

University of Nevada, Reno

Make Believe: Stories

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in English

by

Leanne Howard

David Durham, MFA/Thesis Advisor

May, 2022

Copyright by Leanne Howard 2022
All Rights Reserved



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

We recommend that the thesis
prepared under our supervision by

LEANNE HOWARD

entitled

Make Believe: Stories

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

David Durham, MFA
Advisor

Christopher Coake, MFA
Committee Member

Daniel Morse, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Caitlin Earley, Ph.D.
Graduate School Representative

David W. Zeh, Ph.D., Dean
Graduate School

May, 2022

Abstract:

Collected here are eleven short stories of magic, distant worlds, survival, transformation, and healing. A war orphan fights for the chance to be a queen. A young Polish girl on her way to America finds solace and courage in her Babcia's fairytale. A modern-day pact with a demon provides respite for a young woman's chronic pain. A closeted monk remembers what he has given up after a sip of magic beer—and more. Each story provides a new perspective on how magic can awaken us to ourselves—and to the beauty of being alive.

To Dad.

Miss you every day.

I couldn't have done it without your support.

Acknowledgements:

It's true what they say in the backs of books: finishing a successful project takes a whole village of support. I share this achievement with all the following lovely people. David Durham, Chris, and all the faculty at the University of Nevada, Reno over the years: thank you for giving me encouragement and support when it was so desperately needed. David Kennedy and Justin, our weekly coffee visits quite literally kept me going, and I'm incredibly grateful to have shared this journey with you both. Linzy, Taryn, Naseem, December, Natascha, Emily, Manuela, and Trae: you helped to keep the fire burning and inspired me constantly with your own amazing work. Dana and Andy, there is not enough pizza or beer in the world for me to show how thankful I am for our conversations. Keep on being amazing. Alex, thank you for being on the other end of that phone line whenever I needed you. *Beaucoup d'amour, mon ami.* Ang, thank you for putting up with long spaces between texts and being a friend through thick and thin. Your check-ins meant the world. To my family—Mom, El, Scott, Elijah, and Everett: love you all endlessly. Thanks for putting up with your weird daughter/sister/aunt. To Dad: how much I wish I could put this in your hands and tell you how it couldn't have happened without you. And in the place of honor at the very end of the list: Derek. You make life worth living. Thank you for getting me through this.

Table of Contents

A FEAST OF MANY FLAVORS.....	1
THE GIRL WHO CLIMBED UP A MOUNTAIN.....	23
HEAVENLY BODIES.....	28
THE WITCH OF SARA ANGELINE.....	51
NO LONGER WALK IN LONELINESS	62
I'M SORRY, MY LORD, MY LOVE.....	78
EDWALD.....	78
DANOR	84
LUCIA.....	91
SEVEN BEACONS BURNING.....	99
BROTHER, WHAT IS YOUR NAME?	114
RESIGNATION LETTER FROM THE LIBRARY OF LOST THINGS.....	133
PATIENCE IS WHAT BUILDS THE BOAT.....	138
LAST WORDS OF THE NETHERWORMS.....	161

A FEAST OF MANY FLAVORS

They put red crescents out just to tempt us. More specifically, to tempt me. Somehow, they must have discovered that the crisp pastries are my favorite food. But who would have told them? Mami? Luto? Unless that little tidbit was in my file when they conscripted me, they couldn't have pulled it from my family. My mother and my brother are long dead.

Movement at my elbow catches my eye: Three reaching for the basket, her delicate fingers parting steam as she selects the pastry she wants. Gods, they are fresh from the ovens. I can practically taste the crust of buttery goodness on my tongue. First a crunch, then the tart sweetness of the red honey paste inside. My stomach grumbles.

Three takes the largest and bites into it, crumbs scattering down her standard issue blue uniform. She closes her eyes—lighter blue, like the waters of Lake Verala—as pure pleasure crosses her features.

Jealously, I watch her consume each bite, until a flick of her tongue captures the last crumb from her lips. My eyes leap up to her hairline as she swallows. Sure enough, it is already a shade lighter, closer to wheat than the dried grass brown it was at morning bell.

My envy turns to cold satisfaction in my gut. Three can eat the whole basket. She can turn back to her natural platinum-white; her longer, narrow-framed face; her wide mouth and gap teeth.

I glance behind her, to where the queen sits on her dais. Dark hair coils over her ears and shoulders, trailing down in long braids that almost drop into her bowl of plain oats. She pushes the bowl aside, already finished.

Ruthlessly, I do the same to mine.

Three will never be Valya Cara. Chosen. But it takes more than red crescents to stop me.

#

The twelve of us gather in the training yard after morning meal, same as always. Up ahead, the queen is in her dark green and black leathers, hair pulled up in a massive coil around her head. It looks too heavy for her, weighing her down. Even as I watch, her shoulders slump.

I imitate the movement, relaxing from my soldier's stance. Just a bit more forward. I drop my forehead a fraction. There.

I am too far away to see her chest rise and fall, but if I could, I would match my breathing to hers. Perhaps at luncheon, if I am quick enough to table. The secret to being Valya Cara is all in the details.

“Good,” says Pol Arran, right in front of me. He almost startles me out of my stance. A slash of eyebrow—yes, one—governs his face, dominating over small, dark eyes and a sharp nose. Beyond his shoulders, his twin and fellow Council member Pola Rita hands a practice sword to the queen. “You will fight me today, Carita Nine.”

He hands me a practice sword identical to that which the queen holds up in front of us. More scarred on its edges, perhaps, where Pol Arran's bit into it relentlessly over

time. But the same weight, the same make. I lift it before me in synchronized movement with the two-handed stance of the queen.

A glint of approval swims through Pol Arran's murky eyes. Then he springs at me.

He adopts the heavy-footed style of our enemies, the forest-dwelling Rorkans. As a result, I crouch lower, putting my weight on my heels the way the queen favors. Despite this preparation, the clash as I bring the edge of my sword to meet his vibrates through my bones. A cross-body parry, then a backhanded twist as I block his thrust. His blade slides down mine with a harsh scrape until the hilt crushes my fingers. I manage to avoid the point by dodging left, but my hands go numb.

Ahead of me, I hear a scratch and a dull thud as Pola Rita's sword does the same to the queen. I spare a glance in their direction as our fight continues. The queen stops to suck on her fingers, anger sparking in her bright blue eyes. Blue, like the waters of Lake Verala.

Warm pride curls through me. I matched the queen's moves to the tiniest detail, just as I've been practicing for so long.

But Pol Arran bears down again. Thus is the way of the Rorkans, fast combat with heavy-armed swings, their brute strength their greatest asset. I assume that beyond us his twin does the same. I barely manage to hold off his thrust with my numb fingers, determination keeping the sword in my hands. He begins to circle me and I mirror him, like the queen up ahead. When he feints, I'm ready.

A clang as he comes from the right. My arms vibrate like the timekeeping bell. Two more standard strikes with all the force of Pol Arran's not-insubstantial muscle weight behind them. I stumble back, a feeling of wrongness searing through me.

Up ahead, the queen holds her own.

I fumble. The sword falls from my numb wrist. Pol Arran has me, the tip of his sword brushing against my throat as I swallow hard.

"Not bad, Carita Nine," he says, keeping the sword in place. Then he smiles, a long slash of white. "But not perfect."

I step back and bow to him, my eyes dropping to the ground. "I thank you, pol." But in my head I'm thinking: next time.

#

I make it to the third seat from the dais at luncheon. Like I've practiced, I match my breathing to the queen's, watching the rise and fall of her slim shoulders with caution. She eats half her filet of tria fish and exactly four bites of steamed green sodlan, unsalted. So do I.

I'm chewing my last bite of sodlan as slowly as I dare—the queen sometimes swallows quickly—when the memory of the red crescents returns to me. Gods, how they smelled: sweet and yeasty, with the mellow richness of butter on top. My stomach growls again.

At either side of me, Four and Eight finish up their tria fish. Four poured some of the creamy white sauce onto hers—a mistake. She has a long way to go, not like Three, who was born with the advantage of the queen's blue eyes. Four is like me, a brown-skinned river dweller from the low country, and her hair even curlier. She's been a Carita

for seven years, same as I—probably drafted after the same massacre. Probably lost her people the same way. And yet she remains square-jawed and wide shouldered, only a few shades lighter in skin. Weak-willed.

I swallow my sodlan. Up on the dais, the queen's throat bobs at the same time.

A rush of rightness, like a spike of adrenaline through my veins.

I can't wait to get in front of a mirror.

#

My chance comes after needlepoint, when we sit in two rows of six and match the queen stitch for stitch. She always pricks her finger about three minutes after her movements slow, and she grows weary sooner than usual today. Strange, how this concentration exhausts her, but wielding a sword is what our queen was born to do. Watching closely, I wait until she makes a clumsy stroke and prick my finger at the same time. The pain wakes me up, and I lick away my blood, just as she licks hers. It tastes salty.

She sets aside her needlework, raises a hand to her forehead, and stands. This time, she wobbles a bit on her short heels. My shoes have no heels—our uniforms are standard issue, to avoid unfair advantages—but I force myself to wobble upon rising just the same. It isn't hard. I feel a bit dizzy, my pulse racing, as another rush of adrenaline surges through me.

The twins step forward, a matched pair. They take the queen by her elbows and help her right herself. I stand taller in pale imitation of the movement, but by then, she is already leaving the room.

A collective breath goes out of us when the door clicks shut behind her. For a moment, the silence swells, all of us standing like statues in our last positions. Then the spell breaks, and we dig in pockets and boots and breastbands for our mirrors.

Like all the others, mine is palm-sized and round, just large enough to show my head and shoulders. I hold my breath as I lift it into place, but I needn't have worried. I've more than compensated for the slip-up against Pol Arran with my breathing tactics today.

My hair falls straight and heavy in one long braid. If I were to unwind it, it would be wavy not like it was when I lived in the river house and Mami brushed it at night, but wavy like the queen's when she combs it before bed: something waiting to unkink. I achieved a sheen today, the bluish tint that shines from the queen's braids when the sun catches them at the right angle. It is the right shade of black, far darker than it once was.

My face is better too—pale cream, with the spots of warm blush that are often high on the queen's cheeks of late. My chin comes to a point like hers, my dark hair peaking in a crown between my eyes. My nose is right—a slight point, small, the nostrils barely flaring as I breathe.

It is only my eyes that are wrong today.

Still a bit slanted, and muddy brown at their center. The blue is coming in—just a ring of it—but it blends into the color of riverwater during flood season as it reaches my pupils. The lashes, long and curled, are like the queen's, so that's something.

Relief and disappointment mingle as I put the mirror back in my pocket. We still have afternoon tea—three cups, black, not a bite of sandwich—when I might eek a bit more blue out of the day.

But it is not to be. Pola Rita finds us in the stitchery room five minutes later and tells us afternoon tea is cancelled.

“The queen called a meeting with her Council,” she says, both her slender brows lowering in a severe frown. (Unlike her brother, she plucks.) “You will return to your quarters for the remainder of the day.”

Whispers break out as soon as she leaves us. It has been months since we’ve skipped tea, dancing lessons, dinner. Then, it was because the Rorkans lured our ships to a devastating defeat near the Freedian Islands.

Ten speculates as we move through the halls to our barracks. “I heard they made it to the Violet Hills.”

“Heard from whom?” asks Eleven, a sarcastic bite to her voice.

A fair question. We are kept separate from the others in the palace, only allowed in our barracks, the training yard, and rooms where the queen is about her day. There are rumors that a few girls break that rule to sneak out and fraternize with the groundskeepers.

As Ten blushes and says, “I can’t remember,” I look at her with new eyes. Her hair had been turning brassy of late, despite her not unskilled efforts of matching the queen during the day. A secret liaison could be the reason. Who knows what she does to her precious body at night? True, our time apart from the queen doesn’t affect us as much as our mistakes in her presence. But the tangling and thrusting of sweaty bodies in the hay is drastic enough to add that red back into her braid.

“Doesn’t matter,” says Seven, bringing me back to the discussion. “It’s impossible. The Rorkans would never make it so far north.”

The Violet Hills are just a day's march south of the palace. A few girls exchange worried looks, the fear in their eyes matching that uncoiling in my gut. Many nights, I close my eyes and see the river running red. We fight a brutal enemy.

But the queen gives her people hope. The Rorkans' Lo-Suriel, spirit-speakers, have nothing on our spellworkers, who gift the queen with immortality. Or so the queendom thinks.

The realization hits me hard as we turn the corner to our barracks. The queen's ever-lessening bites of food. The way she holds her trembling hand to her head at embroidery, a bead of blood on her fingertip. The twins' hands at her elbows, helping her stand.

The queen is dying.

#

I was ten when they found me in the river behind our house, washing Rorkan blood off my arms. I remember the way the brown surface of the water rippled and changed, and suddenly I saw not only myself, but another: a tall pol with hair like fire and lines in his freckled skin. If he ever told me his name, it's lost now. Buried deep, like my own.

The fiery pol must have searched our house before he found me. Either way, he didn't ask about my brother, curled around a pike inside, or my mother, hair dragging in the ashpile where she fell. Instead, he looked at me closely in my bath of blood and riverwater and said, "I have a place for you." Little did I dream that place might be the throne of the queendom.

But they didn't give us that detail, not at first. They had to weed out the twelve of us from the other war orphans. Some of them were pale northerners, fathers lost at sea, mothers lost to the promise of soldiers' coins. They favored those, except when they started marching us toward the palace. Then they saw how the cold-weather ones couldn't last.

We were called by the villages where we were found. This made it easier on the march for us to band together with our closest neighbors. Other river rats made the best nighttime companions, because they would sing the same hushed stories that Mami used to keen into my ears at night. But when we made it to the Amari Fields outside the palace walls, they gave us wooden swords as heavy as our arms and twice as long and made us knock each other down.

The other river girls fought like the wild creatures we were, nails biting hollow cheeks, toes jabbing into shins, fists around curls. But none of them had ever washed blood from their arms. I was left with a scar that has long since disappeared, straight like a reed across my chest. The fiery pol wasn't happy about that, but I'd still won.

They waited until the moons had risen and took twelve of us, the victors, up a dark tunnel into the back of the palace. One from each province, they said. It was fair that way.

When we were lined up in a squat, dark room, they turned their backs and told us to strip. I thought we would be killed, some kind of ritual sacrifice for the spellworkers to gain power. Mami used to whisper about them, after Luto was asleep. She said if you angered them, they would put a bad-luck mark on your soul.

But it was good luck for us that day: instead of death, they brought us blue uniforms. Each one was the same size, so the sleeves hung over some of the girls' hands. My sleeves were an inch too short, the tunic tight around my hips.

When that was over, they lit the lanterns in a ring, and we saw that we stood before a black stone altar. Behind it was a woman who had been in shadow before—who perhaps appeared from shadow, coalesced, while we weren't paying attention. I remember her eyes, the same dark flecked with gold as the silt beneath the river. She smiled, and a part of me grew rapt.

“Daughters,” she said. “You have been alone. You have struggled. You have been brave.”

We waited. The girl nearest me, from the province beside mine, shifted on her feet. I wanted to grip her shoulders and hold her still.

“Not in vain,” said the shadow woman. She lifted her arms and smiled again, and I saw that they were twined with the thin gold wires of a spellworker's sleeves. “Today you will be consecrated as Caritas, and we will entrust you with the secret of our land.”

We gasped as one, as if the ceremony had already been completed and we were tied inexorably to the same body. But then whispers broke out across our ranks, like bubbles in water, and the spellworker waited for them to quieten before she explained: the queen was not immortal as we believed. She was a body reborn from her own people, from hardship and trials, and we twelve would compete to become her. The ceremony performed that day would tie our bodies to hers, and each move she made that we matched would transform us into her, the spellworking trick that kept our people in belief

for a millennium. One of us would become the perfect match. We would be tried, and should we fail, the shame of our defeat would stop our tongues. Forever.

A few of the girls traded looks at that, an expression that I well remembered: wide eyes, tight lips. Fear. But something else awakened in me, something fierce as the girl who had washed in the river.

Determination.

#

Once in the barracks, we strip off the blue uniforms—larger now than they were seven years before—and wash ourselves in the basins beside our beds. Some Caritas work quickly, modesty urging them into the black clothes we sleep in, but I don't bother with that anymore. Instead, I trace my wet rag over each rib, checking for the deeper hollows that I should have by now. I swoop the cloth across my flat chest and concave stomach. Close.

“There's something I don't understand,” says Seven, already dressed, head propped on her hands as she lies in bed.

“What?” Eight turns to her, still naked. Her ribs only show when she sucks in a long, deep breath.

“If we're supposed to become her—” Seven lets the doubt creep into her voice “—why aren't we at those meetings? The war councils?”

Eight snorts. “You think they want to risk her top advisors finding out about us? We're secret. That's the point.”

“But we never have any sort of lessons,” says Ten, sitting beside Seven. They looked like sisters with a couple of years between them. “Not even the twelve of us, alone.”

“I heard Pol Arran talking about it,” says Eleven, lowering her voice. She needn’t—the room is empty, save for us—but we all gather closer anyway. A drip of cold water slides down my naked legs. “He said he doesn’t want to waste resources on any old Carita. You have to win. Then you learn.”

“When did he say that?”

“Last month. To Pola Rita. She was asking if we should be training on archery, too.”

Four’s brow furrows in a frown. “Does that mean the queen is doing it? Surely, if she is, so should we?”

“No.” All eleven of them turn to face me when I speak. It’s like looking in a fractured mirror. “Haven’t you noticed? She’s too tired.”

They all fall silent, the implication of my words hitting them. Perhaps I’m wrong to reveal my hand. But there is no harm in letting them know. They will lose anyway. I swore it to myself, to that girl in the river who has forgotten her name.

Three breaks the silence when she sighs. “I guess I should’ve skipped the crescents.”

#

There are more of them at breakfast the next morning. My head aches just smelling their sweetness, but I grit my teeth and imagine my oats taste as sweet as Mami’s recipe. It is a trick I used with Luto, when rations were low before the end. He

always complained that it didn't work. Now that I can see how right he was, my lips quirk at the thought of telling him so. A moment later, I realize my mistake. Up on her dais, the queen is pale-faced and stoic.

I force my expression to behave. Perhaps a bit of brown has already leaked back into my eyes. Storm and blast. I will have to be more careful, especially if my suspicions are correct and one of us will soon be Valya Cara.

Pol Arran doesn't choose to fight me. He chooses Ten, despite the hint of red in her hair. She's good, stumbling more than usual, as the queen does, and I taste jealousy instead of the emptiness in my stomach. It fuels me. By the time stitchery comes, I'm ready.

The tiredness rises faster this time. Not just a prick, but a hard jab. I suck the blood up from my finger like sweet wine. The twins, dressed in the green robes of Council, carry the queen out.

Another mirror check. The rusty flavor of my blood still lingers on my tongue. I smile, and my teeth are red from it. But the rest of me is almost perfect.

Thin face. More red in my cheeks, a contrast to their paleness. And eyes of blue, blue, blue like the river reflecting a summer sky. So close.

Pola Rita comes in again. "The queen is busy with her Strategists of War. You will return to your barracks for the afternoon."

Though her sharp features betray no falsehood, a powerful lick of excitement heats my core. I stay in the center of our pack as we move through the halls, one body of twelve. A pair of clear eyes here, a jutting collarbone there. To my left, One's perfect mole beside her nose, a twin to the queen's; to my right, Eight's spattering of freckles on

her forearm. But also square jaws, wide shoulders, flaxen hair. None of us are perfect. But none are as close as I.

#

The next morning, I'm late to breakfast. I haven't slept well, plagued by the same old nightmare of dipping my hands in the river, watching the current carry away eddies of blood. It will be no easy task, being queen.

Because of my lateness, I overhear the twins as they whisper at the dining room doors. They can't see me where I hide around the corner.

"You've seen her. It has to be today."

"Please tell me you're certain."

I strain to hear the rest over the pounding of my heart. "—wait and see. Trust me," says Pol Arran.

I retreat silently and come forward again with heavy footsteps. By the time I emerge from the corner, they stand straight and tall, their padded armor covering all. They keep their gazes ahead as I pass them, and I try to match their stoicism, burying my excitement down deep. I'm distracted as I take my seat—farthest from the dais—but I soon come back to the present when the queen never arrives at table.

The Caritas around me exchange looks of confusion. Some of them shrug and spoon oats into their bowls, adding blackspice and red honey, taking advantage of a meal when the queen isn't in the room. But a meal apart still matters. No queen at breakfast means she likely isn't eating. I push away my bowl.

An answering wash of energy makes my heart beat faster, blood rushing from my head.

The sense of rightness grows as we head out toward the training ground. Today is the day I will be selected. The certainty guides each step I take, each breath. I don't need the queen before me anymore. I will become her.

#

"Nine." Pol Arran and Pola Rita stand before me, equal in height and build. Without the plucked eyebrows and Pola Rita's longer hair, they would almost be identical. The pola hands me a practice sword. "You'll be fighting us both today."

A jarring note interrupts the song of adrenaline filling my veins. "But . . . my pol, my pola—"

"Do it." Pol Arran raises his sword, clearly indicating he isn't planning to wait. He will strike, whether I defend or not.

This, then, is another test.

I fall into the queen's stance: both hands firm but relaxed, sword raised. I don't need her over his shoulder. I know what she would do.

He feints left while his twin comes from the right. I spin left and block him, putting her on his other side. Divide them—that is the way to defeat an enemy. Pitch them against themselves. Now they are in a line, Pola Rita out of my way, and Pol Arran's eyes shine. What would the queen do next?

The pola is always teaching her to move her feet in time with her breathing. I match the two, my heartbeat dropping in as a third flavor to subtly alter the dish. Our swordplay becomes just another meal, when I let my will overcome my sense of self. Cease to exist. Become the queen instead.

Shoulders slump a little forward. Hands grow clammy on the hilt of the practice sword. I've seen the wood darkened by her sweat. I've seen the way she glares at the pola when things don't go her way. She fights with a grudge, to hide her nervousness. I let my own creep forward, matching my hunched stance to hers.

The Pol's eyes grow even brighter. He sees it. I fight off the pride—a distraction. I spin as he bears down and knock him back into his sister, who struggles to right herself and attack me again. It is almost clumsy, the way I batter forward, clumsy like an angry and sloppy fighter would be. Spunk, not style. Pola Rita swings her sword in a chopping motion toward my neck, and I duck beneath it, rolling in the dust. My own sword I use to chop off her ankles—metaphorically. She falls to the dirt.

I spring up, the tip of my sword at her throat. She has dirt on her face, a smear across the bridge of her nose. It makes her look like her brother, the way it fills in the space between her brows. I almost smile.

But the queen never would. My arm trembles a little from the effort, from my rapid breathing. Pola Rita opens her mouth—

—and I feel the point of a sword dig into my back. I leap aside to find Pol Arran wearing his slashed grin. “Well done, Carita Nine. You fight like a queen, and we need that now more than ever.”

My blood sings. All those meals condensed into bites of focused attention, all those pricked fingers, all the bruises from Pol Arran's sword. They've built me into this body, this queen, and proven I am the one to lead us to victory. A surge of energy fills me, like it did that day on the Amari Fields. But this time, I feel a shift, and I imagine my eyes rounding out, that blue shining through like a jewel from the queen's crown.

The other Caritas are restless behind me, trading a few whispers that I can't catch. Nothing good, but it hardly matters now. I bow. "I thank you, my pol."

He thwaps my hand, hard, so that I drop my practice sword. "Come with me," he says.

I fight off the sting. My rush of pride helps. "Yes, my pol."

Pola Rita stands up and follows us, but the slant of her brows means she isn't happy about it. Eleven pairs of eyes trail after me, each a variation on Lake Verala blue.

#

Pol Arran takes me into a new wing of the palace, one I've never seen before. That's how I know it's time. The room where we stop only confirms it for me. On the far wall is a mirror as tall as two Rorkans and as wide as a creek. I can see the shape of my queen in it.

I realize a second later that I see myself.

"Wait here," says Pol Arran, sounding almost amused. Pola Rita follows him out, and I wait three breaths before creeping closer to the mirror. A few strands of hair have come loose from my braid, hair the blue-black of a raven's wing. The dark tendrils frame a heart-shaped face, fevered red cheeks, bright blue eyes. Something I've never noticed before—a cluster of light freckles, almost invisible, across my nose. I turn my head side to side. A mole on my cheek.

I unbutton the top button of my uniform. My collarbone stands out like the rung of a ladder, broken only by a slight dip at the base of my throat. That was never so hollow before. Tears could drip down my cheeks and collect in it, I think. Only they won't have to—not anymore.

A sound from the corner of the room draws my attention away from the woman in the mirror: the twins returning. Pol Arran holds a chalice, Pola Rita a small knife. My lungs constrict. “So it’s true,” I say.

They face me, side by side. “Yes,” says Pol Arran. “The queen is weak. The ceremony can wait no longer.”

“And I’m . . .?”

“Valya Cara,” says Pola Rita. Ever the inscrutable face, but there’s a hint of sadness in her tone. What will she do now? Recruit more orphans? Or does she mourn the loss of the other Caritas, if what the spellworker has cursed them with comes true? Regardless of her thoughts, she kneels before me, holding the knife across her palms. Pol Arran does the same, holding up the chalice. Their faces drop toward my feet.

I see my wavering reflection in the clear chalice water. “Where is the queen?”

“In the next chamber,” says Pol Arran to the rich burgundy carpet. “Do you remember what to do?”

As if I could forget the ceremony I memorized my first day as Carita Nine. The ceremony that told me I might one day be someone other than a river rat, an orphan, a survivor.

As I had that day seven years prior, I lift the knife and kiss the blade. It’s warm against my lips, like the tender brush of Mami’s kiss goodnight. I squeeze the hilt in my hand with the same strength I used as I gutted the Rorkan who lied atop her. Back then, it was his blood that spilled across my arms. Now, as I lift the knife and dig it into my thumb, it’s mine.

The blood flows down my arm, dripping off my elbow into the waiting chalice. Pol Arran watches the waters turn pink before passing the chalice into my hands, heedless of the blood dropping in large pats onto the carpet. Perhaps that's why it is burgundy, I think. After all, this ceremony has taken place here every few decades for a thousand years.

I hold my pointed chin high as I carry the chalice before me, through a set of gilded doors, into the room beyond, where my queen awaits.

She lies propped on a stack of pillows in a narrow bed at the center of the room. Dark hair spills over white silk, framing her red-brushed features. Always that heated blush of life, the same pink as the chalice water. Beside her on a bedside table waits a great feast. I can see pots of jam and cold-sliced meat and steaming crescents. My stomach growls as I creep up to her. Not yet. I can eat when the spell is over and my bites don't matter anymore. When I am queen.

She opens her eyes. Lake Verala blue.

There are signs I've never noticed before. After all, I've never been this close up. Thin lines of age ripple outward from those long-lashed lids. Her lips, too, are dry and cracking, not the full-budded kiuli blossoms they appeared from far away. She has a spot of brown—an age mark?—beneath her right ear. And then she smiles.

My own lips rise in answer.

“Are you ready to bear this burden?” she asks, in a voice like dry grasses catching fire.

“My queen,” I say, “I am.”

She nods to me. I lift the chalice and drink. It tastes fresh and sugary-sweet, like red crescents. I savor each drop as it slides down my throat. Then I hand the chalice to her. Her hands shake as she takes it from me, but no pink liquid spills over the side. She raises it with painstaking slowness to those dry lips and wets them, just barely, with its contents. Then she sets the chalice on the table beside her bed.

I can feel it beginning now. My blood stirs, heating within me. It courses through my veins with a rush of energy, relearning the pathways of this new, soon-to-be permanent form. Just as they told me it would. The queen reaches for me, her breath hitching, and I lace one of my hands through hers.

She gazes at our clasped fingers, her lashes hiding her eyes from me. Will she become the person she was before as she departs this flesh? I watch for signs, and for a moment, I think I see changes. Her skin begins to darken, the edges first, like shadows creeping up around her. Something pulls me to her jeweled eyes, and I lean forward on my toes, searching deeper.

Her fingers spasm around mine. My eyes feel dry, and for a flash of a moment, I blink.

It is after that blink that things begin to change. No longer pleasantly warm, my blood heats to searing fire. My guts writhe within me, nausea rising in my throat. Before my swimming vision, the queen begins to transform. Her age-spot disappears in a pool of creamy white. The lines beside her eyes flatten out, porcelain-smooth. Her red lips plump and stretch into a smile.

A smile? But she is dying. Something isn't right.

One glance at our clasped hands tells me the real story, the lie the spellworkers protected all those years ago. My fingers grow dark as hers stretch long and pale. She grips me harder as if she can read the realization on my face. I am not becoming her.

She is consuming me.

I close my eyes. My body revolts against the theft, pain shuddering through each limb until it's all I can do to stay upright. My muscles spasm. My lungs burn.

I remember Mami. I remember Luto. I remember my reflection in the murky river waters, sadness already washing away and leaving the cold, hard bed of survival in its place.

I will not die like this.

I open my eyes. The feast is the first thing I see. Without removing my hand from the queen's—I can't, her grip grows ever stronger—I lift up a crescent in my free hand. There's no time to savor the smell, the texture as it crumbles between my fingers. I shove it into my mouth, eating it up in one bite. It tastes sweeter than honey, sweeter than blood, and it washes away the nausea in a wave of warmth and memory. The jam next. I dip my fingers into it and scoop out a large bite. The queen makes a sound of alarm as I lick it off. Sugary sweet and tangy-sharp. Next to the jam there are tiny bell fruits, and I pop them into my mouth, one by one. They burst with tart juice that tastes like joy. The queen's fingers go slack, but I'm not finished. I lift the cold meat and lean back my head, lowering it into my mouth, sucking off the salt like the starving woman I am. It floods me with energy. It fills me with power.

The queen's hand falls away.

When I look down, swallowing my last bite, she is pale and grey against the white sheets. Her hair is the color of river water, a murky sludge that straggles like water weeds. Her eyes flutter once, twice, and then close forever, but not before I glimpse the look in them.

It's something like relief.

#

When I step out of the room, I enjoy the flashes of surprise that cross the pol and pola's features. I savor them, like I savored each bite of food I just swallowed down. But they are not as sweet as the sight of myself in the long mirror. I turn and meet the eyes of a girl long forgotten, a river rat with hair that Mami's comb could never tame. My square shoulders and wide hips strain against my too-tight uniform.

"What—what happened?" asks Pol Arran, nonplussed. "The queen . . .?"

"The queen is dead," I say, turning to them. I can feel the scar I earned on the Amari Fields puckering against my tunic. Strength flows in my limbs. I meet their eyes.

They are the first to look away. After a long silence that roars in my ears, they speak in one voice, the voice of the Council. "Long live the queen," they say. "Long may she reign."

And I determine that I will.

THE GIRL WHO CLIMBED UP A MOUNTAIN

Not the darkness of the ship but the smell is what frightens Hania most.

“Babcia?” she asks, leaning into arms like homespun wool. “Will you tell me the story?”

Babcia clears her throat. “The girl who climbed up a mountain?”

Hania nods, her hair making static against Babushka’s scarf. Pricks of blue-white dot the night-dark hull, like the stars over home in Gologury. Here and then gone.

Babcia takes a breath.

#

In a distant kingdom, the plainest girl in the plainest village keeps the plainest geese.

One day, her gander catches himself in a bush of briar. As she frees him, she tears her sleeve and loses three drops of blood.

The next morning, she awakens to find that her geese are missing. In their place, she meets an old man at her door. He is so small and wizened that his scarlet cap barely reaches her knee.

“Where have you taken my geese?” she asks.

“It is not I who have stolen them,” he says. “It is the Witch of the Briar.”

The girl cries out in dismay at the name of the most formidable witch in the kingdom. “How will I get them back?”

The old man points with his cap to the hazy blue distance. “You must climb to the top of the mountain.”

#

On the day of Babcia's burial, the clouds pierce low as a thatch roof.

Hania's father keeps the distance of a plow between them as they return from the graveyard. At the farmhouse, he goes into the kitchen to make coffee.

"Will I make golabkis?" Babcia's favorite. Hania speaks in Polish, forgetting for a moment about this place called *Oo-is-kon-sin* that is meant to be home.

"English, Hanna," admonishes Tata without turning from the stove.

Although the air outside chokes like winter briars, Hania goes to the outhouse and warms herself with tears instead. They drip like sizzling fat to her arm.

#

After many hours, the girl and the old man reach the foot of the mountain.

The girl looks up to the very top, higher than she has ever looked before. "How will I find the path?"

"Your feet will tell you."

The goosegirl's feet are plain and stubby, like the rest of her, but as she watches, they move, leading her to a path. The path becomes stairs, and the stairs take her up the side of the mountain. As she walks, the sun smothers her, until three drops of sweat fall from her brow.

After a while, the girl and the old man reach a fork in the path. At the place where the fork splits hunches an old woman with a dress as pale as new butter.

"Hail, goosegirl," she says, lifting raisin hands. "Will I lead you up the right path?"

The goosegirl is wary, but the old man says, "Look to your head."

The girl hesitates only a moment longer, for she is kind and trusting, and she senses that the old woman means no harm. “I will take your help,” she says, “and thank you for it.”

#

Anxiety like a peach pit lodges itself in Hania’s throat. Out over the heads of the other schoolchildren, she sees the smiling faces of fathers and mothers, none of them belonging to her. They have come for the Reading Day, to hear their own children read in smooth vowels, perfect tongues.

Her fears rise, oil on water. *The girl who can’t read*, says her teacher. *The girl who speaks like a cow*, say the others. *The stupid Polish girl*.

She tastes a bittersweet ache behind the pit in her throat.

#

When they reach the top of the mountain, the girl and her companions can see all the places where the moon touches the kingdom—but no geese.

A laugh like the whistle of the North Wind: the Witch of the Briar appears, tall and narrow in a tattered white cloak.

A thorn of fear lodges in the girl’s heart, but she finds the courage to say, “What have you done with my geese?”

The witch smiles. “I will give you your geese,” she says, “if you give me in return what three things are most precious to you.”

“That is impossible,” says the girl. “My geese are all that is precious to me.”

The witch shakes her head, still wearing a hungry smile.

The girl has endured the tight gnawing of hungry days. She has suffered the quiet loneliness of autumn twilight. She has climbed to the top of the mountain. But to come so close, only to fail . . .

She closes her eyes. Three tears slip to the mountain stone.

Then she hears the voice of the old man. "Listen to your heart," he says.

The goosegirl does not want to listen to her heart, for its music warbles on a weak strain. But the old man has led her this far, so she seeks deep for her heart's melody.

She finds the song of a plain girl from a plain village. She hears stubby feet and scratches on her arms. But she also hears feet who found the mountain path and did not stop.

She opens her eyes. To her wonder, where her tears fell is a gray-coated tomcat. "I am the tears of your heart," he says.

The woman in the butter dress stands beside her. "I am the sweat of your labor."

The old man in the red cap takes her other side. "I am the drops of your lifeblood."

The goose girl sees that she possesses three precious friends more valuable to her than a thousand geese. But before she can speak, they cross from her side and give themselves to the witch.

"Now you must honor your promise," says the old man.

The witch laughs. "So be it." She disappears as her cloak scatters from her, twisting into feathers, squawking into plain geese. The girl smiles.

Her happiness fades, however, when she sees that her friends are gone.

"How will I get back down the mountain?"

To her surprise, she receives three answers. *With your fortitude*, say the tears in her eye. *With your cleverness*, says the sweat at her brow. *With your love*, says the blood in the rhythm of her heart.

#

As Hania takes the stage, her father's face comes into view, an almanac showing years of hard work and weather.

She swallows spit into the empty cavern of her stomach.

Her father smiles.

His smile is Babcia's. It is a proud smile, a warm smile. The smile of home.

Hania glances down at the words she has written.

"This is the story of the girl who climbed up a mountain," she begins.

HEAVENLY BODIES

At first, Judith did not notice the demon on her kitchen counter. She was too busy unwinding her scarf from around her neck and using its soft red wool to wipe the tears from her cheeks.

“Your pain has a delightfully aromatic tang,” said the demon. “Might I taste it?”

Adrenaline jolted through her, closing up her throat, so her scream came out strangled.

“Oh, you mustn’t do that,” he said. “Fear is terribly bitter.”

Judith balled her scarf between her hands and held it over her mouth, pressing another shout back down her throat. She sucked in a shaky breath, inhaling the familiar musky scent of the wool peppered with the spice of a few flakes of snow. Despite this attempt at calm, she could still see the demon perched cross-legged on her countertop. If anything, the creature grew more solid: the red, formless mist circling him faded, leaving what looked like a fat green cherub wearing the face of a gargoyle, apple-cheeked and sharp-fanged. His eyes were small and glistening, like metal coat buttons, buried beneath a heavy brow and pointed ears. His pudgy fingers laced together as if in prayer, resting atop one knee. A limp pair of bat’s wings peeked out from either side of his back, a slightly darker green than the rest of him. As Judith sucked in another breath—wooliness in, wooliness out—she saw a pointed tail flick forward and backward over the speckled brown granite, idly, like the tail of a cat on a windowsill.

“Perhaps I should introduce myself—”

A knock sounded on the door at Judith's back. She jumped away and yanked it open, startling the person on the other side. *Tam.*

"Hi," said Judith, breathlessly. She watched Tam's blue-stormcloud eyes for some indication, any indication, that he also saw the hellspawn in her kitchen. But his gaze never left her face.

"Everything okay?" He wore his post-gym uniform: gray sweats and a band t-shirt, this one showing a skeleton eating an ice cream cone. His feathery tattoo peeked out from under his right sleeve, stark black against his pale skin. The necklace he always wore, with its enamel "he/him" in gold letters, rested on his collarbone. She thought she could see his pulse beating at his neck.

"Oh. Yeah." Judith leaned against the open door, just in case her bushy ponytail had been blocking Tam's view into the apartment. His worried expression didn't change to, say, one of fear and utter shock, which wasn't a good sign. "I just got home."

Tam cast a concerned look around. His beard was growing in after almost a year on T, and it suited his sharp cheekbones and flushed-pink skin. "You sure? I thought I heard you scream."

Judith felt her cheeks heat up. Why was he always stumbling across her at her worst? She thought of their first meeting over a year ago, when she moved into the building: sweat stains beneath her arms, stuffed-full box of dishes in pieces at her feet. "Bad day," she said now, as she'd said then.

Realization flickered across his face. "Right. I'm an idiot. How are you feeling?"

"Fine," she said. *Fine fine fine.* She'd said it so much over the past year, it had lost all meaning. "Just a little tired." *And hallucinating.*

“Of course.” Were his ears turning red? He gave her an endearing, self-mocking smile. “I’ll leave you alone.”

No. Stay with me. But Judith bit back the words. The pain in her pelvis, her constant companion, could be a jealous bitch. “Sorry. Maybe we could hang out another time?”

Tam’s eyes lit. “For sure. Text me. And . . . if you need anything, you know where to find me.” He pointed at the faded green door across the hall.

“Thanks.” She watched until his door clicked shut, fighting desperation. Then she braced herself and turned around.

Nothing.

The kitchen was as it had been that morning, when she left for her doctor’s appointment: a few coffee cups stained with peach and cotton candy kisses beside the sink, Lovelace the Succulent in the windowsill, snow drifting down beyond. A brown granite counter scattered with nothing but the crumbs of her breakfast—cream cheese on rye.

Judith let out a long breath, sagging against her closed door. After a few moments of quiet, she hung her scarf and purse on the hook beside her and began to unbutton her coat.

“Full of foul, malodorous happiness, that one,” said a voice to her right. “I almost lost my appetite.”

Judith’s skin prickled with chills as she turned. Sure enough, the demon floated above her small Ikea table, his legs dangling off the scarlet cloud of mist that kept him airborne. Judith stumbled back.

The demon sighed. “I thought we were beyond this.”

“You’re not real. You’re not real.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “*You are not real.*”

“I beg your pardon?” When she opened her eyes, the demon stood upright, his hands balled into dimpled fists. “You address Baal-Zebub, one of the seven princes, who has condescended to visit your humble abode for a mutually beneficial arrangement! And who could, by the way, just as easily have snapped his fingers and turned this place to dust.”

“What’s wrong with my apartment?” Judith said, glancing around. She’d saved for this place.

“I was not referring to this—dwelling,” said Baal-Zebub, waving a hand. “I was referring to your realm. What do you humans call it again? Earth?”

Judith choked. Then, a burble of laughter escaped her lips. She couldn’t help it.

“Mmm,” said Baal-Zebub, closing his eyes and lifting his bulbous nose in the air. “Warm notes of hysteria. A bold flavor, to be sure.”

There was that word again. *Hysteria*. Just like that, the laughter died. Judith was in Dr. Ng’s office again, the crunchy paper of the exam table making a rustling noise no matter how still she tried to sit. *No, an ovarian cyst wouldn’t be causing you that pain. You shouldn’t be feeling anything.*

. . . put you on Loestrin . . .

. . . come back in three months for a follow-up . . .

. . . only way to diagnose endometriosis is with a laparoscopy, and even then, you might not know.

As if her thoughts had called the beast from its cave, a familiar stab of agony went through Judith's pelvis, inside her right hip bone. A throb began shortly behind, almost like a muscle spasm but not quite. She found herself remembering the monstrous images that came up when she googled "ovarian cyst," huge white balloons that looked, ironically, like eggs. Only that wasn't what she had, according to Dr. Ng. She gripped her abdomen.

"Ah," said Baal-Zebub. "There we are. The *saveur* of frustration, the piquant nip of bitterness, the delicate undertone of despair. A perfect dish." His wings flapped in time to Judith's frantic heartbeat, and then he was hovering before her, one finger outstretched to her cheek. She couldn't move. His fingertip brushed beside her nose and she felt wetness—a tear. He brought it to his thin lips and lapped it off his skin. "Truly delicious."

As he spoke, a small miracle: Judith felt the prick of pain in her pelvis subside, a wave sliding back down the beach. The tide was pulling out. It was only a dull roar, not the pounding torment it had been a moment before.

Baal-Zebub reached out with his other hand and caught the tear on her opposite cheek. This one he sniffed, very carefully, as if afraid of inhaling it up his nose. Then he grinned, showing double rows of narrow, needle-pointed fangs, and popped his finger in his mouth. "Delissuss," he said around the digit.

Again, the ocean shrank away. Judith was standing on the dry part of the shore, safe from the rip of the current. "How—how are you doing this?" she asked, wonder in her voice.

Baal-Zebub removed his finger from his mouth and dusted his palms together. “A prince does not answer *how*. A prince answers *why*.”

“All right, then. Why?”

The fangs appeared again. “Mutually beneficial agreement, remember? Besides. You summoned me.”

“I summoned . . .?”

“Oh, yes. When you were walking up the stairs just now. Your tears—the tears of a woman in pain—they smell as delicious as confinement in Sussex in 1823. They call to me.”

Judith fought to keep up. “So you can . . . *eat* my . . .?” She gestured at her abdomen.

“Your pain, yes,” said the demon, nodding. “And I believe it is chronic?” He sounded hesitantly gleeful, like a child afraid of getting his hopes up.

Sick days, skipped nights out, afternoons curled around a heating pad. “You could say that.”

“Excellent. Then I take it by the dry tone of your voice our agreement is to your liking?”

Judith hesitated. Stories about demons tended to have a common theme: whatever you do, don’t make deals with them. But those were fables, fantasies, fairy tales. This, her body told her, was quite real. And the little demon had helped her in the past five minutes more than nine months of internet research, three visits to a General Practitioner, and two OBGYNs. “What’s in it for me?”

“I’ll stop by for nibbles. Your pain will go away. Over time, you’ll develop defenses against it.” The demon grinned. “No more pain.”

Judith poked the hellscape between her hipbone and her belly button, that No Man’s Land where happiness went to die.

Could this be the answer she’d been searching for all along?

Tam’s smile flashed in her head. All the casual coffee dates she’d skipped because her stomach ached, all the movie nights he’d suggested as they passed each other on the stairs. She counted them at night when she couldn’t sleep.

Perhaps, after this, she could say yes.

She took her hand from her abdomen and held it out for a shake.

Baal-Zebub’s tail came around his pudgy belly and curled into her palm. It felt like the class snake she’d held once in the fourth grade, a rosy boa, muscular and cold to the touch. They shook briefly, hand to tail, and then Baal-Zebub’s red mist began to swirl around him.

“Farewell for now, mortal,” he said, patting his stomach. “Happy paining.”

#

About a week later, Judith was in bed at two in the afternoon, wishing Baal-Zebub would reappear. If pain was his dish of choice, her body was serving it up hot and fresh. She moved her now-lukewarm heating pack off her abdomen so she could test the skin with her own fingers. It was warm and swollen, pressing against the elastic waist of her pajama bottoms, straining away from the nausea. Not for the first time, she fantasized about carving open her stomach and taking all the organs out, emptying herself of whatever poisons lived inside. She closed her eyes.

Beside her on the mattress, her phone buzzed.

She put away her fantasy, tugging the phone into her range of vision. A text from Tam: *Headed to Jewel. Need anything?*

Judith's pulse quickened. For a brief moment, she had another vision: herself and Tam walking to the grocery store, combing the aisles, arguing over the best flavor of ramen (chicken mushroom, obviously). Sharing a cart, carrying it all home, cooking together. Curling up close on the couch, legs over laps, fingers sifting through hair like the first brush through fresh snow.

I'm good but thank you! She typed instead. Then she put her phone on silent and tossed it onto her nightstand. The movement sent a twinge down her abdomen, rooted near enough to her appendix to have caused a trip to the emergency room once or twice. She poked at it. A blaze of pain responded, a sharp version of the bright ache that was her constant companion. It shopped with her. It jealously withheld happy hours, trivia nights, Cubs games. It curled up around her at night.

She pressed harder with her index and middle fingers. The pain flamed through her bloated stomach. She tasted salt.

"Just in time," said a gravelly voice. "I was getting peckish."

Relief trilled through her at his words. Baal-Zebub sat comfortably on her second pillow, wings at rest. The red mist that heralded his movements dissipated into her bedroom's chill as he reached out with greedy hands and plucked up her tears, one droplet per finger. Then he licked them off each tip with gusto, fangs gleaming. At the end, he lifted his nose into the air and grinned. "Pleasantly acidic today."

Judith sucked in a breath. Her fingers hadn't moved, but the sharp pain beneath them was gone. Even her nausea had lightened, a tension smoothed out of her abdomen like a stubborn wrinkle. "I can't believe it actually worked."

"Here." Baal-Zebub held out a small palm. His green glassy skin swirled with the grays and pinks of granite. "I'd like to order dessert."

Judith hesitated.

Fangs caught the dull wintry light from her window. "No fear, now. You'll ruin the fun."

At that, Judith slid her hand atop his. After all, how much could it hurt?

Baal-Zebub opened his mouth even wider, lifting her index finger to his fangs. Then he bit down above her first knuckle. She felt a prick, a light brush of sharpness, but nothing strong enough to be described as painful. She'd adjusted her definition of that, over the past few months.

Her eyes fluttered closed as the demon sucked at her blood. A warm sensation slipped over her, starting at her head, caressing her breasts, curling over her abdomen, slipping between her thighs and down her legs. In answer, her muscles let out a sigh, pooling into the mattress. She was both heavy and weightless, sinking into nothing.

The delicate smacking of lips brought her back to awareness. She wiggled her fingers and toes first and found that the demon had released her. She opened her eyes.

Baal-Zebub floated overhead, supported by a cloud of red mist. Satisfaction half-lowered his eyelids. "Rich and oaty, with a hint of caramelized sweetness. Delectable." His ears flicked as he lowered his head in a slight bow. "I thank you."

Judith pushed herself up to sitting. Her heating pack slid off the mattress and landed on the wooden floor with a dull thud. “Thank *me*?” She put a hand over her stomach, a now-familiar movement. It grumbled: a normal grumble, not the kind of roiling upsetness that meant she would have to skip dinner. “When can you come again?”

Baal-Zebub lifted his chin and regarded her regally. Then his fangs flashed. “Music to my ears, young human. Just say my name aloud three times, and I will appear.” The red mist started to coalesce around him.

“Thank you—”

“Don’t abuse the privilege, mind. I can break our little arrangement at any time.”

“Yes. Of course.”

Then he was gone.

#

“I’m so glad you texted me,” said Tam as he unpacked the last grocery bag onto Judith’s counter. “I hope you like Italian.”

“It’s my favorite,” she said, swinging her feet beneath her barstool. *This is real. He’s here, and I’m hungry.* For the first time in weeks, her stomach wasn’t trying to swallow her abdomen whole.

“Are you just saying that?” As Tam smiled, Judith noticed for the first time that his canines were a bit crooked. She imagined them nibbling her lower lip and felt her body grow warm beneath her sweater.

“No. I love pasta. Anything with carbs.”

“Excellent. That’s a very low bar.”

She laughed, then started to shimmy off her stool. “I should be helping.”

“No!” Tam rushed around the counter and held her still, his palms warm on her shoulders. She froze, meeting him eye to eye. “This is my treat. You sit. I cook.”

“Are you sure?” Judith was scared to breathe. He was so close. She could smell the cold on him and, behind it, the fading spicy scent of his cologne.

“I’m positive,” he said in a low voice, his eyes on her lips. She held her breath. Then he let her go and hurried back into the kitchen. His ears were slightly red. She watched as he pulled down a pot and began to fill it from the sink. Somehow it boded well that he knew where to find everything, as if he, too, had the same kitchen logic in his apartment right across the hall. Matchmaking by BuzzFeed quiz. *Organize your kitchen cupboards and we’ll tell you your soulmate.*

“Huh?” she asked, when she realized Tam waited for an answer.

“Wine?” He showed her a bottle of red.

“Oh, yes, please. But are you sure I can’t pay you back or anything? This looks kind of . . . pricey.”

His cheeks grew pink above his beard as he uncorked the bottle. “No, it’s my treat. Trust me, I’ve been dying to cook for—to cook for someone for a while.”

“Okay. Thanks.” There had been many nights, before Judith had the courage to do more than exchange hallway pleasantries with Tam, when she’d smelled delicious things coming from his apartment. It had been so hard not to knock on his door and invite herself to dinner. *Hi, I think you’re really hot, also your food smells amazing, can I come in?*

And then the pain had started.

But that wasn't her problem tonight. No, tonight she was two weeks into her Demon Therapy and it was working just fine. She drank her wine slowly, nursing each delicious sip, letting it warm her toes as Tam talked her through each step of his *cacio e pepe*.

"It's kind of the most boring pasta dish you can make," he said as he spooned them each a bowl. "I'm realizing that now."

"It smells amazing." Buttery and sinful with a hint of fresh ground pepper. Her stomach growled.

They ate at the tiny Ikea table, knees knocking every so often, until finally Judith got up the courage to keep hers pressed right against Tam's jeans. He didn't move away, just smiled at her shyly as he sipped from his wine glass. Then he said, "Hey, did your doctor's visit go okay?"

"I'm sorry?"

"The other week. You told me you were going to the doctor again. How'd it go?"

"Oh, you know."

"That bad?" Tam's crooked smile came back.

"I basically paid her \$125 to tell me to suck it up." Judith poked at her last scoop of pasta. "Talk about masochism."

"I know how that goes." Tam hesitated. "Finally got insurance to cover the T, though."

"That's great! Through the graphic design job?"

"Yeah. It's awesome. Saves me tons. I'm still not . . . not sure about the surgery,

though.” He fingered the stem of his glass. “That shit’s expensive.”

Judith set down her fork. “That sucks. I’m sorry, Tam.”

He shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“Your voice is sounding good, though. A lot less like a teenager who just dropped out of choir.”

His smile reappeared. “You think?”

“Yeah, totally. You’ve got a nice growl.” Judith summoned her courage, then said, “It’s . . . sexy.”

“Thanks.”

Their eyes met across the table for a long moment, and Judith held her breath.

“Are you ready for dessert?”

The tension broke. She laughed. “Yes, please.”

When all the dishes were scraped clean, Judith hesitated by the kitchen counter, unwilling to say goodnight. She felt full and warm and satisfied and there was no need to go lie down or put her heating pad in the microwave. The feeling was so foreign she almost cried.

Instead she said, “Do you want to watch something?”

Tam paused in the act of packing up his fancy cheese and olive oil. “Oh.” His blush reappeared. “Yeah. That would be great.”

Judith led him over to the couch, pulse leaping as he settled down beside her. The smell of his cologne was strong this close, and she let herself lean into him with a release of breath. *So good.* “What should we watch?”

His eyes turned mischievous. “You’re giving me the deciding power?”

“Absolutely. You’re the guest.”

A couple of hours later, Tam pulled her back into the shelter of his arm. “Are you liking K-dramas yet?”

I’m liking you. But Judith held back the words. A strange feeling radiated out from her chest—not like the pain that spiraled from her core. No, this was something else. Something that tasted like contentment but rushed through her veins like fire.

“I am,” she said when she found her voice. “We should watch more sometime. If you want.”

Tam’s fingers stilled on her shoulder, his body going soft. The silence stretched for far too long before he said, “I’d like that.”

A bit later, as they stood up to say their goodbyes, Judith’s fingers linked in his. “I had a really good time,” she said. “And dinner was delicious.”

“Thanks.” Tam stepped closer to her, until they were a few inches apart. “I can do spaghetti and meatballs, too.”

“I can’t cook,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

His canines peeked out. “It’s okay.” His eyes drifted down her face, catching on her lips. “Turns out there are other things I like about you.”

Judith’s pulse beat in her ears. For the barest instant, she thought he was going to thank her and leave. And then he kissed her. Sweet, short, the taste of wine still on his lips. It was like the blissful bite of the demon’s fangs.

“Goodnight, Judith,” he breathed when it was over.

“Goodnight, Tam.” She waited until the door closed behind him to pump her fist in the air.

#

It wasn't until later that night, when Judith was changing into her pajamas, that she noticed the scale.

At first, she thought it was a scab, or perhaps a bruise. Granted, it was in a strange place for a bruise—midway between her belly button and her dark brown tufts of pubic hair, about the size of her thumbnail. But when she reached down to touch it, she felt the same cold, hard surface as her granite countertop. Around it, her skin was warm.

Dropping her shirt, she closed her eyes and said, “Baal-Zebub. Baal-Zebub. Baal-Zebub.” Panic surged up her throat.

“Didn't I tell you not to abuse the privilege?”

She opened her eyes to find the demon floating on his red mist at eye-level.

“What the fuck is this?” she asked, pointing.

He regarded her coolly, gaze shifting from her trembling finger to the dark patch against her skin. “It looks like you're developing some armor at last. You're welcome.”

“Armor? I didn't ask for—this wasn't part of our agreement!”

“Wasn't it?” The demon flipped his tail, bored. “I told you I'd grant you defenses, didn't I? You should be thanking me. Those are my most effective type.”

“So this isn't going away?” She brushed the scale again, and the resulting chill shivered up her arm and down her spine. She felt no pain, true. But she would become untouchable.

“Oh, certainly not,” said Baal-Zebub. “It will last a lifetime, I assure you.”

“Oh, God.” She buried her head in her hands. Nights on couches suffused with warmth evaporated like boiling water in Chicago cold.

“How dare you pass off my credit?” The demon swelled with offense. “*That One* has no part in this.”

“What? No, I just meant—oh, nevermind.” To Judith’s horror, a swell of pain had begun in her abdomen, to the right of the scale.

The demon watched her closely, then settled into a knowing look.

She hesitated. The pain grew. But, oddly, beneath the patch of skin where the scale had grown—nothing.

Judith held out her finger.

“Are you sure?” Baal-Zebub asked.

She remembered laughing as Tam taught her how to curl pasta into a spoon. She remembered the way his arm felt over her shoulders on the couch. She remembered his kiss.

Fuck it, she thought. “I’m sure.”

#

Winter in Chicago wasn’t so bad, Judith thought. Not when you had a hot guy to go on a date with every weekend and a demon to suck away the pain when you got home at night. Granted, each time Baal-Zebub visited her, another scale grew along her pubis. However, his visits were becoming less and less frequent the more the scales grew. It was like he said: Judith had *armor*.

This didn’t become a problem until the night of her one-month anniversary with Tam. She’d stayed downtown after work, going from her office on the upper floors of 900 North to the fancy Bloomingdale’s downstairs, and furtively purchased a bit of lacy

lingerie in expectation of the evening. Now, she stood in front of her mirror in her apartment, trying not to shred the underwear on her scales as she pulled them on.

Her armor had grown from a single dark spot to a blooming triangle. Each scale was a slightly different shade of green, like edges of a faceted emerald. They started at her panty line and grew downward, eclipsing her pubic hair until she had only a few remnants of dark curls peeking out where pelvis met thigh. If she stroked her fingertip in a line from her bellybutton to the peak of her vagina, her fingers started on warm skin and hit cold scales halfway down, smooth and tessellated together in a swathe that linked hip bone to hip bone. Fortunately, at her clitoris, her fingers hit warmth again. In her own self-testing, she was fully functional, at least in the ways that mattered on her one-month anniversary with her boyfriend.

Tonight was the night she planned to show him. All their previous encounters had been waistline and above—by mutual agreement—but with each weekend the anticipation grew hotter, like swallowing a warm brick. And as she felt only warmth and not pain, the desire grew.

Yet by the time she stood outside Tam's apartment, knocking on his door, worries crowded her mind. How would she tell him about the demon that sometimes showed up across the hall?

How would she tell him about the scales between her hips?

“Come on in!” he called, voice muffled through the door, and she sighed and forced a smile on her face.

His apartment was larger than hers, and cleaner, with green walls instead of blue. Some wacky cartoons he'd drawn in college greeted her in mismatched frames along the

entryway. Tonight, the smell of garlic, herbs, and something yeasty greeted her as she walked in. “Yum,” she said.

“No peeking.” Tam grinned at her from the stove, where he stirred something in a giant pot. “Pour yourself some wine and go hide in the living room.”

“Nice to see you, too.” But she couldn’t help smiling as she poured herself a glass from the open bottle of red on Tam’s counter. She loved the kitschy apron he wore—it said “King of the Grill”—and the way he tried to keep his dishes a secret. She loved the way he tucked the front of his ridiculous t-shirts into his sweats, and the way his dark hair looked after he ran his fingers through it.

The realization hit her as she sat down on the couch and started scrolling through his Netflix account—full of recommendations for Korean dramas and baking shows.

She loved him.

Shit, she thought. This was not supposed to happen. Not before, when she was nauseous and bloated and cramping in pain, and not now, when she was part demon. Or part armored. Whichever it was.

“Okay, you can come in now,” Tam called from the kitchen-slash-dining area twenty minutes later.

He stood over his square mahogany table, two steaming bowls of soup and a fresh loaf of homemade bread laid out upon it. A candle burned in the center. “Kale and vegetable soup for the lady,” he said, pulling out her chair.

“Wow,” she said, leaning over her bowl and trying not to sound nervous. “This smells . . . really good.”

He froze, the smile fading from his face. “You don’t like it.”

“What?”

“I knew I should’ve gone fancier,” he said. “I just thought . . . because it’s freezing outside . . .”

“No, Tam, I love it. I love soup. And did you make this bread yourself?”

He shrugged. “It’s oatmeal. It was easy.”

“Tam . . .” She reached across the table and took his fingers, which were cold to the touch. “Thank you. I’m so happy to be here with you tonight.” That part, at least, was true, even if she fought down a storm inside.

He relaxed. “Okay. But you can be honest. If you really don’t like it, we can order pizza or something, I promise.”

“Not on my life.” And as she caught his tentative smile, she determined to enjoy every bite. The soup was delicious, and the bread steeped in butter was heaven itself. She had no trouble complimenting him on the meal, but as they cleaned up and moved with the wine onto the couch, her fear came back. She began to tremble in his arms.

“What’s wrong?” Tam asked in a quiet voice. He sounded nervous.

“It’s nothing,” Judith said. *Coward*, she thought.

“Look, if it’s bad, just rip the band-aid off. I can’t take the suspense.”

“What?” Judith sat forward so she could turn and see his face. His lips were drawn and thin, his stormcloud eyes darker than ever. “What are you talking about?”

“If you’re . . . breaking up with me.”

Fear rattled her pulse. “I’m not . . . wait. Are you breaking up with me?”

“God, no.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I think you’re amazing. I always have.”

The simplicity of the statement, the truth in his eyes, made Judith's lungs swell with something both sweet and painful. "Okay. I mean, thank you. I feel the same about you."

He let out a rush of breath. "That's good to hear." His cheeks were red. "So why do I get the feeling there's a 'but'?"

"There's no but." Trying to get those crooked canines to appear, Judith wriggled her hand between Tam and the couch cushion, squeezing with her fingers. "Well, there's one, and it's pretty awesome."

He didn't smile. "Judith." He reached for her wrist, stilling her movement. He pulled her hand out and twined his fingers with hers. "We can talk about it."

Her fingers twitched. Her palm was far too clammy for innocence, but still she said, "About what?"

He avoided her eyes. "It can be . . . different. Dating a trans guy. And we haven't had that conversation yet."

Realization struck, followed quickly by a need to make him understand. "No. No, listen, Tam, it's not about that. I mean, I'd be happy to talk, but . . ." As the words left her mouth, she realized her own hypocrisy. Not from the moment she met Tam in the staircase, broken dishes at her feet, had she considered him anything other than what he was. And for weeks she'd refused herself the same sympathy.

She gathered up her strength and cleared her throat. "I have something I've been meaning to tell you."

He blinked. "Okay . . ." He squeezed the hand he still held. "I'm all ears."

"Something has happened to my body."

Confusion passed over his face. Then surprise. “Okay,” he said. “What does that mean?”

“Maybe I should just . . . show you. And then you’ll understand.”

Judith stood up and brought him back to his bedroom. He watched her with trust and concern as she turned and faced him, dropping his hand so she could lift up her shirt. This she discarded on the floor, revealing the lacy bra she’d purchased that evening. His eyes grew dark with longing as her hands went to her pants and began to unbutton them.

I can do this.

The pants fell to the floor. She shook them off one leg at a time and stepped out, facing him. Then, meeting his eyes, she tugged down the lacy panties by just an inch, revealing her scales. They glittered in the dim light from the hall.

Tam sucked in his breath.

“I told you,” she said. “Not normal.”

He stepped forward. She couldn’t quite read his expression in the dark. But then his hands, cool and caressing, rested on her shoulders and pulled her into him. “Not normal,” he whispered in her ear. He kissed her neck. Shivers went down her spine. “But beautiful.”

#

“I still don’t see why you had to go and get completely happy like that,” said the demon from Judith’s kitchen counter.

“It’s okay,” she said, wrapping her scarf around her chin. “I’d like to introduce an alternative dining option.”

“Hmph,” said Baal-Zebub. “I should never have given you that armor.”

Judith brushed her hand over her pelvis. Beneath her jeans, her scales were cool and strong, a wall against the pain. She was a little sore beneath them, yes, but not in a bad way. For the first time in a while, the pain gave her pleasant memories. Her cheeks grew warm.

“Terrible,” spat the demon. “Disgusting. Waste of a good meal.”

“Let’s go.” Judith waved him over.

She could hear his mutterings all the way down the stairs, outside her apartment building, down the icy sidewalks. Right up to the doctor’s office on Broadway. But he never stopped following her, even when she pushed open the door and marched inside. She could see him in her peripheral vision, floating on his cloud of mist, looking curiously about the sterile waiting room.

“Name?” asked the receptionist at check-in.

“Judith Weiss. I’m here for a follow-up with Dr. Ng.”

“Right. It’ll be a few minutes.”

“Actually, I don’t need to see her. I just wanted to let her know that I’m doing fine.”

The faces of other women in the waiting room turned her way. Some were pale, some dark, some sallow. All drawn and tired. One of them, a young woman wearing a green sweater, looked like she had recently been crying. Baal-Zebub wore a wondrous expression that was slowly building from awe to greed.

“Are—are you sure?” asked the receptionist, clearly thrown off by this approach.

“Absolutely,” said Judith. “Thanks for your time.”

She turned, winking at the demon. He blinked twice and smiled that double-rowed

smile, letting all his fangs show through. His eyes were dark and shiny and full of hunger.

Thank you, he mouthed.

Bon appetit, she mouthed back.

THE WITCH OF SARA ANGELINE

When the Witch of the Crossroads caught a glimpse of the young woman walking her way, she thought, unironically, *wonderful*. A year and a day had passed since her last unwary traveler, and her innards had begun to growl. Besides, the fog rolled in thicker these days, which resulted in much more effort than before to make the lights blink and flicker and, eventually, lure someone unsuspecting and unwarned down the wrong fork in the path. Someday, the Witch thought, it would become impossible, the thick roil of human smog blocking her lights completely from this world. But today was not that day.

Today, she ate.

“Hellooo?” the young woman called, a cheery voice penetrating the mist. She spoke entirely too loudly for a person alone in a mist-shrouded bog, but the Witch was willing to overlook this gauche behavior when she caught a glimpse of her prey. Soft brown eyes and a face that favored her long-dead mother, that distant foreign woman who little knew the enormity of her mistake when she took to bed with an Englishman behind her father’s opium den for a single night. The Witch saw all of this and more as she looked her prey from top to bottom. *Sara Angeline*. The fog offered the name up with a swirling obeisance. Though Sara Angeline had been called something else as a toddler, something that lilted and sang with the tones of her grandparents’ language, and the Witch saw that, too. Even Sara Angeline, with her frock-coat and her flannel petticoat and her neatly-buttoned, well-worn boots, did not remember it, just as she did not remember the day her father came and took her from them.

All this the Witch tasted with a sigh like the one after a first sip of tea.

“Hello?” Sara Angeline called again. The Witch magicked her own skin a bit paler—a lingering vanity she could not, in all her unlooked-for immortality, shake off—and pinked her cheeks like a consumptive before she appeared. Sara Angeline gasped and dropped her basket.

“Hello,” said the Witch, smiling with lips made red.

“Oh,” said Sara Angeline loudly again. She bent and retrieved her basket, careful to brush some mud off its round bottom with thin fingers. “I’m sorry. I didn’t see you there. I appear to be lost, you see.”

For the first time in many decades, or perhaps a century, the Witch did not know what to say. This was not the reaction she was used to. A more usual one would have been a scream, an ankle twisted in a bog-hole during attempted flight, a sob that tried to form a word. Or, the Witch’s particular favorite, a delightful combination of the three, not necessarily in the same order.

No one had ever said “I’m sorry” before.

The Witch saw her mistake at once. She had made herself too beautiful. Her master, when he cursed her, told her that she would someday rue the beauty that had brought her to him, but in that regard unlike all the rest he was, in fact, wrong. She had never been able to put it aside. Even as she lured humans to their deaths, she did it with bloodred lips and a waist as narrow as her spine, with a spill of hair like the plumage of a robin’s chest. And when they were close enough to marvel at her, she smiled, and she made her teeth pointed and her lips stretch, until her beauty was grotesque. And then she ate them.

But Sara Angeline was the kind of girl who sprung the traps on her father's estate with bits of wood so none of the foxes would be caught in them. She once held a state funeral for a crow who died of a broken wing, herself the only attendant, eulogizing solemnly in the tomb of her forefathers until her governess caught her and dragged her away. She read a story by Mr. Dickens about a girl with smallpox and cried until her wet pillow left marks on her cheek, and that not long ago, perhaps three months. She was the kind of girl, in short, who saw beauty in many things, and therefore saw ugliness in very few.

But the Witch saw all of this far too late, for she had made herself beautiful, and Sara Angeline stood a wingspan away with a beseeching look in her eyes and a tentative smile on her lips. "Are you all right?" she asked the Witch.

"I'm fine." These were words the Witch had not spoken in a handful of centuries.

"Only you look as if you're lost, too." Sara Angeline frowned as she took in the Witch's thin dress, the bell sleeves of an age long past, the copper collar at her throat that might have appeared to chieftains as a sign of privilege and power but now appeared as a collar on a dog. The Witch saw her seeing this and felt, for the first time in a long while, fear.

There was only one who could look into her like that.

The Witch abandoned the seductive game that had provided her only entertainment for years at a time and lunged instead for Sara Angeline, or for her master parading as Sara Angeline. She gripped that corded column of throat and sent her magic into her claws until they pricked beneath Sara Angeline's ears.

"You said you would stay away for a thousand years," said the Witch.

Sara Angeline swallowed, her throat pressing into the Witch's palm as she did so, a warm caress. She choked, her eyes going black, and the Witch realized her master would never have let her put hands on him, not like this, not without punishment. She let go abruptly, staggering backward.

Sara Angeline fell to her knees in the mud, her hands at her throat. Five thin trails of blood sank beneath the high collar of her gown like a necklace of rubies. She took in great, big, shuddering breaths.

"You are not my master," said the Witch unnecessarily. That was quite obvious, now. The tricks that a mind plays. She had been clumsy. Five hundred and fifty-four years, and now she was becoming foolish. She would never be ready for him at a thousand.

Sara Angeline recovered herself quite admirably, with the fortitude of a girl who had been left alone among strangers for much of her life, and after a time, she staggered to her feet. Her frock-coat, which had never been spotless, was now caked in mud. The Witch temporarily mourned the loss of the flannel petticoat. Sara Angeline did not seem to notice.

"You're mad," she said instead, dawning horror behind those tears she swallowed back.

At last, the familiar. But the hint of fear no longer served to entertain. No, those words echoed. *Mad—she went mad—if you touch her she'll go mad—like a horse gone mad—a horse in the pasture—rutting—she's mad.* Distant memories ran through the Witch, smearing out whatever beauty she had tried to put on. Her bones weighed like bags of salt. She was very tired.

“Yes,” she said, solemnly, through plain lips no longer red, except from being chapped after too long in the sun. “I suppose I am.”

Sara Angeline stood frozen. The Witch felt all the long decades of angry people, frightened people, coming back up her throat, and she swallowed them back. Then, with a wave of her hand, she healed the stripes of injury down Sara Angeline’s solemn throat. “Go now,” she said, turning aside. She had another five hundred years of this. How would she possibly survive it?

For the first time in centuries, the Witch considered letting her master win after all. To lie down—to sleep—

She jumped at a soft touch on her elbow. A tender touch. Sara Angeline stood beside her, hair stuck to her lips, a few wispy strands that had escaped her practical braid. The lines of her strong jaw stood out, set as they were in anger. A muscle twitched on her narrow forehead. “What happened to you?” she asked.

For Sara Angeline was also a girl who escaped from her father’s house and hid amongst the dead from her governesses. She was a girl who fought village bullies until she was whipped in punishment, and a girl who took the whipping with a stoic expression and straight, upright shoulders. She nursed anger deep in her gut, a wound of missing memories she couldn’t put back herself.

“Why are you out here all alone?” Sara Angeline continued. “Did someone hurt you?”

The Witch watched in stunned silence as Sara Angeline bent to her basket and slowly, carefully, pulled out a long, thin bundle, all the while looking from side to side,

as if the Witch's master might materialize from the fog at any moment, as well he could. "Who?" Sara Angeline asked as she searched.

The Witch realized that if her master came here, he would do to Sara Angeline what he had done to her, or perhaps he would eat Sara Angeline and make the Witch watch, or perhaps he would make the Witch eat her. And beneath the cold tang of fear that she had not tasted in many centuries, she also tasted the hot fire of rage. It had boiled away within her so long, and she spent it on cracking bones and licking up blood and peeling back flesh, but it never went away. She had tried to spend it oh-so-many-times on the mean ones, the cruel ones, sending them her light more than she sent her light to the others, but then she realized they were all cruel ones, really, deep down. They were the kind who had no qualms about lying down with a virgin behind her father's opium den after they partook of his opium, or following carriages with pistols in their pockets, or telling lies to young women with ribbons in their hair. They cut purses or longed for their sister's lover or married for wealth and poisoned their husbands' suppers. Men, women, humans, all of them, they carried thorns in their hearts. And the more times she picked out those thorns with her teeth, the more they entered her bloodstream and lodged themselves where once her heart had been.

But not this one. Sara Angeline had thorns, yes, but she used them to protect, like sharp pricks on the stem of a rose.

Sara Angeline now stood with her back to the Witch. She took the cloth off the long, thin bundle and revealed that she carried a knife. "Which way did he go?" she asked, cutting away the mist as her knuckles turned white on the knife-grip. "Just point. You don't have to answer."

He went into the aether. He went into the fog. He went into his tower which reaches high to penetrate the sky.

“Nevermind,” said Sara Angeline, sounding a little irritated. The Witch realized Sara Angeline was not irritated at her; Sara Angeline was irritated at herself, or perhaps at the Witch’s master, not yet knowing his power. “Let him come.”

That knife cutting through the fog made the Witch see. Or perhaps it was the way Sara Angeline stood between her and the darkness. Or more likely it was the way Sara Angeline’s best petticoat had been ruined and her collar stained with blood and she was just as kind as she had been when she first walked up and said, “I’m sorry.” Perhaps it was that.

No matter the cause, the Witch saw that she would sooner eat her own hand like a fox in a trap than eat Sara Angeline.

“Go,” said the Witch. She summoned what remaining power and composure she had, and she imbued her words with a command that lesser people, many lesser people, had fallen beneath. “Go now. Quickly. Do not come back. Take the left fork on the road. It will carry you back to your home and your stair that creaks on the second-floor landing and your favorite patch of sun in the library, where you can see the oak leaves stirring through the windowpane.”

Sara Angeline turned, letting her knife fall to her side. She studied the Witch with a tilted head and still that muscle ticking in her jaw. Then a sadness stole into her eyes that the Witch had not expected to see. “I would like to,” she said. “I will miss that patch of sun. But I’m not going back.”

“What?”

“I’m not going back there. Never. Not until I die and go to be buried there, and maybe not even then.”

“But—but you love to hop over that creaking stair.” The Witch felt stunned. She had once had a human life that she remembered, sometimes very faintly, when the wind blew from the North. The taste of hot wine and fresh bread and nimble fingers tying ribbons in her hair. She could not imagine running away from it, not after being dragged away.

“I do love it,” said Sara Angeline. She used the knife to scrape some of the mud off her frock-coat. “But I don’t need it to live. And I won’t be beholden to anyone there. Not anymore.” Her words dropped like the lever of a loom, pressing threads of the Witch’s heart into place.

This was good. This was right. “Take the middle fork, then.” At the end of that road was a city, and in that city was an enterprising old woman in need of a companion, going off to the east on a ship, and wouldn’t Sara Angeline who wears the face of her mother be such a good choice, really the only choice? And at least there would be coins to rub together, and reading in the hull of the ship at night, and the pungent smell of air to remind Sara Angeline of her true name. “Go,” said the Witch.

Sara Angeline wiped her knife on the bottom of her boot and wrapped it again. She stashed it in her basket and straightened, pushing her plait over her shoulder, watching the Witch with a curious expression. “And you?”

“I will be here, at the crossroads.” Where she was, always. For time and time eternal, like her master cursed her to be. And yet she spoke the words wistfully, for it was sweet to imagine that someday Sara Angeline would be here again.

But Sara Angeline did not accept this. “You can’t. It isn’t safe here, clearly.”

The Witch bared her teeth in a smile. “It is not safe, that’s true. But I need not fear.”

“You can’t survive here.”

“I will,” said the Witch. It was not a lie. Surviving here had been her existence for five hundred and fifty-four years. “Go,” she said, and she thrust out her arms, flinging with them a burst of her power, and Sara Angeline turned away with a frown and began to walk away into the mists.

The Witch of the Crossroads watched her go.

Until her plait stopped, and swung back again, and Sara Angeline’s stern face reappeared. “Come with me,” she said.

The Witch’s blood rushed in her veins. In-out. In-out.

“Come with me,” Sara Angeline repeated, stepping closer. Her jaw firmed again. “I won’t leave you here. Come.” She held out her hand.

In-out. In-out.

The Witch saw them following the right fork. She saw them going to a new city, an unfamiliar one, and Sara Angeline reaching back to hold her hand as they leapt over puddles, and all the while the smell of the sea and the taste of the north wind.

But it was no more than a light sent out to lure her to her own destruction.

“I cannot,” she said at last. “My master put me here and cursed me not to leave this place for a thousand years. I’m . . . sorry.” The shape of the word felt strange on her tongue, not least because they were true.

“Devil take your master,” said Sara Angeline, and the Witch laughed, which so surprised her that she stopped laughing and stared at her own hands as if to make sure they were not disappearing.

“What can he do? I’ll fight him off. I have a knife. I’m a very stubborn person,” said Sara Angeline. She stepped a little closer. Her hair smelled sharp and sweet.

“He has a thousand knives, and something that will cut much worse than a knife. You must go.”

“Come with me,” Sara Angeline whispered. She was so close that the whisper stirred the mist and the mist brushed the Witch’s cheek like a gentle finger. In that moment the Witch felt longing so hot and sticky it clung to her every dark, empty spot like honey in the comb.

And what if she did go? He would find her, of course. But not right away. Perhaps not for four hundred years.

The Witch looked at her hands. They were young, though they had held two fistfuls of centuries. There were things she could do with those hands to make four hundred years a lifetime. Two lifetimes. Perhaps more.

She looked at Sara Angeline, who smiled. “Come?” she asked again, this time soft, this time pleading and hopeful, and the Witch decided it was this she wanted to taste of, this she wanted to boil with, not the rage that had eaten her up for so long. She would consume and be consumed so differently, now, in the grasp of a girl who knew pain but gave none.

“Very well,” said the Witch. She held out her hand.

Sara Angeline’s palm slid into it.

As they walked out of the mists and away from the crossroads, the Witch felt no pull to remain, no magic hammer to drive the nail through her feet. It would be just like him, she thought, to fill her full of bitterness and hatred and tell her she was cursed that way, and all of it a lie. It was like him to make her her own jailor. But she couldn't be sure. She couldn't be sure.

Then they reached the right fork, and Sara Angeline's grip was calloused and tender and strong as she pulled the Witch away down the road, careful always to point out the puddles.

NO LONGER WALK IN LONELINESS

Every hour of the morning so far, I stopped and thought, Thank the gods he's dead.

I know. It's bad. Terrible, even. I feel the lash of the nine whips across my back, the red firebrands of guilt, etc. etc. *Ye must not burn others in mind nor spirit lest ye yourself be burned*, Gospel of Fire, chapter 9. But here I am thinking it again.

The tattoo is still visible on the inside of my right forearm. Here in the dappled shade of the aster tree it winks at me like a half-lidded eye. Why won't it wink closed, or fade away forever? He's dead now. He'll never find me, nor me him. Thank the gods.

Someone calls my name from across the courtyard, and I tear my gaze away. Maybe I can get the money back, I think, another guilt-ridden thought. Maybe I can get what they paid for the spell, and I can find Lillian, and we can finally reach the sea.

Someone calls my name again. Nadia. Lillian's little sister looks nothing like her, especially now, with her eyes wide and fear written across her face. Lillian is never afraid. "Ursula. Did you not hear me calling?"

"I heard."

"I've been waiting here for three hours."

"Rough morning."

She doesn't pry. Something's wrong, something besides the usual bleak acceptance of our fate here at the Holy Circle. "So you know about Lillian," she says instead, warily.

My heart speeds up, my stomach wrenching again, and I'm glad I couldn't eat this morning. "What about Lillian?"

Nadia's eyes are black fire and she resembles her sister for a change. "They took her. A few days ago. Right when they took you. And then this morning . . ."

"What? What happened this morning?"

"There's been an accident. That's all they said."

An accident. We all know that word. But Lillian wouldn't do that. Not to herself. She's the strongest person I know.

It's no use arguing with Nadia, telling her she must've misunderstood. If something's happened to Lillian—if they've cast the spell, and it somehow went wrong?—then she'll be in the Healing Ward of the Four. It's across the yard, south building, its brick too pale to soak up any warmth from the suns. "Let's go."

Nadia follows me. Ever since we got our tattoos, we've been granted freedom, which is the kind of messed up irony that the Holy Circle lives to provide. Poor Nadia. Her tattoo is like a lopsided star, right smack in the middle of her forehead. No escaping that. Before today I've been wearing the long-sleeved winter robes even though it's summer so I don't have to look at mine.

And then this morning, when the first sun stained the horizon gold, I woke up and felt him go.

We reach the steps of the ward just as a purple-cloaked spellcaster starts down them. Nadia and I step aside out of habit, letting the old woman pass. I recognize her. She's the one who cast on me. Her gray hair is in three braids, and the odd blue woad that

she paints up her arms fades into the dull mud of her skin. Her eyes are green-brown like leaves trampled underfoot in the rainy season. She meets my gaze and pauses.

She knows.

But she doesn't say what I think she's going to say: "You'll have to come in again" or "We don't give refunds to the Holy Circle" or "We'll find you another one, you'll see." No, she opens her mouth on a long-drawn breath and speaks in a language I don't understand.

Of course. I'm a fool. The Holy Circle pays the spellcasters for their services, but they make sure we can't communicate with them. I turn to guide Nadia up the stairs, but the spellcaster leaps forward, stopping me with a claw around my elbow. She babbles in her old tongue again.

"*Hunshalla*," she says, over and over, pointing up the stairs.

Strangely, the word echoes in my mind. I shape my lips around it. There's something familiar about the taste. Then the old woman says something else, a stream of words in the old tongue, and I'm lost again.

"She's crazy, this one," says Nadia. "I've known it since she cast my spell." She rubs at her forehead, at the tattoo emblazoned there, her dark eyes narrowing on the spellcaster, who goes silent, watching us both.

"You're right. Let's go." But before we can go two steps, the spellcaster grips my palm. She squeezes it once. Her hand is warm and soft like animal hide. Then she turns away, moving slowly down the stairs into the courtyard.

All at once, I return to the first time that Lillian held my hand. She reached for me, of course, always braver than I. As her fingers tangled with mine, everything

stretched and settled into place like a knot on a tapestry's edge. Her palm was cold and clammy. Outside, the patter of rainfall. Beneath our desks, her thumb trailed over my knuckles. Skitters like static electricity up my arm. I shiver in the heat of the summer suns, right there on the stairs, remembering.

Lillian's touch has a different kind of magic than that which the spellcasters use. A far more powerful one.

Fear sweeps away the vision. I won't be able to go on if she's really gone. Not even to reach the sea.

"What do you think she wanted?" Nadia asks, staring after the spellcaster.

"I don't know." We're in the entrance hall now, and I don't want any extra attention. A red-robed novice priestess stands behind a desk, her head bent over a ledger. She glances up like a startled bird when we approach her. "Lillian Water?" My voice cracks. It's a stupid name that they've assigned her. Lillian should be Fire, and I Water. I cry more often than she does, and she pulls my head into her lap, combing out my hair. But we weren't given a choice when they brought us here.

"Fourth floor," says the novice. Her eyes narrow on me. "Are you family?"

"Yes," I lie. "She's my cousin. This is her sister, Nadia."

I can see she doesn't believe me, but to test me she'd have to call a full priestess down, and whoever that is will be angry at being interrupted. Bitterly, she says, "Very well, then. But I don't think you'll be glad of what you find."

A savage rage burns inside me, but I swallow it down. We hurry up the stairs, my thighs hurting when we reach the top. Down a narrow hallway pierced with noonday light

are a few open doors. The first two are offices, but the third opens into a wide room lined with beds like papers in a stack. They're cramped in here, and many of them are full.

Accidents happen a lot at the Holy Circle.

Lillian lies at the far end, close to a window, so there's that. Sunlight slants in through gray curtains the color of bathwater. My heart stutters to a halt in my chest and that horrible vomit-taste is back in my mouth, only this time it burns like acid and my eyes are leaking, too. Lillian. Anything but her.

At the foot of her bed stand two priests in white robes. The highest order. The embroidery of the Four lines their sleeves and hems: Fire, Water, Air, Earth. The whiterobes only come to the Holy Circle when something truly serious has happened. Otherwise, we orphans are mostly ignored.

Ignore not the weakest of you, for the braid is only as strong as its weakest strand.

Gospel of Water, chapter 2. I hate that I know it by heart.

The priests turn, irritation pinching up their faces, as Nadia rushes forward to her sister's side. I follow more sedately, in part because my legs feel boneless. Lillian's face is like a death mask against the flat pillow behind her head. Her proud chin and sharp nose look sunken in this still repose, as if she's lost her edges. Where her arms, usually so strong, stick out from the blankets, I can see bandages wrapped up her skin.

Not Lillian. Never Lillian.

One of the priests clears his throat. "We were not to be interrupted." His chin wobbles like a fowl.

Nadia's eyes fill with watery fear. She sits down, hard, at Lillian's side, but her sister remains unmoving. I'll have to step in, as Lillian would, if she were awake. Well,

perhaps not with so much resistance. Humility can go a long way with the whiterobes. “Forgive us.” I sketch them a quick bow. “We’ve heard nothing. We were worried.”

The fowly priest waves a hand. “She’ll be fine.”

Relief. Sweet, wet, hot relief that I swallow back down my throat along with the taste of bile. Thank the gods. This time, really, thank the gods.

“But the spell was a complex one, and we’re to make sure it holds.” Here his irritation flashes again. “It requires concentration.”

Frogshit. I know the only magic at the Holy Circle comes from the spellcasters they hire in. There might be a few rebels among the priests and priestesses, but for the most part, they hover and pretend, feigning knowledge where all they have is ignorance and fear. I’ve felt this, in the same way that I woke in the early dawn this morning and felt my soul-bound slipping away. I don’t know how it works, exactly, except that something in me senses the real magic and the fake stuff, and the real is almost never wearing the robes of a priest.

Then again, these men are dressed in white. Perhaps those at the top really do have a grasp of magic.

The second priest, a severe-nosed one like an angry crow, speaks for the first time. “You wear the soul-mark. You have been bonded?” His voice is mild. Nadia glances at him sharply, then away, but I force myself to meet his steady gaze.

“Yes,” I say.

He nods once. “As it is written.”

“As it shall be.” Blast this accursed place. I say it, Nadia says it, the first priest says it, all of us speaking the words drilled into us from the days of our earliest

rememberings. Sometimes I lie awake at night and corrupt them, shaping them wrongly on my tongue. *As it was written, so shall I make sure it is not.*

Except I couldn't. I couldn't stop them from coming to me after my twentieth birthday, subduing me with the ill-made smoke they blow from their clay pipes, taking me to the Spellhouse. I couldn't stop the spellcaster with her blue woad arms and her sad eyes from standing over me, speaking words of a tongue I didn't fully understand and couldn't quite remember. I couldn't stop the burning, the searing, the bonding, the tattoo as it carved itself into my arm.

So shall you take the lowliest of them, the loneliest, and you shall pair them together with the bonding of the souls, and so shall they no longer walk in loneliness.

Gospel of Air, Chapter 10.

This is what they do to us, you see, at the Holy Circle. They find us, they keep us, they raise us, and they bond us. Somewhere out there is a Holy Circle of men who are found, raised, bonded, and in just a few weeks I was meant to meet mine. To further the continuation of our peoples. To do my duty.

Only this morning, I felt the connection drip away.

The priests see me and my tattoo and they think I am an example of their goodness, their rightness, their prosperity. What they don't know is I will never further the continuation of their peoples. What they don't know is I listen to the novices as they whisper in the back of the prayer hall, and I hear them speak of the murmuring hills of the sea beyond our walls. I know there are boats that come to deliver our wheat and our porridge and our incense, and I plan to be on them someday.

Or I did. I'd always planned for Lillian to be with me.

But for now I speak the words I was taught when they brought me here. “As it shall be.”

Nadia turns back to Lillian, who continues in her uneasy—slumber? Unconsciousness? The latter, I think. This is not Lillian sleeping. I’ve seen Lillian asleep, with her head pillowed on her desk during a lazy afternoon lesson. Her eyelids heavy, her smile still in place, as if even in dreams she is irrepressible. She is not like that now.

I inch closer to her bed. Her right arm is wrapped in pale bandages from elbow to wrist, stained pink like sunrise. My head keeps telling me, *not Lillian*. But my eyes tell me to trust what I see.

The priests murmur together with bent heads, two birds of different statures, until at last they straighten and prepare for one parting blow.

“Do not linger long, my Sister,” says the raven-faced one, his features an ill omen. “Your head should turn to other matters now.”

I’d like to show him other matters. I’d like to show him heads turning. I’d like to stand on the bed and twist his head from his shoulders until it pops right off into my hands. But I am well trained. I bow my head as Lillian never bowed hers and I say, “Of course. Blessings of the Four upon you.”

“Blessings.” Their robes whisper across the floor as they leave.

Nadia’s face is drawn. “Gods, Ursula. Her wrist. Did you see?”

“I saw.” *Not Lillian*. But I think of the way she never flinched when the priestesses whipped our hands. I think of the way she carved *The Gospel of Hope, Chapter 1*, under her bed. She grabbed my hand when she was finished, reaching across the slight distance between our mattresses in the dark, and she told me by touch what she

had done. She ran the ball of my fingertip over the carvings, around, up and down. Each letter spelled her defiance. Our breaths made clouds in the dark.

She would not bend. I didn't see them come to take her away for her bonding. I was being dragged to mine. But I do not think she would bend.

“What will they do to her for this?” Nadia asks in a thin whisper. We know the answer. Self-destruction is a crime against the Four, a perversion of Nature. There is no Gospel where that is written, except in the Gospel of the Holy Circle. The Gospel of Hypocrisy. She will become Nameless, a spell cast upon her for silence, the spell that reaches into your brain and scrapes away language. All those beautiful words she carved will be lost to us except where they stay hidden beneath our beds. She'll be cleaning floors, or bringing firewood, any task that she can be shown to do with gestures and then beaten into performing each day.

I taste the bile in my throat again.

No. This will not happen. I will not let them steal her words.

“Nadia,” I say, low, urgent, so that the novice who just came in to tend a girl on the other side of the room does not hear. “Go downstairs as if you are leaving. Find the spellcaster who passed us on our way out. Bring her to me.”

“What?” Nadia's eyes widen. She cringes back, as if to protect herself from some disease in me that's spreading.

“Just do it. Now. Before she can leave the walls.”

Something in my voice is urgent enough for her because she does not protest again. She looks down at her sister, her strong sister, her protector, and then something firms in her jaw and I see she will do it. Or at least, she will try.

I wish she would walk more slowly, but she stops short of jogging. As her footsteps fade down the hall, the novice glances my way, perhaps wondering why I linger, but another girl moans and draws her attention away.

“Lillian.” I need to wake her up. If she could walk, I could take out the novice myself and we could escape down the stairs that the Nameless use for lugging water. Or we could wait in the basement for night. The guards are fewer then, because only those of us with our bond tattoos are allowed to wander the grounds past sundown. They think we are all excited, obedient. They are not expecting me.

Lillian’s eyes flit back and forth behind her eyelids. Otherwise, nothing.

I squeeze her cold hand. A pain shoots up my arm in answer. Sympathy pangs? Her right bandage looks darker. Bleeding again. Does it need to be changed? There’s no time. I move to pull down the sleeves of the ragged gown they’ve dressed her in.

But something pins my gaze. Something about the pattern of her bleeding. It’s not a shapeless cloud of blood staining the white linen. It’s very deliberate, familiar. A heavy-lidded eye winks up at me in lines of ruby red from the inside of her arm.

My breath stops. My pulse clatters. The walls of the room shrink like my lungs contracting.

I unwrap the bandage quickly, clumsily, bending over Lillian to block my work from the novice across the room. Feverish, feverish—what did the spellcaster say?

Hunshalla. A word I don’t remember. A word I don’t understand.

At last the bloodied bandage falls away, and there it is. My own tattoo winks up at me in bold, dark lines. Black, first; but over them, in lines carved with the precision of a

woman who plans with deadly certainty to carve the Circle out of her own blood, the red slashes. Lillian tried to carve out the tattoo, to kill the bond—and in the process, herself.

I lift my arm. My tattoo. They match. The spell was meant to find my soul-bonded, and here she is.

Lillian, who sleeps with a secret smile. Lillian, whom I have loved from the moment she cupped my head behind the woodshed and brought her lips down to mine. Or perhaps earlier, when first she smiled at me from across the dining table, and I remembered what it was to be alive.

We could not have known that we were bonded to each other. I've never heard of it happening here before. When I think of how relieved I was that my bond was broken—all the air leaves me, a squeezing-out as if the gods have taken me in their fists and shaken me.

“No,” I tell her. Her hand like ice melting in mine. My tattoo lines with hers. Two eyes, a face, a whole. One of them weeping. “Come back to me.”

I feel nothing. The same emptiness that I've been celebrating all morning brings a dryness to my mouth. How could I have felt relief? Joy, even? This is my punishment, I think. And it's far worse than what the Holy Circle could construct.

What can I do?

I weave our fingers together, the way Lillian once did beneath our desks. My thumb draws over the bumps of her knuckles, each one sharp beneath my touch. *Lillian.*
My Lillian.

I close my eyes. Perhaps the bond isn't gone, not completely. Perhaps that's what the spellcaster was trying to tell me. *Hunshalla*. All the rage and bitterness and cold, heart-hardening resentment congeals in me, and I'm full of solid, glistening desperation.

I squeeze Lillian's fingers, gentle, gentle. *Come back to me. Hunshalla*.

I don't even know what the word means. But I fill my thoughts with it.

Hunshalla. I'm here. Come back.

I dig deep into myself, looking for whatever remains of hope. *The Gospel of Hope*. That's what Lillian wrote for me. I will write it now for her.

But when I open my eyes again, nothing has changed. She's still a white ghost of Lillian, sinking into the bedsheets as if to disappear into them.

I lean forward and brush my lips against her forehead. She tastes of salt—the beads of sweat that must've broken out on her forehead as she took the knife into her hands, preparing to cut. She smells of lemon oil—that sweet citrus scent we steal from the incense burners and use to smooth our hair. My Lillian. I kiss her nose, then. And finally, her lips.

Let the novice see me. I no longer care.

As I lean back, I feel it. A rumble of warmth starts where our hands are still clasped together and rolls up my arm, to my tattoo. It burns, searing itself into me as truly as it did when first the spellcaster stood over me. I bite my lip to keep from crying out.

And then, sweet joy of joys. *Thank the gods*. Lillian opens her eyes. "Ursula?"

"Shh. My love. Lie still."

"I'm—" Pain breaks across her face. She closes her eyes. "I can still feel it. I tried, but I can still feel it."

“It’s all right.” I will the warmth of my hands into her hands. I lean down and kiss her cheek again, breathing her in. We two are alone, wrapped in golden thread so tight the world is hidden from us. Lillian’s eyes open wide again, and she looks at me with wonder. “Don’t you see?” I whisper to her. “You are mine, and I am yours. *Hunshalla*.”

For some reason, I understand the word now. It means *beloved*.

Her hand grips my hand. She does not believe. But there’s wonder in her face, and beauty, such beauty my heart will break.

“Look here.” I lift her arm with my arm. Our tattoos flash in the sunlight of her lap. “You see?”

“But . . . how?”

“I don’t know. The spellcaster, I think. She’s different from the others. I didn’t think they actually brought together soulmates. But somehow . . . she did.”

Lillian’s face is still drawn. She’s lost blood, and her skin is cold, too cold. But she pulls me closer with her wounded arm, dragging me until my forehead is against hers, her hair tickling my neck. “*Hunshalla*,” she breathes.

When Nadia returns with the spellcaster, I’ve bandaged Lillian’s arm again. The novice is nowhere to be found. I don’t know what she saw, but I think perhaps she left to get a priestess. We don’t have much time.

This time, when the spellcaster speaks, I understand her. Lillian does too.

“I can’t give you anything but what I have already given you,” she says, and I see an apology in her eyes.

“It’s not enough.” Lillian sways as she leans against me. “You didn’t even try to tell us. And what about the others? How many have you bonded?”

“My spells do not unite in vain,” says the spellcaster. “Others’ do. It is all I can tell you.”

“That’s not enough,” Lillian says again. Nadia looks between us, lines on her brow, but she does not ask questions. I wonder if perhaps she is the least surprised of us all. She’s seen us together the most, Lillian and I.

“Nevermind.” My voice is low. “We can bribe our way on the ship with something else. We’ll work if we have to. Or steal aboard.”

“The ships?” The spellcaster is surprised.

“Yes. We’re leaving.”

But Lillian shakes her head. She turns to me. “No. We can’t. What of our sisters? We can’t abandon them.”

“We must.” She can barely stand on her own. “You have to get well first. We’ll come back.”

“We’ll never come back.” Her voice is sad, angry, resigned. Her proud look is back, the one that made me love her, and it’s all I can do to keep my voice level.

“I won’t let you die a martyr,” I tell her. “Look at me.”

She does.

“We’ll take the truth of this place and spread it like seeds in a fallow field. We won’t stop until every last language carries our Gospel.” I grip her shoulders. “We’ll make them pay.”

Her eyes are flinty. She smiles at me, a hungry smile, a fierce smile. “Of course we will.”

The spellcaster gives us one last gift after all. I think perhaps she wants this, a destruction of the new, but she knows the old is gone forever. So her eyes are sad but her smile is full when she says, “May the eyes of your enemies turn away from you, until you are gone from this place.”

We’re out by the back walls when Nadia stops us with her hands on our elbows. She hesitates. She touches the tattoo on her forehead, frowns, looks away. “What did she tell you? The spellcaster?”

I’d forgotten she couldn’t yet understand. I start to explain, but I hesitate. Her fingers linger over her tattoo. The spellcaster’s words come back to me. *My spells don’t unite in vain.*

“Nothing.” Lillian takes her sister’s shoulders in her hands. “Come with us. We’ll find a way to break the spell.”

Nadia doesn’t move.

“Come.” Lillian pulls her again.

“No. Wait.” Lillian shoots me a desperate look, one I read all too easily. *Just shut up and let’s go.* But Nadia deserves to know. I turn to her. “The spellcaster said that her spells don’t unite in vain. Make of that what you will.”

Nadia narrows her eyes at me. “And you believe her?”

I hesitate. I trust very few in the Holy Circle, including those who work for them. But I felt the rightness of it in my bones. That spellcaster’s doing what she can for us, with the remains of her fading power. “Yes.” Lillian frowns.

Nadia turns to her sister. Her fingers brush her forehead again. I see the decisiveness work its way up her face: her tight jaw, her bright eyes. I wonder that I

never saw much of a resemblance between her and Lillian. It's there, in the stubbornness of her look. "Then I want to stay."

"No! Nadia . . . He's not worth the risk."

Nadia reaches forward, stopping her sister, wrapping her in a tight embrace. She closes her eyes and breathes in deep. "I'll see you again," she says. "I feel it in my heart."

Gently, I tug Lillian away. "We have to go."

Nadia gives me a grateful smile. Then she kneels down to help us over the wall.

Our first view of the outside is not like I remember it. When I arrived here, I was young and alone and the world was all in gray. But tonight it's full of color, from the dark smoke of Lillian's hair to the pale blue of the twilight sky to the green, green summer grass at our feet. And beyond it, the shimmering silver banner of the sea.

Lillian's hand finds mine. Her head leans against my head, and for a moment, we two are one swirling cloud of hair blown by the salted breeze. Her whispers carry to me, or perhaps they are my own. *And at last they were free, and they were together, and so it shall be written.*

Gospel of Hope, Chapter 2.

I'M SORRY, MY LORD, MY LOVE

Edwald

I waited a long time to sit at this table and drink this wine. From my right hand, Baron Wulfrun hands me the bottle. He knows I don't let anyone pour my drinks but me. Sleight of hand from a heavy ring is all it takes to kill a baron. The liquid is dark purple, like the jewels that glint on the end of Wulfrun's ceremonial sword. I have no idea why he wears the thing tonight. To protect his manhood, I suppose. I do not bother with such decorations, myself. My wife will be the most effective decoration of them all, and far more richly bought.

Wulfrun raises his glass. "A toast, then, Edwald. To the union of our baronies."

"To the union." We drink. The wine is from a foreign region, perhaps the better to demonstrate his wealth. It tastes of soil and rotting fungus. Of death. I do not like the stuff. No matter. We will not drink like this again. After today, *he* will make the arduous journey up the mountain to my fortress, if we dine together at all. He loves his daughter to a fault.

She enters as if she hears my thoughts. As lovely as the gossamer roses that fade in summer's last sunlight. She is reaching nineteen, and she knows it, wearing a smile that speaks of forbidden pleasures gleaned from ostlers and knights-to-be. Benevolently, I have decided to overlook this. On our wedding night, when she knows exactly what to do with her fine white hands, I will not complain of it. I would rather the tears come from only one of us, and not from my eyes.

“Father,” she says, sketching a curtsy. “My lord.” Her curtsy for me is deliberately shallower. I think she knows this piques my pride, makes my hackles rise. I school myself, sipping the rotting wine.

“Milady Lucia,” I say. Her eyes narrow, and I think by the beating of her heart in her neck that she knows. “Would you like to know what we toast to?”

“Perhaps if you pour me a glass of my own, I will learn.”

Her father looks embarrassed. The poor man ranks his finest jewel too lowly. I laugh, as she intended me to, and pull the goblet from the place set beside me. “As you wish.”

She takes the goblet from my hands with a steady grip. Then, meeting my eyes over its rim, she drinks a long draught. A draught to drown the moment.

I fear I am grinning like a hungry wolf. Her father reddens further. “Lucia,” he says, when her gulp has gone on too long.

She lowers the glass.

“To our marriage,” I tell her, belatedly, watching for the change upon her face.

But it does not change. It is still and white like the stone sepulcher I commissioned for my father in the chapel, as soon as I became baron last May. “It is bad luck to toast after a drink,” she says by way of reply.

#

To our wedding day I apply myself with the same exactness as I do the management of my lands, soon to be expanded. My letters are clear: she will wear her hair in loose falls of amber down her back. She will wear the dress I ordered for her, the

lace woven by the blind nuns to the north. She will ride ahead of me from the chapel to my castle, atop my destrier.

A note comes back from her father's lands. *I will cut my hair.*

Her petulance is that of a child. Through all her secret encounters she has not yet learned that her pricking is what encourages me. I send her a note back. *Braid it, then.* She will make it all the easier for me to wrap my hands in, giving me something to grip.

The idea teases me, but I am interrupted when my steward arrives in my office, a whey-faced man with the convenient tendency to union behind the kitchens with cleanshaven pageboys. Now that I know his secret, he is safe to trust with mine. "My lord."

"Osric." By the look on his face, something is wrong. "Tell me."

"The robber baron, my lord. He has brought you a gift."

"I wish you would stop calling him that." Baron is a word earned by the loyalty of back-bent serfs, by the poverty of hard cellars in the months when taxes are few, by the very blood within my veins. "Something worth having?"

"A fine horse, my lord. Noble. Bred from his own stables."

Not his own. Those stables once belonged to a blueblooded baron like myself. Helfric. But he was too old and weak to mind his lands, so the bastard stole them.

Osric points out toward the bailey, and I can see through the heavy melting glass at my window that a proud black horse stands in the yard. Beside him, the robber. His smudged brown face glances up at my window, studying me.

"Send him away. Keep the horse." It will make a fine piece in my collection. Perhaps I will ride it on my wedding day.

“But my lord—”

“You may give him a loaf of bread from the stores, with my best wishes.” How I would love to see the man’s face as he takes the alms usually meant for the poorest of visitors. Yet he is not worth the energy it would take to don my doublet and walk down the drafty hall.

“Very well,” says Osric, a hint of disapproval in his tone. His lips flatten, but he leaves.

#

The day of the wedding dawns gray and shadowed, the clouds pocked like the face of the moon. I do not mind. My bride will shine all the brighter for it.

Last night, I sent her a bride-gift: a ruby set into a heavy golden chain, the last of my coin spent on something to bind her to me forever. Let it rest between her breasts, I told the jeweler.

“So it may fall over her heart?” he said, a hopeful lilt to his honest smile.

“Something like that,” was my reply.

She sent me back a gift of her own: a misericorde, its point so narrow it could slip between the parting of her lips. A mercy-knife, meant to deliver the killing blow, to ease a knight’s passing from the battlefield. How I laughed and laughed over that knife.

Now I wear it belted proudly at my waist, the way her father wears his accursed sword. The ruby at her breast catches the dim light as she walks toward me in the chapel. It is like I have already slid the dagger into the fine pulse at her throat, already spilt her lifeblood. Yet still she is proud. Her chin carves her path down the nave. I notice she has

not cut her hair, as she promised. Its fat braid hangs down below her waist like a snake in the tree of Heaven.

The ceremony is brief, almost too much so. She whispers her vows without a hint of disdain or remorse, in the quiet voice of a girl mouthing prayers beside her bed at night, and I have a horrible sinking fear that I have already broken her. But then, as we approach my fine new horse, its mane wrapped in ribbons to celebrate the occasion, she does not wait to be lifted up. She leaps upon his back as if she has practiced this, many times. I imagine her in her father's bailey, late at night, sweat forming on her brow and between her quivering thighs as she leaps, falls, tries again. All for this moment.

She reaches his back without strain, and when she glances down at me to gauge my reaction, I give her a wolfish grin. She already knows I am hungry.

As I take up my place behind her, I raise a hand to signal my guard that we shall depart. But, to my surprise, she reaches out and stops me. The soft leather of her glove brushes against my hand. Beneath that glove, fingers that have never known toil. I stop.

"Can't the two of us go together?" she asks, only for me to hear. A low voice, a hesitant one. Perhaps she is a shy maiden after all.

Perhaps I delight in the unexpected discovery.

I glance back at my guards, shifting on their regal horses. True, it's not a very intimate plan, to ride up to our castle with my men pressed at our sides. "Very well." It's the work of a moment for one guard to tie his lamp to the front of my horse's bridle, and then we are but a glowing shadow as we ease off into the twilight.

The journey up to my estate is a steep and treacherous one. This is part of the appeal. Lucia sits so proudly and stiffly before me that she does not brush against my

chest, the insides of my legs, the prick of the knife-hilt she herself has given me. But I notice she looped her rope of hair around the ties of the saddle beneath us. Just in case she should fall.

We round a bend and start the twisting track up the mountain. Far, far above us, my fortress waits like a hawk on the arm of a falconer. Between, a forest of dark teeth. We enter the Blackwald's maw and Lucia tenses before me, a doe scenting danger on the wind. The wet smell of minerals and evergreen tang blankets us. All is silent, smothered, the quiet of a dreamless sleep.

"Don't worry, my darling. The wolves only come out at night."

"I'm not afraid," she says, sending delicious shivers over my spine.

"Are you sure?" I should not give in to temptation, but at the sight of her short, tight breaths, I cannot resist. I lift my hands from the reins to pull her closer to me. They span the width of her waist. She's tense like a bowstring beneath my grasp.

The horse's delicate steps carry us higher and higher. His gait jostles Lucia closer to me. Her braid shines in the dark.

When it comes, the sound startles even me. A crack like thunder splits the quiet: a branch tearing from its tree. The horse, lulled by the hush of the forest, is unprepared for the breaking bones of battle. I, with my hands on Lucia's waist, am thrown backward off the horse when he springs.

She is insubstantial enough. I will pull her down with me. But in the slow speed at which I'm falling, I see her braid tauten where it's tied on the saddle. It holds her fast. Or perhaps—is she urging herself forward? Gripping it, to tug herself in place? My hands

slip from the ermine and lace of her wedding gown. Down, down, down. The ground rises to meet me.

Pain. Shattering blunt pain like the snap of a chicken bone. It's a wash of red around me, like anger when it rises from my blood. Jagged trees gape over me, behind them, a pale thorny sky. Cold. The seeping wet of the wine cellars. The taste of rust in my mouth. My tongue is too large.

Hoofsteps. Footfalls. Lucia leans over me. Her ruby swings forward from her breast, as does her braid, that traitorous rope that held her safely apart from me. Her hands fall to my waist.

There's a strange, tight gasp wrenching the air.

My head. My head aches enough to numb me. When Lucia straightens, she holds the misericorde. Mercy-knife. I'm taken back to all the times blood rushed over my knuckles on the battlefield, the hot sweet strike, and suddenly I understand the way she smiles. Bloodlust. Yet I find that I want it. I want the numbness and the dark hush. Something is leaking onto the path behind me. Slowly, slowly, tearing me from within.

The shadow of a man creeps closer over her shoulder. I never thought I'd see Death himself.

"I'm sorry, my lord, my love," she says, and oh, those sweet words, how they taste on my lips.

Then the knife is at my throat.

#

Danor

I first saw Lucia when her father was forced to treat with me in exchange for the free movement of goods to his lands. The poor man squirmed at the head of his table, and I admit, I enjoyed it not a little. I was becoming used to the pleasure of challenging these fine men, with their full goblets and their red cheeks and their bellies gone to fat. Yes, I told him with my dark eyes: I'm what you call Untouchable. Yes, I told him with the well-used scabbard at my belt: I have drawn blood bluer than yours. Yes, I told him, as my men filled his hall: I've taken the land I own. And I can take yours.

In the end, he agreed to give me one tenth of the value of his goods in order to transport them across my land. This I could take in coin or in material. Our larders will be well-stocked with fine wines for the winter. Useless, in actuality. But I decided I would take a bottle each time, just for the enjoyment of removing it from him.

It was as I left the castle that I noticed her, a pale flower growing from cracks in the dark stone. She stood on the battlements, the wind catching her hair and twining it around greedy fingers. I saw in her upright form something like loneliness, and the expression on her face reminded me of the fox as it catches my eye. Intelligent, sharp, and wary of being hunted.

"Milord." One of my men spoke in our language, so the servants of the castle could not understand.

"What is her name?" I asked him.

"The Lady Lucia. Wulfrun's daughter."

High above, she turned away.

"Find out the woman who tends to her."

And that is how, a fortnight later, I hold a message from Lucia in my hands.

Meet me at the chapel.

#

There is something of irony in the place she has designated for our meeting. It is the first time I have stepped into a chapel since I was a boy. I remember that other time, the warm flecks of spittle drying on my cheeks as I was chased out. The way the breeze licked me as I raced back to the wagons. Today is not like that at all. Today, excitement heats my veins like mulled cider, and the smell of incense catches in my throat. Today, I feel a heady boyishness that I thought long dead.

She kneels on a cushion near the altar, her wimple white as snow down her back. Her hands are clasped around a jeweled rosary, her fingers so pale they might have been drained of blood, or fashioned from ivory bone.

Two men came with me—insisting, of course, and half-worried I might actually tie myself to this outsider. Or that her father might find out and send his men to us. No matter. We can leave again, as we always have, as we always planned to do after mining the riches of this valley.

A cord stirs in my heart. Perhaps she would come with us.

If my men heard this thought, they'd think me mad. But they merely exchange curious glances as they station themselves at the entrance of the church. When my booted heel clips the stones, Lucia turns. Her eyes are the topaz stones that come from the east.

She nods her head, very slightly, indicating that I should kneel on the cushion beside her. As I lower myself, I smell the scented oil she must have bathed in, the fresh flowery scent of powder, and beneath it, the salt of her body. "You came," she says.

“I surprise myself.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I am not oft seen in churches.”

She looks so serious. “But you are not here to pray.”

“Am I not?” I think of her murmuring lips. Her steady gaze, her narrow, straight shoulders. My mother once told me that our people were but stars scattered in God’s sight. I think perhaps today I have a desire to pray more fervently than ever I had before.

Lucia turns away, glancing up at the wooden, painted statue of the chapel’s saint: a martyred woman whose name I know not. Blood weeps from the arrow protruding from her chest, yet her smile is benevolent, at peace, as if this arrow is the one for which she has been praying, and God has answered. “I’ve been promised in marriage.”

It’s like the breathless punch of a bully to my gut. “What? When?”

“Last night. I’m to wed Lord Edwald, the baron whose lands abut my father’s to the west.”

I know the man. His father’s body rots beneath its sepulcher at our backs. So this is his first choice as a new baron? To purchase himself a supple bride? Anger heats my skin, pricking along my spine like a tomcat with sharpened claws. First imprisoned by her father, now by her husband-to-be. I know he will not be kind to her. He is exactly the breed of man who has not been kind to me. He is the reason I came here—to taunt them, to flaunt my stolen wealth before them all. “What will you do?”

Her chin lifts. Her eyes flash. “He will never own me.”

My body shudders at the imagining. He’s drunk on his power, lofty in his fortress of might. He will not go gently with her. He will not kiss the sweet beating pulse beneath

her ear, nor slide his hand slowly, slowly, up those pale feather-downed legs. My own palm curls in on itself. I would show her pleasure, if I could. I would give it to her willingly.

She startles me by reaching over and winding her rosary around my clenched fist. “Do not worry,” she says, that crafty fox’s look stealing into her eyes. “I have a favor I would ask of you.”

A woman like her has never asked me for anything. What I have now, I have taken, deserting my winding paths for a pile of stones on an empty hill. So to see that look in her eyes, to hear her beseeching, is sweet like wine from the last grapes of the harvest. Unlooked-for sweetness, all the sweeter for the finding of it.

“You need only ask,” I say.

#

The horse was my most beautiful and my most headstrong. I knew it would lure him from the start, as Lucia herself had done. Like other men of his ilk, he could not resist the allure of a conquest.

I took the bread his steward, Osric, gave me. At the same time, I passed Lucia’s note. The loaf was well made, wheat flour ground to finest powder. I ate it all the way back down the mountain, remembering how that horse spooked at the slightest sound.

Lucia straightens from Edwald’s lifeless body now, the thin knife in her hand dripping with his lifeblood. *Pat pat pat* it falls on the wet rug of leaves at her feet. In one smooth motion, she lifts the knife and shears off the thick braid that tied her to his horse,

protecting her. It slithers to the ground like a snake from her shoulder, and the ruby he gave her follows after.

“Keep it.” I bend down to retrieve the necklace. Garnet blood has already sullied its gold chain, so I wipe it on my hose. The wetness feels cold and sticky. “No brigand would leave this behind.”

She allows me to tuck it in my pocket, though she scowls in distaste. “You moved at the perfect moment,” she says. “His hands were on me.”

At my feet, he is twisted and malformed in death. A manifestation of his soul. How my mother would laugh to hear me thinking such. As if love has made me a pious man. “Quickly,” I tell Lucia. “We must away.” We’re well hidden here, halfway up the crooked mountain path and cloaked in forest shadows, but his guard could arrive at any moment. We can’t be found here, for our story to work.

But before we move, she draws up her skirts enough to expose the boots of supple leather that she wears beneath her dress. They tighten across shapely calves as she bends and slides the knife into a hidden sheath inside the right boot. Only the tip of the handle peeks out. There’s a matching tip in the boot on her left. Then she drops the skirts, and she is once again invisible.

When we reach the edge of the forest, Wulfrun’s castle lies immediately ahead. It looks smaller now, an octogenarian hunched with age. “Are you ready?” I ask.

She roughs up the hair that now falls to her chin. I can see flecks of blood at its tips from where the wet knife sheered them. She stands a fraction taller, curling her skirts in her fist. “Yes.”

She takes my proffered elbow in a tight grip and leans on me as we emerge from the trees. Up ahead, men at the fortress walls straighten like arrows, their faces turning blank with shock. They were expecting their lord and master and have found instead a changeling with his bride.

“Milady!” One of them shouts from the parapets, signaling down to the men at the gates. Of these, a young and pimply lad with a swathe of wheaten hair runs toward us.

“They killed him,” says Lucia, swaying a little to great dramatic effect. “He’s . . . he’s dead . . .”

“Milady, what happened?” The pimply one gives me an eyeful, clutching the halberd at his side as if to use it, though it weighs the same as he.

“We were set upon by bandits in the forest,” she says. “E-Edwald and I. Robbers . . . wearing colors from the east . . . they attacked . . .” Her hand goes to her throat, where the ruby would have been, a bride-gift so beautiful that everyone in the town had been speaking of it.

The pimply-faced one parts his lips, but Lucia overrules him, more in her bearing than with her breathless words.

“And this baron—he rescued me—please can you go after him, my husband, his body lies in the woods . . .”

She swoons as if losing consciousness. The guard jumps to attention, but I catch her first. I can tell he still distrusts me, so I’m careful when I hand her over to him. “You should get someone. A steward, perhaps. He will have questions. I’m prepared to answer them.”

He seems surprised by this honesty. After that, everything is as Lucia predicted it would be.

The attendant who gave me the bread, Osric, meets us at the gates, a ghostly smile passing his face when he sees Lucia. He sends up a cry for a party of men to retrieve their master and any of the brigands they can catch. Eventually, the village is roused, also, and I promise a company of my men for the search while Osric brings me bread, salt, and wine. The questions never come. I wait by the fire for Lucia to revive herself. We send a note to her father.

By the time he arrives, all is said and done. The brigands have been chased off, as reported by my most trustworthy men and corroborated (so as not to be outshined by the Untouchables) by one or two villagers. Yet the rumor has also spread that I have been the saving of her. I, and I alone.

Her reputation would be gone like frost in the spring if she were found alone with me in any other capacity, and her father knows it. Therefore he is obliging, kind, even, after a fashion. He offers me a better deal on the trade route. A tax that stands to earn far more than his daughter's worth. For while he seems to love her, he so clearly does not know her value.

"I would propose a much more favorable solution to all parties," I tell him smoothly.

And before the moon can wane again, Lucia and I are wed.

#

Lucia

Danor thinks that he saw me before I saw him. He tells me the story now as we walk from the chapel, arm in arm. My husband.

But he is wrong. I saw the way he stood tall in the bailey, towering over my father's men, both pride and scorn in his expression. I saw the bitterness in his defiant gaze. I both saw and felt it alight on me, and soften, like a pat of butter melting slowly in the kitchen heat.

Yet I smile when it is required of me. I laugh between his sentences, filling the pauses with the welcome amusement that I know he longs to give. And his arm through my arm tightens, pulling me close to him. His body is warm in the autumn chill.

This time, as we walk from the chapel, a group of Danor's men surrounds us. There will be no bandits, no blood on this particular wedding walk. The knives coil in my boots all the same. I am not one to take chances.

I remember how it felt to puncture Edwald's skin, the soft velvet at his throat, the most vulnerable part of him. I remember the hot gush of blood, like dipping my hand in wax, the way it molded to me. How easily his life flowed from him. It is not a pleasant thought, but I won't pretend I regret it. Better that than a life in servitude, both in body and in mind.

Danor notices my silence. "Do not worry," he says. "It is done."

It is done. I am protected. "Thank you."

He smiles. He is handsome, though he carries a kind of determined sadness in his heart, and it comes out through his eyes sometimes. A nun peering from behind her veil. I know he has lived a rough life before he took his castle. His sword, unlike my father's, looks worn.

We have decided to spend our first night in our newest property: Edwald's castle. When Edwald died after our legal union, the castle passed to me. Now, by the law of our nation, it belongs to my husband, as all women's property does. I find a private amusement in the knowledge that we'll be sleeping in Edwald's bed, though Danor looked apologetic when he first made the proposal. "It's nicer than mine," he said, taking my hand as if to soothe me. I clutched him back so I would not laugh.

A feast has been laid on Edwald's table, his best wine poured. It is golden and sweet, made from his own vineyards, and tonight I find it tastes particularly delicious. Like honeyed apricots sun-warmed from the branch. The kind I used to glean on my girlish wanderings.

When we are finished, the sun sinks below the horizon, and Danor leans close. I can smell the hint of horseflesh and leather on him, despite his fresh-washed hair. "Shall we to bed, my love?"

We shall.

Our chamber heats with a roaring fire. Edwald's bed, my twice-marriage bed, awaits us. Danor blushes fiercely at the sight of it, and I feel a stirring in my stomach. A fierce desire to laugh again. I have had too much wine.

Then Danor is undressing me, his movements careful and slow, and I am savoring this. Flesh on flesh, the taste of salt and wine on his lips, the caress of tenderness in his eyes. He is gentle, his callouses catching on my skin. Sometimes I wish he would go faster, but I suppose the art is in the lingering. When he is finished, I look up at the ceiling and wonder if perhaps there is something to stay my hand.

He sleeps in the chamber with me, his hand loosely curled around my stomach.

My mother taught me a riddle when I was a young girl. *What is a battle that, if properly fought, sheds blood only thrice, though you fight for a lifetime?*

I did not know. This was in the early days, when she often spun wool at her window and she still looked me in the eye.

Marriage, she said. Her voice was not sad. It reminded me of the bitter taste of grapes gone sour.

But why do you bleed thrice, Mama?

Once on your wedding night and twice for his two sons.

But what if I don't want any sons?

Then you bleed more, she said. She held the drop spindle between her knees to wind more wool to it, her fingers moving deftly despite the knobby joints that pained her. *Then the battle becomes much bloodier, and it is one you cannot win.*

I remember her now, as I lie awake with the slow rhythm of my husband's breath on my neck, and the slow pounding of his heart in his flesh.

Over the next fortnight, I grow bolder with him, and the evenings become a map of my making. *Here There Be Dragons*, say the pale-white margins, as I push him ever faster, toward a new discovery. This is one territory my mother never sought to conquer, much less enjoy. Danor is a tentative explorer. But in the end, I think we are both satisfied.

My lands now stretch across the valley, from north to south. When my father dies, I—well, Danor—will own everything, from mountain's peak to river's bottom. Yet I do not think my husband wishes to linger here. I see him wandering the fields at night, looking up at the stars as if to catch them, falling, on his tongue. He told me that one day

he plans to return to life on the road, to the paths that call to him. He tells me we will have a wedding after the fashion of his people, welcoming me to the fold.

I wish he would leave on his own. It would make things so much easier.

Osric is kind and patient with me. I did not expect gratitude when I bought his loyalty, but then, I should have known Edwald was not the most benevolent of masters. I see the steward dirtying his hands sometimes in the witch's garden, the poison garden, and he doesn't question me when I ask him about what he grows there. He shows me where he keeps his stores.

After the first moon-change of my wedding, I sit with Danor in the last reaches of the night and drink the honey mead I brewed for us. My husband does not know this, but it is from a recipe that my mother passed down to me. Honey and water, left to brew in the bread-house, so that the wild yeast in the air might linger in it. Before the fermentation began, I did as my mother bade me: I pierced between the knuckles of my right hand with the thin knife, and I dropped some of my blood into the honey mead. Three drops. One for health, one for patience, and one for strength, she said.

Then, I went beyond the recipe. I dropped in a fourth bead of ruby-blackness. *One for luck.*

Unlike Edwald, Danor doesn't mind when I pour for him. I fill his mug full.

"This is delicious," he says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I'm glad."

"You made it yourself?"

I nod. "A family tradition."

He stares into it. I think he drank his portion too quickly, for his eyes are glazed and sad. “Tell me, Lucia. Do you ever think of him?”

“Who?”

“Edwald, of course.”

“Do you think of the first man you killed?”

He is surprised, but then he nods. “Yes. Nightly.”

I find this strange, to be honest. I do not think of Edwald, except sometimes to wonder if perhaps he would have broken me after all. This is when I’m feeling most cynical, or most bored.

But Danor continues. His eyes look over my shoulder, into the fire. “It was shortly after I left the wagons. I wanted to make a life for myself, something off the path of the road. So I became a mercenary. It was the easiest job for a strong man with a sword, back then.

“Our first task was to disband a group of ruffians who had been making trouble for a cluster of villagers. They lived high in the hills, in caverns, where they stored the bounty that they stole. We were promised a portion of whatever we recovered.

“Five of us went in. We found twenty of them, all sleeping. So my companions began to roam the cavern, covering a mouth and slashing a throat at every step. The stone became slick with blood. After a while, they noticed that I wasn’t moving. ‘Go,’ they said. ‘Do your part, or you’ll receive no pay.’

“So I went to the corner and pulled my knife, kneeling beside my prey. He was a lad, no older than fifteen, with a bob in his throat so sharp it might break the knife that

drew across it.” Here Danor snorts and shakes his head, pouring himself more mead. “I can still see his face.”

“And did you kill him?”

He nods. “I covered his mouth to muffle any sound he might make. But I did not strike. I waited, feeling his hot breath on my fingers, watching the rise and fall of his chest. My knife grew slick in my sweat-soaked palm. And then he went very still, and his eyes opened, and I felt him hold his breath. And that was when I drew the knife across his throat. When I could look him in his eyes.”

Danor downs the mead. My heart beats rapidly in my chest. What is the point of honor, I wonder, when it kills all the same? Men worry so much over that. But it is just another excuse to take what they want.

And why should I be any different?

That night, we visit the places on the map we’ve not yet dared to go. We tangle like the dragons I’ve dreamt of. Danor bites into my shoulder at the end, drawing blood. And afterward, while he sleeps, I remember Edwald. The brush of his brains on the forest floor. I told him what he wanted to hear, in the end. And what sweeter way is there to die than that?

Danor’s breath in sleep is hardly louder than the popping of the fire. From the moment my mother warned me of life’s battle, I made my plan, and indeed, it is bloody—but I am not afraid of a little blood.

The small glass bottle, full of clear liquid, is cold in my fingers. Two paths unwind before me on my map, newly drawn. In the first, the last of the mead waits to be drunk. Danor will be thinking of it all day, counting the minutes until the moon sets.

Waiting for me to pour, to let the sweetness prick passion in our blood. He'll be so honey-drunk, he won't even notice that I drink none. When he wakes, cold to the touch, Osric will lie for me, knowing well I've packed him a sack full of gold and freedom.

But there is another path. It is windier, and slower to walk. In its turns: the flash of a grin over a simple dinner. The low hushed tones of a language I don't need to speak to understand. Feet that grow more and more restless, even as the snows lock us in. And spring. The siren song of the wider world, which my husband will not be able to resist.

All I have to do is wait.

Danor comes to my rooms as twilight falls. Even the hush of shadows cannot hide his excitement, the heat in his eyes. He holds up the last of the mead, and two mugs. I let him pour. It is time, I think, to compose a new riddle. *What virtues does a woman need to win the battle of life?*

Courage. Danor breathes a prayer into the skin of my neck. Strength. The moon sinks, a pearl falling through water. Luck. Taste of amber from his lips. And wisdom. Wisdom most of all.

SEVEN BEACONS BURNING

I used to wake up to a smack on my lintel and a harsh shout: “Up!” My hands were raw by thirteen, worn red by the lye in the washroom’s soap. Some days I’d be so weary from turning the fat, heavy laundry with my paddle that I’d dream up shapes in the steam. Great birds, like the yenhawks that live at the mountain’s peak. Big enough to carry me away.

Now, nearly a year after being chosen for the beacon-keeping, I wake up to the far off, haunting cries of the yenhawks as they hunt. The first thing I see when I look out my window—made of glass, if you can believe—is the veil of snow that always covers our shy maiden mountain’s head. And when I prepare morning meal, for myself and my father, it’s from our pre-stocked supply of grain and salted meat that will take years yet to run down. We eat four times a day.

On this particular morning, the sky is wrapped in clouds like torn silk. My father hums a chant as he dishes out what is mornmeal for me, evemeal for him. Ever since we came up here to keep the beacon, he’s gained weight. His gaunt cheeks are rounded now.

“What’s on your mind, Pet?” His favorite question.

“Nothing.”

“We promised.”

“All right. I was thinking how much I like it up here.”

He smiles, spooning hot porridge into his mouth. It’s heaped with honeycomb and jellied limocots and spices. “You don’t miss anything?”

I think for a while. I don't want to break our rule. We decided it when we came up here, only the two of us, left alone on a mountaintop apart from the world. We swore we would not lie. "I miss the purple flowers," I tell him. "The ones they used to throw on holy days."

"My Lady's Eyes."

"Exactly those." They were small, no larger than the nail on my littlest finger. Many blooms per stem. They smelled sharp and sweet, like a spoonful of sugar mixed in cider. We'd toss them in the streets, and at the end of the day, when you curled up in your hard bed and smiled for the celebrating, the bottoms of your feet were stained like blood.

"That's it? That's all?" He has a wistful look in his wrinkle-wrapped eyes. I suspect he's missing a past that no longer lives at the bottom of the mountain—a past that's buried there instead.

"That's all." I know he doesn't believe me. He can't fathom a world without affection, without the close press of one heart to another. At least, he couldn't, until my mother died. And then Cadie. Two blows in one. But it's not worth explaining to him that I enjoy being alone, now.

My favorite legend, as a child, was from the sixteenth beacon-keeper, who claimed that after his year on the mountaintop, he could speak to ghosts. We don't speak to them yet, but sometimes when the wind comes from the west and I close my eyes, I hear singing on the calls of the yenhawks.

But Father and I rarely speak of this, despite everything we've been through. And it's better to imagine purple flowers, street festivals, than to imagine we will have to light the beacon.

He ushers me out the door when our meal is over. "I'll clean up."

I let him. This is yet another duty we share. When I eat my evemeal—his mornmeal—I will stay behind in the cabin while he goes out to the cliff's edge and watches. Two eyes, always on the next beacon over. Looking for fire.

Despite the scattered clouds today, I have a clear view to our neighboring mountain, The Jubilee. Its war beacon waits like a toad, unlit. I remember when a man and wife were drawn for it and they made their choice to leave. She had to drink the blue oil first, the one that burns out your womb so as to make you barren. Beacon-keepers are not allowed a third, or a fourth, or a fifth, up on the mountain, though we have food enough to fill their bellies. No, our sacred duty is only for four eyes to share. If we fail in our duty, according to the monks, our souls are cursed to haunt the mountain forever.

Today, The Jubilee Beacon is black as it has been on all other days.

Today, I bring a set of pencils and a sheaf of parchment. The Oran gave them to me as a special gift when I accepted this sacred duty. We were each allowed one request, I and my father. My father requested the pink salt that is reserved only for Orans and their wives. Now we put it on everything, even this morning's porridge.

The landscape I sketch is the same as ever: a wide swathe of silver granite, untouched by trees; pearlescent snow-caps like winking eyes; and The Jubilee, an ever-present scar. I'm not supposed to take my eyes from it, not according to the vow I made. Not while I'm sitting here. But I bend the rule, glancing down at my parchment from time to time.

Father will complain, but he'll put this finished picture on the wall with all the rest of them.

The sun stretches across the sky. My gloved hands and wide-brimmed hat protect me. I have cold tea, salt pork, fresh-baked fruit bread, and a pot of honey to fill my belly at noonmeal. For quartermeal, bread and the aged cheese they stocked for us before we came. They always restock with plenty of food, up on the mountain, when a beacon-keeper changes over. It's enough to make my mouth water as I draw. This luxury will never cure the memory of hunger.

Then, a strange shift: the wind rises. My hat blows backward, choking me as its ribbon catches around my neck. The sun blinds me, but beneath the sound of the wind, I hear it, just for an instant: a song.

No.

The dull beat of drums.

I hold my breath.

The wind dies again. It is but my heart, pounding as if to leap from my chest. There are no ghosts. Nor are there drums below, no Oran preparing for war. On some days it's possible to forget there is even civilization.

The first beacon-keeper set down a legend on paper, the legend of the great battle of Simar-Kan, during which the heaviest casualties fell on the five villages where the Simar river meets the Kan. That battle inspired the beacons. Let no Oran forget those who truly suffer when he marches to war.

I return my attention to my drawing, to *The Jubilee*. The art is spoiled. I jumped when my hat blew off, scarring the sheet with a thick line of red. I fold the paper up and rip it into little pieces, letting the low breeze carry it away. Perhaps some other beacon

keeper will find it. Or perhaps it will fly to a distant corner of this world, exploring where I cannot go.

#

I sleep soundly up here on the mountain, most nights. But tonight is different. Outside, the moon reaches its fullest point, pregnant like a held breath. From the cliff's edge, my father's shadow falls long and lean toward the cabin, leaner than he is in life. I should be sleeping—twelve hours is a long time to sit and watch *The Jubilee*—but instead, I hear the war drums again.

My feet are cold on the cabin floor. I go to the back door, the one to our outhouse, but I don't make the snowy journey to that lone building. With my eyes closed, I stand beneath the eaves of the cabin instead, on the lip of earth that remains untouched by snow, and I breathe it in: the fresh, clean air. Peppery and pine-brushed.

Like fingers, it stirs against my cheek.

I open my eyes to find a yenhawk not six feet from me. It landed so softly, I felt rather than heard its coming. Its long, graceful neck bends backwards like a knot as it preens its feathers. The moon is bright enough that I can see the bird's splendor: red like wine, like garnets, like a drop of blood. Yet there is a touch of purple, the color of the Oran's robes. Just three feathers, on its right wing. I watch as its short, curved beak plucks them.

The creature breathes, chest heaving, and the power behind its grace becomes clear. It stands several feet above me, and if it were to stretch out its wings, I could lay on its back crosswise and my feet would barely touch the jointures where the wingfeathers begin.

From Hearthshame, at the foot of my mountain, they look so small. So lonely. Flecks of spilled soup against a mournful, clouded sky. This one has claws the length and breadth of my legs, and sharp enough they score the stone it stands on. It's not so small and beautiful anymore. I am reminded that this creature could unfold me like a paper dragon onto the snow.

I move backward, slowly, slowly, to press myself back against the cabin wall. I've made no sound, but the yenhawk jerks up suddenly, its breath clouding in the cold, clear night. If I knew fear before, I forget fear in that moment and discover terror. Before I can say a word, it turns to me, its beak partly open and one leg raised. I'll be nothing but a stain of blood on the snow. I hear the drums again.

But the bird's eyes are yellow, yellow like the moon above, and knowing in a way that not even my father's feel knowing. Keen enough to see through to my soul. I meet that dagger slice of a gaze and I think, for the first time, *maybe you don't hear the ghosts. Maybe you see them.*

Then the yenhawk blows me back against the door as it takes to the sky.

I go back inside to seek warmth beneath my heaps of covers, but I do not sleep for a long time. Instead I see in my mind's eye Cadie before she got sick, the way she'd crouch with her bony knees sticking up and steal goldapples from underneath the vendor's table. With my first wages from the laundry, I bought her one, proper and legal-like, as an inside joke. But by then she was so sick, so concave, she didn't even want to eat it.

My father and I came up here knowing we could die in service to the Oran, to the beacon-keeping. Back then, almost a year ago now, I thought a choice between peace and

death was a perfectly acceptable one: peace I never expected to feel again, and death I'd planned to welcome. If there exists a place where your own heart dwells in eternity, who wouldn't want to get there sooner?

But now I think of the bright yellow eyes of the yenhawk, the power in its wings. The bright blush of sunlight on our mountain's cheek. Cadie's smile, which lives only in my memory of her. These are gifts not lightly thrown aside. These are treasures, I think, a beacon-keeper might wish to keep from burning.

#

Beacon watching after a night of low sleep is agony.

I play games with myself to stay awake. Find seven green things. The ribbons around my wrists, pinning close my sleeves, don't count. After that, list the Orans and their wives in order, starting with Exchen the Wary. Tell yourself the legend of the fourth beacon-keeper, the one who burned for seven days.

The hours grow long.

After quartermeal, I hear a clear, high call overhead. More yenhawks—three, this time. They circle like a red halo, high above our cabin. I wait for one of them to dive, but they never do. Not hunting, then. I wonder which ritual I'm seeing instead.

I wish that I could draw them.

But I've already looked away from The Jubilee for too long. Across the mountains, I see the beacon platform, blank and black and staring back.

I think of that young beacon-keeping couple. Perhaps not so young anymore, not in their minds. But not old either.

Surely I imagined the drums. The product of an overactive mind—nothing more. It's easy to imagine things, up here on the mountain. It's easy to get carried away.

#

I sleep soundly that night. Things continue as they had before, our meals keeping track of the turning moon. My father gets even fatter, and he holds the little pudgy in his stomach and jiggles it before we eat our shared meal. He smiles, like he hasn't in a long time. He puts up my drawings.

I should tell him about the drums, but I can't bring myself to do it. We both had a choice, when we were drawn from the lottery to come up here. We could have said no. We knew the risks.

But a year of full bellies, dining on the sweet stock they put in place for beacon-keepers—that we couldn't deny. A year of eating like that could sustain a person through a decade of going hungry. Besides, like I said—peace and death were appealing outcomes, then.

The worries that you bring to the mountain are the ones you pack in your bags below. That's what the monk told me as we set out on the backs of surefooted asses. He's right. We have more food than we could ever eat. We have the cry of the yenhawks as the stars come out. In the coldest months, we had snow to batter us and erase all but the dark implication of The Jubilee. I'll never forget those storms. And we have so much joy.

Joy we did not expect. Not after.

Over our shared meal, my father sighs, scooping honeycomb out of a jar with his fingertips. Who's to call him out for manners? Certainly not me.

“My Pet,” he says, almost absently, “do you know it has been eleven months and three days since we came up here?”

I did not know.

“And tomorrow is the Feast of the Thrice-Lucky.”

A good day for hot, sweet dough and high-pitched chants, the kind that children sing. I remember it well. We used to have a half-day off from the laundries. We’d buy the fried dough for a penny and eat it so fast our tongues burned for days afterward.

But that’s not what my father is remembering.

“The Feast of the Thrice-Lucky. We’ve only two weeks, Pet. Two weeks more.”

Another Drawing is coming. Half a moon, winking down at me, and then I’ll say my goodbyes.

As I go out to start my watch, one of the yenhawks separates from the others, circling low. Low enough for me to spot the flash of purple in its feathers. I find myself entranced, watching far longer than I should, but a quick look back to the Jubilee shows me darkness. No drums. No Oran marching. Thank the spirits.

Two weeks more with these creatures. Two weeks more to listen for ghosts, perhaps to join them. It will go by too quickly, I think, like foam disappearing on water.

#

The next night, I’m awakened before my time by the drums.

They are not my heart.

I know what they are by the sound of my father, bursting into the cabin. He has abandoned his post watching The Jubilee, a crime punishable by execution, and by haunting, if the monks are right. Yet he doesn’t even look afraid.

No, he looks stunned. Drawn, beneath the brown kiss of the mountain. “Do you hear that?” he asks.

For the first time, I actually consider lying to him. *Hear what? Father, it's only the sound of ghosts.* What would we do? Where would we go? We could never go home. But we can never go back there anyway, not truly. Home is a memory now, of goldapples and bony knees and smiles.

So I say, “Yes, Father. I hear them.” The drums of the Oran marching to war.

He looks around the cabin as if he's never seen it, as if it has not been home for eleven months and one week. We both knew the risks when we made this choice. And yet, as with all the risks we take in this life, we thought we would be spared.

Father goes out again, as if to remind himself of the sound drums make. *Bah-dum. Bah-dum-bum.* I put on boots, but I stop before pulling on my warm furs. It's not as if I'll need them.

Outside, moonlight spills across the receding snow. The warmest month. A good time for this, I think. The middle of a blizzard would make things hard.

Father is down at our usual watching-point, his face turned toward The Jubilee. And when I reach his side, the breeze brings the drums louder, as if to emphasize the stark reality of the moment. War. War is come.

And war means the lighting of the beacons.

Against the pitch darkness of the lonely night, a blaze of gold. The Jubilee erupts, spiraling upward with a reach to brush the heavens. I think I hear music, chanting, the prayer of the monks for the Oran and his fatal decision on this day. For to go to war is to light the beacons, and those should not be lit without pause.

I feel the same brush of air against my cheek as I felt when the yenhawk came, and then I sense them: a kind of presence. The ghosts are here to watch the lighting of the beacon. The ghosts of Simar-Kan, those innocents families caught in the middle of war. It is for them that we keep these posts, so the Oran remembers whom he kills when he goes away to battle.

But there are other ghosts, too. I feel them. Mother, gone before her time. Cadie, following after because we could not feed her enough to keep her strong.

How easily it could have been my father or myself instead. How much we wished, at one time, that it had been.

I watch The Jubilee burning, and I fancy I can feel the fire against my cheeks. This is a lie, of course. I feel only the neck-nibble of my mountain's breeze, the pricking goosebumps of the ghosts. But I think that couple would want us to remember them burning hot, like the core of a star.

The Jubilee reflects twice in my father's eyes. "Impossible."

"No, Father. It's time."

He turns to me, his face looking as thin and drawn as it had when we came up here. "This cannot be."

"Our time is now. We must fulfill our oaths." I am able to keep my voice level, but I hardly know how. I feel weary, though I try not to show it. My father was always sensitive to my weariness.

When he still doesn't move, I take his hand—like stone—and draw him along behind me to the platform of our beacon. The Watchtower. That's what we are. The last

beacon of war of our nation, letting all our enemies know that our Oran marches upon them.

I stop when we reach the center of the platform. “You know what we must do.”

There’s a jar of oil and a box of matches waiting in a ceramic box on the platform. We have kept it always clean, always reachable, always swept of snow. We’ll alight in a moment, but we’ll burn for a while. The Jubilee remains a golden comet, falling in reverse.

“No,” says my father. “No, love. Not like this.”

Isn’t it a bit like a song? If we all must die, why not die as legends? But I can’t bring myself to argue for this. All our months spent up here, waiting for peace or death, and all the while I was learning a lesson I hadn’t expected: to live was a gift, and I wanted to keep it.

“We promised.” I say the words half for my father, half for myself. But still, I can’t seem to reach for the oil. I want the ghosts to stop me, to do something other than endorse more needless death. But they are waiting. They don’t speak.

Then, a small miracle: another brush of the wind against my cheek.

A yenhawk lands beyond the platform, ankle-deep in the snow. Its head tilts curiously at us, standing still and ready to burn. It looks afire itself, its amber feathers bristling with moonlight. I see three purple ones. My night-bird.

Its yellow eyes center on me. This is right, I think. As last looks go, those knowing eyes are not the worst of them.

“I always thought I’d give you a choice,” says my father. He’s looking off into the distance with unseeing eyes. Perhaps finding the ghosts at last. Or perhaps finding a memory.

Several things happen at once:

My father pushes me, hard, into the snow. All his newfound strength, the fat atop the muscle, gives him power, and I’m sprawled and breathless in the cold before I can blink. Then I hear the crash of broken pottery in the night, and the *flick* of a match lighting. The yenhawk cries.

It rends my heart.

“No,” I say, watching my father. The fire burns lower on the match, closer and closer to his oil-drenched skin.

“This is the way of it,” he says, and to my surprise he is smiling. “This is how it should be. Don’t be shamed, my daughter.” The fire creeps closer to his thumb. Too fast, too fast it moves, spurred onward by the breeze. “When the west wind blows, will you think of us? All of us?”

“Yes—” I say, or start to say, but the fire reaches his thumb, and with a slow lazy leap it aureoles his hand, and then his shoulders, and then I feel it, I feel the fire of him against my cheeks, and the night is lit with yellow light like liquid as he burns, burns, burns.

Tears steam off my cheeks. I lunge from the snow and try to reach for him, to throw him into the cold, to put him out. But the yenhawk moves at the same time, and I think, *Yes, to be a stain of blood on the snow.*

Its claws close around my stomach. With a clack, they touch.

A moment later, my whole body yanks and we are soaring. The wind batters me. My ribbons flutter and fly off my sleeves, freed. I taste ash in my mouth and I realize I am tasting my father. This might be what it means to haunt the mountain.

Below us, as we fly, seven beacons burn.

#

The yenhawk takes me somewhere I have never been: a nest.

It's warm and large enough to fit several of me, even when the bird curls up around me like a feathered blanket, pulls me close with its neck, and falls asleep.

I can hear something. Not drums. A heartbeat, steady and fast. Faster even than mine. The bird's eyelids move, but it doesn't wake.

Around me is the crown of a vast tree, larger than any I have ever seen. I count many green things. I hear the rustling of leaves and feathers and a hum of quiet contentment and I think I count many of those, too. It's no mountaintop, but we're high, high off the ground, above fire, above ghosts, above war. And those three purple feathers—they brush against a bundle of flowers, growing out of the side of this nest. My Lady's Eyes.

My yenhawk has brought me home.

I mourn for my father, my family, and my mountain. But right now, they are far away.

Instead, a flash of color catches my eye in the steeping dark. A bit of red. I lean forward, careful not to disturb the sleeping bird at my side. Woven into the branches of the nest is a piece of paper. A drawing, or a piece of one. It was once ripped to shreds and tossed to the wind in anger.

Now it's the start of something new.

BROTHER, WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

I need no map to reach the Sisterhood of Solace. The stories I've heard in Grauland are true. After a journey of three days north, I reach the base of their mountain, where a squat brick tavern greets me like the last remaining pumpkin in a patch. Beyond it, a dark road snakes up to the mountaintop. The Devil's Tail.

The publican greets me warmly; I think perhaps I am the first monk he's seen in a long time. But I decline his offer of a brew. I'm sure it's come from up there, from the mountain, from the Sisterhood. People say their beer makes princes cry.

People say their beer can do a lot of things.

"I'm looking for a girl," I tell the publican instead. "Barely fifteen. Dark hair, pale skin, dark eyes. She would have been alone. Have you seen her?"

He shakes his head, brown forehead creasing. "I'd remember her if I had. Not a lot of young women alone around here. But up on the mountain . . ."

"Yes." I cut him off, already heading for the door. "Up on the mountain."

He opens his mouth as if to warn me, but I'm already stepping out into the crisp fall air. It smells of granite, of oncoming snow. I'm reminded of the warm fire, the simple cider that awaits me at the abbey when this mission is done.

And perhaps more. *Find her, complete this duty, and you shall be rewarded.*

Those are the words the Abbot gave me when I received notice from the villagers that my uncle had died. Visions of promotion at last fill my mind. A nearby abbey, eleven leagues to the south, needs a new Abbot.

I've waited so long for this. I've given up so much.

I expect my horse to complain as I nudge him up the Devil's Tail, but he plows forward courageously, and I take heart from that. We are not all in awe of the Sisterhood.

Halfway up the road, I meet a woman dressed in gray. She almost fades into the black, scabby trees of the landscape. The horse notices her before I do, pulling up short. I'm jolted from my memories of Grauland, of the blood on the stile.

"Brother," says the woman. Her hair is graying at the edges, like an icon leached of color by the sun.

I swing off my horse, and she flinches back. Odd. Most unaccompanied women are pleased to meet a monk on the road, aware that we offer a sort of protection, and—I like to think—a sense of peace. "Greetings, mistress. Are you going up the mountain?" She nods warily. Not much for speech, these northerners. "I can offer you a ride."

"No, thank you, Brother."

"Very well. I shall walk beside you for a while."

She neither agrees nor disagrees, setting off at a clipped pace. I can see I've displeased her, but I'm not sure exactly why. All the while, the reminder of my duty sits on my shoulders like a gargoyle on the abbey's edge, ever watchful. The horse's head bobs up and down behind me, bumping my shoulder from time to time as I lead him along. A good animal, steadfast, they said, when I took him from my uncle's house. His snorting breath is the only sound, for a while.

Then, splitting the air: the bells. Peals like laughter, like honey, like jumping in the cold water of a stream. I think of the quiet peace of the cloisters, and my heart aches to be done with this, to be back there. The bells take my longing and magnify it tenfold. What a strange, aching sound.

When I look over at the woman, her eyes dart to the road, and I have the feeling she was watching me a moment before. I sniff as the bells fade. The air smells of woodsmoke, now. “We must be close,” I say, as lightly as I can.

She nods. After a while, she says, “My husband made those bells.”

I’m surprised. “Here?” I regret the question. God looks on all the kingdom and smiles.

If she’s offended, she reveals nothing of it. “It’s the one good thing,” she says.

I’m still puzzling out what that means when we come upon the Sisterhood.

A sharp turn in the road, and it’s there: gray brick built into the mountain, save for the belltower, which juts as if to penetrate the sky. The Sisterhood has no gate, no defense. Only the tall black pines on either side of a curved arch, standing like sentinels as we pass beneath.

The woman walks ahead of me as I tie the horse to a waiting post. She skirts the main entrance, going instead to a small wooden door near the corner. Three knocks. She glances over her shoulder. “Good luck, Brother.”

And there’s that gargoyle again, shifting restlessly. I take no pleasure in this particular mission, but I must do as I have always done: as my Abbot commands. Life will be simple, he promised, when first he inducted me into the official ranks of my order all those years ago. Lead where you are chosen to lead, obey where you must obey.

I’ve done enough of the latter, to be sure. Perhaps, when I am Abbot, I might lead differently.

The thought surprises me, but I have no more time for imaginings. The main entrance to the Sisterhood creaks open. A woman waits there, unhabited, her hair falling

in a long braid over her slim shoulder. Her eyes are pale brown, almost yellow, the frothy shade at the base of a beer's head, golden like her skin. "Greetings," she says to me, her voice light. "How may we help you, Brother?"

I will not let this woman unsettle me. After all, our orders are alike, at their core. "I'm looking for a girl. Barely fifteen. Dark hair, dark eyes. She would have come here recently, seeking asylum. Have you seen her?"

The Sister's lips curl in a smile that's not unfriendly. "I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific. Why don't you come in?"

The amusement, the lightest brush of sarcasm in her voice—these are not what I expected. "My horse needs food and water."

"Greta will see to that." She waves into the darkness behind her, and a girl emerges, at least I think she is a girl. She wears a squat leather cap of the kind worn by blacksmiths and executioners, her hair so short it cannot be seen beneath. A red, puckered scar overcuts her right eye, eyebrow to eye socket, and the lid is sewn shut. On her right hand, two fingers missing.

For half a second, her eye crosses mine, and I suck in my breath. Could it be? Surely not. That scar looks mostly healed. I seek a girl with ten fingers, no scars, never a day of trouble in her life. My uncle's stepdaughter. She was a beauty, the villagers said, though I never saw her for myself. Only a drawing. A sketch. Her mother's last.

Greta's eye drops and the feeling passes. Impossible. She goes to my horse and reaches her three-fingered hand toward his head, careful to remain in his sight. He sniffs, whuffs. Her mangled hand caresses. She's smiling, very gently, as if the expression hurts.

The horse noses into her shoulder. I feel a flash of pity for her, stronger now that she's smiling.

"Come," says the woman in the entrance. "Brother, what is your name?"

"I am called Johan."

"Brother Johan. Welcome to the Sisterhood."

She is Sister Lucia, and she is the Abbess here. Mother Lucia, the other Sisters call her when they pass us in the darkened halls. Torches burn as she takes me through the rectangular front room, outside again, across the square cloisters, into an outbuilding that she calls her office. I must admit, the word surprises me. Yet it is indeed much akin to my Abbot's quarters back home. Rich carpet warms the floor, a fire burning in the grate. Books and scrolls line the walls, not quite orderly, some of them pulled out and thumbed through and left behind on a nearby lectern, a ribbon marking their pages. Indeed, if I put pain to tell the truth, the books seem better used than those in the Abbot's library. More beloved, in the creases of their spines. "Please, sit," says Sister Lucia, indicating the cushioned chair closest to the fire. I obey.

"What is your brew of choice, Brother Johan? I will pour it for you." Still with that smile, as if something amuses her of which I'm unaware.

"Water will do fine."

"Ah. You do not partake. I fear our Sisterhood will disappoint you."

I like a good ale from time to time, and the cider we drink in the fall, after we pick the apples ourselves. The fruit of our labor. But I don't correct her. She moves to the corner of the room to pour me a cup of water from a ceramic jug. When she hands it to me, I quaff the cold liquid. It has been a long journey.

It is the sweetest thing I have ever tasted. The smell of pine and cedar lingers after it.

Lucia isn't smiling anymore. She tilts her head, inspecting me. "You're holding the secret of the Sisterhood in your hands, Brother."

I look down at the empty cup.

"Or rather, in your stomach," she corrects. "Good beer requires good water, first."

It's something I've heard before. My uncle. The brewer. I set the cup down on the floor by the fire and straighten, chastened. "The girl I'm seeking. She was called Helewise, though she may have taken another name. She would have arrived here more or less two weeks ago."

Lucia sits opposite me, turning her face toward the fire. "You think she would come to us?" she asks. "Why?"

"Her mother used to speak of this place."

Now her words come slowly, as if each of them has been weighed carefully first. "Do you know how many women come to us with their mother's stories in their hearts?"

I shake my head. I don't know anything about mothers, nor stories. I lost my own long ago. Indeed, the Abbot once told me that fiction was a sin. I was but a boy then. I haven't thought back to those days in a long while.

As if she sees this in me, Lucia shakes her head. "Do you think people tell stories of your order, Brother Johan?"

"I'm certain they do not. We operate in the real world," I say, "where stories do not matter so much as the truth." Indeed, that is why I'm here. To discover the truth. To find a murderess and hold her to justice. We all must face reality, in the end.

“Who says a story cannot be the truth?” asks Lucia, that smile lingering again. It’s condescending now, and my skin prickles at it.

“I’m not here to speak riddles with you,” I say. “Besides, I don’t believe the stories about the Sisterhood. I am sure we have much in common. We both serve God.”

She looks at me with those amber-drenched eyes and sees all of me, all the lies I’ve ever told. I hold myself firm, staring back. “I think we have different ways of doing that, Brother Johan,” she says at last, soft.

This offends me, though I can’t say why. It’s worse to think we might worship God the same, myself and this irreverent Sister. But her words sting nonetheless. “I would like to see the brewery,” I manage, after a while.

Her eyes slip back to me. She knows exactly why I’m asking. But she rises from the chair and flicks her braid behind her back. “I will show you gladly. You may be surprised at what you see.”

We walk back across the cloisters, into the rectangular entrance hall. The mountain air is sharp as obsidian. Lucia crosses to the left once inside and opens a set of wooden doors. Beyond them, dank stairs lead beneath the ground. “After you,” she says.

At the bottom of the stairs, I pass through a narrow arch and a wall of cool, wet air. Ahead of me stretches a wide, skewed shape like a gibbous moon, clustered with the familiar instruments of brewing: a hand-quern for milling the malt into mash; beyond that, a little platform where a huge copper cauldron heats water over a roaring fire. I can smell the damp oak of wide-mouthed barrels and the sharp hay scent of yeast on the air.

At each of the instruments, a Sister bends to her task. One here with her sleeves pushed up to her elbows, forearms cording as she winds the quern to grind the malt. She

doesn't even glance our way. One there with her hair all bound up in a kerchief—again, unhabited, her coarse skirts tied below her knees—wiping away sweat as she stirs the liquid in an open-mouthed barrel.

“Sister Bogdana is one of our master brewers,” says Sister Lucia. We draw closer to the woman she indicates. From the pot before her, I smell vanilla, chicory root, and anise. Beneath them all, the sour scent of fermenting wort—the liquid left over after boiling the grain to release its sugars.

Sister Bogdana's eyes are closed, her face long and thin like a greyhound's and splintered with purple shadows. As she inhales deeply over her brew, some of her black, straight hair slips off her shoulders and touches into the liquid, floating there like a paintbrush soaking up color. Or perhaps laying it down.

What a fanciful thought. Far too much so, for a man like me. Sister Lucia must notice, for her heady, amused smile returns. “This is one of our rarest brews. We keep it in barrels until the darkest part of the winter.” Her gaze says, *you want to taste it, don't you?*

And I do. I do. I'd like to know what kind of beer turns black as tar, like a man's soul. I'd like to know why the princes cried.

What did they see when they sipped?

I manage to say, “Water is sufficient for the likes of me.” And I almost believe it.

Lucia takes me around the rest of the brewery. There are Sisters everywhere. Some of them wear kerchiefs or dark hoods, ducking their faces out of sight. The scent of beer lingers in the back of my throat, but I'm able to remember my mission.

Helewise might be any of these.

When we climb back up the stairs and into the entrance hall, Lucia stops in the light from a torch. I reach into the small pouch I keep tied on the belt of my cassock, a simple, leather thing to show my poverty. The parchment smells of mildew now, but the charcoal sketched upon it remains intact. “This is the girl I’m looking for.”

She takes the parchment, inspects the quick dark eyes, the pointed chin, the narrow lips. There’s something clever, stubborn, in the way Helewise’s gaze reaches out from that sketch. Her mother was a good artist. I’m surprised by the sadness that pinches my throat at the thought. She was a good woman.

Lucia’s gaze lifts up to mine as she hands back the parchment. “What is it she’s supposed to have done?”

“She murdered her stepfather. My uncle.”

“Is that so? Was he a good man, your uncle?”

He was an honest one. The words stick in my throat. Perhaps the brewery air has left it dry. “All citizens must have justice.” I hate that I spoke. Better to remain silent, for this sentence feels like a defense.

Lucia meets my gaze squarely. “I quite agree.”

“Then you will look at this drawing once again and tell me—have you seen this girl?”

“I’m sorry, Brother.” She sounds it. “But there are no murderers here.”

At that moment, a door opens across from the brewery stairs. The woman who climbed up the mountain with me steps out, in her arms, a small barrel of beer. So that was what she climbed for? She nods deeply at Sister Lucia, who smiles in return. As if begrudging, the woman gives a much smaller nod to me. “Brother,” she greets.

I nod back, and it's then that I see them: the bruises on her arm. Four of them in a row, like dark stars against a white sky. There's an order to those bruises. The footsteps of fingerprints.

Her gaze is forthright, challenging. So much like Helewise's stare in that drawing, I suck in my breath. But there's no way this is my uncle's stepdaughter. My mind is playing tricks.

"May your husband enjoy this batch, Petronella," Lucia says.

"Thank you," says Petronella. The polite words clash with the look in her eyes.

When she is gone, Lucia speaks in a quiet voice for the first time, a hushed murmur that whispers at the corners of the hall. "Petronella comes to us but once a month. It's the only time she's allowed to leave."

The bells return to me. Their sweet, sweet ring. *The one good thing*, Petronella said.

I told Lucia I sought the truth, and I do. But some truths are more painful than others.

"Will you show me the rest of the buildings here?" It is all I can offer as a truce. But I find that I want to see them, as I wanted to taste the beer.

"With pleasure, Brother. Perhaps they will remind you of home."

At last, I surprise her: I laugh. There is nothing of my abbey here.

That, I begin to think, is the problem.

#

Sister Lucia doesn't so much invite me to stay the night as I linger until the sun sets over the Devil's Tail, and there's nowhere else for me to go. She offers me a cot in

her office, but I decline; the stables will do well enough for me. First I dine with the Sisters.

Three long tables fill the dining hall. On the far end, a fourth, stretched out perpendicular to the others, where the hierarchy of Sisters becomes clear. Lucia, Bogdana, a small Sister who looks like a toad, and two others I haven't seen before take their seats here. I am the sixth. Lucia gives me a place at the edge, beside the toady one, whose name, I discover, is Sister Agata. The rest of the room sits after we do.

Lucia must have known I would take advantage of this moment. I search the room, the many-colored bent heads with their brassy sheen and their dark curls and their tight, close-cut caps of hair. Some of these Sisters have come much farther than I to reach this place. They smile, they laugh, they sit quietly in their corners. Some have hands like the cream we skim off milk at the Abbey. Other hands are dark as wet earth, or burned red, cracked and coarse, well used to lye and hard labor. Yet none of them have the triangle face, the sharp gaze that I've journeyed for. And even though I'm the one at the head of the room, I'm the one with the lookout, their eyes pin me in place like a beetle on a cushion. The gentle feminine hum of speech fills the room, so different from the low murmur of male conversation I'm used to. I feel like a novice again, fresh-faced, looking around the greatroom of the Abbey for the first time. Small enough to be invisible.

Agata doesn't speak, and I suspect this is why I have been placed beside her. Novices in black habits bring out our meal, a simple yet satisfying one of gamey stew and hot barley bread. Then comes the pitcher of Solace brew.

Lucia carries it over to me herself. The simple clay pottery glistens with condensation like breath on glass. “Tell me, Brother Johan. You will leave tomorrow empty-handed. Won’t you at least try a sip of brew, while you’re here?”

All the conversation drops away at once. A hush fills the space it left behind, loud enough to batter my ears.

I’m here for duty, I tell myself, not for pleasure. Indeed, to place myself ahead of my responsibilities and my God is to sin in the cruelest way possible. No matter how young Helewise is, or how vulnerable, or indeed how hopeless, she was not right to act as she did. And yet I find myself wondering how else she might have come here. Certainly my uncle would never have let her go.

All at once, I’m tired. I feel the reach of the growing shadows and the suspicion that something is being hidden from me. I’m the little boy in the Abbey again, the one who missed his mother and shrank from the hard stares of strangers. That boy, too, had to grow up fast.

So what if I want to taste this brew that makes princes cry, that women walk up mountains for? Surely one sip will not hurt me, I think. Surely I’ve earned at least that.

I hold out my cup.

My first sensation is of a cold so deep it burns. Like a kiss to ice, it traps my tongue, sharpening against me with flavors of copper and mountain water. Then my tongue grows wet, unfrozen from that sharpness. The brew itself curls into my mouth and across to the back of my throat, and I hold it there, despite the burn. *So cold*. But I taste stone, granite, and a hint of something rich. Like the last remaining plums we used to pilfer from the storehouse at midwinter, Markus and I.

This is a memory I've not had in a long while. I've thought more often of what the Abbot said afterward, long afterward, when he caught us at more than stealing plums. *Some things are best forgotten*, he said, in a quiet murmur as if he were helping me, *and in time, your duty will help with that. This place offers the burial of memory and the start of something new.*

The longer this brew sits on my tongue, the more I taste of its luscious sweetness, a fullness of flavor I'd never experienced before. It awakens from the cold like spring blooms from frozen dirt in early March. Sharp. Bright. Full.

I remember how Markus looked as he stuffed his shirt with plums. He laughed in expression, not sound, as he took my hand and slid a plum into it. *Feel, Johan. It's still warm.*

Sister Lucia watches me with a politely curious expression. As if she doesn't know full well what she and her beer are doing to me. As if she hasn't planned for this.

"I've not tasted exactly this flavor before." I'm proud of how steady my voice comes out.

Sister Lucia smiles. "Is that so? I thought you had."

"No," I lie. "Nothing quite like this at all."

The plums burst so sweetly across our tongues.

#

I finish the meal as quickly as I can without appearing indecorous. I tell Lucia I am tired. No, I say, I have blankets. I have water. No, I need nothing.

It's a lie.

The brew has brought something out in me, something I thought dead, and no amount of praying can put it back again. I try anyway. I'm absorbed in this prayer I once spoke easily, summoning up the words, when I almost walk into the girl Greta. She's coming from the stable where my horse is housed.

"Brother." Her eye is on the ground, hands clasped before her.

"Has he behaved himself?" She looks up, startled, then appears even more confused when she sees my face. "The horse," I clarify.

"Oh." A small smile. "Yes. He's very good."

"I think so, too." I keep my voice gentle, as I did when I first met the horse. There is something about this girl that requires it. "He is called Rabbit. A child named him."

This doesn't provoke the smile I thought it would. Then again, I have never had a way with children. They always frightened me, before. Her eye drifts beyond me. "I should go," she says.

I step out of her way. But before she is gone, I hear myself ask, "What happened to give you that scar?"

She pauses. Her back is to me. Before small shoulders, her capped head does not sink. She says, "A man."

It does not surprise me. I remember Petronella's bruises. I remember a day in the Abbey, the morning of my initiation, the look on Brother Benedict's shocked white face as he and the Abbot open the door to me and Markus, intertwined. From the moment I made my choice not to leave, to continue in my duty, to obey, I have not thought of that day. Not until now. It makes me weary. "Your fingers, too?"

She turns back to look at me. That bright black eye is fierce, penetrating. “Not those,” she says. “Those were from frostbite. When I climbed up the mountain.” I taste awe in the back of my throat. This girl carries something fierce and true in her heart. Something hard.

Survival. The word lingers with me, the flavor, even after she is gone. I cannot stop turning it over across my tongue as I bed down in the stable.

I take out my aunt’s drawing again. In the light of the moon, Helewise’s gaze is solemn and direct, her face unmarred. When I first saw this, I thought she looked untouched. *A soft child*, said the Abbot when he saw. Now, I’m not so sure.

He called me soft once, too. *Your duty will make you stronger*, he said. Thoughts of myself as an Abbot rise unbidden. Would I be able to tell a young monk the same?

Would it even be possible for me to create something different?

Late in the night, I cannot bear the restlessness any longer. I will look one more time, I think, and then I will go. I feel desperate in ways I can’t explain. I want to believe I have tried, but since that sip of beer, I no longer know what, exactly, I hope to find.

Outside, the moon has risen, dressing the Sisterhood in silver. I blow on my hands. The air cuts up here, much colder than below. I no longer doubt the frostbite. In fact, it could happen to me tonight.

I will creep through the dormitory on silent feet, I think. I will peer in, no more. And then I will go.

But before I can even reach the door, I hear a song. Not like a bird; like the bells. This is a peal, high and sweet, and it lures me away from the entrance, toward the back of the mountain. Beyond the brewery.

The black pines encircle me. The song pulls me on. I no longer feel the cold, which should frighten me, but it doesn't. I feel curiosity, madness, desire. I am drawn in.

The pines open up so suddenly I am almost caught out. Almost, but not quite. I hide behind the last one just in time, its thick frame keeping me in darkness. Ahead of me lies a clearing dripped in moonlight, crossed with threads of white. A stream. And in the stream are the Sisters.

Some are naked; some wear nightclothes that stick to their bodies, picking out shapes, here a roundness, here a sharp line. I don't see sensuality in this, but it unsettles me all the same. The abandon of it. The freedom. The starlight glinting off their smiles—it is impossible to look away from that. That is like a garden of flowers that open only at night. Dew flicks from their hands as they kick up sprays of water. It's beautiful, but I feel the wrongness of my being here. It hurts my heart. This is not meant for me.

I turn to go back, to get to the stable, the horse, the hay. The mundane. Yet one face catches my eyes before I go. A smile as wide as the crest of the mountain. Her short-cropped black hair feathered like the underside of a mushroom cap. No more leather holding it down. She spins in a circle, lifting her hands to the sky.

There's something about the smile. The fierceness of it, the life. It contains everything—grief, determination, heady effervescent joy.

I know it's her.

Gone is Greta. She is transformed. Though I think this is not Helewise, either. Not as she used to be.

The story tells itself so easily. I remember the way her mother used to draw, before her marriage to my uncle. The way that slowly faded. And the cheapness of her funeral pyre, so little spent on a beloved wife.

I remember other things, too. Things longed-for and aching. Markus's blank face as I explained to him that I was joining the order, as I'd always planned. Disavowing him. Doing my duty. The way his eyes went cold like the marble statues in chapel. My last sight of his lopsided shoulders as he turned away. I used to kiss those shoulders, right at their sharpest points. Prick-prick. My lips tingle with the memory of it.

Then Helewise-who-is-not-Helewise turns again, carried away into the night with her Sisters. Their songs waver, break, return. A new melody.

My feet itch to join them, but this is not my place, not now. My place lies down the mountain. I return to the stable instead.

Yet as I return to the hay and the warm horse, I don't hold myself back anymore.

I dance.

#

Lucia and Helewise share a look of surprise when they come upon me in the morning. Rabbit is saddled and ready to go, his ears flicking in familiarity as Helewise rubs his neck. I should have known the moment he whuffed into her shoulder.

I have been a fool.

"Surely you will take some of our brew, Brother?" asks Lucia, holding out a stoppered ceramic jug.

"No, thank you." I should not. If one cup is enough to undo me, for a jug I might never leave.

“Some water, then?” In her other hand, she holds a leather bag, full.

That water. Sweet like the stream behind the Abbey. “Very well.” She hands it up to me. I’m careful to meet her eyes. “I thank you, Sister.”

“You’re welcome.” She seems taken aback. A small victory, then, for me. I have pleased her. “What will you do now, Brother?”

“I have to find someone.”

“You will keep looking?” Lucia’s eyes slide away. I know they are seeking Helewise. I know they are relaying a message, something like, *Do not worry. We will not let you go.*

“Not for her,” I say. I look at Helewise then. I tell her myself. “I know the pain of losing someone precious. I wish her nothing but peace.”

Helewise—Greta—she does not smile. Instead, moving slowly, she taps her heart with the stumps where her frostbitten fingers once were. Once, twice. I know without words what she’s telling me. *Take courage. Take heart. Take strength. You’ll need them.*

She’s not wrong. I have no idea what the Abbot will do when I don’t return. I know for certain the other abbey won’t have me. So be it.

All those years of order and duty only buried the good parts of me. It is long past time I unburied them.

The least I can do is ask forgiveness.

Lucia watches me with a newfound respect in her eyes, as if seeing me for the first time. Quietly she says, “I hope you find him.”

Sharp shoulders. Tenderness, even love in his eyes. A tuneless hum as he mops the floor, punishment for spilling candlewax. Plum-sweet lips. I do not tell her this. This is for me to remember. "I will," I vow.

RESIGNATION LETTER FROM THE LIBRARY OF LOST THINGS

Dear [smudged, unreadable],

If you're reading this, you've Found my letter of resignation from the Library of Lost Things.

I thought for a long time about what to write. Well, as long as the Library would let me. I wanted to say something about "tendering my resignation," but I couldn't make it fit. I like that word, tender, used as a verb. It summons my memory of the two small creases that form at the edges of your lips when you're upset and trying not to show it. I suppose I'll never master the art of tendering you, not now.

Then again, you know what's written in the third pocket of the Library. "Things Lost can be Found again." I used to like cleaning the third pocket. In some ways it reminded me most of my universe. There's a song where I'm from, about pretty things, and sometimes I'd sing it to myself as I dusted. How does a Library of Lost Things acquire so much dust, by the way? It doesn't get blown in, does it? There's no wind in this corner of the universes. And it's not Lost. Who Loses dust? Not the Robed Librarian's people, surely, from their ocean of sand? In my universe, that's called a desert.

I grew up in a desert. Not like the Robed Librarian's one. My desert had mountains and snow in the winter and a great big lake like a blue jewel. If I could take you there, I would. Some people said it was the most beautiful place in my world.

But you never asked about my world. And that's not what this letter is for. This letter is about leaving the Library and saying the things I want to say before I am Found.

I never knew I was Lost in the first place. I think most of the things in this Library don't know that about themselves. When I appeared that day in the first pocket, down by the silkworm landscapes, I thought I might've found heaven. Heaven is what some people in my world consider as an afterlife. It's a bit like the waiting place in your world's Recyclification, only nicer.

Nevermind. That stuff's not important.

I bet you're wondering, who or what Found me?

Here's the real kicker. I think you did.

Remember when I first came to the Library? And you said, "You're a pretty thing." Like that song from my universe.

I said, "Oh, no, I work here." Just like that. "I work here." You probably figured out by now that I lie a lot. Or I did, when I was Lost.

But later you told me that in your language, you were saying something completely different. The Library translated the spirit of your words, not the literal meaning. What is it people said about pretty things in your universe again? "You taste like my first morning alive."

I imagine the history of that phrase when I'm sweeping the cloudcastle storage area sometimes. I imagine the way you tasted everything in your universe, even the expressions on people's faces. I like to think of your tongue, a darker pink than mine but still recognizably a tongue, tracing a slow pointed path around my smile. *Your face tastes like surprise*, you say when you savor the salt of my tears, the dew of my sweat, the delicate remnant of sugar from the rim of my coffee, the coffee that's still digesting in my

small intestine because it was the last thing I ever drank before I appeared in the Library. Before I got Lost.

When I was thinking of this, what you'd taste on my lips, the Finding began. The trouble was, I didn't realize I'd been Lost in the first place. But you knew, didn't you? Like the other Librarians. You knew that I wasn't here to work. I was just like the silkworm landscapes, and the great mote art of the fourth pocket, and the shelves and shelves of broken pots glued together by the power of the Library. I was a pretty thing who'd gotten herself Lost here. I know that now.

Once I started talking to you, I realized that I wasn't in heaven. I never passed my physics class in high school, and I avoided the subject like the plague after that, but hearing the Library's translated words from your lips about multiple universes, and the forces that move between them, and the pocket universe that was the Library, made me want to go back and understand it for the first time. Maybe that's what I'll do when I'm Found. I'll be a physicist.

You know what I love best about you? You probably didn't even laugh just then, when you read that line. Or when you tasted it, or whatever. I don't know how the Library is making you see this in your language. Maybe you're tasting this old paper, gathering all the information you need that way. You'll taste my writing first, and then all the ancient history of this Lost paper and ink that I found in the eighth pocket. What does it tell you?

What does my love taste like?

I feel it happening. I've got to write faster.

Remember when you told me about music in your world? You didn't have records or cassettes or CDs or anything. You just had the music of your own voices. And how lovely you sounded when you sang for me. But you cried, after. You said there were meant to be voices behind you and around you, a whole choir of them—choir is what we call it back in my universe. I know you call it something different. *Song-Family*. That was it.

The trouble with family is that when you Lose them, you become Lost yourself. Only I couldn't find them here, my Lost family. That was when I began to understand that Dead is different from Lost. I like to think that if the Library can exist, then somewhere nice like heaven could exist, too, and maybe my dad's there. But you found me on the day when I realized this. A bad day. I'm sure you remember. I'm sure this part of the letter tastes like rage and cold gray grief.

A whole Library of Lost Things, a whole pocket universe full of other pockets, stuffed with junk from when you have to clean out your father's house and you Lose that pin he wore on his uniform shoulder, or when you were knitting a warm hat because all the chemo takes his hair but you never finished it in time and you Lose that, too. Piles of newspapers and magazines or Lost dolls or old toys separated from the memories that once held them close. All this, and no father.

I wanted to destroy the Library that day. I wanted to burn it down, or tear its bricks apart, or set loose all the silkworms and watch them cover everything until it was buried beneath stretched-thin beauty like green things under ice. But you stopped me. You stopped me when you tasted my tears.

Do you remember what you told me that day? People can never be Lost, not really, as long as we remember the taste of them. Sweet and bitter, sharp and mellow, sour and tart. All of them.

I didn't even know I was being Found at that moment, that tender brush of your tongue on my eyes, your tongue on my tongue. But every touch between us was Finding me. I could never be Lost, not with you.

Oh God. I think it's happening this time. This time for real.

Now you understand why I wrote this letter, don't you? I love you. You Found me. The Library's taking me now, sending me home, I guess. But I'll always remember the taste of you. You'll come with me, on the back of my tongue. You'll see my blue jeweled lake and I'll imagine you holding my hand in yours. I'll try to think of what you'll say, what you'll *really* say, what you'll taste in the mountain air. Sage and pine and iron-tanged snow. And my love. My love most of all.

You can be Found, too, you know. Remember that.

Goodbye.

PATIENCE IS WHAT BUILDS THE BOAT

My people tell a story about my birth. When my father was barely a man, they say, three women came out of the birch forest to the west that we call The Maw. Before these women, no living creature came from The Maw, and no living creature went into it, for fear of never coming out. But these women were different.

These sisters—these sprites, or demons, depending on who’s telling the story—they found my father hunting as close to The Maw as any Shoreman would dare to go. They played him a riddle: pick the fairest of us, they said, and she will give you your heart’s desire.

I always imagine my father with his mouth hanging open in shock, face splotchy with surprise. He was, after all, just past eighteen, and engaged to Evie Wyre from Eastside at that. But then I suppose he must have closed his mouth, and sputtered a bit, and settled on a choice. Because my people say that, at moonrise, he came to consciousness, lying in the dew at the edge of The Maw with a baby glowing in the grass beside him.

After that, Evie certainly wouldn’t take him. His mother would have him back, but not me, the red-faced, white-bottomed devil-daughter of the village. So he built us a hovel close to The Maw. I had just learned to talk when he slipped away—into the black mouth of the forest, into the murmuring waters of Our Lake. Nobody knew which.

That is the story my people tell. But my people are fond of stories.

#

“Flatten your palms,” Warren tells me. “You push too hard in one spot. You must relax your wrist. Distribute the pressure.”

I hate sanding. At the rate I’m going, I will sand away my entire boat and have to begin all over again. Warren dips his already stooped shoulders a bit lower to meet my gaze. I can tell from the wrinkles around his eyes that he knows what I’m thinking: they get deeper when he’s disappointed in me.

“Patience is what builds the boat,” he says, his voice as gentle as the waves lapping outside. “Just as patience carries the soul to shore.”

It’s funny how his favorite saying brings a stabbing pain to my temple. Patience has never been my strongest quality. But I swallow my frustration, and I try to relax my wrist. I would be nowhere without Warren. I would have cried myself to death in that hovel at the edge of The Maw.

My people live for Our Lake. We stumble into its waters as little children, chubby of foot and fat of knee, and we do it again nearly every day for our abnormally long lives. When our time comes to die, we are pushed off across the silken blue waters, and we travel from our shores to the other side, the shore we cannot see. It is the final journey of the soul to its rest.

Warren builds the soul boats that carry us home.

He was cutting cedar to build a boat for the widower Dom when he heard me crying from the hovel. He said he found me with my face all blue, so hard was I crying. He spoke to me in soft words, and then he picked me up with his strong craftsman arms and stuck me on top of the cut cedar on his sled. A moment later, he hooked the sled to

his thick leather belt, and he dragged the whole package home—sled, wood, and orphaned demon daughter with dirt on her cheeks.

People on the Shores tend to revere Warren for his work with the soul boats, so they kept their mouths generally shut while he was around, and they let him raise me. He called me Dovie because my father had never given me a name. He said my skin glinted like dove trout when the moon was full. Like all Shorefolk, Warren loves a good story, too.

So I grew closer to Warren's height as he grew closer to mine, and my hair grew silvery-blond while his grew silvery-gray. The more his shoulders stooped, the more he taught me to do, until one day on what we guessed was my seventeenth birthday he asked me to be his apprentice.

"It's a bit late for that," I told him. My hands were already rough with calluses, my fingers tinged permanently with the smell of sawdust and cedar.

He laughed at me. "Patience is what builds the boat," he said.

And here I am, a year later, sanding away on my third training boat, as impatient as ever.

"You've a rough knot, just here," he says, age-spotted hands pointing out the dark disfigurement of the wood at the edge of my vision.

I don't know what I'm going to do when there's no Warren left to tell me what I've missed.

#

Not all Shorefolk are agreed about when and why we started living longer, but it became obvious that, generation after generation, we did. The Eastsiders, whose houses

hug the shell curve of white beach farthest from The Maw, reckon it's something to do with herbs and minerals. They take samples of the lakewater sometimes and gather in the public house to present their "findings," only to have the Westsiders usurp the meeting so they can give sermons on the lake's healing spirit. They use those who live at the southernmost tip of Our Lake, cloistered between the two shores, to judge the winner. It's always a draw.

Once, when I was about ten, I asked Warren what he thought was the cause. He looked up from the delicate petals of the lake rose that he was burning into the side of his most recent boat, crafted for Marnie Daye, six years old, dead from a fall off her mother's roof. "Not all of us live longer, Dovie, dear."

"I know that," I grumbled, shamed into silence. But a voice in the back of me still wondered.

Now, after sanding, the waves rush up to welcome me as I run to the lake from the woodshop. They wash away thoughts of Warren's wrinkles and my lopsided boat. With a fierce kind of determined wildness, I kick off my sandals and rush in deeper, up to my knees. I like the lake when it's choppy and unsettled, tossing itself about like the fish that leap from its waters. It's free when it dances like that. It's alive. Wind whips flecks of wetness onto my cheeks, over my spiky hair.

By the time I leave the lake, dusk creeps up on afternoon, and Warren will be waiting for me. But something lures me toward the west, toward The Maw. The white skin of the birch trees stands out against the purpling sky, beckoning to me like too many spindly fingers on a wide hand.

I've always been attracted to The Maw. It terrifies me, of course, like it should any Shorewoman with half a brain, but unlike all the other Shorefolk, when I look upon that birch forest, I am overcome with a sublime feeling of beauty, the same wild kind I see in the lake on a choppy day. When I tell Warren about it, he says, "Like calls to like," and that's about when I let the subject drop. Sometimes Warren knows more than he should about a person.

The closer I get to the birch trees, the more alive they seem. Silver spiderweb creases on the trunks are like slitted eyes, grinning mouths in the moonlight. I stop a few boatlengths away. When I close my eyes, I can hear three things: the cricket-wing sound of birch leaves in the wind; the dance of the waves; and my heart, much louder than the other two. Deafening, almost.

"Dovie." It's Warren, come down from our house. His voice carries a scold and understanding at the same time. One of his special gifts is making that voice. "We're wanted at the public house."

A feeling of dread rises in me as we head that way. When Warren is wanted, it usually means one thing: someone's gone. It's been a while since our last real boat, and maybe I've let myself be complacent, basking in the belief that our long lives protect us.

But when we arrive at the neutral space of shoreline between Westside and East, it's not a vigil or a wake we stumble into. A crowd of Shorefolk spills out of the familiar clay-built public house, so many Shorefolk that some of them cluster in their fishing boats on the water in order to see what's standing on the pier. Or rather, who.

A man is up there, the light from the pub lantern illuminating him like a shaft of sun through water. He's got gray hair like Warren's, but he's much younger, his face

unwrinkled by the hands of time. He's not a Shoreman; not only do we know every person on our shores, but his trousers are loose and fall all the way to the grass, the color of sand, and he wears a strange, quilted tunic like none I've ever seen. He has bags under his eyes to match the faded brown bag on his back, and he wears a leather belt hung all over with pouches of varying size.

We don't get a lot of strangers at Our Lake. Too difficult to reach, the elders say. South of us, I've heard tell, is a lake of sand, so large you can't reach the shore on the other side. No shore, no soul. But who ever heard of a lake of sand? Boats don't even work on it. It's unnatural.

"Warren. You're here." It's my grandmother—as was. My father's mother. She's one of the respected Westsiders and mighty proud of her friendship with the crafter of the soul boats. Conveniently ignores me whenever she visits, though. Like I'm a waterbug and she's a fishing boat, gliding right over me. "You need to set this place in order," she says, low-like.

"Who is he?"

"Says he's from a city south of the lake of sand. Serves some king or other. Wants to make a map."

The stranger on the pier continues speaking over the murmuring from the gathered Shorefolk. It's his voice that catches me. A voice like the sound the lake makes as it trickles down through the sand. A falling wave. Soft, gentle, determined. "I assure you, I only want a guide for a few days. Someone to carry."

“Ain’t no one going on your fool mission to die!” calls Carn, an Eastsider who wears a permanent scowl on his face. Only the funny part is, all the people around him borrow his usual expression, their foreheads wrinkled with scorn.

The stranger has no response to this.

“What does he want?” Warren asks Grandmother-as-was.

“He’s going into . . .” She stops, glancing at me. Ah, so she *can* see me. I wonder sometimes. “*The place.*”

The Maw. He was going into The Maw? To make a map? “Why’n fathoms would anyone want a map of The Maw?” I ask.

Grandmother-as-was ignores this, but Warren shoots me a concerned look. More wrinkles. Disappointment? I can’t tell. Without answering my question, he politely asks the crowd to make a path for him, and just like that there’s a straight shot from Warren to the stranger.

“Greetings, friend,” he says. “I am called Warren.”

“Honored to meet you. Are you some kind of leader here?”

Warren smiles in a way that says, *oh you lost child*. I’ve gotten that more than once. “You haven’t told me your name,” he says.

The stranger puts his hand over his heart. It’s a worn hand, marked with scars and callouses. Much like Warren’s. Much like mine-to-be. “I am Moreno, mapmaker to the king.”

“We don’t believe in kings.”

Moreno looks as if he never expected to hear that particular combination of words, never in his life. His eyes jump around the gathered crowd. "I'm only looking for an assistant. Some youth who'd like to earn a few coins."

"We don't believe in coins, either," someone shouts.

Poor Moreno. At that he looks like he's been dropped into the middle of the lake before learning how to swim.

"We don't go into The Maw," says Warren softly. He reaches out a hand and grips Moreno by the shoulder. "But hospitality we do believe in. Come in and have some brew."

#

If Moreno has taken badly to the outcome of his visit, I can't read it in his face. No, he gathers in the corner of the public house with Warren and a few other elders, who ply him with a cold mug and warm bread. The Eastsiders pretend to be above it all, clustering in the opposite corner, but the Westsiders regard him curiously, and their bravest little children crawl under the legs of Warren's chair, listening spellbound.

I myself do as Warren would have me: I sit in a forgotten place at the bar, I sip my cider, and I spend the next two hours tamping down the rush of sick-making anticipation that I feel at the idea of going into The Maw.

I'm an apprentice to the builder of soul boats. My place is here, among my people.

The public house starts to empty. The stuck-up Eastsiders go home, and the Westsiders' children fall asleep all over the floor. Like rocks in a stream they lie, and the

elders weave around them, gentle as water. Then, at last, the rocks are picked up and carried home.

“You can stay with us,” Warren tells Moreno, which surprises me. I’d’ve thought he would keep the temptation well enough away. But his lake-gray eyes tell me he trusts me. My heart stings with it.

As we walk back to our cottage, the silence is thick enough to slice. Questions crowd the tip of my tongue. What’s the big city like? How far did Moreno travel to get here? Why does the king in the lake of sand want to know about The Maw? But I keep my own company, as I know Warren trusts me to do.

It’s only when we have a quiet moment alone that my resistance breaks. Warren’s up in the attic, looking for extra cushions to spread on the workshop floor. Moreno watches me with plain good humor on his face. Shaking his head, he says, “How was I to know coins wouldn’t work on you?”

“Your king didn’t tell you that?”

“He couldn’t tell me anything. That’s why I’m here.”

I can’t resist poking at that. “Why does your king care so much about Our Lake?”

Moreno glances up, to where Warren’s footsteps prod the ceiling. Then he leans in. His face turns wry, as if he’s telling me an amusing story. “My king met a man from here. He says your lives are three times longer than they were two decades ago, and growing. He says he knows why.”

“What?” A Shoreman? Gone across the lake of sand? Could it be true?

Moreno shakes his head. “My king certainly believed him. Whether I do is a different story. But I’m going in there to find out why you live so long.”

Warren reappears before I can ask anything else. Moreno doesn't complain as we spread out the cushions amid a layer of sawdust. He takes off his leather sack first, then the belt covered in pouches. And he lies right down on the cushions and closes his eyes.

When we're back in the cottage, Warren goes over to the fish he'd left roasting on coals in the hearth. "Burned to a crisp," he mutters. I watch as he scrapes the burnt fish right out the window into our waste heap. His arms are bony, pointed shadows in the dim light. And his form is stooped, tired, as if when he arrived back here, he sank a few inches lower to the ground.

Once again I find myself thinking, What am I going to do without Warren? I'm thinking it as I climb into my bed. I'm thinking it as I close my eyes and listen for the lapping of the lake. And I'm thinking it still when I wake up in the early hours of the day, when all is watery murmurs and the breath of air across birds' wings, the sun not yet rising.

#

"I want to go with you into The Maw."

Moreno doesn't even blink. One moment he's dozing on his cushions, the next he's wide awake and staring up at me. "I'm sorry?"

"You're going after whatever makes us live longer? And you need an assistant? Well, I'm coming. I want to go."

A gleam of interest steals into his gaze. "Why? Won't you get in trouble?"

I shrug, attempting to mask the stab of fear his words incite. Warren could take away my apprenticeship, or kick me back to my father's old shed, or disavow me. But if it means he lives a bit longer, I'd do much worse than this. "Let me worry on that."

“I’m guessing you don’t want payment.” He sits up now, his eyes never leaving my face. “What do you want?”

“I’ll tell you that when we get there.” I want a cut of whatever we find, but I don’t know how we’ll find it. I don’t even know what “it” might be.

“If we get there,” he says. His eyes smile at me, so I know he’s only making a joke. “All right, young one. We have a deal.”

#

Warren tries to stop me, of course. “You must not do this, Dovie. You’re too young to know the ways of the world—”

“I’m as old as my father was when he got me,” I tell him. Somehow I regret the words. I don’t think people who are old enough bother with arguing that they are.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” Warren’s age steals over him again, and this time it’s my fault. He turns away, his back bowed under the weight of trying to protect me from myself.

I need to do this. To protect *him*. This is what I tell myself as I take him into my arms, a tight hug. “I’ve been patient. But now I have to go.”

His chin rests on my shoulder. Moreno waits outside for me, bag packed, eyes drifting toward The Maw. But I take my slow time to finish that hug before I join him.

“Very well,” says Warren eventually. “But don’t you forget where home is.” He leans back, his weathered hand on the middle of his chest. “Right here, Dovie my girl. Right here.”

#

“So what is it about this place that upsets everyone so much?” Moreno asks me a few minutes later, when we stand before The Maw’s waiting embrace.

“It’s unnatural,” I say. “Quiet. We don’t even swim in the shadow of it.” In fact, I think Warren is the only Shoreperson brave enough to live so close. “Nothing lives in there, and nothing alive comes out.”

“The trees are alive,” says Moreno. And with that, he marches right between them and into the darkness.

So they are. If it had been up to me, I might not have reminded them of it. They all watch me with those wrinkled-up eyes, waiting to see if I’ll join him. *Do you dare?* They ask.

I’m the demon-daughter of this forest. The unnatural offspring of its silvery secrets. I dare.

First it’s like walking through a wall of ice, or dropping into the lake in the middle of winter. All the breath shoves out of my lungs. My eyes see nothing, only blackness.

Then, slowly, slowly, they adjust. The trees are still watching. Moreno is a few boatlengths ahead now, crunching over the moss and dead things that line the path.

Distantly, I can still hear the susurrations of Our Lake against its shores.

That grounds me. As long as there’s a whisper of water, I’m home.

I follow Moreno deeper into the forest.

#

Turns out the man actually is making a map. “So we can find our way back here,” he says. “Not much use in discovering something if you can’t get to it again.”

The forest leans in as if to listen. Or perhaps it's my imagination. I'm tired, and we've been marching all day. The water calls to me all the while, because we've mostly followed the shoreline. We're walking north, toward the other shore. The soul shore. I try not to think of that too much.

Moreno sticks his writing instrument between his teeth as he turns his parchment one way, then the other. "Board," he calls to me.

I pull out the narrow piece of wood from his pack—the pack I've been carrying for several hours now. It pulls on my shoulders, weighs me to the ground. But that's what an assistant is for, he says.

He sets the parchment on the board and starts to draw again.

"How do you keep track of how far we've come?" I ask.

He taps his forehead without looking up. "All in here, Dovie. Mathematics. Do you lake folk know about that?"

Of course I know. I learned them by touch, by the feel of the curving wood beneath my hands, by use after use of Warren's woven measuring cloth. But I don't feel Moreno will understand about the soul boats, so I keep that particular thought to myself. In silence, save for the scritch of his drawing, I run my fingers over my calluses. Sometimes I forget that they're there.

By the time we stop for the evening, my feet carry callouses of their own. We settle near the edge of the forest, between two of its silver sentinel trees, the lake only a few strides away. While our meal is cooking, I strip off my boots and plunge into the water. It wraps cool fingers around my aching parts. It says, *Dovie, Dovie, I missed you so. Come home.*

Sometimes the lake sounds a lot like Warren.

When I climb reluctantly from the lake to eat, I don't bother to put my shoes back on. Not yet. I settle on my knees beside the sorry little fire that Moreno built.

"Your feet," he says, sounding worried and a little awed. I wonder if there's some rule against bare feet where he comes from. But then I see where he's looking. At my heel, where the blisters used to be.

Now they are red patches of newly-healed skin.

"The water," he says. "Whatever's in it must be concentrated out here." He grins at me, a smile wide enough to mimic the moon. "We're close."

The night gives me little sleep, despite my exhaustion. The air is cold in all the places where it kisses my skin, and each time I twist and turn beneath my cloak, another part of me is exposed. Every so often I hear a sound louder than Moreno's even breathing, and I jerk to alertness, only to see the faces in the white bark, nothing more.

In the darkest hours, my mind drifts out away from everything, back in time, back to my father's riddle. I've not thought of that for a long while. What was his heart's desire? Of course I want to believe it was I—but if that were true . . . my mind doesn't complete the thought. It moves on, flitting away like a school of fish.

No. It's far more likely that he wanted one of those beautiful creatures, and I was just the accidental side effect of their coupling.

When I do sleep at last, I dream that the trees come alive, three beautiful women built of ice. They dance before my eyes until morning.

“Sleep well?” Moreno asks as I turn over and groan. Whereas my body was worn down like patchy fabric last night, it’s gone stiff as crunched paper after sleeping on the ground.

“No,” I say. “Bad dreams.”

“Any spirits come out to visit?” He laughs. The sound is loud in the quiet of the forest. He noisily kicks out the fire and gathers up his parchment and board, slinging the pack over to me with a kind of irreverence. I’m almost relieved when we start marching again.

The relief dies as we hit a branching creek and turn away from the lake, Our Lake. No more whispers of water on the shore. The creek babbles away instead, louder than my feet filling Moreno’s footprints, louder than the thoughts filling my head.

Moreno starts to whistle. He stops every so often to add to his map. “We’ve got to find the source,” he says.

“The source of what?”

“This creek, for one. Didn’t you notice? The place where it feeds into the lake is the place where your feet healed.” He points in the direction of the creek’s flow, back toward the lakeshore. Back toward home. “Concentrated,” he says again, meaningfully.

But the creek goes on forever, it seems. We spend several days following it, and it cackles its nonsense into our ears all the while, like little Shorechildren and their rowing rhymes.

The afternoons get hotter, as if we head closer to the sun with each step. Finally, on the fourth or fifth day, Moreno stops early and asks for his pack from my back. He digs out a glass bottle, beautifully blown, and goes up to the creek to fill it. Only he fills it

in the most curious way. Rather than holding the bottle underwater, letting the cold trickle in, he turns it upside-down and touches the lips of the bottle to the water in an infinitely tender kiss.

The bottle sucks up the water, and when he flips it upright again, it's full.

"How—how did you do that?" I ask, my heart pounding.

"We have a few tricks down our trouser legs, in Sundland," he says. He takes a sip of the water, swirling it around his tongue before he swallows, like he's tasting the first batch of cider. Then he offers the bottle to me. "What do you think?"

I take a sip. It's exactly like all the other water I've had my entire life on the shores of Our Lake. A mineral tang underlies its delicate, floral sweetness. Any colder and it might burn my teeth. Sipping it is enriching, like a full meal to an empty stomach. "Tastes fine," I say.

"Tastes fine!" He laughs at me. "I'll say, Dovie." He drains the rest of the bottle.

"Tastes fine. Tastes special, you mean. Something about it. We're very close."

"How can you tell?"

He sobers, putting the empty bottle carefully back in the pack and handing the whole bag to me. "I feel better than I have in ages," he says. "Younger. Like I could live for a thousand years."

I'm contemplating that as we walk. Maybe I should fill one of those bottles for Warren, I think. Is it just this stream that's special? And if he drinks from it enough, not watered down by Our Lake, maybe he'll live as long as Moreno says? My heart skips and gallops a little. I want that. I would do anything for that.

But that night I have the dream again, of the three trees that turn to women, and I wake up sweating. Moreno's breath surges through the quiet of the forest. I strain my ears, freeze my body, but not even the faintest whisper of the waves of Our Lake can reach me here.

#

The next day, we round a bend halfway through the morning and the creek widens abruptly into a stream. It's sedate but still dancing, a kind of delicate joy that matches the wild choppiness of the lake, only more graceful. It's familiar to me in a way I cannot explain.

Moreno stops to add something to his map. I wander away, trailing my fingers in the stream's friendly spray. I'm walking beside it, drinking it in, when a root catches my ankle.

I tumble forward. As I fall, I bite my tongue. The bloom of rust erupts in my mouth, sharper than the taste of the creek water. The ground rises hard to meet me.

"Ow." When I right myself, I look around for Moreno, expecting a laugh, but I'm alone. I wandered too far. "Hello?"

I need a sip of water. The blood tastes heavy in my mouth.

But when I turn toward the stream, to dip in my palms, I find it's gone absolutely still, as if time has frozen. And, indeed, it's not time that has stopped—it's the water. I follow the line of the stream up, up, up, and there's a wall of ice before me, rising higher than the silver trees, gleaming like moonlight. It glistens as water melts from it, dipping down into the pool. Drop by drop.

This unnatural place draws me closer with the same invitation that The Maw gave me for years. *Come in. Come see.* I can't resist it. Nor do I want to. I step closer and my own ghostly face gazes back at me through the blue ice. Silver like dove trout in moonlight.

My hand shakes as I reach out. My reflection reaches, too. Our fingers touch for an instant, and my skin sticks to the cold. I *feel* the ice respond to me. Then it lets me go.

Something moves behind me. I turn, and I'm faced with three women. Three women made of ice.

They are as they were in my dreams, in every version of every story I've ever told myself. They are blue-tinged, silver-streaked, lithe and long and with too many inches on their arms and legs to be normal, but still, they are beautiful. They are holding hands, kneeling by the stream, staring up at me with crystallized-over eyes. They remind me of fish the way they're frozen, scared. I am afraid to speak, afraid they will dash away if I make a sound.

One of them shatters the moment by bending toward the water, and that's when I notice the horns. They each have one, spiraling out from their forehead like a cone of diamonds. It's as long as their forearms—no, longer, even—and when the ice woman bends to the water, drinking it straight from the stream, her horn touches the surface. The water breaks around it, drawing my attention to the spot, and that's when I see it: right where the tip of the horn touches the surface, a splash of light. It pools out and gets carried away by the speed of the stream—like a patch of oil floating on the water, oil the color of pearls and moonlight. And that's when I think I know why the Shorefolk live so long.

The ice woman closest to me stands up from her sisters. She reaches out an arm that should not end up so close to me, not from where she's standing. She opens her mouth, which glistens as if her icy skin is melting, and speaks words in no language I've ever heard before. The words are like a key turning inside me, unlocking my ribcage. I feel a cold burn down to my bones, blissful and painful. And finally I look into the woman's face—I mean, really look—and I see myself. My skin prickles. "Mother?"

She is smiling.

That's when the burning rope falls from the sky and catches her around the waist. She screams, as shrill and cold as the wail of a storm. Her sisters tumble forward in the stream and disappear, blending in with the waters, blue on blue.

"No!" I stumble forward, but the woman—my mother—melts before my very eyes, her arms and legs and body shortening where the fiber tears into her flesh. The rope should break apart and turn to ash, but it clings to her like a black snake, dripping its poison all over her glassy skin. I try to stop it, but the woman drags herself from me as I approach, even as her legs are shortening, shortening, gone.

"Please." I barely recognize my own voice, sobbing and gasping for air. "Please, no—" I taste dirt in my mouth. My knees burn where I have fallen to the ground without remembering. I put my face to the puddle where the black rope lies hissing in the cold water. I cannot tell where the water starts and my tears begin.

"Well done," says Moreno. He is completely calm, calm as the lake on a still day. He kneels beside me with his magic bottle and kisses the puddle where my mother used to be. I feel nothing, nothing, as the liquid-crystal substance of her sucks up into the glass. Gone.

“You *killed* her.”

He blinks at me. He was somewhere else, just now. Somewhere a thousand years in the future, rubbing his coins together, I guess. “What did you think we were doing out here, Dovie? It’s the secret. I’m certain it is.” He waggles the bottle at me, as if to emphasize its importance.

“She was real. She was . . .” I bit my lip. I can’t say more.

I have doubted that my father wanted me for my whole life. I’ve believed that. But when I looked into that face and saw myself, I knew that once, by someone, I’d been wanted. I saw that. And I felt it, too, in the ghost of Warren’s embrace, in the memory of his smile, the way he said, *Patience, Dovie*.

At last I found what I’ve been looking for. And it wasn’t what I sought to find at all.

Moreno swings the bottle back at forth as if he longs to take a sip. “There are two more,” he says. “And maybe others. I’ll be damned, Dovie. That man of yours was right.”

That man. I’m not sure how I know it. But I remember how my father disappeared into The Maw, or maybe into the lake itself, at least the way the Shorefolk always told the story. No one ever thought to add a third path: that he crossed the lake of sand to the city of kings and coins, and he shared his secret.

Deep in the heat of me, I feel a prick of cold. Of icy rage. I, too, want to freeze up like that great tower of ice, such deadly cold do I feel in my bones.

“Dovie?” Moreno tilts his head. “This is it, you know. This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” He shakes the bottle at me. “For yourself. For your old man.”

The worst part is, he’s right. That’s what I wanted. But I don’t want it anymore.

Before he can react, I stand up and push him with all my might, with all the strength I sanded into my arms and carved into my fingers. He stumbles back, but he doesn't drop the bottle, so I push him again. By now he's raising up his arms to fight back, but I duck around him. I'm strong and lithe, built from swimming in my waters, every day of my accursed beautiful life. One push more. The wall of ice looms behind him.

I build myself up. I meet his eyes, a shocked stare of whites and eyebrows. And then I shove him good and hard into the ice.

Moreno falls slowly, like sinking through water. He arcs backward and the bottle goes with him, clutched in his hands until the end. When his head cracks against the ice, it's louder than it should be, louder than even I was prepared for, and my ears go heavy and my head goes numb.

But that's not all. Still wearing his surprise, Moreno slips backward into the waiting embrace of the ice as if it has been primed for him. It weaves around him like a wave breaking on shore. It engulfs him. His mouth stretches in one terrible line of terror, and then he's trapped inside it again, crystalized.

Then the wall of ice turns to water, and it all comes tumbling down.

#

Swim, Dovie. That's what the water whispers to me. *Swim, Daughter.* The Maw has sucked me in, but just as powerfully it spits me back out. I'm a Shorewoman, after all. I belong to the edge of the lake, not the center of it.

The water rushes me out of that forest, through the trees, spinning me like a leaf on a storm. I'm sinking down, down, but the water buoys me up again. *Breathe.* I breathe.

Move. I move. Up ahead there's a shape of something, fighting just like I am to overcome the massive influx of waves and water. A creature? No. A boat. The lake flings me forward and it smacks me right in the face.

When I awaken, I'm staring at Our Lake from above. Its waters are calm and flat as glass today, with wisps of silver that could be trout or cloud shadows. Or—wait. They could be clouds themselves.

The great lake I'm looking at is the blue sky above my head. I flail about, disoriented, and the movement brings me my senses: my toes are wet and heavy, trailing in water; my arms are wrapped in a thick coat of sand. I'm lying on the lake shore.

After testing out all my limbs—miraculously useable—I manage to get to my knees, and then to my feet. One of my boots is missing. I tear off the other one, tossing it down. I glance around the shore. It is unfamiliar, bare.

That's when I notice the stretch of dark shapes behind me, lined up like our shore houses, only smaller, each of them shaped by a familiar hand.

I hug my arms around myself and realize: I have reached the other side.

#

My people tell a story about the day I came home from the North Shore. They say I carried an armful of lake roses, petals dropping behind me, leading a trail of white into The Maw like snow. They say I had scratches all across my skin from the thorns.

People claim that there was a rose for each person drowned that day, the day the lake took our houses. Some say that half our folk drifted across the lake without a boat to guide them in the Great Flood. Others choose not to keep a count, in their telling of the story.

Grandmother-as-was ended up spotting me, they say. She cried out and pointed across bedraggled, recovering sand. When I got closer, she stared at me for a long time without moving, and I stared right back. She claims she was the first to take me by the elbow and lead me to the rest of the folk. In all honesty, I cannot remember.

What I do remember is the way Warren's cottage—our cottage—had been turned inside out, its broken ribs of timber exposed through crumbling walls. I forgot all about grandmothers and lake roses then, except to picture the one that Warren burned into a six-year-old's soul boat, saying, "Not all of us live longer, Dovie, dear."

My people say that the Great Wave carried everyone off who didn't survive its thunderous arrival, but that wasn't true. Inside the broken ribs of our cottage, right where the heart should be, I found Warren, stretched out beside my lumpy, half-sanded training boat.

We sent him across to the unknown shore just as we started the rebuilding. My training boat was the only soul boat we had, so we made do. In a way, it was fitting, because every uneven knot and swirl of wood was as much of his making as it was of mine. In death, his wrinkles were not so deep as I remembered them to be.

After the sending off, we began anew. I sledged in wood from the cedar grove where Warren found me in my hovel, and we built new cottages.

Such is the story my people tell.

But my people are fond of stories.

LAST WORDS OF THE NETHERWORMS

A wave of orange detox mist receded, giving Anabrid her first view of Nethersea Research Station Eight. Through the roughened glass of the detox chamber it loomed: stainless, slate-colored, sterile. A long hall to darkness.

Then something moved, and fluorescent lights winked on. The hall turned shell-bright, and at its ending, where the hall branched in further directions, a Bello Whitecoat stood waiting. Even smudged through the glass, his pointed chin and deep purple, longfaced features were recognizable, stark against the white coat that declared his status as a doctor of science. Danto.

Ana's breath hitched and slid like the chamber doors as they opened. By the time they closed behind her, she had pasted a smile in place.

Danto offered her a hand. "Anabrid! It's wonderful to see you. Welcome to NRS Eight."

His palm was too warm. She'd shaken many warmer palms in her lifetime as a Hybrid, or Brid, but today of all days, the difference was unsettling. She dropped the handshake quickly. "Thank you. And congratulations."

His eye ridges rose, but so then did the edges of his lips in a smile. "Thank you." He glanced left to right, though they were alone in the hallway, and leaned in. "Seriously, Ana, thank you. For coming here. For doing this."

The shortening of her name sounded informal and jarring after their years apart. "You're welcome." What more was there to say? *It's a great opportunity for me. I'll trade breast milk for my dream job anytime.*

His eyes had already drifted down to her breasts. Danto was one of the few males she'd known in grad school—of *any* species, Halomere or Bello or Brid—who *didn't* do that normally.

“Everything was all right? Smooth journey?” he asked.

An elevated flight over the acid storms of the North Nethersea could never be described as *smooth*, but since Danto's eyes had not left her chest, she knew exactly to what he referred. “I pumped,” she said. She'd had to, to keep up her milk supply and to relieve the endless pain, the lumps in her breasts. She lifted the refrigerated case at her side. “I even brought the milk.”

His dark, large-pupiled eyes shone. She handed him the case, careful not to brush his fingers. “I'd best take this to Nyla,” he said with a wide-shouldered shrug of apology. “If you don't mind following . . .”

Danto did not wait for more, hefting the case and hurrying off down the shimmering hallway. Ana followed behind. They took several turns before encountering a male Brid not wearing white. Ana's feet stumbled to a halt, and after a moment, Danto noticed and followed suit.

“Tambrid, this is our new zoolinguist, Dr. Anabrid Northwatch. I mentioned her yesterday.”

Ana flinched and looked at Danto in surprise. *Yesterday?* This station had had one day of warning before her arrival? The Brid male watched her closely, his eye ridges drawn. She had not expected to find another Brid here. Well, besides the baby, of course.

“Welcome, Ana,” he said. It was custom among Brides to get familiar and drop the identifier right away, but Ana bristled all the same. “I’m Tam. I’m responsible for the networks around here.”

“Networks?”

“Information systems.” His skin was a shade darker than hers, a spoonful of lavender mixed with a drop of black, and his wide-set eyes reflected back infinite miniscule hallways like a broken mirror. He wore his hair in a long, thin braid over his shoulder, the same color as his skin, like a tail that grew from the back of his head.

“He’s IT,” said Danto. “Apologies, but we should get to Nyla.”

Ana felt relief as she walked away.

#

Nyla was beautiful by Halomere standards. She had skin like the foam on the Nethersea and eyes the cloudy blue of a toxic storm. When Nyla smiled in greeting, Ana remembered a poem she’d read in her extracurriculars. *Like roses in her cheeks.* Suddenly she understood that line as she had never done before.

Nyla lay with her scientific miracle sleeping in her arms. Ana could just see its—his, she remembered, it’s a he—pale purple dome cresting from white blankets. He had black hair, like his mother. How strange, on a Bride.

Most Brides were like Ana, born from a Bello mother and a Halomere father. Yet this one, this little boy whose father was Bello and his mother Halomere, was much rarer. Ana remembered how sparse her life had been of people like her and felt, for an instant, a flash of deep pity for this boy-child.

Then Nyla caught her eye. “Oh, Ana. May I call you Ana? How can I express my gratitude to you? Words are not enough.” Danto went to his wife and put a hand on her shoulder. She leaned her dark head against his fingers, still smiling.

Ana did not smile back. First another Brid, now a Halomere? And was she expected to say . . . ? *Yes, how convenient that my daughter is dead so that your son may live.* Instead she said, “I’ve been pumping.” She pointed to the refrigerated case that Danto still held.

Nyla frowned. “The doctors recommend it from the breast.”

All that wasted milk. “Whichever you like. I am at your service, provided I’m still able to work.” That was the bargain, after all.

“He’s sleeping now. We’ve decided to call him Gregor.” Nyla smiled at the pile of blankets in her arms. “Will you come back in an hour?”

“Certainly.”

Danto went over to the wall, where a panel of black buttons stood out starkly against the white paint. He pushed one and a screen beside the buttons lit up. “Can you send someone to show Anabrid her quarters?”

A Brid face appeared: Tambrid, looking down as if into a camera on his wrist. “At once,” he said. Ana went to wait by the door. The ache in her breasts inched down her body, to her ankles, and gripped her there.

#

Tambrid himself appeared, much to Ana’s irritation. He greeted her again as Ana with a smile, but his expression wavered at the look on her face. “What is it?” he asked as he led her down the darkened halls. Lights winked on as they turned each corner.

“Only my mother calls me Ana.”

His eye ridges, sprouted with dark purple hairs, furrowed into his wide brow.

“How strange. Don’t you know any other Brides?”

“Not really,” she said. A flash of the only other Brid in Ana’s preparatory class came to mind: Serennabrid. Popular amongst the Halomeres. She came from money on her Halomere side, and due to Ana’s scholarship status, they mostly avoided one another. They might be of the same species, but they existed in entirely separate worlds. Ana had not thought of Serennabrid in a long time.

Tambrid didn’t speak for a while. Then he said, “Well. I’m sorry if I was too forward. I’m always getting told off for my manners around here.” And he grinned again, apologetically this time.

Ana cleared her throat. Her back began to cramp, too, and she wanted nothing more than to lie down. She hadn’t slept well on the journey over, though the toxic storms had been better than normal, the pilot said. “Which one is my room, please?”

“None of these. We put you close to the observation deck. I heard you’re here to find out why the netherworms are dying?”

How nice for someone to acknowledge it: her work. They both knew that was not why she was really here. But it was why she came. “Yes,” she said, after far too long.

“I read your treatise last night. The one about words in the positive register. I’m sure if anyone can figure this out, it’s you.” He stopped abruptly as they rounded another corner, and she nearly walked into him in surprise.

“Well,” she said. “I’ll . . . do my best.”

“I know.” He smiled again. It was unsettling, how often he smiled. She had not expected anyone living in an isolated research station south of the Nethersea to be *friendly*. She didn’t even expect that of people at home. “This one’s yours. Observation deck’s just there. Ellie—Dr. Ellisent—said she’ll take you out tomorrow. Halomere lady. She’s nice. I think you’ll like her.”

Ana supposed an expression of doubt wouldn’t help her cause. Five people in an isolated research station for a year. She couldn’t afford to alienate any of them. “Perhaps I will,” she said, right before going into her room and shutting the door.

#

Nyla came to her with Gregorbrid before an hour was up. The Halomere woman buzzed with excitement, her stormy eyes alight. “We’ve been giving him formula,” she said as Ana shut the door and bade her sit down. “But the doctors were so pleased when we told them about you. He’s got a much better chance with you, they said.”

Ana froze halfway to her bed. *I’m sorry*, the Whitecoat told her in her memory. *We’re not hopeful about her chances*. He had a face like a wilting flower and he smelled like soap.

“Ana?”

Ana jerked back to life. Nyla wore the roses in her cheeks again. She proffered up the bundle of blankets as if bestowing a great gift. So she was going to sit and watch, then, this female? Watch with narrowed eyes of peculiar blue as Ana undressed, put this babe’s mouth against her breast, fiddled until his lips closed around her chapped dark nipple? Watch as he sucked down each gulp of milk, each sip more of her lifeblood,

meant for someone else? She tasted metal in her throat and had to look away. But she took the bundle.

The room didn't have much furniture. Nyla sat on the bed, so Ana took the remaining chair, turning it until she faced the same direction as Nyla. She chose her far breast first, the one harder for Nyla to see. Her shirt was designed for this purpose, easy to unbutton, and she wore a breastcovering that unclipped in the front. Thick, padded, so as to catch any escaping milk. Her breast felt heavy and tender in her hands. Gregor stirred in his bundle of blankets, almost as if he could smell the milk. His little face, wide-eyed and pale purple and blinking away sleep, uncurled from the blankets. And then his thin lips opened. She guided her nipple in between.

When he began to suckle, it hurt, not only on the skin of her nipple, already dry from pumping, but also in her lower abdomen, which began to cramp. He sucked with a strength that surprised her, though at first it didn't seem as if he was getting milk.

"Is it working?" Nyla asked anxiously from across the room. She half-stood.

"Yes," said Ana. She kept her head bent, her lavender hair curtained between them. She shrank the room down to the small fingers that emerged from the blankets, that found the curve of her breast. She listened to his breaths mingle with her own, a quiet syncopated music.

The pain dulled. He began to get milk. He suckled for a long time, longer than when she pumped, and halfway through she moved him to her other breast. Nyla's eyes grew wide and limpid.

When it was finished, Ana handed back the bundle, her arms trembling from holding him so long.

“Thank you,” said Nyla, breathless, quiet. “How can I ever thank you?”

“I’m going to sleep for three hours,” said Ana. “I’ll set an alarm.”

#

Around midmorning the next day, after feeding, Ana met Dr. Ellisent. She was a thin brown scrap of a Halomere female with piercing dark eyes and a firm handshake. Her skin felt too cold.

“Let’s cut to the point,” she said as she led Ana to the observation deck. “You’re here for a terrible reason, and I’m sorry for it. But that child is a blessing. So I suppose I’m glad about that.”

It was the first time someone mentioned, albeit in a roundabout way, what had happened to leave a Brid female with milk and no baby. “Thank you,” Ana said.

“Don’t thank me. We can be pretty uncivilized down here, but we haven’t lost everything yet.” They reached the observation deck then, a large, round room bellying out into the Nethersea water like a bubble waiting to burst. The hyperglass that allowed them full view into the sea stretched far above their heads. In the corner of the room was a small, round entrance to a long tunnel, and through the hyperglass, Ana could see that it led to a docked submachine.

She stopped. “We’re not taking that.”

Dr. Ellisent snorted. “I thought you were here for the netherworms, too?”

“I am. Of course I am.”

“Well, I’m taking you to see them.” That was that. “And you should call me Ellie. Everyone does.” Ellie brooked no further argument, pressing some buttons beside the round door and leading Ana down the tunnel.

When they reached the end, a pressurized chamber led from the tunnel to the entrance of the submachine. “Put this on,” said Ellie, handing Ana a floatation device from which hung an airmask and a whistle.

“What’s the whistle for?”

“In case you’re lost at sea,” said Ellie briskly, already halfway into the pressurized chamber. “But you won’t need it. If something happens in this thing, you’ll drown before you reach the surface.”

Not the most reassuring of answers. For half a moment, Ana fought a curious desire to laugh. Drowning in the toxic Nethersea would mean more than losing breath—it could burn through your skin like acid. The whistle was about as effective as taking an umbrella into a toxic storm.

Ellie waited with impatient hands on hips, so Ana choked down her bitter laughter and put on the floatation device. It pressed tightly around her tender chest. A bit of milk squeezed out and dampened her breastcovering.

When they were in the submachine, hatch closed, Ana let out her breath. The machine was old, somewhat rickety, but familiar to her—the controls matched the vehicles she’d driven to lab in the distant past. She could drive it if she needed to. But Ellie was already behind the main steering wheel, clicking and booting up and prodding. Ana began to pick sounds from the silence: the snap of buttons and the rustling of Ellie’s floatation device each time she moved; behind that, the whispers of sea currents brushing over the submachine. And, behind it all and perhaps imagined, a low, sweet whine.

Ellie froze. “You hear that?”

Ana nodded.

“They know you’re coming.”

Ana regarded the doctor in a new light. Very few were willing to acknowledge the true intelligence of the netherworms. Up north, people thought of them as freak mammals, if they thought of them at all. Anything that could survive the toxicity of the Nethersea was bound to be a bit poisoned, a bit strange. And among the science community, when Ana had published her first treatise on their language, it’d mostly become something to laugh about. *The Brid half-crazed on worms has done it again*. But Ellie’s face was somber, her eyes clear. No laughter here. Ana sat back, relaxing a bit for the first time that morning.

The submachine engine pattered to life, drowning out any further netherworm song. Ellie lifted them from the floor of the sea, steering away from the observation deck and into the dark unknown. She flicked another button and the submachine light burst on, illuminating the ocean path before them. Ana sucked in her breath.

Life was everywhere, even here, even in the most poisonous deadly place on the planet. Seaweed the color of sunset stretched its fronds in a sensual dance. Neon-scaled fish scattered away from their beacon of light. A hard-shelled helocrab beat a slow and steady march across the sand, scuttling away behind ghost-coral when the submachine shadow passed overhead.

Ellie glanced sideways. “What do you think? Scared now?”

“No,” Ana said, not looking away from the window. “Not scared.” Suddenly she remembered how she used to imagine her womb as a kind of ocean, primordial soup in miniature. She used to curl her hands around her stomach, feeling its warmth, imagining

each heartbeat as a lightning strike. *I'll create you*, she whispered to the bump, *and you'll create me*. A whole new planet to discover.

She reached up a hand to wipe her cheek when Ellie wasn't looking. By the time she was finished, Ellie's face looked softer beneath its wrinkles, and Ana thought she might have seen after all.

"I'm going to take you to where their pod's been feeding," said Ellie.

"Do you study them, too?" Ana said, realization hitting far too late.

"I'm a biologist. I study everything," said Ellie. "But, no, not the netherworms. I'm studying their biome. The Nethersea itself."

"Ah."

"It's more interesting than it sounds. Though not, I suppose, to a zoolinguist."

"I think it sounds interesting."

"Well, *you* would," said Ellie cryptically.

"Why, because I'm not like other zoolinguists?" Ana asked, unable to keep the injury from her voice. It was true. Not many in her field were female, much less Brid.

"Because you love the netherworms," said Ellie, as if it were obvious.

So perhaps Ellie had read Ana's work, too.

Just then: another sweet, piercing note. This one started high and shifted low, neutral register, ending on the tone that meant it was a question.

"Catch that?" Ellie asked, raising a brow.

"Not quite. Too muffled. Can we get closer?"

"We're getting there." Ellie patted the dashboard of the submachine as one would comfort a beloved pet. "This old thing's doing her best."

A pattering path later and their beacon of light swept around a rocky bend. Currents lifted plankton and sank schools of glittering fish. Seaweed reached for them and waved in greeting and lifted longing fingers. Then, all of a sudden, the netherworms appeared.

Five of them: A cow, her bull, and three calves. The bull was smaller than the cow, but even smaller meant huge to Ellie and Ana in their submachine. The netherworms lay on their backs for feeding, sucking in great mouthfuls of water and using their neon-bright baleen-covered feeding-gills to separate out their food from the rest. The currents increased around them from the heaving mouthfuls of water they took in and forced back out again.

As the beacon of the submachine swept across them, the cow flipped upright, shielding her calves with her long, undulating body. But she didn't swim away. She rotated slowly in the water, with the lightest flip of her right tapered fin, until she faced them. Her ventral pleats gave off a rainbow of blue to green to orange to yellow and black. She blinked and regarded them heavy-lidded. Such a huge creature, five times as long as Ana and hundreds of tons heavier, and yet she slid, curled, uncurled gracefully in the water. In this she had complete control.

The beacon fell across her blowholes, then her bright green eye. She moaned. It was low, neutral register. A wary request. *Identify yourself*. Ana knew it this time.

But she had no way to respond. She'd been working on a recording database, a way to access words and send them back out into the sea, when she got pregnant. She hadn't opened it since. "I'm Anabrid," she whispered, because she couldn't help herself.

She had to answer. “You don’t have to worry about me.” Beside her, she could hear Ellie breathing.

Through the waves, another sound: high-pitched and squeaking all at once, positive register, demanding. The calves. *Can we can we can we?*

A flat single note, negative register, one of the easiest to learn. *No.*

Ana breathed a laugh. Ellie tilted her head. “What is it?” she asked.

“The little ones want to see. Their mother says no.”

“That the mother?”

“Yes.”

“She’s beautiful.”

“Yes.”

“And three calves. That’s good.”

“Very good.” They were hiding beneath their mother’s bulk, but Ana could still hear them, demanding, crying now. Negative register. *Why not why not why not?*

The mother said something in the neutral register, something Ana couldn’t quite make out or hadn’t heard before. It sounded like a grunt. Perhaps humor? She’d written a treatise about that, once. The use of the neutral register in unexpected moments was a way of expressing humor. It had never passed peer review.

“You said there’s been a death every week?” asked Ana carefully, not looking away. She saw Ellie nod in their reflection in the window.

“Yes. We record them. The same sounds, every time. And their bodies wash up near the beach by the research station. I went out a few times, suited up, to look for signs of a kiteshark attack, and there were none.”

“No damage?”

“Nothing.”

Ana could hardly argue with a biologist. She'd taken several classes, sub-majored in it, because you couldn't study the language of netherworms without at least understanding how their bodies worked, and especially their minds. They had highly developed minds. Some of the braver evolutionary theorists, unafraid of being laughed at, had theorized that the worms were the most ancient, most evolved beings on the planet.

“Can we get closer?” Ana asked.

Ellie hesitated. “A bit. I don't want to stress them with the engine noises. And we'll scare off their food.”

“Just a little closer.”

Ellie guided them in.

The cow's flipper stilled. She seemed to freeze for a moment, turning to stone in a world that was always moving. Then, in a flash, the bull flipped over and nudged the calves and all of them were gone.

“Damn,” said Ana.

At least Ellie didn't say *I told you so*. She took them back silently instead.

#

Alone in her room that night, forty-five minutes to the next feeding, Ana listened to what the station had recorded: the last words spoken by the dying netherworms.

The song was unlike anything she'd heard before. It mixed the registers, both positive and negative, like an overtone—the way some Halomere could sing two notes at once. This was both. This was good and bad, but it was not neutral.

She listened again.

It was almost *goodswim*, but it was not. It wasn't quite *next current*, either. These were her best approximations for the greetings and farewells that the worms used, even in cases of immediate danger, such that they knew they might not see the recipient again. This was something like that, but it was something new.

Goodswim. Next current. Hail and goodswim. Pirim guide you.

Pirim was how Ana had translated their language about their mother-god. It was almost like that, *pir-iiiim*, the way they moaned it. "Pirim guide you" was formal and old and not often heard, not on the sea recordings collected in the last decade. But these last words almost sounded like that.

As she played the wormsong again, a mournfulness rose in her that she hadn't felt for a long while. She'd suppressed it, the sadness. Life was too difficult otherwise. But these words ached with it. They spilled their cry right into her heart and across her soul.

"What are you saying?" she asked. But she heard it again, the triumph paired against the fierce sharp ache, and she almost felt as if she knew.

She played the recording over and over until the alarm went off.

#

So the days passed. After Ana's arrival, no netherworms washed up on shore. She went out a few more times with Ellie in the puttering submachine, but they didn't always sight worms. Activity diminished. The feedings continued on schedule.

One day several weeks after Ana's arrival, Nyla was on her way out when Ana appeared to feed Gregor. "I'm sorry," Nyla said, hair frizzing up around the pale crown of her head. "I've got an appointment with Ellie. Are you okay here without me?"

Ana tried not to sound too relieved when she said, “Yes. Fine.”

The creases of worry around Nyla’s eyes did not exactly lessen, but she smiled all the same as she brushed Gregor’s dark hair away from his eyes. “Okay. Mommy will be back soon, all right, lovey?” She bent to kiss his forehead. Ana looked away. “I hate these check-ups,” Nyla added as she straightened. “I’m always afraid of what Ellie might find.”

A memory from an e-comm swam to the surface of Ana’s mind. *It is not possible for the Halomere mother to nurse for medical reasons.* How distant those words appeared now. “For medical reasons” sterilized a host of traumas as wide as the Nethersea. For the first time, Ana felt a prick of sympathy for Nyla, whose double mastectomy prevented her from feeding Gregor herself.

“Good luck,” Ana heard herself say.

Nyla did not look up from Gregor. Her eyes were soft. “Thanks, Ana.”

Once alone with Gregor, Ana began the now-familiar process of dragging a chair over to his cradle and unbuttoning the various obstacles between his mouth and her breasts. She worked more quickly than usual, freed from the tension of being watched. When she lifted him from his cradle, her arms no longer screamed a protest in anticipation of holding him for the extended feeding time. As Gregor moved in muscle memory toward her breast, Ana realized that somewhere in the last several weeks she had become accustomed to this.

She closed her eyes, sucking in a deep belly breath. She had once read a treatise about the nature of time, purporting that beings could, in fact, travel through it. The thesis sprang back to her mind now as she sat with the weight of Gregor in her arms. Memory, the neuroscientist had written, was as clear a way back as possible and as close to a time-

traveling machine as the world would ever get. Ana had loved that thought at the time. She'd practiced, closing her eyes and drifting back to childhood memories spent with her mother under shady trees on warm afternoons.

Now, for the first time in a long while, her memories urged her to travel. They pointed her toward a dark space in her mind, a part of her brain that currents moved around and avoided as often as they could. A patch of cold water in a warm sea. And, to her own surprise, Ana let herself drift.

The smell of clean baby skin in the air. The weight, heavier than she expected, of her daughter in her arms. Her miracle-child, born from a Halomere donor and Ana's own finicky womb. Life to create life. The shaft of light coming through the hospital window, hitting Ana's feet beneath the thin blanket. Warming them. The distant sound of footsteps and the doctor murmuring with Ana's mother outside the door. The taste of blood. Anna tongued her back teeth. She had bitten down too hard during labor. The rough fabric of the hospital-issue gown, scratching at Ana's back.

This moment, she thought. This memory I will hold with me until I can't hold memory anymore. This place in time, with my daughter alive in my arms.

Then the bundle in her arms shifted, and Ana opened her eyes. Time rushed away and she held Gregor again, back in the hard metal of standard-issue furniture in Nethersea Research Station Eight. The air was colder here. Her fingers felt numb.

Ana glanced down. Gregor had stopped suckling a moment earlier, and he blinked up at her now with recognition in his dark eyes. She saw herself reflected back a hundred times.

Ana went straight to the observation deck. The sadness was in her again, aching.

She flipped a few switches on the nearest wall panel. Recordings in progress.

Without waiting, she sent them to her wristband. She could listen on the way.

She was supposed to wait for Ellie, or Tam. To notify someone. But she was tired of waiting.

“I’m coming,” she told the empty air, the hyperglass, the sea beyond. “I’m coming.”

Her flotation device was as tight and uncomfortable as it had been before. She threw it on anyway, though she noticed the whistle was missing. Laughable. It didn’t matter anyway. If something happened, the ocean would take her. She knew how swiftly she would go.

The submachine controls were exactly as she remembered. The engine sputtered enough to give Ana a flash of concern, but a moment later, it chugged to life and carried her off in a cloud of sand from the sea floor. She had minutes—minutes, before someone at the station would be in touch with her, yelling at her, maybe cancelling her agreement and sending her home. She didn’t care anymore.

Gregor would live.

The netherworms might not.

The currents were choppiest than they had been on previous visits, shoving the little submachine back and forth in a zig-zagging pattern through the water. Gripping the edge of her seat with a free hand, Ana steered around a bend of ghost-coral to the netherworm feeding area, only to find it empty.

She cursed under her breath. Nothing.

But then she took a deep, shaky breath. She paused, and she cut the submachine engine.

Currents massaged her. The ocean curled its arms around the machine. Suspended, Ana breathed, listening.

Distantly, they came: the pure ringing notes, negative register, quick and staccatoed through the sea. *Danger danger danger.*

In an instant, she flipped the engine to life again, steering toward the sounds. She no longer worried that she was going too fast. Rather, she felt as if she were moving in slow motion. *More more more.* She strained to hear the netherworms, begging and praying not to hear the now-familiar last words. *Pirim please no.*

She rounded another clump of seaweed fronds and found herself smack in the middle of a large netherworm pod. Calves scattered from her, ducking behind cows and bulls left and right. One cow turned to face the submachine with lightning-fast speed, her giant body shuddering with power to strike.

“No!” The word escaped Ana despite its uselessness, despite the fact that the cow wouldn’t hear or understand. Yet the cow froze all the same, all that power held in stillness as the currents nudged and poked at the netherworms and the submachine both.

Ana let out her breath. Just then, her wristband beeped.

“What the tox do you think you’re doing?” Ellie’s voice was loud over the sound of the machine. “You turn that around right now. You’re not invincible!”

“I’m here for the netherworms,” said Ana. Her voice shook but the words came out calm. “I’m not coming back yet.”

“There’s an acid storm coming south! You’ll have other chances—”

“I don’t want other chances. I don’t want to wait. I’m tired of waiting,” Ana said.

Ellie sighed. Before she could reply, the wristwatch beeped again: the recordings that Ana sent to herself were available at last. She pressed a button to play them, drowning out whatever Ellie might add.

Negative register song washed over her, a string of frantic and hurried words: *Danger warning bite rip stay shelter longtime goodswim*—chatter continued in a frenzied pace, all of it united around a single thread of warning.

Then the pod shifted and flashed around her machine, and the recordings made sudden sense. At the other end of the pod was a venomous kiteshark, one of the netherworms’ only real predators. It wasn’t the size of the kiteshark that mattered—it was the bite, the deadly venom that swept through the worms’ bodies and paralyzed them, for the kiteshark to drag them back to its den and devour them later.

Ana pressed the communicator on her wrist. “I thought you said there were no bites or marks,” she said.

“There weren’t,” Ellie grumbled. “Turn around now, please.”

“There’s a kiteshark here amongst them. I can’t turn around yet.”

“Do no harm. You know that one? Scientist’s rules. That includes yourself.”

The kiteshark’s tale flicked back and forth to keep it steady in the rippling currents. The sea was churned up from more than the netherworm pod; that was the toxic storm moving in. At that thought, real fear coursed through Ana’s veins, turning them cold as sludge. She’d felt that kind of paralyzing shock only once before, and this time, she wasn’t going to let it sink her.

Out of the darkness and the grief and the cold she felt it: certainty. In this, at least, she could do something. She was here to help the netherworms. By all that lived, she was going to damned well help them.

“Anabrid,” Ellie said somberly through the band. “Please don’t do this. It’s not going to bring her back.”

“I know,” said Ana. And then she gunned the device forward, straight toward the shark.

She rocketed through the netherworm pod, but the worms were faster—they scattered in all directions to avoid the metal bullet coming at them through the sea. The kiteshark was not as clever. The submachine clunked it right on its lower half as it attempted to dart away.

A cloud of dark purple blood burst into the water around her. The sharp dent on the roof of the submachine, poking down toward Ana’s head, was the only evidence of damage. She turned the submachine around again, dimly aware of netherworm song and the rush of currents and the sound of possible thunder far above, outside the shelter of the sea. She blocked them all out and plunged forward again.

This time, she wasn’t aiming to hit. Only to scare the kiteshark away. But even that was unnecessary. As soon as its blood hit the water, it had disappeared, leaving only a wide veil of transparent purple in its wake.

Ana released the controls and sat back heavily in her seat. The netherworms circled the submachine, watching her, uncertain of her allegiance.

“Are you done?” Ellie asked from Ana’s wrist, fire in her voice.

Ana let herself be buffeted. She let the current take her and bump her gently against the nearest worm, a cow. And the strange part was, the cow didn't thrust her away, didn't move to attack or defend. She stared back.

That green eye looked almost familiar.

Ana touched her fingers to the hyperglass of the submachine dash, reaching for the worm. About them, the pod turned, calves creeping closer only to be pushed back by more cautious parents. And all the while, that cow, with her eye like an ancient vent opening to the core of the world, watched back.

"Hello," said Ana gently to the worm. "I see you. I hear you."

The cow blinked lazily and drifted a little closer, her segmented body floating inches from the submachine.

It was at that moment the hyperglass cracked with a loud pop, and the submachine dash exploded with light.

"Shit," said Ana, now frantically pushing buttons. Pressure loss, exterior damage, computer damage. The lights blinked fear and frantic energy into her heart.

"What's wrong? What's happening?" asked Ellie from her wrist.

"Submachine's losing pressure. I'm coming back," said Ana. The netherworms faded into the murky sea as the submachine beacon winked on and off.

"Damn," said Ellie. "Come on, honey. You can do this."

Ana bit down on her tongue to keep herself steady, alert. Gradually, with painful slowness, she began to move back in the direction of the distant glow that was the observation deck.

More lights on the dash winked on. Ana realized a second later that the netherworms followed, swimming on either side of the submachine as if it were a calf in a pod. This seemed odd—netherworms were very particular about whom they accepted into their pods, even amongst each other—but there wasn't time to worry about their behavior. A beeping began on the submachine panel, slow at first but increasing in speed and pitch.

“Come on, don't give up,” said Ellie, but Ana didn't like the tension in her voice. The observation deck had never seemed farther away. The engine chugging grew louder than Ana's pulse, and then with an abrupt and brutal *click* the beam of light at the front of the submachine went dark.

Ellie began to say something else, curses or perhaps blessings or perhaps a parting farewell. At the same moment, a loud crack echoed through the chamber, and then the sub broke apart at the dash.

Sensation rushed in to fill the gap of stunned numbness, of frozen time. Cold water, acid sucked in on a shocked breath, lungs aching, lungs full of poison. So this was how dying felt. It was less an experience than a total assault of Ana's senses, a complete disorientation, as seemed only fitting for a departure from the known world. None of this came to her as thoughts. Bursts of feeling, of memories and time, shattered through her and crumbled her apart like shells beaten on a shore.

Then, from the darkness, senses returned. Warmth. Breathing. A cloud of something soft around her—her own hair. Ana tasted salt. The world floated with her.

She opened her eyes and felt shock rumble through her a second time. All around her the netherworms swam. And one of them, right below her, seemed to be carrying her

forward in a transparent sack of warmth. It came from the netherworm's blowholes, she realized, as if the creature had blown out a protective casing, a kind of placenta to keep Ana sheltered from the toxicity of the water.

A green eye blinked up at her as they drifted through the Nethersea. Ana recognized the cow. The mother's eye was deep as a fathomless cave, as old as time itself. As Ana met that ancient gaze, carried forward in a healing embrace, she felt her atoms almost rearrange themselves. She tasted the currents and knew which way to swim. She felt the bones of the world. She heard every wormsong that had ever been sung, that ever would be sung, and understood the beating heart of truth between them.

Goodlife, said the last words of the netherworm that carried her. *Gooddeath*. All of it was the same. The atoms that made up Ana's daughter Herabrid were the ones that made up Gregor were the ones cut from Nyla were the ones swimming in the ocean now, in the netherworm pod. Life begat itself, in an unending patten that would reach forever, and in this small way, in saving it, the netherworms shepherded that pattern. It was a gift, they said, to live—and a gift to die, to let another live.

Ana understood then that this warm embrace, this shelter, meant that the magnificent creature that moved beneath her would die. Hot tears slid to her lips and tasted like the Nethersea, like the edge of the placental sack around her, whatever it was that miraculously kept her alive. She thought, *I will remember this. I'll be in this moment with you forever.*

And then the shore swam up to meet them, and the netherworm pod sang their farewells. The notes were high and clear and unmistakable. *This is goodlife. This is gooddeath.* They sang even as the green eye slipped closed. *Pirim guide you*, they said.