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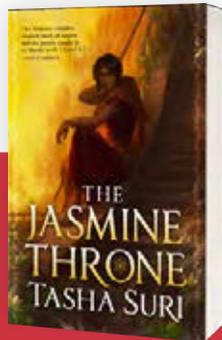
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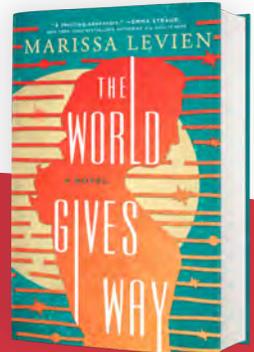
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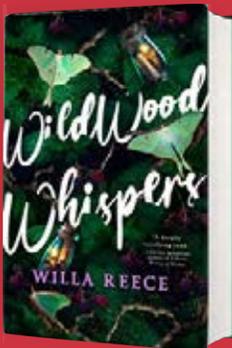
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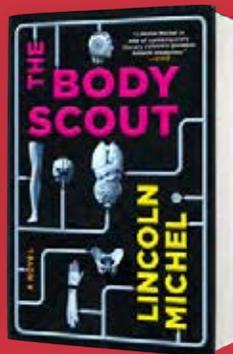
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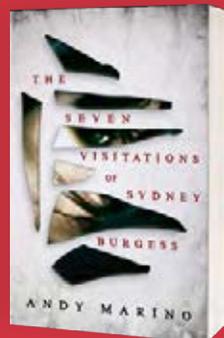
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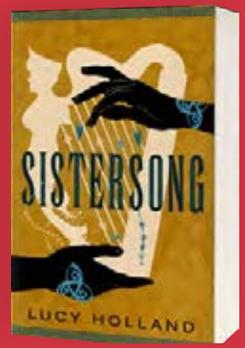
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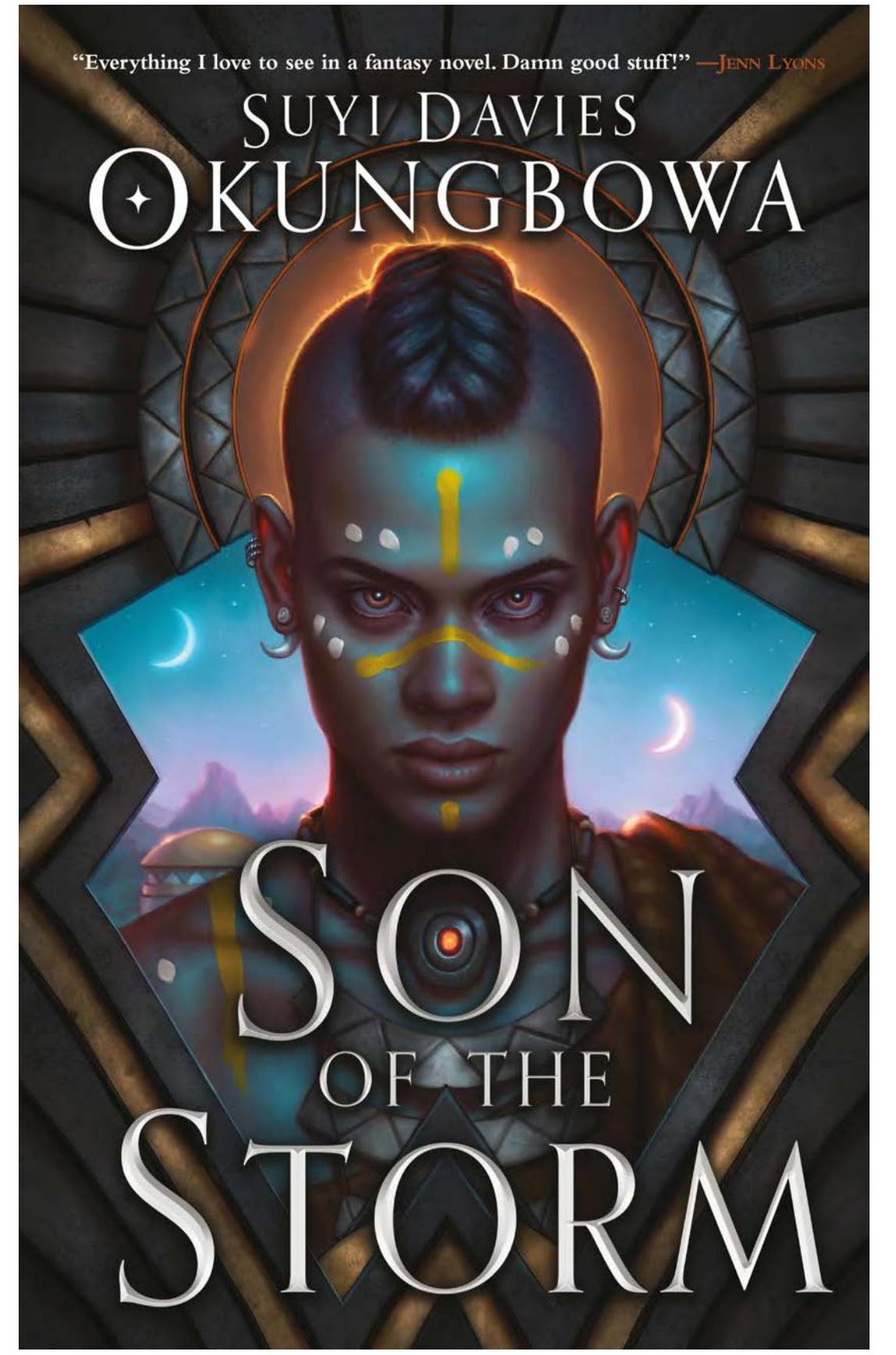


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“Everything I love to see in a fantasy novel. Damn good stuff!” —JENN LYONS

SUYI DAVIES
OKUNGBOWA



SON
OF THE
STORM



Danso

THE RUMOURS BROKE SLOWLY but spread fast, like bushfire from a raincloud. Bassa's central market sparked and sizzled, as word jumped from lip to ear, lip to ear, speculating. The people responded minimally at first: a shift of the shoulders, a retying of wrappers. Then murmurs rose, until they matured into a buzzing that swept through the city, swinging from stranger to stranger and stall to stall, everyone opening conversation with whispers of *Is it true? Has the Soke Pass really been shut down?*

Danso waded through the clumps of gossipers, sweating, cursing his decision to go through the central market rather than the mainway. He darted between throngs of oblivious citizens huddled around vendors and spilling into the pathway.

"Leave way, leave way," he called, irritated, as he shouldered through bodies. He crouched, wriggling his lean frame underneath a large table that reeked of pepper seeds and fowl shit. The ground, paved with baked earth, was not supposed to be wet, since harmattan season was soon to begin. But some fool had dumped water in the wrong place, and red mud eventually found a way into Danso's sandals. Someone else had abandoned a huge stack of yam sacks right in the middle of the pathway and gone off to do moons knew what, so that Danso was forced to clamber over yet another obstacle. He found a large brown stain on his wrappers thereafter. He wiped at the spot with his elbow, but the stain only spread.

Great. Now not only was he going to be the late jali novice, he was going to be the dirty one, too.

If only he could've ridden a kwaga through the market, Danso thought. But markets were foot traffic only, so even though jalis or their novitiates rarely moved on foot, he had to in this instance. On this day, when he needed to get to the centre of town as quickly as possible while raising zero eyebrows, he needed to brave the shortest path from home to city square, which meant going through Bassa's most motley crowd. This was the price he had to pay for missing the city crier's call three whole times, therefore setting himself up for yet another late arrival at a mandatory event—in this case, a Great Dome announcement.

Missing this impromptu meeting would be his third infraction, which could mean expulsion from the university. He'd already been given two strikes: first, for repeatedly arguing with Elder Jalis and trying to prove his superior intelligence; then more recently, for being caught poring over a restricted manuscript that was supposed to be for only two sets of eyes: emperors, back when Bassa still had them, and the archivist scholars who didn't even get to read them except while scribing. At this rate, all they needed was a reason to send him away. Expulsion would definitely lose him favour with Esheme, and if anything happened to their intendedship as a result, he could consider his life in this city officially over. He would end up exactly like his daa—a disgraced outcast—and Habba would die first before that happened.

The end of the market pathway came within sight. Danso burst out into mainway one, the smack middle of Bassa's thirty mainways that crisscrossed one another and split the city perpendicular to the Soke mountains. The midday sun shone brighter here. Though shoddy, the market's thatch roofing had saved him from some of the tropical sun, and now out of it, the humid heat came down on him unbearably. He shaded his eyes.

In the distance, the capital square stood at the end of the mainway. The Great Dome nestled prettily in its centre, against a backdrop of Bas-sai rounded-corner mudbrick architecture, like a god surrounded by its worshippers. Behind it, the Soke mountains stuck their raggedy heads so high into the clouds that they could be seen from every spot in Bassa, hunching protectively over the mainland's shining crown.

What took his attention, though, was the crowd in the mainway, leading

up to the Great Dome. The wide street was packed full of mainlanders, from where Danso stood to the gates of the courtyard in the distance. The only times he'd seen this much of a gathering were when, every once in a while, troublemakers who called themselves the Coalition for New Bassa staged protests that mostly ended in pockets of riots and skirmishes with Bassai civic guards. This, however, seemed quite nonviolent, but that did nothing for the air of tension that permeated the crowd.

The civic guards at the gates weren't letting anyone in, obviously—only the ruling councils; government officials and ward leaders; members of select guilds, like the jali guild he belonged to; and civic guards themselves were allowed into the city centre. It was these select people who then took whatever news was disseminated back to their various wards. Only during a mooncrossing festival were regular citizens allowed into the courtyard.

Danso watched the crowd for a while to make a quick decision. The thrumming vibe was clearly one of anger, perplexity, and anxiety. He spotted a few people wailing and rolling in the dusty red earth, calling the names of their loved ones—those stuck outside the Pass, he surmised from their cries. Since First Ward was the largest commercial ward in Bassa, businesses at the sides of the mainway were hubbubs of hissed conversation, questions circulating under breaths. Danso caught some of the whispers, squeaky with tension: *The drawbridges over the moats? Rolled up. The border gates? Sealed, iron barriers driven into the earth. Only a ten-person team of earthworkers and ironworkers can open it.* The pace of their speech was frantic, fast, faster, everyone wondering what was true and what wasn't.

Danso cut back into a side street that opened up from the walls along the mainway, then cut into the corridors between private yards. Up here in First Ward, the corridors were clean, the ground was of polished earth, and beggars and rats did not populate here as they did in the outer wards. Yet they were still dark and largely unlit, so that Danso had to squint and sometimes reach out to feel before him. Navigation, however, wasn't a problem. This wasn't his first dance in the mazy corridors of Bassa, and this wasn't the first time he was taking a shortcut to the Great Dome.

Some househands passed by him on their way to errands, blending

into the poor light, their red immigrant anklets clacking as they went. These narrow walkways built into the spaces between courtyards were natural terrain for their caste—Yelekuté, the lower of Bassa's two indentured immigrant castes. The nation didn't really fancy anything undesirable showing up in all the important places, including the low-brown complexion that, among other things, easily signified desertlanders. The more desired high-brown Potokin were the chosen desertlanders allowed on the mainways, but only in company of their employers.

Ordinarily, they wouldn't pay him much attention. It wasn't a rare sight to spot people of other castes dallying in one backyard escapade or another. But today, hurrying past and dripping sweat, they glanced at Danso as he went, taking in his yellow-and-maroon tie-and-dye wrappers and the fat, single plait of hair in the middle of his head, the two signs that indicated he was a *jali novitiate* at the university. They considered his complexion—not dark enough to be wearing that dress in the first place; hair not curled tightly enough to be pure mainlander—and concluded, *decided*, that he was not Bassai enough.

This assessment they carried out in a heartbeat, but Danso was so used to seeing the whole process happen on people's faces that he knew what they were doing even before they did. And as always, then came the next part, where they tried to put two and two together to decide what caste he belonged to. Their confused faces told the story of his life. His clothes and hair plait said *jali novitiate*, that he was a scholar-historian enrolled at the University of Bassa, and therefore had to be an Idu, the only caste allowed to attend said university. But his too-light complexion said *Shashi caste*, said he was of a poisoned union between a mainlander and an outlander and that even if the moons intervened, he would always be a disgrace to the mainland, an outcast who didn't even deserve to stand there and exist.

Perhaps it was this confusion that led the househands to go past him without offering the requisite greeting for Idu caste members. Danso snickered to himself. If belonging to both the highest and lowest castes in the land at the same time taught one anything, it was that when people had to choose where to place a person, they would always choose a spot beneath them.

He went past more househands who offered the same response, but he paid little heed, spatially mapping out where he could emerge closest to the city square. He finally found the exit he was looking for. Glad to be away from the darkness, he veered into the nearest street and followed the crowd back to the mainway.

The city square had five iron pedestrian gates, all guarded. To his luck, Danso emerged just close to one, manned by four typical civic guards: tall, snarling, and bloodshot-eyed. He made for it gleefully and pushed to go in.

The nearest civic guard held the gate firmly and frowned down at Danso.

“Where you think you’re going?” he asked.

“The announcement,” Danso said. “Obviously.”

The civic guard looked Danso over, his chest rising and falling, his low-black skin shiny with sweat in the afternoon heat. Civic guards were Emuru, the lower of the pure mainlander caste, but they still wielded a lot of power. As the caste directly below the Idu, they could be brutal if given the space, especially if one belonged to any of the castes below them.

“And you’re going as what?”

Danso lifted an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

The guard looked at him again, then shoved Danso hard, so hard that he almost fell back into the group of people standing there.

“Ah!” Danso said. “Are you okay?”

“Get away. This resemble place for ruffians?” His Mainland Common was so poor he might have been better off speaking Mainland Pidgin, but that was the curse of working within proximity of so many Idu: Speaking Mainland Pidgin around them was almost as good as a crime. Here in the inner wards, High Bassai was accepted, Mainland Common was tolerated, and Mainland Pidgin was punished.

“Look,” Danso said. “Can you not see I’m a jali novi—”

“I cannot see anything,” the guard said, waving him away. “How can you be novitiate? I mean, look at you.”

Danso looked over himself and suddenly realised what the man meant. His tie-and-dye wrappers didn’t, in fact, look like they belonged

to any respectable jali novitiate. Not only had he forgotten to give them to Zaq to wash after his last guild class, the market run had only made them worse. His feet were dusty and unwashed; his arms, and probably face, were crackled, dry, and smeared with harmattan dust. One of his sandal straps had pulled off. He ran a hand over his head and sighed. Experience should have taught him by now that his sparser hair, much of it inherited from his maternal Ajabo-islander side, never stayed long in the Bassai plait, which was designed for hair that curled tighter naturally. Running around without a firm new plait had produced unintended results: Half of it had come undone, which made him look unprepared, disrespectful, and not at all like any jali anyone knew.

And of course, there had been no time to take a bath, and he had not put on any sort of decent facepaint either. He'd also arrived without a kwaga. What manner of jali novitiate *walked* to an impromptu announcement such as this, and without a Second in tow for that matter?

He should really have listened for the city crier's ring.

"Okay, wait, listen," Danso said, desperate. "I was late. So I took the corridors. But I'm really a jali novitiate."

"I will close my eye," the civic guard said. "Before I open it, I no want to see you here."

"But I'm supposed to be here." Danso's voice was suddenly squeaky, guilty. "I *have* to go in there."

"Rubbish," the man spat. "You even steal that cloth or what?"

Danso's words got stuck in his throat, panic suddenly gripping him. Not because this civic guard was an idiot—oh, no, just wait until Danso reported him—but because so many things were going to go wrong if he didn't get in there immediately.

First, there was Esheme, waiting for him in there. He could already imagine her fuming, her lips set, frown stuck in place. It was unheard of for intendeds to attend any capital square gathering alone, and it was worse that they were both novitiates—he of the scholar-historians, she of the counsel guild of mainland law. His absence would be easily noticed. She had probably already sat through most of the meeting craning her neck to glance at the entrance, hoping he would come in and ensure that she didn't have to suffer that embarrassment. He imagined Nem, her

maa, and how she would cast him the same dissatisfied look as when she sometimes told Esheme, *You're really too good for that boy*. If there was anything his daa hated, it was disappointing someone as influential as Nem in any way. He might be of guild age, but his daa would readily come for him with a guava stick just for that, and his triplet uncles would be like a choir behind him going *Ehen, ehen, yes, teach him well, Habba*.

His DaaHabba name wouldn't save him this time. He could be prevented from taking guild finals, and his whole life—and that of his family—could be ruined.

"I will tell you one last time," the civic guard said, taking a step toward Danso so that he could almost smell the dirt of the man's loincloth. "If you no leave here now, I will arrest you for trying to be novitiate."

He was so tall that his chest armour was right in Danso's face, the branded official emblem of the Nation of Great Bassa—the five ragged peaks of the Soke mountains with a warrior atop each, holding a spear and runku—staring back at him.

He really couldn't leave. He'd be over, done. So instead, Danso did the first thing that came to mind. He tried to slip past the civic guard.

It was almost as if the civic guard had expected it, as if it was behaviour he'd seen often. He didn't even move his body. He just stretched out a massive arm and caught Danso's clothes. He swung him around, and Danso crumpled into a heap at the man's feet.

The other guards laughed, as did the small group of people by the gate, but the civic guard wasn't done. He fainted, like he was about to lunge and hit Danso. Danso flinched, anticipating, protecting his head. Everyone laughed even louder, boisterous.

"Ei Shashi," another civic guard said, "you miss yo way? Is over there." He pointed west, toward Whudasha, toward the coast and the bight and the seas beyond them, and everyone laughed at the joke.

Every peal was another sting in Danso's chest as the word pricked him all over his body. *Shashi. Shashi. Shashi*.

It shouldn't have gotten to him. Not on this day, at least. Danso had been Shashi all his life, one of an almost nonexistent pinch in Bassa. He was the first Shashi to make it into a top guild since the Second Great War. Unlike every other Shashi sequestered away in Whudasha, he was

allowed to sit side by side with other Idu, walk the nation's roads, go to its university, have a Second for himself, and even be joined to one of its citizens. But every day he was always reminded, in case he had forgotten, of what he really was—never enough. Almost there, but never complete. That lump should have been easy to get past his throat by now.

And yet, something hot and prideful rose in his chest at this laughter, and he picked himself up, slowly.

As the leader turned away, Danso aimed his words at the man, like arrows.

“Calling me Shashi,” Danso said, “yet you *want* to be me. But you will always be less than bastards in this city. You can never be better than me.”

What happened next was difficult for Danso to explain. First, the civic guard turned. Then he moved his hand to his waist where his *runku*, the large wooden club with a blob at one end, hung. He unclipped its buckle with a click, then moved so fast that Danso had no time to react.

There was a shout. Something hit Danso in the head. There was light, and then there was darkness.



Danso awoke to a face peering at his. It was large, and he could see faint traces left by poorly healed scars. A pain beat in his temple, and it took a while for the face to come into full focus.

Oboda. Esheme's Second.

The big man stood up, silent. Oboda was a bulky man with just as mountainous a presence. Even his shadow took up space, so much so that it shaded Danso from the sunlight. The coral pieces embedded into his neck, in a way no Second that Danso knew ever had, glinted. He didn't even wear a migrant anklet or anything else that announced that he was an immigrant. The only signifier was his complexion: just dark enough as a desertlander to be acceptably close to the Bassai Ideal's yardstick—the complexion of the humus, that which gave life to everything and made it thrive. Being high-brown while possessing the build and skills of a desert warrior put him squarely in the higher Potokin caste. Oboda, as a result, was allowed freedoms many immigrants weren't, so he ended

up being not quite Esheme's or Nem's Second, but something more complex, something that didn't yet have a name.

Danso blinked some more. The capital square behind Oboda was filled, but now with a new crowd, this one pouring out of the sectioned entryway arches of the Great Dome and heading for their parked travel-wagons, kept ready by various househands and stablehands. Wrappers of various colours dotted the scene before him, each council or guild representing itself properly. He could already map out those of the Elders of the merchantry guild in their green and gold combinations, and Elders of other guilds in orange, blue, bark, violet, crimson. There were even a few from the university within sight, scholars and jalis alike, in their white robes.

Danso shrunk into Oboda's shadow, obscuring himself. It would be a disaster for them to see him like this. It would be a disaster for *anyone* to see him so. *But then*, he thought, *if Oboda is here, that means Esheme...*

"Danso," a woman's voice said.

Oh moons!

Delicately, Esheme gathered her clothes in the crook of one arm and picked her way toward him. She was dressed in tie-and-dye wrappers just like his, but hers were of different colours—violet dappled in orange, the uniform for counsel novitiates of mainland law—and a far cry from his: Hers were washed and dipped in starch so that they shone and didn't even flicker in the breeze.

As she came forward, the people who were starting to gather to watch the scene gazed at her with wide-eyed appreciation. Esheme was able to do that, elicit responses from everything and everyone by simply *being*. She knew exactly how to play to eyes, knew what to do to evoke the exact reactions she wanted from people. She did so now, swaying just the right amount yet keeping a regal posture so that she was both desirable and fearsome at once. The three plaited arches on her head gleamed in the afternoon sun, the deep-yellow cheto dye massaged into her hair illuminating her head. Her high-black complexion, dark and pure in the most desirable Bassai way, shone with superior fragrant shea oils. She had her gaze squarely on Danso's face so that he couldn't look at her, but had to look down.

She arrived where he sat, took one sweeping look at the civic guards, and said, “What happened here?”

“I was trying to attend the announcement and this one”—Danso pointed at the nearby offending civic guard—“hit me with his runku.”

She didn’t respond to him, not even with a glance. She just kept staring at the civic guards. The three behind the errant civic guard stepped away, leaving him in front.

“I no hit anybody, oh,” the man said, his pitch rising. “The crowd had scatter, and somebody hit him with their elbow—”

Esheme silenced him with a sharp finger in the air. “Speak wisely, guard. You have this one chance.”

The man gulped, suddenly looking like he couldn’t make words.

“Sorry,” he said, going to the ground immediately, prostrating. “Sorry, please. No send me back. No send me back.”

The other civic guards joined their comrade in solidarity, all prostrating on the ground before Esheme. She turned away from them, leaned in, and examined Danso’s head and clothes with light touches, as one would a child who had fallen and hurt themselves.

“Who did this to him?”

“Sorry, maa,” the civic guards kept saying, offering no explanation. “Sorry, maa.”

Oboda moved then, swiftly, light on his feet for someone so big. He reached over with one arm, pulled the errant guard by his loincloth, and yanked him over the low gate. The man came sprawling. His loincloth gave way, and he scrambled to cover his privates. The gathering crowd, always happy to feast their eyes and ears on unsanctioned justice, snickered.

“Beg,” Oboda growled. The way he said it, it was really *Beg for your life*, but he was a man of too few words to use the whole sentence. However, the rest of the sentence was not lost on anyone standing there, the civic guard included. He hustled to his knees and put his forehead on the ground, close to Esheme’s sandals. Even the crowd stepped back a foot or two.

Danso flinched. Surely this had gone past the territory of fairness, had it not? This was the point where he was supposed to jump in and prevent

things from escalating, to explain that no, the man might not have hit him at all, that he was actually likelier to have fallen in the scramble. But then what good reason would he have for missing this meeting? Plus, with Esheme, silence *always* had a lower chance of backfiring than speaking up did.

He kept his lips tight together and looked down. *Why throw good food away?* as his daa would say.

“You don’t know what you have brought on yourself,” Esheme said to the guard quietly, then turned away. As she did, Oboda put his hand on his waist and unclipped his own runku, but Esheme laid a hand gently on his.

“Let’s go,” she said to no one in particular, and walked off. Oboda clipped his runku back, gave the civic guards one last long look of death, and pulled Danso up with one arm as if flicking a copper piece. Danso dusted off his shins while Oboda silently handed him a cloth to wipe his face. The civic guard stayed bowed, shaking, too scared to rise.

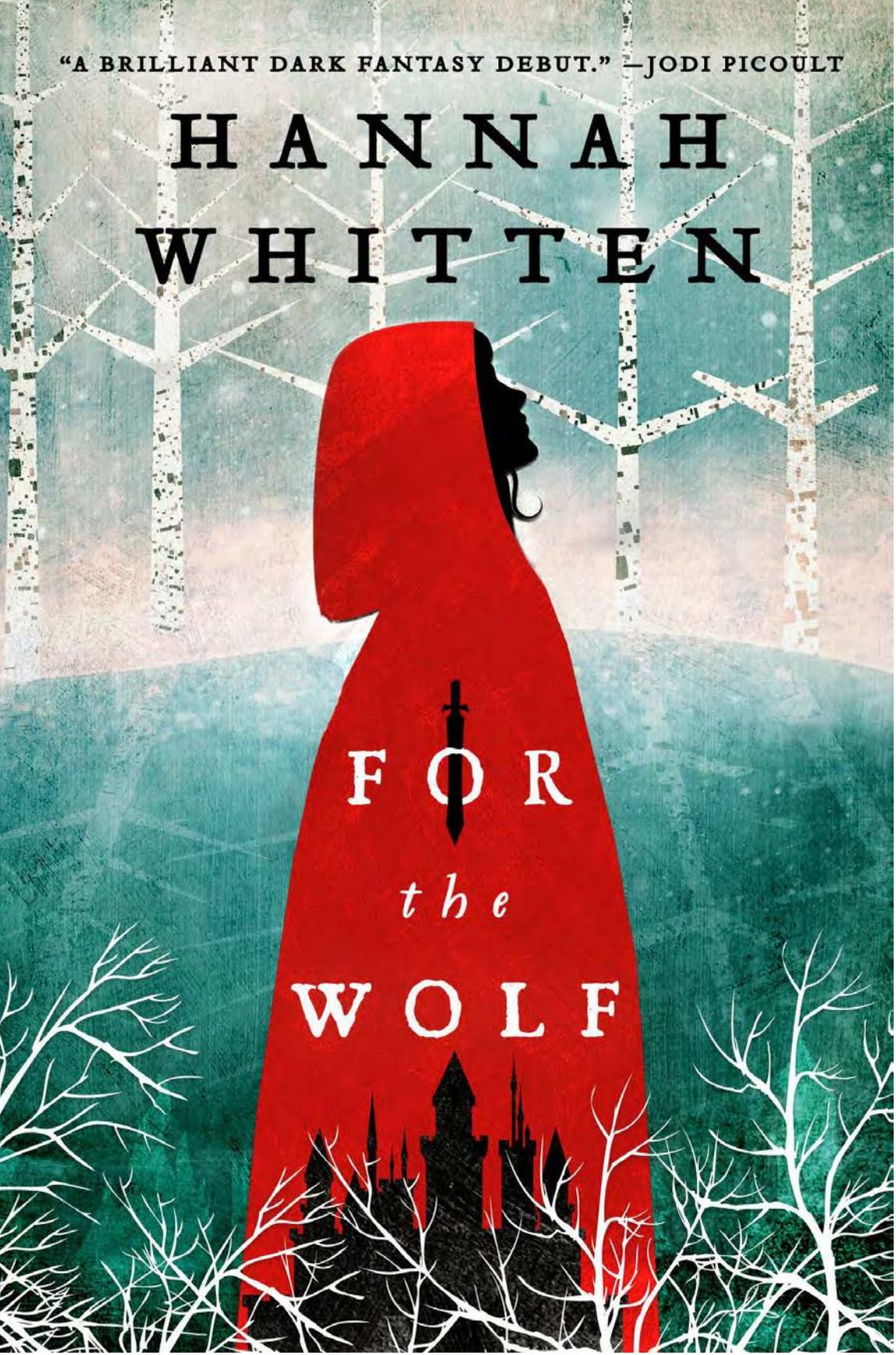
Danso hurried off to join Esheme in the exiting crowd, spotting her greeting a couple of councilhands. He stood far off from her for a moment, and she ignored him for as long as she could, until she turned and wordlessly walked over to him, adjusted his wrappers, re-knotted them at the shoulder, then led him by the arm.

“Let’s do this,” she said.

"A BRILLIANT DARK FANTASY DEBUT." —JODI PICOULT

HANNAH
WHITTEN

FOR
the
WOLF





Chapter One

Two nights before she was sent to the Wolf, Red wore a dress the color of blood.

It cast Neve's face in crimson behind her as she straightened her twin's train. The smile her sister summoned was tentative and thin. "You look lovely, Red."

Red's lips were raw from biting, and when she tried to return the smile, her skin pulled. Copper tasted sharp on her tongue.

Neve didn't notice her bleeding. She wore white, like everyone else would tonight, the band of silver marking her as the First Daughter holding back her black hair. Emotions flickered across her pale features as she fussed with the folds of Red's gown—apprehension, anger, bone-deep sadness. Red could read each one. Always could, with Neve. She'd been an easy cipher since the womb they'd shared.

Finally, Neve settled on a blankly pleasant expression designed to reveal nothing at all. She picked up the half-full wine bottle on the floor, tilted it toward Red. "Might as well finish it off."

Red drank directly from the neck. Crimson lip paint smeared the back of her hand when she wiped her mouth.

"Good?" Neve took back the bottle, voice bright even as she rolled it nervously in her palms. "It's Meducian. A gift for the Temple from Raffé's father, a little extra on top of the prayer-tax for good sailing weather. Raffé filched it, said he thought the regular tax should be

more than enough for pleasant seas.” A halfhearted laugh, brittle and dry. “He said if anything would get you through tonight, this will.”

Red’s skirt crinkled as she sank into one of the chairs by the window, propping her head on her fist. “There’s not enough wine in the world for this.”

Neve’s false mask of brightness splintered, fell. They sat in silence.

“You could still run,” Neve whispered, lips barely moving, eyes on the empty bottle. “We’ll cover for you, Raffé and I. Tonight, while everyone—”

“I can’t.” Red said it quick, and she said it sharp, hand falling to slap against the armrest. Endless repetition had worn all the polish off her voice.

“Of course you can.” Neve’s fingers tightened on the bottle. “You don’t even have the Mark yet, and your birthday is the day after tomorrow.”

Red’s hand strayed to her scarlet sleeve, hiding white, unblemished skin. Every day since she turned nineteen, she’d checked her arms for the Mark. Kaldenore’s had come immediately after her birthday, Sayetha’s halfway through her nineteenth year, Merra’s merely days before she turned twenty. Red’s had yet to appear, but she was a Second Daughter—bound to the Wilderwood, bound to the Wolf, bound to an ancient bargain. Mark or no Mark, in two days, she was gone.

“Is it the monster stories? Really, Red, those are fairy tales to frighten children, no matter what the Order says.” Neve’s voice had edges now, going from cajoling to something sharper. “They’re nonsense. No one has seen them in nearly two hundred years—there were none before Sayetha, none before Merra.”

“But there were before Kaldenore.” There was no heat in Red’s voice, no ice, either. Neutral and expressionless. She was so tired of this fight.

“Yes, two damn centuries ago, a storm of monsters left the Wilderwood and terrorized the northern territories for ten years, until

Kaldenore entered and they disappeared. Monsters we have no real historical record of, monsters that seemed to take whatever shape pleased the person telling the tale.” If Red’s voice had been placid autumn, Neve’s was wrecking winter, all cold and jagged. “But even if they were real, there’s been *nothing* since, Red. No hint of anything coming from the forest, not for any of the other Second Daughters, and not for you.” A pause, words gathered from a deep place neither of them touched. “If there were monsters in the woods, we would’ve seen them when we—”

“Neve.” Red sat still, eyes on the swipe of wound-lurid lip paint across her knuckles, but her voice knifed through the room.

The plea for silence went ignored. “Once you go to him, it’s over. He won’t let you back out. You can never leave the forest again, not like . . . not like last time.”

“I don’t want to talk about that.” Neutrality lost its footing, slipping into something hoarse and desperate. “Please, Neve.”

For a moment, she thought Neve might ignore her again, might keep pushing this conversation past the careful parameters Red allowed for it. Instead she sighed, eyes shining as bright as the silver in her hair. “You could at least pretend,” she murmured, turning to the window. “You could at least pretend to care.”

“I care.” Red’s fingers tensed on her knees. “It just doesn’t make a difference.”

She’d done her screaming, her railing, her rebellion. She’d done all of it, everything Neve wanted from her now, back before she turned sixteen. Four years ago, when everything changed, when she realized the Wilderwood was the only place for her.

That feeling was mounting in her middle again. Something blooming, climbing up through her bones. Something *growing*.

A fern sat on the windowsill, incongruously verdant against the backdrop of frost. The leaves shuddered, tendrils stretching gently toward Red’s shoulder, movements too deft and deliberate to be caused by a passing breeze. Beneath her sleeve, green brushed the

network of veins in her wrist, made them stand out against her pale skin like branches. Her mouth tasted of earth.

No. Red clenched her fists until her knuckles blanched. Gradually, that *growing* feeling faded, a vine cut loose and coiling back into its hiding place. The dirt taste left her tongue, but she still grabbed the wine bottle again, tipping up the last of the dregs. “It’s not just the monsters,” she said when the wine was gone. “There’s the matter of me being enough to convince the Wolf to release the Kings.”

Alcohol made her bold, bold enough that she didn’t try to hide the sneer in her voice. If there was ever going to be a sacrifice worthy enough to placate the Wolf and make him free the Five Kings from wherever he’d hidden them for centuries, it wasn’t going to be her.

Not that she believed any of that, anyway.

“The Kings aren’t coming back,” Neve said, giving voice to their mutual nonbelief. “The Order has sent three Second Daughters to the Wolf, and he’s never let them go before. He won’t now.” She crossed her arms tightly over her white gown, staring at the window glass as if her eyes could bore a hole into it. “I don’t think the Kings *can* come back.”

Neither did Red. Red thought it was likely that their gods were dead. Her dedication to her path into the forest had nothing to do with belief in Kings or monsters or anything else that might come out of it.

“It doesn’t matter.” They’d rehearsed this to perfection by now. Red flexed her fingers back and forth, now blue-veined, counting the beats of this endless, circling conversation. “I’m going to the Wilderwood, Neve. It’s done. Just . . . let it be done.”

Mouth a resolute line, Neve stepped forward, closing the distance between them with a whisper of silk across marble. Red didn’t look up, angling her head so a fall of honey-colored hair hid her face.

“Red,” Neve breathed, and Red flinched at her tone, the same she’d use with a frightened animal. “I *wanted* to go with you, that day we went to the Wilderwood. It wasn’t your fault that—”

The door creaked open. For the first time in a long time, Red was happy to see her mother.

While white and silver suited Neve, it made Queen Isla look frozen, cold as the frost on the windowpane. Dark brows drew over darker eyes, the only feature she had in common with both her daughters. No servants followed as she stepped into the room, closing the heavy wooden door behind her. “Neverah.” She inclined her head to Neve before turning those dark, unreadable eyes on Red. “Redarys.”

Neither of them returned a greeting. For a moment that seemed hours, the three of them were mired in silence.

Isla turned to Neve. “Guests are arriving. Greet them, please.”

Neve’s fists closed on her skirts. She stared at Isla under lowered brows, her dark eyes fierce and simmering. But a fight was pointless, and everyone in this room knew it. As she moved toward the door, Neve glanced at Red over her shoulder, a command in her gaze—*Courage*.

Courageous was the last thing Red felt in the presence of her mother.

She didn’t bother to stand as Isla took stock of her. The careful curls coaxed into Red’s hair were already falling out, her dress wrinkled. Isla’s eyes hesitated a moment on the smear of lip color marking the back of her hand, but even that wasn’t enough to elicit a response. This was more proof of sacrifice than a ball, an event for dignitaries from all over the continent to attend and see the woman meant for the Wolf. Maybe it was fitting she looked half feral.

“That shade suits you.” The Queen nodded to Red’s skirts. “Red for Redarys.”

A quip, but it made Red’s teeth clench halfway to cracking. Neve used to say that when they were young. Before they both realized the implications. By then, her nickname had already stuck, and Red wouldn’t have changed it anyway. There was a fierceness in it, a claiming of who and what she was.

“Haven’t heard that one since I was a child,” she said instead, and saw Isla’s lips flatten. Mention of Red’s childhood—that she’d been a child, once, that she was *her* child, that she was sending her child to the forest—always seemed to unsettle her mother.

Red gestured to her skirt. “Scarlet for a sacrifice.”

A moment, then Isla cleared her throat. “The Florish delegation arrived this afternoon, and the Karseckan Re’s emissary. The Meducian Prime Councilor sends her regrets, but a number of other Councilors are making an appearance. Order priestesses from all over the continent have been arriving throughout the day, praying in the Shrine in shifts.” All this in a prim, quiet voice, a recitation of a rather boring list. “The Three Dukes of Alpera and their retinues should arrive before the procession—”

“Oh, good.” Red addressed her hands, still and white as a corpse’s. “They wouldn’t want to miss that.”

Isla’s fingers twitched. Her tone, though strained, remained queenly. “The High Priestess is hopeful,” she said, eyes everywhere but on her daughter. “Since there’s been a longer stretch between you and... and the others, she thinks the Wolf might finally return the Kings.”

“I’m sure she does. How embarrassing for her when I go into that forest and absolutely nothing happens.”

“Keep your blasphemies to yourself,” Isla chided, but it was mild. Red never quite managed to wring emotion from her mother. She’d tried, when she was younger—giving gifts, picking flowers. As she got older, she’d pulled down curtains and wrecked dinners with drunkenness, trying for anger if she couldn’t have something warmer. Even that earned her nothing more than a sigh or an eye roll.

You had to be a whole person to be worth mourning. She’d never been that to her mother. Never been anything more than a relic.

“Do *you* think they’ll come back?” A bald question, one she wouldn’t dare ask if she didn’t have one foot in the Wilderwood

already. Still, Red couldn't quite make it sound sincere, couldn't quite smooth the barb from her voice. "Do you think if the Wolf finds me *acceptable*, he'll return the Kings to you?"

Silence in the room, colder than the air outside. Red had nothing like faith, but she wanted that answer like it could be absolution. For her mother. For *her*.

Isla held her gaze for a moment that stretched, spun into strange proportions. There were years in it, and years' worth of things unsaid. But when she spoke, her dark eyes turned away. "I hardly see how it matters."

And that was that.

Red stood, shaking back the heavy curtain of her loose hair, wiping the lip paint from her hand onto her skirt. "Then by all means, Your Majesty, let's show everyone their sacrifice is bound and ready."



Red made quick calculations in her head as she swept toward the ballroom. Her presence needed to be marked—all those visiting dignitaries weren't just here for dancing and wine. They wanted to see *her*, scarlet proof that Valleyda was prepared to send its sacrificial Second Daughter.

The Order priestesses were taking turns in the Shrine, praying to the shards of the white trees allegedly cut from the Wilderwood itself. For those from out of the country, this was a religious pilgrimage, a once-in-many-lifetimes chance not only to pray in the famed Valleydan Shrine but also to see a Second Daughter sent to the Wolf.

They might be praying, but they'd have eyes here. Eyes measuring her up, seeing if they agreed with the Valleydan High Priestess. If they, too, thought her *acceptable*.

A dance or two, a glass of wine or four. Red could stay long enough for everyone to judge the mettle of their sacrifice, and then she'd leave.

Technically, it was very early summertime, but Valleydan temperatures never rose much past freezing in any season. Hearths lined the ballroom, flickering orange and yellow light. Courtiers spun in a panoply of different cuts and styles from kingdoms all over the continent, every scrap of fabric lunar-pale. As Red stepped into the ballroom, all those myriad gazes fixed on her, a drop of blood in a snowdrift.

She froze like a rabbit in a fox's eye. For a moment, they all stared at one another, the gathered faithful and their prepared offering.

Jaw set tight, Red sank into a deep, exaggerated curtsy.

A brief stutter in the dance's rhythm. Then the courtiers started up again, sweeping past her without making eye contact.

Small favors.

A familiar form stood in the corner, next to a profusion of hot-house roses and casks of wine. Raffe ran a hand over close-shorn black hair, his fingers the color of mahogany against the gold of his goblet. For the moment, he stood alone, but it wouldn't be that way for long. The son of a Meducian Councilor and a rather accomplished dancer, Raffe never wanted for attention at balls.

Red slid beside him, taking his goblet and draining it with practiced efficiency. Raffe's lip quirked. "Hello to you, too."

"There's plenty where that came from." Red handed back the goblet and crossed her arms, staring resolutely at the wall rather than the crowd. Their gazes needled the back of her neck.

"Quite true." Raffe refilled his glass. "I'm surprised you're staying, honestly. The people who needed to see you certainly have."

She chewed the corner of her lip. "*I'm* hoping to see someone." It was an admittance to herself as much as to Raffe. She shouldn't *want* to see Arick. She should let this be a clean break, let him go easily...

But Red was a selfish creature at heart.

Raffe nodded once, understanding in the bare lift of his brow. He handed her the full wineglass before getting another for himself.

She'd known Raffé since she was fourteen—when his father took the position as a Councilor, he had to pass on his booming wine trade to his son, and there was no better place to learn about trade routes than with Valleydan tutors. Not much grew here, a tiny, cold country at the very top of the continent, notable only for the Wilderwood on its northern border and its occasional title of Second Daughters. Valleyda relied almost entirely on imports to keep the people fed, imports and prayer-taxes to their Temple, where the most potent entreaties to the Kings could be made.

They'd all grown up together, these past six years, years full of realizing just how different Red was from the rest of them. Years spent realizing her time was swiftly running out. But as long as she'd known him, Raffé had never treated her as anything more than a friend—not a martyr, not an effigy to burn.

Raffé's eyes softened, gaze pitched over her head. Red followed it to Neve, sitting alone on a raised dais at the front of the room, eyes slightly bloodshot. Isla's seat was still empty. Red didn't have one.

Red tipped her wine toward her twin. "Ask her to dance, Raffé."

"Can't." The answer came quick and clipped from behind his glass. He drained it in one swallow.

Red didn't press.

A tap on her shoulder sent her whirling. The young lord behind her took a quick step away, eyes wide and fearful. "Uh, my...my lady—no, Princess—"

He clearly expected sharpness, but Red was suddenly too tired to give it to him. It was exhausting, keeping those knife-edges. "Redarys."

"Redarys." He nodded nervously. A blush crept up his white neck, making the spots on his face stand out. "Would you dance with me?"

Red found herself shrugging, Meducian wine muddling her thoughts into shapeless warmth. This wasn't who she was hoping to see, but why not dance with someone brave enough to ask? She wasn't dead yet.

The lordling swept her up into a waltz, barely touching the curve of her waist. Red could've laughed if her throat didn't feel so raw. They were all so afraid to touch something that belonged to the Wolf.

"You're to meet him in the alcove," he whispered, voice wavering on the edge of a break. "The First Daughter said so."

Red snapped out of wine-warmth, eyes narrowing on the young lord's face. Her stomach churned, alcohol and shining hope. "Meet who?"

"The Consort Elect," the boy stammered. "Lord Arick."

He was here. He'd come.

The waltz ended with her and her unlikely partner near the alcove he'd referenced, the train of her gown almost touching the brocade curtain. "Thank you." Red curtsied to the lordling, scarlet now from the roots of his hair to the back of his neck. He stammered something incomprehensible and took off, coltish legs a second away from running.

She took a moment to steady her hands. This was Neve's doing, and Red knew her sister well enough to guess what she intended. Neve couldn't convince her to run, and thought maybe Arick could.

Red would let him try.

She slipped through the curtain, and his arms were around her waist before the ball was gone from view.

"Red," he murmured into her hair. His lips moved to hers, fingers tightening on her hips to pull her closer. "Red, I've missed you."

Her mouth was too occupied to say it back, though she made it clear she shared the sentiment. Arick's duties as the Consort Elect and Duke of Floriane kept him often out of court. He was only here now because of Neve.

Neve had been as shocked as Red when Arick was announced as Neve's future husband, cementing the fragile treaty that made Floriane a Valleydan province. She knew what lay between Arick and Red, but they never talked about it, unable to find the right words for one

more small tragedy. Arick was a blade that drew blood two different ways, and the wounds left were best tended to alone.

Red broke away, resting her forehead against Arick's shoulder. He smelled the same, like mint and expensive tobacco. She breathed it in until her lungs ached.

Arick held her there a moment, hands in her hair. "I love you," he whispered against her ear.

He always said it. She never said it back. Once, she'd thought it was because she was doing him a favor, denying herself to make it easier on him when her twenty years were up and the forest's tithes came due. But that wasn't quite right. Red never said it because she didn't feel it. She loved Arick, in a way, but not a way that matched his love for her. It was simpler to let the words pass without remark.

He'd never seemed upset about it before, but tonight, she could feel the way his muscles tensed beneath her cheek, hear the clench of teeth in his jaw. "Still, Red?" It came quiet, in a way that seemed like he already knew the answer.

She stayed silent.

A moment, then he tilted a pale finger under her chin, tipped it up to search her face. No candles burned in the alcove, but the moonlight through the window reflected in his eyes, as green as the ferns on the sill. "You know why I'm here."

"And you know what I'll say."

"Neve was asking the wrong question," he breathed, desperation feathering at the edges. "Just wanting you to run, not thinking about what comes next. I have. It's *all* I've thought of." He paused, hand tightening in her hair. "Run away *with* me, Red."

Her eyes, half closed by kissing and moonlight, opened wide. Red pulled away, quickly enough to leave strands of gold woven around his fingers. "What?"

Arick gathered her hands, pulled her close again. "Run away with me," he repeated, chafing his thumbs over her palms. "We'll go

south, to Karsecka or Elkyrath, find some backwater town where no one cares about religion or the Kings coming back, too far away from the forest to worry about any monsters. I'll find work doing... doing *something*, and—”

“We can't do that.” Red tugged out of his grip. The pleasant numbness of wine was rapidly giving over to a dull ache, and she pressed her fingers into her temples as she turned away. “You have responsibilities. To Floriane, to Neve...”

“None of that matters.” His hands framed her waist. “Red, I can't let you go to the Wilderwood.”

She felt it again, the awakening in her veins. The ferns shuddered on the sill.

For a moment, she thought about telling him.

Telling him about the stray splinter of magic the Wilderwood left in her the night she and Neve ran to the forest's edge. Telling him of the destruction it wrought, the blood and the violence. Telling him how every day was an exercise in fighting it down, keeping it contained, making sure it never hurt anyone again.

But the words wouldn't come.

Red wasn't going to the Wilderwood to bring back gods. She wasn't going as insurance against monsters. It was an ancient and esoteric web she'd been born tangled in, but her reasons for not fighting free of it had nothing to do with piety, nothing to do with a religion she'd never truly believed in.

She was going to the Wilderwood to save everyone she loved from *herself*.

“It doesn't have to be this way.” Arick gripped her shoulders. “We could have a *life*, Red. We could be just *us*.”

“I'm the Second Daughter. You're the Consort Elect.” Red shook her head. “*That* is who we are.”

Silence. “I could make you go.”

Red's eyes narrowed, half confusion and half wariness.

His hands slid from her shoulders, closed around her wrists. “I could take you somewhere he couldn’t get to you.” A pause, laden with sharp hurt. “Where *you* couldn’t get to *him*.”

Arick’s grip was just shy of bruising, and with an angry surge like leaves caught in a cyclone, Red’s shard of magic broke free.

It clawed its way out of her bones, unspooling from the spaces between her ribs like ivy climbing ruins. The ferns on the sill arched toward her, called by some strange magnetism, and she felt the quickening of earth beneath her feet even through layers of marble, roots running like currents, *reaching* for her—

Red wrestled the power under control just before the ferns touched Arick’s shoulder, the fronds grown long and jagged in seconds. She shoved him away instead, harder than she meant to. Arick stumbled as the ferns retracted, slinking back to normal shapes.

“You can’t *make* me do anything, Arick.” Her hands trembled; her voice was thin. “I can’t stay here.”

“Why?” All fire, angry and low.

Red turned, picking up the edge of the brocaded curtain in a hand she hoped didn’t shake. Her mouth worked, but no words seemed right, so the quiet grew heavy and was her answer.

“This is about what happened with Neve, isn’t it?” It was an accusation, and he threw it like one. “When you went to the Wilderwood?”

Red’s heart slammed against her ribs. She ducked under the curtain and dropped it behind her, muffling Arick’s words, hiding his face. Her gown whispered over the marble as she walked down the corridor, toward the double doors of the north-facing balcony. Distantly, she wondered what the priestesses’ informants might make of her mussed hair and swollen lips.

Well. If they wanted an untouched sacrifice, that ship had long since sailed.

The cold was bracing after the hearths in the ballroom, but Red

was Valleydan, and gooseflesh on her arms still felt like summer. Sweat dried in her hair, now hopelessly straight, careful curls loosened by heat and hands.

Breathe in, breathe out, steady her shaking shoulders, blink away the burn in her eyes. She could count the number of people who loved her on one hand, and they all kept begging for the only thing she couldn't give them.

The night air froze the tears into her lashes before they could fall. She'd been damned from the moment she was born—a Second Daughter, meant for the Wolf and the Wilderwood, as etched into the bark in the Shrine—but still, sometimes, she wondered. Wondered if the damning was her own fault for what she'd done four years ago.

Reckless courage got the best of them after that disastrous ball, reckless courage and too much wine. They stole horses, rode north, two girls against a monster and an endless forest with nothing but rocks and matches and a fierce love for each other.

That love burned so brightly, it almost seemed like the power that took root in Red was a deliberate mockery. The Wilderwood, proving that it was stronger. That her ties to the forest and its waiting Wolf would always be stronger.

Red swallowed against a tight throat. Biting irony, that if it hadn't been for that night and what it wrought, she might've done what Neve wanted. She might've run.

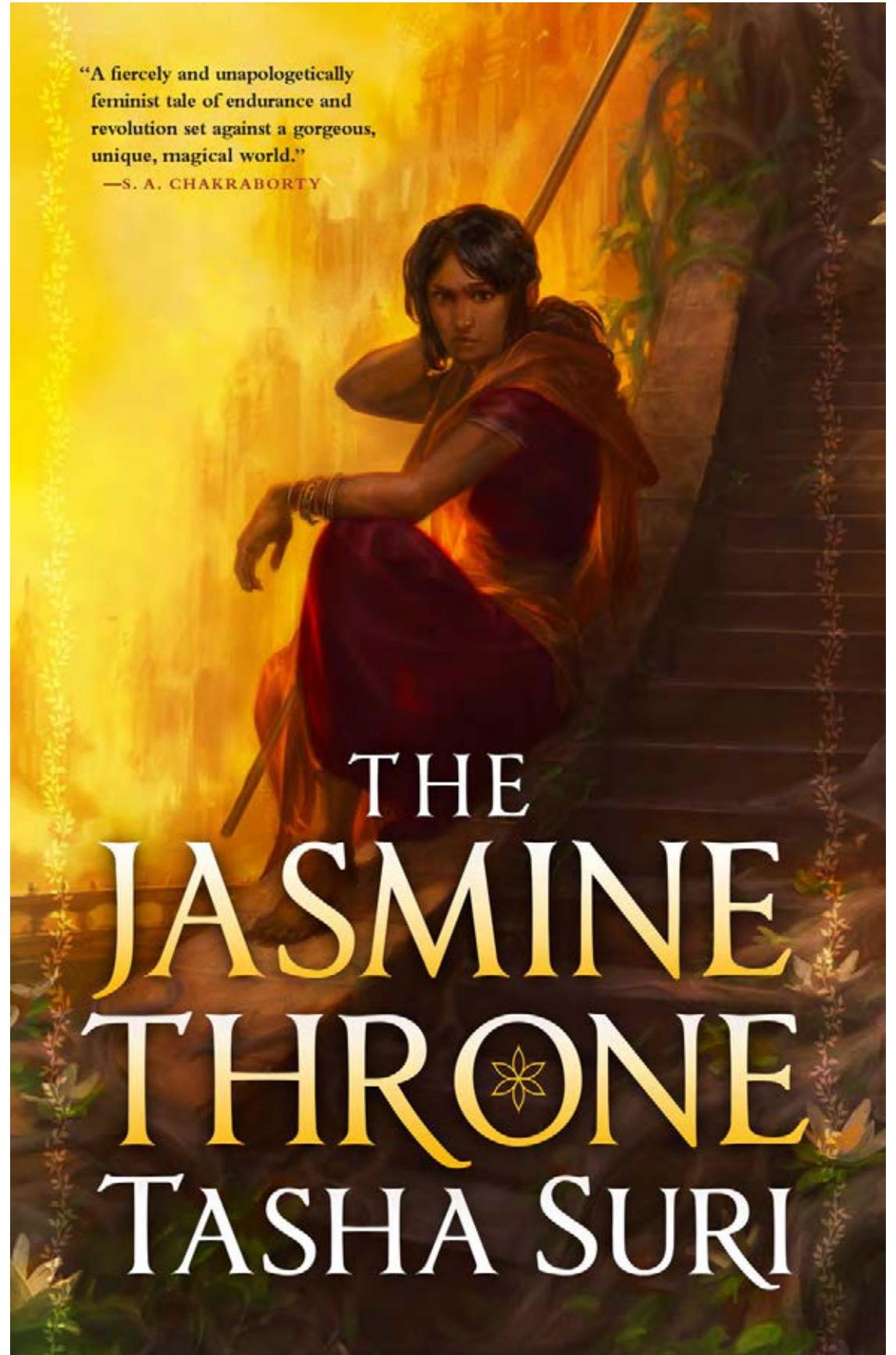
She looked to the north, squinting against cold wind. Somewhere, beyond the mist and the hazy lights of the capital, was the Wilderwood. The Wolf. Their long wait was almost ended.

"I'm coming," she murmured. "Damn you, I'm coming."

She turned in a sweep of crimson skirts and went back inside.

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PRIYA

Someone important must have been killed in the night.

Priya was sure of it the minute she heard the thud of hooves on the road behind her. She stepped to the roadside as a group of guards clad in Parijati white and gold raced past her on their horses, their sabers clinking against their embossed belts. She drew her pallu over her face—partly because they would expect such a gesture of respect from a common woman, and partly to avoid the risk that one of them would recognize her—and watched them through the gap between her fingers and the cloth.

When they were out of sight, she didn't run. But she did start walking very, very fast. The sky was already transforming from milky gray to the pearly blue of dawn, and she still had a long way to go.

The Old Bazaar was on the outskirts of the city. It was far enough from the regent's mahal that Priya had a vague hope it wouldn't have been shut yet. And today, she was lucky. As she arrived, breathless, sweat dampening the back of her blouse, she could see that the streets were still seething with people: parents tugging along small children; traders carrying large sacks of flour or rice on their heads; gaunt beggars, skirting the edges of the market with their alms bowls in hand; and women like Priya, plain ordinary women in even plainer saris, stubbornly shoving their way through the crowd in search of stalls with fresh vegetables and reasonable prices.

If anything, there seemed to be even *more* people at the bazaar than usual—and there was a distinct sour note of panic in the air. News of the patrols had clearly passed from household to household with its usual speed.

People were afraid.

Three months ago, an important Parijati merchant had been murdered in his bed, his throat slit, his body dumped in front of the temple of the mothers of flame just before the dawn prayers. For an entire two weeks after that, the regent's men had patrolled the streets on foot and on horseback, beating or arresting Ahiranyi suspected of rebellious activity and destroying any market stalls that had tried to remain open in defiance of the regent's strict orders.

The Parijatdvipan merchants had refused to supply Hiranaprastha with rice and grain in the weeks that followed. Ahiranyi had starved.

Now it looked as though it was happening again. It was natural for people to remember and fear; remember, and scramble to buy what supplies they could before the markets were forcibly closed once more.

Priya wondered who had been murdered this time, listening for any names as she dove into the mass of people, toward the green banner on staves in the distance that marked the apothecary's stall. She passed tables groaning under stacks of vegetables and sweet fruit, bolts of silky cloth and gracefully carved idols of the yaksa for family shrines, vats of golden oil and ghee. Even in the faint early-morning light, the market was vibrant with color and noise.

The press of people grew more painful.

She was nearly to the stall, caught in a sea of heaving, sweating bodies, when a man behind her cursed and pushed her out of the way. He shoved her hard with his full body weight, his palm heavy on her arm, unbalancing her entirely. Three people around her were knocked back. In the sudden release of pressure, she tumbled down onto the ground, feet skidding in the wet soil.

The bazaar was open to the air, and the dirt had been churned

into a froth by feet and carts and the night's monsoon rainfall. She felt the wetness seep in through her sari, from hem to thigh, soaking through draped cotton to the petticoat underneath. The man who had shoved her stumbled into her; if she hadn't snatched her calf swiftly back, the pressure of his boot on her leg would have been agonizing. He glanced down at her—blank, dismissive, a faint sneer to his mouth—and looked away again.

Her mind went quiet.

In the silence, a single voice whispered, *You could make him regret that.*

There were gaps in Priya's childhood memories, spaces big enough to stick a fist through. But whenever pain was inflicted on her—the humiliation of a blow, a man's careless shove, a fellow servant's cruel laughter—she felt the knowledge of how to cause equal suffering unfurl in her mind. Ghostly whispers, in her brother's patient voice.

This is how you pinch a nerve hard enough to break a handhold. This is how you snap a bone. This is how you gouge an eye. Watch carefully, Priya. Just like this.

This is how you stab someone through the heart.

She carried a knife at her waist. It was a very good knife, practical, with a plain sheath and hilt, and she kept its edge finely honed for kitchen work. With nothing but her little knife and a careful slide of her finger and thumb, she could leave the insides of anything—vegetables, unskinned meat, fruits newly harvested from the regent's orchard—swiftly bared, the outer rind a smooth, coiled husk in her palm.

She looked back up at the man and carefully let the thought of her knife drift away. She unclenched her trembling fingers.

You're lucky, she thought, *that I am not what I was raised to be.*

The crowd behind her and in front of her was growing thicker. Priya couldn't even see the green banner of the apothecary's stall any longer. She rocked back on the balls of her feet, then rose swiftly. Without looking at the man again, she angled herself and slipped between two strangers in front of her, putting her

small stature to good use and shoving her way to the front of the throng. A judicious application of her elbows and knees and some wriggling finally brought her near enough to the stall to see the apothecary's face, puckered with sweat and irritation.

The stall was a mess, vials turned on their sides, clay pots upended. The apothecary was packing away his wares as fast as he could. Behind her, around her, she could hear the rumbling noise of the crowd grow more tense.

"Please," she said loudly. "Uncle, *please*. If you've got any beads of sacred wood to spare, I'll buy them from you."

A stranger to her left snorted audibly. "You think he's got any left? Brother, if you do, I'll pay double whatever she offers."

"My grandmother's sick," a girl shouted, three people deep behind them. "So if you could help me out, uncle—"

Priya felt the wood of the stall begin to peel beneath the hard pressure of her nails.

"Please," she said, her voice pitched low to cut across the din.

But the apothecary's attention was raised toward the back of the crowd. Priya didn't have to turn her own head to know he'd caught sight of the white-and-gold uniforms of the regent's men, finally here to close the bazaar.

"I'm closed up," he shouted out. "There's nothing more for any of you. Get lost!" He slammed his hand down, then shoved the last of his wares away with a shake of his head.

The crowd began to disperse slowly. A few people stayed, still pleading for the apothecary's aid, but Priya didn't join them. She knew she would get nothing here.

She turned and threaded her way back out of the crowd, stopping only to buy a small bag of kachoris from a tired-eyed vendor. Her sodden petticoat stuck heavily to her legs. She plucked the cloth, pulling it from her thighs, and strode in the opposite direction of the soldiers.

On the farthest edge of the market, where the last of the stalls and well-trod ground met the main road leading to open farmland

and scattered villages beyond, was a dumping ground. The locals had built a brick wall around it, but that did nothing to contain the stench of it. Food sellers threw their stale oil and decayed produce here, and sometimes discarded any cooked food that couldn't be sold.

When Priya had been much younger she'd known this place well. She'd known exactly the nausea and euphoria that finding something near rotten but *edible* could send spiraling through a starving body. Even now, her stomach lurched strangely at the sight of the heap, the familiar, thick stench of it rising around her.

Today, there were six figures huddled against its walls in the meager shade. Five young boys and a girl of about fifteen—older than the rest.

Knowledge was shared between the children who lived alone in the city, the ones who drifted from market to market, sleeping on the verandas of kinder households. They whispered to each other the best spots for begging for alms or collecting scraps. They passed word of which stallholders would give them food out of pity, and which would beat them with a stick sooner than offer even an ounce of charity.

They told each other about Priya, too.

If you go to the Old Bazaar on the first morning after rest day, a maid will come and give you sacred wood, if you need it. She won't ask you for coin or favors. She'll just help. No, she really will. She won't ask for anything at all.

The girl looked up at Priya. Her left eyelid was speckled with faint motes of green, like algae on still water. She wore a thread around her throat, a single bead of wood strung upon it.

"Soldiers are out," the girl said by way of greeting. A few of the boys shifted restlessly, looking over her shoulder at the tumult of the market. Some wore shawls to hide the rot on their necks and arms—the veins of green, the budding of new roots under skin.

"They are. All over the city," Priya agreed.

"Did a merchant get his head chopped off again?"

Priya shook her head. "I know as much as you do."

The girl looked from Priya's face down to Priya's muddied sari, her hands empty apart from the sack of kachoris. There was a question in her gaze.

"I couldn't get any beads today," Priya confirmed. She watched the girl's expression crumple, though she valiantly tried to control it. Sympathy would do her no good, so Priya offered the pastries out instead. "You should go now. You don't want to get caught by the guards."

The children snatched the kachoris up, a few muttering their thanks, and scattered. The girl rubbed the bead at her throat with her knuckles as she went. Priya knew it would be cold under her hand—empty of magic.

If the girl didn't get hold of more sacred wood soon, then the next time Priya saw her, the left side of her face would likely be as green-dusted as her eyelid.

You can't save them all, she reminded herself. You're no one. This is all you can do. This, and no more.

Priya turned back to leave—and saw that one boy had hung back, waiting patiently for her to notice him. He was the kind of small that suggested malnourishment; his bones too sharp, his head too large for a body that hadn't yet grown to match it. He had his shawl over his hair, but she could still see his dark curls, and the deep green leaves growing between them. He'd wrapped his hands up in cloth.

"Do you really have nothing, ma'am?" he asked hesitantly.

"Really," Priya said. "If I had any sacred wood, I'd have given it to you."

"I thought maybe you lied," he said. "I thought, maybe you haven't got enough for more than one person, and you didn't want to make anyone feel bad. But there's only me now. So you can help me."

"I really am sorry," Priya said. She could hear yelling and footsteps echoing from the market, the crash of wood as stalls were closed up.

The boy looked like he was mustering up his courage. And sure enough, after a moment, he squared his shoulders and said, "If you can't get me any sacred wood, then can you get me a job?"

She blinked at him, surprised.

“I—I’m just a maidservant,” she said. “I’m sorry, little brother, but—”

“You must work in a nice house, if you can help strays like us,” he said quickly. “A big house with money to spare. Maybe your masters need a boy who works hard and doesn’t make much trouble? That could be me.”

“Most households won’t take a boy who has the rot, no matter how hardworking he is,” she pointed out gently, trying to lessen the blow of her words.

“I know,” he said. His jaw was set, stubborn. “But I’m still asking.”

Smart boy. She couldn’t blame him for taking the chance. She was clearly soft enough to spend her own coin on sacred wood to help the rot-riven. Why wouldn’t he push her for more?

“I’ll do anything anyone needs me to do,” he insisted. “Ma’am, I can clean latrines. I can cut wood. I can work land. My family is—they were—farmers. I’m not afraid of hard work.”

“You haven’t got anyone?” she asked. “None of the others look out for you?” She gestured in the vague direction the other children had vanished.

“I’m alone,” he said simply. Then: “*Please.*”

A few people drifted past them, carefully skirting the boy. His wrapped hands, the shawl over his head—both revealed his rot-riven status just as well as anything they hid would have.

“Call me Priya,” she said. “Not ma’am.”

“Priya,” he repeated obediently.

“You say you can work,” she said. She looked at his hands. “How bad are they?”

“Not that bad.”

“Show me,” she said. “Give me your wrist.”

“You don’t mind touching me?” he asked. There was a slight waver of hesitation in his voice.

“Rot can’t pass between people,” she said. “Unless I pluck one of those leaves from your hair and eat it, I think I’ll be fine.”

That brought a smile to his face. There for a blink, like a flash of sun through parting clouds, then gone. He deftly unwrapped

one of his hands. She took hold of his wrist and raised it up to the light.

There was a little bud, growing up under the skin.

It was pressing against the flesh of his fingertip, his finger a too-small shell for the thing trying to unfurl. She looked at the tracery of green visible through the thin skin at the back of his hand, the fine lace of it. The bud had deep roots.

She swallowed. Ah. Deep roots, deep rot. If he already had leaves in his hair, green spidering through his blood, she couldn't imagine that he had long left.

"Come with me," she said, and tugged him by the wrist, making him follow her. She walked along the road, eventually joining the flow of the crowd leaving the market behind.

"Where are we going?" he asked. He didn't try to pull away from her.

"I'm going to get you some sacred wood," she said determinedly, putting all thoughts of murders and soldiers and the work she needed to do out of her mind. She released him and strode ahead. He ran to keep up with her, dragging his dirty shawl tight around his thin frame. "And after that, we'll see what to do with you."

The grandest of the city's pleasure houses lined the edges of the river. It was early enough in the day that they were utterly quiet, their pink lanterns unlit. But they would be busy later. The brothels were always left well alone by the regent's men. Even in the height of the last boiling summer, before the monsoon had cracked the heat in two, when the rebel sympathizers had been singing anti-imperialist songs and a noble lord's chariot had been cornered and burned on the street directly outside his own haveli—the brothels had kept their lamps lit.

Too many of the pleasure houses belonged to highborn nobles for the regent to close them. Too many were patronized by visiting merchants and nobility from Parijatdvipa's other city-states—a source of income no one seemed to want to do without.

To the rest of Parijatdvipa, Ahiranya was a den of vice, good for pleasure and little else. It carried its bitter history, its status as the losing side of an ancient war, like a yoke. They called it a backward place, rife with political violence, and, in more recent years, with the rot: the strange disease that twisted plants and crops and infected the men and women who worked the fields and forests with flowers that sprouted through the skin and leaves that pushed through their eyes. As the rot grew, other sources of income in Ahiranya had dwindled. And unrest had surged and swelled until Priya feared it too would crack, with all the fury of a storm.

As Priya and the boy walked on, the pleasure houses grew less grand. Soon, there were no pleasure houses at all. Around her were cramped homes, small shops. Ahead of her lay the edge of the forest. Even in the morning light, it was shadowed, the trees a silent barrier of green.

Priya had never met anyone born and raised outside Ahiranya who was not disturbed by the quiet of the forest. She'd known maids raised in Alor or even neighboring Srugna who avoided the place entirely. "There should be noise," they'd mutter. "Birdsong. Or insects. It isn't natural."

But the heavy quiet was comforting to Priya. She was Ahiranyi to the bone. She liked the silence of it, broken only by the scuff of her own feet against the ground.

"Wait for me here," she told the boy. "I won't be long."

He nodded without saying a word. He was staring out at the forest when she left him, a faint breeze rustling the leaves of his hair.

Priya slipped down a narrow street where the ground was uneven with hidden tree roots, the dirt rising and falling in mounds beneath her feet. Ahead of her was a single dwelling. Beneath its pillared veranda crouched an older man.

He raised his head as she approached. At first he seemed to look right through her, as though he'd been expecting someone else entirely. Then his gaze focused. His eyes narrowed in recognition.

"You," he said.

“Gautam.” She tilted her head in a gesture of respect. “How are you?”

“Busy,” he said shortly. “Why are you here?”

“I need sacred wood. Just one bead.”

“Should have gone to the bazaar, then,” he said evenly. “I’ve supplied plenty of apothecaries. They can deal with you.”

“I tried the Old Bazaar. No one has anything.”

“If they don’t, why do you think I will?”

Oh, come on now, she thought, irritated. But she said nothing. She waited until his nostrils flared as he huffed and rose up from the veranda, turning to the beaded curtain of the doorway. Tucked in the back of his tunic was a heavy hand sickle.

“Fine. Come in, then. The sooner we do this, the sooner you leave.”

She drew the purse from her blouse before climbing up the steps and entering after him.

He led her to his workroom and bid her to stand by the table at its center. Cloth sacks lined the corners of the room. Small stoppered bottles—innumerable salves and tinctures and herbs harvested from the forest itself—sat in tidy rows on shelves. The air smelled of earth and damp.

He took her entire purse from her, opened the drawstring, and adjusted its weight in his palm. Then he clucked, tongue against teeth, and dropped it onto the table.

“This isn’t enough.”

“You—of course it’s enough,” Priya said. “That’s all the money I have.”

“That doesn’t magically make it enough.”

“That’s what it cost me at the bazaar last time—”

“But you couldn’t get anything at the bazaar,” said Gautam. “And had you been able to, he would have charged you more. Supply is low, demand is high.” He frowned at her sourly. “You think it’s easy harvesting sacred wood?”

“Not at all,” Priya said. *Be pleasant*, she reminded herself. *You need his help.*

“Last month I sent in four woodcutters. They came out after two days, thinking they’d been in there *two hours*. Between—that,” he said, gesturing in the direction of the forest, “and the regent flinging his thugs all over the fucking city for who knows what reason, you think it’s easy work?”

“No,” Priya said. “I’m sorry.”

But he wasn’t done quite yet.

“I’m still waiting for the men I sent this week to come back,” he went on. His fingers were tapping on the table’s surface—a fast, irritated rhythm. “Who knows when that will be? I have plenty of reason to get the best price for the supplies I have. So I’ll have a proper payment from you, girl, or you’ll get nothing.”

Before he could continue, she lifted her hand. She had a few bracelets on her wrists. Two were good-quality metal. She slipped them off, placing them on the table before him, alongside the purse.

“The money and these,” she said. “That’s all I have.”

She thought he’d refuse her, just out of spite. But instead, he scooped up the bangles and the coin and pocketed them.

“That’ll do. Now watch,” he said. “I’ll show you a trick.”

He threw a cloth package down on the table. It was tied with a rope. He drew it open with one swift tug, letting the cloth fall to the sides.

Priya flinched back.

Inside lay the severed branch of a young tree. The bark had split, pale wood opening up into a red-brown wound. The sap that oozed from its surface was the color and consistency of blood.

“This came from the path leading to the grove my men usually harvest,” he said. “They wanted to show me why they couldn’t fulfill the regular quota. Rot as far as the eye could see, they told me.” His own eyes were hooded. “You can look closer if you want.”

“No, thank you,” Priya said tightly.

“Sure?”

“You should burn it,” she said. She was doing her best not to breathe the scent of it in too deeply. It had a stench like meat.

He snorted. “It has its uses.” He walked away from her, rooting through his shelves. After a moment, he returned with another cloth-wrapped item, this one only as large as a fingertip. He unwrapped it, careful to keep from touching what it held. Priya could feel the heat rising from the wood within: a strange, pulsing warmth that rolled off its surface with the steadiness of a sunbeam.

Sacred wood.

She watched as Gautam held the shard close to the rot-struck branch, as the lesion on the branch paled, the redness fading. The stench of it eased a little, and Priya breathed gratefully.

“There,” he said. “Now you know it is fresh. You’ll get plenty of use from it.”

“Thank you. That was a useful demonstration.” She tried not to let her impatience show. What did he want—awe? Tears of gratitude? She had no time for any of it. “You should still burn the branch. If you touch it by mistake . . .”

“I know how to handle the rot. I send men into the forest every day,” he said dismissively. “And what do you do? Sweep floors? I don’t need your advice.”

He thrust the shard of sacred wood out to her. “Take this. And leave.”

She bit her tongue and held out her hand, the long end of her sari drawn over her palm. She rewrapped the sliver of wood up carefully, once, twice, tightening the fabric, tying it off with a neat knot. Gautam watched her.

“Whoever you’re buying this for, the rot is still going to kill them,” he said, when she was done. “This branch will die even if I wrap it in a whole shell of sacred wood. It will just die slower. My professional opinion for you, at no extra cost.” He threw the cloth back over the infected branch with one careless flick of his fingers. “So don’t come back here and waste your money again. I’ll show you out.”

He shepherded her to the door. She pushed through the beaded curtain, greedily inhaling the clean air, untainted by the smell of decay.

At the edge of the veranda there was a shrine alcove carved into the wall. Inside it were three idols sculpted from plain wood, with lustrous black eyes and hair of vines. Before them were three tiny clay lamps lit with cloth wicks set in pools of oil. Sacred numbers.

She remembered how perfectly she'd once been able to fit her whole body into that alcove. She'd slept in it one night, curled up tight. She'd been as small as the orphan boy, once.

"Do you still let beggars shelter on your veranda when it rains?" Priya asked, turning to look at Gautam where he stood, barring the entryway.

"Beggars are bad for business," he said. "And the ones I see these days don't have brothers I owe favors to. Are you leaving or not?"

Just the threat of pain can break someone. She briefly met Gautam's eyes. Something impatient and malicious lurked there. *A knife, used right, never has to draw blood.*

But ah, Priya didn't have it in her to even threaten this old bully. She stepped back.

What a big void there was, between the knowledge within her and the person she appeared to be, bowing her head in respect to a petty man who still saw her as a street beggar who'd risen too far, and hated her for it.

"Thank you, Gautam," she said. "I'll try not to trouble you again."

She'd have to carve the wood herself. She couldn't give the shard as it was to the boy. A whole shard of sacred wood held against skin—it would burn. But better that it burn her. She had no gloves, so she would have to work carefully, with her little knife and a piece of cloth to hold the worst of the pain at bay. Even now, she could feel the heat of the shard against her skin, soaking through the fabric that bound it.

The boy was waiting where she'd left him. He looked even smaller in the shadow of the forest, even more alone. He turned to watch her as she approached, his eyes wary, and a touch uncertain, as if he hadn't been sure of her return.

Her heart twisted a little. Meeting Gautam had brought her closer to the bones of her past than she'd been in a long, long time. She felt the tug of her frayed memories like a physical ache.

Her brother. Pain. The smell of smoke.

Don't look, Pri. Don't look. Just show me the way.

Show me—

No. There was no point remembering that.

It was only sensible, she told herself, to help him. She didn't want the image of him, standing before her, to haunt her. She didn't want to remember a starving child, abandoned and alone, roots growing through his hands, and think, *I left him to die. He asked me for help, and I left him.*

"You're in luck," she said lightly. "I work in the regent's mahal. And his wife has a very gentle heart when it comes to orphans. I should know. She took me in. She'll let you work for her if I ask nicely. I'm sure of it."

His eyes went wide, so much hope in his face that it was almost painful to look at him. So Priya made a point of looking away. The sky was bright, the air overly warm. She needed to get back.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Rukh," he said. "My name is Rukh."

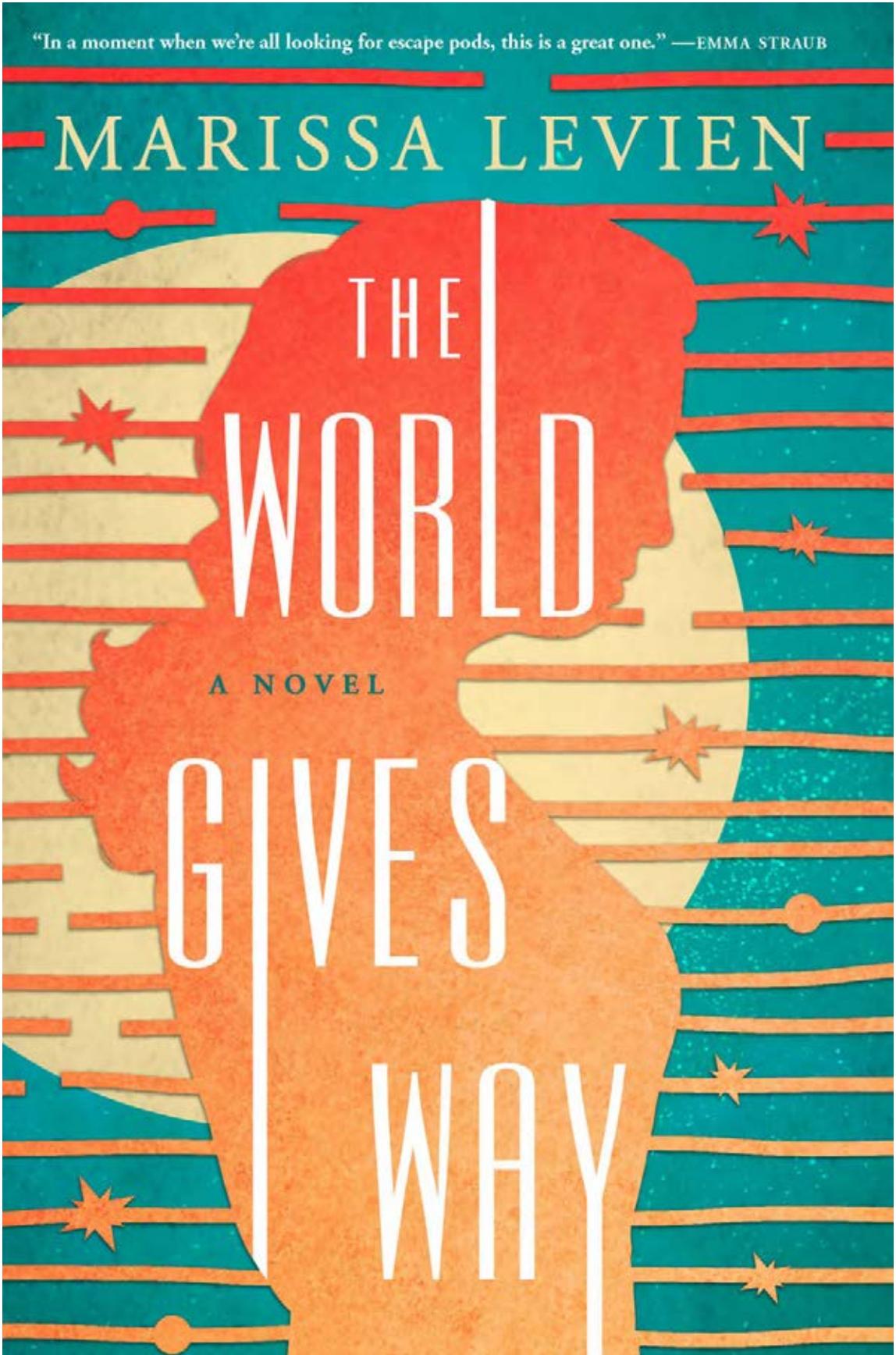
"In a moment when we're all looking for escape pods, this is a great one." —EMMA STRAUB

MARISSA LEVIEN

THE
WORLD

A NOVEL

GIVES
WAY





MYRRA

Myrra smashed a roach with her bare hand as it crawled along the wall, then recited a small eulogy for the deceased in her head. Perpetual survivors, the roaches had managed to sneak a ride on this world to the next, even when every other bit of cargo had been bleached and catalogued over a century ago. Myrra admired their pluck, but Imogene would hate the sight of an insect, and where there was one, there were always more. It was late, nearly three a.m. The roaches liked to explore at night, and Myrra's room was close to the kitchen.

Myrra retrieved an old rag from her stock of cleaning supplies and wiped off her palm. Then she sat back down on her cot, a lumpy pillow propped behind her back, and resumed writing her letter.

It was strange to be writing with paper and pen, but since Imogene had found Myrra's tablet last month, Myrra had needed to improvise with other methods of communication. What a row that had been. Myrra had been so careful hiding the tablet, taping it behind the mirror in her room. But there'd been a bad spat

of earthquakes lately, and it had fallen out at an ill-timed moment when Imogene was inspecting the room. Marcus never bothered enough to care about that sort of thing, but Imogene was livid. She'd only grown tenser and madder and more controlling in the past year, and as she'd screamed at Myrra, she'd framed the tablet as the ultimate transgression. For her part, Myrra had tried her best not to show her contempt. She still winced thinking of the sound the tablet made when Imogene smashed it against the side of a table, the glass cracking, the screen going irreparably black. Just a thin, flat piece of silicon and metal, but it had been a door to the world for a while. And it had proved so useful when it came to Jake.

Jake had given her the tablet six months ago. She remembered him pressing it into her palm in the alley behind his father's store. He was so happy to be helping the cause of the contract workers. His hands lingered against hers, and his forefinger stroked her wrist. Light, like a stolen kiss. That was when she knew she had a shot. They'd gotten good use out of that tablet.

Still, no point mourning something that was already gone. There was always another way through a problem. At least a pen was something easy to steal. Paper even easier. Marcus had boxes and boxes of the stuff, and he was terrible at keeping track of everything in his collections. He relied on Myrra for that.

What was important was that Jake liked writing this way. Paper was unique. Antique. Romantic.

Myrra inspected the red welt on her knuckle where the pen pressed against her finger. A pen was such an unfamiliar thing to hold. The first few letters she'd written to Jake had been disastrous to look at: violent slashes of ink darted across the paper, interrupting the shaky letters she tried to form. The pen spun out of her hand every time she thought she had a grip. Eventually she

learned to hold it like chopsticks, and things improved from there. The lines of ink were still more jittery than she wanted; nothing compared to the smooth looping cursive she'd seen on some of Marcus's antique letters and papers.

Myrra wrote with slow care, frequently checking her spelling in one of Marcus's dictionaries. It was maddening, how long it took. And there was no backspace. Just an ugly scratch to black out the word if you got it wrong. Jake would want her simple, but just simple enough. Misspelled words and bad handwriting would send the wrong message.

Dear Jake. Start slow and familiar, not too mushy. Apologize for not writing sooner. Myrra decided to throw in as many *sorrys* as she could, to make him feel a little loftier. Tell him you miss him. Ask to see him. Don't say why. Don't say I love you, yet.

You have to tease these things out. Add spice to the sauce a little at a time, let it simmer. Patience. Do this right, and where might you be in a year? The first thing Myrra pictured was diamond earrings, long and dangling like exquisite icicles. Imogene had a pair like that. She'd worn them with her blue silk gown at the last state dinner. Myrra pictured a vast bed as wide as it was long with soft mussed sheets. She pictured gold around her finger.

That was Imogene's world she was seeing. Jake was a grocer's son. Myrra would get a gold ring, but not the diamonds. At least not right away.

In fifty years, Myrra would be free. The work contract her great-grandmother had signed would finally be fulfilled, and she was meant to be satisfied with that. Hard to imagine how it would feel, really, to be free. In fact, most other contract workers in her generation considered themselves lucky; her mother and her mother's mother had not lived with that luxury. It was a frequent topic of conversation among her compatriots; everyone had different plans for

what they'd do with their futures once their contracts ended. Most were unimaginative. Women she'd worked with in the laundry had talked about opening their own wash-and-fold service shops. Hahn, a boy she ran into now and then at the grocery store, was endlessly talking about the bar he'd open someday. He had it planned down to the prices of the drinks and the music on the stereo. Some who were employed as maids or handymen were planning on keeping the same positions with their host families; all they were looking forward to was a future where they got paid and had proper drinking money.

But Myrra refused to buy into this kind of talk—in fact, she took pride in her dissatisfaction. A butcher she'd once worked for had told her that the good meat farms knew how to keep their animals fat and happy, trusting enough that they'd cheerfully trot toward the slaughterhouse. The law said that in fifty years she'd be free; well, in fifty years she would be dry and creaky with baggy skin and sagging breasts, looking like the old retired whores off Dell Street who still powdered rouge over their spotted faces. She'd have five good years, ten at most, before her body gave out. Five years after a long trudging lifetime of labor. What kind of life was that? She refused to wait and only get what she was given. Not when she was young and Jake was there for the taking.

She continued the letter for a few paragraphs more, keeping the anecdotes light and quick, asking plenty of questions in between. Jake liked it when she was inquisitive. She mentioned a particularly successful dinner party that Imogene had thrown for her political wives' club. Imogene had been drunker than usual, and the result was that she forgot to critique Myrra on the details of the meal. It was a nice change—lately the household had felt tense, and Myrra wasn't quite sure why. Both Imogene and Marcus would frequently sink into spells of silence; they'd snap at Myrra unpredictably for any old thing.

But Myrra didn't want to think about that. She certainly didn't feel like writing it down in a letter. Instead she described the food. Jake liked that she knew how to cook. She mentioned that Charlotte had been sleeping better—it was a relief, after the latest bout of colic. Myrra wasn't sure how much Jake cared about Charlotte, but she couldn't help writing about her. Charlotte was the only good part of her days.

It was a miracle that Charlotte was here at all for Myrra to fawn over. Marcus hated babies—he hated anything messy. There had been months of guilting from Imogene before he finally agreed. It was elegantly done, Myrra had to admit. If Marcus hadn't gone into the business himself, Imogene could have made a great politician.

“I'm getting older now.” Myrra remembered holding a china tray and watching as Imogene passively yet artfully batted her words over the coffee cups, over the breakfast table, arcing them right over the top of Marcus's wall-like news tablet barrier so they'd fall right in his lap. “If we don't try soon, we might never be able to have one.” He would volley back a grunt, or mumble something about stress at work. Finally, after many mornings of similar repetitive banter, Imogene found her kill shot, something to fire straight through the tablet, hammer through his mustache, and knock out his teeth: “Don't you want to make something that will outlive us? What about your legacy?”

Talk of his manly legacy, his ego, and he was cowed. Imogene won the match.

But once born, Charlotte was treated as an investment by Marcus, and Imogene mostly ignored her in favor of getting her figure back. Myrra knew Charlotte better than anyone, what songs she liked, which cries went with which problem, what you could do to make her giggle.

Maybe this could also be the type of thing Jake liked. Jake seemed like the kind of guy who wanted kids someday.

Myrra ended the letter with a genuine note of thanks for the book that Jake had given her. Another object secretly given in the alley behind the shop, but at this point they'd moved past the quaint brushing of hands. Myrra had shown her appreciation in the most intimate of ways. She knew just how to touch him now.

Myrra mostly stole books from Marcus's library, but this one was hers to keep. Just as long as Imogene didn't find it. On reflex, Myrra reached down and let her fingers slip through the slit she'd cut into her mattress. She felt around through the foam batting until she found the rough spine of the book. She pulled it out and cradled it in her palms. It was an old one, with tanned pages and a faded orange cover. But then again, they were all old. Books, like paper, were rare. Marcus had one of the largest collections in New London, but most people only had tablets. It was truly a beautiful, meaningful gift. Jake's family was well-off, but this was something else. This was an I-love-you gift. An investment gift. *The World Is Round*, by Gertrude Stein. Myrra had taken to reading five or ten pages each night. It was fun—bouncier than the books she'd swiped from Marcus. Some of those had been terrible slogs, pushing through only a word or a sentence at a time. Tolstoy, Balzac, Joyce. The writing was dense and impossible, and mostly it made her feel stupid. But she kept at it, powered by spite and stubborn force of will. People who got paid read books, so she would read books too.

She opened the book and found the page where she'd left off. "The teachers taught her / That the world was round / That the sun was round / That the moon was round / That the stars were round / And that they were all going around and around / And not a sound."

One section in, the words began to rearrange and swim. Myrra's eyes were heavy.

Myrra squinted to see the wooden clock under the amber lamp-light. Imogene, with her shrewd touch, had snagged the clock along with forty other pieces in a wholesale antiques buy, but it broke in half after a bad fall from a tall shelf. Imogene let her keep the pieces, and with a little glue, pliers, and wire, Myrra had managed to get it ticking again. Myrra liked analog clocks—reading their faces felt like deciphering code. Little hand pointing to the right, and long one pointing straight down: three thirty now. Too late (too early?) to be fighting sleep.

Fluffing out the pillow lumps, she closed her eyes and curled up on her side. She was just starting to feel warm under the blankets when she heard the comm box ring out. Myrra sat up with a shock, looking at the speaker on the wall near the door. Imogene was calling. Probably the baby was fussing. Poor little Charlotte, stuck with such a cold mother. Maybe her colic hadn't gone away after all. Myrra groaned as she slid her arms into a nubby blue robe and her feet found slippers. She walked over and pressed the red button on the comm box.

“Should I heat up a bottle?” Myrra asked.

“No—no, Charlotte's fine. I just need your help with . . . something. Could you just—could you come to the terrace, please?” Imogene's voice sounded high and frail—as if she had spontaneously reverted to being five years old. Had she been sleepwalking again? She'd gone through a good bout of ghostly hallway strolls when she was pregnant, but all that went away when Charlotte was born.

“Ma'am, can I ask if you took your sleeping pill this evening?” Myrra tried to keep her tone measured—not good to shock a person who was still asleep.

“Jesus Christ, I’m lucid, I’m awake. Can you just get up here, please?” That sounded more like Imogene.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Myrra considered rifling through the mound of laundry in the corner to find the cleanest dress in the bunch, but the snap of Imogene’s voice still reverberated through the room. Go for speed over presentability at this point, and stick to the robe and slippers. Myrra tucked the nubbled folds higher and closer around her neck. Fifty floors up at this time of the morning, the terrace was bound to be damp.

Myrra slipped out of her room, pushing open the door and easing it closed behind her. The door was an intricate and beautiful object, carved and inlaid walnut with a sculpted brass handle. The rest of her room was simple and bare, but the door had to present itself on the exterior side as well as the interior. Myrra’s room was on the bottom floor, in a dark corner behind the main staircase. It wasn’t likely a guest would find their way back there, but just in case, she still got a good door.

Imogene and Marcus Carlyle’s penthouse was a three-story feat of opulence, with sweeping staircases, vaulted ceilings, marble floors, and antique lead-glass skylights. This amount of living space in a city as packed as New London was exceedingly rare, and by showing the penthouse off as often as possible, the Carlyles were able to provide an easy, nonverbal reminder that they had secured a permanent place at the top of the food chain.

Rushing away from her room, Myrra paused for a moment at the bottom of the stairs, and her face fell briefly in anticipation of the climb. The master bedroom was on the top floor. Most people would have put in an elevator, but Marcus loved antiques, and he demanded authenticity.

But Imogene was waiting. Myrra took another breath, shook

some energy into her body, and headed up. Her hand slid along the polished wood of the banister. Before coming to the Carlyle house, Myrra had never encountered real wood, but here it was all over. This had been poached from an English estate in the old world. Other woodwork on other floors was made from a darker wood, almost black, and full of labyrinth-like geometric knots that made Myrra's eyes cross. Marcus had told her once that these came from Morocco. England. Morocco. New York. Art Deco. Bozart. These names never meant anything to Myrra, but she usually just let him talk, trying to absorb what she could. Knowledge was useful, even if it was snippets of antiquarian trivia. Marcus was apt to brag about origins and provenances given the slightest provocation.

As she passed by a row of bedrooms between staircases, she lightened her step and slowed down just a touch, avoiding any creak in the floorboards. Lately Imogene and Marcus had been sleeping in separate bedrooms, with Marcus taking up residence on the second floor. Myrra wasn't sure if this was a cause of all the tension she'd felt between them or just another symptom of it. The whole thing filled Myrra with worry, though she couldn't pinpoint any real reason for it. Why should she care if Marcus and Imogene had marital problems? They'd never been a happy couple, exactly. This latest separation meant nothing. Myrra didn't see a light on behind any of the bedroom doors, but that didn't mean Marcus was sleeping. Marcus was an insomniac at the best of times. Over this period he'd barely slept at all.

Marcus's behavior had become increasingly erratic and mercurial, with him breaking into frantic bouts of chattering laughter in silent rooms, then suddenly throwing objects against the ornately papered walls in a screaming rage. More than once in the past month, he'd reached out to Myrra in an abrupt motion while she

was cleaning or setting down a plate, gripping her wrist or arm a little too tight, jerking her closer to his face. Then he would come back to himself and let her go, usually with an offhand comment: she hadn't dusted something right, or the meal was undercooked. His eyes were wild and bloodshot, their focus imprecise.

Marcus had never been all that intimidating to Myrra before. Despite his insistence on stairs, he had never developed much in the way of muscle mass. Neither fat nor thin, Marcus had skin with the pale, yeasty quality of raw dough and babyish fine hair that pasted itself to his head. But lately he'd lost weight, and his body was becoming what could best be described as wiry—not just for his sudden thinness, but because now Marcus seemed constantly, electrically tense and poised to spark at any moment.

Over this time, Myrra had frequently looked to Imogene to see if she noticed the change, but Imogene never commented. Mostly she stared off into space, lost in her own thoughts. Thank God Myrra had Charlotte to pay attention to. The rest of the family belonged in a madhouse.

Just at the top of the third-floor staircase was Marcus's study. There was an amber light emanating from the crack under the door. She could smell his cigar smoke. Myrra could feel the pressure of Imogene waiting for her, but she eased her pace further, keeping her footfalls as slow and dull as drips in a sink. She imagined him in there, poring over parliamentary strategy, or perhaps already spinning it for the morning broadcast. From observing Marcus, Myrra had learned that news from the government never came in blunt, clear bursts; there were stairsteps to the truth.

From behind the door, she could hear him pacing. Myrra held her breath.

When she'd gone in there yesterday with Marcus's afternoon tea ("It's still important to observe English customs," he often said), his

desk had been riddled with stacks of tablets, some depicting charts with plummeting downward curves, others with tightly regimented words darkly marching across each screen. Myrra secretly practiced her reading while pouring him tea; there were lots of good complex phrases to untangle, like *Yearly Decline Tracking* and *Integrity and Stability Projections*. Marcus was standing over them, huffing, with sweat stains murking out from the creases in his arms. Myrra had gambled on his patience and asked about the charts. Sometimes Marcus liked to play paternal and explain things to her.

“Oh, it’s just our downfall,” he said with a thin giggle, but then his eyes began to well up, even as he was still forcing out laughter. His hand twitched and he spilled tea all over the tablets. Without reacting, he walked out of the room in a trance, leaving Myrra to clean up the mess. Myrra hadn’t known how to react, but it had left her uneasy.

Once she was out of earshot of the study, Myrra rushed the rest of the way to the master bedroom. When there was no one to entertain, Imogene would often spend days in here, avoiding the endless stairs by having things brought to her in bed. Now the bed was empty, as was Charlotte’s bassinet. Maybe Charlotte needed feeding after all. Myrra couldn’t understand why Imogene would behave so strangely about it. Nobody in this house was sleeping, apparently.

The terrace was adjacent to the master suite of the penthouse. She looked around at the chairs, chaises, and tables. It was large enough for Imogene to throw the occasional rooftop party. The floor was laid out in stunning patterned tiles that retained heat when the sun shone on it, but now, in the dark, they were cold enough that Myrra felt it through her slippers. The damp of early morning seeped in through her robe, through her skin, into her bones.

Myrra didn't see Imogene at first. She raised her head to look at the city skyline, and that was when she spotted her. The terrace was bordered by a cement wall a little over a meter high that acted as a railing to keep people safe from the drop below. Imogene was standing on top of that wall, with Charlotte in her arms.

Adrenaline flooded Myrra's system, lasered her thoughts into focus. Charlotte. What was she doing holding Charlotte up there? Charlotte looked cold—Imogene didn't seem cold at all. Imogene didn't seem to care much about where she was standing. She hadn't seen Myrra yet. Myrra hung back and tried to think what to do.

Imogene paced with bare feet along the top of the wall. It was wide enough for her to walk comfortably, wide enough that people frequently set their plates down on it during rooftop parties. Imogene seemed in control of her body, aware of her surroundings. But Myrra wished she would stop moving around, wished she would sit, give herself a lower center of gravity. The wind picked up at this high an altitude.

Imogene should have been shivering. All she had on was a filmy nightgown and her favorite velvet shawl. Though she hadn't really dressed, not properly, she was fully done up. Dark-red lipstick. Hair curled and pinned in a wave. Myrra was momentarily impressed that Imogene had managed to do her hair at all without assistance. She really was very beautiful, Myrra thought. Sour, but beautiful. The whole situation felt staged, more like a movie scene than the real thing. But then, that figured. Marcus had met Imogene when she was working as an actress, and doing quite well, to hear Imogene talk of it. But that was all before they'd purchased Myrra's maid contract. She had been Imogene's honeymoon present. Myrra wondered why Marcus bothered chasing other women at all. They'd been together for so many years before the baby, and Imogene was still radiant. Myrra wondered if money bought beauty.

Imogene leaned outward to look down at the street below. It threw her body into an impossible angle. Myrra gasped. Imogene turned at the sound and noticed her. She was wearing the smile that she dusted off whenever Marcus brought over his Parliament friends.

“Good morning,” Imogene said.

“Good morning,” Myrra croaked out.

It was hard to breathe. She calculated her odds of being able to run forward and grab Charlotte if Imogene tried to jump. Was she going to jump? Or was this just another strange mood?

Imogene bounced the baby absentmindedly. A high-altitude breeze caught the edges of her skirt, and it danced buoyantly up and down. Myrra stared at Charlotte, asleep and unaware; she took a slow, fluid step toward them. If she could just get close enough—

“Do you think this is real wind, or do you think they manufacture it?” Imogene tossed off. She watched the fabric bob up and down against her body.

“I don’t know, ma’am. How does real wind work?” Myrra asked. This wasn’t what they were supposed to be talking about right now. Imogene’s voice didn’t sound like she was sleepwalking, but could she be sleepwalking?

“I don’t know, actually.” Strange, to hear Imogene say, “I don’t know.”

“Something to do with changes in air pressure,” she continued. “Maybe the world is big enough to create wind on its own.” She let out a single short laugh. “But that’s the problem, isn’t it? We all call this a world. It’s a ship.”

“There’s lots of ways to make a world. This is a world,” Myrra replied. Don’t contradict her, she thought. No telling what might set her off. Just get Charlotte.

Imogene rolled her eyes skyward. “Fine, it’s a world. You know

it was Marcus's firm that came up with the terminology, back when our ancestors boarded? There was a whole PR campaign. As per usual, it was the workforce that really took the bait."

Bitch. Myrra couldn't help the word popping into her head. Imogene tossed out small insulting barbs to Myrra out of habit, but now was not the time.

"I would have liked to feel real earth under my feet," Imogene said.

"We will."

"No, we won't."

Myrra didn't know what that meant or why Imogene would insinuate such a thing. At the mention of it, Myrra felt a different kind of fear, something larger and vaguer than the fear she had for Charlotte. Maybe Imogene was trying to belittle her again. She just wanted to frighten her. Only Imogene would have the balls to talk like this while also threatening to throw herself off a building. If that was what she was doing. Myrra was usually able to navigate tense situations, but here she was at a loss.

"I hate to involve you in this at all, really, but... well, I know I'm making the right decision here, I really do. I feel at peace with the whole thing." With one hand, Imogene briefly touched the side of her head to check that her hair was in place. Her calm was slipping; her eyes kept darting between Myrra, Charlotte, and the drop. She might actually jump, Myrra realized. Imogene was afraid. Myrra dared a few more steps forward.

"But when I came up here, I—well, it's the baby... I can't do this with the baby. It's stupid, really, but I don't think I have the stomach for it."

"Not stupid," Myrra said. She inched closer to Imogene, close enough to brush her skirt. "Can I... can I hold Charlotte for you?"

She stretched her arms up. Imogene pulled Charlotte away

reflexively, and Myrra flinched at how close she was to the edge. She froze, kept her arms aloft, and prayed that Imogene would meet her halfway. Imogene let out a small sigh, and her shoulders slumped.

“Yes, yes, you see, that’s why I called you up here. I need someone to take the baby. I’m so glad you took my meaning—I know it’s hard for you sometimes.” Myrra clenched her teeth, resisted the urge to snap something at her. She was about to throw herself off a building, for God’s sake.

Uncharacteristically, one of Imogene’s manicured hands flew to her mouth, and her eyes widened with guilt. She stood silent for a second. Myrra could tell she was choosing her next words with care.

“I apologize,” Imogene said. Unheard of, to hear Imogene say, “I apologize.” Myrra fought the urge to empathize with Imogene. She’d been burned by that feeling before.

“Will you please take Charlotte for me? I can’t jump if I’m holding her, and I don’t want to leave her out here in the cold—” Imogene crouched on the balls of her feet, lowering Charlotte. Without another word Myrra closed the gap between them, and gathered the baby in her arms. Imogene let out a small animal-like cry upon releasing her.

A wave of relief engulfed Myrra. Charlotte was safe, still sleeping, nuzzling her head against Myrra’s chest, completely unaware of the peril she’d been in. Myrra turned her energy back to Imogene. Now to get Charlotte’s mother down, if she could.

“Ma’am,” Myrra ventured, “maybe if you came down and talked about it, we could figure something out—”

“Stop playing therapist, Myrra, you’re not at all subtle,” Imogene snapped, then looked guilty again. Myrra wasn’t used to Imogene looking so regretful.

“Look, Myrra—I’m sorry. I know I’ve put you in a terrible position. I just—I don’t know how to handle this,” Imogene continued, changing her tone. “You’re probably smarter than I give you credit for. You must know—you must have sensed that something is going wrong.”

“I know you and Mr. Carlyle have been having some trouble—”

Imogene cut her off. “It’s nothing to do with that. My God, the idea that Marcus would ever drive me to—” Imogene let out a short laugh, then her face crumpled. She was crying. It was hard to track her ping-ponging emotions. “Honestly, if I were less of a coward, I’d take Charlotte with me. It’s cruel, leaving her to suffer.”

Myrra didn’t know what to say to her. She felt small and insignificant and confused. Something was happening here that she wasn’t grasping. She clutched Charlotte tighter, as though she would anchor Myrra in some way.

“Please come down,” Myrra said, her voice sounding higher than she wanted it to. A cold wind streamed up Myrra’s robe, flowing between her legs and around her belly.

“I can’t,” Imogene said through tears. She was still crouched, her eyes drilling into Myrra’s. “I don’t have it in me, to see what comes next. If we’re going to die, I want to go out on my own terms.”

Myrra stared back at her, uncomprehending. These are ravings, she thought; she’s snapped, we need to get Imogene to a hospital. And then, one horrible, insidious idea: What if something terrible was coming? What if Imogene was talking sense?

“Surely you must have noticed something’s wrong,” Imogene repeated. Her voice sounded distant.

A slideshow flitted through Myrra’s unwilling brain: the past twelve months, men from Parliament rushing in and out late at

night. Every time they'd handed their coats and hats into Myrra's waiting arms, she could smell the flop sweat and fear on them. She'd talked herself into thinking that it was all to do with the next election, but now that she thought about it again, that didn't make much sense. They'd never looked that scared before.

"What's wrong?" Myrra asked, almost to herself.

Meetings at all hours, shouting through the wall, then whispers so soft that Myrra couldn't make out a syllable even with her head flush against the crack in the door. Scientists and physicists over for tea, with red puffy eyes and wheezing breaths behind loosened ties. Marcus's desperate clutching, the violent downward-sloping charts littering his desk. What Myrra read when she practiced her reading: "Surface Stability." "Hull Integrity Patterns." "Oxygen Depletion Reports."

There had been another earthquake last week. Myrra had panicked at the time, not over the shaking but because she had been cleaning crystal stemware; she'd desperately dashed around the table, arms and fingers splaying out in all directions like a juggler's, trying to catch each piece before it fell and shattered. It was the third earthquake in a month. The seismic reports said that they were only supposed to happen when the world passed certain gas pockets in space or came too close to a star. Something had changed.

The wind's icy fingers slid across her skin again. She started shaking. It was so cold. She wanted to believe that she was scared because of Imogene standing on the wall, scared because she'd almost taken Charlotte with her, but there was another reason to be scared.

Something was wrong with the world. The ship. The world.

Myrra wanted to stop thinking. She wanted Imogene to climb down from the wall. I am not standing here on the roof, she

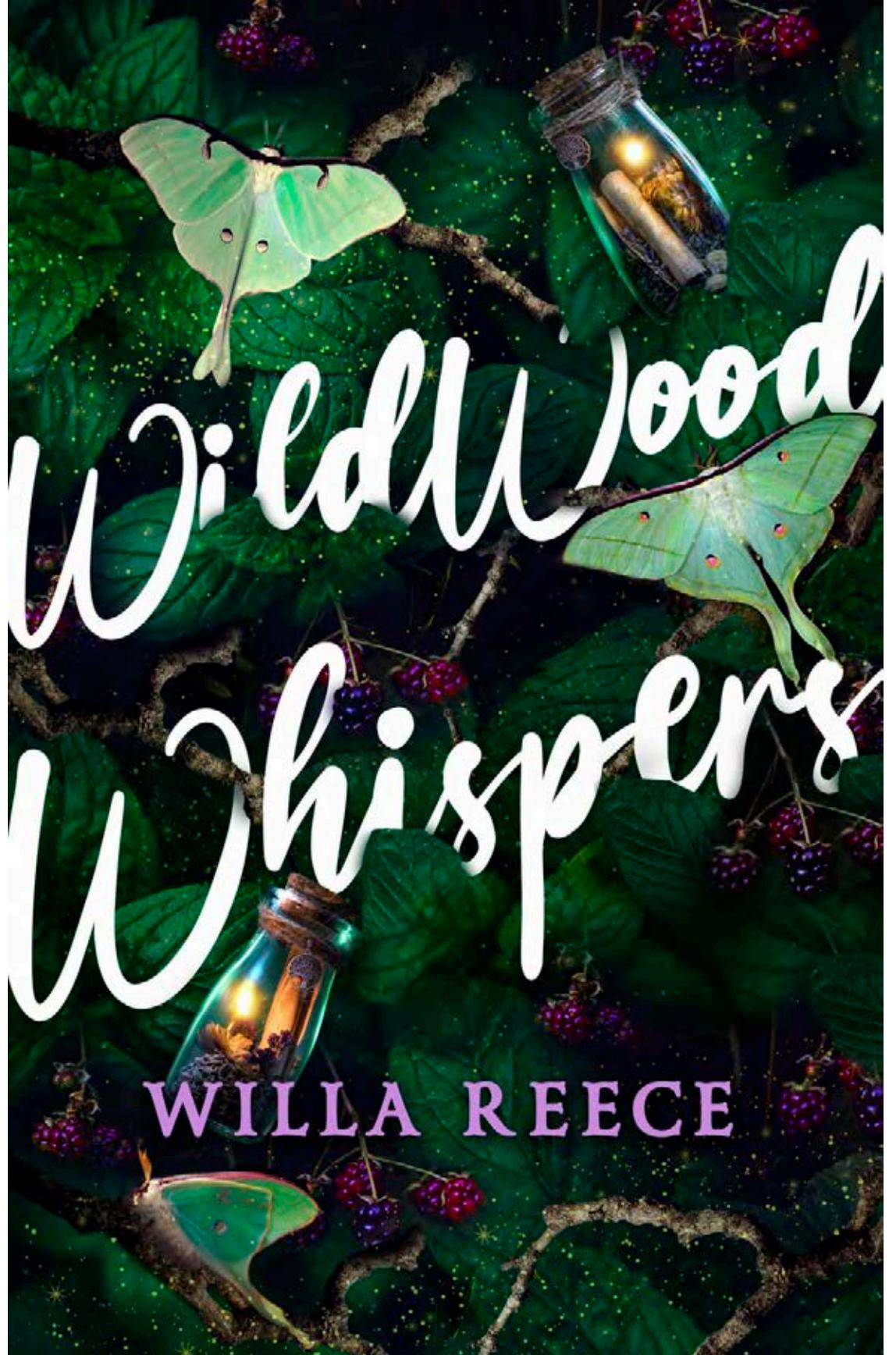
thought. I am sleeping in my bare little room, condensed in a cocoon of blankets. Tomorrow is laundry day. I am hiding books under my pillow. I am growing ever smaller.

“Oh, here—” Imogene noticed her shivering, slid the shawl off her shoulders, and wrapped it around Myrra. “I don’t need it anyway. I’m hot all over.”

Myrra let her finger trace the curled patterns embossed on the velvet of the shawl. It was blue, a blue so deep you could dive in and swim. She glanced down at her pilled knit slippers. Her toes were going numb. How was Imogene so warm?

“What’s wrong with the ship?”

“There’s a crack in the hull,” Imogene said. “It’s growing. There is no way to fix it.”

The background is a lush, dark green forest scene. It features several large, vibrant green moths with small holes in their wings, perched on branches. There are also glowing jars containing what appear to be fireflies or small lights. Purple berries are scattered throughout the foliage. The overall atmosphere is magical and whimsical.

Wildwood Whispers

WILLA REECE

One

*T*welve-year-old Sarah Ross reached quickly for the fragrant charm beneath her pillow the same way she would have reached for a parachute ripcord if she'd been rudely pushed from a plane cruising at ten thousand feet. It was only an imaginary fall, one that had propelled her awake, as bad dreams do, but her trembling fingers clutched at the familiar shape of the tiny crocheted mouse like a lifeline. The charm her mother had filled with sage and lemon balm was supposed to help Sarah sleep, and it did, usually, but the dream fall had cannoned her awake with stomach-swooping dread, as if the entire world had disappeared beneath her sleeping body.

This time her knuckles didn't stop hurting even after the bed solidified under her. She wasn't falling. She was awake. Her soft bedding still smelled like sunshine from its time on the clothesline.

Her hands hurt.

It was only a ghost pain that had haunted her first waking moments since she was a little girl. There was nothing wrong with her fingers, her knuckles, or the palms of her hands. The mouse usually banished the pain by grounding her in the real world.

Not this time.

Sarah didn't take the charm with her when she sat up. She left it where it lay, hidden, because she was twelve years old and shouldn't need to clutch a faded pink mouse for comfort. Her heart still pounded. Her stomach doubted the assurance of solid floorboards beneath her bare feet. Sarah walked over to close the window anyway.

Maybe the chilled morning air had woken her.

But sometimes a Ross woman felt things and knew things that couldn't be explained away by ordinary circumstances.

Predawn light barely lit the sky outside. Sarah strained her ears. There was no whip-poor-will calling in the distance. There were no coyotes laughing their way to their dens for the day or runaway roosters calling triumphantly from hidden bowers far from their barnyard homes.

The wildwood was quieter than it should be.

Unease suddenly woke her completely and diminished the ache in her knuckles. The cabin felt wrong around her, and the wrongness stretched out from where she stood, silent and still, to the Appalachian wilderness that ran for hundreds of miles around her home.

Sarah almost went for her mouse charm again, but then she remembered today was her birthday. There would be apple stack cake and presents and maybe, just maybe, her mother would finally let one of her friends ice Sarah's earlobes and pop a needle quickly into each one. She could wear the new earrings that were sure to be in one of the brightly colored packages in her mother's bedroom.

Happy thoughts.

And, still, Sarah's heart wouldn't stop beating more quickly than it should. The quiet forest and the dream fall didn't explain it. The phantom pain in her knuckles was too common to rush her heartbeat. Something was wrong. It was the wrongness that had woken her. Not the cool breeze from the window. Not a bad dream. Not the occasional pain in her fingers on waking that her mother said would probably be explained one day.

Last night when she'd gone to bed she'd opened the window to release a frightened luna moth caught between the screen and the wavy glass panes. The thumping of her heart against her rib cage reminded her of the frantic beat of the luna moth's wings. Helplessly trying to fly free. She'd released the moth, but there was nothing she could do for the racing heart trapped in her chest.

The floor was cool against her feet, but she didn't pause to find socks or shoes. She hurried out of her loft bedroom and over the small landing that led to the half-log stairs. They were covered with rag rug treads so her slapping feet fell silently as she slipped down to the cabin's great room.

All the lights were off, even the one in the bathroom off the hall that led to her mother's bedroom. Her mother always left that light on in case she had to get up in the night to answer the door. She was a healer, and on the mountain a healer was often woken up in the middle of the night even now, when a modern clinic was only forty-five minutes away.

The unexpected darkness was temporary. The sun would come up soon. There was a hint of pink around the shadowed edges of things.

Sarah went to the kitchen instead of running to wake her mother. She wasn't a baby, in spite of the fluttering moth in her chest.

She was twelve. She was going to get her ears pierced, and pretty soon she would be helping her mother when it came to helping others. She'd already learned a lot by her mother's side—the growing, the grinding, the tinctures and tisanes. She was getting too old to be nervous over dreams and premonitions.

The pain in her knuckles was gone. And its meaning could wait.

The refrigerator hummed a reassuring sound as she opened its door. She reached for the orange juice her mother always kept in a carafe on the top shelf. The familiar sweet tang soothed her. At least, that was what she told herself until she put the juice back and closed the door. It had been the light that soothed her. When the door snapped shut and the refrigerator light went

out, she was left in the strange darkness once more, and no thoughts of sunrise or cake stopped her from finally hurrying to her mother's room.

The dark didn't matter. She knew every familiar step down the hall. She'd lived her whole life in the cozy cabin her great-grandmother had built. Just as her mother and her grandmother had.

Sarah stood in the bedroom doorway for a long time when she saw her mother wasn't in bed. The fall was there again in her stomach and, oddly, in the back of her throat like a choked-off scream. She reached for the doorframe and held it with white-knuckled fingers that were whole and strong and uninjured. Nightmares weren't real. Melody Ross must have risen early to sweep the front porch or grind herbs in the stump that held the stone mortar bowl generations of Ross women had used.

But even hearing in her mind the sound of the oaken pestle, smoothed from the friction and the oil from so many hands, grinding against the mortar didn't convince her.

Because she was a Ross, and Ross women knew that premonitions were as real as the scatter of paper on her mother's bedroom floor.

Sarah let go of the doorframe and rushed forward. She fell to her knees in the pile of paper, but even the rustles as she gathered them up to her chest hardly allowed her to accept the reality of their desecration. Something her mother never would have allowed if she were okay.

Darkness outside had given way to a washed-out gray.

The pages had been ripped from the Ross family remedy book that normally sat on her mother's bedside table. They were worn and stained from years of use. The familiar scripts and scrawls of all the Ross women who had come before her had been carefully protected and preserved.

Until now.

The wrongness swallowed Sarah. The feeling of falling blossomed out from her stomach to take her whole body down into black despair. And still, she gathered up the pages before she struggled, wobbly, to her feet. Every last one.

With the growing light, she could see what she'd missed before.

More pages led down the hall and into the sitting area. And still more led out the open front door. The moth of her heart had risen up into her throat to lodge there so solidly she could hardly draw breath. She ran forward, gathering up the pages because she knew it was what her mother would want her to do.

The book had been a part of her life since she was a baby. She was a Ross. And by the book she would heal and help, bind and brew, nurture and sow the seeds of tomorrow. Hot tears ran down her chilled cheeks. Mountain mornings were cold. Her thin nightgown didn't provide enough warmth. But she didn't go back for a robe. She shivered, cried, and gathered up page after page as her feet became wet and icy in the dew.

She didn't leave any of the pages in the damp grass, even the ones that were sticky with blood. She gathered those too as gasps of despair made it past the moth in her throat and her stiff, cold lips.

The pages led her down a path into the forest. She didn't hesitate even though the woods were still and dark around her. She knew these wildwood shadows. She'd been taught every plant, every root, every tree and every vine since before she could walk and talk. But the wrongness had preceded her here. The morning breeze in the leaves wasn't a welcome sound, because another joined it—a rhythmic creaking that made her clutch the rescued pages to her chest.

Cree-cree, cree-cree. An unnatural sound in a place that should be wholly natural.

Sarah came to the end of the path that led from the backyard to the garden, and unlike every time she'd come to the clearing before, she paused in dread. The creaking was louder. It roared in her ears, drowning out the sound of her pounding heart and the trickle of the mountain stream that usually gurgled a welcome to her at this point.

The cree-cree was ominous. Her mind tried to identify it and shy away from it at the same time.

But what if some pages had fallen into the water?

Panic pushed her forward.

She had to save the pages that had been ripped from the book. It was the only logic she could grab in a morning that defied normalcy.

The sudden revelation of her mother's body hanging in a black locust tree stopped her again. All logic fled. All reason escaped her. The rope around her mother's neck strained and rubbed on the crooked branch that held the other end—cree, cree, cree. Sarah's arms went limp and all the pages she'd gathered fell like crimson-speckled leaves to the ground. Some did fall into the stream then. They were the lucky ones, washed away on rivulets and ripples while Sarah stood frozen, inside and out, staring at her mother's body.

Finally, she released the moth that had been stuck in her throat on a wavering scream. Her cry broke the silence that had gripped the mountain. The stillness also broke, as sleepy crows were startled up from the roosts they had claimed around the gruesome scene. Sarah ran to her mother's blue-tinted pendulum feet. To help her. To protect her. Although it was obviously too late.

There was blood on her mother's nightgown, black splashes of dried blood, stark against the pale pink cotton. Her mother was always clean and neat, strong and prepared, full of energy and delight. Someone had hurt her. Someone had dragged her from the house, leaving a trail of blood-stained pages in their wake.

Sarah wasn't ready. Twelve years of apprenticeship wasn't enough. She needed more than charms and remedies. She needed more than the wildwood garden. The moth was gone. Only groans remained. Sharp and ugly, they parted her lips with jagged wings that cut like glass. Her mother was gone too. There was nothing left but a pitiful shell of the wisewoman Melody Ross had been. Her eyes were glassy and empty. Her mouth would never smile again. Her dark curls were tousled and damp and lifeless where once they had gleamed in the sun.

It had taken Sarah too long to make it to the garden. She must have heard a noise. She must have sensed the terror. It had woken her, but she'd hesitated over her mouse and the dark house. She'd tried so hard to make everything okay with juice and birthday wishes. She was a Ross, and nothing was ever as simple as cake and earrings.

A howl of anger and fear met the sun as it broke over the horizon. Nothing as sweet as a crochet charm would ever soothe her again. Sarah fell to her knees at the base of her mother's locust tree, shocked at the sound she'd made. It would be a long, long time before she was capable of making another.



The ashes sat exactly as I'd left them. The stainless steel urn hadn't tipped over as I slept to spill Sarah and her horrible memories onto the floor. Grim dust hadn't risen up to haunt my usual faceless dreams with nightmare precision, sharp and detailed. The hit-and-run accident that killed my best friend had left me with nothing but a mild concussion . . . and Sarah's ashes.

It had been a month since I'd picked up her remains.

No one else had claimed her.

The hollow chill of that responsibility made me into a shell of a woman through the days and far too receptive to the gnaw of terrible thoughts at night.

I was the one Sarah Ross had turned to after her mother was murdered and I hadn't lived up to the task. I hadn't kept her safe. I hadn't kept her at all. Just as I hadn't kept anything in all of my twenty-three years . . . except Sarah's memories.

I had held her hand when we'd first met, and through a succession of midnight confessions I listened as she'd whispered about the morning she'd found her mother.

She'd been so small.

I'd been awkward, a giant beside her petite frame. She'd been placed in the same foster home as me and they'd had only one bedroom for us to share. Her size had fooled me for only a few seconds. She was the older one. By a whole year. But her age hadn't stopped me from knowing instantly she needed a protector. Something about the bruises under her eyes and the sickly pallor beneath her fading tan skin. Her lips had been dried and cracked. After hours of tears, the salt from her sadness had leached the moisture from her mouth.

I brought her a glass of water and sat on the floor beside her bed. She'd taken a few sips, enough to moisten a parched throat, and then she started talking. I'd taken her hand and held on for dear life.

Until she died, I hadn't known I'd memorized every word she'd said.

The nightmare inspired by her raspy whispers came every night after the accident. It always jolted me awake at the same moment and sent me wandering for reassurance. Every night I found the urn. Confirmation there would be no comfort.

The harsh light from the ceiling fixture caused a glint on its surface almost like glass. In it, my reflection was distorted. The strange, softened face of a woman I didn't recognize caused me to back away and close the door.

The second bedroom of the Richmond apartment I soon wouldn't be able to afford on my own had become a tomb.

On the way to the bathroom for some pain medication, I checked my phone. No notifications. There was nothing left of Sarah there. No messages. No texts. I'd deleted them all and there would never be more. Why hadn't I saved them? Because the evidence that we'd enjoyed a normal life for a while was more than I could bear.

Besides, my heart was as empty as the screen.

I laid the phone on the hall table and focused on the throbbing

at my temples and in various other battered and bruised parts of my body. It was time for another dose. The tiny white pills were probably as responsible for my lucid dreams as anything else, but I couldn't sleep without them and the night was only half over.

Sarah would have brewed some valerian tea. Over the years, I'd learned to like the slightly minty, slightly bitter concoction she remembered from a family recipe.

Sarah had never fully recovered from her mom's murder. She'd stayed pale, surrounded by an aura of fragility only I was allowed to penetrate. I was tall, strong and walled off from the world. Only Sarah managed to penetrate that. But we'd managed to find "okay" together. For a while.

Now, there was a hole in that wall where Sarah used to be and the nightmares slipped through it to freeze my soul. I'd made a promise to Sarah. To take her back home when she died.

It was one I intended to keep. Eventually. I wouldn't let the last thing between us become a lie. My body didn't try to fight the effects of the pill when I lay back down. It was too tired and too sore. Truth was, even my mind was quick to welcome the embrace of hazy unconsciousness. Nightmares were the only place I was sure to see Sarah again. Fear wouldn't stop me from going to her. It never had.

THE BODY SCOUT

"Lincoln Michel is
one of contemporary
literary culture's greatest
natural resources."

—VICE



A NOVEL



LINCOLN MICHEL

1

THE DARK HOURS

When I couldn't fall asleep, I counted the parts of the body. I used the outdated numbers. What they'd taught me back in school when only the ultrarich upgraded. Two hundred and six bones. Seventy-eight organs. The separate parts floated through the fog of my mind, one by one, like strange birds. If I was still awake by the end, I'd think about everything connecting. Miles of nerves and veins snaking through the pile, tying tibia to fibula, connecting heart to lung. Muscles, blood, hair, skin. Everything joining together into a person, into me.

Then I swapped in new parts. A second cybernetic arm or a fresh lung lining for the smog. Cutting-edge implants. This season's latest organs. I mixed and matched, tweaked and twisted.

I didn't know if I was really getting myself to sleep. I might have been keeping myself swimming in that liminal ooze between waking problems and troubled dreams. It was a state that reminded me of the anesthetic haze of the surgery table. Like my mattress was a slick metal slab and the passing headlights were the eyelamps of surgery drones. Outside, the world went by. Construction cranes hoisted buildings tall enough to stab the clouds. Cars cluttered the skies. But inside, my

senses dulled, the world was gone. I was alone and waiting to wake up as something different, better, and new.

I'd been piecing myself together for years. With surgeries and grafts, with shots and pills. I kept lists of possible procedures. Files of future upgrades that would lead me to an updated life. My brother, JJ Zunz, always laughed about it. "One day I'm going to wake up, and none of you will be left," he'd say. That would have been fine with me.

We're all born with one body, and there's no possibility of a refund. No way to test-drive a different form. So how could anyone not be willing to pay an arm and a leg for a better arm and a better leg?

Sure, we're each greater than the sum of our parts. But surely greater parts couldn't hurt.

Each time I upgraded it was wonderful, for a time. I had new sensations, new possibilities. I was getting closer to what I thought I was supposed to be. Then each time seemed to require another time. Another surgery and another loan to pay for it. Two decades of improvements and I still wanted more, but now I had six figures in medical debt crushing me like a beetle under a brick.

That night, as I was Frankensteining a new body for myself in my head, my brother called. The sound jostled me. My imaginary form collapsed, the parts scattering across the dim emptiness of my mind. I opened my eyes. Yawned. Slapped the receiver.

A massive Zunz appeared before me, legs sunk through the carpet to the knees, face severed at the ceiling. He was so large he could have swallowed my head as easily as a hard-boiled egg.

"Kang," he said. He paused, then repeated the name with a question mark. "Jung Kang?"

I shrunk his hologram to the proper size. He glowed at the end of my bed. For some reason, he was wearing his batting helmet. It was 3:00 a.m.

"Um, no. It's me. Kobo. You dial the wrong address?"

Outside, the bright lights of the city illuminated the nighttime smog. A billboard floated past my window, flashing a Growth Cola ad. *The Climate Has Changed, Your Body Should Too.*

“Yes. Kobo.” He shook his head. “My brother. How are you?” Zunz spoke haltingly, like he either had a lot on his mind or nothing at all. He looked healthy at least. A lot of players in the league wanted the retro bodybuilder style, muscles stacked like bricks, but Zunz made sure the trainers kept him lean and taut. When he swung a baseball bat, his arms snapped like gigantic rubber bands.

“Shit, JJ. You sound like you got beamed in the head with a bowling ball. What do the Mets have you on?”

“Lots of things,” he said, looking around at something or someone I couldn’t see. He had several wires running from his limbs to something off feed. “Always lots of things.”

Zunz was a star slugger for the Monsanto Mets and my adopted brother. After the apartment cave-in killed my parents and mushed my right arm, his family took me in. Gave me a home. Technically, I was a few days older than him, but I never stopped thinking of him as my big brother.

“Kobo, I feel weird. Like my body isn’t mine. Like they put me in the wrong one.”

“They? You gotta sleep it off. Hydrate. Inject some vitamins.” I unplugged my bionic right arm, got out of bed. Tried to stretch myself awake. “Here, show me your form.”

Zunz didn’t have a bat on him, but he clicked into a batting stance.

“Fastball right down the line.”

He swung his empty hands. Stared into the imaginary stands.

“Fourth floor. Home run,” I said. Although his movement was off. The swing sloppy and the follow-through cut short.

Zunz flashed me his lopsided smile. His dimples were the size of dugouts. He got back into his stance. “Another.”

When Zunz had first been called up to the Big Leagues, he used to phone me before every game to get my notes. I never had much to say. Zunz had always been a natural. But I was a scout, and it was my job to evaluate players. Zunz needed my reassurance. Or maybe he just liked making me feel needed. As his career took off, he started calling me less

and less. Once a series. Once a month. Once a season. These days, we barely talked. Still, I watched every game and cheered.

“Sinker,” I said. My arm creaked as I threw the pretend pitch.

I watched his holographic form swing at the empty air. It was strange how many ways I’d seen Zunz over the years. In person and in holograms, on screens and posters and blimps. I knew every curve of his bones, every freckle on his face. And I knew his body. Its shape and power. At the Monsanto Mets compound, he had all the best trainers and serums on the house. I’d never get molded like that, not on my income. But watching Zunz play made me want to construct the best version of myself that I could.

“You look good to me. ChicagoBio White Mice won’t know what hit them.”

Zunz pumped his fist. Smiled wide. He may have been in his thirties, but he still grinned like a kid getting an extra scoop of ice cream. Except now he frowned and shook his head. “I feel stiff. Plastic. Unused. Do you know what I mean?”

I held up my cybernetic arm. “Hell, I’m practically half plastic already. But you look like a million bucks. Which is probably the cost of the drugs they’ve got pumping through you.”

I lit an eraser cigarette and sucked in the anesthetic smoke. After a few puffs, I felt as good and numb as I did before an operation.

Thanks to Zunz, the Mets had built a commanding lead in the Homeland League East and cruised through the division series against the California Human Potential Growth Corp Dodgers. As long as they could get past the ChicagoBio White Mice, the Mets were favored to win the whole thing.

“Give the White Mice hell,” I said, blowing out a dark cloud. “Show them a kid from the burrows can take the Mets all the way.”

“Will do, Kang,” Zunz said.

“Kobo,” I said.

“Kobo.” He cocked his head. I heard muffled yelling on his end of

the line. I couldn't see what was around him. Zunz's hologram turned. He started to speak to the invisible figure.

He shrank to a white dot the size of an eyeball. The dot blinked. Disappeared.

The call had cut out.

I finished my eraser cigarette and went back to sleep. Didn't think about the call too much. The biopharms always pumped players with new combinations of drugs in preparation for the playoffs. Hoping to get the chemical edge that would hand their team the title, which would lead to more retail sales that could purchase more scientists to concoct new upgrades and keep the whole operation going. Zunz was a high-priced investment. Monsanto would keep him together.

And I had my own problems to worry about. Sunny Day Healthcare Loans was threatening to send collection agents after me again, and I had to skip town for a few days. I took the bullet train down to North Virginia, the latest break-off state, to scout a kid whose fastball was so accurate he could smack a mosquito out of the air. It was true. He showed me the blood splat on the ball.

The Yankees had authorized an offer. The number on the contract made the parents' eyes pop like fly balls. But when I gave the kid a full work-up, I realized they'd been juicing him with smuggled farm supplements. The kind they pump into headless cattle to get the limbs to swell. The kid's elbow would blow out in a year. Maybe two.

The parents cried a lot. Denied. Begged for a second opinion. I gave them the same one a second time.

I was one of the few biopharm scouts left who specialized in players. Other scouts plugged the numbers into evaluation software and parroted the projections, but I'd spent my whole life desiring the parts of those around me. People like Zunz, who seemed to have success written into their genetic code. I watched them. Studied them. Imagined myself inside them, wearing their skin like a costume, while I sprinted after the ball or slid into third.

I still liked to think baseball was a game of technique and talent,

not chemistry and cash. I guess I was a romantic. Now it was the minds that fetched the real money. That's what most FLB scouts focused on. Scientists working on the latest designer drugs. Genetic surgeons with cutting-edge molecular scalpels. For biopharm teams, players were the blocks of marble. The drugs sculpted them into stars.

By the time I got back to New York, the playoffs were in full swing. I got a rush assignment from the Yankees with a new target. I'd planned to go to the game, watch Zunz and the Mets play the White Mice from the front row with a beer in my hand and a basket of beef reeds in my lap. But the Yankees job was quick work and easy money. Which meant I could quickly use that money on another upgrade.

The prospect was a young nervous-system expert named Julia Arocha. Currently under contract at Columbia University. She was working on a stabilization treatment for zotech critters. Her charts were meaningless scribbles to me, but I was impressed with the surveillance footage. Arocha was a true natural. She glided around centrifuges as easily as an ice skater in the rink, holding vials and pipettes as if they were extensions of her limbs.

The next night, I grabbed a cab uptown to the pickup spot. The playoffs were on in the back seat.

"What the hell?" the driver shouted as a Pyramid Pharmaceuticals Sphinxes fielding error gave the BodyMore Inc. Orioles a runner on third. The man flung his arms wide. They shook like he was getting ready to give someone the world's angriest hug. "You believe that shit?"

"Bad bounce," I offered.

"Bad bounce? My ass. Hoffmann is a bum. We'd be better off with some Edenist who'd never been upgraded playing right field instead of that loser. Don't you think?"

"If you say so. I'm a Mets fan."

He scowled. "Mets," he said, gagging on the word.

The taxi flew over the East River. Great gray barges cut blue paths through the filter algae below.

"Mets," he said again. "Well, the customer is always right. Zunz is

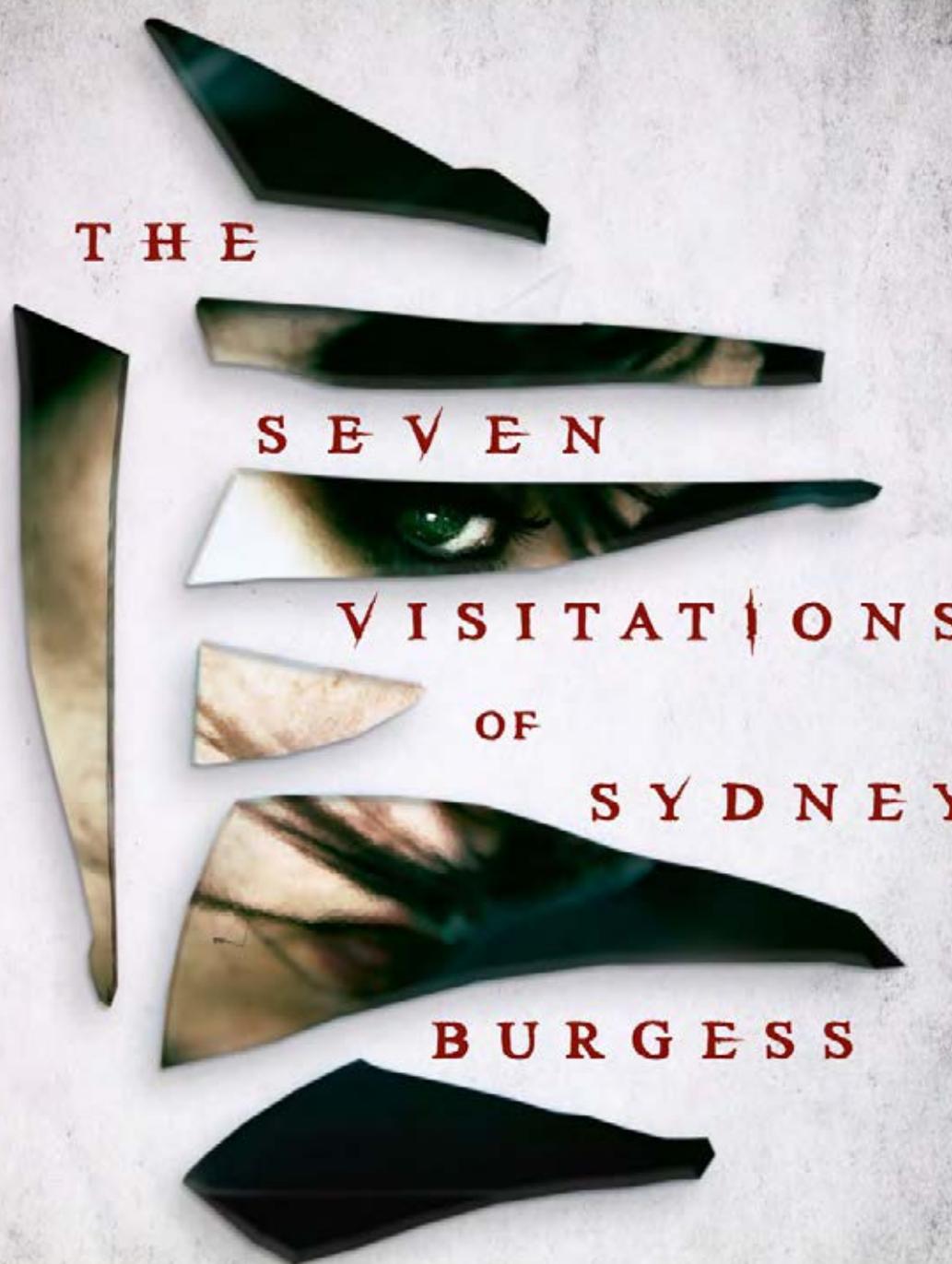
a good one, I have to admit. They don't make many players like him anymore."

"They're trying. You see the homer he smacked on Friday?"

"Right off the Dove Hospital sign. The arms on that guy. Wish we had him on the Sphinxes."

"He's going to take us all the way," I said.

We flew toward the giant towers of Manhattan with their countless squares of light pushing back the dark, both of us thinking about JJ Zunz. Imagining my brother's hands gripping the bat, his legs rounding bases in our minds. His body perfect, solid, and, at that point, still alive.



THE

SEVEN

VISITATIONS

OF

SYDNEY

BURGESS

ANDY MARINO

1

The man in my house is wearing a mask. Even so, I can tell he's as surprised to see me as I am to see him. It's in the way his shoulders jump and erase his neck when I open the door with a triumphant shove, driven by the promise of a rare night alone. With my boyfriend and son camping upstate, I'll be picking the movie I want to watch, ordering Thai food with the spice level cranked, starfishing out in the middle of the bed, dozing off with the windows open to let in the breeze off the Hudson—

“What are you doing?” I blurt out as if I know him. As if I've caught the neighbor kid prowling around the side yard again. He's wearing gloves and a black tracksuit. The drawers of the front hall credenza are pulled out. He steps toward me.

It happened so fast, say people who have lived through sudden bursts of violence—but for me, time's a slow drip and I can see everything at once. Black sneakers on our reclaimed tiles, old appliance manuals in the junk drawer, the RSVP to the wedding of my boyfriend's cousin, a small lace-trimmed envelope waiting to be mailed. The man's eyes are framed

by the slit in his balaclava, a word I know from the tattered paperbacks I tore through in the rehab center's shabby library.

I take one step back, jam my hand into my shoulder bag, and rummage wildly for the pepper spray. But I've never used it before, and it's buried under travel Kleenex packs and lip balm and generic ibuprofen and noise-canceling headphones and laptop and charger and moleskin notebook and tampons.

His hand closes around the Jesus candle my boyfriend bought from the bodega by the train station. Señor de los Milagros de Buga, \$3.99 plus tax. It's the size of a relay runner's baton, glass as thick as a casserole dish and filled to the brim with solid wax.

My fingers brush the pepper spray canister. There's a little rim of plastic that acts as a safety—I just have to flick it to the side. *Too slow, Sydney.* The candle comes at me in a fluid sideways arc.

Half ducking, half flinching, I twist away. His side-arm swing smashes the candle into my left ear. There's an unbelievable volcanic *thud* inside my head, a searing, blinding flash, and time's not a slow drip anymore, it's a film reel with missing frames.

I am holding myself up, clinging to the door.

I will stay on my feet.

There's an electric current buzzing through my teeth. The front hall is full of bad angles, a nonsense corridor in a dream. The coats are swaying on their hooks. I raise the pepper spray, but my arm can only aim it in the direction of the baseboard, the off-white trim that doesn't quite touch the tile, a haven for crumbs and lost earrings. In the gilt-framed mirror next to the closet door, I see a gloved hand

holding the candle up in the air. The man is very tall, and the tip of the candle hits the ceiling before it comes down.

The walls are tinted red and the whole house roars like the ocean. There's a hot-penny tang I can taste in the back of my throat, a cocaine drip that fills my mouth and overflows. Tissue packs and hair clips are scattered across the tiles, coming up fast.

I shouldn't be here. These words can't really form because the darkness is thick enough to stifle thought. It's more like a sharp sense of injustice wrapped in the fear that throbs somewhere in the void. An impression that I have been cheated by circumstance.

I shouldn't be here.

2

"You're a lucky woman," says Dutchess County Sheriff Mike Butler.

I ride a wave of displacement. Lucky? I don't feel lucky. I feel like I want to unzip my skin and wriggle out of my body and into another. By what metric is he measuring my luck? I suppose he means that I'm luckier than a woman whose attack has resulted in her murder. I want to tell him: *lucky* is what you are when you win the lottery.

I calculate how much time has elapsed since the attack. Ten, eleven hours at most. Now I understand all those survivors' stories on *Dateline* and *20/20*. It happened so fast. It's amazing what can be compressed into mere seconds of a human life.

Butler takes off his hat and rocks on his heels. I know his face and name from a campaign billboard near my town's highway off-ramp. On the billboard, his face is somehow both jowly and chiseled, as if the features of a hardass drill sergeant were superimposed onto a mall Santa. In person, Butler's the kind of guy whose middle-aged weight gain makes him look even more powerfully built, his barrel chest and gut filling out his uniform without seeming flabby.

Behind his shaved head is the classic hospital corner-mounted television. Wan light comes through vertical slats in the blinds and paints staccato lines on the wall. *Saturday morning*, I think—words that conjure up Pilates for me, a long run for my boyfriend, Matt, and an extended gaming session for my son, Danny. And then, like a ravenous, plundering army, we take our reward: brunch. When my boys and I brunch, we brunch hard. Pulpy juice straight from the gleaming contraption, huevos rancheros, black beans, avocado, crispy bacon, home fries, strawberries from the little roadside stand...

Butler clears his throat. “Okay,” he says. Then he puts his hat back on and studies the cup of water on the bedside table like it holds the key to cracking this case wide open. I think, perhaps unfairly, that he has no idea how to talk to a woman wrapped in bandages lying in a hospital bed. I am his mother, his sister, his wife. My victimhood disturbs him. It’s not what he signed up for.

He takes a step closer to my bed. “You took quite a shot,” he says. From this angle, I can see the landscape of razor burn under his chin. “Lucky lady.”

It’s almost funny, in an existential nightmare kind of way: trapped in a hospital bed while a man reminds me how lucky I am, over and over again.

He glances at my freshly bandaged wrists, and his eyes travel across my older scars, exposed by my short-sleeved hospital gown. Then he looks me in the face. “I was just at your house. That’s quite a thing you did.”

For the first time, it dawns on me that my house is a crime scene. It’s probably crawling with cops and forensic techs. I think CSI is called something different in real life, but I picture a team in HAZMAT suits, spraying luminol. In reality it’s

probably two local cops in rubber gloves poking around our dressers and desks, combing through the front hall, the guest room. Suddenly I'm laser focused. I can feel a manic surge begin in my toes and course through my body. The jagged mosaic of sights and sounds from last night comes together in the man's cold eyes framed in a tight oval of black fabric.

I manage to hold on to it for a second, but then the mosaic goes out of focus. Cobbled-together images of things I didn't actually see run through my mind. A man in a tracksuit and balaclava walking down the sidewalk in broad daylight. His arms are long, too long, and his shadow pours like oil down the street, up my driveway, through my front door. . . .

"I can come back later," Butler says. He sounds far away. I realize that my eyes are half-lidded. It's not just my thoughts that are drifting. I refused the Vicodin regimen the doctor wanted to put me on, three hundred milligrams every four hours for the pain. Opioids were never my thing—I was a fiend for the rush, not the nod—but I've seen addicts with decades of sober living fall off because of back pain, grizzled old alkies who figure what's the harm in a few pain pills if they're prescribed by a doctor? Or at least, they pretend to think like that. I'd wager most of them know exactly what the harm is, they're just falling back on the oldest addict trick in the book: self-delusion.

And so, all I'm on is ibuprofen. Four gelcaps. It's barely enough for a stress headache. I might as well be taking vitamins.

"The doctor wasn't too keen on me talking to you now," Butler says. "But I'd really like to take your statement sooner rather than later, if you're up for it."

"It's okay," I say, gathering my strength. "I'm good. I want to help."

“Anything you can remember, then.”

“I wasn’t supposed to be there,” I say. “Home, I mean. I was supposed to be camping with my boyfriend and my son, up at Cedar Valley. Taking a long weekend. But I got called in for a last-minute pitch at the agency I work for. In the city. Matt and Danny”—my heart quickens as I try, and fail, to sit up—“the park’s a total dead zone, there’s no way to call them, they won’t know—”

Butler holds up a hand. “We’ve got state police out of Poidras Falls tracking your family down.”

Your family. There’s a deep, sweet hurt behind those words.

“Tell me about the man in your house.”

“He was tall,” I say, flashing to the candle hitting the ceiling before it came down and the house roared and the walls turned red. “Taller than Matt, and he’s six-one.” I pause. “Taller than Trevor, too.”

“Who’s Trevor?”

“My ex. Danny’s father.”

“Okay,” Butler says, flipping open his notebook and jotting something down. He’s not using one of those standard-issue cop notepads, but a green moleskin.

“I have one of those,” I say.

“My daughter works in a coffee shop in Poughkeepsie,” he says. “They sell these things by the register.” He shakes his head. “Kid drops out of SVA, down in the city, after her freshman year, says school is sucking the life out of her painting. So now, you know what she does? Brings home a bag of the day’s used-up coffee grounds, smears them on canvases. Not my thing, art-wise, but she’s saving me forty grand a year, so I can’t complain.”

I don’t know what to say to that. In the moment of silence, I can feel myself drifting again. “Gray eyes,” I say.

“*Gray?*”

“They were cold. Like the winter sky.”

“Winter sky,” he says.

I suddenly recall hurried questions from a different cop in the more immediate aftermath. A woman. Severe pony-tail, wine-dark lipstick. My neighbor, the pediatrician, who found me on his lawn, hovering awkwardly in the background, holding a mug in two cupped hands. I am disturbed by how the memory comes on: from nothing to something, a bucket of paint splattering a blank wall.

“I remember,” I say, “I told all this to somebody at my neighbors’ house.”

“You were in shock,” Butler says. “This isn’t going to be like it is on TV, where you give your statement and you’re on your way. It’ll be a process. You’ll remember new things days, weeks from now. But this is a good time for us to talk. Most people...” He trails off with a frown and lowers the notebook. “Most people would be doped to the gills after what you just went through, but the doctor said you refused the heavy-duty painkillers.”

I hesitate. I don’t hide the fact that I’m an addict in recovery from anyone, but I don’t ordinarily talk to county sheriffs. It feels like I’m planting an asterisk in our conversation, something for Butler to come back to later, casting a pall over everything I tell him.

“I’ve got nine years clean,” I say. I know that this is admirable, that I have nothing to be ashamed of. But talking to cops twists my thoughts. It’s like putting my bags through the scanner in airport security. Of course I know there’s nothing in there, and yet still, after all these years, anxiety engulfs me and my heart pounds and I think, *what if*—what if they find something?

“Good for you,” Butler says. He sounds different now—guarded, maybe. I wonder about his daughter, behind the counter of that coffee shop. Is she an Oxy fiend? Is Butler’s father an alcoholic, dying of cirrhosis? Addicts orbit everyone’s life, and a person’s reaction to addiction in general—whether they believe it’s truly a disease or just an excuse to stay high all the time—tends to be reflected through the lens of their own experience.

Is Butler himself a clandestine pill-popper, a raider of confiscated evidence?

His eyes flit once again to my scars. I don’t volunteer any information about them.

“So, I’m sticking with ibuprofen,” I say, trying to end this conversational tack. But I can see something in his hooded eyes, and a knot forms in my stomach. I know what Butler is thinking. He might not even know it yet, but the kernel of an idea is forming.

Nobody’s as clean as they say they are. We’re dealing with a drug thing. Some dealer who didn’t get paid, some old city debt getting settled up the river, darkening our quiet suburban doorsteps.

I keep my mouth shut. I don’t want to protest too much, before he’s even brought it up. But the way my mind is working now—telling me I have to manipulate, steer the conversation—makes me feel like I’m a suspect being grilled in a stuffy, windowless interview room.

There’s a sharp pain in my head, a cold needle piercing the dull, pounding ache. The edges of the room are fuzzy, lenses smeared with grease.

Butler glances over his shoulder at the door. When he looks back at me, his gaze is unclouded. “The doctor also said you refused a rape kit.” His tone is as matter-of-fact as ever.

“I wasn’t raped.”

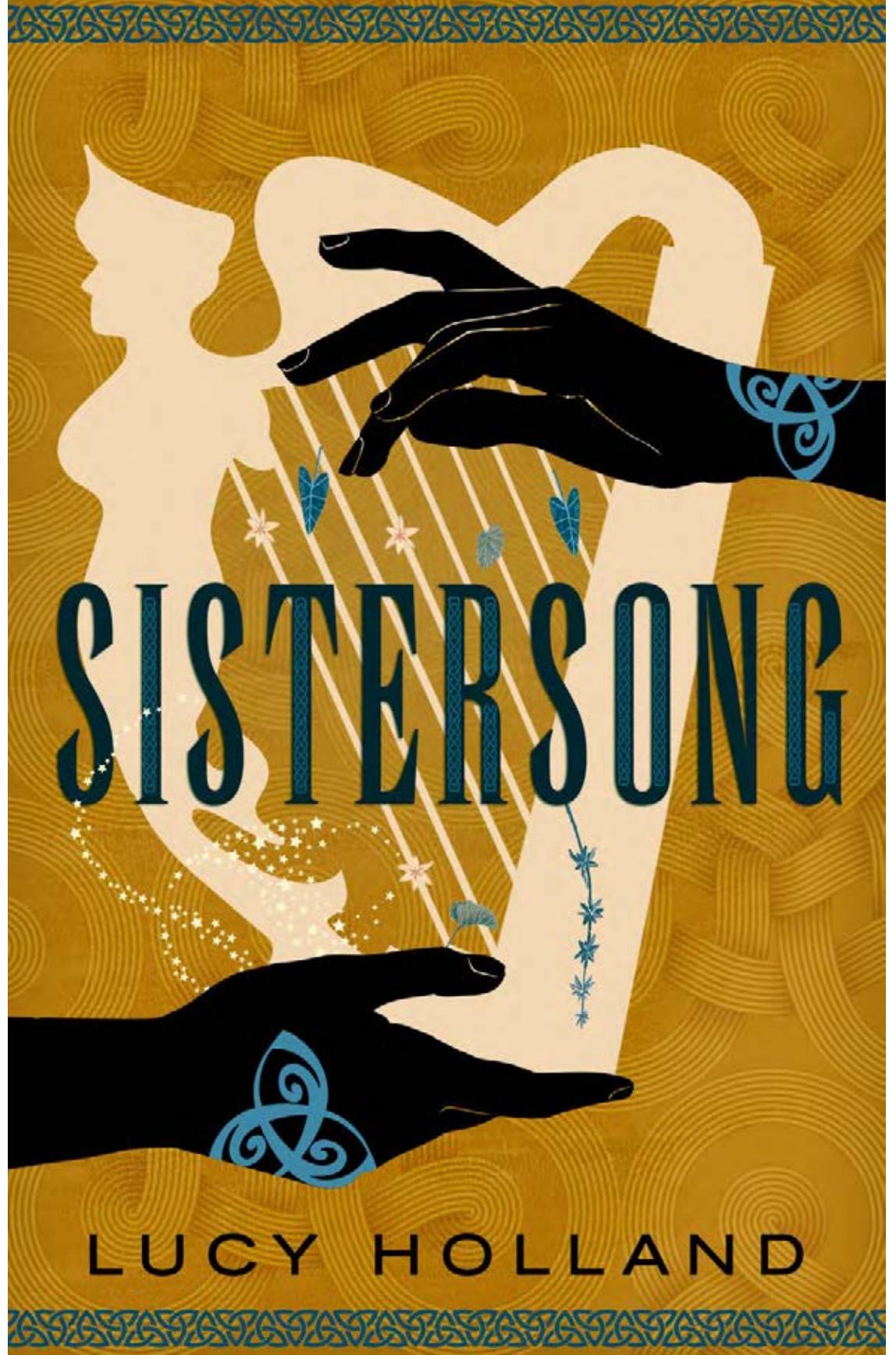
“No sexual assault.”

“No. I told you guys what happened.”

“You told Deputy Carlson, back there at your neighbors’ house.”

“Right. I remember. Sort of.”

He consults his moleskin. “Approximately seven forty-five p.m., you open your front door and interrupt a robbery in progress. The perp bashes you in the head with a”—he flicks his glance to me—“Jesus candle. The next thing you know...”



SISTERSONG

LUCY HOLLAND

1

KEYNE

Imbolc – a festival celebrating the end of winter

I will tell you a story.

Seven years ago, when I was a child of ten, I became lost in the woods. My sisters and I had been travelling the road that skims the coast like a stone from Dintagel. I loved our summer home – a spume-silvered rock of houses and workshops, its docks piled high with amphorae. But there is a place, many leagues to the east, where the road slows, turning inland. It loses itself amongst the trees, straying into giant country. Branches interlace here; it is easy to slip away into the green space between a giant's fingers. Easy for a careless child to disappear.

Looking back, I wonder whether it truly was carelessness. Perhaps it was *her* doing. Given everything which came after, that would make sense.

Between one scout's holler and the next, I am lost, a prisoner of the wood. I feel no fear, more an irritation that I've let the trees trick me. I can hear my father, the king, calling me and the irreverent footfalls of men rending foliage.

I wander so long, it feels as though I've crossed some hidden boundary. I've left our world for *theirs* – the nameless land where goddesses sing to the stars, where lost spirits linger in the twilight.

LUCY HOLLAND

Dark quills scratch me; I am surrounded by yews, the terrible grave-trees which grow from death. I shiver, as irritation turns to fear. Deep voices seem to call my name, anthems to lost children. And now I *am* lost, hopelessly so.

The sky darkens and with the light goes hope. Hunger claws at my stomach; I am old enough to know I cannot survive long without food and water. Tears well. What if I die here and the yew grows stronger, roots curling through my bones?

Despair is a sharp scent and I suppose *she* smells it upon the air, for suddenly a woman stands before me. She is old, but not so old as Locinna, our nurse. Eyes peer beneath a heavy brow, blue, and piercing as a gull's. She wears rags, tattered and rent, but after a blink, these become a cloak of moths, their wings a-flit in the evening. Another blink and it's just an ordinary cloak, albeit a strange one made of patches and ribbons fluttering free.

She extends a hand and I realize I've collapsed to the leaf mulch, the seat of my skirt now damp through. My legs wobble as I stand. Her fingers are rough, calloused like a smith's. I wonder what strange trade might have marked them.

'Are you a witch?' The dangerous question is out in the open before I can stop it.

She smiles. 'Perhaps.' Looks me up and down. 'Would you like me to be?'

'No.'

'And why not?'

'Because witches are to be feared.'

She pauses. 'A good answer, if not entirely true.'

'I want to go home.'

The witch tilts her head, her gull's eyes narrowing on my face as if it were a fine fat fish. 'I wonder if you do.'

'Of course I do.' But I glimpse her meaning. I have never felt at ease in my home.

'You are wet through. Come and get warm.'

SISTERSONG

They are such inviting words. And I'm freezing, it's true. But she's a witch. 'My father must be worried.'

She steps back and something jingles – her stick-wrists gleam with silver bracelets. My eyes widen; only Mother has silver like this. Where hers is solid and silent, however, the witch's bracelets sing. I feel a desperate urge to touch them, to capture those chimes between my palms, as if I could draw the melody inside me.

She notices my gaze, smiles again. 'Would you like one?'

Th oat dry with want, I shake my head.

'Here.' She slides off a single band, passing it over gnarled brown knuckles. Before I know it, my fingers have closed about its shining curve.

'I can't . . .'

'But you already have.'

My cheeks flush. Shaped like a horseshoe, the band is too big, hanging on my wrist like the crescent moon above us. But it shrinks to a perfect size even as I watch, and I catch my breath at the tingle of magic. When I look up, she's half turned her back. 'Wear it when you are ready to find me again.' And she is gone, returned to the forest that birthed her.

The forest I am no longer within, for I now stand upon a wide road, and voices – human voices – are shouting my name. One laughing, one crying, my sisters rush towards me.

I remember burying that silver bracelet, sweating and fearful. I hadn't planned to hide it, but inside Dunbriga, our capital, I began to question my gift. It felt nothing like the spells spoken over hearth and home. Not even akin to Father's ability to spark a flame or ask the skies for rain. It was otherworldly. It had come from the dangerous heart of the forest, warmed by a witch's skin.

And yet for all that, the bracelet was mine now. My parents would surely take it away if they found it. So in the shadows cast by Dunbriga's oldest yew, I gouged a hole in the raw earth and

LUCY HOLLAND

dropped the silver in, weeping to see my shining crescent amidst the dirt.

I've ventured into the forest many times since then and have never once glimpsed the witch. As the years pass and the magic fades, she seems more and more a figment of a fevered mind. 'Just a fancy,' I tell the wheat doll taking shape between my hands. She is nearly finished – a shoulder shy of complete.

'Keyne!'

I twitch. I should have seen Mother coming, sitting as I am at our hill fort's highest point. A waft of rosewater precedes her and then she's towering over me – her shadow blotting out what little sun struggles through the clouds. 'What are you doing?' she demands.

My blasphemous fingers are busy weaving a bridegroom. We make the goddess's dolls every year for the festival of Imbolc. Gildas, the Christian priest, doesn't like it, but I find the work soothing; it takes my mind off other things. And from my perch on the steps of the great hall, I can watch the hold tumbling out below me down the hill. Cattle on the lowest level are tiny as a child's toys.

'I told you to put this practice aside,' Mother says sternly, and I hear the priest in her words. Beneath the queen's skin runs the blood of old Rome, the jewel of the empire that abandoned us to our fate. Father took her for her blood; he thought it might give him strong sons to guard his lands and legacy. Instead he has two daughters . . . and me. Rome's last laugh, I suppose, before the legions left our shores for good.

'We are not prepared for Candlemas on the morrow,' she adds, and the word forces my head up. Bright fox fur frames my mother's shoulders, her curls tamed into an elegant braid. Her skin is a shade browner than my own, though we share the same dark hair. 'And do try to sit graciously. This –' she waves a hand at my trouser-clad legs – 'open sprawling is improper.'

SISTERSONG

My hands clench around the wheat woman. ‘We’ve always made bridegoss, Mother. I don’t see the harm in it.’

‘Brigid is no longer our concern. We need candles for the ceremony, enough for every woman who—’

‘Why is it only the women who must be “purified” at Candlemas?’ I snap, imagining what my sisters might say. Wild Sinne would scoff at the thought, eyes sparkling with some planned mischief. Riva would probably grit her teeth and bear it while murmuring prayers to the old gods under her breath. I almost smile, but it dies when I think about Rome’s god and the way his priests seem to delight in punishing women. Gildas believes all Britons sinners, despite being a Briton himself. He condemns our festivals, our traditions, even our little wheat dolls. But every tale he spins, of revelation and ruin, pushes his Christ further away from me. Gildas’s Saviour is a stranger who died long ago in a hot land I have never seen.

Mother’s gaze briefly strays from my own: part of her agrees with me. But when she says, ‘Make candles, Keyne,’ it is Queen Enica who speaks.

‘Let Riva do the candles. You know she cannot weave the—’

‘Riva is making them already. And when I find Sinne, she will join you.’

She won’t find Sinne. My younger sister has a talent for making herself scarce whenever there is work to be done. And to Sinne, everything looks like work.

Our home, Dunbriga, is a smudge of smoke on the edge of the world. I know it’s not really – Armorica is just across the water, and ships come from further still, bringing us oil and olives, the taste of sun-drenched lands to the south. I like to imagine cargoes of silks and spices cocooned in ships’ holds, waiting to be abused by our rough hands and palates. But when storms keep the ships away, the walls of Dunbriga close in and the fort seems to shrink.

LUCY HOLLAND

We need travellers to remind us that there's a world beyond our borders.

I make my way to the workshop, feeling the holdsfolk's customary stares as I pass. The brideog is coming apart in my hands. I don't know why I care, except that she's an antidote to Christ and his earnest suffering. I am tired of being called sinful. Half my father's hold already thinks me so. I need no help from Gildas and his followers.

At the creak of the door, Riva looks up, her good hand coated in tallow. She's wearing a bandage around the other, hiding the scarred flesh she cried over every night for years after the fire. No one knows how it started, except Riva herself perhaps, and she claims she doesn't remember.

'So,' Riva says, as I take the stool beside her in the dim room. 'Mother found you.' She's as tidy as Sinne is tangled, her chestnut hair braided neatly, sober dress crease-free. Riva has a stillness in her that soothes me. She listens where my younger sister would speak.

I nod. 'Now she's after Sinne.'

'She won't catch her.' We share a fond smile before my sister's eyes stray to the tattered figure in my arms. '... Brigid.'

I let her fall. 'Mother forbade me. I'm to help you with the candles instead.'

Riva scoops the brideog from the rush-strewn floor. The doll is a sorry sight, broken wheat sticking out of her like pins. 'Finish her, Keyne,' my sister says. 'It's important the goddess feels welcome here. I'll see to the candles.'

I force myself to protest. 'There are dozens. And you don't like fire.'

'I am coping.' A tremor in her face. 'You can help when you're done.'

'Thank you.' The words hiss from my lips and I sound ungrateful. I can't seem to sound any other way these days. Riva, however, just nods and returns to her shaping and dipping.

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I know she's watching as my fingers flash in and out of the brideog, perhaps mocking the dexterity she no longer has. But I don't move, because it's warm beside the stinking tallow and the fire that keeps it soft. And that stillness I love in my older sister is here in the room between us. I can feel my earlier anger slowly seeping away.

An hour passes in companionable silence. I stare at Brigid's blank face. She could be anyone. She doesn't even resemble a woman, just a figure with arms and legs, trunk and head: human. That's something we all share. That's what really matters.

Isn't it?

Raised voices pull me from my thoughts. Riva and I exchange a glance before we creep to the workshop door. We don't want to be seen. People clam up around us, the king's children, as if we're his spies. I grimace to myself. It might look that way, but Father doesn't listen to us as he used to do. These days only Mother, his lords – and Gildas – are welcome to speak.

'Hush, Siaun. If someone hears and tells the priest—'

'Then we'll know who's a traitor.'

I put my eye to a crack. Thee men lurk outside, one checking the yard is empty. I guess they'd never dream of finding the royal children with their hands in a tallow vat.

'Do you *want* to be caught? The king will lock you up . . . or worse.'

Siaun snorts. He's a slight but rangy man in a farmer's overall and his cheeks are lean with hunger. Last summer's harvest was the poorest in years and the winter has been hard. 'Lock me up for speaking truth?' he demands.

The other man shakes his head. 'For speaking against the priest.'

'Whose side are you on?'

'It's not about sides, Siaun,' the third man hisses from where

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he's keeping watch. 'Plenty of folk are beginning to listen to the priest. The king listens, so they do too.'

'The king is *wrong*,' Siaun says, and I hear Riva draw a startled breath beside me. Her eyes are wide in the dim space.

Siaun's friend clamps a hand over his mouth. 'Holy Brigid, Siaun. Say that any louder and you'd be lucky to escape with a whipping.'

I swallow tightly. Siaun's expression doesn't change, but his fists are clenched and trembling.

'Will you die for this, Siaun?'

The farmer turns so I can't see his face. 'Our women don't need purifying for the festival of Imbolc, so why is this Candlemas different? Would you let the priest shame them?'

'Of course not, but what can we do when 'tis the queen's will for us to follow new ways? Besides, Gildas is not all bad. I hear he's building proper houses for Brys and his family. Times have hit them hard. And not just them.'

Riva mutters something under her breath and I think, *Candlemas is only the beginning.*

Once Siaun's friends have bundled him away, I meet my sister's eyes. 'Is it true what they said? That there are already people who follow the priest?'

Bandaged hand held close to her chest, Riva says, 'Gildas doesn't care a wit for them, so why build them houses? It must be part of his plan to convert us all.' Her face firms. 'We should talk to Father. Not to tell tales,' she adds hastily when I open my mouth to protest. 'About Gildas. Father allows Mother to honour the priest's festivals, but perhaps he doesn't know how far it's gone. That people are prepared to give up the old ways altogether, that Gildas is essentially bribing them to do so . . .'

'What if Father does know?' The stink of candles clogs my nose. *And what if he doesn't care?*