

Trees Struck by Lightning Burning from the Inside Out

by

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ABSTRACT

The six short stories and novella in *Trees Struck by Lightning Burning from the Inside Out* use the genre elements of high fantasy, horror, and the gothic to explore themes of family, lineage, addiction, and loss in a lyrical style that places specific emphasis on character.

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“Moon’s Up”

Under the shadows of the crumbling spires, the ruins of the witch city as gone as its lost witches, there was once Roslyn, before she became Leof Roslyn, head of her house. Leof Roslyn reimagines this often: the grove of circled beeches where the grass grew tall through the cracks of an ancient gathering place. She and her younger brother—daring each other deeper into the cobbled lanes, into the overgrown skeletons of stone laid in the suggestion of a people that once-were and never-would-be-again. There, they would escape and carve their dreams into the soft beech trunks. They pretended to be warriors, witches, and wolves. They played swan-and-needle.

But this is not the story of the beech grove when Roslyn and her brother were children. Where prayers hung from the trees on strips of fabric, bone-colored, and the names of the lost were written in black scrawl that bled straight through. This is not the story of how once, the nightfall cut their throats with how quick it came. The dread of tangled howls. How Roslyn and her brother climbed up as far as they could into the fabric-coiled-branches, their fingernails red-rimmed. How the monsters chasing could smell them, clawed at the trunks, pining for Roslyn and her brother’s blood. This is not the story of how he fell. How Roslyn caught his arm with a gasp much older than her years—how he dropped, despite her strength, her screaming—into the maw of the living dead. This is not that story. After all—only children try to run from the cursed.

#

Draven leads Leof Becca and Leof Roslyn into the tunnels using the mapper.

Becca and Roslyn must cover their mouths to keep from breathing in the ash that stalks in the torchlight. None of them speak, not at first. Roslyn only bends onto her knees, placing one pale hand on the ground, spreading her fingers wide. She closes her eyes and listens past the wave of the torchlight. Down the spiraling tunnels, the labyrinths of the ruin of crypts. There's a skittering sigh of something like spiderwebs up her arm—it's true. Roslyn opens her eyes, and the light swamps.

"Draven," she says, the name a slice against her cheek, a swell of blood.

Draven grins, mouth uncovered. He's scrawnier than she remembers. Far more skittish.

"It was easy," he hisses, "they laid here, not sleeping—but dead, like corpses." He crouches, stabbing his axe into the ground. "Like this," he digs the sharp edge, "right through their hearts. Right before moon's up." His grin doesn't falter, even when the silence stings and Roslyn must look away. His eyes are too hollowed, bruised from sleeplessness, she guesses. "Now what's this?" he laughs at them, "what's wrong, then, you oafs? Don't you get it? We killed them. Guttled them! Every single one we found here." He coughs. "Surely, there's more—but we'll slay them, too, won't we? This is it... This is what we've all been waiting for, since—"

"There's blood here," says Becca.

They all know how only the living can bleed. It means some of his company had died.

The three turn to the scythe-shapes against the passage pitchstone. The body-red. The slug-smell of rot. Roslyn imagines the way the newly dead crooked, the snap of their joints, spines and fingers. How they crawled as the moon rose. How they flit up through

the rubble of the tunnel's mouth, into the sickle of pale light. But Draven only sighs, as if impatient. "It took us longer than expected to find this place. Next time, we won't cut it so close to moon's up, will we? No, of course not—because we're quick and clever, unlike Leofs, too afraid to leave Eddin, always turning your backs. Too afraid to fight..." He sniffs, rubbing his nose on his sleeve. "It's done, anyway, and you should all be thankful. To me, to us—to Huxley, most of all."

But the Leofs only axe their looks his direction.

Becca and Roslyn are not the only ones who hate Huxley and her cult of followers.

Followers like Draven, recently taken to calling themselves slayers when they're really just thieves and castoffs—not allowed inside the walls during moon's up. Roslyn sees them like rats scurrying between the cracks of things, making Eddin weaker. Taking from the houses they fell from, sowing dissent.

It has seemed to her, as of late, however, that being banished outside the walls did not do what her forbearers intended. Instead of killing the undesirables, it only made them harder to kill. It gave them rights to feeling boastful about their survival. Roslyn's seen them begging near the outskirts of the Heap, even heard them at market, crying how death always finds a way. How the heads of council houses are cowards. The Leofs as oafish as the cursed. How the slayers are the true warriors, unafraid of the darkness, of death.

"How is it you led us here, Draven—found this place without getting us lost?"

Becca is suspicious, but Roslyn knows the answer. She waits to see what Draven will say. He fidgets in his tattered cloak and his old boots. The mapper stowed in its hard cylinder

case slung at his back—the finery of the black leather strap across his chest out of place against his faded wraps.

He grins that grin Roslyn knows well, like he’s about to laugh at her. His teeth are straight and white. “Please.” He lies: “Slayers don’t get lost like Leofs. Like the people of Eddin. They don’t get eaten by the shadows of the spires—the wind, or the cursed. Now—” He pauses, coughing into the crook of his arm. “Now, there’s Huxley. She told me to show you this, show you what we can do—so you can’t deny it.” He stands, shuffling in the ash. “Here’s what. We find where they hole up during sun’s up. Places like this—and we kill them. All of them. We lift the curse, once and for all. It’s not hard—the only thing that’s stopped us is your fears, your—”

“Enough,” says Becca. She’s one of the eldest Leofs on the council, still good friends with Roslyn’s father before he passed his title to Roslyn. Becca and her wife had no children, so soon her own title will fall on her younger brother. Due to his own age, it’s expected he will pass it to his eldest son. So is the way of things. Becca is muffled under her handkerchief. “If this is true—if Huxley’s people—” Roslyn notices the way Becca does not include Draven, “can find their way around the wood reliably, without getting themselves lost... It does indeed change things. But I have never known this Huxley to do anything out of the good of her own heart.”

Draven swings his axe in his hand, as cocky as ever. “Why,” he says, “it’s good to hear you ask, Leof Becca. That’s true—what have the council of great houses ever done for Huxley, for us, the slayers?” The us is emphasized, lingers between them all. “If we do this,” then the we, so it’s clear that he took offense. Roslyn can barely stand it. How

little he's changed, how ungrateful. "Then we expect places on the council. Titles and houses, my Leofs. It's only fair—"

Roslyn's fists clench and unclench. She trembles from a fresh whip of hot anger.

"By god, of course it is," says Becca, and she laughs at him. "I only followed you here because Roslyn still trusts you. But I see now this is a trick—you have always vied for your sister's title—now even in rags, you try to gain equal footing..." She glares at him before heading back the way they came, down the tunnel, her hand at the jeweled hilt of her dagger. "I hope you promised Huxley nothing, dear little Draven," she calls over her shoulder, "because surely you knew not even Roslyn would bow to such a lunatic request from a poor rat like you!"

Draven's grin is gone—his chin dipped low in a snarl at Becca's back.

Roslyn bites her tongue to keep from shouting at him—how dare you—? But doesn't spare him of her own sneer. The fresh betrayal to their family still stings.

But Becca is wrong about why.

Roslyn knows how much her little brother Draven has always hated the cursed.

Hates them more than the houses, than the Leofs. More than he hates heights and onions in his food. More, even, than he hates Roslyn, ever since that day when they were children in the prayer grove. How they almost tore him into fleshy bits after he fell from her grasp in that beech tree. He still has the thick scars of a swiped claw across his face, so Roslyn was not as stunned to hear he became one of Huxley's followers—devoted to their revenge.

But it gave him no shit-all right to steal the mapper from their family. No shit-all right.

Roslyn wonders often how they were ever so close. “Give it back, Draven,” she says.

His mouth tugs. “Tell your council of houses,” he says, pausing as he stalks after Becca, “that if they don’t bargain with Huxley over this—we’ll sneak and kill you all while you sleep.”

#

The curse can only claim them once night falls. There’s no undoing it—it exists to consume, until every last one of them is turned. They say it was the old witch queen, on a black moon, who carved the first of Roslyn’s people alive with her bare talons, wrenching the man beyond death with a spell so sharp she stitched it into his bones. He hungered for his own people. Their blood. He was no longer a man. Those who become cursed move in flocks as fast as birds. They chew and rip and claw until hearts stop, until they turn their prey into themselves. They never grow old. There’s no reasoning with them. Their language is suffering. They take and keep taking unless caught and unwound in sunlight or stabbed clean through their hearts. But they leave no bodies to bury. Just ash swirling in the wind. Like they were made of the stuff all along.

#

Roslyn heads straight for the council house once she returns to Eddin. Though both her parents are still alive, she decides she will say nothing to either of them about her brother and his threats. Her father would only go after Draven himself—and her mother would argue, trying to keep her father from going. I’ll kill him for this, her father might shout if Roslyn told him about the stolen mapper—but he’d be lying. Instead, her father would find Draven, give him money—or pay to get him new boots. Try to bargain

for the mapper back, instead of taking it by force. Roslyn knows the routines of her family too well when it comes to her brother. He's brought them nothing but grief for years. Her mother tries to think of him as dead. But her father still hopes, still asks on market days if anyone has spotted him—still worries when no one has.

The council house might have once been a temple, its black glossy stone similar in style to the spires of the witch city. Eddin was built up around these mysterious structures. There are no histories other than stories. Stories about tears in the wind. How outside the walls, the directions can change. North becomes east, becomes south, or west, becomes another world entirely, far from this one.

Inside, through the great doors, Roslyn heads for the scroll room, barred from general public. Those there for guild business, awaiting contracts, bow slight at her passing. "Leof," they say. Roslyn ignores them.

The light plays through the round glass windows that wane the closer she gets to the back of the hall. If there was one thing Roslyn's people could guess about the witches that once lived here, it would be that they worshipped the moon and stars.

She disappears down one of the pitchstone corridors, and everything goes dim. It reminds her of the tunnels. The sound of twisting torchlight.

She does not find who she expects to find. Not Ralph—one of the wisest Leofs, who she's heard often spends full nights in the scroll room trying to teach himself the language of ruined books. But Becca. "Oh," says Roslyn, unable to help her frown. They'd parted ways once they made it through the gates, saying little but goodbyes.

It seems Roslyn might have interrupted Becca's thought—the older woman was staring out at the view across Eddin and the wilds from the round window.

No one knows what lies beyond the wood. Rumor had it those who once tried, generations past, disappeared—assumed cursed—their bodies never found.

“I see the rats have us both thinking, don’t they?” says Becca. Her braid of white hair trails over one shoulder, un-done from its usual coil. Roslyn hesitates, unsure how much she wants to reveal. But Becca had always been kind—though Roslyn doubts any would describe her as wise. Becca was a woman of action and impulse. She did not have the patience of Ralph, or his bowing neutrality. Perhaps because of this, she too had come to ask Ralph his opinions. If the cursed could indeed be safely slain—it could violently change everything. “He had business with the tutors,” Becca says, as if reading Roslyn’s thoughts.

She nods. Becca would have to do, then.

“Draven,” Roslyn begins, careful. “Before leaving the tunnels, made threats...” and then there was the matter of the mapper, but that secret stays with Roslyn and her house. Roslyn looks at the window. “He said if we would not reward and honor Huxley or the rest of the castoffs for their—slaying—of the cursed, they would kill us. The other Leofs may find this threat empty... But I know Draven, Becca. If it’s truly his intent...” Roslyn trails off, unsure what she should do.

“You knew him once, Roslyn,” Becca says, and Roslyn can feel her stare, “that’s true. But that sly boy is gone. Now he’s nothing but another stupid man, slobbering at the heels of powerful women. I wish he never sought you out. Still, this Huxley is another matter. She’s from an old, fallen house. Her grandmother was their ruin, caught falsely accusing another Leof of theft. She was a frail, sickly woman—no one thought she’d live the first moon’s up outside the walls, but I suppose she did, and more...” Becca taps her

fingers on the table, sighing. “I’m not yet ready to express these ideas to the council without indisputable evidence, but I’ve become suspicious of the reports we’re receiving.” Roslyn looks to her, surprised, and finds Becca’s frown. “I think, given what Draven showed us today, her followers are far more in number than we’ve been told. I worry our informants have been found out—bribed. It’s right to think the council would dismiss Draven’s threats—we’ve been told Huxley means nothing. That she is just another rat fighting for power over other rats. But if we dismiss her and these reports are false...”

Roslyn swallows, understanding. “Then—what do we do, Becca? What can be done?”

Becca shifts in her chair, clearing her throat. “That’s why I came for Ralph,” she says.

“I came because I’m going after Draven,” Roslyn confesses, but she keeps her voice firm. Becca raises her eyebrows, but Roslyn misunderstands, prompted into lying. “Just to talk to him,” she clarifies—even though she was thinking of doing nothing of the sort. Becca was right, Draven was no longer a boy. Roslyn had to take back what was stolen from her family. He wasn’t the only one who could make threats. She would instantly make good on hers. “I came to confide in Ralph,” Roslyn says, bowing her head. “In case something were to happen to me.”

“I did wonder,” says Becca, standing, seeming to have bought Roslyn’s lie. “How much Draven might mean to Huxley. I heard he became her follower, but I suspect she sees him more than just another rat—especially if she sends him to us. He’s newly fallen, and she’s already used his connections—but how many other ways might he have taught

her to weasel her way through the cracks of things? Or might she see him as something that could be bartered for more power?” Becca places her hand on Roslyn’s shoulder. “I feel we’re in the dark, dear Roslyn. But if you’re already set on going to find him, the winds are telling me you’re the one I came to see.”

#

Roslyn has only seen the mapper unfolded once, on the moon’s up her grandmother died two years ago. She remembers the way the mapper’s ink shifted like smoke, like threads moving in and out of focus, the drawings of the wall and ruins tumbling deeper the longer she stared, until she felt a lurch of vertigo, a brush of spiderweb against her cheek.

It was sewn by witch magic, like the curse. Roslyn had gasped, frightened, but Draven only leaned closer.

It untangles the pathways, shows the truth of direction, their grandmother had wheezed from the bed. I stole it from a wolf-man in the wilds. I was only a child, and I thought the mapper might lead me home...

There were all kinds of stories of naked men wagging through the split trees beyond the walls, dimples of paw prints on the pathways—stories of naughty children disappearing in daylight, leaving only a smear of blood on an edge of bramble. There can be no real wood without wolf-men, her mother said once. But Roslyn had always been suspicious of these sorts of stories, used to scare children from straying from their parents—especially when she was a child. Because what were wolf-men compared to the things she’d seen with her own eyes in the dark?

Draven had frowned. Did it, he pressed, did it lead you home, Gran?

The answer seemed obvious to Roslyn. But their grandmother shook her head. No, she said, it did not.

Roslyn's skin had turned gooseflesh as she peered over the mapper with her brother. Draven couldn't stop playing with the edges, but she kept her hands fidgeting in her lap, watching Draven stare so long she thought for certain something would happen—the air in the room tendriled—but then her father found them out. Maybe he'd felt it, too.

Roslyn could tell he was angry with his mother, but she was dying.

He made Roslyn and Draven promise they saw nothing—he'd taken them each by the shoulders, shook them, insisting. They each promised him they would keep it a secret. Not even their mother knew of it. Then their father took it from the room, and Roslyn hadn't seen it since.

Not until that very morning, the cylinder casing slung over her thieving brother's back.

#

Roslyn knows she's being followed as soon as she reaches the Heap. It's the most dangerous part of Eddin because it hugs closest to the inside wall, but when those following her reveal themselves and she readies to face them, there are far more than she thought there were. The sun has arced far past its highest point, but even so, the castoffs still haunt the winding narrow streets, peeling hunched from her shadow as they begin circling. They weren't allowed in Eddin during the moon's up, but Roslyn knows this rule has become twisted since the time of her grandmother, just not how badly. She blames the lazier Leofs who found it bothersome to enforce their ancestor's rules. The

guards of the walls have attended many council hearings since her father's days and it was not uncommon they simply went ignored.

She remembers one guard woman just before her brother left. Her frustration ended in shouting: Do you know how many of them there are, you oafs? They breed, and you sit here, doing nothing. We push them out—we drag them out, we close the gates—but they know how to crawl right back inside to safety when the cursed come howling at moon's up! Roslyn was alarmed, the youngest and newest on the council. It was only her second or third hearing.

She went to her father afterwards, but he'd merely shrugged. Those of the wall always complain, he said, this is natural, their duties are difficult—they must keep us safe in the face of our curse.

Now Roslyn tries to keep her surprise from her face.

The woman that emerges before her is taller than Roslyn's father, tan, hair dreaded in ash. She introduces herself with her dagger drawn, and Roslyn's heart plummets, seeing the bone-hilt—it belonged to her mother. How much had Draven stolen when he left home?

"Yes, it's true," the woman says sly. She grins with a mouth full of rotting teeth. "The name's Huxley. Now—I wouldn't go that way, Leof," she says, tilting her head down the nearest branch of pathway. There's a cool sharpness in her features. The ash markings on her face, neck, and hands give her handsomeness a menacing quality—and Roslyn begins to understand why so many follow her. "If you're not careful," Huxley says, "if you're not paying attention, even here inside the wall, the paths might steal time,

not just place. For instance, you could be walking at the edge of dusk,” she tsks, “and then it turns moon’s up, and then—you’re dead—meat.”

The way Huxley talks—her hand motions, little fingers walking, the crunch of her fist, give Roslyn the impression something is off. The way she teeters on the balls of her feet, like she can’t keep still. But far worse—her manner is familiar—the grinning at nothing funny. It reminds her of Draven.

His fall from their house happened shortly after their grandmother’s death. He’d been spending more time away—and when he did come home, he would act strange, sleep through the day, lash out at anyone who asked questions. He fought with their parents at a constant. Roslyn knew this, even though she wasn’t living at home. Even though she had moved to the council houses until she found a partner to begin a new home under their family name. Meanwhile, her brother became thin, pale, his eyes always squinting at everyone like they were strangers and he didn’t understand where they’d come from. She’d walked in on one of his fights with their father—she’d never heard him scream like that, not even when they were children. He was throwing things, couldn’t find his boots. He started crying. Two days later, he left. He told us we were monsters, her mother said, he told us he’d rather be cursed than be the son of a council family...

Roslyn’s first instinct is to backhand Huxley. Keep her head high, spit she’s just as brave, just as clever as the castoffs. But instead she only places her hand on her sword, delicately, eyeing the rest of the shadows in the dimming light. They’re covered in ash, so much ash. The ash of the dead. More grins creep their faces, like there’s something funny about dead meat.

No, something is not right.

Roslyn tries not to think about the way the light slants the lane. “I didn’t come here to see you,” she says, cool, “In fact—I don’t want anything to do with you, Huxley. I came to see my brother, Draven, second of his house. Point me to him,” Roslyn says, “and I’ll be on my way—”

“Ohhh,” says Huxley, nodding, she takes back her dagger, and her followers take her lead. “Draven, our huntsman. There he stood at the edge of the wood, chopping the dead with his axe.” Roslyn’s skin crawls at the children’s rhyme, Huxley’s singsong and giggle. Some of her followers hum the tune, eyes rolling to the sky. “He’ll find another tunnel,” Huxley says, clipped. “But—darling, I don’t think you have the mind for it.” Her fingers open the leather pouch hung from her neck, pinching ash onto the back of her steady hand. She furrows her brow at Roslyn, almost sincere in her concern. “Understand, you’ve got to look the monster in the eye. Tell it, I’m the one who will lift your curse. I’m the one with the power, yes. They claw and claw, but you tell them, that’s how you do it—you tell them: you don’t eat me, I eat you.”

In one smooth motion, Huxley snorts the ash from her hand.

Then she laughs and laughs, and they are all laughing, the crooked lane, the dusk, and Roslyn recalls the way she’d crouched in the tunnel that morning, trying not to breathe it in.

#

Her heart is in her mouth. That was it, the reason. The shifting of something wrong. There is nothing Roslyn can do now, but follow. Follow through the cracks on the edges of Eddin, through the cramped spaces of narrow streets and houses, most

abandoned, she realizes. They skirt the inside of the wall—unstable, she sees now. The wall, crumbling—and how long had she been lied to? Becca was right, but it was far worse than she thought. Far, far, worse.

“Did you know,” Huxley says, her bony fingers clutching Roslyn’s shoulder as she hisses in her ear, “did you know, they sometimes squeeze through... Mad with hunger. It’s the smell.” Huxley smells. Inhales Roslyn’s golden hair. They pass a guard from the wall, but the guard does nothing, even nods to Huxley, barely gives a second glance at Roslyn’s house seal on her cloak. “It’s the scent,” Huxley says, “the cursed bide their time, scrambling at the stone, no matter how you try to repair it... They strike.” Roslyn swallows, Huxley’s nails dig. “But we fight them off, don’t we? Us and the guards—why, we’ve become almost friends now. But you see, you can tell. Soon—my pretty Leof, soon they might leak into your homes. Threat or no threat, it’s simply the way of things. Only you’ve no need to worry, no need. Not with me here to protect you...”

Roslyn’s hand grips her sword, but then Huxley’s hand is there, over hers, cold and hard in warning.

“I’m so glad you came, Leof,” she says. “Like I thought you would, for darling Draven. Did you know,” Huxley says, and they stop before one of the jagged pinches in the inside wall, a skinny gap like a strike of lightening, so narrow it would have to be passed through, sideways. Beyond it, there were the wilds—the pockets of lost direction, of wolf-men and monsters.

“Did you know,” Huxley presses, “my family house, long ago, owned something of a marvel. It was a map of shifting ink, of grave importance! Did you know, my

grandmother,” Huxley grins against Roslyn’s ear, and those around her echo her, my grandmother, “my grandmother decided it was irresponsible to keep it secret... She thought, how unjust! How cruel! To keep such a secret from the rest of the houses... It could lead us away from this place, it could help us fight the cursed during the day under the spires, it could help us kill them. Did you know,” did you know... The rest of Huxley’s followers speak like they know her thoughts—like they all share the same thoughts. “Did you know, that when she confided in her best friend, her only friend,” her special friend, “that friend betrayed her?” Betrayed her, “Betrayed her!” Roslyn closes her eyes, clenches her jaw. “Her best friend stole the mapper! and when my grandmother accused her, well, I think you know the rest, my Leof.”

They force her through the gap.

Back out into the edge of the wilds, on the cusp black sky.

#

Roslyn lets out something like a scream. But then her face heats—from anger or shame, or fear—she doesn’t know, because instead of the cursed, she finds Draven. Draven standing in the dark without his cloak, without his shirt. Just his pants, his boots, his axe. The mapper slung over his back. The rest of him is already smeared in ash like the shadows that bend from the wall. “What is this?” Roslyn manages, finally, and she is allowed her sword. No one stops her from unsheathing it. But she knows. Sees now they must come here every moon’s up. To slay.

The shadows of Huxley’s followers lope towards the tree-line ahead, twirling, laughing with one another like playing a children’s game. Draven turns, grins Huxley’s

wicked grin. Roslyn imagines him in the tunnel. Coughing into his arm. He twirls his axe in his hand.

She did this to him, she thinks. She did this, back when they were young and she led them into the prayer grove. He almost died, was almost cursed. But he killed the two that came after them, unwound them into ash with his small knife, and all the while, Roslyn stayed in the tree, sobbing. Transforming him into fearlessness, making him believe he could be a hero. Hope.

“Draven,” she tries again, but what she says takes her off guard. “Please. Come home—”

She hears Huxley cackle somewhere behind her.

“This I’ve got to hear,” Draven says. “Why, Lyn?”

She swallows, hating how Huxley is there, listening to them. But she keeps her head high, holds onto the glimpse of her purpose. “Never mind it.” Roslyn tries to be sharp, hiss like him. “I see now, you’re truly lost. I’m here for the mapper, only. That’s all, Draven—” she senses Huxley’s interruption, “I don’t care,” she cuts, louder, “I don’t care if it wasn’t ours to begin with!” Draven smirks, but she steals it as quick as it came. “I don’t care about houses!” She spits, holds up her sword. “Draven—you lied and stole from us,” she sentences, “your family. Your mother, father. For what—? For a pile of ash and bone... Now you bleed for it!”

Roslyn strikes for him—the lithe spring of her body, her thrumming heart, surprising even her. He jerks away, the movement clumsy and just as shaken. Roslyn misses his gut by a hair. “Please,” he snarls, edging back from her, but she follows, thinking of every time her mother danced around his moods—every moment her father

did something kind for him when he was undeserving, when he never thanked either of them. Put food on the table, and he would complain about the food. Went to market as a family, he would pout about his tired feet. Ask for money—spend it on what? On ash. “Did you really,” but then he’s giggling at her, they all are. “Did you really come all this way to try to kill me?” Who cared if the mapper was Huxley’s right? Who cared about the ancient betrayals of grandmother against grandmother? Roslyn cared about now, she cared because maybe she was feeling the fool, too. Feeling like the old Leofs who hated change. Maybe she was feeling jealous of her brother. For playing the hero, stealing back the mapper, slaying the cursed at moon’s up, believing he could save them all if he fought hard.

“Ros-lyn!” Draven warns, almost nagging—and then they are circling one another, Huxley’s followers cooing around them, licking ash from their palms as the moon’s up folds closed. The huntsman stood at the edge of the wood... Huxley begins to sing, spirited, as Roslyn takes another lunge, more willing than her brother to draw blood and knowing exactly what it will bring if she does.

They clash, he pushes—catches her guard back with his elbow hard enough so she can feel the bruise. Chopping the dead with his axe...

Something changes, she can hear in the cries of Huxley’s followers, in the pitch of her song, in the shifting look in her brother’s eye—a savagery she could never match. ...He sang remember me.

The cut comes, a hack at her side, and even though her leathers blunt the force, she can still feel a rip of blood. Remember me...

There's spiderwebs in all of this, she thinks, there's something of the old tales lingering near the tree-line—in the ground, in the tunnels, something of the witch queen dressed in her cape of raven feathers, sewing a hex, her craft looping over each finger, killing ...and then he turned to ash...

Roslyn runs, sure she hears the break of the cursed from the trees, the screaming—she is gasping through the slice of the wall, into the streets of the Heap. Leaving her brother and Huxley behind.

Roslyn understands. Knows she doesn't care about the world the way they do. Doesn't have the mind for it. But then. She hears them. Singing. That children's rhyme—until it turns into nonsense, and she is lost on the edge of her doomed city, in the pathways overgrown. The stab of deep-dark, the hurried panting. They come, skitter. The cursed. Huxley and her followers. Their ash giving them the tendrils of her scent on the wind. Roslyn limps, slows. She hears the shrieking, just like she did that moon's up with her brother—their gut-steams, and so she knows they must pine after the drops of her blood over the ground.

They will chew her down to the bone when they find her. She glimpses them, all elbows, knees, lunging at her in the dark, and she leaps up, back up the wall, please, kicking, pulling, letting go of her sword, scrambling with a sob, here: there's a desperate hand at her ankle.

There's a clawed grip that drags her down.

“The Passenger”

I try to take a picture of the eerie. The power’s out, so I’m like, okay, standing outside the Pump n’ Stuff, looking at the gas pumps. My last customer was twenty minutes ago. Down the street by the McDonald’s, the black veiny power lines seizure under the blinking traffic lights. I listen to the curdles of wind. There’s no one around. No one at the Kum & Go across the way. No one in the dirt parking lot outside Toby’s bar. Just cars rumbling along on the I-29 overpass.

Eerie.

But the picture I take is just a spread of grainy nothingness, boring, and I sit on a milk crate, and I mope: so much for the camera on the new LG EnV, sigh sigh sigh. But then at least it’s got the flip-out keyboard, at least I don’t have to look slow and stupid texting Wig anymore.

He’ll be here soon. I just ended my shift and he’s the early type.

My palms start to sweat. This is it, Kara. Even though he hasn’t been texting back since Friday after our quasi-date at Taco John’s, and even though he didn’t show up yesterday like usual to share a joint during break and make up jokes about all the customers. Still. He’ll be here. Because it’s finally happened. Myspace post and everything.

Miranda and Ludwig broke up.

There’s a kid working McDonald’s that goes out by the dumpster to try lighting a smoke. He cups his hands, I can see the sliver of flame—then it’s gone, snuffed by the wind. There’s the customers, all leaving. The street bathed in green traffic light. Then

gold. Then red. Leaves whirling from ditches. There's an honest-to-god-no-shit tumbleweed going see you later, dude.

That's when I get the text.

Not from Wig, but from her. Miranda.

This is Miranda Feldman, the text reads, like she forgot she gave me her number senior year of high school as I signed her yearbook. Have u seen wig?

Gross.

Then there's a car. This real shitty ass car. This crappy ass two-door, green Cavalier. The same one that's picked me up after work every Tuesday since August. It runs red. Pulls up on a slam of brakes.

I can see the shadow of him inside.

The door opens. I pocket my phone and climb in.

#

Here's the thing about Miranda. From high school. From math. I try not to think about her more than I think about Wig. But they're sort of hand in hand sometimes. Especially because she's with this other guy now and sometimes, like yesterday, I go creeping to the public library just to look at stuff like Miranda's Myspace page. There was a picture. Black and white. The two of them. Miranda and this other guy. This other-Wig. This guy with this whole swooped-bang look and dyed black hair. This Gerard Way look. But Wig can't even do that style. He's got a widow's peak.

I swallow, anxious, because I figure how Wig must be feeling. Right now. Why he hasn't been answering my texts since after our Friday sort-of-date. Thanks to my local library I know they broke up on Facebook and Myspace sometime around Saturday

afternoon. So here he is. Right here, right now, all mine. Ready for an official date, maybe, where I'll finally, actually get laid. Except something is wrong. Wig looks um. He's gone all pale. More than usual. He's holding onto the steering wheel sort of like if he lets go he'll throw up. He runs another red.

Main street's nothing but traffic lights. Tick, tick, eerie.

"Hey—um, how are you feeling, are you okay?" I say. I try to play it all casual. Last week he didn't talk much, but that's normal and he looked okay. Hawkish hair, dyed this sick color. Dark green so it does look a convincing black in the dark. By sick I meant sick. That kind of sick. But the rest of him does look like the other kind of sick when we pass yellow. The um kind. "Wig," I say. I joke, "are you high?"

He rubs his eyes. "Fuck," I think he says. His eyes are bloodshot. It's hard to tell. He always smells weird. Not like pot, not all the time, but other stuff, too. Like incense sticks, all cinnamon, daydream, lavender. I always avoided him, in school. I knew him back then. He was in the same class as me. The same class as Miranda. Sometimes I wonder which one of us changed the most. I guess you don't grow much, only two-ish years out. He'd show up to chem and paint his nails with sharpie. It was like. Very strange.

He turns up the music. He's listening to uh, some real loud ass shit. Per usual, I guess.

"I'm having a thought," I say. But he doesn't hear me. Good. I take a drink of my Joose.

Wig flips his phone open. His very own EnV, only the green color's worn off and there's duct tape. I try to side-eye for the reflection of his screen on the glass of his

window while he texts. Balancing the wheel with his knee. I'm not spying. But I'm trying to. Just when I think I catch something he chucks it. His phone. Into the cup holder. Picks up the PBR from the holder next to it. He rubs his nose and takes a drink. I've never seen him drink in his car before.

I guess I should try to make small talk. Maybe ask if he's going to do a spell tonight, at the beach. Even though the wind is bad. But I kind of. Shit. Don't want to ruin the surprise. Just the two of us. In his car. The music. The town silent. Dark. Every house window reflecting Wig's headlights back at us. Reverse-deers. Even though I'm sort of getting anxious about how he's drinking the PBR at the wheel. Which. I mean. It isn't really like him. We pass Duke's, my trailer court. The little square of the community college. Wig runs another light. My eyes close.

This guy shreds. On his vocals. The bubble of guitar. I can't shake this little feeling...

Wig and I talk about music all the time. I grew up on my dad and mom's stuff. But he's more into the alternative trends. When we first started hanging out this past summer, I was like: "I'm into your music but." And he was like: "But?" And I was like, casual: "But they're sort of like. Really shitty towards girls?" In reality. This was a thing my English teacher said senior year before we graduated. Posed the question. Sort of about, like, all rock n' roll music ever. But particularly, Wig's kind. The emotional kind. Everyone in class was like: bullshit! But I tried it out on Wig to see what he'd say. Maybe it's sad but it's the truth: I'd like him to think I'm smart.

I guess I shouldn't care stealing what the teacher said. Because it worked. He was like: "Maybe. I don't know. So what's your stuff about?" I shrugged. Then I made him a

CD. With that one Neil Young song about Charles Manson. That Black Sabbath one about doing heroin and Vietnam veterans. Then that one by Iggy Pop that's about David Bowie. It made him think. I think? He liked the CD. I think. But then I see it on the messy floor of his car. Scattered with the rest. My sloppy sharpie: Kara's. Scratched to shit by my Converse. I glance at him.

I'm not so sure I'm right—that my English teacher was right. I mean, about his music. To be fair. If I'm honest and all. I've been listening to it a lot more lately and mostly it seems like these screaming guys are all dating the wrong girls. Or it's about hate-loving their dads.

My phone vibrates. I jump-scare, Jesus. Slide it open. It's Miranda. Fucking Miranda.

Kara please, it reads, this is important ...r u with him ?

I want to tell her to fuck off, but I don't have the guts.

I take the biggest. Fucking. Drink. From my Joose. I wipe my mouth with my sleeve. My heart is like: Do I bring it up? The breakup? What will he say? It's stupid, I think. He was ever even into her, I mean. Miranda. From math. In math, freshman year of high school, she told him to slit his wrists. Kids laughed. Being teenagers, at the time, we were into that. The idea of death, I guess. For sure. There was this whole mood, this whatever about it, go Plath yourself, etc. But. Miranda's hot shit. Really, I mean. If I were gay. Long legs, long neck, this real beautiful jawline. No acne. She could've been on America's Next Top Model. Everyone thought so.

What I'm trying to say is, I'd forgive her too, for bullying me, if I were Wig. If she just apologized one day out of the blue after we both got into the same college. If she

were going to live on the same campus I'd be living on for four years and I was overwhelmed about living in a place like the Twin Cities. Miranda's ACT was 30, I heard. I even heard she cried about it.

For comparison, I didn't even take the ACT.

Looking at Wig now, I don't know what he's thinking. His slouch. He keeps fidgeting with his phone. The PBR's tab. He's even singing. Kind of, under his breath. Yeah, you were right about me... and we're on the edge of town, now. Past the Cherry Street Grille, past the dentist whose daughter was featured on 16 and Pregnant. Past the empty lot by the evangelical church. The town's sign: Home of the Tanagers. I'm having a thought. I want to say... I'm thinking. No. I'm thinking just let him be. For now, just let him be. Deal with it all at the beach.

I look down, my phone vibrates, Miranda: Kara and wig hey this isn't fucking funny ok I no about ur beach thing—I fiddle with the buttons, figure how to get my phone to stop vibrating.

I guess he told her. I wonder how much he used to talk about me. What he said. I think about responding. I think about saying to Miranda: yeah so if you know you should leave us the fuck alone, and I would spell out all my yous because I actually care about language. I guess. I even type it out. Just to try out my keyboard, but then I'm like. No, fuck her. Fuck Miranda.

Sometimes I forget how Wig got into Macalaster after high school. How he spent two whole years at a private college, taking classes like qualitative literature. For real. He and Miranda had been a thing since the summer before they left for college. I knew this from web sleuthing, even though I didn't talk to either of them, ever. Facebook,

Livejournal, Myspace trifecta. Miranda, rebel: look at my hot boyfriend, into lighting black candles and smoking pot and really into the Used, into Bright Eyes, The White Stripes, Linkin Park, also, hi, he studies philosophy at Macalaster, full ride. Wig, Wig. Ludwig.

But then he didn't go back this Fall.

He spent more time hanging out at the Pump n' Stuff gas station.

Buying gum and beer and smokes.

In other words, now he's a college dropout.

This is weird, maybe, but at first I was mad at him. I wanted to say. Why are you staying here? In town? This town? You can't be here! I heard what you were given. Smarts, tuition. Do you know what you've done, Wig? Do you? But I shudder just thinking about saying those things. I'm not his fucking mom. I get this feeling. Keep getting this feeling. Like he knows. Like knowing has fucked him up. Every day. Who is Wig, I mean, if he isn't the college type?

Then out back, by the dumpsters. Splitting a joint on break a few weeks ago, he said: "I'm having a thought." That's our thing. I'm having a thought. Like it's beamed down to us by aliens. I'm having a thought. This thought. He went: "Get this. Senior year. Back before I left for college, I did one of my mom's spells. This love thing. I didn't really believe in it, Kara. I don't think I believe in anything, to be honest. But. You know those three wishes fairy tales...when all your wishes go wrong? How payback's a real bitch, if you're stupid about what you wished for? And everyone is, you know... Everyone's always super fucking stupid..." He shook his head.

I just nodded. I didn't say what I guessed or that he should chill out, you know. There are logical explanations as to why a popular supermodel like Miranda would date a scrawny emo kid like him. For instance. I would've said to him: your SAT/ACT scores were through the roof, I would've reminded him, and you grew up below the poverty line so you got all those scholarships. Then, there were his entry essays, probably. A+'s. How he did policy debate for the debate team. How they usually choose two kids a year from our town. So the love thing. I mean. They were accepted to the same college. It wasn't a wish. It was because they were smart.

Maybe, too, his Myspace. He started it up his senior year. Miranda had one, too. He hung out with the local bands. 2k friends. Pictures of altars. Tapestries. He had a good eye. Tarot readings. Maybe I did one of his spells. Maybe two. Maybe a love thing. I didn't tell him: pretty sure Miranda did, too, Wig. Pretty sure you had all of us doing black magic in our closets summer after senior year. Because no one knew what the fuck they were doing with their lives.

But he dropped it. The Myspace, just last month. The same time he dropped Macalaster.

Then it was all: hi, Kara, what's up? At the Pump n' Stuff. More and more often. Until it was September and I realized he never went back with Miranda to the Twin Cities. They were doing a "long distance relationship" before he went back to school in the spring. I can't believe we all bought that, looking back. But then I remember this one afternoon. Out back. By the dumpster during break. I remember him going: "I don't know if she really loves me, Kara..."

"Lol," I'd said. Then he got kind of mad. I guess it was mean. But I said sorry.

So I guess he did believe in the long distance thing. For a little while.

Wig, now. In the car. He mumbles something.

Maybe Wig says, “I like you, Kara.”

But the guy shredding his vocals is too loud. Be my serene... Okay. I can’t tell for sure.

Still, now I’m just drowning in my sweatshirt. It’s hot. Like, temperature hot.

“I like you too,” I brave, sudden, into my half-finished Joose, but already feeling a little woozy, a little more daring. I say: “Hey, um, doing a spell tonight, Wig, in this wind?”

Wig and I have been doing “the beach thing” every week since August. Even when it rains, even when it’s October, like now, and it’s getting colder and we probably should find a better spot. Even when the power’s out. Even when he doesn’t answer my texts for days. It’s like going to church, I guess. I mean, I don’t know. Maybe it’s weird, but he told me he used to do this all the time, visit the beach like this, back when he was in high school. He told me he wanted to try to like, get into it again. He has these candles and a lighter and he builds an altar out of driftwood and actually it isn’t that weird. I swear. I always feel super calm afterwards. We just sit in the sand and we listen to everything around us and I try to empty my mind of getting laid, usually unsuccessfully, but I try. Afterwards, the first time he took me out here, we got drunk and went swimming fully clothed. But still nothing happened. He’s so good to her, I’d thought. Miranda. At the time. I’m so good to her, I’d thought, too.

Now the song is all pitched up, and the guitars are tapping, and Wig is checking his phone.

I guess he doesn't hear me.

I look down. Miranda and her stupid texts. Jesus.

Kara im worried since friday he keeps sending me the same texts

He wont respond

Tell him kara

Tell him to leave me alone if ur with him

I'm not so warm anymore. Reading these texts. They make me freezing cold. Like the wind is rattling right through me and I'm ankle deep in mud. Wading bramble. I delete what I'd written before, about fucking off. I re-write it: why don't u leave *us* alone miranda, but then I have to try to edit the text because I forgot about how I was going to write out all my yours.

Why were we so nice to Miranda?

Fuck Miranda.

But still. I don't send my text.

Then it comes out of nowhere.

He throws it.

His phone.

Hard.

Into the windshield.

It spiderwebs.

The windshield. My heart spikes up into my throat. Then he's finishing off the PBR. Crunches it up. Tosses it at my feet. With all the CDs. My CD. His CDs. The crumpled-up trash of fast-food. Bags. Cups. Beer cans. His notebooks with their stupid

doodles. He's shaking. Trying not to cry. I know he's upset. But I'm shaking. Too.

Honest, I'm kind of scared. I want to say: what, the fuck. What, the fuck is your problem, Wig? But I don't. Because of the way he looks. About to sob. And. Actually. I've never seen a boy cry. This is mean. But I don't want to.

I look back down, into my cold hands. Into the cold light of my phone. The alerts. Going off, one after the other. Blink, blink, blink. There are so many texts, now. From Miranda. There are missed calls. I frown. The time is all wrong. They're marked from hours ago. My phone says it's near 3AM. But it can't be. I read through the messages. Each of them is like a tiny sliver. My mouth draws open, but there are no words that come out. Just a stifle. That wind and panic.

Kara he is missing that's why Im asking ok

Did u hear he is missing do u know

They can't find him Kara u should turn on the news

Kara if u guys ran off 2gether please tell his mom ok

Kara he told me about how u r into him

Kara

answer

He keeps texting me I am having a thought

I am having a thought

Wig lights up a smoke. On Friday, on the weird night of what I considered our sort-of-date, I'd finally asked him. About the college dropout thing. I wanted to ask: will you really go back in the spring? Like you said? But I didn't. While we walked the 24-hr Taco John's drive-thru. I'd said, instead: "What happened—why did you drop out, Wig?

For real, this time. It had to be better than bumming around here.” I acted all casual, after ringing the window door-bell.

He’d said, shrugging: “I couldn’t do it anymore. The homework. The classes. I got sick. Brain sick, I guess. Like I just. Um. I get sad all the time. Sometimes, I mean. I didn’t leave my room or go to my classes. I’d sleep until dinner time. But it’s okay. I’m taking care of it.”

I’d just nodded. But now. I should... I think. I should turn down the music. I should talk to him. About it. All of it. These texts from Miranda. The breakup, too.

I should turn down the music. I should ask: what did you mean, Wig? What did you mean on Friday about getting sad all the time? Why does Miranda think you’re missing? And mean it. But he reaches for the dial. The same time I do, and his hand moves through mine in a shutter of light-play and cold air. He reaches past. To his phone. On the dash. Spider-webbed glass. The singer croons. I am not your friend... I blink. I just saw something? Everything is all wrong.

It’s dark out. Now. Real dark. Not power’s out dark, but far past the traffic lights of town, dark. The stars are rolled out, the storm clouds all blown past. The trees small signposts. And I’m shivering. Bad. Teeth chattering bad. It’s like all the windows are down. The wind clattering straight through us. My heart hammering like I’m running a marathon. I need to say something.

Wig turns onto the gravel road heading towards Burbank beach. High schoolers still come here on weekends to party. To have bonfires. We used to, too. No. By we I really mean, the Mirandas. I went only once. With my friend and her boyfriend. We were seventeen. Ripe for partying. For letting go and doing crazy stuff we’d regret later. But

we never did. Then they left. For college. Bye, Kara. I should say something. I should say something but when I open my mouth I just gulp down a gasp of wind.

#

There's another car parked in the ditch off the gravel road. There aren't any stars. The trees are all creaking.

There, we sit.

For a while, in the guitars, in the car.

It smells like Joose. My BO. Like sour PBR. Like old pot smoke. But. Still. I think he might kiss me. I want to kiss him. I want to tell him I was into him, since senior year of high school. Really. He grew into himself that year. He stopped wearing those stupid sock gloves. Because of the new dress code. He got a tattoo. This skull, on his knuckle. He was smart. Too smart. But he doesn't kiss me. He shuts the car off. Power's out. If I'm honest. Now that I'm thinking about it. Now that I notice. He hasn't looked at me all night. He looks fucked up. In a trance. He finishes his smoke as I'm looking down in my sweaty palms at my phone's cold light.

There's no service. I stare at Miranda's last text until it goes dim.

Kara his mom thinks he killed himself

Then we're out. Of the car. But. Was I standing? This whole time? I feel. Like I'm splitting. Apart. I double-take, notice. The other car. The car that's parked there, in the ditch. It's our car. Wig's car. His shitty ass Cavalier. Green, two-door. The same rust spots. The same license plate. What. The Fuck. There are two of his car. How. How are there two of his car?

“Wig?” I say, finally. I step away. But he’s already climbing. Through the ditch. Back turned to me. Fuck, fuck. I blink. “Wig, seriously, I’m not joking—what’s going on?”

He ducks under the barbed fence. Heading for the path to the beach. I mean, it’s not really a beach. But we call it a beach. It’s a riverbank. The Missouri. But the sand’s thick. There are sandbars. But then there are these dips. These undertows. Places where you can’t touch. Then you can. You have to walk. A ways. Through this grove of trees. Down the slope. By this guy’s pasture. Then you’re there. Driftwood. Beer cans, smashed. Broken glass. Dog collars.

I glance over my shoulder. The car. The one we drove in. It’s gone. There’s a tremor. Through me. This. Absolute. Dread. My heart is. That guy’s vocals. The drop beat. The pour of where you been? Like a douse of river. I am guitar, drum, bass. Ache. Whirlpool. I am running. Running after. Him. Gulping wind. Tripping. Over the scatter of branches. Of leaves. Then when we’re on the beach, round the bend of trees: the sand stings. My face. The trees aren’t creaking. They’re moaning. I’m sort of. Scared. I think. I. I catch up. He’s at the white-capping. River.

“Hey!” I say. I want. Him to. Look at me. But he. Still won’t. “Wig. Please. Look,” I reach for him. “At me...”

He doesn’t hear? Maybe. I stop. My reach. He’s undressing. His favorite button-up. With the flower-pattern. On the pocket. The dark green that matches his hair. Then his jeans. I’m standing there. Saying his name. Saying: “Wig? Wig! Ludwig...!” Maybe. It gets all wet. My voice. It gets all high-pitched, scrambled, whiny like it’s through a

scream of wind. He looks at me. But not at me. He looks not good. He looks more than um. He looks more than uh or huh.

He looks like a ghost.

He takes off his jeans. His legs are skinny, dark hair. He leans over. I think he might kiss me. But he doesn't. He whispers in my ear. But I don't hear words. I only hear shiver. Like dead skin like dead eyes like dead fingers like dead lips. "What?" I say, "Wig, I can't hear you!"

He pulls away. He takes off his shoes, socks. Then he holds up his phone. He texts. He waits. I'm. Really. Dizzy. I reach. I look. There.

I am having a thought

He looks at me. He turns. He throws it. His phone. He throws it out, far. Far. Out. The streak of spider glass glow. Then gone.

"Wig—?" My voice breaks. He's sprinting. Into the water after it. His phone. I blink, watching him. Fuck. He's running. Into the water. "Wig!" I almost follow. But I stumble. My shoes weigh me stopped. Sopped. Sand stings. My eyes. They water, I blink. Over and over. He's out in the water. Moon-skin, no pull, like the water isn't even there. Like he can't even feel it anymore. Bye, Kara. He's all light, he's all mist over the water. Black water. Swimming. He's.

Then I can't watch. I can't watch, I can't watch this.

My panic cuts me into a sprint. Back, over the bank. The beach. The bend. Up the slope. I'm just. Thinking, still: I have to call. Someone. There's no service. I need service. Like connecting might make a sandbar. Might make the water glow like summertime. Bring him back.

Like he wasn't already dead. Like he didn't already do this. Days ago, maybe Friday night. After. After he held my hand. Because I'm gasping. For. Breath. Fucking. Gasping. There are no words. Just snot. Shaking. Shivers and I look down at my knees. My feet. My shoes. My knees. Bleeding. Legs on fire like I ran through thistle. Ran through ditches. My shoes, muddy. Ankle deep in it. Torn sleeve. Scratches. Knotty burrs tied up in my shoelaces. Prickling. With each. Step.

Like I ran. Like I ran the whole way here. Out of town. Miles. In the dark. In the wind.

Then. His car. His real car. Not the ghost car. Not the dream car. The whatever it was car. The only car. His shitty Cavalier. Bye, Kara. I am reeling at its handle, I'm screaming. In shock. Maybe. In denial. It's dark. Power's out. I am opening the door. It's a mess. Inside. There's beer cans. Baggies. Lavender. Daydream. Keys in the ignition. No phone. But. I'm leaning, into the passenger's seat. Hands digging up the floor. His CDs. Some split, shards, scratched. Mine. My CD. Kara's.

I am shattered. I am pinhole stars.

Anyway, he'd said, right before our quasi-date night, out behind the Pump n' Stuff. You want to get McDonalds when you're off, Kara, maybe walk over? I'd smiled, face heating up. Yeah, but no, haha, how about Taco John's, I'd suggested, there's this kid over at McDonalds, he spits in all the food. I imagined holding Wig's hand. It's a date, he'd said, like it wasn't a joke, like he actually meant it. Like we agreed, finally, that Miranda didn't deserve how good we are. Were. Then he'd grinned. He'd even paid, after I asked. About his dropping out. After he said the words brain-sick. Made a joke of

paying. Like what is this, a date? We walked through the park. Then I did. Held his hand.
We ate our tacos on a bench. I was full of sound.

Now. I will get in his car. I will turn the key. In the ignition. I will collapse. I will
come together. I will collapse. I will riot my voice away. But.

For now.

I'm having a thought.

I am having a thought and.

I will have. More thoughts.

Infinite thoughts.

“The Last Shaper at The Witch City’s Waypoint”

Ess sang he found me in the reeds in the heat of summer, my mother a crow lying dead.

I was too young to know my first shape. He sang I pissed and shit and cried all the time, and he thought more than once about leaving me for the bears to raise. But the bears are all dead, which I didn’t learn until I was old enough to hunt on my own. *There is another world*, Ess used to sing, *between the paths of these ruin-woods, kept from us—and that’s where you come from, little kit. The shrinelands, the black hills, the old warrens. This is the curse you inherited from your mother: to live out your days in the bones of the lost witch city Gea, to keep the books, as I did.* But then Ess was gone—taught me there are no shrinelands the same way there are no bears.

Taught me how the wind prowls and pines for you if you dare to get lost in the pathways.

#

Then: Roo, my sister. Her disappearance happens in the spring; she turns the wrong corner under the shadows of the black spires and disappears, eaten by the wind. That’s how I imagine it happens. Sometimes the paths will play tricks, north turns south, could be east, might be west, but Roo could always find our way. I search for her as careful as I can, for days, for three moons, taking care not to get lost, taking care to mind all the corners of the ruins. Then by the river that cuts the heart of the crumbling spires, too afraid to get lost, too afraid to search all the places I’ve never been, afraid of the wind that might undo me—on a hot afternoon in late summer, I stop on the steps of a crooked path and I let myself cry. Ess found Roo in the winter after my tenth summer, young and

scared, wolf fur as white as the snow and paws cut with ice between each of her toes. She wouldn't speak. Never spoke. But she was kind, she was clever. She was brave. And then I'm done, and she's gone, and so I stop looking. I rarely leave my den.

#

Until Ess, our singing had no written language, so he taught me the languages of books instead, called common, and a scrap amount of a language he called witcher—the yarns and a handful of crude phrases, most of them akin to *fuck the bitch queen* and *would you like to suck my big prick?*, and *I am guilty of nothing* and *yes, that is a gutty challenge, pretty boy* and *I will eat you to spare your mistress a sorry rut*. He didn't like conversing it aloud. But before he lost himself—he showed me letters he created for our words, and he put a feather in my hand, and he told me to write all his songs about our great patrons during the time of the Raven as he sang them, and I was so glad to do this, so awed by his wits to find symbols in our singing, I didn't hear their sorrow until long after he disappeared. They're the only thing left to remember him by.

One begins: In a time before time, something attacked something else, and there was life.

#

I go hunting, but I make traps, something about the thrill of a catch less rewarding without Roo. The common weasel struggles, the snare caught around its chest and neck chewing deeper through its skin. When it catches sight of me, it pants little squeaks, its eyes bulging. Blood stains the breeze from the strangle of wire. I shape human, take off the curve of sharpened antler from the leather string I use to carry it around my neck. I coo, “Thank you, goodbye.” Catch it by the throat, dig the sharp of the antler hard until it

spasms. I work undoing the snare. Undo the wire, reset the catch. I wipe the antler in the grass, place it around my neck against the sling of worn leather where my map fits snug. But when I'm about to shape, I stop, going still.

#

There! she appears through the seam of a telling, on the breeze. From a different path of direction, no easy one. A woman, like Roo. She wades through the tall grass. Makes pleading sounds at me like she'd been looking for me all this time, trips until she is only crawling. Decorated strange. Far, far away on some other string of paths, there's a nest of angry howls and cries rising above the ruin-woods—cut short, like the slamming of a gate. She comes so close, hand outstretched as if to touch me. My instincts catch. I startle, shape fox. Her eyes widen before they roll back into her head. She goes limp. Ratshit on this afternoon, for leaving my den.

#

Ess sang once, just before he disappeared, that he heard voices hiding in the eaves of trees, in the shimmer of the pines. The fabric of this place is thin, he'd sing, the magic is dying. Then Roo drew once she saw a man running, not me, on the deer paths, skidding out of sight, unwound by the wind. I thought they were batshit. This woman is far from Ess and she is not Roo—I take the weasel from my trap and I mean to leave her, but then she's awake, and she's making strange sounds and going on and on and rubbing at her eyes. Her hair is the shortest I've ever seen, half of it down to the scalp, the rest a mess of curls, the color pale, blond—speckled by blood. I can smell it. She smells all wrong, like rust and a tangle of other things I can't place, like scabs and rot, maybe. I think she might kill me and I should hide, but fear stabs me in place.

The woman digs in a pocket of her strange decoration. Boots, shirt, pants, a whole outfit I wouldn't know what to make of, only Ess would collect things like that from the ruins. Forgotten things, clothing, cups, toys, coins, bottles, buttons. The books usually told him what they were, what they meant or used to be—what to make of them even though he couldn't read very many. They're forgotten, too, as forgotten as most of their languages—the many not in Ess's common.

But then she's pinning something shiny to her collar, fixing a button inside her ear, and then like it's no trouble at all, like she's grown up beside me, the two of us—she's singing like a shaper, out of breath, pointing at me. “Don't you dare rutting move, dog-man,” she sings. “I think my ankle's sprained—ratshit!” She heaves in a great breath, painful, cursing. “Ratshit!”

I drop the weasel out of surprise and I shape human. “Don't rutting move?” I sing to her.

“Knew it,” she sings, but it's seething, through teeth. “Now, really! I have seen some real batshit catshit in my day—ancient sea slugs, the insides of a world-eater, I've even seen a man *turned into* a toad—but I've never—*ever* seen a man turn into a dog, then *back* into a man.” She shakes her head. “But that's the universe for you, infinite and full of dogshit—hey, you going to help me, or just sit there gawking like *I'm* the one that's been running around the woods naked?”

“Help you,” I sing, “eh, why would I do that?” I eye her, wary. “I'm not stupid,” I sing.

She meets my hard look, then pulls off something from her belt, and points it at me. I frown, unsure what it is, other than colored black and red, and maybe dangerous by

the way she aims between my eyes. “For dogshit sake,” she squawks, “it’s a gun! Nevermind the make or model, since it doesn’t look like you’ve got less of a clue what plasma, lasers, or *bullets* mean—”

“I’m not stupid,” I sing.

“I heard about that.”

I shake my head. “Eh, you’re batshit if you think I—”

She laughs mean, takes aim and shoots behind us, into a crumbling archway of ruin. I duck with a whine, covering my ears. The sound scares me more than the light that explodes the rock in a plume of dust and smell of something burning. “Basically,” she sings, “it does that, only it does it to your guts—it turns smart guys like you inside-out. Now—I *order you to never again* call me batshit, help me up, and take me to like, I don’t know—your *place*, in this shithole. Then water, seeing as I doubt you’ve got a commlite hooked up to the Interstellar Military Alliance. We might be stuck with each other, come to think of it—but we’ll figure it out. Draw a line in the dirt or something... I haven’t got anything to steal, so—don’t even think about it.”

I scratch up behind my ear, confused. “You’re not from the shrinelands, are you?” I sing.

She sighs. “No,” she chirps, “I’m from up there.” She points up at the blue cloudless sky.

#

The woman tells me to call her Shar. I don’t tell her what to call me until she prods about it and waves her gun around. Then Kit, I sing, and tell her my shape is not a dog, but she doesn’t listen. Instead she remarks on the curliness of my hair, how tall I am,

my tan skin in contrast to her bloody *pallor* as she called it, then moves on to observing the narrowness of alleyways, the strange obsidian ruins, the spires on the horizon. I quickly learn she is nothing like Roo because she will not shut up. I'm used like a crutch, ordered to stay human—until it turns out her ankle isn't sprained, and I'm glad to let her go—her smell isn't what I imagined the sky might smell like. Bloody, like a hunt. Then, by the time I think I should've led her off a cliff, or led her into a trap, if I were Roo, smarter—I've led her straight to Ess's den, the folds of damp earth, of books.

I light the lanterns, since there's no natural light. Try to keep my back from her, until I can't when I spark the hearth—I'm wound, all tense, knowing she's watching, still afraid she might kill me, but not as afraid of her as I am of the gnawing wind lurking around the wrong corners. I have the fleeting thought she could be a witch, unable to explain her any other way, and I turn, fully expecting her to have her gun raised, still pointed in warning. But it's not, and she stands with a furrowed brow in concentration, eyeing the shelves, the stacks, the table, scrolls of parchments, crow feathers, ink pots. She whistles a babble of nonsense, not song.

Then without asking, she picks up the nearest book on a stack near the door and fingers through it, briefly, before letting it go for another, her gun tucked at her belt. My frown turns into a glare. I bawk at her. "Those are mine—be careful, they're old, aren't they, eh, can't you tell—"

"I can't read any of these," she sings, like she's troubled by it, like she should be able to. "I mean, they're all in different languages, aren't they?" She crosses the den and sinks into my best chair facing the hearth. "Now I'm starting to get a little spooked, Kit." She winces, rubs her shoulder. "Exactly what's this place of yours doing with a shithole

full of dead languages, eh?”

“They’re not all dead,” I sing, “I know common, I know witcher. I know shaper, too—”

I fetch her one of the books in common, showing her and taking the chair Roo used to curl up in every winter, nose to bushy tail. Shar lingers on it, seems to become even more troubled. She must read several pages before she speaks, and it comes out in a low song, a flinch. “This is Mandarin. It’s dead, too—or it has been, for a long time. I should know, my parents were some of the last who knew it. But they’re gone...” There’s a pause between both of us, and I think maybe about Ess, about telling her—but then she’s moving on, giving me back the book and forces it out of me, anyway: “Exactly where are the rest of your dog people these days, Kit?”

“Okay,” I sing, “I’m not a dog, also, eh, they are gone, they got lost, the wind ate them.”

“Dog, fox, wolf, whatever,” she chirps, “none of you were actually born here, were you?”

I scratch behind my ear, off-put. “Ess sang no, but Ess might’ve lied. I don’t know—”

“Eh, but what’s the *last thing* you remember, in the other place, then? Before this one?”

“*Eh*, maybe don’t interrupt me,” I bawk, glaring. “I was singing I don’t know because it happened when I was only a pup, if it happened at all. It didn’t happen to Roo until later, but she couldn’t sing anymore, and she was still a pup, too. Then Ess. Ess *never* sang about it. He called this place a witch city, witch ruins, witch curse. He hated

witches. He sang they warred with us, they locked him up and threw away the key. He sang we are all from the shrinelands. But maybe, maybe he would've sang anything to us—how would we ever know any different—understand?”

Shar rubs at her eyes. “Rutting ratshit,” she whispers, tipping her head down, covering her face. There’s a great shudder that moves through her, a breath gathered, maybe the edge of a sob before she calms. I wonder if I imagined it. “This is a tear,” she mourns, “It’s a waypoint...”

“Eh?” I prod, anxious because of the way she sings it, because of her face, grown grim.

“The last thing I remember, I was on Roi, way out in Andromeda, no joke. You know, we’ve been at war in that rutting galaxy since the moment we showed up, that’s the truth, and I’ve seen it all. I know I don’t look it, but I’m getting on, Kit, like two-thousand-something—centuries kind of melt together. But anyway, I was on Roi, running my rutting rump off from a bunch of rutting—uh, *vampires*, I guess, is the best thing to call them—one even used to be my rutting girlfriend, the whole thing sucked. So I tried to phaze to my starship, but I must’ve tripped something or, ratshit—I don’t know. It felt like one of them ripped my leg off—I had this gut of pain. Then I ended up here. Exactly what,” she sings, “do you make of a song like mine?”

My skin crawls, a sensation so human I startle, breath catching. I don’t understand half of Shar’s story but I hear the sorrow, the undercurrent in her tune like every song I sang after Roo disappeared. I blink, scratching up behind my ears. I try very hard to understand what Roo might’ve understood. I try hard to think of an answer, a clever one, the right one... But I can’t, and so Shar goes on. Goes on and on with more songs. Songs

that come from the sky and stars.

She describes pockets of worlds inside constellations, torn by wars that have lasted ages, ripping the universe at the seams, creating cracks in reality that you can sometimes slip into if your death isn't careful enough. If it isn't clean. "I don't understand," I chip at her, shaking my head until my chirping turns to growls, until I go back to calling her batshit, crazy in common, lunatic in witcher and worse, because singing isn't as cruel. She only watches, until I'm finished.

Then she prods: "Look, haven't you ever heard of ghosts? *Spirits*? You've lived a ghost life here, Kit. You died. Long ago, maybe the moment you were born..." and that's it. That's when I tell her she has to go. I tell her I hope she gets lost in corners, that I hope the winds eat her away. "The winds!" she laughs at me. "I've been eaten by worse. By space worms and moon wolves, bellies full of iridescent planktons, the prettiest most delicate things you've ever seen. I'm not afraid of being eaten by the wind—no rutting way. Don't you worry, Kit, I plan to get as lost I can here, and really—if you're *actually* as smart as you sing you are, you'll do the same..."

#

But what does she know of anything, this woman from the sky?

It's dark by the time she leaves, and I track her, troubled, wary of her songs, her bravery.

I watch her while shaped fox, from the farthest edge I dare go as she disappears under the black shadows of the spires, under the spread of infinity—thinking about Ess, about Roo, about my fear coiled like a ball of snakes underneath my fur. I asked her, before she left the den, I sang: then what will happen, if it's true, what will happen after

you are eaten—what’s on the other side of the corners, what will happen if the wind blows backwards? But Shar just shrugged, and stretched her arms, heading for the dug-out door. “The great mystery,” she sang, “maybe it’s different for all of us. Maybe you’ll find your shrinelands, and maybe I’ll find my parents. I like imagining something sweet and gentle, worth the long journey. But really, it’s anyone’s guess.”

#

My favorite book holds a song of a warrior who is visited by a fox-spirit. Eventually, they fall in love and leave the warrior’s world for hers. They become partners of the sky. In most witcher yarns the foxes are always tricksters—they lie, or steal, or run away with treasure or hearts of men. But this one is different. There’s no depiction of bloody war, there’s no dead mothers or fathers, but still it unfolds like soft rains split by the sun. I take it with me when I leave my den, following the scents of Shar, the worn leather of her boots, the dried tang of blood. I trot down the familiar ruin-paths, conjuring up Roo’s smarts and Shar’s bravery. I follow the dusty deer trails leading into the roots of the black spires. I carry the book in my sling, hoping that when I greet the wind, I have something to sing to it. Something kind, and glad, and good.

“Trees Struck by Lightning Burning from the Inside Out”

It is sweet and fitting to die with one's pack under the full moon, but the sky is clouded by the city lights: orange and yellow and red like fire. Roque is running. Like a cracked whip, without sense. Under a sliver of jagged sound, under the leering fray of glossy towers, he smells a dog without a leash, the sharp of silvered bolts. He sees a woman with a cardboard sign reading something-something about the world, who catches his eye, whose own eyes widen, whose mouth opens and makes a howling noise: something-something about wolves! wolves! The road towards dawn outstretches before him, choking on cars and steam and fur and bone. Roque is running, running. His paws thump in tandem with the code of his heart, and he transforms.

#

I shit you not, the den was in this underground shithole out by the train tracks. Outside, on the gate leading to it, there was an honest-to-god sign that said NO DUMPING, but as soon as we crossed beyond the gate we had to navigate piles of actual junk. Old coils of bedspring, plastic toys, a sagging couch, at least five ancient television sets, a mountain of cassettes. On the gravel, spools of black videotape were tangled in neatly arranged piles, like someone decided to sit there and chew apart all the plastic. The den itself was past all that shit, in the rubble of an enclave painted with the words FAIR IS FOUL & FOUL IS FAIR FUCKERS. Some real nice digs.

There shouldn't be a fire pit. I know we're all thinking it—the wild ones, they're not supposed to have thumbs, you know? After the carnage, some of us stand near the arrangement of cinderblocks that circle the fire pit like sad-ass lawn chairs. Our

crossbows hang limp in our hands. Someone's phone goes off but we don't even pick it up. This fire pit is fucking weird, none of us says just yet. It looks like a stump, the midsection carved in a big X with raw pulsing pinks and reds at its heart, peeling the core back white. The stump sits in a charred indentation in the ground, and it reminds me of one summer when lightning struck a tree on the farm and ate it from the inside out. Once in a lifetime, tops.

Behind us, snaking from beneath the circular enclave that might've once had something to do with trains, there's a root-path leading crooked into the den. If we listen, which we all do, we can hear shouting. Will and the rest of us are still down there, probably counting up the corpses. They didn't really fight us when we found them, and I know we're all sort of disappointed. They howled and cried and clawed at the dirt but their den was nothing but damp earth and dead ends. Wolves used to live in caves or in the woods, but shit, where can you find places like that anymore? From the earth's belly, I hear Will start up about skinning their hides.

Someone's phone goes off and this time it gets answered. This shakes us apart, gets us moving. So what if they carved a stump and made a fire and sat here at night watching it with their dumb eyes? We round the perimeter, keep watch. Another of us takes out his phone, too, and snaps a few pictures. "This fire pit is fucking weird," he's the first to say. "I'm putting this thing on Instagram." I shrug. I got rid of all that shit after my parents died. Facebook before the funeral—then afterwards, Twitter, then Tumblr, even Snapchat, and definitely my Grindr profile. Online, time vaults would lurch open at the stupidest times. I'd be checking my phone in bed and then next thing I knew, my Ma's face would peer up at me and I'd go to her profile, which I should've deleted a long

time ago, but never did. I'd reread the RIPs, the thoughts and prayers, and I guess there was probably a way to disable all that shit, like unfollow her, but I never did. I just shut it all down. Now I only talk to fellow hunters, I guess.

#

Growing up, I didn't give a single fuck about wolves and neither did my parents. But even in Big Sky Country they'd crop up, and sure, we had a coalition in town meant to protect us and all that shit, but for a long time, the worst you'd hear about was someone's raided chicken coop or a missing cow or two. There'd be rumors, or whatever, about a family that went missing, but that was always on rez land and the coalition would say well, you know, that's out of our state jurisdiction, and no one wants us out there anyway, and that was true, so that was that.

The most controversial law didn't get passed until around the time I was born because it wasn't until the early 1960s that the wolves started smartening up. There was the Wolf Man, sure, and maybe a few like him in the Middle Ages, so now people are figuring hey, that might explain a lot—but it didn't happen in droves until much later, and pretty soon, for a few days out of every month, wolves could walk and make sounds and use thumbs. Then they got to thinking, which was when the real trouble started because it pried open a big can of fucking worms, so it was all “civil rights” this and that. Anyway, even the human-ones are born wolves, so this law passed in maybe 1996 and it prohibited hunting them unless they're wild. The ones that can transform are tagged—assimilated into our Great Fucking Society.

I know this guy who used to hunt with our coalition who dated a tagged one once, but it was real hard seeing as they couldn't be together most of the time, and then it got to

the point where the few days out of the month they *could* be together, they mostly argued about his job. But all of what we do's legal, you know, legit. Except I guess that wasn't the problem.

She was very sophisticated and all that shit. She even had a YouTube channel, I think.

But then even he got her to admit wild wolves don't give a rat's ass about anyone but their own packs and they give into their hunger real easy, she even said she didn't like running with them—but come on, she'd said, it's still kind of fucked, what you guys do, isn't it? So then this guy, he sat her down, told her all our stories. He saved mine for last, Little Arlo and His Daddy's .22 against the Big Bad Wild Wolves. I watched them tear Ma and Pa to shreds. They smelled like piss and their fangs were long and yellowy and there wasn't anything human about them. Whenever I talk about it, my chest starts feeling numb and the numbness stretches into my fingertips. I get dizzy and sometimes I throw up, and honestly, I was pretty angry about the whole fucking thing, having to listen to him tell the likes of *her* about that night.

#

Will comes up from the den and glares at us. "Tell me you fucking got it," he grits, "and you already tossed it onto a goddamn junk pile!" Will's a man with hobbies. I think years ago he might've been a teacher, but mostly I think that's bullshit, even though he does know a lot about the Second Amendment, and arsenals, and what George Washington would think about all this shit. He owns a gun range on the outskirts of the city, and he started this little hunting business on the side because of all the government incentives. I mean, that's what he said, but it's pretty clear he enjoys himself out here real

good. He smokes a cigar and looks like he's playing a Vietnam vet. I'm not sure he's ever been to war. Some of us did a tour or two in Iraq, but I didn't. When I turned eighteen, I only wanted to kill one species, and it wasn't other humans.

We tuck our phones away, but only one of us has the courage to ask Will what he means. "Huh?" says Horace. He's a couple years older than I am, went to the same school as me and all that shit. Circled the same hangouts. My last year was kind of a blur on account of my parents getting killed, and the switch from Big Sky Country to Shit Can City. There were a lot of counselors and a lot of fights with the wolf-kids. The wolf-kids had a special program, and would only show up for a few days out of every month, and so it was hard not to hate them. I roughed them up on the regular, I guess. Horace, too. We'd lost something, and yeah, it *was* that simple.

They owed us a healing. Everyone knew it.

His crossbow hanging from its strap on his shoulder, Will takes a big puff on his cigar. I quit smoking yesterday and I can already tell that's all gone to fuck in a dickbasket because I really want a smoke. His glare worsens, like it's lowering us into our graves. "Arlo, how many were in this pack?" he cuts.

I flinch. I was on recon, so I should know. "Um, like, there were six," I say. "Sir," I add, already knowing what he'll say.

He looks at all of us. "We've been watching this pack for months. We got all the goddamn fucking permits. You're supposed to be guarding the perimeter, making sure they were all down there—and what the fuck do I emerge to find?" We don't answer. "All of you—staring at your goddamn dicks—your phones in your hands! Our count is five. Now one of them's out there—" He makes an accusatory motion with his cigar,

“and so help me god, if it kills *anyone*, that death is on you. The way I see it—Jesus, I hope it’s only some fucking bum gets killed.”

We look to one another and I feel really hot, like I’m wedged in the heart of the burning stump. Will gives one look at the fire pit and the cinderblocks and he sneers.

#

I order coffee and eggs and bacon and three chocolate-chip pancakes, and I only have appetite for the coffee, so I just kind of sit there staring at the syrups. I’m always buying shit I can’t afford, I think. Horace, who likes us all to call him Ace due to something that went down back when he was a kid—I’ve guessed probably involving a different nickname—orders waffles that look like they’ve been dressed in a whipped cream and strawberry tutu and avoids catching my eye. No one should blame me about what happened, but it’s pretty clear they all do because I’m the one Will barked at, and when he said *that death is on you*, his grave glare was right on me—even though all of us were distracted when we came up from the den.

Ace watches my coffee ritual. Two packets of Sugar In The Raw. One thimble of vanilla creamer. “R,” Ace says. “Dude. Are you going to eat that?” He stabs his fork at my bacon.

“No, dude,” I say, and I mean it to have a little edge, but it doesn’t. “It’s yours, man.”

Before we left for Denny’s we checked the junkyard’s perimeter a few more times and all that shit. A few of us pissed on the burning stump and the fire went out and then Will went home with some of the older guys and that was that. Lone wolves usually get picked off by the police if they’re spotted in the city and all of us figured it probably ran

that way even though we don't have a good reason. Abigail, who used to be called Abby until her little brother got his throat ripped out by a wolf or something, ordered hash browns with cheese and said, whatever, assholes, that wolf's as good as dead anyway—so shut the fuck up about it, will you?

Now she goes by Gail, which Ace and I think is ugly but we've never said so.

"Hey," she says now, nodding her chin somewhere behind me. She's sitting opposite Ace and me, next to Logan—who has always just been *Logan* and a heaping pile of steaming bullshit. Logan ordered fries and a Diet Coke and he's gay, so Ace always makes stupid jokes. Like I'm supposed to want to fuck every gay guy I come across, shit, man, and Logan's not even my type. First of all, fuck Diet. Second of all, wolves have never fucked with his people, so, I mean, it's kind of fucked he's always hanging around with us. Now he double takes at Gail's nod, and raises his plucked-perfect eyebrows and that's how I know even before I turn around that there's going to be wolves in the far corner booth, scowling at us.

Both Ace and I sit up straight and turn around—what else are we supposed to do?

"Guys!" Gail hisses even though I know she can't mind. "Jesus," she grits, just like Will.

When we turn back, the wolves we saw—*the wolf* I saw—makes me feel like I've been stun-shot and now I'm sinking. Like I'm ghosting down through the booth and through the layers of the earth we learned about in school. Crust, mantle, outer core. I don't make it to the inner core, though, because by that point, I've melted into liquid fire.

#

The wolf's name was fucking *Casper*, so that's on me, I guess. When he said his name I was grinning, I was like, "Ha ha ha, like the friendly ghost?" and when he gave me this "huh?" face, I should've figured and all that shit. Who never saw *Casper*? But I guess at the time I was more figuring, maybe I just remembered the movie real well because when I saw it growing up and Casper turned into a real human kid at the end it made me go fuck, well, I might be into guys.

We met at this gay bar that Logan likes that's really chill on Tuesdays and sometimes I go with him, and then sometimes, but rarely, Gail will show up with Ace in tow.

Casper found me at the bar waiting for a drink, already drunk and kind of pissed because it was one of those nights. Ace was showing everyone this YouTube video back at our booth and they were crowded around him but I couldn't hear shit. Three people around a phone is fine and all, but four is pushing it and just for the record, I'm not one of those anti-tech dickwads or anything, I'm just fucking poor and after my grandparents died, my iPhone cracked all to shit. They were footing the phone bill, so that's that.

Anyway, now that I'm thinking about all this, I guess there were more signs than his stupid reaction to my teasing. His grin, for one. It was a very nice grin, but now that I'm looking back, it was maybe a little too wolfish. Like I could tell there was a little bit of hunger for human flesh lurking behind it, but at the time, that wasn't the kind of human flesh I was thinking about. He had jet black hair shaved into one of those punk haircuts I used to wear but couldn't maintain because right after my parents died I was really into the Dead Kennedys, and there was something weirdly sexy about Jello Biafra's voice when he sang "Police Truck" that was loopy and aggressive but desperate

all at the same time, and Casper reminded me of that sound. His eyes were narrow and brown, and they laughed really easy, but never at me. Also he had a tragus piercing and I mean, shit, man, I mean, really—how does that play out on a wolf’s ear?

So I got my drink, and then he was like, “You smoke,” but it wasn’t a question and like a total fuckup I was, like, yeah, how’d you know? And he tapped his nose and winked, and he was like, “I could smell it on you.” And now I’m thinking fuck, well, that was pretty obvious, Arlo, you fucking brainless dick, but at the time I was kind of relieved because he asked if he could bum one. I wanted everyone to see me leaving, having a good time, so we went out back together and we smoked the rest of my pack, and then we made out for a while and then we went back inside.

He was like Joe Strummer, if Strummer were East Asian and at a gay bar and not dead.

The fucked up part is that I saw Casper a couple of times after that, which led to him getting my number, which led to him knocking on my door one night pretty drunk, and I guess things had been so good the past year, you know, that I wasn’t really paying attention to the moon anymore. I paid a lot of attention to it after my parents died, and I guess I always carry a vague awareness of it because I’m a hunter, but I never thought about hunting when I was with Casper and we never talked about it.

After he spent a few nights with me, he found my crossbow in the closet with its silver-tipped bolts and I found him staring, and I told him it was cool. I was like, you want to give it a shot? I know a place we could go. I have the license and all that shit, and he was like, “Have you ever killed anything, R?” and I told him yeah, I’ve killed plenty,

and then he actually grinned. He was like, “Me too.” But after that he didn’t come around as much, so that was that.

It’s not like we were in love or anything, but I guess, lately, I’d sort of missed him.

#

They’re two booths down in the corner, but the booth between us is empty. Gail starts throwing these tiny little balls made out of Logan’s straw wrapper. Her aim is shit, but you’d never know it because when we’re down in the dens, a lot of the time there’s really no aiming involved. She starts using his napkin and Logan just lets her, nodding and smiling like isn’t this funny? We’re regulars at this Denny’s, so I don’t see how we’ve never seen them here before.

I start imagining how white trash we must look in our gear and how we brought our bows and bolts inside and how fucked up that kind of is. Back in school, Ace and Logan, who lived on the edge of some trailer court hinterlands, had these four-wheelers and we used to go down and shoot paintball and I’m starting to think maybe we never grew out of it because we’re still wearing all our stupid ass shit. We have these bandanas around our arms with this wood-axe emblem. Like ha ha, get it, like we’re the huntsmen from that story where that girl gets eaten by a wolf, which by now, I guess, everyone figures was probably true.

I sink a little lower, trying to remember if any of them ever saw Casper with me, and then I get my answer. Logan shoulders Gail. He’s looking at me. “What’s wrong, R?” he says, and I can hear it in his voice, this cruelty he gets when he’s about to start whaling on someone.

Under the table, my hands clench and unclench, and my palms are sweaty.

Gail is laughing now, and Ace starts in on my eggs, and Logan winks at me.

“Hey, will you fucking shut up?” I say. I want to tell Gail to stop throwing shit, but I don’t.

“What crawled up your ass and died, R? Chill the fuck out.” Gail rolls up another piece of Logan’s napkin and dips it in my coffee—what the fuck, I growl, but she sends the wad sailing. “It doesn’t fucking matter,” she says for the thousandth time. “Just because you’ve got your panties in a bunch over losing one doesn’t mean we’ve got to share your shit mood, you know?” She snorts with laughter, “Fuck—they’re catching on, I think—”

I can’t help sneering. “The thing we lost wasn’t one of *them*, it was wild, it can’t even transform—” like the pack that killed your brother, but I don’t say that part. Gail’s still laughing, but Logan gets this frown going and I know he hears me. “And seriously, what the fuck?” My voice is a little louder now, “I’m not the one who lost it, why am I getting blamed? Ace was the one on his phone, and you’re the one who was fucking with Snapchat filters the whole time—”

“Dude, um,” Ace looks up from his phone, “you were the one staring at that fire pit—”

“Yeah, um, *actually*,” Gail chimes in, “that was weird, wasn’t it? I mean how’d a bunch of wild wolves cut a stump like that and light it on fire?” They’re all looking at me. “You’re the one who did recon,” Gail says, like I don’t already fucking know.

Then I see the flicker of dangerous excitement in Logan's eye. "Hey guys," he says, interrupting Gail, and I know he's going to tell them. "Did you know R here *fucked* one of—"

"Excuse me."

We look up.

It's one of the wolves, but it isn't Casper. The wolf-girl doesn't say anything more, just dumps a cup of her yellowy piss right on Gail's head. Gail screeches, chokes on it—and I'm out of the booth like lightning, Jesus, shit! not because I'm afraid of getting piss on me, but because everything is fucked and my heart's thrumming crazy like it did on my first hunt and I've got to *move*. I push the wolf-girl out of the way and she's howling, like, *howling* with laughter, and I think I'm totally leaving, but I don't have a car, and even if I did, Ace always drives.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" I say, once I'm out in the parking lot. I figure the cops will be here soon because this isn't such a bad side of town, I guess, and it'll be this whole thing. They'll see we've got our bows and all that shit, not that it really matters, but we'll have to stand around in this Denny's parking lot all night showing them our licenses, getting looked up in databases—they might call Will, fuck, I mean, I doubt I'd lose my job, but maybe I could.

I pace, trying to remember. I don't know. I didn't see shit. I didn't see that fire pit on recon, I just saw a fucking hovel, and wolves, and piles of junk. The moon's been high the past few days, and just yesterday I was there, and I didn't see any of them transform. Not the month before, not the month before that. I mean, it's not like we just shoot up any old pack we find. They've got to be verified, you know? And they were, but even if they

weren't—who the fuck am I shitting? Will's taken us to a few jobs way outside the city, in the suburbs that need a quick favor after a kid goes missing. It wasn't my fault. It's not my fault. No fucking way, man.

Casper doesn't say anything, but I know he's standing there. Watching me after he lights up his smoke, and I let him watch and take a few drags. Finally, he says, "They called the cops, I think, but Amadeus and Freya just ran—she's the one who came up to you guys." He shrugs and takes another drag and I want very badly to ask him for a smoke, and I know he wishes I'd ask.

"Why aren't you running?" I say. I stop pacing, but now I'm shaking. I can't get calm. They get to pick their human names, I heard. Whatever names they want and I don't give a *fuck* why Casper picked his. Something is moving through me like a tremor now, the kind that splits mountains.

"I will," he says. He still looks the same, only he's got new boots. He fidgets with his phone in his free hand and it lights his face up, the sharp of his bones, his narrow nose. Deep down I know he's anxious, but he looks indifferent. Like whatever, man, you're on your own.

"Fuck you," I say. I let the words cut my mouth and they hurt and I want him to know how bad they hurt even though I can tell they've cut him, too. It doesn't fucking matter.

He tenses when I move towards him, like he's watching the earth crack wide open, but he's not going to move, he's just going to let himself fall in like a stupid fucking idiot. Like those wolf-kids at school or the wild ones in the den. Like they just exist to take it and do nothing, just lie down and die, only, I'm wrong—and he doesn't

take it. He flicks his smoke and then right here in some Denny's parking lot we tear each other into hundreds of raw, bloody pieces, and we don't say a word the whole time we just keep hitting and hitting and hitting and hitting and I don't know how but it starts ripping me up inside, too, how easy it all happens.

#

When I moved to the city, I moved in with my grandparents who owned this little townhouse in a retirement community, I guess. They're gone now too, so when I moved out on my own, I got this place near the city park and whatever's left of the gardens. The trees aren't like they were back home, but it's about as close as I can get to real colors, you know?

I live in a basement apartment with one window and one room. It's No Smoking, but I smoke anyway and all that shit. Some nights, I can't stand the smell, so I wander outside in the dark, on the trails near a ravine that cuts through the park like a wide gash. The ravine goes on for miles that way. By my place, on the trails, there's usually a shitload of litter and something strange will come over me and I'll get right up next to the bank smoking my smoke, and fish out all the trash. I never put it where it belongs though—I sort of just pile it up beside me in the rocks.

The first few times, I liked it—the hunting, I mean—and this pack, it's not like they were innocent and all that shit. They'd killed a few people living near the tracks, so at first, no one was saying much about the deaths, but then the police got involved and Will stuck his nose in, got us hired. Will calls them hunts. Lately, they've felt more like exterminations. My first kill was pretty scrappy and all that shit. Thing put up a fight. I've got scars, sure. I used to be proud about them, but one night, when Casper found one

(and I guess he must've known but he asked anyway), I said it was from falling out of a tree when I was a kid.

I didn't even know he was one of them so it's weird, you know, that I lied.

Will's always going on and on about the world dying, and getting worse, and how *the apocalypse is nigh* and all that shit, but lately I sort of feel like the world's been totally shit-canned since probably forever, I guess. Since man first fucked some woman in a cave. There's never been anywhere safe, or perfect. Not when people are always around to ruin it all to hell.

But now I get to thinking about fire pit again, that stump cut into sections. How it reminded me of the lightning-struck tree seeping at the seams with fire, back when my parents were alive. I fish the last of the trash out of the water and sit, taking a long drag on the last smoke from Casper's pack. My fingers are numb. Back at the hunt, that wild wolf tricked me, I guess. When he heard us coming, he was probably outside, keeping watch like we should've done on recon. I'll bet he knew I was in his yard, made sure I saw what he wanted me to see. I'll bet he was a sentinel, like I am.

I mean—or, I don't know.

#

The cold moonlight bites Roque as he staggers down a steep ravine. There are no birds here. He is human. He is clumsy, naked. There is only the sound of rust, and grinding halts, and Roque is shivering. He has to stop so he can weep. Roque is human. He gags on his tears. They taste like slivers of silver. Near him there is water, and he laps it up to wash the taste of grief out of his mouth. Later, he will throw it back up because it is rotten and contaminated and his insides are raw. The trees hiss at him, his feet cut from

the rocks of the stream. He is weeping, weeping, weeping. He is alone. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a shadow in the dawn with smoke pouring from its mouth. Roque is human. When he sees the shadow, he knows it sees him.

“Swan-and-Needle”

The witch queen takes the Swan to her dungeons to show her the prisoners. My pets, the witch queen calls them, I’ve grown quite fond of their howling. Upon their approach, shadows wag alive, but the Swan does not look at the them. If she did, she would not be able to keep her grin, or stop herself from cutting the witch queen’s throat. The prisoners speak to the Swan in the Swan’s language as they pass. The wind, they howl, what does the wind tell... But the Swan only speaks to the witch queen in her lilting tongue: “I daresay the songs are true—you are a woman of your word,” the Swan says. The witch queen’s glance prickles the Swan’s gut, and the Swan can feel the queen’s craft, thin tendrils shimmering over pale skin, like fabric. The sight of them does not bother you, the queen asks the Swan. The prisoners cry, dig at the stone, the iron. “Not as much as you might think, your queenship—after all,” the Swan does not look the queen in the eye, but at the jewel of her glittering earring, “what are gutty wolves to a crow born of the Owl?”

#

The Swan’s people and the witch queen’s people were once one people, long ago. They shared the same kind of craft that held fast to their beings, beyond bone, beyond aura. Until the Owl’s daughter, the Raven, discovered she could pick apart her craft like undoing fabric—until the threads danced around her and she could stitch them into anything she desired. The Owl disapproved of this witchery, of her followers, and the Raven disapproved of the Owl, old and stuck in his ways, like the craft he held so close to him it sank into his bones and would not budge. The war between them has lasted longer

than either the witch queen or the Swan has been alive, but still, generations past, they hail from the same family. Its why the canine family hated to send the Swan to make the proper negotiations. Its why the rest of the families: feline, serpent, ursine, all insisted an avian go. Here, the Swan was to present the terms of her people's surrender of the city the queen's own clutched onto for so long. The shapers would retreat to their hills—allowing the witches to have their black spires, their walls, all of it, at long last, finally in peace.

#

The queen only spoke civilly with shapers from the avian families. The Swan must do her best to do the same. But at dinner, all she can think about are the cages, the pits, the dungeons. Most of them, the prisoners, they were canine. From the Wolf's family, from the Hound's. The canines despised the witches more than most—they were warriors, exchanged rivalries on the battlefields—the Swan knows for certain they have a particular deep hate for the queen's sword and shield. Two men always by her side: one a master of hex craft, the other of ward craft. This is the crutch: witch women do not fight, they will not bleed. They stand on the edges of battle, shouting orders, playing dolls with their men. The Swan steals glances at them. Neither smile, they are never addressed. Two shadows in a great hall carved from obsidian. Feeders of ravens.

"I should like to visit the shinelands one day," the queen says, as if when it is all done and settled, this war between them, she might be able to step foot in the old woods without being eaten. the Swan grins, prompted to describe home. The hills, the warrens, the patron shrines that appear and disappear in the woods, ribbons tied to them like smoke. They say if you ever see your patron shrine, you're to offer it something and it

will grant your wish. the Swan has never seen hers. The queen tilts her head. “It sounds as though they are hidden by pockets of pathfinding craft...” the Swan covers her wince by taking a long drown of wine. Pathfinding, another art of stitching cast by witches. the Swan is already sick of witches. She longs for home.

“That’s true,” the Swan manages, “I had not thought of it that way. Perhaps one day soon you will be able to tell us. Now tell me, your queenship,” the Swan tries to change the subject, “at what time tomorrow do you expect our formal negotiations to begin—I know you sent word to your coven, still returning from the lines—do you expect them by first light, or...” The food sits sour in the Swan’s belly, she looks at it, shredded greens, then at the queen’s plate. The queen is eating meat, she realizes. Delicate, a heart of rich food prepared with gross intention—swan. Like in the dungeons, the Swan’s eyes cannot meet the queen’s. In that moment she hates her own family who sent her here into the jaws of a wolf because she was cleverest, thought best at playing witch. Best at keeping emotions hidden, her face smooth like the men the witches breed.

“First light is too soon,” the queen says, sly, “I told them last light. It will be a full moon.”

The Swan wants to insist, wants to say: I don’t gutty think I will be able to last that long without pecking out your eyes, your queenship. But she says nothing, only looks to the queen’s stoic sword and shield, wondering how many of her own they’ve killed with their arrowed hexes.

#

By a low moon after dinner, the Swan flies through the high halls of the queen’s castle, then shapes into a mouse to sneak past the dungeon’s guards. The guards are boys,

perhaps only a handful of years younger than herself—but they don't act like the kind of boys the Swan knows, shapers. Instead they're quiet, sewing embroideries, string threaded through hoops. the Swan has heard this is how they practice stitching casts. Neither of them seems interested in guarding—she supposes she could have come to them human, and still they would not have noticed her passing there. But she had not stretched her wings since her arrival the day before, and for the briefest of moments she could pretend she was home in the aviary—until she slipped into a world made of cages, of blood and fur and the smell starvation that gives off a rusty sting.

When she sees them there, in the cages, all at once the Swan does not know what to say to them. They sleep huddled, restless, itching their skin and minds raw. For a long while, she only watches them, sniffing them out. From the canine families—most of them from Wolf and Hound, But there is one from Fox and one from the serpent families, from Rattlesnake. It's the one from Fox that spies her, before she even shapes. Fox's eyes searching, fixing on the shadows.

Fox doesn't sleep. Fox can't sleep. Fox might never sleep again. Every night is the same.

the Swan turns human, shivers at the lick of cold over her naked skin. That's when she sees the Fox, and she has to cover her mouth to keep her heart from lurching out of her mouth when the Fox shapes, human, so thin it isn't natural, her body like a man's, breasts small, the sharp of her shoulders making them look broader. But no, the Fox is a woman like the Swan, only older. They come forward, touch through the bars, even though they have never met. They talk like lovers, but that is the way when there is only madness. "I'm here for you," the Swan sings in their language, coo of birdsong. "I

was sent for you. To order you free. Tomorrow, wait.”

The Fox, despite everything, gives a sly look, holding onto the Swan’s hands. Both are trembling. “Now we thought you would never come,” the Fox sings, “there have been others, they die here. The wind tells I am unsure—” there is stirring in the heap of fur, the wolves’ ears perking at the sound of their song. The Fox pays them no mind. “Why come for us now, I mean.”

This is what the Swan feared, by coming to see them. But it is also why she came. “It has been decided,” she sings, careful, “it has been weighed and agreed upon by all the families, even the Wolf—” though she leaves out the Wolf was angriest at the outcome, despite having lost the most—once, the Swan thinks, this had been a war between the avians, but they were wise enough to let go of the city of black spires long ago. But by then there were too many casualties, too many lost for nothing from the great patron families. Too much stolen from the Wolf. “It has been decided,” the Swan swallows, “that we are to give up the land here to them—as they have already carved a space for themselves here for so long. That we let them have the spires and the flatlands, and we keep our hills in peace. It has been decided.” The Cow sings like reciting someone else’s song. Someone who had never met the witch queen. Never saw her eat swan and never sat through it, feeling the way the queen’s craft crept around her like an aura, a warning.

The Fox takes away her hands. Then there is a chill, and the wolves are awake now, listening. “What is it?” they growl, “what’s this the swan girl sings?” They begin to argue, do not take to the news. “Wolf would never do such a thing,” they bark, “Wolf would not let her win like this—Wolf should leave us here, Wolf should fight. He knows we can make our own way, we will—” But the Fox says nothing—perhaps knowing it is

wiser to let the witch queen have her spires, perhaps knowing when it is smartest to break, why the families all agreed. Perhaps not wanting a life of war, like the wolves. Not bred for it, not suited. The Fox says nothing. Until the Swan looks to her, startled by the growing snarls of the wolves. This can't be, this can't be, they howl, all this for nothing, this can't be... the Swan wishes wolves were as selfish as songbirds.

"You have met her," sings the Fox, sudden. "Their queen, You know what she is like..."

The Swan's skin crawls, a human sensation of dread. "Yes," she sings, "she eats swan."

"Then you know," the Fox sings, as if something has been settled, "why really we fight."

The Swan finds herself nodding. It catches her, this nodding, it cuts her heart because she knows she has been given a decision to make. She thinks of the queen's sword and shield—of the boys guarding the dungeons. "My name is Ebba," the Swan says, then, and the Fox takes up her hands again, through the iron, and perhaps they really could've been lovers, the two of them, if they weren't here underneath a city of witches, and if the wind told just the right kind of story...

"Margutt," the Fox says, a canine family name. She glances at the wolves. "You must be as strong they are, Ebba," she says. "But you already know this. The wind tells you already are."

#

Months ago, the witch queen had a baby girl. the Swan has heard this, but there is no evidence of it in the halls and the queen has not said a word. The Swan wonders, while

taking a flight at dawn, circling the black spires, if something happened to it, the baby. If it took a gasp of this world and choked on it until it died—though the Swan supposes if that were true, word would have spread by now... the Swan wonders who is father might be—the sword or the shield? They are always together, witch men, shoulder to shoulder. They all move as one in pairs.

The queen was lucky to give birth to a girl—in the world her people forged, only women inherit, only women own property, only women pass on their titles. It has solidified the reign of her bloodline. For shapers like the Swan, these customs are strange. Even if they choose to pair for life, their children are given to carers after shaping for the first time. The only thing to inherit is the history of your first shape's patron, whatever it may be—no barring on your parentage. The rest is yours to forge, to make your own. Your name, your worth. Of course—if your first shape is avian, if it's canine, feline—some from the rodent family might say there's no denying you're better off. But to the Swan, now, circling the black spires of the witch city—it simply isn't true.

#

The queen does not come to see her at noontime. Instead, the Swan is left to her own devices in the gardens, always in sight of the guards. It's the waiting that begins to itch at her. Here, there is nothing to do, even a strange absence of birdsong among the wild rose. It is strange to think the Swan planned to be on her way home by this hour—bent her knee for her people, given terms of surrender, spread swift on the wind. The Swan watches the guards watch her. She thinks of the shaper men she knows, and decides all of them would never have been able to stand still for this long. But really, the women, either. She nears what she think might be a shield, standing posed near one of the garden

trellises. The sleeves of his black coat embroidered with a silvery triangle, the wild rose white, and the sword for once, a little ways off—how strange, she thinks, to see them apart. “Hello,” she says to him in his tongue.

Then he surprises her. He looks.

But does not say anything. The Swan pauses, as if made aware of his craft. Nothing like the queen’s, not kept hidden. Instead she can feel it shimmer with an aura of curiosity. For the first time since she’s arrived, she grins not because she thinks she’s meant to, but because it happens natural. “Did you get in a row with the sword?” she says, glancing the direction of the other guard. The curiosity wanes, glitters into a flush she takes as a yes. “Do you like being a guard?” she says, then. It seems like he won’t say anything to her, but then he does, very quiet.

“I daresay, I like guarding here,” he says, “better than I like guarding in the dungeons.”

The Swan’s grin fades and she doesn’t dare lift it back. “Yes,” she says, as if she agrees.

#

There are eight in the queen’s coven. Eight women that council her on the war, eight women each with their own swords and shields, eight women with reputations on the lines of battle, eight that have, in their day, stricken fear in the hearts of wolves. The Swan sits among them at their round table, etched with a circle instead a circle inside a circle: moon, earth, womb. The Swan is told to sit next to the queen in a foolish sign of paid respect, so that the Swan’s elders might know the great respect that the witch people still hold for shapers, despite the shapers losing their holds in what will now become

witch country. The Swan, to her credit, holds her head high. She recites the things she was told to recite. Their terms. No, she will not back down from them. Yes, all the prisoners they've taken, all of them free, no exceptions. None kept for pets. For cages, for entertainments. No. Yes, no. These terms have already been agreed upon.

Yes, you are a woman of your word. Yes, and so are you. This goes on for quite some time. The moon high outside the tall windows, left open on the cool night. Pairs of men guarding the doors, every crevice of the room. But all the while, the Swan is not thinking of the treaties, her recitation of terms, her signatures or the subtle jokes of surprise that she can sign her name—no, the Swan is thinking of the witch queen, dining each night in her rooms. The delicate meat on her plate, the gentle saw of her knife, the poke of her fork. She is thinking of the wolves in the cages, the queen starving them. The queen, the queen. Not the rest of them, not the swords, the shields, or even the eight women of the coven who have done equally terrifying things.

No, no, the Swan is thinking only of the queen. When the negotiations are over, the queen. When the blade is slipped from the Swan's sleeve, the queen. When it stabs at the queen's throat, when it cuts, when it jabs, when the blood is fresh and hot—the queen. But when the arrowed hexes from the swords come, shredding her before she can spread her wings and fly from the windows, but when they reach her heart and unwind it, and she is dropping, and dying, only then does she think of the Fox.

“Everything is Temporary”

I am a piece of star that’s been scatter-shot, pin-holed, kaleidoscoped, all: hello, hello, hello, little earthling, have you tried this new cushion, have you been to this byeee party? (I’m not expecting you to get it, I just want you to *feel it* wherever you are—feel that vibe, man.) But just then—shit, rain slams on the tops of the greenhouses, one big *woosh* that means the office/shop will flood, is flooding, and I’ll need to move the expensive planters, the heavy ones—(now, Cam, move!) and bring them up on the counters so nothing gets ruined. The rain crash-lands me down into the dirt and brick, down into the gray, meaty world.

I rush up the Drivehouse, knocking my head on a geranium basket before tricking myself in a sober calm. I am calm, it’s alllll good, bro. Joe glances at me on his way to the Boilerhouse and shakes his head with this, *sure as shit you were stringing out magic by the Bluehouse* (FYI: the dumpster, because it’s blue) *huh* look. I roll my eyes, even though he’s right and I still feel like I’m floating above the earth’s flesh. For instance, every basket of petunias in the transplant rooms swirls *rain rain go away* the way my mom used to sing and it makes me dizzy.

“Hiii, back from break!” I tell Valerie, skipping upstairs to the office.

I pull my hair up into the highest knot I can to hide its ethereal lift, but there’s shit I can do about the stars in my eyes or the mist gathering at my ankles when I pause. Luckily, the rain’s got her distracted, standing near the doors looking out at the blacktop street, the wind pushing over the hydrangea bushes. I could’ve stayed outside in it, got myself drenched spinning a few more rounds around the glimmering stars—made Valerie

do all the heavy lifting—but she’s getting on, and I hate it when she’s in a mood.

That’s when I see the two of them, hovering by the red, glassy hummingbird feeders. (It’s probably okay for me to exaggerate my heart stopped, or kicked clean of my chest so everyone here gets that their appearance is, you know, surprising.) But there they were, anyway, and after the surprise wore off I think maybe they’re here buying a vegetable garden and/or bedding plants and/or sweetpea and/or spelling herbs and/or praying mantis cocoons and me working here at Gilmore’s is just a coincidence or something—but then Valarie turns from the downpour and goes: “Back from break—?” and they both look at me at once with their twined grins and then I’m: *ohhhh, fuck me, what’s this about?* because Valarie doesn’t seem to see them and regarding witches, you know, I’m no expert or anything, but just saying—it isn’t a good sign.

My magic dealers give nothing away, even though I feel sure they can hear my thoughts.

#

Probably you think this is bullshit and I’m trying to skirt around things and get to the good part, but just in case you’re wondering later on, I’ll just cover all this now. No, I can’t remember how I first met them. I think we went to the same middle school, but there was a long stretch in between of blurry factory work, lines, lines, lines. (I’ll get to this later, chill.) But by eighth grade I was on the no-career-path-track so I was forced to drop out with the other stupid kids, then the ones who were good at magic went one way, and the ones who were good at math went the other.

Then again, I could be misremembering—the way magic can sometimes lead you into doing if you’re like me and you’re literally using as often as you possibly can afford,

which lately, isn't much. How long I've known them, I guess, isn't really important, only, I thought I should at least tell you their names are Teagan and Lincoln and they're practically the only witches who will deal any magic in Northeast Ohio. I guess I should've asked Teagan/Lincoln why they were bumming around in the goddamn warrens, but then again, people think it's so bad here, but it really isn't—I mean, ha ha ha, guys, it's not like we don't have magic dealers, right?

Teagan/Lincoln are, by the way, also twins, so for the longest time since they appeared as daily morning fixtures in the park across from my house, it was hard to figure who was who. I think they like to fuck with people—mostly because, well, wouldn't you? They've both got this variation of a platinum blond mohawk except one of them has bangs—but I swear to god, the one with bangs could be either of them, so don't embarrass yourself thinking it's Teagan when it's actually Lincoln. Same goes for whose got the nose ring and the tongue ring. The first time I approached them in the park on the pretenses of “ohhh, dude, didn't we go to school together? huh? back in the day?” (None of us knew the answer), one of them was wearing a long black jumper and the other one was wearing jeans, both with these funny/ironic? letterman jackets. But when I think back, maybe I just assumed the one with jeans was Lincoln because I never really asked, so who the fuck knows. Basically, you know, they're just one witchy entity.

#

Teagan/Lincoln (call me Link, Lincoln said to me once) definitely, for sure, one-hundred-and-a-million-percent, holyshitthisisembarassing, knows that I just, like, five seconds ago in my car, got super high up on their magic. It's almost unnerving whenever one of them wears a face the other one doesn't—for instance, one of them raises their

pale-almost-non-existent eyebrow and the other's grin starts to come off a bit too smirky, but maybe, I think, I'm just being paranoid. I blink, scratching at one ankle with the heel of my shoe, like that'll get the cloud of mist to go away, or the feeling in my chest like I could float off the floor if I really put my mind to it. "Uhhh," I say, and believe me, I would've said more until I remembered to figure in Valarie can't see Teagan/Lincoln and so I'd probably lose my job, you know, poking at thin air about what it wants from me. I'm feeling pretty smart about remembering, (that's top-notch thinking, isn't it?) when Teagan/Lincoln drift up to the counter—I can hear them, drawing in their breaths.

"It's so nice to see you," says one of them. They're both very pale and thin-boned and sometimes when they're talking they blur into skeleton birds with long necks and sharp claws. Last time that happened, I had to lay down in the grass at the park and close my eyes and I swear I levitated right into a worm hole. Like, both kinds at once. I can't have Valarie watching that...

In a sharp flit of thought, I remember the reason I came off break in the first place and move around the counter to pick up the shop's expensive pot off the floors. Sometimes when it rains hard, the gutters fill up, and the rain will seep through the cracks in the ceiling/wall connecting the shop/office to the Bighouse and pool along the brick seams.

Lincoln/Teagan watch, Valarie wordlessly passing through them on the way to the bathroom. I think if I'd gone to magic school like them, they'd *still* make me anxious.

(By now I bet you've forgotten what they last said to me, so I'm sorry, and I hope you don't judge me on this, since it happens all the time when I'm high up, but I mangle

up my next thought because I'm feeling all the hairs on my arms and legs lifting at once, my skin yawning.)

I echo; "It's so nice to see you, too, yeahhh, man," (instead of "Jesus shit, what the fuck are you guys doing here, getting me fucking fired?") Then, "Whaddup, whaddup?" I say, syllables tripping out of my mouth, tumbling into tiny dough balls. Tegan/Lincoln must hear the real thought underneath, though, because then they're doing that grin thing, and I know, suddenly, that I have access to something they must want. They want it very badly, and while *they* are—they know *I'm* not above stealing. Maybe because they do remember me from school, after all.

"There was a thing you said," says Teagan/Lincoln, "at the park, two days ago..."

The last two days become a tunnel of light, red lulling by my ears. I don't remember.

"I think," they say, prodding, "you mentioned a talking cat." Maybe-Lincoln (because even though they're equally hairless and flat-chested, when maybe-he lifts maybe-his fingers to maybe-his chin, there's the suggestion of absence) nods. "If I recall—if I recall, you said," maybe-he's mimic of me sounds a little shriller, "and the worst part are the cat questions—the stupid fucking customers and their stupid fucking cat questions—and then, not even the cat will shut the fuck up either." Immediately, I want to tell Teagan/Lincoln I would never say such a thing, but that would be a more embarrassing lie, since I'm definitely, sort-of-for-sure, eighty-five-and-a-thousand-percent positive (like I said) they can read my thoughts.

There they are again: the grins.

"Oh," I bubble, sighing, "the cat, yeah, yeah, the cat. Right on. You want to see

the cat.”

#

(This is the part where I tell you I got this job because of a boyfriend (future: ex), and it was too good to give up.) Back when I was fresh booting out of school, they put stupid kids like me into the lines. I’d been with GM for awhile, meaning, like, since I was fourteen to twenty-nine, but then it was all *see you later space cowboy* after that because of layoffs. (Which fucking sucks because I was promised after 30 things go easier). But there’s always layoffs, everything is temporary, even when you’re twenty-nine—no, *especially* when you’re twenty-nine.

That’s something my dad used to say, and no, it wasn’t like “don’t worry! everything is temporary” it was more like “watch the fuck out and try not to panic, Cam! because *everything is temporary!*” But I must’ve had a whiff of magic on my side because I was getting laid while I was getting *laid-off* (ha ha ha, no?) and my guy-pal hooked me up real nice with this sweet gig at Gilmore’s where all the women work the office/shop and the men are the ones who do the heavy lifting. Three people (only!) in the whole place ever went on schooling after fourteen. One of them is Valarie—a math whiz who had it all and lost it all in the trial and tribulations of a divorce or academia (choose your own adventure). The others: Joe and Caleb. They don’t talk about it. I think they were once engineers.

But the cat. Right, the cat. (Get on with it!) Every morning when I come into work, she’s either bathing in the fairy-light inside the Quonset Hut (the light there is just so nice and soft and shimmery in the mornings, you’ve got to stop by some time), or she’s asking for food, like, literally, “where the fuck is my food, Cam, the fuck is my

water dish empty when it's one-hundred degrees?" I take her attitude in stride. My brother had a dog that could talk—I mean, right before he went off on magic-track and I never saw him again—so it's really clear, you know, that Gilmore's cat is way damaged goods like the rest of us since there isn't anyone with a lick of magic in the whole joint. I know this because Meeko (that's the cat's name) has told me herself while lapping at her foot. "You stupid fucking humans," is her constant meow-mantra between the eaves of the clematis and spikes—or the potato vines, or the superbells, her favorite.

The thing is, Meeko seems to *select* the people she wants to freak and I can't tell if Valarie or even Joe or Caleb have had to deal with her shit. I've seen it in some of the customers, though. They'll come in and see her laying out on the counters (I get this question at least one million times a day) and they'll go, "Ohhh so cute! Is she pregnant or just fat?" and too rarely, *too rarely*, Meeko will be like, "The fuck did you just say?" and this look comes over their face and they'll look at me and I'll look at them and shake like a leaf thinking I'm going to lose my job. But most of the time they don't bring it up—like they know what they heard, and who said it, and most of the time I think they're just high up on magic and good at hiding it, like most everyone who lives here. I mean why else would you come to buy tomatoes in one-hundred-degree heat unless you were so high up the waves of light felt like cloudy tendrils on your skin?

But most of the time—Meeko doesn't say anything. Meeko the cat just lets everyone pet and prod and ask, "is she pregnant? Is she pregnant? Is she pregnant?" Over and over and over again and I have to keep going, "No, she's just fat, no, she's just fat."

The thing is, I like this job a lot, the work, I mean, counting everyone's boxes, working in one of the last outposts of small business in the area... Gilmore's got by on its

tourism, a glass labyrinthine linkage of other people's potential flower gardens, the structures strug together for a hundred years, each one built up on itself with names like The Outbacks, Palletalley, Veggiehouse, etc etc. etc. It's beautiful here. Lantana, stargazer lilies, mother of millions, violas.

The problem is—it doesn't pay shit next to what I got on the lines. No benefits. I guess when you exchange almost every ounce of paycheck with witches in the park for a slice of sky, living off coffee and canned soups and McDonalds dollar menus, the whole lifestyle starts to feel pretty temporary on the come-downs once it's time to pay up for the rent, heat, water—the pressure sucking you down and holding you there. God, it sits on your chest. It's the worst thing.

#

Tegan/Lincoln follow me to find Meeko. They hover behind me as I lead them down the long rows, and it feels like we're traveling on clouds. Once in the park, Teagan/Lincoln said they liked selling their magic off to people that didn't have any. "It's an abundant resource," they said, "never-ending, and it's not fair, you know—it's not fair only some of us have it..." I nodded along, "Too right, tooooo right," I said, "this is so cool of you guys, yeah."

It's not like I was their only customer, either—once I saw them dealing to this kid, couldn't have been tracked yet, but who knows (I know, deep down, but allow me this) maybe he had his own magic, maybe he was asking them for advice. Here, we pass by the begonias, and I skirt around a woman with a walker who tries to stop me: "Do you have any of the ones that looks like roses?" she prods, as Teagan/Lincoln float through her like sunshine ghosts. Jesus.

“Uhhh,” I say, “go to the front, ask for Valarie.” Wherever Valarie went off to. (I guess I forgot to make note after the bathroom thing, sorry).

I look for Meeko in the usual places. Under the benches, in the cocoa shell baskets, in the forest of long tomato four-packs, singles, the cat-nip herbs. Meeko is nowhere to be found. I lead them outside to our small selection of perennials.

The rain has stopped, which means somewhere, a hundred Ohioans are making the same joke about the weather, “if you don’t like it, just wait five minutes!” and they’re all fake laughing. Then I almost run into Joe. He used to be a good friend of my ex—my ex, who lifted up off the face of the planet a year ago, and became thin air. (This was a convenient excuse for a breakup on my part, but I’m not a monster, I was part of the search parties, only, you can’t search the stratosphere). Joe gives me this look again, and I think he can see them, Teagan/Lincoln, because he gives a nod their direction, then his eyes on the pathway.

“This is weird,” I say, as we wind through the dogwood by the worm tree. (In early summer, there are these tiny green worms that float down from the leaves and get in your hair, they are like squiggles, no bigger than your fingernail, this is not fiction, this is a real tree, I am not shitting you here). “Honestly, I don’t know where she is,” I say. “I’m wondering though—I mean, if you could... What do you want with her?” Teagan/Lincoln give a sidelong look at one another, the usual thing—exchanging thoughts, probably. Their eyes are twin sets of delphinium.

“Meeko is an artifact,” Maybe-Teagan says, the way maybe-she pushes imaginary hair behind maybe-her ear, bone-fingers curving. “It’s okay, we feel her close, she’s only shy. But she’s worth a lot—understand, Camila?” I’m already nodding, because they

know so much more than I do. Because they have magic and because I'm coming down, down, so deep the weight of *temporary* is sloshing at my ears. (This is the part where I might tell you my mother called me Camila, or my father, but the truth is no one used to, and the name feels witchy, un-mine). "Teagan and I are willing to pay you."

I blink, not hearing them because I thought—the one with bangs is Lincoln, then. No—or I've lost it again, who said what—but someone's mouth said *money*, right?

"Uhhh," I say.

Teagan/Lincoln are gracious enough to repeat, "Pay you. For the cat, Camila—we were thinking six-hundred. That's about—what? That's about how much you make a month, isn't it? Six-hundred, for the cat. Meeko is very important, you see, because," the other one picks up the line, their speech slow as slugs while my mind crawls like thrips, "because artifacts hold so much energy, they're ancient things, touchstones. Permanent. Neither of us want to lie to you—you can either sell Meeko to us, or we will take her. Meeko is very important, you see. Very, very..."

I'm nodding along the ridges of very, very. Yeah, right on—very, very, even though I'm getting this vibe, (do you feel it, too?) I'm getting this vibe like they're not so interested in keeping Meeko as a new pet cat with a foul mouth—I'm thinking instead of the way they deal out their magic, long threads of string on a spool, the pinch of it when you wrap the thread around your finger, when it sinks into your skin, when your limbs fall asleep and you're levitating into the moldy ceiling of your shitty hovel—I'm thinking: what kind of drugs do witches take? I'm thinking: next month's rent, of cheap beer. I'm thinking: very, very, yes, yesss.

#

Teagan/Lincoln leave in a sleek, white vintage corvette stingray, which might as well be the same as a whorl of leaves. I stand in the parking lot watching them, delayed in my wave until it doesn't matter anymore and they're far out of sight. Then a guillotine of hot summer sun comes slanting over me, (us, can you feel it?), the greenhouses. I breathe it in, no more ethereal lifts, no more mist at my feet—no more storm clouds.

The way forward is perfectly tiled, one cheap-brick at a time.

"I'm not even kidding," says—Joe, using the butt of his Falco to scratch above his eyebrow. I've only seen him without his red cap one time, and I had to double-take because of his bald spot. Joe isn't that old. He's only like, thirty-something. (But the sun here will put years on you if you're not careful. I can already feel it happening. My tan skin, the sun spots, the new moles that sprout on your arms ready to poison you like a fairy tale mushroom.) "I think if they wanted me to help them find something," he says, grinning, "I'd go lock myself in the garage."

"Uhhh," I say, "okay, dude, have fun dying of dehydration." (Ha ha ha?) Joe just shrugs. "They're not that bad," I go on, "they're really nice, actually. They're so nice. They help people." I'm trying to remember myself, before. Before I started going to the park. How did I survive before that—how did I push forward with all this pressure and weight, in this heat, in this slant of light? Suddenly all I can think about is crisp, airy, one-hundred dollar bills. "Excuse me," I say, leaving Joe in the lot next to the wisteria and a pile of crumpled cigarette butts.

Inside, Valarie is there at the register with a huge line of old people, looking totally *where the fuck have you been?* (only she'd never swear—during lunch breaks she reads her bible) and Meeko's sprawled near the register, and a customer coos, goes,

“ohhh, look at you, so happy—is she pregnant?” and the work of my response does its own druggy trick to make the time pass.

#

Meeko doesn't say anything. I spend the rest of the blistering afternoon keeping tabs on her, startled when Valarie has me put the pots I'd moved up on the counter, back down on the floor. The rainstorm from this morning feels eons ago. Unreal. Imagined. Then once we're finished, everything swept, the trash taken to the Bluehouse, the Drivehouse impatiens baskets cleaned, my fingers sticky with blood-sap from dead-heading, plucking off their limbs—it's time to close.

I do it this way: go to my bicycle, pretend I'm biking off, up the hill of the country road (it takes me an hour to bike from shit apartment/house/hovel (choose your own adventure) to work). Then I stop on the hill's crest, hiding behind an old dilapidated sign for a once-was bowling alley. It reads: TH_NK_YOU_GO_DBYE. From here, I have a vantage down the hill of the cars that leave: first Caleb's, then Joe's. I take out the last of the spool of magic from my bag and roll out the last thread—clear, like fishline. There's hardly any left, just a few twists. I thread it around my pointer finger as tight as I can, until it feels like I can hear my heartbeat on the tip of my finger—then it's done, sunk into me, Teagan/Lincoln's magic dissolving twine. I cry a little, at first, like I always do, but then the tears are gone, and after a million years, so is Valarie.

Back down the hill, coasting, I don't even have to pedal once, and my bike gains a spooky height, rides a wave of my mom singing *you are my sunshine* all the way to the bottom.

Next, I hop the padlocked fence, then slip in through the Pepperhouse plastic flap,

torn weeks ago and never patched. The Pepperhouse's green scent makes my mouth water and I let my tongue hang out, tasting the air. It tastes like my father's garden smelled, the fleshy tomatoes, the sweet corn and asparagus—kale and lettuce, so so so good (believe me). Inside the Drivehouse the geranium baskets are swirling back and forth, giggling *hello, hellos we didn't think we'd see you agains!* "Hello!" I say, "hello, hello." I'm waving at them as I float by, my toes dragging the burlap ground, everything is good, I think, and of Teagan/Lincoln: everyone is so nice to me, (and guys, I don't deserve how nice you are...) Then I find Meeko, "Meow," I say, "Meeko, Meeko," and there are dewdrops on my face and in my hair. There is no pressure, and Meeko is so nice to me. (They weren't this nice to me on the stamping lines, the grease and scream of the break whistles, they weren't this nice to me, my parents after my witch-brother left—none of them this nice!)

Meeko pets my arms and I pet her arms, and I lift her up up up and hold her like a baby and she is saying, "Camila, you haven't got an ounce of magic in you, but that's okay because you are weightless." Do you know what it's like to feel weightless in a body with so much weight? (God, look at you little earthling, you haven't got a clue!) Meeko and I share giggles and forgive each other for every sour thing we've said among the zinnias, and the best part is, when I put Meeko in my pack, head poking out so she can breathe and show her tiger stripes, and I get back on my bicycle, and I'm pedaling hard back up the hill, huffing and puffing, Meeko says: "I forgive you for selling me to Teagan/Lincoln, Cam. I know how much you need this. It's okay."

#

I fall, wreck, go splat. (Maybe you saw that coming)

It happens two blocks from home on my way to the park through the woods.

After I stole Meeko.

Put her in my pack.

There's this little indent where if you know where to look along the road, you can cut off from 422, past the graveyard and golf dome, and disappear into the humid trees. The trail leads the opposite direction of the park, of my hovel, but it felt right.. Until the crash-landing, until I can no longer fly—the magic dribbled out of me until there's nothing left but the sewage ravine and the roots of elms and oaks trying to hang on.

I go tumbling, and it's fast and hard and a scream of a plummet. In the confusion, I think I see my ex's body underneath the film of nettle, and I try to reach for his hand, but then he's gone and there's nothing but jagged branches. The blood on my arms isn't from the fall, but I feel the stings, the raised skin, the claw-marks dug into me like tiny wails, like big yowls.

The blood on my face, and the weight... (The weight, guys.) God, the weight is something else. Beyond hungry, beyond tired, beyond counting coins in your hovel.

Like I will never get up, and underneath me, wedged, zipped, misshapen.

My pack is still.

I blink. There's nothing above but swaying limbs, a glow of night-sky.

My intake of breath, ditch-gasping. Teagan/Lincoln watch me, hunched, from a sickle of moon, crooking their bone-fingers around their threads of craft, shaking their heads at all the little earthlings. "Unless you have your own magic," they sigh, "what goes up must come back down." I open my mouth because I ought to explain, say something more than uhhhh, this time. No matter who's watching. I desire a permanent

thing, I confess. I deeply need a permanent thing. Please...

(Can you give me this one permanent thing?)

Hild of Fire

Chapter one

My father's accountant talks numbers. It's just like him—my father, to make the executor of his will his own accountant. Mr. Beau Hernandez speaks in a squeaky high-pitch, his hair gone gray, his beard in need of trimming just as it did when I was a child. His suit sleeves are still too long, his lapel, stained. But despite his appearance and manner, I watch him keenly figure sums as if he were a Symbolist. He mumbles through my father's debts. The remaining fortunes after payment. Most importantly, the value of the land. He pauses to scribble at his desk.

I wait for him to finish, pressing my lips into a thin line, until finally, he looks at me. I hold my chin high, my gloved fingers digging into the hard leather of the cushioned chair. "I came here," I say, back stiff as a coffin, "because in the letter I received—it said if I did not attend to my father on his death bed, he would give..." I can barely get the words out. I can barely keep from hissing. "He would give—my inheritance—" I close my eyes, "to his—dogs."

Hernandez blinks, then seems to consult his papers like the act of shuffling might stop me from questioning him further. "True," he says. His eyes skip at his watch. "I did not see you at the funeral—or the burial. It seems you did not attend to your father on his death bed, as asked."

"No, I did not," I strain, "because I only received this letter one month ago, Mr. Hernandez—allowing scarcely enough time for me to travel all this way from Chicago in the first place!" I almost reach for the letter in my breast pocket—have the pleasurable

thought of tossing it alight on his desk in peel of flame. Use the rest of his papers for kindling and burn his entire office to the ground. But I don't. It would be disrespectful to my craft and unwise in Hull. I must pressure him in other, more subtle ways if I am to gain the fortunes I so desperately need.

Mr. Hernandez glances around his shared office, two desks unoccupied. "There is no need to shout, Ms. Ellis." At the third sits a woman I catch on the edge of staring. "Luckily," Hernandez goes on, "the will itself was worded more carefully than the letter. The papers for the estate and the earnings are yours, only so long as you can produce the code to the safety deposit box containing them." He appears almost smug, then. Like he knows what I'll say next. I hate it.

"Code," I say, clenching my fists and creating an aura of heat, indulging in making him at the very least, uncomfortable. "What code?" Despite our differences, I would have come to see my father if I'd known he was dying sooner. Not for him. But for the estate. Instead, I'd arrived only that morning by steamboat on the Misery River—late. The journey took even longer than expected after a gang from the wasteroads tried to pillage us clean two days ago. I arrived to Hull already furious by the delay, and it wasn't long after checking into my hotel that the valet informed me my father had died six days ago, after an illness of aging that clutched him for months. I hired a carriage to Hernandez's offices at once, the letter creased in my pale hands.

Hernandez sighs, feigning sympathy. "That's a shame," he says, "just a shame, Ms. Ellis, that you do not know the code. This is where your father's will becomes tricky. If you can't produce it, then his will stipulates the estate is to be bequeathed to his dog." He takes off his spectacles, a move I suspect he uses to keep his straight face. "But, you

see, Ms. Ellis, since dogs cannot legally own property, it means the titles your father willed must be entrusted to the bank—” I open my mouth, but he continues, “There is, unfortunately, another complication. In a mere week’s time, the bank must put the estate up for sale, since it is not legally owned—and,” he becomes hushed, eyebrows raised, “after speaking with Mr. Brown, a most esteemed creditor and friend, I was informed this morning that there are already parties interested in the land.”

“Mr. Hernandez. I demand to see this will,” I say, “the writing. His signature, now!”

He does as he’s told, licking a finger and shuffling his papers until he produces a document in my father’s thin lettering. This isn’t surprising, I ration. I should’ve known. Ten years ago, I received a series of letters from a wealthy dowager in search of a new apprentice, claiming to have once been close friends with my mother. It was all I needed to hear to risk everything and leave Hull. The last time I saw my father, I was in the process of running away with a hearty sum of his money to Chicago. I was fifteen years old. Under the dowager’s tutelage, I mastered power I could now use to threaten. To kill, if I wanted. I look at Hernandez, his frayed tie, his brown, scheming eyes—a thin layer of sweat forming along his brow, along his rumpled collar.

I lift my eyebrow. “Do you know this code?” I say.

Izalith, my familiar, a yellow-spotted salamander with a sleek soot colored body, scuttles over the back of my glove from the sleeve of my black collared blouse. The politest of warnings.

Hernandez frowns, clearly unsure what he just thought he saw. “I—I do not, Ms. Ellis.”

“Then it seems I must find this code,” I say to him. I look away. “And I assume,” I say, “I must do it without access to the house?” Finally, I’ve got him squirming. He knows something is amiss, loosens his tie as if he’s become overheated—like a toad in boiling water. I stay poised.

He nods. “Correct, Ms. Ellis. Though all is not lost. If you would prefer access, I’m sure a representative from the bank would be more than willing to assist you on your search—”

“Perhaps,” I say. But I relax. There are other ways to get what I want. The kind of ways in people like Hernandez’s nightmares. “I suppose I might take it up with the bank, then,” I say. I stand, returning my father’s will with my black-laced gloved hand. “Tell me, Mr. Hernandez,” I say as I gather and sleeve my coat in its deep red. “Do you know if there are any burnings at tonight’s half-moon? I haven’t seen a proper one in ages, and I was always fond of the fires...”

He pauses, as if taken aback by my interest.

The burnings of elemental Symbolists became popular after the end of the Uprising two decades ago, a brief but bloody war that resulted in the outlawing of sign-magic in all its forms. Before that, those who studied sign-magic had usurped the technocratic leaders of the Relic Era in the latter half of the twentieth century—men with names like Regan, Gorbachov, and Thatcher—and reigned afterwards for nearly two hundred years. It was during the recent Uprising against them that my father was clever enough to not only survive in the fighting, but make a name for himself in the aftermath.

During my early childhood, the previously unassuming town of Hull brimmed with outlaws from the east, escaping the new laws of the land. My father hunted them,

appointing himself their judge and jury with surprising fervor until his late retirement five years ago. By then, Hull had become renowned for its stake burnings of sign-magic practitioners. My father had been the first in the region to charge coin, to make their deaths a spectacle. But recently, as the immediacy of the Uprising fades, some have begun to see the stake burnings for what they truly are: a barbaric way of execution, the likes of which the world hasn't seen since the Dark Ages. The burnings in Hull had come under particular scrutiny, I heard, after my father's retirement. Their declining popularity has led Hull to host burnings based on scarcer evidence, on pure heresy, sensationalizing the crimes of the accused about to be burned at the stake in attempts to draw back more of their hemorrhaging crowds. I suspect their business will not last much longer.

Hernandez slips on his spectacles and picks through his papers.

"It's true Hull still manages to keep up its traditions," he says. He offers a weak smile as he brings one paper close. Hernandez skims, then he nods. "The *Journal* does say there are to be two burned, at sundown. Both accused of grave robbery and blood work..." I see his face change—become more approving. "It seems one of them is that devil of a boy—Ezra Laska. They think he's the one who tried to rob the damn bank not but six months ago. He's wanted in three territories by now—they claim he's only twelve," Hernandez scoffs. "I find that unlikely. Don't you, Ms. Ellis?"

Laska.

I recognize the name, perhaps from my studies, but I don't remember the context.

"I believe children perhaps the most capable of monstrous acts," I tell him coolly. "Unlike us, Mr. Hernandez, they don't often conceptualize empathy for others. For instance, I can tell you're only feigning that you're sorry for my recent misfortunes." I

allow a careful grin, showing a flash of teeth. “Let us hope I don’t have to mirror these feigned feelings if I am unable to locate my father’s code—I can assure you, this room will become much more than just stuffy.”

Mr. Hernandez makes no immediate move at my open threat. He only stares, red-faced, until a bead of sweat tickles from his hairline. He covers it with a hurried fold of the Journal, reaching for the handkerchief from the inside of his suit jacket.

“Will that be all for now, Ms. Ellis?” he says, sharp. He pats his forehead dry, eyes lowered on his desk. I can tell he’s furious.

“It appears so, Mr. Hernandez,” I say. I keep my grin.

Finally, I’ve been presented with a turn of luck at the news of tonight’s stake burnings.

Blood workers deal in the dangerous elemental sign-magic of blood. By reading blood-signs, they can divinate meaning, able to predict the fate of the living, or act as medium for the dead. The true masters of blood craft, able to command corpses and ferry souls themselves, were hunted to extinction by the end of the Uprising, their art forbidden even in my own circles. The taboo of the taboo. Sign-blood is considered the most dangerous of all the sign-magics for its potential to corrupt the practitioner. Even so. By rescuing the strongest of the two workers and forcing them to do my bidding, it still offers the best chance to retrieve my father’s code, tricked from his own essence. My inheritance could be restored to me as early as tomorrow’s high noon.

I stand, sleeving my long coat in its deep red. Izalith, my familiar, wriggles happily under its high collar. “I mean to see you again very soon,” I say to Mr. Hernandez, and take my leave.

Chapter Two

No one at the burning was bound to see the resemblance between me and my father, but nevertheless, I elect to hide my face and cropped hair under a wide dark hat, just in case. My mother died in the aftermath of the Uprising, but I carry her inheritance with me wherever I go: her red hair, her sharp face, her long forehead. My blond-haired fool of a father only gave me a smattering of freckles, his thin lips, and his sneer. Even though the night is warm, I decide it best to keep my long coat and wear my boots, laced tight with a pointed toe. My tailor understands that I like to draw the eye. But not tonight. *Inconspicuous* hasn't been part of my temperament in years, but I must remember to keep my eyes lowered and my head bowed. To merely observe.

It's nearly dusk by the time I arrive on foot to the street entrance of the burnings, marked like the entrance to that of a boneyard.

Omnia mors aequat is scrawled with decorative flourish inside a black-iron archway. Death makes all things equal.

I pay my carriage, lingering at the entrance only to note the board of postings next to the archway, usually pasted with a variety of wanted posters. During my childhood, I remember there being so many, it was difficult to find room for more plus the scheduling of executions. But now there is only one poster, one schedule.

To be burned at sundown: Ezra Laska and Roberto Reyes. The poster belongs to Laska. It appears Roberto Reyes never earned the same infamous reputation. Laska's sketch depicts a boy with tangled hair and a mischievous half-smile. The kind of look that reads, *I'd kill you in your sleep and rob your corpse before I'd ever pickpocket you, don't*

you worry, ma'am. Like Hernandez remarked from the *Journal*, the scrawled description below the sketch claims him only twelve years old—a nasty spawn of poor parentage if the following litany of all his crimes proved true.

“Two of’pents,” says the man waiting on the other side of the archway, collecting the fee.

I pay up. “This Reyes,” I say, “he has no wanted poster? No listing of crimes?”

The man gives me a strange look. “No, ma’am,” he says. “But he were caught red-handed alongside Laska. Wardens caught ‘em digging up graves in the ol’ boneyard north of town.”

I remembered that boneyard well. It was where many outlaws tried to hide, in the midst of overgrown relic ruins. During my childhood, it was heavily patrolled by my father’s men, later nicknamed gravewardens, and then just wardens once they started patrolling the entirety of Hull proper. Most were veterans from the Uprising, already used to hunting practitioners of sign-magic.

I climb the path leading up a to a small crowd in front of me, the river straight beyond them. Fifteen years ago, it would have been difficult to find a view so close to the stakes along the modest ridge. Disappointed in the crowd’s size, I try my best to blend in among only a dozen or so old men and women, all perhaps my father’s age, carrying the same weight in their glances. The men shuffle in the gravel lot, lighting rolled smokes and mumbling with their wives about the Laska boy and his come-up-ins. The women shake their heads. No one seems to feel much pity.

I turn my attention on the site of the burnings.

Nine misshapen rod-iron stakes spread equally apart, forming a neat row along

the ridge between the crowd and the river. My instinct is to look away from them, but I don't. The ground below each is blackened of life. Hardened and heaped in the ash of the dead. An upside-down boneyard. I had seen hundreds of burnings in Hull before today, but I could not read sign-fire, then. I try now, only able to bear skim-reading the wormy symbols in the ancient soot. They writhe with anger: a high-pitched wail of flame. My eyes prickle. I force myself to stop reading.

I failed to account for how it might affect me—being back here, bearing witness to these atrocities. I once thought them necessary, the burnings. Just. It was only after discovering the truth from the dowager about my mother's origins as a practitioner of sign-fire that I came to suspect my father's penchant for deception. Embers of old anger spark to life, my chest tightening. I bow my head, lips pursed. I have an intense desire to be done with Hull for good.

There are to be two blood workers burned, Laska and Reyes, yet I see only one stake has been properly prepared. Kindling and brush skirt the nearest rod-iron to create an upright pyre, branches from trees crooking un-trimmed from its breadth, tangled alongside gray driftwood. In my father's time, each accused would have been given their own stake. Their own private space to die. But it seems my luck still holds—I would be able to spare them both this way if all went according to my plan. Beside the pyre, I watch as the executioner prepares their torch. They wear the traditional beaked mask of a carrion bird, a feathery black cape draped over their shoulders.

The judge and her wardens converse in a square stage to the right of the pyre. I recognize the judge for her long, blue coat. It was the same color my father wore during his tenure. Blue was the color of those victorious in the Uprising, those wary and hateful

of sign-magic. The blue was a lighter shade than the deep, almost black blue of the wardens and their dark leather. The judge is young and wears a crisp pant, a starched collar, and a suit vest. Not far off, either, I realize, from how my father used to dress for such occasions. Perhaps she admired him. I did, once—before everything changed. It dawns on me I could have been her, this judge. It was no secret my father intended me to take over his position. Heat prickles my neck. It was sickening.

The judge turns her attention beyond the crowd, and following her look, I see an entourage of several wardens approaching with the criminals in tow. I frown, leaning into their path for a better look.

There were many terms for practitioners of sign-magic throughout the ages, but two emerged in the last century to delineate expertise: workers, and Symbolists.

Symbolists spend years under the tutelage of a master of one particular sign-element until they too, can write and rewrite the signs. But unlike Symbolists, most workers are considered charlatans—the magicians of the lower class. Few take the time to study their craft beyond cheap parlor tricks for coin, only able to *read* the signs—not manipulate them.

Symbolists are now a rare breed. I was lucky to have found the dowager and her Society, still upholding the traditions of master and apprentice despite the aftermath of the Uprising that sent much of the practices into turmoil.

But Laska and Reyes are charged as mere blood workers, not Symbolists of Blood. Neither would boast true mastery. I mean to accost the stronger of the two after their rescue to help retrieve my father's code as soon as possible. I stare between them as they approach, trying to figure out which face matches the sketch on the wanted poster I

read outside the archway. I highly doubted this Laska's list of crimes, considering a simple worker could never carry out half the deeds attached to his name. But even so, he was a safer risk than the other, who had no reputation preceding him.

I squint as the entourage splits the crowd, and I'm caught off guard.

Both are young, but only one looks like he's still a boy. Except his hair seems too dark and cropped, his face pudgy—far more round, compared to the hungry fox-like look of the boy in the sketch. Despite this, the older of the two doesn't make a clear match, either. He seems at the oldest sixteen, even if lither in stature and thinner in the face.

I consider the possibility Laska's poster is sorely outdated. But still fail telling them apart. Both seem irrevocably guilty of their alleged grave robbery. The legs of their trousers are up to their knees in dried mud. Their faces are equally smudged—the older boasting a cut cheek and sore lip suggesting he lost a fight. He pushes at one of the wardens herding him, narrowly avoiding stumbling into me when he struggles backwards from the warden's clutches. The younger one pauses behind in a fit of sudden coughs—the wet kind that send him hunching inwards, unable to cover it with his tied fists. I glimpse a smear of blood on his lips as the peacekeepers force him to recover before he frantically licks it away. His skin seems just as pale as the older one.

Which is the true Laska?

I back further into the crowd as they're brought in front of the judge.

Izalith, my clever familiar, is gone from my sleeve.

My plan for their rescue in place.

The judge appraises the older of the two first. There is no condemnation about the unnatural meddling of boundaries set by the dignified laws of nature and god. None of

my father's old declarations from the Uprising.

“Roberto Reyes,” the judge begins. But instead of watching Reyes, I eye the younger one immediately, the one they must be charging as Laska. Besides his round face, I decide his nose also seems too broad compared to the sketch. The rest is hard to tell behind all the mud, and the sun has almost set along the river, the sky grown dark. I squint back at the older so-called Reyes. His nose seems a better fit. Narrow, a high forehead. “Under oath of the laws of this land,” the judge says to so-called Reyes, “I hereby charge you with grave robbing and intention to reanimate the dead. Do you deny it, son?”

My father used to rouse his crowd, reveling in his power. *Guilty? not guilty? what say you!* There'd be shouting, hand waving—but this crowd is silent. Given the recent reputation of Hull's burnings and Reyes's lack of notoriety, it wouldn't surprise me if he were revealed to be completely innocent.

But Reyes makes no plea. “No,” he says.

He rolls his eyes as he's taken to the pyre, then tries one last attempt to run, kneeling one of his wardens and pulling away from the other's grip. The one he kneed recovers quicker than Reyes must've bargained, slamming him to the ground with a thud that draws only a few of the crowd's attention. They tussle in the soot, but it's no use. Even so, he gives a shit-eating grin as they force him to the rod-iron atop the nest of pyre, tethering his arms at his back against the stake.

I narrow my eyes.

In my father's time, it was only the Symbolists of Blood who treated their crimes and deaths so cavalierly. They were almost extinct by the end of the Uprising. The few

that were left were snuffed out in the decade that followed by those like my father. I'd seen less than a handful burned in my fifteen years in Hull, and I remember them all for the way they laughed full in my father's face as the flames ate them alive. How their laughter turned into screams.

The study of sign-blood among Symbolists has since been considered too dangerous to truly master. The Society in Chicago forbid all study and practice of what they considered a perverse element. Rewriting sign-blood was rumored to rot you from the inside out. Drive you mad the way those of Blood were driven mad during the wars that destroyed the Relic Era in the late twentieth century. In the Uprising, those of Blood found no allies in their fellow Symbolists of Fire, Water, Earth, or Wind. Even the dowager remarked she was glad to see them all culled in the aftermath.

"Ezra Laska." The judge appraises the boy next.

He stares ahead, past the pyre into the darkness beyond. His expression is distant, and even from here I can see him shaking like a candle flame.

The so-called Reyes already on the pyre is far less composed, his grin drawing from the crowd, to the judge, to the crowd, and back again. His eyes are maybe lighter. But maybe not.

I clench my jaw. No matter, for now—I would assure both their survivals and sort out this confusion afterwards.

"Under oath of law," says the judge, "I hereby charge you, Laska, with reanimation of the dead, thrall-body resurrections, grave robbery, bank robbery—and," she pauses, the crowd at attention, "having sexual relations with a corpse." There are a few sharp intakes of breath—some even laugh. But the so-called Laska, makes no

indication he hears them.

“Do you deny these charges?”

The boy coughs.

He coughs and coughs, the fit causing many in the crowd to wince.

This time there’s blood drooled from his lips. He’s sick. It’s undeniable.

There’s a look of tired pity that overtakes the judge’s face, a drawn-out silence that seems to punctuate the pathetic nature of Hull’s cruelest traditions. Everyone tenses, all of them perhaps hoping the same thing: Maybe this Laska is already dying from his untrained meddling with sign-blood, maybe there was no need to feel guilty for sentencing a mere child to the stake.

“N—no,” Laska says, weakly, but there’s little easing in the crowd at the tremor in his voice.

Meanwhile, the so-called Reyes watches from the stake, now with a cocky half-smile, his hair wild from his struggle with the wardens.

Just like in the sketch on his wanted poster.

It’s then I realize the truth, recognizing his demeanor, that cunning look on his face.

They’ve confused them, the fools.

The grinning man is really Laska.

The sickly boy is really Reyes.

I watch half repulsed and half fascinated as the real Roberto Reyes is herded to the stake, chin dripping with blood from his coughs. He puts up no defense as he’s tied back up against the real Ezra Laska.

This is far from the burnings I remember as a child, where a mix of six to seven workers and Symbolists made a show of it all—the crowd betting on who might beg for forgiveness, or who might put up a struggle. No. This feels more like a chore. One made by greed.

The judge waits until they're secured, then asks the last question: "Do either of you have any last words?"

This gets the real Roberto Reyes to hesitate. His wide eyes fall to the judge. "Reyes is innocent," he gasps. "I hired him. He doesn't know any work, especially not blood—I swear it."

I frown.

Did Reyes insist his identity was Laska's on purpose once they were captured?

Even the judge must have an inkling something is amiss. But I know because of my father's time as judge—it isn't the first or the last strange deathbed plea she'll have heard in the company of thieves. "Then what would you have me do, Laska?" she says.

The crowd stirs, turns restless.

"Don't burn him," says Reyes, "Leave him alive—throw him in jail, but let him live."

"Reckon you can't kill me, judge!" calls out the real Ezra Laska.

My father would have delighted in this. He would have turned to the crowd. He would have asked their opinions, even though he'd already made his decision. Fire, always fire. There is no pleading yourself free from the stake.

The real Reyes must never have seen a burning. Maybe it was why the real Laska found his plea so amusing, the way my father might.

To her credit, this judge seems sick of the business of burnings, wanting no part in a show. Perhaps she didn't admire my father, after all. But just as she nods to the executioner—there's a collective gasp from the crowd at the crackling appearance of the world's ugliest rat around Laska's shoulders.

Reyes chokes in a new fit of coughs.

Laska's grin intensifies.

The crowd boils to life, glad to have something else to focus on besides a sickly child. "Is that an opossum?" a man says.

The thing hisses. Its rat-like tail coils around Laska's neck.

"Reyes is a warlock!" someone shouts. "Burn him!" another joins. "It's his familiar!" Panic twists. "He's a Symbolist of Blood!"

Taken completely by surprise is not a face I've allowed myself to make since I mastered my studies in sign-fire. Flames spin over my heart. *Laska*. That's how I recognized his name.

The Laskas were a large family from the east, boasting ancestors as far back as the Relic Era wars—all of them trained in the dark mastery of sign-blood. I hadn't heard the name from my studies, but from my own father over a decade ago. He boasted to have ended their line for good in the aftermath of the war as they tried to flee into hiding in the western plains and mountains.

My father, ever the liar.

But I must act, not stand like a dithering fool.

Instead of recoiling with the crowd, I creep further into the shadows, circling left, opposite the stage and closer to the pyre. I peel my laced gloves as I go, folding them

neatly into the pockets of my coat.

The judge orders them dead at once.

The executioner brandishes their torch and lights the kindling.

Laska spits at them. “This ain’t the first time someone’s tried to kill me!” he shouts. “Nah, I been this close before and death still don’t mean shit!”

The boy Reyes, beside him, seems to have already made peace with his fate. He leans back and closes his eyes.

I observe it all. The chaos, the crackle of fire. Revel in the strange thrill. Until soon, just like the Symbolists of Blood from my childhood, Laska laughs at the rising flames until he begins to cough, ragged, from the black smoke. I blink. My lips curl in disgust at his obvious hunger for my father’s old theatrics. But I remain resolute. No matter if this Laska is more than just a dirty blood worker, but far worse—a Symbolist of forbidden sign-magic. All the easier to blackmail him with. I’ll simply stay on my guard. Make use of his supposed talents and be done.

I draw as close as I dare to the pyre without being noticed in the fire’s light and stretch out my arms from my waist. I cup my scarred hands upwards in search of warmth and kinship.

Sign-magic can be mastered by anyone determined enough to learn it. It’s merely a branch of different languages, one the student must let sear into the body as well as the mind. Before the Uprising, mastering sign-magic was a privilege, a right only afforded to those in the most affluent circles. My father perpetuated the lie that it was an innate, born talent. For over a hundred years after the end of the Relic Era, those of Blood, like Laska, reigned as if that were true. Insisting themselves god-appointed nobles, they tore the

world apart and built it to their liking, splitting territories and felled cities amongst themselves in the bloody aftermath. Until those like my father rose up against them.

Rose up, but instead of taking the power for themselves by right, to use diplomatically and responsibly—they outlawed its uses all together. Because they feared it. Because it had been used against them. To hurt them, to control them. To brainwash them into thinking themselves unworthy. But those like my father are wrong.

There is no special caste. No one born powerless.

The only requirement is the student's willingness to risk everything for their craft.

I lift the shimmer of signs from the blaze. The signs flare into focus, the forceful language of fire. I read them, taking in their dimension, the way they demand all of my senses. I consume color and sound and heat. The signs brighten like constellations in my mind, constantly shifting and licking inside the flames they embrace. I begin to see from the perspective of each flame, feel the way they curl and consume. Feel the way Izalith scurries along the edge of Laska's boot as they begin to barb up his leg. Feel the way Laska's breath hitches in fear, and the way Reyes screams, wet and bloody.

Izalith's company keeps them both from burning, but despite their immunity from the heat, the boy Reyes's bravery is no match against his own body's instinctual fear of suffering. He shudders—and goes still. I falter and the signs blur out of focus, but I regain their clarity by skim-reading the flames closest to Laska's hammering heart.

Fully immersed, I begin the process of rewriting the fire's signs to subdue its hunger. Rewriting signs is much harder a task than simply reading them or even writing them into being. It's rewriting that takes years of dedication. It's rewriting that takes sacrifice. I deconstruct each constellation, unfold the language and reform it to mean

something else. Mean: wane, choke out.

The trick to commanding fire isn't control—but bravery in the face of great chaos.

Instantly, the roar of flames goes out, replaced by the disorientating black of night.

Rewritten out of being.

I blink, coming back to myself, vaguely aware of a voice ordering the crowd to get back. The pyre still smokes from the last of the embers underneath the kindling, but in that moment, everything is shadow and uncertain. There's a tremor in the crowd, a diversion made by fear, even the wardens stunned stiff. I use it. Press fully into the charred earth, approaching from the back of the stake. But too soon, I hear the judge recover, ordering a search of the stake. Behind me, the river smooths like black glass under the stars. The kindling crumbles as I climb the back of the pyre, faster now that I hear wardens shouting and coughing at the executioner for torches.

I find Izalith once I reach the ropes—slithering in the ash from the aggressive hiss of Laska's opossum who has finally, it seems, found out her presence, yet remains too dim-witted a match for a shy salamander. The soot stains my hands black as I begin to untie them, until I discover the ropes half-untied already.

Laska, half-conscious, and Reyes—dead.

I falter. Laska killed him using sign-blood. Reyes, only a boy. Even in the shadows, I can see the deep, clawed marks on Reyes's small arm, explaining why he panicked despite immunity to the fire. But I brush away my disgust. No matter. I needed Laska, and I would never give him a chance to do the same to me. I pull. Drag Laska back towards the riverbank, away from the pyre and the crowd.

It's then I hear one of the wardens shout: "Someone's got Reyes!"

Laska slumps into me, barely able to support himself. Mumbles too quiet for me to hear as I half-drag him towards the river, my jaw clenched. For a scrawny anemic, he weighs far more than I thought he might. I move to adjust my arm under his shoulder as we crest over the bank. My heart alights at the growing threats and nearing shouts from the wardens. There is no going back, I think. This is done. We'll have to go down the bank, and circle back around to the road. From there, I'll hire a carriage, and—my boot catches on a clip of stone in my distracted panic. Just like that, Laska and I go tumbling down a path of rock and bramble, towards the river below.

Chapter Three

Laska's familiar appears from thin air the moment we slam onto the sand. He cringes as it tries to hop protective over his chest, pushing the opossum off him. The creature appears unfazed by the shove. It turns instead on me, and hisses. I rise and stand my ground, squinting in the darkness, only able to discern its shape by the white of its fur.

Familiars are fickle creatures—each one serving their partners in unique ways. Its abilities could potentially extend beyond its penchant for appearing and disappearing at will. I hold out my hands, meaning to assert my power by writing sign-fire into my palms, but I catch myself at the sound of the wardens shouting: "Cut 'em off at the road—go back around!" I peer up into the darkness. Torchlight glimmers along the crest of rod-iron stakes. Using my talents would only draw their attention.

Izalith coils at my wrist, and I look back to the opossum, sensing the way its tail

switches back and forth in a challenge. I sneer, dare it to strike. But then Laska reaches out, scooping the thing into his arms the moment it pushes to leap. He hisses in its ear, too low and hoarse for me to hear. It disappears, but not without a parting glare.

Though I should be momentarily relieved, my body still feels charged from the aftermath of rewriting sign-fire to rescue Laska from his execution. I've never done something so risky, so showy. Instead of fear, I feel a strange thrill. I've never rewritten a fire so large, either. It far surpasses anything I accomplished as an apprentice or as a master during my time in the Society. I bent every last flame to my will. I could have stoked it even higher. I could have made it spread, made it eat away everything in its path. I could have burned down all of Hull. But I didn't.

I squint at Laska in the darkness. He's harder to make out, but I can hear him stifling coughs, spitting onto the sand. I lift my chin. Recognize myself at a disadvantage. I've never encountered a true Symbolist of Blood. Until now, I thought they were extinct. The things I know of their mastery are only based on my limited studies, my father's horror stories, and the sparse histories of the Relic Era wars. Nothing first-hand. In my circles, any discussion about sign-blood was considered strictly taboo, as was seeking further knowledge. I had expected total confidence in abducting a mere blood worker to do my bidding. But this was a more delicate matter. I had not expected to run into anyone close to rivaling my skills. Especially not in Hull.

Even though the two of us are well hidden in the shadows this far from the stakes, I already dislike how long we've stayed. I shake the tension from my fingers and slip on each of my gloves, pocketing my hands. Laska appears to be leaning over his knees, breathing ragged.

“Please,” I say. “It’s just a bit of inhaled smoke. Now we can’t afford to dilly dally all night, can we? Get up!” I can just make out the way he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “Or,” I say, assuming his glare and meaning to prod him into immediate action, “I’ll light you on fire.”

He rubs away the rest of the dried mud on his face using the hem of his flannel, and I think for a moment he might argue—but then he does as I’ve instructed and stands to follow me.

Heeding the wardens meaning to patrol the main road, I lead us east along the bank until we near the outskirts of the docks south of Hull proper. The concrete and steel ruins of the old Relic city before Hull loom like tombstones in the river’s shadows as we creep along the shore. It’s slow going in the sand, especially in my heavy boots, but I keep my head high and make efforts to not push too far ahead of Laska. It isn’t wise to keep him so long at my back. From a distance, the docks appear lively with the business of the riverboats, even at this hour, patrons and workers alike traveling into Hull for its nightlife.

My first thought is to procure a carriage back to the hotel, but I hesitate, wondering if the wardens might have gone ahead to the docks and warned of Laska’s potential appearance. Maybe it would be best to walk clear of the river, first. I veer us up a slant of bank easiest to climb up, crunching over a bed of dead cattails onto a dirt road I assume takes us to Hull, but soon find draws us west, in the direction we came.

I turn. Laska almost runs into me, looking the other direction. He’s shorter than I am by several inches, perhaps less if he stopped skulking around. He avoids my eye as I stare him down.

“In exchange for saving your life,” I say, “I demand that you conjure my late father’s spirit so that I may speak to him.”

Laska rubs at the rope-raw skin on his wrists, and for the first time I notice the palm of his left hand is wrapped in an old fray of dirty cloth. Not only that, but he’s wearing a relic. Headphones, a rim of thin metal around his neck. I bite my tongue to keep the look of surprise from my face. The cord leads to a Walkman. I’ve seen only one before, and that was in Chicago, at auction. It sold for twice the amount of my father’s fortunes combined.

“You ol’ Rick Ellis’s daughter?”

He mumbles so quiet, I assume I mishear him.

“What?”

“This ain’t about the dog inheritance thing, is it?” he says.

I feel my lip involuntarily curl.

Did all of Hull know the circumstances of my father’s death?

“Heard talk in the jail.” I strain to hear his explanation, his tone almost deadpan.

“The courier was in bragging about some cut he just got from the bank for delivering a letter late to dead Rick’s daughter.” His eyes are downcast, as if he’s speaking to his boots, his manner far removed from the obnoxious way he acted on the stakes. My fists clench in my pockets at the uncovered depth of the conspiracy against me, but I keep my mouth shut. “When?” he says.

“Right now, at once,” I say.

He shakes his head. “No,” he says. “First, I eat.”

“Pardon, but you’re in no position to be ordering me—”

“Food.” He fidgets with his sleeve, eyes lowered. “Food, ma’am, or I’m no help to you.”

I study him, easier to see now in the distant lamplight from the docks. The mud gone, his face is as pale as the boy Roberto Reyes’s sickly pallor. His eyes bruised from sleeplessness. It’s obvious now the sketch of his wanted poster is severely outdated. He seems even older than I first thought by way of his tired frown. I’d been considered unusually adept for taking only twelve years to master the craft of rewriting sign-fire. How old must he have been when he mastered sign-blood? It was simply unheard of. However, I knew from my studies that the craft of sign-blood could suck the practitioner as dry as the corpses they meddled with. Perhaps, for this reason, it was necessary for them to begin their studies young. Unlike other sign-magics, writing and rewriting sign-blood requires blood.

The Symbolist’s own blood, used as the catalyst.

If our meeting was less precarious, I might ask. But asking now would uncover the truth: how little I know of his kind—and I can’t afford him the upper hand. He could use it to trick me.

“It’s Ms. Ellis, not *ma’am*,” I say. Then: “Food first,” I decide, relenting only to his pallor. I can’t afford him fainting of fatigue, either.

He hesitates, seeming to think.

“Hull’s back the other way,” he says, “take the first right.”

I glare, but having no other choice, follow his directions, taking the lead. Laska keeps watch at our backs, hunched, his head crooked over his shoulder as we travel along the thin dirt road. I know less of Hull’s streets than I care to admit. My father was not one

to take his daughter to unruly or unsavory establishments—or anywhere near Hull's less desirable neighborhoods. That included the docks and the roads leading to and from them. Most of my outings were to the burnings and the courthouse, all by closed carriage, though there were our bi-weekly strolls to Mr. Hernandez's offices from the bank on occasion. My father and his wardens always kept watchful eyes on me, making it impossible to explore on my own. I can remember passing through downtown, hearing its eccentric noise, smelling the sour of whisky and chislic.

Focusing on my plan, I decide the best course of action is to return to the hotel. Have food brought to my rooms. Though Laska is still a fugitive, the wardens can't have gotten a good look at me, and surely news of his escape can't have reached as far as the valet. I could lend him my hat as a disguise, I decide—sneak him in just in case. Then be done with this dark business by morning. I glower at the thought of the bank colluding with the rest of the town to swindle me out of my inheritance. I expect my father to put up some resistance, but after so many years, I delight in the thought of my planned threats and accusations. I'm no longer the naive girl I was ten years ago. I indulge to imagine the look on Hernandez's face as I produce my father's code.

Laska turns us down a lane barely big enough for us to fit shoulder-to-shoulder.

That's when I get the sensation I've been trailing after him for far more twists and turns than I thought—ever since leaving the outskirts of the docks and making it into downtown's brick buildings and gas lamps.

I bristle, but before I can insist he stop this instant, he's slipping through a nondescript door. I choke down a shout along the lines of *just what in the blazes do you think you're doing?* It comes out more like a grunt of frustration. I follow after him,

having no choice.

There's music. Loud music, unlike anything I've ever heard, the only discernible instruments a guitar and a man's crooning, no musicians in sight. More relic technology, I decide, in the unlikeliest of places.

he smell of smoke and drink is more familiar, the insides similar to what I might imagine any other gambling house or saloon in Hull might look like. Dimly lit, cramped. There's a bar on the left. Tables, chairs, cards. Even a pool table, only, instead of anyone playing, there's a man laid on top with his eyes closed. Several are gathered around him, either discussing his death or attempting to levitate him using sign-air. Badly. I become instantly aware of the bar's favored patrons. Mere workers. Thieves. The lower classes.

Laska continues his skulking along the bar, perhaps showing off the greatest amount of talent in the entire establishment when he uses sign-blood to animate a skeleton nailed to one of the stools to high-five him. Only a few seem to notice our entrance. I sneer at the shelves of liquor, dust collecting on the top shelf, the smudged mirrored wall behind the display. The postings in English, Spanish, Lakota, and Hutterisch hung crooked on the wall: NO GUNS OR ELSE THAT MEANS YOU SANDRA, next to peeling wanted posters, including Laska's own.

I hear my name followed by a guffaw of laughter.

Laska. I'd taken him for soft-spoken after our escape, almost shy, but I watch in keen fascination as he undoes my assumptions in an instant, shouting at the bartender about needing the stiffest, most expensive drink she has. "I just got my skinny ass saved from the stakes by Ms. Ellis over there!" He jerks his thumb my direction, his tone mocking. The bartender says something, but I don't catch it. He laughs. "Ha, okay! True

enough, she'll have the same, then.”

My eyes narrow on him. I've lost count of the times I've been made a fool throughout the day, but I do what I did with Hernandez. I give Laska no satisfaction to see me the least bit troubled. I undo the buttons on my coat one by one, then sit stiffly beside him, my hat on the bar.

“Pardon,” I say, crossing one leg over the other. He double-takes. I suppose it's the first time he's seen me without my hat. “This isn't food. I didn't ask you for a drink.” I keep my tone even. “I asked you to help me converse with my late father, actually—” I lean, catching his eye, but this time he doesn't look away. If anything, it seems to draw him in. “I didn't ask you, did I? I told you,” I say. He stares, inches from me. This close, I see his eyes are hazel like fool's gold. “Laska, is it? Tell me, are you sure you're even old enough to be here?” I can tell that stings him.

But the hurt pride on his face passes as quick as it came. “I'm twenty-eight,” he says, flat.

“He's eighteen,” the bartender says. She sets two glasses down on the bar and dusts off a bottle from the top shelf with her rag before popping the cork. I guess her around fifty, her face long, skin tan and her hair straight and dark, almost reaching her waist. “Thought you'd be ash and bone by now, kid,” she says to Laska as she pours the glasses, “heard you got carted off by gravewardens. But suppose you escaped? It ain't very wise to come by here—is it?”

There's an undercurrent of waring to her words, but Laska seems too distracted to notice, tapping his fingers impatiently on the bar. He takes up his glass as soon as she's finished pouring.

“Morgan!” Laska shouts, sudden. I frown, confused, until I realize Morgan is the bartender. “I done told you the last time you called me *kid* that if you ever called me it again I’d make you pay for it!” Morgan moves on to pouring my drink, ignoring Laska’s shouting. “Now you listen here, you old broad! I’m going to finish my drink with Ms. Ellis, and then—if you don’t hand over every last pent you’ve made tonight by the time I’m done, I’m going to smash this here glass,” he holds it up, “into your face,” if possible he gets even louder, “drag you into the back!” Morgan places my own drink in front of me and rolls her eyes, “—string your dribble of a soul out of your damn belly button—and use it to wipe my own fucking ass!” Laska almost downs his entire drink in one swallow. “Please note, Morgan, I’m parched tonight seeing *as I almost died!*”

Instead of heeding his threat, she looks amused. “You sacred of death now, huh?”

This seems to take Laska off guard.

I like her already. If only I’d known about this place before I went to the burning. I may have been able to hire a suitable enough blood worker that wasn’t a deranged Symbolist wanted for a myriad of undignified crimes.

“What?” Laska shouts. “No! Why, first time—”

“Here it comes: I barely escaped, *yada yada*, my miserable childhood digging holes—”

They bicker, as it becomes clear Morgan has no intention of giving into his threat.

I half-listen while I write my drink alight with fire. The flame waves blue before turning invisible, and I lift the drink to my lips, sipping a delicious burn. Izalith, my familiar, peeks from my sleeve and curls my thumb for a taste as I eye the morbid skeleton a few stools away, stuck upright by a metal pole. I count a number of missing

vital bones. The thing barely passes as human.

“That's the late owner, allegedly,” Laska says, still loud, leaning close. “Morgan says he was all, *my dying wish is to be buried at my bar*, ain't that something? Didn't want a new body or nothing. His land of the dead must be nice, huh? Mine's a shithole! Tell me, Ms. Ellis, do you believe all the stuff about good people getting heavens and bad people getting hells, because—”

There's a man, from behind.

Laska scrambles off his stool from the man's strike like he knew it was coming.

I move out of the way with my drink, take a polite sip and commend myself on how unsurprised I am that there's to be a fight.

The man straightens, maybe only Laska's age, judging by his lack of a beard, but almost twice his size with tan skin and long, dark hair. “No shovel this time,” he growls, and I might have thought him handsome until his grin bears a full set of bad teeth. He cracks his knuckles. “I'm going to enjoy this, Ezra. Heard you were back in Hull, can't believe you'd risk coming back here after last time. Thought me and my boys taught you a good lesson.”

“Tread carefully, Diego,” Morgan warns, “best know there's wardens out tonight.”

Laska says nothing, appears to think. I see him glance around the bar, then at me.

The man notices. He smirks. “How much you pau up for this pretty company, Ez?”

I scoff, not believing him serious by the quality of my outfit—until I realize he is.

But before I can react, Laska moves. Fast. He knees Diego in the groin, then

breaks his glass across Diego's head. I cringe at the meaty sound, and edge from the sputter of blood.

Diego roars, lunging at him, but Laska pushes from the bar, moving light on his feet and out of the way.

Morgan curses as they dash into the tables.

I see a few onlookers already ducking out the door, everyone else finally noticing the brawl and shifting to do the same.

Morgan moves around the bar. "Break it up!" she shouts at the two men approaching her from Diego's table, "get 'em the hell out of here!" They stop her from going any further. "What's this?" she hisses.

I strain to hear them over the music. "Diego keeps his promises," one says.

"He told Ezra if he ever saw him again, he'd kill him."

I narrow my eyes, noticing the way Morgan's hand moves into her coat pocket.

"If you two don't get Diego out of here," Morgan threatens, "I swear I'll do it myself—"

The nearest takes her by the shoulder. I brace for the sound of gunfire. But instead, Morgan throws a right hook with a whip of gold across her knuckles. The man limps to the floor, holding his jaw in a drool of blood.

The second steps forward and tries to twist her arm, but Morgan slams her palm to his chin, forcing his head back and giving herself room to rebalance against the bar as the first one recovers. Even though it's clear she can hold her own, I feel the same thrill I felt in the aftermath of the burning as I hurriedly finish the last of my drink and stand by her side. I needed this over soon. I'm not going to let anyone ruin my plans with Laska.

I pocket my gloves and roll back my coat sleeves.

Morgan struggles with the first man, his mouth still bleeding from her initial hook. The second takes notice of my approach, looking as though he's deciding best how to restrain me.

He hesitates as I lift one of my hands. He's keen enough, at least, to notice the knot of scarring in my palm. But instead of taking heed, he has nerve enough to write flames from the fingertips of his right hand, where shifting tattoos of sign-fire wreath each of his fingers.

I tilt my head, amused.

Workers rely on signs tattooed onto their skin. A decent tattooist might provide marks good enough to conjure simple tricks, but Symbolists such as myself can draw upon the language of sign-magic and write our elements in an infinite number of ways, our entire hand used as the catalysts. That—and unlike workers, we have the ability to rewrite our element to our will.

I letter fire into my palm, letting flames lick from my fingers, stoking them higher. Izalith shivers happily over my hand. Taking far less effort than it did to rewrite Laska's pyre, I rewrite the man's simple flames and put them out. The man curses, realizing he's out-matched. I catch the glint of a knife only moments before he strikes, barely missing a jab at my stomach. My body tenses. I catch his wrist, twisting it up in a peel of sign-fire from my hand. Let it burn.

The man screams, the knife toppling onto the bar. I slam my boot heel on his toes.

He crumbles, rocking over his blackened hand, howling over the music. My ears ring.

I turn to Morgan. Her attacker has found her throat, unfazed by her attempts to twist herself free from his grip.

In stride, I move behind the man, drawing my finger across his neck in a scroll of flame. The heat hums my forearms, stoked by Izalith, tingling up from my fingers.

He cries out, tearing like paper onto his knees.

Morgan breathes deep, freed, her eyes meeting mine in a silent thank you. The man tries to rise, but I push him down with my heel to keep him down.

Meanwhile, Diego slumps against the bar.

Laska pauses, the two of them catching their breath. The tables are in disarray, one of the chairs broken. By now the bar's patrons have all disappeared. Laska seems relatively unscathed, most likely having dodged the worst of Diego's attacks during the brunt of their fight.

He blinks, steadies himself, and brandishes one of the chair legs from the ground. Diego barely flinches at the first whack, taking hold of the leg on the second hit and nearly pulling Laska off balance. Laska lets go, throws a punch that's punished immediately by Diego's fist to his gut. Laska stoops over in a ragged gasp.

Diego laughs at him, approaching quick, his mouth full of blood.

Then, just like at the stakes, there's a tear in the fabric of reality. Laska's familiar opossum comes hurling through it, this time pouncing straight for Diego's throat, wasting no time with intimidation. Diego startles against the bar with a shout of frustration before throwing it across the room. It disappears in a whirl of thin air. That's when Diego finally notices his two friends. The stench of charred flesh. One whimpers, the other fallen unconscious. He looks up at me. My hands soaked in fire.

His face hardens, coming to understand, perhaps, the real danger.

But before I can reach him, the free arm of the prop skeleton at the bar moves.

I flinch as it stabs Diego in the shoulder with the dropped knife from the man that tried to attack me. Diego grimaces, howling. Blood dribbles his front.

My eyes widen to where Laska stands, breathless, his hand a fist against his own shoulder. He animated the skeleton to stab Diego. Laska relaxes. The skeleton's arm goes limp, and I catch a streak of sign-blood on its yellowy ulna. Laska must have written it when he first came into the bar, before even ordering. It's then I realize he must have planned this—meant to draw Diego 's attention to him. But why?

His opossum reappears with a practiced scurry onto his shoulder as he approaches Diego. The bandage is gone from his hand, lost in the fight. I glimpse the wound in his palm before he pressures it near the knife's handle still sticking from Diego 's shoulder. Blood dribbles from it all the way to Laska's elbow—his own blood. Blood alive with sign-magic, the endless scrawling of the universe, of all things living and dead.

“I made a mistake, Diego,” Laska says, so low I barely catch it. Diego seethes, tries to move, but Laska uses the sign-blood from his hand to mark him still, his hand firm against his Diego 's chest. The lettering spreads out from his fingers like a disease. “I let you live,” he goes on. “But that’s fine. I always fix my mistakes.”

Before Diego can beg or plead, Laska’s sign-blood barbs deep, into Diego 's very being.

It rewrites. Erases his soul.

The death is unnatural. Forced. It steals my breath and Morgan’s next to me, and my head goes momentarily dizzy, hairs raising in the charged aftermath of torn life. It

was the same thing he must have done to the boy Roberto Reyes on their shared pyre, but I'd been too distracted with my own rewriting to feel the cut. I watch, rapt, as Diego's body falls into a heap at my feet.

This is why they were so feared. Symbolists of Blood. Hated. How their craft became forbidden even among other Symbolists. It was rumored they first used their powers to heal, to ease pain. But something happened, some disastrous shift during wars in the late twentieth century. Whatever healing capabilities they once had were long gone. This was more in line with my father's accounts of the Uprising. How through greed and corruption, they used dangerous powers for their own ends, treating life they were supposed to protect with dangerous disregard.

But despite my disgust, a separate part of me revels in the way it creates disorder.

I stare down the chaos, until beside me, Morgan slides the brass knuckles from her hand, stretching out her fingers. Her eyes linger on my hands, my fingers still licked by fire.

"Just perfect," she says, "another mad warlock hanging around my bar."

Warlock. I've heard the term used only a handful of times before, mostly my childhood. From my father. It was used before even the Uprising. Meant as a derogatory stab at Symbolists for their assumed love of bloodshed.

"Excuse me," I say, arms crossed, deciding it fair to speak my mind, "but I'm not some—some—" It's not often I begin a sentence without the words to end it. I look to Laska, on his knees over Diego. He seems to be tasting Diego's blood on his finger. "Feral," I decide, "Symbolist of Blood. I'm part of the New Symbolist Society. I completed my studies under the founder herself, a master of Fire. I write and rewrite in

accordance with all of our laws. I would even have my own apprentice—if not for...”

But I catch myself too late. I stop. I raise my chin.

Laska looks at me, darkly, just as the two men I burned huddle limping out the door.

“In accordance with all of your laws,” he says.

I close my eyes, angry at myself for exposing my hypocrisy.

“Truly, Ms. Ellis. I reckon I find that fascinating, just as you might say.” His monotone gives a slight inflection of sarcasm, and if I didn’t know any better, his familiar on his shoulders gives an eerily human-like grin. “Last I heard, your order, or cult—or whatever you call yourselves, ain’t even allowed to venture any further west than Chicagoland. Lest they be discovered and burned, like so many of their kind they abandoned out west after the Uprising.”

“Please,” I mock at the ready, “so very rich, coming from a Laska—your family cut the northeast territories to the bone even *before* the fighting. I heard they practically treated their populace like medieval serfs. It’s the fault of Symbolists like you that stoked fear in the hearts of men, isn’t it? If those of Blood in power had held the beliefs of my cult, as you graciously call it, perhaps this business of burnings and outlawed sign-magic might never have come to fruition.”

“Don’t call me Laska,” he says, but unfortunately gives no other indication I’ve upset him. “Besides, my ancestors paid for their crimes—your father made sure of that, Ms. Ellis.” He stands, looking to Morgan, seeming to consider our discussion resolved. “Know that dying kid, Robbie,” he says, “the one who came here asking for me last month? The one you turned away?”

“I turned him away,” Morgan says, “because he was looking for you!”

“He mentioned that when he found me in the boneyard, and now he’s dead.”

It takes me a moment to realize they mean the sickly boy from the stake.

Roberto Reyes.

Morgan’s look hardens into some kind of recognition. “*You didn’t*,” she says.

“Diego were a killer.” There’s an undercurrent of frustration in Laska’s monotone. Like he almost expected Morgan to be thankful for the mess he made of her bar. Like he’d accounted for every angle of his plan, and decided he knew what was best for every person involved. “Those rumors about him and his boys are true. They get drunk and scrap everything they can find on the roads. Even bodies. I seen it myself. Diego had it coming. If you don’t believe me, so be it. But I ain’t going to lose any sleep over choosing him.” I strain to hear his mumbling, sure I’ve missed something—something Morgan has already understood. “Now, I’ll need a place to stir Robbie up. I’ll pay up if you let me stay here. I won’t be gone long. I meant to be here earlier and ask you proper. But none of this were exactly to plan after I got caught with Robbie.”

“Piss on your coin,” spits Morgan. “If this weren’t about that boy, I’d call the wardens!”

Laska’s face is unreadable. Not sorry, not anything.

He glances from his boots, then nods.

Morgan scoffs, but doesn’t press him further. “I’m washing off this blood,” she says of her hands, and she disappears behind a black curtain behind the bar without another look at him.

I narrow my eyes on Laska as he creeps around the bar as soon as she’s gone,

retrieving a nearly full bottle of whisky and a spool of what appears to be bandage.

Morgan bearing witness to fistfights must be routine. He picks up a rag, using it to clean the blood already drying on his arm. His familiar scurries from his shoulders onto the bar top, tensing at my approach.

I lift my chin, my glare at least keeping its mouth shut from hissing this time. It certainly keeps no qualms about making itself known, despite the dangers such behavior could bring to Laska. It's then I notice what I hadn't before. Its eyes not black and glinting but filmed by the decay of death.

"This isn't food," I say, trying to match Laska's monotone. I'm no longer amused after his reminders of the risks I've taken by coming to Hull. It had only been recently that I lost both my apprenticeship and my stipend at the Society. My father's letter arrived just in time—preventing me from doing anything too rash in response to the dowager's punishments. Given the circumstances, I thought it best not to imagine what my future might hold. But it's only now I understand I came to Hull with no intention to return to Chicago. There was nothing to return to.

Laska makes stripes of bandage with his teeth and uses them to wrap the wound in the palm of his left hand. The wound makes a circle in the center, the edges hardened scabs. Flesh rewritten in the purest essence of sign-blood. Not living, not dead.

The black spot.

The mark of mastery for those of Blood. Every Symbolist has scars. But theirs never heals. It festers, reopens, the skin unable to knot closed. I notice him looking at my hand, and I tip it palm up on the bar, meaning for him to see the trophy of my power. Taking up almost the entire center is a tangled nest of burn scars. The pattern melted skin,

different than that of sign-earth or sign-water.

He pops the cork off the whisky with the thumb of his freshly bandaged mark hand. Takes a drink straight from the bottle. “This isn't food,” he grits. Finally, agreeing. He sets the bottle between us. “I could tell on the way here, you ain't never spent a day in your life in this part of Hull, Ms. Ellis. Most here work, understand, and that's what I'm doing—I'm working. Then once I'm done, suppose I'll work for you. Take you to your dead Pa. How's that sound?”

My first instinct is to take immediate offense. Tell him I've worked plenty as a student, that I even, for a short time, lived comfortably as a master of my own apprentice. Not the life my father wanted for me, true. But he taught me to spare little interest in pursuing habits that did not bring me influence over others. This time, however, I check myself. Let Laska think what he wants to. I can't allow him any more control over the events of tonight than he's had already.

“I demand a cut,” I say, instead. “Did this job involve you burning at the stake? Did it involve an assumption you and Morgan could take on three men? They would've killed you.”

He fidgets with his sleeve. “Fair,” he seems to decide. I stay wary of his moods. The sociopathic way he acted on the stakes, his killing of Reyes and Diego, contrasted against his grand entrance into the bar, his laughter with Morgan—his quiet, almost shy way he speaks to me. “Like I told Morgan, it ain't exactly to plan. I were caught in the boneyard along with Robbie, by mistake. He were supposed to get carted off in my place. There was more wardens than we bargained.” His eyes stay lowered, I assume not proud to admit mistakes. “Now as for the burning, Puck here were chewing through the rope.”

He scratches at his opossum's ear. "Let's suppose I would've escaped." I frown. "But it were a risk, coming here, only I figured someone of Fire could do just as well as hired goons against the likes of Diego and his boys. That right?"

He scoops the whisky and bandages, heading back around the bar. His familiar, Puck, disappears by some unspoken command. This time I'm close enough to feel the chill in its wake.

"Roberto Reyes?" I say.

He pauses. He's thinking again, I can tell, figuring how much he wants to tell me.

"Robbie Reyes," he says. "There I've set camp, first time I've slept so well in ages, and this brat kid from old town's got the guts to take my own shovel and poke me awake. It's because he heard, you know, that those of Blood could heal people..." My eyebrows raise in a spark of unexpected interest. That was not a rumor I thought common. "I go, like hell I can heal. Go to a real doctor, Robbie Reyes, I'll pay up. He goes. The doctor says to him, you're going to die, son, you got a lung condition. Those brats in old town die all time of stupid shit. But then he comes to me, and he goes, hey, it hurts all the time, Ez, can't you just take me to the land of the dead?" Laska pauses, his grin gone. "Then I go, just about how old are you, Robbie Reyes? He tells me going on fifteen, but I figure nah, he's lying. Then I say how about you take the fall for my crimes, Robbie? I'll work free of charge. Just say no and close your eyes, it's as simple as that."

I clench my jaw. Taking in what he's told me matched against the sickly boy I'd seen at the stakes, coughing blood.

"Now?" I settle on saying, even though I begin to suspect the truth.

"Well, Ms. Ellis," he says, "we've got a body, don't we? I'm supposing it needs a

soul.”

It was why he killed Reyes on the stake once he realized their immunity to the fire. I sneer. This scheme has the markings of a Symbolist of Blood all over it. Messy, morally twisted. He plans to put Reye’s soul into Diego’s body.

Morgan appears before I can say any more, rolling her eyes. “Oh good, you’re still here,” she sighs. She opens up her palm, marked with a scaled tattoo of sign-water. “Almost forgot. That’s twenty of pents for the drinks.” I let my face betray me. She answers in a mocking grin: “I said you looked rich, so he ordered two.”

I glare at Laska, beginning to move Diego’s corpse. But respecting Morgan, I nod and pay up.

Chapter Four

My curiosity finally gets the best of me, and though I still feel tense about leaving Hull and gaining my father’s inheritance as quickly as possible, I’ve never seen a soul brought back into a body, and a separate part of me remains patient. I observe stiffly from my seat at the bar while Laska and Morgan tend to Diego’s corpse. They sprawl him out on the pool table, where Morgan begins to stitch and dress the knife wound on his shoulder. Laska pulls up a chair facing them. He sits and takes a drink of whisky straight from the bottle he brought from the bar once Morgan turns her back. I realize I’m unsure how to interpret his drinking. Habit—or was it to cope with something—fear?

“Excuse me,” I say, after some deliberation.

He and Morgan both look at me as if they had forgotten my presence.

“Before,” I say, “you said that boy Reyes thought those of Blood could heal

people.”

“Did I?” Laska says. He fiddles with his Walkman at his belt.

I raise my chin. “You did. You said—*he heard that those of Blood could heal people.*”

He doesn’t look up, seeming to ignore me.

“So,” I say, irritated.

Conversing with him begins to feel like learning to read sign-fire.

“So what?” he mumbles to his Walkman, only sparing me a single glance. “Don’t follow what you’re meaning... You got a question or nah?” He adjusts his headphones over his ears.

Finally, I give in. “I mean, do you know where Reyes may have heard it—this rumor?”

Laska settles into his chair. “No, ma’am,” he says. “People from Hull say crazy things.”

I’d heard the claim relating to healing only once before, not from Hull, but referenced deep in an accounted history of the Relic Era wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

I can’t help but feel disappointed in Laska’s disinterest, but I sense he’s telling the truth. It’s become obvious to me that he hungers to be perceived as clever by those around him. I watch as he settles in his chair and mumbles to Morgan, too quiet for me to catch. Then he closes his eyes, his breath turning measured and slow in meditation. The strange aura of sign-blood creeps from his bandaged mark hand like tendrils of smoke. I feel it curl up his arm, sink like ink into his skin. Just like with Diego, I don’t need to be

fluent in sign-blood to recognize the act of sign-magic being rewritten.

Only this time, he's doing it to himself.

I stand, unable to sit still. My skin crawls—his life-essence—gone.

His body goes limp, head lulling forward, arms drooping. Even Morgan pauses from Diego's corpse to look at him. I don't notice my approach until I stop, uneasy, only an arm's length away. I try to relax. But unlike with Diego, the sensation of his rewritten sign-blood doesn't fade away. The aura lingers, signs coiling in and out of his body in an incomprehensible blur of living language. Rewriting, continuous. I lean to look at his face, my hands clenched into fists deep in my pockets. His eyes are open. Rolled into his skull, shivering their whites—but I can see the scroll of signs writhing in them, skimming the surface of his eyes. My mind pinches, unable to make sense of what I see.

He's alive. Dead. He's everything all at once.

It's then I hear faint voices. I stiffen, unsure at first where they come from, until I realize they're emitting from his relic headphones. Technological oddities requiring nuanced forms of lost power are rare. The Walkman I once saw auctioned in Chicago was non-functioning. I assumed so was Laska's, until now. I catch something moving inside the box-like device at his belt, endlessly turning on a loop. There's a man's voice: *"Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania..."*

"He says it's supposed to help him keep time," says Morgan from the table.

"Keep time?" I whisper, my curiosity finally breaching my pride.

"In the land of the dead," she says, "so not to lose himself there."

Izalith squirms along my sleeve, but I make no move. I remain unable to break my stare from the shaking whites of Laska's eyes. The land of the dead. The place where

souls, the purest essence of sign-blood entwined into our beings, return after leaving the body. Those of Blood were said to have the ability to travel between life and death, between the two planes, due to their affinities in reading such life forces. It was said they could read the land of the dead itself, but not rewrite it. This, however, did not stop them from simply rewriting souls from one plane to the next. I knew no one who had been to the land of the dead and returned, until now.

I recall what Laska told me. I'll work for you. Take you to your dead Pa.

He means to take me into the land of the dead alongside him.

Instead of fear, I feel a strange sense of exhilaration.

I don't know how long I'm staring, studying Laska's face and listening to the voices, trying to push myself to understand the blood-signs—until I hear Morgan mumble from the pool table. "Not sure what's worse. More of Diego's boys, or the damn wardens." I look up, feel heat rise to my face, accidentally meeting her eye and finding her look annoyed. Morgan puts her tools down on the table, patting away the sweat on her forehead with the back of her arm. I straighten. My posture is sore from leaning bent over for so long. "I'm sure you feel it, huh?" she says, and I know she means Laska's aura of sign-blood. "It gives me the creeps. It's unnatural."

I ask without thinking— "Do you see it?"

She frowns, looking to him. "See what?"

But I don't respond.

"I'm going out for a smoke," she says, then. "He said ten minutes."

This time she must read the question on my face.

"Ten minutes to bring Robbie Reyes back to life." Morgan pauses, then:

“Between you and me, Ezra comes off shy, sure, but he’s been a cocky little shit since the day I met him. I thought he was one of them orphans from old town. He came right in here, sat at that bar and ordered a double corn whisky, the cheapest I got. Judged him about Robbie’s age, but I humored him, asked him what he was celebrating. He spoke so quiet I could barely hear him, goes: killed two men out on the road, thought they caught me unawares in the ditch, but I showed ‘em good—ain’t nobody can kill me, and they ain’t even the first who’s tried.” Morgan sighs, producing a rolled smoke from her breast pocket. “He ain’t from Hull,” she says, eyeing him. “Far as I can figure, he was bred by the wasteroads between territories. That’s where the law don’t go...” Morgan pauses. “Heard there’s groups out there that eat people alive. Honestly, can’t imagine it.”

I take my hand from my pocket and write a flame along my thumb to light her smoke. Morgan reaches, takes the offer. “I traveled from Chicago by way of a train to Omaha, south of here, then came up by boat,” I muse. “The train yards have their own wardens meant to deal with threats. They make deals, pay gangs for protection and tolls just to pass through. But one gang tried to pillage us on the river.” I pocket my hand, my chin high. “The other travelers were lucky I was there with a tight schedule to keep... I can tell you it did not end well for our attackers.”

Morgan half-grins, turning for the door. “Looks like all you damn warlocks love to brag.”

I clench my jaw. “You must have been young when you fought in the Uprising.” I mean to expose the hypocrisy of her prejudice, recalling the tattoo of sign-water I saw on her left hand.

“I even used to be one of your father’s wardens, Ms. Ellis,” she says. “In fact, I

was up for judge, ain't that something! I was planning on changing quite a few things up 'round here, but—was up against the bank director's daughter for it and bet your ass the bank won out. Decided to take over my cousin's bar—he moved back home to take care of his Ma.”

I frown and try to recall ever seeing Morgan during my childhood. But my father's wardens are indistinguishable in my memory, all wearing their dark blue coats, their black long boots. I kept no particular relationship with any of them.

“Why, if I'd gotten my way,” she goes on, pausing and turning back at the door, “I'd've made sign-magic legal, but under strict regulation.” She eyes Diego's corpse, Laska slouched in his chair. “I wouldn't kill him for this shit. But I'd sure as hell jail him.”

“What about a trial?” I say, raising my eyebrow.

I hear her scoff, the door swinging shut behind her.

Now alone, I turn my attention back on Laska. He hasn't moved, sign-blood coiling thick from his mark hand in a bloody aura, infinitely rewriting and rewriting. I concentrate the way I do reading sign-fire, but soon feel the old familiar ache, a splinter in my mind.

I wince, looking away. It's been almost twelve years since I first tried to understand the signs of fire. To begin, I first had to see it—train my mind to conceptualize the life governing the flames, lift the signs to the surface, like opening a book and peering at pages and pages of an arcane, foreign alphabet. That was the easy part. For several years after that, I had to make sense of that life. I had to learn the meaning of the signs, always shifting. It felt as though I experienced a never-ending

headache, sometimes plagued by migraines. The dowager claimed the pain a rite of passage—it could even kill those less dedicated. But then, slowly, the aches faded. The signs became clear.

Finally, able to understand them, I fused sign-fire to my hand to create an endless source. My catalyst: allowing me the ability to write my own, to summon fire from seemingly nothing.

Ten minutes?

The moment I doubt it, sign-blood unravels a poem of life over the corpse's skin.

Diego's body seizures to life on the pool table.

I step backwards, my hands exposed from their pockets—palms heated in sign-fire, flames curling my fingertips. Ready. But for what, I find myself unsure. Diego's body cries out, curls inward. He clutches the bandaged wound on the shoulder, and then his head. I look to Laska for answers. Had he done it? Was this the boy Reyes, now in Diego's body? But Laska remains unchanged, still slumped in his chair.

On the pool table, the body shudders. Bleary eyes meet mine. The face twitches in recognition. "You," he moans. "The fire..." But despite his tears, his gasps are calm, perhaps for the first time in a long time finding each breath comes easy and causes him no pain. It's him, I realize, certain. Laska found Roberto Reyes's soul in the land of the dead. He rewrote it into Diego's dead body. The last imprints of sign-blood sigh over Reyes's new skin, a lingering aura.

For the second time tonight, I open my mouth before I quite know what to say.

What could be said appropriately to a dying boy now awake in a stranger's body?

"Robbie..." I begin, "can you remember it? The land of the dead?"

His voice is hoarse, confused, “Wh—what?”

Perhaps I should introduce myself first—

The door to the bar bursts open.

Morgan’s eyes are wide.

“Wardens,” she says. “None of my old friends, either—they’re the bank’s boys.”

I stiffen, forced to come to terms with how ill-prepared I am to confront Hull’s authorities. Presumably, they haven’t yet connected me with who they thought to be Reyes and his escape from the stake burning. But then, what if they had? It was not far-fetched to imagine them interviewing the crowd. How several might have mentioned a suspicious woman in a wide, dark hat. This was Hull, after all. But instead of shutting out this line of paranoid thought, instead of feeling anxious imagining myself on the ridge of stakes—I feel the same strange thrill I felt after rescuing Laska from the same fate. Let them come, I think. Let them come. Let them burn.

“Ten minutes!” Morgan complains at Laska, still slumped over in his chair. She looks at me. “Hide him behind the bar—behind the curtain leading to the back. There’s a door. Tell him when he wakes he owes me triple! Triple!” She counts her fingers. “For killing Diego in my damn bar, bringing the wardens, and making me be the one to get Robbie Reyes back on his feet! Next time I see him, he better pay up, or *I’ll* be the one stringing his soul out his damn ass, understand?”

On the pool table, Roberto Reyes sits up blinking. He holds his head, taking deep breaths.

I don’t argue, once again rescuing Laska by aiding in his escape from the wardens. The aura of sign-blood still in the act of rewriting sends shivers up my arms as I

drag him across the floor by his legs. I'm careful not to get mud on my coat from his boots. Izalith squirms up my forearm past my elbow, making me even more uncomfortable. By the time I let go, ducked behind the bar, I realize I've been holding my breath. I let it out, shakily, but have little time to regain my composure before I hear the door of the bar open wide. "Search it!" orders a voice.

I hear Morgan try to argue. "What's this about, you idiots—? The fight's already over!"

My arms strain as I pull Laska beyond the curtain, my heart hammering. There's no light in the back room. My eyes strain as I light a flame along my thumb, seeing an old pump and rusty bin that give off the damp scent of dirty water. The room is narrow, more like a hall—and cluttered by boxes and trash. I look down at Laska, the shaking whites of his eyes.

Morgan was right—it's been far past ten minutes since he left for the land of the dead. I can't carry him unconscious. Not for long or far, anyway. I catch my breath, irritated. Though I know little of those of Blood, I can't shake the feeling something's gone wrong. I've already exerted too much effort securing him for my own needs. I can't afford losing him after everything he's put me through. I curse, racking my memory of any clues about his kind I could use to bring him back.

The voices near, Morgan giving the wardens a fake story involving a fight between so-called Reyes and poor Diego, who she only just finished bandaging up. "Did you see who this hat belonged to?" I go rigid at the warden's question, reaching immediately to my head. I clench my jaw. I'd left my hat on the bar with my gloves. Morgan has no choice, admitting she saw me, but didn't catch my name. They ask her for

a description and I hear her stall by acting uncertain.

I have to think fast.

I move to my knees from my crouch and lean over Laska.

His smell is not as terrible as I might have assumed. Not like death, but like damp earth and bonfire, sunken with something else I can't place. His headphones now crooked around his neck, I can just make out a shrill woman's plead: "*Stay, though thou kill me, sweet Demetrius!*"

Instinctually, I take up his mark hand into mine. If I can feel-see the act of sign-blood rewriting over his body, perhaps I could at least respond to it using the language of sign-fire, and it might wake him. I nudge a reluctant Izalith around our wrists to allow him immunity to the heat of fire. His hand is corpse cool, the shivering language of sign-blood still blotting under and over his skin. It feels less unnatural than it did before, similar to the chaotic movement of flames. I recall my earliest lesson. How sign-magic derives from the same root language of life and of being. Blood is water, water is air, air is fire, fire is earth, earth is blood and so on into the infinite blaze of all that was, is, and will become. I hold my breath, conjure fire into our hands.

Language combusts, scribbles together jagged—sign-blood entwining with sign-fire.

I'm seized by a memory not my own. My arms sore, my hands calloused. The ring of a shovel struck against a skull, once, twice. My breath hitches as the skull splits, caves, shatters into brain and blood. Then, unbidden, a name I've never heard before knifes in my mind: *Brax*.

Laska wakes from the land of the dead with a shuddering cry.

But it's too late. The strange knot of language thrums like the pages of an a pried-open book between us. It reveals words, sentences, paragraphs, stories of our memories shared in torn bits and pieces. There's the dowager, her bone colored hair and brown skin, her garter snake a bracelet at her wrist. Her proud disappointment blotting into my father the last time I saw him, sneering in anger—more of Brax, before his death. Brax, in his black cape. Brax, his horned owl perched atop his shoulder. Brax, always in the boneyards. Brax—always the shovel in his hand.

Izalith bites my thumb.

I let go of Laska, stifling out my fire.

My ears ring from our strange sign-talk.

Both of us breathe deep, faces inches apart.

But there's no time for me to feel anything other than panicked.

There are voices. Too near. "Thought I heard something, is all—"

"Wardens," I whisper.

Laska and I tangle apart in the darkness, clumsily making it to our feet. I tremble, my hands now shaking as I try to write sign-fire back into my palm to see by. I only manage a weak flame over my fingertips, too shaken by the rush of strange memories not my own. Brax, pulling me by the ear. Brax, telling me to get back to digging. Brax, telling me to shut up, be quiet. But I seem to regain my composure faster than Laska. He rubs his face, turning away—if I didn't know better, to muffle his gasp and bleary eyes. I'm the first to reach the back door. I almost trip over a broom as I pull it ajar the moment the curtain from the bar spreads open, revealing us.

I take Laska's arm, forcing him into the alley.

We run, and the wardens follow.

“What happened?” Laska says, seeming to finally come to his senses.

“What happened?” I cry, “you tell me! What kept you?”

I move to flee into the street—

He pulls at my arm. “Not that way, are you stupid!” We dart the other direction.

I follow his lead, having no choice. He makes quick work of Hull’s streets, turning them into an unexpected maze. Lanes blur together, alleys turning into alcoves he folds us into—pausing, and then reemerging a beat later. Soon it feels as though we’re doubling back the direction we came, this time cutting through wider, more vacant streets. Even when the wardens are long gone and our pace finally lapses from a run, to a jog, to a walk—neither of us speak as I follow him further into the shadows, past the shacks and rundown businesses near the more neglected parts of Hull. The lanes turn into broken cobble, unkept, the structures more like ruins. Trees loom the edges of the streets, spruce and cottonwood tangling together, unruly. The lamps have all gone out, and I keep close, adjusting my sight by the light in my palm held to my chest.

Laska turns a fresh corner, leading us onto a street split by long grass and bramble. Forest appears to line the right side, yet in the midst of the trees I can feel a structure like a fence—ornate iron, seared with sign-earth, wound in ivy and almost made invisible by a knot of mulberry trees. I feel foolish for not guessing it sooner. He’s been leading us along the far edges of Hull’s municipal boneyard. My father claimed it had been in Hull as far back as the Relic Era.

If my directions are still sound, we were east of my father’s estate, on the opposite side.

I concentrate, try to see if I can discover where Laska might be leading us using the breadth of the memories our shared sign-magic gave us in Morgan's bar. I can remember long nights waiting for a man named Brax outside taverns, trailing after him in shallow moonlight... There's a pinch in my mind, like learning sign-fire, and I find it difficult to focus on any sensation for long. This is not my language, not my own self, and my mind seems to know it. But I find the memories I have of Laska only involve this Brax, nothing about staying in Hull. If Laska visited the town as a child, he didn't know its name, and Laska's life after this Brax's undoing remains a mystery.

Not everything was exposed between us, then, I decide. But what had the sign-magic inadvertently shared of *my* memories? Had he seen the Society, the dowager?

Laska motions for me to cross the street with him, hunched keeping an eye at our backs.

Instead of leading us up to the fencing of the boneyard, Laska leads over to the left of the street, into the ruins of old housing foundations, littered by trash and overgrown. He kicks at the ground with his boot heel. There's a hollow sound, and I lift my eyebrow as he bends, sliding a sheet of rusted debris from a grate in the ground.

"Most of these boneyards, the real old ones, they got tunnels. Built by those of Blood during the old bone wars. For grave robbing." He lifts the grate, exposing a hole that leads into the earth. "What's that ol' saying?" he says. "Ladies first?"

"Most certainly not. Where does it lead?"

"Do you want my help, or nah?" he says.

"I'm not a fool."

"I ain't one neither."

“Where?” I demand.

But he calls the bluff I won’t follow, and he disappears into the darkness, using a ladder at the hole’s edge to aid in his descent. I lick the flames higher along my fingers, Izalith tensing at my wrist. I hesitate, listening to her warning. Might he try to trick me? But the thrill of our second escape overpowers my caution, and it’s my curiosity that leads me onward, no matter how unwise. I reluctantly begin my descent, assured by my own abilities, sign-fire stoking thicker into my hands. I carefully climb, minding my back to Laska. The ladder creaks under my weight, the metal rungs rusty and the last one, I discover—broken. My boot slips. I stumble onto a dirt floor and lose balance. Laska’s hand touches my waist to steady me. The pressure is light, but I startle when it lingers there and I pull from him. Think of Diego, marked by his sign-blood.

“The last rung’s broken,” he says, and if I didn’t know any better, almost apologetically.

“Is it?” I glare.

I hold my hand cupped at my chest, but I find him already turned, heading into the deep shadows of the tunnel. Parts of the passage have caved in, making it even narrower than the alleyway outside Morgan’s bar, so at one point, I have to turn to the side, shuffling through a thin gap heaped in dirt. Rotting planks half-cover the ground, the rest of the walls and ceiling made of clay, some roots even hanging loose from above.

Laska moves quickly. It isn’t a long journey, but by the end of it, even I can sense his discomfort, his breathing measured, as if forcing himself to stay calm. I sense the reason why, the memory unfolding in the back of my own mind: he’d been awake the entire time—listening to the shuffle of dirt over the coffin Brax trapped him in, listening

to the man's mad ravings, louder even than Laska's own screaming. *Bloodthirsty animals. People eaters, back stabbers! Never trust a Laska! Never let them run—*

By the time we emerge from the tunnel, having scrambled up another ladder, both of us are shaken, bent over the marble floor. We catch our breath, recovering from the memory. I notice the shovel first, the spade encrusted in mud, a pack, a cast iron pot, a flask, I guess, probably not of water, a spare flannel, knotted like a pillow. The air is cool, as if we're still underground, but dry, no scent of damp earth like in the tunnel. The ceiling is circular, crafted by the same pale stone as the walls. The walls, marked with the etched names and dates of the dead.

Laska's hideout is inside a mausoleum.

"That were close," he sighs in the darkness, so quiet I barely hear him.

I get the troubling sensation he doesn't mean our escape from the wardens.

Chapter Five

"Morgan says you owe her triple," I say.

I watch Laska devour his food in the dim light from his lantern. He sits cross-legged, pulling half-eaten bread, raw carrot, and what appears to be fruit leather from deep in his pack one at a time. Puck, his opossum, looks smug at me from his lap.

Hunched, Laska holds each bit of food with both hands, like any moment I might jump him and try to steal it away. I pull my knees to my chest and sigh, leaning against the cool mausoleum wall of etched names. I find it strange I can almost guess the reason for his strange behavior, remembering long nights of gnawing hunger, of fighting over scraps with Brax's owl familiar, named Nox. Brax's cackling.

Brax. Nox.

Before tonight, I'd never heard either of those names—but whatever transpired between the two of us in the back of Morgan's bar gave me his memories of them.

First, I think of Brax as his father. But I concentrate, disciplined to ignore the uncanny sensation in my mind, and find that isn't true. Understanding comes easy, as if I've always known. Brax was short for Braxton. *Gideon Braxton*. He wasn't a Laska, and he'd made sure Laska knew it every second of every day.

Not a father, then, more like a caretaker. A terrible one, at that. A tyrant.

Laska's earliest memories are of this man.

Brax in boneyards. Brax, marking corpses with rewritten sign-blood.

I suspect the sharing of our memories accidental, my own fault—tangling sign-fire and sign-blood in an attempt to find something the two of us shared, a common language enough to reach him by.

But there's something Laska isn't telling me. The reason he didn't wake along with Reyes. The task of meeting my father and demanding my inheritance feels further complicated.

"Don't think I got enough to pay up Morgan triple and pay you," Laska says.

It takes me a moment to understand. I forgot I said anything about Morgan.

He hesitates, takes a full bite of bread. "How did Robbie seem?" he says, then.

I wrinkle my nose. "Don't tell me he didn't know of your plan to use Diego."

"I suggested it, and he took to the idea." Laska smirks, "Now he can get into bars."

"He's only a child," I muse. "Can he really cope with such a heavy decision?"

There's a hint of anger that finally flashes Laska's usual impassive expression. "What's being a kid got to do with it?" he says. "Robbie ain't stupid, if that's what you're meaning..."

I notice the way Laska tries to push his untamed hair out of his eyes, curving it behind his ears. He exposes a yellowy bruise from his fight with Diego at his jaw. I imagine what he might look like if he had a proper tailored coat, long and fit to his narrow shoulders. Black wouldn't suit him. He'd look too pale. It would have to be the colors of earth—green, or brown, his vest maybe blue, or better, something matching his hazel eyes. Perhaps his hat could be black, I compromise, but not his clothes. He would look more handsome, I decide, more his age. But what did I care what he could look like? If he wore finer clothes? If he combed his hair? I frown.

I've let my curiosity about Laska and his craft control my actions for too long.

It was high time I got on with the dark business of taking back my inheritance.

"Before, at the bar, you mentioned you mean to *take me* to my father," I say.

"That's right, in the land of the dead. What, are you scared or something?"

I grow agitated. "No. But isn't it easier to just speak to him from here?"

Laska squints. "Look, something tells me that if I go knocking on ol' Rick Ellis's door, he ain't going to open it and take my hand. Things work different here than they do there. I can't force an unwilling soul. That's why some people who die stay dead. If they don't want to be brought back, I can't do nothing for it. If they don't want to talk to me, can't do nothing about that neither. Rarer, they can disappear the second I think I've found them." I open my mouth. "Not to mention," he goes on in his mumble, "one," he holds out his hand and points, looking to it, "I don't force souls around in the land of the

living, neither, and before you ask— believe me, people with souls like Diego? They’re plenty willing. Two,” he extends another finger, “even if your Pa were fine with me barging in and takes my hand, there ain’t no damn way I’m willing to let the infamous Symbolist killer *Rick Ellis* use my body to argue with you,” he pauses, then adds: “unless you pay up first.”

I sigh, rubbing at my temples. “Do I have to die, then?” I say, “In order to go with you?”

He pauses to chew through a full bite of carrot. “That’s the idea,” he tells Puck, still in his lap. His eyes lower. “It’ll be painless, though—I mean, don’t worry. I mean,” he mumbles through his next bite, “I’ll make it painless. For you...” He swallows. “Just like falling asleep.”

“Is that what you told Robbie Reyes?” I say, thinking of the stake, the marks on his arm.

“What’s that supposed to mean? You got a real question for me, or what?”

“Sure,” I say, “how do I know you won’t leave me there, in the land of the dead?”

“I stayed true to Robbie, didn’t I?” he says, “and suppose I owe it to you if I’m honest.”

I blink, surprised to hear him admit his mistake in almost dying at the stake burning. “I thought you said Puck was chewing the rope,” I say, sly.

His opossum, at least, meets my eye at the sound of his name.

“Not for the stake,” Laska says. I strain to hear him. “I mean for back there... at the bar.”

I tense, unsettled by his answer. “This—Brax,” I begin, taking it for an invitation

to prod the depths of what transpired between us in the back room. “I saw him. In the signs. He’s the one who taught you sign-blood.” But the memories prickle my mind. “No,” I say, correcting myself. “No, I—remember. You learned it by accident, as a child. It came to you easy in the boneyards, you had the black spot by your tenth winter, and when Brax saw it, something happened. It was like he went mad.” The knowledge presses against my mind. “He thought you meant to kill him, but he was wrong, all you wanted was to run away—at first, anyway. Until he buried you alive. But you escaped, and then it felt inevitable. You took up his shovel while he was in the land of the dead.” I remember Laska’s fear, the way he grit his teeth, his deep, shaken breath as he raised up the spade. “You split his head in.” I wince, my eyes closing, mind aching.

Laska says nothing.

Doesn’t defend himself, doesn’t try to explain or justify what he did.

But I’m learning, understanding—edging closer, I realize, to the thing he isn’t telling me.

“When you say I saved you back there, you don’t mean from the wardens, do you?” I say.

His eyes lift to mine, finally. But instead of answering, he completely shifts my bearings. “That girl caught you studying sign-blood,” he says, “your apprentice, I saw it.”

There it was. Exposed. The Society already pursued in the taboo study of sign-magic, but it kept one rule. Pursuing the craft of sign-blood was off-limits. Forbidden. I knew he’d seen the dowager, but I didn’t know until now the extent of the memory. Her cool disappointment so like my father’s before I left home—her insistence that I leave.

I had broken her rule. I had studied sign-blood.

Perhaps if Laska concentrated, he could even recall the day I stumbled upon a collection of rare relic books from an estate sale, years ago. Relic letters. Relic fiction. It was the accounts of those of Blood *healing* during the old relic wars that first captured my interest. For poetry had it, that was where it all began. Long before the fires, the floods, the earth, split—the endless armies of the dead, there were those trying everything they could to heal a terrible sickness. Discovering the cracks of magic in our infinite universe. But if the craft of healing through sign-blood was once possible—it was thought lost to the centuries. It felt like a worthy pursuit, however impossible, or so ill-advised.

Laska eyes me, then stuffs his last piece of dried fruit in his mouth. He pushes Puck off his lap and moves to sit beside me against the wall. I stiffen, feel our shoulders touch, but I don't move. The scent of apple mingles with his smell. Earth after a rain. He begins undoing the bandage of his mark hand. I notice the red of his knuckles from his fight, the dirt underneath his fingernails. He looks down into the large circular wound in his palm. It's stopped bleeding, but only parts of it have hardened into dark scabs, the rest gnarled red—and there, festering along its edges, a black pit in its center: the language of life and death, the signs squirming like maggots.

“I can see them,” I say, transfixed. “The signs.”

“But can you read them?” Laska says in my ear.

I concentrate.

But it feels like a pick strikes behind my eye. Izalith squirms under my sleeve, and my breath hitches. I turn my face away. “No,” I say. “Every time I try, it—hurts more than it did before.” He says nothing, and a silence settles between us. Not

uncomfortable, but patient, both of us thinking. “Does it hurt?” I say then, of the wound. I glance at him, still staring at his palm.

“No,” he lies, then he offers it. I hesitate, think again of Diego, how unwise it is to allow Laska to be this close to me, someone of Blood. Izalith tenses over my hand in warning, but before I can stop myself, I’m allowing his touch, trusting him, at least, because he asked my permission. “It ain’t quite like your catalysts, here,” he says, drawing his fingers over the scarred skin coiled inside my palm. “To write *new* sign-fire, you had to rewrite your own hands to be able to do it—I can feel it.” He pauses, turning over my palm. “I can’t see it though,” he gives a half-grin. His touch is cool, light. “But everyone forgets sign-blood isn’t really about blood, or even the body. It’s about essence. I can’t *write* a new soul into my hand, like you can write fire.”

I frown, having never thought of it that way. But a part of me remains suspicious, thinking of history. “Why sign-*blood*, then, if that’s the case? Why not sign-essence, sign-soul?”

Laska hesitates. “Dunno,” he says, “Never thought of it like that before. But sign-blood ain’t like other sign-magics. It can’t be *written*, it can only be *rewritten*, and by that I mean, I can only command a body by making it an extension of myself, of rewriting it into part of my essence. I can only take a soul and put it into a new place. Either here, around the land of the dead, or into other bodies. I can’t write a new body just by using my catalyst. It’s the land of the dead where all the writing happens. Everything’s always being written there. Life, death, all of it in between. Not just people, either,” he glances at Puck, curled on his pack. “In the land of the living, we become everything it writes. That’s how come sometimes we can read a soul’s fate. But luckily—that’s where those of

Blood come in best. Unlike everyone else, we can rewrite it.”

I let go of his hand. “It makes you think you’re a god.”

Laska laughs. “If the definition of a god is someone who gets to decide who lives and who dies, then I guess that does make me a god.” I chill at his arrogance. “Don’t look so disgusted,” he says, nudging me at the shoulder. “It’s your definition, ain’t it? And I ain’t even a sliver of what my ancestors were like, by the way. I ain’t about riches, having more than I need. Believe me, it ain’t even my fault. I didn’t mean to become a Symbolist. You can’t say the same. I mean, why leave Hull—travel all that way to study under some rich, snobby woman? Just for the knowledge?” His grin widens, “Just to teach it? Nah. You like the power... *The application.*”

I lift my chin. “My mother studied fire,” I say, “I wanted to follow in her footsteps.”

“Sure,” Laska says. “Did your Ma just sit around all day, reading and thinking?”

“Teaching isn’t just sitting around,” I scoff, “but I suppose you wouldn’t know—”

“Noble,” he mocks, grinning, “but you hated teaching. Did your Ma teach, then?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. I think of my father. “Maybe,” I say. Then, “Probably not.”

“Fancy that,” Laska says.

“Don’t you worry...” I hesitate. “Don’t you ever worry that one day, you’ll turn and find everything amounts to nothing. The way Brax did. The way—my father did. That people might turn into decks of tarot, just signs. That you could care less. Maybe you see it like that already.”

Laska’s grin fades. “That’s it, then? You think everything amounts to nothing to

me. Just because life and death shouldn't mean much to someone who can bring souls back from the land of the dead? But that's not how I think, Ms. Ellis." He offers his hand up to me like he did before. Asking. But this time there's no hesitation. I'm drawn by the same curiosity that led me here. Despite his arrogance, despite my better sense. Like in the back room when we hid from the wardens, I feel the creeping sensation of sign-blood and answer it with sign-fire. There are no memories. This time there is only one thing. A greeting, an understanding. "Everything is everything to me, all at once," he says, and I feel it. The connection that was able to rescue him from the land of the dead in Morgan's bar. The link between fire and life and death in the signs.

Chaos. Chaos, like sign-fire, chaos, like sign-blood. Chaos, the same thrill standing it down, the same thrill, feeding it. The same sense of power. Fire and blood. Invincible, like gods.

I grin.

He meets it with the same rare, cunning look he gave on the stake, from his sketch.

"It's Hild," I say. The lightest I've felt in months.

Trusting him.

"Ready to see your father, Hild?"

"Yes," I say.

Chapter Six

I'm fifteen, clutching a tear-stained bundle of letters from the dowager in my hands. The tears are not from sadness, but from anger, and long since dried. The

stagecoach jerks, the world outside only a dappling of pale light through the drawn curtains. I keep my posture straight against my cushioned seat, and it takes me a moment to recognize the person sitting across from me is not my father—but a young man, at first unfamiliar. His hair is combed and styled, his coat a deep green and his clothes tailored to his narrow frame. Handsome. My face heats. But then I recognize his slouch, his crossed leg revealing the mud stains on his boot. His mark hand is covered by a fingerless glove instead of wrapped in bandaged tatters, and his eyes—his eyes are rolled back in his head, eerily showing their shaking whites just like in Morgan’s bar. His opossum appears around his shoulders, its rat-tail coiling around his neck. I startle in recognition.

He is Ezra Laska, a god of death—and I am dead.

This place. My father’s coach from when I was young—why this place, of all places—?

“Dunno,” Ezra says. “Everyone sees something different. Makes their own universe.” He speaks comfortable, raised enough so I can hear him without straining. “The land of the dead could be anything. Mean anything. Maybe it’s just a feeling, a possibility, a memory, a moment in time you keep tripping over, a dream,” he pauses, “a nightmare. It might change at any moment. It shifts with you, it is you, I suppose. In a way. It’s everything and nothing, a veil of all sign-magic bound together at once, in the purest of forms. But,” he hesitates. “There’s a risk we might begin to forget ourselves if we’re not careful. The longer we stay—the more dangerous it gets. Time moves different here than in the land of the living.” He taps at his ear. “I’m keeping our time. But when I say we’re done, we’re done. That’s if you get what you came for or not.”

I swallow, anxious. “I have to be quick,” I say.

He inclines his head. “That’s the idea,” he says.

“Ten minutes,” I say, trying to match his usual confidence.

But he only gives a weak smile, and I feel unconvinced, self-conscious, a disaster.

Fifteen.

There’s a stretch of silence. I peer around the coach, exactly as I remember it and just as stuffy, my dress low-cut the way my father hated. Already in this moment I had been conspiring against him, had found out the secret of my mother’s origins from the dowager. The woman made no qualms about her intentions, stating she thought it best to get me away from that man. *What your mother saw in him, I cannot say*, she wrote, calling him a devil, a monster. I had been conversing with her for over a year, back and forth.

Now it was time to confront him about my knowledge. Time to uncover the truth. I suspected, deep down, that he had possibly done something to her. My mother. While the dowager did not know the circumstances of her death, she did not dissuade me from thinking otherwise. The only moments I saw him for any extended period of time was over our Sunday dinner and our weekly ride to the stake burnings. I had decided it best to speak to him in a place where I knew he couldn’t run. Where I couldn’t run, forcing bravery. He would answer, then. Do more than that—he would fund my leaving of Hull.

The coach slows.

“Found him,” says Ezra. He grins. “I’m getting good. Just broke a personal record.”

I have no time to respond before the door opens, and he’s stepping outside.

There’s the bright heat of a summer day, the sweet scent of lilac.

Ezra turns, offering me his gloved hand as I make to step from the stagecoach.

“Take it,” he says, “and I’ll rewrite you into your father’s land of the dead.”

I lift my hand. There’s a slender knotting of sign-fire in the familiar shape of Izalith around my wrist, though unlike Puck, her body itself did not actualize here. Her flames are ever-moving, continuously alive, twined to my own essence, a symbol of my mastery, of my power. My eyes prickle from relief. Izalith’s strength flows through me, grants me bravery, assures me I’m not alone. I feel her support, her curiosity. Through everything, she has been my constant.

I take Ezra’s hand.

“Breathtaking,” he says of Izalith’s sign-fire, and I feel my face heat at his compliment.

Then I am through the door—Ezra’s touch a chill up my arm, flames shuddering in wind.

I stand on the large, front porch of my father’s manor. Not fifteen, but myself—or at least, a comfortable self. Dressed in my favorite coat, a deep showy purple. The yard of my childhood home is close-quartered by a proud linden tree and the front flowerbeds. Along the iron gate, the hedge of lilac bushes is in bloom. The sun shines pale, obscured by the manor’s Mansard roof. The trim of the roofing and exterior crown moldings are dark purples and greens, framing the soft-brick exterior. It boasts two stories, evenly spaced windows, a glass conservatory overlooking a view of the river on the far side, and one tall steepled tower on the right, housing the library and my father’s study.

Puck hisses and Izalith heats around my wrist at the familiar bark of a dog.

I stiffen as it emerges around the corner of the porch’s wrap-around, nose to the

ground. It catches sight of us, a low growl challenging Puck, its stance alert and still. My father kept many dogs throughout my childhood, presumably up until the day he died.

But this one—I realize, I recognize. “Sy?”

The dog relaxes at the sound of my voice and bounds towards me. I drop to my knee by instinct to greet him, scratching up through his neck and ears the way I did when I was young. His body is lithe, his breed often used for hunting pheasant, his fur brown and white, the face bearded, the tail docked. I could remember, as a child, the way he was like my own companion, a comfort, a friend. He followed me everywhere, closer to me, I even thought, than he was to my own father, who regularly gave him little attention.

Sy lived an extraordinarily long life for a dog, still by my side even by the time I was fifteen. I assumed he must have died shortly after I ran away, and the morning I ran, I had made sure to say my last goodbyes to him.

But—

It was within the hour that my father learned of my escape.

He was too late, arriving only after my riverboat left the docks.

I had glimpsed him, my father, pacing at the riverbank. Sy by his side. It was the last time I saw either of them. I pause, feeling the way Sy’s fur warms at my touch.

Tangles with sign-fire. My hand draws back in sudden recognition, seeing the way flames lick his heels, his tail.

Sy.

My father’s familiar.

The discovery unravels a ball of anger somewhere deep in my heart.

I can do nothing but stare as it burns along my insides, along my skin.

Beside me, even Ezra stiffens, seeming to understand just as my father rounds the porch's corner. He stops at the sight of us, holding a book in his hands.

He's young. Perhaps as young as he was when I was a born. His pale hair is close-cropped, freckles over his nose. He wears no coat, but still wears his black suit vest and pants, his white sleeves rolled. No gloves, and he always wore gloves, I recall with a sinking recognition. I can't see the palm of his hand, but I can feel it, the sensation of sign-fire, sensitive to it the way that I wasn't the last time I saw him. He looks confused at Ezra, but then sees me.

"Hild," he says, a note of surprise.

My jaw clenches. I lift my chin.

My own father, a Symbolist of Fire.

I draw what strength I have left to keep myself as cool as possible.

I stand. "I'm here for the code to your safety deposit box at the bank," I say, even.

He frowns. "Here, come around this way and we can sit in the shade..." He glances at Ezra. "I didn't think there were any of your kind left," he says, and before I can redirect our conversation, he's disappearing from where he came from, Sy following in a careful lope.

Ezra and I exchange looks—or at least, I try to catch the whites of Ezra's eyes, but feel uncertain he meets them.

I follow the sound of my father's voice, rounding the porch's corner. "Didn't imagine you'd be able to reach me after my death. Not reliably, anyway..." I blink, and it takes me a moment to acclimate to our new surroundings, no longer the front of the manor, or even the porch—but in the back garden, underneath the shade of the trees I

used to play in as a child. Everything was in bloom, a drastic change from the overgrown neglected plants I remembered. There was a cobbled path that wound through it, then steep down the edge of the chalk bluff to the river below, where I would swim with Sy on hot summer days. I swallow a pang of nostalgia.

My father motions to a chair at a small round table, setting his book down next to a rolled smoke pinched on the edge of a delicate ashtray. There are exactly three chairs, the path underneath paved by a jigsaw of smooth stone. I sit, stiff, still admittedly stunned, unable to do anything but take it in. Ezra stays standing, his hands in the pockets of his coat, seeming to look everywhere but at my father or me. My father doesn't pressure him, only takes his own seat and reaches for the tin of tobacco and paper near the ashtray. "Either of you want a smoke?" he says.

Neither of us respond.

"I figured you might want the house, even just to sell it," he says, then, beginning to make himself one. "It was probably cruel, threatening you like that with the inheritance. But to be honest," there's a hint of hurt in his tone, his eyes on his work, "I really thought you'd come."

"Did you," I grit.

I try to control my anger the way I did in Hernandez's office. But it feels impossible, the emotion bleeding around the edges of each word as I stare at his hand, feel the sign-fire. The day I confronted him in the carriage about my mother, he did not deny she was of Fire, but he withheld revealing anything more. He forbade me from leaving to follow in my mother's footsteps, even threatening to imprison me in the house, if that's what it took. I glance at Sy, betrayed. I mistook him for my companion, when he

had really been a guard, appointed to watch me at all times. Preventing disobedience.

“I always took your bigotry and prejudice against sign-magic for ignorance,” I say, stiff. “But it seems even that was too kind. How long have you been of Fire?”

My father weakly grins. “The Ellis’s were a lesser family in the grand scheme, and your mother came from a family of workers. It’s true the Ellis’s owned property, could afford to be educated, but just like the rest of the populace, we were beginning to squirm under the heel of those of Blood. There had been talk of the Uprising for quite some time. Those of Blood could see it coming, knew their time was nearing its end. It’s strange.” He pauses. “They had become so delusional, they turned on us first. Lesser families of sign-magic, accusing us of betrayal. It was a Braxton who killed your grandfather, accusing him of purposely enabling the riots, a damn Laska that bathed in your aunt’s blood. Is it so impossible to imagine, that when the Uprising began, we sought the same revenge as the rest? Luckily, many leading the charge had never heard of us. It made it easy to fade into obscurity during the fighting, once it became all too clear that sign-magic was better left to the shadows. Your mother and I,” he grins, “we shared a drive to hunt down those of Blood in the aftermath, it was why we came west when they fled. Who better to find them, to sniff them out,” he glances at Sy, “than those with a knowledge of signs?”

He lights his smoke with his thumb, leaning back in his chair. I’m unable to stop myself from questioning him, unable to stop myself from revealing how much I don’t know in exchange for reconciling the perceptions I held of him and my mother with what he’s now told me.

“If what you’ve said is true,” I begin, “then what happened to my mother, and

what about the others? Those of Water, Air, Earth, even Fire? I saw it as a child, you burned them all, it didn't matter if they were of Blood or not, or even if they were Symbolists. Most were only workers..."

I notice my father eyeing Ezra. I follow his look behind to where he's leaned hunched against the nearest tree, his hands still in his pockets, Puck still perched on his shoulder.

"You must be a Winnick," my father says. "There was one family of Blood that we could never find."

"Nah, sir," says Ezra, "Never heard of 'em. I ain't anyone's family."

My father takes a drag on his smoke, then a look of understanding comes over him. "No—I remember. The night your mother died, we were far south of here, on the wasteroads near the Platte. Finally, we'd chased ol' Eli Laska and his daughters to the brink. They caused a lot of grief, killed people from the next town over just to use their bodies as guards. They knew we were coming. It was my wife Luna's decision to split up. I found one of his daughters still in their hideout, dying—a baby screaming in her arms, bloody and new. Had a daughter of my own, by then, just a child. I took one look and left them for the coyotes. By the time I rejoined the chase Luna was dead, her soul gone out like a flame. I burned them all, no stake. Just prairie fire." He ashes his smoke. "That means you must be Ezra Laska," he says, glancing. "I saw your posters before I died. What ever happened to you, boy? Did your mother make a pact with the devil—?"

Ezra's face is unreadable.

"As for the reason why I burned so many in Hull..." He pauses, taking another drag. "I was not adverse to the study of sign-magic, but I was adverse to those insisting

on practicing it openly, despite the result of the Uprising.” I think of Morgan at the bar, the tattoo of sign-water on her skin. “I believe it best left to the shadows—best left to those able to take on its challenges with the respect it deserves. Not just for any common uneducated idiot to dabble in, untrained.” He scoffs. “Even despite the new laws, there were people who couldn’t even read in our spoken language, suddenly going around trying to understand the true forces of nature. The majority of those I burned were of Blood, true. The rest, a danger to all of us—not just the common person.”

“Bullshit.” My father bristles, Ezra no longer leaning against the tree, but leaning close to his ear. “Let me get this straight,” Ezra goes on.

My father covers his flinch by stubbing out his smoke. Sy growls, goes ignored.

“The Uprising starts, and you use it as a way to justify personal revenge—suppose that’s fine, only by the end of it, turns out you’re still not satisfied. Turns out, actually, you’re just like they were. That you believe there’s only a sliver of people out there deserving to learn sign-magic. The ones who got books, and time. Know who that ends up being, in the end?” He points at me. “Rich people, from the same families as before.” I feel heat rise to my cheeks. “Believe me,” he says, “you ain’t got to be that educated to understand the language of blood—”

My father rolls his eyes.

“Boy,” he says, “the world’s always been ruled by the rich. Look no further than the Relic Era. Even before the discovery of sign-magic, they waged terrible wars. So much of it based on religion, on skin. Suppose you’d know that if you could read.” He holds out his pale hand, looks between us. “Those atrocities, *genocide*, it’s in our blood, the three of us. We should count ourselves lucky our ancestors practiced the right rites,

were of the fairer-skinned.” He seems amused. “Not to mention, before the Uprising, the Laska’s were the wealthiest of all—no more noble than a damn slave holder. Besides,” he shrugs, “I’m not talking about your ability to *learn* sign-magic, boy, to read and write it, I’m talking about your ability to *apply it*. The power of any sign-magic in the wrong hands can enable a single person to do an almost unimaginable amount of destruction—”

“Being *educated* doesn’t stop ‘em, does it?” Ezra hisses. “Nah, far’s I see it, being educated don’t mean shit if you’re the type that likes to burn people alive.” He tilts his head, pausing, his eyes rolled eerie white. My father makes no move, even Sy going still. “I can see it in you, Maverick Ellis,” Ezra whispers, “I can read it in the sign-blood. Your soul. Those innocent people you burned. Just for the thrill. It weren’t because you thought them unworthy.”

I think of the burnings I attended as a child. If my father truly believed the stakes necessary for forcing sign-magic to the shadows and protecting the general populace, he would not have made such a frequent spectacle of them. I remember his laughter, the way he prodded the crowds. My father—not just a killer, like I had already taken him for, but a killer of his own kind. Bred by the war, enabled by my mother. A lone wolf, gone unchecked. Izalith squirms.

But my father seems mostly unfazed. “I don’t have to listen to such hypocrisies from a Laska,” he says to Ezra, tone edged, “your family tortured innocents for the damn sport of it!”

“Don’t you worry, sir,” Ezra smirks. “I heard about all of it and more, growing up. Did you know my grandfather thought eating people would make him invincible? That my mother drank the blood of young virgins, that her sisters used souls as

playthings? Never trust a Laska, ain't that the saying? I think about it all the time, that's true. But I never knew 'em. Honestly, don't care to."

I feel a sudden kinship with Ezra I did not expect to find.

I study him.

How did he reckon with the terrible nature of his past? The horrors of his lineage?

My father scoffs. "I doubt you can claim to feel no pleasure in rewriting sign-blood—"

Ezra grins, closer. "I do," he says, "but unlike you and them, I ain't so weak. I control it."

My father finally appears irritated. "And you, Hild?" he says. He looks to me. "I never told you of your mother's past, or mine, because I meant to protect you from it. When that woman contacted you, Luna's friend, trying to restate the old traditions, I kept you from leaving because it was the right thing to do. Exactly what father in their right mind would allow their only child to go gallivanting off to pursue an outlawed craft?" He glances at Ezra. "But you didn't listen, and now look at you—an Ellis, trusting a Laska in the land of the dead. Risks like this are exactly what I meant to protect you from. He'll get you killed. He might do it himself—"

"I am not here to discuss him, Maverick." I lift my chin. "I'm here for my inheritance."

For the first time since my arrival, I feel to have regained my footing with Ezra's help.

"Get out of my face," my father says to him, waving his hand. Ezra draws away but keeps his grin. I feel amused by his ability to command such a menacing presence

when he usually keeps to himself. Unlike in the land of the living, he seems far more comfortable with himself and conversation.

My father glares. “Inheritance? My daughter, you had your chance.”

I narrow my eyes, keep my tone as matter-of-fact as possible. “But I didn’t,” I say. “Not really. The bank tricked you. They sent your letter late, and they’re looking to claim the estate for themselves. I came to see you, didn’t I?” I prop my elbow to the table, resting my chin on the back of my hand, noting the way my father’s eyes fall to Izalith, my bracelet of fire. “Perhaps I’m late, but by no fault of my own, and here I am. I traveled back to Hull, no less.”

“Traveled to Hull?” my father says, pausing. Then: “So you left the Society, did you?”

He seems pleased.

I let a smile play on my lips. “I did,” I say, “it turns out I care little for upholding traditions, and though I admit to feeling—disgusted, by your actions, killing workers and your own kind...” I think briefly of the men I burned at Morgan’s bar, the roil of fire over their skin. “I can’t deny I’ve felt the same *thrill*, as Laska puts it, in practicing sign-fire.” I glance between them. “The two of you speak around the reason there are laws,” I say, “laws, to prevent anyone, regardless of their class, from wreaking havoc. Thievery, murder—these are things both of you have committed for far too long, gone unchecked. Perhaps it is time for new laws. Regulation.”

My father follows my meaning. “Then who will uphold these new laws?” he says.

“Me,” I say, “of course. But I will need your legacy here in Hull to do it, understand?”

He gives a hint of a satisfied smile, drumming his fingers on the table, appearing to think. He glances at Ezra. “I assume he’s already broken some of your *new laws*, hasn’t he?”

I keep my eyes on my father. “He has,” I say, “and rest assured, he will pay for them.”

My father finally relaxes, easing into a full grin, and takes his book up from the table, tearing out the first page. He produces an ink pen from behind his ear, not there a second before, and begins to write.

I steal a glance at Ezra. His grin is gone, replaced by an angry frown, his chin lowered, arms now crossed against his chest. Puck glowers on his shoulder.

“Here it is,” my father says, sliding the paper across the table to me, “and give the bank hell, while you’re at it—the damn bastards. I suppose Hernandez, the fool, was in on it, too? I guess it isn’t so surprising their loyalty to me died when I did. But they practically run the damn town. The new judge is the director’s daughter. You’ll need to keep them an ally if you’re looking to assert any dominance.”

I read the series of jagged numbers on the paper, committing them to memory, and nod.

“Thank you for the advice,” I tell him.

“Even despite taking such a risk,” he glances at Ezra, “I’m glad you came—”

“We have to go,” Ezra interrupts, but it’s so quiet my father doesn’t hear him.

“—I always believed you’d come back, and perhaps I’m glad you left, too—”

“Hild,” Ezra says in my ear. I feel his hand on my shoulder.

“—the study sign-fire is in your blood, I think I was wrong to suppress it—”

“Maverick,” I say, and my father stops, attentive, his expression kind, “I—”

Then he’s gone, along with Sy, along with the manor in summer, the garden’s cool shade.

I’m fifteen, clutching a tear-stained bundle of letters from the dowager in my hands. The tears are not from sadness, but from anger, and long since dried. The stagecoach jerks, the world outside only a dappling of pale light through the drawn curtains—no.

I startle, breath hitching as I realize I’m back in my own land of the dead, Ezra, sitting across from me with his frown and eerie eyes. It’s my turn to glare.

“Excuse me!” I cry, “Take me back, I wasn’t finished with him!”

“Far’s I can tell, you were,” Ezra says in his deadpan.

Puck glares at me from his lap.

“I wasn’t! You could have spared a clearer warning—”

“I told you we had to go,” he says. “I weren’t lying—”

“I didn’t think you meant *that very instant*.”

“So?” He says. “You got your code, didn’t you?”

“You could’ve let us say our goodbyes—”

“I’d already let you stay too long for the code.”

I sneer. “You’re angry! You did it out of spite!”

“Did I?” he says, seeming to dare me to go on.

“Yes,” I say, “and you have nothing to be angry about—”

“Real interesting,” he says, “because it sounded like you told him you’d kill me.

Not only that—but seems to me like you’re no better than him! Thinking you deserve

taking charge!”

I laugh at him. “Please,” I say, “there are other ways to punish people for crimes—”

“So you admit I’ve broken your *new* laws,” he says, “for what? For Diego, Robbie?”

“I wouldn’t charge you for things you’ve done in the past!”

“Exactly what’s that supposed to—?”

But Ezra stops abrupt, head turning quick.

It’s then I notice my stagecoach has stopped, the door ajar.

Everything outside the coach is darkness, until I see the blood-signs.

Ezra shivers, a tremor moving through him out of the corner of my eye. Puck playing dead in his lap. I realize the darkness is alive, a shadow overtaking the doorway. My head tilts. There’s an offering of a crooked wisp of smoke, forming something like a claw that reaches, suggests I take it. I know who it is, the name a stab, a threat.

Ezra’s greatest fear, the thing that hasn’t let him go, that keeps haunting him, that keeps *hunting* him, even in the land of the dead. The reason he took so long in Morgan’s bar, the answer to my questions gone ignored. I should’ve known, I should’ve guessed. I can see the sign-blood squirming inside the shadows, the rotted core of his essence...

Brax.

I reach, angry, fingers curling with flame, meaning to burn him, willing to fight him—

Ezra gasps, too late. “No!”

The shadow-claw grabs my arm.

Chapter Seven

I'm standing in a boneyard under a dome of stars. The landscape is flat, prairie stretching out to every horizon, meeting a night sky. The moon is full, making it easy to see the shapes of the sunken graves, the curve of tombstones. I'm myself, as far as I can tell. The same self I was in my father's land of the dead, my purple coat, my pointed boots. Izalith, still a wreath of flame at my wrist, her relief matching mine. But it does not last long. There's a sound like a wet crack, a hitched breath, the scream of an owl.

I turn and squint into the darkness, smell the smoke from a campfire before I see it, the heat close. It's burning low and hungry, wriggling over the last of the charred wood. There are shapes in its shadows, moving—that crack again, hitched breath—

I don't move, stunned by déjà vu and uncanny horror, trying to make sense of a scene from someone else's memory, now playing out in a third person in front of me.

Ezra, a child. The boy from his sketch, a quick and quiet shadow slinking in the darkness. Puck trails at his heels. He's holding Brax's shovel, even taller than himself, and I feel a sense of doubt. His same doubt. The weight of the thing in his arms. He can't possibly carry enough strength to do what he's about to do. But he'd been digging holes his entire life, hadn't he? It took him too long to figure out the world was larger than boneyards, that regular folks didn't live in them, that regular folks couldn't see the symbol-like shapes in other folks, that regular folks didn't go around digging up graves.

So many graves. Unmarked, marked, mass graves. The dead, the dead, the skeletal dead. Brax looking to build an army to take back the world. Marking corpses in his sign-blood.

It was no wonder Ezra could see signs before he even learned to talk.

Then after a while he started to understand them—read them in blood

He had tried to run away after Brax discovered his black spot.

He'd been free for two moons, before Brax hunted him down, tied him up. Tried to bury Ezra alive. But Ezra had learned a thing or two from Brax, by then. He'd been marking corpses in his own sign-blood, on the lam. Buried alive, he forced the bodies he marked to dig up his own grave. The same method he used to move the skeleton in Morgan's bar. But it took an unexpected amount of strength, patience, trial and error. By the time he was free, he'd been buried for three days, starving, smelling of his own piss and shit—and angry. More than anything else. He was angry. What had he ever done to Brax to deserve such a betrayal? What had he ever done to Brax, but obey his every command? The anger eclipsed his old feelings of desperate approval, of hungering over Brax's attention, the rarest of moments when Brax would pat his head, and tell him *you did good, kid*, after pickpocketing the right things, after relating the right overheard rumors, after striking the right coffin—the body decorated in jewels or old relic tech.

Ezra lifts the shovel, the most scared he's ever been.

Brax's eyes are rolled into his skull, his body coiling in the writhing of sign-blood. In the land of the dead. Doing what there, Ezra doesn't know. It had taken him too long to figure out regular folks didn't look that way when they were asleep—and he still isn't sure he understands it fully himself.

He could not do it.

The thing he's about to do.

But the signs call to him, and in them he can read the way Brax's essence is

twisted, the darkness lurking there, not like a regular essence, but monstrous, half-rewritten, deformed, not human, not animal, not alive, not dead—

He strikes once. Twice. Again, again, the blood scissoring from Brax's head.

The wet crack, split, the hitch of breath. The scream of an owl, the seizure—

I blink, and it begins again.

Ezra, slinking in the darkness, holding Brax's shovel. Puck at his heels.

He lifts it, his eyes bruised from sleeplessness, reading Brax's essence.

He strikes, once, twice, again, again—

The wet crack. Breath hitch. The scream of an owl.

It begins again.

Ezra, slinking in the darkness, holding Brax's shovel.

He lifts it, peers into Brax's soul—

He strikes. Once, twice, again—

The crack. Hitch. Scream of an owl.

This is it.

This moment.

Over and over again.

This is Ezra's land of the dead.

Him in the darkness. The shovel.

Ezra lifts.

He strikes.

Once.

Twice.

Again.

Again.

The crack.

The hitch.

The owl—

Ezra

Lifts

Strikes

Once

Twice

The crack

The hitch

The owl

Ezra

Lifts—

“Stop!”

I reach, grasping the shovel with both hands the same moment he means to strike, forcing the shovel still. He looks at me. But his eyes are not rolled the way they were in my land of the dead, or my father's. Instead, they're the regular eyes of a child—wide, frightened. “Ezra?” I say.

But he doesn't seem to recognize me.

“Thank the black veil!” booms a voice. I startle, letting go of the shovel, looking down at Brax. His eyes are still rolled, but he's awake, standing. Unlike my father, he

looks exactly like he does in Ezra's memories, tall and imposing, his dark, long hair in a tangled knot above his head, his pale face in need of a shave. He grabs his shovel from Ezra. "Give me that, you filthy brat!" He grins a slice of crooked teeth, a gold tooth. "Finally outsmarted you, didn't I!" He turns his attention on me, stretching out his arms. "My thanks," he says, "you've no idea how long this kid's been smashing my head open, feels like a damn eternity, really. Thought at first it couldn't be done—rewriting myself into *his* land of the dead from mine. Then it worked, but I couldn't quite give myself any more agency than just, you know, generally make him suffer by reliving his worst memory. Until you came along, ha!" He hits Ezra's upside the head. "Tried to hide in someone else's land of the dead, didn't you, idiot!" He eyes me. "Yours, huh? Exactly who are you, *willing* to be here? For him?" I open my mouth. "Oh," he says, "no, I get it. You like him."

I glare, trying again to interject, but he interrupts.

I begin to guess why Ezra is so quiet.

"Robbing the cradle, aren't you? But I won't judge, suppose I did it literally—found his mother, barely alive, and she was begging, oh please take him, blah, blah, blah. I go, excuse me, woman, do I look like I can take care of a fucking baby while I'm raising an army of undead? But she makes a good point, saying I could do it twice as fast if I had an assistant. I guess that isn't quite cradle robbing, if she gave him up freely... But you get my point, anyway. It was only afterwards I realized I'd made a grave mistake, as they say. I saw it in the signs—the little shit was going to do me in someday after becoming a Symbolist. But I thought, fine, fine, I'll just make sure he doesn't learn sign-blood. Didn't know he'd turn out to be some kind of freak prodigy at it. I mean, I

don't even think he knows what the word *prodigy* means, catch my dirt?"

"I think that relic saying is catch my *drift*," I manage in his brief pause.

He snorts, "Sure—well, anyway. Suppose it's time to get rid of you."

"What—?"

The blow comes hard, sudden, before I have time to react. The shovel, thwacked against my head. I gasp, blink away greens and purples, a clash of stars as I try to crawl away from him.

"Unfortunately," Brax says, taking hold of my leg and dragging me backwards across the ground. "I can't exactly rewrite you into the land of the living, assuming you've got a body there that hasn't gone to waste." I can barely claw myself steady, mind still reeling. "I haven't quite figured out how to do that yet, without a body of my own to tether me, seeing as my old one hasn't got a head. But now I'm the one in control—finally, and I can start to think up a way to get out of here for good. I'd rather not have any interruptions or distractions. That brat and I are going to have a nice, long chat. Well, let's be honest, I'll probably be the one doing all the talking. More like a nice, long lecture as I experiment on his essence. Hey, kid, get over here!"

Brax whistles, stopping us amid the of crooked tombstones.

Ezra appears, not seeming to notice me, fixating instead up at Brax.

There's a shadow above us in the darkness, circling. The screech of an owl.

Puck is nowhere to be found.

"By the veil, what have I told you!" Brax flicks at Ezra's ear, causing Ezra to flinch. "Eyes on your damn boots!" Ezra's eyes dart obediently to the ground. Brax shakes his head, still gripping my leg. "Kids. They way they look at me. Can't stand it.

Gives me the damn creeps.” He holds his shovel out. “Here, take it! Take it!” Ezra takes it. “Dig up one of these graves, will you? I’m dumping your girlfriend, how’s that sound? Believe me, you don’t need her. I had a girl once, your mother—just kidding. I would never court a Laska. That’d be like asking to have my prick ground up into some kind of fertility potion. Well? Don’t just stand there! Get to it, kid!”

But Ezra makes no move, his head bowed.

Brax lets go of my leg.

I scramble back up to my feet, instinctually trying to let flames along my fingers to use as my weapon. But I find the sign-fire absent, and it dawns on me for the first time that I’m unable to conjure or manipulate fire. I blink, confused. I was able to do it in the stagecoach. But. My heart sinks. The stagecoach was my land of the dead. This place, this boneyard under the full moon—it isn’t mine. I stiffen, lifting my sleeve to find Izalith, still burning bright and fierce. Like Brax’s campfire, I can still see the signs in her, read the flames. I frown, thinking, but then I glance up and double-take. Ezra is older, taller, his self from the land of the living, hair tangled, flannel untucked, dirt stains on the knees of his trousers. He holds the shovel, but hasn’t moved.

Brax stands before him, a wicked grin slicing his face.

Ezra’s eyes roll up, showing their whites. He stays still.

“No!” Brax cackles, “Not ever again, you little shit! I told you to dig!”

Brax hits him hard upside the head, leaning close.

“I—said—dig!”

Each word is a violent scream in Ezra’s ear.

Ezra’s eyes blink back to normal.

He begins to dig, a child again—his head bowed.

Brax turns on me, and even though his own eyes are still rolled, I feel him fixate on my hand. “Let’s see, which one of the cowardly lesser families are you from?” He’s grinning again, his voice even. “Miller, Alonso, McNeil?” His eyes narrow, “You’re not a Wlodarski, are you?” This time, I keep my mouth shut, knowing better. “No matter,” he goes on, “only that when the time came for them to fight, they turned tail and ran. No wait, I’ve got it!” He snaps his fingers. “The red hair, you’re an Ellis of Fire! That family was a strange one, *selective*.” He air quotes, raising his eyebrows. “Had a thing for redheads, if you know what I mean. They’d arrange any marriage with one, even from a lower class. I always thought that was a bit suspicious, not to mention over the top, I mean, fire, redheads? I never had any kids of my own, but you can bet your ass if I had a red-headed brat, I would’ve racked up the price for it and made a pretty of’pents!”

I swallow, trying to ignore him, but unable to shake the growing anxiety of how little I know of my family’s past. How the more I uncover, the worse and more twisted it seems to get.

Brax whistles, sharp and loud. The circling shadow from above us swoops and lands on his shoulder, leering with its dead eyes. Nox, his familiar, a horned owl. “That oversized rat giving you trouble, darling—did it go where you can’t follow it?” The owl screeches, restless. She flaps her decayed wings, claws kneading. “There, there. Once I figure a way out of here, you’ll be free again...”

I watch Ezra behind them, no longer digging, but standing still.

Brax turns, immediate. “What part of *dig* do you not understand?” Nox tilts her head, screeching. “It was your first damn word—dig, dig!” He flicks at Ezra’s ear.

“*Enough.*” I borrow from Izalith’s resolute strength. “Touch him again and I’ll kill you!”

Brax pauses. “Kill a soul in the land of the dead?” He turns, fixating not on my hand this time—but all of me at once. “Like no one’s ever tried that before, what a barbaric idea. Forcing an unwilling soul to cease its very existence? To become *nothing?*” He’s reading my sign-blood, I realize. My essence. I keep my chin high, but a tremor moves through me, unable to hide from such a gaze. “Oh,” he says, “oh no, no—what’s this?” Nox tilts her head the other direction. “Turns out *you’re* the reason he’s even bothering to fight me. No—” His grin drops, he glares at Ezra. “You just met her, idiot!” His swivels his attention back and forth between us, Nox’s head tilting, tilting. “Fine!” he seethes. He grabs the shovel from Ezra’s hands. “I’ll bury her myself!”

There’s darkness.

It happens so fast, my gasp is delayed, panicked—I move, but find my surroundings confined, elbows, knees, head, hands, all knocking against something hard. No. My hands reach, feel the smooth wood only inches above my face. In the darkness, I hear my own breathing, but nothing else. No Brax, no Ezra, no owl. No boneyard. Just the inside of a coffin. My nerve breaks. My breathing turns short, labored, I scream. Tears come unbidden, my chest tight. I barely have enough space to move my hand to my face, to rub them away, to scream again, this time into my fist. *The longer we stay, the more dangerous it gets.* Ezra’s warning feels ages ago.

How much time had passed in the land of the living? Had our corpses started to rot—?

My father was right.

Ezra killed me, hid his secret from me—that Brax was still hunting him. Still after him, in the land of the dead. I shared the memory, but not the way Ezra read Brax’s sign-blood, the way he saw Brax’s soul the moment before he struck. The soul, twisted, corrupt, on the verge of becoming unrecognizable, a monstrous thing. Brax had been trying to rewrite his very essence, by force of will, so that even without a body tethering him to the land of the living, he would still have agency in the land of the dead. Ezra didn’t know it, then. But it was clear now—if Brax clawed his way out from his own land of the dead into Ezra’s, could move between them just like a living Symbolist—if he found a way back into the land of the living—he’d truly be unkillable.

Immortal, a lich, able to shed one body for another, able to leap between both realms.

I choke on my sob. How could he have known Brax had gained so much power—impossible agency, unlike anything he’d ever seen? Perhaps Ezra let us stay too long in my father’s land of the dead, but it was only because I toyed, let the conversation meander. Ezra tried to stop me, in the stagecoach, once Brax found us. I was the one who reached willingly for Brax’s shadow-hand, I was the one who thought I could fight Ezra’s demons for him. I was the one who stayed his shovel. Let Brax free of the trap. I was to blame, all of it. My fault, not his.

I had to be the one to get us out of it.

First, I quit my crying. No sense in it.

I steady my breathing, calm myself.

I close my eyes, taking in Izalith’s bravery, her focus.

There would be no way out of this unless I regained control of my situation. I go

quiet, still. The silence is agonizing, unlike anything I've ever experienced, the darkness pressing in on all sides—*darkness*. I use the top of the coffin to push down the sleeve of my coat, revealing the bright fire of Izalith, thrumming warmth, quivering alive over my wrist. I lift the signs from the flames, reading them. I concentrate. Back when Brax buried Ezra alive, Ezra escaped his coffin by using thralls, corpses he animated, marked in his sign-blood, to dig himself out. I recall Brax's campfire—the signs of fire living there. But there was no way to use fire to dig myself out. To hurt Brax. That would require me to rewrite it. Not only that, but force myself agency over another soul, something Ezra said was impossible to do in the land of the dead. A lost cause.

Then again, Brax had done it. Rewrote his own essence to embody *not* the purest compilation of sign-magic: fire, earth, air, water, life. But only *one* of those things. Life. Blood.

But how could I do it—not in my own land of the dead, but in another?

Izalith relaxes from my wrist, a wreath of fire stretching out along my hand.

I open my eyes. The sign-fire dances in her flames, turning white hot, blue.

“No,” I say, I swallow a sharp constricting of my throat, sore from fear.

She wriggles to the top of my finger, around into my palm, urging me.

My heart pounds. “What will happen, Izalith—?” I say, my voice breaks.

She relaxes, coiling her body of dancing fire into my nest of scars.

I'll miss you, she seems to say, and I feel her surge of bravery.

My eyes prickle, and I can only manage a brief nod, a whimper.

I open my mouth and swallow her whole.

The pain is immediate, incredible, quick.

Fire strikes down my throat, burning me from the inside out. Bone and insides gone, skin peeling until I'm stripped, leaving only to my core, my essence. Not fifteen, not my self, just a pure binding of sign-magic. Izalith leads me burning one page to the next, all of it—chaos, all of it—being written, being rewritten. I stare down the signs of fire bending and sliding crooked, out of place, tumbling from the pages into an essence of my own creation. Flame, cinder, ash, even smoke. I see all of it, I use all of it, I write, I revise, I revise, I read every sign of fire that ever was, is, will be. I write it as part of myself. I shape my own being from a lineage of destruction.

Brax does not see me coming.

I rise up from his campfire, reforming myself my body from the dying flames.

I can see every squirm of sign-fire inside the pages of the land of the dead, bright amid the signs of earth, water, air, blood. Just like at Morgan's bar, waking Ezra, just like in my first lessons, I make the connections. If life is water, if water is air, if air is fire, if fire is earth, if earth is life—then all of it is still in Brax. All of it is still in me. The thread binding the book, that only needs to be tugged to let the pages of it loose. Brax turns, too late. I strike him, a whirlwind, eat him the way fire eats, first one layer than the next, even his scream. Flaying, deconstructing his essence of blood into all its different meanings, its different elements, all its different powers.

I rip, I tear.

I scatter him to the wind, and finally, I take Ezra's hand.

Chapter Eight

Robbie Reyes almost chokes on his drink when we come through the door of

Morgan's bar. In the light of day, deserted, the bar takes on an uncanny stillness. I notice two dirty windows half-covered by curtains I hadn't noticed before, the peeling dingy wallpaper, the etched initials and scratches on the tables and the bartop. Robbie stands behind the bar, seeming finally at ease in Diego's older body. I'm struck only momentarily by the strangeness—the way Robbie dresses with his shirt untucked, the sleeves cut at the shoulder showing off the muscle in his arms. He's unshaven, his hair left untied. It did not feel like the way Diego carried himself.

“That door was locked!” Robbie's quick to scowl. “It means we're closed. Wait—” His scowl disappears, his eyes growing wide, “I know you. You're that woman, from the stakes—”

“Morgan's letting you drink?” I say, amused, noting the bottle on the bar and his glass.

Robbie frowns, double-taking. “*Ezra?*”

“Robbie,” Ezra says, giving a nod.

“What happened to your hair?”

“He combed it,” I say.

Ezra clears his throat. “Where's Morgan?”

“Errands, or something.” He shrugs.

Ezra and I exchange a glance, agreeing we have no time to wait for her.

He lifts the first sack and drops it on the bar top. Robbie's eyes grow even wider.

“Tell her that's triple,” Ezra says. He catches Robbie's eye. “Plus some. For all the trouble. Most likely, she ain't gonna want to take it once she figures where it came from, but,” he gives his half-grin, “that's the best I got. Rotten coin. If she expected

anything different, well, suppose she shouldn't have. She can toss it in the river for all I care, but I paid up, far's I see it."

I lift the second sack, setting it beside the first. "Listen carefully, Robbie." I reach inside my coat, taking out the envelope from my breast pocket. "I'd like you to give this to Morgan, from me." I hold it between us, and he takes it, reluctant, his eyes still darting from the bartop, to us. "There's a letter inside, clearly spelling out my intentions, plus the accounting of my late father's fortunes, including the manor house, now legally hers." I allow myself a sly grin, recalling the way I stood over Hernandez as he wrote up the correct and official paperwork. Ezra sat smug in the chair in front of him, laid back with his boots on the desk, hands in his pockets.

"Tell her that I have done all I can to assure her control of Hull if she so desires it."

Before meeting with Hernandez, Ezra and I made two stops throughout Hull. First, to the tailor's to find Ezra a proper coat and new clothes, then to the Broadmoore, to clean ourselves up and indulge in getting to know one another better—and finally, to the bank. I relished in the look on the creditor's face as I produced the code to my father's safety deposit box, containing the title and writs of his property and fortune. Once obtained, I let flames conjure down my arm, lick from my sleeve into my palm and peel along my fingers. I did the same with my other hand, writing flames into my hair, flames sparking behind my eyes. The knot of scars in my palm, my catalyst, had disappeared after I woke from the land of the dead. So had Izalith. My heart still pinches at her absence, a piece of me forever missing, fractured, but I soon found that my abilities were no longer bound to my hand. I can write fire from anywhere—everywhere. I can

become it. Tune myself to the sign-fire part of all things. Burn from page to page in the chaos.

“Now,” I’d said, recalling the way the bank tried to trick me, how my father spoke of their corruption and their greed, how they owned half the town. How most importantly, the new judge was in their pocket, in place to further their control. “I’d like to make another withdrawal.”

Ezra grinned his cunning grin beside me. The creditor balked in recognition, finally recognizing Ezra for the same man that tried to steal from the bank six months ago. “You’re supposed to be dead—burned at the stake!” he gasped. “Who—who robs the same bank twice?”

“Can’t say I cared much for my land of the dead. Decided it weren’t worth staying.” Ezra met the man’s eyes. “This time, figured I’d just bring someone with me who can count past ten.”

My father was right, in some regard.

There was a thrill to it, dangerous, the stoking of the fire, the hunger in the signs. The black smoke, twisting, the bubble and ripple of flame eating everything down to the foundation. The roar, the wave of wind. We robbed the bank, and I let it burn. There was a thrill. The same feeling I had helping Ezra escape from the stake. The same feeling I had hurting the men at the bar, running from the wardens. The trick to sign-magic isn’t control, but bravery in the face of great chaos—the ability to stare it down, instead of let it take you. Ezra was right. Lesser people would let it take them, let it corrupt them without understanding its complexities, its potential to destroy the world, or the potential to lift it up from the ashes. Power, privilege. It has to be read before it can be written.

Rewritten. But I am still learning. There are still so many uncertainties.

In Morgan's bar, I force Robbie to meet my eye. "Tell Morgan I'm trusting her. That she is to stop the business of burnings in Hull like she said, and that in this territory—the study of sign-magic should be deemed legal, so long as it follows her regulations. Explain to her that by the time she receives this, Ezra and I have already broken her regulations for the selfish misuse of our abilities. Tell her she and her wardens will have to catch us on the wasteroads, if they're so inclined, as we have no intention of going quietly. I have included updated information on both of our descriptions for the posters and sketches. Make quite sure she notes that we never want to hear the names Ellis or Laska ever again. From now on, I am Hild of Fire—he is Ezra of Blood."

I hesitate at Robbie's gaping.

"Understand?" I say.

He nods.

"Good," I say. I lift my chin, eyeing him. "Then—goodbye, Robbie," I say.

Ezra knocks his knuckles on the bar. "Nice to see you again—alive, and all."

Robbie blinks, and the two of us turn, heading for the door.

"Oh, and if the wardens come by," Ezra calls, "tell 'em I said good luck!"

I smirk, nudging him, and Ezra's grin widens. He holds open the door for me, looking as sharp as he did in my land of the dead, a far cry from the boy that slinked after Brax in boneyards. "I think I'm getting tired of running," he says, as we stroll down the alley, shoulder to shoulder, the smell of smoke from the bank fire hanging in the air. I glance at him, surprised. "I mean," he clarifies, "I've been *walking* all my life. From boneyard to boneyard. Town to town."

“So?” I say, sly.

“Horses and I don’t tend to get along.”

“I can’t imagine why.”

“The wasteroads are a dangerous place,” he goes on.

“Good thing we’ll be making our way, together.”

“Most people, they’ve got fast getaways—”

“Relic tech,” I suggest.

“Exactly.”

“There *is* a mechanic in Hull,” I remind him.

“True,” he says, “let’s say we take a peek at what he’s working on.”

We pause at the edge of the alley, looking out at the deserted street.

“Suppose everyone’s off watching the bank,” Ezra observes.

He begins down the road, but I tug at his sleeve.

“The mechanic is this way,” I say.

He grins. “So it is,” he says, and follows me.