

Landslide Part Two -

The weather was not right for mountaineering. It was too slick, the rains had come too early. The temperatures were warm enough to make it wet, to melt the snow on the higher altitudes, but cold enough to easily seep into Fletcher's hastily assembled hiking gear. He didn't care, though. He had a mission, to reach the far mountain, the one that the old woman had pointed to, where the fates lived.

His rage kept him warm, or so he told himself, even as he shivered and the tips of his fingers and toes grew horribly pale and bloodless. But he was not about to give up so easily. The fates had to answer for their negligence. Thankfully, he came from a people who were better suited to exposure to the elements. He managed to keep himself full with scrawny mountain hare and melted snow.

On the seventh day of his trek, he reached the sheer face of the mountain of the fates. What would he find there, he wondered as he scabbled upon the rock. Would he find a trio of old women, like some tales said? Or perhaps a gathering of spiders, their webs kept only for themselves instead of the poor village below?

His wonderings continued, until his arms ached and his breath grew shallow in the thin air.

He climbed, and climbed and climbed, through the upper mist that surrounded the mountain peak. He could barely see his hands above him as he pulled himself higher and higher and higher.

There, finally! A ledge, just wide enough to stand upon. He hoisted his bow up and away from him, and swung himself up onto the ledge.

The ledge wound up and away, and disappeared counterclockwise around the peak. It was hewn, surely by something conscious, it was too neat and direct a path.. For this surely must be the peak of the mountain of the fates. It was silent here, not even a breeze despite the height.

Fletcher picked up his bow and crept along the mountain ledge.

As he turned around the bend, the mountain opened up to him. Not as a cave or hewn stone temple. No, there was a grotto! Snow covered the top, but there was a natural pool in the center, surrounded by pines and other, stranger trees that he did not recognize, as if they were in the middle of an evergreen spring and not the peak of a mountain. Fletcher wondered at the strange sight before him, and nearly forgot his task until three huge figures emerged from behind one of the trees that lined the pool. Fletcher raised his bow instinctively, but hesitated.

There were three herons, moving gracefully and slowly through the pool towards him. The sight alone wasn't enough to stay his hand. No, the voices in his head were.

“What brings you/brought you/will bring you here?”

“I come from the village in the valley, the one protected by you—well, supposedly protected! The great woven wall has fallen!”

“And you think, thought, will believe that we are, were, will be to blame?”

“Enough, just fix this or I will kill you! You are simply herons, aren’t you?”

“We cannot, will not, could not prevent the tragedy of the wall.”

“Why not?”

One of the herons stepped forward.

“We will not prevent the tragedy of the wall, because we will teach those to maintain it.”

“But it is too late, the wall has fallen!”

Another of the herons stepped forward to meet its sibling.

“We do not prevent the tragedy of the wall, because it is not our fault. It is the fault of those who maintain it.”

“But no one maintains it, that was your job, was it not?”

The third heron stepped forward.

“It was our job, but humans had requested responsibility. So responsibility was given. You came here, you sought vengeance, but we were not responsible. Humans were. They stopped maintaining the wall, and they destabilized the ground.”

“What do you mean?”

The first heron flapped their wings in agitation.

“The future will not be infinite, and yet is it what you humans are seeking! An infinite future, for your own greed! But there will be more disasters, and the future will be lost!”

“Lost?”

The third heron bowed their head.

“Those who had given you employ, young archer.”

“Find them.”

“And there you will find justice.”

Fletcher had heard the rumors of earthquakes following Hex stations. But he had thought them simply stories, propaganda and fearmongering. Hex was the savior of these small, forgotten communities. They brought jobs, stability.

That’s what everyone said.

“Well, I can’t just destroy *them!*”

The second heron gazed at Fletcher.

“Ah, so why is it so easy to destroy us instead?”

Because it was easier. They were just birds, as easy to pick off as any pigeon or dove he had in the past. Hex was something else, bigger and stronger than him. It wasn’t just a thing of flesh and bone, either. Even if they really were responsible for the destruction of the town, how could he hold them accountable? They surely had an army of lawyers, hell...they had an army of guards. He was one of them!

And he knew, no other community had made them stop—how else would they continue fracking if anyone had truly proven the dangers of their work?

But Fletcher didn’t tell the fates any of that. Instead, he raised his bow and notched back the arrow in his hand.

“Someone has to answer for what was done.”

But even as he had one of the heron’s in his sights, his hands trembled with doubt. The old woman did not ask him to kill the fates. She asked for their help. That only they could fix the wall. So this would not happen again.

“Fix the wall. Or I will kill you!”

The fates seemed unfazed by his demands. He let off a warning shot just above their heads. That seemed to ruffle their feathers a bit, but they did not move.

“The next one goes into your head! What do I have to do to fix it?”

“Is that what you really want? To know how to fix the wall?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. Come, then, to the river of time and gaze into its waters.”

Fletcher lowered his bow, but did not disarm it. He slowly walked closer to the edge of the pool of water, the one that flowed down and around the mountain. He looked at the fates, and they stepped back to give him space to wade into the river. The ripples slowed, and stilled as he did.

He looked down at his reflection, and then it disappeared.

He saw the wall being constructed, woven by the fates, with reeds from the river in their beaks. The people, from long ago, learning the long and arduous process of weaving to protect themselves from other humans, from predators, and the elements. He saw when the effects of keeping people out affected the progress of the village, and as those people began to leave, or began to allow more people in, the wall did not hold its primary purpose any further. It fell into disrepair. The world had moved on. And when the energy company came, it was merely a curious quirk of the community rather than a deterrent.

Because of the humans and their own choices. Fletcher saw the landslide again, the terror. But then he saw the split.

Two stories.

The first: The fates die, either by his own hand or another's. He wasn't the only one who knew the myth of the fates. People leave the area. The village grows empty and dark. The few houses standing housing only employees of the company. And when the mountainside was sucked dry, when the earthquakes and landslides threatened even Hex's investment, the land stripped of everything, did it finally rest in peace. Decades go by. Hundreds of years. Thousands. Slowly, the earth recovers. Adapts. Changed forever, with no one to enjoy the beauty of the valley. Too dangerous for the remaining humans on earth to use, after all. Too fragile. Prone to landslides for the rest of time.

Perhaps it wasn't too bad. Perhaps for the humans, but the land would recover in its own way.

But then there was the second story. A branch. A narrow way through. If he was brave enough to take it. To accept the consequences.