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WE'RE ALL MONSTERS HERE AND OTHER STORIES

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Lindsey Jones. WE'RE ALL MONSTERS HERE AND OTHER STORIES. (Under the direction of Mary Carroll-Hackett) Department of English and Modern Languages, April 2010.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine characters caught up in a transformation of identity: either a transfiguration or a transmogrification. Through the lens of fantasy, I sought to explore the trials of these characters in an exaggerated fashion that allowed me to take familiar questions and themes and attempt to make them new. All of my characters face a realization of identity: either they are startled into understanding that they are not who they thought they were, or they struggle to assert their version of self against pressure to be what others want. In “Marked”, Dwire has his self-conceived identity shaken because he was willing to do things that made him no better than the monsters he hunted. The narrator of “I Am” faces a situation almost completely opposite to Dwire’s; when he defies his purpose for being and says, ‘I am not a killer’, he undergoes a transfiguration. For Katya and Shai-Neferat, they struggle against the will of both loved ones and society to assert themselves as individuals rather than have an identity forced upon them. Shai-Neferat goes so far as to defy her god’s plan for her. Through these crises, and their responses to them, my characters change, none of them able to simply return to things as they were. These questions of identity stem from my observations of those around me who have grappled with many of the same issues my characters face and from my own stubborn fight to preserve my identity—to know when I ought to change and when I ought to stand my ground. In kindling life in these characters, I have struggled most with their voices, fighting to give them words that are their own rather than sallow imitations of mine. It is well into the revision process that my tone deaf ear begins to hear, and I am able to attempt to craft individual voices, often word by word. I must also fight my natural inclination to write in the highest rhetorical style, even when it is not suited for an individual story. Ultimately, I write because I am a teller of tales, and I have been fascinated by the ‘what if’s’ of the world since I was young, put to bed with ‘Magic Tree Stories’ where my father sent me and my favorite stuffed toy leaping through a magic leaf pile into other worlds. Since then, there have been many who have guided me along my writer’s path: among them Megan Whalen Turner, Madeleine L’Engle, and every mythmaker that ever tried to weave meaning into their world through story. I also owe a debt to J.R.R. Tolkien for instilling in me a respect for world building and fostering my sense of storytelling, leading me to the exploration of what would become some of my strengths as a writer. As a Christian writer of fantasy, he also validated my own writing with his concept of sub-creation: “We make in our measure...because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”

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by

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A thesis in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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Dedication

This is for my parents, who took everything that comes with raising a dreamer in stride. Thank you for your loving support and for being my biggest fans and my harshest critics, so I could strive for my best and never settle for less.

It's also for Kristie, my dear friend. You'll know which story is for you. One day, I hope you will be able to proudly wear your own face too.

Acknowledgements

I owe a great deal to my thesis committee for their patience and involved reading of this work. I am indebted to Dr. Rhonda Brock-Servais for her genre expertise and for the sheer fact that she found my zombies “lively.” Dr. Brett Hursey deserves my thanks for his aid in reigning in my narrative voice and his keen eye for inconsistencies. This thesis also would not have been completed if it were not for my thesis director Mary Carroll-Hackett, and her willingness to endure my—often painful—first forays into writing as I attempted to learn some modicum of authorial control.

I would be remiss if I did not also acknowledge my debt to my friends and family that helped me along the way. To Jenn, my poor roommate who had to live with me while I wrestled with this tome, thank you for picking up the slack when all I could do was growl “thesis” for days at a time. I also would not have been able to produce this if it were not for Dr. Audrey Church and Ms. Frances Reeve providing me with both a source of income, and a stable, caring workplace environment.

This thesis is the work of a great deal of frustration, sweat, and blood, but ultimately it is not mine. It is an undeserved gift. One for which I am humbly grateful.

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Marked

Dwire slid through the trees, just keeping the stag's lather-slick flank in sight. Its hooves grazed the moss-covered trunk of a fallen log as it leapt. Dwire swung around the log, knotted limbs snatching at his hair. He squinted against the dirt and sweat beading along his eyelids. The stag's tongue lolled from its gaping mouth, but it showed no signs of slowing.

"Enough," growled Dwire as the stag burst into a clearing. Dropping to one knee, he braced his hands against the ground. The earth tremored and trees groaned. The stag slid to stop, flinging bracken. The ground surged beneath its feet. Clumps of dirt and rock showered the stag as a wall of earth tore free and jutted into the air, blocking its path. The stag's hooves skittered across the ground. It turned tight circles, eyes rolling.

"No more running. No more hiding," said Dwire as he pushed through the undergrowth, brushing dew from his tunic. The stag backed toward the cliff, lowering its rack and swaying its head. "An impressive disguise, even down to the fleas."

Snorting, the stag pawed the ground.

"Haven't you had enough of playing the dumb animal?" Dwire asked, running an idle hand along his hairless jaw. "The villagers near the forest call you Blood Prong, Lord of the Forest."

Dwire stared out from his dark cowl, the whites of his eyes smudged in the shadow. "I've seen the shrines. They're very devoted, your followers. Pity they can't see you now, hiding in a wrecked sack of skin and bones. Pity they can't see how the great Anur runs."

The stag's head snapped up, nostrils flaring.

“Why does it know our name?” it asked.

A smile twitched the corner of Dwire's thin lips. “It speaks.” He motioned at the animal, “Is this necessary?”

A crimson glow filled the clearing as the mud encrusted body of a mortal stag melted away. Anur shook off the last shreds of glamour, stepping forward on long, slender legs, his head raised high. A trailing ruff of red fur encircled his strong neck, hanging between his dainty front legs and running in a stripe along his back. He carried his head with ease, despite the massive, many pronged rack of antlers—white horns curled up to piercing tines, ghostly lights flickering above each point .

“What does the black robe want with one of the Riamar?” asked Anur. His star-lit eyes roved over Dwire's dark tunic.

The Riamar, the third aspect of the world, balanced existence opposite nature and humanity. They were power made flesh, immortal beings capable of casting off their physical form and walking like ghosts. They called themselves Riamar; men called them spirits.

Dwire returned Anur's gaze. “I want Grauhine.”

“It is death to seek the wolf.” The lights atop Anur's antlers flickered. “Grauhine will rip out its heart and crush its bones.”

Dwire pulled at his sleeve, sliding the coarse fabric above his elbow. Broad trails of slick grey flesh bit deep into his arm, the wound's edges raw and red. “We've met. And I very much hope to meet again.”

Stamping a hoof, Anur's large ears flicked upward. "It is blessed to be alive. The man thing should not seek our kindred."

Reaching into the pouch at his waist, Dwire pulled out an oblong crystal. He rolled it between his fingers. The first light of morning pooled in its core as he held it up.

Anur reared and slammed his hooves into the earth, "It is a Sealer!" He lowered his antlers. "It will not have our soul."

"You should have told me where to find Grauhine," said Dwire with a shrug.

"The Riamar will make it pay. We will make all black robes pay for stealing our power." The muscles along Anur's neck flickered. "They lock us in scraps of glass and jewels—cold dead things." The lights flared. "No more."

Deep within himself, Dwire felt a crescendo of power rising from Anur, cresting like beating drums. The stag charged. Leaping to the side, Dwire let the insubstantial keening of a trapped spirit fill his body as he uncoiled the power of an eastern wind bound in his tunic clasp.

The Sealer tensed. Anur pivoted on his haunches and thrust sharpened horns through Dwire's chest. He felt the heat of the ghost flames but no pain. His body drifted mist-like. Anur's eyes widened; Dwire passed through the rack of spears and placed his hand on the stag's head.

Dwire allowed the song of the eastern wind to fade into the background. "The Riamar have had their ages of tyranny. The world is ours." He felt his gift swell within him and reached out, groping for Anur's soul, ignoring the screech of power as the stag tried to drown him out. Dwire could hear the soul as it sang, hidden away at the core of

Anur's being. It sang a song of grass, smooth muscle sliding under taut hide, and the hollow rasp of antlers. He gripped the white hot coal of Anur's soul and wrenched it free.

The Riamar bellowed as his soul arced through Dwire and flowed into the crystal clenched in the Sealer's hand. The woods fell silent as the stag faded away.

* * *

Dwire banged on the smooth white walls circling The Spire. "A weary brother returns!" he shouted, tilting his head back to scan the sloping battlements. Brushing dirt from his long black tunic, he leaned against the wall, the chill of the polished surface seeping through his clothes.

He gazed out over the valley; the slate roofs of the village rose above tilled fields and orchards of plum and green apple. He could just make out the forms of the Ungifted, bent in their labor with hoe and rake and plow. Unable to trap souls, or even use their power, the Ungifted took what life could give them with callused hands, their skills limited by human possibilities. They often worked for the Clever, those unable to seal a soul but with enough talent to use one once a Sealer had it bound.

"Sealer Dwire!" a female voice called from above. Craning his head, Dwire made out two figures standing at the brink. Stepping back, he saw the young Initiates leaning over the edge, bare feet gripping the stone.

"I seek entrance," he said, waving up at the gatekeepers.

"The way is open for those who ask," they replied in unison.

Dwire ducked his head to hide his grin. He could have opened the gate himself, but he had been young once and had enjoyed the prestige of being a gatekeeper. The

stone before him shivered and curled back into itself. A long passageway stretched through the wall, the other side a mere gleam of light.

“My thanks to the gatekeepers,” he said, blading his right hand against his chest and inclining his head.

“Sealer Dwire,” shouted one of the girls, “was the hunt successful?”

“In a manner, gatekeeper, in a manner,” Dwire said as he started into the tunnel. He slipped his hand into the pouch at his waist, rubbing his fingers over the smooth sides and sharp points of the crystal. He wasn’t coming home empty handed at least. Beneath his fingertips Anur’s trapped soul responded; its song groaned in the back of his mind like the rasping of tree branches.

Sealers like Dwire hunted the Riamar, trapping their souls and binding them in an object. With these bound tools, the Gifted and the Clever could make the spirit’s power their own. A soul like Anur’s could be woven into a cloak that would let its wearer run with the swiftness of a stag, or it could be beaten into a sword with the sharpness of his antlers. Such a powerful soul would bring a good price unless Dwire decided to keep it for himself.

Dwire blinked. Bright morning light washed over him as he stepped out of the tunnel. He heard a gentle whisper as the passageway flowed shut behind him. For a moment Dwire breathed in the scents: bread baking in the ovens, the tangy odor of trumpet vines, leather and sweat from the practice field, and black earth furrowed in the gardens. Home.

Before him The Spire thrust up from the ground, seamless white stone spun like glass. The six lesser towers, each with their own pinnacles and turrets, clustered around

the base of the great tower. The stone rushed upward, streaming into the sky until it needled into nothingness. Slender arches leapt from one building to the next, layers of gently curved pathways bending over one another like willow branches.

Dwire grimaced suddenly, gripping his arm as pain spiked along it. A hiss forced its way between his clenched teeth. He clutched at the healing power threaded through the band around his left arm and relief seeped into his veins. The spasm unlatched its claws and sank back as a dull throb. He'd waited too long between cleansings.

Sinking down in the shade of the orchard, Dwire rested his head against an apple's knotted trunk while his heart slowed. He'd never met a spirit as vengeful as Grauhine. Fear of Sealers kept most spirits defensive at best, and the few who stalked the hunters became bedtime stories to send Initiates scurrying under their sheets. No one told stories about Grauhine.

His habit of slaughtering whole villages was the least of his horrors. In the hushed cloisters of the Sealer's council—where they had no choice but to talk of the wolf—one mangled survivor said she thought Grauhine targeted the Gifted not just because they threatened him. He did more than kill; he waited for their souls to loosen in their dying bodies and then tried to tear it out. He was learning to practice their art.

Dwire thought about the rotting flesh of his arm. He'd escaped the wolf two years before, and only just, but Grauhine was still trying to kill him with this creeping phage.

As his heart slowed, Dwire staggered to his feet and headed through the orchard, skirting the busy practice fields. Passing into the shadow of The Spire, he hurried into the great tower's high-ceilinged entrance hall. Open stairs spiraled up to meet airy balconies. The walls stretched high into the tower before coming together around a cluster of

glowing crystals. A breeze swirled through the building, brushing strands of soft brown hair into Dwire's eyes.

Young voices spilled out of gathering rooms as he climbed higher. Pain stopped him against a doorframe. He rested and listened while a group of children in multicolored smocks read the words their teacher wrote in the air, dutifully repeating each shining letter. Continuing along the hall, Dwire passed over one of the arching bridges to another tower and glanced down at the lattice of intersecting paths below.

"You are overdue, Sealer Dwire," said a healer as Dwire entered the quiet dome of the sanatorium.

"Yes, yes. I know," said Dwire, his attention clouded. The sanatorium clamored with the presence of souls, the walls themselves studded with spirits to ward off sickness. He trailed after the healer as the shrouded figure led him to a broad bench.

"This one will see to your arm," said the man as he motioned toward a slight figure who had appeared at his side. Healers rarely called one another by name.

"Strip, please," said the girl as the man left them. She wore a simple red caftan belted at the waist, her head shaved like all in her profession. She smiled as she drew closer. The gems set into the skin below her eyes gleamed as they caught the light. Healers fused souls into their flesh, scattering jewels like freckles across their bodies.

"It's just the arm," said Dwire as he worked the clasps of his tunic.

"Your clothes are woven with souls; they will interfere with this one's work," said the girl. "You know this."

Dwire studied his laced fingers. "I wasn't thinking. I could change?" he asked as he made to stand. Her hand on his shoulder stopped him.

“Strip, please,” intoned the girl.

Dwire shifted on the bench while she continued to smile at him, her eyes unblinking. He thought that bonding souls to their bodies turned healers’ minds. Reluctantly, he stripped down to his underthings, even removing the tie that held his hair. Only the braided armband and a simple pendant of amber sea glass remained.

He hunched his shoulders, curling his brown wiry frame into a ball, and refused to meet the healer’s eyes. The grey bands of dead flesh spread up his arm, splayed across his shoulders, and snaked about his left side. The inflamed edges oozed yellow pus, and the spidery tracks of burst veins crawled across his skin.

“All of it, Sealer Dwire,” she said.

Dwire fingered the piece of glass. “It’s only a necklace.” He reached for the armband, his fingers hovering over the ties. He paused.

“If I take this off, the pain will come back,” said Dwire.

“It is necessary,” said the healer. Dwire felt a slim cool hand on his good shoulder. He looked up into the girl’s eyes. “This one is sorry for the pain.”

Dwire nodded and worked the ties loose, letting the armband fall to the ground. Pain welled up from the wounds and spread outward, licking through his flesh. His left side burned. The fire caught through his skin, searing across his body to die in a dull ache on the other side. The muscles snapped taut across Dwire’s back.

The healer placed her hands over the wounds, and her eyes rolled white. Dwire could feel her presence as she sunk down into the pain. She bled it out, knitting together what she could. The heat flared. Then darkness.

*

*

*

Dwire felt something digging into his arm. He opened his eyes to find a stunted old man poking him with a skeletal finger. Dwire leapt to his feet, "Master Ashinar!" The healer gripped his arm and forced him back onto the bench.

"This one would appreciate you not moving," said the healer, her mouth set in a pinched line. Sweat sheened along her scalp, and she seemed paler.

Dwire nodded, allowing her to continue wiping dried pus and blood from his side. He felt the comforting presence of the armband again.

"Master," said Dwire. He raised his open hand before his face and drew it down into a fist above his breast as he inclined his head.

Ashinar grunted. Strands of paling red hair hung down over his narrow chest. He peered at Dwire from the shadow of his cowl, his frown pulling the thin skin tight across his face. Dwire had always thought Ashinar resembled a child's stick doll with a bird skull balanced on the twiggy neck.

"How was the hunt, young Sealer?" asked Ashinar, studying Dwire's face.

"Only a stag, the one the villagers in the basin call Blood Prong." Dwire glanced away. "Grauhine's trail vanished."

"Of course. Yellow Eyes has been playing this game for centuries." Ashinar shook his head. "What were you going to do that your brethren have not been doing for generations?"

Dwire clenched his fists. "I thought." His jaw twitched as he gritted his teeth.

Ashinar cocked his head and strained his scrawny neck as he stared up at Dwire. "You thought you could seal Grauhine's soul?" Ashinar laughed. "You? A sea merchant's son? The only Gifted in a family of Clevers?"

Dropping his head, Dwire studied the healer's hands as she wiped a rag across his chest. It bit like vinegar.

"Still, you may be right," said Ashinar. Raising his gaze, Dwire looked at his master. The muscles around Ashinar's pallid lips spasmed, one corner pulling upward. His seed black eyes glittered. "Get dressed. There is something for you to see."

The girl glared at Ashinar as he turned and walked away; Dwire moved to follow, but she grabbed his elbow, and he felt a soft pressure dig into the joint. "You will not wait so long to see us again. Three weeks, no more." She looked at him with vacant eyes, "Or this one will take that arm."

Nodding, Dwire gathered up his clothes. "Three weeks," he said, running his hand along the grey bands. The edges still tinged pink, but the wound was clean. "Thank you."

"It was this one's pleasure," she said.

Dwire bowed and hurried after Ashinar, pulling on his clothes as he went.

"Does it still bother you?" the old man asked.

The wind tugged strands of hair away from Dwire as he worked it into a loose braid. "Only a little."

"Good. You were rash, going after Grauhine like that," growled Ashinar. He held his cowl against the wind. "But wonder of wonders, you lived to be rash enough to try it a second and even a third time." He snorted. "Glory hunting fool."

Dwire suppressed his grin as he followed Ashinar deep into The Spire's heart. As they paced down the rough hewn stairs, he could feel the souls that lurked beneath. Their presence spiraled up like heat from a forge. He listened to the melody they sang, the tune pulling him forward.

Molten veins of glass snaked through the walls; the souls trapped beneath their smooth surface lit the way. Leaving the stair behind, Ashinar led him deep into the confusion of old halls; columns and arches of smooth black stone twisted through the floor and ceiling, The Spire's dark roots.

Ashinar paused for a moment as if listening. "Ah, I believe you remember Nos." Ashinar gestured at the tall man that rounded the corner in front of them.

Dwire gave a thin smile. "Hard to forget being frozen to the dormitory ceiling on the Day of Choosing."

"Yes, memorable," said Nos, his pale eyes flicking over the dust on Dwire's traveling robes.

Dwire tugged at his collar and smoothed the fabric that bunched under his belt. He remembered Nos being fastidious in his dress, even as a child; he didn't seem to have changed. The hem of his skirted vest, pale blues shot through with silver embroidery, hung to just above his slippered feet. A twist of knotwork clasped his high collar, and his blond hair swept back along his skull, pulled into a tight ponytail at the nape of his neck.

"All has been made ready, Master Ashinar. I gathered the others as soon as you informed me of Dwire's return," said Nos. "Has he been made aware of our endeavor?"

"Enlighten me," said Dwire, crossing his arms over his chest.

"This is better to be seen," said Ashinar. The old man shuffled away, Nos gliding behind. Dwire took a slow deep breath. Brushing a strand of hair from his face, he followed the retreating pair.

Ashinar led them deeper into the Sealer's labyrinth than Dwire had ever been. The dankness of the corridors crouched on his lungs, and dust settled in drifts on the polished

floors; a path worn through the middle told Dwire that others had started to reuse these forgotten halls as well.

“Tell me, Sealer,” asked Ashinar suddenly, “why does Grauhine escape us?”

“He is too strong. Even if he can be caught, nothing will hold him for long,” said Dwire, puzzled.

“Yes, yes. Gem, metal, stone – all useless.” Ashinar flicked his boney fingers in dismissal. “We have woven him into intricate patterns, hoped to lose him in a maze of knotwork, and folded him through the truest steel, but still he breaks free.”

“I was there at all your lessons, Master,” said Dwire.

Ashinar peered back at him, lids lowered. “Were you now? Do you think I didn’t notice when you left a reflection or a shadow in your place?”

“Master, I—”

“Bah, that is the past,” Ashinar grunted, “I knew you wouldn’t be an easy student from the day I chose you. Most masters don’t find their students frozen to the ceiling. What matters is the present. The present where Adherent Nos may have finally found a way to trap the monster’s soul for good.”

“Impossible.” Dwire shook his head. “All we can hope for is a temporary prison. As you say, we have tried everything.”

“Not everything,” said Nos.

Dwire quickened his pace so that he walked at Nos’ shoulder. “And you’ve found something missed through all these generations? How?”

“By seeing beyond convention.” Nos did not look at Dwire, keeping his gaze ahead as they turned down a side passage. “We have always sought to bind souls to soulless things—objects never meant to house a soul.”

“Don’t lecture me,” grunted Dwire, narrowing his dark brows. “I don’t care why a soul is bound, just that it can be. What does any of this matter?” Dwire looked around Nos to Ashinar.

His master sighed, the noise whistling through his nose. “Stop prattling, boy,” Ashinar snapped. “This attitude of never asking why is exactly the reason Adherent Nos made this discovery and you did not.”

Dwire looked away. Ever since he’d left his grey novice’s mantle at Ashinar’s feet, his master had never called him *boy*. Drawing his hand in front of his face, Dwire dropped it and clenched it above his breast. “Master, my apologies.” He turned to Nos and repeated the gesture. “And to you, Adherent Nos,” he said, stumbling over the title.

Ashinar grumbled in the back of his throat, but he returned the gesture. Nos merely bladed his palm in front of his face before tucking his hands into his sleeves.

“What is all this?” asked Dwire. “Have you found where the wolf is hiding?”

“Come, and you will see,” said Ashinar, leading them to the end of the corridor.

As they rounded the corner, Dwire put a hand to his arm. It ached. Dissonance screeched through the soulsongs’ harmony. He staggered back a step, clinging to one of the twisted arches. He blinked away the darkness creeping along his vision. Even in the Hold, with its thousands of crystallized souls, he had never felt a spirit so strongly.

Ashinar gripped his elbow, dragging him toward a set of iron plated doors. The old man’s fingers dug into Dwire’s arm. The pain burned through the fog of the soul’s

presence. Even as the noise faded, Dwire could still feel something crawling along the edge of his consciousness.

Nos paused before the doors, once again looking Dwire over. “You do hear them, don’t you? The souls?” He pressed his lips together in a shrewd line. “Perhaps Master Ashinar was right, and you are capable of this task.”

Dwire gagged. Grimacing, he swallowed bile. “What’s in there?”

“Grauhine,” said Ashinar. His gaze flicked to Nos. “And an appropriate vessel.”

Straightening, Dwire drug his hand across his mouth. “A new kind of crystal?”

“No,” said Nos. “I have discovered a new vessel stronger than steel or stone.”

With a wave of his hand, the doors swung inward. “Flesh.”

A young man knelt in the center of the vaulted chamber; his head bowed under the chain’s weight around his neck. Links the size of Dwire’s fist ran from cuffs at the youth’s wrists and ankles to rings buried in the ground. A niche in the wall held a large blackened crystal bound in iron—Grauhine’s soul. Green light played across the room, wavering from jagged crystals thrust through the ceiling. Four twining pillars sprouted from the floor, their iron branches holding up the emerald torn roof.

Even through Grauhine’s presence and the low trill of protective souls bound into the columns and jewels, Dwire felt other Sealers in the room. They pressed against the chamber edges, dark forms against blackness. Each had a contingent of power woven through their clothes and hammered into their steel.

Dwire’s gaze returned to the youth in the center of the room. Lank hair fell down his back in slender twists. Straining against the chain, the man raised his head. Sharp cheekbones jutted from a narrow face strewn with feeble stubble.

“Who is he?” asked Dwire.

“An Ungifted,” said Ashinar. He rolled one eye up to study Dwire. “Does it matter?”

“They are useless,” said Nos, closing the doors behind them with a gesture. He clasped his hands before him. “Worse, they are spreading, mingling with the Gifted, and diluting our talents into nothingness. I have given them purpose.”

Dwire licked his lips. “You want me to carve out his soul?” He focused on Nos’ expressionless face.

“Exactly.”

“And the council? What do they think of this?” asked Dwire, turning to Ashinar.

“We act of our own accord.” Ashinar’s frown deepened. “The council would deliberate us to death while Grauhine roamed free.”

“What you’re asking me to do –” Dwire squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his lips together as he shook his head. “This is lunacy!”

His words echoed back at him as Dwire strode toward the prisoner. Gloved hands shifted on hilts.

“What would you have us do, Sealer?” asked Nos. “Trap him? Hold him until his prison is about to break and transfer him to a new one. All the while hoping we haven’t misjudged the strength of his bonds and that we can move him before he kills too many of us? Is that what you would have us do?”

“Yes!” said Dwire. “This is no spirit. This is a man. A life. You can’t ask me to take his soul.”

“We lost two of our brethren when we took Grauhine. How many more would you have us sacrifice?” Nos gripped Dwire’s arm, a chill spreading out from his fingers.

“And what of this? You swore to make the spirit pay.”

Dwire jerked his arm away and pointed at the huddled man on the floor. “And what has he done? Tell me his crime.”

“He is blight,” said Nos with a slightly quizzical tilt of his head.

Dwire’s voice dropped as he spoke through bared teeth. “I will not do this thing.”

“He took a village on Straling Cove before we caught him.” Ashinar’s voice sounded small. “They’re all dead. He ripped open their carcasses and left them to rot in the sun.” He grasped his knotted hands together. “Men, women – little girls in pieces.”

Dwire stopped. “Straling Cove?”

Reaching up, he pulled the leather thong from around his neck. The piece of amber glass, well-rolled by the waves, dangled at the end. The greenish light skimmed across the cloudy surface like a sunset over the ocean.

Pinching the glass between his finger and thumb, Dwire stared at it. Everything he carried sung with a spirit’s power – everything but this. With it in his hands, he could feel the sting of salt on his skin and hear the incessant cry of gulls. Everything smelled of fish. Sand burned his feet, and his mind swam with the voices of old men trading stories while they mended their nets. The glass was memory: paddling in the cove, never being hungry for long, hunting mussels in tide pools with other boys, searching for sea glass on the shore. Straling Cove, his father’s boyhood home.

Dwire’s arms dangled loose from his shoulders as he studied the glass.

Ashinar placed a hand on Dwire’s back. “It is only one life.”

Closing his fist around the glass, Dwire murmured. "Make the beast ready."

He drew his sleeve across his eyes as the other Sealers prepared. Dwire circled the man, inspecting the chains and fastenings. Running a finger along the links, he felt the strength of the spirits imbedded within: bear, ox, wild boar.

Dwire knelt next to the man. "Tell me your name."

The young man glanced up through his lank hair. His gaze held a bitter acceptance.

Dwire forced himself to look into those blue eyes. "Your name, boy, if you want to be remembered."

"Tam," he said, "Tam."

Dwire squeezed Tam's shoulder. "There won't be any pain."

The youth hummed in the back of his throat. "Pain means I'm still alive," he said.

The other Sealers gathered around Dwire in a wide circle, Nos and Ashinar among them. Nos clutched the iron wrapped jewel. The Sealers raised their hoods and held their hands before them, palm up. Dwire could hear the soulsong rising to a clamor around him as the other Sealers stiffened; their power poured out in a protective ring.

Clutching the amber glass in one hand, Dwire placed the other against Tam's forehead. The boy's shoulders sagged. Dwire twisted his head and closed his eyes; stretching out, he searched for Tam's soul.

Every soul felt different, some light, some dark. Tam's smoldered like newly covered coals. It clung to the youth's body. Dwire followed the soulsong, cutting each thread that held it in place. The form beneath his fingers quivered. With a final cut, Dwire wrenched the soul away. It leapt through his body and poured into the glass. Tam

crumpled to the ground in a heap. Dwire dropped the amber piece in his pouch. Around him the Sealers' energy hummed.

“Do it,” he said.

Nos took the crystal and held it high above his head. He locked eyes with each Sealer in turn and, at a subtle nod from Dwire, flung the crystal against the floor. Shards of iron and quartz sparked across the pavers as a red mist billowed up. Tendrils snaked together in a thickening cloud, threading into shadowy bone and sinew.

A moan filled the chamber, rising in pitch to a grave-wind howl. Gleaming yellow eyes snapped open amid the fog. Grauhine flung himself at the ring of Sealers, blood-stained jaws gaping. The invisible cage hurled him to the ground. The wolf shook his famine-lean husk. His bright eyes shone out of a fleshless skull, the bone disappearing into tendon and tattered snatches of skin on his neck and throat. Leaping to his paws, his long fur bristled; the spiked ridge along his back stood up like quills.

A black tongue slid from his lipless mouth and ran over yellowed fangs. The wolf turned to Dwire. He stalked forward, the stones cracking beneath his feet. Decay shot through the polished floor at each footfall.

Dwire dropped to one knee and rammed his palm into the ground, clenching his teeth. Threads of light erupted around Grauhine, arcing over his back and driving into the earth. The wolf thrashed as his legs buckled beneath him. The net of light lashed him to the floor, pulling tight across his muzzle.

Leaping forward, Dwire placed his hand on Grauhine's jaw. He only had to reach out, brush his fingers along Tam's body. But those horrible yellow pits gripped him. His

arm began to ache; pain ate through the protective soul the healer had woven into his armband.

Blood dripped down Dwire's face, running from his nose over his lips. Grauhine snarled. The cords screamed in Dwire's mind as the wolf's soul battered against all the others. One of the Sealers in the perimeter jerked suddenly and collapsed. The barrier wavered. Grauhine thrust out with his power. Dwire's leg curled beneath him as he dropped to one knee. Another Sealer fell.

Groping behind him, Dwire searched for the body, straining. His ears rushed with his throbbing heart. A growl shuddered through the wolf. Shaking, Dwire lunged backward. Blood stained his eye as pressured veins burst. His fingers brushed the body's heel, and Grauhine's eyes snapped wide. Dwire arched beneath the strain.

The threads settled to the ground as the soul flowed through Dwire and into its human prison. The ring of Sealers folded to the stones as Dwire's palms hit the floor. He rested his forehead against the stones, shaky breaths grinding through his raw lungs. Blinking, he spat and dragged a crimson smear across his mouth with the back of his hand. He shoved himself onto his knees.

"Well done, Sealer Dwire! Well done!" said Ashinar.

Nos glided past Dwire and peered down at the body. "Impressive."

Dwire merely nodded and staggered toward the hall. He made it to the door before he dropped to all fours, heaving.

A chain clinked.

Dwire crawled to his feet, Nos and Ashinar backing away from the chained form. It shuddered. The eyes fell open, gleaming yellow staring through a tangle of hair.

Struggling to stand, Grauhine's limbs folded. He grew still as he stared at the hand in front of him. With icy deliberation, he moved it in front of his face, flexing the fingers one by one.

"What have you done?" he asked, his voice rasping in his throat. Jerking back, he swallowed as if not sure the voice was his own. "What have you done to me?"

Leaping up, a chain yanked him short. "Soul stealer, what have you done?" he screamed. His limbs stuck out at odd angles as he thrashed. "I'll kill you! I'll kill you all!"

Dwire turned and walked away.

"Go ahead," he whispered, ignoring the thing screaming in Tam's voice. He rolled the glass in his hand. "We're all monsters here."

I Am

I had seen so much death in my few years and been the cause of most of it. I was very good at what I did. The men I have worked for—and the women—saw me as a tool to be bought and bartered, stolen or sold. I was a thing. As if I should care. I existed to serve my master and do his will. If he commanded me to strike, I struck. If he ordered me to abstain, I abstained. But I did love it when he told me to strike.

My days were measured in taken lives. I had been the stab in the dark, the prick between men's ribs, and the betrayal of trust. One of my more poetic masters said that kingdoms toppled when I struck a blow and that I rode down the tumult of war into chaos. I liked the sound of it, but I still slit his throat when his wife proved the stronger of the two and took me for her own.

Mercenary, assassin, soldier, defender, blade for hire—I had been all these and more. Whatever my master willed, I became. But never in my life had I been a thief. To slip through silent rooms without murder in my heart rankled me. When I hovered above sleeping forms, their breath fogging against me, I yearned to stop their hearts. My nature.

It was not my latest master's. Dimas pitted me against locks, jostling tumblers rather than piercing armor and flesh. He lived a life foreign to me, but I did as he wished. I was nothing more than a tool to him, after all. That, at least, was the same. He used me more gingerly than the others, though. And he never dispatched me to kill, despite my silent pleading.

I had never served someone who did not share my taste for death and havoc; Dimas and I shared only youth and loneliness. The streets had raised him. They gave him

everything he had: his skills, his luck, and his strength. They also took anything that could have responded to the warmth guarded in his heart. The streets devoured it all with pestilence, despair, and escape measured in empty flasks. One like me left his only remaining friend to drain out into the sludge of a back alley.

I never had any use for friends. Blood coated my first memories. I remembered hovering over an aged magician, slick with her life and reeking of alchemy. The potions seared through me. It woke me from whatever stupor I existed in before I first felt pain. The old woman butchered, the once neat laboratory broken, a fire licking up the back wall, those images filled my first conscious thoughts. I treasured them.

I remembered the deranged, envious glint in the eyes of the magician's apprentice as he crouched over the old woman's corpse. He had wanted his mentor's secrets and used me to get them. But this selfish young man didn't have the strength to keep me, and I traveled from person to person, loyal only as long as I was theirs. Prolonged loyalty was weakness. I could just as easily serve one master as another. One of my earliest lords even ordered me to take his life. I did it gladly.

This thief was something new, however. Dimas kept me as his brute strength, but he forbade the spilling of blood as if the sight appalled him. His stubborn refusal to use me as I was meant to be used brought a seething emotion boiling through me. I was annoyed. I had never been annoyed before.

I yearned to be slick and crimson again, to feel the warmth evaporate, but Dimas knew how to control me. There was never any chance he would slip and let me loose. But tonight, I thought he would have to give me my head.

It began like any other night of prowling through opulent homes, sneaking in at windows, and cutting purse strings. Dimas never took as much as he could. Sometimes, he even put coins back, a strange smile on his face.

During the deepest hour of the night, when even the pariah dogs had curled up in dark corners, we moved down a back alley, creeping with the shadows. Suddenly, a soldier appeared at the corner, hand on his sword. I leapt with anticipation.

We pulled back into the darkness, tight against the chiseled blocks. I could feel Dimas' heartbeat quicken. It was not the panic I had savored so often but a fearful excitement. Barely breathing, he waited, pressing me behind him so I would not give us away. Most nights he blacked me with soot so that my paleness couldn't flash in the darkness. Not tonight.

Fate had finally remembered me and seen that this thief had neglected my purpose. I could see how it would happen, the soldier passing, Dimas trying to hide me. And then, just as the tightness would melt from his muscles in relief, the soldier would see me. I would just be a brief glimmer in the dark refuse of the alley. The soldier would spring at us, tearing his blade from its sheath, and Dimas would have no choice but to let me be what I was. There would be blood when Dimas had me cut down the man.

The soldier scanned the streets. Life had flogged him, beaten him with misery and suffering. He hadn't broken, though. He twisted. Vileness etched his face with heavy lines and curled his mocking lip into a snarl. I had seen such men before; they had led me to my cruelest acts. This man prowled the streets for sport.

Dimas watched with hooded eyes as the soldier passed. Once the man's footsteps receded, the thief crept back onto the streets.

He was not prepared. A strong hand clamped around his throat and lifted him from the pavement. The fingers tightened. Dimas kicked and flailed, twisting in the man's grip. The soldier leered and licked his lips.

He didn't see me coming. Metal rung as I struck at the gauntleted hand, sparks scattering across the cobblestones. I struck hard and deep, but I tasted no blood.

Dimas lunged forward as the soldier's grip loosened, ducking beneath his arms. In one movement, my master called me forward and set me at the soldier's throat. I hummed with anticipation. Finally.

And then he had me wait. I did not understand. This man threatened us, attacked us; he deserved to die. I willed that fate would not abandon me and let Dimas' soft heart prevail.

"Well, go on. Stick me," the man spat, "And go brag to your whorescum friends."

A flat smile stretched across Dimas' face. "Your kind haven't left me any friends," he paused, "or many whores for the making of new ones."

The soldier stiffened, and I yearned for the restraining hand to drop away. The thief blinked languidly. "Slaughter is not my trade. I am a thief, nothing more. I steal only what I can return." At this an infuriating smirk slid across Dimas' face, "And my skills are not great enough to steal a soul back from the mouth of Hell."

Metal ground as the soldier bunched his fists.

Dimas circled the man, his deft fingers unfastening the latches of the soldier's sword belt. He left me at the man's throat. With a jerk, Dimas flung the soldier's sword onto the angled rooftop. The sheath slid down the slate in a clatter of grating metal and caught between smoke dribbling chimneys. Dimas gave a mocking salute before shoving

the man to the ground. We ran. The distance between us and the soldier grew. Dimas could outrun anyone.

Suddenly, I tumbled to the ground as Dimas jerked and fell, crashing to the cobbles. I slid across the street, stones rough beneath me.

Blood matted his curls into knots. Crimson streams snaked between the cobblestones, gathering in small lakes before spilling over and rushing on. Rushing toward me.

I waited for the euphoria. My lust clamored to lap up the blood it had thirsted after for so long. But the reek of it repelled me. It was not how I remembered.

Tossing another rock in his hand, the soldier sauntered up and stood over the fallen thief. He rolled Dimas over with a prod of his thick-soled boot.

Dimas' eyes refused to focus. I could see his finger twitch, groping for me. He thought I would save him.

The soldier reached down and plucked me from the ground. His gauntleted hand clenched my hilt with familiarity. He was acquainted with blades.

“Idiot boy.” He raised his hand; my silver sheen glinted in the moonlight.

Dimas sprawled beneath me, still pawing at the spot where I had been. I would be the last in a life of betrayals. An unfamiliar feeling settled through my tang—nausea.

I plunged downward. I would bite through the boy's rag-thin shirt and his prized vest, slice stringy muscle, and slide between ribs never fully healed from childhood falls. I would notch bone, and for a tortured instant, Dimas' heart would continue to beat around me. And I would have done what I was made to do. Fate had smiled.

But I didn't.

I stopped; my point dug into the braiding of Dimas' vest. For the first time in my short life, I defied my master. No, not even that. I did not belong to the soldier, even though he held my hilt.

“Devilwork” he growled, pressing down on me.

I would not kill. I fought the hand that gripped me. I did what no blade had ever done—I acted of my own accord.

Tendons twitched along the man's bristled arms as he twisted against me. I felt his other hand close around my quivering hilt. I wrenched away and drew a long line of blood down his palm. The man bit off a curse as I yanked backward, throwing his hand toward his chest, my point flashing at his throat. With a cry he flung me away and disappeared into the night.

Beside me Dimas began to stir, hunching up onto his knees. I looked at the slice of sky visible between lines of ragged laundry and houses staggering over the street.

What was I now?

Dimas crawled to his feet, his movements sluggish. He lurched over to pick me up, a silent moan forcing open his lips as his fingers dug into the street. Levering upright, he wiped the flat of my blade against his sleeve and tucked me up close to his ribs.

Quickening

Shai's bare feet slapped against the cool stones, echoing along the vaulted corridors. She darted beneath flowering columns of stone papyrus stalks. Myrrh and frankincense hung thick on the dry air. The sheer white linen of her dress flowed behind her as clusters of amulets beat out a sharp rhythm against her narrow wrists and ankles.

Priests belted with ox tails narrowed their painted eyes as she passed; rebuke furrowed into their withered lips. Shai laughed. Since she had arrived at the temple as a child, she had never seen them give her any other kind of look. Racing on, her dark hair bounced about her face as she dashed for the glowing rectangle of daylight at the end of the hall.

Shai flashed into the walled garden, the sun flaring about her and catching in the broad beaded collar around her neck. She splashed into the long reflection pool. A flock of long-billed ibises leapt into the air in a confusion of flapping wings and dangling reedy legs. Flowering lotuses floated in her wake as she kicked up a fine spray.

A group of girls appeared from an adjoining courtyard. Shaking their sistrums they clapped their hands and stamped their feet in rhythm. The elder girls began to dance, twisting their bodies with the music and raising their slender arms above their heads.

Shai leapt from the pool and slid in among the dancers. The girls smiled, laughing as Shai twirled and spun. The beat began to quicken. The youngest girl grinned as she shook the rattle in her hand even faster.

The other dancers fell out, joining in the circle around Shai. Weaving her arms, She rolled her hips and mocked the cobra with her swaying head. Kicking out one leg,

she leaned back, her spine arching. For a moment, she hung motionless. Then, placing her hands upon the floor, she kicked her legs over her head and vaulted to her feet.

“Shai-Neferat!” the girls yelled, clapping as they clustered about her. The blue faience beads at her throat rose and fell with her heavy breath. Her dark cheeks flushed as she smiled down on the girls about her.

“Will you dance with us when we return from the festival?” asked one.

Shai laughed, “No, daughter. I am too old to dance the closing rite of Opet. The Nile rises and brings new life—it is a dance for the young.” She knelt down, “And you are young and strong; you will dance for Lord Knem. Keep practicing what I showed you, and he will be well pleased.”

The girls drifted away, their sistrums rattling in their hands. The tallest girl stayed, her eyes stretched wide. “When will you teach us to dance like that, mistress?”

“In time, young one, in time.” Shai took in the girl’s strong arms and legs. “You are nearly ready to learn such things.”

The girl’s eyes crinkled as she smiled. “Thank you, mistress!”

As the girl rushed after the others, Shai turned to the far end of the garden; the urge to leap and run welled up. She laughed. Today she felt like one those girls again. She hadn’t felt that in a long time. Darting forward, Shai left the garden behind, cool twilight closing in above her as she passed back into columned halls.

Before her, dusty light spilled into the hall through great gaping cedar doors. Stepping into the soft glow, Shai couldn’t stop the smile that pulled at her lips.

“Lord Knum, Lord Knum,” she shouted as her eyes fell on the broad figure hunched in the middle of the room. The ram-headed god bent over his potter’s wheel, chalky smelling clay smeared up to his elbows.

“You forget yourself, Shai-Neferat,” he murmured, his hands still pulling at the clay. Even that soft reprimand rattled Shai’s bones, the one and many voices of the god crashing over her like the Nile at full flood.

Falling to the ground, Shai pressed her face against the stones. “I beg your forgiveness, great one, I —” she swallowed the words, “there is no excuse.” A light touch brought her to her knees as Knum smiled down on her. The strength of the gods burned in his gentle eyes.

“There is nothing to forgive, child. See that you do not forget yourself with my brethren, however.” Knum ran a hand along his muzzle as he returned to his wheel, “Sekhmet is particularly displeased with mortals as of late.”

An image of the lioness shot through Shai’s mind. She remembered a time when a worshipper had been less than reverent before Sekhmet. The roaring goddess had ripped the heart from his chest and devoured it before death settled in his eyes.

“The Pharaoh’s scribe is to have a daughter,” Knum said, sinking to his wheel. The clay flowed beneath his fingers as he molded a wide-eyed face. Broad features emerged. Gently rounded arms and legs adorned with dainty hands and feet grew out of the clay.

“She is beautiful, my lord,” said Shai.

Knum smiled and gave the wheel a gentle push. As it turned, the clay figurine began to change. Lines etched themselves about the wide eyes and age settled upon the

rounded hips and pulled at the child-dry breasts. The clay turned brittle and crumbled into dust. The wheel continued to turn. Moisture crept back in, the clay forming together in a lump. Tiny features emerged, delicate fingers and tiny nails. A plump little body pulled together from the mass. Limbs lengthened, and the grub-like face melted through the stages of youth to the cusp of womanhood.

Shai had watched the potter god craft hundreds on his wheel, but she still felt a thrill as she watched his handiwork. He formed every stage of life from the smallest seed to the farthest reach of years when the spirit fled the body to live among the gods. She often wondered what he had thought when he pulled her from the clay.

“I thought I may have scored her too much about the eyes in later years,” said Knum, folding his hands together, “but I believe her to be the sort to smile often, and she will bear the mark of her happiness into the twilight.”

The fine lines about Shai’s eyes crinkled. The heavy green on her eyelids and the dark kohl drawn out from the corner of her eyes could not quite hide the encroaching mark of years. She glanced about the room. Thousands of clay figurines stared back at her. Which one would be this child’s mother? she wondered.

A second figure suddenly stood beneath Knum’s hands – a thin boney woman with large eyes. Running his thumb along the child’s arm, he pulled away a little curl of clay. A second swipe of his fingers and the arm was whole again. Rolling the bit of clay into a ball, Knum pressed it into the thin woman’s stomach. Pliable clay enfolded the piece. The god moistened his fingers in a shallow dish and wiped the clay smooth.

“She takes after her father, doesn’t she?” asked Shai as she examined the Scribe’s wife.

Knum smiled. "I have had enough of jutting bones and thin skin." He snuffled in a bleating sort of laughter. "I pulled her father from a particularly large lump of clay, so he had neither."

As Knum rose from his wheel, both figurines vanished. "What would you have of me, child?" he asked.

A shy smile flitted across her face, and her hand drifted to her slender belly.

"I wanted to see his face. I couldn't wait to know him better," she said. Her eyes danced around the room, flitting from statuette to statuette.

Knum shifted his bulk.

"We've been trying for so long, and now," she paused, "finally. We are blessed." She lowered her eyes. "I am sorry, Lord Knum; I am impatient. I know he'll be beautiful. Nine months is just so terribly long to know him and yet not see his face."

Shai sighed. Somewhere among those clay faces her son waited. Which one? She had no doubt that her body carried the extra weight of a son; a daughter would not have made her so ill.

"My lord?" asked Shai when Knum did not respond.

His gentle face twisted as he shook his head. "Oh, my child." He placed a massive hand on her shoulder, the warmth of his power flowing outward from his touch. "There is no child to know."

Shai drew back, her kohl rimmed eyes darting. "My lord jests. I feel him. I know."

"Your womb is hollow," he said.

Shai grew still. “He is there. I have had the sickness and the hunger.” Shai’s voice hitched as she gestured at her lean body. “See how round I grow.”

Knum gathered Shai into his arms and pressed her to his chest. His warm breath brushed across her head, the sweet smell of harvest grains. It was like the first time her mother had brought her to the temple to start her training as an acolyte. He’d crouched down and looked her straight in the eye, that same sweet breath becoming her whole being.

“Oh, my dearest Shai.” He brushed his thick hands through her hair. “Your inmost places are a desert.”

Pulling away, Shai searched Knum’s face, desperate for a lie. “But I feel him, I feel him growing,” she whispered.

“The strength of your desire is all that you feel.” Knum shook his horned head.

Shai looked away and turned her rigid back on Knum. “Why am I hollow?” she asked, her words hanging chill on the hot air.

The god paused. “Because, I made you that way.”

* * *

Shai lay on her back, peering up at the stars as her husband slept beside her. The heat had driven them to their roof where they unrolled their mats and placed their headrests on the flat stones. She could feel the silent void of the house below. The tomb.

The dormitories would be the same, the girls all back in their villages for the festival of Opet. Shai offered a quick prayer to any god who was listening.

“Lords of the East,” she prayed, “bring the river flood and the black earth so that we may uphold the balance and keep Ma’at.”

Sometimes the flood did not come, and the fields shriveled, the red earth of the desert creeping through the desperate stalks. And sometimes it came too high, villages taken beneath the frothing waters. She had lost a student to the river.

She prayed they would all return this year. It would be two weeks before the festival ended. Until then, the dormitories would lay silent. There would be no whispering or sudden bouts of giggling. No listening to the quiet breaths of girls on their mats. No wrapping her arms about the youngest to guard against the terrors of the night. She would have two weeks of quiet before they returned, and she once again unrolled her mat in the temple.

Turning over, Shai whispered to herself. "Ahmos, Bai, Denderah, Meryt-Amen." The eldest boy would be named for his father and the eldest girl after her grandmother, Denderah. For the others, she had always liked the sound of Bai, and Meryt-Amen had been one of her most gifted pupils. Meryt-Amen was married now with a little daughter of her own.

Why, she wondered. Why? She could hear Knum's words. *I made you that way.* Shai tasted salt as her tears ran down her nose and slipped between her lips. Why? *Because, you have daughters aplenty.* Shai listened to the silence that stalked through her house. The way it pooled in the little room beneath her; the room she'd painted with swallows when her younger sister had her first child. Shai had added papyrus reeds by the door when her second niece was born. The room with the tiny amulets sitting on the sill: fish to prevent drowning and scorpions to ward off poison. In the corner, sat a patched leather ball that she had used as a child. A doll with jointed limbs held the ball in its

wooden hands. Shai had bought it when she'd gotten a clay crocodile for her brother's eldest son.

I made you that way.

Shai slid to her feet as Ahmos continued to sleep. Padding down the outside stairs, Shai went through the courtyard and into the house. She found her sandals and dressed, then carried her burnished copper mirror and stick of kohl into the courtyard. She rimmed her eyes by moonlight. Groping through the darkened house, she felt for Ahmos' writing kit. She laid aside the reed pens and palette of red and black ink, and took the wooden tablet into the moonlight. With a charred stick from the kitchen fire, Shai drew clumsy words on the tablet and left it on the steps.

If the gods made me hollow, they can make me whole as well, she thought as she headed onto the road. She could reach the temple complex at Karnak by the time Ra steered the sun barque into the sky. With Opet approaching, the gods would have gathered to hold council in the court of Osiris. They would hear her.

* * *

None of them listened. As an acolyte of Knum, the gods granted Shai an audience. Knum had watched with wet eyes as Shai begged the gods to restore her.

“What has been made is made, and cannot be unmade,” Osiris said. Isis offered her sympathy, and even gentle Tauret could only shake her head, a slow sad smile on her lips. Sekhmet laughed.

Now, Shai stood before the temple of the only god not present at Karnak—the solitary god Set. Often at odds with the other gods, Set did as he pleased and ignored his

brother Osiris' commands. Cloistered away in his wasteland temple, his gaze half turned out of Egypt to foreign lands, the god of the desert had little love for mortals.

Shai dug her fingers into the bag she clutched and stepped into the roiling darkness of his temple. Blackness assaulted her as she felt her way through the hall, her hands brushing along chiseled hieroglyphs. Her fingers dipped down into carved waves and papyrus stalks, tracing along the backs of ducks and lions.

She blinked the gloom from her eyes; hulking columns sprang out of the shadows, their bases piled with drifts of sand. The vastness of the empty space pressed against her, and her hesitant steps echoed.

A steady clicking sounded from the darkness like nails rapping on stone. Shai felt hungry eyes following her. The rearing serpent and the ostrich feather jangled at her wrist; their subtle chimes laced the air with unseen protection. Swallowing her fear, she hurried forward with an incantation on her lips.

“I know the names of the two and forty gods. I know their names so that they may protect my heart from judgment and my body from harm. The One Who Rose up in the West and the Eater of Entrails hear my pleas. He of the Crimson Boat and She who Goes like a Roaring Lion know I refrain from evil.” Her throat seemed to twist shut as she forced out the last word. Coughing, she glanced over her shoulder. Dark forms slid between the columns.

Suddenly, a skeletal shape loomed up. Shai felt her pulse beating in her ears. The columns rung with the sharp click of talons on stone as the creature paced forward. It plastered its tall rectangular ears flat against its skull. Creeping forward like a pariah dog stalking a rat, its forked tail stuck out straight behind it.

Shai froze as its slopping muzzle snuffed along her arm. A hollow whine rumbled from its narrow chest. Saliva, thick and hot, dropped onto her foot, sliding down between her toes. The reek of raw meat and day old blood clogged the back of her throat as the beast lifted its scarred face to hers. Twisted teeth shoved into pale gums flashed in the wane light as it curled its thin lips, slaver strung between its jaws.

“Typhons, Hounds of Set, I bring a gift to your master. I ask that I may pass,” said Shai, fighting to keep her voice steady.

The scarred typhon crouched before her, its narrow shoulder blades sawing against slate grey skin. Rasping growls, like the rubbing together of pottery shards, echoed around her.

Suddenly, it stopped. Turning its head to the side and pricking up one ear, the typhon waited. The creature grated out a bark and dug its front paw into the pavers; its nails scored deep marks in the stone.

The hungry shadows vanished, and Shai stood alone with the scarred typhon. Snorting, the large beast turned away, its forked tail lashing behind. One blue eye glanced over its shoulder as it trotted further into the temple.

Running a hand over her amulets, Shai hurried after the typhon and tried to keep its hunched back and erect ears in sight. The loneliness of the temple wrapped about her feet, tangling her steps as she pushed forward. Only the shallow, wheezing breath of the typhon and the horrible clicking of its nails sounded in the shadows.

The suddenness of the chapel startled Shai, the hall shearing off into a shabby room. A solemn statue reared before her. Feeble flames sputtered in grimy lamps at the statue’s feet. The strange face, with its sloping muzzle and erect rectangular ears,

glowered through soot and dust, a frown etched into its stone features. Shai glanced at her guide. Set had made the typhons in his image.

Dropping to her knees, Shai pressed her face to the sand covered stones, grit grinding into her palms. “Lord Set, He Who Thunders in the Sky, I bring you an offering.” She up-ended her sack on the altar. Three crisp green heads of lettuce thumped onto the slab, flinging clouds of dust into the air. “Please, hear my plea.”

Shai waited, her lips moving in a silent recitation of the honors of the god: Mighty Set, He Who is Powerful, He Who Makes His Place in the Desert, Bane of the Serpent.

“I am not in the habit of reading minds, mortal,” said a voice. “Speak.”

Shai whirled, thinking that words had slipped from the typhon’s jaws. The animal stared at her, mute.

“My pets are hungry, and it’s amusing to let them dig out the entrails of bothersome mortals.” The voice rumbled. “But you brought me my favorite snack, and that inclines me to patience.”

Shai’s gaze turned to the statue, her heart thrumming. Stone crumbled into flesh and molten blue eyes stared down at her. The meager flames sunk deep shadows into the strange features of the God of Chaos. Shai swallowed; she had not expected the solitary god to manifest. She tried not to stare at his ill formed limbs. “My Lord Set—”

“Did I ask you to grovel?” Set asked, picking at a strand of his long red hair. “How does Osiris stand you pandering fools? What is it you want?”

The words shot forth before Shai could stop herself or lace them with the proper respect. “A child. I want a child.”

Set snatched a head of lettuce from the altar and extended it to Shai with a subtle smirk on his face, “Maybe you should eat this?” When Shai shook her head, Set waved his long fingered hand in dismissal. “Pray to Tauret; that full-bellied sow is always willing to help your kind propagate.”

“Tauret has turned her back on me – they all have. The gods have turned their faces away.” Shai forced herself to hold Set’s gaze. “You are the only one who may listen.”

A too-smooth hand ran down Shai’s dark cheek. Biting her lip, she tried not to stare at the wan skin. The long fingers trailed along her collar bones and skipped across her suddenly pimpled flesh.

“You want a child?” She could see his teeth in the dim light. “If you were younger perhaps—prettier. Then you could have a child of me.”

Shai jerked away from the pale hand. She stumbled backwards, her feet sliding on the sand strewn blocks. Strong hands clamped about her shoulders. Sweat leeches from her skin as Set clasped her to his broad chest. His flesh burned.

“You have nothing to fear from me, daughter of Knum. We are the same, you and I, two deserts from which no green thing may spring.”

His touch faded away, his heat retreating into the shadows. “You truly want a child?”

“Yes,” said Shai, her voice wavering.

Set watched her from beneath heavy lids as he picked dirt from under his nails. He smiled again. “My brother has a son, and yet he cannot find it in his heart to give you one. Such a little thing to ask.”

“But I, who have no son,” Set paused, his eyes seeming to peel back Shai’s flesh, “I cannot give you one, even to spite Osiris. But you shall have one, in the end.”

“My lord?” she asked.

“You know what to do, Shai-Neferat. You know how to get what you want. It’s written all over your heart – the dark knowledge of what you’re going to do – the chaos you will bring.” Set leered. “Come now, little mortal, you’ve known the answer all along.”

Set placed his mouth close to Shai’s ear. His breath fell dry and brittle on her shoulder. “A little betrayal will get you what you want.”

Shai swallowed the bile that had forced its way into her mouth. She looked away. “I ask your blessing.”

“My blessing is not easily won.” Set drew back, his eyes flicking over her amulets. “And I will not share you.”

The protective chime of the amulets grew to a clamor as Shai closed her fist about them. With a jerk, she flung them to the ground. Tauret, Sekhmet, Osiris, and all the rest – she flung their charms away – even Knum’s. The clay and glass crumbled into dust as they struck the floor, the darkness rushing in to lap up their spilled power.

“You do know how to please me, don’t you, little mortal?” Set pulled a lock of his red hair free and held it taut. He wrapped his taloned hand around Shai’s wrist and laid the strands across it. Writhing like serpents, the strands wove around one another, twining into a slender cuff.

Drawing a sharp nail down his forearm, Set opened a deep gorge in his flesh. Gleaming god’s blood rushed from his vein, golden hot. The typhon darted forward at his

master's call. Its dry tongue lapped up the blood and gleaming droplets splashed across its muzzle.

“You have my blessing, Shai-Neferat.” Set gestured at the typhon. “This thing will take you to your heart's desire.” Set plucked a head of lettuce from the altar. It crunched as he bit into it, thick milky juices dribbling from his chin. “Knum crafts a son for the pharaoh—the most beautiful boy he has ever created. Remember that.”

Bowing, Shai turned and fled the twisted god, the typhon padding at her heels.

* * *

Shai pressed a hand against the typhon's boney neck as they moved through Knum's temple complex. A shroud of nothingness wrapped about them. With the blood of a god flowing through its lean frame, the typhon passed un-noticed through the halls. The guards could neither see nor hear them.

Shai set her teeth and fought the urge to pull her hand away from the tepid hide. She could feel the life Set had stolen to make his horrible creatures more than a pile of cast off skin and bones. And they always wanted more. Each time they passed a beating heart Shai could feel the typhon's hunger grow.

As they approached Knum's workshop, her shoulders sagged. The massive doors stood closed, and the god's seal gleamed from the dark wood. The typhon stood up on its hind legs, pressing its paws against the doors. Knum's seal flared. It crackled as the typhon continued to push. In a sparking shower, the seal broke and scattered the floor with dying cinders of magic. The doors swung open.

A sigh slipped from Shai's lips as she entered the empty room. Sometimes Knum worked passed the dying of the sun, locking himself away from interruption. Even with

the festival, he rarely left his work for long. The darkness fell away as she jerked her hand from her guide.

“Do what you will,” she whispered. The beast snorted, and its tall ears twisted to catch a sound in the hallway. The typhon stalked out the doors.

The blank, staring faces of the clay statuettes seemed to peer down at Shai as she approached Knum’s wheel. Feeble light filtered through the open roof. Far above, Khonsu’s crescent form danced beneath Nut’s star studded arch. Shai did not fear the eyes of these gods; their gaze was only for each other. The happenings hidden by night’s gloom, whether good or evil, meant little to them.

Shai paused. The room smelled of clay and dried grass. It smelled like Knum. Biting her lip, she glanced toward the gaping doorway. She stepped toward the hall and reached for the missing amulets at her wrist. Shai stopped as her fingers closed over the lock of hair. The red strands shone in the moonlight.

She turned her back on the door and brushed her palm along the wheel’s smooth surface. Running her eyes over the staring faces, she searched for the one she knew to be hers, the one Set had given to her. Within the hoard of newly finished un-conceived bodies, one sat apart.

Moonlight splashed across his tender features and welled above his curving lips, sliding down his cheekbones. A rearing serpent curled on his brow, the mark of royal blood. This was to be the Pharaoh’s son, his heir.

“No. My son,” whispered Shai. A fierce look filled her eyes. “My Ahmos.”

The statuette appeared on the wheel beside her hand. Peering into his face, she saw that he had her nose. He was meant for her. Let the gods give the Queen a different son, she thought, Tauret has already gifted the great house with daughters.

Dragging her finger down the figure's calf, Shai dug out a lump of clay. How had Knum done it? She closed her eyes. Thinking of Knum distracted her. Turning back to the shelves, she searched for her statue; her eyes seemed drawn to her own form. She glimpsed it among the thousands of other statues, and when she turned back to the wheel, it stood next to the boy's. Contemplating her flat angled form, Shai rolled the clay between her fingers, imagining how that would change. Setting the little lump of life at her figure's feet, she turned back to the boy.

Shai pushed and pulled at the clay, attempting to re-form the curving slope of his little leg. The clay resisted her touch, at once too dry and too wet. Her fingers left trailing marks across the surface and smudged the silky skin. Her knuckle caught his thigh, gauging a deep mark across his hip. Tears blurred the world before her. Frantic, she worked the clay, striving to regain the shapely form as the figure twisted beneath her touch.

Hoarse growls sounded from the hallway as the typhon retreated into the room, spine nearly pressing through the skin of its arched back. Scrambling, Shai gripped the little ball of clay and dug it deep into the belly of her statue, her nails puncturing the dry brittle surface of her womb.

A hot, sticky stream ran down her legs, seeping across her abdomen as she fumbled to drag the clay across the hole. Flesh wrenched and tore. Shai clenched her teeth. Skin knit together in a whorl as it solidified, puckering in a ragged scar.

Crumpling to the floor, Shai lay in a shuddering mass. Her haggard gasps ripped the silence. Sweat slick hair clung to her skin, plastering her face in stringy tangles. Blood wicked through the white linen of her dress.

She stared up at Knum as his shadow fell across her. Framed against the moon, the brilliance of Knum's eyes cast light across his shadowed features. Dampness splashed across Shai's upturned face. Large drops mingled with the heavy kohl about her eyes and trailed down her cheeks.

"My daughter, what have you done?" Knum's eyes slid over the boy's ruined form. "You have stolen the son of the pharaoh, Osiris on earth."

"My son, my son." Shai folded about her pain.

Knum ran a hand down the grotesque mockery of his work. Only the face survived. The once supple clay held firm beneath his touch. "You have fouled the clay." He rested his horned head against his chest. "He is ruined."

"He is perfect," said Set, appearing from among the staring faces. He rested a sallow hand on the typhon's head. The leering god strode across the workshop, his barbed tail flicking behind him. Faience-blue eyes met muddy brown as Set fixed Knum with his gaze. Reaching out, Set ran his fingers down the clay figure's misshapen form. A shudder ran through his own twisted frame. His lips split in a grin as he glanced at Shai. "Oh, he is his father's son."

Gone Sane

Nita rested her head on Greer's shoulder as they rocketed down the dirt road, singing against the bass grinding through duct taped speakers. The morbid whine of guitar strings crashed against Nita's ears as Greer thumped the dashboard. Nita admired the way Greer had stripped the flesh from her hand so the bone shone in the moonlight. She'd snuck out once to have her foot stripped, but her mother had caught her and locked her in her room for a month. Nita sighed as she thought of her mother's lectures, "Your flesh will rot away soon enough. No need to go rushing the process when it's still more or less there." No wonder she'd been so keen about getting that carding law passed for all the flaying parlors in town.

"Don't conk out on me now, chica," Greer howled over the music as she shoved Nita upright. "Lightweight."

Nita shoved her friend back, sending the truck jolting across the road. "Not everyone's got the stomach you've got, girl. Titanium!"

Greer flashed her filed teeth, bits of ragged flesh still caught between the points. She rolled her loose eye in its socket to look at Nita, "Pansy."

"Whatever," said Nita. She blew a strand of hair out of her eyes and stared out the window. Listing barbwire fences and cow-trailed fields blurred through the one eyed glare of the truck's headlight.

"Wimp," said Greer.

"Stop." Nita sat up straighter and peered into the darkness.

"Limp noodle."

“No, stop,” Nita pawed at Greer’s arm.

“What, can’t take...”

“Stop, just stop!” yelled Nita, grabbing at the wheel. The truck jerked off the road and skidded to a stop in a cloud of dust.

“You crazy?” Greer yelled as Nita flung herself out the door. Her pink skirt hitched up her round thighs as she ran. Moonlight played across her bloodless skin. Greer stormed along behind her, scuffed cowboy boots crunching through the dry grass. “Your brain melt out your ear or something?”

Nita crouched over a huddled mass thrown half in the ditch. “It’s a person,” she whispered. With a shove, she rolled him over. A muffled groan slipped from his purpled mouth, and blood caked his dark hair. Nita peered at him. She tore through the ragged tarp cocooning him and sat back, her hand over her mouth.

Greer hooked her thumbs in her belt loops. “That’s nasty.”

“What’s wrong with him?” asked Nita. “He’s all pinkish.” She leaned forward and brushed a hand over the boy’s chest. “He’s hot. Practically boiling.”

Greer kicked at the sand. “Fascinating. Are you done playing with the road kill? My daddy will eat me alive if I don’t have the truck back in time for him to get to work.”

“We can’t leave him. He needs a hospital,” said Nita.

Greer gripped Nita around the arm and hauled her up. “Just let the freak be. He’ll kick it soon enough, and we won’t have to bother. Look at him.” She pointed at the boy’s chest with her artfully painted finger bones. “He’s got some sort of spasm.” His chest swelled and then drifted back down, swelled and settled.

Nita jerked away from Greer and draped the boy's arm across her shoulders. She staggered to her feet and started toward the truck, his limp weight dragging on her.

Greer called after her, "Bleeding heart! If he were meant to live he wouldn't be in a ditch somewhere."

Nita stuck her chin in the air and kept trudging toward the truck. Her hands slipped down the boy's steamy flesh. Behind her Greer kicked a piece of gravel. Suddenly, the boy felt lighter. Nita looked to the side as Greer got under the boy's other arm and settled his weight across her wiry shoulders.

"He ain't going in the cab," she grumbled.

Nita smiled.

* * *

"Greer, have a look at this," said Nita as she perched on the boy's hospital bed. She held her watch in front of his mouth as little puffs of mist ghosted across its face. They receded and then appeared again in steady rhythm. "It's so funny."

Greer leaned over the bed and curled her lip. "You ain't right, you know that?"

"Nita Barlow?" asked a white coated doctor from the doorway.

"Yes?" she bounced off the bed.

"You brought in our John Doe here. Is that right?" The doctor's stitched open eyes flicked across the clipboard.

"Yep, he's mine. Can you fix him?" asked Nita.

"Freak don't need fixing," grumbled Greer, flopping into the armchair. "I say float him in a jar like them two headed pigs at the fair."

Nita flipped her braids over her shoulder as she rolled her eyes. “Shut up, Greer. Can you fix him?”

The doctor shrugged. “Not that much to fix really. Just the head wound needed stitching; everything else is your basic clean and leave. As to his abnormalities—quite rare,” the doctor cleared his throat, “I believe that the practitioners down in Research would be quite interested in such a specimen.”

Nita crossed her arms and stepped in front of the boy’s sleeping form.

“They would compensate you, of course,” stuttered the doctor.

Nita bared her teeth. “I’m keeping him. Now, is he ready to go, or not?”

“Really, miss, reconsider. What are you going to do with such a person? You could advance the sciences with such a contribution. We’ve never seen a warm one here.”

The doctor stepped forward; his stretched eyes moved from Nita to Greer.

Greer threw up her hands. “Don’t look at me. It’s useless talking good sense to her.” She crossed her arms and kicked her legs up into the windowsill.

The doctor frowned and scratched at his clipboard. “As you wish. Once he wakes up, he’s free to go. If you change your mind?”

“I won’t,” said Nita as she snatched the paper from the doctor’s hands. He opened his mouth as if to protest one last time, but Nita flicked her hands at him and shooed him out. She hopped back onto the bed and pressed her face up next to the boy’s. “When do you think he’ll wake up?”

“I figure ‘bout now,” said Greer as she screwed her boney finger into his side.

The boy jerked away from the prodding. His eyes snapped open. He blinked against the bright light as he focused. His pupils shrank to pinpricks as Nita gave him her

best smile, the grin stretching nearly to her left ear. Her mother said her smile was her best feature, the way she could show all her nice teeth along one side.

“Hi!” she said.

The boy screamed.

Nita clapped her hands over his mouth, locking her arms to keep him still as he squirmed beneath her weight. “Hey, hey, it’s okay. No one’s gonna hurt you.”

Greer stomped over to the bed and glared down at the boy, rolling her eye at him. “Quit your yelling, and she’ll let off you. Got it?”

He swallowed and nodded.

Nita pulled her hands from his face and cocked her head to the side. “I’m Nita, and this is Greer. We saved your life.”

“She did the saving,” said Greer, jabbing a finger at Nita, “I just got drug along for the ride.”

“I’m so glad you’re awake,” said Nita, clapping her hands. She grabbed the boy’s face and kissed him—hard.

He jerked away and flopped over the bed rail, retching into the trashcan.

Greer grinned as Nita sat back on her heels and pouted. “You’ve got a real way with the boys.”

As the heaving subsided, the boy sank back against the pillows, dragging the back of his hand across his mouth. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

He wouldn’t look at them. Nita followed his gaze, trying to find his interest in the watercolor wallpaper.

“Lost it, completely lost it,” he said in a breathy voice, giving his head a shake.

“The doc did say he got conked pretty good, maybe he’s addled,” said Greer. She probed the boy’s stitches.

He hissed and jerked away. He looked at Greer and gritted his teeth. “Go with it, just go with it,” he mumbled. Swallowing, he turned to Nita. “I’m in a hospital?”

She shrugged. “We found you in a ditch, pretty banged up, but that’s all we know. Don’t you remember?”

The boy shook his head. He winced, holding his temple. “Everything’s fuzzy. All I’ve got are bits and flashes. I’m,” he paused. “My name is Joel,” he forced the word out, mouthing it as if it tasted unfamiliar. “Nothing’s right.”

“That’s just the head wound talking,” said Nita. She gnawed on her lip and tapped her thumbs together. “Can we go now? This place is so boring.”

“Go?” asked Joel.

She jerked down the covers. Joel scampered back against the headboard and plastered his hospital gown against his bare legs. He pulled at the collar of the gauzy linen and peeked inside. His cheeks turned a funny red color.

“Why’s his face doing that?” asked Greer as she backed away. “It better not be catching.”

“Clothes,” said Joel, his voice cracking a little.

Nita darted out into the hall and snatched scrubs off an unattended cart. “How about these?” she asked, presenting them to Joel. Nodding, he took them and started to slip the pants on under his gown. He paused as Nita stared at him with interested eyes.

“Could you maybe,” he cleared his throat, “turn around? Please?”

Nita frowned but turned her back and folded her hands.

“Only Nita could pull a prude out of a ditch,” said Greer. She stared at Joel until Nita elbowed her. With a sigh, Greer turned her back as well.

Joel slithered into the scrubs and double knotted the drawstring around his thin waist. “I’m good.”

“Great!” said Nita, grabbing his sleeve. She didn’t like the heat of his skin and her lips still prickled from the kiss. With a jerk, she pulled him off the bed, steadying him when he threatened to pitch forward. “Let’s get out of here.”

With Greer ambling behind, Nita drug Joel through the hospital, the boy shying away whenever anyone passed. His neck swiveled to track each person.

“You one of them agoraphobes?” asked Greer. “You afraid of people?”

Joel glanced at her, his eyes trailing down her fleshless hand. He shuddered. “No, not people.”

Nita paused as she glanced through a long bank of windows. Breaking away, she pressed her nose to the glass and stared through at ranks of bassinets; rows of blue tinged babies lay silent in their swaddling. Nita waved her fingers at them, cooing. She gripped Joel’s arm as he inched forward.

“Just look at the darlings. When I grow up, I want six just like them,” she said.

Greer crossed her arms and hovered in the background. “Any boy gets me with one of those and I’m ripping it out.”

“They’re dead,” whispered Joel. He rested his palm against the window, curling his fingers against the glass. “All dead.”

Nita glanced at him. “Such a bunch of sweet things, course they’re not dead.” She reached up and banged on the glass. Inside the nursery a wail went up, catching from

bassinette to bassinette. Even amid the screaming one bundle lay still. Nita gave a sheepish grin. “Well, maybe that one is. It’s just so hard to tell sometimes.”

Suddenly, Nita turned and scanned the empty hall.

Greer raised an eyebrow as she followed her friend’s gaze. “What?”

“Nothing. I just thought I heard someone call me.” Nita shook her head and beamed at Joel. She grabbed him by the sleeve and dragged him away. “You’re coming home with me.”

* * *

Greer threw them out of the truck when they got to Nita’s, tires squealing as she fishtailed away. She still hadn’t let Joel ride in the cab. Nita bounded up the front walk and wrenched open the door. She motioned for Joel to hurry.

“Are your parents home?” asked Joel as he paused to wipe his still bare feet.

“Just us. Isn’t it great?” asked Nita. “Mom’s at the Natron Spa all week.” She pulled at her face, stretching the skin taut. “Preserving her features.”

“Your dad?” asked Joel. He trailed up the stairs after Nita.

“Oh, Mom ate his brain when I was three,” she said over her shoulder. “This is my room.” She flung open a door with a glittery My Little Ponies poster plastered over it. “Ta-da!”

Joel slid into the room, squinting against the florescent green walls. “It’s very,” he seemed to search for a word, “colorful.” He furrowed his brow and gestured at the walls.

“Do they glow in the dark?”

Nita kicked off her shoes, flinging them into the closet with a flip of her toes.

“That’d be neat, wouldn’t it? I’ve got sticky stars on the ceiling.” She flopped onto her

bed; stuffed animals bounced off either side. Arching back, she studied the ceiling. “If you kind of squint at them, they look like a robot. You’ll see tonight.”

Nita frowned and rolled up on her side. Joel had gone stiff and looked more flushed than normal.

“I think I’ll have trouble seeing them from the couch,” he said.

“There’s plenty of room for two.” She scooted over to prove her point.

“The couch will be fine,” he said, curling his toes in the carpet.

“Yeah, but what if Mom gets back early? She’s got this thing about sucking brains first and asking questions later. You should have seen the mess at my 8th birthday party,” said Nita as she rolled to the edge of the bed. She looked at him with shrewd eyes.

“Course, you’re kinda gross hot, and that might keep me up.”

“How about I sleep wrapped up over there,” he said, pointing at the corner farthest from the bed.

Nita bounced off the bed and grinned at him, setting her tongue just between her teeth. “Like a Joel burrito.”

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After a dinner of leftover pig jowl that Joel barely touched, Nita dug a pile of her dad’s old clothes out of the bottom of the rag bin for Joel. The clothes bagged from him like a child playing dress-up and had a few smatterings of bleach stains, but Nita rolled up the cuffs and punched a new hole in one of her belts so Joel could keep the pants from dropping around his ankles. He resigned himself to the rhinestone butterfly belt buckle.

As he sunk into the chair next to her bed, his stomach growled.

“You hardly touched your jowl,” said Nita, giving him a playful shove. “I told you, you were putting it in for too long. It was cooked through, wasn’t it?”

Joel cupped his hand behind his neck. “I’m fine, thanks. It was,” he cleared his throat, “filling.”

For a moment Nita just looked at him before she rolled onto her stomach and jerked open the drawer in her bedside table. “Have a look at this,” she said. Nita kicked her legs above her as she groped around in the drawer.

She drew out a little stone box, cradling it in her hands. “Close your eyes,” she said as she crawled forward.

“If I close my eyes, I won’t be able to see it,” said Joel, leaning away.

Nita laughed. “Just for a minute.”

Licking his lips, Joel stuck his hands out and closed his eyes. His neck tightened as Nita upended the box into his palms. “It’s squishy.”

“Well, go on. Open your eyes,” said Nita. She leaned forward, grasping her knees.

“I don’t think I want to,” said Joel.

Nita laughed again.

His chest swelled outward, and then Joel cracked one eye. He yelped and thrust his hands away from him.

Nita trailed a finger over the bloody lump of flesh in Joel’s hands. “It’s my heart.” She furrowed her brows as she looked at Joel. His mouth moved strangely—like she’d seen fish do when you left them on the dock. “Oh, Joel! You look so much better. Your color is practically gone.” She batted her eyelashes. “Did my heart do that?”

Joel swallowed and wet his lips. “Why?” he coughed and had to start again. “Why is your heart in your dresser?”

“Oh, it kept falling out, and I was afraid I’d lose it,” she said. She jerked down her tank top to reveal a large hole in her chest, pieces of broken rib jutting into the cavity.

Joel averted his eyes. “It doesn’t look right,” he said. He turned the purpled flesh over in his hands. Blue veins cracked across the surface, and the ragged edges hung limp.

“Sometimes the boys treat it roughly. You know how boys are.” She took back her heart and turned it over. A large knot of plaster patched a jagged hole. “The last one almost wouldn’t give it back. He ate a whole chunk.” For a moment she fell silent. “The other girls’ hearts are prettier, but I think it’s practically as good. At least, with the plaster, I know it is mine. One time, I almost took another girl’s heart when I got mine back. He had twenty-seven of them.”

Nita slipped her heart back into its stone box.

“Maybe if you kept it with you?” asked Joel as he scrubbed his palms against his pant leg.

“My stitches look awful, and it just slides off the string or tumbles out at the worst times. I was at Kara’s slaying last year, and it popped right out of my blouse and was just hanging there. So embarrassing.” Nita hid her face in her hands, peeking between her fingers.

Joel took her hands, causing her to pause. He was so hot. “I mean, why don’t you keep it safe, here? In your drawer.”

She pulled away and reached up to pat him on the head. “And how would anybody know I liked them?” She continued to stroke his hair. It was soft. He knocked her hand away and slid off the bed, tugging at his collar.

* * *

A night breeze chimed through the beaded curtains as Nita crept up on Joel’s sleeping form. The rhythm of his chest seizing had slowed. Cocking her head to the side, she stretched out her hand above his chest and let it hover just above his shirt. She floated her hand with every swell as she mimicked the odd movement. She grinned, her teeth flashing.

A rock bounced against her window. Nita jerked back as Joel blinked awake.

“Nita!” Greer hissed from outside.

Sticking her head out the window, Nita waved at Greer. “Hold on a minute,” she called before pulling back inside.

“You’re awfully dressed up,” murmured Joel. He levered himself up on his elbows and blinked up at her.

Nita did a quick twirl, the sequins on her fringed skirt winked in the pale light. She struck a pose, running her hand down her thigh and pursing her lips. “You like?”

“You’ll get cold,” he said, glancing away as she re-adjusted the strap that kept sliding off her shoulder.

“Why would that matter?” she asked.

Greer’s voice slithered in from the window, “Nita, move your maggoty butt!”

Nita jerked Joel to his feet. “She’s always so impatient. Come on, let’s go!” She shoved the sash up higher and threw a leg over the sill.

“Out the window?” asked Joel, backing away.

“How else would we do it?” she asked, ducking back into the room.

Joel motioned at the door, a kind of helpless look on his face.

Nita hid her giggle behind her hand. “Oh Joel, you’re hilarious. What fun would that be?” Striding across the room, she grabbed Joel around the wrist and drug him forward. He lurched away from her. He was really weak for a boy. Heaving him up onto the window sill, Nita peeled his fingers off the edges as he scrambled to get back inside. “Greer! Catch Joel!”

“What?” Joel wailed.

She crossed his arms and set her chin on his shoulder. “It’s fun.” She flung him out the window.

Nita hadn’t heard screaming like that since one of Greer’s pigs got caught in barbed-wire.

Joel landed hard in Greer’s arms, struggling away as she forced her face into his. “Shut up, you ninny,” she growled.

Leaping from the second story window, Nita landed with a thud. She smoothed her skirt and brushed the dirt from where her knees had hit. Greer had dressed up for the occasion as well, her ragged mess of hair streaked neon green. She also wore the spiked choke chain she’d gotten off her Pit Bull when it died. Nita’s eyes trailed down Greer’s bare arm.

“Oh, Greer!” she gasped as she rushed to her friend’s side. “What happened?”

Greer shrugged and pulled back the ragged skin on her shoulder where a large chunk of flesh had been bitten out. “My daddy wasn’t happy about the truck.”

“He did that just because you were late?” asked Joel. He had taken on a healthy greenish cast again.

“Lucky I caught him in a good mood,” Greer called as she sauntered toward the truck. Nita skipped around to the passenger side as Joel trailed behind them. He hesitated as Greer grabbed the door handle. She glanced over her shoulder with narrowed eyes and jerked her head toward the truck bed. Joel sighed and hoisted himself up onto the tire and slid over the side into the back.

Tires squealed as Greer threw the truck into reverse and whipped around, the muffler roaring as they lurched forward. Nita glanced through the back window and waved at Joel. He peeled himself off the tailgate long enough to offer a hasty thumbs up.

Greer ditched two cop cars on the way to the bonfire and almost hit three opossums. The last one leapt out of the way just as Greer swerved onto the shoulder. Nita patted her friend’s arm, careful not to touch the still oozing hole. “You’ll get them next time,” she mouthed.

A few other stragglers were still arriving at the field when Greer slammed to a stop. Slipping out of the cab, Nita helped a windblown Joel crawl over the side of the truck bed. The three beat through the tall grass, heading for the top of the hill where a bonfire already flared against the night. Shapes slipped out of the darkness from all sides; some carried fence railings on their shoulders toward the fire.

Several people gave Joel lingering glances; a few wrinkled their noses in disgust. Some girl with only half a face pointed and laughed. Nita bared her teeth. The girl stuck her nose in the air and primped her hair as she stalked away.

“Greer! Hey, hey! There’s my girl!” shouted a lanky teen as he bounded down the slope. “How’s about a kiss?” He puckered his lips.

Greer sunk her fist into his middle. The boy folded double. “You don’t know how to keep your tongue in your own mouth, Midge” she said.

Nita put her head against Joel’s and whispered, “It came loose, and she swallowed it. They had to cut it out with hedge shears so her daddy wouldn’t find out.”

“Love you too, sugar,” said Midge, straightening. He turned to Nita with a broad smile; the sagging flesh sucking at the hollows of his cheeks wrinkled. “Fetching as ever, Nita. When’s that lovely little heart of yours going to be sitting on my desk where it belongs?”

Nita gave the boy a quick hug. “Just as soon as it’s the only one sitting there.”

“You ask too much of a man,” he said with a shrug.

Greer rolled her eye. “What have you done with Penny? I thought I saw her scrawled on the list for tonight.”

“Here, right here,” called a girl, waving her hand above her head. She scurried up to them, pig-tails bouncing. “I had to say ‘hey’ to some girls from school.” The bones of her knees and elbows peeked out from beneath her lacy dress.

“How’s the new school? We never see you anymore,” said Nita. She threw her arm around Penny’s shoulders.

“Good, good. I’m really liking River View. It’s got better funding than Big Hill; you don’t find people you know in the Tuesday Surprise so often,” said Penny. She opened her mouth to say more but stopped, her hand poised mid-gesture. She stared at Joel. “Who?”

Greer snorted. “Nita’s freak.”

“Don’t be rude, Greer.” Nita drug Joel forward as Penny and Midge studied him.

“This is Joel. I found him.”

He swallowed and offered a half-hearted wave. “Pleasure.”

Penny chewed on the end of her pigtail, “He’s so...flushed. Is he sick?”

Midge took a step backward.

“Nope, just a freak,” drawled Greer.

Midge stared hard at Joel, his brows knit together. “You’re awful familiar looking. Did we terrorize freshmen together, or something?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really remember,” he said, shaking his head. He leaned back as Midge stuck his sagging face into Joel’s own.

“You sure? ‘Cause I’ve got a memory for faces.”

A shot from the top of the hill and a chattering of voices interrupted Midge.

“They’re going to draw the names. I ain’t missing out cause of your little sideshow act,” said Greer as she started up the hill. The others followed, Nita towing Joel along at the end.

“What does she mean—about the names?” asked Joel.

“Oh, that’s the only fair way to choose who gets picked. Since you weren’t on the list before, you won’t be chosen, but you also can’t join in,” said Nita offering him a sympathetic smile. “Sorry. But you can watch. That’s almost as fun.”

“But what are we doing?” asked Joel.

Nita ignored him and shoved through the crowd around the bonfire, shouldering her way to the front. Greer waved over the crowd, the firelight dancing along her

bleached bones. She pushed a hulking boy out of the way so Nita and Joel could join them.

“Have they picked yet? Have they picked?” asked Nita.

Penny shook her head and bounced on the balls of her feet.

A boy clambered up a hastily constructed scaffold in front of the fire and held up his arms for quiet. Silence rippled through the crowd until only a few voices remained on the fringes, those around them hissing for quiet. “Tonight’s chosen are,” he made a flourish as he reached into a sack. “Terrance Ritter, Deborah Ashman, Ben O’Farlen.” Groans punctuated the night as he read off the names. “Matt Foote, and Penny Cartwell.”

“No,” gasped Penny as she backed away from the fire. Straight into Midge.

“No good, honey. Just your luck,” he shoved her forward into waiting hands.

Sobs thrummed through her body. “Help, please. Not me, not me. Someone help! I wanna go home,” she screamed.

Greer spat. “Oh, shut up and take it.”

Joel shifted and hunched his shoulders.

The still-struggling chosen were herded together beneath the stand. Penny trembled in the center, shrinking into herself. Some of the crowd mounted the platform and helped the MC hoist buckets of paint over the edge. Liquid black drenched the group below, who then spread out in a haggard ring around the bonfire. Everyone else bunched together so that clear paths shot through the crowd in front of those circling the fire.

The MC raised his hands again. His voice carried across the shuffling crowd, “You all remember the rules. Anyone that’s not a paint is off limits.” He turned to the black smattered group beneath him, “Go.” Some leapt forward into the clear lanes, others

hesitated. Most just stood there, hanging their heads and weeping. Just as the first painted one was about to break out into the field, the MC's hands dropped.

The yell of the crowd swallowed up the screams as the lanes crushed together. Nita saw Penny just ahead of her as some boy grabbed her pigtail and yanked her to the ground. The boy sunk his teeth into Penny's arm as someone else grabbed her from the other side. The crush pushed Nita back, blocking her view. A severed arm smacked her in the face. She leapt on it and had to shove another girl away.

She glimpsed Greer through the crowd, wrenching someone's head off. The noise reached a fevered pitch, and then the screaming evaporated. The roiling crowd began to melt away. Nita tried to straighten her ripped skirt, but gave up. She touched the tip of her ear; one of her earrings had been torn out, along with part of her ear. Her mother wasn't going to like having to pay for another patch job.

"Joel?" she called across the crowd. She hoped he'd been able to get a good view of everything. Eventually, she found him, huddled by the tree-line. He smelled a bit like stomach innards. "Are you hurt?"

He jerked away from her touch.

"Joel?" she tried again.

He turned on her, drawing the back of his hand across his mouth. Redness splotched his puffy face. "Why?"

"Why what?" she asked.

"Why would you do that? Why would anyone," he said, clenching his eyes shut and swallowing hard. "Penny was your friend."

“But she was picked. We all had the chance to be picked; it’s part of the fun,” she said, digging her toe into the mossy ground.

“That!” yelled Joel as he leapt to his feet. The unhealthy red color grew in his face and his eyes looked wet. “That was murder.”

Nita pulled back, hurt by the anger in his voice. “But, but it was fun.”

Joel shoved past her and stalked down the hill, disappearing along the road.

Nita scrubbed at the black smudges on her hands as she watched him go. “It was just fun,” she whispered.

It was a silent ride back to Nita’s house, punctuated only by Greer’s offers to hunt Joel down and kill him. Her offers grew ever more creative. Nita merely pressed her forehead against the window and sighed. Every few minutes Greer offered another suggestion. Chainsaw. Ice pick. Gasoline. Shotgun. Hatchet. Lawn Gnome.

Nita rolled her head back against the window to look at Greer. “Lawn Gnome?”

“Ours is wicked heavy,” said Greer.

Nita gave a weak smile.

“Forget the freak. This Friday, you and me are going to have some fun. Sound good?” asked Greer as she crunched to a stop by Nita’s house. Nodding, Nita slid from the truck and clambered up the drain pipe just as the sun started creeping up the wall.

* * *

Nita pushed the entrails around her lunch tray, swirling the intestines through their grey gravy. She half raised the fork to her mouth and then let it fall.

Greer watched from between darkened eyes while she tapped a rhythm on the metal table. “It’s pork today. Got good flavor.”

“Yeah,” said Nita. She paused and started stirring in the opposite direction.

“I helped slaughter them myself,” said Greer.

“Sounds like fun. This from your farm then?” asked Nita.

Greer slammed her fork into Nita’s food, pinning it through the tray. “No, I went and gave the stinking customer-stealing Graf’s a hand. You leave your brain behind today?” She grabbed Nita’s bangs and pulled her head down, digging through her hair.

Smacking Greer’s hand away, Nita combed through her mussed hair. “Sorry. It’s just eating at me.” She twisted a strand of hair between her fingers. “He was so upset.”

“So, what?” asked Greer. She grabbed the fork and jerked it out of the table.

“Maybe you’ve got yourself a parasite? You look horrible.”

“Thanks,” drawled Nita as she rolled her eyes. “I haven’t been sleeping. It’s that dream again, the one where someone is calling my name. I keep waking myself up looking for the voice. It’s gotten worse since we found Joel.”

Greer smirked and leveled her fork at Nita. “You know they’ve got medicine for that,” she said around a mouthful of food.

Midge sauntered up and threw his leg over the bench, straddling it. “I think I found your boy.” He dropped an open yearbook onto the table and jabbed a finger at one of the pictures.

Nita snatched the book from Midge and stared at the photo. “Is that Joel? But he looks so,” she searched for the word, “normal.”

Greer craned over her shoulder. “Normal? The boy is fine.”

A boy that looked very much like Joel leered from the photo, his handsome nose gaping open and lips stitched back over his teeth. His ashy skin lacked any hint of the ghastly flush it had now and his eyes were seductively dull.

“How about a little appreciation for my fine memory?” asked Midge, spreading his arms wide.

“Mozel tov,” drawled Greer.

“I was hoping for something a touch more enthusiastic,” he said as he snuck a piece of food off Nita’s plate. “Something lip related?”

Nita ran her finger across the picture. “What happened to him?”

Midge shrugged and pulled one of his lanky legs up to his chest, leaning on it as he stared at Nita. “Dunno, sugar. I saw him last year at the Jordan Creek bonfire. You should have seen him going after the paints.” Midge pursed his lips in remembrance. “Ripped a spine clear out. A thing of beauty.”

“How’d he go from that to a warm blood in a ditch?” asked Greer.

The three looked at one another in silence. Nita bit her lip while Greer sucked her teeth. “Scary. If it can happen to him, we’re all fair game.”

* * *

He was sitting on the front stoop when Nita got off the bus. He looked better than he had, dark circles beneath his eyes, cheeks pinching his bones. Nita took a few hurried steps forward before slowing and lazing up next to him. Joel forced his head up to meet her gaze, his arms flopped limp across his knees.

“Hi,” he said.

Nita raised her nose and refused to look at him.

“The Police laughed at me,” he said, dropping his head back between his knees. “They threatened to lock me up in the loony bin. Maybe that’s what I need. A long-sleeve sweater that ties in the back.”

Blowing a strand of hair out of her face, Nita dropped down beside Joel. “They’re not in season. Why’d you come back?”

“That is the question,” he said. He shivered a bit as the wind nipped through his light jacket, wrapping his arms about his chest.

“Come on.” Nita gripped him by the elbow and led him up to her room.

Joel studied the posters of prancing ponies and barely skinned singers screaming into microphones. “It’s sick, what you all did,” he said without turning around. He sunk down on the edge of Nita’s bed. “What I did,” he touched above his heart, “before.”

“Oh! You remember!” Nita squealed. Joel held up his hand to stop her as she rushed to hug him. She stopped anyway, remembering his heat.

“Just enough.” He studied the lines tracing across his palm. “That bonfire wasn’t my first. I was like you. Like everyone else.” He clenched his hands. “And then...I wasn’t.”

Putting her hands on her hips, Nita pouted. “Then why were you all over us about the bonfire?”

“The dream doesn’t look so nice once you wake up,” said Joel, bitterness creeping into his voice. “And that’s all any of this is—a dream.” He shook his head. “Just tell me why you do it.”

“The rush. It makes you feel so alive,” said Nita, scrunching her nose. It was obvious.

Joel gave a bark of pitying laughter. He sighed and ran his hands through his hair.

“You don’t even know.”

“What?” asked Nita.

“You’re dead. All of you!” he flung his arm toward the world outside the window.

“Every single one of you are dead, and you can’t even see it.”

Nita fought the smile tugging at her lips. Clamping her hands over her mouth, she tried to shove the giggles back down her throat. He looked so serious. She burst out laughing and wrapped her arms round her middle in case her sides split. Sinking down into the chair, she pressed her lips tight, trying to hold herself together.

“It’s like a bad horror movie,” she said, still fighting off the giggles. “Dead people walking around—bodies with no one inside.”

“You’d be surprised,” he said; a wry smile ghosted across his features.

Nita buried her face in a pillow and drew her legs up under her.

Joel knelt in front of her as she peeked over the pillow. He took her hand and brought it to his chest, holding it over his heart. It thudded beneath her hand, almost beating out a rhythm. Her flesh crawled. It jarred her bones. She tried to pull away, but Joel latched onto her hand.

“Feel that? *I’m* alive,” he said. “I used to be like you, but now I’m different.”

“It’s wrong,” said Nita, taking back her hand. “You’re wrong.”

Joel grabbed the chair and swiveled it around to the mirror. Their reflections gazed back at them. Hers pale and beautiful, his warm and ugly.

“Look. Really look,” he said.

Nita smiled at him and shook her head but gazed into the mirror anyway. “I’m normal,” she said finally as she twisted back to look at Joel. Her smile faltered, and she drew away from the pity in his eyes.

“You really think so, don’t you?” He grabbed his coat from the bed post and turned to go. “I wish I could make you see.”

“And the freak’s back,” said Greer from the doorway. She lounged against the doorframe, playing with her voodoo bunny keychain. “Let’s go, chica. They ain’t holding up a hazing just for us.”

Nita grabbed her purse from the bed and slipped past Greer, giving Joel a last glance. “Stop looking at me like that. I’m going have fun, and you’re not ruining it,” she huffed over her shoulder.

“Fun like the other night?” asked Joel. He stared at her from beneath ruffled bangs. Accusation and sadness lurked in his bright eyes.

Nita stiffened and minced past Greer, tossing her hair. Greer bared her pointed teeth. “I’ve got a gnome with your name on it.” She leered as he edged backward.

* * *

Putting on a smile, Nita nudged Greer with her shoulder as they walked through the darkened school corridors. “So. Whatcha have in mind?”

Greer licked her teeth as she held open a stairwell door. “What do you say to a little target practice?” But when Nita pressed for details, Greer only gave a teasing smile.

By the time they reached the roof, Nita was hanging off Greer’s arm. “Come on, Greer, tell me, tell me, tell me. Please?”

“Impatient much, girl?” Greer pushed Nita to the edge of the roof. “Well, go ahead. Have a look then.”

Nita leaned over the short wall and peered into the quad below. Shapes milled in the darkness. Suddenly, lights flooded the area, surprising the teens below. Some hissed and threw their arms over their eyes.

“You up for a little freshie hazing, cupcake?” asked Midge as he sauntered along the roof, rifles slung under his arm. A number of seniors flanked him.

Nita nodded and bounced up to him, sticking out her hand for a weapon. Midge laughed and passed around his arsenal. Dumping small caliber bullets into her pocket, Nita ratcheted the slide into place and loaded the gun.

“Got ‘em locked in good?” asked Greer, throwing a rifle over her shoulder.

“They’re not going anywhere,” said one of the others. He pointed at the chain and padlock running through the iron grated door at the end of the quad.

“The freshmen aren’t as stupid this year as I’d like,” said Midge. “Entirely too much work to lure them in here.”

Greer settled atop an air conditioner vent. “Nita’s got first pickings.” When some of the bigger boys didn’t look like they appreciated it too much, Greer cocked her gun with a lazy click and cradled it with the barrel facing in their direction.

Nita hunkered down against the wall, shoving her blouse sleeve out of the way as she settled the rifle butt against her shoulder. Closing one eye and sighting down the barrel, she centered in on a young girl with pigtails. Her finger drifted to the trigger as she imagined the squelch of the .22 striking flesh and the bruise purpling around the hole. The pain shooting through the girl’s body. The shock. The tears.

Her finger dropped away. She swallowed and repositioned the gun. The cold stock pressed against her cheek as she nestled into the trigger again.

“Any day now,” hissed Greer.

Nita sat back. “Let’s all just go. More fun that way,” she said.

“Works for me,” said one of the others. A crack echoed through the silence, followed by a yelp of pain. The others opened fire. The freshman down below broke into a blind panic as bullets stung them from all sides.

Nita wrapped her hands around the gun, growing very still, her eyes flicking from one downed student to the next. The cries of terror burrowed into her ears as she watched them convulse, their bodies jerking away from the stinging bites. The girl in pigtails huddled in the corner crying, “I wanna go home!”

For an instant the girl seemed older, black paint smeared across her lacey dress.

Nita blinked away the vision. “Stop! Stop!” she yelled. No one heard her. Slinging the rifle across her back, she leapt over the wall and dropped into the courtyard.

“What the? What’s she doing?” cried one of Midge’s friends.

“Nita, stop!” yelled Greer as Nita shoved through to the padlocked door. She jerked the chain around so the lock hung on her side and raised her rifle butt.

“Your friend’s lost it, Greer!” shouted another.

“Nita!” Greer’s voice caused Nita to pause as she caught her friend’s eye. Greer stood on the lip of the wall, confusion souring to anger as her fingers ground around the gun barrel. Nita looked away and brought the rifle down.

A flood of freshman swept past, coursing around her as they dissipated into the school. She allowed herself to be swept along with them, swirling through the halls and

cresting against locked doors. The current beached her on the stairs as she clambered up above the rush of heads.

A voice struggled through the din, calling her name. Joel leaned over the railing above Nita and waved her up. Anger burst through her as she saw the warmth in his skin. She imagined the insidious thud of his heart creeping beneath the rush of panicked voices. In her head she could feel the tremors rippling through the floor and reverberating through her skull.

Joel stumbled backward as Nita howled, leaping up the stairs, lips stretched back over her gums. She slammed him against a wall. “You did this!” she screeched. Joel struggled under her grip, making a strange gasping sound as she clenched her hands around his throat. He scrabbled at her fingers, nails sinking into her flesh. His eyes started to roll back. Growling, Nita flung him to the ground and straddled his chest. She bit down hard on his shoulder, satisfied by the blood that welled up. “What did you do to me?”

Joel stared at her as she glared down at him, blood dripping from her chin. “Tell me!” She raised her hands above her head and bashed Joel about the head and chest. “What did you do?” she yelled. “What did you do?” Again and again she screamed at him, smashing her fists into his head. She must have nicked something as blood started running down his forehead. Through the blood, Joel just stared at her. He didn’t fight back; he didn’t even cry out. She hated him for it.

“It’s not any *fun*,” she sobbed, dropping her hands onto his chest. She rolled off and sat hunched up at his side, snot running from her nose.

Joel eased himself up, wincing. He stared at Nita as she scrubbed at her face with her sleeve. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Greer’ll never speak to me again,” said Nita. “But I couldn’t take it. I just,” she gripped her stomach, “it made me feel like I had maggots.” She hunched up and hugged her knees to her chest. “I’m wrong now.” She flinched away as Joel placed a hand on her shoulder. “Wrong like you.”

He tried a smile, face contorting in pain as he pulled his split lip. “Wrong like seeing what no one else can.” He snorted. “Like being the only one sane.”

She twitched. “I just want it to be fun again,” she whispered.

The two sat in silence as moonlight crawled across their skin, tangling in a halo behind Joel’s hair. A hollow clapping made them both look up.

“That was something, honey. I’ve never seen someone botch a hazing like that,” said Midge, framed by some of the larger teens from the roof. “Really ruined it for the rest of us.”

“Sorry,” murmured Nita.

“Don’t be, love.” Midge knelt down next to Nita and rubbed her back. “Can’t help it if you went a bit crazy. I’d go crazy too with all that drumming.” Midge brought his hands up, two fingers poised over his palm. One-two. He clapped his fingers against his palm. One-two. Thud-thud.

Nita whirled to look at Joel, who had pressed against the wall, holding very still.

“We’re tired of that tune,” said Midge as one of the others closed the gap between him and Joe. He grabbed Joel around the neck.

“Let him go,” screamed Nita, latching onto the teen’s arm. He grunted and shrugged her off. “Midge, please!”

“Came here to have a good time,” said Midge, “and we’re going to have it.” He held out his hand to Nita. “The more the merrier.”

Nita lunged at his face, shrieking as one of the other boys shoved her down the stairs. Her head bounced off the concrete. She lay in a heap at the bottom, dazed. As they dragged Joel off, his struggling grew fainter. Nita latched onto the horrible sound of his heart, listening for it reverberating through the halls.

A volley of rifles cracked. The shots echoed into silence.

* * *

The world looked strange tipped over on its side. The cool tiles pressed against Nita’s cheek as she lay at the base of the stairs. The silence crushed her into the floor.

Shoes squeaked. “Nita,” a voice echoed down the empty corridor. “Nita.”

She’d heard that voice before, but never answered. “I’m here,” she whispered.

A pair of scuffed converses crossed in front of her. A man knelt in front of Nita, his white lab coat pooling around him. He smiled. She cringed and curled into a ball. He was so much worse than Joel. Pink and hideous. She could hear the blood moving through his body. Nita gagged as she thought of that blood: hot and red tearing through him. She studied her wrist, comforted by the cool stagnant blue branching beneath the surface.

“I’ve been calling you. Why didn’t you answer?” he asked, voice gentle.

Nita drew her feet up under her and sat up. “I didn’t hear you,” she said. She tried to look at him and offer her own smile in return. She couldn’t bring it past her molars.

He sighed and rocked back on his heels. “No one ever does.” The fabric bunched around his arms as he rested his elbows on his knees and cupped his face in his hands. He looked at her.

Nita searched the air for some clue what the stranger wanted. She wished he’d stop looking at her like he expected something. “Why are you here?”

“Because, you called me.” He blinked.

Her mouth opened and shut a few times before Nita could form the right words. “But that’s because you called me first.”

“Exactly,” said the man with a smile.

Nita slumped back against the stairwell. “I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to,” said the man. “Here, I’ve got something for you.” He cupped his hands closed and stretched them out.

Nita couldn’t help leaning forward.

He unfurled his hands. A heart rested in his palms.

“That’s mine!” said Nita, her voice spiking with indignation.

“Bit the worse for wear, isn’t it?” asked the man. He passed his hands over the lopsided flesh, and the cold flushed out of it. The plaster patch popped off and shattered against the floor. The heart convulsed. “There you are, a proper heart.”

Nita placed her hand over the gaping hole in her chest. It itched.

The man peered at her. “You know, it really doesn’t belong in your drawer,” he said. He pointed at Nita’s chest as she clenched her hands over the hole. “What say we put it where it belongs?”

Nita stared at the man's shoes. "Am I dead?" She bit her lip and forced herself to look him in the face. "Am I wrong?"

The man cocked his head to the side and gave a sad smile.

"I didn't know." She pulled her shirt away, sliding the loose rib clear of the hole.

"There will be pain," he said. Nita closed her eyes and nodded. The heart slid into her chest like a hot poker, the beat jarring through her bones. Her body jerked as curdled blood melted through her. She felt the man's strong arms around her. His heat charred her flesh. As the pain crested, his heat crept down through her skin, mingling with the fire boiling from her core. For an instant, she saw his face. He was beautiful. The pain tugged her into darkness.

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Nita groaned as she blinked awake; the bleak walls slanted sideways across her vision. There had been a man with her heart. Her hand drifted to her chest and trailed across the now solid flesh. For an instant, she thought she heard Joel's heart again.

Nita pressed her palm against her chest and felt the same subtle thump she'd felt when Joel had made her feel his heart. It didn't jar her now.

Her head rested in someone's lap. Their cold form curled around her, and an icy hand stroked her unraveling braid. She rolled back to see Greer looking down at her, pale and dead. Nita shuddered as Greer's loose eye rolled to focus on her.

Her friend's dull eyes were slick, her thick eyeliner smudged. She held her mouth tight as she looked down at Nita. "Hey there, freak."

Daughter of Setesh

To any other's eyes, she would have been invisible, another lowered face in the silent crowd. The servant is perhaps the most easily overlooked individual on this earth. The aristocracy whom they serve take little notice of them, as if they do not exist until summoned. Despite the fact that I must count myself among that shallow misguided lot, I do not ignore those of 'lower station'.

There was no ignoring this girl. I must admit, I engaged in rather impolite staring as she ghosted across the Continental's crowded veranda. She darted from table to table, gathering the leavings of Englishmen retiring from the swelter of the Egyptian sun. Nothing about her struck me as special save for an air of forsakenness. Even the other servants disregarded her, shunned her. None crossed her path, and if words were exchanged, they were brief.

As she drew near my table, another guest pushed his chair into her path. The shattering of glass could be heard above the din of the assembled aristocracy, but they did not so much as spare a glance from their tea and cucumbers. The girl dropped to her knees, catching up the shattered glass so quickly her hands bled.

I recognized the man as Lord Braydon, a man whom I had the unfortunate pleasure of encountering throughout the social season and the good fortune of being able to avoid on most occasions. This gentleman, and I use the term loosely, wrinkled his nose as if a stray dog had just crawled in his path. "You would think the establishment could afford to have something other than savages in its employ," he said.

“The Savoy imports maids from France,” said one of his companions who had entirely too much neck and, given his choice of fashion, clearly wasn’t aware of it. He had the lean look of a man who had long since bled the wealth out of his family name. “Course, they don’t speak a sight of proper English.”

“That’s the French for you,” commented another, a youth in a tawdry cravat.

Braydon folded his thick arms as he peered down at the child, for she could be no more than fifteen. “Mind you, she’d be quite the conversation piece back home. Who else would have a genuine maid from the Orient?”

“It would be the talk of society,” said the giraffe.

“You could train it to do tricks. Like those monkeys in Kensington Garden,” said the cravat. He took a sip, his manner of drinking tea as affected as his clothing.

Braydon grubbed behind his ear. “Here then girl, let’s have a look at you.”

The girl continued to pick the glass from between the tile.

“Maybe she doesn’t speak English,” said the giraffe.

I pressed fingers to my temples as Braydon tried to shout his way through the language barrier. The girl spared him a glance before returning to her work. An old woman in a magnificent plumed hat condescended to offer them both an irritated glance.

Braydon narrowed his piggy eyes and grabbed the girl around her thin arm, yanking her to her feet, the glass falling from her hands.

“Have a look at those eyes,” said Braydon. An unsavory look settled across his face as he jerked the girl round for his friends to have a look. “Seems a countryman has been sampling the local flavor.”

His companions laughed.

As the girl stood trembling, blood traced down her hands and dripped from her fingertips. A drop splashed across the toe of the gentleman's shining black shoe. The girl made no noise, just collapsed in on herself. She knew what to expect.

The rolls of flesh that were once his neck wobbled as he blustered, his face taking on the shade of an overripe plum. He raised his fist: a great slab of meaty flesh with stubby sausaged fingers. The girl cowered, her small frame trembling. That massive lump of meat fell.

Braydon's small, moist eyes stretched wide as I appeared before him, his wrist closed in my fist. "Sir, I believe you should take your leave," I said.

He looked me up and down with an appraising glance. Those mean, piggy eyes held no recognition, though we had been introduced on several occasions. He scoured my person for any sign I was beneath him. Doubtless, he thought no man on earth had the status to treat him in such a way. Nonetheless, etiquette demanded he act with courtesy toward a fellow gentleman.

"This grimy little harlot has ruined my best pair of shoes," he said, wiping his free hand down the front of his waistcoat in greasy streaks.

"No damage has been done a handkerchief cannot mend." I hid my contempt beneath my mustache. "If you cannot find it possible to reach your feet, perhaps one of the vultures in your party can oblige." The vultures themselves seemed miffed by this identification.

Braydon puffed out his chest. "This is no business of yours, sir. You'll kindly remove yourself. That halfwit will pay for her clumsiness. Those of *her kind* must be kept in their place. No Arab bastard of a whore will show me such disrespect."

The old lady in the hat looked appropriately shocked and muttered a scandalized, “Well, I never.”

I admit that I might have lost my temper. “At least this girl’s mother earned an honest wage at her whoring. Your mother did it for free.” Apparently, my grip had tightened rather dramatically around his wrist, as his small eyes began to water. Squealing, the man writhed in my grip.

After I released him, he slithered away, his gaggle of leeches following in his wake. Such devotion to his purse strings.

Stooping, I knelt before the girl. With a soft smile on my lips, I raised her chin. There it was, the reason the others avoided her. Her olive skin was smooth and sun kissed, but the eyes that stared out from behind dark locks were blue: blue like Egyptian faience.

She was a half-breed then, probably with a European father and an Egyptian mother. Her eyes told a story of hard days beneath the boots of others and nights tucked into lonely corners. Despite the trials scored into her eyes a veil of innocence still softened them.

“All right then, it will be fine now,” I said as I took her small brown hands in mine, watching in fascination as the blood pooled in her palms, hard calluses rising like mountains above a lake. She watched me with distrust as I bound her hands with what had been my second-best handkerchief. She didn’t understand. Unfortunately, the extent of my Arabic included only the most basic terms.

It was like talking to my hunting falcon back home. I did not speak his language anymore than he spoke mine. Our understanding was one of gentle caresses and tender

tones. It was also one of snatches of meat and dead mice, which is where the analogy broke down.

The girl watched in stunned silence as I picked up the broken pieces of plate and glass, and placed them on her tray. Raising her to her feet, I set the platter in her outstretched hands and tucked a few bills between her fingers.

Her wide eyes could only stare in bewilderment as a small, sweet smile curved her lips. Then, with a string of soft words, she drifted into the forest of potted ferns—gone. As I have observed, servants are some of the most easily over-looked individuals. The way the girl vanished made me wonder, though, if their invisibility was not simply the disdain of their betters, but a skill cultivated by the serving class.

Over my last few days in Cairo, I watched for a flash of blue eyes in a dark face. My vigilance proved to be in vain. Idly, I toyed with the idea of questioning the other servants through my dragoman—my local guide and interpreter—but I dismissed it as an overly romantic notion brought on by the mystique of the Orient. The whole affair would likely prove nothing more than an amusing story to be shared over a pipe when I returned to England.

Thoughts of the incident faded against the rush of preparing my dahabeeyah for its voyage down the Nile. My ultimate goal was the temple of Karnak at Luxor, a journey which would take some weeks. I had employed a kindly, if overly fussy, English matron to oversee the appointment of the ship since I had no interest in such arrangements. It proved difficult to persuade her that I had no intention of hosting any gatherings upon the ship and required only the most basic necessities. And yet, I still found myself fending

off her inquiries as to whether I would prefer the salon's drapes to be in mauve or blue check.

At last, the day of departure arrived, and the final details had been arranged. As I mounted the carriage amid my luggage and travel kit, a thought of the girl struck me. I half expected to catch a glimpse of her just as we rolled out of sight. This was what came of indulging in the writing of women; one came to expect the most absurdly romantic occurrences. The carriage jerked away into a street swarming with bustled ladies teetering on the backs of over-laden donkeys, persistent beggars, and hawkers of tomb treasures. As I gazed at the crush of people and livestock, I wondered if perhaps my reading habits wholly deserved the blame for causing such flights of fancy. The mystique of the Egyptian country permeated the whole of the place: from its veiled women and the stirring minaret cries to the hulking monoliths that seemed handed down by heathen gods. The very air breathed like smoke through a water pipe. It threatened to carry me away.

I found something medicinal in the solid Britishness of the blue-check curtains that flapped from the open windows of my dahabeeyah. God bless my fussy Matron who saw no reason for the common homespun comforts of the English countryside to be superseded by Oriental opulence. Once on the dahabeeyah, I could breathe again, the perfume of the city swept away. I listened to the call and response of the captain and his crew as they maneuvered the vessel into the Nile's broad center and raised the triangular sail. I ran the checked linen weave between my fingers and forgot about the girl.

We stopped at some of the lesser sights along the way; I had no urge to be choked by the press of tourists, all with Murray's *Handbook to Egypt* clasped to their chests and foppish attempts at local garb. There would be no avoiding it at Karnak. As it was, I still

had to deal with the locals whenever we put in at the docks. Inevitably, a gaggle of ragged women and dirty children met us as soon as we landed, all with their hands out for baksheesh. If I never hear that cursed word again! Baksheesh. I believe it to be the first word out of their infant mouths, so the mothers can set them begging at the doorstep.

The haunting halls of Karnak were worth dealing with the crowd, even if I did have the unfortunate pleasure of being herded about with a bunch of Irishmen. Given the height of learning Egypt must have attained when it constructed such things as Karnak its descendents have fallen off a great deal. Forests of stone pillars lined the temple complex, each carved from base to apex and crowned with a finial in likeness of lotus or flowering papyrus. It took six men with their arms linked to encircle just one of these columns. In contrast to such riches, the modern Egyptians live primarily in mud huts.

I thought of the girl only once, when my dragoman Shakir showed me a statue of some long dead priestess whose name sounded like a sneeze.

“She was the ‘Wife of Amun’ and held power second only to the pharaoh,” said Shakir as he gestured at the limestone figure.

Egyptian art tends toward a blandness with respect to emotion in the features. But not with this sculpture. You could see something lurking behind the half lowered lids, a secret hiding in the depths of her carved eyes.

As we were leaving Karnak, I took a fancy to a little stretch of hieroglyphs on the wall. I brought out my kit with its chisel and mallet and began carving the piece from the greater design. It was a wondrous little depiction of animal headed gods escorting the sun on its nightly journey through the underworld. One of them did not look like any animal I had seen; tall rectangular ears topped his sloping snout and the narrowed prick of his

visible eye—another oddity in Egyptian art—still had remnants of a faience glaze. I only recognized one of the hieroglyphs, the one that looked a bit like a cross with a looped handle: the ankh, the symbol of life.

Shakir tugged at his robe as I started tapping against the rock. “Sir Davis, there is a dealer of antiquities in Luxor with a fine collection. He is the cousin of the cousin of my wife and will sell you beautiful things for small money.”

“But that robs it of the story,” I said as I continued to chip away at the surrounding stone.

“It is a very little thing. The cousin of the cousin of my wife can give you better,” said Shakir.

I glanced up to see him rubbing the amulet around his neck: a single staring blue eye set in an open palm. Though he prayed five times a day like a good Muhammadin, Shakir appeared unable to shake a belief that devils infested the sands and that the ghosts of dead gods could menace the living through the carved walls. Not a skittish man by nature, Shakir nonetheless exhibited a solemn superstition. It made it difficult to walk down the street without incurring the wrath of some dark spirit at every corner. Beneath his robe I knew him to wear an assortment of wards against evil and penchants for good luck: cowry shells, a tiny brass bell, beads of amber, and lucky coins from as far east as China. His most recent acquisition, a particularly haggard rabbit’s foot, had been given to him by an American plantation owner who paid entirely too much heed to the hoodoo absurdity of his Haitian slave.

“Am I attracting the attention of the evil eye?” I asked.

Shakir's hand clenched about the blue eye; his face remained untroubled. "It is best not to speak of the 'ain. Your piece of stone may bring envy," he said.

"And the wares of the cousin of the cousin of your wife won't?" I asked, unable to keep the smile from my lips.

Nodding, Shakir fixed me with a serious stare, "He is skilled at making the spirits happy. They no longer see beauty in his things. They do not envy."

Shakir could not dissuade me, and I chipped the little piece free.

In a fit of whimsy, I delayed my return to Cairo one more day and had the deebayah anchored near some strikingly un-touristy cliff-dug tombs. The idea of sleeping under the stars on a mild Egyptian night appealed to me, and I had Shakir arrange a campsite on the shore below the cliffs.

After a full meal followed by honeyed dates for dessert, I lounged beside the fire and gazed up. The stars were different than English stars, but I could still spot Orion hunting the darkness.

I thought of the frieze bundled in my streamer trunk. One of the hieroglyphs stood out in my mind. I glanced at Shakir, who crouched flat-footed across from me, "What is this symbol?" Dragging my finger through the sand, I drew a staff topped by the profile of the slope nosed god. At the base the staff split into a forked tail.

Shakir peered over my crude drawing. He stroked the graying patch in his beard, running his thumb down his chin. "It is called the was-scepter. It is power and dominion."

I pointed at the head, "Is that the same god from my frieze?"

Shakir nodded. “Setesh. Or Suetek or Set, he has many names. He was the god of the desert and of the chaos. The story says he envied his brother Osiris and he murdered him, cutting him into many pieces.”

“Who would worship a god like that?” I wondered.

Shakir gave an eloquent shrug, an art among his people. “Who can say?”

Glancing up at the lonely cliffs, I wondered if the long plundered graves once held the bones of someone who could worship such a god. I’d never felt the call of the dead while at home, even in the presence of the standing stones. But here they seemed to stray too close to life, their everyday utensils just waiting to be picked up and used. These time haggard people weren’t dead; they’d merely stepped out and would return at anytime. Even the kettle was on waiting for them.

The ancients in those tombs strove for immortality with such skill that their bodies remained through the ages. If only their spirits could return. I glanced at the was-scepter sketched into the sand. Did it hold sway over death?

A wind played through the cliffs, and I imagined the voices of the dead whispered on the drafts. They called for someone to make the signs and perform the rituals that would bring them back. They suffered without a priest.

The snap of draperies on the breeze brought me to myself. I realized I was on my feet. Was I really going to indulge such fantasies and climb the cliffs? I looked out across the sluggish Nile, stars wavering in its gentle current as it flowed north to the sea. I laughed. Oh Egypt, you would have to try harder to trap me in your mysteries.

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The trip back to Cairo unfolded much as the voyage to Karnak had, with hands out for baksheesh. After weeks on the water, my rooms at the Continental provided promise of a restful retreat, though I was sad to bid farewell to my curtains. Shakir, too, seemed eager to return to the back alley warren where his family resided.

I hoped to find rest in the comfort of the hotel; what I found was sweltering heat. Even the descent of the sun behind Cairo's skyline did little to the temperature. At times like these I thought it might be preferable to brave England's damp winter drear.

There was no relief. Even peeling off my coat and collar did little to stem my discomfort. I thought of an iced bath, but it seemed an extravagant indulgence. In despair, I retired to the Ezbekiya Gardens, hoping to find their cool paths protected from the heat.

As I walked across the dusty street to the gardens, I looked for the regular gaggle of stragglers hanging about the Opera House across the square, but even they had retreated from the night's warmth. It was well into the morning hours when I entered the leafy sanctum; I expected to have the manicured lawns to myself. Meandering the graveled paths, I threaded through heavy hanging breadfruit trees and syrupy jasmine toward the magnificent banyan tree. A shiver of movement in the shadows surprised me as I approached the pillared tree. My imagination populated the bushes with the most sensational phantasms: plotting rebels, indiscretionate youth, or the rendezvous of traitors to Queen and Country.

My imagination lacked the fertility to concoct the scene I uncovered as I pushed through the flowering myrrh. It unfolded like the tableau of a penny dreadful. The body of Lord Braydon sprawled beneath the scented canopy, striped to his shirtsleeves. He

appeared to have died in a great deal of pain as his eyes had rolled up so that only the whites shone waxy in the darkness. He had paled, and his vast girth pooled about him.

I caught a flash of color as the girl glanced up from where she knelt over the body. The blue of her eyes hid no fear, bewilderment, or—more importantly—compassion; the veil of innocence had been ripped away. She gripped the dripping knife in her hand with the casualness of a long acquaintance. A satisfied smile pulled at the corners of her dark lips.

Between her slim fingers I glimpsed the golden hilt and decorated pommel of an ancient knife. She'd rimmed her eyes with kohl, drawing the lines out almost to her temples. In her face I could see something of the proud look of the priestess of Amun, the look that hid deep secrets.

And then she saw me. She seemed mildly surprised as if I had unexpectedly come upon her picking the flowers. There was no fear. For a moment she considered me, wolfish eyes searching for weakness. She found me utterly wanting.

I foolishly made to reach for her. I expected her to run. She was just a girl after all. Instead, she darted forward, landing a blow to my ribs that sent me sputtering to my knees. The press of her blade to my neck stopped my cries for aid.

She chattered at me. Not in Arabic, but something older.

“If you hope me to beg, you are to be disappointed,” I said. “I am English.” If only I could believe myself.

Something shifted in her face as she forced my head back with her knife. I looked up at her much as she had looked at me the day we met. The thumb of her free hand ran over the still pink lacerations across her palm. Slowly, she pulled the knife away.

I opened my mouth to thank her but never got the words out as the girl suddenly flipped the knife and smashed the pommel into my temple. I have a vague recollection of hitting the ground and then being drug through the tangled underbrush of thorns and grasping roots.

When I awoke, it was to Shakir's incessant shaking. Back in my suite of rooms, nothing appeared to be amiss other than my lack of a shirt.

"Are you in good health, sir?" he asked, valiantly trying to find somewhere to rest his gaze other than myself. Part of why I had hired Shakir had been for this very fact; he lacked the capacity to tell a decent lie.

Pressing a hand to my tender skull, I tried to raise myself into a seated position. "What happened?" I had a distant sensation of minor scrapes and bruises across my body, but there was also a numbness down my neck and shoulder that bordered on pain.

Shakir attempted a smile. "That I do not know. I entered your rooms to deliver your parcels as you asked." He gripped his amulet. "The door was locked."

He couldn't seem to keep from staring. It cinched a knot of unease in me. His words faltered and his untroubled mask of solemnity kept sliding off his face. Shakir's strangeness did nothing to ease my temper.

"Damnation, man! What is wrong with you?" I asked.

"Sat Setesh," he finally murmured, pointing at my neck.

I raised my hand to my throat, the flesh twinging beneath my touch. I strode to the mirror and stared in horror at the grotesque black mark carved into my skin. The ash that had been rubbed into the cuts still dusted my shoulder and clung to the remnants of salve streaked across the wound.

Dunking the edge of a towel into my basin, I dabbed away the last of the salve and soot. The wound opened a little, dribbling down onto my chest. I craned my neck to stare at the mark: an ankh with a was-scepter speared through the center.

“It is her mark,” whispered Shakir, his hands twitching through strange signs in order to ward off evil. “How can you live? She always leaves them not alive.”

“What does this mean?” I demanded, jabbing my finger toward the mark.

“Your life is hers,” he said. “For now, she spares it.”

“Hers? Who is she?” I yelled, backing Shakir against the wall.

The poor man held his fingers in the mark of the horns against me. “The one with the ‘ain. They call her the Daughter of Setesh. She worships the old gods, and they say the spirit of Setesh walks with her.”

I sunk into my chair and ran my hand down my brand. I would never escape this. There was nothing intangible about Egypt’s magic, it was all too real and stalked the streets in the body of a mad child.

And if No Face Fits

A dozen blank-eyed faces stared from the wall. Katya stared back, equally blank-eyed. Her mother, Nelin, flitted about the room turning down the lamps and twitching the curtains into place.

“Which face will you try today?” asked her mother, glancing over her shoulder as she straightened the already neat bookshelves.

Katya met Nelin’s gaze in the vanity mirror. She swallowed a sigh and turned back to the masks on the wall. Row upon row of painted porcelain.

“The Huntress, I thought,” she said. “Verusha and I are going riding today. Unless she decides to wear the Pink Priss again.”

Nelin cast her narrowed eyes to the side. “Don’t be rude. Your sister can choose whichever face she likes. If she wants to be refined she may, just as you may choose to tromp about like we couldn’t afford to buy you a better mask.” Her mother sniffed.

“I happen to like this face,” said Katya, fingering the mask in her hands. The smooth porcelain flowed into a broad ruddy face, the eyes crinkled with laughter, the mouth painted into a smirk.

Nelin placed her hands on the back of the chair. “But you could do so much better.” She knelt down, nearly resting her chin on Katya’s shoulder. “Aren’t you tired of seeing this every morning?”

Katya stared at her reflection: the mottled, translucent skin, the veins pulsing just below the surface; thin colorless hair fell lifeless about her shoulders. Her flat, nearly featureless face stood barren next to her mother’s dainty chin, high cheekbones, and

haughty upturned nose. Katya ran a boney hand over her lack of features, sliding over her lipless slit of a mouth, up the rail of her nose to the pits of her eyes.

It was the same blank slate she saw every morning; the same that everyone still in ribbons saw. Her pitiable ancestors had crawled through their lives with nothing but that pallid stretch of skin. They hid their state behind crude masks gouged from whatever they could find. Katya had seen some of these early attempts behind smudged museum glass.

And then the Craft had been discovered, or divinely inspired, depending on your belief. For those who could learn the skill, the crude masks could be made into something more: a face.

Katya dropped her hand; Nelin wouldn't approve of this fascination with facelessness. It was an unpleasant biological joke meant to be dealt with in private, discussion couched in euphemism. Still, Katya couldn't help but wonder what drove her ancestors to be so shamed by what they were when they knew nothing else. She'd once snuck out to hear a Primordial Aesthetic speak in a back alley on faces being a custom of vanity separating mankind from the immaculate savagery of their roots.

Katya startled from her thoughts as her mother petted her head. "You could be so beautiful." She reached up and pulled a mask from the wall, its gold and purple ribbons fluttering. "This face would suite you well." She pressed the mask into her daughter's hands.

It stared at Katya through half veiled eyes, its full lower lip drawn into a shy smile. Katya placed it on the table. "I'm going riding today," she said.

Her mother straightened and lifted her head, arching her slender neck. "So be it. Girl," she snapped and motioned to the servant shadowed in the doorway. "Help Mistress

Katya dress.” She turned to her daughter. “I trust I will not hear anything disgraceful after your ride today?”

“Of course not, Mother,” said Katya. Nelin narrowed her eyes and twitched her skirts about her as she swept out the door. The servant bobbed a curtsy and scuttled into the room. Katya gave her as close to a smile as she could come with her lipless mouth. “Good morning, Sylvia.”

“Good morning, miss,” said Sylvia, keeping her head down. “You’ll be wanting your favorite again?”

“Please,” said Katya.

Sylvia gathered up Katya’s silken hair in a neat twist and jammed a pin through the sleek strands. She pulled together some of the green and brown ribbons hanging from the mask and left the rest to dangle on either side of Katya’s face. Knotting the ribbons, Sylvia pulled the pin and let Katya’s hair tumble down.

Color coursed through the pale strands as they took on a slight golden tint. Katya’s translucent skin bronzed. She spread her full lips over even little teeth in a smile, her grey eyes crinkling at the corner. She twisted her head to the side and ran her fingers along her jaw, the edges of the mask still visible where they had melded with the skin.

Sylvia threw open Katya’s wardrobe and flicked through the brocade-trimmed dresses and trailing bustles. “Riding was it, my lady?” she asked.

“With this face?” asked Katya. She felt the smirk tucked at the corner of her mouth pull her lips. She put her fingers to her cheeks and her smile broadened.

A shadow shot through her eyes and her face fell, hand dropping. Her face was flawless. She could almost feel the weight of the gold pieces in the smooth porcelain, just

as she could see the poverty etched into Sylvia's skin. The rough wood grain of the girl's mask still swirled across her face, hovering just below the surface. The edges of the mask were distant shadows; it had been a long time since her ribbons had been cut.

Katya walked to the edge of her bed and lounged against the footboard. "Sylvia, how long have you been out of ribbons?"

The girl stopped as if startled. "Why, miss, forever and a day. I was hardly three," she mumbled, flicking her gaze up to Katya's face and then away again.

Katya shoved herself to her feet. "So young. You couldn't have even chosen for yourself," she said. She gripped Sylvia's shoulders and turned her around.

Sylvia refused to meet Katya's gaze and pressed the back of a knuckle to her bowed forehead, her fringe flopping over her hand. She touched the pronged servant's mark that had been burned into her mask before she put it on for the final time. "There were many mouths to feed, miss."

Anything else Katya might have said stalled on her lips as pounding footsteps clattered down the hall. She turned just in time to see a child launch through the air. Grunting, Katya barely managed to regain her balance as her little sister latched onto her; Ver was getting much too big to be doing that.

"Ver! What are you doing running through the house faceless and half naked. If mother catches you..." Katya trailed off as she tried to unwrap Ver's arms from her ribs.

"But, if I get dressed before I pick a face then I won't like what I'm wearing," Ver said, leaning back as far as she could to look at Katya's face. "I'd have to change again." She wriggled out of her sister's grasp and thumped to the floor. "Come help me pick out a face."

“And both of us be half naked?” asked Katya with a laugh.

“Fine, when you’re dressed,” said Ver as she leapt onto Katya’s bed. She rolled over onto her back and arched over the footboard to watch. “But I am in favor of nakedness. On principle.”

Katya turned aside to hide her grin; where had Ver picked up that phrase?

Sylvia helped Katya into a loose sleeved shirt and cinched the corset up to her breast bone. Shoving her billowing pants into tall boots, Katya made a great show of lacing them up while Ver tapped her fingers. The instant Katya’s fingers touched the fur trim at the top of her boots, Ver shot out the door and down the hall, calling for them to hurry up.

She laid out three masks on her canopied bed. Katya dropped a pillow over one with pink ribbons and a dimpled smile. After some indecision on Ver’s part and some prodding on Katya’s, Ver decided on a mask painted with a dusky glaze and full dark lashes framing wicked green eyes. Sylvia tied the chocolate ribbons and helped shove the excited Ver into her riding habit. No sooner had Sylvia finished twining the red and gold ribbon into Ver’s plaited hair than the girl was out the door and beating down the stairs. Katya could only thank the Craftsman that she decided not to slide down the curving banister.

Throwing on her trailing overcoat, Katya caught up Ver’s cloak from its hook by the door and followed her sister’s boot prints along the snow covered path to the stable. She found Ver with her face buried in her reindeer’s white fur.

“Hello, Caswell,” Katya murmured, offering her palm to the reindeer’s snuffling nose.

“Is there anything more lovely than hugging a deer?” asked Ver as she rested her cheek against Caswell’s shoulder.

Katya shook the cloak at Ver, causing her to sigh and detach herself from her mount. She shrugged it on, Katya belting the mantel around her waist and pulling up the tasseled hood. The two saddled their reindeer and slid halters over their furry faces. Ver kept tinkling the little bells that hung from Caswell’s bridle.

Katya boosted Ver into the saddle and then swung herself up onto her own brown mount. “Hup-hup,” she said with a flick of the reins. The reindeer trotted out into the snow.

The sisters clipped down the lane, puffs of breath clouding before them. Katya crouched down in her saddle when she saw a breach in the stone wall ahead.

Ver saw the hole as well. “You wouldn’t.”

A devious look crept over Katya’s face. She clapped her heels into Rut’s flanks and snapped the reins. Her deer leapt forward, hooves churning the ground. The wall rushed closer. Katya settled into the saddle as Rut gathered himself and leapt.

“Mother’s not going to be pleased,” shouted Ver with a grin as Rut landed on the other side.

Katya pulled the deer around, circling him. She returned Ver’s grin. “No, I rather think not.”

“Come on, Caswell,” shouted Ver, tapping her heels to his side. As she sailed over the breach, Ver threw back her head, shrieking with laughter. The sisters pounded across the vacant field in a spray of fresh powder. Ver lay low across Caswell’s neck, urging him even faster. Stretching out, his hooves snatched at the snow.

Ver pulled ahead, and Katya kicked Rut forward, matching her speed. As the far wall grew closer, Katya pulled back on her reins. Ver threw up a hand as she surged past. The girls pulled to a stop and let their mounts rest; the deer's sides swelled against their saddle girths.

Katya led them along the wall until she found a gate to let them back onto the road. They meandered down the wooded path, the trees' brittle fingers flicking snow at them with the breeze.

Up ahead the path opened ahead. The trees fell back as wrought iron poles jutted from the ground, twining together to form a spear-tipped fence. Katya pressed Rut into Caswell's side, forcing them to the other side of the road. A brooding stone building squatted behind the fence. Its tinted windows glared at all who passed, the somber black door closed against drifts of snow.

Worked into the iron above the gate were the words "Sisters of Benevolence". Katya shuddered. Her mother had taken her to the orphan asylum once on a trip of charity. She remembered the sour weight of the charity masks in her arms as she trailed after her mother's skirts. She also remembered all the faceless children pressed against doorframes and between banister railings. Everywhere, bodies huddled in dirty smocks with gaping lipless mouths and glistening pits where their eyes should have been.

Katya shook herself as they trotted past. She kept turning in the saddle until the asylum disappeared behind gentle hills. She had half expected to catch a glimpse of those faceless against the tinted glass.

Farther on, they found a sheltered watering trough at the crossroads. Katya swung off Rut and broke up the ice with her riding crop. The reindeer dropped their heads into the icy water, slurping and grunting to one another.

“A coin from the lady?” whined a voice.

Katya jumped back, leveling her crop at the knot of rags that had detached itself from the other side of the trough.

“Pardon, pardon, didn’t mean to fright you,” said the man, holding his grubby hands in front of him.

“Might we give the poor veil something?” asked Ver as she studied the moth eaten scarf that draped across the man’s face. “I’ve got my little purse with me.” Ver unhooked the pouch from her belt and started pawing through the coins.

Katya watched as she selected one and leaned down to give it the man. He darted forward and snatched it from her fingers, popping the silver piece into his vest.

“Much thanks to the generous lady.” He gave an awkward bow.

A sneering undercurrent in his voice made Katya’s fingers tighten around her crop. Swinging up onto Rut, she led them away.

Ver twisted in her saddle to wave goodbye to the man. He clambered up onto the edge of the trough and threw back his veil. Ver yelped and buried her face in Caswell’s neck. The veil’s face slid to the side like a lump of unfinished clay. One eye twisted away; the other glowered straight ahead, nearly bulging from the socket. The man cackled, a knotted smile cracking open. “Treat for the generous lady. A coin to see the freak!”

Katya glared at him as they rode away.

After the girls stabled their deer and gave them over to the grooms, they tromped into the kitchen, snatching hot rolls from the white plaster oven. As Katya spread butter over hers and reached for the honey, Sylvia appeared in the doorway.

“The mistress is wanting you, miss,” she said to Katya.

The sisters exchanged glances. “I’ll be right along. Thank you.” Tearing a bite from her roll, Katya abandoned the rest and followed Sylvia into the mural encrusted parlor. Vines and birds curled across the plaster up to the lacey molding. Her mother sat framed by her high-backed chair. “You asked to see me, Mother?”

Nelin folded her hands in her lap. “Are you a child of the tundra?”

Katya’s brow twisted, “No.”

“Were you born wild and homeless?” asked her mother. She regarded Katya with fragile serenity.

“Mother, what are these questions?” Katya clasped the back of one of the chairs.

“Than why do you insist on acting like a wild thing that’s just slid in on the back of a dog sled like some Traveler urchin? Mrs. Ivanof said she saw two girls tearing like fiends across her son’s fields today. She thought, surely, she did not know them,” here Nelin paused, “but she said the elder one was still in ribbons.” Sweeping to her feet, she smoothed her bodice. “Today you’re a terror, but tomorrow you’ll choose a different face, and I have no idea what that will bring. I only ask for consistency, the chance to really know my own daughter.”

“You know me,” said Katya, folding her hands into the small of her back, “you know that I’m not ready to choose.”

Nelin threw her hands in the air, “Katya, you’re nineteen years old. And faceless. It’s absolutely unheard of.” She placed a finger under her daughter’s chin and tilted her head back. A manicured nail brushed a stray curl from Katya’s eyes. “All your friends have long since chosen and debuted. Don’t you want that? Such a beautiful party where all eyes are on the you that you’ll be for the rest of your life?”

Katya backed away. “And if I choose this face for forever?”

Nelin stiffened. “Be reasonable. Such a face is fine for when you’re young. I played with one much like it when I was little. But you’ll want to grow out of it. You’ll want a face for the rest of your life. Do you want to wear that to the balls and dances of the season?” asked Nelin. “Do you want to show it to all the young men?”

Katya studied the heavy velvet drapes. “I’m not ready yet.” She bowed to her mother and turned to leave. She paused in the doorway. “But if you force me, I will choose this one.”

“Don’t be such a child.” Nelin’s voice tightened. “There should only be one girl in ribbons in this house.”

Katya looked over her shoulder through half lowered lids. “I’m happy with where I am, Mother. With what I am and what I am not. I’m sorry this displeases you.” Katya turned and strode out of the room, boots clicking. She stopped just down the hall and closed her eyes. “You shouldn’t be listening behind doors, Verusha.”

Ver slid out from behind the cracked cloak room door. “You were fighting again.”

Katya knelt in front of Ver and grabbed her shoulders. “What Mother and I do is strictly between us. Do you understand? Don’t let it bother you.”

Ver bit her lip and cast a glance back toward the parlor. Piano music floated from the room, the piqued keys jarring the strings.

“This calls for hot chocolate to spoil our dinners,” said Katya, extending her hand.

* * *

A tinkling of bells rung Katya awake. Hissing against the cold, she rolled out of bed, dragging her comforter with her. Poking her hand out of the trailing blanket, she eased aside the drapes.

The effervescent glow of the snow reflected clear skies and starlight. Beyond the high garden walls, straggling trees banded together in thickening groups stretching out into the forest. Globes of light drifted between the bare limbs and snow glistened pines. They wandered in twos and threes as they gathered together and streamed deeper into the forest.

Katya let the comforter drop around her feet as she struggled into some clothes. She snatched her favorite mask from the wall and hastily knotted the ribbons. Her fingers fumbled through her hair, yanking as it tangled. She frowned at the reflection; it might have been a little crooked.

Easing out her door, she slid down the hall and ducked into Ver’s room. Hushing her sister’s grumbled protests, Katya coaxed Ver out of her nest of blankets and into a face and clothes. They snuck past the servants’ quarters and down the back stair.

“Where are we going?” asked Ver once they were safely beyond the garden walls.

Katya grinned and pointed at the lights in the distance.

“Travelers?” squeaked Ver as she followed the trail her sister plowed through the deeper drifts of the forest. “I’ve never seen one up close.”

Trails riddled the forest, coming together into larger and larger paths. Among the impressions of many booted feet were the huge prints of dogs and, when the woods opened, sled skids.

A gauzy glow began to seep through the trees and soon Katya and Ver could hear drums and singing. Ver tugged on Katya's sleeve and pointed up. Tatters of brightly colored ribbon began to appear in the trees. As the pines thinned, grand spread-limbed oaks took over the forest. The ribbons grew more dense as the girls continued, the lower limbs thick with a fluttering rainbow. Some were tied in clusters on the tips of branches; others had been stitched along yards of ribbon and knotted to fall nearly to the ground.

Ver reached up and ran her fingers along the trailing ends. Silk, satin, and velvet hung among coarse linen and burlap. Tiny beads swirled along ribbons of deep blue and purple; jewels winked at the ends of gossamer strands tangled with simple leather thongs and weather drained cotton.

"When I get my ribbons cut," said Ver, "I'm going to climb up and tie them to the highest limb I can reach."

"What if you choose a face that doesn't favor climbing?" asked Katya as she lifted Ver over a fallen log.

"Then you'll do it for me."

Katya put her finger to her lips as the drumming grew louder. Crouching behind a slanting tree, the girls peeked into a clearing filled with strange people, silky dogs, and sleds. Clusters of teardrop shaped lanterns on long poles spread golden light across the snow-packed clearing. Overhead, curtains of ribbons hung from the arching branches.

“Travelers,” whispered Ver as her wide eyes followed the swarm of people, their white hair and skin stark against their bright clothes. “How do they tell each other apart?”

Katya shrugged. Every sun bleached Traveler looked very much like every other Traveler. She studied their smooth white faces for differences. They all seemed to have the same almost bonelike flesh, narrow nose, and knife-blade cheeks. Their faces still looked very much like the masks they carved from the hipbones of wild reindeer.

“Is it their marks? Is that how they do it?” asked Ver as she studied the black designs inked into the Travelers’ faces: minimal patterns of dots and swirling lines running down the nose, flowering across the chin, or trailing under the eye.

Katya hummed in the back of her throat. “Mother once said that the scaring marks their families.” She pointed at the carved designs that adorned their cheeks and foreheads. “Individual choose the inked design, with no two the same. Snowflakes.”

“It’s a debut!” said Ver, bouncing on her toes as she pointed to a group of young Travelers moving with ceremony to the center of the group. One of the slope-faced dogs raised its head to look at Ver and Katya, pulling thin lips over its teeth. Ver lowered her voice. “There’s the ribbon cutter. But some of them are my age; will she really cut their ribbons so soon?”

“Travelers don’t think of age like everyone else,” said Katya.

The calling drums crescendoed into silence as a woman in a bone beaded headdress entered the clearing. Her windswept voice spiraled into mournful song.

“They still don’t see the science in it,” said Katya under her breath. As the song fell into chant, the young people slid forward, one at a time, under the woman’s hands. She touched her palm to their forehead, dragging her fingers down across their eyes and

lingering on their lips. With a dagger flash, she cut the leather thongs holding the mask. It stayed in place.

Once all the ties had been cut, the drums started again, joined by long stringed instruments, rattles, and low voiced bone pipes. The newly debuted scattered into the surrounding woodlands to knot their ribbons among the rest.

Katya elbowed Ver and jerked her head back the way they had come.

Ver stuck out her lower lip, but turned to leave. “Katya,” she whispered as she burrowed under her sister’s arm.

The Traveler ribbon cutter stood in their path, a bemused expression on her solemn face. Her blue rimmed eyes sparked as she spoke to them in her own tongue.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand,” said Katya, returning the Traveler’s smile with her own hesitant one.

“I hardly think she’ll understand that you said you don’t understand,” said Ver.

Katya turned to her in slow exasperation. “Yes, thank you, Ver.”

The woman continued to smile and beckoned them toward the clearing where they had brought out slabs of honey roasted venison and steaming butternuts.

“It would be rude to refuse,” said Ver, already edging toward the clearing.

Katya sighed and allowed herself to be ushered into the festivities. Before she quite understood what was happening, she was pulled into the warmth of the celebration. Someone pressed food and drink into her hands and she found herself nestled in amongst a group of girls near her age. She didn’t sit for long before the girls coaxed her into mystic, whirling dances where she was passed from hand to hand until she dropped exhausted onto a furred rug to watch.

When Ver began to nod, Katya found herself bundled onto a dog sled with Ver nestled against her shoulder. She directed her driver back toward their house as best she could with pointing and exaggerated pantomime that seemed to amuse him. The sun still lurked beyond the horizon when she bid the Traveler farewell and marched Ver up to bed. Stripping off her sister's shoes, Katya tucked her under the covers, fully clothed and faced.

Katya backed out of Ver's room and eased the door shut, letting the knob slide through her hand as she felt the bolt settle into place. When she turned she found her mother standing in the middle of the hall. Nelin's silken dressing gown hung straight from her stiff frame. Katya's hand still rested on the doorknob. Neither mother nor daughter spoke for a long moment.

"I found my daughters' beds empty in the middle of the night," said Nelin. Her quiet voice carried down the hall. It lacked all passion.

Unable to look her mother in the eye, Katya's thoughts stumbled over a thousand different things to say. None of them right. The silence tightened.

Katya flinched as Nelin finally moved, turning toward her own room. She stalked down the carpeted hall like a haunting, every move sharp and deliberate. She paused at her double doors, one hand on the paneling, one resting on the handle.

"You are a taint to your sister," said Nelin without looking at Katya. "She will be just like you. She will never debut." The door opened, and Nelin disappeared through it in a whisper of white nightgown.

Inside Ver's room, Katya heard a snuffle. She turned the knob and saw Ver sitting up in the middle of the bed, her favorite doll tucked under her chin. She curled her lips

under to fight the tears. Katya crawled into bed behind Ver and wrapped her arms around her, resting her chin on her sister's head.

* * *

Days later, Katya curled in the window seat with a book. She couldn't seem to stop twirling her purple and gold ribbons. For the past few days, she had worn her mother's favorite mask.

The tension between them had sent Ver into a melancholic state, and she would only wear a dour mask with grey ribbons and washed out eyes. This morning, however, Ver had been back in one of her usual masks, humming to herself on the way to breakfast. Katya hadn't seen her since then, though.

Doors slammed open downstairs.

"Katya!" Sylvia screamed.

She dropped her book and rushed to the balcony. Her fingers whitened around the wood as she stared into the foyer. Both the inner and outer doors hung open, snow swirling through the entrance hall and drifting around the figures curled on the floor. Sylvia cradled Ver in her lap. Her apron wicked red.

"It is 'Mistress Katya' to you, girl," barked Nelin from the other room. She swept into the hall, a beating in her eyes. She faltered only an instant when she saw Ver. Catching up her skirts, she ran to her daughter's side, kneeling in a puddle of velvet. Her hands flew over Ver's body and pressed Sylvia's palm hard against the crack that ran down Ver's face. "Katya, the doctor."

Katya could only gape through the banister railings.

"Now, please," said Nelin, turning a pale face to her elder daughter.

Katya ran.

The townsfolk told her later that she was a shower of hooves and flaring skirts, matching wild eyes with her panting deer. Katya remembered none of this, just that she was suddenly back in her sister's room, the doctor leaning over Ver.

"Now, what exactly happened?" he asked, dabbing at the blood that seeped through the cracks at Ver's temple and ran down her jaw.

"The girl found her in the street," said Nelin. She folded her hands in her lap and inclined her head to Sylvia.

"She was just lying there, sir, bleeding out into the gutter," said Sylvia who couldn't keep from gnarling her apron. "It was a veil standing over her. He had her coin purse. The little green one with the pewter clasps. I gave it to her for her birthday."

The doctor scratched at his leather cracked face, his delicate, almost feminine hands contrasting against his worn features. "Well, it's a grievous wound to be sure, but we're lucky she's a young one. All this will be needing is some rest and the removal of her mask. It'll take the damage with it."

The doctor reached under Ver's hair and searched for the knots. He stopped then, drawing his hand out from the mass of curls. With deliberate speed, he flipped Ver's hair back and exposed the side of her face and neck. He turned on Nelin.

"Madam," he said through his teeth, "what manner of mother lets her daughter out of ribbons at such an age?"

Nelin drew herself up. "Remember to whom you speak. She isn't," Nelin trailed off as the doctor motioned at Ver's un-ribboned face. Nelin dropped to her daughter's side. "But she wouldn't, she wouldn't." Nelin stroked Ver's hair. "Why would she have

done such a thing?” Her hand hitched, an almost imperceptible pause as she glanced toward Katya. “What can we do?”

Running a hand through his thinning hair, the doctor shook his head. “Pray that it hasn’t taken hold yet. Girl,” he snapped his fingers at Sylvia without taking his eyes from Ver’s tiny form, “get more of your women. I’ll be needing clean cloths and basins of hot water. Fast as you can.”

Sylvia curtsied and fled. The doctor creaked open his black bag and started arraying wicked looking tools across the night table. He swept Ver’s favorite doll to the floor with the back of his hand as he laid a scalpel in its place.

The world dimmed around Katya. The slumped doll mocked her with its broken smile. She moved through a world of ghosts as she picked up the doll, stroking the shattered edge. It was the only real thing in the room. The color dried up, and the sound faded to murmuring. Compulsively, Katya stroked the crack in the doll’s face.

She continued, even as her sister screamed, the servants throwing themselves across her convulsing body. Blood smeared the doll’s face as Katya ran her thumb along it, mindless. China splintered into the basin. Bandages were called for. And then Ver wasn’t screaming anymore. The doctor inclined his weary head to Nelin and gathered his tools.

“There might still be mercy in this world, Madam, if she is breathing in the morning. I have done all I can,” he said. He paused in the doorway, “I don’t know what possessed your girl to go having her ribbons cut, but that was Traveler work. No decent folk would dare to cut so young.” With that, he pulled on his cap, touched the brim, and shuffled out the door.

Sylvia tugged the doll from Katya's hands and dropped it in the basin of mask shards. She guided Katya to her bedroom and sat her before the mirror. With quick hands, Sylvia cleaned and bandaged the cut.

Katya sat silent as Sylvia undressed her. She raised her arms when asked, or stood, or sat, or whatever she was told. Through it all she said nothing. Sylvia untied the cords, cupped Katya's face, and removed the mask, revealing once more her pallid facelessness. Sylvia whispered a good night and slipped from the room, leaving Katya stiff before the mirror.

The fire burned low; logs collapsed in a spurt of cinders. A sob caught in Katya's throat. She pressed her hands flat against the vanity table to stop their shaking. Tears leaked from the pits of her eyes. They darted down her smooth face, slipping along her throat and soaking into her collar. Katya touched a hand to her cheekbone. She had never cried without a face before. Dropping her hand back to the table, she let the tears thread their way in silence.

She woke to her mother flinging open the drapes. Sunlight battered her pale skin and lidless eyes. Throwing up a hand, Katya shielded herself and straightened to her feet.

"Your sister will recover," said Nelin, preempting Katya's question. Katya sank onto her bed. "In fact, she will be well enough to attend your introduction this coming First Day."

"My introduction?" asked Katya, looking up.

"I'll be sending out the announcements this afternoon," said Nelin. "We'll use the cream stationary."

Katya slid to her feet. “But I’m not ready; I haven’t chosen a face yet. It’s too soon!”

“Then you had better hurry up and choose,” said Nelin, turning to her daughter. The muscle at the corner of her mouth twitched. “You have one week.” A feverish dryness had etched itself into Nelin’s red, puffy eyes.

“Mother, please, I’m not ready. You can’t mean this,” said Katya.

“Grow up,” snapped Nelin, clenching her hands into fists. “I’ve pandered to childish stubbornness long enough. Pick a face and stop being...*this*.” Her delicate lip lifted in a sneer as she gestured across her daughter’s pale body.

“You can’t do this,” said Katya, slamming her fist into the covers. “You’re upset because of Ver.”

“Upset?” snapped Nelin. “If you hadn’t been so willful, your sister wouldn’t have felt the need to grow up in your place. She’s lying in there because of you.” She jerked her head to the side as she noticed Katya’s favorite mask sitting on the edge of the vanity. “Pick a face, and when the ribbon cutter comes, you will be out of ribbons and debut to society like a proper lady of breeding.” Nelin picked up the mask and dropped it to the floor. It broke in three. “Choose well,” said Nelin as she swept out of the room, her trailing skirts scattering the pieces.

Katya went to the door and locked it, sliding the key into her pocket. She settled to the floor and stared at the fragments. Reaching out, she brushed her fingertips across the porcelain, nudging the pieces together. She dug her fingers into her palms until her hands shook. Yanking the bottom drawer from her vanity, Katya upended the contents on the carpet. She knocked through the scattered spools and jars of paint until she found a

pot of glue. Slowly she began to fit the mask back together. Where chips stood empty, she patched them with plaster.

Fumbling with the ribbons, Katya pulled the mask to her face and tied a clumsy knot. Her lank hair turned golden, and she blinked grey eyes. The face that stared back at her stared in ruin. A flaming scare puckered the left side from chin to scalp, catching her lip and pulling at her eyelid. Pockmarks and spidery lines pitted the rough skin.

* * *

A haze of chatter hung over the foyer as the crowd waited for the debut to begin. Cinched into their finery, they whirled through musty patterns of social etiquette. Polite smiles came in involuntary spasms, the manners bred into their bones.

The noise burst into shards of silence as a crash rang across the din. Porcelain rained from the balcony, shattering across the floor in jagged fragments. Bits of broken faces stared up with razored eye sockets and splintered smiles.

The startled mass turned to the railing above them.

Katya offered a lipless smile as she swept to the head of the stairs, her lank hair floating in wisps behind her. With a pale hand, she caught up her trailing gown.

She nodded to Ver. Her sister strained forward in her wheelchair, staring out from a swaddled mound of blankets. Ver's face shifted from one of horror to shocked wonder.

Katya sought out her mother in the crowd and gave a measured nod when their gazes met. Nelin pressed her lips together. The color bled out of them.

Taking her place at the head of the stair, Katya turned to the butler.

“Introduce me.”