

“Yah!” Nicolas cried, trying to urge his mule to go faster. His village hadn’t possessed a horse in two generations, nor would he have known how to ride one, but he desperately wished he had something better to ride. The mule snorted and continued at a brisk trot, seemingly unaware of what was going on around them.

“I thought animals were supposed to sense disaster,” Nicolas muttered to himself. He tried to swat the mule’s flank with his branch-turned-crop, but hit himself instead. He was too big to mount such an animal, but he had no other option.

In the past, he could manage to guide the mule and his cart up the mountain, but it was slow going in the best of conditions. He needed to get to Chilzo and find out what happened. Something must have gone wrong. Otherwise he would’ve sounded the horn, and none of this would be happening.

The ground shook. In the distance, Nicolas could hear the earth crack as if split by lightning. He looked out to the fields, his skin feeling cold and thin in anticipation of what he would see.

It had emerged from the horizon like a shadow from the clouds. With each deliberate step it became more real. It towered high beyond imagination, its broad horns blotting out the sun as it slowly swung its head. What looked to be the remains of an ornate cathedral hung from its throat; whether it was caught in its gnarled mane or was imbedded in its flesh, Nicolas could not say. With each step a massive bell within the ruins rang out a mournful tone. To Nicolas, it sounded like a warning come too late.

It had stopped twice since its appearance, bowing its head into the cornfields. What wasn’t already crushed under its pillar-like legs was rotted under the creature’s breath. Even from the village one could see the air shimmer from the beast’s cavernous maw and watch as the stalks withered into brown coils.

Elder Russel had sent a runner for the capitol, but no one expected the church to respond in time. John and his gang of delinquents saw it as a chance to seize glory and had charged off into the fields, never to be seen again. Melanie had begun shrieking at the sight of the thing and threw herself down the well.

When Nicolas had gone to find his mule, he saw Elder Emily sitting calmly while her family scrambled to load a cart with provisions. It was strange enough to distract him from the immediate chaos.

“Aren’t you going to get in the cart?”

Elder Emily gave him a sad smile and shook her head. “There is no running from this. I’d rather accept it now.”

Nicolas had wanted to say more, but the creature lolled then. Its voice rolled over the valley like thunder and nearly drove the strength from his knees. He had hurried on to get the mule and make his way to Mount Elphorn as fast as possible.

The road from the village to the mountain was straight enough with well-worn grooves from the wagons that would come for the harvests. The fields spread out in either direction. Nicolas had loved them all his life. He loved how they grew into a sea of green that rustled gently in the breeze. He loved the golden tone the fields took in the autumn. Lillian didn’t like the rustling they made then. She said it sounded hollow and dead. Nicolas felt it sounded more like soft laughter; a promise of a returning friend.

Now the behemoth overshadowed all of it. Black craters marked its inexorable progression, and arcs of decay cut brown swaths through his sea of green. This wouldn't be happening if Chilzo had sounded the horn. As dire as things were, perhaps there was still time. Chilzo would know what to do.

Nicolas hadn't known what to expect the first time Elder Russel had taken him up the mountain. The winding path up the mountainside was invisible to him, and he couldn't understand how Elder Russel knew where to step or where to turn. The temple carved into the mountainside was all the more striking because of how natural everything else appeared. In muted light of the day, Nicolas could see countless golden inlay strands within the temple's stonework.

Inside was unlike anything Nicolas had ever seen. The floor was a mosaic of heroic figures and twisted beasts that defied description. The center of the room hosted a recessed fire pit burning with a brilliant blue flame. The chest-high wall that ringed the room held shelves for books, bowls and potted goods. The upper half of the ring consisted of widely spaced columns. Between them one could see all the land surrounding the mountain. This was befuddling since the temple was recessed inside the mountain. What's more, while it had been cloudy that day, the sky seen between the temple's pillars was crystal clear.

The magic room was so distracting Nicolas had failed to notice the child sitting on a cushion and reading a book. He was even more curious than the surroundings. His skin was a soft, robin's egg blue and his hair snowy white. When he noticed them, his golden eyes lit up with excitement. He wore a robe of a style and texture Nicolas had never seen, and hung off Chilzo's slight frame with great weight.

"Russel!" Chilzo had greeted. "Has it been a month already?"

"According to the moon," the elder had affirmed. "I have brought along little Nicolas. He will be taking over my duties after the next harvest."

"A wonderful pleasure to meet you," the little blue boy said, extending his palm upwards. "I am Chilzo."

Nicole had looked to the oddly outstretched hand, to the boy, to his elder and back again, utterly lost. Elder Russel took his hand and guided it, lightly swiping his palm across Chilzo's. He then turned Nicolas's hand over so that Chilzo could return the gesture.

"He...doesn't seem to know much about the customs."

"Few do anymore," the elder had admitted. "I had hoped...nevermind that. Nicolas is a good boy. He works hard and is good-natured. I'm sure you'll get along fine."

"You're blue," Nicolas had blurted.

Chilzo then burst into laughter, as beautiful as a carol of bells.

Things had gone much more smoothly afterwards. Nicolas learned the way up the mountain, what offerings and provisions to prepare, and how to count the moon's faces to know when to make his next trip. He took over Elder Russel's duties far quicker than expected and ended up lingering in the temple more than was traditionally found acceptable. Chilzo didn't seem to mind.

"It gets lonely," he admitted once. They were looking out over the lands below, even though they should've been staring into the heart of the mountain. Nicolas had asked how such a view was possible, but Chilzo had only winked and raised a finger to his lips in reply.

"Can't you come down to the village once in a while?" Nicolas had asked.

“That would violate the pact.”

“I could come visit more often. It’s not that hard a climb now that I know where to go.”

Chilzo had given him a heart-breaking smile, full of longing and remorse. “That would violate the pact as well. We’re already pushing the boundaries as it is.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re not meant to.”

“Well...that’s stupid.”

Chilzo belted out his musical laugh. “Right you are.”

Nicolas had tried very hard to understand Chilzo’s world. The books stocked on the shelves were full of empty pages. However, if you drew one knowing the type of contents you wanted, the text would be there. The potted goods would never run out, so the provisions Nicolas hauled up the mountain were mostly indulgences. The fire at the center of the room never needed stoking, would not burn when touched, and kept the room both warm and cool throughout the year. It made returning to his village cottage unbearable sometimes.

One day, Nicolas realized that for all the magical luxuries, there was nowhere to sleep.

“I’m not allowed to,” Chilzo explained. “Otherwise, something might arrive and I wouldn’t be awake to blow the horn.”

The Elphorn was what the mountain was named for. It was a colossal structure. Its bell was tall enough that Nicolas could stand in it and not reach the top. A set of glittering stairs, carved from a glassy crystal, led to the mouthpiece high above. Even with the curve of the central extension, Nicolas could hardly see the top of the stair. The horn was made of a material he could not recognize, but seemed almost like bone. Every few meters it was reinforced with a band of dark wood, fastened with golden bolts.

“I guess you can’t tell me what the horn does,” Nicolas had said.

“It wards off evil,” Chilzo answered frankly. His tone had put a knot in Nicolas’s stomach.

“Well, if you can’t sleep, how do you get rested? Wouldn’t it be worse to be drowsy all the time?”

“I have my books,” Chilzo had said. “I have my games. I count the stars, the clouds, the birds and such. I keep myself occupied.”

“Well I don’t think it’s right. You’re supposed to stay up here, all alone, and you don’t even get to take a nap?”

“It’s fine, Nick. Really.”

Nicolas had not been convinced, and Chilzon didn’t sound entirely convinced either. But Nicolas had learned he could only question things so far. Once, when he had pried too insistently, Chilzo had stopped talking to him. He moved around the room like a ghost, even becoming harder to see. When Nicolas had returned the next month, Chilzo acted as if nothing had happened before. Nicole wasn’t sure if that was part of the magic of the place, or if it was Chilzo putting on an act.

The memories made his chest ache, and Nicolas whipped the mule furiously. They had barely begun the mountain’s path and the stubborn thing had slowed to a crawl.

“Faster, damn you!”

The mule bucked with an angry bray and threw him off. It snapped at him, and Nicolas lashed it across the nose.

“Walking would’ve been faster!” he shouted at the animal. It laid its ears back and glared in return.

Nicolas turned and made his way towards the temple. He had guided the cart enough times he could avoid the problem spots, but he still watched his footing. If he turned his ankle now, or fell off the side, he would’ve died of shame before exposure. His breathing became ragged and he stopped half-way up to recover. He looked to the fields below. The behemoth had turned its head towards the village. It had taken all day to cross the fields, but all it needed was a couple of steps to reach his home. What’s more, in the meadows to the east, a storm front was rolling in low to the ground.

Nicolas began to move, but something within the storm caught his eye, and he stopped to look again. The clouds did not rise into the anvil shape he was used to. They were uniform, bubbly, and visibly roiled like a boiling froth. And then something emerged from beneath them. It was a long shadow, but not cast by any shape and moving independently of the clouds. It had a shape and weight to it, like a grand ribbon, and swiped into the meadow like a cat’s paw.

More shadowy arms descended into the meadow, pulling up grass and land alike. As each tendril retreated back into the clouds, teeth emerged. Masses of black pushed out of the vapor to viciously bite down on shadow, earth and all. Nicolas felt like screaming until it silenced all other thoughts in his head.

Instead he sprinted up the mountain. Whatever was below was at least a mile away, and yet he felt the immediate dread in his heart. He gripped the rocks to hurl himself forward. He scrambled over the brush on all fours like an animal. When he reached the temple his clothes were snagged and his palms scraped, but he didn’t care. He had made it.

The Elphorn stood as it always had. The temple looked to be in good order. So where was Chilzo? Nicolas took a stumbling step towards the temple; his moment of rest had allowed his fatigue to catch up. He took a breath and stepped into the temple.

Everything was as he remembered it. Between the pillars he saw the nightmares descending upon his village as clearly as he had from the mountain path. Nothing was broken or out of place; no signs of sabotage or struggle. And then he saw Chilzo on the floor.

His head was on a seat cushion and his knees drawn to his chest. He was sound asleep.

Nicholas trembled. He wasn’t sure if it was rage, or sorrow, or guilt. He remembered the pang he felt when Chilzo had said he wasn’t allowed the luxury of sleep. He never would have begrudged him that indulgence. And yet here they were. Chilzo was doing what Nicolas had always hoped he could enjoy, and disaster was unfolding just as Chilzo had forewarned.

Nicolas took a step towards him, then stopped. If he woke him now, he would never sleep again. He would never consider his own needs ever again. He would do his duty, as he should, but be enslaved to the arcane and arbitrary rules of this place. What was unfolding below was a nightmare, but Nicolas could not add guilt to Chilzo’s many shackles.

Instead he rushed back outside and up the stairs to the Elphorn. There must have been a reason Chilzo was entrusted to the task instead of anyone else, but Nicolas didn’t care. He had spent ten years of his life getting to know the beautiful, alien child of the mountain. All he had been able to do for him was bring him treats and spend a few hours a month breaking up the monotony of his existence. He would do this for him too.

Nicolas gripped the railing of the stairs and caught his breath. A horn of this size would need all the strength his lungs could muster. Between the mountain and the stairs, he was nearly spent. He couldn't give a half-measure. Far below he saw the head of the behemoth eclipse the village. The ravenous clouds were converging there as well.

He gripped the mouthpiece, breathed deep, and blew.

Chilzo stirred as the mule nibbled at his cheek. He blinked away the blariness from his eyes and smiled up at it. He reached out and rubbed its face.

"Hello, you smelly thing," he laughed. He frowned and looked closer. "You have a cut on your nose. What happened?"

The mule turned and wandered away. Chilzo rose and stretched. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept. It had been good - dark and dreamless - but he hated the confusion that came with it. How long had he been gone? He jumped to his feet with a realization. The mule! It was Nicolas's mule! He wasn't due for half a moon!

Chilzo rushed to survey the world below. The eastern meadows were awash with foam. His beloved village was intact, but the skeletal remains of something massive laid on its very edge. Behind the blackened bones was the cornfield, ravaged and ruined.

"Nicholas?" Chilzo called. His voice was soft, because he was afraid of the answer.

He hurried outside and up the stairs of the Elphorn. Nothing was there, save for a ragged flap of leather stuck to the mouthpiece. Chilzo plucked it free and it blew away in the wind. He climbed back down the stairs, heart racing in confusion. How long had he slept? Who had blown the horn in his absence? Why had the mule wandered up the mountain on its own?

He hoped Nicolas could fill him in when next they spoke.