

Dead Things and the Invisible Girl

by

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Dead Things and the Invisible Girl

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ABSTRACT

Dead Things and the Invisible Girl includes an excerpt from the fantasy novel *Blood Bound* and a collection of short stories that focus on the themes of family, loss, grief, identity, and social interaction.

Blood Bound follows the lives of three women over the course of two decades. Leah is a fallen goddess, magically bound to the powerful Hethleine royal family of Cor Izaias; Elianna is the proud and mischievous Hethleine princess; and Shani is a slave in the lowest caste of Chervis, where religion and open free-thought is banned. While Leah struggles with the inevitable death of her current blood-bond, the queen, Elianna must grow up fast to take the queen's place as ruler of the city, and Shani will finally learn what it means to have a purpose. But everything comes with a price.

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Part One – Blood Bound

Prologue

In the city, they were called *xilvesh*, the unclean.

Groups of three to four of them were bound – some by thick, coarse rope and some by chains – to large wooden stakes pounded in the packed sand, six or seven lengths apart from each other so that they could not fight or squabble. There were a hundred or so of them this day, gathered together across the low field like cattle, waiting in the humid air. They wore whatever scraps they managed to save from their previous owner or had been given to hide their nakedness. Many did not have sandals or boots, and their feet burned in the hot sand. But for the most, they exposed to the rising afternoon suns. The heat lit them up from the inside out, seeped out from them to gather in the creases and bends of their skin, drip across their forehead and faces. They smelled like sweat and shit and earth.

The overseers, perhaps fifteen or so of them, paced the length of those gathered and tethered, each with a small crop in hand about the length of a man's forearm, always

a bit too quick to yell or lash out. They were dressed in loose-fitting tunics and breeches, with wrapped sandals, made for movement in the sand of desert and beach.

I'm not unclean, thought Shani, as she gripped the rope where it knotted in the metal loop attached to her collar, a thick leather band that chaffed where it wrapped around her dark neck. She itched at a spot of dry skin where the collar rubbed against her windpipe.

The rope threaded through her collar attached to a pole that two others were bound to, an older, dark-haired woman she didn't know, and a slight, blonde girl that she'd been sold to the overseers with. The dark woman had yet to acknowledge them, but in the carriage ride over, Shani and the blonde girl, who she learned was named Maola, had whispered back and forth until they were shushed by the threat of an overseer's slap.

Though she knew it to be useless, Shani's fingers still traced the knot in the rope, a thick coil of weaves that looped over and under each other. It was a slavers knot, she knew. It was meant to be cut, not undone, and if the bearer struggled, the tighter it would become. She'd seen a similar knot, tied improperly, strangle a field dog in minutes when it fought against the rope.

Shani was a pretty girl, just shy of her bleeding years, her brown-gold hair shorn close to her scalp to lessen the chance of nits and eyes so light gray, they appeared white in certain light. Her last overseer told her she might have been god-touched with those eyes, that it was a pity she was a xilvesh. That pity never kept the hag from freeing her however, and Shani wasn't certain that god-touched were even a real thing. She'd certainly never seen one herself. A god-touched wouldn't be a xilvesh to begin with. A

god-touched wouldn't hunger when they went without dinner or shiver when the sun dipped below the horizon.

She and Maola, she thought, were some of the youngest in the group.

Maybe a handful of the other girls were under bleeding years, a few boys who hadn't started to grow hair on their face. There was a dozen and a half who were incredibly old, who were obviously too old to sell, and would eventually end up unloaded in the slums of Urippu to fend for themselves. Most of the xilvesh present though were able-bodied workshomes or pleasure girls or boys, individuals who'd have no shortage of offerings. Shani wondered who would want to purchase a ten-year old, what she could potentially provide someone.

In the far distance, behind a series of sequentially rising cobblestoned walls, the gleaming ivory walls of Maruji castle glittered in the bright sun, like a shining beacon of light. Shani had never seen the Maruji Keep up close. She'd never even viewed it across the Jokai, a deep moat named for the first person to drown inside it. Book history said the person was a traitor noble, who had been chased from the keep when their treason was discovered. Xilvesh history said Jokai was a pleasure girl whose mistress found her at bed with her mister and forced the girl to walk into the moat with stones in her pocket or face the executioner's ax.

The keep was located at the innermost part of the city, unreachable for most citizens. Though all the regions in Pelvyr were blocked off to outsiders by high walls, Cheris was the only city she knew of that blocked sections to their own citizens. The city itself was not only walled, but it was also walled from within. Cheris was broken into five separate wards, each divided by a gate at least twenty to thirty lengths high, and one

needed explicit permission to pass through those gates. While free citizens could pass through the gates unmolested, they still needed special permission into the two most central wards, which housed the noble houses and most of the higher-end merchants. Xilvesh could only go through gates with a specific charm, showing them as a representative of their overseer.

Shani's last overseer was an elderly seamstress in Cosza. While she often received work from those in the inner two wards, she did not have the clearance to pass herself into the Arisu ward, let alone Marwary. Shani would give anything for that simpering, irritating woman to come back to life. A month ago, the seamstress had passed away, and her son sold most of her possessions and property, including most of her xilvesh.

Slaves were legal in Chervis. And while the exchange of persons was supposed to be highly controlled, at the edge of Urippu, the outermost ward of the city, the trade and sale of xilvesh was slightly *less* regulated. In fact, regulation was practically nonexistent. An overseer could do pretty much whatever they wished to a xilvesh, regardless of their standing.

A good xilvesh, she thought, is a dead xilvesh.

Shani's fingers worked at the knot at her throat, feigning an itch.

"You got vermin or somethin'?"

Shani turned to glance at the woman bound beside to her.

She was paler than Shani, but far darker than Maola. Shani didn't know if she had ever seen a person paler than Maola. Though they'd only been in the field for an hour or so, the girl's skin was already flushed red with the heat, sweat pooling darkly at the back

of her shift. Her white-blond hair reflected the sun's light, but her skin seemed to seep it up until it boiled over.

Shani made a questioning sound in the back of her throat.

“Don't you know the common tongue?” asked the woman quietly.

Shani glanced at Maola, who shrugged at her weakly.

“What's it to you?”

“Stay 'way from me if you got vermin,” the woman muttered under her breath, slinking further away as the rope would allow her.

She might have been pretty once, Shani thought, studying the woman. She was older by far, with wrinkles in her skin at the corner of her eyes and lips, a deep crevasse of skin between her thick eyebrows. She had kohl-lined eyes and plush lips that looked as though she'd smeared raspberry filling against them. She had a thick head of dark, curly hair, done up in some intricate pattern that she supposed was supposed to look appealing. Shani had never had hair long enough to do anything with.

Hair ain't important, her previous overseer had said, one of the times she took a shear to her lengthening hair. *Can get caught in the loom. Can get nits. Not worth it.*

“Don't got nits,” said Shani finally, pressing her shoulder against Maola's.

“You sure?”

“Mind your own!” snapped Shani, a bit too loudly.

The crack of an overseer's crop split the air against her ankle. It wasn't close enough to really hurt, but the sound inspired the fear of pain, which was almost worse than actual pain. The dark-haired woman didn't flinch, but she did glance away, though it was hard to tell if she was merely keeping herself from punishment or if she felt poorly

for getting the girl in trouble. Maola, however, made a small, distressed noise next to her, like a wounded animal, and Shani wrapped an arm around the girl's shoulders, pressing her close.

"It's okay," she whispered, pressing her mouth close to the other girl's ear. "I got ya."

She had to stretch, because Maola was a good bit taller than she was; a few years older too, but she seemed as weak in mind as she was in body, caving against the overseers' threats. Shani had found herself as the girl's backbone more than once during their journey through the gates from Cosza to Urippu, stealing extra scraps when the girl seemed too slow to grab her own food from the small pile provided by the overseers, sacrificing a few her own precious hours of sleep to make sure that no other xilvesh came pawing at the girl at night.

"She ain't gonna last much longer," said the dark woman lowly, staring straight forward and trying to limit the movement of her mouth, so that she did not appear to be speaking. "Where she come from? Lyeon?"

Shani shrugged. People who lived in Chervis were used to the heat. There were pale folk, same as dark folk, but they covered up or kept out of the sun. They didn't have much choice as it was in this field, waiting around for the bidding to start.

"What's her collar say?"

"Huh?" said Shani, her own hand rising to press against the thick leather at her throat.

"You simple or somthin'?" the woman asked waspishly, as loudly as she dared. The closest overseers were a few lengths away and didn't seem to hear her. "The collar

says where ya come from. They burn it in 'afor they put it on ya. So whoever buys ya knows what you're for and where ya from." The woman lifted her hand to her collar and rubbed her fingers against a small set of indentations in the side that Shani assumed was just some sort of design pattern. She touched one of the small brands. "This one says I hail from Ingerna." She touched another. "This says I skills in more than just fucking."

Shani slid her fingertips along the thick leather, searching.

"What's mine say?" she asked.

The woman leaned closer. "Twist ya head about, think it's on the other side.

She did as the woman asked, swallowing thickly, her eyes on the closest set of overseers. They always walked two at a time, to make sure that one couldn't be subdued unnoticed. The two closest were engaged in something amusing, sharing a thin hip pouch between them.

"Rivin," said the woman, shifting back again. "And untouched. Ya got the reed and the bud. Also ya studied. They gave you a book. Don't see many xilvesh with a book. You trained at a tutor or somethin'?"

Shani shrugged but flushed hotly at what the woman said. She had no worries for her own sex when she was with the old woman, but the dark woman's words reminded her that she could be sold for pleasure. She was young enough.

"Hag didn't mind if I read," she said eventually.

"Some'un had to teach ya though."

They were interrupted by the call from the overseers. The market must have opened, Shani assumed, which meant that like everything else present, they were also for sale now. Next to her, Maola slid closer, practically pressed herself against Shani's

backside. The girl was flushed a deep pink, and Shani knew she'd need some ointment the following day, if not in a few hours, to soothe the stain the sun would leave in her skin.

It felt like hours before they were approached, men and women alike poking and prodding. Shani wanted to scream when they touched her, wanted to bite at their fingertips as they seized her chin to turn her face this way and that, prized open her mouth to glance at her teeth like a mongrel. She made an angry, violent noise she didn't know she was capable of when an old man dared to slide his cane between her legs. The dark woman next to her glanced her way, almost as though she wished to say something, but she never did. Nobody touched her the way they touched Shani or Maola. She didn't know if it was because they were still so little, so young, but anger burned in Shani's gut at the intrusive handling.

An elderly man took her gently by the chin, pulling her face toward him.

The man was lightly brown-skinned, backlit by the angle of the sun and tossed slightly into shadow, but she could see that his face was heavily creased with age and exposure. He looked tired, like he'd travelled a long way. He wore an inexpensive but thick, well-cared for robe over his tunic and breeches. His clothes were plain, with no addition of noble addressing.

"Lo, little one," said the old man to her. "What's your name?"

Repressing this urge to snap her teeth at his fingers, Shani managed to utter her name as well as Maola's, who was still pressed closely against her side.

"What a pretty name." The man smiled at her. "Have you heard of Cybele?"

Shani's gaze snapped from the land to the dark woman, who met her eyes with something that appeared like panic, her lips pressed closely together. The dark woman gave her head a very short, pointed shake, something that could look as though she were merely tossing some hair from her eyes.

"No," said Shani. "Religion isn't allowed here."

"Ah, yes," said the old man. "That's what they say. But could they punish you if they didn't know what was in your mind? Are they able to know what you think?"

Shani did not know how to answer the man, so she kept her mouth shut, lips pressed tightly together. She hoped the old man understood that she was not ignoring him, but that his words were treasonous. If a xilvesh were to utter the same words aloud, to the wrong person, they could easily find themselves without a head.

"I don't know, sir," she said eventually. "I'm not studied in the history."

The older man smiled and lifted his hand toward her head, gently pressing down. Despite the fact that her hair was short, it was a thick and curled, and the man's fingertips passed through slowly. It did not hurt, though, which was all that Shani cared.

"I shall take this one," said the man, raising his voice, his hand still perched atop her head. "How much is she?"

One of the overseers walked over to talk to the man.

"You have to buy both of us," sputtered Shani, interrupting their exchange. Both men turned to look at her, one amused and one annoyed. "Maola comes with me. We're a pair."

The older man glanced toward the pale girl huddling against her, her blue eyes vacant and afraid. His smile faltered for just a moment. Shani wrapped her arm around

Maola's waist, hoisting her taller frame against her, though she still appeared hunched and awkwardly twisted, as though she didn't fully control where her limbs went. In the moment, Shani thought she saw anger pass through his eyes, but then it was gone, and his smile was back in place.

"Of course," he said and pulled a small purse of coins from inside his thick robe. "I'll pay whatever they require."

The overseer overcharged, as they normally do, and Shani waited for the older man to retreat, for him to apologize for his oversight, because two young girls before their bleeding age could hobble someone. But the man smiled and produced the coin, more gil than Shani had ever seen in her life, and she wondered who this old man was that he could just purchase the two of them without thought. He dropped the purse in its entirety into the overseer's outreached hand, a hand which quickly shoved the money inside their robe. The overseer took a set of sheep clippers from the inside of his vest and lifted them toward the knot at Shani's throat, then Maola's. The rope dropped to the sand, and Shani stared at it, the dirty, foul length of it in the dirt. Though still collared, it was the first time she had been outside a home without a leash.

Shani also wondered what she was to be for this man. She knew men. Knew what they wanted, what they expected of her. When the rope was gone, then man stretched out his hand.

"So," he asked, offering each girl a hand.

Maola seized his left hand swiftly. Shani took his right when the man wiggled his fingers at her. A tiny smile broke across the man's tired features.

"Do you know of Cybele?" he asked them again.

Shani made a face. “Religion isn’t allowed here.”

“That’s what they want you to think,” said the man, swinging their entwined hands just slightly between them.

Chapter One

Leah woke, quickly and all at once, with the taste of someone else's blood in her mouth.

She'd been dreaming again. Though in the fog of sleep and seizure, she could not recall what happened in this particular dream. It felt more familiar than foreign to her, perhaps because of how frequent the dream came. It always started the same, with fire, with the pain of burning one life away, with the great brazier and her body and the slick slide of one skin into another. Sometimes there were feathers, sometimes scales. Sometimes there was nothing but bone, friction, like she was some nightmarish figure come to draw everything to death. Sometimes she was unable to return to sleep after those dreams. And the faces on the other side of the brazier changed rapidly, sometimes old or young, some angry or frightened or ecstatic.

She tasted the blood in her mouth and faintly heard the ancient beating of a drum, of rhythmic chanting, of her lover's voice whispering in her ear.

She shook her head in several violent little jerks, fighting against the bond's *mimickry*, but as always, her body was no longer her own, limbs jerking in the motion of a seizure but without the pain. Bile rose rapidly in the back of her throat, slick and gamy,

and her vision swam. Across from her bed, the painted mural on the wall of her bedchamber appeared as though it were moving. Leah blinked her eyes to focus, staring at the figures depicted: two feathered-and-winged serpent gods locked in battle with a horned demon, a god with the face of a tusked pig and the body of a man; an ancient scene from books and history. The battle between the gods Inilheime, Arazumin, and Ipeyr had been so violent and devastating, the land had blighted, and the Eddan desert had been created, a vast wasteland that stretched between the two continents now known as Pelvyr and Toscalos, separating them forever. Leah had commissioned the work shortly after moving into the room during her first life, as a reminder of what true failure looked like. She woke every morning to the image of her greatest moment of weakness. Arazumin, her twin, her love, was gone, lost somewhere distant where she could not find him, could barely feel him, and Inilheime as she had been was no more.

Now, there was only Leah.

Leah forced her breathing into a rhythm, started regaining movement in her body first with her fingers, ticking them slowly in and out, until they prickled painfully with feeling. She rolled her shoulders. She cracked her toes. Finally, she managed to lift herself, heavy-headed, into some semblance of upright sitting. The entire process took only a few minutes, but it felt like hours to her. A sharp pain twinged behind her left eye, which she knew would settle into a dull throb within minutes. When she swung her legs over the side of the bed and made to stand, her knees buckled, and she stumbled forward onto her palms. The stone floor, polished smooth by centuries of feet, still rubbed abrasively against the soft skin of her hands. The blood was thick on her tongue and she

gagged, retching onto the floor in front of her. She made a disgusted sound and wiped at the spittle on her chin with the back of her hand.

Lit from only a single, long-stemmed candle, her room was a mass of darkness and flickering shadows. From the other side of the chamber came an inquisitive, soft *kehkehkeh* sound, like a shrill, quick chuckle. Inhuman yellow eyes blinked at her through the dimness.

Leah retched again.

Keh. Kehkeh? said the yellow eyes again. In the dim light, a large dark mass shuddered in the corner of the room, accompanied by the soft rustle of feathers.

“I’m fine,” she gasped, wiping at her mouth again, this time with the edge of her blanket.

The falcon chirruped worriedly at her again.

“Shut up, Yokke,” Leah hissed. “I’m fine.”

The scent of ozone and electricity filled her bedchamber, the room sweltering with the heat of an oncoming midsummer storm. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the air was humid with unspent rain. Outside her chamber window, the visible sky was purple and black; dark, pregnant clouds hanging low. To someone once used to spanning the skies, used to stretching her wings above the clouds and escaping the storms into the bright, silvery light of their skies twin moons, Cala and Persepi, the air felt heavy and claustrophobic. There were no stars visible tonight, no moons. Leah felt her grounding even more on days where she could not see the sky.

Heedless of shoes or coverings, Leah struggled to her feet and threw open the door to her chamber, dashing in her underclothes into the corridor.

The castle seemed endless at night, stretching for a dozen or so lengths in either direction. A single torch burned at either end of the hallway, the rest extinguished by servants once the royal family retired to their chambers. The darkness would have defeated normal eyes, but Leah hardly paused. She blinked a few times, focused a small bit of energy toward her nightsight vision, and the corridor flared with light as her pupils dilated rapidly, flaring to three times their normal size. Her bare feet slapped against the cold stone of the corridor, echoing harshly in the silence of the castle at night. A young maid carrying laundry shrieked when she nearly crashed into her. Another time, Leah would have felt poorly and apologized for scaring the girl, but now she simply made an irritated noise in the back of her throat and bared her teeth in a grimace as she pushed the girl out of the way. But her body still felt foreign, not quite asleep but not fully awake, and not her own. The attacks were happening far too often. The memory of spasms twitched in her fingers or her side occasionally and more than once, she found her feet twisting awkwardly underneath her, and she stumbled in her run.

While Amurnest Castle was a maze of winding corridors and twisting staircases, designed to confuse any intruder who did not know the layout's designated patterns, Leah had been present at the castle's very inception. Leah herself had had a hand in the castle's design when Cor Izaias had been razed and destroyed, torn down brick by brick, by postulants of the boar god, Ipeyr, in the Crucible Wars almost a thousand year ago. Leah knew the castle better than anyone currently alive, had infused the very stone with as much protective magic as she could manage, weaving tiny bits of her life essence in until the walls practically breathed. Centuries later, Leah took the time every few months to

reinforce those protections with a variety of energy infusions and potions. The castle was her lair and hoard combined, and she would defend it with her life.

When she reached the royal chamber, she slammed her fist into the wooden door. It fell open under her palm and she slightly stumbled inside, still a little unsteady on her feet. She grabbed onto the back of a winged-back reading chair to hold herself upright.

“In here!” called a voice from an open archway on the room’s far side.

Leah threw herself toward the bedchamber.

On the floor beside a sprawling four-posted bed, her lower limbs still half-wrapped in a thick blanket, High Queen Olyme Hethleine laid on her side, a smear of blood or mucus across her lips, still shaking with residual tremors. Though she was only approaching her fortieth year, the queen’s thick, dark hair was liberally streaked with silver. It stuck to her cheeks and neck, which were slick with sweat. While her eyebrows pinched together, she did not appear to be in pain, however.

Her wife and queen-consort, Marais, knelt next to her still in her nightgown, and frantically pulled a dark hand through the loose end of her corded hair. Towering nearly a foot over her own wife and with significant inches taller than Leah, she was a pretty middle-aged woman, exceptionally tall and lean by the standards of Cor Izaias, with skin the color of polished onyx, deep-set hazel eyes, and a small gap between her front teeth. She wore her hair in a thousand tiny braids all woven into a single larger braid that she frequently wore over her shoulder. It glittered like the scales of a serpent in the low brazier light. Leah remembered when she first met the woman as a girl of fifteen: bold with an ax and spear, a girl who preferred trousers to dresses and who boldly approached the older Olyme to boast that she’d be in the woman’s bed within a fortnight.

Now she looked helplessly weak, kneeling beside her lover, her eyes shining with tears.

“She bit her tongue,” Marais said softly. “I only woke because she slapped me across the face when she started seizing.”

Marais had lit a lamp on the bedside table, and it threw dancing shadows across the fallen queen’s face. Leah knelt next to Marais and smoothed her hand across Olyme’s clammy forehead. Her other hand came up to her queen’s throat, feeling for a pulse.

“Tell me she’s not dead,” whispered Marais.

“She’s not dead,” answered Leah with little pause. “I would have known that the minute it happened. But her blood is weak.” Her fingers clocked the queen’s pulse, light and fluttering like butterfly or bird; it was hard for Leah to count. “Check her head, my lady. Did she strike it?”

Marais leaned over to gently lift Olyme’s head into her lap. She drew her fingers over the woman’s scalp and through her hair, parting it to view down to the scalp. Leah took a moment to briefly study the queen-consort through her curtain of dark hair, wrinkles forming in the corners of her lips and eyes, the way her fingers shook as she combed them through her lover’s hair.

“I don’t think so,” Marais said eventually.

“Call a servant to rekindle the fire.” Leah began to draw the blankets away from Olyme’s body, now shivering with the cold sweat. “She has a fever.”

The woman rose to one knee and slid an arm beneath Olyme’s shoulders, the other beneath her thighs, and with a small grunt hefted the queen off the ground and into her embrace. Marais shoved the leftover blankets aside to create a space for Leah to

lower Olyme. Once the Queen was back on the bed, Marais wet a small towel from a bowl of water on the bedside table and slipped between them to clean off Olyme's face.

Pain flourished deep in the center of Leah's chest. It hurt to see her, this once strong woman so weak and feeble. She knew what it felt like. Leah had begged Olyme to reach out to other physicians, seek council from others outside the protected circle of royal healers. The seizures were becoming more and more frequent. This was the third time in less than a month that Leah had found herself in the royal bedchamber in the night, coaxing Olyme from phantom hysteria or picking her limp body off the floor. The illness disappeared as quickly as it appeared, leaving no outward trace of whatever malignancy existed within. While she was left weak and nauseous after every episode, with pounding headaches and cold sweats, Olyme appeared no different than if she had a cold or stomach-sickness. Even the smallest magicks belonging to the new gods the people of Cor Izaias and the royal physicians worshipped could find no particular cause for Olyme's seizures and progressive weakness. She was constantly cold, but frequently was wracked with a tremendous fever, so strong she often grew delirious. She had trouble remembering planned conferences and people. Sometimes her limbs shook, at times so strongly she could not even hold her own teacup. And the seizures.

Every day she seemed worse.

Leah met the queen-consort's eyes, and the other woman quickly glanced away. They would be unable to hide their monarch's failing health for much longer. Marais might wish to pretend they could keep everything locked in their tower, safe from the eyes of the kompline or other noble families, but Leah had seen the sun set bloody on one

age. It was her job to make sure that never happened again. The Hethleines were to be protected at all cost.

“Can you truly do *nothing*?” the other woman asked.

Leah sighed and stood back against the far bedpost, her face a tight mask of conflicting emotions. “I’m not a miracle worker,” she answered eventually, but frustration welled inside her. “You know I am not a healer. I never have been.”

Leah was no help in this regard. Even at the height of her power, back when she could tear sky from earth and sack cities with her flames, she was a destroyer. Healing had been Arazumin’s power. Where she was war and death and blight, he was gentleness and life and creation. She once told Arazumin he was the reason that the summer birds sang and the winter flowers bloomed. He’d certainly bloomed enough for her. Leah often felt hopelessly lost without him at her side. What good was her sword, her claws, her power to boil blood inside a body if she could not use any of it to save her bond, to save Olyme. Leah had dealt with sickness in her countless years, and death as well, but not normally at such a young age. Olyme was thirty-seven. She had her entire life ahead of her.

“What is the point of you, then?” asked Marais quietly. Grief choked her, nearly a physical thing caught up inside her throat. Leah could not blame her for her grief, for her anger. She felt it herself, deep in her gut. “If you are only a foreshadow of pain, what is the point of you? You are nothing but a reminder of death.”

“I would give my life to see her well again, Marais,” said Leah eventually.

“Could you?” Marais asked. “Could you truly give your life for hers?”

Across the chamber, a door opened. “Marais, leave her be,” came the deep, mortar-and-pestle voice of her husband, all quiet intensity.

In the shadow of the doorway, the third member of the royal triad, Cealan, leaned heavily against the door-jam, his left leg propped at an angle to alleviate the weight. *An old war wound*, he liked to joke, though everyone knew he’d broken his leg falling from a horse when he was a boy. His family was noble but remote, and a physician hadn’t been able to set his leg before it twisted on him. In the winter months, Olyme would wrap his knee in hot towels and rub ointment into the gnarled skin where the bone had poked through. He was closer Leah’s height, a bespectacled man, stockier in the face and around the middle than he had been in his youth when he’d accepted Olyme’s and Marais’s proposal for marriage. His neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard covered the lower half of his face and neck and framed his thinly pursed lips.

“Pestering Leah about things she has no control over will not help Olyme,” Cealan continued, limping just inside the room. He moved with the gait of a man familiar with pain but accustomed to suffering. Quietly, he approached Marais from her other side as one would an angry cat, bracing himself against the wall and gently sliding the burning lamp further away from his nightshirt. He perched himself behind on the bedside table and laid his hand along the slender curve of Marais’s neck. “That damned woman,” he said under his breath. “She’ll be her own undoing. We should have never let it get this far.”

Marais pressed her lips into a thin line. “And what should we do, old man?”

Leah closed her eyes and pressed the left side of her face against the cool wooden bedpost, willing the throbbing behind her eye to fade. While Olyme’s seizures did not directly trigger pain within her body, they were still physically taxing and the more they

occurred, the more Leah found herself affected. The first seizure had only triggered a minor headache that faded in the hour, but with their increase in frequency, they seemed to have lasting effects. Her knees still felt weak, as if she stood in quicksand, unable to fully find her footing. Nausea roiled in her stomach, though she had nothing left inside of her to let go. In the heat of the bedchamber, Marais's silence was a physical thing, a coiling snake. Even after knowing her a dozen or more years, Leah still found herself amazed that an ordinary human woman could have such a strong physical presence.

Sweat dripped down Leah's spine and gathered in the fabric of her nightshirt at her lower back, sticky and wet. She needed to shower. She needed to eat. She needed to escape this room that already had begun to smell like death and grief and anger.

"I've sent for the physician," said Caelan eventually, when neither woman seemed eager to respond to him. They had a handful of royal physicians that were sworn to utmost secrecy, normally guaranteed through a mixture of coin, bred loyalty, and Leah's threatening smile. "But Olyme is not improving. We need to discuss what happens when she never does. We cannot go on pretending like this isn't happening."

Marais made a grand gesture with her hands in frustration. "What do you expect us to do, Caelan? Tell her to step down? To let outsiders experiment on her body?"

"I never said that," said Caelan.

"Well you haven't said much."

"We should attempt to wake her," muttered Leah lowly. "She'll never forgive us if we talk over her. She should make her own decisions before she's robbed of her mind as well."

The room was quiet for a moment more, dwelling in the implications of what the Queen would do to their decision-making. While smart and logical, Olyme had a bullheaded, stubborn streak. She would never forgive them for talking over her, even if she were ill.

“We need to bring the children back,” Caelan said eventually, quietly, as if he knew what sort of fury his words would draw. “They need to prepare. Elianna especially.”

“They are children,” Marais insisted angrily. “They should have no part of this.”

“And so they should never see their mother again?” Caelan barely glanced her direction. His eyes were focused on Olyme on the bed. “They should never have the opportunity to say goodbye?” Marais’s lips twisted in a scowl.

“Elianna will be queen soon enough,” Caelan continued. “She will be bonded. We’ve known this since the day she was born, since we brought her into this world. She needs to understand. We can’t do that when she’s lost in grief. Or anger.” He turned his head just slightly toward her, a look akin to pity on his grizzled face.

Leah felt a knot form in the pit of her stomach at the mention of the crown princess and she closed her eyes to avoid the king-consort’s gaze. Elianna was a willful, bull-headed child, just like her mother. She did not care for many people. Quite like Marais, Leah thought without real bitterness. But the princess did not like Leah at all, and it worried the woman.

Marais argued quietly, “As our daughter, should we not spare her grief when we can?”

“Not if it means that she suffers in the long run. Are you so selfish that you would deprive her this?”

“I care about her,” snapped Marais.

“By the gods, are you still children yourselves?” snapped Leah. Her voice crackled loudly in the room and Olyme, in the bed, groaned and shifted. Leah’s eyes opened and for a moment, they glowed pale ruby in the low light of the lamp. She lowered her voice when she continued, “Do you want me to help or do you want me to play the part of a simpering servant girl? I cannot do both. I am the one charged with the protection of the royal line. In the end, Olyme will need us all. The children will need us all.”

“And what do you expect us to do?” asked Marais, voice broken. “It seems so hopeless.”

Though still frustrated with him, she instinctively leaned into Cealan’s chest now, her forehead nestled in the hollow between his neck and collarbone. Cealan smoothed a dark hand up and down her back, drawing circles with his fingers. The two of them together looked small and displaced without Olyme’s bold, slight figure between them, bolstering them. Leah wondered if this was how she looked during moments of indecision without Arazumin next to her.

“You make her comfortable,” said Leah. “You soothe her and listen to her and love her, and you make her as comfortable as possible.”

“And what will you do, Leah?”

“I’ll do what I’ve always done,” Leah quietly said. “That hasn’t changed.”

A knock sounded, alerting them that the physician Caelan had called for was there.

Leah pushed away from the bed and swept out of the bedchamber to let them inside, closing the door behind her. Behind the door, she heard Marais angrily cry, “This is such shit! Everything’s useless.” Leah bit her tongue as she let the physician, a short and frail-looking man in his twilight years, into the royal chambers and instructed him towards the bedchamber where his Queen and her consorts waited. Quietly, without a word, Leah excused herself into the darkness of the castle corridor.

#

Frustration blossomed during the walk back to her chamber, blanketed by the darkness of the corridor and the silence that followed. *Everything’s hopeless*, Marais’s words echoed in her mind. *She’s useless*, Leah heard instead.

It certainly felt the way, even though she knew she should not.

Leah took the long way back to her room, pacing down dark corridors lost in her thoughts, knowing that she would be unable to sleep again. Amurnest Castle at night was a strange, unusually quiet place. During the day it bustled with members of the royal court and those that attended them, but most of those individuals had homes and their own households to attend. Few lingered overnight, especially when the castle was in such close proximity to the Treetop district, where most of the noble families kept house. Once the sky darkened, the castle became vastly more intimate, as if quietly embracing those who were allowed to remain past the setting of the sun. Leah felt comforted in the silence, in the darkness that surrounded her like a comforting blanket. Every dark room of

the castle, every cobwebbed corner and every carefully laid stone held a firm grip on the woman's heart.

Like she did many times when she couldn't sleep, Leah quickly found herself led to what she liked to call the hall of memories. Olyme frequently mocked her for her melancholic nostalgia the hallway brought out in her. The corridor was located in the heart of the castle, easily accessible and dozens of different corridors spoked out from this central path. It was filled with paintings of the Hethleine monarchs, all the queens of old. Every time a queen passed away, her painted image was added to the hall of memories so that those down the line could remember where they came from.

Leah paused in front of the first painting, craning her neck back to peer up at the canvas, which stretched nearly twice her own height up the wall. It was oldest painting on record post-war, but not the oldest Hethleine ruler by far—those extended long before conflict had decimated Pelvyr. The queen in the image was pale and dark-haired, with so many curls around her head that her face looked tiny by comparison. She held herself straight-backed and her lip curled just slightly on the left side of her mouth like a snarl. Behind her in the painting stood her husband, with his hands folded and his head bowed. Beside him and just slightly behind were her two daughters and their nursemaid, a young woman with short, mousy-brown hair and unassuming green eyes. Styllea was the first queen after the Crucible Wars, and she had ruled for a grand total of three years, before some upstart faction from Neikswood decided they wanted a chance at the land in the Kezraca region. This was long before Kezraca had even a name to call itself, when it was just some warring countryside without real leadership or guidance, before it had the great wall that now surrounded the region for protection.

Leah stared at the young woman with unassuming eyes in the painting. It felt so strange to see herself from the outside, even if she did not look the same.

She glanced to the next painting, which prominently featured the youngest of the two daughters from the first painting. In the background once again, there was the woman with the unassuming eyes, but this time she was blonde, and tall, and thick. Instead of quiet passivity, she bore an open smirk, clad in thick leather armor and carried a lance.

Leah was in every painting, never in the foreground, that was not her place. The paintings were of the ruling queen, the Hethleine monarch, but behind them was always Leah. She was the silent glue that held together the empire, an ever-changing figure that stood behind her queen and made sure that nothing happened to her. Or at least, she tried to. The priestess, Maurin, who created the bond intended for it to be a blessing, not a curse. In her last moments, she thought that by bonding the monarch and goddess they worshipped, she could save her land and people. Forge a protective failsafe between postulant and divinity that would ensure the noble line would never fall. It worked, sort of. The bond created a mental connection between Leah and her queen, one that allowed Leah hypersensitivity to the needs of the monarch. It was useful, but not without its downsides. Like the mimickry that allowed Leah to feel when Olyme suffered her seizures. While she felt what Olyme experienced without suffering any of the physical pain, repeated exposure still taxed her own physical form. Leah could have perhaps found a way, a loophole in the magicks if she studied it long enough, but it was exceedingly useful over the years. Not only did she know the minute that a queen was ill, but she could feel when overwhelming fear or anxiety held a woman in its grip, she could feel the

pangs of child labor before a woman even realized that the babe was coming, and she could tell when death loomed on the horizon.

Olyme did not have much time left.

Few over the years had ever guessed that the guiding hand behind the queens was that of an ancient goddess. Those that did were sworn to secrecy. Some died because of that knowledge. But most cared too much about the kingdom to betray their queen's trust.

Leah paced the hallway, staring into the eyes of her previous lives, saw the countless faces of the queens who she had served, cared for, and loved. She looked different for every bond, became whatever they needed her to be. Sometimes she was a stalwart champion, fierce in battle and with magic bursting from deep inside, someone that made them feel safe and protected. Sometimes she was a confidant, a private companion, someone they knew they never needed to hide things from, who always upheld their best interest first. Sometimes she was an advisor, mother, a sister; she was always the voice in the back of their head. Leah thought of the way she appeared now, quietly unassuming as always, shaggy dark curls and a lean, trim figure that hinted at the muscle she hid beneath her tunics and armor. Olyme had needed a friend. The woman was an only child who grew up with the weight of the Hethleine empire on her back. For her, Leah became exactly what she needed. Leah could never have predicted that that Olyme would need anything else of her, anything past friend or occasional bodyguard. It was a stake in her heart, knowing that she failed in keeping Olyme safe, even from her own body.

Leah stood at the end of the hallway, staring at the faces in the paintings, all the women she had been charged to protect and had to eventually let slip away. No matter

how much she loved them, how fiercely she tried to protect them, in the end they were mortal.

And they died just the same.

Chapter Two

Dawn lingered at the edge of the horizon when Leah finally made her way back to her bedchamber, the sky beginning to lighten with a new day. Yokke's nest in the corner of the room was conspicuously empty, and she did not know if he'd left because he knew she needed space or because he did not want to deal with her in this mood.

She stripped her soaked nightclothes and discarded them for washing, then stood naked in front of the painted mural on her wall. Leah found she did this frequently. The image was painted directly onto the wall, unable to be removed without significant effort, so that she could always remember to be stronger than she had been. She palmed the images of the winged serpents, one crimson and spewing flames, one blue and erupting from a broken crevasse in the earth. She traced the feathered wing of the blue serpent, almost petting the stone wall. Across from the serpents, the horned-demon Ipyer loomed dark and fiery. The serpents looked so small, so weakly beautiful compared to the vengeance of the black demon.

Arazumin, she thought, reaching out from the center of herself, drawing weakly on the magic that remained in this form. Her body was weakening in a way she'd experienced only once or twice. It was preparing for the next shift in the bond, Olyme's

frailty seeping through the bond like poison, the bond recognizing that she could do nothing but wait.

Leah felt herself stretch into nothing, into an obscure void where little existed. She knew intrinsically that he was not dead, but she had never been able to find him. His presence seemed to wink in and out of existence, and at times, she wondered if he existed only on the spiritual plane, a place she had never gone physically, had only mentally inhabited once or twice. Its pull was too strong to avoid for long and staying there potentially meant being stuck there. If Arazumin was there, then he was most definitely stuck. Centuries had passed, there was no way that she could extract him. But other times she could not feel him at all, and it felt as though he were truly gone. The times when she felt other god's presence the strongest was in the fog between sleep and consciousness. Sometimes he seemed so close she could reach out and touch him, embrace him once more. His whispers were in the ancient tongue, a language she spoke only with herself, for none remembered now. His words were normally too quiet to understand.

Where are you? she thought to herself and touched the figure in the painting.

Leah felt claustrophobic in her chamber, as though the walls were slowly enclosing on her. She could not stay in this room. She bathed in the cold water left by a servant from the day before, trying to rid herself of the fear that seemed to cloy at her skin.

She dressed in a mix of casual clothes and day to day armor, a dark undershirt and breeches, both made of breathable, but sturdy cloth. Over her undershirt, she wore a thick leather sleeveless jerkin, reinforced with light chainmail over the locations of vital organs and a high, thick collar that covered most of her neck. Her shoes were hard-worked

strappy leather, thick-heeled, with space inside for a hidden dagger. After she affixed a set of golden vambraces on her forearms, she grabbed her longsword from where it rested on the footboard of her bed, and stormed from the room with more purpose than she felt in her heart.

#

The turrets of Amurnest Castle were among highest in all of Cor Izaias, second only to the castle of Maurinest, where the council and religious heads met, just on the other dividing branches of the Mazegh river. The castle existed mostly in the skies, twisting upwards in half a dozen spires, its grounds unfurling like the branches of a tree. The Kypper Bridge connected the two castles over the river, creating a unique system for allowing nobles, councilmen, and royalty to pass between the two castles without ever having to set foot on the ground below. The bridge had been outfitted with several guard stations and lookout posts along both sides, where the personal police guard of the Hethleines—whom outsiders called the Unkindreds—could watch over not just the two castles, but the river and the city below.

In one of the tallest lookout points, accessible from the bridge below by only a small ladder, Leah lazed broodily, as she had for the past few hours, head braced against the side of a small window so that she could look out over the city she'd sworn to protect. The lookout nest was so high, it allowed her to see all the way back to the third district at the far end of the city with her advanced vision, giving her a bird's eye view of the entirety of Cor Izaias. In order to support its height, the nest was small, allowing for only a single adult, or two very small children, to perch inside.

Leah knew that she would be unbothered there and she spent the rest of the dawn waiting for the sun to rise and wash the previous night from her skin.

Cor Izaias sprawled outwards to the west of the castles, nestled in the space between the diving Mazegh branches. Other than the royal and parliamentary castles, the capital consisted of three districts: Treetop, Hollow Hall, and Rootstown. Treetop was closest to the castle, colorful and vibrant; it was where most of the cities noble families and merchants set up. Centuries before, the citizens of Cor Izaias built a man-made fjord between the north and south branches of the Mazegh, effectively sealing Treetop District from the other two, creating a small bubble of protection. Anyone that wanted to attack the richest portion of the population would have to come by boat, and as a capital built on a river, they were more than prepared with one of the fiercest navies in all of Pelvyr.

Below her on the bridge loitered a handful of soldiers, talking and relaxing on the stone benches. Perhaps a few carried daggers or small blades, but they were without swords or spears. Leah, who rarely ever left her bedchamber without her blade, felt a cold chill of fear slip down her spine at the thought of how relaxed and unprepared the people in the capital had become.

While it had been nearly a millennium since she and her brother had fought the boar god Ipeyr—though they did manage to thwart his attempted takeover, they were still ruthlessly defeated and cast down from their heavens—and war had not reached the borders of Kezraca for centuries, it was still all too possible.

It was part of why Marais's words that morning bothered her more than she cared to admit. For someone who once had the power to topple mountains, create vast deserts, and level cities with her flames, the fact that she could do nothing but sit and wait while

someone she cared for withered away left a hollow and sickly feeling in the pit of her stomach. Not for the first time, she wished that Arazumin was there, not just for comfort, but for his mystical, healing touch. If there was anyone in the world who could heal Olyme, it was her lover.

She was torn from her musings by the raucous call of crows that echoed around her for a moment as a flock of the birds passed, dark twisting shapes against the pretty blue sky. She listened to their words; the language of crows was a simple but incredibly specific one, created from needs of food and fear, and as such, they spoke only in two tones: hunter and hunted.

The Hethleines' family symbol was a falcon—specifically a black falcon set against a fiery, ruby sun—but all sorts birds made the valley at the heart of the Kezraca city-state their home. In the ancient days, Leah assumed they flocked to Arazumin, with his kind heart and gentle touch. But they seemed drawn to her in their own way, perhaps, more cautiously. Birds and animals were among those who could more easily see the godhood inside her, though it burned lower and lower with every passing century and every passing bonded. She feared that one day it would burn so low that even if she managed to find Arazumin, he would no longer be able to recognize her as his twin.

When they had fallen, they had been split, the last powerful push of Ipeyr's dying postulents directed towards keeping the twin gods apart. It was only through the luck and power of a single priestess, a young devotee to Inilhieme, that Leah had managed to remain inside the borders of Kezraca. That priestess, one of the original members of the small Hethleine noble house, bound the goddess to the blood of the Hethleine line. Maurin gave her life so that there was a chance her line might continue.

Few remembered that priestesses name. Leah named Maurinest Castle after her.

In the wake of the Crucible Wars, most religions disbanded for fear of retribution. The war that had ravaged the country of Pelvyr was not a war of the people, but a war of heavens. The gods that the people had worshipped not only had turned on each other, destroying the landscape and cities, but had abandoned their people to live in a world without them. Some still worshipped. Other gods had risen to take the place of Inilhieme and Arazumin and Ipeyr, but none would ever be as strong, as forged from sky and fire, earth and sea, and blood.

By true dawn, word had leaked of the private gathering of physicians in royal chambers during the early hours of the morning, and the castle was in discreet uproar. Servants and noble men and ladies alike whispered quietly that Leah had been summoned in the pre-morning to the royal bedchamber, that the king-consort had sent for the physician, and that the queen and her lovers had yet to exit their personal tower.

From her spot above the passing individuals on the bridge, she could trace the discussions that were had, her hearing able to pick up even the most under-breath whisper from nearly a league away. It was gossip borne of worry and concern, not ill-will, Leah thankfully observed, one well-trained ear to the metaphorical ground. The Hethleines had ruled well the walled city of Kezraca and its capital, Cor Izaias, since the dark days after the Ipeyr rebellion and the Crucible Wars. Few were eager to see the bloodline diminish or fail. Considering the problems outside the walls of the city limits—the rampant slave trade and moral atrocities in Cheris or the monsoons that wrecked Hidan and ruined crops every winter—the people inside Kezraca, the walled city-state, were relatively happy and content with their monarchs.

Leah wondered if the people would stay so happy when they discovered that Olyme had kept her sickness hidden for so long, when they realized that their next monarch would be a child queen. Leah, in some new physical appearance, would be there to advise and protect as she always had, hovering the background and only emerging when necessary. Marais and Caelan would act as king and queen regent until Elianna reached her fifteenth year and could fully assume the full role of queen and take up the mantle that her mother left behind. Leah lost herself in her thoughts, turning them over and over like the pommel of a blade in her palm, until a knocking came from beneath her on the bridge.

Chapter Three

Leah jolted from her thoughts at the hard, rapid slam of metal on stone from beneath her. Clearly, there would be no more peace for her this afternoon.

“Oh, m'lady, I believe someone misses you,” a voice called up through the small passageway into the lookout nest. “Won't you come down from your tower?”

The coaxing was followed by the irritated chuckle of Leah's pet.

Kehkehkehkehkeh.

Caelan, Leah realized, somewhat in irritation and somewhat in passive acceptance. She should have known that he would not allow to her wallow for so long, would not let her to her own quiet solitude. Slowly, the woman gathered her things and made her way down the ladder. The wind had picked up since she'd climbed into the nest, and she felt it buffet her left and right. The fabric of her tunic flapped noisily in the breeze, and the air smelled strongly of ozone and rain. Kezraca in summer was a mess of weather, either blisteringly hot and dry or cloyingly humid and stormy. It seemed this summer they were in for the latter. She would need to pay close attention to the potential flooding hazards. They had dammed in the Mazegh in several places, but it still tended to overflow when heavy rains came, flooding the lower levels of the city and frustrating

royals, merchants, and traveling traders. It was something that the queens wished to fix, but all things considered, had little time when it did not threaten lives.

When Leah's feet settled on solid stone again, she turned to face the king-consort, now dressed officially in the black and ruby colors of the Hethleines, a thick ruby tunic with gold accents and dark breeches. He wore a simple thin gold chain around his neck, and two thick wedding bands on either hand—right for Olyme and left for Marais. He listed to one side slightly, awkwardly propped with his raven-headed cane he used to walk, not just because of his injury, but because of the extra weight he carried. On his shoulder, looking every bit the haughty hunting falcon, loomed Yokke, Leah's pride and joy, and sometimes frustration.

Though she and Arazumin had created several gods and goddesses during their time in power—children, if one could call them that, though they had been created more through magic and less through traditional birth—the falcon that followed Leah was perhaps her most perfect creation. With a chest the size of a large melon and a wingspan of nearly four feet, Yokke had been modeled after several different types of falcon from the Kezraca valley, molded to possess the best features of some of the most terrifyingly efficient predators. His eyes were equal in size to that of large-breed dogs, his beak a wicked orange and black curve that could tear through flesh and bone, and his talons were the size of a small child's hand.

Leah loved him dearly.

He was the last piece she had of Arazumin, who had given her the heart of his most beloved stag to fill the giant, cavernous chest. That heart swelled inside Yokke the same way that her love for Arazumin filled her, buoying her, and at times, she felt as

though only Yokke could truly understand her. He was the last connection that she had with her previous life, the last connection to her lover. The falcon practically vibrated with magic, and he made both Leah and Cealan look small and fragile in comparison.

“Did you miss me, Yokke?” she asked, rolling her shoulder slightly in invitation.

The falcon ruffled his feathers and made his usual, eerie chuckling sound, tilting his head at her in a way that reminded her far too much of her lover. Cealan bent, dropping his shoulder so that it would line up with hers, to allow the bird to carefully navigate the transfer. Yokke, careful not to let his claws tear through fabric or skin, walked from the king-consort’s shoulder to Leah’s. He pressed his beak against her head, drawing his beak gently through her hair and clicking his beak, preening her briefly. She rubbed the back of her hand against his thick chest, letting herself find comfort in the warmth he exuded and the rapid, furious beat of his heart underneath her fingers.

Cealan looked at her pointedly. “Your absence has been astutely noted.”

“I don’t want to be the same room as Marais right now,” said Leah, walking to the edge of Kypper bridge. She crossed her arms and leaned against the high stone wall, peering out over the capital. “I’d be sorely tempted to have Yokke rip her face to shreds.”

The falcon chirruped quickly in succession and agreement, fixing his dark golden gaze upon the king-consort, as if to challenge him.

Leah smiled quietly to herself and drew a finger along the bridge between eye and beak. “No, you can’t eat her,” she joked. Cealan did not appear as amused.

“She has most certainly said worse to you,” he said eventually.

“It’s the truth of the matter,” said Leah quietly. “Marais is cruel for the sake of cruelty when she cannot handle herself. This time she was cruel for the sake of fact. I *am*

useless. In this form I have no ability to truly protect anyone.” She bit her lip and glanced down into the blackness of the Mazegh river below. Once, she could see straight to the bottom, some hundreds of feet deep. Now, her vision only allowed her half that depth. “Olyme’s bonding did not empower me. Honestly, I think I am weaker now than previous.”

“Has that happened before?”

Leah gave a half-hearted shrug. “In times of peace, occasionally. Peace was few and far between centuries ago. I become what the Queen require.”

Caelan paused. “And what did Olyme need?”

“Friendship,” said Leah. “She needed someone who was not interested in politics or the safety of a country. As much as I love Kezraca, I would raze it the same as Eddann if it required to keep her safe. My loyalty is to Olyme, and those that she cares for.”

“Perhaps, someday, the Hethleines won’t need the bond,” suggested Cealan.

Leah felt a shiver run through her. Some day.

“I don’t know where that leaves me, Cealan,” she admitted.

It was a fear she had only spoken of half a dozen times throughout her centuries of servitude to the royal family. What would happen if there was no bond? She truly had no idea, but she didn’t particularly wish to entertain that option. “I haven’t been without a blood-bond since before the war, before Maurin died to create this bond. Would I simply become human? Would I pass into the God-realm?” Leah shrugged and let herself find comfort in the gentle swipe of the falcon’s beak through her dark hair. “Or would I cease to exist? There’s too little magic left in me to know for certain. There’s a chance that I could simply fade into nothing. For the longest time, I fear that of Raz. We were without

our whispers for so long after the war. It took decades for me to be able to hear him again, and even now, I can hardly hear what he's saying. It's more feeling than actual words."

The king chuckled, and Leah felt her face flush angrily at his laughter. "I'm glad that my potential death amuses you."

"No, I was just curious. How is your brother-lover doing?"

It was Yokke who swiftly turned and snapped his beak at the king's flippant tongue, the sound coming from his mouth no longer a chuckle but a shriek.

"You are outside yourself," said Leah bluntly. "You know it's not the same. We were created from the same magic. It's not the same as flesh and blood siblings."

"I apologize," said Caelan quickly, retreating a step to put more space between himself and Leah. "I spoke out of turn. I meant only to inquire for your sake. Any distraction could potentially lead to devastation for us."

Yokke ruffled himself and settled heavy on her shoulder, but as he pressed his beak against her, he kept his one eye fixed on Caelan. Leah had always liked the king-consort. She liked him more than Marais, when the women had finally begun shopping around for a royal consort. He reminded her of the brotherly parts of Arazumin, which was perhaps why his jokes got under her skin so. Out of Olyme's spouses, he was the easier to be around, more laid back and able to see past his position.

"She's going to die," murmured Leah shortly. "It's been centuries since I lost a blood-bond this early." She turned her gaze to the bustling capital and port beneath them, fingers digging into the stone beneath her fingers. In the city below, tiny dark figures deaf

and blind to them on the bridge. “How much of that is my own fault? Is it my failing magic in this bond that has caused illness in Olyme?”

Cealan shook his hand and covered one of her pale hands with his dark one. “Oly’s illness has nothing to do with you. Don’t put that on yourself. She’d slap you if she could hear you right now.” He sighed low, shifting awkwardly on his twisted leg. “We’ll prepare. We’ve sent for Elianna. We’ll *talk* to the council. It’s high time they knew what was actually going on. We can’t hide it any longer.”

“Your daughter detests me,” said Leah. “I’ve never had a blood-bond hate me before.”

“My daughter detests most things.”

Leah turned to look at him, displeasure written across her face.

“There’s a first time for everything,” he said, spreading his hands before him in placation. “She’s a brat. You’ve got Marais to thank for that. But she can be taught, as Marais was before her. That woman, she can certainly act in public when it calls for it.” He reached to take her hand and soothe it between her own, before settling it in the crease of his arm. “We will deal with that when it comes to it. It will take nearly a fortnight for Elianna to return, if not longer, knowing my daughter. But for now, put it from your mind.”

Caelan spent the walk across the bridge catching her up on everything that she had missed after she had retreated to her room.

Fled was the word that Caelan had used. *Quickly*.

He was always so cheeky, even at the most inopportune situations.

“Nothing new to report,” the king-consort said, shaking his head. The physician had come to examine the high Queen but had found little they didn’t already know. “With the gil we pay those people, you’d think they’d have something new to say. But they can’t find a single reason for her illness. They treat her as if she were merely complaining of a few headaches.”

Leah brushed her chin with the hand that Caelan was not occupying. “They are just as at a loss as we are. These people love her, you know. They don’t wish to see her suffering. They just don’t know how to fix it. And no man or woman wants to approach their king and queen and tell them that they are useless.”

“They are useless,” muttered Caelan.

“They are *mortal*,” said Leah. “So, they have only mortal remedies. I fear Olyme’s illness might only be fixed by the god-touched and few of those exist in this age. Those who haven’t passed into the God-realm have hidden themselves from view. It would take ages to search them out. Faith has fallen out of favor on this side of the world. A decade ago, it was still permissive to worship as you wished in Ingenra or Chervis, but now it’s been outlawed outright. Tascalos has less regulations. It makes sense that they would cross Eddann to avoid potential persecution.”

“Tascalos has less laws in general,” muttered Caelan. “Anything passes there it seems.”

“Which makes it all the more acceptable for those not wishing to be found,” said Leah shortly. “Anyway, it wouldn’t matter. We serve at Oly’s command.”

Olyme had sworn the three of them, her closest confidantes, to secrecy. It was why the children were sent away, why there were no more invitations for children to be

present at gatherings. Most of the royals, Leah knew, assumed Olyme did not care for her children, and had sent them away as soon as she could. None of them knew she'd done it against any of their wills as soon as the twins were permissible for travel, as a request to keep her children from seeing her illness. Olyme also did not want to reach outside the realm for help. They had already betrayed her with their invitation to the royal physicians without her consent. Leah could only imagine how irritated her queen was with them, how angry she was to know that she had been unable to make an invested decision.

“Could it be because of the bond?” Caelan asked quietly, murmuring straight into her ear so that his words would be undetected.

Leah shook her head. “It has never been the cause of sickness before. I cannot see why it would suddenly become an issue now. The effects have always been one-sided. The queen cannot feel what I feel, only I for her. The bond was created so that I would always know if the queen was ill or in danger. And even so, those effects are only temporary.”

The bond was not just classified information. It was perhaps the Hethleine family's most guarded secret. There was a reason that Leah changed with each new bonding, appearing different so that her agelessness would not be noticed, her presence as untraceable as they could make it. The magic Maurin had woven into the bond created a layer of acceptance to this strange person standing at the new queen's back, but people still questioned her presence at times. Leah could hardly call herself a real goddess at the moment, but the city had flourished with the knowledge, power, and psychic abilities she retained. It was another reason that most of those who still possessed some level, whatever it was, of enlightenment left Pelvyr. Even in cities where religion was

permitted, those who were found in favor of a god still suffered certain stigma. If word got out to other kingdoms in Pelvyr that Kezraca was keeping a god-touched on retainer, especially one involved in the Crucible Wars, they could have a new war on their hands.

Silence and secrets thankfully grew easier with time.

As the centuries passed, those most affected by the war slowly died, and the effects of religious upheaval had faded. But zealotry had been practically unofficially outlawed in most cities, even if there was nothing written in stone. Cities moderated their own laws, and Cor Izaias had an open religion policy, but it had become relatively known that after the gods brought their pride and destruction down into the world of men, instead of in the skies or outerworlds where it belonged, religion was far less tolerated in the open as it had been before. It was a private matter, with small cults and temples hidden in the small corners of cities, never on main streets or too conspicuous. In Neikswood and Ingerna, open worship was practically a crime and in some cities like Cheris or Helia, religion was completely outlawed, with persecution a major cause of discord amongst their population, considering the rampant slavery they relied on for the majority of their workforce.

“Where are Marais and Olyme now?” asked Leah, as they passed the guards stationed near the public entrance to Maurinest.

The two of them would enter instead through a small side-door, the covered entrance to the castle that did not open into the main corridor, but exited them in a small sitting room, outfitted like a small sequester or library. Several thick carpets crisscrossed the floor, hiding a trap door. It was meant as an obvious distraction from the small portion of false wall next to a bookcase on the far end of the room. Rooms like this were

common in both Maurinest and Amurnest. Leah had personally seen that the architects of both castles had signed their names onto their contracts in blood. Oaths like that, despite the lack of organized, government-sanctioned religions, would still end in death should they choose to go back on their word. In all her years, Leah had never seen a being, god or man, escape the results of bloodmagic. It was something even she avoided, even at her strongest.

The only bloodmagic she'd ever willingly entered was Maruin's bond, sealing her fate to that of the Hethleines.

The guards bowed to their king-consort and Leah—their captain—who appeared to be escorting the king. Leah was proud to note that while their tunics and slacks were the hot-weather, lightly-padded uniform, all six guards wore heavy vambraces and vests with chainmail woven into the fabric to cover their throats, chest, and bellies. With summer came a high volume of traveling merchants and dignitaries. There was no war now, but it never hurt to be too careful.

"They're in the court now," he told her, using their casual terminology for the throne room in the adjoining castle, as they crossed the rest of the way over the Kypper. He'd refused to let go of her arm, casually petting at her forearm.

"I'm not a dog," she hissed, gray eyes flashing.

When he simply smiled at her, she bared her teeth in mock snarl. A small flood of magic created the illusion of fangs.

"I want to warn you," he said quickly, before Leah could open the door to the throne room, and he gently took her by the elbow. Caelan looked slightly apologetic. "Olyme is not happy I sent for the children before discussing with it her."

“That was quick,” said Leah. “And how did they take that?”

“Not well,” said Caelan shortly. “But I wanted you to be prepared. I know Elianna is troublesome, but she’s a good girl. She’ll do her duty.”

“Sometimes,” Leah sighed as tugged the thick door to Maurinest castle open, “I wish they didn’t have to.”

They entered quietly from the servant’s entrance near the front to attempt from distracting whatever business Olyme was currently involved in at the moment. They also avoided the annoying presentment announcement from the court herald.

The throne room was densely populated, but not overly crowded. Nobles and merchants lingered in groups of seven or eight, dispersed over the enormity of the room with plenty of personal space between them, quietly conversing in low tones so as to still to hear the exchanges between the queens and the people who approached to discuss problems or business, or both. Two or three times a week, the royal trio would gather in the great throne room of Maurinest Castle for public appearances. While Amurnest and Maurinest castles could technically be considered one giant complex, with the Kypper Bridge as a great causeway connecting the two structures, the people of Cor Izaias recognized them as separate entities.

Amurnest, with its winding corridors that seemed maze-like and pressed inward, confusing and personal, was a home and residence for the royal family and retinue. Maurinest was the heart of the political and loose religious hub of the city. True business was not to take place within the walls of Amurnest. While small meetings and gatherings could be held there at convenience to the royal family, especially with exceptions made for pregnancies, sickness, age, or weather, major events and policy issues were to be dealt

with in Maurinest. The Kompline council met within special chambers, off-limits to those outside the precious inner circle of religious figures, political heads, and the Hethleines. There were even apartments made for short-term residence for foreign dignitaries, military officials, and even the council, when they were needed short-notice.

It was considered practical, considering how many people went in and out of Maurinest on business or trade any given day, that the royal family's private residence would be kept separate and off-limits to most travelling through.

Amurnest was *private*. Leah had made sure of it.

The throne room was, frankly, relatively controlled in terms of demonstration. It was built for purpose and not decoration, unlike many of the other, more elaborate locations in the castle. The large, high-domed room was comprised of alabaster-white walls with obsidian and ruby accents, mostly unadorned except for the occasional floor-to-ceiling window or hanging ruby/gold tapestry. The ceiling was painted with murals of the history of Cor Izaias: Queens and their king-consorts meeting with dignitaries from Kaaaleth, Hidan, and Jempu, the cities closest and held in highest regard; the fjording of the Mazgeh; the rebuilding of the royal castle of Sakrinest, a small personal castle of the royal family used during pregnancy and late in life; birds of all sorts flying in the forests of Lakcris Forest. The room's most ostentatious adornment was the floor. The smoothed, limestone floor featured a scene of an obsidian black Hethleine falcon coupling with a ruby-throated sparrow, the sparrow's tail trailing behind it like a bride's train. The falcon was ringed with gold stone, the sparrow's eyes were brilliant blue with lapis.

As Caelan excused himself from her side, making his way toward the front of the throne room, Leah found her eyes drawn immediately to Olyme holding court at the front of the room.

The High Queen was clothed in a simple ruby gown with little elaboration, her silvery black hair pulled tightly at the back to the nape of her neck in a simple, twisted knot. She had a thick black cloak wrapped about her shoulders. Leah often worried that she could potentially have an attack in the middle of the throne room, for all her noblemen and women to see.

However, the woman seemed bright-eyed and slightly flushed, joking with a nobleman from Jempu and his retinue. Marais was dressed in similar fashion, a simple black and gold gown with few embellishments, but her multi-braided hair was folded and twisted into an extravagant ball piled on the top of her head, dotted with jewels and ribbon, like a coiled snake.

The front of the throne room was comprised of a raised dais and elevated receiving floor, a good two feet over the rest of the room, where three high-backed obsidian chairs sat. This was where the royal trio sat when they were seeing visitors, Olyme in the center and her two consorts to either side. Beneath them, on a lower dais, was a smaller obsidian chair and several low, cushioned divans, for the rest of the royal family. The dais was empty other than Olyme and Marais, who sat in the chair to her wife's right.

It seemed so strange to her eyes to see no children, hear no laughter. In ages past, there had always been children at court. Not just the royal line, but those who would eventually serve as little lords and ladies in waiting, the tiny little princess and prince

court that played and frolicked on the Kypper bridge and ran amok in the halls of Amurnest. There had been no children in court for nearly two years now, since Olyme's youngest children had been born, when her maladies first began to affect her. The excuse for the rest of the noble families had been that the twins were weak-willed and needed time before they were exposed to the rest of the general populace. As such, children were unofficially removed from this particular meeting place. Nobles were still allowed to bring their children to Maurinest, but a separate chamber was used to house them during their stay.

Caelan, Marais, and Leah often wondered originally if the pregnancy, and the birth of the twins, had someone triggered something dormant inside of Olyme, some hidden sickness. There was nothing to prove it, one way or another. That uncertainty was why Olyme and Caelan had stopped sharing a bed.

Observing as her blood-bond and Marais greeted their husband, Leah thought back to the days she had spent with Olyme as a child, how they had bonded even before the magick. Leah practically raised Olyme as a child, the way she had raised Olyme's mother and grandmother and great-grandmother, and all the other high queens since the Crucible Wars. Caelan had said that Elianna would soon be on her way back to court. Elianna was the first child that Leah had very little involvement with, and it worried her. The child had been five when she left, and now she was almost eight. She also seemed to *hate* Leah, though she had little reason to.

"We're pleased to announce," came Marais' voice, drawing Leah from her thoughts, "that the crown princess, and her siblings, will be arriving back at court shortly. The twins have recovered from their condition, as we expected they would with age, and

we are eager to invite all your children to rejoin us in the throne room, as they would have in ages past. Elianna will need a retinue, and we shall obviously discuss this with those of you with daughters of age, if you so desire that they adjourn from your side for a time, of course.”

Caelan sat down in the chair to Olyme’s left, took his wife’s hand, and smiled at the crowd, though his smile did not go higher. From her place in the back of the room, Leah met his eyes and then Olyme’s. Her queen met her eyes and twisted her lips in a small grimace. She tilted her head and glanced away. Leah silently bowed her head and then swiftly left room.

Part Two – Dead Things and the Invisible Girl

10,000 Nights Ago

Faith comes home from her grandfather's funeral angry and hysterical, helps herself to a generous three-finger pour of Grey Goose, and breaks a set of her mother's expensive china plates. Her mother, though solemn-faced and bent-headed throughout the ceremony, went straight from the cemetery back to work, because the restaurant doesn't wait around for dead in-laws. She wants to cry and scream, break everything and anything she can grip between her fingers. She wishes her mom was home, that she had an audience, because that would make her rage so much easier, feel more fitting. Instead, she must fester in silence—a wound no sleep could soothe, no shower could clean, no alcohol could disinfect. She's on her fourth glass of vodka when her two best friends knock at the door.

It's hard to believe that there was a once a time when they were inseparable, that before the rest, it was just the three of them against everyone else.

Diana's still in her mourning clothes from the funeral and Zeke's in his work rags from the garage. They wear such serious expressions on their faces, it causes Faith to

burst out in laughter. When her two friends exchange a concerned look, she clutches at the stitch in her side and tries to muffle the sound with her wrist. It doesn't stop. It just keeps coming—up and up and up, flowing out of her throat as smoothly as the vodka went down. Before she knows it, she's crying and on her knees.

Diana gently kneels, always so careful of her clothes, and cradles the girl's face gently against her stomach. She makes quiet shushing noises at her while she threads her fingers delicately through her dark hair, as if she can pet her into solace.

Faith clings to Diana, knuckles white, as her body shakes and shivers, sobs bubbling out uncontrollably. Still she feels disconnected, as though her body is no longer hers, that the grief has taken home and created a new person in the wake of this tremendous loss. If it didn't hurt so much, she'd probably be angry with herself, making such a scene.

When she calms, when Zeke is able to help her to her feet, they end up on the pull-out couch in her basement: Zeke in the middle, Faith and Diana surrounding him like a set of closed parenthesis, like they used to do when they were little kids and it was still okay for girls to have boys over for a slumber party. With the lights turned off, they pull the blanket up over their heads, as though the covers could keep out all the bad in the world. She and Diana hold each other by the wrist, each with a leg tossed over Zeke's, their heads pillowed on either side of his chest. He pets their hair as he's been taught to comfort.

Zeke doesn't talk about his girlfriend and what she means for him, how he may follow her out of their small Pennsylvania town and into the lights of NYC. Diana doesn't bring up her sister's abortion, won't say that the woman paces the hallway late at

night like a phantom. Faith doesn't mention her ex, how she's hurting because he wasn't the one that got away (he was the one she never had to begin with).

Instead, Diana asks her if she's planning to go Christmas tree hunting with them come December, because Faith could always find the tree that was just the perfect fit, with the thickest branches and the sweetest smell of sap.

Faith jokes about the time she tricked Zeke into becoming her first kiss, down at the playground when they were twelve, and then she pushed him into a puddle because he told her she had cooties.

Zeke recalls when he helped Faith relocate a baby bird back into its nest before it could die, and then she cried when the baby birds grew up and flew away. He asks Diana if she remembers their first dance, when his palms were sweating so much, her hand slipped out of his when he went to help her up and she broke a heel in the middle of the makeshift gymnasium dance floor. He keeps talking until the girls' eyes shut and their fingers twitch lightly against his chest, their warm, combined breaths soaking into his core. He kisses the tops of their heads and wraps his arms around their shoulders, hunkered down like he's comfortable on the pull-out couch in Faith's basement they outgrew before they all hit puberty.

They sleep together like they used to, before merely sleeping had some ulterior motive, and deal with whatever is left of their ghosts in the morning.

No Chaser

We went out on a date the night before it happened.

I wore a dress with two layers of spandex underneath, to hold everything in where I wanted it. My left bra strap kept slipping down my shoulder. He wore dark-wash jeans and a charcoal-colored button up that made his green eyes look gray.

He smelled like stale cigarette smoke and some cologne I think I recognized from Bath & Body Works, something that had a name like *Heat* or *Sandalwood and Steel*.

He took me to a Mexican restaurant, some place with cartoon jalapeños and smiling sombreros painted on the walls; that played mariachi and Spanish pop music over the crackling speakers, so broken I couldn't understand a word, even if I spoke Spanish. I hate Mexican food, but normally I can pick around the beans and chili enough to look as though I'm enjoying it. I was more interested in the tequila on tap.

I got a seared tuna salad, no beans, no corn, no sour cream, no guacamole, no chili lime dressing. He joked I'd be a cheap date.

We talked for three hours. I drank three different kinds of tequila.

When he dropped me off at my apartment, he pressed me up against the side of his red Toyota and kissed me, fingertips lightly curled against the side of my neck and into my hair. He tasted like refried beans and corn chips, salt in the corner of his lip and lime on the roof of his mouth. I spent an hour just kissing him in my front yard, my fingers tangled in his dark curly hair while his hands clung hopelessly to my hip bones, as though terrified to tread higher. When I finally pulled my face away, he let go like I burned him, face flushed either from the kiss or embarrassment. I'd never made a boy blush just from a kiss before.

I told him I'd call him.

When I went to sleep, it was with my nose pressed into the crease of my wrist, where his cologne rubbed into my skin to mix with leftover perfume. I slept in until noon. The smell of his cologne still lingered in the spaces between my fingers.

I woke up to the red flashing light on my phone, to four new messages and two voicemails. I slapped fingers into keys, squinty-eyed in the noon sunlight, pressed the receiver to my ear. There was a roar. The phone made a loud thud when I dropped it to the hardwood floor. My knees made a louder one.

I crawled hand over knee to the bathroom, puked into the toilet with my face straight in the bowl. There was vomit in my hair. It tasted like tequila.

I wondered what heroin tastes like when you choke on it.

The Festival Boy

I met him I was eight-years old.

It was one of those perfect summer days that occurred before the air got too hot and humid, when the nights still cooled into the fifties and a light jacket was needed once the sun went down. Before everyone sprayed themselves sticky with mosquito repellent, and the air filled with the scents of coconut sunscreen and the thick smoke of TIKI Torch oil. That night, the moon hung low in an awkward blob, too bulbous for a crescent and not quite full, but it was unearthly bright, even against the harsh, luminescent glare of the carnival lights.

It was the final night of the St. Constantine Festival, hosted by the local Catholic Church. St. Constantine was the kind of church that no longer had nuns but had its own bingo night. Though a highlight of early June in our town, just after schools let out for summer, it could hardly hold a candle to many of the big city summer fairs. But it was the first real event of summer. A safe environment when parents let their kids wander

without adult supervision, because people were *everywhere*, and because everyone knew everyone in our town. It was an excuse to eat greasy food, smoke a cigar with the guys, gossip at the lemonade stand, and gamble in the lopsided blue tent in the back lot.

My mother had dressed me in a floral print sundress and yelled when I forgot my cardigan in the van. She'd pulled my dark hair into a tight bun at the top of my head and added a floppy daisy hairpin – a hand-me-down from my sister – for the full effect.

She told my sister to hold my hand and not let go for any reason. More than occupied the sights and smells around me, the sweetly tart lemonade my father bought me, I took her hand gleefully. But somewhere between the Ferris wheel and the Chinese food stand, our fingers detached.

I can't recall if it was the flashing, multi-colored lights that drew me towards the makeshift road of carnival games or the rows upon rows of fuzzy stuffed animals. There was no keeping track of time in my young mind, and though I was a child alone, no one stopped to ask if I was lost. The game handlers glanced my way occasionally. Without any money, I did little to hold their attention. But their prizes held mine. Smiling frogs, floppy-eared puppies, dolphins swaying in the light summer breeze, and a line of splotchy ponies that my eyes frequently fluttered back towards. I stopped in front of a stall featuring a balloon game, absently sucking my lemonade as I stared.

“How much for a pony?”

The young man at my side was a stranger. He towered over me, but I felt unthreatened. He looked barely older than my 17-year old brother with his shaggy blond hair and scuffed sneakers. He smiled at me, and I couldn't help but smile back.

The handler took a drag on his cigarette and motioned toward the wall of toys.

“\$3 for 5 darts, \$5 for 7.”

The young man shook his head. “I didn’t ask for the stakes, just how much for a pony.”

“Four rounds of 7 darts,” said the handler eventually.

“Then I’d like 28 darts, please,” said the young man. He pulled a brown wallet from his pocket and slipped a twenty-dollar bill on to the stall’s tabletop. “So I can win this little lady a pony.”

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The police officer's name was Hank. He was forty-nine years old, balding, and had never wanted children. "Now, Jeremy, can you tell me what happened?"

Jeremy's elbows splayed further apart on the table, compensating for his heavy-hanging head in his hands. The hair on his arms prickled, though the room was not cold. In front of him, the police officer lounged casually in his metal chair, balanced on the back two legs. When he coughed, Jeremy looked up. A Styrofoam cup of hot chocolate steamed slightly a few inches from his left elbow.

"Don't I need a lawyer?" asked Jeremy, glancing around the room. There was no two-way mirror, no bloodstains on the walls, no torture devices. Just the single table they sat at, a single door, and a single window. There wasn't even anyone in the window. "Before I talk to you, don't I have to have a lawyer present? I've seen *Law and Order*. I'm 17. My parents are supposed to be here. Or my lawyer."

"Your parents are on their way," said Hank, glancing at his wristwatch. "We haven't charged you with anything. You're not under arrest. Kid, you're not in any trouble. Not yet. I just need you to tell me what exactly happened."

“I already told that other police officer!” Jeremy said anxiously, ignoring the hot chocolate and clasping his hands on the table close to his chest. “*He* knew what I was talking about. We were just out doing some geocaching and we found that – that *thing*.”

“What were you filming? At 2AM? What were you kids doing in those woods?”

Jeremy huffed. “I told you, I told the police officer we were geocaching! The filming is part of what we do.”

Hank rolled his eyes, sighing slightly. “Geocaching? Is that some new thing you kids are doing lately? What is it exactly?”

“Geocaching is like... It’s like a treasure hunt. Only the point of it isn’t to find buried treasure or whatever,” explained Jeremy breathlessly. His hands felt slick when he smoothed back his hair from his sweating forehead. His fingers trembled. “People hide things. They’re hidden all over the world. In trees or under bridges or in bushes. The idea is they’re *everywhere*. And when someone hides something, they name it and enter the coordinates into the geocaching website and then other people can find it.”

Hank nodded. “The... geocaching website?”

“Yeah, like we use the app...” Jeremy reached for his cell phone, forgetting they had confiscated it when he’d been brought into the station. “You took my phone, or I’d show you. But they’ve got an app. It uses your location and tells you all the different geocaches that are near your location. Normally it’s a lockbox or bottle or something you can shove stuff inside. And there’s always a log to sign and date that you found it and then you put it back for other people to find. Sometimes there are little things inside, a poker chip or a toy car or Pokémon card. Just something to show that you’ve been there.”

The front legs of Hank’s chair hit the ground with a little metal clink. “So that’s

why you film it.”

Jeremy exhaled loudly. “Yeah. We start filming when we get pretty close and then we film until we find it. We sign the cassette and leave it in the cache.”

“Start from the beginning,” asked Hank. “We’re going to record this conversation, but remember, you’re not being charged. Just...start from the beginning.”

#

At midnight the parking lot of the local McDonalds was empty except for Jeremy Kolchik’s red Ford Focus, a black mustang, and a battered station wagon. Stretched out low in his car, Scott Travis played with the dial that controlled his side mirror, twisting it back and forth as he waited for the store’s lights to go out. His girlfriend, Hanna Redmond filed her nails in irritated silence. Scott glanced at the clock on his dash.

“They’re late,” snapped Hanna finally, pointing over her shoulder at the still-lit building with her nail file.

Scott sighed and sunk lower in his seat. “It’s only twenty after. It takes time to close the store. Besides, where’s Jessica? The bitch is always late.”

“Jessica,” Hanna growled, “got dropped off before the inside closed. She’s been sitting in there the entire time. There was no way she was going to convince her stepmother to let her out this late. She told her she was meeting Robbie and me to study for a test, and then she was staying the night at my place. Which isn’t a lie.”

“Okay, okay. No need to shout.” Scott closed his eyes and tugged his hat down toward his nose, folding his arms over his chest and shoving his hands into his armpits.

A loud crack against his window made him jump. Hanna let out a shriek and grabbed his knee with her claws. Jeremy cackled and leaned against the mustang,

clutching at his waist. Behind him, Jessica pursed her lips at Scott, sucking suggestively on a cigarette as the smoke curled around her nose. Scott declawed Hanna from his kneecap and opened the door quick enough to smack Jeremy in the shin.

“Let’s get going,” snarled Scott, as he slid out of the mustang. “Let’s take your car, Jer. The ‘Stang is too small for all of us to fit.”

Still in the shadow of the mustang, Hanna made a face. “Not in the McFry mobile. It always smells like grease in there. No offense, Jeremy,” she added, slipping a tiny smile on her face at the end.

“None taken, Hanny,” said Jeremy, shrugging out of his yellow McDonalds shirt. He tossed the sweaty garment at her face, causing her to shriek again. “But my car is still the biggest. Suck it up and you can sit up front.”

Jessica stomped her cigarette on the ground, her phone making ghoulish shadows on her face. “Closest cache is off Four Mile, probably down in the ravine.” She offered Hanna her elbow as they made their way toward Jeremy’s Focus.

Scott made a noise in the back of his throat. “I thought we were going to do the old graveyard by Wendy’s tonight! We’ve been scouting it out for weeks.”

“We have do that one during the day, Scott,” argued Hanna, buckling herself into the front seat primly. “If anyone in the Wendy’s or the drive thru sees a bunch of teenagers in the old graveyard at midnight, they’re going to call the cops on us. At least if we’re just in the woods, people can’t really see us.”

“It’s not like we’re doing anything illegal.”

“Tell that to them,” said Jeremy. “They almost arrested Jessica and me when we were getting the cache outside King Hookah. It was in a random parking lot and they still

were all, *What're you kids doing? Getting high?* Like we're gonna get high in a damn parking lot." Jeremy put the car into drive and turned to look over his shoulder at Jessica in the backseat. "You have the coordinates?"

Jessica smiled, lighting a cigarette. "Turn left."

#

"So that's when you went to the woods," said Hank, taking a sip from his coffee cup. "With the two girls? You sure there wasn't another plan going on?" He gave the teenager a pointed look. "You get my meaning?"

"It wasn't like that," stuttered Jeremy, blushing five shades of red. "If we wanted to, you know, *do stuff*, there are a million other places we'd go."

Hank hummed to himself, still leering, and Jeremy blushed further.

"So the S-bend," continued Jeremy, "where Four Mile turns into Raccoon. We'd gone there before, for geocaching, but the ravine is really steep, so we can only go there when it hasn't rained or you risk, like, breaking your neck and stuff. We parked in the lot by the church and walked down. We figured a car parked on the side of the road would catch more attention."

"You figured right," agreed Hank. "So you're in the woods..."

"Well, obviously, we still got noticed." Jeremy continued, "We're in the woods..."

#

Scott fiddled with a small, hand-held lantern, trying to maneuver Jessica's lighter toward the tiny wick while Hanna used her cell phone to give him enough light. She balanced an old fashioned camcorder against her hip. Bent over Jessica's phone, Jeremy and Jessica glanced left and right over their shoulders. Every once in a while, they would

step backward or to the left, continually glancing around to reorient.

The lantern lit with a small hiss, and Scott lifted it toward his face. “Let’s get this damn show on the road,” he whispered forcefully. “It’s freezing. Are we close?”

Jessica nodded, looking toward the ground. “The clue is weird though. It says it should be around here, but the clue doesn’t make sense.”

A deep wrinkle formed in the space between Hanna’s eyebrows as she played with the camcorder. “What do you mean the clue doesn’t make sense?” she asked. “The point of the clue is to give us a hint where it’s at. Am I doing this right?” She turned to Scott, offering the camera.

He glanced over her shoulder and nodded. “Yeah, it’s recording. Just don’t point it at the ground.”

“Thanks Miss Obvious,” snapped Jessica, “I didn’t know that. Yes, the clue doesn’t make sense.”

Scott asked, “Well? What’s the clue say?”

“It says,” read Jeremy, “*I’m dying to meet you, just watch where you put your feet.*”

“What the hell does that mean?” said Scott, snatching Jessica’s phone out of Jeremy’s hand. “Are we even close?”

Jessica shrugged, taking a long drag on her cigarette. “It says we’re right on top of it, but it doesn’t give us any real clues other than ‘look down.’ There’s a million places to *look down* at. But it doesn’t even say if it’s a box, a bottle, if you need to dig or if it’s covered. The damn thing doesn’t even have any comments on it.”

“Does it say if anyone signed the log? Normally people will at least check that on

the app,” asked Jeremy, using his cell phone light to look around his feet. Hanna took a few steps toward him, shining the light from the video camera at the ground.

Scott shook his head. “You mean nobody’s even found this thing? Why’d we come here then? It’s pointless. A dog probably buried it or something.”

“Guys,” said Hanna.

“*You* were the one who said let’s go geocaching tonight!” Jessica’s voice climbed in volume, her teeth snapping hard on the t’s.

Hanna tugged at the back of Scott’s shirt. “Babe, maybe you should —”

“Not now, babe.” Scott brushed her away, advancing on Jessica. “You’re seriously going to blame this on me? I wanted to go to the one on the damn main street!”

Jeremy held up his hands, “C’mon, guys, let’s just go back to the car.”

“*Guys!*”

The shriek made three teenagers turn to Hanna, who was slowly beginning to shake. She pointed at the ground. Jeremy’s eyes followed the shaft of light from the camcorder to the spot it illuminated on the ground. Sticking out of the ground was a human hand.

A loud shuffle of leaves and the crack of breaking sticks behind them made them stiffen. Scott caught Hanna as she began to viciously tremble,

“What are you kids doing down there?” a voice asked. “We got a call about some suspicious activity down here. This is private property, you know. They could press charges.”

Jeremy turned around, shielding his eyes from a bright flashlight pointed in their

direction. “Officer... We were just geocaching and... There’s... There’s a *body*.” He pointed a shaking finger to the ground at their feet.

#

Hank leaned forward in his seat, scratching the side of his face. “Did the officer have a name?”

Jeremy frowned and glanced to the side, chewing on the corner of his lip as thought. “No,” he said. “He never gave us his name. When we said that we found something, he just told us to go back to our car. And that’s when the other cop, the other guy came pulling up and told us that we were out after curfew and we’d need to go with him.”

“Hold on.”

Hank slid his chair back, the metal squealing against the cold ground. He walked to the door and called out to another officer. A young woman with short-cropped blonde hair walked over.

“Dawn, who brought the kids in?” asked Hank.

The woman answered, “Ralph did. He was patrolling and saw the car in St. Mark’s parking lot. He assumed it was some young couple trying to be frisky. But that’s when the kids came walking up the street looking like they’d seen a ghost.”

Hank frowned, his eyes darkening. “Who was partnered with Ralph last night?”

“He wasn’t,” said Dawn. “He was alone last night.”

“Hey, kid,” said Hank, turning back to look at Jeremy, still sitting at the table.

“The officer in the woods – did he ever say what his name was?”

“Walsh,” said Jeremy. “He said he was Officer Walsh.”

Hank sighed and looked to Dawn. “Are the kid’s parents here yet?”

“He’s the last one,” said Dawn. “His parents are signing for him now. The other three went home about an hour ago. All their stories matched. Captain sent a recovery team out to go check out the location.”

Hank nodded, and Dawn closed the door.

“What?” asked Jeremy, his voice rising slightly. “What’s wrong?”

“We don’t have an Officer Walsh on roster,” sighed Hank. He folded his arms across his chest, glancing away. “Whoever told you to get out of the woods... They weren’t a police officer. I’m going to need you to sit down with a sketch artist. You kids got very, very lucky.”

#

“Officer...” stuttered Jeremy, his body giving a violent shake. “We were just geocaching and... There’s... There’s a *body*.”

“Whoa, calm down, son.” The police officer walked closer, lowering his flashlight toward the ground. The light hit on the spot of the ground Jeremy pointed to. “I’m Officer Walsh. Why don’t you kids go back to the car? I’ll take it from here.”

Blame It on the Night

The sun was setting low on the city of Amarna when the whispers of rebellion reached the palace of the Pharaoh.

It was in the center of a splendid palace throne room that She composed herself as He on an elevated dais built to draw the eye. His seat, a high-backed throne molded from polished sandstone and gilded in gold, dwarfed his tiny frame, but he commanded the attention of every soul even in his silence. The palace had been built in the same manner as the temples of Aten that surrounded it: so that the rays of their Sun Disk god illuminated the alabaster, limestone and quartz structure, creating the illusion that the grand room was lit from the inside instead of out. The setting sun shone through the western face, casting silhouettes in extreme on the polished floor. Servants walked in the shadows of the various statues and icons that loomed amongst the room, filling large braziers with tinder and straw for when their god drew from them the day.

Swathed in a billowing, many-layered gown of feathers and silk-soft white linen, the Pharaoh Neferneferuaten sat still as a statue. Though the elaborate headdress that crowned him seemed too large for his head, he wore it proudly with straight back and single-minded determination. Only the thin veil of the lightest linen shrouding his face

from view was out of place amongst the caricatures of previous pharaohs, long dead now, scrawled along the walls and corridors of the palace.

To the left of the throne, on a pallet of feathered cushions and blankets sat the Pharaoh's eldest daughters. Meritaten, the Great Royal Wife, sat closest to the throne. Just beside her lounged her younger sister, Ankhesenpaaten, lazily offering strips of raw beef to a black-furred cat. Meritaten toyed with Ankhesenpaaten's long, braided dark hair, twisting it back and forth. The young princess whined when her sister pulled too harshly and tugged free of her sister's fingers.

To the Pharaoh's right, Tutankhaten, the Crown Prince and all of seven, sat sideways in his own miniature throne. In his lap, he animatedly played with a set of toy soldiers, occasionally making appropriately discreet noises with his mouth. When he grew too loud in his play, a gentle slap against the armrest of the stone throne and a pointed – but veiled – glance in the prince's direction was all that Pharaoh Neferneferuaten needed to hush his son into chagrined silence again.

At the base of the disk-shaped dais, knelt a soldier from the royal militia. Just behind him, stood Ay, the Pharaoh's Grand Vizier, and the General of Armies, Horemheb.

On prompting from the general, the soldier quivered before beginning to speak.

“Great Pharaoh,” said the soldier hesitantly, his eyes fixed on the many skirts of Neferneferuaten's gown. “The city boils since the presentation of the new icon at the entrance to the Temple of Aten. The people grow restless. More and more shrines to Amun have been found in the city.”

General Horemheb continued in place of the soldier, who had trailed off into silence in the presence of his pharaoh. “This morning when the priests awoke, they found chickens slaughtered outside the entrance to the temple. Slaves spent the morning scrubbing blood from the feet of the statue. The priests fear this is only the beginning, and with renewed worship to Amun, they fear our god’s anger. They say that every day Aten leaves the sky earlier and earlier, abandoning us to the dread of night longer and longer. The priests say the desecration at the temple will not be tolerated. Aten will forsake us.”

Slowly, Pharaoh Neferneferuaten lifted his hand toward his wife and daughter, beckoning to her. Silently, Meritaten stood and walked to the throne, taking her husband’s hand in her own. Pharaoh Neferneferuaten leaned toward her, whispering quietly into her ear, the shadow of the Pharaoh’s grand headdress throwing the young woman into nearly total darkness. Meritaten nodded, and turned toward the group at the base of the dais.

“The Great Pharaoh thanks you for your continued diligence and wishes that the light of Aten follows your footsteps,” announced Meritaten. “He prays that our troubles will soon end, and he asks of what his great advisors might hope to accomplish.”

Ay replied, “A sacrifice would be prudent.”

“And soldiers outside the temple,” added Horemheb. “The priests fear that the next time, it won’t be chicken’s blood staining the temple floor.”

The Pharaoh turned to his wife, whispering once more.

When the Pharaoh finished, Meritaten’s attention redirected to the advisors. “Vizier Ay,” ordered the Great Wife, “Pharaoh Neferneferuaten bids that the priests

sacrifice to Aten at the temple for the next seven nights. Slaughter a goat for the first six and give the sacrifice to Aten, along with wine and beer. On the seventh night, slaughter a cow anointed with water from the Nile.” Then, to the General of Armies, she said, “Place ten of your best soldiers outside the temple. Arm them so that the people of Amarna know that Aten will not allow his temple to be desecrated in such manner. Let it be known that should the culprits be found, they will be put to the sword.”

The advisors bowed, murmuring their thanks and adoration of the Pharaoh and his wise decisions.

The sun kissed the horizon now, the sky streaked with dark oranges and purples. In his tiny throne, Prince Tutankhaten grew more and more impatient, tossing his toys to the ground and clambering out from his chair. Suddenly, the Pharaoh Neferneferuaten stood to his feet without a word and beckoned to his younger daughter with a low sound in the back of his throat. Ankhesenpaaten got to her feet with little grace, rushing to grab his hand in hers.

Meritaten bowed her head to the advisors. “You are dismissed,” she said shortly.

Just as shortly, the royal family descended from the dais together and exited toward a seemingly unending corridor; Tutankhaten lead the procession, with Pharaoh Neferneferuaten and Ankhesenpaaten trailing a few lengths behind, and Meritaten just after.

The family passed in silence into a long hall that led to their royal bedchambers; a series of interconnected rooms sealed away behind heavy linen drapes to ward off unwanted eyes. Though the sun had yet to fully sink beneath the horizon, the corridors of the alabaster palace were lit only with the braziers. They cast the royal family in eerie,

shadowed relief against the highly decorative and storied palace walls. Finally, they reached the end of the expansive hallway, which opened into a private garden. A large bonfire burned in the sand at the far end of a long pool of water. A safe enough distance from the bonfire, a few servants played with Pharaoh Neferneferuaten's three remaining daughters.

"Go," said the Pharaoh in the most hushed of whispers, releasing Ankhesenpaaten's hand. She ran first to a dog, gnawing on a bone and began to tease it by seizing the bone and throwing it far. The dog bounded after it. Much the same way, Tutankhaten bounded after his sister, but with much less grace and more childish ambling and wheezing than the dog. The Pharaoh turned to Meritaten and bade her follow him into a side room, just off the garden, the inside hidden with thick linen drapes. A single, tiny brazier lit the room, casting long shadows on the glimmering walls.

It was in here that the Great Pharaoh Neferneferuaten began to disrobe before his wife.

First came off the linen gloves, then a feathery cloak that seemed almost as weightless as it was endless. The Pharaoh offered the cloak to Meritaten, who took it without question. Next, came a thick brocade necklace of gold pleating, inlaid with emerald, jade, and quartz. It clinked heavily into the young woman's waiting arms. Next came the thick linen coat, embroidered with gold chain on the back in the image of Aten. Meritaten took this also and hung them over the back of a nearby chair. Lastly, Pharaoh Neferneferuaten took off his elaborate headdress with the striking golden cobra and the braided wig.

In the Pharaoh's place stood a woman in a simple linen shift dress with crows feet wrinkling her kohl-lined eyes, her mouth a vivid slash of red across her face. She shook out her short-cropped black hair, her shoulders sagging somewhat as though she still bore the weight of her extravagant costume.

Meritaten watched the woman before her with a critical eye, taking in every seemingly aching joint and every painful stretch. They listened to the sounds of the royal children playing in the garden, discordant to the silence of the room.

"Mother," said Meritaten simply. Lovingly. Finally breaking the silence.

#

Queen Nefertiti cupped her daughter's chin in her hand affectionately, leaning forward to kiss the younger woman on the forehead. "Daughter," she said in the same tone, her voice high and clear. "Let us join your siblings."

Linking arms, the two conspirators proceeded out to the gardens, greeting servants and animals alike as they called out to Nefertiti with warmth. With the help of Meritaten and a servant girl, Nefertiti lowered herself onto a cushioned pallet at the edge of the pool. The woman untied her sandals and dipped her feet into the dark water, the coolness soothing her aching feet. A servant bowed low and set a plate piled high with fresh dates, pomegranate seeds, vine grapes, almonds, sycamore figs, and carob beans. For the first time since she woke that morning, Nefertiti allowed herself to relax. She accepted a horn of wine and cuddled her youngest daughter, Setepenre, into her lap.

From where she shared a horn of goat's milk with her younger sisters, Nefertiti sensed her eldest daughter's fretful gaze upon her. The sickness that grew in her bones and her stomach, she knew, would eventually cause her body to wither and die. So too

would the secret that she carried out daily in the throne room, eating away in her gut like a parasite.

Across the pool, Tutankhaten, Crown Prince, hobbled as swift as his clubbed foot allowed. His grin spread his cleft lip wide across protruding teeth as he chased a dog too hasty for him to catch. Every few minutes, he would slow to a painful shuffle, dragging one leg behind the other. He would wheeze and cough, and the dog would slowly creep toward him and wag its tail, and the chase would resume. It was only then that Nefertiti's smile would falter, that she would clutch her daughter closer to her breast.

She imagined her Temple of Aten, with the newly finished statue of her Sun Disk god shattered to pieces on the smooth, sandstone floor.

She imagined her priests gutted and throatless, bleeding black amongst their ruined icon.

She imagined her daughters running through the corridors, naked and bruised, raped and pillaged as though they were slaves.

She imagined her son in her arms on the throne room floor, his once-bright, lifeless eyes staring back at her.

As she watched her children in the flickering light of the bonfire, she felt suddenly cold. Glancing upwards into the blackness of the night sky above her, she could only close her eyes and say a silent prayer that the sun return the next day and not leave her family alone in the dark.

So Easy from Above

There are moments Katie won't ever forget.

She couldn't if she tried.

She didn't have friends like Marie, nerdy friends, friends who spent more time with their nose in a book or a computer than talking to normal people at parties and bars. She had never considered herself a nerd, just a consumer of all things pop culture. If that included things normally tailored towards nerd, well, then she just had a decent appreciation for hard work. Because fandom was *hard*. But Marie — sweet, analytical, anal-retentive Marie — flew under the radar and became the most important person in her life.

Thinking of Heather led her down a brick road of memories. In twenty years, when she hopefully has a teenage brat or something (she kind of wants kids, honestly, she'd never thought about it before), she doesn't want to be able to recount this tale for her daughter. *You're worth so much more than this. If he can't see you, he doesn't deserve you.* She doesn't want to have to tell her son, *Don't lead a girl on. It's one of the worst things you can do.*

Katie wants no part in this memory. But she's knows it tattooing itself to the inside lining of her ribcage in faltering beats.

She's standing in the kitchen, laughing through gritted teeth as Dom struggled yet again to let the soup sit and thicken. It's already been ten minutes since they added the first four cups of milk, and Katie's internal recipe states it should be stirred frequently, but not constantly. So every few seconds she's slapping Dom's hand off the whisk while he mumbles, "But, Kate, you said you have to stir it!"

Every time now, she nods and replied, "Yes, but not constantly. It has to sit a little. The stirring is just so the flour and fat don't burn to the bottom of the pan."

All the while, she's crumbling the massive pile of fried bacon into bits, her eyes fixed on the steps at the far side of the kitchen. She tried not looking, but then her heart would speed up to the point she feared Dom could practically hear it racing, and she'd force herself to glance. Now after a half hour with Dom in the kitchen, anxiously waiting, she's given up all pretenses. Nobody's noticed her anxiety anyway. Well, except Brie, but there was no keeping anything from that woman.

Heather's across the room at the kitchen studying for a test with Cory, diagrams and graph paper laid out like a tablecloth across the polished wood. They're quietly arguing about an equation over tea and coffee, waiting for dinner. Heather's right, she thinks, from what she can tell. Cory likes to play devil's advocate, and if the smile in the corner of his lips is any indication, then he's simply being difficult on purpose.

Brie's perched on the countertop on Dom's other side, quietly slicing cooked potatoes. She uses the delicate kitchen blade the same way she'd use a pocketknife, holding the vegetables over the bowl balanced in her lap, instead of chopping them on the

cutting board. Katie's seen the boys do this as well, with fruit and pieces of bread, keeping everything well in hand. She wonders if it's a tendency born from the military, from eating in places where they didn't have the luxury of a table or plates. Brie's got one eye on Dom and one eye on Katie, not even watching as her slim fingers construct potatoes unhurriedly.

She knows. Katie knows that Brie knows, and Brie knows that Katie knows she knows. It's a frustrating venture, because she doesn't really care if Brie knows. Brie doesn't judge, she doesn't gossip or spill secrets, not when it really matters. But she doesn't know if Brie *approves*. The woman is not often forthcoming, but Katie knows that Brie loves her in a fond way, like how someone might care for foster child or a particularly needy pet.

So Brie doesn't say anything about her wandering eyes, how she's only absently instructing Dom instead of ordering him about the kitchen the way she normally does. She just makes casual conversation while Katie tells Dom to add the last four cups of milk in, measuring out exactly a tablespoon of sriracha sauce for flavor.

She watches Katie, and Katie watches the elevators.

Brie is helping Dom slowly add the pieces of potato to the soup (without splashing soup all over himself and the stove) when Aaron thunders down the stairs. Katie's mouth goes dry, and she turns her back to the room, busies herself without checking oven and the baking garlic bread.

Aaron glides into the room, clean-shaven and striking in a ruby dress shirt and charcoal vest, black slacks and shining shoes.

Katie doesn't want to notice the crisp lines in the pants, know it means Aaron took time specifically to iron with military precision, no different than the careful but efficient way he disassembles a gun for cleaning. She doesn't want her stomach to churn when she see's he's slicked back his hair with product, so unlike the messy, loose fringe he normally. And she definitely doesn't want to watch him fiddle with the silver cufflink stars she'd given him for his birthday six months ago.

Dom's asking her questions, and she hears him, but she can't breathe. "You add the cheese in next. The whole bag," she says. "We don't kid around about our cheese."

She's taking a deep breath when she turns around, not looking at Aaron, definitely not looking at Aaron. But the man slings his left arm around Katie's neck then, leaning into Dom's space to smell the boiling pot.

"Make sure he doesn't burn down the building, doll," he says conspiratorially. The words rumble where her shoulder is pressed against his chest and Katie fights a shiver. "I'm not going to be here to pull the punk outta the rubble."

Katie doesn't know this dark-haired, confident man at her side.

"Looks like you cleaned up well for once," Dom's saying. He tugs at the collar of Aaron's shirt. "Shoulda sprung for the haircut too though."

She works her way out from underneath his arm to the other side of Dom, nudging him away from the stove so that she can stir before the cheese burns. Quietly, Brie presses her knee against Katie's side.

Aaron makes a sour face, half shrugging. "Katie said to keep the hair," he says finally.

“Oh, well, Katie would know best what the ladies like,” agrees Dom good-naturedly.

Brie says quietly, “Yes, I think Katie knows what she likes.”

Katie tries to discretely pinch Brie’s ankle, but the redhead easily knocks her off balance instead. Aaron reaches around Dom to press his hand against her side, stabilizing her. When she glances up at him, he smiles, really smiles at her, with this odd sort of needy look in his eyes.

“How d’I look, Kate?” he asks. “Presentable?”

“You look great, Aaron,” she rasps, throat dry. “Real debonair.”

“You gonna be here? Be up? When I get back?”

She wants to die.

She wants the floor to swallow her up so she doesn’t have to see him look so good when it isn’t for her.

Katie nods, forcing her lips into some poor facsimile of a smile. “If you want me to, I will.”

Dom laughs. “You might be waiting a while.”

The laughter that bubbles up her throat has a touch of hysteria to it, and she turns away so neither of them can see her eyes gone glassy. Brie’s knee is back in her side, almost to the point of painful, and Katie realizes that the woman’s both finished and turned off the soup. There wasn’t much left, just the bacon, the sour cream, and the chives. She turns to look at the stove, turns it off quickly and grabs a mitt to pull out the blackening bread. With little care, she tips the pan in the sink, bread ruined.

“Shoot, Kate,” Dom apologizes. He’s at her side, glancing down into the sink. “I forgot about the bread.”

“It’s okay. I forgot about it too.”

Aaron slides behind them, a hand on each of their shoulders.

“Sorry ’bout that, guys. Guess I’m just damn distracting.” He has no idea. “But don’t worry, I won’t be back too late. See you when I get back.” He presses his lips to Katie’s temple quickly, checking his back pocket for his wallet at the same time. “Don’t wait up, asshole.”

When he’s gone, Katie slumps against the countertop, forehead pressed to the cold surface where Brie was sitting. The woman’s ladling the soup into bowls in Katie’s stead, carefully placing her body in Dom’s eye line to effectively hide Katie’s face behind her breasts. It’s Cory who finally breaks the odd hush that has fallen on the room, like Aaron sucked all the air out of the space when he left. Katie switches to the other cheek. Cory isn’t looking at her, but instead at Brie. He’s frowning. Heather, however, stares at her.

“Where’s he off to?” Cory asks in a quiet, just the side of inquisitive way.

Dom glances up from inhaling his soup. Katie wonders if he even tastes it, he’s swallowing so fast. “He’s got a date. Lily, I think her name is..”

“What do you mean, *Aaron’s going on a date?*” asks Heather suddenly. She’s going for casual, like Cory, but her voice is pitched high.

Dom’s stirring his soup counter-clockwise with his spoon in thought and eyes the scientist curiously. It’s the tiny furrow of confusion in his brow that makes her stomach plummet. “Is this a trick question?”

Heather opens her mouth twice, unable to make the words work. She glances at Katie, who is astutely avoiding her gaze. “But what about Katie?”

Dom lets out a tiny bark of laughter. “What *about* Katie?”

At his side, Katie tucks her chin against her chest and tries to remember the breathing exercises Cory taught her after her car crash. It feels the same way. The counter presses into her chest and she feels the steering wheel hard against her stomach. Her legs are locked, arms clutching the counter edge. She’s wedged between steel and she can’t fucking breathe. *What about Katie?*

In the Depths

When Pam said they'd be spending the next few weeks at an island observatory, Rachel had been thrilled.

She hasn't been to many islands, just a celebratory post-graduate trip with friends to the Outer Banks and the short trip to the Bahamas for one of the most awkward weddings she's ever attended as Pam's plus one. But Rachel likes to think she knows exactly what an island is. Islands are festive. They're full of culture and language, teeming with life and food and color. They're normally south of the equator, and they're usually *warm*.

To say she's disappointed, standing in a thermal sweater and baby blue windbreaker on the upper deck of a ferry, is perhaps the understatement of the decade. There would be no bikinis or sunbathing, nor drinking in floating cabanas with attractive men speaking foreign languages she didn't understand.

It rains a lot, Pam said.

This isn't completely true either. While the sky hasn't stopped spitting at them since stepping off Sean's small jet on the Scottish mainland, Rachel isn't certain you could call this rain. At first, she thought Scotland was their destination. It is, technically,

an island, as Pam described to her, despite being attached to another country. But then Sean had disembarked his private jet and pointed with a cigar to a tiny blot of land somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean.

“This is such bullshit,” Rachel mumbles under her breath, staring blankly at the dark patch of land in the darker sea, looming ever closer. She’d gathered her ponytail into the collar of her jacket, but tiny tendrils sneak from the band to whip in her face. Every few moments, she tucks another curl behind her ear only for the wind to tear it free again.

A few feet behind her, Pam sits at a covered bench with Sean O’Connor, peppering him with questions. The man, latest in a string of high-end patrons willing to throw millions in grant funds at Pam’s up and coming astronomy research, gives answers as quickly Pam can ask them.

Rachel pulls her cell phone from her pocket, checking it for probably the fiftieth time since they’d first landed. She watches, with increasing dread, as another bar disappears from the top left corner.

“Does this place even get service?” she asks sullenly, glancing at the pair.

Pam blinks, interrupted mid-science, like a tiny deer with her big brown eyes.

“What?”

Sean cracks a grin that lifts one side of his mouth higher than the other. “I’ve got the observatory equipped with Internet and Wi-Fi, but Sally wanted the house a bit more simplistic than our other homes. An escape from the evils of the world, if you will.”

Rachel goggles at him, abject horror on her face. “The Internet is evil? *Blasphemer.*”

Pam's nose scrunches in the way it does when she's trying very hard not to laugh. "Rachel, we're in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. What could you possibly need internet for?"

"Porn?" suggests Sean.

"Exactly," says Rachel, pointing with her (for the next few weeks) \$800 paperweight. "When you're not dry humping Sean's giant telescope, you're going to be humping an actual penis. The rest of us are not so lucky."

"Oh my god, Rachel, that's disgusting. Keep it to yourself." Pam flushes a pretty shade of pink, eyes on a spot of the deck near her toes. "Besides, that's not how it is."

Rachel's eyebrow lifts. "Oh? So, you are not hoping to do some mixing with the natives? Specifically, that delicious blond scientist that came to visit a few months back? What was his name? *Rodger?*"

Pam's blush darkens. "His name is Tom, Rachel, which you very well know. Stop playing around. Sean was just telling me about a plan he has for an observatory on the mainland as well."

"Since when is an observatory more interesting than sex?"

"She's on her own there," Sean is quick to interject. "Sex trumps nearly everything in my book."

Pam says lowly, "When the sex is hypothetical in nature, *yes*, an observatory is far more interesting to me than sex right now. *Observatories* don't give me mild panic attacks and lapse my ability to speak for several minutes straight." She scratches a hand roughly into her hair, disrupting the braid Rachel had spent several minutes constructing

while Pam packed last minute things she didn't need. Her voice has a slight whine when she asks, "Can we please stop talking about this now?"

"I'll cut you some slack, I guess," says Rachel, glancing to Sean.

The dark-haired man smirks at her over his Styrofoam coffee cup, looking at Pam and then back to her and rolling his eyes. Rachel stifles a laugh in the crook of her elbow as she turns back to the railing, staring into the morning darkness. Rachel loves to heckle Pam more than anything. Sean only encouraged that trait in her. The man is old enough to be Rachel's father, but like Pam, he possessed such an air of casual disregard for social niceties and modesty that she has a hard time reminding herself he is technically the *boss boss*. She raises her hands to her face and blows into them, catching the tip of her glove between her teeth. *Perverted Uncle Sean*.

"So are you? Excited?"

Rachel turns her head, and Sean dodges around her flying hair. "I'm sorry. I didn't know I was supposed to have specific emotional responses right now. Excited about what?"

Sean gives her a pointed look. "About all this!" He gestures with his coffee cup to the incoming island harbor.

She meets his eyes skeptically.

"All what? The island with no Wi-Fi? I'm more excited for the queen-sized bed that better be in my guest bedroom." They've spent the past twelve hours in some manner of traveling. The sky is lightening along the horizon, but the island is still mostly shrouded in darkness. If she stares long enough, she thinks that she can see the faint outlines of fishing skiffs lining the docks.

“Ah, you’re not looking close enough, Sparky. I may be just a city boy —”

“If you start singing Journey to me, I’m knocking you off this boat right now.”

“— but there is a lot of character in this tiny little island,” he continues without pause. He offers his coffee cup. “This beach is legendary. Lots of history. You were a history major for a few semesters in college, weren’t you? You can appreciate a good history lesson.”

“This was supposed to be a vacation, Sean,” grumbles Rachel, sipping briefly on his coffee. She grimaces; Sean took his coffee black as his credit card. “Islands are supposed to mean vacation. Not only is this island too cold for bikinis, but Pam said that it’s dangerous to swim in the water.”

“Not if you want to be eaten.”

“Yuck. So, am I going to see any man-eating sharks while I’m here? Do they do a fun show? I saw one of those in the Bahamas when Pam and I went. A whale-watching boat ride. It was a bit overrated though.”

“They don’t have sharks here, babe.”

“Then what does this island have?”

Sean turns his gaze back to the frothing sea; a half-smirk hidden by his coffee cup and doesn’t answer. They’re closing in now. Close enough that Pam puts aside her notebook and grips the railing at Rachel’s side, eyes fixed on the beach. Watching her boss, Rachel’s chest clenches a little at the look in the woman’s eyes.

Pam doesn’t date. Hasn’t since a disastrous split from an ex-fiancé left her shattered on Rachel’s bathroom floor, a shell of herself for weeks following. For the most

part, Pam had ignored Thor's courteous but clear interest. That isn't to say the woman wasn't interested herself.

She wraps an arm around Pam's waist, and the woman's head falls softly to Rachel's shoulder.

"I'm sure he's going to be excited to see you," she whispers, squeezing tightly. "You'll be getting laid in no time."

"Thanks, Rach," says Pam, snorting softly.

Beneath them on the ferry's first deck, there's shuffling and scraping, the sound of a door slamming. There are only a handful of others on the early morning ride, mostly natives or local mainland merchants. It's a pleasant sort of background noise, and they take the silence in for a few moments, watching the incoming island grow larger and larger. It takes shape before their eyes—a large mound with rough, craggy edges. The docks cut into the side of the jagged landscape, the visible beach small in comparison. The left side of the island is a series of high cliffs, most of them a sheer drop into the sea. Long rows of dock stretch parallel to each other, jutting out from the island like wheel spokes, boats of all sizes shifting back and forth in the churning waves.

It's in that quiet moment that Rachel hears the swift sound of something in the water. A strange splash, like a low, musical warble.

"Did you hear that?" Her voice is strange to her, in the still moment, like the wind caught her words in a ghostly fist and threw them far into the distance, until they're muted and stretched.

Pam lifts her head wearily from Rachel's shoulder and frowns. "I hear people down below?"

Rachel shakes her head. “No, it sounded like when we went whale-watching.”

“But we never saw any actual whales,” argues Pam.

“No, but we saw a bunch of dolphins, and they were all jumping up in the distance and you could hear them splashing. It sounded like that. And then.” It’s Rachel’s turn to frown. “I don’t know, like a music box. But under water.”

Sean gives her a sly look. “I think you’re hearing things, Lewis.”

“Duh, I’m hearing things. I just don’t know what those things are!”

There’s a shrill sound of feedback, and a voice comes through one of the many speakers stationed along the ferry. It’s a recording, one that sounds ancient; a sailor or something, Rachel thinks. With smoke in his throat and years of breathing in more saltwater than a man should ever inhale. The voice asks them to return to the main deck. It warns that there may be some jostling, for parents to keep an eye on any children aboard, to be aware of all hands and feet, and to watch the breakers for suspicious shadows. The last bit seems like an odd sort of instruction, but Rachel shrugs and grabs her suitcase, marching after Sean down the stairs to the main deck.

They don’t have to wait long. Whoever is piloting the ferry has made this trip a hundred times over or so, and easily navigates the hull through the docks until they approach the largest one. The ferry shifts and makes a lot of metal whirring sounds. It clanks and groans and seems to lean just slightly to its right. Then a man unlatches the door and tells everyone one last time to be careful where they step.

Rachel goes to step forward, but Sean wraps his fingers around her elbow gently and says, “Wait,” very quietly into her ear. She glances back but does as Sean asks. Pam is fiddling around with the zipper on her jacket and their exchange goes unnoticed.

A dozen men push past her immediately. Most of them are the older, wizened sorts, with gray at their temples or sprinkled into their beard. A tall, good-looking black man who looks to be about Pam's age walks briskly by, a duffle thrown casually over his shoulder. He glances back at them, and Rachel is struck by the warmth in his eyes.

"You're here early, O'Connell," he says.

Sean gives the man one of the most genuine smiles Rachel's seen in weeks, and he lets Rachel go to shake the man's hand. As far as she knew, Sean came here mostly for work, so she's surprised to see him so friendly with a native other than Tom and his family.

"I'm here for the whole shebang this time, Wilson," says Sean, gesturing at the girls. "Brought some friends too. Miss Ford's been dying to see my telescope." He waggles his eyes suggestively, and Pam makes a frustrated noise behind them.

The man chuckles. "Craig Wilson," he says, extending his hand to Rachel this time. "Any friend Sean's is welcome here."

She shakes his hand, grinning widely. "Funny, that's *not* what they say back in New York." His fingers are cold from the wind and the ride over, but his palm is warm, and she can feel callouses rubbing where their skin touches.

"Rachel Lewis. Sean says I'll be totes welcome. That's Pam. Do you live here?" she asks.

"Part time," says Craig Wilson, chuckling at her joke. His smile easily matches hers, open and friendly.

Sean says, "Craig's a paramedic in Skye. He'll live here soon enough though. His girlfriend is an islander."

Craig chuckles again. “Maria tries. I manage to make it out to Lewis about once a month, if I’m lucky.”

A pointed cough behind them sends a jolt up her spine. One of the ferry workers gives them a pointed look, and she realizes that they’re the last people to disembark.

“Yes, yes, we’ll be going.” Sean grabs Pam’s suitcase and Craig grabs Rachel’s, without even asking, and they step off the boat so that it can return to the mainland.

The sun is just cresting the horizon, sending beams of light smattering across the harbor. Now that she’s here, and its lighter, Rachel can see that the beach is already teeming with island life. It’s busier than she expected, this tiny little spot of an island in the Atlantic. Fishermen and merchants are hurrying along the docks and the boardwalk, conversations shouted in guttural Scottish over the wind and the sound of the sea.

The water is blue in the sunrise, bluer than Rachel expected, but still exceptionally dark.

They walk slowly toward the island; the dock seems even longer than she first thought, a hundred yards or so. Sean and Craig talk quietly to each other, Pam with a hand on Sean’s shoulder for balance as she peppers Craig with questions. Rachel hazards a glance at the edge of the dock, feeling her stomach lurch just slightly without a rail to grasp. Beneath them, the sea is the darkest blue she’s ever seen. It’s gorgeous, clean water, and Rachel thinks that even if it were warm here, and there weren’t vague man-eating sharks, she would be too afraid to swim in these waters. Who knows what could be lurking around, when she probably couldn’t see more than a foot into the darkness.

Suddenly, there’s a shout from the shore.

Rachel glances up sharply, nose narrowly missing Craig's shoulder as they stop walking.

Her brow furrows as she stares at the tiny manlike figures running on the beach. It's not a shout of alarm, but at the same time, it's not excitement either. It's something altogether different, almost anxious. Some of the men point out to sea, and she follows their line of sight, but sees nothing in the waves. Craig nudges her shoulder.

"Look there," he says, pointing with his free hand toward a breaker near the shore.

"I don't see anything," says Pam after a few moments.

"Just wait."

"Is this some weird island thing?" she asks skeptically, but Sean seems just as interested in the incoming wave.

Craig takes her chin in his fingertips, and he moves her line of sight even closer to the beach, where the wave hasn't reached yet. She makes a half-hearted disgruntled sound, but does as he says. Then he points. "Watch the bird and watch whitecap."

She's not quite certain she knows what a whitecap is, but she knows what a seagull looks like when she sees one, so that's where she keeps her eyes trained. There's a tiny grey-white mass in the distance, poking its head into the dark water. A seagull, she realizes faintly. She watches it surface and then throw itself back into the water half a dozen times. It's nothing.

Then suddenly, it's something.

It's a shadow, like the pictures she's seen on the Internet of kelp as a shadow in a massive wave. But this one moves too sharply to be kelp. The shadow cuts along the crest

of a wave, and she can see a split in the water, the vacuum left behind as something races through the current.

Rachel finds she's been holding her breath, and she forces herself to take another one as the creature shakes water from its great head as it powers through the water. The wave seems to divide around it, as though the water moves itself to let the thing pass easier. The movement is sinuous and snakelike, and as Rachel takes a deep breath, she is overcome by the pungent, briny smell of fish and sea in her lungs. There is a loud sound, not quite a scream, but something similar. The seagull disappears from the surface of the sea. The creature was there and then it was gone, diving back into the sea before any of them could particularly process what had occurred.

The ocean returns to placidity, a small shift of water and salt, and Rachel stares at the place where the seagull disappeared from as though the silence will give her an answer. The wave continues on toward the shore as though it were never interrupted. The whole event was thirty, maybe sixty seconds long, but Rachel is awestruck.

“What was that?” she breathes, turning to Craig.

Craig smiles. “That’s a *kelpie*. A water-horse.” He claps a hand on her shoulder, and she finds herself staring up at him like he’s some figment too, about to vanish into the sea in the same manner. “Welcome to Scotland.”

The Tree-house

My sister Leah married Jacob Mackenzie, the blacksmith's boy, on a warm day in May, just shy of her eighteenth birthday. There were all sorts of rumors, of course. Goodly folk paid them no mind, or they wouldn't cop to them where our Papa could hear. We were used to rumors. They followed us like mosquitoes at the lakeside, pinching at our bare thighs and arms, buzzing about our heads. In a small town like ours, high up in the mountains, nothing unusual happened without setting off the cacklers shucking corn on their porch or trading in the market. Leah shouldered them with more grace than I ever could, more than I ever gave her credit for.

I must admit, some of them were my fault.

Jacob was a handsome man. He was well off, with a good name and a paying job. He treated my sister well, never raised voice or hand to her. He was the kind of man I always wished for her to marry; the man she swore she would. Despite the grief I yoked about her I can't regret the part I played.

They married on the crest of the Hollyhock Hill, where Leah and I used to picnic in the summer. We climbed the great, dead oak tree at the foot of the Hill even though Mama never stopped scolding us for doing so. We knew which patches of berries were

ripest, where the ducks from the lake used to hide their nests. Every summer until she was sent away, Mama crouched beside us in the heather, and we listened as their tiny beaks slowly cracked their eggs, as they peeped their first tiny peeps. The first year after Mama left, we tried going back, to recapture the old magic those tiny little creatures conjured, but it never came.

Leah cried when she kissed Jacob up on the Hill. She wore our Mama's brooch fastened at her breast and my bandana in her hair. Papa walked her down the makeshift aisle between the standing congregation. Little Sean held the rings safely in our old music box. It was so old, when he opened the lid at the priest's request, our lullaby was nothing more than a tinny, faint warble. Even that made Leah cry. I always thought weddings were supposed to be happy. Maybe that was my fault too.

#

Mama said we got our blonde hair from her and our nose from Papa. She said that the only reason folk could tell us apart was 'cos we saw differently.

When Leah and I were born, the midwife told our Mama that we were either a blessing or a curse. Anything what arrived in twos came that way. Our Papa liked to tell this story when he was finding fault with us, as though it helped to remind himself to go just a bit easier. As though her spirit might give him strength to be a man alone, with two young girlies. Papa would say, even after a fourteen-hour labor, our mother still had the gall to look that old woman in the face and tell her shut her mouth and get out. The midwife bid as she wished, but not before she added, "You can pretend, but she ain't ever gonna see. She's blind, missus."

No matter what we were, angels or demons, she loved us just the same. It was always like that with Mama. She could look past any fault when it came to us. “Leah, my love,” she said. “Rachel, my darling.”

I used to tell us I was bigger than Leah as a baby, but she made more of a fuss. Mama said Leah came into the world reminding everything with ears that she was important. Mama said I didn't make a sound, 'cos I knew that Leah was the one who really needed the attention, no matter what the doctor said.

Mama loved me just the way I was.

#

In the woods, there's a moment before danger strikes when everything goes quiet. Bird calls, climbing squirrels, little nesting animals scuttling about the dense forest undergrowth; they all freeze when the predator comes into view. Even the streams and little rivers mute themselves, hiding away their babbling until the tension finally eases, and they can speak again.

But the woods in full quiet is more of a feeling than a sound. It's that sensation of being watched, of almost precognition that something's coming. It's the moment when your brow furrows without cause and the little hairs on your arms stand on end. When you can hear every piece of fallen timber creak beneath your boots, and every labored breath, it's near a religious experience. And why shouldn't it be? The woods only go quiet when they know something bad's about to happen. I'd like to think those moments are the ones where your God's most likely to pause in his doings and turn an ear.

I'd never been in the woods when they'd gone quiet before, but Leah had. Leah said there was nothing quite like it. She made it sound beautiful, like everything had

stopped and paused, the beasts all looked at her and froze in silent awe. But that's just Leah's nature. I can hardly blame her for it. It's difficult, living in the shadow of your sister. I wouldn't know about that.

How do you know if you're in the shadow when your every moment is in darkness?

#

When I was ten years old, an older boy pushed me down and kicked dirt in my face. He knocked my bandana from my eyes and laughed and laughed. He probably pointed too, at my face, at my dead eyes. It happened often enough. I sat on the ground in front of the boy, knowing Mama would holler something fierce at me for getting my skirt dirty. I never cried because they pushed me down, just because I knew that Mama would be upset.

But after the scolding, Mama always gently washed my scraped knees and hands after, pressing kisses to my eyes behind the cloth. "Fight back, my darling," she'd whisper to me softly. "I know you have it in you. Show them that you're just the same."

Leah never asked what Mama said to me when we were alone. When I made my way up the rickety stairs to our bed in the loft, she'd grasp my bandaged hands and pull me close. We'd huddle together, curled under the blankets like a set of closed parentheses until our breaths mingled and we couldn't tell whose blonde hair was whose anymore. "You're *my* sister," she'd say around a lock of hair, a mouthful of bedclothes. "That's all that matters. We'll show *them*."

That day when I found myself on my behind in the dirt, with tears streaming down my dusty face, someone grabbed my hands and pulled me to my feet. The hands

were not ones I was used to; they were bigger, rougher. It wasn't but a second later that I could feel Leah's familiar, delicate touch as she balanced my wobbling body from behind.

"It's not nice to pick on girls," said the boy with the hands. I never did hear what the boy who pushed me down said, because Leah steered me away.

After she'd wiped the tears from my face with the corner of her sleeve, the rough hand seized mine again for just a second.

"Here, this is yours." My bandana, mostly worn from years of use, but with the tiniest sliver of smooth silk in the very middle. I clutched it to my chest.

"Give it here." Leah unwound the bandana from my fingers and wrapped it securely, hiding away my blindness. Then she rounded on the boy with the hands. "Why'd you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Help her like that?"

"Ain't that what good Christians s'posed to do?"

That made her quiet, and I felt her, vibrating next to me. Leah always had things that she wanted to say, words that were just shaking to burst out of her, but she never could manage to put them together the way she wanted them to. She settled on, "Nobody else would have."

"Well, I ain't nobody elses."

I knew that he meant *I'm not like everybody else*, but I liked how those words sounded coming out of his mouth. Sound was the most important part of my sightless world. The boy with the hands was gone, but Leah pressed close until her chin rested on my shoulder. I stared out, unseeing, after that boy.

I felt something then—the first of many somethings I'd feel—and it weighed heavy in my gut like a stone. Leah's arms were about me, and I recognized her touch for the apology it was. Leah couldn't be everywhere at once, though she tried as hard as could be to shadow my every step. But I knew then, that though our eyes normally saw so different, this was one time that we'd see the same.

“That's Jacob Mackenzie,” she whispered, mouth so close to my ear her hot breath fluttering my hair. “He's the blacksmith's son.” I could feel her smile against my throat, and her fingers tightened on my shoulders. “Someday, I'm gonna marry that boy.”

#

Days when the woods were loud and alive, on her good days, Mama took us to the Tree-house.

Mama said that her Papa's Papa built the Tree-house for her when she was just a girl, even younger than we were. She said he cut down the tallest, strongest trees and bent them to his will. Her Papa's Papa was the one that made our music box, which she kept in the Tree-house. “*So nothing bad will ever happen to it.*” It was in the heart of the woods, just past where the rope-path ended. Both of us knew that if we strayed far from the rope-path we'd get ourselves lost. The woods were always a dark sort of place, but it was a different kind of darkness for Leah. She didn't love the Tree-house the way that Mama and I did. We could spend hours sitting inside, high up in the treetops, just listening to the birds and feeling the patches of light warm our faces. I never understood what Leah saw in the woods that Mama didn't.

“Don't come here without Leah,” Mama told me, kissing between my eyes. I crossed my wrists behind my back to latch onto the tips of Leah’s fingers. “Leah, never let your sister wander here alone. Bad things happen in the woods to girls who wander.”

#

When we were twelve at the harvest festival, some of the older girls stole away in the evening. Curious, and always eager to get into trouble, Leah quickly drug me along after her. I followed, blindly as ever, unable to follow on my own.

“We're going to find out who we're going to marry!” said one of the girls when Leah asked why they fled in the dark of night.

That interested Leah. Ever since the day when Jacob helped me to my feet, he was all Leah spoke about. How his hair curled over his collar, how his eyes were the truest shade of blue. Like I could ever know. I truly believed that one day, she would marry that boy. Abandoning me for just a moment, I could feel her excitement as though it were a palatable sensation. It cloyed thickly in my mouth, like the peanut spread Mama put on our bread sometimes. My fingers felt heavy in her grasp, and the stone settled low in my belly. I recognized this as a time when nothing could go right.

Leah tried to appear calm in front of these older, more mature figures, these creatures caught halfway between daughter and wife. “What do you do?”

Someone pressed an apple into my palm.

I squeaked, “Me too?” Only Leah heard me.

“Of course, you too,” she said, cupping my hand that held the apple tightly. “But we can't tell Papa. He won't understand.”

One of the other girls giggled. “We'll pass around the knife; you've got to slice the skin from the apple. Watch it. The blade's fierce.” There was a smooth, crisp sound as she took the knife edge to the fruit. It swished smoothly and wetly through the flesh. “Don't toss away the skin, but eat the apple first to the very core. Then, with your back to the river, toss the skin behind you and into the river. The skin will take the shape of the first letter of your future husband's name.”

I could hear the girls giggling amongst themselves. Once or twice one of them nicked their fingertip or their palm, and a tiny curse sputtered forth. I could feel Leah at my side, her very presence quivering. When the knife finally made its way to us, she made quick work of the skin. Before she ate her own apple, she pressed the knife carefully into my palm. “Can you do it?” she asked. I nodded, though took far longer than any of the other girls by half. Though she was impatient, Leah bounced on the balls of her feet next to me, waiting eagerly while I devoured my own apple. All around us were the sounds of whispering, of the gentle splashing as a skin found the river.

When I was finally finished, she seized my hands and spun me sharply. “Ready?”

I sucked in air and balanced my apple skin between both palms. Leah released first, with a breathy whoop. I followed quietly. The sound of two splashes, one right after the other, thrilled me to my bones. Leah gripped me by the elbow and tugged me to the river's edge with the other girls. I flailed for a moment, balance lost, before she righted me. I gave her what I hoped was my most apologetic look, and she made that noise in the back of her throat that Mama hated.

“Well?” I asked, pressing against her. “What do they say?” At my side, Leah was silent.

“That can’t be right,” muttered one of the other girls. “Can that be right?”

“That’s useless, she’s bli—” another started, but someone shushed her loudly.

The stone settled into my stomach again, and I tugged at Leah's arm. She elbowed me hard in the gut, throwing me off balance. Confused and unsure, I wavered heavily on the spot, not daring to move without my sister to lead me away from the river. I could not count on the other girls, but for a moment, I felt a sick assurance that Leah would turn and leave me.

After a pause, she reached down to take my hand and tug me. “Come on,” she muttered. Behind us, the girls giggled, but the sound was much more ominous. “This was stupid anyway. Apples don't tell the future.”

#

“Why do you bring us here?” Leah asked Mama one day, long before I felt real shame, while I served us tea on the Tree-house floor. Mama liked to bring her tea to the woods to drink with us. “Trees all look the same.”

“I like it here,” I said quietly. “Nobody stares at me here. Or pushes me down.”

Mama smoothed her fingers through my hair. Her front tooth made a light clinking noise against the teacup's porcelain rim. I sucked down my tea, burning my tongue. “Did I ever tell you girls the story about the Hollyhock Bride?”

I shook my head.

“No,” said Leah wonderingly. “Does it have a happy ending? I don't like them unless they've got a happy ending. Some of the girls at lessons were talking. Then Missus Fitz made us sit and weave for an *hour*, until my fingers were numb! Then, she told us a story about a girl who's father betrothed her to two men, because they were going to

war. And he thought if she had two, she'd have a better chance that one would live. Both of 'em loved her, but she only loved the one. So's she waited for 'em at the road every day, hoping she'd see the one she loved walking back the ways to her. But when the other came back and said the other man died, she had to marry the man she didn't love, 'cos he loved her. Missus Fitz said that woman came into the woods and wanted to die, to be with the one she loved. She said that the woman climbed the tallest tree she could find and tied herself a noose. Then she jumped. I didn't like that story.”

Mama was real quiet, then she put down her tea. I made to give her more, but she put her hand on top of mine and just held it there on the teapot. I thought I could feel her shake.

“Didn’t Missus Fitz tell you the rest of ending?”

Leah made a sound in the back of her throat that Mama would have scolded her for if we had been in public. Ladies weren't supposed to make noises like barnyard animals. But we were in the Tree-house, which is I guess that Mama didn't mind so much. There wasn't anyone else to hear except the animals that chattered away in the trees, and I doubted they minded. It probably made them feel just at home amongst us furless two-feet-walkers. “That was it. She died.”

Mama clicked her tongue twice, like when she gave Papa's gelding directions on which way to turn. “Missus Fitz surprises me, telling such frightening tales. Especially when untrue. Leah, drink your tea, and I'll tell you the rest.”

With a grumble, Leah sipped her tea, lightly and properly like a good lady should.

“Now, that's not what really happened in the end.”

“It isn't?”

“No, my love.” She leaned forward and kissed between my eyes. “When she looped the noose about her neck, God took pity on her. She had obeyed every rule that was set before her, and she had loved her husband as she had sworn she would. But she was old and sad, and tired of life. She was pious and good, and when she fell from her tree, the noose broke. She plummeted toward the earth, and when she passed through a shaft of warm, summer light, God changed her. When she emerged the other side of the shaft of light, she was changed into a beautiful dove. She flew to heaven, to be with God.”

For a while, we were silent but for the gentle shifting of our skirts and sipping of our tea.

“That's worse an ending still!” exclaimed Leah suddenly, slamming her palm down on the wooden Tree-house floor.

Mama set down her teacup. Mine was still nearly full; nearly full and cold.

“Yes,” said Mama, getting to her feet and moving about the Tree-house. “I guess perhaps you're right.”

#

“Where's your shadow?”

We were sixteen, and Leah had been forced to stay after lessons to wash the desks. Leah liked to back-talk Missus Fitz. I liked to think that she did it because Missus Fitz would slap my knuckles when I didn't move fast enough, or step on the back of my boots. She also liked to make me stand at the front of the room and recite the daily Bible verse from memory. I always had trouble, even with Leah muttering the words under her breath as she read them from the blackboard. Missus Fitz thinks I'm just faking. A part of

me, that strange, wicked part of me that weighed heavy in my belly at odd moments made me think Leah back-talked Missus Fitz because she was an old spinster who didn't have her own children to torment, so she tormented us. But a part of me thought maybe she tormented Missus Fitz because she blamed her. Blamed her for telling us the real Hollyhock Bride story, and because Mama never become a dove.

Whatever Leah's reasons, I always waited for her behind schoolhouse. That day, I stood heavy with summer sweat, my back pressed against the rough wooden siding. A rough hand slid into mine. I tried to shake him off.

“You're not supposed to be here,” I whispered, dropping his hand and sliding further along the schoolhouse wall. “I told you.”

He slid closer.

I whispered again, frightful, petrified that Leah would hear my heart hammering in my chest as clearly as I heard it within my own head. When he pressed closer still, I reached out finally to stop him. “Jacob,” I said, as harshly as I dared, which was not all that harshly at all. My hand touched the bristled fabric of his shirt-vest. “Please.”

Jacob held fast my hand there, pressing his own over top of it. “Give me good reason, and I will. I ain't heard a good one yet.” I felt the rough fingertips of his blacksmith's hand graze the side of my face. I froze. For several breaths, we stood like that; my hand upon his heart and his upon my face. “I lov—” I mashed my free hand against his mouth.

With a strangled sigh, I slipped my hand from under his to cover his hand on my cheek. “There may not be good excuse yet. But if you...If you *d-do*, as you say you *do*, then please. Please just do as I ask.”

“I can't,” said Jacob, and he pressed close again and pressed his lips against mine gently. So gently I thought my heart would burst from my chest.

His fingers traced the bandana covering my eyes for a moment, and I flinched. “Don’t. They say it's ghastly.”

“I've seen'em before.”

Knowing I could not stop him—that even if I could, I did not want to—I clenched my eyes shut. Jacob pulled the bandana loose, until it hung down against the bridge of my nose. Coming closer still, he kissed my eyelids gently.

A gasp drew us away from each other. My back pressed against the wall until the splinters were near painful, and the low, heavy feeling settled into the pit of my stomach. Jacob moved away, and with trembling fingers, I lifted my bandana until I was covered again. Leah gave one pitiful sob, then I heard her rush away, though I couldn't see. Jacob reached out and brushed my shoulder. I smacked his hand away.

That night, Jacob brought me home, handed me off to my father. When I curled up in my bed beside my sister, she turned her back to me. For the first time in my life, I felt truly ashamed.

#

I balanced baby Sean on my knee, picking flowers at the edge of our garden. We were picking flowers. *To send to Mama*, Papa had said. Bitterness swelled in me for a moment, for the plants in my fingers could be just as easily poisonous weeds for all I could tell.

“These are for Mama,” I said to Sean; I hardly believed my own words. “Can you say that for me?” Though at barely a year, he hardly understood a word I said. I touched

his forehead with my index finger, then touched his heart. “*Mama,*” I repeated. Sean laughed and gripped my finger, no attempt to speak.

“Com’n, Sean,” I prompted again. “Say ‘mama’ for me.”

“He’s a baby. He doesn’t know what you’re saying. Stop talking to him like he’s a person yet.” There was a flutter next to me, a furious sound of anger and a gentle breeze as Leah turned away. I reached out and felt the wildflowers she’d picked tossed down haphazardly. Baby Sean gurgled and I felt him tear a stem apart in his tiny fists.

Papa placed a hand on my shoulder. “The anger always comes first. Don’t begrudge your sister. She feels with the ferocity of a twister.”

I reached back, covering his worn fingers with my own. “Mama’s never gonna come home again, is she?”

“Your Mama,” Papa started, then broke off. He made a sound low in his throat, half train whistle, half animal in pain. Leah got it from him. “She’s not well. She needs to be with people who can take of her. That hospital, they can do that.”

“Will we *ever* see her again?” I tucked Sean closer to my chest, and he whined against me, struggling to get free.

“Try not to think of such things, Rachel.” I wondered if he ever really believed that Mama loved him at all.

“She told us, y’know,” I yelled at him, angry. “About the Hollyhock Bride. I know why she did it.”

I could hear Papa walking away, leaving just the two of us in the yard. “That’s just a story, girl. Ain’t nobody ever turned into no goddamned bird.”

#

It took me a while, but I found my way to the Tree-house just fine. I'd left Papa napping in the rocking chair and Leah reading on the floor. Sean, all of four now, was already fast asleep in his tiny wooden crib. Perhaps it was odd, but it seemed fitting that none of them would notice my absence; not for an hour or so. That would give me the time I needed.

That silence that stretched between Leah and I felt like a gaping canyon I could never hope to cross. She continued to lead me to and fro in town, coming and going to lessons, helped with chores at the house. But she no longer whispered her little secrets in my ear, or seized my hand in a sudden grip and held me fast. I stood silent at the blackboard during lessons, for I could not see the Bible Verse Missus Fitz had written on the board, and Leah refused to help me cheat any more. At every turn, when Leah was not at my immediate side, Jacob pressed forward. The first day he came back to me, while Leah washed desks again, I reached out to feel his face. I slapped him furiously. I told him to go away. That I could never love him. For once, I was thankful for the darkness. The words tore me apart as they ripped from me, and I was glad to not see the pain that they might have left, as though a visible wound, upon the boy with the hands.

Without my sister at my side, I became the shadow.

I realized, without me at her side, my sister could finally flourish.

The length of rope that we used to help us up the Tree-house steps, the one that dangled down through the narrow opening in the floor, would serve my purpose.

I sat on the lip of that opening, and slowly, my work came to fruition. I felt around for the low-hanging branch I had learned to avoid to wrap the excess rope

around. With no eyesight, I bumped it frequently. Though unsure of how true nooses were meant to be tied, I figured I could manage a proper guess.

#

My sister, Leah, gave birth to her first child at the end of a long winter, when the sun hid itself for days on the end and ice covered everything.

When she'd found she'd become pregnant, she laid down on the ground and wept, covering her stomach with her hands and beating the ground with her fists. After she had exhausted herself, Jacob gathered her in his arms and put her to bed. She'd laid there for days, only moving for tiny physical excursions, and then returning to her mourning bed. One morning, Jacob sat beside her on the bed and shook her shoulder until she woke.

"This was on the mantle," he said. "I think it's for you." He handed her a single pale white feather.

It was days before she came outside after she the birth, wandering into the yard with Mama's old shawl draped over her shoulders, her eyes narrowed against the afternoon sun. I watched her from the edge of the yard, perched on a fence post at the edge of the Makenzie property. She looked tired and pale, so much skinnier after months of watching her rounded belly. Leah held her daughter in her arms, head bent and lips against the space between her eyes. She made slow circuits around the garden, whispering or singing to her; she was too far away for me to hear.

My ears were not as good as they once had been.

There Lived

There once was a Man who held the world in his hands.

I say this, because it was my world.

#

The Maiden and the White Tree

A long time ago, there once was a beautiful maiden who lived in a poor village at the end of a vast forest. The townsfolk in the village were afraid of the forest, for every night, shrieks and cries and horrible caterwauling would sound from deep within, echoing throughout their tiny streets and creeping through their tight-closed windows. Not one soul dared to wander through the forest, and the few souls who tried were never heard from again.

One day, one of the family dogs wandered into the woods and the maiden hastened to get it back. It was day, and the forest made no sounds during the day, so it must be safe. Because there were no paths in the forest, as no villager ventured into the darkness, even during the day, the maiden tied the end of a string ball to a tree at the edge of the forest. As she entered the forest, she slowly let out the string, so that she could find

her way back. She walked further and further, until, what seemed like forever, she came upon a meadow.

In the center of the meadow was a tall white willow tree, with leaves made of real gold. She plucked one from the tree and held it in her hand, astounded at its strange foliage. The leaf was thick and weighty in her palm, gilded with tiny white veins. The maiden peered around her, but saw no one else, no beasts that shrieked or vengeful souls that cried. The maiden tied her ball of string to the trunk of the tree and hurried to follow its length back to her village.

Once there, she told all she could find of the forest's true nature, that the shrieks and cries must be just the wind, or that the creatures only came out at night. She told them of the meadow and the white tree. When they laughed at her, she showed them the golden leaf, told them that they could also have golden leaves, if they followed her. The next day, the maiden led the villagers into the heart of the forest to the white tree with its rich burden, and the soon the tree was soon plucked bare. No longer did the forest cry and shriek at night, its voices silenced with the loss, and the village's fear faded.

For weeks, the villagers came back to the tree, but the tree never bloomed again. The maiden's father was a wood-cutter, and it was finally decided to cut down the tree. With the wood, the maiden's father made a giant table for the town hall, with intricate carvings of faeries and woodland beasts in a deep wood. With what was left, for his daughter, he

paid a papermaker to craft a book. The wood-cutter presented the book to his daughter, a thick tome of tanned, white leather, with gold letters: The White Tree and Other Tales. He told his daughter to fill it with stories.

Days later, the maiden herself vanished in the night, with no word or note or sign. Some said she ran away to another village, while some said that the creatures of the forest came for her, seeking revenge for the white tree. All that was left of her was the book.

#

The townsfolk in the villages he frequented called him the “Collector.” He was a hoarder of stories. The Man had a Christian name, of course, but if asked, no villager ever seemed to recall hearing it. I guess, of course, that was our little secret. Names are important, after all. Though not an old man by age, the man was weather-beaten and worn. His face held lines carved deep in his temples and at the corners of his eyes, permanently squinted against the wind and sun. His fingers were tough, with thick callouses and cracked knuckles.

He travelled by foot or by carriage, town to town, a faded leather pack slung over his left shoulder, collecting stories from every place he visited. He stayed wherever there was space, no matter the conditions, and if no space could be provided, he camped out under a thin tarp he kept folded in his pack.

Though he seldom spoke, he acquainted himself with the folk of every village he stayed in. He frequented the drink taverns and inns he stayed in, dawdled in the alleyways near brothels, sat solemn in the back pews of churches. He was familiar with priests and scholars, landlords and beggars, barkeepers and drunks. Some villagers snubbed

their nose at him; such a learned Man — capable of reading and the written word! — wandering aimlessly from place to place with naught but his unkempt clothes and worn pack. Others prided him on his piety, his detached indifference to mortal properties and money.

In each village he went to, the Man would ask the villagers if they had any stories for him to write down. It did not seem to matter what stories they were, if they were tales for children or young women or men, he listened to all, no matter how short or long-winded. Every story was precious, he said. Every word deserved to be heard. Every story he collected was heeded with diligence and carefully written in thick, red ink in a large, white-leather book.

#

The Mirror Man

Many years ago, in a village that has long since been forgotten, there lived a man who disappeared into a mirror. He was not very rich, but he was happy, with a wife and a young child. One day, while he was shaving, he cut himself upon his neck. While the cut was quite shallow, it bled quite profusely. There was blood on his neck and chest, blood on his shirt, and blood upon his hands. There was even blood on the shaving mirror hung upon the wall of his shack. He tried to mop up the blood with his soiled shirt, but the blood seemingly had no end. He grew dizzy and leaned upon the wall when something caught his eye.

There was a face in the mirror.

This face was not his face, but the face of a beautiful young man. He stared into the mirror, unblinking, and the mirror man stared back. The man blinked, but the mirror man did not. The mirror man smiled with crooked teeth and pale green eyes.

“Do you want to come with me?” the mirror man asked.

“Come where?” asked the man. He thought it strange, because the mirror man’s mouth never moved, but he heard his voice as clear as though the mirror man stood next to him.

The mirror man smiled wide. “Why, into the mirror!”

“Why would I do that?” asked the man.

“Because I want you to.” The mirror man held a hand out to him. “Use the cut. Take the blood upon your hand and press it to the mirror. Come to me. Be with me.”

The man stared into the beautiful eyes the man in the mirror and did as he asked. He smeared his palm through the blood still welling against his chin. He pressed his hand to the mirror and heard the mirror man sigh. A hand gripped his suddenly, and he was gone.

#

This is how I remember it:

When the Man had still been a Boy, before he’d become the Collector, he lived in a village that was very poor. His father was the butcher and his mother was sickly. Though he was to apprentice in his father’s shop, he was terrified of blood. Anytime the Boy saw blood, he would faint. His father was an angry sort of Man, who beat his son

when he thought he was weak. In one such fit of rage, his father sent the Boy into the woods at night. The father told the Boy that this would make him strong, that he would become hardened to fear, and that if he could not survive one night alone in the woods behind their village, then he should not come back at all. The Boy's mother had cried and prayed for her son, but the father locked her away and threatened to kill the Boy if he turned back.

And so, the Boy had ventured into the woods. Now the woods were haunted, so the townsfolk said, but the Boy had never seen or heard anything scary in the woods. And nothing could be more frightening than the sight of blood. In fact, he wondered if perhaps it was even worth coming back home. Surely if he left, he could find some other life that did not involve carving up dead animals?

But my mother, thought the Boy, and he steeled himself against the cold and the dark, straightening his shoulders to set him off into the woods. He wandered for a long time; so long, he wondered if he would ever be able to find his way out again. It seemed like he was in the woods for hours but the darkness never changed, the land shrouded in endless darkness. But soon, the Boy could make out a spot of light in the distance. He hurried to it, thinking it to be the edge of the wood, eager to be out of the gloom. But it was not the end of the wood.

It was a meadow. This was where he found me.

#

The Lady and the Lake

Once upon a time, there lived two young girls who wandered into the night alone. Late one evening they spied, from the window of the

cottage they shared with their father, a glowing orb floating upon the lake outside the village. Now though their father had always warned them to be wary, but they were inquisitive and courageous, and most of all, they were bored.

Using the light of the full moon to guide them, they followed the path to the water's edge and found that the orb was no longer in the center of the lake, but was only a few feet from shore. The orb seemed to shift closer, as though aware of their presence. The younger of the two sisters stopped on the beach, wary to venture too near. "Sister, be careful," she bade, "It could be a spirit. Or a monster." But the older sister wandered closer. She removed her slippers and lifted her skirts, stepped onto the beach and sunk a toe into the water. The orb pulse. She stepped further into the lake, wading ankle-deep, and the orb pulsed and moved toward her.

When it was close enough, the young girl reached her hand into the water and the orb dissolved into the palm of her hand like mist. The orb left a small impression of a circle with lines branching outward, like a faint, glowing golden tattoo upon her skin. When the girl lowered her hand, a man stood before her, but no man that she had ever beheld before. His skin was white-gray, like ash, and his eyes a glowing blue. He had silvery hair and no clothes. "He's a demon!" cried the older sister. The younger sister gasped but did not move or shield her eyes.

“The moon has chosen you,” he said, though his mouth never moved. She met his eyes and nodded. “You must come with me,” he said. The younger allowed herself to be led further into the water, heedless of her older sister’s cries. When they stood chest-deep in the silver reflection of the moon, the man clasped her about the waist and dipped her until her head touched the surface of the lake. He kissed her on the mouth. He kissed her on the chin. Then he kissed her on the neck. The water around them pulsed, and the younger girl cried out. The silvery water became tinged with blood. Then they sank into the lake together.

#

The meadow in spring was beautiful. It was the only spot of light in the entire forest, the foliage too thick, the branches too numerous everywhere else. Only tiny shafts of light managed to make their way between the tree trunks, and the rest was left in shadow. The forest preferred it this way. So long had it spent left alone that when it finally was penetrated, the retribution it wrought was swift and fierce. The forest lived and breathed and had a mind of its own, and when I led the villagers into it so many years before, the forest wrought its vengeance on me.

When the Boy beheld me, he was afraid.

I stood, naked and white, where the white tree had once flourished, unable to leave that spot of blighted dirt. My body served as a physical replacement for the life that I had helped destroy, my very being intertwined with the forest. My lungs were dry for lack of breathing, my skin had grown thick and rough like bark. A mouse had made a home within my hair, birds nested on the arch between neck and shoulder. My feet grew

downward, rooting me to the earth. The forest had consumed my flesh and turned me into another trophy to display.

“Are you a forest spirit?” the Boy asked me, voice soft and gentle. “Is this your forest?”

It took nearly all my energy to fix my glassy gaze on his young face, to force a body that had not spoken for decades to find its voice again. The Boy was so full of life, it hurt.

I whispered, “No.”

The Boy flinched at my voice. “Are you stuck here?”

“I am cursed.” My voice was dry like leaves on bones, crackling logs on a bonfire. It was ancient and tired, strained. “You are as well.”

“What do you mean, *cursed*?” the Boy said shrilly.

A breeze drifted through the meadow and I sighed with the trees and leaves around me, swaying gently. The boy shivered. I saw that he came with nothing but the clothes on his back, thin and thread-bare. The weather no longer affected me, the cold did nothing but flow over me like a stream over bedrocks. I was both as alive and dead as the forest around me.

“You’ve entered the meadow. The meadow is cursed. You will be stuck here.” In truth, I had no idea if the meadow was the true cause of the magic that held me here or if it had been that first golden leaf I plucked from the white tree ages past. But something about these words felt right in a deep, small place inside of me. I *wanted* the Boy cursed. I paused, turned my face as much as I could. “Unless you help me.”

“Help you?” he echoed, wringing his tiny hands before him. His face grew red and he let out a wail. “I don’t want to be stuck!”

“Is the book still there?”

The Boy was blubbering now, thick hot tears spilling down his face, tiny wails that echoed around the comfort of the meadow. Irritation blossomed, and I wondered if the years spent in the meadow had shriveled my heart the same way flowers wilted in winter. Though the meadow had cursed me, there could still be a chance that he could leave. But... The magic of the meadow flowed in my dry veins, and it compelled me to extend that reach.

“Boy!” I snapped. “The book! Is the *book* still in the village center?”

The Boy’s cries faltered. He stared at me pitifully through wet lashes.

“The, uhm, the faerie book?” he asked softly, hiccupping. “The one from the story? Of that gir...” He trailed off, eyes widening as he beheld me in all my glory—this twisted thing, rooted to the blighted ground.

“*Go the village,*” I whispered. My wrist creaked when I slowly twisted it, a low sound, pointed east, back towards the place I once called home. “Bring me the book. You shall bind yourself to it, as it is bound to me. With your blood, you will fill it with stories, but you will leave the last page empty. Only then will I release you from your curse.”

The words settled in the air like lightning, electric and vast. The meadow’s power surged within me as the cursing took effect. The Boy ran, surely feeling the effects of the magic settling in his bones. But I knew in that place from which the magic welled, that he would return to me. And he would bring me back my book.

#

The Sea Girl

In a land far, far away, there lived in a village on the edge of a cliff an old woman and her daughter. The old woman was poor and sickly. Her husband had died some time before, and her daughter was well-over the proper age to be married. The old woman earned a living doing the mending and washing for other households in the village, because she was too old to do any other kind of work.

Her daughter assisted the schoolteacher with the young girls and boys in the village, learning to read and write. There was little money for a dowry, and the daughter was not so unfortunate in appearance, but she had a stern disposition. In return, she had very little prospects for marriage. The daughter was a very proud woman, but she cried and cried when she thought that she would never have a husband or children to take care of. She cried because her mother was ill and she feared she would die soon. The daughter spent what few hours she had to herself along the rocky ledges of the cliffs, singing to the sea and to the birds and the fish.

One day, the daughter went to the cliffs the same as she always did, but this time she spied a young girl in the water. She called out to the girl, who waved merrily at her. Concerned, she made her way down to the water's edge to help the child but found her nowhere in sight. It wasn't until she began to sing that the girl reappeared, surfacing slowly from under the churning waves. Up close she was unworldly, ghostly pale skin and hair, black eyes, and webbed fingers. But the daughter was unafraid.

“Prick your finger,” the young watergirl whispered, but her mouth did not move. “And offer it to me.”

Entranced, the daughter found a sharp stone and with a cry, she pierced her middle finger. She offered her dripping finger to the watergirl, leaning off the rock outcropping, over the water’s surface. The watergirl smiled and wicked smile, all teeth and seaweed and rotting waste. She opened her mouth and took the daughter’s finger into her mouth, wrapped her webbed hand gently about the daughter’s wrist. The daughter allowed herself to be led under the waves.

#

I sent the Boy away eager and determined in the bloom of spring. He came back to me a shade, slightly humpbacked and gray at the temples, in the dregs of winter. While I knew that some time had passed, even I was confounded by the change it wrought. A full lifetime had not past for him, of that I was certain—I tracked the cycle of time by the change in the forest. I was twofold surprised; first that his task had drained him so significantly, and second that a tiny fragment of guilt welled inside me. Perhaps the forest had not destroyed everything I once was, this meadow not fully in control. This fragment inside flourished too late for the Man, for though I held some guilt, I had not an ounce of regret. My body was pale and winter-weakened, but my mind was strong.

“It’s done!” the Man cried, throwing the book at my feet, rooted to the meadow floor. “I demand you release me. I’ve done as you bid.”

I crouched as much as my constraints allowed, fingered the book’s weathered cover. Bits of leather flecked against my fingertips, the golden lettering near completely

faded. I opened it tenderly, smoothed a hand down the page. *The Maiden and the White Tree*. The tiny flare of guilt bit stronger knowing that the first story the Man recorded was mine.

“It’s filled?” I asked, voice like dead leaves, like sticks upon stone.

The Man answered, “Except for the last page, as you instructed.”

“Your blood,” I said then. “Prick your finger and take my hand.” I straightened and reached for him, eyes closed. “And I will release my curse.”

The Man was not happy, but he used the tiny blade from his pack to prick the tip of his finger. He smeared the blood along his palm, then reached for me. We grasped hands like a battle, fingers gripped too tight, nailed scratching skin. I sighed as our palms kissed, true air crackling through my winter-dry lips. The Man cried out. I felt the wind against my face different now, sifting through my hair, biting now against my naked skin where before I had not felt its fierce chill. I wiggled my toes in the blighted dirt where the trunk of the white tree once grew. Where I once stood. I opened my eyes.

Now stood the Man, pale and naked, feet rooted to the dirt beneath him.

“You tricked me!” he shrieked, but it sounded like a thousand leaves on stone, like branches cracking underfoot. “You tricked me, you witch!”

I picked my book up from the ground, traced the golden letters and held it close. The white leather was restored, gleaming in the low light filtering through the boughs. The book pulsed like a heartbeat underneath my palms. I stared at the Man, my savior, my Collector.

“I saved the last page for you,” I said finally. “Thank you. I won’t ever forget you.”

I left the Man there, rooted deep, waiting for the next to stumble into his meadow.

#

The Soul Book

Once upon a time, there lived a Man who held the world in his hands.

Now I Lay Me

Oliver Parish stood awkwardly just inside the hospital's sliding glass doors, a small, brief-case-like bag clutched in his sweaty palm and he contemplated his situation. He'd only ever been in a hospital once before, when he broke his wrist playing tennis in high school.

The sign painted on the wall across from him was a symmetrical honeycomb, with tiny, happy scrub-clad bumblebees in various chambers and a smiling queen bee with a stethoscope at the very center. The entire hospital seemed to take the metaphor to heart. Each floor was designed like a honeycomb, with a reception desk at the center and the halls spreading out from the center like spokes in a wheel. Everything had a shiny, almost glossy finish to it, from the floors to the cabinets, to the windows. The polished hardwood floors were a dark golden-brown; the walls were buttery yellow and robin's egg blue. Room numbers were embossed on bumblebee placards, and the elevator floors had a distinctive bronzed honeycomb pattern.

The charming bees, however, were no help in directing him toward the appropriate floor. The nurse at the central reception desk had been glaring at him for over five minutes while he contemplated the map. Oliver abandoned the floor map to approach the desk, adjusting his camera strap anxiously on his neck.

Before he reached the desk, the nurse called out, “Can I help you, sir?”

“Uhm, hi. I’m supposed to be meeting, uhm—” said Oliver. He sat his compact case on the ground at his feet and curled his fingers over the smooth edge of the countertop. “Robert Jackson? He and his wife, Lynn, had a baby last night. I’m a friend of the family.”

“Room number?” The nurse wore dark blue scrubs, her brown hair pulled into a sharp bun at the nape of her neck. She looked tired. Her makeup had worn across her cheeks, caked a little at the corners of her eyes.

Oliver shook his head. “Robert called me about two hours ago and said to meet him on the pediatric floor? His daughter is supposed to be in the NICU.”

“If she’s in the NICU, I highly doubt she’s allowed visitors.”

“She’s, uhm, she’s *dying*, their daughter,” Oliver stuttered quietly, face flushing. “Going to die. I don’t know the particulars. They asked me to take photos before...”

The nurse made a noise in the back of her throat, a cross between sympathy and an impatient sigh. “Let me make a phone call.”

“Thank you.”

Oliver turned his back to the desk as he fiddled with the black DSLR hanging from the strap around his neck. He booted the camera up, scrolled through some of the senior photos he’d taken the week before. His camera was slightly warm in the palm of his hand, shiny black but well-worn to matte in places where his fingers rested. This kind of photos were more his style, bright and bold, mostly facial portraits, but a few action shots of a young brunette blowing bubbles or playing a trumpet. Carrie was seventeen, still a junior, but ready for senior year. She was giggly and vivacious; the sort of girl

Oliver would have never had the guts to talk to in high school. He paused on a photo of Carrie smiling directly at the camera, bright and so alive.

“Excuse me, sir?”

Oliver turned. The nurse had her palm over the bottom of the phone’s receiver, angled away from her mouth.

“Mr. Jackson will meet you at the elevator,” she said, that sad sort of smile on her face like she didn’t know whether to offer her condolences or not. “It’s floor five.”

Oliver smiled and thanked her. He picked up his camera case from the floor and took the elevator to the fifth floor. When he arrived, Robert was waiting there as the nurse said he would be, smiling wearily at him from behind a Styrofoam cup of coffee, bright teeth against dark skin. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, a scrub cap pulled tightly over his thick dreadlocks, and he wore a gown that tied behind his back.

The fifth floor was decorated as similarly as the lobby, with honeyed hardwood floors and blue-and-yellow walls. Everything had a beautiful smooth wood finish, even the carts that held the glass incubators and the tiny, fragile babies.

#

Friend of the family was perhaps too strong a phrase. Oliver and Robert went to college together at Bowling Green State University, roomed on the same floor all four years of undergrad. They bonded over friends who dropped out of college because they smoked too much weed or missed too many classes, absentee parents, and older siblings whose successes consistently overshadowed their own accomplishments. They enjoyed beers and exchanged homework occasionally when it wouldn’t show up as plagiarism,

had a few double dates with girls that never stuck around. But their closeness hadn't extended past graduation.

They'd stayed friends on Facebook, and Robert occasionally liked one of the pictures Oliver uploaded to his business page. They exchanged happy birthdays once a year and casual remarks about the current season's sports team – Cleveland was always losing, no matter what sport they were watching. Oliver hadn't received an invitation to Robert and Lynn's wedding, and Oliver wasn't planning to invite either of them to his and Stef's wedding in November.

Oliver had been surprised when he received a private message from Lynn a month ago, asking if he did baby shoots. He hadn't been aware Lynn was even pregnant.

They'd agreed on a meeting time at Robert and Lynn's house for the following week, a little fixer-upper four-square. The neighboring houses had basketball hoops and street-chalk drawings in the driveways, swing sets and treehouses in the backyards. It was just outside of the city, so his Uber ride wasn't long. Lynn greeted him at the door with a hand on her belly and a large glass of iced tea. They were the type of couple who had half a dozen professional pictures mixed with candid photos spread on the mantel above the tiny fireplace. The largest was a black-and-white wedding photo, Robert's black skin a stark contrast against Lynn's pale features. Oliver briefly entertained the thought of one of his sets in such a precious place.

Before they sat down, Lynn made a noise and clutched at a spot above her hip.

"This kid," she joked. She rubbed at the spot. "She kicks so hard. Sometimes I can't sleep for all the kicking. She might have been a soccer player."

“I’ve never done a baby shoot,” Oliver admitted to her, once they had him on their couch, his knees knocking together nervously. “But it’s not *not* doable. Pinterest, as annoying as it is, is very helpful nowadays. I can get a lot of ideas from there. Did you have anything in mind?”

The couple exchanged a long, silent look before Lynn turned to him.

“Our baby is going to die, Ollie,” said Lynn gently.

Oliver set his glass down on the coaster Lynn had put down, smoothed his hands down his jeans and stared at the centerpiece of white lilies on the coffee table. He didn’t know what to say, and for a few moments, the three of them sat in utter silence.

“I’m so...sorry,” he managed eventually.

“It’s okay,” eased Robert. He reached out and clasped Lynn’s hand. Her fingers looked exceptionally pale and thin clasped between Robert’s strong, dark ones. “We’ve been preparing for this for a while. Emily—that’s what we decided to name her—has a genetic disorder. She has congenital heart and brain failure.”

“Did you—?” Oliver paused, chewed his lip as he wondered how to phrase his next question. “Is that something that they could have caught?”

“They did,” said Lynn. She smoothed her shortness with a small, forced smile. “But we wanted to spend as much time with her as we could. There *are* instances where a child can live for a few months, maybe. I just couldn’t pass up the chance to hold my baby girl. I’ll love her for as long as God lets me.”

Oliver nodded, still feeling uneasy. “And you want me to take pictures? Of... Emily?”

“I’m getting induced next Thursday,” said Lynn. “We’ve gotten permission to have a photographer come into the NICU, and if she’s stable, they might let us bring her home. It would just...it would mean a lot. You and Robbie were so close in college, and he said you always took such beautiful pictures. I looked at your FaceBook page.” Her voice cracked slightly at the end, and Lynn sniffed, raising a hand to her face before she shook her head. “Oh goodness. I-I’m so sorry, please, excuse me.”

Oliver stood quickly as she rushed from the room. He could hear her on the stairs, then he heard the slam of a door. Robert quietly got to his feet on the other side of the coffee table, his hands shoved in the pockets of his hoodie.

“Sorry about Lynn. She tries to act like she’s handling it,” explained Robert.

“No, no,” interrupted Oliver. “Nothing to be sorry for. God, *I’m* the one who should be apologizing her, asking all these questions. I can’t imagine what you’re going through.”

“You’ll do it, though?” asked Robert. He took a hand out of his pocket and rubbed at the back of his neck anxiously. “I know it’s a lot to ask. We haven’t seen each other in six years,”

Oliver nodded reluctantly. “Just some shots at the NICU?”

“If they let us bring her home for her to pass here, then we’d like some in the nursery. I don’t know how likely that is. And then...if it wouldn’t be too awkward, some at the calling hours.” Robert shifted uncomfortable, not quite meeting Oliver’s eyes. “I don’t know, honestly. We’ve, uh, been seeing a couple’s therapist. Lynn’s got a lot of anger. We’ve been trying for years to get pregnant, and now *this*. She’s just so frustrated.

I don't know how to comfort her, I'm just as lost. Doc says this whole thing can help with the grieving process."

"Whatever makes it easier," said Oliver. "Easier for you guys, that is."

"You know," said Robert quietly, "I never really wanted kids."

Oliver glanced at the man, standing awkwardly in his own home in front of someone who had once been a friend but was now practically a stranger. "I haven't really thought about it."

"Lynn's always wanted kids," Robert said. "It didn't matter to me. All that mattered to me was her. She wanted kids, so we'd have kids. And then this."

The silence stretched between them for a minute. Oliver could faintly hear Lynn upstairs. It sounded like she was crying.

#

When Oliver got home a few hours later, he'd wandered a bit aimlessly into their extra bedroom, which they'd turn into a small workshop for the two of them. His fiancé, Stefanie, was an artist who taught at the local high school and sold small commissions on Etsy for extra cash. They didn't have much room for a real workshop in their apartment, so they'd compromised and split their extra bedroom into a workspace instead of setting it up as a guest bedroom. Half the room was dedicated to Oliver's photographer while the other half held anything Stef might need for a painting or charcoal portrait, which was her specialty.

In the corner of the room, fit for either to occupy, sat Stefanie on a small, plush recliner reading a book. Their workshop had the best light in the entire house.

“Hey, baby?” he asked, tapping his knuckles lightly against the door-jam, even though he knew he didn’t actually need to. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course, Olle,” Stefanie answered in reply, folding down the corner of her book page and placing it on the drawing table next to her. “What’s up?”

Oliver paced into the room and settled on the recliner’s armrest.

“You know how I said that a friend from college messaged me on Facebook? Asked if I did baby shoots?”

Stefanie nodded. “You seemed really anxious. I know you don’t have much experience with kids, but it can’t be too difficult, right?”

“Their kid is dying, Stef,” he said quickly, in a single breath.

“Excuse me?” asked Stefanie.

“It’s some, I don’t know, grief-thing,” he said, spreading his hands out in front of him. “Robert said they were seeing a therapist. They named her and everything. Her name is Emily. And they want me to take pictures of her before she dies. And at the funeral.”

Stefanie was silent for a moment before she said, “That’s fucked.”

“I *know*. But what do I say?”

“Are you,” she paused. “I mean, can you do it? Can you stare at a dead baby’s face and edit those photos?”

“Should I?” Oliver asked. “Should I say no? I’ve never been to a funeral before, I don’t know what to do. I need a little guidance here, babe.”

Stefanie placed her hand on Oliver’s arm, rubbed her thumb against the soft skin of his inner elbow and kissed where she could reach of his shoulder.

“Maybe. Maybe try? If it’s too hard, you can always bail. But I’m here. And I mean...” Her thumb paused for a moment before resuming its tender stroke. “If you can provide them some kind comfort, then you’ve done your job.”

#

He officially accepted the job an hour or so after his and Stefanie’s conversation, when he’d called Lynn up and told the woman that he would take photos of her dead baby.

Oliver didn’t have much of an appetite for dinner, and Stefanie had watched him anxiously fork his pasta around the plate for approximately fifteen minutes before she’d plucked it from underneath him. She told him to take a shower, try to clear his head before coming to bed, and that she’d pack away dinner while he settled.

While his shower had been pleasingly hot, it did not settle his mind.

He and Stef had a rule, considering they frequently spent a lot of time doing work in their home, that the bedroom was off-limits to outside stimulus. They didn’t have a television or a computer. Their phones were left charging on a small table in the hallway. The only electronic devices allowed in the bedroom were the digital alarm clocks on either side of the bed and a small old iPod dock for when they wanted to listen to music.

That night, Oliver kissed Stefanie good night, but he couldn’t sleep. He laid in bed for what seemed like hours, staring at their white ceiling. He glanced at his fiancé, lost to the world in sleep, and gently removed himself from their bed.

In their workroom, Oliver booted up his Mac desktop and typed the words *Memorial photos* into Google search. He was appalled at some of the search engine suggestions.

“Is it rude to bring my child to a funeral?”

“Is it OK to take photos at a funeral?”

“Can I take photos in a cemetery?”

He felt uncomfortable even reading those questions.

He knew that in the past people often took photos of the dead before they were buried. Ut that was decades ago. Surely people didn't do it now?

Oliver did, however, find a website that wasn't Wikipedia dedicated to current memorial portraiture, and from there, found a link for a website called *My Soul to Take*. From the title, he assumed it would be some goth website, something obsessed with what happened when people died. He was surprised to find that it was a legitimate memorial photography website, with recommendations for everything from how best to photograph a body in a casket to how approach family members at a gravesite.

The whole endeavor made Oliver sick to his stomach, but he'd promised Robert. More important, he'd promised Lynn, who he would feel significantly more guilty toward if he bailed.

Around three in the morning, he easily himself back into his bed still unsettled despite his few hours of research.

#

Less than two days later, Oliver found himself stuffed into a suitcoat too wide at the shoulders and too tight at the waist, something he'd bought for a friend's wedding a few years before, shuffling awkwardly around a small funeral parlor with his camera clutched between his hands. Though Robert had assured him everyone was aware of the

reason for his presence, Oliver couldn't shake the itching sensation of every eye upon him.

He arrived at the funeral home shortly before the rest of the mourners, with permission from the undertaker, who had been told of his coming in advance. The undertaker was a middle-aged man with a bald spot and a severe moustache, who led him through the entrance hall with single-minded purpose whilst listing various rules for flash photography in their business. Robert and Lynn were waiting with several other family members he'd never met in the central chamber. The funeral home was comprised of three large rooms, the central entrance hall that opened into the large receiving chamber, and then a smaller, personal room with couches set off to the far side by a small archway.

Robert acted coolly put together when Oliver eventually made his way toward the family and introduced him to several other members of his and Lynn's extended family that were present. His face was drawn and pinched, closed off. Lynn was silent and still, staring blankly into the carpeted floor in front of her as she perched, stiff-backed in a chair beside the casket. An older blonde woman, who Oliver could only assume was Lynn's mother, hovered at her side, hand clutching Lynn's shoulder. Every few moments, she let out of a shuddering gasp, like she couldn't quite catch her breath between heartbeats.

When Oliver asked if he should wait to take photos, Robert could only shrug; the grief was inevitable, whether he waited ten minutes or three hours until the calling hours were over. He settled for fiddling with his camera for as long as he could delay, then proceeded to approach the casket.

Oliver had never been to a funeral.

Emily's body was at the back of the receiving chamber, propped on a small table with a thick black tablecloth. Her coffin was a shimmering ivory, gold-trimmed, with soft velvet interior that framed her tiny form. From the outside, it looked a plush music box. Emily's body was dressed in a lacy baptismal dress, a white cap on her head and little white lace gloves covering her little fists. Very little of her was visible beneath the dress, cap, and blankets; only her little brown face protruded. Unfortunately, there would be no avoiding photographing her face straight-on, with her swollen eyes or cleft lip. He could edit the photos only so much without completely masking Emily's features. Sighing, Oliver raised the viewfinder to his eye.

As guests began to filter into the room behind him, Lynn let out faint, echoing wail: "I want to hold her. Let me hold my baby."

#

After the mortifying experience at the funeral home, it took Oliver almost a full week before he could bring himself to touch the photos of baby Emily. He kissed his fiancée goodnight before locking himself in his studio with a pot of coffee, determined to finally edit the photos. He'd left the photos to upload while he had dinner and walked the dog, as it took around two hours for all three-hundred-some photos to compile on Oliver's desktop. While JPEGs were easier to compile, he preferred working with raw files and messing with them on his computer instead. It helped when he needed to cull all the poorly taken photos from the good ones. Any good photographer would admit that for every excellent photo, there were five or six poor ones that were out of focus, overexposed, or dark. By the time he finished, the nearly four-hundred photos would probably end up being more like eighty or one-hundred.

When they'd first talked, Robert and Lynn said they wanted a simple esthetic, basic. Just them and the baby. "*Nothing crazy,*" Lynn had said, when he'd brought up some examples of photos on the internet. Many of them featured props that they couldn't incorporate in the hospital, as the venue and Emily's issues limited them some, but Oliver thought he'd managed to do a decent job of it, despite...everything.

Everything, Oliver thought to himself. After Robert had escorted him to the NICU, where he'd been forced to don a scrub-cap and protective gown, he'd spent about two hours shooting the baby in what he hoped were discrete and respectful pictures of the ill child. The nurses for the most ignored them, but they frequently glanced over, either out of curiosity or concern. The nurse assigned to baby Emily stayed with them throughout the shoot, making sure that Emily's IV or oxygen didn't dislodge. The entire process drained him in a way he could not imagine.

Oliver had never thought about having children, despite being engaged. After this experience, he wasn't certain if he would ever be ready to confront that potentiality.

With the images compiled, he steeled himself, and then opened the tiny blinking folder. He clicked on the first image in the inventory. It was one of Emily in the incubator at the NICU, before he'd asked if Lynn could hold her. The baby was uncomfortably proportioned: a head twice as small as her body, eyes swollen shut, a cleft joining her lip and nose (little more than two slits across her tiny face), and awkwardly splayed limbs. Her tiny hands were permanently clenched, index and pinky overlapping the middle fingers. Her skin was too thin and stretched, near transparent, and flushed a feverish pink. The hospital had put in her a basic onesie; cotton, little tiny ducks with binkies in their beaks. Lynn had brought a small, plush giraffe and a fuzzy pink baby cap from their

home. She quietly told him that they were the first items they'd purchased when she found out she was pregnant.

Oliver scrolled through the set of ten or fifteen pictures, all taken relatively in the same manner. Sure, he changed the angle or the amount of which he blurred Emily's distorted features, or what he was focused on, but they remained the same. They were still photos of a dying baby, one who the nurses assured them was not in pain, was not aware of them, and would probably not last the night. He scrolled past an image where the angle was not sharp enough, Emily's face was too prominent, her features a bit too blatant. Her cleft formed a shadow like a carving on her tiny face. Oliver inhaled sharply and quickly moved the image toward the trashcan on his dock.

Most shots of Emily were from behind, facing away from the camera. He'd taken micro-photos of the baby's clenched fist or her clothed toes. He tried to hide her face as much as possible, not only so he would not have to look at it, but so he did not have to present such a stark reality to the Jacksons. He hoped they would remember Emily as he tried to make her appear, innocent and new, with no distinguishing features that would clutch at their memories.

A half-hour later, Oliver had discarded nearly half the photos from the NICU. Most of them were either of Emily by herself or Lynn holding Emily. Robert, despite his obvious distress in person, appeared light and loving on camera. His face was calm and awe-inspired as he looked at his daughter. Oliver was particularly proud of the set of photos that featured Robert straight-on from the front, the baby balanced on his fore-arms with her capped head cradled in his dark hands. But Lynn had been tired, frustrated, and in pain. It showed, thought Oliver, in nearly every photo her face appeared. Lynn had

originally balked when Oliver asked her to hold Emily. She didn't want to touch the baby and Oliver didn't want to push, but Robert spent nearly twenty minutes cajoling his wife into handling their child. There were photos that worked, but the ones that did, Lynn's face was not visible. No matter what trick he tried, he could quite manage to hide her discomfort from the camera.

The easiest set of photos by far to go through was the ones of the nursery. Several days before Lynn gave birth, Oliver had gone over to take photos inside the Jacksons' home. The couple had converted Robert's old office into a nursery and spared no expense to get everything a baby could ever need. The thick carpet was a plush burgundy, and they had pasted dozens of wild animal decals on the cream-colored walls. The furniture was all a dark cherry-wood, polished smooth until it shone. An oversized stuffed giraffe sat in the corner of the room, towering at nearly five feet in height over the back of a delicately crafted wooden rocking chair. Giraffes, Oliver learned, were Lynn's favorite animal.

He had nearly thirty photos just of the nursery as it stood and several more of Lynn sitting in the rocking chair, holding various items from the nursery. In one set of photos, Lynn and Robert stood beside the frilly bassinet, sat directly underneath a large bay window in a pool of sunlight, their fingers interlocked and cradling her swollen belly. Try as he might, there was no way to frame the images any other way than downcast. Both parents considered the empty bassinet with lowered eyes and controlled faces, a space that would never be filled.

The photographs from the calling hours were terrible. Not for their quality, but for their content. He scrolled through image after image of tiny baby Emily swaddled in her

velvet casket. He'd contemplated, at the time, trying to take photos of the funeral home the way he'd taken pictures of the nursery, but eventually decided against it. There was no way to hide her disfigurements, no way to cushion the blow of a burying a dead child.

The night seemed to drag before him, the photos in the folder unending. Eventually, the photos began to blur together, a single life measured in one-hundred and sixty-seven remaining photos. In his haste, Oliver double-skipped through a set of photos, then forced himself to backtrack. When he scrolled back, his breath caught in his throat. He clicked backwards one more photo, paused, then clicked forward again. He clicked forward once more, then quickly back. On his computer screen was a single image, slightly overexposed, of baby Emily.

#

Lynn was the one to answer the door when he knocked. Oliver hadn't seen the couple in a few weeks, but from Lynn's broad, smiling face in the doorway to their home, he could only hope that they were healing.

"Come on in, Ollie!" she said, grasping him by the elbow to tug him inside. "Robbie's just out for a walk with Dio. He should be back any minute."

"Dio?" Oliver allowed her to lead him into the living room, settling into the same chair he'd sat in only two months ago, before baby Emily had entered and left their lives.

"Oh, we adopted a puppy. Robbie thought it would help." Lynn shrugged absently and then laughed, "You know, like a child!" She called over her shoulder as she walked from the living room to the kitchen, "Would you like something to drink? Water, iced tea?"

“Uhm, no, thank you,” answered Oliver, raising his voice just slightly to be heard. “I’ve just come to bring the photos. Stef and I have dinner plans.”

“Oh! How did they turn out?” asked Lynn when she finally returned to the room. She set a glass of iced tea down on the coffee table between them, cradling her own against her knees. “I’m sure they’re beautiful.”

“Quite good,” stuttered Oliver, self-consciously rubbing at the back of his neck. It felt strange to discuss the photos of her dead daughter so matter-of-factly. He sat the album between them on the coffee table, pushing it slightly closer to her. “I printed and compiled them into an album. There’s a disk in the back of the jacket with a CD of the raw files, if you wanted to print larger or smaller ones. I have copies on my harddrive as well, so just say the word and I’ll print you whatever size you want. I just assumed you’d prefer to have copies of the original files.”

Lynn smiled at him. “That’s *so* sweet, Ollie. Thank you.” She reached out to pat at his hand, which balanced on his knee. “You’ve done so much for us. We couldn’t have done this without you.”

She went abruptly quiet and tugged the album closer, opening the lid. The first image was the photo of the couple standing beside the empty bassinet, hands folded and interlocked over Lynn’s stomach. Oliver turned away to stare out the front window, to look anywhere but Lynn as she saw the photos for the first time. Every few moments as she quietly flipped through the album, Lynn would let out a little noise, like a sigh or a gasp, but she never said anything further. It was as though Oliver had suddenly disappeared from the room entirely. When the silence that stretched between them without Robert as a buffer became too stifling, Oliver took an anxious sip of tea. It was

lukewarm and bitter, and he choked on it slightly. Tea splashed down the front of his sweater and he hurried to put the glass back down on the table, pulling the material away from his skin. Laughter bubbled out of Lynn's mouth, unstifled.

"Oh, my god, how embarrassing," he muttered. "Can I use your bathroom?"

"End of the hall," said Lynn, still chuckling as she turned back to the album, "the door on the right." She turned another page. Baby Emily's blurred face stared up at him from inside her glass incubator in the NICU. "Hey, maybe you can take pictures of us and Dio soon."

There were two doors at the end of the hall. Oliver paused between them, his hand on the knob of the door to his right. The door to his left hung slightly ajar, not quite setting right on its hinges, with light pooling through the crack. He glanced back down the hallway for a moment, but there was no sound other than the gentle *shhh* of Lynn's fingers slipping against the plastic film photo album. Quietly, Oliver removed his hand from the doorknob and tentatively pushed the door to his left further open, stepping forward to stand in what used to be Emily's nursery.

The room had been absently and violently dismantled. None of the furniture remained in the room except for a small pile of cherry wood in the center of the room. The pasted animal decals had been ripped from the walls, leaving behind stripped white splotches where the paint had literally peeled from the wall. In some places, it seemed as though the decals had been carved out instead of ripped, drywall and insulation visible through the deep gouges. The carpet had been roughly uprooted, the pale, unfinished hardwood laid bare. What remained sat in a lump in the corner of the room where the rocking chair had sat. On the floor, a small, toy giraffe sat half-flattened on its side, soft,

white padding bursting through a popped eyehole. A puddle of sunlight spilled over where it laid underneath the window where the bassinet once stood, as though crushed beneath a boot.

#

When Oliver returned home, Stefanie was in their workshop room, a mismatched apron wrapped around her waist and she wore thick, dark gloves. She had a wine bottle held in a makeshift vice, a can of spray paint in her hand.

“Babe?” asked Oliver from just outside the room.

Stefanie set down the can of spray paint and gently removed her gloves.

When she walked into the hall, Oliver knelt down so his head was level with her stomach, and he pressed his forehead into her navel.

“I know we haven’t talk about it,” he said to her stomach, eyes shut. “But I’d be okay with it.”

“With what, Ollie?” asked Stefanie.

“With being a father,” answered Oliver after a minute of silence. “With having a kid.”

Sleeping in the Bones

It's the sound of the siren that wakes us, a jarring shriek in the muted quiet before sunrise. We jerk in bed. We shake our heads to clear the fog of sleep or rub hands across our faces. Those of us who have partners turn to them and share a pointed look in the darkness of a bedroom. In one of the houses, a baby cries out, plaintive and lonely. In one backyard, a dog barks persistently. It normally barks, and there have been many complaints made about it in the late evening or early morning hours, but now it barks and even so often, another dog answers it. Nobody questions this barking.

In bathrobes and nightgowns, in boxers or wrapped blankets, our bodies tiredly emerge from the warm nest of their beds and trudge toward windows or doors. We stick our fingers to make space between the slats of a blind, shift a curtain just a sliver, but nothing more.

The siren has stopped, but the lights continue to paint our well-manicured lawns, the walls of our bedrooms, the exhausted but curious expressions on our faces. The space the sound has left behind creates a slight ringing in the now-silence.

It is near 5am, and there are three cops and an ambulance parked outside the Sullivan house at the top of the College Park cul-de-sac, small figures weaving in and out in the early, gray light. Some of us will attempt to count the number of emergency figures

no matter the distance, no matter if we've remembered to put our glasses on or not. Perhaps we exchange a quick word with a partner or a sibling. Some of us check on children or pets with nervous conditions. None of us are surprised.

At the top of the street, all the lights in the Sullivan house are on.

#

It's Edna Ostetler who first makes her way toward the scene an hour after the siren stopped screaming, in sensible brown flats and a patterned wrap tied over her short, permed hair. She's supposed to walk with a cane. She doesn't, though. She never does. She's nearly ninety, a bag of flappy dark skin and some bones, and basically an ability to irritate everyone, we suppose. Weekly, a nurse from the closest senile living facility visits her to bathe and wash her, to tidy the house that she can no longer manage. We've overheard her daughter, a young lawyer who lives closer to the city, arguing with her through an open window or two during summer. Her daughter wants her to move into a care facility, some place where she can be looked over. Edna, we've heard, says she will die or be killed in her house.

When she emerges from her home, the cane does not make an appearance, of course. Edna seems to live on spite and strong, black coffee.

She's dragging her dog, a pug named Bugsy, along like the thing enjoys going for walks. Bugsy didn't enjoy going for walks when he was a puppy, too fat with all the scraps from Edna's late husband, let alone now that he is old and even more fat (we think her husband's name was Jackson, but he passed away something like ten years ago, and honestly, he was a bastard to begin with). Bugsy pants and makes little half-grunt half-

coughing noises as he waddles along slowly after Edna, who lives three houses down from the Sullivan house.

#

It would not be the first time that the authorities were called to 302 Mulberry Circle, nor would it be the last. Our children had made certain of that. With little to do other than terrorize the simple parks nearby and a frequently shoplift from the small shopping center, there's little outlet in the summer for wandering teenagers.

The Sullivan house was haunted long before the Medfords moved in.

It's been called a number of things over the years, but most of us still call it the Sullivan house, even though the Sullivans haven't lived there in thirty years.

The corner house at the top of the College Park cul-de-sac, 302 has never had a family stay for more than a few years since that first family. It sits like a vulture, an old Victorian not quite defeated but still a little ramshackle, a looming gargoyle at the top of the hill. The longest to live there was its namesake, of course, the Sullivans, an Irish immigrant family who came to the United States back in the forties. A split-level, the main portion of the house contains a small kitchen and common room, has three regular upstairs bedrooms, and a large converted basement to hold the rest of the 14-member family. Irish, you know. But shortly after the family moved in, the family matriarch, an angry old woman named Rebecca, passed away of cancer. During their seven-year stay, three more family members would die inside the home: two young children and an older man who passed away suddenly after a freak accident (none of us can quite remember what the accident was, though we're all certain it was bloody).

Shortly after the second child's death—pneumonia, a toddler—the family packed their bags, turned out the lights, and moved on in the night.

When nobody lives there, it's a ghost house, a vacant lot relatively taken care by the landscaping crew the neighborhood employs to oversee general maintenance. There's a series of small rock-like burial stones, which some of us swear are where the old Sullivan dead were buried, because the closest cemetery was located at a Protestant church. We assume the Sullivans were Catholic, because again, Irish, but no one can remember for certain. Most acknowledge it's probably a dead hamster or three, maybe a dog or a cat. But for months, the house will go unnoticed, just another useless limb of the neighborhood, like Rebecca Markel's tomatoes or the Morris' oldest son. Children play, shaded under the front yard's large oak tree in the summer and in piles of leaves in the fall. Teenagers from surrounding streets pick the lock and break in, stay overnight as some kind of rite of passage. They want to see the dead ghost children or the ghost of old Mrs. Rebecca Sullivan creaking down the hallway. Sometimes they want to drink beer with their buddies or have sex with boyfriends or girlfriends who won't call the next day. They call it *sleeping in the bones*. Or *boners*.

We all know someone who has seen something in the Sullivan house.

#

Ruth Marie shifts the blinds of the kitchen window, the one over the sink with the window that sticks when she opens it. She's too small to close it when it sticks, so the breeze hits her in the face. She's the too-skinny sort with too much make-up, and she often wears sunglasses indoors. We assume she likes bourbon or scotch, neat, considering

her trash frequently tinkles with the high notes of clinking glass bottles. She puts her trash out in black garbage bags, the kind serial killers use to dispose of bodies in movies.

“Should we go out and stop her?” she asks her husband William, watching Edna approach the Sullivan house from across the street.

William sits at the kitchen table, plate empty of anything but crumbs, and bends at his thick waist as much as he can manage to tie his boots. He has an early shift at the construction yard, and as long as he can maneuver his truck up the lane, he doesn't really care what sort of mischief or madness is happening at the house at the top of the hill. William cares little for anything outside his Monday night football games and weekly pizza delivery.

“Hun, don't get involved.”

“It might be serious, Will,” says Ruth. “I know we haven't really spoken to the Medfords, really, so it's not really our business or anything. I kept meaning to, of course, but Caleb just started college and everything, so I never got around to it. Should I go see what's happening?”

“Ask Joan later. She'll know everything there is to know.”

#

There's been caution tape set up since the police first arrived. While one cop car left sometime during that first hour, the second still sits there with its lights on and a black van now sits, parked just off on the main street instead of blocking traffic to the cul-de-sac. Two young men set up a camera just in front of the Ruth's driveway, careful to set it outside of private property range. A brunette with a tweed skirt and big hair primps in the middle of the street. Two officers stand at the bottom of the Sullivan's long

drive, one of them wearing a wide-brimmed sheriff's hat, a slight slouch to his pouched form. The other, with a face just this side of boyish, has a clipboard.

"Excuse me," says Edna, waving a wrinkled hand at the two. "Excuse me, gentlemen."

The officers turn to her.

"Ma'am," says the one in the sheriff's hat, "you can't be here."

"I live on this street, I'll go wherever I damn well mean to, boy. What is going on here? Has someone died again? Is that the cause of all this racket?"

The officers exchange a glance before the same officer says, "Ma'am, the investigation is on-going. I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you go back home."

"So, I can't know anything?" Edna huffs. "My day is just interrupted?"

"We're sorry, ma'am," the other, younger, officer begins, "but the investigating officers need..."

Edna huffs again, cutting him off. "Son, the adults are speaking."

"Ma'am," the first officer says again.

"Stop calling me ma'am," snarls Edna. Bugsy gives an anxious whine at her tone and Edna jerks the leash, causes his collar to jingle sharply. The pug's whimper cuts off.

His glare is mutinous on his smashed face.

Yes, Bugsy, we hate her too.

#

The Medfords moved into the Sullivan house about three years ago, back when Joan was still pregnant, before Ruth's trash clinked merrily, and before Marcus' wife left him for pediatrician or gynecologist or something.

They're a quiet bunch. An older married couple named Alan and Christina, with two children that perhaps were a little too old to live at home right now. They didn't have much, and it seemed as though they simply moved in overnight. One minute, the yard was empty, and the windows were still boarded up, and the next, there's a strange paisley printed valance in the kitchen window and the door's thrown open, the subtle shriek of moving table legs on cheap linoleum spilling out. As a simple white family of four, not openly religious or salesmen, most of us ignored them.

We weren't rude or prying. But there wasn't anything particularly special about them. They seemed to move as a cohesive unit, in and out of their home, like no one could leave without another attending as well.

We tried to be nice. We tried to be neighborly.

Most of us sent a welcome to the neighborhood card or left a covered dish on their porch.

The Medfords returned our glass bowls and dishes to the right porches. They sent out thank you letters and followed our instructions about removing that ghastly paisley print from the kitchen window. It wasn't our fault they kept to themselves. They're a quiet bunch.

#

Mr. James Kiriazis, the Sullivan's house only neighbor and one of the few lone bachelors in Mulberry Circle, does not garden.

To be honest, we didn't even know he was aware there were flowers in his yard.

Mr. Kiriazis, whose face will grow large and red if referred to by his Christian name, has lived alone near the top of Mulberry Circle for nearly thirteen years.

Occasionally he can be seen barbequing in his backyard with his brother, who visits during the summer months, and watching hours of golf on his fifty-inch flat screen television in his boxer shorts.

Just shortly past eight in the morning, while Edna Ostetler argues with the two police officers, Mr. Kiriazis emerges from his front door with a large, filled ice-pitcher of water in nothing but a pair of plain white boxers and a fluffy purple bathrobe.

He walks the perimeter of his yard, grumbling under his breath as he waters the flowers, or perhaps they're just weeds, in his yard.

When he comes to the side of his property that his home shares with the Sullivan house, he glances up to peer over the head of Edna at the officers. Maybe he doesn't say a word, it's hard to tell from so far away. Maybe he only gives them a look, that sort of half-shoulder shrug and *What can you do?* twist of the mouth. Maybe he tells Edna to get that damn dog out of his yard before he shits in his daffodils.

We watch Mr. Kiriazis walk back into his house and slam the door.

There are no daffodils in Mr. Kiriazis' yard. They're obviously begonias.

Or weeds.

#

The Morris' lawnmower engine refuses to turn over. It sounds like its dying.

Daniel, the Morris' 19-year old son is hunched over it, furiously pushing the little rubber bulb on the side to pump the pressure and then tugging as hard as he can. This used to be the job of his older brother, Richard.

Richard left town for California with his rock band two years ago.

Richard still writes, we know, asking for money.

Next door, Hannah and her sister Georgie, watch Daniel's backside from the porch. Long-since retired and even longer-since widowed, they enjoy the way Daniel's back muscles flex beneath his tank top and the two aren't afraid to break something in their own home to try and coax him inside. It's a little creepy, to be honest. Aren't they afraid they'll break a hip?

"Everything alright there, Dan?" calls Georgie, swirling a teaspoon in her tea.

The young man nods and gestures to the lawnmower. "I think it's dead."

"*Oh*. How unfortunate."

"Say, Dan," says Hannah. "Do you know what's happening up the street? Those sirens this morning were so awful. I couldn't fall back asleep. I had to take a pill."

"Don't know, ma'am." Daniel ruffles his hair, shaggy and brown about his ears. "Mom said Mrs. Edna was up there earlier, but that the cops wouldn't say nothing. They got it all taped up though. Ain't seen no one go in or out all day that wasn't a cop, though. Think it may be on the news, though?"

Georgie sips her tea, tips her neck slightly to keep Daniel in view as he maneuvers the lawnmower into a new position. "How unfortunate."

#

It was Christmastime when that first situation occurred, the one that we expected.

The Medford's daughter was home on holiday break and *something* happened.

We don't particularly know the details, because most the argument occurred inside the home. We only noticed when everything spilled into the street, when it became a *scene*.

But Alan and Christina, we could tell that they were angry. The window blinds were drawn shut. The door wasn't opened more than enough for a body to squeeze through. We think that the Medford girl brought home another girl for Christmas. Or the boy brought home a boy.

Who knows? We don't.

#

It's around lunchtime when nine-year old Kira and five-year old Marnie Jeswald run into their home screaming.

"There's a body!" yells Kira.

"*Body!*" Marnie echoes.

"What the *hell* is all that racket?" gets yelled from somewhere on the second floor.

The Jeswald's patriarch, Mark's father, an asthmatic eighty-year old and perhaps the scariest thing in the neighborhood outside of the Sullivan house and Edna Ostetler, has Alzheimer's and cancer and a bad case of gout. The Jeswalds brought him home eight months ago because he was supposed to die at any point and Mark couldn't bear to let his father die in a nursing home. His wife and his father do not get along. His father hasn't died yet. Mark Jeswald hasn't heard the end of it since.

"Shut up!" Linda Jeswald grabs both girls by the elbows to drag them onto the back outside onto the stoop. When she's got them outside and the door swiftly shut, blocking out the angry calls from Father Jeswald, she turns to them with arms crossed.

"What are you girls screaming over?"

"Somebody's dead!"

“Dead!”

“There’s blood all over the walls!”

“Blood!”

“Billy said!”

“He said! He said!”

The girls continue wailing, and Linda pinches the bridge of her nose.

#

Jack, Marcus, and Ron stand at the end of Ron’s driveway, just a few houses down on the other side of the College Park cul-de-sac from the Sullivan’s.

“It’s fucking ghosts,” says Marcus through a cigar.

“Jesus Christ,” says Ron. “Mark, you are thirty-eight. You have to stop believing in ghosts. Nothing happened to you that night. It was just your imagination.”

“You didn’t even stay the whole night that night,” says Marcus. He’s got an indignant look on his face. “Don’t tell me what I did or didn’t see.”

Ron looks up toward his husband beseechingly, like he’s asking for back-up.

Jack takes a sip of his beer and says quietly, “You didn’t stay the whole night, Ron.”

#

When she finally gets the girls settled, Linda sits on her porch with a pack of Virginia Slims and rings up Ruth, who answers promptly on the second ring, as she was instructed.

“Billy’s got the girls thinking there’s a dead body in that Sullivan house, Ruth,” says Linda when the other woman answers, exhaling a cloud of white smoke. She taps

ash straight onto the ground, not an ashtray in sight. “Now they’re over here screaming about blood and bones and a body in the walls. What the hell kinda movies have you been letting that boy watch lately?”

Ruth’s quiet on the other end. “It looked like a body, Linda, I don’t know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for Billy to see. I didn’t even get a good look, they have the house all blocked—”

Linda goes quiet. “What do you mean a body?”

#

“It was probably an overdose,” says Joan Stuben to her husband. She leans heavily against the open screen door of their enclosed, wrap-around porch. Her husband, the hen-pecked Arthur Stuben, bends over the open hood of a 2009 Carola.

“Huh,” he answers absently. Arthur whacks at something inside the car. There’s the distinct sound of metal on metal.

Joan and Arthur are considerably one of the youngest couples in the College Park cul-de-sac. Their massive colonial takes up a plot of and a half of land itself, with their long stretch driveway taking up the other half. Joan pretends to enjoy yard work, refuses to let Arthur hire a private landscaper, and ends up requesting the help of whatever neighborhood teenager she can bribe with her store-bought cookies and lukewarm iced tea. There’s a patch of crab-grass growing in the back left-hand corner, and we think her rosebushes are looking particularly sad.

Joan smooths a hand down her apron. We don’t know why she’s wearing an apron. She always does when she appears outside, but we know that Joan rarely cooks,

and on the rare occasion she does, a delivery car from either Hunan's or Pizza Hut is quick to follow.

"It has to be an overdose," she says again, tapping her chin with a well-manicured finger. "Don't they have a young daughter?"

Arthur grunts. He tugs at something in the car. There's a splashing sound and a short sputter. Arthur grunts again. "What did you say?"

Arthur should not be allowed within fifteen feet of a car engine. Arthur is an accountant.

"*I said,*" repeats Joan, arms crossed over chest, "don't they have a daughter?"

"I don't know," answers Arthur. "You're the one that met them."

Joan makes a face. "I wouldn't say I *met* them, per say..."

She's had more interaction than he did. More interaction than most of us, to be honest. Arthur has never once spoken to the Medfords. When they moved in three years prior, Joan had dropped off the expected casserole (in a hard tin-foil container), but even she hadn't had much exchange with them since.

Joan glances toward the top of the cul-de-sac, ruffles her hair and sighs loudly.

#

The sun is just beginning to set when the officers quickly tear down the caution tape. A piece flutters silently down the street, caught in the breeze until it catches in the Morris's prickly ball-like shrubs at the edge of their driveway.

The ambulance is long gone. Whether there was a body in the back or just an empty cab, whether the inner walls of the Sullivan house are painted with blood or the floors with dried vomit, not one of our Mulberry Circle neighbors have been able to

coerce a straight answer from the two cops. The one with the sherrif's hat had been particularly short toward the end.

Edna Ostetler is asleep, we assume, because her doors are shut and locked, her windows closed, and there's no sound from inside her home. Plus, she's old and going to sleep around 6pm is sort of what old people seem to do, we think.

Mr. Kiriazis makes one final lap around his front yard with his jug of water, this time in a pair of loose jeans and a polo shirt instead of his underthings. We're uncertain if he's drowned his begonias, if his imaginary daffodils have been shitted or trodden on.

Ruth sets out dinner for William, a pot-roast. He'll finish most of it, but perhaps wander down around midnight, still a little hungry. Billy is in his room, sent to bed without dinner and no video games for inciting the riot with the Jeswalds daughters.

Georgie and Hannah read poetry on the porch. There's nothing else to do.

Daniel Morris left hours ago in his pretty bright red mustang and an even prettier girl from his high school sitting in the passenger seat.

Linda helps her father-in-law with his evening shower. He peed the bed again.

Ron and Jack cuddle together on the couch in their living room, and they talk about Marcus, whether or not he's okay now that Lucy's gone. They're worried about their friend, because he seems to be losing time nowadays, seems to be losing focus. We've all seen Marcus at a back-lit window or curled alone on the couch watching infomercials at 3am.

Joan and Arthur try to have sex. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

Nobody is watching the gargoyle that is the Sullivan house, looming dark at the mouth of the cul-de-sac, silent and still. Nobody is watching when a car drive homes and

Alan helps Christina from the passenger seat, quiet as they always are. Nobody is watching when they make their way back into their home, the lights flipped on at the end of the street.

Strange Weather Patterns

A year after she was kicked out SUNY Upstate, she begins to vanish from sight.

Kate wakes during a summer thunderstorm in the early hours of the morning, head blaring with last night's Wild Turkey and stumbles her way to the bathroom to throw up all her bad choices in the kitchen sink. She rinses the sink, thankful that she hasn't woken her parents, and slips into the shower to quell the cold sweats, to settle her clenching stomach. In the swirling water by the silver strainer to catch her long blonde hair, she cannot see her toes. Where they should be, where the water warmly rushes around two things that should be there, there is nothing but a faint shimmer, like wisps of mist or cloud. She wriggles her toes. The water splashes around her feet, clearly disrupted by her movement, but seemingly without cause.

She wishes for a pill, for anything to blot out the pounding in her skull, the way her mind just won't shut up, the way her chest feels small and tight. She curls up on the floor of the tub and stays there until she thinks she can breathe again.

#

At a party in the backyard of an old high-school acquaintance two days later, people avoid her. Or they make polite conversation and never make eye contact. She

doesn't blame them. She can smell weed somewhere, and she's itching like a bloodhound.

Kate's only at the party because Chelsea, a coworker, invited her. They went to high school together but ran in different groups. Chelsea wants to show off how perfect she and her new boyfriend are, how cute they are together, how *Didn't you guys date in high school? What a small world!* Kate hasn't spoken to Dan since they broke up before she left for college almost three years ago and she doesn't want to see him now. It seems like a far-off life, that person she was in high school, her life before Adam.

But Chelsea is the only friend she knows still willing to give her percs after last summer.

Kate spends the night with her face in one bottle or another, the percocet lulling her mind into gentle hush, soft and mellow, everything muffled like voices underwater. It makes the dollar-store Christmas lights strung around the backyard go hazy and out of focus, lets her feel like she's expanding outward, into something bigger, something greater than the tiny person she has become. It lets her forget for a moment that she's partying with college kids, because she can no longer call herself one. It drowns out the shrill buzz in her head she's always trying to silence.

Kate finds the guy with the weed and she shotguns it straight from his mouth. In between hits and kisses, he breathes wet smoke and vapor onto her tongue, thick and syrupy in the warm glow of pills and alcohol and summer air. Is it true? he asks, lips barely touching hers. Did you OD last summer? Kate steals the joint from his finger tips and takes a drink from a flimsy plastic cup. Yeah, she says, Yeah, you're making out with a dead girl.

She sleeps with Dan in someone's little brother's room, leaves her shoes and a puddle of vomit in a flower bush at the end of the driveway, the sun just beginning to rise around her. Her pocket vibrates, low and steady, but she ignores it and begins her walk home.

#

When Kate wakes the next morning, her mouth tastes of sour beer and stale cigarettes. She does not remember getting home. Her head aches, hair still pulled tight on her head. She roots for her cell phone in the nest of pillows and blankets and finds it a minute later, red-barred with the brightness cranked full. Kate sits against her elbow and blinks, wills the fuzzy shapes in front of her eyes to make meaning.

It is just after 2pm. She has twelve missed calls, thirty-seven text messages, and two voicemails. Nine of the calls are from her mother, two from Chelsea, and one from Dan.

Kate scrolls through the texts from Chelsea, mostly unconcerned, until she reaches the last one: I thought we were freinds. God youre such a bitch.

Dan's says simply: Did you get home okay? And then: I'm sorry.

Kate falls back against her bed. Her legs are falling asleep. Light pools across the bed, buttery and warm, and she lifts her blanket over her head, as though if she willed it hard enough, the sun would disappear, and she could stay hidden away forever.

#

Her mother's face is a wall, nothing but brick and concrete. Kate wanders out into the kitchen around 6pm, unsure whether food is a good or bad idea. Her mother is at the dining-room table feeding Adam spaghetti-o's. Adam's babbling happily, dribbling food

down his front and it only gets louder when he sees her, babbles something that might be the beginning of her name, hands outstretched and grabby. She cannot look at him. Kate tiptoes to the refrigerator, snags a bottle of water and two oranges. Maybe if she's quiet, her mother won't say anything, won't break the tremulous silence. Kate eats them standing at the kitchen counter. She wonders if there's still aspirin in the house, or if her mother has flushed that down the toilet too.

“What the hell am I gonna do with you, Kate?” her mother finally asks, when Kate breaks silence and the seal on her water bottle.

Kate wants to say, *I'm fine.*

Starts to say, *Leave me alone.*

Kate says instead, “I don't know, Mom,” and leaves the kitchen.

She strips in the bathroom, turns the water on full blast and leans her forearms against the cold tile. She stares down at the place her feet should be, nothing more than a glimmer, like change winking up from the bottom of a wishing well.

#

She calls off work the next two days, half because she can't stand the idea of facing Chelsea and half because she knows no matter how much they threaten, she's not going to get fired. Each morning, her mother opens the door at the bottom of the stairs that leads up to her second-floor loft bedroom. Kate has trained herself to know when that door opens, to hear the creak and swing of the old wood. She knows that she has seventeen seconds from the first creak to hide whatever she can before her mother reaches the top of the stairs. She's surprised that she still has a door, knows from stories

at forced NA, AA, and suicide prevention meetings over the past year that sometimes parents or wives or whoever sometimes refute the need for privacy in these situations.

She imagines her mother's face as she has seen it countless times: pinched, tired, disappointed. She thinks of the gray growing at her mother's temples, the way she stopped talking to Kate about church. She wonders about Adam.

On her nightstand, her phone lights up and dances noisily across the surface. Kate lies in bed and wiggles her toes, wonders if the space above her ankles where she used to see her feet is just a hallucination or if she really may get her wish.

#

She gets a lecture on responsibility the first day back at work. Kate's boss, a tall and thin woman with a soccer-mom bob and too much nervous energy to be just anxiety, tells Kate she could be something, she could really be something if only she cared about the way her actions affected the other people in her life.

Kate thinks that's contradictory. The whole point of becoming something, making yourself better, is rooted in selfishness. Kate knows she's pretty selfish. That's why she called off work two days in a row.

When her boss excuses her, Kate lets another coworker drag her into a corner.

"Dude, what happened with you and Dan?" the girl asks breathlessly. "Chelsea was furious. She said you guys disappeared at Jack's party?"

Kate shrugs. "It's not a big deal." Kate has been ignoring all the text messages, Dan's voicemails. Most of the time, she keeps her phone in airplane mode, uses it as a means to tell time. She deleted all her social media last summer, when she could no longer take the questions from her dormmates and college friends.

Absently, Kate wonders if she should tell someone that her body seems to slowly be disappearing. That's probably a bigger deal than fucking Dan Killian. She can no longer see anything beneath her kneecaps. Kate has begun to wear long socks, so no one notices there's nothing between her shoes and the bottom of her slacks. Would they believe her? Would she care if they did? Sometimes it felt like the entire world is too much hassle, like the amount of energy she has to exert for any given activity is just too much.

“Uhm, it's kind of a big deal to Chelsea that you disappeared with her boyfriend.” The girl taps her toes against the ground, *click clack, click clack*. “You were plastered.”

“That's pretty standard, nowadays.”

#

Sometimes Kate sneaks into her brother's room late at night just to watch him sleep, the way his tiny chest rises and falls in quick little gasps. Even in his sleep, if she offers him her finger, he clutches at her and won't release her for hours. Sometimes she needs to feel important. Sometimes she needs to be reminded that despite how terribly she fucked up, she hasn't ruined him, not yet.

Adam still looks at her like she hung the moon, this tiny little boy with dark messy hair and bright blue eyes. He doesn't know any better. He doesn't know the sort of damage that she can do yet. He looks like he could come from her parents, their dark hair and pale complexion. Kate is the odd-one out; tall where her parents are small, blonde and brown-eyed and naturally golden. Her dad used to joke that she was a fairy-child, that they adopted her, that they found her on the side of the road. She was a fairy for Halloween six years in a row, her mom patiently altering the costume with every growth

spurt, until she decided she was too old for made-up stories and wanted to be a zombie instead.

Her dad doesn't make jokes anymore.

Kate knows her parents love her. They wouldn't be so angry if they didn't.

She loves Adam though. The most perfect child, who never cried, who slept through the night. Adam, who smiles at her even though her body is slowly fading, twinkling out, the most beautiful stardust in a galaxy of her ugly selfishness. The first thing she said when she woke up in the hospital last summer was, "Is Adam okay?"

"How could you do this to us?" her mom had cried, but she sat the toddler on the bed between them on the bed anyway. Adam smiled, unaware, Kate held him and cried. She loves Adam. Kate loves Adam so much that she feels as though she might shatter him from trying to hold on too tight.

#

The bathroom is the only room in the house with a lock on the door now, so it's the only place she feels safe enough to explore the changes to her body without interruption.

One week since she noticed the strange absence of her toes, Kate sits in the bathtub, doodling on her calf with a sharpie. The thick, black lines sit in midair, like smoke-lines drawn with a sparkler on the 4th of July, curling where her skin naturally bends. She traces circles around her ankles, the felt tip ticklish, then traces the line with her fingertip. It smudges and smears. She can see the places where the ink catches on the tiny hairs. Most of both legs have faded from view. She could see her left kneecap last night when she kissed Adam goodnight, after his bedtime story and his song (which she

sang to him three times) and crawled into bed. This morning, when she got dressed, it was gone. All that's left behind is the faintest shimmer in the light, like wisps of cloud or dust curling in sunlight. She's slowly growing accustomed to the visible lack of limbs, the way that she seems to float along instead of walk. There is nothing of her physically missing, just invisible. She can still feel her legs, can still hold and touch them. It's perhaps the most literal interpretation of phantom limb yet.

There's a bottle of Bulleit propped against the side of the tub, halfway gone. She lifts the bottle to her lips, a trickle of liquid escaping to slide down her throat and breasts, as she traces the shimmer of invisibility creeping up her thigh, wrapping up her hip. Absently, she wonders whether Dan would think more of less of her now.

#

Kate's drunk when she calls him, in the treehouse her father built when she was four. She came out for one cigarette and stayed for six.

She wonders if she's ever had a real conversation with him sober, but she's pretty sure she's never had a conversation with *him* sober. Dan Killian was her boyfriend in high school and he'd taught her and Chelsea how to shotgun beer, how to steal cigarillos from convenient stores. She broke up with him through a text message the week after they graduated, and though he tried to call and see her, she ignored him. Dan and Chelsea started dating three months ago, and Chelsea had done everything in her power to rub that fact in Kate's face.

He says her name simply when he answers, just a deep, slow, "Kate." Like he's exhaling her or something. He still has the ability to make her insides shudder, flash hot and cold.

“Dan.” She tries to mimic him.

“We’re talking now? I thought you hated me.”

“Why would I hate you?”

Dan makes a low throat-noise. “It’s been three weeks.”

“Fair.” She chews her lip, fumbles with the lighter as she goes for another cigarette. “Do you still smoke marbs? A friend at Upstate turned me onto smooths.”

“Kate,” he says again lowly. She can’t tell if he sounds agitated or just impatient, or perhaps resigned. “Did you call for a reason or are we just gonna breathe nonsense at each other for a while?”

Kate exhales smoke and closes her eyes. “Can you—I dunno, talk at me?”

“What d’you want me to talk about, Kate?” he asks slowly, flirtingly. It almost sounds like a purr. It feels natural, falling back into this habit the same way she falls back into others. She can imagine his smile, his eyes. She rubs the spot on her hipbone that he used to grab. It disappeared that afternoon. Dan used to say he needed to anchor her to the ground or she’d float away like a hot air balloon, big dreams and the need to run.

“Anything,” she says. “Just don’t wanna be anything right now.”

Dan pauses, asks hesitantly. “Are you high right now?”

“No,” Kate says quickly. “Not tonight.”

“I’m sorry. About what happened last summer. I only know what I heard.”

“Yeah,” says Kate. “Me too.”

She hangs up the phone.

#

Last spring, Kate came home from her third semester of undergrad because she got caught with a baggie of percocet, oxycodone, and weed in the dorms. Her roommate turned her in. She was placed on academic probation, pending expulsion. The college she went to, half a state away, had a zero-tolerance policy. Her parents were devastated, naturally. All that hard work, her scholarship, the money they'd put into her checking account.

Last summer, Kate spent her days sleeping in until noon and her nights smoking and drinking and getting high, sleeping her way through the dropouts and burnouts and rejects.

Last summer, Kate drank a bottle of whiskey and swallowed half a dozen percocet. She followed it up with a handful of her mother's sleeping pills. Her parents were out, a rare night they'd planned for a month and half. It was the first time they let Kate watch Adam alone. Kate passed out while the child played in his playpen on other side of the room.

#

A few days after her phone call with Dan, when Kate gets home from work, she hears her mother trashing her room, throwing things around, like she doesn't care what she breaks. Kate hesitates at the bottom of the stairs, wonders for a moment if she should throw a tantrum, but decides she just doesn't have the energy. She turns to her father, sitting on the couch with Adam sleeping quietly in his lap, watching a television game show on mute. He looks tired, she thinks, his face wan in the flashing lights of their flatscreen. Adam plays with a stuffed dog, one of her old castoffs. Kate sits down on the

other end of the couch. Her father turns his head slightly, just enough away from the television so that he can view her from the corner of his eyes.

“Can I hold him?” she asks quietly, so as not to disturb Adam.

“You going to say anything? You broke four plates when she went through your room the first time.” Her father gently transfers the sleeping child into her arms. “Mind his head, Katie.”

“Dad, I-I *know* how to hold him.” Adam fills her arms, so different than last year, or the year before, when he was just a newborn. He feels sturdier, more real. Perhaps less breakable, though she’s still terrified of how easily everything falls apart in her hands. “It honestly doesn’t matter. Not anymore.”

Her dad looks like he wants to say something more, looks like he starts to, then stops.

“I don’t know what to say to you now, Kate,” he says instead. He sounds resigned, and Kate wonders if she could talk to him, if he’d understand now. He smooths a hand through Adam’s hair. “I don’t know what we did wrong that could make you do something like that.”

“It’s not about you guys,” argues Kate in a whisper, too aware of the child she gently rocks against her chest. “It’s about *me*. It’s nothing that you guys did, I’m just, I’m—”

Her dad says when she doesn’t say anything else, “What do you want us to—”

“Dad, I’m going invisible,” interrupts Kate too loudly, and for a moment, she considers ripping off her sweatshirt, bearing her invisible left arm, which disappeared late

the night before. She doesn't think either of her parents have noticed the long-sleeves, the gloves. Hell, they probably think she's cutting, that she's hiding track marks.

Adam makes a sleepy, angry baby noise in her arms. Her father scoffs and lifts the child from her arms, stands to take him from the room. "Don't be so dramatic, Kate."

#

Chelsea definitely isn't talking to her.

It's the first shift that they've shared together since the night that Kate slept with Dan, and Chelsea seems determined to perform every task without acknowledging Kate's existence. It's an upgrade from what Kate expected. Their coworkers watch the space between them like it's a wild animal, as though they're going to throw down any minute on the front line of a shoddy little small-town café.

Their coworkers watch the space between them like it's a wild animal, as though they're going to throw down any minute on the front line of a shoddy little small-town café.

"Stop smiling," one coworker, who has long since grown tired of their standoff, snaps at their dishwasher. "You look like you're imagining a porno in your head." She turns to Kate. "Can't you just make up already? Apologize or something? This is getting ridiculous."

"I'm not gonna apologize when I didn't do anything wrong," murmurs Kate, warming the milk for a cappuccino. She's wearing a turtleneck today and thin gloves on her hands. Parts of her start fading at the most inopportune times. The invisibility is creepy up her chest. There's not going to be much left soon. Nobody wants to ask about the gloves.

“Ex-fucking-cuse me? You didn’t do anything wrong?” Kate spills the steamed milk onto the counter, startled with how quickly Chelsea’s by her side. “He’s my *boyfriend.*”

“You fucked plenty of my boyfriends in high school.” Kate sets the cup down on the table, begins to wipe up another mess she’s made.

“After all I’ve done for you,” hisses Chelsea, “all the times I covered for your drunk-ass with your parents? I let you stay at my apartment when you were too scared to tell your parents you got kn—!” She cuts off with a howl.

Kate’s hand has lashed out, like it has a mind of its own. She has Chelsea by the end of her dark braid, wrapped it in her fist, and she jerks it. Chelsea’s head snaps back until the girl is staring directly up into Kate’s face.

“Shut your damn mouth,” says Kate quietly.

Customers have their phones out, recording their exchange. Kate lets Chelsea go. The girl’s shaking. Their boss stares.

Kate throws down her apron and marches out the door.

#

In the bathroom mirror, she’s nothing more than a floating head. Laughter bubbles up inside her, threatening to spill out. She’s full on whiskey, but she hasn’t had a pill since the night of the party, and that’s a first since she detoxed in the hospital.

She calls Dan anyway.

“Can you meet me at the treehouse in my backyard in like a half an hour?” she asks.

Kate stares at the space where her body used to be, runs invisible fingertips along invisible breasts, shifts awkwardly on her invisible feet and cocks an invisible hip to one side. It's almost beautiful, the way the space left behind almost shimmers like a barely-there mist. *Maybe I'm not invisible*, she thinks, *maybe I'm just a cloud*.

"It's 2am," he answers.

"Please? I know, I know it's a lot of ask."

Dan's quiet for a moment, and she hears the shifting of skin on bedsheets. She remembers his bedsheets back from before, and she wonders if they're the same. And would her skin feel different now? Can anyone feel her except for herself? Suddenly she's suffocating.

"Half an hour?" asks Dan, his voice cutting through.

"Yes," she chokes.

"I'll be there."

"Dan," she says before he can hang up, "bring something to drink."

He's already curled in the corner of her childhood treehouse when she makes her way into the cool night air, bundled in sweaters like it's the middle of winter. Dan doesn't ask and passes her a small bottle of Bulleit as she lowers herself to the floor next to him.

Kate takes a small sip, then another. She takes a breath and swallows two large gulps, nearly a quarter of the bottle. Dan grabs it out of her hands, his face twisted in concern.

"I'm going to show you something," starts Kate, peeling her gloves off. "And I need you to not say anything until I'm finished."

"Did you get a tattoo?" jokes Dan.

He's not joking when she slowly undresses in an inverted striptease, slowly disappearing instead of revealing as she peels layer after layer, until she's sitting naked but her underthings and socks. They float in space, filled but clearly empty.

"I seem to be disappearing," says Kate finally, beginning to shrug, and then realizing that he can't see it. "It's getting worse every day. Pretty soon there's gonna be nothing left."

Dan hesitates, meets her eyes, and then reaches. "I'm going for your knee, but god, I'm so sorry if I miss."

Kate grabs his hand and leads it there instead. He wraps his fingers around the curve, rubs his finger into her skin like he isn't handling what looks to be thin air, cupping her nothingness in his palm. He feels normal, no different than her own investigating fingers.

"Does it hurt?"

"No," she says. "Can you feel me?"

"That's so weird," he says and nods. "It's like, not like real skin. Like holding stuffing. Or cotton candy."

"Will you touch me? Just one last time?"

"What happens when you're all...?"

"I don't know," says Kate.

They're quiet for a moment longer before Kate blurts out, "I'm sorry I never told you about Adam." She glances down at where her fingers should be. "I know you know. I know everybody knows."

“I don’t know how to be a dad,” Dan says eventually, after a belabored pause. “Did... did you want me to...” He makes a vague motion in the air.

“No. He doesn’t even know about me,” says Kate. “He’s better than us, Dan. We can’t mess him up like that. I just thought you should know. Should hear it from me.”

#

Eventually Kate calms and redresses, and they sit quietly for a few hours, like they’re waiting. They finish the bottle between them and Kate’s stomach is full and warm, Dan’s shoulder is pressed tight against hers until he slowly passes out, curled up in the rickety floorboards. Hours later, it begins to rain, and Kate leaves Dan in treehouse.

She goes to the front yard to smoke the last of her pack of cigarettes, thankful that whatever might be happening to her, she can still appreciate the pleasant burn in her chest and the back of her throat. She sits down in the middle of her driveway and stares down the street in the still-gray dawn haze. Eventually, Kate lays down, invisible hands clasped against her chin, letting the rain soak through her clothes until it reaches her skin.

Maybe it’s better this way, she thinks to herself, blinking against the rain in her eyes. Dan was asleep when Kate realized she’d faded away, that while he held her, she’d just disappeared.

Ironic. She’d wanted everyone to stop looking at her for so long.

When the cold and the wet become too much, her clothes soaked through, she moves to retreat indoors. But not before she notices that in the driveway, where she’d laid, the ground is still mostly dry. There’s a pale, dry patch on the white concrete surface in the shape of her body, like a chalk outline.

Kate quietly lets herself into Adam's room and peers down at him, so full of something she doesn't even know. Adam is curled up in his crib with her old scruffy dog clutched against his chest, arm around the middle where there's no stuffing left. She reaches down to touch his head softly, smooth his dark hair back away from his face. She lets him grab her hand, like he always does, his tiny finger wrapped around a space of mist and stardust.

This time, he wakes just barely, blinking up at her with his bright eyes. He makes a noise of recognition, and throws his arms up at her, fingers grabbing and clutching in the air.

Kate reaches down and lifts her son into her arms, cradling him against her chest, feels something blossom inside her chest, warm and bubbly, like sunlight.