

Chapter Four

remnants

x

Ocea cries in the arms of her mother, Emily. A beautiful blonde woman with little wrinkles on her face, holding her daughter so tenderly. Her eyes show little concern, but an overwhelming tenderness.

“Little ones can be so cruel to one another.” Emily brushes Ocea’s head, laying against her breast. “What did they say to you, darling?”

Ocea whimpers with quick grasps for air, “...I don’t know.” Her tears slow, as she peeks her gaze out from her mother's clothing. “They said I need to grow up. They think it’s stupid that I make up stories.” She starts to huff to tears again, “And I think it’s stupid too.”

Emily squeezes her tightly, “Those around us often can’t understand the things we care about so much. But not doing it or thinking it’s stupid will only do you harm, my love.”

Ocea pouts, “I don’t wanna do it anymore.”

“Why, darling?”

“Because no one cares!”

“I care.” Emily holds Ocea’s face in front of hers. “I care.”

Ocea turns her wet face away, “But no one else does.”

“That’s not true. Ossa loves everything about you. He can’t get enough of your stories!”

“No, he probably doesn’t like me either.”

Emily’s jaw drops, “Now you are being ridiculous!”

“No, I’m not.”

“How could you think Ossa doesn’t like you?”

Ocea shrugs.

She's reluctant to bring up the letter he never responded to. He hasn't so much as mentioned to her even.

Emily chuckles, "Come on, did something happen between you to?"

"He just stopped talking to me."

"Little ones really can be so cruel sometimes." Emily shakes her head with a smirk. "Why don't you write to him again?"

"Why?" Ocea asks angrily.

Emily pauses, gathering her thoughts with a calm sigh, "My love. Never stop writing—To Oslo, your friends, your parents... And if anyone puts you to shame, your writing is not for them." Emily brushes Ocea's cheek, "Not all of us have gifts, my love. Such gifts don't deserve to be suffocated by those who can't understand them. Instead, share them with those who celebrate them."

Ocea mumbles, "...Do you think, Ossy understands them?"

"Look at the fun the two of you have. Of course he does."

Ocea dries the tears from her face, "Yeah, I guess so."

It wasn't any easier from this point on. While Ocea and Oslo continued their childish antics together, it wasn't long before Ocea became more distant. She focused more on her friends, her beauty, and her grades. Of course, there's nothing wrong with that, but as this bled into high school her best friends started drinking and smoking whenever they had the chance. Every once in a while she'd have to play along to save face, though she found no pleasure in it herself. She unconventionally beautiful. She had the eyes of the boys in her class, but she never indulged them, which arguably made her more desirable.

Day in and day out, she searches the halls for the thrill her childhood once brought her. Her English and Literature classes couldn't suffice, there was no expression. It made her grow more of a distaste for writing. Essays and research. Citing sources. Yuck. Her hunger lingered on, in search of what she once had. But school jaded her of it.

It was a crisp fall day, somewhere in the mid-high school years. Her window was cracked to feel the liberating breeze. The fall wind is nostalgic. The tides of change that circulate through the air are a reminder of moments that have happened over time, year

to year. That breeze greets Ocea, welcoming her into her next life and reminding her of her past few. And as soon as the sweetest wind captivated her room, she stares out the window only to see her neighbor, *Ossy*.

Butterflies flood her vacant stomach, swirling in her heart to greet him. Though left with sour sediment in the pit of her gut, she turns away. She wants to cry but doesn't know why. She turns to her desk, grabs her old journal, and flips to the first blank page.

She doesn't remember what she wrote that day, but it didn't stop there. Something about that moment sparked inspiration in her, she wrote with passion each and every day from that point on. Moving from her paper journal to her laptop, she formed a collection of letters, poems, and songs. Her mind traversed each page with grace; a brighter hope that filled her mind came pouring out with each keystroke.

She ends with this: *'I hope one day you'll find this to be a beautiful thing. I hope one day, you see me again. I hope I still mean something to you, and this isn't all a waste of breath. I want to try again.'*

"Mmm... Too much?..." Ocea stares at isolated words on the page. "Yep. Too much." Like ripping the paper from a journal, she drags the page in the trash bin on her computer, right-clicking it, and selecting *Empty*.

As high school came to a close, she felt she had nothing left, she was eager to leave her old friends behind. Although she couldn't get into the school she wanted, her parents negotiated her going to State close by, at least for the first two years. She couldn't help but wonder what Oslo decided to do about school. He was excelling in art. It covered many of the halls throughout senior year. He was praised as a great artist, though he would never acknowledge it. He even completed a promotional animation for the school for his final project. It was magnificent what he could do all on his own.

When Ocea's final class let out her friend, Esty, came running for her outside the school. Gripping both of Ocea's shoulders from behind, she exclaims, "We did it!"

Ocea clenches, not expecting Esty, as she was trying to slip off without saying goodbye, "We did—"

"Why so glum? Come on, we're going uptown with the others!"

"I can't, Dad needed me for something today." Ocea smirks.

“What’re talking about? It’s the last day of high school! B—I need you to not have to deal with your dad right now.” The two start walking down the walkway to exit the schoolyard.

“It’s fine really, we just gotta prep a couple of things before our family vacation.”

“Okay okay, but look, I *need* you this summer. Don’t go disappearing on me now. I gotta grab a hold of Curtis before some other college skank.”

“Of course Esty. We all know you’re *thee* skank for Curtis.”

“Thank you for acknowledging—Wait vacation, so you going with that Ossy’s family?”

“As usual. Yep.”

“Is he gonna be there this time??”

“Probably not, Esty.” Ocea rolls her eyes.

“Probably not? So you *want* him to be there?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Ocea drops her hands out in front of her, defeated.

“I haven’t had a real conversation with him in forever. Might be kinda awkward.”

“Ocea... Is Ossy, *your* Curtis?” Esty looks her dead in the eyes.

Ocea sarcastically, “No I’m not Oslo’s skank, if that what you’re asking.”

“Yes, no—Ocea, you haven’t locked eyes with a boy since Sophomore year and that was Mr. Tidley.”

“That is so not true!—Public speaking Mr. Tidley? How could you not stare at the fungus on his chin?”

“Well of course you had to but don’t try changing the subject, are you going to make a move on Ossy or not?”

“Esty, drop it. I’m not talking to you about Ossy.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Ocea keeps walking, without looking at Esty, “You don’t understand, and you’re not going to, so let’s just drop it. Okay?”

Esty, not paying much mind to Ocea’s attitude, “Alright—Well, ima head uptown. Good luck with vacation stuff.” She turns away from Ocea, walking to the lot a few yards in the opposite direction.

Before turning the corner to her street, she stops and stares at the sky, feeling slightly guilty about how she handled that.

“Esty, you wouldn’t get it. You don’t have an Ossy. You have a...*Curtis...*”

She takes a slow breath to feel the summer air. She can’t help but laugh, “I guess I don’t have an Ossy either. Lately.”

It’s finally hit her. Whether she loved it or hated it, high school was over. And with a sorry excuse of an online graduation left, she looked more forward to the awkward beach trip with Oslo.

Tears form in her eyes, but her face is emotionless. She doesn’t know why she’s crying, but she quickly wipes her tears and keeps walking when she hears someone walking her way.

When Ocea returns home, she runs straight up to her room. She sits at her desk, opens her laptop, and opens a folder labeled “*Don’t read these again*”. This was a folder she herself avoided. It was a ‘write and burn journal’ of sorts, after she wrote she never looked at it again.

A messy sorting of documents was thrown all throughout the folder, except for one document at the very end. It was labeled “*ZCollection*”. The ‘Z’ was at the beginning only to ensure the file would sit at the bottom. She had all sorts of content splattered chaotically throughout this document with only subtle labeling guiding you. The first few titles appeared to be poems and songs. At the end sat a story, titled “*Corea and the Deep Dark Meadow*”. But before that was a letter. A reincarnated form of the letter she wrote Oslo and put in the tree trunk after their fight when they were kids.

Ocea checks the time and still has plenty of it before her mom or dad gets home. She clicks print on her “*ZCollection*” document. *Letter. Standard this, standard that. Portrait, not Landscape.* As her mouse hovers over the final *Print* button, she freezes. ‘*Don’t think now, you idiot.*’ She looks away from the screen and clicks her mouse button to print. She runs downstairs to her father’s office, waiting for all 365 pages. Halfway in, she checks the time again. Still plenty of it. She thinks until she hears the garage door open. ‘*WHAT.*’ Panicked, she runs to the garage door window to peek in. ‘*What’s he doing home so early?!*’ She runs back to the office. 60 pages remain. She clicks cancel, grabs what she has printed, and runs upstairs.

'I'll print the rest before we leave next week.'

With nothing but instinct driving her, she holds tightly to these pages, eager to deliver them to Oslo. At the very least, it will be the last story he has of hers.

The day before the trip approached. Esty has been bugging Ocea all week to hit the town with her and everyone else, but Ocea's avoided every invite. She walks down to the office quietly while her parents are outside figuring out how they'll pack the car. *'Last sixty... printing... okay.'* Ocea sighs with relief, tapping the desk by the printer trying to hurry it. Just after twenty pages are printed out, the printer stops.

"Refill Ink." It reads.

'N...no. No. It was full. I can't give him a story without an ending!' Ocea hears her parents approach the door. She grabs what she can and runs back to her room to finish packing. *'The most important part is the front letter anyway.'*

However, instead of packing, Ocea sits on her bed, punching holes and binding the pages together. She stares at the letter on the front page longer than she's stared at any page in a book. She looks to her left, at the curtains hanging in her window. She has a vision—undoing each curtain's thread, shattering the glass that stands between her and Oslo, getting caught in the window screen, and screaming to him that she's sorry. The vision fades. She looks down at the document, "...This'll do."

The trip itself was so far a disaster. On the outside, it was a good and wholesome family vacation. On the inside, her heart was in turmoil. As soon as Oslo asked her how she was, she choked and said, "I'm good." Not a, "I'm great! How are you?" Just, *mEh I'm good eHh*. And this was only the beginning. She couldn't beat herself up enough on the drive to the beach. She could only be thankful to be in a separate car from him. As for the rest of the trip, she couldn't swallow her stress. She thinks about the 363 pages that weighed down her backpack, not to mention the missing two. She looked for every opportunity to bring it up to him, have a moment alone, and explain herself. Yet, not a moment was found. She even walked off to the shore at night, beckoning in her heart for him to follow. But he didn't. It wasn't until poker night. An ice breaker, that's all that was needed. They eventually both went out, with only the parents in play.

'This is my chance.'

But before Ocea could say anything, Oslo asked her, “You wanna walk out?” Gesturing to the beach beyond the trail.

She nods her head, “Yeah sure.” Before she could forget, she ran to grab her backpack with the papers inside, meeting Oslo out the back.

“What’s in the bag?” Oslo asks, dodging every needle of a twig below him in the sand.

“Oh— just water and stuff.”

Ocea never got around to talking to him about the book and letter. Standing on that shore, her nerves got the best of her. Oslo was so confident. Calm and collected. The conversation was warm. This is the beginning of something new, the rekindling of something old. As her nerves calmed, her bag got caught on a tree branch on their walk back up the trail. Remembering the papers, shivers crept up her spine like a bug. Breaking loose of the branch, she assures herself, ‘*We have time. It can wait.*’

She couldn’t have known.

'Ossy... Wake up, Ossy. Please wake up.'

Oslo shakes himself awake in a dark and clouded room. The only thing he can remember is a grey goo surrounding and suffocating him. But also fire. Swords. Torches. Dark Portals. Horses. Warlords. Rot. But then there was a meadow. Glistening with light, turned dark and desolate.

"My suit!" He stands in the cold rain. He runs up the steps behind him, remembering the moment he was mocked by a strange girl. *'What was her name... It doesn't matter.'* He looks down at his soggy suit. Soggy, but clean. Shining, like crystals in a bath. He looks up to the doorman, "Hello again, I was with that couple that just walked in a moment ago."

"Yes, of course. I see you fixed yourself up. Stupendous!"

"Indeed." He continues inside to see glistening golden pillars and large archways that frame a ballroom floor.

'Follow my voice.'

Startled, he looks across the room. The girl. She's so beautiful. Radiant. Gentle in her walk. The blondish beauty stares back at me. It's *Sara*. She gestures for me.

'Ossy.'

Oslo approaches Sara across the room when an orchestra starts playing a romantic ballad. He's startled by the sudden music, standing in the middle of the floor when his hands are taken up.

"Brave of you to come, Cal." Sara holds Oslo's hands as they begin to dance in circles. One, two, step, one, two, step.

"What... why?"

"You took his suit after all."

Oslo looks around the room, within a few seconds he spots the other girl that was calling him Cal. She stands hunched over next to the man she was with, only now he wears a patchy black suit. *'That's right... I took it right off of him.'*

Startled, "How'd I do that?" Oslo attempts to shift further from the couple's line of sight into the dancing crowd.

"I dunno, you tell me." Sara leans her head against Oslo's chest.

“Ocea.”

“Yes?”

“How’d we get here?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean—”

“Oh! Get ready for the dip!— one, two... step, one two, there we go, and... DIP!”

Oslo dips Ocea with shaking knees, relieved to pull her back up quickly. “That was pretty good, Cal!” She slides closer to him, adjusting her hand to his back, and his hand on her hip, “Sorry, what were you saying?”

“I can’t recall.”

“That’s okay, we got another one coming! One, two... yep, one, two... and... DIP!”

Oslo loses his grip on her this time, dropping her head to the floor. Her dress shatters into pieces as a black curtain forms around her. The crowd continues dancing around them while Oslo is panicking, picking up the pieces of her shattered dress and placing them back on her.

“What have I done— what have I done.” He exclaims frantically.

“Cal, that’s exactly what you do. What you’ve always done.” The girl from before stands behind him. “Picking up the pieces you broke... Ya can’t fix ‘em. Ya can’t fix any of this. When she’s gone, she’s gone.” The girl’s words echo through Oslo’s mind as he’s left in a deep, dark hole in the ground. He hears nothing but chanting tribesmen, eager to start the ritual.

“Just as it should be. This death... This must be what Ocea thinks of me. Sending me to die in her own dreams. Torturing me for what I’ve done. Well, so be it.” Oslo stands firmly to his two feet, looking up at the sun shining down on him.

“Come and kill me then! Come on!” The image of Oslo dropping Ocea on her head replays through his mind.

“Get this over with! Get me out!” He shuttered as soon as he said those words, *get me out*. “No... I can’t leave. I can’t leave her. I told her parents I would save her.”

He mumbles, “Even if she hates me. Even if she wants me gone.”

Suddenly, her gentle voice whispers to him, as if she was speaking directly into his ear, “How could I hate you? Oslo, you’re picking up my pieces.” Oslo looks up from

the bottom of the hole, seeing her in the sky, extending her hand down below to him. “Now let me pick up yours.” Oslo with his mouth open and shoulders dropped reaches for Ocea’s hand.

She continues, “Now, shall we try this again?”

Oslo shouts, finding himself in the Ether again.

Underneath him sprang dirt, rock, and patches of grass spanning for miles. Many miles away stood tall spruce trees all around him. He could see waterfalls, snow-capped mountains, desert hills, molten rocks, and what looked to be a tall bright green Jungle, all opposite each other in a circle beyond the tree line. Oslo felt at peace knowing she was not suffering in her sleep, dreaming beautiful dreams. But that thought was brief, as he heard her call out to him again,

‘Follow my voice, Ossy.’

“This place... it’s so familiar.” He says without seeing much of anything at all. Blurry-eyed, the world around him bends, sending him through the expanse of grass, dense forest, and a small town, until he finds himself inside a home. It’s *his* home. Except it’s not.

“Glad to see you’re still with us, Ossy. It’s been some time.”

‘Is that... Jay?’

“You vanished on us, you know. It hasn’t been the same town without you.” Jay says melancholic while staring directly at Oslo from his throne.

“I—I had to find her, remember?”

Jay stares back at him with emptiness.

“You gave me my sword and ordered me to the Meadow. From there, I ran into a demon... That’s right... *Kanashibari*. And I defeated him! But—He came back...” Oslo stares at the seams of each plank on the floor, rubbing his hands nervously, “He came back and took her. Now I have to go find—”

Jay interrupts, “You could’ve told us the truth, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on Ossy. She’s not here right now. It’s Ocea, you should’ve told us you loved her... Maybe we could’ve kept you both out of this mess.”

“Love her... How—” Oslo winces, unsure of what to say.

“Ossy, you saved her, you can come home now...”

“No, you’re wrong. She’s still out there. She still needs me.”

‘*Ossy...*’

“There!” He looks up, staring through the ceiling to the heavens, “She’s calling me, she still needs me!”

“I see.” Jay grips the side of his throne, “I have to go for now, but I’ll always be here, waiting.” He throws his hand in the air toward Oslo as if he was casting a spell.

Oslo’s vision blurs, knocking him back to the ground, only to find himself in the midst of war. Horses charge to his left and right, wearing Japanese banners and rope. Samurai flood his surroundings, slaughtering each other. Oslo looks up hearing a call for him, “My lord!” Makita on horseback rises from a pile of ash to his right, drawing his blade to slice an enemy charging toward Oslo. The enemy horse rears as a spear is raised to pierce Oslo’s chest. As Oslo braces himself, Makita’s swing cuts the hands wielding the spear. However, the horse kicks Makita to the ground next to Oslo and then runs free.

“Makita!” Oslo cries, rolling over to his side, grabbing a hold of Makita.

“My lord, leave me. Don’t let my death be in vain. Forget not, the power of the Gauntlet, and save the princess—” Makita’s breath is heavy, but quickly slows as his eyes reflect the burning red sky.

“No!” Oslo cries, rising to his feet. He stares down at the mechanical Gauntlet that covers his right hand, “That’s right. Makita gave this to me.” With this weapon, he grips his katana hilt, drawing it like a beast draws his fangs, he runs through the blood-covered battlefield. Flames rise on the horizon. Oslo sees a tall tower behind the enemy gates past the sea of samurai in front of him. He runs like a jaguar, cutting enemies down with one short swipe of his blade and gauntlet. His eyesight remains on the tower when he hears her voice calling from it—

‘*Ossy... I need you here... Come to me, Ossy...*’

“How could I let you go, my Ocea? How could I let this— agh!” He clashes swords with his enemy, pushing him to the ground and stabbing him through his armor, “How could this ha—happen?” He continues his charge.

He soon finds himself at the front gate. Thirty times the size of him with red octagonal pillars and golden trimmed walls. Old decrepit logs stand tall with many gashes to their structure. The bodies of their enemies lay at Oslo's feet, as many of his men have been attempting to break through the gate. They ram the gate over and over, giving it all they got.

"Hours we've been here, my lord! Won't budge!"

Oslo calms his stance, walking slowly toward the back of one of the rams. He places his Gauntletta on the back of it. "On my count!" The men prepare their stance, "ONE!— TWO!— THREE!!" Oslo thrusts all his body weight into the ram with the power of the Gauntlet. It pumps steam and sparks violently as Oslo pushes it to its limits, providing an unstoppable force to the battering ram. With a roar from the door, it swings open, unable to be held back by the enemies any longer. Though, behind the gate, sits something unexpected.

A man. Not army, rests on his knees in a clean Kimono, untouched by war.

"Oslo."

"...Koji." Oslo stands in amazement, "Where is—!"

"She's not here. For you blame the wrong man."

"What do you mean?! How could she not be here?"

Koji points back to the tall tower behind him, a great Japanese work of art, with a beautiful curved roof. Though to Oslo it is but a prison where Ocea is sealed.

"A man of darkness charged through our gates this morning, killing all my men in my castle." Koji lifts his robe, revealing a dark wound. This wound was veiny and covered in purple and red marks, nothing like Oslo had ever seen before. "You have the wrong man, for I was only trying to protect her."

Oslo questions this remark, but can't stop thinking of that dark figure. "I know who took her, I'm here to kill him, and take Ocea back to our Kingdom."

"Then go—do what you must."

Oslo's attempt was strong. He felt he chased her up the tower for ages, years even. His muscles grew weary and tired. His throat cracked and dry, screaming for her. His Gauntlet, suffocating his hand.

And yet, what felt like ages moments ago felt like seconds when he reached the top. Where the demon stood before him, Ocea in his arms, “A valiant effort, my child. Do you yet know pain?”

Oslo, with much pain, “Of—Of course I know pain. Look at what you’ve done to me, demon!”

“You still don’t get it...” The demon with his two pearly specks for eyes grins to his ears, “You only do it to yourself.” He sits on a throne that rests at the top of this tower. Four small windows surround them on each wall, and magnificent curtains fall as a backdrop behind the demon. Surrounded by red linens and dark spruce wood, the demon holds Ocea to his chest. “I can only exist because of you. She lays here because of you. My boy...” He curls his body, looming over Ocea if he was going to eat her.

“What are you? Why are you doing this?”

Ocea cracks her eyes, trembling, “O—Ossy...”

“Ocea! I’m right here.”

She gently raises her trembling head to meet Oslo’s gaze, “It really is you.” She reveals an exhausted smile, “Ossy, you have to listen to me.” She holds something in her hand as she stretches it out towards Oslo, “You have to—”

They vanish.

“NO!”

Sand slowly floats to the ground from where her hand was stretched out. He runs to the throne, grasping at the air, hoping to feel her there. He only finds that she is gone. He crawls over to the sand.

“I have to... I have to what? Sand? What is this?” As he touches it a vision of grey goo flashes through his sight as quickly as he could blink. Dropping the sand, he sits with his eyes wide open. Trembling, he reaches out for it again. This time, the goo forms something, but he still can’t quite make it out. He gathers more sand into his palm, causing his vision to become more and more clear.

He sees a beach. The water laps against the shore peacefully. Something else is there, in the distance. A lighthouse. ‘*What is this? What is she’s wanting me to see?*’ Before he has much more time to think, his body is being lifted and transported again. His vision is blurred, as sounds are traveling by him faster than he can perceive. It was

like a train passing by with everyone screaming at him from the inside, he can't make anything of it. '*The Ether— No...*' Before he knows it, he appears somewhere he's seen before, but can't think of what this is. Until...

"Ah come on!—"

"*Tuso, Gaga, mahk-rena-duso!*"

A force meets Oslo's chest, pushing him out of the tent and into the sky. He floats just above the colony, wind rushing around his body. The elder and his clan walk out from under cover to observe Oslo.

"What are you doing to me!?" Oslo chokes through the air.

"Reveal her or be damned!" The elder holds the circle towards Oslo.

Oslo gasping for air, "I don't... Know..." His eyes open wide, '*I know this. I've been here before. They're going to seal me away.*'

Oslo, covered in nothing but a loincloth, turns around to look at the previous dream. '*But there I am too. The tower in the red sky.*' He turns back to the Elder that's casting a spell on him, holding him high in the air.

"I do not have your daughter. Nor do I know who she is." The tribe's people look at him in amusement, not understanding what he's saying. "But I have to go find someone I've lost too." Oslo cups his hands in front of him, closing his eyes, he hears the water lap against the shore. Sand slips through his fingers to the colony down below. Visions of the beach start blinking in front of him again until he finds himself there, escaping the Elder and his tribe.

Looking out to the ocean, he can feel the calm. He sits, resting his toes in the sand for a moment. Closing his eyes and humming in peace, completely ignorant to the fact he was seconds away from suffocating.

The dips lower in the horizon—golden hour. He looks over to his right. '*The lighthouse. And Ocea?*' She stands in the distance, too far for him to be heard, so he runs towards her, only to find his foot digging into grass up to his knees, running for his life. Confused, he looks behind him only to see glowing leaves from torches and cries of the tribe's men screaming bloody murder to the dense jungle.

Tribal drums clamor in the distance as if coming from the sky above, perhaps playing in Ocea's mind. *'The tribes men and that shaman, they were gonna put me down in that pit again.'* Oslo trembles.

He starts to run like he's never run before through the tall brush. Visions of the beach start flashing before him again.

"It's dead ahead. The beach. She's waiting for me."

Oslo's feet feel heavy trudging through the jungle. Vines drape in front of him as he tries to maintain a straight line forward. The drums in the sky become more intense, the fire from the tribe's torches burn brighter and closer, and their roars and foot steps thump closer and closer. He's dodging roots emerging from the ground of the giant trees that surround him, every once in a while tripping up, throwing his hand to the ground to catch him and maintain his stride.

"A bridge!" Oslo cries out.

A few yards in front of him as he appears in a clearing is a long rope bridge with wooden stakes holding the foundation on either side. Below the bridge is a giant gap that falls down into nothingness and no sign of making it out alive if you fell. As he approaches the bridge he hops from one plank to another, hoping they hold stable. About halfway through, the planks grow weaker and more wobbly, slowing Oslo's pace. He looks back in panic, seeing the tribe's men running up on the bridge calling out spells to no effect.

Out of breath and bent over against the rope, "What do I do?..." He takes a deep breath while pulling himself up, "What do I do?" Oslo stares back at the tribe, then forward to where Ocea stands on the beach beyond the trees.

"I can't lose her now." He wipes sweat from his brow, "I don't know what happens if they catch me. But I can't risk it. I can't lose her. She's just right there." Oslo steps forward, stretching one arm after another across either side of the bridge. "I have to wake her. This is it."

As he stretches his arm across the other end of the bridge, he pushes off from the final plank. But as if a vortex was trying to pull him in, the plank caves below him. He hangs on tight to the cliff side. He was able to catch a rock lodged into the ground as he tries to pull himself up. He looks back to see the tribe inching closer and closer as they carefully traverse the wooden planks.

"I have to." Oslo musters up what strength he can, but it fails every time. The tribe comes closer as the drums are louder than ever pounding into his eardrums.

"I have to." Sweat drip drip drips *BANG BANG* down his brow. *BANG BANG* The grip in his right hand against the rock becomes more intense as blood vessels pop

pop pop in his fingers. When Oslo looks up at it he sees a metal wristband stretching over his skin, slowly devouring his fingertips and forearm, The Gaunt... Oh what was it... Gauntlet. Gauntlet... Gauntletta!" A surge of steam and sparks come from the Gauntletta forming around his hand, allowing Oslo to pull himself up with no struggle.

"This is in the wrong dream—" Oslo looks up to see the tribe a few planks away from him. Just when he's about to run, he stops and looks at the foundation holding the rope bridge to his side of the ravine. He takes his mechanical fist and starts to beat the wooden stakes, hoping to snap them, but it's not working. Closer they come, stretching their arms out, throwing their torches.

Just then, Oslo realizes, "if this Gauntlet can come from another dream, so can my blade."

He stretches his arm out, focusing on Makita, only to be distracted by the tribe's screams. He tries again, *Makita, Makita*. Nothing. The drums intensify, pounding Oslo's chest with every beat, rattling his brain with every bang.

*The healing pool. The Gauntletta. Makita. Makita. *BANG* The tribe. The curse. Makita. Makita. Spears. Spells. Makita. Makita. Horses. Swords. Banners. Torches. Flames. Yelling. Makita. Makita. Makita.*

A hand grabs onto his shoulder suddenly, pulling him towards the rest of the tribe crowding the bridge.

*Makita. Gauntletta. *BANG* *BANG**

"OCEA!"

The sword forms in his hand, he pushes the tribesman back, forcing all the men to fall back on the bridge. He slices the ropes holding the bridge, breaking the only support holding the Tribe's men up. They fall into the darkness with the light from their torches slowly fading into the depths.

Oslo nearly falls to his knees, stopping himself by digging his katana into the dirt, he stands firm. He presses onto the shore, looking back to see the Elder standing on the other side of the ravine. He cries, but with a smile on his face, waving to Oslo.

"...Dad?" Oslo stops where he is and turns back. "Dad!" The Elder bows, and turns back to disappear into the jungle. "Was that him this whole time? Or did that just

happen? Why did he cast those spells on me? Dad!” Oslo turns back to run to the beach, knowing he can’t spend more time contemplating.

“His daughter. He said I took his daughter. Dad doesn’t have a daughter.”

Before long, the jungle comes to a clearing, opening to a shoreline. The drums are gone, and the sword and gauntlet slowly fade away. He can only hear the calm ocean. Standing in the soft sand, he looks back.

“This is the trail—that trail from the beach house.” He looks to his right, noticing the lighthouse in the distance, and a figure standing beside it. “There she is.” The lighthouse glows, beaming its light in the distance to the water. It spins as if signaling to a ship to come home.

“That must be it. Your mind. You can wake up now.” Oslo knew from the beginning when he found himself trapped in Ocea’s dreamscape that he was put here for a reason. He’s destined to wake her consciousness and bring her back to her parents. Seeing her at the lighthouse beckoning to him was all the pain, the dreams, the nightmares, coming to an end.

As he approaches her, he calls out, “Ocea! Ocea! It’s time to come home! Ocea!”

She turns from looking out to the shore, staring Oslo directly in the eyes. A golden glow radiates from her chest as she smiles. Tears come to her eyes as she opens her arms to him. But when Oslo takes another step, he finds himself standing in the Meadow. The same meadow he first found her in. The same meadow that Demon took her from.

“N—No...” Oslo’s hands stretch in the air trying to find Ocea. “No! No!”

“Ossy.”

Oslo turns to see her standing in front of the house in the Meadow.

“Ocea! I thought I lost you!”

She smiles, “My love, I can be yours forever.”

Oslo, stunned, “Ocea—”

“Yes... Oslo. We can be here forever. I prepared this place for *you*.”

Oslo stares in silence. Before he can say anything,

“Do you want to spend your life with me?”

Ocea's eyes glowed brighter than the sun. Oslo's heart sank only to rise again the next second.

He rubs his eyes and takes a deep breath. "Of course I do."

"Then stay."

"Stay? No, Ocea, you're supposed to come with me."

"Ossy, stay! Stay in this meadow with me. Harvest the crops. Raise a family. All right here, in this little meadow. I did all of this for you! Stay, Ossy." She looks at him with tender eyes.

"What about you, Ocea? Aren't you still asleep? Won't the demon keep coming after you?"

She shakes her head, "Not if we stay here. This place is safe."

"But the Demon, he took you from here once before!"

Ocea swallows with a lump in her throat, "I know... It's different this time."

"What do you mean? How?"

"He told me..."

"What? What did he tell you?"

"If we stay here, he'll leave us alone. Forever."

"What do you mean? How can you trust *him*?"

"If you try to wake me... he'll never stop attacking. He'll be relentless."

Oslo contemplates. *Why?* Why would the Demon want to leave them alone? Why would he let them live in peace in Ocea's dreamscape? But it didn't take him long to realize his true intentions for them.

"Ocea. I don't think I can stay."

"Ossy..." Ocea quivers. "You—You're going to leave me?"

"No... No. Ocea, he wants you to sleep forever. I don't know why, but he does!"

"You're going to leave me here alone... After I did all of this for you."

She tugs at his heart.

"Maybe this is how..."

He thinks maybe it's *a* way to do it. If he stays here in the meadow, she'll eventually wake.

He hesitates, “Ocea, I don’t know the right thing to do.” Oslo scratches his head, “It’s for you. Whatever I do, I’m just trying to do what I can for you.”

She grabs his arm. “Then stay. Stay with me Ossy. Stay here and live and love me. I’m begging you.” She wraps her arms around him, clinging to him desperately. “Here we can have each other exactly how we want each other. We can live the life we want to. This life is perfect, with no more pain. No more cruelty. Just us and the meadow.”

Oslo closes his eyes, nervously wrapping himself around her. After moments of silence Oslo lets out a sigh of relief.

“I’ll stay, Ocea.”

“I’ll stay.”