

## **Peter Pays Tribute**

Written by Liana Burnside  
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## Acknowledgements

*Dedicated to my first four readers: Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Wood, Naomi Burnside,  
and my little sister Rochelle.*

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## Chapter 1

I am master of the silent scream. It took years of practice to get it just right. Sometimes a growl or whimper would slip from my mouth and my vocal chords would twang against my will. That doesn't happen any more. I can scream silently without the outside world knowing. And I can do it for hours on end.

"...despite his huge contributions to the realm of literature, all the personal facts of Shakespeare's life can be condensed onto an index card," drones Timothy Brown.

I've been silently screaming since I woke up this morning. It's the kind of day where my worries are like the Big Bad Wolf, testing the architectural integrity of my mind. Today, I'm worried the sky might fall on top of me. Even before I looked out my window, I knew it was overcast. I could feel the sky breathing moist, clammy air across my neck. The clouds are weighing it down, and any minute it could slip out of place and crash to earth.

To most people, it's just a cloudy day. To me, it's an impending apocalypse.

Timothy finishes his paragraph. Without missing a beat, Amber Clain picks up where he left off, skipping over me. By now, no one even looks up when it's my turn.

At first there had been that painful silence. Stern looks from the teacher. Trips to the office. Hushed rumors. Why can't Matt Burton talk?

Yes, I don't talk. I can, I just choose not to. Every time I open my mouth, bad things happen. A wisp of my stupid drifts out for the world to see, and a tendril of the world snakes through my lips and down my throat. Thinking of all the germs, all the skin cells from other people, all the bad that's floating out there, it's enough to make a person want to stop breathing. But that's not the reason I stopped talking. Okay, that's not the *only* reason I stopped talking.

See, I was tired of being compartmentalized. Matt is a quiet kid. Matt doesn't make trouble. Matt is a wuss. I was the stock character in everyone else's personal drama. You know, the shy, brainy kid who won't get a date to prom but after graduation will make millions doing something intellectual and bland. That's what people see when they look at me.

I wanted to surprise people and make them revise their opinions. In order to do that, though, I had to make radical changes, like wearing leather or disrupting class. But that's so against my nature, I just couldn't do it.

I gave up talking instead. It was a silent, orderly way of saying, *You don't know everything there is to know about me, and you can't predict my life*. The idea was everyone would be so shocked, that they'd pay attention to me.

I went three days before anyone noticed. That's when it stopped being a trial run and became permanent. There were problems at first. When teachers called on me and I refused to answer, there was detention and calls home. The school counselor recommended a therapist to Dad. I overheard (okay, I was listening in on the other line) that conversation. It went like this:

"May I speak to Mr. Burton?"

"This is he."

"Mr. Burton, I'm calling about your son Matt's disorder. We at the school feel it would be best if he sought psychiatric help. You see, it's become a disruption—"

“We’ve already been through therapy. The psychiatrist said that Matt had made enough progress to stop seeing him and start functioning on his own.”

“Really? We weren’t aware of the problem until two weeks ago.”

“Really? He’s had it since birth.”

“...But he’s talked before.”

“...What?” asked Dad, and I could *hear* his eyebrows furrowing.

“I said he was talking fine up until a few weeks ago.”

“Are we talking about the same problem?”

“Mr. Burton, I’m talking about your son’s *muteness*. Is there perhaps a medical reason he can’t talk?”

Silence for a while, until Dad’s storm-cloud-thick voice responded, “Excuse me a second. Matt! Come here.”

That’s when I had to put the phone back, so I don’t know how the rest of the conversation went.

Mute for two weeks, and Dad didn’t notice until the school counselor called.

Finally, the school washed their hands of me, saying they had done all they could. It was up to Matt’s family now, to pull him through these troubled times.

That was a year ago. I’m still not speaking. However, text-based communication isn’t against my self-imposed vow of silence. Now that I’m not using my throat, I talk with a pencil.

I’ve written forever. Just ramblings in the margins of assignments and on the back of unused paper. Things like an up-to-date description of the weather, my latest symptoms, and poetry only a mother could love. But ever since the silence, I’ve started to write longer things. Still mostly ramblings, but occasionally something coherent slips out, like a short story. All my words from this past year are on paper, in a file on my desk. I saved them up and wrote them down, instead of tossing them into the atmosphere to be misheard and twisted and echoed into oblivion.

Oh, and here’s my secret shame. I want to write a novel. Kind of like how an anarchist wants to blow up the Capitol, a dream that gets so overcomplicated in your head until you talk yourself out of it. Seriously, just plant some bombs on the front steps and run. Just sit down and start writing. But every time I try, the details rear up at me. Where is this going? How can you possibly have enough words to fill a hundred pages? What would you do with a finished novel?

I’m not sure. But I’m tired of being scared of words that aren’t even written yet. So I’ve decided that today is the day. I’m going to start a novel, and I’m not going to think about any of the important questions.

Except that I need something to write about. Fantasy is my first choice. I read *The Hobbit* when I was seven, and I’ve been madly in love with fantasy ever since. But does she love me? I’ve racked my brain for a week, praying to Fantasy and laying offerings of half-dreamt plots at her feet, begging for the rest. I just need a little push in the right direction.

World History is next, so I should have plenty of time to think.

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Reading aloud. Again. I used to be a firm believer in paying attention in class, but it’s too frightening now. I’m afraid that if I focus on a droning voice for too long, it’ll be burned into my head. That’s why there’s screensavers for computers and plasma TVs,

because if you leave one image up too long, the pixels get stuck, and that image will be ingrained forever. Screens need movement or they get stagnant. I can see the same thing happening to my brain.

A doctor would tell me I'm being irrational, but I'm not. Look at high school teachers. They focus on one subject so much, all the versatility and life is sucked out of them.

But I'm also scared to daydream. This is Mr. Gregory's class. He frightens me.

When the kid in front of me finishes reading, I huddle down in my seat. Behind me, Alesha Carberry picks up the next paragraph, but Mr. Gregory raises his hand, and her words wilt in her mouth.

"Wait, Alesha. It's not your turn."

An uncomfortable silence falls over the room. No one speaks, but no one dares look up. They're embarrassed for me. I'm embarrassed for myself. Concentrating very hard on the blue spot under my fingernail that I can't get rid of, I pretend not to notice Mr. Gregory's pointed stare. It sets my neck on fire. I think I'm melting.

"Come on, Matt. One paragraph."

I stare hard at the rims of my glasses. Don't make eye contact. That works for dogs.

"Just read the paragraph and I'll leave you alone."

*Leave me alone now.*

At least Mr. Gregory stopped sending me to the office. All they do is call Dad and then return me to class, like an unwanted present gets returned to Wal-Mart.

After some more soft threats that I ignore, Mr. Gregory sighs, and allows Alesha to continue. He doesn't stop glaring, though. He has heat vision, I know it, and my entire body is warming. By now, I have a dangerously high fever, and I could go to the nurse. Except, in order to do that, I'd have to ask to be excused. No, suffer in silence, that's my motto.

Trying to distract myself from my imminent doom, I get out a piece of scratch paper and brainstorm ideas for my novel. The hero will be unequalled in valor and courage and all those other knightly traits. There should be a big, sweeping quest. And maybe a dragon.

I'm writing about a dragon setting fire to the school, hoping it will lead somewhere, when Mr. Gregory snatches the paper off my desk. For a split second, our eyes meet, and I can feel my retinas burning. He's going to blind me with his laser vision! Thankfully, he looks down at my paper. With two simple movements, he crushes it and tosses it in the trashcan.

I sit still for the rest of class. As soon as the bell rings, I fly out the door, into the pulsating crowd. It's lunch, but I don't go down to the cafeteria. I have serious doubts about the cleanliness of the tables. There's no food allowed in the library, so usually I skip lunch altogether. Maybe that's why I'm so skinny.

Slipping through the dark wooden doors of the library, I make my way to Maggy and I's special spot. There's a dingy couch nestled in between the foreign language books and the science volumes. Sometimes we play cards there. We used to talk a lot; now we pass notes.

Maggy's not there. Since she has other friends, it's not a surprise, but it's still disappointing. Giving the couch a quick spritz of Febreze, I sit down and pull my notebook out of my backpack.

For the second time today, I brainstorm ideas for a novel. I get several, and by the time I have to leave for class, the paper is stuffed with half-formed plots and brief character descriptions. Except, when I read them over, they sound trite. That word describes me. My life is like Shakespeare's: all the important details fit onto an index card. What do I have to write about?

But Mr. Shakespeare was the best author ever. Well, that's what the teachers drill into you, that Shakespeare is the pinnacle of the English language. His plays have lasted centuries. And they're not even original. He stole all his plot ideas. So if originality isn't the key to writing, what is?

Sweeping everything into my backpack, I head for Biology. It's the one class I have with Maggy, and we're lab partners. We have a deal. She handles the filthy lab equipment, and I do the calculations and planning and thinking, and we both pass.

*I'll worry about writing later, when I'm not worrying about unsterilized microscopes.*

After a stressful day at school, I run home, trying not to look at the looming grey sky. It looks closer than it did this morning.

*It's just the clouds. The sky is not falling. The sky is not falling. Don't think about the sky falling.*

I think distracting thoughts until I'm safely inside. Once my roof is securely over my head, I start on homework. I cruise through Biology and World History in a matter of minutes, and then start in on Trigonometry. I could have taken Pre-Calculus, but I opted to take Trig.

I took all accelerated classes as a Freshman, and then I dropped down to normal-level. The easier homework is nice. The boring classes are not.

After working through all the pi symbols, I finish Trigonometry and start on English. We're reading *The Odyssey*. Of course, since it's a standard level class, we're reading only a few pages a day, but I can't stand reading books in bits and pieces. I think it's inconsiderate to leave the characters in limbo, trapped between pages, so I try to finish books as fast as possible. I read until precisely six minutes after six, when Dad breezes through the door. Dad's a perfect example of someone whose mind is stuck on one subject. He's an accountant for a nearby car dealership, and all he can think about is numbers. From the carefully calculated positioning of his tie and his exact steps, you can tell he's always doing math in his head.

Dressed in a slate-grey suit, his silvering hair slicked forward to hide his receding hairline and his briefcase swinging in time to his steps, he looked like a lawyer or a doctor or some high-class official. But he was only Mr. Burton the Accountant.

"Hello. How was your day?"

I flash him a thumbs up, one that he's too busy calculating to see.

"That's good," Dad rumbles on his way to the kitchen. He tosses his briefcase on the recliner without even looking. Quick and efficient as lightning, he starts making dinner.

I read some more, trying not to be distracted by the banging from the kitchen and the booming from outside. I'm glad I'm not in there, handling metal pots while thunder



bellows outdoors. All it would take is one quick flash, and then I'd be charcoal-dead on the floor.

"Dinner. Come and get it."

Dad is a pretty good cook. After all, recipes are just glorified instructions, and he's good at following those. Recently he's become obsessed with these alternative, all organic diets and vegan friendly casseroles. They all smell like fried gym socks to me, with the flavors ranging from well-done skunk to raw dirt. But hey, I'm too hungry to be picky.

Over dinner, Dad talks about his day, some amusing anecdote about a lady asking if steering wheels are optional. I don't pay attention. Even before I stopped talking, our conversations were one-sided. Except now, Dad just fills in responses for me, like this:

"What do you want for dinner?...Casserole it is."

Or:

"So what are your plans for today?...Sounds good."

I think he's lonely. I've never been good company, and he misses Mom. She died ten years ago, and he still makes her favorite French soup on their anniversary.

"You know, I was thinking we should do something fun together this weekend. We could go to the zoo, or maybe see a movie."

As long as I can bring my trusted bottle of Febreze, I can brave those places.

"It doesn't really matter what we do. I just...well, there's someone I want you to meet."

That means he has a new girlfriend. Dad dates prolifically, and occasionally things get "serious" enough for him to introduce me to the lucky lady. I've met seven of his girlfriends in the past two years, so I'm not surprised, just peeved.

"You don't have to if you don't want to. But I think we both know what decision would be best."

I grunt. Taking it for a reply, Dad pats me on the shoulder and heads for the television. I place his dishes in the washing machine and dash upstairs. All of a sudden, I feel like writing.

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"Peter! You have displeased me once again!" thundered the Grey God.

Below Him, his acolyte shivered on the stone altar. Peter, through sheer chance, was the last remaining priest of the Grey God. He had been a mere altar boy when a horrible plague killed all the other acolytes, leaving him alone to serve the Grey God's will.

"No matter how simple the order, how easy the task, you are constantly failing."

The voice, deep and angry as a thunderclap, reverberated around him. That was all he knew of the Grey God: His powerful, disapproving voice. Only the High Priests were allowed to look upon the deity. Just because Peter was the last one alive didn't mean he was worthy of viewing the Grey God's magnificence. All he could do was stare at the granite and hope this was over quickly.

"There is only one option left. I need new acolytes. Anyone more competent than you."

If Peter wasn't so terrified of his master, he would have risked rolling his eyes. Peter was plenty competent, the Grey God just expected too much of one

person. He wanted Peter to fulfill the duties that occupied a dozen High Priests, all by himself.

“I will recruit more, Omnipotence, just give me time to find –”

“We can not simply *recruit* more. This plague isn't mere chance or misfortune. It is Sick Wind's doing. She is angry, punishing me for a transgression I don't remember committing. You were spared, I suppose, because you are too lazy to catch a cold. The only way to get rid of the pestilence plaguing this temple is to seek Her out and settle the matter. So, either you find Her for me, or you can stay here and recruit more acolytes that will die within days. The choice is yours, but I think we both know what decision would be best.”

With a crackle and a sizzle, the air became lighter, all the gloom leaving with the god. Peter looked to the throne where the Grey God must have sat moments before. Only when he was sure it was empty, Peter risked showing his despair. Sick Wind was the goddess of disease. How was he supposed to track down a goddess? She was said to reside in the dying breaths of the sick and the festering wounds of the unwhole. But those were legends. Peter had witnessed his own parents die, taken by the bleeding cough, and he had never seen Sick Wind.

How could the Grey God do this? Leave him an impossible mission, with absolutely no direction or help? Peter wanted to give up, to run away from his finicky god and make a new life for himself. But you couldn't run away from someone who was omnipotent. If he deserted, the Grey God would seek him out and smite him.

There was only one choice. Peter must carry out his impossible mission, and appease his unappeasable god.

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After an hour, I sit back and admire my handiwork. A page and a half of writing. Not a novel yet, but it's a start.

*Where did that come from? That wasn't the story I had in mind at all.*

But this felt right. This finally felt like my ideas reaching the page, instead of wilting in midair.

Outside, it's raining. Going to the window, I watch the raindrops dash themselves against the panes. The sky is deflating, letting out all the water and receding and leaving enough room to breathe. Now everything is okay, and tomorrow won't be a bad day.

It's still early, so I flop on my bed and open my book. I can't keep Odysseus in the clutches of Circe forever.

## Chapter 2

The next morning, I hit my alarm on the sixth ring. Dad's made an omelet out of artificial eggs, and after fruitlessly searching the cupboards for something else, I scrape a tiny portion onto my plate. They taste like rubber bands. If the eggs aren't real, then what are they made out of? Is it FDA approved?

At seven thirty, I begin the long process of herding Dad into the car so he can drive me to school. Nagging's a lot harder when you're mute, and most days I have to literally hang onto his sleeve before he'll get ready.

"Okay, hold your horses, I'm getting there."

Sometimes I feel like Lassie, whining and scratching until people guess what I want. Except everyone always guessed what Lassie wanted, and some of the things I want can't even be explained with words.

Dad delivers me to school a record three minutes early, and I have enough time to run around to the back. I hate using the front entrance, because we have stone gargoyles (our overly publicized mascot) guarding the doors.

My first class of the day is Trigonometry, with Ms. Damma. She's the only female math teacher at our school, but she makes up for it by being as mediocre and masculine as possible. If she actually taught us something, I wouldn't hold it against her. But she doesn't.

For an hour and a half, I doodle in my notebook and try not to go insane from boredom. Then, when the bell rings, I have to go to PE. I hate PE. It's the one class where I have to interact with other people on a regular basis. If someone calls me "Mute Matt" one more time, my heart may implode.

Luckily, today we're running the mile. No physical contact, no choosing teams, just running. After the mile, when everyone stands around talking, I slip into the locker room and change back into my clean clothes.

When the bell pings, I walk slowly, very slowly, to my next class. World History. Why do I have that class every day? I want to skip, but I don't have the guts. Where would I go? What would I do? And what would I say to Dad when the school called him? Oh, that's right, nothing, because I don't talk.

I sneak into class, trying not to draw attention to myself. Mr. Gregory tosses me dirty looks, but he doesn't come over. He never has, but who's to say he never will? All I know is, I won't rest soundly until I'm out of this class for good. That's in early June, practically a lifetime away.

Kids fall into their seats as class starts, and Mr. Gregory makes a most delightful announcement: we're doing a group project. An oral presentation, to be exact. He doesn't look at me, but I can feel his malice poisoning the air and infecting my lungs. He's designed this assignment to punish me. I knew he was out to get me, but I thought he'd be more subtle. As kids left and right grapple each other, forming pairs worthy of Noah's Ark, I just dig deeper into my fingernails. Maybe the blue spot under my right ring finger is bad luck, and that's why this is happening.

I've never been good at getting in groups. I'm a natural-born odd-man-out. So my usual strategy is to sit still until everyone's paired off and I can see who's desperate enough to take me, or the teacher assigns me to a group, or better, decides I have to work

alone as punishment. But if Mr. Gregory makes me do the oral presentation all by myself, I'm screwed!

Panicking, I realize that this has been his plan all along. He's going to give me a choice: talk or fail. And he's going to put me up in front of the class, on display, and everyone is going to see me, and they'll probably sell tickets. Come see the silent boy speak on command. But even if I want to, I won't be able to talk, because aren't vocal chords muscles, and won't they atrophy since I haven't used them? I'll open my mouth and try to speak, and I'll hack and wheeze and my vocal chords will spill onto the floor. Will Mr. Gregory still fail me if I have my vocal chords lying in a heap at his feet? He will, because he's had it out for me since the day I walked in, I know it because –

“Hey, Matt, do you need a partner?”

Dane, the border-line nerd with a redeeming haircut (Maggy's description, not mine), is there. He looks casual, one hand propping himself on my desk. But I can see the pity in his eyes, and I want to say no. Except I don't talk.

“Cool,” He says, supplying me with an answer, just like Dad. From him, it doesn't sound presumptuous. Falling into the seat next to me, he takes out a notebook.

“So, like, I'll need your address and a time when we can get together and work on this. Whenever is fine with me. It's due on, let's see...” He scans the rubric, but I can tell he already knows the due date by the way his eyes slide right off it. I've pulled this trick before. Act like you haven't meticulously studied the requirements so you don't look like a nerd and know-it-all. I can also tell he's planning to do most of the project himself. I know, because I've been in his position before, working with someone who isn't reliable.

“Yup, the day before Halloween. That gives us more than a month to work on it. Should be a piece of cake. Do you have any preferences about the subject?”

Preferences. That's a nerd word.

I grab the rubric from his hand and circle my “preference:” the mystery religions. Not that I'm super into mythology, but it beats “women's roles in Athens.”

“Mystery religions? What's that about?”

*It's a mystery.*

I think if I said this, Dane would laugh. It could be the beginning of an actual friendship. Instead I shrug my shoulders. When Dane goes up to write our names on the sign-up-sheet, though, I get enough courage to scribble it on the rubric.

Dane comes back, looks at the sheet, and gives a punctuated snort. Not quite as powerful as if I'd said it out loud. But baby steps, right?

“Okay, well, we'll get together next Saturday. See you,” Dane says, shouldering his bag just as the bell rings.

I wave goodbye, until I realize that class is over for me, too. Like a dope, I scramble out, thinking that Mr. Gregory hasn't beaten me yet.

Due to a brainstorm during lunch, I scribble the next part of my story onto a piece of paper. Straight after I get home, I run upstairs to my computer. After transcribing what I wrote during lunch, I continue, straight into the good stuff.

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“...trespassers are not welcome here!”

“But I wasn't trespassing. Please, I'm on a quest for the Grey God. If you could help me –”

“Ha! Not a trespasser? You enter my land uninvited. That is trespassing enough for me.”

Peter’s quest was not going well. After days in town, hopelessly asking for information about Sick Wind, he had decided that the only thing left to do was wander around until he either found Her or died in a horrible accident. When he had spotted a dank looking cave, he set out to explore it. After all, a goddess of sickness might live in a cave. But no, all he had found was an angry, short cave hermit who was unwilling to listen to reason.

“I am Briskel, lord of these caves and everything in them!” he cried, matted beard swinging in rhythm to his words, “Since you entered this cave, you are now under my command. Into the pit with you!”

“Okay, maybe if I just turn around and – wah!”

Something grabbed Peter from behind, something cold and scaly. It was too dark for Peter to see more than a hulking form, and even that quickly disappeared from sight as the thing tossed him into a pit. Peter landed with a very hard, very painful *oof*, but thankfully the pit wasn’t much deeper than he was tall. In fact, it would have been a simple matter to scramble up the edge and out, except that the thing hauled a heavy covering over the top. Peter was in complete darkness now.

“At least the old coot’s cackling isn’t as loud in here,” he mumbled, rubbing his sore back.

“You can say that again.”

Peter jolted into a sitting position.

“Who’s there?”

“Donis, wandering bard extraordinaire. For the price of a hot meal, I can recount the entire history of the world. For a hot meal and a lice-free bed, I can recount something interesting.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have a hot meal to offer you. Or a bed.”

“Yes, I thought as much. Say, where exactly are we?”

“Um, we’re in a pit, in a cave belonging to some crazy man,” Peter explained, feeling around him. Nothing but dirt walls and dirt floor.

“Where’s the exit?”

“I don’t think there is one.”

“Well, how’d we get in here, if there’s no exit?”

Peter sighed, standing and knocking on the heavy wood above them.

“Okay, there is an exit, but it’s blocked. Didn’t you see that... *thing* cover it after they threw me in here?”

“No.”

Silence fell, as Peter took inventory of his bones and tried to sort out the stranger’s comments.

“So,” piped up the stranger, “I told you my name and occupation. It’s courtesy for you to do the same.”

“Peter. I’m an acolyte of the Grey God.”

“Who?”

“The Grey God. Master of storms and vengeance.”

“Oh, I know who *He* is. I was asking about you. I thought all of the Grey God’s acolytes were killed. An earthquake or something.”

“Plague, actually. And yes, all but me died,” Peter said.

More silence, with Peter musing and the bard doing whatever bards do in the dark.

“So, Peter, what say we escape?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Peter murmured, sliding down against the walls, “Just lead the way.”

“Oh, no, I need you to lead the way.”

“I don’t know the way.”

“I’ll tell you how, but you have to promise to lead me out of the cave.”

There was no jest in Donis’ voice, and if Peter didn’t know better, he’d have thought the man had a rational plan.

“I’m going to start singing.”

Peter sighed and sank lower against the wall.

“Get up, lad. Once the covering is removed, you have to get both of us out of here.”

“Okay, yeah, I’m ready,” Peter said, stretching out on the hard floor. How long would the old man sing before he gave up? Peter hoped he had a nice voice, because the insane are known for their perseverance.

A light strumming echoed around the pit, and Peter recognized the sound of a kithara, his favorite instrument. What’s more, he recognized the tune. It was a hymn the priests sang, when they petitioned the Grey God on someone’s behalf. It was a call for vengeance.

After five minutes of singing, the covering peeled back.

“Stop that noise!” Briskel commanded.

Donis obeyed, slipping the kithara strap around his neck. Before the roof could slide back into place, he leapt towards Briskel, swinging a heavy walking stick over his head. A musical war-cry came from his throat, and the two landed in a heap.

“Come on, Peter, up and at ‘em!” he cried, flailing his stick back and forth. He didn’t hit his target.

Peter scrambled out of the pit, just as Briskel screamed, “Lout, don’t stand there, save me!”

The covering plunked back into place, nearly smashing Peter’s feet. Even after only half an hour in the dark, Peter found the cave light too harsh for his eyes. All he could see was a large figure rushing him.

Panicking, Peter turned to run, but then he remembered his promise to Donis. Should he stay and help the crazy bard?

He didn’t have time to think of an answer, because the creature was on him, grinding him into the ground.

“Not that one, you fool! This one, this one on me!” Briskel cried. He was grappling with Donis, and against the odds, Donis was winning.

The heavy weight on Peter vanished, and he sat up. With his returning sight, he could see something gigantic, with a curving tail, rip Donis away from Briskel and start shaking him.

“Peter! Help!”

Peter was tempted to sneak away, before that hulking shadow of mystery started shaking *him*. He was edging towards the entrance when he slipped. Falling to his knees, his hands brushed something wet. Guano. The floor was layered in guano. Spotting a dying fire, Peter scrambled forward. He remembered that the priests used fresh bat guano as fire-fuel.

With only a hint of a plan, Peter kicked some of the burning sticks out of the fire, onto the bat guano. He wanted a mild distraction, so he could have time to think. However, the guano was fresh, and it caught fire the second sparks touched it. Flames screamed across the floor, as fast as thunder. Peter’s eyes welled over with tears in the bright blaze, and he had been outside less than an hour ago. For the cave-dwellers, the light was unbearable. They clutched their eyes and shook their heads. Donis fell to the floor and scrambled forward.

“Over here!” Peter called, “Follow my voice!”

Black, smelly smoke filled the cave, and Peter choked on the taste of it. He grabbed Donis’ outstretched hand and hauled him towards the entrance. Behind, the two figures were howling and thrashing about, caught in a stupor. With a sick satisfaction, Peter predicted they’d probably die in the flames.

Bursting out of the cave, Peter disengaged himself from Donis’ grasp and took lungfuls of fresh air. Being outside felt good.

“Thank you for helping me back there,” Donis said, fingering his kithara for damage. The bard strummed it, producing a lush chord. “There, that sounds fine,” he said. He then fumbled for his stick, lying in the grass at his feet. Even so close, he fumbled a while before grabbing hold of it. When he stood back up, Peter noticed the milky color of his eyes.

“You’re blind?”

“How perceptive of you to notice,” Donis chuckled, running his hands over his pack, to make sure nothing was missing.

Peter looked the man up and down, noticing his disheveled and unshaven appearance. Of course, that could be the result of living in a pit for a few days. Anyways, under all that dirt was a man in his mid-twenties with a slender build. He’d have had a nice face, if his eyes weren’t so unsettling.

“What say we leave this place, just in case our friends decide to come after us?”

“I don’t think they will,” Peter said, checking his own pack and finding it singed, “but you’re right, we should get a move on.”

“It is all right if I travel with you?”

“As long as you want, but I’m not going anywhere nice. I’m on a quest to find Sick Wind.” *For a god that wouldn’t come to my aid even when I was in need.*

“Well, that sounds interesting. I’d love to come with you.”

Peter shook his head in disbelief, trying to decide if the man was joking.

“Well then, follow me. Or, um, do you need help?”

“I can follow you,” Donis said indignantly, “Just tell me if I stray too far off the path.”

“Fine by me. We’ll try to get to a town before dark.”

They left the smoke-spewing cave behind, setting their feet to the trail. Two traveling companions, heading for who knows where. It was going to be a long journey.



### Chapter 3

After staying up so late typing, it's hard to get out of bed the next morning. But today is Friday. If I make it through today, then I can sleep in tomorrow.

For breakfast, I have all-organic granola. It tastes like regular granola, but without the sugar. So it tastes like dirt.

Dad decides to interrupt my breakfast with uncomfortable questions. Slipping into the seat next to me, he asks, "Matt, about this weekend? Well, there's a corn maze, out near the fairgrounds. I thought the three of us could go. You know, you, me and Amanda?"

So that's the name of his latest and greatest girlfriend. I stir my granola around, wishing I had the guts to say no.

"Sound good to you?... Great."

Dad leaves to get ready. This is his silent way of apologizing, getting ready without me having to nag him. I dawdle and make us late anyways. That's my silent way of rebelling.

School is unusually pleasant. I breeze all the way to lunch, where Maggy is in the library. She has her blonde hair in tight spirals down her face. It's amazing how girls do that. One day their hair's straight, the next it's curly, just like magic.

"Gooooood morning!" she cheers, even though it's past noon.

Pulling a deck of cards out of her pocket, she starts to deal for a game of Speed. I'm not really in the mood for cards, but they're already in front of me. I pick up my stack and proceed to lose.

We play five rounds before Maggy gets bored and starts talking. While she talks, I take out my Purell and douse my hands. I know girls don't *really* have cooties, but after Elementary School, the fear's ground into my subconscious. It's like how people know you can't get bad luck from a black cat, but the furry critters end up in the pound regardless.

"So, I get my driver's license next semester. Maybe, you know, I could start driving you to school."

*Not unless you're a really good driver.*

But I nod, because I know it's the kind of question you can't say no to. I'm glad Maggy's my friend, but she's super sensitive. Or maybe all girls are sensitive. I have no idea. All I know is that I have to be careful with what I agree to, what I write, the looks I give, and the attention I pay while she's talking. If I sigh when I shouldn't or look confused when I should look understanding, Maggy gets frustrated. And then *I* get frustrated, because half the time I don't know what I did wrong.

Then there's the fact that Maggy has plenty of friends, but she's *my* only friend. If I'm a crappy listener, she can go find someone else. In fact, I'm confused about why she even bothers hanging out with me, but I'm not about to question it.

"Cool. And I can drive you home and stuff too. I can drive you anywhere you want."

*I never go anywhere,* I write on a piece of paper, handing it to her.

"Yeah, but that's because you don't have a ride. You'd go places if you had someone to drive you."

I shake my head no. Maggy lets out an exasperated sigh.

“Well, maybe we can fix that. In fact, we should totally go to a movie together this weekend. Come on, it would be so much fun!”

Cringing inside, I try to think up a polite response before realizing that I have a legitimate excuse.

*Dad’s got a new girlfriend. We’re going to the corn maze this weekend.*

“Oh. Well, maybe next weekend.”

*World History project. Gotta meet with my partner.*

“Partner project? Will you be all right?”

I nod, glad to weasel my way out of another painful public excursion. I hate being around large groups of people, because they never wash their hands and sometimes you can smell them. And then they get indignant when you use Febreeze. Like it offends them. Maggy understands, and even more to her credit, she acts like it doesn’t bug her.

“Well, okay, but you’re not off the hook. You *have* to let me take you somewhere,” Maggy says, putting her fists under a big pouty lip. That’s her begging face.

I nod again, knowing that if I’m resourceful enough, I can put it off inevitably. Maggy’s tried diligently, ever since we became friends two years ago, to “pull me out of my shell.” Her words. And occasionally I give in, but it’s always awkward and unpleasant.

The bell pings. In one smooth motion, Maggy slips the cards into her backpack and the backpack over her shoulder.

“Come on. We don’t want to miss Bio, right?”

After school ends, I dash home and dive into my homework. I want to write, but homework comes first. Dad says that if my grades drop low enough, he’ll take away my computer. So, I’ve spent the last few years perfecting the low B average. Good enough for Dad, enough for the school to leave me alone.

It takes me an hour to get through my homework, and then I’m upstairs at the computer.

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They made it to a small, scrappy spread of huts masquerading as a village, and Donis sang for their dinner. Unfortunately, the place had no inn, so they had to sleep under the stars. Since Peter hadn’t even expected a hot meal, he was too happy to complain.

“So, you must make a pretty good living as a bard.”

“I hardly have a coin to put in my pocket, unless I’m in a rich city. People around here don’t have a lot to give.”

“Then why bother coming out here? Why not stay in the big cities?”

“Because... I only know three stories. That means I can stay three nights at most.”

“Only three stories? But, I know more than that!”

“In truth,” Donis said, laying his blanket in an unruly heap on the ground, “I have a poor memory. I learn stories, but then I forget them. I can remember all sorts of music, but few will pay for music alone.”

“So you spend most of your time wandering?”

“Yes. That’s the life of a bard.”

With a heavy sigh, Donis fell onto his blanket. He strummed his kithara, plucking out a melancholy strain. Peter, though, couldn’t help but be envious. A

life to do with what he pleased. When Peter took his oath to serve the Grey God, he was promised food and a home for as long as he could work. At the time, with his parents gone and his stomach crying, that was all he cared about. Now, though, he would have chosen the half-starving life of a mediocre bard.

With a sweeping motion, Peter laid out his blanket. This quest was the only freedom he'd get. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad thing if it lasted a long time.

"Good night," Peter murmured, sinking to the cold ground.

He fell asleep to the twittering strains of kithara music. The next morning, he awoke to the sound of a panicking bard.

"No!" Donis howled, arms sweeping the ground frantically, "Peter, Peter, wake up! We've been robbed!"

"How do you know if you can't see?" Peter asked, peeling himself off his blanket.

"I can still feel!" he exclaimed, his hands clawing the earth, scooping out palmfuls and tossing them about. "My kithara is gone! I always sleep with the strap around my neck, but it's gone! Gone gone gone!"

"How could someone still it if it was around your neck?" Peter asked, scanning the ground. No kithara.

"I don't know. But we have to find it. That instrument is my livelihood!"

Peter was tempted to tell the old man he was out of luck, that he'd have to get help from someone else. After all, Peter was on a quest, and he couldn't get side-tracked. But the man was scraping the ground and wailing, and Peter didn't want to leave him to starve. Plus, without the bard's help, he could starve, too.

"Okay, look, let's go into town and see what we can find."

"You'll have to do the seeing for both of us."

"Right. Maybe you should stay here while I go into town and look. I'll be faster by myself, and you can guard camp."

*And then I can slip away quietly if I can't find it.*

"Fine. I get it," Donis said, slumping onto his blanket.

Peter went back to the main crossroads, the closest the village had to any center. His plan was to loiter a little, see if anyone suspicious showed up, and then maybe roam the streets a little.

His musings were interrupted by strumming, coming from a nearby rooftop. It was bad music, whether because the instrument was out of tune or the practitioner was unskilled, Peter couldn't tell. But it sounded like a kithara.

Suspicious aroused, Peter circled the structure, looking for a way to climb on top of the roof. He found a large crate against the house next door. It was too heavy for his thin frame to budge, so he settled for scrambling atop, and then, with quite a bit of strain, heaving himself onto the neighboring roof. As he hauled himself up, the music stopped.

"Hey, don't you know it's rude to climb on top of other people's houses?"

There was a girl on the roof across from him. She was dirt-smeared and hungry-looking. A kithara hung incriminatingly around her neck.

"Where'd you get that?" Peter called, propping himself up on his elbows.

The girl's hands covered the kithara, trying to hide it.

Impatiently, Peter hauled himself to his feet and looked for a way to the opposing roof. If he could get over there, it wouldn't be that hard to wrestle the instrument away from the girl. She had to be a couple of years younger than him, and at least a head shorter. However, the space between the roofs was too far for him to jump.

"Look, if you give it back, I won't tell the watchmen. Come on, don't make trouble for yourself."

"Watchmen? What city do you think you're in?" the girl laughed, throwing her head back.

"All right, then, I'll tell your parents."

This just made her laugh harder. Sitting on the edge of the building, feet swinging over the side, she began to twang on the instrument. Peter hoped she wouldn't break it. In the meantime, he was going to find some sort of authority. This city had to have someone in charge. They'd handle the girl, and she wouldn't be so smug then.

The second his feet touched the hard-packed earth, the girl leapt over his head, onto the roof he had just been standing on.

"Hey!" Peter called, lunging back onto the crate and clawing his way onto the roof. But he was too slow. Light as a sparrow, she jumped to an adjacent roof, hands outstretched, with the instrument clutched in one dirty paw. The kithara's shoulder strap was cut in two, flapping in the wind.

Peter eyed her, eyed the gap between the roofs, thought about the wonderful meal he'd had last night. If he got the kithara back, he could eat like that almost every night.

*My life isn't worth it*, he thought, sliding down to earth again. This time, he didn't even look up as the girl bounded from one roof to another. It was distracting, though, when she followed alongside him, jumping from roof to roof, as he searched for someone who looked important.

"Why are you following me?" he asked. True, it would make it easier to apprehend her, but he couldn't stand the mocking strumming.

"Cause we don't get many travelers here. Are all travelers as cowardly as you?"

"You're gonna break your neck."

"Hasn't happened yet."

The girl laughed and laughed, her scorn searing the back of Peter's head. He forced his legs to keep walking. As soon as he found a guard, she'd stop laughing.

"You know what? Fine, you can have this back. Couldn't sell it, anyway," she said, swinging the kithara around by its strap. The instrument creaked in protest.

"Don't do that!"

"Catch!" she said, arching her arm back like she was going to hurl it full force at Peter's face. Instinctively, he covered his head and ducked. When nothing smashed into his delicate cranium, he peeked out through his fingers. There was the kithara, lying at his feet. And there was the girl, scrambling back

onto the roof and cackling. She was a rapid devil. Peter snatched up the instrument and took off, the girl's laughter chasing him out of town.

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I stretch and crack my knuckles and sit at the computer for another five minutes. When nothing comes, I decide now is a good time for a break. Going down to the kitchen, I sort through the pantry. There's these weird beet chips, 100 % natural.

"Put that back. Dinner's almost ready," Dad commands. He's sautéing some mishmash of vegetables over the stove. It doesn't smell good. It doesn't smell *edible*, more like burning rubber. But I obediently return the bag. There's nothing to do but sit at the table, fingering a scratch in the polished surface.

Dad plunks the still-steaming pile on the table.

"Wa-lah. Dinner is served."

He doesn't tell me what it is. I poke at it a long time, trying to identify the orange chunks.

"Oh, for Christ's sake. It's not poisonous."

And Dad hasn't keeled over, so I decide to try it. After eating half of my half-sized portion, my stomach informs me that it's had all the abuse it can take. I shovel the rest into a Tupperware. I hear Dad sigh behind me, and I decide to get back to writing. There's nothing else for me down here.

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Donis almost wept when Peter placed the kithara in his hands. He stroked the porous wood, fingers expertly searching for damage.

"Where did you find it? How did you get it back?"

"Doesn't matter. Come on, let's go."

Over Donis' questions and exaltations, Peter rolled up both blankets. He pushed one into the bard's hands, then dragged him forward.

"Hey! I don't need to be walked, like some incontinent child."

"Of course. Sorry, I forgot. Now come on, let's get out of here. Before we get robbed again."

They walked all that day, in the heavy heat. Peter glanced behind frequently, but he didn't see anyone following them. Donis chattered away, not sensing anything wrong. He carried his kithara under one arm, the strap flapping against his side.

"So, does it look like we're near a town?"

"No. We might have to sleep outdoors tonight."

"Agh, walking all day, and not even a bite to eat!" Donis exclaimed.

"We'll find something," Peter said. He dreaded foraging for food. What's worse, he'd have to do it for two people, since Donis wouldn't be much use. It was late afternoon, and Peter decided that if he wanted daylight to scavenge, they'd have to stop now.

"Well, it looks like we should make camp," Peter declared.

"So early?"

"Yes. You can set up the blankets. I'm going to search for something we can put in our mouths."

Before Donis could reply, Peter walked off. After only a few minutes searching, he found an apricot tree. The fruit was hard, unripe, mottled and small.

*These will probably make us sick,* Peter thought, wrenching some fruit from the branches.

Using his outer robe as a make-shift sack, Peter lugged the apricots around for a while, searching for something else. There were only more apricot trees and amber grass, clinging to the roadside.

If they baked the apricots over a fire, maybe that would soften them up. Boiling them would be better, but Peter only had the water in his flask, and there was nothing to boil them in. They were destined to eat the fruit hard.

As Peter dragged himself back to the campsite, he spotted a fire.

*A blind man lighting fire?*

Nervous, Peter walked faster. The fire didn't look like a raging beast out of control. In fact, as he got closer, it looked very orderly, in a nice pit with all nearby grass dug away. Donis was sitting close, talking to another figure.

"Donis?" Peter called, trying to keep the suspicion out of his voice.

"Oh, Peter, you're back! Come meet my friend, and have a bite of dinner."

Donis motioned to the figure seated behind him. It was none other than the thief, sitting there gnawing on a hunk of bread.

"What are you doing here? Shoo!" Peter called, throwing a rock-hard apricot at her head. She dodged it easily, and it landed in the fire.

"Peter? What's wrong?" Donis asked.

"Yeah, Peter, what's wrong?" the girl echoed.

"Be quiet, you," he growled, then turned to Donis, "That's the thief! She's the one I had to wrestle to get your kithara back. Get out of here, or I'll push you into the fire."

"Thief?" Donis asked.

"Wrestled me? I don't remember that part."

Dumping his bundle of apricots on the ground, Peter strode forward, trying to look as tall and intimidating as possible. The girl didn't move an inch. In fact, a smile spread across her face, and she met Peter's gaze evenly.

"B-but she brought us dinner," Donis stammered, holding up a loaf of bread and some jerky.

"You're just here to steal our stuff. Don't play innocent with me, you dishonest little wench."

"Okay, I admit it, I took your kithara. But I gave it back! And I brought you a meal, to make it up to you."

Peter gestured sharply towards the road, but the girl just smiled.

"I'm confused," Donis broke in, "Who's doing what now?"

"She's leaving."

"Why? I can feed you guys, y'know. Trust me, I'm plenty good at getting food."

Grimly, Peter looked at the loaf of bread Donis held. It was probably stolen, but it still looked more appetizing than the apricots.

"He's a bard. He can *earn* food."

“Really? It looked like you were gonna go hungry tonight. Oh, wait, I guess you *did* have food,” she said, looking at the flaming corpse of the apricot he had thrown. Her face became serious, and, cupping her jaw with her fists and putting on a pleading face, she said, “Please! I’ve always wanted to travel the world. It’s too dangerous for a girl to go alone.”

“If you can keep feeding us like this, welcome aboard!” Donis said, shoving some jerky in his mouth. Obviously, the matter was already resolved in his blind eyes.

“Don’t eat that,” Peter barked, yanking the jerky out from between his molars, “She *stole* that food.”

“It’s still edible,” complained Donis, hugging the remaining jerky to his chest.

“You can’t honestly want this tramp to travel with us!”

“Oh, come on, Peter, give her a chance. She messes up, we abandon her at the nearest town.”

“She *stole* your kithara! She’ll probably take it again, as soon as we’re asleep.”

“If that was her aim, why didn’t she just wait until we were asleep before approaching us?”

“He has a point,” the girl chimed.

“You’re not staying.”

“You can call me Rag, by the way.”

“That’s not a name.”

“Never said it was supposed to be,” she said, stretching out on his blanket.

“*Donis*,” Peter pleaded. Donis was too busy shoving jerky in his mouth to respond.

## Chapter 4

After staying up well into the morning, clacking away on my keyboard, I planned on sleeping until noon. Dad bangs on my door, howling like a tomcat, at half-past eight.

“Matt! If you’re not ready to go in half an hour, I’m dragging you out!”

*Out where?* is the only thought my brain can piece together. My head’s still clouded with dreams, and I consider going back to sleep. But then I remember what he’s talking about.

*The corn maze.*

I consider rolling back into my dream-places, but without enthusiasm. Dad’s serious about dragging me out of bed. He’s done it before, when I tried sleeping in to avoid meeting one of his girlfriends. That’s not an experience I want to repeat.

Shedding one pair of clothes and slithering into another, I look in the mirror. I’m going for the “problem child” look. That usually gets Dad’s girlfriends packing. Actually, I’m pretty sure I’d send them packing no matter what I look like. The first conversation usually goes like this:

“This is my son, Matt.”

“It’s so nice to meet you!” (insert some middle-aged, over-dressed soccer-mom, beaming and holding out her hand expectantly).

“...”

A nervous chuckle from Dad, as he explains, “Matt doesn’t like shaking hands.”

“Oh. Um, well, that’s okay. How are you, Matt?”

“...”

“Yeah, he doesn’t talk, either.”

Come to think of it, Dad’s girlfriends usually dump him shortly after meeting me. But he insists on introducing them.

True to his word, in half an hour Dad pounds on my door, and I open it before he can knock it down.

He scrutinizes me, sighs, and says, “Could you at least comb your hair?”

I shrug noncommittally. He sighs again, resigned, I suppose, to me being an embarrassment.

When we drive over, I sit in the back of the car. You’d think someone as stuffy and vegan as Dad would drive one of those tiny Japanese cars. But no, he drives a sports car. Red, no less. I always thought that if Dad did have a nice car, it’d come in black. All the cars from my childhood were brown minivans and gasping old trucks. Then, he landed this job working for the car dealership, and now he can afford something that isn’t an eyesore.

“All right, we’re picking Amanda up at her apartment. Do you want to come inside or wait in the car?...Okay, I’ll roll the windows down.”

Why does he even bother asking, when he knows what the answer is going to be?

“You’ll love Amanda, she’s great. Just...try to smile, okay?”

I see his eyes in the rearview mirror, looking pained and stressed. His “deer in the headlights” look reminds me that this is a worse ordeal for him than for me. It’s a comforting thought.

We pull up to a Victorian looking building, cliché architecture and tiny border of grass. I always think of apartments as those really tall, hotel-like buildings, the kind



you'd see in New York. The kind no one with a soul wants to live in. This place is only a couple of stories tall, but it squats fat and huge on its tiny piece of land. The quaint shingled roof and columns reek of phony.

"Be right back," Dad says, peeling down the windows a few inches so I can breathe. There's nothing worse than sitting in a motionless car, windows up. The air stagnates and presses in on you.

I fidget in my seat, wishing I had brought a book. Reading in the car makes me sick, though. However, waiting and being anxious also makes me sick.

Then there's Dad, coming back with his girlfriend. I see the colors first, the cross-hatched red of her plaid t-shirt and burgundy pants and yellow for hair. At a guess, she's probably late twenties, but I've never been good at guessing the age of women. But she's younger than Dad's other girlfriends. The way she walks, too, pulling ahead of Dad and laughing over her shoulder, she's not soccer-mom sweet. She's got too much energy.

When they get close to the car, I focus on the seatbelt, pretending not to notice them. There's something very awkward about seeing them the first time they see me.

In a pincer maneuver, Dad slides through one door and the woman slides through the other. She turns around and flashes me a smile, but doesn't hold out a hand. I don't know if Dad already told her I don't shake hands or she's rude or what. Whatever the case, I'm so grateful I manage a half-smile back.

"Matt, this is Amanda. Amanda, this is Matt," Dad says, and then talks in a rush, so Amanda can't try and fail to start a conversation with me.

I look out the window and count traffic signs all the way there. I avoid reading billboards, because advertisements give me a headache. All those people, trying to shove their thoughts into my head, cajoling and threatening and lying.

We arrive at the cornfield, and I step out of the car and feel the air, full of dirt and vegetation and all kinds of animal scat from nearby fields. Unsanitary as it is, at least I can sense and name it. The air in town, that's the kind of air that makes me nervous. There are so many chemicals and fluids and people mixed in, it's a biohazard soup.

There are people here, too, with a line to enter and a slow trickle of people exiting. It bothers me that people are entering the maze faster than they're escaping. If it keeps up, then the maze will be flooded with a bunch of sweaty, smelly people. What if it gets so plugged up we can't even move? We'll be trapped.

*It's just corn. It's just corn. You can push through it. It can't hold you. It's just corn.*

I do the breathing exercises Dr. Cormack taught me, and rationalize and rationalize until I'm calm. But when we get into the maze, with corn snaking up towards the sun, it gets a lot harder to rationalize my fears away.

Dad and Amanda laugh and talk and elbow each other. That's different than the couples I usually see, plastered against lockers and spending more time making out than talking. Is it an age difference, or is it because I'm here?

I decide that if I don't have a panic attack and keep quiet, I can get through this day unnoticed. Easier said than done. The more time I spend in the corn maze, the taller the stalks seem to grow. It's like they're reaching for the sun, to swallow it whole.

Clinging onto this idea, I make up my own myth, telling it to myself over and over again. And every time I think it, and convince myself it's just a story, it takes a little of the fear out of being trapped in a labyrinth. After several very long hours (it was

probably closer to 45 minutes, but my sense of time was thrown off) we make it to the end. Dad and his girlfriend walk sloooowly to the car.

“I haven’t been in a corn maze in close to a decade,” Amanda says, sweeping her hair out of her face. Her smiles aren’t wide. In fact, her lips don’t part, just stretch.

“We used to go to one of these things every year, back when I was a kid,” Dad replies.

I’ve never been to a corn maze before. Not that I’m complaining, but its weird Dad never thought to take me.

“Well, how about we grab a bite to eat? I’ll buy,” Amanda offers, flipping her hair over one shoulder. She’s constantly pushing her hair around, sweeping it one way and then tossing it another.

“No, I’ll buy.”

“No, *I’ll* buy.”

“I don’t think so.”

They shove each other around while I stand in front of the car and seethe. Dad knows I hate going out to eat. And I didn’t even bring a bottle of Febreze. But he’s making goo-goo eyes and they’re *still* ignoring me, even though I don’t want them too. I tap my foot very loudly, my version of clearing my throat, and get nothing. I could wave my arms over my head, but what difference would it make? Really, I’m just a tagalong on their date. Usually I’m painfully at the center of attention. I can’t decide which is worse.

With an epic show of restraint, they stop shoving each other long enough to slip into their respective seats. They pick right back up the second their seatbelts are on. The way they’re carrying on, I doubt Dad will be paying enough attention to the road to drive safely.

*Maybe if I just stand here, they’ll drive off without me.*

But Dad notices, and I see his face deflate.

“Come on,” he calls at me, trying to sound encouraging and mildly annoyed. But I see trepidation in his eyes. He’s thinking *Don’t screw this up*. So I give him a look of my own, one that says *You know how much I hate eating in public, and you know we shouldn’t be doing this, so tell the girl you’re busy and let’s go home*. That’s a lot to fit into one look, though, and I know he’s not going to get it.

I sink into my seat and buckle my belt, drawing it out as much as they dragged out their walk to the car. This, however, has the negative result of getting Amanda’s attention.

“So, Matt, where would you like to eat?” she asks, showing teeth in her smile for the first time. She talks slower than necessary. Dad must have told her beforehand that I’m weird.

I shrug and scowl, making it very clear that it’s not that I don’t know where I want to go, it’s that I don’t want to go anywhere.

“Well, we can always just do fast food,” Dad says. He doesn’t want to take me out in public just as much as I don’t want to go.

Amanda questions me some more, trying to goad an answer out of me. I shrug and Dad gives me that strained look.

“Oh, come on, there has to be *some* place you want to eat.”

Even if I did, I couldn't *say* it. Didn't Dad mention I don't talk? You'd think if he talked about me at all, that'd be the one thing he'd mention. That's the only thing about me worth mentioning.

Finally, Amanda's lips seal together, still a smile, but somehow more genuine than her teeth-flashing one. I hate this woman. She turns to Dad and gives him directions, not naming a place. So I guess in the end my opinion didn't really matter.

We pull up to some posh French-imitation café. It's the kind of place that sells mediocre food at inflated prices.

"This place has the *best* croissants," Amanda says, in this snobby voice that begs someone to imitate it.

Aren't croissants just swirly rolls? I mean, I like good rolls as much as the next person, but they're something you eat before the actual meal.

There's a greasy-haired guy at the counter, and he shoots us a look that quickly sorts itself into forced politeness. Amanda steps up and gives an order a mile long, filled with extras this and hold that's. Dad stands next to me in awe, until his senses kick in.

He leans close to me and says, "So, what do you want to order?"

I give an angry shake of my head.

"Come on, Matt. Just this once, try the food. It's not going to poison you, I promise."

Amanda's done with her saga-length order, and she steps aside and motions for Dad. With a warning glance at me, he steps up and places a double order of the first thing on the menu: a croissant sandwich with ham and swiss. And even though he talks with Amanda while the sandwiches are being made, he looks at me again and again.

Picking up the food and settling into a table, Amanda digs into her meal with a ferocity most girls wouldn't dare show in public. Dad eats his slowly, taking time every couple of bites to scowl at me. I don't touch my food. I can barely stand to sit in the chair. Other people have sat in this chair, fat, sweaty people and people with STDs and girls on their period. Jesus, it hurts to sit here! I don't want to die like this!

A gentle stomp on my foot snaps me back to reality. Dad's looking at me, nervous because he can tell I'm starting to panic. He taps his forehead.

*It's all in your head.* That's what he's supposed to tell me when I start to hyperventilate.

But it's *not* all in my head. Germs are real. Periods are real. *Fat people* are real.

"Oh my, look at the time," Dad chuckles, "I'll never get...the fence fixed at this rate."

"Oh, gee, I'm sorry," Amanda apologizes, wiping her mouth and eyeing my untouched sandwich.

*You want it, lady, take it.*

"Matt, aren't you hungry?"

"Oh, he...doesn't like restaurant food," Dad admits, looking at his napkin likes he's just shared a dirty secret.

Amanda lowers one eyebrow, but doesn't say anything.

Dad throws some money on the table and we leave. Like an overeager dog, I'm walking circles around them and urging them to go faster. Amanda's shooting me curious looks, like she's noticing me for the first time. One way or another, it'll probably be for the last time, so I try not to care.

We drive Amanda back to her apartment, and Dad walks her to the door. In case they revert to the entwined teenagers I know they've been holding back all day, I study my seatbelt and try not to think about how long Dad's taking. What if it's not making out that's taking so long? What if he's apologizing for my behavior? That's even more uncomfortable to think about.

Dad slides back into his seat and sighs heavily. I can't tell whether it's a good sigh or a bad sigh.

"Well, that wasn't so bad."

He says that after every date he takes me on. So Amanda wasn't that different after all.

\*\*\*

When Peter woke the next morning, he half-expected to find "Rag" and all his possessions gone. She was there, though, conversing with Donis and polishing off the last of the bread. The jerky was gone, too, but Peter wasn't about to complain. He didn't need the girl's food, anyway. He fished out an apricot, and, with only mild difficulty, bit into it.

"We have a long day's walk ahead of us. I want to be at the next town by sunset," Peter explained, packing up his supplies.

"Oh, good. Then I can get us more food," Rag said.

"Donis will get us more food. The honest way."

Cold silence hung between them as they walked. Donis made a few attempts to start conversation, but Peter was in no mood to talk and Rag had nothing intelligent to say. They focused on the road.

Noon came, hot and heavy, and their water skins ran dry.

"If we don't find water, I'll be in no shape to sing tonight," Donis complained.

"Don't worry, there's water around here somewhere."

"How do you know?"

"There's a field up ahead. Looks like wheat. And where there's plants, there's water," Peter explained.

"Wish I could tell where there were fields," Donis muttered, wiping his brow. Peter's ears were full of this morning's complaints, and he'd about lost patience. He'd find Donis water, and maybe something to shut his mouth with, until tonight at least.

In the distance, the plants waved to the approaching travelers, up and down in the wind. They were too green to be wheat.

"I think it's corn," Rag said. She'd been silent most of the morning.

*Probably trying to lure me into a false sense of security,* Peter thought.

But she was right about the plants. The corn wasn't ripe enough to eat, though, just barely starting to thicken and bud in the ears.

"Come on," Peter said, pushing a way through the stalks, "let's see if we can find where these plants are getting their water from."

"I don't think it's a good idea to walk through someone else's corn like that," Rag chided.

"Since when did you care about other people's possessions? Of course, you're welcome to stay here."

Rag huffed and looked away.

"She has a point, though," Donis said, playing with the strings of his kithara.

"Are you coming or not?"

He didn't even look behind him. Either they'd follow or they wouldn't. He'd miss Donis, but if he could get rid of Rag in the process, so be it. But he heard corn shifting and bending behind him. He kept walking.

"Do you know why corn is golden?" Rag's voice came from behind him.

"I don't care."

"I wasn't talking to you, I was talking to Donis."

The tips of Peter's ears turned red, and he was glad he wasn't facing them.

"I think I've heard the story before," Donis muttered, "but I can't remember how it goes. Tell it to me."

Rag cleared her throat, then began, "When First Dawn created the world, to reflect Her light, the rays filled everything so that there was no difference between night and day. People didn't know when to sleep or when to work, and the owl clawed at the eagle. So, Bountiful Harvest, goddess of plants, created corn, and had it grow tall towards the sun. She gave seeds to the farmers, and told them to plant and work the ground. And corn sprang up across the land, growing tall and full. The corn sucked up some of the sun's rays, enough so that there was night. That is why there is night, and that's why corn is golden."

There was a brief pause, and then Donis said, "I wish I knew what golden looked like."

"Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't realize."

"Well, I mean, it's just a bit confusing, is all. You have your golden jewelry and statues, and then corn is also golden, but you can eat it. What's the difference?"

Rag laughed, saying, "Well, now that you mention it, that is a bit confusing."

She laughed again, and Donis joined in.

*Why's he laughing at himself?*

Trying to tune out their prattling, he focused on the sounds of the field. There were crickets and birds and...and more laughter.

"Quiet! Do you hear that?"

The laughter behind him died, just as the laughter ahead faded into nothing. Was it just an echo, or something more?

"Hear what, Peter?" Donis asked, walking closer to him.

There was another sound. Not laughter, but music. Glancing down at Donis' kithara, he made sure the strings were still. They were. This music was coming from elsewhere.

"I hear it now," Donis whispered, "What should we do?"

"Find out who's making it," Peter whispered back, moving slowly towards the sound. Something about its subtlety, the way it faded in and out, told him to be sneaky. It sounded unnatural, ethereal.

The music stopped, and then picked up a moment later, in a completely different direction.

“Are my senses fooling me, or did the music hop from one place to another?” Donis asked.

Nervously, Rag whispered, “I think we should leave.”

Peter ignored her. Aiming towards the new source of the sound, he walked forward. Again, it broke off and then picked up from another direction. But he wasn't about to give up. Every time the music started, it was a little louder, a little closer. Finally, he could make out a clearing in the field, with the notes wafting towards him. He bolted forward, and this time the music stayed put. It was a woman, strumming on a lyre. She sat cross-legged on the ground, in middle of a large swath of dead corn stalks, lying wilted around her.

Oblivious to Peter, she played on, her eyes closed and slender fingers sailing across the strings. Her golden-brown hair matched the dying, withering stalks, and her skin had a pearly luster.

Behind him, Rag stumbled into the clearing, dragging Donis with her. They stopped dead, captivated by the sight of the woman. She continued playing. Peter didn't know whether he should cough or speak or turn around and go back the way he came.

Finally, the woman put down her instrument and opened her eyes. They were as pale as her skin.

“You're lost, aren't you?” she said, rising.

“Lost? No,” Peter replied, at the same time realizing that he had gotten turned around in the corn and did not, in fact, know where he was.

The woman gave a half-smile, not showing any teeth.

“You are lost. And you will stay lost.”

Behind him, Rag and Donis gave out timid exclamations. Peter wanted to snap at them not to show their cowardice, but he didn't dare turn his back to this woman.

“Who are you, to tell us what to do?”

“I,” said the woman, playing a lilting chord on her lyre, “am Miranda. And you are Peter, acolyte of the Grey God.”

It was Peter's turn to give a small gasp, and he backed away from her.

“Who are you?”

“You already asked that. Further introductions are not necessary. All you need to know is that you are not leaving this cornfield. You will die here.”

“Why?” Peter squeaked, backing into Donis. The three huddled together, forgetting their differences and shivering as one.

“Tell your god,” Miranda said, that close-lipped smile taking over her face, “that I am done waiting. I am taking matters into my own hands.”

The corn danced under a sudden gale, and Peter shielded his eyes from the flurry of dirt. When he chanced looking up, Miranda was gone.

## Chapter 5

I didn't manage to write any more that weekend. After sitting at the computer for three hours straight on Sunday and not thinking of anything, I was so disappointed that I couldn't write Monday, either. Tuesday morning, I go to school determined to find inspiration.

Of course, school isn't a very good place to get ideas. By World History, I am too disappointed to even pretend to look for inspiration.

"Don't forget to work on your presentations. This isn't the kind of thing you can put off until the last minute," Mr. Gregory warns, flailing his finger at us.

I glance at Dane, and he catches my eye and gives a half-smile. We haven't started yet. I don't even remember what our topic was. I wrote it down somewhere.

"Now, since I'm such a nice guy –"

*No you're not.*

"– I'm going to give you today to work on your projects. We're going to the library, and I expect you to do *research*, not blow the class period 'Facebooking.'" He puts air quotes around Facebooking.

I linger as the other kids rush out the door, not wanting to get caught in that press of bodies. Surprisingly, Dane waits with me. I half-expected him to dash off and ignore me. In fact, I wish he did, because then I could have spent the period writing on the computer. Now we'll actually have to do research.

"So, have you looked the mystery religions up at all?"

I shake my head.

"Well, I did a casual search, and I got some pretty interesting stuff. Way more interesting than the usual Greek mythology."

I like Greek mythology, but I just smile and nod.

"It's hard to get definite information on them, though, cause they were a mystery and all. Like, you were put under an oath never to tell about the rites, under pain of death. So we know stuff happened, we just don't know what that stuff is."

*If we can't find out what happened, what are we supposed to report on?*

"Anyways, I've already checked the school library, but they don't have a whole lot we can use. I put holds on some books at the public library that look promising."

He's actually admitting to going above and beyond on a homework project. That's nerdy. Maybe he assumes it's safe to tell me, since I don't talk to anyone. Or, I don't know, maybe he thinks I care about the project. Most of the kids I grew up with still think of me as a straight-A student. I guess word hasn't spread that now I'm satisfied with scraping by.

"So, um, we still on for this Saturday, your house?"

Dane trots slightly ahead, eager to get to the library. I give a nod, and then he's silent for a while. Sliding through the thick wooden doors of the library, Dane heads for the reference section. Everyone else is at the computers, faces highlighted in the glow of monitors. Personally, I'd rather do research on a computer, but I'd also prefer not to be squeezed in-between all those people. So I follow Dane to a table, where he's got at least five books.

"Okay, so I've checked these books already, and they did have *some* stuff we can use. We just have to go through and pick out what we need."

Dane's thumbing through pages, and I do the same. I'm not sure what I'm looking for, so I spend most of the time looking at the pictures and watching Dane scribble in his notebook. I feel completely useless. Usually I'm the one doing all the work in a group project, and being on the other end is like having the teacher ask you to give him a pop quiz. It's easier, but uncomfortable all the same.

This is Dane's project. After all, he's the one who'll get up and speak in front of the class. He knew that when he asked to be my partner. I mean, he's not *stupid*, of course he knew he'd have to do all the work. I just wonder if he minds.

"So, what do you think we should focus on for our report?"

*The mystery religions?*

I cock an eyebrow, and Dane elaborates, "There were several mystery religions. We could go in depth on one and just mention the others, or we could do a brief overview of several, or mix-and-match."

*Overview*, I scrawl on scrap paper. It'll be easier if we only have to worry about basic facts, and maybe I'll be able to contribute something.

"Okay, that sounds good. The report's supposed to be ten minutes, so if we choose five and spend a couple of minutes on each, we'll be golden."

He talks like my grandma.

"Man, it's gonna be hard to narrow it down," he muses, scanning his pageful of notes.

I glance down at my empty paper. Yeah, this is gonna be hard.

"Well, we just gotta burn away anything that's unnecessary."

Absently, I nod, pause, and then nod again. That's a good idea.

That's a really good idea.

\*\*\*

At lunch, I do some guilt-induced research on mystery religions. My fingers ache to type, but I can't yet. I want to find at least two useful things before I call it quits.

But when I get into the research, I find that it isn't that bad. It's actually fascinating. And, since I'm paranoid about the school computers swallowing my story and sending it to plagiarists in China, I decide to hold off writing and do research until the bell rings. I walk away with about three-quarters of a page. But my handwriting is smaller than Dane's, so I call it even.

\*\*\*

Peter's tongue clung to the roof of his mouth and his breath came in whittled gasps. All around, corn danced in the hot breeze, the stems mocking green and the tops laughing gold. The plants towered strong and endless, but they couldn't find a drop of water anywhere.

"How long have we been walking?" Rag whined, "It feels like hours."

"The sun still feels like noon," Donis said, scrubbing at the sweat on his brow.

In all the time they'd wandered the field, the sun hadn't moved. Peter suspected magic was at work. After all, no cornfield could flower without water, but they had yet to find the source.

Behind him, Rag whimpered.

"Peter, how long are we going to walk before you give up?"

"Better to walk ourselves to death than sit and wait for a miracle."



"A miracle's probably the only way we're going to get out of here," Donis replied.

Peter didn't respond. If it took a miracle, well, they were doomed. Right now, the Grey God was more likely to punish him for his failures that assist him in his endeavors.

*It's not even my endeavor. It's His, but He's not about to help me.*

"Can we take a break?" Rag asked, sinking to the ground before Peter could respond. Donis flopped down beside her.

"Not for long. We need to keep moving."

Rag relaxed on the ground, stretching out her feet and pillowing her head in her arms. Closing her eyes, she looked perfectly peaceful. She had whined and complained every step of the way, but she didn't look that distressed. Likewise, Donis tapped the sound box of his kithara and gnawed his lip. He looked contemplative, not panicked.

*Am I the only one concerned for our lives?*

"All right, enough resting," he snapped, nudging Rag with his foot.

"I barely sat down!"

"No," Peter ordered, hauling her up, "we are not staying here."

Rag shoved him away, dusting the dirt from her knees and looking offended. Luckily, though, she didn't sink back down.

"Come on, Donis," Peter said.

"Peter, I've been thinking," he mused, rubbing his chin, "and I may have a solution to our dilemma."

"Oh, do tell!" Rag cheered, clapping her hands.

"Yeah, don't keep it to yourself," Peter muttered.

"We need to start a fire."

"It's hot enough already."

"Not for warmth," corrected Donis. "We can burn down the corn field."

Donis reached into his robe and pulled out flint and steel. They shone in the light, glaring back at the sun.

"That could work," said Rag, taking the flint and steel from Donis' hands.

"Not so fast!" barked Peter, swiping it away from Rag, "Aren't you forgetting something? We're *in middle* of the cornfield. If it catches alight, so do we."

"Ah, I thought about that, too. So, here's what we'll do: we strip away a large patch of ground, clearing it of everything that can burn. Then, while the rest of the field is in flames, we can stay in the clear area."

"It'll have to be a pretty big space."

"I think it's a great idea," said Rag.

Peter wasn't convinced, but Rag and Donis were already tearing at the nearby corn. If he refused, and they ignored him, what would he do? Shoulders sagging, Peter kneeled next to Donis and hacked away with his cooking knife. It was too dull to be much use, so he gave up and used his bare hands. By the time they had a space barely big enough for the three of them to stand in, Peter's hands oozed blood. Donis' calloused fingertips fared a little better, but Rag looked ready to cry.

“Is this big enough?” Donis asked, feeling around. He couldn’t turn in a full circle with his hand outstretched.

“Not nearly. It needs to be *big*, so we’re safe from sparks.”

“How long do you think it’ll take?” Rag asked, wiping her hands on her clothes, smearing them with blood and dirt.

Peter looked at his own wounds, layered in earth. He longed for water to wash them with. Instead, he tore off a scrap of cloth and wrapped it around his hands. Rag mimicked him, and then helped Donis do the same. They tore at the stalks for what felt like hours, the sun unmoving overhead. Peter was exhausted, and not just from the work. All the anxiety and traveling and dealing with Rag and Donis made him tired.

“Are you guys sleepy?” he asked.

Rag nodded, rubbing her eyes and putting dirty circles on her face. Donis grunted a response, but he didn’t stop working.

Their circle was bigger now, a weak stone-toss in width. It still wouldn’t be enough. If they wanted to escape the smoke and burning cinders, it would need to be as large as a market square. Peter didn’t know if he had that much energy left.

“I’m so thirsty,” Rag whispered, and she was crying tears that dragged furrows on her dirt-caked face.

“Hey, don’t waste that water,” Peter reprimanded, but that just made Rag cry more. “I mean it,” he said, patting her on the shoulder, “We can get out of here, we just need to persevere. So save that water for working, okay?”

With a sniffle, Rag went back to weeding. Peter clawed alongside her, working slower than he had before. Fatigue was wearing him down. How long until he couldn’t move anymore? Donis was digging away, scraping at the earth like a dog. Sweat ran down into his eyes, but he didn’t bother to wipe it away. He didn’t need to see.

The cornfield was motionless, not even a wind to take the sunlight away. Peter could hear every snapping root and rustling corn stalk as he swept them aside. They worked in the silence, worked until Rag and Peter panted in the soil, and Donis tugged on the same stalk for several minutes before giving up.

“Peter,” he croaked, “Peter, I don’t think I can dig anymore.”

Their patch was large now, an empty sore, a festering scab, a tiny clearing in the field. Would it be enough?

“Go to the center,” Peter ordered, pushing himself to his knees, “I’ll light the fire.”

Peter crawled to the edge of their space, pulling the flint and steel out of his pack. It took several furious swipes before he generated sparks. Even then, they fell dead on the ground. The corn was so green, nourished with unseen water, that it wouldn’t light easily.

“Come on!” Peter shouted, “I need a breeze!”

The next time he struck the flint, a whiff of air gathered the sparks and distributed them across the corn. Nothing. The corn still wasn’t catching fire. Peter beat the two together, striking out a rhythm of frustration and anger. He produced as many sparks as a bonfire, and they swirled in the air and scattered

across the field. Soon, feather-down smoke wafted into the air. Peter smacked the flint a few more times for good measure, and then retreated to the middle.

For the first few minutes, they watched the orange flames of the fire compete with the yellow of the sun, and the green stalks morph into browned husks. Soon, however, they couldn't see much of anything. The air faded to ash.

"Cover your mouths!" Peter ordered, unwinding the cloth from his hands and wrapping it around his nose. Blood and dirt crept up his nostrils, but it was less caustic than smoke.

Huddling close to the ground, the three shivered in the heat. Waves of fever broke against their backs. The hot was a force, tearing at their eyes and prying at the coverings on their face, looking for a way in. Roaring, crackling, frothing smothered their screams. Feeling the ground, Peter grabbed a hand, and then another. He didn't even know who he was holding, just that he had to hold something real amidst the trance-like haze of smoke.

*Even if we survive this, how long will we have to wait before the ground cools enough for us to travel? We'll die if we have to wait long. We need water. We need water.*

Peter's hands were bleeding again, wounds torn open from his clenched grip. He could feel the blood, the last liquid left in him, drying fast in the heat of the apocalypse air. He felt afraid and tired, but more than anything he felt angry. Why was this happening to him? What did he do to deserve this?

Sleep tugged him gently down.

\*\*\*

"Matt! Dinner's ready!"

With a snap, I'm back in my own world. The one that sucks. I've been typing for two hours. I rub my eyeballs hard. One of these days, the monitor light's gonna get stuck in my eyes, and when I close them I won't be able to shake that blue glow. How will I sleep at night? I jot down a reminder to take breaks every half-hour and pin it up on the computer. Gotta take precautions against unholy insomnia.

Downstairs, Dad has a normal meal spread across the table. A *normal* meal, spaghetti with meat and no nasty pseudo-cheese. We've been eating vegan for about two months, no explanations as to why, and now I guess we're not. Can't say I'll miss it.

"All right, Peter, I'll be back around eleven. I expect you ready for bed."

I stare at him, and then look at the table. There's one place set there, and only a tiny amount of spaghetti.

"If you need me, we'll be at the Hickory Smokestack."

Another girlfriend so soon? Couldn't be, he usually takes a couple of weeks to rebound. So this must mean he and Amanda aren't broken up *officially*. It'll happen some time this week.

Dad leaves, and I look at my plate. He's going off to get dumped by a girl who doesn't like me. I'm home alone with my first real meal in over a month.

I grab the bowl of spaghetti and a fork and head back upstairs.

\*\*\*

Peter woke shivering. At first he thought the killing heat had destroyed his senses, but this felt genuinely cold. The sky was still black, but it didn't burn his

eyes. There was a brilliant flash, and a clap. Thunder. And that was water, wetting his eyes and taking the smart from his hands.

It was raining. No, it was *pouring*. A deluge, torrent, gift from heaven, and his entire body was drenched. When he tried to rise, he had to pull himself from the mud with a squelch. Donis was sitting up, palms raised to the air and his entire body shaking. Rag was still unconscious, and Peter lifted her up and shook her. She'd drown in the mud, if he left her. With a feathery gasp, she awoke. Immediately, she copied Donis, cupping her hands and watching as they filled with water.

"Where did this come from?" she breathed.

"From the sky. It's rain."

"Not just from the sky," Donis interjected, "A gift from your god."

Rag was licking the water of her dirty, blood-caked hands. Peter pulled out his water skin and pried off the top. It would take a while to fill up, but he'd rather drink clean water.

Donis strummed his kithara, a soggy sound coming from the saturated wood. Persisting, he hummed a paeon. Peter ignored him, instead focusing on washing off the dirt and mud. Instead of fever, a chill crept up his body, and he knew they'd spend an unpleasant night.

The clouds were clearing a little. Filtering through the vapor, sunbeams lit their surroundings. It looked like a war zone. Smoke, like from a thousand funeral pyres, swirled across the ground. And, miraculously, among the twisted, flaking stubs of corn, a few patches remained uncharred, standing out like stubble on the earth's chin. In an eerie, desperate way, it was beautiful.

"We should get moving," Peter said, taking a much needed swig from his flask.

However, with the clouds dispersing, he could see that it was dusk, soon to be a chilly night. They wouldn't get far before they'd be stuck in the dark.

"On second thought, let's set up camp."

After they rolled their blankets out on the soggy ground and bedded down, Donis resumed his strumming. He was singing his thanks, and Peter didn't want to blaspheme by stopping him, but lying on the wet, cold ground, he felt a surge of something that definitely wasn't gratitude.

\*\*\*

There, I reached a stopping point, and I only typed for an hour straight. I shut the computer down and browse my bookshelf. I'm done with *The Odyssey*, so I pick up an old classic, *Ender's Game*.

Reclining on the bed, I read until Dad comes home, when I throw the covers over my head and pretend to be asleep. After he checks on me and then goes to his own room, I resume reading until the early hours of the morning.

## Chapter 6

School drags along, slower than a legless cat. But when Maggy visits me at lunch, things brighten a little.

“Good morning,” she says, falling into the couch next to me.

I grunt and nod over the top of my book. Maggy hates when I read while she’s trying to talk, but I can’t put it down just yet. I’m almost done.

“Look, Matt, I have the perfect plan for next weekend. We can go trick-or-treating together!” She claps with the tips of her fingers and looks at me with an open mouth, expecting an answer. I shake my head.

“Oh, come on, Matt! This will be fun, I promise! I’ll even help you with your costume.”

I’ve despised Halloween ever since I was little. It’s the day when everything is backwards. Normally, you’re supposed to stay away from strangers and wear moderate clothing, but on Halloween, you’re forced to go undercover and walk up to every door in the neighborhood, begging to be kidnapped. If the most basic rules of childhood, stranger danger and “being yourself,” turn inside-out, what other principles of nature could suddenly quit? Gravity? Photosynthesis? Time? I’d rather be safely at home when the apocalypse happens.

“Matt, when was the last time you went trick-or-treating?”

When I was six. After three blocks of crying and dragging my feet, Dad gave up and took me back home.

Despite the fact that I rattle my head back and forth and give her ten different shades of stink-eye, Maggy persists.

“Look, Matt, either you go trick-or-treating with me or I’m dragging you to the Sadie Hawkins dance.”

*Deal*, I scribble, and pass it to Maggy.

“Okay, you gave me your word. This is a legal, binding document,” she says, waving the paper in my face, “I’ll stop by on Halloween. If you chicken out, then you’re gonna learn to dance.”

I can’t figure out why Maggy is so intent on dragging me places. She has other friends. It may be the fact that I’m her only *guy* friend. Apparently, she’s about as tongue-tied as I am when it comes to the opposite sex. Except I don’t count as a guy, which, far from making me feel privileged, makes me feel like crap.

“So, if you *do* decide to go, what are you gonna dress up as?”

Shrugging, I shake my book, thinking maybe she’ll get the hint.

“Oh, come on, anything at all, what would you want to be?”

*I hate disguises*, I write.

“They’re not disguises, they’re *costumes*. It’s like the difference between a white lie and the blunt truth. Disguises hide who you are; costumes are someone you could be.”

Maggy’s a drama geek. She auditions for every school play, and usually lands on the chorus, but that doesn’t stifle her overwhelming enthusiasm for drama theory.

“Anyways, I was wondering if you could help me with my bio homework.”

Sighing, I put my book away. So much for reading.

Later that afternoon, as I’m pounding my way through some confusing unit circle business, the phone rings.

*Let the answering machine get it. It has better conversation skills than me.*

With a screech, the machine clicks on.

“Matt, it’s Dad. Just calling to let you know that Amanda is coming over for dinner tonight, so I want the living room clean. Oh, and put on a nice t-shirt, at least.”

I look down at the shirt I’m wearing. Gray, a logo from a band or something I don’t even know. This is the only kind of T-shirt I own. But, just to say I tried, I go upstairs and dig around in my drawer. At the very bottom there are a couple of polos, smelling like must and faded.

*Informal or rank.*

I stuff the polos back into the recesses of my drawer. I’d prefer not to smell like rot. In fact, thinking about it, I pull the shirts back out and stuff them in the trash downstairs. I don’t want those shirts spreading their infectious stink to the rest of my clothing. Then I have to wash my hands for a good five minutes. After they’re sanitized red, I resume my trigonometry homework.

When Dad pries open the door, he gives me a once-over before his coattails are fully in the house.

“Is that the nicest shirt you have?”

He gets to the kitchen, sees my polos stuffed in the trash, and sighs.

“Why are these here?”

It sounds like a rhetorical question, so I don’t look up from my homework. But then Dad’s standing in front of me, crumpled polo dangling from his hand. I shrug my shoulders, and his eyes narrow. He’s not letting me go.

*It was dirty,* I write, handing it to Dad apologetically.

“Matt!” Dad crumples the paper in anger, destroying half an hour’s worth of homework. “Matt, we talked about this. It’s not going to kill you. You can wash things that are dirty.” He’s ramping up for a “not everything is deadly and it’s all in your head” speech, but then he looks at the clock and growls.

“Just – just go fix your hair. And please, try not to...”

He wants to say “try not to embarrass me.”

“... try to be pleasant.”

I gather my homework and escape upstairs. A ten second conversation, and I feel like crap. I want to slam my door, but I don’t dare. Instead, I slide it closed and go to my computer.

\*\*\*

Peter woke shivering. It wasn’t dawn yet, so he decided to huddle in his wet blanket and dream of warmth. He could hear the sleep-sounds coming from Donis and Rag, little snores and squeaks. How could they sleep in the cold?

As the sun dragged itself above the horizon, the mist burned away. Peter could see for miles into the distance. No sign of a town.

Beside him, Donis stirred, breathe changing tempo. Peter crawled out of his blanket, wincing as the wet air met his damp flesh. Clawing away the goose bumps, he called out to Donis.

“Donis? You awake? Come on, we have to break camp.”

“Is it even dawn yet?”

“Close enough. Now come on, I want to get to the next town as soon as possible.”

With several nudges and the threat of being left behind, Donis, and then Rag, pulled themselves out of bed. As they rolled up their blankets, Peter surveyed the land. He couldn't tell which direction was which. Where was the closest town? Where was the *path*? As far as his eyes could see, charred corn stretched across the landscape.

"All right, fearless leader," Rag sneered, "Where to from here?"

Peter searched for the sun amid the morning fog. The sun was east, the path had been going northeast to the next town, they had strayed north from the path into the cornfield, so...

"We follow the sun."

"Does that mean we have to turn around at midday?" Rag asked. Mornings did nothing to sweeten her temper.

"What happens," Donis mused, "if we don't find a city by nightfall? Another night spent hungry?"

"We should have grabbed some corn while the field was standing," Rag muttered.

They walked until midday, and Peter did consider turning around. Although they had finally left the burnt field behind them, there was still no sign of a path. It might be better to retrace their steps.

*No*, thought Peter, *there's nothing to retrace*.

Navigation was new to Peter. He hadn't left the temple in ten years, except for brief visits into town. Never before had he traveled without a guide, and without knowing exactly what his final destination was going to be.

Mercifully, they stumbled across a stream. Filling their flasks and lounging by the shore, they discussed what to do.

"How big is it?" Donis asked, dipping one toe into the water.

"Too wide and too deep to ford safely," Peter observed, chucking a stone into the water. The ripples were shredded in the steady current.

"Ah, but if it is a large stream, then there might be towns, either upstream or downstream."

"So which way should we go?"

"We could wait for a boat," Rag suggested.

"We could be waiting forever," Peter said.

"Is the water dirty?" asked Donis.

"No, it's clear," Peter answered, "looks like runoff from the mountains."

"Then we should head downstream."

"Howya figure that?" Rag peeped, taking off her bandana and dunking it into the water. The sun was hot and merciless overhead, and Peter could feel a sunburn creeping across his scalp.

"If there was a town upstream, or any settlement worth stopping at, there would be debris in the water."

"Makes sense," Peter said, "so we head downstream until nightfall."

"Are we gonna spend *another* night hungry?"

"Feel free to turn back at any time," Peter said, hitching his pack high, trying to cover his neck. Maybe, if he could shield it, the sunburn wouldn't be as bad.

By the time his feet were blistered and his skin cracked, they had spotted a town up ahead. It was a sizeable one, too.

"We'll definitely be able to find food there," Rag chuckled.

"No stealing," ordered Peter, "We can't get in trouble with the law. Donis will get us our food."

However, things didn't go as planned. When they got to the local inn, there was a troupe of performers, complete with a bard. The owner said they didn't need any more entertainment for the night.

So they sat in the road, rubbing their stomachs and thinking of what to do. Or rather, Peter thought of what to do. Rag already knew what she wanted to do, and she had convinced Donis, as well.

"I promise we won't get caught," Rag coaxed, "I'll have enough money for food and a room at the inn to boot, all before sundown."

"That's the best offer we're going to get," Donis reasoned.

Peter didn't reply. He had a hard time even hearing them over the growling in his stomach. If they didn't get food, then there was no way they could make it to the next town.

"We could always try again tomorrow," he suggested, "see if the other bard leaves."

"Yes, well, about that," Donis mumbled, "I don't feel comfortable following his act. What if he sings all the songs I know tonight? And I don't think I'm good enough to get *three* people dinner. Come on, Peter," he said, trying to pat Peter on the back and missing by several inches, "we're in the service of a higher power."

"The Grey God is a god of vengeance and retribution. He *punishes* thieves and those who do wrong."

"What are you so worried about? I'll be the one doing the stealing," Rag said.

One last quiver in his stomach made up his mind.

"Okay, fine," said Peter, "Donis and I will wait here. You have an hour. If you get caught, we're not bailing you out. Make sure no one follows you."

Peter and Donis sat in the dust until Rag came trotting back. She had a jubilant look on her face, a bulging purse in her hand, and a new robe wrapped around herself. Plopping the purse at their feet, she stood with her hands on her hips.

"Where'd you get *that*?" Peter asked, eyeing her new garment. It fell in wispy, expensive folds around her body.

"Clothesline. Almost got caught by a guard back there, so I nabbed this. Walked right past 'im without him recognizing me. That's the power of a good costume. It's comfortable, too."

"Really? I wanna feel!"

Donis pawed at a sleeve, running it against his cheek.

"You and your disguises," Peter snorted, picking up the purse. It was delightfully heavy. "I'll handle the money."

"Fine, if that makes you feel better. But just know that I can take it back any time I want."



Peter didn't know what to say to that.

\*\*\*

Dad's commanding me to come downstairs. Amanda's here. I'm tempted to cross myself.

There's another non-vegan meal spread across the table. Maybe he knew Amanda would be disgusted with his usual bile-smelling dishes, so he practiced on me to get back into the swing of things. Well, if that's what it takes to get normal food, then maybe I don't mind Amanda coming over for dinner. I mean, real grilled chicken and cheesy broccoli and *everything*.

Amanda's sitting with her legs hooked around the chair legs, looking much more at home than she has any right to be. I sit at the far edge of the table, which isn't that far away at all. Luckily, Amanda is content with ignoring me.

"So, is your mother any better?" Dad asks, putting a tiny amount of chicken on my plate and handing it to me. He's determined to either starve me or malnourish me.

"Well, a little, but there might be a relapse. I'll probably end up spending Thanksgiving with her, even though I promised I'd never go back to Portland again. It's just so gloomy there."

"That damp probably doesn't do anything for her health."

"Oh, I know, but she refuses to move. That's where her roots are, and that's where she's going to die, whether that's in six months or six decades."

I chew my chicken slowly, savoring every bite. It would taste better without the background noise. It doesn't matter whether I eat fast or slow; Dad's going to make me sit here until they're done. I might as well take it slow and see if Dad will let me have seconds.

"It's not the rain," Amanda explains, shaking her fork for emphasis, "It's the *constant* rain. All day, all year."

The way she waves her fork around makes me nervous. What if she loses her grip? Someone could get hurt.

Helping myself to a second piece of chicken, I half-listen to Amanda's tales of the woes of Oregon weather. She goes on for quite a while, finally concluding with, "I swear, if Death has a home residence, it's in Portland, Oregon."

Amanda and Dad laugh. I just feel sicker. I guess now I can safely cross Portland off my 'places to live' list.

I rise from the table, and when Dad looks at me, I gesture towards the bathroom. He studies me for a second before losing interest and turning back to Amanda. When I'm sure he's not paying attention, I rush upstairs to my room.

\*\*\*

With the money, they rented a room at the inn and had a hearty meal. Forcing down as much soup as his stomach could hold, Peter sat by the fire and watched the other bard tuning his instrument. As he plucked out the first notes, Peter could tell he wasn't as skilled as Donis. His voice was better though, more refined and silky. And he was a better storyteller.

After warming up, he asked for requests from the crowd. There was an undecipherable murmur, people suggesting this and that with no real conviction. However, no matter how obscure a story people mentioned, the bard would nod his head and say he knew it.

“Do you,” Peter called, “know any tales about Sick Wind? About where she resides?”

Stroking his instrument thoughtfully, the bard leaned forward in his chair.

“Well, tales about her are few, and not very good for dinner.”

“Please,” Peter said, gripping his chair, “Anything at all.”

As he waited for the bard’s answer, Peter didn’t dare to breath. This could be his chance. No more aimless wandering.

“Well, if there are no protests,” he said, looking around. All was silent. With a cough, the bard started in on a song, flicking his kithara in accompaniment.

“Long ago, Sick Wind roamed the land as She pleased, casting Her glance this way and that. Everywhere She went, people of all kinds fell ill, the healthy with the wounded, the young with the old. There was no order to things, and man lived a life of unexplainable suffering and fear. They died without warning or cause.

‘With one voice, the people cried out for help. They wanted life to make sense; they wanted justice for their dead. The Grey God heard their pleas, and with His thunder He drove Sick Wind to the north, and with His lightening He caged Her in the land of unending rain. Now, She must send Her servants to do Her bidding, and they are few. That is why the sick and old die before the young and healthy, because Her servants cannot gather the souls of everyone. But, occasionally, they work swiftly, and are able to snatch a soul in its prime. And that is why sometimes death strikes unexpectedly.

‘So when rain comes, and you hear thunder roll, know that it is Sick Wind trying to escape Her prison, and the Grey God holding Her in.’”

The crowd, held still by the bard’s voice, stirred at the end of his song. Murmuring and shifting, they called out for a happier tale, something to lift their spirits. Obliging, the bard began a recounting of the first disagreement of man and woman. Peter didn’t hear his words. He was too busy reflecting. Sick Wind was in the north, contained by the Grey God’s powers. But, if He held Her, why would he need Peter to go find Her? And why wouldn’t He tell Peter where She was, since He must know?

\*\*\*

Luckily, Amanda leaves before Dad can force me downstairs again. I help him with the dishes, as a way of apologizing. He’s humming, so I take it as a sign that he’s not furious.

Still, to make it up to him, I sit through the first fifteen minutes of the evening news with him. He doesn’t say anything about me leaving the dinner table. Maybe he’s actually glad I left, so he could have a normal conversation with Amanda. Sometimes, I think people are only happy when I’m gone. Because most of the time, they don’t seem too happy with me there.

After I absorb as much news as I can stand, I go upstairs and stare out the window. I stare until it feels like my spirit leaves my body and floats unfettered through the stars. I wish I could sever the connection between my body and my soul. Without a body, I wouldn’t have to worry about germs or grades or other people. And maybe my body would be happier, too, not having a mind to fill it with fears.

Maybe the priests are right, and the spirit and the body were never made to coexist. Or maybe it's just me, my soul and my body don't match. Am I the only one in the universe who feels this screwed up?

## Chapter 7

School's a dream the next day. A terrible, amorphous dream. Mr. Gregory makes me stay after class, and I'm too chicken to run away. So as everyone else files out the door, I sit in my seat, trying not to look afraid. Teachers can smell fear. They love it.

"Matt, we need to have a talk," he says, lounging on the edge of a desk. He has hippie grass-root leanings. I bet he has a stash of pot at home. He's probably vegan, too. He and Dad could have a great time together, eating their nasty animal-friendly food and talking about what's wrong with me.

"Matt, you're not doing very well in this class."

I have a C. A precariously low C, but that's passing. There has to be at least five kids in the class who are failing, but Mr. Gregory has to single me out.

"Your record says you used to be a very good student."

*Your record.*

Who needs hidden cameras when you keep people locked in a building for eight hours a day, with teachers studiously evaluating their every move? Why even have a record? Why can't people just come talk to me if they want to know what I'm like? Sure, I can't recall every grade I ever got in every class I've ever been in, but there has to be more to people than grades.

Mr. Gregory's voice cuts through my thoughts.

"This oral report is a big part of your grade. You can still pull it up...or you can send it straight to the depths. The choice is yours, Matt. But I want you to know, I expect you to participate in the report, or both you and Dane's grade will suffer."

Participate? Does he mean *speak*? I don't have a choice, I *can't* do that. But I can't not do it. I can't fail this class, and I can't drag Dane with me. All I can do is stare at Mr. Gregory as he walks away, and think how much I want him to drop dead.

The second I get home, I'm upstairs and pounding on the computer. I want to scream and rant and rave, but I don't have the words. So I write instead.

\*\*\*

Peter wanted to stay in bed for the rest of his life. He wanted to forget about his demanding god and go on dreaming forever. However, after five minutes of Rag prodding him and repeating his name, he abandoned that dream.

"What?!" he growled, shooting up in bed.

"S almost midday. Are we gonna get going or what?"

"Do we have enough money for another night at the inn?" he asked, clawing at his eyes. He hoped they weren't red.

"Yeah."

"Then let's just stay here for one more day."

Not showing any surprise or concern, Rag said that would be fine with her. She grabbed Donis and made for the door, calling that they'd be back before nightfall.

Peter lay on his mattress for a long time. After a while, though, he couldn't ignore the need to urinate any longer. Slumping onto his feet, he dragged himself downstairs and outside. The little shanty at the end of the street was occupied, so Peter went behind the inn and urinated vengefully against the wall. It wasn't

the inn's fault he was having such a horrible time, but it felt good to punish something for his misfortune.

*Maybe that's why the Grey God does it.*

A dry dragging sound at the end of the alley caused Peter to yank his pants back up. When he whipped around, though, nothing was there. Nothing that he could see.

"I think I'll go find Rag and Donis," he said. Peter never spoke out loud, but the stiff silence demanded it.

Not having the slightest idea where Rag and Donis were, he wandered around the town, trying to stick to the more traveled streets. The city, however, wasn't cooperating. None of the streets were well traveled, and even though it was full day, Peter saw no one. It wasn't a big town, but there should be *some* people.

"Where is everyone?"

Peter hated the sound of his voice, watery and high. Why was he talking to himself?

It was because of the silence. Forget the people, where was the *noise*?

"Where is everyone?!" Peter shouted.

*That's it, I'm going back to the inn and waiting for Rag and Donis. I'm going to walk slowly and evenly, and I'm not going to talk to mys-*

Before he could complete the thought, Peter fell face-first into the hard-packed dirt.

*No, not fell, pushed,* he thought, trying to get to his feet. A blow knocked him back down. Then there was a weight on his back, making his spine groan like dry wood being pulled too hard.

"Get off!" he yelled, but he couldn't be sure he *wasn't* talking to himself. He could feel the pressure, but he couldn't see anything on top of him. Not even a shadow on the ground. He felt metallic cold wrapping around the bare skin of his wrist. The weight on his back was gone, but before he could rise, he was hauled forward. Scrambling and thrashing and trying to gain his footing, Peter was tugged swiftly out of the city. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't gather the breath in-between gasps of pain.

The skin on his legs was grated of, and he could feel the blood. The thing, whatever it was, was going to drag him to death.

At least, that's what he thought. But just outside the city, the force took a sudden turn and headed for a shadowy overhang, under one of the nearby hills. As soon as they entered the shadows, Peter's captor materialized. He couldn't make out everything, but there was a carapace-coated hand around his wrist. The thing was as tall as a man, but it shuffled on four legs. It shuffled on four legs, and it had a hand wrapped around his wrist. How many limbs was that? Peter was too panicked to do the math.

"Let go of me!" he said, pounding with his free hand on the monster's arm. It was hard as a rock, and every bit as unyielding.

For every step they took into the shadows, the creature's outline became clearer. There was a tail arching over its head, curved like a scorpion. In fact, the

thing reminded Peter of the scorpions he had seen scuttling between rocks. Except frighteningly huge.

They were back in the hill now, in a shallow cave. The creature tossed Peter on the ground. Curling in a ball, he tried not to whimper. His legs were flayed, and he felt sure that if he looked outside, he'd see fragments of his skin clinging to the rocks.

"Not so big now, are we?" a voice cackled. Peter looked up, his eyes still adjusting to the dim light. However, it didn't take much effort to recognize the bedraggled figure in front of him.

*It's that crazy hermit. What was his name again?*

"And now I, Briskel, shall have my revenge!"

*Briskel. That was it.*

"Where is your bat guano now, boy?!" Briskel screamed, aiming a kick at Peter. Full force, it felt as powerful as a drunken goat's. Obviously, spending your life holed up in a cave was not the best way to remain fit. Peter could defeat the old man easy, but he wasn't so sure about the hulking figure waiting a few feet away. That was the real danger.

Briskel peppered Peter with a few more kicks, all the while laughing. After a few minutes, however, Briskel got bored.

"You!" he shouted, and the figure perked up, "Tie him up! And you," he said, speaking back into the cave, "get the fire started."

The thing bound Peter to a long stick, hands and feet. In the back, Peter could smell smoke.

He wasn't sure what they were planning, but he knew he didn't like it.

\*\*\*

I want to keep writing, but I have homework. So instead I go downstairs and hammer away at Greek roots (the same ones they've taught us every year since seventh grade). And, of course, Dad talks to me all the while. That's why I like to get as much homework as possible done *before* he gets home. Dad has a compulsive bonding complex. He never seeks me out for one-on-one time, but if I happen to be in the same room as him and the TV's not on, boy am I in for it.

"So, Matt, how was school? ... That's good."

"I'm making Eggplant Pomodoro for dinner."

"So, um, I got your note... about this weekend. Group project, huh?"

"... If you need any help, let me know."

"I always had a hard time with group projects, too."

"It's, uh, it's not always easy relying on other people."

Long pause. Dad's knife beats on the cutting board, a steady one-two rhythm. *Thunk* as it hits, rest as he raises the knife. *Thunk* again. Another rest. Not rushed, deliberate.

"So what's your project on?"

My pencil lead snaps, leaving a dirty smudge on the paper. I hate smudges, because then you have to erase them, and that feathery-pink eraser dander is impossible to get rid of. Three strokes and the smudge is gone. Wiping the eraser bits into a neat pile for later disposal, I continue with my homework. I'm almost done.

"Well, like I said, just let me know if I can help. All you have to do is ask."

Dad puts the Popowwhatever in the oven, and then he stands there, looking from me to the couch. Gee, more awkward bonding time or the TV? I make the decision easy for him by rushing back upstairs. I'm as done with my homework as I want to be.

\*\*\*

It was getting hot in the cave. They were building a bonfire, so fierce it reached the ceiling. Gagging on the smoke, Peter thrashed against his bonds. He was crying, crying because of the smoke, he told himself.

They were going to burn him alive. He wasn't stupid, he suspected it the moment they started the fire. He just didn't want to admit it. How would it feel, to be roasted? Unpleasant, probably. No, actually, a more accurate word would be excruciating.

For a while, he held onto the hope that Donis and Rag would rescue him. They'd get back, realize he was missing, and come searching for him. Except they might not notice he was gone. They'd be too busy eating food.

He was going to die.

"All right," called Briskel, safely at the mouth of the cave, "burn him, boys!"

The scorpion/man dragged the spit, Peter hopelessly attached, towards the fire. Even this far away, he could feel the blistering heat. How much hotter would it be *in* the fire?

"Okay," wheezed Peter, "I give up. If you're listening, Grey God, now would be a good time to help me. Please."

He could smell something burning. He hoped it wasn't him.

"Please! I need your help!"

Thick, dark smoke curled around the cave, and Peter couldn't tell how close they were to the fire. Was he seconds away from his death, or did he have a minute yet? The fire roared like a thing alive.

He was closer to meeting Sick Wind now than ever before. The irony didn't escape him, but he was too busy thrashing and crying to appreciate it. The smoke reached out for him, wrapping around his body like angry snakes.

Peter was tempted to give up, to just close his eyes and pray for a swift end, but he heard a sound. Amid the torrential fire, there was a rushing. That's the only way he could describe it. There was the sound of something very large coming towards him very fast.

With a hiss, the thing carrying him was knocked off its feet. It dropped Peter, and he landed in something hot and wet and sizzling. His back was on fire. Still bound to the stick, all he could do was scream and kick. But then he was moving, being carried away. Water was in the cave, pouring in from the outside and sweeping him away from the flames. With a sharp, cracking pain, Peter was dashed against the cave wall, and the spit broke in two. He was secured to the pieces, but now he could move his arms and legs separately. Flipping onto his stomach, he braced himself against a couple of rocks. Around him, water gushed past, a river's worth. The air was thick with smoke and the ground laden with water. There was nowhere to breathe.

*I escaped the fire, only to drown.*

But the flood was past now, gone as quickly as it came. Apparently, it had washed Briskel and his pets away. Peter was left to lie on the ground and gasp

for air. His back steamed, soggy and burnt. With limbs tied fast, the only way he could get out of the cave was to squirm like a worm. With every movement, his back screamed. He could feel the flesh seeping blood, and he could smell it, too. By the time he got into the open air, he was too exhausted to even cry. Under the night, he lay on the ground and struggled to breath.

“See, Peter,” thundered the sky, thick with storm clouds, “All you had to do was ask.”

Peter, cold and hot, fainted on the ground.



## Chapter 8

Friday. I love how that hits me the moment I wake up. Last day of school for the week. It makes the rest of the morning rituals (brushing teeth and packing my backpack and disinfecting my socks) easy, because I won't have to do them tomorrow.

Dad gives me a ride to school, the usual silence to the tune of old rock. At least it's not classical. I hate classical music. It's like your grandparents coming out of the grave to rant about how everything was better in the old days.

My first class of the day is "Study Hall." Yeah, it's not really a study hall. It's actually the class they make high-risk and border-line special needs students take. They just call it study hall so it won't hurt our delicate self-esteem. I fear that class with an unparalleled paranoia. Even though the teacher is really nice, I'm tempted to spend the period in the bathroom instead. Because even though public bathrooms make me want to take a bath in acid, this class is worse. All the punk "ask me about my new drug-dealing stint" kids are in it. The ones who are *this* close to dropping out, but by the grace of God are passing. I don't know why I'm in there. I'm still passing all my classes. For the time being.

I sit in my seat, very still, listening to the teacher talk about "time management, and what it can do for you!" Ms Hinckle is the happiest person I've ever met. Either she's unaware that half the kids in this class would mug her on the street, or she's every bit as scared as me and she hides it behind a smile. She's a brave, stupid woman.

After a thirty minute lecture no one pays attention to, we're free to work on homework and ask for help. No one ever does. No one does homework but me, and I don't need help. However, Ms Hinckle grabs a seat next to me.

"Matt, Mr. Gregory talked to me about your project."

She speaks to me like she's talking about the death of a loved one. Very gently, trying to open the discussion without opening Pandora's Box.

"We've discussed it, and he's not willing to back down. He wants you to participate, but he says that as long as you give it your best shot, he'll give you the grade you deserve."

Mr. Gregory thinks I deserve an F.

"Now, Matt, I know this is hard, but I have faith in you," she says, patting my desk gently. We've gone over the whole, *don't touch me and put your germs on my germs* thing, so she doesn't touch my hand. "I've done some research, and I found people who might be able to help you."

She lays a slim business card on my desk and walks away. I want to throw it in the trash, but I figure the polite thing to do would be wait until next period. Picking the card up, I read "Dr. Collins: Speech Therapy." There's a number and, even better, an email address. I pocket the card, just in case.

After school, I decide to email Dr. Collins. There's no way I'm paying to see this guy, but maybe he can help me out.

*Dear Dr. Collins,*

*My teacher recommended you, and I was wondering if you could answer a question. Are vocal chords muscles? And if you don't use them for, say, a year, will they rot away?*

*Sincerely,*

*Peter*

I don't sign my real name, because everyone knows how dangerous it is to talk to people over the internet. Besides, using Peter feels natural.

When Dad gets home, he tells me he's going out with Amanda.

"And, um, Matt?" he says, scuffing the floor, "Don't bother waiting up for me, okay? I won't be home until tomorrow. I, uh, I hope that's all right."

That means he and Amanda are going to have sex. He's an adult, he gets to make his own decisions. I just wish he wouldn't ask my permission when he could care less about my opinion.

"I ordered pizza. I'll leave you twenty bucks."

I wave my hands, indicating that is not okay with me. I don't like pizza; it's almost as bad as restaurant food. And I am *not* going to answer the door to some pimply pizza boy. That's opening the door to disaster.

"Look, it's a guy with a pizza. Hand him the twenty and then slam the door. He's practically the same age as you."

I stamp my foot, feeling like Charlie Chaplin. I have to communicate through over-acting and charades. Even though I'm flailing and acting like a mime on drugs, Dad doesn't pay me any attention.

*Fine, don't listen to me!* I mime, crossing my arms. I punch the air a few times, my way of saying: *And you can shove your dirty pizza*, followed by sticking my finger in my throat and kicking the ground. That means, *And it's not all right with me if you have sex with Amanda. She's going to dump you in a month and you're going to be heartbroken and you're going to blame it on me! So I hope you have a horrible, unsatisfying night!*

There's a lot that can be said with nonverbal communication.

"Good night, Matt. See you tomorrow morning."

He walks out the door, and I lock it behind him. Just for good measure, I lock and unlock the door several times, enjoying the final little click of the deadbolt.

I spend all night fuming. When the pizza boy comes, I don't answer the door. He rings frantically, persevering for a good fifteen minutes before giving the door a kick and leaving. After he leaves, I dig through the refrigerator. There are a ton of fresh ingredients, but I have no idea what to do with them. In the end, I make a sandwich, lettuce and tomatoes and some other vegetables piled on vegan-approved bread. Also, I slip the twenty dollars into my pocket. Dad doesn't have to know.

When I finish off my paltry meal, I go upstairs to write. But I can't concentrate on my story. The only thing I can think about is Dad and Amanda and... Jesus, why'd he have to tell me?! A couple of years ago he wouldn't have. Or maybe he did, and I didn't understand. I don't remember him doing something like *this* before. Staying overnight someplace.

I have hours until I'll be sleepy, and nothing to occupy my mind. So, out of desperation, I email Maggy. Just a casual, *help, I'm bored enough to die and I need a distraction*. Maggy's neurotically obsessed with all things on the web, so she checks her email every five minutes.

In the meantime, I dust my bookshelf. Dusting is one of those things that you always forget to do until it's too late, and you have a layer of dust so thick you don't want

to touch it. And you have to be careful, because you don't want to knock the dust into the air. Then you're *breathing* it. That's ten different kinds of unhealthy.

When I check my email, Maggy's replied.

*I'll be right over.*

That was not the response I wanted. I spend an anxious half an hour debating what to do. In the end, I decide not to answer the door. It worked with the pizza guy.

Maggy, however, is more persistent. I know from the way she rings the doorbell rapid-fire that she's not about to give up. Timidly, I open the door a crack.

"Hey, Matt! What's happening?"

*You can't come in, I mouth.*

"Huh?" she asks, tipping her head to the side.

I sigh and go to grab a piece of paper. The world would be a lot easier if everyone could lip-read. When I go to get paper, Maggy slips through the door.

"I brought *Lord of the Rings!*" she says, holding the DVDs up triumphantly.

I'm ready to shoo her back out, but then I think, *Why not? If Dad finds out, it'll just serve him right.*

Because, technically, I'm not allowed to have people over when Dad's not home. But it's one of those rules that enforces itself, since I never have people over period. If Dad finds out, I can just say I forgot. After all, it's been maybe four years since I heard Dad even mention it.

So, while Maggy deciphers the DVD player, I rummage around in the kitchen, searching for popcorn. I find a few packets behind a box of rice, sad and forgotten looking. We don't have butter, but salt is vegan approved.

With the popcorn only mildly singed, Maggy and I sit on the couch and watch *Lord of the Rings*. She's been force feeding me the trilogy, since I didn't see them in theaters. I'd probably appreciate them more if she didn't yak the entire time.

"I am *so* excited for Halloween. I'm still not a hundred percent sure what I'm going as, but I have it narrowed down to a ninja, a firefighter or Pocahontas. Matt, you *have* to go with me. Come on, none of my other friends will," she whines before I even have a chance to shake my head. "This is one of the last years we can get away with it. Soon we'll be in college, and no one gives candy to college kids. I want candy, Matt!"

I slip the twenty out of my pocket and into her hands, jotting down on a piece of paper, *Now you can buy yourself some. So stop asking me to go with you.*

Maggy shoves the twenty back in my face.

"It's not just about the candy. I *know* I can buy candy. I want... Matt, this is, like, a our childhood going out the window. Don't you want to enjoy it while it lasts?"

When I shake my head, Maggy sighs and buries her chin in her neck. Silence pushes its way between us, forcing us farther apart. Finally, I scratch on a piece of paper, *We're doing something childish together now.*

She gives a punctuated laugh and says, "Well, I guess. But still, please think about it."

Maggy talks for the rest of the movie. I wonder if she ever feels like she's having a conversation with herself. I hope not, because this time I'm really listening. When the movie ends (why are these movies so ridiculously long?) Maggy bids a cheerful goodnight, waving to me all the way down the driveway. Even though I want to shut and lock the door right away, I wait until she's out of sight.

*That wasn't so bad, I think, heading upstairs to bed.*

If being social was always that painless, I might do it more often.

*Well, Dane is coming over tomorrow.*

*Oh crap, I forgot to do research.*

But Dane will be prepared, so that much is easy. I just wonder how I'm going to break the news to him, that both our grades are in the toilet.

\*\*\*

Dad is home by the time I wake up the next morning. He could have not told me he'd be gone all night and spared me the agony. With that bitter thought in mind, I tramp downstairs. He's making an apology breakfast; I can smell the waffles. And is that sausage? If he's making me sausage, then I can be cordial for one meal. But he can't buy forgiveness that easily, just tolerance.

"So, Matt, how was last night?" he asks, placing a heaping plate in front of me. It's turkey sausage, but still. It's meat. I dig in, completely ignoring Dad's efforts to start a conversation. Of course, he's used to that by now.

"So, you have that friend coming over today, right?"

Ten o'clock sharp. Most teenagers wouldn't schedule anything earlier than noon, but not Dane. Not me, either. I'd rather get this out of the way than have it hang over my head all day.

With half an hour until Dane comes, I gather my notes and do some last-minute research. Dad knocks on my door at least twenty times, asking if I need anything. He thinks this is the first person I've had over in a year.

*Shows what you know.*

When the doorbell rings, Dad beats me to the door. He's giving Dane a groveling welcome, asking him to *please* make himself at home, and he is *so* glad he came over.

Before Dad can get down on his knees, I escort Dane upstairs. I give Dad a look that says *Do not check in on us*, and then I slam my door for added effect.

"So, that's your Dad, huh?" Dane says, laughing uncomfortably.

We start on the project. The basic idea is to organize everything into a PowerPoint, so that the presentation practically gives itself. All the information will be in a friendly, comprehensive format projected onto a screen and into the minds of our fellow students. Our voices will be superfluous. I wish.

Dane handles most of the typing. It's my job to sort through our notes and organize them so that they "flow." That's what Dane told me to do, and I'm not 100% sure what the heck that means, so I make it up as I go along. He hasn't complained yet, so I must be doing okay.

Halfway through, I work up the nerve to tell him about Mr. Gregory's ultimatum. Or *inform* him, because there's no actual telling involved. He reads my note, and I see his face fall.

"Oh," he says, handing the note back to me. What the hell am I supposed to do with it? But I figure he's probably shell-shocked, so I take it back and toss it in the trash. Dane's face flashes through a ton of expressions, confusions and anger and blame and sympathy, finally settling into resigned acceptance.

"Well, that's too bad," he mumbles, looking at his fingers. I feel like I should give him a pat on the shoulder or something. After all, there go those scholarships, all because he helped me out. No good deed goes unpunished and all that.

We go back to working on the project. Being silent makes you acutely aware of other people's silences. After all, when you never say a word, you notice what other people say more. And when they stop saying things, there's no way you can fill the void. You just have to wait it out. But Dane doesn't speak, just stabs the keyboard with all the resolve of Brutus murdering dear, beloved Caesar.

Finally, he slams the desk with his fists, making the computer screen quake.

"Damn it! I am so angry!"

I don't know what else to do besides look at my feet.

"Mr. Gregory has no right to do this! I mean, who does he think he is? How is this going to help anyone? It has nothing to do with *education*. And it's certainly not in his jurisdiction. The administration doesn't have a problem with you not speaking, right?"

He swivels to face me, and he's angry, but he's not angry at *me*.

"We oughtta do something about this, Matt."

I nod, because who wants to get between an angry nerd and their grade?

"We should go talk to the principal."

I'm still nodding, but inside I'm thinking, *Oh no, I am not taking this to the principal.*

"Monday."

I stop nodding, because I realize he's serious. Unlike most people, who rant and whine and then go home and forget their worries with a gallon of ice cream, Dane actually means what he says. I want to shake my head, but my neck is frozen.

"Or, no, we should go to Mr. Gregory first. But if he doesn't listen to reason, then we'll take it to the principal."

I must be looking faint, because Dane asks me if I'm okay. I write bathroom and slip out. And I do go to the bathroom, but I also splash cold water in my face and do my breathing exercises.

*Okay, no big deal, just go back in there and tell him that there's no way you're confronting Mr. Gregory.*

After ten minutes of thinking about what I want to say, I feel steady enough to tramp back to my room. Dane's almost done with the presentation, just proof-reading, and he's typing with a normal amount of force.

*I can't face Mr. Gregory*, I write. Dane reads it and gives me a heightened eyebrow. By way of explanation, I add, *He scares me.*

Dane looks at this for a while, cocking his head to the side and pursing his lips. Finally, with a sigh, he says, "Yeah, he scares me too. But look, we'll go together. I'll do all the talking, but he won't take us seriously unless we do it as a team. After all, teachers are just big bullies, and there's nothing bullies fear more than large groups."

He's picked an analogy I can understand well. And he has a point. But I still don't want to be convinced, so I shake my head.

"Matt, I promise it won't be that bad. Please."

Dane didn't blame me for screwing up his grade, even when it was obviously my fault. So maybe he won't blame me if I refuse to go. In fact, I know he won't blame me. He's too nice. But he won't like me, either.

I give a sigh and a nod, and Dane smiles.

"Yes! Trust me, everything's going to turn out all right."

How do you argue with that kind of upfront optimism?

After Dane leaves, I shovel down a quick lunch and get right back upstairs. It's my turn to type now.

\*\*\*

When Peter woke, he was lying on his stomach in a bed. His back burned, but it was subdued, less urgent than before.

*Where am I?*

"Are you awake yet?" a voice asked, prodding him on the shoulder. Peter winced. The voice and inconsideration belonged to Rag. She repeated the question, and Peter answered before she could poke him again.

"Yes! I'm awake."

"Good. We were worried about you," she said, helping him roll over and sit up. Peter's back wept with every movement. "Yeah, those burns were pretty bad when we found you. We paid a medic, and he bandaged them up and stuff, so they should be better. But still, there's a chance you might catch disease and die."

"Wonderful," Peter moaned, sipping the water Rag offered. His mouth and throat soaked it up, and he had to drink for a while before it could even reach his belly.

"Careful. Don't want to get sick."

"How long have I been asleep?"

"A couple of days. We're almost out of money, by the way. Don't worry, we're good for another night. Anyways, Donis and I looked everywhere for you, when you didn't come back to the inn. Well, I looked and Donis worried. Anyways, we found you over by the foot of the hills, after that freak storm. What *happened?*"

"It's a long story," Peter sighed, sinking into the pillows. That hurt his back, so he rolled over. "Where's Donis?"

"Getting food."

"You sent the blind man to get food?"

Rag just shrugged.

Peter dozed in and out. Even in dreams, he could feel the throb of his back. It had its own pulse, and it burned from even the coverings around it. He wanted to claw it off his back, but knew better. It was the only thing between him and an infection.

Donis came back laden with food. Despite his eyes, he had made an excellent selection, with everything looking fresh.

"Was this expensive?" Peter asked, chewing on bread. Real bread, not stale travel rolls.

"Um, yes, well, about that. We're out of money."

Peter swallowed his mouthful of bread. It didn't taste as good now.

"No problem," Rag said, "We can get some more. The room's paid for tonight, so we don't need to worry about it now. I'll find some tomorrow."

Peter was too tired to argue. He ate as much food as he could and went to sleep.

The next morning, he felt horrible. He'd rolled over in middle of the night, and the pain woke him up. So, he corrected himself, only to roll over again. He was exhausted.

However, when he saw Rag, donning her old clothes, he had to say something.

"You're not gonna steal, are you?"

"What do you think the clothes are for? I go out, pick up some money and come back here and turn into a refined young lady. Don't worry, I won't get caught."

"Just because you won't get caught doesn't mean it's right."

"Got a better idea?"

"No, but I'm tired of you using that excuse. Just because I can't think of anything doesn't mean you can rob someone. *Help* me think of something else."

Rag didn't look interested. Peter turned to Donis for help, but he was snoring away on his mattress.

"Rag, look," Peter said, blocking her way to the door, "I don't know if you can fully appreciate this, but we are on a quest for the god of *justice*. What do you think's gonna happen to us if we steal all the time?"

"Well, nothing's happened so far."

"Rag."

She groaned and threw her hands into the air. However, she wasn't forcing past him.

"We have someone who can earn money –"

"You mean *him*?" Rag asked, gesturing to Donis sleeping in an undignified ball. "Peter, Donis means well, but I don't think he's good enough to get us more than one night's room and board. How are we supposed to get enough food to travel?"

It was Peter's turn to sigh. She had a point.

"Okay, you asked me to help you think of an idea, so here's one. We steal, and if your god has a problem with it, He can let us know."

Peter was about to argue, but Rag grabbed his hand and dragged him out the door. For a girl, she had a very strong grip. It was all that sneakery she did with her fingers.

"What are you doing?" Peter hissed.

"I'm tired of being the only one to get my hands dirty. Maybe if you *participate*, you'll appreciate the hard work I do. And you'll see it's not the end of the world."

"I don't know how to steal!"

"I'm about to teach you."

Much to Peter's relief, she let go of his wrist. How humiliating would it be, to be dragged down the street by a girl? And, even though he was free to run back to the room, Peter didn't. He followed behind.

*Rag's right. We need money and we need supplies. If the Grey God doesn't want me to steal, He's free to tell me any time.*

And, it he went with Rag, he could make sure she didn't get in too much trouble. No stealing from babies or anything.

So, Peter walked around the local market alongside her, trying to look inconspicuous. The crowd was thinner than he would have liked, though, so it was hard not to stand out, especially in his flowing grey robes. People may not know they meant he was an acolyte, but they did notice they were extravagant.

“Oh, it’s no use,” Rag growled, leading him behind a building, “You’re just no good at blending in. Okay, here’s the new plan. The man selling pots on the far side just made a lot of money. Go up to him and ask him about something. I’ll sneak around and get the money while he’s not looking. Think you can manage that?”

“Yes,” Peter agreed. He was excited in spite of himself.

Trying to look calm, Peter waltzed up to the seller and started asking all kinds of stupid questions. The man, after looking him up and down and deciding it was possible he had money, began explaining things Peter had never considered in a pot. He listened, though, and tried not to look at Rag sneaking up behind. Almost a shadow, she slipped around the back, lifted the small chest off the ground and whisked away, not breaking her stride. Like a cat, or a dancer, or even the wind, she moved gracefully, confidently and subtly.

Peter talked with the man for a few more minutes before announcing he wasn’t interested. The seller got a frosty look on his face, and Peter scurried away. He didn’t want to be there when the man found out he had been robbed.

Back at the room, Rag and Donis were dancing with glee.

“We could do this forever,” Donis said, hugging the chest, “Just live here at the inn.”

“Someone would notice eventually. After a while they get paranoid and it gets harder and harder, ‘til you can barely take anything at all,” Rag said.

“You know from experience, huh?” Peter asked. But he was feeling too good to make a big deal out of it. He had stolen, or at least helped, and he was still alive. Either the Grey God didn’t notice or He didn’t care.

“So what now?” Donis asked.

“Well, Donis, you’re gonna go buy us supplies. Rag and I will hide out here. Then, we hit the road.”

“Sounds good to me!” Donis said, grabbing the chest. He’d probably never held so much money in his life.

Skipping out the door, he left Rag and Peter to wait. At first they shuffled their feet and avoided each other’s gaze.

Finally, Rag said, “So, have you been smitten yet?”

“What?”

“Smitten...or is it smote? The past-tense of smite.”

“Oh,” Peter started, “*that* smitten. Um, no, I don’t think so.”

“Good.”

There was silence again. Rag seemed content to sit on the table and swing her legs, graceful even in repose.

“So,” Peter started, “how did you learn to steal?”

“I was hungry.”

Peter thought that was it, but after a long time, Rag continued, quietly, “I wanted to be able to support myself. So I could leave home.”



That was all she said until Donis came back. Even so, Peter felt he had learned a lot. There was more to Rag than met the eye. In fact, there was more to most people than met the eye. It's just he'd never bothered to look.

"Well, shall we?" Donis asked. With a groan, Peter put his pack on. That hurt too much, so he wore it around his front instead.

"You look stupid," Rag said.

"But I feel great," he replied, "Come on. We're heading north."

## Chapter 9

Dad knocks on my door. Perched on the bed, book in hand, I consider ignoring him. It worked with the pizza guy.

“Matt. We need to talk.”

Dad barges into my room, which I just finished sanitizing from Dane’s visit, and sits down on my bed. My *bed*. He must be pissed, if he’s punishing me like this. How am I supposed to sleep tonight?

I sit on the precipice of my bed, as far away from Dad as possible. He scoots closer.

“Matt, Mr. Gregory called me.”

On a weekend? This teacher’s *psycho*. How far is he gonna go to drag me to hell?

“He told me you’re close to failing.”

I am *not* close to failing. I have a C! That’s not failing. Before I can write this down, Dad continues.

“We talked for a long time, and I think he has a point. Matt, how long are you gonna stay silent? The rest of your life?”

We’ve had this talk before. He’s going to tell me I’ll never be able to get a job, and I won’t function in the real world, and I’ll die cold and alone. That’s bull. There are people born mute, and they function. And besides, I have no intention of staying silent forever. I just don’t know when I’m gonna start speaking again. When I’m ready. Eventually.

Dad’s going full tilt, wagging his finger and lowering his brow. I’d stop being mute this minute, if it meant I could be deaf instead. Even though he doesn’t raise his voice or get angry, it still cuts. After about fifteen minutes he loses steam.

“Look, Matt, I think it’d be a good idea for you to see a therapist again.”

Dad sighs and pats me on the knee. Yeah, Dad, just showered. Then he leaves the room and I shut the door, not slamming it, but sealing it very, very tightly. Before I get angry, I set about stripping the quilt off my bed. Sanitize first, and then I can be upset.

I replace my sheets, change pants, wash down the door knob and then spritz Febreze into the air. After that’s done, I collapse on my fresh bed and just breathe. It’s hard.

*Relax. Mr. Gregory can’t make you talk. Dad can’t make you talk either, no matter how many therapists he drags you to. They can fail you and punish you and make your life hell, but that can’t make you talk.*

*That’s one power you have over your own life.*

I’m upset, but in a distant sort of way, like I’m borrowing someone else’s anger. I guess Dad and I have fought so many times about me speaking, it doesn’t feel real anymore. That’s kind of unsettling, when the biggest problem in your life feels worn-out and rehearsed.

Sitting back up, I contemplate my options. If Dad is on Mr. Gregory’s side, then forget about bargaining. For my grade at least. Maybe I can still do something about Dane’s grade.

What if I really do fail Mr. Gregory’s class? I’ll have to repeat it. But I don’t want to fail. I deserve to pass his class. I put up with that obnoxious little shit every day; I am not going through it again.

I need advice, so I boot up my computer and log on to my email. Maggy might have some kernels of wisdom. But when I log on, I see that I have a message. It's not from Maggy.

*The only way to find out who it's from is to open it.*

*But what about viruses?*

It says it's from a Samuel Collins. That name sounds familiar enough to goad my curiosity. When I open it, I'm greeted by a nice heading that says *Dr. Collins- Speech Specialist*.

*Oh yeah, I remember emailing him.*

I scroll down to the meat of the message, warily debating whether I want to read it. What if he tells me I can never talk again?

*Dear Peter,*

*The vocal chords are actually not muscles at all, but soft tissues connected to the larynx. So, theoretically, if a person stopped talking, basic functions like swallowing and breathing would guarantee that speech capabilities would not be lost completely. Said person might have to relearn how to form sounds, but I doubt the process would be too strenuous. However, since this is all theoretical, I cannot say anything for sure. If you would like to know more, feel free to contact me and set up an appointment to blah blah blah...*

I'm not reading anymore. Vocal chords aren't muscles. That means I still might be able to talk. It's like Jesus himself came down and laid his hands on my head!

I run to my mirror and press my forehead to the glass. Slowly, I trace my throat with my finger, feeling the bumps and curves of the larynx hidden under the skin. Buried in there, I have the power to speak. Any time I want to.

I meet my own gaze in the mirror. My reflection's gaze. My breathing has shrouded the glass with that milky white foam that's impossible to wipe away completely. My face is half-observed under that white sheet, so I can't see my mouth. Just my eyes, staring back.

I can speak. If I want to.

What would I say to myself? What would I say to anyone? After all this time silent, I don't have the guts to start talking out of the blue. The world still isn't ready to listen to me.

There's nothing for me to say. Even though I want to speak, I can't find the words. For the longest time I stare into the mirror, almost speaking, almost speaking, and slipping back into silence every time.

There's a knock at the door, and I jump.

"Amanda's here!" Dad calls through the wood, "Come and say hi!"

It's an order, not a request, so I wipe off the mirror, eyeing the reflection one last time. Then I head downstairs.

*I'll come, Dad. But I won't say hi. Not until I'm ready.*

Dad forces me to stay downstairs for a while, sitting between him and his beloved. They're tossing love-stricken glances at each other and giggling, even when nothing is said. The first chance I get, I sneak back upstairs and stuff my blanket at the foot of the door. God, why do they make so much noise?

I don't want to go back to staring at the mirror, so I email Maggy instead. I make it *very* clear that she can't come over, but I also tell her about the situation and how nuts it's driving me. It's almost eleven, and Amanda shows no signs of going home.

She writes back: *Ew! They're totally gonna do it again with you in the house!! My deepest, deepest sympathies. If you were ever to sneak out, now would be the time.*

I reply: *Sorry, but you know I don't sneak out. Too much madness after dark.*

*Hey, Maggy, purely theoretical, but if you, say, left your family for a long time and didn't get to talk to them and then came back, what's the first thing you'd say?*

Maggy: *That one's easy. I'd tell them I love them.*

Well that doesn't help me one bit.

Desperately clinging to our conversation, I type a chapter's worth of emails to her. It's just Maggy and I, having a conversation. It must be three in the morning when I go to bed. I fall right asleep and don't notice anything else. I just think about how good it felt to talk to Maggy.

The next morning, the first thing I want to do is write. I'm not even hungry, so I sit down and let the words flow.

\*\*\*

After a long day of travel, they made camp and prepared for a paltry dinner. Even on half-rations, their supplies wouldn't last long. So, while there was still some light, Peter left Donis and Rag to start a fire while he searched for food.

"Are you sure that's all right?" Rag asked, "Wouldn't it be better if I went, with your back and all?"

"I can do this," Peter replied, even though his back hurt fiercely. He wasn't about to admit it to anyone.

Peter made out for a grove of trees. Maybe there would be fruit on the branches, a little riper than the last fruit he's found.

However, after wandering through the them, Peter realized that he wouldn't be able to tell what was edible and what wasn't. There were strange lumps attached to some of the trees, possibly seedpods, perhaps fruit. He identified the odd lumps as pomegranates, the kind of fruit people offered at the temple when they wanted vengeance for a deceased relative.

Plucking it off the branch, Peter hefted the fruit in his hands. He didn't know whether it was ripe or not. Even if he tasted it, he probably still wouldn't be able to tell. It was something to supplement their meal, though, so Peter ripped several from the boughs. Cradling them in his arms, he lugged the lumps back to camp and plopped them beside the fire.

"What are *those*?" Rag asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Food, so don't complain," Peter said, peeling off the skin with his knife. Seeds spilled out, dozens of seeds held together with a red jelly. "Um, does anyone know how to eat pomegranates?"

"We could boil them and mash them down," suggested Donis.

"You can do that with pomegranates?"

"You can do that with practically anything."

Dubious, Peter filled a recently bought pot with water and plunked the fruit in. While they munched on their bread, they watched the fruit simmer. It didn't smell too bad. Peter hoped that meant it was ripe. They squished the

pomegranates into one gelatinous mass, quivering red with seeds laced throughout.

“Do we eat the seeds?” Rag asked, poking the giant pile.

“I think so. I’ve never actually eaten a pomegranate. People would come to the temple and burn them, though.”

“Burn em, huh?” Rag muttered, scooping a portion up and glaring at it. She looked like she wouldn’t mind burning it.

“Well, it smells great, and that’s all that matters to me,” Donis said, slurping up a mouthful. When he didn’t vomit or clutch his belly, Rag and Peter sampled their own portions. It wasn’t bad. Chewy, but sweet.

“You know, there’s a story about pomegranates,” Donis mused, lying back on the ground. He had shoveled his serving down before Rag and Peter had even started, and he probably would have eaten more if given the chance. Now he was just thinking out loud, to occupy his mouth. “S a good story, too. If only I could remember it.”

“There’s a story about everything,” Peter said, flopping onto the ground beside Donis. He made sure to flop on his belly, but even so, pain shot through his back at the sudden movement. After all that food, he was sleepy.

“What was that you said, about people burning the pomegranates?” Donis asked.

“Just that. When people thought a relative had been murdered or something, and they wanted to find out who did it so they could get vengeance, they brought us a pomegranate. We’d burn it on the altar and then the priests would eat what was left. Then they’d wait for a vision from the dead, so they could tell the family who to punish.”

“Communicating with the dead?” Rag cheeped, licking her bowl, “Isn’t that something they should go to the temple of Sick Wind for?”

“Well, when it’s a matter of vengeance, they come to us.”

“Huh. Maybe that’s why Sick Wind is mad at your god. He’s infringing on Her territory.”

“This ritual’s a hundred years old at least.”

“And gods sharing domains and responsibilities isn’t that uncommon,” offered Donis, “To cure droughts, you can go to either the Sultry Goddess or, um, who else?”

“The Grey God,” replied Peter, “you know, for a bard, you are really lousy with your lore.” Of course, Peter was lousy with his lore, too. All he knew came from living at the temple, and that was only rituals and offerings that applied to the Grey God.

Donis mused some more about stories he couldn’t remember, while Peter drifted closer and closer to sleep. It was hard for Peter to tell when he slipped into dreams. That was partly what made his visions so horrifying.

The earth buckled and heaved around him, the ground turned into a churning, boiling fluid. As he lay helpless, forms clawed their way into the daylight. They were people. Or at least, they *used* to be people. Now they were figures of rotting muscles and peeled-away flesh. Forcing their limbs to move in a stuttering fashion, they clawed their way towards Peter. He was frozen. Not even

his mouth could move. As the dead came close, he could hear their whispers, collectively snarling from empty throats.

Something jolted Peter, and the convulsing meadow dissipated in an instant. He was back at the campfire.

“Peter, what’s wrong with you?” Donis asked, leaning very close. Beside him, Rag looked at Peter with a mixture of curiosity and concern, “You were screaming loud enough to wake the dead.”

Rising up, Peter gulped the air. There were tears on his face, and his throat had that warm feeling, like it had been called into action unexpectedly. He didn’t remember screaming and he *didn’t* remember crying, even though he had wanted to do both.

“Wh-what happened?” he asked, running his hands through his hair.

“I told you. You were screaming like you’d been grabbed by a demon.”

“Was it a dream?” Rag asked, holding out the water skin. Peter shoved it away. His stomach and his heart were mashed together, beating and squirming as one. If he drank anything right now, it would come back up.

“Yeah, it was a dream,” he answered, cradling his head on his knees. That hurt his back. “At least, I think it was a dream. I hope it was a dream.”

The sun still clung to the horizon, casting enough light so Peter could look around. The earth was smooth. No churning, no emptying graves, no angry masses of the dead.

“Well, if it was just a dream,” Donis said, crawling to his blanket, “I’ll be going back to sleep.”

Rag followed suit. However, she didn’t immediately take to snoring. Instead, she surveyed Peter and, seeing him still shaken, suggested, “You should try to get some sleep. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Peter nodding, rubbing out the last of his tears. He felt better now. Not good enough to sleep, but he could try.

As soon as he lay down, though, he felt sleep pulling him back. He was closing his eyes, slowing his breath...

...waking up in that other field under an unnaturally bright noonday sun. A ripple traveled through the ground. Before it began heaving, began turning inside out, Peter caught a glimpse of someone, whole and alive, standing at the edge of his vision. But then it happened again, the nightmare surfacing of the dead. Peter wanted to thrash and scream, but his body was inert.

*I must be screaming in the real world. They’ll wake me up. They’ll save me. Unless they decide to ignore me.*

This time, he did not wake until the dead were upon him. Those decaying fingers and smiling skulls and that horrible, horrible stink tore at his skin. He felt like gagging, but even his reflexes were frozen. With a shock, he realized he wasn’t even breathing. He was dead, and these things had come to claim him.

But they didn’t drag him away. Instead, they spoke to him. Jostling each other and fighting with their flimsy limbs, they struggled to get close, so they could lean over and whisper in his ear. No matter how close they got, Peter couldn’t understand the words coming from their mutilated lips.

*I don’t know what you want!*

Through the turmoil of bodies, Peter saw a figure walking towards him, smoothly, upright. Someone out there wasn't dead, and they were coming towards him. Even though the ground buckled, the form never stumbled. In fact, it walked with such controlled grace, Peter knew it had to be a woman. In her arms, she held a lyre. It was the woman from the endless cornfield, the one that had cursed them and disappeared. Miranda.

As she drew closer, Peter could see her lips in that closed-mouth smile. She was enjoying this. She stood beside the writhing mound of dead and looked down at him. The dead, though they still coiled and lashed, gave her a wide berth. With her toes almost touching his head, she leaned over him and began to whisper, her words cold and clear.

"Since you refuse to die, it seems we will have to do this the hard way. Find me. I will be waiting—"

"Wake up already!"

Peter was wet. He was wet, and he was back in the world of wakefulness. Beside him, Rag stood next to the dying fire, holding a sagging water skin. She had dumped cold water over him.

"Couldn't you have shaken me?" coughed Peter. The night air dug into his skin, and with a shiver, he pulled towards the fire. The only part of him that wasn't cold was his burned back.

"I tried. I shook you, I slapped you, I screamed. You were screaming, too, but you wouldn't wake up."

"Oh. Well, thanks," Peter mumbled. The woman, Miranda, had been telling him something. Something important. He hadn't gotten it all, and he didn't care. If it was that important, she'd have to tell him in a place that was less frightening.

*What was that woman doing in my dreams?*

"I think I figured out what's happening to you," Donis remarked. He was thumbing his kithara. Apparently he hadn't been much help when Peter was screaming in his sleep. "What you mentioned earlier, about the priests eating the pomegranate. Were the visions they had anything like what you had now?"

Peter held his head and thought. Well, he had never heard them scream in their sleep. And they didn't go to sleep to have visions, they went into a trance. Was there a difference?

"I can't say for sure, but... maybe. I'm definitely dreaming about the dead. But I'm not a priest."

"You're the closest thing to a priest of the Grey God there is. I think that's what these dreams are."

It made sense to Peter. He was so desperate to explain those otherworldly dreams, he probably would have accepted any explanation. Anything that proved he wasn't just losing his mind.

"Well, how do I get them to stop?"

"How should I know?" Donis said, "You're the acolyte, not me. How did the priests get them to stop?"

"I don't know. They never did anything after they had the visions. And they slept soundly that night."

"Perhaps they were just used to them."

“Or maybe it wears off after a few hours,” suggested Rag, stirring the fire.

“That could be,” mused Donis, “In any case, they’re not dangerous. You should just bear through them. And try not to scream so loudly. Some of us are sleeping.”

With that, Donis rolled over. All Peter could do was gape at his insensitivity. Not scream? Easy for the one having peaceful, normal dreams.

“Maybe you should stay awake for a while,” Rag said, sitting cross-legged beside him.

Peter nodded. That sounded like a good idea, but he didn’t think he could pull it off. Already, sleep tugged at his eyelids, making them droop. Was that part of the effect too? This exhaustion that pulled him into slumber? Peter had never felt this tired in his life.

“Will you,” Peter began, hesitated, and then continued, “Will you stay up with me?”

For a moment, Rag looked like she’d refuse. But then her face softened. She threw another log on the fire.

“Yeah, I guess I can.”

They sat in silence for a while, watching the fire flicker. However, it was too hard to stay awake like that, so Peter started a conversation.

“Do you miss your home?”

Rag snorted and looked into the darkness, away from Peter.

“No.”

There was more silence for a while, when Peter couldn’t gather the courage to try again. He was dangerously close to drifting off when Rag piped up.

“I know what it’s like, to have dreams so bad you don’t want to sleep.”

She was staring straight into the fire now, her face unreadable.

“What do you dream about?”

“My father.”

Peter puzzled over what that meant, not entirely sure he wanted to find out. His first impulse was to say he was sorry, but he knew that would sound insincere. Instead, he said, “I know what it’s like, to be bound to someone you can’t please.”

Rag nodded, still staring into the fire.

“Peter, are you running away?”

“...No. I don’t have the guts.”

“Well, it is kind of impossible, to run away from someone who’s omniscient.”

Peter laughed, genuinely laughed, for the first time in a long while.

“Yeah, those were my thoughts. But lately, I’ve been wondering if the Grey God really is omniscient.”

“What?” Rag gasped, switching her stare from the fire to Peter, “Isn’t it sacrilegious to say that?”

“I think so. And that’s the thing. I can curse the Grey God, and steal, and say things like that, and nothing happens. I don’t think He watches me all the time.”



*I don't think I'm important enough.*

“Interesting,” murmured Rag, “So if He’s not omniscient, and you could run away, where would you run to?”

From there, the conversation blossomed into amiable talk like Peter had never experienced first hand. He and Rag talked about places they’d go, if only they knew how. They talked about the exotic towns they’d heard about, pristine across the sea. They talked until the fire died down and the night thinned, and they slipped into dreams.

There were no more dead waiting for Peter. Only the woman, with her lyre and mocking smile, standing in the distance and singing. Peter listened to her beautiful, ethereal song echoing through his dreams until dawn.

## Chapter 10

Monday dawns too soon and too early. I smack my alarm and roll out of bed. Lying on the cold floor, I look at all the dust bunnies lurking in that space between my bed and my wall. Who said there's no such thing as monsters under your bed? With a shudder, I make a mental note to vacuum them up later.

As I march into school, I realize that I'm supposed to confront Mr. Gregory at lunch. I almost turn around and march back out. There goes my lunch plans with Maggy. Maybe Dane will forget, and I'll be home free. But this is Dane I'm talking about. He probably typed up a speech and rehearsed it.

*No biggie. He promised you wouldn't have to say anything. Just stand there and nod.*

But I can't calm down. For the first two periods, I'm nervous and fidgety and sweaty. I hate sweat. It's like flypaper for germs.

By World History, I'm weak in the knees. I slip into my seat and finger the profanity carved into my desk. That about sums up my feelings right now. When Dane walks into the classroom, he flashes me a thumbs up. Sure enough, he's clutching a paper that probably has a list of his grievances.

I sit through class and think up excuses. I could go to the school nurse. I'm feeling very queasy. Feverish, too. But the school nurse hates me, and she and Dad have pretty much agreed that unless I vomit up blood I have to stay at school.

*Maybe if I ram this pencil far enough down my throat, I'll cut myself and trigger my gag reflex. Then I'll be vomiting blood.*

But there's no way I'd ever do that. The graphite could get lodged in my throat, or I could choke on my own congealed blood, or the cut would get infected and I'd suffocate on pus.

Class ends, and I want to run out the door. Dane catches my eye, though, and I'm frozen to the spot. When the classroom's empty, Dane comes over to me and gives me another thumbs up. Not sure where I'm getting the strength, I rise from the desk, and we march towards Mr. Gregory. I feel like there should be a dirge playing in the background.

"Mr. Gregory," Dane announces, and Mr. Gregory gives a sigh and folds his arms. "Matt and I want to talk to you."

"Is this about the oral report?"

He has "I've already made up my mind" written all over his face.

"Yes sir. Matt and I feel you are being unfair. We have both worked hard on this project, and we're far more researched than the other teams. We feel like," and here Dane pulls out his paper and reads off all the reasons Mr. Gregory is being unfair. Before he gets far, Mr. Gregory shoves the paper down.

"Dane, I haven't given you a bad grade yet. So far, you both received full points for the research parts. However, for the oral part of the report, I will judge you based on how you *orally* present the information."

"B-but that's not fair!"

"I'm sorry, Dane, but it's in the rubric. I can't score you differently than I do any of the other groups."

Dane isn't taking this very well. He's chomping down on his lip, to keep it from quivering like the last autumn leaf on a tree branch. I want to step in, to take the pressure off him. But I can't.

"It's still not too late. Matt," Mr. Gregory turns to me and my stomach shakes hands with my brain, like on that rollercoaster I foolishly went on back in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, "I am willing to make a few concessions. As long as you speak during the report, even if it's a small part, then I will give you full credit for trying."

Mr. Gregory's eyeing me with his laser-strong gaze. Dane's looking at me with hope. I'm looking at the floor.

"Matt, can you do that?"

Yes. I can. I can physically vibrate my larynx and produce words. Theoretically. But I don't think I have the courage to do it at the front of class.

"Matt?"

Mr. Gregory is burning into me with those inhuman eyes. Maybe he's really a cyborg. Maybe I should stop, drop and roll, because I'm sure my skin is catching on fire.

There is enough silence to fill the gym, all being focused on me. Why is everyone so hyper-obsessed with *my* silence?

After a while that lasts too long, Mr. Gregory says, "Well, think about it."

The conversation ends, and Dane and I are left to straggle off to lunch. Even though Dane bids me good-bye and doesn't say anything about the conversation, I know he's hurt. I know it's only a matter of time before he blames me, too. Hell, I'm blaming myself.

Maggy's not in the library. That's fine, because right now I'm not in the mood to hang out. Instead, I slump on the couch and shut my eyes. As a little kid, I used to wonder what happened to the world when I blinked. Would it still be there when I opened my eyes?

Right now, I hope not.

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Home. I spend an hour on homework, a few minutes watching the mirror. Still nothing. I'll type instead, even though I'm afraid of how the story will go.

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After that horrible, horrible night, Peter wanted to sleep through the day. However, even though he felt closer to death, he knew they still had a long journey ahead. It wouldn't get any shorter if he rested.

Pack slung across his front, Peter dragged behind Donis. Rag walked beside him, surveying him skeptically.

"You shouldn't push yourself too hard."

"I know. But we can't wait. We have to move forward."

Rag sighed and rolled her eyes.

"You men and your self-destructive gallantry."

"That's unfair!" Donis called from the front, "I've never had the slightest twinge of self-destructive gallantry in my life."

*Yeah, I know.*

They stopped to eat lunch under a shady grove of trees. Pomegranates hung from every branch, and Peter lost his appetite.

"I'm going to fill our water skins," he said, watching Rag and Donis plucking the fruit and adding it to their meal. Well, at least *they* had a supplement to their diet.

Peter filled the flasks until they were brimming. Then, because the day was warm and his back was warmer, he undid his bandages and soaked in the cool water. He wished he could see his back. It didn't feel like it was healing.

After sitting in the water long enough to start shivering, Peter dragged himself back to shore. He did his best to retie his bandages, but they were lopsided and had gaps.

*It'll do for now*, he thought, picking up the water skins and heading back through the trees. For a moment, he thought he'd lost his way, because he couldn't hear any chatter. Not Rag, not Donis, not even birds. Peter turned in a slow circle. His back prickled, and it wasn't just the poor bandaging job.

Hyper-aware of his surroundings, Peter darted back the way he came, making sure to glance over his shoulder every few steps.

Back at camp, their supplies were strewn all over the place, some even dangling from the trees. Donis lay in a heap on the ground. Rag was nowhere in sight.

Kneeling down, Peter rattled Donis back and forth. When that failed, he upended a water skin over his head. With a sputter, Donis came to life.

"Back!" He yelled, swinging his fist at Peter's head. For a blind man, he had uncanny accuracy. With an "oomph" and a thud, Peter fell back.

"Donis! Donis, it's me, you crazy man!"

"It is? Oh, oh Peter, you have no idea how relieved I am to hear you," Donis cried, trying to hug Peter and missing, "Peter, where is Rag? Is she with you?"

Grinding his teeth, Peter scanned the area.

"No. I don't see her anywhere. Donis, what happened?"

"We were attacked."

"By who?"

"It wasn't a person. I can't say what it was for sure, but it definitely wasn't human. It was too *fast*. And it made Rag scream. I don't think just anything could do that."

"Did you... I mean, did Rag see it coming?"

"You'd have to ask her."

"I don't need to," Peter said, gathering their supplies, "I think I know what this thing was. Donis, do you remember the things in that cave, where we first met?"

"You mean the monsters that were working for that crazy hermit?"

"Yes. They tracked me down, in the last town. Hence why I was lying burned and half-drowned outside that cave."

"I wondered if you were ever going to explain that."

"Come on," Peter said, stuffing the supplies into a pack, "We need to find a cave."

"I'm no good at looking for things. Would it be all right if I stayed here?"

"No."

Hauling Donis up, Peter made for the hills he had seen earlier. If there were any caves around here, that's where they'd be. However, the closer he got, the more he felt like Donis. Quivering, useless and ready to run. Briskel didn't have anything against Rag. But he hadn't had anything against Peter and Donis when he took them captive. If they didn't rescue her, he'd probably roast Rag alive.

*It'd serve the thief right.*

But Peter couldn't leave her to die. A week ago he would have, but not now. Even though his back sweltered under the memory of last week's bonfire, Peter tramped on. When they located a cleft in the hill face, Donis stopped him from going in.

"Peter. Peter, we can't just march in there. We need a plan."

Grateful for the distraction, Peter halted.

"What do you suggest?"

"Well, I think being unseen is preferable. Is there a way we can make ourselves invisible? Caves are hard to see in, right?"

"Not for these creatures. They're used to the dark," Peter said, scratching at his chin, "Maybe we can use that to our advantage. I also think they hate light."

"Can we bring light with us?"

"Yes. We'll light torches."

Quickly, they set a couple of branches on fire. They wouldn't last long, and they weren't very bright, but Peter felt more confident with the smoldering sticks in hand.

"Are you ready?" he whispered.

"I'm ready," Donis replied, hefting his torch in one hand and his walking stick in the other, "I may not look it, but I've whacked plenty of heads in my time. I can fight."

*How would you know whether you were knocking heads or something else entirely?*

Tiptoeing on trepidation, they made their way down the dark hole. Peter could smell smoke, but since he was holding a torch, he had no reason to panic. Yet.

They walked for quite a while, far back into the unexpectedly long cave. Peter was ready to order an about-face when he thought he saw something moving. Even though he hefted his torch higher, he couldn't see a thing.

*That doesn't mean something isn't there.*

Remembering the shadow-drenched figure that had hauled him away, Peter scooted closer to Donis.

"I don't think we're going to find anything in here. We should turn back," Peter muttered.

"But-but I thought we were going to rescue Rag."

Taking a deep breath and gripping his sparking stub, Peter said, "Okay. A hundred steps more. Then we turn around."

They went a hundred steps, and with another inhalation and mustering of courage, a hundred steps more. The entrance of the cave was far gone, and Peter was sure now that something else was walking beside him. As their lights

grew dimmer and dimmer, he thought he could make out a shape, skulking beyond the light.

"We need to turn back," Peter squeaked. But, with a cold tremor, he realized that they'd never make it to the cave mouth before their torches went out. They'd been lured here, ensnared by their own stupidity. "We're gonna be trapped in the dark."

"Well, that's never stopped me before. Take my hand," Donis soothed, tossing his branch aside. It fell on the floor, and with a last puff died. From the dusk, a creature appeared in hazy outline.

"Donis!" he yelled, "R-right there!"

"What is it?" Donis gripped his staff with both hands, easing into a fighting stance that looked too refined for a blind bard. The thing, now that they'd spotted it, cast aside stealth and skittered towards them.

With a wild cry, Donis burst forth, swinging his walking stick willy-nilly. Peter backed out of range. Even though Donis swung blindly, he was intimidating enough to make the creature hesitate. In that second, Peter came up with a plan. He was going to run as fast as he could in the opposite direction and hope Donis was distracting enough to provide a clean getaway.

However, when he turned around, there was Briskel, one of the monsters standing at his elbow. An unconscious Rag lay at his feet.

*How did they sneak up behind me?*

"So, once again you have fallen into my clutches," Briskel started. But before he could get going, Peter had an idea. According to his burnt back, humans were flammable. And Briskel was more or less human.

Screaming, Peter leapt forward and shoved the hot stub into the man. Briskel was so covered in grime and refuse and guano, the sparks caught, and flame wrapped around his cloak.

With a scream and a hiss, he beat at himself. The monster tossed its head and backed away, startled by the sudden light.

"Donis!" Peter yelled above Briskel's howls, "Come on. We're getting out of here!"

Donis gave a few more wild swings at the beast behind, who was also shrinking away from the fire, and then stumbled towards him. They each took one of Rag's arms, and began a lopsided run towards the entrance.

Briskel was on the floor, the momentarily bright flames flickering out. He was screaming and yelling at his creatures, but they were too frightened to obey. Donis and Peter tripped all the way into the open air, and they kept going.

"Where are we headed?"

"Somewhere there's no caves," Peter gasped. His back burned from the strain, and he jostled Rag so much, he was surprised she hadn't woken up yet. Surprised, and a little worried.

They fled back to the grove, gathered the rest of their supplies, and dragged themselves a little farther up the road. However, Peter was too nervous and exhausted to continue.

"Stop. We'll light a fire. A big one," he huffed, slumping Rag onto the ground.

“Shouldn’t we make sure she’s all right first?”

“Fire. They don’t like fire.”

So even though it was only late afternoon, they lit a huge bonfire and huddled around it.

*We’ll have to travel with a lit torch all the time now,* Peter thought, dabbing at Rag’s brow with a wet cloth. The color came back to her face, and her breathing was normal. Peter thought she’d be fine, once she woke up.

“So, um, you don’t think they’ll come back, do you?” Donis stuttered.

“They will. That crazy hermit is out for our blood.”

“Well, we *did* set his home on fire.”

“And I just set him on fire, back in that cave.”

“Really?” Donis gasped, “Wonderful. Now he’ll never leave us be.”

Rag gave a cough, and both Peter and Donis occupied themselves with making her comfortable.

“Where am I?” she murmured, her voice a faint breeze, “My head hurts something awful.”

“You were abducted,” Donis supplied, holding out a water skin in the general area of Rag’s head, “We rescued you, though.”

Donis puffed out his chest, unaware that he looked ridiculous and unheroic.

“I was abducted?”

“Yes. Let me fill you in on the details,” Donis said, and proceeded to blow the story out of proportion. He added ten more monsters, a bloody battle, and fire raining from the sky.

*That’s what you get when you let a bard tell a story.*

Rag enjoyed it, though. She laughed and gasped and didn’t take him seriously at all. She was a good enough liar to know one when she heard one.

By that time, it was getting dark, and they ate their dinner around a bonfire. Even after gathering wood for an hour, they’d barely have enough to last until dawn. And to think, they’d have to do this every night. What would happen once they got into the mountains, where there were caves aplenty and little wood? Peter was too exhausted to worry about it.

Rag offered to take the first watch and keep the fire going. She claimed she felt great, and Peter was too tired from last night to argue. However, once he settled into his bed, he was too nervous to sleep. Donis’ snores didn’t help.

“You should get some rest. I’m gonna wake you up in a few hours,” Rag chided.

“I know. I’m trying. It’s just a little hard, when you know there’s something in the dark watching you,” Peter said. He swore he could feel eyes pricking the back of his neck. But then again, he’d felt like that since they’d left the cave.

“I’m not worried about them,” Rag sniffed.

“Yeah, well, you didn’t see them.”

Giggling, Rag scooted closer.

“You’re right, I didn’t. But I don’t care how ferocious they are. I’m still not scared.”

“Where do you get the bravery from?” Peter mumbled, wavering between sarcasm and curiosity.

“You,” Rag said, wrapping her knees in her arms, “You saved me back there. If they return, I guess you’ll just have to save me again.”

Laughing, Peter buried his head under his blankets. He was sure he was blushing. Rag was calling him a hero.

He didn’t deserve it. He’d wanted to abandon her and Donis back in that cave. It was mostly stupidity and chance that allowed him to save her, not his own courage. However, Peter didn’t want to tell her that. Instead, he hid his shame under his blanket and pretended to fall asleep.



## Chapter 11

I don't want to go downstairs for dinner. I want to spend the rest of my life in my room, feeling cowardly and staring at the mirror.

*This is Mr. Gregory's fault. Not mine.*

But it doesn't matter who's fault it is. If I don't speak, Dane and I are going down like a leaky Titanic, regardless of who's to blame. I'm so angry I want to scream. I wish I could. I wish I could start talking again and just fix this whole stupid mess. But at the same time, I'm scared to open my mouth. Things will be different once I speak.

At first everyone will be excited, and Dad will want to show me off to Amanda or whoever else he's screwing at the moment, and Maggy will expect me to become social. And everyone will treat me nice for a while, and then the novelty will wear off, and they'll leave. Things will go back to being the way they were a year ago, with everyone ignoring me.

*Why bother going through all the pressure and embarrassment of speaking again, if no one's going to listen?*

Dad knocks on the door, informing me that I have to go downstairs and eat *something*. I feel too queasy. Maybe I'm dying of nerves. But I don't want him to come in and mess up my bed, so I obey. Listening to Dad talk to himself, I think about how conversations would be different if I talked. I could tell him the food sucked, but it's not exactly a secret that I despise it. So maybe I wouldn't say anything at all. Maybe nothing would be different.

After dinner, I head directly to bed. I'm done wondering what would be different if I could speak. It's obvious. Everything would be the same.

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Sidling into World History the next day, I notice Dane's already there. I try not to catch his eye, just slip into my seat and play invisible. I'm always the first one here. Dane must have made a serious effort to get here fast. I think I can guess why. From the furrowed brow and tight lip, he was arguing with Mr. Gregory. And he lost.

He didn't tell me he was going to talk with Mr. Gregory. Obviously, he's decided to jump ship on the whole "we're in this as a team" crap and try to save himself. I can imagine him, pleading with Mr. Gregory to fail me all he wants, just spare *him*.

*Still, he stuck by me for a remarkably long time. Most people would have screwed the teamwork thing and argued about being graded separately from the first.*

Dane doesn't look my way. We're the only two people in the classroom, so he has to see me, but he faces the front. Fine. It's better this way. I don't want our eyes to meet, for that guilt to pass through his and the betrayal to pass through mine. Eyes aren't windows to the soul, they're defensive gaps for hurt to attack our brains.

So we ignore each other during class. Except that I'm hyper-aware of his every move. He takes notes and nods his head and scratches his neck and acts perfectly normal. But I've spent most of my life anxious and upset, and I know how to spot the signs. He doesn't raise his hand. He clenches the pencil with white knuckles. And he never, ever looks back at me.

Then, at the end of class, Dane shoulders his bag and walks out the door. He still doesn't glance back.

Watching him go, I think that if I had the guts to say something, right now it would be "I'm sorry."

Maggy's in the library. I don't feel like disappointing more people at the moment, so I pull out a textbook and pretend to be absorbed in homework. That doesn't put a dent in her talking.

"Matt, Halloween's next week. Come on, it's not too late to get a costume."

I close the textbook with a snap and send Maggy a look. The kind that says "I wouldn't go ice skating with you if hell froze over." Instantly, I feel like a huge jerk. Maggy gives a sharp sigh and looks at her feet.

"All I wanna do is have fun together."

She doesn't say anything else. After a few minutes of sitting in that silence, she gets up and leaves. No accusations, no insults, no backward glances.

Even if I could speak, sorry wouldn't be enough.

*I really need to write.*

\*\*\*

After a fitful night of sleep, the group got ready for another day's travel. They each carried a bundle of sticks, lighting one from the remains of the fire.

"Do you think one torch will be enough to keep those monsters at bay?" Rag asked.

"They're pretty scared of fire. I think we'll be fine," Peter reassured, even though he'd been wondering the same thing himself. They'd be in the foothills by nightfall, and the day after that the trees would start to thin out as they got into the mountains. To pile misfortune on misfortune, their food supply was running low, and the only thing they could spot was pomegranates.

*Well, I guess if I'm forced to eat them, I won't mind staying up all night to tend the fire.*

They made good progress, getting farther than Peter had hoped. It helped that they didn't stop for lunch. Too timid to reenter the trees, and with the sun too hot to stand still, they marched straight through the day. By late afternoon they were ready to fall onto the ground and sleep.

"All right, what do we have to eat?" Donis muttered, foraging through a pack. "Hmm. Well, there's not a lot in here."

"Peter, what are we gonna do for food?" Rag asked.

"I have no idea."

"Well, we have to do something."

"I know," Peter growled. He was stoking the fire, trying to concentrate.

"And what are we gonna do for wood when we get into the mountains?"

"How should I know?"

Rag descended into silence. After they got the flames going, they put their stale bread over the fire to toast. It came out singed.

"You know, Peter, Rag has a point," Donis said, already done with his meal, "We need a plan."

"All right, how about the next time the monsters attack, you two stand in the way and I escape."

Bitter silence followed his statement. Peter scuffed the ground. He was only joking. Mostly.

“You know, they aren’t after *me*,” Rag said. “I got dragged into this for hanging around you.”

“You can leave any time you want,” Peter said.

“I know!” Rag shouted, thrusting her crust into the fire. “You tell me that every time we talk. It’s obvious you want me gone. And you know what, I might just leave.”

She sniffed and turned her back on the fire, but made no motion to go. However, she was silent the rest of the night. Donis tried to chisel through the hostility with jokes, but it was no use.

*I should apologize*, he thought. Instead he stirred the coals, trying to coax it into a safer intensity.

The next morning, nothing was better. With empty bellies, they ascended into the mountains. Hiking uphill was hard, especially with a torch in hand. Several times, Peter stumbled and almost snuffed the flame out on the granite. No one offered to help him. He could excuse Donis, because he probably didn’t realize Peter was having such a hard time. However, Rag saw and only tossed her head.

At noon, they were half-way up the mountain. Even though they were closer to the sun, the wind bit with fangs of ice. The air was harsher up here, barely filling their lungs in thin wafts.

“Peter, where exactly are we headed?” Donis gasped, propping himself up with his walking stick.

“I don’t know.”

“You mean to tell me,” Rag interrupted, “that we’re wandering up here for no reason? We have no idea where we’re going?”

“We’re heading north.”

Rag’s snort echoed back at him, intensified by the curve of the mountain.

They stopped for lunch, huddling together in the cold and digging through their sacks for scraps of food. Unless they found something else, they’d be hungry tonight.

“Okay, let’s make camp here,” Peter ordered, “We’ll spend the rest of the day gathering wood and food.”

“From where? There are no trees,” Rag observed.

“There are bushes.”

So they threw their packs in a pile and started hacking and pulling up the shrubs that dotted the hillside. Even though he had a knife, Peter couldn’t use it while holding the torch. Should he give away his safety and make his job easier, or hand the knife to someone else and struggle with his bare hands?

In the end, he couldn’t part with his security, so he handed the knife to Rag. She accepted it without thanks, but her frosty exterior melted a little, and she even gave a few smiles at Donis’ jokes.

“There’s some berries on this bush,” Rag said, “Do you think they’re edible?”

“Only one way to find out,” Donis said, feeling around for a berry and popping it into his mouth.

“Donis!”

“What? It’s just one berry. If I’m not sick by nightfall, then we know they’re okay.”

“Well, better you than me,” Rag muttered.

They found more of the bushes scattered across the hillside. By the time they had enough foliage for a night’s fire, they also had enough berries for a meal. However, they hadn’t found any wood suitable for torches. Unless they wanted to burn twigs, tomorrow they’d be walking fireless. Peter was anxious, but Rag and Donis didn’t seem worried.

“I think as long as we stay in the sun, we’ll be okay,” Rag reassured.

Peter wasn’t so sure. If Briskel was desperate enough, he’d attack in sunlight. However, there was nothing to do but hope for the best.

As they sat around the fire in the oncoming dusk and ate their mystery berries, they swapped stories and tried to ease each other’s anxiety. Peter felt like the rifts from last night were falling away, and that they could leave all the unpleasantness behind. Even if it was a temporary mend, he was glad it was there.

“You really think we’ll be safe tomorrow, without a fire?” Peter asked. He felt like a whiny infant, fishing for comfort.

“Sure. I mean, if they’re going to attack, why not attack at night, right? I say, if we make it through tonight alive, we’re safe enough.”

“Great,” Peter murmured. That was reassurance. For tomorrow.

## Chapter 12

The next day, I print out the first few pages of my story and shove them into my backpack. I can't stand the jerk I am, but I don't know how to say I'm sorry. So I've come up with an alternative.

I just hope I have the guts.

In World History, Dane flashes me a brief smile. He's probably still upset, but at least he's calm enough to fake not being mad. Our presentation is in one week. That means I still have time to think of a way to fix this ungodly mess. For now, though, I'm going to tackle a problem that's a little less hopeless.

At lunch, Maggy's there. She doesn't look happy, though. I know Maggy, so I know from the way she's sitting and the lack of a cheery hello that she's still angry. However, Maggy hates being mad at people, so this is her way of trying to smooth things over. She's going to force herself to sit and be cordial and pray for the tension to dissolve.

I'm tempted to let her make the first move. If I wait long enough, she'll start a conversation and things will go back to the way they were before. Except that's a chewing gum and paper clip solution. She'll forgive me, but she won't forget.

So, with a deep breath, I sink onto the couch and extract those first few pages of my story. It's like holding a hot potato. I want to hand it to Maggy and let her read it silently and be done with it. But that's not what I promised myself.

I used to wear band-aids for weeks. Not because I liked them; I hated that synthetic linen clinging to my skin and absorbing germs. But I was afraid of the pain and of holding that dirty rag in my hand. Most of all, I was afraid of seeing the wound underneath. I was afraid of pulling the band-aid off too early, before the wound had time to heal, so I kept them on for weeks longer than I should have.

I'm holding the papers in my ever so slightly quivering hand, and I'm deciding if it's too early. Maggy's curious about what's going on, but not saying a word. I think maybe she senses that right now the last thing I need is someone to fill the silence for me.

It's time I do that myself.

With a big, shaky breath, I start to read.

“Peter! You have displeased me once again!”

My voice is squeaky and strained. Even though I printed out the first ten pages, I only get to about two and a half before I decide to quit. My throat feels weird, like I just drank unsweetened lemonade. Maggy doesn't say anything after I finish reading. She's giving me a strange look, surprise tinged with something, maybe another shade of surprise. Like, she's shocked I'm speaking and she wasn't expecting a story.

Finally, she says, “Is that the novel you've been working on?”

I nod.

“Am I... am I the first person to hear it?”

Another nod. I can't find any words to explain why. I want the words, but they're all gone now. No, they were never there at all. I don't have the strength yet, to think of words to say. Just to read words I've already written.

Maggy isn't bothered when I revert to silence. In fact, she seems pleased. Side by side, we sit for the rest of lunch. Maggy doesn't pressure me to talk or anything. However, when the lunch bell rings, she gives me a smack on the knee as she rises.

“Bring more of your story tomorrow, okay?”

I’m smiling like an idiot. That’s better than any praise she could have given me. She wants to hear more.

After school, I rush home and back up to my mirror. I sounded like a squeaky, prepubescent nerd today. Not very attractive. I think with practice I can get over that.

However, back at the mirror all the words evaporate again, and I just stare at myself in frustration. Why can’t I speak? Now that I know I can do it, it should be easy. Except that real life is never logical.

On a whim, I grab my story out of my backpack. Since it worked today, maybe it can work now.

It doesn’t. The only difference is now I have papers to crinkle in frustration. I guess, like the best whiny people I know, I need an audience.

*Well, speaking can wait until tomorrow. Right now, I have to make sure I have something to read aloud.*

\*\*\*

The next day, they pressed on without a torch. Sending the frequent glance over their shoulders, they scrabbled up the slope for the first half of the day. It was slow going, but up here there were plenty of berry bushes. They ate as they went, dining off the same bushes they used as a handhold.

When they stopped for lunch, they found a spring to fill their water skins. It was cold, stagnant stuff, but they were too thirsty to be picky.

“Okay, group,” Peter said, sprawled on his belly, “from here, I think we can cut across the ridge to the next mountain.”

“And where exactly are we going again?” Rag asked, folding her arms.

“North.”

She didn’t say anything to that, just ground her teeth. Peter couldn’t blame her. How would they know when they arrived? Even if they wandered for the rest of their lives, they could still not find Sick Wind’s domain. On the positive side, though, every step they took was one further from Briskel and his monsters. Assuming Briskel was stationary and not moving towards them.

“Come on,” Peter said, hauling Donis to his feet, “Let’s get across the ridge.”

After another couple hours slogging along, they set up camp. Even though Donis and Rag reassured Peter that there was nothing to worry about, Peter insisted on gathering plenty of wood. Better to be over-prepared than eaten.

Once the arduous work of gathering firewood and lighting the fire was done, they weren’t in a talkative mood. Donis shoved his berries in his mouth and fell asleep, leaving Rag and Peter to stare into the coals.

“Peter,” Rag whispered, gathering her blanket around her, “I know you mean well, but how long do you plan to wander aimlessly?”

With a sigh, Peter explained, “There’s nothing else we can do. We have to keep searching, even if we don’t know where we’re headed.”

“You’re gonna push yourself straight into your grave.”

At that, Peter squirmed uncomfortably. He had been thinking the same thing. Unconsciously, he reached to feel his back, at the wounds that weren’t

healing fast enough. He was sure he was getting an infection. But how was he supposed to know? He couldn't just turn around and look.

"Rag? Can I ask you a favor? Could you rewrap my bandages? Last time I took them off, I couldn't put them back on straight."

"Sure," Rag chirped.

Slipping out of his robe, Peter sat in nothing but his breeches. It was cold, and Rag's hands were colder. Resisting the urge to yelp, Peter forced himself to sit still as she unwound his bandages. Being half-naked in front of a girl made him uneasy. But who else was he going to ask to treat his wounds? Donis? Instead of dwelling on it, Peter bit his lip and pretended not to notice Rag's hands on his back.

"It's awfully red."

"It's a burn. What other color would it be?"

"And there's some pussy stuff, too. I think it's just blisters, though," Rag reassured. "What are you supposed to do to blisters again?"

"Um, you're either supposed to bleed them out or not bleed them out no matter what, but I can't remember which."

"Well, I am *not* popping your disgusting blisters with my bare hands. Let's assume you're not supposed to mess with them."

Gently, Rag realigned the linen, taking her time to get it straight and cover every square inch of back. When she was done, Peter threw his robe over his head, partly from the cold and partly from self-consciousness.

"Thank you."

"Any time," Rag said, dusting her hands off, "but now you have to do me a favor. You have to promise me that if we don't find Sick Wind soon, within a month, you'll give up this stupid quest."

"You can't abandon an errand from a god! Especially my god. He'll hunt me down and smite me."

"But you said you weren't sure he was omnipotent."

"He doesn't have to be. He'd search until he found me, and then, I don't know, turn me into something unpleasant."

"You're already unpleasant," Rag bit back, scowling, "and besides, if this quest is that important to the Grey God, why doesn't he help you out? Point you in the right direction, give you supplies, at least send a thunderbolt through that idiot Briskel?"

"I don't know," Peter admitted, letting his head fall, "I think maybe he enjoys my suffering."

"That doesn't sound divine."

"It's not, but what choice do I have?"

With a sigh, Rag tossed another hacked-up bush onto the fire. She watched the embers drift into the air and extinguish before they reached the sky. Peter watched her watching the flames and wished he had something to say that wouldn't prove himself a total coward.

Finally, Rag spoke, "You have the choice to try."

She was still gazing at the sparks, their brief phoenix-flight to extinction. A frown covered her face. It wasn't quite disappointment. More like she was waiting for his reply.

"All right," Peter said, "all right. If we can't find Her, then...then I'll run away."

"Really?!"

"Yeah," he whispered, chewing on his desire to take the words back. Promising to run away took a lot of courage. Still, a promise was a promise. And he was glad he had made it.



## Chapter 13

The next day, as soon as I roll out of bed, I'm thinking about Maggy. Today, for once, I'm actually looking forward to school. Well, okay, I'm looking forward to lunch, which is a part of school. If I keep this up, and start talking normally and skip off to lunch every day, I'll be a regular kid.

Dad will be so proud.

*Dad.*

Sitting across the table from him, munching on one-hundred percent tasteless granola, I think about saying good morning. Could I, if I really wanted to, open my mouth and break this silence?

Not yet.

I sit through my boring, inefficient morning classes, zoning out until World History. There, I spend a guilty hour staring at the back of Dane's head. Our presentation is next week. I have to think of a way to fix this, and soon.

*Just talk. Just open your mouth and do the stupid report.*

But I can't just "open my mouth." If I want to talk, I'll need something more than resolve. I'll need the words. Where do you get those?

Class ends, and I let Dane get a head start, so I don't have to run into him.

*I'll find an answer for you, Dane. Tonight, when I have time to think about it.*

Maggy's already in the library, sitting patiently. Slipping the papers out of my backpack, I start to read. No introductions or explanations, not even a hesitation. All those hours staring in the mirror without a single word, but now I can spit them out without fretting over it. Why?

I read the next few pages, stopping when my throat starts to hurt. Even though they're not muscles, my vocal chords aren't use to this sort of exercise. I don't want to wear them out.

After I finish, I fidget with the papers. I'm waiting for Maggy to say something, but she's quiet. Did I do something wrong?

Finally, she pipes up, "It's nice to hear your voice, Matt."

I nod, not meeting her gaze. What the heck is that supposed to mean? Is it girl-code for something?

"So... is this gonna become a regular thing? You speaking, I mean."

My first impulse is to nod, but I stop myself. Truth is, I'm not sure if I want to start speaking to everyone. And even if I wanted to, I'm not sure I could. So I settle for a shrug. Maggy doesn't look disappointed, just bobs her head like she expected that answer.

"Well, I hope it does. If there's anything I can do to help, let me know, all right?"

She smacks my knee and then pulls out her cards. We spend the rest of lunch normally, her talking and me nodding.

After school, I zip through my homework. I want plenty of time to fret over World History.

Mr. Gregory isn't going to budge, and I can't stand to screw Dane over. Right now, it looks like the only rational solution is for me to speak. If only I could talk when I needed to, and the only thing I had to worry about was the moral quandaries of

compromising my personal vow of silence for a grade. But no, even if I decide I want to prostitute myself to make this mess go away, I'm not sure I can.

I rake my fingers through my hair. When I was little, I used to do that whenever I was anxious. So, all the time, practically. I pulled a lot of my hair out, so that I had this permanently ruffled, half-bald look. Mom threatened to put a cone on my head if I didn't stop, so I learned not to pull as hard. Still, when I'm mulling something over, it's habit to claw at my head. After all, it's my brain's fault I'm so upset. If I couldn't think, these things probably wouldn't bug me as much.

*Okay, what are my options?*

*Give in or be screwed. That's it. But I can't even do that. I can't do anything to make them happy. Why am I even trying?*

Just thinking about it is giving me a panic attack. But I can't ignore it. That's what I've been doing so far, and it hasn't helped.

*I have to speak.*

That's all there is to it. I have to speak, and I have to find out how.

"Hey, Matt. Whatcha thinking about?"

Dad's home. I must have lost track of time. He's giving me that look, head resting on slumped shoulders and face sagging down. It's the look he gives when he's worried about my worrying. It makes him look so *old*.

I wave a hand at him, to tell him everything's fine and he can go back to ignoring me. He's not buying it. Instead, he sits down on the couch beside me.

"You know, Matt, if you wanna talk about anything, I'm here to listen."

Of course he's there to listen. Not to listen to my problems, but to listen to me finally give in to the pressure. This is his fault. If he'd taken my side, Mr. Gregory would have conceded. But *no*, he's on the enemy's side.

I want to scream in his face and tell him how everything unpleasant in my life is happening because of him. Instead, I snatch my backpack and run upstairs. Dad's not going to do shit, so I might as well panic in my room, undisturbed.

*I can't find a way to help you, Dane. Not now, maybe not ever. And right now, I'm too pissed to even feel guilty.*

Instead, I boot up my computer. At least in my world things make sense.

\*\*\*

When they woke the next morning, the fire was dead. Peter experienced a moment of panic, before he remembered that it was dawn anyways.

Nudging Rag and tossing a stone in the general direction of Donis, Peter hauled himself up.

"Come on," he called. "We might as well get started."

"Not yet," moaned Rag.

Peter yanked the blanket off her, and with a yelp she bolted upright. Ignoring her complaints, he turned to Donis. Except Donis wasn't there. And now that Peter looked, he could see that his blankets were in disarray, as well, and the ground bore marks of something heavy being dragged.

"Rag," Peter breathed, grabbing her shoulder.

"Mm?"

She looked up, and her body stiffened. For several moments, they stared at the ground. Peter didn't want to say anything. The second he opened his

mouth, he'd have to admit that Donis was gone, and then they would have to formulate a plan to rescue him.

*Maybe we can just leave,* Peter thought. He hated his cowardice, but at the same time, he prayed Rag would think the same thing. If she suggested they turn tail and run, Peter wasn't about to argue.

In the end, it was a cackle from behind that broke the silence. Rag and Peter whirled around, even though Peter already knew who it was. After all, who else would be on this miserable mountain at the break of dawn, laughing like a loon?

"So, we meet again."

"I'm pretty sure he said that the last time we saw him," Peter murmured.

"Ah, but what's this?" Briskel said, feigning surprise, "One of your number is missing."

"Like we didn't know. Now, are you gonna give him back, or do I have to stomp over there and break every bone in your disgusting body?"

For a few seconds, Peter had to process who had said that. Surely not him? No, he couldn't pretend to be that gutsy, not even if his friend's life was on the line. He looked at Rag with a mixture of horror and awe. She looked ready to bite someone.

Briskel also took a few seconds to recover from the verbal assault. His mouth dropped and his eyes popped and he looked like a village idiot Peter once knew. However, with a jolt, he rearranged his expression into a snarl.

"So! I see you are too stupid to know fear. Or perhaps it was the blow to the head I gave you?"

Rag looked ready to roll her eyes, but Peter gave her a nudge with his toe. When she flashed him an annoyed look, he mouthed *don't make this worse*.

"Aha! Out of witty comebacks?" Briskel raised a furry eyebrow, then continued. "Know that I could have murdered you in your sleep, but I choose to draw your suffering out more. You have no choice but to submit to my all-powerful might while I torture your friend before you! Even now, my creatures are binding him and preparing him for –"

"Both your creatures?" interrupted Peter.

"What?"

"I mean, are both of them binding him? Because I think Donis could outfight just one of them."

"Yes, yes, they are both binding and gagging him and preparing him for –"

"So it's just you here?" Peter asked, trying not to give himself away.

"Um, well, now that I think about it –"

With a pounce, Peter was on top of Briskel, pounding the old man's dirty face with his elbow. Briskel squirmed and yelped like a puppy, and Peter had to use both hands to pin him to the ground. With a painful sounding thump, Rag plopped on Briskel's legs.

"No, no, I got him," Peter called over his shoulders, "Get some rope out of the bag."

Together, they tied Briskel's hands behind his back. There was enough rope hanging off for Peter to hold, like a lead on a horse. He yanked Briskel to his

feet, resisting the temptation to push him back down. The old man gave a few feeble tugs on the rope, but he had no chance of escaping and he knew it.

“Okay, you crazy hermit, I’ll make you a deal,” Peter said, “Lead us to Donis and call off your monsters, and I won’t slit your throat. Does that sound like a fair trade-off?”

Briskel gave a squeak and a nod.

“Good. Rag, get our stuff. We’re going to rescue Donis.”

After Rag bundled up their belongings, Briskel led them downhill. No one said a word. Peter was sure it was because both Rag and Briskel were terrified of him. He had scared himself, too. Where did that bravery come from? It didn’t matter, as long as it stayed around for a while.

They weren’t walking for long before Briskel led them to a recess in the mountainside. It was a cleft more than a cave, shallow enough that Peter could see two large forms huddling in the shadows. Between them, Donis lay trussed in thick rope. He looked unhurt, just frightened.

“Call them off,” Peter growled into Briskel’s ear. For effect, he prodded the old man with his knife. The rusty thing was probably too dull to kill anyone, but Briskel didn’t know that.

“Aqra! Buamelu!” Briskel cried. Even when he was frightened, his voice was loud and demanding.

The two figures hissed and pawed the air with their semi-transparent hands. Briskel ordered them to come away. Prodding him with the knife, Peter forced him to command the creatures to back farther and farther down the mountain. After several prods, when Peter couldn’t make out a shimmer of the beasts in the early morning light, he deemed it safe enough to turn his back.

“Rag, help Donis.”

Rag rushed forward, attacking the knots holding Donis’ bonds. After several minutes, she clawed him free, the rope falling in thick coils onto the ground. Without a moment’s hesitation, Donis ripped the gag off his mouth.

“Oh, you saved me! I thought I was going to die, I really did. Those things grabbed me, and I’m pretty sure my life flashed before my eyes. It’s too bad I’m blind, because I really would have liked to see it. How did you get rid of –”

“We’re holding Briskel captive.”

“Oh.”

“What now, Peter?” Rag asked.

“I-I’m not sure. Do you think we can just...let him go?”

But he knew the idea was foolish as soon as it was out of his mouth. Briskel would get his monsters and attack them by nightfall.

It was like that phrase the priests said, “grabbing a wolf by the ears.” Now that they had him, letting him go and holding on were both dangerous.

“Do you think –” Rag whispered, “Do you think we should...kill him?”

Briskel gave a whimper.

“If we kill him, what will stop his monsters from attacking us?” Peter mused. Briskel rattled his head in agreement, and Peter was tempted to shake him.

“Why don’t we just take him with us?” Donis suggested.

“That doesn’t solve our problem in the long run,” Rag pointed out.

“Well,” Donis replied, “it’s better than nothing.”

And it was. So with heavy hearts, they dragged Briskel along with them. He was one more mouth to feed and shelter, and they’d have to guard him all night. But until they thought of something better, they were stuck.

With a shudder, Peter wished he hadn’t been so courageous in the first place. Now they were all in a mess, and they couldn’t think of a way out.

*Briskel may be in bonds, but he’s the one holding us hostage.*

*I have to think of a way to fix this. Before Briskel thinks of a way to kill us in the night.*

\*\*\*

Friday morning dawns less dilapidated and dreary than I could have ever hoped. I think I’ve found the solution to my problems.

And, surprise of all surprises, today I’m actually looking forward to World History. Well, not the class itself, but the chance to sort things out with Dane. I have a letter written out and tucked into my pocket.

So I sit like a good little boy in my first two classes, head up and following the teachers with my eyes. They love when you do that, and 90% of the time you can still zone out and they won’t notice. It takes more effort than regular daydreaming, which is why I usually don’t bother, but today I’m feeling generous towards all. Even teachers deserve to feel like someone is listening to them. Well, some teachers. Mr. Gregory doesn’t deserve squat.

As usual, I’m first in the classroom in World History, so I sit at my desk and wait for Dane. I have the nervous habit of tapping my fingers, and sometimes I wonder if the desk can feel me. Does it tickle, to have people drumming on you all the time? I wonder if some desks are like me, and they hate people touching them. That must be hell.

Dane arrives. He’s second here. I’m pretty sure if someone did a study, they’d find that you can order a class from nerdiness to shallowness just by the order students arrive.

Trying not to look overeager, I walk up to Dane and hand him my letter. And then, because it’s really awkward to hover over someone while they read your writing, I flit back to my desk. I try not to stare at him. I know he’ll be thrilled that his grade is no longer on death row. His face will light up like a kid at Christmas, and he’ll be so happy that he’ll forgive me on the spot for all the trouble I put him through, because now I’m “doing the right thing.”

*Would he have forgiven me if I decided not to speak?*

Class starts, but before Mr. Gregory begins his sermon, Dane flashes me a thumbs up and two rows of teeth. I respond with a thumbs up of my own, but can’t force a smile.

Right as class ends, Dane bobs up to me, filled with puppy-energy.

“Really, Matt?” he asks, shaking the paper in his hand like Charlie with his golden ticket, “You’re gonna talk?”

I nod, keeping my face blank.

“Well that’s...that’s great! We present on Monday. Will you be ready?”

Another nod. Dane tosses an exuberant adieu over his shoulder as he darts out the door.

As I sling my backpack over my arm, Mr. Gregory sidles up to me.

“Hey, Matt,” he says, pulling on the “I’m your buddy” façade, “I overheard you and Dane. I’m really proud of you.”

He pats me on the shoulder. I want to bite his spindly fingers off his bony hands, but I’m afraid I’d catch his stupid. Instead, I shrug him off and march out the door.

Even though I’m doing the right thing and rebelling against Mr. Gregory’s manipulations, I don’t feel triumphant. In fact, it feels like I’ve played right into his hands.

Once I get home, I start in on my master solution to overcome my muteness. Since it’s easier for me to read words off a page, I’m going to just write out what I want to say during the presentation and rehearse it. Painfully simple, and hopefully effective. If not, then I’m screwed.

Basically, all I have to do is copy down a couple of slides from our PowerPoint and rehearse the text until I think I can say it out loud. It takes me five minutes to write it out. After a half hour of pouring over the words and imagining the feel of them on my tongue, I move on to trying to vocalize them. After another half an hour staring at the page, I decide to take a break. Right now, my voice just isn’t there, so I might as well write in the mean time.

\*\*\*

Peter did not get a restful night of sleep. Even though they divided the dark hours into watches, he didn’t trust Rag and Donis to stay awake. Definitely not Donis. So his paranoia pried his eyelids open and made sure he was exhausted by morning.

*I can’t go on like this. We have to do something about Briskel.*

He thought about it all morning as they trudged up the mountain side. However, no matter how much he churned it over in his mind, he only came up with two solutions: let him go, or kill him.

*I’ve never killed someone before. Could I do it, if I needed to?*

Peter would like to think yes, like to think that he’d be able to stand up for himself and defend his friends, but he wasn’t sure. The thought of cutting someone open or twisting their neck until that final snap...

Maybe he could ask Rag or Donis to do it for him. Rag had enough guts, and Donis wouldn’t even see the dead eyes and that last jolt of the body. But maybe you didn’t have to see to feel guilt, and guts probably couldn’t override a conscience.

That evening, when they left Rag on guard duty so they could gather branches, Peter asked Donis about it.

“Do you think...it would be best to kill him?”

“Yes,” Donis replied without hesitation.

“But...but isn’t it wrong to kill him? I mean, he’s helpless!” Peter said, clawing at a bush and wondering why he was defending Briskel.

“I don’t like the idea of killing someone, but we can’t keep dragging him around. He’s dead weight.”

*Says the blind man.*

But Peter saw his point. They could barely feed themselves. And maybe his creatures would give up the chase if their master died. After all, they probably weren’t intelligent enough to understand the concept of revenge.

“I still don’t want to kill him in cold blood.”

“Well,” Donis said, rearranging his armful of bushes, “it’s your choice. But you know what my thoughts are.”

With that, he turned around and made his way back towards the campsite. Peter was left to wonder why it was *his* choice, and what choice he should make.

## Chapter 14

Sweet, sweet Saturday blooms way too early. Well, I suppose it blooms the same time it always does, but this time I actually have to be awake. I have work to do, figuring out this project.

By noon, the only thing I've accomplished is making myself feel like a total failure. Kind of an oxymoronic accomplishment, but it's better than saying I wasted the entire morning hating myself for not being able to speak.

Crawling downstairs for an unremarkable lunch of PBJ, I think about what I can do. Writing the words out didn't help. I still can't talk. And I don't have weeks to worry about this. I need a cure *now*.

It would help if I knew what the problem was. Why can't I speak? I don't know, so anything I try will be guess and check. I hate guess and check, but a lot of times in math, it's more reliable than the formulas, because if you remember one thing wrong, you're done for. So I suppose even if life did have directions, it would be just as efficient to stumble around and try to hold myself together, instead of following a formula only to discover I had it wrong all along.

*Okay, so time to make a random guess about how to fix my life.*

*...I think I'll email Maggy.*

After all, I don't have a problem reading to her. Maybe if she helps me practice, I can get this down. However, the chances of Maggy sitting patiently at home on Saturday, waiting in front of her computer for me to email her, are next to none. She actually has a life and friends, so who knows when I'll hear from her?

In the meantime, I do more wild guessing about how to solve my muteness. I try turning off the lights. I try saying it while lying on my bed. On an especially stupid impulse, I thought I might try singing it, but my vocal chords steadfastly refused to cooperate. Not for the first time in my life, I felt like my body was punishing me. Maybe it's getting back at me for all the vegan crap I forced it to eat.

Mercifully, Maggy emails me back after a couple of hours, saying she's inviting herself over to my house and she should be there within the hour.

I set to work rearranging my room. I can't really clean it, since it's about as sterile as a lawyer's heart. In fact, I actually mess it up a little, trying to make it look normal. You know, put some papers on the desk, tilt some books in the bookshelf, things like that. Usually, I wouldn't even think about it, but when Dane saw my room, he seemed uneasy with how clean it was.

The doorbell rings, and I realize with a jolt that I haven't even informed Dad that someone's coming over. I dash downstairs, but it's too late. He's standing at the door with an incredulous look on his face, like maybe he can't believe there's a girl scout that old selling cookies. He's never actually met Maggy face to face; I try to shield her from my Dad as much as possible. She's a great friend, and I'd hate for him to say something awkward to screw it all up.

"Y-you're here to see *Matt*? I didn't know he talked to girls."

Like that.

I subtly shove Dad out of the way, grabbing Maggy's hand and racing upstairs before he recovers. Inside my room, I'm tempted to bar the door. But I know that would make Dad suspicious, so I just hope he doesn't check on us.



“Um... your Dad seems nice.”

I roll my eyes, making sure Maggy can see me.

“Oh, he’s not trying to be stupid. And you know, he kinda has a point when he said you don’t talk to girls. You don’t talk to anybody.”

*I talk to you.*

Maggy falls into my desk chair, stretching to the point of breaking. Like, wouldn’t sitting up straight be easier?

I scoop my speech off the desk and show it to Maggy.

“Is this that whomping huge oral report that’s been giving you hell?”

I nod.

“And you... wanna practice it out loud in front of me?”

This girl’s a fast study. Without hesitation, because I’m too nervous to allow time to second-guess myself, I plunge into my report. Since it’s only a page, and I’m rushing through, it takes maybe a minute. Maggy is silent for a moment, squinting at me.

“Okay, that wasn’t bad. Now, do it again, and this time... go a little slower. You’re kinda hard to understand when you go fast.”

With an intake of breath, I start over. This time’s a little better; I can feel it. And then the time after that and the time after that and so on, a dozen times at least. I want to stop, because I’m afraid of straining my voice, but I don’t dare ask. Maggy has her business face on.

However, a noise makes me pause. Dad’s coming up the stairs. I just know he’s gonna butt in here to make sure we’re not up to anything “promiscuous.” Maggy hears it, too, and we both give each other the look. The kind that screams “act natural,” and never fails to make you act more unnaturally than you were two seconds ago. I plop on the bed and stuff the papers under my butt and look at Maggy and she starts talking and there’s this tension that says we’re both up to something and then Dad comes through the door without bothering to knock.

Short silence. Dad pops in; Maggy chirps a hello.

“So, Maggy, will you be staying for dinner?”

Ah, there it is: his carefully planned pretext for coming up here. We know he’s just here to check on us. He probably knows we know that’s why he’s here. Still, he has to pretend like it’s some big secret.

“Oh, no, I’m only here for a little.”

Dad nods. Then there’s a moment where he thinks of how to retreat.

“Well, you’re always welcome at our table.”

And then he gives me a hard look that says “this should never happen again.” Also, when he backs out the door, he makes a point about leaving it wide open. How are we supposed to practice now? I just... *can’t* let Dad hear me, but I know if I close the door, he’ll think of a way to come open it again, and I’ll really be in for it later.

Maggy and I exchange another look, me hoping she has an idea and she hoping I have an idea. With a sigh, I put my report back on the desk. Enough practice for one day, I guess.

We sit for a while. I don’t want Maggy to leave, but I’m not exactly sure what we’re supposed to do. It doesn’t take long for her to slip into her habit of filling the silence.

“Well, you’re making a ton of improvement, you know. I bet in a couple of weeks, you’ll be talking normally again. Do you...want that?”

I shrug.

“It’s your choice. And I mean that. If you don’t want to talk, you shouldn’t have to.”

I look up in surprise. All along, I’ve felt the same way. I felt like talking should be *my* choice, but no one understood. They all wanted me to talk, and they thought I was selfish for not doing what they wanted. But here Maggy is, saying it should be my choice, without the slightest hint of judgment.

Maggy interrupts my reprieve with a gesture of her head, indicating the report on the table.

“I know you’re trying to do the right thing. Like, Dane doesn’t deserve to be docked. But that’s something Mr. Gregory’s doing wrong, not you.”

Yeah, but that doesn’t make it okay for me to toss Dane to the sharks. I want to believe Maggy, to think she’s absolutely right. But I know it’s not that simple.

When Maggy leaves a little while later, I’m more confused than ever. Everyone’s telling me different things; who am I supposed to believe? I know who I *want* to believe.

Dad slinks into my room and sits down on my bed. Maggy had the sense to take the desk chair, but no, Dad has to get his butt all over my blanket.

“Hey, Matt, I thought we could have a talk,” he says, extending an arm like he wants to give me a side hug. I glare at him, and he decides against it. “You know I love it when you bring friends over. I do. But I think that, um, that maybe we should set some ground rules. I just don’t think it’s appropriate for you to bring your lady friends up to your room.”

*Why not? You do.*

“And, um, I’ve kind of neglected doing this, but I think I should tell you some things. You see, Matt, intrapersonal relationships are complicated, especially intimate ones, and –”

*Oh God! He’s starting the sex talk. You’re about three years too late, Dad. I’ve already learned everything I need.*

But there’s no escape. I sit there for a very awkward fifteen minutes, regretting my existence and wondering how Dad could be so clueless. I mean, he’s always been out of touch with me, but I thought that was because he didn’t care enough to get involved. Doesn’t he know I don’t respect his information? That I’m going to ignore everything that comes out of his mouth? That I consider Wikipedia a more reliable source of information on life issues?

After he leaves, all I can do is massage my eyelids. I should change my sheets, but right now I’d rather type. I need a distraction.

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The next day, as Peter led Briskel along the steep trails, he imagined what it would be like to kill him. One shove at any moment, and Briskel would fly over the edge of a cliff. Peter wouldn’t even have to see him die. And he could claim it was an accident, too.

*Whoops, sorry, Grey God; I didn’t mean it. I promise. Don’t claim vengeance on me.*

But when he thought about it, he realized it didn't matter whether the Grey God found out about it or not. He didn't want to kill a helpless man. Even if he escaped punishment, he couldn't escape that feeling of awfulness, that knowledge that he had killed another human being.

*If I don't kill him, though, he could hurt my friends. Doesn't that make killing him the right thing to do?*

Peter didn't know. And the more he thought about it, the less he understood. So instead he focused on the ground in front of him and the cry in his belly. They were deep into the mountains now, and if they didn't come across an unexpected food source soon, they were in trouble. Even the berry bushes were scarce up here.

When they stopped to make camp, Peter volunteered to gather the fuel, and Rag offered to help. They left Donis with Briskel's lead tied around his waist.

Rag didn't waste any time in silence. She chattered to herself, because Peter was having trouble paying attention. Still, he was glad for the noise, and she didn't seem to mind him ignoring her. Well, that's what Peter assumed.

"Peter! This is important, so listen to me!"

"Hm?" he asked, looking up.

"I asked you what you're gonna do with Briskel. We can't lug him around forever."

Peter gave a heavy sigh and hacked harder at a bush.

"Come on, Peter, we have to talk about this."

"Why is it my decision?"

"What?"

"I mean, why do I have to make all the choices? Can't someone else decide?"

Rag stopped what she was doing and turned to face Peter. Likewise, he abandoned the bush and sat heavily on the ground. After a few moments, Rag sat beside him. She traced the bald rocks with her finger, thinking of what to say.

"I suppose you don't have to make the decision alone. I'm willing to talk it over with you. But I'm just as lost as you are. I think you should be the one to have the final word."

"So you're pretty much telling me you wanna talk my ear off, tell me what to do, and then make me take responsibility for it?"

"That's not what I'm saying at all! I'm saying that if you need someone to talk to, I'm here."

There was silence. For a few breaths, Peter thought about what he wanted to say.

"Do you think killing him is the only way?"

Rag pursed her lip and tapped the ground before saying, "I think if we let him go all the way up here, even if he did find his monsters, it would take a while for him to regroup."

"But he'll come after us eventually."

"Let him come. We can handle him."

Peter snorted.

“Look, all I’m trying to say is...you shouldn’t force yourself to go against your nature. If you don’t want to kill him, then don’t. We’ll let him go and worry about the consequences later.”

With that, Rag rose and returned to yanking on her bush. Peter sat a few minutes more, thinking about what she had said.

If only he could do what his conscience told him, and not have to worry about other people. But he did, and he was no closer to an answer now than that morning.

Hauling himself up, Peter resumed hacking away at the bush.

## Chapter 15

Sunday. And, since Sunday is family day, Dad's decided to invite Amanda over. Since when is she family?

On the bright side, this means Dad will be too distracted to talk to me about tomorrow. The big day, when I sink or swim. Except, I'm so confused that I don't know what is sinking and what is swimming any more. I should take a big lungful of water and get it over with.

When I go downstairs for the obligatory Sunday dinner, I find that there's real food on the table. Like, chicken smothered in something saucy. I fall into my seat half in a daze, expecting the food to evaporate into something vegan.

"Amanda made us dinner. Isn't that nice, Matt?"

Oh. *She* made it. It looks a lot less edible now. However, Dad's eyeing me, and he heaps some onto my plate before I can tell him no.

I have this thing about food made by people I don't know. It's icky. Like, how do I know they didn't spit in it or do something else disgusting and spiteful?

So I'm looking at this chicken, and I'm wondering if food made by Amanda is okay. The sauce looks malicious. It's red and clumpy and it smells potent. I look up at Dad, giving him the silent plea. He's ignoring me.

Poking and prodding my meal and wishing I had a smaller portion, I try to think of a way to get rid of it. The phone rings, and Dad gets up. This would be the perfect opportunity to dump the chicken in the trash and bail. Before I can do anything, though, Amanda pounces on me with another round of "ask a stupid question."

"So, Matt, how's school going?"

*Honestly, lady, haven't you figured out by now that I can't answer?*

I give her a thumbs up, but I write "shut up" all over my face. Ever slow to take a hint, she asks another.

"Do you like the chicken?"

I look at my plate. Even though I haven't dared put any to my mouth, I've stirred it around quite a bit, so I can see how she'd think I've eaten some. I flash another thumbs up, because I think it would be rude to stick my finger down my throat and mime gagging.

"Good. Do you want to know what's in it?"

It probably won't make a difference either way, but I nod yes.

"Well, first there's chicken."

*Duh.*

"Then I put in some rice."

*I can see that.*

"Then there's my secret ingredient."

*Seriously, lady? You didn't tell me anything.*

"Do you want to know what it is?"

Against my better judgment, I nod. She's intrigued me. There's no better way to engage someone's attention than to mention a secret. It's like yanking the rug out from under your feet. Mean, but effective.

"Well, guess."

I throw my hands into the air, but Amanda just laughs and throws her hair over one shoulder. She's not giving this one out for free.

I dash into the kitchen, where Dad is deeply engrossed on the phone, and grab a pen. Back in the dining room, I snatch a napkin and write down a short list of things that are red.

*Beets*

*Cranberry sauce*

*Entrails*

Amanda looks over the list and laughs.

"No way. But you're close on one of them."

*Which one?* I write.

"I'm not telling."

*It's the entrails, isn't it?* I scribble.

When she sees that, she gives a snort, the kind of sound you think women like her can't make. She doesn't look offended, though. I think she's enjoying this game, too.

"You know, it would be a lot easier to guess it you tried some."

I look at my knees. So she did notice I wasn't eating any.

"Come on, Matt, it's not poisonous. Your Dad and I both ate some, and we're fine."

I shake my head and clench my hands. She pressures me some more, and I'm tempted to put my hands over my ears.

*I can't*, I write on the napkin, hoping that will be excuse enough and she'll leave me alone. She doesn't, and it's making me feel sick. It's not like I don't *want* to eat actual food. But I can't. Even if I tell myself it's not poison and even if Dad eats it and even if I know all the ingredients, I'll still be at the toilet tonight, puking. Logic and my body don't mix. I don't know Amanda well enough to let her make my food, and that's the end of the story. And right now, it's making me feel like a jerk.

Just when I'm ready to make a break for it, to get the hell out of this uncomfortable conversation, Dad comes back to the table. He doesn't sit, though. He walks up to me until our knees are almost touching and I have to crane my head back to see him. The look on his face is not one of happiness and fatherly love.

"Matt. Do you know who that was on the phone?"

Why do people insist on asking me questions I can't answer? Did it escape their notice that I'm mute?

"That was your teacher, Mr. Gregory."

Well shit.

*What kind of psycho calls on a Sunday? It's a freaking Sunday! I hope that atheist burns in hell.*

"Do you know what he told me?"

I can't even fathom. My guess would be one more threat about my grades, but at this point that seems redundant. We all know he's not afraid to fail me.

"He wanted to call and tell me how proud he was that you'd decided to participate in the presentation."

For a moment, I have to think about that. First off, I have to think about why that would be a problem. Then it hits me, like a bucket of Gatorade poured down the unsuspecting quarterback's body after the big game.

Dad folds his arms and glowers at me. I can't figure out what I should do. What does he want me to do? What is the response that is least likely to cause an unpleasant fight? Suddenly I'm glad Amanda's there. Dad's not going to start screaming at me in front of her.

Instinctively, I glance at her, just to make sure she hasn't spontaneously combusted when I need her. No, she's still there, looking slightly baffled.

"Well, that sounds great," she says, placing a hand on Dad's elbow. She still has no clue what's going on, but her girl-sense is picking up tension, and she's trying to defuse it. "Is this the same project that's been causing so many problems?"

"So you can talk?"

"What?" Amanda says, cocking her head to the side.

"Not you. You."

He points his finger in my face, close enough to make me lean back.

"Mr. Gregory says you've decided to talk. Why didn't you tell me?"

Dad's finger is still perilously close to my face, and it's making my cross-eyed. Over it, though, I can see his face. The only hint of his emotions is his eyebrows, pushed so low they're almost spilling over his eyes.

"John."

Amanda stands. With just the lightest touch to the shoulder, she gets Dad to lower his arm.

"Amanda, I think you should leave."

*Please don't.*

"I think I should stay."

Dad turns his stare from me to her. I can breathe again. I've forgotten to for the past couple of minutes, so I take in a few lungfuls, trying not to gasp. If I stay quiet, maybe I can keep the attention off of me longer.

"Look, Mandy, sweetie, Matt and I need to have a talk. I think it might be easier if you weren't here."

"Why? John, we discussed this. We agreed that I could help with the parenting."

"Yes, you can. But not now."

I'm getting that itchy feeling in my stomach, the one that comes when I think about how long it's been since Mom's been dead. I don't want to be a part of this conversation. I don't want to watch these two people fight and bicker like... like a married couple!

But the second my muscles flex, before there's breathing room between my butt and the chair, Dad has his hand on my shoulder, pushing me down.

"You're not running away from this, Matt!"

*Don't touch me!*

I wrap my hands around his arm, but it's like a buncha mice trying to move a mountain. Why is he so much stronger than me?

"John, calm down."

"I am calm," Dad shoots back. And it's true. That one flash, the momentary raising of the voice is gone. Because Dad doesn't lose his temper; he refines it.

For what feels like forever, Dad holds me down, putting his clammy hand all over my shoulder, and Amanda folds her arms and stares at him. She thinks she can wait this

out. Maybe she can. But I can't. I can't take another minute of this. And I'm crying, too, even though that's the most humiliating thing I can do next to wetting my pants.

"Is it true, Matt? Are you going to talk?" Dad whispers.

There's nothing but my wheezy little sobs to answer. Dad wants a response, and as soon as I give him one, he'll probably let me go. But I have nothing to give. Only this silence and my stupid, pathetic crying.

"Fine. You don't have to talk to me. But you are giving that oral report tomorrow."

Dad releases me, turns away and settles back into his seat. Apparently, he intends to go on with dinner like nothing happened. Amanda slips back into her seat, too. Her eyes meet mine, and she gives a sympathetic frown that would probably be a pat on the knee in normal circumstances, with a normal family, a normal me.

They resume eating. There's no words, only the melody of silverware and my sniffing. When I get up to leave, they don't stop me. I run upstairs to the bathroom and lock the door and sink to the floor.

Sitting on the fluffy blue rug, I use my knees for a tissue. I sit there for a long time, until I finally have sense enough to get up and strip off my clothes. I take a shower, the water so hot it fills the room with steam. I'm in there for a long time, watching the vapor swirl and dance and die before it ever accomplishes anything. Finally, I turn off the water, change into fresh clothes, sit down at the computer and write.

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By first light the next morning, Peter had his answer. He had stayed up all night, fretting and shivering and wishing he could get some sleep. Even Briskel slept better than him. Perhaps if Briskel had known that it was his fate Peter was restless about, he would have had a sleepless night as well. But no, the fool rested, peaceful and oblivious.

*Well, tonight I'm going to get a good sleep at last, because you will be out of the picture.*

In the distance, he could see a fork in the road, maybe half a day's travel ahead. It was a place where the path branched around a mountain, one going down and winding back toward where they came, and the other ever up and off into the distance. When they reached that divide, Peter was letting Briskel go, and making him take the path leading down. If Briskel wanted to survive, he'd have to take that trail, back into a land with food and water and air.

*In fact, if we want to survive, we're going to have to do something about that soon. We have no supplies, and it looks like the trail gets even more barren.*

At this point, Peter was considering asking his god for help. Only the threat of imminent death could force him to do that. But that's where they were at.

*I don't know how to ask for help, though. Should I just...raise my hands and yell? Usually the priests offer a sacrifice when they call on the Grey God, but I don't have anything.*

"Hey, Donis," Peter approached his friend as they broke up camp that morning, "um, I've been thinking about our situation, and I think we should...ask the Grey God for help."

"Well, it's about time. We could really use some assistance."



“Yeah, except for one thing. I don’t know how to ask for help.”

Donis scratched his head and mumbled something under his breath. They’d cleared up camp, and Rag was waiting for them, holding Briskel’s lead and tapping her foot.

“I can sing.”

“Like you did before, when we were in the hole?”

“Yes. But this time I’ll just be accompaniment. You have to do the actual asking.”

Before Peter could object, Donis pulled out his kithara and started strumming. The blind man sang softly, a low, gentle song. Feeling awkward, and hyper-conscious of Rag approaching them, Peter began a hurried prayer.

“Um, Grey God, this is your servant, Peter. We need your help. We’re hungry and lost and we don’t know what to do. So if you could give us aid, any kind of aid, we would be most grateful. Without help, we cannot fulfill your quest. So please help us.”

Peter didn’t know how to end it, so he shuffled his feet and listened to the last strains of Donis’ songs. Rag was standing at his elbow, looking confused. Still, she held her tongue until Donis was done.

“What now?” Peter asked.

“I don’t know,” Donis admitted, “You probably have as much of an idea as me.”

“Well, usually if He’s going to answer, He comes in a storm.”

Glancing at the sky, Peter looked for storm clouds. Everything was white and fluffy.

With a sigh, he shouldered his pack and announced, “It doesn’t look like we’re getting an answer any time soon, so there’s no use sitting around. Come on.”

They walked in silence for the next few hours, each caught up in a personal reverie. Peter was fighting disappointment and indecision. Soon, they’d reach that branch and let Briskel go. Their enemy would start on the path towards plenty, and they would be stuck on a fool’s errand.

He was so wrapped up in his musings, that at first he mistook the rumbling for his aching belly. It took a prod from Rag to snap him into reality.

“Hm?” he asked, raising his head.

“I said, do you think we should stop?” Rag repeated.

It was then that he noticed the clouds broiling in the sky. This high up, they were uncomfortably close, and Peter was aware of electricity making his neck prickle.

“Looks like we’re going to get an answer after all,” Peter sighed, “Yeah, let’s go under those rocks.”

However, they didn’t make it to shelter before the storm broke. In the space of a minute, from the time the first drops fell to when they were tucked under the overhang, they were soaked.

“Well,” Rag said, holding her water skin out into the downpour, “at least we won’t have to worry about water.”

*That solves one of our problems.*

The thunder started. It came from all directions at once, loud enough to make Peter's bones hurt.

"Peter!" Rag shouted, "How is your god going to answer us?"

"I'm not really sure," he screamed back, "Usually the priests talk to Him. He doesn't really like to, um, 'socialize' with other people, so most of the time He refuses to talk to anyone but them."

"So...will He talk to you?"

"He has before. When He absolutely has to."

"Will He talk to you with us around?" Donis piped up.

"No, probably not," Peter said, hanging his head, "I should go out to meet Him."

He looked at the storm, one continuous sheet of silver falling to earth. He'd probably get struck by lightning before he walked ten paces. Not to mention get drenched.

*Well, I'm already wet anyways.*

"I'll be back soon," he said. Taking a deep breath, he ventured out into the typhoon. The water pounded on his back so hard, it felt like a hand was pushing him down. Peter thought there was only so much water one robe could hold, but apparently not. His clothing grew heavier, clinging to his body like honey and weighing it down like stone.

He walked until he was out of sight of the stony outcrop. Then, he huddled in the rain, waiting for something to happen. There was thunder and thunder and thunder, pealing a war march. Peter studied the ground in front of him. It was the color of soggy.

Above him, there was an explosion of lightening that knocked him to the ground. The storm still raged on all sides, but in the space Peter was in, there was calm.

"Peter," boomed a voice above him, "you called me."

"Y-yes. We need your help. We don't have food or supplies. And we have no idea where to go. We need guidance."

"I know. Do not think you can tell me anything I cannot observe for myself," said the Grey God, his voice deep like the cocoon of thunder around them, "I have not held my hand out of ignorance. I have refused you aide because there is something you must do first."

"What?" Peter asked, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice. It didn't seem fair that he had to do something to earn his god's help, when the only reason he was asking for help was because he was on a quest for said god.

"There is one of your number, the hermit, who has done much evil. He has gone unpunished for too long. You must be my justice, Peter. Offer him as a sacrifice, and I will show you the way you should go."

"You want me to kill him?" Peter whispered. He realized how stupid the words were as soon as they were out of his mouth.

"Yes, I want you to kill him!" the Grey God cried, "Until you do, you will receive no assistance from me. Now go!" The sky tore about at this final cry, and the Grey God was gone.

Peter lay on the wet, rocky ground for a while longer, shivering and confused. Then, he pulled himself up and headed for the overhang. He wasn't sure what he would do when he got there. What do you do when even your god betrays you?

## Chapter 16

Dad doesn't mention the project at all the next morning. He acts like nothing is wrong, but I can feel the menace radiating off him.

Today is a big day. The day I finally make a fateful choice. Except I really don't have a choice. That's the reason teenagers have such a problem with identity. We're old enough to understand we can have power over ourselves, but too young to usurp that power from our parents.

Sitting in the car with Dad, I'm acutely aware of just how much control he has over my life. All that debating and pondering and soul-searching for the right answer comes to nothing. He steps in and takes it all away.

I slip into my first class a full ten seconds after the bell rings, a sure sign that the entire day is going to be crappy. Panic gnaws at my skin, just below the surface. Yes, this is definitely one of those days. If I make it through without fainting, breaking out in tears or becoming an atheist, it will be a miracle indeed.

First period melts away, and before I know it, I'm clinging to the last little bit of second hour. In a few minutes, I'll have to go to World History. I'll have to get up in front of all those people who hate my guts, and I'll have to talk. Will they throw rocks at me?

I check my speech, folded into sixteenths and tucked into my pocket, half-hoping I've lost it. No, it's still there.

As the bell tolls, the blood sinks to my toes. I feel like I'm in one of those old movies, sped up, so that everything goes too fast and jerky.

Am I going to die?

*No, you're not going to die. Breathe. Breathe. Go to class. Don't panic.*

The thing about telling yourself not to panic is that usually you're already panicking. It's like dropping your cell phone in the toilet and going, *Crap, don't get wet!* Too late.

Dane's there. He's got his game face on. Like, this huge, stupid grin. I bet he's *excited* to do this. I mean, now that he knows I'm gonna participate, and his grade isn't in trouble, he's pumped. The little nerd probably can't wait to get up there and impress everyone with his vast knowledge of secret rituals. I want to shove an Orphic bowl down his throat.

*Why am I angry at Dane? This isn't his fault.*

But that's what happens when I'm trying to hold myself together. I get snippy with everyone, like a rabid dog.

"Are you ready?" Dane asks. I swear to God, he's actually bouncing on his heels.

I sigh in response. I'm not going to bother flashing a thumbs up, because he wouldn't notice anyway, and I'm too distracted to lie. However, Dane overcomes his enthusiasm long enough to notice.

"Hey, you're okay with this, right?"

I nod, and he bounces away to set up our PowerPoint. I'm a little disappointed. I thought maybe he'd see through that lie and, I don't know, give me permission to back down if I wanted. But he's only human.

Class starts and Mr. Gregory takes attendance. I'm counting every breath as he goes through the role. Then, he gives some stupid spiel about how we're supposed to be

taking notes during these presentations, and he means notes in our notebooks, not the kind we pass to our friends, blah blah blah.

People are more annoying when you're nervous.

"All right, Dane, Peter, you're up."

I feel ready to faint. I know I'm gonna faint. I'm going to get up there, and it's gonna be my turn to talk, and I'm gonna faint. But that might be easier than going up there in front of all those people and speaking.

As I haul myself out of my desk and wobble to the front, I can feel their eyes watching me. Yes, it's that kid who never talks, getting up in front of the class to give an oral report. I can hear their silent cries, waiting for me to fail. They're sharks and I'm a bleeding kitten.

Dane and I stand at the front of the class, him with beaming eyes, me trying to suppress my shaking knees. I'm clutching my paper, trying not to shred it. With a nod, Mr. Gregory signals us to start. Dane does so with gusto. Disgusting gusto.

So Dane is whizzing through our report, speeding towards my part at breakneck speed. I swear, he's not even pausing to *breath*, yet I'm the one feeling out of breath.

*Don't faint. Do not faint.*

I repeat this mantra, trying to steady myself. Like the cowardly lion, right about now I could use a dose of courage. Maybe they come in vials, and you can inject it into your system like heroin.

There's a pause. Dane isn't talking any more. It's my slide.

Everyone is waiting on me.

*Here it comes. I'm going to faint.*

I inhale and prepare to fall over. I don't. I take another deep breath, telling myself I'm going to faint this time. It doesn't happen.

And that's when it hits me: I'm not going to faint. There's no quick way out of this. I can't lose consciousness and then wake up in a hospital bed ten days later with this ordeal over. I'm going to stand up here until I talk or-or there is no other option! I think this whole time I've hoped I'd die of a heart attack or something, so I could avoid this. But it's not happening, and I have no contingency plan.

The awkward silence stretches out. I look down at my paper, hoping maybe my vision's blurry so I can't see the words. No. They're right there, crystalline. Another excuse ripped out from underneath my feet.

Next I try my throat, to see if it's constricted. It's clear.

And I feel my voice beneath it all. The words are right there, I've practiced them, and I have the same feeling as when I read to Maggy. I can do this. Physically. I can open my mouth, and my voice will work fine. Yet I can't find the courage.

I'm a wuss. That's all there is too it. All along, I was planning, banking on some physical ailment, when I should have planned for my own cowardice.

Everyone's looking at me, and there's no escape and no excuse. I just can't do it.

With a sharp exhale, I look at Dane. His eyelids close for a second of mourning, and then he's back on his feet, reading aloud my portion and acting like nothing happened. He wraps up the presentation, even fields a few questions, and then it's over and we're back in our seats.

A couple more kids present, Mr. Gregory ends it with a few sentences I reflexively block out, and then class is over. I flee out the door, even daring to come into

contact with other people as I jostle and shove and run like the chicken I am. It's disgusting, and I shudder at every touch, but I know seeing Dane's disappointment would be worse.

First thing I do when I get home is unplug the phone. It's not going to save me, but it will delay my horrible fate. Then, I go to the computer, because I have all this stuff bottled inside, and I want to let it out.

Except when I get there, nothing comes to mind. Well, no, a bunch of stuff comes to mind, but it's all the wrong stuff. Like, I'm caught up thinking about what an idiot I was today, and how everyone's talking about what a social retard I am, and when Dad finds out he'll make me move out.

So I do my homework. All of it. After that, I don't know what to do. I don't think I can stomach a book. I just want to numb my mind, to make all of my worries go away. So I turn on the TV.

An hour later, Dad walks through the door.

"So, Matt, how did it go today?"

Crap. I hadn't planned for this. I thought unplugging the phone would be enough, but I realize how foolish that is. Of course Dad would ask me how my day went, and I can't lie to him. I could have if I'd thought about it before hand, but this is too sudden. My disappointment and self-loathing flashes across my face, even though I try to hold it back. It's like someone smacking you on a bruise. The pain's too fresh and unexpected to ignore.

Dad sizes me up for a bit. Then, with a sigh and a shake of his head, he goes into the kitchen. I don't hear anything from him until dinner. In fact, I don't hear anything from him then, either. He just plunks the food on the table, and I gobble it up as fast as I can and retreat upstairs.

Yes, the silence is creepy. But if he's trying to make me feel bad, or give me "a taste of my own medicine," it's not working. I prefer it to him screaming at me. In fact, it's even better than him talking normally. If he thinks he can out-silence me, he's wrong.

I try typing again, but nothing comes. It's like I'm verbally constipated. All I can do is sit in my room and wonder at how empty my life was before I started to write. What did I do all the time?

With a huff, I fall into bed. I can't write, so for now I'll just have to dream.

## Chapter 17

Most mysteriously, when I wake up the next morning, everything's back to normal. Dad's talking again and stuff. Does that mean he's not angry? That he's lulling me into a false sense of security? Only God knows, and I just have to guess.

I stand outside school a long time, wondering how much trouble I'd be in if I skipped. Maybe no one will care if I play hooky. They may not care, but someone's bound to notice. I may already be in huge trouble with Dad. Why risk making it worse?

Still, as I slip into my first class a few minutes late and feel curious stares, I want to slip back out. Dad would tell me it's just my paranoia, but I know these people are gossiping behind my back. Even though I don't care what other people say about me, I do care how they treat me. Like, when the gossip starts, everyone acts like you're diseased. They keep their distance and they avert their eyes and make you feel like pond scum that came to life.

I sit in my desk and make violent doodles in my notebook, of people puking up their insides and being smashed by pianos and all sorts of fatal things. Murdering stick figures is such a therapeutic, stress-reducing activity.

That's how school goes for me. I sit there and pretend that the rest of the world doesn't exist. Of course, I'm hyper-conscious of everyone around me, but they don't know that. They think I'm in control.

When the time comes for World History, I walk down the halls, chanting "You're not upset" in my head. Bullshit, I know, but it works. If you tell yourself to think something over and over, you can force yourself to believe it. For me, that's how I force myself to act happy when I'm upset or about to melt down. It works as long as no one talks to you.

There's one person who isn't satisfied to let me suffer in silence, though. At the end of class, Mr. Gregory asks me to stay. I don't. I jostle my way out the door and down the halls, touching all those icky people and pretending not to hear him calling after me.

So far, that's the highlight of my day.

Maggy's in the library. She's got her business face on. Yesterday, when I was too upset to read, she immediately guessed why, and she was all over me with condolences and reassurances. Today, I bet she's reloaded with a ton of cheerful, supposed-to-be-uplifting crap. I'm so excited I can puke.

The second she opens her mouth, I hold up my hand, hoping she'll get the hint to stop. Instead, she switches gears.

"Oh, Matt, trust me, things will work out."

Sometimes I have to wonder if people actually listen to themselves. They have to know they're not fooling anyone, so why do they even try? It's like they're auditioning for a role at life, saying all the right things and putting on all the right emotions, but they don't really feel it.

I fall onto the couch and put my hands over my face. Just for today, I wish Maggy would go hang out with her other friends. She has the entire lunchroom, the entire *school*, and I only have here. So if she wants to lecture me about optimism, all I can do is hate my ears.

"Look, grades aren't the most important thing in the world."

*I KNOW!* I write, ripping the paper out of my notebook with a vengeful twist and shoving it in her lap. *It's other people that don't understand.* I add that last as an afterthought, jotting it down while Maggy is still processing the first.

She's quiet for a moment. Probably thinking of a way to put a positive spin on this. Finally, she sighs and says, "You know, Matt, maybe it doesn't matter what your Dad thinks."

Now it's my turn to sit there and process information. I snatch the paper back and write on it: *Yeah it does. He kinda controls my life.*

"No, he doesn't," Maggy says, air-patting my knee, "I mean, when you think about it, what can he do to you? Ground you? Maybe he could take away your computer, but that's about it. Really, Matt, you don't have much a person can take away."

She has a point. In the most basic, philosophical sense, Maggy is right. I have nothing to lose. However, Dad doesn't have to take anything away to make my life unbearable. It's the silent suffocation of living with him. Sometimes I feel like I can't breathe when we're in the same room, because there's all this disappointment and scorn waiting to crowd my lungs.

I'm silent for a long time. What is there to say? Maggy can't understand what it's like, so this conversation is hopeless.

We sit without talking for awhile. Maggy bobs her feet up and down. Finally, she huffs and takes out a book. Me ignoring Maggy and reading a book is nothing unusual, but Maggy never turns down the chance for conversation. I feel like she's upset with me. Why? Because I'm not agreeing with her?

School ends, and I spend a lot of time studying for a math test. It seems like I study harder for tests now than I did when I was a good student. When I used to take notes and pay attention, there wasn't much to study. Now, if I want to maintain my solid C average, I'm going to have to cram.

So I'm slogging through my textbook, looking for anything relevant, until Dad comes home. He brought a guest. Amanda trails through the door after him, arms full of groceries. She shuts the door with her foot. Just a casual flip of her foot, getting her dirty shoes on the door like she owns it.

"Hi, Matt," she calls out, winking at me. What the heck does that wink mean?

I incline my head towards her, ever so slightly, and go back to studying. However, it's hard to concentrate over the noise.

Her and Dad are in the kitchen, giggling and talking like a seventh-grade couple on their first date. It's disgusting, how they can shove each other and laugh. Looking at them, you don't see any of that strained sexual tension you get from high school couples. I guess that's because once you *have* sex, the tension's gone.

*Focus on math.*

That's like telling yourself to study a rock when there's a shoot-out going on. They're too distracting for me to concentrate on something I hate in the first place.

With a sigh, I snap my book shut. I'd go upstairs, but dinner's almost ready. Besides, I was about to quit studying anyway. There's only so much math a person can take at one time.

I rub the corner of the book between my eyelids, thinking how nice it would be to force it through my skull. I have a killer headache coming on, from all the stress and reading and listening to Dad and Amanda.



“Hey, Matt!” Amanda calls to me, “Do you wanna come in here and help us?”

I pretend to ignore them, but Amanda calls me again.

“Come on, Matt, you gotta learn how to cook. How are you gonna feed yourself when you move out?”

I shrug my shoulders, but she’s not taking no for an answer. Planting herself in front of me, she reaches a hand out. I flinch away, thinking she’s going to grab me. When she doesn’t, I feel like a jerk. She’s reaching her hand out, but she doesn’t touch me. For an uncomfortable few seconds, we stare each other down. She doesn’t lower her hand.

“It’ll be fun,” she promises.

“Yeah, Matt,” Dad shouts, “Come in here and make sure we’re not poisoning anything.”

I grit my teeth. Dad never makes fun of me. He snorts and treats me like a baby, but he never makes fun of me. In fact, Dad never jokes about anything, let alone my “condition.” Is it being around Amanda that makes him so goofy? Or is this a way for him to get back at me, pretend he’s having fun while insulting me?

I hate when people mock me. What I hate even more is that Dad has a point. Part of me wants to go in there and monitor them. But if I go in there, I’ll be a third wheel.

*Who cares? They deserve a third wheel.*

I stand up and follow Amanda back to the kitchen. However, I refuse to handle any raw meat. So Amanda sets me to chopping up some parsley.

“Do you like meatballs, Matt?” Amanda asks.

I nod.

“Have you ever cooked anything before?”

I shrug. I’ve warmed up stuff in the microwave, and I’ve made brownies out of a box and stuff. But real cooking, like this, has always been Dad’s domain. He gets the kitchen and the TV, and I stick to my room.

Amanda interrogates me some more, asking all kinds of yes or no questions. I’m polite, answering them with a bob or a shake, but I can’t help but be annoyed. I know exactly why she’s doing this. In front of Dad, no less. She’s trying to suck up to me, to prove that she can be a good replacement mom or whatever.

I hate when dad’s girlfriends try to suck up to me. If they want to infringe on Dad, fine, but they can’t insert themselves into *my* life.

Except, I really don’t mind Amanda that much. Unlike the other potential brides, I feel like Amanda would be nice to me even if she didn’t have anything to prove to Dad. I could be wrong, though. My people sense is about as fine-tuned as a politician’s moral compass.

After I’m done chopping up the parsley, I watch Dad and Amanda form the meatballs. With their bare hands. I mean, I know where meat comes from and everything, so it’s not that. It’s looking at their hands, coated in that greasy pig-meat swarming with botulism, that makes my stomach tickle. They pop the meatballs into the oven, then wash their hands for a disturbingly short amount of time.

“All right,” Amanda declares, swiping her hands on the back of her pants, “we’ll let those cook for about 20-30 minutes.”

“Can’t wait,” Dad says, tossing aside his vegan ideals and wrapping an arm around Amanda.

I try not to roll my eyes. We eat nothing but broccoli for three months, and all of a sudden she comes along and meat's okay. At this rate, we'll be roasting a pig on a spit by next Tuesday. At the same time, I'm really grateful. I miss meat.

While we wait for the meatballs to cook, Amanda and Dad turn on the TV. They're not watching it at all, instead using it as a pretext to sit on the couch together and talk. After my brief stint in the spotlight, I'm invisible again. That's fine with me, really. It gives me an opportunity to relax on the chair next to them, half paying attention and half worrying over life.

I never used to watch television, but here I am for the second day in a row, sitting in front of it. It's an anesthetic for the brain. Maybe that's why Dad likes it. When you watch it, all your real problems sort of melt away. He's not watching it now, though. He and Amanda are too busy flirting.

A slow twenty minutes passes. The lovebirds don't notice the passage of time at all, but I have my eye on the clock. Since they seem preoccupied, I check on the meatballs myself.

They look very...meaty. I don't know how to tell if meat is done or not. They're kind of brown. Does that mean they're ready?

"Smells good," Amanda says, coming up behind me. She slips oven mitts over her hands and takes the meatballs out of the oven. "All right, are you ready to eat?"

I'd pick 'em right off the plate if they weren't still blistering hot. However, since I don't want to burn my tongue, I sit at the table and mind my manners. I dish nine or ten onto my plate and shake my hand at them, trying to dislodge the steam. It's torturous, to smell it and see it and have it sitting in front of you and still have to wait. Amanda and Dad aren't having any problem waiting. They're playing footsie under the table, choking back their giggles and pretending that I'm not right there.

"So, Matt, do they look safe to eat?" Dad calls out, turning his attention to me. There's a jackal smile smeared across his lips. Even though he's acting playful, I know he's out to bait me. "You sure you can eat it?"

I glare at my plate, wishing the meatballs would cool already. Dad's gonna spoil my appetite, if I don't hurry and get them down. I can tell that's what he wants.

"Oh, don't worry, Matt," Amanda croons, nibbling on one edge of a meatball. "You saw us make them. Besides, they were cooked at 400 degrees. Bacteria doesn't get through temperatures that high."

I hate when people try to reason with me. I'm not an idiot; I know the bacterium gets cooked out. I know people eat at restaurants all the time and never get sick. And I know that most of my fears are all in my head. That doesn't make it any easier to forget about them. In fact, it makes it harder. How can you defeat something imaginary?

Before Dad can say anything else, and before I can irrationalize myself out of nerve, I take a bite of a meatball. It's still too hot. Convulsively, I swallow without really chewing. The meat worms halfway down my throat and stays there, a sick, hot lump of coal. I wash it down with water, trying not to cough.

As quickly as it came, Amanda and Dad's interest in me wanes. They're back in their own world again, leaving me with my meatballs. I try another one, blowing on it and taking a small bite.

*Not bad. Way better than vegan casserole.*

I suck the grease off the meatball, relishing the creamy texture and powerful taste. Plants don't give off liquids like this. Tomatoes have that clumpy pus and cucumbers leak that thin, sour stuff, but nothing compares to grease. I take my time, lapping the meatballs dry and then nibbling at the edges to reveal more grease. It's as sweet as the elixir of life.

After I'm done with my first round, I grab seconds and thirds. I contemplate sticking around for fourths, but Amanda and Dad are cuddling. I decide to split before they upset my stomach.

As I deposit my plate in the sink and dash, Amanda calls after me, "Nice seeing ya, Matt."

I throw my hand in the air in a half-hearted wave. If she wasn't such a slut, I wouldn't mind her coming over. She's nice enough, and her cooking's good. I just wish her and Dad would tone down the romance thing.

*Well, no one's perfect. At least I got a good meal out of it.*

Now that my belly's full of something other than compost, and Dad doesn't look like he's going to do any drastic punishment, I feel a bit calmer. I'm still upset, but I think my mind's clear enough to write.

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Peter didn't say a word when he returned to the overhang. He shook off Rag and Donis's questions, plopping down under the ledge and waiting for the storm to clear. He told himself that he'd have an answer when the sun came out. However, the clouds melted away and Peter still didn't know what to do.

"Peter?" Rag asked, sitting beside him on the cold stone. "I think we need to keep moving. We can't stay here forever."

Still not saying a word, Peter dragged himself up. They wrung out the water clinging to their clothes, then set their feet on the trail again. They were almost to the fork in the road, the place where Peter had told himself he would let Briskel go. As they approached, Peter saw how steep the path leading down was.

*All I'd have to do is shove Briskel. He'd break his neck before he hit the bottom, and that would be that.*

When they reached the branch, Rag and Donis stopped, turning to Peter for directions. Rag had Briskel's lead wrapped around her wrist. Taking the rope from her hands, Peter drew out his knife. Briskel let out a wispy squeal, looking like he was ready to fall over. However, Peter tightened the slack so he couldn't pull away. As the hermit cringed and whimpered, Peter slashed through the bonds. The ropes around his hands fell to the ground like a dead snake.

It took a few seconds for Briskel to realize he was still alive. He brought his hands to his face, running his fingers through his scraggly hair.

"You're free," Peter said, looking at Briskel but not seeing him. "You will take that path down the mountains, and you will not bother us again. If you do, I will kill you."

Briskel's mouth opened and closed, like a fish waiting to be hit over the head with a rock. His eyes were fish-like, too, bulging in the afternoon sun. Finally, the shock wore off. His mouth closed, then set, and then he opened it again, to say something. Peter cut him off.

“Shut up. Whatever you’re going to say, I don’t want to hear it. Just leave.”

Briskel opened his mouth once more. With a growl, Peter gave him a shove, sending the man stumbling back a few paces. While he was still regaining his balance, Peter turned and strode down the other trail branch. Rag and Donis followed close behind. However, Peter didn’t turn back to look at them. He didn’t even look back when Briskel shouted after them, much less listened to the old man’s words.

*I’ve done more for him than he deserves. It doesn’t matter now, whether he makes it down the mountain or not. I have a clean conscience.*

But a clean conscience came at a heavy price. They were foodless, directionless, and completely without the Grey God’s aide. The thought almost paralyzed Peter’s shuffling feet. Briskel had ceased calling after them, but he didn’t leave Peter’s mind.

*Is it to late to go back and bash his head in with a rock? What if I’ve made a horrible mistake?*

But he didn’t have the confidence to undo his decision. He knew that if he turned around, he’d lose his nerve by the time he got to Briskel. Then he’d turn around again, only to be plagued by more doubt. He’d run back and forth the rest of the day, trying to make up his mind. It was better to stick with an unsure choice than wallow in indecision.

They walked in silence for a long time. He could smell Rag and Donis’s curiosity, wondering what had happened with the Grey God and if they were going to get more supplies. However, Peter radiated anger and frustration, and they were too timid to confront him.

After a long, uneasy hour, Donis spoke up.

“So, just to make sure, we did let Briskel go back there, didn’t we?”

“Yes,” Rag replied, low and sullen. They whispered back and forth to each other. Peter thought maybe they were trying to be considerate of him. Maybe that, or they thought he was on the verge of snapping.

The grim air lifted a little, and Donis and Rag chattered until they set up camp. Since Peter was in no mood for company, he sent them off to scrounge for berries while he started the fire.

Peter chipped away at the flint, trying to get the sparks to light the weedy mountain grass. There was hardly anything here to burn, much less air to feed the flames. After cutting his finger, banging his knuckles and embarrassing himself in front of the mountain, Peter was ready to give up when some spidery tendrils took light. After that, he fed the fire and tended it carefully until it was securely rooted in a bush, turning the leaves black and sending up a tiny light.

*Where are those two? If they don’t come back soon, I’m gonna run out of fuel.*

Peter threw himself onto his blanket. It was already chilly in the evening air, and he was tempted to go to sleep while he wasn’t shivering. What was the point of staying up? Donis and Rag would bring back a few handfuls of berries, just enough to make his stomach turn. And then, after they were done with dinner, they’d probably question him about today.

Burying his nose into the wool, he tried to think of a way to avoid that conversation. There wasn't one. Sooner or later, Rag and Donis would want to know why the Grey God wasn't helping them.

A scuffling sound made Peter lift his head. At first, he assumed it must be Rag and Donis returning, but the sound was too quiet for that. There wasn't any talking or laughing to accompany it. With an uneasy feeling in his stomach, Peter sat up and reached for his knife. Surely it wasn't Briskel, back with his monsters already? Peter thought he'd rather roll over and die than have to deal with them again.

But, no, Peter actually saw something on the edge of camp. It was small, hunched over, and hobbling towards him on three legs. Peter's breath caught in his throat, and he was tempted to rub his eyes. However, he didn't dare move. His body tensed like a cat ready to pounce, as he eyed the thing limping towards him.

It was a mountain goat, hardy and small and weedy as the mountain grass. What it was doing this close to a campfire, Peter had no idea. From the way it crawled along, belly close to the ground, he could tell it was wounded. Perhaps blood loss had made it delirious. In any case, it was closer to Peter than it had any right to be, and it was hurt.

*I can smell the blood. I can smell the meat.*

Moving lightly, like a rumor through a crowded room, he snuck towards the creature. The idea was to get close with his knife, so he could land a killing blow. Peter didn't think he could throw his weapon with any strength or accuracy, so he wanted to ambush the half-dead animal.

Even though he moved without a sound, the creature swung its head upright. For a suspended, painful moment, Peter feared that it would bolt. When the goat straightened, though, a tremor grabbed its body. It swayed from side to side. With a choking noise, it fell. It flailed its legs for a few seconds, and then was still.

Suspiciously, Peter moved closer. He ran the tip of his knife through the animal's fur. It didn't stir.

Up close, Peter saw that one of the goat's back legs was mangled, marred with a bite that festered with infection. This creature had been attacked, survived, and then made its way here, to die at Peter's feet. He couldn't believe it was coincidence, not for a second. But the Grey God wasn't about to do him any favors. So how did this miracle happen? Peter was too hungry to think about it.

By the dying light of the sun, Peter tore open the goat's belly, making short work of its insides. He didn't have any experience cleaning a kill, so it was more or less guesswork. He knew he didn't want the organs, and he wanted to salvage as much meat as possible.

He was up to his elbows in blood when Donis and Rag returned. When Rag saw the goat, her eyes widened, and she dropped her berries in shock.

"Wh-what is that?" she asked.

"Dinner. Come help me gut it."

"Gut what?" Donis piped up, sniffing the air. "Is that blood I smell?"

"Peter, what happened? Did you catch that goat?"

“Not quite,” he grunted, separating meat from skin with a pull. “It sort of stumbled into camp.”

“With the fire going? And then, what, it stood still so you could kill it?”

“Even better. It fell dead at my feet.”

While Rag gathered her wits, Donis knelt next to Peter. He extended a hand, brushing the goat’s coarse hide, until Peter shooed him away.

“If you’re not gonna help, get out of the way.”

Obediently, Donis moved back. Both he and Rag seemed at a loss for what to do. Finally, Rag took the meat Peter had carved out and set it over the fire to cook. She helped him dispose of the organs and finish scraping out what meat they could.

Even though the goat was emaciated from brutal mountain life and days of fighting infection, there was enough meat to make Peter’s heart soar. There was enough for tonight, and the next night, and the night after that. More food than they’d had all week, clinging to the goat’s bones and skin.

By the time they set the last scraps over the fire, the first bits were cooked. Swiping them from the coals and waving them around to cool them, Peter could feel his stomach give an expectant rumble.

“This is amazing,” Rag sighed, leaning over Peter’s shoulder and inhaling the smell of roasted meat.

While Peter and Rag hovered over the meat, waiting for it to cool, Donis pulled out his kithara. He plucked out a few notes and cleared his throat, starting in on a paean to the Grey God, thanking Him for their bounty. Only a few lines in, Peter interrupted him.

“Stop that,” he growled, yanking the instrument out of Donis’s hands.

“But, Peter, we have to show gratitude.”

“No we don’t. The Grey God did not give us this meal,” he spat out, shoving the kithara into Donis’s hands in a way that made it clear he’d shove it down his throat next if he started playing again.

Silence wrapped around the group. It was the careful quiet of people treading on eggshells. Peter hated it, all this anxiety and curiosity centered on him. However, he didn’t have the strength to explain how he’d failed to his friends. He didn’t want to tell them that there were no gods on their side.

Peter tore at his meat, savoring the flavor and trying to ignore Rag’s looks.

What would happen when they needed the Grey God’s help?

Peter retreated to his blanket, the taste of meat lingering on his tongue and turning to a sour bile. Even if he didn’t tell the truth, his friends would guess sooner or later. It was only a matter of time before they found out what a cowardly fraud he was.

Judging from the penetrating silence, Peter wouldn’t be surprised if they knew already.

## Chapter 18

School. Always more school. It's like this constant weight on my back, threatening to crush me. I still have two and a half years left, and after that is college. Then I'll be stuck in a job I don't like for the rest of my life. It's enough to make someone suicidal.

Mr. Gregory ambushes me as soon as I walk into his class. I guess he was kind of frustrated yesterday, after I walked out on him. So now he's gonna get me before I have a chance to escape. He's waiting at my desk, propped up against the wall with his arms folded.

"Matt," he drawls, looking at me out of one eye, "how come you didn't stick around yesterday?"

I shrug, slipping into my seat without meeting his gaze.

"You and I really need to talk. It's about your performance in this class. Now, you can either stay after class, or I can arrange an appointment for you and your father to come in after school. Whichever works better for you."

That's not some idle threat, either. He's already proven he has no qualms about calling home, and Dad's pretty predisposed to taking his side. I sigh heavily, and Mr. Gregory smirks.

"Good. I'll expect to see you after class, then."

With that, he waltzes away as the rest of the students start filing in. He gives a lecture like normal, and I don't pay attention, like normal. But when he dismisses the class, I have to stay behind. I catch a glimpse of Dane heading out the door. I don't know whether to be jealous that he's leaving or grateful that I don't have to risk an encounter with him. We haven't spoken since Monday.

"All right, then," Mr. Gregory says, sitting on top of the desk in front of me. If students sit on the desk, they get yelled at. But it's okay for teachers, who usually weigh 50 pounds more than us, to sit on top of them. "As you are probably well aware, Matt, your grade in this class is faltering. Once I put the oral report grades in, you will have a 63%."

Wow. That is close to failing. I was fine with a C, and a D wouldn't be the end of the world. But what if I don't do well on the final? What if I really do fail this class?

"So, what do you want to do to fix that?" Mr. Gregory asks, propping his chin on his arm and his arm on his knee.

*What do I want to do about it? Why bother even asking me that question when you don't really care? When it comes right down to it, it doesn't matter at all what I want. It's what you're willing to give me.*

Mr. Gregory stares at me. He has this unwavering gaze that makes you want to squirm. Like, didn't anyone ever tell him it's rude to stare? They at least should have informed him that it's creepy as hell. I think maybe he wants me to say something, to answer his asinine question. I'm not about to bark on command.

"What grade do you want in this class?"

That's a loaded question. He probably expects me to say an A, at which point he'll berate me for not working harder and say it's my fault for not doing my best. However, I don't really even care about getting an A. I'd be satisfied with a C. If I told him that, he'd probably give me a lecture about not settling for mediocre.

Since he's giving me that penetrating stare again, I write a reply on a piece of paper and hand it to him. It says, *I just want to pass.*

He looks it over and sighs.

"Well, if that will make you happy. But life is about more than just getting by, you know. No, never mind, that's a conversation for some other time. I think right now, passing is a good goal. So, what are you going to do to pass?"

I shrug, looking at his dingy grey sweater and not his face. My goal for this conversation is to end it with as little preaching as possible. If he'd just shut up and tell me what he wants me to do, it would be a lot easier.

"You know, Matt, I decided not to dock Dane for your performance on the oral report."

I look up. There must be shock on my face, but I wipe it off, replacing it with annoyance.

*You could have told me that sooner, douche bag!*

So does this mean that Dane isn't mad at me? He hasn't talked to me about it. I'd think he'd be so exuberant, he'd tell the world. So maybe he is still pissed at me for letting him down.

"So you don't need to punish yourself for letting him down," Mr. Gregory says, speaking exactly what was on my mind. "Just worry about your own grade for now. And you will need to do a lot of worrying."

Mr. Gregory tilts his eyebrows, one up and one down, in an expression that's more goofy than anything else. Then, he gives a little flick of his hands, dismissing me. Confused, I scribble on the paper, *But I thought you were going to tell me how to raise me grade.*

He reads it and gives a little snort.

"No, I wanted to talk to you to see if *you* had any ideas about how to raise your grade. It's not my responsibility to supply all the answers. If you do come up with an idea or extra project, come talk to me and we'll work things out. Until then, I suppose you'll just have to pay more attention in class."

With that, he returns to his own hulking desk at the back of the classroom. I have no idea what else to do, so I swing my backpack over my shoulder and head towards the library.

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It's just me and Dad and vegan dinner tonight. There's some sort of spinachy salad, held together with what I would assume to be melted cheese, except it can't be real cheese. Do they make vegan cheese? What do they make it out of, plastic?

"So, Matt, how was school?" Dad asks. Even he sounds bored with his questions. I guess since he has Amanda to talk to, our one-sided conversations must be getting to him.

There's silence for a long, long time. I clean my plate, except for the unidentifiable blue chunks that I refuse to eat. My stomach's missing the meat, but since staring at the table isn't going to make any magically appear, I decide to head upstairs. Dad stops me after I dump my plate in the sink, though.

"So, did you ever sort out what you're going to do about World History?" he asks, still sounding bored. Or maybe resigned is a better word.

*The oral report didn't hurt me that bad, I write out. I can raise it to a C.*



That last one I add a little half-heartedly. It'll take hard work for the rest of the semester, but Dad's not about to let me get a D. In fact, I expect him to be mad about the C.

Instead, he says, "Well, whatever. As long as you pass."

At first, my brain can't process the information enough to even be shocked. Then it sinks in a little, that Dad actually means it.

Since when does Dad not care about my grades? Wasn't he yelling at me last weekend for having a C? There was that whole guilt trip about how I couldn't do the bare minimum in life, and now he isn't the least bit concerned.

I go upstairs and close the door. I feel like Prometheus unshackled for the first time in centuries.

Dad doesn't care. That means that I don't have to stress out any more. I mean, I'm not gonna quit school altogether, but now I can do as well as *I* want to do.

*What caused the change of heart?*

*Who cares, as long as it stays this way?*

With that thought, I forget about studying for my math test tomorrow. Booting up the computer, I check my email. Maggy's left me a little note of encouragement, telling me she's sorry she wasn't in the lunchroom today, she had to study, blah blah blah. I know the real reason she wasn't there. She's frustrated with me, so she's avoiding me.

I write her an email back, telling her the good news. I don't care about grades anymore. I'm over the oral report and on with my life. It only takes a few minutes before I get a response.

*Matt, that's great! Good for you, for standing up to your Dad. Feels good to live your own life, huh?*

*So, now that you're not so concerned with school, how about taking a weekend off? Trick-or-treating this Friday?*

For some reason, I feel like something got lost in the transition from my head to Maggy's. I'm not standing up to Dad; I'm only slacking off because he's letting me. And just because I don't care about grades anymore doesn't mean I want to dress up and walk the streets after dark, banging on people's dirty doors.

How to write a response? Should I correct her, and let her know that I'm as spineless as ever? It's fine with me, if she thinks I'm braver than I am.

*But what to do with the trick-or-treating?*

I don't want to go, but at the same time, Maggy really wants me to. And I don't want to disappoint her. I kind of want...to spend time with her.

Finally, I respond: *You have to help me choose a costume.*

After that, I boot up my computer and start to write.

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The next day dawned just as cold and miserable as any other, but Peter thought he felt a bit of hope in the air. They didn't have to worry about food for a few more days, and they were finally rid of Briskel.

However, Donis and Rag still tiptoed around him, barely talking and not looking him in the eye. Peter didn't know whether they were angry or just confused, and he didn't feel like confronting them. So they carried the silence with them as they journeyed, slung across all their shoulders as a group burden.

Then, after a while, Donis and Rag started talking to each other. Their voices were low enough he couldn't make out what they were saying. They were also making sure to stay far enough back that he couldn't hear them properly.

*They're probably gossiping about me. Maybe they're planning on ditching me.*

Peter wanted to tell himself he was being irrational, but he couldn't. In the back of his mind, he had a niggling suspicion that before long, he'd be completely alone on the road. Rag and Donis probably would have left him already, if there were any towns nearby.

By afternoon, Peter was tempted to scream to cover up the whispering from behind. Luckily, they shut up long enough to put some of the roasted meat in their mouths.

"Do you think Briskel's finally gone?" Rag asked, not looking at Peter, even though the question was directed at him.

"No one knows for sure. But who cares?"

By nightfall, he was so fed up with himself he wanted to jump off a ledge. Once again, Peter stayed behind to start the fire while Rag and Donis scrounged for some berries. They didn't want to, but Peter forced them to go under the pretext that they needed as much food as possible. Really, he just wanted some time to himself to think.

His friends came back all too soon, toting a few pitiful handfuls of berries. Since no one wanted to stomach the berries alone, and Peter didn't want to waste them, they decided to make a soup with the meat. They mashed up the berries and mixed them with water. Then, they put some jerky in and set their bowls near the fire to warm. The result wasn't cuisine, but at least it was edible.

"So, any chance of us finding another wounded goat before we finish up the meat?" Donis asked. He had some berry smeared on the end of his nose.

"I wouldn't count on it," Peter replied, staring at his empty bowl and wishing he could have more. They had to make their meager meat supply last as long as possible, but that was easier said than done. With his belly still rumbling, he had to pack the jerky back into his satchel.

Donis had already settled himself into his blankets. Rag, on the other hand, was staring into the flames with a pointed concentration, not zoned out or day dreaming, just studying the fire.

"Good night, everyone," Donis yawned, before throwing the blanket over his head. A few minutes later he started snoring.

Peter decided he might as well sleep, too. However, even after he was under the blanket, he couldn't get his mind to rest. He tossed and turned, trying to find a spot that was warm and didn't have rocks poking under it. Staring up at the stars, he felt his eyelids drooping.

"Peter," Rag said, her voice shaking him back to consciousness. "I have to talk to you."

*And you had to wait till now to do it, when I'm almost asleep.*

With a groan, he sat up, wrapping the blankets around him to try and keep the heat in. Even though he hadn't said anything, Rag continued.

"I think I'm going to run away."

"You mean...you're going to leave me?" Peter asked. He couldn't blame her, and he had suspected all day that thought was on her mind, but it still surprised him to hear it out loud. He thought they would slip away quietly once they reached civilization, not giving him any kind of warning or explanation.

"I didn't say that. I said I was going to run away," she replied, looking from the fire to the sky. "This quest is impossible. Do you even know where we're going?"

"We've discussed this before. I have no idea."

Rag looked at him now. The firelight lit the edges of her hair and cast her face in shadow, so that Peter could not make out her expression.

"Yes, I remember now. You said you didn't know where we were going or how long it would take. You also said that if we couldn't find a way, you'd run away."

"I did?"

"Don't pretend like you've forgotten. You said that if your god wouldn't help you or you couldn't think of a way to find Sick Wind, then you'd abandon this stupid quest."

*I know. I remember making that promise. I remember how good it felt, to think about running away to somewhere the Grey God couldn't find me.*

Blanket still gathered around his shoulders, Peter scooted closer to the fire, to Rag. He could see her face now, the outline of her eyebrows knitting together in worry.

"Will you do it?" she asked, leaning closer to him. Her fingers dug into the dirt, leaving little furrows. "Will you run away? You and Donis and I, we can find someplace, a big city or something, and make a living there."

"Make a living doing what? Donis can't earn more than a couple of night's keep, and thieves get caught if they stay too long in one place."

"Fine, then we'd keep moving. It doesn't matter. But let's abandon this fool's errand!" she hissed, pummeling the dirt with her palm. "It doesn't matter what we do, as long as it's our choice. I don't care if he is a deity, the Grey God doesn't have the right to order you around like this. You said you thought He wasn't omniscient, that you could escape Him. So let's run away!"

She was talking so fast her words blurred together. Obviously, she thought Peter needed a lot of convincing. In fact, Peter thought he needed a lot of convincing. But thinking about the Grey God's cruel demands, how Peter had ignored them and still heard nothing from his god, and how much he despised the deity, he found he didn't need any convincing at all. He wanted to run away.

"Rag," he started, but she was talking too loudly to hear. "Rag! Be quiet and listen."

Her words dried up.

"You're right. We should quit this quest."

"...you mean it?"

"Yes. I mean that I *want* to run away. But I'm not sure I can."

Rag's eyebrows fell south again, her momentary glee thrown off for a look of confused frustration.

"What do you mean?"

“Just what I said. I’m not sure I can escape the Grey God.”

“But you said you thought the Grey God might not be omniscient.”

“I’m not sure. Maybe he is, maybe he isn’t. But why take the risk?”

Rag was saying something else, something about courage and being a man, but Peter wasn’t paying attention. Instead, he focused inward, thinking about his god. There was no way he would run away when he was sure to get caught. But the more he thought about it, the safer it seemed. After all, he’d said some pretty horrible things about the Grey God. And he’d defied one of his orders. Even after all that, he was still alive. So the Grey God probably wasn’t omniscient.

*But why take the risk?*

He hadn’t been asking Rag; he had been asking himself. What if he did run away, and the Grey God sent someone after him to punish him?

*Who? The Grey God has no acolytes left.*

Even though He was supposed to be a deity of vengeance, the Grey God rarely did His own dirty work. He sent one of His servants out to do it for him. And with Peter as His only link to the world, He couldn’t afford to kill him. At worst, He’d come down in an angry storm and beat Peter within an inch of his life, then order him to get back to work.

*He can’t do anything to me.*

“I’ll do it,” Peter said, interrupting Rag, who was still arguing full tilt.

She paused, looked at Peter suspiciously, then asked, “Really?”

“Yeah.”

Rag threw her arms around his neck, sighing into the blanket.

“Finally. I was beginning to think you didn’t have a spine at all.”

*I don’t. If my life were in danger, there’s no way I’d do this. But it’s not, so...what do I have to lose?*

## Chapter 19

Thursday passes so uneventfully that I can't even find the motivation to write at the end of the day. The only event with any color is Maggy hinting that she has a costume idea for me. Of course, she's not about to tell me what it is. She wants me to live in fear and suspense until tomorrow night.

And then it is Friday. Now, when you're already paranoid and superstitious to begin with, days like Halloween, April Fool's and Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> are unbearably stressful. Last year, on April Fool's day, I feigned sickness in order to stay home. And I mean a Shakespearean performance of coughing and gagging and all the tricks in the book. Luckily, Dad didn't even remember what day it was, otherwise he would have been too suspicious to let me stay home.

So I go to school on the fateful day of tricks and treats. Normally walking through the halls is like visiting a zoo filled with howling creatures. On Halloween, though, it's more like a circus. Maybe circus doesn't cover it. Freak show might be a better term.

Even in class, you can't get away from the muffled hysteria. There's something about coming to school in costume that makes people forget their brains. To make matters worse, even a few of the teachers dress up. It's like they exchange their common sense and decency for a chance to look like a clown.

I slouch deep into the recesses of my desk and pray for this day to be over.

In World History, Dane comes to class three minutes before the bell tolls. He's not wearing a costume, either. He's probably here early to avoid the hallways. They're crowded enough as it is, and when you add those bulky costumes and protruding decorations, you're likely to get an eye poked out.

As he sinks into his seat, he tosses a glance back at me. Our eyes meet for a moment, and he gives a faint smile. It has all the sincerity and enthusiasm of my thumbs-ups. Still, at least he's acknowledging my existence.

I'm disappointed. I don't know why, but for some reason I thought after we did the project together, we'd be... friends. Or something. Maybe that's unrealistic, but since he doesn't seem to be the most popular guy on the planet, and we're both kind of nerds, I thought things would click. Of course, I'm not really good at making friends, so it was guesswork to begin with, but if I hadn't let him down, who knows?

*I'm sorry, Dane. I'll try and make it up to you. I don't know how, but when I think of a way, I'll let you know.*

My head falls to my desk, and I keep it there until Mr. Gregory yells at me to sit up.

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Around six the nervousness starts. Maggy said she'd come at six thirty, force me into my stupid costume, and we'd be out on the streets by seven sharp. After a lot of haggling, she consented to only an hour of trick-or-treating. That means that in two hours, I'll either be home safe or dead.

Dad's thrilled that I'm going somewhere. At first, I debated whether I should even tell him. He's going to a movie with Amanda, so I could probably slip in and out without him noticing. But if I'm going to wander the streets, I want an adult to know. That way, if I'm not back by tomorrow, he knows I've been abducted by a bunch of Satanists who

want to use me in their sacrificial rituals. Maybe the police will find enough of my body in a dumpster to fill up a casket.

I sit on the couch, bobbing my leg up and down and trying to convince myself that tonight won't be that bad. I've gone trick-or-treating before. It's one of those experiences I've pushed into the back of my memory. However, I did survive it.

The doorbell rings, and I look at the clock in terror. She's fifteen minutes early! At this rate, we'll be out of here before six thirty! That's another half hour wandering the streets.

When Dad opens the door, though, it's Amanda.

"All right, Matt, have fun trick-or-treating. Stay safe," he calls as he pulls the door shut behind him.

I let out a sigh of relief. I have another fifteen minutes after all. And now he won't be here to buzz over our shoulders while Maggy and I get ready.

A pleasant five minutes late, Maggy knocks on the door. When I open it and see her, I'm tempted to just close it again.

She's wearing what can only be described as a tube, or perhaps a cylinder, with crude holes cut for arms. On the tube or can or whatever it's supposed to be, there's a gruesome little drawing of a bug dying a horribly painful death, surrounded by a green cloud of gas.

"I'm bug spray!" she sings.

I give a little shudder. Bug spray is one of those things I always let someone else handle. Frankly, I have no problem killing bugs, it's just the idea of holding a can of toxin in your hands that frightens me. Anything that's powerful enough to kill a roach is powerful enough to kill a human.

"Guess what your costume is."

Speak of the devil. She holds up a clear trash bag, through which I can make out a plastic carapace and antennae.

With a groan, I let her inside.

*It's only an hour.*

While I fumble with my costume in the bathroom, trying to figure out which parts go where, Maggy channel surfs. We'll only be here a couple of minutes, but she just has to turn on the TV. And people say it's not a drug.

The costume is itchy. Maggy's brought a black sweater and pants to wear, and they don't fit me quite right. I'm trying very hard not to think about where they came from. She bought them, that's what I'll tell myself.

Anyways, over the questionable clothes, there's this stupid plastic shell that's supposed to look like a roach carapace. It doesn't fit quite right, either. It's curved, so it doesn't sit flush against my back. Then there's the brown shin and arm guards, which I guess are supposed to add to the effect. Really, they just tie together the stupidity. And to top it off, there's a headband with some antennae stuck on it. I try not to think about lice as I slip it on. I really hope this costume isn't used.

"You ready yet?" Maggy calls out.

I glance at my watch. 6:50. That means I have ten more minutes to dawdle in the bathroom. I don't want to risk leaving early. In fact, maybe I can drag out getting dressed, and we can leave late. That would be a miracle.

After another five minutes, though, Maggy's knocking on the door, telling me to hurry up. She makes some sarcastic comments about me falling in the toilet, so I finally slip out.

"Aw, look at you! You look great!"

I look like an idiot, but that's what Halloween is all about. More than my stupid costume, I'm also worried about standing out like a sore thumb next to all the Elementary school kids. Luckily, both Maggy and I are kind of young looking. We could probably pass as 7<sup>th</sup> graders.

"Ready to go?" she asks, slipping back into her tube. She had to take the stupid thing off to sit down. If she slips in that, there's no way she's getting back up. She can't bend at the waist at all, and it stretches down almost to her knees.

Maggy hands me a pillowcase and drags me out the door. It's 8'o'clock sharp, so I guess I have a full hour ahead of me.

"So, Matt, are you gonna say trick-or-treat with me?"

I roll my eyes and shake my head.

"Oh, come on, we're going over to the rich neighborhood. None of these people will know you, so what's the harm? It's only three words. Or, actually, it might be one word. I can't remember. So come on, will you do it? It could be good practice."

I'm thinking about it. It's not like I'm opposed to practicing, I just don't know if I can. My throat will probably quit when the door opens. But, if it doesn't...well, I'm not going to make any promises to Maggy. I don't want to end up letting her down.

We spend a while walking across a couple neighborhoods to the richer part of town. I mean, our neighborhood is nothing to laugh at, but we're still beggars compared to the newest suburb. There's a pool in every backyard, and the houses are a little farther apart. Maggy promises it'll be worth it, though. Apparently, there's people up here who give out king sized candy bars. Frankly, I could care less, because I'm not going to risk eating candy given to me by complete strangers. But if the houses are farther apart, that means I'll have to endure that much less knocking on doors.

We go up to the first house, and Maggy rings the doorbell. There's shuffling and creaking and then the door opens. Maggy sings a triumphant trick-or-treat, and I echo with a small grunt. I'm too nervous to make much noise. What if the person shoos us away, tells us we're too old for trick-or-treating?

But the person, a frazzled old granny who looks too old to own a house as new as this, doesn't say a thing about our ages. She just thinks we're the cutest things she's ever laid eyes on, and she gives us a cavity's worth of candy.

After that, I gain a little courage. At every door, I get a little louder with my half-coherent trick-or-treat, until I'm finally saying it along with Maggy. Not nearly as enthusiastic as her, but there's words coming out of my mouth. I'm talking to people I don't even know. It's a lot easier to talk to people when you don't have to worry about making a good impression.

So Maggy and I continue our pilgrimage from home to home, begging for candy at every door. Along the way, we see fellow travelers, also decked out in garish disguises.

"See, I told you you'd have fun," Maggy says, elbowing me in the ribs. "If you want, we can go past eight."

I give her a glower. I'm having fun, but not *that* much fun. Maggy gives a sigh, but her disappointment dissipates at the next house. By the time our hour's up, we each have a sizeable haul. I'd say at least five pounds of candy, and that's only from one hour.

"Not bad," Maggy says, hefting her bag up and down to feel its weight, "but I've had better days. You should see how much candy people give out when it starts to get late and they're about to turn their lights off. Now that's a haul! Come on, Matt, let's stay out a little later. We'll get even more candy," she whines.

"You can have mine," I say, shoving my bag into her arms.

The candy slips into her arms without protest. She's too busy looking at me to really comprehend it.

"Matt... that's the first time I think I've heard you *say* anything in a year."

I shrug. Really, I wasn't even thinking about it. I've been saying "trick-or-treat" over and over for a while, and there wasn't any paper around, and Maggy was liable to keep whining, so I just... said it. Now, though, she's got me feeling self-conscious. I scuff the ground and shrug again.

"Well, anyways, it's nice to know you *can* talk, if you need to. Come on, let's go home."

She takes the lead, and I follow behind. I'm glad she didn't make a big deal out of it, but of all the things she could have said to brush it off, that's the worst. It makes me think of the oral report, when I tried to talk and couldn't. It's like, I needed to talk then, so why couldn't I?

Maggy walks me back to my house. Usually it's the guy that escorts the girl, but well, we both know I'd never have the guts to walk anywhere by myself after dark. Maggy will be fine, though. She's a capable young lady.

"Well, Matt, thanks for going with me," she says, loitering on the front step.

I nod while I fumble with the key, trying to stick it into the lock. I crack open the door, but don't go inside just yet. Maggy's still standing there, and I'm not exactly sure what she's waiting for. I can't just shut the door on her.

So, after a pause, I clear my throat and mumble, "See ya."

Maggy smiles, giving a little wave before skipping away. I slip into the safety of my home, locking the door and breathing in the comforting, secure smell.

The clock on the wall says it's ten after eight. Plenty of time to write before Dad gets home.

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There was no reason to press further into the mountains, so they returned to the trail they had put Briskel on. Since going down the mountain was bound to be easier than going up it, Peter hoped they'd be back in the lowlands within a couple of days. There, at least the nights wouldn't be so cold. And there would be pomegranates for Rag and Donis to eat.

The atmosphere was lighter now. Peter wasn't as paranoid about his friends abandoning him, and they in turn seemed more cheerful. In fact, by noon, they were laughing and talking again like old times.

"So, what are our plans now?" Donis asked.

"Get as far south as we can. Somewhere where it's warm all the time, and we can pick fruit year round."

"That's gonna take quite a bit of traveling," Rag observed.



“Yeah, well,” Peter replied, “it’s not like we have anything better to do.”  
That made them laugh.

That night, they were far enough down the mountain that wood-gathering was easier. There were berries aplenty, too, even though they were sick of berries. They finished off the last of the meat, warming it over the fire and chewing the greasy bits.

Within a week, they were back in civilization. Or rather, they had reached a tiny town nestled in a crossroads. It was the kind of place you couldn’t imagine people actually living in, just a place they stayed at on their way to somewhere else.

“All right,” Rag said, rubbing her hands together, “let’s check the local inn, see if they’ll give us a room for a few songs. After that, I can *secure* a few supplies.”

“You better be careful,” Peter warned. “In a town this small, they’ll notice if you take too much.”

Rag swished her hand, not the least bit concerned.

They located the inn, a mid-sized building that loomed over the tiny huts around it. The owner, a shabby man with dark smears of sleep under both eyes, readily agreed to their offer. Apparently, it had been a long while since any sort of entertainment had stopped at this ramshackle town. He wanted Donis to start immediately.

“Well, Donis, break a leg,” Rag called, heading for the door.

“Wait! I’m coming with you,” Peter said.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Donis doesn’t need help here. And someone has to keep you in line.”

Together, they strolled the streets. It was getting late, and the pitiful few shops had closed. To Peter, this meant they might as well go home, but Rag didn’t look disappointed in the least. Instead, her eyes roamed the streets, never pausing on one place too long. She was surveying her prey while trying to look casual.

“So, Rag, what’s the plan?”

“We bide our time and try not to draw attention to ourselves.”

“Sounds good. Bide our time till what?”

“Till dark,” Rag muttered, giving him a sidelong glance that said quiet. There were still people roaming the streets here or there, so Peter took her advice and stopped talking.

Within an hour, it was too dark to move about with much ease. The only lights were the flickering rays coming through the occasional window. These, too, were extinguishing one by one.

“Rag,” Peter whispered, “Is it dark enough yet?”

“There’s still light, isn’t there?”

With a sigh, Peter crossed his arms and waited some more. They weren’t even pretending to go anywhere now. It was too dark for people to see them easily, so it was safe to loiter.

One by one, the lights in the windows went dark. Even after that, Rag waited. The growl in Peter's stomach grew a little. They had missed the dinner at the inn.

*This had better be worth it, thought Peter. How are we supposed to steal anything when I can't even see my hand in front of my face?*

But he could see his hand in front of his face. And when Rag gave the signal a few moments later, the silent beckoning to follow, he could see that, too. His eyes had adjusted to the dark.

Creeping slowly, they slipped down an alley. There were clothes suspended by a washing line, flapping like ghosts in the night breeze. Delicately, Rag unhitched them and shoved the bundle into Peter's arms. He was tempted to ask what the heck he was supposed to do with someone else's laundry, but he knew better than to talk. Right now, Rag was in control, and he was just the tagalong.

Cautious as cats, they made their way from one end of town to the other. Along the way, Rag would stop to pilfer something, from a spade leaning against the side of a house to a sack stuffed behind a shop counter.

*She must have memorized where all this stuff was on the trip through town. Impressive. But it's still just junk. What are we going to do with it?*

After they had looted as much as both of them could carry, they made their way to the inn. That, too, was dark when they slipped inside. Guided by Donis's snoring, they found the little patch of ground and the straw mattresses allotted to them. Together, they crammed what they could into their packs, and bound the rest into a lumpy bundle with the laundry. It didn't look too conspicuous, but Peter thought they'd have to hit the road mighty early, before everyone in town came hunting for them.

"So, Rag, what exactly are we going to do with all this...stuff?"

"Sell it, of course. This stuff is as good as coin, once we get to the next town."

"Yeah. All we have to do is lug it there."

Rag gave him a shove on the shoulder, and they both wormed into their blankets.

"You know," Peter yawned, rolling around and trying to find the comfortable spot on his mattress, "Tonight was kind of fun."

"Really? Are you sure you aren't racked with guilt?"

"No. I mean, I do feel bad for these people, but...it's amazing, how you move through the dark like that. And it was kind of exciting."

"Welcome to the wild life, Peter."

## Chapter 20

The plan was to sleep in till noon the next day, but that got scrapped when Dad came in and shook me awake.

“Hey, Matt, how was last night?”

I claw his hands away. He’s sitting on the edge of the bed, and with a sigh I forget about sleeping. We’ve had this talk before, about how I don’t want him on my bed, but I guess he doesn’t care.

“Look, Matt, I have to run some errands. Amanda’s coming over for lunch, and she might get here before I do. She can let herself in. I just wanted to let you know she’s coming over, okay?”

No, that’s not okay. What do you mean, she can let herself in? Does she have a key? Surely Dad wouldn’t be that stupid. They’ve been going out for, what, three months? For all we know, she’s a crazy ax murderer. It takes years for you to get to know a person well enough to trust them with your house keys.

Dad gets off the bed and exits the room. See, that’s the bad thing about being silent. People don’t know if you’re silent with shock, agreement or anger. Usually they interpret it the way they want to interpret it.

With another drawn-out sigh, I set about remaking my bed. This time I’m just going to dump the quilt in the laundry basket and make it Dad’s problem. There’s a spare, moth-eaten blanket I don’t enjoy using because it smells funny, tucked in my closet. With practiced precision, I lay it on the bed.

Dad may be worried about me functioning in the real world, but at least I know how to do laundry and change my own sheets. That’s more than I can say for most high school boys. Heck, that’s probably more than most men, period.

Dad’s already gone when I get downstairs. So, I fix myself a breakfast of granola and soy milk, trying to remember the last time I had a breakfast I actually liked.

Afterwards, I do my usual Saturday cleaning and sanitizing. Not just my room, but the other parts of the house Dad would never think to clean. Like that little space between the toilet and the wall, or dusting on top of the window ledges. Without me, Dad would probably catch some nasty disease and die. At the least, his house would be so revolting he’d never get ladies to come over.

*I suppose that makes me an enabler.*

Cleaning done, I grab a book and a space on the couch. Normally I read upstairs in my room, but I want to keep an eye on Amanda when she comes over.

A little after eleven, there’s a knock on the door followed by the grating click of keys in the lock. It’s a courtesy knock, because she knows I’m not about to answer.

“Hey, Matt,” Amanda calls, shutting the door behind her. “Is you Dad home yet?” I shake my head.

“Well, should I wait until he gets back or start on lunch?” she asks. I assume it’s a rhetorical question, so I go on reading. After a moment’s debate, she sits on the couch next to me. I scoot a little further away, subtly indicating that just because the seat is empty doesn’t mean it’s available, and she better not get closer than she has to.

She flicks on the TV. There’s a few minutes where we sit in peace, and then she starts talking again.

“So, Matt, have you and your Dad been getting along?”

What am I supposed to say to that? I chew my lip and nod yes. Of course, the answer isn't completely dishonest. Dad and I haven't fought lately, but that's because we've barely been talking.

With a soap commercial buzzing in the background, Amanda and I sit side by side on the couch. She's waiting to ask another question. It's one of those deals where you're trying to start up a conversation, but you don't want to be too pushy, so you wait a little in between. Kind of like the chit chat transients have on subway trains, when they know no one wants to talk to them but they're trying to coax people into conversation anyways.

"You know, I put in a good word for you, with your Dad. About that whole oral report thing."

I glance at her out of the corner of my eye. She's staring back at me, though, so I pretend to continue reading. Chances are, she's only starting this conversation to win brownie points with me, and I'm not about to make it easy.

"Your Dad's really worried about your grades, you know. He wants you to get into a good college. And everyone knows you're smart; you're just not applying yourself"

My fingers tighten around my book. If she was planning on getting on my good side, well, she pretty much destroyed her chances. I've only heard this argument a million times.

"I told Dad that your grades really aren't any of his business."

That argument's new.

I forget my book and look at Amanda.

"It's really disappointing that you're not trying your hardest. However, you're old enough that you should have the freedom to make your own decisions."

She turns back to the TV. I doubt she's forgotten me, though. This is just a ploy. You say something really interesting, make some big reveal, and then pretend not to care. She wants me to beg her for more information. Maybe it'll satisfy her power craving.

However, if there's one thing I'm good at, it's outlasting other people. I turn back to my book. If she doesn't want to explain herself further, fine. I'll take her words at face value.

For some inexplicable reason, Amanda's sticking up for me in front of Dad. Thanks to her, I apparently have the freedom to make my own choices now. That explains Dad's sudden change of heart.

In spite of myself, I smile. I make sure to hide it behind my book, though, so Amanda can't see.

I get to make my own choices. I can fail all the classes I want. The best part is, as long as Dad sticks with Amanda, I'm guaranteed protection.

I feel a surge of gratitude towards Amanda, but I suppress it. This is what she wants. The only reason she told me was so I'd like her more. Heck, the only reason she did it in the first place was to get me on her good side. She wants to get in the brat's good graces so the Dad will like her more. If they moved in together, my life would be a constant game of good cop bad cop. Or maybe it wouldn't. Maybe once she moved in with us, she'd drop the act and start treating me like crap.

My life could turn into some horrible retelling of Cinderella. I hate fairy tales.

I shoot another suspicious glower at Amanda, trying to see her real motives. All I can see is that content look on her face as she stares at the TV.

*I don't know whether you're being genuine or not. It doesn't matter, though. As long as I have my freedom, you have my thanks. But I still don't trust you.*

As soon as Dad gets home, I retreat upstairs. It's possible they're cooking something non-vegan, but right now I'm not that hungry.

*I think I'll write instead.*

\*\*\*

They set out at first light. After stealing so much, they agreed it was best to get as far away from the town as possible.

"I still think most of this is junk," Peter grumbled, hiking his bulging pack higher. The burns on his back were gone now, so it didn't hurt.

"It is junk," Rag replied, "but it's junk we can sell. Once we get to the next town, we can trade it for food or anything else we want."

"Is that before or after we steal from the merchants?"

"Before, of course. We sell, we steal, and then we split."

Peter rolled his eyes and readjusted his pack. No matter how he placed it on his back, it kept slipping. It was too full to carry easily.

"So, once we sell this, I don't have to sing for our keep anymore, right?" Donis asked.

"Why don't you want to sing?" Rag asked, looking over her shoulder. "You're a bard. It's your job."

"I love singing. I just don't like doing it in front of people."

"You are the poorest excuse for a bard," Peter muttered.

At midday, they stopped to pick fruit. There were pomegranate trees, sprinkled throughout the grove. Both Donis and Rag helped themselves. They crammed their mouths full of the seeds. By the time lunch was done, their mouths were stained a vicious red. It made Peter shudder.

*No wonder pomegranates are the fruit of the goddess of death.*

As they exited the grove of trees, Peter saw a large group of people in the distance. He didn't think anything of it, until he noticed that the band had picked up the pace when they saw them.

"Who do you suppose those people are?" he asked Rag.

"I don't know. There's an awful lot of them, though."

"And it looks like they're heading towards us."

"Maybe," interjected Donis, "we should walk a little faster."

They took his advice, walking as fast as their legs could carry them without showing panic. When Peter glanced over his shoulder, though, he saw the crowd was jogging now. There was a cry, muffled by the distance between them, but still threatening.

"Rag, what happens when you get caught for stealing?"

"Nothing good," she growled, grabbing Peter and Donis and dragging them into the trees. "Come on. We might be able to lose them."

*If we don't, we're dead meat.*

"But I thought you said you only stole junk," Donis huffed, stumbling over a root. Peter hauled him up.

"We did. But it was a poor town," Rag explained.

She stamped her feet restlessly. If she was by herself, she wouldn't have any problem escaping her pursuers. She'd probably climb a tree and then double back, or just run so fast no one could catch up.

"Sorry we're slowing you down," Peter said, yanking a little harder on Donis's sleeve.

"If we get away, I'll forgive you."

There were shouts behind them. With a growl, Peter ripped his pack off his back and threw it on the ground.

"Peter!"

"It's what they're after," he explained, peeling off Donis' pack, too. "And it's slowing us down."

Rag didn't argue, but she made no move to remove her pack.

Together, they stumbled through the trees, trying to put as much distance between them and their pursuers as possible. Rag kept several paces ahead, glancing over her shoulder and tramping like an anxious horse.

"I think they're still after us!" she called.

Sure enough, Peter could hear the heavy breathing of someone running hard, the scuffling of feet through leaves. He tried to put on an extra burst of speed, but Donis tripped and dragged Peter down with him. They sprawled across the forest floor, feet still flailing in an attempt to get away.

Something grabbed the back of Peter's robe and pulled. He was hauled to his feet, to the very tips of his toes, until he was gagging and kicking. A very tall, very angry man held him, looking at Peter with eyes narrowed in fury.

Peter racked his brain for something to say. He didn't think an apology would sound sincere. That and he was having trouble breathing, so he couldn't say much at all.

There were more men joining the first, surrounding them. Rag was nowhere in sight, but they had Donis.

"You boys think it's funny to steal?" the man holding Peter growled.

He released his grip. Peter fell to the ground, coughing. When he tried to stand up, a heavy foot stamped down on his chest.

"You aren't going to like what we do to thieves," a voice snarled. Peter couldn't tell who was talking. The circle of men all looked the same. They looked like they wanted to kill him.

"We gave it back," Peter coughed out, and the boot pressed harder on his chest. He tried thrashing, but he couldn't move enough to do that. Now, his lungs were squeezed so tight, it felt like he was suffocating.

*Maybe I am suffocating! Maybe I'm dying!*

The foot lifted, and Peter sucked in a breath. Before he had enough air to sigh in relief, the foot returned, a hard kick to the ribs that made him yelp. He squirmed backwards, only to run into someone. They shoved him back into the middle of the circle. Donis was there, quivering and rubbing at a split lip. For a second, they cowered against each other, looking at the barrier of angry men.

Peter surveyed the crowd, trying to think of a way out. Could they fight? Well, they could, but they were certain to lose. If he could break through the wall,

he might be able to run away, but there was no way he could take Donis with him. Begging for mercy might be the best approach.

"Look, we're sorry," he began.

"No you're not. Not yet."

With that, the band was on them, snarling and lashing out like starving dogs over spoiled meat. Peter instinctively ducked his head, trying to shelter it beneath a rain of kicks and punches. He had never been good at fighting. All he could do was curl in a ball and hope nothing important got injured.

Someone dragged him to his feet, only to smash him back down. Peter hit the ground hard, and he felt something wet on his side.

*Am I bleeding?*

His hand flew to the area, coming away wet and sticky and red. However, when he brought the liquid to his lips, the taste wasn't salty enough for blood.

*I fell on a pomegranate. How fitting. I'm going to be beaten to death under a pomegranate tree.*

The blows were so hard, Peter couldn't tell the difference between a kick and a hit anymore. He felt dizzy.

*Are they really going to beat us to death? It was just some clothes. And that basket. And a hoe. And a few bowls. Okay, it was a lot of stuff, but would they kill us over it?*

Peter thought about calling to his god for help, but then he remembered that he wasn't serving that god anymore.

"Hey!"

He heard shouting. It was a light voice, not gruff like the men.

"Is this the stuff you lost?"

It was Rag's voice. There was shouting from the men, and then scuffling. Opening his eyes, Peter glimpsed Rag running through the trees, holding out her pack. The men chased her, and they disappeared from sight.

"Peter?" Donis called. "Peter, are we still alive?"

"Yeah," he replied, pushing himself up, "but we have to move."

He helped Donis to his feet. For a moment, they swayed from side to side, trying to catch their breath.

"Is Rag going to be all right?" Donis asked.

"I don't know. She can probably outrun them, though. Let's worry less about her and more about us."

They limped through the grove. During the fight, Peter had lost his bearings, so they wandered blind through the trees. Then they stumbled upon the packs, lying on the ground.

*Well, those buffoons couldn't have been that concerned about their belongings, if they didn't even bother to pick them up.*

There was the bundled sheet, too. Peter snatched the hoe out of it. Even though it had a spindly wooden handle, it was better than no weapon. After dumping out the heaviest of their stolen goods, Peter slipped the pack back on.

"Come on, Donis. I don't want to risk using the path, so we'll go through the trees."

"For how long?"

“Until it’s safe.”

“How will Rag find us?”

Peter didn’t have an answer to that. Instead, he grabbed Donis and led him in a direction Peter assumed was south.

By nightfall, they had heard no sign of the men. Peter deemed it safe enough to build a fire. He was hoping Rag would see it. If she was anywhere near them, she’d follow the fire’s light into camp.

“What’ll we do if Rag doesn’t come back?” Donis whimpered.

“Look for her tomorrow morning.”

They both knew what a hopeless suggestion that was. Either she’d escaped and was making her way towards them, or she was a goner.

“My face hurts,” Donis whined.

“Yeah. You have a nasty bruise. Several, actually.”

Peter stirred the fire with a stick, thinking about his own injuries. His face hurt. So did his legs. His entire body was one unpleasant ache.

“I think I’m going to bed,” he mumbled, draping his blanket over him.

“What about Rag?”

“If she’s out there, she’ll find us. Whether I’m awake or not.”

With that, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

\*\*\*

It was a dream. Peter knew it from the way his surroundings swam in a half-formed haziness. He couldn’t focus on anything. It was the kind of dream where he felt disconnected from his body, swimming in a fog of nothingness.

“You survived today. I’m impressed.”

The voice echoed around him. Peter would have turned to look for a source, but he didn’t have a body to turn with. In this dream, he was formless.

“In fact, you’ve been very good at surviving near-death disasters. Why do you think that is, Peter?”

Peter couldn’t find a voice to answer with. It was just as well, because he had no idea what to say. What kind of dream was this?

The haze in front of him rippled, and a woman took form. It was Miranda.

*What are you doing here?* Peter thought. *No, a better question might be, who are you really?*

Miranda smirked, her lips pressed closed.

“You should be dead by now. You should have died ten times over.”

She flicked her honey hair over one shoulder. In this light, though, her entire countenance had a sable tint. The locks flickered iridescent, black and yellow at the same time.

“You should thank me, you know. The lady of death doesn’t want you yet.”

*Sick Wind. They’re connected. Is she...Sick Wind’s acolyte?*

Peter didn’t know anything about Sick Wind’s priests. In fact, he wasn’t even sure if She had a temple. He had a feeling in his disembodied stomach that this woman was Her servant, though.

“Your friend is in trouble. Up the path and a stone’s throw into the trees. She’s wounded and her pursuers are gaining. Go help her. Death is on your side.”



She faded again, like mist driven by a wind. Not long after, Peter awoke with a jolt.

“Donis!”

His friend was snoring by the fire.

*So much for keeping watch.*

“Well, whatever, you stay here,” he ordered the unconscious bard.

Peter grabbed the hoe, feeling the thin handle topped by brittle metal. If he hurried, and got to Rag before the other men, he wouldn’t need a weapon at all. If he did fight, though, this was better than nothing. Just barely.

Peter dashed up the path, slowing down after the fire went out of sight. The dream hadn’t told him how far up the road he had to go.

*Why am I listening to a crazy dream in the first place? It was probably something I ate.*

Except he hadn’t eaten anything all day.

Peter halted. He heard something in the bushes, the wispy rustle of shaking branches. Cautiously, he left the path and entered the shadowy grove. After he had walked a few paces in, he called out.

“Rag? Rag, are you there?”

“Peter?”

The voice came from above. Peter looked up, but all he could see were intertwining branches. She’d chosen a pretty good hiding spot.

“Rag, come down.”

“I can’t. I twisted my ankle a while back. It was all I could do to get up this tree in the first place.”

“Hm,” Peter grunted, rubbing his chin. “Well then, it might be best for you to stay in the tree until dawn. You’re probably safer up there anyway.”

“No! Peter, I heard them send someone back to get dogs. What if they find me in this tree? I can’t run away any more.”

“Yeah, that could be a problem,” Peter muttered. “All right, I have an idea. Which tree are you under?”

“To your left. No, next one over. Yeah, that’s it.”

Tossing his hoe onto the ground, Peter held out his arms.

“Okay, jump.”

“What?”

“Jump into my arms.”

“That’s your bright idea? Peter, what if I miss?”

“Look, just aim for my voice. It’s not that far of a drop anyway.”

Rag was ready to argue more, but a sound killed her words. There was barking in the distance. Before Peter opened his mouth to encourage her, Rag slid off her branch. She fell into Peter’s chest, and they crashed to the ground in a heap.

“This is what I get for trying to be gallant,” Peter winced, worming out from under her.

“Sorry about that. But thanks for breaking my fall.”

Rag’s voice was cheerful, unpanicked. A moment later, when she tried to get to her feet and failed, the worry crept in.

"I can't get up."

Slinging her arm over his shoulder, Peter dragged her to her feet. She inhaled sharply, a sound perilously close to a sob.

"We can't outrun them."

"Don't worry. I brought a weapon."

He searched the ground for his hoe, felt the rough wood and clenched it. Supporting Rag with one hand and wielding the hoe in the other, they made their way towards the campfire. It was painfully slow, and also painfully quiet. They couldn't hear any barking behind them. Peter was trapped between hope and despair. Maybe the hounds had lost the trail. Or maybe they were approaching silently, trained to attack without warning.

Then he heard panting. Like a raspy wind, the sound shot towards them from behind. Peter let go of Rag, and she fell to the ground with a yelp. Gripping the hoe in both hands, he turned to face his foes.

They were shadow on shadow, moving through the trees. The way they wriggled and bunched and sped through the darkness, there was no way to tell their number. Peter didn't think there would be more than five, though.

*Just five dogs, and no humans in sight. I can handle this.*

His knees had all the stability of wet bread. They trembled and struggled to hold him upright.

"Stay behind me, Rag," Peter warbled. She probably couldn't do anything else, but right now he needed to hear the sound of his voice, maybe one last time.

The first dog approached, breathing in those regular gasps each time its feet kissed the earth. It was lean and long-legged, breaking from the crowd with a burst of energy.

With an added spring, it leapt towards Peter's legs. The other dogs were close on its heels, and Peter knew he had one shot to stun this beast.

He swung the hoe in a wide arc, connecting with the dog's side. There was a sharp crack. He feared it was the hoe, snapping in two, but when the cur sunk into a pile the handle was still in one piece.

Three other dogs fanned around him. Their comrade lay at their feet, unmoving. Instead of leaping at him head on and making easy targets of themselves, they circled beyond Peter's reach. He didn't want to swing at them and risk overextending himself, but at the same time, if he didn't do anything soon, one of them would get behind him.

*Go for the long-furred one,* Peter thought.

He didn't know where the thought came from. He had no reason to think the scraggly, shaggy dog would be a good target. But he didn't have any better ideas.

With a violent intake of air, Peter jumped forward. The hoe came up, over his head, and then down. The dog tried backpedaling, but he only moved his head into the path of that hard, metal end.

Carried forward by his momentum, Peter tumbled into the dog. Four legs entangled with two, and he fell heavily to the side, shoving the still twitching dog away.

*Two down.*

One at his back. Peter rolled away, but the dog leapt for his face. Yellowed teeth met the wooden handle. The animal shook its head from side to side, and Peter almost lost his grip. He could hear the other dog snarling behind him. With a burst of fear-inspired strength, Peter kicked the canine clinging to the handle away. It yelped and backed off, leaving Peter a chance to spring to his feet.

Then the fourth dog, husky and spraying saliva, leapt at him. A swing, a thunk. The dog fell to its side, but got up slowly. Red oozed out of its fur, at the place where the sharp edge of the hoe had met the ribs. It was far from dead, though.

The other dog was back for more, latching onto Peter's arm and making him the one to yelp. Two blows, one to knock it off and one to knock it down. Peter struck with his knee and then with his weapon. There was a punctuated crack. The hound fell to the ground, as did half the hoe.

*It lasted longer than I thought it would.*

A thunderous growl reminded Peter that he still had one assailant left. Snatching the other half of the hoe off the ground, he held it up. Now, in both hands he had a stumpy bit of wood. There wasn't enough leverage in either to be deadly.

*He's already half-dead. I can do this.*

However, the dog had learned its lesson. It limped around Peter, keeping beyond his reach. They both panted, their ragged breathing synchronized. It was only then that Peter realized he was wounded. Liquid, too hot and thick to be sweat, trickled down his back.

*When did that happen?*

The fight was too much of a blur to remember. All he knew was that both he and the dog were losing blood. Soon, one of them would give.

The dog crouched low, and Peter tensed. But instead of springing forward, it sprang around, dodging under Peter's arm and behind him. Before he could turn, the dog pounced and knocked him forward. It had his neck in its teeth.

Something was wrong, though. Instead of white pain and then nothing, Peter could feel the cold saliva and imprint of the dog's fangs. The grip was weak, barely enough to break the skin.

Peter shoved the weight off of him and got to his feet. The canine lay on the ground. There was a wet noise to its breathing, like it was gargling water. Feebly, it struggled to rise. Before it could regain its footing, Peter drove the metal part of the hoe into its skull. There was a shudder, and then the dog was still.

Now it was Peter's turn to sink to the ground. His vision blurred; he swayed, but somehow held together.

"Peter?" Rag called. "Are you okay?"

She pulled herself towards him, crawling on hands and knees.

"Yeah," Peter said, gulping in air, "I'm alive, at least."

He took Rag's hands. Leaning on each other, they struggled to their feet. Draping Rag's arm over his shoulder, they started the slow trek to camp.

“Careful, Peter! Push yourself too hard and you could die.”  
“I don’t think so. Tonight, death was on our side.”

## Chapter 21

Surprisingly, Amanda isn't there when I wake up the next day. Maybe she has somewhere else to be on a Sunday. In any case, it's just me and Dad and a day with nothing to do.

I lay in bed until noon, reading a book. Part of me wants to write, but I can never write early in the morning. I need an entire day of frustration in order to find inspiration.

Finally, come lunchtime, Dad knocks on my door and tells me I can't spend all day in bed. He claims he has a scrumptious meal waiting downstairs. I have my doubts, but I clamber out of bed anyway.

Downstairs, there's artificial bacon and fake eggs and milk that does not come from cows. Sometimes, I wish we'd just eat fruit and nuts for breakfast. All this vegan-friendly, pretend food only reminds me of what I'm missing.

When I take the first bite, nibbling on the bacon with the tips of my teeth, I'm surprised by how good it tastes. What the heck is it made out of? It tastes juicy and sumptuous, just like real meat.

"You like it?" Dad asks, slipping into the seat across from me. "I figured I might as well make bacon and eggs for lunch, since you weren't up for breakfast."

I poke the eggs. They jiggle and quiver like something made of protein and not recycled soy. So... is this food real?

"Matt, there's something I want to talk to you about."

Yeah, it's real. I can tell from Dad's tone. He's got a pleading look in his face, which means he wants to talk to me about something I'm predisposed to oppose. This meal is a bribe. It's supposed to keep me glued to the table, so we can discuss something uncomfortable. He tried the same thing the first time he told me he was dating, after Mom's death.

"You know it's okay with me, that you didn't participate in the oral report."

It's not okay with him at all. There's a crease in his face, like it's causing him physical pain to say this.

I shovel another forkful of eggs into my mouth. Chances are, I'm about to lose my appetite. Might as well eat while I can.

"But... I want to know. Are you considering..." Dad drums his fingers on the table, like he's trying to find the words, "talking again?"

*Actually, Dad, I've already started talking again. Just not to you.*

I shrug my shoulders.

Dad sighs and looks disappointed. I guess he was hoping for a more definite answer.

"Because, you know I'd love to hear you talk."

I scratch my plate with the fork, dragging lines in the bacon grease. See, I know Dad would love to hear me talk. It's not a secret. But I don't want to talk to him. I think part of me enjoys making him suffer. Like I want him to get down on both knees and beg for forgiveness.

"Matt, I'm sorry if I've upset you."

Oh God, never mind. I don't want his apologies after all. It's too embarrassing to watch.

“We don’t exactly have the best relationship, but I wish that you’d tell me things. How am I supposed to understand what you want if you don’t talk to me?”

Now I’m squirming in my seat. I know this already. Why does he feel like he has to tell me? I know our relationship is crap, I know he wants me to tell him things, and I know it’s unfair of me to shut him out. What I don’t know is why I still do it. If he could tell me that, it would clear up a lot of our problems.

I thought I wanted him to suffer, but that doesn’t do me any good. Maybe I wanted him to apologize, but here he is saying sorry and all it does is make me feel uneasy. Besides, I don’t know what I want him to apologize for. I mean, I have a vague idea about how mean he’s been to me over the years, but I can’t think of any definite instance. I know I’m being selfish and immature, but I don’t know why.

“I just want you to know, Matt, that if you ever need someone to talk to, I’m here. And I’d love to listen.”

There’s a very awkward silence. Like, he’s expecting me to say something, to break down and say all is forgiven, I’ve decided to give up my vow of silence.

After several minutes, I take my plate to the sink and escape.

It’s barely after noon, but I’m ready to write.

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As soon as they got back to camp, they extinguished the fire and shook Donis awake. Leaning on one another for support, they stumbled through the darkness, off the path and as far as their legs could carry them. A few times Peter thought he heard shouts, but nothing near enough to cause panic.

Finally, they found an abandoned den of some kind and squirmed inside. The sun was almost up, but none of them saw its light. They were fast asleep.

When they finally awoke, it was past noon. Slowly, carefully, ears on high alert, they crept out of the den. Still no sign of the men.

With Rag’s assistance, they flushed the dirt out of Peter’s wounds.

“How does it look?” he asked, gritting his teeth.

“Red. And bloody. Luckily, I think all that scar tissue on your back absorbed some of the damage.”

“It doesn’t hurt any less.”

Peter’s old bandages were dirty and ragged, but they didn’t have anything else to put on. So they rewound them and hoped for the best.

“Okay,” said Peter, straightening up, “our first order of business is to get as far away from here as possible.”

“Agreed,” said Donis.

After fashioning a crutch for Rag out of a large tree branch, they set out through the forest. Even though it was unlikely their captors were still pursuing them, paranoia made them wary. By the end of the day, they were lost. They had no idea where they were in relation to the nearest town, the trail, or anything else. On the positive side, they found a stream.

“Well, we have fresh water,” Rag commented. “Tomorrow we can follow this and see if it goes anywhere.”

Since they were down from the mountains, the nights were warmer. They decided not to risk lighting a fire. Instead, they curled up under the stars and listened to their complaining bellies.

*Ever since I left the temple, it seems like I never have enough to eat. I guess I took the food there for granted.*

Trying to ignore the shaking of his belly, Peter closed his eyes and drifted to sleep.

He was having another weird dream. His body was nowhere to be seen, nowhere to be felt. His consciousness hung suspended in that formless soup.

He expected Miranda to come again. Instead, there was thunder.

Peter wished he could find his body. He wished he could summon legs to run away with. There was no doubt who the thunder belonged to.

“Peter,” the Grey God rumbled. Peter couldn’t see anything, only the distant flash of lightning. Or was it distant? In this boundless, shapeless void, it was impossible to tell.

“Peter,” came the voice again, “You are running away from me.”

It wasn’t a question. It also wasn’t necessary. Peter knew he was running away. Why did the Grey God have to tell him?

“You can’t run away from this task, Peter. I need your help.”

He felt like squirming, except he didn’t have a body. Anger, fury, lightning vengeance he would have expected from his God. Anything put a plea.

“If you run away from me, my connection to the earth will be severed. I will be powerless to enforce my will on earth.”

*Maybe that’s not such a bad thing,* Peter thought. *Your will was usually bad news for other people.*

“You risk throwing everything out of balance. If I have no priests, there is no medium for people to bring their grievances to. Imagine the misdeeds that will go unpunished. People will cry out for vengeance, and I will not be able to help them.”

*And, let me guess, it will be all my fault.*

Peter was expecting a sharp rebuke, but instead the Grey God’s voice was gentle. Still rumbling and deep, but without its usual fierceness.

“You cannot run away from your responsibility.”

There was silence after that. The rumbling faded, the lightening ceased, and Peter was left feeling guilty and ashamed. But not enough to resume his quest.

## Chapter 22

You know, as much as Garfield creeps me out, the cat had it spot on when describing how horrible Mondays are.

On top of the usual Monday blues and hues of grey, I hate this guilt clinging to me like Saran wrap. Why is it, every time I start to feel good about my life, something comes along to screw it up?

*This week is going to be better. I'm going to turn things around.*

However, I have no idea where to start with Dad. Our relationship is a spewing artery and right now all I have is band-aids. So, I think I'll tackle something more manageable, like patching things up with Dane.

During first period, I write an apology, but it sounds stupid. My thoughts flatten like toothpaste onto the paper. It's hard to sound genuine and apologetic on college-ruled paper. I do the best I can, fold it into eighths and tuck it into my pocket.

Come third period, I'm nestled in my seat and waiting for Dane to show up. By the time he gets to class, though, the bell is about to ring and there are a million people there. I don't want to hand him the note in front of everybody. I mean, to me, seeing people pass notes is so seventh grade. It's kind of like texting the person sitting next to you. So I decide to wait until after class and hope he sticks around long enough.

When the bell rings, I see Dane flit towards the door. I manage to catch his gaze for a moment, though, and I give him a look. For a second, I think he's going to ignore me. To my surprise, he lingers.

After all the other students are gone, and it's just me and Dane and Mr. Gregory shuffling papers at his desk, I approach. I have my pathetic note in my pocket, but I'm too disgusted with it to pull it out. Instead, I take one deep breath and plunge into words.

"I'm sorry about the oral report. I don't know what happened. I was planning on talking, I really was, but it didn't work out. Sorry."

I look down at my shoes. The laces are dirty; they need to be replaced. Funny how you only notice stuff like that when you don't have time to do anything about it.

"No big deal," Dane replies.

I glance up, to try and read his face. He's staring at me, surprised I talked. I can't read anything else. It looks like maybe that's it, he's going to walk out the door and be done with the issue.

"It didn't affect my grade, anyway," he says, shrugging.

Oh. So the only reason it's no big deal is because your grade is undamaged. I guess that means you wouldn't be talking to me if Mr. Gregory hadn't changed his mind.

"Yeah," I mumble, "That's a good thing. Sorry for keeping you from lunch."

"No big deal. I never eat the lunch here, anyway. I mostly just sit on the bench and read."

At this, I perk up. There's something I relate with.

"You know," I start, "You could come to the library with me. It's quieter in there, so it's easier to read."

"Really? I didn't know the library was open during lunch."

"Yeah, most people don't."

"Huh. Well, peace and quiet sounds nice. Sure, I'll go with you."



However, Maggy's in the library, too, so it isn't as peaceful as I promised. Dane doesn't mind. He and Maggy get along great, and they spend most of lunch talking. I sit and watch, adding a grunt or a yeah when it's appropriate. I didn't have any problem at all talking to Dane, and I think I could talk to Maggy, but with the two of them here, I can't find the words. I don't want to butt in on a perfect conversation.

So I listen. I don't mind; I just wish the words could reach my mouth fast enough so I could participate.

Lunch ends, and Dane and Maggy leave looking happy and content. I'm happy, too. It looks like Dane isn't mad at me, and he'll probably come to the library tomorrow. I just don't know if it will be to see me.

Dane does come to the library with me the next day. Except, just as I feared, he doesn't care about me. He's there to talk to Maggy.

"Okay, so, favorite movie?" Dane asks. They're playing twenty questions. Well, actually we're playing Blackjack, but they don't pay too much attention to the card game. I've cheated five times now and they haven't noticed.

"Hm, favorite movie?" Maggy ponders, rubbing her chin. It's her turn. She has an eighteen, but since she's not saying anything, I go ahead and hit her. A six. Too bad.

"Well, I actually have quite a few favorites. Can you narrow it down?"

"Okay...what's your favorite movie that I've probably never heard of?"

"What's the point in telling you that?" Maggy laughs.

"Well, you said narrow it down."

I roll my eyes and reshuffle the deck. Right now, I kind of regret inviting Dane to come. Who knew he'd be so noisy? I thought he wanted peace and quiet, not to disturb mine. And, I mean, it's not that I mind him talking to Maggy. I just wish they wouldn't pretend I wasn't here.

The laughter dies down some. It's one of those unexpected lulls that can only mean the mood has taken a turn for the serious. I stop shuffling my cards.

"So...Maggy, how would you like to do something this weekend?"

This is one of those moments where your jaw drops in surprise. Except, I never leave my mouth hanging open, because it's an invitation to bugs. But I feel like it.

Who is this kid? I thought Dane was a nerd, someone who spent their weekends studying and wasn't a social butterfly and definitely didn't ask girls out on the spot. I feel betrayed.

Maggy makes a surprised sound, like she wasn't expecting this, either. She recovers quickly, though.

"Sure. We can go to a movie. One I've never heard of."

"Sounds great."

They part ways at the end of lunch, handing out cheery goodbyes to each other and barely glancing my way. I'm left holding a deck of cards. They're Maggy's, but I doubt she'll even realize they're gone. I dump them in the trash as I leave for class.

I can't wait to get home and write.

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When they reached the next town, they peddled away the remaining stolen goods. Peter breathed a sigh of relief, but he was disappointed in the paltry sum they were paid. It was barely enough for a day's worth of supplies. He'd risked his life for that?

“Don’t worry,” Rag reassured, “We can pick something up.”

By “pick something up,” she meant steal. Peter was less enthusiastic about the idea than ever.

“Didn’t you learn your lesson? What if the same thing happens again?”

“It won’t,” she defended. “This town is bigger. They won’t be able to pin it on us, and there’s more opportunity to take stuff.”

“Whatever. I suppose there’s no stopping you. But you can count me out.”

“Oh, come on,” Rag wheedled, tugging on his sleeve, “It’s easier with you around.”

He ignored her, instead focusing on finding a place to stay. The town was large enough to merit a few inns, sprinkled along the main road. Right now, he was trying to decide which kind of inn would want Donis’ services more: a run down one or a wealthy one? In the end, he decided to choose an inn in the middle.

“Do I really have to sing?” Donis whined. “I get so bored, singing every night.”

“You’re a bard. It’s your job.”

“But it’s boring! It’s the same three tales over and over again.”

“That’s your fault, for not having a better memory.”

Donis folded his arms and pouted, but that night he sang all the same. During the performance, which Peter himself was tired of hearing, he noticed Rag slip out the door. He took a deep breath and tried to ignore it. Above all, he just hoped Rag was more cautious this time.

She glided back in before the performance was over. As she fell into the seat beside him, she flashed a wink and a smile. This made Peter more nervous. After last time, he was half-hoping she’d return with nothing.

Late into the night, when the other patrons retired to bed, Rag revealed her spoils. She had a sack filled with small coins, which she claimed she had gotten from a dozen sources.

“I didn’t take a lot from any one person, so relax. The amount’s so small, no one will be too worried about it.”

“You little cutpurse!” Donis cackled, patting her on the back. “I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

“Well, we’re about to find out,” Peter growled. “Rag, you can’t keep stealing.”

“Why not? You were fine with it until we got caught.”

“I was never *fine* with it. I tolerated it because we needed food.”

“Oh please,” Rag sniffed, “You said it was fun.”

“All right,” he conceded, “for a while there it was fun. But that was before we almost got killed by an angry mob of villagers. How long before we get caught again? And what if we aren’t as lucky next time?”

Rag threw her hands into the air, feigning exasperation, but Peter could see he had struck a nerve. Now Donis spoke up.

“If she doesn’t steal, how are we supposed to eat?”

“You’ll have to work, is all.”

"I can only get us one night and one meal at an inn. What are we supposed to do in between?"

"I don't know. But there are plenty of inns in this town. We can spend a few nights here while I think about it. In the meantime, though, we can't afford to steal."

He shot a look at Rag.

"Well, what do you want me to do with this?" she said, holding up the bag, "You want me to go around returning the money?"

"No. We can keep that."

Rag rolled her eyes and Donis huffed. Peter went to bed feeling like a villain. Why was it he was always at odds with his friends? And why did they get along better with each other than with him? Was there something wrong with him?

He closed his eyes and tried not to think about it.

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Over the next few days, they sang and slept at every inn in town. Peter still had no ideas how to earn more money, short of settling down in one place and indenturing themselves. In the end, they used their coin to buy supplies and head to the next town. Peter hoped there would be an answer there.

Donis and Rag, though, weren't content to let the issue lie. They pestered him the whole way, teaming up to make their arguments more persuasive.

"So, what are we going to do if you don't have a plan by the time we reach the next town?" Rag asked.

"Donis will just have to work harder."

"How come I'm the only one who has to work?" Donis whined.

Peter set his teeth and ignored them. Why was it they dumped all the important decisions and responsibilities on him, and then whined when they didn't agree?

"Okay," Peter snapped, cutting Rag off mid-sentence, "How about this? I am open to suggestions, if you have any. If you don't, I would appreciate it if you would shut up."

That silenced them. It made Peter feel like a jerk, too. That was even more unfair. Why should he feel guilty? He was just trying to look out for them. He felt the beginnings of a headache.

They slept that night in a grove of trees, Rag and Donis at one end of the fire and Peter the other. He felt horrible, and his back was itchy and hot, but what could he do?

*Something needs to change. I'm just not sure what.*

## Chapter 23

As part of midterms, which is mostly an excuse to give us an extra test, they hand out grade reports. Mine has a couple of low As, some Bs, and one C-. Guess what the C- is in. World History.

I experience a moment of faintness, thinking about what Dad will say, but then I remember that he doesn't care. Or at least, he's pretending not to care. Either way, there's no reason to stress. Still, I can't shake the feeling of failure. I'm used to being on the honor roll. After a while, you expect your report cards to look like the last words of someone falling off a cliff: a long stream of AAAAAA.

*Dad's not going to punish me, though, so what's the big deal?*

Well, what if my crappy grades prevent me from getting a college scholarship? I mean, I'm not sure I even want to go to college, but what if I decide I want to later, but I don't have the money? School used to be easy. It could still be easy, I'd just have to take more notes, study harder, maybe get sleep the night before a test.

I shove the thought down, trying to focus on not paying attention in class. It's funny how hard I have to fight my instincts. School is more boring when I don't pay attention.

I argue with myself all first period, and by second period I've resolved to do something about it. I want a steady C in World History. If I can get that, then I'm fine with my grades.

*But how to do it? Mr. Gregory said he was willing to work with me, but he didn't want to tell me what to do. He wants me to think of something. Probably to boost my "sense of personal responsibility" or something.*

I'd like to go up to Mr. Gregory and say I've decided I want to do a word search to earn all my points back, but I don't think he'd go for that. So what can I do?

Deep down, I know what Mr. Gregory wants. He wants me to talk. Maybe that's all I have to do to appease him.

So, with a heavy heart and shaky knees, I linger after third period. Dane doesn't even notice, heading right out the door and towards the library.

I inhale, taking a breath that fills my chest and dilutes my self-doubt. Then, I approach Mr. Gregory. He watches me like a cat watches a dust mote flit across the ground, deciding if it's worth batting at.

"Can I help you, Matt?"

"I... I thought of what I wanted to do to improve my grade."

Surprise makes Mr. Gregory's eyebrows tilt upwards. I kind of like this whole shocking people with my talking thing. At least now I know they're listening to me.

"Well, what is it?" Mr. Gregory asks. His voice is subdued, like he's afraid of speaking too loud and frightening me away. Maybe he knows I'm scared shitless of him.

"I want to make up the oral report. I'll come in after school, and do my part."

Tapping his pen on the desk, Mr. Gregory considers it. His head leans to one side, then the other, a see-saw of decision.

*Oh, just shut up and tell me I can do it already.*

"Well, you could do that," he draws, "but I'm not sure it would be worth much. After all, the assignment was to speak in front of the class."

My teeth grind together so hard, I'm sure Mr. Gregory can hear them.

“Fine. I’ll speak in front of the class,” I promise, even though I’m not sure I can.

“There’s another problem, too,” he continues, and I want to slam his face into the desk. This was supposed to be easy! “The class has already heard the information you were supposed to present.”

*Yeah, but money says none of them were listening. They won’t know the difference if I give it again.*

“Here’s an idea: you choose some topic you find interesting, anything from history, and give a presentation about how it affects us today. It only has to be a few minutes. I’m thinking, oh, five.”

*That’s not a few minutes! That’s practically ten percent of an hour. What happened to me being able to choose what I want to do?*

Leaning back in his chair, Mr. Gregory waits for me to spill over with enthusiasm and gratitude. I take a deep breath and sort out my thoughts. My goal is to explain my concerns to Mr. Gregory in a way that doesn’t include profanity.

“So, all I have to do is...talk about something in history that people still use, or is still in existence?”

“Something like that. You could talk about Greek democracy, and its influences on our forefathers, except that’s already been done.”

Has it? I wasn’t paying much attention during the reports, either.

“Anything?”

“Anything,” Mr. Gregory affirms. “You get to choose the topic.”

I give a dry swallow. Right about now, I’m starting to wonder if it’s worth it.

What if I go to all this trouble, only to freeze up in front of the class?

*I’m speaking to Mr. Gregory without a problem. Talking gets easier all the time. If I want this enough, I can do this.*

“How much is this extra project going to be worth?” I ask.

Mr. Gregory smirks and rubs the stubble on his chin.

“Well, that’s up to you. It all depends on how much work you put into the project.”

I feel myself glowering, but I can’t stop. That sounds dangerously vague. Like, what if I put all this time and effort into it, and he doesn’t think it’s good enough? I’ll be screwed cause he’s a jerk. With no rubric, how am I supposed to do this?

Seeing my indecision, Mr. Gregory throws out some bait.

“It’ll be worth your time, I promise.”

*Yeah, that inspires me with faith. Your promises are worth less than your stupid motivational posters.*

But I have no choice. I agree to his offer and droop out the door. My first impulse is to head for the library, but I squash that. I’m in no mood to be a third wheel. Instead, I sit outside my next class, like some hobo sleeping in a doorway.

It gives me time to think, though. By the time the bells rings, I’ve thought enough about the project to tuck it safely away and ignore it for a few hours. I have an inkling about what I want to do, so I won’t have to think about it when I get home. I can get straight to writing.

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They were at the next town, bargaining for a room with an inn owner. Donis wanted to settle for the normal deal of a meal and a place to sleep, but

Peter wanted more. Maybe, if they could get some money in the bargain, that would solve their problems. The innkeeper, though, was uncompromising. At best, he offered them two meals and a private room, but he wouldn't part with any money.

"Well," Peter chirped, trying to put a positive spin on it, "at least we don't have to worry about breakfast now."

"What about lunch? And tomorrow's dinner, when we're on the road?" Rag asked.

"There's plenty of fresh fruit out there. We can live off of that."

She rolled her eyes and plopped down on the bed. Donis didn't look convinced, either, but he didn't have time to pout about it. He had work to do.

Except for a few minutes to eat dinner, Peter didn't leave the room. He was tired of hearing Donis's songs, and he wanted to be asleep by the time his friends came upstairs. That way, he wouldn't have to hear them complaining about their lack of funds. However, that same worry kept him awake. When he heard the door open, he clenched his eyes closed and pretended to sleep.

Donis and Rag complained for a while, making vague statements about how they should do something and Peter was going to let them starve. Finally, mercifully, they went to bed. Peter stayed awake a little longer, wishing he could find a way to please his friends, keep them safe, and ease his consciousness.

*Why should I feel bad about stealing anymore? I'm not under the Grey God's thumb, so I don't have to be afraid.*

That was a lie. Even without threat of retribution from his god, stealing still put them in danger. But it was something more than that, too. He could see why Rag enjoyed it; he had felt the thrill. It took skill and concentration and wits, and it made him feel alive. But that sensation didn't cover the grimy feeling he had afterwards. Even if it was fun, it was still wrong.

*Maybe I wasn't honest jut because I was afraid of the Grey God. I think, deep down, it was for myself, too.*

He had wanted to rebel, lashing out against the Grey God's morals, but now that he thought about it, they were his, too. He didn't steal just because he was afraid of punishment.

*So, I guess I was really betraying myself when I did that.*

Sighing, Peter rolled around under his blanket. Realizing the truth didn't make it any more pleasant. In fact, now he felt self-loathing. With a lot of will, he forced his mind to calm and his breathing to slow.

The next morning, Donis and Rag weren't in the room when Peter woke. He didn't think much of it, assuming they were downstairs taking advantage of the free breakfast. It wasn't until he had eaten his fill and returned to the room that he began to be suspicious. Their bags were still there, so they hadn't left without him. That was a relief. But if they weren't here...

*Then they're out robbing someone. They banded together and disobeyed me. Why? Why not talk to me?*

Peter didn't know if he could locate his friends, and even if he did, he didn't think he could stop them. So, nervous all over, Peter decided to wait downstairs.

He sat at a table and picked forlornly at his eggs. When the inn door creaked open, he swung his head upwards. It wasn't Rag and Donis, though. It was Briskel.

For a second, Peter didn't believe his eyes. He rubbed them and checked again. Briskel looked just as shocked. He stood in the doorway for a moment, before turning around to leave.

"No you don't," Peter rumbled, standing up so fast his chair rattled behind him.

He pounced on Briskel, dragging him in and slamming the door closed. For all he knew, Briskel's monsters could be waiting right outside, and he didn't want to take any risks. Briskel kicked feebly, like a lamb caught in an eagle's grip.

"What are you doing here?" Peter snarled, coating his fear in anger. "I warned you not to follow us."

"I didn't! I didn't follow you, I promise. I'm here looking for work. It's a coincidence, I swear. Let me go, and you'll never see me again."

*Unlikely. Of all the towns in the world, and all the inns in the world, you just happened to walk into this one?*

Clamping his hand over Briskel's mouth, Peter dragged him upstairs to the room. With a push, he shoved Briskel to the floor and seized his knife from his pack. Peter didn't know if anyone would come running if they heard screaming. The knife did the trick, though. Briskel was reduced to a whimpering pile on the floor.

"Talk."

"I told you the truth," Briskel squeaked.

A worming anxiety crept through Peter. Why hadn't Rag and Donis come back by now? It was almost midday.

"What did you do with Rag and Donis?"

"I didn't do anything."

"Yes you did," Peter menaced, raising the knife higher. All that did was make Briskel whimper more.

Peter was thinking of torture methods he'd heard of, hideous things he half-believed and didn't dare try himself, when the door to the room opened. Rag and Donis were there, flushed and smug. For a second, everyone paused. Then, Rag pulled Donis in and shut the door behind him.

"Is that who I think it is?" Rag asked.

"Is it Peter?" Donis chimed.

"What? No, it's not Peter."

"Peter's not here? Where'd he go?"

"I am here," Peter groaned. "She's talking about Briskel."

"Where have you been?" Peter asked at last, breaking through his surprise. "Wait, you don't have to tell me. I know where you've been. The question is, what did you steal and how much trouble is it going to get us into?"

"How come you get to ask all the questions?" Rag huffed. "I want to know what *he's* doing here."

"I was trying to figure that out myself," Peter replied, sending a glare at Briskel.

"I told you," Briskel replied, sitting up straighter, "I'm looking for work. I'm hungry and cold and I wanted a place to sleep."

"But don't you have a home?" Donis asked. "With monster servants?"

"Yes. But I lost my way. I don't know how to get back. And I don't know where Aqra and Buamelu went to. You chased them off, and now I can't seem to find them. Do you know how hard it was to get a pair of scorpion men to do my bidding? Much less how much effort it took to train them?"

"Yeah, that's too bad," Peter muttered, turning back to Rag and ignoring Briskel's complaints. "So, what did you steal?"

"Just some food. Necessary supplies, if we want to reach the next town."

"I told you, we can pick fruit. We don't have to steal."

"— had to knock on death's door to get those." Briskel ranted, oblivious to the fact that no one was listening to him.

"Peter," Rag groaned, "what are we going to do come winter?"

"I'm not sure, but we'll think of something."

"Took them from Sick Wind herself. And I had to slip past a pair of fully grown —"

Peter turned to yell at Briskel, but paused.

"Wait, did you say you stole from Sick Wind?"

"From her temple, in the mountains. The scorpion men are Her guardians, you know. I took the eggs from a nest, than split before the parents could find me."

"You know where Sick Wind's temple is?" Peter asked.

"Yes."

"Could you take us there?"

"Peter," Rag said, stepping between him and Briskel, "why would we want to go there? We're not on a quest anymore, remember?"

"If I remember correctly, the deal was I'd give up if I couldn't find a way," Peter replied, lifting his chin defensively.

He didn't know why he bothered. Rag was right, he wasn't on the quest anymore, and he didn't have to serve his cruel god. But for some reason, when he heard Briskel mention Sick Wind, his heart lifted. This could be hope.

"Could you take us there?" Peter asked again, brushing Rag aside.

"Well, I... I think I remember the way. It's actually not far from here. You were close to it, really, when you let me go."

"Peter," Rag whispered, placing her hand on his shoulder.

He shrugged it off. His anger had dissipated, but the sores on his back hurt too much for Rag to touch them.

"Peter," Rag said again, "you don't need to do this."

"You're right, I don't. But I think I should."

He heard Rag give a weighty sigh, but he didn't turn to look at her. His eyes were fixed on Briskel. Could this man show him the way? More importantly, could Peter trust him? For all he knew, Briskel would slit his throat and run the first chance he got.

"Fine. You can go," Rag sneered, "but don't expect Donis and I to follow you to certain death."



“You don’t have to come,” Peter replied. “This isn’t your duty.”

There was silence for a second, then Rag made a choking sound in her throat. Before Peter could sort out what that meant, she slung her pack over her shoulder and grabbed Donis’s as well.

She shoved one pack into the blind man’s hands, steering him towards the door. Peter thought she’d march right through it without a second glance. In fact, he thought maybe she’d been looking for an excuse to leave for a while now. They hadn’t been getting along very well, and Peter knew he was sour company.

Rag did stop, though, turning to face him and saying, “There’s nothing but death waiting in those mountains. We are not going back,” she said, giving Donis a little shake. He nodded his head, more in shock than agreement. “If you get tired of serving a god of spite, one who uses and mistreats you, come find us. We’ll be in the south, living as free human beings.”

With that, she dragged a startled Donis out the door. Peter wanted to run after them. He didn’t, though. Rag was right. They were free beings, and he shouldn’t have dragged them on his quest in the first place. However, now that he knew the task was possible, he couldn’t ignore it. Too many people needed the Grey God’s help for him to run away.

Turning to Briskel, he said, “So, how about you and I make a deal?”

## Chapter 24

I've found a topic for my special report. Since Mr. Gregory wants me to do something "interesting to me," I decided to do something he'd expect. I'm going to do a report on the printing press. Everyone knows I like to read, so it won't be a big surprise. I'm hoping the other kids will write it off as my usual nerdiness and stop paying attention within the first 30 seconds.

So, since I want to get this horrible ordeal over with as soon as possible, I decide to do some research during lunch. It's the perfect cover. I'll still be in the library, so it won't look like I'm directly avoiding Dane and Maggy, but at the same time I don't have to hang out with them. Watching people flirt is really uncomfortable. If they knew how stupid and phony they looked, well, there'd be a lot less unplanned pregnancies in the world.

I select a computer and get down to business, filling my paper with semi-relevant data. Johannes Gutenberg, 1440, Germany, changed the world as we know it. What more is there to say? I can't imagine myself talking for five whole minutes about this, much less making it interesting. And Mr. Gregory said he'd grade me based on my effort. Something tells me if I get up there and just present straight facts, he's not going to be generous.

So how do I show I'm putting effort into it? Really, it doesn't matter how hard I try if it doesn't show. The important thing is to make Mr. Gregory *think* I've worked hard, so he'll give me a good grade.

*He wants this to be relevant to me. So...maybe if I talk about how much reading affects my life, he'll be touched or something.*

Getting up in front of the class is bad enough, but talking about something personal is even worse. In front of all those people who don't care, who think badly of me, who will use personal information against me the first chance they get.

"Matt," Maggy calls, grabbing the chair next to me. I snap out of my inner trauma and look at her. Dane grabs the chair next to her. "Come on, Matt, can't you study at home? Come play cards with us."

*Oh, now you want my company, after I leave. People never appreciate you 'til you're gone. It was the same way with talking. No one ever listened to me before, and now they all try wheedling me into speaking.*

Still, it's nice to know they want me. And since I'm not going anywhere with my project, I figure I might as well.

We play and talk the rest of lunch, and Dane and Maggy act completely normal. It feels great. It feels like I have real friends.

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Amanda's coming over for dinner again. I swear, she spends so much time at our house, it's like she lives here. On the bright side, we're probably eating something non-vegan. That's cause for excitement.

Sure enough, when Amanda walks through the door, she has a sack of groceries that include slabs of meat. Thick, juicy, dead meat. They're real steaks. I haven't had steak in a year.

Like a little lost puppy, I follow her into the kitchen. I want to hear those steaks sizzle, smell the boiling fat and steaming blood. For that, I'll even put up with Amanda

and Dad. I think it's kind of funny, how their idea of a good time is making food together. Especially since Dad is supposed to be vegan and not eat meat at all. Love overcomes all moral obligations.

We season the meat, sprinkling over this mystery powder that's brown and gritty and looks delicious. Even though the meat looks scrumptious, I don't want to touch it while it's raw. So I turn mine over with a fork, sprinkling some here and there and not getting too close to the oozing hunk of germs.

Amanda greases down the skillet and puts it on to heat. I think you're supposed to cook meat over a grill, because that's the way they always do it in those beer commercials. We don't have a grill, though. I mean, what's a vegan supposed to put on one, corn?

After Amanda starts cooking the meat, there's not a whole lot left to do. I stand around, inhaling the musky sent of dead things set on fire, and Dad excuses himself to the bathroom. The moment we're alone, Amanda wastes no time with awkward silences and breaks into conversation.

"How's school going, Matt?"

I shrug. Seriously, all I want to do is breathe in meat. Can't I do that in silence? Maybe she thinks I'm hanging out here cause I want to talk to her or something. Wrong.

"Are things looking up?"

I'm not exactly sure what she means, so I shrug again.

"Are you getting the grades you want in school?"

*The grades you want.*

How very diplomatic of her. She's found a way to pester me about my performance without making judgments about what kind of grades I should get, thus making it seem like I have a choice.

*My grades are really none of her business. I'm not even her kid.*

I scuff the floor, deciding whether a yes or no would be the best answer. Maybe I should just shrug again.

"I'm working on my World History grade."

*Wait, did those words come out of my mouth?*

To her credit, Amanda doesn't make a big deal out of it. She doesn't even miss a beat in responding.

"Can you make it up, after the oral report fiasco?"

I grimace, wondering if Mr. Gregory told Dad all the gory, embarrassing details and if he told Amanda. I consider lapsing into silence again, letting Amanda make up her own response. But that seems, I don't know, *rude*. At the very least, Amanda's never been rude to me.

"I can make up the oral report."

"Oh?" she says, flipping one of the steaks over. It gives a sultry sizzle, leaking a clear fluid. Most of the blood is gone now, which means it's almost ready to eat. I think. "How exactly are you doing that?"

"Another oral report," I murmur.

"I see. Do you think you can go through with this one?"

I'm not sure how to answer that, so I shrug. Now seems like a good time to lapse into silence anyway, since I'm pretty sure I heard the toilet flush. Dad comes back before Amanda can prod me much more, and instantly the conversation turns away from me. I

make it all the way through dinner without any more hard questions, and then I escape to the safety of my room.

I should work on my report some more, but I'm not in the mood for it. I think I'll write instead.

\*\*\*

Briskel was a bad traveling companion. Well, he wasn't absolutely miserable, but he never talked.

They traveled all the way into the foothills with no problem. There was plenty of fruit hanging from the trees, so food wasn't a worry. Peter stuffed his pack full of pears, apricots and plums every opportunity he got, just in case it was a while before he found food again. Once they entered the foothills, though, he consumed his supply within a few days. It was back to berry picking.

They took the same path up that Peter and his friends had taken down. It was a lot closer to Sick Wind's temple than where they had first entered the mountain range. At least, that was what Briskel said. Peter hoped the crazy old man wasn't trying to trick him.

They had made a deal, to put aside their differences and work together. Briskel would lead him to the temple, and he would help Briskel get a new pair of monster eggs.

In reality, Peter was hoping to slip away from him before he had to hold up his end of the bargain. Not only did he not like the idea of facing a pair of fully grown scorpion men and trying to steal their babies, but he didn't think it was wise to give Briskel a new pair of minions. He hoped Briskel didn't sense his deception, and he prayed that his companion wasn't planning a trick of his own.

They were in the mountains, getting closer all the time, Briskel claimed. The nights were fiercely cold, and they were nearing the area where even the berry bushes faded out, leaving only scrubby grass. If worst came to worst, they could eat that, but they wouldn't even have a fire to toast it over.

"Are we close to the temple yet?" Peter whined, stoking their pitiful fire.

"Pretty close."

"How close?"

"Close."

"How many days?" Peter prodded.

"That depends on how fast we walk."

Peter growled under his breath. Every time he asked Briskel about the temple, the answer was vague. Soon. Close. Almost there. He wondered if the old man was trying to keep his leverage, or lead Peter into a trap, or maybe he was just confused about the way. Whatever the reason, it didn't bode well for Peter.

Several times he thought about turning around, but then he remembered that there was nothing left to go back to. Even if he wanted to, he probably would never find Rag and Donis. Going back to the temple was out of the question. No, the only option was to complete his quest.

*Then what? Be an altar boy again? The Grey God is sure to be angry with me. I'll probably never become a priest. Even if I do, I don't think it will make me happy.*

Peter was so deep in his misery, Briskel had to shake him before he noticed the figures approaching.

“Who would be this far up a desolate mountain?” he wondered aloud, feeling for his knife. Peter didn’t think bandits would bother coming this far up, but who else would? He didn’t dare hope that it might be...but it was.

“Peter!” Rag called, waving her hands over her head. “How come you walk so fast? It took us forever to catch up with you.”

“What are you doing here?” Peter asked, not believing his eyes. “I thought you wanted to leave me.”

“Well, we did,” Donis explained, “but we changed our minds. We didn’t want to leave you alone out here with that murderous fiend.”

“I’m right here!” Briskel shouted.

Donis shrugged his shoulders.

Peter was so overjoyed to have his friends back, he didn’t mind splitting their dinner four ways. The next few days were like a dream. He woke up every day and expected his friends to be gone, but they were still beside him.

However, there was no getting around the fact that they needed supplies. Donis and Rag had brought a little food with them, brittle crackers that they exhausted almost immediately.

“Couldn’t you ask the Grey God for help?” moaned Donis, rubbing his empty belly. They were down to water and grass, and no one felt good.

“I...I don’t know,” Peter mumbled, not looking at anyone. “Last time we tried that, it didn’t work out so well. And I don’t think I’m ready to face him. Not after what I did.”

*After I abandoned him. He’ll probably smite me on sight.*

“Well, we have to do something,” Rag insisted.

So, as everyone huddled together around a nonexistent fire, Peter went off on his own to plead for help. He couldn’t ask the Grey God, but he had another deity in mind. Before, when the goat had stumbled into camp, and later against the dogs, Peter had felt another presence watching over him. For some reason or another, Miranda had taken a liking to him. Whether she was a servant of Sick Wind, or some other deity entirely, Peter didn’t know. He only hoped she’d be willing to help him one more time.

Filled with uncertainty, Peter threw his hands in the air and began his plea.

“Miranda, whoever and whatever you are, I don’t know why you’ve helped me so far, and I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to repay you. All I know is, for reasons of your own, you’ve given me aide. Please, help me again. We need food.”

After that, Peter didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t promise this person anything. His life already belonged to the Grey God. So he made a few more pleas and then returned to camp. Nothing happened that night, and they went to bed tired and hungry.

The next morning, they woke up *cold* and hungry, but they pressed on nonetheless. Donis and Rag looked like they regretted coming after him.

They came to a branch in the trail. When they asked Briskel which way they should go, he said he had to think about it. So, while they waited for

Briskel's memory to reappear, they lounged around on the rocks and talked about food.

"What I wouldn't give for something really decent," drooled Donis. "Something meaty and saucy and warm."

"There was a lady in my hometown who used to make meat pies. Sometimes, when she set them on the sill to cool, I could nick one. She wised up after a while, though, cooked up one with meat gone bad and put it out for me. I was sick for a week. Still, it was nice while it lasted."

"It would be heaven," mused Donis, "to be able to not worry about food. Feels like I've been hungry my entire life."

"Me too," chimed Rag.

Peter squirmed on his rock. If he stretched his memory, he could recall being hungry as a child, living in a small house with his parents. Since becoming an altar boy, though, he hadn't wanted for food until now.

"Look, I'm gonna take a walk," he said, slipping off his seat. No one bothered to call him back.

Peter chose one branch of the path at random, deciding he'd walk down it a ways and then come back, hoping Briskel would make up his mind by then. The path was narrow, barely an arm's length across. It clung to the mountainside like a child to its mother, following every curve and ripple. Because of the tight bends, Peter couldn't see more than a stone's throw ahead. Before long, he was out of sight of his friends.

He made his way past the turns, curving into the mountain then out. Really, he didn't feel much like walking at all. He considered turning back, but a sharp ache from his belly urged him forward. It was like something was tugging at his innards, telling him he couldn't turn around now.

This high up, the air was thinner than peasant soup. Peter had to stop to catch his breath. Panting, hands on knees, he looked down at the narrow path. There, lying in the middle, was a bird. Dead. It looked like a sparrow, delicate wings spread across the rocky ground. There were no wounds; it lay perfectly whole and completely still.

*I haven't seen a bird in a while. Come to think of it, what is a bird like this doing all the way up here? What does it eat?*

Scooping up the bird with one hand, Peter examined it. It didn't look thin and starved. It didn't even look sick. So why did it die?

Peter placed the bird back on the ground and turned on his heel. Almost giddy, he made his way back to the group.

"I think I remember the way," Briskel said, "It's that way."

He pointed down the opposite path Peter had come from.

"Too bad. We're taking the other one," Peter ordered, slinging his pack over one shoulder. The wounds in his back were flaring up, surging with a pain he feared might be infection.

"W-what?" Briskel stuttered. "But I think this is the right way."

"Are you sure?"

Briskel chewed his lip. That was all the confirmation Peter needed.

"Come on, everyone. I have a good feeling about this path."

They walked for a few hours on the trail. Peter started out feeling confident and hopeful, but it didn't take long for his surety to waver. Inconveniently, the path narrowed so much that at times they had to edge sideways. With a sheer drop-off leering at them, and no place to set up camp when it got dark, Peter considered turning around. But then they took the next turn.

The path careened downwards, leading to a valley that was wide and welcoming and impossibly green. Peter stopped for a moment, staring with eyes he was sure were faulty.

"Peter? What is it?" Rag called from behind.

"It's...it's food."

Laughing, he trotted down the path as fast as he dared. The others, once they passed that last turn and overcame the shock, were quick to follow.

Here, in the middle of a forsaken mountain range with not so much as a flowering bush, there was this crevice overflowing with greenery. There were trees, not twisted and thin like mountain trees, but with full trunks and spreading boughs.

*How can they grow this high up? Aren't they starved for air?*

But with every step, Peter felt the air around him thickening, warming. This was a pocket of fresh, forest air, maintained by the trees. It was impossible, but Peter was here, breathing it in. His feet brushed grass, thick grass, not the stringy stubble that dotted the mountains.

"It's a miracle," breathed Donis, "I'm feeling it, but I don't believe it."

He was cut short by an ecstatic Rag, who gathered him in a hug and twirled around. They laughed into each other's necks, caught up in the moment. Peter looked away. Just how close had they gotten in their time alone?

*It doesn't matter, Peter reminded himself. After you complete your quest, you'll have to go back to serving the Grey God, anyways.*

"Yes...I think I remember something like this," Briskel muttered.

"What? You knew there was a valley like this? Why didn't you say anything?!" Peter rumbled, fighting an urge to throttle the old man.

"Well, it's all sort of hazy, to tell the truth," Briskel replied, looking at the ground. "I was sick, the last time I stumbled on this place. Near death, wandering blindly in search of a legend."

"But you remember the way, right?" Peter growled.

"Yes, yes, of course I do."

Peter wasn't convinced, but he didn't have the energy to argue. Instead, he entered the trees to search for food, leaving a confused Briskel and an embracing Rag and Donis behind.

## Chapter 25

Friday. One more week down. I'm not looking forward to the weekend as much as usual. Maybe it's because I've decided to give my oral report on Monday. That means I'll be practicing all weekend. There's also that date Dane and Maggy have. But that's none of my business.

I suffer through school, wishing I could be writing. Of course, I don't have any ideas yet, but still. Writer's block is more pleasant than public education.

After third period, I ask Mr. Gregory if I can present on Monday. He jots me down on his schedule, saying that should work out. However, I don't want to go to the library, so I hover around the door, unsure if I should leave.

"Is there something else I can help you with, Matt?" Mr. Gregory asks.

*Yeah, you can make it so I don't have to go to the library and hear Maggy and Dane planning their date.*

"I was wondering if I could practice my report in front of you. Just so, you know, I don't get nervous on Monday."

Actually, I only have the first few minutes of my report planned, but if I can stay here any longer, then I'm ready to fly by the seat of my pants.

"That sounds like a good idea," Mr. Gregory says, giving me a pitying look. He must feel so sorry for the nervous little boy who suffers unbearable stage fright. It disgusts me, to have him think that way about me, but on some level it's true. I am nervous about this report.

So, I take out my notes and throw together a presentation for Mr. Gregory. Even though it's just him, my voice wavers and I'm sweaty all over. What's wrong with me? Why can't I do this?

But I am giving it. It sucks, but I can do it. I drag it out a full four minutes, only one minute less than the requirement. Jubilant, I look up at Mr. Gregory. His face is twisted, like he's deciding what expression to show me: encouraging or disappointed.

"Well, that was a good start. However, you were just telling me facts, things I could have looked up on Wikipedia in two minutes.

*Damn, he saw right through me.*

"What I want you to do is interpret the facts, make them relevant. Don't just tell us what happened; tell us how it affects us. What impacts do you feel from the printing press?"

I stifle my urge to groan. I knew he'd say this. For some reason, he doesn't want useful information. He wants some dramatic revelation, a pouring out of the soul, and I don't want to give it to him.

I could come up with something. I mean, I know the printing press affects me. However, I can't think of anything to say that doesn't sound... trite. Thanks to the printing press, we have books. Yay. That's exactly what everyone expects me to say.

"Do you... have any suggestions?" I ask.

"I can't write this report for you. It has to be personal reasons."

"Why? What does this have to do with history?"

"Nothing. I mean, not directly. But I think it will be good for you to make a personal investment in your learning."

*The hell does that mean?*



“Matt, I get the feeling you aren’t interested in what you’re learning. I’m just trying to get you to connect with the material.”

That sounds like a bunch of indecipherable teacher mumbo-jumbo, so I decide not to question it. Instead, I politely excuse myself and leave. I might as well wait outside my next class. It can’t be any more uncomfortable there.

After school, I intend to slip right into the weekend, gracefully ignoring everything until the last minute. Except, when I sit down to write, I’m overwhelmed by worry. I can’t ignore the oral report. It’ll just loom over me, a sinister angel.

I promise myself that if I practice it five times, that should be enough. So I rehearse it, standing in the middle of the room and not looking at the mirror. I’ve found out that I can talk okay, as long as I don’t have to look at myself while doing it.

Since reading my story to Maggy, my voice has strengthened. I get through the report two times before it feels tired. After that, I take some time to revise my report, trying to rearrange the sentences so they don’t sound stiff and formal. I figure, since I’m good at writing, I may as well use that to make my report easier to listen to. It’s still a far cry from interesting, but now it’s not horrible.

After the next run-through, I throw together my PowerPoint presentation. With just a little copy and paste, and some cheesy clip art thrown in for good measure, I have a suitable companion to my report. PowerPoints are really more for the speaker’s benefit than the audience’s. They’re just a glorified version of Teleprompters.

With my lame visual assistant on the computer, I start on the fourth run-through. Doing good. I still only reach four minutes, and I haven’t added that “personal touch” Mr. Gregory asked for. My goal for the fifth run-through is to spout something that isn’t 100% cliché. When I’m two minutes into it, though, I hear the door close downstairs. My voice withers in my throat.

*Dad’s home already? How long have I been practicing this stupid thing?*

I decide to take a break. Dad’s sure to go somewhere with Amanda this weekend, so I can practice then. Maybe I can even invite Maggy over, to...oh, wait, she has that date tonight.

I work half-heartedly on my other homework. Really, it wouldn’t take me long if I could concentrate, but I can’t. I mostly just punch numbers into my calculator until I hear Dad calling for dinner.

Since Amanda isn’t gracing us with her presence, we’re back to vegan. When is Dad going to make a decision? What’s the point of only being vegan when your girlfriend isn’t around? And what the heck are these red slivers? We’re having some kind of dip with these disgusting colored chips. I don’t know what kind of chips they are, but it isn’t potato. There’s bread, too.

How do you make vegan bread? Is yeast against the vegan code of honor? It’s alive, so shouldn’t it count? Then again, I guess plants are alive, too. You know, this vegan thing is really half-assing it. Plants don’t deserve to be slaughtered any more than cows.

I’m in the middle of planning my new dietary craze, called “starvation,” when Dad breaks my train of thought.

“So, I hear you’re making up your oral report.”

*Did Mr. Gregory call again? Why can’t that man leave me be?*

“Amanda told me.”

*Thanks for keeping a secret, Amanda.*

Of course, I never told her it was a secret, but still. Does she tell Dad everything? Now I know not to confide in her.

“Um, Matt?” Dad asks, swirling his dip around with a cardboard-colored chip.

“How come you talk to Amanda?”

*Oh, not this again. He’s gonna give me another guilt trip about not talking to him.*

I don’t even look at him. I pretend to be very interested in the texture of vegan bread.

There’s a pause, not even the sound of chewing to break things up.

“Well, I don’t want to sound like a broken record –”

*You do.*

“– but I can’t wait until you talk to me.”

Silence again, but thicker and laced with guilt. I squirm around in my chair, still studying the hunk of bread.

“Well, enough of that,” Dad says, to my utter relief. “There’s something else I need to talk to you about. Amanda and I have been dating for a while –”

*Yeah, like, three months.*

“– and I’m thinking about proposing to her. You two seem to get along great, so it shouldn’t be a big deal, right?” Dad asks, looking at me with those puppy eyes.

*Not that big of a deal? You’re marrying her, and you don’t think it’s a big deal?*

I’m speechless. Even if I wanted to say something, I don’t think I could. I mean, I know Dad’s dated Amanda for longer than he usually dates a chick, but it’s only been three months. Shouldn’t you, like, date someone for three years before you decide to marry them? And I don’t hate Amanda, but that doesn’t mean I want her living in my house.

I don’t think Dad wants to hear my complaints, though. I think he wants me to act happy, so he can do this without feeling guilty. Since I’m too dumbfounded to nod, I give my signature shrug. Dad lets out a sigh of relief, like that’s the answer he was hoping for. I endure another few minutes before slinking upstairs to write.

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After spending the night in the valley, where the air was warm and there was plenty to drink, they gathered supplies and set off. Against his better judgment, Peter let Briskel take the lead. By now, it was obvious that the old man was lost, with only a vague idea about the correct direction. A vague idea was better than no idea, though.

Behind him, Rag held Donis’s hand, helping him navigate the narrow trail. Someone needed to help him, of course, but Rag sure was holding his hand tight.

*Don’t be jealous. You can be jealous later, when you’re safe.*

Peter’s back made him irritable. It stung every time he brushed it against something. The pain was so fierce, he had to hold his pack in his hand, rather than on his back.

They wandered all day, slept in a slightly less narrow part of the trail, then wandered some more. At every fork in the road, Peter’s faith in Briskel decreased. Around sunset, they stumbled upon the little valley again.

“You led us in a giant circle!” Peter yelled at a cowering Briskel. “Do you remember the way or not?”

“I thought I did, I promise,” Briskel whined. “It’s just, well, my memory’s hazy. The last time I came this way, I was in pretty bad shape.”

Peter put his head in his hands. He was too tired to deal with this.

“Okay, fine,” he snapped, sinking down to the ground. “We’ll spend a few days here, resting up. Then we’ll try again.”

“A few days?” Rag asked. “Do we need that long?”

“I do,” muttered Peter. His salty sweat made his wounds hurt fiercely, and he felt light-headed.

That night, they gathered around a fire and ate fruit from the trees. Peter was feeling fine, until the fruit turned sour and twisted his stomach this way and that. Excusing himself, he stumbled into the trees, where he vomited and vomited until there was nothing left in his stomach and his knees trembled from the effort.

Dragging himself back to camp, he saw all of his friends looking healthy and content. Obviously it wasn’t the fruit that made him sick. He had an infection, and they were days, weeks, away from anyone who could help them.

Peter curled in a ball, shivering in the mild air. Without meaning to, he fell into an exhausted sleep, dreaming troubled dreams about earthquakes and a city carved in stone. Somewhere in the distance, thunder echoed.

## Chapter 26

Dad and Amanda are going out to dinner tonight. On the plus side, that means I'll have the house to myself, so I can practice my report. On the downside, he's taking her to this really posh place downtown. That can mean only one thing: he's going to pop the question. At this rate they'll be married by Christmas. Some kids get toys; I get a new Mommy.

Dad's going all out for the occasion. He's even wearing his nice suit, the one that's charcoal black instead of muted grey. Trying to block out the drama, I shut my door. I can still hear him, using our forgotten blow-dryer in the bathroom.

Around six, he calls out a goodbye, telling me not to wait up and keep the door locked and there's food in the fridge. After he's gone, I boot up my computer and practice my report. I do it maybe six times in a row, until it's engrained in my brain. I think I'm as ready as I can be. I still have to see if I have the bravery to stand up in front of the class and say it.

Tired from the report, I fall into bed and sleep.

Dad doesn't get home until ten the next morning. I know, because the shuddering thud of the front door wakes me up, and I manage a glance at the clock before I roll over and go back to sleep. Around noon, I mosey downstairs for some food. Amanda's at the table, sipping something out of a mug. I can't say I'm shocked to see her, just peeved. It's like waking up Thanksgiving morning and realizing you're gonna have to share turkey with all those in-laws you don't like.

"Morning, Matt," she says. It's ten minutes past noon, so I don't know if she's being ironic or uninformed. I shrug back.

As I open the fridge, hoping Amanda's brought something non-vegan with her, I steal a glance at her hand. There's a rock on it. I turn back to the fridge. Nothing but vegetables. And an orange. I go for the orange.

I suck on the orange and look anywhere but Amanda. She, on the other hand, is staring directly at me without any qualms. It's kind of unsettling. After a while, I give in and stare back. All this does is make her smile.

"Well, Matt, it looks like we'll be seeing a lot of each other from now on."

I nod.

"So, tell me, are you going to start talking on a regular basis, or was that a fluke?"

I don't respond. Whatever I say, she'll report it straight to Dad.

Amanda stirs her beverage with a spoon. I think it's coffee, but it smells sweeter than that. Maybe she's drinking hot chocolate.

"In any case, I suppose it doesn't matter. You shouldn't talk until you're ready to talk."

That's exactly what I've been thinking for the last few months, coming straight out of her mouth. My paranoia flares up. How does she know that's what I've wanted to hear?

Dad comes in, an uncharacteristic ray of sunshine. He hands out pleasantries like candy before settling down to his vegan-from-a-can lunch. Yeah, nowadays you can be vegan and still have your food super-processed.

Retreating to my room, I dig out a book and start reading. I should probably practice my report, but I don't think it would help. I know it by heart now, so I'll either

give an awesome presentation tomorrow, or freeze in helpless terror as I watch my grade go down the toilet.

Even up in my room, I can hear the lovebirds cooing. They sound so happy. I don't think Dad's had a friend in a long time. He's the odd man out at work, and then he comes home to me every day. If I didn't have to put up with her, too, I'd be glad he and Amanda got together. But I do have to put up with her, and I'm a little suspicious about her motives. She's too nice. No one's that nice unless it somehow benefits them.

Later in the afternoon, Dad knocks on my door and peeks inside. I immediately stretch out on my bed, trying to take up as much room as possible in case he wants to sit on it again. He doesn't, only invites me to play a game with him and Amanda before heading downstairs. He doesn't force me, so I'm free to stay up here and read. But, well, I'm kind of feeling guilty now, about being part of Dad's loneliness. I want him to be happy with Amanda, I guess, and I don't want to act like a brat about their relationship. So against my better judgment, I follow him.

They're playing Boggle, using our beat-up old set that's cracked and has two inches of dust on it. It's hard to play games with just two people, so it doesn't see a lot of use.

Most people would think that since I'm good with words, I'd be a natural at games like Boggle. Not true. I hate trying to decipher words in that confusing jumble. It makes me go cross-eyed, staring at the little blocks and spreading my eyes out around the vowels, trying to connect letters in a way that makes sense.

So I lose every game we play. Between hearing Amanda and Dad debate over whether "poo" is a word and kicking each other under the table, I actually have fun. We're almost like a family.

Weird. I never thought I'd be part of a family again.

Finally, things wind down. When I look at the clock, I'm surprised by how much time has passed. If I want to write that next chapter, I have to start soon.

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Every day, Peter felt worse. At first, he tried to hide his sickness from his friends, but on the third day, when he couldn't even get up, they figured it out on their own. He was aware of being rolled on his stomach, and his wounds being dampened. Every touch was agony, but he was too tired to cry out. While his friends treated his sickness, Peter drifted in and out of dreams.

Sometimes, when he slipped into sleep, it felt like he was slipping into the ground as well. He'd have the sensation of being pulled under the earth, and he'd wake up with a gasp. Waking up got harder and harder, though. Soon, he slept long enough for his dreams to take shape.

He fell through the ground, drifting through the solid stone of the mountains until he came to a cavernous space. Instead of utter blackness, the cave was filled with light, radiating from the very air. Here, under the mountain, it was noon all the time. The harsh light tore at his eyes, tore at them until he thought he was crying blood. Through the haze of pain, he could see someone standing at the other side of the cavern.

The cavern was gone. Rag was above him, shaking him and calling his name.

"Peter! You can't fall asleep. You have to stay awake, okay?"

He moaned and tried to shut his eyes. An explosion of cold on his face snapped him back, and he found the strength to sit. Rag was there, an empty water skin in her hand. Rubbing the wetness with a sleeve, Peter tried to remember where they were.

“How are you feeling?” Rag asked, her voice soft, like she was afraid of waking someone up. Peter couldn’t see anyone else. Where were the others?

A flash of dizziness forced him to lie down again. He could feel his stomach contracting, but there was nothing to throw up. Instead, he was left gagging and spitting out threads of sour bile. Behind him, Rag rubbed his shoulder and made cooing noises. He was too weak to push her away, even when her hands jolted the wounds on his back.

“Peter, don’t fall asleep. I’m afraid of what might happen if...if you don’t stay awake. Do you hear me? Nod if you understand.”

Peter managed a nod, but it set his head spinning, so he had to close his eyes. With Rag screaming in his ears, he floated back towards his dreams. Her voice, while increasing in frenzy, grew more distant. Finally, he could hear her no more.

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Peter was in the cavern again. He couldn’t tell whether it was a dream or not. Since he had slipped out of his body and through solid rock to get here, it should be a dream, except he could feel the stale cave air going in and out of his lungs. The light made his eyes sting, the floor was cold beneath his feet. Everything radiated in pristine detail, more real than any dream had the right to be.

His sickness was gone, too. Or rather, it wasn’t connected to him right now. He could still feel the nausea and desperation of his body, lying on the ground far above his head, but it was distant. Confused, Peter brought his hands up to his face. They were solid, not shimmering and ghost-like, as he had expected. The body he was in seemed real enough, but he was aware of his body above, too.

“It’s good to finally see you.”

Peter snapped his head around to the sound. There, on the other side of the chamber, on top of a throne, sat a woman. She had long, sable hair and dark features, and a tight-lipped smile that reminded him of someone. Miranda. There were a few changes, different hair, and a shadow about the face, but he could tell he was looking at the same person.

“Are you...Sick Wind?” Peter asked, voice trembling.

Miranda’s smile stretched further, and he could make out the tips of an elongated pair of canines. He had the sudden impulse to bow, or fall to the floor, or something. This was a goddess. He’d never seen a deity before, not even his own deity. She looked... surprisingly normal.

“I thought you’d never get around to it,” Miranda, Sick Wind, said, her voice quiet as a whisper but as clear as birdcall. “It took you long enough.”

Still in a daze, Peter couldn’t think of a response. Here he was, talking to a *god*. Goddess. His mouth refused to make words.

Sick Wind rose from her throne, walking towards Peter with the fluid grace of a panther. There was a fragrance around her, like fruit on the verge of rotting. Involuntarily, Peter shuddered. She didn't look menacing, anything like a god of death, but She frightened him to the core. It was the chill aura around Her.

"You're dying, Peter. Up there." She raised one thin finger to the roof. "Lucky for you. I was afraid you'd wander around forever before you figured it out. But you didn't figure it out, did you? It was luck."

Peter could only stare blankly. She laughed at his confusion.

"Only the dying can enter here. That garden is the entrance to my temple. There used to be an entrance proper, but there were a few earthquakes, a fire, a cave in. Most of the temple is in ruins. I managed to preserve this little piece, my personal prison."

"You...you mean you're trapped here?" Peter asked, dredging up the strength to speak. Even though Sick Wind frightened him, She hadn't hurt him yet.

"Not physically. I'm a goddess, after all. I don't have a body like you."

"So why don't you leave, build a temple somewhere else?"

A sad smile spread across Her face, and there was anger in Her eyes. However, Peter sensed that the rage was directed elsewhere, not at him.

"The Grey God trapped me here. A long time ago. You've heard the tale, I assume?"

Peter nodded.

"It wasn't a problem, at first. I had my temple, my servants and priestesses. But they were all killed a few years ago."

"Is that why you're angry at the Grey God?"

She closed her eyes, turning away from him.

"Yes. I want to be released from this prison. But that's not enough. I have no living acolytes. Even if He sets me free, I have no followers, no temple. So, what I want is for the Grey God to share His. It's the ultimate irony. The god of retribution is going to have to make amends to me."

"But...why didn't you just tell Him that? Why did I have to come all the way out here to hear something you could have told him yourself?" Peter asked, immediately biting down on his tongue. He hadn't meant to sound so angry.

"I'm weak," She said. There was silence for a while, and Peter thought perhaps She was done. She wasn't. "Gods can still die. Not the same way humans do, of course. We don't cease existing, we cease...functioning. If no one calls on us, we become little more than a legend, and then, just a memory. It has been so long since anyone has called upon death."

"You've lost your power?"

"Most of it. I no longer have the power to communicate with gods, or even become a physical presence in the world. I am an illusion and a dream, with all the force of one, too."

"But...when you appeared to us in the fields and cursed us..."

"I was trying to get the Grey God's attention. I can't communicate with Him directly, but I thought if I cursed you, He might take notice. Well, your god has a thick skull, and that didn't work, so I decided to bring you here myself."

“I see. So you want me to tell the Grey God about your plight?”

“And then some. But first, you’re going to have to survive. You’re in bad condition up there,” she said, pointing up again. Peter could feel his other self, weak and struggling. Was the sensation getting fainter?

“I’ll do it,” Peter said.

“Of course you will,” Sick Wind smirked. “You don’t have much of a choice.”

With a wave of her hand, the world around Peter rippled. He felt himself fading, melting back into his body and the troubled sleep of the sick. Before he went, however, he found himself thinking about Sick Wind’s words. *He had no choice*. Perhaps, but was that the only reason he wanted to help her? If only he could think; if only he wasn’t slipping away.



## Chapter 27

Amanda, ever so gracious, volunteers to take me to school the next day. The ride is awkward as hell, but at least I'm early. With a big day ahead of me, heaven knows I want as much time to fret as possible.

In case I die today, I make sure to notice every detail in my first two periods. I even write it down, in what could easily be mistaken as notes but is more like me savoring every minute of what could be my last few hours on earth. Okay, so it is notes. Sitting in my chair staring into space gives me too much time to worry, so I occupy my mind. Taking notes isn't as bad as I remember. It makes the day go faster, actually.

Then third period comes. So far this year, three has not been a magical number for me.

I do some quick breathing, in the nose, out the mouth. I have my note cards in my hand, even though I don't need them. The words are carved in my heart. Or at least my brain. As a final preparation, I cough, making sure my voice is there. It is.

Mr. Gregory gives the introduction, yells at someone to put away their cell phone, then invites me up. I tell my legs to move three times before they respond.

I stand in front of the class, telling myself not to panic or break down crying. It wouldn't be so bad if they didn't all hate me. It's not my fault I'm weird.

My eyes fall on Dane, more at random than anything else. He flashes me a thumbs up and a crooked smile.

*Okay, so there's one person who doesn't hate me.*

Mr. Gregory gives me the go ahead. There's a silence that stretches out a few seconds, a few more seconds, until the patience in the room is uncomfortably thin. They don't think I can do it; I can see the looks on their faces. They think I'm going to chicken out again.

*You have no idea what I'm capable of.*

I think that's why I went silent in the first place, because I was tired of everyone making judgments about me without getting to know me. Nothing I could say would make a difference; they were determined not to listen.

*They're listening now.*

I clear my throat, giving my voice a nudge, and plunge in. It's like jumping into icy water: so shocking that in a few seconds you can't feel anything at all. I'm too scared to realize I'm scared.

"Johannes Gutenberg made an amazing discovery in 1440. Bu using a process called moveable type..."

Before I know it, I'm six minutes into the presentation and taking questions. Then I'm floating soft as a feather into the security of my seat.

I did it. I survived. I deserve a t-shirt or something.

After class, I check with Mr. Gregory to see what grade I got.

"I'm thinking a B...plus," he smirks, quirkng one eyebrow at me.

"How much does that raise my grade?"

"To a comfortable C."

My shoulders sag.

"That's it?"

“It’s better than nothing,” Mr. Gregory says, donning a mantle of self-righteousness. Then he lightens up, giving me a smile. “You know, you can still fail this course if you slack off. On the flip side, you can make a B if you start doing your work.”

“Any chance of an A?”

“I thought you didn’t care about getting good grades.”

I shrug and look at my tennis shoes. Even if I can speak, sometimes there’s no better response than a shrug.

“Well,” Mr. Gregory purrs, “nothing is impossible.”

He’s still an ass, but at least he’s giving me a chance. That’s all I need. I shoulder my backpack and head for the library, not sure what I’m going to find.

Dane and Maggy are both there, playing cards like normal. Completely normal. I slide into the game, and even enter the conversation. They’re still a little flirty, but they aren’t ignoring my existence. For now, I can handle that.

When the bell rings, I trot to keep up with Maggy, instead of letting her race ahead of me.

“So...how did Friday go?” I ask. I know I sound intrusive and jealous, but curiosity is killing me.

“It was nice,” Maggy says, shrugging.

I have to chew on that for a bit. As far as I can tell, they aren’t romantically in love. There is definitely something between them, but it could just be friendship. The only thing I can do is wait and see.

Compared to third period, fourth period is a breeze. I take notes, just for the heck of it. They work their magic, and before I know it school is over. To add an unexpected twist to my day, Amanda’s waiting to pick me up. I could get used to not walking home from school.

I try and do homework as usual, but Amanda bustles in and out, distracting me. First she cleans the kitchen, then she rearranges the furniture in the living room. I can’t just sit there and watch her do all the work, so I help her shift things around. Unfortunately, that makes her think we’re best friends. Afterwards, she sits next to me at the table and talks.

“You know, I really think this place needs a face lift. A fresh coat of paint, something besides that awful green. It’s so dreary.”

Why is she telling me this? Surely she knows I don’t care. After a bit, Amanda lapses into silence, staring at the wall and painting it with her mind.

“You know, Matt, I hope you’re okay about all of this,” she says, gesturing with her hand to indicate I don’t know what.

“You mean...moving the furniture around?”

“What? No. I mean, your dad and I getting married.”

“Oh. That.”

A few beats more of silence, and then she prods me, “So are you okay with it?”

“That depends. Are you asking me because *you* want to know, or because you want to report back to Dad?”

I can see I’ve hit the right spot. Amanda looks down, rubbing the table with her thumb.

“I’m sorry. That was kind of dishonest of me, wasn’t it?”

I keep my mouth shut. She realizes her mistake, so there's no reason to be a jerk about it.

"But I only did it because your Dad deserves to know what goes on in your life, and I didn't think it was that big of a deal. But...I wouldn't tell him something like this."

"Promise?"

"Of course. It wouldn't mean anything coming from me, anyways. He won't believe it until he hears it out of your mouth."

She lets that sink in, probably hoping it will hit a guilt nerve.

"So are you okay with this?"

I think for a little, weighing the pros of Dad being happy against the cons of having a step mom.

"As long as you stay out of my room, it's great," I reply.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Your food is way better than Dad's."

She laughs, giving me a nudge on the arm. I let it slide, just this once. There's plenty of time to go over the whole "hands off" thing. For now, I'm enjoying the sense of a household at peace.

Amanda bustles off to do some other chore. Not me. I persevere until I've completed every last bit of my homework, and then I clamber up to my room.

Things are wrapping up, I can sense it.

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When Peter woke, he had no idea how long he had been asleep. From the ache in his muscles, he feared it had been a while. He was on his belly, face squashed into a rolled up blanket. With a groan, he pushed himself to his side.

"Peter? Oh, Peter, you're alive!" Rag said, giving him a hug.

Peter winced.

"Sorry, I forgot about the back," Rag apologized, moving away.

"Are you feeling better?" Donis asked, offering a water skin to the empty space above Peter's head. Taking it from him, Rag put the skin to Peter's mouth and helped him drink. His tongue was so dry, it hurt to move it, but he licked the water off anyways.

"We have to –" Peter started, trying to rise. A stab of pain in his back forced him down. His mind swirled and rippled, refusing to focus on any one thing. He had something very important to do, if only he could think straight. After forcing him to drink more water, Rag and Donis left him alone to sleep. Peter didn't want to sleep, but his eyelids closed and he drifted off.

When he woke again, he felt mildly better. He was at least strong enough to recognize that he felt horrible. This time, he ate some food before falling asleep. The cycle repeated a few times, waking briefly to eat and drink, then exhaustion forcing him asleep. Finally, he had enough strength to sit.

"Donis," he croaked, finding his voice screechy from disuse. "Donis, where's your kithara?"

"Donis isn't here right now," Rag said, sitting beside him and easing him down again. "He went to gather food."

With a sigh, Peter closed his eyes. He needed Donis to help him call on the Grey God. Once they did that, this horrible ordeal would all be over. Where was he?

*No rush. I know what to do now, so I can do it at any time. How long was I out?*

He opened his mouth to ask Rag, but a different question emerged.

“Are you in love with Donis?”

Peter bit his unruly tongue, punishing himself for asking the question he didn't want to know the answer to. Obviously, his wits were still scrambled. Maybe the infection had reached his brain.

Rag chuckled, forcing his mouth open and pouring water down it.

“We're not in love,” she scoffed. “We're friends, but I'm not *in love* with that fool.”

Too tired to question her honesty, Peter shut his eyes again, intending to go back to sleep. However, a rustling banished those thoughts. Donis stumbled into camp, arms full of fruit. With an agonized grunt, Peter forced himself upright again.

“Donis, get your kithara.”

“Ah, Peter, you sound better. Finally awake, huh?”

“Get your kithara,” Peter ordered, not bothering to answer his question.

Confused, Donis placed the fruit on the ground and fetched his kithara.

“I need you to help me call the Grey God,” Peter explained.

Donis cringed and fingered the rough wood of the instrument.

“I thought you didn't want to call on him.”

“I didn't. I don't. But this is different. I've found Sick Wind.”

Rag and Donis's eyes both widened in shock.

Rag recovered first, asking, “What do you mean you found Sick Wind? You've been lying here sick yourself. Where did you find Her?”

“Down there,” Peter said, pointing with one finger to the ground.

The surprise on their faces changed to disbelief, and Peter sighed. He knew it sounded crazy. He could explain until he was blue, but they probably wouldn't believe it. In fact, Peter was beginning to doubt it himself, wondering if perhaps it had all been a hallucination brought on by the illness. What if he called the Grey God, only to report a mistruth caused by infection? Would his god understand?

*Probably not, but it's a risk worth taking. He hasn't killed me yet.*

And he wouldn't kill him. The Grey God needed him. Realizing that, some of his fear for the deity dissipated.

“Just play a song,” Peter coaxed, seeing Donis still stuck in disbelief.

Somewhat reluctantly, Donis strummed a few notes. Peter waited several measures, trying to think of what to say. He wanted to yell at his god, tell him to come down and undo His stupid mistakes. However, Peter didn't think that was very respectful. Even if the Grey God had mistreated him, it would do no good to be rude.

Finally, Peter called out to the heavens, “Grey God! I have done what you asked me. I found Sick Wind, and I have heard Her grievance. She lies in the

mountain, in the ruins of Her temple. She wants you to release Her from the spell that binds Her to these mountains!”

He didn't mention the part about Sick Wind wanting the Grey God to share his temple. She could ask that herself, after Peter was safely out of the way.

Weather came fast in the mountains, and in no time at all the sky was covered in a raspy clouds. There was thunder, lightning.

“Peter, should we...leave?” Rag asked, looking at the boiling storm.

“I think that might be best,” he replied.

He wanted his friends beside him. Even if they stayed, there wouldn't be much they could do, though, so Peter thought it best if they retreated. His friends were quick to scurry away, probably to the far edges of the valley.

With a flash and a spark and a great, crackling boom, the Grey God appeared. Peter remembered at the last minute to avert his eyes, but not before he saw a brief outline, a person shrouded in cloud.

*So, the Grey God looks like a human. I think I knew that all along.*

“Well, have you finally done it?” He boomed. Even when He wasn't angry, His voice was loud and deep.

“Under here,” Peter said, pointing down. “She can't leave because of the spell you placed on Her.”

“That's all She wants? But...I released that binding as soon as I realized She was angry.” If a god could sound confused, the Grey God did now.

“You released the bonds,” came the chill voice from behind, “but offered no way of escape.”

Peter turned to see Sick Wind. He didn't even think about averting his eyes. She didn't look like a deity at all; She looked like a tired woman. Perhaps a bit more radiant, and maybe slightly translucent, but still human. Here, under normal light, Peter could see the shadows beneath Her eyes and the weary sag of Her shoulders.

“I have no power to travel,” She continued. “You released my bonds, but left me to die.”

“So what would you have me do?” demanded the Grey God, defensive.

“Stop trying to usurp my power. Stop taking death into your own hands.”

“I exact vengeance.”

“And I rule death. Those seeking death, wishing for death and wishing it upon others, should come to me.”

“How do you expect me to help people if I cannot deliver vengeance?”

It looked like they were descending into bickering, and Peter wanted to excuse himself.

“I do not want to usurp your authority, either,” said Sick Wind. “I propose we work together. Let me share your temple, since I no longer have one of my own. We will no longer compete with each other, and you can make amends for imprisoning me.”

The flint in Sick Wind's voice made it clear that it wasn't a request. Even so, Peter didn't know if the Grey God would agree.

However, He didn't protest. Instead, He said, "And how would you accomplish this? You are too weak to take yourself to my temple, too fragile to travel with me."

"The boy."

Peter had been edging further and further away. He'd carried out his duty; he was no longer obligated to help the Grey God. However, Sick Wind's voice froze him to the spot. He hoped she wasn't talking about *him*.

"He can take me to your temple."

Peter cringed. She was talking about him. Maybe, if he broke into a run, he could make it out of here.

*No. Sick Wind needs my help. And maybe the world needs my help. I can't abandon this until it's over.*

Peter took a deep, deep breath and said, "What would you have me do?"

"Stand still."

Sick Wind walked close to him, looked him in the eyes. She grew more and more translucent, until she was no more than a wisp. Then she was gone. Peter blinked several times, wondering what had happened.

"Good," the Grey God said after a brief pause. "Now return to the temple."

"B-but where did she go?" Peter asked, confused. He almost looked at the Grey God, then caught himself.

"She is sickness itself. She's inside your system, so you can bring Her back to my temple. And if I were you, I'd hurry. There's no telling what damage She could do to your body."

Peter gulped, regretting being so charitable. He almost swooned, he was so terrified, but then the Grey God laughed.

"I'm joking. She can control Her powers. Nonetheless, it would be wonderful for everyone involved if you could get back as soon as possible."

The storm was lessening, blowing away. In a second, the Grey God would be gone in a flash. Peter chanced a look up, just to make sure he was right. To prove maybe there was something human about the Grey God. When he looked up, he saw that same form, more or less human. Arms and legs and a face and eyes that met his gaze. Guilt flashed through Peter as he realized he had been caught looking at his god. However, the Grey God only gave a small laugh before disappearing in a blinding flash.

Peter had to wait a few minutes, rubbing at his stinging eyes. He should've known that flash was coming.

From behind he heard Donis call, "Peter? Is it okay to come out?"

"Yeah. Come on."

His friends appeared, looking hesitant.

"So...what do we do now?" Rag asked, surveying the clearing. She was probably looking for some clue as to what happened. She'd find none. There was nothing left of the god's visit.

*Except maybe this sick feeling in my stomach.*

"I have to go back to the temple. You don't have to follow. I know it's a lot to ask of you. But...if you could come, it would mean the world to me."

“We might as well,” Donis replied, looking cheerful. He didn’t seem to mind at all. Peter looked at Rag, who tilted her head to the side.

“What happened to running away with us?”

“I can’t run away any more. I have to do this.”

She nodded, unhappy but understanding.

“Fine. If you have to do this, so do I.”

Peter’s heart lifted at her words. Then he saw how close she and Donis stood together. He didn’t know what was between them, and he didn’t know if he could ever live a normal life, free from the demands of the gods. There was a chance, though, that things would work out for the best. Right now, that was all he needed.

“Speaking of running away,” Peter mused, “where did Briskel go?”

“Who knows?” shrugged Rag.

“Who cares?” scoffed Donis. “We think he decided to flee, after it was clear you were going to die. He’s out of our hair, though, and that’s all that matters.”

Peter didn’t think Briskel was gone for good, but Donis was right. They didn’t have to worry about him for the time being. If he got in their way again, Peter was confident they could take him on. He wasn’t scared of Briskel anymore.

“All right,” he said, urging his friends on, “Let’s get going. We’ve got work to do.”

As they climbed out of the valley and crested a mountain, Peter looked out over the land and thought about how he wasn’t scared of much of anything right now. Trials would come, and he would face them. He could do it. For now, though, he savored being on top of the world.

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There. I lean back in my seat and read over the last few lines. To me, that’s as complete as the story can ever be. Maybe someday I’ll write a sequel. Maybe someday I’ll get this baby published. For now, I bask in the sense of a task done.

Dad knocks on the door, peeking his head in.

“Hey, Matt, Amanda and I are going to play cards. You want to come down and show us a few games?”

Game night, like we used to do when I was little? Before Mom died?

I shut down my computer and rise from my chair.

“Yeah, I’ll come.”

END