

## **Distribution Agreement**

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter now, including display on the World Wide Web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Maya Bradford

December 06, 2016

Borealis

by

Maya Bradford

Jim Grimsley  
Adviser

Creative Writing

Jim Grimsley  
Adviser

Lynna Williams  
Committee Member

Lisa Paulsen  
Committee Member

2016

Borealis

By

Maya Bradford

Jim Grimsley

Adviser

An abstract of  
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Creative Writing

2016

## Abstract

### Borealis

By Maya Bradford

Borealis is a post-apocalyptic novel that explores the lives of multiple characters suffering from a disease known as “the Sleep”. The Sleep manifests differently in everyone, most commonly causing people to sleep for days, weeks, even years at a time. For some of the characters their dreams are heaven. For others, they abuse a drug called Everwake in order to stave off the hell their nightmares bring. For most it is simply a fact of life. For the duration of the novel, the main characters find themselves in or nearby a commune run by a cruel woman named Mare Ryu and a man named Torres, a self-loathing lucid dreamer. In the commune is the leech house, a home separated from the rest where the undesirables, or “leeches” are sent to eventually starve given that the rest of the commune neglects them. Here live a bitter, ill man named Hammond and an old woman named Asha. Arriving to the commune in the story’s beginning are Lune, a young man trapped in the body of a child, and Sophia, his controlling mother, followed by Malt and Osiris, a mute woman who suffers persistent psychosis caused by the Sleep and her service dog. In a ship in the cove near the commune live Sunny and Nien, two friends struggling with past trauma, their relationship with each other and their relationship with a dead woman named Anette who knows more about the world than either of them. In the middle of it all is an enigmatic entity called the Sparrow, which composes part the cult beliefs of the people of the commune. Their motivations differing wildly, these characters come and clash together, discovering more about themselves and each other than they could have originally imagined.

Borealis

By

Maya Bradford

Jim Grimsley

Adviser

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Creative Writing

2016

## Table of Contents

1. Umbra	1
2. Rainless	26
3. Lune's Dream	54
4. Messiah	58
5. Forgive Me	89
6. Love Me to the Bone	94
7. Gas Flame	119
8. Mother Dragon	172
9. Soleil	188
10. Calavera	218
11. Psychopomp	236
12. You Never Know	247
13. Shibboleth	261

## Borealis

by Maya Bradford

### 1. Umbra

(Lune)

When you finally get the energy to run, you lose the energy to breathe. And if death doesn't take you, the sleep gets you instead. Crushing, crushing sleep. It doesn't hurt. You can sleep for months on an open beach, provided you're fed and the sun doesn't bake you dry. Exposure kills most people sleeping if their nightmares don't bother first. I've watched men and women both fucked in their sleep by shadows yawning and blowing heat into their blistered hands. Pull aside the coats, maybe the thin fabric of underwear stained with frozen blood, or piss, or

semen. Boys who sleep still wet-dream. Dreams of tits, and ass, and bellies filled with good food and bodies moving around after good sleep, real sleep, not this drowning kind. Bodies sung electric. You try to fight the sleep, you die. You try to run from it or anyone else, you'll be swallowed up by it. People have to move in groups to stay alive as the sleep has no rhyme or reason, sometimes it's days, sometimes it's months, sometimes we never wake up.

But Mama and I were foolish. We stayed a pair and hid from other people. She had fears. And I was the only thing that could soothe them.

She and I'd been taking it slow, walking by an ocean slushy with ice; our skulls bleary with sunlight. I was born dreaming. She was born dead. Revived, but still carried with her the experience of being dead. Because of this she liked to toy with our mortality; and often, we ran out of food, and often, we trembled in the cold. We ate sand and frozen Coca-Cola and had to wrap our bruised fingers in strips of pages torn from Mama's books and dipped in baby oil. Our feet were bleeding, too. My socks had as many holes as the beach punched with ghost-crab homes. And we couldn't even fish those out of the cold sand to eat.

We'd passed over the city out of fear of being swallowed by it. Its system. Everything on a clock, every building converted

to a hotel, each room filled to the brim with sleeping people and the people feeding them, nursing them, singing. They stare down at their stopwatches, and then move on to the next bed. In the cities, you are just a number. Work, and feed, and slumber. Mama and I were looking for something more. And by this I mean to say we were looking for nothing at all. Did you know, I, Lune, would love to be my own person? But I am nothing but an extension of my Mama. There never was a cord to cut.

We split from the beach and into the woods and walked for a few hours. Paused to rest several times. I told myself again and again to leave her. Go to the city. Get warm. Get fed. But you see, there were reasons I couldn't. There are reasons I can't. Now we stand at the edge of the woods where the trees grow sparse. Mama cradles the curve of her belly with one hand. She says, "Look, Lune. Lights."

I look. There are orange lights in frosted windows, casting color on the outside. I lower my gaze. One house sits far away from the others like a child with her knees pulled to her chest. Beside it is this lush little fenced-in garden, overgrown with berry brambles and wildflowers. We walk down the path toward the lonely house. Get closer. See a pretty old girl digging in the soil with her hands, her progress lit by a camping lantern hanging in the outhouse behind her, the door ajar. Her hands shake. Bandanna on hair half-silvered like tinsel or ticker

tape. She has stubble on her face and lifts it to see us, me and Mama. We walk to her. She has a shotgun by her side, but she doesn't reach for it.

"Where the hell have you been?" she says, squinting as we draw near. "Does it really take that long to mess around in some old sh--" She blinks, her eyes widen. "Oh. Here I was thinking you were someone else. My apologies. The dark plays tricks on me sometimes."

Mama notes the shotgun, too, glancing at me. But the old woman still doesn't go for it.

"There another toilet upstairs?" Mama asks. "Inside where it's warm?"

"Yeah, but that one's clogged. Someone took one massive shit, and it got frozen in the pipes."

"Well, fuck," Mama says. She scratched the empty cigarette pack in her coat-pocket. Mimed pulling one to her lips, lighting it, taking a drag, throwing it in the snow. Nervous tic.

"Why? You looking to just take a dump or for a place to stay?"

She sees the pain we're in. I think my stomach grumbles, but it might be the ocean. Who would've thought--people out here? So much nothing and then people, living, breathing people, easy-on-the-eyes people with full bellies and shoes. Awake.

"If you have room," Mama says. "Me and Lune here can share a bed. If it's not any trouble. Just for a few nights an'--"

Lady interrupts. "You can stay for the night if you need to."

"Just the night?" Mama says. "Well... we were hoping maybe a little longer than that. We're hungry. And weak."

"We're all weak," Lady says. We were all weak, though. Life had two options: fatigue or sleep. Nobody's going to push themselves to run for fear of pain and death or blacking-out into sleep anyway while your body is thrown into momentum and you find yourself in that bad spot where people beg to die but nobody can even hear their voices. Mama gets the paralysis bad, even when she's not pushing herself too far. She says she can see me sitting there, staring at her face; and she's screaming at me to help, can't move any part of her, trapped in this world and that. Begs me to move some part of her body so it remembers it can move, remembers it's supposed to be awake. *Sometimes*, she says, *you face the face of God, and sometimes the devil.*

Most people fear the paralysis. Mama's only lasts for hours. But if you push yourself too hard, you can get stuck in it forever. Never quite waking up. Never quite relapsing into dreams. Mama knows what it looks like, though. She's quick to put a bullet in the head of people trapped like that. But first she lets me hold their heads, sing a lullaby. Tell them they're

going to a place where they'll sleep for ages. Real sleep. Part of me fears that nobody really dies. Part of me fears that the bullet Mama puts in their brains just stays there, freezes there, expands there, and they feel it, and they stay alive, and everyone stays alive even without food or water, until they're bone. Then glitter. Then water vapor.

I scuff my feet and look around. They got drying racks with slabs of fat meat and tobacco. My stomach grumbles. I just woke, and Mama said I slept for weeks and she had to feed me cold dirt when she ran out of saltines. Then she found the vending machine frozen-shut and broke ice like it was communion to get the Coca-Cola free.

"Listen," Mama says, stepping closer. Finally the hand flinches toward the gun. Mama leans forward, letting the furs fall open and show the crease of her cleavage. She's trying to be charming. Maybe they'll let us stay longer than one night if she talks right. Looks good. She licks her lips and continues, "We can be of help, maybe, if you got anything you need done."

"We don't have enough food for two more mouths, not even a little one." Lady's hand is on the butt of her gun now.

"What happens if we fall asleep tonight? You just going to throw our bodies out in the woods?"

"Ain't that where you've been sleeping all this time?"

"You old bitch," Mama mutters. I wince. Lady laughs.

"Look. I take care of me and my own, just like you take care of yours. Now you can come inside, get some supper, sleep in a nice bed for once, we'll even make you breakfast in the morning. Then you better be gone by the time the sun's high."

"My little one's got a beautiful voice," Mama says. She tugs me forward. Old lady looks at me. Sucks her teeth, rinses the soil off of her hands with a spigot in the middle of the garden.

"That's good," she says. There's a half-smile on her face. "Is that a boy or a girl?"

"Not saying," Mama says.

"Someone's going to find out," lady says. "Surprised nobody has already. Sure you two have slept at the same time before, and there's always someone want to look inside a little one's pants."

"Point is, It doesn't know. It's gonna be that age forever."

"It a hermaphrodite?"

"No."

"So someone's going to look and find out. And if she's a girl--"

Mama's angry. "Don't say she! She. It's It. Not boy, not girl, not unless I say so."

"Fine," lady says.

"And anyway, anyway," Mama says. "Got a belt on It. Locked up. So even if It looks, It don't know."

"It knows," Lady says. "Everybody knows what they is from the moment they born."

Their eyes lock for a few moments before Mama jerks her gaze away. "How you even have time," she says. "To build houses and tend gardens like some old world people."

"We fight the sleep off," she says. "Taking drugs."

Ah.

"There are five of us in this house, and we all take turns hunting and gardening and feeding the sleeping ones. But the way we do it, girl, the drugs can take the edge off real good. That fog becomes a distant cloud, a wisp of smoke even. Sometimes I even feel like running and jumping and dancing."

Mama laughs. This beach is quiet, so her laugh echoes out into the thick copses of pine trees and the rickety houses.

"If only," she says.

If there were only five of them, who were the other buildings for?

"Maybe if Hammond's feeling generous, he'll make you a goodie-bag for the road."

She turns and faces the house and yells someone's name. Hoarse man's voice yells back, "Lord, Asha, I'm fuckin' busy."

"Must be cooking dinner," Asha says, wiping her hands and blowing into them. "I've been out here so long, I don't even remember what I was looking for. You know how hard it is to keep shit straight at my age? Best put me in the ground now."

I giggle. Her eyes fall on me again. She says, "What's Its name at least?"

"Lune," Mama said.

"Loon?" Asha repeated. She slumps back against the wall of the outhouse squat in the middle of the garden, drums her fingers on her knee.

"Lune," Mama said.

"And your name?"

"Sofia," Mama said.

"Sofia and Lune. Lune has a pretty voice, you said." She rolls her eyes around in thought as if reconsidering this whole one night only business. I see Mama light up like neon.

"And what can you do, Sofia?"

"Work," Mama said. "Work hard."

"Well, hell, everyone can work hard if they put their mind to it."

Mama shivers. She's hungry. I'm hungry. We want to go inside, want a good bed. Sleep is eating at us. We fought it off for at least a day, and I can tell in Mama's quivering voice all she wants is to fall down. She doesn't want to tell. There are

things we keep between the two of us; some things because she doesn't want either of us carried off from each other, and some things because the less we talk about them, the more we can pretend they never happened.

Asha blows heat into her hands and half-turns as if preparing to go back inside.

Mama blurts, "Lune can lucid dream too. Been able to do it for as long as It's lived."

This is a lie. I remember the first time I realized I was dreaming. Pain that spread through me like ink through water and burned like paper edges to flame. It overwrote my entire body. I screamed, but I couldn't wake up. I learned that sleep is not anesthesia. Dreams are as fragile as burned paper. I learned to punch through. I learned to wake myself up. But by the time I did, the pain was numb, the wound was stitched, the blood was dry and washed away.

"Lucid dream?" Asha says. Her brow furrows. "Come inside."

Finally. Mama relaxes. She leads us over and pushes open the front door. The instant warmth when we pass over the threshold is overwhelming. I stagger. I black out for a moment, feel myself falling. Kick. Asha has caught me. Mama is bracing herself against the wall.

"I want sleep," I say.

"Nobody wants sleep, little Lune," Asha says. There is a man standing in the house, but he is a blur to me. He comes closer. I'm queasy. He has a thick smell, smoky smell. His body is kneaded with bruises.

"This is Hammond," Asha says.

Hammond pulls me to my feet and tries to get me to stand, but I'm swimming now, away.

There's a sharp burn on my cheek and my eyes spread open as I realize he's slapped me, but I didn't even hear it or feel his hand.

"Stay up," he says.

"Lord, Lord no," Mama says. "It's so warm in here. Hell. I need a bed."

She's on her hands and knees now. Her head is bowing.

"Keep her up," Hammond says to Asha.

"She just wants to sleep," I say.

"Lord," Mama says. "Lune, baby, Lune, where are you?"

Hammond grabs something from the counter. I feel a new burn somewhere on my arm. I numb. I tremble. I relax. The darkness goes away. I stare at his face, which is clear now.

"You stay awake," he says.

I twist around to look at Mama. It's too late for her. She's sleeping. Curled up. Her chest moves up and down.

Wringing her hands, Asha walks over to Hammond and murmurs something in his ear. Hammond sucks his teeth, looks at dizzy me.

"How old are you?" he asks.

"Eleven."

"In waking years."

"Twenty-three," I say.

"You're no child," he says.

"If It wants to be a child, let It be a child," Asha says.

He gently pushes me over to Mama, and I try to grab her arms while he lifts up her legs. I still feel strange. Swimming. But awake. There's something crisp about the air.

"I'll fix supper for them," Asha says.

Hammond nods. He pulls Mama away from me, knowing my body is too weak. He carries her for me up the stairs. I follow. He pushes open the door to a bedroom. There are three beds here, maybe one for Hammond and one for Asha. Someone is already asleep in one, the blankets tucked around them like a funeral shroud. He lays Mama in another.

"Can I push them together?" I ask, pointing toward the empty bed. My voice is weak. "I want to sleep next to her."

"You're not going to sleep now," he says, lifting the sheets up to Mama's chin. "I gave you our last bit of 'Wake. Should hold you for a few days."

I scratch at my reddening arm. It's more itchy than it is sore, though the needle stung going in. "If this stuff works," I say, "Why isn't it all over the place? Why don't they use it in the city?"

"Limited resources," he says. He seems restless, like he wants to ask me something. I sit on the edge of Mama's bed, staring at the lines on my palms.

He finally says, "Are you a boy or a girl?"

"I don't know."

He scowls. "You know," he says. "Even if you can't see it, you can feel it. If you have a cock, it swells up with blood sometimes and gets hard as rock. You'd be able to feel it. Even when it's soft. Don't be stupid."

I feel anger spark up in me. I tear at my clothes and yank them down and show him the belt my Mama put on me. He stares for a moment, eyes moving from my bare chest to the belt. He then moves his hand to cup my crotch, and another to my chest.

"Girl," he says.

"Does it matter?" I say.

"She's trying to protect you, but it don't matter. If someone wants to fuck you they'll fuck you regardless of what bits you have."

"Mama says I'm It, so I'm It." I pull my clothes back to cover me.

"You're not a baby," he says. "You've got 23 years of mind in there. But your Mama wants you to stay a baby. You let her call you 'It' when you know exactly what you are."

"Leave her alone," I say. "I'm all she's got." There's no life in my voice when I say this. I'm not exhausted anymore, but I want to sleep anyway. But nobody sleeps when they want to.

"You can be more than that," he says. I'm barely listening. My eyes are watching the ships on the wallpaper swell and contract, bend like broken necks, like battered bodies, like spare birthdays.

I don't notice when he opens the nightstand drawer and places something in my hands. It takes a moment for my teasing eyes to drift down to it. A gun. There are so many guns, it doesn't frighten me. I am more afraid of my own thoughts than I am of starvation or thirst, of the fingers on triggers or the hands on penises pointed at me and Mama through all these years. My teeth always ache, so I hold my tongue rolled back against the roof of my mouth, always half-swallowing my words.

"What's this for?" I say.

"To kill her," he says.

My fear then opens up like a wound.

"What?"

"It's better if you do it."

"No--what?! Kill her? *Why?*"

He's holding open her eyelid. Gives me a look like I'm mad.

"We just wanted someplace to stay for the night -- for a few days, maybe -- and you're --"

"You think I just wouldn't notice?"

"Notice what?"

"That she's got the paralysis, Lune. Ain't no one waking up from that."

*Oh.*

"You pushed yourselves too damn hard," he says. "You should've rested."

"It was too cold," I say.

"She's as good as dead like this. You know that."

My mind flashes back to my mother's gun discharging into the brains of all those paralyzed people. I shudder. "It wouldn't have been like this if that woman downstairs had just let us in instead of talking her fucking ear off!"

"I'm sorry," he says.

"How long did you know?" I say.

"The moment she hit the floor I knew. I've seen this. So many times." He pushes the magazine into the gun with a click. I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Get this over with," he says.

No. And I don't want to. I don't fucking want to. I shove past him. I run downstairs. Asha has a bowl on the table and is washing dishes. One bowl.

"You said *them!*" I scream.

She turns, silver hair sticking to brown face. Hammond comes downstairs behind me.

"You said, 'I'll fix supper for *them*. Not 'I'll fix supper for *Lune*.'"

"Sweetheart," Asha says. She puts the pot down. She still has her shotgun by her side.

"I'm not going to kill my mother. And you're not going to kill her either. We're going."

"Lune," Asha says.

I say, "Don't say my name like you know me."

Hammond says, "She's crazy. The way her fingers shake and her eyes roll when she blinks. You're so used to crazy you don't even know what it looks like."

"Come eat your supper, Lune; it's getting cold," Asha says.

I slam my hands on the table, shaking the bowl and spilling the soup. Droplets of it scald my skin, but I couldn't give less of a shit.

"She's pregnant," I say.

There isn't a flicker of emotion on Hammond's face. He says, "Baby'll be dead in a few weeks anyway."

"No, no. She's *been* pregnant. For years now."

Asha and Hammond glance at each other. I look at Mama's bag slumped by the front door and trace the bulge of her gun through the fabric with my eyes. It's empty. Asha's shotgun is probably also empty. But it's the threat that counts.

"Go check," Asha says. He turns and goes back upstairs and I go with him.

He pushes Mama over onto her back. We roll the furs away from her belly to expose the ragged wife-beater, yellow with her sweat and the dirt we've slept in for so long. He pushes his fingers into one of the holes and tears it wide open so the stomach is bare and presses his hand up against it, and then his ear. He inhales.

"His name is Sam," I say. "He's ten years old."

Hammond's fingers curl, and he sits up and bites down on his cracked bottom lip. For a moment, my eyes catch on those lips, and I can't look away. I spit out more words to keep the machine that is him, and me, and sleeping Mama, and unborn baby running. "I can talk to Sam, too," I say.

"Good Lord, you're all fucking mad," Hammond says under his breath. Lips so dry the skin sticks together when he parts them. Am I mad, though? I can't stop.

"I read to him. Mama's books, the one in her bag. Make up stories. And we talk in our dreams. I mean, I talk. He doesn't

answer. He just listens. It wasn't always that way though. Only these past few months. But it's like I've known him my whole life."

Hammond scratches the bedsheets. He's not looking at me.

"Why is his name Sam while yours is Lune?"

"What?"

"Lune's a stupid name."

Doesn't hurt like it should.

"It means moon in French," I say.

I move my eyes up away from his mouth and to his eyes.

They're glassed over. "So you can lucid dream," he says. "Can you wake her up?"

"No," I say. "I can't." I'm not sure why I lie.

He bites his thumbnail. Mutters something to himself. I stare at him as he paces.

"Hell," he says. "He probably already knows. God fucking dammit."

"What are you talking about?"

He jerks toward me, grasps my hands in his. "You share dreams with your brother, yes? When you sleep, can you sense other people too? Other people sleeping nearby? Not just him?"

I wince when he grabs me, pulling my hands away. "Yeah," I say.

"How close?"

"What?"

"How close do they need to be?"

"I don't know."

He steps away and starts pacing again. "What about paralyzed people? Can you sense them? Read their dreams?"

"No," I say. "I can't. What is this about?"

He exhales and his hunched shoulders sink. "Good," he says. "That's good."

"What the hell are you on about?" I say, clutching the sheets. He's scaring me. And not in the way I'm used to. It's that crazed desperation on his face. The anxiety. The left corner of his lips curling downward, trembling.

"We have some time," he says. "I need to think."

He moves toward the door, stops to glance at me. A sudden calm has settled over him.

"Go eat," he says. "You need your strength."

He steps out of the room and I hear his footsteps continue up the stairs to the next floor. I get up to close the door behind him and move back to Mama's side. See, I don't like this. I don't like this at all.

I grab Mama's arm and pull, trying to slide her off the bed. She's heavy. She slides half-off. I go for her legs, then, managing to pull her feet to hang limp to the floor. She's too

heavy. I give up and bite back crying because crying is expected of me and my fragile little self.

I push my face close to hers, press my ear against her lips to hear if she's trying to talk, inspect her body for twitches. Hear the breathy murmurs, a groan in her chest. Her eyelids flicker. I wonder if she can see me. I close my eyes and exhale, smiling and aching bad at the same time.

I go and stand in the corner with my forehead against the crease in the wall. Hammond's mouth comes to mind, and I feel my cock stir beneath the tight belt. I shiver, I groan, I hate myself. I want to sleep; I want to die. I want Mama dead, but I don't want her to know I want her dead. I want to hold Sam in my arms. I want Hammond to hold me. I'm hungry. I'm hard. I'm alone.

Use every part of the animal. She deserves every part of her used, like she's used every part of me.

\*\*\*

My stomach full, Asha letting the fire low, I head back upstairs. We ate in silence. I heard coughing from upstairs. I traced her pretty face like a picture with my eyes but kept most of my gaze buried in the lukewarm bowl. Seasoned food still tasted like nothing. But I was glad for it. Glad to fill that empty ache in me.

I look up toward the flight to the third floor. Hear coughs again and walk past the bedroom where Mama is and onto the stairs. Two rooms on the third floor. One must be the toilet, at the end of the hall. But halfway down a door is open. I look into the little room and see Hammond, shaking, pink saliva dripping through his fingers as he tries to hold it in.

"Are you okay?" I say.

He looks up at me, eyes bloodshot. I look down at his large feet, blue, toes curled, the syringe on the floor, the track marks on his limp arm.

"Are you dying?"

"Would you like that?" he says, trying to wipe his mouth, but only smearing the bloody spit on his face. I scratch my arm. Not wanting to answer.

I say, "Why is this house far away from the rest?"

"I know you're not a child at mind, but that soft, high little voice and all those questions you're asking could really convince a man." He wipes his wet hands on his trousers, his breathing haggard as he sits up.

"We're leaving," I say.

"Are you?" he says.

"There's a reason for it," I say. "That you guys are isolated."

"Mm."

"Some sort of plague," I say. "I don't know."

He laughs and laughs until his laughter crumbles into a coughing fit. "You don't really think that," he says, catching his breath. "You wouldn't be standing so close if you thought that."

I take a step back. He straightens up, closing his eyes and sighing. "You won't catch what I've got. It doesn't work that way."

"Why then?" I say. "There's obviously something wrong with you all."

"We're leeches," he says. "Suck the lifeblood from the commune and give absolutely nothing in return. Take, take, take, it's all we do. This house here -- the leech house -- just a hospice until we starve or they get fed up and throw us out in the woods to die."

"Well, we're definitely leaving now," I say.

"Good to know you have a heart."

"Don't pull that bullshit with me. Asha was willing to leave me and Mama out in the snow till she found out I could sing and lucid dream."

His eyes open. "Were you listening? We're starving, Lune. We barely have anything to give ourselves."

"Then why the hell do you want us to stay?"

"I don't," he says.

I stare. His expression hasn't changed.

"What?"

He tries to stand, but his body is weak and trembling. I can almost see the blue bruises shift across his skin like aurora. He falls back down, grunting.

"I want you to go," he says. "Back where you came from. And take your Mama with you."

I stay quiet for a long while, letting his words sit with me, sit in the pit of my stomach. His small, pointed eyes roll back into his head. I listen to the hum of the heater, feel the stale air on my back, me eclipsing the striped orange light that painted his body and made it seem longer than it was, made it seem like he was nothing but bone and ribcage.

"So what was all that back there?" I say. "You acting all obsessed with me? And Asha only let us in because I'm gifted. You make no sense."

"If it was just you alone," he says. "It would be different. But it's not. Your mama being here ruins everything. Everything I've fought for."

His words slur a little at the ends and I swear I can see streaks of color in the corner of his lips. His words are stamped out when I yawn. Feel that sharp, electric feeling in my chest. I'm falling asleep. It startles me. I panic inside, but the panic is muted on the outside.

"You said the medicine worked," I say, stumbling back, rubbing my face.

"It does. But we ran out two days ago, so I gave you a stimulant instead. Made from the mushrooms growing in the woods. Just gives a bit of energy. It's not going to stop the sleep."

He sits up, outstretches his hand to me. "I need you to see something," he says. "With your own eyes. Else you won't believe me."

"Why did you lie to me?" I say, taking another step back, shaking. The wooden floor creaks and the room rocks around me as if the whole house is on waves.

"Come here, Lune."

"No."

"Lune."

"You say my name like you like the way it sounds," I say. "Like music."

"Maybe I do. Maybe I'm already in love with you."

The world stabilizes for a bit. My gullible little heart flutters for a moment and then clenches hard at the dull look on his face. Look at your tiny, skinny, little self. Love, ha. Could anyone?

"Don't tease me," I say. I clutch my arms, seething.

"Come here," he says again. He pats his lap.

I step forward, and then back again. My eyes flicker and I realize, finally, that I'm tired. The buzzing in my head, the warm air, my aching legs, bleeding feet. All I want.

I go to him and climb onto his lap, and he wraps those bony arms around me tight and looks down at me. His face is dissolving into a million somethings. Stars, microorganisms, droplets of light. I feel his lips on my forehead.

"Sing to me," he says.

I sing. My voice disembodied from me. His body is an ember, just warm enough to try. I sing. Something about gloomy Sundays. High, sweet voice not meant for this song, not husky, not woman enough, too much boy, not enough man. God, how I wish I wasn't still a child. I wish he'd push the hand on my shoulder down my stomach, down into my pants and hold me there, hold it, the little thing, hold everything that's missing, everything that grows hard and then soft again like ice into water and back again.

But I am just a child. He holds me like a child. Even though he said I wasn't, he can't get past this faint little body and a mind too lucid for its own good. His head falls back against the wall and his eyes close. He hums. I fall in love over and over again. With him. With anyone.

I hear Asha's footsteps on the stairs and I hear her voice but it's nothing to me. I sing until I hear my own voice echoing

in my dreams; and I'm standing on a beach again, this time full-bodied, this time holding stupid little dark-haired Sam in my arms and instead of dreaming, I'm reading, reading the same lines of the same story over and over again.

## 2. Rainless

(Nien)

He choked back a bottle of *Angel's Envy* half-filled with his own backwash. A wet dark, and the heat is hazy and the smoke like a genie smoke soaks into the damp wood, skunking up the place. There is an altar covered in marigolds. It's a television with the screen kicked out like Hosea kicked out her teeth and she lies there wrapped in her tattered winter clothes like a molt. She rubbed herself down with overripe peaches to make herself smell good n' sweet, inside of those thighs already sticky. They've made an island out of the mattress in this room, and the island's writhing with magic like the peaches with

maggots. *Just keep your mouth closed*, he says, except when he wants to enter, and then the lack of teeth is nice. As is the groove in the roof of her mouth.

Hosea said, *She's got a witch-heart*. But Hosea changed his name to Sunny before he died, so what does he know? Her hair, half-unbraided, feels like a sponge when he grabs it, always oiled, smells like spices. They spear ghost crabs with little metal rods and cook them over a fire and listen to the carapace crack open from the heat and pick out the meat to eat with butter or sriracha sauce. She never says much, and it scares him. Perhaps, she is a witch. Sunny told him to only do it a certain way, *so she don't get pregnant*. That's how you bring a devil into the world. Sometimes they boil the crabs but she's too lazy to filter the sea-water sometimes. He's scared to go into the other rooms. They're filled with ocean now, too, warm ocean. His stomach churns at the thought of water, being submerged in it again, and so she bathes him with sponges and dish soap, some off-brand Mexican kind. The sleep gripped Hosea while they were swimming, and he drowned. He watched him sink into the deep blue.

It's better this way too. Hosea never stopped hating, never stopped seeing witches everywhere as if every day was their Sabbath day.

He rubs her jojoba oil on her legs and over bug bites she's scratched open and wonders what her body would look like were she not starving, were they both not starving. His hands catch on hipbones and collarbones and limp breasts, and he raises his eyes to her and says, "We're going to die."

Her smile makes his heart squeeze in pain or in love, he doesn't know, he wants her and wants to live and maybe there would be more food if there was one of them; but how's a corpse supposed to feed a sleeping man?

"Sometimes I hope the little fish just swim into my mouth when I'm sleep," she says.

"Bake themselves on the way in, hm?" he says, trying to match her humor.

She laughs and says, "Lord, your breath so bad they roast." She twists that little wire of a body away from him and pulls open the window to let more sunlight in, though some already sputtered through the broken slats in the shutters. He's happy to see her few teeth now. Maybe he made her self-conscious with the talk, but it was only because he didn't want to think of what Hosea did. She swallowed a tooth, even, and maybe even now a little devil was growing in her belly.

"We're going to die," he says again. His tongue swollen. He watches her nipples lay flat, rolling with stretch-marks and she watches the rise and fall of his belly resting fat from so much

alcohol or malnutrition, she wasn't sure. The dark curl of pubic hair rising up beyond his faded jeans and in a line up his stomach. "We don't have enough food... we gotta get fat before we fall asleep."

She lifts her canister of oil off the nightstand and pushes it to his chest and says, "Drink this. Lots of fat." She pats his belly. He puts it down. He says, "Maybe we should leave. Look for somewhere else. Look for more food while it's still summer."

He's brought this up before. She gives a simmering smile again. "We'll live," she says.

"I'll swim again. I'll be brave. We got up in this wreck, we can get out again."

She sits up from the mattress and like a ghost moves past him and over to the altar and reaches inside.

"...what are you doing?"

She sits down. Pulls the little silver pipe from her TV altar and thumbs the tobacco into the bowl and lights with the little blue Zippo. Lifts it to her lips. Crosses those thin legs, and says, "Are you awake? Or are you dreaming that you're awake?"

\*\*\*

His eyes flutter open. Sunlight warms his back and arms as he straightens up, staring for a moment at the drool on the counter, wiping it from his cheek. He hears the hum of the ICEE machine, sits for a moment on the ground to watch the drums spinning, blue and red, thick as the winter ocean. He cracks his knuckles one by one. The room's poured full with sunlight the color of beer. He thought of her skin, dark as stout, shivering with sweat, and he swore he could still smell the peaches.

He grabs a plastic cup, remembering Hosea asking him for a slush. He'd fixed the machine a year ago and Hose couldn't stop drinking the stuff, wouldn't until his teeth rotted out. Stupid kid. Not even the worst of his addictions.

Weeks ago they argued. "No, listen," Hosea had said. "The sugar is like antifreeze so it doesn't freeze solid."

"Why doesn't the ocean freeze solid?"

"That's not ice. It's like...algae or something, I don't know. I don't know everything."

*You know enough, and yet you're still stupid enough to stick needles into your arms and believe in witchcraft.* He lifts the tab on one of the drums, letting the cherry flavor pour into the cup.

The ocean was even slush last winter. But they wanted to escape. Anette knew the ship was there, hidden behind an outcrop in the cove. She'd seen it foraging. Mentioned it. They were

desperate. Afraid. They thought they could swim to it still, thought all three of them could make it, but no. The sleep gripped Anette while they were swimming, and she drowned. He watched her sink into the deep blue. Hosea hated her though, so it was okay. It was all okay.

At least the two of them made it. When he and Hosea first crawled aboard over the rope ladders and collapsed onto the deck of the *Arcadia*. Trembling and wet, but thank god the water around the ship was warm and crystal blue. And in those moments before they fell asleep, Nien swore he could hear the whole world breathing.

Anette woke him before they both starved. Hosea had grown a beard stiff with salt. Snored, curled up in a ball, his fists clenched. He wouldn't remember this sleep. He'd deny it happened because it was empty. No dreams, no nightmares. A sweet black-out like going under anesthesia. He'd deny it because it didn't fit the narrative.

Nien wandered the decks with a flare-gun. Just in case. Found the lower ones flooded. Found empty cabins still strewn with clothes like the people who'd been there had dropped everything and ran, TVs still on, their white noise canceled out by the ocean's white noise. Then he found the food court stocked with goods that had a longer shelf life than his soul. He'd come back, sit over Hosea, eat, drink, and consider not feeding him,

consider letting him die of dehydration on the warm open deck where the snow melted before it even touched the water. He found tools. He thought of more violent ways to do it. He thought of throwing him overboard to drown like Anette did. But he decided he didn't want to be alone. And she wouldn't let him sleep forever. So he put his anger up on the shelf next to his soul and smiled when Hosea finally woke up and asked for something cold to drink. He found the flavored syrup, rigged up the machines, and made the kid a slush. Since then it'd become ritual.

The cup overflows, so he scoops off the excess with his finger, then sucking it off. The ships rocking doesn't bother him anymore. It lulls him. He sets Hosea's cup aside. Thinks for a moment of poisoning it. Wishing he had a bottle of antifreeze. He shelves his anger again. Grabs a cup for himself.

\*\*\*

This part of the ship had burned. Warped iridescent glass windows let in light which whitens floors flooded from sprinklers now rusted stiff from running so long. It whitens, too, the ocean which seems an extension of the semi-flooded floor.

On a sagging bunk, Sunny sits with his legs crossed, shirtless, toying with the spring and battery of an unscrewed flashlight. Getting bored, he finally puts the flashlight back together, turning it on, looking at the engorged veins in his arm.

He drops the flashlight on the bed and pulls a knife from his pants pocket. His face is pained as the knife parts his skin. The blood runs down his arms, at first glass, before fading into red like litmus paper.

He takes the pre-filled syringe from the other pocket, pulls off the cap with his teeth, fumbling with trembling hands to force the needle past the dead veins and to the ones still plump with blood. Needle finally takes purchase. He thumbs down the plunger. A soft *psss* of moving liquid into the stream. It chills him. He shudders. Feels his heartbeat quicken and his mind go electric.

"Hosea."

Sunny turns his head to the doorway, dropping the syringe. He clutches his arm, the pain shoots through the high, roots digging through veins for watered-down blood. Nien stands in the doorway, holding two slushies, one blue, one purple.

"*Tío*, you're awake. Have good dreams?"

"The best dreams. Dreams where I'm starving." Nien places the cups down on a plastic table, rubbing his cold hands on his cotton pants.

"You're starving but you get witch pussy. A worthy trade."

"...Hosea."

"We established this, Nien, we call me Sunny now. Because it makes me happy. It makes our rainy days go away." He sniffs. "Is she purple on the inside?"

"You've already asked me that. Many times."

"What was your last answer again?"

"No. She's blue."

"Did you at least use a condom? It's a dream, you know, you can think up anything you want."

"It's not a worry of mine."

"Why not?"

"The world's already filled with devils, Sunny."

"And cannibals," Sunny says.

"And cannibals."

"Amen."

Sunny reaches for the purple slushie, then pauses. "What's that?" he says.

Nien glances at it. "You said you wanted mixed."

"Nah. Too much cherry. Take it back."

Nien snorts. He'd been out for hours. Days, maybe. And the kid sat up here, day-dreaming, not caring where he was. "I didn't realize the cherry to blue raspberry ratio was so delicate," he says.

He noticed the bleeding arm, the syringe now swiped into the corner of the bed. He doesn't say anything.

"Nah. If one flavor overpowers the other? Boom. All bets are off."

Nien moves to sit next to Sunny on the bed. "I'll remember that when I'm mixing nuclear waste with my vodka."

Sunny takes the slushie anyway after wrapping an old T-shirt around his bleeding arm. He pries off the lid and mouths the slushie, slurping it down, muttering through a mouthful, "Nuclear waste makes the best chaser."

Nien drinks with a straw. The labels on both cups are bleached and faded. Syrup and ice congeal in the straw, and he gives up, taking the lid off of his and drinking the syrup that's separated at the bottom of the cup. Finished, he stands, moving toward the window, drumming on the fire-marbled glass.

"Nien," Sunny says.

"Hm?"

"I was wrong. This tastes pretty good."

"Hm. Okay."

Nien presses his forehead against the pane. It's warm in some places, cold in others, like a lake.

"Hey, Nien?"

"You don't have to keep saying my name, you know. I'm the only other person here."

"When I die... will you do my body a favor? I mean...a huge favor?"

"You mean *don't* have sex with it?"

Sunny stares, his purpled mouth hanging open. "What? What the fuck is wrong with you!"

Nien chuckles.

"That's fucking sacrilege man. You don't desecrate a body."

"I know, Sunny. It was a joke."

"Not funny. Not fucking funny. The only thing worse than cannibals is necrophiliacs."

"And witches?"

"Witches do all that and more. I mean, at least cannibals have, like, a need to fulfill."

"Oh. Sex isn't a need?"

"If I had a choice between a corpse and my left hand, I'd go with my left hand. It's never let me down. Plus it's warm. That's not a guarantee with a corpse."

"Is that why you're cutting it open? Easy access, hm?"

Sunny cringes. He glances at the bandaged arm, then holds it behind his back. "I don't know... I can't... I can't get it like I used to without digging deep, you know?" He hides the shame on his face by smiling, turning away.

Nien sighs. "You ever think that maybe the stash you stole when we ran away was watered-down batch? A bad batch? I don't know how drugs work."

"Maybe," Sunny says. His voice is soft now. "I was serious, though. I want you to do something nice for me when I'm dead."

"You're not going to die."

"You say that, but... while you were out, I found some people."

"What do you mean? What people?"

"I don't know. They were in a little boat, trying to fish, I guess, and got sucked inside the...engine. Roasted alive, I guess. Two of them. They were holding each other when they died. Stuck together, you couldn't tell whose bones were whose..."

Nien's stomach turned. He placed the syrup-drained ICEE down. "Who do you think they were?"

"Doesn't matter. You have to respect all bodies. God judges the dead, not me."

"You sure judge Anette pretty harshly," Nien says, without any venom.

"Yeah, but, in your mind, she's not dead," Sunny says. "I am."

Those weren't the magic words this time. Nien turns and looks at Sunny, pain in his eyes. "You're just as alive to me as she is."

"Which one of us did you save, Nien? Me or her?"

"Neither of you, I wish," he snaps, but doesn't mean it. He's too tired to argue. "Just...tell me what you want me to do with your body."

"Whoever those people are, I need you to help me dig them out. We'll put them out to sea or something romantic like that. A giant Viking funeral pyre."

"And what about you?" Nien says, his voice cracking. What he wouldn't give for lucidity. They say lucid dreamers are the only sane people left.

"Put me in the engine where they were and let me burn too."

"Why?"

"So nobody can tell who I am. So I'm nothing but tar and dust. And no one can hurt me."

"It won't matter when you're dead, Hosea. You'll rot anyway."

"Sunny. It's *Sunny*."

"Sorry. I'll bury you or throw you in the sea. It won't matter."

"It will matter," Sunny says. "Listen. I don't mean dead-dead, Nien. I mean, the next time I sleep."

Nien doesn't answer for a long while. He turns away from the window, glances at Sunny, eyes as half-molten as the panes once. His fists clench, lips quiver around words but don't release them. He turns away, biting on the red straw.

"Let's go...take care of those bodies," Nien says. "Before they stink up the place."

Sunny rolls off the bed, setting his half empty cup aside after considering whether or not to eat the drained ice at the bottom.

"Yeah," he says.

\*\*\*

Sunny's body's the color of amber and overwritten with faded tattoos. Names of mother, brother, little sisters, Messiah, tío, tía. Lines with no meaning crossing his back. As if it is the Red Sea. Needles must've loved his skin more than the mosquitoes in Florida where he was born. He throws his shirt on the floor, wades into the water that has flooded the stairwell and the floor below it. They can hear the engine from here. Stirring like a washer.

Nien stands on the step above the surface, exhaling, watching Sunny pull into a backstroke and then tread, easy smile

on his face. He once thought that if he had ink he'd add Nien's name to his tattoos. No better a brother these days. But his body had become an obituary, and everyone but God knows Sunny will die first.

"You coming?" Sunny says, spitting out warm, salty water. The machine filtered out all the debris. Only thing left are some brave little crabs and mussels clutching the walls, fighting the pull of the current.

"Yeah, just...give me a moment." He considers sitting down. His voice cracks when he speaks. "When did this place flood? It wasn't flooded last time I was down here."

"I don't know. Tides? But it doesn't go any deeper than ten feet, tío. If you drop, I'll just pull you out. Promise."

Nien feels his stomach churn and braces himself against the wall, clenching his teeth. "Oh, God."

"What? You falling asleep on me again?"

Glancing over, Nien can only see the white of Sunny's grin. "Why were you down here anyway?" he says. Their voices echo up the stairwell.

"Engine makes the water feel like a bath. Sometimes it bubbles, and it's like my own personal Jacuzzi."

"But it's dark. And you're always on about that 'sunny skies' BS."

"Come on, Nien. You can close your eyes and float and lose yourself in this noise. It's heaven."

Nien looks forward. Swallows. It's like an underwater cave carved out of metal. He feels himself holding his breath, feels his lungs being crushed like rose-petals under a pestle of ocean-water. They swam until their bodies were made of ache. Until their bones swallowed themselves and coughed themselves back up. Until they lay on the rocky beach numb and trembling, their minds numb and trembling, three of them swam but only two made it.

He'd looked back, and her eyes were closed, and she was sinking. He couldn't help but think that maybe...maybe Hosea turned back and kicked her in the head. Knocked her out. Maybe she wasn't sleeping. Just unconscious. He couldn't tell. Sound is as muffled in water as he imagined it was dead in space. And he thought he saw a thread of blood billowing from her nose as she sank but noses bleed when you push yourself too hard, it's just one of those things. It wouldn't be the first time Sunny had kicked her... but he couldn't ask. Who was he to accuse? And whenever he asked Anette, she'd just smile that smile like nothing could ever go wrong.

Maybe she smiled because he'd gotten everything wrong. Maybe that world is real. Maybe he is sleeping now, and she has

her head on his chest, listening to his heart drum like a timpani. And she hungers.

"Nien," Sunny says. Nien's eyes float back down to him.

"Hm?"

"You said you'd do this with me. Look, I promise I won't let you drown. Cross my heart."

Hope to die.

Nien swallows again. His mouth feels dry. The ice sits in his stomach, the syrup separates from it, silt in water. Dust in a nebula. Nien, your soul is torn in two. Until it congeals again.

He slips into the water, faltering for a bit until he brushes up against Sunny's warm body in the dark. Sunny grabs his arm at the crook of his elbow. Leads him underwater. The noise gets louder, and they swim into the dark until Nien begins to panic. Then they come up on the other side of some wide doorway. The air is so hot here, blasting, that his face dries and his blond hair curls stiff.

"Breathe," Sunny says. "You're holding your breath, man. *Breathe.*"

Nien sighs. Treading water, he struggles for something to grab before realizing that his feet can just barely scrape the bottom here. He stands on his toes. Sunny grins at him, shorter

than him by a several inches but a better swimmer, not afraid of sinking.

"One time I came down here when you were out, and I swear I felt something big swim by my feet. I mean, fucking bigger than the gators in the Everglades."

"...God, fuck, it's not sea monsters I'm afraid of, Hose."

Sunny doesn't bother to correct him this time. "One more dive," he says. "You remember the way, yeah?"

"Oh, sure. It looks *exactly* the same filled with half the goddamn ocean."

"Not even half," Sunny says. He takes Nien's arm again, sucking in air and going under. Nien groans and follows him into the dark, scissoring his legs, wondering if the glowing notes they stir up are sand or fallout.

They finally arise again. Nien's mind had gone blank in the presence of swallowed sound, but it clears now with the heat. His ears ring. He hears Sunny's laughter. It's shallow here. He can stand with his shoulders above the water. Relaxes a bit.

"Wasn't so bad, now was it?"

"Shut up. That was bad. And we have to swim back."

"Nah, not if you don't want to. Not today. We can spend a few nights. I brought some food down here back when it was dry. Tio, it gets so hot in the guts of this thing you can roast marshmallows."

Nien closes his eyes and sighs. "And people."

"*Que en paz descanse.*"

"Amen."

They rest for a while, letting the water lap at their chests. Nien feels his skin prickle as sweat replaces the water seconds after his face dries.

"Ready?" Sunny says finally.

"Mm."

"Up this way."

He wades to another stairwell, this one leading upward. Nien follows. A crack of soft violet light simmers through the seam in a door at the top. The water at their ankles now, he pushes his fingers into the seam, prying. It opens with a screech, and the heat is almost unbearable, as if someone pulled open an oven. Nien jerks his face away, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Jesus Christ."

"I told you."

Nien grabs his shoulder, yanking him back. The door slams closed. "Do you want to die? We can't just walk in there bare-ass naked like that."

"It's not radiation. If it was, there'd be signs everywhere. That little symbol that sort of looks like a Christmas angel."

Nien gives him a look, letting go. "How are your hands not burning?"

Sunny goes quiet for a moment. "I don't feel much in them," he says, soft. "The drugs make everything numb after a while."

They enter the room. It is circular in shape, in the center this massive pillar of an engine. Shelves line the walls.

"I know that sound," Nien says, to no one in particular.

The *whirr whirr* of the cooling fans didn't do much to dry the sweat from their half-naked bodies. But there was some deeper grumble, like a hungry stomach. Churning liquid. A washing-machine sound.

Sunny pulls the two syringes from his shorts, his hands numb, shaking, and lays them down on the tissue paper. He stares at Nien's arrow-shaped back.

"Nien," he says.

Nien runs his fingers over the faded labels of food Sunny left from an earlier trip, sitting on a metal shelf. Fumbles with the boxes of stale Cracker Jack and canned peaches, pineapple, string beans.

"Found my stash, eh?" Sunny says. He cracks a smile.

"Didn't think you were comfortable eating in front of dead bodies," Nien says. He opens a flat, dusty can of RC Cola and sniffs at it before taking a sip, and gagging at the syrup congealed at the top, setting it back on the shelf.

"Yeah, about that," Sunny says. "I didn't actually need help with the bodies, man. ...they already got sucked back down through the pipes. Machine's self-cleaning, y'know? I just..." He trails off, seeing the dreamy expression on Nien's face as he rounds the room like an ambulatory, not bothered by the heat anymore.

Sunny bites his lip. He lays down a small brown bottle beside the syringes. Squeezes the tabs on the safety cap. The label a scrap of masking tape with the words "stay awake" written on it in thin red marker. "I'm on my last bit," Sunny says.

As he walks, Nien leaves footprints in the condensation on the glass floor. He moves close to the center engine, taking a breath, squinting into the light as his eyes water. The strobing light. He looks down into it. At the liquid boiling and spinning from the pressurized jets, half-cooled steam drifting up into the room. "That's summer," he says.

"Who's Summer?"

"No," Nien says. "The... the heat. We can't see anything outside, just...the sunlight comes down sometimes. But the heat. It comes and goes. And she... we call it summer. And when it's gone, it's winter."

"What are you on about?"

"Anette!" he calls. Sunny cringes at the name.

"God, Nien, she's dead! What the fuck are you expecting?!"

"This is where we are...below this thing," he says. "The battery smell. The churning sound." He looks at Sunny, his eyes watering. "I just...Look, I need to try. I need to see for myself. Maybe if we find our way down there in this world, she and I can find our way out in that--in my dream."

"Oh, my God, you're insane."

"And even if we can't find a way in, I gotta bring her food."

"What?"

"We're starving--she's starving."

"It's a dream, man. Let her starve so she can go haunt some other poor fuck."

"Sunny, this is all I have."

"What? What are you going to do? Slam some nachos over here and, next time you sleep, regurgitate them down her throat like a mama bird?"

"Jesus Christ, Hose, I don't know. I just...maybe if we get some food down there, I'll remember where it is next time I fall asleep. And I can get it for her."

Sunny scowls. "You don't even know when the next time you'll fall asleep is. Maybe she'll do us all a favor and be dead when you get back. You know, like one of those Tomagachi

toys we used to play with when we were kids. Where it died if you didn't feed it for three months."

"No. No. She's always waiting for me when I come back. Right where we left off. I've told you this."

"Girl's a goddamn VCR."

"Hos--Sunny. Please. What do you want me to do? Sit around all day and watch you inject shit into your arms?"

"That would be preferable to you sticking your little white needle in the voodoo doll."

"It's not her fault, Sunny."

"Did she tell you that?"

"No, but..."

"She said she was sorry. Who says sorry if they ain't guilty?"

"Sunny--"

"I'm right here, Nien. You don't have to keep saying my name."

"Sorry," Nien says. "But you don't know how much this means to me."

Sunny bites his fist, leaning hard against the engine. "No, you don't know. I was going to ask you to put me in, man," he says, his throat raw. He slams his palm against the glass. "I'm not going back to sleep. I'm out of this miracle drug. It says *Stay Awake*, but there's no fucking more after this bit. Fucking

zero. So I'm going to fall. And you know what you have to do. Nien, I wanted to spend my last few days with you, chilling, daydreaming, pretending to smoke a blunt, and you had to go and ruin it."

"Maybe you *should* sleep," Nien says. "You're all wired up. Shaking. Look at you. You haven't slept in months. Who's to say the dream won't be different?"

Sunny's eyes glaze over. His laugh is cold. "It's Hell," he says. "I was in Hell. Torture day in, day out, every second was real, I remember the stench of my sweat and the darkness and her fucking witch-face smiling down at me as she pushed me back down every time I tried to climb out. She fucked with my dreams and I'll never dream of anything else. Ever. I might as well be dead when I sleep again. I might as well be." He looks down at Nien again. "And here you are complaining that her tummy's grumbling a little. I'm glad she drowned, Nien. I would've done more than just kicked her fucking teeth in. I hope her ghost starves. And then drowns again."

Nien's fist crashes into Sunny's jaw before the other boy can fling up his arms in time. Staggering, he grips Nien by the shirt to stay upright, twisting away from his fists. The rage in Nien's pale eyes feeds Sunny's own. He spits in Nien's face, reaching down and scooping the syringe from the floor and

stabbing the needle into Nien's arm, breaking it off in the muscle. Barrels into his chest, shoving him.

Sliding backward, Nien crushes the second syringe beneath his right heel. His slipping left foot knocks over the little brown bottle. Sunny hears its hollow clank. He lets go of Nien. Scrambles for the bottle. Nien kicks it, where it clatters across the cool glass floor before falling in the seam between the engine and the grating. Sunny falls to his knees, trying to stuff his arm into the seam, but the bottle is out of reach.

"Fuck, Nien," Sunny says clutching his head.

"...dude. I'm so sorry."

Sunny's right fist pummels into Nien's soft stomach and he doubles over, gasping for air. Sunny hits him again and again until Nien's knee slams into his face. His head crashes off the engine, as he falls back for a moment, dazed, clutching the fabric of Nien's shirt. Nien stares down at him, panting, teeth clenched, gripping his stomach.

Sunny's head falls forward; wincing, he half-pulls himself up before collapsing back down to his knees. He looks up at Nien with a dazed smirk on his face.

"Look," Sunny says, grinning and wiggling his now-loose incisor with a finger. "You almost got a tooth."

Nien slaps him, only hard enough to wipe the smirk into a scowl. He grabs Sunny's shoulder, hard, digging his fingers in.

"I'll hold you down and kick the rest in while you're begging for forgiveness at my feet," he says. His voice is cold.

"Oh, you know nothing of begging," Sunny says. "Absolutely *nothing*."

He sees stars as his head is slammed back against the engine again, coughing up vomit only to swallow it back. He writhes, his shorts dragged below his pale waist. He comes to, his eyes stinging with tears, a twist in his gut. "Let go of me!"

Nien relaxes his grip. Sunny yanks away, spitting blood from his mouth. "I'm done. I'm fucking done."

Sunny pulls up his pants. He stands up, wiping his mouth as he walks away. "You're on your own," he says. He wrenches the door open. It slides closed behind him.

Nien stares after him, his rage subsiding in seconds to emptiness, a stomach crumbling with hunger, cold with ice, sore. "*Sunny*," he calls out, but his voice is hoarse.

He leans against the engine, warming his aching back. His left arm paralyzed with pain, he tires to pull the broken needle out with dull fingernails. Giving up, he drops his face into his right hand, breathing out. Minutes pass. There is nothing here. Nothing but the hum of the engine and buzzing red emergency lights.

He thinks of the water, surrounding him, everywhere. Thinks of how the pain he's in wouldn't get him very far. Bracing

himself to his feet, he goes over to the metal shelves, taking one of the heavy Tomato paste cans and moving back to the engine. The paper label barely keeps the metal from singing him. Getting down on his knees and swinging hard, he hammers at the pliable grating until it splits, a screw popping loose. He pries the thin metal sheet back. Squeezes his thin body into the seam wincing as he burns his back on the engine-side. The pressure crushes his organs against his bones and his eyes bug as he writhes, trying to get free. Then he falls, yelling out as he plummets, slamming hard against the glass below. It does not give.

"Ah...gh..." He dry heaves, colors teasing in his vision. He touches his now-busted lip. The pain from the fight with Sunny seems swallowed up by this new pain. He grasps for one of the metal cords snaked around the engine to heave himself to his buckling legs. He tilts his head up, seeing Hosea's drug-bottle nestled between the cords. He tries to lift, finds the pain from the needle in his arm too much, falls back down to his knees, cursing.

His head throbs. Too much exertion, and you'll fall asleep. Too much exertion, and you'll die. His body begs him to stop. He lets it cry itself to sleep, lets it go numb, lets the feeling of a thousand needles in his arms and legs hold him on the floor like a vice. The bubbling of the liquid below comforts him. It

congeals along the edges of the tank, looking like the thick slush that scums over the surface of the ocean. He presses his cheek against it, letting the pain be melted away and remembers the scar on that cheek, its risen outline, that crude carving of a sled dog. It would've been a tattoo, but they ran out of ink. Neither Sunny or Anette ever brought it up, so he forgot it was any more than a normal scar.

He turns his head to trace it with his finger, wishing it was a fish, wishing instead he could swim without fear. Or a crab so that he could walk ocean-floor.

Then he seizes one of the cords and shakes it, violently, screaming at the tangled mass. Like tentacles they pulsate, flicker, sway. Finally the bottle flies free, dropping skittering, cracking open on the floor. Nien watches and lays his head back down. The medicine is viscous, the color of cooling lava. He watches as it drips through the glass. It is not glass, no. A stiffened membrane. Porous on a level he cannot see. He watches these droplets so orange they're almost blue, diffuse like ink into the effervescence.

He watches the reaction like he is the catalyst, the bright blooms of color bursting here and there, a chain-reaction of supernova, it is stunning; a siren starts blaring, the membrane explodes in places and leaves a spray of tiny pieces which do not cut his skin, but crush themselves into powder on contact.

He claws himself across the floor, wishes for a cool drink, thinks the steam that whistles past him is a song, Anette's breath, her smile empty of teeth, her teeth replaced with turquoise, how pretty would that be? Or maybe lapis lazuli. He rests his body against the engine as the sounds blur into one noise, the lights switching on spread upward above him, infinitely, like a universe expanding. His head rolls back. He falls again, sliding once more into the gap between the engine's column and the floor, asleep before he hits the ground.

### 3. Dream

(Lune)

My father, he was hard of hearing, he sits carving wood in his easy chair, dropping the shavings around his feet. They curl like snakes. He kisses Mama on her belly. We play CDs. I sing, Mama sings. We got lobsters in the lukewarm bathtub. Father says, "Boy's got a voice like a god."

Mama smiles at me. We go outside. She holds my hand. We play in the sun-warmed rainwater, catching earthworms, letting them go. She pulls me back to the porch. Kisses my mouth. Unravels my clothes. Her breath is sweet. My stomach hurts. The sun burns my back. I am small, I don't know what I'm doing. I

love her. Her dress rolls up to her thighs. She pulls me on top. I fuck her. Can you use "fuck" when you are just a child? It feels good. It feels bad. It feels like nothing. The wood creaks. She holds my small hand over her mouth.

Is this what dying feels like?

The shack door opens.

There is a rainbow in the corner of my vision. The rainbow makes a sound when its arc touches the ground. It is the sound of my heart pounding, the sound of my father's fist slamming on the table, splintering it. The sizzle of the hot knife as he ties me to the kitchen table like he tied Mama to the bed, and brings the glowing blade between my legs, and cut as I screamed. Punished me for what I had done. Oh. This is what dying feels like.

The sound, I reach for it. I clutch onto it. Onto anything. Pull myself out. I feel myself rising. I can't remember. Was it a rainbow, or was it a star falling? The bang of the sky falling? Was there ever a sky? My ears ringing. His hateful face; fuck him. But it's okay. It's all okay. I'll wake up soon and remember I never had a father.

*Bang.*

Stop. I'm caught up in the darkness in-between dreams. There was one before the last one where I was with Sam. I told him it was time to go. Time to be born. But he didn't understand. Now he's gone. So I sit in the dark and wait for him again. Waiting, I diffuse into a billion little particles, hot as that knife, and the pieces of me spread across the water that forms below. I am not myself anymore. I am everything. There is a machine on the water now, round and vibrating with unspent energy. There is a boy.

The boy breathes. He knows how to breathe. The filth caked on his feet washes away as he steps from the surf and onto the hulk of metal radiating heat. It burns them numb. The steam makes his eyes water. Sweat gathers in the crevices of where he sucks in his cheeks. The hiss of water pressure, farther out the sound of cove water bubbling from volcanic temperature, all registered as numb silence. He sees the effervescence, but does not mark it. Blood trickles from his ears. The light radiating from the center enamors him. It is the prettiest shade of nuclear he has ever seen. His body quakes. He falls to his knees. Stomach aches. Something tells him to drink, so he does, but all he tastes is heat and salt so he coughs it back up, and along with it, a bloom of blood which dyes the water around him pink. The man behind him pauses. The metal clang of his chains on the metal surface reverberates, but the boy doesn't hear him.

The boy just stares at his own blood as if it were a miracle. The man wipes his knife and presses his boot onto the boy's back and watches him writhe as his face dips into scalding waters. Sometime underneath, the ringing stops. The boy can hear again. Hear the ebb of water, the hum of the machine, the sound of bubbles exploding from his mouth, even his own trembling grunt when something cold and metal slides into his flesh, muscle, cutting bone, piercing veins, and opening up his body like a blossom.

Whose dream is this? Is that me? Is this a repeat of the last, just a different scenario? Is it Sam? No. Even if it is, this doesn't bother me. The boy is just an image. A figment. Got no soul. It doesn't bother me. Not even the way the man stands there, staring down at what he's done. I just wait for the dream to slip into nothing again. But the man raises his head and looks right at me.

"It was an accident," he says. I expect to see the face of my fictional father, but it is not him. This man has turquoise teeth. He has a handsome face. This is his dream, not mine, not Sam's. I am intruding. He knows I'm there because he knows he's dreaming. He's as lucid as me. I recoil from him, from his knife. It bothers me. He's one of those people. People who treat

their dreams like video games and kill and kill for fun and for once I am glad I do not have a body.

But he says, "I've done this. Over and over again, just to see if I had it in me. Just to see if I really could have done it. But I am still unsure of myself."

He drops the knife. It clatters off of the metal causeway and plops into the water. Silence for a moment. Then a blaring alarm. The machine bursts open sending forth a wave of cool, viscous fluid everywhere, baptizing everything in this pocket universe. It saturates every little piece of me and the *bang* echoes up and over and pulls me out of sleep along with it.

#### 4. Messiah

(Malt)

Your name is Malt, and you stand on the empty beach with your feet sunk in the sand and your boy-dog's feet likewise. His name, Osiris, Egyptian God. He groans, trying to slip from his collar in your hands. The crabs are building shelter from the

rain with pine-straw, scurrying around the sunken treasure that is your feet, and the dog doesn't like it at all. He bites at them.

>Calm dog

You scratch the dog's ears. He whines, sits down, looks up at you with mismatched eyes. What a pretty mutt. Like you, Malt. Got both chocolate and some cream. Can say your father's name in creole. The dog wags his tail, noses your legs with his snout toward the forest, trying to get you to move. How long have you been standing here?

>Walk to the forest

You pull your legs from the sand and move. You watch the crabs. They're building a church now, using the holes where your feet were for the nave. They wave about tiny sand dollars for their communion wafers, and it makes you smile.

The forest's dappled shade grows thicker the deeper in you have to go. The thought makes your stomach turn. You're scared of the dark. That's why you stood on the moon-bleached beach for so long. Osiris whines. He's trying to tell you it's okay, but it's not okay. The dark can swallow you like a large sea fish. And unlike Jonah, you won't be going anywhere.

See, you live in a waking dream and each morning, the sun stuns you into silence and each evening, the moon strikes you dumb. But your tongue still tastes saltwater, a moldy lemon, the

soft, sour soil, the paper crunch of dead leaves. Your skin, hot and cold. Your eyes, light and color, the absence of light and color. You see things others don't see. You feel things they don't feel. You hear things -- a voice, not mine, but the voice of a woman -- or was it a child? -- telling fables and fairytales and each time they speak, your world changes again.

>Sleep

You can't sleep now. Not even if you tried. God says when you get to sleep.

>Are you God?

Pay attention, kid. You have to make it somewhere before you die.

>Status

Your name is Malt. You are female. You are twenty-nine waking years old. Your left hand is rotting from a wound you got while you were sleeping. You haven't eaten in three days. You drank rainwater yesterday. You carry playing cards and a broken earring in your pocket. You have a poor memory. It resets. You still make progress, though you can't remember why you're here, how you got here. Your companion is Osiris. A service dog. He's trained to feed and give water while you're out. He's not a big dog, but he'll fight to the death for you.

>Continue into forest

There's a brave girl. The air in this forest is electric. Flowers you have never seen, tropical flowers with glowing petals grow between the roots of the trees like the granules of sand between your toes.

>Pick flowers

You run to the wildflowers and pluck one by the stem, and its glow dims as soon as you remove it from the earth. This makes you sad.

Osiris snatches the flower from your hand and eats it. He throws up seconds later. If you could speak, you'd scold him.

>Keep walking

You go, now, with the flowers lighting your path. But soon you realize the flowers are snow, their glow the moonlight's illumination. Your hand is wet from the handful you grabbed. There are no flowers. Who told you there were flowers?

You see a man, he's digging in the frozen soil in a clearing where the moon smiles down on his white back. He has a spade, and he's digging up mushrooms, putting them in a pile. He has a gun, too. Osiris growls, lowering his body. Licks your hand, not taking his eyes off of the man.

>Call out to him

You can't talk, Malt. You do need medicine, though, for your rotting hand. Maybe he's a medicine-man. Who else digs up mushrooms in the cold and dark?

>Throw rock

You get to your knees, scramble around in the loam and snow-patches for a rock. You find one. Roll it around in your palm. You stand up again and throw it at the man.

It skips and lands a few feet away from him. His eyes lift from the dirt and to the stone. Then they rise to you and Osiris. Osiris barks, wags his tail. It's been a while since you and he saw another person not sleeping or dead.

"Anette?" he says, squinting in the dark at you. Anette? You step back, unsure. He realizes something. Grabs his gun and points it at you, standing slow. You wish you could call out to him. You let go of Osiris's collar and the dog walks over, body lowered, tail wagging. He knows what to do. You follow him out into the clearing, let the moon bathe you. The man stares. He lowers his gun and begins rounding you. Osiris rolls in the dirt, acting a fool. But he knows danger when he senses it.

The man pats you down, looking for something, keeping the gun pressed against your body. You shudder. Sigh. You don't remember the last time anyone's touched you, man or woman. And you can't remember if you liked it.

"Are you soft in the head or something?" the man says.  
"Walking around with no weapon and that pitiful dog. Are you looking to get hurt?"

You stare at his face. He looks sick, sicker than you aside from your hand. Ribs are showing through his shirt and his body bruised and pale. He takes your left arm and then lets go of it, jerking away. He catches your eyes.

"This okay?" he says, holding onto the hem of your sleeve.

>Yes

You nod and smile. You understand English well enough. Someone taught you. Maybe your father. He could speak it better than Americans could.

The man lifts up your sleeve and cringes, sees the rotting fingers, black palm tissue swollen open, the smell, the leaking fluid, the sticky bandages you tried to wrap it in.

"Ugh," he says, turning his head away and letting the sleeve fall. The hand is the only way you can tell time. Only way you know it's not standing still.

"Fuck, that's...you need to cut that off. You can't just..."

He steps away from you, mutters, "Fuck," again, and goes back to his mushrooms, scooping them all into his bag.

"I need to go. I don't have time for this. Stay here. Don't follow me."

He backs away. Trips over Osiris, who's dragging his belly on the ground, submissive, begging. He falls but catches himself with an outstretched arm, scraping it open. He grunts, but grabs

his bag, shoving Osiris out of the way. The dog whirls around, licking his face. Breathless, steadying himself, the man clutches at the tags dangling from Osiris's collar, reading them.

*My name is Osiris, and this is my human Malt.*

"Malt," he says. "Look. We don't have any room. Sorry."

He stands up, and starts to walk away. You see the orange and blue lights simmering in the distance where he's heading. Could that be heaven?

Your eyes rise above him for several moments before settling back on him and seeing him buckle down to his knees with a groan. He then collapses onto his side. Osiris gives you a look, whining as you grasp his collar again.

>Check body

You and Osiris move to him. Osiris licks his face and gives a concerned little bark, nosing him. You crouch down and put two fingers to his neck like your father showed you. You feel the man's pulse.

>Slit throat

You can't do that, Malt. And you wouldn't. You're a good person.

>Kiss

You kiss Osiris. He returns the love by licking your mouth. His breath smells sticky-sweet from the flower he ate.

>Kiss man

You take the man's face between your hands and you kiss him. His lips are full and chapped and parted in sleep, and you wonder what he's dreaming of, and if it's you.

>Love man

I'm sorry, Malt. I don't understand. Maybe you mean like when your father held you on his knee and called you, *Muñequita*. Or how you feel you'd die without Osiris. But you cannot feel that way for this man.

>Please

Please who? The dog or the man?

>Wake him

You slap his face. You already know this won't work. He remains still.

>Eat mushrooms

You pry open his bag. The mushrooms are dull and gray, not like the pretty flowers. But you're hungry. You take one and pry off its cap. You push it into your mouth and chew. Eventually, you've picked through the entire bag, giving some to Osiris. He laps them up. You are no longer hungry, but you feel bad for stealing his food. Maybe you should go to the lights and ask for help.

>Search body

You push your good hand into and under his clothes like he did you. You find a whistle hanging around his chest.

>Blow whistle

You blow it. The sound that comes out is melodic rather than shrill. You wait. Nobody answers. You feel more awake now. Your body tingles and you turn to look around. You thought you saw lightning, but maybe it was just your eyes adjusting to the bruised dark. You drag him a few more feet through the browned pine needles and supple snow. Look back toward the smear of the shoreline. The sky crackles, smells acrid like batteries gone bad. There is a flash, and when the light settles you see something bobs in the water. The ocean first swallows up what it was, and in turn the entity drinks up the cerulean cove water and becomes its own island, color of a beetle shell, undense enough to float.

You turn to it, cradling the man in your arms like he is that baby you lost. And you think, did that come to the water, or from the water? Should you go to it, or run away from it?

>Go to it

Oh, you would, Malt. You would. You were the child that wandered off from her parents, into crowds and thunderstorms, beads and crushed marigolds, into bars of men smoking Nacional cigarettes and drinking rum, into a field of people lying on beach towels, staring up at a sky full of fireworks. They

maneuver faster than the stars but die faster than the stars.  
But take it slow. There's no rush this time. The ocean is blue  
because you told it to be.

>Pray for it

You clasp your hands over his hands and bow your head.  
Osiris bows his head too. But it is a machine, Malt, it doesn't  
know God. The ocean's foam begins to bubble. You think you hear  
people somewhere far-off yelling.

>Pray for them

What a heart you've got there. Such empathy. Empathy is  
already in your inventory, but you haven't found a use for it  
yet.

The man stirs. He wasn't asleep -- he just fainted. Drool  
is on his cheek, and he tries to wipe it away, but his hands are  
clasped in yours. His eyes open. He tears away from you. He  
grabs his mushroom bag and squeezes it, and upon finding it  
empty, stares at you with hatred.

>Pray for him.

You can't do that now. He doesn't want your prayer.

"Do you want me to starve, huh?" he says. What is he  
talking about? There's enough food for everyone. These people,  
their skulls are made of sugar, and they're still hungry.

He opens his mouth to complain again before his eyes catch  
on what's happening in the sea. He drops his words. Osiris licks

his hand. His eyes go so big they pool with the light now passing over the forest like the destroying angel.

"What is that?" he says. "Am I asleep?" He pinches himself. He pinches you. He's chewed his fingernails to the nub, so it doesn't hurt.

"Fuck," he says. "It couldn't be. Come here. Come with me." He struggles to his feet and wipes the saliva from his cheek, and you're not sure if it's his or yours or the dog's. He begins to stumble in the direction of the lights. It takes several minutes. The sparse pine trees only grow sparser; and finally you can see where a building stands, tall and crooked, an outhouse squatting in the overgrown vegetable garden beside it, the wood of the fence half-rotted.

>Follow him

You follow him with a smile on your face, as if he's your Messiah. You've followed many people. And you've never been lost, even if they didn't know where they were going. The last people you followed numbered forty. Tried to merge with bigger groups sometimes, but it got hard, people would steal and run off in the night, so forty was a good number. Everyone would take turns. Watch over those who were sleeping. Flush the feeding tubes and liquefy the food. Scoop out the waste from their soiled clothes. Carry them in wool hammocks. You wandered across deserts with them, wore clear plastic beads in your hair

and belly-button, pierced the lips and ears and labias of other girls and kissed them when you wanted to, told stories of your childhood misadventures to those sleeping and those awake. Your talking voice was okay. The stories more than made up for it, they loved the one where you almost drowned in Macasía as a child. But they'd say, "Malt, your singing sounds like a frog. Croak, croak--" and laugh, and you'd laugh with them because it was a time of love, even when your croaking voice withered into nothing they still loved you, and Silas with his black skin and white teeth would hold you in his arms, and drink Cola with you mixed with rum, and fuck you until you lost your voice again. But he wasn't the father of the baby you lost.

You'd smile at Silas the same you smile at this man. But he is not a messiah. He is a disciple like you. And he doesn't know where he is going.

Osiris follows at your heels, nipping at them, playful. You scratch his ears. You feed him the last mushroom you hid, palmed up your sleeve. The man goes toward the backlit house, casting glances toward the new island in the ocean like he's nervous. You try to count the windows on one side. Six. A good number.

When you finally make it to the yard, past the outhouse that doesn't smell and up to the front porch, the violet light has dispersed into a few distant flickers. The man pounds on the heavy wooden door.

"Asha!" he says. His voice cracks like he's about to cry.

The front door opens after a while and an old woman looks out at the three of you. She's pretty. The smoke of cooking food boils out from behind her and you inhale. Those mushrooms now feel like pebbles in your stomach in comparison to this sweet smell. Your father's cologne was one of coconut, vanilla and his sweat. Of burning fields of sugarcane.

"Come inside. Come on," the old woman says.

The man pushes inside, peeling off his snow-caked boots and rubbing his feet while leaning against the wall.

"The Sparrow," he says. "They did it! It opened up. It opened up like a goddamn--" His words collapse into a coughing fit. Old woman rubs his back. You're unsure what to do. Neither of them look at you.

>Step inside

You step forward. Your feet accidentally crush some water crackers inside the plastic wrapping. You step back. Osiris noses past you to sniff at it.

"Dog stays outside," the man manages to say through the sound of coughed up mucus.

You stop in your tracks, step back, clutching the dog's collar. You won't go anywhere without him. You promised.

He sees the look on your face and averts his gaze, wiping his mouth with his fur coat. "It's unclean."

"Oh, hush. They can take a shower," the woman says.

"And what if it gets in the food?"

"I'll make more."

"We don't have *shit*, Asha."

"For God's sake, Hammond, you're worrying yourself sicker than you already are."

She pats his back and turns to look at you. The warmth in those eyes. In those bones. "Come inside, honey, you're letting the house get cold."

"No dog," Hammond says.

"Hell, Hamm, quit your whining and go upstairs and rest."

"You never take anything seriously."

"You're shaking like a leaf. Your face gone blue. I'm taking that seriously. Get your ass upstairs."

He shuts up. He casts a glance back at you before coughing again, the phlegm thick in his throat. He grumbles and moves toward the stairs, clutching his coat hard as he goes up them.

Asha takes your hand and pulls you inside. Osiris follows, head low. You turn your head as she closes the door.

There's an arrangement of food around the threshold, in neat little baskets and wax paper. Caramel candies, cream, some still steaming hot and causing the plastic to mist over. She goes back to the stove. You see Osiris lunge for something, a wrapped morsel of meat.

>Pull him

You yank on the dog's collar and he whines, his paws sliding against the wood floor now wet with snow.

"This food is for the King," Asha says. She flips something in a sizzling pan with a long-stemmed fork. The oil pops and crackles and you smile.

"You don't talk or something?" she says, turning to face you. You stare back at her, unsure of what to do.

"Are you shy, or... is something wrong?"

>*Nothing's wrong*

Malt, girl, hush that sweet mouth. Lots of things wrong. But you have nothing to say.

"Okay," Asha says. "Four strays in two days and one of them can't even talk. Lord have mercy. How about you do me a favor. Go upstairs and feed the little one and the pregnant one...you know what pregnant is, right? You're not stupid too?"

>Yes

You nod and she looks at you, unblinking for a few moments before turning back to the stove and reaching for a cabinet above it. Opening it, she pulls out a can of formula, shaking it up in her right hand before handing it to you.

"Feeding bags're in the closet, IV poles by the beds. Should be some syringes in there too if you're not too lazy to flush. You're not dying of hunger yourself, are you? Don't know

how in the hell you manage to survive out there in all that wilderness by yourself."

>Point to Osiris

You gesture toward Osiris and smile. Asha gives you a flat look.

"Okay. When you show me that dog knows how to operate a feeding tube without any thumbs I'll believe you."

You slosh the can back and forth as you move toward the stairs, listening to the formula settle inside. Malt, you can make an instrument out of anything.

\*\*\*

You push the door open, see three figures huddled in three beds. You reach into the closet for the feeding bag, have to hang it on the IV pole, stand on your tip-toes to pour it full of formula. Some spills on your leg and Osiris laps it up. You pull back the blankets of the middle bed. There's a piece of masking tape on her right shoulder. Written in red marker is the name Sofia.

You see the swell of Sofia's belly and think of your own soft belly, the stretch marks, how it never went flat again like it was when Papi called you *flacita* because you were nothing but skin and bone.

Ah, you remember now.

You named the baby Four Roses because it was born dead and had four little red sores sprouted on its head like rose-buds. You carried it still, wrapped in a blanket. Sometimes you thought you saw its chest move. Like a little doll it never decayed. You were with that herd of people, crossing the desert like nomads. But you lost her when you were sleep. Someone stole her. Maybe she's someone else's baby now.

>Flush feeding tube

You unravel Sofia's feeding tube, tracing the knitted trim around her stoma with your finger. You pop the syringe on the end of the tube, pulling back on the plunger. Fluid from the stomach floods into the tube. It gurgles as it goes back down.

Moving back over to the sink near the closet, you turn on the faucet. It sputters metallic water. You press down the stop as Osiris whines and places his front paws on the basin as it fills. With your thumb under the plunger, you slide it upward so the water is sucked in. Go back over to Sofia, attach again to the tube, flush it.

The sound brings it back. You look over to the other bed, where Lune is sleeping. You know these people, but they don't know you. You followed them. And even when you forgot you followed them, you still did, because you commanded Osiris to follow their scent, the musk of a pubescent child and a mother swollen with another child, both with hormones wild. You first

saw them bathing in a hot spring, skin like syrup but the child's a little lighter, dark hair in waves on both of them, but the child's a little straighter. You can't place what you were doing before that. Only that when you were close to them, you started dreaming again. The blackness went away.

You move to attach the two tubes, but pause, hearing voices in the hallway.

>Listen

"Didn't I tell you to get some rest?"

"What use is it? What's the goddamn point?"

"So you don't look like a nervous wreck when they come by. So they're not thinking you're even more of a leech than we already are."

"None of that matters now."

"Look at how much food we give to the King. Every last bit of it. All the food from the garden too. They can't punish us again."

"She'll always find a reason to punish us."

"All the more reason for you to clean yourself up and calm the hell down."

"Asha."

"It's seven already. They'll be here soon."

"This is different, okay? Simon and Lynn succeeded. They pulled the Sparrow up out of the sea. And now we got a lucid dreamer who can open it for us."

>Spy

You crack the door. Peer out. Hammond's face looks ancient in this light.

"I'm not leaving," Asha says. "And I'm sure as hell not leaving based on some poison idea Torres planted in your head when you were barely more than a child. Poison you spread to those poor kids and let them prolly get themselves killed out there. There's nowhere to go. I ain't dying trying to find my way out there."

He grabs her by the shoulder. "But I *am* dying, Asha. That's an absolute. And the only way I live is if the Sparrow takes me."

"All these years, and he still got a grip like a vise on your brain. Out of all the lies he told you this is the one you believe?"

"She saw it too. That girl in there. Malt. We were near the beach--we saw the light through the trees."

"Even if we did go, Ham, what about them?" She looks at you as she gestures toward the door, catching your eye. You slam it shut. She continues, "We can only carry Eric. Between the two of us. Maybe Lune if you wake her up or if that dumb girl helps. And how far? And what happens when we hit the water? You think

Simon and Lynn are out there waiting for us. What if they're not?"

"I don't know," he says.

"And what about Sofia?"

Silence. The floor creaks as someone shifts their weight. You lean your head against the door-frame, exhaling.

"They can't have her," Hammond says. A drawer scrapes open. Asha's breath catches.

"Hammond," she says. "Hammond, *no. NO.*"

The doorknob twists, and you stagger away from it. Your heartbeat skips. Osiris growls, ears flattened against his head. The door creaks open, and you stand with the tubing trembling in your hand as you see Hammond, covered in sweat and shaking. He closes the door behind him. Locks it. He looks at your dog, who's now in front of you, baring his teeth. He barks. A warning. The man's eyes raise to you.

"Why are you even here?" he says, his voice quivering. "I thought I couldn't leave you in the woods like that, but you can take care of your goddamn self it seems. Why are you here? Where did you fucking come from?"

You followed them, Malt. That's all you know.

He points the gun. Not at you, but at Sofia. His hand shakes. You look at the gun, look at sleeping Sofia, her pregnant belly, look back at his trembling arm and those eyes

half-lit with something that maybe at one point could have been rage but is now burning out.

>Connect feeding tube

You shift, move to connect the red nozzle at the end of the feeding back to the tube arching from Sofia's stomach. You adjust the flow on the clamp. The bag begins dripping. The light-brown formula pours down the tube and into her stomach. She needs more than one can. Got to feed the baby too. But Asha only gave you one can. You freeze up. Your eyes shift to the bed on the right and the little figure huddled there. Maybe you were supposed to split the can in half for both of them. You turn and look at Hammond. You don't know what to do.

He stares at you now, the gun still pointed, but his finger not on the trigger.

"Give that to Lune," he says. He gestures toward the figure curled up in the right bed. "Give the food to Lune. You're wasting it."

You curl the fingers of your good arm into Osiris's fur. He's tense. You hear the rumble of another growl in his throat. Hammond is shaking hard now. He's as restless as you.

"GIVE IT TO HER," he says, gesturing again toward the bed.

Osiris barks.

Hammond's finger squeezes the trigger, and the gun goes off. You don't feel the bullet. The nerves in the flesh are

dead. It goes straight through, buries itself in the wall. You feel nothing but the pressure of it. The splatter of fluid against your clothes. You turn and look at the wound. Instinctively clutch it. Nothing hurts. But you grimace. Your legs buckle. Ears ringing.

He lowers the gun. "Oh, hell," he says. Smoke curls from the barrel.

>It's okay

It is okay, Malt. You force that grimace into a smile as your eyes water. Osiris whimpers, paws at your leg. You slump down. You thought you felt every second of the bullet whizzing through, the heat, metallic taste, but your body has as bad a memory as your mind. Light and chilled air darts through the hole in the wall, illuminating the little droplets.

The door pounds under Asha's fists, her shrill voice saying, *"What did you do, Hammond? What did you fucking do?"*

The gun slips from his hand, clatters on the floor. It doesn't go off again.

"Hammond!" Asha screams. *"I swear to God! I swear if someone's hurt or dead in there--"*

He moves over to you as the fluids soak the sleeve of your shirt. Takes your dead hand. You flinch away.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Let me see."

>Let him

He reaches for your arm again. You don't flinch this time. He begins to unwrap the sticky, soiled bandages, but this time doesn't even flinch at the smell.

"We need to remove this hand," he says. "It's doing you no good, and I just made it damn worse."

He pulls your hand to him, pressing around the wound with his thumb. More fluid bubbles out. You gag, turn your face away. He takes one of the syringes and fills it back up with water, squeezes it to irrigate your wound. You feel a tingling in your shoulder. He pulls off his belt, ties it so tight around your forearm the ache makes your legs weak again and you want to faint.

>Pray

You close those eyes and hope someone other than me is listening, Malt. Murrur words in that scattered brain. Osiris whimpers. You hear your father's voice as he carries you -- too big to be carried at that age, but skinny as sin -- through warm water, eating a mango with his free hand. Carrying you, it was like he had one good arm, too. You later watched him sleep and sleep and sleep and never wake up. Must've had sweet dreams. Must have dreamed of carrying you. But this time, all the way across the ocean with the sun on his back.

>Please answer

Nobody but me is listening.

Hammond clears an end table and sits you on it. He rummages through the closet for something. Anything. To cut.

"If you don't cut out the infection, it'll spread through the rest of you and kill you," he says. "Don't you know that?"

>Cut

He turns back, frustrated. His eyes dart to Sofia. He says. "That was my last bullet."

>Cut

"*Hammond,*" Asha says. "*Open the door.*"

>Slit

You feel the fluid oozing through your fingers. It's not blood anymore. Think of the bitten mango on the floor writhing with maggots. You had a brother too. Troubled. Always after girls. Troubled as this man. Sweet sun and island water. Can you remember?

>*She cut them*

Who cut what? Your eyes move to Sofia too. Hammond's eyes are wild. He has eyes like the pretty Chinese girl your brother chased when he was young and you were younger, whose skin browned like plantain over a stove. Your father carried your brother too when he was too old. Maybe your mother breastfed you both too long. This fluid is the color of milk. You look at Sofia. You feel pain in your chest. This is called envy, and it is good to feel.

>Off

Your eyes close again. It's like going underwater. Silas couldn't swim. He said, "No nigger here knows how to swim. Why do you know how to swim?" Laughing the whole time. You'd say, "Babies know how to swim fresh out the womb. You knew how, you just forgot."

>On

Your eyes open again. Hammond doesn't know what to do. He's tired. He sits on the edge of Sofia's bed, tears on his face. "What are you doing here?" he says to you. Osiris lays his head at Hammond's feet. "Why can't you talk? You just up and forgot how?"

You don't answer. And nobody answers your prayers.

He says, "I forgot I buried the knife."

You stare at him and for the first time realize something strange. That face. You tilt your head. You were wrong. He is not older than you. No. Aged by something other than time. That face is barely a boy. That's why you think of your brother. Something makes him look older. Something kills him from the inside out. Living dead.

"I felt guilty so I buried it," he says.

"Hammond," Asha says. "Open this goddamn door."

"In the hard dirt under the snow. You want to know why? Because I almost killed someone with it. I couldn't do it. I

couldn't kill anyone even if I wanted to." He pats Sofia's mattress.

Asha seems to hear this on the other side of the door. She gives a whimper of relief. She stops jostling the knob. Osiris goes to scratch at the frame, his tail between his legs.

"And sometimes," Hammond says. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm cursed. This same thing happened last year. Found two stray boys in the woods. Sleeping. And...this girl who lives in the woods-- I thought you were her when I saw you first in the dark--she was feeding them. But it was too cold, too much snow. I couldn't just leave them there with winter coming in, so Asha and Simon and me, we put them out in the shed with the smoked meat. Meat we were hiding from the others. But we ate it all. Until we had nothing left but formula, which we shared with those boys. I said -- I asked the girl to stay with them all the time, but she'd sneak out to catch fish and such. Sometimes the blond boy would wake, and I'd see them talking by the stove, him and her. And then we ran out of formula and went to town and had to beg the others for more food but they wouldn't share it. They laughed at us. Then Kim died in her sleep, *may the King keep her*, and Asha and Simon and Lynn fell asleep though I begged them not to; and I shot up night after night to keep them all alive until I was starving too and I was so hungry. I was so hungry, Malt, I went into that shed while those two boys were

still sleeping. The girl wasn't there. I dragged one back to the house. I lay him on the table, and I tried. I tried to cut his throat, but he screamed. I swear he woke up just for a split second and screamed right as I had the knife over him. And you should have seen her come in after me. You should have seen the look in her eyes. I let her take him back to the shed. She gave me the fish she caught. I buried the knife and...I couldn't go out to that shed for weeks. But the next time I checked, they were gone. And when they were gone, the snow stopped falling." He exhales.

It's not the sickness that's aged him, no. Something else. He says, "We barely made it through that winter."

Lune jerks upright, feverish, hair mussed, chest heaving. Hammond leaves you, goes to Lune's side.

"What did you see?" Hammond says.

"What?"

"Your dream? What did you dream about?"

Lune winces. Closes their eyes and exhales. "There was this machine," Lune says. "Big. Round. Like a globe, but it was moving. Breathing. And this kid, he was trying to get to it, but it was closed. It wouldn't open for him. And this man came up behind him, and just killed him. For no reason. And then the machine opened. And then I woke up."

"Did he talk to you?"

"The boy or the man?"

"The man."

"Yes," Lune says. "I don't remember what he said. He was really tall and had his hair in a bun."

"That was Torres," Hammond says. He sits on the bed beside Lune.

"The machine," Lune says, shuddering. "I can still hear it. Echoing around in my head. I can feel it. Under my skin."

"That's the Sparrow," Hammond says. "You feel it because you can lucid dream. Torres can feel it too. I wanted you to see it."

"Why?" Lune says. "It scares me. *He* scares me."

"Because I need you to open it for me."

"Right. Should be simple. How hard can it be, Lune? Just open a fucking five-billion ton globe-machine for the guy, piece of cake. You say *I'm* nuts?"

"Lune," Hammond says. "Please."

"You tried to shoot my mother and now you're asking for a favor?"

"Torres, that man you saw, he and Mare Ryu are in charge here. They're not good people."

"And? Why does it matter if they find my mother?"

"Because they're dying," he says. "The sleep makes us live forever, but the 'Wake kills the sleep. So they stay awake."

They start dying off like they're supposed to do. This was their choice. But with her, with Sam, they get off scot free. With her, their mistakes mean nothing. I can't let that happen. They don't deserve it."

"So you'd kill my mother -- and Sam -- just for revenge? Against people we don't even know?"

"You saw it, Lune," Hammond says. "You saw what he's like."

"I don't know what I saw!"

"They're evil people. If they find you here, they'll use you and Sam and your Mama until there's nothing left to use, and you're kidding yourself if you think you can do anything about it."

"I could wake her if I wanted to," Lune says.

There is a pulse in your brain. A cold wave washes over you as you remember more. That glittering city. Leaving it. No, being thrown out because of something you'd done. Silas? Dead. It wasn't your fault. The two of you left the big group and drove to the city for a new life. Then something went wrong. And you ended up alone again. No, you had Osiris at least. He was a gift. There are so many gaps. But yesterday, before you woke up on the beach, you were alone in the darkness. Sand and ocean, but an empty sky. Not even Osiris was there with you. Not even me. And then you heard Lune singing. Then telling a story you'd heard over and over again. A story of a rain-forest with flowers

that glow. Then you saw Lune. Standing over you while you sat on the ground like a child. Sitting down with you to hold you. Lune was a woman in that place. Lune called you Sam. But you didn't mind. You just smiled and thought of your father and his love. And then Lune touched your face, and said, "It's time to go. Right now." And you awoke.

Hammond seems stricken by Lune's words. "You said you couldn't," he says. "Why did you lie to me?"

"I didn't trust you. I don't know you."

"Well, do it now!"

"It's not that easy. I have to feel a certain way. I have to find her in all this noise. It takes a while."

There's a softer knock on the door now. "Hammond," Asha says. Her voice is weak. "They're coming. From the big house. I see the flashlights."

Hammond lowers his head. He doesn't wait for Lune's answer. He stands up. Looks at you. "Hide. Go hide. In the showers outside. Turn on the water so you don't get cold."

Lune doesn't move and Hammond wrests the child hard out of bed and to their feet.

Lune reaches toward Sofia. Hammond shoves Lune toward the door, reaching past to unlock it, and puts a rough hand on your shoulder. "Go," he says.

>Go

You scoop Lune up and exit into the hallway. Asha's face is solemn. She ushers you and Lune to the stairs.

"What about her?" Lune screams, reaching back toward Sofia.

"I'll hide her," Hammond says.

Asha pushes you out through a tiny back door behind the stairs, one that you have to duck through, and the cold hits like floodwater, and Osiris's legs sink in a patch of snow. Asha closes the door behind her. You can't tell if it's painted green or blue in the dark.

*>Paint above it with lamb's blood and turn the ghosts away*

These aren't those kinds of ghosts, Malt.

"They'll check the house first," Asha says. "Make sure we're offering enough food. See who's asleep and all. They prolly won't check back here. Good thing is the water is piping hot, so it should keep you two from catching your death from cold."

She nods toward your hand, now falling apart at its seams, seeping fluid through the rags. "Forgive him for that," she says.

She pushes you and Lune into one of the shower stalls. Closes the door. Latches it shut from the outside. Lune is scared. Clutches on to you after climbing down.

Osiris wriggles in through the gap under the door, looking annoyed, wetting his belly. He pants when he finally squeezes through, tail wagging pitifully. Minutes later, you both hear

voices from inside. There is a fragment of a window at the top of the shower. Lune stands tip-toed to look through the fogged-up glass but can't reach.

>Pick Lune back up

You lift the little one onto your shoulders to see as the kitchen light turns on. Your five good fingers so numb with cold they might as well be part of the dead hand. Lune's skinny legs remind you of your own at that age. You pretend to be your father. Almost have to keep yourself from swaying back and forth and singing *Los Caballeros* off-key, smiling like there's no day like today.

5. Forgive Me

(Lune)

I sit on Malt's shoulders, looking in through the window at the blurred figures inside. I recognize one of them as Hammond.

He sits down on the bottom step as the front door opens and people enter.

"You don't have to wear those masks," Hammond says. "You wanna catch what I've got, you've gotta suck my dick for it."

"Where's the rest of your household?"

"One's asleep upstairs. Like he's been since last winter. Other's outside on the loo."

The figure shuffles through some papers. "Half-year census says five people." A woman's voice.

"Two died. Recently," Hammond says.

"Cause of death?"

"Freezing their asses off in the woods. Hunger. I don't know."

"Sparrow take them," the woman says. "All your food here for the King?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Not a lot," she says.

"All we've got," Asha says, coming back in through the front door, rubbing her hands as if she's been cold. "But the formula. And that's for Eric. Our blender broke last winter and we asked for a new one and no one gave it."

The woman lowers her mask but the window is caked with mire and the bodies of dead summer insects and I can't make out her

face. She says something like, "Times are hard lately," and then, "Escort me upstairs please."

Hammond stands, turns, and goes upstairs. The rest of the people follow. Maybe seven of them. Asha turns out the light. There's nothing more to see. Malt lowers me down from her shoulders.

There are cobwebs on the ceiling quivering with water droplets. I start to tremble. She shakes her head and turns the half-rusted handle on the wall.

The lukewarm water sputters from the shower-head and onto us. There's a leaking dispenser on the right wall and the soap is iridescent, smells of lilac and something chemical. The water soaks through the fabric of my clothes and she stares at me, already stripping naked, flat chest --not like Mama's breasts which were always swollen with milk-- wide hips, skin dappled like some light was shining down on her that wasn't on me. She squirts soap into her palm and lathers it into her curly hair. My stomach cramps. I begin to peel off my clothes as well, throw them in a damp pile into the corner of the shower. The dog sits whining in the opposite corner. I guess he hates baths as much as I do.

I almost don't notice my belt's been unlocked, loosened, and slides off of me easy as the rest of my underwear. And when I do notice, I don't care.

Malt's eyes run down to between my legs where my boyish dick hangs, flaccid, small. She looks up at me, startled, her eyebrows furrowed. I avert my gaze.

"I'm glad you can't talk," I say.

She wraps her arm around me, pulling me to her chest. Wet, slick skin, smells of sweat and lilac, the pink-brown areola in the corner of my vision, blurred by soap and water and tears. I can't anymore. I cry into her. The dog licks water from my legs. I listen to her breathe, her heartbeat. I feel like I've known her for a while. I think I hear her say something but she says nothing at all.

*"She cut them off, Malt," I say. "While I was sleeping. She was shamed of herself, what she did, so she cut them off."*

Malt strokes my limp hair and I wished it curled the way hers did, tangled and big, growing out instead of down so my mother would have been too busy combing to think of castration.

I squeeze her hand so hard I'm sure it hurts her, but she doesn't make a sound.

*"Say something, Malt. Please."*

There's a knock on the shower stall door. We freeze.

"It's just me," Asha says. "These walls are thin. Please shush up."

"You said the water would be hot," I mutter. Malt smiles into my hair. Asha sighs.

"You'll get plenty hot water if they find your ass and take you over to Mare Ryu."

There's shouting upstairs. Asha moves away from us. I hear the door creak open and slam shut. A light flicks on upstairs above us, causing the droplets in the cobwebs to shimmer like a mess of stars.

I squint. Osiris weaves between our legs, afraid, growling at the noise.

"They found Mama," I say. "Oh God, they found Mama."

After some time, some talking whose voices and words I cannot discern, the front door opens again. I peer through a crack in the shower stall. Look out and see those seven, eight people carrying someone, and I know it's Mama, I know it.

I go. I burst outside. Run toward them as fast as my feet can carry me until I feel blood running from my nose and fall onto my hands and knees on the cold, pebbled ground, skinning them, heaving. I cough up bile. Clutch my stomach. Struggle to stand again and limp.

"SAM!" I scream. My eyes are bleary from warm water and soap and my own stupid tears and I can barely breathe. The people look at me.

I hear an, "Oh, fuck."

I hear Osiris bark. I hear Malt's footsteps as she walks out after me, and wraps her arms around me again as if she's

known me her whole life, and it's cold, it's so cold, my eyes roll back, my stomach twists, I spew up again on my naked chest and fall clear out of Malt's arms, onto my face, which bruised swallows the ache of sleep like needles through my skin.

## 6. Love Me to the Bone

(Nien)

The whirring of the engine up above, the heat from it warming the water to the temperature of a bath. They waded in it. It soaks the mattress. Sometimes the water gets so hot that they have to climb onto the counter-tops and clutch each other there as it boils beneath them, and the crabs follow, scattering around their feet, and the little fish die unless they find a cold spot like a cockroach in a microwave. They give a little food. Not enough, though. Never enough.

"Do you see that?" she says, lying on her stomach, pointing at the small porthole above the bed. It is the first thing she's said in days, always so quiet. He enjoys the quiet. Only likes the sound of her soft moans and whimpers. Sounds she can make with her mouth kept closed.

"See what?"

"Something falling from the sky," she says. "Look."

He doesn't look. He doesn't care about what's outside.

"It's just fireworks. They did fireworks last year, too."

"No," she says. "A star."

"A meteor," he says, tracing the bone of her shoulder-blade.

"No. Not a meteor. A whole star."

He laughs and says, "How do you know it's a falling star?"

"How do you know it's not?"

"Because they're too big."

"Depends on where you're looking from, don't it?" she says. He toys her hair around his fingers. He has no care for things falling from the sky. She goes silent for a while and it relieves him. But then she speaks up again.

"Hosea--he's like that, too. One thing to him looks like hell that to someone else is heaven," she says. He rocks her in her arms. She was getting too weak to move now. Nien imagined her bones were fragile as ice and would break like ice if he wasn't careful. She plays with her lighter, cupping the flame with her palm.

He doesn't answer. He pushes against her closed legs, as if they are a barrier to all he wants. She pulls away from him. She says, "He says I got a witch-heart, as if he don't know no better."

"You don't," he says. "Hosea was a fool."

She chuckles and says, "He *is* a fool. *I* was a fool."

"No," Nien says. "I can feel you. Your skin, your bones, your breath. You're alive."

"My soul trapped in your little bottle," she says. "Like a genie. You rub me good and get your wishes."

"No," Nien says, sitting up and frowning his brow.

"I'm just a good fuck, hm? All for you."

"No--Anette. It's not like that."

There was something harsh in her tone. Something he hadn't heard before. "You've stopped caring," she says. "But that's okay. I've starved before. I've died before."

The water now cooled, Anette stands up. Wades over to the dingy mirror and begins combing the new growth of her unraveling braids. "Lord, it's so nappy," she says, rubbing grease along her edges. Her stomach grumbles.

"Anette," Nien says. "I do care. I tried to get you food."

"You don't care," she says. "About what actually matters."

"You matter. Hosea's dead in this world. You're not."

"You think this is a whole different world?" she says, amused. "This is a dream, Nien. I had mine. My own world for five whole years. My paradise. But it was a dream. And you know what happens to dreams when you wake up? You know? They turn to smoke."

She moves toward her television altar and caresses the top of it.

He says, "This feels as real as anything. Even when I wake up, it's like a memory of something that just happened."

"What it is and what it feels like are two very different things."

"The 'real world' feels like a dream," he says. "I can't even remember where I am out there."

She doesn't answer. She reaches in for her silver pipe, flame on the lighter swaying side to side like an island woman dancing. He watches it flicker, tries to think of the right words to say, the right combination to shush her up and lay her down. There was nowhere else to go. Nothing else to do but make love and hold each other, why waste time talking?

"Hosea," he says. "He wants to die anyway, Anette."

She says, "He wants to. I'm going to. Which sounds better?"

He grabs her hair roughly, pulling her by her braids to face him. "You stop that talk," he says. "Right now."

"Or what?" she says. "You'll hit me?"

"No. I'd never hit you, just...stop saying stupid things. God, please. I love you. I can't think of losing you again."

In certain light her brown eyes are a haunting blue, a shade of blue that doesn't quite exist, but everyone who tries to describe it says the same damn thing.

"Anette," he says. "Please don't make me wake up."

"He doesn't want to sleep and you don't want to wake up. Haha." She cups his face. Those iridescent eyes. They make his chest hurt, his ears ring. "But you have to."

"No."

Her full brown lips form over those words he hates.

"Are you awake?" she says.

"No. Anette, please. No."

"Or are you dreaming that you're awake?"

"I'm awake," he says. "You can't make me think this is a dream."

Her hair pours from her head and splashes onto the floor in soapy colored suds; his eyes sting and tighten, eyelids ache, and he can't look at her, can't stare at her directly without blinding pain, her skull now a vessel of light, it blazes from every office, from every beaded facet, colors glittering the edge of the spectrum; his vision bleeds. His mind crackles with the static of white noise. He reaches for her, wants to touch her, to grasp her hips, but instead his hands are enveloped by flesh folding into itself like ribbons, barred by brittle bone.

"STOP, ANETTE!" he screams. "STOP!"

He jerks forward, yanking his arm free as the splatter of watery-hair across the floor continues and every inch of his

flesh burns but to the point where it's so hot it's not even pain he feels, it's nonexistence.

He slams his hand back down. Hears bone crack. His eyes open, though they weren't closed. He sees the blood running from Anette's nose as she lays underneath him, trapped beneath his weight, his heaving chest. The dark bruise spreads across her face like a map.

"What--!"

She does not cry. The tiny droplets of blood are like premature pearls. He kisses them away, kisses the bruise in the hopes it will evaporate.

"You felt them, then," she says. "The little stars in me."

He places his lips, and then the bridge of his nose against her collarbone. The soft blond hair on his body stands on end. He looks around, at anything, at the empty plastic bottles of sriracha sauce on the shelves, at the shelled-out crabs with their carapaces strung together for her jewelry. They boiled the extra meat off those in an attempt for broth. Everything is okay.

Breathless. "What was that? Anette?"

"That was my witch-heart," she says. "You got a good look, didn't you?"

"This isn't a dream," he says. "It's not. You can't make me think it's a dream by playing tricks. I'm not going to leave you."

"So close, too," she says. "But you got the fever, so it don't matter."

"What are you talking about?"

"You lust for me. Lustful. We're all lustful. It's a human thing to want to fuck. I know."

"Anette--"

"Shush."

"I love you. I love you. It's not lust."

"I am dead, Nien," she says.

"We're all dead," he says. "Every one of us."

"But I can stick around," she says. "What does that mean? I can stick around. I wasn't erased. I got a soul still. And it can starve. It can breathe. It can die again."

"It's beautiful," Nien says. "It's blue on the inside."

"Oh," she says.

"Brown on the outside," he says.

"When I worked in the cafe in Toronto, some men that come they'd say 'Oh, you look like chocolate' -- 'Oh, I like my girls the color of coffee. A good cafe-au-lait. And I'll be the milk.'"

"You can't be dead. As long as I love you, you'll stay right here."

"Until I starve," she says.

"You won't starve," he says. "I'll get us food."

"Ask me if you can touch my hair," she says. "They liked to ask that, too. Before I got it locked they always asked. 'Wow, it's so soft,' they said. I could live off coffee, you know. That coffee with all the sugar and cream, syrup an' espresso. Like a milkshake. Enough calories to feed a damn horse. I could live off of that. I did."

He is afraid to touch her hair. The sound of it splattering on the ground, like foaming blood. Makes him shudder. But that was just--hallucinations? He looks at his own hands. Little flecks of her blood. What could he have done?

"'I'll be the milk,' they'd say. 'I'll touch your pretty, poofy hair all night. I bet you got a nice, fat ass, black girl, turn around. Our children will be beautiful. Mulatto babies get the best of both worlds. I want sugar, sugar. I want cream. You want my cream?'"

She laughs and laughs. Nien pulls his knees to his chest. He rolls his head back. "What do you think this is?" he says. "A game?"

"Make-believe," she says. "A dream."

He crawls off the bed. The water scalds a bit, but it's not too hot. He wanders to her, reaches again to touch her around her jutting ribs. A shiver.

"You think the heart does what you wants it to?" she says. "It got a mind of its own. Owns both the body and the soul."

He feels the bone, the solid skin, sighs a sigh of relief, mashes his face into her hard shoulder, pushes himself against her, some part of him wanting to quiet her with his cock, it throbs hard against the small of her back.

"I love you," he says. "Anette. Believe me."

Her dreadlocks are parted by his burrowing face. He kisses her shoulder. Gently bites at it. Tries to pull her back onto him.

"Heart got its own soul," she says. "Its own diseases. People call it 'witch' because they call everything they scared of 'witch' like it means something."

"It doesn't mean anything," he says. "Sunny only said that because he was mad."

Her body is solid. Thank God, Thank God, don't float away, Anette, don't evaporate.

"A leech is someone who is useless," she says. "A witch is someone who is malicious and hurts other people for no good reason."

She turns around in his arms, his skin red from the heat. His erection rests now against her groin, but she doesn't pay it any mind. Protean blue, those eyes. No longer brown on the outside. No longer cracked open like a candy shell. Her hard ribs press against his left arm as she leans her weight there.

She has her silver pipe. He waits for her to light it, to say the magic words that wake him every time.

He only blinks before her ribs open up like a trap and sink into his arm and he screams, again seeing stars, a heart beating twice as fast as his, the vessel of recolored light.

No. The pain is in his upper arm, not his lower. And the light is from the engine, a soft violet, on him like sunlight. He hears a voice saying his name, reverberating. Hard to hear over a blaring alarm. He recognizes the speaker.

"Nien!" Sunny says. "Are you alive? I swear to God if you went and died before I did--"

Nien doesn't answer. The trembling won't stop. He wants to swallow himself. He opens his eyes. The groan is involuntary.

"What the hell are you doing down there?"

"Fuck, man," Nien says. He coughs up bile, a bit of blood. He looks up. There's a vast, empty space above him. The central pillar of the machine is gone, leaving a gaping hole in the floor of the deck above through which Sunny now peers down at him.

"What did you do?" Sunny says. "The whole place lit up, Nien. Like a fiesta. I was leaving, then all the lights turned

on, and there was more rumbling, and quaking --are you okay? Lift your arm and show me it's not broke."

Nien lifts up his right arm and lets it flop back down.

"You're lucky that mattress broke your fall, eh?" Sunny says, grinning.

Mattress? Nien jerks his head to one side. The water. The dresser. The broken TV altar with wilted marigolds. The crabs scuttling around. The shelves with empty bottles of already-eaten sauce, wax paper with residual oil, broken bits of crab shell. He'd found it. And he'd been here before. Had to be. How? He knew it was down here, yes, but how'd he end up here? And she...where was she?

"Sunny," Nien says. His voice is barely a whimper.

"I'm coming," Sunny says. "Let me find something to climb down with--I'm not jumping like you. Knowing me I'll break my neck."

"No. This is our place," he says. "Me and Anette. Our place. But the ceiling's broken. It's not supposed to be broken."

"This is the real world," Sunny says. His face has disappeared from over the edge, but Nien can still hear his voice reverberating everywhere. "It's supposed to be broken."

"Don't come down," Nien says. "Don't. Just throw down some cans, please."

"You are one desperate, horny little man," Sunny says, obliging Nien as he reappears at the edge with armsful of canned vegetables and boxed crackers.

"Peas," he says, tossing down one can. "Okra. Peaches. Pineapple. Tuna. More tuna. Mandarin oranges."

Nien tries to catch the cans but wince as they glance off his broken body, bruising him, cracking a fingernail, ache only added on top of more ache. He lets some just drop into the water and sink to the room's floor.

There is still some tired anger in the way Sunny throws the cans. He goes back for more, scooping the whole shelf clean, and then dumps them all over the edge, letting Nien get pelted as he covers his head and cowers.

"There's all the food I collected for us," he says. "Now you and the witch can fine-dine on expired okra and soggy Applejacks in peace."

Nien fishes after the food, placing it up high, on the shelves, looking around at how desolate this place is. How pathetic. Was Anette really the only thing making it teem with life?

"She's not down here," Nien says.

"Of course she's not. She's dead."

"She might be hiding," Nien says. "From you. Because of what you did."

"*Dios mío!*"

"It's not a joke, Sunny."

"Of course it's a joke," Sunny says. "But you know what? You know what would make it funnier? If you die down there. Chasing your ghost. At least you'd die happy."

"You don't mean that," Nien says.

Sunny laughs. "Of course I don't. Of course."

He flings something else down. A thick red cord of climbing rope with a carabiner. Nien exhales. Wraps his fingers around it. Hooks the carabiner into a belt-loop of his jeans. He's hauled up. A spray of water droplets as he's lifted upward. Something glitters in the water. A missed can, a minnow, a mermaid with Anette's face, maybe. It doesn't surface. He turns his eyes upward. Soon, Sunny hauls him out of the pit. He hears a voice. A digital female voice blaring something over and over again in a language he can't understand through speakers around the room.

Sunny stands over him, unspeaking. He sits up, damp hair falling into his face. "I'm sorry," he says.

Sunny crunches his fist into the wall. "You fucking idiot. You can't make it back on your own. Too much of a pussy to swim by yourself. Hell." His voice cracks. Nien stares at him. "So you had to go climb down into some crazy machine, what are you trying to do? Prove something? To me? Or the dead girl?"

"Neither," Nien says.

"I thought you went and got yourself killed," Sunny says. "Alarms were going off, this lady's voice started yelling over the intercoms, all the lights came on in the whole ship. You should've seen the look on my face when I saw you conked out on a mattress down there."

"I went after your medicine," Nien says. "The bottle that dropped."

Sunny's face softens. "Oh," he says.

There is a brief pause. Nien considers embracing Sunny, if only to feel someone else's warmth. The alarm continues blaring.

"What is she saying?" Nien says, starting to be irritated by the voice.

"Hell if I know. It's Chinese though, I think." Sunny sits down beside Nien. He glances over, opens his mouth, then closes it again. Scratches at the scabs on his arms.

"Did you get it?" he says.

"Get what?"

"The bottle."

"No, it--" he pauses, trying to think of the moments before he blacked out. "It broke. The top half cracked off and all that was left spilled into the engine thing."

"Oh," Sunny says.

"Don't worry about it, Hose."

Sunny chews off a fingernail and spits it out. "Why shouldn't I? You get to worry about your dead girlfriend, I get to worry about my drugs."

When Nien doesn't answer, he continues, "Why are you so obsessed with her anyway?" he says. "It's a dream."

"If you were in my dream instead of her, I'd do the same thing."

Sunny snorts. And then laughs. "That's so fucking gay," he says, feigning wiping a tear from his eye. "You're like my brother, tio."

'Then why do you call me tio?'

"Because you remind me of my tio. Pasty white guy like you. We used to fight all the time, and I'd kick his ass, until this one time he got the upper hand and burned me against the radiator."

"I've always wondered about those scars," Nien says.

"No, *those* scars are on my bare ass. Unless you've been looking. In which case I'm flattered." He picks at another fingernail, exhaling.

"Did you see Anette? When you were out?"

"Yeah," Nien says.

"Next time tell her 'Hi' for me."

Nien glances at Sunny to see if his face is sincere.

Sunny's looking away.

"You mean 'goodbye', don't you?" Nien says. "Because you still plan to off yourself."

"It's a romantic way to go, man, I don't know why you're so up in arms about it."

"Because we've established this," Nien says. "You're not going to kill yourself."

"Technically, you'd be doing me a favor. Remember? You'd be killing me."

"No," Nien says. "I've got a better favor. We're going to go get you some more."

Sunny turns, his fingers tangled in the grating on the floor. He searches Nien's face for something disingenuous.

"What?"

"We're going back to land," Nien continues. "To that town. To go get you some more medicine."

"When?"

"Right now."

Sunny shakes his head. "Neither of us is in any state to swim that far."

"There are life-rafts on the top deck, Sunny. We don't have to swim."

"It's winter, you realize that?"

"The water is warm. It's always been warm. This whole ship is like a boiler."

"They'll see us coming."

"Anette says it's their holiday around this time. So they're celebrating."

"All the while playing the bones of their victims like xylophones," Sunny says, grinning. He takes Nien's hand, squeezing it. "You're going to get us killed."

"And ate," Nien says.

"And ate," Sunny says. He drags Nien into a hug. They both wince. Nien seethes through his teeth in pain as Sunny pulls back and gently lifts up Nien's left arm, the broken bone straining hard against the skin.

\*\*\*

The sun-bleached orange raft unfurls as it inflates with whirring air as Sunny tugs on the painter. Nien sits clutching his arm in the sling made out of Sunny's stiff jeans. They're both strapped in life-jackets. The whole ship is lit up like a city abandoned by nothing but the fish, crabs, and boys who squat there.

Sunny presses down on the nylon raft with his foot, satisfied when it's firm.

"You don't have to go, you know," he says.

"It was my idea. You're not going alone."

"Your arm," Sunny says, not bothering to glance back, knowing the hopelessness of arguing. The heat from the water overwhelms the chill of the pre-winter air. Nien stares at the ocean, not saying anything. The sight of it makes his stomach turn. He and Sunny shared a box of mac-and-cheese cooked over a portable stove they found, ate the noodles plain and then sprinkled the cheese powder onto their tongues. They shared a bottle of green tea. It doesn't sit well in his stomach. Nothing does. He can see the faint smear of land out there, the land they swam from a year ago. Is it even land? He can see the muted cusps of the trees, the boreal forests grown wild without the intervention of saws. The kind of forest beside which you'd find this rickety, three-story house in which lived Sunny's cannibals who were not cannibals at all, but leeches, what's the difference? They both drink blood.

"Nien," Sunny says, breaking his thoughts. "If we don't make it--"

"Don't talk like that," Nien says.

"No, I'm serious. If I fall asleep before we get there or before you get the drug in me, you have to promise me you'll kill me, okay? If we're on the water, just slip me off of the raft and let me go the way Anette did."

Nien cringes hard. Not "witch". Not "whore". He said Anette. And somehow that makes it all the more sour.

"Otherwise, find a gun," Sunny continues. "Not a knife. I don't want anyone using a knife on me."

"Anyone but yourself. Right."

"Shut up. If you want to go raw for the rest of your life, fine, but think of it like this. The sleep is a sickness. Mental illness, Nien, only everyone has it. This drug...wherever they got it, whatever it does to keep us awake, it's medicine. Our brains are imbalanced, telling us to sleep for weeks or months, not waking up. You can just let it go raw like any illness or you take the meds. That's how it works."

They drop down the supply bag first. Sunny stabilizes Nien from below as he hauls himself down the emergency ladder. He dips into the water, then climbs into raft, reaching out his arm so that Nien can steady himself and climb in afterward. Once they're both settled, Sunny cuts the painter, detaching them from the ship.

They have food for a few days. Found frozen fruit, meat, boxes of dinners. Placed it in a cooler with smelly ice from an old ice-machine that just started churning. A water purifier. The portable stove. A storm lantern.

Sweat begins to drip from his body, the chilled air no longer feeling cold as heat radiates and his muscles ache. He tries not to think of Anette. He tries not to think of her.

Focus on the raft, Nien. It'll float. Don't think of sinking.  
Don't think of hunger.

An explosion sends the raft careening in the wake of white-hot waves. Sunny grabs a hold of Nien, seizing his broken arm. He screams from the pain, the roiling dark ocean spitting up the slush into their raft, the sheer heat of the air drying them as soon as the scalding water soaks them.

"Don't fall in--" Sunny says. "Don't fall in!"

The sky has been blacked out by something glittering, massive, the core of a star without the light.

Nien feels his stomach rise and never quite settle as Sunny forces himself over, covering them both with a fire-blanket in hopes to quell the burn of the steam. The raft spews forward in the wake of it, tumbling, foaming with hot water that scorches both of their legs and chests. Nien grips onto Sunny, his fingers digging into his ribs, half expecting the flesh to fold over his hand and swallow it or sink in, the bones like teeth. He finally wraps his arms around Sunny's back, clawing onto him tight as they're thrashed by sizzling waves.

The raft eventually is forced away from the mass. It drifts into calmer, gently dipping waters. Nien is too afraid to look up from the fire blanket. He hears Sunny's panicked breathing which somehow calms him.

"Are you okay?" he says.

"I'm sorry," Sunny says. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Calm down."

The air under the blanket is hot, stale, the blanket soaked and heavy on his back. He can only make out the dark ink of Sunny's tattoos. He tries to soak up little bits of sizzling water with the hem of the drenched blanket, but the air chills it fast enough.

"We're alive," Nien says. Half-laughing, exasperated.

"Raft didn't capsize."

"What was that? What was that?"

"Don't look." Nien lifts the blanket to cover their eyes. The thing has no silhouette. It's so big it could be the earth's silhouette.

"A sea-monster?"

"Jesus Christ, Sunny, I said don't!" His own fear bubbles back up, souring in his throat. "We need to make it to land," Nien says. "That's all we care about right now, okay? Make it to land."

He knows what it is, though. Anette's falling star. A whole star. Except it didn't fall from the sky. It rose from the ocean, chilled by the churning waters which pirated its heat.

He lowers the blanket. The ship is sinking now. The hollow, sucking sound as it is dragged underwater. It was this--this thing holding it up, and it too has a color he cannot describe.

Sunny is trembling under the blanket. They are thankful for the cold air. The melted flesh here and there, burns not too deep. He helps Sunny sit up.

"What is it?" Sunny says. He clutches himself, rocking back and forth.

"Don't look at it. Look over there. At the land. It pushed us toward the land, so that's where we're going."

"I've seen that thing before," he says. "I've seen it before. In my nightmares."

They feel its looming presence at their backs. Sunny shakes. He holds on tight to Nien's broken arm but Nien grits his teeth through the pain as the waves push them to the shallows.

"Just don't look," he says again. "Focus."

Sunny rolls over, turning his face back toward where they came, lifting the blanket. "My God, it's full of stars!"

Nien laughs. Coughs up warm, salty water and punches Sunny gently on the arm. "Jesus Christ," he says. "You didn't look, did you?"

"Am I going to turn into a pillar of salt?" Sunny says, grinning. He lays his head in Nien's lap. The water in the raft laps at their feet, their tired hipbones, their aching arms. The burns aren't too bad. All Nien can think of is Anette. Anette becoming a monster made of light and fluid and static. To chase

him away. She wanted to chase him away. Make him afraid to sleep like Sunny. Why?

"You remember this shit?" Sunny says. Nien's begun absentmindedly stroking Sunny's hair but Sunny doesn't mind.

"You remember us running across the beach, seeing lights turn on behind us, voices, thinking the cannibals were chasing us-- then us jumping in the water like idiots? Like there was somewhere to go."

"Yeah," Nien says.

"We were swimming to die," he says. "Ha. No way we were going to find anything out there. Why'd we even try?"

Nien exhales, recalling that Anette had told them the ship was there. But of course Sunny wouldn't remember.

"Drowning is better than cannibals," Nien says.

"And here we are. Going back."

"We can camp out in the woods again," Nien says. "Like we did before we swam."

Sunny cringes. The woods. Anette had made herself a little home in the woods and took them there after they ran from the commune. That's where Anette had tried to explain things. That's where Sunny threw her on the ground, grabbed her by the hair, and kicked her teeth out. Where Nien failed to do anything about it. He would've done something about it by now if Anette hadn't stopped him. He tries to convince himself so.

"Nah," he says. "Let's just go straight there to that house. Lots of places to hide around it."

He sits up, lifts his head as he sees fireworks exploding above the trees. "There they are. Having their parties."

"Lay back down," Nien says. "Save your strength."

"I feel fine," Sunny says.

"That could change at any moment. It's a bit of a walk to that house, remember?"

A light rises up behind them too. From the heavy mass that seems to breathe, seems like someone looking over their shoulders. A soft, violet light that recolors the whole ocean. They pretend it's not there. It's not written in their scripture, no. There's no prophecy for Nien and Hosea written that involves this thing, no words in the holy book. They do not look at it again. They don't speak of it yet. They will later, on the beach, lighting a fire with the blue Zippo, noticing the footprints in the dark, rocky sand, and beside them paw-prints, both leading into the forest. The smoke of their fire will mix with the chalk blue smoke of the fading fireworks.

The dense fog obscures first the ship, and then as much of the risen mass as it can, displaced water radiating outward from it on every side, gently nudging them toward the shore.

It fills the negative space behind them, leans into their peripheral vision. If Mare Ryu saw it, she'd say, "Sparrow". If

Sofia saw it, she'd say "God." If Malt saw it, she'd say nothing at all. Lune too would pretend it didn't exist. Lune pretends a lot of things don't exist. Anette would know what it is. She knows everything. Someone once told her she could learn anything she wanted to, and so she did.

Nien compares his skin to Sunny's skin in the violet light. He holds Sunny's head. Sees Sunny's eyes flickering.

"Hey," Nien says. "You falling asleep on me?"

"No. Light hurts my eyes. Like a fucking carnival, that thing."

Another barrage of fireworks, squealing, crackling over the trees. The raft eventually washes up on the beach, but Nien and Sunny don't yet move. They close their eyes and listen. They listen to the omnipresent hum of this monolith. The shower of sparks. The rush of the ocean. The cold wind in the pine branches. Even the light has sound. Even the sound has light. They hear people walking in the woods and someone begging, *please, don't leave me here, please, I swear, I'm no leech.*

## 7. Gas Flame

(Lune)

"Fight it," someone's voice says, and I can't tell if it's Mama's or not-Mama's, only that my feet are on hardwood and I'm stumbling. My feet splash into hot water and needles shoot up my legs. Someone's arm is around my waist, leading me into the bath. The mineral foam bubbles up around my chest. I can't breathe. I black out again. I wake up. I remember having a dream that wasn't mine. I am not wet, but I am warm. I feel formula sifting slow into my stomach through my feeding tube.

I remember being awake sometime. I pushed a funnel with plastic tubing down the throat of a boy having feverish dreams, face slick with sweat. I poured thick fluid into the funnel, watch it snake down the tube and between his lips while I held his head. His body couldn't have been more than seven. I didn't know how old he was in waking years.

I sang to him as the meal goes down. I placed the funnel aside and push his wet hair out of his eyes. His chest shuddered, I saw his eyes rolling under their lids. He calmed.

"Very pretty," a woman said. She was watching me. She had hair cut short and teased and this lithe body covered in tattoos. I could see her small tits poking through the fabric of her sleeveless shirt as she leaned over another bed, rolling a sleeping woman from her stomach onto her side, dipping a sponge in a bucket of soapy water and scrubbing under the limp breasts and armpits. The sleeping woman had a red rash all over her.

"What are their names?" I said.

"You'll be asleep when they're awake."

"I'd want them to know my name," I said.

"That boy you're feeding is Derrick. This woman is Onette." She points to the others. "Yvonne, Lainey, Seth, Arvid."

I mouthed those names after she says them, memorizing them. I mouth them again, and swallow the memory. How long has it been? Was that a dream? There's distant music now.

"Morning, sunshine," someone says. It's a blond woman with a drooping face. Not the tattooed woman. I turn my head. Across the room is a short man with deep-tanned skin. He's inspecting a hole in a latex glove. My stomach turns. I try to rip the feeding tube out.

"Hold on, hold on," the woman says, grabbing my wrists and pinning them down.

"Where's Mama?" I say, not thinking.

"Mama?" she says.

"I mean Malt," I say. "Where's Malt?"

"You mean that shy woman with the dog who don't talk?"

I nod. The man with the glove turns around. Says something in a language I don't understand. French, maybe? The blond woman's face is tired and has no color but she manages a smile and says to me, "He says you can go," and unhooks the feeding tube from my stoma and rolls down my shirt. A fresh T-shirt that smells like fabric softener. My tattered clothes gone.

"Go where?" I say.

"Outside. To the party," she says. "Mare Ryu was very happy with you. She wants you to enjoy yourself. Says you can sing the wings off angels. Torres says three days so far without nightmares in the house. You know how great that is?" Who are these people? Why can't I remember shit?

I look down under the covers. Someone has changed my underwear. Someone put my belt back on. I blush. I cast blond lady a cold look but her back is turned now as she speaks with the man in French, it must be. Her hair is loose curly and short, only touching her shoulders. Her body flares out in the middle with fat, but she wears a long shirt to cuff it all in. She must eat well. The man's body too looks strong. They weren't thin like Asha and Hammond, or me and Mama.

"The air drop arrives tonight," she says. "You think today's a feast-- wait until you see all the winter food . You won't be so skinny for long."

"May I go?" I say, hating how my voice sounds like whining.

"Oh, of course," she says. She moves back over to me. I yelp as she slides an IV out of my wrist, only just noticing it was there. "Just one thing. Mare Ryu says you're not allowed to drink."

"Is she my new mom?" I say, a bit bitter.

"You drank last time you were awake and passed out," she says. "Your body's too small for all that mess."

"How long have I been--out?"

"Seven days since we found you. Three days since you last woke up."

My head hurts. I try to think back. My stomach flips when I realize what a fool I made of myself, running naked from the shower and falling dead asleep in front of all those people. I cringe. Squeeze my eyes shut. God. At least they haven't mentioned anything about Mama. And Hammond. I worry about Hammond. I want to ask but my tongue feels swollen and dry in my mouth. I realize I'm scared to. I realize there's a reason he and Asha live so far away from these other people, in a shitty little house with a broken toilet. I remember the word "leech"

being said, over and over again. By Hammond. By Asha. By the woman with tattoos.

I climb out of bed. I inhale, rub my arms before realizing the house is heated all over, not just space heat by a radiator. Even my feet aren't cold. Someone gave me socks. They itch. I peel them off and flex my toes.

"Where's Malt?" I ask again.

"Outside enjoying herself, last I saw" the woman says. "We gave you both some of the 'Wake intravenously and she took to it real well. You've been doing good too. Only sleeping for a few days at a time."

"And the dog?"

"He's out there too." She smiles.

The man says something to me in French, waving his hand. I shuffle away from the bed. The room is spacious, two windows streaming in late sunlight, but mine is the only bed in here. Hearing a voice call her from outside the room, the woman leaves. The man keeps his back to me.

"Did you wake me?" I ask.

He places some things into a bag. "No," he says. "You woke yourself. Hearing me. Hearing the music." He taps his ear.

"Remarkable."

Gathering his things, he leaves the room too. I stay still for a while, staring at my feet. I thought they found Mama. But

maybe it was someone else they carried out of that house. The other sleeping person, what was his name? Simon? Eric?

Outside, the music changes to something else-- a different song, more energetic. I hear excited yells, laughter, hollering. I will myself to move and follow the two out the door into a long corridor lined with doors. This is a big house. The walls are painted with swirling murals of deep space, galaxies collapsing into oceans, along the far wall is a leviathan so long it curls upon itself twice, spanning the whole hallway, and it has a belly full of stars. The whole thing is photorealistic. The sight of it all makes me sick to my stomach. I stagger forward. Look at the ceiling. At the glow-in-the-dark stars pinned up there. I want to throw up. She told me I drank. How much? Enough to pass out. But that was three days ago.

I hear the two of them talking again, in French. They're now in another room. I don't want to see them. I move in a different direction, toward the music, clutching my belly. The feeling passes, but the murals continue across every wall I can see, sometimes spilling onto the floor, I have to remind myself I'm not stepping in real water, that this isn't real stardust that anoints my feet.

I eventually come to an open room. I see a door left ajar. Music is drifting in from it. There are a few people in this room. Some asleep, being tended to. Others awake and sipping on

colored drinks as they look at me passing and smile or stare. None of them are beautiful, but together they are beautiful.

A girl sitting in the doorway offers me a joint. I stare at her, her light brown skin and straight black hair tied in a ponytail. Cheekbones high as she was. After I don't answer she laughs and brings it back down to her lips for a puff.

"I'm in love," she says.

"With who?"

"With the King. He came to see me last night. But no one believes me. It's too early, see." She blows smoke through her nose. "He's supposed to come tonight. But I woke up and saw him. Lying in bed with me. He must really like me."

"Who is the King?" I say.

She laughs again. "Maybe you'll see tonight," she says. And then, "Sometimes I think it must be lonely floating around out there all year. Then I realize he's made of ten-thousand different souls, but they all think as one. And all of them might like me."

"Just 'like'?" I say. "Does he not love you back?"

The smile on her face makes those cheekbones seem to rise higher. "If he loved me, I wouldn't be here right now talking to you, now would I?"

She lays her head back against the door, closing her eyes. I step outside onto the porch. The murals do not stop but I

can't pay attention to them now. What King? Someone told me about it. The tattooed woman. Ryu. Was that her name? I remember her, pointing to the towering pile of food. She said, "All this food is for the King, because we must keep him happy. Nobody eats it."

I said, "What if they're starving?"

She said, "Nobody starves here. Only leeches craving blood. But that's not starvation. It's gluttony."

I remember. I stole a bottle from the pile and I drank it all, drank myself silly just because I could. I can remember how my throat burned. I don't know why I did it. Mama taught me how to steal, but it never felt good. She stole from me and it never felt good.

"Close the door," someone says. The girl in the doorway grumbles and gets up and shuts the door behind her, leaving me on the wide porch. I pull away from my thoughts. Look out toward the town and what once was the road now re-purposed. It was a place that had been abandoned and refilled again by new people. Too isolated for those who wanted the safety of a city or a wandering band. This, a little tourist trap in the middle of nowhere, should have been left abandoned. Mama and I saw the Road Closed signs. I don't know what we were looking for. But here was something pretty.

Crappy motels, a tiny chapel with only two windows on each side, a theater with lights and marquee. A cantina. On the outside, the big-house itself was lovely. It was an old inn. Tin blue roof, pale rose pueblo/stucco walls, wooden storm shutters over the windows, a porch of weathered brick and worn wood. There were pastel Christmas lights strung from every building.

In the center of it all are several bonfires. And around them are young people dancing. They dress like it's not cold, and I know why. The drug feel like fire in us, we have volcanic veins and hot blood, cool sweat. I see flat, rolling abdomens and ribs showing and someone's playing hand-drums.

I walk into it all. On the fringes, people sit around eating rice bread and oysters and drinking from mason jars. A fire crackles. There are carts where new food is being prepared. I watch a lady dip sugared dough into a fryer full of oil. I read the signs, hear the voices saying what's what: peaches and watermelon slices, blackberries, mango squares on toothpicks, pots of honey, raspberry tea in paper cups chilled over with ice, orange juice, boiled peanuts, fried donuts, frozen yogurt, margaritas made from cheap mix with salt on the rim. I'm offered many things. I take something. A drink. I'm not sure what it is. They told me not to drink. I sip at it. It's cold, slushy, like the ocean, but the fires and this heat radiating from both inside me and somewhere else makes the frigid air not faze me.

In one circle, I see them raise their effigy of the King. It has the horns of caribou. I finally see Malt, that jewel-eyed Caribbean girl dancing in the middle of them, more woman than girl though she has no breasts but those swinging hips are magic, I know, and listen, and I'm more girl than boy because I have no \_\_\_\_.

Around the dancers and those eating, there are those getting their hair braided, dyed with colored powder, woven with flowers, fixed stiff with glass and wooden beads. Tattoos inked onto their skin. Noses and lips pierced with hot needles and strung with pretty jewels the colors of the Christmas lights on the buildings.

I drink. There's alcohol in it, but I don't care, I'm lost in the midst of these people, these pulsing bodies. Who are they? Why do they act like I belong? The music stops. Someone calls for someone else to tell a story. Those dancing keep dancing as if the music is as part of the air as nitrogen is. Malt keeps dancing, her dog at her feet, until she sees me. She stares for a moment as if trying to remember who I am, what she owes to me, and then moves to me, her arm outstretched.

The people part for her and then fill in the space she's made. Some of them notice me too. They say, "Lune," they say "Angel voice, sing for us!" There are too many people here. It makes me as sick as the mural did. I gulp down more of the sweet

drink, feeling the burning aftertaste. My skin prickles with a heat that shouldn't be there. I'm too far away from the bonfire to feel this hot. Malt embraces me. Osiris licks my feet. Licks the stardust from my soles. I want to ask Malt if she knows what happened, but she won't answer. She has no voice. Just music.

"Hey," I say. "I want to go back inside."

She nods and takes my hand, leading me back toward the big house. There are sounds of disappointment from a few, but everything continues unhinged. Some of the dancers collapse in their fever and are carried, sleeping, into the buildings. Someone shoots off firecrackers in the distance and a spray of hot blue sparks comes down. A man begins to storytell, his loud voice stretches across the whole crowd and to me as if he's talking in my ear.

"If there was no sin in the world, there would also be no good."

*"Tell the one about the \_\_\_!"*

My head swims. I turn and notice her bad hand's been removed. It's gone from the wrist down. A clean amputation. We get back to the porch. She sweeps me through the front door and closes it behind us. Osiris curls before a fireplace. She sits me down on a couch. The high native girl with the nice cheekbones waves at me from across the room. She braids and unbraids her dark hair.

Why is she here? One arm, no voice. Isn't she a leech? Does she perform miracles? Out of all the things I do not know, is this something else? I think of my voice, of my lucid dreaming. I remember the questions Asha asked us when me and Mama first got here. *What can you do?* People recognized me. Recognized my small, wasted body. My plain, androgynous face. I felt jealous, suddenly. Why was she here? What did she have? They're keeping me because I have value. Is she only here to leech off of that?

Malt catches the look on my face and frowns and steps back. Maybe they kept her because she made me feel happy. Safe. She and her dog. I don't want her to go. How I wish she was my Mama. Every time she's close to me I swear I've known her for longer than a few days.

"Lune," someone says. I'm not sure why. I turn and see the tattooed woman sitting not far from me, on a couch opposite. She drinks from a wine glass. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Who are you again?" I say.

She laughs. "Ryu. Mare Ryu."

Malt sits down beside me. Mare Ryu stands up and comes over to us, taking the left seat on the couch. She gently takes the drink jar from me and sets it far away, pushing it to the far edge of the end-table. "Don't want you getting sick again," she says. I look at her, piecing her together again from that hazy memory.

Her body is lean with muscle.

"Where am I?" I say.

"The big house. My house. Ain't it pretty?"

I avoid the murals, staring at the floor, the fire, her painted toes.

"I guess," I say.

"You're confused. And lost. That's okay. It's one of the side-effects of 'Wake. If you sleep while taking it, it butchers your memory of what happened in-between. Unfortunate, isn't it?" she pulls a face. "Poor thing. I bet you can't even remember all the conversations we had a few days ago."

"Did we...actually talk? Or are you bullshitting me?"

"We talked. We talked a lot," she says.

I wince. Fuck. I wonder how much I told her. Especially if I got drunk. Why did I get drunk? Why am I so stupid?

"But you know who's just dying to see you?" she says. My eyes finally read her tattoos and I realize that snaked across her body is a miniature of the same murals that decorate the walls. I turn to Malt. Bury my face in her shoulder.

"Lune, sweetheart, don't be scared." Somehow she charms me, makes me face her again without even touching me. There are tears in my eyes. You fool. Foolish child. I hold my breath.

"Torres really wanted to meet you, but you were asleep up until

now. He said, *The King comes tonight and he might whisk Lune away to the Sparrow before I get to meet him.*"

Torres. I remember that name. I remember that dream. The murder. I remember what Hammond said about him, about this woman too. They're evil people.

"Don't you want to meet him?" she says.

I don't. I don't know what I want to do. I want to know where Mama is. Where Hammond and Asha are. If they're safe. If Sam is safe. I want to spit up these questions at her, but I cannot even look her in the face. I stare again at her feet. At least they're where the tattoos end. "Can Malt come with me?" I say. "And the dog?"

"Nobody's stopping them," I say. "But Torres wants to see you alone for a little while. Have them wait outside the door."

She looks at Malt and says, "Malt, you remember where Torres's apartment is, right? Top floor?"

Malt nods. She squeezes my hand. Oh. She already knew her name. Did I tell her that? Did she see the marks on Malt's arm?

"Malt's already met Torres," Mare Ryu says. "He's a sweet man. Honest. Isn't that right, Malt?"

Malt nods. She stands up, not letting go of my hand. Clicks her tongue to Osiris who rises up to follow, his dusky coat coated in a light film of soot. We head toward the stairwell. I

glance back at Mare Ryu, who watches me, sipping now at the drink she took from me. She is wicked. This I know.

\*\*\*

His apartment reminds me of the inside of a gypsy caravan, but somehow just barely big enough to fit a man so large, so tall. He closes the door behind me, holding a bottle dwarfed in one hand, before offering me a seat on his bed as he sits at the table, pouring himself another drink. He's already been drinking. His face flushed slightly red, I wait for him to slur his words, to say something ridiculous. He is handsome. Painfully so. His dark, graying hair swept back in a bun, he smiles at me and see teeth replaced with turquoise and somehow even that is charming. I expect stupid words. I hope for it. But his voice comes smooth as the drink he pours.

"I hope I didn't inconvenience you. I understand you probably want to be outside at the party."

"No," I say.

"Well, good," he says. He too is tattooed, but not with those haunting images of stars and sea-monsters scrawled across the downstairs walls. His body too is thick with muscle, and I wonder how when those of us who are not starving are still lean, our muscles atrophying when we sleep.

"Would you like a drink?" he says.

"No, sir."

"Sir?" He chuckles. "I'm Torres. Call me Torres."

"That sounds like a last name," I say.

"It is," he says. "I'd tell you my first, but we aren't friends yet." He winks.

Something about him makes me at ease, there is less sharpness in his gaze than in Mare Ryu's. He seems kind. By the way he speaks, smiles. Maybe Hammond was wrong. Maybe Mama and Sam and I could be safe here. Taken care of.

"Who is that woman downstairs?" I say. "Does she own this whole place?"

"Ah, you mean Mare Ryu? I guess you could say that. But what do you mean by 'this whole place'?"

"The whole town," I say. "Is she the mayor?"

"Mayor," he says, laughing. "She owns the land, yes. And she lets the people live here. It's 'Mare' Ryu, not mayor. Mare like a female horse. Her name is Ryu, and Mare is a bastardization of the French word for mother. *Mere*. You speak French, don't you?"

"No. Why?"

"You have a French name."

"My mother liked the song. By Debussy."

"She could've named you Clair," he says. He drinks for a little while and I watch his throat gulp. "Well, Ryu originally spelled it 'Mere', but the misspelling stuck because sometimes she's crazy like a horse. But the good kind of crazy."

"There's a good crazy?" I say.

"Yes. There is a good crazy. Like Malt, for example," he says, nodding toward the door. "Or a bad crazy. Like your mother."

I freeze. He finishes this drink. Unscrews the cap to pour another.

"How do you know about my mother?" I say, softly. Was it a guess? Because of my name? It had to be a guess... or did I tell everyone...

"Ah," he says. "Did Ryu not tell you I was magic?"

I snort. I pretend not to be bothered. "Magic," I say. "She just told me you really wanted to see me."

"I did," he says. "Well, actually, it was she who suggested I see you. Because, as she says, you are a little clam. A silent little oyster who won't spill his pearl. And so, it's my job to pry that pearl out of you."

He says this as he places a bottle opener to the cap of another drink, wrenching it off and this time bringing the bottle straight to his mouth. I take back what I said earlier. There's something there. Something very unkind.

"Why?" I say.

"Because that is my job. If I didn't have a job, I'd be a leech, and Lord knows Ryu doesn't like leeches."

"I don't want to tell you anything," I say.

"I have a gift," he says. "I am a very patient man. And because of that I find time to exercise that gift. And that makes it stronger. More refined. I can lucid dream. That means something different than it did years ago before the Big Sleep, but it is a power only a few of us have, but even fewer bother to use to their advantage."

Putting the bottle down he rummages around on his person for something, before pulling a pack of cigarettes from his pants pocket, and a lighter from another. He lifts the stick from the pack and puts it to his lips and lights it. "I have very peculiar tastes and urges on which it would be unwise to act in reality. But I can be whomever I want in my dreams. There are no consequences." He puts out his cigarette without finishing it. "And I can be whomever I want in others' dreams too. I even killed a boy last time I slept. And then I killed myself." He sighs and stirs his drink. "But Little Lune, you are a glorious creature, has anyone ever told you that?"

I notice now that my hands tremble. "No."

Maybe I just blurted while drunk or fucked up on whatever drug they gave me. Lord, what did I say?

He fixes a stray piece of hair, pushing it behind his ear.  
"It's not because you're pretty. I think everyone has the capacity to be so pretty if they want. If they cut their hair and wash. But that voice. That sweet little castrato voice, my God. And you can lucid dream. You should visit my dreams and sing to me."

It's okay that he knows this. For some reason, everyone already knows.

"I don't want to," I say.

"Why don't you want to?"

"You scare me."

"I guess. I guess I am kind of big and you're so small. Is that imposing?"

"You're a creep."

He laughs. "My love, forgive me then. All the little señoritas say I'm so handsome. Can you be a handsome creep?"

"You are handsome. You and Asha prettiest people in this place. But you're a jerk just pretending to be nice. How good you look in the mirror's not going to change shit about that."

"I'm not pretending. I never pretend. That's what dreams are for. This is real life. Should I pinch that little ass to remind you?"

"Shut up!"

"This is the 'your mother cut off your balls because she felt guilty for fucking you and now you don't know what the hell you are' real-life'."

I spit at his feet. He casually pulls his boot off with one foot and wipes the saliva away with his bare foot.

"She shouldn't feel guilty. What were you, sixteen waking years when it happened? Old enough for it to feel good even though you're still a squirt."

"Shut up."

"Lune, you should talk about your feelings. Bottling it up is no good." He shakes the bottle and grins.

Oh, God. I want to leave. I feel the urge in my body to get up and go. I don't want to hear anymore. But I stay. God, why do I stay?

His flushed, chiseled face twists into a frown, suddenly. His brow furrows. "How lonely must you be," he said. "To do that to your own son. She got it all wrong." He swishes the bottle. "To let that happen. To let your base impulses get the better of you. Nobody deserves to live with that, Lune. Nobody. I broke my daughter's neck so she wouldn't live with that. I should've broke my own, but it all happened too fast."

There it is. The disgust bubbles up in me and boils into rage but I can only say, seething, through my teeth, "Then break it now."

"Why when I can spend my life repenting for what I did? Leech as she is, Sofia doesn't need to die. She's been carrying the consequences of her actions for ten years in that womb of hers."

I stare at him. My teeth clench. I scream through them, lower my head. Watch my tears drop on the wood floor.

"Oh," he says, shifting in his seat. "Did you not know?"

"I knew," I say.

"Because he looks just like you? Siblings can look like twins you know. Even years apart."

"He's mine," I say. "I just knew."

"I'm glad you're honest with yourself," he murmurs. "The Sparrow doesn't open up to those who lie. Liars leech off of their own souls."

He stands up and places the bottle on the table. "Do you want him born? Because she carries him like a brand of her sins."

"He's a child, not a punishment. He deserves to be born. At least see this world before he asphyxiates from the filth of it."

He walks over to me. Touches my face. "You look like someone I could love, Lune. You look like you want to love."

"I don't want you," I say.

He chuckles. "Handsomest guy in the whole damn place and you don't want me. Your standards must be heaven-high."

"You only want me because I look like a child."

"My tastes aren't exclusive. Perhaps I'm attracted to that heart."

He takes my chin in his hands and kisses my lips, then pulls away.

"There was someone else I loved a good while ago. Many years. But he had no heart. How can you reciprocate with no heart, Lune? How can you feel anything at all?"

I feel a burning. I blush. I tear my head away from his hands. "Please don't do this..."

"Do what?"

"Play make believe with me."

"I told you I don't pretend. Pretending is for dreams."

"You can't love me. You just met me."

"I didn't say 'I love you', I said I think I could." He brushes hair from my eyes. "Because you are a little prince. On your own little planet with your own little rose and you want nothing more than to stay there. Because you're happy. And I can't make you happy if you don't want me to. I am repentant."

*Le Petit Prince*. One of Mama's books.

He kisses me again, on my cheek. "What do you want, Lune?"

I scream. "MALT."

The door swings open and she stares at us, startled. Torres turns to look at her. Stray gray hairs falling across his brow.

She moves, saying nothing like always and scoops me into her arm like I'm her baby. Torres stands up. I tremble in her grip.

"What did you expect?" he says, half laughing. "What did you think I was going to do?"

"You should fucking burn," I say.

"I burn every day. I burn in my dreams. Do you know what bones as small as yours sound like when they break? I hear that in my thoughts every second my mouth is shut."

Malt strokes my hair. Torres leans against the table. "Do you understand forgiveness, Lune?"

"Shut up."

"You're projecting your hatred of your mother onto me. You don't hate me. Do you understand forgiveness?"

"Yes," I say.

"Ah, no. You know the definition but you don't understand a bit of it."

"How do you expect me to forgive--"

"This woman who's holding you? You have no idea what she's done in her life. She could have murdered someone too. Slit a lover's throat perhaps. And maybe it's her eternal hell to forget and not be able to tell anyone about it because the gods cut the tongue off of her soul and so she can't repent or beg anyone for forgiveness for what she's done."

Malt drops me. I land on my hip bone, cry out, clutch the rug, lying trembling between the two of them.

"But you take comfort in her because she's kind to you. But you know nothing of her life."

He goes over to the counter. Pours coffee grounds into a filter and sets the water boiling.

"You'll forget in the morning, Malt, don't worry."

He presses the empty bottle to his lips. "Get up, Lune. You can't be weak. Forgive yourself."

"What did I do wrong?!"

"Hate. Hatred is a poison. Don't waste your time with it."

"No," Malt says. I stare up at her. That first word. "No. My baby. My baby." She leans down and grabs me again, pulling me into her arms. "*Munequita*," she says.

"Tell Heartless to bring Sofia here."

"Who is Heartless?"

"Hammond. Sorry. That's his name now." Torres hiccups and wipes his mouth, watching the coffee pot fill.

"We'll do a cesarean. Get your son out."

I shudder. My son? My fucking son?

"No, a girl," Malt says. "It's a girl. Little girl. Four roses bloom on her head. Look, Silas."

She turns to Torres and presents me to him. Torres catches a laugh under his breath. "You are crazy. We're all fucking

crazy." He sips his coffee black. "Tell Ryu to let him in. Hammond I mean. And your mother. Ryu hates him. She hates leeches. But she'll get over it. I'm the only person she listens to."

Malt goes quiet. That soft, serene look returns to her face.

"Why'd you kick him out?" I say. "What the hell did he do wrong?"

"Me?" Torres says. "I didn't. He was all my joy. But he was a smart boy. So smart. Old beyond his years. Already ready to go to the Sparrow. But Antoinette was Ryu's little toy and she ran away one night. I don't know why; she was well fed. Ryu thought Heartless had everything to do with it. Broke her heart when that girl split and she took it out on him."

He rubs his temple, brow furrowing again. "Does he think it was me?"

"Does it matter?" I say.

He lowers his gaze. "No, I guess not. But tell him what I told you. Hatred is poison."

"People like you are poison," I say.

He grins. Shakes his head. Drinks more coffee. "Ha. Go away, you angry little fuck. Come back when I'm handsome enough for you."

"Malt, let's go," I whisper. She nods and turns, glancing back at Torres before pushing through the door. It slams closed. Osiris waits patiently in the hallway, wagging his ragged tail.

\*\*\*

We pass by an open door.

"Lune," someone says. I cringe. Peer through the door. Mare Ryu stands beside a table, stirring a bowl of pureed food. A black man near Asha's age, with graying hair and beard sits at the table in a reclining chair, fanning himself slow with a straw hat.

Mare Ryu beckons us forward. Malt steps into the room, Osiris sniffing at the air.

"This is Eric," Mare Ryu says. "You might've seen him before. Sleeping in the leech-house. He just woke up from a year long sleep."

The man in the third bed in the room we were in. Was that who they were carrying out of the house? Not Mama?

"Hi," I say.

"Eric, say hi to Lune."

Eric cracks a faint smile at nothing. He reaches slowly to a napkin on the table to dab the drool from his mouth. His eyes are filmed over. The salt of dried tears in the crows feet

beside them. He tries to speak, but his words just slur into nothing.

"Don't push yourself," Mare Ryu says. "Malt, will you be so sweet and help me feed him. First time he gets to chew in thirteen months."

I clutch onto Malt harder to keep her from going. Eric stares right through us like we're ghosts. I hear that people who wake up from long months or years are wasted. Some go crazy. Some can't cope and kill themselves. Their brains struggle to realize reality, fail to convert sensation into something meaningful, like a match failing to strike.

Mare Ryu says, "Aren't your arms tired, Malt? He's a big boy now, set him down."

Malt places me down. My legs wobble a bit. I bite back everything I can. Mare Ryu waves Malt forward again and hands her the spoonful of mashed food when she comes to the table. I want to pity her, her one-armed self. I want to know why she seems to be under this woman's spell. I want to know where Hammond is. Where Mama is. Where Sam is.

Mare Ryu walks over to me. I avert my gaze as she speaks down to me as if she has peeled open my thoughts.

"Eric should be very grateful to you, Lune. He might've never woken up if it wasn't for you. Those who stay in their own dreams too long usually find themselves already on the path to

the Sparrow. And then the King will take their hands and lead their souls away. But you, lucid dreamer, you shared his dream and he woke when you did."

I can wake myself. If I try hard enough. If the fall is too long, the pain too much. That is how Mama and I survived on our own for so long. I can wake Mama too sometimes. But to bring someone else with me, someone I don't know or care about or feel anything for back into the waking world? Bullshit.

Her voice is deep but mellow. She places a hand on my shoulder and I flinch away. "I don't have any magic powers," I say.

"Not magic. A miracle."

"Why'd you send me up there?" I say, trying not to cry, trying not to be a baby. "Why do you give a shit what I think-- what I dream about? He told me you wanted to open me up like an oyster."

"I already have," she says. "Torres too has a gift. Did he tell you that?"

"He tried to have his way with me."

"Don't tell lies," she says. "He's never faltered. I would know. We share more than just dreams."

"He touched me," I say.

"Why would he touch you when he could just do so in his dreams?" she says, laughing.

I look over at Malt gently spooning food into Eric's mouth, and him mashing his weak jaw. She drops a bit on the floor for Osiris to lap up.

"I know about your Mama," Mare Ryu says. "Her name is Sofia. And she's pregnant with another boy named Sam."

"...where is she?" I say.

"That's enough for now, Malt," Mare Ryu says. "Get the medicine and syringe from the edge of the table there and give him a shot."

"Where is she?!"

I am clutching Mare Ryu's shirt before I know it. She stares down at me. "You should ask that boy," she says. "The one who calls himself Hammond now."

"Where is *he*?" I say. "And Asha."

"Being punished."

"Where? Why!"

Eric groans at the table. Mare Ryu shakes her head. "Stop shouting, Lune, save your breath. It's been seven days. They've been out in the woods, in the cold. Chained. They're probably dead."

"Dead," I say. "Dead. Not 'on their way to the Sparrow' or some bullshit. Just 'dead'."

Malt fills the syringe from the little brown bottle and presses the needle into Eric's arm. He gurgles. He looks up at

Malt as if finally realizing she's there. They smile at each other. It makes me sick.

"Torres said you hated him. Hammond, I mean. You hate him, that's the only reason you threw him in the woods."

"And he hates me just as much."

"He should!"

"Why? What have I done wrong? I've taken in lost people. People who would have died in the wilderness. Pointed them toward the Sparrow. I took in Heartless when he was smaller than you are. And he spurned my generosity."

"How? Torres said something about a girl named Anette--"

"Anette was a sweet, simple girl and I loved her," she says. "But that boy ruined her. When we found him, I thought he was a miracle. I thought I could love him too. But he had a witch-heart. Everything fell apart around him. Everyone had nightmares, people slipped into paralysis and never came out. I told him to get fix himself or leave. For the good of the commune. And you know what he did? He gave it to Anette. Poisoned her until she lost her goddamn mind and ran away. And maybe he was normal after that, but you think I could forgive him?"

"Running away sounds like sanity," I say.

"What's sane about going into that cold, dark forest bare-ass naked to be eaten by wolves or raped by savages?"

"Savages?"

"Yes. Savages. People who wander about like you and your mother and this woman. Like there's nowhere to go."

"Well maybe she hated you too."

"She was too stupid to hate. Like this one." She gestures to Malt. "Have you even seen a spiteful look on her face?"

"Malt's not stupid. And Anette probably wasn't stupid either."

She turns back to the table, scooping up the empty bowl and placing it in a sink. "I like to think you two are here to replace them. Anette and Heartless I mean."

"I bet you kept them like slaves," I say.

"We are all slaves," she says. "Freedom comes only in our dreams and after we die. But that is no reason not to celebrate life. It's holiday. The King will come tomorrow night. Hibernation begins also. But tonight we dance and sing and eat ourselves sick. Even if you don't believe it, we are so happy to have you. You are a gift from the Sparrow. And this one." She tugs lightly on Malt's coiled fro. "Nice to look at even if she's a leech with one arm for work and no voice for storytelling."

"If I am such a gift, if I'm so fucking valuable to you, then you should grant me one thing."

"I sent someone to look for your mother as soon as Torres pried that little tidbit out of you."

"No, not my mother. I want Asha and Hammond brought out of the forest."

I see Mare Ryu's cracked smile from the side as she washes the bowl.

\*\*\*

They scrub the dirt from his face with wet washcloths, covering him in a heavy fur blanket as he trembles on his hands and knees, coughing hard. Asha winces, leaning against the side of the outhouse, holding a warm compress heavy with aloe to her bleeding head.

"God have mercy," she says. "You could've killed him. You could've fucking killed him."

The blood too drips from Hammond's brow and he catches it in his palm, staring.

"Hammond," I say, softly.

He looks up at me. At Malt. At the dog. He grits his teeth.

"Look at him, he can barely stand," Asha says.

"He's alive, isn't he?" the blonde woman from earlier, the one who was beside my bed, crouches by Hammond's side with a canteen of warm soup, putting it to his lips. "Drink this," she

says. In her right hand she holds the knife she just used to cut the crude shape of a leech on their foreheads, wet with both of their blood.

She helps him tilt his head back and he drinks, groaning. "Come on. The whole thing."

He swallows the soup down and she takes the canteen away, caressing his face.

"You threw them in the woods," I say. "They've been out in the woods for seven days."

"And they survived," the blond woman says. "Because the Sparrow is merciful."

"What did they even do wrong?"

"They are leeches," she says. "Anyone who comes on this land must meet Mare Ryu. They hid you from us. Planned to keep you for themselves without thinking of how such talent would benefit the rest of us."

They talk about me like I'm some sort of resource, something he hoarded underneath his floorboards. Hammond's eyes move down to my feet, to the boots I have on.

"Hey," he says, half-smiling. "Those were mine."

There are pine-needles in his hair. A piece of gauze over his forehead. He smells like ointment, like dirt, like cold. They'd thrown him in the woods with no food, no water, only the

clothes on his back. And here he was. Alive. He was sick, and Asha was old, and yet somehow they'd survived.

"Where's Mama?" I say, gently. My toes curl in the shoes at the thought he'd worn them once. Once when he was my size. He goes into another coughing fit and the blond woman rubs his back, placing a fresh canteen of cool water to his lips. He drinks, almost desperately, before lowering the canteen.

"Sofia," I say. "Where's Sofia?"

"I hid her," he says. "Like I promised you."

"Where?"

"Upstairs," he says, looking upward at the tall, narrow house.

"Where?" the blonde woman says. There are others with her. They wear gloves, have masks over their faces like being a leech is some sort of disease.

"Go fuck yourself," Hammond says, spitting at her feet. "You think you're something, April? Just because you can read dreams and know some medicine?" He straightens his back, exhaling. "I struggle. Day after day to keep my family -- these people you call leeches -- alive. We work ourselves to the goddamn bone. We get so little food, so little formula, and yet you still expect us to give it up to the King. And we're still alive. You know why? Because no matter who you call a fucking leech, hard work is better than any *talent*."

April shifts, dipping another washcloth in the steaming pot of water another person holds, wringing it out, and pressing it against his face. "You say these things to me, but you won't say them to Mare Ryu," she says. "She is interested in the full-term child, and a mother who can bring a child to full term. If this baby is born alive...Imagine. Imagine this dwindling world rekindled."

I stare at Hammond. He doesn't look at me. Only at the shoes. His old shoes. Barely a scuff on them from years of staying inside.

"We already searched the house, Heartless," April says. "We didn't find anyone in there. Lune really wants to know where Sofia is."

"How's Eric?" Asha asks. "Is he okay?"

April ignores her. She seems annoyed now, getting impatient. She leans down next to Hammond and says, softly, in his ear, "Yes. I'm better than a boy whose only purpose for so many years was being a fuck-toy."

"You know nothing," he says. "Only what you heard through rumors."

"Oh, no. Rumors never spread as fast as the sound of your moaning through the big-house," she says.

"Stop," Asha says. "Just stop it now. You two acting like children. None of us here are children. Not even Lune."

I'm thankful for her voice. I close my eyes. Breathe out. Malt holds my hand.

"The only child here is that baby in Sofia's womb," Asha continues. "I'll show you where she is. Just let Hammond rest."

"Go on, then," April says. A few people help Hammond up, leading him inside the house to sit by the stove. Asha goes upstairs. April and the others follow, leaving me downstairs with Hammond who trembles even in the warmth.

"Hammond?" I say. He pulls the blanket up around his head and looks at me, the orange light of the lit stove flickering on his face.

"How are you still alive?" I say. "I didn't know they'd thrown you in the forest. I would've stayed awake. I would've done something."

He looks from me to Malt, then back to me again. "How much of that story that I told Malt did you hear?" he asks.

"Most of it," I say. "The gunshot woke me up."

He winces when I mention it. Leans back in the chair. "I'm okay," he says. "You know those boys I was talking about? The ones I took in after I found them sleeping in the woods last year?"

"Yeah," I say. Malt nods. Osiris lays at Hammond's feet, letting him warm them in his fur.

"They came back," he says. "I thought they were dead or long gone, but they came back. From the beach. They had food. They didn't recognize me. The one...the one who I almost killed. I remember having that knife at his throat and him waking up and the look in his eyes...but he didn't recognize me. Do I look so awful now?" He laughs. "They saw the others dragging me and Asha into the woods and leaving us there chained up. They shared their food with us. They had a raft with a tent, and water filter, and a stove to cook it. It was like some God was taking mercy on me. I told them to hide when I heard the others coming, calling our names. But they said they were coming to the village to look for more 'Wake."

He erupts into a coughing fit. Malt pats his back. I hear something loud upstairs, the sound of cracking wood.

"I told them to come tomorrow. Tomorrow is the first night of hibernation. They can sneak some, maybe. We're all out, but...they can sneak some from someone else's house."

"Who makes the 'Wake?" I ask. A door opens upstairs. There's the sound of many footfalls, and then I see April, appearing satisfied as she descends the stairwell. Behind her, the group carries Mama, still limp with sleep, Asha following behind.

"Where was she?" I ask.

"Behind a false wall with an empty feeding bag," April says.

"There was food in there too. In case she woke up," Hammond says.

"I don't know what game you're playing at, Heartless," April says. "People aren't things to be kept and hidden."

"Tell that to them. Over at the big house," Hammond says, a scowl on his face. "Tell that straight to Mare Ryu's face. And Torres too."

"Well," April says "Since you thought you had the right to claim these new people as part of your household, you may present them to Mare Ryu as such."

"Just let her take them. I don't care," Hammond says. "Honestly. *Honestly*. I'd rather stay here, in my house with Asha, and live on what little we have left."

"Get up, Heartless," April says.

"Let him rest," Asha says.

April again ignores her. She says, "Mare Ryu wants to see you too, not just them. Get up."

I wait for him to say something snarky. Sarcastic. I wait for him to lean back on the couch, to spit at her feet, to tell her 'fuck off'. I wait for it. But, no. He lets out a sigh and gets up.

\*\*\*

The party has slowed. Instead of dancing, the people sit in circles around story-tellers, the bonfires burning out. Some have fallen asleep early and are carried inside. Others listen, the orange half-light of embers only lighting up their faces enough for them to all be pretty, enough for me to see the glances of pity they give before turning enraptured back to the teller.

Mare Ryu stands on the front porch of the big house, still in silken night-wear, the winds stirring her dress around her thick, bare legs. April nudges Hammond forward. Mare Ryu draws a tongue across her teeth. She does not speak loudly, as to not interrupt the stories.

"Heartless," she says. "The Sparrow had mercy on you."

The cold, the freshness of his wound causes it to crack open in places, little rivulets running down the bridge of his nose. I look at the ground. Mare Ryu draws her large toe in a circle like stirring a teacup.

"I wouldn't call it mercy," Hammond says, his breath misting from his lips. He trembles violently. I don't know if it's from the cold, the pain, or from fear. A few members of the big-house sit in the rocking chairs on the porch. They watch with eyes glazed orange by the nearby fires.

"You have Lune to thank for your getting pulled out of the woods. Say 'Thank you, Lune.'"

"Thank you, Lune," he says.

I redden. Asha mutters something behind us.

"And this is Sofia?" she says, raising her eyes above Hammond and me.

"I checked her up," April says, cutting in. "She's pregnant, Mare Ryu. Her baby is full term--it could've been born years ago."

"I know she's pregnant," Mare Ryu says "Torres found the baby boy's dreams."

"What?" I say, standing up, reeling inwardly. *What?*

"And shared them."

My hatred splits like lightning and I find myself screaming, clawing at Mare Ryu as Hammond holds me back. Some people turn from the storytellers to stare. Mare Ryu grips my jaw, closing her hand like a vice around it.

"No violence," she says. "We will have peace."

"YOU BITCH!" I snatch my head away, biting at her hand as she pulls it away.

"Please, Lune," Hammond says. "*Don't make a scene.*"

"The fucker is a pedophile, he said so himself!"

"Everyone goes to the Sparrow," Mare Ryu says. "From the most virtuous of us to the most pathetic. Those of us who have sinned just take longer to get there. Now, Lune, you speaking up on behalf of Hammond and Asha made me remember how hatred

poisons the soul. And how difficult forgiveness is. Heartless, you grew up in this house, and I kicked you out just to be vengeful. And then I ordered them to throw you in the woods to die when I found out what you were hiding from me. But by the Sparrow's grace you lived. And because of that I'm inviting you to come back and live in the big-house. With what remains of your household."

A strangled sob comes from Asha's throat. Hammond raises his head and I'm ashamed for him for the tears in his eyes. "Thank you," he says. In the short time I've known him, he's never looked so small. He trembles like a leaf.

Mare Ryu steps aside and outstretches her arm to welcome him inside the house. He crosses the threshold, bare cracked feet turning blue. He seems bewildered, his head turning to scan the spacious room and the murals coiling from the walls and onto the floor. He rests his toes at the edge off a mass of dark, glittering scales, still, as if he's scared to go any further.

I follow him inside. "Hammond?" I say, reaching to touch him. He doubles over into another coughing fit, falling onto his knees, hands slapping down on the body of the painted leviathan, and coughs up bits of blood. Some people come and tend to him, wiping his mouth with a cloth napkin and helping him up.

I hear Mare Ryu say, "Asha. It's been a while."

"You don't invite me to parties," Asha replies.

Those people lift Mama into the big house, laying her on a loveseat in the common room. Malt and Asha enter behind us, Asha shuddering, rubbing her arms, picking at the gauze on her forehead every now and then. April closes the door.

"Go get the doctor," Mare Ryu says.

April nods and disappears into some side-room. I head for the couch to sit beside Mama. I'm tired.

I dig my fingers into the dog's warm fur, trying to soothe the cold ache from them. I close my tearing eyes. The other members of the household scatter like roaches, leaving behind their bottles of moonshine and absinthe, their smoldering joints and cigarettes, their half-eaten bowls of rice pudding and wild strawberries.

"Heartless," Mare Ryu says.

He's been sat down in a chair and sips hot tea that smells like raspberries that a girl shared with him, her lipstick mark still on the rim of the teacup. I feel that worm of jealousy rise up in me.

"Yes?" he says, wincing as I guess the tea scalds his tongue.

"Until we get a bed ready for you, you will be staying with Torres."

He spills a bit of the tea on his lap, pupils dilating. He stares at her, and then looks to the stairs. "I don't..."

Mare Ryu crosses the room, leaning across the coffee table toward him. "Do you want Lune to go with you? You'd like to see Torres again, right Lune?"

"Not particularly," I say.

"But Heartless shouldn't go alone. He's changed these years. All the fire's gone out of him now. And what a pity. How can a man love you when you have no fire left?"

I take Hammond's hand. My rage is quieted as I feel how bad Hammond shakes.

"His eyes were once the prettiest blue," Mare Ryu continues. "The color of a gas flame. Haunting."

I help Hammond to his feet, moving toward the stairs. He follows me. This talk of the past quakes him, I know, and I don't want to know. Everything that happened before Mama and me arrived. It's not a chapter in my book.

We ascend. I see Asha casting us both a worried look until a wall papered with ships and compass-roses blocks my view of her. I hear Mare Ryu ask Asha if she'd like a shower, some tea, some aloe for her scar. These stairs are nice, polished, don't creak as bad as the splintered wood in Hammond and Asha's house. It's lit well enough that I can glance at his face, see the anxiety there, the illness, his gaunt, wasting body like a twig ready to break.

"Do you remember where it is?" I murmur as we get to the upper corridor. His eyes close. He sighs as they open again, shifting over to me.

"Of course I do," he says. "You stay here."

"Why?"

"I don't want him to--"

"I've already seen him."

Hammond flinches. I see a flash of jealousy on his face and he twists his head away from my gaze.

"Ah," he says. "Well never-mind then. Come on."

He continues down the corridor. "Hammond," I say. "He didn't-- I didn't -- do anything."

"Mm."

"I didn't want it."

"I believe you, Lune."

"No, I'm serious. I didn't. And he didn't touch me."

"*That* I don't believe," he says.

"Okay, he kissed me."

"Maybe you remind him of his daughter," he says, bitterness in his voice.

This time I flinch. "Fuck. No. Hammond, I'm not a girl. I'm not an It. I'm a boy, okay?"

He pauses and looks down at me. "What?"

"I'm a eunuch."

"You what?"

"I was castrated. That's why when you...felt...you didn't feel anything."

"Who did that to you?" he says. The concern on his face scares me. The worry. He's been so cold up until now I thought he lost the capacity to feel.

"My mother," I say.

"Fucking leech," he says.

"It was an accident," I say, surprised to finally hear myself say it out loud. "She was sleeping when she did it. Dreaming. Of someone else. I didn't know what to do."

"Was the castration an accident too?" he says.

I go quiet.

"It doesn't matter. It's over," he says. "They have her."

"You can still leave, Hammond. You and Asha. They treat me well here. Even if they are bad people."

"They treated me well too at first," he says. "Now look where that's got me."

We stop several feet in front of Torres's door.

I squeeze his hand again. "Hammond, if you really don't want me to go in there with you, I won't."

"It's fine, Lune."

"I promise I didn't want him. I don't want him. I want you."

The words fall from my mouth like the shame onto my face.  
Hammond looks down at me again.

"What in the hell do you want with me?" he says with a grim smile.

I am a child. A child, a child, a child. Nothing more.  
Lord. He can't even see. We're at Torres's door now.

"What's the point of love?" he says.

"We're all going to die," I say, my throat stinging.

"Heartless."

"Then I'll fuck you," he says. "If that's what you really want. And we can play make believe. And then I can die before the Sparrow opens and you can go on with your life pretending that someone actually loved you."

I snatch my hand away from his. I feel my chest heaving. I want to vomit. I'm so stupid. I'm as dumb as Malt, as simple as Anette. Everything aches. I want to die too. Let's go together. Goddammit. Let's just fucking go together.

The door opens and Torres looks down at us, towering, his graying hair frayed and tied back again in a messy bun.

"Heartless," he says.

Hammond says nothing. Torres touches his face.

"Look at that age. How long has it been? Only five years and you look like you're going on thirty. And those eyes are gone. But these brown ones still pretty as anything. My God."

"Thank you," Hammond says.

"Come in. I made coffee."

He lets us both in to his apartment. He's cleaned up since yesterday. He seems sober. He pours us both coffee and sets it on the table, dropping in an ice-cube each to chill it fast. He gets milk from the refrigerator and pours it into both mugs. I watch the sweet-smelling steam curl up on itself. By the time I take a sip, it's lukewarm. I'm too afraid to ask for sugar. As if anyone would give me sugar anyway.

"*Sparrow thank you for the Sparrow,*" he says, a sort of grace, before pulling out a plate of choux pastries from his magic fridge and setting them before us. Hammond picks at the corner of his place-mat.

"Why thank the Sparrow?" I say.

"It provides our heat. Our electricity. Keeps it warm enough that it doesn't get snowed over. It's why we live here." He has a dreamy smile on his face as he explains. "People who don't live here don't know what they're missing."

"A cruel, crazy bitch in charge of everything," I say.

Torres laughs. "She wasn't always like that. Do you know what happens to someone when they lose the only person they've ever loved?"

"I've never been in love," I say.

Hammond doesn't say anything.

"You should try it sometime," Torres says.

"I tried," I say.

Hammond doesn't say anything.

"Would you like me to call you Heartless or Hammond?"

Torres asks.

Hammond doesn't look up. "I admire your restraint."

"My entire life is restraint. Being in love is a passive state. You don't have to act on it." He bites on a pastry. I take one. Nibble on it. Begin to eat the entire thing. My stomach cramps.

"I'll call you Heartless because that's what I'm used to. Don't take offense to it," Torres says. Then, "Hey. Look at me. Why won't you look?"

"You kissed her?" Hammond says, nodding toward me.

"Him," I say.

"It," Hammond says.

Torres laughs. "Are you jealous?" he says.

"No."

"You liar. What have I told you about lying, Heartless?"

"I'm not a child anymore."

"Anyone can be taught a lesson. Not just children. Just look at this little one's heart break right in front of you."

He moves closer to Hammond. Takes his hand. Kisses it.

"Look at me. Please."

Hammond looks at him. His full, chapped lips quiver. I stare at them. I look away. Just a child. No.

Torres kisses him hard, almost desperately, hands groping along Hammond's thin back and Hammond can do nothing but wrap his arms around the bigger man as he's pulled close. I watch them kiss. The feeling stirs in me, but dissipates. I redden. I'm ashamed. They ignore me. They pull away to breathe and stare at each other and Torres begins to undo Hammond's pants, giving him a look that no one had ever given me.

I stand up. Bear the pain as I strain against my chastity belt. I take the mug of coffee and the plate of pastries. I walk out of the apartment. I walk downstairs. I hear people arguing and snoring behind the closed doors of rooms. I want to kill. Die. Be a murderer like Torres and Malt. Be a bitch like Mare Ryu. Be a lover. Be my mother. Kill my mother. Be a father and a child at the same time.

My anger stirs itself into a wave and pours down the stairs. But I spill the coffee. The plate trembles in my hands. I see a dark-skinned girl at the bottom of the flight with a light cupped in her hands. She peeks through her long fingers at it. Smiles. Looks up at me. Like one of Mama's hypnopompic hallucinations superimposed into my little world.

"What do you want?" I say.

She braces against the tide, though tall and willowy, and takes a step toward me. She opens her hands. The light comes pouring out like a fountain, penetrating my dark mood like chemiluminescent ink.

*"There's enough room for all of us,"* she says.

"Where?" I say. In Hammond's pants?

She half-turns, syrupy light crashing all around us. *"When you open it, you let everybody in. Don't deny anyone. Not one single soul."*

"Open what?" I say.

She smiles. *"There's a star in the ocean, cooling now, but still volatile. A whole damn star. You will open it. Then all of us--all of us can rest."*

I think to the machine I saw in the dream with Torres.

"Lune?" someone says. The vision and the woman dissolve and I see another woman, the one named April peering around the corner at me. "Seeing things?" she says. "Another side-effect of the 'Wake, I'm afraid. Delusions too. But you'll learn how to handle it."

She approaches, slapping her hand on my shoulder.

"Hallucinations go away once we've got the levels balanced in your system. I might need to do blood-work. You aren't afraid of needles, are you?" She grins. I stare at her.

"Your friends are in the sitting room," she says, taking my arm to lead me there. Not much I can do about being yanked along being so small. We enter. More people have cleared out, probably sinking into their winter beds to sleep or stare at the painted ceilings or tacked-up glow-in-the-dark stars.

"What's that look on your face?" Asha says, sitting up.

"You look like someone killed your damn dog."

Malt pulls a face. Osiris whines at the word "dog".

"Nothing," I say. "Where's Mama?"

I sit between Asha and Malt. I've known them for two days and I want to say both of them make a better mother than my Mama, but then I remember Torres's words about how I don't truly know anyone. What was it that Asha did to get put in the leech-house? She seems hardy enough at her age that it couldn't have been weakness. I put the mug on the coffee table and Osiris begins lapping at the remaining coffee before Malt yanks him away.

"Doctor's looking at her," April says. "He says the baby's full-term. Been full-term for years now, but he's also been asleep. This whole time."

"Is that why he's lived so long in there?" Asha asks, taking one of the pastries and taking a bite.

"He's blessed by the Sparrow," April says.

"Has he started surgery yet?" I say.

"No," April says. "Just trying to make sure it'll be viable. I mean-- make sure the baby is ready and your Mama will be okay. It's a miracle, Lune. The first baby to go full-term since--"

"I don't give a shit if she's okay," I say. "Get my baby out. And don't bother sewing her back up."

April's mouth snaps shut.

"Lune," Asha says.

I glare at April. She shifts, uncomfortable, in her seat. "Lune," she says. "I know you might not want to hear it, but your mother is a miracle too. She might be the only woman who can give birth to a living child, and we don't want to give that up."

Mama? A miracle? Bullshit.

"You're a nice person, April," I say. "To be honest, I think you'd run this place better than Mare Ryu."

Asha half-chokes on her pastry.

April reddens. "Oh, don't flatter me."

"I'm serious," I say.

"That's not appropriate," April says.

"You dream about it, I bet," I say. "Taking a knife to her throat while she sleeps. Or maybe shooting her when her back is turned."

"Enough!" April says, scowling. "You shut your fucking mouth."

"I dream of things like that too," I say. "But I'm not brave enough. To carry it out."

Her face goes blank. She looks at me, mouth hanging open, then closes it and rubs her temple. Yawns.

"I would be a better leader than Mare Ryu," she murmurs. "I, for one, wouldn't let leeches like these into the fucking house." Her eyes glaze over Asha and Malt. Asha flicks her off. My eyes wander over April's flabby body and I think even that would be better than what I have. I spit the rest of my anger out.

"You look tired," I say.

"I am," she says. "I am tired."

"You should get some sleep."

"Funny," she says. She yawns again. I see those dark bags under her eyes. Bruises. Her fingers curl into her palms. "I'll be upstairs."

We watch her leave. Asha wipes crumbs from her mouth, eying me. "Well," she says. "They're putting me to work in the kitchen. I best get going."

I sink my head into my hands as she stands up and stretches. "Take it easy, Lune. You're going to have a little brother soon. Everything will be okay."

I'll take Asha with me. And Malt. And Sam. To the star machine. Just the three of them. Everyone else can go to hell.

## 8. Mother Dragon

(Torres & Ryu)

"Welcome back, Mr. Torres," the nurse says. "How're you feeling?"

"I feel like shit," he says. "May I have my meds now?"

"Meds every morning at 9AM. You know this," she says. "Sit down so we can check your vitals."

Torres slumps in the seat. His throat dry, he shudders. The nurse straps the cuff of the blood pressure monitor around his upper arm. Places the metal end of thermometer with a plastic tip under his swollen tongue. He feels the film of sweat under his clothes and wants to strip them off. The noise picks at his headache like a nail at a scab. The cramping stomach, the urge to shit himself as they sit here making sure there's no fever. But there is. There's always been a fever.

The patients are gathered around in a common room, a light-skinned girl with wide hips standing at the front reading from cards, some sort of group ice-breaker activity.

"Autumn. If you had to choose, what's your favorite animal in the ocean and why?"

A tired black woman slumped at a table raises her eyebrows. "What?"

"What's your favorite animal in the ocean, and why?"

"Girl, I'm from the hood, I don't know nothing about no damn ocean. Ask me another question."

The people laugh. There's an old woman sitting by herself, mumbling to herself, chanting.

A gray-haired man in a wheelchair with one leg sits coloring at a table with two girls, a dark-haired boy with a cleft lip and scars across his wrists, another man in striped pajamas who twitches and scratches his shaved head. The girl up front calls on him next.

"Name one thing that you like about yourself."

"I have blue eyes," he says. "That makes me special."

This continues. Torres rolls his own eyes. The nurse reads out the meaningless numbers, unstraps the monitor and pops out the thermometer.

"May I go back to bed?" Torres asks.

"We keep the doors locked until 10AM and unlock them after breakfast." The nurse is a machine, he swears. He gets up, stretches, cracking some bones, goes to walk up and down the hallway just to have something to do. The ice-breaker ends and

they start to play cards and color, anything to curb the monotony of just another behavioral health hospital. Torres met a nice man named Tim his first day here. But he left the same day. It's been a week. Torres asks the nurses the same questions in the hopes something will change.

An hour passes. His legs get sore. He wants to use the phone, leaning in the doorway, his stale headache making him wish for a handful of little blue pills to swallow, easing the pain about as good as tissue stuffed into a wound. The light-skinned girl talks on it and won't shut up. He closes his eyes. She's calling customer service, asking about her iPhone, then her mother, crying over the divorce. He scratches at a scab. She has a nice ass, so nobody's going to tell her to get off the damn phone, there's a ten minute limit, and only two phones for thirty people, don't be selfish. He taps his head against the door-frame and opens his mouth to say something, anything, maybe something nice. Then her voice stops. Like her words got choked back. He opens his eyes. Watches as she falls. As her face first slams against the concrete wall and then she staggers backward, and drops onto the floor. He can't bring himself to call for help. His own voice is frozen in his throat.

There is a sudden silence. Someone screams for a half-second, then even that fades. He clutches his cramping arms, walking down the hallway, the lights hurting his eyes. He stares

into the common room. Everyone lies still. On the floor, limp over the tables. Even the nurses behind the counter. Blood seeps from the head of one who brained herself on the metal faucet.

Sound spills back in like color. There's the sound of screeching tires, metal crashing into metal, car horns blaring. He jumps. "Oh, fuck," he says. "Oh, fucking hell. What is this?"

He goes to the nearest person-- the man in the wheelchair. Feels his pulse. His heart still beats. His breathing slow. He's asleep? No, not dead. Asleep. He checks the next person. Asleep. They're all asleep. He shouts in someone's face, slaps someone else hard across the cheek. Nothing. They're all asleep and they won't wake up. There were voices, and now there's just noise. Like the world before language, before people, even. Except the noise of machines in place of the noise of animals and unbroken wilds. What is this? Why is he awake?

His eyes turn to the gray phone sitting at the front desk. He reaches for it. Picks up the phone, his hand shaking. Dials the number. He waits for nothing but noise. Maybe, an automated voice. Maybe that would relax him. Maybe he should turn on the TV and listen to those prerecorded voices. Drown out the sound of the disaster outside. He's seen blood on the road before, and he's sure now the streets run red with it. Everyone fell asleep at the same time. How? He listens to the tone. It goes on for ages. Then the voice at the end of it saying, *Please leave a*

message, it seems to beg. Is she asleep too? Why won't she pick up?

He slams the phone back down on the receiver and picks it up again. Dials another number. Waits. The tone goes twice. Three times. Then a click.

His father's voice answers the other line. "Hello?"

"Papi, put Ryu on the phone."

There is shuffling. The man shouts across the house. A minute passes and finally there's a long sigh.

"Yes?" she says.

"Am I going crazy?"

"As long as they keep putting crazies and addicts in the same place, I don't see why it wouldn't rub off on you."

"Carolyn won't answer her phone. Everyone's out. Dropped like flies. They're breathing, but it's like they're in comas, Ryu. Nobody's waking up."

"You need me to come get you?"

"Don't leave Papi alone. And..." he shifts the phone in his hand, starting as he hears the sound of another car screeching outside and crashing into something, the side of a building maybe. "Oh, fuck," he says. "Do you hear that?"

"You want me to pick up Carolyn too?" she says. Her voice sounds tired.

"I don't know if I told you, Ryu, last time we spoke, but she and I, we have a little boy. Newborn. Just a few weeks old. Just please...go check on them. Bring them with you here. We can all stay together--I don't know what's happening. All of you are the only people I have left since Ma died. The only people I love."

"Love?" she says, laughing. There's the hint of something bitter in her voice.

"Yes. I still love you. You left me."

The old man's yells something in the background.

She answers him, shouting, "I know, I know--Lucas told me. He sees it outside." Then returns to the phone."I'll bring you some booze too, hm?" she says. "It'll be like we're in high school again."

"Whatever you want," he says. "I just want us all together. It looks like hell outside, Ryu. We've got to stick together. Take care of each other."

"Take care of each other," she repeats. "I see."

There's silence for a moment. The old man shouts something else. Torres squeezes his eyes shut. Listens to her soft breathing.

"Ryu, please."

"I'm still here," she says. "I was watching the TV."

"Go get Carolyn before something happens. If people are dropping down, not waking up, but other people are still awake -- someone could hurt her."

"Someone could hurt her?" Ryu says. "That would be unfortunate."

"Please hurry up."

"Papi ordered food and he says we're waiting for it to arrive first."

"For God's sake, tell him the deliveryman's probably dead, the old shit!"

Ryu laughs and says, "Okay. Steal a key-card and go wait in the lobby. We're going now. --*Papi, put on your jacket.*"

"*Why?*"

"*We're going to pick up the Chinese food. And Lucas on the way back---we're coming.*"

"Okay," Torres says. He sets the phone down on the counter, almost too afraid to hang up. He reaches for a keycard from the slumped floor nurse. Takes someone's jacket from the coat rack. Loads up the pockets full of the medication before heading toward the heavy doors.

\*\*\*

They sit in an empty hotel room now, half-eaten boxes of Chinese food sprawled across the table. The TV is on. Torres caresses Carolyn's long hair as she breast-feeds the baby. On the bed in the other room, Ryu rides Papi, the old man holding on to her hips as if they were his bible.

"Fuck," he says, grunting as he loses himself.

Carolyn turns up the volume on the television. "This is crazy," she says.

Torres kisses her cheek. "We are alive. We are awake. One step at a time."

Ryu roll off of his father whose chest heaves, pulling a jacket around herself. Leaving the bedroom, she goes for the pack of cigarettes on the dining table.

"Not in front of the baby," Torres says. "Go on the balcony."

Ryu gives him a long look, putting the pack down. Papi follows her out of the bedroom, wrapping his arms around her waist. He leans down and kisses her belly, laughing. "Maybe we'll have a little one to ourselves soon, eh?"

"We don't have room for another baby," Carolyn says.

"The world just made a lot of room," Papi says. "We are a family now. There's nothing wrong with a big family."

"With a daddy and a mommy and a grandpa who fucks the daddy's ex-wife," Carolyn says. "A big, beautiful family."

Papi only laughs. Ryu rolls her eyes and kisses his head and says, "If you want something to be disgusted about, ask your boyfriend there to tell you about the other child he had."

"Enough," Torres says. "We don't talk about it."

Carolyn looks over at Torres with questioning eyes, but doesn't say anything. He unscrews the lid on a bottle of Xanax.

"What is the baby? A boy?" Ryu asks, coming over. Carolyn nods. "May I hold him?"

She lets Ryu take the child in her arms, and Ryu cradles him. "This new world. Refreshing itself, just for you," she says. The baby looks up at her with wide brown eyes.

"He'll be pretty," Ryu says. "Like his mother."

"Or handsome like his father," Carolyn says.

"Look at those eyelashes," Ryu says. "Do you think it'll matter, Torres? That he's a boy?"

"What do you mean?" Carolyn says, her face troubled.

Torres leans back on the couch, closing his eyes.

"What does she mean, Torres?"

"Maybe she means he'll turn out a faggot like his father," Papi says. He's mixing a drink at the table.

"Oh," Carolyn says, blushing. "He's not gay. Trust me."

"Who ever said a gay man can't pleasure a woman? I never said that," Papi says. "My best friend in high-school was gay."

Had girlfriends all the time just to cover his ass and they were none the wiser."

Ryu hands the baby back to his mother. Torres swallows. His throat is dry. He licks his lips.

"He's not gay," Carolyn says, frustrated. "Everyone fucks around when they're young. Some when they're older too. Like sleeping with their father-in-law."

"Ex," Ryu says. She goes and sits on the table where Papi is now drinking. She lights up a cigarette. Blows out smoke in the old man's face. He grins at her. Knocks back his mix of Viracocha and Hawaiian Punch.

"I don't know why you let her do that, right in front of you, Torres," Carolyn says. She is annoyed. She looks like she's going to cry. "No respect. She doesn't respect you."

"We're a family now," Torres says. "We stay together. I've been thinking about it. None of us can sleep now, but we will, so we have to take care of each other."

"I'm not fucking sleeping," Papi says. "I've never dreamed about anything. You think I'm sleeping for weeks and weeks like all those people? Hell. If I fall asleep, one of you put a bullet in my head."

"Don't be stupid," Torres says, turning to look at him. "There are four of us. And the baby. No way we all fall asleep at the same time."

"I won't go to sleep either," Ryu says. "Kill me if I do."

"You're shitting me," Torres says, glaring at them both.

"We can make it through this fine."

"I'm old, I'm getting all the goods in life. I'm satisfied," Papi says. "It doesn't matter to me."

"I don't want to sleep either," Carolyn says, softly.

"You have a baby to take care of," Torres says. "Don't you talk like that too."

"We haven't slept in three weeks. None of us. And seeing everyone else out there drop like that...what if they're not asleep? What if they're just paralyzed? What if they can hear everything? Feel everything? And they're all dying slow." She shudders. "The thought of sleeping scares me now. Doesn't it scare you?"

"If any of you fall asleep, I'm not killing you. We're going to keep moving. And you're coming along. And we'll shove a tube down your fucking throat and feed you baby formula if need be. But no one's going to die on my watch. And if I drop, you better not kill me either."

"Three against one," Ryu says. "Majority rules."

"Bullshit," Torres says.

"It's a deal," Papi says, kissing the breast that hangs loose out of Ryu's jacket.

"Cowards," Torres says. He turns back around to the TV, his arm spread behind Carolyn on the couch. "Ryu, go out on the fucking balcony and stop poisoning my son with your cancer-sticks."

"Poison," Ryu says, standing up and moving to the glass door. "That sounds like a good way to go. Better than getting shot in the head. Or having someone snap your neck."

Torres flinches. The door slides open and she steps outside, letting in cool air as she closes it behind her.

"Papi," he says. "How much food do we have left?"

"Plenty of this greasy Japanese shit. We're running out of booze, though."

"I'll go get some," Torres says, standing up and reaching for his jacket. "And formula for the baby, Carolyn. Just in case you want to take a break."

She looks up and smiles at him before turning her attention back to the television. He heads for the door, grabbing the car keys from the counter.

\*\*\*

The door opens. Ryu looks up from where she sits at the table, a gun in her hand. Torres hasn't been back in two days. She sees the strung-out look on his face.

"You relapsed," she says. "Again."

"I brought more food," he says, dumping the plastic bags of groceries on the table. "And booze. And formula for the baby."

He steps around the table, walking toward the couch as if wanting to collapse before he hears the squish sound beneath his feet. Looks down. His father lays underneath the table, bullet-hole in his head. Pool of blood, gray hair stained red. Torres whips around and to the sink where he vomits up everything.

"You got fucked up again," Ryu says.

"No," Torres says.

"Don't lie to me. Don't you lie to me. I know how it looks. I dealt with that for seven years, you disappearing and then coming back days, weeks later. Leaving me alone to raise our kid."

"I fell asleep," he says. "I was asleep."

"And then the one time," she says. "The one time you were getting clean and I left you alone with her to go look for work. No, you hadn't fucked me in months. But you took more pills and decided she looked like a tastier treat than I ever was, huh? Did you always think that way? Was it the drugs talking? I don't think I'll ever know."

He wipes bile from his mouth and turns to her, shaking.

"Ryu," he says. "Why is Papi dead?"

"You killed our daughter. You killed our daughter with your fucked-up self and said it was an accident, and I was such a helpless leech myself that I helped you make it look like an accident."

"Please, stop," he says.

"And what do you do after that? You go back to your drugs. Even harder this time. Because you can't bear to be sober. In and out of rehab, on and off the streets, and now I don't even have a little girl to look after, to remind me that there's something worth living for. Your father ends up in the hospital because of his liver and you're nowhere to be found. So I go take care of him when he gets out. At least he says 'You're beautiful', and makes me feel good, and doesn't murder the one thing I loved."

"Then why did you kill him?" Torres says, finally managing to turn away from the sink and look again at the bleeding body beneath the table. "What did you do? Where did you even get that gun?"

"He fell asleep," she says. "We all made a pact, remember? Three days ago. Did you get too high to remember?"

"I fell asleep too," Torres says, sick to his stomach. "Oh, God. Oh, God. Where's Carolyn?" Ryu says nothing. There is a sound of something clanking from the bathroom. Torres moves past her, pushes the door in. Carolyn is slumped on the toilet,

trembling, clutching the baby in her arms. Her whole body weak. Torres kneels down in front of her. She gazes down at him, seeming so far away.

"Stay with me. Stay with me, baby girl," he caresses her face. "For our baby. For this." He touches the sleeping child's curled hands as it suckles at her breast.

He hears Ryu stand up behind him. Move toward the bathroom door. "If she sleeps, we're leaving her," Ryu says. "That was our deal. We all made it together."

Carolyn let's out a long groan. Her head lolls forward.

"Please," he says, shaking her. A smile flickers and her eyes roll back, then close. Torres grasps her hand. Presses it to his forehead. Her thick, ash-blond hair falls like a veil over her face.

"She's out," Ryu says.

"Give me the gun," he says.

"You don't have to kill her," Ryu says. "Just leave her, Torres. Let's go."

"She will wake up alone, abandoned, our baby starved to death. I can't think of what will happen."

"Someone will find her," she says.

"That is why I killed Akiko. I didn't want her to live with it. What I could have done to her."

There is a long silence. Then Torres hears the tears in Ryu's voice. "Don't talk about it," Ryu says. "Like you're sorry."

"I am sorry," he says. "It haunts me. I should've killed myself instead of her."

"You should've," Ryu says.

"I shouldn't have had a child knowing what I am," he says. "A fucking abomination."

Ryu goes silent again. Then she says, "God made you that way."

He says, "No, the *devil* made me this way. Give me the gun."

"No. Because you're just going to put it to *your* head. And leave me alone. Like you always have."

"I won't leave you, Ryu. But I don't know why you think you need me."

"I don't want to be alone," she says. "I did her wrong too by not telling the truth. You should be in jail -- in an insane asylum. I should be in jail for lying."

"I should be dead," he says. "Death is mercy."

"I know it's mercy, that is why I won't let you die. Because you deserve no mercy. And neither do I."

She fires the rest of the bullets off into the kitchen wall, and he flinches at every shot, covering his ears. She drops the gun. Kicks it away. "We're going to go now," she says. "North."

"Okay," he says.

"Give me back the life you owe me," she says. He stares at Carolyn. At the sleeping child. Neither of them wake at the sound of the gunshots. Trembling, he presses his head against her soft thighs. "I will," he says. "I swear to you. I'll make up for it."

## 9. Soleil

(Nien and Sunny)

The bones aren't hard to find. Though the forest is barren of animals, it is not empty of bones both bleached and calcified, skulls covered in warm foam blown over from the ocean, wildflowers blooming up firm and erect from the sockets as if they were electric. These bones, they are fragile, though. Sunny crushes one under his heel and it becomes dust.

"God," he says, lifting his foot. "Forgive me."

The child whose bones they are doesn't say anything in reply. It died sleeping, in a fire. It lays tangled among its mother's bones which aren't blackened, and its siblings' bones that are.

"You okay?" Nien says, grabbing Sunny's arm as he stumbles again, smearing the bone-dust across the ground. The air smells like the residual smoke of fireworks, a smell that sinks into the snow, the earth, the bones, Sunny's stiff wet T-shirt. He bites his bottom lip, peeling off some skin.

"Yeah. Just...woozy. It's no big deal."

Near the bones were the impressions of two tired bodies. Bodies that had been tied at the wrists and ankles and thrown, begging, onto the ground, bodies that praised the ground for being soft but cursed it for being cold. Starving bodies.

There were bones and there were bodies, but this time the bodies did not become more bones. Nien sees a sliver of metal in the soil and kneels down to dig it up with his thumb, revealing one of the cans of food they'd given them.

"Where do you think they went? You think they ran off somewhere?"

Sunny gently picks up the half-powdered little bones and places them aside.

"You see how weak that guy was? Could barely hold down his fucking food. Surprised he could still walk."

"I could say the same about you."

"Ha. I'm fine, tio. There's a difference between being a little tired and being on the cusp of death."

Nien unearths the can some more, until he can tap on the side and hear the liquid soup sloshing around inside of it.

"There's still soup in here. They wouldn't run off and leave food behind."

"Maybe they were rescued."

"Maybe they were taken back by the people who threw them out here in the first place."

"The guy. He couldn't look at me. I mean, neither of them said much, but he couldn't even look me in the eyes."

"He looked like he'd been asleep for years," Nien says. "Probably not right in the head after waking up from that."

Nien thought of Anette as he said this and felt a sour twist in his stomach. He saw the skin peeling from her face and light and static underneath, the white noise under the nail-beds of the black-skinned bitch, a pure nightmare. Nien, you fucking fool, in love with a nightmare, didn't Sunny tell you so? Didn't he warn you of witches?

Sunny thinks of the man and the old woman and how, when he and Nien peered at them through the trees, the man was sobbing into the old woman's chest and she was trying to sing him a crack-voiced song to calm him. They were chained there, by their ankles, the shackles drilled into the roots of the nearby trees.

He and Nien shared their food when the people who left them there were gone. The two drank from the cans without heating the food when the water-logged portable stove wouldn't catch flame.

It'd been seven days, and Sunny and Nien had come once a day to feed them. Their faces said *thank you* where their voices couldn't. Finally, Sunny, anxious, on the third day, asked them their names, where they came from, why they were thrown in the woods, if they were cannibals, where were the drugs? The man refused to say more than a few words. Nien recognized his face but couldn't place it. Maybe from the city? The old woman braced herself against a tree and asked if they had any booze. Once they brought it, a few cans of Molson Dry she knocked them back until her lips loosened and she told them a pretty story about a glass pod that washed up on the beach, like a giant seashell filled with cool liquid and ocean-water, cracked open and a man and woman found it, and they cracked it open, and inside were human remains and little fish feeding on the remains, all mutated and swollen, their shimmering scales melting into each other, eyes fallen out, but the body inside was perfect save for the little bits of it eaten away. And the liquid inside turned to gel when exposed to the air. But liquid again when it touched warm human skin. And along the beach they found more pods, half-covered by the sand, some smashed to bits like meteorites, the bodies in pieces, hair here, a finger there, an arm, a leg,

intestines, and the liquid pooling out, scumming over the surface of the ocean like an oil spill, but twice as pretty, and the algae too drank of it like it was a gift from God and fell glittering across the shore when the tide came in, and the man and the woman played in it, and swallowed some, and found themselves revitalized, found that they couldn't sleep, they didn't want to sleep, they weren't forced to sleep whenever sleep told them to, sleep wasn't Jehovah anymore, and they gathered up the algae and the pods and the liquid and they built a church and a house of blues and they took in the people that the city threw out, took in the wanderers, made them process the drunk algae into drugs in hot-houses, then inject them into the bloodstream, then you don't sleep, simple, *What the hell do you mean cannibals, ain't no cannibals here, boy.*

And Sunny flipped his shit at finding out the scum on the ocean could keep him awake but the woman laughed and said, *they found it fresh, it gone toxic now, you drink that shit straight, you dead.*

So Sunny asked about the process to make it injectable, and Asha--that was her name, Asha -- shrugged and said, *Hell if I know. But if you want more, you have to go by the chapel before hibernation starts and beg Mare Ryu for some, but she'll probably just send you to the leech-house unless you show you're worth taking in before winter gets bad.*

Then Nien asked if they could steal it, and Asha just laughed and said, *As long as you stay awake once you get to town, maybe. But if you fall asleep around there, even slip, doze off for a split second, Torres will climb into your head faster than a parasite and make himself a home in your dreams.* And Nien said, *Fuck*, and Hammond--the man-- gave Asha a look, and Nien said, *We've already been there. We ran away last year. But we were asleep. Who is Torres? Maybe he forgot us...*

And Asha laughed again and said, *Fat chance.* And drank the last of the beer, and not seconds later fell asleep against the tree, drooling. Nien and Sunny looked then at Hammond who kept his face turned, his eyes downcast like embers. Sunny rounded him, begged him to tell more. Sunny said, *just like you two would've died if we didn't help. You owe it to us.*

Hammond finally looked up at Sunny and then spoke, *Torres doesn't forget a face, a dream, nothing. He knows everything. He's more lucid than God Himself.* And Sunny said, *Well, hell, you're saying there's nothing we can do? We can't sneak in and steal any because he'll know we're there. That's it, huh? That's all. No way around it.*

Hammond closed his eyes and exhaled and said, *No, there's a way around it. He may know, but he doesn't have to tell Mare Ryu. But you gotta give him a good reason not to tell Mare Ryu.*

*What does he want? Nien said. Money? Booze? Green tea?*

Hammond said, *That's a good question. If we weren't left to die in the woods I might be able to give you an answer.*

But now they were gone. They'd been retrieved. Left Sunny and Nien without an answer, without a plan, without a wild brown witch in the woods to guide them like last time.

"What do we do?" Sunny asks, kicking at a clump of snow.

"Maybe they were lying?" Nien says. "There are lucid dreamers, yeah, but one so good he can reach for miles?"

"If he already knows us," Sunny says. "And he knew of us a year ago, why the hell weren't we caught or something? I know Anette showed us the way, but with that kind of power, he could..."

Sunny trails off. His eyes dilate. His throat tightens and he places his head in his hands. "Oh, hell," he says. "Oh fucking hell."

"What?"

"It wasn't Anette. It wasn't Anette, was it?" He slams his fist against a tree. "You told me it wasn't her, but I didn't...believe you. God-fucking-dammit, Nien, it was that man! Torres -- that's his name, right? *He* fucked up my dreams. Anette was... she was just trying to help, I remember now. She was trying to wake me up from that hell but it warped everything and-- fuck, Anette, I'm sorry."

Nien stares, blank-faced, at Sunny, whose eyes are welling with tears. Sunny turns, grinding his teeth and says, "Go to sleep and tell her I'm sorry. Ask her to forgive me. Please."

"You're kidding me," Nien says. "All this time I told you it wasn't her and you trust the words of some random dying guy over mine?"

"They said his name. Torres. I remember him, Nien. He was in my dreams, I just blocked out his name, his face. I couldn't think of him, it was like hitting a wall every time I tried. But it all came flooding back. Fuck."

Sunny shakes his head. His hands tremble, curled into fists. "What kind of sick fuck would poison someone's dreams like that? And why *me*? You didn't have my nightmares. Why'd he screw with me?" He sinks down against the tree, hugging his knees in the soft impression where Asha's body lay just a day earlier.

"You gotta tell Anette I'm sorry, man. You gotta tell her."

Nien crouches down next to him, unsure of what to feel. He opens his mouth, closes it. Places his hand on Sunny's shoulder. "She won't let me sleep. Every time I close my eyes I see this watery light. Gets brighter and brighter until my eyes are swelling up with cold tears that make them ache and I see teasing colors for ten minutes straight. And the migraines..."

Sunny grabs Nien by the shirt. "Hold on," he says. "You're telling me she can keep you awake? Just like that with her fucking backwater voodoo?"

Nien pries Sunny's hand off.

"I don't know. If she can wake me, why *couldn't* she keep me from sleeping?"

Sunny scowls. "And here we are. Risking our lives when we could've just asked your lady to do it. Ha."

"What?" Nien stands up. "Hosea, you hated her goddamn guts. In your eyes, she fucked with your head and ruined your dreams for the rest of your life. You told me to keep her away from you while she was begging you for forgiveness, and *now* you want her inside your head? *Now?*"

"I know it wasn't her *now*, Nien, that's the point!"

"No. That's not the point. Even if you do forgive her, or want her to forgive you, she's dead, isn't she? That's what you've been saying all this time. *You're chasing a ghost, Nien, you crazy son-of-a-bitch, give it up.* You're choosing to believe me now when it conveniences you."

"A man on his deathbed will believe anything."

"You're not on your deathbed. You just won't give sleep another damn chance. We've been away from that place for a year now, away from that man's reach, your dreams are probably clear

now. I crossed the ocean for you, Sunny. We didn't do this for nothing."

"Are you... jealous?"

Nien snaps his head back toward Sunny. "Don't even insinuate-- jealous?! No, I'm not jealous. What the fuck would she want with you after you kicked in her fucking teeth and called her the devil's whore and that nonsense."

"You don't want me to forgive her."

"That's not true, Hosea."

"No. As long as I hated her, you could be her white knight and console her about what a bully I was, and get in her skirt--"

"You want to know the truth? She cares about you. She cares about you so much she won't let me sleep because she wants me to help you. But why should I help you? In that world, you're dead, and in this one, you want to die. Why the hell are you worth helping? I could sleep forever. I could be with her, Hosea. I love you, but you make me fucking miserable. She makes me happy."

"She's a good fuck. *That's* what makes you happy."

"...how the hell would you know that?"

"I assumed."

"Did you touch her?" Nien's fists curl. "When we were in the woods, after running away, and I left to find food... did you touch her?"

"It's not like she belongs to you, Nien. She's a free woman. Not a slave. You were born a few centuries too late for that."

"So you did."

"I'll neither confirm nor deny. Just so I can watch you squirm at the thought."

"Fine, then. Fine. But let me tell you something. You think she had nothing to do with the way your dreams turned out? She did. Maybe that man -- Torres, whatever his name was, gave you the nightmares, but you slept deeper than that damn ocean. She tried everything she could to wake you up. And then the last thing she tried was to make those nightmares worse." Nien shoulders his backpack, begins walking away from Sunny, in the direction of the town. "And it worked."

He doesn't look back. Moments later he hears Sunny get up and jog after him, catching up. "I'm desperate, Nien," he says, soft. "I'd do anything at this point. I can feel sleep. Pulling at me. I close my eyes and see flashes of those nightmares... they're getting louder, I can smell them. Taste them. I swear to God my heart will stop if I have to dream them again in full. Or I'll go insane. For real this time. If you know Anette can't help me, then fine. We'll go and get the drugs. But if we can't find them or get any, I'm not just going to let go. I'm going to kill that motherfucker who planted the nightmares in the first

place. Somehow, he'll suffer what I'll suffer. Promise me we'll do that at least."

"I'll promise that," Nien murmurs. "But I still won't kill you when you fall asleep."

"...why?" Sunny grasps Nien's arm, pulling him to a stop. "Why?"

"Because I've learned something. Something I didn't want to tell you, but I don't care anymore. I know this world is real. I've always known that. But it doesn't matter. People don't die when they're killed asleep, Sunny. They keep dreaming."

\*\*\*

Inside the leech-house are three beds, a cot and two tattered chairs, a toilet with clogged or frozen pipes, an empty kitchen with a pan with melted sugar congealed at the bottom, a bullet-hole in the bedroom wall, flecks of dried blood on the floor of a tiny side-room, more blood near the bullet-hole, sheets stiff with dried sweat, crumbs of food, droplets of a dog's saliva, a torn-open wall in the tiny room across from the toilet, weeping insulation foam, the hollow sound of wind, an empty gun, discarded shells, the echo of the gunshot hanging frozen in the air.

Nien cracks open a can of Campbell's Chicken Gumbo, pouring it into the pot over the stove after scraping out the candied sugar, or as much as he could. A little sweetness in the gumbo never hurt anybody. Sunny pokes a plastic spoon into it as the stove heats up with its little blue gas flame. He yawns. His eyes close for a bright moment. Feels the silvered thread of sleep tugging behind them. Nien jerks him back from the stove as he sways toward it.

"Stay awake," he says. "I need you."

"Why?" Sunny murmurs, rubbing his eyes, wincing as a shard of a nightmare appears in the corner of his vision. "I thought you said I wasn't worth it."

"You're braver than I am. I can't do anything alone. Not even in my dreams."

Sunny feels a lump in his throat at the word *dreams*. That if he died in his, he'd be there forever.

"Where are the damn bowls?" Nien mutters, scanning the bare cabinets whose doors were left wide open. "Do these people just eat with their hands?"

"Just eat the soup out of the pot," Sunny says. Another yawn. He sinks into one of the chairs. "That old woman -- Asha -- she was real pretty. Must've been stunning when she was young. I've always thought white hair looked nice on women with tan skin."

"Hm." Nien turns off the stove once the gumbo is hot, grabbing the pot and dropping it on the table before it can burn his hands. Some gumbo sloshes out.

"She drank all our fuckin' beer," Sunny says, scooping a thin layer of soup and some bits of chicken onto the plastic spoon and sipping. It scalds his tongue, is mildly spicy when the heat dissolves. He warms his hands a few inches from the pot.

"I was here," he says. "On this table when I woke up. And saw that person with a knife over me, but their face was cast in shadow. I don't know. Maybe it was a dream. But if he'd killed me then, cut me up for food, would I still be dreaming now?"

"Don't think about it," Nien says. "When you feel full, we get up, and keep moving. I see the chapel down the hill. That's where Hammond said we can ask for the drugs."

"Do you think they already know we're here?" Sunny says, scooping gumbo into his mouth before it cools, uncaring. He passes the spoon over to Nien, who blows gently on the soup before taking a bite.

"Maybe. We're close enough."

\*\*\*

"I wish this gun still had bullets in it," Sunny says, nudging the gun on the table.

Nien hands the spoon back. "A gun's a threat even without bullets."

"Not when these assholes can read minds."

"I brought the flare-gun from the raft. Just in case."

"Right. We can start a small fire with it. Just in case we get cold," Sunny says with a wry grin.

He sees Nien's pained face and puts the plastic spoon down, staring at his friend through the blue steam curling from the stew.

"Nien," he says. "Why do you have a look on your face like I'm already dead? I should be the sad one here, tio. Even I can force a smile."

"It's nothing," Nien mumbles.

"Ah. It's not about me, is it?" Sunny pushes the chair back and stands up. "It's about your lady."

"She's not my lady. Like you said. I don't own her. It's just when you and someone else feel like the only two people left in the universe you can't help but feel they're yours."

"Aw. Did she not put out last time?"

Nien glares at Sunny's stupid grin as he slips the gun into his waistband.

"I'm glad we both have the bad habit of making dumb jokes while the other is serious," he says, taking one more spoonful of the gumbo before standing up. "I'm worried about her. I'm worried about what happens if she dies again."

"We threw down the food, Nien," Sunny says. He picks up his backpack, heading toward the door. "She's probably having her own little fiesta, smoking her pipe and flicking the bean. No worries."

Nien shoulders his own pack, glancing at the unfinished pot of gumbo on the table. "That food thing was a wild shot in the dark. She won't even let me check up to see if it worked."

"There's no 'checking up' for you, tio. If she didn't make you wake the hell up you'd stay there forever if you could, and you know it."

They push open the leech-house door and step out into the cold, letting it swing shut behind them. They stare down the hill toward the chapel. It's early morning now, and the patches of snow make the sky seem brighter than it should be. There are burned-out bonfires in the center of the town, but everything seems quiet now. The partying is over. The square has been cleaned of both trash and people. Sunny looks at Nien whose face is stoic, red from the cold, half-overgrown with soft blond stubble. He rubs the back of his own neck, exhaling.

"Okay," he says. "We go now or we don't ever."

Nien's eyes scan the horizon and catch for a moment on a shed nestled behind the leech-house outside the garden fence. Familiarity floods him with warmth. He inhales sharply, turns and begins toward the shack. Sunny follows. "Where--? Oh."

"Remember this?" Nien says, toying with the broken padlock on the door.

Sunny pushes the door open, staring into the dark shed, the corroded tin roof with half-slushed snow gathered in the eaves and dripping down through holes that had once been patched with insulation foam and fabric.

Sunny runs his hands along the colorful, plastic-wrapped boxes on the back shelf. Emerald City 16-shot, Blazing Bethlehem, Flashing Thunder Candle, Bengal Fire, Blue Rose Blossom, Nuclear Sunrise, etc.

"Fireworks, man," he says. "We can use these."

Sunny picks up a box with the words GOLDEN CRACKER emblazoned on the sides and shakes it in Nien's face. "This can be your stage-name when you become a stripper someday," he says.

Nien side-eyes him. "Yeah? And they'll call you 'blue rose blossom' when you're a hooker."

"I don't get it."

"Because your ass will be sore."

"My joke was better," Sunny says, scooping the fireworks into his bag, pausing on a box of Sparklers. "Man. Used to love these things as a kid. You could write your name in the air."

"Hold on..." Nien pats his pocket, feeling the hard outline of something there. He pulls it out. Anette's blue Zippo. The metal is cold as he presses his thumb against the rounded corner. He doesn't remember how it got there.

"Use this," Nien says, handing it to Sunny.

Sunny flips back the lid and lights up the sparkler, and it hisses to life, filling the dark shed with sweet smoke and sizzling light. He writes *Hosea* and the afterimage is burned into the air for a few seconds. He then downturns the sparkler, pressing it into his palm.

"Ah--what are you doing?"

"We might die, man," Sunny says, dark eyes glowing orange as the skin on his palm swelters, the bandage around his wrist curling back its gauze threads. "I got all sorts of names tattooed all over me, but I don't have yours." He lifts the sparkler, and shows the star of red, blistering flesh in the center of his palm now. "Push your thumb in there."

"Jesus Christ, Hose."

"Just do it." His eyes smile. "I want something to remember you by, Golden Cracker."

"You're so weird," Nien says, laughing as he pushes his thumb into the blistering flesh, then shudders.

"Nah. I told you earlier. Practically can't feel anything in my hands and wrists anymore."

"It's going to get infected, your hand's going to fall off."

There is a moment of silence. Nien retracts his hand as Sunny lowers his. The sparkler dims.

"We could use the fireworks as a trap," Sunny says. "Put'em in a pile right inside the door. Blow the ever-living fuck out of whoever walks in if they don't give us what we want."

"Chapel only has one door. It catches on fire, they lock us inside, what then?"

"Then we both die."

"But we won't die dreaming."

"That would be the ideal outcome."

"I want to die dreaming, Sunny."

The sparkler fizzles out, leaving them again in the stale dark. Sunny takes Nien's hand, squeezing it. Nien flinches at the feel of the blisters bubbling up on the skin.

"You afraid she won't let you sleep? Girl's got a vise on your mind so tight your coal-brain could turn to diamond. No way she won't let you go easy. Picture me coughing to death from smoke inhalation between the pews while you nap on the altar under the statue of crucified black Jesus."

Nien chuckles. "Sounds like a good way to go."

"Like hell it does. I just burned my good hand, how'm I supposed to have one final wank before I go?"

Sunny finishes scooping the fireworks into his backpack by the light of the Zippo. "Unless you can think of a better plan, this is what we've got, tio."

"Then let's hurry up and go," Nien says. "I've got a date tonight."

\*\*\*

The well-worn path down the slope from the leech-house is clear of both grass and snow. The chapel is built of wood but has a metal cross on its steeple prelit with the dawn-light. They get closer, pass by the outer buildings. No one sits out on their porches and patios. The shutters are closed, and soft orange light flickers through some of them, casting fractals on the wood, brick, and the ground.

A door opens. Nien freezes as he sees a woman step outside. Behind her is a threshold piled high with wrapped food. She shakes out her coat and coughs, casts a glance over the square and lands on them. Nien averts his eyes. Nudges Sunny to keep walking, expecting the woman to yell or sound some alarm but she

doesn't. She buttons her coat and steps off the porch, heading not toward the chapel, but instead toward that massive, three-story rose-colored house sitting at the forefront of the town.

Sunny picks up pace toward the chapel. Nien does the same, saying softly, "Maybe Hammond and Asha are here, and they can vouch for us. Maybe they already did."

"They were thrown in the woods to die. I'm not sure they were in much of a position to vouch for anything."

They round the front of the chapel. Sunny's heartbeat quickens when he sees the doors slightly open, light spilling out from inside. It's small, only three windows on each side, only doors in the front. One way in, one way out.

They approach the door. Nien glances back at the woman, who's disappeared inside the big-house. Maybe she's gone to tell. It doesn't matter. It's too late now. He steps ahead of Sunny and pushes into the chapel, thankful for the rush of warmth that anoints them as they enter. It is empty.

"What do we do now?" Nien says, running his fingers over the polished wooden armrests as he passes by the pews. Sunny follows, closing the chapel doors behind them.

Sunny doesn't answer. They hustle toward the front of the church. They wait.

The doors open, letting in a crack of sunlight. A woman enters. She has bright red hair and a calm face. Her bare arms are sleeved in tattoos.

She flips a switch and the chandeliers in the chapel alight, revealing the apse, carved out of crystal like carved-out interior of a geode, a pomegranate half. She sees the two tired, trembling boys in the geometry of the refracted light and pauses, stupefied.

Nien tries to clear his swollen throat and Sunny stares, stares between the woman and the formation at the church-front that reminds him of the mass he saw on the cove punched-drunk with a billion tiny stars and ocean-water. His gaze travels back and forth down the aisle three times before the woman opens her mouth and says, *"Who are you?"*

It's a phrase she hasn't said in ages, because she always knows, because Torres always tells her when there's someone new, doesn't he? He never lies, or gets distracted, or withholds the truth. He sifts through dreams like flipbooks while sipping mouthfuls of salvia and breathing out the person's soul and she reads it, reads the signals, that is communication, that's what communication is supposed to be, that is partnership, blessed be the Sparrow, he promised, didn't he? After everything he took, he swore to give it back, and never--

"Who are you?" Nien squeaks out, clearing mucus from his throat. "We're just looking for somewhere to stay."

Two boys. One white, one brown, brown one has tattoos like you, Ryu, think of all the faces he's seen, you've seen, remember, god dammit, Sparrow, blessed be.

"You'd have better luck in the city," she says. "We've begun hibernation. There's nowhere for you to stay."

"Nien," Sunny says, soft. Nien ignores him. Steps toward the woman.

"We heard a rumor," he says. "From this girl we met in the woods. That this town has medicine that fights the sleep."

"What girl?" she says.

"Pretty black girl with...weird eyes. Looked like a nomad, way she was dressed. But she said you had medicine. My brother here--"

"He's your brother?"

"Different mommas," Sunny murmurs. He taps Nien's shoulder, still staring toward the crystalline apse, his eyes flickering, Nien not sure if he's acting or actually falling asleep.

Nien licks his lips. Feels his stinging eyes welling up with tears. "My brother needs that medicine. You see, he can lucid dream, but he-- we came originally from the city-- and he had this nice business going as an interpreter until some other lunatic lucid used him like a conduit to poison all his

customers' dreams. So he has some angry, powerful people after him now, with their own lucids claiming they can kill fuckers through their dreams, and we had to book it, and Hosea hasn't slept in months but the sleep's like an ocean, you know? A cruel, merciless bitch and it's going to drag him to the deep if he don't get a hit of your magic medicine real soon, miss."

"There's no such thing as killing people through their dreams," Mare Ryu says, and Nien says in reply, "You try convincing Hosea otherwise. He'll go crazy if he sleeps again, miss, maybe they won't kill him, but they'll drive him mad, I swear it, please have mercy, he's my little brother, ma'am, he's just a dumb kid."

"*Oh, fuck,*" Sunny mutters. Nien glances over at him, his buckling legs; is he pretending for pity's sake?

"If we had this medicine, you don't think the people from the city would've overrun us to take it all?" she asks.

"Girl in the woods said it was a secret how you made it."

"Did this girl tell you her name?" she asks.

"Why the hell do you care?" Sunny snaps. He's gripped Nien's arm now. His face has paled. "You wanna fuck her too?"

A gunshot goes off, ricocheting off the apse, sending crystals showering down into the choir. Sunny raises his hand to his face, feels the numb, tattered flesh of his ear, the blood, broken earring, shorn black hairs, deafened by the sound, no

pain yet. Nien stares at him, sees the dark droplets soaking through his shirt. The woman has no gun in her hand. She turns slightly back toward the open door.

Nien pulls the flare-gun from his coat. He rips open Sunny's backpack, jamming the gun inside and firing. The flash of light blinds him, he screams, sees Anette in the bleeding, cascading colors, her hair melting around his ankles like Sunny's burning bandages, the pain in his skull, a bell ringing in his ears.

Sunny wrests the bag from him, tosses it at Mare Ryu's feet as it explodes in a crackling, sizzling burst, popping along her legs, the heat, the smoke, the melting plastic and charred cardboard, everything more volcanic than her veins Sunny grabs Nien and pulls him down behind the foremost pew as fireworks fizz along the chapel floor. There's a moment before the crackling stops, and a last squeal as one bursts in the stratosphere and fills the chapel with shifting light.

Nien clutches his head, the ringing releases, finally, replaced by groaning.

"Shit," Nien says. "Shit, Hose, your ear..."

"You fucked her up better than she did me," Sunny says.

"I bet that woke you up good, didn't it?" Nien says, smiling as he swallows the colors teasing the corners of his

vision as Sunny laughs and bites back the hell-images teasing to swallow him.

There's the sound of commotion outside. Somebody screams. Sunny grips Nien's arm. "I guess we're dead soon, then," he says.

Nien spits. "God, you just couldn't keep your mouth shut? I had her going--"

"I'm on a short fuse," Sunny says.

"Mare Ryu?" someone says. "Mare Ryu! Are you okay? Look at me!"

They see a pair of bare legs from underneath the pews. Someone kneels down, a curtain of blonde hair falling around the face. "Get the doctor! Where is he?"

"Doing surgery," someone says, a man's voice. "On that pregnant woman."

"Tell him to stop and come here!"

"Right now?"

"Yes! She's burned all over--"

Another voice. "I don't think he's started yet--he's just preparing--"

"Go get him!"

"Someone go get Torres too."

"Were those gunshots?"

"Fireworks went off. Mare Ryu, stay with me. I have you. I'm here."

"I don't think we're getting those drugs," Sunny says.

Nien squeezes his hand, feels it trembling. "We'll ransom it."

"What?"

He stands up, flare-gun pointed at the kneeling blonde woman.

"Get up," he says. "Back away."

"Nien!" Sunny says through his teeth.

The blonde woman rises, steps back, hands raised. Nien moves the gun from her to point at Mare Ryu, who writhes on the floor in her own blood, sweltering burns all over her body and hands. She covers her face.

"We want 'Wake," Nien says. "A lot of it. And then we want to leave."

"Why are you doing this?" she says.

"Someone shot at us first," Nien says.

"Nobody shot at you. We aren't allowed to use guns--"

"Nien," Sunny says. "I'm falling, man."

"Go get the damn medicine," Nien says. "Now."

"I'm not leaving her," the blonde says.

Nien flinches as Sunny hits himself in the face, clawing at his eyes.

"NOW!" Nien says, his hand shaking on the gun.

"No," the woman says. Her jaw tenses.

Nien's palms sweat. He doesn't know what to do. Anette would know what to do, though. If she'd just let him sleep. He closes his eyes, see the crackling white behind his lids, a blocked synapse. Then he hears it. A cold solution pouring, splattering on the ground around his feet, slush rising between his toes, trickling down his back. He sees the colored foam rise on his shoulders and become Anette's fingertips, the eyes like they're being seen under ultraviolet light. It feels like fire. That smile missing front teeth. It's a picture book. He can scratch the dry skin and sniff the sour smell of embalming fluid.

"Anette," he says.

She wraps around him, moves like her ankles are broken, then like she's swimming in air, away from him, toward the burned body on the floor, kneeling over her. Nien sees the ashy knees, mosquito-bitten legs, the tangled roots of the dreadlocked hair and thinks *lovely* as she takes Mare Ryu's face in her hands. Kisses her brow.

"Anette!" Nien says, desperate now, reaching for her. She looks back and dissolves into suds which baptize his feet like a tide and sends the shivers from his ankles up his spine into his skull into his mind which snaps, out, like a light.

Tumbling over, he thuds against the floor. The flare-gun fires off and sends a hissing rocket skittering underneath some pews.

"Fuck, Nien," Sunny says. He crawls over, shaking him. "Get up. I need you. *Nien!*"

Nameless people with pretty faces flood into the chapel, grabbing Sunny and wresting him to his feet. He cries out as the needle sinks into his neck and feels his heartbeat quicken and flinch as he tenses with pain, saliva running from the corner of his mouth. He groans as the horror-pictures fade and he's left with that warm, pleasant buzz. Good shit.

"April," someone says. A short, dark-skinned man half out-of-breath kneels down next to Mare Ryu whose twisting and writhing has gone still.

April pulls her bloodied hair behind her shoulders as she crouches down in front of Sunny, wrenching Nien up by his hair, pulling a pocket-knife from the pocket of her robe and putting it against the sleeping boy's throat.

"This isn't not your first hit, is it?" she says, reading Sunny's eyes. "I can tell."

"Mm..." Sunny's head lolls. Someone grips his chin to hold it straight.

"Your blood's pale," she says. "Is his?" Pressing the blade into Nien's cheek, she cuts across, watching the red blood seep from the gash.

"No," she says. "So that makes him a leech, and you a liability."

"April," someone says. "Torres won't answer--I've knocked on his door and he won't answer."

"Your friend's going off now," April says. "Not in the woods, but into the ocean. Too many people manage to find their way back from the woods."

"Like Hansel and Gretel," Sunny says, reaching up to wipe his mouth only to have his arm is jerked back further. "Except with booze bottles instead of bread-crumbs."

She pulls a face, dropping Nien to the floor. "You're useful only because you're already addicted. That means you'll do what you're told when the time comes."

"Mhm," Sunny says.

She turns around, again brushing stray hairs from her eyes and says to the people, "Take him to Torres. I don't care if the door is locked, knock it down if you have to. I want this kid licking his boots by the end of tonight."

Someone says, "That's not all he'll be licking," and someone else giggles.

Sunny's teeth clench. He closes his eyes, then opens them again to see a split group dragging Nien away. He doesn't struggle as they lift him up too, force him to walk. No way Anette will just let Nien die. She'll handle it. She always has. He thumbs the needle of the syringe he palmed from April, hiding

it in his bunched sleeve, thinking of the best way to make a man tell the truth. Stick a needle in his eye?

As they stumble down the chapel steps into the snow, his eyes catch the hunting rifle laying there in the middle of the yard, half-covered.

"'We aren't allowed to use guns', huh?" he says. April stops before she splits from the group to go with those carrying Nien. Her eyes fall on the rifle. She has a look on her face like she's just woken up.

## 10. Calavera

(Anette, Torres and Ryu)

They lay on their stomachs, watching the cockroaches. Two half-ones on the AC unit that they've smashed with our rubber-soled shoes, shining like bits of broken jewelry. Little Aztec beads.

Anette says, "Their skeleton is on the outside. Like yours."

There are more. She pushes down the nozzle on the Hot Shot. Cockroaches move before the stream of poison hits the bed post

and fly straight into our faces. They scream like banshees. Bat at the air. Capture them in plastic cups -- the translucent kind, not red solo. They let them go on the porch and then slap themselves, thighs, arms, slap our clothes in the fear the roaches are crawling on them. Then they curl up on the floor by the fire and laugh.

Other side of the house, near midnight, his pants down to his ankles, her panties half-yanked down her unshaven thighs.

Shallow pumps in and out and it stings. He sees her eyes watering and frowns, with a grunt tries to press his thumb against her clit as if that too don't sting. She winces.

"Hell," she says. Through her teeth. He stares. His cock goes soft in her, slides out as he sits up.

He opens his mouth to say something, then closes it. Grumbles underneath his breath and stands, struggling with his pants.

"I'm going outside."

She sits up. "Why?"

"To get some air," he says. "Maybe go check the rabbit traps."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," he says.

She pulls up her underwear, her pants, and wraps her arms around her knees.

"When I was younger I could pretend, but not so much anymore."

"I'll go," she says. "Check the traps I mean."

"Okay," he says.

She grabs her coat from the bedpost.

"Have you dreamt about it lately?" he says, stopping her in the doorway.

She turns. "Yes. I thought of a name for it," she says.

"Sparrow."

"Sparrow," he says.

"Because it sounds sad. Sparrow is a sad-sounding word."

He half-sits on the edge of the bed and says, "Has it talked to you?"

"Sometimes," she says. "But I don't understand it most times."

They go silent. Anette steps back into the bedroom, wringing her hands.

"I'm sorry," she says again.

"For what?"

"For coming on to you. I shouldn't have done that."

He smiles and says, "It's not like I complained."

"It'll make her angry," she says.

"Everything makes her angry."

"You remind me of someone," she says. "That's why I did it."

She saves most of the talk of her dreamworld for Ryu, but Torres has heard a lot of it.

"He's called the King," she says. "And he's got ten-thousand shapes."

"Unfortunately I only have one," he says.

Anette buttons her coat, her locks falling over her face "The King," she says. "He leads people to the Sparrow after they die."

"Is it like heaven?" he says.

"No, because everyone goes there. Those that done wrong just take a little longer."

Just a little longer. That doesn't seem too bad. She turns to go, the coat swamping her body, as she is tall but slender. Still smaller than him. He doesn't know what to think of her. He knows she isn't stupid though Ryu treats her as such. But she is capable. He sees it in her eyes. He saw it when she climbed into his bed as he lay in the dark, staring at the ceiling, twisting himself up inside. Asked him if there was anything she could do to get his mind off of his sins.

The house has two bedrooms, one on either side, and they-- he and Ryu--sleep separate, and she sleeps in whichever bed needs her the most.

It was six months ago they found Anette stumbling afraid through the boreal woods, body torn by the cut-up chain link fence she'd dragged herself through to get on the land. Like all who were drawn here, as if beneath the earth or the water lay a magnetism, she'd dreamed wild dreams, dreams of the Sparrow, and woken up trying to find it. There was a desperation in all of them. Something not quenched by food or water or warmth. She came from the city where they had hibernation houses. Anette had been one that fell asleep during the third wave that crashed over the earth. She'd been asleep for five years. Five years is when that city gave up on you ever waking, and left you out in the wilderness to make room for more beds. But Anette had made a new world in her dreams. She had no will to wake up. Her body, somehow, willed her to when she found herself starving and cold and alone and remembered reality existed and struggled to think back to who she was before she slept, the coffee shop where she worked learning English and the girl she was fake-dating who taught her French. The cat in their apartment with the blue-bolt eyes. All of that was gone. And she was not even conscious for the five years of lying abed, being pumped full of formula and water and sang to by carolers whose songs she heard in her dreams and thought they were her own songs, moved to a different bed each year she did not wake up. It was strange how the world had changed. This world was cold and silent. The girl she fake-

dated was blonde and had tattoos on her wrists, her thighs, the small of her back. They were watching a movie together on the last night, lying on the couch.

Now, she lies on the couch between these two people, her head on her lap, her legs across his thighs. They talk to her, but not to each other, and she wonders if they hate each other, wonders what happened to make them hate each other, wonders why, if they hate each other, they drove all the way up here together. They both told her the last part of story in ways that weren't too different. But Torres tells it better.

Ryu lay in the backseat, polyester stained by red box dye, a halo on her head. He drove. Driving was slow sometimes because of the idle cars junked in the middle of the streets. The border was crossed a long while ago. He listened to the radio. He looked at his wrist handcuffed to the steering wheel and thought it was funny. He swallowed his Xanax like a good boy. Chased down by Crush or cold coffee like a good boy. Appraised her ass as she broke into yet another Starbucks, Wendy's, Tim Horton's for a spoiled meal, only to find some lit up, people talking, their companions asleep on tables. Spinning neon signs, and then forest, an expanse of thick, boreal forest that cast shadows on her still body.

Then the long fence came and as did the wire-cutters. They squeezed through. Traveled deeper into the trees, skirting the

oceanside, sleeping in a stolen tent. Found a town called Finmoore, abandoned, residents dead or gone to the city for proper care.

They were both skinny. Lots of food, no nutrients, no time to stop in cities with greenhouses and dispensaries, had to hunt this wild vision in Torres' brain.

He hated himself more than he hated her. He had a million good reasons to hate himself. He wrote them down in a journal he hides from Ryu but later showed Anette.

"I can feel its heartbeat drum inside my own chest. It is deep beneath the waters of this dark lagoon and sends me images of plasticine shapes with blurred edges, of human bodies with broken geometry, of its core, an engine that feeds itself. I tend to Ryu's dreams like a nursemaid while my own are filled with noise. She doesn't ask me where we're going when I drive, I just drive. Drive until I find the lagoon. Beside this old, abandoned town called Finmoore. A long walk through the woods. I carry her to the beach. The water is warm. I bathe her in it. It wakes her up. But I'm too busy feeling this pulse, the vibration in every grain of sand, up my legs, making them buckle, into my bones, killing me inside. I see it driving itself. I hear it trying to speak to me, telling me it fucked up too. I'm glad to hear I'm not the only one who's fucked up."

Both she and Torres can hear the Sparrow. They know where it is as simply as someone who closes their eyes knows where their hands are, their nose, their eyelids. It's always there. The acrid smell through pressured meters of saltwater. The sound of it purging itself. They feel it trembling. They taste the salt of it, sense its shape as if they're holding a miniature to their lips. Torres doesn't understand but Anette understands.

She steps outside and onto the porch where Ryu leans over the banister, having a smoke.

"I haven't seen another roach inside today," she says.

"Think we got them all."

Anette smiles at her and she smiles back. "I'm going to go check the rabbit traps."

Ryu snubs out the cigarette and kisses Anette's forehead and says, "Be careful."

\*\*\*

She sees this pod washed up on the beach like a giant glass cockleshell. She goes over to it. Touches it. The surface is cool and warps under her hand, ocean-water and cool liquid come bubbling up between her fingers. There's a crack along its side. She slides her hand in. The membrane bursts open and inside she sees a body, curled up on itself, little fish nibbling on it,

all mutated and swollen, their shimmering scales melting into each other, their eyes fallen out. The liquid inside turns to gel when exposed to the air. But liquid again when it touches her warm skin. She reaches in to touch the body. It's cold. Still. It doesn't seem to breathe. A boy's body. She leaves it. Sees more pods along the beach, half-covered by the sand, some smashed to bits like meteorites, the bodies in pieces, hair there, a finger there, an arm, a leg, intestines, and the liquid pooling out.

She hears the Sparrow say, *It was an accident.*

This isn't anything she hasn't seen before. She turns back to the one that's still in full. She reaches inside again, tries to scoop the boy out. When he touches the air, he gasps. Anette drops him. The warmth returns to his body and he falls onto the ground, writhing, gripping handfuls of sand. He can't be more than five years old. He coughs up the fluid. It runs from his nose. His eyes webbed shut. She sits down with him, wipes his face with the hem of her coat dipped in water. She plucks off the parasitic little fish. He says something in a language she doesn't understand. He is afraid. She knows this. She was afraid when she first woke up too.

She takes off her coat and wraps him up in it, lifts him into her arms. "It's going to be okay," she says. What a foolish thing to say.

\*\*\*

His eyes open. Three faces look down at him, a man, two women, all strangers. The room has a low ceiling and a fire crackles. The older woman says, "Christ, look at his eyes."

"Witches have eyes like that," the girl says.

Torres says nothing. He moves away. Goes to sit down.

"He's not a witch," Ryu says, glaring at Anette. But the girl spent five years dreaming. And there were witches in her world.

"He has a witch-heart," Anette says.

"Enough. You've been up longer than both of us put together. Go lie down."

"For God's sake, she found him, let her stay," Torres says. The first words they've exchanged in a while.

"I don't want her to scare him."

"She's not a child."

"Maybe if she was a child you could've stayed hard for her longer than a few seconds."

Torres shuts up. The boy doesn't understand. He pulls his knees to his chest.

"He doesn't speak English," Anette says. "Or French. I tried."

"There were more, though?" Ryu says. "More pods?"

"All over the beach. But in pieces. I didn't check all of them, but from what I saw, the people were in pieces too."

Ryu grabs her coat, shoulders it on. "Come with me," she says to Torres.

"Why?" he says.

"I don't want to be alone."

"Take Anette, then."

"Are you serious?"

"I told you," he says. "I told you time and time again I don't have it in me. I'm sober, I'm clean, I have a fucking soul."

Ryu looks at Anette who looks at the boy now picking at his skin. Torres stares at the woodgrain of the table.

"Fine," she says. "I'll go alone."

She shoves out of the front door and off into the woods where the tree canopies are now laced with sunset. Torres closes the door behind her. He says, "I hope she dies." Then winces and sits back down.

Anette doesn't mind though. Ryu has said similar things about him.

"He doesn't seem hungry," she says. "Or thirsty. What are we going to name him?"

"He already has a name," Torres says. He pulls his palm-sized journal and pen out of his shirt pocket, ripping a page out and handing them to Anette to give to the boy. The child takes the pen clumsily in one hand and stares at it for a moment, looking up at Anette.

"Go on," she says.

He looks back down at the lined paper, and hand trembling, draws two crude Chinese characters:

仁. He gives the paper back to Anette, stained blue from residual fluid left on his body. She lifts it to the firelight.

"Heartless," Torres says, reading over her shoulder.

"What a funny name," Anette says. "Heartless."

He doesn't bother to correct her this time. Her names for things stick. He moves over to the couch, pulling off each cushion one-by-one. He grabs the handle and pulls out the thin mattress. He unfolds it. He goes to the closet to retrieve the linen, making the bed. He then picks up Heartless from the floor. The boy squirms. He does not speak. Torres plops him onto the bed and says, "Rest."

Heartless's face is blank but he cocoons himself in the sheets. Moments later his brow wrinkles. He begins to cry. Quiet little sobs.

Anette climbs into the bed with him and holds him close. Torres gets up and makes coffee. He and Anette both can lucid

dream. It's why they can hear it, the Sparrow, when no one else can. He and Ryu found Finmoore and moved into one of the little houses and set rabbit traps in the woods and ate all the food the abandoned town had to offer. He'd taught himself how to wake himself up. She'd taught herself how to daydream. He was asleep one night and she wandered into his dream and saw him standing over a dead child in a meadow. The Sparrow was in the background, hovering. It had taken the place of the sun. Torn a fissure in the sky. He tried to hide the body in the grass but she didn't seem to notice it. And would it matter this time? This was the only thing he ever dreamed. She asked him for food. She showed him where she was in the forest and upon waking he went out and found her. Brought her home to Ryu who smiled for the first time in forever. That made three mouths to feed. Now this boy. Four. Soon one of them will have to go the city and ask for more food. It is a long drive. Ryu will insist he make it. And he fears that when he gets back, this little fucked-up family they've made will be gone. And he'll be alone with his thoughts. With his shame.

He pours from glass carafe into his mug and considers drinking it black. He sits for hours, considering it. Anette drifts off into her little world. Heartless sees teasing pale colors, then the big man sitting at the table staring into his coffee cup.

"You have gas-flame eyes," Torres says without looking. The boy buries his face in the wide gap between Anette's breasts. He hides. Then he looks again. Torres taps his fingers on the table. Then he says, "You are beautiful."

Heartless hides again. Torres stands up and walks over to the bed and looks down at Heartless, and considers drinking his coffee black. He thinks better of it. He sits down again.

"I lied," he says." She was not running around and around. She was running away and away."

Silence.

"From me," Torres says. "She was running from me. And I killed her."

"It's okay," Anette says.

"Nothing will make it okay," Torres says.

"Yes," Anette says.

"There is nothing sweeter," Torres says. "Sweet until the last tooth rots from my mouth." He sips at the coffee. Sighs. Reaches for the sugar bowl and scoops more in, with milk.

She feels Heartless's cold sweat on her, then a warmth as she slides her hand out. He's peed himself. She sits up, not saying anything. The poor child. She sees Torres backlit by sunlight streaming in through the windows.

"Good morning," Torres says.

"Morning," Anette says, her body as warm and wet as the sheets.

She gets up and goes to sit at the table, rubbing the gooseflesh on her arms as if it's cold. His coffee mug is empty.

"He needs the bathroom," she says softly. Heartless's eyes are closed. Torres doesn't know if he's asleep or if he's pretending to be asleep.

"It's fine. I'll wash the sheets once Ryu gets back."

He taps the rim of the mug. She sits down across from him, running her finger along the smooth bulging side of the coffee pot.

"It looked sort of like this," she says. "What he came out of."

"He was sleeping," Torres says.

"Not breathing. Heart not beating. I thought he was dead."

"A lowered metabolism," he says. "How do you think he got in there?"

"He was born in there," she says.

Torres gives her a look. "If he was born in there, how would he know how to write?"

"A communal dream," she says.

He drums his fingers on the table. "Maybe there is. More than likely he was some sort of passenger, though. Machines can't make people, Anette."

"The King sometimes falls in love," she says. "And when he does, sometimes he'll take his lover and spirit them away straight to the Sparrow. But most times he leaves a gift. With the girls he knocks them up. He gave me this gift and I gave birth to a billion little stars. If a person can make a galaxy why can't a machine make a person?"

He gets tired of her delusions sometimes. But again, it's not her fault. It's the damage of the brain after a sleep too long, a mind trying to remember itself, struggling again to be whole and fill in the gaps. He'd learn for himself how the gaps could be filled with fabrications and the brain would accept in desperation to repair itself. And soon he'd learn to color in those holes himself at times in others' minds. Ryu would tell him to, and he would listen. He had to. She had lit the gas light in his own mind and he took it like a torch to everyone else. Manufactured thoughts are like a threading needle going back over and over the same piece of fabric until it bunches, buckles, believes everything you tell it.

The front door swings open. Ryu enters, carrying a garden pot sloshing with liquid. She sets it down on the table, grinning, her face flushed, her eyes bright. Torres is taken aback by it.

"What is this?" he says.

"Drink it," she says.

He peers inside the pot, seeing thick clumps of algae congealed in viscous fluid. He gives her a look. Anette sticks her hand into the pot and the solution melts into a soupy consistency. She cups her hands and scoops some to her lips, sipping it.

"It's gone, Lucas," she says. "The tiredness. The pain. It's gone."

"What is this?" he says again, watching Anette slurp down the rest.

"Algae that absorbed whatever stuff came out of those pods," she says. She tips it into his coffee mug. "Drink. Please."

Pulling a face at the smell, he drinks. The air around him crackles and the crumpled edges of his vision smooth. His whole body feels warm, feverishly warm. He sips some more, then downs it all without even thinking.

"There's more. All over the beach. We'll take it to the city and sell it there," she says.

"Sell it? Hell, Ryu we don't even know what it does."

"If we make enough we can buy the property instead of squatting here." Her energy flows out of her and permeates the whole room. Even Heartless peers out from under the sheets.

"If we own the property," she says. "We could get recognized by the city as a commune. And no one else can claim what we've found."

"Four people don't make a commune," Torres says.

"You don't think more people won't come knowing we've got this?" she shakes the pot. "This. This is all we needed. What I've been looking for. Everything wrong I've done--we've done--will be forgiven. We can make things better for people."

"And you want me to go," he says. "To the city. To sell it."

"You've dealt before," she says. "When we were young."

"And ended up beaten half to death more than once."

"Give out some on the street. Then once you have testimonies, take it to the city council. It's simple. Tell them you can lucid dream and they'll give you temporary housing."

"I'm just to leave you all here," he says. "You're just letting me go."

"Yes."

He thinks of the machine. Whatever this solution is, it's muted that omnipresence he feels, muted the noise, the static, and he wonders if Anette is feeling the same thing. But most of all he wonders about Heartless, wonders if the Sparrow let people go if it would take them in too.

"What if I don't come back?" he says.

The truth is he wouldn't come back. And neither would she. The truth is, sometime between the day he left for the city, and returned weeks later with twelve people, a small caravan of cars loaded with food, the deed to the land, and the day they moved into Finmoore's inn, converted the smaller buildings into hot-houses to produce more of their milk and honey, sometime in the middle of all that they lost themselves. To greed, to power, to lust. It's not an unexpected thing. It's just human nature.

## 11. Psychopomp

(Hammond)

I'm stirred from an unconsciousness by Torres's breath on my neck, by his legs shifting under the cool sheets as he sighs, still inside me, going soft.

"You fainted," he says. I don't answer. He kisses me behind my ear. It makes me shudder. The feeling of his bones against mine.

"You're dying," he says.

"I'm aware," I say.

"You aged twenty years in ten and now you're dying," he says. "I told you where the Sparrow was. How to make it rise. You could have left. You could have saved yourself." He slides out of me, still holding me, dwarfing me with his tall, heavy body, his hair undone. "Why did you stay?"

"Because I couldn't leave you and Mare Ryu to ruin the world."

He says, "It's like the only language you can speak is hatred."

Like I don't have a good reason.

"Do you feel satisfied?" he says, stroking me gently. My whole body erupts in shivers.

I exhale sharply. "No," I say. I sound so weak. I hate my quivering voice. I hate the hold he has on me. How safe I feel with him. How safe I feel with him in me. "I feel weak."

He's tracing the bones in my back with one rough finger. He nuzzles his face in my hair. "That's okay. You're in pain, Heartless."

The shame boils up inside of me. I've disgusted myself. I have a witch-heart and there's nothing I can do.

"Anette. I saw her last winter. She's alive," I say.

"Did you ask her?"

"I did," I say, swallowing. "But she refused. She refused to open the Sparrow for me because she thinks it would be selfish if just me and the leech-house people were the only ones to go in. Even though I came from it. Even though I'm dying. She believes everyone deserves to go in. Even Mare Ryu. Even you. Because she's a good person."

"None of us are good," he says.

"Well, she's better than you. And me. And that counts."

"If everyone goes to the Sparrow, even the most despicable of us, then what's the point of being good?"

I clench the sheets.

"This world matters too. This *life* matters too. You sit around smoking and drinking and pretending it doesn't just so you can swallow your guilt, but all of this matters, otherwise Mare Ryu wouldn't treat people like horseshit, brand us leeches, and starve us to the point of fucking cannibalism."

There's a pause. I wait for something other than his sickening nonchalance.

"Kill her, then," Torres says.

I roll over and stare at him. "What?"

"You've wasted your entire life being hateful. There's no point in stopping now, is there?"

"Yeah," I say. "There is a point in stopping now."

I take his hands. Large, calloused hands. I place them around my throat.

"Heartless," Torres says, soothingly. "I'm not going to kill you for you."

I await the flicker of panic in his eyes, the flashback to these hands snapping his child's neck, but there's nothing. Just calm. And it enrages me.

"I did what I promised," I say. "I'm done. I can't run away like Anette did. She can play the shepherd. I'll be the one that died for your sins."

"Someone already died for my sins. I don't need another one." He pulls his hands from my throat. Places them on my shoulders.

"A child is being born today. You should go congratulate the father."

"Ha."

"Don't you want to see that spiteful little face of his again?"

"No. It would make me sad."

He plays with my thinning hair.

"He's in the infirmary with his mother now. There are surgical tools on the table. Bernard was about to perform a Cesarean, but Ryu got hurt by the two boys outside who are here looking for drugs to chase the bad dreams away. You wanted to distract me with your wasted little body and turn my ears away from her pleading because you promised them you'd help. I can hear her, Heartless. Screaming internally. I am a bad person, and to think anything could change that? I'd be kidding myself."

He sits up. Leans back against the headboard. I watch the rivulets of sweat run down his softening chest as he scratches his eyebrow.

"She won't recover from those burns. Bernard is a shit surgeon and none of us can make the journey to the city in the middle of winter. Go put her out of her misery, Heartless. See how quickly you can turn revenge into mercy."

"God. *Fuck.*" I jerk away from him. "Is *that* what you thought you did to Akiko? *Mercy?*"

Someone pounds on the door. Torres closes his eyes and sighs, kisses my shoulder and pushes me up and off of him. "Go on. Get out of here."

I clothe myself in loose sheets and stumble, looking for my shirt, my pants, my jacket. Torres stands up and stretches and goes to the door, opening it. There's a hushed exchange of words. He takes a step back. I pale as the kid, Sunny, the one I tried to kill for food, the one who saved our lives out in the woods, is shoved into the room. He looks at me. I stare back.

"Well. This is awkward," Sunny says. The door shuts behind him.

I avert my gaze.

Sunny continues, "I guess I finally know the answer to that question. *What is it that Torres wants?* But you knew the answer all along, didn't you, Hammond?"

"I did my job," I say. "You're welcome." I'm sore and tired and dying and don't want any of this shit. Not now.

Torres sits back on the bed, rubbing his eyes with thumb and index finger. "I remember you," he says.

"I'm fucking glad," Sunny says. "Now, before things get too serious, I have some questions."

"You're wondering why you have awful nightmares."

"Yes," Sunny says.

"And wondering if I can fix them."

"That too," Sunny says.

"And after I tell you, you intend to kill me."

"Sounds about right," Sunny says.

"Can this wait?" Torres says.

For a moment, Sunny looks confused. "What? What do you fucking mean, 'can this wait'? Jesus Christ. You've ruined my life, and I ruined Anette's life--I killed her, thinking it was her fault--she drowned because of my spite, and it's your fucking fault!"

Drowned? I feel my stomach clench. The pain is a wild and burning knot, but it smolders as I swallow it. I bite at the skin around my fingernails and let them continue their confrontation. Can you imagine, Anette, big sister, this boy drowning a soul like yours?

Torres doesn't believe it either, but his expression flattens and he says, "So you admit it? That takes guts."

"Don't act all high and mighty now. I screwed up, I know that. I didn't mean to do it. This world is brutal."

"And you killed the one person that knew how to avoid the wolves."

"You are no better than I am."

"I never said I was."

"Child-fucker."

That squeezes a laugh out of me. Torres's jaw clenches.

Sunny continues, "Person who brought me up here told me all about you. Probably thought it would scare me."

"But who's afraid of the big bad wolf," Torres says. "I'm not here to have a pissing contest with you over which one of us is a bigger piece of shit. Perhaps it will appease you to know it wasn't your mind I was aiming for. It was Anette's."

I glance at Torres. Sunny stares. "What do you mean?" he says.

"Ryu wanted her back. Anette could make everyone in the commune dream the same dream. It was beautiful, her world. While I spent my nights island-hopping from mind to mind in the hopes of sating whatever it was I wanted, she had crafted this persistent little paradise and Heartless here was the only one she ever let in."

I cringe at the mention of my name.

"She could go there at any time, even when she was awake. Just sit there with her head in the clouds. Until Ryu forced her to invite everyone. And then manipulated that communal dream as a means of control. Poor girl pretty much went insane after that. Ran off into the woods. Ryu hoped that if I poisoned her perfect little world, she'd do exactly what you're doing now. Come back here in the hopes I could fix it."

"But you missed," Sunny says. "How the hell did you miss?"

"I don't know. I suppose my heart wasn't in it. She didn't deserve that."

"And I did?"

Torres sits up, eyes narrowed. "What makes you think I gave a shit about you? You were deep-sleeping, wasting of starvation, and only days away from being served up on a tin platter for the leech-house's midwinter roast. I took those odds. Lots of things I've done make me a bad person, but not that. If you want to kill me, fine. Then do it, but have a good fucking reason."

Sunny's eyes drift from Torres to me, his mind slowly calculating something I hoped he would've forgotten by now. My swollen throat, shaking legs, thin face. Cracked lips bleed. Eyelashes clump together with tears. My heart sinks.

"No cannibals, huh?" Sunny says.

"Asha had nothing to do with it," I say. "She was asleep. I had mouths to feed. I thought you wouldn't wake up. We all know how it feels to be desperate. Anette, though. She saved you from me. Just like she saved me, years ago. But you killed her. It's like this never-ending cycle of mistakes and none of us will ever escape it."

"Yeah?" Sunny says. He pushes the syringe out of his sleeve. That sharp, infected needle. I appraise it. He drops it on the floor where it clatters, crushes the glass tube underneath his heel. "Fuck you guys."

He turns around. Opens the door and walks out.

I exhale. Looking over at Torres. His eyes are closed. Then they open again. "Heartless."

"I admire his restraint," I say.

The door swings closed.

"Come back to bed," he says.

I step toward the door, shouldering my stained shirt and the too-big stiff jeans.

"I lied to him, Heartless. That Hell I made. It was meant for me. Not for Anette, not for him, but me. I missed--I slipped into his mind while I was making it and poisoned him. But I've spent every second my life after what happened trying to damn myself."

I don't answer. I won't answer him. Nothing *happened*, he *acted*. He *did*. He *fucked*. He *murdered*. He *lied*. He *smoked*. Nothing just happened. Nothing ever just happens. The silence is cool summer rain, how good it feels.

"I'm afraid," Torres says. "I don't want to face her. What I've done."

For a moment, I cannot tell if he's talking about Akiko or Ryu. Whatever he's done is lost in me. I did my job. I distracted him long enough for the fireworks to burn as bright and blue as my mother's soul, melt Ryu's skin into a dark sort of matter. It doesn't matter. He pulls the sheets to his chest, now, hearing her scream for help inside his head and he is too afraid again to answer that call. Mercy eats at your heart like moths. But I am not moved. I'll do it for him.

"Anette didn't run away because she went insane. Anette ran away because of something Ryu admitted to her. Ryu told Anette that she lied to you. You didn't kill Akiko. She tripped down the stairs and broke her neck while you were blacked out you didn't remember a thing, so Ryu told you that you did it. You're not a bad person because of your urges. You're a bad person because you became the monster she made you think you were. But that was your choice. You could have left."

Silence. He sinks down into himself. Pulls the sheets over his face. "Please," he says.

"There's a baby being born today," I say. "I have to go congratulate the father."

I wait until I cannot hear Sunny's footsteps on the stairs any longer. Then I follow.

12. You Never Know

(Malt and Lune)

Do you trust me?

>Yes

Your name is Malt and you hunger. Hunger for something you cannot have. Maybe it's peace, maybe it's love, maybe it's dreamless sleep, you don't know, you only know you want it.

Right now you're sitting in a warm tub in water filled with bath salts. The hair on your legs has grown long, but now you shave it, like your tía who lived in America taught you to when you were sent to stay with her as a child. She said, *Little one, no man will love a woman hairy like a monkey. Lucky you got*

*light skin. Don't look like a Haitian girl. Stay out the sun, and shave them legs so you stay pretty.* But your father and brother loved when you darkened, like batter left too long on the griddle, but still sweet, sweet enough to call Caramelita. Sweet enough to call Malt, one of your favorite nicknames, given to you by the American uncle who loved you almost as much as your father did, a white man with powder blue eyes the color of the off-brand soap you used as a child while bathing with your brother. They loved you darkened because it reminded them of your mother, who had Haitian blood, who died in the summertime when the living was easy but living was pointless so she stopped and was blown away like dandelion seeds.

But enough on your mother. Mothers are all the same. You saw a mother with her child bathing, just months ago, in a hot spring, the steam rising up between the woman's legs, her milk-swollen breasts, hard nipples from the cold air, the round stomach rising and falling as she washed the child's hair, scrubbing out the dirt with a pumice stone. You didn't remember where you were going, but you decided not to go there anymore, instead follow this woman and her child and her child in her. Because she reminded you of the baby you lost. Your belly never grew that big, your breasts never that full, but you looked at the child with its wet hair slick over its face and thought of

placenta, thought of how this one too was a miscarriage, being carried around by its mother for way too long.

You watched them until they dried and dressed and curled up in their furs to rest. You saw the child had something attached around its waist and groin when it rose from the water and pulled on its clothes. They slept, not with the mother holding the child, but the child behind the mother, arms wrapped around her, fingers in her hair, singing sweet songs. Sometimes she would cry. Sometimes the child would. You'd watch until Osiris licked your hand and whined. And you'd wonder which one was actually the mother.

And when you were asleep you'd learn the answer. Lune was. Lune nursed you and sang to you and brought you back to those joyous days before you left Dominicana. Your father, your beautiful father, was also your mother because he had to be. And you could be both mother, and brother, and son to Lune. Lune didn't know you weren't Sam. Lune would never know. Wherever Sam was, it was not here.

When you were awake, you'd return the favor. When they both slept you nursed them, brought them food, the born child learned your touch in his dreams; he was never quite dreaming deep. If you wanted to, you could've killed the Mama and took her place and maybe even then the child would've never known the difference.

Shh. It's okay to have these thoughts. You are a good person. You are a terribly good person. That is all you need to remember.

You climb out of the tub, towel dry your body and dappled legs. You pull on your clothes. You think of Silas who peeled each layer off one by one until you thought he'd pull off your skin along with it like nothing more than tight fabric. You thumb away a bit of blood from where you nicked yourself on the knee with the razor. You wait for a moment, running the towel along between your legs, along your swollen labia, shuddering, then drop it at your feet. You get dressed.

The skirts of your dress stir around your legs as you open the door to the infirmary. Mare Ryu said you make a good nurse, your touch so tender, and so here you are. The doctor is gone. He told you to get clean, so you got clean. Damp hair drips on your shoulders and back. You always hated the feeling. Cried whenever your Papa washed your hair with coconut milk. Then cried whenever your auntie in America pressed it straight with a hot comb heated on the stove so you didn't look like a negra. You shudder. Osiris laps the water from your legs again from where he waits at the foot of Sofia's bed. There is a noise outside, but you're so caught up listening to me that you don't even notice.

Sofia lies on the table, covered in sterile sheets, only her abdomen exposed. The doctor's tools are left on the tray nearby. You pick up the scalpel. Turn it in the light as if the blade is one facet of a diamond.

Your brother thought all roads in America were paved with diamonds.

In America, you had a cousin named Alex. He was so light he could pass for white like his father, but didn't have the same Caribbean-colored eyes. He couldn't speak Spanish. He liked video games more than he liked chasing ass, unlike your brother, and he taught you how to play on his computer and his NES, taught you the glory of bullet-time and hammerspace, he was there when you first started bleeding, ran to get you a towel, and holding your cramping stomach you thought of how a woman's womb was hammerspace, only there to hold what is boundless. Alex stole his mother's tampons for you and watched you put one in with both awe and disgust. And when you were done you and him explored each other's bodies. And when you were done, he cried and said he liked boys, it wasn't right, what was he going to do? You only sat there and thought of the feeling of his cold fingers in your hammerspace.

Are you still there?

>Yes

It's okay to lose control. I'll go if you want me to go.

>Don't go.

"What are you doing?"

You hear Lune's soft voice and turn to see them sitting on the windowsill, legs hugged to their chest, staring at you. You place the scalpel down. It's not your place.

>Select Character

Who?

>Lune.

Okay. Your name is Malt. This isn't your story anymore.

I'm called Lune after the song Mama Sofia couldn't stop listening to when she was pregnant with me. And now that we've formed this mutual nesting of our souls and our DNA, we decided on the name Sam for my brother-son, because it is plain and

unisex and short for several names. Excuse me. It's not that she couldn't stop listening, it's that the song wouldn't stop playing through the walls of her neighbor's home, and do you know how it feels to be a lonely woman? Do you know how it feels to wish you were a woman so that you could come to terms with the empty space between your legs?

I wonder if Malt has ever been called nigger, even though she's not *that* black. Not as black as the girl I see in my daydreams drinking peach cider and lying on her back in the grass as if she's waiting to die, or already has. What does color matter? Why do genitals matter; it's not square peg in round hole when there are so many holes to choose from and they're all different shapes.

What is she waiting for?

"What are you doing?" I ask Malt, but I don't care. She's strange and dumb and one-armed, and I'm the valuable one, Mare Ryu said so, but Malt doesn't even crave validation as much as I do, I don't think she cares about anything but her dog.

And me, maybe?

She looks back at me with that haunting smile as if to say, *No, Lune, you don't get to be valued. You're a leech like the rest of us. Just wait and see.*

But her eyes smile with pity. She looks at me like anyone else would, and I hate it. Small and soft and mutilated. That's all you are. You got a sweet voice, but that's all you are.

I look at the woman in the bed who made me this way. Curse her fucking hands and the knife that cuts and the milk-fat breasts and the long long hair always tangled and the hazel eyes bruised from lack of truthful sleep. Fuck her for knowing how it feels to be lonely. How it feels to be a woman. How it feels to know what you are even if everyone despises what you are.

I stand up and step over beside Malt and look down at Mama. I close my eyes and worm my way inside her skull, inside her dream.

She sits in front of a coffee cup still steaming. The coffee is black, and she's only taken a sip. Her hair is over her face. There's an orange pill bottle with a white cap beside the mug, but the label is torn off, and the bottle is empty.

*Hey, Lune, she says, half turning to look at me. Sing me a sad song.*

*Are you lonely? I say.*

*God, baby, I'm always lonely. That's a part of being me.*

*I can make it worse, I say.*

*Sing me a song, Lune, she says, her voice cracking.*

*Did you know that if you die sleeping, you keep on dreaming forever? I say. Can you imagine being lonely forever?*

She starts to cry. I savor it. Sometimes it's nice being cruel.

*Sing her a song, Lune,* someone says, and I turn and see the black girl with the long braids sitting in a rocking chair, cradling baby Sam in her arms. No--he's ten years old. But still a baby.

*Are you going to leave me?* Mama says.

Yes, I say.

Anette holds Sam up to the light shining through the window. *Would you look at that,* she says.

I don't look. Mama lowers her head and says, *Are you taking the baby?*

I don't answer before a gunshot pierces the silence and shakes me free and I'm back in the infirmary next to Malt with my hands squeezed into fists and going white from lack of circulation. Malt turns her head. Osiris is alert, growling, ears back.

Mama's body begins to seize. Her summer's come early. The water breaks, fluid soaks the sheets, she shakes. The catalepsy kicks in and I hear groaning from her throat as the monsters that haunt her paralyzed self crawl into her sight. I know what the water means. A louder groan, now, a contraction. He's coming. I scramble to Mama's side. Malt only stares.

"Malt," I say. "*MALT, DO SOMETHING.*"

Malt's one hand twists tight around the railing on the bed. She does not move. Osiris barks, runs in circles, noses at my legs. I want to go and get help, but I can't move, I don't want to move, I want her to die, but not like this. Minutes pass and the shaking stops, but the contractions don't.

The door opens. I hope it's the doctor, but it's not the doctor. It's Hammond. I can't process the disgust I felt toward him earlier. I just need his help. He sees the panic on my face and the dreamy smile on Malt's, then the flooded sheets and the film of sweat breaking out on Mama's body.

His eyes sublime, lips curl into words I can't hear. Is he calling me baby? No, *the* baby. Little Sam. I nod.

He calls out for Asha. He takes the scalpel from the metal tray, cuts into Mama. She opens like a blossom. He sticks his hands into her. Don't worry. It's all petals and pollen and nectar. Asha pushes into the room, wiping flour off on her apron and I take again a moment to stare at her pretty face as she swears under her breath and begins to tell Hammond what to do like a backseat driver. They argue. His arms are drenched in blood.

Sam comes out, fills his lungs with air, wailing. God, he's tiny. He's so tiny. I kiss his little fingers. I take him from Hammond. The cord is cut. I let the blood soak my clothes. My hands. My toes. I wrap him in the sheets.

Hammond doesn't speak for a while. Then he says, "Congratulations." The dull in his voice almost makes me laugh. Sam's cries fade into little whimpers. He stares up at me with wide brown eyes. His face is--no? Not like Mama's. No. I didn't actually know what he looked like. I made it up in my mind. Figured he looked like me. But ten years in the womb changes things. His skin was luminous, and his wide, dark eyes lined with petals. Evolution.

Asha puts her hand on my red cheek. "Look, Lune. Look what you did."

Look what I did. I...created this? From mutilation comes mutation.

Gunfire. Footsteps pound on the floor outside. Panic. I wipe the blood from him with the hem of a soiled sheet. The smell of Mama's urine and my sweat. Asha's peppermint breath, Malt's scented Chapstick, the droplet of Torres's cum on Hammond's starched shirt. I can't inhale.

So I show him to them, those that for a fragment of a lifetime could've been my family. I look up at Hammond, his trembling lips. He catches my gaze. My eyes say, *Take a picture of this. Keep it in your wallet and tell them this is our family.* His eyes say, *Lune, please, let me die in peace.*

"*Las rosas,*" Malt says. "*Oh, the roses.*"

I hand Sam gently over to Malt, and she cradles him, kissing the forehead, those eyelashes like rose petals, but electric blue.

They are the color of the dip-dyed white roses I once saw in a grocery store refrigerator on Valentine's day. Branded as all the various hues of M&Ms. I wanted them because the color didn't exist in nature, it was as manufactured as everything my mother ever did. She bought them for me with a few wilted dollars, I paid her back years later with something that should've been shot blank. Should've. But it wasn't. And here, little Sam, the sum of it all.

My minute-family, they don't speak of how beautiful he is. He is better than us. Even his little mewls like chimes. Maybe they are jealous. Maybe they're afraid if they say anything, I'll cry. It's summer on the other side of the world, and there's no reason to cry.

And Sam, my sweet little Sam, knows too there's no reason to cry because he stops. Stops breathing too. Still as a doll in Malt's arms, but she doesn't seem to notice. She looks up at me and smiles. Hammond opens his mouth and closes it. He avoids my gaze. Asha puts a hand on my shoulder.

Maybe he never cried, never breathed. Maybe I was hearing things. Seeing things. Dreaming things.

The door opens. People come filing in, lifting Mare Ryu onto the table beside Mama. The doctor swears when he sees us, curses every single one of us, leaves Mare Ryu's side and begins to stitch up Mama. She's still breathing. So is Mare Ryu. Hammond has a look on his face like he wants to set the room on fire.

"Where is Torres?" The doctor says, the suture needle in his thick fingers diving into the skin of the uterus that once stretched to hold me, a big baby, eleven pounds at birth.

"Upstairs," Hammond says.

"Go get him. Get him down here."

Hammond stands and waits as the doctor sews up Mama, the Frankenstein, and me, her monster.

"What are you waiting for?" the doctor says.

The other people are tending to Mare Ryu at first. Then their eyes notice the baby in Malt's arms. Malt has burrowed into a corner with Osiris nosing at her arm and her arm holding Sam's little head. They stop. Drop their cannisters of aloe. Fall to their knees. Osiris is pushed aside. Whining, he runs to me. I stroke his ears. The doctor turns to see what they are looking at. He drops his suture needle. He leaves Mama's side.

Hammond next takes the scalpel and presses it into Mare Ryu's throat. Up and out. He covers the wound as the blood bubbles up and oozes through his fingers. She dies. That's that.

I take Osiris's collar and lead him from the room as those inside call to those outside and I'm lost in a pressing mass of people. Asha says my name. Hammond tries to follow me, his eyes on mine, but he's pushed back, pressed against the wall. He drops the scalpel. Anoints a few bare feet in Ryu's blood.

Sam's crisp cry rings out and leaves me empty.

I half-turn. My heartbeat skips, and then settles. It's too late to feel.

Mama gets up and squeezes through the people. Her eyes are closed, flickering beneath their swollen lids. She's still dreaming, but she's walking because I told her to. In her dream, I promised her I wasn't leaving. I told her to come with me. We're someplace warm, maybe in Arizona, climbing red stones and losing our lunch of boiled eggs and siracha over the drop of a canyon. On purpose, though. Fingers down our throats, purging the sin, the sex, the dysmorphia. That is a good image. I tell her to focus on that. Focus on the heartburn and laughter. Her body smiles.

Each chapped foot staggers on the wood as she follows me. I whistle through the gap in my teeth. I beckon her with a finger. Come along, now. Her feet crunch into the snow and her body shivers and I, impatient, watch the hot blood drip onto the snow from her soft belly, each stumble tearing the fresh, unbandaged wound.

My eyes look up to Torres's window and I spit next to the red droplets. He isn't in the window, but I know he's looking. What does he know of power? Her unsteady footfalls, she now the fucking zombie, long tangled hair wrapped around her own neck like a noose. The science of understanding Sofia's mind is cryptozoology. Her body instinctively wraps its arms around itself to shield the cold. I take off some oversized jacket that was thrown at me, one where the sleeves droop past my hands. I throw it over her shoulders. Take her wrist. Lead her forward. Osiris follows at my side, giving me a puzzled look. Halfway across the yard, he sits down. I yank his collar and he stands again, giving one last glance back at the closing front door as he follows me and Mama off toward the woods.

### 13. Shibboleth

(Nien, Lune, Malt)

Listen. I know everything, because I am King.

The machine, it doesn't float. It rests on the water and the waves break against it. It turns so slowly you can barely tell its moving. The hull hums so gently you can barely tell its

breathing. Half the light in the sky bends around it, the other half drank into the core, its own event horizon.

The surface is lined with raised bumps like braille. This thing was folded smooth in on itself when Nien and Sunny skated over it, but now fingers of glass spread, open and out. The people stop at the deflated raft on the beach and stare.

Inside each capsule is a body. Soon the capsules detach from the surface, lifted up by thin branches, and to Nien, it looks like a carnival ride, and he thinks of being thirteen at a state fair, drinking watered-down hot cocoa under a bleak November sky. He is a fool.

The people stumble in the sand as they see it. The two carrying Nien drop him. His head bounces on the damp beach and he sits up, dazed, seeing double with the sand caked in his hair. He rubs the sleep from his eyes. For a split second the foam on the waves is made of static. He wipes his face with his shirt as the people fall on their knees, trying to scrub away two worlds overlaid on top of each other, but it doesn't work. It's burned hard there.

"What...is that?" someone says.

Somebody else answers, "Sparrow."

They ignore him. He spits up sand, shuddering at the grains between his teeth as he crawls toward he and Sunny's capsized raft. Grips one of the cool booze bottles left over from their

one night on the beach and empties it of ocean-water. He grips the neck in his hand, rising stiff to his feet, backing away, preparing to brain whoever notices him. Flickering in the corner of his eyes he sees someone, and swings, but the bottle catches air. Anette stands before him, smiling, walking backward toward the water. He reaches for her.

The air fills with the rumbling of helicopter rotors louder than the hum from the machine. The helicopter appears on the horizon. Nien watches the blades that seem to move in slow-motion, parting the air.

"There's the airdrop," someone says.

April's voice rings out. "Jesus fucking Christ, why now? Someone get them on the phone."

Your name is Malt. Your story has ended, but let me continue just a little more.

Years ago, your white cousin opened up his Dungeons & Dragons bestiary and showed you the names and pictures of all the monsters and you sat there, staring, as if you'd find yourself somewhere among them. He flipped from the back of the book to the front, and settled on one called Aboleth. It was an aberration. It could make illusions, make slaves for itself. It lived in the water. It was an aberration, like you. At first glance, you could mistake it for a leach. But leaches don't have

that power, the power to enslave people/in burning fields of sugar cane/in hot-houses bubbling with 'Wake.

White cousin with his dark eyes like his mother, closed the book and asked you if you knew of *El Corte*. You didn't at the time, but you learned, like the two of you learned each others' bodies--he was your first Silas--and as you learned the sensation of his warm breath on your labia minutes later as you brushed his soft cock with your fingertips, laying head-to-groin like twins in a womb, part of you wished you could enslave him, in that thick plantation of pubic hair, in that pussy sweet as sugar cane. But he liked boys. Nothing could make him turn. Nothing could make him roll his Rs across your flat chest. Failing, not like a virgin, but like a Haitian struggling to say *perejil*, and then dying in a spray of Dominican gunfire. His flaccid penis was a shibboleth. He couldn't pass. He couldn't pass even when he was shot to death outside a bar for looking at another man the wrong way.

His father sent you his books. And every time you turned to the page with that aberration, you thought of *El Corte*, thought of Haitians who threw themselves down cliffs and waterfalls into the bright blue foam of the Sea of the Dead. And they call it the Caribbean. Tried to climb back up onto the beach, but no, them black bodies hacked by the edge of machetes, their blood becoming the ocean's backwash. They were leeches too.

And you, when summer comes, will work in the hothouses to make the 'Wake, to sell it to the city in exchange for food. The smell will seep into your skin. Your arm riddled with holes and scabs from the needle, your addiction festered and unfed. You'll make a mistake, and Mare Ryu will send you to the leech house to starve, just before winter, but she'll give you a choice to save yourself. In the choice between saying *perejil* and *perejil*, you'll choose not to say anything at all.

But there will be nothing to say. She is dead now. Hammond took her life because he is Heartless.

And Lune wants so badly to be heartless too. He watches his mother's face soften with relief as she steps into the ocean, her feet warming. She wades up to her swollen thighs in violet ocean suds, the algae circumambulating her legs.

You hope the ocean parts for her, but you know not what she's done. The ocean just staggers around her like a comb through your thick hair.

Sofia sits in the surf. The tide is low, but it buffets her, soaking her hair, rinsing out the blood with salt. Lune wants her to rinse her misery out with salt.

"Go on, now, Mama," Lune says. "Drown."

Another wave sprays over her. Sofia gasps, snapping out of her spell, flailing in the water. Lune stumbles and falls. The water inks red with more blood as her stitches are ripped apart.

Lune climbs to his feet, grabbing Sofia by the hair, big black handfuls of curls, trying to calm her, trying to find her face in the mess of waves and island-water. Lune grabs her round face, wipes her eyes and says, "Sleep. Just sleep. Shhh. Go back to sleep."

She obeys. Falls over in the surf.

Lune waits with Osiris in the sand until the undertow takes her. Lune closes Lune's eyes.

But Sofia is not dreaming. She is just dead. Fainted from the bloodloss, drowned. Doornail dead. I know what it is like to die dreaming. I know because I know everything about this island, about the sea of the dead, it doesn't matter where it is, it does not matter whether you call it *Celtic* or *Caribbean* it's all the dead sea.

But Lune doesn't see this. Lune hears the crackle and groan of the Sparrow and sees the broken, sifting shapes slip in and out of mind. Lune trembles. Feels its heat scald his skin, its size mass the sky. It is trying to speak but he cannot understand, he'll never understand. The light melts through his eyelids and he trembles. He has to face it. Everyone has to face it.

"Open," Lune says.

His eyes open. The machine spikes outward like a visualization of music, tripling its size. Like a nova. The interlace of metal prongs expanded, capsules hanging like teardrop baubles on the ends. The pilots can't pull up in time. The helicopter smashes into the machine, sending fire and shrapnel and shards of molten glass up into the air, pilots and cargo incinerated. It all rains back down. The shockwave shatters the capsules as the heat softens them. They burst open, and out flows this blue-green fluid and the liquefied remains of the bodies inside.

Nien stands up as it pools on the water like an oil spill. He splashes out into the shallows and the others follow him, half-swimming, half-running, not parting the sea but partitioning their bodies and brains between fear and joy. Nien reaches it first.

The syrupy, glittering liquid pours into his hands, cooling them, dripping between his fingers. He fills the bottle with it, laughing like he's just found paradise. He sips some himself, feels the burning on his tongue, his gums, his throat. It goes down easy. Weak tears on his cheeks, the salt in the water no longer abrasive, but cleansing, breathtaking, like a billion stars just rushed past. Wouldn't that be nice? Anette's mouth is on his now, and she leads him deeper into the water, graduated

from a witch to a siren. She's smiling with her mouth closed-- perfect, those full lips perfect--she's dreaming with her eyes open, her mosquito bites open, her legs open, all for him, god, all for him.

The people begin wading into the slush, arms out, hands cupped, splashing and drinking from the tips of their fingers. They rip off their jewelry, suckle on each other's fingers and link arms, hold waists, keep each other upright in the crush of the surf.

He looks upward at the bright of fire and smoke fading in the pale sky.

The water is milky and warm. The fluid moves through it like ink before congealing at the surface, inseminating the algae. People drink and forget they're drinking saltwater back like it's the good old days, like they're by a television enjoying cold pizza and beer, like they've been awake the whole time and God, they've seen everything, they swear, every fucking bit of it, every frame of the gag reel, life is hilarious, the sex is good, the violation forgiven because some sleepfuck, because it happens, because your dreams consent for you.

I never did anything wrong. Torres cannot forgive himself for anything. Sofia blames herself for everything. Sunny only has nightmares. He thinks he wants to die. He doesn't know what

I know. The food is ashes, ashes, but we never have to sleep again, you hear me? Never again.

The tide takes the Nien out farther, pulls him into the shade of the machine and then sucks him under. He hears that familiar hum. The sunlight cast through the glass pods sends scattered fractals of light into the water, and the shapes move and shift around him like ghosts. This is the sea of the dead after all.

Below the water are tens-of-thousands of more pods and he wonders whom they're for.

He closes his eyes as he sinks. As his mouth opens and bubbles explode from his lips. He's resting. Resting, finally. Not tired, but satisfied. The light warms the back of his eyelids red and he reaches out to grasp it but instead finds his hands pressed against the one of the glass pods of the machine, so he looks inside and sees her, his Anette, sleeping. In a full cascade of afro hair. He tries to speak her name, struggling as he realizes his mistake; he drank of the fluid, his six pomegranate seeds. He is not asleep, he is awake, he is terrifyingly awake, he is drowning and not dreaming, why must it be this way?

Pods break and plummet from the surfaced half of the machine and crash into the water. They are buoyant. Around him he sees them rise back up with the last of his air.

He drowns. His body sinks into the deep of the cove, but the Sparrow takes the threads of his soul and rewrite them. A new pod grows, beside mine. The cells form like frost crystals on glass. Soon a little embryo, in a few days, a baby, in a few months, a child. The Sparrow will make mistakes. It will miscarry. There will be premature births and premature deaths. But it will learn with each iteration.

On the beach and in the surf, the people of the commune stare as the fallen pods crack open, and out climb new people, gasping, struggling in their afterbirth.

They stand with nothing but the stretch of water in-between, watching each other. This time, there's no word to separate them, no word to break them. No shibboleth. They do even not speak. They drop everything and go to each other.