

DEEP WAS THE WELL



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Prologue

One night when I was hungry, I met a red-haired man at the edge of a soybean field. He gave me bread to eat and told me the story of who he was.

“But first,” he explained, “You need to know the story of the sad king.”

“Why a sad king?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, we have to begin with sadness. I promise you, though, we will not end there.”

“If you promise me, then I will listen.”

“This is the story as it was told to me. This is part of my story, and your story, too.” He pointed to the beautiful lady and the thin boy nearby. “And it is their story. It is the story that begins with a sad king.”

Once there was a king who loved his queen. It was a rich, glowing type of love. You know, the kind where you almost can't look at the two of them because you know you are watching something holy and intimate. Such was their love that it made the city that they ruled a beautiful place, and the people that they ruled over were beautiful within in it.

There was a magical thing in this city; a well that had no bottom and pulled up water from the secret places where the mountains dig down with their roots. The water was said to impart a certain knowledge to all who drank from it. Those who had this knowledge were fine-tuned to sense the emotions of those around them; this ability allowed them to issue forth healing with their hands and their voices. The city built a house around the mouth of the well, and all newborn babies were given a drink of the cool water within their first few days.

The people created a magnificent place, there in the crags of the mountains. They built white towers and pinnacles that rose up from the boulder fields and aspen groves and shimmered like the diamonds of a left-hand ring. They had a love that was as fierce as the land around them. They loved to learn, to feast, to dance, to create, but most of all, they loved love itself.

There came a spring day when the queen and her babies were playing at the edge of the river, taking care to keep to the shallow places where the glacial melt did not rage and rush. The littlest one, a sprightly girl with inkspot curls and eyes the color of the ocean followed the path of some curious flying thing and tumbled into the current headlong. Few people, if they are not mothers or fathers themselves, understand the ferocity that accompanies such a role. The queen had three children; she knew this feeling well. Before anyone had the sense to understand what was happening, she had thrown herself in after the child.

The attendants gathered their wits and staged a rescue of the two. The queen being the stronger swimmer, they reached her first and took hold of her arms.

She would have none of it.

“My girl!” She begged. “Save my girl, you fools!” And because she was the queen, they had no choice but to obey her and focus their efforts on the baby.

The girl was pulled from the current, waterlogged and badly frightened, but otherwise very much alive.

The queen had drifted far downstream by then, beyond the sight and aid of the crowd on the banks.

Her body was never found. They say that she rode the river for many miles and eventually washed out to sea, and that is why the ocean writhes with never-ending sadness.

Because she had no final place of rest, the entire city became a memorial to her passing. The people wore the cumbersome garment of their mourning for many days. Flowers closed their petals tight against the sadness. The sun hid his face from the crying. The chagrined river dwindled down to a trickle as if to atone for its terrible deed.

The little girl pulled from the rapids was never allowed to forget that she lived because the queen did not. Her existence became defined by a guilt that could never be relieved.

Such a guilt festers until it grows into a black hole that devours light and air and matter.

And the king?

First, he denied her death.

“Stop your crying, children! She will come back, any day now.” He would say as he walked the halls of the castle. “She was a fine swimmer; I’m sure she’s just enjoying the summer in the country.” Or, “She had always wanted to visit the sea. Perhaps we will join her in the fall.”

When she failed to return, he grew dark with anger. He became a cyclone that left a wake of broken furniture, shattered windows, and ringing ears wherever he went. The city walked on eggshells for months and the daughter who lived was sent away for her own safety.

The anger shifted and sharpened itself as the king attempted to make a bargain with death.

“If only I had been there when it happened!”

“If the attendants had just done their job and saved her!”

“If the child had been more careful!”

But we all know that no amount of bargaining will bring back the things that we have lost.

Finally, the king fell into a long, dusky depression. Or, perhaps more accurately, he threw himself into the yawning chasms that sadness cracks open in our hearts, and there he rolled and tossed and folded into his grief. It burned in his throat and tracked salty, stinging trails around his eyes until they were too swollen to greet the bitter daybreak. It was a moan that could not be voiced, a cry that shuddered in his lungs, and the perennial visitor that he could not rid himself of.

This went on for months. Outside, the people whispered in the streets and the white buildings crumbled under the long reign of sorrow.

On a cold night, in that terrible place of exhaustion beyond the aid of sleep, the king decided that one thing and one thing alone had brought on this nightmare: emotion. His wife’s love for their daughter had been her demise, and the king’s own inconsolable grief was wreaking havoc on the city.

“I must stop it.” He muttered, repeating the words until they a mantra of sorts and eventually grew to be his sole purpose for continuing with life. He reached deep into his heart and tried as he could to stop the emotions that beat against his chest with bruised and frantic wings. But you know, and I know, that no such thing is possible. One can never fully shut down the process – physical, mental, and emotional – of feeling. Grieving and celebrating, despair and joy; all of these things are woven into the fabric of what we are.

So the king set off into the night and sought out a pathway seldom taken that lead up into the mountain passes, clinging to an agonized hope. He was following a myth; the tale of a man who practiced such arts that could alter the human will, mind, and emotions. A sorcerer who had long ago left the brightness of the city to hide away with his dark spells and potions and was only now spoken of in fearful whispers by young children. No one knew for sure if he even existed.

Higher into the mountains the king stumbled. His mind had tricked him into believing that relief from this burden of feeling was within reach if only he could find the sorcerer.

“I can fix this.” He told himself as the rocks banged against his shins and the coarse branches of the timberline brushed his face. “I can fix this.”

He must find the man. He must make things right once more. For himself. For the kingdom. He must never again feel the unending, gnawing ache of grief that had become his waking nightmare. ..

Just when the sheer force of his emotions threatened to overwhelm him, he pitched forward into a clearing. There stood a crumbling shack, with a lone light burning in the window.

Part One: Birth

But you can't start. Only a baby can start. You and me - why, we're all that's been. The anger of a moment, the thousand pictures, that's us. This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us. We can't start again.

- John Steinbeck

01. A Boy with Dreams

There was no sense to be found in dreams.

Noa Ryverson expected one simple thing out of life: that it should make sense. Therefore, he thought it was unfortunate to find himself shoved backwards through all five stages of sleep at approximately 5:24am on the 5th day of June in his 26th year.

It wouldn't be fair to say that he was entirely unprepared for the first sensation transmitted throughout his brain by the chatter of his neurons. He and this reaction were well acquainted.

Years of similar mornings had marked pathways in his mind and taught him how to respond to this idiosyncratic way of re-entering the waking world. Four deep breaths. In through his nose. Down through his diaphragm. Expanding in his lungs. Moving oxygen through his veins. Back out through the mouth. Repeat three more times. And then he was here once again, and here that was in his own bed in the attic where he lived, with the long row of windows facing west across a city that had yet to begin its circadian rhythm. Here was the promise of daybreak just on the edge of being fulfilled. Here was a pair of freckled hands that were slowly releasing their grip on the corner of his sheets.

Somewhere out in the grey pre-dawn, a clock named Chronos was chiming.

What remained of his adrenaline slunk away with the last exhale as he turned an ear to the sound. It was a perennial thing, constant, reliable. Time made sense. It moved forward with ease and never bothered to look back on the days it left behind. The chime, bottomless in tone and polite in volume, confirmed that it was indeed 5:30am. This was something that Noa had already guessed. He read the slant of the shadows on the white buildings and his seven pieces of furniture the way that some people might read a book. Although there was satisfaction in being right, it did remind him that his recommended eight hours of rest had been cut short by forty-five minutes, and sleep deprivation wasn't good for his mental or physical well-being.

Noa reached for the small bottle on his nightstand and skimmed the text: "Take two capsules one hour prior to sleeping, with water to ensure a night of undisturbed rest".

He sat up and rested his elbows on his knees, rubbing his left ear as he lapsed into thought. There was an unassuming, half-circle of tissue missing from his upper cartilage that he often rubbed between his thumb and index finger. Something about the familiar texture of it helped him to focus. He was debating whether or not to report back to the physician he had been seeing for the past several weeks, since the problem had started affecting his ability to sleep. He knew from his own research that the most recent dosage was one of the strongest prescriptions available for his symptoms. It served to reason that an eight-hour stint of rest shouldn't be much to ask.

To add insult to injury, the capsules had also given him a headache.

No, this was definitely not good for him.

Sleep withholding itself, he pushed back his blankets and stretched. He often found that the best remedy for that which didn't make sense was to move forward with something predictable, and going through his morning routine seemed a good way to do this. He ate his breakfast portion. He showered. He straightened his apartment. Finally, he tucked his helmet under one arm and slung his satchel over his shoulders with the other, allowing the door to click behind him like a well-placed period at the end of a sentence. He had made a game of his extra forty-five minutes, spreading the time out over the morning so that there would be no standing around and counting wasted seconds. The result was that most of the tension had left his muscles as he tossed a leg over his bicycle and waited for a break in the traffic flowing by the long row of the stucco houses where he lived.

Noa's mind, which he had kept so disciplined since waking, crept quietly away from him as he watched the pedestrians and other cyclists going by.

He was thinking over his conversation with the physician from the day before.

“Sir, have you ever heard of someone having pictures playing in their brain while they’re asleep, almost of their own volition?”

With a scratch of his hollow cheeks that hinted at his confusion, the physician had asked Noa to recount the specifics of the pictures. A knot formed between his shoulder blades as he answered. Despite the fact that this dream – as he had learned it was called – had been a visitor of his every night of his life for as long as he could remember, he spoke in short, rough clips as he replayed the memory of cold water rushing past him, covering his head, filling his mouth and nose.

“Drowning,” the doctor explained. *“Your mind is playing out a scenario where you are drowning. This is what happens when a human body is submerged in water and is unable to take in oxygen. Typically, one would experience this in bodies of water that move with a very fast current or that is of a depth that is above one’s head.”*

At least it had a name. Names meant that research had been done and studies documented. A name was somewhat placating.

“But why do these pictures, or these experiences, play out in my brain while I’m asleep?”

“Well, this occurrence is something known as dreaming, Noa. It is a malfunction of the human mind in which it unnecessarily simulates a scenario – imagined or actually experienced, pleasant or painful. People typically have evolved beyond the ability to dream; we haven’t treated this for many years now.”

“What purpose do they serve?”

“They don’t serve a purpose. It’s a misfire, that’s all.”

There was his break in traffic. Noa reigned in his rouge thoughts and took his place among the rest of the commuters. A full spectrum of color, some on bikes, some on foot, moved uphill with purpose towards the Halcyon city center. There were the Educators in pale yellow jackets, physicians and their aides in crisp whites, Civil Matters clerks whose dour beige he usually flicked over quickly... and there was himself, of course. His light blue shirt, buttoned neatly down the front, marked the exclusivity of his Role. Noa was a Climate Engineer. They were a small subset within the framework that ran the city; only one other person in the crowd wore the same color, and she, Mae, was walking several yards away from the bike lane that he was traveling in. Noa waved at her as he passed. Symian and Nico, their fellow Climate Engineers, commuted in from the outskirts of the city via the Underground.

Noa was something of a long-limbed, gangly boy. As such, he completed his one-point-six mile commute in fifty-three seconds less than the average cyclist. It almost made all of the ducking through doorways and tugging his shirt sleeves down over his wrists worthwhile. He slid his bike to a stop and removed his helmet, waiting for Mae to break her way out of the crowd and join him as they climbed the steps to their Contribution Site.

“Morning, Noa. Say, you look tired. Are you still having trouble sleeping?”

Two months shy of her fortieth year, Mae Hammond moved with careless posture that took away nothing from her gracefulness. Her head was crowned with close-fitting dark hair; over the past few months, it had begun to accumulate streaks of silver that caught the sunlight spilling over her desk. The mother of a six-year-old girl, she occasionally forgot to switch out of parenting mode when she interacted with the rest of the world, sprinkling her conversations with reminders to sit up straight if she caught them slouching or take a walk if they had been sitting too long. Noa, as the youngest Climate Engineer was a likely target for this. He did his best to respond with tact while still asserting his maturity. The idea of being parented as a twenty-six-year-old was of no use to him.

“I’m working on it. Good morning to you, too.” Noa punched in his code on the keypad and held the door as Mae went through. The undeniable scent of new carpeting greeted them. Climate Research had been completely gutted and remodeled last year; the bland cubicles changed out for an open work floor that boasted floor-to-ceiling windows in every direction but north. It had been 374 days since the installation of the light blue carpeting, with four sets of feet walking the length and width of it for eight hours a day. The smell remained as unworn as ever.

“Still smells like new.” He quipped, sitting down at his desk and plugging his tablet into the dock.

“You say that every morning.” Symian remarked as he walked in the door. His broad frame, shaped into square angles by his time spent as an athlete during his Upper Education years, settled against the cushions of his desk chair with a routine sigh. Despite what his appearance suggested, Symian was benign in personality; he spoke in short, easy sentences and navigated his way through the beginning of his fiftieth decade without much fuss.

“What can I say? I take satisfaction in the predictable.” Noa lightly swiveled his chair back and forth as the transparent monitors surrounding his desk came to life. They responded to a few staccato taps of his fingertips, displaying the view from the top of Chronos. The four faces of the clock rose high above the city, a consistent reminder of the steady, kinetic motion of time.

“Speaking of predictability,” Mae shot a glance out the window nearest her desk. “Nico is late. Again.”

“I most definitely take satisfaction in that.” One corner of Noa’s mouth tugged upwards. Nico Johnson was their Supervising Engineer. He was known for never being on time as much as he was known for talking too loudly and too often as he strolled by their desks smelling of poorly-selected aftershave.

“When are they going to make you the boss?” Symian was studying his own monitors and stroking his pronounced chin. “We all know that you run the place.”

While Symian tended to over simplify when it came to details, in this case, he wasn’t exaggerating. Noa was responsible for operation of the reactor that rose up from the heights of Chronos and controlled the climate of Halcyon. His fingers determined how much sun, cloud cover, or rainfall would be allowed within the 180,000 square miles of the city limits. He ensured that the warm day temperatures were ideal for crop production and that the cool night temperatures provided the rest period that their grains and soybeans needed.

Put into simple terms, Noa was the weather of Halcyon.

The general population made this out to be something of a glamorous Role, and Noa a celebrity within it. He knew better. He knew that behind every afternoon undimmed by storm clouds, or every cool evening rain was a framework of variables and numbers and chart readings from years of data. This many inches of rain yielded this many pounds of food, divided by the current population with different caloric and nutritional needs to take into account based off of levels of physical activity, age, size... the whole process really came down to mathematics.

Fortunately, for everyone involved, Noa had a mind that had been built for numbers.

At 10:45am, he stood and counted the series of quiet pops as he stretched his muscles. Midmorning rest periods were in place to help encourage activity, physical or mental. He kept a tangram puzzle in the bottom of a desk drawer, often using it to keep his mind alert. It was supposed to form 102 different shapes; to date, he was at 89. His goal was to form 103 shapes, simply to see if it could be done.

Today, however, he had another matter to attend to.

Noa possessed a unique combination of curiosity and confidence. If, by small chance, some uncertainty or lack of understanding slipped through the cracks of his calculating mind, he set out to learn all that he could about that thing until he knew how to corner and cage it. The unknown presented him with a challenge, and the events of the morning had brought him to a conclusion: his dreaming malfunction had long outlived its feral days.

The whole concept was so absurd that it made him certain a solution had to exist. If the physician couldn’t find it, perhaps Noa’s tenacity could.

It made sense to start with medical records. After all, if a physician knew about the malfunction, there must be some history of treating it. Maybe from those forgotten centuries, before they had perfected the immune system with all of their advancements in the science of human behavior.

He hesitated mid key-stroke, tapping his fingertips together. Technically, he was using his Contribution clearance to do personal research, and Noa questioned the wisdom of this. He dismissed the thought, reasoning that 15 minutes spent minding his own well-being would be worth it if he could start sleeping again. The average hour of sleep lost translated into 20 minutes of wasted productivity throughout the day. This amounted to nearly 87 hours of wasted productivity in any given year, and when he thought of it this way, it became much easier to rationalize his actions. His personal well-being would ultimately affect his Contribution performance, and so this wasn’t simply benefiting him as much as it was benefiting his Site and Halcyon as a whole

That being settled, Noa moved on.

The information was harder to find than he had assumed. With four minutes and thirty-eight seconds remaining of his morning rest period, he finally located a short list of individuals— two males and one female in the last century, and none in the last fifty years. He scribbled down the names and stuck them in his pocket to revisit over the midday hour.

Chronos' final noon chime was still ringing in the warm air when Noa left Climate Engineering. His destination was an impassive square of a building that stretched for several blocks in all directions, four doors down from his Site. Within the marble walls of this structure, there existed birth, death, and every notable detail that occurred between the two. This was Archives - a bloated monument to nothing other than the eternal cataloguing of human records.

Noa rarely visited the Site. He dealt with numbers, not actual citizens. A Physician or an Infrastructure Advisor might be more familiar with the cavernous hallways, and the steel shelving units that crept along on silent gears at the push of a button. The place was plain to the point of a headache, all squares, crisp corners and very little color or even windows, with the intention that it would convey order and efficiency. To use any of its appearance on inspiration would have been a waste.

The receptionist was stamping files when Noa entered. Without stopping the continual *clump, clump* of her work, she smiled at him with all twenty of her front teeth and offered her assistance.

"I'm looking for the following records." Trying not to get too distracted with the extent of her manufactured efforts at being polite, Noa unfolded his scrap of paper and handed it to her. "Lilith Jackson, Avery Langdon, and Mark Burris."

Still smiling and still stamping, she asked him to take a seat while she pressed a button on the panel behind her desk. While he waited for a clerk to come and escort him through the building, he noticed her noticing him.

It was something that he had come to expect. He was significant; everyone knew his Role and how it affected them, but it went beyond that. He also had to up with the peeks at his hair that was an obnoxious red instead of dark brown, or the craning looks of confusion at his six-foot-two height that topped out at least four inches above anyone else. There were the freckles to take in as well; hundreds of them that peppered his skin and made him an anomaly in a sea of pale, smooth complexions. If someone was particularly observant and a little bit liberal with their stares, they would also notice that he was the one person in the city whose irises weren't brown or grey. Noa had green eyes, nearly yellow, the color of faded soybean leaves in August.

Any one of these physical traits would have been enough to raise eyebrows. The combination of them landed Noa far outside of the context of normality; he was a class of his own. There was no appropriate length of hair or expected gestures, no behavior that seemed out of place when it came from him.

Noa was clever. He believed in making good use of what resources were available, and as such, he had learned to work his differences this in his favor. No one had been surprised when he had landed a Role as a Climate Engineer at such a young age.

"Oh, that's just Noa. He's something else." And with a nod of their heads, they moved on.

Even so, there were times when the discreet gawking grew tiresome. He wasn't in the mood for it this afternoon, and wondered why the clerk was taking so long. Noa crossed his legs, resting his ankle on top of his opposite knee and tapping his foot on the floor. Fiddling with his shoelaces, he concentrated on the *clump-clump* of the stamp, counting the length of each successive mark. Four seconds, on average. If that receptionist worked the generic eight-hour work day and stamped without interruptions, she might stamp upwards of seven thousand, two hundred files –

"Sorry, Celya. I was buried in the back corner of my hallway. Took me awhile to get down here."

He glanced up. Celya the Stamper was flashing her garish smile at a girl standing in front of her desk with her back turned to him.

"I'm sure. Here, Mr. Ryverson is looking for these files. Would you mind escorting him?" She nodded at Noa. "You can follow Miss Thilleste."

Without a word, the clerk had already begun to head down the main corridor towards the first floor lifts. Noa came behind. Miss Thilleste must not have thought much of formalities; she hadn't taken the time to introduce herself or even say hello. He shook his head. There was a reason that some people were receptionists and others spent most of their day hidden from the public.

He often made a game of meeting new people in which he attempted to guess every numeric measurement of the person – height, weight, age, and sometimes, for an added challenge, obscure things like shoe sizes and heart rates. Part of his reason for doing this was that he enjoyed the process of finding out if he was right, and part of it

was wishful thinking that he might someday come across another person with physical features that strayed, even a little, from average. The girl's face was angled away from him, which meant a lack of source material to work with. He would have to do his best.

Height was easy. Five feet, one and three-quarters of an inch. She was a slight thing, though not the breakable type like Celya who sat behind a desk and smiled over her delicate fingers. This girl was lithe and sinewy, built for walking the long hallways and climbing the ladders that reached up to infinity. Somewhere in the range of 119 pounds, if he had to guess. Judging by the length of her hair, she was just out of the classrooms of Contribution School, between twenty-one and twenty-two years old. Dark curls congregated against the collar of her navy Archives shirt and waved their flyaway tendrils in the artificial breeze of her forward motion.

She was what one might expect from a female of her age group, with an exception: the peculiar way that she carried herself. It wasn't that she limped or walked too fast or too slow; in fact, Noa had a hard time pinpointing it. Something about the way that she held herself together, traveling close to the wall as though the space in the building was a live thing that might swallow her whole...

When they reached the lifts, he had his first glance at her face.

He had been off on two counts: one was that she was older than her hair length suggested. Twenty-four, perhaps? Not quite his age, but older than a graduate.

It had also been incorrect to think of her as average.

She was – in general. But Noa never took in the world with broad strokes. His brain was fine-tuned for detail, and in this sense, the clerk was fascinating.

He started where most people often finished with him – the eyes. Miss Thilleste was wearing glasses; an accessory that appeared on a handful of the older generations only because they chose to continue wearing them out of habit. Why anyone younger than eighty would have them was a puzzle, and what lay behind the frames was equally unusual. She had large eyes, almost too large given the shape of her face. They were blue. No, they were green. More aqua, perhaps. He was having a hard time telling the exact shade beneath the fluorescents.

This detail got the better of his curiosity, like an itch that begged to be scratched.

In all of his twenty-six years and eighty-nine days of living, he had never seen eyes that color. Up until now, he had assumed that the entire world had either brown eyes or grey eyes except for him. This girl had proven him wrong a third time.

Seeing pieces of our own abnormalities jumping off of another face plays a game with our minds. It can pick at the seams of your identity or it can pull the threads tighter as it becomes better defined. It can make you want to know their idiosyncrasies or it can threaten the routine of your exclusivity. In Noa's case, the Archives clerk was the most interesting person that he had come across for some time.

"She means well."

"Hmm?" Up until then, the girl hadn't spoken. Having accepted that perhaps she wasn't going to anytime soon, Noa had been entirely absorbed in his analysis of her.

"Celya. Our receptionist." The lines on her face softened, opening up in response to something that she found entertaining. She just about to smile and Noa found himself returning the gesture.

"I'm sure she's just very good at what she does."

"She is."

She resumed her silence, and Noa resumed his observation.

The rest of her features had no real significance. He had seen the high cheekbones and the sharp nose on other women before. This was unfortunate. At the rate things had been going, he had half-expected a third lip or a second chin.

Realizing he had forgotten one detail, he glanced at her name badge.

Z. Thilleste.

"Z for?" He asked.

"Oh," she said as she unlatched the door to the lift on the second floor, "Zefyr. Z for Zefyr."

It was an old-fashioned name. Probably not even in use anymore. Yet on this girl, who tiptoed the line between average and extraordinary, it made sense.

They passed four side galleries before they turned left.

“It’s retired.” She sat down at a narrow desk, and Noa pulled up the chair across from her.

“Beg your pardon?”

“My name.” She entered her information in quick taps on the tablet in front of her. “I was born shortly before the numerical naming experiment. When the studies showed that people responded better to a real name instead of a number, they revised the naming database.” The corners of her mouth turned up. “Zefyr didn’t make the cut, though. Too impractical, that’s my guess.”

“So, it’s possible that you’re the last Zefyr?”

“I suppose it is!” She slid the tablet across the desk so that he could begin filling out the bottom section. “And you’re Noa, one of many Noas, but the only Noa Ryvverson, right?”

“Apparently, I’m hard to miss.”

Her eyes kept sneaking upwards. At first, he assumed that she was looking at the absurdity of his hair. But no, she seemed to be studying something just to the left.

“That must have hurt.” She nodded towards his ear, and Noa unconsciously reached up and put his hand on it. Normally, a lock of hair hung over the missing piece. Now that the temperatures would be warming up for the growing season, he’d had it cut short.

“Honestly, I don’t even remember.”

“How did it happen?”

“I was six or so. I ran into a metal gate with my bike and ripped a chunk of my ear off.”

“So now there’s a gate somewhere in Halcyon with a piece of you hanging from it.”

His mouth involuntarily mirrored hers as she continued to smile at him. It was a genuine expression, he realized; he already knew that she didn’t think much of manners.

“I’ve never gone back to look for it.” He typed in his code and handed the tablet back to her.

“Don’t you ever feel like something is missing?”

“Not in particular.” A cup of brown liquid was sitting on the desk, letting off curls of steam. Noa took it to be coffee – a caffeinated beverage was avoided in general due to the studies on its addictive qualities. Some people took it as a stimulant to counteract a lack of sleep, but even this was rare.

“Long night?” He asked, nodding his head towards the cup.

Zefyr became very intent on her tablet.

“You might say that. They’re doing some improvements on the water recycling system in my housing unit.” She spared a hand from her typing to wrap it around the cup and move it closer to her, as if to hide it from view. “Maybe they haven’t worked out all of the issues. It makes a racket during the night.” Pushing her chair away, she stood. “I’ll be right back with those files.”

Noa watched her shadowing the massive shelves, counting in a whisper as she went along. There it was again; the quiet way that she acted out her footstep as though she were holding something sacred inside of her bones. He had picked up on it in their conversation as well. Almost timidity, but no, that wasn’t quite how he would have described it. It was too intentional. Every movement, every word spoken in soft alto tones was carefully considered and seemed to come up from a long way down, making its appearance as an easy smile and a cadence that suggested a conscientious interaction with the space around her.

Up the ladder.

A half-second of hesitation before she grabbed the files.

Down the ladder.

Back towards the table.

Quick footsteps.

98 per minute?

“Did either of your parents have red hair?” She slid back into her seat.

“Oh, no. I mean, I wouldn’t know. I don’t have parents.”

“Everyone has parents.” She raised an eyebrow at him.

“I never knew them. I was a ward of the city.”

The amusement left her face, like children caught in a rainstorm.

“I’m sorry, it was rude of me to ask.”

“It’s no bother. You can’t miss what you never had”

“You must get sick of people asking you about your hair.” She was pulling out the contents of the three files and laying them across the table between them.

“Actually, you’re one of the first to ask. Most people just stare and point.” Noa leaned forward and tried to read the information upside down. “Do either of your parents have blue eyes?”

In a subtle slip of her mannerisms, she started in her chair. Just as soon as he caught it, she composed herself and left Noa to wonder if he had really seen her strange reaction at all. She adjusted her glasses and studied the brown files in front of them.

“Interesting request you have here. These were the last dreamers.”

This was so unexpected that Noa set aside how nonchalant she had been about ignoring his question.

“You’ve heard about dreaming?”

“You hear a lot as an Archives clerk.”

“I suppose you would. You get to see all of our secrets, don’t you?”

“Only the dead ones.” She gestured around her. “Living files aren’t my department. So, don’t fret. I have no details on your sordid past as a street urchin. Although I am curious...” she raised an eyebrow at him. “Why the interest in dreaming?”

He could have said anything and she wouldn’t have questioned it. Nobody ever did. But the more he tried to think of a way to downplay the question, the less he wanted to. Why shouldn’t he tell her? It made sense; she could keep a secret, couldn’t she? She did it day in and day out.

“It’s for personal research.” He admitted. “Technically, I’m using my Contribution clearance for something unrelated – “

“You have dreams?” Curiosity leapt off of her features. “For how long?”

“All of my life. Twenty-six years and eighty-nine days, to be exact.”

“That’s amazing. Do you have any idea why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you dream?”

“There’s no reason for it. The physician described it as a malfunction of the mind.”

“Did he?” Zefyr leaned back in her seat.

“I take it that you have your own theories?”

“I do, actually. We dream about things that we can’t resolve.”

Perhaps telling her hadn’t been his most clever idea to date.

“I guarantee that’s not the issue in my case.”

“What do you dream about?”

“Drowning. And for the record, I’ve never even been swimming.”

She rubbed her knuckles against each other, the lines around her nose wrinkling.

“It’s just my theory, that’s all.” She said at last. “Here, I’ll let you do what you came here to do.”

She slid all three data files into her tablet and started to rattle off instructions on using the viewing program. She stopped after a moment, as though something had occurred to her midway through the lesson.

“You know what you’re doing, don’t you?”

“I think I can figure it out.”

“Right.” She nodded. “Take as long as you need. I’ll be just down the hall.” She stood and left Noa to his own devices.

All three citizens had started out with similar symptoms to his: recurring dreams that they couldn’t explain. Like him, the malfunction began to affect their ability to sleep through the night. All had seen physicians, all been prescribed with the same medication that Noa had sitting on his bedside table. As he flipped back and forth between the records, patterns began to surface in their later years.

Inability to sleep more than 1-2 hours.

Difficulty regulating body temperature.

Significant lapses in memory.

Cognitive impairment.

These symptoms varied in intensity, but the patients had one thing in common: they all developed chronic insomnia. It overshadowed every aspect of their lives; their Roles, their family obligations, even their ability to hold a conversation.

It got worse after that.

Lilith Jackson died at 43 years of age.

Avery Langdon died two years earlier than her.

Mark Burris didn't even make it into his fortieth decade. His death certificate was dated three days before his thirty-fourth birthday.

Noa set the tablet down and counted his breathes.

Five seconds per breath, thirty breaths a minute, times sixty times twenty four times three hundred sixty-five times eight, minus eighty-nine days worth of breathes –

Chronos was chiming, reminding Noa that his midday break had come to a close and that he was wasting his remaining 245,635,200 seconds. He stood up and pushed his chair back in. His body wasn't reacting well to the news; he shoved his shaking hands into his pockets and traced the seams to give them something to do other than hang uselessly at his side.

"Any luck?"

Noa had nearly forgotten about the girl who had been shelving files twenty feet away. He watched the repetitive motion of her arms reaching and lowering as he opened his mouth to answer and then closed it when he couldn't think of anything to say.

Zefyr stopped her chore and closed the distance between them.

"Is everything alright? You look like you found something you didn't want to find."

"Have you read these files?"

"Not recently. Why?"

"Dreaming seems to eventually induce chronic insomnia."

"Oh." She looked away. "I take it that's not a good thing?"

"No. It...well, it results in a shortened lifespan."

She was running her fingers over the wood grain of her desk, the corners of her mouth turned down. Noa didn't know if she would reply, or if she did, what she would reply with. Her only involvement with him was the information blinking up from the screen of her tablet. The fact that she was watching him trying to absorb the possibility of his future dissolving sometime in the next ten years was coincidence.

"Thanks for your help with those files." He nodded to the table.

"I'm sorry there weren't more welcoming secrets in them."

"Well, you don't write the contents."

She looked up from her preoccupation with the desk.

"If you needed anything else... you know, in terms of research, I might be able to help."

Grey. Her eyes were also grey. A slender ring at the edge of her irises that hemmed in the blues and greens. Noa caught sight of it just as he turned away.

"I'll keep that in mind."

Symian and Mae were discussing their offspring again.

"...so, Lynette has moved on to bird taxonomy. It's a relief, to be honest. I thought we were never going to get past reptiles."

"Archaic stuff, isn't it? Tyler had to learn all of the same things. I guarantee, he'll never use it."

"You never know." Noa called back from the driver's seat of the Aubade. "Lynette might end up in Food Production. She'll need to study animal behavior if she does."

“She’s already decided that she wants to work in City Defense, like Jerome. Personally, I think she just prefers the red uniforms.” In the rearview mirror, Noa caught Mae doing her best to stretch out her legs in the passenger area.

Halcyon operated on a conveyor belt of order and efficiency. If you could not walk where you needed to go, you rode a bicycle. If you could not bike, you rode the Underground. It had been nearly a century since anyone had thought of needing a personal vehicle. Within the city nowadays, only two such machines existed, and Noa was driving one of them. Aubades were sleek, durable inventions that moved like whispers through the mountain passes. They were powered by solar cells, and built to withstand the terrain without much objection. While they were ingenious in their durability, they lacked anything resembling comfort. Noa typically offered to drive to avoid cramming his long legs into the passenger area.

“We’d better stop, Mae.” Symian was working on a mental puzzle, his thick fingers wrestling with reassembling the wooden slots. “You know how tiresome Noa finds these conversations.”

“Poor boy. Wait until he has a brat of his own.”

“Ah, but that would require finding him a spouse. Bound to be difficult. I have serious doubts about Civil Matters dredging up a female of his caliber.”

“You two are hilarious.” Noa remarked. “Really, I can hardly contain my amusement.”

“Systemized co-habitation and reproduction is a benefit to our fine society, Noa.” Symian was reciting one of Halcyon’s many by-laws, his voice droning in an imitation of the webcasts they had all watched during their Upper Education years.

They were making their quarterly trip to a weather stations housed in the mountain peaks. There were four stations, one for each navigational point. Once a year, every station required an inspection and fine-tuning, a responsibility fell into the lap Climate Engineering.

Boredom, dripping like a leaky faucet, came easily to Noa during these trips. While at their workstations, Symian and Mae mostly kept their heads bent over their tasks. When they talked, they spoke about the climate and crop yields and compared charts and graphs – all things that he understood. However, in a cramped vehicle carrying them 15,000 feet above sea level, they entered into a three-hour stretch of isolation from the city. Their tablets couldn’t connect to the Network while in transit. Nico was not there to ask unnecessary questions while leaning on their desks with his sweaty palms. Out of their routines, the pecking order of topics between Symian and Mae typically ended up on the subject of children, something that transmitted as white noise to Noa’s ears. His attempts at joining the conversation were often not worth the effort, as had been proven minutes before. He knew nothing about children. Was it reasonable for a six-year-old to already know what Contribution role she wanted? And since when did the color of a uniform play any part in that decision?

The tinted windshield could only block out so much of the glare reflecting off of the snow pack, emphasizing what he already knew: this was ugly land, inhabitable beneath the blanket of ice and hyperborean temperatures. The mild climate of the city made it even more unattractive to him. There, everyone knew what to expect at any given moment. Here, the storms rolled in without warning, ripping apart the warmest layers and grinding away at anything not made of stone and steel. The emptiness, the long drive, the irrelevant conversation – all of it exhausted Noa, and the last thing he wanted to have to think about was his exhaustion.

He didn’t need to be reminded that his dreams were killing him.

“Darn these seats. Like sleeping on a marble bed.” Directly behind him, Symian was squirming. The creaking springs, too loud in the small vehicle, decided to pick a personal battle with his nerves. “Hey Noa, when they make you the boss, how about you redesign these rigs? Give us a little leg room, at least.”

“Better yet,” Mae piped in. “You could make those blasted weather stations inspect themselves!”

In spite of his negative outlook on the world in general, Noa gave in to the response of his facial muscles pulling the corners of his mouth upward.

The dome of the station, set like a diamond on the crest of the mountain, glinted against the impossible blue of the sky. Mae leaned forward and pointed at it.

“Good old East Crest. That’s my favorite one.” She studied the display on the dash of the vehicle and checked her notes. “According to this morning’s report, we have approximately twenty-three minutes of clear weather, if we arrive on schedule.”

And I have approximately 245,462,400 seconds left, give or take.

Noa shook himself. Two days later and reality hadn’t made much of an effort at being kinder to him. He knew it was better keep those thoughts to the side, but it wasn’t easy; he felt more like he was releasing them into the orbit of his periphery instead of throwing them out of sight.

He shifted his concentration back to driving the Aubade. Really, the vehicle was brilliant. It’s response to his hands was intuitive. Predictable. It did exactly what was expected of it –

Noa hung on to the tail-end of this thought as he slammed his foot on the brake pedal.

“What in Halcyon, Noa?” Symian turned around in his seat, his face rearranged into thick lines and furrowed eyebrows.

Noa didn’t reply. All of his attention was focused on the sight just beyond the tinted windshield.

He saw the boulder tips sticking out of the snow like crooked teeth, the frozen wave formations of the drifts, and the East Crest roof gleaming at the top of their route. All of this belonged. He should be seeing it. But he also saw something else.

Twenty feet ahead of the vehicle, where no living thing should be, he saw a bird.

It was picking its way through the snow on scarecrow legs. The fine-grained particles that traveled on the winds came rushing down the slope towards it. The drifts would kill it, knock it down and scrape its lungs with cold.

The bird ran away, always staying just out of reach of the blowing snow. It seemed to be making a great game of the chase as it went along.

Noa was dumbstruck.

“What is it?”

Mae, who would have flown through the windshield had she not been buckled in, muttered something under her breath about bird taxonomy. He gave her a sharp look in the rearview mirror.

“What did you say?”

“It’s impossible, but...I think that’s a sanderling. It’s a type of wader. Lynette just did a report on them.”

“You mean like the ones that live along the coast?”

Mae was shaking her head.

“Like I said, it’s impossible. It completely defies reason. See the way that it’s darting away from the edge of the drifts? It does the exact same thing with ocean waves.”

The thick walls and tight seals of the Aubade did a good job of muting most outside sounds. However, Noa was almost certain that he could pick out a faint whistle, high enough that it climbed to the top of his hearing range and hovered there like an unwanted visitor.

“Why is it here?”

“Beats me if I know.”

“But won’t it die?”

“If it stays much longer, probably.”

“It doesn’t make sense.”

Symian cleared his throat.

“Alright kids, we’re on a pretty tight schedule. I, for one, don’t want to get stranded up here in a blizzard. Can we forget about the wild animals?”

Mae blinked and sat back in her seat.

“He does have a point. Now that Noa has demonstrated how well the brakes work, let’s get on with this.”

Noa, however, continued to watch the bird.

“Noa?” Mae tapped him lightly on the shoulder. “Is everything alright?”

“It doesn’t make sense.” He repeated.

“Of course it doesn’t.” Mae affirmed calmly. “We’ve all established that.”

In a slow, disconnected motion, he eased his foot off of the brake pedal, taking a final look out of the side window.

The bird was still there, still trailing the edge of the wind, still splitting the air with a high trill that simultaneously mocked the cold and his logic.

02. A Girl with Secrets

Two days after seeing the bird in the tundra and four days after meeting the girl with strange eyes, Noa was making his way towards the city center plaza with the rest of the population. As predicted, the sky was mild as a newborn baby, curving away to meet the encircling mountains at the city limits. He'd been careful to ban any cloud cover from creeping across the sun between the hours of 11:00am and 2:00pm; studies had showed that this naturally lead to a lack of concentration and the Chancellor thought highly of an attentive crowd.

It was Remembrance Day. Once a year, every citizen gathered at the plaza to commemorate the productive past and the promising future of Halcyon. Noa considered this a waste of an afternoon. After two hours of listening to the Chancellor droning on in her adenoidal voice, he usually found he was in need of a nap.

At this point, that may have been a good thing.

This year had the potential to be more engaging. Nico and the Food Production Supervisor were scheduled to give a presentation on the anticipated harvest yields. Grain and soybean production was projected to land somewhere within .02% of the demand; the result of Climate Engineering's research and Food Production's accuracy. There would be little waste, and no rationing of their portions.

"He's not on the platform yet." Mae muttered. She and Symian accompanied Noa on both sides. "What's the view like from up there? Do you see him?"

Noa scanned the crowd, looking for Nico's greasy salt-and-pepper mop. Some people looked for familiar landmarks in a mouth or eyes or a chin. Noa had a running catalog of what his acquaintances looked like by the crown of their head.

"I think he's in the general vicinity." He squinted. "There's a whole mess of middle-aged officials near the platform. It's hard to tell them apart."

"Better hope he doesn't make a fool of us." Symian was shaking his head.

Noa was distracted from his search by a head of scrubby curls, squirming on top of a navy shirt just to his right. He bypassed the group in front of him and fell in line next to the Archives clerk.

"Hello, Zefyr the Last."

She craned her neck up and smiled in recognition.

"Hello, Noa the Dreamer."

"Of all the things to remember me by..."

"Well, what would you prefer? Noa the Red-Haired boy? Noa the Freckled? Noa the Tallest Man in the entire city?"

"You can just call me Noa."

"How have you been?"

"I'm about to cured of my insomnia by the monotony of Remembrance Day."

Zefyr waved her hand around at the tide of citizens flowing through the streets.

"Doesn't this invigorate you?"

"Not particularly."

"I suppose nothing holds your interest long when you're terminal."

He had to admit, she had a talent for being profoundly blunt.

"By the way..." Zefyr was reaching into her satchel, rooting around up to her elbow as she wrinkled her nose in concentration. Satisfaction lit up her face as she pulled out a small bundle of fabric.

What happened next caught him off guard. Continuing to watch the push of bodies around them, she pressed the bundle into his palm and slipped his hand into his pocket.

"There's a note in the fabric that will explain how they work." Before she pulled her hand away and faced forward, behaving as though their mysterious transaction hadn't just taken place, she met his eyes once and winked.

During his time as a student, Noa had always scored high on his tests because he had learned to pay attention to the significant parts of the lesson. He had a knack for recognizing important moments without anyone tipping him off to the fact, to focus his mind's eye like the lens of a camera and capture still frames of what he wanted to remember.

The memory of Zefyr pressing the bundle into his palm stayed on his hand like an imprint. Instinct told him to take note of this, to record the event onto the walls of his brain and map his way to the graffiti. In that moment, the depths where her thoughts lived and moved had cleared; they were no less deep, but the glare of the sun had faded and he was able to see down to the hidden things as they made their way along the bottom with no concern for the breathing world above them.

He would want to remember this.

“What is it?” In his pocket, Noa's fingers curled around the bundle.

“It's a secret.”

Mae's voice drifted over the heads in their vicinity.

“Noa! We're supposed to be near the platform! Come on!”

He turned back to Zefyr to ask about her strange gift, but she had managed to slip through the tide around them and out of his sight; even his eyes couldn't pick her frizzy hair out of the hundreds of other heads of dark curls. Hiding his other hand in its pocket so that he wouldn't feel off-balance, Noa took his place behind Mae and Symian.

The clear screens positioned all throughout the plaza began to display the telecast of Halcyon's history. While the modulated voice of the narrator talked them through Halcyon's rise from a remote mountain outpost to the utopia that it was today, Noa casually pulled his hand out of his pocket and glanced down at the fabric bundle. The cloth was ancient; some sort of cotton or linen, patterned with miniature ivy leaves so faded that they were barely visible through the stains and worn-away threads. He rarely, if ever, laid a hand on any type of natural fabric. Everything he touched was made of recycled synthetics – his clothes, his sheets, the upholstery on his couch...

So where had she acquired the fabric? Why had she given it to him?

He forced his curiosity to cooperate with his patience as he slowly untied the bundle and removed one corner of the fabric wrappings. Dividing his attention between the stage and the gift, he studied the contents. Strange. It was nothing more than a bunch of dried leaves. Noa pinched one of them between his fingers and hid behind the guise of scratching his nose to see if he recognized the scent. Mint. Something else as well – a headier note, more floral.

Zefyr had, for no apparent reason, given him a bundle of herbs. He stuffed the fabric back into his pocket and faced forward. There would be time to inspect it later, and she had mentioned including a note. Perhaps that would explain her intentions.

At the first chime of Chronos' noon bell, the telecast ended and Chancellor Wallace stepped up to the podium. Noa braced himself for her speech by measuring the amount of people that fit within a three-foot radius of him and multiplying that by the square footage of the city plaza. Being tall had its advantages; it made counting heads much easier.

As his glance flicked over the neat rows of people, his peripheral caught sight of the Chancellor's hands busy at the podium. Her face was drawn together in tight lines as she continued to look down. She placed her fingers over the microphone and spoke to one of the aids behind her, motioning them forward. In a quick action not intended for anyone's eyes but theirs, the Chancellor passed along a fabric bundle to her aid.

She turned back to the crowd, the lines replaced by her characteristic mask.

“My apologies for the delay. We are all aware of Chronos and his unforgiving nature.” She gestured up toward the clock. “I will therefore do my best to get back on schedule. On this fine day, we have gathered to remember...”

Noa wasn't listening to a syllable of it.

Not because it was boring – which it was.

Not because he had heard similar speeches in previous years – he had.

He barely noticed Mae letting out a long exhale when Nico managed to approach the podium only two minutes later than scheduled. His ears tuned out the minutia of Nico's presentation while his mind turned over the

second significant moment of the day – the discreet passing of a piece of fabric from the Chancellor to her aid. Because he was tall and because he locked in on details, he, and perhaps only he, had seen the faded ivy leaves on a scrap of stained cotton.

A piece of the same material was wrapped around a bouquet of herbs in his left pocket.

Noa gave himself five minutes of personal time when he returned to his desk to withdraw the bundle and take a closer look. He had been correct about the mint. The other ingredient that he hadn't recognized was crowned with a spire of faded purple blossoms.

Zefyr's note was stuck into the rubber band that held the herbs together. In scrawling letters, she had written the following:

Dear Noa,

These are herbs that may help with your sleeplessness. It's a blend of spearmint and lavender. They won't prevent your nightmares, but they should help you get back to sleep if you wake up. Boil 2-3 leaves in water and let them steep for five minutes. Drink one cup of the tea. Let me know if you need more.

Zefyr

Lavender. That must be the other herb, with the purple flowers. Noa pulled out a stem and studied it. He had never actually seen unprocessed versions of either herb before. Ground mint particles made up part of his dinner portions due to the calming qualities it provided, but the lavender was a mystery. He knew for a fact that it wasn't cultivated in the Food Production fields.

Unanswered questions were crowding his thoughts like hungry children at mealtime. In a way, it was a welcome distraction; unlike the dreaming malfunction, Noa was had a good reason to think that the answers could be found without muss hassle– Archives was less than a block away from Climate Engineering.

He would solve the mystery tomorrow.

That night, Noa had a different dream.

He was walking up the long slope where he had seen the bird. The wind was cold; he could see it barreling down the incline, working loose the top layer of the snow pack until it was a wall of white that rose up to block out the sun.

The bird was there, trotting just out of his reach. He was trying to take hold of it and save it from the incoming storm, but every time his fingers brushed the downy feathers it ran away, chirping as it stretched its scrawny legs. It didn't help matters that one of his hands was occupied by his grip on a scrap of ivy-patterned fabric that kept making an attempt at flying away.

As the wall of white came closer and Noa worked to pull the bird away, the snowflakes turned to drops of rain that grew and bonded together until they formed a wave. The swell ate everything in its path, melting the snowpack and rising high above his head in a white crest. The sound, growling and keening as though it were a sentient thing, made his eardrums cringe.

From somewhere inside of the racket he picked out a scream.

The roar of the wave faded to an echo as he jerked out of sleep. However, the screaming continued for a few uncertain seconds before it stopped, lingering in his vocal chords and ringing in his ears.

It was earlier than usual. The city was still asleep in the dark hours, so quiet that even his breathing seemed loud. The lamps had been turned off at midnight; nobody had a reason to be out in the streets after that, at least until the sun came up around six. There was only a tired moon, hunched over thin with age, and even the thinnest streaks in the east were still hiding, leaving Noa with nothing from which to tell the time. He tapped a finger against the screen of his tablet, waiting for the display to come to life. 4:48 a.m. That was better. Not knowing the hour made him dizzy.

Midway through the second of his four breaths, when it was only halfway down his windpipe and his thoughts were occupied with finding a use for his extra time, a memory from the dream distracted him.

Someone had been screaming.

He had been screaming.

Noa let the air out of his lungs in a rush. The muscles between his shoulder blades pinched at each other; had someone heard him? Had he woken up the elderly man on the floor below him, or the young family across the street? There was no reason for a human voice in Halcyon rise about the average sixty decibels of conversational volume. Well, perhaps Nico was the exception, though no one made a habit of it.

It had been twenty years since Noa had made a sound like that. The memory of his last scream was an old one; it had occurred the day that he ran his bike into a metal gate and ripped off a piece of his ear, resulting in the scar that his thumb and index finger were brushing against as he sat in his bed an hour before sunrise.

He stood and wandered to the windows, searching for something consistent to focus on while he calculated the decibel levels of a yell and tried to accept the fact that his voice had climbed to that height.

He unlatched one of the panes and leaned on the sill. The outline of the city stretched in front of him in straight, uncompromising lines. On the opposite side of the street was another line of row houses, identical to his. One more residential block beyond that, the City Center buildings grew tall and narrow; Infrastructures' octagon panels of white rose out of the middle, its copper roof still shining with newness. The only other structure taller than this was Chronos, who stood a little apart from the rest of the City Center, too serious to be concerned with its activities.

In a strange way, the fact that time was still awake, tall and alone on the outskirts of the other buildings, helped to ease some of Noa's disorientation.

The tip of the reactor glowed a dim blue. It was powered by the instability that it took from the surrounding atmosphere, converting it into stabilized pressure that in turn exempted the city from severe weather. At the moment, there wasn't much to keep out; the crops needed a period of rest from the sun and heat, and so Noa allowed most of the cool air of the mountains to creep into the streets. People also tended to sleep better when the air had just enough of an edge to it.

Everyone except me.

Of course. He was something else, and it would serve to reason that he was the only person in the entire population who was immune to the efforts of his engineering.

Here, with nothing to count in the darkness except for his remaining breaths, the thoughts that he had been avoiding all day began to make tighter orbits around his head. He might have given in to their insistency; awake and alone in the hour before any living thing was moving, except that he became distracted by a shadow in the street three stories below his window.

As he understood, shadows moved in slow-motion. This one didn't. Heading east, it sprinted through the darkness where the shade trees and buildings pooled together. Occasionally, the shadow stopped, nearly disappearing before he saw it jump out from the shelter of a wall or courtyard gate.

Something about its movements triggered a memory in Noa's tired brain. The way that it held itself together as though every motion was well-considered and took into account the space surrounding it...

His curiosity became unbearable, making his hands clumsy as he shoved his feet into shoes and pulled on warm clothes. He didn't bother to with any plausible reason for what he was about to do other than the fact that he had to know. He must find out why the girl from Archives was running through the streets at 4:45am.

The night air tingled in his veins as he pulled his apartment door behind him and jogged down the alley where he had last seen the shadow. There she was, a few hundred feet ahead of him, with a hood covering her head and her breath rising in little clouds of ghosts as she traveled through the dark, still heading towards the eastern border of Halcyon.

She was working her way in an arch around the backside of the city center, flying by the identical row houses that guarded the evening like pale soldiers with reposed faces. It didn't take long for Noa to realize that she was moving fast. He hadn't expected that from her. Normally, his long legs made him the one that people struggled to keep up with.

On the edge of the city, they approached a warehouse that served as the last outpost before a switchback trail climbed up and emptied out on a high plateau dotted with wind turbines. Zefyr didn't hesitate once as she ran towards the warehouse and, as though she had done this every night of her life, unlatched a basement window and slid inside.

Noa stopped to catch his breath. Going in after her didn't seem like a wise idea- he wondered about his ability to even fit through the window. The corners of his mouth turned down as he looked at the ridges of corrugated steel in front of him. To the best of his knowledge, they performed maintenance on the turbines in this building. Why was she there, at 5:11 am, going through a basement window that conveniently happened to be unlocked?

He was saved from an attempt to follow her through the window when he saw her reappear at the opposite corner of the structure. It faced the empty wilderness of the mountains, and she was running across the gravel yard towards the switchbacks. She was no longer wearing her parka and denims. They had been swapped out for a bizarre set of clothing; brown things that, from this distance, resembled well-fitted grain sacks. They wrapped around her and hid her against the backdrop of the trail crest.

Everything that Noa had observed about the girl so far was a brick laid in the foundation of a profound mystery. Eyes. Glasses. Hair. Walk. Herbs. Fabric. Clothing. And now this. But what was this? He waited for the structure to take shape against the backdrop of the windmills as they turned over on themselves. There must be a reason – everything had one. Even this girl with all of her quirks, including her excuse for setting out on the first set of switchbacks.

Seconds ticked by and no revelation appeared. Noa had two options: he could go home and calculate the remaining hours until he could approach Zefyr in a normal setting, or he could follow her into the back country and see for himself what secrets she carried in her pockets.

He took a deep breath and ran after her.

Up the switchbacks he climbed, high onto the exposed plateau that anchored the wind turbines into the ground. Noa had never passed through this area on foot. The enormous scale of the scenery played tricks with his perception; he seemed small out here, and Zefyr was only a tiny brown dot beneath the giant limbs of the turbines. Above him, the hum of their engines vibrated in the silence, and their long arms interrupted the stiff breeze like an undisciplined student that talked out of turn.

She didn't stop at the edge of the wind field. By now, the eastern sky was rolling over in its sleep, blinking with a cold light between the crooked rows of mountain summits. The wind was retreating in front of it, filling up the spaces between the foothills and cooling the sweat on Noa's forehead. It was a reminder that he was a long way from the controlled climate of Halcyon and that all of his knowledge meant nothing here. He shivered. Even in June, it was still cold at this elevation.

Still, she climbed higher.

Something was different. Somewhere along the way, her calculated footsteps had changed into an easy stride that was oddly appropriate for the landscape. She had stopped behaving as though she assumed the world was about to swallow her, or that she needed to be contentious of the amount of space that she took up with her movements. Instead, the omnipresent emptiness made her fast and graceful; she was comfortable with this land.

Noa's initial impression had fallen short, but he was coming to terms with the idea that this might be common in her case.

It wasn't that she was different because she was timid, or because she was a small person overwhelmed in a large city. She was different because she carried the enormity of a vast and secret world inside of her. Halcyon wasn't substantial enough to house everything that made up the riddle of the girl from Archives.

She was a mystery so thorough that Noa's curiosity would never leave him alone until he had worked through every detail. It pushed him forward through the thinning air that tricked his lungs and made his head spin. He didn't care. It didn't matter at this point.

He had to know.

They had stopped climbing, coming to a level ridge that overlooked a valley freckled with glacial rocks. Zefyr was already up and over. She had slowed her steps, giving more thought to them as she picked her way along the incline. Halfway down the valley, she stopped, wrapped her arms around herself, and faced the east like a statue.

Noa was going to catch her off guard if he wasn't careful about making his presence known. He crouched behind a boulder to see what she would do next. The elevation made him work harder for his breathes, and he welcomed a moment to let them catch up.

Boy and girl waited, waited with the whole rest of the world in anticipation that shivered on their skin and singed their wide-open eyes. The cold valley waited for the dawn to clear the shadows. The birds, with songs hidden under their ruffled feathers, waited for the signal of their conductor. Even the wind had inhaled, holding in its breath. The boy waited for the girl to make her next move, and the girl waited for something that remained a secret to him.

And then –

The color of the atmosphere changed, shimmering, breaking apart into luminescent particles that mirrored the fading blue at the curve of the sky so that every lungful of air became a taste of the newborn morning. Inferno broke out on the horizon; ninety-three million miles of dead, weightless heaven was the only thing standing between them and the tens of thousands of degrees. Shadows ran to the corners of the valley, stretching their arms out into long, disembodied shapes as they attempted to hide until evening.

It was a wasted effort. The sunrise would win.

Night could not stand before it. This was war - the hills themselves bled gold from the battle. A violent victory was taking place over the dark and cold, and marching at the front lines were the trumpets of tiny bird voices that exploded as the light reached the branches of their thorn bushes.

Noa had never seen a sunrise in the mountains. He knew the sensation of the sun warming his skin. His eyes knew the light that it gave during the day and the darkness that came when it set. He knew the different ways that the sun could affect his life – his food supply, the temperature, the energy it provided to the city through their solar panels...

But never once had he seen it so like this, so direct, so full of new and brilliant intensity.

His eyes were drawn to it on their own volition. When his retinas began to burn, he looked away and shook his head at his idiocy. He knew better than to look at the sun straight on.

Even with his sight recovering, he held handfuls of anticipation between his cold fingers. The sun gave him a compass, a guide to tell him where he was and when he was and how many hours he had left. Like the shadows, the Unknown couldn't exist in the light, and the answers to his questions were coming, any minute now...

But then, when he was expecting clarity, the sunrise played a joke on him. Instead of the key to the riddle of the girl, the spectacle of heat and brilliance brought with it another mystery.

Behind his closed eyes, Noa heard a sound unlike anything he had ever heard.

It was a scream. But not a scream. There was lightness to it, a lilt that raced to the tops of the boulders and jumped back down again in abandon. It ricocheted off of the walls of the waking valley and angled up until it broke through the mountain sky and shattered it beyond repair. Each piece grew wings to fly, and fly they did. Over the dew and the sleeping glacial rocks, over the faint trail, over the shelter that Noa had found behind the boulder and his eyelids, to his disbelieving ears and the hallways of his exhausted mind, where it would haunt him for many years afterwards.

He would have forgotten about the girl, except that he opened his eyes to pinpoint the source of the noise and saw her running down to the valley floor. Assuming that whatever was making the sound must be pursuing her, he looked at the rim.

There was nothing. Yet the sound followed her, wrapped itself around her like a worn in garment and shook the hood loose from her head. Where she went, the sound followed. And the way that she ran...it wasn't what he would have expected from someone being chased. It was more like a graceless dance whose steps were made up of clearing the hollows and low rocks and whipping around boulders that couldn't be avoided.

Realization had been taking its time as he observed her behavior, and was now slowly stringing together the reality of what was happening in front of him.

Zefyr *was* the sound.

He couldn't have imagined it; that such a small, unassuming person had the ability to produce something so strange and so *loud*.

Insanity. That was the only reasonable explanation.

This conclusion made what she did next a little less absurd. She stopped just shy of the swath of sunlight and collapsed in a heap, absorbed in low, broken variations of the noise that she had been making. It wasn't until she grew quiet and continued to lie in the wet grass that Noa developed some thought for her well-being. How was he supposed to respond? What if she needed medical treatment? He stretched out his stiff legs and started down the slope towards her.

When he reached the floor of the valley, he began to call her name in the calmest voice he possessed. The wind was against him, and it blew the words out of his mouth as he spoke. It wasn't until he had come within several yards of the place where she was laying that she showed any sign of noticing him.

Her reaction, coming on so fast that it stopped him in his tracks, confirmed what he had already been in the process of admitting to himself.

Following her had been a bad idea.

In Contribution School, Noa had spent one semester studying animal behaviors. It was a required class for Climate Engineers due to their infrequent visits to the back country and the possibility of interaction with wildlife. He knew how to protect himself in a bear attack. He knew to lift his pack above his head if he met a mountain lion. He knew that elk, no matter how friendly they seemed, could trample a grown man or gore him to death.

But on this morning, of all mornings to forget, he had overlooked an important rule: do not startle a wild thing in its natural habitat.

She was on her feet before he could ask if she was alright and did she know her name and why she had come here. The girl standing in front of him was a sharp dichotomy to the one who had been running down the slope just before. This one, all tight nerves and coiled muscles, was staring at him with wide eyes that lacked her glasses to soften their enormity.

The look on her face spoke long before her words: Noa was the intruder. High above the city, away from everything that he was familiar with and surrounded by everything that she seemed to more than familiar with, he was at a loss; this land, this behavior, was completely foreign to him.

Several times, Zefyr opened her mouth and then closed it in a thin, uncompromising line. Noa being just as hesitant to start a conversation, silence moved between them in awkward, limping motions.

After one minute and twenty-two second of exhausting quiet, he gave it a try.

"Hello."

"What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same."

The rising sun had reached the staging ground of their production. It illuminated Zefyr from behind and focused its glare on Noa as though it were her personal bodyguard, unnerved at his intrusion of her privacy.

He tried again.

"I'm sorry for startling you." Noa held out his hands, palms facing upward. "I saw your fit and I just wanted to make sure –"

"You saw *what*?"

"Your fit?" The edge in her voice cut his statement into a question.

"It wasn't a fit. It wasn't anything like that." Her silhouette burned at the edges as she crossed her arms and pulled herself up to a height that she didn't possess.

"What was it, then? What were you doing?"

"I hardly think that's any of your concern."

"Well, if you're a risk to yourself, you could be a risk to others. You should really see a physician."

The shadow-puppet form wound itself tighter, trembling a little with effort.

"Did it ever occur to you that stalking is perverse and inappropriate?"

"I wasn't stalking you."

"What else do you call following me for two miles in the middle of the night and sneaking up on me?"

“Look, I’m sorry. Honestly, I was having trouble sleeping and I saw you below my window on your way out of town. It made me curious, so I followed you.”

“Where do you live?”

“One mile north of the city center, on 13th Avenue.” Noa shielded his eyes, attempting to get a read on her expression and failing. “Would you mind turning? I’d prefer not to go blind.”

Wordlessly, Zefyr moved to the side. Noa could now see that she was calculating something, chewing it over as her eyebrows pulled together. Her face changed. Now she was smiling at him.

“You’re still dreaming, Noa.”

Her arms uncrossed, dropping behind her back as she spoke to him like an adult addressing a small child. She was taking slow, easy steps around him; her eyes clear and huge and innocent.

It was almost believable.

“I’m not, though.” Noa shook his head. “You’re trying to trick me. It won’t work.”

“Dreams can seem very real sometimes.”

“What are you hiding? Why won’t you just tell me what you’re doing up here?”

“I know, I know. It must be difficult, not being able to understand something that’s happening in your own brain.” Zefyr pointed towards the peaks. “Do you see all of that snow up there? Any minute, the sun is going to melt it and this valley is going to flood.”

She had hit a nerve.

“Stop it!” Noa took a step towards her. She backed away with grace, showing no change in her expression.

“Don’t say that I didn’t warn you.”

And then she simply watched him squirm.

Noa was fighting a war between his logic and the instinctual reaction that surfaced when his expectations for a world that made sense weren’t being met. He knew that he had followed her, that he had seen her lose her mind and run screaming into the valley. He knew that she was doing something secretive and that she was also doing her best to hide it from him. He even knew that it defied science for the snowpack to melt quickly enough to produce a flood.

While he struggled to right his capsized ship of reason, Zefyr turned her face to the rising sun and remarked, “It must be past six. I hope that you’re not expected anywhere.”

As was his instinct, he took in the slant of the shadows, the fingers of molten gold in the mountain crevices, and the proximity of the sun, overgrown and bloated with authority. She was right; Noa figured that it was somewhere between 6:05 and 6:09...

Before he could respond, there was a rustle of wet grass and the pounding of small feet that faded as they ran. Zefyr was tearing across the valley, heading towards a dark mass of pines that covered the north hillside.

“Come back here!” Noa yelled. The memory of his nightmare screaming made his vocal chords shrink back from anything above a ten decibel rise in volume. Unfortunately, this proved to be inadequate; either she hadn’t heard him, or she was ignoring him.

Just as he was gearing up to go after her, she threw a sentence over her shoulder. The sound of her own voice barreling out at such high levels didn’t seem to bother her at all. He even heard traces of amusement in her words as they caught the wind and dove towards him.

“Don’t be late!”

She had done it.

The girl had done the unthinkable. In reminding him of the unforgiving nature of time, she had changed the steadfast thing that Noa leaned against for guidance into a cruel tyrant. His intent to chase after her was brought to a jarring conclusion because time was now chasing after him.

Forty-two minutes from the valley to the edge of Halcyon, and then another sixteen minutes from the warehouse to his apartment, provided that he maintained the same speed from his journey out of the city. This would result in his one hour morning routine being cut down to somewhere between five and ten minutes.

He turned and ran.

Up the walls of the valley, over the catwalk ridge that bordered it, down onto the plateau that dwarfed him with its immensity, beneath the windmill giants that stretched on until the end of the new day, until his legs and lungs had set up picket lines of protest that marched to the beat of the blood moving in and out of his heart.

Hurrying made him awkward and uncoordinated. It threw pebbles into the grooves of his shoes and found well-hidden ridges to bang his ankles against. Finally, at the bottom of the switchbacks, he bent over double and gave in to the overwhelming need to catch his breath.

Halcyon was laid out neatly beneath him, with its circular grid directing the crisscrossing streets towards the city center and the white stucco buildings bleached to meet the morning. Sweating and late as he was, Noa found himself at odds with the predictability at his feet.

Chronos began to chime. Once, two, three...seven times.

It was bad enough that Zefyr had brought up the dreams. That was cruel – he had trusted her with his secret and she had hit him over the head with it. But on top of that, she had reached into hour and minute and second and thrown him off-balance. Heat that had nothing to do with exertion ran up his back and burned beneath his skin like a fever. He gritted his teeth as he stood, trying to convince his muscles to carry him the rest of the way.

Noa didn't have time to waste.

There wasn't even a moment to think about how much he disliked her.

Anything resembling sanity continued to remain at large for the rest of the day. Noa wasn't even able to confront the girl when he sailed through the front door of Archives at 12:06 that afternoon. He was told by Celya over the crunching of her stapler that Zefyr had taken a personal day and wouldn't be back in until tomorrow and did Noa have any desire to leave a message for her?

"Not particularly." He said.

The following afternoon, Celya's twenty-toothed smile greeted him yet again as Noa approached her desk. As always, it existed as a separate entity from the eyes that traveled up to his hair and the smooth hands that were occupied with feeding papers into a document scanner. One ongoing project running through the veins of Archives was the chore of doing away with their paper files, scanning them into digital format so that they could be preserved within the Network. This had been in process for almost a century; the bin that Celya was working out of contained files from over forty years ago. The time frame gave weight to the enormity of the task.

"I'll call her down right away!" Celya reached behind her.

"There's no need, really." Noa leaned both of his elbows onto her desk. "I can find my way up there."

The methodic groaning of document feeder gears hesitated.

"It's not typically policy for me to let citizens escort themselves."

Noa forced a smile.

"I think you know me well enough by now, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, if you're sure..."

"Of course I'm sure. Thank you, Celya!" He shoved his hands into his pockets and walked away before she could change her mind. The resuming *whirring* of paper against plastic told him that he was in the clear.

By the time he turned the corner of Zefyr's hallway, he had the whole conversation and even some variables of it worked out he turned the corner of Zefyr's hallway.

The first order of business would be an apology.

"Don't you think it was inappropriate for you to take advantage of something that I told you in confidence?" He would ask, looking down his nose at her.

"Of course!" She would reply. "You're right. I'm very sorry. Is there any way that you can forgive me? Really, don't stress yourself if it's too much of a bother..."

Secondly, he needed to talk her into explaining her reasons for being in the mountains to begin with. The outcome of this issue was a little less certain, but he had confidence in his guesses.

"You're right again!" She might say. "I was out of my mind, having a fit. It's a good thing you snapped me out of it and followed me to make sure that I was safe." Then, she would likely apologize once more for her rudeness.

Finally, what he had been after all along was an answer to his original question. Why had she given him the herbs, and why had he seen the Chancellor with a similar bundle? This remained enough of a mystery that he came short on conclusions.

He found her perched on a ladder twenty feet above him, saddled with a canvas bag that bulged with the square corners of brown files.

“Who let you in here?”

That was all. Zefyr wasted nothing on him – not a single glance or greeting.

She was supposed to be apologetic from the start. Noa scrambled to recalculate his conversational roadmap.

“I talked Celya into it.”

“That’s impressive.”

She was too comfortable on top of that ladder; instead of making a move to come down, she leaned further into the rungs.

“It’s easier to break rules when no one knows what to expect from you.” He rocked back and forth on his heels, trying to strike a balance between being polite and being clear about the fact that she owed him something.

“So that’s why you’re here, isn’t it?” She was removing the small plastic files from the bag and stacking them with precision on the top shelf. “Because I’m expected to behave a certain way and you’re not, and that makes my behavior questionable and yours overlooked.”

“There’s no law against following someone, is there?”

“There’s also no law against watching the sunrise.”

“Look, would you be willing to come down from there? It does make conversation a little difficult.”

“No thank you. I’m quite busy, as you can see. “To emphasize her point, she continued to shelve files, meticulously lining up every edge as she stacked them. He was an afterthought, and she was going to great lengths to make him was aware of this.

Noa knotted his fists inside of his pockets.

“Would you rather I come up there?”

“Actually, that’s against policy. I’m afraid I can’t allow you to do that.”

She still hadn’t bothered to look at him.

“Did anyone ever mention to you that you have terrible manners?”

This time, she didn’t even reply.

“If you don’t come down and have a conversation with me like a normal adult, I’m going to ignore your policy. It’s stupid, shouting up and down at each other like this.”

Zefyr rotated the upper half of her body and finally looked down the rungs at him.

“If you touch that ladder, I’ll kick you.”

“You’re hilarious, you know. I would laugh, if I hadn’t already done it twice this morning.”

“It’s not a joke.”

He was inclined to believe it. Everything about her – the narrow nose, the hard-set jaw, the thin line of her mouth – all of it conveyed disinterest so sharp that Noa felt his carefully-constructed plans for their conversation crumbling around his ears.

Noa Ryvverson wasn’t used to behavior like this, and especially not when it was directed towards him.

He decided to tell her so.

“You know, *some* people would consider it a privilege to have a conversation with me.”

This comment sparked some interest. In a series of nimble motions formed from performing the same actions day in and day out, she slid down the ladder and threw aside the canvas bag. It fell heavy on the floor, the contents groaning quietly as they settled.

“That’s better!” Noa smiled. “Now, about the other day-“

“Did you *really* bother to wheedle your way in here *just* to tell me how important you are? Good lord, not only are you a creep, you’re an egotistical creep.”

Instead of being contrite and apologetic, she had just insulted him.

He was never wrong, except when it came to her. Noa's curiosity in the girl was eroding beneath a current whose source was found in the fact that she was never what he expected her to be.

Again, her posture was shaking at the edges as though she had been sketched by an unsteady hand. She didn't even give him a reasonable amount of time to form a reply; while he was still weighing out his words and developing a new strategy to salvage the last fourteen minutes and thirty-four seconds of his life, Zefyr pointed towards the main corridor and stated, "You need to leave. Now."

"I'm not finished. In fact, you haven't even allowed me to start." To leave would mean running away from her like he had in the valley. Here in the city, hemmed in by the safety of straight lines and a climate that responded to his control, there was no reason to let her get the better of him again. "I think that you owe me an apology. I would take an explanation, too, while you're at it."

Zefyr brushed past him, putting a good amount of effort into striking the hard little soles of her shoes against the marble floor.

"Where are you going?" Noa asked as he trailed behind her.

"To call Security."

"Oh, for Halcyon's sake, woman. What's wrong with you? I've never met someone with this much capacity for being unreasonable."

"Actually, I'm being very reasonable. You're the one that won't leave."

"I just want to talk to you! What's so unreasonable about that?"

"The fact that I've made it clear that *I* don't want to talk to you, that's what."

Their voices had been climbing in volume as each tightened their grip on the conversation and pulled at the other in an escalating tug-of-war.

A man with a round, pasty face peeked at them from around the corner of the main corridor.

"Is everything alright, Zefyr?" He was peering at Noa throughout the duration of his question, the confusion lingering on his sallow skin like a pang of nausea.

"Of course, Wyn. I was just showing Mr. Ryverson his way back downstairs."

"Hmm. Fine, then." With a last look and an echo of slow footfalls, Wyn disappeared.

Zefyr turned her full attention back to Noa.

"Now, if you're ready, allow me to escort you down to the lobby." She crossed her arms. "Or, if you'd like, I can give you explicit details on how the pipes in the wall next to you are going to explode and flood the building. Whichever you prefer."

"That's not going to work today."

"Then we can keep on like this and waste the rest of your midday break. Mind the time, though; it'd be a shame if you had to rush again, wouldn't it?"

Just as it had the morning before, heat flew up his back.

Even his curiosity had its limits. Seventeen minutes and twenty-six seconds of awkward, disembodied pieces of conversation with nothing to show for it was more than enough for him.

"Fine. I'll leave. But not because you're telling me to leave. I'll leave because trying to get any sense out of you is an obvious waste of my time."

She shrugged.

"Whatever suits you. I'm not picky."

He didn't bother saying goodbye. In all likelihood, she wouldn't have returned the favor.

Notes from a Secret-Keeper #1 – The Northern Lights

There is a room with four concrete walls accessible only by a code that the girl should not have. Such details have never stopped her; the secrets of the entire city live in the stolen knowledge of her fingertips.

Down to the last stop of the lift, at the bottom of two more sets of stairs, and at the end of a long hallway, beneath the boiler room and the pipes and the blood and bones of the building, this room contains things that want to be forgotten but will never be given such a privilege. They are old files; paper things with softened edges from all of their years of knocking against one another in their plastic containers. They will never know the gears of the document feeder. They will never be made public.

She knows this room well.

She knows the honeycombed texture of the concrete, knows the coldness of it on her palms and how unyielding it is. She knows the bruises that it leaves on the knuckles that beat against it, and the way that it swallows a human scream and hides the sound just as it hides those files.

She tries to rest against the concrete gently at first, whispering to the thin space between the wall and her –
Come back, come back, come back.

When this isn't enough – and often, it isn't – when the cold texture does nothing to ground her and remind her of who she is in light of him and the whole rest of the world, she tries harder.

The concrete never yields, no matter hard she hits it, no matter how many times she shoves her weight at it. The walls never betray her secret, no matter how loudly she might yell –

Come back, come back, come back.

When she was a small girl sliding on the veneer seat of her school desk, her Educator once played a video on the Northern Lights. The next morning, while she watched her mother's hands buttoning her yellow jacket, she told her about the flickering haze that rises off of the face of the mountains in their ethereal curtains of blue and green and pink.

That's it. She explained. That's what I see when I look at people.

Some people have almost no haze, most just have a faint sheen, but some have brilliant colors that fling themselves off of their bodies and fascinate the little girl.

Her mother sat her down with terrible calm after she said this. This was before her hands shook as they buttoned her jacket, before the black fog that clouded the air around her.

Look at me, she told her. I want you to look at me so that I know you understand. Never, never say things like this. Never mention it to anyone ever again.

The little girl never did.

But as she grew, she came to love the people with the brightest colors, followed them around and watched them shimmer like far-flung arms of the sun. When she was a teenager, she realized that her actions – a word spoken, a smile, a change of pace – could make the hues curve at the edges and billow out in cloud formations.

At first, it was a great game. Sometimes, she would push herself to see how high the colors could go, how closely they could mimic the movement of her hands. She would watch whole rooms of people go up in smoke – brilliant blues and neon yellows and the shade of pink that lives on the delicate curve of a child's cheeks.

She never remembers the exact day that it went too far – the day that her insides bent and cracked and hurt so bad with the colors that she swore she must be dying. No one could hurt that much and still live. She never remembers because she was lost in it for hours, and it wasn't until she fell off of her bicycle and rolled into the gutter that she woke up and remembered that she was a singular person, not someone made up of bits and pieces of everyone else.

The grimy, tangible reality of laying there with a bruised head and bloody palms brought her back.

It isn't always violent. Sometimes, if she can catch it before it gets overwhelming, the smooth surface of a wooden desk or the rough bark of a tree will do the trick.

Today has not been one of those days.

The boy is the brightest she has seen since her mother, with colors that change at the blink of an eye. Mostly, he is caught between a cautious, curious yellow and a slow red that gives away the fact that he is running out of time and he knows it. But there are also traces of a remarkable green, green that is the color of hope.

She could help him, if she didn't fear him, if he didn't loom like the choking fog of a forest fire, if he didn't look at her with his calculating eyes and notice everything, if he hadn't followed her and violated the one place where she is wholly herself.

The concrete remains.

Come back, come back, come back.

03. The Second Sunrise

Giving up on the mystery that was Zefyr made life far less interesting.

For the short period of time since they had met, she had been acting as a sort of competitor to the more ubiquitous tenant squatting in his mind: the dreams. Lined up next to each other like athletes in a race, Noa had to admit that she had often won out. He supposed this made sense; the consequence for the unanswered questions that filled the air around her like a cyclone was only his unsatisfied curiosity. As much of a headache as this gave him, it wouldn't shorten his life span.

Having banned her from the race track due to her unfair conduct, Noa was left with his remaining seconds to count and a brain malfunction to cure.

Inquisitiveness notwithstanding, he could be patient and methodical in most cases. Urgency was not something that he bothered with on his best days; a rushed conclusion was usually an inaccurate one. He was convinced that somewhere, within the storehouses of information, he would find a solution. Every day presented a new variable, a new set of minutes and hours and possibilities within which he might stumble across exactly what he was looking for.

His analytical approach had always served him well. But in this particular matter, there was an important distinction: time was not on his side.

Every night, he slept less. Sometimes, it was only five or ten minutes. Sometimes, it was as much as an hour. It was ironic; his mind was his only chance of beating this, and the longer that sleeplessness wore away at him, the more the framework of neurons and brain cells started to slide out from under his feet.

There was one benefit to insomnia: Noa had more time for research. He would sit at his table in the grey light and exhaust every possible phraseology and search engine available to him. The last century in Halcyon had brought on so many medical advancements that his digging took him a long way into the past, back to the days where people's bodies still betrayed them with unfamiliar terms like cancer, or tuberculosis, or asthma. These being the more obvious killers, most of the information he found from treatment records addressed them. Apparently, death by insomnia hadn't been a high priority.

He did find a blurry scan of an old book on folk medicine that suggested remedies like inhaling chopped onions throughout the night, turning the bedclothes upside down, bathing in ice water, and eating raw pumpkin.

Lavender and mint were also mentioned.

The bundle of fabric and herbs was still sitting on his counter, untouched. He watched it from across the room, half-expecting it to glare back at him until he turned away. Something lumped in with ice baths stood a good chance of being useless.

Besides, for all he knew, Zefyr might be trying to poison him.

One week after the incident in the mountains, Noa was sitting on a bench in the green space near his office, doing his best to pay attention to a block of text on his tablet. Earlier in the day, after watching him break his lunch portion into twenty-seven pieces and aimlessly push it around on his plate, Mae had poked through the haze of his exhaustion to ask if he had scheduled another visit to his physician yet.

"No." He had replied, stacking the pieces on top of one another. "I'm working on it myself. I'll figure it out. I just need a bit more information, that's all."

Mae had given him an uneasy look and suggested that he get some fresh air. Too tired to disagree with her, he was trying to make the most of his time by reviewing a required update to the Climate Engineer manual.

In reference to Appendix C42, please turn to page 191.

His eyes wandered out across the aesthetic garden that dominated the center of the green space. The flower beds were bordered with bold colors; royal blues and serious magentas stood at attention in neat lines. The inner level was softer; quiet pinks, foggy purples, and unassuming yellows wove in and out of one another. In the middle,

rising out of a copper urn, the blinding tumble of white reminded him of the glare of the sun in the peaks, where he had watched a bird singing as it defied reason...

Noa shook his head and turned back to his tablet.

In reference to Appendix C42, please turn to page 191.

His right hand supporting the tablet was shaking.

“Not again.” He muttered, switching hands and clenching his fingers into a fist.

When it didn’t help, he shoved it into his pocket and took a deep breath. Hand tremors were an expected side effect; he knew this. He started his paragraph a third time.

In reference to Appendix C42, please turn to page 191.

Noa lost track of long he had been dozing when someone settled onto the opposite end of the bench. He sat up and rubbed his eyes.

A small paper cup was sitting on the bench slats next to him. Curls of steam escaped out of the lid, squirming before they evaporated like mist before a sunrise. Trailing behind this was a heavy scent, laced with the burn of caffeine.

“I thought you might need that today.”

It was Zefyr, and she had brought him a cup of coffee.

“Is this your peace offering?” Noa asked as he pried off one corner of the lid and sniffed.

“You might say that. I take it that you’re still losing sleep.”

“I can’t understand why everyone is so interested in my sleeping habits today. For what it’s worth, I’m still researching a cure. You can’t rush good research.”

“Of course not.” She shook her head. “I’m sure your body will agree wholeheartedly when it starts to break down and stop functioning. Let me know how that works out for you.”

“I don’t think it’s any of your business.” He brought it the coffee up to his mouth and took a sip. “Where do you get this, anyway?” It was terrible. Bland food was one thing; their portions had no particular flavor to speak of. But intentionally drinking something that tasted bad must be yet another bizarre trait of hers.

He ought to start keeping a tally of them.

“A man sells it out of his living room window half a block from the Underground station near my house.”

“What do you mean he sells it? With what currency?”

“I tell him something that he doesn’t know, and he gives me a cup of coffee.” A coy parenthesis tugged at one corner of her mouth. “I live on the north end of the city, you know. Strange things happen up there, away from the Center.”

“I suppose that you had to go without your coffee today. That’s a shame.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I can’t imagine you were able to produce two cups worth of useful information in one morning.”

Zefyr stretched out her legs in front of her, crossing them at the ankles.

“A simple ‘thank you’ might have been fine.”

“I didn’t know that we were bothering with formalities.”

Noa raised the cup and took another sip. The process of drinking the coffee and the resulting grimace as it slid over his taste buds was loud and awkward within their silence, so he set it aside.

It took her six deep breaths and just as many shifts in her seat to allow the words to tumble out, cautiously peeking around the corners of her expression before they revealed themselves.

“I’m sorry that I tried to trick you the other morning.” She fiddled with a loose thread on her shirt hem. “And for being rude to you at Archives.”

Noa leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. Good. That was out of the way. The explanation would come next.

Instead, she looked sideways at him and asked her own question.

“Why didn’t you try the tea yet?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I was suspicious.” He gave her an intentional look. “Taking herbs from strange women who roam the back country doesn’t seem like an entirely safe bet.”

“Really, if I wanted to kill you, I would have finished you off the other morning. With my bare hands.”

Noa studied her profile, trying to determine if she was serious or not.

“That’s why I go to the mountains.”

Good lord, she must be serious.

“To kill people?”

Zefyr seemed to be entertained by his question. She leaned forward and covered her mouth with her hand. The lines around her eyes rearranged themselves, and Noa could hear a muffled version of the unknown sound slipping out between her fingers.

“No,” she straightened up. “To pick herbs. That’s why I go to the mountains.”

“What was that noise, though? The noise you made in the valley? You were making it again just now.”

“That?” She looked surprised, as if the answer should have been obvious. “That was laughter.”

“You’re tricking me again. I know what laughter is, and that wasn’t it.”

“What is laughter, then?”

“It’s an appropriate response to something that amuses you. Say, if someone trips while they’re running up a set of stairs, you laugh at them. Ha ha ha. It’s good for you to laugh – they recommend laughing at least four times in a given day. You should know that – we all learned it in Lower Education.”

Throughout their conversation, Zefyr had been successful in a perpetual quest of finding other places to rest her attention than in his direction. Noa had watched her studying the even green grass, the parade of colors in the flowerbed, and then the curt spheres of the ornamental trees, until she eventually settled on some distant point that he couldn’t make out. But now, she turned to him and brought her eyes to meet his.

There it was; the window that opened into the deep and unknown places of who she was. This was important, he knew. Though there wasn’t much that he recognized in the turning gears of her thoughts, he caught himself leaning in to hear what she had to say.

“That isn’t laughter. It’s fake.”

“What do you mean?”

Her eyebrows pulled toward one another. She was evaluating him, making a determination that ended with her slowly shaking her head and looking away.

“Never mind.”

The window had slammed shut.

“You always do that!” Noa groaned. “Why can’t you ever just answer a question straight on?”

“Because you wouldn’t understand the answers.”

“You’re insulting me. Of course I would understand them.”

She was tapping the tips of her fingers together, the potential for more laughter shadowing her mouth.

“Don’t worry; I haven’t forgotten how important and intelligent you are. Listen,” she looked at him again. “There is real laughter and there is fake laughter. When you laugh – really laugh, you know it. You mean it. There’s my straight answer.”

“How do you know it?”

“I already answered this. Next question.”

“Fine.” Enough interrogation might have a chance of finding one answer that actually made sense. “Were you trying to poison the chancellor on Remembrance Day?”

“Was I trying to... what on earth gave you that idea?”

“The fabrics matched. I didn’t think you were giving her herbs as well.”

“Noa,” she was shaking her head at him. “I gave her strawberries.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Have you ever had an alpine strawberry, just hours off of the plant?”

Noa shook his head. He wasn’t even sure if he knew what a strawberry looked like.

“Then you wouldn’t understand why I gave them to her.”

“Does she have some sort of a preference for them? How would you know if she does?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then why did you give them to her?”

“To give her something to question.” Zefyr was running the tips of her fingers over the metal frame of the bench, tracing the geometric shapes as a blind woman might read a Braille text. “Because she’s a notable figure, and, as such, it’s beneficial for her to ask questions.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “Are you keeping up?”

The half-hour chime of Chronos rumbled out a low gong that hummed in their ears. Noa wasn’t keeping up, and he was also not ready to admit that. He eased his shoulders up and down instead, as though a spoken reply was too much for him to bother with.

“I didn’t think that you were.” She re-crossed her ankles in the opposite direction and resumed her watch on the unknown sight beyond Noa’s line of vision.

“It just seems like a waste.” This was the closest that he could come to admitting that she was right –he had no context for what she was saying. “All of that work for what? To create questions with answers that only you understand?”

“I could show you how to understand them. If you wanted to know, that is.”

She tossed the invitation out like a gnawing bone to a wild dog. Noa circled it, doing his best to reign in his curiosity. He did want to know. In fact, it was unbearable how much he wanted to know.

“How would you do that?”

“Do you have any personal days that you can use?”

“A few, yes. But really, I’m quite busy with my research.”

“Spare me two of them and consider this a part of it. I’ll show you where the herbs grow while we’re out.”

“Out where?”

She leaned towards him and directed the next sentence quietly towards his ear. “If you want to know, meet me outside of the turbine repair house at 5:00am, three days from now.”

“What do wind turbines have to do with any of this?”

Zefyr had stood and was in the process of pushing her glasses back up to the bridge of her nose.

“Absolutely nothing. The warehouse just happens to be the most accessible way into the mountains.”

She was on her way Noa could answer. As was her habit, she left him empty-handed, without a goodbye, a last glance, or a single detail to his name.

Noa’s tablet had settled into his lap, and he glanced down at the screen simply because the blocks of text and the rectangular shape were easier to take in.

His mind kept trying to move forward, to sputter to life and resume its careful calculations, to make sense of whatever had just happened between him and the mad girl who never did what he thought she would do.

But he was so tired.

The beginning of his paragraph blinked up at him a final time, unconquered and unread.

In reference to Appendix C42, please turn to page 191.

In the end, Noa blamed his decision on his lack of sleep.

It was a thin excuse; a ledge with just enough space for his reason to stand on if it didn’t move too far in either direction. And truthfully, waking up at 4:15 a.m. did mean waking up two hours earlier than he was supposed to, and so it was exhaustion that he allowed to follow him and offer words of encouragement when he began to question the wisdom of his decision in the pre-dawn of the third day. The shadows wrapped their elongated pools around him as he made his way east, huddled in his parka and trailed by the clouds of his breath.

After all, it was only one day – eight or ten hours at the most. If his odds were the same as Mark Burris’s, he didn’t see the harm in using 28,800 of his remaining 244,771,200 seconds to solve some of the mysteries from the past month. Perhaps the sooner the topic was put to rest, the more mental space he could devote to staying alive.

He reached the western corner of the turbine repair house at the second chime of five. Zefyr was hopping from one foot to the other, holding a bundle of fabric against her chest. She was wearing her strange clothes again, and her eyes were missing their glasses. In the absence of this accessory, they were sparking with an energy that he found excessive at this hour.

“You came!” Her words tumbled out in a rush of a disproportionately large scarf around her neck. “I had my doubts about you.”

“It’s only because I’m sleep-deprived and my mind isn’t functioning at full capacity.”

“Well, I’ll take it.” She shoved the bundle at him. “Now, I have to lay down some ground rules for our expedition. There are three.”

“Why three again?”

“Three is such a nice number, that’s why. It makes lovely combination when you string multiples of it together. And, it’s not nearly as regimented as two.”

The boy whose mind charted courses seas of numeric had never heard of anyone giving personality to a digit. Noa blinked at her, his brainwaves stumbling along behind her voice as she continued.

“The first rule is that, while we’re in the mountains, we don’t talk about our Contribution Roles. The back country doesn’t care what you do – only who you are. So, for today, we are not Climate Engineers and Archives Clerks, we are just Noa and Zefyr.”

“Is there a difference?”

Her features turned severe.

“Of course. There’s an enormous difference. The second rule is that I have the right to veto any questions if I think it’s not time to give the answer. You ask a lot of questions, and I think we’ll enjoy the day much more if I don’t have to answer all of them.”

Noa opened his mouth to object but she cut him off.

“The final rule is that you need to do exactly what I tell you to do.”

“Do I get any say in these rules?”

“No. They’re my rules. You can make your own, if you want.”

“Let me give that some thought.”

“Take your time. But the night is going to sleep, and we need to be on our way before she’s gone. Follow me.” Unlatching the basement window, she slid inside and called up from the darkness below. “Mind your head! It’s a short ceiling.”

Noa was studying the window and trying to think of a reasonably graceful way to slide his long limbs through it. He tossed the fabric to Zefyr and awkwardly dropped down.

His nose turned up when he caught the smell of metal and grease. They were in some sort of supply room; the lines of shelving stretched on into infinity and were populated with neat stacks of minutia; bolts and tools and wires and boxes.

“Why are we down here?” Noa had to duck his head as he followed Zefyr through the maze.

“Because,” she stopped in front of a closet. Judging by the accumulation of cobwebs near the hinges, it wasn’t used often. “You need to change. Here.” She re-deposited the fabric into his arms, and Noa realized it was a stack of clothing. Zefyr opened the closet door and pointed inside.

“It’s wool. Our city clothes are no good in the back country. They don’t breathe. Wool is the best – it keeps you warm in low temperatures, cool in hot temperatures, and dry in a rainstorm.”

“I suppose it makes you fly, too.” Noa was skeptically examining the fabric and wondering how it would keep him warm. It seemed flimsy. “Where did you get these?”

“A flock of sheep made them for me. Now get on with it.”

Thinking over her reply that was not really a reply at all, Noa pulled the closet door shut behind him. The darkness was thick; his own hand was invisible in front of him. Opening or closing his eyes didn’t make a difference, and the cold raised goose bumps on his arms as he began switching his denims and parka, banging his elbow on a shelf in the process of pulling the shirt over his head.

“Everything alright?” Zefyr asked from the other side of the door.

“Just fine. Brilliant, actually.”

I’m changing my clothes in an abandoned closet, He thought, so that I can follow a girl that might possibly be insane into the back country. Of course, things are brilliant.

Just as he was about to laugh at the absurdity of the whole thing, one significant detail jumped out at him: the sleeves of the shirt were long enough.

Clothing was a low-grade headache when you were four inches taller than anyone else in the entire city. He had made his peace with it as much as he could – accepted years of tugging down cuffs over his wrists or rolling up sleeves to hide their shortness. This shirt, scratchy and surprisingly warm, brushed against the intersection of his thumb and palm and lay over his shoulder as though he had been wearing it every day of his life. Nothing that he owned fit him like this.

Even though he couldn't see, when he traded his jeans for the pants, he felt the hems fall past his ankles.

He pushed open the closet door and hid his hands in his pockets.

"How do I look?"

Zefyr nodded once.

"Unbearably handsome. They fit you well, actually."

"Apparently, the sheep make clothing for strange men on a regular basis."

"They sent this along, too." She reached into her satchel and fished out a wool cap. "Sixty-percent of your body heat escapes from your head. And for you, why, that must be a lot."

His reply came automatically. "The average body produces approximately 50-60 watts of energy a day. I'm a little larger than average, plus we'll be climbing, plus –"

"Oh stop." Zefyr shoved the hat at him. "Just put it on."

Figuring that wearing it might save him somewhere around the equivalent of 45 watts of energy, if not more, Noa obeyed.

"Do I meet your standards for adequate back country attire now?" He asked as he pulled the brim down over his ears.

"You'll do."

She set off again through the labyrinth of shelving, leading him up a narrow set of stairs to the main level, where the darkness stretched beyond the reach of their eyes. One turbine blade lay on the floor like the limb of a fallen giant, the dim light coming through the glass block windows and stretching over the curvature of its surface.

"I forget how large they are sometimes." Noa remarked when they passed it.

"Or how small we are."

"That, too."

They had at what must be the east wall of the warehouse. Zefyr was running her hand over the corrugated steel, searching for a landmark. When she found it, she shoved her weight against the wall and slid aside a panel. Outside, the cool night air and the stars that chose to remain until daybreak waited for them.

They were quiet for awhile, focusing their energy on the switchback trail. The climb and cold temporarily pulled Noa out of the haze that he seemed to spend most of his time wandering through these days. He and his curiosity were wide awake when they reached the plateau and began weaving between the trunks of the turbines.

"Why do you change in the warehouse?"

"Because," Zefyr threw a hand up towards the whirling overhead. "The turbines don't ask questions."

"I thought that you believed it was good for people to ask questions?"

"There are some questions that I find too personal. Explaining my choice of clothing is one of them." She looked over her shoulder. "How are they, by the way?"

"Sort of scratchy." Noa admitted. "But you're right; they do breathe well."

"They'll soften up after a few wears."

Noa turned over the implication of her statement.

"Do you mean that I get to keep them?" He finally asked.

"If you'd like. Consider them a gift."

A gift. Noa knew this word but not well. A gift was like a favor – something that you received without earning it. He had heard the term used around things like transportation, or food, or housing. These were supposed gifts from the city in return for the contribution of its citizens. However, to the best of his knowledge, he hadn't done anything to earn the clothing on his back.

In that sense, it was the first real gift that he had ever received.

“Thank you.” He looked down at the sleeves. “I’ve never worn anything that fit me so well.”

“Don’t mention it. I noticed that you’re always pulling on your shirt cuffs.” Her mouth slipped into an easy smile. “I wouldn’t wear them around the city, though. You might start a trend. Pretty soon, everyone will want their own fancy wool clothes, and we wouldn’t want to overload the sheep.”

“Of course. The sheep.”

“If you wanted, I could let out some of the hems on your other clothes, too.”

“You know how to do that?”

“It’s another one of my strange hobbies.”

“Like making tea.”

“Just like that.”

They had reached the end of the turbine field by then. Zefyr looked behind at them and waved a hand.

“Who are you waving at?”

“The windmills. It’s only polite. They’ve been waving at us the whole time.”

Noa didn’t bother replying to this.

They lapsed into a quiet made up of only their footfalls on the dirt path and the sound of a warm west wind moving through the grass as it brushed against them with glistening fingers. They were passing over the same area as last week, Noa realized. Zefyr was in the lead, and he turned his attention to watching her movements again.

After observing her for nearly a quarter mile, he broke the silence.

“You’re different today.”

“How so?”

“You’re more careful.”

“I’m not sure that I follow you.”

“I mean, the other morning, you moved differently. Like you belonged out here.”

At first, Noa thought that she wasn’t going to reply. She seemed to be focused on the inconsequential task of breaking off the tips of the grass and pulling the fibers apart.

“I always come alone.” Her eventual answer rushed out of her mouth. “It’s distracting, having someone else along.”

“How long have you been coming up here?”

“Just over eleven years.”

“How often?”

“One or two days a week, when I can.”

This was somewhere between five-hundred seventy-two and one thousand one hundred forty-four days – the equivalent of one and a half to three years. When he thought of this, it made her level of comfort with the foreign land a little easier to rationalize.

They had reached the rim of the glacial valley, still peaceful with the night and the dew. Noa looked at Zefyr with skepticism as they began the walk down.

“You’re not going to...laugh, are you?”

She did, softly, against the folds of her scarf.

“No, not this morning. I don’t have time. There are things I need to show you.”

To emphasize her point, she began taking longer steps, giving in to the incline until the momentum of it shot her out on the valley floor in an easy sprint. Unsure of what else to do, Noa followed.

She stopped and eyed one of the boulders.

“This will work.”

She began to pull herself toward the top as though it she was climbing a ladders in Archives, but Noa was distracted by his evaluation of the footholds. How much weight did they hold? Should he lead with his right of left foot? How would he balance himself when he reached the top?

Zefyr’s face appeared over the edge of the rock.

“Do you know how to climb?”

“Of course I know how.” Noa ran a hand over the back of his neck and resumed mapping out of his route.

“Put your left foot there.” She offered. “Yes, that’s good. Now put your right foot there.”

“I wasn’t asking you. I’m fine.”

“I’m sure you are, but we haven’t got all morning.” She slid forward and offered her right hand to him.

“Here. Just push off and grab hold.”

“I don’t need your help.” Noa tried a different handhold, using the wrong hand and wondering why she thought it was necessary to peer down at him over a smile that she wasn’t making an effort to hide. “Besides, you can’t pull me up. You’re lighter than me.”

“Now you’re being insulting. All you do is sit at a desk all day and push buttons. I regularly have to cart around half of my weight in files. Come on, don’t be stubborn.”

This was a new development – being at a disadvantage.

It was a good thing that it was only for a day.

“Fine.” He sprang up and took her hand, bracing himself against the boulder and using her weight as an anchor to haul himself to the top. “But only because you’re in a hurry.” He settled into a hollow in the rock and draped his arms around his knees, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. “You are a tough little squirt. Next time you talk about killing me with your bare hands, I might take you seriously.”

“You really should.”

“What did you have to show me?”

Zefyr was looking to the east, a smile haunting the outline of her mouth.

“Close your eyes.”

“How can I see with my eyes closed?”

“There are other ways to see the world. Now close them.”

Noa obeyed.

“What is it like?”

He rested his jaw against the familiar support of his hand, running a finger along his ear. He felt tired all of a sudden; the climb and the hours of lost sleep loitered just outside the doorway of his eyelids.

If his sleep patterns had ever held any sort of normalcy, Noa would have understood the beautiful calm that comes in the moments before you are completely awake, in that place between consciousness and unconsciousness where all type of absurdity is possible and even tangible. There, you are no one, no age, with no name and you are also everyone and everything. This was the atmosphere that he found himself in, on top of the boulder, just before the dawn.

Bereft of sight, his other senses rose up to the challenge.

First, he heard.

Two sets of human lungs recycling their breath – his own that wound through his internal ear and Zefyr’s exhaling. Tiny wings opening and beating the air with the occasional high note escaping from the chorus hidden in the bushes below them. The wind, tiptoeing with caution in the grass. Farther away, to the north, it made a different sound. Noa remembered the pine trees that Zefyr had ran towards; how their needles trapped the breeze and gave it a voice as they bent the pitch here, and then there, low and then high. Much farther away, the cascades were rushing with the spring melt, emptying into the kettles of glacial lakes. This sound was a trigger; it tugged at the memories of his dreams, and he shivered unexpectedly. Not now. They were a long way from there.

“I hear expectation. Birds and the wind in the pine trees and the cascades.”

Scent came next.

The immediate proximity of his skin was most noticeable. He smelled different. It was as though the air of the back country had trapped itself in his pores and hidden in between the locks of his hair. Close behind this, he could detect the rough cut scent of wool clothing. Beyond that, there was something that had only recently become familiar. It took him a moment to place it.

“Are you carrying mint?” He asked.

“You’re good.” Zefyr laughed. “Actually, I have my herb bag in my satchel.”

There were other scents out of reach of the shelter of their boulder – things that smelled cold and wet and impossibly clean - the smell of the dew on the ground.

Finally, he felt.

The bottoms of his pant legs were damp from the grass.

“It feels like wet socks.”

“You’ll dry.”

The wool brushed his skin with its newness and created prickling patches along his spine. His muscles felt stretched and stiff, and across the top of his clasped hands, the air was chilly.

There was something else.

He had grown so used to ducking his head and fitting into spaces just slightly smaller than comfortable that it had taken him the past hour to notice this detail. Here in the back country, there were no doorways too low or seats too short – only the sky that raced upwards without any limit to its heights and rocks that loomed above his head. He had been too distracted by Zefyr’s actions to notice this last time.

“It feels...open.”

He swore that he heard her shiver.

“That’s one of my favorite things.” She spoke quietly. “The space, and how much room there.”

Noa thought of the way that she had carried herself last time – with graceful carelessness, not paying attention to the amount of matter her movements occupied. Of course. She could scream or laugh or run or jump all that she wanted to in this place. Nothing that she could do would overwhelm it.

Warmth touched his eyelids, coloring them red and interrupting his thoughts.

“Is that...?”

“Yes. You can open your eyes now.”

He caught himself, pulling hard on his desire to look.

“No. You can go blind doing that.”

“I’ve watched hundreds of sunrises, and I still have perfect vision.”

“Then why do you wear glasses?”

A note of laughter tumbled out of her mouth.

“They’re fake. I’ll explain later. Open your eyes.”

“I’ll pass, thanks.”

She was squirming next to him. He could tell by the rustle of her clothing.

“You’re missing it, Noa!” She elbowed him. “If it eases your mind at all, practically all of the ultraviolet radiation is removed from the solar beam via ozone absorption and atmospheric scattering when the sun is this low. In other words, you can risk ten seconds.”

“Oh, why not?” He muttered. “Just ten seconds. If it will stop your hassling.”

He opened his eyes, counting inwardly as he did, allowing the last of his senses to paint a complete picture of the new morning.

One one thousand.

All along the razorback ridges of the mountain range, the mist still loitered and tried to squeeze in a few more seconds of existence. The light had illuminated the fog with a delicate pink that sat on top of the lavender of the mountains themselves.

Two one thousand.

Huddled against the belly of the ribbon wisp clouds were conglomerations of orange and red.

Three one thousand.

The refined gold of the sun itself stretched out confident limbs towards their boulder as it pulled aside the curtain of night and soaked into the fibers of their clothing and skin.

Four one thousand.

The blue-black sky gave way to a lighter shade as the stars winked out in its zenith.

He abandoned his counting.

This was another moment being recorded on the cave walls of Noa's mind. He would want to remember this; his second sunrise and his first intentional viewing of it. While focusing the internal lens, creating a space to file away the sights and sounds and scents, something burned in his throat, climbing up until it spilled into his nose and blurred his eyes.

At first, he assumed that he had inhaled a speck of dust, or perhaps been watching the new sun for too long. Automatically, he reached up to clear his tear ducts.

After wiping one eye, he stopped.

This feeling was not external. It radiated from his chest and traveled the framework of his nerves until the remote outposts of his fingers and toes had received word, but still, it did not come from a tangible place. There was no internal organ that produced it. It was not a heartbeat or a catch in his breath. It wasn't an empty stomach or a shiver that responded to the cold.

His logic ran out to meet it, like antibodies responding to an infection, only to come to a standstill when they made contact. Like magnets repelling against one another, his mind bent and warped at the edges as it was pushed back from the sensation. It didn't help that he was tired, so tired that the process of trying to understand felt like a long climb upwards with worn-out muscles.

"Zefyr?" He tore his gaze from the sun and looked at her. "What is that?"

"What is what?"

Her eyes had a faint shimmer from the dawn reflecting in her wide irises, but they were otherwise dry.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the sensation was gone, leaving only a wet path from his tear ducts to the edge of his jaw.

Zefyr was watching him, her head tilting it at an angle. Her attention moved from one eye to the other, down to his mouth and nose and back up again, as though the details of his face were written in a foreign language and contained a message that she had been waiting to find. There, as he watched her watch him, inside of the blues and greens and the thin ring of silver where the light was pooling, he detected understanding.

After a long while, she turned away and remarked, "It's been forty-five seconds, you know."

Noa shook his head, rubbing his eye to clear them until his head hurt.

"I suppose I lost count."

"You must be tired."

"You have no idea."

04. Twenty-Seven Bones

They climbed off of the boulder not long after the valley had been cleared of its shadows.

“What did you think?” Zefyr asked.

“It was...” Noa hesitated, in search of the right adjective. Pleasant? Too generic. Nice? Not quite enough. There was one word, a term that he rarely used because it carried a weight to it that even the most impressive aesthetic display couldn’t communicate. He had never thought he might use it to describe something so raw, but as he lined the word up next to the memory of the sunrise, they flowed into one another and made perfect sense.

“Beautiful. It was beautiful.” He put his hands in his pockets and traced an invisible line in the dirt with his foot. “Where to now, little squirt?”

A tiny crease appeared in between her eyebrows as she pulled them closer to each other.

“Well, I hadn’t thought of that.” She reworked her mouth into a haphazard version of a frown. “There’s some herbs I want to check on, and I suppose – if you wanted to – you could come along. Do you have any issues with heights?”

“No. I’ve worked on the reactor before.”

“Right.” She nodded slowly. “Let’s get on our way, then.” She began to cross the valley, heading towards the broken teeth formations of the eastern range.

“You seem indecisive.” Noa remarked as he followed her.

She looked over her shoulder.

“We can go home, if you want.”

“That’s not what I meant.” He stretched his legs out until his pace matched hers.

“Look, I assumed that something would happen but I don’t think that it did.” She kept walking faster, as though physically keeping her distance meant that she could also avoid his questioning. “That’s the best answer I can give you right now.”

She was again grabbing grass blades and shredding them with her fingers as she talked, and Noa was about to resign himself to silence when she fired back with her own question.

“Did you really follow me last week simply because you were curious? I mean, would you have followed just anyone?”

“Yes and no.” A flock of sparrows dipped into the valley, and he traced their flight with his eyes. “I probably would have followed anyone, but you’re exceptionally interesting.”

She threw aside the handful of grass blades.

“What makes me so interesting?”

“Only things that I might notice. You have very different details, and that’s usually the first thing I look at.” He pointed to her face. “Your eyes, for example. Which reminds me; what was it that you said about your glasses being fake?”

“They are.” She didn’t volunteer anything more than a shrug of her shoulders.

“Why do you wear them?”

“My eye color is one of those more personal questions I don’t care to answer. The glasses have turned out to be fairly effective at warding them off.”

“I don’t suppose I’m allowed to ask that question, am I?”

“Recessed genes. That’s really all there is to it. Every few generations, this eye color shows up on my mother’s side of the family.”

“What’s so painful about explaining that?”

“Nothing. It’s just that I would rather not draw attention to it. It’s like you, and all of your abnormalities.” She had to turn her head up to look him in the eye, emphasizing their difference in height. “You get tired of being reminded that you’re unusual, don’t you?”

“What makes you think that?”

“The way that you notice people noticing you.”

Conversations with her were a faucet that flowed and stopped with a quick turn of a handle. One minute, she was either giving bizarre answers or ignoring his questions completely. The next she was switching directions without warning, slamming him broadside with the simultaneous display of her bluntness and her perceptiveness.

Even to himself, Noa didn’t often admit what she had just said. The stares from strangers, the side comments about his being “something else”, the way that he never quite fit into clothes or through doorways or really anywhere – all of this made constant and quiet circles around the periphery of his life. He had built up his immunity, had convinced himself that instead of being an outsider, he was better off than people who went through their days never thinking twice about their ability to fit in.

She, a stranger, had looked right through his efforts and called him out on it.

Zefyr wasn’t finished, though.

“That’s the thing about being different. You wage war with your desire to be accepted and yet still be exactly who you are, and you’re never allowed to take a break from that battle. To make peace with it, you do the best you can with what you’ve got. You impress people with your intellect or confuse them with your eccentricities. You become the youngest Climate Engineer or that mad girl who takes off into the hills. When really, all the while, you wonder why there isn’t a world where to be normal is to be different, and vice-versa.”

There was no bridge that Noa could have built using his usual tools – his Contribution Role, his numeric mind, his stubborn curiosity – that would have allowed him to reach the places where her mind went. But here was something; a fallen log, or just the right arrangement of river rocks for him to follow. Here was one small area where he stood a chance of understanding her.

“It seems that we have more in common than I thought.” He acknowledged.

“No, not really.” She grinned. “We’re only alike in the fact that we’re both different. But even your differences are different than my differences. We’re not alike at all. You just want to think so because it makes you seem less different.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Their conversation had brought them to the base of the mountains; the unfocused colors and shapes sharpening into the outline of boulders and clumps of young ferns uncurling to greet the June morning. Noa saw the faint outline of a trail draped against the face of the hill. Zefyr made her way towards this.

“You’re sure you want to come along?” She raised an eyebrow. “You’re not a great climber.”

“You’re so tactful with your comments. I think I can manage.”

“Good.” She looked at the crumbling path with familiarity, even welcome. “Because we’re going to the top of the world.”

The trail – a loose definition for what they were walking on – snaked in and out of the balding ridges and the cold, dark valleys that never saw the sun. There were a few wide sections that didn’t require much out of them other than the forward motion of their footsteps, but for most of the climb up, they were sliding past eroded stretches of loose dirt or pulling themselves up over narrow stairways that seemed to have been built for a graceful giant instead of a scrawny girl and a gangly boy.

The higher they climbed, the more the altitude stripped the oxygen from the air. They concentrated on breathing instead of talking. Wanting to take advantage of the unusual odds he was having with getting reasonable answers from Zefyr, Noa used the quiet to line up a new list of questions. He rearranged their order several times; first, according to the number of words, then the number of letters, then by how long he guessed Zefyr’s answers would be to each one.

The trail rolled over the top of a dry platform; the summit of one of the smaller mountains. Here, the view was stark; not even the debris from the glaciers could survive the wind that whistled over the eastern range. Despite

the absence of trees to block it, the sun had no effect on the patches of snow that huddled in dirty groups between the red rocks.

There was one exception to the ugly scenery; a lone rock, its blank face turned to the southwest, had bolted up towards the sky and left a long hollow where it had been laying. The combination of the shelter it provided and the exposure to the sun had created a patch of green, obnoxiously bright in the colorless landscape.

The wind stung their eyes as Noa and Zefyr crossed the distance from the trail to the rock. They sat with their backs against it and the sun on their faces while the granite arms of the slab hid them from the elements.

“We made it.” Coming out of the layers of her hair and scarf, Zefyr pointed to the green carpet at their feet. “And just in time. These are the first leaves of the year.” Her hand disappeared up to the elbow into her satchel, rattling the contents around until she found a paring knife and a faded drawstring bag.

“What is it?” Noa asked, watching her cut out clumps of new growth. This hadn’t been the first question on his list, but he let it come out because it fit the moment.

“Yarrow. It’s useful for slowing blood flow from cuts, and the tea helps with headaches.”

He gave in to one more out of order question.

“Where did you learn all of this? Something tells me that it’s not on a list of courses offered in Contribution school.”

“Not exactly. An old book in the mountains taught it to me.”

This was another one of her answers that wasn’t really an answer, more like her way of avoiding the question indirectly. He went back to his previous agenda.

“I was wondering...down at the bottom, you were talking about how we’re both different. I think I understand – partially at least. You’re physically different, like I am. Not as obviously, but just enough that I noticed it. But there’s more, isn’t there?”

Zefyr, her hand busy with winding string around the bundles of leaves and shoving them into the bag, stopped midway through one bunch.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“You’re different inside, too. It’s like all of the physical differences, and all of the strange things that you do are just symptoms of some integral part of you that I can’t put my finger on. Can you enlighten me?”

Her answer was unusually apologetic.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t answer that, not yet. I have to invoke Rule #2.”

“That’s a shame. In the order of questions I wanted to ask, that one kept ranking first.”

“Here’s the best that I can do: when you’re able to understand the answer – and I think that someday, perhaps you could – you won’t have to ask the question. It will make sense.”

She went back to bunching yarrow leaves, and Noa went back to wondering.

He turned her reply over, laying down a track for it to travel on by scratching out numbers in the dirt.

One-hundred nineteen pounds.

Sixty-two point seventy-five inches.

Eight thousand one hundred sixty-two point five days.

One hundred five thousand strands of hair.

He shifted them around, played with them by adding in average numbers like the one hundred trillion cells and the two hundred six bones...

“Noa?”

“Yes?”

“What are you doing?”

“Math.”

“I can see that. Why are you doing math?”

“Because,” he looked up and took note of her expression – a mingling of curiosity and confusion. “I’m trying to figure you out.”

“Oh.” One eyebrow pulled up higher than the other. “What do those numbers have to do with me?”

“They’re your numbers – or at least my best guess at them.”

Her raised eyebrow lay back down, pulling in the other as her nose wrinkled around the edges.

“And you think I’m the crazy one.” She muttered, stuffing the bag back into her satchel. “People shouldn’t be reduced to equations, you know.”

“Why not? I think equations are brilliant. They’re so straightforward.”

“The ability to measure something doesn’t make it any less overwhelming.” She pointed to the nearest peak. “See that summit? It’s nearly sixteen thousand feet above sea level. Even I know that, and I almost failed at math because it bores me to death. But that doesn’t make the mountain any easier to climb.”

Noa leaned back, brushing the dirt from his fingers.

“It helps me clear my head, that’s all. Your answers – or lack thereof – make me dizzy.”

“That’s the altitude. Come on, let’s go. We’ll take the opposite side back down.” Zefyr stood, her clothes whipping around her as the upper half of her body left the shelter of the rock.

“You’re all stocked up on your greenery?”

“For now. Are you ever going to try the tea?”

“Maybe tonight.” The wind made talking difficult, but Zefyr seemed to hold back from raising her voice. Noa assumed it was appropriate to use a few more decibels. “If I survive today, I’ll trust that you’re not out to do away with me.”

“No, your own brain is taking care of that.”

“Again, your tact amazes me. Don’t concern yourself too much, little witch. I’ll figure it out.”

“I’m sure you will. By the way...you’re off by fifty-four days.”

“What’s your date of birth?”

“March 9th.”

“Well,” he remarked as he followed her down the eastern slope. “That’s something else we have in common. We share a birthday, two years apart. That makes us practically twins.”

The path that Zefyr picked was more agreeable than the one they had taken on their way up. It curved along the knobbed spine of the mountain range until it met up with the timberline and wound through mismatched congregations of aspens and pine.

Up until today, Noa’s only frame of reference outside of Halcyon’s clipped landscape had been the emptiness of the peaks. Here, beneath the patches of sun that peeked between the silver tree bark and feathery clumps of new leaves, he found innumerable details to study and make patterns from. He was so distracted by his observing and subsequent cataloguing – one hundred seventy-nine aspens, two hundred twenty-eight pines, a half-dozen squirrels, three rabbits, thirty-two sparrows – that he didn’t notice an important detail until it had grown from a distant hum to a low rumble. By the time he acknowledged it, his body had started to react.

He knew this sound; white noise that moved over beds of gravel and rock and sediment, eventually overwhelming everything in its path. He also knew the illogical way that his blood seemed to drop in degrees until the cold worked its way through him and made him shiver, or how his nerves tied themselves into knots and the neurons in his brain begged him to turn and run, only to realize that his muscles refused to listen.

But this was different. The sound, an intrinsic part of his dreams, had always been heard internally, like a memory of a difficult conversation or a loud piece of machinery. When he woke up, the sound left and there were only the quiet morning noises.

Noa, already awake, couldn’t find a way to escape this time. Trying to push down the unsteady feeling in his throat before he spoke, he swallowed. It remained.

“Is there a river nearby?”

“A waterfall, actually.” Zefyr’s voice didn’t change. “Just up ahead. It’s quite a sight.”

Down the incline from where they were standing, stretched out in perfect detail that hadn’t been blurred by the uncoordinated motion of his dreams, the current raced on over the edge, churning up a spray of mist as it fell against the rocks at the bottom. As far as he could see, nothing held still. Nothing allowed itself to be tamed or kept in order. There was no algorithm to river that could give him a chance at organizing his thoughts around it.

Zefyr was correct. It was a sight.

While Noa was still struggling with the sound and the disorder, Zefyr was making her way towards a ledge that hugged the rocks near the waterfall. It cut back and forth down the cliff, emptying out a steep gorge that followed the crooked river below the falls.

That was their route.

Just before her head disappeared over the edge, Zefyr saw that Noa had stopped following her. The confused lines of her face softened.

“Oh! I’m sorry Noa. I forgot!” She pulled herself back up to level ground and walked towards him. “We can go back up and take the other way down, if you want.”

The idea of having to retrace their steps and go out of their way over something this senseless gave him a hold to dig the fingers of his logic into. He shook his head.

“It’s fine. It’s can’t reach out and grab us, can it?” He laughed, like he would laugh at someone tripping over the stairs. It was funny, awkward, uncoordinated. It should be laughed at.

Zefyr was not convinced.

“Are you sure? You’re shaking, you know.”

“It’s just a reaction.”

“I don’t mind going back.”

“No, don’t be stupid. Let’s get this over with.” To prove his point, he walked towards the ledge with movements that had the best intention of representing confidence. They fell short – he wondered if he had ever looked awkward than he did as he swung his legs down onto the trail.

Twenty feet down, he was forced to admit that this hadn’t been a good idea.

The lower he went, the stronger the reaction came on. Some bends in the trail stuck out sharply into the spray, and the fact that none of his muscles were willing to work with his brain made traveling these sections particularly difficult.

After rounding one of the corners, he flattened himself against the face of the rock and leaned all of his weight into it. This was the backbone of the mountain; it should hold still, should give him a straight line to measure reality against and help him accept it. But it didn’t. He could feel the rock shaking under his palms from the force of the river washing over it. He watched the water going by him; focusing on the individual drops that jumped out of line from the main current. They were small, weren’t they? Almost nothing. And really, when it came down to it, wasn’t the whole waterfall just made up of trillions of tiny drops? He idly wondered how many gallons were going over the falls per minute.

Of course – that was it.

One thousand eight hundred gallons per second, if he had to guess. He had been standing here for twenty-four seconds, and climbing for nine hundred sixty seconds...one million, seven hundred twenty-eight gallons of water had flowed by him.

He hadn’t expected the number to be so high.

Zefyr had been following just behind, but now he saw that she had paused at the bend, close to the edge. She put her hand out towards the mist and stood there, letting the drops pool on her palm and splash at her upturned face. Slowly, her expression rearranged itself into the last thing that Noa would have expected from someone standing ten feet away from his nightmare.

She smiled.

Noa held his breath and watched, trying to figure out if he should dislike her or admire her.

Presently, she pulled her arm back in and wiped her wet palm on her shirt. Her cheeks were pink when she reached him.

“What was that?” He asked.

“Just something that I do to anchor myself when I get distracted.”

“The water must be cold this time of year.”

“It is! There’s still quite a bit of ice, higher up.” She shivered. The fact that she was also smiling made a confusing combination of features. She nodded at him. “Taking a break?”

“I was just counting the gallons of water, actually.”

"I see. Well, now that you've measured the river, it's much less overwhelming, isn't it?"

"Certainly. I've got it under control." He didn't have much mental space to use on her. Most of it was occupied by the process of reasoning himself the rest of the way down.

"The river isn't even flowing at its full spring rate. When the ice dams break, it's twice as wide. How many gallons is that?"

"Three thousand six hundred per second, give or take."

"Imagine that!"

"I'd rather not."

"Which reminds me – we should go. Sometimes it storms in the afternoons and the gorge isn't the best place to be when that happens. Are you ready?"

"Whenever you are."

Zefyr rocked on her heels and watched as he slid away from the wall. The closer he came to the next bend, the longer he paused in between footsteps. He could feel the spray hitting him now, with no respect for his personal space, or for that matter, anything else.

It happened. He had known that it would. In the middle of a repetition of the fact that he wasn't actually in any danger, his logic gave up the ghost and ran away from this unconquerable thing that shaped landscapes and carried boulders for miles.

He was stuck. He couldn't reason himself to move because reason had left him.

"Noa? Are you alright? Because, you know, if you wanted to stop, this isn't a good spot."

He didn't reply. That would have meant thought and speech, neither of which he was capable of.

Time was passing, moving forward as it went by without a side glance at the boy on the ledge. He could have been standing there for hours, or even days. It was irrelevant. Perhaps he would stand here like a statue until he couldn't stand anymore.

"Here. I'll lead."

In his periphery, Zefyr moved past him and appeared on his opposite side. And then, completely engulfed in a battle between his reality and his nightmares, he felt something warm slip between his fingers; skin that was threadbare like old cotton yet smooth where the elements had worn it away, stretched over a series of strong, slender bones. Twenty seven of them, to be exact.

When he was a child, Ms. Jones, the wrinkled old house nanny at the Child Wellness dorms, would take him along when she ran errands – dropping off the laundry, picking up their food portions – and as a precaution against the flow of bicycle and foot traffic, she would often take his hand in her cold, vein-riddled one. The gesture had nothing to do with warmth or nurturing; it was a practicality. However, his young mind had made a connection from it. If someone took him by the hand, he couldn't be lost.

That had stopped somewhere around age seven or eight. But almost twenty years later, his brain kick started and the connection resumed, coming to life like a rusty piece of machinery. He looked down at his hand inside of her hand; freckles and red skin against pale knuckles and calluses.

It was her face, however, that caught him off guard. Her features, always in a hurry to move from one expression to the next, sharp and quick and even condescending, were only open and honest.

"It's alright." She said. "Just follow me."

And because his mind had convinced him that he could not be lost when she had a hold of him, he did.

They made it to the bottom, with Zefyr towing him behind her through the mist. When they reached the floor of the gorge, she sat him down on a fallen tree trunk and dug out her water bottle.

"Drink something." She ordered. "I'll be right back."

Like the squirrels he had been counting earlier, she ran off into the bushes while Noa breathed.

When Zefyr reappeared, she had gathered up one corner of her shirt into a makeshift pocket and was holding it close against her. She was carrying a pile of tiny red fruits, nearly oblong but pointed at the tips, and speckled with yellow seeds. She passed him a handful.

They were still warm from the sun.

"Are these...?"

“They are indeed.”

He had to watch her eat first - he didn't know what to do with food that wasn't precooked and packaged into a shelf-stable, non-descript square. Each fruit wore a green cap of leaves, and Noa watched Zefyr balance this part between her thumb and forefinger while she bit off the red portion before he gave it a try.

Coffee's strong flavor came from its bitterness. Strawberries were the opposite. They was sweet – sweeter than anything he could ever remember tasting. There was a sour edge at the end, too, just before he swallowed.

“They're good, aren't they?” Zefyr tossed a few strawberry tops over her shoulder.

“The Chancellor really doesn't know what she missed out on. She probably threw them away, you know.”

“Too bad for her.”

Noa studied his fifth berry before he ate it, trying to count the seeds.

“We should grow these in Halcyon. What do you think the germination rates of these seeds are?”

“They don't taste as good if you try to cultivate them.”

They sat in silence, biting into strawberries and tossing the green parts into the thicket behind them until only a few remained.

Zefyr broke the quiet.

“You should take swimming lessons. It might help with the reaction.”

“I was just about to thank you, honestly.”

She let out her careless smile, tracing the ridges of bark on their log bench with her pinky finger.

“I thought we didn't bother with formalities.”

“A simple ‘you're welcome’ would have been fine.” His own smile followed hers – it happened so naturally that he wondered if studies existed on the subject of imitating the body language of another person. Did it happen with everyone, or was this another thing that set her apart?

“If it helps ease your mind at all, I've had my own share of reactions like yours.”

“What triggers it for you?”

“Triggered, actually. I don't have them anymore. But when I first started coming up here, I once got charged by a mountain lion. For a long time after that, I'd get paralyzed by the thought of them stalking me in the trees above my head.”

“How did you get over it?”

“I started roaring back when I saw them.”

She would. Perhaps she was the only person that he knew of who would, but the image of her yelling back at wild animals almost made sense when he tried to picture it.

She elbowed him.

“It really does help. You should try. Go over there and yell at the waterfall until you're hoarse.”

“I'll keep my distance. I appreciate the advice, though.”

Noa kept impulsively looking at her out of the corner of his eye – her wool hat was falling down over her forehead, and the burn of backcountry air had smeared itself across the tip of her nose. He decided that, for the time being, there was no reason to dislike her. “You know, you can be quite a pleasant person. When you're not insulting me or being absurd.”

“I don't know if I'm supposed to be offended or thankful for that.” Zefyr nodded to the remaining berries. “Save those, for after lunch. They help wash the taste down.” One more trip into her satchel produced a stack of portions. Their size confused Noa – they were much smaller than what he normally ate; more like child portions. She passed three of the squares to him.

“Let me know if you want more.” She said in between mouthfuls.

Noa hadn't even unwrapped the first one. He was still curious about the smaller size.

“Where did you get these?” He finally asked.

“I trade with the school kids at the Underground station. They think it's some sort of privilege – eating adult portions.” Zefyr made a face. “They probably disagree when lunch time rolls around, though. Most of them don't trade with me more than once.”

“Why do you eat child portions?”

“They taste marginally better than adult ones.”

“But it’s food. Why does it matter how it tastes?”

“Strawberries are also food.”

“You shouldn’t mess around your food portions. How would you know you’re getting the right amount of nutrition?”

She rolled her eyes.

“I eat when I’m hungry and stop when I’m full, that’s how.”

It occurred to Noa that her actions had another consequence.

“Well, you’re also throwing everything off. I can’t arrange the weather properly if –“

“Rule number one!” She shoved a fourth portion at him. “Here, have another. Your nutritional needs exceed mine because of your size and age. Maybe getting adequate sustenance will make you less disagreeable.”

“I take back everything that I said about you being a pleasant person.”

According to Zefyr, the gorge curved around to the north in a long crescent and emptied out just beyond the valley where they had watched the sunrise. After they left the waterfall and the deep pool behind, the river grew narrow, only a few feet across in some places, and the trail kept a safe distance from the bank.

It was colder here, in the veins of the land where the sun couldn’t reach. Water dripped from crevices in the walls like teardrops from an infection. Here and there, the fern fronds shivered against each other. They were the only signs of growth, aside from a few spindly trees that were attempting to survive.

Noa had been splitting his attention on a conversation with Zefyr about tea making and his preoccupation with the fidgeting stream. The combination of the two distracted him, and because he couldn’t see the sun anyway, he didn’t notice that it had disappeared until a different type of light flickered across the walls of the gorge.

Both of them looked up. The sky had changed – the wide blue had been replaced by low sheets of clouds that shoved against each other on their way down the valley.

Noa counted the seconds – one, two, three, four, five...

At seven and a half seconds, the thunder followed, vibrating as it bounced down into the narrow space.

“How much further until we’re out of the gorge?” Noa asked.

“About a mile and a half, give or take.”

Storms could move at up to fifty miles per hour. At the most, they were moving four miles per hour.

Zefyr stopped looking at the sky and faced forward.

“Those are cumulonimbus clouds, you know.” Noa said.

“I know what they are.” She was quick and calm when she replied, as though concern wasn’t worth her time. However, she did start moving faster. Not to be outdone, the clouds kept coming from the mountains, carrying spats of lightening in their arms and followed by long drumbeats of thunder.

She hadn’t thought through their route very well. He should have known better than to let her lead him down here. He watched her head bobbing in front of him and wondered how she could have been so stupid.

Noa wasn’t usually indecisive. He didn’t expect his thoughts surrounding Zefyr to switch between admiration and dislike as often as they had this afternoon.

“Well, that was brilliant, leading us into a gorge just in time for an afternoon storm. I thought you knew what you were doing out here.”

“I’m sorry.” She spit the words like liquid too hot to swallow. “It came on faster than I thought.”

“No, you weren’t thinking in the first place. That’s the problem.”

“You could save your breath and move a little faster if you stopped being rude, you know.”

She had a point. Noa went back to counting seconds between the thunder until the rain began to fall and he switched to counting the drops that fell on his shoulders before there were too many of them.

When it rained in Halcyon, he arranged it to be nothing more than a mild drizzle that fell in long, easy sheets across the city and lasted for a few hours to help irrigate the Food Production fields. Staying dry meant wearing a sturdy rain jacket and a good pair of shoes.

This was something else entirely.

The limited opening of the gorge seemed to concentrate the drops so that they fell hard and fast and soaked through the best efforts of their wool clothing. It wasn't a mild summer rain, either; this was a storm from the peaks that hung on to the cold of a mountain winter. At first, it cooled them; they had been running for the past few minutes, and Noa welcomed it.

This didn't last long. He had to resort to gritting his teeth to keep himself from shivering, and also because opening his mouth to take his discomfort out on Zefyr was too much of a possibility.

The weepy drips in the crevices increased, growing into miniature versions of the river as they wound through the familiar places in the rock. At the top, they whispered. By the time they reached the bottom, they were shouting, raising their voices to match the level of the swelling river as it rose up against its banks, and gnawed away at the comfortable distance between its banks and the trail.

Then, somewhere in between the growing discontent of the river and the bedlam of the sky, they heard another sound; sharper, more defined, as though the pitch of it had been tightened. It echoed off of cliff face and boulder and ledge until it reached the ears of the boy and girl who were racing the storm.

Noa stopped, looking up and down the river as he tried to place the sound. The rain was running in his eyes now, and made it difficult to see.

Zefyr backtracked and pulled hard on his arm.

"Keep going."

Her voice shook.

They started to run again, and over the pandemonium Zefyr yelled instructions.

"Remember Rule Number Three?"

"The last time I did what you told me to do, I ended up here."

"Shut up. You don't have any choice. You need to run like you've never run in your life. No matter what happens, don't slow down, don't look behind you, and don't ask me questions."

"What was that sound?"

"Damnation, just listen to me!"

There were a plethora of things that contributed to his awkwardness –his cold and tired muscles, the film of rainwater that he had to keep wiping from his eyes, and his limbs that weren't used the terrain. Zefyr pulled ahead and sprinted, stretching her legs into long strides that cleared the rocks. Noa was doing his best to keep up when he noticed a roaring in his ears.

I must be working myself very hard. He thought. I need to rest soon.

But no, this was not an internal sound.

Two things happened then. The first was that Zefyr sprang forward and pulled herself into the feeble branches of one of the trees. The second was Noa made the mistake of looking over his shoulder.

He knew this sight – the distinct crest of the waves at the top of the mass of moving water, the violent way that it pushed and pulled against the wall of the canyon, and how it groaned when they didn't give way...

Because it was a dream, and he would eventually wake up, he stopped running and stared at the swollen torrent, noticing the tree roots and chunks of ice moving with it. Strange. This was a new detail.

Although it wouldn't do anything, he threw his arm in front of his face to block out the worst of the sight.

He began to plead with himself internally.

Wake up, wake up.

The strength and cold caught him off guard. He lost his footing, his sense of direction, and his last shred of reason as the water ripped into him.

Notes from a Secret-Keeper #2 – The Flood

Some people make the mistake of thinking of spring as a soft, delicate thing – all full of baby animals and tender flower buds.

She knows better.

Spring is violent. Thawing, freezing, blowing, growing, digging, swelling, birthing. Rivers that cannot contain themselves, having been held back all winter by the grinding ice. New grass that the ground issues forth through the mud and compacted soil. The changing of bird calls from simple chirps to long trills belted out to impress the potential mate. The nearly instantaneous explosion of blossoms, sometimes pushing right out of the snowdrifts like a phoenix from the ashes. To see spring is to know hope, and to know hope is to understand violence.

The girl who has roared at lions and raced flash floods for fun, who has touched the thorns to gather the blossoms and birthed the lambs to harvest the wool, no longer fears spring and all of the ferocity that accompanies it. She welcomes the chaos, even dares to revel in it.

Her feet are certain; they know well the texture of rock and gravel beneath the soles of her shoes and the motion of muscles turning to navigate the obstacles. She knows that the pitiful branches of the tree ahead are their best hope, and so makes for them. Her hands anticipate the wet bark and the death grip, her legs plan for the jump upwards.

She knows that she will make it.

But the boy is a stranger to the violence and to the land itself. His fear, rising off of his skin in a haze, makes him clumsy and throws rocks in his path, and his confusion clouds his senses even as he tries his hardest to understand what is happening.

She knows that the boy will not make it.

The flood reaches him just before he reaches the tree, and she has time only to act, not to think. Sparing her arm from her grasp on the meager shelter, she reaches out into the flotsam and the anger and the madness of the river and grabs his hand.

And then it is only her, holding him between his death and his survival.

The water has teeth made from debris and shattered ice, and muscles made from the dizzying slant of mountain slopes. Its only concern with the boy and the girl is that they are in the way of its constant movement and its relentless quest to travel the innumerable miles and arrive at last at the sea. It will grind away everything in its path; boulders, banks, villages, even mature trees will not escape.

She feels her shoulder joints straining, popping, protesting as she tries to pull him in towards the branches. She is strong, but he is heavier than her. Perhaps, on a clear day without the current fighting her, she could have done it. But this is not a clear day; this is an afternoon of storms and surges and the river is very angry with her. It will rip her arm off if it so pleases, without a second thought.

In the boy's defense, he makes one attempt to pull his body towards her but loses his nerve when he feels the full impact of the struggle.

Above the ever-moving surface of the flood, she looks down at him.

She shouldn't be surprised by how childish he appears; how frightened and lost and desperate he has become in the midst of living his worst nightmare. She can see from his eyes that he knows; he will not survive if she lets go, and she cannot hold on forever.

Over the sound of rage and rushing, she hears him plead, just once.

Please, don't let me go.

And somehow, despite the inevitable outcome of such a promise, she resolves that she won't.

Once, when she was being foolish, more foolish than she is being at the moment, the river caught her and carried her downstream for several miles. She fought her way to shore and crawled up, covered in bruises and cuts and muddy flood water. Because there was nothing else to do, she laughed at herself and went on her way.

She cannot hope to fight against the current. But perhaps there is hope in fighting with it.

Her arm is going numb from the effort of providing an anchor to the boy. She takes one long, bold breath and looks down at him again.

Try to keep your feet pointed downstream, she yells.

He doesn't understand, and there is no time for the grace of an explanation as she unwinds herself from the tree and releases both her body and his to the mercy of a spring flood.

At first, not realizing that she is still holding on to him, he loses his composure, threatening to drown both of them. She can't really blame him; he is immersed in the thing that he fears the most without even knowing what it means to fear in the first place. But she cannot fight both the boy and the river, so she pulls him in and wraps her arm around his neck.

Stop fighting. She yells in his ear. I've got you.

His fear is still tangible, but he obeys.

And for a moment, she can hope.

Indeed, the water is a violent thing, but she knows better.

She knows that hope is the most violent thing in the world.

They ride the current with dropping stomachs and hearts that ache from beating so fast. She tries to steer them away from the worst of the debris and she mostly succeeds. There is one tree, one gluttonous and overgrown cottonwood that she can't avoid and all they can do is scrape against it and hang on to each other until the tree decides it's had enough and pushes them back out into the river.

The encounter is not without its casualties.

The screaming starts after that; the unearthly sound of a wound on a body that has no prior memory of such a thing. The boy, who has concentrated his every effort into letting her save his life, abandons this challenge and loses himself in all of his terror and pain and the choking hold of guilt that he's held at arm's length because he knows it will drag him down and she will go along with him.

They all pulled beneath. For a long time she can't find the sky and they are left to breathe through the water.

When she finally drags both of their heads back to the surface, her stomach turns over on itself in at what she sees; they have left the narrow gorge and entered the wide-open meadow, and they are much closer to the shore.

They go under again.

Often, the task of survival in this land has been tiring. But trying to survive for both of them is the most exhausting thing that she has ever done. She stretches, strains, grits her teeth and beats her lungs. She is lightheaded and desperate but she is stubborn and she made him a promise.

Her feet find the ground. Her head finds the air.

She knows that they will make it.

05. The Storyteller

Noa had constructed his life around rhythms. They were the walls that he leaned against and the path that his feet walked on. When he was dizzy or disoriented, often all it took was some simple metronome to right his balance and remind him who he was and where he was going. It might be the ticking of a clock, the blinking of his tablet compiling a report, or the circular motion of his legs pushing against the pedals of his bicycle.

This day, this strange day that had taken him a long way from those dependable structures, had at last dissolved into a black hole of misdirection. There was no up or down or right or left, no hours to count, nothing to steady his equilibrium.

He wasn't stupid; Zefyr, for all of her attempts at the impossible, was no match for a flash flood.

He had given up after the tree branches had bitten down and spit them out. Something had happened then, something that his brain was trying to process.

There it was. A throbbing in his right calf that latched onto a memory from the river; pain that was hot, out of place in the freezing water, coming from his leg. Whatever consciousness he had left had been poured into that one thing, and it held his attention so much that he lost track of whether or not they were floating or falling or under or above the water. Somewhere in the far-flung corners of thought, he was looking at her just before they went under the water, realizing he was pulling her down with him.

But there was nothing he could do, nothing more to see or think or hear or number.

At least until now. The pulsing that grew warmer with every second had a beat to it. He reached toward this. Gradually, it showed up in other places – in his fingertips, his neck, and most noticeably against his chest. His leg wasn't warm anymore, it was scorching. The pounding on his chest was painful now, and he tried to push it away only to realize that the world was still heavy beyond belief.

There were sound waves moving through the water, parting the molecules with tiny fists that lost most of their stamina by the time they reached his ears.

“Noa, wake up.”

At first, he mistook them for his own thoughts. This must be a dream. Probably the worst dream that he could remember, but all dreams had an ending and pushed him backwards through his sleep, up into the straight lines and solid shapes of reality. He didn't have a reason to think that this one would be any different.

“Shallots, wake up! You're supposed to listen to me, dammit.”

Something wasn't quite right. His mind never used language like that –

The rhythms skidded to a stop, interrupted by an exodus of muddy floodwater from his lungs. It seemed to stream out of every exit that his sinuses possessed – nose, mouth, eyes, ears, all of them were scraped and scoured by his body trying to replace the water with his breath.

Waking up wasn't usually this uncomfortable.

He coughed until it felt like an earthquake was cracking his chest apart, and still he kept coughing. Finally, when enough space had opened up in his lungs to allow air to move down his windpipe again, he stopped. The rain was still falling. He could feel it running across his face and blurring his view of the grey sky. Traces of sand and grit crunched against his teeth and stung his eyes and nostrils. He inhaled carefully and tried to focus on the cold gravel under his hands. It was the first solid thing he had touched in awhile.

Someone moved next to him, throwing themselves back out of his line of sight in a huddle of wet clothes, matted hair, and a choking sound that hid behind a pair of scraped hands.

“Good god,” Zefyr wheezed, “it took you long enough, didn't it?”

Noa made one go at sitting up and then thought better of it. Instead, he turned his head in her direction. She looked strange, sideways and distorted, curled up behind her knees as she rocked back and forth.

“What are you doing?” He winced as he spoke; his throat wasn't in the mood for talking yet.

“Shut up.” The mumbled reply seemed to have every intention of firmness, but fell short of it, landing somewhere between exhaustion and hysteria. “Just give me a moment; I’m spent.”

Finding that his arms were functioning again, he brought one hand up to his face and rubbed his temple in an effort to correct the pounding behind it. Of course, he would give her a moment. He had nothing else to do.

Zefyr stopped rocking. She straightened her spine and crawled over to him.

“That’s a bit better.” Her eyes were bloodshot and the skin around them swollen, but she didn’t pay any attention to this, or to the episode minutes before. “Now, to tally our losses. Let’s see, I still have my pack, but half of the contents seem to be gone. Including the water. That’s just great. Your hat is missing, one of my pant legs is ripped off at the knee, and I think my left arm is permanently stretched a few inches longer than my right. Anything else I should know about?”

“That tree pulled my leg off.” Noa propped himself up on his elbows and looked down when his vision stopped spinning. Good lord, he was dirty. No, he was beyond dirty – he was an entire palate of mud and sand that hid the original color of his clothes. Zefyr was rolling up his pant leg and studying the source of the throbbing.

“What happened?” He asked as she began to inspect the cut with her fingers. “Did someone pull us out of the river?”

“I did.”

“No you didn’t. That’s impossible.”

“The one time I give you a clear, concise answer, you have to argue with me. I’d reenact my impressive rescue, but I don’t think you’re in a hurry to get back in the water again.” She wrinkled up her nose and leaned in. “This looks deep. I can’t really tell with all of this muck on you, though. I’ll need to clean it.”

Noa was unconvinced.

“Really, how did you do it? I mean, not to offend you, but -”

“Oh, shut up.” Her fingers were now skirting the edge of the wound. “All one hundred nineteen pounds of me is made up of pure brawn. I am, as you put it earlier, a very tough little squirt.”

Still skeptical, Noa looked around. The land was open here; it stretched for miles in a hazy curve empty of any other life but them. Beyond the meadow, clouds of mist gathered at the base of the mountains where the wind slid down the slopes and stoked the rain into horizontal curtains.

From what he could tell, they were alone. He glanced down at the bank of the river; rising up from the surge of the flood, the muddy ground contained a set of small footprints and one long drag mark from the edge of the water.

“You really did pull us out.” Noa was about to thank her when her attempts at cleaning the cut brought her into direct contact with it and set off a string of explosions in his head. Before he could catch it, his voice ran from him and burst out into the damp world. Zefyr’s hands jerked away.

“I’m sorry!” She wailed. “I need fresh water.”

There had been numerous unfamiliar experiences throughout the course of the day. Gritting his teeth until his jaw protested, he added mind-numbing pain to the list.

When the hurting had stopped taking up any available space in his mind, he saw that Zefyr had moved away to the edge of the river. She was looking up and then down the current; taking long breaths that shook her shoulders. Her outline was unsteady; Noa realized that the temperature had dropped, and she must be shivering. He wound his arms around his chest and watched as his breath came out in wet, thick clouds.

She came back to him and knelt down.

“Can you walk?”

Of course, he could have. Walking on a wounded leg wouldn’t kill him. He opened his mouth to say yes and then stopped when the pain from the cut made another rotation through his nerves.

“Maybe you could go and get help, from the city.” He mumbled. “I can wait here.”

“No, you can’t.” She frowned at him. “If a bear doesn’t get you, you’ll die from hypothermia.”

Both were a possibility, and he didn’t prefer either one of them.

“Well, what do you propose?”

“If you lean on me, do you think you could try to stand? There’s a shelter nearby. I can boil the rainwater and clean your leg. You’ll be out of the weather, too. Then I’ll go back to the city and get help.”

Noa watched the rain drops congregating on her face and dripping off her sharp nose. How had he ended up here? He could string the events together, could navigate from point A to point B and understand the sequence of hours that had passed since he left the clean, white squares of Halcyon. But it was a bizarre predicament to find himself in; miles from the things that he could touch and understand, hidden from the course of the sun to tell him when he was, with his only reasonable chance of surviving the day resting on the narrow shoulders of this girl.

“How far are we talking about?”

“Maybe half of a mile.”

“And you’re sure you can handle this?”

“Don’t be insulting. Give me your hand.” Noa obeyed, and she doubled over and pulled so hard on his arm that it caught him off guard. “Help me out a bit, won’t you? See if you can spring up on your good foot.”

It took a few minutes of awkward shifting and hobbling and balancing, and by the time both of them were standing they were sweating from the effort. The cut in Noa’s leg pounded harder at the change in blood flow, and he bit his lip to distract himself.

“There! Look at us!” Zefyr was grinning as she tucked herself under his arm and took him by the waist. “And now we’re nice and warm, too. See what a good idea this was?”

“Just brilliant.”

“We’ll go slowly. You’ll be fine, I promise. I’ll talk you through it.”

They took their first uncoordinated step forward and managed not to fall over.

There were only about 2,100 more steps to go.

“And what will you say?”

“I’ll say, ‘Noa, you’re certainly doing well, for a pampered city boy. You’ve taken everything I’ve thrown at you in stride. Even a flash flood! I bet that you’ll want to come back to the mountains every day from now on. Just wait until the wolves come out at dusk!’”

“That’s supposed to help?”

“It takes your mind off of your leg, doesn’t it?”

“Just don’t drop me. I’m not responsible for my actions if you do.”

“I’ll consider myself sufficiently warned.”

Half of a mile was a manageable distance. Noa thought all of the places that he traveled within a half a mile of his row house – the cleaners to drop off his laundry, the Food Production station to pick up his weekly portions, the green space near Climate Engineering...not to mention that he must walk that distance at least once a day by passing back and forth from his desk to the other workstations.

A half of a mile was, on average, two thousand one hundred steps. His strides were slightly longer than average; for him it was more like two thousand steps. At one hundred fifteen steps per minute, it was easy for him to cross that length in a little over a quarter of an hour.

And on he went, adding and subtracting and averaging everything that he could involving half of a mile. He was trying to find a rhythm perpendicular to the one that was aching in his leg and echoing in his head. Every time he thought that he had managed to get away it and clear his mind, his thoughts slid right back into the tempo.

Zefyr was talking, more than she usually did. Noa hadn’t thought of her being so discontent with silence.

Later, he realized that she had been trying to distract him.

It helped at first. When she got on a topic that she liked– at the moment, it was wildflower varieties – her voice had a low, easy cadence, like rolling foothills just before they grew teeth and turned into mountains. It was not flat or dull, obnoxious or imposing.

Eventually, though, like everything else, it fell in line with the pounding.

One-two.

“Asters bloom in late summer.”

One-two.

“Honeysuckle comes sooner, not long from now.”

One-two.

“And violets are the earliest – we missed them already.”

It grew colder.

Noa was vaguely aware that they were going uphill, and that the wind had nothing better to do than cut through their wet clothes. The raindrops had changed their patterns; their long, heavy lines moved more lightly against each other and took on an opaque look. He blinked as they hit his face.

“Is that snow?”

Zefyr stopped and looked up.

“Figures. That’s mountain weather for you.”

The absurdity of it woke him a little.

“Snow in June. That’s ridiculous. I don’t even like it in the peaks in January, where it belongs.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad. The air smells different when it snows. Blue and grey smells. It changes the sound of the land, too. Nothing is quiet like the world after a blizzard.”

For weeks after that day, Noa thought back on their conversation and wondered to himself if he had been hallucinating or not. He held on to a dim memory, real or imagined, where just like she had done at the waterfall, Zefyr turned her face up and allowed the snowflakes to fall on her dirty cheeks. They lingered for a fraction of a second on the curve of her smile and the lashes that framed her eyes, venerated before they were melted by the warmth that came off of her skin.

She was so strange.

The path became steeper under their awkward progress and the snow slid beneath the soles of their feet. Still, Zefyr didn’t stumble or lose her hold on him. She never protested when he leaned most of his weight against her. It was an odd turn of events; the girl who carried a whirlwind of movement and questions with her that often made him dizzy had become the only steady thing in a gray world.

There was a tall, narrow doorway cut into the rocks in front of them, and then the wind stopped. Four stone walls sagged around them. Like a tomb, they held the cold air unmoving in their grasp, and this pained Noa. He was so tired of being cold.

“Where are we?”

“It’s a secret. I’ve hidden out here before.”

“Certainly a cozy place to pass the time.”

“In its defense, it was abandoned. Abandoned places are rarely hospitable at first. They say that long ago, a sorcerer lived here who liked to meddle. Once, his meddling went much farther than he intended and the sight of the cabin drove him mad, so he fled from it.”

A bunk had been carved into one of the stone walls. Zefyr sat him on top of it.

“Lie down and put your leg up.” She pried the lid off of a dusty chest and pulled out a blanket. Must and age hit his nose when she shook it out and handed it to him, and he was tempted to push it away until he remembered that he was probably much dirtier himself.

She was moving like a cyclone again, going in and out of the doorway and carrying armfuls of twigs that she stacked against the wall. After that, she brought in thicker branches and logs; these slowed her down long enough for Noa to ask if he could help.

“No.” She was rigid in her reply. “Damnation, can you just listen to me for once and lie down? You’re going to bleed to death if you don’t.”

“You have such a foul mouth.” Noa muttered as he looked down the side of his leg. He had been so focused on how much it hurt that he hadn’t noticed how gravity had been pulling his blood towards the ground since they had left the riverbank. It had soaked through the dirt and wool and made dark blotches along the hem of his pants.

Foul language notwithstanding, he caved and obeyed her.

He was cold past the point of discomfort now. Pressing his arms against his chest and his lower jaw against the upper didn’t do anything to stop the shivering. He shook until he swore his bones were going to crack.

Zefyr stopped moving for awhile, busy with stacking twigs and branches inside of a dirty recess. It seemed like such a funny ritual to be spending her time on, one that became even more mysterious when his unsteady vision saw sparks coming out of her hands. They rioted across the base of the woodpile and went on to scale the teepee formation as they ate away at it.

Warmth came from the glow across the room, and it turned Noa's thoughts into listless, drowsy words that couldn't keep themselves in order.

She's a witch. A little mountain witch, like the ones they told stories about.

Having just watched her produce light and heat with her bare hands, it didn't surprise him when her outline blurred and split into two versions of her; one who stood up and continued to run in and out of the doorway and the other who continued to kneel by the recess and blow at the sparks.

When he was warm enough to stop his teeth from knocking together, he asked a question to the girl kneeling on the floor. The other one seemed so busy, and it made sense not to bother her.

"How did you do that?"

She turned around, the details of her face shadowed by the light that rimmed her silhouette like the sunrise had done last week.

"You've never seen fire?"

"Is that what it is? I studied forest fires one semester. I didn't know they came in a smaller size. What did you do that for?"

"I'm going to melt the snow and boil it so I can torture you again with my rudimentary medical skills."

"No, that bit where you split in two. The other one is still stacking wood."

Zefyr stood and moved across the room toward him. Her shadow went in front of her; taller than she really was, stretching out and filling in the hollows of the stone floor. Noa watched it blur and fall across his bunk until something cold touched his face. He flinched and turned away.

Someone laughed next to his ear; a tight, choked laugh. It was Zefyr's voice, but the sound didn't fit. It was too stiff of a noise for her to make.

"You say the most amusing things. I'll tell you what; why don't you try sleeping for awhile? It's going to take some time for the fire to get warm enough. "

As usual, she hadn't given him anything resembling an answer. It was insanity; how she always won out and he ended up going along with whatever she said. As he fell asleep, he imagined that his logic was a long, straight line that stretched on beyond his vision and provided the most certain course to navigate by. In contrast, hers was a bizarre compilation of spheres and ellipses that occasionally crossed his path.

Yet somehow, she always arrived before him.

His sleep was punctuated by a still-frame movie of Zefyr, or at least the collective version of her. Now there were three. She – no, they – were a whirlwind of movement; one fed the fire, one dragged in a pot of snow, and the third left the stone cabin for a long time.

"It's a good thing there's three of you." He muttered. "That looks like a lot of work."

No one replied.

The wind picked up, gathering high and low notes as it pushed against the stone walls that refused to yield. The best that it could do was blow snow through the cracks in the window and drift it under the door in skittish bursts. Another howl cut through the noise, long and unbroken until it disappeared in a haunting peak at the end that made his skin crawl. The fire-tender and the water-boiler ignored it, but outside he could hear the third girl making sharp sounds in the blizzard.

"Go on, you dirty mutts. You can't have him, or me for that matter. Get out of here or I'll tell Lieb."

The door blew open and sagged on its hinges. A good inch of snow and the long-absent Zefyr tumbled back inside. Her white hands were holding pieces of bark and leaves and grubby roots that he didn't recognize. The water-boiler took the items from the gatherer and threw them in the pot.

There were pleasant smells then, like the bundle she had given him on Remembrance Day. He wasn't cold anymore. He was too warm, and welcomed the prick of cold fingers near his ankle.

"I'm going to clean the cut now. It will probably hurt."

“Which one of you?” He asked, but he never got an answer. Instead, heat made contact with the skin on his calf. He tried to pull his leg away. In the hazy corners of his mind, he thought that he heard Zefyr cursing and telling him to stop kicking her.

When he opened his eyes again, the three girls were stationed around the room, talking to each other.

“I don’t know what to do with him. He’s worse off than I thought.” The one pacing in front of the door yanked her hands through her hair as she spoke.

Rocking on her heels by the fire, the second one offered a low reply.

“You could try to find Lieb. He’d know how to help.”

“No, no. I can’t do that. Its six miles from here. If I get lost, we’ll both die.”

The third, who had been leaning against the wall in silence, finally spoke.

“You did the best that you could. The cut is clean. If you can break his fever, he stands a chance.”

The pacing girl wrapped her arms around herself.

“I was so stupid. Just idiotic, going in that gorge. This is my fault. What if it gets worse?”

“You shouldn’t say things like that,” said the kneeling girl. “It doesn’t help the situation, feeling sorry for yourself like a bratty child.”

“She’s right, you know.” The leaning girl straightened up. “You’re always so quick to lose hope, when that’s the very thing you need. There’s always hope.”

“What is hope?” He asked the triune girl.

The last one to speak turned and looked at him and suddenly only she remained.

“I didn’t know you were awake.” Her cheeks were flushed, a detail that Noa blamed on the warmth of the fire. “I was just thinking out loud.”

“What is it, though? I’ve never heard that word before.”

She crouched down next to the bunk. One smile, just a small one that had to work hard for its existence, moved at the corners of her mouth.

“Hope is the most violent thing in the world.”

Noa was studying the lines around her eyes, how they came in and hid the blue-green irises with their silver rings. She must be tired. He hadn’t actually seen her rest since they had sat on the log, eating strawberries. How long ago had that been? Was it still even the same day?

“What time is it?” He asked.

“You know, I can’t say for sure.” She glanced up towards the dirty window. The only picture it showed was a vague darkness, undulating with the tiny grains of frost that scoured its surface. “The sun’s been gone for a few hours. I’ll bet it’s about eleven.” As if on cue, she brought her hand to her face to cover a yawn.

“Are you going to sleep at some point? You look tired.”

“Maybe later.” She slid her back against the wall and sat down. “I’ve gone and picked a fight with your fever, and I need to see it through. I hate losing.”

She was trying to fill the space around her with carelessness, to laugh at and make light of the situation with a run down smile and a sloppy curve in her posture. But the firelight did strange things to her face; it flickered in the hollows under her cheekbones and created shadows beneath her hair. Whatever was happening behind her serious eyes was hiding from him.

He had been many things today that he wouldn’t have been normally.

Hungry, and she had fed him.

Thirsty, and she had given him water.

A stranger, and she taken him into her world.

And now finally, he was sick, and she was caring for him.

She had no reason to do any of this, but she had, and this made her even more of a stranger to him.

“Why are you doing this for me?”

Her fingers followed the pathways worn between the stones that made up the uneven floor. She was intent on the pattern, as though she needed to memorize it before she could spare her concentration for an answer.

Abruptly, she laughed; a cloud wisp of a sound that came out because nothing else would.

“Oh, why not?” She said. “You might as well know. There are many reasons why I’m doing this, but the unfortunate summary of all of them comes down to my feeling guilty. Does that mean anything to you?”

He shook his head.

“Guilty...is it like hope?”

“No, not at all. They’re only alike in the sense that both are emotions. But guilt is much heavier than hope; it doesn’t really take you anywhere, just hangs on your shoulders like – “

“Wait!” Noa cut in. “That first part. Emotions. What are those? Are guilt and hope the only two? Why haven’t I ever heard of them before?”

“You and your questions!” Zefyr stood and threw two more logs into the fire. “Just slow down; you’re going to fry your poor brain.” She moved back to the bunk, brushing her hand against his forehead before she sat. “Maybe now isn’t a good time for this conversation. It could very well be precarious, and I don’t know how that would cooperate with fever-wrangling.”

“No, not that.” He pushed her hand away. “You always do that. Give me crapshoot answers. Just tell me.”

“Fine! But as soon as you say a word about multiple versions of me, the conversation is done.”

“Alright. What is guilt?”

“Guilt. I suppose we can start there.” She was frowning as she worked out the rest of her answer. “It’s not my preference, but it will do. Guilt is a feeling – an emotion – that typically is a result of one doing wrong to another in some way. Fortunately, to answer your second question, guilt is just one of many emotions; why, there are hundreds of them altogether.”

“But the emotions...” he was losing his patience with her. “Where do they come from?”

“I was getting there. Scientifically, they happen in your brain, in a few different areas. Sort of along the lines of a sixth sense, but more ubiquitous than simply touching or smelling or seeing. It’s not unusual for you to feel them in the rest of your body, too. It might be something pushing at your chest from the inside, or wringing your stomach out like an old rag. It could be a burn that comes up your throat.” She was leaning forward, hugging her knees, tripping over what she had to say next. “Though really, emotions happen somewhere else. Somewhere that can’t be seen or touched or measured. Like an intangible space hidden in between your skin and bones and blood, but not actually present. I’ve heard it said that emotions happen in your heart. Not your physical heart; an alternate one that beats with your feelings instead of your pulse. Goodness, now you’re really going to think that I’m crazy.”

“Of course you are.” Noa mumbled. “That’s alright, though. Keep going.”

She rubbed her eyes as she continued.

“I’m sorry. I’ve never had to explain this to anyone else before. I didn’t imagine it would be this difficult. So, finally, why haven’t you heard of them before? The easiest answer is that you were raised in a city without emotions. Halcyon has reactions and sensations and confusions and instincts and they come so, so close to having emotions, but they don’t. Instead, you laugh at people tripping up stairs because you’re supposed to laugh. Or you frown when you’re confused because your face involuntarily moves that way. Or, to give you a more relevant example, you’re rendered immobile at the sight and sound of a river because it reminds you of a dream where you’re powerless to stop it from hurting you.”

He had to admit - she did have a talent for telling stories made up of just enough relevance that a less reasonable person might believe them.

“What happened to the emotions?”

“Well, that’s a more difficult answer. They were poisoned, in a sense. You might say their hearts died, centuries ago. And ever since then, they’ve poisoned every child that was born, so that we all walk around with dead hearts and fake laughter.”

This was insanity, of course. What she was saying shattered every context that he had for his life and left a gaping hole in a world with no straight lines or walls to lean against. This was beyond brain malfunctions and time keeping and engineered weather. This was an accompaniment to the heat around his eyelids and the room that moved in sideways circles even though he was lying down.

“That’s absurd.” He shook his head. His words were loud in his ears; he flinched and tried to push the echo away to focus on her reply.

“Every time I actually tell you the truth, you say that.”

“You don’t really believe what you’re saying, do you?”

She straightened up.

“I do. I more than believe it. I know it. It’s like this - have you ever finally introduced yourself to someone that you saw every day? Maybe you passed by them on your way to your Site or you saw them periodically in the city, enough that you knew their face and perhaps even what they did and where they lived. The only thing you lacked was a name. That’s what emotions are like for me.”

He turned away and focused on the crumbling mortar in the ceiling. What was the point? Was making sense of her words even important anymore? She was three in one, and she could create fire out of thin air. Nothing that she told him, even the most straightforward answers, would fit into any frame that he looked through when he viewed the world.

Still, she kept going, kept invading his logic and shoving it aside.

“You know them, too – because you know me. You’ve observed them, watched how they behave, and been completely stumped by their existence. You even pointed them out to me earlier today.”

“You’re talking gibberish.” He would have laughed at her, made fun of the silly tales that she told as they tripped up the stairways of his mind, but the heat pushed against his efforts. “I figured it out already. Your brain misfires. Makes you crazy.”

“No, it doesn’t. You were so intent on knowing earlier, and now I’m telling you. Emotions are the thing inside of me that make me different.”

“So why do you hide them? Are they dangerous?”

“Some might argue that, yes.”

“You should get rid of them, then. Take some of that poison you’re going off about.”

“You’re being an ass.” She was wringing her hands together, pulling at her knuckles and fingernails and palms. “I’d rather die. Not having them is far more dangerous than the worst emotion could ever be. It can destroy people, Noa; completely ruin them and make them go mad. I’ve seen it.”

“You’re already mad. What’s the difference?”

“Oh, shut up.” She finally lost her patience, crossing her arms and pulling herself into a tight bundle. “You don’t believe me; and that’s fine, I don’t know that I expected you to. But you don’t have to keep insulting me on top of it.”

The fire filled their silence with its own version of an argument; the twigs and wet wood asking to be left alone and the flames never listening, never ceasing to consume it, to change it and lay it to waste.

Finally, Noa asked, “What have you seen?”

And then her eyes were no longer looking at the dingy cabin and the shadows moving across the walls. She was flipping through memories like someone might run through a slideshow, and seemed to have stopped on one in particular. Something was shining in the corner of the eye nearest to him; he could see it catching the light as it slid down and spread out across her eyelashes.

She blinked hard and it was gone. It must have been another trick of his fever.

“Let me ask you a question.” She said. “What’s the very earliest thing that you remember?”

This was a difficult request for someone who, in almost area of life, followed the forward motion of time. Memories never served much of a purpose for him; going backwards was counterproductive. If something was meant to be in the present, it would have followed him.

But there was one exception.

“The dream.” He replied. “The one about drowning. That’s the first distinct memory.”

“I’ll tell you a story, then - about a dead heart that became dangerous.”

“Is this a true story, about someone you knew?”

“All stories are made of truth, to some degree. But this one is very true, and yes, I know the person. It starts...well, I’m not sure exactly where it starts. By a river, I suppose. Years ago, there were villages by the river in the mountains; half a dozen or so. Back then, the river was just a young thing. It was narrow and full of mischief, held at bay by a dam just above the plain...”

She talked with her foothill voice and created landscapes for the camera lens of his mind to focus on. The village contained a wooden house, new with the smell of fresh pine boards and early spring. The house contained a family that was rowdy with three people, perhaps more, but at least three: A tall man with freckles on his skin, a beautiful woman with copper hair, and a little boy who was right in the middle. The family was called Saoirse, and even before that name the boy was called Kelvyn.

Perhaps the boy ran along the bank of the river all day. After all, they were both children then, and didn't have a reason to mistrust one another. Perhaps he was loud and wild and chased the squirrels so that he could count them, one by one, until he knew them all. Perhaps his mother grew flowers from the dark soil and his father pulled fish from the cold stream.

There could have been many things, both peculiar and wonderful, that happened in that village. But one certain thing happened that changed all of that. When the spring grew older, it bullied the river and pushed it too far. It refused to be held back by the arms of the dam and shoved it away until it was overwhelmed by its own current. It ate up the village and the new house and the garden. Even the man with the freckles and the woman with the copper hair were caught in it.

Only one person survived the flood.

It was Kelvyn, the boy. People from the city came after the water had washed everything away. They found him and brought him back to clean him up, assuming that was the end of it. But perhaps he was used to doing whatever he wanted to do. Perhaps, instead of counting numbers he wanted to count squirrels. Perhaps he talked too much or too loud or not enough or when he was not talked to first. Perhaps he cried and laughed when there was no reason for it. Again, it was all a guess, right up until they gave him the poison that killed his heart.

Zefyr let out an exhale and stopped.

The room was turning hot and unfocused; its walls shimmered and bent out of shape and Zefyr's outline trembled as she threatened to split in two again. Sleep was running after him, and with the last few sprints of his will, he kept ahead.

He had to know.

"Zef? What happened to Kelvyn?"

Her mouth smiled, but her eyes did not.

"I think you know. But I can tell you, if you want." She put her cool hand on his temple, and he was too tired to push it away again. "They changed his name. I'd imagine that he grew up quite fine. He was intelligent and curious and even though he was drastically different on the outside he convinced himself and the whole rest of the city that he was the same as them on the inside. He went on to become the youngest Climate Engineer in recent history. He had dreams about the thing that he couldn't remember, the thing that he could never resolve because connected to those dreams were emotions, and he couldn't feel them anymore. His dead heart haunted him, started to wear away at the only life he knew –"

"No." He cut in. The story couldn't end. He saw where it would lead, and that was a terrible place. He had to keep her from going there and dragging him behind. "It's not real. Stop."

The version of her standing at the foot of his bunk spoke to the one who had told him the story.

"He's going to lose his mind. You should let him sleep." She pried open the window with violent hands, finally letting in the tantrum of the mountain blizzard that had been grinding its teeth against the glass all this time.

The third girl was throwing logs on the fire once again, whole armfuls of them until it blazed up around the edges of the recess, turning the stones black. It fought the snow and the wind and the cold, and created a light so brilliant that darkness could never comprehend it.

"You can't stop now." She said. "He's so close."

Noa spoke to the girl closest to him – the one who was equal parts kind and crazy, with shining eyes and shaking fingers that pushed back the fever from his forehead.

"It's just a story, isn't it?"

This was the last question that he could manage. They were there, all of them, watching.

The weeks of lost sleep.

The sick feeling that twisted in his stomach when he thought of the flood.

The cut that hurt down to his bone.

They were waiting for him, waiting to tear in with long claws that caught the fire light and burned with the heat that frayed his nerves.

“I’m sorry, Noa. It’s real.”

Zefyr was cruel. To say that when he didn’t have anything left to fight her with. He heard himself pleading, his voice moving in wide circles from a low whisper to a deafening hum.

“No. No.” He said. “Not real. That’s not me. No.”

She continued to run her fingers along his hairline, and the cold pressure of her hand pulled out a memory. It had been hidden under piles of other memories that curled and crumpled with age; cool hands, like hers but not at all like hers. Longer, with delicate fingernails that brushed his hair behind his ear. She had red hair, not brown, and it flowed like the river outside of his window.

Noa had never wanted anything as much as he wanted that memory.

He left behind his pleading to follow it. The realization that it had been missing was like a long hallway that haunted him with emptiness and made fun of the fact that he had been living all of this time in one tiny, shabby room, never knowing what existed outside of it. He wanted until it hurt. His chest ached from wanting, and then the ache rose in his throat and refused to go away no matter how hard he swallowed. Finally, it found its way to his tear ducts and washed clean trails across the dirt on his face.

Inside of him and yet outside of him, in the intangible space hidden in between his skin and bones and blood, he felt it. This time, his logic was so overwhelmed by fever and stories that it was brittle, like an old rubber band. It strained at the edges as Noa tried to wrap it around the wanting, the feeling.

For a second, he thought that his own mind would break from its efforts to keep secrets from him.

But it didn’t. It pulled back and lay down in a long, straight line that stretched beyond his vision and provided the most certain course to navigate by as he walked towards the memory. The feelings that came along with it swelled from the spring flood and rose, cold around his ankles.

This was a dream, he knew. And like all dreams, it would end.

The sky cried until it filled the plains and blocked out the sky above him. It was gone, all of it – the village, the house, and the red-haired woman with the beautiful, cool hands. Noa was alone now, and alone had never been this awful. Now he would drown, and if he didn’t, he would be the last one left alive.

A thin arm pulled him from the current, and then with her bare hands Zefyr set fire to the forest and burned it down to the stumps of the trees. Even the stone cabin smoldered until it was only a charred mound of pebbles and the boy and girl were defenseless from the blizzard.

A single note defied the cacophony of the wind as a sanderling picked its way over the drifts. It looked once at them and then spread its cotton-lined wings and flew away, over the mountain peaks burning gold with a newborn sun.

06. A Long Mile

It was morning; Noa could tell by the way the light was pushing against his eyelids.

His head ached. His attempts at moving it got caught up in the momentum and sent his equilibrium sliding sideways. He slowly, cautiously tried to connect his hand with his temple to rub it.

There, in the middle of easing his eyes open and feeling sick from the throbbing behind them, he froze. Something had changed.

The strange memories of last night crowded his mind and begged for attention, only to run off as soon as he gave it. Behind them, after the fever and the stories and the pain and the nightmare, there was something else.

The world was so clear that it caught him off guard, knocking holes in the moment and throwing open boarded shutters. It was sight so omniscient that it hit his eyes stung, and sound so omnipresent that he wondered if he should cover his ears. It was on the sidelines of every sense his body was capable of processing, running so recklessly fast that he only caught glimpses of it as it tore down his barriers and left nothing and everything between him and the rest of the world.

Everything – the slant of the sun, the scratchy smell of the blanket, the sound of the embers in the fireplace falling against each other as they died a long death - was as mundane as they had always been, but at the same time were screaming, reeking, and blinding him with newness. In response, his heart picked up a banner of rebellion, armed itself and started to riot inside of his chest.

There were three possibilities. The first was that he was still dreaming, the second was that he was dying, and the third was that he was losing his mind.

Noa had a context for the first two – they were not this.

He could have blamed it on insanity, except that his mind still worked so well, still wrapped equations around the world to the tune of his blinks, still moved with certain footsteps as it interacted with his senses. Yet somewhere, rooms that had been nailed shut were open and a celebration was taking place inside of them, so loud and so chaotic that it took the very idea of celebration and climbed to dizzying heights to throw it into the sky and watch it rain down like confetti.

He had been holding his breath without realizing it, and now let it out to attempt words.

“Zefyr! *What it is?*”

There was more force in his question than he had intended; the sound bounced off of the stone walls and produced a jerk of hair and limbs next to him. She had fallen asleep with her arms and head resting on his bunk, and her eyes, wide and unfocused from sleep, blinked at him as the sun filled her irises.

“What are you talking about?”

He sat up, edging away from her. This was her fault, it had to be.

“Why is it so *loud*? What’s happening? Turn it *off*!”

“Oh. That.” She rubbed her eyes. “I know, it’s probably overwhelming at first but you’ll used to it – “

“No! No, make it stop! How do I make it stop?” The way that she was taking this all in stride made it worse. He wanted her to understand how disorienting it was, and to react appropriately.

But never once had she done what he expected her to do.

“What do you feel, Noa?”

Her question was the equivalent of blowing a hole in the dam of his confusion. Anything and everything came spilling over in a violent rush as he gawked at her.

He hated.

He hated her birds nest hair and wide eyes and the dirty face that, despite everything, was calm and curious. He hated that she had saved him from the flood and hauled him here and fought his fever when he was a stranger and she had no reason to do anything for him. He hated that here, in the insanity that she had built up around her, she was still the expert and he was still at a loss.

She had asked for it.

“I hate you. Good lord, I’ve never disliked someone like I dislike you now.” He was trying – and failing – to find the valve that would help him get control of the words that he was saying and the rising volume at that they came out at. “I want to yell at you. In fact, I could *swear* at you and I’ve never sworn in my entire life –“

“You are yelling at me, actually.”

He ignored her.

“Why do I want to do this? What’s the purpose in yelling at you? *Why do I want to yell at you?*”

“Well, I guess everyone starts somewhere, don’t they?” She remarked.

“Why can’t you just answer me, dammit?”

She started to laugh at him.

“Stop!” He shouted. “Why are you laughing? This isn’t *funny!*”

“I’m laughing so that I don’t cry. This is the most beautiful thing I’ve recently seen.”

“You’re insane. Crazy, completely crazy.”

“Calm down, would you?” Her composure was slippery; she was having a hard time getting a grip on it in between her giggling. “I’m going to help you, I swear. I’ll teach you whatever you want to know about this.”

“Get away from me. *I hate* you. Go drown yourself in the river.”

And then, in the middle of hating her, he changed his mind.

He didn’t mean what he was saying. Noa was actually thankful that she was still there, so thankful that saying something so untrue and rude made him sick to his stomach. He covered his face with his hands because he was going to start screaming and if he didn’t muffle the sound, there was a good possibility that his head was going to explode.

It didn’t make much difference. In the end, pain still kicked with spite at his eyeballs. The worst part was that he couldn’t get control of his own voice to make the shouting stop. It just went on callously, throwing punches and curving at the end with its own helplessness.

“Noa!” Zefyr’s voice still contained traces of her laughter as she took him by the shoulders. “For the love of anything that might be holy, would you *calm down*? Look at me.”

“No.” He moaned. “You hate me. You *have* to hate me.” Of course, she had to. He hated himself at the moment.

“Stop being an ass. I don’t hate you.” She pulled his hands away from his face and gripped them until he felt the tendons pinching. “Here, do you feel that? That’s me. That’s something real. When I get overwhelmed by my emotions, I try to find something that grounds me, something tactile that I can feel with my hands. It reminds me of who I am.”

“You’re hurting me.”

“Sometimes that’s what we need.”

“Am I crazy? Did I lose my mind last night?” Noa pulled his hands out of hers. “You told me a story about a village and a boy. Was that real?”

“That boy is sitting in front of me trying not to have an emotional breakdown. Yes, it’s real.”

“It can’t be. They would have told me about it. How do *you* know? Why would they tell you and not me?”

She held her palms up in front of her, talking with deliberate, even tones.

“You hear a lot as an Archives clerk.”

This set him off again.

“You *read* my file? You told me that you couldn’t!”

“You’d be surprised at what I manage to get away with.” A ghost of a smile played at the corners of her eyes and mouth. She was entertained. “Unlike you, I use my banal qualities to slip around the rules. I got curious after that first day we met, and so I tracked down file number R082467, right around the corner from mine, and read up on you.”

“That’s wrong. You invaded my privacy.” There went his voice once more, stampeding by at a terrific volume. “Didn’t you have to take some sort of oath when you first started at Archives? I’m going to tell them. I’m going to tell them that you’re crazy and I hope they lock you away –”

Zefyr rolled off of the bed, calling on her non-existent height to fire back at him.

“Go ahead.” She spat. “Drag your sorry self the whole nine miles back to Halcyon. In case you’ve momentarily forgotten, there’s a foot of snow on the ground, your leg is sliced open, and you’ve been running a fever for the past twelve hours. If you want to keep going on about how crazy I am, fine. But *I’m* the one who pulled you out of the river, carried you to shelter, and kept you from losing your mind last night. At this point, insanity notwithstanding, I’m the best chance you have.”

Noa tried to lean against the wall to locate his sense of balance, and then gave up. He threw himself down on the mattress instead, dizzy and nauseated.

“It hurts.” He moaned. “*Everything* hurts.”

“Here. Sit up, you ninny.” She nudged him, holding out a leaking tin cup. “You’re dehydrated.”

Sitting. Swallowing. The weak sun, hidden behind a sheet of clouds. Zefyr, checking the cut and then trying to wrap it up with her scarf. All of it was painful. But the worst pain came from the ineffable places that had opened up inside of him; abandoned rooms that throbbed and pulsed with their emptiness.

As soon as he could get his body back to normal, he would have to take care of that.

Zefyr was moving around the cabin, folding blankets and throwing things into her satchel.

“Where are you going?” He asked. The idea of her leaving made his chest go cold.

“We’re going to someone that can help you.” She straightened up. “It’s only about a mile...”

“No. I can’t, Zefyr.” He was tempted to lie down again, but that would require movement, and movement was excruciatingly difficult.

“Sure you can. You’ve got one leg that works fine, and I’ll hold you up on the other side like yesterday. Some fresh air will do you good.”

“Just leave me here.” He pleaded, all the while trying to ignore his aversion to the thought.

“Under normal circumstances, I might consider it.” She put her satchel over her shoulder and handed him another cup of water. “But neither one of us wants that, do we?”

And just as she had yesterday, she took his hand and pulled him up. The corners of his vision blurred together, but her sharp shoulders and scrawny arms were solid and held on to him. Together, they stepped out into the new world.

As far as they could see, the back country was dressed in shining white, turning in every direction just to watch itself sparkle in the morning. If it hadn’t been so painfully brilliant, Noa might have thought it was beautiful.

Zefyr told stories while Noa counted their footsteps.

He had to admit, her insanity made her an excellent storyteller. On she went – about strange creatures with three wings that granted visions to wise men and effervescent women who lived in trees and came out when the moon was full to riot in the meadows.

He was having a hard time keeping his count – or really, anything – straight. There was no rhythm today to follow, just feet that were wet and cold from the melting slush and a constant drone of hurting that moved back and forth from his leg to his head.

Three thousand fifty-two. Three thousand fifty four. No, wait, fifty-three. Fifty four. Fifty five.

“...one set of wings covers their eyes, and another covers their feet. With the last two wings, they fly. I told you, three is a lovely number. Their name is literally translated as ‘burning ones’. They lived in the high places – up near the peaks, I suppose.”

At four thousand steps, his resolve pitched forward, reaching for the end of the journey. It had to be coming, any minute now...

Somewhere around seventy steps later, he asked her how much farther it was.

“Not far. I said about a mile, didn’t I?”

“We’ve gone over that.”

“It was an approximation.”

He looked down at her; beads of sweat were shining on her forehead.

“Aren’t you cold? I’m freezing.”

She avoided his eyes.

“I’m pretty warm, to be honest.”

As they neared five thousand steps, it occurred to him that she was sweating because, despite feeling like his blood was cooling and congealing in his veins, his skin was on fire.

He lost count around six thousand steps.

“We’ll be there soon.” She promised.

With aching fingertips, his logic hung on to her words; straining to support the entire weight of a reality that he was desperate to wake up from.

Eventually, it was forced to let this go as well.

After that, there was nothing left but heat and cold and pain. The combination of them felt oddly similar to being underwater and waiting to run out of air.

She was letting him down. There were tree roots against one side of his body, and it took him a moment to recognize that he was lying on the ground.

“Here?” He asked. She would know what he meant.

“No, not yet. We’ll be there soon.” Her hand again, on his forehead. “Noa, can you open your eyes? I need to talk to you.”

“I can hear.”

“Open them anyway. Rule #3 still applies.”

He humored her, wondering why the lines of her face were pulled so tight.

“Here’s the deal, genius.” She was talking quietly, close to his ear. “You’re losing quite a bit of blood. I need to do two things, neither of which you’re going to like. The first is try to stop the bleeding. You’re in luck; there’s a whole patch of yarrow right over there and it might help. But it’s going to hurt, I’m fairly certain. Can you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“Don’t pass out, alright? I can’t carry your dead weight very far.”

“Fine.”

“The second thing is that I need to find us some food. That’s easy; you just need to wait here until I get back. But then you’ll have to eat it. Agreed?”

He nodded.

She removed her scarf and pressed a handful of leaves against the cut.

It was unbearable. Noa wasn’t sure where that much pain could be coming from; his entire body was already trying to breathe through a flood of it. Instead of screaming – which required too much energy – he threw an arm over his face and bit down on his dirty sleeve.

The colors behind his clenched eyelids kept blinking between the hot red of consciousness and a black hole that seemed warm and safe in comparison. But no, he had promised that he wouldn’t go there.

“I’m done.” Zefyr, from miles away, was picking up his arm and moving it aside. “Still with me?”

He nodded.

“You’ll feel better if you eat something. Just wait here.”

He watched her footsteps walking away, shifting from two to six to four and then back to two.

His temperature was just coming around the curve from inferno to arctic when he heard movement nearby – twigs snapping and branches shifting.

Good. She was back. She would keep him alive for a little longer.

“Zefyr?” He whispered.

Strange. She moved lightly, with quick taps of her feet. Not like this. This was heavy.

This had a voice that was not hers.

He opened his eyes again.

Claws. Dark claws. A thick muzzle with twitching whiskers. All of the rest was tawny fur with muscles that flowed into one another, constructed so that a grown man stood no chance against them.

A pair of yellow eyes was locked in on him as the claws padded against the wet ground and the hunched shoulders rolled like waves.

And then, a tiny earthquake, claps of thunder, feet that were pounding against the earth. The gleam of the eyes moved towards them instead of Noa.

“Go on!”

Her voice, on its fiercest note, howled like the corners of the wind. Something flashed in her hands as she sprinted into view and planted herself between him and the eyes.

“I said *go!*”

If he'd had it in him to laugh, he would have. Because, right in front of him, she was going to get gored by a mountain lion. Even if he shut his eyes, he would still hear her screaming.

There was a snarl, a rustle of fur and muscles and she yelled.

But it wasn't from pain – it was a challenge. It was a chord that he had never heard before, made of embers and stubbornness and an unconquerable, unknown weapon that she pulled up from inside of her.

If he hadn't already concluded that she was insane, he might have admitted that it came from a feeling.

The heavy footfalls faded. Zefyr landed on her knees next to him.

“I found strawberries. They're a little frostbitten, but they'll do. Still with me?” She asked.

He nodded.

There were three again. One of them stood farther away, holding a knife in her white hand and standing guard over him and the girl who was kneeling by his head with her handfuls of strawberries.

The third one was hunched over, halfway between the other two.

“I *can't*.” She was saying, choking on the words. “I can't do this. I...I'm *so* tired.”

The girl with the knife walked to where she was crouching and kicked her.

“Stop. You have to do this. You're the only one who can.”

Putting food in his stomach kick started the last reserves of strength that he needed to get up again and hobble along next to Zefyr. However, there was not enough left to do much of anything else; he didn't bother counting, didn't try to single out a few of his brain cells to think through whatever had occurred the night before. All of them needed to be focused on the motion of lifting his good leg, leaning against her shoulders, and moving it forward.

It may have started to rain. Fire could have fallen from the sky, or a whole troop of wild beasts come down from the hills after them. Zefyr may have grown as tall as a giant, or split herself into six parts, arguing between each other while they took turns supporting him.

Logic had abandoned him miles back. Anything could happen now.

“How do you feel?”

She had asked the question several times already, and each time he hadn't answered, assuming that it would go away if he ignored it long enough.

“Noa? How do you feel?”

He shook his head.

“You haven't said a word in almost thirty minutes. Talk to me.”

“It's like drowning, isn't it?” He said. “That part where you finally let all of the air out.”

“No.” Her voice dug in to him, like her narrow shoulders. “That's giving up, and it's not allowed. So stop doing it. That's an order, and you have to do whatever I tell you to do.”

He started to lose track of what he was supposed to be doing. *Lean on her. No, lift your leg first, and then lean on her. There's more. What next. What comes next.*

“We'll be there soon, Noa. Keep going.”

If he could just remember what that meant, he would have.

In the end, someone dragged him. Across a stretch of wet, trampled grass and then onto a wooden floor. It could have been her, but no, she was just a scrawny little girl.

Zefyr's voice was screaming a name that he didn't know.

“Lieb! Damnation, where are you? Of *all* times to misplace yourself, old man...”

Her voice sounded strange. Low and sharp, with teeth that held off the higher notes of hysteria as she yanked open cupboards and slammed objects onto various surfaces.

Noa was looking out across a length of floorboards that stretched away from him, noting with disinterest the knots in the pine, when a pair of purposeful feet in black shoes came through the door.

“My goodness, Z. What’s the problem?” A baritone voice, made up of the same stuff that formed the mountains. “And what happened to you? Is this the boy?”

The low notes finally gave in, and she cracked on each word like old, fragile glass.

“I’ve killed him. Oh shallots, Lieb! I’ve *killed* him. There was a flood and he cut his leg and we came from the stone cabin –“

“You *what*? That’s six miles. How did you get him here?”

“I dragged him.”

“*Six miles?*”

“He limped most of it. I did what I could but finks, he lost so much blood.”

“I can see that. White as a ghost. You should have left him at the cabin and brought me to him.”

“I’m sorry!” Hysteria again. “I-I’m sorry. He was afraid of being alone. Can y-you help him?”

“Calm down, Little Z. He’ll be fine. Go put dry clothes on and eat something; you’ve got the shakes.”

“N-no I want to help.” Her voice kept catching on her sobs like a hiccup. “I-I’m fine.”

“If you want to help, get a hold of yourself.” He spoke with equal parts gruffness and warmth, like an old wool blanket. “Here, give him this.”

She was shoving at Noa from behind, leaning into him until he was almost sitting. This was terrible; shutting his eyes couldn’t stop the room from sliding sideways.

“Alright, genius, one last request.” She was trying to talk over her sniffles. “Drink this.”

Something sweet was under his nose. His stomach pitched, and he turned his head away.

“You’re so damn stubborn. Please, Noa. I’ll never tell you to do anything ever again.”

Because he couldn’t imagine a better compromise, he obeyed.

Whatever she gave him was sweeter than a whole handful of strawberries, without any texture or other flavor to cover it. The only thing that kept him from gagging was the fact that it brought heat all down his throat and into his chest; wrapping around the cold parts inside of him until he stopped feeling like shivering was urgent and necessary.

Through the long tunnel of his vision, someone was bent over his leg, muttering to himself. Noa matched the deep voice to a weather-burned man. He wore thick glasses, with eyes almost hidden between the leather textures of his long face. Heavy hands, skilled in spite of their size, were tugging at Zefyr’s scarf.

“He’s a physician?” Noa asked.

The old man’s mouth twitched into a tight smile.

“He’s better than that.” Zefyr let him down, choking on a sob that turned into a laugh. “You look terrible.”

He could have said the same for her. Her face was all white and worn out as though the hours of holding it in tight concentration had drained all of the color and life from it. From the corners of her bloodshot eyes, he could see two wet trails catching the light from the fireplace. “

“You’re crying.” He observed. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head, her eyes softening at the corners.

“Did it kick in yet?” The old man asked. “I need to seal this cut.”

“Not quite. Valerian takes about two minutes. Any second now.”

All during the haze of their never-ending walk, Noa had fought back unconsciousness as it opened up in front of him like a bottomless pit that he would fall into. But now, it couldn’t be avoided. Instead of a hole to tumble down, it was a thick curtain of warmth and darkness that reminded him of watching the lights go out, block by block, in Halcyon, except that his senses were the streetlamps. Smell. Taste. Touch. Sight. And finally –

“He’s out.”

Sound.

7. The Eleventh Hour

In one of his earlier grades, the equipment broadcasting a telecast about multiplication tables had gone haywire, resulting in it skipping back to the beginning of the video over and over.

Noa's dreams under the black blanket were similar.

He always started out on the bank of a river, facing a house that was tall and thin. Through an open window, a female voice called to him.

"Don't go where I can't see you, Kelvyn."

Even when warning him, the voice laughed like the narrowest part of a half-grown stream.

The sun that trickled into the interior of the house flashed against red braids. Noa had never before attached the idea of beauty to a human being, but this woman took the word and ran with it without waiting for his permission. She was beautiful; no one would deny that.

The dreams were always different after this. Sometimes, the groan of steel and rock knocked him off of his feet, and the water came for him with foaming tips and hungry teeth. Sometimes, there were birds; entire flocks of sanderlings that fell from the sky and tap-danced alongside the edge of the current. Other times, he looked down the river and saw the back of Zefyr's messy hair as she ran from him, laughing, holding something in her left hand that he wanted to take from her without understanding why.

And then, as though his brain had been wiped clean and rebooted, he was back in front of the house.

There was a dream that outlived the others. It began with the variation where he watched the dam break and the waves move down the valley towards him, but different from the other times, when the water caught him he was strong and stubborn. He kicked against it, fighting back until his foot hit land and his arms pulled him into a tangle of tree roots hanging out from the bank.

Someone offered him a hand, and he looked up.

There was crowd of men standing on the shore, watching him with silent, solemn faces. Their faces were old and young, imposing and entreating. They all wore grey; long grey coats and frayed grey pants and even grey hats with brims dripped rain. One had stepped forward to pull him out –

His eyes flew open.

Slowly, methodically, he took in his surroundings, trying to place them. There was a paneled ceiling above him, stained in warm, honey tones. Hiding in every nook and cranny were scents that he had only known in small traces before today; somber leather, cool lavender, and prickly wool, all of them existing under a blanket of wood smoke.

For the boy who owned exactly seven pieces of furniture, the clutter was overwhelming. There were things tacked into and against and on top of the shelves, tables and counters; like the land that the cabin was built on, there was no real organization to any of it. An entire wall consisted of haphazard shelving that sagged beneath a library of real paper books. Noa never seen so many of them in one place; almost everything that he had ever read was backlit by the glow of his tablet.

A behemoth contraption made of black cast iron huddled in one corner. The counter next to it was covered with greens and berries and other items that Noa didn't recognize. There was a thick slab of wood that resembled a table with a menagerie of mismatched chairs leaning against its sides, cousins of the run-down couch that he was laying on and the cushions that sulked around a hearth. A faded curtain hung in the opposite corner from the kitchen. Finally, at the other end of the room, a spindly set of stairs circled up towards the ceiling and disappeared.

On one of the cushions, directly in front of him, Zefyr was hunched over an enormous book that took up her lap like an overgrown child. She was facing the fireplace, her shadow flickering at the edges as it stretched behind her. It gave the illusion that the tiny girl was much more than her appearance suggested.

In a way, it made sense. She was small and unremarkable, except for her puzzling kindness that almost made him want to believe everything that she had told him.

But the absurdity of her stories, and how they bled into her actions and made her just as unpredictable, were like the long shadow behind her. They were something to distrust and tiptoe around with caution because in spite of the length and height of it, a shadow is only a shadow; a distorted version of reality.

“You’re awake.” She said without turning around.

“How did you know?”

“Your breathing changed.” She looked at him over her shoulder. Her face was clean; the river dirt and the exhaustion were gone.

Sleep was still pushing back at him, making him groggy as he sat up. There was something that he was supposed to take care of; for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out how to connect the current moment to whatever it was. Instead, he asked about the most important matter that he could think of.

“What time is it?”

“It’s just after one in the morning.”

“Don’t you ever sleep?”

She set her book on the floor and shifted her body so that she was facing him, the corners of her lips tugging up.

“I’ve become skilled in the fine art of taking naps. I thought it would be helpful if I was awake when you came around. How do you feel?”

That was it.

Physical being the most obvious issue, he kicked off the blanket and pulled up his pant leg. In the back of his mind, he knew that moving so quickly should have been painful, but it wasn’t. He felt fine – no, more than fine. He felt sharp and alive and his heart was beating hard.

The cut. Where was it? There was nothing there but smooth skin covered in freckles.

Perhaps it was the other calf.

The rip in his pant leg and the crusted brown of his own blood on the hem were so tangible that they mocked him. He was on his feet before he knew why, demanding an explanation from the girl sitting on the floor.

“What day is it?”

She dropped her smile.

“Calm down. It’s Thursday.”

“The *date*, Zefyr.” He bit down on each word and spit it out at her. “What’s the date?”

“June 26th.”

“That’s impossible.” He pointed to his leg. “The cut is gone. Do you know that, even with the most advanced care in the city, something like that takes *weeks* to heal? Now tell me, how long have I been asleep?”

“Well, valerian root doesn’t technically make you sleep as much as it disrupts your brain. It’s been about eleven hours.”

“Eleven hours be *damned!*” He was shouting again. Since when had shouting become so natural for him? “Tell me the truth!”

Finally, she stood up. His tantrum didn’t have any effect on her; this made him even more uncomfortable. Heat – like a fever but not at all like a fever – flew up the back of his neck.

“Come look outside.”

He stalked after her, towards a door with chipping green paint thrown over the planks. Pulling it open, she pointed at the sky.

“I’m assuming you know your astronomy.”

The stars were huddled in tight groves above him. Taking a deep breath, he scanned the shapes that they made, unwilling to believe that they were the same stars he had seen just days ago and unable to argue with the honesty of the constellations.

“Now, look at the size of the leaves on the trees. They’re no bigger than they were yesterday.”

The half-opened leaves on the low-hanging maple were too familiar.

Zefyr closed the door and crossed her arms.

“Anger.” She said. “That’s the feeling. You’re angry. Probably afraid, too.”

“I’m not either one of those things.”

“Suit yourself.” Still nonchalant, she went to a pile of fabric scraps in the corner and located a stack of clothing, folded into neat squares. “However, you are hungry. Even you can’t deny that.”

“Where is the old man?” He demanded, ignoring how her words made his stomach growl. “Someone around here *has* to have more sanity than you.”

“He’s out walking. He does that sometimes...”

“Apparently, I was mistaken. You two must be in on this charade together. I’ll bet he taught you everything that you know, didn’t he?”

“Well, yes. In a way. Now, please be reasonable. If you want to go on about how crazy I am, fine. But, on a very practical note, you need to eat something.” She shoved the clothing at him. “And, you smell. Directly behind this cabin is a shed containing a water pump. I’ll make you some food while you go get cleaned up. We can yell at each other all you want to after that.”

His ability to process thoughts must be misfiring. It took him a full thirty seconds of glaring at her before he finally was able to admit that she was right - he was hungry and filthy, both of which needed to be taken care of.

Outside, the canopy of stars kept a cold watch over the world and the boy. The water from the pump was freezing; Noa gritted his teeth while he washed the dirt from the past thirty-six hours off of his skin and pulled on the clean clothes. He didn’t know what to do with the ruined remains of his first real gift, so he rolled them up and tucked them under his arm.

The smell of cooked food hit him like a wall when he walked back into the cabin. His stomach protested, reminding him of how empty it was. Zefyr was sitting at the table, across from a bowl of liquid and a chunk of bakery. She had her hands wrapped around a chipped mug too large for her fingers; little curls of steam escaped, followed by a scent that had started this whole debacle – lavender and mint.

He pulled out the chair across from her and looked down at the food. The bakery was easy enough; it wasn’t too different from a portion. But the bowl was a mystery. He caught Zefyr trying to hide a smile behind a sip of her tea.

“Go ahead, laugh at me.” He grumbled. “How do I eat this?”

She swallowed, her mouth still curving up at the corners, and pointed to the silver utensil next to the bowl. It looked like a measuring unit from his chemistry courses, back in his Upper Education years.

“It’s called a spoon. That’s bread in your hand, and the stuff in the bowl is soup.” She stood up, heading for her cushion and the book. “I’ll spare you the trauma of being watched while you try to navigate eating normal food.”

After not eating anything but strawberries in the past 24 hours, Noa would have chewed on a sheet of cardboard. What he ate instead overwhelmed him with texture and taste; this food had depth and structure and stuck to his ribs when he ate it. He didn’t even care that he burnt his tongue on the soup.

After the bowl was clean, he pushed his chair away from the table and made his way back to the couch, settling into the rusty springs and watching the girl on the floor.

“Do you feel better?” She asked, looking up from her page.

“Physically, yes.”

“But you’re still angry.”

“Spare me the jargon. Who was that old man, and what did he do to my leg?”

“He goes by Lieb, and on occasion, I refer to him as my grandfather as a term of endearment. He is, in truth, the closest thing that I have to a decent family.” Stretching her legs out in front of her, she continued. “He’s your stereotypical ‘old man of the mountain’ type, hiding under the guise of being a sustenance farmer – “

“What do you mean ‘Old Man of the mountain?’?” Noa cut in.

“You’ve heard the tales before, I assume.”

“Yes, but they’re just tales. Crap that children say when they should be paying attention to a lesson.”

“Aren’t you the studious learner?” She said, standing up and moving to the moth-eaten curtain on the opposite wall. “See this? When I pull it aside, it’s nothing.” She slid the cloth away. Behind it, there was a section of wood paneling that looked like every other wall in the room. “But when Lieb opens it, there’s a whole closet full of...well, I suppose I don’t even know. He never lets me in. There’s a shelf full of little bottles and all sorts of strange ingredients. He reads out of a thick book with a lock on it; I’ve never seen the key. Anyway, whatever he keeps in there is what he used to heal your cut.”

“You’ve got to be joking.” Noa stared; at her, then the curtain, then back to her. “This is more of your craziness, isn’t it? Those are just stories; they don’t translate into reality.”

“I don’t suppose your leg has anything to say in response to that?”

Noa turned to the fire, aware of the hot bitterness in his mouth where an answer should have been.

Zefyr went back to the cushion in front of him, tucking her knees against her chest.

“What are you feeling, Noa?”

“I’m thinking that now, on top of solving the problem of my dreams, I need to figure out what on earth happened the other night, and why everything is so...*loud*.”

“I didn’t ask what you were thinking.”

“I *know* what you’re trying to ask me.”

“Something is different. You can’t deny that, can you?”

“That’s irrelevant. It’s just a reaction of some sort.”

She kept watching him, and he kept wishing that she would have the decency to stop.

“Do you really believe that?”

He intended to fire back with a quick answer, but the words stuck in his throat.

Finally taking his eyes away from hers, he focused on the hands clasped between his knees and the shadows that moved over them from the glow of the fire.

“I don’t know what I believe.” He admitted. “Everything that you’ve told me...it’s not only contrary to the world that I know, most of it is impossible. I would have to find a way to prove it before I believed it.”

“For God’s sake, Noa. Look at your own skin, or your hair. Stand up and walk around, or pay attention to what your heart is telling you. What better proof do you - “

“Zefyr, stop.” He interrupted her; not intending to be rude, but to save her the effort. “The past two days have been...traumatic, to put it lightly. I can’t say that I have much of a reason to trust anything that’s happened since then. Any logical person would understand.” He threw this out on the side. She ignored it.

“So what now?” For the first time since meeting her, her voice was not arguing or jumping or insulting, only sliding down in defeat. “What will you do?”

“I’d like to go back to the city. I’m due at my Site in about six hours, actually.”

He looked up at her. She was bent over her book, running the fingers of one hand up and down the binding and gripping the dog-eared corner of the cover in her other. He watched her fidgeting in silence, until she slammed the book shut and stood.

“I can’t convince you of something that you don’t want to believe.” She said. “Come with me; I’ll show you the way back to Halcyon. We’re only about a half of a mile from the valley.”

Noa followed her out the door, into the pale light of the back country stars. They crossed a ragged patch of grass and went into a grove of pines that grew like giants with perfect posture and formed a ceiling of low voices above them. Their needles carpeted the damp ground beneath the quiet footsteps of the two travelers, and where they walked, the scent of damp soil and decay drifted up.

The snow had melted, leaving behind a rawness that pulsed with recrudescence. Zefyr led the way through the tree trunks, weaving in and out of them with steps that whispered more than they fell. She had on a yellow shirt, the color of the center of a field daisy. It occurred to Noa as he walked behind her that, up until now, he had only seen her in dark colors – her navy blue Archives shirt and the brown wool clothes that she had been wearing the day before. In the darkness, she moved like a misplaced ray of the sun.

The land opened up ahead of them. There were the sleeping glacial rocks spread out on the floor of the valley, where this whole ordeal had started.

“Can you find your way back from here?” She asked.

“I should be fine.”

He had done it. He had gone to the edge of his abilities, physical and mental, and returned with an answer to the question of the girl from Archives. Noa thought it was unfortunate. He had been right since that first morning – kind and fascinating as she was, Zefyr lacked a sound mind.

But it strange; concluding that she was simply crazy didn’t give him the satisfaction that solving a problem normally did. Though he wouldn’t admit it, to her or himself, he almost wanted her stories to be true.

He decided to take care of the formalities instead.

“Thank you, Zefyr.” It was a reasonable thing to say – she had saved his life. “You’ve been incredibly kind. I can’t say that I know anyone who would have done all of that for a stranger.”

Without looking at him, she nodded.

“You’re welcome. Noa...if you ever want to talk, well, I can help. I can teach you.”

“No, that’s not necessary.” His eyes drifted to the valley below. “It’s probably best if I don’t bother you anymore. I’ll leave you alone.”

“Fine.” She swallowed hard. “Can I ask you one favor? In exchange for saving your life?”

“Of course.”

“Don’t mention any of this. Me, the emotions, and especially Lieb.” She met his eyes. “It’s one of those things, you know? The things that you don’t want to answer questions about.”

She was too stubborn to plead or beg; only her eyes gave away how much she wanted this from him.

It couldn’t hurt, he reasoned. One little secret.

“I promise.”

She turned away.

“Thank you.”

He was getting ready to move forward, down the slope, when one last question stopped him.

“Zef? What will you do now?”

“Me? Oh, I’ll go back to Lieb’s cabin and sleep for a few hours. In the morning, I’ll show up at Archives, climb ladders, and misplace files. The usual.”

This didn’t line up.

She almost made sense here, under a sky that brushed the tips of the mountains and tossed clouds over the wide vistas. It was a place large enough to take in everything that she was – whether it be insanity or emotions or something else altogether. The girl was made of back country scents and comfort with the land around her. The sketchy trails and sepulcher canyons might as well have been her home, yet she came back to windowless hallways and a city that was too small for her.

Perhaps he hadn’t completely solved the problem.

“Why don’t you stay up here?” He asked. “You prefer it, don’t you?”

“I didn’t know it was that obvious.” Her mouth smiled, but her eyebrows pulled together as though her face couldn’t make up its mind about its expression. “It’s for Lieb’s sake. Like I said, I consider him family, and as such, it’s important to me that he remains well-hidden from prying eyes. As insignificant and average as I am, if I were to suddenly disappear, it would raise some of those questions that I’m not comfortable answering. People might look for me. The very last thing that I would want is to lead them to Lieb.”

The answer could have stood on its own, if it hadn’t been obvious that more thoughts were hidden in plain sight on her face. Her eyes narrowed, watching the horizon for something that only she could see.

At the end, all she said was, “Family is a funny thing.”

“I suppose it is.” He replied. “Though I wouldn’t know.”

Her thoughts came back a little closer to their conversation; now her eyes were studying the ground beneath her feet. Noa realized that she wasn’t wearing shoes.

Of course, she wouldn’t. That would be too reasonable.

“What I mean is that you do things for them that don’t make sense.” She went on. “Family is esoteric – you are different collectively and different individually and somewhere in that mess you’re understood and that’s what motivates you to do those things.”

Sometime later, when it was important to know, Noa would look back and realize that she was saying something in between her sentences – that she had dropped herself into a flash flood, supported his weight for miles, and gone without sleep because she considered him family. That the two of them were esoteric; different collectively and different individually, and within those differences, they would come to understand each other in ways that no one else could.

But for once, he didn’t have any questions to ask. There was just one last thing to say.

“Goodbye, Zefyr. I might see you around the city.”

She smiled then; a real smile that moved up from her mouth and settled across her entire face.

“I won’t say goodbye. We don’t bother with formalities, remember?”

As he turned away, he found that his own expression had followed hers, and he was also smiling.

Noa stopped once, somewhere during his trip across the valley with only the shapes of his breathing for company. He looked back up towards the columns of pines. There at the edge where he had left her, he could just make out a pale yellow shape, standing like a still frame of the sunrise in the middle of a moonless night.

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“Welcome back, Noa. Say, you look like you’ve spent some time in the sun.”

Noa ducked his eyes down as Mae walked by his desk the next morning.

“I figured I was low on vitamin D.”

She stopped, observing him over his monitor with shrewd brown eyes that Noa did his best to ignore.

“Still not sleeping, I see.”

The commotion of Nico assaulted the doorway of Climate Engineering, saving Noa from having to remind Mae that she was not actually his mother. Their supervisor arrived to start the day in a cloud of aftershave and shirt wrinkles.

“Morning!” He bellowed, loping by with a gait that managed to resemble forward motion. “Noa, do you have that analysis I asked you for yesterday?”

Without looking up, Noa replied.

“I wasn’t here yesterday, sir.”

“Really? Hmm. That’s odd.” Nico rambled towards his office, running his fingers through his slick hair with quick, twitchy movements.

“Wouldn’t worry too much about it.” Symian said in a low voice. “He was only here half the day himself.”

Noa’s work greeted him like a familiar street corner. He had wondered if it might look different; perhaps the numbers and charts and graphs wouldn’t provide their same steady footing. His shouldn’t have been concerned. It even helped to put his mind at ease, settling back into a complexity that he understood. After days of constantly feeling like he was the mercy of Zefyr’s puzzle piece answers, certainty was a welcome change of pace.

There were a few conflicting moments over his midday break. Noa took a walk around the building and realized that, through the civic structures, warehouses, and residential blocks shimmering under the noon sun, he could look straight east and get a glimpse of the mountains. He had good eyesight; if he squinted, he could almost make out the ridge that surrounded the valley.

The sight of it produced a wanting that moved like a tired, dying river in his chest, and he turned away.

There were new mysteries to be solved in the days that followed; wild questions that he set out to trap and tame during the hours when he should have been sleeping.

First, he went after the reactions.

They were everywhere and they were constant. His blood changed temperatures, his heart skipped beats, and he caught himself smiling before he could get a hold of the expression. Listening to Mae and Symian talk about their children caused a lump in his throat that he had a difficult time getting rid of. Nico’s inefficiency did more than give him a headache; it burned behind his temples and brought on a strong desire to raise his voice.

At night, as he went through every piece of information he could hack his way into, there were times that he had to stand up from his tablet and walk away due to his urge to throw it across the room. The data existed; his searches produced long lists of files all throughout different areas of the Network. Most of them were housed within the Child Wellness system; a few were scattered in Education and Medical. Yet in spite of his high security clearance, Noa was a lab animal in a maze of dead ends. Every time he thought he was getting close, the banal grey dialog box would hold up a hand and blink back an error code.

Error 401 – User security clearance is insufficient.

He could get away with quite a bit, but having to apply for a new tablet on account of smashing his against the wall would be difficult for even him to explain.

The reactions were like the sparrows in the thorn bushes. They chattered and shivered and beat the air with their wings and teased you with the thought that, once you were close enough, you could reach out and make a tiny

pet out of them. Yet every time, they were too fast to be caught and tamed; rising in mismanaged troops off of the branches and tearing open the sky as they went.

Deciding that he needed a break from this particular topic, moved on to the next item.

‘Old man of the mountain’ produced nothing in his search results. ‘Miraculous Healing’, ‘Sorcerer’, and ‘Magician,’ were equally fruitless. This wasn’t like the maze, this was like having a wall shoved in his face with no other direction to go in.

The final blow came four days after returning to the city, when he tried searching for ‘poisoning of babies’ and ‘dead hearts’. He got quite a few results from this one – over three hundred. Unfortunately, all of them had to do with administering First Aid to children exposed to toxins.

On the verge of breaking something and not having slept since he got bak, he fell into bed and screwed his eyes shut against the pulsing behind them.

Noa dreamt of the grey men.

He was walking through a crowd of people in the streets of Halcyon, not much different than the morning crowd. There was something that he was trying to catch up to, just ahead and out of his sight. However, he was going against the flow of traffic, and moving forward was difficult.

They appeared at intervals. The first one was rude; his shoulders shoved against Noa as he passed him, throwing him off balance. The next one was worse. This man held up a hand to Noa’s chest, demanding acknowledgment.

Gradually, more of them appeared. The systemic colors of the city bled together into a mass of grey coats and grey hats, all of them turning to Noa with unblinking eyes. None of them spoke; they talked instead with their insistent glances.

Look at us. They said. Here we are.

One in particular stood out. Instead of being forceful, he extended his hand to Noa as he passed by, as if to call a truce. This man had a face just as piercing as the others, but with well-worn lines trekking it like footpaths on a map.

He was smiling.

Noa stopped in his chase, undecided. Slowly, he reached out to take the man’s hand.

Just then, his vision picked out a streak of yellow in the grey ocean.

Zefyr turned around and looked at him over her shoulders. She didn’t laugh this time, only paused for a moment to observe what he would do.

Weighed down by the thick, sluggish logic of his dreams, Noa realized that she had been the thing he was pursuing. Specifically, something that she was holding in her right hand –

The wall of water arrived. He watched it swallow her, watched the kind face of the man in front of him dissolve into a blur, felt the sting of the river in his eyes before he woke up in the cold hours before morning.

The following day, Symian approached his desk. His body language was puzzling; his hands were hidden behind his back, and he cleared his throat a few times before he spoke.

“Say, Noa.” He began. “Mae and I were just going over the schedule for the upcoming week, and she thought I should ask you about something...”

It took effort to shift his attention from his monitor to the thick man standing in front of him. While he had heard Symian’s words, the meaning of them wasn’t setting in. Schedules. What schedules? Noa managed dozens of them, kept them all open throughout the day and zipped between the screens with a swipe of his hand. Not sure of what to say, his eyes settled on Symian as he worked his heavy jaw up and down in thought.

“You have a moment?” Symian finally asked.

“Oh. Right. Of course. Which schedule?”

“The one you sent us this morning.” Symian retrieved his chair from his desk and settled his tree trunk limbs into it. “See, there was a discrepancy, around the first of the month.”

“No there’s not.” The reply ran from his mouth as though it were being chased by a pack of wolves.
“You’re just reading it wrong.”

Symian was calmly flipping through the different calendars, until he came to the one in question.

“That one there. Too many days in between rain showers.”

Noa blinked at the date and all of the neat grids of corresponding data laid out next to it. It had made sense when he checked it over, hadn’t it? He’d spent a total of twenty-seven minutes proofreading – five more than he usually did because he knew he was tired. His thoughts slid out from under him like tired feet on a steep trail as he tried to remember what reason he had in mind. There was a reason. There had to be. Everything had one.

Symian’s voice wandered through the haze.

“Kid? Say, when was the last time you slept?”

“Last night.” He replied. This wasn’t exactly true, but explaining would mean shifting his attention from the schedule; he was already having a hard enough time with that one issue.

“Guess we’ll have to just change it. Don’t worry about it – everyone makes mistakes.”

“It’s *not* a mistake.” Noa kept staring at the screen, waiting for it to prove him right and noting that his heart took off in a riot when it didn’t.

“It’s alright, Noa. We’ll just change it.”

“No! There’s nothing to fix.” He pushed his chair back and went to stand up – to accomplish what, he wasn’t sure, except perhaps to do something other than sit there uselessly.

Symian clamped his hand on Noa’s shoulder like a vise and held him down.

“Finks sake, kid.” He was laughing – like this was a funny thing to be mocked. “You look like hell. Take a few days off. Get some sleep already.”

Noa shrugged him off, hiding his hands under his desk so that no one could see how much they were shaking as he replied.

“Sorry, Symian. I’ll fix that date. Thanks for catching it.”

“Not a problem. You going to see a Physician about this stuff or what?”

“I’m working on it.”

Noa didn’t trust himself to attempt any research that evening when he arrived home. After closing his door behind him, he leaned against it for awhile, tapping his bike helmet gently on the veneer to see if he could maintain any sort of consistency.

After three minutes of this, all of which produced a different number of taps, he tossed his helmet aside and slid down to the floor. He was normally a tidy person, but now found himself surrounded by evidence of the past few days; his rain jacket from yesterday, the muddy hiking shoes he had kicked off after coming in from the back country, and the bundle of scratchy wool clothes were scattered within tossing distance of his door. Putting things where they belonged wasn’t something that he had the mental capacity for this week.

Absently, he picked up the wool shirt, rubbing the thin material between his fingers. The smell of it – wood smoke, pine sap, and cold mountain air – set off a landslide in his chest. The weight of it moved downward, heavy and undeniable.

There was a fourth matter to take care of.

Noa had been avoiding any thoughts surrounding Zefyr’s story about his past due to the fact that wrapped up inside of this topic was a pull so strong that, no matter how hard he reasoned with it, couldn’t be considered a mere reaction. Every time he tried to process her story, the red-headed woman came to mind. It was such a blurry memory, like a yellowed photograph or a garbled recording. The problem was that he wanted, more than he had wanted anything before, for her to be clear and concise.

He exhaled, pushing his palms against his eyes and trying to move backwards through time.

If he could remember more, it would make easier to believe Zefyr’s story, and from there, any number of stories that she had told him.

He ran through the clearer memories impatiently. Education, riding his bike, hiding his bony knuckles and ankles that stuck out from his inadequate clothing, Ms. Jones and the veins in her hand. . .and the dream. Always the dream, always the empty nights of staring at ceilings and counting his breaths.

After that, it was dark – a threshold that stepped off into nothing. Noa hesitated. To go into that room would mean stumbling blind while looking for a shape that he didn't know. Noa was caught in a war between his longing and his dislike of situations that couldn't be controlled. One leg at a time, he stepped through the doorway and held his breath

There was the house, and the flashes of copper inside of the window. The edges of his thoughts were unfocused, like the lens of a battered camera. It was hard to pick out details; a flower here, a squirrel there. His body started to react. His nose was stinging and saltwater was burning under his eyelids as though the ocean made up part of his memory instead of the mountain river.

“Don't go where I can't see you, Kelvyn.” The voice laughed.

Ironically, the one place that he wanted to go was inside, near her.

He was still holding his breath, trying to beat back the intensity of his reaction. His ears began to pound, growing louder until he was convinced that his brain coming loose inside of his skull.

The memory pixilated, cracking in the middle as it broke into pieces – more than he could ever count. She was gone, again. It was just him, lying on his floor, out of breath and exhausted.

By clenching his teeth together until they hurt, he could just barely keep himself from crying.

The dream of the grey men revisited him. This time, they were in the valley where he had first decided that Zefyr was crazy. Again, he was chasing after her, and again, the men were holding him back. When the kindest one put out his hand, Noa brushed it aside and broke free from the crowd.

Instead of continuing to run, Zefyr stopped and turned to him. Finally, Noa was able to see what she was holding in her hand.

It was a file. That was all. Nothing important.

They stood and looked at each other for a long time. It could have been days or weeks or years; life moves at a different pace in our sleep, sideways and backwards and in circles and almost never linear.

Just as she had predicted it would, the ice in the peaks began to melt.

Before the water came to obliterate them, Noa read the numbers stamped on the front of the file.

R082467.

“Hello, Mr. Ryvverson. It's a pleasure to see you again.”

Celya's hands were still today. They sat folded on her desk as if her fingers had been glued together, the long nails being too much of a hazard for the general public. Above her white smile, her eyes gave away her confusion.

Normally, when attempting to get his way, Noa had learned that excessive manners were fairly effective. He tapped his fingers on Celya's desk and tried to remember what it meant to be polite.

“Mr. Ryvverson? Can I help you with something?”

He gave up.

“Is Ms. Thilleste in today? I had a few questions for her about some research she located for me.”

“I believe she's up there. Shall I call her or – “

“I'll track her down.”

In the lift, he it briefly crossed his mind that that he had forgotten to say thank you.

Zefyr was hidden in a deep pocket of her hallway. It took Noa a good seven minutes to track her down. For a moment, his thoughts tumbled over each other in a mad rush at the possibility that this might be an ugly representation of his dreams – him looking for her and not finding her until it was too late.

He let out a deep breath as he rounded a corner and saw her messy hair. She was kneeling on the floor, tilting her head at angle as her fingers danced along the spines of the files. She paused when he came closer.

“Hello, Noa the dreamer.”

He wasn't prepared for the reaction that followed when she stood up and faced him; glasses crooked, dust smeared on her shirt, and a wide grin moving over her sharp features. It was fast and brilliant, like watching the eagles in the peaks taking off from the cliff faces and racing through the clouds. Where he had felt dull and ill for the past week, there was lightness that pushed against his ribs and came out in the form of smile that mimicked hers.

Without consciously realizing it, Noa had wanted to see her ever since he left her at the edge of the pines last week. Every head of curly hair on the street had been checked over more than once. Every pair of eyes had been weighed against hers, and when he climbed the steps of Climate Engineering in the mornings, he had been using the few functioning brain cells that he had left to look down the street towards Archives.

For such an unstable person, she had the unique ability to ground him like no one else could.

"You know," he remarked. "That's one of the first times you've actually said hello to me."

The length of her smile was directly proportionate to the amount of time that she spent studying him. The longer she did it, the smaller it became.

"Good lord, Noa. Have you slept at all since last week?"

"No. Not really." He laughed at this as he held out a slip of paper; after all, it was absurd enough to be funny. "I'm wondering – hoping, actually – that you can help me locate this file."

She took the note from him and read it.

Then, like they had in the dream, the boy and the girl looked at each other for a long time.

Zefyr broke eye contact first. She pulled a pen out of her pocket and scribbled something down beneath the file number before she pressed it back into his hand and curled his fingers around the scrap of paper.

Meet me at the warehouse at eleven tonight. It read.

Looking at him again, she said out loud, "I'm sorry, that's not my department. You can check with Ceyla on the way out; she can direct you to the right floor."

Before he left his Site that evening, Noa took two personal days, for good measure.

Zefyr was seven minutes late. This sent his thoughts into a panic again. Maybe she wouldn't come. Maybe she had changed her mind about helping him.

But at last, he caught sight of her sprinting across the gravel yards between the buildings, and his muscles were able to crawl out of the pinched positions they had worked themselves into. She slid to a stop, grinning like a fool as she reached down and unlatched the window.

"After you." She noticed the pack he was carrying, nodding towards it. "Were you planning on going somewhere after this?"

"You never know." He replied as he dropped himself into the dark basement.

Past the walls and shelving of minutia, with the scent of engine grease stinging their nostrils, they went to the closet in the forgotten corner of the basement. Zefyr stepped in with him and pulled the door shut.

Her tablet came to life, illuminating the piles of cardboard, oil-stained rags, and cracked mop buckets. They turned two of the pails over and sat down across from one another.

"Technically, this is illegal." She explained. "Do you have any qualms with that?"

"I'll worry about it later."

"Fine then." From her satchel, she pulled out the file; unassuming inside of its brown jacket. Shoving the data chip into the top of her tablet, she passed it to him. "Here you go. You'll probably want some privacy, so I'll wait outside –"

"No, don't." Up until recently, Noa hadn't understood what it meant to want something – really want it. Now he knew; tonight, he wanted two things that kept competing for priority. He wanted to see where he came from, and he also wanted Zefyr to stay with him. "I might have questions, and oddly enough, you've been my best bet when it comes to answers."

She settled back on top of the bucket, tucking her hands between her knees.

"Scroll all the way down to the bottom. It's in the file titled 'Immigration.'"

Past everything that had defined him so far – grades, accomplishments, medical history – he located the folder and opened it.

The first thing that he saw was an image of a child. If he went back through his memories, he knew this face – he had seen it in the mirror every day. But it was different than he remembered; there were details that didn't fit. The white of his eyes and the red that rimmed them stood out from the sediment that had managed to stick to every possible surface – his face, his red hair, and the ripped clothing that he held together across his collarbone with one dirty hand. The other hand was reaching up; towards a darker stain that covered the left side of his head, towards what might have been the top of his ear if he could find it underneath the dried blood....

Noa opened his mouth to say something and came up empty. Instead, Zefyr filled the void.

"You haven't changed much."

"But, the gate..." he managed.

"You said yourself that you didn't remember it. What if, instead of telling you that you lost part of your ear in a flood that killed your family, someone told you that you ran into a gate?"

Sometimes, when he tuned in to the frequency of the peak stations, he would watch the orographic storms that formed, to the untrained eye, out of nowhere. The development stage came first; insolation from the heat of the plateau pushed warm, moist air up the slopes of the mountains, towards the cold peaks.

"Why would they do that?"

"This is a difficult thing for a grown man to process, Noa. Imagine trying to explain it to a six-year-old."

Her logic was right on the edge of making sense.

Noa forced himself to go past the image, to a text file dated, ironically, June 26th, twenty-three years ago.

Outlying Infrastructure Supervisor N. Johnson returned to Halcyon on the 25th day of June, having found one survivor of the dam collapse. The refugee – a male child – was determined to be somewhere between three and four years of age. While able to state his name he was unable to give further information. Child Wellness will continue to monitor his progress to determine the status of his mental stability. Having suffered multiple physical traumas, including an extended period of time spent immersed in the river, the possibility of brain damage is being considered.

Because warm air has a lower density, it continues to rise. In colliding with the cooler air, it condenses, forming tall cities of cumulous clouds.

There was an accompanying audio file. Noa clicked on this. The quality was poor, as though someone hadn't pushed the microphone plug into all the way into the recording jack. He could just make out two male voices.

"You're well aware of our procedures regarding refugees, Mr. Johnson."

"I'm aware, sir. However, you've seen the boy's test results; don't you agree it would be a waste to follow through with policy?"

"We've been reviewing his scores, yes."

"So you know that his attention to details far exceeds his age bracket? The boy clearly has an eye for seeing things that other people miss."

"As I stated, we're in the process of evaluating him. His physical appearance is a divergence from our preferred attributes on many levels. There are also behavioral issues that need to be addressed. Currently, he's in the care of a foster family; they've had a difficult time managing him."

Garbled silence followed.

"Pardon my forwardness, but if the foster family doesn't work out, I would be willing to assume responsibility for the child. I'm of the opinion that he has enormous potential. Have you seen the way he works on mental puzzles? Clearly, he's -"

"We appreciate your offer, Mr. Johnson. However, you know as well as I do that you're not eligible for such a responsibility without a partner to accompany you in the endeavor. Go apply for marriage permissions and then perhaps we can have a discussion about it."

The audio dissolved into white noise.

The latent heat of the collision gives the warm air what it needs to continue climbing; the updrafts reach higher and higher, shaking on their foundations, turning over on themselves with instability.

"What are preferred attributes?" Noa asked.

“Me, actually.” Zefyr shifted leaning forward, resting her chin against her palm. “Minus the eyes. Dark hair, light skin, small to medium build, grey or brown irises. Uniformity is easier for the mind to process.”

“But they let me stay. Why?” Talking had become difficult; he had to work past something lodged in his throat to accomplish it.

“Apparently, someone worked your differences in your favor.” She nudged her knee against his. “Are you alright? We could stop here – “

Even the most defiant cities reach their limit; the clouds bash against the ceiling, scattering like the last speakers of a lost language.

“No.” He tried to swallow the lump before he opened the proceeding text file. This was dated one month after the first.

The refugee’s placement family has agreed that it is in their best interest to discontinue their involvement with the child. Behavioral issues have not improved; Kelvyn continues to exhibit signs of physical trauma, including shedding tears and raising his voice, with no supporting reason for such actions. A specialist will assess his condition before any conclusions are made regarding his future as a citizen.

Back on the ground, where the invading breath of warm air came from, the pressure drops.

There were two remaining pieces of data; a video file, and a collection of photographs dumped under the title, “Background Information.” Noa, doing his best to keep his fingers from shaking, went to the video first.

There was an antiseptic room with bland blue chairs and a steel table. In one of the chairs, a man was sitting with his hands folded in front of him and a posture so straight that it could have been used as a yardstick. The other chair was empty; the person that was supposed to be sitting in it was standing on one foot and then the other, swinging his arms. From beneath a head of uncombed red hair, he was grinning at the man with gleaming baby teeth

A glass of water sat on the table between them.

“Why don’t you sit down, Noa?” The man said, calm as a corpse. In response, the boy stuck his hands in his pockets and shook his head.

“Kelvyn!” He insisted. “Not Noa. I don’t want to.”

His voice was tiny, loud. It was the ring of a bell or the hum of shattering crystal.

“But aren’t you thirsty? You’ve been out in the sun all morning. Come and have a drink.”

The little boy eyed the man, sticking his tongue out at him as he pulled himself into the chair. He sat on his knees and leaned on the table. His nose wrinkled up while he watched the man across from him.

“You’ve been naughty this morning, you know.” The man pushed the glass of water towards the boy. “Can you tell me why you had such a fit after breakfast?”

“I want to go home. By my mum and da.”

“This is your home, Noa. You don’t have a mother and father.”

“No! Not Noa. Kelvyn.” He drew the words out, stretching the vowels like rubber bands before scowling at the man and stating that he didn’t like him.

“We’ve given you a nice new name, though. Why don’t you be a good boy and drink your water?”

“It smells yucky.”

“It’s special water; like a treat. It will make you feel much better.”

“That’s – “ Zefyr started to say.

“I know.”

The reactions were there; Noa had expected them. They were humming in his ears, growing louder until his head hurt and made it hard to watch what was happening in front of him. The boy picked up the glass. He took a long drink before he set it down and sat back in his chair with a dead heart.

“Now don’t you feel better?”

“Yes, I do. Thank you.”

Although it wouldn’t have accomplished anything, Noa wanted to turn away, to yell into the dark, tight space of the closet that no, this was not him and that had not happened.

Freezing drops of water reach for the hand of the one closest to them as they fall, pooled together into something larger than they ever intended. If they stay above the ground long enough, the other drops join in. They

start a revolt, overthrowing their inevitable dissolution as they race back towards the warm earth. Hail falls in sweeping sheets, denting rooftops and shattering windows.

Noa went to open the next file.

“Wait. Not that one.” Zefyr tried to stop him, but she wasn’t quick enough.

Photographs popped open, one after the other. Buildings that sagged against the current. Piles of furniture, the cushions and rugs swollen with water. The river, spitting out over the gaping dam. Bodies – a long line of them on the shore, stretched out on their backs and staring up at the grey sky with glassy eyes. Dirty and bloated and almost non distinguishable. They could have been anyone.

Some people went through life with a manageable ignorance. They blurred out the minutia; their mind didn’t focus in and snap pictures of anything, good or bad. They didn’t pay attention, didn’t sharpen the edges of a scene like a macro lens that magnified every detail, every curve of the light or variation of a color...

Noa Ryvverson was not that lucky.

There, at the end of the line of corpses, he saw what others would have missed. He saw a pair of faces, the combination of which made up what he saw when he looked in the mirror. He saw, through the river dirt caked, red hair on a head and freckles on a hand. He saw the two distinct sets of features and genes, blood and bones that had produced a son who would never know them.

He sucked in a breath and held on to it so that he couldn’t scream, or vomit, or drown as he shoved Zefyr’s tablet off of his lap. He needed his arms to wind around his chest and hold himself together.

The glow from the screen winked out and left them in the dark. But because he paid attention, because he saw and recorded things that others ignored, the images stayed, branded into his eyes and memory.

“You were right.” He said. “God, you were right about everything.”

He had thought that she was crazy; now, this seemed hilarious. Noa bent over and began to laugh, rocking on the bucket and not bothering to count decibels. At the edges, his laughter frayed and split open, unable to hold back the truth about its identity.

It was not laughter at all.

As the moisture falls it creates a downdraft. Up and down the ladder, to the heavens and back. Igniting fires. Tearing into buildings with banshee shrieks. Destroying century’s worth of bark and branch. Raging over the tops and around the sides of dams and bridges and banks.

I am chaos. It says. No one can tame me.

He hadn’t cried in twenty-three years. Eight thousand, three hundred ninety-five days. An approximate one fourth of the average human life. Hours of busying himself with school and physical activity and questions. Minutes of watching the sun in the sky and guessing the time. Seconds of yawning and breathing and living and scraping along like a monochrome photo trying to capture every hue of the color spectrum.

Noa had forgotten how hot and painful tears could be, and how they would scour his eyes raw from the salt. He had forgotten the way that you had to fight to breath past the lump in your throat. He had forgotten how violent and involuntary it took hold of you, shaking your insides lose until you’re left with no choice but to beat your hands against something to steady yourself and wait, wait in for a deep breath and a break in the hurting.

He had forgotten that crying was not much different than drowning.

“What is it?” He moaned. “What is it called?”

Occupied with his agony, he hadn’t noticed that Zefyr had moved closer to him. She was rubbing her hand over his back, tracing the shape of his shoulder blades with awkward, hesitant fingers.

“Sadness.” She whispered. “You feel sad.”

“How... do... I... make... it...stop?” Rough sobs shoved in between his words, and where they couldn’t get in, heaving attempts at catching his breath took their place.

“You can’t. I’m sorry, Noa. You can’t make it stop. It’s a part of who you are now.”

“No, no, no.” He tried to break free from the long sound of the “oh” and couldn’t.

“I know. I know. It’s terrible.” Her words moved in time to the slow motion of her hand on his back. “But that’s why hope exists, my dear. You hang on to it; clutch it to your chest and roll around in the deep, terrible tide of

sadness and somehow it holds you there so you don't fall off the edge of the world. And then one day, you find your footing again and, with your face still disfigured from all of your grief, you race out to meet the sun in the morning."

He was quiet for a moment; a lungful of air in between the cracks before he broke again.

"Zefyr," he choked. "I can't remember them! I can't even remember their names! I can recite from memory how to calculate annual rainfall down to a fourth of a centimeter, but I can't remember *where I came from*. I can't...I can't."

The world had been broken apart and pieced back together with such enormity that, for the first time in years, he was only a small child playing in the shadow of a giant.

The situation represented a vulnerability that Noa had never encountered. He caught up to his sobs and held them in his throat, avoiding Zefyr's general direction as though not meeting her eyes in the dark would make up for the fact that his composure had cracked open right in front of her.

Ignoring this, she leaned in closer and said, "I want to show you something. Consider it the first of many things you'll need to learn. Just stay there. It might be...well, it might be strange."

To be fair, she had warned him. He also knew by now that she never did what he expected her to do.

Still, it caught him off guard.

She put her arms around him, on top of his, and held on as though she had joined in the struggle to keep him from falling apart. No one had ever come this close to him before, and he didn't know how to react to the contrast of it being both awkwardly foreign and incredibly pleasant.

"What is that?" He asked, finally able to take a deep breath.

"It's called a hug. More formally, an embrace."

"What's it for?"

"I suppose you could think of it as another way of talking. You know, when your words fall flat and can't really communicate what you want to say."

"If they could communicate, what would they tell me?"

She laughed against his sleeve – not a laugh that mocked him and not the other kind that she had said was a real laugh. This was a laugh that was trying not to cry.

"They would say that I'm sad for you."

Part Two: Childhood

*And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
In the sun that is young once only,
Time let me play and be
Golden in the mercy of his means,
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
And the Sabbath rang slowly
In the pebbles of the holy streams.*

*All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
And playing, lovely and watery
And fire green as grass.
And nightly under the simple stars
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars
Flying with the ricks, and the horses
Flashing into the dark.*

- Dylan Thomas

9. Luella

“It was a good idea, coming with me. Now you get to meet Lieb properly.”

“I even brought clean socks this time.”

Noa was once again making the journey beneath the windmills alongside Zefyr. The moon was only a thin cuticle above them, swinging between the clouds that rushed past it on their way east.

Sadness was an odd thing. It hung around like a bad cold; even after the worst of it had passed, he was still wiping his nose on his sleeve and rubbing his eyes.

This time, he gave her a moment to wave at the turbines before they approached the crest of the valley.

“We’ve been sitting for awhile.” She remarked. “I’m going to run. You can race me, if you want.”

She didn’t wait for him to reply before she took off. Over her shoulder, she called, “But I will win.”

The only downside of accepting that she was not crazy was that Noa was back where he had started when it came to interpreting her behavior.

However, he hadn’t run a race since his Upper Education years, and if he was honest, his legs were feeling cramped from sitting in a dark closet for an hour.

“Why not?” He muttered, before he set out to catch up to her.

This was another thing that he had forgotten: the steep exhilaration of speed just for the sake of speed. He gave in to the incline with his long legs, the wind slapping his face as if it were an old acquaintance aggravated by his absence. Ahead of him, beneath the hair streaming out from her roots, he spied the corner of Zefyr’s smile as he caught up to her. On it grew, until the top row of her teeth peeked out from between her lips and like the girl that was wearing it, begged to be followed.

When he thought back on that night, Noa was never sure who started to laugh first; quietly at first, like the footfall of a rabbit in the brush. He remembered watching her as the bridge of her nose wrinkled, just before the staccato notes of her voice took to the air.

He had heard this before. Her laughter had haunted him ever since then with its refusal to be analyzed and explained. It had chased him from this very valley and the memory of the sound had bled on his ears.

But now, he understood, at least in part. He had been let in on her secret.

He wanted to laugh with her, and so he did.

This was not a mockery of a clumsy scene unfolding, neither was not an action being carried out simply for the benefit to his mind. This was not a polite, appropriate response to words that were spoken as a joke. It was abdominal muscles clenching. It was vocal chords shattering the emptiness of the night. It was eyes, still raw, that crinkled around the edges until they ran once again with tears. It was the sunrise and the first taste of a warm strawberry and the audacity of green things that grew on the top of the world. It was a riot inside of his chest and a tribe of vagrant stars that dove and whipped across the expanse above their heads.

Zefyr must have been wrong – Noa didn’t understand how it would be possible for him to continue to feel grief in light of what he was feeling now. The two didn’t belong together.

Sadness had leveled him with its sheer force. Whatever this was did the opposite, even as they both stopped and sagged against the nearest boulder to press their hands against the stitches in their sides.

A long time ago – or perhaps just two weeks prior – he had looked down into the depths of who she was and listened to her saying that when you laugh – really laugh, you know it. You mean it. She had said it with intensity that took him by surprise at the moment, a fervency that he hadn’t understood.

Now he knew it. He meant it.

Both of them tried to stop several times. She would grow quiet and take a deep breath, only to fall right back into the anarchy of the moment. His luck wasn’t much better than hers.

They laughed until their ribcages ached, and only when they were too tired to laugh anymore were they able to calm down and attempt a conversation.

“Happiness.” She said as she wiped her eyes. “That’s the name of it. What you’re feeling.”

He stored the word away, carving it into the doorframes of his consciousness.

He would want to remember this; how the best thing to do after a painful cry is to laugh until you crack your chest open with joy instead of sorrow.

That night, for the first time in his life, Noa Ryvverson was given the one thing he had been looking for: a sleep without dreams, made up instead of a warm, safe blanket of darkness behind his eyelids.

They arrived at Lieb’s cabin somewhere around two a.m., stumbling over their own feet as Zefyr lead him up the circular stairs into the loft.

“You can sleep here.” She offered.

“Where do you sleep?”

“Oh, I normally sleep here, too. I can go downstairs and take the couch, though, if that’s awkward.”

Half-asleep and confused, he had asked why would it be awkward. She just shook her head and decided that she would sleep where she always slept, which was on a piece of furniture in the corner that, in its prior life, had been a sofa but now lacked a backrest and one arm. Noa ended up across the room, on a fraying hammock slung beneath thirty-one bunches of onions, braided with four apiece, and approximately fifty bouquets of dried herbs that he had been counting just before dropping off.

Somewhere in the beautiful half-consciousness of watching the sun creeping into the warped glass of the windowpane, it occurred to him that he had slept straight through. This fact pulled him out of the tail end of sleep, and he sat up.

Zefyr was already awake. She was looking at the ceiling as she waved her hand through a beam of light and scattered the dust particles.

“Morning.” She rolled on her side and studied him. “What’s wrong? You’re not going panic again and tell me how much you hate me, are you?”

“No. Not yet, at least. It’s just...”He hesitated. “I didn’t dream.”

“Good. Lord knows you needed the rest.”

“I don’t understand. What changed?”

She shrugged.

“I suppose you resolved it, in some way. I mean, if you had dreamt about drowning, what would you have thought when you woke up?”

“I guess I would have understood where the dream came from in the first place.”

“There you go then. Now, are you hungry? Because I’m starving.”

She kicked her blankets off, running down the stairs in a whirlwind of wild hair and appetite while Noa considered how strange it was that his sleeping mind had found some form of resolution while his waking one was still scrambling to catch up.

Their host was equal parts fascinating and baffling.

When Noa joined Zefyr downstairs, the old man was bent over a wooden crate in the corner, peering at something within the folds of a faded quilt that was letting out low, aggravated squeals.

“I swear, Lieb, you’re getting soft in your old age.” Zefyr was saying as she scurried around the kitchen. “You know better.”

“Aw, Little Z, you have to admit. He’s pretty cute, isn’t he?”

“The boy or the animal?” The two of them exploded into peals of laughter. “Oh, there you are, Noa. I suppose you need a proper introduction. Lieb, this is –“

“The infamous Kelvyn!” Lieb tore his attention away from the box and pumped Noa’s hand. “Why, he does clean up nice, doesn’t he? Z, you didn’t mention that. He’s quite dapper. A little gangly, but that’s easy to fix.” To Noa, he raised an eyebrow and remarked, “She never brings friends around, much less male ones.”

“Noa, old man. He goes by Noa.” Her hands occupied with handfuls of various ingredients and a kettle of water, she tipped her head in their direction. “And this is Lieb, the next best thing to having a grandfather.”

“It’s a pleasure, son.” Lieb bellowed. “A real pleasure.”

“Likewise.” Noa studied the eyes hidden behind the thick glasses and the sediment of years passed by, noticing how easily they fell into laughing lines. “If I’m correct, I’m overdue for thanking you.”

“Oh, that. Well, I couldn’t simply leave you on the floor after Z dragged you all the way here, could I?” She shook her head.

“Let’s not relive that occasion. Fewmets, what a nightmare.”

Lieb trotted back over towards the box.

“She has a point. It’s probably good that you don’t remember much of it. Isn’t that right?”

Noa had heard various squibs throughout his childhood about the archetype of the lone mountain dweller, but had naturally always ignored them. The old man shuffling around the room hardly fit the stereotypical description – he was neither tall, well-spoken, or bearded. Lieb was all thinning hair, brown skin and unpretentious gruffness; he often repeated himself in low, distracted mutters, asking questions without really looking for answers and then surfacing from his rhetoric to turn to Zefyr and ask with a grin, “Isn’t that right?” Zefyr, apparently used to this, would nod her head regardless of the topic and reply, “It sure is.”

He was more like a force of nature than a person, and in light of it, Noa didn’t have much to say. His eyes kept sneaking from Lieb to the ratty curtain and back again. He knew from the past week that there was no knowledge he could pull from to solve this puzzle; all he had were children’s stories that he had ignored.

The old man was a gem of a mystery.

“Come look at this, Kelvyn!” Lieb was waving him over with his heavy hand. “Found this little rat last night when I was out walking. He must have gotten washed out of his den in the rains.”

The reasons would have to appear someday. Perhaps not on this particular day, but Noa could be patient until they came for a visit. He joined the old man, bending over the box and looking down at a tiny grey creature, squatting on its haunches and growling.

“Is that really a rat?” Noa asked.

Lieb scooped it up. The creature didn’t like this; it squirmed and snapped its teeth at the calloused fingers.

“Might as well be. It’s a fox kit. They start out this color.”

“Were there others?”

“None that I found. Here, have a look at him. Funniest thing you’ll ever see. Don’t let him chew your fingers off, though.”

Before Noa could object, he found himself with a handful of fur and teeth. To keep it from biting him, he picked up around the waist, letting the back legs dangle while the face scowled at him.

“You should really stop that.” He said. “It’s not very productive for either of us, is it?”

Orphan boy and orphan fox looked levelly at one another, sizing each other up.

In the end, Noa won. The fox stopped snapping, curling its tail around itself as it settled into the crook of his elbow with an idiotic expression that oddly resembled a grin.

Zefyr’s hands were rushing through the piles of food on the counter, cutting and chopping and rinsing. They only stopped to feed wood into the stove. Her words followed just as quickly.

“Don’t get any ideas, either one of you. It’s a wild animal. Not a pet.”

Noa tucked the fox under his arm and wandered over to watch. He had never actually seen someone prepare food before, and it fascinated him. Despite how fast she moved, she kept a rhythm almost artistic in nature – a flash of a knife, a toss into the skillet, a splash under the faucet. Some of the cupboards were out of her reach, but this never stopped her. She simply swung herself up onto the counter, retrieved her ingredient, and swung back down as though it was a part of the routine.

“How hard is it?” He asked. “Cooking, I mean?”

“It’s very – “ Zefyr started, but Lieb interrupted her.

“Nothing to it, as long as you start with the good stuff. Just throw a few things in a pan.”

“Ignore him.” She retorted. “All he can make is a pot of soup. If you want to learn about cooking, come over here and I’ll teach you how to wash dishes. That’s where everyone starts.”

Leaving the fox kit in the crate with a fresh round of growls, Noa joined her. From the burner, she gave instructions, and he wondered the whole time about the tiny curve that she wore at the corner of her mouth while he scrubbed grease off of the skillet. Occasionally, she offered encouragement.

“That’s very good, for your first try. You haven’t even broken a dish yet.” Or, “You really have a knack for cooking, Noa. We’ll have to let you do this part from now on.”

After breakfast, Zefyr lead him outside, insisting that he needed to get a lay of the land.

“What does this have to do with emotions?” Noa asked.

“Emotions are best learned kinesthetically. It’s high time you learned what hope feels like, and as luck would have it, we have a wheat field to replant.” She explained. “The snow wreaked havoc on it last week. If you don’t understand hope by the time we’re done, I’ll have to question the legitimacy of your experience.”

Closed off from the world by a troop of pine trees that cradled a wide pasture in their arms was a village of hodge-podge buildings. The patriarch of these structures was built from long slats of grey wood, worn down from years of wind and rain and snow that made its continual existence that much more impressive. Several smaller sheds huddled close to it for shelter, and at the edge of the assembly the steep point of the cabin’s A-frame roof raced down to meet the ground.

“He calls it Luella.” Zefyr waved her hand around. “It’s an old word for ‘atonement.’”

“Why does he call it that?”

“You know, I once asked him. He just recited some old rune about the ground being cursed and that everyone will eat bread by the sweat of their brow until they return to it.”

“So that’s where you learned the fine art of cryptic answers.”

It was like Halcyon in the sense that it sustained human life and operated almost entirely independent of anything except the weather. However, the similarities ended there.

The city was orderly and polite, forged of straight corners and color schemes that flowed into one another without interruption. Even the older quarters had a certain refinement. Things matched, made sense, and operated smoothly because they couldn’t do otherwise. Inefficiency was a dying breed, on its way to extinction within the next few decades.

The farm was a very different matter.

As Zefyr dragged him over the grounds, Noa kept looking for it- the secret that would tell him how the whole operation stayed afloat. It was a teeming mass of disoriented chickens, lazy sheep, three crotchety goats, the enormous berth of a dairy cow, and an ill-tempered black cat. All of the feed, bedding, smell, and waste that went along with this menagerie were heaped in piles anywhere and everywhere.

“It’s different stages of open-air composting.” She explained.

“It looks like piles of crap.”

“It’s also that.”

Lieb, she said, had never bothered with titles for the livestock. She had other opinions, and had taken it upon herself to assign names to them out of an old book of saints she came across while wiping the shelves.

Watching the cat streaking by in a blur of low hissing and black hair, she frowned.

“That’s St. Francis of Assisi, who was a very peaceful man. I thought that naming the cat after him might help his personality, but I’m having my doubts.”

One side of the main barn had been converted into a greenhouse, the light filtering through an incidental collection of old windows and plastic sheeting. Lieb heated it with a combination of compost and feeble solar generators.

“Look! He even has lemon trees!” Zefyr pointed out.

Noa was studying one of the generators with skepticism.

“He should really update this. I could get him the parts and help install them.”

“That’s the newest one. It works just fine.”

“But what will he do when it stops working?”

“He’ll figure it out.”

Kinesthetic learning was nothing new to him. Noa had always slid in and out of learning styles with ease, which was why all of his Educators had been liberal in their compliments to him. Kinesthesia typically meant using his hands to teach his mind something new.

At the moment, his hands were occupied with hanging on to the narrow seat of a piece of that only distantly resembled a field tractor. Zefyr was driving, coaxing the antique beast along as it chugged and shook in protest. Behind them, shaking on its chains like the ghost of a criminal past, the plow was doing more jumping and moaning than turning soil.

Perhaps this was her version of an introductory course.

During a practicum trip in his Lower Education years, Noa had visited the Food Production fields at the base of the reservoir dam. The sleek machines, crawling like overgrown insects up and down the rows of wheat, had given him the impression that sustenance farming happened at the push of a button or the quick swipe of a hand. Apparently, he had been mistaken.

“You know,” he yelled over the bedlam, “We’re only going about eight miles per hour. At this rate, we’re going to be plowing at least until four.”

Completely occupied with the wide steering wheel that threatened to launch her off the seat whenever they hit a rut, she replied “I can’t push it any more than this. I’ll kill the engine.”

“Here, let me try. I always drive the Aubades.”

“This isn’t the same.”

“It can’t be that different. Move over. I’m supposed to be learning kinesthetically, remember?”

They had one quick swipe down the length of the field, enjoying the breeze in their hair before the tractor shuddered and squealed to a stop, leaving their ears ringing in the silence.

“I told you.” She said, jumping down from the seat and trying to pry the hood off of the engine without burning her hands. “This is vintage equipment. What’s worse is that it’s retrofitted vintage equipment. Absolutely anything can happen. Lieb’s going to have a conniption.”

Noa looked over her shoulder at the engine. Clocks, the reactor, Aubade engines, tractors – they all ran on the same basic principles of belts, gears, and solar batteries. After studying it for a few seconds, he had determined the cause of the problem and traced the route of the repair with his eyes.

“I can fix it. When the engine cools down.”

While they waited for this to happen, Zefyr saddled both of them with grain sacks and showed him how scatter the wheat over the raw soil that they had already plowed. The earthworms rolled over in the harsh light, shying away from the smooth kernels as they settled in between the miniature valleys and hills of the plow furrows.

“Don’t you plant it in rows?” He asked, measuring the closest approximation between handfuls so it wouldn’t grow unevenly.

“Why would you bother with that? You fit more in this way.”

While the mountain sky raced over them and threw clouds across the field in long, sweeping graces, Zefyr talked about hope, and Noa did his best to follow behind.

“As I said, hope is a violent thing. These seeds – do you see how small they are? Smaller than my fingernail. And you already knew what a chore it was to get the soil ready. After we plant them, we’ll wait. We’ll wait at the mercy of the rain and the generosity of the hungry rodents. We’ll shiver in our beds and think about the wheat shivering in its skin, and we’ll know that we’re waiting for the air to finally accept that its summer and it can show off with hot afternoons and warm winds.”

Her arm scattering the seeds waved like a symphony conductor, and her voice followed the motion without a single false note or misplaced stanza.

“Nothing happens for awhile, and then one day, we’ll wake up and the whole area will have changed. The ground flushes a violent green as the wheat pushes against its old skins and cracks it open. First, it grows just up to the aches of our feet. Then, it’s tickling at our ankles. Then, while we’re not looking, the teenage plants get it into their head that they would like to one day become bread and flour and beer and cereal and they put all of their pretty

new hats on display. They move around our knees and have secret conversations with each other. I've never seen the ocean – have you?"

"I haven't."

"Well, I think it's probably quite a bit like the wheat fields just before they turn yellow, when they wave as though the laughter of a million people were brushing across their surface. And then they finally grow up, all golden and exhausted. There's no color like the color of ripe wheat. It's one of the most beautiful things I've already seen."

Noa stopped his scattering and opened his palm.

Between the dirt and grime that had filled in the lines of his hand, seventy-two grains of promise waited for the long fall down to the earth. Here, there was no controlled climate, no irrigation canals or automated machines. There was only mountain soil and a prayer for rain that would come often but not too often.

But there was bread; he had eaten it and been nourished by it.

Because there was bread, there was hope. And because of this hope, he scattered a handful at his feet and reached into his sack for another.

When the engine had cooled, Noa sent Zefyr back to the sheds with a list of tools. She returned hauling a metal chest that banged against her knees.

"I didn't say bring the whole shed back with you."

"Shut up. The truth is that I don't know bird crap about tools and so I just brought you the whole thing." She pitched it at his feet and put her hands on her hips. "Lieb is a terrible teacher, to be honest. His head runs around in some other timeframe; he makes the strangest comments about gender and work. Hence, he goes out of his way to not teach me practical things. Like engine repair."

Noa ducked his head as he dug through the tool chest, trying to hide his amusement and not bothering to keep in a side comment about her superior cooking skills.

She was studying the engine, ignoring his sarcasm.

"You could teach me, though, couldn't you?" Her voice was unusually kind. This made him suspicious.

"The one thing in all of this madness that I know and you don't," he said as he began loosening a bolt.

"And you want me to forfeit my knowledge. What if I said no?"

"I'll show you how to cook."

"Oh, you already did that. I'm quite good at it, remember?"

"I mean, really cook. Not just washing dishes."

"Fine. Try not to get too much grease under your fingernails, little squirt."

Zefyr was a terrible student; engine repair turned out to be too straightforward and tedious for her. She gave up after misplacing half of the bolts and then putting the other half out of order. Instead, she settled herself on the tractor wheel and talked to him about pride.

She described it as a long road that wound around the base of the mountain, almost meeting up and forming a circle but not quite.

"You start out with insecurity – thinking that you can't do anything right at all. And then, at the far end of the road, you end up at arrogance – thinking that everything you do is right and people ought to fawn over you as you walk down the street."

It was strange to feel a sense of familiarity with what she was saying. He knew that scenario, had watched it play out in crowds before when people noticed him not only for his physical differences, but because they knew and he knew that he was good at almost everything he did – up until meeting her, he was almost never wrong.

"So, is pride a negative emotion?" He finally asked, bending his head further under the hood and focusing on reconnecting the solar line.

"No, not all bad. I think that there's a place somewhere in the middle of the road – some shady grove of trees with warm rocks to sit on – that you get to at the end of a long day when you know you've worked hard, or when you do something that you didn't have the gall to do before, like not reacting to mountain lions. That's a good sort of pride."

Noa straightened, wiping his hands on his shirt.

“Why don’t you give it a try? Fire the old beast up.”

“Is it fixed?”

“We’ll see what happens.”

Zefyr yanked on the gearshift and turned the key. The engine groaned, unhappy about having to wake up from its nap, and then finally rolled over.

“We’re brilliant!” She yelled above the noise.

“I’m brilliant, you mean.” Noa pulled himself up onto the seat. “Move over. I fixed it, so I get to drive.”

“I helped.”

“Yes, you did.” He grinned. “Take some pride in that, Zef.”

Over the next twenty-four hours, Noa planted two acres of wheat, seven rows of carrots, and nine mounds of peas. He helped Zefyr retrieve two chickens from the woods, snuck five handfuls of table scraps to the fox kit when she wasn’t looking, and gained four blisters, two skillet burns, and an approximate teaspoon of engine grease and dirt that set up camp in between the grooves of his skin no matter how hard he scrubbed at it.

In the process, he had been schooled on ten different emotions. In addition to the four that he knew already – sadness, happiness, hope, and pride – he learned the names and personalities of six more.

Fear, he already knew. Fear was the cold feeling that ripped into him when he thought about rivers and floods. Fear stopped him in his tracks and made him shiver in broad daylight. It knocked him out of his sleep and paralyzed his muscles.

As Zefyr had pointed out, anger had been the first emotion he had felt the morning after the flood. It was the heat rising up the back of his neck and the voice that rose before he could get a handle on it.

Zefyr’s explanation of anger prompted him to apologize as they were walking back from the wheat field.

“I was an ass last week.” He confessed. “I suppose this is guilt, isn’t it?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I didn’t take it personally. Even though you probably wanted me to.”

Embarrassment came when he tried to follow Zefyr’s directions while they were making supper together. She had asked for half-inch pieces of onion, hadn’t she? How was he supposed to know that she meant something else and that actually cutting the entire bulb into half inch squares would take almost thirteen minutes?

Jealousy found him while they produce them. They joked and poked fun at each other, twin landmines that exploded with laughter and confidence that could only be a result of years full of nights just like this one.

It was a language that Noa knew in theory, but he struggled with the grammatical rules. Watching them left him feeling like he was the last contestant in a race with a long way to go before he could catch up. They had a good hold on something that he was only just beginning to grasp.

At the end of the long day, a different feeling visited him as he was swinging in the hammock and wondering about the possibility of actually being able to sleep. Just as his thoughts began to slip into unconsciousness like graceful birds taking wing, Zefyr whispered something across the room.

“Contentment.” She said. “That’s the feeling.”

Just before anger, like a perpetual tap of water against his temple, was irritation. This emotion had surfaced regularly in the past week when it came to encounters with Nico. It also made a surprise appearance when, on the following morning, Zefyr grabbed one end of the canvas he was sleeping on and gave it a strong push before tearing across the loft on her way downstairs.

“Daylight’s wasting!” She yelled.

He buried his head into the rough weave of his pillow.

“You’re unbearable. It’s only five thirty-two. I’m still recovering from chronic sleep deprivation.”

Out in the middle of the sheep pasture, with no one but the new grass to compete with, a lone oak rose ruled the landscape. With its perforated leaves and branches that fell out from the trunk like open arms, it begged to be sat beneath.

Noa and Zefyr humored the request. The afternoon light was warm on their faces as they squinted into it, and the wind pulled the hair from their eyes and foreheads. It came from the western hills and brought with it a whisper that summer had finally arrived in the mountains.

“That one there, with the spot on his back, is St. Ignatius of Loyola.” Zefyr was saying from her hollow between the tree roots. “And the one that keeps ramming into him is St. Bernadette. And then that one, who keeps looking over here like she’s convinced I’m going to give her a treat is St. Margaret of Antioch.”

“You know, I thought you were just being elusive when you told me that these clothes came from a flock of sheep in the mountains.” Noa remarked, watching the lambs knocking against each other on knobby knees. “How do you tell them apart, other than the one with the spot? They look alike.”

“Oh, I know them. When you know something, there’s no way you can confuse it for something else.”

After managing to avoid the topic for a good four minutes by counting the nubs of acorns above him, he asked, “Now what happens?”

Zefyr was fiddling with a handful of grass blades, tearing the pieces into long strips and laying them in a pile on her lap.

“That’s up to you, really. I have to be back at Archives bright and early tomorrow. I was thinking I would pack up and head down the mountains in an hour or so. Whether you want to come back with me is entirely your decision.”

Noa had expected an answer along these lines.

“I’m having a problem working something out.” He admitted. “Why do they keep poisoning people? Are emotions something they don’t want us to have?”

“In a way. They don’t have a good reason for not poisoning people – it’s what they’ve been doing for centuries and it works for them. Why disrupt it? Why make people question something that they’re comfortable with? After all, no one is sick, no one goes hungry, and everyone knows what’s expected from them.”

“Why was it so important for me to get them back? Why couldn’t I sleep until I figured it out?”

“You know why.”

“Am I really the only one, other than you?”

“To the best of my knowledge. There have been others, though. Remember the dreamers?”

“What was different about them?”

Grass blades were too flimsy, so Zefyr moved on to a stray tree branch and began peeling away the outer layer of bark.

“Does it matter, Noa? The important question is what do you want to do now?”

“I think I want to go back. They need me, and I...well, I like my life there. I suppose I was happy with it all along, even if I didn’t know it. But is that even possible anymore? Is it safe?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that. Especially in your case, being that people don’t have the same expectations for you. I’d recommend a healthy dose of tact and discretion – no meltdowns or uncontrollable sobbing. It creates less of those uncomfortable questions. Hiding comes naturally after awhile, really. I’ve been doing it all my life.”

Noa watched her strip away the new growth, revealing the pearly core of the wood beneath it.

“Is it hard? Hiding?”

She stopped peeling, intent on a long tendril of bark that wound around her pinky.

“It can be.”

He waited for her to say more, looking away when she didn’t and watching the sheep roaming from one patch of grass to the next.

“Can I come back to Luella with you, once in awhile? I think I would like that. It would make hiding less difficult if I knew I wouldn’t have to do it all the time.”

“You can come with me as often as you want. Let’s plan on meeting up at the turbine warehouse say, six days from now.” She tossed the bark pieces and naked twig aside. “Maybe the wheat will be up by then.”

“I hope so.”

09. The Conflict of the Small Boy

Collecting new knowledge was one of the most satisfying things that Noa could think of. Hidden away from the rest of the world in between the crags of the mountains, he had diligently followed the curve of Zefyr's voice for the past two days and left behind him a trail of neatly processed thoughts and ideas to trace his way back to and eventually, draw a map to navigate by.

Back in Halcyon, in synthetic clothes that only caught his attention when his sleeves rode up while typing, Noa downloaded the lessons from his brain to his fingers. He arranged the information into the straight lines of spreadsheet cells – how the topics connected and talked with each other and what outcomes he could expect from certain emotional experiences.

They filled in the hills and valley of his charts and populated the slices of his graphs. Happiness stood like a triumphant mountaineer, while sadness fell hard into the low ravines.

He was relieved to find that, given the different variables that made up his day to day life, he was more likely to experience positive emotions on a regular basis. Jealousy and embarrassment stood a chance of sliding in during his visits to Luella, but they were only temporary. After he had a better understanding of what he was doing – both with his feelings and with the crumbling back country soil, they would fade.

There was one conflict that Noa couldn't fit into a spreadsheet column. It visited him all throughout the next day. Behind his screens, chewing on contentment as he worked through his tasks, he would find himself pausing for a moment, looking over his shoulder as if expecting to see something.

It took him four hours and thirty-two minutes to work out. Sitting on the bench in the Green Space over his midday break, Noa found that the conflict came up whenever his thoughts crept back towards the video he had watched on Zefyr's tablet – the one of him as a child, swinging his arms and hopping from one foot to the other.

It bothered him in a way that he didn't have a definition for. Not quite sadness, far from irritation, and only distantly related to anger, the best that he could come up with was a vague sense of detour that took place when he remembered that, years ago, he had been that child. Not only that, but he had gone from being that child to being the person he had been for the past twenty-three years; a person that he now found himself trying to reconcile with whoever he had become since gaining back his emotions.

The fact that all three versions of him were so different made for a rough transition.

He spent the next five days flipping through the variations.

First, the small boy – grinning with pearly baby teeth and refusing to stand still.

That was me. He thought. *I was born in a village by a river and I was called Kelvyn and I had parents.*

Next, the person he had been for most of his life – the number-counter, the anomaly, the too tall man who made himself fit into a way of living until he emerged with confidence and genius.

That was me, too. I was brilliant and I surpassed expectations. I was something else.

Finally, there was the most recent version of Noa Ryvverson – who cried and laughed and planted wheat and burnt his hand learning to cook.

There I am. But I'm still brilliant and I suppose that somehow, I'm still also Kelvyn.

He had the strange sensation that, if he could reconcile all three, it would make up for the fact that he couldn't remember his life before Halcyon.

When he and Zefyr returned to Luella the following week, Lieb immediately brought up the fox kit.

“Just take a look at him, Kelvyn!” He bellowed as the evening sun herded them in the door. “He's a regular trickster. Watch this!”

Lieb dangled a piece of bread over the kit, who responded by jumping and racing around the old man's legs until he gave him the treat.

“That’s brilliant!” Noa grinned. “Let me try it!”

Zefyr was less enthused. She crossed her arms and watched the whole display with eyes that would have frozen over the river at flood stage.

“Shallots, Lieb! You know better! Now he’ll never go away. We’re stuck with him.”

“The boy or the fox?”

The old man laughed so hard at his own joke that Noa had to join him. Zefyr shook her head and set up the coffee pot with fresh grounds, banging the kettle on the stove and muttering the whole time about the two “sentimental males without a lick of common sense.”

Over the rim of his evening cup of coffee, Lieb said, “You really ought to give him a name.”

“That is a terrible idea.” Zefyr bit on each word as she spoke it. “He’s not a *pet*. He’ll raise hell for the chickens and raid the compost pile.”

Completely ignoring her, Lieb found the book of saint names and handed it to Noa.

“Need to keep up with our traditions around here. Isn’t that right?”

“It sure is.” Noa agreed.

He found a name that he liked at the beginning, but read all the way to the end of the book to make sure – rushing never produced good results. In the end, the fox was named St. Aidan of Iona, or, more simply, Aidan.

“That’s fine mountain name!” Lieb rubbed his chin for emphasis. “It means ‘fiery one’, doesn’t it?”

“I didn’t know that names had meanings.” Noa admitted.

This led to a separate study of yet another book from the shelves; a grubby paperback with browning pages titled *Popular Names of the Back Country*. While Lieb cleaned and oiled his tools and Zefyr cursed and wrestled with the pedal of the sewing machine, Noa spent the evening on the couch, glancing up from the book from time to time to peek at the ratty curtain and then to the old man sitting on a stool in front of the fire, his wrenches gleaming in the flickering light.

For all practical purposes, he looked harmless.

Noa shook his head and went back to the book. His patience would have to pay off someday.

“Apparently,” Noa said to Zefyr the next morning, “My parents weren’t very creative. Kelvyn means ‘one who dwells by the narrow river.’”

“Well, that’s a sensible name.”

“Zef, why does Lieb call me Kelvyn instead of Noa?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. He almost never calls me Zefyr, just Little Z. I think he gets something in his head and latches on to it like a burr on sheep’s wool.”

They were checking the chicken coop for eggs. Doing this made Noa feel like he was invading the bird’s privacy, but Zefyr shoved them off of their scrappy nests without a second thought.

“City names don’t really have meanings, do they?” Noa asked.

“No, not usually. But I once heard a very old story, about a flood that covered the whole world. The only person who survived was a man named Noah, who took his family and two of every kind of animal and loaded them onto a boat. Because of them, humanity was saved.” Zefyr passed him a handful of warm eggs, looking around the coop as she did. “Shallots, she’s gone again. That damn hen.”

“Who’s gone?”

“St. Elizabeth Ann Seaton. She’s a good layer when she actually makes up her mind about it, but she has a bad habit of wandering off at night while her sisters are heading to the coop.”

Noa followed her through the narrow doorway, stepping around the worst of the chicken droppings. Zefyr was looking out across the pasture, squinting her eyes towards the far corner where a thin line of scrub bush separated it from the wheat field.

“I’ll go check the woods. Run those eggs to the cabin and then come find me.” Still squinting, she grinned. “Aren’t you lucky? You get an impromptu review in irritation. Nothing is more irritating than trying to find a deranged chicken.” With that, she hopped the pasture fence and ran, scattering sheep and sparrows as she went.

Noa was just about to climb the fence on the opposite side and enter the woods when he heard Zefyr, midway through calling the chicken's name, swear and stumble over something.

"Everything alright?" He asked, pushing the branches to the side as he went to join her.

"You might want to stay there. She's pretty gruesome."

"Who is – oh."

St. Elizabeth – or what was left of her – lay in a pile on the ground in front of them. Noa could pick out the head and the black beads of her eyes; beyond that all that remained was a pile of feathers caked with blood and decay. Colonies of flies had moved in, buzzing in angry circles over the dead chicken.

"Noa, I swear on anything that might be holy, if that damn fox got into the coop..."

"He wouldn't wander that far from the cabin." Noa insisted.

They stood in silence for a moment; disgusted by the sight and unable to look away. Noa had never seen death on such an intimate level before. He kept studying the scattered limbs that had once been a part of the bird; it occurred to him that, on some level, everyone was only made up of a few thousand different pieces, and that the possibility existed of someone coming apart so completely that nothing – skill, magic, expertise - could put them back together.

He turned away and swallowed hard.

"Attractive, isn't it?" Zefyr muttered.

"Just brilliant."

She bent over, as close to the remains as she could get without actually touching or inhaling them.

"This is odd. There are some black feathers, all mixed in with hers. She's a bantam, though. She didn't have any black on her."

"Must have been the crows."

"I guess so."

As they walked back across the pasture together, their shadows moved in long lines ahead of them. The grass was just drying from the dew, leaving wispy water spots across the hem of their pants.

"That was horror." Zefyr said quietly. "It's what happens when fear can't believe what its seeing." She shivered a little, like she was trying to shake off the emotion and leave it behind her to bake in the morning sun. "Do you want to race me back?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

"Well, if you want to, you can."

"Why do you run all the time? What's the hurry?"

She had already wound herself up like a jackrabbit at the beginning of his question. By the time he got midway through it, she was well ahead of him.

The conflict, which Noa had begun to mentally refer to as "The Conflict of the Small Boy" came to a head four days into the following week.

Once a year, every site was visited by various grade levels of Lower Education students with the intention that it would help the children hone in their interests. Noa did his best to make himself scarce when this day rolled around; having a class of thirty students wandering through his space gave him a headache.

In light of recent events, he had overlooked the date this year. Just after his morning break, a class of eight-year-olds, plain and uniform in their tan clothing, began to file through the door in groups of twos and threes until they were huddled around the office floor with their Educator making patrols around the mass of dark hair and half-grown bodies. Thirty-three pairs of eyes, most of them deep brown but a few of them a cold, clear grey, flicked from Mae's gentle smile to Symian's thick frame and finally, to the red-haired man that they had all had heard about but few had actually seen.

Nico was nowhere in sight to give the introduction and tour. Awkward expectancy settled over the group. While they waited for him to show, the Educator did her best to keep the whispering to a minimum. She was mostly ineffective; the curiosity of an eight-year-old child is difficult, if not impossible, to contain.

"He really does look like his head is on fire."

“What’s wrong with his skin?”

“I heard that he’s as tall as a tree when he stands up.”

Noa kept his eyes on what he was doing, bowing his head to hide a smile. Why had he always avoided these visits? It must have made sense to him at some point, but it seemed silly now. Children were genuinely entertaining.

Nico finally rambled out of his office, clearing his throat and piling on too much enthusiasm in his voice as he greeted the class. While he was talking, one of the boys on the edge of the group inched closer to Noa’s desk until he was leaning against the corner of it, watching the numbers on the screen and the tap dance typing of Noa’s fingers with brown, blinking eyes.

Noa looked up, meeting the wide stare.

“Hello there.” He said to the boy. “Do you want to see?”

“Yes sir.”

Noa motioned him closer and switched screens so that they were taking in the view from the weather reactor. He pointed out the different commands that he used to adjust the frequency; how so many taps in one direction let in so much cloud cover and so many taps in the other direction gave them a mild blue sky. All the while, the boy kept looking from the monitors to Noa.

Finally, he jumped into a break in Noa’s explanation.

“What’s all over your face?”

“They’re called freckles.”

“Why do you have them?”

“Well, I was born with them. I have different skin than most people here in Halcyon.”

“Oh.” The boy’s mouth turned down at the corners. “You’re not as tall as a tree then, are you?”

“Perhaps a very young tree.” Noa stood up; the boy’s head just barely came to his stomach. “But I am much taller than you are.”

“I’m still growing.” The boy crossed his arms; it reminded Noa so much of Zefyr that he wanted to laugh. “Someday I might be as tall as you.”

“Someday. What’s your name?”

“Cylas. I’m eight years and thirty-two days old. I know what pi means. Do you want me to tell you?”

Despite the fact that Noa also knew what pi meant and had in fact known it since he was seven, he was about to ask Cylas to fill him in on the details when the orbit of the boy’s Educator reached his desk.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Ryvverson.” She gripped Cylas’ shoulder and steered him back towards the group. “I hope he’s not disrupting your work.”

“He’s fine. We were just about to review the finer points of pi.”

“Well, I’ll let you get back to what you were doing.”

Noa continued to stand, watching the group move like a slow current towards Nico’s office, where half of them crowded in and the other half stood with their hands clasped behind them, peering into the doorway.

It wasn’t until he had watched them for almost six minutes that he was able to pinpoint the irrevocable strangeness of what he was seeing. They stood so still; like a group of warm-bodied statues whose only sign of life was the occasional shifting of their weight from heel to toe.

If he had never seen the footage of his younger self filling up the camera lens with constant motion, it might not have bothered him as much.

“What do you know about children?”

He and Zefyr were working their way along a ridgeback trail three days later, high above the tree line. She was carrying an old sheet of greenhouse plastic tucked under her arm; Noa was still trying to determine what it was for. When he had asked her about it, she had arched one eyebrow and said, “We’re going to the glacier, of course.”

As usual, he was left to wait until the answer showed up in plain sight. Hopefully, the connection between the glacier and the plastic would be fairly straightforward.

“I know some.” She mused. “I was one, after all. Why? Are you thinking about applying for a spouse and having some of your own?”

“It hadn’t crossed my mind. But I am curious, are they supposed to stand so still?”

They were approaching the long wash of dirty ice and snow, blinding their eyes like a field of tiny mirrors beneath the midmorning sun. She stopped to shove her feet into the shoes that had been dangling off of her satchel all morning.

“I’m guessing you had your annual visit this week as well?” She remarked. “To answer your question, yes, they are supposed to stand that still. They don’t have much of a reason not to.”

He watched her yanking on the leather laces as though she was attempting to channel all of her impatience for the necessity into her knots.

“Are all children like that?”

“All children in Halcyon.”

“But what about other children? The ones who aren’t poisoned? What are they like?”

Zefyr straightened up and re-adjusted the plastic sheet.

“Lieb has some books on the subject. You’re welcome to borrow them anytime.”

They started walking again. Before long, the soft shuffle of their feet on the dirt trail was replaced by the crunch of snow beneath them as they broke through the crust of it.

The subject matter hadn’t been exhausted for Noa, and he continued.

“When did your emotions come back? How old were you?”

“I never lost them.”

“So you had them when you were a child?”

“I had something when I was a child, yes. I didn’t know their names, though.”

“What was that like? Did you stand that still?”

“Of course I did.”

“So children with emotions aren’t all that different?”

They were climbing up a steep incline, which made asking questions difficult.

“From what I’ve read, they’re very different.”

“Then why weren’t you?”

“Shallots, man!” Zefyr turned around and faced him with a scowl. “The questions, remember? The ones that I don’t like answering. Now, can you please drop the interrogation? I don’t have enough breath to keep responding.”

When they reached the top of the incline, Noa gave her a full minute to adjust her breathing before he started again.

“Alright, let me sort this out: children with emotion are different. You were an exception because you didn’t want to stand out. If you hadn’t cared about standing out, what would you have been like?”

Zefyr was unrolling the sheet of plastic, kneeling in the dirty snow and ignoring the damp spots bleeding into the knees of her pants.

“I would have played.”

“What’s that? Is it like athletic games?”

“It is and it isn’t. Children with emotions are allowed to act out the wonder that they feel. They run because it’s the closest that they can come to flying. They yell because voicing what they’re feeling at a normal volume is completely insufficient. They squirm incessantly because the whole universe is flying around inside of them and, given such circumstances, who could possibly hold still? Here, sit down on the plastic, like so.”

Noa sat, looking at her expectantly as she crossed her legs and settled herself a few inches in front of him.

“What are we doing?” He finally asked.

“We’re gathering our courage, genius.”

He looked around. There was nothing to gather but stray pebbles and tired out glacier ice. Being that the object to be collected was slow in making its appearance, he resumed the subject at hand.

“Children without emotions aren’t really children, are they? They’re more like miniature adults.”

“Let’s not talk about it anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” she grabbed hold of a handful of snow, packing it into a ball and flinging it down the glacier, watching it shatter as it hit against rocks and well-worn gullies. “We didn’t get it, and we don’t get to do it over again, and that makes me angry. Are you ready?”

“What for?”

In response, she dug her fists into the ground and began to shove the plastic, with them on it, towards the slope. By the time Noa registered what was about to happen, the incline had grabbed hold of them and was biting down on their momentum, sending them flying over the ice with nothing but the mountain air to shield them as they picked up speed – ten, fifteen, twenty miles per hour, if not more.

Wondering at the odd sensation of his stomach having been left at the top of the slope, he grabbed her shoulders. There was nothing else to hold on to.

“Is this safe?” He yelled in her ear.

“Safe enough.”

“How do we stop?” This sentence was interrupted near the end by a ridge in the glacier that jolted him so hard his teeth banged against each other.

“I usually just fall over and roll. I’m open to suggestions, though.”

In the end, they did just that, tumbling a few yards before they came to a stop near the bottom of the slope, just before the boulder field. While Noa waited for his equilibrium to balance itself out, he went through and counted his bones to make sure that none of them were broken. Aside from the spray of snow that had managed to lodge itself down the back of his shirt, he was fine.

Zefyr was lying on her back, giggling.

“Did you like it?” She asked.

“It was exhilarating.” He pulled himself up on his knees, trying to reach between his shoulder blades and loosen the ice before it melted. “What did that accomplish, though?”

“It accomplished participation in a unique set of circumstances, that’s what.” She transitioned from laying to standing in a blur of wet clothes and made for the plastic. “Nobody else gets to go sledding in the middle of July, do they?”

“Where are you going?”

“Back to the top.”

“Just to go back down again? Isn’t that counterproductive?”

She stopped, resting her chin in her hand and studying him.

“You know, you’re right. It doesn’t make any sense, does it?” She wandered back to where he was still fighting with the shirt full of snow. “Here, let me help.”

“Oh, that’s fine, I think I’ve got it – What, *Zefyr!* For the love of anything that might be holy!”

Without batting an eye, she had scooped up a handful of the stuff and shoved it down his collar. It slid along his neck and settled right where the previous bunch had been.

As she took off, shrieking with laughter, his irritation flared up to near full-blown anger and then faded in a hurry when he realized that, provided he could catch her, the favor could be returned.

The world was enormous that day, and within it, they were very small. It loomed like a great wall before them as they walked the slope. It lay, cold and calm and terrifying with its steepness when they reached the top and tipped their weight forward on their flimsy sheet of plastic. It blurred by them as they flew down the incline and spilled over each other at the bottom. All the while, the sun was close and huge, burning their skin and melting ice that clung to their clothes.

They climbed up and slid down nearly a dozen turns. Somewhere along the line, Noa stopped being shocked at the intensity of their speed and began to look forward to that final tip over the edge of the slope, when the scenery rushed by them so quickly that they had to shut their eyes and hold their breath. He laughed when they shuddered over a bump and the adrenaline of almost falling off flooded his nerves.

Catching up to Zefyr and dumping a handful of snow down her collar also made him happy.

It was only when the plastic cracked in half during the twelfth run that they gave the glacier a last look and set off towards Luella with soaked pant hems and wind burned faces. .

Afternoons in the back country were fickle, mostly due to the fact that, despite the pointed spires of their summits, the mountains were terrible gatekeepers. The clouds snagged against them, looked behind them briefly, and pulled their clothing free without a second thought.

The sprouts of wheat had finally pushed out of their shells, waving short arms in the breeze that raced across their green tips. Having lost track of Zefyr while thinning out the carrot tops later that day, Noa found her crouching at the edge of the wheat field, running her hand over the thin blades.

“They’ll look much different next week.” She said, as though she regretted it.

Noa laced his hands together, resting them against the back of his neck and studying the low bank of clouds that were rolling over the tops of the pine trees.

“We’ve got about three minutes and twenty-five seconds before we get rained on.” He remarked. Glancing down at the wheat, he flicked his eyes over the crooked rows, running through germination rates and comparing them with what he knew about harvest yields.

“You could make almost eight hundred loaves of bread – seven hundred and eighty, to be exact. Of course, that depends on the development of the heads. If they get the right growing conditions, you’ll have between 50-60 kernels per stalk, which would mean - ”

“Why do you do that?” Zefyr cut in as she stood, pulling her eyebrows together.

“Well, I thought it might be useful information.”

“No, the counting? Why do you count everything?”

The first few drops of rain began to dot their shoulders, like the edge of a curtain that moved in the breeze from an open window.

“Can we pause this?” Noa asked, heading for the pasture. “I’ve already swapped out clothes once today.”

“That’s fine. I suppose we’ll have to try outrun the rain...”

“I suppose. That’s a real tragedy for you, isn’t it?”

She grinned as they pulled themselves over the fence and started to run between the drops. The sheep bailed at them, the dull clang of their bells echoing as they wobbled towards the paddock overhang. Noa’s legs were already sore from their morning at the glacier; he let Zefyr go ahead of him, jumping up the porch steps after her.

“I won.”

“I let you win.”

“Psh. You only wish you were as fast as me. I’m smaller than you – there’s less wind resistance. I’m like those cottontails in the bushes.”

“Ah, but I have longer legs, little rabbit.”

They filled up the doorway with their scrawny limbs, leaning against opposite posts while they caught their breath and watched the rain come in sweeping sheets. Again, this was not the soft mist that fell in Halcyon. Even in their sprint across the pasture, the ends of their hair had started to cling together in wet clumps. Puddles congregated in the trampled yard. A pitiful chicken scuttled towards the coop, shaking water from the ends of its feathers. From within the branches of the maple tree, now hidden in a coat of broad leaves, a warbler bird belted out a high *tee-hee*.

“How much rain will we get?”

Noa leaned forward, observing the structure of the clouds as though he were greeting the face of a long-time acquaintance.

“Half an inch. Maybe three-quarters.”

“Can we press play again?”

“Certainly. Once more with the question?”

“The counting.”

“Right.” Noa reached back along the train tracks of thought for his answer, but he found that particular stretch of it overgrown from lack of use. Come to think of it, when had he started to translate everyday life into

equations? It wasn't a habit he had recently picked up; by his sophomore year in Upper Education, he was already being considered for Roles that required advanced math skills.

"You mean you don't have an answer?" Zefyr was tapping her index fingers against one another, a combination of entertainment and impatience hiding at the corner of her mouth.. "I need to record this."

"Just give me a minute."

He remembered estimating the length of his shadow based off of the position of the sun as he rode his bike between the shade patches when he was twelve.

Seven days after his ninth birthday, he had spent an entire morning counting every step of every stairway that he climbed.

Somewhere in his sixth year, his educator had caught him rebooting his tablet so that he could re-take a math test over again; not because he had failed, but because he wanted to.

And finally, there it was.

"Age four. I was having a hard time falling asleep, and Ms. Jones told me that counting as high as I could go would keep me from thinking about my dreams."

He could remember the ceiling tiles above his bed – fifty by forty, two which had water stains in them and one which hung sadly against its supports.

The walls had wood paneling – two inches wide, seventy-two panels per wall, one of which contained an oddly-shaped knot that Noa had imagined was the third eye of his caretaker.

Out of the corner of his vision, he saw Zefyr straighten up.

The foot of his bed had ten posts, the head had the same.

"Come on back here, genius. Your thoughts ran off somewhere."

When he turned towards her, he saw that her mouth had moved away from the cliff edge of a smile. He took a deep breath before answering.

"There were nine hundred fifty thousand four hundred and two threads in my blanket."

The words fell like a plate from the shelf.

She was giving him the strangest look. A tiny crease formed between her eyebrows, and she moved away from the doorframe and said, "I think I would like to hug you. Would you be alright with that?"

"If you want to."

When she put her arms around his waist, he found that he didn't know what to do with his own. Eventually, he settled for looping them across her shoulders.

Beneath his chin, her hair was coarse, and smelled like the sun. He spoke a question against it.

"What are trying to say this time?"

"The same thing as the last, actually."

Since coming to terms with his emotions, Noa rarely dreamt. On occasion, he would wake up in the morning with the sense that he was slowly sliding out of a story he had been participating in while asleep, but there were no distinguishing features that he could hang on to as his consciousness returned.

Waking up midway through that night and trying to get his bearings by looking at the slant of the moon coming in the window was a disappointment.

"Wassa matter?" Zefyr mumbled from her couch.

"Did I wake you? I'm sorry."

"You were counting in your sleep."

"I dreamt about the wheat fields. I was trying to keep track every single grain." He couldn't but help but laugh at this. "Funny, isn't it?"

"Mmmhmm."

"The problem was, I was much smaller. I couldn't hold them all in my hands."

She was quiet for awhile. Noa had just decided that she had gone back to sleep when he heard her roll onto her side.

"There's enough bread."

“What?”

“Don’t worry Noa, we’ll have enough bread.”

“Oh.” He smiled in the darkness. “That’s good to know. Thank you.”

Her breathing slowed down after that. Noa lay awake and looked up at the bunches of onions hanging above his hammock. He started at the top of one of the braids, counted two of the bulbs, and then shook his head before he turned over and faced the window. The last thing that he remembered before he fell asleep was the changing patterns across the yellow surface of the moon.

Notes from a Secret-Keeper #3 – A sky full of rebels

Some faces are made for seriousness.

She knows, even without looking in between the smudges on her mirror, that she was born with such a face. Mirth doesn't settle on thin ridges and inhospitable hollows. In the same way that the sun can only pierce so much of the ocean's depths, light avoids the sea colored irises of her eyes.

But other faces are so well suited to laughter and careless smiles that their warmth dispels the darkness and makes a mockery of gloom and death.

Such is the face of the boy. He has a gaze that hints at August afternoons and worn out grass, rimmed by forest fires for eyelashes and hair. His skin never burns or browns as hers does, only multiplies the constellations of freckles the more time he spends beneath the sun. There are no harsh features to avoid when one looks at him; just a wide open curiosity resting on a mouth that was made for a smile.

She's never met anyone more ill-suited for seriousness, and yet she's also never met anyone so inclined to such a state of mind. Like two interconnected monitors, his eyes watch the words that she speaks and always, they are calculating, analyzing, counting, multiply, averaging. This many words per minutes. This many letters per word. This equals that. The square root of hope. The circumference of guilt. The sum of happiness.

And it's not that she minds entirely. His logic is a brilliant thing, a noontday sun for her to travail against and come to love.

She just wishes that he smiled more.

She knows that the things she treasures the most – the beaten down tractor, the mismatched farm, the deranged livestock – are the very things that he struggles with. She sees it, blinking in the evaluative reports of his mind. Inefficient, inoperable, insecure. He is not used to the peace that comes from learning to love chaos, whether it be in the form of thundercloud emotions or eccentric old men.

However, he does try.

When she runs, he follows until he pushes past her and pulls ahead. When she climbs a tree, he climbs a higher one. When she attacks the soil with the rusty shovel, he asks for a turn and finishes the chore in half of the time. When she demonstrates some new skill, he coerces her into teaching him.

Neither one of them really knows what having a sibling is like, but she imagines that, in his trying, he is making a very good brother out of himself. And really, both of them, orphans in a sense, need a family before they need anything.

He finds her one night in the haymow, to show off his newest blisters and ask indirect questions about why the house is lit with candles or why the carrots are weeded by hand or why one loaf of bread takes an entire day to make or why the old man lives like a refugee in the mountains.

I don't know, she tells him. I don't ask questions.

With the lack of answers still swarming around his head, he helps her move the old hay to make room for the new hay while the cow goes on lowing and crapping and chewing its cud and the chickens wobble and titter under their feet.

When the chore is done and the sweat is hiding beneath the hair on their necks, they sit in the doorway; he on a chair that has been missing its back for three years and she on a stool with one bum leg.

Watch, she says. Look out there.

There is no moon tonight; no wayward tyrant to showboat his luminescence and dim his much smaller cousins. The stars have already begun to come out of their slum shanties and light their rebel torches to celebrate having the sky all to themselves. They will have revelry tonight, clustering together until some of them take off in a streak of defiance and illuminate the land as they run.

Such is their merrymaking that the rustling grass in the pasture answers with lights of its own; a lovelorn Morse code of blinking and tapping that never repeats itself, never looks back on who it was moments before.

Fireflies? He asks.

She nods her head.

Maybe that's why. He says.

Why what?

Why the old man lives by candlelight.

They watch heaven and earth shimmer with the brilliance of a million diamonds; far too many to ever be numbered. And slowly, as if he were testing the validity of such a motion, as if he wants to be sure of the feelings behind it, slowly, he smiles.

11. The Rescue of St. Ignatius

During their trips to Luella, when he wasn't pulling weeds or trying and failing to milk the cow, Noa read children's books.

According to Zefyr, they might give him some resolution to his conflict. She steered him towards a dusty ledge of Lieb's library and told him that any of the books on that particular shelf would do just fine.

Running his fingers over the colorful spines and through the yellow pages, he noticed four distinct details.

One was that they were all narratives – stories like the ones that Zefyr told him from time to time.

The second was that the longest one was just shy of 200 pages; some of the others were much shorter, bringing the average page length down to about fifty pages.

The third defining characteristic was that either the main or secondary protagonist was always a child.

The fourth thing that they had in common was their content. Nothing happened, or at least nothing that he could relate to. They flew. They battled pirates. They tamed wild things by staring them down. They had long conversations with an apple tree. They ruled over tiny planets and tended rosebushes.

He worked his way through them like a chore. His past had been so far disconnected from a normal childhood that most of what he read was more absurd than useful. If it fit at all into his previous notes on emotions, it fit awkwardly, riding up like the sleeves of his city shirts.

But once in awhile, without a sensible reason to support the thought, he wondered if he might be getting a glimpse of whatever he had missed – here when the thunder jumped over the pasture hills with heavy footsteps, or there when he looked up at the wide sky while the clouds ran past the squinting eyes of the sun. It happened when he realized how quickly the world moved, and how much space existed within those movements. It happened when he found himself feeling small in an enormous land that he was just barely familiar with.

It also happened when he watched change.

Throughout his life, July had never been much more than another month, distinguished only by its long days and the blunt angle of the sun overhead. The weather didn't change noticeably in the inconspicuous climate of Halcyon. It simply threw off its June skin and stepped into the next one, not bothering about the certainty of August waiting on the horizon.

As he and Zefyr passed beneath the wind turbines – sometimes late at night, other times before the sunrise – he was always surprised at how much contrast existed once the weather was outside of anyone's control. Zefyr had told him that June was nothing like May, and he soon found out for himself that July was nothing like June.

Life didn't happen slowly here. The back country never thought about what it should be doing next before it went right ahead and did it violently.

Zefyr had been telling the truth when she said that the wheat would look different from week to week. The peas overtook their trellis and curled around each to hold up the weight of the pods. The carrots sent up shoots, poking only the crown of their orange heads above the soil to reassure the farmers that yes, they were getting along just fine without them.

Aidan lost his grey baby fur and grew into a sleek, sly adolescent, strutting through the yard in his red coat and impressive tail. He didn't lose his habit of rubbing against Noa's ankles for handouts, and he mostly left the chickens and the compost piles alone.

It was a funny relationship – the boy and the fox. Noa kept trying to reconcile it and couldn't. It had been over a century since domesticated animals had lived within the city limits, and even then they had existed only as a means to an end; like the farm animals in Luella, they were expected to provide clothing or food or, at the very least, fertilizer.

Aidan didn't serve a purpose; even on good behavior, he was a neutral member of the farm.

But when the day came that Noa, on Zefyr's insistence, walked the fox out to the far end of the pasture and pointed him in the direction of the woods, he did it with a tired weight dropping down through his chest.

He knelt next to the fox and scratched behind his ears.

"You need to go back where you belong now, you rascal."

Aidan cocked his head, sat on his haunches and curled his tail around his paws.

"In all seriousness," Noa continued. "You shouldn't stay here. Go out and find yourself a pretty girl fox and dig a den. Go on."

More blank staring followed, until it was slowly replaced by a new expression. Although Noa knew better, he could have sworn the animal was grinning at him.

He made an attempt at simply walking away, but stopped when he felt something brushing his legs.

The boy returned to the farm with the fox still rubbing his ankles as he walked.

Zefyr was irked.

"He'd go right back where he belongs if you would both stop feeding him from your plate."

"No," Noa said, rubbing the russet fur behind the fox's ear. "I don't believe that he would. He likes me."

"You can try again tomorrow. I'm sure he'll understand then."

Noa did try, and Aidan didn't understand any better the next day than he had the day before.

Lieb, in his backhand way, made a remark about Noa having found himself "a fine pet."

Something clicked for him; the children protagonists in the stories occasionally had pets. From what he understood, pets could be companions, and having companions increased a person's chances of feeling happiness. It was another variable to add to his spreadsheet.

From then on, when the fox would follow Noa around Luella, shaking out his tail and making odd little noises of contentment, Noa would smile to himself as if he were playing a game and think, "I have a pet. That's what purpose Aidan serves."

From what he could determine, the fox increased his potential for happiness by point-seven percent.

For the most part, Noa's predictions about the ratio of his emotions were correct. Sometimes, they moved a little in one direction; he would spend an extra four or five minutes feeling irritated, or he would find that feelings of happiness stayed for a visit even after the actual event that shaped the feeling had passed.

However, there were situations that, no matter how perceptive he was, he couldn't have prepared for. During a trip to the mountains near the end of July, he was unwillingly forced to confront one of them.

He had spent the morning helping Lieb patch the barn roof. After scrubbing the tar off of his hands and enjoying the contentment that followed when he looked up at the neat section of shingles, he found Zefyr crouching in the long grass by the pasture fence, fingering the handle of her paring knife. The wind kept blowing her hair up and over her eyes; she looked more like tumbleweed than a girl.

"What are you at now, little rabbit?" He asked, settling himself next to her.

She held a finger to her mouth and pointed up the length of the fence post.

"I planted sunflowers there, for the birds to have in the fall." She was talking in hot, quick whispers that stung like fire ant bites. "The squirrels keep digging them up and eating them. I'm trying to stand guard long enough for the seeds to have a chance."

"Ah. I see." He glanced at her knife. "And what are you going to do? Spear them?"

"I wish! No, I'm just hoping that the sight of the knife will strike fear in their greedy hearts."

Noa rested his chin in his hand, hiding a smile.

A squirrel trembled its way up onto a fence post, nerves twitching as it anticipated the smooth hull of the seeds between its sharp little claws. Like a streak of lightening that came and went and ripped the sky open in the process, Zefyr was on her feet and running across the pasture.

However, she went in the opposite direction.

Noa didn't understand at first. He stood and called after her, "You're going the wrong way!"

The human eye is capable of processing between ten and twelve distinct images per second. In that timeframe, he saw the girl sprinting through the grass with no shoes. Then, he looked on towards a commotion

taking place in the corner across from the pine grove – branches moving and sheep scattering. Next, it focused on the smoke and bursts of flame coming from the center of the mayhem, trying to identify a dark shape perched on the railing. He caught the gleam of the sun on blue-black feathers that reminded him of the crows loitering around the swamp. Out of place with the waving grass and tree trunks, Noa could also see flashes of light bouncing off of sharp, metallic points. Two sets of five, like a pair of hands tipped with steel claws.

Finally, his eyes went back to Zefyr.

She tripped once and went sprawling, skinning her bare knee before she wrenched herself up and kept running. Noa could see now that there was white fleece and red blood dripping from the claws, and all of her effort was bent on those two colors.

While she ran, her little knife flashed, and her voice that tried much more than it was went in front of her like a battle horn.

“Put that *down!*” She screamed. “It doesn’t belong to you!”

Noa’s reaction was visceral. Before he could think through what he was doing, or what he was going to do when he caught up, his legs were clearing the pasture fence and taking off after her.

He had just reached her and was about to grab her arm when a hot wind flattened the grass and stung his eyes. It smelled strongly of sulfur, and in the process of trying not to choke on the stink, he rammed into Zefyr and knocked the breath out of both sets of their lungs as they fell over.

“Damnation, Noa!” Zefyr hollered, kicking him off of her. “For the love of *anything* that might be holy! I could have stabbed myself when you plowed into me like that.”

“Oh, shut up. It’s not like I was trying – “

He was interrupted by a movement that came from the mass of smoke and claws. The feathers had form now; three pairs of wings, beating the air out like an old scrap of cloth. Behind it, the woods woke up and began to move with sudden, nervous steps. Twigs snapped off of their larger branches as they beat against their neighbors with loud cracks. The dried layers of grass hiding near the roots of the living ones pulled loose and flew away in tight spirals. Not far from the fence, a terminal tree gave up the ghost and hit the ground with a final thud that shook their bones. There was sound, too, rising above the noise of the wind. Rusted metal was grinding against itself, shrieking, splitting their ear drums like the requiem of a phantom machine slowly coming back to life.

The brush scattered beneath the fence ignited.

Noa caught the outline of a creature that distantly resembled a man – a very tall, very thin man with pieces of metal that covered parts of his body and wires that ran in and out of him. His head and feet were hiding behind two pairs of the wings as they worked the fire into a frenzy. The third pair of wings moved across the charred chest of the creature, thumping like the beat of a disembodied heart.

In place of hands were the claws. Inside of them, the creature was holding the limp body of one of the lambs.

“What is *that?*” Noa demanded. Another blast of heat washed over them, and he looked away.

“I told you about it, that day we walked from the stone cabin to Luella.”

“Oh, that’s helpful. Because that trip was so clear and memorable.”

The sky started to rain down embers that glowed like torches as they settled in the dry patches of leaves and pasture grass. The metal shrieked again, and the creature spread out all three pairs of wings to their full span before it launched itself into the sky, burning branches and reeking of sulfur as it went.

Zefyr was on her feet just behind it, jumping the clumps of fire and throwing herself over the fence into the woods that was still shaking from the motion of the black wings.

Wondering if he had any other choice in the matter, Noa followed her.

“Zefyr! What is it?” He asked again, shouting after her as they ducked in between tree branches and cleared overgrown roots.

“One of the seraphim. I think that’s what killed St. Elizabeth.”

“Why are you chasing it?” He asked.

“Are you blind, man?” She was watching the direction of the wind as she ran, matching it up with the occasional treetop engulfed in flames. “It’s got Ignatius.”

He looked at her running ahead of him, fast and strong and graceful. Her face was set and her eyes were wide open; nothing that resembled fear hid in the shadows that whipped across her cheekbones as she passed under the branches. It wasn't anything different from what he usually saw – in his head, the idea of Zefyr went hand in hand with the idea of infallibility. She out swam floods and carried grown men on her shoulders and had held her ground under the worst of his temper and insults.

But there was a memory from the other afternoon that kept jumping in front of this. The piles of bloody feathers and rotting entrails, the many pieces that could never be put back together....

It changed the way that he saw her. Suddenly, she was not omnipotent. She was scrawny and incredibly reckless and the thought of her taking on the terror that was burning up the forest made his stomach turn over on itself. His arm shot out and grabbed a handful of her shirt.

This didn't slow her down. She jerked back, twisted around, and shoved her elbow into his stomach.

He doubled over, swearing and sick, still trying to keep up.

“Zef! Don't be an idiot!” He groaned. “What are you going to do, stab it with your paring knife?”

She ignored him.

Just shy of a mile from Luella, over a low ridge at the bottom of the glacier, was a lake. Lieb kept a raft docked there and would sometimes shuffle his way out the door with bright eyes and a fishing pole, making comments about the bluegills that were waiting for him. Noa had only seen it the day that they had gone sledding. He knew it was calm and freezing and very deep, and that was about all he wanted to know.

The seraph was heading in this direction; through a break in the trees, Noa saw it tucking in its wings and making wide orbits around the perimeter of the lake. From behind one of the boulders, Zefyr was dragging Lieb's fishing raft towards the edge of the water. Whatever it was that was motivating her – anger, adrenaline, insanity – made her unstoppable. She was shoving off from the shore just as Noa reached it.

He stopped, his anger at her stupidity draining into cold, level fear when he looked down at the dividing line between water and land.

She may as well have jumped off the edge of the world.

“Zefyr! Come back!” He screamed after her. “Good god, would you just use your head for once?”

“I'll get right on that. As soon as you stop distracting me when I'm trying to concentrate.”

He ran through an internal string of every curse word he knew before trying again.

“You're being irrational. This is the worst idea you've ever had – worse than the day we got caught in the canyon. It's not going to end well.”

Her voice was farther away now, swallowed by the distance.

“If you don't like it, swim out after me.”

It may have been a good thing that she was a hundred feet from the shore. Noa was ready to murder her.

The seraph began to make a tighter circle, the metallic sound rising to in pitch as it moved into the eye of its self-concocted hurricane.

Noa heard Zefyr shrieking at it.

“You *bastard!* I said put that down!”

She had a tinder box of a heart, and pride lit it on fire. Noa imagined that he could see it from where he was standing – she was reaching for the height that she didn't have, her nose wrinkling around the edges and a heavy scowl on her forehead. Her eyes would move like a ripening wheat field under the exhale of a hurricane, and every muscle would be held against its bones so that she couldn't come apart at the seams.

Based on ferocity alone, she could have won.

At the center of its orbit, the seraph paused, hovering just above her. Waves rippled out beneath it, and the little raft dipped and bounced over their white tips.

It – he? Noa didn't know. The creature shocked him by actually obeying her. It dropped the lamb, right before it dove for the girl.

It crossed his mind that he should scream, or run, or at least look away. Yet all he could do was choke on his cowardice and watch the sun flashing on metal and water.

But the seraph's actions weren't the only ones that had the ability to shock him. Zefyr was good at it – she had been doing it even since he met her. Quicker than the screech of bloodied claws, quicker than the cyclone wings and the spurts of orange fire, she jumped off the raft and disappeared beneath the waves.

The sharp splintering of wood cracked in the air as the seraph ripped the raft to pieces. Whatever its claws didn't mangle was left to burn, flickering across the tips of the ripples while the creature took off over the hills. A line of blazing trees followed it like a wound flaming with infection.

It dipped over the horizon, into the dark valleys beyond Noa's line of vision.

On the edge of the world, nauseated and relieved, he waited for Zefyr's head to resurface.

A minute went by before she appeared; a little dot of dark hair and white skin, paddling towards him while he stared. His mind, needing something to do, counted the trail of ripples that she left behind her.

When she got to the shore, he didn't say anything as he grabbed her hands and pulled her out. He didn't say anything while she stood there, wringing the water from her hair and shirt and laughing about what a close call it had been. He didn't say anything when she stopped laughing and said that it was too bad about Iggy – he was all ripped open and bled out by the time the seraph had dropped him.

Finally, she asked, "Are you alright?"

Noa realized that his heart was beating hard again, despite the fact that it had almost cracked his chest open minutes ago and needed a rest.

"Are you?" He asked lightly.

"Oh, I'm fine. Just a little wet."

"Good." He turned away.

"Noa, what's the matter with you?"

Making an effort at slow, measured breathes, he rubbed the group of nerves on the back of his neck that had grown unbearably hot.

Don't yell, don't yell. He told himself. It's counterproductive. Don't yell.

Finishing a fifth breath, he turned around and faced her again.

"Why did you do that?"

"Don't be an ass. I was trying to save Ignatius."

"No. Not that. Why did you go out there, on the lake, with your damn knife and no shoes and...and...good lord, why don't you *think*?" Now that he had something to say, he gave up on his efforts to keep his voice down.

"Why don't you ever use your head? I told you, that was a *terrible* plan and it wasn't going to end well and do you have *any* idea what could have happened – "

"Oh, stop. Nothing happened."

At some point, he had moved closer to her and taken her shoulders. He kept yelling, now with his face inches from hers.

"Well, I didn't know that when you rowed out to the middle of the lake like an idiot. What was I supposed to do, come out there after you? Oh, that was just brilliant, wasn't it? Leave me here to watch the whole thing play out because – and you, of all people, know this - nothing scares me more than water and next time you feel like being an inconsiderate ass why don't you just throw yourself over the falls right in front of me..."

He could have kept going, but she yanked his hands off of her shoulders and started to laugh.

"You have the most amazing temper. It's beautiful, really. I never would have guessed that about you. In fact, I've only known one other person who could fly off the handle as easily as you can. And that's me."

"This is not funny. Do I look like this is funny? Do you see me *laughing*?"

She stopped.

"No, I suppose I don't."

They faced each other, their petulant silence broken by a burst of chattering teeth that finally broke through Zefyr's stubbornness. She started to laugh again, invading the outskirts of his anger by throwing her freezing arms around him.

"I'm sorry." She said. "I wasn't thinking – about the water. And I didn't know liked me that much."

He was trying to stand apart from her shivering and his desire to hug her back by keeping his muscles stiff and unaffected. It was working – barely, but it was working.

“I don’t like you at all. In fact, I was ready to kill you. But you almost took care of that yourself.”

And then, because he desperately needed to release the last of his tension, he returned her embrace and started to laugh with her.

After all, someday, when they looked back on the event, it might be a funny thing.

“That was tremendously brave of you, running after me to help.” She remarked as she dropped her arms.

“You really are something else, Noa Ryverson.”

“No, that wasn’t bravery.” He shook his head, amused at the idea. “I was terrified.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it does. Bravery is the opposite of fear. It would be impossible to feel them both at once.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Emotions don’t work like that. You can feel more than one at any given moment.”

“But not opposite ones. That wouldn’t be reasonable.”

“It’s a different type of reasonable. You’ll see.”

Back at the pasture fence, they found Lieb calmly beating out the remains of the brush fire with a rusted shovel. As they approached, he leaned against the handle and studied the pair.

“You might have left some water in the lake, Little Z.” His eyes gleamed from under their grey brows.

“What have you two been at?”

Wringing out the corner of her shirt, Zefyr grinned.

“Oh, you know, the usual. Taking on mythical fire-breathing creatures and getting well acquainted with the bottom of the lake.”

Noa couldn’t joke about it yet, and being anything else he might have said wouldn’t fit into the conversation, he went back to saying nothing.

“Say, do you mean that a seraph caused all of this racket?”

“I think so. The one that they experimented on in the city, all those years ago. I’m sorry to report that we had two casualties: your fishing raft and St. Ignatius.”

“Well, that’s a shame.” Lieb adjusted his work gloves on the shovel handle. “I’ve been baiting it for the feathers, you know. It’s a rotten deal that it went after the lambs. Isn’t that right?”

“It sure is.” Zefyr chimed.

Noa couldn’t contain himself anymore.

“You were *baiting* it? Why on earth would you do something that stupid? Have you seen the claws?”

If the younger man’s outburst affected Lieb, his only indication of it was to run a hand over the brown bald crown of his head and grunt to himself before he answered.

“Seraphim feathers – the ones from the center pair of wings – are remarkably useful, Kelvyn.”

“What for?”

“Certain lines of work.”

It had to do with that curtain – or whatever lay behind it. Noa had had enough. He was gearing up to ask – no, to demand – a real answer, when Zefyr took his arm and steered him towards the cabin.

“We’ll see you later, Lieb!” She called over her shoulder, her voice bright. To Noa, she said, “Come on. I’ll bet that bread needs to be turned once more – you always let it rise too long. And I need to get out of these wet clothes before I get hypothermic.”

Noa redirected his frustration to her.

“I’m sick of this.” He muttered. “I can be a saint when it comes to patience, but so help me, Zefyr, I’m fed up with the old man and his secrets.”

She swung her arms with nonchalance.

“Don’t they say that redheads have bad tempers? You’ve just become a stereotype.”

“You’re avoiding the topic.”

“No, I’m just not bothering to answer questions that don’t have any apparent answers.”

“Do you know that I’ve either felt terrified or enraged for almost the entire past two hours? That’s a long time muck around in those emotions.”

Blunt and direct, she turned and looked up at him.

“Then it might make sense not to feel them, don’t you think?”

Anger was exhausting, Noa found. It ran in tightly compacted motions through his veins and then left just as quickly, not bothering with the mess that remained behind it. To persuade it to stay and clean up wasn’t worth the effort. His emotions had spent the afternoon doing a relay between fear, irritation, more fear and then anger, and he gave up. He knew he was already well over his estimates for those emotions – his whole week was thrown off now.

When he had calmed down, it occurred to him that an answer found using something as impulsive as anger probably wasn’t an answer that he wanted. It would be a fast, childish answer – not an accurate one.

He would solve the issue soon enough.

12. Through the Cellar Door

The encounter with the seraph brought to light a detail that Noa hadn't been fully aware of before. He had accounted for Zefyr's influence on his emotions when he initially put together his spreadsheet; the irritating way she played pranks on him, the jealousy and embarrassment that he felt when she had the upper hand in a task and he did not, and the warm contentment that came when they would sit in their silence, allowing the summer evenings underneath the oak tree to talk for them. But as she had a habit of doing, she proved him wrong.

He had given her too little credit.

Realizing how much anger and fear the experience at the lake had produced also made it obvious how easy it was for her to take him in the opposite direction. At the end of the week, he looked forward to meeting her outside the turbine repair house, switching skins from their fake clothing to the strange, comfortable things that came from Lieb's cabin, and trekking across the plateau. In fact, he more than looked forward to it; there were evenings when his anticipation appeared without much thought, and he would catch himself smiling on his bike ride home from Climate Engineering.

There was a detail that became more obnoxious as time passed. In a way, it was ironic; the subject that had served as the catalyst to everything that he was learning about himself continued to move in quiet, constant circles around the periphery of his mind, still untamed.

Given the fact that emotions were the feature that set Zefyr apart, Noa had assumed that understanding them would also mean understanding her. It was strange then, almost two months after meeting her, to realize that she devoted a good amount of effort to avoiding one particular topic: herself.

She moved with careful, deliberate steps around the subject, toeing the line as though it were a hole that she could fall into and take him along with her. Anything that he learned about her, he picked up by either by observing her or by accident.

It wasn't that she did anything that surprised Noa. He knew that she laughed because she was happy. Her face pulled into tight, sharp lines when she was angry. She scowled and swore – at him, at obnoxious sheep, at Aidan, or even a stubborn weed - when she was irritated. He wasn't sure what she did when she was afraid because he never saw her showing that emotion.

The basic structure of her personality was starting to take shape. The problem was that the foundation of who she was remained a mystery.

He tried sneaking through the backdoor, into the cellar, by asking backhanded questions. All that came from this were answers that were equally as vague and left him wandering through the hallways.

On the topic of fear, he brought up an earlier conversation.

"So that day at the waterfall, when you told me that you don't have reactions anymore, what you really meant is that you don't have any fears."

"No, I don't. I'm not allowed to, in fact."

"Says who?"

"I say so. I've had too many."

The following day, he asked her to tell him more about pride.

"What do you think about it?" He asked.

"Pride is a tricky thing." She said. "It gets me into trouble more often than not; I tend to think of myself as infallible and occasionally this is disastrous."

"You don't say."

"Well, yes. There was that. Also, I almost never cry. I've decided that I'm too proud for it."

"Wait – that day that you brought me to Lieb. You were crying when I fell asleep."

"No, I wasn't."

"Yes, you were. What's wrong with crying? Isn't that a normal reaction to strong emotions?"

“In general. You’ll find that things change over time. Emotions take on the shape of the person they belong to. Like a new pair of shoes. Getting angry seems to suit me better than crying.”

Noa thought of a few different approaches to solve the problem. It might be as simple as spending more time together. This seemed like a good idea on a few levels – being around her typically produced something along the lines of contentment, even happiness. There were also weeks when the stretches of days in between their trips limped along, and he couldn’t see any issues with giving them a nudge.

He brought it up above the dull thudding of their feet on the homeward trail, fifty-five days after they had met in the halls of Archives.

“I was thinking,” he began, “When you first told me about emotions – that night that I had the fever – you said that they also happen in your brain. Is that something that you can teach me about?”

The lines around her nose wrinkled.

“I suppose. If you really want to learn about that.”

“I would. But, I was also thinking that it’s not appropriate subject matter for Luella, is it?”

“Not really, no.” She raised an eyebrow. “Did you have something else in mind?”

“What if we met in the evenings while we’re in the city, say every other night?”

She was walking faster now, pulling ahead of him.

“I don’t know. Why would we do that?”

“I thought we established this already?” He stretched his pace and caught up to her.

“No, I mean why would two people who have no reason to interact with one another spend time together in Halcyon?”

“Oh.” He finally realized what she was getting at. “The questions again. Well, we could meet somewhere out of sight, if that makes you feel better.”

In the end, they agreed to meet at the turbine repair warehouse two evenings from then, after the sun set.

It wasn’t ideal. The city didn’t get dark until nearly nine, and by the time they met up and slid through the window, they ended up with less than an hour together. The oil slick stink gave him a headache, it was crowded, and no amount of squirming made a comfortable seat out of an overturned bucket.

“I don’t have any of the right books with me.” She apologized. “So, I’m going at this from memory.”

As it turned out, her memory had depth to it. Shelved between the prose that she rambled when she was teaching him a new emotion, the varieties of herbs and wildflowers and how they were used, and the theology of mountain farming, she had whole books worth of information about how emotions interacted with the mind. When she started talking, she didn’t hesitate or search for words, only moved from one area of the brain to the next as though she were reciting multiplication tables.

“Most of the action happens in the Limbic System.” She put her hands on either side of his head. “Right there in the middle. Within that system, there’s a few different areas all talking to each and saying, ‘why, Zefyr is such a fabulous person. Just being graced with her presence makes me happy.’”

“She’s so humble, too.”

“Naturally. One interesting thing is that most the areas associated with emotional processing are also helping us to remember things. For example, the hippocampus, part of the limbic system, is what allows us to establish long-term memories. And then just on top,” She pointed to the crown of his head, “the cingulate gyrus is like a walkway between the hippocampus and the thalamus; because of that connection, we learn to associate emotional memories to smells and pain. So, when you think about the cut on your leg, or drowning in the flood – “

“It feels terrible.”

“Exactly. But now think about the scent of Lieb’s cabin. How does that feel?”

Noa thought of the collection of smells; herbs, leather, musty books, all of coated in a layer of wood smoke.

“It feels safe. Somewhere between happy and content.”

Her glasses had been inching down her nose, and she readjusted them before resuming the lesson. “Here is my theory on the poison: it’s not as though it shuts down these areas of the brain. I think that they keep chugging away. That’s why we have instinctual reactions that aren’t much different from emotional behavior. Of course, I’ve

never seen a scan of someone's brain activity, but I would imagine that mine would look quite similar to anyone else's. It's the heart and soul that shrivel up and die, so that the moment you experience something that can't be processed by your logic alone, you get thrown off."

"Did Lieb teach you all of this?"

"Good lord, no. He's a terrible teacher."

"Where did you learn it, then?"

"I read it in his books."

"So you taught yourself?"

"I didn't have any other options." She leaned back, resting her shoulders against the shelves. "Anyway, moving over here, directly inside of your temple, is your amygdale..."

They met two nights that week. Other than the subject matter and the fact that she was completely self-taught, Noa picked up two more details about her.

The first had to do with wildflower seeds. On the second night that they met, she arrived at the window ahead of him. As he approached, he caught her reaching her left hand into her pocket and coming up with a clenched fist, releasing it, and repeating the motion. Tiny grains fell like laughter against the dry earth surrounding the window well.

"What are you doing?" He asked when he was within whispering distance.

"Planting wildflowers."

"That's a funny spot for them. Will they grow there?"

"They'll grow anywhere, if I take care of them. They're tough like that."

As they left the warehouse that night and parted ways at the intersection of 13th Avenue and 40th Street, he caught her scattering more seeds as she slipped off into the darkness that gathered around her gracefully.

The second thing that he learned was really more of an answer to a question he had been asking himself for awhile: did it make sense to think of consider her beautiful?

He could say that she was attractive. Most females in Halcyon were, and aside from a few details, she looked like the average woman in the early part of her twentieth decade. But his definition of aesthetic appeal had always been based off of superficial qualities; the way that a person presented themselves to strangers that they might not have to see again, or the façade that they kept in place to represent an idea, like the architecture of the city.

Zefyr was nothing like that; she had terrible manners and for all he could tell, didn't even own a hairbrush. She swore and insulted and laughed loudly. She cleaned up from one chore and went right back to smelling like dirt and hard work within an hour. She could never seem to make up her mind about whether she felt like being kind or being rude to him, and sometimes she ended up being both at once.

It was something else; a feature that he couldn't place, occasionally moving over her expression like a change in the light. It softened the edges of her face and the hard angles of her bones, reshaping his definition of her from his first impression to one that contained all of her strange quirks, the kindness that she didn't owe him, and a final understanding of what had been so interesting to begin with.

When this happened, he had no doubt that she was a beautiful person.

He had explored a few theories on what physical variable could be causing this. Lighter colors, like the yellow shirt that she wore in the back country. Her eyes, when she didn't wear her glasses or find other places to park them when they talked. The low light of the candles in the cabin after the sun went down. The way that she smelled like sun and outside air, even when she was indoors.

The truth was that it was all of these things and yet none of them.

He did know this: after spending most of their time together away from Halcyon, spending two nights with each other in the city taught him that she was more likely to come across as unremarkable when she was busy with the chore of hiding.

Noa's transition from Halcyon to Luella and back was seamless. She was different – more like the contrast between the months that was characteristic of the back country. June was nothing like May, and July was just as different from June. In the city, she hid behind shelving and spectacles and navy blue clothing. She was quiet and

average and held herself close to walls and outside of streetlamps, sprinkling water on wildflower seeds planted in secret. Past the plateau, manners, shoes, and caution were abandoned. Noa had a hard time remembering that this was the same girl who walked like she assumed the world would swallow her if she took a wrong step.

For about a week, he thought, *Oh, that must be it. She's beautiful away from Halcyon.*

But by the end of the weekend, he realized that even this couldn't be used as a hard, fast rule. She still threw off an infallibility that clouded over whatever it was that made her beautiful. She didn't fear, didn't cry, and she never talked about herself. She was the expert and the teacher, and she used this to keep her distance.

He started to keep succinct records on her, adding to the list of numbers he had made at the beginning of June.

Ten, for her bare toes and the fact that she almost never wore shoes when it was warm enough.

Five and a half, for the average mile per hour that she moved at. Even if she didn't have to run, she usually did; across the pasture, up the switchbacks, between the barn and the cabin...

Seven, for the hours that she typically slept. Most people needed eight; she ignored this.

Once, Noa came around the corner of one of the sheds where she was hanging out a new batch of wool scraps to dry. He had just finished washing off chunks of mud from his shoes, and had left them against the south wall of the barn to dry. In the meantime, he was doing his best to keep away from gravel and stray nails.

Still several yards away, he stopped. Her back was turned to him, and she was shaking the wet fabric as though it needed to learn better manners. He could hear her saying words, but at the same time, not saying them.

Zefyr was taking musical notes and wrapping her voice around them like an old blanket before she tossed them out her lips. The sound moved in and out of the swaying clothesline; a susurrus that told a story about a low valley and violets that that were blue.

Carefully, he turned away and walked on the balls of his feet until he was out of earshot.

Later that night, he added another number to the equation: one-hundred eighty hertz, for the frequency of the sound that she had made when she thought that no one was listening.

During a lazy afternoon, after they had spent the morning cleaning out the chicken coop and then parted ways to wash the smell off of their skin, Noa lost track of her. He wandered around for a good twenty minutes, eventually running into Lieb.

"Have you seen Zefyr?" He asked.

Getting him to answer the question turned out to be a task of its own. The old man had an uncanny ability to get distracted, and as Noa followed him across the yard, he paused to take care of no less than five issues – a wobbly chicken, a leaking hose, a stray tool.

"I saw her disappear upstairs." Lieb finally said. "In a hurry. You know her. She never takes her time with anything. She'd try jumping a canyon if she thought it would get her on her way faster. Isn't that right, Kelvyn?"

"It sure is."

When the midday sun hit the windows of the loft straight on, the space heated up like a solar oven and baked the scent of onions, herbs, and warm pine. Noa found her kneeling on the floor, in front of a grimy mirror propped against the wall. Two clumps of hair and an old scissors sat on the crooked boards around her.

"What are you doing, little squirt?" Noa asked. "Admiring yourself?"

She kept tugging at the end of the curl just behind her left ear; winding it out like an old spring, releasing it, and then starting the process over again.

"Hardly. I'm overdue for a trim, that's all."

"You must either have a very dull pair of scissors or very thick hair." He said as he crouched down next to her. "You've been up here for almost forty minutes, and I only see two locks."

She took her time replying as she continued to unwind, release, and repeat.

"It's just, well, I really should cut it shorter, shouldn't I? All the rest of my graduating class went out and had it done the week that they started at their Sites, but I've been putting it off for the past two years." Zefyr dropped

her hands in her lap, as if she suddenly realized that she had been repeating the action for the past ten minutes. “If I keep it like this much longer, I’ll start to stand out.”

Noa studied the two blunt ends at the back of her neck where she had cut the hair closer to her scalp, remembering how he had mistaken her for a recent graduate because of the length. He started to ask about her reasons for not cutting it, and then stopped himself.

It was silly, to ask a question that he knew the answer to.

“You like it longer, don’t you?”

She wrinkled her nose, half in a smile, the other half in a frown.

“What I really like is ignoring expectations. If people expected me to grow it out, I would probably decide that I wanted to shave my head. But yes, you’re right. I like it longer because it takes away the responsibility of it looking nice.” She laughed. “Do you ever notice that women who have straight, sleek hair, like Ceyla, can’t get away with messiness? Well, clearly, there’s no hope for me, with a mop like this. It’s a separate entity, and it tends to do whatever it wants. And that’s why I like it. I get an excuse to look haphazard.”

Noa laughed along with her, running a hand through the roots of her curls until they popped out of the back of her head like crooked tree branches.

“Then you should never cut it. In fact, don’t even trim it. It’s like those alpine strawberries – they’re much better when they’re not cultivated.”

She stopped laughing.

“I wish I could. I’m not like you, though. I don’t have that luxury. Standard attributes and all of that.” She met his eyes in the mirror. “But, that’s enough for today. This is a significant decision to make, and it’s too hot and stuffy up here to think about it.”

She left the scissors and the disconnected curls to collect dust on the floor and followed him downstairs. Outside, when the wind came running through the yard and pulled their hair from their foreheads, she turned towards it and smiled.

And there it was, for a half of a breath. She was very beautiful.

The next time that they met in the warehouse closet, Noa made an off-hand remark about looking for a different space.

“Don’t you like our cozy little annex?” Zefyr asked.

“No.” He admitted. “Not particularly. It’s crowded and dark and it smells like engine oil.”

“Well genius, I don’t know where else we could go.”

“I have an idea. A good one, actually.”

“What’s your brilliant idea?”

Rocking on his heels, he smiled and said, “It’s a secret. You know that stand of Alder trees that grow at the bottom of the clock tower? Meet me there.”

Two nights from then, Noa was leaning against the base of Chronos with his hands in his pockets and thirty pounds of musty textbooks sagging in the pack on his shoulders. When they left Luella earlier that week, Zefyr had piled them in and then handed the bag to him, making comments about what a good student he was and how much he could learn now that they had appropriate reading material.

He was about to pitch them on the ground when he saw her meandering across the green space, giving the impression that if she did eventually end up joining him in the Alder trees, it would have happened purely by accident. She didn’t seem to notice him until she had almost walked by him, and even then, she turned her head in both directions before slipping through the screen of leaves.

“Hello. Glad that you decided to join me after all. I wasn’t so sure there for a moment.”

“I was just trying not to be obvious.” She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “So, where now where do we go?”

“Close your eyes and I’ll show you.”

She obeyed right away – Noa had guessed as much. He took her hand and led her through the shrubs that grew around the base of the clock tower until they came to a door that most people would have missed, if they know what they were looking for.

Inside the cool interior of the tower, they rode the lift to the top floor; thirty five stories up, three hundred seventy-five feet from the base.

“Can I look?”

“Not yet.”

He pulled her down a narrow hallway lined with storage lockers, heading for the metal stairs at the end.

“Can I look now?”

“No. You’re peeking. That’s not fair.”

She made a face.

“I’m terrible with suspense.”

“Well, there’s stairs to climb. Why don’t you devote some of your energy to those?”

At the top, he eased the trapdoor open with his shoulders and pulled her onto the wooden platform.

“Alright, tell me. What’s it like?” He asked.

She was squirming and smiling; this was her favorite type of secret.

“The wind is blowing very hard. And the sun – there’s nothing in the way of it, is there? It’s almost like being in the back country but we didn’t walk on any dirt roads and I’ve never heard of an elevator in the mountains. And something is going on overhead. It’s like the roof is alive. Can I look yet?”

Noa glanced at the angle of the sun.

“Just wait fifteen seconds.” He urged.

Right on cue, Chronos shook the air with the six ‘o’clock chime. There in the belly of the clock, the noise vibrated in their chests and rocked the platform that they were standing on.

Zefyr threw her hands over her ears and laughed.

Because her eyes were still closed, Noa could watch her face for as long as he wanted to – she couldn’t see, couldn’t know that the sight of her laughing like this in the city fascinated him.

When the chimes were done, he told her to open her eyes. She blinked a few times, smiling and then frowning and then smiling again.

“I’m impressed.” She finally said. “It’s far superior to the closet.”

“Good! Mountain ranges make for stiff competition, but I thought you’d like this.”

Just beneath the four faces of the clock, under a canopy of gears and cogs that moved in and out of one another with clicking, kinetic motions, there was a platform that stretched out from the trapdoor in a neat hexagon. A thin railing ran around the perimeter of it. It was the only thing standing between them and the thirty-six story drop; with no walls to stop it, the sun was free to wash over the floorboards in giant puddles.

A ladder, straight and uncompromising, climbed up between the clockwork. Zefyr’s eyes looked up the length of it with curiosity.

“Where does this go?”

“To the weather reactor. There’s no platform or anything; when we have to work on it, we clip into a climbing harness. It’s a good fifty foot drop from the top.” He shook his head. “I know what you’re going to ask. The answer is no.”

“Oh, come on. I won’t touch anything. Besides, I spend half of my life climbing ladders.”

“You’re not going to leave it alone until I let you go up there, are you?”

She had already started climbing. Noa stood beneath her and watched as she grew smaller, swallowed up in the turning gears.

“How do I make it rain?” She called down. “These poor city people; they have no idea what a real rainstorm is like.”

At the top, she looped an arm through the rungs and swung half of her body out into the empty air like a monkey from a tree branch.

“Would you stop that?” Noa leaned on the ladder and scowled. “I swear, if you slip, I’m not breaking your fall. For one thing, I’d only have a second and half to react, not to mention that your potential energy at impact would be almost six thousand five hundred -”

“This is *brilliant!*” She yelled, ignoring him. “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve recently seen.”

He had been at the top of the ladder before. She was right – it was brilliant.

Eventually, she climbed back down and jumped the last ten feet.

“Alright, enough. You brought the books?”

“All forty pounds of them.”

“Poor boy. It’s really more like thirty.” She went to the pack and slid out a thick book, setting it on the ground in a cloud of crumbling bits of paper before she flipped towards the appendixes near the back of it. One of the pages was detached from the spine; this, she unfolded and spread on the ground. It was nearly the size of a bed sheet. To keep it from blowing away, she sat down in the middle of it. Several diagrams of the human brain were sketched out in faded blue ink, criss-crossed by years’ worth of creases in the paper.

“I’ve been meaning to show you this since last week. Obviously, we didn’t have the space for it in the closet. This is much nicer.” A corner of the sheet caught the wind. Noa knelt on this section and gave her his attention as she choreographed her way across the diagrams and pointed out with her shoes the area that she was addressing.

He had been listening and watching for almost half an hour when a detail that had been tugging on the shirt sleeves of his thoughts refused to continue being ignored. In the middle of a sentence, without waiting for a comma or an inhale of breath, he removed his hand from the act of rubbing his ear, reached across the space between them, and pulled her glasses off.

Zefyr jerked away.

“What are you doing?” She sputtered.

“You don’t need to wear those around me. I know what color your eyes are.”

She rubbed the bridge of her nose where the frames had left tiny indents.

“I forgot that I had them on.”

“But, there is something that I don’t know.” Noa took a deep breath, testing out the stability of their conversation before he continued. “Why are you an Archives Clerk? Obviously, your role is below what you’re capable of. You could have been a physician. Or an Educator. Probably a very good one, too.”

Her eyes, bare and uneasy, looked for a place to hide and settled on the course of her pinky finger as it traced the outline of the brain stem.

“I like filing.”

“Bird crap, Zef. Nobody actually likes filing.”

“I do.” She laughed. “It’s very satisfying.”

He had backed her into a corner; she couldn’t jump the subject, only throw jabs at it.

“If you’re trying to be funny, I’m not laughing.” He said. “Can you enlighten me on something?”

“That’s what I was trying to do. Before you got off track.”

“How is it remotely fair that you know everything – *everything!* – about me that someone could possibly know about another person, and in fact, you knew things about me before I knew them myself, yet whenever I ask you a question about something that’s anywhere close to being personal, you do whatever you can to avoid answering me?”

Unabashed, she turned to him and asked, “Do you have a favorite color? I don’t know that.”

Noa hung his head in his hands.

“You’re unbearable. What’s the point in trying to have a conversation with the only other person in the entire city that’s capable of emotions if they *never* say a damned thing about how those emotions affect them?”

Still looking down, Zefyr had been hanging on to the smile at the end of her laugh, as though she took pleasure in her sidestepping of his questions. However, something that he said wiped it away completely. She stood up and moved away, balling her fists and making an obvious effort at not looking at him.

Without its paperweight, the diagram flew up and threatened to take wing like a panicked buzzard. Zefyr threw herself back on top of it, trying to get her arms around all four corners.

“Well, serves me right.” She muttered. “I was going to go stand over there and look out at the city and brood like a silly girl. Fat lot of good that did me.” She rolled the paper into a messy bundle, shoving it at him so that her arms were free to cross in front of her. “Do you really want to hear this?”

“I wouldn’t be asking if I didn’t.”

“Then let me tell you a story.”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“Shut up, would you? I’ll get there. I’ll start by telling you about a little mark, stamped into the bottom left corner of every single birth certificate. There’s a space in that mark to write in the date and time.” She drew her eyebrows together. “It’s called an Inoculation Mark. After they give you the poison, Child Wellness fills in the information. There’s a file in Archives that, if you noticed everything the way that you do, you would probably be able to tell that the time was written in with a different pen and handwriting than the date.”

“So what does that mean?”

“It means the process wasn’t completed. It means that, as a two-year-old, that person knew that she laughed more than the other children did. It means that, by the time she was six, she was aware that she had something that others didn’t.” Her words, chipped and rough at first, started to shove at one another in their hurry to trip through her mouth. “When you’re different in a city that values homogeneity, where people expect you to be as normal as you look, the only thing that you can really do is to land somewhere right in the middle. Don’t ask or answer too many questions. Don’t aim too high or too low. Don’t push or pull against societal boundaries that stand out to you like a sore thumb but not to anyone else. Your whole life is a great game of hiding and pretending.”

She was looking out across the copper rooftops, as though she was searching for something hidden beneath the eaves and green sheets. Over and over, her fingers tapped against the opposite arm where they were resting; moving like a metronome for the thoughts running races behind her eyes.

Coming back to the wooden platform, she shook her head and finished the story.

“When I saw what Contribution Roles I qualified for, I realized that I could accomplish two things at once by training for Archives. I could hide away for most of the day between the metal shelves where no one would notice me and I could keep tabs on my own file, even make alterations if I had to.”

“You wrote in the time stamp yourself, didn’t you?”

“My first week. I noticed it was blank and figured that forging it would be one more way that I could stay unnoticed, if anyone ever got curious and asked questions, or if I did something stupid like, say, losing my temper or smiling too much.”

She let out a long breath that she had been holding and was quiet, huddled in and deflated as though the conversation had worn her out. Only her fingers kept moving – still tapping her arm.

The meaning of what she had told him settled slowly, spilling out into their silence as he thought back through twenty-four years worth of hiding, fifteen of them that she had spent alone. Up until she met the old man, there had been no one. She had been brushing against the shoulders of her emotions for as long as she could remember without any hope – hope hadn’t been learned yet – of understanding what was happening inside of her. There had been no teacher, no guide, no one to tell her that crying was normal and expected or that laughter - real laughter – could crack open the world.

If his conflict had been based in the contrast between who he had been and who he was, hers – the conflict of the small girl – came from having the ability to blaze up like a vigil fire and always being denied permission to do it. Instead, people had expected that she exist as the dim, dull nightlights that lined the walkways below his house.

They were allowed only to be, never to be brilliant.

It bothered him; the sad notes of it had the ability to seep past his skin like a cold rain. Noa kept his thoughts away from the edge of it. He didn’t want to throw off his week by feeling too much grief, even for her.

Eventually, he asked, “So that’s the story? Now tell me, was it really so bad, sharing that with me?”

Zefyr wrinkled her nose, like she did when she was both irritated and amused.

“Well, I survived, I suppose. Shallots, I hate talking about myself.”

“I hadn’t noticed. What’s so bad about it?”

“I don’t really know how it’s done.” Her mouth attempted a smile and fell short. “Even Lieb, dear old man that he is, keeps to himself most of the time. We get along well as a result. I don’t press for information, and neither does he.”

“Not like me.”

“No, not at all like you.”

“It’s not bad to share secrets once in awhile, you know. In your case, it might even be good for you. They must get heavy, carrying them around like you’ve been doing.”

“Yes.” She said, finally stopping her tapping fingers, as though it had occurred to her that she was wearing grooves into her shirt sleeve. “They are very heavy.”

Later, before he went to sleep, when he was trying not to think too much about their conversation, he added another number to her equation.

Fifteen, for the number of years that she had spent carrying her secrets around like an oversized pendant with a clasp that had rubbed her neck raw.

Part Three: Adolescence

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful.

"When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

- Margery Williams

13. A Study of the Color Red

Mid-morning, on Tuesday of the following week, Noa was working through of a report from Child Wellness about the new physical curriculum being implemented by school-aged children when Nico's aftershave, moving like a dust cloud before a storm, assaulted his nostrils. He looked up.

Sure enough, the twitchy man was standing in front of his desk, clearing his throat.

"Have you got a few minutes, Noa?"

"I can give you ten, actually. Will that do?"

"Yes, yes. Let's talk in my office."

With the numbers on his report blinking patiently behind him, Noa followed his supervisor to the partition at the far end of their office floor. Before he walked in, he caught Mae making a face out of the corner of his eye and Symian shaking his head.

The room they went to was paneled in tones of deep brown and red – imitation wainscoting meant to resemble mahogany. Nico had to move a box of equipment off of a chair before Noa could sit down. He had been making off hand remarks about "finally unpacking" his office for months. Apparently, the habit of saying it had now overruled his desire to follow through on the semantics. The seat cushions were covered in a pugnacious vinyl that matched the carpeting and creaked with uselessness. They weren't meant for sitting in for long periods of time, but given Nico's tendency of taking the longest route when sharing simple ideas, Noa and his colleagues often left the room with sore backs.

Nicodymus Johnson was a tall man by Halcyonian standards. He hovered around five feet, ten inches, with a lanky form that pulled his posture and even his face downward. His dark eyes hung listlessly in their sockets, and the crown of his head was all limp hair, grey flecks, and grease.

The surface of Nico's desk was a breeding ground for disorganized files and half-eaten portions; he had to push one of them off to the side before he could rest his long hands against it. He went on to clear his throat three more times and punctuate the sound with a quick scratch of his scalp. Whenever he did this – and he did it often - his hunched fingers flapped like they were hoping to take wing and find a purpose other than twitching through his hair.

In the back of his mind, Noa felt an eddy of fear start to form. Had he been too careless in the past month? Had Symian or Mae mentioned something about him hiding his head and smiling more often than usual? He wasn't sure what might happen in a conversation on the topic, but he resolved to make a little more effort towards obscurity when it came to displaying his emotions in the future.

Nico changed his mind about his body language, leaning back in his chair and resting his hands on his knees instead.

"How have you been, Noa?"

This was a question had too wide of an opening. Noa toed the doorway to test his footing.

"I've been well. Not much different since my assessment in January."

"Ah, but I beg to differ."

The eddy turned to a whirlpool.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Well, I've noticed a few things, in the past month specifically. First of all, have you addressed that sleeping issue? I only ask because you do seem well rested."

"I believe it's been taken care of."

"Ah, good, good. I've also seen that you're utilizing your personal days on a more regular basis."

"I trust that it's not causing any disruptions in our work, is it?"

"Not at all. You see Noa, there's a reason that Contributors are granted personal days. I'm sure you've seen the studies. There was some concern about the fact that you rarely took any. Might I ask why the change?"

Noa had never been in the position where he had to tell a blunt lie. He crossed his ankle over his knee and focused on the seams that connected his sole and shoe.

Hobbies. That was a safe bet. He blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“I’ve started taking swimming lessons, actually.”

After saying it out loud, Noa had a difficult time not laughing. He brought his hand up to his mouth and did his best to smooth out the smile that wanted to show itself.

The tapping of the paperclip that Nico had been fidgeting with stopped, ending with the muffled ping of it hitting the chair mat beneath his desk.

“You never learned?” He was leaning forward now, his fingers making sweaty marks on the desk.

“No, not until recently.”

“Well, that’s probably a wise move. Good for you.” After two more throat clearings, he went back to the conversation. “What I’ve really noticed is that your performance in your Role had improved significantly. I can’t quite put my finger on it; it’s not that you were doing poorly before, but now it just seems as though you’ve applied yourself on a whole new level. Your work is more accurate and timely, and in fact I’ve seen that you pick up tasks from Symian and Mae.”

Noa nodded slowly and focused over Nico’s shoulder, at the stand of aspens outside of his window. Seven of them, carefully trimmed and spaced so that the very tips of their branches strained to make contact with their neighbor.

Of course, he was improving. Everything in his life was improving; his Role wasn’t exempt.

“I’m assuming that getting adequate rest is a contributing factor.” He said. “I appreciate you pointing that out, though. Is there anything specific I can improve on?”

“As a matter of fact…” Nico took a deep breath and twitched his fingers through his hair again. “I do have something I wanted to suggest, to you specifically. You see Noa, I’m sure you’re aware of your precociousness, and where that’s taken you so far. Really, no one is surprised anymore. We’ve just come to expect that from you. Which is why I wanted to talk to you, and you alone.”

Having accepted that the points of the leaves would never reach each other, no matter how hard they tried, Noa turned back to his supervisor and waited for him to get to the point. It had to happen – eventually.

“I’ve been in conversation with the Chancellor, along with the supervisors from Food Production and Infrastructures. She’s expressed an idea of a new Contribution Role; a sort of liaison between the three Sites that will advise them and take a more active part in Halcyon’s decision making process.” He lowered his voice and drew his clammy eyebrows together. “What do you think?”

“Of the Role, sir?”

“Well, yes, that. But what do *you* think of being in that role?”

The question knocked him off guard.

“Me?” He asked, working his way through the meaning of the question. How would this affect his emotions? Would it make him happier? Would it increase the potential of feeling irritated? What and when would he learn what he needed to know? And… “Who would maintain the reactor?” He asked this out loud – it was important.

“Oh, you would still be solely responsible. Mae would be your back-up, like she is when you’re not in.”

“What would the Role entail?”

“You’d have to familiarize yourself with both of the other sites, and spend some of your time there with the supervisors. In essence, you would be doing quite a bit of what you do now, just on a larger scale with more pieces in place.”

This was appealing. He enjoyed his current responsibilities. Tweaking the weather patterns and watching the results march by accurately and obediently was like a long, satisfied exhale. It made sense that doing more of it would produce more contentment in his life, and contentment was an emotion that he enjoyed.

“And, there would be meetings – you would have to present the information, of course.”

The appeal slid to an opposite corner, defeated. He had seen Nico sitting around those tables with the other supervisors, waging war in the only way that residents of an emotionless city could - with reports and statistics.

Meetings were an enormous waste of time. He had always thought so. There was no reason to debate numbers; it wasn't as if they lied, they just were.

Nico, ignorant to Noa's internal debate, went on.

"It would be a wise move for you, Noa. A real opportunity to use your brilliance and do something important for the city."

The scales tipped.

He would be good at this – he was good at everything, and everyone could see that. He was necessary, instrumental. This Role would define that even more clearly. Wasn't it fortunate for Halcyon, that he had turned up here twenty-three years before? That he had exceeded expectations and that even the process of gaining his emotions back pushed him ahead? It didn't matter that he was different or that he was afraid of water and couldn't remember who his parents were...

Somewhere, like a squirrel twitching along a fencepost in the corner of his memories, Noa caught himself remembering the smell of engine grease under the hot sun while Zefyr sat on the tractor wheel and told him stories.

Pride is a tricky thing.

But no, this couldn't be the same type of pride. This was the good kind - the satisfaction of hard work that she had mentioned. He was certain of it.

Besides, guilt and excitement didn't belong in the same experience, and excitement was more appropriate for the occasion.

"Can I give it some thought, sir?"

"Certainly! I'd expect that much from you – no hasty decisions."

"Thank you. Is there anything else?"

"No, no. Go on back to your spreadsheets."

Noa stood up and attempted to rub his lower back without his supervisor noticing. As he was walking away, Nico's voice stopped his hand on the doorknob.

"If I can offer my own opinion... I do think that you bring something that nobody else does. Humanity, you might say. We need more of that in our decisions."

Noa was glad that he was no longer facing the man; Nico couldn't see the way he caught his breath and held it in as he turned the knob, brushing past the burgundy door.

That evening, as they sat in the puddles of sunlight spilling over the tower platform, Noa told Zefyr about his conversation with Nico.

When he finished, she met his eyes and asked, "Will you take it?"

"I think it would be good for the city."

"Ah. I see." She looked away, starting in on memorizing the grooves in between the floorboard.

"You don't think so, do you?"

Below them, the city was moving and turning and chugging along like it always did. Zefyr studied the motion of it, tilting her ears to pick the sounds that changed dimensions up here, so far removed from their ears.

"Here is what I think: you can only predict so much before you come to the end of yourself. And when you get there, you'll find that it's not nearly as terrible as you thought it might be. That's where people start seeing their hungry neighbor and sharing what they have, or turning their faces to the storm because feeling the strength of it reminds them of their humanity."

Noa ran his finger along his ear. She was doing it again – saying something that was only distantly related to the words that were coming out of her mouth.

"Are you talking about anarchy?" He finally asked.

"No." She laughed a little. "Believe it or not, I'm not violent enough for anarchy."

"So what are you saying? That I shouldn't do this?"

"My approval doesn't matter. I'm not your mother, Noa."

"Yes, but you're... well, whatever you are, it counts for something."

She looked up at him again, the windows of her eyes cracking open just at the bottom.

“Would you be happy if you did that?” She asked.

“I think so. I’m happy with what I do now, and Nico said that it wouldn’t be much different.”

“If that’s how you feel, then I think you should take the position.” She started to dig around in her satchel, pulling out the outdated psychology textbook that they had been working their way through. It was her way of ending the conversation.

This irritated him for more reasons than one. He hated when she ignored his questions, and he also didn’t like that she had found a reason not to give him a straight answer in the first place. Why couldn’t she be happy for him, instead of going off about storms and coming to the end of himself? If she disapproved, she should at least say so; it would give him the chance to argue with her about the matter.

He was gearing up to pick a fight with her when he caught sight of something as she opened the book.

“What happened to your knuckle?” He took her hand in both of his, squinting at it. Two gashes, still bright red and recent, marked the joints of her left index and middle fingers. Zefyr glanced down at her hand and then turned away, mumbling about taking a corner too fast the other morning and bashing them against a shelf.

Noa looked closer at the cuts.

“You should really get these checked out, Zef. They might need stitches.”

Pulling her hand out of his, she slid it beneath the weight of their book.

“It looks much worse than it really is.”

“Don’t they hurt?”

“I haven’t noticed it much.”

“Well, if you’re sure.” Noa shook his head. “I hope the shelf took a beating, too. It’s a shame that it got in the way of whatever you were in such a hurry to do, isn’t it?”

“Oh, a real tragedy.”

August tiptoed into Halcyon, and by contrast, hit Luella and the surrounding countryside like a freight train.

These were days for moving slow; both the animals and the humans left the work of spring and early summer behind. The garden had grown; it was no longer a delicate child that tripped over its own feet and needed constant supervision – it was a wiry adolescent. The plants were gangly and capable things, weighed down with fruit and needing nothing more than a drink from the bucket if too many days went by without an afternoon storm.

Following lunch one day, Noa and Zefyr had flopped down between the arms of the oak tree roots to wait for the rain to come and break the humidity that had stretched over Luella like a long, stubborn exhale. According to Zefyr, it was cooler in the shade. This might have been true, if the haze of patronizing clouds hadn’t rolled in from the mountains and blurred out any definition of shade or sun.

Both of them had tried to be productive. Zefyr had a pile of patches and ripped garments, and Noa had moved on from children’s books to an archaic set of encyclopedias. They had initially interested him because they contained an alternate universe of information than the encyclopedias he had grown up with. He was working his way through a section on various religious traditions, feeling both disgusted and fascinated by the photos of blood sacrifices and elaborate ceremonial garbs.

For the past seven minutes, Zefyr hadn’t stitched a seam, and he hadn’t read a paragraph. They had resorted to lying still; breathing and sweating because it was too hot to do anything else.

Aidan was curled up inside of his tail, taking advantage of Noa’s absent scratching between his ears and making low squeals of contentment. Suddenly, his head snapped up, and his nose twitched at attention. The fox jerked to his feet and bounded towards the corner of the pasture, launching between the rails of the fence and heading into the line of trees.

“You’d better go catch him.” Zefyr mumbled, watching the scene through her eyelashes as she worked at improving her napping skills. “Lieb still hasn’t repaired that section of the fence. One of the chickens might have gotten out, and I swear, if that brat bothers those hens one more time...”

“Oh, give it up, Zef.” Noa sat, setting his book aside and squinting into the hazy dark of the forest. Through the thick leaves, he could just make out a speck of copper fur. “Hey Aidan, come on back here. It’s too hot to chase you around.”

The fox ignored him. He seemed to be focused on something; his tail was thick and bristled, and he held his limbs at attention.

“He’s not going to come. You have to go get him.”

“Damn that mutt.” Noa grumbled, standing and making his way towards the fence. He swung his leg over, swatting at the briars that always found their way into the torn hems of his pants. There wasn’t much point to it – sturdy as they were, he had learned early on that his gifted clothes, or any clothes for that matter, were no match for the landscape. Most of what he wore these days had patched elbows or rips in the knees.

“Alright, you rascal. I came all the way in here – “

Noa stopped just short of the fox. Low growls came up from Aidan’s throat and through his bared teeth, and steep ridges of fur rose and fell along his spine.

Hoping for a chicken instead of a bear, Noa scanned the tree trunks.

And then, ten feet in front of the fox and the boy, he saw it.

Dodging the decaying twigs and tiptoeing gracefully around the patches of moss, was the bird from the mountain peak.

It looked at Noa and bobbed its head in recognition before it ducked through the bushes and went deeper into the forest. He could hear the high trill as it moved farther away.

Aidan went after it in a blur of hair and teeth.

“You mongrel.” Noa scowled, annoyed about having to wade through the sentient heat. “You’re worse than Zefyr. If you had any sense, you would just come back and lay in the shade -”

He stopped. Not far from the edge of the forest, in a clearing bordered by the silver trunks of aspens, Aidan had paused and was easing himself around the perimeter as the little bird shot out from the underbrush. Noa took his eyes away from Aidan, curious about what the sanderling.

There was a person, standing like a statue just beneath the branches on the opposite side. The bird ran back and forth between their legs, chirping and defying the humidity like it had defied the cold months before.

It was a woman; a tall woman, with slender arms that reminded him of the willow trees growing along the river bank. The fact that she was there at all was a mystery, but what caught him off guard was the color of her hair. In between the hazy sea of grey bark and green branches, a brilliant red was falling down over her back, stirring from a phantom breeze like a ripple across the surface of the lake.

He saw that color every day when he looked in the mirror. It existed in only one other place in his mind: the faint memories that he had of his mother.

And then, she spoke.

“You should come over here, Kelvyn. Where I can see you.”

To maintain his sanity, he decided that he must have fallen asleep beneath the oak tree.

This had to be a dream. It was too surreal; watching himself move slowly across the clearing towards the woman, wanting to speak and try out the word, “Mother” but not able to because he was holding in his breath.

There were more sanderlings now – dozens of them. They dropped out of the sky in hordes, running between the legs of the two red-haired humans and ringing the summer air with their shrill little cries of rebellion.

This is not real. They sang.

Of course, he knew this. It didn’t stop him from closing the distance between himself and the woman. His hand was shaking as he reached out to touch her shoulder.

Just as his fingers made careful contact with her arm, she burst into flames.

Noa jerked back. His eyes, widened by horror, felt the heat of the fire as it licked up the length of red hair, curling crimson at the tips and reeking of sulfur.

The birds were still falling from the sky, piling on top of each other, clumsy with their multitude. They began to fight, pecking and scratching, ripping fissures in between their feathers. The obnoxious red stained their tan down. Still, they fell around him, until the metallic sky was blocked out and everything was blood and fire.

Finally able to suck in a lungful of air, Noa started to scream.

He would wake up now. Zefyr jump out of bed and rock his hammock and tell him to shut up, that he was only dreaming and it wasn’t real.

There she was; grabbing his shoulders and shaking him hard.

“Noa, look at me! Snap out of it, damnation!”

He wanted to hang on to her, to feel the sturdy realness of her bones and the way that his ear drums cringed when her voice rose so high.

Except that he couldn't. All he could do was stare and scream.

She kept yelling at him.

“Stop looking at it! You have to look away. Please, Noa, *wake up!*”

Smoke was creeping by them, convulsing with the wind and blocking their view. Noa couldn't see the birds or the woman anymore. Where they had been, he could make out a shape. Black feathers and wires and metal, just in front of him. From it came heat so heavy that his thoughts ran together and a noxious scent that dissolved his screams into heaving attempts to catch his breath.

In between coughing and confusion, Zefyr was still shouting at him.

Why is she always so loud? He wondered, finally turning to look at her in hopes that the yelling would stop.

His eyes were watching her, even though his mind was limping behind at a much slower pace than usual. She was balling her hand into a fist, pulling her arm back...

Her hand connected with the side of his head. He was awake now. He could see the ground flying up at him, and he put one arm out to break his fall. He landed on the forest floor among the moss and miniature brush fires that had ignited around his feet. The smoke was passing over his head, churning like a thundercloud and making his eyes water, but there were no more birds or burning women.

Only the black beast ten feet in front of them.

“Zef! For the love of anything that's holy!” He pressed his hand against the throbbing in his temple. “Was that really necessary?”

She didn't answer. He was trying to find her, trying to keep track of her outline in the fog but her punch made it hard to focus. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Aidan taking off in a streak of bright fur. The bushes were on fire. The wings were moving. Zefyr. Where was Zefyr?

There she was. Pulling her shirt over her mouth, springing off of the balls of her feet while her voice screamed and her knife flashed.

No, she wouldn't be that stupid. Not again.

The eerie repetition of the situation grabbed him like a cold hand as she brought her arm up towards the center pair of wings. Noa saw a flash of red feathers, hidden underneath the blue-black gleam.

A long screech of gears and steel deafened him, drowning out her voice. She was still shouting – he could see her mouth hanging open as the claws came towards her. She jerked away, holding up her knife. Metal scraped metal. Once. Twice. She was dodging it, moving backwards towards him. She might have a chance.

The third time, her knife broke in half.

She tried to jump clear and fell short.

She collapsed next to him. At first, he felt sick with relief. She seemed to be in one piece – nothing was hanging out of her chest or stomach and both her arms and legs were still connected. It wasn't until he noticed the blood pooling along her hairline that he panicked.

Her brain. He thought. *God, her brain is falling out of her skull and I'll have to try to hold it in.*

This was almost worse than anything else – she had a beautiful mind and Noa was horrified at the thought of it being damaged. He bent over her, searching for the source of the bleeding and trying to get a grip on what he was saying instead of intelligibly begging her not to be dead and wouldn't she get up and why was she so damn reckless in the first place...

“Stop it.” She was moaning, pushing his hands away. “I'm fine. It's just bleeding like that because of all the vessels.” She tried opening both her eyes and had to settle for one; the other had blood in it.

He knew full well it would have been much more useful for him to be reassuring and steadfast; he could have told her that it was alright, he had her and he would take her to Lieb right away and she would be fine.

But he was so angry with her for functioning at that level of stupidity that the only thing he could think to say was “Dammit, Zefyr! Why are you such an ass?”

“Noa! Behind you!” She was looking over his shoulder, trying to sit up when a shadow fell over them. He didn’t have to turn around – he could see the smoke reaching around them like the fingers of a dead man, and how her eye was wide and the color left her face. He could feel the wind that was not the wind at all, tearing over his back and ripping young branches from the trees. He could hear it – the beating of wings, the rusted grinding of old metal that made him grit his teeth together.

He pushed her down and threw himself on top of her. It wouldn’t do much more than buy her time, but it was all that he could think of.

There was a sharp sound; a thin growl, like teeth taking a strangled grip on something, and then the shadow and smoke and wind moved away from them.

Zefyr, looking under his arm, sucked in a breath.

“Aidan?” She gasped.

Noa rolled over. What he saw amazed him. The fox was dancing, back and forth, under the wings and between the legs as he dove in and bit at the feathers and skin. The seraph couldn’t move his long, loping arms quickly enough to catch him.

“Oh. Oh god. What’s he doing?” Noa moaned.

“Saving our lives, genius.” She paused. “I don’t know why he’s doing that. He’s not supposed to do that.”

“We have to help him.”

Noa started grabbing whatever he could find – twigs, rocks. Zefyr, one hand still holding her head, sat up and did the same. When Noa went to stand, she looped her arm through his.

“Give me a pull up, would you?” She said, grimacing. “I just need something to lean against.”

He got her on her feet and pushed her towards the pasture.

“Go. Get out of here.”

She propped herself against a tree trunk and ignored him, pelting the seraph with rocks despite the blood running in her left eye. Noa didn’t have time to be angry with her – Aidan was moving slower now, winding down. The claws were lashing out without taking aim, trying to beat back the shower of pebbles and the sting of little teeth coming out of the ground.

There came a terrible moment when both of the humans ran out of things to throw, and the fox had to stop to catch his breath. One of the wild swings of the arms hit its mark; Aidan yelped, rolling over a few times before he landed on his side and didn’t move.

Noa, in the middle of bending over to pick up more ammunition, felt his chest contract. Something whistled through the air; in a daze, he watched the cracked remainder of Zefyr’s paring knife embed itself into the bare chest of the seraph. It made an awful noise – like the scream of a building exploding from the inside falling in on itself before it took to the sky, lighting up the tips of the aspen trees as it went.

It was over.

Zefyr fell on her knees by Aidan, fighting with her hair to give up the scarf that she had tied it back with and pressing it against the deep gashes.

“Are you just going to stand there like an idiot or are you going to help me?” She shrieked.

Noa dropped his handful of rocks and turned away.

“It’s fine.” He had to swallow hard to talk, and his eyes couldn’t blame their stinging on the smoke anymore. “Just leave it. He’s only a pet.”

“Oh for god’s sake. Stop being an ass. He’s still alive. He has a chance.”

Noa turned around and forced himself to move towards her.

“Really?” He asked, looking at the blood seeping through her scarf to ground him. He didn’t dare hope – it had already been too violent of a day.

“No, I’m just messing around with your emotions because I’m a sadistic jerk. Here, can you carry him? I’ll keep pressure on the wound. We need to find Lieb.”

“He can help?”

“Of course he can. Once, a bear got at the goat pen and ripped one of them open. It was worse than this, and he pulled through just fine.”

Aidan was alive, Noa realized. When he took a breath, it made a gurgling sound, and his ears twitched sporadically.

They moved carefully, with Noa holding the fox and Zefyr pressing on the scarf the whole way out of the woods and into the pasture. The sheep ran away from them, and the oppressive heat stood like an invisible wall that they had to push through.

“Zef,” Noa started. “Your head – “

“It’s fine.” She snapped.

They didn’t say anything more until they had crossed the eternal length of the pasture and were climbing the porch steps, ducking through the doorway. Zefyr had him set the fox on the floor, still keeping her hands against the scarf that was now soaked through completely. She sent him to the cupboard for yarrow and tansy and a handful of other ingredients, and then ordered him back out into the yard to find Lieb.

Although he knew the layout of every building in Luella, they confused him, moving sideways and backwards and in circles as he raced between them, calling for the old man and finally noticing that his fishing pole was missing from its pegs next to the barn door. He sprinted back to the cabin.

“He’s at the lake.”

“Dammit!” Zefyr was sweating, biting down on herbs and slipping them under the cloth. “I can’t make the bleeding stop.”

“I’ll go get him – “Noa was already on his way out when her voice stopped him.

“You’ll be too late.”

He turned back towards her, taking deep breaths to keep his heart from beating its way out of his ribcage. From across the cabin, the ratty curtain shivered.

Noa ran to it and wrenched it open. It was useless; he had no reason to think that he would find anything other than the honey tones of the wood paneling. Still, something drove him to try; somewhere, like the rim of the sunrise on the mountains, he had the oddest certainty that this time, it would be different. It would work. It had to.

He would make it work.

The iron rings squealed across their rusty rod, revealing a narrow room with walls entirely covered in shelves of bottles and tins. A stone slab ran the length of the alcove, and in the middle of this was a book broader and thicker than Noa had ever seen. He made for it, busting the lock off as he yanked the cover open.

“Noa? Good lord, how did you...?”

“I don’t know.” He was flipping through the pages, running his eyes over the tiny print. “It just happened.”

As he read, the words bolded and grew in front of his eyes. He saw that, listed in this book, were remedies for any and every type of physical ailment. Everything from cancer to hay fever referenced a corresponding potion further on.

“There has to be something here.” He whispered, scanning through asthma, bee stings, berry poisoning...

What am I doing? He thought. *Good lord, what am I –*

There it was. He started grabbing ingredients off of the shelf, only hesitating long enough to read the labels before he dumped the measurements into a steel bowl. As he banged the pestle back and forth, he looked over at Zefyr. She was staring at him, both eyes now open and enormous.

“What are you doing?” She whispered.

“I don’t know! Here, he needs to swallow this. Do you have – “

“I’ll find it.” Shaking herself out of her stupor, she sprang up and started pulling open drawers, tossing aside unwanted items until she found a syringe. She jumped over the back of the couch and then hesitated just outside of the alcove.

“It’s fine.” Noa said. “You won’t burn up or anything.”

“I know. It’s just, well, I’ve never been inside of this room.” She finally joined him, dipping the tip of the syringe into the concoction in the bowl.

They stumbled over each other, back across the cabin floor. Noa held up Aidan’s head – it was hot and damp and seemed to be disconnected from the rest of him, and he shivered. Zefyr worked the syringe between his jaws and pushed the plunger down.

When the contents had been emptied, they had nothing left to do but wait.

Noa sat back and took his head in his hands.

“What was that?” He muttered. “Oh, good lord, Zef. What am I doing? What am I – “

“Noa! Look!”

He peeked between his fingers. The ragged edges of the cuts were reaching for each other. Beneath them, the dark cracks lost their wet look and faded from red to blush to the sleek, russet fur. It was like watching a time lapse of complete regeneration; cells turning over and being made new, damaged tissue shrinking up until it disappeared altogether, and the white scar lines fading like morning fog - except that the whole process happened within the span of thirty seconds.

When he spoke, his voice was caught somewhere between his profound relief and the backlash of his panic.

“He’s alright?”

“Yes! Of course!” Zefyr was smiling. “Listen – hear his breathing? He’s fine.”

“But he’s still not awake.”

“Did you give him valerian?”

Noa thought back over his actions in the alcove.

“I think I did. I don’t remember clearly, to be honest.”

“I’m sure you did. It will help him sleep while he heals.” She paused. “Shallots, are you feeling alright? You’re all white around your face.”

Noa was still watching the fox, who looked like he did anytime he laid down under a shade tree and took a nap. If he wasn’t still trying to erase the image of Aiden’s side being ripped open five minutes ago, he would have never been able to tell that anything had happened.

“I might throw up.” He confessed.

“Here. Sit back. Catch your breath.” She pushed him against the side of the couch. “I wouldn’t judge you if you did throw up, though. That was quite a bit of insanity. In fact,” she stood, looking down at her arms. They were covered in blood – hers and Aidan’s. “I’m going to wash this off. What a mess.”

14. The Story of the Sad King

Noa was rubbing his eyes and trying to get his emotions to behave civilly towards the events of the past hour when he heard a crash near the kitchen table. He leaned forward and looked around the couch. Zefyr was on the floor, tangled up with a chair, half-groaning, half-laughing as she attempted to push it off and set it upright, only to have it keep tipping over on top of her.

“Good lord, Zef.” Noa stood up, latching on to the hilarity of the situation like a drowning man to a piece of flotsam. “Do you really need to attack every piece of furniture that gets in your way?” He pulled the chair off of her and hoisted her on to it, forgetting his nausea and disorientation when he caught sight of her face.

“I’m sorry.” She was saying, leaning forward on her elbows. “Fewmets, I’m a ninny. I was just hot and I kept looking at all of that blood and when I went to grab on to the chair I grabbed on to the back of it and – “

“It’s alright. Come on, put your head down between your knees.” He watched her for a moment while she went back and forth between giggling and moaning before he stood and went to the water pump at the sink, filling the dishpan and grabbing the scrub brush and a jar of soap.

“Are you judging me?” She asked, her voice muffled by the fabric of her pants as her head rested against it.

“Of course. Harshly. I’ll never have the same respect for you again.” He pulled out a chair across from her and took her left arm, scrubbing gently at the blood and dirt lodged into the cracks of her skin.

She poked her head up, taking the brush from him.

“I can do that.” She insisted.

He went back to the sink, filled another bowl and added a clean washcloth to it. While she washed her hands and forearms, he started to work on her face, pushing her hair back so that he could locate the cut and make sure it was cleaned out well.

“I can do that too.” She grumbled. “Just go get the mirror from the loft.”

“This is easier.”

He was relieved to discover that she had been right – the wound wasn’t deep at all. It ran just along her hairline, above her left temple. Carefully, he cleaned the skin around it – her eyelid, her forehead, and the thin trails that had leaked down over her high cheekbones. Finally, he pumped a bowl of fresh water and started to dab at the cut itself.

He stopped when he noticed her eyes were watering, the edges rimmed in red.

“Am I hurting you?” He frowned. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” She kept swallowing, clenching her jaw in between her gulps. “Oh, dammit. I hate this. It burns up the inside of my nose, you know? I just – well, it’s Aidan. I’ve been so mean about him. I kept thinking, he shouldn’t stay around. You shouldn’t get attached to him, and he shouldn’t get attached to you. It’s not supposed to happen like that.”

The effort that she was going through to keep herself from crying confused him. She was so proud and stiff and suddenly very lonely at the same time. She was fighting a war that he didn’t – couldn’t – understand.

She sniffled and kept going, firing shots like a desperate soldier.

“It seemed like if that happened – if you got attached – he couldn’t be what he should be. He couldn’t be brave or fierce or wild, couldn’t hunt or figure things out on his own. If he stayed with you, he would be weak.”

Noa rang out the wash cloth, rinsing the last of the blood from her hair.

“Oh, I don’t know. He was pretty brave today.”

“That’s just it. He wasn’t just brave, he was selfless. He saved us. And I’ve been horrible to him.”

He set the bowl aside. It wouldn’t occur to him until weeks afterward that perhaps the conversation about Aidan hadn’t really been about the fox at all.

“It’s clean. Do you want anything? I can just step back into my lab and mix up a cure.”

They both looked at the curtain. The alcove was gone – there was only the familiar lines of the wood paneling behind the bunched curtain.

“I need to figure that out, one of these days.” He sighed, turning back to her. “How do you feel?”

“I’m fine, actually. Thank you.” She looked down. Her cheeks were a curious shade of pink, like the blush of the sun when she spent too many hours beneath it. It was an unusual color for her – she was typically pale and even. It must have been the heat. “I think I might nap for a little while, though. I’m feeling pretty worn out.”

“You should do that.” He offered her his hand, and she pretended not to notice as she stood up and made her way to the couch. The springs shivered as she threw herself on to the cushions and took a deep breath.

“What are you going to do?” She asked, the end of the question dissolving into a yawn.

“I’m not sure.” He crossed his arms and stood in the doorway. “I might try to track down Lieb. I’ve got a head full of questions I’m sick of waiting to ask him.”

“Well, take it easy. He is a stubborn old man, you know.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I’m glad that Aiden is alright.” She laughed quietly. “You’re so strange – pretending that it didn’t matter if he lived or not when all along you were heartbroken about it.”

He looked over his shoulder at her and grinned.

“I suppose I was trying too hard to be practical. But you’re not practical at all. Which was a good thing today.” He turned back to the yard in front of him. He wanted to say one other thing, and it was easier to say it to the empty porch instead of directly to her. “I’m glad that you’re alright, too. I kept thinking that your brain had been damaged and what a shame that was.”

“Oh, it’s a little late for that. My mind’s a hopeless case already.”

“You shouldn’t say that.” She couldn’t see his smile, but he let it spread across his mouth anyway. “You have a beautiful mind.”

“Go on, you sap.” She muttered. “Being sincere doesn’t suit you.”

He was still smiling when he walked down the porch steps, back out into the warm afternoon.

The haze had cleared from the sky, and the sun was making a game of hiding between the tree branches and burning that much brighter when it peeked through them. Humidity still hung in the air, but the lengthening shadows promised cooler hours ahead.

Noa walked the narrow trail to the lake slowly. His mind was making frantic attempts at organizing the past two hours, lining up the events with the feelings. The burning woman and the birds. Horror. Zefyr charging the seraph. Terror. Aidan getting ripped open. Sadness. Finding that he had the ability to do something that should have been impossible. Hope? Relief? Ecstasy? He didn’t know what it was. Perhaps it was like mixing different color pigments – a combination of enough emotions eventually produced a proverbial soup that left him wading through a pool of brown and grey sensory overwhelm.

Perhaps he ought to simply give up on today – hide it from the rest of his week so that the scales weren’t tipping sideways in their attempts to balance themselves.

He was feeling mostly content, and a little bold when he reached the lakeshore and found Lieb squatting next to the frame of a new raft. His pole was wedged between the rocks nearby, the little bell at the tip of it tinkling faintly in the breeze as the line drifted in the current. Without looking up from his work, he asked, “Well, Kelvyn, what’s the good word?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“What’s Z up to?”

“She’s taking a nap.”

“Good place for her. Wish I had time to take one! Well, the fishing is good today. Doesn’t make much sense, given the heat, but we’ll have a fine stringer of fillets for supper tonight. How about that?”

Knowing better than to verbally offer his help, Noa went to the opposite end of the raft and steadied the pole while the old man fitted the joints together. They didn’t often work with each other. Noa mostly followed Zefyr while Lieb wandered the gamut of the land absorbed in his rhetorical conversations. Zefyr had once admitted that

she let him keep to himself because every time that she tried to help, he seemed to forget that she had a good grasp on what she was doing, instead explaining and re-explaining the details of a project.

It was true; Noa counted a half-dozen instances where Lieb repeated instructions to him while they worked on something that he had just demonstrated his capability in. Each time, the old man would look up at him, squint his face into a grin, and say, "Oh, you know what you're doing, don't you? Never mind."

Noa had been waiting until the first pole was in place before attempting any real conversation. However, Lieb, his eyes locked in on the overlapping rope in his hands, beat him to it.

"Something on your mind, Kelvyn?"

Nothing changed in his voice; he may as well have been asking one of his rhetorical questions or talking to himself about the weather or the ornery ram. Noa watched him for a moment before he plunged in.

"You're low on goat horn powder."

The brown hands stopped tying mid-knot.

"She figured it out, didn't she? I knew she would, one of these days."

"Actually, it was me. I figured it out." Noa went through a recap of the afternoon, running over the worst of the details like they were hot coals beneath his feet.

Finally, Lieb looked up from his work. The lines around his eyes folded into each other as he narrowed them and listened to the boy's story.

At the end, all he had to say was, "I didn't expect that."

The bell on the pole began to chime loudly.

"Can you grab this one?" Lieb asked, nodding towards it. "It's no good, leaving a knot half-tied."

Noa brushed the pieces of bark off of his lap and went to the rod, studying it for a moment.

"I just turn the reel, right?" He rubbed the back of his neck. "I've...well, I've never done this."

"Really? We need to fix that." The fine art of fish wrangling apparently took priority over half-tied knots; the old man eased himself up and picked his way over the pebbles until he was at Noa's side.

"Any fool can turn a reel." He explained. "If you want to catch anything, you need technique. Here, lift the pole up; give it a little jerk so that you hook him on there. Good, good. Now, you can start reeling. Not too fast. Not too slow. If he were much bigger, you'd want to let him get some of the fight out of his fins, but he's just a panfish. Show him whose boss."

The sun flashed on incandescent scales as the perch flopped onto the shore, his gills flaring.

"Look at that, Kelvyn!" Lieb hooked his thumbs into the belt loops of his tattered pants and grinned. "See, I told you, it's all about technique. You're a natural. Now, you never keep the first one – it's bad luck. Let's get that hook out of him."

The next part wasn't as satisfying as reeling the fish in had been. Noa felt oddly guilty as he worked on angling the hook out of the lip, and the tail kept thrashing against his hand.

"That's a good hold you had on him." Lieb remarked. "Sometimes, they swallow the hook and you need to pull up half of their insides. Just as bad as it sounds, too."

Noa had seen enough innards being ripped up to last him a life time. He was biting the side of his cheek, feeling a little sick, when the hook came loose. He let out a long breath and dipped his hand into the lake, releasing the fish and watching it speed away into the dark columns of weeds and lily pads.

"He'll live?"

"Sure he will. Although they're not too bright; he might end up on the end of your line later today." Lieb shook his head. "Fish are incredibly thick-skulled. You'd think swimming around with a hole in your lip would teach you a lesson, but I'm not sure it does."

Lieb pulled out a tin of earthworms from the shade of a rock, and showed Noa how to bait the hook and cast the line back out into the lake. After the pole had been wedged back in its resting place and they were seated around the raft again, Noa waited.

While he tied and re-tied and sealed the knots with pitch, Lieb offered nothing.

Finally, as they lifted the next pole and settled it on the frame, Noa grew impatient.

"Who are you?" He asked.

“Oh, come on now. You know who I am. Though I would probably forget my own name if I didn’t have you two reminding all the time.”

“Then what are you?”

“Just a senile old man, son.” Finally satisfied with the fit of the rail, the old man leaned against it and regarded Noa. “Look, I know what you’re really wanting to know, and I’m not sure how to explain it in a way that would make any sense to you. You’re too bright for me to keep up with.”

“I’ll take whatever you’ve got.”

“I suppose it’s like this: I’ve been many, many things, Kelvyn. More than I can count. What I am now is the most agreeable, and I don’t care to be much else in my lifetime.” He readjusted his glasses. “But there was a day, years and years ago, when you might say that I had gotten to be quite adept at bending the rules of reality. Of course, I came to accept that reality is just what it is and I’m better off making my peace with it. A few things stuck around – hard as I try to forget them, maybe they’re just too useful to be forgotten. What you saw this afternoon is one of those things. I have to admit that it’s come in handy, here and there.”

“I couldn’t find anything written on the subject.”

“No, there wouldn’t be. The skill is even older than your city.”

“Who taught you?”

Lieb laughed.

“God or the devil himself, I suppose. Take your pick.”

“And the room – why was I able to get in today?”

“Oh, that’s simple.” Lieb went to pick up the next rail. “I’ll take it you were feeling a little worked up, and you’d convinced yourself that you were going to find a way to help no matter what. There was no other option. You knew that once you touched that curtain you were going to find something. Isn’t that right?”

Noa knelt on the opposite end of the beam, leaning his weight into it to keep it straight.

“So, it’s desperation that does it?”

“Some might say that. I’ve always known it as faith. You believed, and it was. I told you, it’s simple.”

The mess of his emotions during the moments in the alcove came to mind. That didn’t seem simple.

“What’s faith? Is it like other emotions?”

“In a way. A feeling and an action. You know how that goes - the substance of things hoped for. The evidence of things unseen. Subdued kingdoms. Worked righteousness. Stopped the mouth of lions. All of that. By faith, Noah built the ark and saved humanity. What’s so funny?”

Not knowing what other response was appropriate, Noa had started to laugh.

“You two. That’s what.” He said. “I can never tell if you’re actually lying to me or if you just don’t know how to give a straight answer. I can see why she gets along so well with you.”

Lieb reached up to scratch his thinning hair, looked at the pitch on his hands, and thought better of it.

“Well, what did you expect?”

“I really don’t know.” Noa leaned back, still smiling. Up until now, he hadn’t been sure what his opinion of the old man was, but now there was no question: he liked him. He was eccentric and fascinating and never apologized for it, and although Noa had no context for what a father or even a grandfather ought to be like, he had the sense that Lieb was the closest thing he might find. “I should know better by now, shouldn’t I?”

“You should!” Lieb was grinning back at him. “Consider yourself lucky, Kelvyn. Playing around with faith has gotten a lot of people into more trouble than they bet on. It’s a good thing you didn’t burn off your face or turn that fox into a toad or a maggot. Next time – “he gave a final tug on the knot, cinching it tight. “If you’re so keen on bending the rules of reality, try to do it when I’m around.”

The bell was ringing again. In the hot, heavy evening, it swam through the air like laughter.

Lieb tipped his head towards it.

“You’ve got this one?”

“I’ve got it.”

The stringer was heavy with fish when the old man and the young man made their way back through the woods, walking in and out of the long shadows of the trees. When they were about halfway, Lieb began to pat down his pockets, muttering to himself about his favorite set of pliers and where they might have run off to.

“Go on ahead.” He told Noa. “I’ll head back to the lake and see if I dropped them along the way. Just hang the fish in the pump house when you get in – I’ll clean them up in the slop sink.”

Noa kept walking, waiting for the pasture fence to come into view. He passed the stringer to his other hand. Carrying a load always seemed to make the time pass more slowly – he could have sworn that the pasture fence was closer than this.

After seven more minutes of walking, he stopped and squinted through the underbrush. The lake was less than a mile from Luella, and he had already walked half that distance when Lieb had turned back. All that he could see in front of him were crooked tree trunks – the grey lines of the fence weren’t where they should be.

Noa tried heading a bit north of where he had come from, still following the path of the sun and waiting for the branches to part and let him through. This was impossible. There was the single pine that had grown away from its cousins on the opposite end of the pasture, marked with the forage holes of a woodpecker. Beyond that there was a border of beech trees that threw their heavy branches over the fence and needed to be cut back for the second time that season. He turned to look behind him.

“Over here, Kelvyn.” Lieb’s baritone came from the direction he had just been facing. Looking over his shoulder, Noa could now clearly see the pasture, the crown of the oak arbor tipped in the evening light and the sheep wobbling closer to the barn. Lieb was ducking between the fence posts, the pliers sticking out of his shirt pocket.

“I must have gotten turned around.” Noa remarked as he joined the old man.

“No, that was my fault.” Lieb straightened up. “I forgot to allow you specifically. You’re always with Zefyr so it’s never crossed my mind before.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Didn’t she tell you?” His eyebrows pulled themselves low. “It’s like your weather guard that you have in the city. Except instead of rainstorms and high winds, I keep out folks that don’t belong. They can walk around and pry all they want, but they’ll never get through. Good thing you didn’t keep wandering; who knows where you might have ended up.”

“Oh, no, she’s never mentioned that.”

“Well, now you can come and go as you please, even if she’s in a huff about something.” Lieb looked at the stringer with a stroke of his chin. “Say, we really did well. Isn’t that right?”

Noa replied automatically.

“It sure is.”

His mind, however, was trying to sort through details of a conversation that had taken place not far from where he was standing. It had been dark; Zefyr was wearing yellow and Noa was about to walk away from her.

“People might look for me. The very last thing that I would want is to lead them to Lieb.”

She often told him half-truths or slid around his curiosity with the skill of a feral barn cat. But even for her, a blatant lie was unusual.

Aidan met them in the yard, rubbing against their ankles and making obvious glances at the fish.

“Come on, pup.” Lieb said. “You can have all of the scraps after I clean them.” To Noa, he said, “See if you can get Little Z up off of the couch to help you make up the batter. We’ll throw them in the pan as soon as the fillets are off the bones.”

He found Zefyr already awake, sitting on a stool in the kitchen with only one candle lit while she sliced cucumbers and bell peppers.

“You’ll go blind like that.”

“It’s cooler in the dark.” She looked up from the pile of vegetables. “I’m not cooking anything tonight. We’ll just have to be like rabbits and eat greenery.”

“You’re probably not going to like Lieb’s supper plans then. He’s in the process of cleaning off two dozen pan fish and expects batter and a hot skillet waiting for him when he comes in the door.” Noa went to the sink and did his best to wash off the fish scales and the smell.

“Impractical old fool. Well, you can cook it. I’ll sit on the porch with my pepper sticks.”

Noa lit another candle and went to the shelf, pulling out a swollen hardcover with water stains on the pages. He had recently discovered that Lieb had entire books on the subject of food preparation, complete with exact measurements and timelines. This amazed him – cooking suddenly became blissfully scientific and straightforward. To Zefyr’s irritation, this had proved to be a turning point in his kitchen skills.

She glared at the book as he set it on the table and started to root around in the silverware drawer for anything that remotely resembled measuring spoons.

“Those recipes will ruin your creativity.”

“Wash the dishes if you don’t like it.”

Before he flipped the page open, he stopped and studied her. Her face was just unwinding itself from her scowl, and she was bending over her cutting board again.

Noa mentally tried out several approaches.

“Say Zef, I know you probably won’t tell me anyway, but that bit about not leading people to Lieb was bird crap and you know it.”

“So, Lieb gave me specific permission to get past his little spell. Good thing nobody else in Halcyon can.”

“The strangest thing happened tonight. I was wandering around in the woods and no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t get back to the pasture. When were you going to mention that?”

Nothing sounded right. Instead, he found himself asking, “How is your head?”

“It’s fine. That nap was a good idea – I feel much better.”

“Can I take a look?”

“As long as you don’t get fish guts in my hair.”

He stood in front of her and pulled her hair back. The cut was already starting to scab over – Noa could see that she had rubbed some concoction out of her canning jars on it. He let her fringe tumble back over her forehead again and returned to the cookbook.

“You’ll probably have a scar, you know.” He said, flipping to the index.

“Good! I can show it off. People will think I’m tough then.”

“I hardly think you need to worry about that.”

They were quiet for a moment; Noa was skimming the recipe and reaching for the cornmeal near the top shelf when Zefyr broke their silence.

“You’re upset, aren’t you?”

Taking care to level off what he thought might be close to a cup, he dumped it into the bowl.

“What gave you that idea?”

“Well, it’s obvious.” She was chopping carrots with loud thumps of the knife. “I mean, at least to me.”

“I’m not upset.”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

And you’re far too good at it. He almost said. But he held it back – tonight wasn’t ideal. Lieb might walk in the door. She might get defensive and angry, and as much as he wished she had told him the truth in the first place, he didn’t want to fight her for it, at least not now. He wanted to make supper with her and read books on the cool porch until they went to sleep and most of all, he wanted to give himself a few simple hours of feeling happy because both of them were still alive and, given the bizarre circumstances of the day, that was something.

“It’s just residual, from this afternoon.” He finally said.

She didn’t ask about it again.

Real food still surprised him at times with the intensity of its flavor. Tonight was no exception – nothing compares to fish just out of their scales and vegetables just out of the dirt. He didn’t even mind that he sweated the whole time he cooked the fillets and started to feel as though the scent of fried perch was seeping into his pores.

They brought the candles and their tin plates out onto the porch and let the crickets fill the void in between their conversation. Lieb spewed compliments on the food like punctuation marks throughout his explanation of the seraph – how in its original form, seraphim granted visions and dreams and how the city had captured it centuries

ago and performed experiments on it in the hills, only to have it burn down the facility and escape into the crevices of the mountains.

“...the red feathers, from the center pair of wings, those are invaluable.” He dislodged a fish bone from his teeth and set it in a pile with the rest on his plate. “They restore wisdom; the kind that heals, like the Knowing.”

“What’s that?” Noa asked over a mouthful of food.

Zefyr made a funny sound, as though she were choking.

“It’s just a story.” She rushed. “Good lord, didn’t I ever teach you not to talk with your mouth full?”

“Z, you’ve really never told him?” Lieb set his plate aside and leaned back in his chair.

“She’s not very forthcoming.” Noa muttered.

“Well, goodness. All of that and you’ve never told him about the well.” Lieb was shaking his head.

“He knows about the poison. I didn’t think other details were important right now.” Zefyr got up and took the empty plates inside, banging them into the sink.

“What’s she so testy about?” Noa asked.

“Oh, take your pick. But honestly, she’s never told you where the poison comes from?”

“No.” He admitted. “I always assumed it was something that they made in the city.”

“Not that, son. It’s too appalling a thing to be able to produce in a lab.” Lieb rested his hands on his paunch and looked out across the yard. The moon was half-full; in its quiet light, the barn loomed, and the trees brushed against each other in whispers. St. Francis slunk around the corner of the shed; his eyes caught the light of the cabin as he glanced in their direction before he tore away. The wind coming down out of the peaks cooled the heavier air beneath it; Noa knew that it would rain the next day, if not sometime tonight.

After squinting into the dark for a few long moments, Lieb began again.

“This is the story as I remember it. This is part of Z’s story,” He nodded inside, where the clatter of tin and cast iron was drifting out of the doorway. “And I suppose now its part of your story, too. It is the story that begins with a sad king.”

The old man’s voice changed as he talked. It lost the jerking cadence and the scattered questions; only the deep baritone of it remained as he painted a picture with his waving hands and words that moved into one another like the grey dawn dissolved into a blinding morning.

There were pieces of the story that Noa understood; loss and grief, and even the idea of wanting to deny an uncomfortable truth. He had done that himself. But he struggled with parts of the tale, especially Lieb’s description of Halcyon before the poison. He had always imagined that the loss of emotion was what had propelled them so far forward. The thought of both emotion and logic not just existing, but thriving alongside of each other had never crossed his mind.

Lieb was changing directions with the story; and Noa set his thoughts to the side to catch up. Aiden crept up from his cool spot under the porch and rested his head on Noa’s feet. Zefyr had moved out of the kitchen by now. She was leaning in the doorway, tapping her fingers against the wood frame while Lieb talked about the long, dark journey of the desperate king up the mountain.

“...Just when the sheer force of his emotions threatened to overwhelm him, he pitched forward into a clearing. There stood the crumbling shack, with a lone light burning in the window.”

Here, Lieb stopped for a moment with his hand frozen mid-gesture. He moved his jaw up and down as though he were ruminating on a thought, and then shook his head and continued.

“The king had found his salvation, or so he thought. Now this sorcerer wasn’t evil by nature, only very meddling. He liked to have a hand in things that were better left to others. He agreed to help the king, and set to brewing a potion made of the darkest, most wretched ingredients he had in his possession. He bottled it and gave it to the king, but warned him to keep it for himself.

The king stumbled back down to the city, and from the crest of the foothills saw it still sagging beneath its grief and mourning. Right then, he thought of a way to cure not only his own ills, but the ills of everyone. He went to the well and dropped the potion in. It boiled and trembled and he saw many terrible things writhing in the depths of it, but he reckoned that it must be so. He must fix this. He must make it right.

The water calmed, and the king drew up a bucket.

He took a long drink.

His first thought was of the grief, or more accurately, the lack of it. Like the well itself, the torment inside of him had lay down and no longer waged war with his emotions.

What he didn't realize was that he would never laugh or cry or feel again. Had he truly understood what happened, he would have mourned his loss. But, having lost his very ability to mourn, he went on his way."

"And that brings us up to date." Zefyr cut in. "It's a fascinating story, grandfather. It gets better every time you tell it - "

"Not quite, Little Z. Kelvyn wanted to hear about the Knowing."

"There's nothing more to tell. Once the well was poisoned, that gift died out with the last generation to drink the clean water." She nudged Noa with her toe. "Come on and help me close up the barn for the night."

"For pity's sake, Squirt. Let him finish." Noa was getting irritated with her. She was already on shaky ground with him; he had half a mind to bring up the lie right then and let her get embarrassed in front of Lieb.

The old man cleared his throat and continued.

"That's not necessarily true, you know. There were rumors that something like that couldn't die it; it was too valuable. They say that the kings daughters – and everyone born from them, retained it naturally."

"Of course, there wouldn't be any way to keep track of who those people are. It all happened centuries ago. Good thing those are just rumors!" Zefyr was already heading down the porch steps, jumping the last two as she trotted towards the barn. Noa frowned after her.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He asked.

"Oh, she's right. It probably is a good thing." Lieb stood up and ran his hand over his forehead. "Imagine, in a city full of people with damaged emotions, being able to sense all of that and knowing that if you were somehow able to break yourself into a million pieces, you could heal it. That would be a heavy thing, wouldn't it?"

Lieb disappeared inside, and Noa slowly got up and crossed the yard towards the yellow light spilling out of the barn doorway. Zefyr was patting the thick flank of St. Catherine, the dairy cow. He stood on the other side and leaned his elbows on the cow's back.

"You know," she said, a faint smile appearing at one corner of her mouth. "You have the loudest silence of anyone I've ever met. What do you want, genius?"

"What makes you think I want anything?"

"When you spend most of your time hiding, you get very good at reading people. Your identity sort of depends on it, I guess."

"That sounds like a heavy thing."

"You get used to it." She moved away, hooking her heels into the haymow ladder and climbing up. "Good lord, it's a thousand degrees in here." She tossed down a fresh bale of hay. Automatically, Noa carried it to over to St. Catherine's stall and untied the bailing rope.

They were quiet as they finished the chores, talking in low voices to the animals and interacting with each other by way of simple requests.

"Could you hand me the shovel?"

"Of course."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"That's right, St. Patrick, save some for your sister. Can you reach that bucket up there?"

"Sure."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

It wasn't until they slid the deadbolt into the heavy lock that Noa finally said anything substantial.

"That was an interesting story."

"I suppose it is."

"You don't like it, do you?"

Zefyr pulled her fingers through her hair, letting out a hot, quick breath as though she were trying to purge the warm air of the barn from her lungs.

“I’ve just heard it too many times, that’s all.”

“Why do you think he tells it so often?”

“Beats me. It’s like there’s something in it that he doesn’t want me to forget.”

In all that had made up the evening, there was something that Noa was supposed to know. It was just on the edge of his logic – wading through the many possible answers to the equation of why she lied and what she was hiding from him and how did the strange old man and his bizarre alcove fit into all of it. His emotions felt it, too. There was sadness – a slow, tired kind that walked along the ditches full of broken things that were beyond even his ability to fix; the lost queen, the grief of the king, the guilt of the daughter, and the void left in a city he had come to call his own.

He found himself feeling sad for Zefyr as well, without being able to point to one single source of it. Perhaps it was because her heritage – the blood that ran in her veins – was so full of grief. Perhaps it was she tried so hard to drag it behind her instead of looking it straight on and dealing with it.

Perhaps it was the fact that she wore her secrets like armor, when all along, he was not the enemy.

Noa had a strange dream that night. He had found his way into the alcove again, but couldn’t get out. The paneling bruised his fists until it finally splintered under them. When he was free, he started to run through the forest. He needed to get to the river. He didn’t know why. He just ran.

It was the same river that he saw in his other dreams – the narrow one that laughed without any care about the dam just above it. This time, he was not standing in the path of the flood when it broke – Zefyr was, or at least he thought it was her. She was both much older and much younger; child and woman, daughter and mother. She was the queen and she was the girl pulled from the rapids. Noa never saw which one, or if she survived at all. When he reached the water, the sky was blocked out by the seraphim and their flashing claws. The metal was groaning, and the river tried to yell above it.

A loud bang knocked him out of the dream. The shutter on the window had come loose; it squeaked on its hinges and slapped against the wall. Outside, the rain had started to fall in long, heavy sheets; Noa heard it tapping against the roof above him. He rolled out of his hammock and latched the shutter on its hook, looking out into the wet darkness before he closed it. The smell of rain hitting the still-warmed surfaces of the world drifted towards him; the dull sting of the old shingles, the sweet tang of the resin in the pine grove, and the heavy steam that rose up out of the crumbling soil in the garden behind the cabin.

Water was a catalyst.

It ran through the land like a great, unconquerable beast and wherever it went, change was sure to follow. Smells were sharpened. Colors grew bolder. Details were magnified in every drop of rain or lingering bead of dew. Kingdoms rose and fell. Lives ended. And sometimes, in the case of the boy at the window, it began.

When he got back into bed, he glanced over at Zefyr. Part of him wished that she had woken up when he did, but she was sound asleep, her mouth hanging open and one leg kicked out from under her blankets.

It was probably for the best. After all, people didn’t drown while sleeping in storage attics.

Noa lay awake, counting the seconds in between the lightning and thunder. His eyes closed on their own when the storm was still two miles away.