

Blue Time

The Master Song Series, Book 1

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PROLOGUE:
HORSES AND HUNTERS



A Nightmare galloped through the woods—an obsidian, foam-flecked whirlwind with hooves as immense as any elephant’s, and the Forest inhabitants recoiled from her poisonous darkness. She was a Nightmare in the truest sense of the word: smoky tendrils curled up from her nostrils as she ran; her eyes were violent, glowing red. But her mane was the most fearsome thing. It smoldered, and in the glint of the occasional, somber moonbeam that was able to penetrate the canopy, the Treeman, who was watching her trample through the Forest, would have sworn the horse’s mane looked like it was in flames.

The vantage point was sixty feet off the ground, nestled between the boughs of an ancient oak. No one could see the Treeman, this *Coeduine*, because he was made of virtually the same substance as his perch. He curled five long, slender fingers around his staff, and the slight creaking of wood might have been his hand or the staff itself. His feet dug into the bark—a person would be unable to distinguish where his toes ended and the tree began. Standing on the ground, he would be as tall as the Nightmare, about eleven feet, with shaggy hair like oak leaves tied back behind broad shoulders, and a stern, intelligent face carved out of wood. This *Coeduine* was a tracker and a warrior, a *sealwyr* in his language. His speed rivaled the horse’s, as did his power. He moved like water; an odd sight to the unaccustomed eye, because he looked like he was made of rigid bark. And he was, after a fashion, though he looked human, especially in the face: his yellow eyes, his white teeth, his lips pursed in deep thought.

The question was, should he confront the Nightmare alone? Or should he get reinforcements? But that would mean tracking the beast, and who knows how long that would take, or what damage she could do in the meantime. There was a human settlement just a day's journey from here.

No. No time for reinforcements. He would do this himself.

Twirling the staff and nestling it under his armpit, he slipped out of the tree, uncoiling like a timber serpent, lithe and silent. The Treeman's dexterity would appear astonishing to a human, though it was average for his race. Muscles rippled as the Coeduine tightened his body for the chase.

He broke into a run, wind-swift, but quieter. A human's eyes would deceive them, had anyone been around to watch. Was the Forest moving?

An ear-splitting neigh, almost a demonic shriek, shattered the inky quiet of the woods, for all sounds from the local inhabitants had been silenced. It was almost as if the Nightmare was calling attention to herself.

It was preternaturally still, dark, eerie. Fog twirled around the Treeman's long legs. He leaped over fallen trunks, stones, brambles and plants, under branches, over branches, sometimes swinging into the trees like a monkey, sometimes on the ground like a pursuing tiger, slinky and fast, never breaking stride. He was on the beast in moments.

"Leave me be, Treeman. I've no quarrel with you," the Nightmare snorted as the Coeduine pulled up short, not even breathing hard. He twirled the staff and slammed one end into the damp earth, a gesture of warning. The horse was speaking his language.

They were now in an odd clearing, surrounded on all sides by a nearly impenetrable Forest from ancient times: the Morsden, which translates as "The Covering." For the most part, the Forest was a wall of foliage, unless someone carved out space for a village. But here was a natural clearing about a mile's circumference, exactly circular with soft grass, ankle-high to a human. No hand, *Coedaoin*e or human, had made this. In all his time in the Covering, the Treeman had never seen this clearing before. Above their heads, brilliant starlight streamed down, overpowering a wan sickle moon. The heavens were watching, and the Treeman felt a stirring in the ground that he could not explain—but it didn't concern him at the moment.

Yes, he was *sure* the Nightmare's mane was burning now. How was that possible? Who among the Corrupted knew such evil Singing? He had never seen anything like it.

"Who Awakened you?" the sealwyr demanded.

"Please," the Nightmare scoffed, stamping her hoof and sending up a plume of acrid-smelling smoke. "Don't insult me with questions you know I won't answer."

"Were you sent by Agenor?" the Treeman persisted.

The Nightmare whinnied, which he interpreted as a mocking laugh. "Agenor? Is that the pig?" The horse's eyes narrowed. "No. He's out of favor from what I hear. His incompetence is a source of much derision. I answer to a higher power."

If the Nightmare were to be believed, it meant only one thing. The Coedune blanched. "Bàisolc," he whispered. Yes, it must be true. Only an evil as great as Bàisolc could or *would* Awaken a mare into something like this. She was not the work of an underling.

The beast widened her eyes in surprise and golden sparks leapt out of her mane to shower the misty grass. "You're not just any sealwyr if you use the Ancient's name without trembling. Let me pass. I'll give you no more free information."

"You're not welcome here."

"Then let me leave!" the mare exclaimed. "You're blocking my way." She cocked her head in puzzlement. "What is your name?"

The Coedune was silent. He pulled his staff out of the ground and held it in a defensive position.

"What, you're going to fight me with a stick? Sealwyr, you are braver than most, but maybe not as smart. Need I remind you? Wood *burns*. Now come, I've told you more than I should; what will it hurt to tell me your name? I would know who it is I am going to trample."

"What's *your* name, monster?"

"Arsoíche." The horse bent one front leg and lowered her head in a mocking bow.

"*Night Terror*. Interesting."

"Thank you, I thought it was fitting."

They started circling each other, the Treeman swinging his staff in long, slow arcs. Every step Arsoíche took left a puff of smoke, and her long mane flickered with embers.

A realization came to the Treeman as they circled. “You’re searching for a Verse!” the Coeduine said.

“I told you I’m not playing these foolish games. I do not answer to you.”

She *was* looking for a Verse, the Treeman *knew* it. The horse was in the Forest for a specific reason, not just running amok to scare the inhabitants.

“You know, you could just let me walk out of here, sealwyr. I’ve no fight with the Morsden.”

“You should know my name is Ysgafn Droed,” the man of wood said in reply.

“*Light of Foot*. Interesting.” The horse snickered and her volcanic eyes were narrow slits.

“Thank you, I thought it was fitting.”

Arsoíche charged Ysgafn with a war cry, ears flat against her head, hooves sending a shower of sparks into the air. The Nightmare’s teeth were bared in two sets of vampiric fangs, and her mane was truly a flame of fire now, flying five feet behind her head. She brought her entire bulk to bear upon the Coeduine, but Ysgafn was not named “Light Foot” for nothing. Leaping to the side like a bullfighter, he brought the staff down on the mare’s snout with such reverberation that it startled the birds out of their sleepy nests and sent them screeching into the night sky.

The Nightmare roared in pain and anger. She turned much too quickly for a normal horse, biting the arm of the hunter and tearing a deep chunk of wood-flesh away. The Coeduine let loose a sharp cry. The gape in his forearm bled something akin to blood and bubbled with yellow hissing foam. Venom! As if the Nightmare wasn’t formidable enough!

Arsoíche spit out the flesh of the Treeman.

They faced off again. The seriousness of the first attacks had drained any sarcasm out of their demeanors; now they panted, each waiting for the other to move and make a mistake. But Arsoíche was impetuous again, striking out with her hooves once, twice, three times.

Ysgafn blocked the jolts as best as he could with glances of the staff now held in his good arm. Every kick felt like his arm would shatter. He must do something, or the Nightmare would crush him. The poison was affecting his vision, and he felt himself weakening.

Whirling the staff in an arc under Arsoíche’s forelegs, Ysgafn brought the beam straight in between the back legs and twisted it around, throwing himself into the dirt as he did so. The attack

knocked the legs out from under the horse. With a bellow and a curse, Arsoíche collapsed. The Coedune had less than a second to tuck and roll, or he would have been pinned by her. Before she could recover, the Woodman untangled his staff and rolled to his knees in one fluid motion.

With his uninjured arm he brought the butt of the staff down on the horse's ribcage like a vertical battering ram. He heard something snap and crack, and Arsoíche howled. She lost her breath, gasping and rolling onto her feet, red eyes wide in pain. Her mane was extinguished and smoking in ratted wisps.

Good. Ysgafn didn't think he could stand another assault. The wound in his arm was running blood, a foot-long, jagged gash with the imprint of the Nightmare's fangs. He was beginning to feel lightheaded. He patted out some flames that had caught his oak-leaf hair alight and leaned on his staff.

Arsoíche coughed and sputtered, trying to recapture the lost breath, stumbling and falling as she loped away from the sealwyr.

"No more." Arsoíche choked and spat lava-like blood on the ground. It cooled in seconds and crusted over. "Leave... me be, Woodman."

Now Ysgafn had a dilemma. It was against Coedune law to leave something like *that* alive in the Forest, but if Bâisold had risked sending a fiend as rare and powerful as the Nightmare in search of a Verse, then he was closer to finding one than the Treefolk realized. The questions were: which Verse, and where was it? Ysgafn thought about asking Arsoíche those questions, but he knew what the answers would be.

No. Leave Arsoíche to make her way back to her master with a broken rib. Honestly, Ysgafn was unsure he *could* kill the Nightmare in this state.

The poison was crawling up his arm like a thick fire. It wouldn't kill him; no, not someone as powerful as a Coedune. But he'd be sick a couple days; and the fever would slow him down. He had to get information relayed to the Eldest as fast as possible.

"Arsoíche," he said through clenched teeth, "if I see you again, I'll break more than your rib. Get out of the Morsden. Now."

Just before the Nightmare disappeared into the blackness of the thick trees, she tossed her mane in an act of prideful defiance and glared over her shoulder with molten eyes.

“Yeah, yeah.” Arsoíche gave a wheezing laugh and winced in pain. “Bàisólc was right: leave it to the Coedaoine to miss the forest for the trees!” And she hobbled off into the night.

Ysgafn collapsed cross-legged on the spot, using the staff for support. His vision danced, and perspiration beaded his rough forehead. What the Veil did that mean, ‘Forest for the trees’? Or did it mean anything at all? Something hidden in plain sight? Not getting the bigger picture? Was that just a mocking statement to rile him, or was the Nightmare trying to share something important? Was she playing him?

Ysgafn winced as he sucked out venom from the bleeding wound, spitting the foul smelling stuff on the ground in hissing drops. It blistered his mouth.

There was no way he’d make it to Rhydderch’s cabin tonight. The *Pêllys* would have to help.

“Bassett?” Ysgafn called out moments after Arsoíche had disappeared.

A ball of light about ten inches in diameter burst into existence at eye-level with the Tree-being. It zoomed and zipped, whizzing in excitement, changing from whites to yellows to greens to reds. It was mesmerizing to watch, but with the poison haze, it gave the Coeduoine a headache.

“Are you going to stop bleeding?”

“Never mind, I’ll be fine,” Ysgafn told the little person in the light. He unraveled a strip of black leather from his staff and clenched his jaws as he pulled it tight above the wound to make a tourniquet. “Did you hear everything the *Truillygru* said?” he asked the *Pêllys*, referring to the Nightmare as “Corrupted.”

“Not a word escaped me, Ysgafn.”

“Good, my friend. Make haste to Rhydderch and Fiorlen and relay what you overheard. If you happen upon one of the Thornsword Brethren—Boujòn should be notified that Arsoíche might try to return to the Morsden.”

Bassett spun in an impatient whirl. “And then?”

“Have Rhydderch get word to the Eldest that Bàisólc is looking for a Verse in southern Morsden Deep and make sure to mention Arsoíche’s statement about ‘missing the forest for the trees.’ I think that might mean the Verse is nearby. I will work on healing and see if I can’t uncover

a lead. Can you remember to make your way back to this clearing? Meet me here at tomorrow's nightfall."

"You will be all right?" the will-o'-the-wisp asked.

"I won't die."

"Good enough, then. Hail, sealwyr Ysgafn!" The ball went dark and was gone.

After Ysgafn had dressed the wound as best he could, he pulled to his feet, leaning on the staff. Some venom was circulating through his body, and it made his brain dull. Still, he forced his mind to consider the possibilities. What was the forest, what was the trees? Was the horse just mocking him? Or was it something deeper?

What if she wasn't looking for a *Verse*? What if she was looking for a *Demeglwys*? Here, in the clearing. The forest for the trees, missing the bigger picture.

The last thought shocked his head clear. Really? Could it be? He spun on his heels, taking in the clearing in one panoramic view. Could a Sanctuary be hidden here? How could Bâisolo have found it? Even Crannhyn knew not where the Temples were, they were covered in the Veil so many centuries ago.

But, yes, Ysgafn thought. *I can feel something here*. It was subtle, but it was there. Perhaps the small amount of venom still in his system was playing tricks with his brain, but he didn't think so.

And now he cursed himself for sending Bassett off so soon. If there truly was a Sanctuary here, time was of the essence, and mighty Crannhyn must come. Ysgafn wasn't sure he knew enough of the First Tongue to open the Temple alone. Hmmm.

If only it were dusk, he could find out...

As he searched for a suitable spot in the trees to hide and recover, he thought of the human girl from so many years ago. A small smile spread across his face, in spite of the dull ache of his wound. It had been decades since he'd thought of their times together in the Morsden, seeking for the Love Verse. She would be, what, sixty and some by now? What she wouldn't give to be here, if there really were a Sanctuary hidden in the Morsden!

Ysgafn selected a low branch and eased himself against the trunk. Whatever the mystery would reveal—tomorrow evening couldn't come quick enough.

CHAPTER 1: PRETTY ODD



Talking to plants was something of a secret pleasure for Nolan. Not that he expected them to talk back or anything, but it had been an odd habit of the boy's to pretend trees were his imaginary friends since he was old enough to walk. He conversed with them in his mind and gave them names from fantasy stories he read. The poplar by the school's playground was Edmund; the willow whose branches wept over the small creek that ran behind his house was named Wendy; there was a tall, ancient oak in the front yard named Cornelius.

In real life he had only one friend. That was Stanley Stewart, who was just as peculiar as Nolan but for different reasons. According to IQ tests, Stanley was the smartest kid in three states. But of course, being *smart* is something entirely different from being *cool*. Nolan didn't think Stanley talked to plants, although he'd never asked him; and obviously he would never, ever, admit to anyone publicly that he talked to trees and flowers more than he talked to real people. People thought he was odd enough as it was.

Adolescence had exploded in Nolan's life when he was twelve years of age. Overnight, it seemed, a heavy cloak was thrown over his shoulders, a dreadful burden that led to a breaking voice and a complete lack of any kind of motor skills. He was pale-skinned, uncoordinated and self-conscious, freckled and graceless, short and skinny. Normally, the emotional scars of those teen years fade, leaving behind a perfectly normal, well-equipped young adult; but to someone like Nolan, it seemed awkwardness would always be a fellow traveler.

He'd yet to have a growth spurt, just a bit over four foot eight; but his arms, legs and neck were longer than they should be. Or so he imagined. He weighed seventy-six pounds, which is a massive difference when most of his classmates were, like, four inches taller and a good twenty pounds heavier. His voice cracked when he spoke, so his replies were terse to the few people who did talk to him. Most people thought he was stuck up, or maybe just dumb; but in actuality, he didn't want them to laugh at his squeaks. If he stood up too quickly he'd get dizzy and almost black out. Apparently this happened to kids his age, something to do with starting puberty or whatever; but it seemed to happen more to him than anyone else he knew.

Nolan was in sixth grade at Buckingham School, overlooking Dorchester Bay, next to an antique Catholic church; and the school was set up like a college campus: sprawling and intimidating, with century-old red brick buildings and rolling green grasses, complete with gnarled old trees for him to chat with. The private school hosted first through ninth grades, and there were about seventy children in his year. None of them (except Stanley) talked to him if they could avoid it.

He was supposed to be taking an Intro to Economics exam on the final day of school, but his mind was wandering as it often did. He watched Edmund sway in the hot wind and wished he was outside, too, with a pair of dark sunglasses on. Nolan hated Economics, so he was repeating a poem to himself and tapping a pen on his leg to the meter. Might be a little weird for a boy his age to like poetry, but it's just the way his mind worked: economics, stupid; poetry, awesome.

Nolan, unlike Stanley, wasn't overly intelligent. Most times, he maintained average marks in school, although this had more to do with a tendency to daydream than any lack of smarts. His best subjects were Literature and Biology, and he prided himself on knowing more about plants than anyone in school, maybe even Stanley. His favorite hobby was botany, which was *very* odd for a boy his age. What twelve-year-old knows the first thing about growing flowers, herbs and fungi? But Nolan had a green thumb, and so he spent most of his time studying plants when he should've been studying for things like his Economics test.

The problem with being a plant lover was he had asthma, so a lot of the pollen and fragrances that plants put off could make it hard to breathe. But in spite of that, his room was

overgrown in various foliage that could be smelled as soon as someone entered his parents' house. Nolan wasn't about to give up the one thing he was good at for some silly reason like... breathing.

The boy's eyes flickered between a lock of his red hair and the desk in front of him where his all-but-blank Economics exam was taking up space. He sighed, blowing the lock up in the air with thin lips stained purple from some grape candy he was illegally sucking on. (Candy was contraband at Buckingham School.)

Truth be told, Nolan despised his red hair because it was different than what most kids had. His classmates made fun of him, calling him "Firetruck" and "Torchlight." Things like that. His mother had the same color, and although he'd never tell her, he wished it were his father's dirty blond (like his lucky little brother got) or even just a mousy brown; something that didn't stand out so much.

It also annoyed him that his cheeks were covered in this ridiculous peach fuzz. He wished he could grow a beard, something manly. His nose was straight but long, maybe too large for his face, and that bothered him. He was convinced his teeth were oversized, and that bothered him, too. In fact, when he looked in the mirror, Nolan didn't like much of anything about his looks.

Some would call him unique, as if that were some sort of compliment. To him, unique meant *weird*, and he didn't want to be weird; he wanted to be like everyone else. Just *normal*.

Now unless one thinks there was nothing redeeming about Nolan, for those few who acknowledged his existence, it was universally accepted that his eyes were his nicest feature. They were huge, bright, and green, like June beetles he'd been told. Somehow the hazel of his father's and the blue of his mother's had mixed an unusual shade that could be seen clear across the room. His vision was amazing, well over 20/20; but it was persistently drawn to minute details against his will, like smudges of paint on the walls or little bits of dust floating in the air. It made his eyes hurt and gave him terrible headaches, especially if the sun was bright outside.

All of these inane things were racing through his mind, along with the poem, as he alternated those green eyes between the lock of hair and the lonesome test in front of him, until:

"Mr. Marten, with your situation regarding my class, it might be advisable for you to pay attention and *take your exam!*"

Nolan jerked his head up, eyes fumbling for the source of the outburst. Oh, yeah. It was his Economics professor. Nolan's voice cracked as he said, "S-sorry, Dr. Whitefield, just resting my eyes for a minute."

After a fashion that was true.

Dr. Whitefield bored holes into him, clicking a red ink pen over and over to show her agitation. "Perhaps you would do well not to drool so much when you are 'resting your eyes,' Mr. Marten."

Several kids chuckled. Nolan's eyes were drawn to the old woman's double chin, and he noticed a mole on her neck that was turning purple with irritation, a long gray hair growing out of it. He blinked and shuddered. Yecch! Why'd he have to have such good vision?

"Yes, ma'am," Nolan mumbled, returning to his exam. He scratched a leg through his navy blue shorts and sighed again. What did he care about the current financial situation of the Czech Republic? Where the heck was the Czech Republic anyway? Geography was one of his worst subjects. Was it even a real country anymore? No, that was Prussia. Right? See, his mind was getting all cluttered now, thanks to the stupid, non-existent Czech Republic.

Nolan hazarded a glance to his left where Stanley Stewart was gazing up into space, possibly working out some algebraic formula to count how many tiles were on the ceiling. He'd been done with his exam thirty minutes ago, and since he had the highest grades in the class, there was no way Dr. Whitefield was going to complain *he* was daydreaming.

Maybe Stanley would let him cheat...

Making a slight jerking motion to get his attention, Nolan formed a "help me, help me!" expression with his eyes and nudged his chin at Stanley's effortlessly composed paper. His friend actually *scoffed* and turned the paper over so he couldn't read it. Nolan tossed him a scandalized, savage look.

The bell rang an excruciating fifteen minutes later. Nolan moaned and threw his pen down in despair. Well, that's another test bombed. His sole chance of passing this class was if Whitefield really liked him... He looked up to see her glaring.

Aw, man, he was gonna fail...

As Stanley gathered his overflowing book bag and Nolan shuffled up to the front, a thick boy named Jason Dupree shoved him aside and slammed his paper down on the professor's desk. Dupree bellowed, "I am *outta* here!" And the brute stomped off to join a jovial sea of students clambering for their lockers, eager to tear the place apart. *Well, I'll bet he passed the test*, Nolan thought sourly. Even though Dupree had the mental capacity of a blade of grass.

"Have a good summer, Dr. Whitefield!" Nolan tried to sound cordial, maybe earn a few last minute brownie points. Maybe she thought his hair was too long and that's why she didn't like him. (It was questionably legal by Buckingham's standards.)

Or maybe it was because he thought her class was ridiculous and had only turned in half the homework assignments for the year.

Yeah, that was probably it...

Avoiding Dr. Whitefield's withering stare as he turned in the exam, Nolan picked his way to his locker through a mob of students and dodged a wet clump of paper towels aimed at his head. Stanley shuffled up next to him, smirking.

"So how d'you think ya did?" he asked brightly.

"Oh, shut up, that was so weak! You could've let me copy!" Nolan's voice cracked.

Stanley pretended to give it serious consideration for a second. "Ummm, no. See, cheating is wrong, and cheaters never prosper, and it's your fault you didn't study with me last night instead of bowling on Wii." He offered a smug grin. "Besides Whitefield was watching you like a hawk. You'd've been caught, so you should thank me for being stalwart against letting you copy."

Nolan had to guess what stalwart meant, but he wasn't truly mad at Stanley. He pretended to glower for a few seconds as some tall kid threw a pile of papers up in the air, singing, "School's out for summer! School's out forever!" They were littered with about two reams worth of math homework as if they hadn't been standing there, talking like real people. Stanley brushed away a stray sheet, unconcerned, as the rude kid tramped by, still spouting old rock-and-roll lyrics.

Stanley was a pudgy boy. No one would call him obese, but a bit on the heavy side, sure, with kind of a blotchy face and nerdy glasses that almost hid soggy gray eyes. His thin blond hair was cut short and parted on the side, and he positively had the worst sense of fashion ever given to a geek. He unbuttoned the scarlet Buckingham uniform to expose a wrinkled, dirty T-shirt

boasting that famous picture of Albert Einstein and his wild hair with a caption underneath that said, “Brains matter.” With hefty white legs glowing out from underneath knee-length shorts, and red socks sticking out the top of his Converse sneakers, he looked preposterous. Nolan couldn’t help letting a little giggle escape.

Appearing at Nolan’s elbow was his brother, Emery, who was in fourth grade and sported the very normal looking dark blond hair and hazel eyes of his father. The nine-year-old waved, having just finished his final exams in a separate building from the sixth graders. Emery was popular among his little friends, unlike the older sibling. He waved a second time to Stanley, who gave him a superior nod of the head. Emery was the typical younger brother, rather annoying to the older boys but tolerated from time-to-time when they coerced him into bringing drinks and snacks and stuff, which of course Emery was only too happy to do because he got to hang out with the “big kids.”

“I’m sure I got an A in Physical Science,” Emery said by way of hello. He’d threaded his way through the campus to Nolan and Stanley’s building.

“Good for you, squirt,” his brother replied in a put-off mood, his pride still smarting from the disastrous Eco exam. Nolan unbuttoned his own uniform and shrugged out of the shirt, unpacking his cluttered locker. “Oh well, just a nice, quiet summer ahead of us filled with my plants and your science journals, eh, Stanley?”

“Yeah, uh, except for the part where we’re all leaving for Ireland the day after tomorrow. Remember?” Nolan looked crestfallen and Stanley smirked. “Ha! You forgot!”

“I’m *so* excited!” Emery interjected.

Nolan moaned and his forehead slammed the locker door shut. He’d forgotten in the agony of today’s miserable exams. His parents were taking them to spend the better part of the summer in Ireland. His aunt Florence, who lived there, was getting remarried the first of July, and that meant he’d have to spend most of his time away from his plants and books in the presence of his snotty, conceited cousin Genevieve. Yuck... She was two and half years older, and she lorded that over the boys like a queen. She also thought herself very pretty, and as most people agreed, Nolan obviously couldn’t stand her. It was luck she lived on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, so he saw her rarely, like when his aunt came visiting on random Christmases.

Both Stanley and Emery were beside themselves at the prospect. Nolan just knew the whole thing would be a nightmare. He'd been trying to push it from his mind for weeks, so as not to ruin the excitement for his friend and brother.

Of course, Nolan's parents were ecstatic about the thought of spending a few weeks in Ireland; it was a good excuse to take a long break from the rat race of Boston. "You an' Emery're old enough now to enjoy the cult'ral heritage," his mother said. She'd been raised there and still had a soft accent. But what did *he* care about his cultural heritage? Wasn't Ireland just a dinky island out in the middle of the ocean? Who cares about some thousand year old country inhabited by shepherds?

"Well, I can't wait!" Emery put in after Nolan slammed the locker shut with his head.

Nolan scoffed. "Don't the men there wear skirts?" he asked Stanley, looking sideways with his forehead still resting on the metal grate of his locker.

"Nah, that's mostly Scotland. C'mon, bro, cheer up, it'll be fun. At least I get to come with you, what if you had to stay with your cousin and I was stuck in Boston?"

"Well, I think it's a waste of a summer!" Nolan's voice squeaked again and he fell silent.

"Well, I think it'll be very cool to go, and you should be thankful your parents have enough money to pay for all of us," Stanley said, perhaps a little jealously. His parents were much poorer than Nolan's and rather lazy people. Their paying for a month-long vacation to Ireland would've been as likely as paying for a trip to the moon.

It was Stanley's grandparents that spent most all of their finances on the astronomical tuition fees of Buckingham, which provided the kind of education their brilliant grandson would need to get an MIT scholarship. Nolan got the distinct impression Stanley's own parents couldn't have cared less whether their son went to college at all. It was kind of sad, and Nolan felt guilty whining about a trip that Stanley had been dreaming about for weeks.

"Yeah, at least you'll get to come with us." Nolan sighed and opened the locker again, removing his belongings, and slamming the locker shut as a throng of eighth graders kept bumping into him. The three boys allowed themselves to be jostled along the buffalo herd of students toward the front doors of Buckingham's Stringfellow Hall and out into the stifling summer air.

Boston was experiencing a strange heat wave that had killed something like four old folks whose houses didn't have air conditioning. It was all over the news, how to stay cool and keep hydrated, something most Bostonians usually didn't worry about. But now, the asphalt was scalding hot, and the three boys started sweating. Smog hit Nolan's lungs, and he gagged on a cough. He plunged a hand into his shorts and retrieved an inhaler, taking a deep hit of the medicine and waiting for his lungs to stop itching. His head swooned a bit, and his eyes began to throb in the harsh sunlight. Where were his sunshades?

"You okay?" Emery asked. He pointed to the sunglasses hanging out of Nolan's backpack pocket.

Nolan nodded. "Just hard to breathe in this heat."

"Yeah, let's get some shade," Stanley said, looking around. "Your mom's late. Must be traffic."

They stood underneath a gigantic tree Nolan called Cristo and watched the students clamber into buses and their parents' cars. Stanley leaned his broad back against the trunk, chewing on his pinky finger and wiping sweat off his glasses with his free hand. Emery was talking to a couple of kids in his grade. Nolan squatted down.

"Hey, dorks, the short bus is filling up quickly—you'll miss your rides!" Jason Dupree sniggered and sucked down a Coca-Cola, while tormenting a helpless nerd just across the way who was struggling to get on his bike. Nolan would've ignored him like usual (Buckingham didn't even *have* short buses) except Stanley retorted:

"Don't be an idiot, Dupree. You realize that doesn't make any sense, right? I mean, considering I've got a 175 IQ, and you're in remedial *everything*, maybe *you* should get on the short bus, you sticky, mongoloid troll!"

Nolan was quite sure Dupree had no idea what "mongoloid" meant and supposed it took several seconds for Stanley's rejoinder to register in Dupree's dull brain anyway, because there was a marked space of silence before the bully's ears turned red with rage.

"Uh-oh. That's probably a little less polite than he's used to." Nolan scrambled to his feet as Dupree hopped off the other kid, who gave a wild look of respect mingled with sympathy to his

soon-to-be-murdered fellow geeks and sped away from the scene of the crime. “Aw, man, here he comes,” Nolan muttered, “Emery, keep away.”

That’s all Nolan needed just before his mother pulled up, to get himself or his brother pummeled by this bozo five minutes into summer break. He coughed on the smog again and waited for the attack. He was scared enough to cry, but he didn’t want Stanley to see it, so he made to go stand in front of his brother. It would look like he was trying to protect Emery, and maybe Stanley wouldn’t see his shaking knees. It was like ice cold water poured down his back.

But they were saved the beating by his mother materializing out of nowhere, hair aflame in the sunlight, oblivious to the bully bearing down on her children. She pulled her oldest son into a side hug, calling to Emery who came running over, and leaving Dupree to crack his knuckles and slink off to wherever sweaty trolls went for the summer.

Darla Marten was the ol’ block from which the Nolan chip came off, except her eyes were blue instead of violent green. She was in her late thirties. One glance from any passers-by and they would say, “Yep, mother and son.”

As Dupree slinked away, a sense of calm flooded Nolan, who was not a very brave boy at all. Realizing he was saved by his mother’s sudden appearance, he sneered and waved childishly at Dupree’s back until his mother began to squeeze him and place a reassuring hand under his elbow, trying to shield him from the sun and stroke his hair at the same time. He coughed.

“What’s wrong, Nolan? Yore asthma? Lor’, it’s devilishly hot out here, get in the car quick-like, lads!” she was saying as Stanley either laughed at their good fortune of escaping Jason Dupree or at Nolan being pampered by his mother in front of the whole student body. The son tried to squirm out of his mother’s grip.

“Gedoffme, Mom,” he managed as he pushed his head through her arm, mussing his hair. “You’re embarrassing me in front of the whole school!” She released him as though shocked to find her nearly teenage son embarrassed at being doted over in front of his fellow students by an overbearing mother. Darla Marten turned her mothering to a more-than-willing Emery as Stanley looked around the campus. No one was paying them any attention; they were as invisible as always to the rest of the school, no matter what Mrs. Marten did to her sons. She then said hello to Stanley and began herding them all to the SUV.

All four slid into the Martens' Nissan Armada, Nolan in the passenger seat, where his mom continued to fuss over him until he said, "I'm *fine*, Mom, get a grip," with a crack in his voice, and Mrs. Marten clicked her seatbelt, pulling out in front of several other cars and buses, a few who beeped angry horns. She drove like a maniac.

"Are ya breathin' all right, Nolan? How's yore lungs?" She persisted, placing a hand on his chest and weaving in and out of rush hour Boston traffic like hers was the only car on the road. Stanley gripped his armrest with white knuckles, and Emery hooted at a near miss with a semi.

"Mom, I'm okay," Nolan replied sharply, "let it go!"

"Smog's a plague in this heat. Not surprised yore asthma's actin' up." Another jolt as a van laid into its horn with Darla oblivious. "So're ya lads excited about the trip?"

"Absolutely, Mrs. Marten," Stanley replied, still recovering from the near miss.

"Nolan's not. He doesn't want to see Genevieve," Emery tattled.

Darla gave her oldest child a sidelong glance which almost put the SUV into the guardrail. She ignored the screeches of the cars behind her as they laid on their brakes. "Well, I suppose you and yore cousin don't have much in common—"

"She's a stuck-up squid!"

"Nolan!" His mother burst out laughing but swiftly stifled it. "Genevieve can be a little, er, self-centered now an' again, but she's a nice girl in spite of it. And jus' think of the experience, takin' in all that Irish culture!"

"Dad says Irish culture's nothing but beer and boiled meat," Nolan persisted. "And seeing as how I don't like either..."

Stanley chuckled.

"Well, yore father liked the Irish enough to marry one, so he's full of hot air, that man. You'll have fun enough, I promise, without boiled meat *or* beer." Mrs. Marten turned off the freeway, cutting across three lanes of traffic and almost sending a mass transit bus onto the shoulder. "T'tell ya lads the truth," she continued, oblivious, "I'm a little nervous about this trip meself. Sister gettin' married to some Welshman she hardly knows... And you *know* how the Welsh are!"

“It’s ‘myself,’ Mom, ‘myself.’ You sound like a fruit when you say ‘meself.’ You’ve been American long enough to say it right. And no, Mom, actually, we don’t know how the Welsh are, seeing as how we’ve never met anybody from Wales before,” Nolan pointed out thoughtfully. “Where is Wales, anyway?”

“On the island with England, to the west,” Stanley supplied.

“Well, then, why not call them English?”

“It’s an entirely different country, Nolan!” his mother said, exasperated.

“That’s like saying Rhode Island’s an entirely different country from Massachusetts.”

“Rhode Island *is* an entirely different country from Massachusetts!” Stanley deadpanned, and everyone laughed as Darla turned onto their street, the tires squealing as she took the turn at least twenty miles an hour faster than legally allowed.

“Well, boys, I can tell ya this,” Darla said, recovering the Nissan as she steamed ahead toward their house. “Yore goin’ to thoroughly enjoy yoreselves out there.”

Nolan rolled his eyes, unconvinced. “Yeah,” he murmured with a squeak in his voice. “I can hardly wait...”

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