

- Chapter One -

Thunder rumbled and lightning crashed as rain poured down into the mountain pass, and threatened to wash away the earth itself. A lone figure hurried forth over broken trees and troublesome rocks. A strong gust of wind blew past and swept the dark hood from his face. It revealed the face of a boy, about mid-teens, with startling white hair, and eyes that gradually changed colour; first light blue, then dark blue, then purple, then dark red, then red, all the way through to green. The boy quickly pulled the heavy hood firmly back over his head and held it in place against the screaming wind. The very mountains themselves seemed to bend down to take a closer look at the boy, as he struggled against the lashing rain.

The pass soon ended and the ground began to slope gradually upwards. The boy continued on, navigating his way through the increasingly treacherous terrain. He was a young boy, only fifteen years of age, but his gait and gaze showed he already carried burden enough to last a man into his old age. His freezing legs trembling beneath him, the boy continued up the slope, though it grew steeper and slipperier with every shaking step. Suddenly his right ankle twisted beneath him and gave way causing him to fall onto the mud slick ground with a sickening crunch.

Grabbing onto small shrubs and grass that grew up the slope to stop himself from sliding back down to the bottom, he began pulling himself along, scrabbling for more plants and grass to pull himself up the steep terrain.

After a long struggle, pulling himself up the ever-steepening mountainside, he came across a cave that seemed to be cut into the very side of the mountain.

Hauling himself into the cave mouth, the boy lay still on the floor for a moment, startled to find that he could almost not hear the storm any more. Sopping wet and every pore clogged with mud, the boy decided that he was just very lucky, and that he should rest here for a while. Sitting up slowly, spots of light danced before his eyes before fading into nothing. Looking around himself, he noted that he could see the back wall of the cave from where he was sitting, it was slightly rounded and there was a scorched mark on the floor near to it. The cave was shaped a bit like a squashed sphere, its walls rough but circular and

rounded, and its ceiling relatively flat but it rounded upwards a little.

He crawled over to one of the sidewalls and pulled himself up. He made to step on his right foot, but it crumpled and he found himself on the ground again. The boy pulled the boot from the offending foot, before slowly peeled off his mud caked sock and laid it out on the dry stone floor next to his boot. He then pulled his saturated cloak off his shoulders and laid it out next to his sock and boot, water dribbling continuously from its woollen folds. Under his navy blue cloak, he was wearing baggy pants, of the same colour, that were bound from his knee down to his ankle in blue cloth. On his feet he wore brown leather boots and coarse grey socks, the right pair of which were drying currently. On his upper body, he wore a baggy shirt of similar style to his trousers that were bound from his elbow to his wrist and around his waist in the same type of blue cloth. His white hair seemed to shine silver in the moonlight, but it was wet, plastered to his head, like the fur on a drowned cat, and the mystical effect was lost. Over his shoulder there was slung a large leather bag, not unlike a sack with handles, it had no obvious seam, but was more of an organic and continuous shape.

The boy cursed his own stupidity at being capable of procuring such a troublesome injury, and scowled as he glanced down on it; it was an angry red and had already swollen so that it would not fit back into his boot.

"How silly this is." he muttered to himself. "Such an easily preventable wound too." He thought for a moment before saying, "I wonder if anyone would notice if I used a bit of," he cleared his throat, "luck. To help it heal faster." His ankle was twisted, swollen and possibly broken. Clenching his hands together he warmed his hands by blowing onto them. Looking back down at his continuously swelling ankle, the boy prodded it gingerly. He snatched back his hand swiftly as sharp and slicing pain ran instantly through his body. Gritting his teeth, the boy felt around to see if any bones were broken, his face pulled in a pained grimace as his ankle twitched and shivered in pain. "No." he murmured gratefully. "No need for any extra luck today."

Upon finding nothing broken, to his intense relief, and now in a cold sweat, he shuffled over to the back wall of the cave where its last inhabitant had left a pile of split wood and kindling. He picked up several stout sticks from the pile and unwound some

of his leg bindings, down near his ankles. He laid the sticks parallel to his ankle, then rewound the bandages around his ankle and the sticks, creating a splint. The boy smiled gratefully for the unexpected find, he felt warm and safe in this little isolated cave, almost like a baby duckling huddled under its mother's wings. Setting up a small fire, he stoked it until it gave off enough warmth. Shuffling over to lay his wet clothes on the ground next to the fire, the boy was asleep long before they dried.

- Chapter Two -

A lady stood in the distance, surrounded by white and wearing a white dress, her long blonde hair flowing gently down her back. The boy stood up from sitting on the ground and walked slowly towards her, his ankle had somehow stopped hurting, but even if it had still been hurting he wouldn't care, he had to get to that lady. Before he could go a step further, she slowly turned around. "Faye," The boy stopped in his tracks as though frozen; how did she know his old name?

"Come." as though an invisible force pushed him from behind, Faye lurched forward and began walking towards her again, faster this time. Stumbling over the ground, Faye walked faster and faster, until he broke into a run, racing towards the lady. Before he could reach her she turned to face him. Faye stopped suddenly, and was sent sprawling across the ground at her feet. Looking up at her, Faye gasped in horror. She was dead, her guts pouring forth from her stomach and her face mutilated by scars and dents. She smiled, twisting her broken face into a horrifying expression. Faye gasped out a choked scream and scrabbled backwards, noticing now that they were both standing atop a mountain of bloody bones. The lady held out her hands, beckoning to him, but Faye hurried backwards so fast he was sent tumbling backwards down the hill of carnage, over and over, head over heels. Eventually he came to a rest on his back staring at the sky. Suddenly the dead ladies face loomed over him and he screamed.

Faye jerked up, a cold sweat breaking out across his skin, his breath coming in gasps and the remnants of the scream on his lips. He looked around himself; the cave was very dark save for the dwindling flames of the campfire in front of him. Faye rubbed his face and sighed "It was just a dream..." As he closed his eyes, the ladies face flashed in front of his eyes again and he gasped in panic, adrenaline pulsing through his veins, his eyes darting back and forth in their sockets. What had changed? Something had changed, he could tell. Glancing frantically around, he noticed a dark humped shape at the entrance to the cave. It stirred and the whites of eyes turned towards him. Gasping in shock, Faye shuffled backwards as fast as he could, towards the back of the cave. Almost there, he choked in pain; he had forgotten about his ankle.

"Get away from me!" cried Faye, stricken with terror left from his dream. "Wait!" said the figure, "It's okay! I won't hurt you!" It stood up and walked towards the ring of light cast out by the the campfire. Faye pressed himself against the wall and his breathing grew faster and faster. The figure stopped at the edge of the light and sat down. Faye shut his eyes as he drew a shuddering breath. "Calm down," said the figure, "please. I won't hurt you." But Faye couldn't hear their words, all he could hear was the breathing of the figure, and the terror pulsing through his veins. He dug his fingers into the dirt of the floor, down until they were cut and bleeding from digging into the rock of the cave floor. "You don't need to be scared, you know." said the figure. "You're in my cave, after all." Spots of light popped in front of Faye's eyes and he slowly slid down the wall to the floor, unconscious from lack of oxygen. Slowly, the figure crawled forwards slowly into the light revealing it's face. She was a young girl, about eleven to thirteen years old, and she looked grubby and smelly, like she had been living in a cave for a long time, which, she probably had because she had declared that it was her cave. Faye breathed slowly and softly, looking at her on an angle, his eyes closing. The girl got up and walked over to Faye. She bent down and felt his forehead with her soft, pale hand. The girl picked up Faye's cloak and wrapped him up in it next to the fire. The girl looked through his bag for ingredients and soon Faye was lying next to the fire wrapped in his cloak and with a steaming infusion of elderflower waiting for when he woke up. The girl sat silently for a while before speaking; "My name is Danielle," she said to Faye as he slept, "and I will tell you why I live here, maybe you will remember when you wake up..."

- Chapter Three -

Faye woke with the morning sun. He sat up immediately, the fuzzy remnants of last night events floating lazily through his head. He looked around and quickly took in the following happenings; A young girl, roughly his own age, was sitting by the fire skinning a dead rabbit, and outside it had stopped raining and the sun was shining down into the valley and through the cave entrance.

The girl Danielle looked over at him and smiled. "I am glad you have woken up so early, I made you a yarrow and elderberry flower infusion to help with your fever and I was about to cook this rabbit." Faye put his hand to his head as the bright light stung his eyes and hurt his head. Groaning, he lay back down on his cloak, his eyes tightly shut. "Who are you?" the clarity of his voice surprised even himself as it echoed around the small cave. Danielle laughed and came over to sit next to him.

"I guess I should explain that, shouldn't I? My name is Danielle," she said, "And I have been living in these mountains since I was eight years old." Faye opened his eyes in surprise and looked at her face; it was a pretty face, light freckles over a pretty nose, wildly curly black hair fell on either side and continued all the way down to her waist. Danielle looked at him, her hands crossed awkwardly over her chest. "I know that look; what's a little girl like you doing living in some desolate mountains like these, right?" Faye nodded, "That's somewhat what I was thinking, yes. But in all curiosity, how did you come to live here?" Danielle sighed and flopped down to lie beside him. "You know about Baron Jendak, right?" she asked, turning her head to look Faye in the eye, on her face a look of dislike at the name. Faye nodded his head slowly, "Yes... I have heard of him." Danielle clenched her fists; "He killed my parents and left me for dead." Faye stared at her in wonderment, raising himself up slowly and carefully, he rested his back against the cave wall, and Danielle shuffled up with him.

"How old were you?" Faye asked. "I had just turned eight," said Danielle, "And that was six years ago." Faye scrutinised her again, thinking. "Then you are fourteen. The same age as me." Danielle met his gaze, her head cocked, and she laughed suddenly, "I guess so." Faye looked down at his lap. He didn't

know what to say to that, she had obviously been through so much and he truly could never understand what that felt like. "I'm sorry." said Faye, his head still bowed, "Sorry for what has happened to you." He raised his head and saw that Danielle was looking down into the fire, a sad smile on her face. She jerked her head up quickly when she noticed he was watching her, her expression one of surprise. Faye laughed and Danielle grinned at him. "Sorry if I'm so awkward." she said rummaging through her scruffy old rucksack, "I have been alone for six years, not many people come across these mountains anymore." Faye smiled, "No-one except me." Danielle laughed, her voice echoing around the cave. "No-one except you." she agreed.

- Chapter Four -

The maimed woman was coming again, her bloody hands raking at the air before her. And screaming. Her scream permeating every orifice of Faye's body. Shaking with terror, he curled his hands around his ears, trying to block out the noise, but it was no good, it broke into his mind and made him cry out in agony. Falling onto his back, he wrapped both his arms around his head, blocking his ears and eyes completely. Suddenly, Faye noticed the screaming had stopped.

Unwrapping his arms from his head, Faye felt a soft touch on his forehead, as light as a butterfly's wings. Opening his eyes, Faye's eyes were overwhelmed by the light that filled the cave. "You're awake!" exclaimed Danielle, flustered.

Sitting up, a damp cloth slid off Faye's forehead and into his lap. "You were having a bad dream, again." Danielle said. "You were rolling around and yelling like you were in pain." Faye rubbed his eyes, blinking at the still bright light. "Did I wake you?" he asked shakily, trying to sound more together than he actually was. He held out the cloth, and Danielle took it, unfolding it and laying it on the ground to dry.

It was early morning but Danielle had already compiled a bundle of dead rabbits, a polecat and a separate bunch of yams for them to eat. "Not exactly," said Danielle, "I don't sleep very well, so I spent the night making sure you didn't roll yourself out of the cave." she made a wry little smile, but it dissipated soon after it was created. "Are you sure you are all right?" she asked tentatively. Faye shook himself slightly, "I should be okay. I need to continue on my way as soon as possible."

He sat on his knees, careful to rest his weight on his uninjured ankle, and rolled up his blanket, shuffling over to his bag. Almost there, he wavered, light popping in front of his eyes. Breathing heavily he sat still for a moment as the pain and light subsided. "Faye?" Danielle sounded worried. "What happened?" Faye shook his head, "It's nothing. Just a slight dizzy spell, I'll be fine." he gave her a reassuring smile and finished off packing his things into his bag. "Thank you for helping me these past two days." Faye said to her as he tentatively stepped onto his damaged ankle. "Hang on!" exclaimed Danielle. "Where are you going?" She grasped Faye by the shoulder, turning him toward her and making him wince as he put too much weight on his

ankle. "Why do you have to leave so soon?" Faye smiled kindly at her, "I appreciate your help, really I do, but I have to go." "You're not ready to leave yet!" exclaimed Danielle. "You can hardly walk by yourself! Where do you have to go in such a hurry?" Faye breathed a deep breath and stood up shakily. "I am on a," he faltered, "a journey, I'm looking for something." "A journey that sends you into mountains as empty as these?" said Danielle incredulously. Faye scratched his ear uncomfortably. "Come on," said Danielle, "You can tell me. I mean, seriously, whom am I going to tell?" she spread her arms to take in the desolate mountains and empty cave. Faye laughed. "I guess you're right," he said.

Faye raised his hand, palm pointing towards the ceiling, and clicked his other hand on top of it. A bright flame jumped from his fingers and landed on his palm, dancing back and forth across his palm. Danielle stepped backwards in fright and Faye closed his hand, snuffing out the flame. "What are you?" asked Danielle, her face full of incredulity and a poorly disguised fear. Faye smiled sadly and sighed. "I am unwanted." he said dejectedly. "A wolf in a flock of sheep." Unwrapping it's bindings, he showed her his right wrist. It was emblazoned with a large decorative scar in the shape of a spiked circle with a cross in it. "Do you know what this means?" asked Faye. Danielle shrank from it as though it was poisoned. "No." she said. "Tell me." Faye wrapped his wrist up again. "It means that I do not exist. I am a *hyaktei* or shadow walker. Unnoticed and unobserved, the moment I was born I was banished to walk in the shadows of civilization as a monster. A freak. This was burned into my skin the week I was born." Faye's shoulders seemed to sink and a single tear ran down his cheek and dripped down onto his shirt. Danielle laid a tentative hand on his shoulder, and squeezed it. "What kind of parents could do this to their own child?" she asked incredulously. Faye looked at her, his eyes burning with an inner pain. "As soon as I was born," he said, "they threw me down a well." Danielle drew in a sharp breath and put her hands to her mouth. "How could they do that?" she asked again, her voice threatening to be choked by her feelings. "And how did you survive?" "I was so covered in flames that I dried up the whole well." he said ruefully "I don't blame them. After all, who would want to responsible for bringing a demon into the world?"

- Chapter Five -

Danielle and Faye made their way steadily through the mountain pass. They started out early in the morning as frost still clung to the grass and they reached the end of it by the time the sun was at it's highest.

As they walked out of the cover of the trees, Danielle looked back for a moment, hesitant. Faye leaned on his staff he had scavenged and waited. Those mountains had been her home for almost her whole life. Faye walked over to Danielle and put a hand on her shoulder. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked, softly. Danielle gripped her hands into fists and turned away from the mountains. "I'm sure," she said, firmly.

They walked for the rest of the day, and by the time it was dark they came upon a small town. A faded carved sign told them it's name; Brenn. At the worn, old inn the landlady greeted them warmly. When Faye pulled a small pouch of gold pieces out of his bag and set it onto the counter to pay for their stay, Danielle gasped in awe. Faye was confused momentarily before remembering that Danielle's parents had been farmers, and that they probably didn't have much money at all, let alone pouches of gold pieces. Faye paid for a room with two beds and they retired for the night.

The room was dark, with a small chandelier in the centre of the ceiling. The floor was covered in moth eaten carpets that would have once been grand and colourful, and the walls and ceiling were of a beautiful dark wood, that from years of wear and tear had a layer of scratches and scuffmarks over it. As Faye and Danielle settled down, Faye removed his boot and repeated his daily ritual of changing his bandages on his ankle. The swelling had gone down quite a bit and so Faye wouldn't need to put as many bandages on to hold it in place. He let it relax without its restraints while they rested.

Danielle sorted out her belongings and, after giving Faye a quiet smile, wrapped herself in a cocoon of blankets and drifted off to sleep. Faye returned the smile reluctantly, finding the expression strange on his face, and stared out the slightly foggy window, past the tree line of the forest behind and up at the silently rising moon.