

The narrow corridor leading to Orville Partridge's study was dark and uninviting. Pax had always avoided this corner of his grandfather's home, but now more than ever the lifeless rooms felt impossibly distant.

Old wood floors creaked with each step. Even under Pax's light tip toe the boards would give way and groan. There was no reason for Pax to sneak through the house. It had sat empty ever since his grandfather passed, and no family members other than his own father had bothered to visit the estate postmortem. Still, Pax felt better slinking through the halls to avoid disturbing dust sediments.

The estate smelled old, it had even before its only resident left. Pax had always assumed the house had smelled that way because of how his grandfather smelled. But maybe it was the other way around.

Reaching the back of the hallway, Pax checked behind himself surreptitiously, then turned the glass doorknob to enter his grandfather's study. Pax winced as the door creaked open, popping against aching hinges. He squeezed inside and checked down the hall again before closing the door behind himself.

"I thought that was you Pax," Margaret said.

His sister's voice shattering the silence made his heart jump. He yelped and spun to see her cross-legged on Orville's desk, flipping through some volume. Her blue eyes glowing orbs in the midday sunlight.

"What are you doing here?" Pax asked, voice uneven.

"Reading."

"Oh."

"Why are you here?"

"Hm?"

"That's what I thought."

"How did you know it was me?"

"Your footsteps are distinct."

Pax was embarrassed with his performance. He was not trying to be silent, but he considered his performance at least discrete.

Relaxing from startlement, Pax took a couple steps into the room. Margaret stared at brother expectantly, still poised over her book. Cool natural light spilled through the tall windows on the right of the study. No other light illuminated the space, most corners were swallowed by shadow.

His sister had stacked numerous volumes next to herself on the desk. Other books lay open or marked with bright pink tabs from a sticky pad. The scatter of her research was organized compared to the remainder of the study. Mountains of texts, scattered relics, collections of art, and whatever else their grandfather had hoarded was left as it always had been, scattered randomly.

Margaret pretended to return to her reading "So, are you going to explain why you are sneaking around Pop's house?" She asked.

"I wasn't sneaking," Pax lied, "I was just coming here to do some research."

"Uhuh. You couldn't have gone to the library?"

"Not really."

Pax squirmed where he stood. Fresh pangs of grief must have twisted his tone and expression because Margaret immediately looked up and understood.

"Yeah... me too." Margaret said.

Both siblings had spent a lot of time in this study. Pax remembered hiding between piles of books. Trying to interpret the heady texts strewn across the office. The study's vaulted ceiling lifted two stories high. A wooden ladder secured to the back wall led up through a hatch into to a cozy loft. A spot Margaret would often hide. Orville had cultivated a love of books in his grandchildren. This study was a paradise. For Pax it was an Oasis hidden in the dark corner of the estate.

Pax had returned to pay his respects. It had taken two weeks to muster enough courage to visit the estate. Certain pain had kept him distant. Now, he decided, it was time.

In shuffles, Pax drifted by dusty shelves, following the wall to the first of two paned windows. Through the cloudy glass a breathtaking landscape stretched. Pax lingered for a while at the window. Unable to tear himself from the tapestry beyond.

"You are just like dad you know," Margaret said, "He always stands at that window, looking out at the forest."

"Hm, you're right he always did." Pax smiled at the thought, then frown at another, "Dad never really talked about what Pop was like. I always wondered what he was like as a parent."

"He said some things. Like how Pop traveled a lot. How obsessive he was. Strict."

"So how dad is."

Margaret gave a rueful chuckle that hummed behind her lips and responded. "I supposed you are right."

"Like father like son." Pax said grimly.

Margaret's smile disappeared at the implication. "Only if you choose to be."

Pax grunted with disdain. His eyes searched the horizon, stretching his vision as far as it would allow.

"There is something else out there Margaret. I can feel it. It is on the edge of my vision, like a fragment from a dream."

"You can't run from your problems."

"What if the tug of desire propels me to a solution. The object hidden from my view very well may be the catalyst of retribution."

"Retribution for what?"

Pax caught himself. Unsure of why he said those words. "I don't know. There is a ghost of rage whispering in my ear. I feel helpless to stop it."

"Pax..."

Drifting from the window Pax ran his finger over a bulging shelf. Tucked between the titles was a mask with the complexion of a wild animal. A bear, possibly a wolf, it was indistinct.

"There are things that we do not yet know." Pax rubbed his head, frustrated with remembering. "There are events that feel like memories in my mind. Repressed moments. The nightmares leave the most potent dread."

"Maybe if you would share your nightmares, I can help you understand."

"How could you understand something you have not experienced yourself." Pax snapped

“Don’t be so callous.” Margaret said in a biting tone.

Pax quickly melted into a defeated posture. “Sorry. I did not mean it like that... I feel the grief of so much loss, yet I cannot place why.”

An awkward silence grew between them. Margaret truly did not understand the weight resting on Pax’s shoulders. *Ever since he got the ring, his demeanor has changed drastically. That youthful glow has all but disappeared from his eyes.*

“Have you considered not wearing the ring?” Margaret inquired.

Pax lifted his hand and rotated it slowly to see all sides of the ring. With a blank expression he watched the steely band. Interwoven stalks topped by petal crowns carved into the small object. The word Wolfsbane inscribed in a similar fashion on the inner circle of the ring. Slowly he removed the ring and flung it into the wastebin. It rattled against the sides of the metal container.

Margaret snorted in surprise, “Well that was quick.”

Pax raised his right hand to show his ring finger, the wolfsbane ring firmly wrapped around. Margaret blinked and squinted to confirm her vision, dumbfounded by what she saw.

“How did you do that?” Margaret gasped.

“I thought I was insane the first time it happened. I took it off to shower and well... next thing I know it was on my hand. I thought I had just imagined taking it off, but then when it kept reappearing on my finger...”

“Do it again. I don’t believe you.”

“Ok.” Pax said. He flung the ring again, this time in a high arc up toward the loft. A soft thud against carpet indicated a landing.

Pax held his hand to show the ring had promptly returned.

Still skeptical, Margaret extended her hand requesting to hold it. Pax hesitated. He knew the effect that the ring had on himself as well as his grandfather.

“Please I have to know.” Margaret insisted.

“Fine but if you feel---”

“I will drop it immediately if I feel anything strange.”

Pax removed the ring and offered it to his sister. She opened her hand and accepted the metal band with open palm. Immediately she clasped her fingers around the ring as if to prevent its escape. She was unsure when the ring returned to Pax’s finger. All she could recall is that there was the ring, then only air trapped in her grasp.

Pax could not help but smile at the wonder blazing in his sister’s eyes.

“Incredible!” She exclaimed. “Are you making it do that?”

“To some extent. I can summon it or make it stay, but if I don’t think about either, it eventually returns on its own volition.”

“Why haven’t you shown me this before?”

“With everything going on, Pop dying, Festival preparations, you are getting ready to leave, it honestly felt insignificant.”

Melancholy swelled in Margaret’s chest. It truly was the intersection of many endings. It was something they had known would come for many years, but somehow it felt unexpected. Pax’s words riveted new significance in her brain: *“There is something else out there Margaret. I can feel it.”* A new beginning perhaps.

Pax had gone to stare out the other window. The second of the two was perpendicular to the large wooden desk three quarters of the way back into the study. Orville had loved that window for all the glory it held in those glass frames. Margaret watched Pax's shoulders, backlit by midday light. Those shoulders seemed somehow looser, firmer than she remembered. Those shoulders had helped carry the coffin in the funeral procession. That same procession had marched off with their childhood. Margaret could already feel that pragmatic disbelief filling the void where her childlike wonder had slept. *Many endings indeed.*

The mystery behind the ring troubled Margaret. She suspected, now more than ever, that there were aspects of the artifact that were beyond their current scope. Maybe the siblings had in fact caught wisps of something else, a fact eluding everything but instinct.

"Are you going to tell me what you are hiding from me?" Pax asked, his tone suddenly ominous.

Margaret tensed. She was used to being the one to see past her brother's defenses. His new perceptiveness was haunting, invasive. The tone in his voice did not leave room for speculation, he was demanding an answer rather than asking.

Pax surprised himself with his bold intuition. Maybe it was a byproduct of how close he was to Margaret, but this degree of sensitivity was a new experience. His suspicions alone were enough to warrant confrontation.

"I am hiding something," Margaret ventured, "but I cannot share it with you quite yet. I promise to tell you in time."

*Those blue eyes only face one direction I suppose.* Pax thought. "Very well, but this will not be that last time I ask."

"I promise, in time."

Pax departed from his window view and took a seat in Orville's green leather chair behind the desk. Margaret spun and hung her legs off the back of the desk, then cocked her head at her brother.

"Do you care to know why I am really here?" Pax asked.

"Yes." Margaret immediately cursed herself for sounding too eager.

"Pop's final words to me consisted of two requests. The first was to wear the ring. He insisted that I would understand in due time why, but that I must discover those reasons by my own merit. The second, and the reason I am here, was to never cease learning. Because a wise man never ceases learning."

Margaret recognized the phrase. Their grandfather had impressed those words on their minds. So often in fact, it had begun to mean something else.

"You waited this long to look for it?" Margaret asked.

"The days after that, when he became comatic, I searched the study for the bookmark. I never found it. Then, when he died, I lost interest, I began avoiding this house."

The blue, tasseled bookmark. *Never cease learning* had become a command to find where Pop had hidden the bookmark. They would scurry over each shelf until they unearthed the intended literature. Then, on the high of their little scavenger hunt, they would rifle through the pages, learning without ceasing.

A huge grin spread across both their faces. The pleasant memories of racing through the study flooded back, spurring an episode of chaotic joy in their hearts.

"You can help if you would like," Pax offered.

Without another word they began to mill through the study. Systematically picking through books, combing the nooks and hidden corners they had grown accustomed to checking.

Pax flitted between the more obscure places. He had naturally checked the more obvious hiding spots when he entered the room. The search had become reflex.

*Pop loved his games.* Pax remembered fondly.

The game had evolved into a practice. Pax had grown to crave that excitement of discovering something new. Something that was hidden in plain sight. By making it the object of a game, Orville had ingrained an essential joy to learning.

Fifteen minutes passed. Margaret sighed loudly to share her frustration with the statues watching from their shelves. An ape with its chin planted in its palm seemed entertained by their fruitless endeavor. A taxidermy rabbit perked its ears with patient interest.

Pax, across the room was also feeling stumped. Orville apparently had no interest in leaving his grandchildren with menial tasks.

"You think he would have hidden it in a different room?" Margaret asked over her shoulder.

"Never. Pop never changed the rules. He has simply outdone himself this time."

No matter how difficult the hunt had been, the bookmark was always in the study, just as Orville promised. Pax assured himself that his grandfather would not change the rules. Not for his final request. *After all these years, he still found a new place to hide that ridiculous blue bookmark.* Pax thought

Pax froze. There was an itch at the edge of his consciousness. A gentle warning from his subconscious that something was coming.

"Someone is here," Margaret said, punctuating Pax's premonition.

"What do we do?"

"I don't know, it is not like we aren't supposed to be here."

"Who would show up here? Mom and Dad are preoccupied all day."

They spoke across the study in hushed tones, their apprehension mounting.

The latch of the back door unlocked. The creaks barely perceptible, but their trained ears interpreted the sound of an intruder doing their best to remain imperceptible.

"Did you drive here?" Margaret hissed.

"No, walked. They won't know anyone else is here." Pax whispered back.

They came to an unspoken conclusion. Swiftly they climbed to the small loft overlooking the study. The space was neat, two armchairs and a stack of folded blankets next to plush cushions. To standing lamps accompanied either armchair. On the wall across from the floor to ceiling windows, a small square hatch enclosed a closet space. The closet, they had discovered as children, had another door at the back that led to the attic. Silently they stole through the hatch. Each avoiding the spots in the floor they knew would give under their footstep emitting a loud creak.

They heard faint noises of the unknown intruder making their way through the first floor of the house.

Closing the hatch behind themselves, they were plunged into darkness. Carefully, they squeezed between boxes and paraphernalia, feeling their way through the familiar landscape of

their hiding place. Light peeked through a small crack at the baseboards. They had pried the crack open over the years to create a peep hole into the study.

Pax peered through the gap and held in a gasp. Through the peep hole, the top bookshelf obstructed part of the view into the room, and through its open face only was part of the study visible. Perfectly placed behind the rows of books was a leatherbound journal, protruding from the shut pages was a blue tasseled bookmark.

*Pop placed the bookmark in a place he knew only we would find.* Pax realized.

"Margaret, wait," Pax whispered, "You need to see this."

Margaret paused, her outline barely visible in the darkness. She crept back to where Pax was, laid out so his eyes could look directly through the crack at the base boards. A quick inhale said she saw the bookmark.

"He wanted us to find it. No one else knows about this crack," Pax explained.

Footsteps had grown louder. Pax felt his heart thumping in the darkness as he stilled his body. Margaret positioned herself to spy through the crack as well. Curiosity and fear cemented the siblings into a silent observance. Pax wondered why he felt so much fear. How had he already concluded the intent of this intruder? Was it really an intruder at all? Margaret seemed to sense danger as well. They shared that animal instinct, a trait reinforced by their father's training.

Listening closely, Pax could pick out the directness of the footsteps. Whoever it was knew their way through the house, a mansion with at least twenty rooms. Their muffled stride headed for the study.

Closer, closer, then nothing. Pax's stomach clenched, he felt adrenaline pumping through his veins, sharpening his senses.

The slow knob turn was inaudible, a light dress shoe ventured into the room, followed by a pouchy lipped, bearded man wearing dark wash jeans and a blue, burnt orange button down. His Lichen green eyes and regarded the study with need.

"It's Uncle Reginald," Margaret whispered in Pax's ear. Pax flinched at the sound, then relaxed realizing her level would not carry more than a few inches.

Reginald regarded the walls from a moment more, then satisfied with his scan, closed his eyes, and raised his hands. He rotated his palms to face the ceiling, locking his elbows at his waist. Pax felt the poison quiver in response to a release in energy. *He is using Slate.*

Reginald's Slate materialized as a smokey mist the mist gathered and coagulated a just above each palm. The life energy became a physical goop that twisted and reformed into sixteen hunched appendages and matching sets of bulbous body segments. As the goop materialization completed, the silvery film dripped away to reveal two arachnid forms. They were unlike any spider Pax had seen before. Both spiders similar in size to Reginald's large hands, both creatures now balancing atop their respective appendage, testing their newformed limbs. Their appearance was jet black and did not have the hair studded body of most spiders. These conjurations appeared to have armor plating as exoskeletons.

"Go, find the blue bookmark." Reginald ordered the spiders. His voice projected confidently as always. Pax did not even have to strain his ears to eavesdrop.

The spiders leaped from their master's hands, scurrying off to search the bookshelves.

"What does *he* want with the bookmark?" Margaret whispered.

“Who knows? Pop obviously left it where only we would find it.” Pax said pointing through the crack to the tasseled bookmark.

They both knew they could not allow their uncle to get that bookmark. Whatever the significance, neither Pax nor Margaret trusted their troublesome relative with any of Pop’s legacies.

*I must know what is in that book.* Pax resolved.

“If we can pry the crack open, we can reach and grab the book,” Pax said softly.

“He will hear,” Margaret retorted.

“Yes, but if we are quick, we should be able to slip away before he can get to us. We know this house much better than him.”

Margaret huffed. She was not pleased with showing themselves so readily.

The spiders glided over the books, working their way up and down shelves, over stacks and piles. Reginald scratched his beard staring at the floor expectantly. *He is so confident, unaware we are watching.* Pax realized.

“We don’t have time. The spiders will find the books in minutes.” Pax said, his whisper was urgent.

“Ok,” Margaret conceded, “Here, used this. She slid the drakon bone sword from its sheath, the scraping sound of bone on bone was dull but Pax tensed reflexively. Reginald still stood unaware of their presence.

Pax swallowed. He could make out the sinewy tapping of grotesque appendage as the spiders obediently scoured below. He could feel sweat beading, the enclosure trapping Pax’s sense of safety. He silently rearranged himself so he could push downward on the hilt. In position, Pax imagined his movement, how he would slip the sword between the crack, and in one motion pry the baseboard further from the floor.

“Ready?” Pax asked.

“On my count,” Margaret instructed, her outline just a foot away.

Spiny footsteps sounded louder than before. Pax cleared his head, summoned Slate aura to his arms and abdomen. Wolfsbane poison protested, but Pax ignored the complaints.

“Three...”

Pax slid the blade between the wood.

“Two...”

He sucked in musty air.

“One.”

Pax drove his body weight downward against the handle of the sword.

The wood groaned mightily, only budging an inch at first. Reginald’s voice called out to the noise. “Who’s there?” His bellow was fearsome against the silence.

Pax spent more Slate on his muscles. He felt a rush of energy and the old wood began to crack. Margaret goaded him to move faster.

“Hunt,” the command came from that same booming voice, though it was not directed at Pax and Margaret.

*The spiders.* Pax’s stomach dropped. He put everything he had into a desperate shove. He felt a raw unbridled rage wash over him, his lever shot downward as the baseboard splintered and separated from the wall. Margaret slipped her hand through and grasped the book.

“Got it!” She said, her voice louder with an edge of panic. She immediately handed Pax the leather-bound book and reclaimed her sword. Then, without another word, they crawled back through the closet. Invisble objects clatters and toppled as the pushed recklessly across the darkness. Pax heard a heavy thud followed by a crack as Margaret kicked at a hatch leading into the attic. Dim light spilled into the closet and they flung themselves through the back hatch into that attic. Pax kicked the door closed behind them and slid a stack of boxes against the panel. He jumped, hearing two thuds as the spiders landed against the wood. More scuttling ensued.

The attic was dimly lit by a far stain-glass window, shadows cast by colorful light backlit boxes and neglected furniture.

“Move! Those creatures will find a way through before long.” Margaret shouted. She knocked over some boxes, making way toward the light.

Pax gripped the book viciously. He felt the braided tassel between his fingers to confirm its existence. He found his hand shook furiously.

More commotion as boxes toppled and fragile object shattered. Pax found that his body was moving, but his mind was stuck. He tucked the precious volume against his furious heartbeat.

Shoving over a stack of cardboard boxes, they had arrived at the window. Instinctively, they both knew this was their best way out. Going through the mansion meant facing their uncle and his spiders. The long steeped roof of the house intersected at this middle window. Various furnishings lay messy before the stained glass.

“Brace me!” Margaret instructed.

Pax understood and wrapped his free hand around his sister’s waist. He stuck his feet out behind to resist the pushing force. Thrusting his Slate downward into his legs and feet. Poison gushed into his body muddling his consciousness. Pax ignored the strain.

Margaret threw her own slate in a pressurized burst, creating a violent wall of energy. The push sent her backward against Pax, who desperately resisted the force.

The clutter laid before the window was thrown outward, glass shattered as a chair, dresser and the rest escaped out into the air, the falling three stories to the front stoop.

Margaret’s spell subsided. Pax released his own Slate and stumbled forward. His vision swam, the poison tested his willpower. *Not yet. I must protect the bookmark.*

His sister was already running, her powerful legs leaping from the gaping hole where the stain glass window had been.

Pax heard the attic door rip open behind him as he threw out through the fresh portal and down into the debris littered grass.

“Stop!” Reginald demanded.

He bounded up the stairwell with a few leaping strides. He sensed his spiders had finally found a hole to crawl through and would soon reach the same position as him. He cursed himself for being so slow. Furious that he had neither sensed another presence in the study nor reacted with proper speed. He was sure he had been alone. It would have taken a particularly deft individual to escape his senses.

He crested the top stair. He was shocked by the scene. *My prey shattered a window, no... they blew out the entire wall!* Reginald seethed.

The sturdy wood siding, some of the roof, the heavy stained glass, it was all gone. The cragged edges indicating the entire wall had been wrenched from the house.

A few more steps and Reginald stood looking down at the yard. Crushed furniture, shattered glass, and chunks of Orville's home were scattered across the front lawn, three stories down. Reginald searched wildly and caught a glimpse of two figures right before they were swallowed by the treetops.

He grimaced as he recognized Pax and Margaret.

His jumping spiders scampered up beside Reginald. Reginald considered sending his pets on the hunt but dashed the idea. *I can't attack Clever's kids without consequence. Not yet.*

"You are dismissed," He said to his spiders, "we finish this hunt another day."

The spiders dematerialized into silvery goop, splashing to the floorboards until evaporating back into pure life energy.