

THE MOUNTAIN

No creature grows old in this place.

I noticed it about three weeks after my month-long camping trip, when the shadow of stubble around my mouth and throat refused to become a full-fledged beard like it usually did in that amount of time. Then, I didn't think much of it. Perhaps it was something in the food I was eating, or maybe the stress on my body from such a drastic change in environment.

It's been so long, I almost can't remember why I had come to this remote place. No doubt it was to get away from what used to be my life. My job, my home in the city... it was all mundane, senseless, monotonous. All those days blur together in my memories like a stream meeting a river. But I can remember what it was like when I first came here. That part of my life is as clear as the light of day.

My arrival here on the mountain was far from easy. The hike was to last two weeks before I turned back, but several days before I reached my end point, I found another path hidden in the underbrush. It was strange; this path was not on any of my maps. If any locals had been around, I'd have asked them, but I hadn't seen another human soul in days, and I had to be hundreds of miles from the nearest town.

I'll be the first to admit that temptation has always been one of my weaknesses. Besides, what could a small delay hurt? I'd show up a few days late to a meaningless job. I followed the trail which was marked by small cairns every few yards. Excitement ran through me, spurring me onward despite not knowing where I was going. It was possible this was just a loop that joined up with the main trail, or even a path to a ranger station or fire tower. But even as I thought it, I knew that couldn't be right. Ranger stations and towers were almost always clearly marked on the map.

The trail led on for many long hours. Eventually, I was forced to set up camp for the night. The next day was much the same, and the next. The trail led a winding path through the mountains and I was increasingly desperate to find out where it would end. Now, of course, I understand what was drawing me along that tiny path, but then, I only knew that I was being pulled by some unseen force I couldn't begin to comprehend.

It was on my last day of traveling that I found an end to what I was beginning to believe was futility. I was ready to turn back the very next day. The sky had already turned that pale blue of dusk, and the scudding clouds were brilliant in the pinks and golds of sunset when I broke through the woods to a ledge overlooking a valley.

I knew at once that this place wasn't for just anyone's eyes. I was privileged to even look upon the scene before me. Below me stretched an old-growth forest. The trees were taller than they should have been at this altitude, rising proudly into the air, giants who occupied this land long before any human had set foot here. Beyond the valley rose a single peak. It was unremarkable compared to some of the others I had seen so far, but there was something about it that called to me. I was meant to go there, to climb to its summit and discover whatever ancient truth it chose to share with me.

The decision to make camp beside the ledge was a ruse, a plan to trick myself into considering whether I really wanted to make the journey down there. But I already knew what my choice would be. I could feel it in my gut: that mountain was meant for me.

The next day, I admit, I threw caution to the winds when I clambered down the ledge to continue following the trail, which I simply knew led to that mountain in the distance. I disregarded the gnawing in the pit of my belly which served to remind me that I was needed back home, that I had limited supplies, that I was no longer where I said I would be on my journey. If I got lost or hurt, I was on my own.

Nevertheless, I pushed on. The trail grew more and more difficult, as if it was testing me, and it became a battle of wills: man versus nature. Even the weather was in on it, for torrents and tumults of rainwater coursed down upon my head. But, I won. Covered in scratches and bruises, I broke out of the last tangle of thorns into a clearing. And up ahead was a shape that was jarring against the curvature of all that is natural. An edge of a building made from logs.

Disappointment rushed through me upon seeing it. This was supposed to be my own private victory, a place where I would be all alone save for what lurked in the wilds of the mountain. But also, I could not turn away somewhere to resupply, nor the chance to speak to a denizen of this place that called to me so strongly. As I rounded the corner, I was startled to find a whole town comprised entirely of log buildings. The old forest, so tall in its splendor, must have hidden these signs of civilization from view when I stood on the ledge above the valley.

Feeling out of place hefting my large pack, I wandered down the dirt street. As I gazed down at the muddy road beneath my feet, I noticed that there were no tire tracks at all, but rather, hoof marks. Sure enough, when I looked up, there was a stable not far from where I stood. There wasn't a car in sight either, not even the beat up old truck I imagined would fit perfectly in this mysterious town.

A sign that creaked in the wind dripped with the subsiding rain over the largest of the cabin-style buildings. It read "general" in faded yellow letters. Sweeping droplets from my brow, I entered the shop. I expected a grizzled old man to be working the till, or perhaps a plump grandmotherly old woman, but the woman who was there looked only slightly older than me. She leaned heavily on the counter, a few coils of dark hair slipping from a taut bun to fall into her face as she read from a yellow-paged book.

She looked up lazily when I entered, and it was clear that she had expected someone else. Her eyes grew wide and she stared at me. "Who are you?" she asked in a voice with an accent I could not place.

"Uh, my name is John," I replied, slightly startled. "John Dell. What's this place called?"

"It doesn't have a name," she said, her wary expression never fading. "How did you get here?"

"I followed a trail to get here, but it's not on any of my maps of the area. I..." I broke off, unsure of how to explain why I was so transfixed by this valley and the mountain above.

The shopkeep's dark eyes changed from round and wide to understanding. "Ah," she said. "You're traveling to the mountain."

The way she said it was so certain, I was momentarily disconcerted. "Yes," I said after a heavy pause.

She nodded once, then gestured at the shelves in the store. I hadn't noticed before, but the whole shop was lit by candlelight and fire. "Take what you need," she told me. "The path continues over there." She pointed out the window to where the land sloped steeply upward. Through it, I saw another of the small rock cairns.

"Thank you." I perused the shelves. There was mostly fresh fruit and vegetables, as well as various dried meats and fish, but on some of the back shelves, there were tools, along with nails, buckets, knives, and cloth. It

all seemed rather unusual to find in a general store. I helped myself to a few pieces of fruit and returned to the woman at the counter. "How much do I owe you?"

The woman shook her head. "There is nothing you have that we need. Take it."

I felt my eyebrows rise on my forehead, but I gave her a smile. I had a feeling that second-guessing this generosity would get me nowhere. I turned to leave, trying to swallow down the myriads of questions that were wont to tumble from my lips, but despite myself, one broke free. "Do many people come through here?" I thought I already knew the answer.

"No. You are the first in many years."

"How do you survive out here? Where do you get supplies from?"

She frowned. "We live off the land. As we were meant to do."

"Right." That response only left me with more questions than before. "Well, thanks. I guess I'll be on my way." I walked out the door towards the mountain path. As I walked, I became aware of eyes upon me, and when I looked back, there were at least a dozen people gathered in the town, and all of them were staring at me.

For the first time since I had found the mysterious path, seeds of doubt began to sprout in my mind. What exactly was I walking into? But dogged determination won out over fear and I forced myself to look away from the townsfolk.

The path up the mountainside was rough and untamed. Brambles clawed at my ankles and thorns raked over my exposed arms. In some areas, it was almost impossible to make out the trail, and I could only hope to spot one of the cairns nearby. The air was alive with insects swooping to and fro, many of them circling maddeningly around my head, their shrill buzzing sounding constantly in my ears. Though she sent her soldiers to stop me, I would not give in to nature's attempts to thwart my discovery of this place.

As I hiked, I marveled at the massive trees around me. I had heard of trees in the west that were wide enough to drive a car through, but these seemed like they could contend with those tales. Moss covered the forest floor, a green carpet soft enough to sleep upon. Winding vines of ivy climbed the trees, covering the branches and dropping down into curtains over apertures in the stony outcroppings all around. It was beautiful here, serene, but when I stopped to truly listen, I felt a buzzing of energy coming from somewhere deep in the ground. Or perhaps it was in the air around me. I couldn't tell, but it made me feel invigorated and alive, like a cup of morning coffee.

The trail continued upwards, curving along the sides in a spiral up the mountain. It was certainly taking me the long way around, but I found I didn't mind. There was so much to look at, so much to take in. All thoughts of home and work had slipped away, hidden deep inside. The anticipation of what I would find at the top thrummed through me alongside the energy of the mountain.

When at last the treeline began to recede, I knew I was close to the summit. I slowed my pace. Suddenly, I was nervous. What if there was nothing at all up there and this was all a waste of time? But I knew that couldn't be true. The pale flowers and vibrant grasses even began to fade as I climbed towards the top, still following the spiraling trail. Left in their place was stark grey rock which glittered as the sunlight reflected off bits of mica and pyrite in the stone.

Finally, I crested the top of the mountain. I stumbled backwards when I saw what awaited me at the

peak. A lone buck stood on the mountaintop, its deep brown eyes blinking slowly as I approached. Its antlers were immense, almost as wide as I was tall. One prong had a string of beads wrapped around it, yellowed bone. I realized I was shaking as I edged nearer. What was I supposed to do? In my heart, I knew this all meant something, I just wasn't sure what.

The buck snorted as I reached out a tentative hand to pat its tawny pelt. My fingers brushed against its nose and it leaned into my hand, allowing me to touch it. The tension drained from my body and I closed my eyes, all at once exhausted from my travels. "What is this place?" I whispered to the animal before me. "Why am I here?"

I'll admit, I half-expected him to answer, but when a voice cut through the stillness of the mountain, I cried out and fell backwards.

"You must discover that for yourself, child."

My neck twisted harshly as I spun to lay eyes on the speaker, for it *hadn't* come from the buck, and this was a thin, reedy voice. A frail old woman stood behind me at the end of the trail.

"Who are you?" I gasped.

"Agnes," she said. "But *they* call me the mountain witch."

"A witch?" I repeated. At this point, I was ready to believe anything. "Did you follow me from the town?"

She scoffed. "The town? I do not go there. They come to me if they have need." She placed a skeletal hand on the side of the buck and stroked him.

"What's his name?" I asked, for lack of a better question.

She shook her head and two white braids slid from her shoulders to her back. "To name him would be to do him a disservice."

I didn't understand what she was talking about, but her demeanor made me refrain from asking what she meant. Though she was feeble and slight, she radiated strength. I rose from the ground and stood in front of her. "I'm John. John Dell," I said.

"I know who you are."

"Alright," I said, bemused. "Can you tell me why I felt so drawn to this place?"

"This is where you're meant to be."

She said it so matter-of-factly, and in that moment, I decided I was going to stay. Agnes smiled like she knew exactly what my thoughts were. "Where do I go?" I asked.

"Come." She led me down the path and I followed. Despite her aged appearance, Agnes was graceful, never faltering as she slipped through the woods, barely brushing the undergrowth. I felt like some sort of monster, tromping through the forest with massive boots and a backpack that knocked leaves from trees and snagged vines on its straps.

The clearing she led me to was at least halfway down the mountain. It was large and surprisingly flat. A perfect place to build upon. And that was exactly what Agnes said to do. "This is where you will build your steading," she said. "The river is just through the trees. You will have water and food. Buy chickens from the town and you will have eggs."

And that was all. Agnes turned away and disappeared through the trees, as silent as the powdery wings of a moth in the night. Was I really going to do this? Leave everything behind on nothing more than a feeling, a whim?

Yes.

The answer was obvious. Yes, I would.

The cabin I built was small, with one main area and a tiny offshoot room. It was made of crude wood and handmade nails. The townsfolk had arrived in force, armed with hammers, nails, and saws to help me build. They did so in silence. It was ritualistic, like they had done this before and many times.

In those days that followed, I had all the time in the world to reflect on my choice. I contemplated as I created simple furniture from wood and rope- a table, stools, a hammock, benches. My thoughts had a tendency to wander from place to place, much like I did in my former life. Imagining it as a previous chapter of my life took much getting used to. There were times when I wanted nothing more than to return to the bustling city life that was all I had known previously, but the mountain held me back. That inexplicable pull of the land here was intoxicating, like it wanted me to stay.

Did it know me somehow, deep inside? Did it deem me worthy of its grandeur? Or was I perhaps one of the lucky few who stumbled upon this source of contentment? Agnes, the witch, had said I would discover for myself the secrets of the mountain. But I had questions. So many questions. Surely if I bound myself to the land, I was entitled to some answers.

But I decided to wait, to acclimate myself to what was to be my home forevermore. I spent my days wandering the forest and following the churning river to see where it would lead me. I found it began at a crack in the rock, gushing forth from deep underground. When I tasted it, thirsty after the long climb, it was sweet and pure. Another day, I journeyed to where it poured out into a small lake in the valley. There were countless new discoveries to make, thousands of tiny mysteries to try and comprehend on the mountain. And I studied them all, lost in the bliss of experiencing true freedom for the first time in my life.

The days passed. I know not how many, for after a while, time lost its meaning. There were no schedules to keep here, no appointments or objectives to meet. Here, I could simply *be*. I knew roughly when a year had passed, for the seasons still changed. When the snows of winter began to fall, the townsfolk came to me with handmade blankets and warm clothing, which I gratefully accepted. They taught me to make my own from the pelts of animals and wool from their sheep.

They never hunted upon the mountain. They taught me that too. The woman from the general store became my teacher in their way of life. Her name was Toma. She had taken a liking to me, it seemed, and hastened my acceptance by the rest of the town. We spent many a long hour lying beneath a great willow tree at the edge of the lake in silence. There, the hum of the mountain's energy was fainter, but it still resonated throughout my body.

After years of living in seclusion on the mountainside, even the animals that lived there became comfortable with me. Squirrels and chipmunks would eat from my hands if I offered seed, along with all manner of birds. The deer grazed beside me while I sat upon one of my carved wooden benches out in the forest, and the buck who had allowed my touch at the top of the mountain came to me often. He and I would walk in the woods together, side by side. He even allowed me to place a second strand of beads over his antlers to commemorate

our strange friendship. It was a rough sort of paradise, this mountain living, but for the first time that I could remember, I was happy.

Happiness was all well and good, but I knew there was something else about this place that I was missing. Something none of the townsfolk spoke of, nor Agnes in her home above the cloudline. I spent many years trying to learn what I wanted so badly to know. One autumn day, while I was in the town, offering to carry up a load of supplies to Agnes, I figured it out. Two of the townsfolk had a child, a little girl. Before me, they were the most recent to arrive at the mountain. I studied the child. I knew they had come here with her in tow. As I looked at her, playing happily in the street with a cat, I finally understood.

I went to see Agnes at her tiny cottage. "I've figured it out," I told her while she tended to her garden of herbs.

She didn't answer, only clipped a small sprig from a plant and held it up to me. "This should be enough," she said. She strode into her home. I followed, ducking below the bundles of dried herbs and flowers dangling from the ceiling.

"I know what the secret of the mountain is."

Agnes didn't look at me. "Do you?" she asked, placing the fresh sprig into a carved wooden bowl full of liquid. "Drink this." She held up the bowl.

This was not the first time Agnes had given me one of her concoctions. "What is it?"

"Good for you." She pointed a gnarled finger at my ankle, which I had twisted the other day while climbing to a particularly hard-to-reach spot.

Wondering at how she knew these things, I drank down the brew. It was bitter, but I finished it without complaint. I handed her the bowl and said, "The little girl in the town. She should be a young woman by now. It's been nearly twenty years. And I should be going grey, but even my hair won't grow. No one ages here, do they? Not even the animals. That's the secret, isn't it?"

"That is *a* secret," she said. "This mountain holds many."

I frowned. "There's more?"

"You will learn, in time."

I sighed and sat down at one of her tables. "But I've been here so long already," I said.

Agnes turned to stare at me, her faded blue eyes sharp. "So long?" she repeated. "Child, you know nothing of time."

That quieted me for a few moments. "How long have you been here?" I asked her after a while of watching her prepare another mixture.

"I stopped counting the years after three hundred."

I stood up. "Three hundred!" So this was what I had chosen. Or had the mountain chosen me? I still remembered the pull it had on me, even from miles and miles away. "Tell me," I said. "Tell me another secret."

Agnes paused in the middle of creating her brew. Finally, she turned around to face me. "We are not the only ones who are drawn to the mountain and its many boons. There are *things* here. Things unlike you or I."

"What do you mean?" I thought of the buck I walked the woods with so often. "The animals?"

"No. These are older than the animals. Older than the trees."

Was Agnes deliberately being mysterious? I couldn't tell. "What are they, then?"

Her voice fell to a whisper and I had to draw nearer to hear her next words.

"They haven't a name. But they are ancient. They stalk the shadows and the night." She paused, eyeing me for a moment. "Stay out of the deepest caves," she rasped. "For now, they slumber, living in harmonious peace with the people here, and I suggest to you that you do not wake them."

I was quiet for a moment, letting her words sink in. Despite asking directly, Agnes hadn't actually said what these *things* were. "I don't know what you mean," I told her, hoping she would be more forthcoming.

She let out a rattling sigh and fixed me with her pale stare again. "I have only seen one once, when I first arrived here, and it was but a glimpse from the corner of my eye. When I turned to look, it had disappeared."

"What did it look like?"

"It stood tall, far more so than myself. Its limbs were long and thin, and it covered its face with the skull of a deer. It wore bones, old bones, faded and yellow." Agnes shivered, although the day was a warm one. "You must understand, child: I was never meant to look upon this thing."

The sparse hairs on the back of my neck prickled, and I had to fight the urge to turn and glance behind me.

Agnes continued, "Though I could see none, I felt its eyes upon me. Never before have I felt such fear. An ancient, primal dread that cannot be described. I ran from that place and I have never returned."

I tried to hide my frown. It sounded like a legend, nothing more. Not only that, but Agnes said she had just arrived at the mountain. Maybe she had climbed into one of the caves and gotten spooked. Agnes noticed my expression.

"Believe me or do not," she said. "It makes no difference. But you asked for secrets."

"I did," I admitted. "I'll be careful." I made to leave the cottage, but Agnes pulled on my sleeve.

"Take this," she said, and poured her concoction into a small glass jar. "You'll need it. To ease you into sleep."

I thanked her, pocketing the mixture, though I wondered why she thought I needed it. My sleep had never been better since I came here.

That night, I laid awake, listening to the sounds of the mountain as I always did, but tonight, it felt different. My mind returned to Agnes' tale of the ancient things in the dark, and I kept imagining that something was just outside my cabin, watching me through the pinprick spaces between the logs. I glanced at the mixture Agnes gave me, sitting on the table beside me. Sighing, I opened the jar and drank it down, gagging at the sharp taste.

Almost immediately, waves of drowsiness threatened me, and I rolled over, determinedly facing the wall. If something was looking at me, it did not make itself known, and I was soon lost to sleep.

The next day, I returned to Agnes her jar, and we talked of other things far more pleasant. She told me of the beasts of the mountain, how they knew to leave the mountain to give birth and raise their offspring. But they always returned. This was their home.

I must admit, Toma came to mind then. I had thought for the past years that starting a family might be something I was interested in after all, now that I knew her. Previously, it was a distant dream I had given up on

when I came to the mountain. But now...

Agnes, in her strange way, knew what I was thinking, and a crinkled smile came over her lips. "Ask her, child."

And so I did. Not that year, nor the year after. Instead, I relished the time I spent with Toma. We traversed the mountain together, most days not even speaking, but it was that sort of companionship that I yearned for, to be able to be with someone for hours on end without a word. We wove baskets from the river reeds together. We left the safety of the mountain together, venturing out to collect old bones and the shed antlers of young bucks.

We did everything together, but it was only when she found herself spending more nights in my cabin than in her own home that I finally asked her if she wanted to stay together forever. The concept of marriage was foreign here. There were no couples save for the family with the eternal child, and they were already married.

But when I asked, Toma merely smiled and took my hand. From a cloth pouch at her hip, she pulled out a carved token and closed my fingers around it. I reached into my own pouch and produced the small wooden ring I had painstakingly carved years and years ago for just this purpose. She allowed me to slide it gently onto her finger.

Life, which was already perfect, was made all the more so. Toma joined me at my cabin, and I never slept alone again. Once we were bound to one another, I felt comfortable enough to mention the mountain's secret. "How old are you, Toma?" I asked her one day as we sat beneath an immense oak tree, gathering acorns. She looked no older than mid-twenties, but I knew better now.

She averted her eyes, fixing them on two acorns joined together at the top rather than on my face. "We do not ask such of one another," she murmured, dividing the acorns with a gentle tug.

"Alright... what was it like where you came from?" I asked instead.

At last, Toma met my gaze with her own of soft amber. "That is a different way of asking the same question," she said.

I smiled, certain I looked sheepish, for she was correct. "I want to know you completely. You already know everything about me, after all." I had told her in detail about my old life, so much so that she must have committed my stories to memory by now.

"Surely you have secrets even I cannot fathom."

I shook my head. "Not really. You can ask me anything."

Toma shifted a mossy rock, unearthing a small striped creature with many legs for which I had no name. She let it crawl onto her hand, watching the way its legs moved hypnotically. She was silent for long minutes, and I had considered the topic concluded when she spoke. "Nearly ninety-seven winters."

I had to force my jaw to remain in its place, lest it make me look foolish by dropping open. "That long?" It was little wonder her diction was so different from my own. "Do you miss your old life?" I already knew what her answer would be.

"No. It was not a good life. Here is where I am meant to be and here is where I shall remain until the end of my days."

"With me, right?" I nudged her.

“Of course.”

We collected acorns in silence for a few moments longer, but my thoughts were abuzz with more questions. Furthermore, I knew I was putting off what I truly wished to ask Toma. I stewed a while more before broaching the subject. “Did you ever talk much with Agnes?”

“Some,” she said, her thick locks partially obscuring her puzzled expression. “Why do you ask this of me?”

“I’ve been talking to her a lot,” I told her. “When I bring supplies from the town to her cottage. She told me something a while back that I haven’t been able to forget about.”

“What was it she told you?”

I paused, wondering if I should speak of this to her. Agnes hadn’t forbidden it, but it seemed a taboo topic. “Have you heard about...” I had no good word to describe the *things* Agnes claimed existed here. “Beings or creatures of some kind here on the mountain? Other than us and the animals, I mean.”

Toma shook her head, her eyes narrowing as she thought. “I have no recollection of anything of the sort,” she said.

In that moment, I chose not to sully her thoughts with my own paranoia. “Forget about it,” I said. “It’s not important.”

She nodded, taking me at my word. And perhaps it really wasn’t important after all.

The years went by so quickly, I could barely comprehend it. Life here was bliss, pure and simple. But nothing perfect lasts forever, as I learned one day.

The crisp autumn of the mountain meant the trees were on full display. It was my favorite season, even before I came here. Life seemed to burn brighter on the mountain, for the colors were unlike any trees I had seen back in my old life. Crimson, gold, orange, and a whole host of browns glowed beneath warm sunlight. I walked down a trail that had become etched into the earth due to how often I hiked there. I rounded a bend and froze. Something was lying on the ground before me, and there was a scarlet surrounding it that did not come from the trees. My heart throbbing within my chest, I approached, and could not hold back my cry.

It was a buck. Not just any buck, but my friend. He who had met me upon the peak of the mountain on my very first day here. There were deep holes in his body, round and oozing with his life force. Scattered around him were the remains of the beaded gifts that had rested on his antlers.

“No,” I whispered. Who would have done this? And why? I needed to find Agnes. I pressed a hand to the buck’s coarse flank. He was already cold. I rose and hurried back towards my cabin, not fighting the tears that streamed down my cheeks.

Toma was there to meet me, out of breath, her eyes shining bright with some wild emotion I couldn’t read. We spoke at the same time.

“He’s dead. I need to see Agnes, now.”

“John, people are here.”

“What?” We spoke in unison again.

Not waiting for Toma to try and speak, I blurted, “The buck, the one I walk with sometimes... he’s dead. Someone killed him. Not one of us, this was done with a gun.”

Toma's eyes sparkled with unspilled tears. "It was them. The people that came. The store was ransacked. They left this." She held out a handful of crumpled paper. Flashes of my old life came back to me upon seeing money, so foreign here on the mountain.

"Who are they? How did they get here?" This place was so remote, so far removed from civilization, it was nearly impossible to stumble upon it by sheer chance.

Shaking her head, Toma closed her eyes. "Cruel men who hunt only for sport. They kill for pleasure."

"We need to find Agnes."

"You go," said Toma. "I must stay. I will protect our home."

I hesitated. Leaving Toma on her own when there were strangers on the mountain went against all my instincts. But she crossed her arms like she knew my thoughts and gazed at me with defiance on her face.

"Go to Agnes," she said. "I know these trees. They will not find me if they seek to do me harm."

I strode to her and took her in my arms, laying a kiss against her lips. We were both trembling. "I'll be back soon. Agnes will know what to do."

As I tore through the forest with reckless abandon, the sadness within me gave way to anger. My friend was dead. Left on the ground to bleed out in agony. There would be a reckoning for those who had committed this vile act. As I ran, I heard distant noises, and they only served to solidify my rage. Loud raucous laughter, the thumping of bass from a large speaker, gunshots. It took all of my determination not to turn around right then and bring the killers to justice. I told myself over and over, a mantra, that I needed to speak to Agnes first.

When I reached her cabin, I burst through the door to find her settled quietly before her fire. "Agnes, someone's here!" I cried. "People on the mountain, they've killed the buck and left him there to rot!" Agnes did not respond at first, and every second of silence caused my anger to blaze brighter. "Did you hear me?" I said loudly.

Agnes turned to look at me. "I heard you, child. I know your pain. Come. Sit by the fire."

I remained on my feet. "There isn't time to sit! We have to do something before they kill again!" Once more, silence fell, save for the harsh breaths cast from my mouth. "Agnes!"

"Sit," she repeated, and I knew I would never get anywhere unless I complied with her wishes. I sat, perched on the very edge of the crude wooden chair.

"I did not believe him, child."

"Believe who? About what?" I was impatient, enraged that my friend was torn from this beautiful place.

Agnes prodded the fire with a stick. "The one who came before me. He who led me to this place, who taught me the ways of the mountain. He told me the secrets here, as I have told you. He also passed down a warning before he left the comforts of this place."

"What? What warning?" I did not understand what this had to do with the current situation. All I wanted was for Agnes to get to the point so we could do something!

"He told me that one day, others would come. They would leach the mountain of its riches and I would be called upon to take action."

"Right, well, the time has come!"

Agnes shook her head. She had yet to finish speaking. "It was then that he told me of the *things* of the

mountain, those ancient ones who reside here.”

I nodded, fury clawing at my insides, demanding to be released, like a wolf in a trap. I knew about the ancient things already. But what good would that do? Should we merely wait for the intruders to stumble upon the deepest caves?

“He also told me that they can be called upon.”

It took a moment to process her words, for my thoughts were disjointed with grief and anger combined. “Called upon? For what?”

“To protect the mountain, child. There is a ritual.”

I looked into Agnes’ weathered face, searching for the right words. “Agnes, whatever you saw... are you certain it was real? A hundred percent, no doubt *real*?”

For the first time since I had known her, I saw a flicker of hurt in her glacier-blue eyes. “I know what I saw,” she said sharply. “You came to me for help. Will you not listen?”

Shame rose up in me, warring with grief and ire. Shame won out and I bowed my head. “I’m sorry,” I said, and stood up, pacing the small cottage. “Tell me what you know, please.”

Agnes seemed to accept my apology, or at least, she passed over it without further comment. “There is a ritual,” she said again. “Passed down throughout the ages of those who resided upon the mountainside. If done correctly, the ancient ones will awaken and purge the mountain of all its enemies.” She directed me to sit in the chair opposite her once more, and I did so. “Never in my time did I expect to use it, nor will I.” I interrupted then with protests, but Agnes cut me off. “You will perform the ritual, child. My time has come. Once I have taught you what I know, I will leave this place, for I am old. Too old. This world would not have me back, nor would I expect to survive within it today.”

I shook my head, certain I was misunderstanding Agnes’ words. “You’re- you’re leaving the mountain?”

“Yes. I shall live out my days in the peace and solitude of nature far from here.”

“No!” I stood up again so quickly, my chair fell backwards with a thud. “Agnes, you can’t! You can’t go!” I thought about what life on the mountain would be like without her, and found I could barely imagine it. She had been a fixture in my life for decades now. Who would mix the potions and poultices when someone was ill? Who would I carry supplies for after my weekly visit to town? Who would-

“You, child.” She answered my frantic unspoken questions. “Protect this place with all your heart.”

For the second time today, tears formed in my eyes, spilling down my cheeks and leaving tiny shadows on the floor until they landed, staining the wood. “I can’t,” I whispered. “I know nothing. Not like you.”

“You have my books, my notes.” She pointed a quivering hand at a shelf where stacks of yellow papers and even some birch skin lay. “Even I knew nothing once. You have all the time you need to learn, and the compassionate spirit this mountain needs to survive.”

I gazed at her for a long moment. She was serious, I realized, and there would be no convincing her otherwise. I thought about it hard, but in the end, I knew what my answer must be. “Alright,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

Agnes took my hand in hers and squeezed it. It only lasted a fraction of a moment, and then all at once, she was on the other side of the room rifling through her papers. She pulled out a thin leatherbound book and searched through it until she came to a page near the end. “Here is what you must do. You must be the one to

perform the ritual.”

I read the scrawled words on the paper. I could barely understand the language. This must have been written centuries ago. Agnes hurried throughout the cabin, pulling bundles of herbs from the ceiling and shelves, handing them to me. “What does this mean?” I asked her. “These words?”

“The invocation,” she said. “They are what you must speak.”

“But what does it actually say?”

“I know not, child. These words are older than me by an age or more.”

“I guess we should get started.”

She shook her head. “Not yet. You must warn the town. Keep them in their homes tonight. If they are true to the mountain, they will not be harmed. You must flee too. Stay in the town tonight.”

I nodded and met Agnes’ gaze for what felt like the last time. “Be careful,” I told her. “This place won’t be the same without you.”

“My home is now yours. Do with it what you will. Goodbye, John Dell.”

Without another word, lest I say something foolish or pleading, I turned and left. As I raced down the mountain, I saw signs of our foe. Deep holes in the bark of trees that poured out sap like blood. The unnatural silver of crumpled beer cans that littered the forest floor. The remains of a fire. This must be their camp. Through the trampled foliage, I saw brightly colored tents. I approached, reaching out a hand to touch the almost unfamiliar plastic.

“Hey! The hell you think you are?”

I leapt forward, spinning around and pulling the knife I kept always by my side. A man approached from the forest a ways away. I wondered how I hadn’t heard him; his footsteps were like miniature earthquakes. He raised some kind of rifle and aimed it at me.

“Guys, come here! We got a thief at our camp!”

“I mean you no harm,” I lied. Was this the one who had killed my friend? “I was only passing through.”

Three more men came crashing through the undergrowth, each toting a weapon as massive as the first. “Who the hell is this?” said one of them, also taking aim.

“He must be from that weird town,” said a third, taking a long swig from a can and crushing it in his hand before throwing it to the forest floor.

“I am,” I said. The less they knew about my cabin and Toma, the better. “I’m heading there now.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” said the first. “Not ‘til we make sure you didn’t touch nothing of ours.”

“I didn’t.”

“Sure you didn’t. Let’s empty his pockets.”

Two of the men came at me from both sides, and I held up my knife. “Don’t touch me.”

The first man laughed sneeringly. The world seemed to slow as I saw his finger shift to the trigger. I turned and ran, zig-zagging through the trees. A shot rang out behind me, echoing in my ears.

“Ha, lookit him run!” one of them yelled.

They gave chase, but I was in my element and they were clumsy, uncoordinated, and foolish. As I

melled into the shadows of the trees, I heard one fall hard. He screamed out an expletive, but I couldn't hear any more than that as I ran, as silent as one of the big cats that sometimes lurked the mountainside.

What little doubt I had in my mind about performing the ritual had dissipated the instant I was shot at. These men were the epitome of evil, as far as I was concerned. When I reached the town, I began to shout after taking a few deep breaths to calm my nerves. The people came out of their homes, murmuring questions.

"Listen to me, all of you!" I cried. "Something will happen tonight... I can't say what, but Agnes told me to tell you all to stay in your homes and do not come out, no matter what."

"It's because of the strangers," someone said. "Is it not?"

I nodded. "That's right," I said. "We have a plan to drive them from the mountain. I wish I could say more."

"Where is Agnes?" asked another.

I hesitated. I wasn't sure whether to tell them the truth or not, but I felt I owed it to them after all they had done for me. "She is leaving the mountain."

Gasps of outrage and horror came then. "She can't leave!" a woman wailed. The solitary child began to cry.

"Who will we go to when we are ill? She cannot go!"

"I- quiet please! This is important!"

The crowd stilled enough that I was able to speak again. "I will learn Agnes' herbs and mixtures," I said. "I will be your caretaker."

The people were silent for a long moment, and I feared they would not accept me. Then, they began to speak again, and most of them seemed calmer.

"Where is Toma?" someone asked, and a chill ran through my body. Those intruders had been willing to shoot at me. If they found Toma, what might they be willing to do to her?

"I'm going to get her now," I said. "Stay here. Lock yourselves in. Close down the store." I turned and ran up the path to my cabin.

When I arrived, I found Toma and explained to her everything that had transpired, even the secret Agnes had entrusted to me. Toma would stand by me through this trial, I knew, but first she needed to know all I could tell her. She believed me right away, as I knew she would, and together we returned to town armed with bundles of herbs and the leatherbound book.

Nighttime now, we barricaded ourselves in the general store and set to work performing the ritual. I was the one who would carry it out. Toma retrieved for me what I needed at the moment and stood by me for support. The last part of the ritual was to say the ancient words inscribed in the leatherbound book. I stood in the center of the ritual circle and said the words in a strong, clear voice.

A violent wind blew through the cracks between the logs of the wall, snuffing out our candles, and though it had been a clear day, raindrops began to fall on the roof. A crackle of thunder sounded overhead, and Toma and I sat down on the floor, huddling together to wait out the long night.

Together, we must have drifted off, for I awoke in the cold and dark for seemingly no reason. It was no longer raining. Instead, the night was deathly quiet. There was no wind to shake the branches, nor even the

sound of insects crying. I glanced down at Toma, silent in her slumber save for soft, barely perceptible breaths. She was beautiful. Perfect, like the mountain itself. My thoughts turned to sorrow again as memory took over. Pools of scarlet flashed in my mind and I closed my eyes, breathing in Toma's earthy scent in an effort to keep from succumbing to my rage.

A scream shattered the silence of the night. Toma awoke with a gasp and clutched my arm. "John," she whispered. I nodded, taking her hand as a second shriek tore through the thin mountain air. Then another voice joined in, and another. I had never heard such cries. They seemed to emanate from the depths of the body, for they were human. I had been here long enough to recognize the sound of foxes and wild cats. This was different. I must admit, beneath the raw terror and rampant fear, I felt a surge of satisfaction. Our mountain was safe.

Was it though? What exactly had I unleashed? I trusted Agnes, of course, but even she admitted that she had never before cast the ritual. What if these *things*, these ancient beings, purged the mountain of all its inhabitants? Perhaps now that they were awakened, they would stay that way.

"John, what have we done?" Toma said, her voice barely a breath.

"What we must," I answered. I hoped I was right.

We held each other in silence as the screaming continued. After what felt like an age had passed, the world was quiet again. Toma dared to look at me. "Is it safe?"

I shook my head. "We have to stay until dawn."

"There is comfort in the sun after the darkest of nights," she said, sounding relieved.

The eerie stillness of the night continued for many hours. Toma fell asleep against me again, but I could not sleep any longer. I remained awake, staring at the window, waiting for the first rays of light to spill over the trees.

As my eyes finally began to droop, I saw something that had every hair on my body standing upright. A shadow moved past the window, impossibly tall. I even thought I caught a glimpse of antlers. I held my breath, listening to the gentle scuffle of leaves underfoot that even the most graceful of creatures could not hide. Footsteps moved from the window to the front door, slowly, deliberately. The stepping paused outside and I swear I heard the rattle of breath before it was gone, moving deeper into the town.

I thanked the stars then that Toma was still asleep. She did not need her mind to be haunted as mine was sure to be. I would never tell her what I heard and saw. Agnes was the only one I could think to confide in about this, but another pang of pain went through me when I remembered she was leaving forever.

Sleep finally came for me just as the sky began to change from black to pale purple. When next I woke, Toma was sitting beside me, running long, delicate fingers through my hair. "It is safe now," she said. "The town has gathered."

I rose to my feet and with Toma beside me, I opened the door to the general store. I blinked in the sunlight streaming down through the trees, dappling the ground. It had to be close to noon. Outside the store were the townsfolk, and all of them looked to me in expectation.

"It's over," I said. "We're safe now."

"What about the strangers?" someone shouted. "We heard the screams in the night. Have they left?"

I looked between them all and realized I did not know the answer. "I will journey to their camp," I said.

“The rest of you should stay in the town until we know for certain.”

Everyone seemed satisfied with that, and the small crowd began to dissipate. I turned to Toma, to urge her to remain here too, but I recognized the defiant look on her face before I even spoke.

Together, we followed the trail up the mountain. The cairns along the way were mossy and damp from last night’s rainfall. I led the way to the intruders’ encampment. At once, I knew something terrible had taken place here. Trash was scattered everywhere, along with the hunters’ supplies. Their brightly colored tents were torn and bent, flaps of plastic swaying in the gentle breeze.

Toma reached out to touch the tent, as I had done upon first seeing it. “So strange,” she murmured.

We headed deeper into the camp and quickly stumbled upon where the hunters had gone. A body lay before us, the ground around it dark with spilled blood. At first, I didn’t understand where all the blood came from, for the body seemed unmarked, but then, when I went to turn it face up, I realized. The body was soft and pliable in my hands. As I turned it over, it flopped unnaturally at angles that made no sense.

I recognized the jacket the man was wearing. It was the hunter who had shot at me, and all his bones were missing, taken from a long thin slice that went from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. His face was sunken in and his eyes were gone too. Not far from him were the other two bodies.

My stomach, though empty, roiled like I was about to be sick, and I retched, but nothing came out. Toma rubbed my back. She had no reaction except to comfort me. “We must bury them,” she said when I was capable of listening. “No one can know this truth.”

I agreed. We returned to our cabin and retrieved shovels. The digging took many long hours, but together, we toiled until our secret was buried beneath the damp soil and autumn leaves. We brought their tents and supplies to the town, where they were dispersed amongst the people.

The town will never know of the ritual, or the lengths Toma and I have gone through to conceal horrors from them. Life on the mountain returned to normal, and we carried on living. We have taken Agnes’ place as keepers of the people. Toma excels at herbal remedies, while I tend to other matters, resolving arguments, keeping everyone supplied for the winter, and greeting new settlers when they arrive, although that is a rare occurrence.

Toma and I have taken up residence at the lake. We age slowly here, but it was a necessary move, for she is with child and we want our baby to grow up. When our child is old enough to understand and choose a life for themselves, we will return to our life of peace on the mountainside forevermore.

Perhaps our most important task, however, is that we keep the ritual and secrets of the mountain. I still have much to learn, and no doubt the mountain has many more secrets I may never know. But I do what I can with what I’ve been given, and that will be good enough.