

**EVEN IF
WE BREAK**

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To the dragons who saved me

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ONE
FINN

We're leaving the world behind.

The narrow mountain road creeps higher, and with every step, Flagstaff and our small suburb of Stardust disappear a little farther into the distance. With every step, we're more alone. It's just the five of us.

It's not a comfortable walk—the straps of my backpack dig into my shoulders, my binder is sweaty, and my crutches keep slipping on loose rocks—but it's a beautiful one. The muddy road first winds around a dark and ghostly lava field, then nestles between a whispering pine forest and steep cliffs.

If only I could relax enough to appreciate it. But I keep my eyes on the ground. It's safer that way—and less painful too.

"Are you okay?" Carter falls into step with me, the two of us lagging behind the other three. Carter's the only one lugging a suitcase up this mountain, and it makes his pace more irregular than mine. His face is almost as red as his shirt, and he's sweating. The sun won't let us forget that it's summer.

"Please tell me you wore sunscreen," I say.

He rolls his eyes. "Yes, Dad."

"You like me a whole lot more than you like your dad," I joke, and immediately realize how mean it sounded.

Carter flinches, then takes a deep breath and looks at me with something that's far too much like pity. And underneath is a gentleness I haven't seen in years, reminding me of the exuberant gamer he was our freshman year, before he became the son his parents wanted him to be. "I'm glad you're here, dude. It's been a while."

I'm not sure *I'm* glad. A weariness has settled in my bones and my joints, and it refuses to come out. At least this is the last time we'll come together as a group.

Too much has changed. Some friendships aren't meant to last. We've outgrown one another. There is too much hurt and history between us.

But Ever wants us to try one last time, and for Ever, I'll do anything.

Even if it means pretending everything's okay and putting costumes and characters over the cracks between us.

Even if it'll break me.

Even if it'll break all of us.

I glance toward the front of the group, where Ever navigates the road. They're with Liva, and the sight of her perfectly styled hair and flawless smile makes me tense up. Pain stabs at my legs and radiates to the rest of my body. If Ever's why I'm here, Liva's why I wouldn't be.

Carter is unperturbed by my silence. "So, what do you think Ever prepared? I mean, we all know this game will be another murder mystery. Our characters are only good at solving murders. But this is our last weekend together. It must be something special. Do you think it'll be our boss fight? Take down the BBEG? They've been secretive for weeks."

Although so much of me doesn't want to be here, I can't help getting drawn back into our game, into the world of Gonfalon. I *missed* this. But I continue my silence, trying desperately not to care.

Carter keeps talking. "We have the perfect location for it. Have you heard the ghost stories about this mountain? Apparently they go back for decades. *Centuries*. Do you think Ever will weave some of that into our story? You know, for full immersion? It would definitely make this weekend memorable."

I can't help myself. "Ghost stories, huh?" This doesn't seem like a haunted place. The mountain is green and blossoming under the summer sun. The foliage still smells of rain and the aftereffects of a storm. Birds chirp, eagles call, and every part of it is so tranquil, it

chafes. Only the road itself is imperfect, scarred by a year of minor quakes.

“Mass murderers. Disappearances. Strange music coming from the shadows. The last thing the murderer’s victims heard before he killed them was a music box melody.” He looks up at the mountain and grins. “People *die* on this mountain, Finn.”

“You sound *way* too excited about that. Besides, if people *died*, how did anyone know the music box was the last thing they heard?”

“Wouldn’t it be fun to play through the night and then meet actual ghosts?”

“...no?” This is exactly why Fatima, my therapist, says white people *die* in haunted houses. We have no nose for danger whatsoever.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?”

I roll my eyes. “Where’s your sense of self-preservation?”

“Aw, c’mon. You don’t think anything would actually happen?”

Underneath my crutch, a small pebble skids off the path, and I take a second to reposition myself. “No, I don’t think anyone *actually* believes in ghosts. Not even nerds like you who go to the library to dig up local haunts.”

Carter smirks. He’s your average pasty-white all-American boy, with sparkling blue eyes and curly blond hair. “I’ll have you know, I will always take nerd as a compliment, and in this case, I *didn’t* go to the library. Liva mentioned it the other day when we were—oh.”

He must see how my face falls at those words, because his face falls too.

Carter has never tried to talk about what happened. Maddy sort of brought it up once, asking how I was doing, but she was deeply uncomfortable. Ever faced it head-on, but they approach everything that way. And even then, I couldn't tell them all of it.

This is why I don't want to be here. It's not just what happened between Liva and me. The group fell apart after I got into that fight. We'd barely gotten used to Zac leaving. We were picking up the pieces. And instead of heading back into the game, I led us straight to an awkward three-month hiatus that everyone's pretending didn't happen.

I can't help but think I don't belong here anymore. No matter how much I used to, once upon a time. No matter how much I'd give to belong once more.

"It's okay," I lie. "We're all together, and that's what matters, right?"

We have to try. Or at least pretend. After all, isn't that what the whole weekend is about? Pretending?

We're only here to fall apart again.

Carter tugs at a strand of his sand-colored hair. He doesn't meet my eye. "I'm sorry, dude."

Yeah. "Me too."

Maddy glances back, her lips set in a worried line, but Ever and Liva haven't heard us and forge on ahead. One day, Liva and I will have the conversation we need to have. But it won't be today, and I won't be the one to instigate it.

“I meant to ask—are you looking forward to college?” Just like that, Carter has changed the topic, and something has subtly shifted in his face. He’s bottled his vulnerability, put his mask back on. We all have our secrets, of course. Carter’s is that beneath it all, he actually used to be a decent person.

I nod.

“You’re going east, right?” Carter’s father taught him to be in control of conversations, to always have the last word. This version of Carter never quite knows how or when to shut up, and this conversation is just another reminder of everything that’s changed between us. Once, we were close enough that he wouldn’t have had to ask this.

“Mm-hmm.” Drexel University. One of the best game development programs in the country, and the one that offered me an almost full-ride scholarship. Plus, it’s about as far as I can possibly get.

I want to be safe, and here isn’t safe anymore.

Carter huffs with the effort of dragging his ludicrous bag. Poor guy. He couldn’t possibly have anticipated we’d have to abandon our cars on the private drive because of a blockage, but he looks ridiculous. “I’m headed in the opposite direction. USC. I can’t wait to get out of here. This town—this state—is getting too small for me. I want something that challenges me.”

“Somewhere you can prove yourself?” My tone is harsher than I intended. This version of Carter—a bragging blowhard—brings out the worst in me. I take my eyes off the path and glance up at him.

He shrugs. “Yeah, I want to prove myself. Something wrong with

that? Having ambition isn't a bad thing, is it? I want something more. Something *better* than all of this."

"Can't argue with that."

The path winds sharply to the right, and I have to focus on where I place my crutches—and my feet. The pine trees to my right seem to climb farther up the mountainside, as though they're shying away from the steep drop on my left, and honestly, I can't blame them. But when I turn the corner, I curse.

The path is blocked by another barricade of boulders that almost reaches as high as we do. A tree has cracked and is leaning on the boulders.

"Frack. This wasn't here yesterday either," Ever says. "They must have slid down the slope during last night's storm. We'll have to climb over. Do you think you two can manage?" They turn and glance at Maddy and me. "We'll climb over first, so we can help you on the way down."

We're only an hour into the trip and already things are going sideways. I shouldn't have come.

But I tense my jaw. "I'll be fine."

Something like anger or disappointment flashes in Ever's eyes. Probably both. They hate it when I refuse to accept help.

"Do you need a hand?" Carter offers, already reaching out to me.

I shrink away from it. "No, thanks. It's better if I find my own way across." I can't trust any of them not to let me fall.

"Sure, your call." Carter falls into step with Maddy and offers her

his assistance instead. She nods gratefully. She'd gone pale at the sight of the boulders. After this trek, her knee must not be in great shape either. The road leading up to the cabin nestled snugly in a grove on top of Lonely Peak used to be comfortable, but bad weather, climate change, and an honest-to-eldritch-gods mudslide have recently put the last few miles out of commission. I'm sure Liva's family will pay to fix it at some point, but they haven't yet.

Ever and Liva make their way across first, holding onto the tree for balance. The boulders, all different sizes, don't seem to be particularly stable, and there's a small voice in the back of my mind—one that sounds remarkably like my therapist—telling me I should accept the offer for help.

After three years of PT and occupational therapy, five years of hospitals and arthritis specialists, I know exactly where my physical boundaries lie. I'm just incapable of admitting they exist.

And they keep closing in on me.

"Your mind is playing tricks on you," my friend Damien would tell me. "Asking for help isn't weakness. And limitations aren't a weakness either. They just are."

So what should I do with them, then? I'd ask him.

He'd ruffle my hair. "Accept them. And yourself. I know it's difficult. I know the rest of the world teaches us differently. But you're not lesser because you're different. You don't have to push yourself in an uncomfortable mold to be considered acceptable."

But instead of speaking up, I wait for Carter and Maddy to cross

too. They make their way tenderly, but as the rocks shift beneath them, small pebbles are sent flying over the edge, down a steep cliff. I focus and listen, but I don't hear them fall. It's an endless drop and a harsh silence.

Then it's just me. I realize what a terrible decision it was to wait until last.

"Finn, are you sure?" Ever says from behind the rocks. "I'm worried about you."

That settles my resolve, and I take the first step, climbing on one of the smaller boulders. It shifts and moves under my weight, but up is relatively easy. It's going over that's the problem.

Without sure footing, all I can do is place my crutches first. One step. Then the next. From this boulder to one higher up, a rock that looks a little more steady. Another step.

I lean hard on my crutches, because it's the only way I can keep my balance, but that makes it hard to ignore how shaky they feel. How tangles of pain shoot up through my legs every time my feet slip, every time my ankles overextend.

I'm a fool.

On the other side, someone shouts something, but my world has narrowed down to these rocks now. Whatever they say, it's not louder than the blood pumping in my ears.

I reach the highest point. The fallen tree hangs over the rocks, allowing the narrowest of gaps.

I'm going to have to fold myself through it, like the others

did, and somehow catch myself on the other side. I put one crutch through, then lean on the rocks and follow with my head and shoulders, ignoring the pain. I turn sideways, one knee first, so I have a way to brace myself. Then pull the next crutch and try not to launch myself down, continuing to ignore the pain. I find a good place to put the crutches and turn all the way through.

When I tug my foot free from the branches, I nearly lose my balance, but I manage to catch myself and stabilize.

Another step—

And I feel the crutches slip out from underneath me. I don't know if it's the rocks that shift or if it's my own lack of stability, but it's as though time slows down, and I can feel myself fall, oh so slow.

Then my knee buckles. The ankle twists. With the elbow cuffs around my crutches, I can't reach out to stop myself, because the impact would destroy my shoulders. I can only close my eyes and let myself—

Collide.

Strong arms come around me, bracing against my downward momentum. Then, other hands join the first person, holding us up and slowing us down to a stand. I hardly realize I'm not falling anymore, because the world is still twisting around me, and I may have messed up my hip again.

"Finn." Ever's voice comes harsh and angry like punches. "You fool of a Took. Ask for help when you need it."

Firmly on the ground, I open my eyes. There are manicured nails

around my arms—with the symbol of Gonfalon, a stylized, golden G, delicately painted onto each one. I nearly, nearly flinch. “Don’t—” Out of all my friends leaping up to help me, why was it Liva who succeeded? Pain burns in my ankle, but my anger burns hotter.

Liva lets go off me and steps back. Ever is directly behind her, glaring at me. Carter, frowning. Maddy, pale with worry.

I’m reeling with fear and fury and hurt, and it’s so much, so overwhelmingly much, I don’t know how to deal with it but to sink down and sit and ground myself. Breathe until I get my equilibrium back and my hands don’t tremble with rage anymore. Wait until the anger—at myself, at Liva, at this cursed mountain—withdraws into the usual shadows.

“I thought you were smarter than that.” Ever hands me a bottle of water out of their backpack. Underneath their words are others: *I thought you were okay with this weekend.*

“I am.” For them, I am. Or I thought I could be, at least.

As I catch my breath, I glance around at the group. We’re a collection of individuals, all of us broken, all of us fragile. But the thing that scares me most isn’t that I might break us apart further.

It’s that I *want* to.