“Freedom is not a state; it is an act. It is not some enchanted garden perched high on a distant plateau where we can finally sit down and rest. Freedom is the continuous action we must all take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society.”

— Rep. John Lewis

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The Future Fire (http://futurefire.net/) is edited by Djibril al-Ayad, with associate editors Regina de Búrca and Valeria Vitale; assistant editors Cécile Matthey, Bruce Stenning and Trace Yulie; occasional guest editors Kathryn Allan, Emma Bridges, Fábio Fernandes and Lori Selke, and copyeditors Brian Olszewski and Hûw Steer.

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Editorial

Djibril al-Ayad

There are times when it’s hard to remember that things don’t always get worse, but it helps to remind ourselves that there is a dream of a better world that we fight for. Sometimes we can look back on horror, on repression, on injustice, from a place of relative safety.

The stories and poems in this issue include a lot of tales of small hope, snippets of progress, steps on the road to healing, or compromises that allow at least the continuing possibility of a better future. There is intense ugliness and pain in the world, but there is also fierce beauty, and the little things that help us to carry on: family, traditions, ritual, honor, passion, and even revenge. What they have in common is that they neither completely distract us from the grimness of the world, nor submerge us in dystopian nihilism, but combine unflinching grit with that glimmer of promise. Whether epic fantasy, urban fantasy, horror, solarpunk or space
opera, written art can warn at the same time as it warms…

So let us enjoy the heartening work of Aimee, Alexandra, Anshritha, Clark, Devin, J.D., Jamie, Katherine and Naethan, as well as the gorgeous illustrations by Carmen, Cécile, Dr. T., Eric, Fluffgar, Miguel, Naethan and Toeken. The work never stops, but that doesn’t mean we can’t also play.

Djibril al-Ayad, October 2021

Comment on the stories in this issue on the TFF blog: http://press.futurefire.net/2021/10/new-issue-202159.html
My family believes that if you grind the petals of an avlina flower and bake them into your courtship cake,
the magic of the binding ceremony changes, and guarantees the baker happiness. My mother and aunt searched the forest for one for me, and it’s sitting in a place of honor on the windowsill. My mother put it in the crystal vase that she’s always kept in the bottom of the china cabinet—the one that I’ve never even been allowed to touch.

I’d rather put nightshade in my cake. Or even better, not have to bake one at all.

I think about walking out the door, just leaving everything behind and starting over with just myself, without the weight of family or expectation or obligation. Maybe I’d meet a nice girl, and we could flirt over coffee and never talk about our past.

The morning sunlight sparkles through my mother’s special vase, paints rainbows on the wall, the chipped counter, my apron, the backs of my hands. It took them weeks of hunting to find the avlina flower.

I stand and measure out flour and sugar and oil. The flower itself is pale pink, delicate and lovely. Its subtle fragrance fills the kitchen.

My aunt hovers in the doorway behind me, watching my every move, her face tight with worry. Tradition demands that I bake my cake alone.

“Kitty’s baked cakes before, Haley,” my mother calls from the living room. “Stop lurking.”

“Our future has never depended on one of them before,” Aunt Haley mutters, but withdraws.

I pull the petals off one by one, whispering, “He loves me, he loves me not,” and of course I end on, “He loves me.” I glower at the final petal before dropping it into the mortar.
I grind the petals into paste and whisk it into the eggs.

My cake is lovely, if I do say so myself. I matched the avlina’s color in the buttercream frosting, and went with a simple, rough finish. I did a wonderful job. I want to cry.

My mother coos over it while I box it up, and even Aunt Haley looks grudgingly impressed. I hug them both tight. I remind myself that I love them very much.

I let my mother carry the cake, and we all leave together. With each step, I feel more tired, more trapped.

There are only three other girls my age in town, and we meet them at the town hall. They look nervous and happy and I try not to hate them. None of them meet my eyes.

Our cakes are placed on a display table. The others are covered with designs and smooth fondant. Mine looks out of place, and I feel a faint stir of hope.

The suitors aren’t supposed to know which is which, and they can only pick two cakes to sample. Maybe no one will taste mine.

People begin to trickle in. I sit between my mother and aunt. My mother grips my hand so hard that my bones ache. My aunt sits with her eyes closed and lips moving.

I daydream about getting up and just running as far as I can.

Nathan Hirth strides in. He smiles at me, and my mother squeezes my hand even harder. Finally, the mayor arrives. He intones a spell over the cakes, and
magic drifts down from his fingers like flower petals. He steps back and smiles at us. “You may begin.”

Theodore Bingam, whose father owns the hardware store, steps forward and takes a bite out of one of the cakes. Light flashes, and one of the other girls stands up and runs to him, laughing.

In spite of everything, I find that I can be happy for them.

A few other men step forward and try two cakes each. Nothing happens, and they step back, disappointed. My cake is still untouched.

Nathan steps forward. His father is the richest man in town, and Nathan has made no secret of the fact that he wants me.

My feelings on the matter are of no consequence. With both my father and uncle dead, I need to marry someone who can support my mother and aunt. And no one else would dare to take me from Nathan Hirth.

It’s said that the magic favors the Hirth family. I think that it’s more likely that they just have the mayor’s favor. Nathan goes straight for my cake. He looks directly into my eyes as he takes a bite.

And nothing happens.

Nathan’s eyes flick to the mayor, who looks shocked for a moment, before an impartial mask slides over his face. For a moment, I think that Nathan is going to throw my cake onto the floor, but he just glares around the room and stalks out.

My mother and aunt’s faces have both gone gray. I feel shaky and sick. I don’t want to marry Nathan, but now that I’ve escaped it, I have no idea what else I can do.
More suitors approach the table. None of them touch my cake.
I feel hollow and shaken, like a bell that has just sounded.

We finally head home, and my mother and aunt collapse in tears. I carry my cake with its single bite taken into the kitchen. I cut myself a piece and eat it slowly. It’s fluffy and sweet and delicious. I cut pieces for Aunt Haley and my mother. It would be foolish to waste it.

Someone knocks on the door. My mother and aunt look alarmed. “Who could that be?” my mother whispers.
“Maybe they’ll just leave,” Aunt Haley says.
The knock sounds again, louder this time.
“I’ll get it,” I say, pressing plates of cake into their hands.
There is a woman standing on our doorstep. Her dark brown hair is braided, and she’s wearing a fitted leather jacket over a long, flowing black skirt. She scans me from head to toe. “Kitty? Did you become a spinster today?” she asks.
I want to be offended, but I’m too tired. “What do you want?”
“That’s what I’m here to ask you.”
“I don’t understand.”
She grins. “I don’t imagine you do. Are you going to invite me in, or are we going to conduct our business on the street?”
It is very satisfying to close the door in her face.
“Who was it?” my mother asks.
I shrug. “I think she was selling encyclopedias.”

I go back into the kitchen to make tea, and she’s sitting at the table, fork hovering over a slice of my cake.

Fear spikes through me. How did she get in? What is she doing?

Her eyes hold mine as she takes a bite of the cake, and a flash of light fills the room.

When the light fades, she’s smiling. She has a pretty smile. “This is quite good.”

“Who the hell are you?” I ask.

“My name is Tania Varuska.”

“Why are you here?”

She takes another bite of cake. “I’m here to claim you as my bride.”

We end up letting Tania Varuska stay in the guest bedroom. She presses a kiss to my cheek before we part for the night. She smells like cedarwood and lavender. She practically vibrates with happiness. I have no idea how to feel about any of this.

“It’s all because of that damn flower,” my aunt says. “It has to be.”

My mother nods and wipes tears off of her cheeks. “We just wanted you to be happy!”

We finish the cake for breakfast. “We should go see the mayor,” I say. “He cast the spell on the courtship cake, so he should be able to check and see if Tania and I are actually bonded.”

“Sounds good to me.” Tania twines her fingers through mine and grins at me. “It’s interesting, isn’t it?” she asks as we leave the house.
“What is?”
“The magic. The way it’s working on us.”
“I’m not sure what you mean.”
She squeezes my hand, and I realize that I haven’t even tried to pull away.
Nathan Hirth is standing outside the mayor’s office when we arrive.

“Hello there,” Tania says.

Nathan purses his lips, glancing at our entwined fingers. “Good morning, ladies. Who is your friend, Kitty?”

“Oh, we’re not friends,” Tania says. “I’m here to seduce her.”

Nathan clearly has no idea how to react. It’s nice to see someone else feeling the same way I do. “I’m here to see if I can appeal the ceremony. Something clearly went wrong.”

“Oh no, the ceremony worked perfectly. She’s just not for you,” Tania says. She pulls me closer to her and squeezes my hand.

I like the way her shoulder presses into mine, warm and real.

Tania and Nathan glare at each other till the mayor’s secretary opens the door.

Nathan is ushered into the mayor’s office first, and the door closes firmly behind him. Tania strokes the back of my hand. “Don’t worry about him,” she whispers.

I squeeze her hand. After ten minutes, Nathan storms out of the mayor’s office. “This isn’t over!” he shouts. He glares at Tania. “You won’t have any better luck.”

My mother and aunt stand up. “We’ll go talk to him. You girls wait out here.”

“That’s not necessary,” Tania says.

My mother gives me a look. “We’ll wait here,” I say. Tania frowns, but lets them go.
Once we’re alone, I turn and look at her. Her hair is down today, soft around her face. I find myself wanting to touch it, so I do. I push a strand back behind her ear.

“What is happening to us?” I ask.

“I think we’re falling in love,” Tania says.

“Did you know it would happen?”

“I—I did. I was going to talk to you about it first, but you made me angry.”

“How did you get in? How did you know to come looking for me?”

She shrugs. “Your window was unlocked. I just climbed in. As for the how I knew—well, I dream things, sometimes.”

“You dreamed about me?”

She shrugs. “I’ve dreamed about you my whole life. I’ve been waiting for this day for a long time.”

My mother calls us into the office. “The mayor wants to do a test,” she says.

“Test away,” Tania says. “You’ll find everything in order.”

The mayor frowns, but starts casting a spell. It makes Tania and I glow pale blue.

“Well,” he says. “It does seem like everything is in order.”

Tania grins, and I find myself smiling back.

“Do you have the bride price?” the mayor asks.

Tania pulls out a checkbook and hands my mother a blank check. “That won’t be a problem.”

I raise my eyebrow at her. She pulls me toward her and whispers, “My family is loaded,” into my ear. The words hardly register as her breath sends a shiver down my spine.
“You can participate in the group wedding today, if you’d like,” the mayor says.

It’s all so fast. I hardly know her. But it seems like she knows enough for both of us. “We’d be delighted to,” I say. My mother and aunt gape at me. Tania just grins.

I already have a dress ready, and Tania, of course, has brought one with her. My dress is pale pink. Like the avlina flower. Tania’s is sky blue. She looks stunning in it. I find myself reaching out to touch her hair again.

Before we leave for the wedding, I stop her. I have so many questions. “How are you doing this to me?” I ask. “The magic. How does it work?”

Tania tilts her head to one side. “I’m not the one doing it, Kitty. All I can do is dream. The love magic is all you.”

I think about the avlina flower and its promise of happiness. Yesterday, I’d been willing to marry Nathan for my family.

Today, I want to kiss Tania. So I do.
Her first night outside Charlotte, Dix camped beside the interstate. It was cool even for February, the temperature nestling deep down into the 40s, but she had a good sleeping bag, and she didn’t want to splash out for a hostel this early in the trip northward. When
she was a kid, there hadn’t been much money for vacations, but she remembered one trip to Florida and the cement-block motel they’d stayed at, its floral-scented shampoo and cigarette-scented sheets.

That place had probably been underwater for years, now. Dix locked her bike around a sturdy-seeming red maple—probably unnecessary, but city habits died hard—and climbed the same tree to secure herself for the night.

Before she hung her backpack on a nearby branch, though, she made a careful nest in her lap and opened the top flap for one last look at the treasure inside.

Lemons, lemons by the dozen, winked up at her, some mottled green and some sunshine-yellow. Heavy, and expensive as all fuck, and absolutely worth it. She latched the backpack up and chose the most solid branch she could reach.

The need for sleep wrestled the throb of her overworked muscles to a stalemate: a light, often-interrupted doze. Dix had been doing physical work all her life, but spending a week on a bicycle burnished all those years of levee work and building decon to a nostalgic glow in her mind. She was too old to throw herself into this kind of adventure—

She was too old not to. Once they put her in the ground, she’d be flat out of second chances.

Her eyes closed, though her lashes still stirred against her cheek. There was sleep, and then there was rest. She’d take whichever one she could get.

One more week until home.
When Dix flicked back over the years of memories, she sorted them automatically by fights: the ones she’d won, the ones Liz had, the ones that had lasted for days of stony silence, the ones resolved by a brief burst of sisterly understanding.

One of the worst had started over a swing, of all things. The bus had just dumped Dix at the bottom of the hill after a day of hauling sandbags in the Neck. She’d trudged up the last hundred yards home only to find her sister pushing Mae on this stupid jury-rigged swing. Liz had built it out of scrap twine and an old piece of siding, and hung it from one of the apple trees that filled the backyards on this block. “Aunt Dixie!” Mae shrieked. She took a hand off the rope to wave, and tumbled face-first into the dirt. She came up with stained knees, still grinning. “Look what Mama made!”

Dix didn’t remember exactly what spark had lit her heated words. The risk to the apple tree, maybe—they needed that fruit. A solid toehold into anger, a rational-feeling one.

She did remember putting one hand out to turn Mae aside. She remembered marching straight past her, up to Liz. She remembered that Liz wasn’t looking at her. She was saying to Mae, “You have to kick your feet straight up to the sky next time, honey. Like you’re going to fly.”

She remembered where the argument ended, too. “You’re always wasting time,” she’d screamed into Liz’s face, “and no one’s got time to waste anymore!”

Liz had lifted Mae off the swing and settled her onto her feet. Mae wasn’t crying, but her face was blotchy and her lips crimped. Dix remembered that too. “If you want to talk about this later,” Liz said, “we’ll talk.” She
looked down at Mae again. “I have to be at the wharf for secondary testing at seven tomorrow.”

“… I know. I’ll watch her.”

“Thank you.” She lingered a moment by the door before disappearing inside. “Hope is a habit, Dix.”

A bad habit, yes, a dangerous one. Hope had shaped this foundering world into what it was. The trees creaked, and Dix’s bones echoed.

Mae tried to work one sticky hand into Dix’s clenched fist. Dix couldn’t open her hand, not yet, couldn’t let go of the feelings she had no name for. When her attempt at a handhold failed, Mae grasped Dix’s wrist instead. “Auntie,” she said. She sniffled, once, and wiped her nose on her bare arm. “Eat dinner, and then you can come push me on the swing.”

Outside of Greensboro, snow started falling. Dix coasted to a rest on the interstate’s broad shoulder the first time her tires slipped. Snow would hide the potholes; the last thing she needed was to go head over handlebars and break an arm. She’d barely seen another cyclist since leaving Charlotte, and only twenty or thirty cars a day. An injury would leave her well and truly fucked—and a broken bike wouldn’t be any better.

It would be a long walk yet into the city proper, but she could see an old freight depot from the road. The building still had a brown-gold logo on the side. PSU, Dix read, then amended in her head: UPS. Rows of semi-trailers stood in front, cabs nowhere to be seen. Years of sunlight had faded the rainbow of paint colors, but they looked well-maintained. A corrugated tin sign hung from one… vacation? Vacancy. Dix hesitated—
you never quite knew who you were going to meet in
the Bible Republics—then wheeled her bike over. She’d
chance some fire-and-brimstone for a night indoors.

An older black man hefted the roll-up door at the
back of the trailer when Dix knocked. He looked her up
and down. “You looking for a room?”

“Yeah.” Dix gave him a similar once-over. In his
fifties or sixties, but moving well enough. Missing a
couple fingers on one hand. A relic of retrofitting these
trailers, probably. A curtain hung just inside the roll-up
kept her from evaluating anyone else who might be
inside. Most folks were all right, even these days, but it
would’ve been nice to know what she might be up
against in case these weren’t most folks. “You take
barter?”

“Depends. What you offering?”

“Labor, if you need it.”

His mouth pulled into a scowl. “Nah. I got a son and
he got a husband. They still young and healthy enough
to do what I can’t. You offering anything else?”

Reluctantly, Dix unshouldered her backpack and
opened it. The lemons on top had mottled green and
yellow skin, like dragon eggs in a kid’s story. She’d
pushed all the rippest ones, the pure gold, down to the
bottom when she’d repacked. She wished she could
remember how many she had, how many she could
spare. She’d counted them enough times but the
numbers always flitted out of her head as soon as she
was done. All she knew was she hadn’t even gotten out
of North Carolina yet and she had a long way to go.
“You can’t have them all. But I could spare, uh. Five.”

“Ah, put that away.” The old man snorted and shook
his head. “We get a truck up from the coastal plains
where they grow all that stuff, once a month. Lemons, oranges, avocados. The works.”

Dix’s face reddened. Of course they did. “Sorry.” She fumbled the flap closed. “We don’t get them back home.” Someone probably shipped citrus that far north, but they weren’t selling it at the street markets where Dix shopped.

“Yeah?” The old man’s jaw softened. “How far you come?“

The weight of the backpack pulled familiarly at her shoulders. Dix let it bow her neck forward, too. She was used to the embarrassment of pity, though usually for different reasons. “Most recently? Charlotte. Boston, if you go all the way back to the beginning.”

“Well. Mmm. Guess you ain’t looking to pawn the bike, then.”

Her hands tightened reflexively on imaginary handlebars. “No, sir.”

Air whistled in his nose when he leaned against the truck frame and heaved a sigh. “Then you willing to drop off a letter in the city for me tomorrow? Save me and the boys the trouble of walking. Got better uses for them around here anyhow.”

It was a generous offer already and he sweetened it with a lopsided smile. Dix looked up at the gray-swabbed sky, at the fine layer of snow that had already piled up on top of the trailers. “Sure,” she said. “I could help.”

When Dix and Liz were kids, winter brought snow, sledding, hot chocolate. You couldn’t get chocolate anymore—not unless you had a lot more money than
Liz made, working on the eco-remediation team at the People’s University. A few of the save-the-world corps had come knocking on her door with their opportunities—rich folks were still out there, throwing money at their problems. Hungry for the old kind of world, where they’d have someplace to spend all that cash of theirs again. But she’d always turned them away. “This is home,” she said. “And I’m doing good work here.” These days, if snow fell on Boston, it fell sparse and soggy and was gone by the morning. The only reliable indicator of the season was a fight about Dix going south for better jobs.

“We couldn’t even visit you down there,” Liz said. Her eyes flicked to Mae, who had just turned fourteen and asked out the Yang girl from down the street within the hour of Liz lifting her injunction on dating. She stood over the stove, tossing golden rice back and forth in the pan. Dix had tried to get a job picking that rice down on the Neponset River floodplain farms, but they hadn’t needed her. The workers got a 5% discount if they bought rice straight from Riverlife Incorporated. “I can’t take Mae into the Bible Republics. Besides: you belong here.” Liz always said that, as if there were anything here left to attach a life to. “You belong with us.”

“I belong where the money is.” Money could buy a better place, where Mae and Liz wouldn’t have to share a room. And Mae would need new shoes again soon, not to mention cloth for new clothes, the girl grew like bamboo … Dix thumped an old duffel bag into the middle of the kitchen table. She hadn’t put any clothes in it yet, nor any of the supplies that she would need on the road. But having the bag there, waiting, was a
comfort somehow. Even empty. “In the offseason, that’s south of here. West, maybe. I don’t know.”

“No, of course you don’t know. Why wait for a parachute before you jump out of the plane?” Rice flew out of the pan and ticked down in between the range and the countertop. Wasted food. Dix grimaced, but Liz didn’t seem to notice. “We can coast by for the winter, Dix, really. We’ll tighten our belts and be okay! But if you’re going to insist on treating this family like—like an accountant’s ledger, you could try again for a job on campus. Custodial work—”

“I can’t pass the fucking application exam!” Dix yanked the zipper of the duffel bag. It stuck until she pulled the fabric with both hands instead. Then it sang shrilly to the end of its line. “Even the janitors there have to be able to do calculus.”

“Don’t exaggerate.” Liz pressed again, as stubborn as ever. “I could help you study this time.”

“It’s not because I’m lazy!”

The tension spilled out of Liz’s shoulders. She set the spoon on the counter. “I know,” she said. “I know that you’re not. I’m sorry.”

The kitchen chair groaned when Dix leaned on it. “I’m too stupid for saving the world, Lizzie. All I’m here for is keeping you alive, fed, long enough to do it.”

A sharp double click: Liz’s wrist, and the gas valve, turning in unison as she extinguished the flame. “Dixon. Don’t you realize what it means to me that you’re here? Helping me raise her? Don’t you realize what it means to her?”

Liz’s outrageous calm opened a valve too, piping away Dix’s rage, storing it somewhere for later. A last wisp of it squeezed between her clenched teeth: “Then
why are you such a bitch about me trying to teach her to live in reality?”

The wooden spoon cracked against the counter where Liz set it down. Liz never raised her voice. Almost never. “Please put your bag away,” she said. “It’s dinnertime and it’s Mae’s turn to set the table.”

There was no exit 29 off I-95. Dix had cousins in Ashland who’d said she could crash with them once she made it past Richmond. The sun pounded heat mirages into the asphalt, but she’d had her eyes peeled for miles now. The numbers had jumped straight from 24 to 31 and not an exit ramp in sight, not a single sign that looked like it could spell Ashland.

Dix dismounted and leaned her bike against the guardrail while she checked the paper where she’d scribbled her travel plans. Exit 29, in her own crooked handwriting!

She’d bartered for a secondhand road map of Virginia and the Carolinas. It unfolded grudgingly across her lap, well-worn creases parting to create a gaping trench of nothingness in the Atlantic Ocean, to divide the Smoky Mountains in half from east to west.

It took her the better part of ten minutes to trace I-85 out of Charlotte, follow it along to I-95, then work her way up the tiny towns crowded in alongside that thick yellow line. Finally she found Ashland, checked it against the version scrawled on her notes, confirmed it must be so. The little blue number beside the interstate didn’t match, though. 92, not 29, though when she blinked it tried to jump back. 70 more miles before she
could rest a spell with family. She squinted up at the sun.

Five hours, probably. She could still make it today, if she rode hard.

It would have been stupid to think the fights would end after Liz was gone. Mae was her mother’s daughter in every painful way.

When Dix got out of bed the morning after the funeral, Mae was already awake, nibbling on stale sympathy bread from one of Liz’s coworkers. She had an old photo album spread on her lap, one of the ones Dix and Liz’s aunts had recovered from the old house before it went under. Crumbs pinged against the glossy plastic pages. Despite the reflection from the rising sun, Dix could make out two identical smiling faces hunched together over a bright yellow cake. Twelve candles—six twice over. You couldn’t have told who was who but for the gap in Dix’s grin. She’d lost her front teeth first. The only time she’d ever beaten Liz at anything. “It should have been me,” she said, and swallowed a sob.

“Aunt Dix.” Mae set the book on the table with a rap of cover against wood. The pages fluttered, turning themselves to a well-creased point: Liz’s college graduation. By that point the symmetry had long since broken: Liz’s hair buzzed short, Dix’s long and braided; Liz in her black cap and gown and Dix in a borrowed dress. The smiles still matched, though. “Have breakfast with me. There’s bread left, and Mrs. Tremblay’s mulberry jam.”

Dix’s stomach lurch. Without Liz, the algal carbon sequestration project was doomed to founder. Dix
couldn’t fix that, no more than mulberry jam could fix her. “I’m not hungry, Mae. Food is … just too normal to think about right now.”

“Yes. It is. And we have to anyway.” The crack in Mae’s voice stole the strength from Dix’s legs. She crashed against the kitchen doorjamb and caught herself on the knob to keep herself upright. “Because my mom’s dead and my dad lives in fucking Osaka now which might as well be the dark side of the moon and if we can’t sit here and eat toast I’m going to lose whatever’s left of my shit.” Mae stood and threw her empty plate into the sink. The shatterproof Corelle sang shrilly, then clattered to a rest on top of last night’s dishes. Mae folded her arms and hunched against the counter. Like her mother, she spoke in an easy conversational tone. Liz had never sworn at Dix in her life, though, and the heft of the words struck the wind out of her now. “Eat something. Or don’t. I’m going to take the bus out to Franklin Park—”

“No. No! Wait, Mae.” Dix squeezed her eyes shut. “You have exams next week. You can’t be wasting time screwing around at the zoo right now. It’s up to you now to—”

“I’m going to take the bus out to Franklin Park,” Mae continued, talking over Dix’s last few words, like she did any time Dix talked about exams or going to college. Any time she tried to stitch their fraying present to the broad unknowable canvas of the future. Mae didn’t want to be the thread that held it all together. She shouldn’t have had to be. But the world was what it was, and what choice did any of them have but to live in it as best they could? “I need some fresh air,” she went on. “I need to see Lena. I need to get out of the house. I
need—I need—I need something else. I don’t know. It’s not here.”

Dix found herself scraping the chair over the curling linoleum tiles, sliding to a seat. A pillar of shadow fell over the table: Mae, with the sun rising through the living room window behind her. The bread was in front of Dix, and a dirty knife too. She picked up the knife and wiped crumbs from the serrated edge. “… Be home in time for dinner.”

“I’ll see you tonight.” Mae’s footfalls echoed one another all the way out onto the porch. The front door banged shut, and the sound of her departure was cut off altogether. The knife clattered to the table in front of Dix and the empty house keened in the wind from the water.

Dix stopped on the George Washington Bridge for a look down into the city. Late morning sun sparkled on the water; dark moldering buildings cut up through the surface like the spines of some resting leviathan.

Liz had gone to school somewhere down there. The university’s name had slipped away from Dix sometime when she wasn’t looking, over all those years. She scanned the surviving buildings, trying to pick out ones where Liz might have lived, worked, attended classes. No way to know, of course; not even to make an educated guess.

Dix picked her favorite one, a tall skyscraper. Either its remaining glass had been tinted faintly blue-green, or it had captured the light reflecting from the water. One tall spire still thrust skyward despite the waves lapping
insistently at its sides. The view from inside must have been amazing, once.

Or still was, maybe. People lived stranger places these days. Dix raised one arm to wave, just in case. Then she pushed off and pedaled around the half-dozen cars that had been stripped but not yet pushed off to clear the bridge.

It hadn’t always been fights. Had it? Or were they just too far back, taken wing alongside the names of old colleges and friends’ birthdays and streets where Dix had once lived? When she scraped the limits of memory, she came up with matching dresses and matching rollerblades. Paired stuffed animals—a teal dragon and a purple monkey. Liz reading to Dix, and later, doing her homework; Dix teaching Liz to ride the bike they’d always had to share. Always sharing: shared toys, shared bedroom, shared birthday cakes.

Always a lemon cake, with homemade buttercream frosting. Five or nine or thirteen candles, but the cake underneath was always the same. Lemon was Dix’s favorite. Liz liked chocolate, but she’d started lying to Mom early, and never stopped.

“We should have your favorite this time,” Dix pressed most years, when July rolled around. But she never pressed hard and Liz always pretended not to hear.

Spring construction had just been getting off the ground when Dix set off for the south, but the Blue Hill Avenue Bridge over the Neponset had the attentions of a
work crew when she passed over. They were laying down dirt to lengthen the bridge northward; still, Dix had to ford what had once been River Street with her bike and its sensitive cargo hefted painfully on one shoulder and one pedal chafing the back of her head. The crossing only soaked her as high as the knees—no need to stop for a change of clothes.

The Gladeside Field still slept under a coat of winter mulch, waiting for seedlings, but the rooftop farmers and kitchen preservers had come out for the morning market anyway. Beeswax candles, the last shriveled winter potatoes, hand-knit plastic nets, crusty sourdough loafs. Dix lingered by a battered card table where a scrawny kid was hawking glass jars of jelly—a touch of sweetness would pair so prettily with sour, bold lemon. But she didn’t know how many lemons she would need, nor how many attempts, to get everything right. To *make* everything right. Reluctantly, she handed over
two lemons to the dairyman for a half-pound of goat butter, three more to the miller for fine-ground flour. Then she pushed her bike through the slowly accumulating crowd.

It felt strange to knock on the door of her own house. Was it still her house? No one answered, and the key turned in the lock when she tested it. There were too many pairs of shoes inside the door: she recognized a pair of Mae’s, but there were several pairs two sizes too small to be hers, plus one set that looked far too big.

Roommates, then. Or maybe Lena had finally moved into Mae’s room and brought her brother with her?

She moved into the kitchen, opening drawers, putting spoons and cups on the counter. The mixing bowls weren’t where she expected them to be, but she found them on top of a high cupboard.

Things moved around on you, when you weren’t there to keep an eye on them.

The entire time Liz was pregnant, Dix forced smiles, a skill at which she became well practiced, and inquired regularly after Liz’s health. When the baby arrived, and Liz asked for her help while Davy went back to work, Dix resolved to make herself useful. If she was anything at all, it was useful.

But seeing that pale scrawny thing swaddled up in Liz’s arms, the mewling cries, the dark blank eyes and grasping fingers—it was too much. “I don’t know how you could do something so fucking selfish,” she’d said, banging around in the cupboards for the makings of a meal. She didn’t raise her voice, not in front of the baby, but the bowstring-tight tension in her jaw made arrows
of her words. “I don’t know how you could bring a person into a world like this, on purpose.”

“A world like what?” Liz sheltered the baby’s face with one hand while she nursed. She ate for half an hour at a time and then slept to eat again two hours later, a life of constant need. The schedule had taken a toll on Liz, who had aged five years in the baby’s first two weeks. New channels marked her forehead, and around the sides of her mouth, carved by the rivers of worry and exhaustion that constantly flooded their banks. “Tell me what the world’s like, Dix, that I can’t have something to hope for.”

“Hope is a luxury. You can go look for it at a grocery store in 2029, and bring back some chocolate and coffee while you’re at it, thanks. Oh, and tampons. The kind with actual applicators.”

“Luxury.” The baby’s soft sucking sounds became louder, and she grunted in dismay. Liz rearranged her with a shift of one arm and the steady, easy rhythm resumed. “The kind of luxury you can afford to dole out for yourself, and everyone else can just scrape along doing without?”

Dix banged a pot into the sink and turned the water on. The faucet coughed once, then grudgingly obliged to fill the pot. “What exactly do you think I have to hope for these days?”

“Me,” said Liz, as bitterly as Dix had ever heard her say anything. Dix turned to face her, the angry words sliced out of her by the jagged edge of Liz’s hurt.

Liz looked back at her, face still, mouth set. Neither said anything. The pot of water filled, then overflowed. Water flowed freely over onto Dix’s feet; the livid
wounds between her and Liz stayed dry and bloodless, refusing to scab over.

Something had gone wrong with the mixture. The solar oven smelled sweetly of lemon, but it huddled in the bottom of the pan and refused to rise. When the edges started to blacken, Dix panicked. She scrutinized the recipe, re-reading the measurements, the instructions, the extra notes Liz had once scrawled in the margins. She’d been so careful to check teaspoons against tablespoons, 1/2 and not 1-2 ... she must have just skipped a line somewhere too. She should have marked them off. She dragged one sleeve under her nose, along the rough patch of old tears and snot she’d worked into the cuff on the long trip.

The screen door banged against the side of the house—the pneumatic closer had broken last fall and Dix never had figured out how to fix it. She hitched her shoulders up to hide her face.

“Did you come back for the project launch?” Mae asked.

“I was trying to—what?”

“The project launch.” Mae shifted from foot to foot; the aging deckboards complained of the movement. “That team they brought in from Aga Khan have been working on the scaling problems. Solving them, I guess. Lena says. But she’s just a clerk. I don’t know.” She shrugged helplessly. “They’re launching broad-scale sequestration in the Atlantic next week. Apparently.”

“I didn’t think …” Dix focused on the white curl of steam threading through the seams in the oven. “No. I didn’t know that.”
“How long have you been back?”

Dix’s legs quivered, and she put out a hand to the ground to hold herself up. “I had something I had to do.”

“What? Hide in the backyard? Clean the oven? Compost the garden, paint the deck?” The door shut, more gently than it had opened. “You said you were going south for work. For some reason I thought you meant farther south than behind the house. God! I had to bring in roommates, Aunt Dix.” Mae half laughed, half sobbed. “You can’t have your bed back but at least I kept the roof over our heads. At least I did that.”

“You did a good job. You did the right thing.” Soft steps on the deck. Dix let herself drop to a sit in the stiff, damp grass. “And I went. I did go. For work. But … it’s a long way down. I had a lot of time to think.”

“Yeah?” Mae’s legs cut a tall dark pillar into Dix’s periphery. Between her and Dix, the backpack huddled, its secret cargo still hidden. Dix’s fingers twitched. “Think about what, exactly?”

“About … what’s important.” Dix lunged for the backpack. “I’m sorry, Mae, you weren’t supposed to see me yet—”

Mae was young and fast and full of anger, and Dix was none of those things anymore. She tore the backpack out of Dix’s reach, and lemons spilled free like stolen sunshine.

Two school papers, once marked all over in red, the other nearly pristine. “What I Want To Do When I Grow Up” printed on the top in a serious black font. I want to de a seintist or an engnere, the first one began,
and petered off a few more hard-earned sentences later. *I don’t know what I want to do yet,* started the other, printed in a sturdy teenage hand, *but I know what I want to be, and that’s happy. I’m not stupid. I can see the world around me. I know it’s going to be hard and that’s okay too.*

Lena had indeed moved in when Dix left, and two of Mae’s co-teachers from the neighborhood crèche as well. Between the four of them they scraped together enough flour and butter and sugar, and a pair of brown eggs from the chickens Lena had installed in the backyard. Dix, stumblingly, read the recipe aloud, and ran her fingers over the deep lines where Liz’s pencil had once pressed. They decided the electricity levy was worth it, and as the oven heated, the kitchen filled with warmth and sweetness.

It was dark by the time the cake was done, but one of the teachers put out a lopsided beeswax candle that her crechies had helped to make, and Mae started a pot of sassafras tea. Someone found a jar of jam in the cupboard, and they slathered it on each slice to sweeten it, to stick fallen crumbs to a searching, scraping fork. Dix cried when she took the first bite, but Mae’s head leaned against her shoulder and the tears didn’t linger.

“Mom made this for my birthday once, when I was little,” she said, and sighed into Dix’s shirt. “When the trucks still ran. With jam and everything. It was so good. I never thought I’d have another. Do you remember that, Aunt Dix?”

Dix did.
Together they held back the darkness and weariness with a wisp of candlelight and sweet golden cake. “Tomorrow we can make lemonade,” said Lena wistfully, and Mae squeezed her hand.

A hope for the future. Small, yes. But people made more from less all the time.
The Abridged Excerpts from the Diary of a Corpse
Naethan Pais

Illustration © 2021, Naethan Pais.

The following story is inspired by a popular folktale from India known as ‘Baital Pachisi’, originally written in Sanskrit and compiled in the 11th century.
Dear Maya,

The dead aren’t supposed to have fun.

The dead are supposed to lend their hair for the raven’s roost, let the worms tunnel under their skin and wait for their bones to turn brittle and powder the soil.

Now don’t get me wrong, I’m not so different.

I’ve hung upside down, impaled by the same branch of the banyan tree for the better part of King Vikramāditya’s reign.

Nothing has changed.

My skin went soft and grey soon after the first monsoon showers, and the spotted eagle that hung about the graveyard worked its way through my ribcage all summer.

I was fortunate to have died a young man, for my hair still holds strong at the roots, though the smell of coconut oil has long worn off.

Between you and me, probably for the best.

Now, about four weeks back, the silence of the graveyard began to break. The vetalas who still remained in the graveyard—the ones who lived in the bones, at least—spoke in raspy whispers.

They told of a stranger cutting his way through the woods, covering three yojanas worth of land in a single day.

He rode no horse—choosing to wear a simple wooden sole beneath his feet, instead—and though he had a scabbard attached to his waist, it was barren.

I was the first to see him.
It was the seventh day of Pausha, in the dark half of the year.

He emerged from the woods, panting, with splintered branches still knotted in his thick hair. His body glistened with drops of sweat and blood, for he had just fought through the brambles, and the thorns were tough this time of year.

He circled the graveyard, running his hands across the tombstones, searching for something. And as soon as he felt the leathery roots of my banyan tree, his face broke into a knowing smile.

As the youngest *vetala* in the place, I recognised him immediately.

The noble King Vikramāditya, the envy of scholars of this land and the next. So great was his leadership, that in his kingdom, even paupers had at least two gold plates from which to eat. Legends are written long after the subjects have passed, and that bore true until Vikrama took the throne.

If I had a spine, I would have bowed.

Vikrama hauled my body off the branch, threw me around his shoulders and marched back into the woods.

“You’ve waded through thorns and pebbles to get to me, My King,” I said. “While I consider it an honour, I have no drink to offer you, no bed in which you can lay. The least I can do, is beg for you to rest. As soon as the sun breaks, I shall wake you myself.”

Mortals are not accustomed to the dead speaking, and mortal though Vikrama was, he never flinched.

“The sorcerer waits,” he said, twigs snapping beneath his feet. “I swore I would find your corpse and deliver you to him at the earliest.”
“Ah, is this one of your famed promises, Vikrama?” I said. “Your tales are told in this world as well as the next. Never was it known for you to break an oath.”

“And I intend to keep my winning streak.”

When I was ten years of age, my mother caught me with my hand in the earthenware pot, thick curd smeared across my hands.

I paid for it with three whips from the bamboo stick, all of them landing neatly on my knuckles.

That night, as my father applied a paste of turmeric and spittle onto the wound, he asked, “Did you take your whips in silence?”

I winced as the wound burned. “Screaming would have landed me three more.”

“Even the chickens scream as I slit their throat,” he laughed. “And when has that ever stopped my blade? What I mean is… did you never reason with your mother? With a clever tongue, you could have weaselled out of it.”

“How?”

“Maybe a mosquito fell into the pot,” my father said. “And you were merely fishing it out. You could have been a hero, Betaal. Instead, here you are. Bleeding out on my kitchen floor.”

He pulled me closer, hand on my shoulder. “Remember, Betaal, if you succeed in pulling a man by his ear, his head is sure to follow.”

*And that’s how I got the idea for the stories.*

We had trekked into the deepest part of the forest and a miasma of rotting bark hung in the air. Vikrama walked with one hand feeling the way in front of him,
for the canopy overhead blocked even the thinnest ray of moonlight.

He had trouble drawing breath as he sunk from the weight of my body.

Fortunately for him, most of me had rotted away.

“My King, the woods ahead seem to stretch till Ujjain. And with the darkness around us, there is no sight that would soothe the eyes and ease your burden. Instead, let me amuse you with a story.”

Vikrama shook his head. “The sorcerer warned me of you and your schemes, vetala. You have a sharp tongue for such a rotten mouth.”

“Oh, it’s just a harmless tale, my King. If there is any scheme behind it, it is only that I wish to see your wisdom myself. For, at the end of my story, I have a riddle. If you fail to answer, I shall be happy to be your prisoner. And if you answer it correctly, I shall slither out of your arms and head back to my tree.”

“And what if I choose to remain silent?”

“Well, my King, if you know the answer and refuse to speak, your head shall erupt into a thousand pieces.”

And from that day on, I began my tales.

Some told of kings who severed noses as punishment, others sang of queens who could be burned alive by moonlight, another of boys who could craft lions out of scattered bones. Birdmen, warriors, poets and dacoits all played a role.

And at the end of each, I posed a question.

As legends of King Vikramāditya’s wisdom reach as far as Kanyakumari, he answered every single one.

And every answer was tinged with sadness, for as soon as it was spoken, I flew off his shoulders and back
to my tree, leaving the mighty King a few steps away from delivering my corpse.

And the cycle was renewed the next day, for he always came back to retrieve me. So on and so forth, we sparred with words rather than scythes, and our battle raged for twenty-five days and twenty-five tales.

Vikrama’s will and wisdom is his curse, for he is prepared to repeat this pointless charade for the rest of his life, just as a gardener daily tends to a seed that has been boiled.

But, maybe, I’ve thought of a way to set him free.

And, I shall write of it tomorrow.

Yours truly,
Betaal

22nd Magha, 57 BC
Somvaar
The Fourth Part of the Night

Dear Maya,

Vikrama emerged back from the woods around the same time as he always did. He was clad in garments he had borrowed from a goatherd wandering the woods.

My previous story had been long and laden with detail, so much so that we had walked nearly nine yojanas. And after I flew back to my tree, Vikrama had to tread the same ground once more.

What always surprised me, no matter how many times I saw it, was Vikrama’s expression as he hoisted me on his shoulders once more. It was one of utter determination.
Like, he knew that this time…surely, *this time* was the last.

It would have struck me as naivety had it come from anyone else.

“My King, I have laboured all eight parts of the morning to prepare this tale,” I said. “It’s sure to best all the others. And I hope, for your sake, that the riddle at the end shall stump even you.”

Vikrama didn’t bother answering. He stepped delicately into the wet earth, his foot falling neatly into footprints that he had been making for the past four weeks.

And the twenty-sixth tale began just as the others.

In a land not so far removed from our own, there ruled King Vasudev. Never before was someone so deserving of the noble title of ‘Maharaj,’ for an aspect of his fame was his good virtue. Much like yourself, Vikramāditya, it was his custom to give three times more what a person asked of him, even up to half his kingdom.

This tale, however, involves a toll far greater.

One day, while he rested in his private chambers, a guard arrived.

“You have an unbidden visitor, Maharaj,” the guard said. “This man has arrived without giving us word of his coming.”

“Direct him to the court,” Vasudev said. “And let us receive him with the proper rites.”

The guard shook his head. “This man wishes to see you privately, Maharaj.”
A large man shambled into the chamber. He wore a grimy cotton dhoti and no other garment to cover his torso. His brow was slick with sweat, and his eyes studied the room in an erratic sweep, as if he expected dacoits to jump out from the curtains.

He held a small package wrapped in banana leaves.

As Vasudev bowed down to offer the traditional greeting, he noticed the colour of the man’s eyes were different from each other.

“Whatever your request may be, my good man,” Vasudev said, “it shall be yours. But, you must stay back so I may present you to my court. In all my travels, I have never seen eyes such as yours.”

The man gave a violent start as Vasudev spoke.

“Maharaj.” The man fell to his knees. “I’m afraid that isn’t possible. But, before you hear me, let me present to you my gift.”

He unwrapped the banana leaves, and an object as small as a berry tumbled out.

Vasudev gasped.

On the floor, there lay the most brilliant jewel he had ever beheld. It had an almost bewitching aura to it, changing colors in tandem with the light. Its beauty rivalled even that of the winter moon.

Vasudev quelled his desire to touch it, for it wasn’t his way to desire the property of others.

“My man, why do you give this to me?” he asked. “You could sell it in the market for much coin and provide not only for yourself, but for your next three generations.”

The man offered up the jewel in his cupped hands. “Maharaj, in return for this jewel, I only ask for your protection. I am in grave danger, and fear for my life. I
wish to remain in complete solitude, such that no other person could ever recognize me.”

“Certainly,” Vasudev said. “From this moment on, I shall remain the only person to have looked upon your face. The royal guard itself shall be tasked with your protection.”

Satisfied, the man kissed the Maharaj’s feet.

Vasudev peered into the man’s eyes for one last time, marvelling at their different colors, and bid goodbye.

The jewel was placed in the very centre of the Maharaj’s turban, and Vasudev ruled for many months, his virtue increasing tenfold.

Until one day, another visitor—a mendicant wearing garments that had more holes than cloth—arrived at the court of Vasudev.

“Maharaj,” the mendicant cried. “I have travelled many hard months to come here, and myths of your goodwill are spoken on every lip along the road.”

Vasudev, swayed by flattery as easily as any other mortal, declared. “Anything within my power shall be given to you.”

The mendicant, his eyes still latched to Vasudev’s feet, cried out, “Though my family owns little, we have a family heirloom, given by fathers to their sons since the time of King Chanayana.” The mendicant wept, and went on in dry raspy coughs. “However, a few months ago, my hut was ravaged by a thief. By the morning, the space beneath my bed—where our prized possessions are kept—was empty, and the heirloom gone.”

“Describe your heirloom to me, my friend, and I shall deploy my guards—a hundred times hundred, if necessary—to search the land.”
“Your entire Kingsguard would be useless to me, Maharaj,” the mendicant said. “For, I require only you.”

He sniffled, and continued, “My family seeks a boon, which we can only acquire by practicing a certain ritual. One of the components of the ritual involves an object—worth the weight of two dog’s eyes—for it to bear fruit. My heirloom weighed exactly the same, and though it pained my family to part with it, we were to use it in the ritual before it was stolen.”

The mendicant’s forehead touched the floor as he began to convulse.

“Maharaj,” he said. “And you wear my heirloom at the top of your head this very moment.”

He pointed a shuddering finger at Vasudev’s turban. The jewel embedded in it glimmered, the light refracting within.

“My jewel?” Vasudev said, shocked.

“Yes, Maharaj,” the mendicant said. “The man who gave it to you is likely to be the very same thief who robbed me. I only ask for it to be returned to me.”

Vasudev slumped back into his throne. “But this jewel was given to me as a gift, a symbol of my promise to a man who sought my protection. It is not my right to give away what has been gifted. I shall give you my entire treasury, but not this jewel.”

“Maharaj, all the gold in the world is of no use,” the mendicant said. “For, that jewel weighs the same as two dog’s eyes. And that is the requirement for the ritual.”

The King refused and the mendicant begged. On and on, they reasoned, their argument lasting from the first sight of the moon to its last.
At last, the mendicant stood up, defiant. “If you will not give me back my jewel, at least identify the thief, so that I may confront him myself.”

Vasudev caressed the jewel in his turban, as unease settled in his chest.

“It seems all I can do today is refuse your requests,” he said. “For the thief sought my protection. And I took an oath, that till his last day, and the days after that, I shall remain the only person who can identify him.”

The mendicant beat his chest in frustration.

“I’m sorry, my friend,” Vasudev said. “I cannot hand him over to you.”

By the time I finished the story, we had walked over 2 yojanas and the sky began to tell of the first part of the day.

Vikrama had maintained his stony silence throughout the tale and marched on as steadfast as before. Though he tired like any other mortal, not once did his feet linger.

“I trust that you were amused, my King,” I said. “And now, using the wit that your poets sing about, let me ask you a few questions. The first:

How would you solve the problem of the thief and the mendicant, so as to satisfy them both?”

“Sometimes,” Vikrama said between breaths, “my mind half-slips and I think it would be better if you smashed my head against this tree. My mind is already in a thousand pieces if not my head.”

“Come now,” I said, “You swore to bring my body to the sorcerer, did you not?”
Vikrama sighed, “I see only one way in which to satisfy both the thief and the mendicant. And it goes like this:
“Maharaj Vasudev, if he is as his true to his word as you claim him to be, must gouge out both his eyes and offer it to the mendicant.”

“Legends are often half-truths,” I said, “But maybe not yours. And why must the Maharaj do that, Vikrama?”

“As Vasudev remains the only person to have seen the thief, his blindness will now make it impossible to identify him, even if his oath forces his hand. And in giving his eyes to the mendicant, the ritual which required an object worth the weight of two dog’s eyes is now fulfilled. In such a way, he satisfies both his promises.”

“His Majesty does it again,” I said. “Well don—”

Vikrama jerked my body off his shoulder and set it gently on the mud. Kicking the gravel off a patch of land with his feet, he sat down, resting his back on the bark of a tree.

And he whispered, with a voice so low that the Lord of the wind would have been hard-pressed to hear, “Every day you narrated stories of crows and their carrion, thieves and their loot, warriors and their sacrifices. But, today you speak of this… Vasudev. Did you think it would slip me, vetala? That I wouldn’t notice? For you never narrated the story of Vasudev…”

He leaned closer, his voice lower still. “…but of me.”

The thick canopy overhead broke, letting in a wandering ray of moonlight. They bathed us in a pale semi-circle of brightness. But it was enough to see Vikrama’s eyes. The skin around his empty eye sockets was still pink and swollen, deep furrows dug out from where he had wedged the blade in. He had washed out
the area with *neem* water, and covered it with silk patches.

“I’ve answered your question, *vetala*” he said. “Fly back to your tree, and we shall continue this tomorrow.”

“Not yet, O King,” I said. “For there is still one question remaining. The thief who sought your protection had eyes of two different colours. Pray tell…what were they?”

Vikrama threw his head back and laughed. The sound bounced off the trees and shot off in the distance, the echoes sounding demonic.

“Oh, they were beautiful indeed, *vetala*,” Vikrama said. “A pity you could not see it.”

“You were the only one in the land fortunate to see them, Vikrama,” I said, “You need only tell me the two colours and we shall begin again tomorrow. Lest you forget, your silence will o—”

“Yes, yes,” Vikrama sighed, “A thousand pieces. Even the ravens shall not care for my remains.”

“Go on then, my King.”

Vikrama opened his mouth as if to speak, but closed again, as if his tongue thought better of it.

“If I fail to bring you to the sorcerer,” he said, “Won’t he just send another man? One as damned as I?”

“Probably.”

“Then,” Vikrama said, with a teasing smile, “Won’t you entertain him with your tales?”

“And my riddles, yes.”

Vikrama touched his face, letting his fingers linger around his eye sockets, “Tell me, *vetala*. Won’t I be in your stories, then? I have no doubt this very night will make an appearance.”

“Of course, my King.”
“So, when you speak about me,” Vikrama said, a hard edge in his voice, “May you never say that King Vikramāditya traded the life of a thief to save his own. For telling you the colour of his eyes would betray my oath.”

“You refuse to answer?

“I’ve been your keen listener over the month, vetala. And for it, I only have one request,” Vikrama said, “If I must die, let my head not erupt into a thousand pieces. Allow my people the honour of seeing their king one last time.”

“Though it is not in the nature of a vetala to heed wishes, maybe I can learn from your generosity,” I said, “It shall be done as you wish.”

Vikrama lay his head against the tree, and turned his face toward the heavens. The moon shone.

I, myself, am a witness to a thousand moonrises. But, never once have I seen it glow as it did that night.

“And Vikrama?” I said, “The thief’s right eye was blue and his left brown.”

Vikrama’s mouth dropped open in surprise, “How?”

“Don’t you expect a man to know his own eye color?” I said.

Vikrama started forward, “But, the Kingsguard? I thought I—”

“Don’t blame yourself, O King,” I said, gently, “Nor find fault with your Kingsguard. I resided in a little shed by your palace—and by your grace—no eyes ever beheld me, not even the birds. It was a fever that took me in my thirtieth year.”

He relaxed again, satisfied that it was no mistake of his that led to my death.
“Now, swear to me your last promise, Vikrama…” I said, “…that you will finally rest.”

Vikrama gave a short nod, and lowered his head until his chin beat his chest.

And history tells us no more of the noble King Vikramāditya, save for his honour.

Yours truly,
Betaal
“Survive, whatever it takes.
“How long did I have to survive for? Would I ever be able to live without constantly trying to survive?”

—Sayaka Murata, Earthlings
So how was the funeral?
  Tense? Boring? Did anyone cry?
  Did anyone tell the truth?
  No, no. I’m not judging you for going. I understand that feeling—needing to see, to know for sure. Even if it’s only an empty coffin. It’s better than nothing. If they gave up, if they really gave up, that means it’s over. It has to be.
  And they did give up fast, didn’t they? Even I was surprised. Normally they drag this show on much longer.
  Maybe they knew, deep down, even if they didn’t want to. Maybe they were relieved.

  It’s an interesting way you look at me—don’t lie, I can read it in your eyes. That moment of doubt: if I’m not the worst thing yet.
  But I know the way it goes, heart—
  I know the way to the bottom.
  It’s no pretty thing. You find it on your hands and knees, face mashed into the concrete, carpet, mattress—the cloying scents of cologne and rot in the air and puke in your throat, never quite rising. You find it scrambling with broken nails, bloody fingers, bloody lip, not thinking anything but to just get away, somewhere, anywhere. Or: you’re not thinking anything, numb and struck dumb and pulled taught as a wire. Frigid. You can’t move.
  It’s all the same, in the end, though, isn’t it? That way you’re forced—down deep, down low. And believe me, it’s a long fucking way down.
Though you already know that, of course.

How shall we begin?
The rules, maybe? That’s a good place to start. Usually is.
Has anyone taught you this before? No?
Here is who may go devil hunting: the one who survived the sin, their siblings, their siblings in arms. You’ll know if they count. You’ll know it in your gut.
We do not find people—they find us. If they know what they want, if they’re of our sort, they know the way.
Get the job done. Always. It’s that simple.

But you want the story, don’t you? I understand perfectly. Are you interested in the details—shall I edit out the viscera? Shall I silence your ghosts, or let you keep them?
Well, regardless—
It will help, hopefully. That’s what it’s meant for—but it’s also another rule, I’m afraid. You have to hear it, before anything else, so that you can better make the choice. And then we can talk about why you really came here, and where it can go from there. Sound reasonable? You need to say yes, darling. I need to hear the word.
Yes. Good.

The girls come to me in the night. Witching hour. The first thing I hear is the tires, shrieking across wet dirt in the driveway—it’s a distinct sound. It belongs to
those in a hurry, running from something, or to it. Then, the knock at the door.

I dismiss the rain right before I open it. It’ll come back, of course, but for the moment it makes it easier to see their faces. There are two of them—one standing strong, the other behind her shoulder, a little flighty. The first has dark curls and a wild storm in her eyes, an old faded scar on her chin—lightning against her darker skin—and gold-wire glasses perched on her nose. She was the one who brought them here—I can smell her fury, which she hides everything else behind. It’s heady. The second has red hair and freckles scattered across her sweaty face, her bottom lip caught between her teeth as she chews it bloody. Nervous, putrid tang.

“Welcome to the ranch,” I say. I have many names for the place, beyond the ones they use. I cycle them out. This is the one I like right now. It tastes like coiled rope and wind.

They both look familiar—high school girls, certainly—but it still takes me a moment to place them. The redhead is easier. I know her—or, I know her brother, but it’s almost the same thing when you’re working with twins who share a face. “Jenna Murphy,” I continue, and she squeaks. It takes me a little longer with the other one. I remember her with different glasses—big, thick plastic ones from when she was a kid. “Gabriella Montoya.”

“Ella,” she corrects firmly. “Can we come in?”

“Of course.”

Once she’s through the door, Ella shakes off her raincoat, and then elbows Jenna to do the same. “Jen,” she says sharply, when Jenna doesn’t move. I point at the bucket next to the door, and Ella chucks both coats
in. They follow me into the living room. Taking a seat at the table, I light up a cigarette and wait. The girls stare at me.

“You shouldn’t smoke,” Jenna finally says, as if out of reflex of habit, and I exhale, nodding through the grey.

“You shouldn’t,” I agree, lingering on the *you*, “But the list of things that can hurt me are pretty limited, heart, and I don’t age, so I’m not particularly worried about my lungs. It’ll take a lot more than that to kill me.” Jury’s out on what could. Plenty of people would like to know—and so would I, sometimes.

“Secondhand smoke.” Jenna points out.

I grunt, but she has me there, so I stub out the butt of my cigarette on the empty plate next to me. “Fair enough. Now, what can I do for you?”

“We want to go hunting,” Ella says.

I snort. “Yeah, figured as much. Doubt you’re showing up for an evening of backgammon. So what little beast has gone and proved his worst this time?”

“Darrel Steege,” Ella says.

“Ah.” I know him more by name than anything else. Hell on wheels—boy on a bender, young and dumb and full of an unearned confidence that the world bends to him—but this is the first I’m hearing of this sort of thing. He’s their age—shares classes with them, probably—but I don’t think they’re hunting for their own sake. Their body language would be different.

“Who?”

“My sister,” Ella hisses. “Mercedes. She’s barely twelve.”

A kid. I’m well used to all this, perhaps a little too much so, but my stomach still turns over itself in protest
every time. The urge for another cigarette blooms, and I shove it down. It’s harder, for everyone, when a kid’s involved. A special hell.

“Okay, yeah,” I say. “That’s more than worth a hunt.” Ella looks slightly mollified by my ready agreement, but I can still read the excited energy in her, the brimming rage she can’t begin to know what to do with. I can count it in the rigid set of her shoulders, her creaking fists, the tilt of her chin. Further down: the hesitance, the unsure angle of her feet, her world’s propriety battling with her resolve. She wants so much. She’s afraid to demand it. She’s afraid of what it would mean. But she still does.

If I was younger and then some, newer, I’d look at her and think about how much she must love her sister, to feel all this pain, but I’ve seen my girls fight tooth and vicious nail for others they barely know—those that they hate, even. It’s a strange thing. I’d call it wondrous, if it wasn’t born out of something so heavy.

“Your sister doesn’t want to come?” I won’t take small children hunting, but twelve is scraping along old enough to where I feel like it won’t just fuck them up more.

“No.” Ella says it quickly, but there’s a change in her posture, a flicker in her eyes. She’s not good at subtle, this one. She didn’t ask. I say as much.

Ella puffs up. “She’s twelve. She shouldn’t have to deal with this shit.”

“No,” I agree. “But it’s not about should. It’s about the choice. She’s had enough autonomy taken away from her already.”

“I don’t want her to have to deal with this anymore! She’s terrified. She can’t sleep—she gets nightmares,
panic attacks. She’s wetting the bed; she hasn’t done that since she was three. I can’t—I can deal with this. I’m allowed to go hunting in her stead. Sisters and sisters in arms, I was told.”

“Technically,” Jenna says. “It’s siblings in arms.” It’s the first time she’s spoken since Ella brought up the hunt. I hunted with her brother last year, for the sake of a friend of his. It’s probably where these two got the idea. It’s all word of mouth in this business.

“She’s right,” I say. “Just because it’s more often women doesn’t mean we work in absolutes.”

I’ve found my quarry in all types. I got a girl once who had a bad habit of drugging her partners. I strung her up on high. She lived, barely. I check in from time to time to make sure she stays in line. It depends on what the client is after. Not for this one, though. Not when it comes to kids. There’s only one way that ends. I’ve got rules.

“God, okay, whatever.” Ella drags a hand down her face. “I still have the right to hunt in her place.”

“Sure,” I say, “I ain’t arguing that—just tell your sister first.”

“Please,” Jenna puts a hand on Ella’s arm to stop whatever frustrations were about to escape her mouth. “Please. Mercedes is still so traumatized she’ll hardly talk about it. She can barely process what happened. If we ask her, it could take days or weeks before she’s capable of reaching a decision. We don’t have that kind of time.”

I huff, picking up my snuffed cigarette and hopping off the table, heading for my kitchen. I never did get my dinner. “You in a special rush? Rain’s monstrous—isn’t exactly the night for it.” This is getting too messy too
fast. Kid cases always are, but that doesn’t mean I enjoy the complications.

“There’s a wraith,” Jenna calls to my back and I stop, turn around, point my cigarette at her like a warning.

“You really should have lead with that.”

The girls blink wide when I usher them into the garage and pull the overhead light on. Pushing past, I head for my storage racks of supplies, looking for what I’ll need. I run my fingers over tools and treasures, mumbling considerations under my breath. This kind of thing works bigger than guns and knives, especially with weather like this. I’ll need a tarp, and rope. Chow would be a decent idea, if we’re dealing with a wraith. The freezer creaks when I heave the heavy door open, and I study its bowels, all the saved up little bits from over the years. They have their uses.

“Why the shit didn’t you tell me your sister’s gone wraith?” I ask, eyes still on my freezer. Wraiths are magic gone sideways. Trauma given form and gone nuclear, looking for an escape. Never an easy time to handle, and always a ticking clock.

Behind me, Ella grumbles. “It’s not my sister.”

So another victim. Great. Trauma, even secondhand, muddles our ability to tell a cohesive narrative, but still—would have been good to know.

The freezer door drops with a loud thud, and I shuffle the different packages in my arms. “Jenna, get me the bucket in the kitchen,” I say, then look back to Ella. “Then who?”
“My sister’s best friend. Isabel—um, Isabel Peters?” Something sad and distant crosses her face. “Izzy and Mercy, that’s what everyone calls them.”

“Great, another kid.” The younger a wraith is, the more volatile. Not her fault, but—trickier, for me.

Ella shrinks, burrowing between her shoulders and retreating into herself. She was a happy kid, not that long ago. She’d had braces that flashed when she smiled, but it was still a lovely thing. She’d smiled a lot, even the few times I’d been around, moving between the shadows of the ones that would never notice me, would never find their way here.

“Focus,” I say to Ella gently. I feel for her, but it’s going to be a long fucking night, and I need to know what’s happened so we can get moving. “Tell me about Isabel.”

Jenna and Ella share a look, both hesitating, but it’s Ella who opens her mouth, hand darting up to the back of her head, fingers carding nervously through the thick, black waves. “I knew about Isabel first, technically. My sister kept… phrasing everything in these hypotheticals outside of herself. What if a friend… that kind of thing. Asking for my advice. By the time I’d gotten the truth, Steege’s family had already dealt with Isabel’s—and then they dealt with mine.”

“Still can’t believe they paid everyone off,” Jenna mutters, finally pushing off the wall and fetching the bucket I asked for. She puts it in front of me, and I dump the frozen meat into it. “It’s so fucked up. Thought that shit only happened in movies.”

“Sometimes clichés are real.” I drag the bucket over to the sink, turning on the water. “This is a small island, and there’s a lot of money hidden inside it, money with
deep roots. Things get handled internally.” But that’s what I’m here for, too.

“It’s just…” Jenna wraps her arms around herself, a forlorn tilt to her head. “All those years… he was always trouble, but I never thought he was *this*… messed up.” I squint at her wobbling chin. Their mothers are friends, aren’t they? All these kids grew up together.

“Why are you here, then?” I ask gently. I’d hardly condemn her for helping her friend, but this is a big ask. Jenna looks away, careful. Oh so careful. “Just am.” Her face is fragile, but with a stubborn tilt to her jaw. I don’t press any further.

I gesture Ella forward and pass her the bucket with the meat and slopping water. “We should have seen it,” she says. “I should have seen it. He and everyone in his family can rot. They can’t just buy my sister’s consent after the fact.”

“Wasn’t on you,” I say, “And they’re twelve. They *can’t* consent.” I nod to the bucket. “That’ll defrost the meat. Put it in the back of your car.” Hopefully they were smart enough not to bring their own.

“It’s from off-island, the city,” Jenna says, as if on cue. “A friend of my brother’s hotwired it for me.”

“Just as long as it can’t be traced back to you.” I grab a tarp and rope and hit the garage opener. As the door creaks up, I whistle. “A pickup. That’ll make life easier. Good girls.”

Jenna opens up the back, and Ella pushes the bucket in. We load the rest of my supplies in heavy silence. We can’t afford any missteps tonight, if there’s a wraith out. Devil hunting is devil hunting—I’ve been at it long
enough that even when things go sideways I can kick and wade my way upstream out of pure spite. I’ve never missed a target, and I’ve never lost a client. I don’t plan to start. But wraiths are another matter—a wraith means there is something here this night that is out for saving—and that’s not half as easy. I’ve lost wraiths before. They haunt me. Forgotten siblings I didn’t make it to in time.

“What state is Isabel in?” I ask quietly. “How long has the wraith been around?”

“She’s…” Jenna swallows nervously. “She’s in the hospital, a coma. Her parents are with her. She took some pills yesterday. If they hadn’t found her when they did…”

I grunt. It’s horrible, obviously—the kind of shatteringly unfair thing that makes one’s gut squirm and chest ache, body unable to fathom the wrongness of it all—but it’s not any less than I was expecting. Wraiths always mean dire straits, and this one has been through hell and come out the other side only to find no one cared about the bruises or bloody legs or the rips in the seams of her soul it took to claw through survival. Not surprising things went this far.

“The wraith showed up this afternoon,” Ella finishes. “She messed up a couple guy friends we know pretty bad. Broke one of their arms. She didn’t know any better, I know. A man’s a man to her right now. But it—I knew I was out of time to make a decision on this.”

“Yes,” I agree. “You were. So—” I lead the girls over to the cabinet, dig my keys out from the cord around my neck, caught under my shirt, and unlock it, peeling back the doors. “What do you want?”

Both the girls pale a little.
“I don’t like guns,” Jenna says faintly, but Ella rallies more quickly, shaking her head.

“I don’t either, but just for tonight, fuck that.” She pulls a hunting rifle off the rack, checks it over. Jenna remains frozen.

“I don’t like guns,” she says again, on autopilot.

I shrug. “All right. Then tonight you like axes. And—” I pull my quarry off a shelf, and pass them around. “Everyone likes knives.”

Ella takes hers with a strained look on her face, hand flexing nervously around the handle, but grip firm, and Jenna hesitates—selects hers with a tiny whine, staring down at it.

“…You don’t have to do this,” I say as quietly, calmly, as I know how. “You get that, right? This isn’t law, or some right of passage.” Almost every one of them is always nervous, a little unsure. In the back of their minds they want to know if they’re right. They pause and dither, waiting for some absolution I can’t offer them, some reprieve. It all comes down to whether the resolve can hold up—I can see that in Ella, she’ll handle herself, but—

“No,” says Jenna distantly—and then again, firmly, “No. I want to be here.”

She passes me back the axe, and I heft it over my shoulder. Someone’s taking it, even if it’s me. It’s goddamn useful.

“I—” Jenna stops, and starts again. “On second thought, I will take a gun.”

A relieved smile slips across Ella’s face when Jenna takes it off the rack, and I clap her on the back. “Then let’s go.”
The Devil Hunters of Fawn Street

The rain starts back up when we’re on the road out of my territory, thick and pelting. In the back of the truck, one hand clinging to the side and the other braced against the floor, foot wedged against the bucket on the other side of the bed to keep it from moving, I tilt my face up into the wind, let the water make its way down my skin and take root in my hair. I close my eyes, breathing in the cold night air, the crisp scent of the overturned dirt and the evergreen trees. I’m soaked to the bone, freezing my ass off, and it’s wonderful. I feel fully inhabited, flesh and bone, in some pounding, vicious, vengeful way.

(…Do you know that feeling? It’s like nothing else in this world. I cling to it, the memory of it, always. Find it, if you can. It will keep you alive.)

Most of the time, especially when everything is over and I must crawl back home and wash the guts and filth off, light up and put on the coffee and try and chase the tremble from my bones with nicotine and caffeine, the hunts feel too close together. You spend every day, every hour, praying that no one ever finds the way again, that no one comes knocking at your door, because that means it’s over—the world has moved on and it doesn’t need you anymore. It’s funny, isn’t it? That this is one of the few duties you can give your life to and just continually hope that it becomes obsolete. That you become obsolete.

God, to let the witch rest. To let her find something else to fight other than the stinking, rotten corpse of mankind and its barbarities.
But the hunts always come. It’s a lot—it will always be a lot. It will weigh heavy on you, and you’ve got to come to terms with that. I couldn’t count how many times I’ve curled up under the spray of a shower and wept for all the girls, the kids that didn’t make it, for myself, and the ways things seem to be getting worse than better. That’s never going to leave me.

It’s not all bad, though. Sometimes, on the nights like this one, when the sky is heavy with moisture and anticipation and the moon bright, and the wild scent of the island is in my lungs, I know I’m about to have a hand in some small reckoning, some tiny twist of the knife, and I think: *finally.*

As we drive, Jenna cracks open the window to the front of the truck, leaning into it. “Are you sure you can track him? He’s not at his house. His parents packed him up and went somewhere else once word got round at school.”

“If he’s on the island, I’ll find him.” I say firmly. “If he’s not, it might get a little more complicated, since that ain’t my stretch of land, but I’ll find him all the same. You got the token?”

Jenna extracts a dirty sweater from her bag, passes it through the window. “We got it from his gym locker. Locks aren’t that sturdy. Will it work?”

“Yes,” I say, and take it in hand, holding it to my face and wrinkling my nose at the stench of sweat and iron, distinct and all devil. Nasty, but useful—I focus on the scent, and then turn my attention to the wind whipping by, the whispers of the island. Breathe in deep, sort and filter. Find the trail. A million lives
running by—bats in the trees and ants underfoot and humans, beautiful, horrible, complicated humans, everywhere—but I’m looking for something specific.

I catch him, and open my eyes. “Left,” I say, and Jenna relays the instructions to Ella, who yanks the wheel sharply onto the next available dirt path.

The girls grow quiet when we get close to the house. It’s on the water, looks like a rental, but still fairly fancied up. I’m almost impressed at the balls it would take to stay here—on the island where it happened, on my island—but it seems humans never learn. They’re not the first parents to live in denial about what their child is, or about what’s coming for him.

I instruct Ella to pull the car over at the top of the long, weaving driveway. Far away enough that our faces won’t be visible should someone wake. Once we’re parked, the girls just sit there, each fidgeting nervously in turn. Ella’s eyes are flinty, her face sickly wan. Jenna’s forming sweat stains on her shirt.

“What about the wraith?” Jenna asks quietly.

“Your boy first,” I say, and swing out of the back of the truck. “Make room up there. I’m going to need somewhere dry for this part.” The girls shuffle over obligingly, and I get inside. “You brought what I need?”

“Yeah.” Ella ducks down, searching through her bag. “Jenna’s brother told us.” She fishes out a plastic baggie housing locks of dark hair, and a tiny china horse fit for a young child.

“Good.” Wiping my hands dry on the sides of the car seat and rolling up my sleeves, I take both from her. Neatly and firmly, I smash the china figurine on the top
of the dashboard and dump the snippet of hair overtop the shards. It sizzles where it falls, breaking down the shards even further. The girls hiss when I rake my fingers between my breasts, digging into well-worn scabs and coming up with red under my nails. I turn my hand over the pile, let the blood drip down, and repeat the process until there’s enough.

“Jesus,” Ella mumbles as I stir the mixture with a finger.

“Oh, he has nothing to do with this,” I say, and Jenna giggles sharply. Too loud, too high.

I tilt my head as I observe my work, checking it over. Devil’s spell. A piece of her that has survived, a piece of who she was before he took that from her, and a piece of someone who has dedicated every scrap of flesh to the hunt until the last.

Next to me, the girls are arguing in whispers as they try to puzzle it out for themselves. Ella elbows Jenna. “It’s magic. Don’t question it.”

“It’s poetic justice,” I say, and when they stare blankly at me, I shrug. “That was a joke.”

The window creaks when I roll it down, and I scoop the mixture up in my palms, leaning out the side of the car and cupping my hands to my face. The wind helps me along as I blow out over it, and the sticky paste of sharp shards and sodden hair turns to a fine powder as it rolls past my fingertips. I duck back into the car and we watch the particles, shining silver, float by and down to the house. “Now we wait.”

The rain punctuates the silence as we sit, thundering down onto the windshield and roof. It sits at an odd tempo with Ella’s anxiously drumming fingers on the wheel, her hunched frame. Jenna sits between us,
squashed onto the seat-divider, with her tense hands curled up in her lap, staring out towards the house morosely. I lean back in my seat, crossing my arms and closing my eyes.

“...I don’t even like my sister,” Ella blurts out, breaking through the white noise, and I crack an eye open. She looks half-sick, chin resting on the wheel and teeth worrying at her lip as she stares out. The shadows under her eyes are more distinct in the gloom, somehow, and I wonder how long it’s been since she’s slept a full night. “I don’t. Not really. She can be such a brat. Most of the time I fucking hate her.

“But when I heard what he did to her—I wanted him dead. I wanted to rip him open and gut him, tear him apart slowly, for hurting her.” She snorts tiredly. “So—I guess that’s something.”

“Ella...” Jenna says, carefully. “You—” She stops. “Oh my God.”

“What?”

Jenna leans forward with a sudden urgency, bracing herself against the dashboard, and points. “It’s Steege.”

We look down the driveway to see the boy stumbling out his front door. Tripping over his own feet, he makes his ambling way towards our car. We can’t see his face at first, but when he comes closer it becomes easier to make out his closed eyes, slack mouth, the sprinkle of silver over his nose and brow.

“Magic,” Ella mumbles.

“All right,” I say, “Everyone out.” With some nudging, the girls pile out of the car, and we all stand to its side as Steege stumbles up to us. I cast an eye to the girls, studying Ella’s tight shoulders, the hatred in her
scowl, and Jenna’s nervously intertwined fingers that do nothing to disguise the disgusted slant of her mouth.

“What do we do with him?” Jenna whispers, cupping a hand over her mouth and leaning into Ella’s side.

“We take him, duh,” Ella says.

“But what if we wakes up?”

Ella doesn’t answer. Then, with sudden hurry, she steps forward, fist swinging hard at Steege’s face. They collide with a sharp crack, and down he goes, hitting the paved road.

“…Now he won’t,” Ella says. Her voice shakes, but she’s smiling grimly as she shakes her hand out, knuckles red.

I nod. “Let’s get him in the truck.”

We take the high, winding road over the crest of the island, where the trees are thick and the houses are few—faint black shapes with the occasional flickering light in the gloom.

(You know that road, yes? Sometimes the way here is on that road—on the left, next to a big, half-dead blackberry bush strangling some old cherry trees—and you can find it under the right moon.)

I’m back in the bed of the truck, with Steege a slack lump at my feet. When we turn sharp corners, his body slides from one end of the bed to another, slamming none too gently into the wall. I could stabilize him—brace him with my feet or something. I don’t.

Jenna raps on the window before sliding it open once more, and I duck my head through. “I know you said we needed to get moving, but it’d help a bit to know where we’re going.”
“The wraith,” I say. “We’ve got her cure, so now we’re just in the business of finding her.”

“You can’t track her the same way you did him—if we get you something of hers?”

I shake my head. “It doesn’t work that way. He’s a physical thing—I can find him by scent. He—well, he reeks, and he reeks hard of all that he’s done. But wraiths aren’t… they’re—something else.”

“So how do we find her?” Ella calls back.

“Where did Steege assault Isabel and your sister?” I ask Ella, and she makes a face.

“Is that where she’s gone? Seriously?”

“Most likely bet. She’s stuck in a loop. She’d almost certainly be there.” That’s what wraiths do, after all. They live it out over and over, that day of death. They look for a different ending they’ll never find.

Ella nibbles her bottom lip in thought, fingers drumming on the wheel. “Mercedes said… the park by the woods. Steege saw them walking home from school, offered them a ride—she thought it would be fine, he’d driven them before, bastard—but. He took them there instead.”

I consider it. Wraiths like woods, as much as wraiths really like anything. “Yes. Go.”

Ella nods, speeds up, and Jenna gives me an unreadable look, before asking, quietly, “What’s going to happen to Isabel? Will she be okay?” There’s a quiver in her voice that betrays her concern. I watch her carefully.

There’s a cost to being the expert in this situation. I know I can tell lies, and the girls will believe me. I can tell them that everything will be fine, and they’ll have to take that as gospel.
But I’m not one for false hope—no devil hunter is. You have to be willing to work with reality to survive what we do. It’s the little truths that make the whole mess of what we are more stomachable, as are the cruel, horrible facts that explain why we must exist. I cannot promise these girls that Isabel will be fine any more than I can promise them that what they are doing tonight will undo the damage done to themselves and Ella’s sister. It just doesn’t work that way.

But that’s not why we do this. We do this in the hopes that this particular devil will never rear its ugly head again, that a few girls might sleep more peacefully at night for knowing his absence. That a wraith can break her loop, can go home. Can have a chance, if only a chance.

“Depends on what—” she starts to ask, before Ella hisses out a curse and slams her foot on the brake. Jenna flies forward with a yelp, seatbelt saving her, and I crash painfully, shoulders catching in the window frame and the pile of junk in the bed of the truck slamming into my legs.

“Jesus, Ella,” Jenna hisses. “What the hell?”

“The road’s out!” Ella says defensively, gesturing ahead of her. “Flash flood warning. There’s no way to go around the roadblock without breaking it.”

“No.” I shake my head. There’s a crack when I stretch my arms, but nothing feels broken. “We’ll have to turn back.”

“Right,” Ella says, going to put the car in gear, and I hear a thumping noise as something tumbles out of the bed of the truck, followed by a mess of sloshing and panting. When I turn around, Steege is out of the car and stumbling along the road. I curse loudly, and when
Steege looks over his shoulder and sees me, his eyes widen and he runs faster.

“We’ve got a runner,” I say, and bemoan the fact that I somehow didn’t notice he’d woken up as Ella and Jenna look in the rearview mirror.

“Fuck,” Jenna says, with feeling. “Do you need a gun?”

“Might do.” I watch Steege slip and swear his way down the road. “Pass me one. I’ll see if I can get a clear shot through the rain. I’d rather not go chasing after him and get mud all up my pants before I have to.”

Jenna hands me the gun, and I line it up. Eye to the scope. Breathe in, out. Tell yourself this means something. Tell yourself you cannot let him get away.

I shoot, and miss, narrowly. Mostly because he trips in a puddle and takes a sudden knee, before he’s up again. I grumble, reposition the rifle. I can’t have him reaching a house.

“…Oh fuck this,” Ella says, and puts the car in reverse, hooking her arm over the back of the seat and peering out over her shoulder. The car shoots down the road, tires squealing in the sludge, and I brace myself right before it collides with Steege with a thick, meaty crunch. Jenna flinches as he goes down, but nobody makes a sound. Ella hits the brakes, and the car squeals to a stop as something bumps under the wheels down below.

“Oh my god,” Jenna says, a faint, panicky awe in her voice. “Oh my god, Ella, you just ran Steege over with a car. Holy shit.”

“Yeah, and I’ll do it again if I need to,” Ella’s face is white, but set in stone, fingers tightening on the wheel.
“Let’s just hope you haven’t killed him yet,” I say, and hop out of the back. Jenna follows after and hovers behind me as I crouch down and peer below the car. There’s a muddy, humanoid lump between the wheels, and when I grab a stick off the ground and prod him, he groans. “Oh, good. Alive.”

Jenna and I drag him out from under the car, and when we get him out he squirms slightly on the ground, somehow still conscious. He whimpers, and I roll my eyes. “Hold him still. Gonna make sure he can’t run off again.” Jenna nods, and while there’s been anxiety buzzing in her frame all night long, that’s finally gone when she plants a boot on his neck with purpose. There’s morbid fascination in her expression, something cold.

Steege wheezes under her, eyes bulging, as I dig in the back for some duct tape and then stoop to tie up his hands and feet. “…Jenna?” he croaks feebly, sounding entirely confused. Concussed, probably, if not sporting fractures. “What—”

“Oh, shut up, Steege,” Jenna says.

Steege’s eyes finally track to me, and a new and particular terror passes over his face. I smile sharply for him. Fangs out.

Men like him can never find the way to me and my kind, our doors will never be open for them, but they know what we are when they see us. They know what retribution looks like when it stares them in the eye.

That’s about when it seems to kick in for him that what’s happening is real and not all some strange, painful dream—and he opens his mouth and starts screaming. Loud, terrified, throaty screams—the kind a
man would never cop to, especially as being caused by a woman.

“Oh, none of that,” I sigh, and pull a strip of duct tape from the roll around my wrist, sealing it over his mouth. “You’ll wake up the whole damn island.”

“Back in the truck?” Jenna asks.

“One last thing,” I say. “He could still get loose, and I have no fucking interest in chasing after him again.” I get my rifle out of the truck, and aim it at Steege’s ankle. The girls’ eyes are wide, but neither of them looks away when the shot rings out.

The metal pieces of the park, swings and slides, flash in the moonlight when we arrive.

(It’s one of the oldest things around here, did you know that? Old enough that even I can remember playing on it, in a life long gone. Back when I had no needs for guns and knives, and I had a name that fit in my mouth, its syllables well shaped and whole.)

Ella pulls up at the side of the road closest to the trees, and we clamber out. Popping the door to the bed, I slide the meat bucket to Jenna, and then Ella and I heave Steege out of the truck. He moans garbled words around the tape, and stumbles between us, hopping to stay off his broken ankle. The rain washes away the sluggishly drooling blood quickly, but it can’t erase the red stains on his sleeping pants or the swelling and bruising of his skin.

We drag him past the tree line to a small clearing and then dump him on the ground. Ella stoops, bracing her
hands on her knees, and we both breathe heavily. Jenna stumbles into the clearing behind us, lugging the bucket and with the tarp tucked under her arm. We go to help her, relieving her of her burdens, and when we turn back, Steege is wriggling pathetically away.

Ella sighs. “Getting real sick of this shit, Steege,” she says, and grabs him by the tape around his ankles, yanking him back into the center of the clearing. Planting a foot on his chest to stop him from moving, she looks him over with narrowed, considering eyes, fingers fidgeting over the hunting knife that sits tucked through her belt.
Jenna, though, doesn’t move from where she stands next to me—watching Ella and Steeg with an unreadable expression.

“It’s still not too late to walk away,” I remind her softly. “You don’t have to do this.”

“It’s not that,” she says, shaking her head. “It’s just—it feels so wrong to want this. I’ve known him my whole life. But I still—I fucking hate him so much, knowing I grew up with him, played with him, sat in the same classes as him, and all that time this was inside him. I hate him and I want to hurt him so badly, and knowing that—that violence is inside me is…”

“Frightening?” I ask, and she nods, wiping at her cheeks. I don’t have the heart to remind her no one can see her tears through the rain. “I understand.”

And I do. I really, truly do.

“…He was my date,” Jenna says quietly, too quiet for Ella to hear. “For homecoming, sophomore year. I threw out the dress.”

I close my eyes. Ah.

“I’m not going to tell you this is right, Jenna,” I say carefully. “It’s not… I can’t just decide that for you. This isn’t for everyone. And it’s not pretty.” I shrug when she looks at me, because, well—that’s the truth of it. “But this does not make you and him the same. At all.”

“I feel like it does. Like it makes me—”

“A monster?”

“Yes.”

“There are different kinds of monsters,” I say.

I have known monsters. I’ve hunted demons and devils, lived as a feral little thing desperate for the blood of the shadows under my bed. I have ripped into the
flesh of those who took what was not theirs with my bare teeth and pulled them apart by each snapping rib with my claws.

I am a monster, and I am not like these girls, but I am not like him, either.

“Are we killing this guy or not?” Ella calls to us loudly.

Jenna startles, taking a deep breath and curling her hands into fists. “Yes,” she says firmly. “We are.”

I spread out the tarp, and the girls pull Steege back to his feet again, before pushing him onto it. The tarp does little to soften the blow of the ground, and Steege groans as he hits it. There’s mud scattered across his face, and the rain washes it into small rivers across his skin and into the matted corners of the duct tape on his mouth.

Ella eyes him carefully.

“We’ll need a little blood going,” I say. “For the wraith.”

“Right,” Ella says, shaking her head. “Right, I can do that.” She straightens herself up, fiddles with her knife, raises it up between her hands. The moonlight catches on the pose like a portrait, a story told, and Ella stays there, looking to play her part.

The knife shakes, and shakes, caught between trembling fingers, and she doesn’t move.

“Fuck,” she whispers, and the actress in her cracks, slinking low beneath the girl—the vulnerable, terrified, heartbroken sixteen-year-old girl, who has watched her sister lose childhood entirely too fast, and is having to grow up herself here, now, in a vicious kind of way. She sinks into a crouch, bracing her elbows on her knees, her forehead against the hilt of the knife. “God dammit, Steege,” she whispers, and I touch her shoulder. Tell her
with my eyes everything Jenna already knows—you
don’t have to do this. You can walk away, go get in the
car.

Swearing softly, Ella leans forward, rips the tape off
Steege’s mouth.

“Oh god, Ella, please—”

“Oh fuck off, Steege,” Ella says miserably, hilt of the
knife back against her skin, pressing hard. She closes
her eyes. “You’re a fucking rapist.”

“I’m—s-so what, you’re going to fucking kill me?”
His words are slurred through the pain, but adrenaline
pushes him on, desperate. “What the hell, Ella?”

“Yeah,” Ella says, mouth tight. So much grief.
“Yeah.”

Jenna makes her way closer, and he turns to her,
pleading. “Jenna, come on, come on, we’re practically
cousins.”

Something complicated, a little broken and a lot
furious, shutters across Jenna’s face, before she goes
utterly still. “You hurt those girls,” she says quietly.
“Those little girls. They were little girls, Steege.”

“It’s not—Jesus Christ, I didn’t hurt them! We were
just—it was fucking fooling around, a goddamn joke,
it’s not a big deal—”

“Not a big deal?” Ella’s voice is blank. Her eyes
open, and she hisses out a breath, slow and measured.
“Not a big deal? You raped my sister, Steege! You—”
her words escape her, and a hand comes free from the
knife, fisting in her rain-soaked hair and pulling.

“She’s twelve,” Ella chokes out. “She was a fucking
kid, and you hurt her, so fucking badly. You took something from her she’ll never, ever get
back. And you know that, you had to have known that,
Steege, why would you—” A half-screech, a wounded animal sound, escapes her mouth, and the hand in her hair falls, punches the ground near Steege’s head as he flinches away. The knife flashes, finally pointed directly between his eyes. “So now I’m going to take, and no one’s coming to help you, just like no one helped her.”

Steege recoils, fresh desperation winning out over the moment of indignation, and his eyes quickly slide back to Jenna. “Jen—”

Jenna cocks her head. “Known Mercedes and Isabel my whole life. Practically cousins,” she says flatly, turning his words back on him. “Come on, Steege.”

Steege finally faces me with a half-feverish look. His lips are a bloody smear of cracks and rips, and dark marks are starting to creep up his arms from how hard he’s strained against his bonds. I can still smell the gunpowder from the bullet I put in his ankle, but it does little to rid him of his stink. “Huntress!” Steege cries. “Huntress, please!”

“Oh piglet,” I say patiently, and take a step forward, crouching down and smiling my nicest smile. Men like him always want their girls to smile. “There’s no point going down that road. I’ve seen many a sight better at this act than you are.”

Steege whimpers, before the shouting begins, as if on cue: “Help! Someone help me! They’re going to—” Jenna slaps the tape back over his mouth.

There’s a rustle in the bushes, and I turn, studying the tree line. The wraith. She’s here. “I’m serious about that blood,” I say, and the girls nod.

“Happily.”

“Just don’t kill him.” I pick up the meat bucket. “I’ll be back. I’m going to find Isabel.”
The Devil Hunters of Fawn Street

The trees part for me, and I make my way further into the dark.

The meat hits the ground in thick chunks as I walk, fished out from my bucket. They’re defrosted by now, more or less, and reek of devil as I drop them. I can hear her moving through the trees, drawn by the scent. It’s not what she’s searching for—that’s back the way I came—but this is a good way of calling her out, letting her know I deal in the things she needs. I whistle as I go, a low, slow tune someone I knew long ago taught me. It’s important to be calm, to assuage her panic. A wraith will find no threat in my kind.

I keep moving even after I’ve dumped the last of the meat, and eventually I feel a touch at my back, a strong puff of air, and I stop. “Isabel,” I say, and I can feel her tense up behind me. “It’s okay,” I say quietly. “It’s okay, I’m here to help you. I’m a friend.” I raise my hands and turn slowly, pivoting on my heel.

“Oh,” I say, once I set my eyes on her. “Oh, hello, lovely.”

It’s hard to explain what a wraith looks like to someone who’s never seen one. You have to see it yourself to fully understand it.

Picture them as a manifestation, an embodiment, of a specific kind of pain—a fury, a shame. They look like a feeling you know inescapably, buried deep and low in your chest, when you’ve been forced all the way down to the bottom.
It’s old, old magic, not unlike what I do. Wraiths are what happens when someone who has been hurt in that specific, terrible way finds no place to put all that feeling, and it boils over, spills out. Not everyone can go down that path—for better or for worse.

Mostly, if I had to offer a comparison… think of a wraith as like a young deer, on staggering, unsure legs, and with the most specific, unforgettable eyes. Always cast in shadow, and with every step, every movement, its every particle sings with a certain kind of grief.

They are terrible to look at, and they are beautiful.

A hand on her side, I lead her back through the forest. I am gentle as I can be, crooning and whispering words of encouragement, of understanding. I have handled many like her before and have walked in her steps. I know the way.

We can both smell the blood as we get closer, and she perks up. I whistle sharply to give the girls some warning, and then we come into the clearing. Steege is spread out on the tarp, red bubbling from cuts up and down his chest just as fast as the rain washes it away. Jenna’s face goes slack in disbelief when she sees the wraith, but Ella has enough common sense to grab her by the arm and back them both up, knife slipping out of her hand.

Steege stares at us as we approach, no longer able to scream, no longer able to do anything but gag on his own blood and vomit, but the fear in his eyes—something he has never tasted in his life, but all of us have grown up knowing so well—it is clear, and it is delicious.
You know the rest of this part, right? I don’t need to tell you any more. You remember how it goes.
What was it like, eating the heart right out from him?
Don’t look at me like that. It’s just a question.
…I never said I was a nice person, you know? I never said I was good.

I never said this was justice, that this is the solution. I never said this works for everyone. I never said it’s the path of the best, or the bravest. Only that it’s mine.

But what else would you do, when the world is this way? When nobody looks and so few care. When the devil always slips between loose fingers and does it again, and again, and again.

Revenge fantasy. Sure. For the record, fuck whoever taught you that phrase. I’m going to guess it was a man.

Just—was it good? I hope it was good. I hope it helped.

I hope, for what it’s worth, it made you feel a tiny bit more whole, a little more like the world can go on. That you can go on.

I really do hope that.

We dump what’s left of him in the river, trusting it to cart him out to sea. The girls are quiet on the drive back, for a long time, until Jenna says, “The wraith… she just vanished after it was done. Does that mean Isabel will wake up?”

“I don’t know,” I tell her. “We have to wait and see.”

“But there’s a chance?”

“Yes,” I say, and she relaxes, just a little.
Ella, then, speaks. “You know… I’m just realizing, we never asked what your name is. Jenna’s brother never told us.”

I shrug, tilting my face up to the waning night sky, still slung out in the bed of the truck. “It’s not like you really need to know.”

“Yeah, but—” Ella glances at me in the rearview mirror. “I mean… you just helped us murder a guy?” At that, Jenna laughs—high and frightened, but with a touch of relief. “I kind of feel like that warrants us at least having a name to call you by.”

I grunt and close my eyes. Fair enough. “…Bet. You can call me Bet.”

“Bet,” Jenna says thoughtfully. “Is that short for Betty?”

“No.”

“Then—”

“No more questions.” I say tiredly. “Enough questions.”

The girls fall silent, but when I crack an eye open, their faces are calm.

We drop Ella home first. It’s not day yet, but the darkness has let up enough to see better, and as I switch into the front of the truck, Jenna and I watch her stagger down her driveway. The door opens, and a head of similarly dark curls, pulled into two messy braids, pops out. Mercedes. I watch the way her eyes widen when she sees her sister, the state she’s in, and how she staggers out to meet her. Ella wraps her arms around her and presses her head close to her chest with the back of her hand, ducking her face down into Mercedes’s curls.
The girls sob, the both of them, and fall—a collapsed, grieving, messy puddle of limbs on the concrete.

“Will they be okay?” Jenna whispers.

I wonder what okay is—that this brings them closer together? That things go back to normal, somehow, as much as possible? “I don’t know,” I say again, because that’s the truth of it. “I don’t know.”

When we get back to my home, the only one on its street—the only one you will ever find, traveling this way—we unpack in silence, dumping the guns and knives, the bucket, the shovel and tarp, into the garage. I drag the hose out, and we wash down the truck thoroughly, scrubbed clean. After, I push Jenna into my shower, and once she has a change of clean clothes on, I let her clamber back into the truck.

“You know how this works, right?” I say. “You get caught, I was never there.”

“I know,” she says.

“Good.” I study her, the pale flush of her skin, the dark lines of her eyelashes. She and her brother really are identical. “Tell your brother hello.” He used to come around, to visit. For a while. And then he didn’t. He moved on, and how can I be angry, when that’s exactly what I’m here for? I knew what the job entailed.

“…Thanks,” Jenna says, and that’s all—just one last awkward smile from her, and then the idle rumble of the pickup as it drives off, fading from view, into the rising light.

I waited for you, after that.
I didn’t know how long it would take, but I knew if you could, you’d come. You can say a girl like me knows her own.

And yes—now I have told you what I needed to say. Thank you for listening. Even with the interruptions.

Hey, like I said. I enjoy the pushback. It’s been a while, truly.

I was given a story a lot like the one I just gave to you, once.

It was told to me by someone who gave up her name in exchange for other gifts. They are not easy gifts to bear—but they give you a chance. Just a small one, but still. Even a small chance is worth a lot.

And then she offered me a bargain, old magic. The same one I am offering you.

I was told this: I don’t know if the things we do are good, are right. They probably aren’t. But humans are not particularly good, often times, either. No one but our own will protect us, will free us, and until the world corrects itself, we are needed. When the devil comes knocking, there is no right or wrong. There is survival.

So: Hello. My name was Beatrice, once.

I know the way down to the bottom. Deep and dark and low.

So do you. But the only one who can make you walk this particular path in front of you is yourself. That’s your choice. There’s always a choice.

Welcome to Fawn Street.

Will you stay?
The man should have been handsome. But his high cheekbones threw severe shadows on his hollowed cheeks. His pale blue eyes appeared sharply manic in their watery glassiness. Gentle blond curls were pushed back from a high forehead, not styled, but the result of anxious hands running through the loosened waves. The slight tan of naturally pale skin had taken on a sallow tone. But his smile was untouched by whatever affliction marred the rest of his beauty, teeth unnaturally straight and white. The perfection could have been as off-putting as the flaws, and yet that smile glowed with natural charisma. Even without the smile, he still would
have been the most appealing man in that bar. It was not surprising that his lonely evening seemed to be ending with him on his way to a woman’s flat.

Despite the hollowness, the anxiety, and the sallow skin, the woman reminded herself that she was lucky.

In front of her door, keys held loosely in her hands, she frowned. She had often ended a night feeling successful, pleasantly surprised, excited, but she had never stood in front of her modest third-floor walk-up telling herself that she was lucky. And though it was late, and though it was rude, and though he truly was the most appealing man that had been at the bar that night or any night in the past week, the woman remembered old advice from her mother to always trust her gut. Her gut was saying that there was nothing lucky about this at all. And though her whole face turned pink in an embarrassed blush, she told the man that she had changed her mind, and left him in the hallway outside her door, locking two locks behind her and securing the chain. She did not see his face as she made her swift escape. She would not have thought he was so handsome if she had.

The walls were thin enough for the woman to hear the man’s soft footsteps as he headed down the stairs, and she sighed, relieved that he had not made a scene. She left a trail of her coat, purse, and shoes across scratched wooden floors as she made her way to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water with shaking hands. Once, distracted by a good friend’s illness, while walking across the road in a stupor of pre-emptive grief, she had nearly been hit by a speeding car. The fluttering in her heart now was the same panic of a disaster barely averted.
The drip, drip, drip of the tap that refused to shut off completely steadied her pulse to an equally even beat. She gave the tap a few twists, but the drip refused to stop. It was a wonderfully mundane problem to have, and she decided to leave it for the morning.

As she finished undressing in her bedroom, she did not see the drops turn red. They were far too thick to be water, almost crystalizing as they met and merged at the base of the sink. Even when the drip finally stopped, the red mass continued to grow, eventually taking the shape of a human; a woman, long hair slicked against her back, limbs overflowing from the sink in which she sat, naked skin slick with a liquid red sheen, as gory as a new-born, as delicate, too. This woman from the tap would go to the bedroom like a speeding car, like the worst luck in the world. But before she did, she looked at you with eyes covered in a pale pink film.

Cassandra was not awakened by the familiar chirp of her alarm, but by the loud bang of her flung-open door hitting the wall. She tore off her eye mask and, after blinking away spots from the already-afternoon brightness of her small studio flat, saw that her private space had been invaded by her tutor, Dr Ellis Farbringer, who brandished a piece of paper in front of him like a sword.

“Pop quiz!” he announced, and then, as if just noticing that she was still wrapped in a duvet, continued, “You should be out of bed already.”

“I’m not working today,” Cassandra said, failing to convincingly frown at the energetic man bounding
around her flat in a ragged tweed jacket and partially undone bowtie.

“Of course you are! But, clearly, of course you aren’t,” he said, gesturing at her without meeting her eyes.

He was never one for eye contact, and she was used to his wandering attentions, his gaze dropping to the floor then flitting to his hand then up to the ceiling. It was hardly the oddest thing about him, and she had learned not to expect him to pretend to be like everyone else. It was refreshing, if not endearing. If not a little more than endearing.

“I gave Bailey my morning reservations for the private study room.”

“Well, you should have submitted that in writing.”

“I did.”

Cassandra took a moment to be glad that she had worn pyjama bottoms despite the uncharacteristic heat that drifted through the open window. Apparently just noticing the source of the warm breeze, Ellis slammed the window shut as she dragged herself out of bed.

“You of all people know the dangers lurking at night in London,” he scolded.

“My biggest danger right now is heatstroke and exhaustion,” Cassandra countered. “Tea?”

Ellis nodded as Cassandra went to fill up the kettle at the sink, retying her long brown braid that had become frayed in her restless sleep as she walked across her Archive-provided flat. The tap was dripping. She paused, trying to hold on to the memory of her nightmare. She could see that not quite handsome face very clearly, the creature in the sink, impossibly pink
eyes with an unnerving softness that made Cassandra want to stick her fingers in and dig…

“You should put in a maintenance order on that tap,” Ellis said over her shoulder.

She set the full kettle on the hob to boil and snatched the quiz out of his hand.

“Why do I get special treatment this morning?” she asked as she scanned the page.

“I offered the quiz to everyone,” Ellis protested. “You’re just the first one to actually give it a look. ‘Sort the cursed artifacts into their respective countries of origin.’ I thought it could be helpful.”

“Any object from any country can be cursed,” Cassandra shrugged, handing the paper back to him. “I could probably think of ten examples of various origin for each of those objects.”

The kettle signalled its readiness with an insistent whine. Ellis helped himself to the mugs, fitting each with a teabag of English Breakfast. In his mid-thirties, he was one of the youngest tutors in the Archives, though the greying of his hair, his near-sighted squint, and his insistence on dressing the part almost made him seem as old as his colleagues. Cassandra herself was one of the oldest of the students at twenty-eight, and she often had to remind herself that this man was meant to be a figure of authority. She supposed he would have been more comfortable tutoring the younger Bailey, Simon, and Rayaan who were now finishing occult-related undergraduate degrees, or even teenage wonder Minji, though the girl seemed to have no interest in finishing a formal higher degree or publishing her findings. Though he was the researchers’ closest day-to-day contact, overseeing their general education in the
Archive of the Inexplicable and Dangerous, the students were assigned personal tutors based on the focus of their theses. Ellis and Cassandra’s speciality in curses and monstrosity lined up in an odd kind of luck.

*The worst luck in the world.*

“Are you alright?” Ellis asked.

He sat at her modest table, occupying the only chair, but that was not why Cassandra had frozen while standing by the sink. She shook her head, though she could feel her heart beating fast in her chest.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Just having nightmares. I’m sure it’s the heat.”

She glared at her bed, an unkempt mess overlooked by a large banner with *Archive of the Inexplicable and Dangerous* inscribed in fancy calligraphy, the closest thing to school spirit she could find in her new place of education. The banner hung in each hero’s room as a free gift, but as a student archivist Cassandra had to purchase her own. She was happy to buy it. It was an odd kind of encouragement, a promise of the future she was forging for herself.

“Very uncharacteristic weather this far into the autumn,” Ellis agreed, sipping his tea and grimacing, a habit that Cassandra had learned not to take as a comment on her tea-making ability. “Well then, you said you could think of ten examples for each object. Prove it. Starting with the candlesticks.”

Cassandra listed her answers in rhythm to the dripping of the tap, telling herself that it had just been a nightmare and that there was nothing to worry about.
In a different kitchen, a different tap dripped another creature into existence. It was not an exact replica, but a recognizable variation. Its jaw followed a familiar line and its much shorter hair was still reminiscent of the last nightmare. For a moment, it sat, confused, flexing and unflexing its fingers, thick clumps of gore running down its forehead, lodging in the corner of those inhuman eyes. Then, the mass that looked like a woman pulled itself out of the sink and stumbled into a living room, where a human young woman was sleeping on a sofa, the television in front of her displaying the text “are you still watching?” The girl was wearing clothes from a night out dancing; an impractical and uncomfortable dress that would have shimmered in any light brighter than the dim glow of the television. It fluttered in a tinkling of plastic sequins as the fan in the corner made its rotations. She had gone out looking for company but had changed her mind about the company she had found. That hollow face had not given up on her yet, though. He was already far away, down the street, but he stopped when the creature fell upon the sleeping woman.

She beat out with fists much more solid than the creature, kicked with strong legs despite the surprise of the attack. But then the blows become softer as her body began to melt under the creature’s touch, and an attempt to scream turned into a faded garbled mess. The woman from the tap sunk her hands into her struggling victim’s stomach, and the fabric of her dress, as well as her skin and bones split easily under the pressure, adopting the fragility of the creature’s gelatinous form. The woman on the sofa began to shrink as her body lost its shape, seeming to disappear into the creature that now
straddled her, but the creature was shrinking just as quickly. Before the television decided that the woman was no longer watching and turned itself off, all that remained of the victim and her attacker was a slick stain of red across the cushions and floor, dotted with chunks of unrecognizable viscera that jiggled in the breeze of a fan.

Out on the street, along the Thames, a handsome man decided to walk a little longer, not quite feeling satisfied, but at least feeling fed.

A gentle hand shook Cassandra awake.

“Have you been here all night?” asked Rayaan as he slid into the seat next to her.

Bailey and Simon sat across from her and did not hide their smirks as she wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. Cassandra was alarmed to see that she had drooled on an original Assyrian text recounting hybrid monsters of the eleventh century. The only other person who would check out this book was Ellis, and if her drool discoloured the illustration, he was bound to notice.

“She only read for an hour before she passed out,” Minji chirped, hidden somewhere in the shelves, probably stuck to the single plug powering her laptop that she had found in this old wing of the library.

“Looked like she had been possessed. Or like, drunk.”

“Neither,” Cassandra sighed, rubbing her eyes. “I just haven’t been sleeping. Nightmares.”

“Could be anxiety,” said Bailey. “Don’t you submit your dissertation in a month?”
Cassandra groaned. While the others were working on undergraduate theses that would max out at around ten thousand words, her own PhD dissertation was looking like it would hover at ninety-thousand words. The first half had gone by so quickly, helped by her passion for the subject as well as the realization that her thesis on the label of monstrosity as a curse employed for cultural scapegoating was much less theoretical than she had once believed.

She used to wonder why Bailey would get lost in her research on abnormal parasitic infestations without writing anything for months and marvelled at how Simon excused his forays into the practical exploration of occult urban architecture over actually working on his thesis. Rayaan had finished his own first draft on what he termed *visceral hauntings* months ago and seemed to have forgotten about the mountain of line edits he had received from his tutor, and Minji made no effort to formally write up her research into viral urban legends. Cassandra had quietly congratulated herself on her discipline and productivity as she wrote page after page, scheduled meeting after meeting, and continued to build on her work, utilizing both the publications housed in the Archive as well as heroes’ stories from the field. But lately, every time she tried to write, her eyes went heavy, and she found herself dreaming of someone else’s flat, back in that nightmare with its twin spectres of the handsome-not-handsome man and the women who dripped into existence.

“There’s no shame in asking for an extension,” shrugged Rayaan. “Your university already thinks you transferred to distance learning for your mental health. I’m sure they’ll understand if you need more time.”
It was a believable excuse, after what she had gone through, and no one in administration at the University of Glasgow questioned it when she relocated to London. Any issues she had switching to Ellis as a partner-university supervisor were handled by the Archive. It was going smoothly, a path set out from the shaky start of postgraduate academia to the formerly impossible dream of a set career as a member of the Archive of the Inexplicable and Dangerous, the official aid to the heroes—

“I doubt Ellis would be as forgiving as your university if you don’t step it up,” said Avery.

Cassandra had not heard the girl come into the wing. The heroes rarely visited the archives, leaving the research aspect of their work to the aids: students contributing to the knowledge of the inexplicable and their tutors, former students who decided immersion in a violent world of supernatural monsters was worth the life-long steady paycheck. Cassandra was still unclear who exactly paid them, that invisible organization that kept their lights on and their taps dripping. She had once hopped on her bike and followed a man wearing a black suit in a black car who had met secretly with Ellis. She trailed him all the way to Buckingham Palace. After that, she had decided it might be safer not to investigate who was invested in the work of the Archive’s heroes. Heroes like Avery.

“Any updates in the murder spree?” asked Bailey.

“Not until you guys provide me with any leads,” Avery snapped. “Did you think I came by for a friendly chat? I need information before I can do anything.”

“There’s no connection between the women, so far,” Minji’s voice called from her mysterious location.
“Except that they had all gone out on the night that they disappeared,” Simon added.

“But they all disappeared in their homes,” Rayaan cut in, “as far apart as Blackfriar’s, Richmond—”

“We knew all this yesterday,” Avery interrupted.

Cassandra noticed that the girl’s clothes were covered in grime, like she had dragged herself across some filthy street. She guessed the benefit of being able to compress your body and flatten yourself down with the same efficacy as several rodent species had the downside of the Archive expecting Avery to use that power in even the most unsavoury situations. When the girl had told Cassandra that she had been wading through sewage for the Archive since she was fifteen, she had not realized that the hero was being literal. She had not realized that the girl with dark, distant eyes and arms covered with as many scars as tattoos was only seventeen. She looked as old as Cassandra, was as short with her same stocky musculature, and even wore her hair in a long dark braid. Looking at Avery was like seeing a version of herself from another timeline. It was a timeline she had no interest in visiting.

“We’re looking into it,” Bailey said, the pep in her voice clearly forced.

“If you want to compare notes, I’m breaking for lunch at noon,” said Simon, leaning back to balance on the edge of his chair in a childish daredevil ploy. “What do you say Avery. Is it a date?”

“You know I’m a sucker for a pretty face,” Avery said, her grin more threatening than playful. “But I doubt the Archive would let a hero date a research student.”

“Well, maybe we could break some rules?”
A curious expression crossed Avery’s face, but dropped when the chair slid out from underneath Simon, depositing the boy in a heap on the floor. Avery rolled her eyes and left, and though Cassandra did not hear a collective sigh, the relief in the room was palpable. Despite Simon’s flirtations, none of them really liked interacting with the heroes.

The Archive found those remarkable individuals in similar situations to how they had found Cassandra—the inexplicable and dangerous kinds. The heroes just faced whatever supernatural entity they had encountered with better defence mechanisms than any of the research students possessed, in the form of unusual abilities. The heroes were the ones who worked in the field, hunting and destroying the monsters that secretly plagued London.

Heroes did not reside in run-down street-level studios, but floor-spanning flats on the top levels of Archive accommodation. They enjoyed a salary that allowed for any comfort they could wish for. They did not answer to any tutor or Archive employee, but to the organization itself, which provided them with their tasks. And then they died, always sooner than Cassandra expected. Avery had already been working when Cassandra joined the team last year. Since then, three more heroes, each with their own unique abilities, had come and gone.

They were called *heroes*, but Cassandra had a feeling that the organization viewed them in much the same way as they viewed the monsters that the heroes hunted. Cassandra’s research into the curse of monstrosity had recently become less about the creatures being hunted and more about the heroes being used up by the
organization, many of them too young to realize they had much less power here than they were told. They were naïve enough to be manipulated by forces well practiced in the art. Ellis had never told her to edit out this scathing critique of the Archive. She wondered if he could not even comprehend it as a critique, failing to see the title of hero as a curse, or if the ever-changing team of heroes made him as uncomfortable as it did the students. They did their best not to get to know Avery, to make it easier when she would inevitably fall to some horror lurking in the night. There was nothing any of them could do for her, though all members of staff, from security to sanitation to archivists, felt bad for them, as pointless as the feeling was. Heroes did the saving, and no amount of research had ever helped a student save a hero.

“I didn’t know there was a current task,” said Cassandra after she was sure the girl was gone. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Ellis said not to distract you from your work,” said Rayaan.

He cried out as Bailey kicked him under the table. So much for the tutor being understanding about an extension. It sounded more like he would be less willing to provide it than Cassandra was willing to ask for it.

“Well, let me know if you learn anything more about these blood-stained disappearances,” said Cassandra.

“How did you know that they were blood-stained disappearances?” asked Simon.

“You just said that they were, when Avery was here,” Cassandra said quickly, and she could see all the younger students frown as they tried to remember if that
was true. “Besides, we work with the inexplicable and dangerous. When is the field ever *not* bloody?”

The others nodded in agreement. Cassandra knew that she had been too tired to pay attention to the facts they had spouted at Avery. When she had asked for updates, she was really thinking about blood filling a sink, the creature with pink eyes, her nightmare taking shape in reality. She hoped that the others would find a lead through their research. She hoped they would not ask her any questions about the task that she was sure she would be able to answer.

The handsome man was staring into a mirror, hands caressing healthy skin, fingers playing with shining curls. He was beautiful, even before he smiled.

He stood alone behind a running tap, not a drip but a stream into a modern trough-like sink. This was the restroom in a high fashion club, or fusion-dining restaurant. He was on another hunt. He did not need to hunt. He was well fed. And he was not going to find a victim in the men’s restroom. But he did not seem to be in a rush to leave, and he smiled like he had already won as he admired himself in the mirror.

No, not himself.

He was looking past his reflection, at something over his shoulder, someone who did not belong here, someone who was only dreaming, and yet, the man still saw you. He saw you, laying in your bed, under a banner that read *Archive of the Inexplicable and Dangerous*. His new target. His next meal.
“When Rayaan is writing about visceral hauntings, does he ever mention anything about literal *viscera*?” Cassandra asked Ellis. “Like, gore discarded by the immaterial body left at the scene?”

“This meeting is about your work,” said Ellis, raising an eyebrow over horn-rimmed glasses. “Not Rayaan’s. And no. When he says visceral, he means tangible.”

She had meant to ask about an extension. She had already contacted her course convener at the University of Glasgow and received a very encouraging email. This meeting was the perfect time to bring it up, but when she tried to get back on track, a different request tumbled from lips.

“Could you ask Simon to do an underground exploration of sewage tunnels linking the victims in the task? See if there are any masses, viscera or gelatinous kinds of masses, in the connecting pipes?”

“I told the others not to distract you with this task,” Ellis said, but he seemed more confused than upset. “And what do you mean by gelatinous masses?”

“I don’t know,” Cassandra said, staring down at her lap. “It’s just…”

“A funny feeling?”

Cassandra’s cheeks burned and she refused to look up at her tutor.

He had been on the scene when the Archive had found Cassandra, caught up an event that belonged in the horror stories she studied, not the University of Glasgow’s Research Annexe. She had visited many times before, examining the marginalia in medieval and Renaissance texts, paying close attention to hybrid creatures and hybrid people and whether they were presented as divine or monstrous. She had seen
everything she needed to see, had read every page contained in the library, but sometimes she came back just for the comfort of being close to something that she understood. Glasgow was so much bigger than the highland town she grew up in, overwhelming even as a more manageably sized city, filled with new experiences that she did not care to experience. The books in the library were familiar, its monsters almost friendly now that she knew them so well. She returned to them in the same way she returned to her favourite bench in Kelvingrove Park or her usual coffee shop on Byers Road. But on the night when she had first learned about the Archive of the Inexplicable and Dangerous, she had not gone to the library searching for the comfort of familiar illustrated faces.

For the past week she had been suffering from nightmares about a creature that she was sure she had never seen in any of the library’s archives, though it belonged in the manuscripts as much as any dragon, frightful snail, or murderous rabbit. It had slithered through her mind, consuming the ink of the texts and any late-night staff member who happened to hear its munching. It ate through her research material as she slept, and it slept as she looked for pages that she knew had already disappeared. And though the library closed at 2 a.m., around midnight she had woken up knowing, sure, that she would catch the creature in the act. She was just not the only one to catch it.

When Avery had slithered under the door, Cassandra initially thought that the hero was the monster responsible for her nightmares. The girl had expertly thrown a knife over Cassandra’s shoulder, catching the ink-and-flesh consuming serpent in a watery black eye,
saving the student from being the creature’s next meal. Cassandra still thought that if Ellis had not been there, uncharacteristically supervising this trip as an excuse to visit a distant archive, Avery would have left her behind, bewildered, with no explanation to offer the university for the ink-black splotches that now covered the floor, the walls, and the priceless texts. But, even as an avid researcher himself, Ellis had found it odd that Cassandra had happened to be at the exact location of a supernatural phenomenon in the middle of the night.

She had told him about the disappearing pages, explained that she figured whatever culprit had been responsible was likely to be prowling at night, how she had just had a funny feeling and had never expected to find a supernatural creature. When she mentioned her research into curses and monsters, Ellis had become excited, comparing it to his own work. He had told her that, unlike other Archive students who were recruited through early career publications relevant to unsolved tasks, he had been thrust into the world of evil and darkness by his involvement in an inexplicable event concerning surgical students and an unfortunate batch of cursed Buckfast. When he brought up the opportunity to research for the Archive, and the potential of an assured career, Cassandra had jumped at the chance. The university had accepted that she had witnessed vandals desecrating the works she loved so much and needed distance from Glasgow in order to complete her degree. The university had also received a large donation from the Archive.

Cassandra had considered mentioning the nightmares to Ellis, labouring over whether or not she was just being dramatic. The other heroes had such obvious
powers. They seemed so strong and confident, and she much preferred her work in the Archives to potentially tackling tasks in the field. She did not want to confront monsters. She just wanted to know about them, everything about them, understand them and share that understanding with others through peer-reviewed essays in respected academic journals. After she had seen three heroes be recruited for their abilities and die in the span of less than a year, she had decided it was best not to mention her dreams, both for her desired career and her own safety.

But now, women were dying, and Cassandra had information that might save them. And it was hard to be concerned about the danger of telling her tutor about her possible ability when she was already in danger from a monstrous hunter.

Ellis cleaned his glasses with a tweed sleeve, though Cassandra could not see a single smudge on the lens. She was surprised that the man’s hands were shaking with something resembling fear, whether of her or for her, she was not sure.

“Cassandra, is there something you need to tell me?” he asked.

Cassandra hesitated, her face still flushed as she nodded.

“I need maintenance to fix the dripping tap in my room,” she said. “It’s incredibly important.”

“Why?” Ellis asked.

His voice was hard, but the hand that he reached out to hold hers was surprisingly soft. Like an apology. Cassandra took a deep breath.
“Because that’s how he hunts. I’ve seen it. In my nightmares. I know the creature from the task. And he knows where to find me.”

Aren’t you so lucky, to see that smile? For the first time in so long, you feel lucky. You want to keep feeling lucky.

Cassandra woke up with a gasp. Her eyes immediately darted to the tap, but it had been fixed that afternoon and there was no red drip.

“Did you see anything?” Ellis asked.

“Why did you let me fall asleep?”

Cassandra hopped out of her chair and paced in front of her tutor who tugged uncomfortably at his sleeves.
“If you are having the funny kind of funny feelings, I thought it might strengthen the connection,” said Ellis. “Get him here faster.”

He coughed, perhaps embarrassed, and Cassandra realized that they were alone.

“Where’s Avery?” she asked.

“She left,” said Ellis. “She said that she was tired of waiting. And considering I did not give her a very good idea of why she should expect the creature to appear in your room, it was hard to convince her to stay.”

Cassandra groaned as she sat back down on the chair.

“Maybe it is just intuition, or something I came across in my research popping up through my subconscious,” she said. “Or maybe I’m just having paranoid fantasies about a handsome monster with high cheekbones and a great smile.”

“Well, um, I think it’s better to be safe,” Ellis stammered. “I checked all the taps in the building for leaks, and there is no way the creature can drip its way in.”

Cassandra frowned. She thought about the women, inside their apartments. They all thought that they were safe. They had all made the right decision. They were grown women who knew what it felt like to be manipulated, no matter how practiced the manipulator was, how charismatic his smile. They knew better than to let him into their rooms, and so he had to get in by whatever means he could.

“The creatures in the tap,” said Cassandra slowly. “That’s not how he wants to eat.”

“But you said—”
“That’s how he’s been forced to hunt, to improvise. He follows the women home, and when he’s denied the feast, the surrogate creature feasts on his behalf. He gets fed, but it’s a backwards kind of feeding. A memory of a woman consumed, sent to consume. But I think he would rather feast for himself. He’s not in it just to feed. He wants them to want him. To feel lucky. He wants the satisfaction of a successful hunt.”

“Wait, wait,” said Ellis. “You’re saying that his victims become these creatures that you saw forming from the drip?”

Cassandra had not been paying enough attention to the creatures in her nightmares. She had noticed its form shift into something different and yet so familiar. She had just thought it had looked familiar because it was so much like the first monster. She did not realize it was familiar because it was actually so much like the first victim. It was the first victim, or else, it was built on her memory, her consumption, her blood and viscera.

“Ellis, when did Avery leave?” she asked.
“An hour or so ago?” he guessed. “Why?”
“Did she say where she was going?”
“Just that she was overdue some fun,” said Ellis. “But I know she came back, I checked with security. Cassandra, where are you going?”

Cassandra was already out the door, running to the front desk, where a bored security guard was quietly playing a true crime podcast.
“Did you check Avery back in?” she asked, and the man jumped at the shouted question.
“Um, yes?”
“Was she alone?” Cassandra asked, and the man hesitated. “Or was she with a man? Blond? Great smile?”

“Just let the girl have some fun,” the man said, glaring at Cassandra. “You know what it’s like for heroes.”

Ellis had jogged out of the room to meet her, but he had to continue jogging to follow Cassandra to the lift.

“Where are we going?” he asked, breathless as the doors closed on them.

“We’re too late,” whispered Cassandra, though she hoped it was not true.

When the lift opened, Cassandra sprinted to the end of the hall, though she knew there was no point in running. The door to Avery’s flat was open. She could hear Ellis’s steps behind her, and she wanted to yell at him to stop, to keep his distance, but her throat had closed in a mix of guilt and fear.

She knew what she was going to find before she walked through that open door, and yet it still shocked her to see the man standing over a half-dissolved Avery, his hands plunged into her stomach. He had undergone a transformation similar to the creatures that he made from drops of blood, his body as soft as the victim beneath him, fresh as the gore that coated his arms and slicked back his hair. His eyes were covered in a pale pink film, but they were wide with surprise as they looked at her, then at Avery, then at the wall behind sofa where he had trapped the girl. Not at the wall, but at the banner hanging on it: *Archive of the Inexplicable and Dangerous*. It decorated the flats of all the heroes, a poor present given in exchange for everything they could offer, and Cassandra had the same one over her
own bed. Though there was little left of Avery, Cassandra could still see the remains of a long, dark braid, exactly like her own.

The man had thought that Avery was Cassandra. This was her fault. He had wanted to hunt Cassandra. And now another hero was dead.

It would have made sense to feel hopeless, but Cassandra felt angry. She knew Avery, as much as she tried to keep her distance. She knew Avery because she knew herself, as well as she knew each monster drawn in the margins of carefully tended manuscripts, each creature cursed to carry the consequences of their own monstrosity, powerful enough to be feared and used but not powerful enough to see the trap that had been drawn around them. Cassandra had avoided the label long enough to observe the inky nets that contained monsters in myths and reality. They ensnared the naive and young who wanted to help as well as the old and sinister who wanted to hunt.

But it did not matter if they had the same banner or the same hair. Cassandra had outgrown her resemblance to Avery when she stopped feeling lucky to have someone think that she was special, and she started feeling owed satisfaction for her efforts, be it the award of a PhD or the reward of a successful hunt.

The man was as soft as his creatures, the mass of his body as fragile as the one he had broken beneath him, and when Cassandra rushed forward and dug her fingers into his pink eyes they gave as easily as gelatine, as flan, as cheesecake. She gouged in as deep as she could, and since she was not the kind of monster who fed on gore, the creature did not disappear, consumed, but collapsed in thick, jiggling chunks on the floor as she tore him to
pieces. She did not know if he tried to fight back. She did not know if he could. She only knew that he had the worst luck in the world, to hunt the only monster who had been studying him night after night and figured out that he was just a pretty face, so easy to discard, and even easier to destroy.

The three men who sat on the other side of the desk were nearly identical, from their slicked back black hair to their black suits to the earpieces that they would tap every so often, as if it would help them hear their instructions a little better. Ellis sat in the corner of the room, fidgeting with the patch on the elbow of his jacket. Cassandra was trying her best to stare straight in front of her as she sat on a chair that seemed purposefully uncomfortable, but each sporadic twitch of his fingers kept drawing her attention back to her tutor. He was not looking at her but kept glancing over his shoulder at the door, like he suspected someone might be eavesdropping on the other side.

Though the email she had received summoning her did not say what this meeting would be about, Cassandra had entered the room with a terrible certainty that the Archive was about to recruit its newest hero. She had never heard of a hero refusing the position before. She had always thought that it was because they had been honoured. Now she wondered if it was because a hero who did not work for the Archive was nothing more than a monster, and if it could not be an asset, it could easily be a task for some other hero to complete.
The email also said it would be a closed meeting, but Ellis had walked in beside her like he had every right to be there, and though Cassandra thought that the men were waiting for him to leave, her tutor seemed to be very settled in his chair. Eventually, one of the men tapped his earpiece, turned to another man and shrugged, and then began to speak.

“Can you explain to us exactly how you knew that the monster, which we will be recording as Humanoid Cloning Parasite, or HCP, would be in Hero Number 27’s room?” he asked.

“I just had a funny feeling and wanted to check in on Avery,” Cassandra snapped.

“Do you have any idea how you came to have this… funny feeling?” a different man asked.

“She’s a researcher,” Ellis said suddenly, and all three men looked as surprised as their stoic faces would allow them to. “She knows monsters. She spends all her time writing about monsters. She has written nearly fifty-thousand words on monsters. She had all the information we did, and she figured it out because she’s a PhD student and it’s her job as a PhD student to make these kinds of connections between the theory and the practice of monstrosity.”

“Yes, she knows monsters,” said one of the men, composing himself much quicker than Cassandra was able to. Her mouth was agape as her anxiety-ridden tutor glared at each man with an intensity she had never witnessed before. “But how did she know about the connection between the dripping taps and his means of hunting? How did she know that those manifestations from the taps were how he fed, and that if welcomed into a victim’s home, he would feed on his own? How
did she know about the fragility of HCP’s form? How did she know that he was handsome, and had blond hair, and a great smile? How did she know that he would target Hero Num… Avery?”

The door behind them burst open and Simon, Bailey, Rayaan, and Minji rushed into the room, each carrying an impossibly large burden.

“Cassandra, did you not see on the email we sent that this is supposed to be a closed meeting?” one of the men asked.

“I didn’t invite them,” Cassandra insisted.

The students walked past her, up to the table where the men balked, and deposited several large academic journals, scraps of notes, prints of blurry photographs, and a collection of other materials in front of them.

“We’re here to protest this meeting for Cassandra’s acclamation,” Simon announced.

The men behind the desk glanced at each other.

“I think you’re mistaken,” said one of them. “This isn’t—”

“I think you’re mistaken,” Minji exclaimed.

“You’re giving her credit for our work,” Rayaan said.

“It was a group effort,” Bailey insisted.

“Slow down, slow down,” said one of the men, but the students had no interest in slowing down.

“I didn’t crawl through sewage to make the connection between the pipelines that linked each of the victim’s flats with shared issues regarding water pressure, in a daring feat of urban exploration, for you to ignore my contribution to the project,” Simon said all on one breath, pointing to the photographs that Cassandra guessed could have been pipelines.
“He was a parasite, and he bred like any standard supernatural parasite,” Bailey announced. “The second we learned about the blood stains left at the scene I knew it was the result of feeding, a messy feeding that must have been done by a juvenile, and it was clear to me that he must have been manifesting a new juvenile parasite for each remote feeding. It’s really obvious, in fact, if you have any knowledge of supernatural parasitic hunting tactics, which of course, I do.”

“You think Cassandra knows the visceral nature of inhuman manifestations?” Rayaan scoffed. “I know how fragile they are. I’m the one who figured out how he could be taken down. Torn down. Both. If you don’t believe me, I already have a complete first draft of my thesis that you could read that explains everything.”

“And you just… figured this all out, on your own, with only a few blood stains to go off of?” one of the men asked.

“No, but it’s all over the internet,” said Minji. “There’s like, a viral TikTok sound about these exact attacks, whole Twitter threads about avoiding this Tom Hiddleston-type who’s been following girls home from clubs. Someone posted an actual instance of one of the parasites attacking a victim on their Facebook Live, but the cowards took it down. That’s a lot more proof than your average viral urban legend. No need for a funny feeling when you can just watch a video and be like, yeah, that’s definitely a monster. Especially when you’re Cassandra, and you know all about monsters.”

The men’s stoic expressions were fading into disbelief. The man in the centre was tapping his earpiece almost nonstop.
“Do you, um, have any documented proof of those claims?” he asked Minji.

“Of course not,” she said. “I don’t write anything down. If you want publishable material, you’ll have to research it yourself. I’m here for practical results, not your stupid academic theory. And the monster’s dead. What more could you want from me?”

With a few more taps on their earpieces, the men thanked the students for a job well done, either promised or warned that they would be in touch, and then left, closing the door behind them. The group waited until they could hear the revving of an engine and the crunch of gravel as the car drove away before they began gathering up their research materials, joking and smiling as Cassandra sat, speechless.

“Guess we’re your heroes, huh?” Simon laughed.

“Next time you’re having nightmares, maybe let us know, okay?” Bailey said with an exaggerated groan. “I do not want to cram like this again. It was shoddy research. But I actually think it’s helped me have a breakthrough on supernatural parasitic breeding habits…”

“Whatever, they bought it,” said Minji. “I have to go doctor some YouTube videos to make it look like I didn’t lie. Feel free to thank me anytime.”

“We couldn’t let them take you from your research,” Rayaan said, more subdued than the others, though a smile played at the corner of his mouth. “You’re submitting your dissertation in a month! You’ve worked too hard for them to… well… transfer you.”

Cassandra smiled back at him but closed her eyes with a sigh as her peers left the room, Minji still complaining, Bailey still theorizing. Though she could
not wait to join them, to continue her work with them, she found it hard to stand up. The researchers had finally managed to save a hero. She did not realize how tightly she was holding her shoulders, shock and stress and anxiety building inside her as she reckoned with how close she had come to being deemed a hero by the Archive, until she felt Ellis’s hand on her back and her muscles relaxed.

“TI told the students about your nightmares, and I gave them your tips,” he whispered. “I know you told me in confidence, but I thought… I couldn’t let them transfer you. I couldn’t let you end up like Avery.”

“Thank you,” Cassandra whispered.

“You know, it’s fine to submit for an extension,” said Ellis. “Especially if you think it will improve your dissertation. Your research is incredibly important. The way people view heroes, the way they’re cursed and how they’re used, well, we need to have it. We need it to be accepted by your peers. We need it to be published, and cited, and used to prove over and over again that the way we treat heroes is truly monstrous.”

Cassandra looked up at him, and was surprised that his gaze was on her, not escaping to examine the floor or the cuffs of his jacket but staying resolutely on her face.

“I don’t need an extension,” Cassandra asserted. She accepted his hand when he offered it, helping her to stand. “Not anymore.”

“No?”

“No. I just need a good night’s sleep.”
A rotating fan cooled her room, accompanied by a warm breeze from her open window, and for the first time in a long time, Cassandra did not have any nightmares.
I have loved my armor too long
to feed it to the unhungry belly
of the recycler.

Let me show you the treasures of my closet.

i. raspberries
   Raspberries do not grow on the station,
   but my long white shirt has a red stain
   on its hem, and when I wear it
   I hold the taste of raspberries in my mouth.

ii. the wind
   When I wore my blue dress, the wind touched me
   like it had asked permission and heard
   my resounding yes, and pressed its hands to my
   body.
   There is no wind here, but the dress remembers.

iii. joy
   I cannot wear my spiked gold heels
   on the mesh floor of the station,
   but I still need the height and the shine,
   the feeling of fizz and laughter.

iv. belief
   There are no more job interviews,
   but when I put on my pinstriped jacket for them,
   people would believe I could do the job.
   I need to believe, now, that I can do the impossible.

I need these things more than I need
functional jumpsuits, practical boots.
Armor

How can I go into the wild starred future without my breastplate of a wool coat or my gauntlets of soft mittens? Do not ask me to.
he kindly danced for me

J.D. Harlock

Illustration © 2021, Cécile Matthey.
he kindly danced for me

because I would not dance for Death—
he kindly danced for me
and showed me a lesson
in
graceful—
humility

he slowly moved—a deathly pace
serenaded by—the deathly shapes
that hovered over
and twirled along
in ghastly—
symphony

and I stood there…
I stood there…
mouth agape
admiring
with composure
and grace
his sublime—
ability

that is
until—
he reached for me
for me alone,
in this phantom ball,
in this phantom hall,
beyond the veil
of—
tranquility
and then—as if by spell
I moved in…
I moved in…
and grabbed his hand
and took the lead
and in the lead—
we danced!

oh, how we danced!

swaying and spinning
through the air—
in perfect harmony

and though our time was brief—
all too brief
I found a comfort here
here,
in his embrace,
his deathly embrace,
relieved
by his exalted—
civility

because our little dance
it taught me death
it taught me life
within the limits
of—
possibility

for no matter the gown,
no matter the ball,
this little dance unites all
he kindly danced for me

and so I dance here…
yes,
I dance here…
with bated breath.
for we are all equal unto Death
requiescat in pace
HAIR

You know the old saying
That a woman’s hair is her
Crown and glory, symbolizes
Her strength, fertility and virility?

Is it still a crowning glory
If damaged, falling, thinning
Naturally brunette once; now
Slight silvers among the brown
That appeared seven years ago
Multiplied when the candle is blown

No virility or fertility is here
Symbolic only of severe stress
Was the hair of a Disney princess
Lovely, luscious, lively, lustrous, liquid
Now it’s hacked away with garden clippers
No stars are at fault, the folly is in your follicles

FOREHEAD

Bulbous blobs—two
Big bumps on each side
Of your wide, tensed forehead
From when you fell on the ground
Or crashed your head against the table
Or from that one time you walked into a door

“They look like mini headlights”
Was what your big brother would say
Before he’d press his finger on your nose
Like it was a switch that ignited those headlights
E Y E B R O W S

Thick bushy brows
Raised in mock horror
Furrowed to create creases
On the bumpy, broad forehead

Overgrown, unshaped, unplucked
You cannot contain it, so you let it be
Why get trendy neatly groomed eyebrows
When everything else from the bed to your life
Is dense, wild, rowdy, messy, unruly, and disordered

E Y E S

Ever heard of this adage—
Eyes are a window to the soul
How much can we see of your soul
When the windows are dull, droopy, dead?

Large eyes, too large for that face
Purple puffy bags stacked under them
Orbited by rings of black circles of darkness
Sunken, gaunt, hollow, swollen, gaping, hardened
With such lifeless eyes, we’re scared to see your soul

N O S E

Nose as red as a siren
Turns redder when you cry
A girl at school called it strange
Insisted that it is your worst feature
For over a month after that,
You squeeze your nose tightly
Hoping the pressure sharpens it
When you finally release your fingers
It inflates to a size of about half your head

You give up trying to reshape your nose
Instead, you get it pierced on the right side
As a piece of decoration for your faultiest feature
No longer want to distract from the ugly anymore now
You want to commemorate it, worship it, embrace it fully

M O U T H

That girl at school misspoke
This is easily your worst feature
A mouth crammed with words unsaid
Puffy and pale, with its corners strained
A hard straight line, your mouth never smiles

It stays silent, screams, smokes
Crooked large teeth, a lashing tongue
Red lips, too red—they look a lot like blood
Bruised, bleeding, bitten; they have learnt to bite

S K I N

A blotted star embossed
Ink printed below the clavicle
You want to paint yourself more
There is too much ink, too little skin
Four holes pricked in each ear
Left: Two below your broken cartilage
Two holes right above the protruding tissue
Skin submerged in stains, scars, stabs, scabs

HANDS

Trembling hands
Drop what they hold
Never do as they’re told
The shimmer gold of polish
Outgrown a fourth of every nail

Fractured both hands
When you fell down stairs
Took months and months for
You to be able to write one word
Since then, your poetry won’t rhyme
The trauma—every verse is a staircase
Invite him to celebrate
this gift of power and virility
your freedom To Be
your own irrepressibility

Resist instincts to placate
when you see his furrowed brow
apologies escape so easily, but
you’re the monster now

Invite him as your equal
he’d said you were before
why fear a minor deviation
to the eternal trust he swore

Leap out of the shadows
shake off the stagnant vows
you don’t have to come off clean
you’re the monster now

Invite him to perform
accept, embrace and reconcile
you’re still his loving wife
and you’d like it if he’d smile

Absorb, engorge and swallow
everyone in town
externalize the personal
you’re the monster now
Guidelines for submissions

*The Future Fire* welcomes submissions of speculative fiction and poetry with progressive, inclusive and socially aware disposition. We are particularly interested in feminist, queer, postcolonial and ecological themes, and writing by under-represented voices.

- Fiction (up to 1000 words): pay $10 per story
- Fiction (up to 17500 words): pay $20 per story
- Poetry: pay $10 per poem
- Illustrations: pay $10 per story illustrated (+$10 for the image we use as cover art).

Submissions by email. Responses with 30 days. No multiple or simultaneous submissions, please.

All guidelines at [http://futurefire.net/guidelines/](http://futurefire.net/guidelines/)