

FOLLOW THE GIRL

ASTER WOOD

and the CHILD OF ELYSO



Book 4

J. B. CANTWELL

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CHAPTER ONE

I hit hard.

My bare arms scraped against short, dead cornstalks as I skidded across the field, finally coming to a stop in a cloud of dust. A mouthful of bone dry dirt choked me, and I coughed. My eyes watered as cold wind blew against my face. I stared around.

I was home.

My heart sank.

Everything was the same as before. Stark. Vast. Dead.

I hadn't expected to feel anything other than joy at returning, finally, to Earth. But the barren landscape was a shock, something I hadn't seen in many long months, and it did not welcome me. No breathtaking vistas awaited. No gently trickling streams. No warm sunlight beneath teal skies. Compared to the planets in the Triaden, it seemed nothing of beauty remained in this place.

My fists dug into the loose, gravelly dirt, and I pushed myself up to standing. The scrapes on my arms stung, but they would heal. The coughing gradually ceased. I rubbed the dirt out of my stinging eyes.

I was in Adams county. I knew that, even though I had spent most of my childhood in the city. I recognized the odd rock formations to the east, with the telltale shapes I had gazed upon since early childhood. Somewhere out here was Grandma's farm. I spun around, searching the brown, lifeless horizon. Overhead, storm clouds threatened.

Cait burst through, landing nearly as hard as I had. Her little body rolled over and over like a carelessly thrown doll, bumping and scraping along the ground. She cried out with a particularly rough thump to the knees and tumbled to a stop just a few feet away.

I rushed in her direction, my temporary disappointment immediately replaced with worry for the little girl.

"Cait," I huffed, my throat still choked with dust. "Are you okay?"

Her giant blue eyes looked into mine for a quick moment, her face frozen with a look of shock. Then, the corners of her mouth turned down. She whimpered.

"Owie," she said, her mouth opening wide into a silent cry, fat tears dripping down her dirty cheeks.

She unfolded her legs from beneath her and inspected them. At the sight of the blood on her knees she cried louder. Suddenly, her eyes became frightened, and I noticed her shrink away from me as I got closer. She had trusted me. She hadn't counted on scraped knees. That hadn't been part of the deal.

"Cait, it's alright," I said, kneeling down. I moved one hand out to inspect her leg, but she snatched the injury away. I paused, thinking, then sat down in the dirt beside her. "You'll be okay," I said, trying to employ the same soothing sound my mother used to when I would get hurt as a young child. "It's just a couple of scrapes. It'll heal fast. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

She ventured a look in my direction, sniffed hard, then shook her head. The tears still came, but they were silent now.

"Good," I said. "Now, I told you I'm going to take care of you, remember?"

She stared.

"We're on Earth now," I continued. "Everything's going to be better here. The Coyle," I paused, not wanting to upset her further. "He can't get to you here. Do you understand?"

She didn't respond, but she didn't shy away again. Another blast of winter wind hit us, and we both shivered.

"Come on," I said, standing up and reaching out both my hands to her. "It's not going to get any

warmer. Let's start walking."

~~I pulled out the traveling cloak from my pack and draped it over both of us. Instantly, the wind was blocked as though we had our own little room to protect us from it. It had been Kiron's gift to me when I had first met him, and the cloak had kept me warm through much more severe elements than these.~~

As Cait and I took our first steps away from our landing spot, I bent and scooped up the chaser she had used to follow me here, stuffing the fat ball into my pocket.

"Better?" I asked, tucking the blanket back around us again.

She looked up, eyes round, and nodded.

"Can you walk?"

Another nod.

Guessing that we were northwest of the farm, we started off, the hills on our left side. It was difficult to tell the time of day with the cloud cover, morning or afternoon, but the fact that it was still light at all was comforting. As much traveling as I had done at night in the Fold, something about the idea of walking around on my own planet in the dark made me nervous. There may not be evil wizards on Earth, but there were other, less obvious perils.

My first days in the Triaden seemed like years ago now. Was it possible that only eight months ago I had been a sick, weak kid? My ailing heart had cursed me since birth, and only upon arriving at Kiron's doorstep had I found the magic, and the will, to heal. I had journeyed so far since then, met wizards and demons and fought battles that the people of Earth would never have believed. Eventually, I discovered my own unique sort of magic, tied to the vibrance of life that pulsed in the Maylin Fold and my tendency to find hope within the most dire circumstances.

But that magic wasn't with me here. I had left my wood staff, the vehicle that brought my power to life, with Kiron and the others. They would need every weapon they could get to fight the Corentin and his armies in my absence.

And they would fight Jade, too, I realized. To fight the enemy would be to fight the girl I had met and befriended at the very start of my travels in the Fold. The girl, my own flesh and blood, who had eventually fallen to the possession of the Corentin. She had tried to kill me more than once since then. And yet I still felt that feeling, that tiny spark of hope that someday I could free her from the prison the Corentin had created for her within her mind.

I picked up the pace as I thought of her, of my friends facing off against her. I hoped I could find the gold I needed on Earth and return before another drop of blood was shed. Before any more of my friends fell victim to the Corentin, or his minion, the Coyle. Time was running out.

Our feet crunched through the dead stalks as we walked. Cait's eyes drifted around, and I could tell she was concerned about where her path had taken her. I couldn't blame her. Between the biting winds and the expanse of dead fields, it was not a friendly looking place.

"Things used to be different here," I said, looking across the fields, myself. "Before I was born, this place was a lot like Aeso."

She looked up hopefully, as though the landscape might change back to the familiar green of her homeland with my story. I continued.

"I never saw it, though. Only pictures."

"What's pictures?" she asked.

It was the first time she had really spoken. But I didn't know what to say. *What's pictures?* I chewed on the inside of my cheek, thinking. Of course she wouldn't know. They might have wizards and magic in the Fold, but we had our own kind of magic on Earth. We called it *technology*.

"Have you ever made a drawing?" I finally asked. "Or a painting? Like with a paintbrush?"

She nodded.

“Then you’ve made a picture before,” I said. “You draw a picture. You paint a picture. Only the types of pictures I’m talking about are made a different way, with something called a camera.”

She looked confused.

I sighed.

“It’s sort of hard to explain,” I continued. “You use the camera, and you take the picture.”

“Where do you take it?” she asked.

I stopped, staring at her, and then suddenly burst out laughing.

“No, no,” I said. “You don’t take it anywhere. The word take is like the word paint. It’s like, you make the picture.”

She looked down, seemingly embarrassed by my laughter.

“I’m not laughing at you,” I said, backpedaling. I put one hand on her shoulder, squeezing. We walked on. “It’s just hard to explain. Anyways, you take the picture, and it’s kind of like drawing with a brush. But what comes out has more detail than a painting.” I looked up towards the distant hills, remembering. “It’s almost like having a memory that you can hold in your hands and look at with your eyes.”

She was silent.

“I’ll show you when we get there,” I said, feeling a little defeated.

“Where are we going?” she asked. Her little moccassined foot kicked against the dry stalks as we walked.

“To my grandmother’s house,” I said. “My father’s mother.”

“I know what a grandmother is,” she said quietly.

I suddenly felt ashamed at having laughed. She was just a little kid, a day and a half out of being possessed by the Coyle. And now this, hurtled to a planet she didn’t know or understand.

I stopped walking again, turned to her and knelt down.

“I’m sorry I laughed,” I said, looking her in the eye. “I remember feeling just like you when I came to Aerit for the first time. There were lots of things I didn’t understand. I felt stupid. And scared. Really scared.”

She folded her arms in front of her chest.

“I’m *not* scared,” she said stubbornly.

For a moment I was taken aback. Then, without knowing where the understanding came from, I suddenly knew what to say.

“I know you’re not scared. You’re way tougher than me.”

And you’ve been through way more.

“I’m just trying to explain,” I went on. “There might be lots of things here that you don’t understand right away. So if you see something new, just ask me about it, okay? I promise I won’t laugh anymore. Deal?”

She pulled the blanket close around her face, looked up at me with untrusting eyes.

“Tell you what,” I said. “Do you want to ride on my back? You remember I’m pretty fast, right?”

I turned my back to her, encouraging her to climb aboard. Suddenly, she smiled.

“Okay,” she said, gripping her little arms around my neck.

I stood up and folded her legs into the crooks of my arms, turning to face the direction we had been traveling in. But before I could take a single step, I froze.

A sudden sense of danger overwhelmed me at the idea of running, and my eyes scanned the flat, open land before me. In another life a simple jog might have meant my death. My heart, diseased since birth, had prevented me from accomplishing anything more exciting than a brisk walk for the majority of my life. In all of my thirteen years, the only time I had ever breathed easily, or run fast, was back in the Triaden.

Was my heart, now beating Earth's oxygen into my veins again, still healed?

"Come on," Cait urged, squeezing her legs against my sides as if I were a pony.

I chuckled, trying to push fear away, and took a few tentative steps.

Nothing happened. My heart did not explode in my chest. My breathing was normal.

I pushed a little faster, a slow run now.

My heart beat, strong and steady. My breath came, free and clear.

Could it be possible?

I felt my body launch forward like a truck hitting fifth gear, and suddenly the dirt was flying beneath my feet. Cait squealed with delight at the speed, but I wanted to go faster. My breath came in gasps now, but I didn't care. I pushed my legs harder. And harder.

But the blinding speed I was searching for eluded me.

I focused on a point on the horizon, willing my body to shoot towards it like a bullet from a gun. My feet hit one after the other, again and again until I was running with all the efficiency of one of Earth's machines.

But I could not go faster.

Finally, I slowed, first to a jog, then a walk. I stopped, panting hard, releasing Cait from my back. She slid down to the ground, her hair a mess, a huge smile on her face.

"That was fun," she said. "You're faster than Rhainn-y."

I smiled back. But inside, my heart hurt. Not from the effort of the run, but from my lack of speed. I had run fast, that was sure. But nowhere near as fast as I could in the Fold.

My ability to run was the only piece of magic I had known since the moment my feet touched the ground on Aerit, Kiron's home planet. I had left the staff with Kiron, believing that its magic wouldn't work on Earth. But part of me had hoped that I was wrong, that somewhere within Earth magic stirred and I would still have the uncanny ability to run faster than any animal that had ever traversed these lands.

I leaned over as I caught my breath. Sweat broke out over my body, and I shivered as my skin met the cold air.

There was no magic here. It had been as I had believed. Any magic Earth contained, it seemed, was as dead as the plains surrounding us.

But I was still healthy. Still strong. The lack of obvious power was not a death sentence.

Standing back up again, I put my hands on my hips and looked down at Cait.

"Maybe we should walk for a while," I said.

"No!" she said. "Again! Again!"

I smiled.

"In a little while, okay?"

"Awww," she complained. But she fell into step beside me as I started walking again.

I slid my hand beneath my shirt, holding it over my chest. I could feel my heart beating beneath my fingers. It felt strong. New. The breath I sucked in and out of my lungs was clear. My chest did not clench.

I was healed, it seemed, both on Earth and in the Fold. But the speed I had found, the speed that had protected me, saved me from so many dangerous encounters, was gone. Would it come back to me, the magic I had felt coursing through my veins, when I returned to the Fold? Or did a return to Earth mean that my time as someone extraordinary was over?

I had been brought to the Fold, a crease in the fabric of space that allowed easy travel between planets, by accident. I hadn't known that the blank letter I had held in my hands was actually a link, a portal to a place far from here. Upon arriving I had learned that my ancestors had not come from Earth. That my existence had been, basically, an accident.

But now, with Earth in a state of steep decline, and the three planets that made up the Triaden in the Fold at war with the armies of the Corentin, things had changed. Without my presence, without the accidents that had brought me into being and later sent me hurtling across the cosmos, Earth and all of its inhabitants would have unknowingly met an unimaginable enemy. One who would destroy what was left of Earth beyond imagining. Everything around us that my eyes could make out, the remnants of a society that no longer existed, would be obliterated once Earth became close enough for the Corentin to stretch out his rule and blanket this planet with his darkness. The people who remained, who had survived the Long Drought and made lives for themselves in the towering cities, would have fallen to him as so many others had already.

Others could fight him. Others could make their attempts to restore order to the planets that now swung wildly out of alignment.

But only I could come back here and get them the gold they needed to do it.

I reached out my hand automatically, and Cait took it. Together, our feet crunched through the dead stalks, which had lived only long enough to be disintegrated by the poison rains that now haunted everyone who remained.

We walked for hours. Sometimes side by side, sometimes Cait riding piggyback. Far in the distance a couple of buildings came into view. The sky was growing darker now, either from the day ending or the clouds growing thicker, I couldn't tell. I hoped that one of those buildings up ahead was the farm. There was nowhere to take shelter out here from the cold of a winter night.

Suddenly, the sky seemed to split open. A crack so loud I had to put my hands over my ears as it echoed across the clouds. My stomach dropped painfully. I knew what that sound meant.

Rain.

Cait had her hands over her ears, too, but only for a moment. To her, the rain was nothing more than something unpleasant we would have to walk through. Maybe not even that. She might have even taken delight in splashing through the puddles along the journey. If the journey we were on had been on any other planet but Earth.

She didn't understand.

I knelt down in front of her again.

"Time to get back on, Cait," I said. "Make sure you wrap that blanket around you tight, okay?" She looked confused at the tension in my voice, but she didn't argue.

The sky was darkest behind us, and it was a relief to realize that we wouldn't be running into the rain, but away from it. I took a wild guess that the buildings up ahead were two miles out. How long would it take me to get there in this mortal body?

I broke into a run, immediately winded by my panic.

Wait. Pace yourself, or you'll never make it.

I forced myself to slow down. Between my pack and Cait, I had nearly eighty pounds on my back.

The sky cracked again. And again. It was only a matter of time. The clouds were right behind us.

Be careful. Don't fall.

I had seen the people who had been caught out in the rain in the hospital when I was a small child their skin taugt and red as though seared with a hot iron. If I fell and twisted an ankle, hit my knees in the dirt the way Cait had, it could be the difference between life and death.

The raindrops started. I felt the first one on the top of my fist, the second on the tip of my nose. The acidic water rested innocently on my flesh for several seconds. Then it began to burn.

"Owww!" Cait yelled from my back, clearly struck, herself. "Owww, it hurts!"

"I know," I called back. "Hang on. Make sure you're covered by the blanket!"

Her cries became howls of pain as I ran through the fields. We had to get there. Had to reach beneath the protection of the old buildings up ahead. I heaved us through the dirt, which was quickly

becoming sticky mud.

How long had it been? How far had I come? A half mile? A mile?

The water began to puddle at my feet, and it splashed up around my calves with every stride I took.

I panted, pushing myself to go faster, all the while keeping the buildings up ahead in sight.

Were they getting closer?

Rain made its way into my eyes, and they stung as if I had opened them under ocean waves.

They *were* getting closer. Up ahead, I could see the road, long disused and crumbling. I didn't bother to look for cars as I stumbled across the pavement. There would be no traffic out here. There would be nobody at all.

"Are you okay?" I choked as I ran.

Cait's quiet whimpers of pain seemed to bounce around the inside of my skull.

My face burned. My bare arms felt like they were on fire. Now that we were close, I couldn't tell with my stinging eyes if this was the farm at all. But it was shelter. It was a way out of this pain, and I pushed with everything I had to get us there.

The water seeped through my pants, coating my skin with the sharp sting of acid.

Why had I come? In that moment I wished I had stayed in the Fold. What good could come from returning to a place like this? Earth was ravaged. Destroyed. And now it would destroy us.

The mist that hung in the air was finding its way into my throat, and I coughed. It seared as if I was drinking boiling water.

Cait had gone quiet now, but her fingers gripped hard around my neck. I put my head down, trying to shield my face from the spray. I looked up from time to time, watched the looming farmhouse getting closer and closer.

The rain seemed to sense that our respite was close. The sky opened up and dumped water down upon us. Just steps away from the front porch of the house, I was completely drenched but for the place on my back where Cait's little body was pressed into mine, every other inch of me screaming in agony.

Then we were there. I dropped Cait, hard, on the porch. She came back to life, wailing in pain. I fell to my hands and knees, crawled towards the door, everything blurred and confused. My eyeballs felt like they were melting within their sockets. The handle was locked. I pounded on the wood, praying that someone inside would hear us, would help us.

I slumped down at the doorway, no longer able to summon any strength to fight. Every ounce of energy I had was gone, sapped away from the run, insulted further by the stinging rain. I heard Cait's cries, but I could do nothing for her. I could barely breathe, myself.

The world started to go dark, and I fought off unconsciousness. I had to get us inside. I had to protect Cait. I had promised I would.

Behind me, I heard sounds, muffled by my exhausted brain. The door handle creaked, the wood groaned, and the door to the house opened.

Someone stepped over the threshold. Then, a cry. A cry that wasn't Cait's. I tried to look up, but saw only the outline of a person hovering above me, the shapes made blurry by my damaged eyes.

"Aster?"

I opened my mouth to speak, to agree.

Yes.

My brain called the words, but my voice stayed silent.

The person kneeled over me, her shocked face coming into sharper focus as it got closer.

I stared into the eyes of my Grandmother, warm and full of concern, as the world around me dimmed to black.

CHAPTER TWO

I woke in the guest room where I had stayed when I had first come to the farm. The mattress was still as lumpy beneath me as it had been the last time I had been here, the wallpaper still ancient, slowly peeling away from the walls of the old farmhouse where my dad was raised. If I hadn't known better, I might have been tempted to believe that it had all been a dream. That everything I had experienced in the Fold had been nothing more than a horrible nightmare.

But the skin on my arms, tight and still stinging from where the rain had coated it, would not allow me to deny reality. I shifted a little and groaned as I felt it crack like brittle paper.

Grandma appeared in the doorway, a small bowl in her hands.

"You're awake," she said. "Thank God."

She walked over to the bed and sat down carefully on the edge of the mattress.

"Where's Cait?" I asked, unable to raise my voice louder than a whisper.

"Who, the girl?" she asked. "She's downstairs watching television."

Television. I wondered how she was reacting to something so unusual.

"Is she okay?"

She took a piece of cloth, dipped it into the solution in the bowl and began patting my wounded arm.

"She'll be fine," she said. "She only got the burns on her hands, and one little spot on her face."

I sighed with relief. The blanket Kiron had gifted to me had proven more magical than I ever would have thought. It must have protected her from the rain.

Her hand paused, and through my blurry vision I saw her glaring down at me. "What were you thinking?"

I ignored her question, still too caught up in my own thoughts.

"Where's Mom?"

"She'll get here in a day or two," she said, resuming the treatment of my arm. A light tingling sensation came to the surface of the skin where she patted. "I called her after I got you up here. You were delirious. If it wasn't for the girl, Cait you call her? If it wasn't for her help, I don't know how I would have done it."

I tilted my head back against the musty pillow and, for the first time in a long time, let myself relax.

Everything was going to be okay now. Cait wasn't badly injured. Mom was on her way. I was warm and comfortable, as comfortable as I could be with my wounds.

Grandma stayed silent for a time, carefully treating every inch of my exposed skin. Both arms, my face and neck, and halfway up my legs were affected and burning. As she spread the liquid over my skin, the pain gradually eased. She handed me the wet cloth.

"Squeeze a couple drops into your eyes," she said. I did as I was told. The relief was immediate, and slowly the room, and her face, came into clearer focus. I handed the cloth back to her.

Finally, when she had checked me over for any spots she had missed, she set the bowl on the nightstand, sighing heavily.

"I don't know how your mom is gonna react, seeing you after all this time," she said.

How she would react? I didn't understand her concern.

"Her heart broke in two when you left," she went on. "I thought I might lose her there for a time. Losing Jack was bad enough, but Dana, too..."

Her voice drifted off, and a thin tear streaked down her cheek.

"I didn't leave," I croaked. I suddenly felt unsure, nervous about the mess I had left behind. "I wa

well, I was taken.”

Her eyebrows raised high on her forehead.

“Taken? What do you mean? I thought—we both thought that you left. That you were angry about the summer.”

I laughed a little, but the effort hurt my insides, and I stopped abruptly.

“I didn’t leave on purpose,” I said, stifling a cough. “Trust me.”

“Well, where did you go, then? Someone took you?” she asked. She looked confused. I guess she had never considered anything other than abandonment as a reason for my disappearance. So few people lived out this way, I could see why kidnapping had never entered her mind. But I hadn’t expected them to think I had run off, and a cold feeling of dread hardened in the pit of my stomach. Was this what my mother thought, too? That I had left her? Like my father had?

“Nobody took me,” I said. “Not exactly. You remember when I was spending all that time up in the attic? I found something. It was a sort of map, only it wasn’t. It was a portal. I’ve been on another planet, on a few planets, actually, all this time.”

I cringed, waiting for her reaction. Now that I was finally speaking the words, the explanation about where I had vanished to, I was terrified. Would she think I’d gone crazy?

Then, she did something unexpected. She smiled.

“I think you’ve been remembering your Pa’s old stories,” she said. Her look shifted to pity. “You poor thing. You must be awfully traumatized.”

“Dad’s old stories?” I asked. My dad had never so much as read me a picture book, let alone told me stories as fantastical as what I had experienced. “No. I’m telling you the truth. I know it’s hard to believe.”

“Child,” she interrupted, patting my hand with her warm, wrinkled palm. “I think whatever you’ve been through has—”

“That’s not it,” I protested. “Ask Cait. She’ll tell you the truth. I rescued her from the Coyle. She was under his enchantment. And I brought us back here. Grandma, we’ve been on the other side of the universe this whole time. We’ve been in the Maylin Fold.”

At this, her patting stopped. She stared at me, mouth slightly open, as if I had said the last thing she had ever expected to hear.

“What did you say?” she asked. She looked weirdly terrified.

“I said we’ve been in the Fold all this time. I met a wizard. His name was Almara. And he had left a map, I think it was originally supposed to be for Brendan, to follow him. Only Brendan couldn’t get back to Aeso from here. I was able to, though. Probably because Earth is closer now than it was back then, and—”

“That’s enough,” she said sharply, standing up from the bed. “I didn’t realize your father knew so much about the nonsense passed down the Wood line. I’m only sorry he told it to you at all.”

“Wait. Dad knows about this?” I asked.

“Oh, sure,” she said. “Jack knows all the crazy stories from his pa’s ancestors. I told Charles years ago to stop telling the stories to him. He was just a child, and fairy tales told as truths help no one. Especially someone with Jack’s...problems.” She stopped, averted her gaze, and I could tell she was reliving some of her own nightmares. The nightmare of having a sick child and not being able to help him, for instance. “We all have to live in *this* world, no matter how broken it is now.”

I was reeling. My dad, all this time, must have known exactly where I was. Or at least he might have had a good idea. Had anyone thought to ask him? I struggled to sit up in the bed, but the skin on my arms gave way, cracking in earnest. I felt the tickling sensation of blood as it trickled down my battered forearms to the bedsheets. I gasped at the pain of it, and soon I was struggling to hold back another coughing fit.

I held out a hand to her, a gesture asking her to wait, to not leave me here alone with so many thoughts swirling in my brain. I had too many unanswered questions.

Suddenly, I felt that I had to find him, my dad. I had to tell him. About these past months. About how I had been healed. Maybe Grandma was wrong. Maybe, all these years, what everyone else had taken for madness had simply been the truth.

And no one had ever believed him.

Was it possible?

"I'm telling the truth," I said, finally catching my breath, my tone nearly begging. "Ask Cait."

"The girl won't talk," she said, her voice as stern as I'd ever heard it. "I don't know where she came from, but she needs to go back home. You can't just pick up kids when you're off having an adventure."

I laughed. I couldn't help myself. She thought I had been out on an adventure? For the fun of it? She folded her arms, not understanding that to take Cait home would require a lot more than just a drive down the road.

Her face darkened.

"I want to know where you've been," she said, walking towards the door. "And trust me, your ma not gonna be too keen on hearing this nonsense, either."

"Grandma, wait," I called.

But she didn't wait. She strode from the room, her anger overcoming her. And I was left with my mouth hanging wide, lost for an explanation she would accept.

I watched the sky outside slowly darken as the sun set behind the thick blanket of clouds. Overhead, the steady drum of rain gradually lightened until only an occasional pattering could be heard sounding against the metal roof of the farmhouse.

Somewhere out there my mother was driving, on her way here. I imagined her face, set with the determined look of hers I knew so well, like a steel mask shining with her intentions. And what could I expect when she arrived? Would she get angry like Grandma had when I told her the truth about where I had been? I knew the answer to that already.

Yes.

For the first time since I had left Earth, I felt something other than longing to see my mother again. The familiar feeling of dread that came with silly things like lost homework and late arrivals filled me. I pushed the feeling down, determined myself to stay strong. She might be angry when she got here. That was fine. I would have to deal with that. But in the end I would have to make her see the truth, one way or another.

Grandma had kept Cait away from me for the entire day. Maybe she was down there trying to get her to talk, to tell her what she wanted to hear. But I couldn't see how some horrible tale of kidnap would be any better than the true story I had told.

Still, part of me understood her doubt. It *was* crazy. Would I have believed some kid from school they'd come back after a long absence, spouting tales of wizards and monsters and jumping from planet to planet like some sort of cosmic ping pong ball? No, of course not.

Would I have believed it if the person had been Grandma?

I didn't know.

I grew restless lying in the bed. So many days of living on the run had resulted in changing my body from that of a soft, weak-limbed, sick kid to the hardened, lean muscled machine of an athlete. Despite my injuries, I was anxious to be up and moving again.

I looked down at my arms. The cracks had scabbed over, and the skin surrounding them felt noticeably softer than it had before Grandma's treatment. Whatever she had put on my skin had helped immensely. It still felt tight and uncomfortable all over, but my skin had stopped cracking with my movements. I should have stayed in bed for much longer, given what I'd been through. A few days of rest would have done me good. But I needed to see Cait, to make sure she really was alright. Her wounds were probably in the same state as my own by now, irritating, but already on the mend. But I was concerned about what Grandma had said about her not talking. I had promised to take care of her and I needed her to understand that she was safe here, even if our stories were not going to be believed. Each pang of stinging from my own body reminded me that I was not off to a very good start of presenting Earth as somewhere friendly for her to hide out.

I hobbled over to the dresser and found that Grandma had left an old pair of flannel pajamas for me. The fabric was soft and warm, so unlike the clothes I had been wearing for the past eight months. Putting them on, I was amazed at how easy everything was here compared to in the Fold. Even though Earth was in a steep state of decline, I was warm, fed, and comfortable. It seemed impossibly decadent compared to trekking through the prickly forests of Aeso, or the cold, hard caverns in the Fire Mountains.

I looked out over the fields, long unplowed and unplanted.

Comfortable but dead.

These pajamas were from a different time, a time before Earth's deterioration, saved and tended for generations. The green outside had shriveled long ago, leaving only the soil's fruitless attempts to grow the grass anew as it was battered, time and again, by the poisoned rains. Everything in this part of the country had been abandoned decades ago as the people moved into the cities, hiding from the elements. Earth had been built into a place that worshipped excess while it still had resources to waste. Now, all we were left with was what remained from the days when the fields grew green. In time, even these soft pajamas would become coarse and worn. What would remain of our comfortable civilization in a hundred years? Two hundred?

We would lose our comfort as the goods of our ancestors slowly decayed. But we would have no breathtaking vistas to warm our hearts in the place of the lost softness. Only the dead soil would greet our hungry eyes when we went searching for beauty.

The floorboards creaked beneath my bare feet as I moved into the hallway, clutching onto the dark walls for support. As I approached the stairs, my way became easier, lit by the dim electric lights filtering up from downstairs. Sounds of cartoons drifted up the stairwell, and the smell of dinner made my stomach grumble loudly. I couldn't remember the last time I had sat at a table and had a proper meal.

I made my way down the staircase, eager to find the source of the smell. The television came into view, and before it sat Cait. She sat up on her knees, her face just a few inches from the screen. I looked around the room, but she was alone. I walked to the set and knelt down beside her. She glanced at me, then back to the images on the screen, completely entranced.

"Aster," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Have you seen this?" Her mouth hung open, as if she had intended to say more, but then, distracted, had forgotten whatever it was.

I sat down heavily onto the floor and put one arm over her chest, pushing her back a little.

"Don't sit so close," I said, parroting the warning I and every other kid on Earth had probably heard a hundred times. "It's not good for your eyes."

She obliged, but only scooted back a few inches. Now that she had found this magical box, where stories and music and entertainment flowed, she seemed unwilling to part any farther away from it than that.

I watched the show over her shoulder. It was a silly cartoon about a rabbit and a fox. Together, the

penciled characters danced in a lush, green meadow, singing a song I hadn't heard before.

"It's called television," I explained.

She glanced over.

"What is it?" she asked. "That woman, she doesn't seem to care about it at all. Rhainn-y won't believe this when I tell him. We've *never* seen magic like this." Her eyes were wide, as if she couldn't understand how anybody who possessed such a treasure would ever stray so far away from it as Grandma had.

I smiled, almost laughed. But then I remembered my promise to her, that I wouldn't laugh at her again.

"It's sort of normal on Earth," I explained. "Most people have TVs—er—televisions. We call them TVs for short." Her gaze drifted back to the set, drawn by the howling cry of one of the characters on the screen. "It's not magic. Anybody can get one."

"Can I take one home?" she asked, eyes glued again to the fox, who was now running through the field, his rear-end on fire.

"I don't think it would work at home," I said, leaning back against the wood floor.

It was sweet, watching Cait. Looking around the room, sparse as it was, I realized it was full of things she wouldn't yet understand. Normal things like light bulbs and radios, would seem magical, impossible, to her.

Grandma came through the kitchen doorway and stopped, watching the two of us sitting in front of the television. She looked conflicted. One second, she seemed happy to see us there, safe in her house. Then the next, a cloud came over her features.

"Oh, is the little miss talking now?" she asked, busying herself as she noticed my gaze. She had a bowl of salad greens, still black with the gritty soil she grew them in beneath a canopy to protect them from the rains.

Cait looked up at the reproach.

"Sorry, ma'am," she said, her voice small and quiet.

Grandma's face broke into a smile, obviously surprised by the comment from her. She moved across the room to us, wiping her dirty hands on her flowered apron. She knelt down before Cait.

"I don't bite, you know," she said, reaching out one hand and brushing a strand of Cait's brown hair away from her face. "I tried to tell you that before."

Cait didn't recoil, but she didn't lean in, either. I could tell she was uncomfortable.

"Cait can be shy," I said.

Any five year old would be, having lost her family and winding up on a strange, hostile planet.

"You don't need to be shy with me," Grandma said, smiling. "I just want to help you get back to wherever you came from. Back home."

Cait's eyes grew wide, and she pushed herself away from Grandma, her cartoons forgotten. She leaned up against me like a pup against its mother.

I didn't want to fight. I didn't want to have the same argument again, not when we were just getting settled. But I understood Cait. And I wanted a respite, myself. I needed a break from Corentin's rule, just as she did.

I wrapped my arms around her and found she was shaking.

"It's okay," I said. "Nobody is going to make you go back there."

Grandma looked surprised and withdrew her hand, not wanting to scare the little girl further. Her face was confused, concerned, and sad all at the same time. After a few long, awkward moments, she spoke again.

"How about we eat dinner," she said, forcing a smile. "You must be hungry."

Cait peeked out from where she was burying her face in my chest. The kitchen did smell good.

Grandma and I both stood up, and I offered a hand to Cait.

“Don’t worry,” I said.

Tentatively, she reached out and took it.

Grandma turned off the set and we settled down at the table. She produced a giant bowl of pasta covered in a chunky sauce and handed the serving spoons to me while she tore at the lettuce for the salad. I scooped up a serving of spaghetti and plunked it inexpertly onto Cait’s plate. She stared at it, unsure, as I served myself and Grandma.

My stomach was doing backflips as I sat and stuffed the first delicious forkful into my mouth. My tastebuds exploded as I inhaled bite after bite. It wasn’t until my plate was half empty that I even looked up to find that Cait had yet to pick up her fork. I hastily wiped my face with one of Grandma’s old fashioned napkins.

“You should try it,” I said. “It’s really good.” And it was. Meals served in the Fold, while sustaining, always seemed to be lacking in flavor. My pleasure synapses were firing like mad as I took a piece of buttered bread from a plate nearby and shoved half of it in my mouth.

“What is it?” she asked, wrinkling her nose distrustfully.

“It’s called spaghetti,” I said.

“Why is it bloody?” she asked.

Grandma laughed, staring back and forth between us uncomfortably, unsure if Cait was joking.

“It’s tomato,” I explained. “It’s a kind of vegetable, only it’s got all kinds of spices in it to make it taste really good.” She looked up at me, still unconvinced.

I shrugged.

“Suit yourself,” I said. “But it’s dinner.”

She picked up her fork and stabbed at the pasta. Then, when she finally seemed determined to at least try a bite, she lifted the fork up off the plate, only to watch the slippery noodles slide right back off.

“Here, let me show you,” I said, leaning over. I took her fork and twirled it around in the noodles until I had a kid-sized bite wrapped around it. “Here.”

She took the fork from me and took the first tentative bite.

Her eyes grew round again, but this time from surprise, as she tasted Earth food for the first time. After that, she didn’t speak for several long minutes as she mastered twirling bite after bite onto her fork and navigating it into her mouth.

I sat back, my own plate cleared, and watched her, satisfied that I had brought her some joy. For a moment I forgot the turmoil of my return, the sting of my skin. I just sat there, enjoying the sight of this one little girl in the midst of discovery.

I looked over at Grandma and noticed that her own food had been left untouched. She caught my eye.

“How is it that she doesn’t know what spaghetti is?” she asked. “Or tomatoes?”

I didn’t respond, just stared back at her. She didn’t want to hear the answers I had to her questions.

A long silence hung heavily between us. I, unwilling to budge in my account of what had happened to me. And Grandma, who seemed to be trying to decide what to believe.

She hasn’t decided yet. Not for sure.

“You know,” she finally began, “I saw your dad not long ago. There was something about him that rattled me.” Her body gave a visible shudder at the memory.

But before she could continue her story, a gravelly sound made us all freeze. It had been so long since I had heard a sound like that, of automation, of technology, that it took me a minute to figure out what it was I was hearing.

Then, it hit me. The sound was of a car crunching down the gravel road as it approached the house.

I jumped up from my seat, not bothering to wait for either of them to join me, and headed towards the front door.

CHAPTER THREE

Mom.

She was already crying by the time she was out of the car, forgetting to close the door as she leapt from the driver's seat and ran towards me. My worry about what she would think about my story vanished as I ran for her, and tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, blurring her dark shape. We hit and I instantly felt that we were two people hanging onto each other for dear life. I pressed my cheek into her lumpy sweater, smelled the laundry detergent, hid inside her arms.

It had always been like this. Just me and her.

She was talking, screaming I think, but I could barely hear a thing as she gripped me to her. After a minute the sound stopped and her crying returned. I pulled away a little, meaning only to look up into her face, but she held me fast. I breathed deeply.

"Mom," I said. "Let go."

"No," she said. "I'm never letting you go again."

Something between a laugh and a cry escaped my throat, and I stopped struggling. All those months I had been out there on my own, waiting for this moment, and now we were here, together.

But, unlike I had expected, the fear that had grown inside me as I had faced down demon after demon in the Fold did not evaporate with the feeling of her embrace. I had thought I'd feel safer, that she would be able to fix everything once I got to her in an instant, her magic more powerful than any wizard I ever could have dreamed up. But nothing changed in that moment except that I was no longer alone. Maybe it was facing reality, maybe it was me growing up a little bit, but I didn't feel any safer than before. Now, reunited with the people I loved, I suddenly had even more to lose. And I was acutely aware that, even though I was home, it wouldn't be for long.

"I thought you were dead," she sobbed into my hair. "I thought—your heart—"

"No," I said, my voice cracking. "My heart's good, Mom."

Somewhere behind me little footsteps tramped along in the dirt, and soon I felt myself being gripped by another pair of arms.

"Don't leave me like that!" Cait yelled, hugging tight to one of my legs.

"I didn't leave you," I said, looking down at the top of her head. "I just came out to—"

"You said you wouldn't leave me alone!" she cried. The temporary joy brought on by her plate of strange spaghetti was gone, and she had fallen back to being terrified.

Finally, I broke Mom's grasp. I only allowed one quick glance into her eyes before I knelt down before Cait.

"It's okay," I cooed, wrapping her in a tight hug. I picked her up and turned to Mom. "This is my mom. Mom, this is Cait."

Mom stepped back, surprised.

"Hello," she said, confused. Then, trying to sound friendly, "Who might you be?" She wiped her face with the palm of her hand and forced a smile.

Cait just glared.

"Aster's mine," she said, wrapping her arms around my neck as if I were her favorite doll.

I laughed.

But Mom couldn't be bothered to be distracted by the cute little girl for long.

"Where on Earth have you been?" she asked me, new tears springing to her eyes. "We searched everywhere for you. We had the police all the way out here. I even went up to that camp you were talking so much about, thinking that somehow you'd made your way there after I told you you couldn't go. But when you weren't there, I—I—"

“I didn’t run away,” I said, hoping she would believe me. “Mom, it’s not like that. It’s not your fault.”

Tears streamed down her face again, lit only by the dim bulb on the porch Grandma had flicked on.

“And your father,” she continued, barely listening. “I found him, out in his shack on the mountain thinking he had come and taken you. But all he could do was blather on about other planets and alien and magic and...oh, Aster. Where have you been?”

I froze, my mouth already open to answer her questions, but no words came out.

My father was talking about planets? And aliens? And magic?

Overhead a crack of thunder boomed across the clouds, lightning flashing across the night sky like a fireworks show.

“Better get back inside,” Grandma called from the porch. “Last think you need is another burn.”

Cait jumped down from my arms, so fast I was almost insulted by how easily she gave me up at the mere mention of the rain. But I couldn’t blame her. Even mild injuries could seem like the end of the world to a little kid.

“Another burn?” Mom asked, grabbing my arm and trying to inspect it in the dark. I sucked air through my teeth at her grasp on my still-sore skin.

“Let’s go inside,” I said, turning, cradling my arm.

“Oh, no,” she said. “You’re hurt.”

I moved towards the house and she followed, wrapping her arms around my shoulders as we walked. It wasn’t until we were in the light of the kitchen that she saw the damage that had been done to my body. She let out a little shriek as she took in the red, scaly covering that had been healthy skin only this morning.

“What happened?” she asked, shepherding me over to a chair and practically shoving me down in it.

But my mind was latched onto something else, was racing madly. Dad. He knew what was going on, might have known this whole time.

“We got caught in the rain,” I said, distracted. “It’s nothing. I’m alright. What did Dad tell you?”

“What do you mean what did he tell me?” she asked, grimacing. “*Where have you been?*”

Cait sat back down at the table, staring back and forth between her half-eaten plate of food and the rest of us.

“He’s been with me,” she said, picking up her fork and twirling a bite of spaghetti onto it. “On Aeso.” She looked up at me and smiled. One of her baby teeth stuck out at an odd angle, and I realized it must be wiggly. “He glows.” Then she focused her full attention back on her meal, slurping up her noodles.

I cocked my head. *Glow*s?

“Aeso?” Mom asked. “What’s that?”

My wonder at Cait vanished in an instant, and I stared back at Mom. I wanted desperately for her to believe me, but I was terrified that she wouldn’t.

“Mom, I promise I’ll tell you everything,” I said. “But first, tell me what Dad said. It’s important.”

She stared, clearly not understanding why I suddenly had so much interest in the father who had abandoned me so many years ago. Finally, she relented. “Nothing,” she said, sitting heavily into a chair across from me. She held her hand out across the table and I put mine into it. She didn’t seem to want to let go of me.

Grandma crossed to the kitchen and pulled down a bottle of an amber covered liquid from the shelf.

“It was more of his usual blather,” Mom said. “I thought he had been taking his medications, but

apparently not.”

“But what did he say?”

“What does it matter?” she sighed. Then, seeing that I wasn’t giving up, continued. “He kept going on about some warrior person on another planet, and that aliens were coming here to invade. It was the same stuff he always used to talk about, only worse. You know he’s always been on about other women he’s engaged to marry, other planets he’s planning to travel to, other *dimensions* he’s visited, the voices in his head...” She took the drink from Grandma’s outstretched hand and absently set the glass on the vinyl tablecloth, her face disgusted at the conversation. Her fingers worked around the edge of the rim absently. “He didn’t look good. He hasn’t been taking care of himself. He kept talking about hiding gold.”

I reached out, steadying her hand on the glass.

“*He told you he’s hiding gold?*” I asked. My heart was suddenly thudding in my chest, and fear started to prickle along the edges of my brain.

“Yes, something about his birthright. It was hard to understand him, Aster. He wouldn’t stop. When I tried to get him to sit and talk calmly, to tell him you were missing, it only made him crazier.”

“What did he do?” I asked. “When you told him?”

She sat back, eyeballing me.

“He started pacing, as usual,” she said. “He didn’t speak to me again after that. He just paced around and around. After that, he came back here.”

“He came here?”

Grandma slurped loudly from her own glass at the far end of the table.

“That’s what I was about to tell you,” she said.

“When?” I asked, turning away from Mom. “What did he do? Why did he come?” The brief feeling of comfort I had felt was draining away. What did he know?

“Didn’t even barely look at me,” she said. Her eyes were wide again, terrified for reasons I couldn’t understand. Her own glass was empty now before her, her hands wrapped protectively around it. “He just blew right by me, straight up to the attic. He banged around in there for a good hour, but when I tried to talk to him he just ignored me. Then, just before he left, he came back downstairs. He sounded so normal.” Her voice cracked at the memory. “I hadn’t heard him speak so clearly since he was your age, since before the illness took him.” She stood up from the table and moved to the foot of the stairs, looking up as if she could see the ghost of him descending from the attic as she spoke. “It was right here. He looked me in the eye, told me everything would be alright now. But his eyes—” she broke off, a sob choking her words.

I stood up from the table and approached her, forced her to look at me.

“What about his eyes?” I asked.

“They were—they were—black,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. “Like the darkest storm cloud you’ve ever seen.”

Her shoulders shook, with either fear or sobs, I couldn’t tell. I stepped back, reeling, and braced myself against the couch.

It wasn’t possible. The Corentin’s power couldn’t reach all the way to Earth from the Triaden.

Or could it? Who was to say he couldn’t possess a single soul that walked the barren wasteland that remained?

With a wrench in my gut I remembered Jade’s eyes the last time I had seen her, mad from Corentin’s possession. Black as coal.

And suddenly the completeness of the Corentin’s efforts to stop me finding the gold I needed settled upon my shoulders, weighing me to the floor like a stone.

No. No. No.

I took the stairs two at a time, not caring when the effort made my skin crack again.

“What are you doing?” Mom called from downstairs. As I gripped the string hanging down from the attic door, I heard her footsteps on the stairway. “Aster, get back here! I’m not done talking to you.”

But I couldn’t wait. I couldn’t delay. I had to know, had to see for myself.

I wrenched the door open, and as I pulled it down, a ladder unfolded. I hauled myself up the rungs and just as I stuck my head inside the musty space, I felt Mom’s hand grip my ankle.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she demanded.

I shook my foot free and continued up into the attic.

“He took the gold,” I said, breathless. “Oh, God. What are we gonna do?”

“What? What do you need gold for?” she asked, climbing up behind me.

I ignored her. I found the single light and flicked it on. The space looked just like I had left it half year ago, piled high with boxes and books. Without waiting to explain, I dove in, madly searching through every open box, trying to remember what the one I was seeking looked like. Around me, books and clothes and old trinkets flew as I scoured the place for the one little box that held the key to balancing the Fold, to getting my life back, to saving all the people I had left behind in the Triaden.

In the darkness, my hands closed around it, the old, wooden jewelry box. I was panting as if I had run halfway across Aria. I slid down to the ground and held it in my lap, hoping that it was just as I had left it the last time I had been in this room.

I opened the lid and slipped my hand inside, searching for the familiar snarl of jewelry, the long forgotten treasure gathered hundreds of years ago by my own ancestor for the very same purpose I wanted it for now.

To balance the Fold. To reinsert the gold, so rare and precious in the Fold, into the core of the misaligned planets. To foil the Corentin’s plans before he could take the any farther.

I willed it to be there. I prayed for it to be there. I begged the universe above to let it be there.

But the box was empty.

Mom was crying again. I hadn’t noticed her enter the attic. She sat down beside me, wiping her tears on the back of her sleeve.

“Baby, what is going on with you?” she asked, overwhelmed. “You’re scaring me. Please tell me. Tell me where you’ve been all this time.”

My fingers were still searching every inch of the empty box. Could it be hidden somewhere inside? Maybe there was a secret compartment. But in my heart I knew the truth. He had come for the gold, taken it. Why, I couldn’t imagine. But it was gone. I turned to Mom.

“What Dad told you is true,” I said. “About the warrior. A champion, they call him. Me, actually.” I caught her eye, tried to get her to understand, to believe me. “I didn’t run away, Mom. And nobody took me, either. I’ve been on another planet this whole time, trapped there. A lot has happened, and I will have to go back eventually. I came back here, back to Earth, to get the gold hidden in this box. It was left here by my great, great grandfather Brendan two hundred years ago. Left here for me.” I looked down at the empty box. “We have to find Dad.”

It sounded insane. I knew it did. But it was still the truth.

“I know it sounds crazy,” I said. “But Cait will tell you the same.” I imagined Cait’s older brother Rhainn, at the mercy of the Coyle back on Aeso. Remembering his imprisonment slammed a weight over my chest. “We don’t have much time. We need to find Dad.”

She looked up at me slowly, and I could see in her eyes she didn’t believe me.

“It’s just the same,” she said, shaking her head slowly. “It’s just like Jack. You’ve gone crazy.”

My heart fell. I shook my head.

“He was never crazy,” I said, the truth of my own words sinking in as I spoke them. “Not really.”

She turned away, leaned her head down into her palms. I put one arm around her shoulders, but she shrugged it away.

I sat there with her for a time, tried to figure out the right thing to say. The only words that would have comforted her were lies, and I didn't have it in me to deceive her into doing what needed to be done. Her crying slowly faded, and she wrapped me in her arms again, slowly rocked me the tiniest bit, as if I were still her sick baby boy.

"You have to believe me," I finally said. "I'm not crazy, Mom."

My heart was breaking as I removed myself from her grasp. I had yearned so many days and nights for the feeling of being held by her, for the comfort of knowing that everything would be okay, that she would make it so.

But I found she could not comfort me now. Not until she understood the truth.

I stood up and started to move towards the doorway. I would have to wait until tomorrow to fully search the attic in the light of day. Just in case something had been left behind that I might now understand. Maybe I would find something that would help her understand, too. Something that would help her believe.

When I reached the hole in the floor, before I took the first step down the ladder I turned back.

"Are you coming?" I asked.

She didn't look up. She was acting like her worst nightmare had come true, and for a moment I wondered if she would have rather gotten the news that I had died all those months ago. I could imagine the future she feared for me now, thinking that I had lost my mind just like Dad. Thinking that I would follow him into madness instead of choosing to stay with her.

As I took the first steps down the ladder, I resolved to somehow convince her. I would make her see.

They'll all believe in the end. When he comes for them.

But all I could do in that moment was leave her there, not ready to accept the truth, crying into her hands.

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