The citizens of Vasconi had a lot of sayings, many whose origins were as lost as their actual meanings. For example, Cassius remembered one man telling him that he had a saying, “stay away from cracked ice.” Cassius had heard the saying around town, widespread among the fishermen and even among the parents who had unruly children to deal with. Like many others, he assumed that the saying was literal, but soon learned from others that it meant to stay away from those who look suspicious, or up to no good. But when Cassius questioned the man, the man said it simply meant to stay away from cracked ice. He didn’t create the saying with a more profound connotation in mind and never meant for it to mean anything more.

For many, this conversation would’ve never stuck, it would’ve been forgotten among the numerous other discussions that people have daily. But for Cassius, it did stick, and from then on, he began to wonder if life was just that, literal. There was no deeper meaning to half of the lessons that his father was trying to teach him. But of course, that could have been Cassius merely trying to get out of the mind-numbing meetings that his father dragged him off to.

For Cassius, this was as weird a time as any to think of this conversation, but he often heard his mother say that the most traumatic of situations breed the oddest of thoughts. And right she was. Only, Cassius was praying to the Divines that perhaps that was not the case, that what rested before him had some deeper meaning that he hadn’t quite grasped.

His grip on his mother’s hands tightened as tears resided on the edges of his eyes, ready to fall whenever the shock had given way to the rush of emotions. Surely something this devastating couldn’t be real, not on a day such as this one. A beautiful day, the first of what he had once hoped to be many. The worst of the snowstorms that plagued Vasconi’s landscapes had ceased, giving way to the true beauty of his land. Crystals crystalized on the trees, hanging off of them and forming dewdrop shapes. The snow was soft, coating the ground in its white dust. Every so often the wind would pick up, swirling some of the ice-dust in the air and deposition it anew. The sun hung over the land, mildly warming those who existed beneath it, while not daring to disrupt the snow.

And yet, here he sat, in a darkened room, lit by two waning candles, his grip faltering over his mother’s cold hands. In the distance, he could hear his father speak with his servants, asking them to plan what would soon be a funeral. The thought broke the dam that held the tears and emotions back.

Cassius shot out of his chair and turned to his father in a fury, “she’s not even dead yet, and you’re planning her funeral?” His roar was loud enough to be heard on the other side of the castle. His small body shook uncontrollably, the young child not knowing how to contain such emotions, he never needed to.

His father simply gave the servants a look, and with nods, they both darted out of the room, leaving the small family alone, a family that was about to get even smaller.

The two stared at one another, neither stepping down. It was a weak hand and voice that finally broke the tension.

“Not here my loves,” Cassius’s mother spoke softly, her throat dry and her energy waning with every word.

“Momma!” Cassius cried out, grabbing hold of his mother’s hand, hoping to transfer some of his heat to her.

“Shh, my love,” she whispered, “you be strong for me.”

Cassius shook his head in refusal, “you’re not going anywhere.” His words were meant less for his mother and more for his father, with them did he sent a narrowed glance. His father ignored him, sitting on the other side of his wife’s bead, threading his fingers through her beautiful silver hair.

“Shush now, you are smarter than that Cassius.”

“You can fight this sickness,” he urged, “tell her father! Tell her that she can.” Both of his parents looked upon him with saddened eyes, unbeknownst to him, they had already spoken in private. His father had said his goodbyes, or he had done his best to do so while he choked on each word.

The silence caused Cassius’s rage to grow even more, he whipped around frantically, searching for something not there. “I will find a cure to this damn sickness.”

“Cassius,” his mother scolded. She beckoned him over and rested her freezing palm on his face, she leaned in and whispered, “be forever not afraid of the cold, my love, for the frost has splendor to behold.”

Tears ran down his cheeks, each individual one coursing their own path as he spoke the next lines, “from the mighty peaks to the unyielding tundra down below.” He waited for her to speak the last line, but the words never came. His eyes darted to his mother’s face, her eyes closed and her pale cheeks now a sickly color. He released her hand it dropped to the bed; the room silent.

“Momma?” Cassius began quietly, calling her name out again and then again. He shook his head as he fell away from the bed, his heartbreaking. He ducked his head into his lap, rocking back and forth as the truth clawed at his mind for acceptance.

“No, no, no. She’s not dead. She’s not dead!” he screamed. He lunged for his mother, grabbing her hand and shaking her, “get up! Momma! Don’t leave me!”

“Cassius, stop!” he heard his father say, the words echoing in his mind but each time they sounded farther away.

“Don’t leave me,” he screamed, feeling multiple arms grab him and pull him away. He fought even harder, ‘she wasn’t dead, she wasn’t dead.’ He heard various voices shouting, but their words were incoherent, nothing they said made sense. He could hardly even hear himself. The only thing he was sure he heard was his heartbeat, thumping wildly.

\* \* \*

 Cassius peered down at the town residing in the distance. Framed beautifully by the sun preparing to begin its descent and the ocean farther in the distance. If he twisted his neck to the left, he could see the start of the snowy mountains that resided to the north of Vasconi, their peaks disappearing far above the clouds. The town was covered in white, with light hues of pink and blue thrown in here and there. He could see small insignificant spots running around, and then more significant spots that resembled the figures of horses. Towards the lake he saw even more spots, all darting around as they played and laughed, oblivious of the somber mood of the castle. Every light within dimmed for the passing of a Duchess, a wife, and a mother.

Cassius’s eyes drifted down to the crumpled-up parchment in his hand. His eyes roaming over the words residing on it in messy handwriting.

Be forever not afraid of the cold, for the frost has splendor to behold.

From the mighty peaks to the unyielding tundra down below.

Give to it your respect, forever this place be your home.

He thought it poor. His mother had said to let the words come to him, and he did, the paper now reflecting what had come to him. He wished to ball it up and throw it away, to never think of doing poetry again. He was sure he was horrible. But his mother said differently. She had fallen in love with it, and as she had shown, recited it to memory. He remembered all the kind words she had said, and how she had interpreted his words. She even wished to show father, but Cassius was not yet ready for his thoughts, for his condemnation.

\* \* \*

“You see all that?” he remembered asking her after she had explained to him her thoughts on the poem. Perhaps he was supposed to see it too, but he did not. He had just written what he thought, and besides it being written about Vasconi, he didn’t think much else of it.

“Of course,” she snickered, grabbing his hand and yanking him after her, running with a large contagious smile. She dropped to his level and covered his eyes, and as if knowing what to do, the wind picked up, causing him to shiver.

“Be forever not afraid of the cold,” she removed her hands, and before him was the beauty of the land once again, she pointed to a few of the dangling crystals, a herd of spotted snow deer licking them, “for the frost has splendor to behold.” She led him further into the forest, stopping near the edge where the land stretched on. “From the mighty peaks to the unyielding tundra down below. Give to it your respect.”

Cassius bowed his head to the scene with a toothy grin, “forever this place be your home.”

“And that my love, is how I interpreted your poem.”

\* \* \*

 Cassius reread the words, again and again, anger and sadness, desperation and hurt, emotions he never wanted to feel again, swirling inside of him. He yelled, tearing the poem into tiny shreds, letting the wind carry them away.

 The land could have its beauty and harshness, he simply wanted his mother … he only wanted his mother. He squeezed his eyes shut as the tears came once again. The wind stinging his cheeks and chilling the tears as they ran down. His mother was wrong, he was wrong. They tried to find meaning to something when sometimes, it didn’t hold meaning whatsoever. Sometimes, the cold was just the cold. And the beauty that it might hold was just a ruse for the hurt found within.

\* \* \*

*7 Years Later …*

“Ooh,” the crowd said in unison, all cringing at the hit that the young man had just acquired. Bags of coin transferred from one hand to the other as bets were placed and changed. Many all against the young man.

“Come on Cassius! Don’t let him get the better of you,” another young man hollered, pushing his blonde hair out of his face, though the wind only put it right back. His deep brown eyes went from his friend’s opponent to his friend, unsurprised at the change in bets. Not only was Cassius just a squire, he was the Duke’s son, causing many to believe him weak and pampered.

“Poor lad never picked up a sword before,” one whispered nearby.

“I’ll have you know he’s picked up many swords,” the friend argued, right as the crowd ‘oohed’ again, he turned to see Cassius back on his butt. This time, Cassius did not rise. He immediately jumped the fence and went to his side, kneeling beside Cassius.

“Anything hurt?”

“Only my pride,” Cassius responded, clutching his side as his opponent approached.

“You have much to learn, boy. Number one, don’t ever challenge your teacher.” The man turned his back on the two of them and walked off.

“Yea, you’re going to hate the next two weeks, Rowan is going to probably make you wash the entire stables, top to bottom.”

“Whatever,” Cassius groaned, standing. He looked over at his friend, Kristoff, giving him a small smile that didn’t reach his eyes. In his own defense, he hadn’t actually challenged the knight who had picked him to be his squire, he had merely argued and said a few choice words. One could interpret them as they saw fit.

“You’re crazy, you know that?” Kristoff added, “not only did you challenge your knight, but you challenged Rowan. A renowned dragon knight, retired or not, that was stupid.”

“I would agree,” another voice added, both of their shoulders tensing.

“Hi dad,” Cassius grumbled, not even having to turn around to know who the voice belonged to.

“Hello Duke Vivet, wonderful weather, isn’t it?” Kristoff tried but upon seeing the man’s glare, decided to slink away instead. He ran off towards the other squires, shouting over his shoulder that he’ll see Cassius later.

Cassius stared at his father, and his father back at him until Cassius finally relented. One day, one day he would win, it would be his father who looked away from him. But until then, well, he would have to lose on that front as well. With yet another victory, his father sighed, one that sounded oddly like defeat.

“Cassius, I did not allow this training to go on just so you could disrespect your betters.”

“How’d you hear about it?”

“The winter wind –”

“Yea yea, the winter wind knows all, the house motto. You know it’s just a motto, the wind doesn’t really speak.” Cassius sighs, wiping the mud that he could, off his body. It was always unwise to walk around with mud clinging to your person, the unrelenting chilly wind would cause anyone to second guess such a choice. Especially later when they tried to bathe it off.

His father gazed down at him with a soft, amused expression, closing his eyes as the wind rushed by, “hmm, I disagree. The wind carries the voices of all before us. Even your mother.” Cassius ignored the last part, continuing to clean himself and personally wishing for the wind to tell his father to shut up.

“Well, that’s nice.”

“Why did you challenge Rowan?”

“I didn’t challenge him, I just questioned him and his fighting, and everything he stands for. But it wasn’t in a disrespectful way, I was just curious.”

His father sighed, “Cassius, a great leader –”

“Stop dad, please.” Before Cassius could say more, one of his father’s advisors approached.

“Duke Tobin, Cassius,” he greeted. He turned up his nose at the sight of Cassius but ignored him and placed his attention on the Duke. Cassius saw this as his opportunity, quickly slinking away.

“This discussion isn’t through,” his father sung after him, but Cassius kept going. Each conversation was like the last. “Cassius, you need to take responsibility,” “Cassius, you need to learn respect,” “Cassius, a great leader must make sacrifices.” Oddly enough, despite him acting out, everything that his father said stuck with him. Cassius was trying, he was trying to be everything his father wanted him to be, but he had made a promise to his mother. A commitment to do what he loved. Perfect for him, that didn’t go in line with being the Duke. He tried to daydream of it, and most times he saw himself leading his people much like his father. He saw himself as just and strong, a leader who fought with his people and for them.

And it wasn’t just him, many have told him that he would make a great leader, even more have told his father that they don’t fear the transition, knowing they will forever be in safe hands. But Cassius just didn’t want that life, he didn’t want to be looked up to. He knew his father strived every day to be perfect, to be better than the man he was yesterday. And because of that, he treated his own wife’s death as if it was an inconvenience.

“The wind still blows; the sun will still rise. One death doesn’t change that,” he remembered his father saying at her funeral. Cassius had turned and walked out, refusing to listen to anything else.

“Hey dummy,” Kristoff shouted, hitting Cassius playfully, and pulling Cassius out of his own jumbled thoughts.

“Watch it,” he growled softly.

“I see that your father didn’t kill you. Great, leaves more for Rowan.” Cassius glanced down at the hoe in his hands and then at the nearby field, smirking, “I’m guessing Wade has you plotting more fields?”

Kristoff rolled his eyes but grinned, “he says that it’ll help me build patience.”

“Has it?”

“Not really, all it has helped me build so far are some muscles to impress the village ladies with,” he smirked, flexing his arms with the garden hoe still in hand.

“I feel really bad for all of those women,” Cassius chuckled.

“What are you talking about, I’m amazing. And watch out, if you keep acting out like this then I’m going to graduate before you. I’ll be your senior.”

“Kristoff, I could do everything in my nature to mess this up, and I’ll still beat you.” His friend huffed, rolling his eyes before retreating back to the garden. Cassius watched him, fighting the urge of jealousy that overcomes him. Kristoff was perhaps right. And Cassius knew that he needed to stop messing around if he truly wished to keep Rowan as his mentor. Rowan’s lectures were probably even worse than his father. Whereas he was used to the disappointed glances that his father sent him, he was not used to Rowan’s. Also, Cassius had issues with his father, well-placed issues at that. He had nothing against Rowan, making his behavior just downright childish at times.

He glanced towards the positioning of the sun. He should go find Rowan and see if he needed to do anything today since this usually was the time he met up with the retired knight.

\* \* \*

Like most times, Rowan was up and tidying up his house when Cassius arrived. But unlike most times, Rowan did not give him a hearty hello or even acknowledge the man’s presence. Cassius stood awkwardly, wishing he knew what to say. Rowan never came off as the type to take apologies, he seemed to be the one to respond with, “don’t apologize, do better.” And the last thing Cassius needed was to be chided.

Cassius stood silently for a few more minutes, wondering if he should help the man with cleaning, he had done it many times before. As soon as he took a step, Rowan sighed heavily and turned to him.

“Why do you want to be a knight, Cassius?”

“It’s a great –”

“No,” Rowan barked, “don’t give me that generic crap. Truly, tell me why you want this life for yourself.”

Cassius thought about his next words, “I suppose there’s no big reason. I simply admire them.” Rowan raised his brow, and Cassius once again growled inwardly, “alright, fine. It has nothing to do with being a noble. Being a knight, one has to work for it. You can be a peasant or a king, but to be in the order you have to work for it, it’s not just handed to you. I want … I need that right now.”

Rowan was quiet, not looking at Cassius but going around his house, continuing to tidy things up. He stopped at a vase in the middle of the table, gently lifting a leaf that was dying.

“Go in the woods and bring me back some more flowers like this,” he told Cassius. Cassius wished to respond but chose against it, he was on thin ice, and his answer could’ve made it worse. He eyed the flowers before turning and walking deep into the woods. He knew the flower, Dragon Blossom, a blue and purple flower that thrived in the north. Named such because its leaves looked like a dragon’s jagged wings and during the coldest months, the crystallization on the flowers looked awfully a lot like scales. They would be easy to find, though they resided farther out in the forest and only in dark places where the sun could not find them.

Cassius whistled a tune as he went, allowing his eyes to wander from one area to the next. A snowflake landed on his hand, slowly melting into his skin.

“Hmm, frozen flake rains upon my skin … a touch of innocence lies within, and as it melts … ugh, no.” He continued to try and think of a poem, a small part of him chiding him for doing even that. Once upon a time he had said ‘never again.’ One such poem, no matter how ripped up the pieces were, refused to leave him be. The wind shot past him, striking him against the cheek viciously and he snorted.

“The wind knows all my ass. Frozen flake rains upon my skin, a touch of innocence lying within, and as it melts the wind dost strike, reminding all of the vicious nights? Eh, not bad I guess.”

He continued on, half of him thinking up a suitable ending for the poem, the other looking for the flower for his mentor. The wind whistled, leaves blowing past him and towards a dark area shielded by bushes and trees. Perfect conditions for the flower. With a broad smile, Cassius made his way towards it, pushing the bushes out of the way slowly when a figure jumped towards him. Cassius shouted in surprise, falling backward, as a heavy object rested on his shelter. His eyes landed on a small white object, two pale blue eyes staring at him. The more he gazed at the creature, the more he was able to point out scales … and talons … and wings …

“Dragon!” Cassius shouted in fear, attempting to move further back but the weight of the dragon forbid it. He has seen dragons but never one so little. The dragon was about the same size of his chest, heavy enough to stop him from moving but not big enough to strike fear into Cassius’s heart.

“Get off me!” Cassius stated, swiping at the dragon, successfully knocking him off his chest. The dragon whined as he righted himself, looking at Cassius as if he had lost his mind. Cassius prepared to run when suddenly he was brought to his knees, his head aching and his heart tremendously hard. It felt as if someone had just shocked him. But the feeling passed as quick as it came. He righted himself, staring at the dragon that was on his back, whimpering in pain. When it too was over it, the two stared at one another.

Something was different, this much Cassius knew. Staring at the dragon, he felt like he had known it all his life. No images appeared, and Cassius knew for sure that he had just run into this beast today, and yet, he felt like he had never been without it. He watched as the dragon cooed softly, cocking his head to the side before slowly approaching.

“How do I know that you’re a guy?” Cassius asked himself aloud, not moving as the dragon approached some more. He shimmied his head underneath Cassius’s hand, picking up his head and making it seem as if he was wearing Cassius’s hand as a hat.

Unable to control himself, Cassius chuckled, using his other hand to scratch the dragon’s chin. The dragon purred softly, hopping into Cassius’s lap and hunkering down.

“I really don’t know how I’m going to explain this one,” Cassius sighed heavily, getting to his feet with the dragon still in his arms. He was going to first see Rowan, but he couldn’t go emptyhanded.

\* \* \*

Rowan heard the door open, rolling his eyes at how long it took the boy to find such a simple flower. He turned to berate him when he eyed the dragon sleeping peacefully in the boy’s arms. The two stared at one another, Rowan’s mouth agape as he gazed from Cassius to the dragon.

“Uh, I got your flowers,” Cassius started, showing Rowan the five flowers now in his grasp, soil still hanging on since Cassius had to make sure the roots were still intact.

“Cassius … what, what is that?”

“Um, yea, I also found a dragon. And I think we’re bonded, I’m not exactly sure.” Rowan collapsed in his seat as he continued to stare, Cassius carefully placing the dragon on the table.

“What do you mean you think?”

“I mean, the dragon hopped onto my chest, and then there were this shock feeling and headache, and when I was back to normal, I just felt like I’ve known him all my life or something. Plus, he hasn’t tried to kill me yet, so I kinda factored that in as well.” Rowan stood, circling the dragon in astonishment. Of course, he was a dragon knight, but his dragon had died a pointless death. And with the death of his dragon, he retired to the land he loved. He could’ve never guessed that the first squire he chose to teach would end up having one of his own. Fate, such a cruel yet funny thing.

“What’s his name?” Rowan questioned.

“Hmm,” Cassius began, “how about Snow?” Rowan raised a brow at his words, and the young dragon growled in annoyance.

“Okay fine, Winter.” The dragon nipped at him, growling as if trying to speak.

Rowan shook his head and laughed, “you don’t name your dragon, Cassius. The dragon has a name, you simply must figure that out. If you are truly bonded, then it will come to you.” Cassius nodded, focusing on the dragon and closing his eyes. This was the test it would seem. He felt something profound inside, a word echoing, again and again, fading into his mind before screaming itself to him.

“Cloud Chaser?” The dragon yipped and jumped on the table, causing it to groan in protest.

“Well, there you go,” Rowan chuckled, lifting the dragon up and putting him on the ground, “I send you to get flowers, and you come back with a bonded dragon. What are the odds.”

“You’re telling me,” Cassius responded, welling up with pride. He smiled down at the white dragon, still unable to grasp it all. He had a dragon, he had seriously found a dragon and bonded with it. He never, not even in his dreams, could’ve imagined this. He never once saw himself owning a dragon, not him, but here he was.

“I suppose along with your knight training, I should teach you about raising the darn thing,” Rowan told him, collecting the flowers and putting them up. “It’s a lot of responsibility, these aren’t pets. These are dragons.” Cassius nodded furiously. “They don’t just pick you because you’re there, you hear me?” Cassius nodded again, going into the kitchen for a sliver of meat. He fed it to the dragon, but his smile faltered.

“I doubt my dad will be pleased about this.”

“I don’t see why he wouldn’t be. This only makes you look more regal, and the town is bound to love it.”

“Yea, that’ll be all well and good but knowing him, he’ll ask why I brought home a dragon and not a Spotted Snow Deer. Uphold the house,” Cassius mimicked, “do we have a dragon on the crest, no we have a deer.”

Rowan laughed, scaring the small dragon when he had begun to do such thing. “Well, nothing you can do about it now. Selling him is the only option, and it really isn’t an option. The whole un-bonding process is none too friendly. You’ll be out of commission for a few weeks.”

“That bad?” Rowan nodded, remembering some of those he had trained with going through it when they wanted out. Poor suckers.

“But that’s all to say that it’s a lot of work too.”

“And I’m ready for it,” Cassius told him, a glimmer in his eye. A glimmer that Rowan had never before seen. He’s been with Cassius for some time, he’s seen him talk about many things and never has this look resided in his eye. The look of victory and triumph, of finally knowing what he wanted and being proud of it. Rowan couldn’t help but smile.

“Alright then, we still got some daytime left. Let’s begin.”

\* \* \*

That night Cassius sat on the roof of his part of the castle, looking at the mountains and the town. Beside him rested young Cloud Chaser. It seemed that all the dragon did was eat and sleep, but perhaps that was because of his youth. Rowan wasn’t entirely wrong about his dad’s impression. At first, he was confused, asking if it was Kristoff’s or someone else’s. Then asking how all of this had transpired on the same day.

His father was more surprised than upset, and if he did want to scold Cassius, then those in attendance made it hard. Everyone gushed or applauded Cassius, congratulations being thrown at him left and right. He wondered how his mother would feel about the dragon. Smirking to himself when he thought about her becoming excited and having him promise her rides when the dragon grew.

“Huh … frozen flake rains upon my skin, a touch of innocence lies within. And as it melts the wind dost strike, accompanying me on my midnight flight.” He heard Chaser yip, and the wind softly blew against him. Not being able to help himself, Cassius began to laugh, each second causing him to laugh harder until tears coated his cheeks and Chaser looked up at his rider in confusion.

“Am I disturbing you?” Cassius giggled, and Chaser huffed, lying back down. Cassius took a deep breath in, the icy air bringing his senses to life. Why did he suddenly feel so alive? As if that very day he hadn’t gotten taught a lesson by his mentor in front of everyone, and then scolded by his father? How could one simple creature, one that he never thought he needed, never factored into his future, change his mood just like that? He wondered if this was a side effect of having a dragon.

In the grand scheme of everything, Cassius cared little. He didn’t like to question things like this, in case it would mess something up in the future. He wasn’t an idiot; he knew having a dragon would be a lot of work. He believed everything Rowan had begun to tell him. He believed that this road would become bumpy and even at points, he would probably want to throw in the title. But one thing he didn’t believe, that he would ever look back on this day and regret it.

For what seemed like the tenth time that day, the wind nuzzled him. As if congratulating him and encouraging him. His father’s words ran through his head, and though his heart broke, he smiled.