

1 - Passing

The boy's mother has passed. Sickness had finally come to claim her. Today, the boy and I held her funeral. We laid her covered body atop a pile of twigs and logs. I set fire to the pile, and watched as the flames began. In seconds, they had swelled, overtaking her body. It only took minutes for her form to disappear, as the flames gave us the mercy of claiming her quickly. The boy believes that I was not pained to watch it.

He is wrong.

We collected her ashes after the burning. We keep them in a small bag. Her final wish was that, when the time is right, we journey to the most vast ocean in the realm and scatter her to the waters. Even in death, she remains infatuated with them.

Her absence is clear to the both of us. The boy does not sulk, and he does what I command, yet he does not speak to me otherwise. It is clear that he grieves, yet I know not how to ease his pain. I struggle now to see what was so clear to her, how she could connect with him so effortlessly.

The boy is not ready for the journey. He is far too young, too unsure, too quick to stray from the right path. I fear that without his mother, he will have no real guidance.

I cannot do this without you, Liv. The boy needs someone to guide him, and I am no proper father. I grow old, and the strength that once coursed through my body is giving out. I know not how to reach out to him the same way you once had.

I miss you. And the boy misses you too. Life will not be the same without you to guide us.

To you, boy... know that I am sorry.

2 - Mercy

It is the second day of life without the boy's mother. Today, I gave him one of the two gifts that she had left us, in case of her passing - a bow, made from the wood of the trees that

surround our home. I was there with her when she crafted it. I remember the loving tone of voice when she spoke about it. "When I'm gone -" she would say - "he will still have a part of me left. A part that keeps him safe, no matter what." She wished that he would carry it wherever he goes, that the spirit of home will help him find his way. For his sake, I hope she is right.

The second gift was for me. A message, one spoken on her last day, long after the boy had been put to bed. She warned me that he would not survive on his own. In her last moments, she begged me to be present, to continue on without her and be there for the boy.

I am trying. It is the hardest task that anyone has given to me.

After giving the boy his mother's gift, I took him out into the forest to hunt. The first of winter set in on this day, and the leaves that had once been abundant on the trees all around us had all but vanished under a cloak of snow. I had to teach the boy to be mindful of his footsteps to make himself quiet. While he started loud, he grew silent in a matter of seconds. I admire his tendency to learn things quickly.

We perched ourselves atop a hill that overlooks a clearing. I gave him arrows that I had crafted earlier that morning, showed him how to draw and aim the bow. Then, we lay in wait. Soon enough, a lone elk approached, its long antlers brushing against lower hanging branches. It stopped in the clearing and began to feed. I told the boy to draw his bow, to take aim, and to remind himself that he mustn't hesitate. He did all as I instructed, and his aim turned out to be true. The arrow pierced the elk's chest, and the animal fell to the ground. As its blood stained the snow, the boy and I approached.

The elk remained alive. Its breathing was quick, and only hastened once the boy and I were in its view.

I handed the boy a knife. I told him that he had to finish what he started. I showed him how to position the blade, and stepped back to watch him do the rest. However, the boy said words that I never would have anticipated next.

"She's scared," he said. "The elk. She's scared of us."

The boy's mother could talk to animals. It was one of her gifts. She only used it to bring peace to the wildlife when there was conflict outside of our home, or comfort to the animals I would kill for our meals. I told him to soothe the elk, to see if the gift lived on in the boy. He stroked its fur, gently, even staining own hands with the blood from the arrow wound. In a hushed whisper, he spoke words of care, of solace, in order to ease the elk's distress. The creature's breathing slowed.

Never before had I considered the possibility that her gift would be passed down to the boy. Yet, watching him now, all I see is her in him. That is the way I want it to remain.

The boy comforted the animal until it breathed its last. Once it had passed, we brought the body home. Tonight, we will dine on elk meat. It will be the first real meal that we share without his mother.

Despite that fact, she has left us with yet another gift. She lives on in the form of the boy.

3 - Dream

Liv came to me in the throes of sleep. We stood along the shore of a vast sea, waves rolling over our feet, hands joined together. I could not begin to describe the sensation in my body. It was like I had traveled to a time - a place - that I was not meant to be. She spoke to me, but her words were not those of a human. They were of a different tongue that was not meant for hearing, but comprehension. Her undecipherable words would begin to hasten, and I felt her grip loosen on my hands. Her expression turned from one of familiarity and love to a frantic one. Around us, the waves began to crash violently. I knew not of what or how this was happening, but I could feel in my heart what all of it meant. Our time together ran thin. She sighed deeply, flashed a smile at me, and pushed me away before the waters could claim me.

I awoke that morning and recalled the dream with stunning clarity. Every bit of it, even her unfamiliar tongue as she spoke to me. I am unsure what it meant.

The boy woke up soon after me. He asked me to go hunting once more. I told him we would not. We should not take more from the land than we truly need. Liv taught me that much. He only gave me a nod as he retreated to his room. I elected not to tell him about my dream. Not yet. Only when he is ready.

There is much work to be done.

4 - Beginnings

I recall the day I had shown Liv this place that we call home. I brought her here the day after I had finished building it, when the wood was still new and the stones were freshly polished. A simple, small cabin in the heart of the forest, away from everyone else. Even with the myths of creatures that slithered through the forest, or the talks of harsh winters that killed off unfortunate families, we both agreed that this would be the perfect space to spend the rest of our lives. With the birth of the boy, Liv insisted I expand the cabin. I did as she asked. She is the only one I would answer to.

I built him a room, a bed. She would provide him books and clothes, things she would always bring back from her trips to nearby villages. While I gave him the fire that kept his lantern from going out, she would sew the blankets that kept him warm while he slept. While I killed the animals that gave us meat, she would cook the meals that kept our bellies full. It is no wonder that she was the boy's favorite.

I know not how to make blankets. I cannot cook the way Liv used to. I am not the same parent that she was. Today, however, is a start.

I called the boy from his room. When he came to me, I handed him a gift of my own. I had used leather from animals that I had slain to create a cuirass. Armor. I told him that, should we ever travel, he was to wear this to remain safe. He took it in his hands, and for a while, did not say a word. He turned his back to me, nodded his head, and returned to his room. He did not come back out the rest of the day.

I feared for the worst. But it seems my efforts were not in vain. I took the boy hunting today, once more. Before we left, he asked me to wait, and made a show of running back to his room. He returned with the armor on, and said he was ready to go.

Perhaps there is hope for me yet, Liv.

5 - Story

Today, the boy and I ventured out to Liv's favorite place in her later years: a lake. Large and brilliantly blue, and just a short walk to the north of our cabin. She was always infatuated with the beauty of water, and loved that our home was so close to it. I never understood, but I never questioned. All I knew was that it made her happy.

At this time of year, the lake was frozen over. The waters that rippled and sparkled so beautifully were now hidden beneath a veil of snow and ice. Perhaps I was grateful for this. I am unsure if I could remain steady when gazing upon what she loved the most.

The boy and I sat ourselves down on the edge of the frozen lake. No words traveled between us for a long while. I could not tell what was going through his mind then. I never can in those moments of silence.

Then he asked me to tell him a story. And I told him the following:

Once, there was a boy, raised to be a man, trained to become a warrior. He was taught by his elders that victory mattered more than anything else, and that his rage was the key to obtaining it. He would go on to command a great and unstoppable army. They vanquished many foes, and left many villages destroyed in their wake.

One day, the warrior encountered an old gardener. The gardener offered the warrior a simple opportunity; to plant a flower seed together. Whether it was out of pity, a desire for change, or simply a joke to the warrior, he agreed to plant the seed with the gardener.

Over the course of many days, battles would be waged in the village the gardener resided in. And the warrior fought wildly, perhaps with more ferocity and energy than before.

But, at the end of every battle, he would always return to the gardener's home, and tend to the seed with him.

Despite his best efforts, the warrior returned one day to find the gardener had been slain by his foes. In a rage, he battled the entire enemy army by himself, and emerged victorious. But instead of returning to his own brothers in arms, he returned to the gardener's home. In this place, he had found something more important than victory.

From then on, the warrior hung up his weapons, and spent the rest of his days tending to the seed that he and the gardener planted together. The seed would grow into a beautiful flower, lovingly cared for by both the gardener and the warrior.

A long while passed. The boy and I did not say anything to each other.

Then he laughed, and said I should tell better stories.

I laughed as well. Perhaps I should.

6 - Gentle

We were attacked by a creature of the forest today. A lindworm, large enough to tower over myself and the boy. It surprised us while we were hunting. I told the boy to remain calm and aimed to battle the creature myself. I felt nothing but a desire to protect as I fought the creature with my own two hands. I wrestled it into submission, all while being sure that the battle strayed far from the boy. When it was beaten, I wrapped my arms around its thick neck, preparing to make the final move.

Just before killing the creature, however, the boy spoke to me. "Father," he said. "It was just hungry! Please." There was desperation in his plea that felt familiar. It was the same concern that Liv would give to any and all animals.

I loosened my hold on the creature, ultimately letting it go and stepping away from it. Much to my surprise, it did not attack further. Instead, it looked from me, then to the boy, eyes

scanning his young face in an almost human-like manner. Then, as quickly as the lindworm had appeared, it slithered back into the woods.

Once my breathing slowed, and my senses had dulled, I looked to the boy to find that he had a smile on his face. What he was smiling about, I do not know. But I knew that I found myself smiling as well. Together, the two of us pressed on into the woods. We would not return home until our hunt was finished.

Every day, the boy surprises me with his actions. His humanity. More and more often, he displays his kindness to the world. It is clear that he will grow to be a better man than me.

7 - Ready

I once believed the boy was not ready for the journey to the ocean, to scatter his mother's ashes. I once believed he was too young, too unsure. But that was only the side of the boy that I had been shown.

Since Liv's passing, I've come to see more of the boy than I ever would have if life continued as it had. I see the side of the boy that reads books and gains knowledge. I see the side of the boy that seeks to learn more about the workings of the world. I see the boy whose aim is true, who can confidently wield his mother's gifts and use them for good. I see the boy who always learns from his elders, and in turn even teaches them. This is the boy I call "Son".

He will have a father who will always love him, even if I know not of if he loves me in return. He will have pieces of the mother he cared about so dearly with him for the rest of his days. He will have himself to rely on, when all else fails. He is ready for the journey.

I remind myself each day that I must be better for his sake. No longer will I simply chop down the trees, hunt the animals, battle the creatures of the forest, or make the armor. I must be more for him. I must be better. I am still unprepared to be without Liv. But Gunnar is not without me. Even without her by my side, I will put my best efforts towards being his father.

Our journey begins tomorrow. We leave for the ocean at dawn.