



HEWN

VOLUME ONE OF
~ULTIMATE FANTASY~

J. G. CUFF

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Welcome to the Queen's Realm...

REBEL AND PRIDE

1

E was but a boy of 10 when he first went to the edge of the Void. It would be the last time that he ever saw his brother alive. And he would make his first kill. The early arrival of spring had breathed new life into the lush Sparrow Vale; a vast, fertile plain of rivers, streams and endless pastures on the western side of the Queen's Realm. The vale's green oasis stretched out from the foothills of the western Timor Ranges, all of the way east, a day's ride by wagon, or a few hours in the saddle, to the edge of the Void Canyon. Within a

month, there would be flowers in bloom, bees collecting pollen for honey, and many reasons to celebrate the end of winter's grasp.

For many miles in all directions, rustic homes, barns and large fields of varying crops spread out like the colored parcels of an endless quilt. In the south end of the Sparrow Vale, near the edge of the Buckskin Forest, stood a simple log house on a farm of nine acres and no more. The upper attic was a loft bedroom shared by two close brothers, Tiberius and Atticus Sloane.

Atticus was lanky and light-haired with small freckles dotting his fair cheeks. Although he was only still a boy, he was very strong from daily hard work on the farm. It was his tenth birthday and he had waited all year to turn a decade. Up in the loft, in

the late morning, he was writing out a list of the things he was going to accomplish in the coming year. Among those things was learning to ride a horse, and beating his older brother in a foot race.

Downstairs in their narrow kitchen, Tiberius had set a fire in the iron cook-stove for their lunch. At 14, he had already become a capable cook, thanks to his mother. His long dark hair was tied neatly back. He was tall and slim; nearly grown into a man. Hard work had not passed him by either. It would be just the two of them at the table for lunch.

Their mother and father, Darius and Aunna, had left by wagon before the sun rose, pulled along by their only two horses named Rebel and Pride; both mares; twelve-year-old twins; one brown and one white. As much of a handful as they could be, they were no

ordinary horses. They were descendants of a rare breed from the Nasura Plains in the far eastern borderlands. The unique breed was more commonly known as Eastern Swifts. They could live an entire century before their powerful bodies began to wane, and they were faster than anything on land. Cared for well, they would outlive the Sloanes entirely, and be left to a new generation. Darius had always said that he named the horses after their distinct personalities. However, their given names reminded him more of his two sons.

The mares were strong workers and equally as stubborn. Darius had to make sure that they were let to run at least once every day. Due to their incredible speed, he did not allow Tiberius to ever ride them at full charge for fear that he might break his neck.

Atticus was afraid to ride the horses. He worked with them well enough to plow and pull, but he did not like to sit in the saddle. That was fine with Darius. He already had one adventurous son. Two would be a worry. While Darius and Aunna held hands, the horses pulled them along the muddy road toward Otium; a small village to the northwest that was home to fewer than 500 people. Merchant shops, farmer's markets, inns, blacksmiths and a large tavern, made up most of the town square. Darius would soon need seeds to sow, new tools, and a special grain mix to keep the horses strong throughout the hard work ahead. Aunna had a list of things that she wanted and Darius already knew that she would get every single one of them.

Aunna was a beauty. Her wavy black hair hung down around her shoulders and she could still seduce him with a simple glance, just the way she had always done for the past 20 years. She adored his strength and honesty, and the way he always touched her gently. She knew that he was a good man and he was the husband that she had always imagined herself with. When Aunna first met Darius, she was all too happy to start a new life. He loved her then and he loved her even more now. They had been introduced at a village dance two years after Aunna's family was killed in a house fire while they slept. She survived her parents and two sisters by being absent the night of the fire; visiting and caring for her grandmother who lived only a mile away.

After Aunna Carey became Mrs. Aunna Sloane, Darius' mother Mary died of a fever the following winter. He was glad that she was with him long enough to have seen him married and happy. Marcus Sloane had raised Darius with books, maps and all sorts of information that he had gathered in his travels. From an early age, Darius could read, write and navigate by the stars. His father had worked as a merchant trader and an adventurer of sorts, although he died quite resourceless. The one thing of real value he left for his family was the twin mares.

When Darius was very young, his father never traveled far from home. After Mary passed away, his range grew and he traveled to many distant places in his old age. After Darius married, Marcus was usually gone for months, even years at a time. He

died when the boys were small, having only seen his grandsons a handful of times. He would be remembered by them for his grand stories, and his big laugh.

"Atticus! Food's ready!"

Atticus climbed down the ladder from the loft and into the sitting room with a big hungry smile, and he quickly sat himself down at the kitchen table where Tiberius was scraping fried eggs and sliced potatoes out of an iron skillet and into two wooden bowls.

"It's your birthday Atticus," he said with a smile, "I made you three eggs, as you are growing stronger."

Atticus grinned and lifted-up his arms to flex his lean biceps. Tiberius laughed and sat down to join him.

After they had eaten, the brothers tidied the house, carried firewood inside, stacked it by the hearth, and then headed outside to the family's three-stall livery. They cleaned out the horses stalls, replenished the water troughs with buckets from the deep stone well behind the barn, and they spread out fresh straw for bedding. "Ah, spring is finally here!" Tiberius said excitedly, as he tossed his rake down to the barn floor and stretched his arms out with a loud groan. Atticus quickly dropped his rake as well and followed him back to the house.

Darius and Aunna returned home soon after, and they were very pleased. With the last bit of supplies unloaded by the boys, Darius sat down beside the fireplace in his old rocking chair to enjoy his pipe, while he listened to his darling wife hum an old song

to herself in the kitchen. She was preparing Atticus' favorite food for his birthday dinner. The smell of cinnamon sweet bread drifted through the house. The boys were in the loft upstairs, changing out of dirty shirts. A moment later, Atticus climbed back down the wooden ladder and his father smiled, beckoning him over with his pipe.

"Come here my son."

Atticus went to his father and Darius set his pipe down on a small wooden table beside his chair.

"Yes Father?"

Darius quickly reached up and tickled the boy's sides until Atticus was out of breath from laughing.

"Father let me go! Your breath is like an old dragon's!"

Aunna's laughter drifted out from the little kitchen and Darius laughed as well saying,

"You are not too big for a spanking if you'd prefer that for your birthday."

Atticus smiled slyly.

"If you can catch me Father, I am one year faster than I was before!"

Darius smiled and shook his head as he let Atticus go.

"Now, I think your older brother has something for you. Tiberius!"

"I'm coming Father," Tiberius said as he came down the ladder with a smile. He looked at Atticus and then went outside through the front door.

"Atticus close your eyes," said Darius.

Atticus smiled and shut them tight, trying to imagine what his gift would be.

"Alright, you can look now," Tiberius said from the doorway.

Atticus opened his eyes and he saw his brother holding a long, narrow shape wrapped in yellow paper and tied with a thin brown twine. It was as tall as he was. Tiberius laughed watching him squirm in excitement, eager to open his gift.

"Well go on, open it!" Darius said. Aunna came out from the kitchen and sat down in her husband's lap by the fire. Her long apron was spotted with the remnants of a hundred previous cakes and pies. Aunna loved to bake for her family. It was just one of her many talents. Atticus stepped forward hastily and Tiberius handed him the yellow-wrapped

package. The birthday boy sat down in the middle of the room and carefully untied the string, so as to not rip the pretty yellow paper. They would use it again for more gifts in the future. Very little was ever wasted in their house. When Atticus saw what was inside, he was very excited. He stood and grinned from ear to ear at his smiling family.

In his hands, he proudly held out a beautifully carved fishing spear. They all admired Tiberius' craftsmanship. Tiny fish and scaled patterns were carved smoothly around the entire length of the wooden shaft. At the tip, a long head of iron, finely sharpened and barbed, completed the spear. The quality and detail in the work was a clear indication of many long hours of practice. Tiberius was always carving something; it was his favorite past-time.

Atticus turned the spear around in his hands and noticed that midway down the slim shaft, neatly engraved into the wood, was an inscription:

FOR THE MASTER

Atticus looked up at his big brother with a curious look. "What am I the master of?"

Tiberius pointed to the spear and said,

"You will be the master of spearing fish when I'm done with you."

"Does this mean I can finally go with you?"

Atticus had always been too small to navigate the fast flowing streams that crossed one another where Tiberius claimed that the best fishing in all of the Buckskin was. They had no reason to doubt him. He had yet to come home from a day in the woods

without at least, two plump trout on his stringer. Tiberius had always wished to bring Atticus along, but the current in some places was too strong for even him to press through. Trying to catch fish and mind a small younger brother at the same time was not something he considered very practical.

"Yes Atticus. You are now old enough and big enough to come with me."

Atticus set down the spear and gave his older brother a big hug.

Then he looked over at their parents seated by the fire.

"Can we go now?"

"Of course you can go," said Darius, "It's less than an hour's walk to the streams and there is still plenty of

light for you to be home by dark. Your mother and I will enjoy some quiet-time by the fire, and when you two get back later, you can open your gift from us.


But you must do exactly as your brother says, and if the water's too fast yet, you two come straight home."

And so it was, Atticus Sloane had finally turned a decade, received his first fishing spear, and was off to the streams with his older brother for the very first time. It was early afternoon on a bright spring day.

Once they had donned their soft leather boots and thick wool sweaters, the boys left the house with their spears in hand. Darius and Aunna reminded them to be back before dark.

THE BUCKSKIN

2

 IBERIUS led the way with a leather sack over his shoulder. Aunna had packed it before they left with a small quilt to sit on and some pieces of salt meat and biscuits wrapped in a wax cloth. The Buckskin was a mix of thick conifers and leafy soft woods. Atticus had been in the forest many times, but never as far as his brother would be taking him now. The small worn path led them along the top of a heavily treed ravine and then the trail would take them east. A warmer week had passed since the last snowfall in the vale. Tiberius

had a feeling that the waters would be flowing a little strong for fishing, but this was his brother's birthday, and it meant a lot to him, even if they caught nothing.

The snow was nearly gone from the ground. Only small ribbons of white remained; packed together in narrow swirls around the bases of the trees where the sun's light had not reached yet. After walking together for almost an hour, they could finally hear water running up ahead.

"The streams!" Atticus exclaimed, running ahead of Tiberius into a small opening in the trees where two swift flowing streams coursed south; each roughly 15 feet across and separated from one another by a long, narrow island of pebbles in the center. Large boulders sat here and there with old sticks and logs caught

against them, pinned by the strong current. It was all very beautiful and Atticus was delighted. Tiberius stood beside him and nodded toward the rushing water upstream.

"Look up there. You can see why you had been too small, until now," Tiberius said, raising his voice slightly over the churning current. Upstream, the banks were much narrower and the water swirled into waist-high pools. The crossing would be safe, as long as they stayed where the streams were wide and no deeper than their calves. As Atticus stepped into the stream, the water pushed hard against his legs; swelling up and around the top of his boots. The cold liquid found its way to his feet and he breathed in through his teeth; curling up his toes and then he ran across. Tiberius laughed, trudging along behind him.

"Don't worry Atticus; your boots will get warmer once we are on the bank."

Tiberius led them over the sand bar and into the second stream. On the other side, the bank was much higher. A large beaver dam had been built and flooded a low meadow in the forest. When they had crossed and reached the top, the boys could see a beautiful pool. It was the size of an acre. At the other side, the trees grew close together in a dark wall around the water's edge.

"Tiberius, it's wonderful! We can swim here in the summer!"

"I knew you would like it. You do remind me of a little beaver."

Atticus smiled and swatted at him with his hand. Once they had stepped into the shallow edge of the calm pool, Tiberius began his instructions on how to stand and hold a spear so that it did not cast a shadow on the surface. He pointed out at a few small dark lines under the surface; little fish too small to spear. Good practice for a new fisherman. After another hour had passed, and the boy had fulfilled his training requirements, Tiberius then decided to show him how to spear in moving water. "Let's try the stream Atticus. It's a whole other skill." As he reached the top of the bank, Tiberius turned to look back and noticed that Atticus was still standing in the water, facing away from him. The boy was staring into the dark woods on the other side of the large pool.

Tiberius followed his gaze, trying to see whatever it was that had so intently caught his brother's attention. He saw nothing more than tangled branches and shadows.

"What is it Atticus?"

Atticus stood absolutely silent and did not turn around. Tiberius walked back down the bank and into the shallow pool to stand behind him.

"What do you see?" Tiberius asked again impatiently.

Atticus slowly turned his head and whispered, "Something is watching us." He raised his left hand and pointed toward the trees. "In there."

Tiberius stiffened and the hairs on his neck pricked up. Holding tightly onto his spear with both hands, he glanced up at the sharp iron tip. His only fear in the Buckskin was a hungry bear; ornery and empty-bellied after a long winter's sleep. Atticus suddenly turned towards him, raising his hands and yelling, "It's coming!" Then he began to laugh.

"I scared you chicken!" Atticus said proudly, with a broad grin.

Tiberius crouched slightly and put his head down. Atticus knew that posture all too well. He gave out a yelp and ran out of the water, over the bank and up the edge of the second stream with Tiberius no more than 10 feet behind him.

"You'd better run Atticus! You're going swimming!"

Atticus ran upstream like a rabbit with a hungry fox behind him; jumping over rocks and logs along the edge and then he swiftly darted to the right and crashed through a wall of thick brush to escape his brother. Tiberius ran past where Atticus had disappeared into the trees and then he stopped. He turned around and tried to peer in through the branches to see where Atticus was hiding, but the brush was too thick.

"Atticus! I'm not chasing after you in there."

Tiberius bent over and placed his hands on his knees to catch his breath. A moment passed and Atticus had not reappeared.

"Atticus! Come out here and we'll fish the stream."

No answer. The only sound was that of the water, rushing beside him. Then, from behind the dense branches, he heard a genuinely excited voice.

"Tiberius! Come and see!"

Tiberius put his arms out in front of him, turned his head to shield his eyes from the thick spruce branches, and then he pushed himself through. He stepped forward and his feet slid down for an instant; jolting him as he quickly landed steady on his feet.

Atticus was standing right in front of him with his arms outstretched and a wide smile on his face. The dirt on his hands and the bits of leave-litter in his hair, made it obvious that he had not fallen so gracefully down the small slope. Tiberius could see right away why the boy was smiling. They were standing on what appeared to be an old stone road.

The large flat rocks were laid tightly together, completely flat beneath their feet. The road was not on any map that Tiberius had ever seen. The edges were lined with large trees that gently turned around a corner with the road to the left and then out of sight.

The branches above their heads had stretched out and over time had intertwined, creating a thick ceiling between the road and the sky. They looked up in wonder at the canopy of long, tangled limbs, just above their heads. It was as though they were standing in a wood and stone tunnel. Tiberius spoke as if he had just solved a great mystery.

"This must lead to something important; an ancient village perhaps. It looks like no one's been on this

road for a thousand years. Imagine what we may find!"

"Or maybe...it leads to the Void," Atticus said, looking up at his brother with a warning expression.

The boys were prohibited by their parents from ever going east of the streams. The Queen's Guard patrolled the lands around their house and the Buckskin forest, but to the east was the Void Canyon and beyond that, the Sorrow Wood. The boys had grown-up learning all sorts of tall tales about monsters in the canyon and ravenous savages in the woods beyond. It fueled their fears and even more so, their curiosity.

"There's only one way to find out," Tiberius said.

"Atticus, do you think you could handle some

adventure this afternoon, beyond fishing? We could spear another time, when the waters more calm."

Atticus looked at him with a very serious look. He seemed to be almost offended.

"You know I can go on adventures now. I'm ten."

Tiberius laughed out loud and put his arm around him.

"Yes, you are Atticus."

"What if Father finds out?" Atticus asked.

"He won't if, you don't tell. Now grab your spear and let's be off!"

The boys set out on their afternoon adventure, walking deeper into the east, down the mysterious old stone road, with wild imaginings in their minds of

lost villages and hidden treasure. They were about to get far more than they imagined.

The Void Canyon was an immense crevasse, a deep, dry, barren trench that stretched from the Devil's Spine 100 miles to the north, down to the Crucio Sea 40 miles south of where the boys were standing. The Void was an inhospitable and very dangerous place; rumored to be the home of many strange inhabitants far away from any law and order. There was only one safe crossing at an outpost for the Queen's Guard farther north. A force of 200 armed men patrolled the Ashen Plains north of the Sparrow Vale, and their outpost was built on the western side of a large bridge that spanned over the Void's only narrow gap.

An ancient stand of behemoth trees on the other side of the canyon, known as the Sorrow Wood, spread

out across the land for many miles. Its endless roots had been creeping into the soil and stone, long before man's time. Many secrets hid beneath its dark canopy where few people ever dared to venture. Countless souls had vanished into the vastness of twisted trees and blinding fog to never return. Some believed that the strange hanging cloud was the remnants of those same souls, forever cursed to haunt the Sorrow Wood as expired shadows, drifting endlessly through the stand, trapped in a living mist. But there were far worse things to fear than ghosts moving through the ancient trees.

Wataeo was the sound they called themselves.

The feral tribesman had earned a well-known reputation for hacking the limbs first; crippling their victims after an ambush and dragging their injured

bodies into the dark trees. The Wataeo had a taste for the flesh of man, and they did not discriminate. Their captives would be kept as livestock; fed, fattened and cared for until their time came. Then, they would be tied to a blessing tree. The blessing trees were sacred to the Wataeo. They chose the oldest and largest in the forest and had worshiped them for thousands of years by fastening their victims together, side by side around the massive trunks; binding them tightly against the trees with long vines. For days, the savages would circle them, chanting and praying, taking bites, and slowly eating their catch alive; feeding on the meat from the blessing tree.

FOUND



HE over-grown stone road coursed along through the Buckskin. After what seemed to be nearly an hour, the tree branches had separated above them and their trunks had been replaced by stone banks on either side of the road. The natural rising of the bedrock below the forest floor had been cut away to keep the road level. The banks had grown to more than 10 feet, lining the road with two sheer rock walls. Tiberius was continuously looking up and he was starting to feel very uneasy. The walls beside them made it felt as though they were being funneled into a trap. He thought it very

foolish to bring his young brother to an area of the forest that neither of them had ever been, and had been adamantly told to never go. This was all his idea and now he had changed his mind. Tiberius stopped walking.

"Atticus, we need to go back. We've come far enough. This is nothing but an abandoned stone path." He knew that was not true. Many hands had obviously worked very hard to carve out the rock and build a road out of solid stone. He was no less curious than before, but his gut was telling him to get out.

"Just a little farther? Around that corner," Atticus asked and pointed to the left-turning bend ahead of them.

"No. We're way beyond the patrol boundary. It's not safe here."

"Please?" badgered Atticus, pointing ahead. "Just that last bend, please?"

Tiberius sighed and hesitantly submitted to the birthday boy.

"Alright, but only around the corner, and then we turn around and head back. We don't have much time before dusk."

Atticus was already walking ahead and Tiberius jogged to catch up. As they rounded the turn, both brothers stopped abruptly in their tracks. No more than 50 feet ahead of them, the road ended and dropped-off at the edge of a cliff. A vast gap in front of them, more than a mile across, ran perpendicular

to where they stood facing. The boys were mesmerized by the sight.

"The Void," Atticus said under his breath.

Tiberius pointed to the opposite side, along the ridge in the distance, where there stood the edge of a massive stand; giant trees, spreading out as far as their eyes could see.

"That has to be the Sorrow Wood. I've seen it in one of grandfather's books. It covered the whole right side of the map. Father said the forest is larger than the Crucio Sea."

The boys walked ahead to within 20 paces of the canyon's drop.

"Let's look down over the side!" cried Atticus, walking forward. Tiberius quickly shot his arm out to stop him.

"Wait! The ground may be loose. Let me see if it's safe first," Tiberius cautioned.

Atticus huffed but stood in his place, as Tiberius moved slowly, creeping carefully toward the ledge. He could now see the bottom of the canyon on the other side. It was a long way down.

Nothing would survive that fall.

Tiberius judged the drop at over 150 feet. He knelt down to set his spear on the ground beside him and then he crept closer. As he turned his head left to look to the northern end of the canyon, he noticed something black on the wall beside him, where the

ledge ran out just past the rock wall. In the hard stone bank, nearly four feet above the ground, was a wide crack that looked like it might be a cave entrance. Tiberius moved toward the opening and cautiously looked inside while Atticus watched him. It was too dark see anything. The moment he put his face near the opening, he blocked most of the light.

"What are you looking at?" asked Atticus impatiently.

"I think it's a cavern. Come on, the ledge is solid. Just stay close to me," Tiberius said, nodding toward the steep drop behind him. Atticus slowly walked to the edge until he was standing beside his brother and looked down with a start.

"That's high."

"Yes, it is. As long as we stay close to the wall, we'll be fine," said Tiberius.

Atticus turned his attention to the wide crack along the rock face beside them. He looked into the dark opening and he too blocked the light, and pulled his head back out. He had never seen a cave before. Neither of them had.

The opening was obviously too narrow for Tiberius to fit through. Atticus smiled, looking up at him and handed out his spear.

"Here, hold this. I'm going in."

Atticus pulled himself up and squirmed his head and shoulders into the dark gap. The crack was just wide enough for him to squeeze through. Once inside, he found that he could stand. The slim beam of light


coming through the opening, only allowed him to partially see. He squinted in the darkness and felt around the dry rock walls. Atticus was disappointed that the small cavern was no bigger than the loft that the boys shared at home.

"What do you see Atticus?"

"It doesn't go anywhere," Atticus said, his voice echoing out of the small chamber. Tiberius was about to reply when the boy shouted,

"There's something in here!"

LUECROKOTA

 IBERIUS could hear his brother scuffling around inside the small cavern. He poked his head in through the crack and Atticus was quick to complain. "Move out of the light! I can't see." Tiberius pulled his head back.

"Well what did you find?"

"It's a box!" cried Atticus, "I'll push it over to you."

Resting near the far wall, opposite the opening, was a wooden box, nearly four feet in length and one foot deep and equally as wide. The box was nearly buried

in a thick layer of dust and sand. Atticus' heart raced with excitement and grand visions filled his thoughts with jeweled crowns and long strands of pearls atop a pile of old coins.

"What kind of box?" Tiberius asked from outside, "Open it up and tell me what you see."

Atticus tried to open the lid; pushing and pulling on the top, but the heavy iron clasps were completely seized. Thick, rusted hinges and iron bands ribbed the outside of the box, holding its wooden frame, tightly clinched together. It was very well constructed. There were two iron ring handles on either side. They were the only part of the box that Atticus could move. He had both hands around the left one, pulling the heavy case forward, inch by inch, into the slim shaft of light where he was able to see it

better. On the left side of the top he saw a black circular burn mark, the size of a man's head, and what appeared to be an eagle's claw inside the circle, clutching onto a star with eight points.

Atticus yelled out to Tiberius, "I'll lift up the end so you can pull it out from your side. There's a handle you can grab." Atticus heaved the box up toward the crack and held it against his chest.

"Tiberius, grab the ring!"

Silence. Atticus yelled again, tiring from holding up the weight.

"Tiberius! Where are you?"

Atticus leaned forward and dropped the box to the ground with a thud. He stood on the top and pushed his head and chest out of the cavern. He saw Tiberius

to his right, facing in the direction that they had come from, and he watched him bend down quickly and pick up his spear from the ground.

Atticus called to him, "Tiberius! What is it?"

Tiberius did not look toward him. He spoke from where he stood, maintaining his gaze.

"Atticus stay where you are."

Atticus quickly crawled back out of the cavern and onto the ledge. Tiberius was holding his spear in both hands and was looking up toward the rock wall along the road. Atticus followed his gaze to their right and immediately saw the body of a large wolf, quietly standing behind a low shrub at the top of the steep bank above them, no more than 20 feet away. It appeared to be hiding its face behind the bush. All

Atticus could see was a large body and pointed ears sticking out from behind the shrub.

The boys had seen wolves before. The secretive animals occasionally ran past their fields in the early mornings. Their father had always told them that wolves don't attack people and are only aggressive when they are starved. Yet, Atticus was scared nonetheless. He had never been this close to one before and he quickly darted behind Tiberius' legs, where he picked up his own spear from the ground. They stood together, tense as drawn bow strings, holding their sharp iron tips out in front of them. Tiberius seemed to calm.

"Don't worry Atticus. Wolves don't attack people who have spears in their hands."

He stood up straight and lowered his weapon, placing his hand on Atticus' shoulder to reassure him.

"He won't bother us. He's just patrolling his territory and wants to let us know that this is supposed to be his place. Father told me that they walk for miles, marking on the trees and rocks, and then after a while, they do it all over again to keep their borders in order."

Tiberius looked up and spoke bravely to the big black wolf on the bank, to impress his younger brother.

"We're leaving now. You can go back into the forest old wolf. Go on, leave us be!"

The wolf stood still, unmoving, and then it slowly lifted its head out from behind the low brush. Its eyes were closed. If it had not have moved, it would

have looked as though it were sleeping while standing up. Something was not right. Tiberius thought the animal may be sick. And then to their horror, it opened its eyes and looked right at them. The boys both gasped and every hair on them stood straight-up. The animal's eyeballs were swollen and solid white. No pupils. No color, just white, as though the eyes had rolled back into the skull.

“What the hell is *that*?” whispered Tiberius.

Atticus wrapped his hands tight around his spear shaft and glanced up at his brother who was doing the same thing.

"Atticus, get behind me. Now!" Tiberius said through his teeth, without taking his eyes off of the wolf.

Atticus stepped backwards slowly, moving behind his brother, and the wolf immediately came forward; bounding down the steep bank, stirring up sand and small rocks that clacked into one another as they rolled, racing down to the stone road. The wolf stopped on the road to face them, only 20 paces away. The boys stiffened. Their hearts were racing and their palms were already slick.

"Go away! Leave us before our spears find you!" Tiberius yelled, out of nothing more than absolute fear.

The wolf stood still and lowered its head. A sickening grimace seemed to widen unnaturally across its muzzle, revealing its large, sharp teeth. A long, black tongue slipped out from inside and licked slowly around its lips.

"Tiberius, what's wrong with it?" Atticus whispered.

The older brother had no answer this time; no words at all. They were gone, along with his bravery. His stomach was tying new knots. The wolf hunched down and began to creep forward, meticulously placing one large paw affront of the other. Closer and closer it came forward. Atticus had to go to the bathroom. The ledge was directly behind them, only five paces back. If the wolf did not stop coming toward them, then they would have to fight for their lives. Imagining Atticus being harmed or falling off the edge, made Tiberius suddenly desperate and furious above his fear. He shouted louder this time, shaking his sharp spear in a menacing display.

"Stop! If you come any nearer I'll kill you!"

To his surprise, and great relief, the wolf stopped. And then a strange thing happened. The large black animal turned around and walked away from them, back down the stone road in the direction that the boys had originally come from. They watched it slowly make its way around the bend, and then disappear. Just like that, it was gone.

Atticus dropped his spear and threw his arms around his brother. Tiberius kept hold of his weapon with his eyes fixed on the road ahead. The wolf may have gone, or it may be waiting for them around the corner. He wished his father was with them now; wished that they had never come here at all. He knew that if Darius ever found out where they were, they would be in a lot of trouble, especially Tiberius. As the older brother, he always took the brunt of it.

The guilt was overwhelming now. He should never have brought them here.

"We need to move away this ledge Atticus, and get ourselves home, fast," he said, glancing up at the dimming sky, "Soon we won't be able to see anything in that tunnel of branches."

Atticus nodded and picked up his spear.

"Is he gone?" he said, asking for reassurance.

"Perhaps," Tiberius answered, still staring at the bend in the road ahead, "Just keep your spear out in front of you, until we make some ground."

The boys began walking, very slowly and very nervously away from the Void's edge and back up the stone road.

"Atticus, I'm sorry I-" before he could finish, the wolf's large head appeared out from the turn ahead, followed by its long, muscled body. It snarled loudly and then ran in a full-charge toward them. They could hear its claws scraping rapidly across the flat stones, propelling it forward. Tiberius jumped in front of his little brother, but it was too late to aim his spear down. The wolf leaped off of the ground and its long teeth punctured Tiberius' soft wool shirt and sank deep into the inside of his right arm, in between his bicep and the bone. He cried out and dropped his spear, as the wolf jerked back and yanked him forward onto his knees. Atticus screamed in terror, frozen in a nervous shiver. He was petrified. The wolf quickly let go and ran back up the road, and then turned to face them head-on again. Fresh blood

stained its broad muzzle. Tiberius was trying not to cry; holding his left hand around the deep holes in his arm. He looked down and saw blood running out from between his fingers. Tiberius let go of his arm and reached for his spear, but as he did, the wolf charged and was on him instantly. It went after his arm again; slamming its gaping mouth around the wound and biting-down hard; pulling away with its powerful haunches. Tiberius screamed out in agony, dragged forward on his chest, as the long, thick needles dug in deeply behind his bicep. The wolf snarled and shook its head violently, back and forth, yanking and tearing the muscle away from the bone.

"HELP ME! Atticus! Kill him!"

Atticus couldn't move. He had already wet himself, and he stood frozen, watching helplessly in horror, as

his panicked brother cried out for him. He just couldn't move, no matter how badly he desired to. Tiberius screamed and punched wildly at the wolf's head, but it was no use. The beast was in a mad rage; violently tearing his arm apart. Crimson blood squirted out from the sides of its teeth, soaking Tiberius' shoulder and torso. With a loud growl and one last rip, the wolf finally tore the muscle from the bone completely, and then it stopped, victorious and dropped the flesh and a shred of dark wool to the ground. Tiberius threw up on himself and then fainted; falling backwards and smacking the back of his skull against the hard stone road.

At seeing his brother fall, Atticus' shock suddenly turned to anger; fight or flight, and he yelled out, "Leave him alone!" He ran at the black wolf with

his spear tip out in front of him, and shut his eyes tightly; as he collided with the animal and felt his spear connect and sink. The wolf yelped loudly, as the sharp iron tip slipped instantly between its ribs and deep into the left lung. Atticus went crazy, pushing harder into the animal, crying hysterically, wanting it to die. The wolf growled, biting at the shaft, and Atticus let go in fear. The long barb on the end of the spear was stuck inside the wolf's chest. It backed away slowly, breathing heavily and limping, keeping its hideous white eyes on Atticus as it retreated.

Blood trickled down from its side, coating its dark fur and dripping to the stone at its paws. Atticus quickly glanced over at his brother. He was still. The black wolf lowered its head and growled with a gurgling

sound, just before it fell on its right side. Its white eyes looking toward Atticus while it snapped its large teeth together with a wet clacking sound. The wolf's panting became quiet and it closed its mouth and eyes. Atticus ran, crying to his fallen brother and rested his head against his chest.

"Please wake-up Tiberius. I'm sorry. It's all my fault, I couldn't move. I have to get you home...you are bleeding everywhere." It was bad. The blood had flowed out around his brother's body into a large, dark pool. Atticus remembered the leather pack on his brother's back and he gently worked the single shoulder strap away from his body. He opened the blood-soaked bag and quickly pulled out the small quilt that his mother had packed along for them. Atticus was no healer, but he knew that he had to

stop the bleeding. Taking the quilt in both hands, he tore the corner with his teeth and then pulled it apart until he had four long rags. He then tied the pieces tightly around Tiberius' shoulder, cutting off some of the flow and then he tried to sit him up. Atticus pulled him by his wrists and lifted him forward into a slump. Tiberius' long hair hung down and his head wobbled while Atticus shook him.

"Tiberius you have to wake up! The sun's going down. Wake up! Wake up!

After a minute of no success, Atticus laid him back down and began to panic. He took a deep breath and decided he had to try harder. He knelt down beside his brother, turned his head away, and then smacked him hard in the face with his right hand. Tiberius' eyelids fluttered open.

"Stay with me!" Atticus was crying, "I'm going to get you home and we'll get the healer. Come on, you have to get up!" With tears running down his cheeks, Atticus helped Tiberius up onto his feet, holding his back steady. Tiberius put his weight onto Atticus' right shoulder and groaned. He was still in shock and the pain had not fully taken him yet. Soon, he would think his arm was on fire.

"We have to tell father about the wolf," Atticus thought aloud.

"No, Atticus," Tiberius' protested in a labored voice, "We can never speak of this again, not to anyone. Give me your word that you'll never tell. We were to never come here. If he found out that I nearly got you killed, he'll skin us both."

"I won't tell, I promise. What do we say when he sees your wounds?"

"We were attacked at the streams, that's all. You'll tell him you scared it off...you saved my life," Tiberius said, moaning loudly.

Atticus felt awful guilty. He had watched as a wolf nearly killed his brother. He could have stabbed it sooner, but he didn't. All he wanted was for them to be at home. He would give every bit of strength he had now to make sure that he got them back safe. One small step at a time, they walked between the walls along the old stone road, closer and closer toward the darkening tunnel of twisted branches ahead.

BLIND

5



LACK. The moon's light could not reach them through the thick canopy above.

The air was chilled. The temperature had dropped with the sun. Blinded by the darkness, they had stumbled for miles, feeling their way along the edges of the trees, while Tiberius agonized and cried in pain with every step. They had already stopped several times for him to rest and he had lain out on the ground until Atticus pulled him back to his feet and begged him not to give up.

"Don't stop! I'm going to get us home safe, I promise. Hold onto me brother and keep moving."

He had lost so much blood that he was beginning to slip away. To keep him awake, Atticus sang to him

through his crying and tears, and he talked of all the things they would do together in the years to come when Tiberius was well again. But the rags that Atticus had tied had all soaked through and were coming loose. Warm, red drops now fell steadily from Tiberius' fingertips, leaving a thin red line of spatter in the darkness behind them.

Atticus could feel his brother weakening. Tiberius leaned onto his shoulder while they limped along, getting heavier and heavier, as his strength declined and Atticus had to literally pull his brother's weight with all of his strength just to keep his feet from dragging on the ground.

THE DEVIL INSIDE

6



E was bigger than all the others; a 200 pound white nightmare. The soft light of the moon was reflected in his white eyes.

He curled his lips back in a growl, puffing warm air out of his wet, black snout; tasting the air around the dead wolf's muzzle.

Man blood.

The abomination that he had become...he owed that to her. She had brought his son back—for a price. Now, they were damned to serve her in an endless hunt. They had searched the realm for unknown years, along with others who had likewise been deceived. They had all found nothing. North to south, they had scoured the northern White Mountains and down the Devil's Spine, into the Void, and back again through the Sorrow Wood. An endless journey—the devil's run. And still, she insisted that it was there, somewhere. That she could feel it hiding. It was as much a part of her as they were; her vile seekers.

She owned their minds; always inside of them, watching through their eyes, no matter how far they ran. Her blood was in his veins, keeping him alive

much longer than anything natural should ever have to live. This time, the form she gave him was wrapped in muscles, jagged teeth and claws, and came wholly embedded with an unrelenting hunger; a constant need for warm, torn flesh in his fangs, and the metallic taste of blood in his mouth. The liquid iron fueled their bodies.

She ran them ragged, exhausted beyond mind and muscle, until their paws were torn; driving them to rabid madness. They only ever slept when they could no longer run. They killed viciously every chance they had, to unleash their fetid hatred. She would never let them go; never let them stop until they found it. He knew that now.

The big, white wolf sniffed the rest of the body that was split between the ribs by a long, narrow spear.

The two had separated earlier along the ridge. His calls had gone unanswered, and now he knew why. Someone had killed his boy. The black nose made its way around to the shaft of the spear, acquiring the stench of human hands.

Rip him apart.

The wolf's angry howl echoed through the canyon. He had the scent he needed now, and he would catch his prey. He always did.

WHITE NIGHTMARE



ACRIFICING their only weapon, he dropped the spear, as he needed both hands to help his brother now. Tiberius was struggling forward on his knees, mumbling nonsense like a man trapped in a fever. Atticus' arms were tiring, trying to hold up his brother and urge him forward in the darkness. They could hear the streams ahead, water running over rocks, not far now, another minute or so.

When they had reached the start of the old stone road where they had first found it, Atticus told Tiberius to lie down so that he may drag him by his sweater, slowly through the dense underbrush. Atticus gripped with both hands near the collar and heaved. His back was aching. The boy was exhausted. As strong as he was, he had been pushed to his limit. It

broke his heart that he could not just pick him up and carry him home. Tiberius closed his eyes just as they came out from the branches and into the moonlight at the stream's edge. Atticus stopped to rest and saw his brother's face.

"Tiberius! Stay awake! I'll get you home so they can fix you."

Tiberius reached his left hand up and touched Atticus' cheek. His hand was freezing cold. Any blood that he had left in him had gone to his chest. He tried to speak, but his lips only trembled and his arm dropped back down to his side. He opened his eyes and looked up at Atticus with the eyes of a doe, lying alive on its side with an arrow in its neck. Atticus had never seen that look before; pure agony and fear of death, and it wrenched his heart. He broke down and

cried, resting on his knees, rocking his big brother in his arms.

"Please, come back Tiberius...say something. I wish I was bigger, I'd carry you on my shoulders, but I can't. I'm so small. I'm sorry I let him hurt you. I love you so much, please don't leave me now," Atticus whimpered, looking up toward the stars, begging for help. "Please Father, I beg you, don't take him now... he's my only friend.....please don't take my brother."

The sound of water rushing beside him drowned out his prayers. Atticus would remember that sound, haunting him, in the back of his mind for the rest of his life. He could see their breath, drifting out from their lips in the silver light, and he shivered to think of how far they still had to go. After a moment, he

collected himself and decided that come hell or high water, he was going to deliver his brother home, alive.

They had to cross the streams first and Atticus would have to do all of the work. He moved to kneel behind Tiberius. Atticus sat him up and wrapped his arms around his waist. He took a few deep breaths and then with a loud groan, he lifted and leaned back with of all his strength, taking most of Tiberius' weight onto his legs and chest, and then he began to walk them across the frigid water.

Tiberius tried to step, but his legs were numb. Just as they had made it halfway across, his strength gave out completely and he collapsed. Atticus instantly pulled up hard against the dead weight, but he could not hold on and they both fell forward, splashing into

the icy water. Tiberius landed face down into the stream. Atticus screamed and rushed to help him. The freezing water shocked Tiberius as it rushed through his nostrils and into his lungs. He choked hard, facing the bottom of the creek bed, helplessly sucking up water and sand. He did not have the strength to move. Atticus reached down under Tiberius' chest and pulled him up and over onto his back, lifting him by his shirt, just out of the water, enough to rest his head back against Atticus' knees where he choked and spit-up water. Tiberius opened his eyes and looked up to see the yellow crescent moon above them. It was the last thing he ever saw.

The white wolf burst out from the thick brush of the stone road and into the stream, it charged toward them with a loud splashing. Atticus looked up to see

the beast's head, and in reaction, he let go of his brother, stepping backwards, he tripped and fell onto a sharp rock beneath the surface. His tail bone cracked and he cried out in pain.

The wolf went straight for Tiberius who was lying on his back with his head underwater. Atticus watched in horror as the wolf bit down over Tiberius' throat.

With a sickening snarl and a quick pull, the wolf completely tore the throat out from his neck. Flesh and veins dangled from its mouth, dripping blood into the fast water. It looked up at Atticus with its big white eyes, and then went straight back to tearing the boy in the river apart. He would kill the little one next. With no way to save him now, Atticus stood, soaking wet from head to toe, and ran across the streams. If he could find the forest path, it would

lead him home. Into the dark woods he ran panicked, blindly crashing through the branches. Dark clouds were drifting high overhead. The moon was leaving him, and with it, the light.

The wolf watched him; its wide muzzle dripping with a pink mix of cold water and blood. It was too dark for man's eyes in the forest. No matter how fast the child ran, he would never escape the wolf's senses. He saw everything, even in the pitch black. Atticus breathed hard. His lungs burned like hell, and his whole body was shaking so that he could not see straight or hold his teeth from chattering. He pushed on running as the terrain allowed, stumbling over logs and branches, scraping his hands and face with every fall, and then his leg muscles began to cramp and seize with pain.

Exhaustion and cold had finally won. Atticus tripped and fell to the forest floor and this time, he stayed down. He turned himself onto his side to keep off of the aching tail bone. Lying shocked and frightened in the darkness, breathing heavily through his chattering teeth, Atticus prayed that he had run far enough to be hidden.

Back at the streams, the wolf with the pink-stained face sniffed carefully along the tree line and soon found his mark. The fresh scent was easy to follow, just like the trail of blood, spattered for miles along the stone path. After a short run through the woods, he caught site of a moving shadow and he lowered his head, staring into the branches, with his ears cocked and tuning. The clouds were parting and he saw the boy.

In there

Atticus saw nothing. He only heard a snarl from the darkness behind him. It was all he needed to get back up. He ran forward in terror with everything he had, but his legs twisted in pain and his body shook in a violent cold shiver. He heard the killer crashes through the branches behind him and he knew it was all over. The heavy wolf slammed into the back of his legs and Atticus fell forward, thrashing and kicking in a crazed effort to survive. As he hit the ground, he nearly crashed into the side of Rebel's leg with the wolf right on top of his back.

The scabbard was rusted, but the blade it bore was clean and razor-sharp. Gleaming in the moonlight, held with two hands, the steel flew down and hammered into the wolf's neck, severing its spine,

killing it instantly. Atticus felt an instant wave of warm blood wash over his backside and his legs.

"Atticus!?"

Darius quickly pulled the dead animal off of his son and picked up the broken boy. He held him close to his breast and searched the darkness for more danger. He had heard his son's cries. The glass oil lantern had gone out when he dropped it to the ground to grab his sword. Darius had been calling their names for over an hour, searching the woods, but they could not hear him over the loud streams between them. Darius was frantic.

"Are you alright? Where is your brother?"

Atticus pointed toward the streams with a blank look on his face. And then he fell apart, crying hysterically.

REKINDLED

8

15 years later...



ATTICUS SLOANE sat in his rocking chair by a warm fire, watching his five-year-old son Marcus sift through an old wooden chest full of books that Darius and Aunna had just left for him after their weekly visit. It was early afternoon in late spring. Green sprouts had begun to rise through the wet ground in the fields, and the hard ice was receding from the lakes and ponds of the Sparrow Vale.

The boy looked exactly like Atticus. His mother Alina had died in childbirth and Atticus had been left to raise him on his own. She had been his first and only love. At 25, Atticus was now a devoted and loving father. The two of them lived in a small stone house, an hour's ride west of the Sloane family farm where he grew up. The house had been given to them by Alina's father, back when they first married. He had owned the seven-acre plot and decided that it would make a perfect wedding gift. After Alina passed away, her parents blamed Atticus and they refused to see the boy. That was fine with him; they were strange people anyway. Atticus owned the land now.

Their closest neighbor was a successful rancher who traded in all sorts of breeds and he spent much of his

time traveling, trading for and buying horses to sell back at his ranch. Atticus had been working for the man since he settled into being a father. His childhood fear of horses had long gone and he was glad to have found good work right next door. Until that year, Marcus had been staying with Darius and Aunna most days of the week, while Atticus worked the ranch. But now, Marcus was old enough to follow his father to work, feed the chickens and keep himself busy playing outside in plain sight where Atticus could keep a close eye on. He was a very protective father.

The large storage chest, now being carefully inspected in the middle of their sitting room, had belonged to Marcus Sr. Darius had finally dragged it out of the cellar and heaved it onto a wagon to bring

along as a gift. An old friend of his father's had been storing it for him and had forgotten about it after Marcus died. It was rediscovered later when his property changed hands within his family a few years back, and he had the chest delivered to Darius.

It was heavy; stuffed full of not only books, but journals, notes, maps and charts. Some old, some new, and some of them were entirely written and drawn by Marcus Sr. himself. The eccentric had spent most of his life hunting down old legends in search of riches. It was as much of his obsession as it was his work. Sadly, he found little in the way of treasures, and in his last days he deeply regretted not investing more time with his family. All of his profit as a merchant trader had gone back into his various expeditions over the years.

Now, his great grandson eagerly rifled through it on the living room floor, pulling out and opening each book and paper, glancing at all the pictures before he tossed it aside and reached in for a new one. Atticus had considered asking Alina about naming their son Tiberius, but the awful memories haunted him still.

Atticus missed his brother very much. Some days were harder than others and he was ever thankful that he had his son to keep him steady. A week after they had buried Tiberius, Atticus was still sleeping in his bed. It gave him small comfort. Darius had hardly spoken in seven days. He came to visit Atticus in the loft one night, just before he had settled into sleep. He sat down beside his son on Tiberius' bed and kissed him on the forehead.

"Atticus, I am so sorry. After all that has happened, your mother and I forgot all about your birthday gift. We've had it here, it's just...."

Atticus patted his father's back gently.

"It's alright. I'd forgotten as well."

Darius reached into the front pocket of his wool shirt and said, "Guess what it is," and managed a smile.

"I don't know Father. There's nothing I need."

Darius pulled a small and very beautiful, cherry-handled folding knife from his pocket and handed it to Atticus.

"I picked it out for you in the village last week on your birthday. I know you always wanted to carve like your brother."

Along the handle, his full name was delicately engraved into along the grain.

"I had your brother carve your name out for you, so you'd never lose it."

Atticus hinged open the blade and carefully felt its sharp edge.

"I won't. It's a good knife. Thank you Father."

"Don't thank me, thank your mother. It took some convincing to get her to agree. She imagined you cutting yourself."

"Is she still awake?"

"No, she's finally fallen asleep in her chair and I intend to see her rest for as long as she needs now. I think we all need sleep and rest."

Atticus frowned and nodded. It had been the longest and hardest week of their lives so far.

"Son, we have a life to get on with and I know your brother would absolutely hate to see us crying for him when we should be enjoying our lives until our own times come. Do you understand?"

The words had come easily, but they were only words. The truth was, Darius was very angry that his boy had died so horribly and so young. He would always grieve for him, every day for the rest of his life. It had taken three whole days before he had finally built up the courage to wrap the mangled body that lay under a canvas in the barn. The wolf had torn so much flesh from the bones that most of the insides had flushed out in the stream's current.

Atticus and his father had dug the grave together in the cold rain, at the north end of their property while Aunna collected flowers to place on him. She had promised herself that she would not cry, but she could not keep it in. None of them could. They had loved him too much. His disfigured body, wrapped in a shroud, was lowered into its final resting place. Darius put his arms around his wife and son, and said few words.

"Tiberius is on the other side now, and there he waits for us. We'll hold our heads high, remembering him as he was, and we'll be proud he was ours."

He could say no more. Darius tried to be strong, but his heart was bleeding. The strong man fell to his knees and wept with all he had. Now they were three.

Atticus would spend many years working hard alongside his father and equally as hard to forget. He never told anyone about the cavern or the box inside. He made sure that Darius and Aunna believed that a rabid wolf attacked the brothers at the streams and that was all. When they asked him why he and Tiberius were gone so long after dark, he told them that they had hiked downstream and had lost track of the sunlight before they made their way back. When Darius asked about the spears, Atticus told him that they had dropped them in the water when the wolf charged them in the dark. He did not feel bad about telling the lies. It would protect them from having to worry any more than they already had to. Besides, he had given Tiberius his word and he intended to take it to his own grave. As far as he was concerned, the

events of that day died with his brother, and the Void was cursed, along with everything in it. Atticus swore to himself that he would never set foot in those woods again. He decided then that it was all just a nightmare and that it belonged with all of the other horrible things; pushed away and buried back into the dark places of the mind. It was the only way for his traumatized mind and broken heart to survive.

Young Marcus was now surrounded by a pile of old books and unfolded papers on the floor. His proud father smiled to himself. After all that he had lost in his life, and for all the grief he bore, he felt truly blessed in that moment. Atticus closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair, listening to the crackling fire. Just as he was thinking of how happy he was,

Marcus said something that took the wind from Atticus' lungs.

"The wolf has white eyes."

Atticus opened his eyes and looked over at his son who was holding a small leather-bound book, opened in his lap.

"What did you say?" Atticus asked shaken.

"The picture," Marcus said, and held up the book.

"Marcus, bring that over here."

The little boy stood and walked over to his father and handed him the book. From the dried corners and deeply yellowed pages, it looked to be very old. Atticus closed it tightly in his hands and asked Marcus to go back to what he was doing. He was more than happy to continue his work, sorting out the

contents in the old chest. Atticus looked down at the book in his hands. There were no markings on it, only a black leather cover, no wider or longer than his hand. He slowly opened and thumbed through the first few pages. The writing across the pages was a language that he had never seen before, and there were black sketches of many odd and indiscernible creatures. They were poor drawings with little details.

A bestiary

He had seen one before; a story book with proper illustrations, but this was different. It did not appear to be intended for telling stories. Atticus skimmed through the pages and then stopped. There it was on the left. A wolf's head with eyes of white was clearly drawn covering the entire page. Beside it, on the

right, a black raven exhibited the same hideous feature. Memories of watching Tiberius in the moonlight, being torn apart in the shallow stream, made Atticus' hands begin to shake. He thought he had this under control. The nightmares had gone and he had finally found peace. Now, he was unraveling all over again.

Marcus had his back to him on the floor, busily mumbling and sorting through a new handful of papers. Atticus looked over at the fire in the hearth beside him, and without another thought, he tossed the old bestiary into the flames. The leather stretched and popped, twisting open and fanning the pages apart while the flames took them. He watched, glad to see it burn. And then, he saw something. Something he had not seen in over 16 yrs. Atticus

jumped from his chair and lunged forward with his hand and snatched the corner of the burning book, jerking it out from the coals. He winced in pain, but the burns were only surface. The book was now smoldering with an awful smell. The flames had gone out when it landed on the floor.

Marcus watched in surprise.

"What are you doing Father?"

Atticus did not hear him.

He was knelt on the floor, flipping quickly through the burnt pages to the back. He knew what he had seen in the flames. On the last page, he saw it again.

Unbelievable

In heavy black ink was the same marking that he had seen on the box in the small cavern. A circle made of

small links, like those of a chain, and within it, an eagle's claw, gripped onto an eight-point star was drawn in detail. Below the sketch, written in his own language, were the only four words in the book he could read:

ILIA KARA ILIA KUHN

The words made absolutely no sense to him. Atticus looked inside the book cover and found nothing. He checked the inside of the back cover and there he found, in faded black ink, the name F. Grayling. There was only one Grayling that Atticus knew of; an old friend to his grandfather; the same man who had delivered the chest to Darius years earlier. With any luck, he still lived in Solarium village. Atticus looked up at his son.

"Marcus, get your coat, quickly. We're leaving."

OF RAVENS AND WOLVES

9



T had taken them the afternoon under an overcast sky. Marcus climbed down from the padded seat of their old, one-horse wagon and gave Autumn the bay, a pat on the side to thank him for the near three-hour ride through the countryside on the cart road. Atticus let go of the reigns and stepped down beside him. They had stopped at the first inn at the south entrance. It was a two-story stone building with a large wooden sign carved: *The Wanderer's Rest*, hanging beside the door from a large iron bracket. Atticus had passed by here a few years earlier with Darius, but they had never stopped.

His mind was racing, trying to imagine how the book was tied to the box, or if the symbol was just a common shipping stamp. After all, he had grown up

on a quiet farm and knew very little of the world outside of the vale. But that didn't explain the white-eyed wolf and raven in the bestiary. Farm boy or not; he had met one of those before.

Atticus knew that certain things may be better left alone. But he could not just throw away the book; not when there was a chance to find some answers. He had always felt that Tiberius had died for nothing, and he was still no closer to understanding what killed him that night. The two wolves weren't just animals. That much was certain. Someone knew more than he did and Atticus knew that if he didn't ask, it would slowly eat away at him. He was now more curious than ever.

They stepped through the large wooden door and into a small lobby humming with the sounds of low

chatter and the crackling of a fire. A young couple was seated to the left of the room in leather chairs beside a fireplace. Above its half-log mantle hung a red silk banner, embroidered in silver with the royal crest of a griffin and a serpent, coiled together around a shield. The lobby was decorated with long bookshelves, lined full with many volumes, and the walls above them were covered in various colorful tapestries of scenic areas and family weddings and other historical celebrations.

To the right of the large hearth, was a wide wooden staircase that went up and out of sight. Beside the stairs, stood another heavy wooden door with the word Tavern carved into the frame above it. Straight ahead of them, against the far wall, was a thick wooden table with large, unlit candles in holders.

Atticus noticed a small silver hand bell resting on the corner.

There was no one else with them other than the couple by the fire. He stepped forward and reached for the service bell. Just as he lifted it, he heard a friendly voice call out to him from the stairs.

"Hello there! Please, don't ring that dreaded chime."

Atticus turned to see a tall, gray-haired man in his sixties, coming down the stairs wearing a long white apron, stained with all sorts of spills that had never washed out. He had a small towel over his left shoulder and looked like the bartender, cook and keeper all in one. He was too young to be the man that Atticus was looking for. Atticus smiled and put his hand out to greet him.

"Hello," said the man as he wiped his hands on his apron.

"Need a room? For two?"

"No thank you. Actually, I'm looking for Mr. Ferran Grayling. He was a friend of my family, or more so, to my grandfather, Marcus Sloane."

The man smiled instantly and very warmly.

"Hello Atticus. I have heard of your grandfather many times over the years. My name is Harold Grayling. I am Ferran's nephew." Atticus was relieved that his search had begun with a strong start. He hoped the man was not dead like his grandfather.

"And, is he...?" Atticus asked cautiously.

Harold chuckled and placed his hand on Atticus' back.

"Yes. He is still very much alive, I assure you. Although, he's in no condition to work here any longer. Lost most of his sight I'm afraid," Harold said with a pitied look.

"That's very unfortunate," Atticus said sincerely empathizing.

"Such is life," Harold said with a shrug. "My wife Catherine cares for him now, at his home near the western bridge. You can visit with him there if you like. He doesn't leave home these days."

Harold then looked down at Marcus with a big smile.

"Who is the young one?"

"Oh, I am sorry," said Atticus, "This is my son, Marcus."

"Pleased to meet you," Harold said to the boy; as he bent down to shake his hand.

"Pleased-to-meet-you-too," Marcus said, looking at the ground with a half-smile.

"You are a nice boy Marcus. You and your father here may have whatever you like from our kitchen tonight, no charge. Would you like some grub? We have a fat swine roasting for supper."

Atticus had only one thing on his mind and it was not food. He was quick to politely excuse them.

"That does sound very tempting Harold, but if it's all the same to you, I should first like to visit your uncle. Perhaps Marcus and I could come back here and have supper on our way home."

Harold smiled and raised his hands.

"Suit yourselves. There'll be plenty left when you come back. Now, to reach the blind man, just head straight north, through the village and turn left at the last lane. When you see the bridge, cross over and on your left again, you'll see a narrow lane with a large oak at the entrance. It's the old mill with red shutters beside the pond. You can't miss it; it's the only mill house in the North End. Oh, and when you see my wife Catherine, please let her know that I have found a girl from Amicitia to work for the winter. She'll be pleased to hear that."

Atticus nodded.

"Certainly Harold. Thank you, we'll see you for supper then."

Atticus and Marcus made their way back outside to the wagon in the cool afternoon air. The gray clouds

had nearly vanished and the yellow sunlight felt wonderful to their faces. The old bay that had been their trusted animal for four years looked to them and whinnied. Autumn did not like standing around unless he was eating.

They passed by many shops and colorful little houses. Busy people walked or rode their horses through the muddy street; all gathering and collecting, heading to and from somewhere or other.

Atticus pointed to the many sights around them and explained all he could to the boy. Atticus was very proud of him. He enjoyed teaching his son about their world and Marcus always listened intently. He loved his father very much.

After a short ride, the bridge could be seen ahead. When they had crossed, the bright red shutters and

the stone mill were a dead giveaway. Atticus felt for the small burnt book in his coat pocket and stopped the wagon in the lane-way. He helped Marcus down and they walked to the door where they were greeted by a pleasant older woman.

"You must be Catherine," Atticus said with a smile and then passed on the message from her husband. She was friendly and invited them in happily. Humble as it was, the old mill house had everything a man could need. Beside the doorway on their right, stood a spiraling staircase that coiled once around the circular room and stopped at other level. Catherine hung an iron pot, filled with fresh water, over top of the flames in a large hearth built into the stone wall across from the front door. She then tossed in a few sprigs and berries for tea. Once

their gracious host had seated them in the open room on comfortable chairs around the fireplace, she went up the stairs to fetch Mr. Grayling.

She returned a moment later, and on her arm, was a very frail man with frizzy white hair and a long, white beard to match. He wore a brown robe, tied at the middle with a cord. The robe had been patched at the elbows many times. A red fox fur was draped around his shoulders. The old man squinted, peering down at his guests, and then he raised his hand in a polite wave. His voice was hoarse, yet he had a soothing tone.

"Catherine tells me that there are two men here from the south vale to see me, and that we are old friends. Ha!" Ferran Grayling seemed delighted to have company. After years of working at an inn, Atticus

imagined that the man surely missed the long chats with travelers by the fire in his old lobby at the Wanderer's Rest.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Atticus stood. Catherine led Ferran toward the fire to meet his visitors. His blindness was obvious.

"May I touch your face?" he asked Atticus humbly.

"Yes, of course," Atticus replied.

Ferran reached out and gently felt the shape of his face with soft finger tips, and then he smiled and said, "Ah, yes, you look like him. I do miss that ol' bastard."

Ferran removed his hands and Catherine led him by his arm toward young Marcus.

"This is the boy," she said. Ferran bent down very slowly and Marcus looked away nervously, as the old man spoke to him.

"Catherine tells me that your name is Marcus. If you're anything like the Marcus I knew, you must be quite the bantam." Ferran smiled and patted the boy's head gently. Catherine stepped in and offered to take Marcus outside to see the pond and the ducks, so that the men could speak freely.

"Thank you Catherine," Atticus said sincerely, "I just have a few questions to ask."

Catherine left, holding Marcus' hand, and then she closed the door behind them. Ferran made his way to his seat by the fire. Atticus sat down in the chair beside him and turned his seat to face him.

"Mr. Grayling, thank you for seeing me."

"The family of an old friend is always welcome. I knew Marcus quite well, may he rest. Now, tell me young man, what brings his grandson calling at my door, twenty years after his death? Hmm?"

"Yes Sir," Atticus cleared his throat. "I have a question about an old book that I believe belongs to you. It has your name inside the back cover. My boy found it in the chest that you had delivered to my father's house years ago."

"Did you bring it with you?" Ferran asked, facing the warm firelight.

"Yes, I have it here," Atticus said, reaching into his coat pocket. He handed the charred book to the old

man beside him. Ferran felt the book, turning it over in his hands carefully.

"It is badly burned Atticus. I could smell that when you walked in here."

"Yes, well...", Atticus began, and then decided to keep the throwing of the book into the fire to himself.

"Well, aren't you going to tell me what book it is?" asked Ferran, lifting his eyebrows. Atticus felt quite stupid and replied, "Of course. The cover is unmarked and it's written in a strange language; one I've never seen before. There are symbols and drawings of many creatures. Some of them in particular appear to have...white eyes."

"Ah, this book," Ferran said as he recalled and rubbed his hand on the soft leather. "I gave this to

your grandfather, many years ago. It is written in Quiin."

"Excuse me?" Atticus thought that he had misheard.

"Kee-in," Ferran expressed the sound slowly. "It is the language you saw in the book. What can I help you with? Surely you didn't come all this way to show me a bestiary."

"No, I didn't," said Atticus. "As I said, I don't know the language and I was hoping you did. There are two drawings, one of a wolf and the other, a raven. They are clearly drawn with large white eyes, and there's a symbol at the back of the book of an eagle's claw holding onto a star."

At hearing this last part, Ferran leaned forward and raised a tight right fist in the air, hollering dramatically,

"The claw of the beast!" Ferran laughed and fell back into his chair. "Atticus, I have heard that story from your grandfather, and a few others, a hundred times or more. I thank you. I had forgotten how it makes me laugh."

Atticus did not see the humor and he tried to be polite through his impatience. He considered for a split second, telling the man what he saw when he was younger. Ferran might suddenly take him more seriously. Atticus decided it was best to keep his secret in the dark, at least for now.

"Mr. Grayling, please. I have traveled almost three hours with a five-year-old boy, to hopefully answer a few questions I have."

Ferran sighed.

"You are a serious man, Mr. Sloane, just like your grandfather was. Forgive me, hmm? I meant no offense. My dear friend Marcus spent many years dreaming of treasure and easy riches while I ground my bones into bits at the inn. It was books like this one here that set him off. I gave that bestiary to him as a novelty only, for his growing collection of absurdities. I never thought he'd adopt it as a...reliable source of knowledge. Now, don't hear me wrong, I don't doubt that there are many lost treasures out there, but I watched my friend give up all he had

and then die lonely with practically nothing to leave his family but that old chest."

"It's alright Mr. Grayling. I didn't mean to be impatient."

Ferran handed the book back to him.

"Atticus, I can't tell you much about that book, only the few things that Marcus told me. And I only remember those because of how many times he did. Your grandfather knew Quin, at least well enough to read some of it. He had a remarkable memory that man. The things he could retain..."

"Did my grandfather ever tell you anything about the book?"

"Oh, he believed that it may have been tied to an old legend; one that has been told many times in many

different ways. That was always the way with him. His mind would just carry him off into some new obsession or other, and there would be absolutely no turning him back; no reasoning with him. He went on about that book for years. I tried to tell him, stories are written, told and exaggerated all the time. Old books are all full of maps and monsters and of course, riches. That's what makes them stories. I know better than to take much of it very seriously."

Atticus was puzzled.

"Mr. Grayling, if this old book is just a poorly drawn bestiary, then why do you think my grandfather felt it was so important?"

Ferran reached forward, feeling for the fireplace poker. His hand quickly found it leaning against the stone and he began to shuffle the coals around. He

seemed to be able to make out the red glow enough to pile them together under the iron pot. He leaned the poker back against the stone and sat back in his chair.

"Marcus believed that the eight-point star in the symbol represented a compass, and according to him, it is held by a dragon's claw, not an eagle, as you had guessed earlier. As for the nasty white-eyed beasts, they have other names, but the Wataeo have the oldest name for them. They call them Luecrokota. It means dead-watcher. I've heard of them before, but I don't think anyone has ever seen one."

Atticus sounded out the strange name while he looked down bitterly at the wolf face on the page before him.

"Lue-cro-kota. Where do they come from?"

"I don't know," replied Ferran, shaking his head slowly, "If ol' Marcus was here, he could tell you."

Atticus was feeling let down. He knew more about the creatures than Ferran ever would. Any knowledge that his grandfather may have had, obviously died with him. Ferran could feel the young man's disappointment from his silence.

"Atticus, I'm sorry I'm not of more help to you. You have come a long way only to learn that I can't translate the book, and even if I could, my eyes wouldn't allow me to see it. I could tell you the story though. Would you like to hear the story your grandfather told me?" Ferran asked in an attempt to cheer him up and to keep his company a little while longer, "I remember it well. It's a good one." Lonesomeness was Ferran's worse ailment.

Atticus smiled. If anything, it was warm by the fire and he did love a good story.

"Yes Mr. Grayling, please. I'd like that very much, as long as Catherine's alright keeping Marcus busy."

"Nonsense," Ferran remarked, dismissing Atticus' concerns with a wave of his hand. "She'll be fine. She's a broodmare you know; had nine of own little devils. And I love every one of them."

Atticus laughed and shook his head. The old man stretched in his chair with a yawn and then nodded toward the steaming iron pot hung above the fire.

"I think I would be better to tell the story with a hot tea in my hand, if you don't mind. My back is made of twigs these days."

Atticus stood and gladly poured the tea carefully into two dark wooden cups that Catherine had set on the mantle, and then he sat back into his seat. Ferran cleared his throat and in a slow and deliberate voice, he began re-telling the story that Marcus Sr. had told him many times before.

"She was once a princess, living in a paradise of warm, healing waters and lush forests that never knew winter. The fabled Auquitine Vale, allegedly destroyed by fire, was long ago, the home of Lady Elassia; the only child and daughter of the White Witch Empress. The empress was supreme ruler and queen of the ancient Dulariun race of Mountain Witches. Their kind was small in numbers, but being born of white magic, they lived long lives, far beyond our own. They were master healers and they had

incredible abilities to manipulate nature and the minds of all beasts, great and small.

Many ages ago, a dark time came when a mysterious sickness gripped the people of the Queen's Realm. They called it the Red Sadness. The witches were not affected by the fevers and the bleeding eyes. There were no cures. The deadly illness took the children first, and by the hundreds they perished; their faces stained by tears of blood. When deep graves began to fill outside of the villages, the witches were blamed for not healing the people and for letting so many of the children die.

The Dulariun claimed that they could not fight the sickness, that it was something they had never witnessed before; something beyond their knowledge. They offered their help but they needed

more time. As the bodies piled higher, angry whispers and dangerous rumors swept through the land, and the Dularium were suspected of propagating the sickness themselves—a conspiracy to wipe out man's world and take his place.

The Red Sadness eventually passed, leaving hundreds dead behind it. Entire villages, gone. For several years after, the white witches were hunted, killed and nearly exterminated. Men came in swarms, armies on horses with cold steel and fire, and they brought hell with them.

The paradise that the Dularium once knew was set ablaze by a thousand torches. Their home was destroyed. In those years, Lady Elassia's true love, a prince from the west, was burned on a stake and her child daughter was drowned; tied and thrown

screaming into the cold currents of the North Mead River. The Dulariun princess went mad in her grief and anger. She fled east, deep into the Black Corridor of the Rancorous Mountains.

Elassia was looking for someone; a powerful sorcerer named Nocrimora. After many months of searching the Shadow Lands where nothing lives, she finally found him. He was a devious wizard. Years before, he vanished from the Queen's Realm. The White Witch Empress had cast him out for his forbidden practice of the evil arts. Anyone who had survived his brutal, botched experiments remained hideously deformed or worse. He had often performed sacrifices, killing indiscriminately."

Farren took a sip of tea with a shaky right hand, cleared his throat and continued the story.

"Lady Elassia told Nocrimora how she wished to punish man for his ignorance. Now, it's true that Lady Elassia was very powerful in her own craft, but she knew nothing of sorcery. Of course, Nocrimora would want something from her in return. He proposed to teach her the true designs of evil and he would give her something that would empower her beyond her dreams, enabling her to slowly tear man's world apart.

In exchange, she would grant him two things. First, she would use her natural abilities over the minds of creatures to help him find and kill a large black water dragon. The elusive beasts were well known for their malevolent nature and noxious blood; making them perfect specimens for all sorts of...pernicious devilry.

Secondly, she would submit to him one large vessel of her blood. You see, unlike Nocrimora, Princess Elassia was of pure Dulariun lineage. The liquid in her veins, when amalgamated with the dragon's, would allow him to create something very awful indeed; something the world had never before seen. He schemed to create and forge a living weapon, kilned in white fire and black magic. It would take many mistakes and long dark hours, but after more than three years, the weapon was finally ready. However, Nocrimora deceived the hateful princess, and he vanished, taking the weapon with him. He had secretly counseled with a vastly wealthy warlord who bargained to provide him with a king's ship, commandeered by 100 slaves to take him south, across the Crucio Sea, where the lord granted him a

castle from the spoils of a previous war. In exchange for escaping the Queen's Realm and living in royal ascent, Nocrimora would deliver to him, a weapon that would grant his armies complete victory over all enemies.

When the cheating sorcerer reached the shores in the dead of night, a mighty ship was waiting for him, just as the warlord had promised. After the landing party of slaves had retrieved him and delivered their new master aboard the ship, they set sail and turned south.

And as they did, the large vessel was attacked from below. The decks burst into timbers as a massive water dragon smashed through the hull, tearing the ship in half.

The leviathan roared and turned the sea around them into purgatory. Terrified crew members were thrown

screaming into the sea and either drowned or fed the monster with their flesh. Its teeth were as long as a man. It is said by one slave who survived, that as the crew died in the dark waves, they could hear a woman's voice, howling across the water like an angry wind. The ship sank, along with everything on it, including Nocrimora and his legendary weapon."

Ferran turned his head toward the fire and then the old man began to laugh.

"Atticus, do you believe it? Your poor grandfather did, at least parts of it. I have added a few bits of my own over the years, for the sake of a good telling."

Atticus smiled.

"What was the weapon? A sword?"

Ferran thought about his question.

"Some versions of the story have a sword, yes. Others, a scepter, magic fire arrows and a bow of impossible draw weight, even a pair of gauntlets that allow the wearer to break boulders into sand with his fists. Take your pick. I like to leave that detail out and let the mind wander."

Atticus enjoyed the story, but he was no closer to any real answers.

"Do you know who may have drawn the symbol in the book?"

Ferran shook his head. "No...It would have been long before my time. That little bestiary you have there is very old indeed." Ferran lifted his eye brows and looked toward Atticus. "If it is indeed a bestiary."

"What do you mean?" asked Atticus.

"Your grandfather once challenged me that perhaps it's a record of sorts. A personal journal."

"A journal?"

"Yes, a sorcerer's account of creatures, spells...magical sorts of things."

"You mean, Nocrimora?"

"Ah, you are brighter than the fire after all Atticus."

Atticus rolled his eyes and asked, "Mr. Grayling, where did you find the book?"

Ferran huffed in his throat as if a bitter taste had reached his tongue. "It was handed to me by a one-eyed bastard after I saved his scurvious hide. He took shelter at my inn and nearly cost me my own

neck. But that is another story, for another time," Ferran said reminiscently.

"Scurvious?" Atticus repeated the new word, lowering his brow.

"Yes, young man, scurvious. It is my word, and it means: One-eyed-bastard-who-owed-me-many-coins."

Atticus chuckled. He was beginning to like the old man.

Ferran rocked himself slightly in his chair and offered some advice.

"Ah, young Atticus. Whatever it is you seek, it is only a drawing in an old book, and the meaning behind it is a legend, and like all legends, they are wonderfully enjoyable to tell, but are all very untrue."

Atticus nodded, partly agreeing. He stood from his chair and politely thanked the gentleman for his time. And then he realized that he still had one more question to ask.

"Mr. Grayling, before I leave, there is one last thing I wanted to ask you about."

Atticus flipped through the pages quickly to the back of the book while he talked.

"There are four words written here, underneath the star...yes, here it is. Ilia Kara, Ilia Kuhn. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Hmm," Ferran replied, squinting in thought. "The words don't make any sense to me."

Atticus pressed him.

"Can you guess at it?"

"I don't know, Atticus. Perhaps it is a name for something or a place. I've never heard it before, and if I have, well than I've clearly forgotten."

Atticus closed the book and shoved it back into his coat pocket.

"Very well, I'll be off now for a warm supper with your nephew Harold at the inn. Would you like to have the book back? I could leave it here with you."

Ferran looked up at Atticus from his chair with a smile.

"No, no, take it with you. You can use it to tell your own stories."

"Thank you again for your time Mr. Grayling. I enjoyed your company."

"And I yours. You're welcome back anytime young man. Don't be a stranger. As you can see, time is no longer my friend."

As he left the doorway of the old mill to fetch Marcus outside, Atticus decided right then that he would take Marcus to stay with Darius and Aunna for a night, and then he would meet with a trusted friend from Otium. Then, the two men could find the old stone road in the Buckskin and retrieve the box, sharing whatever wealth they gained from selling its contents. Atticus remembered how he had barely fit into the cavern when he was a child, and he was already making a list of supplies in his head, such as pick-axes and shovels.

If it's still there...

After learning that his grandfather had believed in something so passionately and that he had lived for such adventure, sparked a sense of pride and purpose in Atticus; something that he had lost somewhere in the sad years behind him. He was tired of being afraid. Atticus did not believe in legends, but someone had tried to keep that box a secret. Perhaps it was filled with jewels, or like Ferran had said in his story, it may be an old weapon.

He could sell it to a collector. Any antiquities, especially tied to legends, would fetch a high price. He could sell it with the book and up the value. He and Marcus could certainly use a few extra coins in the coming year. This time, he would go back to the Void with another very capable man. Well-armed and on horseback, not even a whole pack of wolves

would dare offend them. Not two grown men with blades, bows and horses.

END VOLUME ONE

Volume Two available February 2012

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PRONOUNCIATION

AMICITIA – (Ah-mah-city-ya)

AUQUITINE – (Aw-kwi-teen)

LUECROKOTA – as it appears. (Lew-crow-kota)

WATAEO – (Wah-tay-o)

