

The Nix of the Mountain Valley Pond & Other Fairytales

by

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ABSTRACT

This collection of fiction explores fairytales in both structure and themes. The first half looks at fairytales as a form, taking into account the four key aspects of the structure—flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic, normalized magic—in both original tales and retellings of existing tales. The rest of the collection continues on various themes presented in the first half—of family, of identity, of grief—though varies in their narrative structures.

Table of Contents

“The Nix of the Mountain Valley Pond”	1
“Truth in Retelling I”	17
“Sisters and Brothers”	18
“Truth in Retelling II”	32
“Waning Fog, Waxing Moon”	33
“Truth in Retelling III”	55
“Goodnight, Sweet Prince”	56
“Truth in Retelling IV”	66
“Girls in Jeweled Cages”	67
“Truth in Retelling V”	83
“We Three Survivors”	84
“Truth in Retelling VI”	91
“What Do You Hunger For?”	92
“Truth in Retelling VII”	106
“How to Grieve Your First Loss”	107
“The Sanctuary”	111
“Save State”	129
“Vestal Fires: A Novel”	135

“The Nix of the Mountain Valley Pond”

Cicily holds a hand out past her porch overhang, gauging how heavy the rain is today. A light, misty drizzle doesn't require much more than a hood, so she grabs her cloak off the hook beside the front door.

“I'm headed out!” she calls to her mom Faye.

Faye is working tiny, tight braids into her usual bun for the day. “Don't forget your mother and I are expecting your help at the store today.”

Cicily nods and waves in acknowledgement as she leaves. The sun is actually shining through the rain, a nice change after the dark and heavy storms that were hitting the mountain valley village the past few days. She lets both the sun and the rain hit her shaved head for a moment—she lacks the patience of her mothers to deal with hair styles in the perpetual moisture—before pulling up her hood.

The stream beneath the stilted houses and pathways is quiet, barely lapping against the wooden posts. It snakes into a sizable pond at the center of the village. Cicily remembers tales her mother Arielle would tell her about the pond when she was a child—tales of the nix, a greedy merman, a malicious water spirit, that preys on the selfishness of humans and takes what is most precious to them if they're not careful. Arielle always told these with a bit of sparkle in her eye; unlike her partner Faye, she still believes in the magic of old. Cicily is unsure what she believes yet.

She steps off the dock path and onto rocky land. Her best friend Alecky is one of the few villagers that don't live over the water, which is fine by them because despite having lived here all their life, Alecky detests water and never learned to swim. Cicily, on the other hand, practically grew up in the water; her eyes are even the same clear blue.

Walking through the gate to Alecky's farm, she's greeted by bleats of goats. She laughs as one runs up to her.

"Hi, girl." She scratches the doe in between her stumpy ears, her coat coarse and stiff and water-resistant.

"Ana!" a young voice sounds from behind the house. Alecky's son Sebastian—the name he chose when he realized his true self a few years ago—rounds the corner, his mess of blond hair hanging in his face. He smiles when he sees her. "Oh, hi Auntie Sis!"

"Morning, Sebastian. Is—"

"Yep! In the barn, milking Rosa." He takes hold of the lead on the doe. "Ana thought she could run away, so I had to chase her. I'll walk back with you!"

Cicily motions down the path. "Lead the way."

Sebastian fights to keep Ana from halting to munch on grass, but the trio makes it to the barn without incident. Alecky is sitting next to another doe up on the milk stand, back to the door.

"Did you get her?"

"Yep!" Sebastian leads Ana into a nearby pen, removes her lead, and closes the door quickly before she can escape again. "Got Auntie Sis, too."

Alecky turns around for a moment and smiles. "Isn't it a little early for you to be awake?"

Cicily shrugs. "I'm full of surprises."

Alecky laughs and continues milking. Sebastian tugs on their sleeve.

"Can I go play now?"

They nod. “Be back before lunch,” they say as Sebastian runs out of the barn.
“And be careful around the water!”

“I could teach him to swim, you know.” Cicily leans against the wall, watching them work. “Then you wouldn’t have to worry so much about the water.”

“Not everyone needs to know how to swim. I get along just fine.”

Alecky has always been the equal opposite of Cicily: pale, blond hair a spiky mess upon their head, early riser, fervent opponent of anything having to do with the water their village is surrounded by. They also are far more interested in love than she can comprehend, which is how they became the youngest parent in the village. When their own parents disowned them for the teenage pregnancy, Alecky just packed up belongings and moved into the empty-at-the-time farmhouse, set out to raise Sebastian alone.

Cicily admires their independence and resolve; the idea of leaving her childhood home for her own scares her still.

Rosa the goat snorts and stamps her hoof, indicating that she’s done with her food and wants released. Alecky moves the milk bucket to a safe space and lets the doe off the stand. She trots over to a pen, nudges the latch open with her nose, and walks in.

“She’s a smart one,” Cicily comments.

“Yeah.” Alecky shuts the door and locks the latch. “It’s a good thing she’s the most well-behaved in the barn. Otherwise I think I’d have an uprising on my hands.”

“I bet Sebastian would love that.”

“He probably would.” They take the bucket and pour the milk into a large jug,

already three-quarters full from the rest of the does. “Is there a particular reason for your visit or?”

Cicily shrugs again. “I was up; figured I’d stop by before the moms forced me to work today.”

“Speaking of which,”—they heft up the jug and lead the way back to the house—
“I have that fudge Faye wanted to stock.” Despite their hatred for water, Alecky never bothers to cover up, no matter how heavy the rain is. A characteristic that’s apparently genetic, as Sebastian never does either.

“The buttermilk fudge?” Cicily looks dreamily at her friend. “Think I could snag a piece for the road?”

“For breakfast?”

“*Please?*” she pleads.

“You are just as bad as my son.”

“Is that a no?”

Alecky sighs. “Come on.”

Cicily cheers and hugs them. “You are a wonderful person, and I will never forget your kindness.”

Alecky laughs.

#

Cicily struggles to stay awake behind the counter. Arielle lightly smacks the wood she’s resting her head on.

“You can’t serve customers with your eyes closed.”

Cicily groans. “I woke up so *early* this morning; it’s like I’ve been running for a full day already. Besides,”—she sweeps her hands around the empty store—“there’s not any customers right now, anyway.”

Her mother tucks her dark hair behind her ear very matter-of-factly. “You never know when one may arrive. Better to be prepared than to be caught unaware.”

Cicily groans again, and Arielle chuckles as she joins Faye to stock the storeroom in the back. Not two minutes later, the bells above the front door jingle as someone enters the store.

“See?” Arielle’s muffled voice sounds from the back.

Cicily fights a frustrated and tired sigh, and lifts her head up from the counter. In front of her is Alecky, hair in wild tufts and brown eyes frantic. Fear clutches her heart, and she quickly rounds the counter to grab her friend’s hands.

“Alecky, what’s wrong? What’s happened?”

“Sebastian never came home.” Their voice is broken; words come in fits and starts. “Lunch was a few hours ago, he never came home, I, I looked—” They choke on a sob so loud it echoes in Cicily’s ears. “I looked everywhere but…”

Cicily buries Alecky’s face into her shoulder as words are replaced by tears. She’s at a loss of words herself. What does one say to this?

“Moms!” she calls, her own voice strained.

Both women enter the store, confusion on their faces. “What is…” The question dies on Faye’s lips as she sees them.

Cicily looks at her parents as she clutches Alecky. “Sebastian is missing.”

“Oh,” Arielle breathes. “Oh, darling.” She pulls Alecky from her daughter’s grasp and wipes tears from their face. “Listen to me, now. We’ll find him, you hear me?”

They nod, still struggling to choke back sobs. Arielle wraps her arm around them and leads them over to the few tables and chairs setup for customers to wait or eat the food they just purchased.

“Cicily, close the shop for now, please,” Faye asks. “I’ll make you some tea, Alecky, and then why don’t we start from the beginning, okay?”

Alecky recounts what happened, while Cicily quietly tries to silence her own fears. What if they *can’t* find Sebastian? What if he was taken by an outsider? Or—and this thought frightened her the most—what if he went into the pond and couldn’t get out? She watches as her friend fights to keep their voice steady, keep their shaky hands from spilling their tea. She’s never seen Alecky like this.

She’s never seen Alecky afraid.

The rainfall sounds heavier on the roof as Faye stands up. “We’ll form a search party and we’ll find him, Alecky.” She gently squeezes their shoulder. “We’ll find him. I’ll go start rounding up people for the search. You stay right here and try to breathe, alright?”

“Thank you.” Alecky’s voice is as soft as down.

Faye kisses Arielle on the top of the head before grabbing an umbrella and heading out into the new downpour. Once her footsteps can no longer be heard, Arielle grabs Alecky’s hand urgently and leans in closer.

“There’s something else you can do besides just waiting,” she whispers.

Both Cicily and Alecky move closer to better hear. “What are you talking about?” Cicily asks.

“On the edge of the village opposite Alecky’s farm is a small swamp.” She pauses for a moment, casting a secretive look between the two. “They say it’s home to a witch.”

Cicily stifles a sigh. “Mother, this is not the time for stories.”

“Would you stop being so like your mom for a moment to consider that maybe not everything I’ve told you over the years are *just* stories?”

Cicily averts her gaze from her mother’s stare. Arielle tucks some loose strands of hair behind her ear before she continues. “They say the swamp is home to a witch, a witch so powerful that the laws of time do not apply to her.” She reaches over and takes Alecky’s hand. “A witch with incredible knowledge. She may know where Sebastian went.”

Cicily fights a sigh. “Mother—”

Alecky sits up straight. “I want to go.”

“What?” Cicily turns sharply. “Alecky—”

“She’s right, Sis. I can’t just wait here. I have to try everything I can to find my son.” They look at her with pleading in their eyes. “Will you go with me?”

Cicily takes a deep breath and holds their hand. “Of course I will.”

#

The two have been walking around the swamp for what feels like hours to Cicily. Her mother had called it small, but while in it the swamp seems almost as large as the village itself. She watches Alecky as they stalk in front of her, shoulders hunched and

hair drenched flat against their skull. The rain never let up during their search for the witch, and is still falling strong.

They stop and Cicily approaches her friend, reaching for their shoulder.

“Alecky—”

“Where are you!” they scream into the darkness of the swamp, causing small ripples around their feet. Cicily jolts at the explosion, and takes a small step back as they continue. “Do you think you’re all powerful? Get to play god, maybe, choose who gets your help? What do you want from me! Do you want me to beg, plead? Well, here I am!”

They fall to their knees, swamp water immediately wicking up their pants. Cicily bends down and rubs their shaking shoulders.

“I was so hoping we’d find her.” Alecky’s voice is hoarse.

“I know,” Cicily whispers.

“I really wanted the witch to be real.”

“And who claims that I am not?”

Both startle at the voice, Cicily jumping to her feet. In front of them stood an older woman; her dark skin starting to wrinkle, but in all the places that imply she has spent a lot of her life smiling and happy. She, too, has her head shaved.

She spends a long moment looking so intently at Cicily that the girl feels her skin squirm. Alecky hurries to their feet and approaches the witch.

“Can you help me?”

She breaks her gaze on Cicily to look at them. “Perhaps, dear, but I do not do business with strangers.”

They blink for a moment, confused, before the witch extends her hand. Alecky takes it. "I'm Alecky."

"A pleasure, Alecky. My name is Leigh."

Cicily's eyes go wide. "You shouldn't go around giving witches your name!" she hisses.

"Ah, I see your mother Faye has convinced you to distrust magic." Leigh's face crinkles in a gentle smile. "Though, I suppose distrust is better than disbelief."

"You...you know my mom?"

Leigh looks up thoughtfully at the sky for a moment. "You could say that, I suppose." She winks at Cicily, so quickly that the girl almost misses it.

"Please," says Alecky. "My son is missing."

Leigh's face becomes serious. "A terrible thing to befall any parent. I can augur the swamp for him."

Alecky's eyes become brighter than Cicily has seen them since they walked into her family's store. "Really?" they whisper.

"I just need something of his for it to work." She watches Alecky's face start to fall. "Your blood would work."

Cicily forces herself between the two. "Okay, I *know* that giving blood to a witch is a bad idea."

"You needn't worry about your friend's well-being. Only a few drops into the swamp are necessary for it to work."

"Sis, please," Alecky begs. "I need to do this."

“There has to be another way.” She shakes her head. “We can find Sebastian without getting involved in things we have no understanding of.”

“You are correct about that, young one.” Leigh’s voice starts to get angry, and her blue eyes flash. “You do have no understanding of me or my ways. But staying this closed minded about that which you have no knowledge will do nothing except keep you from growing, keep you from realizing your potential.”

Cicily freezes at her words. Alecky steps around her and holds their hand out quickly. Before she can push her friend’s hand away, Leigh slices their palm with a small blade. Alecky winces, but turns their hand so the blood drops into the swamp water at the group’s feet. Cicily takes a step back as Leigh steps forward.

She closes her eyes and waves her hands slowly over the water in circular motions. The red blood swirls amidst the brown and green of the swamp. Cicily thinks she sees flashes of a clear blue color, grimy green hair, and Sebastian’s face. Leigh stops and looks herself.

“Ah.” Her eyes raise to meet Alecky’s. “I am afraid I have both good and bad news.”

Alecky reaches for Cicily’s hand, and she gives it a tight squeeze. “What is it?” they breathe.

“Your son has not yet been harmed.”

Alecky sighs in relief and smiles so big, but Cicily is caught on one particular word Leigh just said.

“Yet?”

Leigh nods solemnly. “He’s been taken by the nix that resides in your village’s pond.”

“What...” Alecky’s eyes start to water again. “What does that mean?”

Cicily recalls the tales Arielle used to tell her. None of them had a very happy ending. Leigh gently places her hand against Alecky’s cheek.

“The nix is a vile creature, but dear, you mustn’t give up hope just yet.” She wipes away a tear with her thumb. “Man always has a weakness, and that includes those more magical than human. His is bargains.”

“So I can bargain for Sebastian?”

“Yes.” Leigh’s eyes appear sad, but the rest of her face stays still. “But you must be careful about what you offer; he will not give you unlimited chances.”

Alecky nods quickly. “Alright.” They pull on Cicily’s hand. “Come on, we need to go.”

Before she can follow her friend out of the swamp, Leigh stops her with a hand on her shoulder. “I hope you listen when I say to keep an open mind. Your future, and that of your friend’s son, will depend on it.” She stares at the girl intently again. “Do you understand what I am saying to you, Cicily?”

Cicily blinks. “How—”

“Sis!” Alecky calls from ahead, drawing her gaze. “Come on!”

When she turns back, Leigh is gone. She stands for a moment, then runs to join her friend, confused how the witch knew her name when it was never given to her.

#

When they reach the bank of the pond, the sun is beginning to set and the rain has lessened. Alecky stands farther from the edge of the water than Cicily.

“Now what do we do?” they ask, running their fingers through their hair.

Cicily tries to remember her mother’s tales of the nix. “We need to call to him.” She picks up a pebble. “I think we’re supposed to stand in the water and skip a rock, to make ripples.”

Alecky looks at her with some latent fear in their eyes. “How far in the water?”

“A ways.” She holds her hand out to them, softening her voice. “You can do this, Alecky. I know you can. And I’ll be right there with you, okay? You don’t have to do this alone; you never have.”

They nod sharply and grab her hand. The two slowly walk into the pond until the water is up to their knees. Alecky takes a deep, steadying breath, then tosses the pebble. It skips three times before sinking below the surface.

The water stills, for a second, then begins to ripple again, larger than could be created by a pebble. Out of the clear blue water rises a man—his hair long and grimy and green, his eyes burning like coals. His hands are webbed, and Cicily can see through the water that he has a scaled tail in place of legs.

“It’s been some time since I’ve had callers.” His voice sounds like broken glass. “I’d say...almost a decade. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

Alecky grips Cicily’s hand tight before speaking. “You have my son. I want him back.”

The nix’s mouth never changes from a thin line. “The child was promised to me.”

“Wh-what?” Any color in Alecky’s face drains away. “I never did any such thing!”

“*You* may not have, but the child’s father did. He came to me before the birth—he wanted away from the village, he never wanted to live his entire life here. I told him I could make that happen.” He stares unblinking at them. “So we made a bargain.”

Cicily swears she can physically see the air get knocked out of her friend. But Alecky continues to stand tall under the nix’s gaze and harsh words.

“Then it’s my turn to make a bargain.”

The fire in his eyes flickers. “Interesting.” The word grinds out of his mouth. “I have never before bargained with multiple members of one family.”

“So do we have a deal then?”

“*Yes*, I believe we do.” The water starts to ripple around him again. “Bring me that which is most precious to you, and we will see if it is worth your child.”

Just as quickly as he appeared, he vanishes beneath the water, leaving the two standing in the pond alone. Cicily turns to Alecky. “What are you going to do?”

“I have an idea.” A soft smile plays on their lips. “We almost have him back, Sis.”

#

They return to the pond a short while later, this time with Rosa the goat. Alecky picks up another pebble and skips it into the pond. The nix rises and crosses his arms.

“Have you brought your bargain?”

“I present my goat for your consideration.” They try to lead Rosa closer to the water, but she won’t budge.

He narrows his eyes. “How is that most precious to you?”

Cicily nods in encouragement before Alecky responds. “Rosa is my best milker. She provides me with the income and food necessary to take stable care of my family.”

The nix pauses a moment before shaking his head, pond water splashing off his hair in the motion. “No, I’m sorry, that’s not good enough.”

Alecky’s face falls faster than a stone in water. “Wh-what, wait, I—”

He holds up a webbed hand. “Understand that I do not do this often, but I am intrigued by your desperation to bargain.” He stares at them with his burning eyes. “I will give you two more attempts to bring me a worthy bargain. But after that, your child will be lost to you forever.”

He disappears again before either one could say anything. Alecky twists Rosa’s lead in their hands; Cicily can see the panic in their eyes. She reaches out to them, resting a hand on their shoulder.

“We just have to think. We have two more chances.”

Alecky nods. “Maybe...something bigger?”

They take Rosa back to the farm, and Alecky grabs their second bargain. When the two return to the pond, the nix responds even faster than before.

“Let us see what you are wasting your bargain on this time.” His eyes flicker, possibly in amusement.

Alecky ignores him and holds out a piece of paper. “I offer you my farm—both my livelihood and the roof above my family’s head. Without it, we are homeless, left out in the rain.”

Cicily is unsure how Alecky is feeling, but she surprisingly feels confident. This bargain seems so obviously important compared to the first one. Of course this will be found worthy of Sebastian's life. Any reasonable person should be able to see that.

To her horror, the nix laughs—a deep, sharp sound that grates her ears. “Did you really believe that would be enough? You humans and your trivial attachments. One more chance, mortal, and then we're done. I only have so much patience.”

This time, the panic is in Cicily. If they can't come up with the right bargain, they'll lose Sebastian forever. Words start pouring out of her mouth before she can help it. “Oh, oh it's alright, we still have one more chance. We can figure this out, Alecky! Maybe there's a clue in the stories? I can ask...”

Her voice trails off as she notices how calm her friend is. “Alecky?”

“I know what it is.” Their voice is soft. “I know what to offer.”

“Really? That's great!” Cicily pauses, takes in her friend's quiet. “What...what is it?”

They take a deep breath, before facing her, eyes brimming with tears. “Me. I'm going to offer myself.”

Cicily's heart stops. “No! You...you can't do that...”

“I have to.” Alecky grabs her shoulders. “This feels right; I know it is.” They smile sadly. “I have to do everything I can to save my son, remember?”

Tears fall down her face. She wants to fight; there has to be another way. A way that she can keep her best friend *and* save their son. But just when she starts to form her argument, she remembers what Leigh told her as she left.

So instead, she also takes a deep breath and pulls Alecky into her, wrapping her arms as tight as she can around them. The two stay that way for a moment, crying into each other's shoulders and memorizing their scent. When they finally pull apart, Alecky's hands linger on Cicily's arms.

"Promise me you'll take care of Sebastian for me."

"Of course," she breathes. "Like my own."

Alecky smiles and wipes her cheek. "He always has been, a little bit, I think."

Cicily bites her lip to keep herself from crying out as Alecky walks waist-deep into the pond without hesitation. The nix rises mere inches from their face.

"And what do you have to offer for your final bargain?"

"As a parent, what is most precious to me is keeping my child safe. So that is my bargain." They look the nix down square in the eyes. "I offer myself, my ability to keep my child safe, in exchange for my son."

His eyes flare brightly and his mouth turns up maliciously. "What a most *excellent* bargain that is." He glances past Alecky to Cicily on the shore. "I accept."

The still water of the pond riles up into large waves, crashing from shore to shore. Cicily covers her eyes from the spray with her arm; the water is moving so fast that the droplets cut her face. When it stops and she lowers her arm, she finds Sebastian asleep on the shore.

Alecky is gone.

“Truth in Retelling I”

Once there was a mother and her two children. The three of them lived in a cottage on the edge of a wood. You know the one. With magic and danger hiding in the trees. The children, unafraid, ran in the leaves without their mother, found a lost boy without a mother, a lost boy with bark for skin and acorns for eyes. The children fell in love with the lost boy, the way only children can. And they took him by the hand, and ran.

“Sisters and Brothers: A Fairytale Retelling in Three Acts”

This is a story about two sisters and two brothers. Their names are not important; they can be interchangeable with each other. Esse can be Bie’s sister, or she can be Aich’s. Or she can even be Gee’s sister, and the brothers can be paired together. Or perhaps they’re all sisters, or all brothers—or any other possible combination. As it was said, it’s not important. What’s important is the story. The characters can be anyone.

They can even be you.

Act I

Esse was eleven months old when her brother Bie was born; she was eleven years old when their mother died. Their father fell into a deep sadness for the next year, and Esse had to grow up some more. She took care of young Bie and their small farm—tending the garden, preparing meals, cleaning the cottage—while Father spent the days sitting in their mother’s favorite chair or lying in bed.

One day, Esse looked up from the carrots she was weeding and noticed that her brother was not in sight.

“Bie?” she called, worry in her voice for their farm was on the edge of a large forest, and it would be easy to get lost in there. She stood up and raised her voice. “Bie! Where are you?”

Terror gripped her insides. Taking care of Bie was her responsibility; she couldn’t imagine what Father would do if Bie was lost. She couldn’t imagine what *she* would do if Bie was lost. She had to find him.

She brushed her hands off on her skirt and ran around the cottage. “Bie!” she called out again. “Bie, answer me!” But he was not anywhere around the cottage. Or the farm. Which left only the forest.

Slowly, Esse approached the edge of the forest. “Bie?” Her voice was quieter. The forest was dark and cold, and it frightened her. Mother used to tell her that the forest was full of beautiful trees and flowers and nature, which was nothing to be afraid of. Esse was never sure if she believed her, though.

She hoped that Bie wasn’t in the forest—the thought of going into the trees to search for him made her quake a bit in the knees.

A voice called from behind Esse. “Sissy!”

She turned quickly, almost falling down due to her scared knees. Coming up the path was Bie, hand-in-hand with the local witch. Esse ran to her little brother and wrapped her arms tight around him. “Bie, where have you been? You had me worried.”

He buried his face into her shoulder and balled the back of her shirt in his hands, creating a tangle of their bodies that had become all too familiar since Mother’s death. “I’m sorry, Sissy.”

“I found him while I was picking some herbs in the forest,” the witch said.

“I was following a baby deer!” Bie exclaimed excitedly.

“Thank you for bringing him home,” Esse said, smoothing out a section of Bie’s hair that was tangled with leaves.

The witch gave a small smile. “Of course, dear.”

It had been awhile since Esse had last seen the witch. When she was younger, Mother noticed that Esse had a natural aptitude for magic. Mother, however, was not able

to teach her because she was not a witch herself. So Esse started visiting the local witch every week for magic lessons—at least, she did until Mother died.

“How’s your father doing?” the witch asked, tucking her hair behind her ears.

Bie answered before Esse could. “Father’s still sad—he misses Mother.”

The witch nodded. “Yes, I imagine he does, Bie.”

Esse thought about how Father stayed inside all the time, how he didn’t talk much to his children anymore. She also thought about her days at the witch’s home—she remembered it being nice and feeling like home, which her own home on the farm hadn’t been for a while. Suddenly, she wanted nothing more than to feel that again.

“Would you like to stay for dinner?” she asked the witch.

The witch did stay for dinner. And with her help, Father came out of his deep sadness. And after that year, Father married the witch, making her Esse and Bie’s stepmother. For a little while, Esse and Bie were happy—their family was whole again.

Then, their stepmother became cruel. She insulted the children constantly and even kicked them around on occasion; she punished them in excess, withholding meals or locking them up in their room. She seemed to be the meanest to Bie, for reasons Esse could never figure out; and Father seemed to just let her be in her cruelty, for more reasons Esse could never figure out.

The sister and brother suffered through the insults and the pain, because they weren’t really sure what else they were supposed to do. They were only children—adults were supposed to know what was best for them. However, on the third anniversary of Father and the witch’s marriage, Esse finally decided that in this case, the adults in her life did not know what was best for her and Bie.

One night, she held Bie tight against her, his face still buried in her shoulder despite his new height at fourteen years old. She stroked his hair as he cried at their stepmother's latest beating.

"I've figured out a way to stop this, Bie," Esse whispered. Earlier, she had sneaked into their stepmother's room while she was out, and scanned through the witch's grimoire. It was full of spells, many of which made her even more scared of her stepmother. But in those pages, she found an escape spell that should make her and Bie disappear far away from their farm, somewhere safer. "We're gonna be okay again."

Now, Esse hadn't practiced magic since before Mother died, but she felt confident that she could handle this one spell to save herself and her brother. It seemed simple enough. When their parents were busy, the siblings sneaked around the house gathering the necessary ingredients for the spell: thread from both parents' clothing, dirt from the home garden, a handful of comfrey. It also required something that represented personal peace—Bie provided this with a piece of a shed deer antler. Esse questioned him about it, and he just shrugged.

"Deer are peaceful," he said.

Esse accepted it and went on to mix together the ingredients. The only thing left to do was to set it aflame. That was the one bit of magic that Esse remembered how to do. The bowl of ingredients sat in front of her; she turned to Bie.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

He nodded and sat down beside her, entwining his fingers with hers. She took a deep breath and raised her free hand toward the bowl.

The door to the cottage slammed open. The two siblings looked up quickly to see their stepmother. Her eyes grew enraged as they flitted from the children to the bowl and back.

“What are you two doing?” she hissed, arm raised for a strike. “Clean this up, right now!”

Bie’s hand shook within Esse’s. She steadied her own fears and looked straight into the witch’s eyes. “No.”

At this, the witch screamed angrily and started running toward the children, grabbing the old broom handle that she kept next to the door. Bie latched onto Esse’s arm, tightly, and she threw her free hand over the bowl.

“*Incendo,*” she shouted. The bowl burst into flames and the world around Bie and Esse disappeared and turned black.

When Esse came to, she found herself surrounded by dense trees. She sat up quickly and looked around. She was in the forest. But she wasn’t frightened of it anymore—she found herself enjoying the cool breeze that seemed ever present, the sunlight that shown green as it filtered through the leaves.

Mother was right.

“Sissy?” a tentative Bie called out from behind her.

“We did it, Bie!” she exclaimed as she turned around, excited to be free from their stepmother.

Standing in front of her, however, was not Bie, but a young buck. She paused for a moment. “Bie?” she asked, unsure.

The buck raised his head up and down in what Esse took for a nod. “I think something went wrong,” he said, definitely in Bie’s voice.

Esse bit her lip to stop herself from crying. She should’ve known better than to mess with magic, even if it was in an attempt to save her little brother. Just look how she faltered—instead of saving him, she turned him into a deer.

Bie the deer walked up to her and nuzzled her hand. “I’m tired, Sissy,” Bie the deer said.

She stroked the fur between his ears. “Okay.” She looked around the forest again, and this time noticed a small cabin. It was once painted with bright, candy-like colors, but now the paint was faded and chipped. It looked as though no one had lived there for years.

She patted the deer’s shoulder. “Come on, we’ll rest in there.” She led the way, holding the creaky door open so Bie the deer could trot in with no problem. “Then I’ll find a way to fix this, Bie,” she whispered.

Act II

Gee and Aich were nine years old the first time their father tried to lose them in the forest. They weren’t aware that’s what he was doing—they just thought they had wandered too far away from him, or that maybe he was so preoccupied with getting firewood that he forgot they had tagged along. Gee had an exceptional memory, so once the twins realized they were all alone, she took her brother by the hand and led him back through the trees to their small house, finding telltale signs in the bark and ground to show the way.

Momma looked happy to see them, grabbing Aich up when he ran to her. Gee saw a look on Papa's face that she didn't quite understand—he looked angry, or maybe disappointed—but she didn't forget it.

She had an exceptional memory.

When they were twelve years old, Papa woke them up in the middle of the night. “Come,” he said. “We're going to set rabbit traps.”

The sleepy twins followed him into the forest. Once they had set the first three traps, he handed them two more and pointed deeper into the trees. “Go set these up over there. I'll be setting up over here.” He motioned in the other direction.

Gee had a flash of memory from when her and Aich were nine years old, but took the traps and her brother's hand anyway. Surely this wasn't the same thing as before. After they set the traps, they turned back to find their father. The light from his lantern was nowhere to be seen.

Aich started to whimper. “Gee? Where's Papa?”

She squeezed his hand and led him slowly, carefully through the trees. “Don't worry, Aich. We'll find him.”

She tried to find the marks in the bark and track prints in the ground, but the leaves of the tall trees blocked out what little moonlight there was that night. They made it to the very first rabbit trap they had set, but from there she was unsure where to go.

The twins sunk down to the ground, tiredness settling in their bones. Gee wrapped her arm around Aich and held him close. He rested his head on her shoulder. “I don't like the dark, Gee,” he whispered.

She squeezed him tight. “Once the sun comes up, we’ll find our way home. Don’t worry,” she said. “Everything will be alright.”

When the sun started to poke through the trees, Gee was shaken awake by her brother. “It’s morning, Gee!”

She rubbed her bleary eyes with her fist and looked at him. He looked exhausted, the whites of his eyes pink-tinted. “Did you sleep, Aich?”

He shook his head slowly. “I was scared to close my eyes,” he whispered.

Gee took his hand and helped him stand up. “It’s okay. We’ll be home soon,” she said. Now that sunlight was shining into the forest, she could tell exactly where they were—for she had an exceptional memory.

When they returned home this time, Momma looked less happy to see them. Her face looked strained as she received Aich’s hug and glanced at Papa over her shoulder. Papa wore the same face he had when they were nine years old.

After that night, Aich begged for a light to be left in their room while he slept. After that night, Gee started to question why their father kept losing them in the woods.

When they turned fifteen years old, the family celebrated with cake. It was a special occasion, because they always had to be careful with food—they never seemed to have enough for everyone to eat until they were full. But the twins woke up on their fifteenth birthday to the warm scent of sweet baked goods.

Out in the kitchen, Momma placed the cake on the table. Aich excitedly sat down at his plate. Gee sat down a little more slowly. “What’s with the cake, Momma?” she asked.

“Well, it’s not every day your children turn fifteen, now is it, Gee?” Momma responded. She deftly cut two equal sized pieces and placed them on their children’s plates. “Happy Birthday, dear.”

Aich dug into his piece instantly, making noises of delight. “Mmmm. Come on, Gee, eat it. It’s delicious.”

Gee remembered her father and mother’s faces when they were twelve; she remembered how both she and her brother had been yelled at for eating more than their share; she remembered her father trying to get rid of them in the forest. The cake seemed wrong, somehow, but she couldn’t quite figure out how exactly. The sugary scent, however, made her hungry stomach growl. She decided one bite couldn’t hurt, and then another one, and another one, until the piece was gone and she was reaching for seconds. Aich was on his third helping.

Momma and Papa just stood at the table, watching them eat. After Gee finished her second piece and Aich was having his fourth, something felt wrong in her head. She looked up from her plate and saw her parents’ faces. She was able to understand them now—disappointment, disgust, contempt. Her head felt like a pillow attached to her neck. They poisoned the cake, she thought.

She turned to her brother, who was happily finishing off his fourth piece. “No,” she told him, her voice quieter than she wanted. Why wasn’t her voice louder? She wanted to scream. “Don’t, it’s not...right. Stop eating, Aich!” She lunged for his arm to stop him, but missed and fell to the floor instead. Before she passed out, she heard Aich collapse onto the table.

Gee felt twigs and hard ground digging into her back when she woke up. Her head throbbed. She opened her eyes and saw endless leaves laid out before her. Aich groaned beside her.

“Gee? What happened?” he asked, looking around him. “How did we get into the forest?”

“I’m not sure,” Gee responded, though she felt sure that she knew who was to blame. A cool breeze swept through the trees, rattling the branches and giving the twins chills. “Come,” Gee said. “Let’s go find somewhere warm.”

Aich followed her lead. “Do you know the way home?” he asked.

Gee paused and looked around her. This was a part of the forest she had never been in before, and having not been awake on the trip in here, she had nothing to remember her way back. Though as she looked and remembered her parents’ faces, she decided maybe it was better that way. “We’re not going home, Aich.”

“What?” He seemed surprised at her response, lagging behind her stride momentarily. He jogged to catch back up to her. “What do you mean we’re not going home?”

“I mean, we’re not going home.” She held some low branches out of the way so Aich could pass in front of her. “It’s our parents’ fault we’re out here—they poisoned us and left us here to die.”

Her brother shook his head furiously. “You don’t know that, Gee.”

Gee turned to her brother, but saw that he still believed in their parents—believed that they loved them and would never mean them harm. He didn’t have her memory; he didn’t see their faces. Another cool breeze passed by, causing the twins to shiver. There

was no point in her arguing with him right now—they needed to find some sort of shelter from the cold. She continued to lead him through the trees.

“It doesn’t matter, Aich. I couldn’t lead us home if I wanted to—I don’t know this part of the forest.” She pushed away some more branches, and saw an old, faded-colored cabin ahead. “Let’s go check it out,” she said. “Maybe it has a fireplace.”

Act III

The door creaked as it opened. Gee poked her head in. The inside of the cabin was dusty from years of abandonment, but she noticed tracks on the floor. Someone had been here recently. “Hello?” she called out as she and Aich stepped through the doorway. “Is anyone here?”

A sharp trotting sound came from a back room, and out walked a young buck. He stopped in front of the twins, snorted and stomped his front foot in agitation. “Who are you?” the deer asked.

Aich’s eyes widened and he turned to his sister. “Did the deer just...talk?”

“Bie!” Esse called from outside. “I found some food to...” She stopped when she saw the twins. “Oh. Hello.”

“We were just looking for some place warm, to stay out of the cold wind,” Gee said, holding her hand out. “I’m Gee, and this is my brother Aich.”

Esse nodded and hung her basket of wild fruits and vegetables off her arm to free her hand for a shake. “You’re welcome to come in—I can get a fire going. My name’s Esse.” She paused, then reached out to pat the deer’s head. “And this is my little brother Bie.”

“You’re brother...is a deer?” Aich asked.

“Deer are peaceful,” Bie the deer said.

Esse entered the cabin and shut the door. “It’s...kind of a long story.” She knelt down in front of the fireplace, held out her hand and whispered “*Incendo*,” bringing a warm fire to life.

“You’re a witch,” Gee said, amazed. She had never met a witch before.

Esse tilted her head in consideration. She hadn’t thought of herself like that before. “I guess so...Though I don’t do much, especially after...” She motioned toward Bie the deer, who was playfully butting Aich’s leg.

“You said it’s a long story,” Gee said.

“Yes.” Esse placed the basket on the table and started to wash the fruits and vegetables for dinner. Gee walked over and started to help.

“Tell me,” she said.

And so Esse did—and she told her everything. How her Mother found her magic lessons, how she and Bie grew up happy on a small farm, how all that changed when Mother got ill and died, how Father kept to himself until the witch came, which seemed like a miracle at the time. How the witch turned out to be more of a nightmare than a dream come true, how they were beaten and ridiculed and abused. How Esse’s grand escape plan came with a cost for her brother.

And then Gee told Esse their story: how their family was poor, and how having twins to feed put a strain on them. How closely they were monitored with their food—never hit, but sometimes the pain of hungry bellies felt like they were. How Papa tried

multiple times to lose them in the forest so they wouldn't have to take care of them anymore. How, at the end there, she could find no love in their parents' faces.

Gee noticed Aich and Bie the deer listening. Aich's face was pained as he came up to her and grabbed her hands. "Why didn't you ever tell me? About what you saw."

She smiled at him. "I was just trying to protect you, to take care of you," she said.

Esse nodded in agreement, and gently stroked Bie's head. "It's what sisters do."

"Well, you won't have to do it anymore," Aich said, looking at both girls. "Either of you. It's my turn now to take care of you."

"And mine!" Bie the deer chimed in.

"Well then," Gee said, glancing at Esse conspiratorially. "You can start by making dinner."

The four of them laughed, but Aich did move Gee out of the way and started to cut up some of the vegetables. They all ended up pitching in for their first dinner together, with Bie the deer assisting with setting the table by dragging more chairs to it.

It took some time for the four of them to start to move past their childhoods, but with each other's help they did it. Aich accepted that not all parents were always kind, and vowed that he would strive to be kind to his own kids. And with Bie's help, Aich finally got over his fear of the dark, which eventually led him to the love of his life, through a job at a nearby mine. Both Gee and Bie found peace in the forest, and soon were no longer haunted by the looks on their parents' faces or the frightening tone of the witch.

It took Esse the longest to move on. Every time she woke up and saw Bie still as a deer, her self-loathing grew stronger. Gee was patient with her—getting Esse to talk

through her feelings in confidence, strolling amongst the trees, just the two of them. Gee worked with her daily, taking her time to help her realize that what happened was not her fault. She was not to blame for Bie getting the worst of the beatings, she was not to blame for Bie turning into a deer.

“You did what you had to,” Gee told her. “You did what you had to to save both you and Bie. He’s safe now,”—she reached out to Esse and gently pushed hair out of her crying eyes—“because of you.”

It took some time, but eventually Esse believed her. More importantly, she recognized that Gee believed in her, no matter what. And that’s when they fell in love. As they grew older, Bie the deer stayed with them, content to keep an eye out for hunters or other intruders in the woods. The girls never had any children, but Aich did, and he would bring them—three: two girls and a boy—over to visit their aunts and uncle often. And those three children never experienced a childhood like their father’s, or their aunt’s, and for this the adults were forever glad.

“Truth in Retelling II”

Once there was a mother, a single mother of two young girls. She wanted nothing more than to be the mother hen her own mother was for her—wings spread, warm protection from the elements. But her mother had a partner, and she had no one. Just her girls, and a lonely cottage on the edge of a wood. You know the one.

The mother knew too. Everyone knew, and tales of the magicked, darkened wood traveled far. The mother tried to tell them to her girls, her two young girls, but children can be fickle creatures. Fidgety and unaware of their own fragility. She tried, oh she tried, but her tired voice and body could only do as much as it could do. And when she had her back turned, her two young girls entered the wood.

“Waning Fog, Waxing Moon”

I breathe in deep, hold the taste of formaldehyde and sterilization on my tongue. The morgue is cold—as cold as her skin, I imagine, but I don’t attempt to touch her. The pallor of her is paler than I’ve ever seen it, a ghost masquerading as my sister’s body.

“Yes, that’s her,” I say, husky-voiced. “That’s Raya.”

“Salena, you should see this town. I can’t believe our parents got engaged here.”

Cyrus, the deputy, covers Raya back up. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

I haven’t moved, so I’m left staring at the white sheet, resting against her face. It’s sheer; I can still make out her cheekbones, her bloodless mouth, her closed eyes. I wait for her chest to move, like when she’d lay so still to fool Mom that she was asleep before sneaking out the window for the night. She stays still. So still.

“There’s something here, I know it. I swear, the stories are true. It exists, and I’m going to find it.”

#

Three nights ago, before the phone call, I dreamt of my sister. Or, more accurately, of my sister and Mom and me. We were small again; it was shortly after our parents had married and we all moved in together. Raya and I sat cross-legged on the living room carpet—I could feel the roughness caused by spilled drinks against my shins—while Mom perched on the couch in front of us.

“Legends say that hidden in the small town of Almes, the very town I proposed to your father, is one of the last vestiges of magic America has to offer.” Mom paused, leaned in close to build suspense. Raya and I found ourselves leaning in as well. “A lake whose water turns any living thing to stone.”

Raya, wide-eyed in awe, whispered. “*Wow.*”

A sense of dread filled my younger dream self, but I followed the memory’s script against my will. “That’s not true, is it?”

Mom turned to face me, motion halting and rough. “Of course it is.” Her voice was gravel, and when I looked up her skin was turning to concrete, cracking and breaking. She was falling apart before my eyes.

“Salena.” Fear came from Raya’s mouth, floated to mine, became tangible in my throat. I turned to see her, arm extended, skin transforming into brittle stone.

“Sa...le...na. He...lp.”

I screamed and screamed until my child lungs were out of breath, and I jolted awake into my adult body lying in my adult bed. My skin was slick, my lungs aflame. Isaac turned in bed, slid their arm under the small of my back. They murmured into my hair, lyrical Hindi that their mother used to croon when they had nightmares as a baby.

I inhaled, tried to find the taste of their aftershave instead of my fear, held my breath until my chest wanted to burst. One heartbeat, two...three. Isaac massaged their fingers into my back, pressed their lips to my sweat-soaked temple.

“Just a dream, hon,” they whispered, sleep still heavy in their voice.

I nodded and sat up. They blinked and moved to follow, but I placed my hand on their chest. “I’m okay. Just gotta pee. Go back to sleep.” I kissed their cheek, swiped my phone off the side table, and locked myself in the bathroom.

I stared at Raya’s contact information for an eternity before I pressed *call*. The phone rang and rang and rang and I felt the adrenaline rising in the back of my throat, hot like bile. A sharp click resounded in my ear, and I was directed to her voicemail.

You've reached Raya Mallick's phone; I'd say I'm too busy to answer right now, but I'm probably call screening. Leave a message and I'll call back eventually!

I hung up, convincing myself I didn't need to leave a message because, really, what would I say? "Hey sis, funny story, I dreamt you turned to stone and died, so just wanted to check in, make sure you're ok here in the real world and not a crumbling statue." Raya was sleeping anyway; it was very early in the morning still.

I crawled back into bed and curled into Isaac's arms. It was just a dream.

The next time her number showed up on my caller ID, it was Deputy Cyrus on the other end, asking if I could drive down to Almes to identify a body.

#

Cyrus said it may take a day or two to clear all the paperwork so I can take Raya home. I call the motel she was staying at and convince the desk clerk to rent her room to me. He seemed adverse at first, but eventually gave in, even if he sounded reluctant while doing so.

When I pull into the small parking lot, it's empty. Mom used to tell us Almes was a popular tourist location—people in search for the mythical Stone Lake—but that apparently no longer holds true. I try to remember when Mom and Samir last visited the town. A wedding anniversary, I think, but they stopped celebrating those long before the car accident that sent Raya here, searching for answers that are, ultimately, unfindable.

A profound sense of loss glues me to the driver's seat. My whole family is gone now; I'm the last of my house. I grip the necklace Isaac gave me when they moved in, the points of the crescent moon digging into my palm. When I release it, there's two perfect

pinpoints of blood. I wipe my hand on my jeans as I finally exit the car and head into the motel.

The clerk eyes me as he hands over the key, a wary predator following the motions of a new prey. “Room Seven, last room on the right,” he says, his voice monotone.

I feel his gaze on my back as I exit, and when I turn outside the door I can see him in my periphery, staring unblinking at me through the glass. Hair stands on the nape of my neck, and I quicken my pace, clicking the lock button on my keychain as I pass my car.

The door to Room Seven is inconsequential, another grey piece of wood in a line of grey pieces of wood. The number is faded, the wood chipped. A slip of bright yellow police tape waves in the breeze, caught in the door jamb—the only indication that anything out of the ordinary has happened here. I tug at it and it rips, falls in shards to my feet. The only spot of color at this drab motel.

I have to push the door with my shoulder to get it open, grinding the yellow plastic pieces into the treads of my shoes. The knob hits the opposite wall with a jaw-clenching crunch, but when I investigate, there’s no mark on the wall. I run my fingers where the door should’ve hit and feel nothing but cold. Concrete. The walls are made of concrete.

“How homey,” I mutter, shutting the door and locking it behind me.

Finally, slowly, I take in the room. A full-size bed, covers rumpled and age-stained; a doorless bathroom the size of a small closet; papers and folders and open books spread throughout the entire room. Some of the clutter around the door looks stepped on,

presumably by the police or first responders. I pick up a page and instantly recognize Raya's tiny scrawl, even smudged illegibly by boot treads.

My skin crawls, a shiver from my feet to my neck. Raya is...*was* the neatest, most organized person in our family. Nothing about the room I'm standing in represents the sister that would rearrange the silverware after every large family meal, that always knew where the exact shirt or scarf I wanted to wear was. This simply isn't her.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, causing me to jump, my hand spasming to crunch the paper I'm holding. I take a breath to collect myself before answering. "Hey hon."

"Salena." There's a brief pause, and I can practically see Isaac furrowing their brow in concern. "You sound out of breath."

"I just...my nerves are a little frayed, that's all." I attempt to flatten out the page on the mattress. The scuffed ink spreads more with the movement. "Probably a little sleep deprived, if I'm honest."

I can tell they're nodding in agreement by the way the volume of their voice changes. "You should definitely get some sleep, you need it. Have you found a place to stay at?"

"I'm actually in the motel room that Raya was in."

There's a pause. Two heartbeats, three. "Are you sure that's—"

"Something's not right here, Isaac. The room looks like it's been ransacked, and the coroner's report said she died in her sleep, just stopped breathing. We're only 27, that doesn't just *happen* to 27 year olds." My own lungs ache as I speak, frantic energy

suffocating me. I pause to remind myself to breathe. Isaac, knowing me better than anyone ever has, waits.

I speak slower, voice softer. “I need to know. There’s answers here, I just have to find them.”

I hear it before Isaac can point it out; an echo, a shadow behind my own words. The static from the poor connection Raya’s phone always had while she was driving.

“I have to do this, Salena. There has to be some sense to this, because it’s not fair. They were too young, we’re too young. I have to find some answers.”

I close my eyes and listen to Isaac breathe through the phone call happening now, try to match their rhythm to prevent myself from sobbing.

“Do you want me to drive down there?” they ask, voice soft and soothing. “I have a few sick days I can use.”

I shake my head before remembering that they can’t see me. “No. I think this is something I need to do on my own.”

#

With a random selection of legible documents under my arm, I wander the town looking for a strong cup of tea. Mom believed that a good cup of tea was as close to magic as she could get in this country. Growing up, she would tell me—and later Raya—stories of her mother’s childhood, stories full of magic: potions and curses and wonder. She never said it directly, but I know she wished she could’ve lived in her home country long enough for memories, long enough for magic to infuse into her marrow.

Here, it’s called a fairy tale, a relic from the past; there, it’s still a reality.

My sight is hazy with the thinnest of fog, lighter than when I drove in, but still there. It's weird, because I wouldn't consider the town to be in enough of a valley to warrant perpetual cover. The haze casts everything into gradients of grey, which appears to be Almes's unofficial town color. Grey sidewalks, grey houses, grey storefronts. As though everything is made of stone.

One community bed even boasts dull-colored flowers, carnations the shade of a Russian Blue. I stop and finger one, almost expecting the roughness of rock against my skin. Waxy silk coats it instead. I vaguely remember being taught how these came to be the state flower in primary school, but I didn't realize they could come in such an unnatural color.

“Can I help you?”

The voice startles me into almost dropping my papers. I turn to face an older white woman, her fading hair pulled back. She looks at me with her arms crossed and face pinched. It's not a hospitable question.

“Um, I was just looking for a café or somewhere I could get myself some tea?”

She reminds me of the cranky neighbor we had when it was just me and Mom, just disgusted at the mere thought and sight of me running down the halls as a child. “We don't have none of that fancy Starbucks garbage here; this is a *nice* small town.”

I nod, not in agreement so much as placation. “Uh-huh.”

She never looks right at me, her eyes instead resting around the shoulder of the arm holding my papers. “There's a diner over the edge of town, 'though I doubt it'll meet your fancy city standards.”

I start slowly walking backwards. “I’m sure it’ll be just fine. Thank you for your help!” As I walk away, I swear I can feel her gaze on my back the whole time, just like with the motel clerk.

“What the fuck is up with this town,” I whisper to myself, suddenly afraid someone may hear me on this empty street.

#

I’ve taken up a whole booth at the diner, Raya’s notes spread in front of me so I can see them all at once. She had dug deep into the history of Almes, looking up genealogies and various maps and governance documents. Lines are highlighted or circled or surrounded by question marks to bring attention to them, but she also left personal notes to herself in margins: reminders to check out this book, or talk to that person, or stop by the laundromat.

One in particular holds my attention for a long time. She copied a news article and next to the July 7 date she wrote *Call Salena about this year’s birthday plans*. Our real birthdays are three days apart, but once Raya and Samir moved in, our parents thought we should choose a date to celebrate *both* of our birthdays, instead of having two so close together. So we decided the day exactly between the two, July 7, would become our unofficial birthday. When we both grew up and moved out, we still used it. I’ve caught myself almost writing it down instead on documents many times.

I hold my steaming mug tight, take in deep breaths as a new wave of grief breaks over me. I need to focus now; I can cry later.

I’m at a loss of where to start, unsure what information is important to pursue and what isn’t. Pages are missing, scattered and ruined back at the motel or who knows

where. I couldn't find her bag, the one she *always* had with her, in the room. It could easily have more of Raya's work in it.

The bell over the door jingles, filling the empty diner. Deputy Cyrus walks in and up to the counter, orders a coffee to go. He catches my eye and walks over once he's paid. "Ms. Mallick."

"Deputy." I move to hide some of the pages, although I'm not entirely sure why.

He laughs a little, and he smiles a smile that reaches his eyes. "Please, just Cyrus is fine." He motions to the empty bench. "May I?"

He is, by far, the warmest person I've met in this town. I didn't realize my shoulders were tense until now, when they relax. I nod, and he slides in across from me. He points at my necklace.

"Does that mean something?"

I reach up and trace the crescent moon. "Nothing particularly. It was a gift from my partner."

"Some people believe the moon is special, related to magic. I think we have a full moon coming up in a day or two." He looks at the papers, head twisted a little as they're upside down to his view. "Are these Raya's notes?"

The mug nearly drops from my hands. "How do you—"

"I talked to her." He looks up at my face, and adds, "When she sought me out to talk about my family."

I swallow some tea to combat my sudden dry mouth. "Your family?"

He grabs some of the town genealogy notes and places them on top of everything else. "Every family living in Almes has been here for generations, easily going back 100

years, at least. There hasn't been any new blood in a long time." He finds his name and traces upwards. "There was an uncle of my grandmother who wrote some of the books your sister was reading."

"So your family knew about the Stone Lake."

He nods. "Yeah, keeping history of it was a familial duty for a while."

I look up at him. "Do you think it still exists?"

He takes a drag of his coffee and shrugs, but I can tell it's less his opinion and more to avoid the question. I read over the notes, follow his family line. "There's only one parent listed for you."

His eyes grow somber. "My mom left Almes before I was born; she met my dad in Boston. Some of the town elders were... a little unhappy with her, so they didn't bother recognizing my dad in the official records. I've only been here about five years now."

"There's just something about this town that brings people back," I mutter.

He laughs, but there's no humor in his eyes. Instead he looks concerned—or maybe even afraid. "Well, everything should be done in the next day or two, and then you can go home." He stands up to leave.

"Oh, wait!" I lean across the table to catch him. "You don't happen to have Raya's bag, do you? At the police station? It would be blue with stars on it."

He pauses. "Um, no, I don't remember seeing a bag."

"Well I *know* she would've had this bag with her, but it wasn't in the motel room. I thought maybe it was collected as evidence, or personal effects, or... something. Would it maybe be at the morgue?"

He pauses again, longer this time. One heartbeat, two, three. “I’m not sure...I suppose you could call in tomorrow and see, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up. Here,”—He pulls a card from his pocket, writes quickly on it before handing it over—“If you have any questions, or need anything else, please give me a call.”

I take the card. “Thanks.”

He raises his coffee in acknowledgement and leaves the diner. But just before he walks out the door, he turns back to me. “And Ms. Mallick? Be careful.”

#

That night I dream of moons. My sister stashing a moon into her bag, its light pouring out of the stars stitched on the outside. A moon so large I can feel my blood creating tides to its pull. My mother cupping an infinity of moons, placing them into my mouth, one by one, until I burst into blinding brilliance.

I wake with the sun peeking through the cheap motel curtain, wishing I had Isaac by my side. I stare at the ceiling and breathe slowly, touch each of my fingertips to my thumbs, remind myself that it was just a dream. My phone buzzes on the side table, letting me know that I have a voicemail from Cyrus, asking me to come down to the station to sign some paperwork.

As I get dressed, the business card falls from jacket. I pick it up and examine it again. On the front, printed in nice legible font, is Cyrus’ name, rank, and phone number. On the back, scribbled in his quick scrawl, is a note. “Morgue garbage collection: Sundays.”

I have no idea why he thought I needed to know that. Or what makes it so important that he felt the need to covertly pass it along. I guess I’ll ask at the station.

Before leaving, I tuck Raya's notes safely into the bottom of a drawer and double check the lock on the room door. I consider driving, but Almes is such a small town, I just walk to the police station. When I enter, I see the town doctor—who also is the town medical examiner—with Cyrus. The doctor is whispering rather heatedly at Cyrus until the door swings shut. He stops abruptly upon seeing me.

“Ms. Mallick, thanks for coming in,” Cyrus says, leading me to his desk. The doctor watches my every move with narrowed eyes. Chills run down my neck.

“We just need your signature on a few things.” Cyrus hands me some forms. “The first one is just confirming your identification, then there's a few saying you are taking responsibility of transport and custody, and the last one states you won't refute the autopsy.”

I look up. “I'm sorry, what?”

The doctor clears his throat. “It's an agreement that you agree with the veracity of my autopsy and won't have another autopsy performed once you remove the body from Almes.” His voice is gravely, and his tone clearly indicates he's unamused.

A mixture of grief and anger rises in my chest at the callousness. “How am I supposed to ‘agree with the veracity of the autopsy’ of *my sister* when I don't have a medical degree?”

He stares me down. “You just need to sign the form, saying you understand you cannot have another autopsy performed. It's standard procedure.”

I look to Cyrus, but he avoids my gaze. “Fine, whatever, I just want to get her home.” I sign every dotted line and hand the papers over.

Cyrus flips through them to confirm. “That’s everything; thank you for your time.”

The doctor huffs and turns to leave.

“Wait!” I call out to him. He pauses and glares at me. “My sister had a bag with her—blue with stars on it—that’s missing. Would it be at the morgue?”

He speaks slowly. “The morgue is not a lost and found.”

I hear it in his voice: how fed up he is with me. I have to fight to keep myself from yelling. “I thought maybe it was with her body when she was brought to the morgue. There’s some things she would’ve had in there that I’d very much like to have.”

His face twitches. “I’m sorry, but no. There’s no bag at the morgue. I hope you have a safe drive back to wherever you’re from.” He leaves the station quickly, without another word.

I turn back to Cyrus. “He’s a real treat, that one.”

Cyrus files the paperwork I signed. “I gave you my card, right?”

“Uh...yeah.” I pull it from my pocket. “Why did you write the garbage collection day for the morgue on the back?”

“It’s good to remember when the trash is picked up. You know.” He pauses, holds my gaze for a beat. Two. Three. “In case something you actually need is...accidentally tossed into the garbage.”

Suddenly connections click in my brain. “Oh,” I breathe.

Cyrus nods slightly. “These forms should be processed by tomorrow, *Sunday*, so you should be good to take Raya home tomorrow night.”

“Oh,” I repeat. “Thank you.”

#

I make sure the parking lot at the morgue is empty before climbing over the fence at the back. The sneaking out Raya and I did as teenagers finally pays off. There's only one dumpster against the back wall, and I push open the top with some force. I cringe when the plastic lid hits the metal with a clang.

The inside is full of bagged garbage, so after I move some around, Raya's bag stands out. The only spot of color in the whole bin. I pull it out, and while it smells a bit, it's unmarred. I run my fingers over the stitched stars, the once white thread much less so now, but the blue of the bag is still as rich as the day I bought it for her.

I hold the cold metal zipper between my fingers and take a deep breath. What if it's empty? What if there's really nothing going on in this weird town, and my sister did simply just...die? Maybe there is no explanation. Maybe life just isn't fair.

I jerk my arm, opening the bag as fast as possible. Inside rests Raya's wallet, a partial stack of Post-Its, pens of various colors, and a small journal. I take out the journal gingerly, flip it open. The pages are filled with her tiny scrawl. I close it while my sight blurs. In my hand, I hold an actual piece of my sister, her thoughts and words. I can't read it here, next to a dumpster.

On the walk back to the motel, the sun sets. The darkness is almost tangible thanks to the fog. I have to use my phone to read the numbers on the doors and see my keys to unlock my room. When I'm in, I immediately turn on every light, cleansing my room of the dark. I set Raya's bag down on the bed, and that's when I notice a paper on the floor, as though it was slid under the door while I was out.

I flip it over and my blood chills. In bold, large letters, it reads “Stop asking questions or you’ll end up like the last girl.”

I double check the locks on the door and close the window curtains as much as I can. My hands tremor slightly. Instinctively, I want to call Isaac; in fact, my phone is already in my hand, finger hovering over their speed dial. But I know they’ll insist on driving here and taking me home immediately, when obviously I’m right. There is something going on in this town. My sister *didn’t* just die in her sleep at 27. And she’s being released to me tomorrow, anyway, and then I’ll be on my way home. I put away my phone. I’ll call them when I start out on the road tomorrow.

The thought of calling Cyrus to report the threat occurs to me, but I’m not sure if I can fully trust him. Yes, he’s been kind, and yes, he told me about the bag; but he also *knew* it was thrown out, which very well means he could be in on it. Whatever *it* is.

I curl up in bed with Raya’s journal. Maybe she can explain to me what is going on in this town. Before I can read the first page, though, I’m suddenly very tired. The momentary adrenaline from the note has worn off, replaced with exhaustion. I lay down, clutching the journal to my chest, and fall asleep with the room fully alight.

#

This town is so odd. I honestly can’t imagine Mom and Dad vacationing here. What is there to do? The people must’ve gotten sick of Almes being filled with tourists because there are no advertisements for the Stone Lake anywhere. Not even obviously fake ones made to drum up business. Sounds like someone may be protesting just a bit too much.

I spend the day reading through Raya's journal. Entries alternate between observations of the town and the fruits of her research. Occasionally, she's reminded of something from our childhood and reminisces on that. I find myself lingering on those pages, slowly soaking up the words into my being.

The things I'm finding are straight out of a conspiracy theory posted onto YouTube from some random guy's basement at 3 in the morning. Coverups, missing people, residents who creepily watch you go about town and clearly don't welcome outsiders. The only person who's been willing to talk to me is Cyrus. The rest treat me like I'm about to bring the plague. I thought small towns were supposed to be nice...who sold me that lie?

My phone rings, a call from Isaac, but I send it to voicemail. If I hear their voice, I won't be able to hide the threatening note or my growing unease with the town. I send them a text instead: "Sorry, busy packing, getting ready to leave. Will call when heading out."

I put the phone face down on the side table and look around the room. Maybe I *should* actually be busy packing. It's late afternoon already, the sky a deep orange and red. I'm sure I'll be getting the call any minute now that Raya's ready to be released.

I turn the page and find myself at the last entry in the journal. The print is messier, as though she was excited or in a rush. It's dated the day before I got the call. The day she died.

Cyrus told me everything! The Stone Lake does exist! Apparently, the town has been viciously keeping it away from everyone. They don't want magic to make a resurgence in their "God-fearing country." The whole town is in on it. Cyrus told me

where it is, and I'm going to it now. If I wait, they may figure out I know and try to stop me. But I have to see it. I can't wait to tell Salena about it; Mom was right!

My lungs constrict, I can't breathe. *Cyrus told me everything!* runs on loop in my head.

The only person willing to talk to me is Cyrus.

"I talked to her."

Cyrus told me everything!

"When she sought me out to talk about my family."

Cyrus told me where it is, and I'm going to it now.

That asshole cop. He knew. He knew this whole time, and he plays coy, passing messages like we're in a cheap spy novel? I'm out the door, with nothing but Raya's journal in my hands. There is no grief in me, now. Just rage.

I burst through the station door, let it slam against the wall. There are a few people in the station, and all of them jump at my entrance. I stare straight at Cyrus. "Fuck you, you bastard!"

His eyes widen, and he stands up from his desk. "Ms. Mallick—"

"What, you think 'Oh, I can just pick and choose what this grieving woman needs to know, because I know better than her, dumb woman'?" He's closer now; I wave the journal in his face. "You were the last person Raya spoke to before she died!"

The other people in the station are staring intently at me. Cyrus looks around, eyes a little frantic, and reaches out for my elbow. "Perhaps we should take this outside." He leads me out the door, and I wrench out of his grasp.

“Why didn’t you *tell* me?” I want to hit him; I can barely hear my own words with my heartbeat in my ears. “What is with this damn town and secrecy?”

He has that somber look, again. The one from the diner when speaking about his mom. “I couldn’t tell you. For your own safety.”

I do hit him. The crack echoes through the fog. My palm buzzes. To my surprise, he doesn’t react, not really. He rubs his jaw and hangs his head.

“I’m sorry, Salena.”

“Fuck you.” My voice is breathy. I feel myself starting to come down from my rage.

He nods. “Let me drive you back to the motel. I’ll explain everything on the way.”

I cross my arms. “And, what, I’m supposed to just trust you now?”

He looks up at me, and I just know. I don’t know how, but I just do—a feeling in my core that he’s telling the truth. That he’s doing the best he can.

I follow him to his deputy car and get in the passenger seat. He starts the engine, looks at me before leaving the parking lot. “We’ll take the scenic route; give us time to talk,” he says.

“And we can’t just talk at the motel, because?”

“It’s not safe.” We start out on the road, turning to leave and drive around the outside of town. There’s still a persistent layer of fog, but it’s broken up a bit by all the trees. “This town is messed up, Salena.”

I scoff. “You’re telling me.”

Cyrus shakes his head. “No, I mean truly, *deeply* messed up. The things they do, just to keep the Stone Lake a secret, to keep their idea of country ‘pure.’” He shudders. “There was a reason my mom left, but I didn’t want to listen to her. Or maybe I couldn’t listen to her. Like you said, something about this town that brings people back.”

“You mean...like magic?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” He slows the speed of the car, faces me. “I wanted to expose them. I thought maybe that was the way to justice, if word got out about the Stone Lake and the town. I thought your sister may be the one to do that.” He closes his eyes for a moment, two, three, before turning back to the road. “It’s my fault she died.”

There’s a sharp pain in my chest, and I gasp. The clear acknowledgement brings back the grief, and the sorrow feels thicker this time, as though I’m also channeling Cyrus’.

“That’s why I didn’t tell you everything,” he continues. “I didn’t want the same thing to happen to you. I didn’t want to be responsible for two deaths in the same family.”

I turn to him to reply, to say something, but I’m blinded by headlights cutting suddenly through the fog. I’m thrown with the impact, my head cracking into the passenger door.

Then darkness.

#

The first sensation I have when I come to is the smell of wet grass. Then I feel it on my legs and arms. My head pounds when I open my eyes. I’m staring at the sky, which is surprisingly bright. The stars remind me of Raya’s bag.

“Ah, I see you’re finally awake.”

The voice is gravelly; tone unamused. I turn to see the town doctor. “Help her up, would you?” He asks over me.

I’m grabbed by my arms and lifted roughly. Pain shoots through my body, and I realize my hands are tied behind my back. I look around, try to gain my bearings. The moon is full tonight, illuminating everything beneath it.

I’m in a large clearing in the woods with what looks like the entire town in attendance as well. Someone else is holding a bound and bloodied Cyrus up across from me. And in front of us is a small lake, the water so still it looks as though you could walk across it.

“The Stone Lake.” It hurts to talk, but I can’t help it. I can’t believe that after all this, it’s right here.

I can’t wait to tell Salena about it; Mom was right!

“Yes,” the doctor drawls. “It appears you didn’t heed our warning, Ms. Mallick.” He turns and looks at Cyrus. “Nor did the deputy. So we will have two trials tonight.”

“Trials?” I watch as the older white woman I met goes over to the lake and dips an ornate goblet into it, filling it to the brim.

“Magic has left this land because we are a God-fearing nation, Ms. Mallick. As we should be, as all the world should be.” The doctor takes the goblet, holds it up in the moonlight. “Our lake helps weed out those with magic in them, so we can cleanse our town. If you drink the water and live, you are filthy with magic. If you’re not, well, the lake helps you onto your next life.”

“Oh my god, what is *wrong* with you!” I struggle against my captors, but they only tighten their grip. I watch helplessly as the doctor walks over to Cyrus. He tries to struggle as the goblet is pressed to his lips, but that only causes some of the water to spill, the grass turning instantly to stone.

My blood runs cold. “Oh my god,” I breathe.

The men holding Cyrus force his mouth open, and the doctor pours in the water. It splashes as Cyrus tries to fight swallowing, and I only notice now that everyone is wearing gloves. Protecting themselves from the fate they are decreeing to others.

Cyrus’ lips start to grey, and his face turns blue from lack of oxygen. I listen to him choke on air and seize up as his insides turn to stone. When the men let go, he falls to the ground with a thud, heavier than before. I throw up in the grass beside me.

The doctor lifts my chin up to face him. I wish I had the energy to spit in his face.

“This is what you did to my sister, isn’t it. This is what you’ve been doing for years to keep the Stone Lake a secret.”

A faint smile plays on the doctor’s face. “It’s been effective for generations. Not that you or your generation understands, but what we’re doing here is for the good of the many.”

“You’re all monsters.”

I watch as the woman refills the goblet. I think about Raya, standing here in this spot, afraid, alone. I think about Isaac, and how they’ll never know what happened, and I pray they don’t decide to follow in my footsteps. That they stay safe in our apartment, far from here.

The doctor takes the goblet, and I wonder if it'll be easier if I don't fight. I don't really have the energy to do so anymore. When pressed to my lips, I drink, which I can tell surprises him. I keep my eyes on the full moon, large and bright, and wait.

At first, it seems like nothing happens, and I remember how movies always claim that time slows down and you see your life flash before your eyes right before you die. Then my body starts to warm from the inside out. It's not painful, but comfortable. Homemade tea from Mom when I'm sick. The heat from Isaac when we're in bed.

It radiates through me, following the blood in my veins. I feel strong, exhilarated even. Not at all like I'm dying. I look back down at the people in front of me, and they're afraid. I see it in their eyes, but I can also feel it. A knowledge I've always known. Like how I knew I could trust Cyrus at the police station.

Everything makes sense, now. Everything comes into focus, the world clear and bright through the Almes town fog. The men holding onto me yell as though they are burned and let go. I stand, disintegrate the bonds on my wrists. The doctor is radiating fear. They've never actually encountered someone who passed their trial before. Never encountered someone with magic.

I pull strength from the moon, let my body ebb and flow to its gravity. It's time to run a trial of my own.

“Truth in Retelling III”

Once there was a man, who refused to be called father. He tried, he said, he tried but children were not what he agreed to. This marriage was supposed to equate to *more*: more status, more money, more support for him. He did not know that also meant more bodies to clothe, more mouths to feed, so much *more* that anything he gained he lost immediately. Tattered dress. Cold nights. Empty bellies.

The man felt cheated and took it out on his new, young family by planning to leave them. He sold their land and moved them into a small cottage on the edge of a wood. You know the one. In the middle of the night, the man pocketed the money and walked away through the cover of the trees. He was never seen again.

“Goodnight, Sweet Prince”

When the prince’s betrothed moved into his castle, she brought with her trunks and trunks of clothing, numerous ladies in waiting, a couple horses, a few paintings too abstract for the prince’s taste, and a black cat. The prince quickly grew to hate that cat.

Everywhere the princess went, the cat padded along behind her heels. She was never without that cat—the stables, the dining hall, the washroom. At their betrothal ball, that damn cat was always in her orbit, nearly tripping the prince at every turn during the dance, weaving in and out of the princess’s skirts all night.

A month into the betrothal, the prince started plotting the cat’s demise. One rare occasion he found the cat outside, alone—the first time he had ever seen it away from the princess’s ankles. The cat stared at him with blinking eyes, completely trusting as he picked it up and threw it from the embankment. Stupid creature.

He walked into the dining hall for dinner, a bounce in his step. Finally, a night alone with his betrothed. Perhaps this would be the night he convinced the princess to go to bed with him. That damn cat always got in the way, a physical barrier between the betrothed couple at every step. But tonight—tonight would be different.

The princess smiled when he entered the room, and the prince froze mid-step. Sitting in her lap, flicking its tail, was the cat.

The prince made numerous plans to rid his life of that cat. Traps, poisons, drownings, falls, animal attacks, but no death seemed to stick. Each day he attempted another murder, and each night the cat greeted him upon the princess’s lap at dinner, staring him down when the princess left for her room, standing guard over the girl while

she slept. The two were never two, always three, and while the princess never minded—she loved the cat with all her heart, and it loved her—the prince grew hot with rage.

As the kingdom prepared for the wedding—servants and staff working day and night to turn the cold castle into a warm welcome to visiting kings and queens—the prince rode one of the princess’s horses into the forest. One of his men told him about a witch who lived amongst the trees, a witch who will provide whatever magic you desire for the right price.

The witch had a name, floral and fragrant, that men never bothered to remember, simply referring to her as the witch in the trees when they spoke of her and her powers in hushed whispers in dark corners. She held no allegiances, except to herself. She had learned at a young age that one must be willing to do anything to survive, and she was very good at surviving.

Trees became denser and darker the further the prince went into the woods. The princess’s horse started to buck and resist, but the prince forced it onward until the trunks grew too close together for it to fit. He dismounted and tied the horse tight to a nearby branch—he didn’t want it to escape. Proceeding forward on his own, the prince squeezed through the wild flora, clothes and hair snagging at every turn. What sort of wild woman would live in this, he wondered to himself.

After what felt like hours, perhaps days or even years, the prince stumbled into a clearing deep in the forest. Very faint light drifted in from the tree cover, a deep green color through the leaves. The air weighed heavier, an unnatural presence looming around him. He blinked once, twice, to clear his vision, and when he opened his eyes again for a third time, the witch in the trees stood before him.

“Another man has sought me out, I see,” she said, her voice sweet honey. Her skin was the grey-brown of old tree bark, her hair the mossy green of ivy. Her eyes were sharp and bright in the dim light as she watched the prince. She bent half at her waist towards him, a mock bow to royalty.

“How may I assist you, your highness,” she asked, her gaze never leaving his face.

“I need to kill a cat,” he answered.

The witch in the trees laughed, the leaves rustling with her voice. “Surely, a man such as yourself, my prince, can handle that task effortlessly,” she said.

The prince reached into his pocket and withdrew a bag stuffed with coins. When he dropped it at her feet, it clinked loudly.

“I need to kill a cat,” he repeated, “and I require your assistance.”

From the weight of the bag, she knew the prince was serious in his plea. Taking the bag to her lips, she whispered over the cloth mouth, and then dumped it onto the ground. Instead of coins, sand poured out. The prince started, but the witch held up a hand to silence him.

“I have no need for gold,” she said, “but I accept your offer. In exchange, you will complete for me three errands, but”—she stared intensely into the prince’s eyes—“you must agree before knowing what they are. Do we have a deal?”

The prince took her hand in his, a tight grip, her skin electrified against his. The deal was struck. Soon the princess would be all his.

For the first errand, the witch of the woods sent him to the nearby mountain. There lived the only remaining dwarf in the kingdom, surly in his old age. Deep in the

mountain, the dwarves had worked the land's crystalarium for centuries. As time passed by, so did the dwarven race, leaving just one old man to grow the minerals and gems.

The prince followed the tunnel carved into the mountain base down, down, down. The walls were polished, calcite reliefs lighting the way in a variety of colors. It was beautiful in a way that the prince could appreciate, perhaps, if he had the time to do so. But he had more important matters at hand.

"What do you want?" the dwarf asked without turning to face his visitor. He had his back to the entrance to the crystalarium, tending to a bed of amethyst. Hundreds of years old, his hair and beard were intricately braided, his eyes narrowed in a blend of concentration and annoyance. The dwarf wasn't fond of visitors; they always wanted something, and all he wanted was to be left alone.

"I need some crystals," said the prince. He held out the list the witch in the trees enchanted onto a large leaf for him. "Angel Quartz."

The dwarf growled under his breath. He knew the request was the witch's—she had bothered him before, but he refused to help her. He thought her bossy because she knew what she wanted, and didn't approve of how she lived her life. Even dwarven women conducted themselves better than she.

"Witch, if you think a disguise spell is going to fool me—" He finally turned around and stopped short upon seeing the prince, who had his arms crossed and eyebrow arched. The dwarf bowed, his beard touching the stone floor. "Apologies, your highness. I thought—"

The prince cut him off with a wave of his hand. "The quartz?"

"Yes, of course. Anything for you, sire."

The dwarf filled a small bag with Angel Quartz, and then the prince was off to accomplish his next errand.

His second errand took him to a distant valley, where druids had set up an encampment away from sight. Magic users, they kept extensive gardens of rare and important plants, which they would use themselves, but also sell to villagers who wished to change something in their lives. The prince strode in past tents and lean-tos and garden plots, ignoring the stares. Scent of mint and wet soil filled the air.

Before he could reach the heart of the camp, a woman draped in the richest of blues stepped forward. Her eyes were piercing, and the prince stopped mid-step, swearing that his heartbeat halted in that moment as well.

“What brings you to us this day?” the priestess asked. “Are you searching for something?”

The prince cleared his throat and consulted his list. “Yes, I need a few bundles of wormwood.”

“Is this request for you?” The priestess looked him over intently. “Or someone else?”

The witch of the woods and the druids were not allies. As the witch did what she needed to survive, she crossed the druids more than once. After a few years of bad blood, they reached an agreement: peace if they each stayed to their own land. The witch in the trees lost more in this deal, as her forest did not have all the plants that the druids raised, but at the time she wanted one less reason to look over shoulder.

The prince took out a pouch, absolutely bulging with coin, and held it toward the druid priestess. “I’m willing to pay. Handsomely.”

Her grin was wide and all teeth. Much like the witch, the druids were willing to do almost anything for the right price—unfortunately, the witch in the trees was never flush with coin. The priestess called to a druid child in a language the prince didn't understand. The child ran to a nearby hut and returned with three small bundles of wormwood.

“A pleasure doing business with you,” the priestess said as she exchanged the herbs for the coin pouch.

The third and final errand took the prince back to his castle. Had he been paying attention, he would have thought about how different it looked. Old windows were replaced with beautiful stained glass; the gardens were full of new, blooming flowers; draperies and tapestries were updated with the finest material. The royal wedding was just seven days away.

Much like when he was in the mountains, the prince took no notice. He ran through the main hall, past the princess's chambers, and down a flight of stairs to the castle library. Dust filled the large room—the library had been left unused since the prince outgrew his childhood studies and the castle tutor left for another kingdom.

He brushed his finger along the spines to read the titles, searching for the one on the witch's list. This was the last item, and then he'd finally have what he needs to take care of that damn cat. He was almost there. Soon the princess would be all his.

It took him a few hours to go through every shelf in the room before he found the black leather tome, the last book in the last row on the last shelf. In gold leaf, the words *spirituum quaeritis* sat on the front cover, small enough print that the prince almost

missed it. The book felt light, airy in his hand, but once placed in his bag, it weighed it down as though he had placed a masonry stone instead.

When he left the library, the cat was sitting at the top of the stairs, staring the prince down. The prince snarled at it.

“I will be through with you soon,” he hissed in its face as he walked past.

The cat simply flicked its tail and followed the prince with its eyes as he ran back past the princess’s chambers and through the main hall. He mounted the princess’s horse, his bag seeming heavier than it had when in the library. But he didn’t let that slow him or the horse down. He rode straight into the forest, this time forcing the horse to squeeze through the tight trees until they broke into the clearing.

When he dismounted, the witch in the trees stood at the horse’s head, stroking its face. “Do you have what I asked for?” she asked, never turning away from the horse. The horse nickered softly and nuzzled her hand, casting a slight smile on the witch’s face.

The prince dropped his bag with a thud at her feet. She picked it up with ease, and riffled through to verify that it held the Angel Quartz, bundles of wormwood, and the tome. Satisfied, she reached into the air and produced a small vial. It contained a small amount of green liquid, barely more than a few drops.

“That’s it?” he questioned.

The witch of the woods nodded. “Yes. Put one drop in the cat’s food for seven days. That’s seven drops in total. Do you understand?”

The prince took the vial, held it up to the dim sunlight, and smiled. “Perfectly.”

That night, back at the castle, the prince insisted on fixing the cat’s food. The princess, for the first time since she moved in, felt that maybe this betrothal wasn’t going

to be all bad. As dinner progressed, the princess smiled at her betrothed and the prince smiled at the cat as it ate up the food without discretion.

Each night, the prince placed a drop of the witch's potion into the cat's dish, and each night, the cat ate it up. After the first couple days, he started to doubt the reliability of the witch of the woods, as the cat was seemingly unfazed—just as all of the prince's other attempts on the animal's life. But once the cat had eaten three doses, he started to notice the effects. The cat began to act more sluggish, wobbling around the princess's legs as she helped in wedding preparations. After five, the cat alternated between lethargic and frenzied, knocking over the extensive crystal vases set in the entryway to where the ceremony was to be held. The day before the wedding, after the cat's final dose, one of the princess's ladies in waiting found the cat curled up at the foot of the princess's bed, unmoving.

As each day passed, the prince felt the excitement of victory build in his very bones, some days to the point of actual pain. But he didn't mind. At first, he barely noticed. After all, he had more important matters at hand.

Finally, it was the day of the royal wedding. The main hall overflowed with visiting kings and queens and dignitaries, all dressed in the greatest finery. The prince stood at the front of the room, his stomach in knots as the princess walked in, the most beautiful thing in the room. Perhaps even the castle.

Finally, she was all his.

The ceremony commenced with applause, and the castle filled with laughter at the following ball. For years to come, the guests would say it was one of the best weddings they had attended. If they had looked closely at the newly wedded couple, they would've

seen that both the prince and princess were distracted the entire reception—though for completely different reasons.

As the night ended, the prince found himself where he had been attempting to get all this time: bringing the princess to his bed. They entered his chambers, and a jolt ran through his spine. He closed the door behind them and sat on his bed, his extremities tingling as though they were going numb.

The prince reached out to coax the princess over, but before he could a sharp pain gripped his chest. He gasped, struggled to breathe. He fell backwards onto the bed, fighting to unbutton his collar.

“Call...the...physician,” he croaked.

The princess stood where she was, her new crown gleaming in the candlelight. She watched as the prince flailed in agony and pain, face turning red then purple. When he started to still, she stepped closer.

“You killed my cat,” she said.

What the prince didn't know was that where his betrothed came from lived a witch too. A witch of the water, who had watched over the princess when she was a child, and gifted her the cat for her birthday. The two had been inseparable ever since.

Now, the princess had grown up with tales her mother told her, tales of men. When the two kingdoms agreed to the betrothal, the princess had run to the witch of the water, frightened about this unknown man she was about to be shackled to.

The witch had held her close, whispered in her ear. “That cat is your best and most trusted friend. It will keep you safe. I promise.”

The prince looked up at the princess, his vision going dark at the edges.

“You killed my cat,” she repeated. “And it’ll be the death of you. What a shame, they’ll say.” She turned to a nearby looking glass, repositioned her crown. “That the prince died on his wedding night, the excitement just too much for him. What a shame.” She stared at him, eyes hard. “For he really *worked* for that night, trying again and again and again until he *finally* got his way.”

Froth started to appear at the sides of his mouth. He could feel himself slipping into unconsciousness. The last thing he heard was the princess.

“Don’t worry,” she said, “I promise to take good care of our kingdom. Honestly?” She paused, looked at him appraisingly. “I think we’ll all be better off without you.”

“Truth in Retelling IV”

Once there was a wood. You know the one. Trees as far as the eye can see, a green so lush it could only be magic. The wood existed for years upon years, hundreds of years, and grew with each turn of the earth. It mirrored the growth of the world around it: larger, denser. Darker. Oh the stories those leaves could tell, stories of monstrous existence, if only you cared to listen.

“Girls in Jeweled Cages”

Three days before Solstice a witch came into the hamlet peddling her magic. No one knew where she came from, but she was clearly foreign as her head was shaved and everyone in the land wore their hair long. Still, the residents stopped by her cart in the hopes of improving their lives.

The blacksmith’s wife was pregnant, a miracle after years of supposed infertility, and begged her husband to see what the witch had to offer to ensure good fortune for their unborn child. He went with her reluctantly, as he doubted the veracity of the witch’s claims. But as they entered the line of patrons, the witch met his eyes with a stare that pierced the blacksmith’s soul, and he believed. She walked past those in front of the couple and placed a gem into the pregnant woman’s hands.

“A wish stone,” the witch explained to the future parents. “It’ll grant whatever wish you have for your child.” She raised a finger in warning. “But it only grants one wish per owner, so make your wish carefully.”

The gem gleamed in the sunlight, a bright blue with cloudy white streaks that appeared to move within. Like a small lake trapped in glass. When the couple arrived home, they hung it above the empty crib. The blacksmith wished for his son to have skill in the family trade; his wife wished for her daughter to have beauty beyond compare.

Three months later, the community welcomed their daughter into the world. They called her Aderyn. She grew up plain, but her work with metal became legend. By the time she was a teenager, her name was known across the land. While her father dealt with weapons and horseshoes and farm equipment, Aderyn worked in finer things: jewelry and

kitchenware and what could be, and often was, considered art. Things delicate and detailed.

She spent most of her life in front of the fire, hair braided and pinned up to keep it from igniting—a lesson she learned her third time assisting her father in the smithy. Her mother often quietly mourned the daughter she wasn't, but Aderyn didn't mind her life. She knew she had a gift, and she enjoyed it.

Once she reached adulthood, she started accompanying her father to festivals and fairs to hawk their wares. They set up shop, and while the blacksmith called out to patrons, Aderyn sat next to their stand and crafted pieces on demand. Often a line would form, so long that it snaked through the entirety of the festival. Everyone wanted a piece of her work, each distinctly unique, individual, an item that could be shown off to neighbors and visiting relatives.

The blacksmith felt overwhelming pride for his daughter...at first. Then, he started to fall ill: muscles and body growing weak and exhausted. He was becoming unable to keep up with customers. Slowly, more and more purchases and orders were for Aderyn's work, and less and less for his.

At home, Aderyn spent every waking hour at the furnace, creating jeweled silverware and necklaces of various lengths and elaborate candleholders and many other items that were requested of her. Her tools and works in progress occupied more and more space in the workshop, until her father's were piled into a small corner. Soon, their small family was relying on her, and her alone, for income.

“I’m not sure what we’ll do if she finds someone who takes her away like you did with me,” the blacksmith’s wife said one night when they thought Aderyn was out of earshot in the smithy.

The blacksmith sighed heavily, resentment clear in his breath. “I provided for us before, I can do it again.”

They paused and looked at each other in silence, as they both doubted the statement. There were few places to get work like Aderyn’s, but many to get work like her father’s—and lately it seemed that’s exactly where his customers were going.

Aderyn stood outside the doorway to the kitchen, where her parents were talking. A fear she couldn’t quite explain tightened her rib cage around her heart as she listened in secret.

“Well,” his wife said, “let’s be thankful she’s been too occupied by her metal to meet someone and fall in love.”

#

Three months later, at a fair hosted in a town a full day’s ride from Aderyn’s hamlet, she met Ronne. A seamstress, Ronne stopped by her stand to inquire about gemstone pieces she could stitch into the bodices of dresses she was currently making. Aderyn was overtaken instantly—Ronne’s dark skin and red hair radiated, her body soft in places where Aderyn’s was rough. She had never seen anything so beautiful.

They fell in love in the way of youth: fast and hard and all-consuming. Aderyn scheduled more market visits to the town than anywhere else, each longer than the last. Ronne created reasons for her to pass through the hamlet—particular flowers she needed

for dye, wool from a breed of sheep not found near her—and spend time warm at the fire, watching Aderyn work and stealing her away for tender moments.

On one such night, Aderyn laid in her arms, letting Ronne gently tease the knots out of her hair. She hummed as she worked, lulling Aderyn comfortably to sleep. Neither girl could remember being so content, so happy.

“If I may ask, *min skat*,” Ronne said, splaying Aderyn’s hair around her shoulders, “why are you still living with your parents? With your talent, I would’ve thought you’d have enough for a home of your own.”

That tight, inexplicable fear gripped Aderyn again. “My father has lost almost all of his business thanks to me—”

“You can’t take the blame for that.”

“I think he blames me.” The room grew quiet for a few heartbeats. “Any profit I earn is spent to take care of my family.” She turned to face Ronne. “What about you?”

She took Aderyn’s hair into her hands to braid again while she spoke. “My mother was a wanderer. I grew up in a wagon. But once I found my skill, found what I was good at, I chose a place to stay and there I’ve been since.”

“That sounds lonely.”

Ronne smiled knowingly, lovingly. “It used to be.”

#

Aderyn decided she was going to marry Ronne. She felt more sure of it than she did anything else, more sure than she felt that her metalwork was a gift. She worked on pieces day and night, accepted more orders than she could feasibly have time for and completed them, but she was still unable to keep much profit for herself.

At a Solstice Festival in the town, a man approached her. His appearance was average, his blond hair only down to his shoulders, but his presence demanded attention. He introduced himself simply as The Baron, and he had a proposition: to become her benefactor. Apparently, in his large estate just outside of town, he owned a variety of birds, and he wanted her to craft ornate cages for them.

Her father answered for her. “A generous offer. May we take some time to consider?”

The Baron accepted and promised to return later in the festival. Once he left, Aderyn turned to her father. “This is my decision.”

He placed a calming hand on her arm. “I don’t trust him.”

“Why?” She wrenched away from his weak grasp. “Because he’d take me away from you?” All she could think about was the amount of money she would make, how much faster she could marry Ronne and buy their very own home. And here was her father, standing in the way of that.

The blacksmith hid a slight look of hurt. “He’s good for the money, it’s true, but I’ve heard...things. Stories. About him taking advantage of beautiful young women. Please, at least take time to really consider first.”

Aderyn agreed, and when The Baron showed up for the second time, she declined his offer. She continued to work harder as her father grew sicker. Soon he was unable to even lift a hammer or travel with her to festivals and fairs. Aderyn dove even further into her work, but no amount of metal could steel the fear growing inside her.

One day, while the blacksmith lay deep asleep in the middle of the afternoon, her mother packed a bag.

“I’m going to find that witch,” she said. “She helped us before...she *has* to help us again.”

She bent down before leaving, placed her lips on the blacksmith’s forehead. “Stay strong, my love,” she whispered. “I’ll be back soon.”

Aderyn watched as her mother mounted their horse and rode out of the hamlet. She never saw her again.

#

The blacksmith’s condition worsened over the next few months, leaving Aderyn stressed and strained and teary-eyed. When she opened the door to find Ronne, arriving as a surprise to help, she fell to her knees. Ronne met her on the ground, held her tight and close.

“Shh, *min skat*, it’s alright,” she murmured into her beloved’s hair. “You are not alone.”

With Ronne by her side, Aderyn finally was able to get some sleep. She rested her head on Ronne’s chest, let her love lull her by running fingers across her skin. For a brief moment, the first since her mother left, Aderyn felt a sense of peace.

“The doctor stopped by last night.” Her voice was soft, afraid of how saying the words aloud makes them real. Makes them the truth. “She...she said it’s not a matter of *if*...but *when*. That...” Her words broke, and Ronne wrapped her arms around her. “That all I can do is make him comfortable.”

Ronne kissed the top of her head. “Then that is what we will do.”

The blacksmith lasted another entire cycle of the moon. With Ronne helping around the house—cleaning and cooking meals and stitching up worn clothing and

blankets—Aderyn could take some time to work on orders, an attempt to fight the mound of debt accruing since her father took ill. When she came in from the smithy, she found Ronne spooning some broth for her father, and she was full of love. How badly she wanted to propose, right then, but she had nothing to offer. That dream would have to wait a while longer.

At the end of the month, the girls awoke to the blacksmith cold and still. Aderyn knelt beside him, took his stiff hand in hers. “I’m sorry,” she breathed.

There was no money for ceremony. The two of them attended his burial alone, watching as the gravedigger covered him in dry dirt. When they returned to the empty house, hand in hand, there was already a note on the door. The debt collectors had been waiting to shift responsibility, to start pressuring Aderyn to pay her father’s sins. As she read the notice, she knew it would be impossible to pay everything back with work gained from festivals and fairs. There’s only so much work she could do in a day.

She knew what she had to do.

#

She rode into the town with Ronne the next day. They arrived at her shop, where they parted, with Ronne giving her a kiss for luck. Aderyn continued her journey to the edge of town. As she passed the town square, she noticed a board covered in papers: banners for shops and upcoming festivals, depictions of missing women, declarations of engagements. A sort of news bulletin for the citizens. She waved at a few people perusing it, and went on her way.

Just off the edge of town was The Baron’s estate. The house was large, multi-storied, and wider than any building Aderyn had seen before. The grounds were walled

off in the cleanest brick, a pristine iron gate at the entrance. When she pushed it open, it didn't make a squeak.

The door, ornate and imposing, swung open just as silently to reveal The Baron, blond hair only slightly longer than when she saw him last. He smirked, knowingly, and spoke before she could.

“You've come to accept my offer?”

She nodded, eyes low in deference. “If you'll still have me.”

He looked her up and down, appraisingly. “Your work is the most beautiful I've seen, and I have an eye for beauty. I would be honored to be your patron.”

His smile was wide, baring teeth, and Aderyn was reminded of her father's warning. But she shook his hand, signed the deal. She was to move into his estate, an entire small wing to herself: a kitchen, a bedroom, a workspace larger than her father's smithy three times over. She followed Ronne about the place as she excitedly talked about curtains and bedclothes she could sew to make the wing more like home. Aderyn didn't care about that—for her, The Baron's hospitality was only temporary, until her family debt was paid and she could buy a house for her and Ronne—but she loved the shine in Ronne's eyes, so she let her plan.

Aderyn spent the next months working hard in front of the fire. The cages The Baron ordered were elaborate and intricate, each different from the last. They were much larger projects than she was used to, and she would regularly spend weeks on one piece. She often lost track of time, emerging from her workspace having missed meals and sleeping hours. But it was worth it, for each birdcage got her one step closer to her goal.

She saw less and less of Ronne, but Ronne understood. She wanted her love to be happy, and she couldn't deny the look of elation and energy Aderyn would get upon completing a piece. She, too, dove into her craft, and girls made a promise to reunite after each batch of cages was completed.

The day after the first batch, the two never left Aderyn's bed. The second time, they spent the day in town, Ronne showing off her favorite shops and places to eat. Aderyn stopped in front of the board in the town square. There were more notices about missing women. She recognized one from when she first arrived, and reached out to it.

"She hasn't been found?" she asked.

Ronne's voice went a little soft. "None of them have. We've had people disappearing for years, but—"

"Not *people*," an elder woman passing by interrupted. "Women. We've had *women* disappearing for years." She squinted at the notices. "Ever since that baron came to town."

"I'm sure people went missing before The Baron," Ronne said, lacing her fingers with Aderyn's.

The woman shrugged. "Perhaps, but at this frequency? Yes, he's helping our town's economy, but it still all seems a little suspicious, don't you think?"

She looked at Aderyn for a response, but Ronne shuttled her away. "Don't listen to her," she said on their way back to the estate. "It's just town gossip."

After that, Aderyn paid closer attention to whispers when in town for supplies. They all echoed what both her father and the woman said: The Baron had a thing for beautiful women, and wasn't the timing of the disappearances and his arrival suspect?

But Aderyn barely saw much of The Baron herself. He gave her her space, only entering when invited or dropping off new orders.

The third batch of birdcages was the largest and most time consuming, and soon she forgot the rumors entirely, her mind only on her craft and her dream of marrying Ronne.

When she's finished, she decided to spend their day showing Ronne her work. Aderyn led her through the main hall, where they passed floor-to-ceiling paintings of birds and women, women-as-birds and birds-as-women. At the end was a large double door that opened to an aviary. The room was lit by natural light from a far wall made entirely of glass. There stood each of her jeweled birdcages, shining in the late sun's rays. In every one resided a sole bird, each stunning but something about them seemed lonely. There were many birds in the room, but each spaced far enough away as though to prevent communications or relationships between them.

Ronne stood in the center of the room, awash with sunlight and colors reflecting off the cages. Aderyn's breath caught at the beauty.

"Aren't they marvelous?" The Baron walked in behind them, gaze surveying his collection. "Each one unique in her beauty."

"Yes," Ronne agreed, reaching into a cage to stroke the feathers of pale yellow bird.

The Baron turned to Aderyn. "I'm always amazed at each new cage you make me. Despite your own plainness, you've shown that you do know beauty." He looked toward Ronne, shining in the sunlight. "And she sure is beautiful."

"Yes," Aderyn agreed, missing the stare The Baron kept on Ronne until she left.

#

Only half of the family debt had been paid off, but Aderyn decided she could wait no longer to propose. It was all she could think about. She took the blue wish stone from her birth—one of the few possessions she had when she moved to the estate—and crafted a beautiful necklace. Ronne had told her once that she vastly preferred wearing jewelry on her neck, as any on her hands got in the way of sewing. Aderyn hung it around her own neck for safekeeping and continued work on the latest batch of cages, impatiently waiting for the day they're complete and Ronne comes to visit.

That day came and went with Ronne never arriving. Aderyn, fearing the worst, ran into town, hoping to find her at her shop. But she wasn't there. Aderyn searched through the night, frantic, knocking on surrounding homes and stores, hoping someone had seen her.

But no one had. The elder woman from before said she hadn't seen her around for a few days. "Another missing woman," she said, shaking her head. "I'm telling you, that baron has something sinister about him."

For the first time, Aderyn roamed the entirety of The Baron's estate, opening every door, examining every nook and cranny. Looking for any indication that he had something to do with Ronne's disappearance. She ended up in the aviary, with no evidence that the rumors were anything more than that. She slumped on the floor, clutching the necklace she made, and fought the fear that she had just lost the love of her life.

#

Months passed with no clues as to what happened to Ronne, or any of the other missing women. When not crafted cages, Aderyn spent most of her time in the aviary, watching the birds. She had grown attached to one in particular; it was a rich black with a radiant red head. It often chirped at her as soon as she entered the room, as though it was trying to talk to her.

One day, even though she knew she shouldn't, she lifted the cage latch and let the bird out. It darted out immediately, and circled her head before landing in her hair. Before she could stop it, it started pulling at her braids. She reached up to grab it, but it pecked at her hands until she decided to leave it be.

The bird continued to undo Aderyn's hair until it was no longer braided, flowing in waves down her back. It reminded her of Ronne, who constantly played with her hair, and she felt a pang of grief and heartbreak. Unbidden, her love's name emerged from her lips.

The bird stilled, then frantically cried, flying off her and back onto its cage so they were face to face. It stared at her expectantly.

"What?" Aderyn asked, unsure what the bird was wanting.

It ruffled its feathers, seemingly in irritation, before flying back and forth from the cage to Aderyn's hair. At one point it circled her, grabbing a piece of hair at her waist and bringing it up.

An idea occurred to her. "Ronne?" she whispered.

Again, the bird frantically cried and flew to face her. She held her hand out, and it nuzzled its face into her palm. "Ronne," she said again, this time louder and not a question. She knew, and the bird chirruped in approval.

She heard footsteps in the hall, and quickly grabbed the bird Ronne and put her in the cage. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I'll be right back. I'll find a way to fix this."

Aderyn made an excuse about needing materials, and ran into town. She headed straight for the board in town square, straight for the depictions of the missing women. There, a woman with hair the same pale yellow as the bird Ronne took a liking to the last time she visited. Another, snow white with jet hair, matched exactly the large bird trapped in the first cage Aderyn ever made. And Ronne, with her dark skin and red hair. Just like her bird.

Each of the missing women could be matched with one of The Baron's birds.

"Back again?" The elder woman came up behind her. She looked sadly at the board. "Sometimes it feels like there are more and more missing every day."

"You were right," Aderyn said, turning to face her. "It's The Baron. He turned them into birds and..." Her face grew pale. "And he's had me making...cages for them. All this time, they were right there..."

The woman took her hand gently. "Don't blame yourself for being fooled; there are men who keep the wool over everyone's eyes, and that is their fault alone."

"But what do we do?" Aderyn asked. "How do we fix it, how do we free them?"

The woman thought for a moment before answering. "Magic," she said, then nodded. "Yes, the way to undo another's magic is to use some magic of your own."

Aderyn's heart sunk to the ground. She worked with metal, not magic. "Do...do you know magic?" she asked.

The woman chuckled slightly and shook her head. "No. In fact, no in town does. As far as I know, the only time we've had magic was when that witch came before the

Solstice all those years ago.” She placed her hand on Aderyn’s arm, softened her voice. “But you seem like a bright young woman. I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

Aderyn reached for her necklace, ran her fingers against the blue wish stone. “I think I have.”

#

Aderyn entered the estate loudly, wanting to announce her presence. She tried to keep her confidence and bravado up as she walked down the main hall, necklace wrapped in her fist. She was not going to be afraid of him.

When she opened the doors to the aviary, she found The Baron looking out the wall of glass.

“Back from the market?” he asked, keeping his back to her.

Aderyn steeled her shoulders. “I know what you did.”

“Do you, now?” He turned, a maniac look in his eye. “And what exactly would that be?”

She took a small step closer to the nearest cage, positioning the wish stone so it was cupped in her palm. “The missing women...they’re here. They’re your birds.”

To her surprise, he laughed. Hard and loud. She took another step towards the cage.

“And aren’t they lovely?” he finally said, freezing her in her tracks. “Such beauty must be preserved, cataloged, cared for—”

“They’re in cages!” Aderyn yelled, placing her body between him and the cage, her hand behind her back.

“Yes, *your* cages.” He turned and brushed his fingers on one next to him. “Such beauty in them as well. As I said before, you truly know beauty. I feel we are the same, in that way.”

“We are not the same,” she said through gritted teeth. Reaching behind her, she pressed the wish stone against the cage behind her and *wished*.

The stone warmed her skin so suddenly, she almost dropped her hold of it, but she fought through the pain, the burning metal melting into her skin. The aviary seemed brighter despite the setting sun; the metal and gemstones of each cage positively glowing.

The Baron’s eyes widened. “*What did you do?*” His voice boomed, shaking the wall of glass.

Aderyn stepped back from him, eyes tearing. He attempted to follow her, but the cage nearest him exploded, sending metal and stone shards deep into his skin. He screamed in pain, as his skin welted with heat, but Aderyn’s attention was elsewhere.

Standing between them was a girl, a beautiful girl, who hadn’t been there before. Soon, cages all over were breaking violently and releasing not birds, but women. Of various sizes and colors and ages, but all unmistakably beautiful. A group of them turned to The Baron, fury in their eyes and the broken stands of their cages in their hands. Aderyn saw fear in his eyes before they swarmed him, screaming their battle cry until his screams of pain were no more.

A hand rested on her shoulder, and she turned quickly, dropping the now melted and twisted necklace to the ground. There stood Ronne, her love, her beautiful red-headed bird. Aderyn nearly collapsed in relief, in joy, as Ronne scooped her into her arms and they held each other tight.

“*min skat, min snut, min elskede,*” Ronne whispered repeatedly into Aderyn’s neck. A song, a mantra, a hallelujah.

When they pulled apart, Ronne took a hold of her wrist. “Your hand!”

Aderyn looked down at the mangled remains, molten metal twisting into blackened skin. She tried to flex her fingers, but could no longer feel, let alone move. She would never be able to create like she used to.

Ronne touched it gently, concerned. Aderyn smiled, placed her other hand on top of Ronne’s. “It’s alright,” she said. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is I have you.”

The room seemed to still, all eyes on her, but that didn’t stop the largest smile from blossoming on her face. She took Ronne’s hand and pulled it to her chest, held it against her heart.

“Will you marry me?”

Ronne placed a hand on the side of her love’s face. “Of course. *Yes.*”

The rest of the freed women cheered as they kissed, The Baron laying still and bloody at their feet.

“Truth in Retelling V”

Once there was a mother, though not the one you'd recognize. She never asked to be a parent, never asked to be left in a miniscule cottage on the edge of a wood. You know the one. As if she didn't have plans of her own, as if the man who abandoned her was the only one disappointed by the outcome of their marriage.

The children were a handful, one for each of the mother's hands which she often had occupied with other things. Cooking, cleaning, working. Every day a cycle she couldn't break out of, and all she wanted was just one day of rest. Some quiet. Some peace.

If she were to be honest, when her children disappeared into the wood, she felt relief.

“We Three Survivors”

The train stops frequently and often during our journey, patrols checking passes and bodies. Checking for abnormalities, for symptoms: ivy growing in place of veins, precious stones in place of tears, scales or feathers in place of skin. We sit patiently in our seats for our turn.

At the beginning, the car was full of passengers—many bodies squeezed into even fewer seats, others standing shoulder to shoulder, possessions clutched tightly—but now it’s empty and echoing. Everyone in a seat to themselves, including some baggage. No one forced to touch another unless they came together, and everyone breathes a little easier. Crowds increase the chance of infection.

We three spread ourselves comfortably amongst two facing benches—Zeke laying horizontally on the worn cushions, eyes closed and arms crossed; the girls sitting across, Astrid watching the patrols, Helene watching the landscape outside. Everything is white. The sky, the land, the trees. A fresh powder had drifted down during the night, but thankfully it’s not cold enough to freeze the tracks. Yet. It can take anywhere from hours to days to defrost, to get this heavy heap of cold metal moving, and we’re impatient to reach our destination. The safe harbor we’ve been promised.

Nona said when she was a child, the land had seasons. That the ground could be green and warm. She said that with the changing seasons, people’s wellness changed too—that a good winter would freeze and kill off the viruses.

“That’s how you know what’s happening here ain’t from nature,” she’d tell us, shaking her head. “This plague is unnatural.”

We lost her a month before we boarded the train. Another loss of many.

The patrols scan identification, check it with the immunization database. We've grown up with inoculations from birth—a new one every year, then every month, then every week. At first, the symptoms seemed baffling, but similar. Predictable. Able to be categorized and cataloged and cured. At first, we thought it was nothing to fret, another strain of the super flu, mutating with the world. So we took the pills, gave our children shots, went about living amongst each other. Unknowing, ignorant, naïve.

When it changed, it was swift—or, as Nona said, we simply ignored the signs. Humans often dream themselves immortal.

Passengers jerk with the movement of the train, wheels cold and complaining. Everyone in our car is accounted for, a first for the journey but there are so few left. We have no way of telling how many are aboard the other cars; passengers aren't allowed to move about to minimize any travel of the contagion.

Now three, we were seven when we boarded the train all those months ago. We lost Halo at the first check, unable to hide his teeth turned to stone. When being dragged out, he attempted to bite the patrol's arm, but the stone cracked instead against their armored jacket. A few weeks after that, Nysa started showing symptoms: butterflies erupting from their mouth whenever they sighed heavily or belched. They screamed as they were taken, filling the car with bees. The patrol hit them in the back of the neck, and when they went down the car echoed with the sound of dead bees falling to the metal floor.

Rigel was found in the lavatory, pearls bleeding from his wrists. He was part of the largest purge, a small crowd escorted off the train. He complied without a fuss, his

body limp in exhaustion and hopelessness. The pearls were confiscated, marked a biohazard, but we're sure they'll sell them for profit.

Carina was the last of us to go. She simply disappeared.

We remaining three keep an eye on one another: make sure all paperwork is in order for the patrols, check appearances for any noticeable symptoms that could take us away. We're all the family each other has left.

The train speeds to the next stop, despite the groans of the metal wheels on cold tracks. Barren trees and snow-covered ruins roll past, a blur of white and grey. Just more of the same. Nothing we haven't seen before; nothing we haven't always known.

Other passengers are starting to grow restless. A man stands and paces the length of the car; when he passes by, we avoid eye contact. There's no need for interaction—no pleasantries or small talk. We all know where we're going. We all know why we're here.

What remains of the health officials advertised the trip aggressively. Electronic billboards, mailings, frequent announcements on the remaining airwaves. Everyone became inundated, and those who could afford a ticket started buying them. Those who couldn't began applying for waivers, selling precious possessions, doing whatever they could to get on this train. Others simply turned off their radios and locked their doors, resigning themselves to their fate.

For us, Helene had a dream. And when she dreamt, we saw it too, so we made our own preparations to board the train advertised to take people to safety. To a stretch of land supposedly untouched by the contagion.

Though that is not our destination.

We're only a few stops, finally, from the promised land, but our goal is just before that. An abandoned town in the depths of an old wood.

The train starts to slow, signaling another patrol check. Zeke jerks awake from his sleep, eyes open and shining. A vibrant, unnatural green. Astrid reaches for his face, but he pushes her hand out of the way. Helene turns from the window.

"It's time for us to go."

We gather our belongings—at this point, just our jackets and a single bag between us—and move to seats next to the car door. We wait for the train to stop, for the patrols to enter. The other passengers eye us warily. Nerves knock our knees together, and we clasp each other's hands. So close, we're so close, but still so much could go wrong.

Metal screeches on metal as the wheels clack to a halt. We hear the doors open three cars away. Two cars. One. The patrols enter and we bolt for the door, ignoring the screams and yells from throughout the car. Zeke is grabbed by the arm as we pass, but he turns and slams his free palm into the patrol's chest. Tendrils of green bloom, thick and sturdy vines winding around the body, tightening, constricting. The patrol screams, Zeke is released, and we are gone.

The tracks are atop a steep hill. We roll down on the snow like when we were small, laughing and competing to see who reached the bottom first. Stopped, we lie breathless, the cold stinging our exposed skin. We stay for a moment, still in the night air—the first fresh air we've experienced in months. It's crisp and surprisingly clean.

Helene is the first to stand, brush herself off, and look to the trees where we landed. She closes her eyes and breathes, stretches upward and searches for the dream, for the guide. When she finds it, we all feel it—a pull deep in our core, vibrating along

the cartilage of our ribs. We follow, into the trees, snow deepening as we trudge on for a whole revolution of the sun. When night falls again and the cold bites harder, Astrid alights some brush with her breath.

Our surroundings are desolate, abandoned first when the winter came and forgotten later with the beginnings of pandemic panic. We're alone in these leafless trees. We try to imagine what this forest would have looked like in Nona's childhood. Zeke rests his hands on a branch, and for a brief moment we see some green before it shrivels in the cold.

We continue for seven days, invigorated despite our lack of food and water and shelter. We know we're headed for somewhere, for something, better. We feel it in our bones: a light brighter than the winter sun, propelling each step forward through the monochromatic landscape. There have been alleged reports of similar symptoms occurring before someone finally succumbed to the contagion. But we know, we *know*, this is something different.

Finally, we reach a frozen creek, on the edge of an abandoned small town. It looks exactly as Helene dreamt. Stone walls peek out amongst the snow, buildings no longer whole, but we can see where they used to stand. The town appears to be older than the forest, with trees rooted in the stones and skeletons of houses. Everything is covered in fresh powder, glistening in the afternoon sun. It's a strange kind of beautiful.

Walking through the ruins, we reach a farm: decaying wooden posts from a fence, circling stones from a well, rusting metal from a tractor. And a barn, standing tall as the most intact building left of the whole town. A breeze, warmed by the sun, blows through us and swings the barn door open, exposing a light from inside.

Something like faint music twines toward us, circling our wrists, caressing our faces. Helene smiles, eyes bright.

“This is it.”

We run into the warmth of the barn, blood pumping in our ears. The door slams shut behind us. We stop, face to face with an amorphous figure. The one who sent the dream, whose voice has been guiding us all this time.

They exist as ink in water, fluid and changing. When they speak, their voice is soft and resonating, vibrating our whole being like we were on top of a radio’s speakers.

“My children,” they say, then pause. “Where are the rest?”

We bow our heads. “We lost them,” replies Astrid.

The figure comes closer, and we are filled with a warmth. The memory of Nona’s arms around the seven of us occurs to us all.

“You are brave, my children,” they say, “to make it here after so much grief and loss.”

Helene stands, stares hard at them. “We were promised safety. A better life than this.”

The light in the barn glows brighter, a sweet breeze swirls around us. The figure pulls in on themselves, condenses into a more solid form. A human form. First, they’re a mirror image of Nona, but they continuously shift while they speak: from Nona to Halo to Nysa, Rigel, Carina, and then others we don’t recognize, though somehow we know they too were lost to the contagion.

“This world is dying, that is true. But you were given gifts, my children, and you have not shied away from them.” They smile, a kind, comforting smile. “You have been chosen, and you’ve answered the call.”

Once more, we’re looking at Nona’s face. They reach a hand out to us. “Together, we can build a new, better world.”

Astrid is the first to take their hand, and a blast of heat explodes from her, all the snow in the radius instantly melting. Zeke is next, grass begins to grow at our feet, and Helene can see it all unfolding.

The creation of our world.

“Truth in Retelling VI”

Once there were two children. In some tales, they’re both girls. Others, ungendered. Most often they’re siblings, though the age difference ranges from mere seconds to years, but sometimes they’re unrelated—just two young kids on a search. Looking to fill a lack in their lives, a void no one their age should have to attempt to fill. Looking for warmth, sustenance. A caring heart. A guilt-free existence.

In all the stories, the children entered the wood. You know the one. With no love at home, they hoped to find it amongst the trees. So when they met that lost boy, with bark for skin and acorns for eyes, who could blame them for feeling found. Truly, how else was their story to end, except for them to take his hand, and run.

“What Do You Hunger For?”

Angela and Maria are one of three sets of twins in their building. Not the youngest, but also not the oldest. Markus and Titus are adults in the girls’ eyes, both employed and living without their parents on the fifth floor; Tony and Alice are practically babies, still sharing a bunkbed on the floor above. Angela and Maria are old enough to recognize things in the world for what they are: for example, that they live in the smallest apartment on the first floor because it’s all their dads can afford.

Maria doesn’t like the word “poor,” but Angela still uses it.

“It’s what we are, it’s not something to be ashamed of,” she tells her sister late one night, while they mend a couple dresses Maria is starting to grow out of. “It just is.”

“That’s not what the kids at school say.” Maria’s voice is soft; she always worries about waking up Miguel on the other side of the curtain dividing the bedroom in two, even though he’s trained himself to sleep through anything to be able to pull the early morning work shifts. She never has to worry about waking Daniel, who is the light sleeper, since he works night shifts. The girls hardly get to see both of their dads at the same time anymore.

“The kids at school need to mind their own business.”

And that’s the end of that, because Maria knows she’ll never be able to explain to her sister that it’s not that easy to simply ignore the whispers behind hands and the pointed looks as she walks by in clothes three years past their fashion expiration date. That one of the reasons she prefers dresses to pants is that the style for casual dresses doesn’t change nearly as often other clothes, so all she has to do is keep them clean and

looking new and then the comments lessen. They still exist, though, and permeate her mind at night when she can't sleep.

Angela, instead, worries about the bills. Daniel tries to hide them when he grabs the mail after work, but she knows all the hiding spaces. She spent the younger years of her childhood exploring every nook and cranny of the apartment, has it memorized like the lines on the palms of her hands or the wrinkles gathering around her dad's eyes. Having mastered the art of tiptoeing, she gently removes the bills from their hiding spaces every month to read them over, leaving no trace that they were ever disturbed.

She stopped being surprised at the increasing numbers early on in her cataloguing. She learned at a young age that everything costs money, and anyone who tells you otherwise is either deluded, privileged, or trying to sell you something.

“How much do your parents spend to have lights on in your house?” Angela asked a friend in first grade, confident that the numbers she saw before Daniel snatched the bill away were a mistake.

They scrunched up their face in confusion. “What are you talking about? Lights are just part of the house—you don't have to pay for them.”

She stopped talking to the kids at school about money shortly after that.

Both of the girls work covertly to help ease the financial burden of their dad's: Maria taught herself sewing so she can keep her dresses up to date and lasting longer; Angela stops at the soup kitchen after school every day for an early dinner so more food can stay in the apartment for the rest of the family.

One day, while waiting in line for a serving of canned green beans, she overhears two women discussing a way to get themselves out of poverty. They speak in hushed

voices, but Angela's young ears are able to pick up most of the conversation: a man known only as The Wayward One, a product called Sugar, money like you couldn't believe. She tucks away this information for later.

#

In the middle of the night, Maria rolls over in bed and touches Angela's arm. Her sister turns to her, instantly awake as the twins have trained themselves to do to assist each other with nightmares, anxiety, and other fears that can interfere with sleep.

"What is it?" Angela asks in a whisper.

Maria shifts closer and rests her head on her sister's shoulder. Her voice is even softer; only audible because of the close proximity. "They're fighting."

Angela listens and hears what her sister does: Daniel and Miguel arguing in the other room. It's not a common occurrence, but it's bound to happen every now and then. Another one of those things that Angela describes as "it just is."

This one, however, sounds more heated than in the past.

"It was out of my control," Daniel says. "They gave no notice."

A chair squeaks, and Angela imagines Miguel sitting down, placing his face in his hands like he usually does when he's stressed. "We really needed that money."

"You don't think I know that?" Daniel's voice is raised when he speaks.

A pause of silence follows, and the girls know they're seeing if they woke up their sleeping daughters. Maria curls in tighter to Angela, who wraps her arm around her. Angela turns her head to check the clock sitting on the dresser: 3 a.m. Daniel shouldn't be home for another few hours. A panic grabs her chest, which she fights to keep down to

not agitate Maria any more than she already is. Perhaps it's some kind of work holiday that she didn't know about; maybe there's no reason to get all worked up at all.

Miguel dashes those hopes and confirms her fears when he speaks again. "How are we supposed to survive on one income?"

"We'll figure it out, love," Daniel says, voice hushed. "We've done it before."

The quiet is palpable until Miguel stands up, scraping the chair across the floor. "I need to take a walk."

Angela is unsure if Daniel tries to stop him or say anything, because the only thing she hears next is the apartment door opening and closing in quick succession. Maria whimpers and Angela squeezes her tight.

"It's okay; it'll be alright," she whispers into her sister's hair like a lullaby until they both fall back to sleep.

#

The first week of Daniel's unemployment is almost enjoyable if the reason why he's now home all the time is forgotten. It's a nice change for the girls to have one of their dads home and awake in the morning to have breakfast with them, even if breakfast is just toast and jam.

His work gave him a severance package that he assured them is enough to cover costs as he looks for another job, though Angela had been unable to find the numbers to confirm that. She knows from firsthand experience that parents will lie to their kids if they think it'll protect them.

But for this first week, she lets herself believe him. Having Daniel around has done surprising things to the girls' mood, she's noticed: she's laughing more, Maria is

sleeping better. The girls had forgotten what it was like to have any semblance of a “traditional” family, to have someone other than each other to spend time with at home. Angela desperately wants to believe her dad when he says everything will work out.

By three weeks, she starts to doubt. Miguel has picked up as many hours as he legally can and is now practically never home. Daniel keeps assuring them that a job is just around the corner, that they still have the severance pay taking care of things, but Angela sees the look on his face when he comes home from job hunting each day. She can read the numbers in it as easily as the numbers on a bill.

Soon, weeks turn into months, and Daniel is still without a job. He no longer tries to tell them everything’s alright. In fact, neither of their dads do much talking to anyone. The girls can tell that they want to argue with each other, but they’re both too worn down to do so, so the apartment remains eerily quiet at all times. It becomes one of those things that just is.

After a particularly bad morning of silent stares and tension, Angela decides to skip school and heads straight to the soup kitchen. She takes a seat at the table closest to the entrance and waits for the women from before. The women who spoke about The Wayward One, Sugar, money like you couldn’t believe. She waits until well past the end of the school day before she returns home empty handed.

“How was school, mija?” Daniel asks as she walks into the apartment.

“Fine,” Angela lies. Maria gives her sister a pointed look, but stays silent, mending one of her dresses.

She repeats the process the next week, and the next, and the next until it becomes a ritual: once a week, leave the house with bookbag in tow, stay on the bus past the

school drop, ignore Maria's stare as she disembarks, ride until the stop a block from the soup kitchen, set up camp next to the entrance, wait and wait and wait. Try not to give up hope.

She meets him on a day she's about to give up hope. The Wayward One. He emerges from the alleyway shadows like liquid; at first, Angela's unable to identify a body to go with the voice she hears.

"When I heard a girl was looking for me, I wasn't expecting one so young."

His voice freezes her where she stands. Her muscles go cold, and she wonders if this is simply fear, or something else. He regards her silently, his multi-colored eyes taking her in from head to toe. Dark clothes help him blend into the shadowed bricks, despite his pale skin.

"Exactly how old are you, *chica*?" He over-enunciates the Spanish so that it grates in her ears.

She breathes deep to keep her voice steady. "Twelve."

He bends at the waist to meet her eyes. "A little young to be searching for someone named *The Wayward One*, don't you think?"

Angela stands tall, looks him straight in his multi-colored eyes, because this is what she's been wanting. This is what she needs. "My dad lost his job."

"Ah." The Wayward One stands back up and crosses his arms. His eyes sparkle in the dim light. "So you're looking for a job."

It's not a question. He raises his eyebrow, and in that moment, an odd chill overtakes Angela, as though he is reading her soul. Her stomach aches, an ocean of hunger despite the stew she just finished at the soup kitchen. The man smiles a smile that

she's only seen on television, on men that shouldn't be trusted, and pulls a business card seemingly out of thin air. It's a simple white card, with only an address and time listed in small font.

“Meet me at this location tomorrow, and I'll give you your first assignment.”

Angela tucks the card into her back pocket, where it weighs on her mind as she takes the long bus ride back to the apartment. When she keys into the building, she's greeted by their neighbor from across the hall: Leigh, an older woman who lives alone. When the twins were much smaller, she used to watch them when their dads' work schedules overlapped. The girls used to think she was a witch, but Angela knows now that her mysteriousness was simply because they were too young at the time to understand everything Leigh talked to them about.

“Good evening, Angela,” she says. “What are you up to?” Her blue eyes watch her intently, but not unkindly. Angela feels the card get heavier in her pocket.

“Nothing,”—she shifts the weight of her bookbag on her shoulders—“just getting home.”

“Hmmm.” Leigh nods. “Well, I just wanted to let you and your sister know that you're welcome anytime. I know things are a little rough right now, but if you need *anything*—”

Angela hurries into her apartment. “Uh-huh, thank you, good night!”

Lying in bed that night, after Maria has fallen asleep, Angela takes out the business card and turns it slowly in her hands.

#

The Wayward One grins when he sees her. “For a moment, I thought maybe you weren’t going to show.”

Angela shifts from one foot to the other. “The bus was late.”

They’re standing inside a small mom-and-pop flower shop, empty save the two of them and a girl with pink hair reading behind the counter. When The Wayward One leads her past the counter, she doesn’t even blink. He takes Angela through a small greenhouse room where the shop makes custom bouquets and baskets to a door that looks like it doesn’t belong—brushed metal and no noticeable handle. The man doesn’t need one though; he simply puts the palm of his hand on the metal and pushes.

It opens up on a small factory-like warehouse. There are rows of tables set up like conveyor belts, but any motion is done by the people standing on either side. Angela can’t really see what they’re making, their movements from one person to the next fluid and precise.

The Wayward One opens his arms in pride. “Welcome to my domain.”

As her eyes adjust to the dim light compared to the glass of the greenhouse, Angela realizes that the warehouse is too big to be part of or behind the flower shop. She looks around for an explanation, perhaps a wall of windows that create the illusion, though she can’t find any. The man notices her searching.

“The location changes every day,” he says, and she thinks she hears malice in his voice, “so don’t think you can double-cross me with the authorities.”

She blinks, and he smiles again, grabbing a small plastic tube from a nearby table. “This,” he says ceremoniously, “is Sugar.”

He pops the cork and pours out three small crystals into the girl's hand. They remind her of clear rock candy, but they feel heavier than they look. There's a faint pulse in her palm where they rest.

“So...I sell them for you?”

“Not quite.” He lightly touches the rocks, each glow under her fingers. “They're already sold, I just need someone to deliver them.”

Angela stares at the Sugar. “What do they do?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Do?”

“I mean...why do people buy them? They're a drug?”

The Wayward One chuckles. “Oh, they're so much more than a drug.” He picks one up, and it changes colors as he rolls it around in his hand. “Put one under your tongue, and they give you what you hunger for most. It's quite an addicting sensation.”

Angela has more questions, but she's starting to feel like she has made a mistake, gotten in over her head. What if she gets caught? What if The Wayward One can't be trusted? Her fathers have told the twins numerous stories of what untrustworthy men can do to young girls.

The Wayward One looks at her as though he can hear her thoughts. A smirk rises on his face and he holds out the crystal of Sugar to her. “Want to find out what you hunger for?”

Angela knows that answer. It's what drove her to seeking out this man to start with. Her fathers' tired faces, her sister's restless nights. She shakes her head slightly, and returns the stones in her palm into the plastic tube.

“How do I begin?”

#

Angela sees more of her city in the first month of carrying Sugar than in her entire life so far. Once she stops looking over her shoulder for cops, she actually enjoys visiting new places, seeing the trees and the beach and buildings that aren't two steps away from being condemned.

The Wayward One wasn't lying when he said the location of his store changed daily. She has yet to meet him in the same place twice, the warehouse showing up in laundromats and restaurants and once a funeral home. She knows where to go each morning from the business card, the font adjusting itself for each location.

At first, Maria would eye her as she left the bus stop each morning, though she never said anything. Now she doesn't seem to notice. Angela's not sure if that's because she's accepted it, or because she's become more involved with some kids at school. They don't talk as much as they used to.

She would worry if she wasn't certain she's making the right decision, working for The Wayward One. Since she's too young to have a bank account, her payments go directly towards her parent's bills. Whenever she starts to doubt what she's doing, she remembers the look on Miguel's face when they got notice that an anonymous donor paid the utilities for a month—her first paycheck. Her relationship with her sister can suffer if it means their family as a whole can survive.

#

When folding laundry one day when both parents are out, Angela finds a tube of Sugar in the folds of Maria's favorite dress. Her heart and stomach drops as she holds the half-empty container in her hands. When Maria walks in, she turns on her.

“What are you doing with this?”

In her months of working, Angela has seen what Sugar does to people. It makes you feel good, at first, but the withdrawal and addiction are far worse than anything shown on television. She’s had customers so hungry for it, that they nearly attack her to get it faster.

Maria scoffs and takes it from her sister. “What, you’re the only one allowed to have it?”

“I don’t *have* it, I deliver it. This is bad stuff, Maria, it won’t do anything goo—”

“What would you know!” Maria, soft-hearted, gentle Maria, has never shouted before. “You’re not at school anymore, remember? How could you possibly know what’s going on with me, what can or can’t help me? I have *friends* now, Angela. For once.”

Angela takes a deep breath. “If they’re only your friends because you’re doing Sugar, then they’re not really your friends.”

Maria glares with heat in her eyes. She grabs her jacket, placing the tube in her pocket.

“Maria, where are you going?”

“Like you care!” Her words are punctuated by the slamming of the door.

Angela’s heart pounds like it did when Daniel lost his job. She can see her world, her life, disintegrating in front of her eyes. She was wrong; dealing with The Wayward One, selling Sugar, was a mistake.

What was she going to do?

A gentle knock sounds from the door. “Angela? Is everything alright?”

It's Leigh, their neighbor. Suddenly Angela remember that day she met The Wayward One, when Leigh told her that if she ever needed *anything*...

She opens the door and to her surprise starts crying. Leigh doesn't miss a beat, wrapping her arms around her. It reminds Angela of a time when they stayed at Leigh's overnight as babies, and she would hold the twins close when they couldn't sleep.

"I've made a mistake." Her voice is muffled as she speaks into Leigh's shoulder. "A big mistake. I thought I was doing something right, I thought I was *helping*..."

"Shhh." Leigh pulls away, looks Angela in the eyes. "Why don't we have some tea, yeah?"

Angela follows her to her apartment, and over tea she tells Leigh everything. When she finishes her cup, she feels better than she's ever felt. She looks at the empty cups and tea leaves, wonders what sort of tea could do that.

Leigh shakes her head. "I knew that Wayward One was up to something, I just didn't know what."

The girl looks up at her. "You know him?"

"In a sense. Since arriving here, I've attempted to keep track of any other magic in the area." She takes the empty tea cups to the sink.

"Magic?" Angela blinks. "Are you...are you a witch?"

She chuckles. "Some have used that term, yes. I go by many names. An idea The Wayward One took from me."

"So...so you can help?" Angela leaps from her seat. "If you're a witch, if you have magic, you can help me? Do some kind of spell, fix Maria and help my dads?"

Leigh turns to her, eyes soft. “I *can* help, but all magic has limits. I won’t be able to fix everything.”

Angela’s eyes begin to water again. “Please. I’ll do anything.”

Leigh nods and pulls out a small plastic tube. Angela starts. “Is that Sugar?”

“Yes, but not the Sugar you know. Yet another thing that man took from me and twisted.” She pours out three small crystals in to Angela’s hands. But instead of clear and heavy, these are lake blue and light as rain. “These aren’t drugs you flood the streets with. I only give these to those who truly need them. Who want to do some good.”

Angela feels breathless. “How do they work?”

“You put them in a drink—any drink will do—and you’ll get what you need.”

“That sounds vague.”

The woman smiles. “That’s magic, dear.” She places a hand on her shoulder.

“They only work for the person who drinks them, and only one per person.”

Angela looks at her hand. “There’s only three.”

“Yes. And that’s a decision you have to make: who gets what they need.”

“But that’s not fair! Can’t you just give me four?”

Leigh shakes her head. “All magic comes with a price, and this is the cost for Sugar.”

“How will I choose?” The girl’s voice is soft, possibly on the verge of tears again.

Leigh kneels to meet her eyes. “You’ll figure it out.” She snaps her fingers, and when Angela looks up she’s outside her apartment. She checks that the Sugar is still in her hand, that she didn’t just dream that. She didn’t.

She takes a deep breath and enters the apartment. For once, everyone is home. Miguel gives her a small, tired smile; Daniel is filling out another application at the table while Maria works on updating one of her old dresses. Angela looks at them all, and suddenly knows what she has to do. She heads to the fridge, Sugar in hand.

“What do you all want to drink?”

“Truth in Retelling VII”

Once there was a boy, a boy of sticks and leaves, bark and acorns. The boy had no age nor memory of a childhood, his only knowledge the wood. You know the one. His family was amongst the trees, in the cool shade of their leaves and the comforting embrace of their branches. He had known no other way of life, and he was happy.

Once, he came across two children wandering in his home, lost. He could see the sadness in their eyes, permanently scarred in the corners of their face. Hungry, he fed them. Cold, he clothed them. Lonely, he loved them. He led them deep into the wood, where it was safe and warm. They became like him: skin tough as bark, eyes brown as acorns.

And they were happy.

“How to Grieve Your First Loss at Almost 13”

- I. Shock [shok]: (noun) 1. a sudden or violent disturbance of the mind, emotions, or sensibilities; 2. the cause of such a disturbance

Your father’s car drives up the parking lot at the after-school pickup line; Daddy never picks you up. It’s always Mom, she does all the running around even when she’s running on empty, even when she’s spent all day at work and the nursing home with Nana, even when she has to drive your big sister to campus. You open the car door and it’s heavy cement, your bookbag suddenly weighed down by lead you don’t remember putting in there. *Where’s Mom?* The car is cold. *At home.* His eyes stay straight ahead never wavering never shifting. You ask the question you ask Mom after school every day. *How’s Nana today?* His eyes meet yours.

- II. Denial [dih-**nahy**-uh l]: (noun) 1. disbelief in the existence or reality of a thing

Maybe you heard him wrong though you don’t dare repeat the question for what if you heard him right? The emotional response is immediate: the deafening drums in the head, the salty sea in the eyes, the aching anvil in the chest. No. No this is wrong. No no no no no. You hold it in lungs ablaze; a choking sob. No. Daddy turns. *You’re allowed to cry.*

- III. Anger [**ang**-ger]: (noun) 1. a strong feeling of displeasure and belligerence aroused by a wrong; 2. *Obsolete.* grief; trouble

Your brother knew her for twenty-three years; your sister for eighteen; you for only twelve. It would be thirteen next week. Would’ve been. All your friends have known their grandparents all their

lives, some even their great-grands, but you never knew Pop and definitely not any great-grands and none of the kids knew Daddy's daddy and Daddy's mom left the state when you were tiny so you barely even know her. How utterly unfair it is. That you were born last, that you were born late, that you are the youngest by years and years too many years too late.

IV. Guilt [gilt]: (noun) 1. a feeling of responsibility or remorse for some offense, crime, wrong, etc., whether real or imagined

Did I tell her I loved her enough? Did she know I really meant it? I should've helped out more around the house, with the animals, with the chores. You beat your face into your pillow every night, every missed chance every missed opportunity spinning around 'round 'round, awake because you have to be. Awake because the thoughts build a wall a moat a fortress to keep sleep at bay. You think you have all the time in the world to do the things you want, say the things you should, until the world shows up big and huffing and smug to push you to the ground and teach you.

V. Depression [dih-**presh-uh** n]: (noun) 1. the state of being depressed; 2. sadness; gloom; dejection; 3. *Pathology*. a low state of vital powers or functional activity

It's three weeks exactly since Daddy picked you up. Blankets are heavier than they look. So are legs and arms and eyelids and shoulders. Getting out of bed now is a feat that superman can't accomplish, your bones are laced with kryptonite. Heavy heavy head, heavy heavy heart. Relish in the

darkness only to be assaulted with bright yellow light. *You're going to miss the bus.* You respond face encased in pillow. *I don't feel good.* Mom huffs, lifts the heavy blanket like it's a feather, a kite, lighter than air. *You've already missed too many days. Up. Now. Still still,* muscles slowly wavering synapses slowly firing. It's three weeks exactly since Daddy picked you up.

VI. Acceptance [ak-**sep**-tuh ns]: (noun) 1. the act of assenting or believing

Her house is empty. It has been for a couple months or so now, you've finally started to lose track, but it's the first time you've been in since...since everything. It's a ghost town except you don't want to use the word ghost, it feels wrong, blasphemous towards Nana, though you can't explain why you feel that way. You just do. So it's just...*empty*, empty will do. It's been a couple months—you pause. One month? Two, four, a year? Five? The fast-paced flow of time is no longer marked by Daddy picking you up at after-school. That was your past; this is your new now. She's gone. Nana died.

VII. Hope [hohp]: (verb) 1. to look forward to with desire and reasonable confidence;

see also: *hopeful* (adjective)

It's cold now, the start of the northeastern winter, but the sun shines warmth onto you at the bus stop. It's the meagerest of hugs, the light, but you embrace it back, wrapping your arms all the way around until you reach yourself again. A tight squeeze to hold onto summer, onto fall just a little longer. Hang on just a little longer. Holidays are coming up,

galloping so fast you can see them just at the crest of the hill down
the road, all bundled in cheer and goodwill and family. Your house
hasn't decked the halls yet, but it will soon you know it. A cold breeze
ruffles your coat whispering reminders in your ear: *It won't be the same,*
not like before, not like the past, different. You know that too. Squeeze the
sunbeam again. She won't be walking up the road, stubborn to her old
bones that the two-minute walk is nothing to fret over she's strong and
besides *exercise is good for you didn't you hear?*, to celebrate brunch
at your house and unwrap poorly wrapped boxes full of cheap trinkets
that you had to get for her. She won't be there to accept each gaudy
gift as though you presented her with the crown jewels, won't be there
to give you more than you feel you deserve, won't be there to provide the
light-hearted family ribbing, won't be there. *It won't be the same, not like*
before, not like the past, different. The sunbeam warms your face with a
gentle caress, a kiss on the cheek, a whisper in your heart. *But it doesn't have to*
be bad. You know that too.

“The Sanctuary”

There haven't been any group tours or school field trips in a while now, and Jed's house shows it. Cobwebs have started taking over the corners of walls and in the legs of tables and chairs in the opening gallery rooms. I'd offer to clean it for him, but if we don't have any tours to The Sanctuary, then the visitors' gallery would ultimately end up like it originally was so why bother.

I unlock the door with the spare key he leaves wedged in the pot of a dying fern.

“Jed?” I call out. “I brought Chinese.”

Pocketing the key, I kick the door shut behind me. “Jed?” The only answer is the slight echo of my own voice. Figures. Why did I expect anything else.

I brush cobwebs out of my way as I walk through the house. When I reach the kitchen, I'm greeted by a soft thump and the click-clack of small claws. A mewling sounds from the other side of the island counter. I dust off a corner—the kitchen is only moderately cleaner as it's one of the few rooms Jed actively uses—and place the takeout boxes on it, fishing out a dumpling. I squat and whistle.

“Here, Loa.” I hold out the dumpling. “I bet you're hungry.”

A serpentine, feathered head pokes around the edge. Green feline eyes blink twice at me. I wave the food. “Come on, girl, don't play coy. I know you like me.”

She chirps at me and darts forward, snatching the dumpling from my open palm. Loa's a Ngo Dynasty dragon—black feathered, size of a house cat, with a small fin on her back. I tease some webs from her feathers and she wags her tail. About ten years ago, before I started working here, she was found in the streets of Vietnam. Completely startled some poor washerwoman. Jed heard a report, flew out to pick her up, and she's

been with him ever since. She was one of the easiest creatures to tame, although Jed has yet to meet one he can't.

I stroke her head and scoop her up in my arms. "Let's go find Jed, huh?"

She purrs and nuzzles my neck. She used to chew on my hair, which is one of the reasons why I now keep it in a short pixie. I nudge her up my arm 'til she's perched on my shoulder. Takeout boxes in tow, I head through the kitchen and out the back door.

I find him outside, within the fences of the sanctuary. He's not a tall man to begin with, but the griffin he's standing next to dwarfs him greatly. Loa squawks happily, flies off my shoulder, and circles above Jed.

Too lazy to walk around to the gate, I swing myself over the fence. Loa's landed on his head, curling her dark tail in his blond hair. He doesn't seem to notice. His ear is pressed against the griffin's chest.

"Everything all right?" I ask as I approach.

Jed doesn't turn around. "Art is just feeling a little under the weather today. But he's gonna be just fine." He strokes the griffin's beak. "Isn't that right, boy?"

The griffin paws the ground with his claws and flaps his wings. Jed laughs and pats him on the shoulder before turning to me. "Livvy!" he exclaims, brows knitted in slight confusion. "What are you doing here already?"

"Already?" I hold up the Chinese takeout. "It's lunch."

"Is it?"

I shake my head and hand him a box. "How did you ever survive without me?"

"Well I was a lot skinnier, that's for sure." He pats his gut and winks.

#

The shade is thick here. Cool. Fallen leaves crunch beneath me, beneath my tired muscles. Perhaps I could rest while the sun is still high; the sounds of my pursuers have faded. I believe I lost the monsters amongst the trees. And I am rather tired.

#

The Sanctuary's office is a separate small building a bit behind Jed's house. In comparison, it's virtually spotless—the only mess the clutter on the main desk. I sift through some of the papers, filtering junk mail out of the important pieces. Jed sits in an old armchair we drug in a few years ago. He reads through the news on his laptop, searching for strange animal sightings, while finishing his Chinese takeout. Loa is curled up on the chair behind him, purring a little in her sleep.

In the pile I find a recent bank statement—unopened and discarded with the rest of the mail from this week. Sighing, I open the envelope. Although I already suspect what I'm going to find.

“Jed?”

“Hmm?” He doesn't look up from his screen.

I hold the statement out to him. “When was the last time you checked the bank account?”

He shifts in the chair, stirring Loa awake. He answers but still doesn't look at me. “We're fine, Livvy.”

“No, we're *not* Jed!” I shove the statement in front of his laptop—probably more aggressively than I should have. Loa arches her back at me. I ignore her. “There's *maybe* enough here to last us a little over a year, if that.”

He takes the paper from me with one hand and coaxes Loa down with the other. She hisses at me slightly as she settles into his lap. I cross my arms while he glances over the statement.

Sadly, this is not the first time Jed's almost let The Sanctuary fall into financial ruin. How he managed to keep the place going before I took this job eight years ago is a mystery to me. His focus always has been, and probably always will be, the animals first. That's the intention of The Sanctuary, of course: to take care of the mythic creatures that have been abandoned by society. But ignoring the funding of the reserve isn't doing the animals any favors.

"But we filed for that grant, didn't we? That was...what, a month or so ago?"

I run my hands through my hair—if it was longer, I'd probably pull it. "Try five months ago. We were rejected, remember?"

"Oh." His voice is softened, and I regret a little my harsh tone. I've always been the down-to-earth one in this partnership, despite being many years his junior, and sometimes I forget he's not like many other adults I know. My parents would never forget about having to pay bills and keeping the necessary amount in the bank to keep going. They may not think about it all the time, but at the very least it's in the back of their minds.

Jed, on the other hand, rarely thinks that far ahead. He stays on the task at hand—all he wants to do is make the world a better place for these poor misplaced creatures.

"So...some type of fundraiser, then?" He scrunches his brow. "I could maybe talk to my friend at the banquet hall about getting a discounted rate."

“That’s a good idea in the long run, but I was thinking of something a bit more immediate.” I wrestle the bank statement out of Loa’s mouth and lose a corner. Her eyes shine triumphantly. “We should find an investor or two.”

He closes his laptop. “And how do we do that?”

“My parents know some people who may be willing to help.” I slide the bank statement into the appropriate folder in the filing cabinet. “Also, there’s this guy I met in college who’s an investment banker now. He might know someone who’s looking.”

I turn back to him. “But ultimately, it’s your decision, Jed.”

He sits still for a moment, fingers steepled in front of him. Loa rubs her head on the heels of his hands, chirruping. A small bit of nerves tease my thoughts—although I don’t know why. Jed’s never doubted my advice or rejected my ideas before. He’s not the stubborn type.

Finally he nods. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

#

The sound of snapping twigs wakes me. I hear their gruff noises, though I do not understand them. I stay still as stone, still as the forest around me as they get closer. Closer. I shield myself in the leaves, blending, hiding myself from their limited sight. I smell them, smell the blood I drew earlier. They are close. Too close.

#

Bria, one of the two abadas at the reserve, chomps her mouth around the back of my shirt and pulls as I work on fixing their shelter wall. I shake her off, but she just relocates and takes another mouthful of fabric. Rafai, her mate, snorts and nimbly eats off a low-hanging branch of the crab apple tree nearby.

Abadas aren't necessarily short, but not necessarily tall either. They stand at about nine hands tall, comparable to an average small donkey. Originating in Central Africa, they sport two horns on their head, much like a rhinoceros, although reversed in positioning. When either of them hunger for a leaf or fruit from higher in the tree, they use their top horn to knock it down.

They also tend to forcefully scrape their horns on their shelter, which pops nails and loosens planks that I have to then fix.

It's been a week and two days since I talked to Chuck, my friend in investment banking, about helping me find an investor. After going through the motions of updating each other on happenings since we last saw one another—he's received a promotion and has met the man he believes is The One; I've dropped out of college and am now full-time at The Sanctuary—he assured me he'd find some people with money burning a hole in their wallets to send my way.

I'm not naïve enough to have expected immediate results, but I thought I would've at least heard something at this point. Jed acts as though he's already forgotten about our financial predicament, working with Alan—childhood friend of Jed and the only veterinarian around who's willing to assist—on performing checkups, his usual enthusiasm flawlessly in place.

Bria tugs forcibly on my shirt, jerking my arm, and I smash my hand with the hammer.

“Dammit!” I pinch the joint of her jaw to make her release me. “Would you just leave me be?”

She snorts and shakes her head, losing my grasp. I press my hand on her muzzle to prevent her from taking ahold again. She stares me down for a few seconds before huffing and trotting over to join Rafai.

I watch her and massage my wounded hand. “Dammit,” I repeat under my breath.

“Everything alright over here?”

Alan stands behind me in his patented plaid and jeans, vet bag in his hand and slight smirk on his face. His brown skin is splotched with dirt, I assume from the giving the sleipner her shots. I shrug and stand up, still holding my hand. “Just another day at work.”

He holds out his hand and I indulge him, placing mine in his. He probes it gingerly, following the bones and testing the muscles. I wince—every part of my hand is tender and sends tendrils of pain with each touch. Ultimately, though, I’ve dealt with worse. Like the time I had my foot stomped by a griffin, or when one of the hippocampi bit into my forearm.

“Well, it doesn’t appear that anything is broken.” He lets go of my hand. “But it is *definitely* going to bruise. I’d recommend icing it when you get the chance to reduce the swelling.”

“Thanks, doc.”

He smirks again. “No problem, Olive.” He shoulders his bag and heads on over to the hippocampi lake, where Jed’s waiting. He pauses and looks over his shoulder at me.

“Oh, and your bill will be in the mail.”

I roll my eyes and the scoff sounds on its own. Alan laughs as he continues his way.

#

Running, running, running. One spotted me; I was too confident. I have the advantage—four legs instead of two—but they are getting closer. One hollers and a concussive sound echoes amongst the trees, rings harsh in my ears. Ahead the trees are thinning. I am running. I have to cross the clearing before they do.

#

My hand still smarts three days later, swollen and purple, and I haven't heard from any potential investors either. I called Chuck again yesterday—he didn't have anything to tell me that I haven't already told myself. These things take some time, he's passed on my information, I just have to be patient. I thanked him politely for his help and then proceeded to kick the desk in frustration. I probably would have punched the wall if my hand wasn't already throbbing from earlier.

I'm afraid to admit to Jed that I'm starting to lose hope. Or that at the very least I think I am. This is the worst off we've been in a long while, and when I allow myself a moment to dwell on it, my stomach starts to churn. I keep myself busy—and away from Jed—as a distraction.

Loa joins me in the front rooms of the house, swishing her tail back and forth on the seat cushion she's perched on, eying the vacuum cleaner murderously. When I finish and click it off, she relaxes and curls into herself for a nap. I wipe off the new layer of sweat from my forehead—this is my third self-assigned chore of the day, and I'm definitely getting my exercise. I wrap up the power cord and push the vacuum into a corner with my foot. I'll put it away later.

The back door creaks open. "Livvy?" Jed calls out.

I poke my head into the kitchen. “Yeah?”

“We’re running low on bedding, so I’m heading into town. I should be back before you leave. Do you need anything?”

I shake my head. “Nah, I’m good, thanks.”

The truck crunches down the driveway loudly, and I flop onto the couch beside Loa with a sigh. I should’ve reminded him to ask for Tina at the store so he could get the bulk discount. Loa, upset with my intrusion of her space, stretches then hops on the nearby table, knocking over one of the photos positioned there. She hisses at the clatter.

I lift her off the table with one hand and reach down for the frame with the other. Luckily, it didn’t break. Teenage me smiles from the photo with Jed by her side and Sparks, just a chick then, in her arms. The phoenix was the first creature taken in with me on the payroll. I was sixteen and in complete awe of everything. Jed got a call about a phoenix taking refuge in a nearby chimney and asked me if I wanted to tag along—it was only my third day of work.

How could I say no?

The other photos residing on the table are of various school field trips and other tour groups, including my third grade class. I set the photo of me and Sparks in the empty spot and ponder if I have the will to dust now.

I’m interrupted by the long chime of the doorbell. Loa squirms a bit in my grip, and I let her down, staring stupidly in the direction of the front door for a second. The doorbell? Jed wouldn’t be back so soon, unless he forgot something, and I’m not expecting Alan today—though neither of them have any reason to use the doorbell, or the front door.

Then it hits me. It's someone else at the front door. We have a visitor.

We don't typically have unscheduled visitors to The Sanctuary. It's mostly class field trips and group tours, though those have been few and far between lately. I can only come up with one explanation for this anomaly: we finally have an interested investor.

The doorbell rings again, and I hurry to the door before they decide to give up and leave. As I swing the door open, my suspicions are confirmed. Standing patiently in a casual business outfit is Willow Stock—I recognize her from various magazines and newspapers. Her father was Wilford Stock, one of those millionaires that you're not entirely sure how they got to be because they just always have been. He died last summer in a car accident, leaving everything to his daughter. That's a lot of money to leave to someone who's only a year or two younger than me.

Her hair is in tight braids, pulled back into a neat bun; her cream colored dress complements her dark skin perfectly. She's watching a bird on the feeder off to the side of the porch. Behind her stands a put-together, red-headed man in a gray suit, glaring at his watch—a business manager or advisor of some sort, I assume.

I'm suddenly very aware of the dirty work clothes I'm wearing. I mucked out the griffin's stall earlier and worked up a sweat, which doesn't much matter around Jed or Alan, but can't possibly give off the good first impression I had wanted with an investor. Oh well, can't do anything about it now.

I attempt to channel Jed's enthusiasm. "Hi!"

She turns quickly—I startled her. "Oh, hello." Her eyes survey me, and I cringe inwardly at my appearance. She doesn't appear to be disappointed or disgusted, however. Actually, she seems to relax, until she notices Loa weaving between my legs.

Her eyes grow wide, and I can't stop the soft laugh from escaping my lips. "It's okay—this is Loa. She's friendly, I swear." I hold out my hand. "I'm Olive. Welcome to The Sanctuary."

Willow shakes my hand, regaining her composure. "Pleased to meet you."

I nod slightly. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Yes. I've been looking for ventures to invest in since..." She pauses a beat, her eyes briefly losing their determined, businesswoman look. "Well, I asked my investment advisor"—she motions at the man behind her—"for a list of some causes that were in need of funding."

The man nods, looking a bit uninterested, and types something into his phone.

Willow looks up at me, the determined gaze back. "You see, I want to do some good with all this money."

"A noble goal."

"Yes." She rifles through her bag, procuring a folded piece of paper. "Anyway, you were on the list, so I thought I'd stop by and see what you were about." She pauses again. "I hope that's okay."

The list contains about eight names, with three crossed out violently, one sporting a question mark, and two more with checkmarks beside them. The Sanctuary's name stands out to me like a beacon.

"Of course!" I scoop up Loa so she stops chewing on my shoe laces. "How about a tour?"

Willow fingers the list, as though she's unsure if my suggestion is the proper next step. I can't help but feel a bit sorry for her. She looks out of her element as a

businesswoman millionaire seeking investment opportunities—like a child playing dress up with her father’s legacy.

Her advisor clears his throat. “Are you the proprietor?”

“No, but he’s out at the moment.” I shift Loa into a more comfortable position on my shoulder; she nips at my fingers as I do so.

His eyes narrow. “So you’re just an employee?”

Play nice, Olive. I struggle to smile. “Technically, but I’ve been here a long time. I’m happy to show you two around, though, and answer any questions you may have.”

Willow quickly looks between her advisor and me before placing the list back in her purse. “A tour sounds great,” she says quickly.

He closes his mouth, and I smile for real. “Excellent! If you’ll just follow me.”

I lead them around the grounds, giving the stereotypical tour complete with the roving speeches about each animal housed at the reserve. I take her by the hippocampi herd, let her stroke Art the griffin’s feathers, show her the eight-legged sleipner. She’s in obvious awe of the creatures—how could she not be—but I see her mind working as we reach the end of the tour at Sparks’ tree.

She lightly pets Sparks’ head, who ruffles his feathers and croons a four-note tune. “What you have here is amazing.”

Her advisor stands off to the side, back on his phone. I’m pretty sure I hear a soft scoff from him.

“Thank you.” I try to hide the hesitation in my voice. I can sense a “but” coming.

Willow faces me. “But I want to do something *good*. What good are you doing here?”

I blink. *What good are we doing here?* What sort of question is that? I stumble to stay professional, to present a pitch that I should have prepared but don't. "Well, we take in displaced mythic creatures, give them a home amidst a society that has forgotten them."

"Right, and that's admirable. But what *good* is it? Is this really the best solution for them? Is this really a big enough problem that funding needs to be diverted here?" She pulls out her list again and looks at it. "I could be investing in organizations that are feeding and clothing the homeless, helping women escape abusive relationships, tutoring children in impoverished neighborhoods. How does what you do compare to that?"

She stands there, waiting. I can only blink—my mouth won't move. I've never thought about what we do at The Sanctuary in such terms. I grew up admiring what Jed does, having taken a field trip here in elementary school. I made it my life mission to work here as soon as I was able; I would ride my bike here in middle school to volunteer to clean pens. I never once doubted what *good* it all was in the grand scheme of things.

"Um..."

Her advisor's phone chimes. "I'm sorry, Miss Stock, but we have another appointment to get to."

Panic courses my veins. I can't let them leave yet, not before I can convince her we're worth investing in. But the words don't come—I don't have an answer to her question.

"Oh, okay," she says. She packs up her purse, and looks back at me. "The Sanctuary really is amazing."

"Thank you," I repeat, my voice soft.

She smiles. “I think I’d like to learn a little more before making my decision. Maybe visit again later, speak with the owner?”

Relief fills me. “Yes, of course. That would be great.”

“Miss Stock,” her advisor says again, impatiently.

“It was nice meeting you.” She shakes my hand.

I watch them leave, Loa nipping at my ear. “Likewise.”

#

Pain. I move and pain. I still and pain. They caught me. They stand over me, communicating something I cannot really understand, but I see their victory in their eyes. I hope they see my rage in mine. I growl and snap at them, and pain. They are unfazed. I can smell my own blood. Pain in my leg, pain in ears, pain in my body. Pain, pain, pain...

#

“Yes, well thank you for your time,” I say for the tenth time, and hang up the phone. I cross off another school from the notepad on the desk. “Another one bites the dust.”

After 24 hours of waiting around the phone for Willow or her advisor to call, the churning in my stomach returned. I decided to become proactive to combat it, looking up all elementary, middle, and high schools within a two-hour drive of The Sanctuary. It ended up being a pretty lengthy list, and I’ve been working on it for a few days, calling each and every one to give my spiel on why they should consider us for a field trip destination. Only a couple have said they’d keep us in mind—the rest claim they’re cutting back on trips because of financial reasons, but I call bullshit. I know they’re still taking kids to the city zoo and the state university’s football stadium, and I will not buy

any explanation they try to give me on why a sports field is a better educational experience over The Sanctuary.

The truth is, they've given up on us. Just as Willow must have, because I still have not heard from her. Her question lingers in my mind, taunting me and keeping me awake at night: *What good are you doing here?* I still don't have answer for her, and I'm worried about what that means about me.

Have I given up on us too?

Suddenly the office is too small, and I need fresh air. I wander the grounds. I'm alone at The Sanctuary today—holding down the fort while Jed and Alan respond to reports of large, ominous shadows and ghostly sounds of rattling chains. Jed thinks it might be a barghest; Alan thinks it's just some pranking teenagers. Regardless, it wasn't too far of a drive and worth checking out.

I find myself at the phoenix's tree, as I often do when I don't have a task. Sparks croons at me from atop his tree, which is blackened and leafless. His feathers are bright red and orange, reflecting the sunlight brilliantly. A heap of ashes rest in the nest located a few branches below him—I dump it out for him. The ashes are completely dry, meaning that his transformation was a few days ago. A more recent change would have left them damp to the touch.

Ruffling his feathers, Sparks sings a short, four-note tune. I've worked on trying to decipher his songs through the years, to see if he's actually trying to communicate something with me. The best I can figure, four notes means he's happy, three means he's hungry, and anything over six you should run away from.

There's a mewling from above, and then Loa lands on the tree. Sparks puffs up at her, and she arches her back.

"Hey, cut it out."

I reach up and pluck the dragon from her branch. I rub my thumb across the top of her head to calm her down. She purrs and nestles her neck in the crook of my arm. Sparks relaxes and goes back to singing. For a moment, it's peaceful and quiet at the reserve.

I sigh. "What are we going to do, guys?" I whisper.

The beeper on my belt chimes at me, letting me know that the office phone is ringing. I look at it, praying that it's Willow on the other end, but I'm interrupted. Squealing tires and the loud blast of the truck horn rips my attention from my beeper. The slamming doors echo back to me from the barn where the truck is kept.

"*Livvy!*" Jed's voice is loud, urgent.

Loa squawks and flies from my arms. For a beat, I think about the call, but then I'm running full force towards Jed. The truck is backed up to the barn. Alan and Jed wrestle with a bear-sized, black dog in the bed. He has fire in his eyes where irises should be.

"Get the door!" Jed growls.

I grab the handle and throw the rolling barn door up. Inside is half garage, half veterinary clinic. The guys try to drag the barghest into the building. He growls menacingly at them, snapping and shifting in and out of sight, trying to use his invisibility to hide or run, despite being collared and leashed. Attached to his rear right leg is a bear trap, its sharp teeth shredding his flesh. I think I hear more tires crunch up

the driveway, but I'm too concerned with the bright red blood as the guys work the barghest off the truck.

"Olive, a sheet," Alan instructs.

I take a clean one from the shelf and spread it out on the floor. I look up to see Willow and her advisor standing at the doorway. How long have they been standing there? How much have they seen? Willow's eyes are wide and for a moment our eyes meet.

They get the barghest onto the sheet, Alan lays his weight on top of him to keep him down, and Jed ties his leash to a nearby post. I grab Alan's vet bag from the truck and remove a syringe prefilled with a sedative. Removing the cap with my teeth, I stretch a patch of skin near the barghest's shoulder to locate a vein. He protests to the touch, attempting to grab my arm in his massive jaw. Jed leans down on his head.

"Hurry up!"

I jab the needle in and press down the plunger. The beast roars and thrashes, but after a few seconds pass he quiets and stills. The guys slowly release their pressure. The barghest huffs, but doesn't move; the flames in his eyes are slightly dimmer, but still alert, following our movements.

"Is...is it alright?" Willow asks from the sidelines.

"They set a damn trap for him!" Jed is livid, face bright red and eyes as hot as the barghest's. "They fucking *trapped him* and then called us in to finish the job!"

I stand over Alan, who's hunched by the injured leg. "Can we remove it?"

He pokes gently around the wound and the beast whines in pain. "It's torn up pretty bad, but I think it missed the main artery, so the blood loss is minimal overall."

I nod and inspect the trap. Thankfully, it's a design that's simple to remove—wrestle one pin out of its tight spot and it'll just pop open. "I'll get the pliers."

"Will these work?" Willow stands across from me, a pair of pliers in hand. "They were by the door," she says in response to Alan's questioning look.

"Perfect." I smile. "Thanks."

It takes a couple tries to grip the pin covered in slick blood, but once I've got a hold, I pull with my whole body and it pops out. The trap releases and the barghest sighs heavily. Alan immediately goes to work stitching up the leg.

Jed sits on a stool, still fuming. "I can't believe they would *do* that. How could you harm such a magnificent creature?"

Willow looks at him, and I see her mind working again. I realize why I've never questioned our work before—Jed wears his passion on his sleeve and it's hard not to get swept up in it.

She looks back at her advisor, and they speak quietly to each other before she nods confidently. "Okay." She turns to me. "I'll help fund The Sanctuary."

"Thank you!" I fight the urge to jump up and down.

Jed finally takes notice of her presence and introduces himself. "How about we talk specifics in the office?"

She nods and he motions for them to leave the barn. Before he follows, he looks over his shoulder at me and smiles.

"See, Livvy? I told you we were fine."

“Save State”

Quick step—one, two—and I’m behind Target One, the stealthiest I’ve been all night. I draw my knife and ready for the kill, stifling the pride of checking off this task so easily until I actually complete the act. Pause. Breathe. Wait for the perfect moment—

An alarm sounds. A guard on the balcony above us must have a patrol pattern I don’t have memorized yet. I see him shout in an unintelligible language and raise his crossbow at me. My target spins quickly, sees me, then bolts away as more guards rush in from side rooms I didn’t know existed. Clearly my earlier sense of pride was unfounded. *Shit.*

I attempt to execute a tuck and roll out of range of the crossbow above, but I just end up at the feet of another guard. I try backpedaling, but she hits me with her sword before I can draw my own. *Shit shit shit.* One step back, and I’m out of her reach for a second—but not the crossbow’s.

A bolt skewers me sideways, and all I see is the color red.

“Shit,” I mutter as I watch the words GAME OVER drift far too playfully down the computer screen.

Lena tsks behind me. “You did that wrong.”

“No, ya think?” I select *yes* under the ‘Do you wish to continue?’ prompt.

The loading screen is one of the high castles featured in the game, all tall spires and stained glass windows. Perfectly kept gardens surrounding it. I’ve seen this particular image so often I can probably draw it from memory. If I had any artistic abilities, that is. Lena got all of those genes.

“You should’ve sniped him from above.” She perches on the table next to the laptop. The bedroom in my apartment is too small for a proper desk, so Beast—Lena named the laptop after it arrived in the largest box we had ever seen UPS drop off—resides in my kitchen-slash-dining-slash-living room.

I groan and set the controller down. The loading times take almost forever because Lena loaded Beast with as many games as she could, and sometimes couldn’t, afford.

“If you had leveled up your stealth perks instead of health, you could climb the outside walls, sneak through the windows—”

“Enough with the backseat gaming already.” I take back the controller and try to ignore her in my periphery. The rising sunlight creeping through my main window turns her skin translucent. I focus on the game.

I’m back outside the target’s manor. Last time, I broke into the cellar and worked my way up. I decide to go wildly in the other direction this time. Shuffling through my bloated inventory, I equip myself with my strongest one-handed sword and shield.

Lena clucks her tongue; I sense her watching over my shoulder. “That’s a mistake.”

“We’ll see.” I quick-save out of habit, then make my way to the front door.

At the start of the mission, I know there’s one guard inside the door, one patrolling the hall, and then two in the room with the target. If I move fast enough, I just may be able to take them all out by force. Breathe in, breathe out. Then I kick the door down.

The first guard is taken down easily. One swing with my shield arm and he's pinned against the wall, out with a single strike of my sword. I successively accomplish a roll and take cover behind a pillar as the second guard sounds that he saw me.

"You are so boned," Lena whispers in my ear.

I wait a moment, then peek around the corner to see where he ended up—which turns out to be right in front of me. He swings his axe, and I dodge just in time. I go to pull up my shield, but my gaming reflexes fail and I equip my secondary weapon instead, giving the guard the perfect opening for a one-hit kill.

The GAME OVER screen mocks me once more.

"Damn it!"

Lena laughs. "You suck at this."

I rest my forehead on the table. "Why did you even give this to me? Clearly videogames was *your* calling."

It feels like I've been playing for days; I glance at the clock on the wall, trying to remember what day it actually is. Maybe I have been. I struggle to recall the last time I slept—before I received Beast and set it up? After? I think it sat untouched for a while once I brought it home from the family's house. I can't remember.

"You really think dads would have any use for a gaming computer? They were always complaining to me about how games require too many buttons now." The mirth in her face at the memory starts to fade. "Have...when was the last time you talked to them?"

"I don't know..." I avoid looking at her head-on; she shimmers in the corner of my eye. "The funeral, I guess."

Lena is silent for a moment. I don't look at her, I can't look at her. We had this conversation before, shortly after she showed up while I was beginning to play the games she left me, and I'm not ready to have it again.

I don't think I can have it again.

"That was like over a couple months ago, Marci."

"Three months and twelve days," I whisper. I may not know what day it is now, but I do know that. My brain has been keeping count, often against my will. Maybe it would be easier for me if it wasn't.

It would definitely be easier if Lena wasn't here, but now that she is I don't want my sister to leave ever again.

"Marci." Her voice is soft, and I realize my eyes are watering. I rub them quickly.

"I'm just tired...my eyes are tired from staring at the same map over and over and over again." I attempt a grin at her, hoping she'll join in on ragging on my lack of gaming skills.

There's no smile on her face. "You should call them."

"And say what, exactly? Hearing my voice just makes them sadder, I know it. Pop couldn't even—" I swallow hard, fight to keep my eyes dry. "He couldn't even look at me during the service."

Lena doesn't say anything. I take a deep, steadying breath and pick up the controller again. The screen asks 'Do you wish to continue?'

"Besides," I say, "I can't really tell them that you're here or anything."

Her words are quiet. "Maybe I shouldn't be."

“No!” I turn to face her so fast my neck hurts. “Lena, we’ve talked about this. It’s fine. I want you here!”

She shakes her head and stands from her seat. “No, you and dads need to grieve—properly, together. You won’t do that while I’m here.”

“It’s *fine*, Lena. I’m fine.”

“You’ve been playing this game all night, Marci!” She motions to the window. “It’s past morning already, and you haven’t slept.”

“You don’t need to leave for me to sleep,” I retort.

“No,” she agrees, crossing her arms. “But I do for you to move on.”

I don’t want this argument. I can’t understand why she’d suggest it—growing up, we were really close, especially in the later years. We’re only a few years apart, and once I got over my “find everything the younger sister does annoying” stage, we were bonded for life. I was closer to her than our dads, than any of my friends or girlfriends. We told each other everything, counseled each other on work, relationships, school. She was supposed to move in with me when she graduated, and we were going to brave the new big city together.

She can’t leave me now.

“I’ve missed you.” My voice comes out husky. Damn it, I’m sick of crying.

Lena’s face softens, and in this moment it feels like she’s the older sister. “I know, Marci. I know.” She motions towards the laptop. “But you should turn it off.”

I look from the computer screen to the controller in my hands. I remember buying her the controller so she’d stop hurting her wrists playing with the keyboard. I remember discussing with her all her ideas for videogames she was going to design, watching her

play late into the night and trying games far too difficult for me to even fathom. I remember how her face would light up when she accomplished the toughest achievements.

I remember her alive while the gaming controller was in her hands.

“*Marci?*”

The game asks “Do you wish to continue?”

Yes.

“Vestal Fires: A Novel”

Chapter I

After listening to this music for about an hour straight, I still can't determine if there are lyrics or not. Or even if the song has changed once since I walked in. Not that it matters—you don't go to the club for meaningful lyrics. You go for the heart-pounding, rib-shaking beat.

And the alcohol. That's good too.

The club is packed, which is no surprise, but I feel more suffocated than usual. I try matching my breathing to the undercurrent of the prevailing beat: one.two.three.four. An anxiety attack is the last thing I need right now.

It was a *long* day at work. I got called in hours before my shift to assist in an interrogation—that then turned into helping with two more and a lie detector test, which led right up to my scheduled start time. When August, my partner, strolled in with bitter coffee in hand for me, I simultaneously wanted to praise him and smack him for looking so well-rested.

Despite the exhaustion that settled into my bones well before dinner time, I still found myself changing into my dance clothes and searching out a new club to lose myself in. In the club atmosphere, alone and together blends—you can completely forget yourself while being surrounded by the vibrancy of life.

It's a killer place to unwind after the job.

“Dayum, you're looking mighty fine.”

I'm jostled out of my Zen by the alcohol-scented words behind me. I turn quickly on the heel of my boot to face the man. On instinct, my right hand hovers where my

holster would be, even though it's been months since my certification expired and they took back the gun.

His face twists into a sloppy smile that I'm sure he thinks is flirtatious and irresistible. "Can I join you?"

I take a slow, deep breath to steady my frazzled nerves, and put on an innocent smile. "No, thank you. I was just about to leave, actually."

He takes a languid step closer, and my anxiety jumps into high alert. The palms of my hands start sweating as I have to fight my own physiology to keep *my* thoughts my own and not enter his mind.

I can just hear my mom now, scolding me for the hundredth time that I lack proper control of my ability. *You should have better control of your emotions—you're no longer a child, you know.*

An ache starts just under my left temple. *Dammit, Kemle. Keep it together.*

He reaches for my waist. "C'mon, just one m—"

I grab his wrist, tightly, before he touches my bare skin. He looks up into my eyes in surprise.

"I said, *no thank you.*" My words and gaze are steel—I put some of my anxiousness to use and coax just a little telepathy out to make sure he knows I mean business.

His eyes widen, and I pull myself back, careful not to get too deep into his mind. He moves his hands up in placation.

"No problem," he says, his eyes already tracking another dancer to approach.

I scoff a bit in disgust and weave my way through the throng to the bar. I grab a stool near the wall, crossing my legs and slumping a bit against it. The bartender motions that she'll be with me in a moment. Away from the constant press of people, I feel like I can finally breathe a little, though I'm still fighting a bit to keep control of my telepathy, keep myself out of other people's heads.

The bartender wonders if she can get her coworker to switch shifts with her tomorrow; a woman on the dancefloor works through a complicated math theorem while dancing with her girlfriend; a boy across the bar from me worries he'll get caught with his fake ID.

Maybe I should just leave, like I lied that I was doing. I've been up since eight, and it's well past midnight now. Sleep is probably the best thing for me right now, since my head is throbbing and my hands are twitching.

"What can I get for you tonight?" The bartender leans over the counter so she can hear my response. As she nears me, her eyes squint in consideration. I feel the thought travel across her synapses—she's questioning my age, wondering if she needs to card me before continuing.

Out of habit, I focus and push the line of thought askew, let her focus on anything else. Like perhaps how she likes my dance top. I hold the thought there as I order.

"A Jack and Coke, please."

She nods. "Coming right up."

Once she turns away from me, I release my hold on her, sending a quick pang of pain through my temple again. That was stupid of me; I should've just dug out my license, but I'm still getting used to the idea that I'm 21. Where has the time gone?

As I hand the bartender the cash for my drink—with a generous tip for using my telepathy on her—my phone vibrates against my hip. I work it out of my mini-skirt while downing a third of my drink. A call from August. I press it tight to my ear in a futile attempt to hear him over the music.

“This better not be what I think it is.”

His sigh is barely audible above the noise. “We got a call.”

I fight not to cry in frustration; I can’t stop the whine though. “*No*. It’s off-hours!” I take another drink. “Can’t someone else go?”

“The code came for us.” He paused before he spoke, and I don’t have to use telepathy to know that he’s thinking the same thing I am. We’re the youngest on the interdimensional task force, and sometimes it feels like the rest of our team targets us. Or, at the very least, targets me, and August is merely a casualty.

I close my eyes and hold my pounding head. “I haven’t even slept yet.”

The music finally changes to some slower paced, softer EDM which I didn’t even know could exist. The dance crowd doesn’t seem to notice, though, not changing their own tempos or movements at all.

August’s voice is louder in my ear now. “I’d offer to go alone if I could, but—”

“No, no.” I down the rest of my drink, can’t let good money go to waste. “I know.”

One of the main tenets of the task force is that the two-man teams consist of one officer from Earth and one officer from Vesta. The officer from Vesta, in theory, could investigate crime scenes alone if needed, since we know best how to identify whether or

not the perpetrator is from our parallel dimension. The one from Earth, however, isn't quite as equipped, no matter how much training or research they do.

Not that I'd ever let my partner go alone, even if he could.

"Give me the location, and I'll meet you there." I swing off the barstool, and the movement sends another sharp pang between my temples. I'm going to need to grab some painkillers before showing up on scene.

"I can give you a lift," August offers.

"I'm probably not on your way." I squeeze around a few dancers on my way to the main door. "Where's it at?"

Turns out the crime scene is only a few blocks away from the club. While I made the wrong choice of heading out tonight instead of snuggling up at home and marathon-watching sitcoms after work, at least I made a better decision to go to the club out more towards the suburbs than downtown. Silver linings, I guess?

"Oh, that's not far from me, actually." I finally break from the crowd and get to step outside. The cool night air briefly alleviates my headache. "I'll walk."

He pauses. "Walk?"

"Yeah, it'll probably do me some good." I look both ways before crossing the street. "I will need you to do me a favor on your way, though."

#

I've found that the smell of rancid, burnt flesh never really leaves you. There's not enough Febreze in Cleveland to erase the sickeningly sweet scent from your nose. Trust me, I've tried.

I stand just outside the police perimeter blocking off most of the street. Reporters and gawkers stand with me, trying to see past the flashing lights on the emergency vehicles.

Not that there's much left to see.

It was probably a nice two-story home, but now it's just a blackened shell. Not even a shell—a skeleton. There's no roof left and the stairs are only partially standing. Two of the four walls are completely gone and the other two appear to be made entirely of soot and ash.

The yard is large enough that none of the neighboring houses seem to have incurred any damage, aside from a few trees with darkened and curled leaves from residual heat. Some neighbors peek out from windows or stand on their doorsteps to watch the firemen and police officers on scene.

My phone buzzes. A text from August, letting me know he's arrived, parked behind the crowd. I turn my back to the scene and weave my way unnoticed through the people—partially because they're enraptured by the devastation and partially because I'm making sure they don't know I'm there. It's really not that hard to trick the average mind.

He's leaning against his car, arms crossed, a small duffel bag at his feet. The car's an old Dodge Charger—the exact year, I have no idea—but it looks as good as new. Not exactly police issue, but then, we're not exactly police.

His eyes flit quickly up and down, taking in my mini-skirt, exposed midriff, and knee-high boots. “Nice getup.”

I take the duffel bag from him. “Why do you think I asked you to grab me clothes?”

I duck around the other side of the car and start shimmying out of my skirt and into my skinny jeans. He keeps his back to me, ever the gentleman.

“You owe me, you know,” he says over his shoulder. “I had to dig around in your hamper for those pants.”

“Oh, poor Gus. You telling me that you haven’t seen women’s underwear before?”

He exhales loudly through his nose—his version of a forced laugh. “I may be scarred for life.”

Laughing, I finish buttoning up my dress shirt and stuff my club clothes into the duffel. I throw it back into the car, grabbing my mane of hair in one hand. With deft movements of practiced fingers, I braid it back—the only method I’ve found so far to keep my frizzy curls in check.

I reach the end and realize I don’t have anything to hold it. I turn to August. “Hey, do you ha—”

He pulls up his jacket cuff to reveal a hair tie on his wrist. I smile as he hands it to me. “You’re the best.”

“That’s twice you owe me now.”

I wrap the tie around my braid. “I’ll buy your coffee next shift.”

“You better.”

Holding my arms out, I turn slightly from side to side. “Well? Do I look professional enough?”

He simply shrugs because it honestly doesn’t matter. Even though he prefers to dress in the more traditional agent wear of dress pants and matching jacket, we actually

don't have a uniform. Since the task force is still pretty much in its infancy, and our regional team for Northeast Ohio is relatively small, some things have a little more slack.

He reaches into the driver's seat and brings out two little black folios. Our new credentials.

I take my folio from him, open it, and groan. "*Kimberly Aspen?* I don't even look like a Kimberly." I glance over at his and see 'August Whitten' next to his picture, all young and professional looking. I huff and look at mine again.

"It's not fair that you actually get to use your name."

He slips his into his jacket pocket. "Well, Kemle isn't exactly a common name over here."

"It is where I'm from," I mutter.

"You know the idea is to *not* be memorable, right?"

The general population on either world is unaware that the other exists, and the governments want to keep it that way—especially on Earth. They're afraid that it'll be too hard to explain two worlds existing in the same temporal space in two different, but parallel, dimensions—let alone admitting that humans from Vesta have abilities not seen on Earth, or that they've been slipping through the seam between the worlds for decades.

That's where we come in. Our job is to find cases dealing with Vesta natives, take them out of local hands, and solve them.

Before we leave the car, I grab the bottle of acetaminophen I keep stashed in August's car and dry swallow four. He and I then circumvent the crowd, walking around the edge towards the closest cop car. The goal is to stay out of the general populace's memories, so I cast a mental umbrella, a sort of psychic barrier that subverts

attention from the people around us. It's not a super taxing trick, especially since it's over a short distance, but I feel it slip a bit as we walk—probably because I've been up since six a.m. and the painkillers for my headache haven't kicked in yet.

“So, how much do you know about the case?” I ask, glancing again at the burnt-out house. The fire trucks crank in their hoses and on-air reporters stand in front of cameras giving their suspicions on what they think occurred here.

He shakes his head. “Not much. The fire department arrived too late. They're pretty sure the victim is the home owner, but they're running dental records to be sure.”

We flash our badges at the officer guarding the perimeter. He glances at them tiredly, but when his eyes settle on the U.S. Justice Department emblem, they widen and grow more alert. Handing them back to us, he promptly lets us past. I slip mine into my back pocket, but August keeps his in his hand.

“And why are we being called in?”

“The arson investigator can't find the source of the fire.”

“Ah.” I sidle around him to avoid the line of sight of a news camera. “So we're thinking a fire-starter.”

He motions towards the ash heap. “You tell me.”

We diverge—August goes to talk to a local cop, and I head closer to the remnants of the house. At least two more officers check my credentials. One looks from the badge, to my face, and back multiple times. I resist huffing and rolling my eyes, but my right foot taps against the asphalt road.

He's older, been in the job a long while. “How old are you, miss?”

“Old enough.” The words push out from clenched teeth and a forced smile.

I'm too young to be out here. At least, that's what everyone keeps telling me: my co-workers, local law enforcement, Dad. Too young to be hunting down criminals and investigating crime scenes. Three years into adulthood, but still too young.

The officer hands me back my badge. "I swear, they get younger every year," he mumbles to himself as I walk past him and into the house.

I step across what's left of the threshold, burnt hardwood crunching beneath my boots. A medical examiner's assistant I haven't met before stops zipping up the body bag as I approach. Her hair is a dark purple, pulled back in a tight, perfect bun on the top of her head.

"Sorry, do ya need to see this?" she asks, popping her gum.

Every part of my stomach is begging me not to, but I nod. She pulls the zipper down enough that she can expose the head and torso of the poor man. A waft of cotton candy and slightly rotted meat hits me square in the face, confusing my olfactory senses. I fight the urge to gag. My headache pangs through my forehead. The M.E. assistant blows a bubble and watches me examine the body.

Like the house, there are not many distinguishing features left to examine. His skin is a crispy black, hair and eyebrows pretty much completely gone.

I zip the bag back up. "C.O.D?"

She doesn't blink. "Best guess? Burning to death."

"Right. Stupid question."

I stand up and give my surroundings a once over. Support beams stand bare and blackened; the stairs only reach halfway up the first floor wall supports. Various debris

litters the ground around the body, including some bubbled chunks of what looks to be liquefied rubber.

If the house was still properly standing, I'd be in the main hall or living room, only a few feet from the front door. Only a few feet from safety.

“So why didn't he make it out?”

The assistant's voice startles me—I didn't realize I spoke the question out loud. “Probably because the fire was *hot*.”

I turn to her. “How hot?”

“Hot enough to melt his shoes where he stood.” She motions towards the bubbled rubber. “Judging by the remnants left on his feet, it looks like he had to rip them free. Not that it mattered.” She pops her gum again. “Based on his burns, it looks like the fire ate him up fast. I'd say instantaneously if I didn't know any better.”

I make a pretty noncommittal noise, not wanting to get into a long conversation that may raise too many questions. She shrugs and packs up her kit.

“Of course, we'll need to perform an autopsy, check for smoke inhalation. It's possible he was already dead before he cooked.”

I look back at the bubbled rubber, the remnants of his shoes. I highly doubt it. She follows my gaze and thinks the same thing. Damn this headache; I shouldn't be slipping this bad. I really need to get some sleep.

I leave her with the body and meet August outside the house. He raises his eyebrows and I nod in answer.

No noticeable source of the fire, high amounts of destruction, instantly engulfing deadly flames—there's no doubt that a firestarter's behind this.

Looks like we're earning some overtime.

Chapter II

August didn't have to work hard to convince me to go home and sleep instead of heading straight back to the office. My anxiety flared for a moment, worried that doing so would possibly give the captain a reason to berate me—which I know the team would enjoy—but ultimately it would be worse if I fall asleep actively on the job. I just have to trust that's something the captain will understand.

I drop the duffel bag with my club clothes just inside the door to my apartment, letting my keys fall right on top of it. It'll get cleaned up later, maybe. A shower would be good, or some food, but I find myself stumbling to the futon in the middle of the room instead. My head is still throbbing, a nice cocktail of headache and anxiety.

On the end table next to my futon is a partial glass of water and two prescription bottles. I grab both—my daily anxiety prescription and some more painkillers for this pounding head—and chug the remaining water. The sun is rising now, and unfortunately peeking through my window blinds. To block out the light, I bury my face into a pillow, hoping my exhaustion is great enough to allow me to sleep.

#

Too few hours later, I wake up groggy, but at least the headache is gone. Rubbing my eyes I open a window blind to force myself awake with the assault of light reflecting off of windows across the street. The sun is high in the sky; it's well into the afternoon now. I stifle a yawn.

A nice cold shower should help speed up the gaining of energy to get back into work, so I rustle through the piles of clothes for a shirt that's mostly clean. I'm pretty

sure there's one lying around somewhere I only wore once last week. I eventually find it stuffed under the futon—wrinkled, but stain-free. Note to self: do laundry.

Even with anticipating the cold, I still gasp when the water first hits my bare skin. But after that, I relax into it. I've always found chill more comfortable than warmth—especially in the midst of an anxiety attack. It's cozier to be cold enough to snuggle into a soft sweatshirt or bundle up with a comfortable blanket. During the summer, I rack up quite a bill with the A/C, but I feel I make up for it financially by using as little heat as possible in the colder months—although sometimes it is downright imperative to have your heat running during an Ohio winter.

I hear my phone ringing in the other room and quickly finish my shower to catch it. “Hold on! Keep ringing, dammit,” I mutter to literary no one as I wrap myself in my towel. There's only two real possibilities on who's on the other end: my mom or August. My dad respects my intense anxiety-driven aversion to speaking on the phone, and I have no one else I regularly keep in contact with who would call me.

It stops ringing as soon as I reach it, of course. Missed call from August Whitten. Before I can call him back, he texts me. *Wake up already*. I scoff and hit his speed dial.

“You awake now?” He asks in lieu of a typical greeting.

“I was in the shower, thank you very much.” I attempt to wring my hair out with one hand.

“Uh-huh. Sure. Coffee?”

I pause. “Did...did you really just call me and make a big deal about it for coffee?”

“You owe me a cup.” Background noise from the office filters through the call.
“The autopsy is done. Figured we’d stop for coffee on the way.”

I put him on speaker and set the phone down so I can properly multitask with getting ready. “Whoa, it’s done already? That seems fast.”

I can’t hear it of course, but I know August shrugs. “Light day?”

“Must be.” My voice is temporarily muffled as I pull my shirt on. I pick up my jeans from earlier and step back into them. “Meet you at Joe’s?”

“Don’t forget your wallet—you’re buying.”

I make a noncommittal noise to tease him before hanging up. Joe’s is a small coffee shop just down the street from my apartment building. It’s not superb coffee, but it’s cheap, nearby, and a cute little place to waste time if necessary. It’s wedged into an odd corner space between a Subway and bank, but it utilizes its space well—definitely capturing the local non-chain café vibe many think of when they think of a city.

With the sun out, it’s a nice day for a walk, so I leave my bike in the coveted parking space right outside my building. I always found it funny how tenants would find any excuse not to drive when they got that spot, but as soon as I lucked out last week with it, I find myself doing the same. Exercise is a good thing, right?

My calves argue this point as I walk the few blocks to Joe’s. My earlier walk in the middle of the night in boots seems to have taken its toll.

I hold the door open for a couple customers who are leaving, coffees in hand, and then settle down in the nearest couch, stretching out my legs. The café is mildly busy—a few people in line, a few more sitting around at tables and on loveseats, studying textbooks or catching up with their companions.

A guy I don't recognize is working behind the counter, his pastel employee apron contrasting nicely with his dark skin. I'm not usually at Joe's at this hour. I almost always stop on my way to the office at the start of my regular shift, which is when Mercy works. She's worked at Joe's for as long as I've worked on the task force, so we've gotten to know each other fairly well in the three years I've been using high amounts of caffeine to turn me into a morning person. I never have to worry about rehearsing my order to combat anxiety with her—she has it memorized. Didn't realize how much I relied on that until right now, so I start repeating what my order will be in my head until August walks in.

“Hey,” he says, startling me. “You okay?”

“Yes?” I drag the word out, slightly confused. “Why?”

“Just checking. You seemed zoned out.” He motions towards the counter. “Shall we?”

We stand in line behind a single mother, who's internally freaking out about making both her son's recital and her daughter's game today, and a smug business man congratulating himself on beating out his coworker for a promotion. I take a deep breath and pull myself out of their thoughts and back into my own head, getting my telepathy and anxiety under control. August raises an eyebrow in question.

“I'm good,” I murmur.

We reach the counter and I recite the order I've been looping in my head. “One small coffee, black please.”

The barista—Tony, according to his name tag—nods and writes it down. “Alright, anything else?”

“A medium coffee with 3 creams and 4 sugars,” August says with ease.

Tony chuckles and looks up at August. “Like it sweet, do ya?”

August gives a wry smile. “Most of the time.”

I really don’t need to read either of their minds to tell what they’re thinking. I quickly swipe my credit card for the coffees, and Tony prints the receipt.

“They should be ready shortly.”

“Thanks,” I say, leading August to a booth.

“He’s kind of hot,” he says, watching Tony as he fills the orders of the people in front of us.

I at least attempt to be covert about looking at the barista. I could see how someone could be attracted to him in principle—he’s pretty aesthetically pleasing. Being asexual, however, that’s about as far as I go. I can admire someone’s looks and be romantically attracted to them eventually—although I’m extremely content with being single, much to my mom’s dismay—but sexual attraction? Nope. Got nothing.

Tony looks over and smiles at August, who sort of nods and then looks away. I lean over the table towards my partner.

“You should ask him out—he’s clearly into you too.”

He gives a patented August shrug. “I don’t really have the time right now for a relationship, especially a new one. Those are the most work.”

It’s such a bullshit answer, but I don’t press it. I know the real reason, and August knows I know it too. He hasn’t dated since his fiancée died. One time, when he was really drunk, he told me that she was the love of his life, that they had the kind of love to grow

old with, the kind everyone admires. It's a hard act to follow, I'm sure. Even three years later.

Tony calls our order, and we grab our coffees. August leaves a tip in the jar on our way out. I notice a phone number written on the sleeve of August's coffee, which he slips off once we turn the corner and throws away. I say nothing.

#

I've drained my coffee well before we reach the medical examiner's, despite it only being about fifteen minutes away from Joe's via car. For this one moment, with all the caffeine active in my system, I finally feel awake. August brings his cup into the office, casually drinking it like he doesn't really need it to function and just enjoys the taste.

We make our way to the morgue. The halls are rather bland, lacking any art which generally makes it feel like we're walking forever. Finally, I can tell we've made it as I can physically feel it in the hallway as the cold air seeps through under the door. The door is heavy and creaks a bit upon opening.

Inside sterilizing some equipment is the purple-haired assistant I met at the crime scene. All surfaces are shiny and chrome, including the many-tiered fridge for storing bodies on the back wall. The room is pretty open, with just a few tables on wheels, all currently empty, and a sink in the corner. A laptop sits open but asleep on one of the tables.

The assistant turns from the sink at the sound of the door. She looks us both over before her gaze settles on me.

"Hello again," she says before popping her bubble gum.

August looks around the morgue, but we three are the only people in it. “Where’s Day?”

“They had some lecture or something they felt was more important than staying at work today. I can help you, though...” She trails off, fishing for us to identify ourselves.

He pauses for a moment, considering, before responding. “August.”

“August,” she repeats, then points a tanned hand at me. “And?”

I brace myself for a reaction. “Kemle.”

She blows another bubble. “Cool name. I’m Tamara Reyes.” She finishes cleaning the scalpels and other tools and returns them to a box. “You’re here for the house fire, I assume?” I relax. “Yeah. Are you new?”

She walks over to a fridge door and checks the clipboard hanging from it. “More or less.” She rolls the body out, which almost covers what she mumbles under her breath next. “Though I seem to put in more hours than the actual M.E. does lately.”

I exchange a glance with August. I haven’t really worked with Day as much as he has, but I do recall autopsies usually taking far longer than this one did—which I’m realizing may be because of Tamara.

“We were able to I.D. him, but it was a bitch since he’s squeaky clean. Good thing he kept good care of his teeth, I guess.” She hands me the clipboard. “Jackson Mayes. He lived in the house that burnt down. Anything else you’re going to have to figure out for yourselves.”

I read through the paperwork while August looks over the body. He gives a soft whistle.

“He’s basically just char.”

Tamara nods. “Yeah, the fire must’ve been extremely hot. Weirdly hot.” She pauses, eyes us suspiciously. “Has the arson investigator figured out how they did it yet?”

August shakes his head. “Still looking into it.”

Tamara mutters something under her breath that I barely make out is Spanish. I’m assuming it’s swearing of some sort, but I get distracted by a note on the official medical examiner report.

“Wait.” I look up at them. “He was killed before the fire?”

For once, Tamara’s jaw is still, not chewing her gum. “...That’s what Day determined with their autopsy, yes.”

I recall the liquefied rubber on the floor of the house and stuck to the feet of Jackson Mayes’ body. It so seemed to indicate he was standing at some point during the fire.

“How was that determined?” August asks.

Tamara cracks her gum again. “There was negligible traces of smoke in the lungs, which typically indicate the guy wasn’t breathing when the fire was going around him.”

August’s brow furrows a bit. “So what was the cause of death then?”

I flip to that page of the report, which states in neat handwriting “inconclusive.” Tamara shrugs.

“Day didn’t have an answer for that one. The body is too compromised from the fire.”

I look up at her. “Do you?”

She holds up her hands. “Not a real one, and I am not here to lose my job for claiming my boss got it wrong without any semblance of what the *right* answer is, if there is one.” She pushes the body back into the fridge and washes her hands.

I hand August the clipboard and follow her to the sink. “You said ‘not a real one.’ So, what, you have a fake answer?”

Tamara sighs. “Just a feeling and an out-there thought that’s probably coming out of all the conspiracy theory videos my partner likes to watch before we go to bed.”

Out-there conspiracy theories such as there being a parallel world with superpowered people that bleed through and cause trouble on Earth? I’ll have to remember to make that joke to August later. I lean closer to her. “Humor me.”

She looks at me, distrust clearly in her eyes. People get fired all the time for all kinds of reasons, and I know she’s afraid I’ll report her for whatever unorthodox theory she’s got knocking around in her head. I try my best to convey, without telepathy, that I’m trustworthy. Which seems to work because she takes a deep breath and nods.

“Okay, so *hypothetically*, if a fire was hot enough, it could burn you to death before you died of smoke inhalation. In theory.” She throws away her gum and starts on a new piece. “Which is stupid because it’s pretty much impossible to get a fire that hot that fast—because speed would be important too. It’d have to be super hot, super fast to kill you before the smoke. Unnaturally so.” Her gaze shifts a little nervously between the two of us. “Like I said, an out-there thought. Definitely thanks to my partner’s conspiracy theory hobby.”

This time I do coax a little telepathy to calm her fears about us getting her reported over this. She physically relaxes, and I extend my hand towards her.

“Thanks for your help.”

“Sure.” She pops a bubble while she shakes my hand. “Anytime.”

Once we exit the building, August leans over to me. “Don’t think I didn’t see what you did there.”

“Look,” I say to him over the top of the Charger as I open the passenger door. “I know what it’s like to have a fear or worry, no matter how irrational or small, take over your mind. It ruins your whole day—sometimes more. I was in and out in like two seconds. It’s fine, she’s fine, everything’s fine.”

“Uh huh.”

I sigh, loudly. “Just get in the car.”

He starts the car, finishing off the last of his coffee which has to be grossly lukewarm now. “So. What she said about the heat—is it possible for a firestarter to make a fire like that?”

“I honestly have no idea. Mom might know, though.”

As a healer, my mom worked as an emergency medic and doctor at a hospital before she and I made the permanent move from Cleveland on Vesta to Cleveland on Earth. While the process to become a doctor is wildly different over there, she still had to study physiology and anatomy, which may be helpful to August and I here.

I crank up the A/C. “Regardless, it seems like the only logical explanation, right? I mean, nothing on *Earth* can do that.”

“Seems that way.”

“Yeah.” I look out the window at passersby while we’re stopped at a red light. Even if a firestarter can make a fire that hot, there’s no way it’s an easy feat to

accomplish. Just basing how much actively using my telepathy wears me out—even despite how my anxiety messes with it—they would have to focus and work really hard to create such a fire. That takes a toll on your body. Whoever they are must've really wanted Jackson Mayes dead.

I turn to August. “We need to figure out if Jackson Mayes had any enemies.”

He nods. “Should be easier to do now that we know who he is. I’ll go back to the office and start that.” He points at me. “*You* will go talk to your mom about firestarter capabilities.”

I mock groan. “She’s going to hound me about a million other things, first. ‘Are you eating? Keeping your apartment clean? You really should have your act together, you’re an adult now.’”

He side eyes me. “I hear that’s a parent thing. That’s just what they *do*.”

I lean back into my seat. “Maybe I’ll take home all my dirty laundry. I’m sure she’ll *love* that.”

Chapter III

I park my bike behind Dad's truck and untangle my laundry bag from the back—I had to be creative to keep it from flying off as I drove. Lugging it over my shoulder, I open the front door and call out unnecessarily to announce my arrival. "Hey!"

"Shoes!" Mom's voice comes from the kitchen to the left of the entryway.

Rolling my eyes, I wrestle myself out of my boots and set them neatly on the mat next to the door. Dad rounds the corner from the study on the right. He breaks out into a smile when he sees me.

"There's my baby girl."

He envelopes me in his signature bear hug—a perfectly-sized spot that has grown with me. I breathe deep as I hug back, taking in the fresh cotton scent of Mom's favorite fabric softener and the musk of Dad's cheap aftershave.

It smells like home.

I look him over when he lets me go. I've only been out of the house for about a year now, but he already looks older. Traces of gray play hide-and-seek in his brown hair and there are more lines around his eyes and on his forehead.

He catches my eye, and I can tell that he's thinking I've gotten older as well.

"You look tired," he says, eyebrows furrowed.

"Well that's probably because I *am* tired." I sidestep around him so I can see the mirror on the wall beside the door.

Eyes with pink rimming the irises stare back. The light pink contrasts with the dark brown—so dark they're almost black. Which matches almost exactly the half-moons

resting under my eyes. Not so much bags as they are bruises. I groan inwardly that I didn't think to check before leaving the apartment.

I don't normally wear makeup outside of the club, but I would've put some on before coming over if I realized. The lack of sleep I get with working on the force is a sore spot with Dad. Actually, me working on the task force in general is sore spot with him.

He sighs. "Are you getting enough sleep?"

I pivot on my heel and head to the washing machine in the back room, trying hard to keep the exasperation out of my voice. "It's just been a long day, Dad."

He follows me a bit down the hallway then stops, clearly wanting to say something. I ignore him while I dump my clothes into one load of laundry. I don't want to start arguing about my age and my job and my safety for the millionth time. That got old one year in; it's going on three years now.

Mom leans out of the kitchen doorway. "Kemle, have you eaten yet? I was just about to set out some sandwich stuff."

My stomach growls at the mere thought of food other than ramen noodles, popcorn, and coffee. I really need to do some grocery shopping. "That sounds great, actually."

By the time I walk into the kitchen, Mom has the small kitchen table set up already with slices of bread on the plates and various sandwich ingredients in the center. It's like she knew I would mooch off their food before I even arrived. Must be one of those parent things. I start making my sandwich immediately: chicken, tomato,

mayonnaise. Mom pins her long, flowing curls up out of the way and exchanges a glance I pretend not to notice with Dad before they sit down themselves.

There's silence as we eat—not exactly uncomfortable, but not exactly warm and natural either. I keep my attention solely on my lunch for the moment.

Dad finishes his Coke and clears his throat. I pause in my chewing, but don't look up at him.

“Your mother says you're on a case?”

“Yep.” I make myself a second sandwich. “That *is* my job.”

“What kind of case?”

I give him a sideways glance. “The kind with criminals.” I don't really need to be a telepath to know what he's thinking behind his narrowed eyes.

Smartass.

He opens his mouth to say something, but Mom intervenes before we actually start arguing about my life choices.

“What are you investigating?”

In addition to working at the hospital, Mom used to work with some local law enforcement back at her home on Vesta. She served as a medic, but was often around for most of the investigations. Between my parents, she understands the most why I felt compelled to accept the job offer when the force approached me in high school. If she worries about me being too young for it, she keeps it to herself.

I relax a bit back into my chair, taking my gaze up from the table.

“Arson/homicide.”

She nods. “No signature, I take it?”

“No signature, no accelerant, no real starting point.” I shake my head and rub my temples. “At least not yet, anyway.”

“Wait,” Dad interrupts, leaning into the table a bit. “I think I saw this on the news. The house just outside of downtown?”

I refill my glass of water. “That’s the one.”

“It’s probably just some firebug kids—there used to be arson all over that area when I was growing up. Most likely nothing *you* need to be worried about.”

I stare at him hard. I know what he means—that I personally don’t need to worry about this particular crime because, in his mind, it’s an Earth-related thing to be handled by regular authorities—but I’m still pissed off immediately. My words come out rough and slow.

“A man died.”

Dad blinks. “Right...I just mea—”

“I know what you meant.”

I understand that it comes out of a place of love, or very least care, but I’m sick and tired and angry that all Dad has to say to me is that he doesn’t think I should be doing my job. It’s part of the reason why I moved out when I did. They both told me there was no reason for me to have to pay for rent when the house is in town, but I don’t think I could’ve taken the constant looks and thoughts from Dad much longer. It’s easier for my anxiety if I’m not always around it.

He’d rather me go to college and pick up a minimum wage job, something he deems “safer.” He doesn’t, and honestly he just can’t, understand that I’m not like

everyone else around here. I can't just work in an office and hide the Vestan part of me, no matter how much safer it may be.

Stressed and angry, I lose control briefly and am in Dad's head for a moment. He's structuring his argument on how this is obviously unhealthy amounts of strain on me, both mentally and physically. Before he can open his mouth, I hold up my hand to stop him.

"Please don't."

We fall back into an awkward silence, the only sound being our glasses on the table. My head starts to ache a little bit.

"You know," Mom starts slowly, "your dad may have a point."

I turn to face her so quickly the ache in my head spreads across my forehead.

"What?"

She gives me one of those looks only a mom could do. "How sure are you that this is related to Vesta? A lack of signature or ability for the arson investigator to determine anything helps, yes, but doesn't exclusively mean the fire is of Vestan nature."

"The fire was hot, though, unnaturally so."

Dad narrows his eyes. "How do you determine that?"

"The autopsy." I push some food around on my plate. "He burned so fast he didn't even get to die from smoke inhalation."

"I don't think that's actually possible." The tone in his voice starts to piss me off again.

"Maybe not *here*." I turn back to Mom. "Could a firestarter do that? Make a fire that hot? Is that possible?"

Mom considers quietly for a moment. “I’m sure it’s possible, but I’m not sure about *probable*. It could very easily kill the firestarter trying to make that fire.” She moves her plate so she can outline her words with crude illustrations on the table. “You see, a firestarter’s biology differs from ours in core body temperature and body temperature regulation. Since they’re constantly working hot with the fire, their bodies have to work differently, and harder, to keep them from burning up.”

She pauses to make sure I’m following along. I nod because sure, that makes some kind of logical sense—even to my limited science knowledge.

She continues. “Too much heat is bad for your internal organs. Now, a firestarter can withstand more than you or I, of course, but there is still a limit. We are all just tissue.”

I hear the washing machine buzz from the hallway, but I ignore it for the moment. “So, you’re saying that to create a fire that hot, the firestarter would also burn up?”

“Well, not in the same way as your victim most likely, but yes. The heat required to create such a fire would be too much for their body to regulate.”

Shit. Back to square one, it seems. Maybe August will have better luck finding something on his end.

Mom looks at me. “You’re disappointed.”

I stand up to take my empty dishes to the sink. “You know, *you’re* not the telepath of the family. Please stop reading my mind.”

“Keep your emotions in better check, then.”

It’s an old argument. I don’t bother responding anymore. My telepathic ability is directly connected to my emotional state, which of course lends to all kinds of

unfortunate situations. Anxiety seems to be my main Achilles' heel, often causing my own thoughts and feelings to be projected on those around me.

The doctors back on Vesta aren't really sure why my ability operates this way—it's not how it presents itself in others. At least, they claim they're not sure of the reason. Their thoughts have told me an entirely different story throughout my childhood.

They blame Dad. No one from Vesta has had a child with someone from Earth before Mom, and no one has since either. I'm a mutt—my genes a weird, muddled mess that probably shouldn't function, but here I am.

“It's just a little frustrating because now I have to start my line of investigation over. It'll be fine.” I leave the kitchen to move my laundry into the dryer.

Despite the clinking of dishes being washed, I can still hear Dad's voice, trying to be quiet but failing. “Dacia, you can see what this is doing to her mental health.”

I slam the dryer door shut to drown out any more. It'll take about an hour until my clothes are done, but I can't stay here that long if this is going to be at the forefront of Dad's mind today. Maybe August has an update on his investigation—I should at least stop by the office to check.

I slip on my boots and get halfway out the door before I let my parents know I'm leaving. “Hey, I gotta go check on work stuff with August; I'll be back later for the laundry.”

The door is shut and I'm outside before they have a chance to respond. It's nice, quiet, and bright outside; I take in a deep breath before hopping on my bike and driving off, with no one's thoughts but my own for once.