

BOOK TWO

A resounding thud echoed through the forest as the iron doors slammed shut, sending birds flying and causing the rabbits to run for cover. Sean watched the animals scamper into bushes, snapping twigs and crunching the colorful leaves, wishing he could join them. Wishing he could do anything at all except take the next few steps along the dirt path.

At least the sun was out. The light sprinkled through the gaps in the branches, dancing on the ground as the leaves swayed in the crisp autumn breeze. Others had to start the challenge in the rain before. All things considered, it could be worse. The small, steel sword, a dagger, really, attached to his hip felt heavy and awkward. In Jarro's shop, it had filled him with confidence and restless energy. Now he felt like an imposter. He did not belong here.

The sun rebounded off the iron doors behind him, heating the back of his neck, telling him that it was probably time to start walking. The quicker he got started, the sooner this was all over. That was his dream. To have this all over with. With his eyes closed, breathing in the smells of the forest, the tree sap and dirt, his resolve grew. He felt the familiar weight of the stone in its leather pouch hanging around his neck, resting right beside his heart. Instinctively, he grabbed the stone. Maybe it was his imagination, but he thought he could feel a pleasant warmth radiating through the old pouch into his palm. The stone was always there when he needed it.

"I guess we should go," William said. They stood together in a small clearing directly in front of the iron gate. Stretching endlessly before them was miles and miles of thick forest. A dirt path wound into the trees, dissolving into darkness a little ways ahead. Sean swallowed and rubbed the stone through his shirt.

"I guess you're right."

"We gotta do it alone, remember?" William said. Sean tried to pretend William was just as nervous as he was, but he knew that was not true. Each of his older brothers had completed the challenge, Mattheus still had the village record, and they undoubtedly gave him tips, even

though he said they did not. “I guess we can follow this path until it splits. Then I’ll go left and you go right. Sound good?”

“Yep,” Sean replied. His voice was watery and shaky.

William took a quick step forward, the fall of his heavy boots muffled on the dirt. With his right hand grasping the hilt of his sword, he looked like the hero on one of the myth books scattered around the village.

Stepping after him, Sean’s shorter legs couldn’t quite keep up with William’s long strides. Was William feeling the same pressure and anxiety now that the challenge lay before them? He started to ask, but the words caught in his throat. All that came out was an embarrassing mumble. With a quick glance over his shoulder, William all but winked at him and Sean cleared his throat.

Was it his imagination or did that bush just move? Suddenly every tree hid a potential threat, a giant-toothed monster with elongated incisors sparkling, waiting to tear into his flesh. Maybe it wasn’t such a paranoid thought. After all, who knew what was out there? Well, everyone who had completed the challenge did, but they did not give Sean anything to go on. That rustle had to be the wind. But what if it wasn’t? He stepped quicker until he practically walked on William’s heels.

Maybe the King was somewhere out there, watching them, smiling at their anxiety, planning all kinds of torture for those who would dare enter his forest uninvited. If he was as evil as William thought that would be just the thing he would do. And who could stop him? He owned the entire forest.

No one, at least no one Sean had ever heard of, had seen or talked to the King. No one really even mentioned him. Almost as if the King was some kind of afterthought, an unimportant by product of the challenge. Sean’s stomach flipped at the thought of bumping into him in the forest. Would he look like one of them or would he look like an animal? The massive iron walls

around the forest weren't decoration, they had to have been designed to keep people out. If the King was even still alive, or ever existed, he had to hate trespassing.

But he had to know it happened. Especially if the outsider was right and every village did this exact thing. Did the King not care? Or did he not exist? Sean wondered, not for the first time, if the King had really died long ago and the forest was nothing but a living relic to him, a sort of monument to the once powerful. The fountain was nothing but residual power sapped from the King as he died. He shuddered. The forest felt slightly colder and the sun turned menacing.

"What do you think out there?" Sean jumped at the sound of William's voice. It felt out of place in the quiet forest.

"Oh, I don't know." Sean's heart started to race. He quickened his steps to keep up with William's long strides. "Maybe the King."

William exhaled loudly. "Yeah, right." He looked over his shoulder at Sean. "I told you, man, he doesn't care about us. Why else would this forest be here?" William looked forward and shook his head. "Naw, he doesn't care." All the same, William tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword. "Should have just built us a road to the fountain. Instead, we have to go through this."

Maybe he was right. All of the anxiety and stress in the months leading up to the challenge, really his entire life, was more than any kid should have to face. The dark shadow that infected his mind since the day of his birth was a burden he didn't deserve. Now he was staring down several days in a foreign forest with who knew what waiting to pounce on him. The King could have made the challenge easier. There was no way he was there and if he was, there was no way he cared.

"I'm going to put my stone in the Fountain, get my powers, and then, who knows, might have a word or two with the King." That kind of talk felt fun and adventurous on the hill in the village. Now, with the King's forest before them, it felt dangerous. What if he was listening? Sean's stomach did another somersault.

How could William be so nonchalant about giving up his stone? How could he give up something that was basically a part of himself? Unless no one cared as much about it as Sean did. He watched the lump in William's pocket slide up and down with his steps. Anyone who could play in the schoolyard games, like William did, didn't care about their stone. Yet another advantage William had in the challenge. Sean was too sentimental for his own good.

Sean pictured himself standing before a Fountain, as he did many nights before this, it was his favorite mental picture. He was standing in front of a pool with a shallow, carved stone wall encircling it, his sword dripping the blood of a slain monster. The water, crystal clear and warm, lapped against the side. In this version of the dream, the King knelt behind him, begging for mercy. A crown of vines circled his head, digging into his skin. The stone balanced in his palm, hovered over the water. But he could not do it. Even in his imagination, he could not drop the stone in the pool. The pain of being without it was too much.

"What power do you think you'll get?" William asked, breaking the silence of the forest yet again. Maybe he wasn't so confident. "I hope I get ultra strength. Kind of like Mackey's dad has. I could be the best blacksmith in the world. Or I'll be a warrior, like Justin Windhorst." He stared off down the path with a smile on his face. "Yeah, I can see it now. Justin and William, defenders of Wentworth Village, the mighty and the brave."

"Yeah, cool," Sean mumbled.

"Well? What about you?"

"I really don't know," Sean answered. Honestly, he had never really thought about it beyond random trips of his imagination. There were so many powers and so many more to be discovered, he really couldn't pick one. Each person who came through the portal seemed to have a completely unique power. He would have nightmares where he threw his stone into the fountain, anxiously awaiting something to pop out and tell him what he would be gifted with, only to have the fountain spit out his worthless stone and slam shut. "I'm happy with anything really."

"Yeah," William answered wistfully. "I guess I am too. I'll make whatever work."

The temperature dropped as they ventured deeper into the forest. The trees here looked young and full of energy. Birds and squirrels hopped around the branches, chasing the acorns before they all fell away for winter. The forest overflowed with life and noise, insects chirping, the breeze rustling the leaves that still remained on the trees, animals digging amongst the roots. They were not very tall, but they were happy, alive and growing. In this part of the forest, his legs felt light. The breeze mixed with the sweat on his forehead, cooling him down. Maybe this was not so bad after all. Out of all of his wildest hopes, he never suspected the challenge would be....easy.

No one could remember the first person to venture into the forest. It must have been one of the forefathers of Wentworth. Maybe the first person in the village. The forest had always existed, as far back as any story went, the forest was there. The King's palace was also always there. He must have been a truly powerful man, part of an old and important family. Sean felt a chill run down his spine at the thought of him. There was no doubt he was dangerous.

"Do you think there will be food for us?" William asked.

"Umm, what?" Sean replied.

"Food. Like laying around or something. Do you think they'll give us some or do you think it's up to us to hunt and stuff?"

"Oh," Sean said. "I really don't know." When he was younger, it seemed so far away that he did not think about the challenge at all. In the past year, when the promise of entering the forest, maybe to never come out again, was so close he could taste it, he spent his time dreading the challenge instead of thinking about what it would be like. During all of that time, he should have been preparing. Why didn't he prepare?

They had covered hunting in one of Prima's lessons. Sean was terrible at it. He could never quite get the arrow perfectly notched in the bow, so his shots were wild and out of control. Prima would roll her eyes and explain how to do it over and over, but the arrow never found its

mark. And now he might have to hunt for himself. There better be food for them or starving was a real possibility.

“My brothers said they have supply baskets set up,” William said more to himself than to Sean. “But I don’t know if I can believe them. They’ve told me stuff that is definitely not true before.”

“Who are ‘they’?” Sean asked.

“Who? My brothers? You know them.” Of course, everyone knew William’s family.

“No. You said ‘they’ might have food baskets set up. Who is ‘they’?”

“Oh. I don’t know.” There was a puzzled look on William’s face as if he had never actually thought that part out. “The village founders or leaders, I guess. Whoever set up this challenge for us. Whoever gave us these stones.” William pulled his stone out of his pocket and casually tossed it once in the air, easily catching it with his other hand. Pure black and dull, his stone resembled a piece of coal. It had a noticeable chip missing from the side and was scuffed in several places. Sean loved seeing other stones. It felt like he was looking to the soul of a person like he could see who they truly were. He never saw a stone that he liked better than his own, and he guessed that was true of everyone else as well. Or maybe everyone else never even thought about it.

Up ahead the dirt pathway split. The two pathways looked identical, one stretched to the left and one to the right, but one had to lead to the Fountain and the other could lead to death. The canopy of tree branches blocked out the sun. They might have been walking for only an hour or most of the day, it was hard to tell. Somehow, he would have to keep better track.

“There’s a split,” William said. “You want to go right and I’ll go left?”

“Sure,” Sean said. “Wait. How do I know your brothers didn’t tell you to go left and you’re sending me off to get lost?”

William smiled at him smugly. “My brothers wouldn’t tell me the way to go. No one helps each other complete the challenge.” Sean nodded. That ‘individual’ thing again. “They say it’s

because you have to do the challenge on your own, but I don't believe it. I think it's because no one wants anyone else to have powers. We all want each other to fail."

Sean pursed his lips as he turned that thought over. It made sense, in a twisted kind of way. But the villagers could be pretty twisted. "Yeah, you're probably right," Sean replied.

"So you want to go right, then?" They had reached the branch and paused, balanced on the edge of the decision.

"Why don't we just go together? We can help each other," Sean ventured, staring at the ground between his feet.

"You know we can't do that," William answered. "If it bugs you that much, I'll go right and you can go left, I really don't care."

"No, no, I'll go right."

"Okay, cool. Then I'll be seeing you, Sean." William took one quick step down the left path and turned around. "Hey Sean, I bet you twenty coins I make it to the Fountain first." William smiled as if he already knew he was guaranteed the twenty coins. He was.

"Yeah, okay," Sean said. He was not going to make it to the fountain first, that was obvious. Leaving this place alive would be a victory enough. He also did not have twenty coins to wager. But who cares? Dead men are not expected to pay their bets.

William nodded at him with eyes narrow and his jaw set. A vein stood out on his forehead. He turned his back on Sean and jogged down the path.

"Hey, William!" Sean called after him. William paused for a minute and turned around. "Good luck." William looked at him, confused. He nodded and ran down the path, rounding a corner and disappearing from view.

Sean was alone. There was a good chance he would stay alone until the very end of the challenge when he would take the portal and see the entire village gathered around him like a birthday party he never had. But that was a long way off. Right now, he stood alone in a forest while unseen creatures prowled in the bushes. He grabbed at his stone, feeling it through his shirt and the pouch. Desperately, he tried to cling to any thought as his mind reeled. Could he follow William down his path secretly? If he stayed far enough away, William didn't have to know Sean was behind him. William could handle any of the monsters in here and Sean would just sneak his way to the fountain.

But that felt like cheating. The idea of individual responsibility didn't mean much to him, but he knew he had to earn his powers, that was the way it worked. If he somehow cheated the system, maybe they would revoke his power. Could they even do that? He took one quick step down the pathway and it felt like he was stepped through a thick layer of slime. His feet were heavy, rebelling against walking straight into danger. Everything in his nature told him to run back to the door, back to the village where it was safe. That way he could keep his stone instead of dropping it into a Fountain forever. Even if his village banished him for forsaking the mandatory challenge, he was sure he could find another village to settle down in. And as long as he had his stone, how bad could it really be?

With his hands twitching toward the gate a short walk behind him, he hesitated at the entrance to the path. He could do it. It would be so easy to turn around. But an image of his father's face flashed across his mind, disappointment and sadness etched into the weathered features. He saw tears leaking from his mother's eyes. The amount of shame and embarrassment they would feel would be greater than his own. Could he really do that to them? He owed it to them to, at the very least, do the best he could. Even if it got him killed, he took another step forward..

Each step fell easier than the last. The air chilled and the trees started to look a little older the farther he walked. It was really quite peaceful, almost as if he were walking through the

small grove behind the village, picking apples with his mother. Each tree had a distinct knot in the bark that he pretended were faces. He created stories for each one, imagining them as people who had been frozen in place, their histories long forgotten by everyone but him.

This large, circular knot was actually an ancient wizard who had frozen himself to escape from the evil Markuthin. The vines stretching up the trunk was his hair, tangled and matted through years of neglect. Forgotten and alone, the wizard would rest forever, but at least he was safe from the evil that still hunted him.

The smaller tree next to him had a clear picture of the wizard's son who had been so sad at the loss of his father, he too turned himself into a tree. Sean smiled and rubbed the trunk of the tree, right below the boy's face, as he passed it. The bark scratched at his hand in a playful way.

The longer he walked, a deep ache started to develop and worsen in Sean's legs. Trying to untie the knots, he dug his knuckles into his thighs. It must have been hours since he started down this path. Was the challenge really this easy? Besides some tired legs, there was nothing challenging. Just a straight path through the wood, nothing but a simple walk. There wasn't even a steep hill or gnarled roots that tried to grab him. Unless you were afraid of trees or dirt and the occasional insect, this was not bad at all. After he finished the challenge and got his powers, he might actually come back into the forest to wander and climb through the trees. The one in front of him had the perfect, low-hanging branch to lift himself into.

He smiled and pictured himself dangling from that branch, his arms hanging below his head, his face turning red with the blood rushing to it.

Suddenly, the pathway ended at a large tree that blocked the rest of the forest. The path would continue on the other side, it had to. But after a quick glance around the tree, he could not see any traces of another trail. His heart began to race, the smile disappeared from his face. After a few steps into the forest, he shook his head and returned to the tree. Since his legs groaned, he might as well take a break and think through his options.

There was the option to retrace his steps and follow William, but was there any guarantee that William's path led to anything better than this? It had taken him all day to make it this far down his own path. What if he lost another day circling all the way back only to meet with another dead end down William's path? That was a major risk.

William's path stretched to the left and his stretched to the right. Theoretically he could walk through the forest to his left and try to cross into William's path. If he managed to do that, the shortcut would save him valuable time. The forest stretched into deepening darkness on his left and Sean swallowed hard. That was dangerous. Leaving the path would put him at a major risk of getting lost and Prima's navigation lessons were always difficult for him. Most of the lessons were impossible for him. He enjoyed following the North Star, that was something he could do, but the branches blocked any view of the darkening sky.

Trying to cross the forest to William's path might be a good idea, but it was one that Sean couldn't do. Besides, he had to get to the other side of the forest, that was the only part of the challenge he actually knew. He could not get there by going sideways, he had to go deeper into the forest. Going the wrong direction would be nothing but a giant waste of time at best and a death trap at worst.

Even though there was no path, his best option seemed to be to keep walking deeper into the forest. His heart started to beat faster. He rubbed his sweaty palms against the front of his pants. No one said this challenge would be easy, but wandering with no direction through a cold and dark forest? That crossed the line. Maybe he really should turn back. Again, he dug his fingers into the twisted cords of his thighs.

It was difficult, but he had to do it. He may be lost in the forest forever, but there was no point trying to go back to the village without a power. He might as well give this the best effort he could. At least if he failed no one could say he gave up. If anyone even knew what happened to him. Did the elders try to find those that never came out of the forest or did they assume the worst?

On the other side of the tree the forest stretched endlessly into darkness. The temperature had dropped another few degrees, but his palms were still wet with sweat. The friendly knot-faces in the trees turned menacing as the shadows lengthened. They watched him, eagerly awaiting their next meal. As he stood, building any kind of courage he could find to walk into the unknown, his stomach growled and bile rose in his throat.

This was the longest Sean had ever gone without food. What was once always a benefit of having a baker as a father, it now felt like a curse. There might be food boxes, according to William's brothers, but Sean hadn't seen any. Everyone else had taken several days to complete the challenge, Matheus set the record at two days. Could he really go a few days without food?

He made a mental list of his options and ran through it and his heart sank. How could he let himself be this unprepared? Years watching his father taught him how to make bread, but that was useless out here. He couldn't make fire out of his hands like his father could, at least not yet. Prima's hunting lesson seemed basic now and he could not even keep up with the rest of the class in that. There was always fruit, and he enjoyed gathering that, but how could he tell what was safe to eat? Making traps was a feat of engineering far too advanced for him. Another deep rumble tore through his stomach and he doubled over.

Some of the red and orange leaves rustled at the foot of the large Oak tree. A fluffy, brown tail poked out of the foliage. That was it. That was what he had to do. As hard and as sad as it would be, he would have to hunt down a squirrel or a rabbit. There wasn't a chance he could survive without food and he couldn't count on their being food stations set up anywhere he could find. This whole challenge was an individual responsibility after all. He slid his sword out of the sheath, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. Crouched low, he took one, slow step towards the squirrel, his sword held out in front of him, his teeth ground together. One more step. A stick snapped as his foot landed on it. The crack, like a whip, echoed through the trees.

The squirrel heard it, poked its head out of the leaves, saw his attacker, and darted into the forest. Sean's heart sank as he watched the squirrel's fuzzy tail bounding over a small hill. Another one would probably come along, but that one would be equally as hard to catch. This was going to be a hard night.

Several hours had passed and Sean had not managed to get anywhere close to another animal. His legs screamed at him, his back was drenched in sweat despite the cool night. Time after time, his hopes would rise at the sound of a small animal running in the brush, only to be crushed by the realization that he was too slow to catch any of them. He flung his sword against the tree and sank to the ground, deep breaths racking his chest. This was not going to work. He would have to build a trap or something. He was just too slow. Hours spent and he was no closer to the Fountain, completing the challenge, and getting out of this stupid forest.

A soft baying drifted through the trees.

Sean peeled back a bush, to see a sheep with its feet caught in a vine and an inclined head carefully watching him. It was helpless and afraid, its ears perked and its beady black eyes darted from tree to tree. A pit sunk Sean's stomach as he realized what he had to do. Drawing his sword, the once-threatening sound of the sword leaving the sheath now sounded like the hiss of a snake. Tears leaked from his eyes as he looked the sheep over, taking in its beautiful wool, its perked up ears.

This sheep must belong to the King. It had been cared for so well. Its fur was not matted and as white as a pearl. None of the sheep in the village ever looked like this, almost like this one had walked straight from a picture book. It was so fat. The King must have taken such good care of his animals. The King could take such good care of a sheep and let the villagers live in dirty huts? What kind of King was this?

The sheep stamped the ground and struggled to get free of the vine. Its head twisted and it bayed again, softer this time. It was the King's. That had to count for something. He raised the sword, but hesitated, dropping it to his side and squinting at the sheep. Could he

really kill the King's property? There would be no explaining that if he ran into the King. He was trespassing and killing the King's animals.

But Sean was starving. He had to be honest with himself: he was not going to catch a squirrel, they were too fast and he was too slow. This was a golden opportunity, gifted to him miraculously, for food to last him the rest of the challenge. He raised the sword again, closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. Plunging the sword down, he felt warm liquid spray up his arms and recoiled. Mercifully, the lamb did not make a noise. Sobbing, Sean sank to the ground and curled up into a ball, smearing the ground with the sheep's blood.

The village butcher slaughtered animals almost daily and Sean never had an issue with that, but it felt different when he was the one doing the killing. Somehow it was more personal, more intimate and brutal. That sheep never harmed anything. It didn't deserve to die just so Sean could stay alive. There was no justice in that. No one talked about the way it felt to butcher an animal. Why was that not one of Prima's lessons?

Sean stayed in the ball for several minutes with his eyes closed, breathing deeply. Murdering the sheep was bad, but it paled in comparison to trying to salvage meat from the corpse. Giving up, which he desperately wanted to do, would mean he killed the sheep for nothing and he owed it to the sheep to actually get some use out of it. As an added bonus, he was able to take some of the wool and line his thin clothes with it. The forest grew colder as he worked and he was now drenched in sweat and sticky blood.

The sun must be set by now. He thought about the village and his lumpy mattress in the kitchen. Sitting next to the warm oven, watching the sky burst into color like an explosion outside his window. It was always his favorite time of day, sunset. He loved trying to match the colors in the sky with the color of his stone. His stone was always more beautiful.

The sheep fought against being chewed and tasted bland. Maybe he had cooked it wrong, but lighting the fire was hard enough, he didn't have time to worry about proper cooking technique. Last night he complained about the mutton, but this made that meal seem like a

delicacy. At least it was something. This wasn't the time to complain about any food, especially some that was gifted to him.

Slowly, the knot in his stomach untangled, but his mouth had turned into a desert. He needed water, but it was too dark to wander off in search of anything. He would never find the sheep again. In the morning he could find a stream or a pond, but until then he would have to wait it out.

The wool barely moved an inch no matter how hard he pulled. Who knew wool was this heavy? The pile of fluff looked like a grounded cloud. Why was it so heavy when it looked like the stuffing of a pillow? He managed to drag the wool all the way back to the large Oak while sweat poured down his back and neck.

Darkness covered the entire forest, Sean couldn't even see the next few trees. The birds stopped chirping and the squirrels burrowed in trees. He crawled under the wool and closed his eyes. In the morning he would have some more sheep meat. He loved the idea of starting the day with a full stomach, even if it was as bland and gamey as the sheep. Sort of like a headstart. After that, his first priority was water. Then he would find his way deeper into the forest.

How was William doing? Was he able to find anything to eat or was he now starving and thirsty? William was a good hunter, nimble and athletic. He, as usual, aced all of Prima's lessons on hunting. Surely he would catch plenty of squirrels and he probably already found a lake or a river or something to drink out of and clean the caked on dirt off of his face. Sean rolled over under the wool, trying to find some way to lay without the roots digging into him. No one was worried about William. If there was ever someone who was ready for the challenge, it was him. He was basically bred for it.

The wool made everything warm and his muscles started to unwind. He used part of it as a pillow and the rest as a blanket. There was no way William was this comfortable. Maybe he should have crawled up the tree, who knew what kind of beasts roamed this forest at night, but

it was so comfortable and happy underneath his makeshift blanket. Besides, his legs might not even make it up the tree before giving out on him. The forest around him took on a sort of soft, white glow in the twilight, almost as if it were full of magic. It probably was.

Dreaming that he was back in the village, Sean drifted off to sleep. At this time, his father would be outside of the house with his pipe and sweet roll. His mother would have a book and a tea. The night air crept through their hut and cooled the residual warmth from a day of baking bread. Did they ever talk about him? Did they wonder how he was doing?

An earth-rattling roar pierced the quiet night, scattering birds from the tops of the trees. Sean's eyes shot open, but he didn't move. The wool moved as his legs started to shake under it. Through the bushes to his left, he heard what sounded like a giant chewing - a wet chomping and tearing with a low growl in between. Something was demolishing the remains of his sheep. Soon, it would come for him.

Faster than he had ever moved in his life, Sean scampered out of the wool and up the Oak tree. Not noticing the way his legs cried for relief, he climbed as high as he dared, his dagger bouncing uselessly against his thigh as he hopped from branch to branch. Thankfully, he had always been good at climbing. His sweaty palms slipped off of the branches, but he caught himself and climbed a little higher. His heart tried to punch its way out of his chest as if it knew its time was about to be over and it thought it could make a better go of it out there on its own. After two or three awkward slips, moving higher would be a risk, so he settled on a branch, trying to hide in the leaves that had not yet fallen to the ground. Hopefully whatever made this noise could not climb or would not see him.

A low, rumbling growl preceded the monster through the bush. Sean saw its snout first, followed by its barred teeth, perfectly white and larger than arrows. Its eyes were small and glowing red, shining in the night. Its knotted fur was pitch black and shone almost white. It slunk low to the ground, sneaking up on its prey. Even though its stomach was inches from the ground, it still stood 6 feet tall, taller than Sean. It walked on all fours, with padded paws as

large as a dog. Its muscles under its fur bent and straightened seamlessly as it slid under the tree where Sean had just been sleeping. It barely made a sound as it stepped over leaves and fallen twigs.

It looked like a wolf, but a wolf that should never exist. It was a monster if Sean had ever seen one. Maybe it wasn't fair, but the monster oozed evil. It had to be horrendous, violent and brutal. How was something this evil allowed to exist? The King must not have been so powerful if he could not stop monsters like this from living in his forest. The wolf snatched the wool blanket into its powerful jaws, took one bite and then spit it out. It slid between bushes, deeper into the forest, hunting for something else to demolish.

With a short rattle, Sean let out the breath he had been holding since seeing the wolf. How could he possibly have any hope of completing this challenge with those things around? How had anyone completed this challenge before him? Was that the only one in this forest? They expected him to wander deeper into the forest with that thing prowling around, waiting for him. It would be hard enough to stay away from one of those, but if there were more? It would be better to sprint out of the forest and deal with the ridicule from the villagers. He would live as an outcast, he did not care, at least he would be alive. Anything to not see that wolf again.

The steel sword on his hip was laughable now. There was no way that could do any serious damage to a monster of that size. He would have to be swallowed whole and cut his way out from the inside if he wanted to fight one of them. They could easily outrun him and, with those claws, it could definitely climb a tree. Did Jarro know about these things? He had to. He had completed the challenge when he was sixteen. Why did he give Sean such a useless sword if he knew the monsters in here? Was it some sort of sick joke from the elders? How did they allow this?

Basically, he was already dead.

Sean spent the rest of the night in the tree, not daring to close his eyes. From his high vantage point, he saw large birds diving in and out of the trees to his left. Those birds looked

larger than anything he had ever seen, with wingspans larger than the community hall in the village. The beaks chiseled into a point and a caw echoed through the trees. Yet another thing he would have to deal with. He did not see any more of the wolves, but occasionally he heard the familiar roar in the distance. They were out there, prowling and waiting, along with who knew what else just waiting for him to slip out of the tree and foolishly wander father into their lair. The forest belonged to them, not him.

A bush blocked where the sheep had been caught. Sean's nostrils flared and tears rose to his eyes as he stared at that bush. That poor sheep. Sure, it was already dead. Sure, he was the person actually responsible for killing it. But his killing was not so bad. At least it was necessary. The wolf ravished the poor sheep's body. In a way, that was far more disrespectful than actually killing it. The wolf did not even need the sheep meat, it would do just fine without it. It only ate the sheep because it was there and the wolf wanted it. That had to be worse than what Sean did. If he ever actually met the King and was forced to tell him about the sheep, he would be sure to mention that. At least what he did was not as bad as what the wolf did.

What had William done about the monsters? Sean pictured him drawing his sword, flinging a makeshift torch at a wolf and wrestling it into submission. He could almost hear the whimper as the poor pinned wolf gave up and submitted to the rightful lord of the forest. Sleeping soundly, the domicile wolves would guard William all night. They would show him the way to the fountain in the morning and he would be out of here by tomorrow night, setting the new record. That was the way it went for William.

But not for Sean.