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Valley of Decay

The air in the mountain pass is like the hot, choking breath of a monster. Jaryn lags at the back of his group, his arms hanging low and his steps faltering. Sheer, rock walls rise steeply to either side. The mountain pass looks like it was cut out of the stone with a massive, jagged blade, though it was not done well. At the base of the cliffs, it's only wide enough for two or three people to walk abreast, and the space between the walls grows narrower the farther up it goes so that the tops of the cliffs nearly touch. It's not a straight path, either. Already, the entrance they passed through is lost to the sharp twists and turns of the canyon.

Ahead of him, his sister, Kallee, hangs off every word that spills out of the mouth of their self-imposed leader, Hanir. Tall and broad-shouldered, Hanir acts every bit the important and attractive person their village lauds him to be.

Hanir'll be the next leader, the villagers say. He just seems so kingly, doesn't he? Unlike Jaryn himself—below average height, on the scrawny side of lean, and skin so pale, half his village is convinced he's part-goblin.

He'd make a good storyteller, is what they say about him. What they really mean is: *he's of no use to any of us.*

“Gettin’ tired there, buddy?” Brant asks.

Jaryn's head snaps up at the mocking tone, and he narrows his eyes at Brant. Shorter than Hanir, but taller than Jaryn and much stockier, Brant may have lost out where handsomeness is concerned, but he serves his purpose as Hanir's self-appointed bodyguard.

"Go kick some more stones," Jaryn says. "Maybe one will bounce off and hit you in the head."

Brant's mouth screws up. "Ya insultin' me?"

Jaryn rolls his eyes and brushes past him. Hanir and Kallee disappear around another turn, and small rocks scatter around Jaryn's dragging feet in his attempt to catch up to them despite the molasses that's replaced the air around him. He sucks in a breath, almost surprised when he still can, and nearly collides with Kallee when he rounds the sharp corner of rock. He opens his mouth to ask why she and Hanir stopped, but the question dies on his tongue.

The Cursed Valley stretches out before them like the skin of a diseased creature. Pools of still water pockmark the muddy ground, and milky sunlight struggles to break through the thick fog that hovers unmoving in the air. The half-decayed corpse of a deer lies motionless just within view, and more dead things appear the longer Jaryn stands frozen. Then, the stench hits like a physical blow, and he steps back, smacking a hand over his nose and mouth.

Kallee's voice is barely above a whisper when she asks, "What in Kalau's scrolls of Fate happened here?"

"A dead mage," Hanir says with the slightest tremor in his words. "The valley died when he did."

"I bet that ain't true," Brant says, from just behind Jaryn.

Hanir turns, eyes narrowed and jaw tight. “The Village Storyteller said so herself, and she’s older than rocks. You want to question her?” When Brant doesn’t respond, Hanir says, “Don’t know why I need to convince you. We can just see for ourselves.”

Jaryn’s mouth drops open. “You still want to go *in the valley*?”

Brant’s hand drops onto Jaryn’s shoulder. “Lookit this, scrawny boy’s scared.” He leans down. “Ain’t no reason t’ worry, bud. We won’t let no dead mage get ya.”

Jaryn shrugs Brant’s hand off. “Have you even looked at this place? It’s been untouched for *decades*, but that deer is only half-decayed.”

Hanir crosses his arms. “And you’re saying you don’t want to check out a phenomenon like that?”

“I’m saying I’d like to live! This is *dark* magic—”

“Why’d you come if you were just gonna be such a downer?” Kallee asks, her lips pinched.

Jaryn turns to her, his eyes so wide, it hurts. “I- I thought you’d change your mind—”

Brant bares his teeth in a grin. “Ha! Ya *are* a coward.”

“Leave if you want,” Hanir says. “We’re going.”

Brant follows Hanir with a last sneer at Jaryn, who ignores it. “Kallee,” Jaryn says, “don’t go.”

She hesitates, but then, Hanir calls her name and she bites her lip. “I’m sorry,” she says, and runs to catch up with Hanir and Brant. Together, they disappear into the fog. It closes behind them like the maw of a beast.

Jaryn kicks the ground with a curse. As though all his energy is spent, he braces his hands on his knees, sucking in ragged breaths of fetid air. It’s the smart decision to stay—to refuse to

enter a valley cursed to remain frozen in death. It's the right decision, so why can't he get Brant's accusation of "coward" out of his head?

A shrill scream rings through the valley, and Jaryn starts forward—stopping only when his foot sinks into the mud. He stumbles back, a shudder wracking through him. The dead eyes of the deer pierce through him, and for a moment, his lungs stutter in his chest.

Another scream cuts through his panic, and he jumps forward into the mud and fog and cloying scent of death before he can let himself think about it. The fog swirls around him like an old friend as the ground squelches beneath his feet. His progress is slow—every step sinking into the muddy, grasping hands of the bog. Skeletons and partially-decomposed corpses jump out of the fog as though possessed, only to sink back out of sight moments later.

"Kallee! Where are you?" The fog and mud swallow his voice, but he opens his mouth to yell again when his foot collides with something solid. He pitches forward, throwing his hands out to break his fall, but he only succeeds in sinking his arms into the mud up to his elbows. He fights his way out of the sticky mire and staggers to his feet, spitting foul-tasting liquid out of his mouth. He turns, and his knees buckle when Hanir's petrified face screams soundlessly from where his body is being slowly claimed by the valley.

"Ha- Hanir?" Jaryn says, though the blood slowly mixing into a nearby pool is answer enough to the question he doesn't want to ask. Nausea creeps up his throat and he vomits before stumbling away. Dead eyes stare at him from every direction—corpses popping out of the ground and materializing behind the fog as he attempts to run. The ribcage of some dead creature wraps around his foot. The skeleton of a wolf drips rotten flesh from where it stands speared by a fallen tree. The stench of death is so strong now that he gags on it.

“Kallee! Kal—” A body slams into him and they both careen into a puddle with a splash. Jaryn swipes water out of his eyes and whirls around. “Brant?”

Brant’s shoulders heave with gasping breaths from where he’s still on his knees in the shallow water. His eyes dart in every direction, wide and unblinking, until they finally focus on Jaryn’s face. “Jaryn,” Brant says, and it’s his name from Brant’s mouth that sends chills down Jaryn’s spine. “It got Hanir. It—”

“I saw,” Jaryn says. “But what was it?”

Brant shakes his head. “Dunno. Hanir just up and disappeared, but then, it *threw* him back at us. I tried t’ help him, but he was...” He sucks in a sharp breath. “Me ‘n Kallee ran, but we ain’t know how t’ get back.”

“Where is she?” Jaryn asks. “Brant, *where is Kallee?*”

Brant blinks, then looks back over his shoulder. “She was followin’ me up ‘til a—”

Jaryn doesn’t wait for him to finish. “Let’s go,” he says, pulling on Brant’s arm to get him up. “We have to find her, and then we have to get out of here.”

Brant trudges after him. “Do ya know how t’ get out? I ain’t seein’ any path.”

“We just need to find Kallee,” Jaryn says.

The fog parts as they walk, almost as though it’s leading them in a specific direction. Jaryn follows it for lack of a better route, and Brant tags behind him without complaint. It’s difficult to tell time with the fog distorting whatever remains of the sunlight, but after an eternity and no time at all, the fog just ends, revealing the crumbling remains of a castle built into the mountains on the edge of the valley.

The Village Storyteller said that the castle was once a brilliant white, and that the sunlight glittered off its stone walls like a thousand diamonds. None of that image remains now—the

stone blackened and crusted with mold. Its once-proud towers are collapsed in on themselves, its sturdy wall reduced to mere bricks, and where there might've once been a drawbridge, nothing remains. The remnants of a courtyard are just barely visible beneath the muck and rubble, and at its far side, the castle's main entrance stands open like a yawning mouth, its tall doors hanging slanted off their hinges.

"This where that dead mage used t' live?" Brant asks in a hushed voice.

"Probably," Jaryn says. He tears his eyes away from the castle and scans the ground outside the wall, which is mercifully clear of the fog that hangs behind them like a curtain. A still form lying half-hidden in the mud catches his eye. "Kallee!"

"She dead?" Brant asks, as they move to kneel beside her.

"Kallee?" Jaryn's fingers brush her shoulder.

She gasps and jerks upright, eyes wild and darting. "Hanir!" Mud stains her face, clothes, and blonde hair.

Jaryn grabs her hand. "It's okay! You're okay."

"Jaryn," she says, a choked sob rising from her throat. "Jaryn, it—"

"I know," he says. "But we're going to get out of here, okay? We just need to run with the castle behind us. The canyon path should be over there." He points in the vague direction he hopes is their way out. "Can you stand?"

She nods, her teeth tearing at her lip. Jaryn and Brant help her to her feet, but they've taken no more than two steps when her hand jerks against Jaryn's hold.

Her eyes lock with his. "Jaryn," she says, before she's ripped from his grasp and into the air. A sickly-yellow smoke curls around her and she screams. The sound cuts off as she disappears into the darkness beyond the castle entrance.

“Kallee!” Jaryn starts toward the castle, but Brant seizes his arm.

“Jaryn, we hafta go!” Brant tugs him back. “She’s as dead as Hanir. You ain’t helpin’ her now!”

“No, I need to go after her!” Jaryn yanks his arm until pain shoots through his muscles, but Brant’s grip is unrelenting.

“You’re gonna get killed,” Brant says. “We gotta—” He breaks off when the yellow smoke creeps out of the shadows toward them. “Run!”

He pulls Jaryn with him, and they bolt back into the hazy, white fog. The mud grabs at them—seething and bubbling as though coming alive after a long slumber. Corpses and bones rise from the depths of the bog to trip them, and clouds of putrid air burst from the stagnant pools to choke them. Brant’s foot sticks in the hollowed trunk of a still-dying tree, and Jaryn smashes a blood-slicked stone against the rotting wood until it falls away with an unnatural whine.

They run until Jaryn’s lungs burn and his legs shake. He stumbles around another molding corpse and into a deep pool of murky, green water. He can’t find which way is up, and his arms wave wildly until a hand closes around his wrist and hauls him up. He splutters as he surfaces and crawls out of the pool, and then, Brant pulls him to his feet and pushes him back into a run. Jaryn glances back only once at the yellow smoke that seeps ever closer.

“We’ll never get out,” he says between gasps of breath.

“Jus’ keep movin’,” Brant says.

The fog closes in on them until they’re staggering blindly. The wispy sensation of smoke brushes against Jaryn’s skin, curls around his shoulder, and tears into his muscles and flesh like a creature with fangs. Jaryn grunts, then cries out when it *pulls*, jerking him backwards.

“Brant!”

Brant stops and turns, mere steps away from the mountain pass just visible beyond the fog. Jaryn digs his feet into the mud, teeth gritted, and then drops to his knees. He grabs at a stone that juts upward out of the bog in front of him, almost loses his grip on its oily surface, and strains to drag himself to the edge of the fog. His shoulder screams white-hot, the sensation spreading like lava across his back, and the spots that burst in his vision almost blind him to the hands that wrap around his wrists and tug forward and up.

“*Almost—*” a voice that might be his or Brant’s or someone else’s says, but everything has gone dark until—

An explosion of color and a release from the grasp of the smoke so sudden that Jaryn gasps as he collapses just inside the stone walls of the canyon, harsh coughs tearing from his throat. His body shakes, and for a moment, all he can do is kneel with his eyes closed, his forehead pressed into the hard dirt of the passageway, and his shoulder bleeding in red rivulets down his arm.

“Jaryn, lookit that.”

Jaryn sits up and turns to face the valley once more. The yellow smoke hovers just beyond the stone of the mountains, twisting like some living thing. Jaryn shivers at the feeling of a presence within the smoke, but when it finally dissipates back into the fog, the sense of being watched fades with it.

“Dark magic,” Brant says, his mouth a grim line. “We shoulda listened.”

Jaryn glances at him before returning his gaze to the fog. “Yeah,” he says, finding the corpse of the deer, “she should’ve.”