

"Be careful Sval! It's a long way down from there!"

The words ring out hopelessly to a crowd of bright eyes and carefree hearts as a little Sval Ferðastwesfv, no more than ten summers old wraps his legs around a branch and waves to the kit below him. A few struggled to get a good grasp of the trunk while others have stopped at only the first few branches, but not little Sval. Despite all his mothers warnings he wants to go to the top of the tree, to see what all he can see beyond the horizon line. "What can you see? Tell us!" Another shouts, red pigtails bouncing as she jumps around the tree, spurring the others to join her in their dance. "Tell us, tell us!" It's a whirlwind of laughter and excitement, none of the children have ever seen beyond the peaks of the mountains in their village, and rarely do the trees ever grow tall enough but this one holds the perfect opportunity for any brave enough to take on the challenge. Off in the distance, a handful of women tend to a fire, hot stew bubbling for growing kit who have played to their hearts content to grow big and strong, so that one day they can nurture and defend these lands same as their guardians do.

The branches creak and groan under the boy's weight, small twigs shaking off with pine needles as proof of progress. The wind begins to gently pick up, the sounds of branches swaying bringing excitement to the children *far* below. They can hear it, *fjöll kalla*, the mountains call! It's speaking to them through the needles and the gusts, working them further into their frenzy, those on the ground singing while the ones who remain on the stream bounce on their branches to the rhythm. The mountain speaks to us, it's rooting for us! Rooting for *you* Sval! Tell us, tell us what you hear! What you see!

But Sval doesn't hear *anything*, nothing but the splintering of wood as he kicks off from one branch and wraps his arms around the next and... muffled chanting beneath him? There's so much pressure in his ears, drowning out the world now, and his heart is climbing its way into his throat faster than he can ascend this tree. They're all cheering about what the wind told them, but little Sval can't hear it. He hasn't yet, but maybe when he crests this tree he finally will! One more branch, one more yalm and he's at the top! All he has to do is stand up and look out over the Skatay, letting the land's word wash over him.

Nothing,

Just the howl of wind.

His body straightens out as he peaks his head over the top of the tree, and catches a glimpse of the secret world beyond those slate walls. An ocean, impossibly wide, not frozen, but glowing a radiant orange from the sun sinking beneath its depths.

Craaaaaaack

The branch snaps under the weight of a boy too big and up too high. It's a quick fall, Sval's descent slowed only by the branches that served as stepping stones turning to shrapnel under his frame, all coming to a sudden end when Sval's face connects with the snow and dirt. He springs up fast, kit are durable when they're at that age, but where he feels no pain-*well maybe a little pain*, but no fear, the others begin to well up with tears and scream in terror. *What's wrong?* He looks down at himself and watches the crimson flow, a puddle growing quickly as he cups the front of his face. The run back is accompanied by the shrieks and sobs until the adults, driven to action by maternal instinct, come to tend to poor little Sval. His nose bloodied, cracked into an unnatural direction, and tears streaming down his face for reasons he's not sure why. It wasn't the fall that was scary, why's he crying?

Stone crumbles and chips away underneath leather wrapped feet while the cracks in the side of the cliff make for a good place for bloodied fingers to dig into. A clump of snow, knocked loose from the other boy above him, lands on the back of Sval's neck and sends chills through his body.

"Sorry Sval, I didn't mean to-

"Stop that! You boys won't be able to control the circumstances you climb in. *When* yes, but not what happens during. He needs to be fine with the snow."

Sval's only fourteen summers old now, but he's already begun to learn just how demanding this life is. Ever since they split him from a majority of his friends, he, as well as ten other boys, have begun the arduous training to become Wood-Warders, defenders of the sacred ranges of trees between their ranges and the jungles to the south. It's been months of seemingly endless hikes, hunts, sleeping without shelter or fire, all to toughen the soul and harden the spirit. Tonight, an ascent up the side of a cliff to the plateau atop. There will be a rare reward, a filling meal provided by the elders and stories of the stars, how to navigate by them, how they guide one in body and in spirit. A night of respite and nourishment for these weary souls.

"C'mon now Ferðastwesfv, you're wasting energy standing on the side of the rock." A voice chided, worn with decades of experience and minimal patience waits at a relief a few dozen yalms further. It would hardly mark three quarters of the way up, but it would serve as a small relief for his arms and legs.

"I'm...trying, stop talking asshole.." His fingers curl and claw for grip against the shards of stone as a leg hikes up onto another stone. It takes almost everything he has in the tank, but by no one's will but his own he reaches the clearance, pulling himself up and rolling across to lay on his back while he fights for a breath. The air is so thin up here and the chill so cold, as if every breath taken only takes more from him than it gives.

"Fjalar! You're holding us all up! Hurry up or we're leaving you behind." The voice echoes out once more, stealing Sval's moment of respite from him.

"I...I can't! It's too much, I can't take it anymore!" There's sobs, distorted by the sounds of the wind cutting through the stone and urging Sval to crane his head over the side. Poor Fjalar, with bloodied knuckles and a face flush with tears, is stuck in the same spot Sval found issue with. His knees quake, and with them his arms. Amber eyes that hid a kind mind with an even more gentle heart now burn with desperation and fear. His arms hurt, his body aches, he doesn't want to do this anymore he can't-

"Please Fjalar! You can do it, take my hand! Just a little further!" Sval cries out into the near endless abyss on the side of the cliff, flinging his arm wide over the edge as a sign of hope, a way he can help, a way he can save-

"Stop that Sval! He has to do this alone! If he has to rely on you then he will never survive on his own!" The voice bombards Sval as calloused hands fight to drag him away from the edge. He kicks, he screams, he almost throws himself off of the edge himself hoping to get close enough to help Fjalar but his vision goes narrow, the height finally getting to him. *He can't see the ground.* Only a ring of fog they're all above. His eyes stare through Fjalar, all the way to the earth an impossible distance away, helpless for what comes next.

A crack of stone, a gasp for air.
Fjalar falls past the view of the fog.

Sval screams. He screams for an eternity, kicking and begging to go back down and save his friend.

"...You won't find him Ferðastwesfv, it's a long way down." *Not in any way he hopes.*

The crackle of fire accompanies stories of the guiding lights in the sky, how old gods put them there to help us find our ways in times of need. But if they were there, why couldn't they help now. Two bowls of food rest beside a solitary child far away from the others, untouched and long since gone cold. Sval laid on the side of the cliff, hand still hanging off the side, hoping maybe Fjalar would grab it and pull himself up. Then they could be together again. He could look into those eyes once again and feel something worth fighting for. They shared so much time together, they were the oddest of pairs yet the best of friends, they even kis-

Forget it.

The embers of the campfire dance past him, the warmth of their glow slowly getting lost in the void beneath. Amber flits of life in the dark- a light in the dark.

He's gone now.

The growl of the motor is possibly the only thing that makes Iljax feel alive anymore, it rattles him to his core and reverberates in his chest as he soars through the sky. The Manacutters fast, this one at least, a mean machine built for speed and maneuverability, fueled by a steady stream of ceruleum and adrenaline. The cockpit is small, yet sacred, the closest thing he has to finding the divine in anything. Up here there's no more busywork, no tax forms, no customer service or scorned flings looking for revenge. Up here, Iljax is free to escape it all, at his altar of steel amongst cumulus clouds. Inside, a collection of trinkets to keep Iljax's mind at ease, offerings to himself for a safe return.

Party beads from a night in town, a pack of Luckies, the last cigarette from a variety of previous packs combined into one collection, a collage of photographs of friends to remind him what waits for him back on the ground, but despite all he feels the call of the beyond. The looming acceptance that if anything were to happen from heaven on high, he would be powerless to stop it.

BangBangBANG-Thunk The motor sputters and kicks, gauges spiraling out of control as pressure slips from the combustion engine. Eyes glance over the side, watching the depth of view tighten and feeling his focus quickly turn into a haze. He may be eighty-six now, but he's such a long way up, and it's such a long way down. He could fight this, he has every reason to, to pull back on the sticks and put her down gently...but why. If this was how he was supposed to go...that's okay. He's alone, off in the middle of nowhere flying his little circles, same as he's always been, alone, and going nowhere. The hands pull from the controls with the gentleness reserved for the most intimate of embraces and his eyes shut out the world. There's nothing but the hiss of wind as the altitude slips, at this rate he wouldn't even know when he'd make impact, just that the result would be definitive. *Yeah, that's an okay way to go-* the motor sputters back to life with the kickback of some alchemical clog being fired out of the exhaust and the growling of machinery bringing with it the beeps of altitude alarms, their incessant droning on and on returning Iljax's hands to the controls. If he's going to go out, he'd prefer to be at peace, and out of his control. The sticks draw back, the beeping stops. Iljax still flies from heaven on high, a silent prayer uttered that maybe next time he isn't so lucky.

Iljax is climbing again, same as he ever was. He's fourteen again, has he always been fourteen? Pieces of shale cut into his fingers and his toes grow numb with every step. He's been climbing for what feels like days, chasing after the sun and murmurs of voices above yet still the peak is nowhere in sight. "Sval! You're holding us all up! Hurry up or we're leaving you behind." It booms out beyond the clouds from worn vocal cords, the weight of the words forcing his grasp against the stone to cut deeper and deeper into his fingers. *This-this isn't how this went right?* The voices slip further and further away as the night encroaches, swallowing Iljax whole in its oppressiveness. *This mountain*

never ends, you can't do it. He reaches up for a stone and it crumbles in his grasp, and with it his descent begins. Impossibly fast, chest pounding, gut wrenching fear and dread. He watches the ground hurtle closer and closer, he's almost there, *he's going to die-*

Iljax jolts awake to a cold sweat and his stomach in a knot. He's...in a dark room, Ishgardian, the silhouette of a woman beside him in the bed. Her form gently rises and lowers, lost in the tender embrace of deep sleep as Iljax gets up from the bed and wanders to the nearby balcony. Hands press against the mahogany of the door as it welcomes Iljax to pale white moonlight and cold stone beneath him outside. It's a full moon tonight, its glow painting shadows all across Ishgard with no regard to who wants them or not. His arms lean against the handrail and go through his hair, fishing for relief they cannot find tucked into braids and sweat, searching for something to make him remind him he's still alive. Hands push him up into the railing and with shaky legs Iljax comes to stand fully at the edge of the balcony. His toes curl against the stone as his eyes look across the horizon line of buildings before settling on the alley below. It's several floors away, to even more oppressive stonework and the roofs of market stalls. He feels his vision twist once more, what was fifty yalms now feels like five hundred. The pressure builds in his ears, throwing his center of balance into a downward spiral. And at the bottom of the stone he swears he sees two eyes, a golden amber and full of fear. They're so afraid, so *alone*..they beckon to Iljax every time he's looking down from heaven on high. And every time Iljax yearns to find out what's at the bottom of the descent, what waits for him down there, what *he* felt. Was he scared to know it was about to happen, did he find peace that he was free from hell on earth, is it as scary to fall from that high as everyone makes it seem? Go ahead Iljax, put your finger on the trigger. See how it makes you feel alive.

There's a creak of wood from behind him, his head jerking back to make sure nobody's watching him, nobody can see him like this. They can't know he wants *this*. His foot slips off the edge, forcing his body to straddle the railing with a slam. Nothing, nobody, his mind playing tricks on him once again. His gaze creeps its way back off the ledge, fifty yalms high. Be careful Iljax, it's such a

Long

Way

Down.