

A • B R I E F • E P I C



WAKING  
UP THE  
GIANTS

A golden trumpet is positioned at the bottom right of the title, with its mouthpiece pointing towards the right.

ANNA CACKLER

# WAKING UP THE GIANTS

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A BRIEF EPIC

ANNA CACKLER





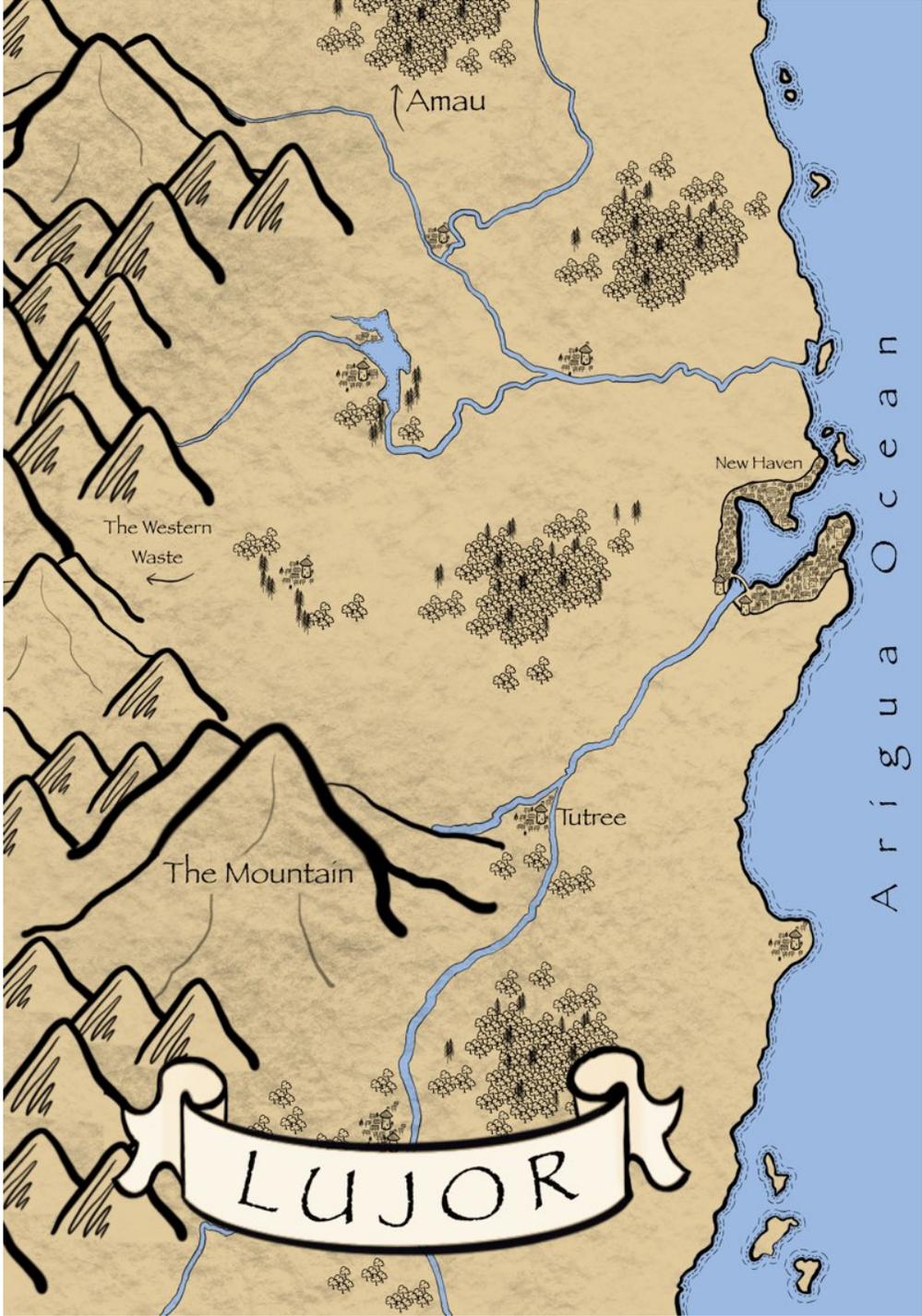
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Cover art by Anna Cackler

*For Isaac, who always looks out  
for those who need it most.*



## WAKING UP THE GIANTS

“These can’t be natural rock formations,” Nora said, gazing up at the moss covered arches as she passed under them. “Look at these angles. These are deliberate.”

“There are no ruins in these mountains,” I answered gruffly. “No man-made anything.”

“You can’t know that, Eoghan,” she answered. She slipped her hand into the smaller bag around her waist and predictably pulled out her sketchbook. “The Mountain wasn’t always forbidden. Maybe people lived up here at some point. You never know.”

Her long, dark braid swung as she turned on the spot. “There are ten of them.” She stared around in wonder as her little stick of charcoal flew over the topmost sheet of paper. “All different, but all geometric. Nothing occurs naturally in groups of ten. Especially not rock formations. I mean, look at it! It feels like a room in here!”

Her sketchbook wasn’t a book. Books were expensive and meant to last. You didn’t bind them until you had words and drawings worth saving. Instead she carried a leather binder containing a stack of rough paper, which she had pressed herself. A useless skill for anyone but a mapmaker.

Thank the gods she didn't bring a book. No one would ever see her sketches. Not ever. But I didn't have the heart to tell her so.

In nearly two weeks on the Mountain, she had used three sheets: One for notes, one for a rough map, and one for sketching unusual trees or recognizable outcroppings. "So we can find our way home," she explained on the third night, her nose close to the paper so she could see in the firelight.

But her drawing of the arches took up an entire precious page. She indicated folds in the stone with concise, confident strokes, and the hanging moss blossomed in black coal on the paper.

These arches were more than just a landmark. They were the first remarkable thing we'd encountered in our ten days of walking. They rose from the weeds and brush in an awkward dome under the high canopy of pines, both alien and natural in this forest shrouded in superstition.

They stood exactly where we expected to find them; Nora's archives had led us here with confidence. If the stories were true, this was the most likely place to find the Clarion.

I eyed the arches as I stepped past her and down under the dome. She was right: it did feel a bit like a room.

The floor dipped downward into a shallow bowl, comprised of the same basalt as the arches above us. The entire space was empty save for the tumbled stones and the stubborn weeds that grew in the cracks. The morning sun streamed in through the irregular gaps between the arches, striping the uneven floor with light.

"I still don't think it's man-made," I said, slipping my main pack off my shoulders. "There would be a real floor, not just more ground." I kicked one of the smaller stones with the toe of my heavy, time-worn boot.

"I'm telling you, this doesn't happen in nature," Nora insisted. She slipped her completed drawing to the bottom of the pile and began sketching a second page. "This is basalt, right? I don't see any sediment or grain. It's just solid stone." She stood on her tiptoes and laid one pale hand on the nearest arch. It was one of two shorter ones that jutted from opposing walls. They each extended about twenty feet across, then ended in a rounded off edge.

Two short arches right at the back of the room, and eight longer ones that stretched across the entire ceiling - for lack of a better word.

"This entire Mountain is basalt," I reminded her.

"Yes, but basalt doesn't form like this! I keep telling you!"

"But it isn't carved either," I said, examining the arch nearest to me. "I'm no mason, Nora, but I know one thing for certain. Tools leave either rough hewn marks, or they leave a deliberate, smooth surface. These have neither. This isn't man-made."

Nora lowered her sketch pad. Her fingers had gone black with the charcoal as usual. She chewed on her lip, thinking hard. "Maybe it's just weathered?"

"Nora," I said again, my tone just barely containing my lost patience.

"Eoghan," she responded with scorn, then waved me away. "It doesn't make any difference. We're clearly in the right place. Finally."

I threw out my arms and swung in a circle to encompass the cavernous room. "Are we, though? There's nothing here!"

She lurched half a step back at my outburst, and a startled bevy of pigeons took flight between the arches to the safety of the pines outside.

I was a big man, especially compared to her small, athletic frame. Tall, broad, and sun darkened with dirt colored hair tied into a hasty knot at the back of my head, I was as foreboding as any ranger you might expect to see tramping in from the wild, bristling with hunting knives and furs for trade.

In the ten days she'd known me, I'd been careful to be as unobtrusive as possible. This was probably my last friend in the world. I didn't want her to be afraid.

Her surprise was short-lived. She closed her leather binder, scowling, and wrapped the cord around it twice with a practiced hand. "The archives led us here. These arches are unnatural. We're right on schedule. The Clarion must be here. It has to be."

I dropped my hands to my sides with an exasperated sigh. "Fine."

"Just -" she pointed at one of the larger piles of stones on my left. "Just start shifting rocks. We came all this way. We have to at least look for it."

She slipped her packs off her back and moved toward a pile of stones near her feet, one large enough to conceal a medium sized chest in the rubble. There she began heaving stones end over end to expose what lay underneath.

Unsurprisingly, there was only more stone under there.

I watched her determined progress for a full twenty seconds before following suit.

She was right. Every day, new smoke rose up in the valley below as another village burned. There was no time for hesitation, and giving up was not an option.

We started in the center on the assumption that it was the most logical place to find the fabled Clarion. When that failed us, we continued with the largest piles next.

The bright stripes of light crept along the floor as the sun moved across the sky. The only sound was of grunts and heaves from Nora, and the scrape and thud of stones being overturned.

Every time I lifted a stone, I half-expected to find an ancient chest or a glint of brass. But every time, I was disappointed.

And every time I thought a specific rock wasn't big enough to hide anything important, I always went back and checked under it anyway. Just in case.

After about two hours, Nora stood up and stretched her lower back with a grimace. "Let's stop for lunch."

I turned over another stone, then another. "Let's finish this section first." Another rock tumbled over as I reached for a particularly large one.

"I'm starving, Eoghan. Let's just take a break."

"Have your break," I answered with a grunt as I hauled on the large stone. "I'll stop in a minute."

"You're going to hurt yourself," she said, one eyebrow raised.

I smirked and opened my mouth to answer, but the stone shifted under my hands. I lost my balance and toppled backwards onto my ass. Nora leaped away to avoid being crushed under me, and pain seared through my tailbone as I hit the uneven ground.

"Holy shit, Eoghan! I said you'd hurt yourself! Are you okay?"

She pulled on my arm to help me up, but she didn't have the strength for it. I lumbered to my feet, ignoring the pain, and appraised the stone I had dislodged.

It only partially came away from its spot, wedged between two other stones in the pile, but a dark gap had opened up behind it.

"Holy..." Nora breathed. She darted forward and plunged her hands into the crevice. "You found it, Eoghan. It's here."

She wiped black earth away from a square corner inside the gap, revealing the dull shine of brass fittings.

The air left my lungs in a woosh. "Holy shit," I breathed in shock, staring at the narrow slice of the chest visible behind the stone.

It was real.

There it was, just like they said it would be. Just like in the stories. A small portion of the chest was visible in the crevice, but judging by the pile of stones I had dislodged, it would be about the size of one of my boots.

She laughed out loud as I heaved on the stone with renewed energy. "I knew it! I told you! I *told* you it would be here!"

"We don't know what's in it," I said. Then, with a roar of effort from me, the stone finally gave way.

"It's the Clarion!" Nora insisted, breathless. "What else is it going to be?"

She helped me rock the small chest out of its tight quarters. I set it on the ground and stepped away. We stared down at it, both stunned into silence.

The little box was unremarkable. Made of ancient, scarred wood and held together with hammered brass, it looked a bit like something you'd find in the back of your average closet. A box for knick knacks or old letters.

"It's made of wood," Nora said, suddenly wary. "Why hasn't it rotted in all this time?"

The exact same thought had occurred to me as well.

"Well," she said, slapping my arm with the back of her filthy hand. "Open it. Go on."

I raised my eyes to the unnatural arches above us in exasperation, but then knelt down obediently.

There was no lock, just a simple latch. The hinge was so encrusted with filth and corrosion that I had to pry it up with the edge of my knife. I gripped the lid gently — surely the wood was less solid than it looked. If the legends were true, this box had been buried under this rubble for a thousand years. Hidden away on the lonely Mountain, far away from the machinations of mankind.

But the rough hewn, gray wood was solid as the day it was made. The hinges ground open under my hand.

Dirty black velvet lined the inside, as untouched by time as the box itself. And nestled in the velvet lay a small brass trumpet. Nothing special. Just a wide mouthpiece and a single, elongated loop of tubing that flared into a delicate bell at the other end.

Simple, unadorned, and unremarkable.

Nora knelt next to me and lifted it out. She held it up between her coal-covered hands so that we could both see.

Triumph and dread twisted my chest into knots. “Well, there it is,” I said, more businesslike than I felt.

“There it is,” she responded in a whisper.

“Okay. Let’s get going,” I said with a decisive nod. I rose to my feet and retrieved my pack without a backward glance.

Nora stared after me, her mouth hanging open. “That’s it?”

“What?”

“We’re just gonna go? Just like that?”

“As opposed to what?”

She looked down at the Clarion in her hands. She held it out in front of her body as if she were afraid to get too close to it. “We came all this way. Ten days in the wilderness of the Mountain, on faith alone. And here it is. This is history, Eoghan. This is why the old pilgrimages were forbidden! To protect this!”

She raised the horn up and brandished it at me. It was so small I could have bent it in half with my bare hands.

This little thing? This is where we hung all our hopes?

"This is..." she said, half to herself. "There are no words for what this is."

"What use are words?" I asked, shrugging my pack onto my shoulders. "We came to find the Clarion. That's done. Now we take it and move on."

"But -"

"The sooner we make the peak, the better. Every day, the Amau army draws closer to the capital, Nora. Soon we won't have a history anymore. It'll go up in flames just like everything else. Now, let's go. On your feet, mapmaker."

I left Nora to come to her senses and stepped back out into the open air under the pines. This high up, the wind was chilly and fresh. It cooled the sweat on my brow and ruffled through my greasy hair.

The fires still burned in the valley below, but the smoke didn't reach us up here. The wind carried the scents of flowers, grass, soil, and rain. I closed my eyes and breathed in deep.

This.

This was why I had become a ranger. To be in the wilderness, to be free was my only peace. And thank all the gods that I could spend my last days here in this unspoiled place where no man had set foot in a hundred years or more.

"Help me tie this up."

I turned at Nora's determined tone. She had emerged from the darkness under the arches with the Clarion in one hand and a length of rope in the other.

"You want to tie it to your pack?" I asked.

"It won't fit inside."

"It will be damaged if you fall."

"I won't fall." She held the rope out to me, but I didn't take it.

"Nora..." I said, dubious.

"You won't let me fall," she said sternly. She shook the rope in my direction once, insistent that I take it without argument. "You're better at knots than me."

Fine. That was just fine.

She turned around to give me access to her pack, but I put one hand on her arm to stop her. "It will be safer on your front. You'll be able to protect it with your arms."

Nora nodded once, then stood straight and silent while I worked. The straps of her pack crossed her body at a diagonal between her breasts. That was the best place to attach the Clarion. I secured it onto the strap, my fingers quick and practical. "It shouldn't restrict your movement too much here," I explained as her eyes bored into me.

She said nothing.

"Is there something on my face?" I asked as I pulled the rope under the strap of her pack again.

"You didn't think it was real, did you?" she asked.

Considering where my hands were at that moment, this was not what I expected to hear from her.

"What, the Clarion? Or the Giants?"

"Both. Either. Take your pick." Her eyebrows lowered and she lifted her chin, defiant.

I pulled the final knot tight and stepped back. The Clarion lay secure across her chest. If she was careful when taking her pack on and off, we wouldn't have to untie it until we reached the peak. Not until our last day.

“What difference does it make?” I didn’t wait for her answer, but turned toward the west and resumed climbing. There wasn’t time to stand around squabbling.

Nora’s feet scraped through the scree as she scrambled after me. “Why in the fuck would you come on this mission if you didn’t think it would work?”

“Would you rather I didn’t come?” I asked, nettled.

“That’s not what I said!” She caught up to me, not even out of breath. She had grown stronger since our first day out, when she had been green and eager. An apprentice mapmaker excited for her first adventure. These ten days had turned her hard and determined, but her faith was untarnished.

“You’d be dead at the bottom of that ravine if it weren’t for me!” I reminded her. It had been a near miss on our fourth day. I’d almost lost her.

“Stop changing the subject!” she snapped. “Why did you agree to climb the Mountain? To find the Clarion and wake the Giants? If this is a fool’s errand, then that makes you a fool. But you’re no fool, Eoghan.” She laughed sarcastically and wagged a finger at me. “You’re no fool. You came on this mission for a reason, and it wasn’t to wake the Giants and end this war with Amau.”

I clamped my mouth shut and kept climbing.

Her short legs ate up the ground next to me, going nearly twice as fast as mine to equal my stride. She used her hands as much as her feet to scramble up the steeper inclines, the Clarion nestled against her chest.

“So what, you think we’ll reach the peak, sound the Clarion, and then what? Nothing?”

“Maybe,” I said, despite my determination to not talk about this.

“Maybe?” she shrilled. “Maybe?”

I thought back to the shape of the ten stone arches that had cradled the Clarion — of Nora's expression as she recorded them in her sketchbook.

Maybe? No.

Hopefully nothing would happen.

"Eoghan!"

"What do you want from me?" I rounded on her, causing her to skid to an unexpected stop. "I'm here, aren't I? We found the Clarion. We're taking it to the peak. We'll sound it. I'm doing everything I'm supposed to do. I'm getting you there. That's the job. What the hell else do you want me to say?"

She met my gaze, unflinching.

"Two days to the top, right? That's what your maps say? Your archives?"

She nodded, stubbornly mute.

I gripped her arms, my expression tight, but the words didn't come. All the things I wanted to say to her, that I wanted to protect her from but couldn't. The words dammed up in my throat as I held her gaze.

Damn it, this was why I always traveled alone. My job was to keep her safe. Fool's errand, indeed.

"Just keep walking," I said instead. "Two more days."

I released her and resumed climbing.

Just two more days. That was all we had left.

"We never ate lunch!" she spat at my back.

"Bloody hell," I muttered to myself. I had never rolled my eyes so much in my life as I had done in the last ten days.

But my feet stopped their relentless march, and I hauled off my pack.

We ate the last of yesterday's rabbit in dogged silence. We had long finished off the flatbreads that we had brought with us, but Nora had rationed out the dried apricots so that we could have a little every day.

I sucked on my portion as we walked, savoring the sweetness.

It was the little things.

We hiked in silence for the rest of the afternoon, stopping only when the sun began to get low. Nora set up camp while I slipped into the woods with my knife and my sling. Squirrels were easy prey this late in the autumn, and I returned to camp an hour later with a whole stack of them.

We ate in silence, sitting close by the fire as the sun disappeared below the horizon. Nora wrapped herself up in every piece of clothing she'd brought with her, and even then she sat right up against me.

"It's getting colder," she said, tucking her hands under her armpits.

"The air is thin up here." I put an arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer under my own cloak. "We'll have to start sharing our bedrolls if we want to sleep well."

"Fine," she answered, her eyes on the fire.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. I assumed (naively, in hindsight) that we sat in peace. We huddled close to ward off the cold. A healthy pile of meat had been wrapped up in oiled cloth, ready for tomorrow. That spot over there, just on the other side of the fire - that would be the perfect spot for us to bed down in a few minutes.

That day had been a success. The Clarion glinted in the firelight from where it was still tied to the strap on her pack. Things were going well. According to plan, at least.

But of course, Nora's brain didn't dwell on simple matters. She didn't worry about rations, safety, or frostbitten toes.

"Why wasn't the chest rotten?" she said suddenly into the cold night air.

"What?" I asked.

"The chest. The Clarion's chest. It was made of wood. Why wasn't it rotten?"

I scowled into the dark. "I don't know."

"It wasn't protected from the elements," she plowed on in a soft voice that resonated loud in my ear. "It was basically buried in the earth. It should have rotted away centuries ago."

"I don't know," I said again.

She paused long enough that my mind began to turn toward bed again.

"What if it's not real?" she asked.

With an irritated grunt, I got up and began unstrapping our bedrolls from the tops of our packs. The Clarion glinted at me, mocking the firelight.

Nora wrapped her cloak tighter around herself to compensate for my lost body heat. "I'm being serious, Eoghan."

I stood up, her bedroll hanging from one hand at my side. "What? What are you being serious about? Tell me. Because from what I can tell, there are two options. Either the Clarion is magic and protected the box from time, or else the entire thing was planted less than two decades ago. It's just a regular old trumpet, in a regular old box. Put there by regular people for some unknown reason.

"It won't wake up any fabled Giants, which means there is nothing to stop Amau from plowing over this land unchecked, and our entire country will be wiped off the map from the Western Waste to the Arigua Ocean. Is that what you're being serious about?"

She stared up at me, her eyes wide at my uncharacteristic bout of words. "Is that what you think? That this is all for nothing?"

"Is that what *you* think?" I retorted. "You're the one who brought this up!"

"What else am I supposed to think?" Nora said, her voice rising to match mine.

"It doesn't matter!" I hissed and gestured with her bedroll. "It doesn't matter what you think or what I think. This is the mission, Nora. This is what we were charged to do by the capital. Two people, only the two of us could be spared from the war. An apprentice mapmaker to navigate and a ranger to keep her alive. That's it!"

Nora glared at me, her face smudged with dirt and charcoal from her drawings and notes. Her mutinous silence should have intimidated me. In the past, I would have clammed up, suddenly unsure of my words in the face of such determination.

But with Nora...

"This was only ever a last resort," I said. "No one believes this will work. The only reason we're here is because someone down there," I jabbed my finger toward the general east, where great billows of smoke were illuminated from underneath by the ravaging fires in the valley below, "thinks the old stories about the Giants may have some grain of truth. We are a prayer, Nora. We're just a hope and a prayer."

"A hope and a prayer? A last resort?" Nora launched to her feet and darted forward.

For an instant, I thought she might attack me in frustration. Her stormy expression said as much. But she went to her pack instead and began untying the Clarion from its strap with angry yanks at the rope.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm going to sound it," she said, picking at one of the knots. "Why wait until the peak? People are dying, right? Cities are burning. Why not do it now?"

"The legends say we have to sound it at the peak, in the Cavern of the Giants," I said. "We have to take it to the top of the Mountain."

She yanked off the last bit of rope and stood up, the Clarion small, even in her hands. "You said it yourself. They're just stories. Who's to say we have to get to the top? Why would it work better there than here?"

"Nora, wait!" I cried, dread filling the pit in my stomach.

But before I had a chance to stop her, she raised the little trumpet to her lips. I watched in horror as she took a deep breath and *blew*.

The night solidified into sound. A clear, high note much too large for such a small, delicate instrument filled the air around us so that nothing else existed. It drowned out the crickets and the cicadas, the owls and the wind. It silenced my heartbeat and the breath in my lungs. It vibrated into the very earth under us and filled my entire being with raw, unadulterated *life*.

"Nora!" I screamed into the sound, but my voice was entirely overwhelmed.

She squeezed her eyes shut against the din, but her determination was as strong as ever. She pushed through despite her agonized expression and clearly intended to hold the note for as long as she had breath.

After a second's hesitation, I knocked the Clarion away from her mouth with a controlled grab at the instrument. The note died away, leaving a ringing silence in its wake.

She stood shaking and empty handed in the wake of the Clarion's note, as if the little instrument had taken its sound from her

very being. Even the forest around us seemed to tremble in the silence.

No, not silence. The forest didn't seem to tremble, it really trembled. The trees shook and lurched in the windless sky and the air filled with a low, gut-deep rumbling.

Shit.

I launched toward Nora, wrapping her up in my arms and hauling us both to the ground as the earth began to shake beneath us. It trembled and heaved, sending agitated clouds of sparks up from the campfire on our right.

"What's happening?" Nora whispered. Her voice was barely audible over the roar of the earth.

"An earthquake," I said.

*Just an earthquake. It's just an earthquake, Eoghan. It's just a coincidence.*

Nora's coal-covered fingers gripped my thick jacket at my sides and she tucked her head into my chest. I gritted my teeth and held on tight, hoping against hope the trees would hold their ground and there would be no landslide to bury us alive.

We were supposed to have two more days.

All we could do was wait. So we clutched each other for what seemed like forever as the very earth betrayed us, until finally it began to lessen.

The quake slowed in waves, easing off, then trembling again with force. Then easing off again. Until finally it slowed to the faintest of trembles, then nothing.

Nora lifted her head and looked around in the darkness. Our fire had scattered and gone out, though the glowing logs still held enough heat to relight it. I set to work on arranging them once more, adding fresh kindling and a new log to get the flames going. It was

as much to busy my shaking hands as it was to combat the chill breeze.

Nora sat, dazed and silent, as I worked. Her eyes fell on the Clarion where I had dropped it on the ground. She picked it up and turned it over in the firelight.

"It doesn't have a scratch," she said in a whisper.

I took it from her hands without grace and held it close to the new firelight. She was right, not a single scratch or dent marred the brass. I had dropped it from several feet, and it had been tossed around in the gravel by a violent earthquake. It should have shown damage.

Nora stepped away from the circle of firelight and looked out over the valley, though not much was visible from our camp. The latest fires had burned low, leaving only a gentle glow to outline the ground in a few places, and the moon was a sliver in the night sky. All was blackness below.

"Do you think it worked?" she asked.

"No," I answered confidently.

"But the earthquake? That couldn't have been a coincidence."

I eyed the back of her head, barely visible in the dark. Whatever the Clarion had taken from her, she seemed to be recovering. "It was just an earthquake, Nora."

She turned around and met my gaze. If her faith had been wavering before, it was strong now. The Clarion wasn't a fake. There was no denying its note had been more than just sound.

"We have to take it to the peak, that's all," Nora said, coming back towards me. "It'll work at the peak, just like the legends say. It'll wake up the Giants."

I nodded, watching as she unrolled her bedding.

"To the peak," I agreed.

Two more days.

I banked the fire as Nora hauled off her boots and swapped out her thick, wool socks for a fresh pair. She climbed into the bedroll, her eyes hollow.

I unrolled my bedroll as well, but I didn't lay it out on the opposite side of the fire as usual. Instead I draped it on top of Nora's shivering form, slipped off my own boots, tightened up my hood, and climbed right in with her.

It was a tight fit, but that was the point. She didn't complain, only made as much room as she could. I put an arm over her and pulled her close, sighing at the wash of warmth.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, Nora's nimble fingers pulled open my coat. I glanced down at her, confused. Had she gotten the wrong idea? If she made a move on me, would I object? I honestly didn't know. There were certainly worse ways to spend our last nights on earth.

But then she slipped her arm around my waist under my coat and nuzzled against the soft, warm wool of my shirt.

I smirked to myself and buried my chilled nose in her curly hair. No, of course not. I was the one getting the wrong idea. She was just keeping warm.

"Eoghan?" Nora said into my chest.

"Hm?"

"You never answered before. Why did you come up the Mountain with me? You could have done anything. Gone anywhere. You could have joined the army, or led the evacuations south. But you didn't."

I frowned against the top of her head. "I'm a ranger. They offered me a chance to climb the Mountain where no one has been for cen-

turies. A new place. And it very well may be overrun with the Amau soon. How could I say no?"

"So that's it? That's all it was?" she asked. "Just a new place. Adventure?"

The end of her braid brushed against my hand, and I began twirling the dark, smooth strands between my fingers. It was such a little thing, a bit of softness in my harsh world of exposure and loneliness.

"I grew up with my Nan," I said. "My mother's mother. She lived right at the edge of the Great Forest of Lujor itself, in a little town that never even had a name. So I spent my entire youth in those woods, days at a time, sometimes. Nan taught me to hunt and how to take care of myself. 'People are mostly good,' she'd say. 'But sometimes there ain't no people around, is there?'"

Nora huffed a laugh, and I smiled into the dark.

"'You gotta take care of yourself, Eoghan boy.' She always called me that. Eoghan boy."

"She sounds nice," Nora said into my shirt.

I laughed once. "No, Nan wasn't nice. She was tough. And she took no shit. But she loved the old way. The stories about the sibyls and the Giants and the old magics. So most nights she'd tell me stories. And my favorites were always about the Giants. How they'd been the first peoples of Lujor and fought in the old wars alongside mankind's greatest heroes. They fought until there were no more wars to fight, until Lujor no longer needed defending. So they went away into the west until they were needed again. They forged the Clarion and hid it away in the easternmost mountain of the Western Wild. And one day they'd rise up again." I heaved out a heavy breath. "And the world would go back to making sense."

I paused, and the sounds of the forest invaded my silence. Owls and night birds and crickets and rushing wind. A twig snapped just inside the treeline, loud enough to make Nora jump.

"It's just a possum," I said, though I continued to stare into the dense darkness of the scrubby trees. If it had been an animal, there would be more sound. Snuffling through dry leaves, mating calls, anything.

But nothing. I heard only the wind and the crickets and the birds. As if whatever broke the twig was intentionally staying very quiet now.

I was no stranger to sleeping exposed. If someone was watching us, they would wake me before they got within ten steps of our fire.

Not that anyone was following us. They couldn't be. No one knew we were climbing the forbidden Giant's Mountain. And I would have noticed them before now.

Better safe than sorry. I let Nora's braid slip from my fingers and reached for the Clarion. I'd left it lying in the grass next to us where I could keep an eye on it, but now that didn't feel secure enough. I pulled the little trumpet under the blanket and kept a firm grip on it behind Nora's back.

"What's the matter?" Nora asked, looking up at me.

"Nothing. Just listening. It's a possum or a raccoon or something."

She lifted her head and shoulders to look toward the darkened trees. She stared for a few seconds, then dismissed her alarm. She settled back against my chest, and I pulled the blanket up to her ears for her.

"So you've always wondered about the Mountain, I suppose? Because of your Nan's stories?"

"They're just stories," I answered.

I felt her smirk against my shirt, and she huffed a laugh. "You don't believe that," she said.

I gripped the Clarion tightly behind her back. Before yesterday, I had believed exactly that. Just stories, distorted through the generations. A symbolic mountain shrouded in superstition. Before yesterday, this was just an unexplored area. An adventure. And yes, maybe a little nostalgia for my Nan's fireside tales.

But now? After Nora sounded this stupid little trumpet, after the very earth moved beneath us? I wasn't so sure.

"They're just stories," I said again, and I buried my face into the warmth of her curls. "Go to sleep, mapmaker."



THE NEXT DAY, there was no more talk of motivation or faith. I tied the Clarion to Nora's strap once more, and this time she adjusted it against her chest with reverence.

The Mountain grew steeper as we ascended. In the early days of the journey, it had been a gentle slope with tall birches, elms, and oaks. But as the way went higher, the trees grew smaller. The earth pitched steeper, and the streams ran thinner.

"There may not be much water past here," I said around noon. Nora crouched next to a burbling spring that ran down the mountain in a trickle. "Drink as much as you can bear now, and we'll save the water."

She nodded and dipped her cup into the little pool a third time.

I walked to the east towards an outcropping of stone. From there the entire valley opened up below me, a far better view than any we'd seen so far. The fires burned lower today than other days, so that even the Arigua Ocean was visible just below the horizon.

This was my home. A small country, inconsequential except for a major port on our coastline. That was visible, too. There, right at the edge of the world, where the startling blue of the Arigua met the sprawling, white city of New Haven. The capital city encrusted the shoreline around a massive bay, the only one deep enough to accept bulk carriers and naval ships for hundreds of miles in any direction. A pivotal stop from north to south.

That was all Amau wanted from us. That was it. One little bay, and the foothold they needed to take the entire continent.

But they couldn't take it. New Haven Bay was well defended with cannons and warships of our own. So Amau decided to come in the back door. They came in from the north with their torches and their pitch, and they decided to burn us out instead.

Nora's footsteps sounded behind me, but I didn't turn. She put a hand on my arm to steady herself near the edge and looked down at the valley below.

"Oh gods," she whispered.

"What?"

"Look. Right there, you see?" She stretched out one finger and pointed to the southeast where a smear of black marred the forest below. "That's Tutree. There. They've hit Tutree."

I stepped forward to get a better look. "Are you sure?"

"Yes!" she cried. "Yes! Look, there's the Greater Apgat River going south, and right there where it meets the Lesser Apgat, that's Tutree. That's home." Her voice trailed off into silence and her expression crumpled into grief.

Sure enough, the shining rivers met right where her finger fell, just at the base of the Mountain. That was where I'd first met Nora in the back room of the Tutree Council Hall eleven days before.

The entire area was a wasteland, even from this height. It had burned and gone out already. They must have invaded just a few days after we'd left.

"It's gone," she whispered.

"I'm sure everyone got out," I said. "They'd have seen the smoke coming."

She nodded, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from the black scar where her home used to be.

I gripped her by the arms and made her face me. Her dark eyes slammed into mine, and I faltered. What in the hell did I think I was going to say to her? Her entire family might be dead now. Burned alive. Every person she'd ever known. And why? For a fucking port?

"We have to keep moving," I said firmly.

Nora returned my stare, dry-eyed and pale. Her small hands went to the Clarion nestled across her chest. "To the peak."

She moved away without another word, west toward the peak that loomed overhead.

The view above was just as grand as the view below. A rounded peak of stone loomed above us. It looked so close, but if Nora's archives were accurate, it would take another day and a half to climb it.

We stopped several times that afternoon so that Nora could make a note or sketch a specific boulder or tree. She labeled each landmark meticulously in her notes and on her ever growing map, cross referencing both with the faded parchments that the Council had entrusted to her when we left.

These were historic accounts of other journeys to the peak. Since trespass on the Mountain had been forbidden, only a handful of people had made the illegal pilgrimage in recent centuries. Every one of

them had been executed for the sacrilege of it, but their accounts had been saved.

And now Nora pored over them, obsessing over every detail. She often read while walking, which meant more than once I had to grab her elbow to steer her around a tree or stop her from walking off the side of the mountain itself.

“Why are you still reading those things?” I asked as she tripped over a tree root. “We don’t need them anymore. That’s where we’re going.” I gestured broadly at the peak looming over us. It was still a long way to go, but at least the way was obvious now.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” she said, slowing to a stop. “We have four different accounts to reference here, and so far they’ve mostly agreed with each other. We came to the ravine right when they said, and that pillar was right where it was supposed to be before we found the arches and the Clarion. It was right there. ‘The pillar stands tall in the west, follow the morning sun for three hours to the arches.’ But this...”

“What?” I asked, peering down at the parchment. It was written in Ambic, which I had never learned to read.

“It says there should be a hollow here. It’s very specific. We just came over the sloping hill, then it should be flat for several hours, a bit of a sloping downward, then the final climb to the Cavern of the Giants. All four accounts agree.” She shuffled through the antique parchments. “But look. It’s completely different.” She gestured around with the paper.

Sure enough, there was no hollow, just a continuous, gentle climb upward of tumbled stone. On our right, a sharp drop off fell away, offering another gorgeous view of the valley below.

“Maybe the earthquake caused a landslide,” I suggested.

"Maybe," she answered, her nose close to the page as she scribbled more notes.

Nora sat down on a large, flat rock near the drop off and began digging through her pack for her old case of cartography tools. She opened the leather case smartly and pulled out her compass and a protractor.

I leaned back on my heels. "Do we have time for this?" I asked as she spread out her map on a flat rock.

"You want to be able to find our way back, don't you?"

"I don't need a map to do that," I said. "I travel for a living, Nora. I can retrace our steps all the way back."

"The maps aren't making sense anymore, Eoghan!" she said, not looking up as she began sketching. "They made sense before, but now they don't. Something changed. You really want me to ignore that?" She stopped sketching and looked up at me, defiant, daring me to argue with her.

"Fine!" I said, throwing out my arms. "I'll just hunt now, how's that? You draw, and I'll hunt. And then we don't have to stop so early tonight."

"Great," she said, her attention already back on her map.

I threw off my pack with less care than usual, unstrapped my snares, and disappeared into the dwarfed trees that clung to the rocky mountainside.

I didn't go far. Just far enough that Nora's muttering wouldn't scare off any rabbits. I had seen a dozen since midday, so it shouldn't take long to catch dinner.

I set up the snares quickly, then headed back to where I'd left Nora to wait.

But before I made it a dozen steps, I slowed to a stop. Something wasn't right. Was it a sound? Or a sudden silence? Or a breath? I

couldn't put my finger on it, but the hairs stood up on the back of my neck and my heart rate accelerated.

Something was wrong here. Was it an animal? Maybe a mountain lion?

I heard it a half second too late. Footsteps running over the loose stones that littered the hard ground behind me. I half turned, but it was no use. A sudden pain shot through my skull and my head snapped around on my neck. The next thing I knew, I lay dazed on the ground with blood in my mouth.

Blackness threatened to overtake my vision. *Sleep. Just sleep, Eoghan boy. Just lay your head down for a minute. You can think later. In a minute.*

I rested my head on the gritty earth. But I had to open my eyes. *There is something important, just open your eyes, Eoghan.*

I forced away the blackness in time to see a pair of black-clad legs running full tilt away from me.

*See? The threat is gone. Rest. Only for a little while, then you can get up.* And for a minute, I let myself have the relief of unconsciousness.

Until a startled scream pierced through my foggy brain like a shaft of light through a dark room. A terrified scream. My name.

"Eoghan!!"

Nora.

She was afraid. Terrified. Absolutely frantic.

"Eoghan! Ahh! No! Stop! Eoghaaaaan!"

I wrenched myself to my feet, my vision blurred and swirling. I bounced off of a nearby tree, but I didn't feel it. I couldn't feel anything. All I knew was Nora was screaming.

Her voice pitched up into a squeal of panic, then stopped suddenly. My vision stabilized in a flash of adrenaline, and I picked up speed.

It was a man. There must have been someone watching us the night before after all, and this was him. He'd tracked us here, waited for us to separate, and then followed me into the scrubby woods.

Because he'd wanted Nora. He'd knocked me out, then went after her as soon as I was out of the way.

I stumbled back to the cliff's edge where I'd left Nora.

The man was there. He knelt over her prone body with his back to me, tugging at her chest. For half a second, my vision went red at the thought of all the things an asshole might do to an unconscious woman's body. But then a bit of brass flashed in the sunlight, and I understood.

He didn't want Nora. He wanted the Clarion.

I stumbled forward, blood running down my forehead and into my eyes. The man in black heard me coming. The blow to the head had left me dizzy, and my once-nimble limbs had turned to clubs. I stumbled toward him at top speed.

He was smaller, but he was faster. He whirled around, a knife in his hand, probably for cutting the Clarion off of Nora's body.

It didn't even occur to me to find my own hunting knife, still sheathed onto my pack twenty feet away. I lunged for him with my bare hands, almost surprised that he stood his ground.

I felt the wrongness in my gut as he plunged his knife into my side. It didn't stop me, though, and his eyes grew wide in sudden alarm.

Large eyes, wider than I was used to. Pale irises, freckled skin, and red hair - he was Amau. This fucker was Amau.

I wrapped my hands around his neck, and he gagged. He yanked the knife out of my side and raised it high, angling to jam it into my neck.

I wasn't too far gone to see the danger. On instinct, I blocked his blow with my forearm and deftly knocked the knife out of his hand. It flew about five feet away, the danger neutralized for the moment.

But I'd let go of his neck, and he'd gained a different advantage. He lunged for me and climbed my body like a monkey. He wrapped himself around my neck from behind, bracing his feet on my waist.

"Just fucking die," he hissed into my ear, his vowels elongated into a thick accent. Yes, definitely Amau.

I dropped backward to the ground and landed on top of him. He grunted in pain and loosened his grip, but only just long enough for me to suck in one breath. Then he reclaimed his hold on my neck, and the darkness began creeping in again around the edges.

If he finished me off this time, there would be no one to stand between him and Nora. Would he kill her, too? Or would he just take the Clarion and leave her?

Had he killed her already?

No. Not possible. She couldn't be dead.

Blackness edged in closer. I pried against the man's arm around my neck, but he was braced too well.

This man was a killer. And once he had the Clarion, he wouldn't risk leaving someone alive who might go after him. If I died, Nora died.

No.

"Stop it!" Nora's voice once again penetrated the fog in my head. She was awake.

Awake and alive. We still had time.

I pried open my eyes to find her standing over us, her cartographer's protractor brandished in one hand with the sharp points out. "Let him go!" she said in a wobbly voice.

I tried a new grip, pulled again. But I could not budge the man's arm an inch.

"Or what, you'll kill me?" He said it almost casually. This was easy for him.

"Yes!" Nora said, but her voice was too high. She took half a step closer and raised the protractor, then hesitated.

"I fucking dare you," the Amau man said. "But you better work fast. Your precious Eoghan is turning blue."

She raised the protractor again, but hesitated once more. Her entire body shook and her dark eyes were too wide.

"Go ahead! What difference does it make?" the man taunted, a note of hysterics in his voice. "We're all going to die anyway! It doesn't matter if I play that little trumpet or if you do, we're all going to die when this mountain wakes up! So if you're going to do it, girl! Just do it!"

"I will!" she screeched.

"You've got me cornered!" the man announced with a laugh. "If I let go of him, he'll kill me. So either he dies, or I do. You decide!"

There was no time for this. Nora would never be able to stab him. She shouldn't have to do this.

But I could.

I stopped pulling on the man's arm, and my strangled breath stopped completely. Pain seared through my abused neck, but I forced myself to ignore the need to fight for breath. Instead, I reached toward Nora, my hand open and asking.

She understood and fumbled the protractor into my hand. I flipped it around in my palm and stabbed blindly over my shoulder. The Amau man dodged, loosening his grip. I stabbed again, he jerked again.

Air. I sucked a precious gulp of air into my ravaged throat.

I stabbed a third time, and this time I hit my target. The protractor glanced awkwardly off of something solid, and the man cried out in pain and anger as I dragged it through his skin.

I rolled over, finally free, to grab him. I had gotten him just over his left eye. The sharp point of the protractor had dug a gruesome gash across his forehead and temple almost to his ear.

I hauled back my fist and punched him square in the jaw. My aim was good, but the bleeding wound in my side had made me weak and dizzy once more. He reared back his head and rammed his bleeding forehead into my nose.

"Argh!" I reeled back with a cry of pain, and Nora screamed. He took his chance and scrambled away, closer to the cliff's edge.

I could knock him off. It would be easy. It would be over.

If only I could get up.

Blackness creeped in again. My limbs went heavy and sluggish. It was everything I could do to just crawl in his direction.

*Just rest, Eoghan boy. Just rest.*

Nora's scream of effort jerked my eyes open. She'd had the same idea as me, it seemed. She launched her small frame at him, knocking him off balance. And with a cry of shock, he stumbled too close to the edge and slipped over it.

But he had time for one last revenge. He reached out and grabbed a hold of the Clarion that was still tied to Nora's strap as he went over.

I watched it happen in slow motion. She didn't even cry out. For an instant, she locked eyes with me. Hers were widened in sudden shock, but her expression was relaxed and calm. Her long, dark braid - so soft - it hovered in the air as she went weightless.

Then she was gone. One second she was there, the next she disappeared over the edge.

“Nora!” I screamed in a broken voice. “Nora! No!” I scrambled to the edge and looked down.

It was impossible to guess how far it was. A hundred feet? More? All I could see were the tops of pine trees below the ridge. Their canopies entirely obscured the ground.

She would have hit every branch going down.

How far was it? Could she have survived?

“Nora!”

Pain tore through my side, cutting my voice off. I rolled onto my back, clapping a hand over the knife wound. I glanced over at his knife, abandoned on the ground a few feet away and bloody. The blade was a couple of inches long. A utility knife.

But it was long enough. Blood flowed freely from the wound and my entire side was soaking wet and sticky.

Okay. Breathe. First things first, my wound. I couldn't do anything else until I stopped the bleeding.

Every movement scorched through my whole trunk. I crawled toward my pack, the one I'd carried half my life. Nan herself had embroidered my name on the top in faded, sky blue thread. I unbuckled the side pocket on the bottom and pulled everything out. Spare socks, twine, sewing kit, salt, bandages. And there, right at the very bottom, that was what I needed.

A small aluminum tin, about the size of a walnut. I'd sealed it with wax years and years before to keep it shut and preserve the salve. The precious Lujor Salve. A miracle in the palm of my hand. It would heal any wound and bring a person back from the brink of death.

I ran the tip of my knife around the wax seal and pried off the little lid. The typical sweet stink of rotten fruit hit my nose. This little

dab had cost me everything to purchase. Just one miracle. A last resort.

It would heal my wound instantly. But there was only enough for one. And if Nora was alive at the bottom of that cliff, she would likely need this miracle a lot more than I did.

But would I survive the climb down to find her? Had that damn Amau hit an organ when he'd stabbed me?

If my wound was fatal, and Nora was already dead...

No.

I closed the little tin and slipped it into my shirt pocket. Then I began unwrapping a thick roll of bandages. I lifted up my shirt and wrapped the woolen strips around my abdomen as tight as I could bear. I covered the wound, but didn't wait to see if the bleeding slowed. There was no time to waste.

The cliff was absolutely vertical where Nora had gone over with the Amau man, but a little ways south, the slope eased enough that I could slide down on my ass. It was slow going, and I had to stop often to breathe and fight to stay conscious. The pain in my gut swelled to an inferno, and blood seeped through the bandaging.

*Just use the salve, Eoghan boy.*

No.

I lumbered onward.

I encountered several long drops, which nearly caused me to black out, and one boulder had to be climbed over. I almost didn't make it.

*Just keep moving. One more step. Get a little lower. You're getting close.*

That was a lie. I wasn't getting close. Judging by a familiar outcropping high above and far away, I'd gone about half as far as I needed. She was too far. It was too far.

I eased down and sat on the ground with a miserable groan.

“Nora.” I tried to call out. I tried. But it came out as breath.

I leaned back against a narrow pine trunk and focused on breathing. I could picture her, like a dream. In my mind, she came striding out of the woods with her pack on and her soft braid flung over one shoulder. The Clarion was still strapped to her chest, not a scratch or a dent. Her face was dirty and streaked with coal from her sketching. She looked just like I remembered her, glowering at me from her rock with her maps spread around her.

This was how I wanted to remember her. Whole and determined and strong. Not broken and bleeding out at the bottom of a cliff.

I’d let her fall. She’d said this wouldn’t happen.

No, it couldn’t have happened. Because Dream Nora was right in front of me, not a scratch on her. I could even hear her voice in my mind.

“Eoghan?”

Just like I remembered. Maybe a little less sarcastic than usual.

“Eoghan? Are you okay?” Dream Nora slapped me in the face sharply. She sounded worried. Why was she worried?

“Oh my god, you’re bleeding,” she said. “Lay down! Let me look at this.”

I tried to tell her that I’d brought her the salve. I could help her if she was hurt, but she spoke over me. “Just lay down, Eoghan. Get some blood to your brain. Oh my god.”

“So soft,” I breathed as my head hit the ground.



I WOKE WITH A START, then cringed when sudden pain lanced through my head and neck.

“Oh my god, Eoghan, just lay the hell down!”

My eyes popped open once more, and there she was. Not a dream, but her. The real thing.

"Nora?" I asked in a hoarse voice. Gods, my throat was destroyed.

Her face swam into view. Not a scratch. Dirty, sure. But hale and whole and frustrated with me.

"Shh," she said. "Lay down. You lost a lot of blood. Thank all the gods you had that salve. Where did you get that? No, never mind. Don't try to talk. That asshole did a number on your throat."

I reached up for her, but could only reach her upper arm. She leaned in so that I could touch her face. "You fell," I whispered.

She nodded seriously. "Yup. I did. I fell. All the way. And I hit every branch possible on the way down. But I'm okay. Not a scratch, see?" She turned up her face as if to show off her unmarred skin. Then flexed her arms to prove no broken bones.

"How?"

A knowing smirk twisted her mouth. "Well, let me put it this way. I think I figured out why that box didn't rot."

I screwed up my eyebrows, confused.

"The box?" she said. "The Clarion's wooden box? It should have been rotted away to nothing, but it was fine?" She reached out and flicked the Clarion, still tied to her pack on the ground. It let out a faint, metallic *ping*. "I think it protected me. You guessed right the other night. It's just plain magic."

"And, the... man?"

Her expression darkened, and she looked away. "He's dead. I left him back there. Couldn't get to him anyway. He was stuck in a tree."

Good.

"How did he find us?" she asked quietly.

"Tutree," I answered.

She nodded her understanding. Amau had taken Tutree just a few days after we'd left. Someone must have told them where we'd gone and what we were doing.

I squeezed her arm once, then let my hand fall.

Nora was full of energy. She moved about, setting up camp like usual. I had left my pack at the top of the cliff, so she covered me with her bedroll and scampered up the slope to retrieve it and her abandoned maps. She even went around to my snares and grabbed a couple of rabbits for dinner.

All I could do was sleep. She woke me up to eat and drink, and then I was out again. At some point during the night, she snuggled in next to me under the bedrolls. She had brought the Clarion with her to bed, just in case.

The next morning, I felt much better. The salve had done its work, so I was able to move around with relative ease. Only my headache and sore throat persisted.

"I know there's not much time, but we should rest another day," Nora suggested. "I don't think you would make it up the peak in this condition."

"I'll be alright," I whispered. Every vocalization sent stabbing pains through my neck, so I accustomed myself to speaking softly.

"We'll stay here," she insisted. "There's a stream nearby, and you're dehydrated from all the blood loss. Just one day, Eoghan."

I could fight her. I could argue that people were dying every day in the valley, but the thought of walking - much less climbing - was unbearable. "One day."

She spent the day with her paper. She still had a whole stack of blank pages left, and this near to the end of our journey, she felt she could waste a few. She sketched birds, trees, squirrels, and even

made a few drawings of me. She showed them to me with a grin. She had drawn me with an exaggerated scowl.

I rolled my eyes at her, and she giggled.

She was good at it. And after nearly two weeks of hard living, she needed a little peace and artistry. She chatted off and on while she sketched, speaking of nothing in particular. I watched her do it, and for a moment I wondered what it would be like to capture her eyes on paper. That intense, focused look.

“What did he mean? That man from Amau?” she asked.

“When?”

“He said we were all going to die when the mountain wakes up. What did he mean?”

Shit.

“He meant...” I trailed off, unsure. Then I changed direction. “You remember... my Nan used to tell me stories... about the Giants?”

Nora nodded.

I cleared my throat with a wince. “She used to tell this one...” Damn, my throat. I skipped to the end. “She said they didn’t leave.”

Nora’s eyebrows furrowed. “The Giants didn’t leave? But they went into the Western Waste. They left. And the Clarion will call them back.”

I shook my head gently. “No. They would never leave Lujor. This is their home. And the Clarion will wake them up. We came to wake up the Giants, remember?”

“But...”

“They didn’t go into the Western Waste, Nora. They *are* the Western Waste. They are the mountains.”

She stared at me. “What? No.”

"I thought... I thought it was just a story until the Clarion. Until the arches."

"The arches?" she asked.

Gods, it seemed like weeks ago. But it had only been two days since we'd discovered the arches and the Clarion.

It hurt to speak, so I showed her. I rested my hands on top of my abdomen, fingers interlocked in a dome.

"They were fingers?" she breathed.

I nodded. "Not man made."

She stared around at the pines and the stone and the grass, as if she could suddenly recognize them as great big body parts.

"But... But why would that mean we're going to die? Why would we die?"

"Landslides," I said. Then I gestured from my shoulder to the ground, indicating a very, very long fall.

When this mountain stands up, we won't stand a chance.

Her eyebrows knit together. "And you knew? This whole time, you knew about this?"

I squeezed my eyes shut. "A possibility."

"That Amau seemed to think it was a real possibility!"

I winced at her elevated tone, and she clamped her mouth shut. In fact, she didn't say another word to me the rest of the day outside of what was absolutely necessary. She stopped drawing and instead resumed obsessing over the archive documents that had gotten us this far. She pored over her own drawings of the arches, trying to see the finger shapes within the stone.

That night, she crammed herself into our bedroll, shivering, and buried her face in my shirt as usual.

"Nora?" I whispered into her hair.

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

She sniffed once, then nodded. "Go to sleep."

I smiled into the darkness.



WE SET out early the next day. Our last day. We packed up camp in silence, paused in the small stand of pine trees, our last haven, then without a word, began walking back up the slope.

This close to the peak, the trees gave way completely. The ground was solid stone and tumbled boulders, with only the most stubborn bunchgrass thriving in the cracks. The icy wind bit through our clothes. In winter, this whole area would be snowcaps.

Thank the gods it wasn't winter.

We kept moving.

We climbed for hours, stopping often for me to rest. I wanted to keep on, but Nora could see the struggle on my face. "Just rest for a minute," she'd say, then refuse to budge until I did so.

Her archives began making sense again before long. She pointed out landmark after landmark, guided us to the left to avoid a cliff edge and a dead end, and took us out of the way once to find a tiny spring dribbling out of a crevice. We stopped there for an hour. It took forever to fill up our water skins.

"We don't even have to get to the actual peak," Nora said while I held my water skin under the trickling spring. "The Cavern of the Giants is about a hundred feet lower."

"Good," I said.

She nodded. "We're getting close. No more stops."

"Alright."

She stood and looked up at me, her eyebrows furrowed. She opened her mouth to say something, but then she closed it and turned away.

Whatever was on her mind, she was running out of chances to say it.

We found it an hour later. The Cavern of the Giants. Right where the archives said it would be. We stood on a slope twenty feet below and stared up at the dark hole in the stone, bemused.

"It's an ear," Nora said, slightly incredulous.

"That's definitely an ear," I agreed.

There was no denying it. The shell of the ear flared to our right. The shape was blunted with grass and weathered stone, but it was an ear. Even if we hadn't known the Giant lay sleeping beneath us, turned to basalt for centuries, we would have recognized it.

This must be why the mountain was forbidden. Anyone who saw this would know for sure the Giants were real.

"That Amau man," Nora said. "He wanted the Clarion. He was going to play it himself."

"So he said."

"Why would he do that? Why would he want to wake the Giants?"

"Maybe he thought if he called them, they would ally with Amau. But that was never how it worked. Lujor is their home."

"They were only ever fairy tales to me," she answered. "I never paid any attention."

The hillside rose gently to the cavern, but the lip of the opening stood about six feet high in the solid stone. Nora put her foot in my hands so I could boost her up, but then I had to climb up behind her with my wits and a few convenient toeholds. I hauled myself up with a grunt of pain, and stood next to Nora.

It was just what you'd expect. A dark, dead end tunnel with a sloping floor. Only just tall enough for me to stand up straight.

Nora moved forward into the dark. I wasn't sure what I'd pictured, but it seemed strange to not find a platform or a symbol on the floor. Someplace obvious to stand and sound the Clarion.

But there was nothing. It didn't matter. We were inside the Giant's ear. That would be enough. If he was going to hear anything, it would be from here.

"Okay," Nora said with a sigh. She brushed her palms on her thighs nervously. "Okay, I guess this is it, then. Help me get this off."

She stepped forward and gestured to the Clarion on her chest, but I didn't move.

This couldn't be the end. These couldn't be our last moments. In all my life, I'd never cared much about when or how I'd die. But now that the time had come, my body rebelled.

"Eoghan," she said softly.

I set my jaw, and began untying the Clarion with confident jerks on the rope. Once it was free, she tried to take it from my hands, but I didn't let her.

"Hold onto it," I said, catching her gaze. "Whatever happens, don't let go of it. Maybe it will protect you again. Maybe you'll get out of this alive."

"It doesn't make any difference," she said. "Tutree is gone. Everyone I ever knew..."

"Don't talk like that," I said sternly.

We stood in silence, both of us holding onto the little trumpet.

"If by some miracle," I said a bit softer. "If we manage to survive this, you can come with me. If you want to. This whole world is about to change. There will be a lot of new maps to draw."

Her mouth stretched into a sad smile, and she nodded. "Okay."

Then she let go of the Clarion and wrapped her arms around my neck instead. I held her tight to my chest and ducked my head into her shoulder. I wasn't ready for this. I'd never be ready. It would never be okay.

But the time came anyway. She took the Clarion from me, tears in her eyes. "We'll make it through. You'll see."

No we wouldn't. "Okay," I said.

"Hold on tight to me. Maybe the Clarion can protect us both."

That was a long shot, but I didn't care. Regardless of any magical trumpet, we both stood a better chance if we could avoid getting separated. So when she turned to face the blackness of the tunnel, I took my place behind her. I braced my feet wide and locked my arms around her midsection.

"Ready?" she asked.

I nodded against her shoulder. "Do it."

She took a deep, steadying breath, raised the Clarion to her mouth, and *blew*.

Just like before, the entire world solidified into sound. Life and connection and *sound*. It was louder there in the partially enclosed tunnel than it had been in the open air two nights before. So loud that where before it had been painful, now it was unbearable.

But I didn't let go of Nora. Not for anything. Not when the Clarion's note bit into my head. Not when the ground began to shake. Not when a different, older, deeper noise began to rumble underneath the clearer note.

Finally, when Nora had spent all her breath, the Clarion's note died away. And in its wake came the growling, grinding, rumbling. The tunnel didn't just shake. It moved. It lifted and began to rise away from the gentler slope outside.

“Run!” I cried over the din. I grabbed Nora’s wrist and sprinted for the bright daylight at the entrance of the tunnel.

Then the floor dipped away at an alarming angle, sliding us backward across the sloped floor. Nora screamed, and I grasped for any part of her that I could hold onto as we slid violently away from the daylight.

We hit the back wall with a shuddering thud.

“Hold on!” I cried out.

“Eoghan!”

The tunnel began to dip the other way, as if to dump us out into the open air. I grasped wildly at the strap that went across her chest and hauled us together as we fell out of the giant’s ear canal.

Nora screamed in shock as she was flung out first. I scraped with bloody fingers at the floor, desperate for any purchase, and managed to catch a stone lip right at the exit.

Nora grunted as I arrested our fall, and she dangled from my death grip on her pack.

“Don’t let go!” she screamed, her eyes wide with terror. “Don’t let me go! Don’t let me fall!”

Beneath her, the earth loomed. Thousands of feet below, and moving.

A large portion of the mountain remained behind as the Giant began to lumber upward. It was as if, all those centuries ago, this Giant had laid down against an existing mountain, only adding to its bulk as he slept through the generations. If we acted quickly, we may be able to jump off and land on solid ground.

The Giant lurched, rocking us viciously to the side. My arm was on fire with the strain of Nora’s dead weight. And every second we waited, our real mountaintop grew further away.

“Just hold onto the Clarion,” I yelled.

“Don’t let go of me!”

“We have to jump!”

The Giant lurched again, like a child shaking water out of his ear. Nora screamed again, because this time, her strap broke.

She scrabbled at it one handed for half a second, but she didn’t have time. She tumbled out of her pack and began to free fall.

“Nora!” I screamed with a ravaged throat.

No time for hesitation. I let go of the Giant’s ear and fell.

We were too high. Just the fact that I had time to think it before we hit the ground was proof enough. Nora had the Clarion to protect her, but me? The impact would kill me.

The Clarion. Nora must have had a similar thought at the same time, because she extended it toward me as we fell.

The ground rushed upward at us. My instinct was to spread out, slow my descent. But I squashed that instinct on a gamble. If I could grab the Clarion, I would be safe.

So I made my body straight as an arrow, diving headfirst toward Nora through the empty air.

I wasn’t going to make it.

She strained for me, her wordless cry sharp in the wind

The ground rushed toward us at an alarming speed.

I reached -- reached again. The Clarion was inches away. The ground was too close. Then I made a desperate grab and closed my fingers around the delicate brass tubing.

Half a second later, we slammed into the steep slope and began to tumble.

It knocked the breath out of my lungs. My body tumbled limb over limb like a rag doll. I had no control, no sense of orientation or anchor. But there was also no pain. I felt the stones and the earth and

the tree trunks as I scraped over them, but no bruising or breaking bones. Nothing.

I spent all my focus on keeping hold of the Clarion, and I could only hope Nora was doing the same. We tumbled and skidded for several dizzying seconds until we slammed into the narrow trunk of a pine tree. The sudden stop finally made me lose my grip on the Clarion, and for the first time, I felt pain. I skidded a further ten feet or so down the hill over stones and tree roots and brush, scraping the bare skin of my arms and face.

“Eoghan?” Nora called down. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I’m okay!” I replied. I didn’t bother to get up, only laid on my back, staring up at the harmless, blue sky.

I’d never look at the sky the same way again. Not ever.

Nora’s scrambling footsteps sounded near my head, and she began yanking on my arm. “Get up. You have to see this.”

With a groan, I allowed her to haul me up.

We stumbled to a crumbling cliff’s edge where the Giant had broken away from the mountain. From this vantage point, we could see deep into the Western Waste. As far as the eye could see, mountains crumbled and broke apart. Huge, stone giants with lumpy, lumbering shapes rose from their hibernations. They shook away massive amounts of earth and stone and fully grown trees.

The rumbling went on and on. The real mountain below us shook and trembled as the Giants moved.

Dozens and dozens of Giants, as far west as we could see.

And our Giant seemed the biggest of all, though not as big as I’d imagined. He had only been sleeping atop the mountain, but he still stood higher than three hundred feet, maybe more — and solid stone.

He turned with a bone deep groan to look for us on the mountainside. Then he bent down so that his craggy boulder of a nose was level with ours. His eyes were great, black orbs, set in stony skin, smooth and round like marbles. No iris, no whites. Just more stone.

Nora and I waited, both of us clinging to the Clarion once more, just in case. The Giant stared us down with his strange eyes, saying nothing. Could he even speak? Would we be able to hear such a massive voice?

Nora elbowed me in the side, hitting a fresh bruise. "Say something."

I shoved her gently to get her to stop digging in her elbow. But she was right. The Giant was waiting.

"Great Giants! We need your help!" I yelled as loudly as I could, but my throat spasmed in pain and my voice cracked.

"Please!" Nora picked up where I left off. "Amau invades from the north! Lujor is dying! The homeland is dying!"

A crevice opened along the bottom of the Giant's face, forming a jagged mouth. "WAR?"

His voice boomed through the air, almost as oppressive as the Clarion's note.

"Yes! War!" Nora cried. "Save us from Amau! Save us from the north! Fight with us!"

The Giant straightened up and turned west toward his companions. He opened his craggy mouth and gave a wordless roar. The host of giants returned the call, a bellow of purpose and anger. And as one, they all began to move east and north — toward the burning valley and Amau. Their footsteps echoed as they went.

Nora and I stood clutching each other on the mountainside as they moved away. Their bulky bodies moved slowly, but their great

long legs ate up the distance with every stride. They would reach the Amau army in less than an hour.

We turned toward each other, disbelieving. Had we really done it? Had we woken the Giants and lived?

Nora's expression was a mix of joy and terror and relief. She smiled through tears, then launched herself at me. With a cry of triumph, she threw her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist.

I caught her, but my legs gave out immediately and we both went down. My knees barked against the hard ground, but it didn't matter. I held onto her for dear life.

"We did it," she whispered. "I told you we'd do it."

My eyes followed another stone giant, smaller than the one from our mountain but still a terror. He pulled a fully grown birch tree out of the ground by its roots and swung it laboriously through the air like a club. His feet, wide as a house, tore chunks out of the mountainside as he climbed over it.

They would wipe out the Amau army in great swaths, and our Lujor soldiers would handle the stragglers. This war would be over in under a day.

"What now?" I asked as Nora slipped off me.

"Where's my pack?" she asked.

We both turned to stare at the scar the giant had left on the mountain when he'd risen out of the stone. "I think it's safe to say your pack is gone," I said, grim.

"Well," she said, hands on hips. "Then I guess now we have to find some new cartography tools for cheap. So, New Haven?"

"That's a long way," I said. There were at least two other cities large enough to find such equipment between here and the coast.

“Yes, and the Giants are moving for the first time in centuries. Lujor is half burnt, and nothing will be like it was the last time either of us saw the lowlands. And we’re carrying a very rare, magical object that will likely draw a lot of attention.” She held up the Clarion and squinted at me against the afternoon sunlight. “Are you up for it?”

“Don’t you want to look for your family?” I asked. “Anyone from Tutree?”

She turned away from me once more and watched the Giants clamber away toward the smoke in the valley. “They would have gone to the capital. We have connections there. If we were to find them anywhere, they’d be in New Haven.”

I stepped up and took her small hand in mine. The noise of the Giants had become a distant rumble. Slowly, the birds began chirping to each other again in the treetops. I hadn’t even noticed they’d gone silent until they resumed singing.

“New Haven it is,” I said, and squeezed her hand once. “Lead the way, mapmaker.”



**The End**

## THANKS FOR READING!

I hope you enjoyed reading *Waking Up the Giants*! I certainly had a great time writing it.

Though this short story stands alone, it exists in the same universe as my upcoming novel, [Little Owl](#). So if you enjoyed this dose of high fantasy, then stay tuned for more!

To find bonus material for *Waking Up the Giants* and sneak peaks at upcoming books, visit my website: [annacackler.com](http://annacackler.com). Subscribers to my newsletter will receive all of my short stories as they are completed.

I am also on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#), so click like and follow to stay in touch! I'd love to hear from you.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A huge thank you to everyone who made this short story a success! As always, I must mention my amazing critique partner, Cassie Swindon. She's the one to credit for giving Lujor it's name. Thanks doll.

To my most faithful reader and biggest fan, my mother: thanks for all you do, past present and future.

A big shout out to Carla Evans, my finishing editor. Nothing gets by her! She's the reason my books aren't full of typos. ;)

And of course none of this would be possible without the unfailing support of my husband, Kevin. Thanks Love!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I love to read and write romance, humor, and fantasy — in that order! My favorite books are those that feature a satisfying and healthy romance between realistic characters.

I have a degree in writing from the University of Central Arkansas. At the time, a Creative Writing degree was not available, but I consider that to be a blessing in disguise. Not only did I study storytelling, but I also dove deep into the worlds of audience, technical writing, non-fiction, and academic writing. And though my writing education has continued over the years in the school of life, I will be forever grateful for that solid foundation I received in the writing community at UCA.

Though I grew up in Arkansas and Oklahoma, I currently live in Puerto Rico, where it never gets cold! My family and I love going to

the beach year-round, where I soak up the sun and inspiration.

I have a wide range of hobbies, including crochet, spinning thread, cross stitch, painting, home improvement, cake decorating, and piano. I like to incorporate these passions into my writing to add depth and detail.

