

Umwelten

*For Justine,
An incredible sister in her family
As well as mine.*

QUERY LETTER:

Dear [agent]:

Bobby & Calvin are twins of the valley. Their father, and their father's father, were as well. They know the Valley's environment like the back of their hand, from the metal-bark trees, to the echo-locating wolves, to the Richter earthworms. They learned it together, how to live off the land as well as with it, all 17 years of their lives.

Bobby & Calvin's world is realistic fantasy, only varying from ours in a few small ways. There is no magic, but a difference in evolution—humans, as well as many species in their environment, developed far more than 5 senses, such as magnetoreception, thermography, and many others. These vary from person to person, and family to family; in Bobby & Calvin's family, the ability to sense static electricity runs very strong, and is just as essential to them as their sight. In some cases, it is even more essential—like Bobby's, who is completely blind and mute.

The Citadel unites the kingdom of the Valley, although it is a very young regime. They are known to be capable, but harsh—when Bobby & Calvin were young, their father had the skin flayed from his arms, removing his ability to sense static permanently. Now, there are rumors that they are coming to small towns like the Valley, looking for military age men with Bobby's exact suite of senses.

Calvin has been translating and sticking up for Bobby his whole life. He is not about to stop now.

Umvelten is a biological-inspired fantasy novel, centered around the relationship of two twins who couldn't be more different, down to the very way they perceive the world. The joy of the project has been in writing and exploring characters who perceive the world in such

drastically different ways than each other, or any of us. Currently 12,000 words, *Umvelten* tries to stay away from fantasy's tendency to glorify violence and power, instead focusing on realistic, small-scale characters in a much larger, scarier world.

I am a computer science major and creative writing minor with a bachelor's degree from Hamilton college. This will be my first novella length work, but I have many poems and short stories published in various student literature magazines on campus. This story is inspired by many fantasy and science fiction projects, including Brandon Sanderson's cosmere, Ursula K. LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness*, M.L. Wang's *The Sword of Kaigen*, and Pierce Brown's *Red Rising*, as well as *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and *Catcher in the Rye*. My other main creative projects are video games—I have made three different small titles, all available online, inspired by artistic and out-of-the-box indie games like *Celeste* and *HeartBound*.

Enjoy *Umvelten*!

Best,

Graham MF Stuard.

Chapter 1: Calvin

The first thing you should know about my family is that we are a large, rowdy and agricultural group. My Father was one of eight children, and one of three pairs of twins. He grew up in the same valley that I did. I've got thirty cousins, and counting—I'm the fourth oldest of them, and barely the second oldest of my siblings. We all have the same northern accent, hairy and coarse arms, and hot temper. There's a lot of love in my family, my Mother has always said, and with all that love comes a lot of passion, and a lot of hot tempers.

The first thing you should know about my Father is that his temper lost him his Static five years ago, when the city infantry came to take a quarter of our town's young men to serve. He tried to hide me, my younger brothers, and some of the other boys from town when he saw them riding into town, but hiding eligible recruits is tyranny against the crown. So is brutally assaulting a soldier when he finds a dozen boys in the abandoned silo, coughing up dust, huddled together. They stripped the hair and cartilage off his arms as punishment, the stuff that allows everyone in our family to sense static electricity—like electric eels, or static raptors can do. Taking away a sense is the cruelest punishment you can receive around here, besides being killed—he's lucky it wasn't his eyes.

The first thing you should know about my twin, Bobby, is that he has never been able to speak, and he can't really see like you probably do. His eyes don't work. Some people call him stupid, and mother says that's the term for people like him, but he's not stupid at all, he's actually really smart, and not just smart in the perfect-memory way that the Walcott's daughter is, he really understands people. He understands me, at least. We've always been close, since we were little.

Finally. The first thing you should know about me is that I'm not quick to anger like most of my family. Even Bobby, though he's mostly mute and much more patient than the rest of them, will get heated and overwhelmed from time to time.

Not me. It's not that I don't get angry—I certainly do—it's that when I do, I know how to hold onto it.

That anger is simmering slowly in me now as I rake my reaper's scythe across the necks of the vines growing in rows down the back of our farm. As I approach each row, they hang loose from the rusted metal supports they grow on, until I flex my hand, feel a static shock course along my arm, and the vines shoot out straight, almost touching the ground, hard as rock. Today I'm only cutting yard-lengths, but I've been left out here by myself because Mother had to leave for council at sunset.

I'm just falling into the steady rhythm of good work when I hear my uncle:

"Calvin! Where are you, kid!"

I climb up the support platform to see my balding uncle peering through the maze of vines and poles, shocking them out of the way as he passes. "Here, Uncle!"

"Oh, hey boy". He saunters over, wringing his hairy, calloused hands. "You're getting to this crop a little late in the day, aren't you?"

I peer at the sun, just sneaking its way towards the crest of the valley. "Yeah. I guess. I've got time."

He grunts, then pauses, awkwardly. "Well, I came out here to talk to you. You know, about your brother. Would'ya hop down from there? I'll help you with this last row."

He doesn't need to specify which brother he's talking about. It's Bobby. About two months ago, one of our neighbors' cousins rode into town, saying that in towns surrounding the

city, the infantry had been collecting people with stronger abilities to manipulate senses, often people missing the core senses—Sight, Hearing, and Touch. He claimed they weren't forcing people to come with them. We know that they don't have to.

I pass my Uncle my scythe, and start shocking the vines with static from my wrists before he cuts them. I wait for him to talk first.

"I know you think we shouldn't send him." Another pause. "I've been talking to your father. You know, when you and Bobby were born, one of us two were going to head east, to Glenvaele. They've got doctors there, you know, and they've got more people who are different like him. Plus, your Mother has an old friend there, Divar, who's a scientist—I think she studies people like your brother."

"Why didn't you go?"

"We always thought it might be pointless, if we couldn't take Bobby there too. We would've gone, but with you kids so young, and the farm, it's hard to find even a single month to get up and leave. But now that you're older, if you could talk to them, me and your father have always thought, I don't know, they could help him. You know what I mean."

I do know what he means. On top of being somewhat of a difficult kid, and an even more difficult teenager, Bobby had some serious health problems when he was younger, stuff that was a bit above the paygrade of even the doctors or healers from other valleys nearby. I would often overhear my parents talking about some place called Gith, that could take better care of him. "I do know what you mean. You want me to take him off your hands." I glance back at him—he's stopped shearing vines to dig through the pockets of his work pants.

“No! I am certainly not saying that. I didn’t even suggest it, actually, especially if your father asks. I’m saying I want you to have this.” He pulls out an old looking, thick and sleek metal disk, with some scratches but no rust at all. “You ever seen it?”

“Was that Grandfather’s?” I asked.

“Yes—it’s a compass. Usually it’ll just point North, but sometimes vipers or large pieces of some metal will mess with it. It won’t let you Seek—it’s a shitty replacement for being one of the Butler’s—but it works just fine.”

“Thanks, Unc. I don’t know about, you know, running off like that—”

“No no, don’t worry about it now. I just want it on your mind. We’ve got months anyways before anyone from the city gets out to a dinky old valley like this.” He picks his blade back up, sighing. “Even with my help, you’re barely gonna finish this plot before sundown. Slacker.”

“Like you’re any better”, I say with a chuckle. The sentiment from my Uncle is not lost on me—he’s usually a sappy guy, but I still appreciate it. We get back to work as he bugs me about the Butler girls, and tells me how in his prime, I never would’ve beaten him in Foot Ball. What a joke.

...

Three hours later, the sun has set, and it’s a cold, clear night in the valley. My Mother and I are herding the rest of my family into the common pavilion, sitting along the front of the natural amphitheater of the hill. The air is full of chatter from the families and the static buzz of so many people together. My Father is laughing with the Walcotts, my little sisters are leading my brother and a mob of kids into a game of tag, and my Mother is talking with the Butler’s. The

Butler girls—Amalia and Allie—are flipping an old metal coin between each other, without touching it. Show offs.

I Feel someone clasp onto my right arm, and know it's Bobby. He's blinking rapidly, a usual tick of his, and humming lightly. I think his ticks help him sense Static better without Sight, but it freaks out most new people we meet. He's facing the Butlers, and I almost think he's laughing at them. I pat him on the shoulder and lead him to sit down on the grass.

“Hello all! Hey hey, settle down!” Pilar Butler, the Grandfather of the Butler house, shouts as he walks up to the stone podium. “Hey Don, hey all, sit down, let's get started.” My sisters perk up, and in a panic, gather all the kids and dash up the hill and out of the common. Bobby smiles as their shrieks and whoops fade off into the distance.

“Thank you all for coming. We've got some small business tonight, and then we've got something a bit more serious. First, Jan, talk to me about the...”

Bobby is shocking the grass below our feet, making it stand up straight, then letting it relax. I pull a tulip out of the ground from nearby and shock it, making it shoot pollen right into his face, and he starts sneezing. Classic prank! We start tying together cords of grass and stems, building a chain, with the tulip on the end. He's always been able to send static shocks further than me—I can get about four yards before the signal starts to fade, whereas one time (with a good chain) he sent a shock from twenty yards, to hit the flytrap my Uncle was standing next to.

“... with Bobby, it's no question. What does that have to do with the infantry?” My Father says, already standing up from his seat next to the rest of my family. At his tone and the mention of my brother, I come back to the moment.

“Calm down, Don,” Pilar Butler says, trying to mediate. “We would send someone with him.”

“And who would you suggest?” Shouts Covey, my oldest cousin, among murmurs from the crowd.

“I’m glad—hey, silence! Listen up. I’m glad you asked, Covey. I would go with him.”

If the backtalk before was distracting, now it’s outrageous. For once, Jan Butler (Pilar’s eldest) and my Father seem to be on the same side—they both stand up, yelling at Pilar.

“SILENCE!” Pilar lifts the large metal block by his feet and drops it, letting it shock everyone into silence. Bobby looks up for the first time, a horrified look on his face. “Jan and Don. You are fathers with young children. This is not a body guarding job—this would be me escorting young Bobby to the city, and returning after a few months at most.”

“Hey, hold on,” I chime in. “Since when are we sending Bobby anywhere?”

“We don’t have many options, son,” Jan says to me, with a pitying look towards Bobby.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean we have to offer him up early!”

My Father perks up at this, turning towards the podium. “Pilar, even the boy sees—”

“We HAVE to send him, Don,” Jan cuts in angrily. “Thanks to you, they have us all registered!”

“Thanks to me?! Easy for you to say, with three daughters...” My Father is drowned out again by the crowd once more—people yelling at Pilar, yelling at each other, or at nothing at all.

Besides me, Bobby’s humming turns into a louder groan.

Pilar goes to slam the pillar once more, but as he’s lifting, he lets out a hacking set of coughs, almost audible even with the crowd in its state. Allie is slapping his back, and Amalia is trying to lift the slab herself, but her pull is too strong, and it’s falling on its other side. Covey is getting in between my Mother and the eldest Walcott boy, who started walking down the

amphitheater as if to take over the whole meeting, and they bump into Bobby as they pass, who starts groaning even louder.

I get a distinct wave of nausea and claustrophobia as the fights and mayhem escalate. I look at Bobby, who's gone from moaning to yelling, still rocking on the grass. "Guys, shut up! Shut up! Everyone shut up!" I yell. The noise only grows.

As Bobby's hands dig through the grass, pulling up roots and clumps of dirt, the grass around him starts to spike up—first a few feet around him, then to the closest people, then further. People jump up from their spots, feet and backs spiked by the striking grass. He strikes the ground with his feet at once, and yells: "GHRRRRGGG!" All around, people are knocked over as the blades of grass stab into everyone within 20 meters.

There's a moment of shocked silence, as everyone turns to stare at me and Bobby, or examine their pricked hands and feet. I turn to the crowd, and I'm about to tell everyone to listen, when I hear one of the Walcott's say "see? He's not just useless, he's dangerous!"

I don't need to stay to imagine the fight that is about to break out between my family and the Walcott's now. I step over the spiked blades, grab Bobby by his arm, and I walk him out of the common. Before we walk out of eyesight, as Bobby is panting and growling still, I turn to see my Uncle looking back from behind the podium, where Pilar is still recovering. He gives me a solemn nod.

Chapter 2: A Short Rest

I made up my mind by the time I got home with Bobby. We were leaving that night. Ultimately, if our town chooses to send Bobby to the city instead of waiting for them to come here, there is nothing I could do about it. Better to take matters into our own hands.

Glenvaele is only a three week journey, maybe two if we are quick—which we probably won't be. I'm not much of a traveler, and Bobby certainly isn't. Our Mother spent a long time traveling when she was only a bit older than us, but that's different—she didn't grow up in the Valley. She's always been saying to our Father that we should travel when we turn 18, and go somewhere as far as the Citadel. This journey is a bit shorter, and we're almost 18 anyways. The farm might struggle without us, but ultimately, they'll be fine—most of the hard labor that we needed done I finished up this last week.

This is what I repeat to myself as I'm packing in the middle of the night. I sneak by my Parent's room to the barn, where I grab any packable rations we have, about 20 yards of good quality leathered vine to sell, and a separate two meter vine to use as a walking stick. I drop some caramelized berries with a note in my sister's room, telling them to claim they saw me and Bobby sneaking out last night to the Butler's—that will buy me enough time that no one will be able to follow me on horseback. They'll also get a good ransom out of my Parents when they finally fess up—those two are always working an angle. I'm hit with a pang of guilt as the door to my sister's room slowly creaks closed.

Finally, I go to wake Bobby up, but when I get up to his room in the attic, he isn't there. I close my eyes, and put my arms out to both sides, focusing on my forearms, feeling the subtle buzz of energy clicking and sparking all around me. The barn is loud, even from here, as the cattle roll around in their sleep amongst the dry hay. I can feel a slight buzz from the rooms

downstairs, but my sense isn't good enough to pick anyone out specifically—people let off less static when they're asleep. Then, I sense him—above me. A comforting and familiar buzz, warm and steadier than most people's, that I would recognize anywhere. I open my eyes, and step out the window onto the roof, where Bobby is sitting, knees up against his chest. He has a bag already packed, and he is staring blankly out at the field. I can tell he noticed me, but he doesn't move.

“Hey, Bobby.” I sit down next to him, and grab his forearm. His eyes are teary, and from up close like this, I can tell his heart is beating fast. Even I underestimate how much Bobby understands sometimes—I thought I would have to wake him up and explain to him what we were doing. “You're ready to go?”

He nods, not turning towards me. “You know this is going to be a long trip, right?” He nods again. That's another thing about Bobby—even when I'm not sure what he does understand, we don't need many words to get on the same page. I stand up, and help him to his feet.

...

I take one last look back at my town as we crest the valley. It's quiet—the only sound is the wind flowing through the trees. I'm sure it is nothing like what Glenvaele will be like, and I can't help but wonder if this is a stupid decision. We don't know if our Mother's friend, Divar, is still there, not to mention who he is. I don't know what or who the Gith are, besides scientists. Neither Bobby or I have gone even close to this far from home before.

I sign, check my Uncle's compass one last time, and turn away one final time from our home. Bobby is trudging, head bowed, hesitant but steady, in front of me. It's time we do something that my family should have done a long time ago—go get some help.

Chapter 3: Farmers Can't Hunt

The first week of the walk was pleasant, only because it was also familiar—it was only when we passed Wessfield, the eastmost town from ours that I have been to, that things started to get difficult. I was able to pick up a few more days of food there, relying on the little actual coinage I had and a few favors on behalf of my Father. Having Bobby with me here was a huge help, actually, because everyone recognized us immediately, even if they hadn't met us, as our Father's sons.

Luckily, water is easy to find—while my Static is a lot less precise than my vision, it has a much further range, and passes through non-static objects. By exposing the cartilage on my forearms to the air, and closing my eyes, I can usually sense nearby rivers or streams from all the fish and other electric creatures. Bobby is even better at this, so if I can't find anything, he usually can. The sensation is hard to explain, if you don't have Static—it feels like your arms are falling asleep, but with added flavors, textures and rhythms.

I realized earlier in my trudging today that I overestimated Bobby and I. I wouldn't make it to Glenvaele alone, not to mention the two of us. I knew this was possible, and I was prepared to hunt. As much as I'm no hunter, I know some basic traps—anyone who grew up with my Uncle would.

I'm lying in the dry, dirty air of the trail, trying to breathe quietly, downwind of the two lines of stripped vine I left from my traps. On the other end are two leaves from a Flytrapper—a small kind of tree, with springy, static bark and large, fuzzy leaves with a crease down the middle. If you take the leaves fresh off the Flytrapper (the older the tree and the higher the leaf, the better), and you strip the little bit of muscle down the central vein, when they are shocked, instead of just clapping shut and squishing small bugs and flies, they will slam closed, sometimes

breaking apart in the process. Like the filaments on my arms when there's a lot of static, the dark fuzzy hairs on the leaves will spike, stabbing into each other when they connect. Attaching two small stones to the ends brings the trap together, letting these leaves take down small mammals rather than just insects.

Bobby is sitting next to me, clearly getting restless. He keeps shocking me on my shoulder further from him, then looking away, as if someone else would have done that.

I feel one more shock to my left, and I jump up out of the dirt, abandoning the pretense of being quiet. He lets out a chortle of surprised laughter as I grab him by the shoulder and try to wrestle him to the ground. "Who was that!" I threaten, smiling, trying to pin his arms. He gets his bearings, pulsing with a smile and light buzz, and pushes me back, trying to pin me with a wrestling move we both learned from the boys in the Valley.

SNAP! A high pitched crack echoes through the air, and we both snap our heads towards it. The Flytrapper is shut, and we both get up immediately and run over. An adult sand rabbit is caught in it, one of its legs bent back horribly, wriggling in the oversized leaf. I've killed plenty of animals, but this takes me by surprise—I didn't expect my trap to be so bloody.

I'm standing there shocked until Bobby leans down, and puts his hand on the rabbit's chest, just below its head. I just watch as he strokes its fur back once, and the rabbit stills, its breathing growing steadier. Then, without hesitating, he stabs it twice in the head. It goes completely limp in his hands.

He lays it down on the ground, and looks at me, nodding. "Thank you", I mutter, coming out of my trance. He grabs me by the shoulder, and walks back towards our stuff.

That night, Bobby and I cooked and ate the rabbit, both feeling a little quieter. I've been anxious this whole journey so far that I'm in over my head, and even if we get a little bit further from the Citadel, eventually the infantry will make their way too, and there will be nothing I can do to help him. But I'm gaining confidence. We're learning together, him and I, as we've always done. The rabbit tastes delicious, and tonight the sky is full of the greens and blues of the Aurora. I wish Bobby could see them.

Chapter 4: Negotiations

I hear the sound of hooves on dirt coming from the east, and a little hope wells up in me. Soon enough, trailing a cloud of dirt, comes along two sturdy horses pulling a caravan stuffed with boxes. It's got a large silver Citadel glyph in the form of a two foot silver medallion on the front—a woman, with huge eagle wings, holding a sword in one hand and a book in the other. The signature Citadel laurel rests upon her head, and the sunlight reflects off the plaque in all directions, catching my eyes. I wave down the rider and they pull to a stop.

“Howdy!” I put on my best greeting smile. “My name is Calvin Tappin, and this is my brother Bobby. I was wondering if I could ask your help—you see, we’re going to the Gith place, um, in Glenvaele—”

“Kid, let me stop you there. Do you know where Glenvaele is?” the rider replies, peeking his head up from his wide-brimmed sun hat.

“Yes! Well, I think it’s—”

“Yeah, the way we came from. Why the hell would we give you a ride?”

“Oh no sir, I wasn’t asking for a ride, I was—”

“What the hell are you asking for then??”

I take a deep breath, and steady myself. “We’ve run out of rations, and hunting has been slow. Do you have any food you could trade for?”

“I can tell you one thing, kid,” the rider says, sliding off his mount onto the trail. “This is a shit place to hunt. But, I’ll trade you some bread for some of that rope of yours over there!” He points to Bobby’s pack, with the leathered vine coiled neatly on the side of it.

“Well actually that isn’t rope, it’s leathered vine—”

“I don’t care if it’s cow shit, can you hitch a horse up with it, and will it hold?”

“Yes sir! And it’s got a few static responses, includ—”

“Then I’ll take it!” He bounds over before I can say much, and grabs the whole coil from Bobby, who hasn’t moved. “Here’s the last of my food, does this feel even to you?” he asks, quickly testing the vine, then hopping right back onto his mount. He tosses me his half eaten loaf, and then half a bundle of some other wrapped foods from the first open box of his cart.

I’ve already started stuffing my face with the bread, so I can barely respond with a “yes sir,” before he’s taken off.

...

It’s almost four hours later, as I’m setting up camp as the sun is going down, when I unwrap the rest of what he gave us, and realize the bastard left us with mostly rotten meats, weevily bread, and crushed vegetables. Some of it’s edible, maybe a day’s worth of food, but I almost threw up trying to force down some of the slightly less grotesque chicken.

I’m fuming by the time I finish forcing down what I can, saving just a bit of edible food for later, and keeping the really bad stuff in case I get desperate. Bobby has been picking around the moldy parts of a huge tomato, sitting on a log on the side of a trail. I can’t believe how quickly the caravan rider came and left—for all he knows he might’ve left us to get sick and die out here, especially if we were city kids.

It’s my anger at that stupid caravaneer that puts me to bed that night, and when I wake up, it’s the thought of his stupid hat that gets me moving.

I’m still fuming as we march the next day. At the caravaneer, and at the pounding rain that has been falling for six hours, and at my town for ever suggesting that we would send Bobby away to the city in the first place, and at my damn Uncle and damn Father for never having made this trip themselves. Bobby’s pace has gotten slower, because this part of the trail is covered in

roots that are much harder to sense with static than to see. He keeps falling every few minutes. His knees and hands are covered in dirt and bruises, and I'm carrying his pack today. Even he's beginning to get on my nerves, though I know it isn't his fault.

As these thoughts are stewing in my head, I feel vibrations in the ground, over the staccato of the rain—more hooves, this time coming from behind me. I pull Bobby down into the brush, and wait for it to come into view. It's a different rider, but he's got a Citadel glyph on the front of his cart, just like the last one, plus the same large floppy hat. I smile.

As it passes, I start coming up with a plan. I motion to Bobby to stay there in the brush, and he looks confused, but he doesn't question it—he's too tired. The cart is moving slowly through the mud in the rain, and without Bobby and the packs, I can jog ahead of it—I don't even have to be that silent as I go along. I run past him in the woods until I am firmly out of earshot, then keep running, scrambling over logs and rocks and mud, until I'm out of breath. I stoop down, gathering as many pollinator flowers I can find, rip them all up, and throw them onto a pile in the center of the path. With a pile about six inches high, I pull up and tie together the roots of two saplings, and leave the far end in the center of the flowers, and lay in wait behind a tree.

I'm shivering and soaked in mud, face covered in snot and sweat and blood from my falls and scrapes, when I hear the horses trudging along again, half a minute later. I wait until they are just a few yards from my pile, and then with all the energy I can muster, I send a shock along the roots into the flowers. They burst with wet pollen into the air, and there's an audible snap that shocks the rider. The horses pull up slowly, and start wheezing and whining in the cloud of dense pollen. I come around to the side of the cart, and quickly tie my last length of vine around the wheel, then shocking it, breaking the wheel from the axel and tipping the whole cart. The caravaneer, who was just getting off his cart, falls face first in the mud with a shocked yelp.

My heart is slamming in my chest, my breathing heavy. “Hey!” I yell, with as much confidence as I can muster. “You’re Citadel, huh? What do you have in that cart?” I motion towards his huge crates, a few of which fell down into the mud beside him. “Transporting some blind kids to your royal prison?!”

“What? No, I’m—who are you?” He looks up, and spits some dirt out of his mouth. “Wait, who is that?” He points behind me, and I turn around, to see Bobby limping ominously forward slowly through the rain, his groaning barely audible. I don’t even notice his static as he approaches—all I can focus on is the blood pumping through my ears, and the Citadel rat in front of me.

I whip back towards him, and he’s rolling forward—I catch the glint of something metal in his hand. Enough. I pace forward, whip out my vine, and with a step, slam it into his leg. There’s a disgusting crunch as the hard vine meets bone, and he yells in pain, dropping what he was holding. I’m standing over him, panting like a feral dog, my vine pointed at him. “Fuck you!”

“Holy fuck, kid!” He’s screaming on the ground, holding his leg. “What was that! Shit!”

“We need food,” I say, “and you’re gonna give it to us, Citadel scum.”

“I’m NOT Citadel!” He shouts. “What the hell is your plan? You’re gonna kill me?” He’s sitting up, looking at the bloody mess I left on his calf. Immediately my rage fades, and I have to swallow some vomit from coming up my throat.

“No, I’m not going to kill you! You have a knife! I—”

Before I know what’s happening, I’m launched off my feet, the breath knocked out of me. My vision spins, and I try to scramble back, until I feel a wet thud against my head. Everything fades.

Chapter 5: Rules of the Trail

You're dreaming. I love you. I love you. You're asleep. You will wake up. You need to wake up.

I sit on a long, overgrown field. There are birds overhead, swirling around each other, amorphous in shape. Maybe they are parrots? They will swoop in and out before me, mimicking sounds. I hear the sound of vines chopping. Another bird dives lower—a familiar low growl of a hound. Swoosh—wheels rumbling over small rocks. Swoosh—Father, yelling, screaming. Swoosh—an awkward silence. *I love you.* Swoosh—a familiar, sickening thud, blood on the ground, rain and blood, the taste of bile in my throat—

My eyes snap open, and a flash of pain sears across my neck. I'm lying down on a wooden bench, slumped down, so the seat has made a crease of my back.

Bobby is looking over at me. We're moving, and it's bright out, and my head is pounding. I try to reach for him, but my hands tug against my back—they're tied with vine to the seat. Bobby looks up as we pull to a stop.

Only then do I realize where we are. Fuck. My heart starts racing. Is Bobby hurt? Are we prisoners? Did I fuck up so badly, I got him taken earlier than if we had never left?

“Hey! Is the asshole up?”

The caravaneer's ugly hat and uglier face pop up over the front of his cart. For some reason, he's got a shit eating grin on his face. Fuck this guy. I try to say something, but my throat feels like it was scraped down by rustbark, and I can only let out a growl.

“You are tougher than you look, kid. I really thought I hurt you back there. Here, have some of this.” The caravaneer hands Bobby some water, and he pours some into my mouth—it tastes divine.

My head is throbbing, and I'm so confused. A new worry pops into my head—how long have I been out? Bobb looks okay—he looks a lot better than I do, at least. No more scratched up than he was before. “Bobby”, I croak, “are you alright?”

“Your mute little brother's alright, kid. He's got some sense, at least.”

Bobby nods to me, his eyes kind. That puts me at ease.

“Listen, I don't know what your plan was if I was from the Citadel, but I'm not. Look.” He lifts his plaque from the front of his caravan and flips it around—the whole thing is covered in profane drawings, with the old crown symbol and the free state A drawn over the book and sword. “These days, it's better to be safe than sorry, with what flag you're flying on the trail.”

I sit up, and say my first words to the caravaneer. “Well, why'd you pull a knife on me?”

“I wouldn't say I ‘pulled a knife’ on you, kid. I'd say I got ambushed and mugged, and thought I might need to defend myself. Which is true, after all.” He motions to his leg, which is bound in the bandages Bobby and I brought.

I sit there for a moment. “Well, why am I tied up?”

“That's a safety knot kid. To keep you from falling out of the damn caravan. Just wriggle around and you'll get out.”

I do. I look at Bobby, and I almost think he's got a smirk on his face. I take a deep breath.

The caravaneer signs, and crawls over the boxes, and puts his hand out to shake. “Listen, I can tell you're not well traveled. Good thing you found someone like me. Also, good thing your brother's not as much of a hot shot as you are. But these things happen on the road.” He looks off to the side. “What's your name?”

I take his hand and shake it.

“I’m Cavlin Tappin, of the Valley, son of Don Tappin, of the Valley. This is my brother, Bobby.”

“I’ve met your mute brother. He’s clearly the one with the brains. If I’d known you were going to Glenvaele, I would have offered you a hitch. Is this your first time on the trail?”

“No, it’s—ow!” Bobby shocks my arm, shaking his head.

“No need to lie. You guys have made it pretty far on foot, but you have no clue what you’re doing. You were almost two leagues in the complete wrong direction, and that map is at least 40 years old. Half of those trails don’t exist anymore.”

“Wait a second. How do you know we’re going to Glenvaele?” I ask. I’m feeling stupider and stupider by the minute. Bobby grabs onto my forearm lightly.

“Your mute brother told me. Or, haha, I guess he didn’t tell me, ha!” He chuckles to himself, for just a second too long. “Haha, damn. Yeah, he showed me. Once again kid, the value of a good map. First rule of the trail—update your maps before you leave.”

I sit there, not sure what to say. I can’t decide if we got lucky or unlucky by meeting this guy.

“You’re damn welcome. Also, I expect an apology. That’s the second rule of the trail—no holding grudges while you’re on the same heading. You’d drive yourself crazy! Mutey here gets that.”

“Stop calling him mute,” I stammer.

“Well, can he speak?”

“No but—”

“That’s what I thought. He’s mute.” Bobby looks at me and shrugs. I almost think I caught a smile in his eyes, but it’s gone the next moment.

“Plus, don’t be too sorry—I got you back worse, after all.” He lifts up his bandaged foot.

“Good thing we’re not walking there. These beasts of burden still have an hour or so left in them today, I’d say, so I’m gonna keep going.” He turns back around to the front of the caravan. “Oh, Carter, right? What’s your brother’s name again?”

“My name’s Calvin. And he’s Bobby. Of the Valley”

“Which valley?”

“What?”

“Which valley are you from?”

I look at Bobby, not sure how to answer. “The Valley?”

“Alright then. Cal, Bob. Nice to meet you two. My name’s Askel.” He turns to the rider's seat, and mutters, “Soft seas and tall stones, Hermae Velkommen.”

The caravan picks back up, and I lay back down. Bobby’s turned to me, with an eyebrow up—I get the impression that he’s annoyed with me. “What?”, I protest. He pulses, blinking blankly at me. “Fine, thank you. I fucked up, and you got us out of it.” He smiles, and lays back down.

“You know we’re probably gonna have to do some work for this guy now, right? Like when we get there. He’s gonna make us shovel his horseshit or something.” Bobby just shrugs. I turn towards him, and let him grab onto my forearm. “How’d you show him Glenvaele on a map, anyways? Does he not know you’re blind?”

Bobby’s face lights up, and he turns to his sack, delicately pulling out an old metal plate with a tightly woven grass grid on it. He takes our map, with its bumps and ridges that let him read the rough direction and destination we are headed, and lays it on top. He traces over it with

his wrist—the spot on the arm with the most dense static filaments. As he does, parts of the grass ripple and poke through the map, drawing a wave from the valley to Glenvaele.

“Bobby! This is amazing! How’d you think of this?” He shrugs again, but I get a pulse from him—he’s beaming. “I mean, how long did this take you? Just knitting the grass alone...” I trail off. “Bobby, how long have I been asleep?”

He takes a second, thinking. Sheepishly, he raises three fingers.

“Three days!?”

He puts up a hesitant fourth finger.

“Four!! Bobby, we should’ve been there already—our map must’ve been far, far off. When are we getting there?”

Bobby looks up, excited. Another pulse—*tomorrow*.

Chapter 6: Final Stop

After about an hour more on the road, I realized probably the reason why Bobby and Askel got on so well—the trader cannot shut up. He very quickly lost count of the rules of the trail, and started over. Not once was one of them the same. He had a lot to say about supply and deceit, how every town has too much of something valuable, needs something cheap and common, and doesn't know the value of something beyond rare they have. From his last stop, he picked up two crates of ferroubark for a nice saddle, and two stops before, he traded some milk (that wouldn't keep for his whole journey!) for some eggs (the ninth rule of the trail—always take eggs over dairy).

The sun just set, and we finished setting up camp. Askel is convinced that the Glenvaele scientists will pay a pretty crown for his bark and other rarities—I can't tell if he's talking about the Gith place or not. He's rambling on about it to Bobby, who is knitting more grass grids by the fire. I say I'm going to grab some more wood, and walk off.

The ground is prickly, cold and muddy on my bare feet—my shoes are drying by the fire. I can feel vibrations through the ground of quakeworms burrowing nests in the roots of the large tinmaple besides me. I can sense the bright and fuzzy static of some baby birds, wriggling around in their nest and rubbing their feathers together. The moon's dark violet halo shines brightly tonight. It's almost full, and casts a white and perse glow, which glitters off of the asters and goldenrods, as well as small crystal veins in the cairn by the trail. The air is ripe and dense, but not wet. Snails lay curled in their shells at the base of the cairn. Together with the flowers they ceremonialize the statue. It's probably just because there's a storm coming, but I can't help but think that they are praying. I'm tempted to join them—I could use some divine intervention.

Now that we are so close to Glenvaele, I need to think realistically. While the township is much more independent from the Citadel than our valley is—it won the right to an operating local government, a militia, and a seat amongst the king's chairmen when my father was young—it is possible that there are Citadel infantry already stationed here. We can't just walk up and tell them Bobby basically has a bounty on his head. Even if we could, who would we go to? The town hall? Their best scientists?

The smell of grass sap and the feeling of Bobby's static makes me turn around. He's walking over to me slowly, holding a small corner of a new grass grid, head characteristically bowed. He's just as worried as I am, if not more—it's hard to remember how confused he must be, on some level, about all of this. I know he's my age—in fact, he's actually older, by a few minutes—but he looks so young standing there, eyes glazed and teary.

“Hey, buddy, hey”, I say, walking up to him. He's sniffing, and I pull him into one of our fathers hugs—tight, with my wrist on the back of his neck, bringing him in close. “Hey, it'll be okay. You've been so strong! You got us all the way here! You've done a lot better than me—I would still be lying in the mud face first, starving.”

I pull him back, and wipe a tear off his cheek. “Don't worry, Bobby. I love you. They won't take you away, and we'll be home so soon.”

Chapter 7: Glenvaele

The next day, Glenvaele is in sight. The name is misleading—it's not at all like a glen, and it's the opposite of a valley. The city sits upon a large, gradual hill, with a river running over the top in an unnatural looking way. There are huge stone buildings littered around the crest of the hill, with mismatched wooden bridges connecting them, and paved streets as far out as where we are. As we ride, we pass a few fields and farms, but even hundreds of yards out, there are nice looking wooden houses, with families bustling around.

As we get closer, I realize just how epic the stone buildings are. They all look built slightly differently. They all are made of a dark gray stone that I don't recognize, and some of them look like they could be even four stories high. In the very center, there's a beautiful clock tower. It is easily the single largest structure I've ever seen. I look over at Bobby, and he looks just as awed as I am—his ears are twitching, and he's whipping his head back and forth, caught off by the static of people rushing by and the noise from the carriages on the cobblestones.

Bobby and I leave Askel at the canal in the center of the city, thanking him for the ride. We promise to meet him that night—we still need to find a place to stay, after all—but that is the last thing on my mind. I'm filled with wonder at the size of the city, as well as the prospect of finally meeting the Glenvaele scientists. For so long, especially when we were younger, bringing Bobby to Glenvaele seemed like the magical solution to my brother's issues. As a little kid, every birthday he & I shared, every shooting star I could see but he couldn't, I would wish one thing—for my brother to talk. My parents would find it written in my New Year offerings, or I would mumble it under my breath while other kids made wishes. (I learned pretty young that other kids' wishes are a bit more light-hearted—I ruined more than a few birthdays that way).

As I got older, and I began to understand the nature of his condition more, that simple wish took hold in the hope that in Glenvaele, there could be something for him. I think that's true for everyone in my family, especially my mother. She's spent more time outside the Valley than anyone I know, and has some old friends who went to school in the capital, so she knows better than most how disconnected our village is, and how much more people know in the outside world. Glenvaele, and its scientists, its industry, and its independence from the capital, became almost mythic to me—a center with graying wizards and ancient tomes, full of secret knowledge.

Glenvaele is not full of graying wizards. In fact, hardly anyone seems old. Suspiciously, most people walking around are young and good looking—most only a few years older than me. Groups of boys and girls are walking around, kicking balls, reading books on the grass, or swimming in the canal.

Bobby and I stick out like a sore thumb here. Still in our muddy overalls, hair matted, we probably look like another species all together. Everyone's clothes are suspiciously dirt-free.

Not knowing what else to do, I take Bobby by the forearm, and walk over to a group laying on a blanket on the lawn. A few of them are passing a bottle back and forth, laughing and joking, and it takes me a few seconds of clearing my throat for one of them to notice me.

“Hi!” I say, using the more urban greeting. “My name is Calvin Tappin, and this is my brother. We're new in town here—we're from the Valley. Could any of you kindly point us to the G-h-ith school?” The Southern noun sounds funny with my rural accent, and it gets a few chuckles.

A girl in the front gives me a bright smile, and answers “Do you mean the Gith institute? Are you a new student?” Her pronunciation is light and flowery, and I'm immediately self conscious of how much I sound like a farmer.

“Yes, sorry—the institute. I am a new scientist, I was looking to find Mr. Divar.”

That gets an even bigger chuckle from this girl's friends, who are now all watching me and Bobby. Bobby shuffles closer to me, and tries to grab onto my forearm for comfort, but I pull away for now.

The girl gives me a sympathetic look. “I do know Professor Divar... she's in empirics and umwelten. I'm her research assistant. Come! I've got to meet with her at some point today anyways.”

“Aw, don't leave yet!” the guy, whose head was in her lap, complains. “We just sat down!”

“We sat down an hour ago, Ish. I'll see you guys tonight? At the presentation?” She dusts herself off, and gives her group a subtle wave, barely listening to their response. She's got a short, utilitarian haircut, and a round face. More striking than that, she's got freckles all over her face. I mean, all over. More than anyone I've ever seen. I almost want to count them—I've got more freckles than most of my family, & I only have a few. Hers are all down her arms and legs. They don't make her ugly at all, though—they fit nicely with her face, her clean clothes, and her soft demeanor.

Bobby shocks me on the back of my arm, and I zone back in. “Do you wanna go?”, she asks me.

“Oh yeah, sorry. Lets.” Bobby and I pick up after her, and I introduce him to her. She says her name to me, but I just miss it, with the way she talks so fast, and I'm too embarrassed to ask again.

“So are you two both students? Or just you, Calvin?”

Shit. “Uh, no, just me. What about you? Are you a student, or a scientist?” I think that sounded right.

“Well, when you look at it formally like that, I guess I’m a student. This is my second year here. But I like to think we’re all scientists here! I guess except for the muse or philosophy students, but most Gith students are in some science—alchemy, botany, physics and empirics are our biggest studies.”

“Well, who does the experiments here?”

“Everyone! Sometimes students will have their own research projects, often professors will run a larger project that students contribute to. Just my department alone sends out copies of three new papers every year to different libraries and schools around the country.”

As we walk, the pavilion we are in starts to make more sense to me. This isn’t an enclave of old nomad researchers—it’s more like a school, but for people my age. People sit on stone terraces, with lightmoss and ivy crawling up the sides of the walls around them, reading from old bound papers, or discussing in small groups.

The girl brings us into one of the larger buildings right next to the canal. She waves to a few people as we go through, me struggling to pull Bobby along at her speed walking pace. We turn into a room on the right, and I am immediately struck by a hundred things at once. Smells, static, noises, a cacophony of out of place sensations bristle against me, and I stop in place so quickly that Bobby bumps into me from behind.

“Oh, so sorry!”, the girl says, seeing my face. “I forget how disorienting it is here when we’re testing. You must have a lot of active senses.”

“Yeah”, I mumble, but she’s already turned the corner, and a few of the sensations calm down.

“Professor Divar! I have someone here to meet you! He’s a new student, and he’s here with his brother to see the lab!”

I turn the corner, and for a second, I think the girl is talking to herself. Until I look down, and I see a white haired, tiny old woman sitting cross legged on the floor, with a glass box on her lap. She turns to me, with a huge pair of goggles on her face, that make her look like a bug.

“Hi! It’s a pleasure to meet you...”

“Calvin! My name is Calvin. Howdy. This is my brother Bobby, we’re from the Valley.”

“Which valley?” The professor asks, sliding the goggles off her head.

“What?”

“Which valley?”

Shit. I look to Bobby again, who of course is no help here. “Um, I think you knew our Mother? She grew up outside the Citadel, and she traveled with you for a while, a few years ago? Her name is Bitta, you’d know her as Bitta Bindeaux?”

Professor Divar’s eyes light up. “Bitta! My gosh! Yes of course! You two are the spitting image of her.” She stands up, coming to hug the two of us. “You know, we’ve met, actually! Before I moved here, I stayed with your Mother in your valley. She must have been three months pregnant with you? Skies Above! Ain’t that a kick in the head. They’re my age, your parents, and they have kids, and now you kids are adults?” She shakes her head, and turns back to the freckled girl—who’s name I still don’t know. She pats her on the shoulder—which is about as high as she can reach. “Dear, never get old.”

Divar comes back around to us, swipes a few pieces of paper off a bench, and motions for us to sit. “Well, what can I do for you two?” she asks, giving Bobby an inquisitive look. “That’s no easy trip you two made.”

“Well, I guess.... My Parents weren’t sure exactly what you researched. But we’ve always thought it was something to do with senses? And Bobby here...” I trail off. Bobby is no longer humming, and he stares blankly into the papers scattered across the floor, but his mouth is twitching to the side. I understand him so well most of the time, but sometimes I forget that I will never really get what goes on in his head. Does he know why we’re here? To get him to speak? Does he know how people see him—some freak with strength he can’t control and doesn’t understand? Does he understand how powerful he can be?

More than that, the question that keeps me up at night, does he know how little I know what I am doing? Does he know that our home isn’t safe, and here might not be either, for him? Do I really expect this woman who I’ve never met to be able to solve these problems for me?

A smirk creeps across Divar’s face, as she looks at Bobby. I feel a distinct, but unfamiliar, warmth and calmness spread over me. “Don’t be so anxious, dear. I think I understand what’s going on here. You’re in good hands.”

Bobby’s let go of my arm, and I look over to him. He’s still looking at the floor, but he’s smiling cheek to cheek—I haven’t seen him happy like this since we left home. He’s humming and tapping his feet and looks like he’s about to burst. “What is it?” I ask him. I feel like I’ve been left out of some inside joke.

“Calvin, you said your name was?” Divar asks me. I nod, confused. “How many senses does the average person have?”

“Am I being tested?” I counter. To be honest, I have no clue. 6? 7?

“No, dear. But I’ll save the rhetorical questions. While it depends slightly, based on region and based on what you consider one sense to be, current research suggests the average is about 7.6 senses per person. But as you know, some senses are stronger than others. This can be

hereditary—as an example, your family has a far above average electrostatic sense, but as I can assume based on your misshapen ears, a subpar sense of hearing.”

I reach up to feel my ears, turning a bit red. Are my ears misshapen?

“Those senses are determined at birth. Some senses can develop in offspring, even if neither parent had it, but that is much rarer, and usually involves some ancestor having the sense somewhere in the family line—it seems similar to hair color, our research suggests. Anyways, I’m sure you’re acutely aware of how your brother's ability senses are much stronger than yours, because he has fewer of them.”

I nod.

“His ability to manipulate the senses is stronger as well. Some senses are harder to manipulate than others, however. You’re familiar with this, even if you don’t realize it. I bet your whole family is able to manipulate static, to some degree. How many people have you met who can manipulate photosonic stimuli?”

“What?”

“Sorry. Have you ever met anyone who is able to reflect and manipulate light, through their eyes? Create illusions, or basic images?”

“What? That’s impossible.”

“It’s not! Just rare. The principle of it is the same as how you can control static, or how ferrically-able people can manipulate magnetic fields. Now, let's put all that together. What senses does your little brother have?”

“Twin brother.”

“What?”

“He’s my twin brother. I’m actually the young one.”

“Oh. Well, how many senses does your big brother have?”

I have to think about it for a second. All little kids went through phases in school of pretending like they had more senses than they do, and trying to see who had more. It would often end in kids accidentally scalding themselves to prove they had heat sense, or another niche sense that is difficult to disprove. “I think he’s got five... right?” I turn to Bobby, hoping for some guidance. He’s still grinning, now facing towards me.

“That’s a good guess. But I have a hunch that he’s missing two of the ones you think he has.”

“What!?” I ask. “You think Bobby only has three senses?”

“Four. I know as a fact you’re missing one.”

“This is ridiculous!” I stand up from the bench. “How could you possibly know that already?!”

“This is my life’s work, dear. I’ve studied the senses and umwelten since I was a student. Humor me, won’t you? Let me do a few tests on Bobby, nothing invasive. I’ll bet you ten crowns I’m right!”

Looking at Bobby so excited, it seems like there’s only one answer to this question.

“Fine. But we don’t have ten crowns.”

The girl lets out a chuckle from the back of the room, where she has been moving around various plates of metal. “I’ll stake the boy's end, Divar. Let’s start up these tests.”

Chapter 8: Games

“So most of these tests are made to detect whether people do have their respective sense, even in some small amount,” Divar explains. “Because of the complex ways some senses are intertwined, it is important to isolate them from each other, if we want to be able to recognize people with very weak, but still existent, niche senses.”

“We’re also going to be using you as a control subject, Calvin,” the girl chimes in from ahead of us. She’s wearing a white lab coat that goes down to her feet, and thin wired glasses, which makes her look intimidatingly smart. Then I see it—a name tag! Stella is her name. It fits well. “You’re a perfect neutral patient, given how similar you two are. After all, control subjects are an important, mandatory, and widely accepted part of the scientific process.” She shoots a snarky look at Divar over her shoulder.

“Widely accepted and a pain in my ass. In this case, it shouldn’t take too long.”

Divar and Stella brought me and Bobby into various rooms, where they did some obvious, easy tests—what color is this word, what animal makes this sound, how far away is this impact—and a few weirder ones, like putting drops of a minty cold liquid on my skin and observing the color it became. Interestingly, the tests were just as simple to execute on me as they were on Bobby, as very few parts besides the tests themselves required vision. Divar said that’s because these tests are made for people missing senses just like Bobby.

“Well, Stella dear, I have bad news and good news”, Divar says, finally looking up from her papers.

“Sorry, professor, hold on a second. I’m double checking something.” Stella is still hunched over her papers, even though she finished her last test on me far before Divar finished

with Bobby. “Can I assume that exo-empiric behavior implies positive sensory values for the visual suite?”

Divar shuffles over to Stella’s papers, and studies them for a few seconds. “What?” I ask. “Is there something wrong with me?”

“The contrary, dear. Let me ask you one more annoying question. How many senses do you think you have?”

Divar has a real talent for backhanded remarks like this. Of course I know how many senses I have! “Nine!” I answer proudly.

“That would be certainly impressive, if that was true.” She looks at Stella one more time, then back to me. “You have sixteen. At least.”

The defensive remark I was about to make dies on my lips. “What?”

“Sixteen, at least. I’m glad we tested you! Some of them are certainly weak, and that’s not unheard of, but I have never tested anyone myself with that many senses. That’s remarkable.”

“So what’s that mean?” I ask.

“Not much, for now,” Divar says. “It’s interesting for a lot of reasons, but Bobby’s results are more pressing for now. The boy can hear on the low frequency spectrum, he has incredible exo and endo-empiric abilities with static electricity, and he can taste.” Divar cuts off there.

“What? First of all, that’s only three. Second of all, you’re telling me he can’t feel, or smell? I’m his brother. I know he can feel.”

“The senses are so interconnected Calvin, we can’t even properly understand it today. So much of what you think of as feeling is really made up of three core senses, that most people usually have two of—nerve endings, heat perception, and static perception. You have all three, and for objects touching your skin, your mind combines them all subconsciously. It’s impossible

to understand, because your brain is constantly filling in the holes in your senses for you with what it assumes is there, based on the other knowledge it has—otherwise known as your other senses.

“Bobby, as you know well, has an incredible static sense. This sense is far more powerful when something is almost touching you. Therefore, Bobby’s sense of touch as you think of it is actually just static, but his brain is able to fill in the missing pieces, just like yours is able to, because it gets more information. Realistically, the only difference it makes is that he most likely perceives his body as fuzzing out just slightly further than ours, and he has a difficult time registering things like glass or rubber.

“Anyways. I didn’t mislead you—he does have one more sense. Have you ever found Bobby to be particularly quick to understand people, even when he is missing parts of the situation at hand?”

I nod, slowly.

“I know this sounds far-fetched, but it is absolutely true. In the same way that you feel and sense electricity, light, sound, heat, all around you, Bobby interacts with people's emotions.”

“What? He can read minds?!” I turn to Bobby, sitting in the beige chair of the testing room. He’s humming loudly now, but Divar doesn’t seem to mind. It almost seems to make sense to her.

“It’s not reading minds—you can’t get the words from someone’s mind. It’s more like sensing the byproduct of people’s emotions. I’ve worked with a few non-verbal patients with this ability. It is very common that language develops differently when this is one of your strongest senses, considering language is really only a workaround people invented because they can’t do what we do.”

I turn to Divar. “What do you mean, ‘what we do’? You can sense emotions too!”

She chuckles to herself. “Oh Calvin, I’m not done. It’s difficult to test when people have this emotional sense in smaller quantities. However, considering your brother’s ability and your number of senses, I’d bet a lot more than ten crowns that you can too.”

Chapter 9: The Conference

[...]

Chapter 10: Doppelgänger

Bobby and I sprint down the hallway after Stella, cutting down shortcuts through the wooden dormitory. Not far behind us, I can hear the clanking and feel the sparks of the metal boots of the Citadel soldiers, splintering wood beneath them, running after us. My heart is pounding in my chest, and I can barely see in the dark. I feel like blind prey, being stalked by a hunter whose eyes can pierce the dark.

“Fuck! Fuck fucking open!” Stella curses at the door, trying to shove it open. Bobby is groaning and panting behind me, getting louder and louder—he sounds sick and horrified the way he is heaving. The pounding of metal closes in on us.

“Stella! Stella, deep breath”, I tell her. I recall what Divar said in her presentation, about how people who sense emotion strongly perceive negative emotions, like anxiety or anger, as being physical entities—they can take up space, enclose you, slam into you, block you from somewhere, just like a wave or wall you could feel and see. Poor Bobby, trapped twice over.

I promised when I took him from home that I would keep him safe. I know it might have been stupid. I thought I knew a lot more about the world than I did. But we’ve made progress here! These people understand Bobby, and they have helped him so much more in the twelve hours we’ve been here than anyone else in twelve years. I won’t fail my brother. And I certainly won’t be letting down my family. They cannot take him.

I pull out my vine from my pack as Stella struggles with the door more. “Stella. They don’t know about me, do they?”

“What?! Help me with this, Calvin”, she pleads, not even turning to look at me.

I breathe in and out, holding firmly to Bobby's forearm. "They don't know me. They don't know anything about Bobby besides his exosense or whatever. Correct?" She doesn't respond, just stares at me. "STELLA!"

"Yes! Sorry, yes, but I don't see why that matters right now."

I look around for a place to hide. "Listen, I have a plan, and you have to trust me. You and Bobby, get in this closet."

"What? They'll find us!"

"No, they won't. I'm gonna pretend to be Bobby. They will leave as soon as they think they have him."

"Are you stupid? Then they'll just take you!"

"Right now, they're gonna find all three of us! I don't wanna find out what they'll do to you and I after they find us trying to escape with him." The metal stomping grew even louder—they can't be far now.

"Calvin, stop, you don't have to be a hero—"

"NO, I DO!" I shout. Bobby lets go of my arm and jumps back, against the wall. "I'm sorry," I say. I take a ragged breath in, and then out.

"I have to be firm. This IS the best way out for Bobby. He needs to stay with you! You and Divar can help him! Plus, they'll think I'm blind and mute. If I can keep it up, they might leave a way for me to escape right in front of my eyes."

Stella is quiet. I take one more breath, and try to think reassuring thoughts. Or reassuring emotions? I need Divar to explain that all again to me. I pull Bobby into one more of our Father's hugs, tell him I love him, then give his hand to Stella. "Hide, please. Maybe I'll find out what they did with the others they've taken. I'll come back. Take care of him for me."

“Of course”, Stella said, breathlessly. They got into the storage closet, and I walked out into the hallway, then crunched over, trying to act confused.

Ever since I was young, people have tried to do impressions of Bobby, all of which are horribly mean and offensive. It’s something I’ve never put up with. With that said, I have grown up translating for him for our whole life. If anyone can do an impression of a blind, mute, and overwhelmed Valley kid, it's me.

Sorry, Bobby, I hope you can't sense this, I try to think to him. Or if you can, I hope you think it's funny. I love you.

Chapter 11: Bobby

The first thing you should know about my family is that we are a large group. We are rowdy and agricultural. I've got thirty cousins, and counting—I'm the third oldest of them. I am the oldest of my siblings.

The first thing you should know about my twin Calvin is that he lives in a mind that is constantly bombarding him with information. He is incredibly intelligent. Although he doesn't always realize it (or utilize it). He's incredibly observant. He is understanding and kind. He has only recently learned quite how much his brain is constantly flooding his system with—it's something I've always thought was obvious. I guess it didn't ever occur to me to explain that to him. It's his brain after all.

The first thing you should know about me is I have always known I see the world differently. But I have only recently understood how differently it really is. I think I have only three senses. Other people live in a world of light that lies. I live in a world of darkness and truth. Everyone has the ability to influence other people's minds. Everyone can read emotions. I never understood that it wasn't tangible for everyone else like it is for me.

Finally. The first thing you should know about the Citadel infantry is that they took my brother. They took him because they wanted me. I guess I have some power that other people don't. I guess that makes me valuable.

I will learn this power. I will crush anyone who comes in my way, like a storm sweeping through the valleys and drowning forests, I will rip the life out of them and I will bring my brother back to me.

To Be Continued....