

A banshee scratch rang across the canyon as the north wind blew his first breath of the season. The sun shone its pale, gorgeous light and a world of shadows became whole again as dawn broke. Color burst over the treetops in magnificent waves and breathed a curious kind of life into the world. In that same moment, a baby with a full head of ghostly white moist hair breathed in his first gulp of air. He wasted no time putting the air in his new lungs to use by screaming. By doing this he joined his mother in a choir of pain and fear. The sickly sweet song bounced off the walls of the small log cabin they were in and echoed through the cold landscape that surrounded it.

Sweat dripped from the mother's forehead. A kindly and rather plump nurse leaned to where the woman lay on the ground and dabbed some of the moisture away with a towel as she tried to calm the screaming woman. She might have well of been trying to calm a raging river. The newly realized mother had her hands grasped so tightly on the legs of the table behind her that the length from her knuckles to the tips of her fingers her skin was a bone-white color. Her face was grimaced as though she had been punched in the stomach multiple times and every muscle in her body was tense and trembling.

A doctor with a rather contemptuous face and a nose like a hawk beak held the wet form of writhing pink flesh in one arm as he cut the connection that still held the two beings, the mother and child, together. He quickly handed the baby to the awaiting nurse. The nurse held the baby as if she was born to care for the young. The doctor hurriedly wiped his wet hands on a nearby towel to dry them and pushed up his gold framed, rounded spectacles.

The woman saw the scene through tear soaked eyelashes and began to think the pain would subside. That would make sense, would it not? The baby she had been carrying for the past eight and a half months was now finally out of her. Yet waves of agony still rolled from the woman's torso. Agony so strong that she lost sight for more than a second and came to, only to see that the nurse was still holding her baby. She was instantly filled with a rage that seemed to spill out from her gut. Why should the pig-like woman be able to hold her baby first? The nurse hadn't gone through months of morning sickness. The nurse hadn't had to deal with labor pain so intense that she was sometimes stuck in bed for an entire day. So why should the nurse get the

privilege to hold *her* baby? *Her* kin? The son or daughter that *she* was meant to love, to hold, to swaddle?

Drool leaked from the corner of the mother's mouth, her eyes filled with a look of insanity. At the same time something sticky and thick pooled around her thighs and crotch. The pain in her gut intensified and she screamed the loudest shriek her raw throat could muster. Veins popped beneath the skin of her neck and forehead. She glared daggers, nay, swords at the nurse as the flabby woman turned to face the mother. A look of fear only seen in animals being hunted appeared on the nurse's kindly face. She lost all color in her cheeks and her throat went instantly dry.

"*GIVE ME MY BABY!*" The woman screamed louder than anyone in the room had thought possible before this moment. The doctor jumped a few inches off his feet, visibly scared.

The nurse stood frozen as a cold morning breeze passed by her through an open window nearby. Slowly and cautiously, never once able to look away from the mother's eyes, the once cheerful woman approached the outreached arms of the mother and carefully placed the babe in the arms of its mom. She then slowly backpedaled to the corner of the room farthest away from the beast in front of her.

As the mother held her child close to her chest, all went silent. Pain throbbed from the mother's insides but the child gave her a strength more powerful than any she had felt before in her life. For the first time her child, her little boy, opened his eyes. They were a soft blue in color. They were wide and wondrous. They were perfect. And they were looking at her.

Oh the joy she felt in that moment. The peaceful bliss she held in her hands. She was overcome with guilt about the way she had yelled at the kindly nurse for a second. Yet that feeling was washed away by a wave of joyous life. She would make amends later, she told herself. But right now nothing could take her attention away from the soft blue eyes that she beheld.

An audible and gut retching *pop* sounded out through the cabin. The doctor had regained his composure by this time and saw blood pooling around the ground where the mother sat. His eyes went wide and his mouth gaped slightly. He looked around for his doctor's bag.

The mother heard nothing of the doctor's shouting. She saw none of the chaos that erupted from his bag. She only saw, only heard, and only felt the delicate little piece of life that she held in her arms. She felt a little weak, maybe, but that was natural, was it not? She had just

brought life into the world. The corners of her vision became splotchy and black. A metallic taste filled her mouth and her mind. She thought nothing of this.

She brought the little boy up to her face and held him there. She brought his small, fragile forehead to her lips and planted a gentle kiss on his skin. The baby giggled at this feeling. The mother giggled in return. She felt very tired now. And was someone pulling at her legs?

It didn't matter. She laid the baby on her chest and watched his eyes close. Those soft blue eyes. She was also tired. So dreadfully tired.

She closed her eyes and murmured half out of consciousness and somewhat delirious, "Goodnight little bug. Goodnight my Will." She then felt herself slip from consciousness completely. Her breathing stilled and so to did her heart. On the chest of the dead mother lay the burst of warm life, oblivious to the death he had brought.

A twelve year old boy walked through the street of a small Alaskan town. His hair was shock white and wild. His soft blue eyes were glazed over as he strode with a load of groceries slung across his back. He was daydreaming. Cold autumn air stung his lungs as he labored back to the log cabin. He had been sent to buy a week's worth of groceries by his father. He walked past a small, two story building and slowed down his pace a little. The building emanated a warm and comforting smell, a smell which Will felt he had known all his life. It was the slightly musty smell of old paper and dust. He knew that his father would be angry at him if he knew Will had stopped at the library, but Will could not overcome the urge to peek in and say hello to Mr. Evans.

Mr. Evans was an old man with a limp in his gait and a cough always building in his throat. He glanced up from behind his desk when the bell that hung from the door rang. He saw the wild mess of white hair and his eyes greeted Will. He set down the book he was reading on the desk in front of him and called a greeting towards the boy.

"How do ya' do, young Mr. Johnson?" Mr. Evans asked with a twinkle in his eye and a grin on his face. Will Johnson was perhaps his favorite child in town. He was quiet and well mannered, unlike the rest. Moreover, he had a delightful interest in books, and Mr. Evans was more than happy to share his collection.

"I'm doing fine, how are you today sir?" Will questioned in a very un-childlike way. There was a sense of maturity and a perceived oddness to Will that made the other children in

school not like him very much. Will was fine with this. Children were dumb and he found that friendships with them were exhausting. He got on well enough with adults though. That is, if one excluded his father.

“I’m doing very well, thank you,” said the small and slightly weasley looking man. His voice quavered slightly with old age.

“That’s very good to hear,” Will said. He took a pause to look around. The library seemed to be covered in books. Labyrinth-like shelves stacked full of stories surrounded the two men. The aura of the store was like that of a heavy blanket. Oppressive, yet comforting.

Will thought he felt something new about the library. He couldn’t say why, everything looked the same as it did the last time he had been there. Yet a feeling in his lower stomach told him that something was different. So he asked, “Have you received a new book recently?”

A childish light filled the old man’s grin. His eyes softened in the fluorescent lights that filled the building and he seemed to become forty-something instead of sixty. “More than just a book, I’ll tell ya. Just yesterday a man, a scrawny lookin thing he was, came into my buildn’ here. He was carryn a big ol’ cardboard box full of books. I looked at him and I said, ‘Howdy, what can I do for ya’, and he said ‘I was wondering if this might be the library here.’ I told him yes, and he just set the box down and walked straight out! A couple seconds later, he comes a’waltzin in with another box, sets that one down too, then leaves without sayin a word! I sat there stunned for a second, and before I knew it I saw him driving off in a fancy black car. Can ya’ believe it? So all’a last night I was just sittin on the floor there sortin through two huge boxes’a books.”

Mr. Evans wheezed with a sickly sort of laugh. He sat back down in his well used chair.

“What kind of books were they?” Will inquired. He reasoned with his own mind that it wouldn’t hurt to maybe pick up a new book while he was in town. His father would probably be too drunk to notice anyway. What was the harm?

“Oh, ya’ know. A bunch a’ this and a little of that. Some classics, some new sci-fi’s, a couple a’ fantasies. I know how much ya’ like those. Wouldya’ like me to show you where I put em?”

Will stood by the doorway and contemplated for a second. Finally, he made up his mind and bobbed his head up and down. Locks of pale white hair went all awry, obscuring the boy’s vision. “Yes please, sir.”

Old man Mr. Evans stood up stiffly from his sitting position. He slowly gambled across the honey colored wooden flooring to the northeast corner of the library. He waved a hand behind him and beckoned the young man at the door to follow. So, Will put down his groceries by the entrance and followed the man with the limp.

The northeast corner of the library was the chilliest part of the store. Glazed windows allowed the cold to penetrate into the shop. Rows and rows of bookshelves were covered in fantasy novels, and Will felt at peace. He loved all books, but fantasies allowed him an escape. They allowed him brief respite from his father's cruel words and crueler lashings. So Will loved fantasy books especially hard. Oftentimes at night he found himself staring at the ceiling of his small room, just imagining himself in the positions of the knights and wizards he read about. How the villagers would have loved him. How the princesses would have loved him. How capable and brave Will was in his own mind. Of course, these thoughts did not match the frail boy that Mr. Evans saw in his library. But there was something about Will, a kind of quiet raging fire, that Mr. Evans sensed and always had sensed about the boy.

Mr. Evans pulled down a paperback book from the third shelf of a bookcase. The cover was black, with nothing on it but a snowflake and the word "Permafrost" above it. The author's name was below.

"I don't know why this book made me think of ya', but it did. Something in my belly told me you'd be in here today so I made sure to remember exactly where I had put it." He politely held the book out to the young man that stood before him.

Something about the minimalistic cover appealed to Will. He reached out his hand and grabbed the book gently with a slight reverence. The book was thick, but small enough to where Will knew he could read it with one hand. The book greatly reminded Will of *The Hobbit*.

Will opened the first page of the book and was immediately hooked. He walked back to the front door completely entranced. He hung a left and found an old black leather couch that smelled like the rest of the store. The seats were worn to the point of looking gray, and a small oval coffee table extended along the length of the couch. Will sat down in the spot closest to the door and continued to read.

Mr. Evans grinned to himself. He knew the feeling of getting lost in a book all too well. He limped from where he was back to his desk. He then rested his hands on the arms of the chair

and slowly lowered himself into the soft and still slightly springy chair. Mr. Evans picked up the book that lay across his desk and also began to read.

An hour later Will had finished the first two chapters of *Permafrost*. He looked up and cracked his neck. The crackling *pop* sound drew the attention of Mr. Evans. They met each others' eyes and grinned.

"So, what doya' thinka' the book?" Mr. Evans inquired. The grin on the boy's face told Mr. Evans all he needed to know already, but he thought it was the polite thing to do to ask.

"I like it. I like it very much," Will replied. He then looked down at his shoes and asked in a timid voice, "I know that you haven't put it into the system yet, there's no barcode, but do you mind if I check it out? I promise to bring it back as soon as I'm done with it."

Mr. Evans smiled at the boy. "Course ya' can. Just as long as ya' promise to bring it back."

Will beamed with delight. He hugged *Permafrost* to his chest and looked like a child who had gotten the birthday present he had been asking for after months of wait. Mr. Evans almost thought it looked like the boy was about to explode. He had never seen Will so happy.

Will looked out the window of the library and was momentarily surprised. The sun looked lower in the sky and the shadows it cast on the cold world outside were longer than they should have been. Will looked up at the old clock that hung on a wall to his right. It was 3:30 pm. A cold dread filled Will. He was supposed to be home by now. His father was going to be very angry with him.

Without saying a word of goodbye, Will grabbed his bags and ran like a wild doe out of the library. Mr. Evans sat where he was, bewildered.

Wind rushed across Will's face. Tears streamed out of the corners of his soft blue eyes and his face was the color of an overripe tomato. He ran so hard that after a minute and a half it stung in his throat every time he tried to take a breath.

Will was racked with pain. His thighs burned. His stomach was knotted into a tight ball. He went on running at full speed for as long as he could. Eventually though, Will's twelve-year-old body broke. He nearly collapsed by the base of the young fir tree that marked the end of the public road. After five minutes of catching his breath, Will forced himself to stand. His thighs screamed at him in protest. Will ignored all of his body's cries for help. Even when

his mind told him to faint, that there was no energy left in the small amount of fat that was stored in his scrawny bones, Will proceeded out of fear and determination.

Will tried to run the three mile drive that led to his house. The ground was uneven and unpaved. After less than twenty seconds Will had to slow his pace down to a jog. His body was not used to running. So it took him nearly twenty excruciating minutes to reach the front door of his house.

Will's house was old. It was little more than a log cabin actually. There was no electricity save for a gas guzzling generator out the back of the house. The only source of heat in the house was an overworked fireplace.

The small figure doubled over in front of the old wooden door. Rasping and wheezing for air, Will took a few moments to steady himself. He knew his father would be mad, but just how mad depended on how much the goat had had to drink that day. If it was a little, a couple of beers, Will was screwed. Will hoped more than ever before that his dad had drunken himself into a coma. If he was sleeping, then he couldn't get angry at his son.

Getting angry at his son was something Will's father did often. If one didn't know better, they might assume that Will's father was not Will's biological father. They looked nothing alike and had none of the same personality. Will's father was fat, lazy, and quick to anger. Will was quiet and full of a determined light. Yet Will's father knew that Will was his son. He didn't know why he was so confident, but he was. Some deep-buried paternal instinct told him so. So if the age-old sin of adultery wasn't the reason for Will's father's hatred, then what was?

Will had asked himself this question before. A few weeks ago he had learned the answer. In one of his drunken rages, Will's father had screamed at him that he had killed his mother. The malice and hatred in his voice almost stung as much as the belt Will's father had held in his hand. At first, Will did not understand. His mother had died during childbirth. That wasn't his fault, was it?

Crashing from inside the house startled Will. He stood up straight and knew.

He was dead.

The wooden door slammed open with a crash that startled the quiet canyon that the small cabin resided in. A taste of fear filled the air.

A big man that was roughly double Will's height stood before him. He was balding and wore a ragged flannel shirt. With every exhale Will could smell the alcohol on his breath and the

tobacco in his lungs. The wind shifted and the smell of an unwashed dog wafted into Will's nostrils and mouth. Absolute terror paralyzed the young boy. A cold chill of dread ran up his spine.

His face was rosy with alcohol and rage. Unchecked fury filled the beast's eyes. It grabbed Will by his wild mane of white hair and yanked him inside the cabin. Will grimaced in pain and wanted to cry out in pain, but he stopped himself. Crying out would only make his father more angry.

The beast threw Will to the ground. Will's head hit the hard floor that was littered with empty beer cans. His eyes went bleary for a moment and he lost his breath.

Then, something snapped inside the small boy.

He almost thought that it was audible. His quiet fire exploded into a raging supernova fueled by years of built up hate and pain. His teeth bore onto each other with almost enough force to crack the small child's jaw. He stood up slowly and glared into the face of his tormentor. The man that was supposed to be his father.

The beast, in his drunken stupidity, didn't notice the change in the boy. He stumbled across the floor in a russian waltz. A hand flew through the stale air that was trapped inside the cabin. Will's left cheek turned to a spark of agony and the force from the slap almost knocked Will off his feet. It should've knocked him off his feet. Yet Will stood tall and turned his head back to the beast. His eyes glowed with malice and determination.

Quick as a rattlesnake, Will twisted his body and uncoiled his left leg. His fist whirred with power as it landed home in the Beast's crotch. The enormous power behind the strike was enough to drop the Beast with a loud *thud* as the heavy man struck the ground. The Beast's eyes seemed to clear and for a second fear penetrated the Beast's heart like a cold dagger. The fear was quickly overcome by a pain deep inside the Beast's stomach. His face contorted in a spectacle of pain as he rolled across the ground.

Will approached the writhing body of the Beast. He had the look of a killer in his young face. His soft blue eyes turned hard.

Will straddled either side of the Beast's body with his legs. The beast hardly seemed to notice. A painful throb had filled its lower gut. The punch to the gonads might have burst one of them. The deadly air of twilight filled the cabin as the setting sun turned the boy's white hair red. He raised his right fist and struck the Beast's face with all the hatred and strength that he had



stored from all the beatings he had endured. A gut churning *crack* sounded through the air as the young boy broke the Beast's nose. Will raised his left fist and brought it down. Then his right. Then his left again.

Pain rippled through Will's killer arms. His knuckles were skinned as he shoved them into the face of the beast over and over and over again. Will felt no pain though. His mind was in a place outside of pain.

Scarlet sweat poured out of Will's fists. He could not tell where his blood stopped and the Beast's blood began.

After a while, the Beast no longer had a face. The Beast no longer breathed. But still, Will brought his fist down on the bloody pulp of the Beast's mass of flesh.

The Beast was dead.

Will dropped to the side of the corpse after some time. Blood soaked his white hair and turned it to rust. He was breathing harder than he ever had as he laid on his back. Will closed his eyes. He was exhausted.

On the ground next to his father, the orphan fell asleep.