

BLACK HILL CASTLE: AN ORDINARY HERO
A Novel

by

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Abstract

My thesis novel, *Black Hill Castle*, is a tale of friendship, exploration, and survival in the contemporary, climate-change-affected landscape of the Cariboo in BC's Interior. The story works with the methodology of re-mapping classic adventure novels, such as *Treasure Island*, or epic fantasy, such as *Lord of the Rings*, and the "hero's journey" (Campbell) onto a contemporary plot. I also use the tools of "fantasy and magic" to transpose fantastical/mystical elements of storytelling onto the realistic setting of my multi-generational cabin. My setting mirrors the young protagonist's fearful perception of the radically altering woods. My work inspires a different perception of "the hero," as I believe the origin story to have toxic connotations, especially for young adult women. My work sees heroic characters through an "environmental steward" lens and understands "the importance of youth agency to early adolescence (being able to 'take a stance') ...[because] the environment [is] widely neglected in literature-based approaches to...education" (Bigger and Webb 402).

The story follows 16-year-old Andy as she returns to her summer cabin—once owned by her grandpa—after he passed away that prior year. Here she finds her traditional paradise to be plagued with fear, sadness, and change. She re-unites with her best friend Lizard, an Indigenous to the region. Soon she begins work at his family-run fishing resort. Later on, a massive storm causes a chain-reaction of wildfires that threaten their community. Andy discovers a map that her grandpa left behind, a map to a scavenger hunt he designed through the forests around the cabin with the promise of a treasure and the title of a hero at the end if she completes the expedition. She decides to go on this journey with her best friend and a newfound friend, a city-comer, Yaz. Through this journey she discovers the real, truer story of her idolized grandpa and learns to become her own type of hero and steward of her own natural environment.

Lay Summary

Black Hill Castle is a young adult novel. The story is inspired by my childhood summers spent at my family cabin in the Cariboo region of British Columbia. It is also an ode to my late grandfather. The novel explores a young female protagonist and her friends as they learn to explore the wilderness of her grandfather's cabin after he passes away from cancer during a wildfire season. The book follows the traditional framework of Joseph Campbell's "The Hero's Journey" and classic adventure novels (Treasure Island) contrasting the popular YA fiction available today. The story explores how climate change in central British Columbia is changing the way youth will live in the summer, but also exploring what it means to call a natural wilderness home.

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Thank you to all of those on my team and who have shown patience.

Dedications

For Grandpa

Introduction

Black Hill Castle: An Ordinary Hero

i The Hero's Journey

The Hero with a Thousand Faces by Joseph Campbell outlines a fundamental story-telling device I have always used in my writing. He outlines a step-by-step framework of the hero character as they move through a cyclical adventure from an ordinary world to an unknown one, and then back home again, using classical mythical heroes to demonstrate the framework. As a young writer, this framework helped me to plot my own stories and make them like the great adventure novels I was so inspired by. Campbell states in his book, *The Power of Myth*:

“The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there’s something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society. This person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It’s usually a cycle, a going and a returning.” (298)

He outlines the behaviour and template for what being a hero means in literature. I have used the traditional template for my own protagonist’s heroic journey through my novel, but also, to mirror my own personal journey in writing this book. The taped posters of the model I had taped on my wall began to outline my life in its entirety throughout this master’s degree and the hardships and depression I faced. The model “tells the story of a person encountering a significant life problem and their “adventure” in resolving it” (Williams 523). The process became an epic hero’s adventure for myself and my protagonist, side by side. Although being inspired by Campbell’s original work, I also use filmmaker Christopher Volger’s simplified and

clearer “Hero’s Journey” template made specifically for writers, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*.

Although I held Campbell’s template on such a high pedestal, I did realize over my research many issues. Male heroes were traditionally outlined by most of the heroic arcs in Campbell’s work, which gave me a difficult time outlining my female protagonist’s journey. Over the course of writing this book, I realized the alternative toxicity with the concept of the hero and his journey and how the people I labelled as heroes in my own life suffered from it.

ii The Ordinary World

My Hero’s Journey begins like most do, in a normal life with ordinary circumstances. My normal life for a long time was centered on education in the school year and being at my cabin in the Cariboo region of British Columbia during summers filled with family and friends. I am writing this paper on the beach at my cabin now, looking out at a small, dome-shaped island in the distance which the community calls Eagle Island, watching the metallic waves roll in, smelling fish and wet pine, and staring out at the grand vista of the mountains beyond. It all comes back to me—every memory I ever created here. I am reminded often of the past, of spending long summer days sprawled out on Reynolds Resort’s wharf with the cabin friends I had met here, with whom I went on thousands of adventures inspired by stories like *Treasure Island* or *Harry Potter* or *Narnia*. I look down the lake to my right and I see my old childhood friend’s cabin, this log home perched behind pine and Douglas fir with a collapsed Canadian flag on the porch. I remember nights spent exploring the woods here, pretending that we were like Indiana Jones. I remember it all because every memory is attached to every square space of nature here. Being here in the flesh, memories fly back to me, and then I return home and they nestle in the back of my mind somewhere. I remember my grandpa teaching me to fish on this

lake or hunt in the woods and my dad teaching me everything there was to know about storms, how to spot them developing on the horizon, what conditions to look out for. He used to say, “When the birches start their dance, you know a storm is coming,” and it weirdly worked every time. It was either him or Grandpa pointing out which berries you could eat, the species of trees, how to start a fire, or other survival skills. At home in the Okanagan, I did not understand the landscape in the same way.

Things have changed at my cabin, and in some strangely illusionary state, I never believed they would. I can see the signs. The rising water levels. The redness in the woods and the scars of the wildfire from 2017 that left a mark that shouldn’t be there—in this paradise. I can see places where our old cabin has weathered: overgrown steps, peeling sidings and rot, holes, and shards. I can see the remnants of Grandpa’s spirit, his old tackle box on the shelf, a dusty photograph of him from war. Ever since the fire, I’ve felt a clawing inside my chest. A hunger to write.

iii A Call to Adventure

*“This first stage of the mythological journey—which we have designated the “call to adventure”—signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown” (Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 48)*

Every journey begins with a call to adventure, so that is where I will begin. It was the summer of 2017 when I came to the cabin for my regular, annual summer holiday. At the time, far too much had already changed at the cabin, and I was clawing to hold on to the tradition of it. I was no longer friends with the cabin friends that I’d known my whole life. My parents and grandparents used to come up in the summer for well over a month and now it was down to, at

most, two weeks. So, in 2017 when I saw all the news of raging wildfires across BC, I did not want to believe this could be another change. Wildfire smoke was something I always associated with my home in the summer in the Okanagan, but it did not belong at my cabin paradise—that would mean, to me, the outside world was infiltrating a place that had always been closed off—and then, that summer, the wildfires came. I still remember being evacuated in the middle of the night. Still remember my dad fighting to stay behind and not evacuate. These things did not happen here. It wasn't fair, but here we were. We lost that summer. We were only at the cabin for days.

For the first time in my life, I feared I could actually lose this place. I had a dream that night that a young boy was walking through a burnt, charred landscape through a burial ground of death, destruction and abandoned cabins. At the end, he arrived at a cabin much like my own, labeled 'Black Hill Castle.' I woke up angry. The fire ended up being okay, but I felt a call to purpose that I needed to tell my story of this place. That I needed to tell it as I always saw it, a great Canadian adventure novel with a great hero leading it. It had to be grand! Like *Indiana Jones* or *Treasure Island*! Some epic journey, because my cabin was perfect and was built in paradise, and so deserved something grand. My grandpa and dad had built this place by hand, and they'd want it told this way. Hunt describes the classic adventure novel as “usually unfamiliar and often exotic” but I wished to write an incredibly familiar landscape, and show how it became unfamiliar (Hunt 328).

iv Meeting the Mentor

“...the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass” (Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces 57).

I always sought stories—at the beginning—from my ‘fatherly figure’ mentors or guides of sorts, like Gandalf or Dumbledore. I grew up with my grandpa, for one, who often acted like another father. He told me great stories of war and how he’d traveled the world, how he knew everything there was to know about maps and loved adventures and wasn’t afraid of anything, or so I perceived. My dad was much the same, always perfectly adventurous, never afraid of the wild, never afraid of anything. He was a Renaissance man, always knew how to do anything when the time arose. I felt like I had grown up blessed by such strong heroic guides. I also had an important mentor in high school, another adventurous ‘Walden’ type figure. I depended on all three of these “father” figures: without them I figured I could never adventure or explore, that I’d just get lost, that I’d break down. I remember going on a ten-day trip outside Victoria on a massive sail boat with thirty crew members in my second to last year of high school, and that experience, which I never thought I’d be brave enough to complete, started with the side-by-side mentorship of my high school fatherly figure. I had lost my grandpa many years back to cancer. I was no longer in high school able to go on these journeys with my teacher mentor because I’d graduated and moved on from that life. It was me and my dad, my dad who did everything in his power to keep this place alive, to keep me alive. I knew it took a lot of work to maintain paradise.

I also spent much of my young adult life reading. I’d found joy in children’s fiction and adventure novels, clearly placing very important memories onto those books. I remember when I was young and my dad had taken me to every library and bookstore across the city of Vancouver to help me track down the entire *Series of Unfortunate Events* series because he was so happy that I’d found such joy in a book.

It was when I found Young Adult fiction in my teens that I really fell in love with reading and writing, finding the particular genre to fit well with my style and taste. The Oxford Encyclopedia defines YA literature as: “texts addressing an audience from about thirteen upwards” where “such texts are informed by the values and assumptions about adolescence that are dominant in the culture at the time of the text’s production” (Young Adult Literature). An example is “*The Catcher in the Rye*, by J.D. Salinger, first published in 1951 and often thought of as the first young adult novel...it includes marginally taboo language and subject matter; it is written in the first-person vernacular, using the voice and language of a teenage boy who feels alienated from adult society and his peers” (Young Adult Literature). I always related to and loved YA books especially with heroic leads, such as the *Hunger Games* that I fell in love with in high school. I fell down the rabbit hole of the dystopian obsession that “fits well with adolescent literature in a generic sense: both are literatures of the disempowered, the oppressed and repressed” and are “largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century” (Jones 225). My deep love for YA fiction never left me and followed me into my master’s program, influencing my writing, leading me to believe that “writers needed to understand the dilemmas that were posed to this generation by their new freedoms and to offer sensible discussion of choices without too much moral instruction” (Hunt 544). I attached to fantasy YA “that often deal with personal and societal issues that are similar to those of realist fiction...and render the familiar and ordinary, strange and extraordinary” (Young Adult Literature). Books like *Harry Potter*, *Six of Crows*, or the *Mortal Instruments* series or sci-fi dystopian books such as the *Maze Runner*, *the Giver*, or *Divergent*, all have those similar heroic protagonists progressing and coming-of-age in a problematic world. I was always inspired by heroes—whether superheroes in

comics like Captain America, ordinary fantasy heroes like Frodo Baggins, or heroes like Jim Hawkins coming of age during an epic pirate journey.

It was my grandpa who got me into reading in the first place and he and my great grandpa, who was a comic book artist, held ‘heroes’ in high esteem and were addicted to classic adventure novels. I became deeply connected to classics because of him, and the genre as a whole felt important and meaningful to me in which I wanted to write. Although most of the fiction I was reading and greatly inspired by, such as *Treasure Island*, *Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*, has male heroic characters, I still never had much issue wanting to emulate the hero myself. Many old adventure novels contained “strict gender divisions in which girls usually only played a passive subordinate role” (Adventure Books). But, because of the way I was raised, I never saw that as a barrier, and believed it more important than ever that I communicate in my own writing how important it is that woman readers can see themselves in any hero. For example, *The Hunger Games* left an impact on me as a young adult because of its new representation of the ‘female’ hero. It not only made Katniss Everdeen the new-age female hero but also took into consideration the differences she would experience as a woman. Katniss has a lot less freedom and “must continually manage friends, family and the wellbeing of her neighbours in District 12, while acting to bring down the Capitol” (Kirby 464). Katniss operates in a fantastical setting that reflects real world issues. Katniss was a hero I could relate to as a female reader and writer because “she is neither principally defined by her masculine attributes...nor sexual appeal” (Kirby 467) and in this she felt different “because her gender is, in terms of the narrative, largely irrelevant” (Kirby 467).

Due to societal changes, themes of environment and climate change have entered the genre. In YA Fiction “changes in society are inevitably reflected in various changes in the form and

content of adventure stories” which include “themes such as environment and racism...[and] the growing importance of woman writers and girls as heroines” working to change and breakdown traditional adventure storytelling to better fit the genre of YA literature today as well as our current climate (Adventure Books). Furthermore, in terms of writing about the natural environment and climate change, I’ve noticed most YA books reflect nature in extreme ways “to the point where the natural systems on which human life on Earth depends have been severely disrupted, or even entirely destroyed rendering life on Earth impossible” (Bulfin 142). As I’ve noticed in YA fiction, “the remarkable increase in...ecologically-themed dystopian science fiction...narratives indicate their relevance in a time of ecological uncertainty and change” outlining that young adult audiences are looking for books that talk about environmental disruption (Bulfin 142). Although climate change is being written about in YA fiction, I found it hard to relate “real life” climate-change-affected landscapes to these narratives because they often painted “panic-stricken or barbaric responses” to natural disasters instead of realistic or hopeful ones (Bulfin 142). Rick Yancey’s *The Fifth Wave* centers around a hero ‘saving the day’ in face of dramatic environmental destruction, mostly on their own and with the help of a few others. This contrasts against the more contemporary view of a climate disaster, like a wildfire where a community lives with consistent catastrophic threat of disaster, and, as a community, learns to survive with it instead of demonizing it.

v Crossing the First Threshold

*“The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown...” (Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 74).*

I believed, as I entered my master’s program, elated, happy, and feeling powerful and more alive than I’d ever felt, that I had a story to tell, and it was a story like these great adventure

novels I used to read, or it needed to be, because I had powerful characters and a paradise unique to the world. I began with a male protagonist, Andy, who travels for the summer to the fantastical place where he would meet his long-lost friend. The premise would be that his grandpa would help him get there. I didn't think much of it at the time. I wanted to write an adventure novel, a real hero's journey. My grandpa and dad were my greatest inspiration for the fatherly figure that would act as a guide for the adventure. Perhaps it was because of the kind of adventure novels I was inspired by, such as *Lord of the Rings*, but my setting began as full fantasy, almost nothing like my real cabin, all made up names, new architecture, fantastical animals and spirits. At the time it felt right to me because it matched so well that typical type of YA adventure novel I was already reading. I felt like this was an important genre to be writing in because "historically" "boys and girls wanted to read adventure stories in which the heroes (less often) the heroines were young people like themselves" (Hunt 325). I questioned if I was going to be able to do my cabin justice, because in many senses, that place felt like an important person to me. In the end, I was still on a high from undergrad and so believed I had a great story under my belt. and I felt confident, thus, I crossed the threshold accepting that I was going to write this.

vi Tests, Allies, Enemies

"Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials" (Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces 81).

I had many ideas beginning my writing process, from conveying themes of environmentalism to the characters already coming to life in my head. I had just finished a degree in Environmental Geography, was fired up about the issues plaguing Canadian society, and believed that stories could be a way to inspire environmental change. I began designing my

characters. The first character I developed was Lizard. Lizard just came alive in my head somehow—he was spunky, passionate, and a little different. He was an Indigenous kid, one who'd grown up at the place I called paradise, who struggled with feelings of depression, isolation, and feeling like an outsider. Then came Yaz, an introverted, city kid who was fascinated with biology. Everyone came after that, the parents, Jakub, the side characters, as if they were all coming alive for me. I'd assembled my entourage that would aid Andy on his journey. Every story I wrote always began with a group of characters, because those were the types of books that I was most inspired by. I refer back to *Lord of the Rings* as the perfect reference to this, of a boy and his friends going off on a magical journey fit with an entire entourage. That was the ultimate adventure. I remember a passage specifically, showing the unity of the character group and how powerful that was in the story (and in other types of adventure novels I enjoyed):

“You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin—to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours—closer than you keep it yourself. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo. Anyway: there it is. We know most of what Gandalf has told you. We know a good deal about the Ring. We are horribly afraid—but we are coming with you; or following you like hounds,” (Tolkien 104).

I think often of Frodo and his friends and the loyalty of the group going on an epic adventure; it inspires me every day to continue writing adventures.

This story begins much the same as did any summer I'd had, so I started my hero's adventure as close as possible to the adventure genre, with a boy returning to the cabin after a year away only to be reunited with his grandpa and friends and for this grandpa to take them on a

great adventure. Cabin time for me was always associated with classic adventure novels and movies and so I ended up asking, “What would it look like if I mapped one of these classics onto my own story?” and “What would it be like if I wrote a story much the same as those, but set in my own familial landscape?”

At first, the adventure plot seemed light and fun. I had my characters, and I knew I wanted a great adventure story. After years of study in Environmental Studies, I was bogged down by fact and theory rather than actual practice and believed I could use “environmental writing” in this novel to provide my own insight and action to what being interconnected with the environment can look like to youth. In the beginning of the novel, I have Andy return over “the hill,” a location on the highway that for myself marked the official entry into the cabin community, and therefore, the beginning of a summer. Andy goes through what I often go through myself as I sink back into this world, a letting go and detachment from technology and the outside world and an entry into this one, that often seems new and unknown every time I return.

Setting has always acted as a character in my stories and so I knew I wanted to explore that. When I think back to Stephen King, I think of the book *The Shining*, and how powerful the setting of the Overlook Hotel was in acting like a character in his story, which was much the exact same way I saw my cabin and the Callows environment. At the cabin, kids would always play, and the adults would always help foster that freedom of play. Reynolds Resort, which directly inspires the Reynolds Resort in this book, is set up like a pirate adventure theme park, complete with fake pirate ships, statues, plastic figures hiding in trees, bolted tackle signs everywhere and more. It turned the very unbuilt landscape of this resort and its surrounding forests into a playground for kids. Every kid here was inspired to play in the forests and treat it

like a playground. Our bookshelves and movie selections, as well, were almost entirely old '80s adventure movies or classic books, which helped foster this sense of play and re-enactment.

The novel went through so many iterations at this period. I changed storylines hundreds of times, from there being a new resort called the Lodgepole threatening to steal the community's customers to there being a magical cave where evil creatures lived. During this period of my first-year Master's program, I was still energetic from my new departure into this new world. I held faith with my mentors and new friends I had met, and I felt unbeatable. I realized every hero feels this way at this point.

vii Approach to the Inmost Cave

"Heroes, having made the adjustment to the Special World, now go on to seek its heart"

(Volger 179).

By the end of my first year of my MFA program, I had finished my first draft of my novel and knew it did not feel right. I remember sitting with my checklist of things I was to accomplish in this book: comment on Environmentalism, check. Gender roles, check. Indigenous representation, check. Write the best adventure novel that could exist? Not really. Document the entire story of my life and the most important place in the world to me...not quite. Pay tribute to my lost Grandpa, even less. Write a compelling story of adventure, friendship, and loss, no. It wasn't working, and, after handing it in for the first time, I knew that it wasn't received well. I felt overwhelmed by the task I'd set out for myself. There was too much to accomplish. Too many themes and theories to rake in. Too much pressure to prove myself. Too much of feeling inadequate, like I was not supposed to be here. I felt as though I were being hit with obstacles I didn't see coming.

I started to dissect what had happened to my story and found that it did not seem much like *my* story at all. The language did not feel like myself. I was inspired by Haruki Murakami's writing style, which was clean, simplistic, and never overwhelmed or littered with fancy words or "fluff." That language style felt comfortable and at home to me, which is why I could always read books like *Kafka on the Shore* and *A Wild Sheep Chase* and feel a sense of ease. Also, often Murakami's work included mind-twisting unclear barriers between reality and magic, and the darkness outside and inside the character's self was never fully explained or answered. I found a strange comfort in how his novels often felt unresolved, unclear and riddled. But I realized this was still a hero's journey, just one written in Murakami's way. The New York Times' article *Subconscious Tunnels* explains, "This is starting to feel like an Indiana Jones movie or something" (Updike). Murakami wrote about a quasi hero, 'Kafka,' leaving an ordinary world of abuse and mental trauma and traversing a new world where fantastical elements exist where he comes-of-age and grows.

I cared about telling a good story. My novel was overridden with "fancy" language and heavy environmental commentary, which washed out the character development of my protagonist and the atmosphere of my setting. I forgot about my mentors and what they had taught me. I hit a series of crossroads. My characters, most of them, were clichéd and I didn't relate to them. The setting did not capture the heart and breadth of my cabin.

In the second year of my Masters, I was going through a massive series of obstacles in which I did not feel like myself. I wasn't doing what I wanted. I was starting to lose my pace with the vision and heart of why I began this journey in the first place. It was autumn when Andy Greene the 'girl' was born. I was sitting inside my home on one stormy night and my parents were telling me a story of my grandpa and all the heroic adventures he'd gone on. I was feeling

rather beaten and discouraged, but with the electric buzz of ‘back to school’ in my mind and having just gotten back from my cabin, I realized this story had to be re-imagined. And the girl was born. It was important, I realized, that she be female. In all the classic adventure novels I’d read, the hero was male, but I realized I needed the female hero for myself.

I decided to rewrite the story as authentically as possible, inspired by real-life friends, and to play within the wilderness. Andy and Lizard spend time at the tree fort watching a thunderstorm, a classic cabin activity that I’d experienced. I have the characters participate in the annual capture-the-flag game. During my education in environmental geography, the philosophical and environmentalist figures Henry David Thoreau and John Muir inspired a way of romantically viewing the environment. Henry David Thoreau in his book *Walden* stated:

“We need the tonic of the wilderness...at the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be indefinitely wild, un-surveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough Nature” (Thoreau 354).

They both inspired my romantic and often fantastical view of nature. This was the way I viewed my own cabin, a mystical paradise, a romantic ‘calling,’ so I wanted to convey that in my book. I rewrote the entire novel. A girl inspired by her grandfather to adventure through the forests in the face of a wildfire. But it was still missing something.

viii Ordeal

“Now the hero stands in the deepest chamber of the Inmost Cave, facing the greatest challenge and the most fearsome opponent yet” (Volger 191)

A friend ended up reading my novel and voicing to me one day at a coffee shop that this story I had written didn’t excite her in the way the original draft had, that, in other words, it was

kind of boring and a little too similar to that “standard adventure novel.” I felt like I was being clogged with opinions. People I knew suggested more analysis of environmental themes, to represent more Indigenous culture, to comment more on Generation Z and the dominance of technology, to have more sexualities represented, more gender spectrums represented, more fantastical representation of the landscape because young adults enjoyed that, and less of the “pure” nature setting. I was trying hard to incorporate everything suggested, like I was the mediator between a hundred different people’s ideas, and that, if I listened, the novel would be great.

Andy Greene decides to follow the scavenger hunt laid out by her grandpa before his death, follow the map, collect the treasures along the way, and succeed in his plan. She is barraged by others doubting her abilities and trying to guide her too much without letting her decide her actions for herself. It is when the spirit I named Orb, a spiritual representation of herself, begins to guide her through the forests, that she follows it, leaving all else behind as she starts to embark on her own hero’s journey.

I returned to my cabin once more to try and discover what my story was. I surrounded myself with the atmosphere of my cabin, the warm basking sun through pine canopies, the calm fishy water of Canim Lake, the far-beyond peaks of Wells Gray. I realized in my life this was always the place I returned to, no matter what had been lost. I was told stories of my cabin, of all it had been through, one night around the campfire with my parents. Perhaps it was an alcohol-influenced discussion, but the things said were different than things said in the past. My mom and dad talked about my paradise and all the work it would require to upkeep. How the embankment was caving in below the cabin, the siding falling off, trees decaying and falling. It strangely surprised me to hear these stories, as naïve as I was, thinking that this paradise would

just stay the same without any work. They told stories of Grandpa that I'd never heard. That he was deeply afraid of war. That he illegally joined because he wanted to prove himself and was dumped because of bad drinking habits. He covered himself in tattoos and got in trouble for drinking. My mom said he used to drink two pots of coffee in a sitting and sit in his 'thinking chair' and smoke and read maps for the whole day. In the end, he didn't die of some heroic battle like you'd expect the heroes in great adventure novels, but, rather, passed away from lung cancer in a care home. I was mad at myself, for forgetting that. I was mad at myself for forgetting that he spent years at the end of his life at a care home requiring assistance, and not living out somewhere like the cabin, chopping his own firewood. My mom told stories of Dad struggling with things I never knew. I started to question the entire fabric of what being a hero meant and question the way I saw him, that maybe I was missing all these stories because these people were trying to hold themselves and this place on a pedestal.

As in any great adventure novel, the way toward acquiring the treasure always results with a spiraling into the darkest place a hero can go. It's the place the hero dreads most, the test to her greatest fear.

As the pandemic edged on and I spent weeks isolated at home, I started to discover the truth of my story. I distanced myself from everyone, my school, friends, colleagues. I knew this journey had to be done alone, and I knew Andy needed to step out on this journey alone too. I started writing truthful statements on the page, statements I often didn't want to be true.

Andy's Grandpa is not alive.

They did not do the epic adventure.

Andy does not end up with the hot new boy.

She is Female.

They do not win against the fire.

Things will not stay the same.

This isn't paradise.

Grandpa is not the hero.

Andy isn't perfect.

The hero isn't what I once believed.

I spent weeks alone and went to a counselor to get help with the anxiety and depression that had plagued me. My mom told me one night that she missed Grandpa the most and that she often believed, in a way, that he was following her still, like a spirit who would be a guiding light for her. My mom wanted me to keep going and keep writing because the story was important to me and, as I realized, it was also important to my family.

I started to think that perhaps writing a novel was like being in a hero's journey itself. I started to think that a hero was just an ordinary person surviving, adapting, and making it through difficult mental challenges and life situations on the daily. I identified a sort of toxicity in labelling people as heroes—in labelling characters as heroes—which seems to disallow the ability to deal with challenges in a non-linear way, to make mistakes, be imperfect, not always fight, and not always win. But there was also a power in the hero's journey, in acknowledging the reader can be a hero themselves and find that power within to get through difficulties and give hope.

Andy goes on her scavenger hunt after her grandpa's death, with her best friend Lizard and her newfound friend Yaz. Andy has been plagued by her fear of change and her fear of imperfect, negative, or dark things infiltrating her self-centered view of her "paradise," especially when her grandpa was once here and made this place so alive for her, making her the

center of the world. She is struggling with confidence, her own insecurity, her ability to adapt and deal with hardship, and the fact that she has been asked, explicitly or inexplicitly, to act the “hero” role that she believes her grandpa embodied and that she believes she must become for him. Andy believes she must become the protagonist in the classic adventure novels they used to read. I was struggling to get any words on the page, struggling to even sit down to write at all.

At the low point of her journey, Andy is alone with the Orb in the forest, succumbing to great fear and panic. She struggles, seeing this illusion/spirit. Magic realism has always been very important to me in fiction as both a writing tool and a genre, and it also mirrors the way in which I always saw my cabin. At the mid-way point of my novel the forest is merging between a sense of reality and a spiritual magical state in which the forest transforms and often becomes fantasy, a similar sense of storytelling I identified with in *Kafka on the Shore*. For me, the natural environment of my cabin brought a sense of magical wonder, but fear was never out of the picture. I used tools of magic realism and wilderness gothic to convey fantastical elements of the natural environment as well as horrific, monstrous entities that plague Andy and her mind through this journey, such as my development of the “Tongue-man” monster. Another influential storyteller to me was Hayao Miyazaki who also used the tools of magic realism to convey themes of wonderment to the natural environment as well as environmental issues, such as in *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away* where the natural world often blends between the spiritual and the real, without any hard-set lines to tell the difference. Andy follows this spirit and this desire to transcend fully into the unknown of the forest with just a map. I also decided, out of my own personal regret of not getting to know my own grandpa’s life more, to write Grandpa Greene’s storyline. I wrote what was honest, trying to let go that my grandpa was this perfect hero and realizing all the things I’d missed. For Andy the heroic way became a mental

journey, a journey of resilience, and was her ability to be a part of an interconnected web bigger than herself.

ix Reward

“We’ve won the right to be called heroes” (Volger 211).

Andy reaches the end of the treasure hunt and succeeds in finding the ‘X’ or the final treasure. I remember sitting down to write the end of the novel in the span of a weekend because, after all the darkness that had happened in my life, I finally felt empowered for closure. I had written endings before but this time, especially after the re-writing and editing what felt like hundreds of times, it felt like I’d earned it somehow. This story was important to me. When the fires came to my cabin in the summer of 2017, I feared that I would lose my paradise. I fear every summer now that something terrible will happen. When my grandpa, my greatest idol, passed away it was unexpected, and I didn’t feel like I had closure.

Three winters ago, my mom came to me and gave me something that belonged to my grandpa and, even though he was her father, she gave it to me and entrusted it to me. It was a small, rusted broken compass. I’ve kept it with me ever since. This is why I gave such significance to the objects Andy acquires in this book, and why they represent a different kind of treasure than *Treasure Island’s* gold and riches. My grandpa had all these little treasures that he held close, and now they are displayed around the house. Every couple of months, either we clean out an old cabinet or my grandma does at her home and we find another treasure. My mom got his old baseball cap, me his military pin, his compass, my dad got his trusted hatchet, and so on. These treasures in the book represent what memories they are attached to and where they transport the holder, more than the value of the item itself. After Andy collected all Grandpa’s

treasures, she arrived at his castle. It was hard to write this point of the book because in a strange way it meant closure for Andy and for myself, and involved leaving it on the island, much the same as the conclusion of *Treasure Island* where some treasure is taken, but most is left behind.

“The bar silver and the arms still lie, for all that I know, where Flint buried them; and certainly they shall lie there for me. Oxen and wain-ropes would not bring me back again to that accursed island; and the worst dreams that ever I have are when I hear the surf booming about its coasts or start upright in bed with the sharp voice of Captain Flint still ringing in my ears: “Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!” (Stevenson 34).

Treasure Island is a coming-of-age of young pirate Jim Hawkins and is filled with classic adventure questing as he and a team of conflicting pirates go after a buried treasure on an island. The book questions, in the end, the importance and weight of all that treasure and perhaps emphasizes how much more important the journey was and what was learned, and that he was inspired by the very imperfect, unexpected mentor Long John Silver.

At this moment Andy finally discovers what she was hunting for, and it wasn't what she expected. She discovers her grandpa's place, his story, and realizes that he wasn't this perfect idol figure, and that was okay. She also realizes how much work he'd put into constructing their narrative for her to live in, and that she'd been living in a fairy tale of this cabin place all along. He helped her to see a more realistic vision of her cabin, and to keep some treasures, but let most of them go, to stay on the island where they belong. I think she believed she would have a sense of ownership over the island, but she comes to learn that he never believed the island or the castle belonged to him and wanted it to be like everything else in the Callows, shared. After finding the treasure in my novel, Grandpa Greene writes in a letter:

“This island is sacred because it belongs to no one. We never wanted tourists to come here and ruin any part of this beautiful oasis. But I don’t want it to be seen as “mine” anymore, because these forests don’t belong to anyone. They just exist and are welcoming enough to give us and our companions a home. You have made the trek, and learned to be at one with the forest. So please, you and Lizard, go give this place warmth again and make it a home for anyone who wishes to become one with the woods” (Woods 155).

There has been a long standing issue in classic adventure novels with “it’s belief in the rightfulness of British territorial possessions overseas” (Hunt 329) and the colonial attitudes of white people that somehow these places, such as Eagle Island in my story, can be owned by the grandpa character after just merely taking place on it. Therefore, Andy discovers that the real treasure isn’t entirely material and the hero, not always heroic, and the place, not really his.

Ever an imperfect mentor, he showed her she was capable of a lot more than she thought. That she and her grandpa weren’t the star of the story.

x The Road Back

“Once the lessons and rewards of the great Ordeal have been celebrated and absorbed, heroes face a choice: whether to remain in the Special World or begin the journey home to Ordinary World” (Volger 223).

The fire comes to the resort. I like the metaphorical meaning of fires. In Environmental Studies in university, we always learned that fires could be catastrophic, but they were a natural part of the ecosystem, and that the only way pine trees could grow and spread their seeds was to have fire come and open their cones. The forests needed fire, and they were a natural part of this “paradise”. Fire was a natural part of life—something that would cause destruction, darkness,

and death—but lead to rebirth and a new beginning for the environment. The fire burns most of the resort. I didn't want to have the fire detour this time, because this is the reality of living in a forest and will be the reality for the future. The hero cannot defeat something that is meant to happen. I think of young adult stories that often have nature diverge and be portrayed as the 'villain' because it will be more pleasing to the reader, that the hero wins and succeeds against environmental destruction. I think of *The Fifth Wave* again and how the protagonist, Cassie, is set up against a series of environmental disasters subjected from an alien invasion, how "demonic" and "villainous" this representation of the environment becomes, and how this story, much like other heroic YA adventures, becomes a strongly singular, weighty venture without much room to struggle with mental health issues.

"I may be the last one, but I am the one still standing. I am the one turning to face the faceless hunter in the woods on an abandoned highway. I am the one not running, not staying, but facing. Because if I am the last one, then I am humanity. And if this is humanity's last war, then I am the battlefield." (Yancey 101).

Although I enjoyed the novel because of the female representation of the hero, it makes climate change and environmental disasters feel like they can only be this extent of catastrophe, and that any environmental condition is a monster that has to be destroyed by a singular hero, not lived with like the normal inhabitants of the Callows community having to deal with catastrophic wildfires as a new way of life. It becomes something that cannot just be "fought" like destroying a dragon in a fantasy series, because fires are a natural part of the ecology of this environment.

xi Ressurrection

“Once more they must change. The trick for writers is to show the change in their characters, by behaviors or appearance...writers must find ways to demonstrate that their heroes have been through a resurrection” (Volger 233).

My aunt told me stories of the 2003 wildfire in the Okanagan, how there really wasn't a choice, how ordinary people had to rebuild, recover, and survive, and how after all that had happened, people continue to live in the interface. Andy and her community begin again. When I was a child, one summer a cabin across the lake was struck by lightning and the entire Canim Lake community took boats over to help the residents fight the fire. I was only seven when I, with my parents, helped fill hoses and buckets to fight the fire. There weren't even fire-fighters; it was just this community. I wanted to emulate that at the end of this book, a realistic hero that can exist in the world. I remember one positive note that always came out of my old environmental disaster courses: that in the face of these types of situations, people seem to come together and perform heroic actions, even if they didn't believe they had. I saw this emulated in real life during the Covid pandemic, of front-line workers and real, ordinary people adapting, surviving day-to-day, and coming out stronger on the other end of a disaster. Those were real heroes. I hoped in this narrative that Andy could be read as the kind of hero a young reader could recognize in themselves. An ordinary hero.

xii Return with the Elixir (Conclusion)

*“The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir)” (Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 211).*

Andy has been through a lot, but she proves to herself she can live without her grandpa walking her through everything. She becomes less self-centered, realizing the importance of

those around her, that she isn't always the center of the world, and she learns the truth of what being a hero means to her. She learns that everyone around her struggle with mental health issues and that she isn't so alone. YA literature is popularly thought to "depict characters who develop insights and learn valuable lessons, and by implication, so will their readers" and that "it is adults who write and interpret adolescence for young people" (Young Adult Literature). I believe it is important as the writer who is no longer a teenager to tell the truth in my story. I knew when I finished the draft that it had been written right this time.

For this novel, I wished to comment on climate change and how our BC environment is changing and becoming more susceptible to catastrophes and changing patterns that will constantly throw off the balance of a normal life—or a normal summer. That increased globalization makes more catastrophes like pandemics possible. I wished to dig into the fact that this will affect the summers youth have from this point forward and that the summers I had as a child, or my parents or grandparents had, may not be able to be replicated. Richard Louv's coined phrase "Nature-Deficit Disorder" from his book *Last Child in the Woods* demonstrates his analysis of children where "within the space of a few decades, the way children understand and experience nature has changed radically...[T]oday, kids are aware of the global threats to the environment—but their physical contact, their intimacy with nature, is fading" (Louv 1). He speaks of the mental implications of children's and young adults' disconnection from the environment and that "green spaces may enable children to think more clearly and cope more efficiently with life stress" (Louv 105). In remapping classic adventure novels and the Hero's Journey onto a modern-day YA novel, it was important that this ancient story template be altered to changing times and changing young adults, such as having the hero be female, and having the hero arc be centered on a mental journey to recovery. Although all these points have been

expanded through this novel, the real treasure for me became archiving my story of a place in time and going through my own hero's journey to complete this book. I got to write about a paradise that I am lucky enough to have access to, and about a hero I was lucky enough to grow up with. Through writing this I was better able to understand the full radius of these stories, with their strengths and imperfections. Christopher Volger states, "the beauty of the Hero's Journey model is that it not only describes a pattern in myths and fairy tales, but it's an accurate map of the territory one must travel to become a writer" (329). I feel like I went on an extraordinary journey these past three years and, in that process, "the Hero's Journey and the Writer's Journey [became] one and the same" (329). My goal is that this story becomes something that can always transport me or others to this world, in case it is ever lost.

Black Hill Castle

Part One

Andy

I entered Paradise.

The familiar waft of wet pine and dirt snuck up on me through the open window of the Jeep as we passed the final hill leading to the Callows. I was reminded of a thousand nostalgic memories all at once—of every summer of my entire life spent here at my grandpa’s home in the woods. I had my cell clutched in one hand, staring at the WIFI bars, watching as they disappeared out of service. I was home.

Dad drove over the many potholes and bumps on the highway, which bounced me, my brother Jordy and my St. Bernard Bernard around in the back seat. Bernard was slobbering all over the place and Jordy was still glued to his Nintendo Switch, not really paying attention to the natural utopia we were driving through. I felt bad for Jordy, because he’d still never experienced what I’d experienced here, and he never got to know Grandpa the way that I did, and now that Grandpa was no longer here, he never would. I wished he’d put it away and pay attention.

It's like Grandpa always said,

“Up here technology isn’t needed, Andy, we leave that world behind.”

He was no longer here. My throat clenched.

My stomach brewed with bubbly excitement looking at how the skies were already dark and storming over. The rest of BC was incredibly hot and dry and back home in the Okanagan I had felt like I was suffocating, the wildfires already spreading even though it was only June, but here was different. Fires happened here, but like anyone who lived at the Callows, we could handle them. Here was paradise—as Grandpa used to also say, a different world altogether that was fresh, wild and free.

I looked out at the great span of Callows Lake coming in through the front view window, the huge lake, speckled with little islands and outlets. I could see flecks of boats across the clear water and the great dark, bubbling clouds of thunderstorms. We drove past Reynolds Resort, owned by Mr. Sherman and home to my best friend in the whole world, Lizard. Reynolds Resort even had a small fire-station, something Mr. Sherman had made up. Out in these remote parts, the people put the fires out themselves. I glued my face to the dirt-specked window, antsy to go meet Lizard again after almost a year apart. We turned down the snaking dirt road that ran parallel to the lake, toward the Greene family cabin.

The cabin sat on a forested lot looking out at the lake. This cabin had history, and every time I returned, I was reminded of it. Our home in the Okanagan was newly built and boring, matching everyone else's house in the subdivision. But this home had been built by hand. This home had been here longer than I'd been alive, and longer than my parents had been alive. I practically jumped out of the car as we arrived, swinging around the side of the jeep and running through the thicket of overgrown weeds and shrubs. This place had not been maintained, and that frightened me. Grandpa had always been meticulous about landscaping the forest, something about keeping debris at bay. I took a moment to look at the cabin, its frayed siding, the bend in the roof and the fallen tree that had obscured half the pathway. There was debris scattered all across the deck and our clothing line had snapped. The place was a disaster, but, I brought my cell out to snap pictures of the view and trees knowing when I got home my Instagram followers would eat this up and be jealous.

I ignored my mom who was yelling at me to unpack as I entered the cabin. The immediate smell of musty mildew and dust hit me, the cabin, covered in a mess made by some squirrel or animal, but I ran past it anyways and up the rickety ladder that attached to the loft to

the far corner of the cabin, by the window, where Grandpa always sat when we arrived. It was his “thinking” spot, he’d always said.

“Everyone needs a good thinking spot, Andy-bear, one with a good chair, a table for coffee, and a good view. Everyone needs to spend more time with their thoughts.”

It was all still here. But the lamp was off. There was no drink on the side table, and the old reclining leather chair was empty. I walked over and wiped a finger of dust from the arm of the chair and looked out the window.

Things were going to change, I thought. I just wished Grandpa was still here.

I went to reach for the old, rare copy of *Treasure Island* that Grandpa and I held sacred. He’d always read to me on the first night that I arrived at the cabin for the summer, and the last. There was only one book we always returned to, that he’d read to me again and again and again ever since I was young. The book was old and rough, but well cared for. It was the copy his father had given him, and his father’s father before that.

“You see this book?” Grandpa held up an old book with a weathered hand.

“Treasure Island?” I asked. “I think that’s a movie I saw.”

“Well this is the Treasure Island, the real one and it’s been passed down for generations at this very cabin, even my dad owned it,” he said. “And it will stay here forever. It’s an important story, a story of pirates and expedition. And I want you to always remember the importance of exploration.”

But it was gone—from the place it had always been, it was gone. I frantically looked around, under the chair, the shelves, the window, the bed. I ignored Mom’s angering cries to get me to help unpack as I searched the entire cabin...and nothing. The book was gone.

“Mom!” I said. “Where is *Treasure Island*?”

“If you don’t get out here,” she came in the door, her hair a mess and that deafening scowl on her face, “—and unpack, you won’t be going anywhere for days.”

That shut me up. I stomped to the car and followed her orders by unpacking, wondering where on earth Grandpa had left our book. I stood on the side of the dirt road, staring off into the woods on the other side, its darkness uncomfortable. It made me uneasy being here, in his home already, but I at least thought I could hold on to that piece of him. Of us.

*

I spent the night alone in my bed, a small cot that was pressed into the corner of the upstairs loft by a window. The roof was triangular and dipped down in each corner, and so the bed snuggled up to the low hanging roof, where I could lie. Thunder rumbled outside and I did not move from my bed. The thunder put me at ease somehow. We got intense storms at Grandpa’s cabin, but that was life here! My parents chattered away downstairs, arguing on about cabin maintenance.

“This place...has really gone to hell,” said Mom. “Every year this gets harder and harder to maintain. Did you hear Mr. Sherman said there was even a tornado last month!”

Dad grunted. “It’s going to be a lot of work...not one I was ready for. I guess your dad wasn’t doing so well after all.”

“But he was able to maintain it, I don’t know if we will be able to. And what about when this place gets passed onto the kids? What then? I’m not like him. I don’t know how to handle this.”

My fist tightened, thinking of the way they were talking about Grandpa like that, like something “weak”. My grandpa was an esteemed figure—everyone thought so. Everyone would look at him in awe. Grandpa was exactly like the heroes in the stories we read, or like the wise mentor or guide, like Dumbledore or Gandalf.

My eyes were growing heavy, so I put down the Harry Potter book I was reading and crawled under the sheets, looking across the room at Grandpa's spot.

"Okay, okay, go sit down and get comfy," he said, as I ran, crawled into bed.

He sat on a small stool next to the bed, tucked one knee over the other and cracked open the weathered book and read Treasure Island to me. I listened, as he animated with his hands and even acted out voices.

"...I remember him as if it were yesterday, as he came plodding to the inn door, his sea-chest following behind him in a hand-barrow—a tall, strong, heavy, nut-brown man, his tarry pigtail falling over the shoulder of his soiled blue coat, his hands ragged and scarred, with black, broken nails, and the sabre cut across one cheek, a dirty, livid white."

My heart sank. I wanted to be happy. I wanted to feel amazing about being here. This past year had been horrific. I'd felt like I was in a state of constant depression after the news of Grandpa's passing, and ached every moment of every day to return here to escape the rest of the world and be with him again. Now that I was here though, it felt empty. Who would take me fishing every morning? Who would I collect beach glass with or explore Eagle Island with? Eagle Island was sacred, except that from some unwritten rule I didn't know about, Grandpa was allowed to go, or that's at least what everyone else said.

With my eyes already closed, I thought back to about a year ago when we'd gotten the call from Mr. Sherman, that Grandpa had been taken to the local hospital. That he'd passed away in his sleep. I didn't go to school for a month. And now I was here, and he wasn't. Mom had asked me if I was okay with coming, but I'd seen how stressed my parents were. Things were a mess at home—there were already ravaging wildfires, and I thought, we needed paradise. We needed to come home.

Andy

I woke up that morning to the sun streaming in through the upstairs loft window and my eyes stung red from the brightness. I peered out at the lake, at the way the sun speckled off the water like glitter. The white birches fluttered in the gentle breeze and I was reminded of a hundred mornings that I woke up exactly like this and everything felt alive. I sat up, feeling good and made my way down the ladder into the kitchen to pour myself a coffee. Dad was out on the wrap-around patio in his chair stuck in a pile of flung pine branches and needles, sipping coffee and looking out at the lake. The radio was on.

British Columbia has declared a state of emergency effective until further notice. The wildfire situation has hit an unprecedented state.

“What a disaster,” my dad said. “At least we’re here.”

“That seems pretty extreme,” I said, looking around.

“It’s bad out there,” my dad said. “It’s never been that dry.”

“It won’t affect here though, right?” I asked, looking at a pine tree next to the cabin, its needles a glaring red shade.

“Oh, we get fires here,” said Dad. “But you just deal with it here. They usually start and snuff out, your grandpa grew up in that life.”

I sipped the hot coffee, imagining my grandpa fighting fires.

“That coffee took thirty minutes to brew this morning,” Dad said laughing. “I guess we should probably get a new machine, hey, maybe like a Keurig?”

I snapped my head at him. “No, this is the best coffee machine.”

Dad laughed. “I think it’s going to conk out soon, and I know you like your coffee.”

“Dad, Grandpa has had that coffee machine literally forever, I sure as hell would not use a Keurig.”

He threw his hands up. “I’m blaming you if I wake up one morning and there’s no coffee.”

“Fine.”

“So, are you heading off to see Lizard, I bet he misses you.” Dad was squinting at me through the morning sunlight, his bald head looking too shiny.

“Yeah, I hope he isn’t put off by how different I look.”

“You don’t look that different, just more grown up. Now go get him.”

I smiled at Dad and ran back inside. It was strange, but I always got nervous returning to Lizard each year. We stayed in touch all year, of course we did, we were best friends. We chatted most nights on the phone. Still, though, my stomach churned with a mixture of excitement and nerves because I knew a lot changed in a year, and I changed. I went to check my phone in my pocket, holding it up to see the time, my eyes grazing over the social medias I’d been glued to for months, the only solace and friendship I could find. In person was too much work. I could see the no service bar at the top of my cell, realizing that I could no longer check any of them.

In the bathroom, I stood in front of the mirror, playing with my short pixie-cut hair and the freckles that danced across my nose. I put on a swipe of mascara to open up my eyes and fitted on a white tank top tucked into my cargo shorts.

I thought I looked different. I’d gotten my braces off recently, so now my teeth were perfectly straight and white. My skin looked better too, after being on acne medication for a while. And, well most of all, I’d cut all my hair off.

After getting dad to put air in the tires, I hopped on Grandma's old rusted blue bike we kept beside the cabin and started to ride. The bike hissed and squealed from its rusted gears, but I rode on.

Along the dirt road, sun basking on my face and exposed shoulders, I felt good. Dirt flew at my cargo shorts and the back of my legs. I could smell pine, and sap and moss and missed how clean and clear the air felt here. Like my lungs could breathe again. But I could also smell the chalky dirt that covered the road, the ground seeming awfully dry even though there was a storm last night. Normally storms here would dump buckets of hail and rain.

I rode along the highway and was thankful for the smooth change of the road under my tires. I wondered what Lizard was doing. What had he done today? Was he as excited as I was? Did he look different? We'd talked on the phone for hours the other night about everything we were going to do this summer—fishing, grabbing coffees every morning at the diner, swimming, watching old 80s movies on his VHS, the potlucks, going boating, the movie nights outside, and of course, the endless exploration. Summer felt short, and every moment had to count. Summers here with Lizard were everything, and I depended on that not changing. If I was going to survive here without my grandpa, I needed us to do exactly as we'd always done. I flew along faster and finally made it to the resort. At the edge of the highway sat a big wooden sign that read:

Reynolds Resort

Great fishing and great fun for the whole family!

I laughed at how Lizard had urged his dad to change it to:

Bait you'll never want to leave!

I turned into Reynold's resort, onto the dirt driveway down the hill toward the tackle shop, and dropped my bike beside the garbage can and looked around for any sign of him.

Reynolds was full of life. RVs filled lined camp sites, as well as tents and trailers. People lounged out on the docks. A couple was just coming in from kayaking. Kids played in the sand on the beach and jumped off the pirate ship. A group of seniors talked on the diner patio with coffees at the picnic tables, Mr. Sherman's array of weird slogan signs and movie memorabilia still hanging off the rafters and nailed to the wood, signs like, *Welcome, drop a line and stay awhile*, and, *To fish or not to fish, what a stupid question*.

I walked forward and stood on the edge of the patio, looking out at that ship. It wobbled in the water, the kids rocking it. It was large, and still surprised me how large it was. I remember playing on it as a kid, because Grandpa and Mr. Sherman had built it by hand.

"Okay, uncover your eyes," said Grandpa.

I was standing, antsy on my feet as Grandpa held my hand. I opened my eyes to see the largest pirate ship I'd ever seen, floating in the water, complete with masts and a big black pirate flag. I was in awe.

"We thought the kids might like a real pirate ship," said Mr. Sherman, standing with his hands on his hips. Lizard was beside him, jumping up and down.

"Happy Birthday," said Grandpa. "Every seven-year-old should be a pirate."

"Andy?" I heard the voice. That familiar voice, but it was deeper now. A wash of nerves and butterflies rushed to my stomach, face heating.

I snapped and turned around to see Lizard, standing in the corner of the tackle shop doorway, hand resting against frame. My whole world seemed to stop. He smiled, leaning in on the frame. He'd grown. His body was different. His hair was cut, less bushy with cleaner cut curls. His skin had cleared. Had he grown muscles? Things were changing so fast.

And then Lizard walked forward and pulled me in for a hug. He'd grown a lot taller than me now.

"Lizard the wizard!" He smelled of sweat, as he'd probably been working all morning. There was a lot to be done around here and I was glad two years ago I'd taken up working with him.

We backed up and held each other's arms.

"God do you ever look different," I said. He still wore the same red hoodie, though, tied around his waist over a black ribbed tank.

"Am I ever glad to see you," he said, surveying me. "You look amazing, and the short hair, god you are so beautiful."

"Thanks," I laughed. "Sort of spur of the moment."

"Well it works," he said, his big grin widening with dimples. "God, I have been working my ass off with little fun! So now this summer is about to get good."

"A summer of adventure, like we promised?"

"Oh more than adventure," he took my hand. "Of expedition and monsters."

"Where do we find any monsters exactly?"

"It isn't a good tale if there aren't any, so we better hurry."

"But can we get coffee first?" My nerves melted away, the familiarity of his presence calming me back to how it always was between us.

"Uh, yes, coffee always comes first—how else would you make it through a perilous adventure with multiple villains, plot arcs and pirates?"

"Yeah, you're right. I'd probably die before act two. Reminds me of that new Netflix show, which everyone died over."

“Oh yeah?” said Lizard. “One day we ought to get Netflix around here, but I’m sure my dad would have a cow about that.”

Lizard chose a table by the water, on the patio that was bordered by an overhanging veranda. We sat down across from each other. Lizard started talking about his newest movie fascinations and the new book series he’d gotten into and I told him about some of the annoying people in my English class and how I’d found a cool sub culture on Instagram by making a fan account for the tv show I liked, in which I wished in that moment I could show it to him. It felt like we’d hardly been apart, exactly what I was hoping to return to.

“Hey.” He put a hand on my hand. “Are you okay with everything?”

I pretended to be dumb. “What?”

“With your grandpa. I know it affected all of us, he was a favourite everywhere.”

I nodded slowly.

“It just feels like he left in such a hurry,” I said, trying not to choke up tears. “Like nothing was left behind and, well everything changed and I never got to say goodbye.”

Lizard took my hands in his rough, calloused ones. “You’ll get to say goodbye.”

“I will?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, licking his lips. “Come on, knowing him, he never just leaves nothing behind.”

I sniffed the air, noticing a tinge of something that wasn’t quite familiar here.

“What’s that smell?” I asked.

“Smoke,” said Lizard. “I know. It’s floating up from the south or something.”

“Oh,” I said. In my home town, there was always smoke, it was only normal for the summer but not here. “Smoke doesn’t really belong here.”

“I know but I guess the rest of BC is bad this year, no worries now that you’re here though. So, what do you want to do on your first official day at the cabin?” asked Lizard, cheerfully as usual.

“So many things I want to do,” I said. I thought of the list I’d made just a while ago before I got here, and that I worked on for the long drive to Callows Lake.

“I made a list actually,” I said, my heart thumping. I took the carefully folded list out of my pocket and laid it on the peeling picnic table that had hundreds of names and writing carved into it.

I always made a list. Lists were my thing. Constant planning, envisioning and thinking every day that I was home about what we were going to do in paradise. If I didn’t, I knew we wouldn’t get it all done. And I wanted to get so much done while I was here. I wanted everything to line up for Lizard and me.

Lizard held the list, smiling to himself and making random gasps and laughs. I ticked my knee against the table. The sun was basking down on the back of my bare neck—so much hotter than I remembered it. Where I lived, the brush grew thick and the skies blue with never a spot of cloud, the sky only ever getting covered by thick hazes of smoke. Back there you were used to the sun—used to spending all day in the neighbour’s swimming pool because you wouldn’t dare go walking down Main Street. Sometimes you’d just stay inside with air conditioning. But now it was starting to feel like that here, which wasn’t what I planned. The stupid outside world was getting in.

“Well, I can always count on you coming in with your big summer plan,” he said, a wide toothy grin spreading across his face.

“You can add to it, whatever you want, we’ll do—except doing an Elizabethan play like you suggested last year, you know I hate dresses.”

“Noted.”

“Super. Have things gotten better around here?”

I knew last summer was rough, the fires around the Okanagan made it unbearable back at home, but imagining the smoke coming into this place, clouded the skies, made me nervous.

“There was the cold snap this year—”

“—right, I felt that too, I think it was minus 20 for like weeks, it was nuts,” I curled my hands.

Sunlight performed well on Lizard’s dark brown freckles that now stuck out more against his dark skin. “Try minus 35 to 40 for weeks, the water lines froze completely. Luckily Paps had seen it coming and had stocked up on winter food and water, Papa Senior had to come in on the ATV from the reserve, but he knows how to get anything done. He’s lived here for generations. It was a mess; everything was breaking and the government is no fucking help.”

“That sucks.”

“Things are looking pretty good right now, except for the wildfire blow up at Williams Lake.”

“It’s far away,” I said.

“Well, wind isn’t blowing this way too much but you can still smell smoke and all.”

“Yeah, I hate that, that’s all you smell back home, hate it.”

“Oh well,” Lizard took a sip of coffee and smiled brightly. “Doesn’t matter now because it’s summer, we are here and adventures are about to begin.”

“So absolutely right.”

“Want to go for a dip?”

“Yes, already wearing my swim suit.”

“Knew it.”

We drank down our coffees and walked down the wharf, Lizard stripping off his t-shirt and me into my all black one piece. Kids were playing “tip the dock” on the old wood floater, screaming as they all fell in under the cool, glacial waters of Callows Lake. I took out my phone that I had shoved in my pocket and filmed, thinking it was irritating that I had to wait months to post this. People were out boating and tubing and fishing and waterskiing. The sun was high, soon to melt below the tall, forested mountains that surrounded the large lake, but for now, casting an iridescent gold glow on the trees. This was what summers were made of—the feel of hot dock beneath your feet, spending all day in the water, surrounded by the great outdoors and fresh air and just fun. I’d forgotten what fun felt like. And it felt free.

*

Later I brought Lizard back to my cabin to watch reruns of old Saturday Night Live shows on my bed that Lizard had recorded years ago. This year I’d downloaded the entire season of Stranger Things and was excited to show Lizard what the proper rave was about back home. We gorged ourselves with popcorn and soda, listening to him complain about how strict his dad was and listening to me ramble on about school and keeping my mind away, trying desperately not to look sideways at Grandpa’s spot.

*

The next morning the smoke had gotten worse. I hated it—hated the tinge of ash in the air that didn’t belong here—the rest of BC was ruining it up here for us. I shook off the bad feeling in my stomach as I told my family I was heading to Reynolds for my first day back at work. Before

I left, I spent another thirty minutes scavenging the cabin looking for anything Grandpa would have left behind. It was so strange. Grandpa had had so many objects that he felt were sacred, and now we couldn't find them? Wasn't it our job to protect these things? Mom always said Grandpa was a hoarder, but he said each object he kept held a story and meaning. He didn't explain that story to others usually. I remembered what he said.

"Every one of my objects holds a story, but it's not for others. You should know an objects importance, but only by the meaning you yourself give it."

Taking the familiar path on my bike, down the dirt road, I reached the highway. I always welcomed the feeling of this highway under my tires, the road usually kept smooth and clean with few potholes, being it was the only road out of this region.

I rode into Reynolds, the dry earth cackling beneath my tire and noticed Mr. Sherman on the roof of the main building, trying with the help of a tall kid wearing a headband to attach a standing sprinkler. I found Lizard down at the docks, hauling in a heavy, water-logged rope from the water. He was moving boats again. He looked up as I parked my bike next to the fish-gut-hut where I took my summer post.

"Hey girl," he said, dropping the rest of the rope in a wet pile on the beach and forgetting it.

"Hey Liz," I said. "What's on the agenda today?"

He scanned my outfit and smiled. This morning I'd picked from my colourful array of anime t-shirts and my summer cargo shorts that I didn't care about getting wet or dirty.

"Nice shirt," he smiled.

"Thanks." My stomach flipped.

“Well, uh, there’s a whole bucket of fish waiting patiently for you,” he said.

“Unfortunately, I’ve got a shit ton to do. There’s so much falling apart around here that needs fixing. Two toilet leaks in two of the cabins, a tree punctured a hole in cabin three, there’s an ant infestation in Pap’s office, and the list goes on...”

“Yikes, well good luck?”

“Going to need it!” and he left, calling out.

I looked around. Lizard wasn’t wrong. Rotting boards stuck up in the wharf and the sidings of the tackle-shop were stripping off. I guess this place was going through a run too.

But before I started work, I took a side trip around the side of the office, toward what we called the “magic” forest where our tree fort had been built. I needed to see it, to see if it was okay.

I remembered Grandpa building that for us too, as he explained that every kid should have a tree fort to play pretend in. Grandpa’s specialty was building things from scratch. He used to believe everything should be built by hand and then rebuilt over and over.

“Right here,” Grandpa had said, standing with hands on his hips.

“Wow,” I spun around, only about six or seven at the time. “This is so cool!”

“This is the magic forest,” said Grandpa. “Did you know, your grandmother created it herself.”

“Grandma? But why?”

“When I was away at war, she wanted to create something special. She laughed at how kids would be afraid to step into the dark wood and wanted to make it feel bright and magical and safe.”

“I feel safe here,” I said.

“And now you have a magic castle as your fortress. Can I show you how I built it?”

I followed him over to the structure and he pointed at the wood holdings. “These are old boards left over from the veranda in front of Reynolds and I cut them and made them to attach to these trees here, you see?”

I nodded, touching the old wood.

“And these bolts came from the dock,” said Grandpa, adjusting his powder blue baseball cap and looking up. “Almost every piece of this place was reused material from somewhere else, and do you know why I’m showing you how this works?”

“No?” I looked at him.

“Because nothing stays forever,” he said. “One day, these things will need to be rebuilt, and then you can do the building.”

“I’m not a construction person.”

“No one here really is,” he smiled. “As a-matter-of-fact, Mr. Sherman isn’t really any of those things, but knows how to do a bit of everything. It’s just part of living in paradise.”

I looked around the forest. Hand-painted signs and wind chimes and wood toys and dream catchers and woven art pieces hung from the clusters of pine and fir and birch trees. Little gnomes stuck out of the dirt, now mostly hidden by layers of needles. I walked on a trail of ornate stepping stones, walking past benches and wrought iron chairs. As far as I could see, the forest was decorated with anything you could imagine—stained glass art pieces, quirky chairs, statues and tire swings. Grandma had made it into a playground that anyone could enjoy, and in the middle of it, looking out at the lake beyond the cliff side, sat Black Hill Castle, our tree fort.

“How about we build a fort,” said Grandpa, pointing between four perfectly lofted pine trees. “Right here, that way you and Lizard have somewhere to play. We’ll call it Black Hill Castle.”

“Okay! Why that name?”

“It’s a good name for a castle, trust me, and you’ll help me build it?”

“Yeah!”

“Good girl.”

“Are we allowed to build it here?” I’d asked.

“Yep, Grandma wanted this to be enjoyed because so many people are afraid to go out here because they say it’s too dark and spooky.”

“It is kind of scary.”

“Once you make it a home, it won’t be.”

I touched the worn siding of the wood plank tree house, lofted high above in the trees. The old painted sign still stuck in the dirt, reading *Black Hill Castle*. I slowly climbed up the weak ladder inside the front door of the castle. Inside, the floor was covered in droppings and pine needles, but I brushed them away, looking at the wet and dishevelled painting and drawings Lizard and I had made that covered every available wall space. An old chest sat in the corner holding our childhood costumes. We liked to pretend we were knights or pirates. It was crazy, I thought, how you could leave a place like this and come back every year to it being the same—untouched and safe.

I stepped back down the ladder and hopped onto the forest floor. It was dark in here and sometimes still gave me anxiety, but the decorations made it feel warm and magical, like some kind of Wonderland.

I looked ahead and saw Lizard through the clearing.

“Thought I saw you come in here,” he said. “This place sure needs cleaning up too, huh.”

“I can help,” I said. “We have to keep this place beautiful.”

“Well, back to work shall we?” said Lizard.

“Let’s do it.”

*

I sat on a twisty stool over the metal bar looking over the patio, cutting the heads off of fishes and gutting them. I’d done this a million times. Grandpa had taught me. It was methodical by now, put the fish on the table, cut the head and tail, run a slick knife down its underbelly.

Grandpa had taught me this after we had gone fishing one day.

“So this fish here is a rainbow trout,” he said, holding the fish I’d caught with my Barbie fishing rod. “And you’re going to gut it.”

“What! That’s gross!”

“No no Andy, this is how we do things. You either return the fish or you use, and just because you’re a girl don’t mean you hand things off. You will gut the fish yourself.”

“I’m scared,” I said.

“I’ll show you,” he smiled into the sunlit lake. “Do it once and I’m sure you’ll be an expert.”

I was watching the kids play on the beach when I spotted Lizard with the guy that had helped Mr. Sherman earlier with the sprinkler. The guy was tall, a lot taller than him and loomed over Lizard as he raked the beach. I could hear them bickering and Lizard slammed the rake down into the dirt, causing the other guy to laugh.

Who was that? Lizard looked up and caught my eye and then shook his head, grabbed the rake and stormed off. Lizard walked over to me at my station as I wiped sweat off my brow and took a sip of gingerale that was placed next to me.

“Who is that?” I asked.

“New guy, his name’s Jakub and he’s Swedish as he keeps telling everyone.”

“What!”

“He’s from Revelstoke,” said Lizard as we walked down the gravel pathway to the main part of Reynolds Resort.

I watched him pull a cart of goods across the uneven ground.

“Is he any good?”

“We’ve been bickering all summer so far, so not really.”

“Yikes.”

The sound of a car pulling up in the parking lot behind us stopped Liz and I in conversation. It was a fancier car—a nice, sleek SUV. I watched as the door opened and a teen guy stepped out. He stepped out of the car and stood beside it, shouldering a cross body bag. I knew I was staring, but it wasn’t everyday that people with *that* expensive a car showed up here. His hair! I’d never seen anything like it. His hair was almost pure white, shaved at the sides and a long lop on top. He wore strange clothing—like that out of some 1940s war-time film. Who wore trousers and a white button down to a fishing resort? He turned and looked directly at me. I couldn’t move and I knew Lizard was watching. The guy’s entire family stepped out of their vehicle and headed toward the resort with bags. I watched as he pulled out a phone, taking pictures of himself with the backdrop of the lake.

I quickly turned away.

“I better go greet these people,” Lizard said. “Pap’s doing something else. You coming?”

“What—no.”

“Come on.”

I quickly followed Lizard to the main office, which was the tackle shop where basically everything was located. I followed him behind the clear glass map counter, where the Sherman family had all their prized maps on display—everything from cartography maps of the region to old historic gold miner’s maps. I loved going in there just to lean over the counter and stare at it. But who was I kidding, I was obsessed with maps, Grandpa had made it so. He said that people should have a map for anything. I moved behind the counter just before the family walked in through the front doors.

“Hello, welcome to Reynolds Resort,” said Lizard.

Lizard was so good at talking to customers and the way his voice and posture changed as soon as he was interacting with customers always surprised me. Lizard was just *good* at this stuff. He could be good at just about anything, whereas I was good at just about nothing. He could make friends with anyone. He was never nervous or shy or awkward and I envied that. I think I’d forgotten how to talk to people properly. I was so used to just talking to people on Instagram. At least I was an expert at Instagram stories?

“Hello, what a beautiful place!” said the mother. She was loud, her voice erupting across the tackle shop.

The floor creaked under her where the carpet was tearing apart. I found it strange that she thought it was “beautiful”. The place was a mess and surely she was not used to places like this.

I tried to smile and I tried not to look at the guy beside her, but he was staring at his phone anyways. He was so tall.

“Well thank you, let me get you checked in,” said Lizard.

I pretended to be staring at the map case behind the counter, studying the cartography maps and realized this white-haired guy was just directly staring at me. My face was getting red, I could feel it.

“Andy?” said Lizard beside me.

“Uh, yes,” I snapped.

“I said,” Lizard’s eyes were wide. “Could you pass me the stapler?”

“Oh!” I quickly passed it to him, hands clammy.

He stared at me, tilting his head to the side and then continued to arrange some papers.

“So where are you guys coming in from?” asked Lizard.

“Vancouver,” said the father. “We wanted some escape from the city for a while.”

“Is there no WIFI?” asked the guy.

It was the first time I’d heard his voice, and it came out dark and gruff.

“Yaz,” his mom hit his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, there isn’t any service here, I hope that will be okay?” said Lizard.

“Oh yes, it is more than okay, this boy needs to learn to live without his stupid devices, right Yaz?” said his mom.

Lizard nodded and smiled. Yaz scowled, turning his head into his connection-less phone anyways.

“Well I’m sure you’ll enjoy our pristine waters and outdoors. Tonight we are having our annual potluck party, so you may join, don’t worry though guests do not have to bring anything themselves. Just bring your happy faces and some good dance moves!”

“We will be there for sure,” said the mother.

She turned to her son, Yaz. He nodded curtly, not saying anything. We met eyes across the bar and he held it. His eyes were so narrow. I snapped away, clearing my throat.

“Here’s the key,” Lizard gave it to them. “You are in cabin four, just past the first sign, four cabins down, thank you so much, enjoy your stay.”

And the family left. The door shut and I practically threw myself over the counter.

“Okay, what the shit was that all about? You are not a very good concierge,” said Lizard.

“That was embarrassing.” I turned, checking my appearance in the mirror behind me. My short hair was a dishevelled mess, my skin pink and oily, and my eyes watery.

“Was it the guy?” asked Lizard. “I honestly hate people like that. It’s like they’ve turned robot.”

I glanced at him. His eyes were raised. His shoulder leaning on the counter.

I nodded. “Yeah, totally. If there was service here, then the outside world would be let in and that’s not okay.”

“True, I guess I’d rather be a bit lost from the world anyways,” said Liz.

“Anyways, just an accidental lapse. I’m fine now. Let’s get back to work.”

“Mhm,” Lizard said, shuffling his hair. “Well, we’ve got to help with this potluck.”

Lizard and I left the shop, making our way to Lizard’s cabin so Lizard could continue to set up the potluck. The sun was high already, the air hot and leaving me feeling sticky. I couldn’t believe how dry the grounds were around Reynolds and how many people already were leaving their campsites in swimsuits to head down to the lake. I spotted Mr. Sherman’s new employee, the lanky teen talking with two girls from one of the campsites, when he turned and spotted us. He jumped in front of us on the path.

“Whoa!”

I jumped and stared at him.

“Watch where you’re headed girl,” he laughed, staring far too directly at me.

“You stepped in my path.”

He smirked. “I’m Jakub, by the way, saw you were the other summer employee.”

“Yeah, I’m Andy.”

“Andy? Like a little boy name?” he smirked.

“Christ,” said Lizard. “Shut up Jakub, let’s go Andy.”

“Rude, I can’t get to know my coworkers?” said Jakub.

I’d met guys like him, cocky and arrogant and getting joy out of annoying girls.

Lizard didn’t meet his eye. “She’s been here her entire life; she has much seniority over you.”

“I see,” said Jakub. “Are you my boss too?”

I shook my head, already moving past him.

“Nice to meet you Andy, I’m sure I’ll be seeing you at the party tonight?” he called out.

I was fuming with anger already, not looking back.

“He’s an asshole,” I said.

“Tell me about it,” said Lizard. “And he’s going to be here all summer.”

*

The annual potluck happened every year at the beginning of summer, where all the neighbours of the Callows, including any guests that felt interested, could come together, eat food and enjoy a large bonfire on the beach, singing goofy campfire songs and roasting marshmallows. Mr. Sherman had taken out the guitar and was strumming along as the group of us sang ‘Lean on me’ and joined arms. My cheeks were flushed from the fire, my stomach full from all the homemade

food that everyone had brought and Lizard had even slipped me a bit of wine behind the log bench.

“Would you like a drink?” asked a man behind Lizard.

Lizard turned around. The Jakub guy was back, this time in a white shirt and folded-over half apron. He offered Lizard a glass of drink that was definitely not juice. Jakub smirked.

Lizard looked at him and turned, not taking it.

“Looks like you could need it,” Jakub said, placing it on the bench. “And P.S...” he ducked in, a gentle hand on Lizard’s shoulder and pressed a mouth to his ear. He whispered something to Lizard that I could not hear. Then he retreated back upward and walked off, without even offering me a drink.

Lizard turned, face beet red.

“What the hell did he say to you?” my voice sounding too angry.

“He said that the employees were having a game of capture the flag later, down by the lake, and he wants me and you to come.”

I looked at him. “Christ. We know about the game, it happens every year, why the hell is he ‘inviting you’?”

“I’m sick of him pretending he knows more about this place than I do,” he said slowly.

Every summer after the potluck the neighbourhood would play a night version of capture the flag and it could get pretty intense. If you won, you were pretty much the coolest person here for the rest of the summer.

“He told me to tell you Yaz will be there too.”

I gulped. “Okay, like I don’t want to go but I also want to beat their asses.”

Lizard didn’t say anything.

“What, you want to go?” I said, biting into a puff pastry.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I really hate him.”

“Then let’s show him how good we are at games.”

Lizard waited a beat and then huffed a laugh. “We are pretty good.”

“You and me,” I reached out and touched his hand still sticky from marshmallow. “Are champions. We’re an A+ team, so we’ll win.”

Lizard looked at me. “Why the hell not.”

“Yay!” I jumped. “This will be fun! I feel wild! Like an outlaw.”

“Oh God,” he said, continuing to fill my cup.

When the songs were over, Lizard, who sat with me on one of the benches, pointed up at the clouds, which were dark as oil and brewing. A huge storm was coming. I could feel it. I looked at the way the lake was changing, waves turning in one direction toward the shore and growing in size. Birch trees bordering the lake fluttered in the new breeze and I could feel the hairs on my neck stand up.

I grinned like a child at Christmas. There was nothing I loved more than storms.

“It’s getting closer, you excited?” said Lizard.

“The last storm that happened was too damn lame,” said Lizard, biting a burnt marshmallow off a stick. “It went so quickly so I hope this one’s a huge one!”

“Conditions are perfect for it today,” I said. “Warm, dry, it could be a good one.”

A rendition of “The Cat Came Back” started amongst the crowd and I joined in, rocking back and forth with Lizard, singing loudly, and feeling butterflies in my stomach. Everyone was here—the neighbours to my cabin, Herman and Susan, Yuri, the old woman in the blue cabin, Mr. Sherman, even my brother looked like he was having fun delving into an unopened bag of

marshmallows hiding underneath the log seat. I caught sight of Yaz's parents behind Lizard and I, chatting to themselves except that, as usual, his mom was talking far too loudly.

“—I don't know, are you sure they're supposed to have bonfires, it's that risky.”

I looked at Lizard and realized he overheard. We turned around.

“I know what you're thinking and it's fine. We've always had fires here in the summer,” Lizard said. Lizard had lived here his entire life, he knew best, not some tourist family.

I looked through the fire, noticing a strange glowing body on the other bench. At least it looked like someone, but the light was bright and hard to look at, as if someone's entire body had turned luminescent. I peered around the fire, and all I could see on that spot of bench was this glowing human-shaped Orb. Rays of light vibrated off of it and I stared, the music around turning muddled and fuzzy, my vision fixated.

“Andy,” Lizard shook my shoulder.

I blinked, looking at him and then looked back but the glowing orb was gone.

“Andy?” he said again, staring at me with big round eyes. “What happened?”

“Oh, nothing.” I shook my head.

“You totally zoned out there.”

“Sorry,” I shook my head. “Tired is all.”

After the fire, Lizard and I headed to his cabin, gossiping about how crazy into the songs Herman and Susan got and how maybe their old age was getting to them. The storm was getting better now, the wind picking up and the lake already choppy with white caps. Everyone got an electric buzz around here when storms arrived. Honestly, they were entertainment for the people of the Callows, and the storms got extreme here. Lizard and his community welcomed them and

their power. We hurried off down the path toward Lizard's log home that sat beside Reynolds, my body running with giddy excitement.

Then, Mr. Sherman was running at us.

"Max, did you tie down that motor boat?"

I turned. It was bad news when Mr. Sherman used his *real* name, and I knew Lizard would hate that. I thought back to the rope earlier that day that Lizard had just dropped. Shit. I'd distracted him.

"What—" Lizard looked at him with wide eyes. "I thought..."

"You thought what?" he looked furious and I was surprised at Mr. Sherman's sudden anger. "You had one job, tie down all the boats, and haul in the large ones high up onto shore. A couple from the city brought that one in! An expensive one and we never get city folk!"

"I—I'm sorry, Paps, I thought...I forgot. But Jakub was supposed to help."

"No, he wasn't. Jakub is in charge of a lot of other important tasks. You had just one. This is our busiest season," he said. "This is the time to be focused. I'm sorry Andy, please go find your parents."

"Paps!" said Lizard.

"No, you can go inside and go to bed early and be up bright and early tomorrow, and as usual, I have to go do the work of fixing it."

"That's not fair! It's our first night together!"

"We're done talking." Mr. Sherman walked off.

Lizard stared off into the distance at the lake, his jaw clenching. I didn't know what to say and bit my lip.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice tight. “I’ll see you tomorrow, okay, I promise.” And then he left.

My heart sank as he walked away. I was angry—how dare Mr. Sherman act like that? Lizard did half the shit around here. It was one mistake. I felt like going after him and saying it was my fault, but Mr. Sherman often got intense and I knew it wouldn’t help.

After Mr. Sherman left to go down to the water, Lizard came whipping out of a nearby bush and barrelled toward me.

“Fuck this, we’re having fun tonight,” he said.

“Okay?” I was in the middle of being completely shocked and excited. “Are you sure?”

I was surprised at Lizard’s sudden rashness. But I couldn’t blame him.

We found the group forming by the cluster of trees in the forest beside Reynolds, the “magic” forest. I spotted Jakub as we walked in.

“Welcome guys, ready for some Manhunt?”

“Ready as ever,” I said.

We followed Jakub as he took us into the forest, toward the growing sounds of young people by the river.

“Okay,” said Jakub. “So basically we start as soon as the sun fully disappears, which it almost is, okay, half of us will be hunters and the other huntees.”

“We know how the game works,” I spat.

“We already picked our hunters, so you guys will have to be huntees with me.”

“The hunters will disperse with heavy beam flashlights and try to capture the huntees in the light, our job is, exactly like capture the flag, get to where the hunters have hid their flag. But the huntees are all split into different groups and first there wins.”

“What do they win?” asked Lizard, and I could tell he was getting excited.

“It’s for fun,” said Jakub. “You become the ‘It’ person at the Callows.”

“I’m not playing unless I win something.”

“Fine,” Jakub spat. “You win a favour from me, anything you want.”

“Absolute deal.”

They had arrived at a large accumulation of people crowded around Black Hill Castle, and then, pulling out of the crowd was Yaz.

“So that leaves me and you three, winning team I say?” said Jakub.

“Uh, no way!” I said. “You two go off on your own.”

“I’ve split it up this way so it’s going to be this way,” said Jakub.

“So the team is the three of us?” said Lizard. “Why exactly?”

“Nope,” said Jakub. “Me, you, Andy and Yaz.”

“Hi,” said Yaz. I realized he was standing behind us this whole time.

My heart was beating way too fast. He was wearing a fully black outfit—black skinny jeans, a fitted black long sleeve and a black beanie to cover his hair.

“Hid the hair so I won’t be a beacon,” he said.

“Excellent,” said Jakub. “You guys in?”

“Uh,” I said.

“Either you’re in or you’re out,” said Jakub.

“I guess,” I said, looking at Lizard. He shrugged. Lizard was disappointing me with how he was letting Jakub walk all over this. Lizard had always hosted these games.

“Good,” said Jakub. “Follow me.”

Jakub blew a whistle that hung around his neck and the crowd relaxed.

“Okay, everyone listen up, we’ve got two more players joining us,” he said to the crowd.

“No more hunters, it’ll make it too hard!” shouted a girl near the front.

“They’ll be huntees on my team,” said Jakub. “I want fair playing, I’m looking at you Renay twins, and first person to the flag, team captain blows their whistle hard, got it?”

“Yes!” the crowd said together.

“Wait, flag?” I asked.

Normally it was a bean bag we were looking for.

“Yes, a flag, it’s capture the flag basically,” said Jakub. “So I just took one of boss man’s pirate flags.”

I looked at Lizard who was kicking at pinecones with his shoe.

Jakub continued. “We’ll give the huntees thirty seconds to hide and get a head start, okay, on the count of my whistle.”

Jakub counted to three and blew.

“Come on, come on,” said Jakub, booking it off into the forested hills.

We followed close behind, running through shrub and debris, my legs catching on twigs, but my heart was beating fast and full of adrenaline as we swerved into the magic forest. Yaz was next to me, graceful in his strides through the tall brush.

“Down down!” said Jakub once we got to a ditch.

We all pummelled into the ditch, lay low, and waited as the hunters’ voices cat-called across the pitch-black woods.

“You have to stay low,” said Jakub, sandwiched between me and Lizard. “An easy swipe of the flashlight and you’re out.”

“Okay,” said Lizard. “How do we know where the flag is?”

Jakub hushed him, slipping his cloth headband off and on his head again, and a flashlight beam whipping across the top of the trees above them. We all silenced, hiding our breathing. A prickly bush stabbed into my knee.

The flashlight crew moved on.

“We have to move slowly and when we can’t see a light, we dash,” said Jakub. “I suggest we shimmy along this ditch, but watch out, guarantee others are hiding here, oh, and watch for the prickles.”

“Great,” I moaned.

“Oh, this is great!” Lizard giggled too loudly. “It’s like you’ve played this game at the Callows for years or something.”

Jakub smiled at him and laid a hand on his knee. “I have experience.”

“You know nothing,” said Lizard. “You probably don’t even know that everyone who lives here knows about this ditch and will go looking in it eventually.”

“That’s why we have to move,” said Jakub.

Lizard didn’t say anything. Jakub was being rather arrogant, thinking he knew this place.

“No!” screamed a voice nearby. Cat-calling ensued and I watched as a guy crawled out from behind a tree, held captive by a trio of flashlight holders. My stomach twisted in knots and I felt pain race to my head. I clenched tight. Calm down. I was good at this game.

“Hey,” said Yaz, hand on my hand. I tensed. “Relax.”

I nodded.

Jakub at the front of our duck row turned around, in squat position and whispered, “Let’s go.”

We shimmied quickly along the ditch. I could hear the sounds of waves crashing nearby and the dance of windchimes, and when I looked up through the darkness of the forest, I could see the collections of hanging wind-chimes and braided decorations lofted between the trees blowing in a new wind.

“Are you kidding me, back out,” A girl up front said, squished in the ditch too. “Get out.”

“We were here, you move up,” said Jakub, flinging his hand about.

A flashlight came whipping across and Jakub backed up, the rest of us falling in a tumble. The flashlight caught the girl’s ponytail and two male voices started cackling.

“Ah, hah, out you go sis,” said the first boy.

“Up you come!” the other boy shouted. “Didn’t last long, now did you?”

“For shit’s sake,” she shot up. “I hate you guys.”

“Back back,” said Jakub, as he tucked and rolled into a bush.

The rest of us fitted into a spot of tall grass behind us and my legs shook trying to keep my balance.

We waited. Jakub popped his head out of the bush.

“That was close,” he said. “Her and I are at odds.”

“Oh,” was all Lizard said. “Who is that?”

“A new guest,” said Jakub, fiddling with his headband.

We kept moving along the ditch. I didn’t see how all this “shimmying” was doing anything good, but we kept on anyways. I was getting anxious. Lizard and I used to excel at these games, but at this rate, another team was going to find that flag. The pirate’s flag. I felt like I was meant to find it. I kept an anxious watch as other players were taken out by the rays of a flashlight.

I looked ahead, above Jakub and saw something in the distance. We were nearing Black Hill Castle now, and by a tall birch tree that seemed to glow white in the dark, was that glowing orb of light. I stopped, staring at it as it seemed to stare back at me. It was round and ovular, but I couldn't quite look directly at it because it glowed hazy with light still. What was that thing? I blinked, thinking maybe something was off with my eyesight today. I spotted two round black eyes, like pebbles, looking in my direction from its center. It made the strangest sound I'd ever heard—a dull echo. Owum. Owum. I could feel it in my head, but none of my teammates made any sign that they could hear or see it. With each echo, the thing radiated off a wave of light that spun across the forest floor.

“What are you doing?” Yaz looked forward at me. “Come on.”

“Do you see that?” I asked, pointing.

“Where?” he looked. “No, what is it?”

“That glowing thing,” I said, in awe. “I need to go after it.”

“Ah, ey? Don't break formation,” said Jakub at the front.

I needed to see what this thing was. I slowly crawled over the ditch without thinking, dragging my body close to the forest floor. Jakub made a gasping sound and Lizard told me to sit down. We weren't going to win like this anyways, already with teams ahead of us in the ditch. It made no sense. The Orb echoed again and the light rays spun across the dirt like a radio wave and I jumped up, dashing behind a bush at the base of a pine tree and sat, panting hard. My team stared at me, doe-eyed in the ditch, throwing hands about in anger. I felt bad, but Jakub was doing a terrible job. I needed to catch this Orb.

I ran and tucked myself behind another tree. A flashlight hit the tops of the tree and I froze. Then it sliced right beside the tree and I barely moved a muscle, only my eyes, to see the Orb.

“Where are you?” called some boy. I sprinted again and I could feel my team on my tail this time.

“I saw something!” said one of the boys. “Stop moving! You’re dead!”

I ducked behind a bush and saw the others at the tree behind me. I looked out at the Orb, but then turned back to them.

“Come on,” I mouthed, urging them on.

“Thought I saw something,” one boy cat-called.

I noticed a ditch in the ground where a large pine had fallen, ripping roots out of the dirt. I motioned the team toward that place. It was the perfect hiding spot, just a few meters away from here, but the tip of the fallen tree was nearest us, so if we could just get on the other side and shimmy up alongside it to an actual hiding place, we’d be safe. The difficult part would be getting to the Orb.

I signalled to the tree and they nodded. I went first, sliding along the ground right under a flashlight beam that danced above me.

“Get out of there!” I froze, swinging around to my team but they were still there. Another boy was caught as he stood up.

Yaz crawled on the ground, tugging his hat lower on his head. A flashlight swiped the ground and he stopped, froze, then it moved on. Yaz pressed beside me, his breath hot. Lizard just full on ran at us like an idiot.

The hunters continued to holler in the forest, flinging their flashlight beams around, still failing to find us.

“Come on,” I waved to Lizard who finally made it over after tripping over a stump. Jakub came running, dragged him and then together, we formed a huddle.

“Good job guys,” I said.

“Really—and you are trying to get us to lose?” said Jakub.

“Crawling up a ditch was doing jack-shit,” I said. “Come on, I found a good hiding spot.”

All I was looking at was the Orb. Why wasn’t it moving? We slowly crawled up the side of the dead tree, getting closer to the Orb’s radiant light. It confused me, but it felt like it was calling to me.

“I’ll watch the tail,” said Yaz.

“Okay, let me watch the front then,” said Jakub, who moved to the front of the line of the large tree.

I kept my eye on it and told Lizard to watch overhead for lights. We then slowly, in a line, moved up the body of the rotting tree.

“Stop,” said Yaz.

A light danced beside the tree and we all flattened ourselves to the ground. A girl walked up the other side with the flashlight bouncing right over the Orb and then retreating.

“Clear,” said Jakub.

We moved again. Slow and steady. My heart pounded in my chest, but my head felt clearer. I felt like I was in some war. Some battle. And it was fun. Was this what it felt like to be in one of those great battles in the stories Grandpa and I read? To be this close to getting caught. This close to failure. It felt invigorating. I could do this more often.

“Okay,” I said, as Jakub reached the front of the tree. “There’s a ditch, just duck under that first root and inside, but keep low because you’ll be exposed for a second.”

Jakub nodded. They were actually listening to me. One at a time, we slipped past the roots and into the hole the tree had ripped out of the earth. Once we were all inside, we got down low, four bodies, breathing heavy, wind whistling through the trees and blowing debris at us. We high-fived around the circle. I peered over the ridge across to where the Orb glowed bright. Hunters ran around it, not even noticing it. Then I saw it. Above it, in the lowest tree branch, was the pirate flag, fluttering gently in the wind.

“That’s it,” I said.

“Holy shit, I see it,” said Lizard. “Let’s make a mad dash!”

“No,” said Yaz.

“No, absolutely not,” said Jakub. “We do this properly. The forest here is too open.”

“Make a distraction,” I said.

“What?”

“Someone needs to distract the hunters while someone else runs for the tree. Who’s a good climber?”

“Me, I rock climb,” said Jakub.

“Definitely not me,” said Yaz.

“And who’s a good distraction?” I ask.

“I can volunteer as tribute,” said Lizard. “I’ve got a good chicken run.”

“Okay, Lizard, when I count to five, you will run the other way, doing your...chicken run—be loud!”

“Okay,” he said, pumping his fist in the air.

“Jakub, you book it for the tree, Yaz and I will stay low just in case it doesn’t work, and we can try again. Worse case, you and Lizard both get caught,” I said. “Lizard, give yourself a couple seconds away from here to make noise.”

“Okay, this sounds like a plan,” said Lizard. “Hell yes.”

“I’m down.”

“Let’s do it,” said Yaz, tugging at his toque again.

“Okay, on the count of five. Five, four, three, two, one.”

Both Lizard and Jakub shot out of the hole. Jakub went running at a bent angle toward the tree and within seconds Lizard was screaming and hollering, spinning in circles and jumping some distance off in the woods, catching all the attention of the hunters. A dozen or so flashlights came after him. Jakub ran, almost at the tree as a flashlight spun around to look at Lizard. Jakub made it to the tree and the Orb was right there, but Jakub didn’t notice a thing. I saw Lizard get caught and I watched Jakub’s long limbs climb up the tree at impossible speed, grabbed the flag, jumped down and blew the whistle. I ran after Jakub, the Orb right in front of my path, but as soon as Jakub turned around, the Orb disappeared.

I felt my heart sink a bit. Where had it gone? I’d done all this work. Next time, I’d catch it. We’d won, though. I’d made them win. I pulled Yaz in a hug.

“Game over!” Jakub said.

Everyone walked back to Reynolds, and after announcing us the winners, the crowd dispersed.

“That was awesome!” Lizard yelled. “We were like, an army squad!”

“I do admit,” said Jakub. “Even though, Andy, you completely broke the rules of T.E.A.M, it was pretty impressive what you did. How did you know the flag would be there?”

I shrugged. It was strange. This *thing* had led me straight to it. Lizard went twirling off down the beach, shouting into the wind and I smiled.

“Here, you earned it,” Jakub handed me the flag and I took it.

*

After the win, Lizard and I went to the castle because a storm had arrived and it had become habit over the years to go to our castle and watch it. My mom hated that I went and hung out in such a rickety tree fort during a thunderstorm, but I didn’t care.

Wind raced in whirlwinds through the forest. I could hear it. Whistling, howling. I continued on, one mud-boot crunch at a time, holding the flag we had earned in my cold hand. Lizard was ahead, his bright red hoodie a beacon in the darkness. He held the flashlight, its beam dancing across shadows in the wood. My gut clenched. Sometimes, no matter what my grandma had done to this forest, it still terrified me to be out here in the dark. I hated that. Because when I was a kid I wasn’t scared. When I was with Grandpa, I wasn’t scared. I looked into the forest and thought I caught shadows of things between the trees. My body started to shake. I shined the flashlight at them, trying to uncover anything.

Thunder rumbled. Then, the sky cracked, like the shattering of a pot on pavement.

“Oh god, this is getting bad!” I shouted over the wind, shaking.

The rain came next, hard and pelting. I ran my fingers across pungent pine trees as we continued on, over piles and piles of stacked debris, pine needles, dead tree stumps, and then, there it was.

Black Hill Castle, looking out over the lake. A rickety, peeling black-painted ladder jutted straight upward. The old sign, now crooked and split, read in thick, streaky white paint:

Black Hill Castle

Members only.

“Come on!” said Lizard. “Ten more minutes out here and I’ll be a soggy burrito, come on, you go first.”

“What if the ladder doesn’t hold?”

But secretly I didn’t care. The energy from the win had melted away and now all I wanted was to get off the ground and away from whatever I’d just imagined.

“I’ll catch you. Where do you think I get these guns from,” he peeled his sleeve back.

I hurried up the ladder.

The sky cracked again. A burst of light. This time, a fork struck into the mountain side behind Eagle Island. The hairs on my arms stood on end as I climbed, carefully, over slippery stairs, pulling myself onto the thin porch around the castle.

I ducked into the doorway inside to find it was dry, but still incredibly cold and musty. The paintings and drawings were still here. Drawings were tacked on every available wall space, ones of great heroes we used to draw for hours, heroes my dad and grandpa told me about. King Arthur was always my favourite and Jim Hawkins. Sir Gawain. Zeus. Achilles. Peter Pan. Bilbo Baggins. Even Captain Vancouver, because my dad made us like him.

“Oh God,” Lizard groaned, his face slick with rain. “I’m about to drown.”

He climbed inside, banging his head on the doorway.

A chest sat in the far corner and I popped it open. Everything was still here, old telescopes, binoculars, dusty weather books, star charts, measuring tapes, lazars, pens and notebooks, sat in a crumpled mess. Everything Grandpa and I had used. At the bottom of the chest, lay our pirate costumes from when we were kids. I pulled out an old pirate’s hat, a peasant shirt and hook.

“Wow,” I said. I realized I hadn’t been here with Lizard in a long time. “How I missed this.”

I looked back at Lizard as he peeled off his hoodie, the corner tugging at his shirt and exposing his midriff.

“Ugh, gross,” he tossed the hoodie aside. “That old blanket still in there?”

“Yeah,” I unwound it from the protective bag and threw it at him.

“Thanks,” he said. “It’s fucking cold now.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said.

“Lizard,” I pulled out another hat and two-tailed black coat with embroidered stars. “It’s your costume.”

“Whoa,” said Lizard. “I haven’t come here in a while.” He held the fabric in his hands. “It’s not the same without you.”

I smiled. “Let’s put them on then!”

“Yeah!”

We realized they didn’t fit exactly like they used to. The chest was a collected works, stuff I had carted to the cabin each year, including all the stuff Lizard had made himself. I peeled on a holster and sword belt, and a small leather pack for instruments. I switched my top out for a peasant blouse and a leather vest, with tons of pockets, including two arm sheaths. On top, I placed the giant black pirate’s cap and red scarf. When I looked at Lizard, he looked brilliant—wearing that long coat, necklaces, a vest, and on top, a velvety top hat.

“Lizard,” I said. “This is ridiculous, but I sort of feel awesome.”

Lizard grinned. “I know,” he tipped the hat.

Lizard unscrewed the thermos and took two tin mugs out of his backpack, pouring hot chocolate into both. I remembered wearing these things. I remembered these silly costumes.

“Arg!” said Lizard, jumping down the swinging rope on our pirate ship.

I ran after him, squishing the big hat further on my head and jumping down below deck, swerving around the other kids playing in their swimsuits.

“On guard.” He poked around the side of the bow, foam sword in hand and started whipping it around, his coat so long on him that it brushed the green slip-proof deck.

“You won’t get past me,” I said, backing up and pulling out my own pink foam sword, bowing.

We play fought. I protected the treasure chest that was sunk in the lake behind me. I snapped him over the head with the play sword and then took my hat off and dove into the lake. The water was freezing, but I pawed through the water, reaching for the small treasure chest and pulling it out of mucky seaweed. I resurfaced, holding it above my head, and looked to Grandpa who was sitting in a plastic chair on the dock. He clapped and cheered.

“Too bad we don’t have whipped cream,” said Lizard, breaking me out of my memory.
“That would really make it a party.”

“You know, some people would think alcohol would make it a party,” I teased.

“Yeah, there’s whisky in the back trunk over there,” he waved off. “But that’s for another day.”

“You’re the only loser who drinks whisky.”

“Hey,” he playfully slapped me. “I’m studying to be a master, remember?”

I shook her head. “What kind of master?”

He scooted closer to me, putting the blanket over the both of us and facing the doorway so we could peer out onto the lake.

“A deviously handsome, Captain of a great ship, Long John Silver kind of master,” he said, taking a sip of hot chocolate.

“Right,” I said. “Leave out the deviously handsome part. And I’d, like myself, vow to be more like Jim Hawkins.”

“Good point.” He threw his hand out, almost knocking over the hot chocolate. “I’ll work on that then.”

Fork lightning struck straight through the lake, followed by booming thunder.

“Aren’t you ever terrified lightning will strike the cabin or something?”

“Well, it’s happened before,” Lizard said. “Remember we had that nice motor boat and lightning struck right through the center of it! Great luck! Now we’re stuck with the Bumble Bee.”

“Aw, the Bumble Bee, is it still working?”

“Of course, shall I make you go water-skiing tomorrow?”

“No,” I shook her head. “I’ve had enough trauma of Bert coaxing me as a kid with Big Ruth bars.”

“Ahhh, yes, the classic Big-Ruth-Coaxing-Method. It’s genius.”

“Bert is genius,” I nodded.

Lizard seemed a lot older now. Still a child at heart, but he’d filled out. His jaw had set in.

“You know what time it is?” Lizard said, slowly, bringing his fingers up and wiggling them.

“What?”

“It is...” he reached into the chest. “Night vision time!”

He strapped on the goggles, now, looking like some virtual reality player.

“Nice,” I nodded.

“Mhm, do I pass the deviously handsome test?” He framed his face.

“Uh, no, but maybe we’re getting a bit closer to the Matrix now.”

“Yes!” he flung his hand out. “Oh god, did you see that one?”

“Sure did.”

“That was like.... buh boom!”

“God, what is in that hot chocolate?”

“Andy, I’m recuperating after a winter in hibernation with zero-percent social life. I think I need to get my juices out.”

I shook my head. “You’re ridiculous.”

Lightning struck, its vein-like fingers coiling out as if some carnivorous monster was reaching down out of the clouds. I knew that I certainly believed in monsters a lot more than most things. Lizard was seeing this through night vision goggles and I wondered what that would feel like—maybe then, the lightning seemed more alien than monster.

I smiled at Lizard, giddy, on a high. I loved storms here and how fun they were.

In that same instant, the ground cracked. I noticed something. A tiny bulb on the farthest side of the mountain across the lake lit up. A little flare.

“Is that a fire?” asked Lizard. “Sick!”

“There’s always at least like two fires after a storm, it’ll be fun to watch them get put out tomorrow.”

“Yeah, remember last year there was so many!”

Lizard wrapped me tighter in the warm blanket. The sky flashed above them and I realized the storm was all around us. The fire was growing. Or was it a trick of the eye? If you stared at a glowing light long enough, didn't it grow bigger? The sky flashed alarmingly bright. I jumped and Black Hill Castle shook. My eyes widened, because in that brief moment of light, I could see something within the shadows. My body shook.

I grabbed the flashlight and crawled out onto the deck.

“Andy, what is it? An animal?” Lizard followed.

I watched the forest floor. The figure stood on the ground gawking up at us. I froze, my insides growing cold. I peered, narrowed my eyes and saw what I believed to be a monster. My whole body turned to shock. It looked like a man, except its entire face was peeled over skin, a massive hole taking up half its face with a black tongue sinking out of it, touching the forest floor. The monster's tongue whipped out in front of him, so long that it coiled up against the ground, all black and scaly. My mind had gone blank.

“Hey!” I screamed down, shining the flashlight among the trees, trying to catch it.

Lizard crawled out quickly with a flashlight, shining it down below to the figure. It disappeared.

“What was it?” asked Lizard, holding onto his top hat. “Andy, are you okay?”

“I...I don't know,” I stared with wide eyes.

Will

It was a long and cold drive back from the town. I usually found drives like this peaceful, warming somehow, as if I had time to think and reflect, but now all I felt was pain. I held the broken compass in one hand, shivering in the back seat of my friend, George's Toyota pick-up. Lizard was here too, young, fiery Lizard, and his father. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve, to damned think about it hurt my entire heart. My daughter was supposed to come up, so was Andy, but not this year. We'd talked about visiting for Christmas for years but it never came to fruition.

Maybe never again.

It was snowing again, a wet and thick snow that made huge puffy snowflakes that covered the sky. It used to get so cold here that the entire lake would freeze over, crazy to think about that now as it was nearly the end of December and we were still getting wet snow.

George pulled in to the Callows, heading down the dark dirt road over the last hill before Callows Lake came into view. The great lake. The speckled islands all in a haze of snow. What paradise this was, and I felt honoured to be a part of it.

"Are you sure you don't want to come stay with us, Will, it's seriously no problem," he said, not looking back. I caught his sad eyes through the rear-view.

"I'm okay," I said. "I promise."

He nodded slowly. "You call us."

"Will do."

We arrived at the cabin and I got out of the vehicle with all my paper work and medical documents in my trusty expedition bag, hauled around my back. To know the old thing was returning me from the hospital now, instead of on some great journey, was sad.

I caught Lizard's eyes in the window and he looked at me, face saddened. I smiled, saluted to him. He saluted back.

I walked to the cabin. The patio was wet, filled with snow, and I went up the steps, unlocking my door. The place was going to be a real bitch to maintain come spring with this mess of snow melt and debris. So much debris.

I walked inside, shuffling my coat off and shoes and immediately heading to start a fire. I took the firewood George had cut for me, feeling guilty of all he was doing for me, and threw it in the fire, my old back not working like it used to, and I was jealous of my younger friend who still had many years left. That evening I sat warming by the fire, knowing what was taking over inside me, understanding it, but feeling nothing. Maybe I shouldn't of smoked all those years. Maybe I shouldn't of drank all those years. I should have taken Andy on that adventure. It was too late now.

I took out a pen and ink and began to write, looking out the black darkened window.

The results were bad, I thought. The doctor had told me to be careful out in the Callows, that perhaps I should consider moving in to a care home in the town, that it's unknown really how much longer I have left. I would never. I grew up here; my parents had fought to emigrate all those years ago from Ukraine. I would never leave and if I had to die here, it was the right choice. But to think of the promise I made Andy, of the summer. I'd said it so many times.

"Andy, I promise, I will take you on a great adventure some day."

I ticked my pen against the paper. It was winter now and summer was so far away. I looked at the phone, walked to it and rang for her. She picked up.

"Gramps?" she said into the line.

It caught in my throat. "Hi Andy-bear."

“You’re calling already? I thought we were calling tomorrow?”

“Well, I know, I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Me too, always, Gramps.”

I smiled, clenching my pen.

“Did you have a good day Gramps?”

“Oh, you know me, keeping up in the yard, ice-fishing, cutting wood, keeping busy always.”

“Wow, you’re always working hard, I literally sat on the couch all day today and watched Netflix.”

“Oh, I hope it was a good, intelligent show,” I said.

“Yeah! I watched *Stranger Things*, it’s quite intelligent.”

“Good girl,” I said.

“I can’t wait for summer,” she said suddenly and my heart dropped. “I’m literally already making the lists for what we’re going to do.”

I had to catch my throat, making sure not to let it go. “I know Andy, me too.”

“Can we go on that adventure this year?”

I paused a moment. “Of course, Andy-bear.”

“Good, because I’m ready now. I know I’m not very good at hiking and I get pretty anxious and stuff and am not amazing, but I know if you’re there, I can do it.”

“Andy, of course you can do it, regardless if I’m there or not.”

“Yes, but I need you there.”

“And I will be, but don’t underestimate yourself. You’re powerful.”

She laughed into the phone. “Alright, Gramps. Oh, Mom’s calling for dinner, can we call tomorrow?”

“Absolutely, dear, call tomorrow.”

And I hung up the phone.

Andy

Later I sat in bed, reading, when Mom came up the ladder to the loft. She came and sat on the edge of my bed, the only light coming from the orange glow of the lamp on the side table behind me.

“How you doing, champ?” she asked.

“Good,” I said, lying. Whatever that thing had been in the forest earlier had never been there before, and I was scared of what that meant.

She nodded. She had her brown hair in a messy bun, pieces of it falling around her neck. “Did you have fun today? You know you don’t have to go to work there if you don’t want to.”

“I like working there, Mom,” I said.

She nodded. “Well, I’m here to talk, if you need it. This is hard on all of us.”

I nodded. I didn’t want to think about it. I felt good tonight, winning like that. But I didn’t want to think about Grandpa not being here. I didn’t want to think about him not leaving anything behind. It felt like I never got to say goodbye, and that I wouldn’t have anything to hold him by.

I smiled, trying to not let the tears come. Mom sat on the edge of my bed, petting my knee. “I remember how adamant Grandpa was, every single night you were here, on putting you to bed. I wish I could’ve been that good. He was really special.”

“I know,” I said. I didn’t want to think about him, if only to spiral into depression again.

“Listen,” she said. “I didn’t want to give you this too soon, after all that’s happened, but I thought you should have it now.”

I sat up, brows narrowing.

Mom pulled out a mug from behind her back, with a note inside.

“It’s addressed to you,” she said. “I have no idea what it is, but we found it on the counter, and of course it was attached to his favourite coffee mug.”

I could see a tear slip from Mom’s eyes. He was her dad—I suddenly felt selfish knowing this was all probably the hardest of all for her and not me. I had never asked. I looked at it as she passed it to me, a small blue enamel mug, all dented and dinged, and a note inside of it. It was his. I remembered what Grandpa had said about the objects he kept being very important to him but that it was up to me to imagine why.

“Thanks, Mom.”

She nodded and patted my head and then left. I looked and opened it with shaking hands. I peeled it open to read its all-too-familiar scratchy ink writing.

Are you ready for that adventure?

My heart was racing at top speed and I held the note like it was gold, fragile gold that could break if I held it too hard. What was this? He hadn’t forgotten about me. I smiled, looking out the window and that’s when I spotted something in the yard. For a moment I thought it was that “thing” again, but no, it was the light that had helped me through that game. Just standing there! Glowing! I could see it looking at me, or what I thought was “looking.” I lay down, thinking of this strange source of light following me and what this note meant. I knew this was a clue. Grandpa loved clues and that meant there were more. I was ready.

Part Two

Will

I always loved June. June meant we'd exited spring and leapt into summer. June meant warmth and the long days of winter behind us. June meant months of summer warmth ahead. I sat here now on the big rock down at the beach, watching the water lap up, looking out at Eagle Island that we called Neverland, with its stark black charred tree sticking out, the one where the eagle sat all day and watched the Callows, the protective mast. It was June 1949, and that meant the last summer of this decade, and I'd just turned sixteen.

Ed was going to be here any moment, so I leapt up, crossed the plank bridge I'd made from the submerged rock to the path and walked up the hill back to my home.

"What are we going to do today boys!" said Ed, hopping off his red bike and skipping down the driveway, already wearing his red striped swim shorts and muscle tank.

Ed was rowdy and up here there was never any relaxing, Ed always had something to do.

"I don't know, you're usually going to tell us," I said, walking on the front porch, bag around my back.

"Let's go down to the resort, steal some bottles and go to Eagle Island."

"Of course," I said. "Where's George?"

"Still escaping chores, he'll be here in a bit."

Since George was younger he often had a hard time, but we always pressed on. My mom came out on the patio, wearing an apron from doing dishes. She spoke at me in her still heavy Ukrainian accent.

"Boy, what I say, go take the dog to the water. Get!"

"Come on, Ed. Tsayta!" I called.

The black lab came running out of the cabin and the three of us walked down to the beach, looping down the steps papa had made that led to the beach below our cabin, through a canopy of trees and birch and wildflowers, all perfectly maintained. I didn't know what it was with Papa, but he was obsessed with cleanliness. It was a forest! But I heard his words constantly.

"We take care of our land."

"I want a clear path; we don't let this place go to hell."

"Cleaning is important. Organization is important. A messy environment is a cause for disaster. We don't want any bad fires, now do we?"

Over dramatic Papa as usual. We knew how to handle that stuff around here. Maybe it was the war gone at last, everyone being afraid of the great old disaster of the world. But it was long gone now. Four years old, and this place had turned to paradise. We could finally rest.

Tsayta raced into the water, splashing, swimming and chasing her tail. I stood with Ed on the shoreline as he picked up rocks and threw them in for Tsayta to go catch.

"Nice one," I said, watching his rock skip.

"I can do better." He leant at a half-crooked angle, bent, picked up a nice, shiny flat rock and skipped it with all his might into the water and I watched as it flew, spiralling across the calm lake water.

The lake was so calm it was like glass and watching that rock fly, skipping 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. Incredible! We both cheered!

"Wow," I said. "Why are you so talented?"

I watched Ed, his blonde hair glinting in the direct sunlight.

"I know," he said. "Pretty impressive."

“You think Jim Hawkins could do that?”

“Oh you know he could,” he said. “Which reminds me, Paps said we’re building a sailboat this year, bet we can really be sailors now, hey?”

“Like an actual sail boat?”

“Yeah, you know how obsessed Papa has been with building mini replica ships. So he’s going to work all summer on it.”

“Oh hell of course,” I said. “One day I want to ride in it.”

“It’ll be hard,” he said. “That’s why I’m going to learn in a class this year.”

Ride in a sailboat. Be pirates. Heroes. That’s what summer was all about.

“I want to be a hero,” I said.

“Bet you do, like your dad I bet,” said Ed.

“Yeah, like my papa.”

Papa had it hard. The only way to get into this country properly was to join the army, and Papa had done it, fought in that war. I loved to tell people about it. When I was older, I wanted to do the same thing. Be known as a hero. Be known like the characters in my favourite books.

“Okay, don’t think about it too much,” Ed joked, skipping another rock, Tsayta going after it. “We’ve got business to complete here.”

“I know, I know,”

After taking Tsayta for a swim, Ed and I left the cabin on our bikes and headed up the dirt road. I had my brand new blue bike, beautiful, swift, a gift for Christmas as we rode up to the resort that sat in the inlet of Callows Cove. The resort was huge, three stories, each room with its own porch, a giant wrap around patio at the bottom, huge sandy beach and clean water and a wharf. Oh, I loved it here.

We rode straight into the resort, pulling out of our bikes and leaning them against an old birch tree. We found George down by the water, hauling in ropes.

“Georgey-boy! There you are!” said Ed, running over.

“Ugh, this is taking me forever,” he whined. “Please help me, guys, so I can get to having fun again.”

George was the owner’s son. Poor boy with so much weight on his poor shoulders. But his dad must’ve been wealthier than most, owning this resort that celebrities even flocked too to get a taste of paradise. We helped George complete his tasks and then met back on the beach.

“We’re stealing drinks,” said Ed.

“Oh no, not again, what if Paps catches me?”

“He won’t,” I said. “We’ve been training.”

“Like the soldiers we are,” said Ed. “Now come on, let’s get a move on.”

The three of us snuck into the resort. I loved the resort, always had. It was built entirely of wood, all log and wood panelling. Inside held carved statues of all the animals that meant something around here. Beside the front reception desk was a large carved eagle, meant to represent lightness and freedom, beside that, an owl for wisdom, in the old diner, beside the door a lynx for deception and a moose for pride and strength. Outside there were deer and a black bear carved into the railing, one for gentleness and grace and one for courage. I loved hearing the many stories of all these animals. George’s dad would tell them all to us, and I enjoyed it. It made me less afraid of the woods somehow.

We snuck over to the diner and, once inside, I called to George.

“George, we need a distraction.”

“On it,” he said.

He ran into the middle of the diner and started flailing, falling on his knees and crying out. The diner staff escaped from behind the bar and ran to him, thinking, because of his great acting skills, that he was hurt.

“Let’s go,” said Ed.

We made a run for it, bent over, behind the bar and started shovelling bottles into our backpacks. Not too much to look suspicious and then booked it back out and out of the diner’s doors. We waited by the lobby, soon, George re-appeared with a bandage wrapped around his knee.

“Ace at acting,” said George. “That’s what they call me.”

“You’re amazing,” said Ed. “Now let’s get it done.”

A storm was forming outside. I could see it in the dark rumbling clouds. My papa knew all about storms, and had taught me on the patio how to see them.

“See that, boy,” he’d said. “Black bottom, flat as a burnt pancake, like your momma makes us when she’s in a mood.”

I giggled.

“That’s a thunderstorm, and you can see by the mushroom bloom overhead,” he pointed with his thick finger.

I’d watched Papa wearing his trusty fishing baseball cap. He knew so much about everything, and I loved that. I loved that I got to have someone who was rich with knowledge. I thought of the owl. Maybe like my papa. Like the guides in the stories.

I could see that thunderstorm now and the way the wind picked up across the lake, black charred gusts. Whipping winds. Eagle Island way out on Callows Lake, standing firm. The boys were waiting at the wharf, sitting in the little dingy and I ran to join them. We struggled to get to

the island, but once there, tied the boat to the old tree that hung out over the water and began the climb up. It was a pretty large and steep island, and required literally hanging on for dear life to whichever tree you could get your hands on. Climbing and climbing we went, the thunder now rumbling above our heads.

George called out, slipping a few times but Ed grabbed him. We kept on. Soon we reached a plateau and followed the familiar path of bent trees and moss toward the castle.

Black Hill Castle sat atop the highest peak on Eagle Island, next to the tree that gave the island its name. A tall, burnt to a crisp pine tree stood here, no living part left but only its black skeleton. An eagle, whether the same eagle I will never know, always sat there. Papa had gotten us the materials and we'd built ourselves a lean-to against some sturdy pines that opened up to the great expanse of the Callows. The perfect viewing spot for any storm.

It started spitting down rain and we ran for cover, listening to it pitter-patter on the tin roofing. I sat down in a heap on the dry moss bed and Ed popped open a bottle of whatever we'd grabbed.

"Mugs, boys," he said, holding his hand out.

I dug for my blue enamel mug where we'd buried the rest of our stuff in a pit. I held it out, Ed pouring drink into it. I took a sip, my body warming.

Lightning struck into the mountainside beyond and I marvelled at how storms never once failed to impress me.

Andy

The next morning I woke up already excited to show Lizard what I had received, but was distracted by the fire across the lake. I quickly made my way downstairs and out onto the porch. Dad was already leaning over the railing, looking out with binoculars at the plume of bubbling cloud smoke that came out of the fire across the lake behind Eagle Island, the one we'd seen last night. My body was revving. Fires were so exciting!

"That's sick," I said.

"Knew there'd be a couple this morning, pretty cool hey?" said Dad. "Reminds me of the one last year. Honestly, I think it was in the same spot."

"Looks so cool. I can't wait to go watch with Lizard."

"Well," Dad put the binoculars down. "Better get your watch on, it'll probably die out by afternoon."

"True. Are they going to fight it?"

"There's actual wildfire disasters in BC right now and they're in a state of emergency, fire workers have worse things to worry about. Remember, fires are normal here, like small fires."

I nodded along, watching the flecks of flame and smoke on the other side of the lake.

I quickly got ready and got on my bike, riding down to Reynolds. There was the slight tinge of smoke in the air, barely anything, but just enough to make your vision seem blurry, as if you couldn't quite make out the details in the mountains.

I rode into Reynolds and found Lizard in the tackle shop.

"Liz," I called.

He stood at the counter, stamping bakery bags and looked up at me.

“Did you see the fire?”

“Uh, of course I did. I’ve been up since six!” he smiled. “Pretty good one hey?”

Behind Lizard on the TV screen the news read, *Dozens of wildfires spark overnight in many parts across BC, including an alarming amount on the Cariboo region.*

I looked back at Lizard.

“What do they mean by an *alarming* amount,” I said.

“Well, yeah, that’s how it works,” he said. “Storms come; wildfires start. It’s not a big deal. This should be interesting. I can’t wait to find them today.”

Just then, Yaz’s mom came barging into the tackle shop.

“Is that something we should be worried about?” she asked with no warning. “I’m Fern, if I didn’t say. We’re at cabin four.”

“I know,” said Lizard. “And sorry, what is the issue?”

“How about all the fires that have started?” She raised a brow.

Lizard and I looked to each other. Fern looked intense. I didn’t really blame Yaz. She had wild curly hair and a lined face, wearing funky cat-eye frames.

“Okay,” he said. “Well, the entire province has been in a state of emergency, but there are no worries here, that fire is just a normal part of summer.”

She didn’t look convinced.

“Trust, me, right, Andy? Storms cause little spark fires all over the place and they die out within the day, unfortunately it’s just a part of living in a forest.”

She blinked and then did her high squeal laugh.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay, I see. Well, you will let me know if things get worse, right? I don’t want my family in danger.”

“I can promise you that your family is not in danger at Reynolds.”

She smiled, did an awkward wave, and then left. Lizard let out a breath.

“Christ,” he said. “City people.”

“A weird thing to freak out about, it’s not even near us.”

“She looks like Baby,” said Lizard.

“Excuse me?” I let out a laugh, leaning on the counter. “A what now?”

“Baby, from *Dirty Dancing*, you know, with that hair?”

I let out a laugh. “You and your weird old movies.”

Lizard touched my hand and then noticed I was clenched onto something.

“Grandpa left me a clue,” I said.

“No way,” he said, looking at me. “I thought you couldn’t find anything.”

“Well Mom gave it to me last night, she was holding out on me, and look at the last line there, read it out,” I said.

“Okay, now that sounds like an invitation.”

“It’s entirely him to do this! To set up a quest?”

“I know,” Lizard said. “I’ve always known.”

“So what do I do?”

“You know what...”

I stopped paying attention to Lizard, and instead was looking below him at the glass map case. He had been leaning on it and half disguising it, but now that he had stood up, I could see. In the center of the case, sat a new map I hadn’t seen before. It was hand inked and drawn on brownish parchment, tea stained and with a map of the Callows, a little red line starting from my

cabin and going upward into the forest to end at a big X, along the way there were little black dots.

“What the hell is that?” I asked.

Lizard looked down as if suddenly just noticing it too. “I don’t know.” He scrambled to get the key from the drawer and open the cabinet up, carefully taking the map out and laying it on the glass.

I picked it up in my hands and flipped it over.

I looked at Lizard like I’d found a diamond and he stared back at me, eyes wide. Was this really happening? Had Grandpa planned this all along? It ached me to know that he’d really done all this, and I’d been back home with my family, not being here. I should have been here. I should have never let him be alone. I had to complete this.

*

I looked out the tackle shop window at the fire once more. I thought about how natural occurrences like this gave the people of the Callows energy, such as how storms and fires seemed to bring people together with a common curiosity. I could see a gathering of people on the wharf just watching. I looked at the map again. It was hand-drawn with ink on crumpled, old looking parchment and I could span it out about the size of the counter. Lizard and I studied it over the counter. It was the Callows, all the landmarks placed, Reynolds, my cabin, the mountains, landforms, and the lake. It was so detailed too, little hand drawn trees and waves for the lake, including the island and landforms. And on it, painted in dotted red ink, was a trail and at the end, a large blotched X on Eagle Island.

“The island,” said Lizard. “That’s so strange. Like Paps has a rule about Eagle Island, we’ve had it for years and years, that no one can set foot on that island because it’s sacred.”

“Yeah, I thought it was marked as sacred space, except for some reason my grandpa can go?”

“Yeah, so my paps always strictly said for whatever reason, well, it came actually from papa senior. But your grandpa is telling us to go there.”

“He must have left something.”

“Shit,” said Lizard, covering his head. “If Paps found out we went there he’d kill me.”

I looked at the trail, a total of seven other marks blotched with a little dot to show that something must be there.

“There’s one dot at my cabin and one dot here in the tackle shop,” I said. “That must be what we’ve just collected.”

“What does the note say?”

“There’s a note?” I asked.

“Yeah, yeah on the back.”

“Oh, weird, I didn’t even notice,” I flipped it over. He was right, there was a note.

One note, one treasure, one trail to home.

My chest filled with excitement. I knew he wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye. I studied the spiralling trail through the forests. The unfamiliar woods. I had only ever been comfortable with the woods around the castle. Out there, I was too terrified to go. I wouldn’t think about that for now. I was too excited.

“We have to do this,” I said.

“I know,” he said. “Can we do it?”

“I think so, I’ve never done this before, like I have no idea what to bring.”

“I don’t think we’ll have to worry about that.”

“Why not?”

He put a hand on my shoulder. “We’ll figure it out as it comes, okay?”

I wanted to trust him and I felt like I had to if this was this important. I didn’t really trust myself and my ability to do this, if I was being honest. This year I couldn’t even make it through my volleyball tournament to Chilliwack without having a series of panic attacks which meant my mom had to come and get me. It was so embarrassing! I hadn’t told Lizard any of this; I was afraid to. He’d think I was ill or fragile and like we just couldn’t do the things I’d done at the cabin my whole life. I didn’t feel as wild or free as I once was.

I breathed out. All I could think about was that Grandpa believed I was the hero like in these stories. He’d said it in words right there. And I had to make him proud.

“Well?” Lizard asked.

I nodded and smiled. “Let’s get this done.”

“Okay! Okay! Right-e-o! Let me just close up.” Soon after we left the tackle shop. I was trying to let my mind relax, and not worry about the deep dark forest. I caught a strange shadow out of the corner of my eye and snuck a glance, already regretting it. Something large slunk around the corner of the tackle shop that made my heart stop. Was it following me?

“Okay, so it looks here like the first dot is at the diner?” Lizard said. “Red’s going to have a heart attack.”

“Oh well,” I said. “She’s about to get rampaged.”

Lizard and I took the rickety steep stairs up the side of the tackle shop to the upper level of the main building. Up here, I could see all of Reynolds Resort. I noticed campers filling the beach, snapping pictures of the fire and brought my own phone out to do the same thing. Oh,

how I urged to post this online, #wildfirespotting. We turned off the patio and into the diner door which dinged to let us in.

“Hey Red-o,” said Lizard, entering.

Red, the diner’s owner, was behind the bar, wearing a white apron speckled with dough bits. She had her terribly dyed red hair in a bun (which she was known for) and her dark olive skin was painted with makeup.

“Oh you guys coming to bother me, I see,” she laughed.

“Pretty much,” said Lizard.

There was only one couple in the diner, sitting in a far plastic red booth next to the wall of windows looking out at the lake. Red steamed milk behind the bar into a jug and poured a cappuccino and sipped it herself.

“Well, what’s going on,” he said, leaning on the counter.

I loved Red. She was a feisty 40-something single parent. Her kid was working at the reserve now, but she worked here. She and Lizard’s dad had been friends since they were kids growing up here. Oh, and she made the world’s best Saskatoon-berry pie.

“Like some pie?” she asked.

“Oh Red-o, you know I’d love some but we’re actually on a quest,” said Lizard.

“A quest?” she raised a brow, cupping her coffee.

“Remember Grandpa Greene?”

“Oh I loved that man, I’m sorry about your loss, Andy.”

I thinned my lips and nodded. “Well, he left me a quest,” I said. “Like a hunt.”

“Exciting. And where are we starting?”

“Here,” I showed her the map.

“Strange,” she said. “I haven’t noticed anything particular, but go have a search around. Don’t damage anything.”

“On it!” said Lizard.

We started moving about the place. I looked under every table in the shop and bar and Lizard searched the patio. We met back inside, confused. Then we moved behind the bar with Red. She served a new customer as Lizard and I searched everything from the espresso machine to the milk fridge. I didn’t even know what we were looking for, which made it all the more confusing.

“Have you checked the storage locker,” she called back.

I looked up at the locker and opened it. Inside was everything from first aid kits to tools. Then I noticed, in the middle shelf, a large green tin box with a painted black smudge dot on it.

I looked at Lizard. The box opened easily and inside was a single grainy photograph of three boys standing in front of Callows Lake. I flipped it over.

Callows Lake, July 1st, 1949.

“Wow,” said Liz. “That’s so cool.”

I inspected it. “Is this Grandpa, look, that’s his hat,” I said, pointing to the boy in the middle.

“I guess so,” he said. “Hey wait a second, that’s my grandpa, paps senior!”

I looked at it again. Indeed, the small kid on the right did look vaguely like Lizard and Mr. Sherman. It was cool to know our grandparents had been friends. I didn’t realize it had gone that far back and that they’d “really” been friends.

“Who’s the other guy?” I asked.

I looked at the tall blonde kid.

“I don’t know,” said Lizard. “I’ve never seen him.”

Shaking, I opened the note attached to it and stood there to read.

I knew this picture would mean something someday.

“Interesting,” said Lizard.

“Yeah,” I said. “What are they standing in front of?”

“Oh, well there used to be a different resort here,” said Lizard. “It was called Mahood Lodge. It was actually pretty famous with celebrities too, like everyone would go there. Burned down in a wildfire though.”

“Oh.”

“Actually it belonged to my grandpa, Dad’s side.”

“What, you never told me that?”

Lizard shrugged. “Long time ago.”

I couldn’t possibly even imagine a different resort at the Callows, especially there, almost right beside my cabin now. There was hardly any evidence of it. It seemed wrong somehow, like that wasn’t the Callows I knew and therefore, seemed to belong in a different world.

“I guess this is happening,” said Lizard. “Shall we continue?”

“Now, please!”

We left the diner, thanking Red and hurried down the stairs. Mr. Sherman was standing on the wharf, just staring out at the lake, zoned out.

“Paps, you good?” said Lizard.

He shook awake. “Oh, yes, yes.”

“What are you staring at?” he asked.

Mr. Sherman shook his head. I looked at the lake, at the island far off in the distance. I tried to make out any clues from here, anything that would decode to me what we were headed towards. I almost wanted to get on the boat and just go directly there and skip everything else. But that was not how Grandpa planned this.

I felt bad for him. It was the start of summer—the best time of year here, when everything came alive, and now this stupid state of emergency could prevent tourists travelling. It had people like Fern who didn't know any better thinking this was bad. The map pointed us next to the small grassy clearing on the dirt road next to my cabin, but first, we walked to Lizard's to get gear. We walked down the dry, pine-needled path toward Lizard's cabin, when we heard shuffling inside the old arcade hut.

Jakub was inside the arcade as we entered. He was in the far corner, repairing some old machine. It was so strange seeing this place empty except for him because it was so cool and normally so many kids flocked here. Mr. Sherman had set it up in an old half barn, where the floor was made of straw and crammed throughout the place was his collection of old arcade machines, table games and pool tables. In the far corner sat two old sofas and a couple of arm chairs around a collection of strange memorabilia lamps, like Mr. Sherman's leg lamp. On the walls were book shelves with every book imaginable and the continuation of his massive obsession of tacky metal signs and licence plates.

"You guys?" Jakub had turned around.

"Hey," I said.

"Ah, it's you, thought it was a rat," said Lizard.

"Ha-ha," said Jakub. "Funny, unlike you kids, I've got work to do, and this place is falling apart."

“Yeah, okay, I get it,” snapped Lizard.

“Jeez,” said Jakub. “Relax.”

I looked at Lizard. He didn’t seem to be taking this well.

“Liz, are you sure we—” I began.

“Andy, I want to do this. Like it’s the only thing I want to do,” he smiled. “It would kill me inside if we didn’t finish this.”

“Okay,” I said.

“I’m sorry, do what?” asked Jakub. “I’m sure your dad wouldn’t be very happy if you two went screwing off somewhere and ignoring work, now would he?”

“It’s a lot more important than work,” said Lizard.

Jakub stood up, brushing off the dirt from his pants. “Like what?”

I was tired of them bickering, so I lied to Jakub, telling him my family needed him for something important.

“Interesting,” said Jakub. “Well, stay on the walkie talkie, in case anyone needs me to get you.”

“Yeah,” Lizard said. “I know.”

“Are you sure your family doesn’t need someone else to help?” asked Jakub. “Like are we talking handyman situations, because I’d be a better fit.”

“Nope,” I said. “Lizard is the perfect fit for this job.”

Jakub shrugged, turning around. “Whatever you want to believe of him.”

Will

For my 16th birthday I'd gotten a Kodak film camera from Dad and was ecstatic just thinking of all I was going to use it for that summer. It was a warm day for Dominion Day, and the boys and I sat on the floating dock, sprawling out on beach towels, soaking in the sun. I had the camera in my hand and wound it, pointing it toward George and Ed who were lying tummy down on the dock next to me, and I snapped a picture.

"Didn't even tell me to smile!" said Ed.

"I want in the moment pictures," I said. "Or else it's boring."

"Or ugly."

"One day I want to look back on this and really know what we were up to."

"Sure," said George. "The importance of lazing on a dock all day. Guys." He sat up quickly. "I'm bored, we need an adventure."

"What kind?" Ed perked up.

"A kind that doesn't involve drinking," I said.

"Okay, and what kind is that?" said Ed.

"Jeezus, Ed, you're going to become an alcoholic one day and not even make it to thirty," George spurted. "You're a terrible influence for young me."

"Shut up," he whined.

"How about a fishing trip?"

"Could be down," said Ed.

"To the hot spots?"

"I do like the hot spots," said George. "Very fun."

“I’ve got a new rod too,” said Ed. “Super fancy. Can probably catch every fish in this whole lake, I’m telling you.”

“Okay, let’s go then,” I said. “We need the map, for the spots.”

“I’ll get it,” said George, hopping up and then immediately diving head first into the cold lake.

Ed got up too and cannon balled. I slowly climbed into the water, dancing the camera above my head and treading all the way to shore. I got out, shook off and wrapped the towel around me. George came running back with the map. We had maps for all sorts of things. I mean, pirates followed maps, and so we always did. We had maps written for hot spots for fish, for our route to Eagle Island, for the bike paths, for the secret hiding spots of our bottles and smokes that our parents couldn’t find. Ed even made a map once for this girl who was visiting so he could meet her in the middle of the night. We made maps.

George unfurled the map and we discussed the spots we would hit, and in what order and then agreed, and split up to gather our gear. The day was so hot and all the visitors were sprawled out across the beach, some playing volleyball, some in the water, some off sailing. Later was the potluck and I was excited. July 1st marked the start of summer and that meant the start of a whole bunch more adventure. And to begin with one today, that was the right path.

I tied the camera around my waist and biked quickly home in my swimsuit to gather gear. Mom was tying laundry outside on a fishing line strung between two trees and Papa was nailing new siding onto the cabin.

“Hey, Papa,” I said, biking in.

“Boy, you’re back.”

“Oh hun, you burnt as a tomato,” said Mom, turning around.

“Sorry,” I said.

“You have to take care of yourself,” she said. “You never remember to.”

She walked over, pestering. Papa continued with the nailing as he had a smoke shoved in his mouth. I packed my favourite expedition bag and Mom kept screaming at me to put a hat on. I came back outside.

“Mom, I don’t even have a hat! Remember, I lost it off the boat.”

Papa stepped down from the ladder, held the cigarette between his lips, and took off his cap, giving it a shake to rid the wood shavings.

“Here, take mine,” he said, plopping his trusty cap on my head.

“What, Papa, this is your cap.”

“I know,” he smiled. “And I think you look better in it. Take care of it though, it’s a damn good cap.”

“I will,” I smiled.

What did this mean? My brute dad was giving me his hat? I felt honoured. I felt like I was growing up. I tied on my pack and hit back on the bike, riding as fast as my legs would take me down the dry dirt road, camera tied to me and swung down the drive to the resort. I met the guys back at the beach.

“Hey, wait a minute,” I turned around to some random guest. “Hey, hey sorry would you mind taking a picture of us?”

“Oh come on, buddy,” whined Ed.

“New hat?” said George.

“Yeah, and I want a picture,” I said.

We smiled for my camera, and I held a hand to the hat, tipping it, standing in my strongest stance for my piddly 16-year-old body. I felt good. I felt strong. I knew that picture would mean something some day.

Andy

The day was so hot that I was already slick with sweat and it was only noon. The air was dry too and the way the pine trees looked so red and burnt, needles strewn all over the cracked earth made me uncomfortable. Where was all the rain? The Callows wasn't like this. I was back working at the fish-gut-hut, gutting and slicing fish for customers, thinking long and hard about Grandpa's quest, staring out at the fire as if it could give me clues somehow. I was mapping it out in my head. I'd assumed this one would take all afternoon. We'd leave, Lizard and I, once we were both off work and begin properly, that way Mr. Sherman couldn't get mad and haul him back. We'd collected the first clue, which meant we were making good progress. But it was the forest. I knew absolutely nothing about hiking "out there". I knew Lizard would understand more than me, but I was worried.

Jakub was wrong. Lizard was perfect for the job.

I placed another fish from the barrel on the cutting board and looked out at the quiet lake. The fire was certainly looking a lot bigger than it had earlier. There was smoke, but most of it seemed to be coming from a distance, but still the fire across the lake produced massive nuclear-bomb like plumes of smoke. But that was the thing. I had grown up here. The Callows wasn't like my hometown. It was wet, rainy, stormy. In all my time here, sure, there had been fires, but nothing that actually caused concern. So, it wouldn't be a worry.

"Listen to me!"

I heard yelling beside the office and stood up, washing my hands off, and then looped around the back of the tackle shop through the dirt pathway to Mr. Sherman's office. I spotted him on the little awning outside his office door, screaming into the cord phone he had stretched all the way outside.

“I need more time,” he said. “Summer has just begun and I know travelers are coming—no, you don’t know that, people are here, it’s busy—the fires will subside—I need more time I don’t have the money yet and I know it has to be in and it will come.”

Mr. Sherman was silent a moment and the look on his face was a look of concern. I noticed more gray hair on his beard than before and his gaunt stance.

“This is my home, our home,” he said slowly. “If I lose it, I lose everything.”

I staggered back, pressing against the wall of the cabin. Lose it? Reynolds wasn’t going anywhere.

“Yes, sir, I understand.” And then I heard the office door slamming shut.

I was breathing heavy, staring off into the forest. What did he mean, lose it? Reynolds Resort had been here for generations. You can’t lose something like this.

I looked off into the woods as, once again, that glowing form came into view. It was here again. I could hear it, its gentle, Owum Owum echoes. It stared at me, two pebbles like black eyes. I ran after it.

“Hey!” I yelled after it, as I ran to keep up. It seemed to slink and slide between the trees.

I ran after it, through the twisted wood, until I happened upon Yaz. He was sitting on one of the decorated benches in Grandma’s wonderland park. It was strange seeing him sitting here, under the cluster of wind chimes, and at his feet, a collection of gnomes. He was just sitting, bent over, a book folded in half in his lap as he read.

I stopped in my tracks. I looked around. The Orb was gone.

He looked up. “Oh.”

“Hi, sorry, I was—what are you doing in here?” I asked, walking closer.

“Mr. Sherman directed me here,” he shrugged. “Said I might enjoy the solitude, or something.”

“Ye—yeah, this is a really important place to him actually, I’m surprised.”

Yaz made room for me on the bench and I sat down. He looked like an angel. Pale skin, freckled face and white hair.

“So why are you here?” I asked.

He held his hands open. “Honestly, I have no idea what to do anymore. I’m sort of used to being online all the time.”

I shrugged. “Well, me too but this is the Callows you have to leave that shit behind.”

He looked at me long and hard, his eyes bright and piercing. “So, why is it important to him?” he asked.

He was so calm, his voice so content and even it gave me chills.

“My Grandma made it,” I looked down at my hands. “She passed away when I was ten. This was her prized place; she worked so hard on it. She wanted to decorate the forest so that people could come here and feel at home.”

“In the woods,” Yaz nodded.

“Yeah, I guess she—well you see, she was never afraid of the woods but she had this whole philosophy that the scary part of the woods was actually coming from our own heads, not what was actually there.”

“Interesting.”

“And she wanted more people to step out of the built resort and into here, and she hoped to make it seem more welcoming.”

“She sounds like an incredible person,” he said.

“She was,” I nodded.

“And Lizard is the owner’s son, I’m presuming.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And my best friend.”

Yaz nodded and studied the hanging ornaments in the trees. It was dark in here. You could hardly see the lake at all. I spotted the Orb lurking in the treetops above us. I felt like I’d come quite a few times already and peered down the forest at the old castle.

“My grandpa came here constantly,” I said, not really knowing why. “We have a tree fort, well Grandpa built it for us when we were kids and we used to play there all the time, but it’s kind of been left to rot honestly.”

“Oh yeah? Does he live here too?”

“Yeah, well my cabin is actually his home,” I said. “He passed away last year though.”

“I’m sorry,” said Yaz, shifting his feet.

“Yeah,” I nodded, thinning my lips.

“Can I see the fort?” he asked.

“Well, there’s nothing to see really,” I said. “It’s pretty old now, honestly, just a childhood thing.”

I felt the map in my pocket. I could feel Yaz watching me. And I could sense a strange feeling in my stomach like he should be a part of this. He helped so much during the Manhunt game. It just worked for us, the way we worked together. I wasn’t exactly good at meeting new people, but it felt right. I think I wanted him to come.

“Hey listen, so long story short, my grandpa set me a quest. Like a treasure hunt around the Callows before he passed and wanted me to complete it and I think you should join, you know, since you’re having tech-dependency issues.”

Yaz looked at me, eyes concentrated. He let out a laugh. “What does this entail?”

“Well,” I pulled the map out of my pocket. “He gave me a map and each point on the map leads me to a new box that is hidden and inside the box, seems to be an object of his and a letter and I believe at the end is some treasure.”

“Sure,” he said.

“Hm?” He said yes that easily?

“Sure, I’ll join. It sounds like entertainment.”

“Huh, actually?”

“And I’m good at hunts.”

*

I closed shop for the day and left my station, washing up and putting the tools away. I spotted Lizard down the wharf, he and Jakub hauling a boat in and I skipped down to meet them.

“Hey girl,” said Jakub.

“Don’t say that,” Lizard snapped.

“Really?” Jakub turns his lanky body to him. “And you’re going to act like that? I haven’t even done anything.”

“You just being here is doing something,” said Lizard.

“Relax,” I said. “Come on Liz, let’s get out of here.”

“Walkie,” Jakub nodded to his hip.

“Already know,” Liz rolled his eyes.

We started walking back toward the grounds, leaving Jakub behind.

“We should get started before Paps decides to tack more hours on.”

“Agreed,” I said. “Oh, and Yaz is joining us too.”

“Really Andy,” he turned to me. “I thought this was supposed to be our thing?”

“I know, I know,” I said. “But the more people we have, the more chances we can do this thing.”

Lizard shook his head. “Okay, well I need to get my backpack.”

We followed Lizard across the campground toward his cabin which sat on the far end of the resort, a little off in the woods. Liz lived in a log cabin that sat on a cliff looking out over Callows Lake. A large wrap-around porch allowed you to look out at the entirety of the valley. The place was old and dishevelled, but had been around for decades and wasn’t going anywhere, built properly like the old cabins were. Lizard bounced up the front patio steps and onto the porch, but I turned as I spotted Yaz walking across the yard. I waved a hand and he spotted me, smiling and walking over.

“Hi,” he said. “Are we beginning?”

“We are. Are you packed?”

“I am,” he pointed out his satchel and this strange belt harness he had strapped over his white button down.

“What did you bring?” I eyed him.

“Oh this is my biology stuff,” he said. “You know, for collecting, tracking, that sort of stuff.”

“Biology?” I asked as we walked up the stairs and into Liz’s cabin.

“I study it,” he said. “Collecting species and specimens, analyzing them, taking notes, that kind of thing. It can be harder doing real life expeditions like this back in downtown Vancouver, so usually I’d just hang out on my forum online, but I guess there’s none of that now.”

“Ah, so that’s why you’re coming with us.”

“Well, and I’d like to get to know you.”

My heart fluttered. “Okay then, good.”

I smiled as I turned into Lizard’s cabin, everything familiar hitting me. The same red plaid “everything”, the massive stone fireplace, the old beat-up picnic table, the 50s style kitchen and bathroom closed off with just a curtain, the VHS wall and the loft leading to Lizard’s space. I had always loved Lizard’s cabin because it reminded of the old 80s movies that he’d make me watch, completely stuck in the past. I rushed toward the ladder and climbed straight up, finding Lizard rummaging about his space.

Lizard’s place was cluttered to the brim, but also magical. It was as if he had vomited up his entire personality and life onto his walls. Posters of romantic movies like *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Notebook* hung on the wall, along with band posters and drawings he’d done. He had books everywhere and DVD cases all over the floor. He had a bunk bed, underneath being a desk area where he made wooden puppets by hand, the same craft his mother had done.

“It’s a bit of an...organized mess,” said Liz, stuffing a hiking pack.

“It’s wonderful,” said Yaz. “It feels like my own room.”

“You, with a space this messy, I doubt it,” I said.

“Any space where I work on my projects is a mess,” said Yaz. “Trust me.”

“Hmph,” said Liz. “Unexpected, but cool.”

“So what’s the deal then with this mystery Grandfather, I mean my grandpa’s...interesting, but he’s pretty delusional and watches TV all day,” said Yaz, crossing one leg over the other on one of Lizard’s clothing-covered arm chairs.

“Andy’s grandpa is basically the hero of those adventure stories you imagine,” said Lizard, turning around and grabbing a fake sword and whipping it around. “He was once a soldier and travelled the world; he fought in the Korean war. He was a bad-ass.”

I smiled, knowing that of all the people to have last seen my grandpa, that I was glad it was Lizard.

“He’s basically Dumbledore,” I said.

“Okay, and he’s done this quest...because?”

“We used to read books, like he introduced me to adventure novels and our favourite was *Treasure Island*. I don’t know why, but I just grasped onto it as a kid and basically he promised to take me on an adventure like that someday, but we never got to. I feel like this might be it though, even if he isn’t here.”

Yaz nodded. “I like a good story.”

“Okay, well, are we ready?” I asked. “We’ve got to hit my cabin now.”

After gathering too much stuff from Lizard’s room, we made our way out.

We walked down the side of the long highway, trees towering over each side. We walked in single file, me at the front, Lizard behind me and then Yaz. I didn’t have my gear yet, but Lizard had his too-large camp sack strapped on his back, still wearing his red hoodie and jean shorts and boots. Yaz, with his Sherlock-esc pack. The last was me.

We walked briskly down Callows place, the dirt road that my cabin sat off that ran parallel to the lake.

I saw Bernard lying on the porch. I saw all my cabin. All of his cabin. Its metallic roof, and grey siding. Its wrap around patio and scattered chairs. The sandbox. The clothing line snaked between tall pines. I could see Mom inside walking around and Dad on the patio eating

peanuts. I couldn't see my brother, but I knew he was inside playing video games and it saddened me. Sometimes I felt guilty, because he didn't really have any friends here. I did. It was my life, but I think he'd missed it. But to stay inside was sad. I worried about him. But now as the time to go.

"You guys look at the map, I'm going to grab my stuff."

I left the team and ran up the dirt driveway to my cabin.

"What're you guys up to?" Mom said.

"We're going on an adventure," I said. "Be back by dark."

She didn't say anything, but when I looked at her she was smiling. Did she know about this? I packed a small bum bag and a small backpack, sticking in a water bottle and ran back out the door, and back to the team at the road who were deliberating.

"It says it's somewhere in the grass here," Lizard said.

"Well?" I said.

"Why would he put something over there," said Yaz. "That's long horse-hair grass, and it's usually filled with ticks, you guys actually go in grass filled with ticks?"

"Pretty normal actually," said Lizard. "We just shake our selves off after."

"He taught me to shoot here," I said.

We started clambering over the ditch and into the long grass beside my cabin. Grandpa used to take me here to practice shooting.

Grandpa had always been the best teacher. Right before the August long weekend, the year that I was eleven or twelve, he had taken me outside the cabin in the hot sunlight of late afternoon and I'd asked him what we were doing, and he'd said I could shoot his gun.

I didn't really like the idea of shooting his gun—I knew which gun it was, it was the one he kept in the back storage room because there were wild animals out here and he thought it was for protection, but to be honest, guns scared the hell out of me at that age, which is probably normal.

I stood next to the dirt road, Grandpa beside me in his camo shirt and his travel backpack, a baseball cap securely on his head, worn and dirty. He placed the large case on the ground, popped open the lid and took out the black machine. I eyed in wonder. His hunting rifle, although I didn't see him ever use it. He popped it on a log and then turned to me.

"See that across the road?"

"What?"

"Those tin cans, I've got some on logs, some pasted on the trees."

"So far away."

"Exactly, and that will be our target practice."

"That's too far, it's not fair."

"It'll be okay, you're my little hero, and you can do it."

I smiled. That always did it for me, him saying stuff like that. My little hero. Of course I wanted to be the "hero" so I had to learn. He believed I could do anything.

"Now squat down slowly now, take this in your hand, look through the view finder."

I did what he said.

"Now try and find a can in your view, nice and easy."

"I got one!"

"Okay, now I'm going to guide with my hands. When the gun shoots it's going to push back on you, okay, don't cry. Be strong."

"I don't cry, I can do it."

"Ready, one, two, three—" and he shot and the gun kicked back and for a second my heart stopped, but then I recomposed, watching the tin can rattling on the tree.

I smiled, Lizard touching my back and bringing me back to reality. We walked forward, searching every bare landscape until I found the box sitting on a rotting log, an old green aluminum one that looked like a large tackle box. I walked to it, opening it to find a worn leather travel bag and a baseball cap. My eyes widened as I picked the items up. They smelled like him, like rusted fire smoke.

"Wow," said Lizard.

"What is this?" asked Yaz.

"His best stuff," I said.

I opened the note attached to the cap.

For the journey

That was all it said. Mom was standing on the side of the driveway now, holding a paper bag. I ran to her. She gave me the bag.

"Snacks for the journey," she said.

I smiled. "Thanks Mom."

"Stay on Lizard's walkie talkie, okay, I want updates on how long you'll be. And don't you go too far, you stay on the trails, where's your dad?" She turned around.

Dad came running off the patio with something in his hand and then rushed over to give it to me. A GPS. I held it in my hand, one of his own that was dirty.

"Need this," said Dad.

"But, what about the map?"

“I know, I’ll program the route in for you,” he said, taking my map and stepping aside.

“Did your new friend tell his parents?” asked Mom.

“Uh, I don’t know. Probably not.”

“Keep me updated then, I’m sure his parents aren’t used their kids going off into the woods.”

“Sure, Mom.”

“Good, now be safe. Oh, and put that on, I think that’s what he wanted,” said Mom.

I looked at the baseball cap in my hand, feeling around its worn powder blue exterior and remembered him wearing it and feeling nervous somehow. This was the hat of a great hero, and for me to wear it? It felt wrong somehow. He’d had this hat, for all I knew, his entire life. He must’ve bought it himself, and worn it to death on his many expeditions and now I was going to wear it in regular life? I knew that now if I ever wanted to make him proud that I’d really have to step up.

“Hun,” said Mom. “Remember, if you ever don’t feel okay, just come home. You have to take care of yourself.”

“I will Mom, always.”

I smiled and I waved at her and Bernard who was now sitting beside her. Why did I feel like I was leaving? My stomach clenched. It felt like that feeling before going to summer camp for a week, or before my grade nine band trip. It felt like when I’d go for a camping trip or stay at Grandpa’s. It felt like I was leaving on some great adventure.

Dad handed the GPS back to me, its bulky exterior looking like an early 2000s phone. The screen glowed green.

“Just follow the directions on here, it’ll tell you where to go,” said Dad. “I never leave without a GPS, don’t want to get yourself lost in the woods without one.”

“Okay, Dad, thanks.”

“Ready?” said Lizard behind me.

“Off you go adventurers,” said Dad.

I nodded. “Let’s go.”

Will

Every adventure with the boys always began with my expedition bag, stuffing it full to the brim with gear, anything and everything we might need. I'd feel lost without my backpack, I couldn't explain it. George always brought a bag with him to bring his stuff, but Ed, he basically went free handed and that never made any sense to me. Sure, I liked to feel the woods on my back, to feel the great outdoors, but I also liked to feel the comfort of the bag digging into the grooves of my back, to let me know I was safe, because I had my tools because in honesty the woods kind of terrified me.

I had the map flustering in one hand, Ed, steering the tin boat. He was one year older than me and really took that to heart, like all the time. He acted like he was good at every damn thing on this earth. But the world was changing, and I knew I could be strong too.

We hit the first spot on the map, the first hot-spot and cheered when we looked down into the clear lake water and saw fish literally swimming to the surface. I cast my rod, us taking turns standing in the belly of the boat and casting out. We caught so many fish that day. And I'd overheated and gotten burnt all over the shoulder, but the hat had protected me at least. When we later got back to shore, strung the boat up and docked the fish, I dove right into the lake, clothes on and everything and it felt so good. The crisp clean water. This place had the cleanest water on earth, I was sure of it.

That evening we gathered around the bonfire they had set up in front of the resort. There were a lot of people here, milling about the lawn, showing off their fishing treasures and Ed was shoving marshmallows into his mouth.

"You think this place ever going to change?" I asked.

"Change?" Ed turned to me. "Nah, course not."

“Why Will?” asked George, roasting a marshmallow over the fire, sitting over his knees.

“Why you ask?”

“I don’t know,” I looked around. “Guess I wonder. I’ll be heading into grade twelve this year, isn’t that wild.”

“School, eh,” said George. “Must be fun, not that I’d know. Gotta stay away from the government schools.”

“High school is a waste of a life,” said Ed. “I’m graduating; I’ll be going into the military this year, hopefully to join some of the international missions. Travelling, boys!”

“Really?” We both turned to him, shocked.

“Yeah, it’s decided.”

“I’ve always wanted to do that.”

“I know,” he said. “That’s why I say, join me, we can finally be the heroes we set out to be, hey?”

“But the war is over,” said George. “What’s there left to fight for?”

“There’s always something to fight for,” said Ed. “Always international issues like in Korea that western countries won’t stay out of. Canadian military though, think about it. I’d like to say that to my family someday. And the uniforms are sick as hell, have you seen ’em?”

“I seriously want to.” My heart was racing. Could I do that? Be like my dad?

“Then I’ll help you,” said Ed. “Seriously. Let’s do this together.”

“Jeez, now you’re making me feel left behind,” said George.

“Don’t worry Georgie,” said Ed. “We’ll come back soldiers and you’ll be proud of us anyhow.”

“Wow,” said George. “Makes sense to me. Maybe when I’m older like you guys, I can too?”

“Not really for you, buddy,” said Ed, patting his shoulder and George sulked.

And in that moment it seemed to make all the sense in the world. I think I was shocked, but I thought it sounded extraordinary. I thought it sounded like a dream come true. To set forth into the world. To travel. To expedition. To be in the military. To save lives and become a hero. It was my dream.

Andy

We walked down the dirt road next to each other, GPS in my hand, Lizard hopping around in front me, skipping. We followed the device to the end of the dirt road that cut off directly into the forest, and at that point, I didn't know where it continued on to, all I saw with a little black arrow pointing me where to go. We took a break to eat, arguing with each other about what was about to happen while munching on one of the sandwiches my mom packed.

I knew what the answer was, and the answer was to leave and go on this journey. The journey didn't look too long and I thought we'd be able to get it done in a day. It would be fun! Yaz had a cell in hand, snapping pictures again.

"Do you have to have that out?" I asked.

"Sorry, taking archival evidence."

"Hey, maybe you should tell your mom, in case she goes a bit off."

"She was pretty on edge earlier," said Lizard, scuffing his boot in the dirt.

"Okay, I'd call her but..."

"Walkie," Lizard unhooked one from his belt and threw it to him.

Yaz caught the walkie, staring at it like it was a piece from a museum.

"Oh, come on," said Lizard. "Take this, hold that down, talk into the speaker. I'll show."

Lizard brought the blocky radio up to his mouth, extended the antennae and called in, listening as it buzzed.

"Heeeello," he drawled out. "Anyone there. This is Lizard, over."

There was static and then the radio buzzed.

"You are really calling in already," spoke Jakub's voice from the other end.

He held it down again. “Look, I’m going to need you to give a radio to Yaz’s parents of cabin four, so he can be in contact, got it? Over.”

“Yeah yeah,” he said. “Do I have to show them how to use it?”

“Uh, yes, over.” Lizard rolled his eyes.

“Channel four.”

“I know,” said Lizard into it quickly. “There Yaz, now they’ll know where you are.”

“Great, that’s not what I wanted,” he said.

“You can’t go off in the woods without contact, don’t be stupid.”

“We could get this done so much faster if we just had cell service,” said Yaz, glaring off into the sky. “It’s stupid.”

Lizard looked long and hard at him and I felt bad, knowing he was irritated with him already.

“That’s not how things are done around here,” said Liz. “So, either you’re going to have to man up and join this adventure the way real woodsy dudes do, or not. Take your pick.”

Yaz snuffed. “Yeah, I know.”

All I could see on the map was the winding path and the X at the end that led to Eagle Island, the forbidden place. I looked off behind Yaz into the woods, noticing glowing eyes that I thought could be that monster again. I knew Lizard would be disappointed in me if he knew how afraid I was, how much I feared the open woods instead of the comfort of my home or phone.

I stood up, putting my paper bag away. I felt so small in this group. Yaz was tall and lean and even Lizard, who’d once been much shorter than I, was now a lot taller and built up. I was the tiny girl. They looked at me with demanding eyes.

“Okay, shall we continue,” I said.

Lizard gulped. “Ready.”

“I can’t figure out how long this will take,” said Yaz.

“It’s okay, we have the walkies. People can contact us, if you don’t want to come it’s okay and I understand,” I looked him.

“I said I would come,” said Yaz.

“Okay!” I nodded. “Okay, this is good.”

“Good!” said Lizard. “Gosh, I feel like the Lord of the Rings troop.”

I held the map in my shaking hand and we walked off into the woods.

*

The team walked on. I felt nervous and sticky with sweat, the GPS slipping around in my fingers. We were actually going straight into the forest without our parents. I glanced at the walkie that Lizard had pinned onto my belt, expecting at any moment a barrage of incoming calls from them. My dad wasn’t like that though. He’d spent every summer here, and before he met Mom, grew up at a small lake south of Kamloops. He was comfortable in the woods, well, if he had his GPS.

I could feel dry earth crunching beneath my feet, and kept my eyes mostly down at the device. I didn’t want to look too clearly at the woods beyond. The trees towered here, massive Douglas Fir, spruce and pine as I’d learned, the understory packed tight with huckleberry bushes, spongy moss and dead, decaying logs. It was so dark in here and the further we walked away from the Callows neighbourhood the darker it got. I remember just the other night looking out my loft window and being terrified. I couldn’t believe how crowded the trees were, how tightly packed and tall and dominating they stood as if monsters. I felt so small here and powerless. The ground was covered in debris and it was often hard to walk and keep pace. As unbelievable as it seemed at the moment, I could imagine Grandpa walking this very path, brush-whacking through

the sharp branches and cobwebs that laced the open air and holding a walking stick to clear the way.

Lizard was at the front and he looked back at me for a long moment, smiled and then started to sing.

“Hi ho hi ho off to the woods we go!” he said.

Lizard always knew how to bring me back down to earth and make me comfortable, even if that meant sharing his terrible singing voice with the group.

“Sing along! Unless you want bears!” he said. “Hi ho hi ho off to the woods we go!”

“Hi ho hi ho,” I sung along.

And then he went louder, belting into the echoing woods. “Hi ho hi ho off to the woods we go!”

I looked to Yaz, who finally cracked a smile and joined in to scream-sing back. “Hi ho hi ho hi ho hi ho!”

I was laughing so hard it was hard to walk, but we kept on, Lizard at the lead with the map even though I held the directions.

“We’re on path, hey?” said Lizard.

“Looks like it!” The arrow was still pointed down a train, still forward.

Then Lizard began with another song, chanting into the woods which we followed suit. Some ways off I could see the Orb again, dancing above the brush, slipping in and out behind trees like it was dancing in the woods. I was starting to feel better and felt comfortable with Lizard in the lead. He always made me comfortable. I depended on that.

“You guys ever done hikes like this?” asked Lizard, now holding a walking stick in one hand, clearing the path of cobwebs for us.

I pelted over another pile of squishy moss, trying desperately to make sure we were on course, trying as Grandpa had shown me once.

“Want to know how to make it out of a forest with just a map?” he’d said. “You just pick a landmark, and head straight toward it and when you get there, pick another until you’ve walked straight out.”

I headed toward a rock formation.

“Nope,” said Yaz.

“Does grade nine camping trip count?” I said. “We went to Okanagan Mountain Park.”

“Ah, not really,” said Lizard, giggling. “The Okanagan’s too easy, too crowded with people. I just mean, there are so many other people! It’s like hiking in Banff. Clear trails, signs, other people, it’s such a white person hike, honestly. Piece of cake, try hiking like a native and bush whacking like this!”

I smiled. It made me happy to see Lizard in such control out here.

“Do you hear that?” called Lizard up ahead.

I listened carefully. I could hear something. Like running water.

“Waterfall!” he said, running forward.

We all ran up the hill until we reached a heavily flowing water fall. I knew this place, they were called Deception Falls.

We filled up our waters at the river’s edge with the filters in our bottles. I noticed then how dark it had gotten. The sun was depleting from the sky and as we climbed the side of the falls up above, I could see the entire lake. The last of the sunlight glowed against Eagle Island. I could see flecks of boats on the water and the cabins of the Callows. And then fire, speckling the mountainside.

“Oh no,” said Yaz. “That’s a bad fire.”

I could see it clearly from up here. The specks of orange, and off one part, giant plumes of dark, ashy smoke rising in the air like a nuclear bomb, something you couldn’t see back at Reynolds properly, or maybe just wasn’t there earlier.

“It’s fine,” said Lizard. “Honestly, it’s like way over there, and these things usually happen and then die out. These forests need fire you know.”

I nodded. “It was true, in my entire life of coming to Grandpa’s cabin, never once had there been an ‘Okanagan’ type fire.”

I didn’t want to look anymore. I turned around, watching Yaz fill his water and put it back in his satchel. He was so precise in his movements, carefully unzipping his bag and putting the bottle in. He caught my eye and smiled looking back down again. We stayed at the river, buying our time with the water and cleaning our faces off. I looked off into the woods to see the Orb on the other side, glowing. Here it was again. This thing was following me, I was sure of it. I didn’t know if I was going crazy or if this was a sign of something. Grandpa always did say that spirits and things existed in these woods that were not explained. Of course, we knew that. Everyone who had spent any long amount of time at the Callows did. I stepped forward to greet it, mesmerized by its light, when I slipped. I could feel my body falling before I could react, and my knee sliced against a rock as I fell, everything getting wet. My body swelled in panic. The device had fallen from my hand into the water.

“The GPS!”

Yaz was at my side. “Hey, hey be careful.” He picked me up and out of the water.

“Where’s the GPS, we need it, shit I dropped it in the water!”

Lizard came running over, fishing the small device out from between slimy rocks and dried it off with his t-shirt. My head was spinning.

“It’s fine, these things are waterproof for a reason,” said Liz.

I looked back and the Orb had disappeared. My knee was bleeding badly. Lizard ran back over with the first aid kit.

“It was an accident.”

“I’ve got it, it’s okay,” said Yaz, taking the bag from Lizard and starting to clean my wound. “I’ve taken first aid.”

“You’ve taken first aid, well I’ve done first aid my whole life,” said Lizard, trying to step in but Yaz stopping him with a blocked hand.

“I said I’ve got it,” he looked up at Lizard. I watched his eyes grow narrow.

Lizard stepped back. “Whatever.”

Yaz took a towel to my knee and cleaned it off with alcohol, so gently that I barely felt it. He cleaned the wound and wrapped my knee in a cloth bandage.

“Do you have spare clothes, you should change,” said Yaz. “Do you want my help?”

“What the fuck—,” said Lizard.

“It’s okay,” I held a hand up. “I’ve got it.”

Yaz helped me to stand but my knee was stinging and wobbly. I walked off the path and into the woods to change into spare clothing, dancing around my injured knee. That was embarrassing. We’d barely gotten anywhere and I’d already fallen? What kind of bad hero was I? I’d forgotten to even look. This Orb thing was pissing me off, making me do such a thing and fall in front of the guys. I was supposed to be leading this expedition, and instead looking like

some princess that needed saving. And I didn't know why Yaz was so protective. I stepped back, thanking him.

"We need to get moving," said Yaz. "Before the sun goes down."

I walked at a limp, which hurt, but I didn't complain. I couldn't complain. They'd think I wanted to go home. There would be no more complaining. I heard Grandpa's words in my head.

You're going to be a great hero.

I could. I was the hero. I had to keep repeating that to myself.

"Can I have it back?" I asked for the GPS.

Lizard handed it to me and I clenched it in my palm. We'd already made it through the spots around our neighbourhood, and I believed we were going the right way because we were following the river. The next spot marked up ahead signified a structure of some sort. I didn't understand how there could be, way out here.

"Liz, we're looking for a structure," I called out.

Liz was way up ahead, shirtless now in the baking depleting sun. He had his whole t-shirt wrapped around his head in a head wrap. Yaz was getting distracted, collecting vials from the river and then from the folds between the river rocks.

"Yeah I see something," he said up ahead.

I narrowed my eyes through the haze of growing smoke to see what looked like a structure up river and nodded. It was probably abandoned. We continued to walk toward it. The closer we neared, the more sketchy I realized it was. Some old settler's cabin. It was crumbling and made of rotting wood half falling apart. The place looked awful. As I looked, I could see a shadow of something inside and stopped dead. For a split moment, it moved into the doorway, its ovular face I now recognized, before moving into a corner. Was it following me too?

“You okay?” Lizard asked, turning around.

My heart raced. Get it together. I had to be strong. They couldn’t think I was seeing monsters. I forced a smile and a laughed.

“Oh yeah, totally, let’s get this clue.”

Lizard didn’t move for a moment, narrowed his brows and then shrugged and we kept going. I was clenching my fists, carefully walking closer to the structure. What was this thing? Was I making it up? Lizard slipped inside and I held my breath, then he peeped his head out, waving us in. Nothing. Suspicious.

“There are so many interesting things out here!” Yaz said. “Things I’ve never seen before, oh it’s going to be very exciting to research this stuff later.”

“Nerd,” said Lizard.

“I think it’s cool,” I said.

Yaz’s walkie buzzed and Fern’s voice came on.

“Yaz, can you hear me, where are you? Hello?” It buzzed out.

Lizard quickly showed him how to hold down the talk button and speak. He held it slightly off to his mouth.

“What Mom?”

“You need to get back,” she said, her voice sounding breathless.

Lizard and I looked to each other.

“What?” said Yaz into the walkie.

“There’s a new fire,” she said, her voice cutting out for a second. “A new fire down the highway, you have to get back.”

“What new fire?” said Lizard, before picking up his own walkie to Mr. Sherman. “Paps, it’s Liz, is there a new fire?”

The walkie buzzed. “Yeah, yeah a new one started on the mountain at the end of the lake, near the highway and it’s moving pretty fast, we’ve been put on evacuation alert.”

“What!” said Lizard.

“Get home,” said Fern. “Yaz, hello, can you hear me? This is bad!”

“Mom, relax, Mr. Sherman wouldn’t let us out here if it wasn’t safe,” said Yaz. “Swear.”

“Now!”

“Everything okay, Paps?” asked Lizard. “What does Papa Senior say?”

“Yep, son, all is well you keep having your fun, he hasn’t even thought twice about it.”

“Okay because we’re probably staying out longer because we’re seriously almost done. This is really important Paps,” said Lizard.

“All good son,” said Paps.

Yaz looked to Lizard, as if asking for help.

“You know you can speak,” said Lizard. “She can’t hear you unless you press the button.”

“Oh,” said Yaz.

I picked up my own walkie and buzzed into Dad, swatting away black flies that buzzed around my head. “Hey Dad, is the new fire bad?”

It took a minute, but Dad buzzed in. “No, no nothing to worry about, just a little flare up. It’s near the highway out of here so the tourists are nervous. You’re good!”

“Okay, well we’re going to stay out a bit longer,” I said. “We’re finishing up.”

“Sounds good Andy-bear,” said Dad.

“Your mom’s just overreacting,” said Lizard, wiping sweat off his brow. “Trust me, my paps has seen this stuff a million times and it’s not a big deal. I think the alert’s more as a heads up.”

“Well, what do I tell my mom?”

“Here,” said Lizard, taking his walkie and buzzing in. “Hi Mrs. Wolff, this is Lizard here, from Reynolds, the fire is nothing to worry about, you go talk to my dad he’ll reassure you.”

“I don’t believe you, dear,” she said.

“Please, Mrs Wolff, trust me. It’s pretty normal here. You are perfectly safe, Yaz will be home soon.”

She grunted and then said okay and buzzed out.

Lizard put a hand on my shoulder, letting out a breath.

“It’s like nobody’s seen a wildfire before,” he said.

“Well, sorry it’s not really normal to me,” said Yaz.

“No, I know, but trust me when papa senior says its okay, it is.”

“I trust you,” said Yaz. “Shall we continue before my mom comes out and murders me?”

“Uh, yes,” I said.

Lizard led me inside the cabin before I knew it was happening. It smelled terrible inside, like rotting wet wood and pungent moss. I covered my mouth, looking around, and there in the corner was the box, a big one this time.

“I’m surprised no one else has taken these,” said Lizard. “You know there are geocache hunts. They’re all around this country in little boxes. You take something, leave something, but, I don’t think a ton of people come out here, like I said, no trails, no signs, nothing.”

I walked over to the musty corner and pried open the lid. Inside the tin box, lay an old leather bound hatchet and a compacted fishing rod. The sight hit me hard. Grandpa had put so much trust in us. In me. What if we'd never done this? Never gotten here? Or someone else had found these treasures? These were his most prized possessions. I never knew most of the story behind them, because he often kept a lot of these stories very secret, but the one thing I did know is how much value he put into them. I bent over, picking up the hatchet, feeling the smoothness of the blade, the old brown leather handle fitting my palm. Yaz bent over and took the fishing rod, immediately extending it so it stood tall.

"Wow," said Yaz. "This is actually a good rod."

I quickly opened the note that lay in the bottom of the box, crumpled and damp, its ink muddled.

The tools of the trade; take care of them.

"What's it say?" asked Lizard, peering over my shoulder to read.

I bounced the hatchet in my hand, picturing the grooves of Grandpa's hand holding it. He brought this thing everywhere. I remembered him strapping it onto this very backpack I was wearing now, on his many hiking trips. The rod too, he'd always stick it in his bag and rant about how much better retractable rods were to normal ones.

Grandpa and I had arrived at Christmas Lake, a smaller lake outside the Callows for a small fishing trip for my thirteenth birthday. It was a stormy day and the clouds were rolling in overhead of the small lake where racing grey gusts freckled the water.

We'd hiked in a bit from the main road, and I followed behind Grandpa, taller than me, my view his expedition bag, hatchet strung across the back, fishing rod poking out the side.

We found the old tin boat that just sat here for people to use and I helped him haul it into the water, brushing out debris and pine needles.

“Ready?” he said.

“Oh yeah.”

We got in the boat and Grandpa rowed out past the clustered weeds and shallows to where the lake dropped off into blackness and then stopped, pulled his pack off, and rummaged for his tackle kit and handed me the rod.

“Open er’ up,” he said.

I pulled open the rod so it was no longer compact and now super long and skinny. I held it over the side of the boat and Grandpa pulled out a lure.

“Okay this,” Grandpa said, peering at me under his cap, “is a treble hook, perfect for casting rainbow trout, it’s got a little spring on it see, and we’re going to also attach our worm so it stays and doesn’t fly off.”

“Okay,” I nodded.

“Always use worms or something edible, much easier to catch that way. It gives the fish an extra snack. Okay, take this in your hands here, I’ll show you how to do it.”

I took the fishing line in my fingers and Grandpa showed me how to clip on the lure, attaching it and then sticking the worm onto the hooks so it stayed. Grandpa showed me how to lean back for a cast, the correct way to sit in the boat, and how to release the line just enough so the line went flying when I cast. It was fun when I learned from Grandpa. I felt like I could learn to do anything.

“Okay, what’s next?” asked Lizard.

“It says we’re going east,” I said, looking up.

“That’s leading off the river,” said Yaz. “I thought we were following the river.”

“I...it says east, that’s where the dotted line is leading,” I said, staring at the glowing green screen. “And then it loops back to the beach. I guess we’re supposed to get to the Island somehow?”

“But there’s such a strong pathway here leading up river, are you sure?” said Yaz.

I turned the GPS toward him and Lizard double checked the map. It was correct.

“It’s true, it’s leading that way,” I said. Was Grandpa insane? The forest looked so deep and thick and that incline! How could we hike that!

“Is it hike-able?” I asked.

“That’s like scaling a mountainside,” said Lizard. “Challenge accepted.”

“We have to follow the path,” I said, shrugging.

“There’s no path,” said Yaz.

“We make one then,” I said. “Or else what’s the point of all this, why would he make the map. The map is the path.”

“I’m in,” said Lizard. “We’ve got each other, we’ll keep on course.”

“We have to go.”

We crossed the river, trying not to get our shoes wet, and made our way up the steep mountainside. The trees jutted up from soil here, almost uprooting themselves, and so we had to zig-zag across the dry, crumbly earth, careful not to trip over roots. The higher we climbed the more of the valley I could see, and the spots of growing fires beyond, maybe even the slightest tinge of smoke.

My knee stung bad and I had to crawl on my hands and knees at times, shoving the GPS into the dirt, to keep from sliding down the mountainside, but I kept going, the guys singing

songs and chanting to keep the momentum. I looked up to see a large Inuksuk structure at the top of the hill, and knew it was then levelling off.

“Is that it?” called Yaz. “On the map there’s a smudge on some structure.”

I sat down a moment, unfolding the map, looking where the next dot lay. “I guess it is. Okay, a bit farther!”

I kept climbing, the smell of dry pine needles that littered the ground here getting in my nose. I was sweating like crazy, my forehead slick and hair sticking to my forehead. I took a large gulp of water, and turned around to look at my team all conked out on the ground beside the structure.

“One of these things, hey?” said Lizard, laughing, standing up and leaning on the tall rock formation, even taller than him.

“I wonder if he built this,” I said, touching my hand to the rough rock covered in moss.

“Like a protector,” said Lizard. “They’re actually supposed to tell direction.”

“What do you mean?” said Yaz. “I thought they were just like cool art forms.”

“Well, traditionally, it means, “in the likeness of a human”, so like the arms are supposed to point the direction you’re supposed to go. I don’t know, it’s supposed to act as a guide or, you know, a warning to travellers of potential danger ahead.”

“That’s cool and scary,” said Yaz. “There’s lots of lichen on it, so it may have been here a long time.” Yaz moved forward and scraped a bit of it into a vile, putting it in his harness.

“So it’s pointing down that way,” I said. “Alongside the cliff.”

“Is that what the map says?”

I nodded. “It does.” I peered down the cliff, the base filled with heavy rocks and sandy cliff, far too dangerous to climb. It felt like Grandpa was leading us on a safe path. I couldn’t help but think that without his guidance, I’d probably have tried to hike through that danger.

“Then off we go,” said Liz.

Will

When I first joined the army there was a lot of training. My whole life turned to training. I'd never trained so hard for any one particular thing in my life. I liked the uniform though, and the feel of wearing it. I felt mature for once, which was pretty cool for a kid. Ed was right there beside me too. It felt like we were living the dream. Ed was cocky. He was given a gun immediately, already strong enough to use it. I remember one particular day at the training camp over by William's Lake and I was given a hatchet and a fishing rod.

"What's this?" I asked the sergeant.

"We're training in all aspects, so you better learn how to use it."

I'd learned a bit of fishing from my dad, and how to swing an axe properly to chop firewood, but didn't know much about hatchet use. I knew I'd have to learn a lot. For some reason, Ed was just good at everything.

We had to run an obstacle course, things like cutting wood with the hatchet or catching fish in the river. It felt like some ultra intensive summer camp. I sucked badly at first, but I was motivated to become the best. These tools were way fancier too than Dad's tools. I mean, Dad's old cabin stuff was not going to work out here in the Canadian army.

Thunder rumbled over the horizon, but the trainers paid no mind. Keep going. Through all wet and weather. It was summer. No stopping. No sickness. Sickness and stopping was for the weak.

And I was not going to be the man who lost because he was weak.

Soldiers did not step down.

That one training day was hot. I swung the hatchet, cutting a good groove in the tree and the bell rang, which meant I succeeded and I kept running, my hands sweaty on the leather hilt.

We got to a river and I stood beside Ed, cranking the rod and letting the line fly.

“What does this have to do with the army?”

“Survival,” he said. “You never know. You have to be ready to adapt to anything.”

Ed had grown a lot in a year, like a lot. He was tall now, buff, built. It wasn’t fair. I was still scrawny and gross. I tried working out but it didn’t work. I’d be that skinny kid for sure. I had to be like Dad. For my dad it had been a great calling. Fight for your country! The world needs you!

What did anyone need with Ed and I?

What did anyone need with me. I guess, I would have to wait. I’d have to prove they needed me.

Andy

The night was dragging on, and I was worried Lizard and Yaz would not hold out much longer and knew we had to set up camp soon. I was surprised they had endured with me this far. But at least I hoped they would. We walked alongside the cliff that looked out at Callows Lake. The afternoon was melting away to dusk. We were all getting tired too. Lizard tripped on a rock, doubling over, causing an eruption of laughter from Yaz that I wasn't used to hearing. It was different than the rest of the forest here. It was open and bright from the last of the sunlight. But I knew soon it would be dark and I wasn't sure how to handle dark.

"What's the plan, Andy?" said Yaz. His clothing was a dirty mess now and he looked less like a city kid and more like he'd escaped a plane wreck.

I tried to pick up speed as the darkness was settling in and caught glimpses of that thing, that monster, appearing in the foreground.

I remembered what Grandpa had said.

There's no use adventuring in the dark, best to wait till morn'.

"I think we should set up camp now," I said. "Somewhere...we're going to get lost at this pace."

"Should I make a shelter?" asked Lizard.

"What are we doing, Gramps?" I asked, standing on the shore of the next-door beach.

"Today," Grandpa said, standing tall with hands on his hips, wearing his favourite golf cap. "I will teach you how to build a lean to."

"What's that mean?"

“A lean to is a structure you make when you’re out adventuring in the mountains and need shelter,” he said, starting to rake away a special spot on the beach. “Very important for our young blossoming adventurer.”

“Like Jim Hawkins would do?”

“I’m sure he made hundreds.”

I smiled. Of course I wanted to learn everything of an adventurer.

“I actually know how to make one myself,” I said.

Lizard looked at me and smiled.

“Yeah,” I nodded, although as soon as I said it, I already started doubting myself.

“So, we continue a bit or stop?” said Yaz. “We have to be careful though, that’s a storm coming for sure over the back mountains here.”

“What?” I turned around. In the last lick of light that afternoon, bubbling white clouds crept over the back mountains. I was familiar with their shape. They were thunderclouds indeed. I felt fear race through my body, a fear that used to be excitement when the news of a storm would arrive. I didn’t think I’d ever truly been outside, stuck, in a storm.

We continued, looking around at the empty flowered bushes and flat spots that rolled up into deep, dark mountains. The skies had clouded over and the distant first rumbles of a storm sounded in the sky, making my stomach churn. The faintest smell of smoke hung in the air. Yaz pointed out a small clearing in the grass in the forest.

I was exhausted. The guys collapsed on the ground.

“Okay, lean-to time,” I said. “Gather some large branches and start leaning them this way against these two trees, I’ll go get some pine shrubbery up there, okay, before it gets too dark.”

I rummaged into the expedition bag and pulled a hoodie over my head, trying to keep away some of the mosquitos. Up ahead I spotted a fallen pine and went toward it, starting to hack off green brush with the hatchet.

“Hey, we need firewood too!” shouted Lizard.

Firewood. Right. I hadn’t really cut firewood before, usually Grandpa did that part. The hail was attacking my back and it hurt, but I pushed through. What did he say about firewood? I wasn’t strong enough to do that.

“I’ve got a special method for you, Andy, take a piece of wood, like an old piece of stump or log, lean it on another log between your legs and swing with the hatchet. It’ll split easier with momentum and the pieces will go flying backward.”

I could do this. Lizard ran over with the hatchet he was now carrying on his bag. I took those pieces, looking at the guys, pretending to know exactly what I was doing. I had to pretend. I was shaking in the cold, but I put a log down between my legs and rested another on top. I stood over it in a split stance. I’d give it a try.

“Use momentum.”

I breathed out, feeling my grip better on the hatchet.

“I can do it if you want,” said Lizard.

“No, no I can do this.”

My hands were so slippery that it was hard to get a grip. I looked up and noticed behind Lizard, the Orb. There it was again! It just floated there, between the dark trees. Its sound filled my ears, and I could tell nobody else was noticing. It was so strange.

I could do this. The echoing sounds of the Orb seemed to calm me. I didn’t know why, but they felt peaceful.

I swung the hatchet in a test try, making sure I was lined up with the log and then I pulled forward and slammed the hatchet into the log. Nothing happened at first, just a thunk. I tried to think back to my grandpa using this hatchet.

He was outside the cabin, around the corner when I came out on the porch in pjs. Grandpa had on a plaid shirt and his baseball cap, swinging throws into a log that was perched on top of stump. I watched the wood splinter, pieces flying off and then he swung again and the log split in two.

I ran before his next swing to pick up the pieces and bring them inside for the fire.

I looked up, Yaz and Lizard staring at me. But the Orb was watching too.

Again, it seemed to say.

I breathed deep and swung the hatchet down with everything I could muster and was welcomed with the pleasant sound of wood splitting. A smile escaped my face, and I pulled the log up, finishing the cut and throwing the pieces to Lizard. He nodded and smiled.

“Guess you can do it,” he said.

I kept on splitting more wood, splitting some for kindling, and I felt a sense of power. Adrenaline. I didn’t feel as cold.

I didn’t want to go to the Orb, for fear it would disappear again, so I let it stay. I built the fire, Lizard next to me, as we set four logs in a square and filled the inside with whatever dry leaves and debris we could find. The wind picked up, a breeze. Lizard came over with a match and threw it into the pit, lighting the debris on fire. I started placing kindling inside, trying to catch the fire as I blew on it.

When I looked up again the Orb, its body fluid and melting in and within the surrounding, stared at me. I smiled.

Lizard looked at me. “Am I doing this right?”

“Liz, you absolutely know how to do this,” I said, looking at the lean-to forming.

“I know,” he said. “But so do you.”

“It’s perfect, now I’ll weave these on top, and you tend the fire.”

I started weaving the branches onto the roof and Yaz put our stuff inside.

“Here bear, you have to take the fluffy ones, lots of green needles, and you weave it together like a blanket, see?”

Grandpa laid the shrub on top of the roof. I handed him new branches.

“This’ll keep your fort nice and air tight, I had this on mine once.”

“You had a fort Gramps?”

“Like I said, every child should have a tree castle.”

I laid the patchwork, one branch at a time, until the fort was dry. I stood back, looking at what I’d created. I’d done it. Maybe I wasn’t so helpless. I looked for the Orb, but it was gone now. The guys sat around the fire in a huddle as thunder cracked in the sky above us. It was dark now, and the only lights I could see were those of Reynolds and the cabins and the flecks of fire creeping down the mountainside.

I pulled out a thin blanket from my bag, making sure to stay in the dry of the hut.

“Well this sucks,” Yaz said through shaking lips.

“It’s fine,” I said, pulling him closer to my body.

“It’s dark out there,” said Lizard. “Kind of creepy.”

“And this is an interesting structure,” said Yaz, studying it.

“I made it the way my grandpa made it,” I said.

I was proud of myself, actually being able to help.

“Maybe we should add some reinforcement though,” said Lizard. “Just to make it stronger.”

“I did do it the way Grandpa said.”

“No, I know,” Lizard waved his arms. “It’s just...there’s some weakness in the structure.”

“I think it’s fine.”

“But it might blow apart.”

I stared at Lizard.

“Give me the hatchet,” I said to him.

Lizard’s eyes widened.

“It’s mine, please.”

Lizard carefully handed it to me and stepped off. “I’ll just fix this up a bit.”

“The fort is fine, my grandpa showed me how to do this.”

“Andy please don’t take this personally. I’m just trying to help.”

I clenched my fists. “You have no right to touch what’s his.” I knew I was getting angry and letting the words come out of me without thinking. I didn’t care.

Lizard just nodded and walked away, Yaz picking at his fingers.

Lizard sat down across from the fire. I glanced at him, his skin warm in the firelight, his hair more wild and curly than before.

We all stayed mostly silent, listening to the thunder rumble and shake the earth outside. I watched the wind blow gently in the trees, swaying them side to side and knew that monster was hiding amongst them.

“So, this ‘treasure hunt,’ why would someone do such a thing?” said Yaz, clearing his throat, poking the fire with a stick.

I was about to say something when Lizard perked up and almost shouted. “Oh, you’d understand if you’d been listening.”

Everyone was in a poor mood. I’d ruined this.

“Because he wanted more people to get out into the woods,” said Lizard. I thought I saw a hint of sadness on his face, rather than anger.

“It’s a good vision,” said Yaz.

Lizard’s voice deepened. “I don’t think you guys actually know what’s out here, out there. Andy, you said he never took you out here.”

“I know,” I said.

“I’ve seen things out there, out here,” he said. “I think when everyone leaves for the summer and the days get short and cold, things change. It gets really dark and silent.”

“What kind of things?” I asked. I thought of the Orb. Of my grandpa. Of those shadows monsters.

He shook his head. “Things you wouldn’t want to know, that wouldn’t make this much fun any longer.” He bowed his head.

Lizard was scaring me. I didn’t like him talking like this, diverging from his normally happy and optimistic self. Yaz stayed silent, just playing around with a stick, dragging it through the earth. I still wondered, though, if he’d ever seen what I was seeing.

“Anyways,” said Lizard, scratching his head. “Sorry to dampen the mood. Andy, you should tell Yaz your grandpa’s story, it’s not about me.”

I poked around the fire with a stick. I didn't always like talking about him. I didn't know why, but I felt my grandpa was the most special person in the world and that somehow sharing him might ruin that, that others wouldn't get it, or pick it apart somehow, or ask why I cared so much.

"You see, my grandpa grew up here," I said.

They were looking at me through bouncing flames. Lizard was the only one who knew this story, but he listened contently anyways. And Yaz, beside me, our knees touching, and fingers every once in a while.

"He came here in the 40s when he was young and his parents were looking for a summer cabin actually," I began. "It was a lot different here back then."

"There was Mahood Resort," said Lizard. "It was like a super famous resort here in the 50s and burned down in a fire."

"Exactly, look at this."

I pulled out the old film photograph, grainy and slightly bent, and handed it off to Yaz to investigate it. The photo showed my grandpa and his friends at the beach, Callows Lake and Eagle Island behind them. I was in awe how the landscape still looked exactly the same, but that my grandpa had been just a teen.

"Yeah anyways," I nodded. "Catastrophic."

Yaz nodded. "This is cool, he even had his own friends here. It says, *I knew this would mean something someday*, what does that mean?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe history is important somehow. All I knew is that he's always been connected to objects, like he believed they would one day act as archival evidence for him or others in his life. But anyways, he lived here every summer of his childhood and had

his own friends and adventures. He used to go to that island in the middle of the lake and him and his friends named it Eagle Island because there's this charred tree that the eagles like to perch on, and I don't know, the tale is they kind of protect the freedom of that place."

"—and so when I was young, I came for the first time. Like, I was basically born here. I learned how to do everything here, all because of him. Like I felt like my grandpa was my 'summer' parent. But Grandpa was a hero, he went to war, was a firefighter and was honoured even in a book once as one. Like a real hero, and he began to tell me these stories, like great adventure novels—*Huckleberry Finn*, *Peter Pan*, *Treasure Island* and that one we became particularly attached to."

"I like that," said Yaz.

"He used to tell me that one day he'd take me on a great adventure and finally let me have this fantastical expedition bag he used to carry everywhere he went, which held all these tools that he treasured. I don't know, I guess it was an interesting way to be raised—I didn't give two shits about princesses, as much as Jakub seems to think here, but wanted to be one of those heroes, as lame as that sounds."

I caught Lizard's eyes across the fire and they were sparkling. He had his hands clasped in front of him, a small grin across his face, blossoming into dimpled cheeks.

"He moved up here full time a while ago and lived with my grandma until she passed away and then last year died of brain cancer."

"Oh," said Yaz.

"Look, I know you guys think I'm insane," I said. "Like your mom Yaz is about to murder us if we don't come back now, but he passed away and I never got to say goodbye. I never even knew he was sick. I guess it was ignorant, but I thought he was stronger than any

living thing I knew, and I never thought this could happen. He always seemed so happy. And when I found the first clue, I knew how much work had gone into this—I knew he wanted me to do this for some reason and that maybe it was his dying wish and, like, guys it will literally kill me if I don't."

Yaz stared at his hands and Liz nodded slowly.

"I think there could be something really special at the end," I said. "And I know we can do this. Like, you all are so talented and cool, even if I hate to admit it. I need your help guys. I'll let you know everything you need to know. I'll tell you more stories, but I need you guys with me."

Lizard reached into his pocket and handed me something into the palm of my hands. It was a tiny carved eagle. I was confused, but I held it in my hand. It was smaller than my palm, a tiny delicately carved wood eagle.

"Here," he said. "It's your grandpa's."

I just stared at him. "Why do you have this?"

He shrugged. "I took it from the last box, I'm sorry. I was mad."

"Well, at least you protected it."

He nodded. "Sorry."

"How many more clues, do you think?" asked Yaz.

"Looks like one more and then the X," I said, rubbing my finger back and forth across the GPS's dirty, specked screen.

"My parents are intense sometimes," said Yaz, as if lost in thought. He twiddled his fingers.

"And Jakub," said Lizard.

“We’re not going back,” I said. We’d climbed too far to turn around. Too far! We were actually doing this, and we could not turn around now.

*

The night grew around us and we let the fire sizzle out, trying to get to sleep through the deep rumblings and crackings of thunder. I had no idea this was all going to take this long, or go this late and knew my parents might be a bit concerned. Yaz’s mom must be going insane. But there was no turning back now. I lay down on a blanket, sandwiched between Yaz and Lizard and gazed off into the bush, watching the flashes in the clouds and the wind whistle through the lean-to structure. The moon glowed hazy.

“You call them” said Yaz.

“No, I’m not. My mom’s going to demand I get back tonight,” I said.

“Okay, okay. I’ll do it,” said Lizard, picking up the walkie. He held down the button.

“Paps?”

In a couple seconds, Mr. Sherman picked up. “What’s up? Why you not home yet?”

“Listen, Paps, we have to stay overnight.” Lizard looked at us with wide eyes. “Andy has to complete this mission, Paps, okay? We are seriously almost finished and we thought we could finish it before it got dark but now it’s dark. Please, can you just trust me and let me stay overnight and tell Yaz and Andy’s parents so they don’t freak out on us. I promise, we’ll be back in the morning after we find the treasure we need. I have to do this for Andy...I promised.”

Mr. Sherman took a moment and I actually thought he wasn’t going to answer but then he grunted through the speaker and said, “yeah okay. Keep the others safe, I’ll let all the parents know. Go finish it.”

“Thanks Paps, love you.”

“Love you too, son.”

Lizard put the walkie away.

“Why are you legit the best,” I said. “Seriously. I’m so glad you’re here.”

Lizard wrapped himself up in the blanket, sharing half with me.

“Yeah, you are lucky.” He laughed.

I looked at him, his face dark in the night.

“Not exactly how we imagined summer, hey?”

“Not at all,” said Yaz.

“No,” he said. “But it’s better. I can’t remember the last time we actually went out—like out out—into the forest, Paps never let me do that which is ridiculous since he wants me to take over the resort one day and can’t even trust me to go into the bush. I’m surprised he actually just said yes.”

“You know your father,” I said. “He’s just strict, but looking out for you, I guess. Maybe he’s changing. Maybe you’re showing him how capable you are.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. He’s still too harsh,” Lizard wrapped his hands in the blankets, glancing at Yaz and I. “This winter was too hard; all we did was fight. I think he’s more stressed out than ever, making so much less every year and there’s been like problem after problem.”

“I’m sorry about that,” I said, pulling Lizard closer.

“What are we going to do. I mean, the resort’s falling apart, Andy, like really and we can’t afford to fix it.”

“When we get back, we’ll do something, I promise,” I said, not really knowing exactly how I could follow through with that.

I lay silent, listening to the sounds of the storm, trying to not let it frighten me. I loved storms, and they had to stay that way.

“Come on, Andy bear, it’s starting!” Grandpa shouted from the kitchen. It was indeed starting.

We had the door to the cabin open, and that familiar smell of rain and wetness wafted through to the kitchen. Mom sat reading a book in the armchair while Dad and my brother played darts, my dog running back and forth in excitement. I threw on a hoodie, and ran outside with him.

He already stood at the balcony, something in his hands—another one of his esteemed ‘tools’ that my mother would make fun of him for, saying that he had too many ‘movie props’ and collectables.

“Oh this is going be a big one, I can feel it,” he smiled at me underneath his fisher’s hat. Everyone thought my grandpa was crazy, except me, I thought he was the coolest man on Earth and although he was eccentric, I wanted to be just like him when I grew up.

“Oh see that! A big strike! Three tails!” he shouted.

I looked out across the lake at the blackness of clouds.

“Now you see this, Andy,” he pulled me up so I could actually see over the balcony as I was too small. “The way you know a storm is coming is you see those giant puffy fluffy clouds I showed you earlier, remember, like the marshmallow.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“And then they form a black bottom,” his eyes widened. “Like a burnt pancake.”

“You always burn my pancakes.”

“I know, darling, I am not a good cook. Anyways, then you feel it.”

“Feel it how?”

Grandpa widened his gestures. “Every time a storm comes you just feel it on your skin,” he pointed at my arms. “The leaves rustle, the lake turns eerily quiet, everything turns quiet and you feel...” he tapped his tongue. “Like a tinge of wetness in the air.” And he held his finger up high.

I watched him in awe. My grandpa knew everything.

“Really?” I said.

“Would you like some clues?”

“Yes!”

“Those birch trees there,” he said. “With their little papery leaves will start fluttering. It’ll feel creepy, like something is coming. And the lake will pick up gusts and turn grey and ashy. But the air will be still.”

“—And then before you even know it, the sky is consumed with darkness.” He pointed out at the horizon. “And you can’t even tell where the cloud is. It’s just grey blackness like a dark mist. And it takes over everything. Storms control these lands, Andy, and it’s best to understand them and to not fear. That is why we stand outside to watch the storm, to let Mrs. Storm know we respect her and we are listening.”

I listened now. I watched the swaying trees. I watched lightning streak through the sky, all purples and pinks and whites. I felt the vibration in the forest floor. I felt it.

In the middle of the night, I woke up to gusting winds. The shelter had hung up better than I’d thought, but the roof was rattling and it was musty, actually, incredibly smoky. Shrieking air split through the tiny gaps in the wood and brush. I’d woken now, and heard many snapping twigs

and weird sounds in the dark forest that I didn't like to hear, and soon enough my mind had consumed me with thoughts of what monsters could be out there and what I wasn't seeing because I was in the shelter and it was dark.

I rolled over on the hard, lumpy ground. I had to remind myself next time to actually make a bed of sorts out of brush and not just sleep on a blanket. Both of the guys were still asleep, looking generally peaceful.

There was no way I was getting back to sleep now. I crawled forward, the only light coming from the glow of the GPS in the far corner of the tent behind Yaz, charging on a battery pack. I put a knee forward, hitting Grandpa's map and then picked it up, my heart almost stopping thinking I'd ripped it. I pocketed the map.

I peered out of the structure to see the Orb floating nearby, so prominent in the night. It was still following me. The night was silent, except for the wind and the two guys asleep. Perhaps now, I could actually see what this thing was, because every time too many people were around or I got distracted, it would disappear.

I slowly crawled out of the structure and walked barefoot across our camp. The Orb didn't move as I came closer and closer.

"Hello," I said into the night.

It echoed back at me, hello, but it was my own voice and I shuddered.

Andy

I knew I was being idiotic, and wasn't even sure at this point how far I'd followed the Orb, but I continued anyways. It was if my feet were not under my control anymore and my body seemed to drift forward, my mind blank. The Orb danced through the wood, slipping in and out between trees like it was playing and soon I was skipping after it, zooming in and out between trees too. I felt crazy, doing this. It was strange that in this moment nothing other than my grandmother's words came to mind.

"Can you pass me that chime, yes right there," Grandma directed me.

I was standing beneath a pine tree as Grandma had continued to hang more things on its branches.

"Where do you even get all these things?" I asked.

"I make them silly," she said.

"You make them?"

"Lizard's grandpa showed me all about them," she said. "So I make them, to bring in the peaceful spirits and ward off the bad ones, and make people feel at home here. I guess the forests are dark, even if I don't want them to be, but the least we can do is have our protections."

Grandma was a huge believer in spirits, and I was following one now. I was sure of it. And if I didn't catch up to it, I might lose it after this whole journey is over. I wondered where a spirit went when a wildfire took over. I realized then how ashy the air smelt. It was heavy. It was probably just the wind blowing the fire smoke this way.

A small thought slipped into my mind. Protections. Did I even have any protections out here?

"Hello!" I called, echoing through the woods. "Why won't you stop for me!"

The Orb spiralled around, but did not stop.

I kept running after it. I'd left the pack and everything back at the camp, and so all I had with me was the treasure map clenched in one hand and Grandpa's baseball cap on my head. I didn't even have shoes. Idiotic. It was fine, I'd just turn around.

I turned but the Orb echoed louder and louder and when I turned back, rays of light were radiating off its body, flying across the ground at me. I stared at it, wide-eyed.

"What do you want?"

Owum. Owum. It echoed. I think it wanted to show me something.

I followed it as the woods grew darker and I could no longer see any sign of the lake or the sky. I shivered, cold, and my feet stung from the sharp debris on the ground.

"I can't do this anymore!" I said out loud. "I'm going to get lost!"

Owum. Owum. It echoed.

I ran faster, but the faster I ran the faster the Orb moved.

I was so tired. Tired of chasing this.

I stopped and turned again. I had to go back. I had to finish this quest. I had to complete every obstacle, obtain every treasure and make it to the X at the end. What if I didn't finish? What if I failed? I no longer had a grandpa to tell me it was going to be okay, all I had was one final quest to show him that I was capable just like him. I was a hero just like him. I uncoiled the map in my hand, fingers shaking. We were so close. So what was I doing out here?

Owum. Owum. It echoed.

"Shut up!" I screamed.

My own words echoed back and I looked at it in horror. It kept repeating my words, louder and louder.

My stomach churned and I shivered. At that moment I desperately wished I was back home at the tree fort castle. That Lizard and I were huddled in the fort in the loft watching old 80s movies with popcorn under thick blankets and planning out our own quests we were going to do the next day. And there was a storm, but we were safe and protected in the castle that Grandpa and us had built. I liked that. I liked pretending better than doing it for real.

Owum. Owum. It continued to echo. I followed it, staggering, realizing how tired I was and that I indeed needed that sleep. Why was it so smoky? I tried to look for signs in the sky, but it was too dark. A stab of cold wind raced through the trees and caught me freezing. Thunder rumbled and the air was far too heavy. I'd run way too far.

I looked at the Orb and it had stopped, and when I looked closer at it, realized it was standing at the base of a tree where a box lay. I ran toward it, stumbled to the ground, forgetting that Orb was right next to me, and through its light, opened the box.

The forest felt like it was spinning around me. The ground didn't feel so much like ground beneath me, but rather soft like jelly, like I was about to fall through the Earth. I tried to stand up, but collapsed. The box opened and inside laid a rusted compass and a note. I opened it.

Find your way

I opened the pocket compass. The glass was shattered. What kind of joke was this? I closed the lid. Engraved on the copper casing, read, "Canada". I opened it again. The compass was definitely broken.

"What the hell is this for!" I said. "It's useless, this whole thing is useless."

I held it in my hand and put the note in my pocket.

I looked up but the Orb's light was dimming, and the woods had grown incredibly dark.

"Who are you?" I said, voice scratchy.

And then the Orb began to change. It twitched suddenly, almost convulsing as threads of dark black snaked from its eyes and down its body. Then it retracted and then let out a sound and twitched again, the black snakes absorbing its body from the inside. I watched in horror as the body twisted and convulsed, growing long arms and long legs and a long black face until it was entirely a misty black with an oval head with no face, staring at me. The monster.

It made a sound and I realized how similar it was to the Owum, but darker, deeper and rustier.

I scrambled backward.

“Who are you! Why are you doing this?”

The thing stepped forward. I could see the stretch of shadow across its distorted skull, like a body trapped in cellophane.

I screamed out, scurrying backward but it was in front of me. My whole body was shaking and I couldn't speak, couldn't get a sound out. I couldn't breathe. I clenched hard onto the compass.

I couldn't breathe.

It stared at me. I could see its jaw twisting and churning. Everything was dizzying and wrong and the background behind it spun and spun and spun. I tried to relax. Relax! Calm down! I could feel hot tears in my eyes as this thing just stared at me, doing nothing. Waiting to kill me. It had me. I gulped for breath. My chest was so tight that I couldn't get air in.

Was this what it was coming down to?

Was this the end?

Breathe. What had Grandma said? What had she said?

All we have is our protections.

My shaking hand held onto the compass that did not work, the metal warming in my palm.

Find your path.

Keep going.

You must live.

Where was Lizard and the others? I had to get back to them. I got up with shaking legs. As I stood up, the monster stood, stretching taller and taller and taller than me. I walked past it. I must find Lizard.

“Get away from me!” I screamed.

The thing was following me in long strides. I turned.

“Get the hell away from me!” I screamed again. “You don’t belong here, I belong here! I’m not afraid!”

And then I began to run and run and run. I didn’t care that rocks and twigs stabbed into my feet. I ran. It was following me, I knew it. I had to find Lizard. This was not going to be how this was going to end. I held the compass so hard my hand hurt. I didn’t know where I was going. I had a broken compass and a useless map after all and wished I had grabbed the GPS, but I ran anyways.

Will

I always loved July, ever since I could remember, but this was the first July in which everything had changed. I was no longer at my home on the lake, playing in the water all day like a frivolous boy. I was no longer hanging out with Ed catching fish and drinking sodas. Those days were the long past days of childhood, and I was a soldier now and soldiers could not afford such luxury. I guess this July was different for most of the world. It seemed like just yesterday, June 25th, 1950, when this whole war began. I had gotten the lecture hundreds of times. That this was the moment we had been waiting for, to act, to assist on South Korea's behalf. That this was the fight against communism itself! Canadians usually did not get this chance!

I wasn't even sure what that meant really, only that all the boys were riled up and ready to fight and I thought I had to as well.

I stepped along, heavy boots squishing into the mud. Ed was a bit ahead of me, leaning low, gun sheathed to his back. I looked around at the brushy marshland, thinking it extraordinary that although I was in Korea, it looked similar like home. There were similar shrubs and trees even. If I woke in some dream, perhaps I'd have never known. The U.S. had ordered the military here, and our Canadian division got assigned to the U.S command. Ed and I had transferred, and now here we were, the dream we'd always imagined. We were set to be heroes.

I'd signed up, drafted to the military only a year ago. It began with three months of heavy training, building up my physical strength, morning after morning of 5:30 brutal wake-up calls. I wasn't even an early bird! It felt like sport training, and weapons involvement and operation training didn't come until the latter half of that year. I was only a teenager still, and it felt like I'd trained for life. Then the announcement came that the war had started and that the U.S. needed us.

Our platoon stayed together, the same since the beginning at training camp in Aldershot, Nova Scotia, and thankfully Ed and I stayed together. Ed was made Corporal, above me because of his skill and leadership. I was proud of him but also jealous.

But Ed was a hero and as a hero, he could lead.

I wore my army badge strapped to my shoulder and edged forward, hatchet on one side, my bag strapped so tightly to my back holding my gear. My prized possessions, keeping me warm. I felt empty without them. I held the compass in a shaky hand, letting my skin warm its metal.

“We’re going the right way?” I asked.

“Uh, yeah, absolutely,” said Ed as we headed nearer to our observation post.

I didn’t know why I was doubting myself. I’d trained for months, trained with this compass for months but still couldn’t help but doubt myself. I guess I was so used to Dad being around, showing me the ropes. Or me just doing something but Dad being right there behind me just in case it was wrong. But it was okay, because Ed felt like an older brother to me and he would protect me.

We inched forward in the dark, the whole platoon, including the many soldiers, the sergeant and three corporals. We had to be careful around these parts. The other side was right there on the horizon, and we knew that. If we were going to succeed, we had to be perfect. I ran the lines through my head that the sergeant had told me, to observe and protect from the observation post we were headed to, and then fight any possible Korean enemy approaching.

“Stay on my heel,” said Ed, leaning even lower. Three other soldiers were behind me.

I followed my sited landmark, looking at the compass, the needle swinging somewhat as I tried to keep it steady, staring at my shaking hand. The DMZ was ahead. Shots fired somewhere off in the distance and I covered closer to Ed. There shouldn't be shots.

"Are you scared or something?" he looked back, laughing.

"No way."

"Calm down," said Ed. "This is no different than all those times back at the cabin."

"Oh I know that."

"We're going to make it through this, okay, and how about after I treat you to a drink?"

"Deal," I smiled. "Where's George when you need him, he always made everything optimistic."

"Eh, optimism is bullshit," said Ed. "What isn't bullshit, faith."

"Faith, really, coming from you?"

"Hey man I've changed a lot. You have to have faith you will get out of this and then return home a hero. Right? Imagine what that'll feel like."

"Pretty incredible."

"Better than incredible," he had his eyebrow raised. "Bet you can find a woman pretty easily after that kind of title."

I could only really think of one woman. I thought back to Eda. I'd met her in the town I was living in during all that training time. We'd agreed to be together once I got back, and I guess that gave me a whole new level of optimism. In my opinion, she was perfect. It was funny, I don't think she really cared I was a soldier. I was built stronger now, but before I was scrawny and thin and weak and she still loved me.

I knew I loved her.

“You know who I want,” I said.

“I know,” he smirked. “But she’ll love you that much more once you return home a hero.”

Maybe that was true. I also didn’t know anything about love, or anything else for that matter. We were running forward now, the rest of the platoon close, sergeant at the front, when the bullets started raining. We ducked, swerving.

I thought of soldiers getting hit with bullets and my body shook. Dad had told me stories that many people he knew had died in his war.

I took cover, ducking, Ed beside me peering around the side.

We had to patrol that night, the observational posts. That was all. It would be fine. I watched the other soldiers with dogs through the thick shadows and thought I could see monsters.

Shots bellowed out of machine guns. Cattle bombs dropped around us in blitz fire. I still had the compass in my hand, useless now; we knew where we were going. I covered my head, the ear-splitting noises filling the airwaves. Tonight, was different than all the other nights of patrol this week. Soldiers out there were angry.

“Go go!” said Ed to us. “Undercover!”

Ed and I went running, found a ditch to hide in and Ed propped his gun on the dirt ledge and spit fire. The whole entire world was spinning and my stomach churning and I covered my head, shaking. I couldn’t stop shaking. Calm down. This is what you’ve trained for.

I peered up at Ed who was shooting, a stern look on his face. I couldn’t do this. My feet were sunk in mud, boots wet. A bomb dropped, whooshing a great amount of debris at us and I froze. Ahead, through the fog of dust, I could see a man, all in black, a massive elongated tongue

dangling from its mouth like some monster. My eyes widened and I cowered. I didn't move. Ed was shaking me, I knew, telling me we had to go. To keep fighting. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't care about any of this, as horrible as it sounded, these people, I didn't even know. These lands, I didn't know.

"Let's get back," saying to Ed.

I suddenly craved the comfort of our tree fort. Of our days back in what summer used to be, hanging out in the tree fort, having drinks, watching storms. Being protected. I realized I was now in the position to protect.

"Forward," he said.

I looked ahead, soldiers dropping like dead insects. The man standing there still, clouds of smoke rushing out around him. It was doomsday. Why had I signed up for this? Dogs barked and I couldn't see anything.

"We have to retreat back, something's wrong," I said, my face a rush of tears and dirt.

"No," said Ed. "We have to get to our post. Soldiers don't back down."

I didn't like it. I hated hearing those words. How long were we going to play this game? And then he burst out of the hole. I followed him. He ran forward, shooting, covering and I ran with him, shaking on my knees, trying to cover. I was no hero. When you read all those adventure stories, it seemed like you too could be on the battlefield. That you too could act like Achilles, to fight, battle, ram your enemies, but when it was happening you didn't feel that fire, you just felt a strange emptiness. But Ed was feeling something else, and I didn't know how to reach him.

Someone from the other side ran forward and Ed shot him square in the chest and he dropped and I looked at Ed and nothing passed his face and I watched as he ran past, stepping on the man's hand. I stood there.

Ed was older than me. Ed had been the one back home who had taken a shy kid like me as his best friend. He'd always been there for everyone else. He cared. He protected me. This was an Ed I did not know. An Ed who I couldn't get to.

I ran after Ed, his wild barrage of shooting melting a pathway.

I heard the familiar whirr of a bomb and saw it in the sky and looked at Ed who was so stuck in his tunnel loop that he was not paying attention.

I screamed. I'd never spoken so loud. The bomb hit just in front of his foot and then screams filled the air. My whole world started spinning, the whiffs of the tongue man following and I ran to Ed. I could barely look. Leg shattered. Blood everywhere. A gaping hole in his side. His eyes ran backward and I picked him up in my hands, looking around, screaming for help, but my screams were muffled and hidden. Everyone was too busy fighting.

"Ed, come on!"

His eyes cleared, looking at me, mouth shaking. "Just kill me."

"No, no," I screamed, taking his arms and starting to drag him through the mud. "We have to get out of here, get home. This is fucking useless. We're leaving. We're leaving."

I dragged and dragged him, a bullet flying and hitting my arm and I bit onto my tongue, tears escaping my eyes.

"Just stop! Stop you arrogant bastards, what's the point of any of this!" I screamed at no one in particular.

"Will, please," he moaned.

I looked at him, held the face of the man I'd known my entire life.

"Let me go," he said, blood pooling in his teeth.

"You're my best friend," I said, catching my tongue. "I...stop talking."

I pulled him up my body, his body so heavy and tall but I mustered it from somewhere. I pulled him up my chest and held him and started to run, my legs screaming in agony. I couldn't stop. I had to find the strength. I clenched my teeth, ankles splitting but I ran. Another bullet hit my hand. I screamed out, realizing I'd lost my stupid compass somewhere. I took Ed's compass in my hand instead, realizing it had been shattered by the blow.

He wasn't saying anything and I was terrified to know. I just had to go. If this was all I could do, I just had to go.

We reached the edge of the forest that separated our team from the soldiers. The doctors were there. I was talking, pleading, but I could barely hear my own voice, only the almost lifeless body of Ed lying down on a cot. I followed him.

"Stay with me, Ed," I said to him. "Let's go home. Let's go back to the castle, okay? You and me, we don't need any of this. We had it alright back there. We had everything."

He smiled lightly and found my hand. "Take care of that place."

"Ed," I said.

I was moved to a cot so doctors could tend to my wounds. I could hardly feel any of the physical pain. I clutched his compass in my hand, warming the metal. It had all been for nothing.

I remember crying so much it felt like I'd lost my vision. I could barely walk. Could barely do anything for the next days. Everything had been so sudden, our group never knew it happen so fast like that. I was so angry. So angry that anyone had ever thought to put boys through this, that tricking us to think that becoming a hero was glamorous and worthwhile was a

good idea. My hand had been bandaged and I could barely move it, same with my pain in my leg and where the bullet hit my arm. I spent the days wander through the nearby town, drinking in some underground pub. I'd never drunk so much.

It was one day the sergeant had come to me, on a rainy cold night as I sat in the corner of the pub alone in some foreign place I didn't know or care about.

"Listen, Will," he said down across from me, full uniform on.

I looked at him with drunken eyes, hand still clenched around the compass.

"We're going to need you to fix yourself up," he said.

"Course."

"It's not you, Will, it's your attitude toward your service. You can receive treatment when this is all over."

"Treatment," I barked. "Treatment from the hell you put me through."

"It's a part of the job of being a her—"

I laughed. "The fact that...that, w-we live for any of this glory really irks me. What a waste of men."

He thinned his lips. "Someday, it'll be better. But, this is the reality. Either we do nothing or fight."

"I'd rather do nothing," I said. "Doing nothing would've saved my friend."

"Ed was a brave soldier, and he died in the line of duty."

I laughed again. "Did you k-know Ed dreamed his entire life of becoming a soldier? He was a cocky bastard and wanted the bragging rights, but it had been his dream. He's going to be forgotten."

"Don't forget him then," said the Sergeant.

I let him leave, and sat there in a heap, the alcohol wearing off. I clenched my arm where the wound suddenly ached. I held tight onto the compass. I started to cry again, great heaving, shaking cries. This was all I had left.

Lizard

I woke in a daze, rolling over on the hard ground and groaned. The near break of morning light cast shadows on the ground in front of me. The light was orange and as I looked up, realized how smoky it had gotten. The sun looked dull and orange and I scrambled to get up. What was going on? Yaz was nearby, still asleep. I stretched looking over to Andy but she was gone. I narrowed my eyes.

“Andy?” I said out loud.

That was weird.

I stood up, patting my sleeping legs against the ground. There had been a storm, but the air was so incredibly dry. I could smell the mustiness of the dry pine-needle strewn earth, all chalky and fragrant. She wasn’t here.

I walked around the site in circles. Nowhere.

“Andy!” I said.

That woke Yaz up. He rolled over and stared at me, blinking between clouded eyes.

“What’s going on?”

“Andy’s gone.”

He sat up straighter. My walkie buzzed, and then my paps started speaking.

“Liz, you’re getting back soon right?” he said, his voice more stern. “Evacuation order.”

“Order?” I spoke into the walkie.

“Yes, a new fire has sparked behind Eagle Creek, that’s on the mountain behind us. Your new friend and Andy’s parents know your sleeping out, but it’s time to get back.”

I looked wide-eyed at Yaz. “But what about the other ones?”

“It’s all bad,” said Paps. “We’re losing all the tourists this morning, but now we have been ordered to leave.”

“We’re leaving?”

“Shit, my mom is going to murder me,” said Yaz, pacing back and forth next to the charred out campfire.

“We’re not going anywhere, but you can’t be out there right now. Okay? Time to come back,” said Paps, and then not a word more.

“Tell everyone that we’re on our way soon,” I put the walkie back on my belt, feeling guilty that I was slightly lying about how “soon” we’d be back. We didn’t even know where Andy was.

“We have to find her.” I was starting to feel dizzy.

I peered beyond at the reddened sun and ashy air. Why had she run off? I didn’t ever expect her to run off into the woods like this. I didn’t think I’d ever seen the skies like this here—this was too much.

“Come on, up, let’s get packed up, time to go,” I said.

“She doesn’t have the GPS,” said Yaz, diving toward the device that was still charging. “Hold up, she can’t be far, her shoes are right here!”

I looked around. What the hell was she doing? My mind was racing, thinking only the worse. Why couldn’t she just stay by me and calm down! My head ached from the intense pressure of looking after her, but also the way the air seemed to weigh on me now. She’d been obsessive with this quest, with her grandpa’s tools, refusing to take them off her body, except the hatchet, which I found beside the bed.

Then I remembered. “Is the map here?”

Yaz and I scoured the tent and came up empty handed.

“I think she’s trying to finish this on her own.”

“Without shoes,” said Yaz. “I’m sorry, but like is there a new rule that says true adventurers don’t wear shoes?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s a crazy idea,” said Grandpa Greene, hunched in his armchair in the living room.

I looked at him now, scraps of paper and writing tools around him on the carpet, sofa and even on the ledge of the fireplace.

“It’s not crazy,” I said, scratching my head.

“I promised her a great adventure, I promised her the world. I tried to design it off my many walks, but hopefully it can at least be something. I just want her to be at home in this place, you know?”

I nodded along. It was a strange thing to hear. I think I had seen this place as my backyard my entire life. I grew up here, generations before me too.

“Will you help her?”

“Yeah, of course Mr. Greene.”

“You’re just like your father,” he smiled. “He would never leave us behind.”

I looked around. We didn’t have time. I couldn’t fail him.

Andy

It was so dark in these woods, so dark because of the onset of heavy smoke even though the light was coming up for morning. I could hardly tell. My leg ached and I knew this stupid cut had become infected or something. I knew I couldn't stop moving, though wished I hadn't been so idiotic as to not bring shoes. The monster had been following me this whole time, and I was surprised by my ability to keep walking. I knew now that maybe the "light" of the Orb was all make-believe, or that this thing had two forms, or that I was crazy and imagining all of it. I didn't know what I had been thinking. But the strange thing was that this thing could have caught up to me this whole time, but didn't. Could it catch me? It didn't try anything back when I'd fallen. That gave me a bit more comfort, but not much knowing that this thing was following me for what felt like miles. How would I explain this to Lizard when I found him?

I tried to remember what Grandpa had taught me. Anything Grandpa had taught me.

"People get lost in the woods all the time," he said. "It's this delusional effect the forest has on us, that when we are trying to escape, only to circle in our minds and end up walking in circles."

"So how do you get out?"

"With no other devices, the only way is with a basic boy scouts skill, pick a tree or landmark two meters ahead, keep your eye on it the entire time as you walk forward until you reach it, and then repeat. It's about clearing your mind and staying focused. Remember Andy, we don't conquer things ultimately by destroying them in one go, instead we take one foot in front of the other until we have overcome them."

I looked ahead of me at a large boulder sticking out of the side of the hill and walked toward it, calling Lizard's name into the wind as I did so, until I reached it. I stopped for just a

moment, wishing desperately I had water to drink. How long had it been? I wished now that I had my pack too. The ground was so dry here, filled with pine debris and dead trees and branches. I touched a tree nearby that was red and dying, saddened, and noticed all the little holes where the pine beetles were destroying it. As I looked up, ash fell through the branches and my heart stopped. I wished I could see what was going on out there. Maybe the wind had blown ash and smoke in from one of the fires elsewhere, but the air was so heavy it made me cough.

I missed the days when it was just me and Grandpa here and everything was paradise.

I kept walking, this time choosing a crooked, bent over tree and continuing on. I kept looking behind me, catching a glimpse of the monster as it hid behind trees. My body shivered. I could see the plumes of smoke of the fire now, overhead in the sky and the air, the further I walked, became chalkier. I didn't want to think of what lay ahead.

I just needed to find Lizard, and the others.

I walked for what felt like hours. I thought the day would lighten up by now, but the sun was completely covered red and the sky had turned orange. I desperately wished for my walkie, but I'd taken it off my belt before sleeping. I was completely alone.

"Lizard!" I yelled, cupping my hands. Where was the camp?

My legs were aching so badly it was hard to walk. I didn't want to stop. Stopping wasn't going to help. I picked another tree and then a boulder and then, I spotted something weird. In front of me, before a decline in the hill, two trees had fallen over each other in a perfect X, and beyond that, a tunnel formed by low hanging Old Man's beard lichen. I walked toward it, feeling the rough bark of the pine trees. The tunnel of lichen was dark but seemed to lead to the shore, so I followed it.

I walked down the hill, holding onto spare roots and rocks, careful not to slip as I descended. The dry earth crumbled beneath me, but I caught myself, my brain empty except for the words echoing in my head. Keep going. Keep going. Find your own path.

I ran my fingers through the hanging, dry white-crustled lichen which felt like dry hair. I found it strange that the woods could do this; create a real-life tunnel that seemed to beckon anyone who came across it to walk through. Maybe this is what Grandpa thought himself.

I looked ahead at the dark tunnel and could see the first spots of lake water brushing up against a rocky beach, and tucked away on the rocks, an old sailboat.

I peered back, the monster lingering at the entrance of the tunnel, covering the way back up. Why was it following me? I unfurled the map and drew my finger across its page. I'd made it. This was where I was supposed to be. I thought of the others back at the camp. It was probably better for them to stay safe there. I was going to do this alone. I folded the map away, popped open the broken compass and continued on.

I reached the end of the tunnel, and smiled, my eyes lighting up as I walked out of the darkness and onto the rocky beach. I was somewhere a ways down the lake, and directly in front of me out in the center of the lake was Eagle Island. I looked at the eagle tree and slowly picked the carved wooden eagle out of my pocket, holding it up to the sky and lining it up with the perch branch.

My stomach sank realizing it looked like an apocalypse out here. The skies had turned a hazy orange and I could no longer see my way down the lake. The water was red, reflecting the sky, a dull red ball of sun reflected on its choppy, gusty surface. If morning had properly risen, I did not know.

It was time to get to work.

I looked at the sailboat. It was small. A two-person. The sails were down, and water filled its cavity. I took sips of the rainwater from the cup holders, too thirsty to think, and then began to ram it off of the shore. I used a bucket inside the boat to scoop the water out until it was mostly dry, and then dragged it the rest of the way into the water, my bare feet hitting cold lake water.

I could do this. Just as Grandpa had taught.

I climbed inside and unravelled the sails, raising them, tying their knots and lowering the rudders. It was a small boat. I could do it.

As I raised the sails and looked up, I noticed a small black flag fluttering at the top mast. A pirate flag. I smiled. Of course he would.

It was all or nothing now. I used the oars to push out a ways into the lake, put them back, and pulled on two ropes and the stern's rudder to try and catch wind. It took some manoeuvring, but the wind filled the sail and the boat burst forward. I laughed out loud. It was working! I pulled the sails taught, adjusted the rudder so I was flying the right direction, and let the wind take me. Spits of water flew at my face; the smoky air filled my lungs. I coughed but I felt alive. Water raced beside me, creating a wake. It felt so incredibly freeing to be out on the open water! To feel the wind on my skin! The rush in my heart!

I felt like a pirate.

Lizard

Yaz and I made our trek through the woods. It was dark here, part from the smoke and part from the densely packed trees. I kept looking over head at the ash falling through the tree-tops, making my stomach churn. It was making me more nervous by the second. This didn't happen like this. How were Paps and I and the community going to protect our resort? I had to get this done for her grandpa. If I could just find her, bring her back to safety and then complete this for her then all would be okay. Grandpa Greene's spirit could rest. I had to get this done.

I stomped forward, hands shouldering my backpack, face sweaty from the already intense heat of the day.

Thank God Yaz was here because he was tracking her steps. I had the GPS in my hand. He had his nose to the ground, and I followed him. It was honestly cool to see Yaz so in his element. I didn't think he'd looked at his phone or snapped a picture all day. I liked watching him take the lead.

I knew where to go though. I knew already how to get to the end of the route. My walkie buzzed again.

"She turned," Yaz said, already moving left.

I followed. This time, I heard Andy's mom on the other end of the walkie.

"Lizard, are you there?"

I picked up the walkie, Yaz and I still making our trek. "Hi, yes it's me."

"What's going on, Andy's not answering! You all have to get back home it's chaos down here!"

Chaos. I felt a wash of guilt imagining my paps trying to deal with the evacuation and me, being out here in the wilderness. He was probably worried.

“We’re coming home now,” I lied. “Please don’t worry, we aren’t in danger.”

“The fire’s moving really fast Max,” she said, using my other name which gave me chills.

“Please get home soon or we’ll have to send a search party out. I’m not joking around.”

“I’ve got it. You’ll see us soon.”

I put the walkie away. We had to get this done and fast.

“And you’re sure these are her tracks?”

“Yup.”

“Alright dude, I guess you’re some Bear Grylls or something.”

“I learned everything there is to know about tracking.”

“But have you ever actually tracked?”

“I grew up in the city, never had a chance, but I tracked people. There aren’t really any wild animals much in the city, but there’s lots of people.”

“Creepy.”

“Purely for scientific purposes.”

“Right.”

We walked in silence a moment, seemingly heading down-hill through the dry underbrush.

“Hey, look I’m sorry for lashing out at you last night,” I said, looking at the back of his blonde head.

Yaz didn’t stop, just kept walking. “It’s okay. I understand, your obviously deeply in love with her.”

“I...uh...what makes you say that?”

He shrugged. “I guess I can tell.”

“I...okay. Honestly sometimes I thought you were into her.”

“It’s okay man, I don’t swing that way.”

“Oh,” was all I said.

“It’s okay, you never asked, I never told so how would you know?”

“Thanks, for putting up with me.” I laughed.

“You’re a weirdo,” Yaz finally turned around, flashing a grin. “But look at me, I’m tracking a human, so, I am as well.”

We both shared a smile.

We walked through the smoke until we arrived at a tunnel created by the Old Man’s Beard. It looked peculiar here, like some magical entrance to another world. I brushed my hand through the scraggly, rough curtain.

“She went through?” I asked.

Yaz kicked dirt. “She did.”

“Off to Narnia, I guess,” I said, continuing onward.

For a moment, it felt less smoky, like we had escaped it somehow by entering this tunnel. I thought of the resort, and my paps and what he must be thinking right now. He had been so stressed before I left, to the point I could not bear it. Perhaps that was some of the reason I had decided to go on this expedition.

What if the fire arrived at our doorstep? We’d fought fires before, but things looked really scary out there this time. Paps didn’t have the money or the resources to deal with that kind of disaster. I remembered back when Andy’s grandpa was here and how motivated Paps had been, but he’s too miserable now. Even papa senior used to hang out around the resort. It was a couple of springs ago I remembered.

“Will, hey, hand me the nail gun,” my paps had said, standing at the top of the silver ladder, leant over the side of the tackle shop, papa senior holding onto the bottom rungs.

“Up it comes.” Grandpa Greene had set up a temporary pulley system attached to the roof’s edge, using a sand bucket, pulley, and thin rope to hoist up tools for Paps as he worked.

I stood down below, leaning against a shovel. It was spring and that meant getting to work, as it always had. Paps, Papa Senior, and Grandpa Greene seemed to never stop working.

Grandpa Greene slowly pulled on the rope, bringing the bucket up to Pap’s level, Papa Senior holding on tight to the ladder. He took out the nail gun, held it in the air like a trophy.

“Got it, pull it down!”

“Right on.” He pulled the bucket back down as Paps nailed a replacement gutter in.

“That’s a pretty silly method,” I said.

“It’s fun, makes the job easier,” said Paps.

“Nothing’s silly if it works,” said Paps Senior.

“When did you get so creative?” I asked, laughing.

“Because we’re best friends,” said Grandpa Greene, patting Paps Senior on the back.

“And we had time to get creative.”

“No use working without you friend,” said Paps. “Or else it would be pretty boring.”

I never thought much about the hole in Paps Senior’s life now that his best friend was gone. Honestly, Paps Senior was always so busy. I guess I never thought much and felt like an idiot for only thinking about Andy and myself this winter. If I’d lost my best friend, Andy, I think I would die. I couldn’t possibly understand the point of life anymore. Paps Senior had to continue on, Paps had to continue on, and I guess there wasn’t much joy anymore. I felt guilt prick at my heart.

“You okay?” asked Yaz. “Kind of freaks me out when you’re this quiet.”

“Uh, yeah sorry, just thinking about...everything.”

“We will find her, look,” said Yaz.

We’d arrived down at a small, rocky beach. On the shore were two obvious parallel skid marks in the mud. She’d pulled a boat out. I remembered now.

“The sailboat,” I said. “Grandpa Greene had left it here. It was his way of getting to the island.”

“Oh, so how are we supposed to get there?”

I scratched my head.

“I don’t know,” I said. “What would Grandpa Greene do?”

“Never knew him,” said Yaz, moving beach rock around with his feet.

I looked out at the calm lake, the water glassy in parts, black-charred gusty in others. I stared out at Eagle Island in the middle of the lake and the tall mast tree that stood where Grandpa Greene’s cabin sat, hidden in a group of pine trees. Andy was going to get there first. On her own. I smiled. The reaction she would have...I could only imagine.

What would Grandpa Greene do?

I tried not to look at the fire on the mountainside behind my resort and tried to focus.

“We have to build a raft,” I said, out of the blue.

“A raft. Yeah, I don’t know how to do that.”

“It’s what he would do. Be creative. That’s what he’d say. I’ve got a hatchet, you got anything?”

Yaz opened his satchel. “This rope too thin?”

He pulled out a bunch of thin, waxy rope from his case.

“It’ll work.”

I spun around, catching a pile of dead birch trees that had washed up as driftwood onto the corner of the shore. I think it would float.

“If we pull these birch out, hack it into even logs, we can float on it. Or at least manage.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

“We have to make it work.”

We spent far too long cutting the birch logs. Yaz pulled them one by one into the shallow shore, lining them up and beginning to loop the rope through the logs and tie them together. My back ached from all the hacking with the hatchet, but the blade felt good in my hand. I’d never held a better hatchet in my life. Once finished, I studied it, feeling like he was here too, with us.

“Test it out,” I said.

Yaz groaned, getting into the water, and crawling on top of the float. It sunk a bit with his weight but stayed up. The boat was super wobbly, and I knew we wouldn’t be able to sit up.

“We’re going to have to lay on our stomach and just paddle. We don’t have time to wait.”

“Seriously?”

“Put your bag on your back and lie down! I’m coming on now!”

I dove a little too aggressively onto the raft on my stomach and the thing flooded with water, but then resurfaced. We would have to make it work.

“I’m soaking,” said Yaz.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “Now kick with your feet and arms and keep the bag up.”

“I feel like an idiot,” he said as we began to kick through the icy cold water and get the raft moving.

“It’s summer. Didn’t you ever just dive into the lake with your clothes on?”

“Uh, no,” he said, peering forward.

We were not moving very fast, so I started paddling with my arm. He did too.

“I don’t know, I’d work all morning and by lunch you’d get sweaty and hot and you’d get too lazy to go change and just jump in with your clothes on.”

“That’s silly.”

“Well, get used to it. That is life up here.”

Andy

“I made it,” I said out loud, the boat docked on the shore behind me. I stood at the base of Eagle Island, its steep incline before me. This place was scared. Lizard always said so and I felt weird to be entering it.

I climbed upward, map in one hand, compass in the other, practically crawling up the steep incline until I made it to the top of the island. I stood there, not knowing where to go. I took out the map. The X was on the corner of the Island, looking out at the water. Then I thought of something. The eagle tree. It had to be.

I was about to run for the X when I spotted the fire on the other side of the lake, this time, behind the cabin. I couldn't see it before as we were too low on the mountains, but I could see it now. Flames littered the mountainside, still a way up the incline, probably mostly curling over the other side of the ridge. Giant plumes of smoke radiated off it. I sucked in a breath, spotting my cabin and Reynolds, just sitting there in the direct line of fire. Why were firefighters fighting it? There should be hundreds of people!

It was fine, if fires like that exploded and actually stayed, the cabins would have burned down years ago.

I had a job to do.

I searched for the tree, spotted it, and then ran full speed. Was the monster behind me anymore? I did not know or care because I had done it. The forest was empty here, devoid of any animals. It didn't feel scary at all, only peaceful.

Then I had a thought, those fires could not reach me here.

I spotted ahead, before me, through the bushes, a small cabin. It was a small tree fort, properly built, standing behind the eagle tree and facing the lake on the perch of a cliff. I walked

toward it, in a daze. What was this place? I walked around the front and on the front door, read, *Black Hill Castle*.

I opened the door. The place filled to the brim with stuff. A desk sat in one corner and a small bed in the other, and beside me a tiny barely-there kitchen. The floors were made with rickety boards. Grandpa's clothes hung from a hook by the door, including his slippers.

I walked inside, mesmerized, as if Grandpa had just been here.

A sudden surge of memories floated back to me. Grandpa and I fishing out on the lake in the early morning. Grandpa and reading *Treasure Island* to me before bed. Grandpa and Dad taking me out on an ATV adventure through the woods behind the cabin. The last phone call I had with my grandpa before he passed away.

I walked beside the desk and bookshelf, stuffed to the rim—there was every kind of adventure novel here, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *Moby Dick*, *Harry Potter*, *Narnia*, *Treasure Island* and tacked on the walls, were newspapers and torn pages of local legends and stories Lizard always talked about. All our favourites. Old editions and first editions and the stories collected in the community. Beneath were other kinds of books, non-fictions and how-tos, books on writing and grammar on storytelling and psychology and poetry and astronomy and history.

I picked up one of the pens lying on the desk. I realized it was a quill and found the old bottle of ink underneath a scrap pile of paper on the scratchy wood desk.

“So he wrote it here,” I said.

He wrote it here. So this must have been this past year. But to come all the way out here! It was insane! Why couldn't he just write it in the comfort of the cabin? Was he crazy? I looked down at my own legs and arms, covered in scratches and bruises, bleeding and purple.

I looked up. Lizard should be here.

On the desk, in plain sight, lay a letter, ink blotted all around it. My hands shook as I picked it up to read.

December 24th 2016

Merry Christmas, Andy. This has always been my favourite time of year, this night, when the darkness seems to momentarily disappear. When love and magic is in the air. I just called you and we had a lovely chat. You seem good. I am surprised now as Lizard and his father and grandfather have just walked in my door. They have surprised me with a Christmas dinner, and a tree and lights. We are listening to music now and Lizard is singing. He has a beautiful voice, Andy. I can't believe they've done this for me. Tomorrow, Lizard agreed to help me finish what I've started. I must stay alive in order to finish it.

This night always reminds me of your grandmother. Oh, did she ever love Christmas Eve. We would always watch White Christmas on the TV, which I am doing now. Did I ever tell you how we met? It was before I left for the war, believe it or not. I met her when I was in training. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. She was shy, but stood her ground and she'd just been sitting outside one evening after her class, staring at the stars and I had gone and sat next to her. She was exquisite. She used to always think about the stars, about what great things might be out there. She was spiritual, you might say. That evening we talked and kissed and soon after. I fell for her fast, but long. Our love lasted a war and a great many battles within myself and we did everything together.

Love is such an interesting thing, but I like to think of it as a companion or a sharing. A great ally. A friend for time. We were soul mates, and in love for decades and when she passed without me, I felt a great sense like a hole was carved in my chest that would never again be

filled. I've felt that hole twice now. I know I will be reunited with her and my best friend soon and that makes me happy. We buried her here, you know, and I requested to be too. So our spirits will live here forever. I see her often, you know, in the form of a light, following me. I know she is waiting. I hope you can find love like this someday.

If you've made it here, you've completed the quest and I can't begin to explain how proud I am of you. I know we read all these great novels of adventures and heroes. I know you thought of me as one too, but in reality I was always just a normal person who struggled. I'm sorry I hid all those struggles from you, Andy, I just never knew how to tell the truth. I lost my best friend in the war and I did not fight. I didn't do a great job actually, and believe it or not, was fired! That baseball cap was my dad's and he gave it to me, and that eagle was made by George as a gift to me, to protect me, and that compass belonged to Ed, my best friend who died in my arms. Protect those things for me. This cabin, that began as a mere lean-to tree fort built by my friends and I, was the place of my childhood, protect it for me.

If you're looking around the castle now, I realize, it must be a mess. This is a sharing place. A place that myself and Lizard's grandpa came to all the time to think and a place Ed used to come as well. Although, I am afraid, I spent a great deal of time there in the past while and it needs to be returned to its former glory, a place where everyone can come and feel at peace to share stories.

I know this place will change and these forests will grow and so will you, but you are resilient Andy dear, I've always known that. You don't have to be some perfect hero, it's all corrupt anyways, all I want you to do is never give up and protect the things that mean something to you.

This island is sacred because it belongs to no one. We never wanted tourists to come here and ruin any part of this beautiful oasis. But I don't want it to be seen as "mine" anymore, because these forests don't belong to anyone. They just exist and are welcoming enough to give us and our companions a home. You have made the trek, and learned to be at one with the forest. So please, you and Lizard, go give this place warmth again and make it a home for anyone who wishes to become one with the woods.

Welcome to Black Hill Castle. It's a sacred place. This is paradise, but paradise needs protecting.

Oh, and our book is on the bed.

~Love, Grandpa

Lizard

We kept paddling on, panting and out of breath. The water had numbed my feet now and when I looked out, I realized how far we'd come. Almost there. I tried not to look at the resort, but I did. The fire speckled the mountainside, sending up plumes of dark smoke into the air like a bomb had gone off. Water bombers danced above the hills. My heart sank. I'd never seen this place like this.

"Don't look," said Yaz.

"Huh?"

"Don't look, stay focused."

I looked at him. "Okay, I will."

We continued kicking in the water, paddling with our arms. the further we went, the sketchier the raft became, slowly getting more and more insecure. But finally, we pulled up to the shore. I jumped into the water waist down and pulled the raft up. It held up but probably would not be useable again. I spotted Andy's sailboat, docked on shore.

"Okay," Yaz climbed to shore, looking down at his soaked clothes. "That was fun."

"It's an adventure, try it once and a while."

Then he laughed, really laughed. I stood there shocked. Yaz hadn't 'laughed' like that yet. But I realized I didn't know Yaz much yet either and there would be so much left of him to get to know.

"Sorry," he stopped himself, wiping his face. "This is just so ridiculous but also the best I've felt in a long time."

"Me too," I said. "It's what her grandpa did, brought the best out in people. Or the 'kid' out in people, should I say."

“Absolutely.” He shouldered his bag. “Shall we?”

“Let’s go get her.”

Andy

I held tight onto *Treasure Island* and his letter, my eyes so wet with tears I could not see. I did not know what to think anymore, but I felt in a strange way like I had never really known my grandpa at all. I wish I could have heard all those stories and known all those truths that he was afraid to tell me. I paced, inspecting every bare corner of their sacred place, knowing that I should return home but feeling like I couldn't possibly ever leave. I smiled at old drawings of mine he'd saved on the shelf, of the piles and piles of old dusty books, of letters half written and discarded and spilled over ink vials. He even had clothing here. His old hunters' jacket and bucket hat with all his fishing lures stuck on it. I noticed other things too. There was an old chest filled with military clothes and cracked journals in the far corner reading the name "Ed." The top shelf of the wobbly bookshelf held a collection of intricately carved wooden figurines. I stepped closer, inspecting the carved eagles and bears and otters. I picked one up, a small carved wooden bear, flipping it over to read the name "George." Lizard's grandpa, it must be. That meant my carved eagle was made by him. Was that why he first stole it?

This place was as alive. It was breathing him and his friends. I felt like I'd found him. And I wanted Lizard here. I wanted Lizard to enjoy this with me. That meant this place didn't belong to Grandpa, but no one at all. Him and his friends just came here and shared it.

I put the carved bear back on the shelf when a knock sounded at the door.

Then the door flew open.

"Who am I kidding, I don't need to knock!" It was Lizard. He was covered in dirt, rips on his hoodie and threw his bag down next to the door. Yaz stood behind him, his hair and face a mess. They looked like they'd been hiking for weeks.

I stood up, eyes widened.

He pointed at me, smile blooming already. “You are hard to track down. Luckily, Yaz can track people! Did you know that creepy fact about him?”

“Lizard!” I screamed, rushing into his arms. He smiled, taking me with him and spinning me around. “How did you find it?”

Yaz and Lizard looked at each other. Lizard looked at me, eye to eye.

“Well,” Lizard closed the door. “I knew where to go.”

“Hm?”

“Listen, we actually have to go,” said Lizard. “The fire’s getting worse.”

“Not until you tell me what’s going on.”

Lizard threw his head back. He turned to Yaz. “Go outside and tell the parents we are coming now and not to worry.”

“Me?” Yaz held a hand to his heart.

“Yes! Go!” Lizard shoved him.

Yaz huffed and left outside, leaving Lizard and her alone.

Lizard went and sat on the desk chair. He wasn’t looking around at all, not even curious to the place he’d just discovered, he didn’t even look surprised. What was going on? I sat on the edge of the bed and waited.

“What do you mean you knew where to go?” I asked.

“The thing is,” he looked up under a bushel of crazy hair. “I knew where to go this whole time. I knew how to get here, to the end, to the treasure.”

“Okay...” I said. I was confused. “So we just wandered around lost half the time for no reason?”

“Not for no reason,” said Lizard. “It’s just, well I helped your grandpa complete this.”

I was staring at him like he was an insane person. Helped my grandpa do this? What the hell did he mean? I looked at Lizard and his face was low and sad. Grandpa had lost Grandma, and he was here all alone. That Christmas? I felt washes of guilt remembering me and my family around the Christmas tree that morning, opening gifts, watching movies. Grandpa had said he was okay, that he was enjoying himself, loving the snow, and we had believed him. I had actually believed nothing was wrong. But Lizard had been there, the whole time.

Grandpa hadn't been alone.

"Thank you," I said, trying not to cry.

"Well, your grandpa was a crazy man, let me tell you, but this was the last thing he wanted to do and how could I turn him away. He said he always wanted to design this for you, and let you out play it. I guess it was a little insane, now that we're here and almost died."

"We didn't, it was perfect," I said, smiling.

"Yeah," he picked his lip.

"Thank you for being with him on Christmas."

"Of course, Andy, up here in the Callows, no man is left behind," he smiled. "But seriously, winters are hard here. I go into immense seasonal depression every year and surprise myself for making it out alive. We would never leave someone alone."

"I feel like the biggest asshole, leaving him."

"You had your own life in a whole different city," he said. "A faster life and here is slow, so I get it. It's so normal Andy, for everyone to leave when the summer ends."

Lizard shifted in his chair.

"But I always thought he was strong, like the strongest," I said.

“He was, I’ve never met a stronger man, honestly, but we can’t all be perfect strong heroes all the time, especially when you’re hurting.”

“I never once asked if you were okay,” I said.

I was looking at Lizard now, but really seeing him. He had scars on his hands from hard labour he had to do. He had built muscles, not from going to the gym or playing on the football team like the guys at my high school, but from actually making a life up here. He knew random skills like riding a horse and fishing and sailing, not because he was some superhero who was good at everything, but because he had to do these things to survive. He had rich dark skin and wild hair and big bright brown eyes and despite everything, a constant smile on his face. We were best friends, but every summer I left. I would rub in his face how this was paradise, and then I’d leave when he got dark and cold and hard and never ask him how he was doing. I didn’t think I needed to. Who was I kidding? He was the real Jim Hawkins, daring, brave and able to do anything. But also humble. I never thought to realize that he struggled too, that he wasn’t always so bubbly and perfect.

“I’m so sorry Lizard,” I said. “I’m a terrible best friend.”

“Hey hey—” he made his way over to me, sitting next to me on the bed.

“I’m so sorry,” I was crying now. “I never asked. I’m so selfish. I never asked if you were okay.”

“Andy—” he pulled my head toward his. “I am okay.”

“But you’re not!”

“Andy, I am okay. It’s a part of life, not something to fear, okay.”

I sniffled and held his hands and nodded. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“About what?”

“About the monster that’s been following me.”

“I have a feeling I know what you’re talking about.”

I told him about the monster and the Orb. How they seemed to follow me. Ever since we went on this journey, they were both like unwelcome companions. It scared me, because I could never actually get near them or touch them.

“Yeah, I’m familiar,” said Lizard.

“What?”

“Here’s the thing about the Callows,” he said, smiling. “It’s a strange place. There are unwritten sacredness and magic here. I don’t know, there’s all sorts of weird stories I hear day to day and sometimes I can’t believe it. But I see them too, or what I believe are similar things, the Orbs and the monsters. I call them companions of the woods.”

“How’s that possible though, logically?” I asked.

“There’s a lot more to the woods than logic. Remember what I said before, there’s a lot out there we don’t understand. But I see them too, Andy. We probably don’t see them the same.”

“That’s...insane,” I said. I couldn’t believe I’d kept this from Lizard. I had no idea we were the same.

Companions of the woods. I had never known anything like it. Why did they follow us? I remembered what Grandma had said, about our protectors. I wasn’t sure I understood how that sickening monster I’d seen could be a companion.

“It’s all in how we interact with the woods, I’ve learned to welcome my Orb, but the monster comes now and again.”

I felt the pressure slowly release from my body. It felt so good to really *talk*.

Yaz burst in through the door, face in a scowl. “What the hell’s taking so long? That’s enough, we have to go!”

Lizard and I looked at each other, clearly completely forgetting the dire situation.

Part Three

Andy

I couldn't believe the state of the smoke, as if suddenly it had completely consumed the Callows. It hung in the air so heavy that it turned the entire landscape orange and fuzzy. I ran toward the cliff, staring out at the Callows to see if the fire had gotten worse. A rim of fire clustered mountainside, turning the sky black and ashy and the lake reflecting the colour of molten lava, making the scene look like an apocalypse.

Lizard stood frozen, staring across the lake.

I looked up as the pines swayed dangerously in the wind. The lake filled with white-caps, heading toward us. This wasn't good. Spots of fire were just across the highway from Reynolds, and that I could see clearly. It seemed like the fire had moved right above Reynolds. It was going to eat it alive! My stomach churned.

"Mr. Sherman called." Yaz held up the walkie. "We have to go or they're sending boats."

I couldn't explain it, but I felt like I'd lost. Paradise was burning. I spotted clusters of boats at the wharf at Reynolds, people standing on the docks. The people of the Callows would fight it. Like they always did.

"We have to go to the wharf, that's where they're setting up," I said.

"For what?" said Yaz, hands on his hips.

"To protect our home and fight the fire."

"To fight the fire?" said Yaz. "I'm sorry, is someone a trained firefighter?"

I stood across from Yaz, and even though he was much taller than me, I didn't feel scared of him anymore. I felt Lizard behind me. He had my back.

"We always fight fires here. Reynolds has an entire fire hut, right, Lizard?"

“Yeah, I mean it sounds weird but most of the time the fires just are left to burn,” said Lizard. “So, if we want protection, we have to do it ourselves.”

“That’s so bad and dangerous!” said Yaz.

“I mean, we can handle anything here,” I said. “The community comes together every time there’s a fire. Remember Liz when your neighbours’ garage lit fire because lightning struck that cluster of trees nearby?”

“Right.” Lizard hitched a knee up on a nearby boulder. “Legit everyone dropped what they were doing and came to Reynolds. We stretched the firehose up from the lake and people were throwing buckets of water at it. We got it out, no forest fire, limited damage. Me and Paps are called the Smokey the Bears, because we look after fires.”

“I hate to give a lecture, but these fires are different.”

I glared at Yaz. How dare he come here and pretend to know how fires work. Lizard was getting worked up, I could tell. He would start pacing around, getting antsy, scratching his head as if he were about to lash out.

“Okay, enough,” I said. “Don’t speak about things you don’t understand. You know I grew up in the Okanagan, right? I think I know fires.”

He nodded slowly. I closed the cabin doors, and Lizard handed me Grandpa’s pack again. I fixed on the baseball cap, and then pocketed all his treasures, holding the compass in my hand.

“Can you hold this for me?” I asked, passing Lizard the carved eagle.

He smiled. “Yeah.”

“Let’s go.”

We ran away from the castle and down the dry hill, practically sliding down the steep embankment to get to the small cove where I'd tied the sail boat. I ran into the water and started untying the ropes.

"Wait, how the hell did you guys get here?" I asked.

"Raft," said Yaz. "Lizard built it."

I looked at the raft pulled up on shore, made of floating birch logs and old rope.

"Are you serious?" I said.

"Well," Liz scratched his head. "It was an emergency."

Lizard hopped in to the boat, Yaz, grabbing the oars, as we pushed off from shore. We paddled out into the lake, my feet soaking, smoke stinging my eyes. It was hard to breathe.

I pulled the sails again, caught wind and had Lizard steer with the rudder at the back. Yaz sat at the front. We headed toward Reynolds, smoky air coating my face. Already, my throat was sore. I squinted hard, barely opening my eyes to a slit. Were we too late? My parents were going to murder me.

What was going to happen to our summer?

Lizard took my hand and held it tight.

I breathed out, and then turned around to watch the castle sinking away.

The Orb stood next to the castle, floating there, staring. I blinked. I see could the misty, bright body glowing in the smoky air, ash falling all around it. An echo erupted from it, and then the Orb sunk through the wall of the castle, lighting its darkened windows.

It did feel like a friend.

I couldn't help but feel as if it was lighting the inside of my grandpa's castle, making it seem like he was home, or perhaps it was protecting it.

I turned around and sailed on.

Will

I returned home a hero. I always found it hilarious how that worked out. I had done nothing. I had done nothing to affect the war. I had cowered and ran. I'd not fought. The only thing I'd done is dragged my friend out of the battle zone. And then I'd gotten drunk and kicked out. So the fact that when I returned to the Callows, the neighbours held a potluck for me was hilarious, and made me feel like an absolute fraud. To whoever was actually a hero, like my own father, I am surprised and in awe of how you completed such an impossible image.

I returned home in July, the height of summer, as I'd always remembered it. I returned more tired than I'd ever been. Bags under my eyes. Injuries covering my body. But I guess walking into the Callows, brandishing a limp leg and a messed up hand were seen as signatures of heroic success. I didn't really want to tell anyone how I behaved and within the first marks of my venture home, I had to tell the awful truth of why I was returning alone, of course, everyone already knew.

I met George at my cabin once I returned, his face a lot harder and sadder, and he met me with a big, shaking, crying hug and together shared what we knew we'd lost.

Later we sat alone at the potluck on the patio, looking out at the lake.

"A lot has changed here," he said.

"I bet," I said.

"The resort burned down," he said suddenly, fiddling with something in his hand.

"Excuse me?" I snapped my head.

His eyes were dark and I couldn't read them. When had all his childhood lit out?

"It burned, a couple weeks ago," he said. "Massive wildfires, and it caught on the railing. Everyone had to be evacuated and it couldn't be saved."

I stared at him like he was bluffing me. He had to be? I looked down at my hands, not even knowing what to say.

“Hey, I uh, I saved something for you though.”

I looked up as George passed me the thing he was holding. I took it in my hands. It was a tiny carved wood eagle. I smiled.

“I know you loved those statues, so did I,” he smiled. “So I learned to carve when you were away.”

“Thank you, George,” I said.

He smiled. “We’re going to rebuild.”

I quirked a brow.

“If you want to help, but I know you must be so tired, after all the fighting you did.”

I looked at him and shook my head. “I’m not. I’m ready.”

“Okay,” he nodded. “We purchased new land, time to start over.”

“I like that,” I said.

He held out his hand and I took it.

I thought of Ed’s words, *Protect that place*.

I would.

“Um, well, I also have a surprise,” said George.

He stood up and waved his hand. I was confused, but I stood, turning around and spotted Eda standing in the underbrush, wearing a dainty floral dress and sandals, her hair in braids. My whole body melted. She was still here. After all this. I ran to her, taking her in my arms and she kissed my neck and then my lips.

“I knew you’d make it,” she said.

“Of course,” I said, looking down.

George walked down the steps. “She’s been here for months, helping us with the rebuild.”

“Really?” I stepped back.

“I wanted everything to be at least half good when you returned.”

Paps and Mom walked back out of the cabin, smiling.

“You two were in on it?” I asked.

“Of course, son,” he patted my shoulder.

I felt consumed with happiness, and put my hands in my pocket, feeling the compass there and felt guilt that I’d gotten all this for doing jack shit nothing. Did I deserve any of it?

Andy

We pulled the boat in to the Reynolds Wharf, securing it. I stepped with shaking legs up onto the dock, my heart racing. I spotted my parents pulling up a long hose from the lake, a team of people with them spraying water onto the tackle shop's roof. There were piles of luggage and bags piled at the end of the wharf, various boats docked out in the water. It seemed like the entire Callows community was here.

Yaz and I followed Lizard as he ran to his dad and grandpa who were stood outside the main building. Trucks blared out on the highway as people evacuated, but the Callows residents weren't going anywhere.

"Son," Mr. Sherman said as Lizard came up to them. "You idiot, we've been looking everywhere for you!"

Paps Senior was just smiling and he took Lizard in his arms, hugging him, face dirty and wet. I watched them for a moment, thinking that Paps Senior had seen my grandpa through most of his life and that maybe I had a thing or two to learn from him.

"Thank you," he said.

My eyes couldn't move from the fire that scaled up the mountain across from Reynolds. A line of neighbours stood at the ready, people with hoses, buckets. Sprinklers layered every single rooftop. I spotted Jakub blasting the firehose across the entire resort, trying to coat everything in water.

Lizard and his family seemed to exchange wordless cues as he then ran away from him and back around the side of the once lively main building.

Yaz's parents ran over.

"We're going," Fern said.

A chorus of yells filled the air. Everyone turned, watching as the first of the cluster of fires jumped the highway, sparks flying and landing in a pile of brush and pine tree next to Reynold's resort sign. The brush lit in seconds. People yelled, grabbing hoses, Lizard and his dad at the front. The sign caught fire, flames licking up the peeling wood.

"You don't have time to leave," I yelled. "How about not being so selfish and fucking help."

Yaz and his parents stared at me. I didn't have time for this. This was my best friend's resort. This was everything to him, his entire life, and to think that a fire could destroy all of that. I thought about school and how our geography teacher had said climate change was going to change these things for us. I hadn't thought much of it—I lived in the interior where wildfires happened every single year, and it was pretty normal. Honestly, it wasn't summer back home at all without the fires. But here—we weren't prepared for a fire like this! No one was. It didn't belong here.

I spotted Jakub standing amongst the crew at the beach filling pales of water and handing them off to people to go dump on every building.

"Let's go! Faster!" said Jakub, pailing water.

I turned to look at Lizard with his dad and grandpa, pulling out a long firehose.

He believed in this quest the whole time, but at what cost? We should have been here.

I saw most of the people from the reserve and Lizard's grandpa dumping more people's belongings onto the wharf, my parents now helping to get people's belongings into boats. Boats were taking off now, heading toward the other side of the lake that wasn't burning.

"These people are putting their lives in danger," said Yaz. "Why can't everyone just leave?"

“If we leave, the resort burns.” I turned to him. “We can do this. My grandpa himself fought a fire back when he was young. Actually they fought lots of fires, and so we can too.”

“It’s insane.”

“Maybe, but it’s what we’ve always done. We have to fight for ourselves.”

I looked at the fire rimming the mountainside, ash falling around us. Any normal person would be terrified, but not the people of the Callows.

“Andy?”

I looked forward and spotted my mom running up the wharf.

“Mom,” I said, running in to hug her.

“Oh, thank God,” she rocked me. “Don’t ever disappear like that again, especially with no word! I almost called the Search and Rescue!”

“It’s okay, Mom, it’s okay. I’m fine.”

“Your leg’s injured,” she said.

“I know, but it’s honestly fine and we have other things to do right now.”

She nodded.

I’d never fought a fire like this before. The way the flames bounced from tree to tree, candling them. The way brush caught fire and then ripped flame across the ground. The way the people of the Callows screamed, running from the flames that, in this wind, flew across rooftops and cabins. This fire was a monster. I joined the team of neighbours nearest me holding a heavy fire hose and helped them pick it up, working water in from the lake, blasting it at the burning roof tops and trees. Water gushed out of the hose, making me step back. I yelled at Yaz to come help, and to my surprise, he left his stunned parents and stood behind me.

“I’ve got you, let’s go,” he said.

“Andy, we need your help!” said Lizard up ahead.

I left the team, Yaz coming with me as we raced up the dirty path to another vehicle pulling into the parking lot, a family with two young toddlers. Yaz picked up the toddlers and raced them to the wharf’s safety. I helped the family pull bags out of their trunk. All of us were here, Lizard, Yaz and I, as we moved the families’ belongings to the wharf where my parents loaded it into safety boats.

Mr. Sherman yelled. “All hands on deck!”

Everyone stopped. I noticed the plume of smoke from the upstairs porch of the main building. I watched Lizard turn, face dropping.

“Fight!” he said.

I’d never seen more of the Callows come together than at that very moment. My thoughts disappeared. My mind numb and empty. I just ran on default. I ran to help Mr. Sherman and Lizard’s grandpa hold a hose up to the porch. Yaz was behind me. There had to be multiple hoses now pointed at the resort. People were yelling. My body shook but I stood my ground.

If Grandpa was here, he’d never stop fighting.

Protect that place.

Flames filled the roof of the tackle shop and I watched as they shot down the bannisters, catching the entirety of the fish-gut-hut on fire. We jumped back. A barrage of community members and people from the reserve started throwing buckets and red powders at the flames. People stopped everything they were doing. I left the hose to the neighbours and ran with Lizard to join in throwing buckets of water on the flames. Nothing was working. The flames jumped

into the brush, engulfing the entire ground around the building. I ran back, dropping a bucket as water sloshed over my shoes, surprised at how fast this was moving. The fire was hungry.

“Get back! More hoses!” yelled Papa Senior next to Mr. Sherman.

This was too hungry.

Jakub sprayed a small hose from down the rocky path, but it was making no difference.

Everyone was being pushed back toward the beach. The community stood in a line with hoses and buckets, trying to put anything out, which turned the ground into a wash of steam and smoke.

Lizard’s dad continued trying to douse out the main building, but the flames were too hot, the smoke too thick and he fell. Lizard and I ran forward, yelling. The smoke made us cough. It was all around us.

“Paps, we have to go!” Lizard said.

“I’ve almost got it,” he said, his face sooty. “I can’t let it go into the forest, my whole childhood, I can’t let it.”

Paps went running to the forest. Lizard and I exchanged glances. We chased him as he abandoned the hose.

The air was too thick here and I couldn’t see as we entered the forest. Smoke hung in here like heavy curtains, low and ominous. We found Mr. Sherman at the magic woods, desperately trying to collect things that my grandma had set up. He was dirty, sooty and even bleeding on one leg.

“Paps,” Lizard said.

“Please.” He turned.

Lizard and I didn't say a word, just started collecting anything we could carry—windchimes, signs, dreamcatchers, anything. I was shaking. I turned to see the flames bouncing into the nearest trees now. This place was important to me too, and I looked off into the distance at our castle uphill, watching as flames engulfed the trees around it.

"We have to go," I said, my head aching.

Lizard looked at me in horror and then at his dad, whose face was tear-ridden and red. He nodded. We raced down the hill, the wind pushing hard at our backs, cutting through trees to the lake. I spotted my parents in a tin boat, motoring up the beach, and then they spotted us. They pulled up to the shore and helped us bring stuff into the boat, hopping in as the forest caught fire behind me.

Dad turned the motor, pulling away from shore.

I folded my fingers into Lizard's, holding his hand tight. I didn't want to turn around, but I did. Everything was lit in flame. I could hear sirens now. I could see the helicopters. Mr. Sherman and Lizard were dead silent.

The gentle whirr of the motor under my seat felt meditative, even as the entire world was falling apart. I looked at Grandpa's castle on Eagle Island, protected somehow. An entire cluster of boats sat in the middle of the lake, watching, everyone now gone from Reynolds Resort.

I wondered how many times Grandpa had protected this place. Probably a lot. And they always won. But we'd lost.

I felt Lizard's calloused hand in mine. In all the commotion, in all the fighting, I failed to realize that our Black Hill Castle was gone, now to be reduced to charred wood and ash and memory.

Will

I walked into the woods beside the new resort and stood in awe of what Eda had created here. I looked at her, her face shining in the sunlight off her bare shoulders. The dark woods here had been decorated with all sorts of artworks, wind chimes, carved wooden statues like those at the Mahood Resort, crystals and stones. I looked at her.

“You did this?” I asked.

“Yeah, while you were gone.”

“It’s amazing,” I said. “But why?”

“I don’t want people to be afraid of the dark woods,” she said. “And I hope this will make people feel more at home, you know, in our new home.”

“You’re incredible, has anyone ever told you that?” I asked.

She laughed.

“Eda, I’m not a hero,” I said, leaning against a tree, immediately regretting letting this all out. “I’m a complete fraud. Everyone thinks I’m this smart, brave, wise person who just fought a war, but I’m a fraud.”

Eda turned and sat down on a jewelled wrought iron bench. I sat beside her.

“I never liked the word hero,” she said, looking up at the trees strung with beaded lights.

I looked at her, confused.

“It’s a yucky term,” she said. “My dad was a hero because he died in the war.”

I looked at her. She’d never told me this. Her face was creased as she said it.

“He died in the war, and of course he was awarded a medal when it was over but I didn’t really care, I’d much rather have had my dad.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I guess what I’m saying is that we all just do the best we can, everyday, and I think expecting that out of people can turn people into things they didn’t want to be. You’re not a fraud, Will, you’re a great man and a best friend and the love of my life.”

I took her hand and squeezed it.

“Thanks, Eda.”

“Hey, you know what I was thinking. You know how you and the guys had that tree fort? On the island?”

I nodded.

“Why don’t we build one here, for the kids to play at. That way they can have fun here and pretend play.”

“Yes,” I smiled. “That was the best part of summers here, pretend playing pirates and knights and heroes, I suppose. God, it was so much better that way.”

“It’ll be like a castle,” she said. “For fun and imagination, just the way I like it.”

“It’s a deal.”

Andy

One month later...

It was a still and peaceful morning at the Callows. It was early—7am early—and I sat on a barged out rock at the beach in front of our cabin. I loved this rock and always had. It was always here, no matter how much the water levels changed, through every season, every year, this large, black stone sat in the water like a pirate's ship, the front pointing directly at Eagle Island.

The storm last night had been rough and now clouds hung over the far pine mountains low and fogged out. For the first time in weeks, there wasn't smoke in the air, just the sharp smell of pine, wet grass, earth and trout on the beach. I stared ahead at Eagle Island and the castle with its black mast tree. I still held the compass in my palm, warming it, and read *Treasure Island* to myself.

My heart stung as I read the last chapter of *Treasure Island* once more, but what really felt like the last words. I closed the book. My grandpa was a smart man—the smartest on Earth, I believed. I think I would've done him proud. I sat there as sunlight began to sparkle off the lake. There's one thing I forgot—yes, we could take care of it, maintain it, but we could also make it better.

I spotted Lizard creeping up on his paddleboard from the left of the lake and laughed. He had sleuthed in, trying to hide, little knowing I was sitting on my pirate ship.

"What in the world?"

"Oh just pretending to be an invader pirate to come steal your treasures!"

Lizard and I looked each other in the eye. He looked so beautiful in this morning light. Alive. Awake. Enthusiastic.

"I actually returned the treasures to the cabin," I said. "Where they belong."

Lizard peeked up. “Oh yeah?”

I looked behind him at Eagle Island in the distance. “There’s no treasure worth hoarding, I should know that the best.”

Lizard nodded. “You’re right. So damn right. Anyways, I am here to escort you to Reynolds for some bob-the-building.”

“Oh!” I jumped up, pretending to be a lady and stepping onto his paddleboard. “My knight in shining armour. I’d be honoured.”

He turned, peeled a gentle hand into my hair and kissed me. He turned back and we set off, out to sea and beyond.

*

We’d spent the entire day building and continuing to clear the debris and ash from the resort. The place was an absolute mess still, but I had faith it would be beautiful again.

“I can’t even believe you are still here,” I said to Yaz. “No offense.”

“My family’s taken a liking to this place, honestly.” Yaz stood in his muscle tank, sweating from the labour that morning.

“That’s good, I’d expect you guys to want a luxury vacation.”

“This is way more interesting.”

Everyone was here. My parents, helping to collect lost belongings, Mr. Sherman parading a crew that cleaned up burnt wood and debris, and all the neighbours. Papa Senior bringing in new materials off a truck. Kids splashed in the water at the pirate ship and lazed out on the floating dock. The resort was entirely ruined, and most people had stationed up in tents and shared trailers and cabins.

“My god,” said Jakub, wiping a hand over his sweaty forehead. “Hard work.”

“It’s going to take forever to build this again,” said Lizard.

I saw Mr. Sherman scrounging for old materials amongst the debris piles, trying to scavenge anything useable.

“What if we rebuild it better this time?”

I stood with hands on my hips. “Think about it, we now have an opportunity, Liz, we can finally build that outdoor theatre you always wanted. Remember how this roof would always leak, we can outfit it better. Whatever we want, we can do it better this time.”

“Oh we will,” said Lizard. “We’ve got investors.”

“What?” I said.

Lizard nodded at Yaz.

“Your parents?” I said.

“They’ve taken a liking to the place, and of course we will have a cabin.”

“Dude,” I said. “Yes, this is incredible!”

Mr. Sherman saluted to us down by where the tackle shop once was, as he stood with workers mapping out a new building. I pulled the image I still had in my pocket out, that of Lizard’s grandpa and my grandpa and Ed. I pictured them here, playing, enjoying summer. Mr. Sherman knew how this all worked. Of course he did. He and his whole family, they’d go back generations, of course they knew how to survive, because they had to. Of course they knew what it took to live in paradise.

Will

I took the familiar trek to the castle, the familiar hike and boat ride, but this time, Lizard at my side. I took faith in Lizard being there and quite liked the kid. He was so incredibly much like his father it hurt. And I know George had sent him with me in good faith. My legs were hurting, back aching and everything felt like it was fighting with me to stop, but Lizard was right there and we reached the last leg of the trail and there was the fort, at the tip top of Eagle Island, next to the old mast tree, the same eagle still sat there. A lot had changed with this fort over the years. Lizard's grandpa, his dad, and I had decided to rebuild it to make it extraordinary, a place that Ed would have been proud of. We made it into a little shack, instead of a fort, added a bed, bookshelves, a patio with chairs and a little kitchen and chimney that if ever we needed to escape we could. I looked out at the Callows now, cold and wet and smiled that I'd made it back here.

Lizard walked over and unlocked the door and I stepped inside. The place was musty and covered in dust, my papers strewn all over the desk from my writings, the bed still unmade, books all over the wood floor, crusty dishes still in the sink. Cobwebs littered every window sill. But it was home. Another home.

"So, this is the end," said Lizard. "Where should I put the book?"

"On the bed," I said, leaning on the walking stick.

Lizard walked over and placed the copy of *Treasure Island* on the bed.

He turned around to me.

"Tell her to keep it all safe, these treasures mean a lot and helped me a great deal to find my way."

Lizard looked at me. "Okay. I promise."

I put hands on my hips, looking around. "There's a lot of history here."

Indeed there was. History as far back as Ed, George and I hanging out here and watching storms and drinking. Me running here when I'd get in trouble with my parents. Ed bringing girls here because it was a castle and made us look like princes. I studied all the drawings plastered to every wall, drawings we did of knights and princes as far back as being ten or eleven when we loved to pretend play to be pirates or heroes. I walked to the giant bookshelf, all books we'd collected over the years and placed here. I found Ed's old stash of liquor under the desk and weird bracelets we'd made from tree twines and Old Man's Beard. I found George's carving collection. I remember George and I coming here and pulling apart the whole lean-to and rebuilding after George actually learned from his father how to build a cabin. We spent that entire summer after the war doing so, and put everything we had into it, placing the cabin around the charred burnt bit of the island the three of us had once called Neverland, where the fire had mysteriously burned in one place because of a lightning strike.

"Think we've got this right, Georgie?" I asked.

"Absolutely. I say we name this a sacred place. Maybe one day people can come here to worship or find peace."

It felt magical here. The fire had blasted the point of this island into charred deadness, but even now, as I walked around I could see blooms growing between floor boards and outside, little trees and moss sprouting the once had been dead. The charred tree had never fallen, but through the open door I could see a single red flower in the charred debris. Life was returning. Sooner or later this black hill would be colourful and bright again. Years in the future, the kids of the Callows wouldn't understand its name, but at least I had people who could tell its story, just in case.

"It's honestly so cool here," said Lizard.

“Well, please bring Andy here,” I said. “Make it your own. Bring everyone here.”

“Really? Paps always said it was sacred.”

“Because it meant a lot to your paps senior, but it isn’t ours really. When we pass away, it must be opened. Protect it. It’s an important place.”

“I promise.”

“Good man, Lizard, just like your grandfather.”

“Eh, well, he’s hard to hang out with sometimes.”

“He’s just looking out for you, kid, he’s built like a rock and he wants the best. Ask him to tell you the stories. I’m sure at that point he’d sit down with you all day.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t go to war like you did.”

“No, he didn’t, but he was brave, braver than me.”

“I’m not sure,” he raised a brow, sitting on the bed.

I leant against the wall. “I understand you want to be a hero, maybe that’s why I’m setting this all up in the first place, I just want you and Andy to know that it’s not all exactly what the books crack it up to be. And that there’s so many ways to be heroic and often it involves not being brave all the time, nor ‘manly’, nor perfect or courageous or in line or strong and thinking so is just untrue.”

Lizard studied me.

“I wasn’t ever that war hero, Lizard, in fact war terrified me and I froze in battle, but I found other ways to keep going and fighting and I think making this, protecting the ones I love, that was my heroism, if I could say that much.”

“I think you’re a hero,” said Lizard. “And I know, Paps did tell me everything. About everything you’ve ever done. You are an idol to Andy, and you’ve made her who is she is and I thank you and to me, that’s a hero. Because of that, I know she will persevere.”

I didn’t want to cry, but I blinked away tears and looked back out the door.

“I guess we should be going.”

“Yeah,” said Lizard.

We left the castle and I turned, looking at it sitting on the hill and inside, believed I could see the Orb. Maybe it was Ed. I never knew how these companions of the forest worked, only that they were always there looking out for us. I didn’t know, and never knew. But I smiled and saluted. Maybe I’d never see this place again, but I somehow knew it would always be there, being kept company by anyone who made the journey, like some protecting castle to this paradise.

Andy

It was mid-August by the time Lizard and I and the community had finished the majority of the build. There was still so much left of course, but that was the truth of cabins—they were work. The new build was already looking eons better. We remade the tackle shop in a sturdy log build this time with a copper roof. Outside had a new and improved fish-gut-hut with the yard converted to an outdoor movie theatre. We resurfaced the dock with a vinyl non-stick grid, which felt pretty insane on the feet and stopped the kids from getting splinters. I could tell Lizard was happy about it all, despite what had happened.

I pulled a black coffee out of the old machine at my cabin and sat with my dad on the porch.

“Go fishing later?” he asked.

“Absolutely!”

Dad looked at me on the patio, drinking my coffee.

“I feel like you’ve grown up a lot this summer.”

I looked at him.

“It was really special what you did with your grandpa’s stuff, putting it at his castle. It meant a lot to your mother.”

“Thanks,” I scratched my head. It was where the treasure belonged, to be shared.

Paps Senior ended up telling me hundreds of stories about Grandpa that I’d never heard—that once him and Grandma had done an expedition in New Zealand. That he actually was covered head to toe in flash tattoos. And that he was afraid of the dark. And of all the adventures they went on.

The more I learned, the more I realized how perfectly imperfect he was, and that Lizard's grandpa was also pretty cool.

Later I could see a storm rolling in overhead. It got dark fast and I felt an inch of fear but before that fear could turn into another monster, I scooted up, called Lizard on the cord phone and we raced to our new version of Black Hill Castle, something we'd been rebuilding ourselves out of our old childhood tree fort. I raced as fast as I could on the blue bike, until I zoomed in to Reynolds Resort, complete with its new state-of-the-art sign and toward the back forest, that wasn't perfect, but was home. Black Hill Castle stood strong, everything redone. I noticed a series of arrows painted on the forest ground and followed them to the Castle's door where an X was spray painted. Outside, the new sign read:

Black Hill Castle

Anyone welcome.

I found Lizard inside, along with Yaz and Jakub.

"All you guys?"

"Of course, it's not a party without me," said Jakub. "Besides, you said 'anyone' welcome."

"I'm surprised y'all fit," I said, climbing in.

"Oh one day Yaz's head will explode through the roof if he gets any taller," said Lizard.

I laughed and snuggled up next to Lizard.

"Are we ready for an ultimate storm watching party?"

"Damn, well I am! Did you bring the goods?"

"Course I did," he flash-grinned at me.

Lizard pulled out the usual array of snacks, popcorn, cream sodas, Big Ruth bars from the corner store.

We cuddled under a blanket, sneaking kisses between darts of fork lightning. My heart was on fire. We watched lightning dash in the distance across the lake, all huddled together in the dark.

Then I noticed a small green tin box in the corner of the castle. That was weird. I didn't think there was another clue.

"Where'd this come from?"

"I found it," Lizard said. "Buried in the ground under the castle."

"I thought we finished the quest."

"Guess there's one more?"

I bent over and popped it open to reveal another clue on a white slip of paper in Grandpa's scratchy handwriting.

"Death is but the next great adventure," ~Dumbledore.

I laughed, a tear escaping my eye. I held the letter for some time and whispered goodbye, slowly folding it back up and placing it inside the case. Yaz and Jakub started arguing playfully about something while Lizard munched on snacks, completely in his own world. I looked around at what we had built again, after all that had happened.

Lightning struck the far mountainsides, lighting up the sky above Eagle Island in a cascading arc of electric purple and blue.

[End]

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