

CASTOR

by

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CASTOR

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## INTRODUCTION

I have had the idea for *Castor* since 2010, and it bounced around my head while I lacked the time or the courage to start a project as long as a novel. I chose a creative endeavor for my honors thesis not because I thought it would be easy, but because I knew it would be harder. Creativity is closely tied to emotion; it is a scary thing to share creative work with friends or strangers. The novel is completely reliant on me as its creator, and writing the perspectives of others forces me to confront emotions in myself that I am not always comfortable dealing with. I entered college with the aspiration to become a novelist—and that dream has not changed—but I am now leaving TCU with a different career objective. This attempt at a novel is a personal test to prove to myself that I can do this, even with other responsibilities of school, and later, work.

This is the culmination of my work here as a member of the TCU English Department undergraduate studies. I have taken creative writing workshop classes: Introduction to Creative Writing, Fiction Workshop, and Drama Workshop. I have also taken other writing classes: Editing and Publishing, Writing Internship, literature classes, and more. All have contributed to my education, and all have helped me hone my craft to its current level. However, like my work, I am still a work in progress.

The genre of *Castor* is fantasy, but it is a type of fantasy that is sometimes called “low fantasy,” as opposed to the typical Tolkien “high fantasy.” There are no elves, dwarves, mystical prophecies, or flowery language. Any magical elements are supposed to take a back seat to the characters and the plot, even if in my work magic may act as a catalyst. Rather, *Castor* is a coming-of-age story, a familial mystery, and a peek into how different aspects of human nature are revealed when we are faced with secrets and power.

*Castor*, as it stands now, is a work in progress. It contains the first steps for Colin, the main character, as he slowly becomes disillusioned with his sheltered life. This section is supposed to introduce some of the mysterious elements of Colin's life and pave the way for an adventure that should feel like a puzzle to solve as much for the reader as for Colin. He will cross country borders, befriend and travel with a homeless girl with a severe mistrust of adults, and solve the mysteries of his father's past.

At the beginning of *Castor*, Colin wants nothing more than to please his father and study the history of some of the older artifacts their shop sells. But, a small project to restore an old desk leads Colin to the discovery of a strange box his father Joseph never wanted him to have anything to do with, which pushes Colin away from the blind faith he used to take comfort in and towards the dangerous secrets of Joseph's past.

Over the course of Junior Honors Seminar and Senior Honors Seminar, *Castor* went through several different stages of writing and planning. Half of the things I put on paper did not make it to the final cut, including some of my favorite characters. My original approach to the story was to interweave several narratives of different characters, and slowly bring each together over the course of the plot. The narratives followed a dark sorcerer with murderous bents, a princess whose pride will lead her toward the mindset that the end justifies the means, and a man no taller than a hand with a fiery disposition and power.

What I envisioned was complicated and required more time to successfully accomplish than I had. It soon became clear that I needed a more focused approach to write the story. I concentrated on my protagonist, Colin, a teenaged boy raised among the comforts of scholarship and business by his single father. I intend to write one narrative

at a time, finishing the plot from each person's perspective before then going back and tying all of their stories together.

I have a two-inch purple binder filled with drafts of this work that I have been passing back and forth between Dr. Langlinais and me. I have a flash drive dedicated to all the documents, drafts, and notes I have been working on since I began the project. I have a journal filled with notes about characterization, plot ideas, and world building. This story has been mapped out and considered from different angles, but I am still manipulating it and reexamining each character's contribution to the whole story.

Even after I turn in my thesis, this project will not be over for me. I fully intend to see this novel idea through to the finish. This is just as much my own adventure as Colin's, and I cannot wait to see where it will take me as a writer. And that will not be all. I have binders and journals filled with story ideas, and I keep adding to them. Regardless of where I go professionally, I will consider myself a writer. That will never change.

## CASTOR

Colin drummed his fingers on the countertop and let out a big sigh. Ignoring the whispers coming from the corner of the shop, he looked out the propped-open front door and scrutinized the blue sky. It was barely past noon.

He crossed his arms on the counter and rested his head on them, letting his bangs flop in front of his eyes. Why did these people take so long? Peeking through the dark, curly locks, his attention drifted back to the outdoors. The door was propped open to let the last of the warm summer winds air out the shop. It made for more dusting, but also kept it less musty. Outside he could see the tailor's shop across the street and part of the house next to that. The sounds of people chatting out on the street and even a horse's hooves on the dirt road near the corner reached his ears.

“I know it's a little expensive, but isn't it worth it when the neighbors have one too?”

Colin immediately stood up straight when the couple turned around. He mustered up his best smile. All they saw on him was an awkward grin.

Colin looked at the couple. They were middle-aged. Their clothes were worn, but brightly colored and well made, and they obviously had expendable money to go shopping in an oddities shop. Colin knew they did not live here. They must have come from out of town, maybe Port Marianos or the capital Vetrosia. The wife seemed to be enjoying herself looking through the various knick-knacks, trailing her fingers along each item displayed on the shelves, but her husband had a stern expression. He tried to meet Colin's eye, but Colin only shifted to see what the wife was holding.

“Did you find anything you like?” he finally asked.

The woman presented a piece of island glass in both hands. The one she'd chosen was frosted with red dye that was bright at the base and spread all the way up into a clear pink at the irregularly shaped top. "This is beautiful." Colin could see her husband rolling his eyes behind her. He felt like doing the same. Most people coming through here were always looking for trinkets, something they could display on a shelf to remember that one time they passed through Althaney. It was a very rare occasion when a real collector came to his father's shop. Then Colin would always have the opportunity to talk about pieces with real history. He loved the objects that had a story to tell.

Instead he had to sell a cheap shard of island glass.

"I'll wrap this up for you." Colin reached underneath the shop counter and pulled out a box, then, with a practiced hand, wrapped the figure in paper, fitted it into the box, and tied it closed.

He presented the wrapped product to the woman.

"Thank you, young man," she said.

He answered with a noncommittal, "Mm."

"Oh by the way," she began. Colin lifted his eyes. "Could you recommend a..." her voice trailed off. She met his gaze. She stood there, speechless, staring at Colin. He could see her eyes begin to widen and her mouth fall open. He could feel her husband staring, too.

Colin immediately realized his mistake and looked at his own shoes. Muttering excuses and apologies, he gestured vaguely at the door and shuffled backwards behind the counter and pretended to be very interested in wiping the dust from a bauble. Across

the store, he could hear the couple whispering to each other as they exited the shop through the open front door.

“Did you see that, Hon? Eyes black as bad luck, they were,” she whispered. Then they were both gone.

Suddenly no longer in the mood to man the counter, Colin pulled himself into the storeroom at the back of the shop. He left the door to the back open, in case any other customers entered, but he hoped that wouldn't happen.

Usually, the storeroom was a mess. There always seemed to be a steady traffic of things entering and being sold in the shop. Whenever Colin's father was away, he would pick up crates of old and interesting objects, art, and furniture. Despite the lonely periods when his father was off at Port Marianos or the islands, Colin appreciated the things he would bring. He loved to analyze each piece and research all the history associated with it: how it was made, where it came from, who owned it and why, and what made it an oddity today.

It started when he was barely old enough to walk, when his father would put him to bed with the stories about these antique objects, brandishing the pieces themselves to illustrate the history. He used to sit next to his father in his shop's storeroom as Joseph would crouch over his desk with a magnifying glass, a restoration kit, several scrolls borrowed from the library in Port Marianos, and his journal. Over the years Joseph had filled several journals' worth of information about the products they sell. Now, though, Joseph traveled so much, always called away to Port Marianos, any of the islands, or Vetrosia the capital. Colin was old enough to look after the shop in the meantime, but he often got bored. Now it was also Colin's job to research the important artifacts they sold.

Colin was almost always in the middle of a project that had to do with an especially rare or valuable artifact, but his favorites were the old ones. Recently he'd finished restoring a piece of a tapestry from over a thousand years ago, a different age entirely. Right now, however, he was working on something a little more personal.

Entering the storeroom, Colin walked up to a sturdy, wooden desk pushed up against the back wall. This large piece of furniture didn't match any age and had an unusual design, but it had been here at the shop for longer than he could remember. It had been Joseph's only inheritance, and Colin treasured it as much as an ancient tapestry. For Colin's whole life, this desk had occupied the same corner of the storeroom, always covered in papers and dust. Whenever father or son were engrossed in a project or needed to set something down somewhere, they would absentmindedly set it on the desk, and sometimes the thing would be forgotten for years. Only once in his living memory had Colin seen it cleared of clutter. And he never remembered it ever being fully clean.

During this most recent trip of Joseph's, Colin became incredibly bored of his chores at the shop. Nobody around needed any research or collectibles lately. Colin needed a distraction and something to occupy his hands. He decided to restore that old desk.

It had taken days to clear out all of the stuff on the desk's surface and file or throw away all of its contents. It had taken another day to clean the outside of the wooden surface and sand away scratches. Now Colin, embittered by the woman's comment about his eyes, grabbed the rough material he used for sanding to start rubbing on the desk's front.

He hated it whenever people noticed his eye color for the first time. Usually it was not a problem. A lot of people had dark brown eyes, and he could usually pass for one of them if he shifted his gaze a lot, but there was no denying the fact: Colin's irises were unnaturally dark. It sometimes unnerved people when they noticed he had black eyes. Most people who lived nearby no longer admitted they were bothered, and he'd gotten used to avoiding meeting any strangers' eyes, but today was another reminder that he shouldn't be normal.

He paid special attention to the grooves in the desk's drawers, pulling out each heavy, wooden almost-box and placing it on the floor next to him. The desk was asymmetrical, with two cabinets on the left that took up the whole height and two drawers on the right that reached from the desktop to the knee. Below the drawers was a false cabinet, with a panel made to match the cupboards on the left. It was here he had to be careful, sanding the scratches out of the corners without ruining the right-angle design. He worked his fingers into edge of the panel, dusting out the tiny wood scrapings. This hadn't been cleaned in years. His fingers slipped. He heard wood crack, and the panel parted from the desk.

Colin was about to curse his clumsiness, but realized as the panel came away that it had grooves along the edges that locked the panel in place. It was not a false cupboard, but a real hiding hole.

He pulled on the panel and completely freed it from the front of the desk. Stuck to where one of the panel's edges met with the desk proper, Colin found a piece of old paper. He pulled it away with his dusty fingers. It was crumpled with age, and if anything

had been written on it, it had long faded away. Taking it for trash, Colin set the piece of paper aside and peered inside this new find of his father's old desk.

From inside there wafted an acrid odor that Colin could taste too clearly. He swallowed back the impulse to gag. As expected by its malodorous air, the inside of the cupboard hole was covered in dust and who knows what else had been in there for years. It really looked like it hadn't been opened since Colin had been born. Yet, despite the disgusting interior, the cabinet's occupant was untouched. The only thing in there was a box.

Colin reached in and freed the small, dark box from the cupboard hole. It was long, and the ends were square. He cradled it in his arms like a baby, rubbing his fingers down the polished wood. There was no detectable enamel surface, yet it was smooth as glass. He also could not identify the wood, unsure whether it was naturally so dark or stained this color. The entire surface of the box was covered in old writing. Colin couldn't understand the symbols, but he had seen similar ones in Old Age artifacts, so this box must be over one thousand years old. Yet, the box felt too new, almost like the wood it was made of was living.

Colin inspected the hinges. They were the same nearly black color as the box. Their design was simple, but they felt strong. Turning it around, Colin looked at the latch. It required no key, but the lid was clamped down firmly. Colin worked his finger into the clasp and pulled on it. It didn't open easily—the only clue to its age—but with a small burst of effort, he worked the latch free and the lid of the box flew open.

“Ouch.” He put his finger into his mouth and tasted blood. He’d cut himself on the box latch. And then he realized his mistake. If this box really was as old as the writing, then he’d should have worn gloves. “Idiot.”

Before he could do any more damage, Colin carefully reclosed the lid and set the whole thing on the desk. He stood there—looking at it. The more he stared at it, the more he couldn’t help feeling that it really shouldn’t be there. It wasn’t something the shop normally sold. Had his father stored it here years ago and forgotten it?

Then he noticed some writing etched on the outside of the box. Looking inside it, he would have assumed it belonged to a similar time period as the tapestry, a time with the same language but a different alphabet. But, this etching was newer and in letters he easily recognized. “Castor?”

Colin turned when he heard the front door to the shop open and close again. He had locked it when he closed, so this could only be— “Dad!” Colin set the box on the unfinished desk and ran into the store to give his father a hug before stepping back to look at him. There were a few more silver hairs in his beard than when he had left, but Joseph stood as tall as ever. He had broad shoulders and large arms, and although he wasn’t particularly tall among others—Colin recently felt great pride at already closing in on him during his growth spurts—Joseph gave most people the impression that he towered over them. Colin realized this most during the few times his father ever got angry. However, when he was little, Colin always felt secure next to his father’s strong presence.

“Missed you, Dad.”

“You too, Son. Did you keep the place clean?”

“It’d be cleaner if I knew when you were returning.”

“So you could only clean just in time for me to get home. No, I know exactly what you’re up to.” He smiled, and all felt right in Colin’s world.

“Well, if you had come home a bit later I might have been able to get more done, but come look,” Colin said, stepping back toward the storeroom. “I’d hoped I’d be done before I showed you, but. . . .” He moved forward toward the cabinet he’d been working on, but his father first noticed the box he had found in the desk. Joseph’s hand on his shoulder suddenly tightened and held him back. “Dad?”

Joseph’s face had gone pale, and he stood there looking at the box with such intensity that Colin could see beads of cold sweat appear on his forehead. For several seconds he did not move, look away, or breathe. He just stood there. Colin had never seen such a wild look on his father before—such a mixture of anger and fear and pain.

“Dad, what’s—?”

“Go upstairs.”

“Dad.”

“Now.”

Colin could feel his face growing hot. His first instinct was to run straight upstairs, but he shoved his hands in his pockets and glanced at that black box one more time. He felt like it stared back at him, sitting on top of that table, judging him.

Colin ran out the front door toward the stairs to their apartment. As he shut the front door behind him, he could hear Joseph disappear behind the backroom door, shut it, and lock it. He couldn’t understand why his father would react that way to some box. He thought that they didn’t have any secrets from each other.

...

Colin lay on his bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. The unlit room was now darker than the night outside, but he had been in there since before the sun had set, and his eyes had long since grown adjusted to the gloom. He wasn't tired and didn't sleep, but there was weariness from the afternoon that he couldn't shake.

When he was young, he'd been yelled at plenty of times for breaking rules, but never like that, or without knowing that he'd done something wrong.

At that moment, he heard the apartment door open and shut, and then boots shuffling wearily toward the bedroom. Colin immediately closed his eyes and pretended to sleep, not wishing to get into another confrontation with his father. He wasn't even sure he could look him in the eye.

Joseph shed his boots and clothes and prepared for bed. When he had finished, he turned toward his son's prone form and quietly said, "I'm sorry, Colin. I shouldn't have yelled. It's just, you need to understand this. It's dangerous. It's not supposed to be here, and you shouldn't go near it. Understand? I know you're awake."

Slowly, Colin rolled over and looked up at his father. "Dad."

"Son?"

"That box..."

"Like I said, you shouldn't even worry about it. It's gone. I've hidden it."

Colin broke eye contact. Something about the way his father said "gone" didn't sit right with Colin. If it was so dangerous, he couldn't have just stashed it anywhere.

"Colin, don't go looking for it."

"But, what if—"

“Colin, it’s done.” Joseph’s voice was regaining that hard edge. “Never mention it again. Pretend it never happened.”

Colin turned away and rolled back on his side. Joseph often spoke out about the dangers of keeping information from people. “You never know who could need that knowledge,” he would say. Now, here he was keeping secrets from Colin. It made him wonder what other secrets his father could have.

“Night, Son.”

Colin heard the creak of wood as his father rested his weight on his bed across the room, then everything was silent as he became still immediately. Soon, he could hear his father’s familiar soft, but persistent, snoring. Colin felt a sudden jolt of guilt as he thought about how tired his father must have been after such a long journey. This afternoon had been exhausting to both of them.

Colin decided it was useless to lie there awake and bothered by his worries. Carefully, so as not wake his father, Colin pushed himself off his bed. He tiptoed across the room, opened the door, stepped out, and slowly closed the door to their shared bedroom.

Sensing he had escaped successfully, Colin moved more freely now. He padded on the polished wood floors with bare feet and easily picked his way through the dark apartment he and his father lived in above the shop. It was small, barely big enough for two, and was divided into a bedroom, a kitchen, and an extra storeroom for overflow product for the shop. He passed through the kitchen in a few steps and didn’t stop to look at the door to the storeroom. Instead, he grabbed the shop’s key from its hook by the door, opened it quietly, and stepped out.

The night air was warm, and Colin comfortably padded down the stairs to the first floor. Althaney was a relatively small town, and most people rose early to their trades, so Colin enjoyed the night in absolute solitude. He looked at the stars and moon overhead and for once forgot any complications or puzzles. Everything felt at peace and simple right there in that moment. Colin wanted nothing except to work with his hands and put his mind at rest.

He slid the key into the lock and entered the store, taking care to remove the jingling bell from the door before it could peal through the silence. No light from the moon reached inside the shop. Colin stood just inside the door, peering at the forms of the covered shelves around him. If he ventured through the shop before his eyes adjusted to dark, he could knock something over. So he stood and waited, using the counter's silhouette as an anchor to gauge his sight. The counter was clean and bare for the night, and it was the most familiar thing in the room, in a shop that moved product every month.

Soon, Colin could see the bare top of the counter clearly in the dark and even the outline of the door behind it. He went straight for the back room, where the half-restored cabinet waited. With his eyes fully adjusted, he could see it clearly. This was it. He very gingerly nudged the offending cabinet door open and peered inside. It was empty. Joseph really had hidden the box.

Colin lit a lamp that was on hand, pulled on some gloves, and went to work finishing what he'd started that afternoon. As he scrubbed off the top layer of wood for treatment, his thoughts went back to that box. It was so smooth, so dark, so unnatural; it seemed to throb with some living power beneath his fingers. But, that couldn't be, his logic told him. A box was made up of walls, a lid, hinges, wood or metal or enamel, or

whatever that material had been. He'd never seen anything like it, but he'd felt it in his hands. He remembered holding it, as if he still had it in his grasp. It was heavy, but the material couldn't have that much weight unless it had something in it. Colin couldn't understand it, but something important must have been inside, something that was powerful. Or dangerous, thinking of Joseph's reaction. But, what could he possibly have to be afraid of? Joseph didn't need to fear anything. Colin had absolute faith in his father.

He stopped rubbing momentarily to wipe some sweat off his face. That's right. He trusted Joseph. They were each other's only family, and Colin had never had any reason to doubt his father. He left for long periods sometimes, but he always came back. Anything he said should be left alone should be heeded.

Finally, Colin felt real, physical weariness begin to replace the mental and emotional activity that had been keeping him awake. He put away his tools and started for the door. He wouldn't look for that box; he didn't need to. He would rather forget about it altogether.

Taking the lamp with him, Colin opened the storeroom's door to the shop. Sitting on the counter, straight in front of him, sat an object that reflected the lamplight. It was small, had a dark, smooth surface, and had old alphabet markings all over it. He could have sworn that the counter was empty on his way in. His father had promised that he had gotten rid of it. Yet there it was—that cursed box.

...

Colin's hand hovered over the box; there was barely a hair's width between them. He had been restless before, but now he felt wired, excited, alert. Joseph had hidden the box, yet here it was, right in front of him, only a few feet from the place they first met. It

was like electricity, running through Colin's limbs and joints, telling him that this was meant to be.

It sat there silently on Joseph's counter in direct disobedience of Joseph's wishes. Colin longed to figure out what it was, why it was here, what his father feared about it, but his father's words were the only thing that kept him second guessing. He had called it dangerous, but Colin was not to know the danger. It drove him mad not to know. It was the one thing he could not stand. He trusted his father completely, but did he trust him blindly? What use is it to avoid a danger when he did not know *what* was in danger? A knife is only as dangerous as the person who wields it. Even to himself. If one did not know how to use a knife, one is just as likely—if not more likely—to cut oneself than other people. The best defense is to know what one is doing, and to learn the proper way to hold a knife. Surely, such logic applied to this thing too? He needed to find out what this thing is. He needed to know every facet of its danger and wonder, because of course this thing is wondrous. How else was it able to appear in front of him? As if by magic? He thought about closing the gap between his finger and the box.

Then, Colin withdrew his hand. His father had been so adamant. Handling this thing in ignorance was no way to move forward. But how else was he going to learn anything about it? He needed to study it.

But his father was smart. He was well-read. He was well-traveled. He was wise. Colin did not want to ignore him. He could not. Joseph's opinion was well respected around Althaney. He was a prominent member of the business owners' association. People asked his advice on matters both small and large. And despite not having been born here, Joseph was the youngest member of the town council, whose elder members

had lived in Althaney for fifty-plus years. Everybody loved Joseph. They would query Colin when his dad would be home next. They always had a list of problems set aside for him to resolve whenever he would return. He had a sterling reputation.

Even outside of what other people thought of Joseph, Colin held his father in the highest of regards. He was his only parent, his guardian, his guide. Everything he knew his father to be was what Colin wanted himself to be when he grew older.

So why, despite every reason that he should trust his father, should he be having doubts now?

Because, Joseph had never kept secrets before now. Colin was his son, but he always thought that Joseph told him everything. His father would tell him funny stories that took place when he was away. He taught Colin everything Colin knew about the shop. He taught him history and carpentry and how to restore things long considered useless and trash. Colin always assumed that it was him and his dad against the world.

But it was not. Joseph kept secrets—big secrets—that Colin could never know. He had been cast into the darkness of ignorance, permanently separated from Joseph, and had not even known it.

This box, sitting cold and smooth and mysterious on Joseph's counter—in Colin's home—was a painful symbol of the separation inflicted by Joseph. He wanted nothing more than to close that gap. He decided right there and then that he would no longer wait patiently in the dark for Joseph to come and tell him it was safe. He wanted to know now.

Colin firmly placed his hand on the lid of the box, defiance and curiosity creating an angry mixture in his head. The scratch on his finger tingled.

In the light of the lamp, Colin fumbled for the clasp. His mouth felt dry, and he licked his lips to spread some moisture, but he really wanted some water right then. Finally he managed to hook his thumb under the lid clasp, pulled it free, and pried the lid open. It suddenly felt unseasonably warm in the room. The light in the lamp flickered against some imaginary breeze. Colin peered into the inside of the box and felt the air escape from his lungs in a forceful breath.

The box was empty.

But there was plenty to see. The inside of the box was nowhere near the unnatural smoothness of the outside. It seemed like roughly hewn wood, but it was well preserved for how old it was supposed to be. Colin trailed a finger along the box's interior, circling across the lines. The inside was covered with carved symbols, spiraling all around the inside lining of the box. It was not any language that was in use today. It was a script that Colin only knew imperfectly, based on the script in the rare Old Age artifacts the shop sometimes turned. Colin had pored over similar symbols, trying to gain some small insight into what they could mean based on old scholar texts and his father's own journals. It was from a time that father and son had been obsessed with since before the son's birth.

And here, in Colin's hands, in the shadowed midnight darkness of his father's shop, Colin had a real, living artifact, probably more valuable than anything he had ever seen. And Joseph had insisted on its danger.

Colin did not know about how dangerous it could be on its own, but he believed that this box, if translated and shared, could change how all of Amberlain looked at its history and its ancestors, which he knew could impact their culture.

Colin immediately grabbed the box and the lamp, and went into the shop's back room. He planned to gather all of his and Joseph's materials on the old language he could find and start translating right away.

...

The back of Colin's neck hurt, and his head felt too heavy. He wondered if he was blinking too much; one, because his eyes felt so dry no matter how bleary they were, and two, every time he closed them, he could feel joyful choruses in the back of his mind, urging him to keep them closed for eight or nine more hours. His arm constantly itched to reach up and support his head, but Colin refrained from slouching. He was manning the shop now, cleaning and attending to customers. He needed to seem alert and lively to any customers, and to Joseph.

But the shop was empty now, and as he slowly rubbed the same spot of counter clear of dust over and over again, his attention kept pulling to the shop's back room and that box. Last night he'd sat there most of the night, with a candle, the box, and his father's translations of Old Age artifacts from years past. Just before the eastern sky was beginning to lighten, he had hidden everything away and snuck back into his own bed before Joseph's form moved.

Colin's father had continued on with business as usual—choosing to begin his own day with aggressive cleaning and shaving—and he was determined to keep up that pretense. He feigned with more vigor than he felt. At first, he did well. Hyped up on the secret he kept from his father and the excitement of a mystery to solve, he had felt energetic enough not to show anything. He had helped Joseph open up shop and even volunteered to rearrange some of the shelved stock, a task that occupied his entire

morning. But now, it was mid-afternoon. Joseph was running errands and checking in with the other elders around town, and Colin was fading fast.

He had worked slowly that first night; the interior of the box was covered with writing, and it wasn't arranged linearly, like Old Age script or the writing he knew. Trails of symbols wound their way across every surface, sometimes doubling back on themselves, sometimes crossing right across other lines of text. Colin didn't know where to begin, so he picked a spot in the top left corner and started converting Old Age symbols to syllables he could read. It took him a long time, referencing Joseph's material and going back and forth between his own notes. After nearly an hour, he'd rewritten what he had assumed was a whole sentence. Then he went to work translating the syllables to his language, trying to detect breaks between words and phrases, to see what he could make of the snippet he separated: "Bound like the fire and its ash, inseparable and all-consuming."

At that point, Colin sat back in his chair and stared at the sentence he wrote. Was that right? It didn't make much sense to him, but he could have made a mistake in translating. What he really needed was the bigger context, but the line got lost in a tangle of other symbols on the box's back wall, and he couldn't decipher where it continued.

He had tried to pick up other corners and pieces of text to translate, but couldn't follow a logical pattern to read them. The first phrase had read like poetry, but some sounded like legalese or part of a manual: "... both parties, once in agreement, must . . . ,” "... for one drop; for two, . . . ,” "... the energy of the vessel must. . . .” Colin couldn't find a bigger context or meaning behind it all.

And, that word, “Castor.” It was the only word written in his language amidst the sea of unfamiliar symbols. It was another mystery to solve, and Colin planned to look more closely at that word that night.

But at the moment, it was warm inside, especially since the sun was at its peak. Slowly, Colin lifted his arm and propped his head on the counter, deciding that he would be alert if he heard the door’s bell jingle. He would just close his eyes and ruminate for a moment.

Colin had not realized he’d been sleeping until the sound of the shop’s bell jolted him awake. He quickly wiped off a line of drool as someone called out, “Halloo?”

“Mr. Dowr.” Colin stood up straight.

“Sleeping on the job, I see.” Mr. Dowr had his usual stern expression to accompany his bent spine and bald head, but the old man was never unkind to Colin.

“Can I help you with anything, sir?”

“I heard your father is back in town. Is he in?”

“I thought he was with you and the other elders.”

“No. Haven’t seen him.” Mr. Dowr limped over to the nearest set of shelves and gazed at some of the product at his eye level. “I’ve been planning a little trip to Marianos, and I know he frequents the Port.”

“He does.” Joseph oversaw some shipments as they came into Amberlain from the islands. Almost every one of his trips included a stopover in Port Marianos.

“I just wanted to talk with your father.”

“He’s not here right now, sir. But, he should be back by this evening.”

“I’m afraid I’m leaving this afternoon. Kind of a last minute thing.” Mr. Dowl looked back to Colin. “Good lord, lad, you’ve outgrown me.” He turned around and shuffled toward the door. “I suppose I won’t catch Joseph. The carriage is waiting.” He left.

Colin stared at the front door as it shut. More secrets. Joseph had said that he would be running errands and checking on the elders. It was common for him to do so right after a trip. Yet Mr. Dowl, one of the eldest elders, had not only not been expecting him, but had come looking for him. Where was he now? And why would he tell Colin one thing and do another?

The jingling of the bell on the door seemed to jolt him out of sleepiness and bring an idea. Joseph was doing something to do with that box. But, Colin still had it, and he now resolved to find out exactly what is written all over the inside and why his father suddenly had so many secrets.

...

Joseph hadn’t slept well the night before, either. He had dozed off quickly enough, but anxiety had twisted his dreams into nightmares, and by the middle of the night, he was wired. To Joseph, anxiety was an emotion that was contagious. “First you felt it, and before you know it, you infected everyone else with the mind worm.” He didn’t want to wake up his son with his fears. Instead, he decided to get up and take a walk.

Joseph didn’t look at the lump in the bed next to him; he didn’t notice it was just a pile of twisted blankets. When he left the apartment and carefully inched his way down the stairs, he didn’t look back at his shop; he couldn’t see the small glimmer of a lamp

under the door of the back room. He just saw the empty streets ahead of him, abandoned for the night.

Joseph walked beyond the cluster of buildings that made up “town” and wandered near the small river that encircled the western border of Althaney. He didn’t cross at the road bridge. He instead made his way to the largest tree nearby, a willow on the banks of the river. The willow was regarded fondly by the majority of the locals, but Joseph had assigned a sadder memory to it. Years ago, he had told Colin that his mother’s grave was under the tree’s protective branches, but in reality Joseph never had Ivanna’s body to bury.

Seizing a fallen branch, he began to churn up the dirt next to a twisted root that looked like a fallen body. He dug, loosening the dirt with the branch, pulling away the excess with his hands, and he managed to dig out the three-foot hole until he found the soil-stained metal box he had buried fourteen years ago.

Sitting on the ground, with the metal in his lap, he quickly wiped his hands together to brush off the majority of the dirt before reverently lifting the lid. He breathed a sigh of relief at finding his own journal in there.

Another chill wind blew through the tree’s leaves. Joseph shivered and looked at the sky; the sun had already started to rise, and he needed to get back before Colin woke up. Joseph closed the metal lid and scooped all the dirt back into the hole. After scrubbing his hands in the river, he grabbed his metal box and made his way back home. He climbed the apartment stairs carefully, entered, and hid his journal in the back of the closet next to the bedroom.

Before he started redressing, he looked down at Colin's bed. His son was sleeping deeply, his face visible between the covers and the pillow. Joseph watched him sleep, remembering how peaceful had been as a sleeping baby, then a child. Now Colin was nearing manhood, but Joseph didn't want to think of him has anything else than someone to be protected. He couldn't keep the world from him forever, no matter how desperately he wanted to.

...

The rest of Colin's afternoon remained unbusy. He kept doing redundant tasks, just to occupy his hands, as he kept glancing at the sky outside, willing the sun to go down sooner. There was so much he needed to do to analyze that box, and he wanted to get at least one coherent paragraph translated that night.

"May I speak with the proprietor?" A soft voice brought Colin back to his senses. He did not remember hearing the door's bell.

"I'm sorry?"

"The proprietor? Is he here?" The newcomer was a man, tall and thin, wearing a black cloak despite the afternoon's warmth. His appearance was odd. His tone was polite and silky. To a casual observer, he seemed relaxed, but Colin noticed that his movements were too smooth, too poised and careful.

"Ah, no, sir. My father isn't here at the moment. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"I'm looking for something old," he said, beginning to scan the shelves.

"Something that hasn't been seen for a long time."

“Well, sir, we have many different types of antiques, some dating back to almost a century ago. If you look over here—“

“That’s not quite what I have in mind.” He held his two pale hands apart about the distance of a standard loaf of bread. “I’m looking for something about this size. Very old. Older than living memory. A different time.” Colin stood rooted to the spot, listening to the stranger’s voice as its deep smoothness lowered into a rough rasp of a whisper. “It’s a dark wooden material, smooth surface. It’s a kind of chest, a . . .”

“A box,” Colin finished. At some point he had lifted his own hands like the stranger, as if he was feeling that strange box in his hands again. Who was this man? And how did he know? Colin shook his head. “Sorry, sir, but that sounds like something you’ll have to go to a specialized collector for.”

The stranger turned to face Colin, and he felt a shudder rake through him. The man’s face was strange; that was really the only way Colin could describe it. Logically, it was perfectly fine; he had a nose, two eyes that were neither narrow nor far apart, a mouth, a chin. But, something was off. In that moment, as he and Colin stared at each other, he seemed almost doll-like. The skin was too pale and free of blemishes, the mouth was too still, the eyes seemed to have a dullness that was devoid of life. But, that couldn’t be right.

Slowly, the stranger took lifted his hand and placed it on Colin’s shoulder. Colin could barely feel a sudden fear of the man standing so close to him. The hand on his shoulder felt way too close to his neck, too easy for him to reach a few inches to strangle the life out of him. He felt the need to duck away and run out the door. But why? It was just a customer. Colin was just a boy in a shop.

The tiny jingle of the door's bell cut through the intense silence. Colin turned his head to see his father in the doorway. Colin wanted to heave a sigh of relief and rush to his father, glad that he brought the sanity back with him. He wanted to greet his father back to the shop, but couldn't. Joseph stared at the stranger, the same fear Colin had seen yesterday etched all across his wrinkles. Slowly, Joseph's gaze moved from the tall stranger to his hand on Colin's shoulder. He blanched.

"Joseph," the man said, his voice reverting back to that deep crispness he had before. He lifted his hand from Colin's shoulder, and it felt like a heavy weight was now gone. "You never told me about your son."

Joseph didn't move. "Colin," he called in a strained voice. Colin quickly closed the gap between him and his father. "Go upstairs," he said quietly.

Without a word, Colin slipped past his father, walked out of the shop and up the stairs. Maybe another time he would have questioned before obeying, but he was more than happy to get away from that stranger in the shop. He had half a mind to sneak to the shop's back room and retrieve the box from where he had hidden it, but decided that was a bad idea.

By the time he shut the door on the apartment, the fear seemed muted, but his heart was beating fast. He walked into the bedroom and sank into his bed, weary once again. These past two days had been such an emotional pendulum. Things were so strange—his father's secrets, the tension between them, scary people coming to the shop—and it all had to do with that box. This was the last straw. There would be no more sneaking around. As soon as Joseph sent that man away, Colin would confront his father. He would no longer take any explanations of "it's dangerous." Down in the shop, it felt

dangerous, and Colin was done being left alone in the dark. Joseph had to tell him everything now.

...

In the middle of the night, Colin awoke to someone shaking him. “Colin!” Joseph was calling to his son in a hoarse whisper. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Colin propped himself on his bed and looked up into his father’s face. His face was an uncommon shade of pale, and the light of a nearby candle seemed to reflect more gray in his beard and a strange glint in his eyes.

“What is it, Dad?”

“Here.” Joseph handed Colin a heavy bag filled with stuff. “Look inside.”

Again, he didn’t answer Colin’s question. Filled with worry, Colin sifted through the items in the bag. It was one of his father’s knapsacks that he sometimes used to travel when bringing boxed luggage wouldn’t be practical. Inside he found some of his and his father’s clothes, mostly warm things. He found some outdoor survival supplies and an old book. He looked at his father, not comprehending.

“Colin,” Joseph said evenly. “We’re going to go away for a while. I need you to do everything I say, okay?”

Colin felt numb. None of this made sense. He remembered his plan before he fell asleep.

“Dad, I need to know now. What’s going on?”

“Just do as I say.”

“That’s not going to cut it anymore.” Colin felt so impertinent, openly disobeying his father to his face.

Joseph took a deep breath before staring Colin straight in the eye and saying, “Son, I promise I will tell you everything I know. But we’ve got to leave now. Take this bag and meet me outside of town on the other side of the bridge. You got that?”

“Meet you at the bridge. But, where are you going?”

“There are some things I need to take care of before we leave. Just go and I’ll meet you there before the moon rises.”

“What?”

“And, son, please, please remember this. If the moon rises and I haven’t come, I need you to leave before the night ends.”

“What?”

“Just leave without me. Talk to nobody. Go to Port Marianos. I want you to get on a ship to Bairn immediately.”

“To Bairn? Why would I need to leave the country?”

“And above all, Colin. You must *never* open that box.”

“Never.”

“Never,” he affirmed. “I’ll give everything I can to meet you on time. Now go!”

After dressing and shouldering the knapsack, Colin was nearly ready to go.

Joseph blew out the one candle he had before and refused to have any more lights on, so Colin had to work in the dark. Before he could open the door and walk out into the night, Joseph peeked through the window curtain. Once he affirmed that the coast was clear, he silently waved Colin outside.

Colin quickly plunged out of his apartment and went down the stairs, careful to avoid the particularly loudly creaking ones. Once he made it to the bottom, his father

followed silently and waved him toward the road that led to the bridge before taking off down the street in the opposite direction.

Colin watched his father go, then turned toward the shop. There was one thing he had to get before he left. Once again using the hidden key to unlock the front door, he stepped through the darkness toward the back room. He opened the half-finished cabinet and blew a sigh of relief. He had half expected it to disappear or to mysteriously move elsewhere again, but the box was right where he'd hidden it. He quietly grabbed it and turned it over in his hands. All of this fuss over a small box. He lifted the lid and stared at the symbols covering every surface, seeming to frame the word, "Castor." His father's instructions to never open the box nagged at him like some out-of-reach itch; he quickly closed the lid and slid it into his father's knapsack.

He also lifted the books filled with his and his father's old notes, but they were too bulky and heavy to carry in the sack. Instead, Colin pocketed his own notebook, hoping that his own notes and memory would be enough to work on this later.

Now that his secret deed was done, Colin slipped back out of the shop and into the night. Without meeting anyone else on the road, Colin passed through the center of town, the shortest route to the bridge. He eventually reached the small river that signaled the outskirts of Althaney. He saw the tree that marked his mother's grave. It felt wrong to be leaving.

He considered waiting for his father on the town's side of the bridge where he could see the road better, but then he remembered the fear and anxiety in his father's eyes and the seriousness with which he told Colin to obey everything he said, and decided to cross the bridge and wait on the other side instead.

Minutes passed agonizingly slowly for Colin. The night felt too quiet. He couldn't hear any bugs or animals making noise in the edge of the foliage on this side of the river. Colin stared at the bridge, praying to see his father crossing it at every second, but his gaze kept pulling to the moon, watching with dread as it rose higher in the sky. "Come on moon, please slow down," he whispered.

Eventually, the moon had reached its zenith. An icy prickle spread its way across his skin. His breathing became shallow, and he had the sudden impulse to run. The thought of having to go at this alone without his father made him feeling like panicking. No. He had to come. He'd said he would. "I'll—I'll wait," Colin said. "Just to make sure he isn't right behind us."

Colin stood there, still as a statue. He couldn't see the road that led into town, so he stared at the moon. Willing it not to move. Wishing on anything he could think of that he wouldn't have to leave without his father. Alone, in the dark, his panic became more and more pronounced. Soon the moon was back on its slow descent toward the horizon. Dawn was coming soon.

"No," Colin said desperately. He wiped his red eyes on his sleeve. He decided to just cross the bridge once more and make sure that Joseph was not on the road.

He walked across the bridge, stopping when he had a clear view of the road and the outline of the town beyond it in the predawn light. The road was empty. Dawn was coming, and still Joseph had not shown up. He squinted his eyes, willing himself to see the shop deep in the distance.

Colin saw it. There was a glow over the center of town and a dark, ominous column of smoke reaching toward the sky. Colin could almost see flames shooting from the distant buildings, right where the shop would be.

Colin didn't want to move. He couldn't bring himself to turn away. All of his fears were happening in front of him. His father, his home, his security were all gone. He didn't know if Joseph was alive or what had happened to him. He gripped the straps of the knapsack tightly. Now, this was all he had of his father's. Besides the supplies, all he had left were those strange, desperate instructions his father had left him.

Colin finally found the strength to turn around and walk back across the bridge. Go to Port Marianos. Get a boat to Bairn. Don't open the box. The road to Port Marianos was easy to travel, but would take two days by foot. He had never gone anywhere on his own, but with the supplies his father had given him, he would have to manage.

But, to get on a boat to Bairn took resources that Colin did not have. Travel between the two countries was restricted, yet his father had told him to go there. He didn't know what he would do if ever did find his way there. He didn't know how to go it alone.

"Mr. Dowl," Colin remembered. He had left for Port Marianos earlier by carriage. He would get to the port city before Colin could hike there, but if he was still in the city, then Colin would find him and ask for his help. He would know what to do.

Colin turned down the road, pulled on the sack straps, and started walking. He hoped he could walk off the fear and the desperation and the loneliness. He prayed to any known and unknown entity that his father had simply needed to take another route and

that he would be waiting for Colin at Port Marianos. All he could do now was go forward.