

Chapter Eight

Forever

xxii

It feels like raindrops on Oslo's skin. The salt burns over every pore as it drip, drip, drips. The sky radiates a deep maroon, with no cloud in sight. Oslo licks the water that's bubbled in his cupped hand as his face lays buried in the gravel path.

"Tears."

He rolls over, turning to face the bloody sky.

"Not a cloud in sight."

He laments as water drops continue to sprinkle on Oslo's face.

"Are you crying up there, Corea? From the Mountain so high? You must feel my pain and helplessness—"

The tears increase, falling faster with each passing second. Oslo's eyes dodge each drop as he blinks, closing them tight when one lands in his pupil. It burns. But he doesn't mind.

"To believe I'm meant for you...Who am I kidding?"

The tears pool around his body, clinging to him.

"Corea and the Deep Dark Meadow." He murmurs.

"I remember her father. And her mother. They told me, 'Don't forget the girl in the meadow. Don't forget our Corea.'"

"And so it goes," Ocea speaks alongside Oslo, though he doesn't seem to notice,

"The prince nodded his head in affirmation, securing the emptying thoughts of Corea's parents that she'll be gone and forgotten. Another fragile life-like dust to the wind. The prince refused. He looked her parents in the eyes with promise. Regardless of the thought of her running away. Regardless of the thought that Corea didn't want to see him again. She doesn't deserve to be alone. But little did the Prince know, Corea still begged the heavens to see him again. The reason she'd gone in the first place, the prince hasn't a clue."

Oslo's ears perk, lifting his head and opening his eyes in amazement. He hears her voice again.

Ocea continues,

"Don't drift away so gently. But if you must, drift away with vigor.' Just like Oslo and the Deep Red Sea. Follow my voice, Ossy, don't drift away. Don't drift away from me. Don't forget the girl in the meadow."

The sky falls with a passion of salty water, drowning out the tears that would form in Oslo's eyes. The pool around Oslo quickly lifts him as the plains start to flood. His body is lifted higher and higher as the deep dark sky glare down at him. He flips head first into the water, diving down to the depths. He swims with vigor. Pushing his legs and arms to the limit as he guides his body to the bottom of the newly formed sea.

A shimmer shines at the bottom where he once lay. As he gets closer, he sees the gilded hilt holding it's bloody blade. He holds tight to it, disturbing the gravel around it as the dust cloud forms around him. Landing on his feet, he pushes off toward the sky again.

Splashing to the surface he sees an island in front of him, once a mountaintop just moments ago.

Oslo treads the waters, "*Isle of Finnen.*"

Swimming to shore, he glares past the trees that come out into the water, seeing a large black spot of smog. The smoke rises, thickening the closer he gets. With a sword in one hand, he paddles with the other. The msky stares at him with an unwelcome eye.

In his soggy tunic he pulls himself out of the water, becoming dry immediately. Though, Oslo thinks nothing of it as he continues through the tree line. Until, sudden voices stop him in his tracks. Voices of children. They skip left and right, giggling, laughing,

"They're playing."

He smirks, "How beautiful it is..."

He somberly continues through the woods. He steps over a small creek, one stone at a time, stepping through a pile of mud on the other side. He sees an empty grocery bag fly in the wind. Soda cans crumpled as the earth swallowed them in vegetation.

“It was beautiful, wasn’t it?” Tears drip down Oslo’s cheeks as he reaches the clearing. Before him is a massive field, with no end in sight. Golden wheat sways with the wind as the sun shines bright overhead.

The sky is a rich blue hue surrounding the perfectly centered sun, floating directly above the island. Just beyond that ring of blue, the clouds bleed the vile maroon coloring.

Oslo turns to the wheat, seeing a large dark mass sitting in the middle of it.

He steps through the fields, “Kanashibari—Why this place?”

A whisper creeps through with the wind as it gently blows between the wheat,

“This is my home. This is my greatest hiding place.”

“How can this be where you hide? It’s the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen.”

Oslo laughs.

“That it is. As I am one with you. I hide, as I am one with you.”

The ground rumbles as the dark mass spins around, revealing the dragon’s neck lifting away from its resting body.

“*Tella!!*” Corea’s voice is heard, though she is not seen.

“*Tella!! I need you—I need you to save me!*”

Oslo quivers as he stands ready with his sword, “D—don’t be afraid! I’m here! I won’t let him hurt you!”

The dragon emits a rumbling laugh, “You have nothing, child. If you die by my hand you will surely die in that hospital bed. Right in front of the one you love. Why risk it, when you could have everything you’ve ever wanted here?”

A chill shivers through Oslo’s bones,

“There’s nothing left for me here. These dreams are nothing to me apart from my reality. In this place, breathing isn’t breathing. Running isn’t running. Loving isn’t loving. I miss my family. I miss my friends. I miss this field of wheat. I miss—”

Oslo looks to his left and right. Children’s voices laugh and scream. Hacking and slashing hay bales, throwing rocks at the tree giants, wooden stakes striking each other, embracing one another in victory.

Oslo turns back to face the dragon, “I may be young—But I’ve had a beautiful life. I wouldn’t change a thing. And those memories can be with Ocea in the real world, forever.”

Tears drip, drip, drip from Oslo’s face as he closes his eyes, splashing to the soil below. The sun is warm and blinding. The breeze is comforting.

“This is bliss...I feel like a child again.”

Oslo’s eyes open, “Demon, you brought me to the most wonderful place. Thank you.”

The dragon scoffs, spitting smoke out of his nostrils,

“This place is all but regret. *Corea* will never be saved by you!” He laughs, “Have you forgotten this memory? You’re the one getting saved here. Stupid, weak child.”

Oslo looks to his left, staring at a large hay bale in the side. From one end of it, a wooden stake pokes out like a horn. He hears the children laughing again. His chin quivers as he forces a smile. He grips his blade, hoping to return home.

“*This was my meadow—For her.*” Oslo thinks to himself.

He turns back, staring directly in the eyes of the dragon as he stoops his head in front of him,

“So if I die, I die in the real world?”

“That’s correct.”

“Just what are you, demon?”

The dragon exhales with a puff of smoke coming out of each nostril. He lifts his long neck higher into the sky. From the massive ball that is his body, two long arms stretch out, gripping the ground on either side of him. As the ground shakes, scales flake off of the dragon’s arms.

“When you’re dead, you’ll have no need to know.”

The large black mass cocks his head back while looking up to the sky. He lunges his neck upward, blasting fire from his belly, causing his neck to light up red as the flaming flurry rushes out his mouth. The smog covers the sky, shrouding them in darkness, with the sun peaking through ever so slightly.

Oslo desperately, “If you die with me, what’s the point in keeping me here? Why do you want me dead?”

Kanashibari unwinds the rest of his body, what was once a thick ball is now a long string of a serpent, slithering through the golden field toward Oslo.

“It’s what I was made for, boy.”

The dragon lunges face-first at Oslo, attempting to crush him under his snout. As Oslo attempts to jump out of the way, his bottom half gets caught on the edge of the dragon’s nose, he ricochets off and over a hay bale landing critically on his hip.

“Agh!” Oslo cries, turning to see the horrid thin eyes of Kanashibari staring back at him. The dragon draws a breath, and the back of his throat starts to glow.

“No!” Oslo shouts, he jumps just behind the hay bale, knowing it won’t be able to hold back fire for long.

The impending flame shoots with such a force, that it pushes and rolls the hay bale over Oslo as it lights a flame. He lies underneath the burning hay with his head and chest sticking out. He claws at the dirt in front of him as he reaches for his sword, feeling the heat of the fast-burning straw above him creep closer and closer.

His index finger brushes the end of the hilt, desperately stretching to grasp the hilt. The dragon slithers, digging his face into the back of the hay bale to crush Oslo, bursting the flame as he puffs air out of his snout. Every last drop of air is quickly being squeezed out of Oslo’s chest.

With one final push, he stretches out, pinching the end of the hilt with two of his fingers, pulling it toward him. As the dragon gargles more fire in his stomach, Oslo gets a hold of his sword.

He bends and twists, cutting the hay above. Embers fall on his face and hair, though he quickly brushes it off. Just as the fire is leaving the Kanashibari’s throat, Oslo runs directly toward him. He jumps, pressing his foot off of his snout, he turns his blade downward toward the beast.

But he’s too cunning. Swift and lanky claws grip around Oslo’s torso. The dragon lifts him high in the sky with one menacing eye in his face.

“There is nothing you can do here, boy. This is my dreamscape as much as it is yours.” Kanashibari scoffs.

Oslo, with blood dripping down his face, “You’re right, demon. This is my dreamscape. So we should have some fun with it—”

Oslo liquifies and slips in between the cracks in the dragon's fingers like running water. As he's about to drop from the dragon's claw, he reforms and hangs on to one finger, swinging his sword at it left and right.

The dragon screeches so sharp Oslo covers his ears as he falls back to the ground. The height in which he falls should kill him, but he crawls out of the crater he made from impact unfazed. He takes his sword with both of his hands,

“Focus. Focus. Water. Where was the water?”

Not a second later, “Got it.”

Oslo sinks. Though not far, as his back collides harshly against some stone at the bottom of the pool of water. He pauses for a moment, and just as his body starts to relax, he startles. He leaps out of the water only to hear screams and violent footsteps assault his eardrums.

He opens his eyes, “I know this place. I know this place.”

Oslo sits in the water fountain amid the town square. Surrounding him are townsfolk dropping instruments and produce, evacuating as far as the eye could see. A shadow grows overhead as Oslo tries his best to react, though the water soaking into his clothing weighs him down.

With a *crash* a great beast lands on the village, crushing several buildings. As fire surges toward Oslo, ankle-deep in the fountain, the water beneath is far too shallow to protect him. He lifts his blade, closing his eyes and turning his head as he braces himself to be burned to a crisp. Though, he isn't. He peers toward the dragon to see the relentless flame in his face, but the blade is absorbing every bit of fire.

“What the hell is this thing?” Oslo laughs. However, his excitement is cut short when he looks beyond the dwindling flame to see Jay, Destin, and Peter. They stand prepared yet helpless with their armor, swords, and bows.

“NO! No—Not you. I can't get you all wrapped up in this! Where are we safe?... Think. Think!”

“Ossy! Hey Ossy! You can't count on us! We haven't ever given up on you, and we're not gonna start now!” Jay yells, though his voice echoes from the sky rather than his mouth.

“No! You can't hurt him, he'll crush you!”

The dragon turns, seeing an opportunity to burn the three friends as they charge their bows toward him.

“Think—Think!” Oslo jumps out of the fountain, running as fast as he can to the dragon’s leg.

The dragon cocks his head back with his belly and neck emitting a red glow as smoke leaks out his nostrils.

Oslo lifts his blade as he’s advancing toward the dragon’s foot. He jumps. However, as he’s about to strike, Oslo and Kanashibari find themselves falling from the sky.

A numbing chill braces Oslo as the cold wind underneath him soon turns into an icy wall he starts sliding down the side of. From a wall, it slopes down to the base of the glacier. The dragon misses the tip of the peak, continuing to drop toward sea beside it. He’s falling limp, with his long lanky body drooping in the wind. Oslo keeps his eyes on the dark figure as he slides down the ice. His sword remains firmly in his hand as if there was some force keeping them together. A cliff with a slight lip approaches. Oslo readies himself to slide off of it with his momentum. Balling himself up and taking off the side, he launches toward the still-falling dragon.

Readying his blade for one final blow to the beast, it starts to shimmer in the bitter winter sky.

“You can’t control me any longer, Kanashibari.”

Oslo inches toward Kanashibari, seeing scales continuously flaking off of him. Paying no mind, he prepares himself for impact. His feet collide only moments before the magical sword inserts itself into the spine of the beast.

A beam of light emits from the point of impact just as Oslo and Kanashibari collide with the base of the glacier. Oslo is thrown away from the sword, sliding a few yards down the ice. He tries to grip the slick ground to stop himself, but has no success. He turns on his back, forcing his heels in the other direction, only causing him to spin out. Soon enough, he collides with a chunk of ice, snapping into his ribcage.

Powdered ice and snow cloud the area, disrupted by the collision. Oslo can see cracks, though they don't appear to go deep. He looks on, only seeing a silhouette of the dragon lying on the ground. Oslo stands, looking curiously at the figure waiting for any sign of movement. Before long he starts at a slow pace, turning into a cautious jog. As he gets closer to the dragon, he appears to be getting smaller, causing Oslo to believe he's not moving at all. But before long his feet crunch against more of Kanashibari's scales. Cautiously slowing his pace, a trail of scales grows more thick with each step. He looks around for some shimmer or glow from his sword to no avail.

A groan echoes ahead from Kanashibari's silhouette.

Oslo calls into the fog, "You never told me, what happens when you die? What if I kill you first?"

The much smaller figure unfolds. Though, not as a dragon. This figure is human-like. With legs and arms stretching out he lifts himself off the ground.

"A—Answer me!" A lump forms in Oslo's throat.

"I don't." A scratchy, beaten tone from Kanashibari.

"What do you mean you don't?"

The sinister voice struggles, "I never die, Ossy."

As Oslo slowly steps forward, the snow starts to settle, revealing the demon.

"You see?" The voice mellows. He speaks with a soft tone. The demon in front of Oslo is still dark, with a bright glowing stab wound in his torso. But as Oslo's eyes trace Kanashibari's figure to meet those pale dotted eyes, he's met with something more unsettling.

“Wh—What are you?” Oslo quivers as he stares into a reflection.

Kanashibari.

The demon stands assuming the form of Oslo as black scales drip off of him.

“It’s always been you, Ossy.”

The glacier starts to sink like quicksand, but Oslo is completely unfazed. All ice high and low melts, dissipating into a vast sea. The glimmering sword that Oslo once wielded likewise melts into the water, tainting it in a deep, dark, maroon color. With no attempt to stay afloat, Oslo and Kanashibari sink below with eyes still locked.

“Of course. Of course, it was you.” Oslo mumbles through the bubbles as the two sink further and further to a place where no light shines.

Oslo and Kanashibari sink into a pitch-black ocean.

The demon speaks softly, “The question remains—”

“Can you die to what’s inside? Can you kill a piece of you?”

All Oslo can see are two white dots and a sinister grin.

Kanashibari continues, “Like losing an arm or a leg. You won’t know how to live without me, Oslo. You won’t know how to survive.”

“Kill you? I stabbed you. Can you even die? This is all just a dream.”

“Dream or not, I am very real. I am the one consistent truth inside of you. The only voice that can connect your comatose consciousness to the real world.”

“You’re wrong. You’re not real—”

A golden thread trailing from the surface appears between the two, illuminating them in the darkness. They trace their eyes up the thin line above. They feel a current, slowly pulling them in towards the thread. That is until it combusts, blasting the water aside and completely blinding the two.

The entire sea opens from the center, dropping Oslo and the demon to the ground. Surrounded by walls of water, the two look to the sky where the beam of light is still emitting.

“Ossy.” The heavenly voice calls.

“Ocea—” Oslo coughs up water as he attempts to lift himself from the ground.

He calls, “Ocea!!”

“Please. Come back to me...”

Oslo drags his feet to the light. Tripping over himself, Kanashibari hurries to reach it first.

“No. No!” The demon begs.

Crawling, Oslo stretches to the light with every fiber of his right arm to his toes tugging. He feels the fibers in his forearms and biceps pull apart. A tear and a rip dismantle his reach, causing him to fall flat. He tries once more, lifting his left arm to the light, ripping his bones out of his sockets as his tendons dissolve into his bloodstream.

Just as his finger starts grazing the light, Kanashibari strikes the light with his claws.

“NO!” Oslo cries.

The beam of light cracks, snapping apart like twigs as the base turns blacker than black. The chain reaction trails up the beam a few inches at a time. Oslo stares at the dying light like watching a row of dominos falling to end his life.

The demon laughs maniacally, “She has no power over me, you child—”

Until a roar interrupts Kanashibari, the two look back at the sea walls crashing down on them. As they both run to the center looking for some hope of survival, the waves inevitably catch up to them, covering them in the deep sea yet again.

Oslo’s heart pounds. It pounds, it pounds, it *BANG* *BANG* pounds as he’s swept into a violent current. Though, the violence of the water soon turns into a warm bubbly current sweeping him up toward the surface, chasing the breaking light beam. It felt as though someone was holding on to him.

“Don’t worry *Tella*. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

The water spirit, *Corea*, sweeps Oslo through the deep dark sea to grasp onto the light that *Ocea*’s called down to him.

“Corea!” Oslo’s words bubble out from his cheeks amidst the water.

She winks to him, “Hold on tight—”

She grips onto Oslo’s sides, “I’ll find you in my meadow, dear prince!”

She launches Oslo from the sea as they reach the surface. He soars high, stretching out his right arm with what muscle he has left. Just when he’s about to grab a part of the beam, it turns black and snaps off. Though, he’s not out of momentum yet. With one final stretch, his right shoulder unhinges as he grasps the very end of the light beam, stopping any further dissipation of it.

For a moment, everything turns white. He floats in nothingness, until, his feet sink into a patch of grass. Birds chirp, the wind sings, and the old wooden shack he knows so well stands in front of him.

An overwhelming joy takes over Oslo as he smiles from cheek to cheek,

“I live here, don’t I?”

“Or at least, I did for quite some time.”

Oslo looks down at his hands. He finds his golden sword resting in the hand he grabbed the beam with. Though, instead of bloody maroon, he holds a bright golden blade that glistens in the light.

A brute voice whispers in Oslo's ear, "You'll never have her back. Over my dead body!"

Oslo turns from the shack to see the demon, Kanashibari, holding Corea captive in the field of grass. His dark claws grip her wrist tightly as her hand goes numb.

"What good is she to you?" Oslo demands.

Kanashibari, wearing the face of Oslo, whispers, "Of all the possibilities, Oslo, this is the one where you have a chance. The moment you take her back is the moment you will wake from your state. But I won't let that happen. Here is where she dies."

"Demon! If you're me, why make us suffer any longer? Why lock me here?"

"It's not so simple, Oslo. Turn, look into the house you once called home."

Oslo turns for a moment, seeing the empty wooden house with the fields of gold behind it.

He turns back, "What about it?"

"Inside that house, you had everything. You had your darling. You had your everything!" As Kanashibari kept talking, his sinister voice would fade away, sounding more and more like Oslo's own voice.

The demon continues, "You threw it all away, for what? A chance?"

Oslo steps slowly toward the demon as he grips Corea's wrist tighter.

She whimpers, "*Ossy*." Only it's not Corea.

Tears form in Oslo's eyes, he looks back to the demon,

"I threw it away for her."

Ocea lays limp in the arms of the demon. Oslo lifts his sword as the demon voice begs him,

"You cannot wake. You will not wake!"

Kanashibari, with the face of Oslo, puffs out his black scales as his white pupils pop out of his eye sockets and his neck elongates. His chest and throat glow a fiery red as he grips tighter and tighter on Ocea's wrist.

She cries.

Oslo looks to her and back to Kanashibari as he gargles the fire in his chest. He spits violently from his gapping mouth as Oslo pulls the sword to his left, avoiding the flame.

The fire strikes the shack behind Oslo, melting it to nothing, as he lifts his sword from his side. With one somber motion, the narrow blade crosses the neck of Kanashibari, ending the tormenting existence he had. Long and scaly, half dragon half man, his head drops to the ground. The eyes droop, the long serpent-like tongue lays in the grass, and a dark grey goo oozes from the end of his neck.

As for his body, it still stands, gripping onto Ocea's wrist.

Oslo stands frozen.

Ocea whimpers, "*O—Ossy?*"

He turns to her, being met with her worried eyes as tears trail down her cheeks. The glowing princess stands in awe, despite the claws that still grip her wrist.

She steps forward slowly, then all together tears away from the demon's shell, leaping to Oslo as he drops the sword. The golden blade explodes as it touches the ground, surrounding them in light.

"Oh my darling, Ossy. *You're here.*"

Oslo feels her tears drop down over his cheeks, mistaking them for his own. Staring at the bright white sky above him, Ocea whispers in his ear.

"*You did it. You're here.*"

The white sky dissolves into white foam tiles as he blinks all of his tears away. He feels the warm embrace of Ocea clinging in a way that she may never let go.

He turns to her, "Am I...Am I here?"

Their foreheads touch as Ocea slides her hands from his back to his cheeks.

"You're here, Ossy." She whimpers, "You're home."

The *drip, drip, drip* of Oslo's I.V. echoes behind him as the *bang* followed by *bang* of his door announces the entrance of the doctor and a couple of nurses. The day is a blur for Oslo as he gets reacquainted with the world around him. After some time, the doctors leave and the teary-eyed Ocea steps back into the room.

"Ossy!" She walks over grabbing his hand as she pulls a chair beside him.

His eyes are half open, "Ocea—It's really you this time? I'm not dreaming?"

"Of course, it's me, Ossy. It's your Ocea."

"That's a relief."

Ocea smiles as she squeezes Oslo's hand.

"I could feel you, wherever it is that I was."

Ocea leans in, "Where were you?"

He gazes blankly into nowhere, "I...Don't know. I can't remember."

"You must've been dreaming."

She takes her hand and places it on his face, rubbing his cheek with her thumb,

"I guess it doesn't matter how long the dream is, the mind always seems to forget."

"You're right. But somehow, I feel like you were there the whole time." Oslo turns and smiles at her.

Ocea's eyes well up, "I—I was, Ossy. I never left."

"Ocea—" Oslo takes her hand in his, pulling it to his chest. The happy expression he had in his face has gone and is replaced with panic.

"Yes, Ossy?"

"How old are we?"

Ocea leans to the back of her chair but doesn't hesitate long to answer the question.

"Thirty-eight."

The world stops.

She sniffles, "You are. Thirty-eight. I, thirty-seven. I'll be joining you shortly." She smiles as the skin around her eyes curls.

Oslo's grip on her hand weakens, "I—I see."

After moments of silence, Oslo asks, “Where’s my parents?”

Ocea clears her throat, her voice shakes, “Your mother is at home. It was three years ago, she had a stroke and has been bedridden ever since.”

Oslo begs, “N—No. No, no, no. We need to go to her, I need to see her at once! How can we get there? Can you drive us?”

“Haven’t been doing much of that—”

“What about my father? He can pick us up? We should call him! Does he know I’m awake? He called me, I remember now, I think he was just trying to call me—”

Oslo trails off as Ocea stares at him blankly. Nothing but tears pouring out of her eyes,

“Ossy.”

She quivers, “Your father passed away. That was also three years ago.”

Oslo falls back into his pillow. He wished he’d never woken up. He hears a whisper in his mind, taunting \ mistake.

“What mistake?” Oslo mumbles.

Ocea weeps, catching her breath she asks, “What do you mean?”

A tear drops down his face, “Waking up was a mistake.”

Ocea begs, “Ossy...Ossy.” Her face drops into her hands, “This is all my fault. Everything—We are here because of me!” She drops her head into her lap in agony.

Oslo, still coming to reality turns to her, “How could any of this be your fault?”

Her voice is muffled through her smuggled face, “I decided to go to the store, I decided to drive the car, I didn’t see the car coming. It’s *all* my fault!”

She lifts her head to meet eyes with Oslo’s,

“And I am the one who ignored you all those years. I am the one who convinced my family to go on a family trip again. I am the one who should’ve been in that coma! Not you! It couldn’t have been my parents who got sick while I was still with them. It was yours. And it’s not fair. It’s not. And it’s all my fault.”

She drops her head against the side rail of the bed,

“So this is what I do. I take the taxi every day for twenty years, begging and pleading something out there to wake you up. I come asking for nothing short of a miracle to happen, and it’s happened!” She looks up to Oslo, reaching for his hands,

“And I’m so grateful, and I’m so angry it took so long. Am I to feel half as bad if it was ten? Or twice as terrible if it was Forty?” She wipes her nose and eyes, “Of course I’m grateful, Ossa. But why did it have to be this way? Why was it me that caused you so much grief!”

Oslo pulls her in and holds her for a moment. He feels her body convulsing in sadness and rage as she huffs for air. He rubs her back, letting her feel at ease in his arms. He squeezes her once more, pulling her in front of him to look into her eyes.

“What’s happened has happened. And none of it could ever be your fault. Not one bit. This is just how life has decided to be for me—”

His reality still feels foggy and uncertain, though, what he is certain of is Ocea is not to blame for these tragedies.

“And I don’t really know what’s happening right now or what’s happened in the past. But Ocea, you’ve stayed by my side all this time and you don’t expect anything in return but for me to wake up. And I’m here now. You couldn’t have saved my dad—” His voice quakes as a tear falls down his face, “You couldn’t have protected my mom. But you...”

Oslo wipes his tears, wiping Ocea’s just after.

With his hands gently on her face, “But you did save me.”

Ocea’s eyes widen as her face sits between Oslo’s palms.

“Of course you did, Ocea. You’ve always saved me.”

Ocea leaps into Oslo’s arms, embracing him with everything she has.

Over the next few days Oslo’s monitored to make sure he makes a healthy recovery. As the sun sets Oslo and Ocea continue catching up, ignoring the numbers on the clock that sits on the counter opposite Oslo’s bed. She catches him up on her job and all the books she’s had to read. Very few of them meet her standard which she’ll send up to her boss for approval. After their green-lit, she’ll help make edits alongside the writer to meet the publisher’s standard.

“I can’t tell you the dread I face when working through some of these books. And I hate to admit it, but some of them, like the HORSE HEAD one, I won’t even get passed

the second chapter before I send a gentle rejection letter.” Ocea laughs as her cheeks turn red.

“You make it that far?” Oslo laughs, “I wouldn’t even make it passed the second page if they’re as bad as the horse head story!”

As they continue, he looks into Ocea’s eyes and can’t help but smile. As they so effortlessly catch up, he can’t help but feel a pit of sadness in his chest. She has so much to share. She’s had so much life to live. But Oslo can’t even remember the dreams he spent most of his life in.

He continues to look in her eyes. He can tell she’s aged, by no means in a bad way. He sees slight wrinkles around her eyes. Her beautiful blonde hair has some darker browns at the roots now. Her face shape is stronger, less rounded. But her eyes, shine just as beautiful as he remembered.

“Oh, Ocea, It’s almost three in the morning! Shouldn’t you be getting home?”

She smirks as she leans back in her chair, “Welp, I’ve made camp of this place the past few years. I’m sure they won’t mind another night. I don’t even know if taxis are out at this time anyways.”

“Do you always take a taxi? Gets expensive doesn’t it?”

Ocea picks at her nails, “Well I don’t do much driving these days... Ya know, don’t have a car anyways. So the cost kinda makes up for itself.” She folds her hands together with a smile.

As Oslo opens his mouth to ask more questions he only lets out a short ‘uh’ before he remembers,

“Of course. I’m sorry.”

“Ossy, it’s okay. I live in uptown, in an apartment so I can walk everywhere I need to. This hospital is only a short distance from the city, so if I *really* wanted to walk I could. I’ve only done that a handful of times.”

The two sit for a moment collecting themselves.

Oslo lays his head back on the pillow looking up to the ceiling,

“I still can’t believe it. Twenty years.” His chin briefly quivers before he lets out a short and sad laugh, “I wasn’t even that old when it happened. I don’t even know what twenty years feels like—”

Ocea grabs his hand as he stops himself from continuing. He can feel her grief without even looking at her. Knowing how awful she feels as is, Oslo keeps himself together and saves his thoughts.

He turns to her, “Maybe we should get some rest.”

She squeezes his hand twice, “You’re right.”

He clears his throat, looking back towards the ceiling nervously, “I—I could probably end up staying up all night talking with you.”

Ocea smiles, “Me too, Ossy. There’s so much to catch up on. *Luckily—*” She stands, turning behind her to make her make-shift bed. “—we have the rest of our lives to do so.”

With Ocea’s back turned, Oslo looks at her shuffling around some paper-thin blankets and a square pillow over a short plastic-y bench. He wells up inside, overwhelmed with gratitude. Overwhelmed with sorrow.

“How could I have left her like this for so long.”

Suddenly, a moment of familiarity brushes through his mind.

“Hold on—I see it. I can see something.”

A memory flashes through his mind. He can’t tell if it was reality or a dream. All he can recall is Ocea’s back to him, just like this.

“Washing dishes. That’s what she’s doing. I’m at a table. Where were we?”

The sound of running water circles around his eardrums. The wind blows all around him as his hair flies left and right.

“...Don’t forget the girl in the meadow...” The words slip out of Oslo’s mouth.

Ocea turns, shocked, “What?”

Oslo appears just as shocked, “W-what?”

“What did you just say?” She steps toward his bedside.

“I—I dunno, something just came to mind just then.”

Ocea looks desperately at Oslo, “Yes, yes—What was it?”

He starts, “Don’t forget—” Before Ocea cuts him off.

“The girl in the meadow.” She reaches into her bag that sits by her chair.

She pulls out a two-inch binder so full the binding rings are about to pop out. She opens it up, flipping back and forth between several pages before she lands on the precise sentence she's looking for.

She passes the binder to Oslo, "Look!"

He leans in reading the exact words he just spoke, "...Don't forget...The girl in the meadow..."

He looks up at her, "Ocea, what is this?"

Ocea snuffles, "It's the story I've been working on for... Well, basically all my life. I've been working on it, reading it to you every once in a while."

As the book sits in Oslo's lap, Ocea flips it back to the front page, pointing at the title in a large elegant font.

Oslo reads aloud, "Corea and the Deep Dark Meadow."

"It's named after Oslo and the Deep—Well you know, it's named after what you're named after."

The room is silent for a moment.

"Ocea, I don't know what to say. This is—" His throat tightens, with a burning surge down to his chest, "This is everything."

Ocea embraces him, "You are everything."

The two drip, drip, drip their tears onto one another as they continuously embrace, ceasing to let go.

"Ossy, I wanted to give you the first iteration of this story the day everything happened..." Ocea pulls away, sliding her hands down to his. "I was just so... stupid and teenage girl anxious. But also it was so bad back then. I've maybe made it partially better in twenty years..."

"Ocea, it's perfect!"

"You haven't even read it yet, dummy!" She laughs.

Oslo laughs with her, "I know but I already know it's perfect. And twenty years Ocea, you work with a publisher, you need to get this out there!"

She closes up the binder, packing it back in her bag, "It's still not done yet...I can never get the ending right. I've written dozens of iterations at this point."

"I'll tell you the ending!" Oslo sits up.

Ocea laughs, “Is that so? Let’s hear it.”

“Prince Tella knows he can’t live for anyone or anything else. He takes up his sword once more, only to bury it in the soil of the meadow, leaving behind a world of danger and corruption. He steps foot in the presence of Corea, only to never leave her sight until the day he dies.”

Ocea leans in, “OSSY!” She laughs hysterically, “Why was that *so good!*”

“I dunno, just thinking off the top of my head!”

She suddenly stops laughing as her eyes widen at Oslo, “*Wait*—Prince Tella? How did you know?”

Oslo laughs as he shakes his head, “Guess I wasn’t so out of it after all!”

The two laugh on. The clock crept toward four A.M. before they decided to call it a night, knowing they had all the time in the world tomorrow.

Through the lens of the hospital windows as the moon rays shine on, there Oslo and Ocea lay, hand in hand.