

TWO YEARS AND EIGHT MONTHS AGO

Grayson Hawthorne is consumed by guilt and grief as he sits in the tree house, reflecting on Emily's death. He recalls his childhood obsession with perfection, symbolized by his meticulously crafted haikus, which now feel meaningless. The weight of his failure overwhelms him, as he blames himself for taking Emily to the cliffs where she died. His emotional numbness is palpable, as he repeats the word "dead" aloud, yet feels nothing—a stark contrast to the pain he believes he deserves.

Below the tree house, Jameson violently attacks the bridges and structures with an ax and other blades, channeling his rage over Emily's death. Nash intervenes, pleading with Jameson to stop, but Jameson continues destroying everything in his path, seemingly reveling in the chaos. Grayson watches, interpreting Jameson's actions as directed at him—a punishment for his role in Emily's demise. The brothers' shared grief manifests in destruction, with Jameson's reckless abandon contrasting Grayson's silent despair.

Nash attempts to mediate, urging Jameson to find a less self-destructive outlet for his pain. Jameson dismisses the concern, declaring that nothing matters unless one allows it to—a stark rejection of emotional vulnerability. Grayson, meanwhile, descends to the ground and picks up a longsword, mirroring Jameson's destructive impulses. The tension between the brothers escalates as Grayson confronts Jameson, admitting fault for Emily's death, but Jameson sarcastically rejects the apology, accusing Grayson of never accepting blame.

The chapter culminates in Grayson joining Jameson's violent outburst, swinging the longsword at the tree house. His actions symbolize his surrender to guilt and self-loathing, as he internalizes the belief that he killed Emily. The brothers' shared trauma fractures their relationship, leaving Nash as the only voice of reason amidst their spiraling grief. The chapter ends with Grayson embracing the pain he once avoided,

finally feeling the hurt he thought he deserved.

