he’d thrown Maji.

“Ow!” she cried, scrambling to her feet. “There are other ways!”

“Sorry!”

Oliver spotted Lucetta grappling with Jacob. A boulder ripped up from the ground, flew at her, missing her shoulder and crashing into a tree, cracking the bark and shattering the stone. Lucetta countered with a hard kick to the old man’s stomach—he was losing steam.

“Emergence is shrinking!” Maji called over the cacophony of growls and screaming.

Oliver looked up, but it was impossible to tell. “Tau, he’s trapped!”

“That was me!”

“Wha—”

“He’s trying to transport Emergence. Don’t let him, it’ll kill him!”

He didn’t question how she knew. Tau had somehow freed himself, again motionless in the chaos. Oliver cried out and flung himself at Tau. His shoulder connected with his Sentinel’s abdomen, arms around his midriff, tackling him to the ground. He collapsed on top, straddling Tau’s ribcage.

“Don’t you dare!” he snarled. “I’m not losing you again!”

Tau clawed at his hips to hoist him off. Oliver grabbed the metal hands, pinned them on either side of his hood. Tau was strong, but so was he.

“No!” His voice cracked. He lowered himself to press a desperate kiss to his boyfriend’s face, streaking blood across it, the red trickling off like water on a feather. “Emergence is shrinking, look! We just need to keep this up—”

Everything went dead still.

So quiet it was like someone had punched him on either side of the head. The only noise left was the ringing in Oliver’s ears. The monstrosities ceased their scrambling, tumbling away from the triangle door, now gone dark. They melted into the grass like blackened snow. The door soundlessly vanished.

Only Jacob remained, climbing onto what was left of Emergence’s arm, pulling away. Still colossal, still ghastly, and still alive.

“FORGIVE US, LIGHT OF DAY.” Emergence took a step back, shaking the ground. *“THIS WAS THE ONLY WAY.”*

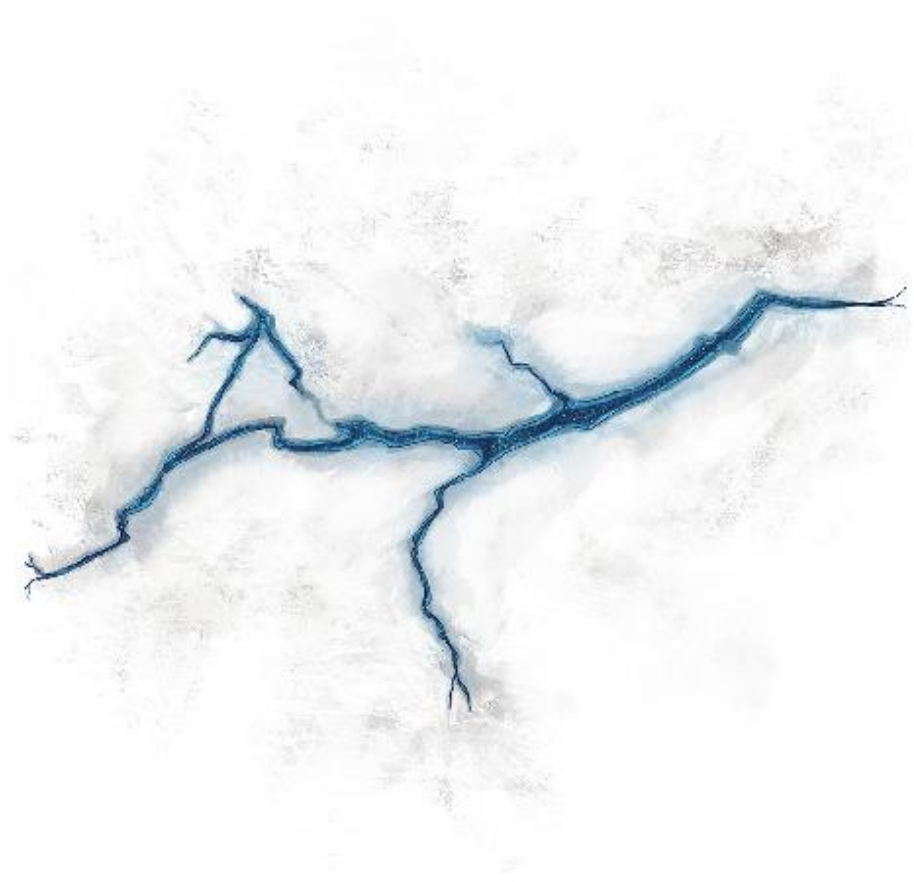
Oliver’s heart beat so violently he became woozy. He looked down at Tau, trembling, wondering if he had just made a mistake. He’d probably saved Tau’s life, but in doing so, Oliver had allowed the ruin of his home and for Emergence to go free. Everyone inside the doorway was now likely dead. His eyes welled up when he looked at the behemoth, feeling a strong sense of betrayal. The feeling was not his own.

“MAY WE FIND EACH OTHER AGAIN, SOMEDAY,” said Emergence in countless voices, their words trailing off into howls of despair. The mountain of corpses faded into the blizzard, vanishing entirely.

They were now alone in the quiet and the dark, in a clearing strangely void of snow.

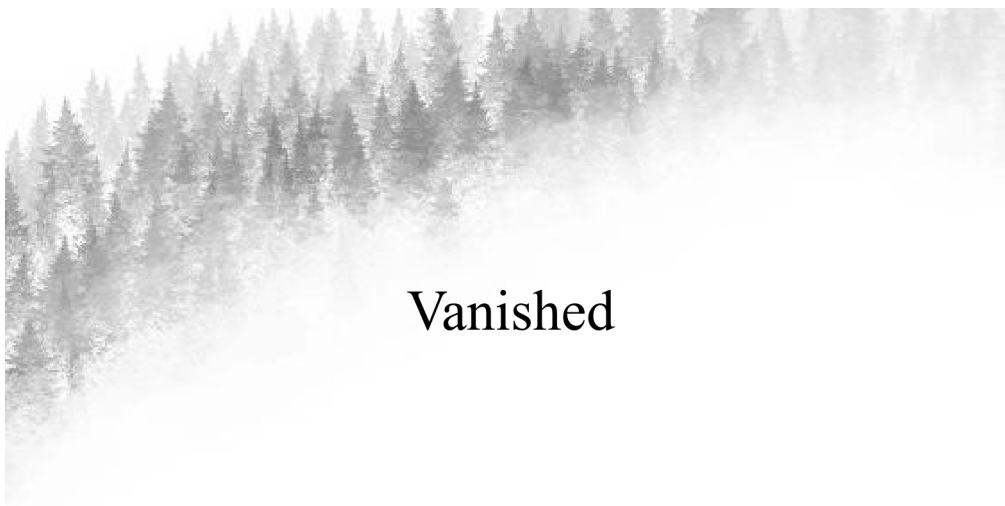
Lucetta and Maji approached, their faces tight with distress.

Hesitantly, Oliver slipped off Tau.





Twenty-Five



Vanished

Tau's mask did nothing to hide the sense of loss and sorrow that spilt from him, washing over Oliver like it was his own grief, breaking open his chest. It took everything he had not to weep.

Tau had just lost *everything*. Other Sentinels, miners, both homes.

And now, Oliver had added to that with betrayal. He didn't know what to say. There was nothing he *could* say. Nothing would make things any better. All he could do was kneel by his side, ignoring the pulsating pain in his face, and wait for Tau to do something other than sit and stare ahead of him.

"I...am so...so sorry." In Tau's faint glow, Maji's eyes were bright. "I didn't want you to die. I just—I knew that trying to transport Emergence would kill you. I'm sorry!"

Oliver bit the inside of his cheek. He was grateful to her for saving Tau, more than he could ever express, but the decision

to make the exchange had not been theirs. He hadn't the right to stop Tau from doing what he thought needed to be done.

"Tau," he croaked, reaching out but not touching, afraid of being shaken off. "I'm—I shouldn't have. My Sentinels, Tau, I'm so sorry."

When the unresponsive moments stretched on, Oliver shuffled closer to stroke the side of his hood.

"Please, Tau."

He didn't know what he was asking for. Forgiveness? He didn't deserve it.

"We tried to help," said Lucetta, standing beside Maji. They were both covered in filth, their skin smudged with tar and dirt. "I'm sorry we were so useless. I'm sorry about your home."

At long last, Tau rose to his feet in one fluid motion. He turned to where the door used to be, and Oliver recognised the distinct sensation of blame directed at him—no, at Tau. He was blaming himself.

"Don't you dare do that!" Oliver moved in front of him so he could look up at his face. "No one is to blame here except Emergence. Do you understand me? We're going to find that bastard and make them pay. I'll do whatever it takes."

"We found Them a few times before, we can do it again," Lucetta murmured.

"It's snowing," Maji said around her sniffling.

Powdery white had come to dust their heads and surrounding grass. So that was it then, the magic that kept this place protected was well and truly gone.

Heart aching, Oliver reached far to cradle Tau's face in both hands. When he didn't move away, Oliver stroked his thumbs across what passed for cheeks.

"We're going to find a way back into your home, okay?" he said, quietly. "There have got to be survivors." He willed his Sentinel to believe him.

Tau lowered, and their foreheads touched. Oliver's eyes drifted shut. He slid his hands down, pressing the palms against the firm chest, feeling for a heartbeat that didn't seem to be there, his own racing. Metal hands came up to cup his face, gently cradling it, and with it came the familiar anodyne glow.

"Thank you," he whispered, the pain in his nose eased.

He stood there with their foreheads still touching, softly stroking the hood for as long as allowed, until Tau eased away.

"Where do we start?" Lucetta's voice was subdued, dragged off by the wind now pulling through the trees and into the clearing.

"The blue doors. They've always led to Emergence, nearly everything blue has I think," said Maji, wiping her face with a sleeve, smearing more blackened filth across.

"Besides the one with Ondine," said Lucetta. "We never went looking for it before. As far as we know, it's random."

And now that Jacob knows about it, I wonder if they're going to hide better." She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, as though uncomfortable when she added, "But... No, that's a terrible idea."

"What is?" asked Oliver.

"Pavlov's mansion."

"That *is* a terrible idea," said Oliver, but Tau dipped his head. "Or a good one? No, no. Definitely a bad idea. We all remember what happened there, right?"

"We could try mining and hope for the best. Might take a long time though," suggested Maji lamely. She huddled near Lucetta, shivering from the cold now congesting the clearing.

"What if we follow Ben? If anyone knows of a way to get into memories like we did, then they'd be in the Library," said Lucetta.

"We could catch up to him too, give him an earful for leaving without a word." Oliver reached out for Tau's hand. When sharp digits threaded with his, he huffed in relief, breath misting before him. Tau wasn't angry with him. "What do you think, Tau? Should we go there?"

His Sentinel didn't do much, so Oliver squeezed his hand, even though he wouldn't feel it. "I know this is a stupid question, but are you okay?"

Again, Tau didn't respond and for the first time, Oliver wondered if maybe he couldn't be heard. He was grieving. That Tau had to do so on his own broke his heart. "I'm really

sorry for everything that's happened. I know... I know I made things worse, I'm sorry. But I'm here for you if you ever need someone to listen."

A gentle tug. Tau pulled Oliver against him, arms encircling his shoulders, holding him tight. In turn, Oliver twined his waist, pressing a kiss to the hard stomach, nuzzling it.

"We should regroup in the mine," said Lucetta. "Pack some things and head for Malimoure."

"How are we going to afford to travel?" Oliver reluctantly pulled away to lead them out of the clearing. "You think having Tau with us is going to help at all?"

"Erm, I don't know. People think he's expired," said Lucetta, walking behind him. At his questioning look, she continued, "The officers you ran away from said so and I...didn't correct them. The announcement is supposed to be in the newspapers by now."

Oliver nibbled his bottom lip in thought. If the authority had been informed, then Pavlov must have told them about it. "Maybe it's better that way. Those who saw him in the mine are probably going to run their mouths though."

"Not if they read the papers," said Maji. "They'll just think Tau is gone again, as long as we hide him."

"We'll get a head start either way," said Lucetta.

Snow filtered past pine branches as they threaded the forest. Tau produced a sphere of light, swinging it off his palm to let it float behind him, more vivid than the one Jacob had stolen.

Oliver realised he didn't know where it might have gone. Most astonishingly, the sphere never vanished, even after Tau was pummelled into a state Pavlov had deemed expired.

“That's some sweet magic you got your hands on, by the way,” said Oliver over his shoulder. He caught a flash of Maji's tired smile. She and Lucetta were walking so close together their arms touched. “I'm jealous. Would love to wield Sentinel magic. What's it like?”

“Exhausting. It takes a lot of focus.”

“Do you think that means Jacob, or maybe Emergence killed a Sentinel to get his magic for him?” asked Oliver. “Which one do you think it was?”

“It was ground related,” said Lucetta.

Maji scoffed. “That's an understatement.”

Suffocating on soil was easily the worst way to go, Oliver decided. “Rho and Gamma are the only ones who have earth-related magic.”

“If any of us ever bothered to read the newspapers,” Lucetta said with a sigh, “we'd know if Rho expired. Gamma has been gone for what, a century now? I doubt Tau will tell us.”

“Maybe one day,” Oliver said with longing. He raised the gauntlet to his lips and pressed a kiss to the back of Tau's hand, ignoring Maji's shocked gasp behind him.

As they neared the edge of the forest and stepped out onto the road, Oliver reflected on how strange it was, surreal almost, to walk a road now abandoned by guards, hidden by

drapes of snow. The flakes melted upon contact with the green sphere trailing after Tau.

He wondered what they would do for money and food while journeying to the war-ravaged lands. How they would fare travelling instead of mining. He opened his mouth to give voice to his musings when a shadow appeared ahead of them. Oliver frowned, unsure of what he was looking at.

Until it hit him like a fist to the gut.

The blue double doors. They had materialised on the road.

Maji bumped into Oliver's back when he came to an abrupt stop, dread twisting his insides. The hollowness he suffered losing Tau was still too fresh on his mind. He didn't want to risk it happening again, he wanted to leave. He wanted to tell Tau to get away, but merely stood there, glued to the spot, watching the doors swing open.

Someone emerged. He didn't know who, unable to see clearly past the white.

Shadowy tendrils shot forward through the snowfall, whipping around Tau's waist and limbs, jerking him out of Oliver's hand. Maji and Lucetta cried out, pushed past him, piling on. They shouted, grasping at Tau's clothes and arms, doing their best to pull him back as their boots scraped across packed dirt.

And all Oliver could do, once again, was look on in horror.

More tendrils entwined Tau's neck, wrenching him out of their desperate grasp. Lucetta and Maji scrambled to follow,

screaming at Oliver to help when Tau's flailing form dragged across the ground through the doorway.

The doors slammed shut with a resounding bang.

Vanished from sight.

The sphere of light fizzled and evaporated like steam.

They were alone in the snowstorm, in the dark.

And Tau was gone.

"Ma-Maji," Oliver gasped. Lucetta and Maji came back to him, panting. He was frozen rigid, it had nothing to do with the weather. "Where... Where?"

"I don't know." Her hand touched his. He jerked back.

"N-No. *No*. Not again!"

Oliver's breath hitched. He fisted his hair and pulled hard. A pain that couldn't compare to the way his heart was tearing itself in half, out of his chest. When he felt hands on him again, he darted forward, to where the doors had appeared.

"Come out, you swiving bastard!"

Nothing appeared, no one showed themselves. No matter how hard he screamed into the speckled void around him, there was nothing. No one answered. Oliver ran down the opposite way. Maji and Lucetta shouted after him. His breath came out in high-pitched gasps, mind and vision a blur.

He was running to Pavlov's estate before his mind could catch up. Past the ornate gates and up the steps, he didn't

expect to find Mister Pavlov sitting by the entrance. Haggard and covered in snow.

“Where is he?!” Oliver bellowed, voice gone hoarse.

“A disaster,” moaned Pavlov, a bottle in his hand. Oliver could smell the stink of whiskey from where he stood. “Everything’s a disaster. So many of my miners, lost!”

“*Where is Tau?*” Oliver stepped closer to the ossified man and yanked him up by his fancy necktie. “Get the blue doors to show, *now!*”

Pavlov’s eyes barely opened when their faces were but a few inches apart. Oliver shook him, his other hand clutching at the yellow cape to pull him further upright. Pavlov whimpered, pathetically, but otherwise said nothing. Oliver slung the man aside, the pained cry and glass shattering only a distant noise as he rammed into the entrance hall.

His gaze fell upon the massive statues of Tau. He released a whimper of his own, unshed tears stinging his eyes.

Everything he did after that passed in a nebulous blur.

Oliver had gone into the storage room to trash it again. When that yielded no results, he found paintings of Ondine. Tore them down, one by one. Nothing. Oliver stormed the mansion, effortlessly throwing aside anyone who got in his way. He destroyed all he could to bring the portal out. It worked for Tau before.

But not for him.

Not even when Oliver stalked back outside and walloped Pavlov in the face. He stared coldly at the man, lip split from where he'd hit him. Pavlov was lucky he hadn't knocked off his jaw.

“I'm going to *kill* you if you don't bring out those doors!”

Lucetta wrapped her arms around him from behind and held tight, easing him away. “Stop. We'll gain nothing by killing him.”

It was a terrible way of learning that until then, Oliver hadn't known what loss truly was. Somehow, they got away from the estate and somehow, returned to the mine. It was the only place they could go. Helen, Anna, and a few of the other survivors stood waiting by the entrance, confused and shivering. Tau's magic would have disappeared from everywhere.

The Tesera Mine was cold and dark and there was very little for them down there. Were it not for Lucetta and Maji, Oliver might have never gone back down.



Two months since he lost Tau and not a day went by that Oliver didn't grapple with the guilt of failing him. Pain clenched his heart in a suffocating grip every day he awoke to remember Tau was gone, if he slept at all.

Most nights, Oliver refused to sleep, unwilling to face another day without his Sentinel as much as he couldn't face

the endless nightmares. Every time he closed his eyes, he dreamt of ghastly, humanoid plants and black insects. They would crawl around him, into him. They would slither under his skin and tear through, turning him inside out.

The Tesera Mine was rebuilt, mostly. Strangely, Sigma was now their Sentinel. Last Oliver heard, Sigma's mine was still active with a little over a hundred miners, the second largest to the Tesera Mine. Their magic was stunning: everything mirrored the night sky while maintaining the light needed to work.

New miners joined. Their numbers increased to thirty strong. Nothing compared to the four-hundred and fifty-eight before, but the place was healing. People were slowly moving on from the horrors that had occurred both within Plainwall and the mine.

Not Oliver. He couldn't.

Because he gave Benjamin every gemstone, they couldn't afford to travel and not for a lack of trying. Oliver even asked Marcy for help. Unfortunately, she had poured her money into the inn and any spare into the fur mantle, something he wore to this day. Rarely did he go without it now.

Its dark grey reminded him of Tau, its tingling like his healing touch. The mantle had the added benefit of never becoming dirty, and for once, he was an effective miner.

Oliver stood looking into the broken mirror that belonged to Benjamin, its wooden frame simple. He had found it on the floor and claimed it. His own mirror had been lost ages ago,

during a fit he pitched when breaking another one of his scissors. Since Benjamin wasn't using it, Oliver was sure he wouldn't mind.

Idly, he brushed his fingers through his hair, now a darkened, ashy shade. His eyes were no longer the bright green they once were, more like the pine forest. He still wasn't used to it, didn't have a clue why his appearance had changed and didn't like it in the slightest.

"You coming, Ollie?" Maji called in through the wide gap in his door. She smiled faintly when entering. "Looking into a broken mirror is considered bad luck, you know."

"Only if you're superstitious."

Which he wasn't.

He had asked them to stop calling him "Sticky" a while ago. Both Lucetta and Maji obliged him right away. He should have asked sooner.

"We still haven't heard from Ben," said Maji on their way down to work. "I think that makes seven telegrams we've sent out now. I hope he's okay."

He and Maji dodged a cluster of miners, some survivors, who glared at Oliver. They were still angry with him for the fire incident.

"He's fine," he said once they reached the cage.

Oliver didn't know how Benjamin fared, there was no way to know. The man had taken on a near-impossible task, but he hoped Benjamin was succeeding in his endeavour. At the very

least, he hoped he would have more luck reaching the Library than they had finding valuables.

Mister Pavlov hadn't shown his face since the night Oliver hit him, although he had resumed his duties as owner of the mine. Every day, Oliver was tempted to go back down and search for the blue doors again. Every single day, he had to resist the urge to beat the living hell out of Pavlov. Lucetta and Maji thankfully kept him in check. They stopped him from committing atrocities with their love and rationale and so, all Oliver could do was mine and hope for the best.

Lucetta was already down in their working drift, along with Helen and Anna. Several weeks into the rebuild, the two had asked to join them. Oliver was pleased to have their help since the two women had an excellent record for finding valuables. Although so far, the only discoveries they made were a few fossils of creatures unknown, and some geodes. They weren't worth a huge amount, but every bit helped.

Oliver was sparing with his money. He had sold off all of his sewing material and anything not nailed down that had some value, hoping to save enough to travel. But the journey to Malimoure was far, treacherous and went in part by sea. It would be an expensive trip. If they wanted to reach the continent themselves, they needed to find more things to sell.

“Good morning, you two,” said Helen with a bright smile.

“Always late,” said Anna, but there was no malice in her words. She was blunt, which Oliver appreciated.

He grabbed a scaling bar and pickaxe out of the hutch near the entrance and set to work in his area. It was the same spot where Maji was pulled free. The stone easily dislodged with each of his controlled jabs. He might have been the most efficient out of them now, but he was still the unluckiest. Oliver had yet to discover anything at all, hadn't even come across any quartz. He was beginning to think he might be cursed.

Until now.

With gloved hands, Oliver pulled schist away, crumbling down by his feet. He observed the vein trailing through the stone in silence. He reached out, fingers trembling.

Softly, the vein glowed sky-blue under his touch.

To Be Continued

Thank you for reading the first instalment of **The Miners Mine** series! The adventure will continue in book two with loads more angst, horror, and sex.

The Miners Mine Tetralogy

Miners of the Mystics ← *You're at the end*

Miners of the Tempest

Miners of the Fortitude

Miners of the Endlong

If you'd be willing to **review** this book on **Amazon** or **Goodreads** to help other readers find this series, I would greatly appreciate it!

About the Author

penny-moss.com

I'm Moss and I like to write. I also like to draw. Mostly, the line at spelling groin as groyne.

Sign up to the [newsletter](#) for news and sneak peeks of chapter art, quotes, etc. You'll also be the first to receive notifications of ARCs for new books by me.



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Thank you to my partner, who continues to and has ensured I'm well fed, helps remind me to go the hell to bed, sometimes dragging me out of it so I'll go to work. Your support is more appreciated than I've likely been able to express.

Blaine Maisey, where do I even begin, in a way that doesn't end up sounding like a love letter?

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Trivia

If you were curious about any of the slang used, here are some definitions.

Applesauce: A very polite way of saying bullshit

Bank's Closed: a 1920s term to say no kissing or making out. Hence, the Bank in MotM (one of the more subtler clues about the time its set in).

Broom-handle: Erection

Butty: A buddy, in particular in coal mining.

Clock-weights: Balls

Cluck: Idiot

Dummock: Buttocks

Gravy: Spunk

Gravy-Maker: Penis

Hockie: Shit

Horsefeathers: Nonsense

Milky: Cowardly

Mucking: Mining term for removing rubble to continue advancing.

Pillock: Penis (you pillock = you dick. Attested to early 1900s, the use of pillock has since changed to mean ‘idiot.’)

Scaling bar: A big fuck off weapon. Basically a spear with one flat end and another sharp end. Used to pry rock away.

Swive/Swived/Swiving: Fuck/Fucked/Fucking

Third Circle of Mining Hell: Just a cute way of referencing the sin of gluttony, something Ollie would be guilty of if given the chance.

Walloper: Erection

Winze: a lil inclined tunnel of death. Serves as a passage from one level to another. They are often flooded and difficult to see when you explore old mines.