THE NETTOVERSE · J.D. NETTO



WINTERBORNE

The Winterborne Saga · Book One

THE FIRST THREE CHAPTERS

CHAPTER ONE

SNOW

I'd scratched the sides of my thumbnails until they bled. My mind wasn't in detention with me. It was still back in that classroom hours ago, my fist colliding with his face, the crunch of bone echoing louder than the silence around me. Regret never showed up. Not even close. The lecture would come soon: consequences, self-control, thinking before acting. But I was done. Done waiting for things with him to change. Today proved what I should've known all along—there wasn't a fucking chance he'd ever be the kid I used to know. And yet here I was, paying for it. Detention. With the culprit's father. My English teacher.

Snow pressed against the windows, piling in crooked heaps. I pulled a crumpled assignment from my backpack and let my pencil wander across the page. At first, flakes. Then, without meaning to, scales. I had never drawn it at school. Only at home in my room. The dragon of ice had followed me here, claws scraping at the edges of my waking mind.

Mr. Silverstein pored over the stack of papers on his desk. No assignment. It was as if he knew how much silence tortured me—and found some joy in it. Silence sparked memories, thoughts, spirals, and served as an invitation for *her* to creep into my mind. Place and time didn't matter. If I sat still for a while, I was suddenly drawn back to that night. At

least pencil and paper were something to hide behind when her death cut too deep.

Many people decided I wasn't worth being around after she died. I didn't blame them in the beginning. Our family may have been all over the news, but I was the main character. I was the one who had been there that evening. Dad and Audrey were out. It all happened while I was home.

Mr. Silverstein would eventually look up through his glasses. I'd pretend not to notice. The man had a mouth and the ability to speak. While trying to avoid the torture, I had managed to fully outline the only friend I'd gained since she died. I could at least count on it to come back. Even on the nights it didn't show, I knew I'd eventually dream of it.

Mr. Silverstein started staring a little longer when he noticed what was on the page. Fuck, I wanted to force the man to spew whatever whirled in his mind. Spare us both the awkward silence. But my mind decided on another path while I shaded the dragon's tail, each scale darker than the last. Grandpa and I were by a fire, his book of stories wide open on his lap. I was too young to remember much, but the tattered yellowed pages and brown leather cover were a vivid image. So were the illustrations on every page. *The Dragon and His Prince.* He used to read me these stories whenever I was over. He never gave the prince a name. He would go on adventures, and he'd fight off enemies and conquer lands with his dragon of ice. Grandpa claimed he wrote those for me. And those were our secret to keep. I never told anyone about the stories. Not even Dad. Sure, it felt foolish. They were just stories. But they were mine to keep.

I scoffed the memory away. It seemed like another life, honestly. All these fond memories I had with my grandparents, my mother and father and sister. Grandma bringing out the Christmas ornament box, forcing us all to hang them together; Mom and Dad being our snow angel companions. Trips to upstate New York and Gloucester in Massachusetts. Now dragons felt more real than those memories.

The door opened. I expected Dad to walk in with a disappointed face. He had this vein that popped whenever he frowned too hard. I was ready to face it, but I got Peter instead.

The swelling and redness around his left eye triggered a smirk. Prick. I despised the guy. I despised my will to cling to any hope we'd ever be friends again. Especially since he'd decided to make my life in this school a living hell after everything happened. I hadn't been on socials since. I still had no fucking clue what I'd done to deserve the switch. I also hated that Peter and my dream friend shared a common trait. They were my best-kept secrets—second to the truth about Mom's murder.

He walked in like the room belonged to him, smugness stitched into every step. One strap of his backpack slung over his shoulder, the other dangling like it was too important to carry the load. Hazel eyes. I hated how drawn I was to the dimples on his cheeks and the golden stubble that shadowed his face. He didn't even look at me.

"How much longer?" He leaned on his dad's desk. "I have to head out soon."

Pencil and paper couldn't keep my attention away from him. The way his buzzed blond hair caught the overhead light, the way his sweatshirt clung to the outline of his shoulders. It was too easy to imagine him without the layers. Too easy, and I hated myself for it.

"You couldn't have texted?" Mr. Silverstein answered in his monotone voice, his gaze on the stack of papers. He fixed his glasses over the bridge of his nose. The man had nice hair, gray and parted in the middle.

"I need time to get ready for tonight," Peter whispered. "I'm going to be late. And this bruise—"

"I'll buy you some makeup." Mr. Silverstein kept his head down.

"Dad, I can't be late because of this freak." Peter waved a hand at me.

Ah. There it was. I should've given him an award instead of a black eye for not saying it sooner. Freak. Because of my eyes. One brown and one gray. And my red hair.

"Whining." Mr. Silverstein's shoulders rose with a disappointed breath. "Again. I'm working late because of *you*. You have a black eye because of *your* actions. Until Mr. Sabio's father shows up, I can't leave. Which means you must wait. Actions and consequences."

Mr. Silverstein would've incinerated Peter with a single stare if he could. Peter only glared at me like I was a moth responsible for eating at his clothes. He quickly glanced at my drawing. Then, just as he was about to return to his father, he chanced another look. My dragon held his gaze hostage. He was ready to say something but walked out instead.

"I'm disappointed in you," Mr. Silverstein said. "Disappointed indeed."

"You're like a broken record," I said without looking up.

"You have so much potential," he continued. "But your lack of emotional intelligence is, honestly, troubling. Reward, Mr. Sabio. Your actions reward you with freedom—or with punishment. Think before you act."

I pressed the tip of the pencil on the page, hoping I'd have enough self-control this time. I failed immediately. "You believe in reward? You could've asked your kid to stay—to sit next to me. He was an ass—" I swallowed and met his gaze.

"Not all punishments deserve a stage." He leaned back on his chair. "Boston is something I'm letting him hold on to. He won't be going tonight." His eyes grew distant. "There's a going-away party for his friend. He'll miss it. Imagine his disappointment when we get home."

I was tempted to pity the guy. What a joke.

"You'll be back with your father and your sister while he cries in his room," he continued. "And then *I'll* be punished." His eyebrows arched up. "It's exhausting, honestly."

"Good to know he can still shed a tear."

"Oh, for every minor inconvenience," he continued, maybe recalling all the weeping memories he had of his kid. "He does it when no one is

looking, of course. That's what we all do. We hide who we are in the darkness."

I puckered my lips, resisting the urge to ask the question. Why? Why had Peter changed so much? Did he know the reason? Yes, I could understand the lack of appeal in being friends with the teenager who was home, locked up in his room, when his mother died. Maybe a couple of months' distance would be enough? But four years? But I had to resist the urge.

"What do you hide?" I managed to ask instead.

He turned his chair toward the window. "Beautiful, isn't it? Powerful, even. How something as small as a snowflake, when falling in great numbers, can bury everything in sight. But no matter how thick the snow gets, it will melt eventually. The secrets we keep are the same. They pile up and hide the truth for a while. But the truth does find a way to come out, Mr. Sabio."

I seriously hoped mine would be buried with me. Snow melted when it got too warm. Maybe my heart needed to grow even colder so my secrets could stay buried. I needed more snowstorms than summer days.

He rose and crossed the short distance to my desk. His eyes fell to the page and stayed there—one beat, then another. I'd seen that pause before; teachers slowed like that when they didn't know what to do with truth. This wasn't that. This was recognition.

"You're very good," he said, low. "And the dragon—the snowflake scales. Very creative." He leaned closer. "Fifty horns, right?"

"You counted that fast," I said.

"Just a hunch." He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. He drifted back to his chair, but his gaze kept snagging on the sketch. "A prince and his nameless dragon of ice," he said then, voice softer. "Are you familiar with such stories?" The words landed like cold water.

I said the first thing that came to me. "Bathroom."

He cocked his head toward the door, signaling that I was free to go.

My steps echoed down the empty hall. No one knew about those. Those were a secret between Grandpa and me. I had kept my bargain. Had he?

The snow piled against the large glass windows. The trees swayed to the wind. Dad needed to get here soon. I pushed the door of the bathroom open, stood in front of the stall and unzipped my pants.

Footsteps. Peter. He walked to the stall to my right. The sound of his pants unzipping made me want to look.

My body betrayed me. Next to him, even pissing felt impossible. He was hitting the urinal while I struggled. I surrendered to the fucked-up part of me that wanted to look at him. A good thing we weren't in a staring contest. His eyes were already on me. His bruise was starting to look a little lonely, though. But he wasn't angry. He wasn't fuming. Instead, curiosity. Desire, even—if I wasn't fantasizing the whole thing.

"Nice dragon," he said with a smirk.

I wasn't sure how to respond. I didn't know we were on speaking terms.

"I remember you being good," he continued. "You got better."

My bladder finally obeyed my brain. Piss hit the stall. He was done.

"You've seen that dragon somewhere?" he asked.

The splash at the urinal was the only sound between us. He stepped back slowly, and for a moment, didn't bother fixing himself. He knew the hold he had over me—and enjoyed it. He always had, even when we were kids. Worse, I felt it, too. I hated myself for noticing, for wanting, for not looking away. Heat crawled up my neck. His smirk said he knew exactly what I'd seen, and I loathed that my mouth twitched like a smile. Then my gaze slipped to his hand. A small tattoo, probably as big as a penny. Its shape still visible. A dragon devouring a snake. We had grown so distant that I never noticed. Even if we crossed each other while walking down the school halls or casually stumbling onto each other at the water fountain. A

bitter thought. Had we still been friends, we could've rebelled together. The zipper snapped shut, cutting the silence, and he was gone.

I fixed myself at the sink. My mismatched eyes stared back in judgment. Yes, I knew how twisted this was. But part of me reveled in it. When I stepped out, he was leaning against the doorframe with his phone. I looked at his hand again. The tattoo was gone. Imagination, or something worse? No eye contact. I no longer existed. My hand curled into a fist anyway, the memory of bone under knuckles humming in my skin.

"Ah, there he is," Mr. Silverstein said the moment I walked back in. Dad was there, too, in his suit and black peacoat, black hair slicked back, vein pulsing on his forehead like always when he was pissed.

"Hey, kid." Dad sat on my desk, my drawing in front of him.

Mr. Silverstein's eyes darted between us. "I'll be brief so we can all—"

"Where's your kid, Silverstein?" Dad cut him off, legs crossed, frown carved deep. "Bathroom, too?"

"He's being dealt with." Silverstein cleared his throat. "Desecrating someone's work is a serious offense—"

"He wrote 'Mother Killer' on my assignment," I snapped. "Start there if you want to be brief."

Silverstein's smile twitched. He loved this. Loved the stage. "Punching a fellow student in front of the class is inexcusable. Henric's lack of emotional control is starting to worry me."

Was this guy serious?

"I don't regret it," I shot back, jumping to my feet. "I'd do it again."

"A perfect example." He waved like I was some exhibit at the zoo.

"Happy to hit him again." My chest burned. "Maybe he'd whine less."

"Kid?" Dad's hand clamped on my arm, forcing me down. His teeth clenched. "What's the matter with you?"

"Don't be political about this, Dad. You would've done the same. Imagine 'Wife Killer' written on your laptop."

The door slammed open. Peter shuffled in, eyes on his phone. Silverstein's face went crimson. If looks could incinerate, Peter would've been ash.

"I'll come back," Peter mumbled, retreating.

"Oh, come on." I was up again. "The fun's just starting."

"Henric." Dad's voice cracked like a whip.

Peter gave me these pathetic puppy eyes—the ones I wanted to carve out while kissing his lips. "Too chickenshit to steal my assignment in front of everyone?" I spat. "Why don't you write me another note?"

Silverstein didn't move. I shoved my drawing in Peter's face. "Take it. Write on it. What now?"

Silverstein laughed. "I have to give it to you, Henric. You have guts. You fight. Unlike some in your family. Some would rather hide than face the consequences."

Dad's vein bulged. His face went pale. "Excuse me?"

Peter dropped his backpack with a thud. "You both need reminding of your place. That fucking dragon proves it." He stabbed a finger at the sketch—and that's when I saw it again. The tattoo. Dragon devouring snake, burning across his hand. "Drawing it here"—he spread out his arms—"all exposed. You're so pathetic, Hen—"

I grabbed his collar, dragging him close. He laughed as if my act confirmed his statement. My fist curled, ready for a repeat.

Silverstein's voice cut through, "The Prince of Winter shall appear. Like snowstorms brewing far and near."

My pulse spiked. Silverstein and Peter seemed dissociated from the moment. It was as if they meant to stir confusion, so we'd stop asking the right questions. And they clearly enjoyed playing whatever game this was.

"Enough." Dad ripped me back, but his eyes weren't on me. They were locked on Peter's hand. His face drained white, the vein that always throbbed when he was angry gone quiet. I'd never seen him look afraid—not like this. "Pack your things, Henric. We're leaving."

I stuffed the drawing into my notebook, slung my bag over my shoulder, and stormed out, Dad's footsteps rushing at my heels. Time to brace myself for the pep talk. Everything had changed the night she died. Every. Fucking. Thing. And no matter how many times I replayed it, the snow always melted to the same truth: I could've stopped it if I hadn't been too wasted to see.

CHAPTER TWO

SNAKES

Dad's knuckles were white while gripping the steering wheel. No big speech about my behavior. The car was a silent zone. No music. His frown was persistent—and not because of the struggles of driving through a snowstorm.

I kept scratching the sides of my thumb, trying to find the best way to ask him about what just happened. The blood eventually trickled down in a thin line, and I realized I simply had to let it out and brace for whatever outcome.

"That was weird," I said.

"Your behavior?" Dad asked absentmindedly.

"The conversation?" I frowned. "Really? You heard it, too. You were there."

He mumbled something, his eyes on the road, but his mind clearly somewhere else.

"I can't hear you," I said.

No reaction.

"Dad?" I put a hand on his shoulder.

He jumped up, gaze on me, breaths heavy. "Sorry, kid. Sorry . . . I'm—that was very strange."

"So my drawing is offensive and a reminder of our place?" My eyes narrowed. "And that whole Prince of Winter . . ."

Dad wasn't here. He was lost in his thoughts again. Face pale.

I went back to picking at my thumb, dragging my nail under the same strip of skin until it lifted and burned. My heart was going way too fast, like I'd just run somewhere instead of sitting in a car doing nothing. So I distracted myself. New rule: count the Rudolph inflatables on the drive home. Carmel is this tiny Massachusetts town where everybody knows everybody's business, but nobody's actually interesting. It's the same houses, the same decorations, the same plastic Santa collapsing sideways on the same lawn every December. Nothing changes. Our house had been the exception for years before she died.

For some reason, Rudolphs are rare. And my mom took that personally. Every year she decided we needed a full reindeer situation. Not just one. A scene. A production. New layout, new lights, bigger everything. It used to be kind of iconic, not that anyone would admit it out loud. In fifth grade, my friends made their parents drive past our place just to see what we'd done. I pretended to be embarrassed about it. I wasn't.

My mind loved to fall off the edge. Here it was again, wishing it could plunge into another chasm. The one where I'd splash into my childhood memories. Days in the park. Picnics. Movie nights with the boys. School field trips. Luckily, my Rudolph-counting game kept me from tumbling. Eight by the time he pulled into the driveaway. The neighbors' glowed in reds and greens. Our house was grayscale. No lights. No wreaths. Just snow and silence. Since Mom died, holidays had become ghosts. Dad killed the engine but didn't move. His grip slackened on the wheel, knuckles pale.

"Kid," he said finally, voice raw. He seemed to wrestle with the words. "You and Peter. You two used to be close."

Stating the obvious.

"There were also the . . ." He cleared his throat. "The other boys from your crew—" He snapped his fingers. "What'd you guys call yourselves?"

"The Midnight Kings." I scoffed.

"Right." His eyes stayed on the house. "They never sought you out after elementary school?"

"You know they didn't."

His grip tightened. I thought he was going to yank the steering wheel from the car. "I need you to think." His gaze met mine. "Even back when you had your social—"

"You know they didn't!" My voice cracked louder than I meant. "Sorry. Why are you bringing this up? If you want to teach me a lesson about today, then maybe go off on how I, I don't know, need to think before I act or something."

He sucked air through his teeth. "That tattoo on his hand."

So he saw it, too.

"Any other kids with tattoos at school?"

"No one else with tattoos that are there and then they aren't," I answered sharply.

He ran a hand over his mouth, eyes scanning the trees.

"What is this, Dad?" I unbuckled my seatbelt. "Why the sudden interest?"

He sat in silence. I waited for the big talk. "You changed, Henric." "You were such a sweet kid, Henric." "What happened to you, Henric?"

He drew in a shaky breath, lips parting. I braced myself for it. He opened the door and stepped out of the car. Snow powdered his shoulders as he waited for me.

"Prince of winter," I muttered, walking his way.

"What did you say?" His eyes cut sharp.

"Silverstein. He said something about a Prince of Winter . . . wings . . ."

He put a hand on my shoulder. Dad could be as predictable as this town. It was the first time in a long time he managed to surprise me. He

was scared. I hadn't seen it in his eyes before. But of what?

"What's up, Dad?" I laid a hand on his arm. "Talk to me."

The man couldn't bring himself to say whatever lurked in his brain. He headed up the steps of the porch and waited by the door. Suddenly, to him, we seemed to be somewhere dangerous, prey to a roaming predator.

The wooden steps creaked as I walked up. His keys rattled as he opened the door. I looked over my shoulder, trying to spot whatever had him on edge. Something new on our neighbor's lawn. An inflatable blue dragon and a snake. Suddenly, both blinked.

My gut sank.

"What the fuck was that?" I said.

"Language, kid."

"What do—" I pointed at them. "Come on, they blinked."

"It was just the wind," Dad said, struggling to keep a straight face. "Inside." He waved his head toward the door.

I looked at the inflatables again and waited. Nothing but their waving to the wind. Maybe I was just way over my head.

"Inside, Henric," Dad insisted. He was very good at bossing people around. He always expected us to listen. When Audrey and I were kids, we'd intentionally not clean up after ourselves or leave toys around so we'd see King Dad come to life. That's what we both called him.

Classical music echoed from Audrey's room upstairs. Judging by the time, she was probably reading. A couple of things were nonnegotiable for her: books, her classical music, and her piano.

"Let's not mention any of this to your sister," Dad whispered, tossing the car keys on the side table by the door.

"Which part?" I snidely met his tone. "How her older brother punched the bully? The one where the bully has a magical tattoo . . ."

Dad's eyes glistened, set on my mother's portrait on the TV stand. I'd sometimes tell myself that I had inherited the shape of her eyes since none of my features were like hers. I had always insisted on her talking about

any of our redheaded relatives. She'd only tell me that I was a rare jewel. The photo was a ghost to him. He measured his words as if he needed her approval to say them.

The music coming from Audrey's room stopped. She opened the door and slowly walked down the stairs, the wood cracking at her step. Her hair was pulled up into a messy ponytail, her face puffy, like she'd been crying over some fictional character's death.

"These books." She shook the novel in her hand. "They should come with a warning or something."

"Who died this time?" I asked, hoping she wouldn't notice Dad's awkwardness.

"I thought you wanted to read this." She handed me the book. *Two Hearts and One Stone.*

"May skip it. Craving something a little more violent."

"Suit yourself." She hugged Dad. "Had fun in detention?"

"You know?" I frowned.

"You punched him." She shrugged. "Word spread like wildfire. Even us mere freshmen got the news."

"All right." Dad clapped. "Dinner? Should I cook?"

"Cook as in pour frozen meatballs into the air fryer and bubble up some pasta?" Audrey smiled.

Dad smirked.

"Pizza instead?" I suggested.

"Absolutely." Audrey waved a hand at Dad. "Card, please."

He handed her his credit card. She grabbed her phone from her pocket. "Are we going with a classic or are we in the mood for something new?"

"Nothing new today." Dad's voice had an edge. "Good old pepperoni."

Audrey looked surprised by the tone but didn't bother asking. "All right. Large pepperoni. Twenty minutes."

I walked up the stairs, struggling to keep a normal composure. I rushed into my room and slapped the light switch the second I crossed the

threshold. I'd ordered these mood-responsive smart lights online a few weeks ago. They were supposed to turn on when I walked in, adjust at my touch, change color accordingly, and send little exercises to my phone depending on how unhinged I was feeling. The lights flared on—bright red—then popped loudly. Darkness swallowed the room. I stood there for a second, staring at the ceiling like it had personally betrayed me, then let myself drop onto my unmade bed.

"You've got to be kidding me," I mumbled.

My phone lit up in my hand. *Should I suggest a calming breathing exercise?* I actually laughed. Fuck calm. Only Peter would be able to calm me down. More than the fucking tattoo that he might've gotten with whatever friends he now had, something else gnawed at my brain. It crept in here and there. A secret we shared. I had been with Cecilia at the time. It happened a few days before Mom died. We were still close. A casual hang at his place. His parents were on vacation. He'd grabbed some alcohol from their cabinet.

A trembling breath escaped me. His hand had crawled up my thigh while we watched a movie. I didn't want him to stop. I ended up inside him that night. I was ready for some pillow-talk but was ordered to put on my clothes and was pushed out the door as if I were an intruder instead of a guest. I never told anyone. Not a soul. I heard from him the day after she died. *You had it coming.*

I wondered if he had some spy gadget inside my house that night. Did he know I was drunk when it all happened? Maybe Cecilia told him? She was there with me. Granted, she had crawled down the window when I returned to my room and never talked to me again—most likely because she saw something.

I pulled my headphones from my backpack and hit play on my Ethereal Vocals playlist. My eyes closed. I resorted to the pleasant part of that memory. I was back in that living room, his hand trailing up my leg, our lips locked, blood rushing through my veins. Then the song stuttered.

A single note stretched, warped, then snapped. A roar broke through the silence. My eyes flew open. My fist burned—not with heat, but with cold so fierce it seared. Frost crawled up my arm, biting into my skin. The roar deepened, rattling the air around me.

Darkness.

Ice.

Rain.

A storm so heavy it swallowed the sky. Then it came, the dragon from my dreams, wings slicing through the clouds. I was on its back, armor black, every plate veined with frozen light. A sigil burned across my chest: a winged W, its tips unfurling into twin dragon heads. The beast opened its jaws and unleashed flames of ice. A torrent of blue-white light burst forth, shards of living frost swirling like embers in reverse. Steam hissed as the cold ripped through the storm, splitting thunder apart.

Another shape emerged from the chaos, a darker shadow, a second dragon, slender and serpent-like, its eyes red like its body. It screamed. Then exhaled. The air shattered between us as two torrents of opposing frostfire collided, the night splitting in a blaze of cold light.

I was used to my dreams. But having them take over me while I was awake was a first. My heart hammered in my chest. My fingers clawed on my bedsheets. They were still there, which meant I was still in my room. But my skin felt the cold air, my breath steamed out of my mouth, and the long dragon charged through the sky with rage.

"Henric," a distorted voice echoed in the distance.

The red dragon approached. It roared. It was a sharper, more high-pitched sound than my own dream friend.

"Henric?" the voice continued.

The long, winged dragon sent a sinking feeling down my stomach, but I wanted to see its rider. My eyes narrowed. The snow and the rain didn't help.

The images shattered to the sound of a bang.

"Henric Sabio, are you alive in there?" Audrey's voice boomed from behind the door.

I sat up. Footsteps pounded up the stairs. The door burst open. Dad.

"Kid, are you okay?" His eyes were wide, breath sharp. Audrey hovered behind him.

"A guy can't nap around here?" I pulled off my headphones. My fingertips were still cold.

"Dad, what's with the dramatic entrance?" Audrey asked.

He raked a hand through his brown curls, wearing gray sweats and a white shirt. "Pizza's here, kid." He brushed past her and went downstairs.

"What's with the attitude? Did something happen?"

"You know what happened." I leaned forward, elbows on my knees. "What, you want a full description?"

"Henric." She sat beside me. "Nothing else?"

I wanted to tell her—Peter's tattoo, the Prince of Winter, all of it. But the look in her eyes warned me not to. Since Mom died, she'd decided every word I said hid another secret.

She scanned the room. The corner of my dragon sketch peeked out of my backpack. She tugged it free, frowning. "Does it have a name?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've got notebooks full of this dragon. I'm assuming you made it up, right?"

"Never thought about a name." I slid it away from her hand and tucked it away again.

She stood and walked to the door, hand resting on the frame. "Always name a beast, Henric," she said softly. "Familiarity makes them our equal."

I let out a long sigh as her footsteps faded down the stairs. My drawing stared back at me. A warning? Was my brain short-circuiting? My right fist was still cold. If I closed my eyes, the red-winged serpent was alive again, its roar clawing behind my ribs. I shoved it all into the imaginary drawer where my secrets went and forced myself downstairs.

No matter how strained things got, Dad insisted the three of us ate together. No electronics. No distractions. Just awkward silences and the occasional comment about the weather. Tonight was no different. The pizza box sat open on the table. Dad held a slice in one hand, a glass of red in the other. Audrey read through her book, chewing absently.

Dad's eyes found mine. Concern. Fear. Feelings I wasn't used to seeing on him. He ate slowly, sipped slower, gaze fixed on the window. Audrey didn't notice. I followed his eyes. The dragon-and-snake inflatables on the neighbor's lawn glowed faintly through the snow.

"Still thinking about Peter?" I asked as he took another sip.

Audrey looked up—half curious, half annoyed—ready to get this over with so she could sink back into her book.

"That and other things." Dad set the glass down. His eyes drifted to Mom's portrait on the cabinet. The photo used to show all four of us. After the funeral, he sent it out to be reframed. It came back cropped—just her. Still, I could make out the snow-covered trees in my grandparents' yard behind her.

"I wonder what she'd say," I murmured. My pizza had gone cold. "About Peter. About everything."

"Why are you two being so dramatic?" Audrey sighed, tossing her book on the table. "Can we just say what's wrong and move on? Sometimes I swear I parent both of you."

Dad ignored her. Fingers laced, thumb scraping his lip, eyes fixed somewhere far away. He looked like a man about to confess something. Then came the sound—low at first. A groan. Then a chorus. Screams. I froze. The sound swelled—a hundred throats crying out from somewhere.

"What the hell is that?" I asked.

The window fogged. Mist rolled across the ground outside, thick and fast, swallowing the dragon-snake inflatable and the street. I shoved my chair back and ran to the window. Audrey joined me. The thicker the fog got, the louder the wails became, rising into a tortured choir.

"Shit," I whispered. "Shit, shit, shit." The mist climbed high, spreading until it sealed our house inside a gray dome. Dad didn't move. His stillness was worse than panic. The mist pressed close, dense as smoke. Snow still fell through it, piling on a world that no longer existed past our fence. His chair scraped back. He crossed the room, slow, deliberate, until his hands rested on our shoulders.

My body grew numb. Something shifted in the fog. A shape peeled through the gray. The face was hidden behind a cracked skull mask, horns curling back. The snout was long, edges splintered. My hands clenched into fists. Rotted fangs hung from twisted roots across his chest like trophies. Between them swung a rusted medallion: a dragon eating a snake by the tail, the snake eating the dragon's. Moss clung to his boots. His cloak, stitched from pelts and thorned branches, dragged through the snow.

He stopped a few feet from the house. A sound followed. A whistle wrapped through the screams of the dead. Shapes formed on the mist. My heart seized. My mother. Over and over—dying a hundred different ways. Crucified. Bound to a stake. Bleeding from a wound in her chest. Each image bled into the next, streaks of crimson flashing like lightning.

I prickled at the side of my thumb, reopening the wound, hoping the pain would wake me. Maybe I was in one of my dreams. Maybe Audrey was still knocking at my door. The blood came. The waking didn't.

Audrey's hand found mine, trembling. "What the hell is going on?"

I couldn't answer. The screams had buried my voice. I wanted to tell myself it wasn't real, but the air felt too cold, too heavy. My mother's eyes found mine in the mist, and the world tilted.

"You hid well, Storm Prince," echoed a distorted voice, sending the screams and Mom's images to a halt. "It's time to come out now."

"It talks," Audrey whispered.

"Kids." Dad somehow managed to keep a steady voice. "Upstairs."

"Who's that?" I insisted.

Two snouts slid from the folds of the figure's pelts, white and slick beneath the porch light. Square heads followed, eyes glowing red, forked flicking tongues. Two pale snakes. My stomach turned. Without the eyes, they'd be ghosts in the snow. Dad's vein didn't throb. It disappeared. The color had drained from him.

"Upstairs!" Dad shouted. "Now, now, now!"

I grabbed Audrey's arm and yanked her toward the stairs. She fought me at first, jerking against my grip until a pulse of blue light spread through the cracks in the floorboards. We rushed up. An explosion. Wood and splinters flew around us. We didn't stop. I risked a glance back. Dad stood in the middle of the wreckage, holding a sword. A fucking *sword*. The blade was broad, gleaming, alive in the blue light. Its rain-guard was shaped like a dragon's open jaws, the metal spilling from its mouth and stretching high above his head.

We reached the landing. I slammed my door and locked it.

"Like that's going to keep it out, Henric," Audrey said, rushing to the window.

"Got a better idea?" The mist outside clung thick. Nothing stirred. The horned figure, gone. The snakes, too.

"What do you think that is?" Her breathing hitched.

"No clue. The symbol around its neck, though. We saw it on Peter's hand at school."

"I knew something was . . ." Her words faded as a blue flicker crawled across the wall, toward the baseboard, bright as a firework's afterglow. We stepped back. The light slithered like a living thing, leaving a trail of smoke in its wake. My breath caught. Wherever it moved, the wall dissolved. Beyond it, the gray dome. Clanging erupted below, steel against something heavier. Groans. Dad.

The blue light shot to the floor, tracing a perfect circle around us.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." I grabbed Audrey's wrist.

"What—what are we—" The floor fractured into floating planks of wood, each hanging in midair like stepping stones over the chaos below.

"No, no, no . . ." Her voice broke.

Dad was locked in combat with the horned freak, sword flashing through the storm of debris. I didn't understand what I was seeing—my house vanishing, my dad fighting like a trained knight. But there was no time to think. Just the storm and the fall.

Audrey leapt to the first plank without warning. Her arms flailed for balance. The flickering light darted under my feet as she got ready to jump onto the next. Then the wood vanished from under me. My stomach lurched up and I reached out, grabbing one of the floating boards, my fingers splintered by the wood.

"Henric!" Audrey's voice cut through the ringing clash of steel.

I looked down. My fingers screamed, but I didn't feel them. Dad held his ground, deflecting strike after strike before landing one of his own. The skull mask flew off and hit the floor beside Mom's portrait.

Silverstein. My extremely poised narcissistic teacher looking like this? So this was his secret when his snow melted.

"There's the storm we've heard about for so long," he said, laughter scraping his throat. He pointed his blade at Dad. "We were forced to, weren't we? The Storm Prince, they called you. And yet you hide here, in this fragile world. You're not worthy of the Throne of Bones or the blood of frozen dragons."

The blue flicker returned, darting across the right wall, leaving thin trails of smoke that forked toward us. The air thickened. The smoke gathered and spiraled, winding around our bodies. My hands burned from holding on.

"Storms brew in silence," Dad said, sword leveled.

"And *we* are the storm." Silverstein's body burst into red smoke, engulfing Dad.

The smoke around me turned pale, almost white. I tried to haul myself up, but the cold dug deep, coiling around my ribs.

"Audrey!" She was half swallowed by the thickening white, only her head visible. The smoke hardened into white slithering scales. A squared head formed beside hers. Red eyes. A forked tongue brushed her cheek. She screamed as the snake pulled her to the ground.

My own smoke solidified. White scales rippled up my arms just as something cold slid against my face. The other snake. Its red eyes locked on mine before its jaw unhinged, baring teeth like frozen icicles. I let go. The snake's scales scraped my arm as it tightened its grip around me in the air.

Its body cushioned our fall. Above, red smoke hurtled through the living room and up the stairs, blowing apart wood and drywall. A portion of the roof was gone. The dome outside visible.

My chest tightened at the sound of Audrey's screams. I searched for her while trying to make sense of what the snake was doing. It wasn't gripping me tight enough to break my bones. It kept its hold tight so I wouldn't move.

The snake watched me. Not like a predator but a keeper. My own frightening nanny. My face reflected in its red eyes.

"Henric!" Audrey shouted from the other side. I tried raising my head, hoping I'd spot her, but the snake's gaze followed my own.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"This thing hasn't crushed me yet, so, yes. You?"

"Still kicking."

The snake loosened its hold a bit. Its attention shifted. The animal stared at something beyond the dome. I tried to bring an arm up, but the damn animal noticed my attempt and tightened its hold again. Its eyes remained somewhere else.

A loud bang came from above. The red smoke was visible through the gap in the ceiling above the stairs. They shot up, high enough I thought

they'd break through the mist and vanish. But instead, they smacked into it like it was a ceiling made of fog, sending out slow-motion ripples.

Dragons. Snakes. Bones. Swords. It all hit me. Did I really want out of this mess?

The snakes hissed, raising their heads. Their icicle teeth were in view as a blue smoke quickly spread across the floor of whatever remained of my house. Their eyes shifted from red to white. A flicker of light glimmered inside them. Its grip loosened completely. I crawled away from its hold and rushed to Audrey, who kicked her way out of her captor's hold. The blue smoke spread over the entire living room. It thickened, rising to my thighs, concealing the snakes. Two hooded white-cloaked figures rushed from the mist, darting our way. Audrey and I quickly glanced at each other. *Run.* But they either moved too fast or whatever happened around us slowed our attention span.

They dropped their hoods to their shoulders. In front of me, a man. Black hair tied into a bun. A scar above his upper lip. His eyes were brown. The garments under the cloak were also white. It resembled a toga over white pants and white boots.

A woman faced Audrey. Hair white. So were her lashes and brows. Blue eyes. A scar on her left cheek, stemming from the corner of her lip up to her ear. She gripped Audrey's wrist, the man mine. At his movement, his cloak parted slightly, revealing a symbol sewn with silver thread. My stomach sank. The winged *W* I had seen earlier. The terminals of the letter shaped like two dragon heads facing one another.

Another explosion. A rumble. The roof warped. A crack spread. Wood and shingles rained down. The woman let go of Audrey's wrist and held up her hands, casting a bright blue dome around the four of us.

A curtain of snow lifted as the roof collapsed around us. Amid the chaos, I pressed my nails onto the pad of my thumbs. The pressure and pain confirmed once again that I wasn't dreaming. That I had just seen a fucking blue dome engulf us. And no, this wasn't of those times where my

winged dream friend would swoop in and take me up to the sky. This was real life.

"Come with us," said the woman.

I was, of course, ready to decline the stranger's invitation. But the red smoke returned, diving our way. The strangers in white tried to push Audrey and me out of the way, but the smoke collapsed by our side. The shock shot me back. My breathing failed. My back thudded over wood and snow.

Chaos didn't stop like my breathing. And suddenly, I wondered what would happen if I remained still. The dome remained thick above, its surface swirling like smoke in the wind. Maybe trying to survive this would prove in vain. Maybe I didn't want to survive the attack at all. Surviving would mean discovering the truth.

The whole truth.

But for my sister and father, I managed to take a deeper breath. My back hurt as I stood on my feet, but whatever pain I felt disappeared at the sight. The two white snakes had a hold of the strangers in white.

Silverstein had Dad by the neck. His sword lay on the snow a few feet away. Audrey was on the other side.

"I expected more from you, Calibor." Silverstein tightened his grip. "So much more. The tales don't match the hero."

Dad's fingers curled around his hand, trying to break free. Scraggly lines of light crawled from between Mr. Silverstein's fingers and warped Dad's body.

"The jewel, Calibor?"

Dad screamed. I had never heard such a sound coming from him. Torment. Pain. Agony. Audrey darted at Silverstein, ready to tackle him. With a single wave of his hand, he sent her flying back as if she were a pebble thrown over a lake. She fell back on debris and snow, cringing and groaning.

The snakes crushed the strangers. At first, groans. Then screeches and screams. My eyes were locked on the sword. I could grab it and run the sword over to Dad, but that'd give Silverstein time to notice, time to move, time to kill us both.

He'd expect Dad to strike. Not me. Could I even lift the damn thing?

What if it was Excalibur-level heavy? What if I faceplanted trying and got everyone murdered? No time to hesitate. I had to try.

"You'll either answer my question," Silverstein growled, "or you'll die in front of your children."

The man had always been an asshole. The smug way he carried himself, like the school halls were built for him. The way he paraded himself around as if he owned the entire school. The way he looked at me —like I was something stuck to the bottom of his shoe. Rage burst inside me, faster and more violent than anything I'd ever felt before.

"Dad . . ." Audrey's voice cracked as she stood up. "Dad, please . . . no. I can't lose you, too."

"Are you going to disappoint your little girl?" Silverstein taunted.

The streaks of light around Dad's body throbbed brighter. Blood started to spill out of his nostrils and ears, dripping fast. He bit down on the pain, but I could see it. Feel it.

"They'll blame you forever," Silverstein taunted. He stood tall, like he'd already won.

I didn't wait. I ran. The dumbest decision in a long list of bad ones. But it was mine. Silverstein was too busy gloating, too obsessed with Dad's pain to realize I was coming. The others were wrapped in their deathly embrace. I wasn't about to let Audrey risk her life again.

I grabbed the sword. A roar exploded in my skull. Loud. Fierce. Ancient. Familiar. My winged dream friend. And the sword? Light. Way lighter than it looked. Like it knew me. It shrank in my hands, fitting me like it had been waiting. No time to think. Just act. I sprinted toward him.

Silverstein finally noticed. He lifted a hand like he was about to raise me off my feet. Too slow. The blade went in. Right through the pelts. No scream. No blood. No dramatic final speech. He exploded into rags and ash. The two snakes burst with him, turning into white dust that scattered over the wood, shingles, and snow.

Just like that. Gone.

Dad fell on his knees, then on his stomach.

For a moment, I wasn't standing in the rubble of my home. I was back in that classroom, wedged into that hard plastic chair, staring at Silverstein's face. I had just made Peter an orphan. I waited for something to hit me—rage, guilt, grief. Something loud. Something that proved I was still human. But nothing came. Just numbness. "Dad! Dad!" Audrey bolted to him, limping.

Dad was okay. Shaken, bleeding, but alive. He hugged her tight, whispering something I couldn't hear. I looked at the sword in my hand. Still glowing. Still warm. My reflection warped in the steel. Without warning, the blade melted into a thick black liquid. It trickled between my fingers without getting them wet, formed a dark puddle, and then slithered toward Dad. He held out his right arm and let the liquid wrap around it. It disappeared under his skin.

The strangers in white composed themselves. The woman remained by Audrey's side while the man approached me.

"Henric." Dad got on his feet, wincing. "Come here, kid."

"You're safe, Calibor," the woman assured him.

"For now," said the man.

"Who are you two?" Audrey asked, breaking away from Dad's hug.

"We came to your aid—"

"And slightly failed." I walked to Dad, eyes on the sword.

The woman walked away from Audrey and joined her companion.

"The symbol on your chests." Dad was wide-eyed. "What are you doing here?"

"Prince Calibor," said the man. "Do not play coy. You know why we've come."

Dad's face, though stained with blood, paled. It was as if the ghost who haunted his mind had leaked out of his brain and into view. Suddenly, the destruction around us didn't seem to be the worst part of this collective nightmare. Their presence was.

"Sombrius trevonous," Dad started. "Sonhatus aladis. Esquici timere. Respirus congelus dragonius."

The second he said it, everything shifted. I couldn't breathe. My chest tightened. My vision went full watercolor. I stumbled back, everything tilting.

"Dad?" I gasped before everything went dark.

CHAPTER THREE

IN THE BUSINESS OF DREAMS

◆ ◆ ◆

A balcony overlooked mountain ranges covered with snow. The balusters were carved in the shape of dragons with their wings tightly wrapped around their bodies. Tall pines towered above the rest. The trees, even without any leaves, were laden with flowers of ice.

In my right index finger was a ring: a blue stone connected by a dragon's wing to the right and a scorpion's tail to the left. My clothes were white and thick. The shirt had long sleeves that laced on my forearms. The fabric was textured like scales glistening under the light of the sun. A hand gently rested on top of mine. A man's. A similar ring on the same finger. His presence felt familiar. Black sleeves. The fabric textured like mine. A roar pulled my attention to the trees before I was able to look him in the face. My winged dream friend took flight, rising from the woods. Its scales of ice cast a bright glare across the sky. A sweet melody echoed in the air. Lyrics followed.

Dream, my sweet boy, to survive
Ride, not to die
Run, but do not hide
Truth is nigh
And so is flight
Rise so high

Crowns and kings will bow to your ice hide

Peace. I felt peace—the kind I had never felt in my entire life. A cold, gentle breeze stroked my cheeks. My dragon friend flew toward the mountains. I turned right, hoping to look at the face of whoever made me so comfortable. Bones. A charred skeleton stood beside me. The wind blew stronger, scattering it into black dust.

A bright blue light. The winter forest burned in glowing blue flames. White smoke billowed up fast, spreading across the sky. In the middle of the fire, a surface covered in bumps peeked through. It rose from the frostflames like a platform, and the fire receded. Heads. Piled heads. Empty sockets for eyes, mouths wide open. Men. Women. Children.

Fire, dragon, crown

Will lead you far and wide

Dream a little longer, my sweet

For the end is nigh

My mother's voice echoed in my ears. Same melody. My heart wanted out of my chest. The sky was lonely. My dragon friend was nowhere to be seen. I pressed my eyes shut. This was a dream. It had to be.

I replayed the dream in my head as we drove past the cemetery near my grandparents' house, humming the melody over and over again. I usually dreaded life when I woke up from my dragon dreams. This time, I had tears on my face. I had never heard Mom's voice in any of them.

She'd sung to me. I hadn't seen her. But her voice. Well, no amount of time would force me to forget it.

I definitely wished I could've stayed asleep like the song requested. We were on our way to see *them*. After four years. Audrey was in the backseat, glued to her phone, while Dad steered us down a road called Salem End.

I'd read somewhere that a witch had once used this road to escape the trials. Fitting. This whole trip had been sprung on us. Dad insisted he had mentioned it at dinner last night, that they had reached out and wanted to see us. An emergency, apparently. Maybe he had. But waking us before the

sun rose and acting like we were late for some grand obligation? That didn't feel normal.

I groaned. My back hurt. I was somewhat familiar with the pain—I'd slid on some black ice when I was eleven on my way back from school. I had been in pain for a week. I had no memory of falling recently, though.

My outfit was proof I wasn't fully conscious when I got in the car—my sacred stay-at-home black sweatshirt had no business leaving the house. My hair was a frizzy red nest. Audrey wore her blue pajamas under a puffed-up coat, her hair tied into a very messy ponytail. Very unlike my sister. She'd look presentable even at a supermarket. Dad, of course, was dressed in his all-black uniform: turtleneck and all. Even though I didn't appreciate being out of the house in sweats, I really couldn't fully grasp the idea of waking up as early as Dad did to dress up everyday.

"So we agreed to this at dinner?" I opened my phone camera. "Really? I couldn't get fifteen minutes to freshen up?"

Dad stayed silent.

Audrey yawned. "I'm shocked that they'd just reach out like that. Are they dying? Is this some big ceremony where they're telling us we're inheriting money?" She seemed to be glassy-eyed. Here but not really.

Dad muttered something under his breath, tapping the steering wheel. A surprise. He didn't respond to her snarky comment.

"Calibor Sabio?" I leaned over and touched his shoulder. "Are you with us?" My British accent was intentionally terrible.

He flinched.

"You okay?"

"Yes, kid. Fine." Dad cleared his throat. "Christmas is almost here. It's when families talk and make up. They invited us over. Let's . . . let's try to keep a positive attitude."

"A positive attitude it is," I said, wincing at the pain on my back.

Audrey winced. "I feel like I've been run over by a truck. Jesus."

He turned on the radio. A soft Christmas piano track started playing.

I had questions. Many of them. We hadn't seen our grandparents since her funeral. Not because we didn't want to. They'd simply decided to disappear. Mom hadn't been their favorite. An expert wasn't needed to provide proof. But Dad never explained the post-funeral distance. I used to blame myself. Eventually, I realized their absence wasn't about us. It was a choice.

Dad drove, distracted, drifting into the wrong lane now and then. I offered to drive. He refused.

"Did I go to the gym yesterday?" I stretched. "My back's killing me."

"You went straight to your room after dinner," Dad said. "Maybe you fell off the bed."

"Probably fell off after the shock of the invitation," I said.

"Excited to see your parents?" Audrey asked snidely.

"Yes," he said, completely deadpan.

She looked at me and frowned. The man was anywhere else but here with us.

"Tell that to your face." I raised an eyebrow. "After four years? Come on. You don't have to pretend."

His grip on the wheel tightened, the sleeve of his shirt pulling up. Red scratches were all over his wrist.

"What the hell, Dad?" I pointed.

"The gym. New equipment."

A sinking feeling hit my guts, and I tried to ignore it. I wasn't a gym rat, but sometimes you'd scratch yourself on machines. It happened all the time. So how many machines scraped him?

"Did I go out last night?" Audrey rubbed her right shoulder. "Is this what being hungover is like? My mind feels . . ."

"Foggy?" I asked.

"That's one way to put it." She shrugged.

"Time for crossword puzzles," Dad said with a laugh that didn't reach his eyes.

I tried to put the pieces together. I'd gone to school. At least, I thought I had? A snowstorm. Something with Peter? Actually, the entire day was a blur. The dream with the landscape and the ring and the song and the heads felt more real than everything else.

Snow started to fall. As the flakes fell from the sky, a cold settled. I turned to Dad. He was nowhere to be seen. I wasn't in the car. Audrey was gone. I was on his back—my winged friend's. Wings spread. My hands gripped around two horns stemming from its back.

The sky wasn't as blue as before. Darkness streaked through it, like black paint smeared on a canvas. My breath steamed. I was about to look over my shoulder when her voice sang to me,

Stay in dreams, my boy, so you can fly

Stay with me, so you will never die

Find in you the will to stay alive

"Stupid." I pressed my eyes shut. "Stupid dream."

"Which is the dream, Henric?" her voice insisted behind me. Close.

I had managed to avoid the sound of her voice all these years. I'd erased all audios and messages. Not because I hated her. On the contrary. Because of my love and guilt. The pain, the grief was too heavy. My thumb rolled the ring on my finger.

"You aren't really here."

"So where am I?" the voice boomed, thicker.

Darkness.

Screams.

The stench of burned flesh.

My eyes shot open, face smeared in sweat. No car. No balcony. A familiar room instead. One I hadn't been in for many years. I was in my grandparents' house. My fingers curled into the sheets. Not too long ago, their feeling under my fingers would've been proof that I wasn't dreaming —that this was real. Now I wasn't so sure.

I winced as I sat on the edge of the bed. My back killed me. The back of my arm was scraped. I looked for my phone by the nightstand. No sign of it. I didn't remember changing into blue pajamas.

I looked around the room. The bookshelf was still to the left of the bed. The fireplace to the front. A fire danced in the hearth. The painting hanging above it was my favorite to look at when I was a kid: a lonely mountain. Its summit covered in snow, its base a blueish black shade. A winter forest spread at the bottom. A pink-and-orange sunset.

My eyes lingered on the painting, my gut still churning from the smell of burnt flesh. I waited for a voice to startle me or for darkness to wrap me again. But I remained in place. To my right was a window I knew all too well. I'd broken it once, during a snowball fight with Audrey years ago.

Maybe my dragon friend would break through it and destroy this entire place. Maybe heads would pour down from it and stack up all around me. But everything remained still—still enough that I finally mustered up the courage to stroll to the shelf.

The dim light of the flames covered most of the spines of the books. I finally stumbled upon my favorite. The worn-out leather, the thin strings laced around it. Grandpa's book of stories and sketches. *The Prince and His Dragon.*

I picked it off the shelf, suddenly wishing that those heads would roll in instead of me having to go downstairs. I was at their fucking house. I didn't hate them. But asking them about their four-year absence felt even more daunting than a few severed heads.

I flipped through the yellowed pages. Sketches and stories. I surely had inherited my artistic abilities from him. Though I didn't think I was as good. I walked to the window and looked outside. The woodland to the right of the house was covered in white. Snow fell from a graying sky.

So Dad wakes us up early for this sudden road trip. We drive for hours. I was probably so tired, I just plopped on the bed. But I must've seen them when I walked in. Did I?

Chatter echoed from outside. One of the things I'd hated when I was younger: Sound carried through these old walls. According to my grandparents, this house had been built a few years after the American Revolution.

I opened the door, and everyone stopped talking. My steps creaked down. The wall to my left used to be crowded with family portraits. One always drew me in: the six of us around the Christmas tree. I was maybe five or six. Audrey's ridiculous green Rudolph sweater. Now? Nothing. Just some old wallpaper.

Grandma emerged by the landing. My body tensed at the sight of her. A thin smile on her face. She was calm. Good for her. I sure as hell wasn't. Her hazel eyes locked onto mine. Her sweater was black, covered in thin patterns sewn with gray thread. Her gray hair was in a braid too complicated for her to have done herself unless she had become some braid master.

"Henric," she whispered. "It's good to see you." She spread out her arms. I slowly made my way down the steps and wrapped her in mine. I missed her and was also ready to flood her with questions as soon as we got over our little tender moment.

Her hand remained on my shoulder as she led me to the living room. She seemed to expect a bigger reaction from me.

Dad sat on their old green couch, wearing the same clothes I had seen him wear in the car.

"Hey, Dad." I sat next to him.

"Kid." He reached for the steaming cup of coffee on the center table.

Bookshelves climbed nearly every wall, stacked so high they felt like they were watching us. The only break in the paper fortress was the fireplace, all stone and silence. We were never allowed to touch the books downstairs. Not that it mattered. Their spines were blank, polished, arranged in careful rows of red, blue, and gray—like trophies instead of

stories. Like they'd been chosen for how they looked, not for what they carried inside.

Grandma loomed to my right, staring a little too hard.

"Where—" A sharp pain on my head. A strange memory. Our house. White snakes. A strange figure with a horned bone helmet. Two people in white. A winged *W*. Explosions.

Fuck. I jolted up to my feet. "What the hell is happening?"

"Henric?" Grandma frowned.

"No, no. We were in the car, I think." I snapped my fingers. "Something happened at the house? What, what, what—"

"It's fracturing." Grandma's voice carried urgency. "It won't be long until the memories come through."

"So something *did* happen." I stabbed my finger at Dad. "I'm not going insane. What . . ." I snapped my fingers, then winced. The pain was sharp, spreading in my head in ripples.

Footsteps rushed down the stairs: Audrey in black pajamas. She was a statue when she reached the bottom, standing at the base in disbelief. Eyes narrowed. Hand pressed on her forehead.

"Sweetheart." Grandma rushed to her side and hugged her. Audrey reluctantly returned the gesture, her eyes slits.

"Hi?" Audrey mumbled, tapping Grandma's back with a confused face.

"Audrey." Dad rose to his feet, composed. "You should sit next to your brother."

"How did we get here?" She did as he asked. "What's going on? Ah—my head. God."

Footsteps creaked from the kitchen, determined, timely paced. Grandpa: his salt-and-pepper hair combed back, beard perfectly trimmed. A black coat draped over his broad shoulders. Eyes dark green and brooding. He moved with the kind of poise that turned heads, every step a declaration that the world belonged to him. Dad frowned at his coming, clearly displeased.

"We might as well lift it." My breathing missed a beat at the sound of Grandpa's familiar gravelly voice. "The pain and the confusion will torture them for days if we don't."

"Just a little longer," Dad insisted.

Grandpa shook his head in disapproval. Impatience. "Calibor, the time to play hide-and-seek is long gone. They can't remain ignorant to the truth."

Two people approached behind him. Their presence whipped me out of the moment. A man and woman in white. A winged *W* symbol was etched on their chest. They seemed familiar. Then it hit me. The car. The balcony. The coming of the man with the boned helmet. Were my dreams manifesting? If that was the case, what else would crawl out of my head in flesh and blood?

"You two?" Audrey pointed at them. "Wait, I just had a dream with you?"

"Not a dream, young Audrey," said the man, fully composed. "A memory."

Audrey's eyes wanted out of her head. "Impossible. We were—no, we were in the car. What the—you!" She pointed at the woman in white. "You cast a blue . . ." Her voice faded.

My jaw worked up the courage to ask. I wasn't brave enough. I realized I was on the edge of a cliff, and whatever followed would push me to the bottom. I'd never find a way to climb back up.

"Who are you?" I asked instead.

"Merador." He curled his hand into a fist and beat it over his chest.

"Luz." The woman repeated his gesture.

"You know them, Dad?" Audrey asked.

"No."

I didn't need to read Audrey's mind. We were both confused. Lost. Maybe even afraid? The books. I scanned them on the walls. They had

been there when I was a kid. Suddenly they were my anchor to whatever truth I could cling to.

"Happy to lift it," Merador said. "I can only imagine how painful—"

"Do it." Dad eyed the ceiling impatiently, as if hoping for a savior to get him out of this house.

A brief smirk touched Merador's lips. A second later, a blinding white light strained my eyes. Something crawled in my head. It felt as if it had many legs, each one equipped with a tiny blade at the tip. As it moved, it infused my brain with memories, each one hurting more than the next. Detention. Peter. Silverstein. The tattoo. House. Bone man. Snakes. Blue dome. Dad's sword. The killing.

Everything was true.

Flames of frost swallowed the edges of my mind, erasing thoughts until only blue remained. Shapes moved within it. People. Dozens of them. Running. Screaming. At first, I thought it was smoke curling from their mouths, but it wasn't smoke. It was their breath turning to shards. The air cracked around them. The frostfire chased their steps, brushing over skin and cloth alike. They didn't freeze right away. The veins on their necks lit up, pulsing blue beneath the surface. Some kept running, their bodies stiff, arms jerking in slow motion. One fell, his hands clawing the air as the frost reached his heart. Silence followed. I stood in a field of stillness. An orchard of frozen bodies, each one locked mid-motion, faces twisted in the last breath they took. The frostfire moved through them like wind through trees, leaving trails of glimmering dust. And then, all at once, they shattered.

The white light returned and slowly disappeared, returning my vision to me. My hands trembled. My stomach churned. Everything around me moved like I was riding a roller coaster. A bitter taste spread in my mouth. When I thought about the bathroom, whatever was in my stomach rushed up. I vomited all over the carpet and fell back on the couch. I pressed the

heels of my hands over my eyes, hoping to keep whatever was inside me, well, in me.

My pulse pounded in my ears. A storm brewed in my guts. Just when I thought about apologizing for the mess, I realized I had nothing to be sorry about. Because it was clear to me in this moment: I was the victim of their lies.

Though I could still taste the vomit, my body suddenly decided to ignore the disaster. Audrey was beside me, eyes vacant, hands on her lap. She was composed, sitting up, the fire in the hearth reflecting on her gaze.

I remembered the living room floor exploding, Dad's sword, light crawling up the wall, the floor splitting, Luz casting her blue shield. Magic? Fucking magic. My hand suddenly remembered the weight of the weapon. My ears the sound of the blade sinking into Silverstein's skin. And the image of the sword melting through my fingers and dragging itself over the snow, disappearing into Dad's arm.

"I stabbed a man," I whispered absentmindedly. "With . . ." I looked at Dad. "With your sword? The one *inside* you?"

"Killing for protection is a right," Grandpa said, nonchalant. "And it was about time you walked in yours."

"And hiding from us that, I don't know, magic?" I shrugged. "Is that what we call it? Magic exists?"

Silence briefly loomed.

"The words you said, Dad." Audrey's voice cracked. "You did something with our brains when you said them, didn't you? It sounds impossible, but . . ."

"I had no choice." His gaze matched his dark confession. "I needed to get you to safety. I also wanted to give you one last chance to remain"—a shudder—"ignorant to . . ." He clenched his hands. "To who you truly are."

"Dad, no disaster gives you permission to mess with my head! With—this feels so stupid—magic? You dragged me here against my will! Henric

killed a man! It's all so—" She turned to me, frowned in disgust, and then turned away.

"And the sword?" I asked, trying not to get caught up in Audrey's reaction.

Dad pulled up his right sleeve and extended his forearm. Thin blue lines snaked over his skin, scattered like lightning.

"With me," Dad said. "Her name is Cevada."

"Well"—Audrey waved a hand forward—"nice to meet you. What other magical secrets are you hiding?" She scanned the room. "What are you *all* hiding?"

Grandpa calmly strode her way. He knelt, meeting her gaze. "You'll need that fire for what's to come. Don't take your anger out on your father or your brother. You'll have plenty of recipients for it where we're going."

"*We?*" My guts still danced in circles.

"We've come to take you home," Luz cut in. "To your real home."

"I don't know who you are, lady." I managed to get up despite the entire room spinning. "But this is a family thing. No offense. And thank you for the shield thing . . ."

Luz's face went rigid. Merador held her hand as a calming act. Clearly, she had words to spill, but not enough room to do so.

"You can't stay here." Grandma speaking as if she had been around after our slightly personal disaster was tough to swallow. I had love for them, but the audacity boiled my blood.

"Sorry, but you don't really have a say in where we go—"

"You're angry." Grandpa's eyes abandoned whatever calm they clung to. "I understand. But there are reasons for our physical absence. Reasons that will require you to mature fast." He reached into his pocket and unfolded a crinkled sheet of paper. My detention drawing. "Where did you see this dragon, Henric?"

"Where'd you get that?" I asked. "Dad?"

"Yes," Grandpa replied before he could. "He brought it with him."

No, I wasn't about to reveal my dream buddy. Dad and Audrey bought into the lie that I had made it up. Grandpa definitely wasn't worthy of the truth.

"My brain." I shrugged. "Your book still inspires me."

"This ice dragon wasn't in that book."

"I didn't say it was. *I* made it up."

"This world has made you soft." Grandma observed me like an experiment. "Both of you." Audrey held her gaze next. "Perhaps the coming of the Damaged was a blessing in disguise. It's about time the three of you leave this fractured place."

"Silverstein," Dad said to us. "It's what we call his kind."

I searched for a hint of guilt or shame, or even regret. Nothing. It was as if Silverstein was a cockroach I had stumbled upon and simply decided to crush.

"You may not think much of us now," Luz said. Her insistence tested my patience further. "But we came to aid you in this world. We've been following the Damaged for a while—"

The books on the wall screamed. Every spine rattled like they choked on their own words. To add even more to how fucked up all of this was, they started melting. Not like candle wax. Worse. Like skin. The covers peeled away, and the pages bubbled and twisted. My body went numb.

Heads. Human heads. Their necks hung down in folds, oozing over the edges. Hair spilled out of their scalps. Some were half shredded like someone tried to tear them off by the roots. Their eyes were haunting. Some open, watching.

Another sign of my dreams leaking into reality? A quick glance around and I realized that this wasn't happening in my head. Audrey was pale, jaw hanging lose. Dad stared, deadpan. My grandparents eyed the heads like a prized trophy. Merador and Luz waited as if expecting orders or a command.

"Have they always been . . ." I let out a breath.

"Yes." Grandma smiled. "They've always been here. Some longer than others. Truth needs the proper season for reveal. Yours has come."

"Is this okay to look at, Dad?" Audrey asked.

"You don't have a choice now but to look at the dead, sweetheart," he replied.

"Of course she does." Heat shot through me. "She's fourteen. Why does she need to see this? Why do I?"

Grandpa's mouth tightened, impatience cutting sharp lines into his face. "This is truth. Our truth. And it's about time you both stop hiding from it."

The vein on Dad's forehead pulsed, thick and furious. He looked like he wanted to tear the room apart. But he didn't move. He just stood there, rigid, jaw locked, like he already knew that whatever he did wouldn't change a thing.

"S-so, what is this house actually?" Audrey asked, eyes on the floor.

"Think of it as our trophy cottage," Grandma replied with a smile. "My sweet, don't be afraid to look at them." Audrey raised her head and eyed the heads. "This is what happens to those who oppose our family. You should be proud of how we deal with opposition."

"And you should be proud of what you did, Henric," Grandpa continued. "Those who rise against us must always be reminded of our strength."

Some heads were more dilacerated than others. Their skin still had their pigment, their lips their hue. One could easily assume they had just been killed. I couldn't tell which one had been here longest by their appearance. Then I noticed it—carved on one of their foreheads. The symbol of the dragon eating the snake.

A flicker lit up inside me, one I quickly wanted to put out. Being praised for killing Silverstein felt good. He had gone after Dad. He would've killed him. He deserved it. But did Peter deserve to live without a father now? I clung to the part of me wishing to believe that I had done

something terrible. But I couldn't ignore the seed of pride Grandpa's words had sowed in me.

"Heads as trophies," Audrey started in monotone. "Messing with minds. Killing a man. What is this? A gathering of criminals?"

Her words triggered Grandpa, the deep frown on his forehead returning, proof he was trying to gather the right words to say. He crossed his hands in front of his body. "This world has made you soft. The signs of such a crime displayed in you and your brother since birth. Your grandma and I decided to be away after your mother's passing so your skin would thicken." He sneered at Dad. "We clearly failed. Now, you won't have the luxury to cling to earthly ideals where we're going. Predators kill. Prey kills. We are entitled to kill."

"We aren't going anywhere with you," Audrey insisted.

"We don't have much of a choice." Dad's voice was steel. "The world you knew is gone."

"I'm going to need you to elaborate," I said. "Gone? How gone are we __"

"Memory." Grandpa grew impatient. "Just memory."

"The Damaged have been looking for you," Luz revealed without invitation. Grandma was clearly bothered by the act, but she didn't interrupt this time. "It's been a few months since we received the reports. Then we discovered the identity of the one Damaged closest to you."

"Silverstein," I whispered without feeling.

"They serve our enemies," Merador said. "The Tryors."

"So we have killers following us?" Audrey shook her head in disbelief.

"Your dad is expendable to them," Grandma said. "You and your brother, not so much."

"You've been found," Merador continued. "Trust me when I say that if you stay, they'll pay everyone you know a visit, especially since Henric killed their head."

"Their head?" I scoffed. "As in their leader?"

"Yes." Grandpa smiled. "They gather in packs when sent on a mission. Silverstein was their head. And trust me, they will not hold back in punishing you."

The symbol of the dragon and the snake carved on one of the heads pulled my attention. I felt displaced, yet strangely at home. I had already killed my mother with my absence. Perhaps owning up to the killing of someone who'd tried to damage my family would be easier than I thought.

"And where are we going?" The symbol held me captive as I spoke.

"Come with me." Grandma walked to the kitchen, the wooden floor creaking at her steps. Audrey and I remained seated for a moment. In my mind, I knew that whatever steps I took from this couch would lead me even farther away from the life I already knew. Though it wasn't a life worthy of medals and prizes, it was the only one I knew.

Audrey followed first. I was at her heels. Dad came behind us, concerned and watchful, leaving Grandpa and the annoyed-in-white to follow after.

Their kitchen was spacious, decorated in tones of brown and red. More heads lined the cabinets, casting long shadows on the ceiling. They had replaced the vases and cookie jars.

Grandma opened one of the cabinets. Some winter clothes were tucked inside. She quickly sorted through them, tossing Audrey a red coat, Dad a blue, and mine black.

The coat was heavy. Gray pelts lined the collar. Thin silver chains connected to buttons shaped like crowns. I put it on, the coat hanging below my knees. Audrey's sleeves were too big, spilling over her hands. The chains on her coat were gold, buttons shaped like mine. Dad's fit like a glove; his chains were etched to buttons shaped like dragon wings.

"These should fit you." Grandma reached inside another cabinet and revealed a pair of black gloves with studs at their cuffs. She handed me the pair and distributed one for Audrey and another for Dad. Boots followed, mine a size too big and covered in mud.

Grandma rushed to another cabinet while I put on the gloves and the boots and retrieved two coats: one green and one blue. The green was hers and the blue Grandpa's. He put it on and opened the drapes in front of the large glass door. A winter woodland under a moonlit night. He slid the door open and breathed in the frigid air. Without another word, they held hands and strolled through the snow. Merador and Luz followed them out.

Audrey didn't hesitate to brace the cold. I stood under the doorframe with Dad beside me, surprised at my sister's sudden courage.

"You know where we're going?" I asked.

"Yes, kid."

"Should I be scared?"

"I protected you for as long as I could." He watched Audrey trudge through the ice. "We have no choice but to be afraid."

"You're not bringing your sword?" I asked.

"Oh, it's with me, kid."

"Are you going to erase my mind again?"

"The Unwritten can only be used once," he said, his voice heavy with the weight of truth. "And it can only be broken once, too. So, no, kid. No matter how much I want to shield your mind—or your sister's—I can't erase any more memories."

"Why didn't you erase Mom's death?" My breath steamed. "It would've been nice to live without that memory."

"You can't remember love if you can't remember pain." He tapped my shoulder.

Some of the trees began to move, though no wind stirred the air. A few bent at unusual angles, their trunks groaning as bark carved through the snow. Branches writhed and tangled, merging into one towering shape. Wings unfurled from splintered limbs, twigs coiling into horns. A snout. They had gathered to form the shape of a dragon.

My grandparents and the annoyed-in-white didn't bat an eye at the sight. They carried on as if the twisting and the curling was normal.

Audrey halted and looked over her shoulder, eyes glistening. Regret? Fear? Hesitation? Or just courage?

I was supposed to fear something this strange. That would be the normal thing to feel. Only I didn't. Curious was more like it. My footsteps crunched in the snow, Dad at my heels. My palms tingled, heart raced, competing beats with my step. Part of me was ready for something new, no matter how strange. Peter flashed through my mind, an illusion that he was begging me to stay. I scoffed it away. I was ready to leave him behind as well.

"Never again," Audrey whispered once we met her.

"What was that, sweetheart?" Dad asked.

"Never mess with my head again," she said, chin trembling.

"I promise."

My grandparents waited, never letting go of each other's hands. Merador and Luz were beside them. As we drew closer, I noticed dark stains along the wooden sculpture of the dragon. At first, I thought it was rot or sap. The closer I got, the clearer it became. Blood. Dried and dark, smeared across bark and twig like strokes of paint. We stopped under the dragon's head. I tried to keep my composure, but my stomach turned when I saw them: bones wedged deep in the crevices.

"You aren't who you are," Grandpa started, then amended. "*We* aren't who we are without sacrifice and glory. This is the Doorway of Athelan, carved in this world with blood and through the death of many loyal to us." As he spoke, a few branches at the base slithered into the shape of a door. "It's time to walk into your truth, kids."

A hidden passage revealed itself within the dragon's body. I blinked a few times, thinking I was inside another dream. Torches lined the narrow corridor, their flames burning an unnatural blue against shadows. The path stretched on, vanishing into darkness. Impossible. The wooden monstrosity wasn't nearly large enough to hold a tunnel that long.

"Where will this lead?" Audrey asked.

“Home,” Grandma replied.