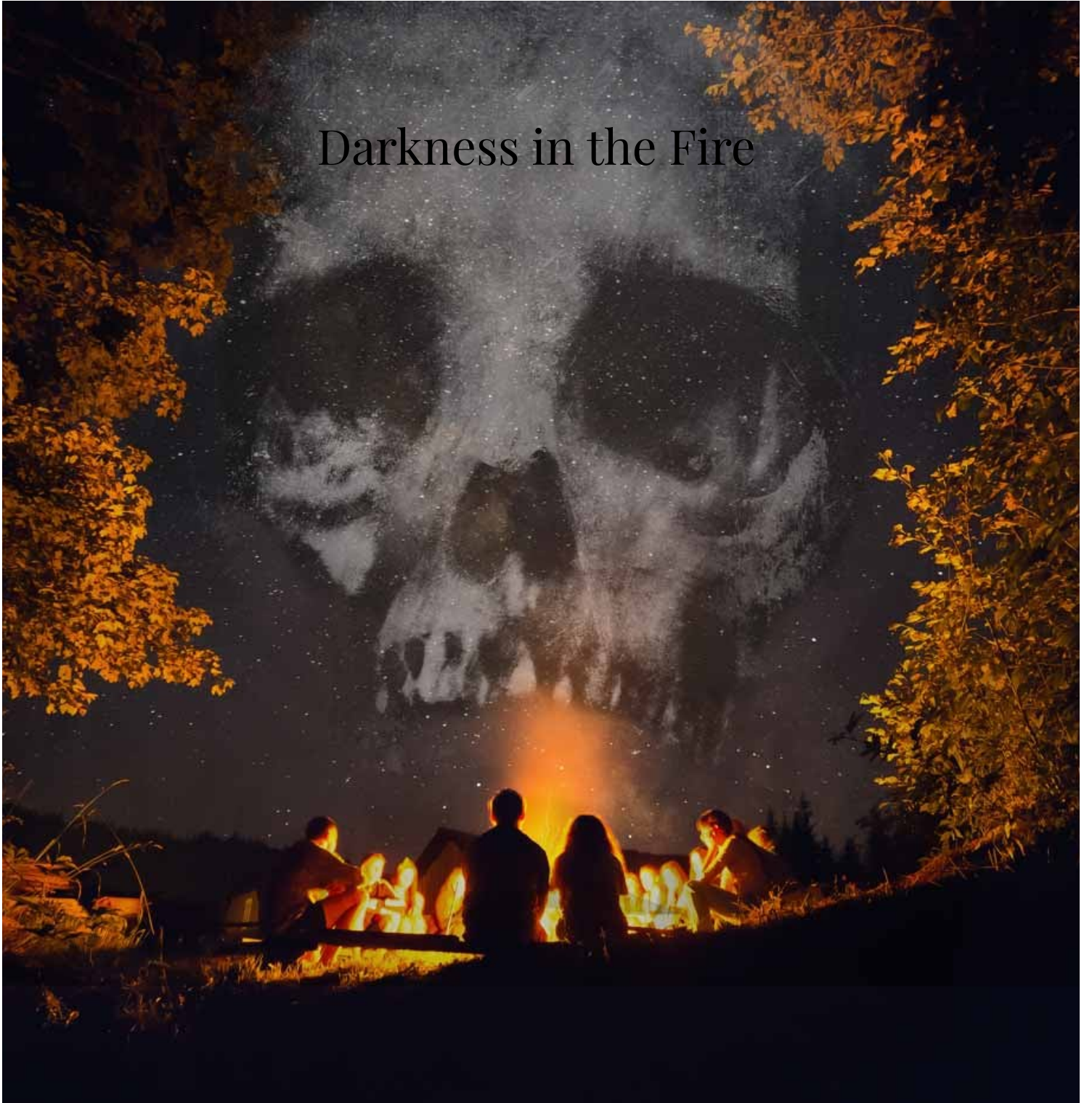


Darkness in the Fire



Chapter 1

The hunter

Jack turned the corner, grabbing onto the bark of the nearby tree as he stopped. His feet, now still. The pricking of the leaves and sticks beneath him was now numb and his hands, calloused and roughened from the environment around him. A spot of light brown sped past, launching himself towards it, landing with a thud on the ground he stood up with frustration, however continued his hunt. Sweat and dirt covered his bare body as if clothing, and his uncomfortable pants, grey and neat were unsuited for this activity. He ran with the freedom that he so missed from back in the island where he wished they were never found. The freedom and authority that he had gained was so quickly dissolved into worthlessness. This daily hunt of his was his school, his education, his own system that required no rules nor order, just a thrill of adventure and an education of survival. Choir boy no more, Jack Merridew was now a hunter. His inhuman ways from the island had not changed, however developed into a more refined brutality as he grew.

As the sun set, the dirt covered boy exited the forest of trees in which he deemed a jungle, his orange hair glimmered with sweat and its disheveled state reflected his feral nature. With his grimy hands he picked up his blue blazer that lay nested between the large roots of the trees, neatly folded. Carefully putting it on, he brushed himself up to what he thought was a presentable state before grabbing his school bag and setting off for home.

A home of orange bricks, sturdy, however, very mundane. Three windows that were in line with each other and a room of glass that stuck out the side. The wooden refined door was his ticket back to his civilised home and civilised parents. With a final look at himself through the glass of one of the windows he rang the grey doorbell. Distaste as he looked at it, reminding him of the shell that commanded the group before he had taken the lead. *Who had a need for that shell, who had a need for any particular rules?*

He met the eyes of his mother, blue and clear, just like his own. The disappointment was apparent and expected.

“Jack, can you tell me where you were?” his mother asked in a serious, however calm voice. She eyed his grey pants, grimy and crinkled. Jack remained silent, not daring to say a word however calmly looked at her back. A minute of silence as he stood there, his skinny self strongly planted to the floor.

“Just go to your room,” she sighed. Breaking the silence and eye contact.

Jack walked up the stairs, *who are you to tell me that?*

He dropped his bag with an angry thud and took his blazer off, its blinding hue of blue hurt his eyes as disgust glanced across his face. *Fancy private schools, and for what? To turn people into mindless beings that follow rules and whatnot.*

Hastily, he changed clothes then shoved cash and a handful of small bags into his pockets. He looked around cautiously then launched himself from the window sill. He then sprinted off.

A hole in the ground, square and spacious with seating along the side, was scattered with boys of all shapes and sizes. This concrete area was grey and bleak, nothing much to it at all. Jack thought that the plain grey had perfectly matched his own mental state at the moment, blank and empty however solid and existent. He confidently walked down the stairs into the area, looking at nowhere in particular. All eyes landed on him the moment he had entered the concrete grounds. "Chief," they greeted, one by one, respectful of his authority.

The boys were a mix of the remainder of his hunters from the island and people from neighbouring schools that he has picked up whilst 'adjusting' to society. He looked around, *maybe even less than half still remained*. With two hands outstretched, one with cash and the other empty, he collected his share from the other boys. Sitting down, he took one last look around as he lit the end of his cigarette. Breathing out with relief.

Not long after, the area was musty from the smoke, the heavy feel of the grey clouds that had collected around them comforted Jack in a way, almost like a blanket, hiding them from the reality that they would eventually return to. This was the bittersweet truth that Jack had come to think about modern society, it was the reality, and the island was but a dream that he had in the past. It was almost nostalgic.

His mother held out the white packets in front of him. Disappointed eyes looking at his still stature. Her mother was not ignorant of the drug use in high schools, however it just never occurred to her that her own son would commit such an act.

"Tell me what this is," she said in a firm voice.

Jack stood there, sturdy and unwavering. His once skinny structure had grown into a more lean muscular one, worn from the hardships that he had gone through and his reluctance to return to normal life.

"Stuff in my drawer," Jack calmly replied, not wanting to say the word out loud.

"It's a drug, that's what it is." struggling to say the word, as if her subconscious did not want her to mention the word.

The silence engulfed the conversation, the mother and son pair stood in the still atmosphere.

The continuous whirring of the engine filled the silence between the two people that sat beside each other, however, the wall that they built to block out the other brought upon a heavy feeling. Jack squinted his eyes as he opened the window, the light of the morning almost blinding him. People stared at him, for his action awoke the people around him. Turning on the tv screen in front of him he browsed through, looking for something to keep his mind occupied. The tv ended up pulling him into a deep sleep.

Jack ran, he ran and ran, adrenaline pumping through his body as he chased down his prey with a spear in hand. His loud voice echoing across the entire island and his hunters running beside him in full sprint, their faces of hungry looks. Ralph ran in desperation, his breath loud and clear and he tripped over branches and twigs however still sprinting forward. This was the thrill of the hunt. This was what Ralph tried to deny him. What everyone denied him. They only need to feel this

rush of excitement before they will be craving it more, hypocrites, everyone. Ralph went down, and his blood boiled at the excitement of the coming kill. He shouted as he neared his prey and his spear rushed towards flesh.

His eyes blinked open and his body jolted. His mother looked at him with confused eyes. Jack's mind was fresh with scenes from his dream as he pulled his mind back into reality. *A restraining reality.*

"We're almost there," his mother said in a fleeting manner as she readied herself for departure. Jack sighed hoping that his 'new change of environment' would please his mother enough for her to care less about him. All he wished for was the feeling of independence and freedom, was that too much to ask for?

"Toyama," he mumbled to himself. As if preparing for the future events in this unfamiliar country named Japan.

Chapter 2

A Beast's Fear

Blue eyes of excitement shone in the spots of sunlight that peaked through the trees. They stared at his own brown ones with shining curiosity. Ame looked back with his own mild curiosity, however felt more threatened by this boy who held a sharpened stick. The red headed boy started to shuffle towards him, every step he took Ame tensed. Debating whether he should scare the boy away for the safety of the residents of the forest or further observe his actions. Humans had always held his interest as he himself was a half human, they reminded him of his sister who, unlike him, had chosen to live among society. However this one, if he had to compare, was more similar to him than to his sister, or in fact any other human that had ventured into the forest. With a rustle of the leaves Ame left the scene.

He watched him from afar. As he did his interest grew weak, replaced by distaste for the boy's acts of hunting. He killed the smaller animals mercilessly with his clumsy movement across the uneven environment. Ame's distaste was slowly replaced by anger, then rage. It was not long until the boy's actions had infuriated him. A disgusting sound caught his attention in the midst of his internal debate of whether to kill this boy or not. He stared at the once brown stick as it was forcefully wrenched out of the hare that it had struck, it was stained with blood and it slowly dripped off the sides of the makeshift spear. The boy's bloodthirsty smile as he looked at his kill and the spear enraged Ame. He leaped out with a loud snarl and with a powerful bite, sunk his teeth into the boy's arm as he attempted to defend himself. The boy yelled in agony. Ame bit down harder and glared at the boy. The boy tried to push him off with his other hand and the spear as his face scrunched up in anguish. The boy had managed a stab into Ame's sides and he let go momentarily with a yelp in pain. He snarled and leaped back at him. The boy's attempted escape was futile as Ame bit down on his leg. Stumbling, the boy fell back down on the ground. Blood from Ame's fresh wounds and the boy's bite marks decorated the ground. Ame felt his consciousness fading due to the blood loss as the boy continued to stab his side in desperation. His grip on the boy's leg loosened and in dizziness, his world turned black.