

HOWL
THE HOWLING EARTH:
ONE
E RATHKE

Broken River Books



Howl

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A DIRGE

I

Freja stretched her face up at her momma strung up in the tree. The blackblood got a whole mess of mommas. So many that it took damn near all of us to carry and lift them up and strap their arms and legs to the branches of the twisted white trees with black leaves. The death trees. Wasn't only Freja stretching her neck far as it could go to hear the final dead words falling from her dead momma's mouth before we left them to the crows.

I was one of the lucky ones. My momma died before I ever knew her so I didn't have to grow up with memories that I'd miss.

It's little things in life that make it shine bright enough to keep kicking.

Nudged Bugg and pointed to Freja.

Bugg leaned on his long sword, nodded, sniffed, spat. “She gonna have a bad time of it.”

“Will.”

Bugg shrugged, turned to the crows crowded on the mushroom trees shading all of us from the burning purple sky, then back to Freja. “She crying.”

I nodded. “Not only her though.”

Bugg nodded, sniffed. Cleared his throat with a clicking grunt. “Twenty bodies. How many you think gonna—”

“Sh,” I pointed to Freja’s momma. We had run out of cord so we shaved some of their heads and used that to lash them to the death trees. Her momma’s body thin and pale from all the blood she bled out every hole in her body but also rigid, like she strained against her own hair binding her to the branches holding her up to the evil sky. With Freja’s cheek so close to her momma’s cheek, Freja’s momma relaxed. Her body sagged slightly. That was it. The moment. Freja’s momma gave up her ghost in one final exhale and Freja fell back hard to the dirt.

Bugg nodded. “One.” His own whisper to match whatever fell from Freja’s momma’s mouth.

He'd go on counting, I knew, but I lifted my sword to rest on my shoulder, went down to Freja past the orchard of death trees and all the mommas hanging there waiting to let go and die for real so we could begin grieving.

Crying into her hands, Freja knelt before her momma's corpse when I got to her. Put a hand on her back but she didn't react. Like I wasn't even there. Like none of us were there but her dead momma who had become empty meat. Turned up to the evil ugly sky where the crows cawed atop the huge mushrooms.

Like they were waiting for me to notice, a handful of them flapped their wings to enter the sky. Gliding down, they landed on Freja's momma's corpse and started in on the flesh.

Nothing but bones would remain in a bit. I squatted down beside Freja, my hand still on her back while she wept. Could've told her there was nothing left to mourn. Ghost's gone. Your momma's gone off to the blackness down below where we'll all be someday to churn in that maelstrom of black fire while we wait to be reborn in a world that didn't hate us so. Your momma's pain ended, girl.

But didn't say none of that. Let her cry. Even set my sword in the dirt, put my arm around her, pulled her close. Her head on my chest so she could hear my own heart beating. Remind her that only the living hurt. Only we strain beneath the evil ugly sky.

We don't cry about that, though.

"I miss her," Freja said, her wet open mouth pressed against my bare chest. Figured she said that to keep from telling me how she'd spent the last week sopping up the blood that spurted and leaked out of her momma. How she spooned her soup and washed her and changed her clothes when she messed herself, when she bled everywhere. How she spent every day watching her momma die right in front of her. How she didn't even have time to wonder if she'd catch this disease too and who would care for her while she bled out alone in her momma's home.

I nodded. "Gonna miss her until you join her down below, in the deep dark."

She went on crying and I looked around at all the hanging mommas strung up and all the sons and daughters and brothers and daddies stretching to hear that final word from the ones they loved

the most in this hallowed life. Looked past them to Bugg who somehow knew I was watching him.

Chin leaned on his big narrow sword, he lifted up one finger on his left hand and four on his right.

We'd give until nightfall or the first howls before we gave them up for lost. Lost to never be spoken of again. Those ghosts trapped in meat who would become monsters to haunt us, to hunt us.

II

“Seventeen,” Hazzi said when we gathered all together beneath the mushroom cap, the bioluminescent walls glowing bright enough for us to see one another, to see Hazzi standing on the stage before us, his two swords hanging limp from his belt. Howls drowned out whatever came next and we all stared up into the mushroom dome above us. From up top, it looked like any mound, but from below we saw through it like a mist streaked with veins and folds. Some trick of the fungal gods that the long gone mommas figured out before any of us—even Hazzi—was born.

A wolf launched over the mushroom. Big as shit and terrible to behold. My heart dropping to the floor when it went by. A streak of grey silhouetted against the glow of the shattered moon. Then an-

other wolf walked right on top of the mushroom and stopped. Raising its head, it snuffed at the air so loud we heard it down below.

Or maybe that was the fear. A terror so bone deep that we knew the texture of every sound and sensation from generations dead and gone. Its jaws parted slightly revealing teeth long as my forearm. Could crawl inside that mouth and disappear. That's how big the wolves were.

Crowded all together beneath the mushroom cap that set the boundaries of our night lives, we watched the wolves and waited for them to leave. My hands held the hands of others. Didn't matter who. Not then. Not in that moment with the wolves swarming through our village.

A thousand held breaths. One great breath held by all of us until the wolves raced off to play beneath their mother, the shattered moon and its glowing archipelago.

Hazzi cleared his throat. "I think it's safe now."

Someone laughed and someone else whispered shut the fuck up loud enough for everyone to hear. Laughter rippled out from there but quickly fell away.

“Seventeen.” Hazzi cleared his throat again. His voice high and whiny when he spoke. “Seventeen of us descended home to the great black heart beating at the center of the earth. That churning cauldron where all souls dissolve and grow once more to fill the wombs of us here above. They suffered, as we all suffer, as we all will continue to suffer, but they are home now. Home to be reborn. Our hope, as always, is that they retain their memories of the deep dark when they are born again and share this knowledge with us.” He looked to the blood and mud witches, our shaman.

Five women old as the earth, their age carved as ravines through their faces. Kotu, eldest of the witches, looked asleep. Her head swaying gently from side to side, mouth slightly open. Beside her, Aya stared up at the wolf while Hyacinth’s lips kept moving, muttering some incantation to keep us safe. Or so I told myself. Only Aya seemed to be aware of the rest of us. Her permanent scowl passed from person to person while Hazzi spoke.

“The blackblood was a heinous disease.” Hazzi shook his head. “A curse from those delving through the detritus of the dead world abandoned by our ancestors who poisoned the waters and

skies and abandoned earth for stars beyond. Those who dig through that gone-away world unearthed some great evil. They mutilate their flesh and call it progress. They make playthings of the scraps of our apocalyptic ancestors and call that hope.” He spat. “Twenty mothers dead. Only seventeen to ever return to us.

“We diminish. Every year, there are fewer of us.” His voice quavered, lurched. “A cruelty, to target only women. So it is that I stand here before you in my wife’s place.” He choked out the final words. Lowering his head, he sniffed and wiped his face with both hands. “Forgive me,” his voice thickened with pain, with loss. Raising his eyes to us once more—like staring into an open wound.

I looked down. Had to look away. Saw the hands still holding mine and turned to each of them in turn. My brothers and sisters, my cousins and uncles and aunts.

Hazzi said, “We’re all sisters and brothers. We rely on one another. We must hold one another up in the coming days and weeks.” He went on to talk of our responsibility to one another, to those left behind, to those children newly orphaned. He spoke of the others out there living in cities of

stone and metal, who steal our trees and mushrooms to build their cities of light and fire and death and chaos.

He did not speak of the monsters. Of the wolves. For Hazzi, they were all the same thing. Those people living in cities, the monsters and wolves eating anyone too stupid to be caught alone outside beneath the moon.

That night, we comforted those who needed comforting. We gave love to those who needed love, gave our bodies to those who could be healed that way, and we refused to leave anyone alone through that first horrible night.

III

Not much remained in the morning. The wolves left nothing of the dead but cracked bones. Even one of the death trees was partly uprooted. A few people were over there building up the dirt to cover the exposed roots.

I collected the bones. Had to tie my sword to one of the ripped cords that held a corpse in a tree, then make that into a belt. My old belt broke the way everything around here kept breaking. Reached for a snapped in half femur, imagining the massive jaws crunching these bones like they were crackers, but my hand met another. Looking up, Freja smiled. I let her take it.

“Might be my momma’s.” She held it in both hands, like it was sacred, like the prelude to a prayer.

“Might be.”

Together, we collected the bones. Others joined us. When our arms were full, we brought them to the blood and mud witches. Dropped them into a pile before their home. One of the great spotted toadstools rising from the fungal network that became our home beneath the skin of the earth.

Aya came out and scowled at all of us dropping broken bones into a pile right in front of her, but she didn't say a word. Sat down and closed her eyes, arms stretched wide. The way the sunlight filtered through the towering mushrooms gave her an uncanny glow, like the bioluminescent moss grew beneath the first layer of skin.

Hyacinth and Kotu came next. They nodded at the growing pile as we collected more and more. They sat on either side of Aya and mimicked her posture. When Jacinta came out, she told me to make a fire.

An unusual request, but I collected moss and twigs to start the fire. Jacinta pulled out a lighter and lit the moss. The fire leapt up and I dumped more moss on the fire, which nearly smothered it. A purplish smoke rose like incense, wrapping round all of us gathered there before the witches.

Our final goodbye to the mommas now boiling in the depths of the earth.

Once the fire got going, the witches began chanting in their secret sacred language. Kotu took out her knife of blackened glass and sliced her palm, letting the blood pour in the dirt between her and the fire. Smelled that too. The blood and the mossy smoke mixed with the stink of unwashed bodies swirled into my lungs. Freja beside me, I took her hand, and she squeezed mine. Didn't look at her. Didn't have to. She was hurt. Would be hurting for a long time. But I'd be there.

Aya began mixing the blood with the dirt to make mud for the ritual. A rite of purification to keep all of us safe, to keep our people whole. A ritual that followed every death and birth.

We needed it.

A roar blasted open the sky. My hair on edge, my blood spiced by fear and fury. Pulled my sword from its sheath along with everyone else. Freja's hand fell from mine as she gripped her own swords. No words passed between us, between anyone. The roar filling the air overwhelmed any other sound. Even the fire crackling close enough

to make me sweat silenced to nothing against that ripping roar.

Not an animal or a god but a mechanical roar. A combusting roar that came ever closer while we stood there, swords in hand, waiting for violence.

The roaring passed us by and I let my lungs empty, slumping as I relaxed. Then the roar twisted back, began circling us. That single roar became two and then five and then a dozen.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I focused solely on my breath. In and out. Slow. In through my nose. Out through my nose. Let the spice in my blood mellow. My consciousness expanding to the towering toadstools defining the clearing where our village sprouted, the many immense domes housing all of us beneath the earth. Contracting back to my own body, I became aware of the breeze against my skin, the smoke and the fire, the lungs breathing and hearts beating all around me. I imagined water dripping from a toadstool and pooling in the dirt in the moment before it became mud.

Was Mudd who told me to be like water. Was Mudd who taught me to wield a blade before he took a bullet through the neck and returned to the

mud. Was me who stood waiting to hear Mudd's final words before his ghost descended to be born again.

The roar of their machines fell from me as I focused on the water dropping off the toadstool and into the not-quite mud. For a moment, there was nothing for me but the sound of water dropping into more water.

When I opened my eyes, the roar remained far from me even as they ripped through the clearing on their mechanized bikes spewing poison black smoke. One at a time, I heard Mudd's voice in my skull. Turned to one of them bursting through the trees past the witches' toadstool. Eyes made of glass and a face seamed by scars, her arm didn't end in a hand but in a spinning blade held by two metal spires connected to her elbow. She drove straight for Freja so I launched myself in front of her, bouncing on the balls of my feet.

Closer and closer, the drop of water in the mud still the only sound in my skull. She pulled the blade-arm back like she was going to punch me with it, but that was when Freja leapt past me, a sword in each hand. With her right sword, she slapped the spinning blade wide while she stabbed

the left sword right through her face. Metal struck glass, and the drop of water became a shattering as the woman's face erupted in blood and glass. Freja's blade deflected away, throwing her off balance while mid-air. Her body struck the woman's and she spun wildly in the air while the bike twisted away from me, smashing through the pile of bones and collapsing uselessly to the ground.

Her shrieking pierced through the roar of the mechanical bikes. Walked past her and her broken body to help Freja up. The tip of her sword chipped off, ruining the integrity of the blade. I helped her up and she limped past me to the woman trapped under her bike. Her shattered face revealed the cracked glass of her skull. Blood so red it looked fake flowed from her mouth full of splintered teeth.

Freja shook her head, then slowly stuck her sword through the woman's neck.

The roaring remained all around us and I turned to see the village burning. One of the bikers grabbed Aya by her braid and dragged her across the clearing until another bike drove over her, flattened her chest. Because he held on tight, this ripped the man holding her off his bike, sending

it smashing through the grove of death trees. A handful of my people fell on him, hacking him to pieces.

They moved so quickly and loudly that I found myself stuck in place. Couldn't chase the bikes or intercept them unless they were already coming for me. And so I stood beside Freja and we watched the bikers burn and kill, their smiles wide, their bodies modified inhumanly. They came to abduct, as always. They came for our women and children and so we kept our blades sharp and close.

A man with antlers like a monster held a child against his chest while he laughed and drove right for me. I took a breath and held it for a moment deep in my lungs, then let it out through my nose. He kept coming, even when I lifted my blade, fearing nothing.

The roaring swallowed the day.

I leapt towards the antlered man stealing one of the many cousins, my sword poised to hack his head in half, but a ripping shriek tore through my shoulder, spinning me away from the antlered man and into the dirt. My shoulder burning bright. Hot blood pouring into the dirt, becoming mud. Freja was there, pulling me back to my feet.

Behind her, another biker. I kicked her out of the way and threw my sword at the motherfucker. It bounced stupidly off the front of the bike, but he twisted in panic, jackknifing his bike to a dead stop right in front of me. Trapped beneath his bike, I stood over him.

He didn't plead or show any fear. Just laughed. I reached down, grabbed the hatchet from his hip and brought it down in his face. Felt the wash of hot blood splashing over my own face. Spat out his diseased blood.

Turned to Freja whose mouth hung open, despair drenching her face. Then, her eyes narrowed and she pushed me out of the way. The antlered man smashed a hammer against her sword held up in defense, shattering it as he flew past us. When he was fifty feet away, he slowed and turned back towards us. His bike roared louder, higher. A monstrous smile crossed his lips. He dropped the child in the dirt beside the bike and drove back towards us.

Hatchet in my left hand, searing wound in my right shoulder. Freja held two swords, both broken in half. Didn't give her a glance. Didn't have to.

We would save our cousin lying unconscious in the dirt. We'd save everyone from this freak.

Like a dance, we rushed forward together. Launching into the air to strike down at him from above as he blurred past us, the way Mudd always taught us, I felt the immensity of peace that I often found deep in violence. My body relaxed. My breathing easy. My vision so clear.

I saw the antlered man's death a dozen times in the heartbeat before I brought the hatchet down, before Freja shoved both broken swords into his chest. But the antlered man looked up at us, eyes pale as the moon, skin dark as the night, mouth opening impossibly wide.

"There are moments," Mudd once told us, "that will return to you for the rest of your life."

Even as I hung there above him, I understood that my life spun in that moment. Nothing that came after would be like what came before.

So close I could smell him. An animal stink mixed with human sweat and blood and smoke. His jaws opening wide enough to swallow my head, he vomited out a viscous black cloud that hit me like a solid even as my gasped breath pulled the poison into my lungs.

I remembered the burning. Then I remembered my body hitting the dirt. Lying there, unable to move, black vomit spilling out of my mouth, I watched the antlered man return to the child he left lying in the dirt. Lifting the child with one hand, he drove away.

And then nothing.

IV

I dreamt in light and only light as if the day's tide rolled over and wrapped round me pulling me higher and higher into the evil poisoned sky. I kicked and screamed to escape the light and return to the black, to the blackheart's echo that was creation and all existence. For we are all only a figment of an echo deep beneath the skin of the earth, past muscle and bone, to that maelstrom churning—always churning.

Far away. My body felt far away from myself. In a chamber of light. Featureless and bright. I sought edges but found none. I reached but touched nothing. And then I turned inside, pulled my insides out, and there I brushed against my body, against sensation, like butterfly wings flapping playfully against my cheek.

I heard, as if from far away, as if buried below, in the deep and the dark, a wretched gasp, which pulled me out of the bright nothingness and I opened my eyes. Blinking slowly, adjusting to the darkness and the smell of smoldering mushrooms, the thick humidity and heat of a sauna. Someone gasped beside me but I felt too far away to turn my head. Staring up into the fungal dome of this room—the sweat lodge.

Freja's voice came to me scraped raw and shallow. "I dreamt I died." Quiet as a whisper spoken to herself. Maybe not even knowing I was in the room with her. Possibly many more lay here with us, dying but trying not to.

Tears rolled down my face from the corners of my eyes. Didn't feel sad or in pain. Didn't feel much of anything. Though I'd found my body, I had not yet filled it. Like my ghost haunted only my head. I smacked my lips just to prove I could.

Freja sucked in a breath and then a sliding sound as she dragged herself to me. A clammy hand to my face, she pulled me towards hers.

Hollow and haggard, her eyes popping, the shape of her skull far too apparent in that faint bioluminescence. Dried mud on her forehead in the

shape of the shattered moon—the blood witches were treating us, but I didn't understand the symbol. Had never seen it used before. "You're alive." She exhaled, closed her eyes, and wept, pressing her forehead to mine. "We're alive."

I reached for my fingers. My toes. They tingled and then burned. Scorching my ghost but rather than recoil, I plunged in and took back my hands and feet. Like a hand in a glove, my body conformed back to my ghost, or my ghost to my body. Flexing my hands, I hugged her awkwardly with one hand. "We're not dead."

Freja's tears became laughter. "Is that good or bad?"

"Only is." Dusty. My throat raw and my eyes itched as if all water had been leached from me. "We're in the sweat lodge."

Freja nodded, then collapsed beside me. "Feels like I died." She breathed deeply, then exhaled slowly. "How did we—"

Tried to remember. Tried to reach back but the past was an open wound. A leaking wound. Again, rather than recoil, I dove in and held my breath as the black liquid fog filled my lungs, coated them,

and drowned me even as I watched the antlers roaring away with that limp child in his lap.

“We did die.”

Freja’s hand found mine and held it. “Not yet.”

Her breath hot on my neck. Turning to her, my head swam and capsized, the room blurring and slurring around me. All around me the vibrations of that heart in the deep dark. My body pulsing for and because of that black heart so far beneath me at the molten core of the earth surrounded by the bones of the earth like a ribcage. I closed my eyes and heard Freja’s voice far away calling my name over and over again as I fell through the floor.

V

Kotu's voice came like a lullaby from before memory first stirred in my head. I remembered a moment I didn't know I remembered. Kotu's warm body, her arms holding me. Staring up at that creased and wrinkled face as she smiled down at me, spoke to me in nothing words, the language of babies and children. And then she did sing, her voice full and powerful.

*"...shadows in my heart,
But I won't let you forget me.
Forget me.
Forget me.
I cannot take back the love
That I gave you..."*

Opening my eyes, Kotu sat between Freja and me. Her eyes closed, her white braids falling on either side of her face. She breathed and so I tried

to breathe with her. My lungs hurt, every breath shallow and painful, but I persisted until the incense and breathing and sweltering humid heat swallowed me once more.

Flickers of dreams or memories. Watching myself as the child I once was running through fields of golden grass that towered over me while the sun shined and the fungal trees swayed in the breeze, pulling the poison out of the sky, filtering the water coursing through the earth's open veins.

Dappled sunlight playing over my closed eyelids, I opened them once more and stared up into the ugly evil sky coated purple but blushing pink. The poison our ancestors released into the air would never fully be clean.

I blinked and pushed myself up until I sat. Dizzy, my own thoughts slipped through my fingers like silkworm threads before the weave. My eyes fell on Freja lying naked in the dirt. I rubbed at my eyes, blinked, and stared. A purplish black fish swam beneath her skin. It crossed her stomach, came to her hip, and then coiled round her upper thigh like a terrible bruise. I reached to touch it, to touch her, but the purple black raced back up over her chest where it settled over one breast, turning

it fully black. Only then did I see the same purple blackness wrapped round my own forearm.

Taking a breath, I brought my arm to my face.

“A curse.” Kotu’s voice startled me. She stood with all the village at her back. Hyacinth and Jacinta on either side of her and all of them dressed in ceremonial garb. Their silver bands wrapped round their wrists, the luminous earrings dangling down past their chins, and their hair falling loosely from their heads or billowing up and out, in the case of Kotu. Her necklace of bone stained black confused me, but her expression was clear.

I swallowed, waiting for the words that would follow. I turned back to Freja. “Please, wait until she wakes.” I pushed myself to my feet, let them observe my nakedness and the purple blackness swimming just beneath my skin. “She won’t believe me.”

Kotu nodded. “You understand then.”

I nodded. “Are we to have nothing?”

Hyacinth lifted a bundle from the ground and tossed it to me. It fell with a dull thud between us. The hatchet I’d used on one of the raiders spilled out. She said, “Wait until we are gone.”

Staring up into the evil sky, the sun beneath the tops of the toadstools and trees. “Morning or evening?”

Kotu said, “Morning of the fifth day.”

“How many were taken?”

Jacinta sighed. “That is no concern of yours. You are no longer one of us. You go nameless and kinless into the world.”

“And if we find them?”

“We would appreciate their return,” Kotu smiled the way she did when I was at my most mischievous. Surprising her in ways that endeared and exasperated her.

She couldn’t say but I heard it anyway. She would miss me. Even the thought cracked open my heart. I clenched my fist, bit my lip to keep from weeping there before my brothers and sisters and cousins, my mommas and daddies. The witches. “You saved me.” My voice cracked and my lip trembled. I stared down at Freja to keep from seeing Kotu’s face. To keep from collapsing. Weeping.

Kotu swallowed, her own voice grown husky. “We hoped—” Her voice cratered, dissolved. She cleared her throat and I turned to see her gripping

Hyacinth and Jacinta. “We lost much. Between the blackblood and this raid,” she took a shuddering breath, let it fall heavily from her. “We hoped to exorcize the demon within you. Within both of you.”

“It will consume you,” Hyacinth sniffed. Tears falling from her eyes.

“Wait, please.” I squatted beside Freja, lifted her head from the ground. She had been shaven clean, like me. Now naked and alone, without hair or clothing. Nameless and kinless. “Hey,” I slapped gently at her cheek. “Wake up now.”

Slowly, she came to. Her eyes focusing on me and, no doubt, the shock of my shaved head. “What happened?”

“Can you stand?”

She nodded but I helped her anyway.

“It will consume you,” Kotu said, her voice now composed. No tears remained on their faces. “You have been cursed by the outsiders. Both of you. The curse will consume your humanity. Rapidly or slowly, we cannot say. You leave us nameless and kinless to fight against your fate. You will become monsters or you will find a way to remain whole and human.”

While Kotu spoke, I displayed the purple black creature beneath my skin. Like a shadow. A poison alive beneath our skin. Freja gasped at it and shivered when I pointed towards hers. When it swam like a koi in a pond, she tried to brush it away to no effect.

I took her hand firmly and held it. Our fingers wove together and we faced all that we had known.

Hyacinth said, “Dawn fades. The day is long but not too long. If you are to survive, you must go.”

Rather than wait for us to leave, they abandoned us. Hyacinth, Jacinta, and Kotu turned away and walked back through the crowd. Through everyone we had ever known. Some of them didn’t look at us. Some of them wept. But all of them followed the witches away, until Freja and I stood across the clearing from Bugg.

Bugg stared at the ground between us, holding his long sword over his shoulder. “It’s not much,” he spoke as if to no one, refusing to meet our eyes, “but it may save your life.” From within his cloak, he pulled out two swords that had been broken in half. He let them fall at his feet.

Then he left.

A MEETING

I

“**S**hadows on the moon.” We’d spent the first and second days just walking west, away from our village. The first night, we cowered beneath mushrooms, fearing everything we didn’t know. We clung to one another that first night, flinching at every sound, every imagined shadow. Was the second night out from our home and she stared up at the moon. “That’s where the wolves come from.”

Shook my head. “Just a story.”

“Nah,” she pointed up at the great abscess in the moon hanging in the evil sky. “Something took a bite of the moon and spat it down to earth. That’s what ended everything. Humanity died that day but the wolves were born from the lunar ocean.”

We sat in the dirt of a clearing where nothing seemed to grow. The tracks of the motorbikes

cut through the clearing leading either away from or towards the village. The mushroom trees and toadstools began to make space for the wooden trees as we got farther from the village.

Leaned back on her elbows, she swished her feet back and forth through the air. Reminded me of being a child where simple movement was all I needed to be content. The forest of toadstools surrounded us but offered no shelter from the monsters prowling the earth. If the wolves came, we'd die. Forgotten. Alone.

Nameless.

“What name will you take now?”

She frowned but kept staring at the moon.

“Don't know.”

“You could keep being Freja.”

“No.” Her voice flat and cold. “Freja died.” She ran her hand over her shaved scalp, which got me doing the same thing. No stubble yet. Shaved me so clean. Like a baby. She sniffed, spat. Dressed in the clothes of the dead raiders, for nothing from home would leave with us. Except for the broken swords she kept at her hip. “What's your favorite name?”

I snorted. “Always liked names that start with V.”

Her face relaxed. She wiped at her eyes. After two days of travel and intermittent anxious sleep, exhaustion caught up with us. “What about you?”

“Who do we want to be now?” I stood, kicked lazily at a clump of dirt. “We could be anyone.” The memory of that child slung limp over the antlered raider’s bike returned like cold water splashed in my face. “We could save him. That boy.”

She yawned, stretching her arms wide. Beautiful basking in moonlight. “At least we’re together.” She turned to me then. “If I had to do this alone—”

I took her hand and pulled her up to me. She smiled wide, leaping into my momentum. Hanging in the air for a moment, I brought her body close to mine. She looped her arms around my neck and stared right into my face. She stroked my cheek, then let her hand fall to my hip and I followed her lead. The skin of her neck so smooth against my palm. Thin and long. Elegant was the only word that came to mind. The only word that felt right.

I opened my mouth to tell her what she already knew. That I have always loved her. We grew together, always in each other's company. I knew her from before memory first sparked inside my skull. Knew her like I knew myself. The two of us were born from the same bursting star millennia ago. Our ghosts born together into the world over countless lifetimes. We were bound together through the black heart's maelstrom over and over, cycling back to the skin of the earth before dissolving once more in the molten core of eternity. That's what I wanted to say. That's what I needed her to know.

But that's when we heard them.

II

She pulled me behind a toadstool and slipped both broken swords silently into her hands. The heat of her body pressed against mine, pressing me into the toadstool's trunk. My heart racing first from her touch and then from danger. Even still, staring at her, I couldn't focus on the approaching threat. My body thrumming with desire and violence.

It raged in me, then. As if a fire started in my chest that someone else stoked. My heart beat so fast that I put my palm against my skin. Felt the heat so hot that I pulled my hand away on reflex.

The purple blackness swelled there. I stared down at it and felt as if it stared back at me. As if it knew me enough to push and pull my emotions this way and that. A hunger in this curse. An all consuming desire for more.

In the two days since leaving home, I had thought little of the curse. A strange and alien mark flowing beneath my skin. But there, between her and the towering toadstool while we waited for whatever approached, I saw the danger. Saw how this curse could steal my humanity from me.

I grabbed my hatchet from my hip. Heavier than my sword, I tried to find the balance. Felt fury building in me, coursing through me. I breathed to try to calm myself, but my body felt out of my control. A war happening beneath my skin that I didn't know how to fight.

So I breathed. I just breathed to keep from leaping out and running straight for whoever came.

Footfalls approached. Several people talking. Their words indistinct. I stared at her while she stared past me towards the clearing we abandoned out of fear. Out of caution.

In that moment, I was only glad she was with me.

The voices came gravelly and caustic. "The fucking walls, baby. Gotta pull the fucking walls down."

"Can't pull them down, fuckhead."

A loud, wet slap. "The fuck was that for?"

“Shut the fuck up.”

She scowled as she stared at them standing there in the moonlight, her jaw clenched. I heard it. Snuffing at the air.

“What?” One of the voices.

“That stink.”

“Mushrooms.”

“Just so. Human.”

I swallowed. Gripped my hatchet tighter. Blood rushed through me, roaring in my ears, in my chest, in my lungs. Wishing I had a sword, I ran a thumb against the hatchet’s blade. Even a broken sword seemed preferable in that moment. I’d never fought with anything but a sword. She brought her gaze to me, eyes wide. I nodded. She closed her eyes and took a breath and I did too. Heard them tasting the air, trying to catch our scent.

She opened her eyes, let out the breath she held, and nodded back. Using her eyes, she directed our attack. I crept along the outside of the trunk while she darted out. Quiet as possible, but they heard us.

Shaggy like a feral dog but standing upright. Long human arms hanging down past their knees and a short muzzle full of carnivore teeth and big

upright ears pointed in our direction, then falling backwards near flat against their heads. Seven of them. They fanned out into a semi-circle to enclose us. One of them was missing an eye with great gouged scars running through its face. The others had similar wounds, but his one eye would make him an easy kill.

The one-eyed monster huffed and then spoke. "The night is ours."

I fought the fury threatening to overpower me. Gritting my teeth so hard I feared they'd snap, I couldn't find words.

But she did. "We'll leave you to it then."

Rhythmic barking was his response. Laughter. The laughter of a monster.

The longer I stared at him, the more human he seemed. Or like some cruel reflection of humanity. "What are you?" The words leapt from my mouth.

The curse. A rising power trapped within me that I could not control.

He narrowed his single eye. Raising his hand with five fingers like any human, but for their length and the fur. Slowly, he extended his claws. Long sickles stretching from the tips of his fingers.

“I’m going to eat your girl and make you watch. Then I’m going to eat you.”

Laughter burst from me then. Igniting fury in him and the rest of the pack. Their hooked claws and their long teeth visible in the moonlight, I saw my death moments ahead of me. A brutal, grisly death. My body mutilated and consumed by these mutants.

It thrilled me and I knew that was wrong, but I could not deny it.

She said, “Just an ugly dog.” Then she whistled a high note that she held.

Their ears fidgeted on their heads and the leader growled. The one-eyed monster lunged forward a few steps and bellowed something between a roar and a howl and scream. I glanced her way, and she crept closer to me. I narrowed the gap.

Time slowed for me the way it always did during fights. As if we moved underwater or through air viscous as the gel inside an eye. I raised my hatchet and the first of the monsters leapt towards me. It slashed its freakishly long arms at me but I ducked underneath, coming in close to its body. The heat and the stink of it closed a fist in my throat, threatening to knock me off balance. But even as the reek

assaulted me and its knee came up to bash in my chest, the pulse of the world churned in me.

Felt it and knew it for what it was. The great blackheart churning all of existence—a tether binding me to it. A tether that must have always been there, though I never knew. A tether binding all of us here above to it below. The tether, I knew, burned in the purple blackness of the curse. What that meant, that this curse connected me to the blackheart's maelstrom, didn't matter in that moment.

But the roiling inside me swam from my chest to my hand holding the hatchet, moving it with a power not my own. All the power thrumming and roaring within me from the consuming curse swept into my arm as I swung the hatchet up into the beast. Though it twisted away from me, the hatchet tore through meat and bone. The severed arm kept my momentum as it flew into the air, the great rush of blood pouring out of the empty shoulder soaked me, but I followed my own momentum and brought the hatchet down through the monster's skull. Splitting it in half.

She had taken care of her monster as well but rather than staring ahead at the battle yet to begin,

she stared at the flowing purple blackness covering her hands.

The one-eyed monster scowled. “I will crack open your bones and drink your marrow, you fucking monkeys.”

Before it could even take another step or growl out another threat, its head exploded, like a bubble made of blood. The remaining monsters scattered in all directions, leaving us alone in the clearing once more, waiting for some new danger, trying to understand what happened as we stared at the headless monster bleeding out into the mud.

III

Probably we should've hid or ran but we stood there with our weapons in hand staring at the violence before us. I looked at her and she at me. Her eyes drifted to my hand, to the curse swimming beneath my skin. And I watched hers writhe up her wrist to hide beneath her shirt.

“What’s happening to us?”

“The curse,” I said.

She puffed her cheeks and blew out the air. “What even is that? What even is this?” She slapped her chest where the purple blackness burned the way mine burned. “Feels like,” she threw her swords down into the dirt but they bounced off and away. “Fuck,” she seethed the word.

“Like it’s fighting you.”

Her eyes flashed towards me, then away. “I want to remain me.”

More footsteps but we didn’t bother to hide. With the curse raging inside us, we had no fear. We watched her come.

She was the tallest person I’d ever seen. Near double my height wearing an ankle-length white coat buttoned from the waist up to her neck with the rest hanging down over black boots reaching nearly to her crotch. On her head, a large red hat with a brim so wide it flopped as she walked. Her right hand held some sort of weapon swinging at her side.

I laughed. Couldn’t help it. The fury and fire went out like that. Such an absurd sight, this enormous woman dressed so wildly for this place we had always referred to as the waste.

She cocked her head at me, lifted her weapon to rest on her shoulder. It appeared large in her hand, which made it truly enormous. Probably the length of my leg. “Where are you from?”

We had decided to protect the village no matter what happened. “South,” I said. “Several days ago, raiders abducted some kids.”

She held up a hand, then shook it. A signal of dismissal, I supposed. With that same hand, she gestured to the corpses at our feet. “You two insane or just idiots?”

My friend who had been Freja pointed at the headless one, “How’d you do that?”

The big woman cocked her head. “What’s your name?”

“What’s yours?”

She smiled, revealing glass teeth. Oddly disconcerting. Seeing into her mouth even when she smiled. “Lady Agova.” She bowed, sweeping her big floppy hat from her head and swinging it out to the side with a flourish. Her shaved scalp crisscrossed by big scars like millipedes. Felt on purpose, to show us this. When she stood, hat back on her head, she gestured for us to introduce ourselves. “Come on, babies.”

“Vera,” she said.

Lady Agova raised an eyebrow, the eye lighting up briefly. Was the first indication that she was not like any human we’d yet seen. Someone more made than grown. “Sounds fake.”

Vera laughed, shrugged. “All names sound that way.”

Lady Agova smiled, snorted. Her gaze fell on me. “And you?”

“Virgil.”

Both eyebrows shot up. “Vera and Virgil? You two twins?”

We looked at each other and laughed.

Lady Agova nodded, her expression bland. “Idiots.” She shrugged. “Come on, babies.” She turned back to where she came from and started walking, motioning for us to follow.

I turned to Vera who said, “Virgil?”

“She put me on the spot.”

Vera patted my shoulder, shaking her head. “This is who we are now.” She turned from me to the dead monsters. “But not who we’ll have to remain.”

Lady Agova snapped her fingers and we turned to her. Arms akimbo, weapon dangling from her right hand still, she had the expression of a scolding momma. “Babies, come.”

We did.

IV

I've often thought back on this moment that seemed so absurd, so silly, yet which sent us spiraling forward to a life that was, for a long time, not of our choosing. A life that I don't think I'd have chosen, yet I cannot imagine my life now without Lady Agova's steady hand guiding us through the nights, through the mountains of corpses we'd build.

I have often heard since my banishment that those living outside the cities, those who keep clear of the ruins of the past, are more like children than people. They cling to their bodies, to their identities, to a dream of humanity that never existed. Or, if it did exist, it never will again.

I have seen much since that day. I have seen civilization. I've lived with them in their vibrant electric cities full of freaks and mutants and con-

structed men and women who define themselves in opposition to the monsters of the wastes and wilds yet drown themselves in a monstrous world of ugly chaos.

I have seen what they call progress. What they call civilization.

It is not civilized.

And yet it has become home to me.

To look back on that day is to sink into a delicate memory. Like a love letter sent to myself, yet left to pulp in the rain.

V

We followed Lady Agova down a well-worn path, her long strides making us jog to keep up. Every sound and shadow put me on edge. Gripping the hatchet tighter and tighter, my jaw clenched, I remained alert, my blood spiced with fear and tension.

“Where you taking us?” Vera held both her broken swords at the ready as well.

Lady Agova didn’t slow or turn to us. “Why do you fight with swords?”

“Tradition,” Vera said.

Lady Agova laughed. “Tradition so old your swords broke? And what about Virgil?”

Vera glanced my way. “He’s not from—”

“Please,” Lady Agova said, “I can hear in your voices that you grew up together. Where’s his sword?”

Vera began some new lie, but it seemed useless so I interrupted her. “Have you ever seen a man with antlers?”

She stopped and turned back to us. Eyebrows up, then falling heavily over her eyes, knitting her brow. “A man with antlers.” She inhaled through her nose and squinted up at the moon. “Have you ever wondered where monsters come from?”

I looked up at the moon, the evil sky, hoping to see what she saw there. “They’re humans trapped here on earth.”

Confusion washed over her face. She looked at me, then away. Scowling, she turned back. “What?”

Vera cleared her throat, shifted. “When people die, their ghosts return to the source of all existence. Our ghost then returns in a new body to live again. Some are lost, though. When they die, their ghost remains and—”

“Babies,” Lady Agova muttered. She sighed. “Monsters were once human. That’s true. But it’s got nothing to do with samsara. Some people make themselves monsters by trading parts of themselves away. I’ve seen people give up their arms for Dust and I’ve seen others exchange their

flesh for bionics and cybernetics. There are those who long to be made rather than born.” She tapped the side of her head with two fingers. “Got a head full of glass myself, but I’m still me. Some give too much away. Then you find them out here.” She swung her big metal weapon, gesturing to the forest all around us.

“Those monsters,” Vera motioned towards where we came from.

Lady Agova shrugged. “Maybe yes and maybe not. Something about them was once human. You can see that easy enough, but weird shit happens out here. There are those who love the wastes and wilds for the way that it does change them. Believe me,” she looked from me to Vera and back, “it does change you.”

“Why are you out here?”

Lady Agova sighed. “Was gonna show you my shell first. Had a whole thing I was planning as we walked.” She shook her head. “You idiots got no patience, you know that?” She stared at us waiting for a reaction but got nothing. “Fine!” She flapped her empty hand, exasperated. “I want you two idiots to work for me. Pay’s great because Avalon needs us. Their walls work pretty good but some

things can't be walled out, get me? But I saw how you two didn't back down against those fucking beasts. That's either courage or stubborn idiocy. Don't matter to me because you handled it.

“That's what I need. People who won't run from monsters but will instead hunt them down to their lairs. Burn out the whole coven. What you say?”

I looked to Vera but she stared with the intensity of the truly ignorant. As confused as I was. She said, “You hunt monsters?”

Lady Agova sighed, “Good fucking lord. Yes, I hunt monsters. You two seem to have a talent for this. You in?”

A man with antlers who filled us with a curse. Couldn't get more monstrous than that, or so I thought at the time.

A READING

I

After washing ourselves clean of gore, Lady Agova didn't lead us to one of the cities full of heathens and mutants but instead to what she called her shell. Didn't even see it until she opened the door. Like a door opening in the air to a dark interior. Tried not to show the shock on my face but Vera and I stood there gaping like idiots.

Lady Agova cocked her head at us. "You lied to me."

"No," I said, still trying to make sense of what I saw. With the door open, it broke the spell. I stepped closer and reached out to the walls of her shell. They looked like glass. Translucent. I saw right through them and yet it felt like metal.

"Not telling me the truth is lying," she said.

Vera ran a hand over the shell too. "Cold. Like glass."

“Idiots,” Lady Agova sighed. She clapped her hands to get our attention. “You’re from one of those anti-civilization communes out here in the wastes. Don’t even think about denying it now,” she raised a hand as if stopping the nothing we were doing. “This is my shell. At the push of a button, it will fold up to the size of a deck of cards, if you even know what that is. It’s camouflaged to keep dummies like you out but, more importantly, to keep me safe when I sleep. As you’ve experienced, the wilds and wastes are dangerous. Freaks and mutants and monsters haunt these places.”

I understood little of what she said.

Vera must’ve understood more. She said, “Like a home you carry with you.”

Lady Agova smiled and pointed at Vera. “Sure. Come inside.” Lady Agova ducked to get into the door. We followed her in. The interior was dark as night for a moment. The door shut silently behind me and the walls glowed gently, like the bioluminescence of our fungal home beneath the earth. Nothing bioluminescent about this place though. Nothing living about it.

Smelled lifeless. Inert. The air had a stale quality that gripped me with panic. I didn’t think so,

but my body believed we'd suffocate in this glass dome. For it was a dome. Still crouched down even though I could have stood, which increased my fear. My body trembled at the closeness of this lifeless place. Had she wanted to, Lady Agova could have stretched her body from one side of the shell to another and nearly touched the perimeter in four places. Circular and lit up and featureless, I grew dizzy just being inside. I began wheezing, my throat tightening.

"Fuck," Lady Agova breathed the word. Her big hand pressed against my chest, then pushed me down to the ground, knocking the air from my heaving lungs.

"What are you doing to him!" Vera screamed. So confined was the space that this blasted out my hearing. Like her words echoed off the walls over and over again, becoming a symphony of voices out of sync with one another.

Lady Agova ignored her though. With her other hand, she slammed something sharp into my chest. It made a gasping sound, like my chest emptied itself of air. Panicking, I tried to slap the wound closed but Lady Agova grabbed my wrists in one of her huge hands and pinned them above my

head. "Breathe," she hissed. Still holding my wrists down, she twisted her body to Vera, swinging my hatchet into the two broken swords Vera swung at her back. Knocking Vera's swords to the side, she thrust the head of the hatchet into Vera's nose. The crunch audible as a shout in the shell. The blood came pouring out as Vera clapped her hands over her face. "Stop it," Lady Agova snapped at her, like we were children.

A tingling sensation seeped out from my chest where Lady Agova stabbed me. My heart raced and my lungs vibrated as the tingling road my bloodstream to my limbs, my fingers and toes. Flooded with power. With strength. My eyes so wide, I clenched my jaw to keep my teeth from chattering, from shattering. "What did you do to me?" I near shouted the words through my teeth.

Lady Agova smiled down at me, her face so close I could smell her. Her scent bloomed in that inert dome, along with the comforting smell of Vera. Then the stink of her blood. My own heart pounding furiously at that scent. At the echo and promise of violence. They swirled together and entered my lungs like music, binding to the magic she stabbed into my blood. She said, "You

were having a panic attack, or something.” She shrugged like the difference didn’t matter. “Gave you something to calm you back down.”

“Feels like my blood’s on fire.”

Lady Agova nodded. “Not freaking out though, yeah?”

“You okay, Vera?”

Vera coughed. Pinching her nose and holding her head back to slow the blood, she seemed more frustrated than angry. “Yep.”

“You good?”

My body pulsed. The blackheart deep in the earth pumped me full of power, of freak energy. Felt like I could rip the metal of this shell open, yet I couldn’t even pull my hands away from Lady Agova’s grip. “Are you a mutant?”

She cocked her head. “This a height thing?”

Vera said, “You’re freakish strong.”

“Freakish big too, yeah,” I said.

Lady Agova laughed then. A harrowing sound that I don’t think I’ll ever forget. Her head thrown back, mouth open wide, yet a small musical laugh came out of her. Like a little girl trapped in the body of a giant.

II

Rivers of fire flowing through my body. I kept clenching and relaxing my fists as we sat in a circle in her shell.

“Sorry about your nose,” Lady Agova said to Vera.

Vera held a bloody cloth to her nose. “Don’t worry about it.” Her voice nasally.

“You were trying to cut my head off, though.”

Vera smiled. “Sorry.”

Lady Agova brightened. “Been waiting for that. Want me to fix your nose?”

“Like you fixed Virgil?”

Lady Agova laughed, eyed me up and down. “He’ll be fine.”

I noticed everything. The way Vera kept running her tongue around her mouth or the way Lady Agova tapped her foot arrhythmically.

Could see the layer of paint on her eyelid, her lips. Big as she was, terrifying as she was, she was beautiful in ways I'd never seen. I'd never seen anyone even remotely like her. Even setting her height aside, her proportions so gloriously enticing that I forgot anything I knew about Vera's body. Once she removed her long white coat, Lady Agova's clothes revealed more than they contained and so every breath she took was a reminder of her breasts. Every time she shifted in her seat or uncrossed and recrossed her legs dragged at my attention as if she screamed at me to stare at her hips, her thighs. Could almost feel the heat from her crotch. Nothing soft about her, though. Even without touching, her body seemed like it was built of iron.

The memory of her holding me down kept coming back to me as I watched her sitting between us. Being overpowered by her. Held down by her. Her huge body on top of mine. Completely at her mercy.

"Why'd you bring us here?"

Lady Agova let her smile fall. "Well, back then, I thought you were hunters like me. Thought I could use your help." She sighed. "My whole crew died last night. Come here. Let me fix your nose."

The pulse in her neck. The way she closed her eyes and leaned back. The heave of her breasts as they swelled against the fabric bound so tightly over her torso and chest. I wanted her. Wanted her to use me. To hold me down and take me.

Vera leaned forward and Lady Agova put her fingers on Vera's nose and spoke some quiet words in a language I didn't know. Taking back her hand, she pulled a pouch from her coat and poured a grey powder into her palm. Spitting in it, she stirred it with her fingers, then smeared it over Vera's nose. Lady Agova said, "Look up."

She did.

"Look down."

She did.

Lady Agova slapped her. A loud smack that poked at my eardrums as I flinched.

Vera moved her nose from side to side, then took a deep inhale. "How?"

Lady Agova shrugged. "Call it magic."

Vera snorted and I turned to her. She seemed so small and common beside Lady Agova. The body of a simple person, whereas Lady Agova was like some great demon of desire. Vera said, "Replace your friends so fast?"

“Yeah,” Lady Agova ignored the bait. “People die fast out here. Seeing you two, shaved and dirty and alone and killing monsters,” she shrugged. “Figured you were like me.” She turned to me and snorted. “Step outside and catch your breath.”

“What?”

Lady Agova leaned close to me and I gasped, my body needing her. Wanting her to overwhelm me. Overpower me. Leaning back, she turned to Vera and I did too. Vera rolled her eyes, grabbed me, and pulled me outside the shell.

“What the fuck, Virgil,” Vera sighed, more exasperated than angry.

I took a deep breath. Fecund and wet. Like recent rain or coming rain. Like mushrooms. Like the forest that had surrounded me all my life. I knelt down and dug my hands into the dry soil. Rubbing my palms furiously into the hard dirt, the friction burning slightly against my skin, I pulled my hands to my face and breathed in deep. Rubbed the dirt over my face. Cooling me down.

A sanctuary. Home. The dirt and the fungus. Being trapped inside that lifeless dome pumped full of fire, I felt—

“What’s he doing?” Lady Agova’s voice.

Vera said, "What did you do to him?"

"Like I said, I thought he was having a panic attack."

"This magic?"

"Depends on what you call magic. I guess kind of it is." She laughed. That high musical sound. The crunch of her boots as the thin layers of dirt flattened to a single layer. The creasing of her crotch-high boots as she squatted beside me. "Feeling better?"

Her voice nearly right in my ear. I turned my dirty face towards her but saw only her crotch. I nodded as she laughed, told us to come back inside, wanted to show us something.

III

She pulled up a slat from the floor, then unhinged its legs to make it a table that she set between us and her. A small table made for one normal sized person to eat at, but Lady Agova loomed hilariously large over it. My blood still burning, my attention still darting back and forth, drowning in detail, in every minor movement or fluctuation in breath or eye dilation or blush.

“Sit down, dummies.”

We sat and Lady Agova pulled out a small box. “You ever seen a deck of cards?” Without waiting, she opened the box. “This is a special deck. Magic, you might call it. There are eighty-eight cards, each one unique.” Slowly, she pulled the cards one by one from the box and set them face down while she spoke. “The cards tell a story. Sometimes of your past, your present, or your future. I know

what you're thinking," she said, wrongly. "There are thousands of decks like this, which is both true and completely wrong. In any back alley of any city or commune, you can probably find some fool with a deck of painted cards promising to oracle you through the tangle of your life, but this deck," she slapped her palm down over the cards, disappearing them beneath the meat of her huge hand, "really is magic. Now, I know what you're thinking. 'Don't they all say that?' Well, probably, but this deck has been to the lunar forest. More than that, it was painted there with lunar dust mixed into the paint. I was there when it happened. A child." She smiled at the memory. "My mother was an oracle like so many others. A liar is what I mean. A faker. But that was before her pilgrimage to the lunar forest where the wolf gods were born."

Felt Vera stiffen at that. A reminder of our recent conversation right before Lady Agova came into our life. My skin danced, soaking in every minute fluctuation in the shell. Motes of dust drifted in the glowing light like shifting constellations. Swirling images made of Lady Agova's dead skin and the dead skin of her companions, so newly dead. All the cast-off people of her life now float-

ing around us, seeping into our skin, our lungs and guts.

“You first,” Lady Agova said to Vera.

Vera took a breath. “What is this?”

Lady Agova smiled, her hand still covering the deck. “I’m going to turn over the cards.”

“That it?”

“That’s it.”

Vera glanced at me. I tried to relax but I was still burning. She sighed and sat. “Fine.”

Lady Agova smiled. “Let’s begin.”

IV

Lady Agova's hand still covered the deck. She brought her other hand up and then slowly lowered it, palm down, and the light inside the dome dimmed. With that same hand, she motioned for me to back away.

I did, and Vera shimmied over to sit cross-legged across the table from Lady Agova.

With nowhere to sit or stand, I leaned back into the shell's wall. Lifeless and cold against my back. A light source without heat or life. Neither fire nor bioluminescence but something alien. Something dead. I wondered if that was the magic of the cities, but the writhing purplish black entity swimming beneath my skin felt alive. The curse was in the meat of me, if it was anywhere. It would poison the ghost of me, though.

Felt the throbbing pulse of the black heart deep beneath our feet at the molten core of the earth. The churning maelstrom calling to me, steaming off ghosts to fill new bodies.

I tried to feel the ghosts in this shell. The ghosts of those that Lady Agova said died the night before but there was only this lifeless shelter. At least they weren't trapped. They escaped back to the maelstrom. Freed from crawling over the earth's skin beneath the evil, poisoned sky.

Lady Agova said, "Close your eyes and clear your mind."

"What?"

Lady Agove flicked Vera right in the center of the forehead. The impact loud enough to shock me and make Vera clap her own hand over her forehead.

"The fuck was that for?"

Lady Agova said, "Please, shut up. Close your eyes. Come on. Close them. Now, imagine yourself staring up into the night sky. Past the trees and toadstools to the sky. That vast ocean of blackness and stars and the moon, the fragments of the moon still hanging up there beyond us. Let your-

self live up there for a moment, amidst the stars and the moon and the great curtain of blackness.”

I hadn't closed my eyes but I was up there in the evil sky, with the stars and the moon and all that black emptiness. Her voice seeped into me. A resonance to her words, like they carried something with them. Like boats transporting more than only the words and their meaning. Some kind of power.

In that moment, the evil sky transformed for me.

Or maybe it was that thrumming power stabbed into my chest still burning through my veins. A beast uncaged inside me swallowing meaning and imbuing it with magic. It stirred the curse swimming within me. I felt it writhing within, over my stomach.

The sky was not evil. The sky was nothing. Only the sky. Only the vast vacancy expanding endlessly over us. No more poisoned than the earth or the waters that the fungal gods, the networks of mushrooms and toadstools, purified.

“Now, take the moon away,” Lady Agova continued. “Extinguish the stars. Allow yourself to be up there in that vast blackness. And then let it

wash over and through you to dissolve your body leaving only the ghost of you behind. Be there in that empty blackness.”

The quiet inert dimness fell upon me then like a heavy blanket. Like a pile of bodies holding me down. Cutting me off from the maelstrom, from the evil empty sky.

“Now open your eyes.” Lady Agova smiled. “Ready?”

Vera only nodded but I wanted to say No. Not ready for this. My body twisting into knots beneath my skin. The intense need to shit but also to vomit but also to curl into a ball and weep. The immensity of the absence. The loss of the black heart’s beat. My mouth dry. My eyes itching. Skin clammy. I swallowed and it hurt my throat.

Lady Agova finally lifted her hand from the deck of cards and flipped over the first one.

Vera whispered, as if we were in a sacred place, “What’s it mean?”

I craned my neck to see around her but the dimness made it difficult to make out. Only saw several hands all holding swords.

“Quiet.” Lady Agova flipped the next card and raised an eyebrow.

“What?” Vera caught it too.

“Nothing,” Lady Agova whispered, her voice falling to the same volume as Vera’s.

And I sank back into that lifeless wall, unsure what demons she called down upon us from this absence of life. This void in the earth where nothing grew. Where nothing could grow. A place without life or light.

Lady Agova flipped another and the weight of all of this compressed my chest like a vice. I stretched my neck like I could raise my head above whatever magic swirled within the shell and catch my breath. Breathing through my nose like I’d been trained all my life, I tried to calm myself but my body pumped and throbbed with the antlered man’s curse, with Lady Agova’s cure.

She flipped another card and then one more. Sucking in her breath, she raised her eyes from the table for the first time and studied Vera. Reevaluating her.

“What’s it mean?”

Lady Agova looked back down at the cards, then to me.

Like a beetle on a fishhook, I squirmed. She cocked her head, furrowed her brow. Pulling her

lip into her glass teeth, she bit down lightly and the ache within me shifted from one discomfort to another. Such a simple gesture, but I wanted her even more. The way she bit her lip and stared at me like I was some unpleasant curiosity.

Then she pulled her gaze away from me and returned it to Vera, to the cards.

Like a first breath after drowning. I longed for the near oblivion, for the overwhelming proximity of danger, of death.

“I think,” Lady Agova said, “I need to pull the cards for him before I can tell you what this means.” She set her massive hand gently over the cards revealed on the table. “Switch places, please.”

Vera sighed. Turning to me, she rolled her eyes but then seemed to take in the reaction I was having to all this. “Virgil—”

“It’s fine,” my voice hoarse and breathy, like I couldn’t catch my breath. I couldn’t. My lungs pumped and my heart raced and I burned. My chest full of beetles and my stomach full of wriggling maggots. My head thick with fungal spores dampening even my thoughts.

Sitting across from Lady Agova, her breasts right at my eye level, I tried not to stare and so I

looked down at the cards on the table. A pinwheel of arms stretching out from an empty center on the card closest to me. Each hand held a sword. The painting had a tactile look to it. Like running my finger over it, I'd feel the brushstrokes. Right above that, a beheaded body. A snake slithered out from between the shoulders. Painted in the same style with heavy brushstrokes and lots of paint. Or so they appeared, but it could have been the magic of them. If I ran my fingers over them, they may have been smooth as the walls of the shell. To the left of that was the head of a massive snarling wolf. The head connected to no body. The severed head of a wolf oriented in such a way that even to my untrained eyes, there was a clear connection to the headless human body and this bodyless wolf head lined up as if they were once one creature. To the right of the beheading were two body entwined in love. One man. One woman. The woman's hand inside the man and the man thrusting into the woman. But as I stared at this seemingly erotic card, the figures of these two shivered through me. Her teeth long and carnivorous while his back had a seam stitched closed. She invited him in to her but penetrated him as well. Counting the limbs,

she had four hands. Two of them flesh and two of them a greyblack something-else. Unable to make sense even of this image, let alone what it might mean, I looked at the final card arranged just above the beheading. A black crow wearing a crown woven of thorns. In its beak, a black rose.

I raised my eyes to Lady Agova. "What is this?"

She took a deep breath through her nose, her breasts threatening to rip her corset. "Ready?"

"No," I whispered.

She smiled. "Same." She flipped the first card and placed it at the corner closest to my right hand. A tree took up most of the left side of the card as it stretched up and off the card. One branch stretched out across the card. From it, a man hanged by his neck from a rope.

Figured I knew what that meant.

She pulled the next card and placed it at the corner closest to my left hand. Almost the exact same card except the perspective was closer. Where the entirety of the man's body could be seen in the first, this one was from the knees up. With this closer perspective, I saw the blood leaking from his eyes and the blackness of his swollen tongue in his open mouth. I blinked and narrowed my eyes.

Wiped at them to make sure I was seeing what I was seeing. I whispered, “That’s my face.”

“Quiet,” Lady Agova’s voice came harsher. She pulled another card, her frown apparent even before she laid it down on the remaining corner across from this second card. Again, the hanged man. This time the image was closer once more to the point that I couldn’t see the tree. Only the man from the chest up, the gruesomeness of his death even more apparent. The face—my face—more bloated, like time had passed between the first and second. The blood and flesh rotting. The lifeless eyes turned redblack.

Caught inside a cyclone. My guts writhing, my curse thrashing, my blood on fire, and my head swimming through oceans of blood and mountains of corpses. Dizzy, I gripped the table. Heard the bellow of a wind from nowhere. Felt the lash of that whipping wind slicing through the tiny shell housing the three of us.

Lady Agova flipped over the next card and placed it in the remaining corner. “The fuck,” she whispered like a hissed breath from clenched teeth. Again, the same hanged man, but this time only his bloated dead face visible. If it had once resem-

bled my own face, it no longer did. It no longer looked like anyone, so rotted and distorted had it become, slowly caving in on itself.

My heart and stomach lurched. Biting down bile, I wanted to ask, but Lady Agova ripped the last card from the deck and slapped it down at the center of the table. The wind, whether from this or that other wind that only I felt, whipped me in the face and tears sprang to my eyes, blood drained from my nose.

Then, with the card settled there among all those other cards, all the swelling sensations and terrors deflated leaving me only a man in a lifeless room with two women. My blood cold and my heartbeat lurching along lazily behind the black-heart that no longer thrummed through me. Its absence sucked the energy from me, leaving me a husk of a person staring down at a card that was difficult to make sense of.

The edges of the final card were faded black as if the card had been scorched all along the perimeter. Against that scorch, the black bled to a deep red. At the center of the card were two children dressed in black staring up at us. Behind them loomed a hooded figure shrouded in black. Skele-

tal hands extended from the shroud to grip each child on the shoulders. From the blackness of the hood stretched bonewhite antlers branching into the air. Around them, an empty field with some barren tree branches poking in from the top of the card.

I whispered, “What is it?” I asked to make someone else say it. To keep myself from seeing exactly what I thought I was staring at.

“Fuck,” Lady Agova’s booming voice splintered the quiet of the room. Grabbing the deck, she threw it at the wall, where cards exploded in all directions. Those that flipped over revealed the same hanged man from different perspectives. She swept a hand over the table, launching the cards that represented our past, present, or future into the wall beside Vera. Once again, those that flipped over to reveal themselves now showed the same hanged man from different perspectives. Always his bloated, dead face at the center.

Vera reached down and picked up the card of the children. She held it to me or Lady Agova but Lady Agova ignored her.

Thick muscled arms crossed over her enormous breasts, she scowled at the dim wall of her shell. She

seemed somehow even larger in her silent fury, as if she had stepped into a shelter meant for a child. As if Vera and I were only children to her.

Vera still held the card out and spoke to both or none of us. “It’s from the perspective of the hanged man. This is what he would see if he still lived. Or maybe it’s what he saw just before he died. His last vision.”

V

Lady Agova's voice was so deep it rattled the bones at the base of my skull. "Shut the fuck up."

VI

The shell disappeared when she closed the door on us. Once more in the forest, I breathed in the fecund humidity. Vera said, “Who were those kids?” When I didn’t respond, she said, “From the picture. The card, I mean. Who were they?”

“Maybe those are the kids they took. The raiders.”

Vera sniffed and wiped at her nose with the back of her hand, then wiped her hand on her trousers. “Her magic didn’t work.”

Brought a smile to my face. Turning to Vera, it was like seeing her for the first time in days. The fire drained from my blood, my thoughts no longer thumped and throbbed within me. “Or it worked too well.”

“What now?” She looked around the forest. The trees and towering toadstools all around us with the spaces between them offering paths to everywhere, to nowhere. “We can head back to the clearing and follow the motorbike tracks.”

“She wants our help,” I nodded towards where I knew the shell still stood. “We might need hers. We’ve never been to a city but she has. She’ll know how to navigate it.”

Vera raised an eyebrow, then scowled it back down. “Don’t trust her.” She folded her arms. “She wants us to do something for her. That’s what this is about. Her little magic show in there turned on her. Seems pretty clear, at least. Like a child, she’s throwing a tantrum because her little trick didn’t go her way.”

“What do you think happened with the cards?”

Vera shrugged, looked up at the sky. “Who cares? We have those kids to save.” Her gaze fell back to me. “Only motivation I need.” Pulling out her broken swords, she clanged them together and looked at me.

Reached for my hatchet but came up empty. “Left it in the shell.”

“We’ll get you a new sword.”

“How many monsters are between where we are and where we’re going?”

Vera shrugged. “Got my swords. I’ll protect you, baby.” Her smile reminded me of the lifetime I’d come to know and love her. Couldn’t help but smile along with her. “Besides,” she swayed her hips extravagantly as she approached, her broken swords spinning slowly in her hands, “we don’t need her magic. We have the whole forest of fungi to protect us.”

She stopped right in front of me, her hips pushed forward to touch me. Her smile swallowed my vision. Everything else disappeared. My hands on her hips, I pulled her closer, my left hand rising to her flat stomach, to the bottom of her breast. She looped her hands around my neck, the pommels of her swords digging into my back, the back of the blade resting gently against the back of my head. Cold metal on my newly shaved head—the newness of the sensation sent shivers down my spine all the way to my toes.

Eye to eye, she kept smiling at me. “We’re no one anymore. We don’t even have to be Vera and Virgil once we leave this giant woman behind. We don’t have to do anything for anyone but each other.”

“Those kids—”

“Fuck those kids,” she whispered, still smiling. “Not really, but we don’t have to seek them. Even if we wanted to, could we ever find them? Even if we find them, could we save them?”

“The curse. We need—”

She shook her head. “Stupid boy. We don’t need to do anything.” As she spoke, the purplish blackness rose to her neck and coiled there, coloring her entire neck black. “What’s a curse? Banishment,” she hissed. “That’s a curse. The curse,” she glanced down as if to acknowledge the black mass beneath her skin, “don’t mean shit but that now we’re free. Severed from who and what we were.”

“Your mother—”

“Is dead.” Her voice a slap. “I will never offer sacrifice or pray at her grave. I’ll never sing with my friends and family to recall her. She’s with me wherever I go, but I’ll never be with her again.” Glassy eyed, she did nothing to hide her tears or the emotion in her voice. “My mother will never know my children or grandchildren. She will never know me. And so I will no longer be that person I was. She belongs to my mother and our people.

“We’ve been banished, Virgil. We’re free.”

Then her lips were on mine and any confusion or longing or disagreement fell from me. Her swords dropped and her hands gripped my hips. She pulled me hard towards her and I unbuttoned her shirt just enough to get a hand inside. Then struggled to undue her trousers with one hand.

“Babies!” Lady Agova clapped her hands twice.

I opened my eyes and saw her dressed again in her long white coat, but Vera ignored her. Kept kissing me, kept her hands on me, and so I followed her lead and ignored Lady Agova.

“Are you serious right now?” Lady Agova’s disbelief got me laughing, but I tried to hold it in, keep all my focus on Vera. “Seriously?” She clapped two more times. “I have a job for you two so listen up.”

Vera leaned her forehead against mine but spoke to Lady Agova. “Your magic didn’t work.”

“It worked. Not the way I wanted, but it worked. Worked better than it ever has before. Now gather round, babies. Momma’s going to explain the world to you and then we’re going to hunt a monster.”

“No,” Vera said,

Lady Agova laughed that sweet, high laugh. “I know how you die.”

Vera sighed and turned away from me, back to Lady Agova.

Lady Agova stood, arms akimbo, legs apart, chin high. “I have seen how you two die.”

A HUNTING

I

Lady Agova didn't like the looks of the sky so she invited us back inside. "Too deep in the night anyway. Just promise you won't start fucking when I go to sleep." She laughed before either of us could say anything then stepped aside and motioned for us to get back into her shell.

Vera went first. She had changed. Even her posture and the way she moved. There was always a stiffness to her back home. A quiet shyness. But here, nameless and kinless, she became graceful or careless. Almost animalistic as she moved into the shell, the bright glow engulfing her. Following her in, nausea roiled within me. My curse hated it in the shell as much as I did. I pressed my hand to my chest and felt the heat of the curse beneath my skin. That black fire bruising. A ghost trapped within my body.

Lady Agove looked in on us and took a long inhale. Nodding, she said, “Yeah, that’s a storm.” She came inside and closed the door.

The shell was once more clean, as if nothing had happened. The lifelessness of the shell made my head swim and my breath come shallow. Vera took my hand and squeezed it, told me I’d be all right. It didn’t help, but also it helped a lot.

Lady Agova yawned and took off her big hat revealing the seams crossing over her shaved skull. She tapped rhythmically on the wall and a slat opened from the wall. It swung on a hinge until it made a table that crossed the entire shell. Lady Agova undid her long coat and tossed it on the ground beneath the new table. Nearly naked before us, she unzipped her long boots slowly.

Vera squeezed my hand and I tried not to stare as Lady Agova got naked before us. With her boots off, she undid the corset too, and let it fall to the ground, releasing her breasts that she didn’t bother covering. Completely shaved from head to toe, it made her body seem even more inhuman. Her huge breasts hovered strangely on her chest as if they were bolted to her ribcage rather than grown there. Not meaning to, I looked from Lady Ago-

va's breasts to Vera beside me. Vera punched me in the arm and I laughed.

Lady Agova rolled onto the table, then grabbed her coat and threw it over her body as a blanket.

Vera's mouth hung open. "You're going to sleep?"

"Hm? Yeah." She tapped on the ground and a slot opened up. From it rose a dozen tiny tentacles that stretched up towards Lady Agova's head.

Before I could warn her, Vera leapt forward and grabbed them all in one hand, unsheathing one of her broken swords with the other.

"Stop that," Lady Agova swatted Vera's sword away. "Sit back down, idiot." Her voice cold. She reached up to the back of her head and pressed her thumb behind her ear. Like a latch releasing, her skull popped open and the tentacles shot out of Vera's grip and stabbed into the back of Lady Agova's head.

Vera's face went slack, her mouth hanging open. I couldn't help it anymore. I pushed open the door and vomited in a sickly stream of bile. I spat and vomited and spat again. Whatever curse was in us, Lady Agova had her own curse.

Couldn't tell which one was worse. Didn't want to know.

Lady Agova sighed behind me. "Come back in. You two babies need to learn a bit about the world, I guess, before we move forward."

II

“What are you?”

Lady Agova snorted. “I’m what god and I made of me.” She bared her glass teeth more than smiled. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-five,” Vera lied.

Lady Agova said, “Liar. You’re pubescent. I can smell it on you and Virgil. That boy’s so horny he’s likely to pass out from all the blood flowing away from his head. You say you’re chasing a man with antlers? You want to know how fucking stupid you sound when you say that?”

She waited for the nothing we had to say but let her waiting become the statement. Nodding, she continued. “The world is full of monsters. Some are made. Some make themselves. Some are born. Some are created. Some are dummies like you, nat-

ural as the womb you came from but so hideously freakish in the jelly of your brain that you're as likely to eat a human as you are to fall in love with them. You want to know if I can help you find this antlered idiot? Yes. I can. But it won't matter. He might be dead already or dead in a week or a month. Those kids he stole—you may not want to save them when you find them. Best thing for them might be that hatchet and those swords, you get me?

“The world is a cruel, dead place, babies. It's a broken place full of broken people. But we can help make it a little less bleak. You can help me take back the night from the monsters prowling beneath the stars and moon.

“Vampires.” She said the word slowly as if demanding we memorize it. “For centuries, they've taken hold of the darkness. You've probably felt them if you were ever out alone at night. That tingling sensation at the back of your neck. That whisper of the wind that sounded like your name, or maybe just any name. The touch of cold on your skin when you should have been sweating. That feeling of being watched, of the night embracing you.” She nodded slowly. “I know where gods go

to die. I've seen them. I've ripped open their jaws and pulled out their throats only to have that same freak bite out the neck of my friends and lovers.

"Thought you were one of us from the way you're all shaved. That's on me. But we all saw the cards. Can't fake that. Can't even—" She looked away, sighed. She fumbled with her coat and pulled out the deck, stretched it out towards us.

Vera took it. Opened it. Taking out card after card, none of them were the same. She flipped through them quickly, lingering a moment on the pinwheel of swords that was drawn for her. She pulled it out and set it aside and did the same for each of the cards Lady Agova pulled for her.

None of the cards showed a hanging man, let alone one who looked like me.

"Where's the—"

"There isn't one," Lady Agova laughed a dead laugh. Caustic, the way it barked out of her. "I've only seen the hanged man twice in my life." She raised one finger. "The night my mother died, she did a reading on herself. Didn't even finish it. The moment the hanged man showed up on her table, she went and shot the top of her head clean off."

She raised another finger. “The day my daughter was born.”

We waited for the end of that story but she kept moving. “Truth is, I don’t know what’s going to happen to you.” Her eyes on mine, weighing me, studying me.

And I felt so small and insignificant there before her. The size of her and the intensity of her attention threatened to overwhelm me again. Even without the fire burning in my veins, desire still swelled within me.

“When the cards change the rules it means anything’s possible. Lucienne ate all four of my hunters last night. She would’ve had me too if I—” She broke off, quirked her mouth to the left, then right. Sniffed. “My dead hunters were made of flesh and bone, just like all of us. Yes, even the ones with metal bones like me. But you,” Lady Agova pointed a big finger at me, “you’re not playing by the rules.”

“What about me?”

Lady Agova turned to Vera and I felt the absence of her regard. “You’ll die far from here as a different person. You’ll wear names the way you once wore clothing. You’ll be known by names you never

took for yourself.” Lady Agova smiled. “You’re a wolf dressed as a woman. You may become the monster or every monster will fear you, as they fear me.

“Now,” Lady Agova yawned, “we sleep.” She clapped her hands twice and the light left the room, shrouding us in a darkness so deep I couldn’t see my hands before my face.

Then the thunder shook the ground and the rain pelted the shell.

III

Vera and I curled up together, our bodies entwined to stay warm. Her head on my chest, my arms wrapped round her, the darkness so absolute, her smell filled my lungs when I breathed. The touch of her body on mine, in my hands. The barriers between us dissolving in that utter blackness. Then her whispered voice in my ear, tingling against my skin.

“What should we do?”

“Go with her.”

“Why?”

“Where else would we go?”

“Anywhere. We could go anywhere. Be anyone. All that we’ve seen today—the world is not what we thought it was. It’s not like the witches said. Or, maybe it is. Maybe this is all evil. Maybe it’s all some terrible diseased magic, but maybe it’s

something else too. We've spent our whole lives living in a small, sequestered world inside of a large open world. I want to see what's out there. Want to understand how someone like Lady Agova and the antlered man and those monsters we killed earlier all exist together."

"We might die."

"We will die. But first we can live."

"Lost in the blue. That's what Mudd called it when I used to stare up in the sky. He knew I was imagining worlds beyond. Different lives. I felt often—I felt that there was more to life than practicing the sword and cultivating mushrooms and hiding each night in the belly of those same fungi beneath the skin of the earth. I just never thought..."

"No one loved me like she did. My momma, I mean. I never imagined a life without her. I spent the last week of her life watching her bleed to death. Blood just pouring out of every hole in her body and even her fingernails and toenails. She begged me...near the end..."

"You don't have to—"

"She begged me to kill her. She gave me her sword and put the edge right against her own neck.

She looked me right in the eyes and begged me only to pull or push down. Ten days she suffered. Ten days she just kept bleeding. Bled more blood than I thought someone had inside them. She begged me and begged me and I just couldn't."

"You loved her."

"I should have killed her."

"You can't take back the love you gave—"

"It's because I loved her that I should have killed her. It's because of the love she gave me that I should have killed her."

"She was your momma."

"I still see her shadow even in this room. I see her there like a darker black against the blackness. Her ghost escaped but I still feel her with me. I can't take back the choice I made or the love that I have for her, but neither can I forgive myself for not giving her the release she begged for. She begged to die and I kept her alive and suffering because I was afraid of the way I'd hurt myself. I feared that I'd always view myself as the person who killed my own momma but instead all I can think about is the way I didn't end her suffering."

"You can't change what you've done."

“No, but I can change who I become. We don’t have to be who we were. We don’t need to believe what we were taught to believe. They took our names and our past. We have been burned from the memory of our people and sent out here nameless and kinless to die or survive. We have been severed from their beliefs. From the black heart and its maelstrom and even from the evil skies. I choose life for me. I choose life because I couldn’t allow myself to choose death for her. And so now I see her always in the depths of night like a shadow against the blackness. A darker shade of black. My mother’s ghost that didn’t escape. She didn’t escape.”

“So what do you want to do?”

“I want us to choose. Together. Choose to live, even if it’s hard. Even when it’s weird. And if the last day has told me anything, it’s that everything is about to get a whole lot stranger in our lives. She’s lying to us, you know.”

“Yeah. About what?”

“She doesn’t know what the cards say. Not about me and definitely not about you. But I do.”

“Tell me.”

“You’ve lost everything. You’ve lost your name and your family and your life. You were an orphan. You’ve known loss since the day memory sparked in your skull. You’ve known death since you were a child. Losing yourself in this banishment has turned your face back to the child you were haunted by the death of those who loved you so much that they died to bring you into the world. Now, you’ll lose your face and everything else to become the person you were always meant to be.”

“All that from the one card?”

“Doubt me?”

“Never.”

“Wasn’t just one card either. Over and over. The deck or whatever magic’s in it was telling you as loudly as it could that your life is about to change. You can cling to the past and die or you can reach for the future and live.”

When the wolves howled, she clung to me tightly. My own fingers digging into her flesh.

Sleep did come. Eventually.

IV

“Stand back, dummies.” Lady Agova tapped a rhythm into the shell and its walls became solid and black, no longer appearing translucent. Another sequence of taps and the shell collapsed in on itself. Folding and folding and folding again, the structure slowly disappeared into itself.

Lady Agova didn’t ask us if we were coming with her in the morning. She just treated the question as already answered. And though we weren’t sure we were going with her, we found ourselves dragged along by the wake of her determination.

When the shell stopped folding, it was about the size of her deck of cards. She picked it up and dropped it in her coat pocket. She turned to us and said, “Lucienne’s young. She’s powerful and vicious and more than a little rabid—that tempers

with age—but we can take her. She was heading north after she ate my friends.”

“Who’s Lucienne?”

Lady Agova looked me up and down. “Know what a vampire does to you?”

I turned to Vera but she stood there like the word meant less than nothing. Which it did.

“How about wendigo?”

“Like a cannibal.”

Lady Agova shrugged. “Sure. Except the vampire doesn’t eat you. Not really. She drinks your blood. Drinks all of it, including your ghost.”

I sucked in a breath and Vera squared her shoulders and said, “Just another kind of monster.”

Lady Agova nodded. “Vampires are dangerous. Strong and fast and able to rip your throat out with their jaws. Worse, they can make more vampires. Some have been alive for hundreds of years and they only grow stronger as they age. If you think what I did yesterday was magic, wait until we find the vampire who made Lucienne.” Her voice caught on the name. She sniffed and coughed like she needed to clear her throat.

Vera said, “Who was she?”

“She’s a vampire now. That’s all. She’ll lead us to the one who made her. All vampires come from a single source but we don’t know how to find that source. A single monster who made a lineage of monsters who continue to create new vampires. If I can find that source, I can end vampires completely. That’s the idea, anyway. Cut off the head of the wolf and all that. Now, come on dummies.” She smiled, hefted her big metal weapon onto her shoulder, and started walking north.

Vera and I stared at one another for a while. Vera shrugged, sighed, followed.

So I followed.

V

Lady Agova walked the whole day but we had to jog to keep up with her long strides. As morning became afternoon, we stopped and collected mushrooms to eat. Lady Agova set down a black disk of metal, then dumped the foraged mushrooms onto it. They sizzled and began cooking, flamelessly.

“What is that?”

Lady Agova sighed, “You really are like babies.”

“Teach us then, mamma.”

Lady Agova didn’t laugh like I expected her to. She blinked rapidly, then wiped at her eyes. Swallowing, she sniffed and muttered that they’d be ready soon. She stood and walked off to the trees, leaving us to stare at the cooking mushrooms.

Eyes wide, Vera opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came to her.

“You remember that wolf we saw a few years ago?”

Vera looked at me like I was an idiot, like I couldn't have said something less clear to her.

“This was the Year of Falling Snow. A wolf limped into the village and we all watched it from below the way we always do when the wolves come. It had a great wound in its hind-leg, from hip to paw. Like something had tried to slice through it. Was Kotu who pointed out that it was pregnant. Its stomach bloated and distended, but when the other wolves approached to do whatever wolves do out of sympathy, this momma wolf sneered and snapped her jaws at them. They kept trying to comfort her through the night but eventually abandoned her.

“In the morning, the pregnant wolf was still there. The witches told everyone to stay inside but me and Bugg—”

“Of course.”

“Yeah. So we sneak out because of course we do. I asked you to come with us—”

“I remember now. I was—”

“We were kids.”

“It’s all right. I was afraid. Can’t say I won’t be afraid again the next time we see wolves or when we see this vampire.”

“That’s how the wolf was when Bugg and I found her. She lashed out at the other wolves out of fear. Fear and desperation, I guess. When we came upon her, she watched us poised like she’d swallow us whole, like she wasn’t dying right there in front of us. But I could smell it. Her pups inside were stuck and she was dying from them. Never mind the gash in her leg that hobbled her. She could’ve run down both of us even with only three legs. She stared at us with such fierce determination, though, that I nearly forgot that she was dying. Already dead, really. That’s why her pack abandoned her. Why she refused their help.”

Vera gestured for me to get to the point.

I nodded towards Lady Agova. “That’s what she reminds me of. She’s hurting in ways she can’t tell us. Even if she could, we may not understand her.”

Lady Agova returned after a while and we ate the mushrooms, then she gathered more, cooked them, and we ate more. Kept eating until we had

our fill. First time I'd been full since the antlered man cursed me.

VI

At night, we slept in the pitch-black shell. Lady Agova slept on her bed while Vera and I curled together in the dark where Vera told me of her momma. Told me the things only a daughter knows. Told me the things I never would have known because I never had a momma.

Her body pressed against mine, I dissolved into her and her memories of her momma. The ghost haunting her. At times, I thought even I could see her as a darker shadow against the blackness.

The days ran together as Lady Agova told us about the world we lived beside but never knew. Most of it slid right off me because I had no reference for what she meant.

All this time later, I'd thank her if I could for all that she tried to warn us and explain to us, but we

were like babies in those days. We knew nothing about anything.

We tracked Lucienne through the forest following signs that only Lady Agova recognized. We knew we were getting close as the bodies began piling up.

VII

Four days out from where we met Lady Agova, we came across the first corpse. Lady Agova had been following signs we never saw, though I felt them like a texture against my skin. Felt them in my curse swimming beneath my flesh. That throbbing thrum of the black heart beating for the world to keep going. A cadence of infinite flux birthing all realities. Was like my curse held a sliver of this power or was connected to it in a way that my ghost trapped in the meat of my body was unaware.

Vera and I never spoke of the curse but I wondered if she felt it too. The way this curse had grafted itself into our bodies.

Lady Agova held up her hand for us to stop. Obedient children that we were, we did. She sighed heavily. “Oh, Lucienne.” She said it less like a curse

and more like a disappointment. As if the sculpture Lucienne had made of this human didn't live up to expectation.

But it did. At least for me. Had I any curiosity about the monstrosity of the vampire we hunted, the vomit I left in that clearing washed away any doubts.

At first glance, I nearly missed what was right before me. His head was at eye level with a placid expression, like we were invited guests walking in on his breakfast. Almost I expected a greeting.

But his head was suspended there. Connected still to the rest of his body, but not in the way anyone would recognize. His neck became two separate spindles twirling away and upward from his head, somehow kept in place as if the spindles were crafted from metal rather than flesh.

These spindles curved down and away before curling upwards where they connected to his chest, kept whole. Bloodless. The flesh had a tight brittleness that I noticed even from a hundred feet away. Like it would crack and fissure rather than bend. There hung his chest, a hole scooped out of the center leaving a reddish black abyss where a heart once beat. Where the arms should have

been were, once again, spindles looping out and away from the torso. The fleshy spindle thin as my finger and twisting and twisting and twisting before the spiraling flesh thickened to hands about fifteen feet from the torso. Where legs should have been was what appeared like a blanket of flesh. Featureless and flat and wide, it stretched from the waist like a curtain up into the trees where I saw no more of it.

Lady Agova approached, ran a hand over the man's calm face. She shook her head and removed her hat. "I'm sorry." The words came strained and quiet. Removing her hand, she told Vera and me to cut him down from the tree

"Fuck no," Vera held a hand over her nose. "It reeks."

"The body's rotting," Lady Agova stared up at the perverse sculpture made of human bone and flesh. "It doesn't look like it but it must be rotting on the inside." She pointed to the hole in the chest. "It looks black in there. Festering with maggots, I imagine." She sighed again. "Come on. Cut him down, babies."

When neither Vera nor I did a single thing but stare and try to keep our food in our stomachs,

Lady Agova lifted her big metal weapon. Rather than smash it into the body, she lifted it with one hand, though it must have weighed as much as I did and pointed it at the man's chest.

The whine of rapid vibration for a moment. Then the chest shattered into millions of fragments like shards of glass the color of bloodless flesh. These shards rained down on Lady Agova's hat and coat but she ignored the shower.

"Come on," she said. "We're close."

Lady Agova kept walking. The day was young and we had miles to go.

Vera scooped up a handful of fleshy shards and held them in her hands. The way she stared down at these fragments of a person sent shivers down my spine. Sweat broke out on my neck, my forehead.

I gagged and she smiled, said, "Feels like potshards. Here, feel."

The vomit just kept coming.

VIII

The next day, after walking past a trail of dismembered bodies and grotesque sculptures, we stared at a mountain of flesh. Five flayed heads lay before it. The muscle and tongue and eyes still attached but the bodies had been severed.

Lady Agova was already lifting one of them in her hands. Before her, a mosaic of skin hues stitched together to form a large canvas. Browns and pinks and some slightly reddish. The canvas stretched between two huge toadstools rising higher than the leafy canopy. Toadstools reaching for the sky.

Kept my eyes up there for a while to keep from dry heaving. The stink of the place overwhelmed me. Like blood and ejaculate rotted together in a cauldron.

Vera said, “How’s she making these?”

“How would you make them?” Lady Agova sounded far away. The life and energy stolen from her voice. I brought my gaze back down to her. Slumped shoulders as she stared into the flayed head in her hands.

“Wouldn’t.” Vera said.

I said, “Know him?”

“Hm?” Lady Agova turned to me, then back to the head. “Oh, no.” She let it drop from her hands. A soft thud on the grass. “I thought they may have been my companions, but...” She trailed off.

“Vampires always do this shit?”

Lady Agova ignored Vera’s question. “She always loved to paint.” The words fell like stones from her mouth to land in still water. The ripples spreading out until they touched my skin. The curse responded and a hunger grew in me. Only then did I fully see the ghastly sculpture in front of me.

A mountain of flesh stitched together and framed by the bones of many bodies. On the canvas written, I supposed, in blood were symbols that had no meaning for me, but Lady Agova was transfixed by them. Ears and lips visible on the canvas made it even more grotesque. The seams of

skin freed from bodies. I asked her what they said but she only shrugged.

“Come on,” she said.

“Where’s the rest of them?”

I turned to Vera who stared at the canvas with eyes open wide, like she was seeing the moon for the first time. Like the way she sometimes looked at me when we were growing up. It chilled me, made my curse roil through my guts and chest.

“Come along, babies.”

We followed her away but brought the reek of death with us. As we walked through the forest following the trail of bodies, we heard singing. Quiet and far away at first. A melody difficult to place. A rocking, swaying rhythm that seeped into my limbs and hips.

Vera bobbed her head in time with the melody as we walked.

Lady Agova turned to us sharply and hissed at us to stop dancing.

“We’re not—”

Lady Agova sliced her hand through the air, demanding our silence. She gestured towards the swords at Vera’s hips and the hatchet at mine.

Slowly, then, she crept forward. The song growing louder.

IX

The trees and toadstools grew closer together as we followed the music. Far more trees of wood than toadstools this far from our village. Every step taken tentatively, I held my breath, even, to keep from being heard. If I had known how, I would have slowed the beating of my heart. Figure a monster who drank blood could hear that kind of thing.

The song swirled around me and the curse blazed beneath my skin. It coiled round my right wrist and hand. Gripping the hatchet tighter and tighter, wondering if I could snap it with just the squeeze of my hand, the curse tasted violence in the air. Or wanted violence.

Kotu's words returned to me. The curse was flaying my humanity away. Indulging in violence would only speed this process. I tried relaxing my

grip, but the curse swelled within my arm, gripping it still harder, as if I could rip the hatchet from my own hands. I turned to Vera to see how she handled her curse, but the sight of her made me take a step back. Both swords in her hands, eyes wide and mouth slightly open.

A predator. A demon in her skin. I gripped her shoulder but she didn't look at me until I shook her slightly and hissed her name.

"What?" The snap of her whisper and the seething scowl caused me to recoil.

"The curse."

Vera thrust her head towards me. "What?"

"It wants this."

"Good. So do I." She kept walking. Had to catch up with Lady Agova who had stopped behind a wide tree. The only one wide enough to hide her. She motioned for us to come.

The song grew louder with every step, but also dug into me. The sounds and the melody plunged into my flesh and caught there, like hooks. The pressure in the air increased and my ears popped, my eyes dried. I blinked and rubbed at them. My cursed hand hot to the touch, still fiercely holding

the hatchet. The hatchet stolen from one of those raiders and only left to me because of its taint.

The leaves rustled and blew from a wind coming from the otherside of the tree Lady Agova hid behind.

Nothing about this felt good but the violet blackness beneath my skin thirsted for more. Like a wolf in heat. Like a hungry baby.

I swallowed but my mouth was so dry my mouth just kind of clicked.

I made it to Vera and Lady Agova. Lady Agova motioned with her head to the trees behind her. That big weapon in her hands made her seem almost small. She cradled it on her chest and took slow, deep breaths.

Slowly, I crept to the edge of the tree. Took a deep breath and looked.

X

She was a child sitting in the center of what appeared to be a tiny tornado. Her mop of black hair twisted and tangled atop her head. Her face serene as she sang, staring down at the head she held in her hands. The song seemed to have no words, just a gentle melody rolling along on vowels that swelled and spread, the cyclone rising and falling in sync with the melody she sang.

A child. Ten years old. maybe less or more, but so small. Thin as a bird, her skin gripped her skeleton tightly like she had starved too long. I'd seen such children. Those who never grew up. Those who broke their mommas to pieces.

Dressed in bloody rags, had I not scene her sculptures, I'd think she was some terribly abused girl. But she was the monster. Our monster.

Stretching forth a finger with a nail long as a knife, she dug it into the head's skin and sliced. Gripping the opening with her other hand, she sliced once more with the long nail. She tugged open this flap, slicing along with her finger. The rough scrape of her nail on bone radiated down my spine and I ground my teeth to keep from screaming. She worked the nail through the flesh of the head until the bone was revealed an inch at a time.

Was only then, as I began to look away, that I saw what she sat on. A throne of bone. So many bones. Didn't know how it held together. Didn't want to know. Couldn't look away though.

A shadow in the trees past the girl and her throne of bone. The glint of metal.

Vera.

I closed my eyes and took a breath, tried to settle myself. The curse pulsed in my hand, furiously hungry for the death of this child. This monster. This artist of horrors.

When I opened my eyes, Vera sprinted towards the child from behind, a broken sword ready in each hand. She slashed down with both swords at the child before I even got out from around the tree. The child pulled her long nail from the head

she flayed and without even turning to meet Vera head on, she slashed her nail against the sword in Vera's right hand. A clang, like metal on metal, Vera's right sword struck the left sword and, together, the two broken swords cut into the throne of bone. With her other hand, the girl smashed the flayed head into Vera's temple.

Vera crumpled like her bones dissolved.

"No!" The word shouted out of me. I came straight at the child who turned to me with a bored expression. The curse pumped fire through my blood and time dilated. The tiny tornado surrounding the girl disappeared. Its sudden absence as much a shock to her as to me. The girl turned away from me and sneered at Lady Agova and whatever she'd done. I threw the momentum of my sprinting into the hatchet. Swinging from knee level up towards her head, I put all my weight and the power of my curse into it.

But the child only grabbed the blade of my hatchet between her fingers. Like hitting a wall, all the momentum stalled to a complete halt. The impact running up to my shoulder joint, vibrating violently, threatening to knock the joint out of socket. She tried to yank the hatchet from me but

my grip was so strong that she simply threw me into a towering toadstool a few feet from her.

My breath exploded out of me first when I hit the toadstool and hung there for what seemed a long time, then the long descent down to the ground constricted my chest further. Gasping for breath in shriveled lungs, I still held my hatchet and tried to rise. Both of her feet landed on my chest. Felt as if the front of my ribcage hit the back of my ribcage. A whiteout to my vision and then the blurred face of the vampire staring down at me.

“No,” I wheezed, pitifully. My curse swung the hatchet with no help from my body but she kicked it away from her, launching the back of my hand back to the dirt, still gripping the hatchet.

A raucous vibration to my right and then the girl disappeared from my chest, followed by cracking wood off to my left.

Lady Agova’s powerful hand gripped me by the chest and pulled me back to my feet. I followed her gaze to where a tree snapped in half. Between us and the tree lay Vera. I hurried to her side and called to her repeatedly, slapping her face to wake her up.

Her eyes opened, the pupil sliding back and forth like she couldn't see me. Alive, though. That was good enough.

I turned back to Lady Agova. "The fuck is she?"

"Vampire," Lady Agova raised her big weapon again, pointed right at Vera and me. A sharp whine and then that wild vibrating, I grabbed Vera and pulled her away. The vampire leapt back into view, eight of her fingernails now long as my forearm. The vibration seemed to emit out of the weapon like a wave of noise that crashed midair into the vampire's chest, launching her back crashing into the trees.

A low whine that rose in pitch until it became a word. "Mommy."

Lady Agova ran into the trees and I followed.

XI

Lady Agova chased the vampire who flashed like a shadow darting between trees as she ran from Lady Agova, her laughter ringing out through the forest, echoing from all directions, confusing me. Lady Agova was too fast to keep up with, but I persisted, my lungs heaving, even as the fog blossomed around us. Just kept running in the same direction, but the sounds of the forest played tricks on me. The cackling laughter surrounded.

I slowed and turned back to where I came from. Vera was still there. The fog lighter in that direction and thickening with each step towards the vampire and Lady Agova. The curse pulsed and I felt the swelling rage of the black heart beneath my feet. That was reason enough for me to return.

“Where are they?” Vera leaned against a tree catching her breath about a hundred feet from where I left her.

I gestured behind me.

Vera nodded and began jogging. I grabbed her arm and she stopped. “What?”

“We won’t find them. They’re too fast. Too much fog.”

Vera’s brow furrowed. “Can’t you smell them?” She turned and ran.

I followed.

Always following since my banishment.

Vera seemed to know the way. Tired and beaten as we were, Vera never slowed even when the fog thickened to the point of blindness. The cackling and the clang of metal on metal surrounded me, making me dizzy. But I kept going. Kept following Vera.

The sounds grew louder and more chaotic, swirling in from every direction at once, and then we were through the fog. Vera ducked and I threw myself to the ground, not knowing why. Lady Agova flew over our heads, her white coat splashed red with bright blood. She crashed into a toadstool

and fell limp to the ground. Vera leapt towards the vampire but I went to Lady Agova.

She spat blood into the dirt as she rose and pushed me out of the way before leaping back into the fight.

Vera fought furiously, slashing both swords so fast that it was difficult to follow her movements, but the vampire ducked and dodged. Untouchable for a moment, the vampire's smile wide and red. Vera screamed, slashing faster and faster. Then Lady Agova was in there with her throwing punches and kicks at the little vampire.

The smile became jubilant on the vampire's face and she laughed as she kept dodging. Lady Agova and Vera worked in unison, like they had trained together for years. Vera slashed her broken swords uselessly through the air. The moment she left an opening, Lady Agova's massive legs kicked into that space to keep the vampire from gaining an advantage.

Vera roared my name and I leapt into it.

The vampire's smile tightened and her laughter stopped. No longer able to dodge all three of us, she used her long bladelike nails to block the

swords and hatchet. Used her feet and knees to block Lady Agova.

Mystifying how such a tiny creature had so much power, but Lady Agova's massive legs swinging into this child should have knocked her sprawling away. Instead, she kicked into Lady Agova's thighs, redirecting her kicks or shutting them down before their momentum became anything to worry about.

The vampire went on the offensive then. She blocked my hatchet swing with one hand, then blocked Vera's swords with the other. Before Vera could rear back for another strike, the vampire vomited a stream of blood into my face.

It burned. Burned like nothing I'd ever experienced. Like I pushed my whole head into a fire. I fell back and away, wiping the blood from my face so I could see. The heat of it scorched my hand and I heard the sizzling of my own flesh from all directions because it was inside me. But the curse powered me on, kept me going. With me out of the fight for a moment, the laughter returned and became that same singing we had followed to find her.

My memories of the rest of the fight flash past me like images scattered. Like Lady Agova's cards promising to tell my future. Images without context or meaning. The pain of my melting face at war with the curse's desire for violence and blood. A chaotic swirl within me that nearly drowned me.

I recreate it and hope I get it right. If Lady Agova was still with me, I'd tell it true. If Vera—

If only. So much of my life because of choices I barely remember.

I saw Lady Agova's big weapon and picked it up. Absurdly heavy, I held it with both hands, weighed down by it. "Lady Agova," I gasped.

The vampire launched into me with both feet, knocking me to the ground. There on the ground, my face burned ever hotter. The scent of my own cooking flesh filled my mouth. Lady Agova's weapon fell from my hands as I tumbled backwards.

Standing on top of Lady Agova's huge weapon, the vampire turned away from me, spread her hands, fingers splayed, the bladelike nails forming a defensive net. Then she spoke.

XII

“Lady Agova, so bright and fair. Lady Agova, let down your hair.” Her voice was high and bright. Childlike. Looking at her from behind, she seemed even more like a little girl. A feral little girl.

Lady Agova’s lower lip trembled. Vera prepared her stance to strike forward, but Lady Agova put a hand on her chest, stopping her. Vera raised an eyebrow but listened. Lady Agova said, “Lucienne...” The name came out husky and strained.

The vampire’s laughter followed, cutting like a knife through the air. “Do you know why he hasn’t killed you yet?”

Lady Agova wiped the blood from her mouth, wiped at the slow trickle of it spilling out her nose.

“It’s funnier to torture you, Lady Agova.” She spoke the last two words with such sneering con-

tempt that I expected Lady Agova to react with fury. To react with anything. But she only stared at the vampire.

“I can heal you, Lucienne.” She shook her head, voice cracking. “I can save you.”

The vampire laughed. A vicious laugh. No longer high and bright but sharp like a sword. “I’m going to cut off your arms and legs. Then I’ll make you watch as I drink your friends dry. Then, I’ll take you back to that fetid city where you can buy or grow some new limbs. When you bring more hunters to me, I’ll make you watch me kill them too. I’ll rip your fucking heart out and return you to the city, have them make you one of silicon and pig and iron. I won’t let you die, Lady Agova, until you beg me and all your dead gods for release.”

Lady Agova shook her head. “Lucienne.” Her posture sagged, her hands limp at her side. “Lucienne.” Her lip trembled and her eyes filled with tears.

The vampire screamed and my vision blurred. Ears ringing, I clapped my hands over them. When the scream stopped and I pulled my hands away, they were slick with blood. My blood. The vampire, no longer on Lady Agova’s weapon, slashed

her claws against Vera's sword. Behind Vera, Lady Agova wept as she stood there.

Vera moved like lightning. So fast that her swords blurred but the vampire worked her backwards, pressing in on her.

Forgotten, I grabbed my hatchet and stood. Threw it as hard as I could at the vampire just as Vera tried to shove the broken blade of her right sword into the vampire's mouth. The vampire threw herself backwards, away from the swords, and the hatchet buried its blade to the left of her spine, knocking her face first to the ground. Without hesitation, Vera brought both swords down on either wrist, severing the vampire's hands.

The vampire screamed and I vomited a torrent of blood. Vera still stood over her, though. No blood flowed from the vampire's severed hands. The scream shattered the very air around me, but Vera raised her swords high once more and slammed them into the vampire's back.

Lady Agova screamed with the vampire and when Vera raised her swords to plunge them once more into the vampire, Lady Agova grabbed both of Vera's wrists with one hand. Tossed her to the side like she was a child's doll. Still crying,

she wiped her eyes like the tears would stop and scooped up the tiny vampire in her huge hands.

Cradling the vampire in her arms, she stroked the tangled mess of hair away from Lucienne's face. Lucienne's eyes fluttered and her breathing slowed to shallow, wet gasps. Lady Agova rocked her in her arms. "It's gonna be all right, baby." While the tears rained down, Lady Agova began singing.

Singing a wordless melody. One I'd come to know.

When Vera turned to me, she gasped in horror, and I collapsed into a harsh burning blackness.

**NEVER
COMING
HOME**

I

“**Y**our face,” Vera said when I woke. I touched my face but felt only bandages.

It burned. I winced at the effort to move my lips.

Vera shook her head. “Don’t. Don’t do that.”

“What happened?”

She swallowed and looked to Lady Agova who rocked her child back and forth, still singing. Eyes back to me, she said, “The vampire’s spit melted all the skin off your face. Lady Agova thinks that’s how she...how she made those sculptures of bone. She said lots of vampires have weird powers. Most of them dangerous.”

“I lost my face.”

Vera didn’t smile. “Lady Agova said we can get you a new one. She wrapped you up and smeared something all over your head. She said it should keep the pain away.” Vera lifted a jar of something.

“She said we need to put this on you again tonight, when we change your bandages.”

“Lost my face.” I stared up into the blank evil sky peering through the canopy of leaves and toadstool caps.

“First your name and kin. Now your face. You’re a dead man, Virgil.”

II

Lady Agova carried her dying daughter the rest of the day. Vera and I followed, our weapons still in our hands. We exchanged only a few words, for little needed to be understood.

Lucienne was Lady Agova's daughter. She didn't have to tell us. We felt it. Knew it in our blood and bones. While still in her arms, we saw the echo of Lady Agova on Lucienne's face. Her breathing had stopped but she was still a monster. Didn't know if death meant the same thing to a vampire.

When night came, Lady Agova kept walking and we followed.

I whispered to Vera, "What about the wolves?"

Lady Agova said, "The wolves will fear me if they come anywhere near." Didn't even break stride. Just kept walking.

Vera's eyebrows rose and stayed up. She shrugged at me and followed. "She's got it figured."

III

We didn't stop walking for two days. By then Lucienne stank. When we urged Lady Agova to stop, she fell to her knees and wept into Lucienne's lifeless body.

IV

“I found out how to save her. How to turn her back into my little girl. There’s a witch in the Necropolis district of Avalon who said she can excise the vampiric parts and rebuild and replace those parts to make her whole. Didn’t believe her at first because why would anyone believe that shit? That’s how the witches get work. Feeding off our anxieties and fear. But I tested it. Brought her a vampire and watched the whole time as she butchered that monster until the monster became whole again. Became someone’s husband. Someone’s father. He had a new eye and heart, new lungs and had to have his intestines and stomach replaced, but he was still him.

“Nearly drove him crazy, though.” Lady Agova sniffed, wiped her mouth. “A few weeks after being

healed, he killed his wife and daughter. When I asked him why, you know what he said?”

Vera and I didn't say shit.

“He said that he couldn't forget—” Sobs broke through, shaking her massive body. She sniffed, spat. Wiped her nose. Her mouth. Coughed to clear it all away. Stroked Lucienne's dead face. “Said the memories of when he was a vampire were too much.” She shook her head, raised her gaze to us. “He was only a vampire for a year. One year.”

“How long was...” My voice trailed off.

“Fifteen years,” Lady Agova said. “Longer than she was human.” Clamping her eyes shut, she opened her mouth in a silent wail before burying her face in Lucienne's silent chest.

V

Lady Agova burned her daughter that night. We didn't tell her that it was the right decision. That she had to. That Lucienne, whoever she'd been, was fifteen years dead.

Instead, we sat on either side of her. Pressed close. We put our arms around her huge body and held her as she wept for her dead baby and we wept for the versions of us that died with our banishment.

VI

Lady Agova pointed towards the shadow looming in the distance like thick tentacles rising into the sky. “There she is. Avalon.” We were five days out from Lucienne’s pyre, Lady Agova kept a handful of her ashes in a vial strung round her neck that she seemed to always be touching. “Home.” She said the word like regret.

The toadstools and fungi were sparse as we came to the edge of the forest. Mostly trees of wood grew.

My curse vibrated at the word. “We can never go home.”

Vera took my hand, but Lady Agova laughed, clapped us both on the back with her massive hands.

“We’re always coming home, babies. Come on, mamma’s gonna teach you how to live. First,

though, we're gonna get paid. Then we're gonna get you a new face."

"New name, too."

Lady Agova smiled. "Sure."

She walked past us. Her giant's gait carrying her rapidly away from us.

Vera shrugged and we followed after her.

THANK YOU

This book honestly only exists because Kelly Losack and J David Osborne scheduled their own cyberpunk novels to be released on December 1st and when we were about six weeks out, I figured I'd try to hit that date, too, because why not, because I've been sick in bed for most of the last month because having a baby in daycare means you're just going to be sick all the time, because I was way too young when I watched Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* and fell in love with Gary Oldman's wild and romantic version of *Dracula*, because I was still way too young when I watched *Interview with a Vampire* and that lonesome romanticism of eternity burrowed deep beneath my skin, because of a lifetime of chasing vampires but being always disappointed by them, because of *Vampire*

Hunter D's obscene ridiculousness, because I've never found a work of cyberpunk that truly satisfied me in all the ways I hoped it would, because I was writing this in a sprint right before publication I let the words roll over me and let all these strange ideas just come bursting onto the page, because writing is fun and maybe the most fun I know how to have by myself, because I've always loved the tension between hopes and reality, between utopia and dystopia, between love and fear.

And so this book is what it became wholly on accident.

I hope you enjoyed it.

Thank you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



e rathke writes about books and videogames at
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NEXT

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